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"Being Chinese in Puebla:" Connecting Transnational Stories in Mexico[1]

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Abstract

In Mexico connecting the stories of Chinese immigration throughout the country has been of particular interest but not for exploring their transnational experience from below. This article looks at the historical discontinuities of crafting the identities of being *Chino(a)-Mexicano(a)* through the exploration of Don Federico Chilián's transnationalism. By doing so we aim to explore the fluidity in constructing the Chinese transnational experience, and the shifting relations of being local and transnational.[2]

Keywords

Transnationalism, China, immigration, Mexico, discrimination

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2 Here we share some preliminary findings of Manzano-Munguía's project on Chinese transnationalism in Puebla entitled: *"Ser Transnacional en Puebla: Los Chinos y sus redes transnacionales de lo Lícito e Ilícito"* funded by the Vicerrectoría de Investigación y Estudios de Posgrados (VIEP) of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla 2014). Manzano-Munguía and Juan Periañez de la Rosa conducted participant observation and open interviews among Chinese descendants (first, second and third generation) residing in Puebla during the summer and fall of 2014.

Introduction

The asymmetrical relationship between Chinese immigrants and the host countries in America has been documented by various scholars who documented their historical presence in Mexico, Latin America, the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States (US) (Chan, López, Pfaelzer). For instance Jorge Gómez Izquierdo documents the Anti-Chinese Movement in Mexico from 1871 through 1934, Lucy Cohen provides a historical account of the Chinese in the post-Civil War. Actually, Cohen is a Chinese descendant – third generation from El Salvador – her grandfather *castellanizó* (Spanishized) his last name to Milián. Yan Phou Lee, *The Chinese Must Stay* (1994), Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987), and James Phelan, *The Chinese Must Go* (1994) emphasize the Chinese presence in the southern frontier of the United States and their contributions to the political economy at the local, regional, and transnational level.[3]

In Mexico, Chinese laborers were mostly hired in the railroad construction, mining, commerce, and the service industry. By 1896 approximately 800 Chinese worked in mining activities at sites where copper was extracted such as San Felipe in Coahuila, Guaymas in Sonora, and Mazatlán in Sinaloa. Others worked in the railroad construction of the south Pacific from 1890 to 1910 (Gómez Izquierdo). The Mexican State neither sought their permanent settlement nor their citizenship. By 1870 the Chinese *jornaleros* (day laborers) were individuals who had "no rights as true citizens […] [there] was no freedom within the system, they were required to accept the rules of the game and this meant to accept their role as laborers, as simple tools of work or capital's motor force," to a greater extent this was the view pursued by most of the newspapers from that period of time (Gómez Izquierdo 47-48).[4]

As Francisco Bulnes, the assistant of Francisco Díaz the Chief of the expedition of the Mexican Astronomical Commission to Japan and China (1874), stated that "[the Chinese belong] to a silent race due to the brutality of their passions, [and] obedient to their blood rage […] (Gómez Izquierdo 49). These kind of statements nested feelings and actions of rejection and discrimination against the Chinese population (see also Jean Pfaelzer's 2007

3 For instance, the expansion of US capitalism (e.g., livestock commerce) in the American West was greatly benefited by the railroad construction, which used Chinese labor force (Lee).

4 Translations from Spanish to English are by Manzano-Munguía.

work on the discrimination and the anti-Chinese policy and law enforcement in the United States) Another example of discrimination is the statement made by Martín Luis Guzmán (1960) in his famous novel *The Eagle and the Snake* in the *Novela de la Revolución Mexicana* (*the Mexican Revolution Novel*) where "hundreds of beautiful and marriageable maidens paraded and there was no single man in state of getting married, the Chinese discounted" (239). The Chinese *jornaleros* represented the flexible, docile, and cheaper labor force *par excellence* in Mexico. And at the same time, their rights as residents or even citizens, were never enacted nor considered in the equation.

In addition to these experiences of discrimination and exclusion, there are other stories related to Chinese transnationalism and based on life-experiences (Chan, López). In the last three decades the study of transnationalism has been under revision and debate. The anthropologists Basch et. al. emphasized the social relations of transmigrants in cross-border activities between their home and host countries, which was criticized by Portes and Kivisto for the emphasis on its ambiguity and the lack of clarity on what this concept really means. Although Kivisto suggests the use of transnationalism as a subset of assimilation theory, Portes and Portes et al. do suggest that the concept is relevant for studying current transnational ventures of immigrants through technological advances in transportation and communication, it also aids in understanding the process of assimilation of "first-generation immigrants and their offspring" from individuals and families theoretically linked from above and from below (Portes 188) and the impact it has on "the development of sending countries" (190).

In contrast, Faist attempts to give some clarity to the concept and brings a systematic and rigorous definition of what he termed transnational social spaces of immigrant communities (Faist). In principle, these spaces are divided in three types: kinship groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities (Faist, "Volume" 202-210). The transnational social space (host and home countries) is conceived of as less pronounced. Despite these nuances, we find useful the concept's ambiguity for studying Chinese immigrants in Mexico while attempting to construct grassroots understandings of what "being transnational" means on individual basis. The debate will continue and it is neither our goal nor our attempt to give closure to it. Rather we conceive transnationalism as a porous concept with epistemological inconsistencies (Bobes León, "Debates"). In other

words, transnationalism acquires its meaning while being deployed in the praxis under specific historical, socioeconomic, political, and cultural circumstances. It is neither perceived as constrained nor limited.

Therefore, we will explore Don Federico Chilián's transnationalism by concentrating on his life-experiences.[5] This will aid in constructing the Chinese transnational experience in Mexico from below. In the rest of the article, we analyze the fluidity between being local and transnational by looking at the life experiences of Federico Chilián, a *Chino-Mexicano* (Chinese-Mexican) living in Puebla. As Sider and Smith observed, the histories threading our past and present are constructed within and beyond the social processes nested at the local and global level (Sider and Smith).

Chinese people faced multiple challenges that were not only related to their precarious status, but also to their constitutive and constituting world of being *Chino-Mexicano* (Chinese-Mexican) while attempting to blend as much as possible with the Mexican mainstream society and dominant culture. Precisely, the process of *Mexicanizarse* (becoming Mexican) undermined the experiences of discrimination and racism through adaptation of strategies such as marrying Mexican citizens, changing their name, and creating legal documentation (e.g., birth certificates and passports). *Mexicanizarse* not only mitigated the recurrence of Chinese discrimination but also facilitated other processes such as investing, gaining social status, and Mexican citizenship. "Federico" Chi–Liang (Figure 2) is a good example of this process.[6]

Qi Liang or Federico Chilián, *El Abuelo,* was originally from Canton or Guangzhou, China[7] and he was still a teenager by the time of his arrival in Sonora or Colima, Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century (Figure 1

5 A special thank you to José Chilián Muñoz and Federico Chilián Orduña who diligently recounted the stories of their Abuelo. Therefore, throughout the text we used the term *El Abuelo* for naming Federico Chilián and avoiding confusion with his grandson.

6 Here we follow Warry's idea of cultural adaptation rather than adopting. The process of being adapted implies a fluid process where people's agency contests or negotiates domination. He explores how Aboriginal people in Canada have adapted to European "ways" (89).

7 Canton or Guangzhou is the capital of the province of Guangdong. It is located in the southern part of China approximately 120 kilometers from Hong Kong. This city is one of the most populated in China and has been recognized as a very important economic and cultural center.

and Figure 3). Despite the lack of information about his parents (e.g., their names and modus vivendi), their decision for sending their son overseas was most likely related to his survival from the third Bubonic pandemic plague that affected Guangzhou in 1894 (Johnson). As Federico Chilián Orduña remembered: "*El Abuelo* most certainly witnessed the tons of deads [*sic*] left by *la peste* (the plague) and his parents did not want to see the dead [sic] of their only child". "My great grandparents decided that Federico was going to live well in Mexico and under Pérez' tutelage [a lawyer and 'friend' of Federico Chilián's parents] […] after all the Porfiriato gave stability to the country" (Manzano-Munguía, Interview with Federico Chilián Orduña).

Figure 1: "*El Abuelo*" (The Grandfather) Federico Chilián (left side)
Source: Family Archive (José Chilián Muñoz)

After his arrival, *El Abuelo* changed his name while still living with his tutor, Pérez.[8] As José Chilián Muñoz y Federico Chilián Orduña[9]

8 Neither the immediate family nor the family archives provide further details about the tutor and lawyer, Pérez. There is no further information about his full name and his place of residence, although it might be located in either Sonora or Colima.

9 José Chilián Muñoz y Federico Chilián Orduña are half-brothers because their father, Don Ramón Chilián Rodríguez, had multiple partners and descendants (around 20 children) but only one wife.

expressed, "*El Abuelo* invented his name […] we are all descendants of Don Federico Chilián… *su nombre real en Cantonés no se sabe* [his real name in Cantonese is unknown]" (Interview).

Manzano-Munguía embraced the idea of finding out the details of his point of arrival in the National Archives (*Archivo General de la Nación AGN*) but first she had to search for his "real" Cantonese name.[10] In 2012 she contacted a Cantonese friend who resides in mainland China.[11] He expressed the complexities of the translating process and the multiple translations that the name Chilián might entail.[12] The lack of further details from the family's end and the early *Castellanización* of his name makes it quite difficult to coin a single name in Cantonese. Therefore, three translations of Chilián in Cantonese were drafted: Qi Lian, Qilian, or Qi Liang (Figure 2).

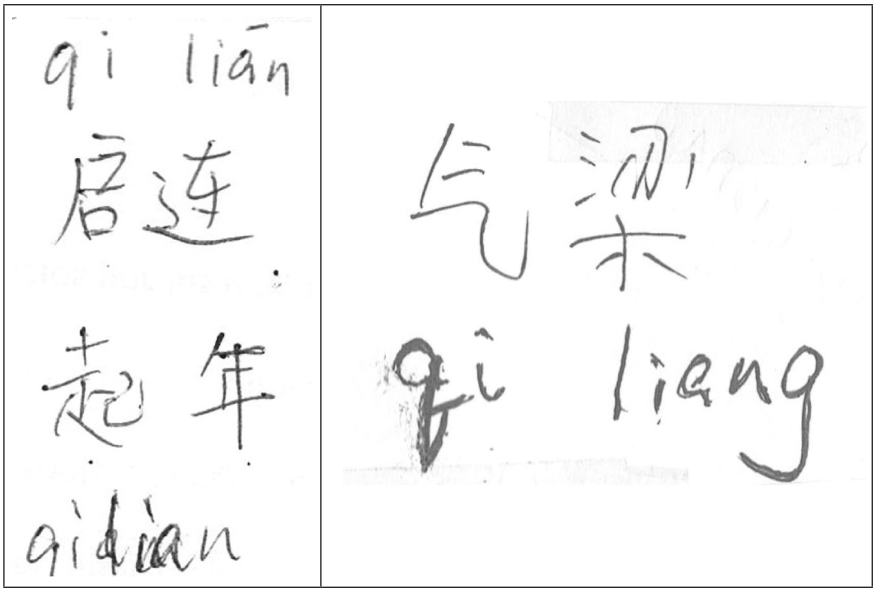

Figure 2: Chilián in Cantonese
Source: Translation by an Anonymous Colleague

10 Here we would like to acknowledge the help provided by the staff at the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) while searching the files of the migration department.

11 At my friend's request, he remains anonymous.

12 This is further complicated if the first name is added to the equation. Therefore, the first name is not even considered due to the lack of knoweldge of the reasons he had for choosing the Spanish name Federico.

The matter gets further complicated because the search at the National Archives (AGN) was multiplied by three, and the ports of entry by two (Colima and Sonora). The search represents a real challenge given the extensive number of files available in the Mexican Migration Department. What was noted is the Mexican or Spanish name that the government official wrote at the port of entry:

Migration Department File 14.

Name: Chi Lam, José

Date of Birth:1879

Place of Birth: Canton, China

Place of Entrance: Manzanillo, Colima

Date of Entrance: 5/mayo/1914 Residence: Tampico, Tamaulipas

Another issue is the pitfalls of the translation process. Usually the immigration officer wrote what "made sense" according to his own terms and biases. Both examples illustrate the cultural bias for writing last names. The Mexican ambilienal pattern dominated rather than the Cantonese patrilineal construction:

Migration Department File 14.

Name: Shing Lau, Lee.

Date of Birth: 1898.

Place of Birth: Canton, China

Place of Entrance: Mexicali, B.C.

Date of Entrance: 01/julio/1910 Residence: Calle 15, V. Guaymas, Sonora

These examples demonstrate the bias inherent in the archival data. Manzano-Munguía will focus on locating the port of entry of Qi Lian, Qilian, or Qi Liang in Mexico, as well as the date of his arrival at the AGN. This task is not complete and will need further refinement.

To return to our analysis of transnationalism, one dimension of *El Abuelo*'s *transnationalism* was the continuous social and economic connections he sustained with his parents until they passed away: "He [*El Abuelo*] wrote letters to his parents and vice versa…*mis bisabuleos nunca lo dejaron* [my great grandparents never left him] he received *bolsitas de oro* [gold sachets] when he needed" (José Chilián Interview). Sometimes *El Abuelo* had "emotional crises and [he] wrote to his parents in China,

and they wrote back and asked him to return to China and they will send *bolsitas de oro* for his return. But he never returned, never […] He died in Puebla at age 70" (José Chilián Muñoz Interview).

His parents' economic help was not intermittent but rather steady as his addictions were out of control and added economic and social burdens: "*El Abuelo tenía el gusto por la bebida y el juego de barajas* (he liked drinking and playing cards) [...] He loved *la cerveza Yucateca y el tequila* […] His addictions made him loose his earnings, the money sent by his parents and savings" (Federico Chilián Orduña Interview) It is important to note that the socioeconomic relation was always from his home country (China) to his host country (Mexico) and not vice versa, contrary to what has been noted in other transnational studies (Itzigsohn, Dore Cabral, Hernández Medina and Vázquez, Landolt, Autler and Baires, Popkin, Roberts, Frank and Lozano-Ascencio).

At some point, *El Abuelo* left his tutor Pérez, but he had working experience in the service and restaurant industry, and other workman's skills. By the time he moved to the state of Guanajuato, he was acquainted with the management skills needed for setting up a Chinese café (Figure 3).[13] Although the name of the city remains an enigma, both grandsons think he settled in San Miguel de Allende or Guanajuato (the capital city) because he rode horses and owned a Chinese café.

Mapping *El Abuelo*'s routes of migration was not an easy task; this figure illustrates the complexity of moving from one state to another while trying to find "a place for living." Other Chinese immigrants might have experienced similar processes of migration and transmigration.

In the state of Guanajuato, Don Federico Chilián married Ignacia Rodríguez Álvarez, or Doña Nachita, at age 30 and the latter at age 23. Doña Nachita "belonged to a family who had relationships with foreigners and she was socially recognize for her knowledge" (Federico Chilián Orduña Interview). They had two children Ramón ("Lamón") y Teresa Chilián Rodríguez, and another one who did not survive and was the cause of her death at age 28. Her older sister, Josefita, and her mother, Tirsa

13 In the Chinese café some food was served, especially bisques, and coffee. In México, the Chinese *cafés* were quite famous for their service and delicatessens. A good example is the current franchise firm known as *Los Bisquests de Obregón* (see their web site for further information).

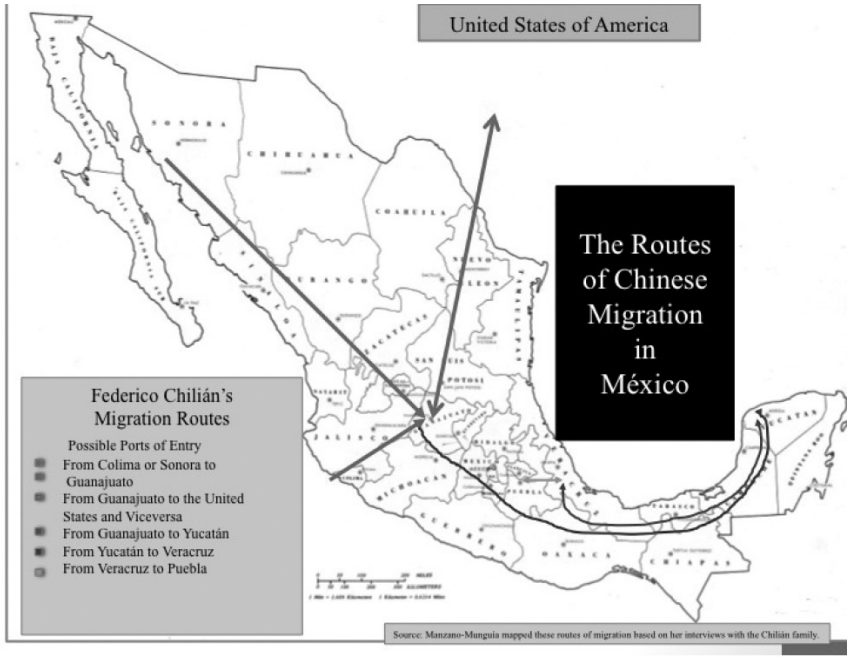

Figure 3: The Routes of Chinese Migration in Mexico

Álvarez, took good care of both children after her death. *El Abuelo* and Ramón left Guanajuato and went to the United States for a short period of time. He did not stay longer because he could not find a job and Ramón was very small (a toddler) and he went back to Guanajuato (Figure 3). Then he moved to Mérida, Yucatán with Ramón who was around 6 or 7 years of age. He left Teresa behind but under the care of Doña Tirsa. He never came back for her. In Mérida, he opened *una tienda de abarrotes* (a variety store) known as "*El Gran Cantón*" (The Great Canton) in the "*Cocos*" (Coconuts) neighborhood. He soon met his new partner, Doña Alfonsa Tun, who was probably of "Mayan descent given the size of [her childrens'] heads" (Federico Chilián Orduña Interview). She took care of Ramón and her other 5 children procreated with *El Abuelo*: Carlos, Alberto, Ángela, María Luisa y Rosa.

El Abuelo's addictions continued: "he drank and played cards as long as it lasted" and that made Doña Alfonsa very mad. They were always fighting. Federico Chilián Orduña remembers his father's stories (Ramón) about the crying and fighting "[…] all the same, all the same"

(Interview). He even bet his wife, Alfonsa, and that was the most extreme of his *parrandas,* which usually took place in the rear part of the store. The relationship did not last for long and she left without any note and with her children, except Ramón.

With the economic help of his parents, *El Abuelo y Lamón* migrated to the Port of Veracruz with the objective of establishing a Chinese restaurant. But first he worked as a cook, handyman, and bread maker. Ramón worked as a handyman and shoe shiner. *Lamón* was not able to finish elementary school;[14] he had to work at early age (when he was six). *El Abuelo* opened a Chinese restaurant in Veracruz but it did not last for long; again, excessive gambling and drinking left him with nothing except Ramón.

As he was now a young adult, Ramón make the decision regarding the new place to migrate: the capital city of Puebla (Figure 3). Businesses flourished and most of them were under Ramón's leadership. *El Abuelo* cooked Cantonese food for the family and lived with them until his death in 1945. He never gave up his love for the *Cerveza Yucateca y el tequila,* and his gambling continued but without major economic risks.

Within the process of moving in and out from one state to another, *El Abuelo* maintained economic and social relations with his parents. He never went back to his home country and his parents died without seeing him again. It was only through their help that he was able to "start a new life and business all over again, and again and in different states" as José Chilián Muñoz stated (Interview).

Another dimension of *El Abuelo's* transnationalism was the recognition of his social status by the Chinese community in public spaces. In other words, the Chinese community in Mexico recognized his family's ascribed socioeconomic status in Guangzhou. Federico Chilián Orduña noted "*El Abuelo* as a Chinese aristocrat […] was always recognized within the Chinese community. In public spaces they [referring to other Chinese] stood up and greeted him with respect while visiting other Chinese cafés or restaurants" (Interview). The experiences of social recognition and respect

14 Neither the second generation nor the third spoke or wrote in Cantonese. Lamón understood the Cantonese his father spoke to him but he never insisted on teaching the language to him: "it was going to give him trouble … *El Abuelo* did not want Lamón to experience discrimination for not knowing Spanish, as he did" (Federico Chilián Orduña Interview 2012).

in public spaces surpassed China's frontiers and positioned them in the heart of Mexico.

These grassroots constructions of being transnational serve as a matrix of the types of being Chino-Mexicano by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico. The engagements between the host and home countries by transnational social actors include, but are not exclusive of, the social, cultural, and economic connections of a Chinese immigrant first generation living in Mexico and who did not return to his home country. The transnational connection was lost after his death, neither his son Lamón nor his grandchildren sought any contact with the immediate or extended family (for examples of the second and third generation of Chinese immigrants living in Mexico see Kas-initz, Mollenkopf, Waters, and Holdway, and Levitt and Waters). This is relevant given that some scholars noted the perseverance of immigrants in not only returning to their homeland but also in sending remittances, and participating in local politics and investments, among others (see Kearney, Kivisto).

Conclusion

Here we explored two examples that illustrate *El Abuelo's* transnationalism by looking at the social and economic relations he sustained with his parents (home country) while residing in a host country (Mexico); and the recognition of his ascribed social status in public spaces while being in a host country. Both scenarios illustrate his "pattern of transnational life" (Pacini Hernandez) experienced by him. The process of *Mexicanizarse* is also present as an attempt to eliminate the experiences of racism and discrimination where immigrants are the target and the object of domination. Even though the "antiChinese" policy and "the aggressive campaigns against them" (Gómez Izquierdo 83-108) have been repealed by the second half of the twentieth century, the contention remains present and Manzano-Munguía's research attempts to explore this issue in the fieldwork season of 2014. Finally, the stories elaborated in this article represent a portion of how the local connects with the global and vice versa, making the concept of transnationalism ambiguous and porous like *El Abuelo Federico*, whose "mobility nurture the dense web of social and cultural connections that is transnationalism's signature feature" (Pacini

Hernandez 82). The stories about Chinese immigrants continue — this is just the beginning of a journey that attempts to unravel the multiple meanings of being transnational in Mexico and China. This is a work in progress and our fieldwork will shed some insights in the near future about the lives of other Chinese transnationals living in Mexico.

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