

Chinese Mexican community organizations in Baja California

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Abstract

Most studies of ethnic groups in Mexico have often overlooked the experiences of Asian Mexicans and its largest subgroup, Chinese Mexicans. Current research on Chinese Mexicans, furthermore, focuses largely on historical populations in Sonora and Sinaloa rather than present-day populations in other locations. This work describes the experiences of Chinese Mexicans in present-day Mexicali and neighboring cities, and shows the degree to which community organizations in Baja California have been able to serve Chinese Mexicans. In particular, some community organizations that formed during the first episode of Chinese immigration to Mexicali in the early 20th century were able to withstand the subsequent drastic decline in the Chinese Mexican population. As a result, Mexicali's present-day Chinese Mexican community, now again growing, is better served by community organizations than its small population and relative poverty would otherwise be able to support.

Introduction

Chinese Mexican community organizations in Baja California provide a substantively interesting case for the study of ethnic group experiences in Latin America because of the lack of existing research on this and similar groups. In Mexico, the concept of *mestizaje* that emerged as the basis of Mexican nationhood during the 1910 revolution led to a conception of Mexico that largely excluded people who were not indigenous, European, or a combination of the two (Knight 1990:96), leaving out both Mexicans of African descent as well as Mexicans of Asian descent. The result of this political and social discourse has been a flourishing body of research on the experiences of indigenous populations in Mexico, but relatively little work on other groups. Although research is done on Asian Mexicans, most of this work is on historical populations rather than present-day populations. In addition, such work focuses geographically

on the Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa, rather than in other states such as Baja California. More generally, work on contemporary Asian Latin Americans often tends to skip Mexico in favor of studies of populations in Brazil, Cuba, and Peru. Even though there are attempts to include Mexico in some studies (for example, Rustomji-Kerns 1999), coverage of Asian populations in Mexico remains limited. This lack of coverage is surprising, especially given that Mexicali is the Mexican city with the highest concentration of Chinese Mexicans, and its Chinatown, although smaller than it was several decades ago, is also one of the most flourishing Chinatowns in Latin America (Cummings 2001).

The case of Chinese Mexicans in Baja California, moreover, is theoretically interesting for the study of ethnic community organizations. Much work on the presence of community organizations serving population groups of a certain ethnicity often focuses on the need for a critical level of financial resources in order to ensure the continued survival of such organizations. Yet Mexicali has had several Chinese Mexican community organizations flourish even though the population has remained rather poor. Explaining the existence and persistence of such organizations, despite such relative poverty, is also needed.

Background

Studies of ethnic populations and the community organizations that serve these populations have demonstrated generally that community organizations flourish only when they are able to obtain enough resources to sustain themselves. As in Shiobara (2007), ethnic community organizations are defined here as "organizations for mutual assistance and socializing" with a majority of members or participants being of that ethnic group. Yet the case of Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali suggests that these explanations are not fully complete.

Ramakrishnan and Viramontes (2006) demonstrate that success of community organizations hinges on the "social standing of long-time active members" to provide the resources needed for these organizations' continuation. Alternatively, Fox (1996) has noted that civil society in general, including community organizations, can arise through the cooperation of local groups and external organizations. Although some connections with external organizations have aided the development of Chinese Mexican community organizations in Mexicali, the Chinese Mexican population largely lacks the free time or money needed to create these organizations, yet Mexicali has seen the presence of several of these organizations.

Furthermore, there are additional reasons suggesting that Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali should have very weak ethnic community organizations. Daley and Wong (1994) note that ethnic community development is hampered when there is a lack of coalition-building across ethnic groups. In the case of Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali, there has very little coalition building with Japanese Mexicans, the other main Asian population group, and low levels of social interaction between Chinese Mexicans and mestizo Mexicans, especially among adults.

With community organizations being such an important part of the "civil society" required for democracy (Almond and Verba 1989) and with ethnic community organizations being useful not just for cultural identity and political participation (Kwon 2006) but also sometimes for creating opportunities to draw new resources into a community (Majka and Mullan 2002), an explanation for the existence of several Chinese Mexican community organizations in Mexicali is needed. What allows for the existence of ethnic community organizations for Mexicali's relatively small and poor Chinese Mexican population?

Framework

A historical institutionalist account best explains the existence of Chinese Mexican community organizations in Mexicali, most notably due to the persistence of institutions well beyond the existence of the population groups that led to their creation. Mexicali's current Chinese Mexican population, which includes a new stream of immigrants, benefits from the founding activities of Chinese Mexicans there during the early 1900s. The migration of Chinese workers to Mexicali in the city's founding years represents a "critical juncture" for the state of ethnic community organizations in Mexicali.

Mexicali was populated in its founding years by not just people from other parts of Mexico but also by many people from China. As soon as Mexicali was founded, in 1903, workers from China were recruited to work on the agricultural lands in the newly irrigated valley surrounding Mexicali. Estimates of the number of Chinese workers in this newly irrigated Mexican city range from fewer than 3,000 to more than 10,000. The flourishing associational life that emerged from this population, large relative to the city as a whole at the time, meant that the Chinese Mexican population in Mexicali was well served by community organizations.

Anti-Chinese sentiment in Sonora and Sinaloa in the 1910s spread to Baja California, but unlike in those states, in Baja California this sentiment was not able to lead to any legally forced expulsion of Chinese Mexicans from Mexico. Chinese Mexican community organizations therefore continued in Mexicali.

The 1940s through 1960s saw a renaissance of the Chinese Mexican population and a revitalization of community organizations, but the 1970s and 1980s led to a reduction in the population of Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali. The stream of new migrants from China to Mexicali was cut off when Mexico switched its diplomatic recognition of China from the nationalist government on Taiwan to the communist government on continental Asia, and that government established a consulate in Tijuana instead of replacing the nationalist consulate in

Mexicali. A reduction of the existing Chinese Mexican population occurred in the debt crises and economic turmoil of the 1980s, with many Chinese Mexicans moving across the California-Baja California border to Calexico, California and elsewhere.

In the 2000s there has been renewed migration from China to Mexicali and other cities in Baja California. These mostly poor immigrants would not be able to found the community organizations that exist, but have been able to make use of the services offered by those that exist. Their arrival to Mexicali, therefore, has revitalized these organizations by increasing the demand for their services.

In contrast, nearby cities such as Tijuana, Tecate, and San Luis Río Colorado in far northwestern Sonora along the Baja California border, did not have a historically large Chinese Mexican population, especially not in their founding days. Although the Chinese Mexican population in these cities is now also increasing due to migration from China, just as it is in Mexicali, there does not exist this wealth of community organizations. Especially in the case of Tijuana, which appears to have a slightly wealthier Chinese Mexican population than Mexicali, there is not this wealth of community organizations.

The founding moment of Chinese Mexican pioneers in Mexicali, in addition to the short renaissance of the Chinese Mexican population the mid-1900s, has therefore led to the establishment of some community organizations that persisted through the demographic collapse of the Chinese Mexican population during the 1970s and 1980s. Current poor migrants from China are therefore better served by Chinese Mexican community organizations in Mexicali than are the slightly wealthier migrants in neighboring Tijuana and in other Baja California cities.

Mexicali was populated in its founding years by not just people from other parts of Mexico but also by many people from China. In the early 1900s, due to a favorable immigration policy under Porfirio Díaz and advertisements about work directed at people fleeing poverty in southeast China, many Chinese workers arrived to the barren desert of Mexicali, which had just been founded in 1903. "Push", or supply, factors explaining this migration included the cession of Chinese areas to foreign countries starting in 1842 (Cardiel Marín 1997: 190) due in part to losses in wars against the United Kingdom and against Japan in the 1830s and 1890s. This impact was most acutely felt in Guangdong, a region in southeastern China that has historically sent many migrants to other parts of the world. In addition, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States led to a need for other countries to absorb Chinese migrants (Yen 1985: 291); Mexico was one of those countries. "Pull", or demand, factors explaining this migration included the fact that contributions of Chinese railroad workers in the United States generated interest in Mexico about bringing Chinese laborers into Mexico (Cott 1987: 72). For example, in 1864 Chinese workers began to work on the Ferrocarril Nacional Central (Craib 1996: 6).

Under Porfirio Díaz, both European and Asian labor were encouraged as a way of promoting economic progress (Ota Mishima 1997: 11). At this point, Mexican immigration policy centered on economic interests, which limited the role of xenophobes and racists in immigration debates (Craib 1996: 15). The first Chinese migrants to Baja California arrived in 1877 (Cardiel Marín 1997: 198) and by 1890 had become established in local fishing industries (M.K. Lee n.d.: 1). Background factors were therefore favorable to the migration of a large number of workers from China to areas of Mexico that needed large amounts of manual labor.

Thus, when the Colorado River Land Company formed in California in 1902 to irrigate the Mexicali valley using water from the Colorado River, there was both demand and supply of workers from China. On the U.S. side of the border, called the Imperial Valley, the Colorado

River Land Company was able to attract rich Americans from the east coast to purchase land and provide workers. In Mexico, however, there were not enough rich Mexicans to purchase the land in the Mexicali valley. As a result, there was a need to advertise in China for both buyers and workers (Selwick 2005a). This original stream of Chinese Mexicans in the founding population of Mexicali had economic success in several key industries, including shoe and clothing manufacturing (Cott 1987: 79), agriculture (Hu-DeHart 10), and to a certain extent, commerce (Velázquez 147) in the downtown area along the U.S.-Mexican border.

Estimates of the Chinese Mexican population vary widely. According to the 1921 census there were 2,806 Chinese Mexicans in Baja California, mostly in Mexicali, which at this time had a population of 6,782. Given Baja California's peripheral status to Mexico at the time, both geographically and politically, both these counts may have been far from accurate. According to other estimates, there were 12,000 Chinese Mexicans, of which 10,000 lived in Mexicali (Velázquez 59-60). With such a cluster of Chinese Mexicans in one city, and with economic success relative to the rest of the population in Mexicali, community organizations began to sprout.

Reactions against Chinese Mexicans in northern Mexico

After the 1910 revolution and its rejection of Díaz's accommodating racial policies and other positivist notions carried by Díaz, many Mexicans considered people of Chinese descent to be contrary to a post-revolutionary nation based on the idea of the mestizo (Knight 96). Economic success of Chinese Mexicans, not only in Baja California but elsewhere in northern Mexico, also led to tension. Reactions against Chinese Mexicans started mainly in other areas, including a massacre of half the Chinese Mexican population in Torreón, Coahuila in 1911 (Puig 21), widespread violence in Sonora in the 1910s (Velázquez 72-73), a partial expulsion and

massacre of Chinese Mexicans in Mazatlán, Sinaloa in 1920 (240), and committees against Chinese Mexicans in Sonora and Sinaloa in the 1920s (González Navarro 93). A tax, nevertheless, was placed on Chinese migrants in Baja California starting in 1914 (Craib 1996).

Despite widespread societal violence against Chinese Mexicans and increasing political pressure from the Mexican central government against Chinese Mexicans, Baja California and especially Mexicali became a refuge for Chinese Mexicans during this period. Although Baja California northern district governor Esteban Cantú changed policies throughout his tenure, he largely accepted Chinese Mexicans, and his semi-autonomous *caudillo* status allowed this to occur even despite objections from Mexico's central government (Knight 84).

Community organizations through the 1940s: proliferation and decline

In 1919 there were 28 Chinese Mexican community associations (Velázquez Morales 171), principally business, political, and civic organizations. These formal associations also helped in daily life, helping to secure food, cotton, and other daily needs for its members (Velázquez Morales 173).

The most general community organization in this period was the Asociación China de Mexicali. This organization, founded in 1918, was originally dedicated to business as well as to coordinate Chinese Mexican hometown associations (Auyón 2003: 94). The Asociación China de Mexicali also had an associated civil hospital.

Other organizations were dedicated not to the politics of Mexico, but rather to the politics of China. The masonic Chee Kung Tong, based in China, had a branch in Mexicali starting in 1920 (González Félix 99-101) and were possibly involved in drug trafficking (Velázquez 236). It competed with another similar organization, called Lung Sing. The Chee Kung Tong favored the

Chinese imperial monarchy and so as competition there arose a branch of the nationalist party Guomindang (Velázquez 172).

Although most of these organizations' political activities were related to the politics of China, violence against Chinese Mexicans turned the attention of some of these community organizations toward those of Mexico. After the killings of Chinese Mexicans in 1920 in Sinaloa, a mutual aid association called the Unión Fraternal China denounced these activities (Velázquez 240). It was not successful and only Chinese Mexicans with official government connections were permitted to stay in Sinaloa (Tang Lay 2005).

Even though there was no official expulsion in Baja California, discrimination was pronounced enough that during the 1930s many Chinese Mexicans, including those who were born in Mexico and had parents who were not of Chinese descent, left Mexico (King Domínguez 2004). Official government statistics note that the Chinese Mexican population of Baja California fell from over 3,000 in 1930 to only 618 in 1940 (Ham Chande 181), or about an 80 percent drop. Interpreting this drop using the high estimate of 10,000 for Mexicali that was used for the 1930s, this means that there were still only about 2,000 Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali, which is not trivial but still greatly diminished.

Although the demographic implosion of Chinese Mexicans in Baja California led to the closure of many of these community organizations, some did still remain, even though they would likely not have been created in the first place if the Chinese Mexican population had always been as small as it had been by the 1940s.

Chinese Mexican renaissance through the 1960s

The mid-1900s represented notable rebound in the Chinese Mexican population of Mexicali and other Baja California cities. Starting in the 1940s the Mexican government began to allow the entrance of Chinese refugees fleeing World War II in Asia, as well as others who were fleeing the war between nationalist and communist forces in China. During the 1940s the Chinese Mexican population in Baja California doubled (Ham Chande 180). The establishment of a nationalist Chinese consulate in Mexicali made Mexicali a magnet for both returns of native-born Chinese Mexicans, as well as new migration from China.

The growth in Mexicali's Chinese Mexican population leveled off in the 1960s, and Chinese migration began to tend toward Tijuana. Mexico cut its diplomatic relations with the nationalist government, now on Taiwan, and established diplomatic relations with the communist government on continental Asia (Cummings 2001). The government of China established its new consulate, however, in Tijuana instead of Mexicali. Furthermore, migration flows to both cities were undercut by the U.S. immigration reforms of 1965 that allowed more Asian migration to the United States.

The population began to diminish, however, in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result of the Mexican debt crisis and related economic turmoil, as well as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1990 which allowed still more migration into the United States, many Chinese Mexicans that were in Mexicali moved to Calexico, California on the other side of the U.S.-Mexico border. Only since 2000 has Chinese migration to Mexicali resumed anew (Wong 2005c).

For a while after 1960, Chinese Mexican community organizations continued to stay strong: at the beginning of the 1960s new Chinese Mexican seminaries continued to open, and in the 1970s a school opened to teach art, Chinese culture, and sports to Chinese Mexicans living in downtown Mexicali (Auyón 2003: 107-108).

Post-2000 migration, job choices, and life experiences

Since 2000, new migrants from China to Mexicali come from many of the same areas as before 1960, with perhaps 90% from Guangdong or Hong Kong (Auyón 2004). This situation is represented by the complaint of one man from Shanghai who declared that he feels as if his family is the only Chinese Mexican immigrant family that does not know how to speak Cantonese.

Reasons for this migration are similar to those of other international migrants: as one Chinese Mexican woman explained, Chinese migrants "go where the money is" ("irían donde hay dinero"). As is the case for much of international migration, many of these Chinese Mexicans who have moved to Mexicali since 2000 chose Mexicali in particular because they have relatives already in Mexicali who already worked in businesses that needed more workers, or who have established their own businesses.

Many migrants from China in Mexicali seem to be concentrated in the restaurant industry. Although there is no scientifically rigorous evidence to confirm this passing observation, and although the sampling method for interviewees is almost certainly nonsystematic and nonrandom, of the approximately twenty migrants from China who were interviewed for this project, two-thirds of them worked in restaurants. Yet at the beginning of 2005, for example, in the food court of the Cachanilla shopping mall, there were 30 restaurants in total, and nine Chinese restaurants. By comparison, there was one restaurant serving Japanese cuisine, and one other serving Arab cuisine. These restaurateurs justify their work choice by noting that Mexicali's border location makes it richer than the rest of Mexico, but its location still within Mexico means fewer regulations with which to deal. Notably, many restaurant workers

had jobs far different from the restaurant industry, including casino operator, flight attendant, and statistics student. These backgrounds suggest that there exists a mismatch between the skills offered by these migrants and the opportunities available to these migrants. Another explanation for a concentration in the restaurant industry, less favorable to these migrants, was given by a native-born Chinese Mexican man who has no sympathy toward immigrants: they only know how to cook ("los [inmigrantes] chinos sólo saben cocinar").

Native-born Chinese Mexicans who were interviewed for this project, to be sure, were slightly wealthier, more middle class, and worked in finance and accounting, in administrative organization, or as a teacher, artist, or in the police force.

Residential patterns are extremely segregated. Most of the Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali live near the downtown district called Primera Sección, or in the Monte Albán condominiums immediately southeast of the Primera Sección. One man recounted how, although he lives in the neighboring Segunda Sección, he does not know any other Chinese Mexicans who live there.

Partially as a consequence, but also as a separate matter, immigrant Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali face barriers to access of the public school system. The schools do not make an effort to teach Spanish to Chinese migrants, and as a result many of these migrants are not able to attend these schools. As a result of this situation, one young restaurant worker not of Chinese descent explained that although she works in a Chinese restaurant and is a native of Mexicali, she never saw a single Chinese Mexican in school, and simply thought that Chinese Mexicans attended a separate school system. There is not, however, any legal school segregation: one native-born Chinese Mexican man, born in Mexicali, recounted that when he was a child he attended a school with other Chinese Mexicans and never had any significant problems with racism.

Contemporary organizations in Mexicali

Despite this new migration, the Chinese Mexican population makes up a much smaller portion of the population than it did in the 1910s or 1960s. As of 2001, there were approximately 5,000 Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali (Cummings 2001); out of a population of 764,602 in 2000 (BC 2004), this is less than 1 percent of the population. By comparison, Tijuana also is experiencing a growth in its Chinese Mexican, and Asian Mexican population more generally as well. Fueled by the maquiladora industry more so than Mexicali, Tijuana's Asian Mexican population seems to be better off economically than in Mexicali.

Compared with Chinese Mexicans in Tijuana, Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali seem to have fewer opportunities for cooperation with other Asian population. The Asian Mexican population in Tijuana has roots in more diverse countries than does the Asian Mexican population in Mexicali. In Mexicali, the only other significant Asian group is Japanese Mexicans, and most Chinese Mexicans and Japanese Mexicans who were interviewed commented that they largely do not interact with each other. Even from discussion with organizers of both Chinese Mexican community leaders and Japanese Mexican community leaders, it does not seem that these leaders interact much either.

Yet while Chinese Mexicans in Tijuana, a small yet relatively richer population with more potential for cooperation with other Asian Mexican populations, seem to be ill-served by community organizations (Sun 2004), Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali, a relatively poor, increasingly immigrant-based group with few opportunities for such cooperation, continue to be served by several important community organizations, both general purpose and religious organizations.

As was the case in the 1930s, the most powerful Chinese Mexican community organization in Mexicali is the Asociación China. Its secretary-general, Sun-Pon Wong, has worked for the Asociación China for 40 years, thus circumventing the problem of institutional continuity under the demographic decline of the Chinese Mexican population in Mexicali after the 1960s. It is funded by Chinese Mexican hometown associations (Auyón 2003: 94). Much of its primary work seems to be directed at helping immigrants to obtain Mexican citizenship, a process which takes about one year (Chong 2005), as well as translation services.

There are many critics of this association, considering it corrupt. One man declared that it was a shame the association takes advantage of Chinese migrants and Chinese Mexicans ("Es una vergüenza cuando la gente china se aprovecha de otros chinos"). One woman said simply that the Asociación China was just bad ("La Asociación China es muy malo, ¿no?"). A few restaurant owners and store owners said, often with bitterness, that the Asociación China is a bother: one of them commented that they only want money from the businesses ("Ellos sólo quieren dinero"). This theme, of the greed of the Asociación China, would seem to repeat, as with other organizations, for some other organizations, although not all of them.

On the same street as the Asociación China is the Asociación Chung Shan de Baja California, which serves as an educational center and art center, and as a Buddhist temple. This organization was founded in 1915 (Auyón 2003: 102). Although there used to be many different temples in Mexicali, this is one of the few that continue to serve a wide population. There are others, but which are much simpler, closer to a personal setup in a house (Selwick 2005b). This temple also prepares a dragon head for parades and celebrations.

Both the Asociación China and the Asociación Chung Shan are mainstay Chinese Mexican community organizations. They are some of the few to weather the demographic decline of Chinese Mexicans since the 1960s. Since the 1990s, however, with the new increase

in Chinese migration to Mexicali, a new force has arisen in the Chinese Mexican community: the Baptist church.

There are three religious organizations, all affiliated with the Baptist church, that work with Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali. This is a case not of institutional continuity from the founding moment, but with local societal actors working with external actors to bring new community organizations. Unlike the Asociación China and Asociación Chung Shan, these churches are motivated by the philosophy of provide related services, apart from general religious donations, for free.

The first of these is a mission of the First Chinese Baptist Church in Los Angeles. In 1989, an old mestizo Mexican pastor in Mexicali wrote to this Los Angeles church, arguing for the need to provide religious services to the Chinese Mexican community (Mexicali Ministry 2005). As of 2005, a missionary named Karlson Poon works in Mexicali; although he lives in El Centro, California, to the north of Calexico, he began his missionary work in Mexicali in 2004, offering services in the Monte Albán condominiums on Calzada de los Presidentes. Services are held in an empty apartment that the mission rents in order to provide services (Poon 2005). Health and hygiene informational services, along with other acculturation services, as held by the mission as well.

A church on Encinas Avenue in Calexico, California serves a congregation that includes many people, including children, of Chinese ancestry born in Mexicali. This church's youth group consists of many youths who were born in Mexicali and who now live in Calexico. One of the goals of this youth group is to conduct outreach and community services to people in Mexicali. In the past, this church also provided English classes to Mexicans, including Chinese Mexicans, in Mexicali. They rented a room in the building of the Asociación China, but this arrangement did not work out between the two parties.

The third religious organization is, finally, actually based in Mexicali: the Iglesia Bautista Bethel, on Calle "A" in the Primera Sección. When it was constructed in 1993, it was established as a church that would welcome Mexicans of all ethnicities, particularly because Chinese Mexicans were not being given an opportunity for religious practice. This church draws a congregation from both Calexico and Mexicali, and services are held in Spanish with some Cantonese. Its strong commitment to the Chinese Mexican population has alienated some non-Chinese Mexicans, which is perfectly fine with the pastor, who is a mestizo Mexican.

Conclusion

A combination of historical institutionalism and outside linkages helps to explain the existence of Chinese Mexican community organizations in Mexicali. The outside linkages certainly help to some degree to explain the existence of religious organizations for Chinese Mexicans; in addition, these churches have also been able to perform some non-religious community services.

The continued existence of these older general-purpose organizations, however, must be explained through a historical institutionalist framework that notes the persistence of institutions set up by a historically flourishing Chinese Mexican community, well after that community diminished in number. The combination of these older general purpose organizations and these newer churches has provided Chinese Mexicans in Mexicali with services from Chinese Mexican community organizations while Chinese Mexicans in Tijuana and other nearby cities continue to lack access to such community organizations.

Appendix: Several Chinese Mexican community organizations near Mexicali

- 1 Asociación China de Mexicali Avenida Juárez 120, Zona Centro, Mexicali, B.C. 21100
+52 (686) 552-4651
- 2 Asociación Chung Shan Avenida Juárez 132, Zona Centro, Mexicali, B.C. 21100
+52 (686) 552-9705
- 3 First Chinese Baptist Church 702 Encinas Avenue, Calexico, CA 92231
+1 (760) 357-6333
- 4 Iglesia Bautista Bethel Calle "A" 161, Segunda Sección, Mexicali, B.C. 21100
+52 (686) 554-2166
- 5 Mexicali Baptist Mission Condominios Monte Albán 408, Calz. de los Presidentes,
Zona Centro, Mexicali, B.C. 21100

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