**Chinese Migration into Latin America – Diaspora or Sojourns in Peru?**
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While teaching my Migration in World History course I became interested in the distinctions in the literature between the kinds of migration. The movement of people is as old as our history so there is much to consider when looking at the motivations, causes, and opportunities that prompt people to move vs. stay put where they are. Economic factors, both the push of hardship and the pull of new options for betterment, are often cited. War, civil unrest and invasions have accounted for the dispersal of populations. Of course politics are intricately mixed into both economics and warfare and social discrimination based on religion or ethnic differences is often cited as a factor for people to move.

Within the literature, however, there are 2 terms – diaspora and sojourning that are often used to denote the distinction between voluntary and involuntary movements of peoples. My goal here is to look at the traditional and evolving use of these terms in the context of both modern World History with special reference to the case of Chinese migration to Peru in the 19th century. [Note that this is part of a larger study to also look at Chinese in other parts of Latin America and to consider questions of “place and space” as part of migration and the trans-national status of Chinese into this same region since the mid-19th century]

Originally used to describe the repeated scattering of Jewish populations, the term diaspora has evolved to incorporate a range of other people who have been seen to share similar misfortunes. The African diaspora (Gilroy, 1993) comes immediately to mind. Robin Cohen (Cohen, 1997a, 1997b) offers an easily grasped definition of the term used in this way by looking as key features:
1. forced dispersal
2. communal suffering
3. uneasy even hostile relations with the host community
4. retained sense of group identity through cultural aspects [language, foods, religion]
5. a longing for or goal to return to a homeland

It is also easy to see how this definition or at least parts of it could be used to describe and help us understand the dispersal of Chinese peoples.

Wang Gung-wu, however, argues that the term diaspora is misused in reference to Chinese, especially those who moved into the regions of Southeast Asia. Wang argues that Chinese are more accurately described as “sojourners.” (Wang, 1991, 1993) He points out that while Chinese tend to retain their cultural aspects, a group identity, and often have uneasy relations with the host community, their dispersal is often NOT forced and ties with the homeland are often retained over many generations. He uses the case of the overseas or “huaqiao” in Southeast Asia to support his points and argues that the application of the diaspora terminology is misleading when discussing the Chinese example.

Adam McKeown (McKeown, 1999, 2001) also challenges the usefulness of the traditional definition of diaspora when applied to Chinese migration. [In all fairness to Cohen, she also points out the questionable usefulness of using rigid application of the definition even to the Jewish experience, pointing out that many Jews willingly migrated throughout the Roman Empire in search of economic betterment and that many assimilated into their host communities.] McKeown, in his article “Conceptualizing Chinese Diaspora, 1842-1949” takes the position that “using diaspora as a category that can be used to define and describe social groups is not as desirable as the development of
a diasporic perspective that can direct the analysis of geographically dispersed institutions, identities, links and flows.” (McKeown, 1999, 307) He also argues that by focusing on the dispersal of institutions, identities, links and flows we can get a more global perspective on the narratives of Chinese migration. This point of the global significance of Chinese migration will be returned to when looking at the cases of Peru and Chile below.

If the definition of diaspora takes on new meaning in the context of globalization, what about that of the sojourner? In the mid 20th century, Paul Siu’s scholarship on Chinese Americans, (Siu, 1952, 34) characterizes the sojourner as one “who clings to the culture of his own ethnic group… unwilling to organize himself as a permanent resident in the country of his sojourn.” If that shift in identify does occurs, argues Siu, then the person becomes marginal within both the context of his country of origin and the country of his sojourn. In Global History and Migration, Wang Gung-wu modifies this rather essentialized definition of the soujourners to give them a more dynamic sense of place. Sojourners, says Wang, self identify as temporary migrants who retain cultural and family ties with their native places. (Wang, 1997, 2) Many Chinese sojourners after years, even generations, in Southeast Asia choose to become immigrants, as did Wang’s family when Malaya experienced the post-colonial nation building opportunities as Britain Asian empire unraveled after world war II. They were already a vital part of their sojourn communities with significant political and economic roles far from the marginal character Siu describes. In spite of this, in the wake of independence, many Chinese families became targets of retribution by the local majority population. Anthony Reid’s edited work Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese offers a

Whether we look at Chinese as sojourners or as diasporic peoples, however, still fails to get at the global nature of their movement. As noted above, (McKowen, 1999, 307, McKowen, 2001 1-24) stories of Chinese migrants tend to be told in the context of the nation-state where they find themselves. We Americans are all familiar with the stories of how the Chinese were lured to the gold rush in California and then helped build the trans-continental railroad, etc. In other words, the story of Chinese Americans is told as part of our national history and the same is true for the coolie labor that worked the sugar plantations in the Caribbean, built the railroads in Panama, northern Mexico and Canada, etc. Even contemporary 19th century observers pressed the point of view, whether it was true or not, that the Chinese were immigrants into a state that was fully or at least predominately cohesive with its own historical identity. Chinese were clearly outsiders and this became most evident with the Asian Exclusion Acts starting in 1882. Such treatment, however, still lacks a global perspective from which to assess the nature of Chinese migration in the Americas. In an effort to remedy this, I’ll now turn attention to the case of the first Chinese workers to go to Peru asking questions about their status as sojourners, migrants, or diasporic people in the context of mid-19th century
nation building in post colonial Latin America and in the context of a globalizing labor market.

The Global Context

We are all familiar with the modernization narrative that puts Western Europe, especially Great Britain, as the economic powerhouse of the planet starting in the late 18th century because of its being first to industrialize. Insightful scholars also point out the agricultural revolution that preceded it as helping to increase labor the supply of labor who then were employed in the new mill towns and foundries. Hand and glove with the new industrialization can the need for raw materials suppliers and soon there after the need for outlet markets of the newly machine produced goods. This gave rise to the scramble for new colonies and conquest that we historians label the new imperialism. One of the essentials for success as an imperial power depended on the availability of large quantities of nitrates – not only as an element in increasing agricultural production but also as a critical element in the manufacture of explosives. The planetary natural nitrogen cycle offered limited amounts. Farmers had long ago figured out that manure, human, animal and plant, enriched their crops and increased their yields. But there was a limited amount of nitrates from these traditional sources. It is not a stretch to say that the growing demand for more technologies of war that gave imperialist states control over peoples and resources in Africa, Asia, and the Americas was limited by the amount of available nitrates. Most everyone knew what made things explode. Scientists also knew that nitrogen was a component of air but didn’t yet know how to extract it in a usable form. “Paradoxically,” says Robert Marks in his Origins of the Modern World, “both the size of the global human population and its ability to conduct modern warfare depended
on and were limited by…naturally occurring deposits of nitrates, mostly in the form of bat and bird guano.” (Marks 2007, 158) So it is not far off the mark to say that European dominance was launched on a firm foundation of shit – bird guano from millennia old deposits. These deposits were minded from islands off the coast of Peru by Chinese indentured labors. It is the recruitment, transport and conditions of employment Chinese laborers in Peru between 1849 and 1880s that I will be exploring next while trying on for size the application of concepts of diaspora and sojourning.

The obvious question is: why not use local labor to do the mining? Initially, they did use local labor, both slave and native workers. Peru was the last Spanish colony to gain its independence in 1824. Soon after independence, fertile coastal river valleys were worked by foreign and local investors growing sugar, cotton and cochineal, an insect noted for its red dye properties. By 1840 the guano beds were being profitably mined for both local and export markets with rapidly increase in demand. Economic growth also brought demands for internal improvements such as canals, harbors, telegraphs, and railroads. It soon became evident that there was not enough labor to accomplish these tasks. (Stewart 1951, 4) Estimates are that Peru’s population at this time was around 2.5 million with probably 70% either pure or mix blooded Indian. These people tended to live mainly in the highlands and tended to avoid labor in mines and agriculture as much as possible but their labor was regularly exploited by European descended mine and plantation owners. At the time slavery was abolished until 1854, there were an estimated 17,000 African slaves, mostly working in the plantations in the coastal regions a practice that had been common during the colonial period. The 30 year lapse between independence and emancipation likely speaks to the shortage of labor. The post-colonial
attitude leftover from Spanish rule also seemed to make many indisposed to work.

Writing in the Callao and Lima Gazette in Nov. of 1871 one critiques of this situation opines that “It cannot have escaped the notice of observant men, native and foreign, much less of those who form the hiring class among us, what a vast number of the population idle away their time.” (quoted in Stewart, 1951)

It is into this context that the first Chinese indentured laborers arrived in Peru in 1949. It started with the introduction of a bill in the Chamber of Deputies by Manuel E. de la Torre, in 1847 to encourage immigration. The bill authorized the executive to make 10 year contracts with capitalists and landowners who wanted to bring in foreigners. Those bringing in foreigners were to be given 4 tons of guano for each worker brought in. Such workers would be free of taxes and, after the contracts were completed, granted 25 acres of land. This bill failed. However, a survey was conducted to determine the labor needs and acceptable terms. Pushed by Domingo Elias, a prominent business leader in Lima, a general immigration law was passed in Nov. 1849. Its main purpose was to promote the influx of Chinese labor and quickly became known by supporters and opponents alike as the “Chinese Law.” (Stewart, 12-13) From then until 1874, nearly 100,000 Chinese coolies were transported to Peru.

The American missionary and diplomat in China, Samuel Wells Williams, wrote in his 1848 history of China that the people of Guangdong and Fujian provinces’ were in his estimation more educated, skilled mechanically and enterprising. (Stewart 15-16) He estimated that between 1850 and 1875 around 300,000 coolies were carried away. He carefully made the distinction between free workers who went to California and Australia and the coolies who went as contract laborers to Peru, Cuba, Panama, and Brazil, etc.
Most of this contracting was done by British companies such as Muir and Russell at times using the notorious TRUCK system using goods rather than money to secure contract. Ships’ captains through his broker hired runners to recruit coolie workers mostly in the coastal regions of south and southeast China but also among Chinese communities in other parts of SE Asia. These runners received a price for each signed contract and person they presented to the broker. The indentured worker was supposedly interviewed by the ship’s captain to confirm the voluntary signing and comprehension of the contract. Often, however, runners were known to have “Shanghaied” their victims, having gotten them drunk and then have a stand-in do the interview with the captain.

[mention the God of Luck Ruthann Lum McCunn – one line reviews calls it a story of diaspora another 2 call it a form of slavery] Other Chinese signed contracts in hopes of escaping the hardships of China in the wake of the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion, both events world historical import.

The first group of 75 so-called “colonists” from China arrived in October 1849 a month before the official passage of the “Chinese Law.” Peruvians who had pressed for the law were, however, paid the bounty for bringing in the workers. In the first decade it is estimated that around 13,000 coolies embarked for Amoy alone. Not all who made the trip survived the passage and many arrived ill and weakened to the point of being unable to immediately begin work. Ships that carried them became know as “floating hells.” While British regulations required 12 square feet per man, these rules could not be enforced in Hong Kong resulting in 8 or less sq. ft. per person. The voyage across the Pacific was long and difficult. Rations were few and medical care mostly non-existent. These early human cargos experienced high rates of mortality. Two ships that left Macao
for Callao in 1850 started with 750 coolies; by the time they landed there were only 304 and loss of 33%. Harsh conditions did meet with resistance. More than once Chinese mutinied against cruel captains. Only the loss of profit to Peruvian capitalists from reduced numbers of foreign workers resulted in improved conditions for the voyages by the mid-1850s.

Early indenture contracts were for 5 years (this later became 8 years) from the date the contract was signed and any time off for illness was added to the length. Chinese were to do any work their patron or master asked of them and could not move without permission. The advance given to the worker in China was to be paid back at the rate of 1 paso a month out of a 4 paso earnings from which the worker was to provide his own clothes. The patron also was obliged to feed and give medical care so long as the illness or injury did not result from the worker’s bad conduct. (Stewart, 19)

For Chinese mining the guano beds, conditions were especially bad. A British observer wrote that “no hell has ever been conceived by the Hebrew, the Irish, the Italians, or even the Scotch mind for appeasing the anger and satisfying the vengeance of their awful gods, that can be equaled in the fierceness of its heat, the horror of its stench, and the damnation of those compelled to labor there, to a deposit of Peruvian guano when being shoveled into ships.” (Duffield, 1877) Another British witness of the period tells of the rations fed to the workers in late morning after 6 hours of work and that each man was “compelled to clear from four to five tons of guano a day.” (Cole, 1877) These conditions took a serious toll on the health of the coolies. Many worked even though ill and at any given time as many a one-third might be in hospital. (Stewart, 97).
Most Chinese contract workers never returned to China. The guano ran out about the same time as an international outcry in 1887 against the conditions just described. The last of these early contracts expired in by the 1880s. As guano deposits dwindled, more Chinese labor was moved to the sugar plantations. In this setting the work was still harsh but many also worked as household servants and artisans. Others worked to build the Andean Railroad. Treatment on the plantations was similar to that administered to African slaves. (Pan 1999, 254) When War of the Pacific [1879-82] broke out between Chile and Peru in, some coolies sided with the invading Chilean army against their plantation owners. Opium use was encouraged and was a regular part of the Truck wages.

Some Chinese who finished their contracts stayed and began commercial operations in urban areas such as Lima. Since Chinese women were not part of the contract system for the guano mining, although some did come to work on plantations, most of the men who stayed married into the local native populations. Official estimates of Chinese populations in coastal in 1887 was 8,503 ex-contact coolies working for wages. Another 1,182 were re-contracted workers and 838 were listed as part of Chinese run labor gangs. There were a handful of shopkeepers, sharecroppers, and innkeepers and even one ex-coolie turned planter with 80-90 free Chinese working for him. (Pan, 255)

The question to ponder now is whether these people can best be described as part of a 19th century global labor diaspora or are the sojourners? Or more likely it depends on which end of the telescope one peers through. For the global perspective, these workers are clearly part of a growing demand for labor in the 19th century. Harnessing their labor
was as important, nay, essential, to the reach for raw materials needed to feed the new economic processes. If the African slave trade qualifies as a diaspora, then the coolie trade can hardly be excluded. From the perspective of those Chinese who signed or were shanghaied into indenture contracts, they more likely self identified as sojourners with plans to return home at the end of their contracts. Much worse for the ware, those who survived their contracts and did not return ended up in circumstances more akin to that of a typical diasporic community. Both by choice and by dent of the hostility from the local elites, Chinese in Peru and in other parts of Latin America

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