

Robert Chao Romero. *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. xii + 254 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2772-4.

Reviewed by Fredy González (Yale University)

Published on H-LatAm (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



Moving across the Transnational Commercial Orbit

Robert Chao Romero's *The Chinese in Mexico*, the first English-language monograph on the subject, makes an important contribution to the existing literature on the topic of immigration and race in Mexican history. Previous work on the Mexican Chinese has mostly highlighted the 1930s anti-Chinese violence in the northern part of the country. Romero departs from this historiography by focusing instead on the economic links that the Chinese in Mexico maintained with other regions of the Americas as well with home communities in Guangzhou. In addition, he offers a substantive social history of the pre-1940 Chinese community in Mexico. His work argues that the Chinese in Mexico were not passive victims of anti-Chinese violence and instead possessed a greater amount of agency than previously acknowledged. In both the United States and Mexico, the Chinese took concrete steps to resist and adapt to anti-Chinese movements and legislation.

Central to Romero's work is the transnational commercial orbit, an economic network created by the Chinese on both sides of the Pacific and extended to Mexico after the passage of the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. It allowed the Chinese to smuggle and recruit migrant labor, collect capital for investment, and import goods for sale to Chinese businesses, all "in resistance, and adaptation, to the Chinese exclusion laws" (p. 5). The transnational commercial orbit helps explain why, after the Chinese Exclusion Act, Mexico would become

an important nexus in the Chinese migrant networks of North America and the Caribbean. One aspect of this was the practice of substitution, in which Chinese workers who landed at U.S. ports of entry and obtained a transit visa en route to Cuba or Mexico switched places with Chinese merchants already based in the United States. By exchanging an undocumented Chinese migrant for a documented one, Chinese workers circumvented immigration restrictions under the Exclusion Act. The practice required coordination between Chinese communities across the Americas. In his discussion, Romero makes a case for the significance of the Chinese community in Mexico to other Asian migrations to the Americas.

Romero's attention to the transnational commercial orbit requires his work to shift between places as distant as Tai Shan and Hermosillo, San Francisco and Havana. *The Chinese in Mexico* moves gracefully between communities across the Pacific and North America. He traces the path that migrants took from communities of origin in Guangzhou to northern Mexico, suggesting that migration to Mexico had as much to do with international developments outside China and Mexico as with "push" and "pull" factors prominent in earlier migration studies, and that Chinese Mexicans were not isolated from the larger Chinese diaspora. Chapter 3 sheds light on the mechanisms that facilitated migration to Mexico, including labor recruitment and smuggling as well as family- and clan-based chain migration, while separately ana-

lyzing the different parts of the country in which the Chinese settled. Romero subsequently provides an in-depth portrait of the Chinese community in Mexico, and gives us an idea of how Mexicans reacted to the influx of Chinese immigrants. An examination of gender and relationships between Chinese women and Mexican men, as well as the reaction of nativists to these relationships and their offspring is followed by a study of the commercial and business practices that allowed Chinese migrants to prosper in Mexico. Chapter 6 examines the resulting anti-Chinese movement as a movement that “sought to end the Chinese commercial monopoly and eliminate the Chinese small businessman, with whom Mexican merchants could not effectively compete” (p. 188). With many forced to flee their homes and businesses, the Chinese population in Mexico declined substantially during the 1930s.

Romero’s sources provide ample support for his argument. Part of his contribution to the history of the Chinese in Mexico is the incorporation of two sets of sources, the Chinese Exclusion Act case files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the 1930 Mexican municipal census manuscripts. Romero has helped fill a lacunae in Mexican sources on the Chinese community through the clever use of U.S. sources, not only the INS files but also U.S. consular reports, which allow us to further understand the Chinese community and the Chinese immigrants from their own perspective. The Chinese Exclusion Act case files, presumably data on those who sought to use the merchant exception and other legal means to enter the United States, provide individual histories of members of the Chinese community in Mexico. Interviews conducted by INS agents provide Chinese voices in Mexican history, which has been rare up to now. Census manuscripts allowed Romero to look closely at representative Mexican municipalities in Sonora and Chihuahua with significant Chinese populations. Where other studies have used Mexican census records to give an idea of what states and territories were destinations for Chinese immigrants, Romero goes into greater depth, looking at the industries where the Chinese worked, the means by which they started and op-

erated businesses, and migrants who were able to send for their relatives. The sources support Romero’s assertion that Chinese merchants were more than simply petit bourgeois merchants and included a number of landless workers.

In contrast to previous works on the Chinese in Mexico, Romero explores the migrants’ potential for assimilation and acculturation. He argues that they “experienced much higher levels of acculturation to mainstream Mexican society than their diasporic counterparts in the United States during this same time period” (p. 115). In addition to participation in Mexican civil and military institutions and associations, Romero sees marrying Mexican women and naturalizing as Mexican citizens as evidence of assimilation. In the United States they were legally barred from doing both. Merchants became Mexican citizens at higher rates than urban and rural workers, a fact that leads to the conclusion that the former had a higher rate of assimilation. Romero’s argument challenges earlier scholarship that argues that the anti-Chinese movements occurred partially because the Chinese were socially isolated from their Mexican neighbors and unwilling to assimilate into Mexican culture. Merchants had other reasons to seek Mexican citizenship, however, such as the belief that it might shelter them from the effects of the Mexican labor law of 1931. The sources that Romero has at his disposal make it difficult for him to find further evidence of assimilation, which is unfortunate since the issue of assimilation is an important one, central to the Asian Latino identity that Romero alludes to in his conclusion.

This minor point, however, does not detract from the substantial contribution the author has made to the historiography of immigration to Mexico. The book provides a clear and straightforward picture of the Chinese community in Mexico. Chapter 4, “Gender, Interracial Marriage, and Transnational Families,” would fit particularly well in a course on race and ethnicity in Mexico. The book as a whole would be a valuable resource for an undergraduate course on Mexican history or Asian American studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Fredy González. Review of Romero, Robert Chao, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32185>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.