

# The Historical Trajectory and Cultural Integration of Chinese Immigrants in Peru

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the historical trajectory and cultural integration of Chinese immigrants in Peru, tracing their journey from the era of coolie labor in the mid-19th century to their modern-day contributions to Peruvian society. The study examines the socio-economic and political factors that facilitated large-scale Chinese migration, particularly the enactment of the Chinese Law in 1849 and the subsequent phases of immigration. The research also highlights the harsh conditions faced by Chinese workers, their struggles for survival and adaptation, and their eventual assimilation into Peruvian society through intermarriage, economic ventures, and cultural exchange. By analyzing key historical events, government policies, and social transformations, this paper demonstrates how Chinese immigrants transitioned from an exploited labor force to a well-integrated and influential community within Peru. Their enduring presence has significantly shaped Peru's economy, culture, and social landscape, exemplifying a complex yet successful model of cross-cultural integration.*

**Keywords:** Chinese immigration, Peru, Coolie trade, Cultural integration.

## 1. Introduction

Since Columbus' discovery of the New World, Europeans have transported a steady stream of labourers from Africa to the plantations of the Americas to perform all kinds of extremely hard forced labour. By the nineteenth century, slavery had been abolished in Peru. At the same time, this led to a shortage of labour on the plantations of the Americas. Thus, they turned to another continent, sending Chinese workers—coolies—to the haciendas on the Peruvian coast.

The wave of Chinese migration to Peru dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and continues to the present day. Chinese immigrants and their descendants became an important part of Peruvian society, bringing not only labour but also a new cultural and social dynamic to the country. Today, people of Chinese descent constitute a notable portion of Peru's population. They are active in the restaurant and retail sectors and play significant roles in Peruvian cities, especially Lima, as businessmen, politicians, economists, and lawyers.

This article will focus on the different phases of Chinese migration to Peru, starting with the enactment of the China Law (also known as "La Ley China") in 1849, with the aim of analysing the socio-economic and historical contexts that led to the migration, the difficult experiences of the Chinese workers in the drudgery trade, as well as the gradual evolution of the relationship between China and Peru. By exploring these themes, this article will attempt to reveal how this migration has influenced the cultural and economic fabric of Peru, as well as discussing the integration of the Chinese in Peruvian society.

## 2. The Enactment of the Chinese Law and the Beginning of Immigration to Peru

Peru is home to a large population of Chinese origin. The Chinatown in the capital, Lima, is the second largest in the world after Los Angeles. According to Eugenio Chang-Rodriguez, the presence of Chinese immigrants in

Peru can be traced back to the era following Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492. The immigrants of this period are known as sangleyes, the name given to the Chinese who lived in the Philippines during colonial times. However, large-scale, organized and officially recorded immigration began in the nineteenth century, more precisely in 1849.

During the 19th century, Latin American countries declared their independence one after the other. Peru also became independent in 1821 when it freed itself from Spanish colonial rule. By the mid-19th century, Peru's economic development was largely stable, although it was often interrupted by civil or foreign wars. The coast was covered with sugar cane and cotton plantations, and the demand for these products was growing daily. Much guano from the coastal islands was being extracted and exported to other countries, as the value of this fertilizer was becoming more and more evident to the country. In addition, Peru was building canals and railways.

All these activities required a significant labor force. During this period, there was a growing global movement advocating for the abolition of slavery, and various countries and regions issued decrees to end the practice of human trafficking. This shift led to a substantial reduction in the availability of laborers of African descent in Peru. In 1854, slavery of African descent people was officially abolished in Peru. To address the resulting labor shortage, the Peruvian government initiated efforts to recruit immigrants from China, following a similar approach adopted by Cuba in 1845 (van der Hoef, 2015: 17).

On 17 November 1849, the president of Peru at that time, Ramon Castilla, enacted an immigration law to facilitate and protect the attraction of foreign immigrants. However, the main result of the law was the introduction of a large number of Chinese workers, hence the name "The Chinese Law". This law stipulated that immigrants must be between 10 and 40 years old. For each immigrant brought in, a bounty of 30 pesos was paid by the Peruvian treasury.

Thus began the mass transport of Chinese workers, for which they were called "coolies" (from the Chinese word 苦力 or

küli, meaning workers hired to do heavy labour). The law was pushed through by the Castilian government and large landowners such as Domingo Elías, who were the first to participate in and profit from the coolie trade (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 63-64). From the year of the abolition of slavery in Peru, 1854 - five years after the arrival of the first Chinese workers - the demand for labour in Peru increased.

At the time, China was reeling from the devastation of the First Opium War. When the war ended in 1842, China and Britain signed the Treaty of Nanjing, which made Hong Kong a British colony and forced China to open its ports to international trade. The Qing government's policy of severely restricting Chinese access to the sea and protecting the country's trade crumbled, while a series of unequal treaties were signed that further increased the tax burden on the local population. At the same time, the Tàipíng Tiānguó movement (Taiping Rebellion), which lasted for more than a decade, spread across the southern provinces of China, with successive armed battles and local revolts in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Armed mobs swept through villages, looting government houses and granaries, causing tens of thousands of casualties and material losses. Chinese society was in a state of crisis and people were in extreme poverty. Opium consumption was widespread in China at the time and many people were left with huge debts. Millions of Chinese were desperate to migrate to another country to find a new life (Stewart, 2018: 11).

According to Rodríguez Pastor, the Chinese Law was not precise or rigorous enough. On the contrary, it was approved without much discussion, on the impulse of the Elías. Pastor refers to the opinion of Jorge Pío, a commentator in *El Comercio*. He argued that this law had not been passed for the development of Peruvian society as the government claimed, but to satisfy the selfish desires of the landowners represented by Elías. "The Yellow Trade" has become a total business.

The Chinese were transported on cargo ships as labour and then sold. Excluding on-board expenses, the importer could sell a coolie to the haciendas for a profit of between 200 and 300 dollars (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 72). We should also bear in mind that almost all the Chinese who boarded the ships to Peru's ports were captured, forced or tricked. There were special barracks in Hong Kong, Macao and Xiamen to imprison Chinese workers. Swindlers and kidnappers were employed to trick and sell them in the trading ports and even in the fields. Before boarding, the Chinese would receive a small advance from the traffickers, usually just a few dollars and not always for everyone, and then sign a contract. This contract was only a formality and was not fully enforced, nor did it guarantee the rights of the Chinese (Stewart, 2018: 26-29).

In one of the published criticisms of the Chinese law, Pío points out that Elías had already begun to bring in Chinese immigrants before the publication of the Chinese law in November 1849. The Danish ship Frederick Wilhelm left the port of Consigmoon in Hong Kong on 7 June and arrived in the port of Callao in October of the same year, bringing 75 of the first coolies to Peru. Elías received a subsidy of five thousand pesos (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 66). This demonstrates the unquestionable political and economic

influence of this landowner. Villafuerte points out that the abolition of slavery was not the only reason why the Peruvian government decided to introduce coolies. Other reasons include the reduction of indigenous labour on the large haciendas in the coastal areas due to illness and ageing, as well as the abolition of the tribute imposed on the indigenous population, etc. (Alonso Paroy Villafuerte, 2012: 128).

### 3. The Journey of Chinese Migrants on the Boats and Their Work in Peru

The ships took 120-150 days to reach the port of Callao from Macau. These ships carrying Chinese labourers were the same as the earlier cargo ships carrying goods from China to America. Their conditions on board were very harsh. The coolies were housed in cramped cabins, out of sight of the sun and guarded by special men. Ventilation, hygiene and food conditions were extremely poor. Food and water were often scarce, infectious diseases were common, and they were subjected to violence by the crew. As they did not speak Spanish, they were also unable to express their needs or protest. Poor conditions on board meant that many people died at sea or tried to escape. This also led to revolts and riots by the Chinese on board. These causes led to an average shipboard mortality rate of almost 10 per cent (Alonso Paroy Villafuerte, 2012: 129). Between 1860 and 1863, the annual mortality rate was even higher than 30%. These are only the recorded figures. We must also take into account that there were also illegal transports for which no data were kept. Therefore, the actual mortality rate may have been even higher.

Between 1849 and 1854, 24 ships arrived at the port of Callao from China (van der Hoef, 2015: 18). Once in port, the Chinese were transported to various locations. Most were booked before they disembarked, and the rest were sold as merchandise. When they got off the ship, their braids were cut off, their clothes were changed and they were sold in the men's market. Although children were not allowed on board, there were always Chinese boys and girls on these ships. They worked in the homes of local landowners, doing domestic chores. At first, encouraged by the policies of the Castilian government, these Chinese worked for the two most important landowners: Domingo Elías and Juan Rodríguez. They were the first introducers of Chinese immigrants (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 72).

In general, the Chinese were engaged in three types of work: farming on the haciendas, usually sugar cane or cotton, guano on the islands, or building railways. A small group of Chinese also worked in the rubber forests of the Amazon. Contracts usually lasted for 8 years. After that, these people could sign a new contract or move to a neighbouring village and set up a retail shop. These Chinese, who eventually settled in Peru, provided valuable labour to the local haciendas, railways or jungles and made a significant contribution to the country's economic development.

The lives of the coolies who worked on the haciendas were very difficult. They lived in shacks in precarious conditions, had to work 10 to 12 hours a day and were paid only one peso for a week's work, while the hacienda owners provided them with just enough food to survive. In these poor conditions,

there was no shortage of people committing suicide, running away or rebelling. Some even set fire to freshly harvested crops (Alonso Paroy Villafuerte, 2012: 131-132).

On the guano islands, the labor conditions for coolies were even harsher and more perilous. There was no technology to assist in the collection of guano and it was done entirely by raw labour. The climate on these islands was extremely hot and humid for most of the year and rainfall was scarce, making it an inhuman ordeal to work so intensely in such extreme conditions. There was also a lack of adequate food and drinking water, while the coolies were brutally mistreated by the harsh guards. Many Chinese retained the habit of smoking opium at home, which temporarily relieved them of the heavy workload. They believed that the narcotics would bring them back to their homeland or help them ascend to heaven. Because of the Chinese workers' dependence on opium, the landowners and guano factory bosses even found ways to import opium as a reward or punishment. Excessive opium consumption also contributed to the high mortality rate of Chinese labourers (Stewart, 2018: 80-84).

Due to the poor transport conditions, the fact that the contracts were not legally binding, and the harsh working conditions, some researchers refer to the transport of the coolies as neo-slavery. Rodríguez Pastor argues that the term semi-slavery is more relevant than neo-slavery, for three reasons: first, the Chinese and the manager signed a contract (although the conditions written in the contract differed from the actual ones). Second, the contract had a duration of eight years. At the end of the contract, the Chinese were free to leave the hacienda or the place where they worked. Finally, Peruvian society did not support the continuation of slavery. Furthermore, the Chinese were free to retain their original religious beliefs and were not obliged to convert to Catholicism.

#### **4. Prohibition and Reactivation of the Transport of the Coolies**

The numerous atrocities and strong criticism surrounding the importation of Chinese labor compelled the Peruvian government to intervene. The Peruvian government issued decrees in both 1853 and 1854 to improve the situation of the coolies, but they were not very successful (Stewart, 2018: 17). In 1856, seven years after the coolie transport began, the Peruvian government repealed the Chinese Law and banned the yellow transport. Part of this decree read:

"...four months from this date (7 March 1856) the introduction of Asian settlers by means of indentures and in the cruel and violent manner in which it has been carried out to date is prohibited."

This means that the Peruvian government was already aware of the conditions under which the coolies were being transported and the inhumane conditions in which they were working. After the decree was issued, five more ships carrying Chinese workers arrived in the port of Callao. One year later, in July 1857, the first phase of the Sino-Peruvian migration came to an end (van der Hoef, 2015: 19; Castro de Mendoza, 1989: 28).

In 1858 and 1859, there were no new ships from China to Peru. The traffic of coolies continued in China, as Cuba did not stop receiving Chinese immigrants. The demand for labour continued, and in 1860 the Peruvian government signed a series of special permits to bring in more Chinese immigrants. Most of these were granted to hacienda owners. At the same time, the government passed a law requiring hacienda owners to hire Chinese workers directly, rather than having them contract with traders first. In addition, the law required the improvement of shipping conditions (Castro de Mendoza, 1989: 43). Compared to the Chinese Law, this law was a breakthrough in the protection of Chinese rights. The process of introducing Chinese immigrants was more strictly controlled. For example, this law stipulated that the number of deaths during the voyage had to be recorded. Between 1860 and 1874, 218 ships arrived in Peru from the port of Macau (van der Hoef, 2015: 21).

By 1874, Peru was already making a bad international impression, with reports of overcrowding, lack of food, disease and violence during the transport of the Chinese workers. In the same year, a series of documents were presented to the Portuguese royal family detailing the actual conditions in which Chinese coolies worked on the haciendas, the extreme conditions in which they collected guano on the Chincha Islands, and the high mortality rate during the voyage. Although the governments of both Macau and Peru regulated the transport of Chinese and their working conditions, they were unable to stop the abuses in the yellow trade.

On 20 December 1873, the Minister of the Navy and Overseas Territories issued a regulation prohibiting the emigration of Chinese for hire. This regulation declared: "The Governor of Macau and Timor is hereby ordered to prohibit the emigration of Chinese for hire from the port of Macau City, and to adopt analogous provisions in the English colony of Hong Kong". On 27 March 1874, the transport of coolies was officially banned. With the arrival in Peru of the last ship, the *Lola*, carrying Chinese, on 2 July of the same year, the yellow trade from China to Peru came to an end, and the Macau organisations involved in migration to Peru closed down or moved on to other activities. It was time for free immigration (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 45).

Thus, in general, in the 25 years between 1849 and 1874, due to a lack of labour and a desire to develop its economy, Peru collected labour from China and transported them to Callao or other ports. During this period, 247 ships transported 91,052 Chinese to Peru (Castro de Mendoza, 1989: 67). These are only the officially recorded figures. It is reasonable to assume that the actual number was much higher. It is worth noting that about half of the immigrants arrived in Peru in the last five years before the ban on Chinese immigration. Ninety-five per cent of them came from Guangdong, and the rest of Macao and Hong Kong.

#### **5. Free Immigration and New Immigrants at the End of the 20th Century**

In June 1874, Peru and China signed the "Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation", also known as the Treaty of Tien Tsin, to guarantee free migration between the two countries. This treaty was signed in the city of Tien Tsin by Aurelio



García y García, the ambassador sent by Peru, and Li Hung Chang, the Chinese secretary of state at the time (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 46). The situation of the Chinese diaspora in Peru improved, the migration process became more regulated and commercial, institutional and business contacts developed between the two countries. These new free migrants were often family members, relatives or friends of Chinese already living in Peru. They settled in and around Lima, mainly in the retail trade. Together with the ex-coolies, they gradually formed a Chinatown. They ran a thriving business of small shops, taverns, casinos and opium dens in the areas where the Chinese worked.

The 1876 census gives us a more detailed picture of the Chinese immigrant population in Lima, the capital of Peru. In 1876, the department of Lima had 225,800 inhabitants, of whom 24,208 were Chinese, representing 10.72% of the city's total population. In other words, one out of every ten inhabitants of Lima was Chinese. Free immigration from China began to decline in 1909 and was completely banned in 1930. The main reason for this was the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Peru during this period.

According to the census, the total amount of Chinese in 1925 was around 45,000, which fell to over 10,000 in 1927. In 1931, about 20,000 Asians lived in Lima and Callao, but most of them were Japanese rather than Chinese.

In 1971, the People's Republic of China and Peru established diplomatic relations, and the Peruvian government relaxed restrictions on the entry of

Chinese. In the 1980s, thanks to China's reform and opening-up policy, a new wave of Chinese migration to Peru began. The number of people going to Peru to visit family and friends, invest in business and settle in the country increased significantly. Before this period, most immigrants came from Guangdong and a small number from Fujian. After 1980, however, the majority of Chinese immigrants to Peru came from Fujian province. This is an important feature of the new wave of Chinese immigration (van der Hoef, 2015: 32).

Hoef's article presents the four types of immigration that took place after 1980. The first group arrived in Peru in the early 1980s, when the country was going through a severe economic and political crisis. After twenty years in Peru, some of these people started their own businesses, others joined the local Chinese organisation "huiguans", became its directors or joined the Chinese Charity. Their business success made them an aristocratic class of local Chinese. The second group of immigrants were the Fujianese who arrived in the late 1980s. They formed the "Hokkien Gongsí" association and founded the famous Chinese food restaurant chain "chifas", which is now present in every corner of the country. They did not get on well with the immigrants from Guangdong. The third group was smaller and came from the northern and central regions of China, such as Hubei, Anhui, Liaoning, Beijing and Sichuan. They were very wealthy and resourceful and came to Peru mainly to invest and import. The fourth type of immigrants are illegal immigrants who came from different regions of China and worked in Peru in low-paid jobs such as cooks, waiters, cashiers in Chinese supermarkets, etc.

## 6. Assimilation and Cultural Integration of Chinese Immigrants

As mentioned above, the coolies had to sign an eight-year contract, after which they were free and no longer had to work. The original idea of many of them was to return to their home country at the end of the contract. They thought they could earn enough money in Peru to "return to their village in silk clothes". Contrary to expectations, they did not get rich from all the work they had done over the years and did not even have money to pay for the trip back to China. Most decided to stay in Peru. Some renewed their contracts for another eight years, others stayed in Lima or the surrounding villages and opened small shops or taverns. A small number of those who decided to return to their country of origin did so on their own. According to Rodríguez Pastor's research, there were only two major collective actions by Chinese to return home, both supported by the SOCIEDAD CENTRAL DE BENEFICENCIA CHINA. One was in 1909, the year Peru broke diplomatic relations with China and abrogated the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation, some four hundred Chinese returned to their country on the ship *Lothian*. Another group was in 1915, when hundreds of Chinese returned on the ship *Anyo Maru*, but no specific numbers are recorded. Almost all of them were elderly ex-Coolies who had devoted their best years of youth to heavy labour.

Newly arrived migrants initially intended to return to China rather than settle in Peru. This idea is known as "sojourner", which means to live abroad without assimilating. Later, however, as they decided to stay in Peru for various reasons, got married, had children and started their own families, the "sojourner" mentality faded and they became more and more integrated into Peruvian society. There were many ways for the Chinese to integrate during the coolie migration period. we will present some of them below.

1) Keep their Spanish names. Westerners involved in the coolie trade in the nineteenth century changed the names of the Chinese labourers they recruited when they registered them for convenience. When they were released, most kept the name or gave themselves another Spanish name. The use of a Spanish name in life in place of the original Chinese name, either actively or forcibly, showed a tendency toward cultural assimilation.

2) Converting to Catholicism. Although the Chinese brought their own religion from China, such as Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, the longer they lived in Peru, the more they tended to embrace Catholicism. For example, they went to church to worship, etc. Catholicism is a significant part of Peruvian life. From birth to marriage and death, Peruvians spend their lives accompanied by Catholic teachings and rituals. For most Chinese immigrants, the practice of the local religion was not a natural process as it was for Europeans, but something passive. Their initial aim in practising such a religion was not to integrate, but the ease of life and expanded social activity of conversion was very attractive. As a result, many Chinese contract workers saw conversion and baptism as a way of being accepted into Peruvian society. In particular, in their marriages to local Peruvian women, the groom often joined the Catholic Church before the wedding. Almost all of

their mestizo offspring became Catholic.

3) Intermarriage with local people. The integration process was facilitated by intermarriage between Chinese and Peruvian women. From Chinese coolies to free migrants, there was a great imbalance between men and women in the Chinese diaspora. Between 1849 and 1874, a total of only 150 Chinese women arrived in Peru. In the capital, Lima, women made up no more than 5.2% of the Chinese population. Given this gender imbalance, Chinese men chose to marry Peruvian women and raise their families. After becoming free men, Chinese men soon entered the small-scale industrial sector, and their accumulated economic power became a major attraction for lower- and middle-class women. Forming a family with a local also allowed them to avoid discrimination.

4) Engage in small business activities and accumulate assets to leave the status of coolie. Having their own business is the basis for Chinese immigrants to establish themselves in Peruvian society and gradually integrate. The former coolies who decided to stay, free of their contracts and wanting to be self-sufficient, moved to the coastal towns and cities to sell food in the streets. Some of them earned their money by recruiting their compatriots to work in the haciendas, and in a few years, they became rich from nothing in their towns. They came to have their own haciendas with hundreds of workers and took advantage of Peru's economic growth to grow cotton, sugar cane or rice on their haciendas, becoming an "agrarian bourgeoisie".

In 1846, the government of Lima thought that there were too few markets in the city and decided to build a new one, called "La Concepción". This market was built between 1851 and 1854 and was located on Capón Street, where more and more Chinese started their businesses. They opened restaurants, grocery stores, taverns, casinos, opium dens, and even night theaters. As these small businesses were generally located in the nooks and crannies of Lima's main streets, the Chinese were known in the second half of the nineteenth century as "the Chinese on the corner" (van der Hoef: 2015, 25). They gradually formed their own neighbourhoods, which later became known as "China town". These Chinese, in turn, retained much of their own folklore, such as dress, language, braids, and opium smoking habits. After the foundation of the Central Chinese Benevolent Society in 1883, China Town became better known. Residents of the neighbourhood speak their native dialect and shops have signs in Chinese, giving the impression of being in one of the Chinese cities. Chinese chifa restaurants have a famous reputation. The name "chifa" comes from the Cantonese word for "to eat", which can now be found in every corner of Peru and is fully integrated into Peruvian life.

## 7. Conclusion

The migration of Chinese workers to Peru was initially driven by economic necessity and labor shortages, yet it evolved into a long-term process of settlement and cultural integration. While the early Chinese immigrants endured severe hardships, including exploitative labor conditions, discrimination, and legal restrictions, their resilience enabled them to establish a lasting presence in Peruvian society. Over time, Chinese immigrants moved beyond their status as indentured laborers,

engaging in small businesses, integrating through intermarriage, and contributing to Peru's cultural diversity. Their influence is evident in various aspects of Peruvian life, including cuisine, commerce, and social institutions. Today, the Chinese-Peruvian community stands as a testament to the complex but ultimately successful process of cultural fusion. The historical trajectory of Chinese immigrants in Peru is a testament to the resilience of immigrant communities and their profound impact on national identity formation. The Chinese-Peruvian experience highlights how migration, despite its challenges, can lead to rich cultural fusion and economic transformation.

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