

The Chinese Community in Peru and the Development of Sino-Peruvian Relations

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Abstract: *This article examines the historical evolution, societal impact, and diplomatic significance of the Chinese presence in Peru. Beginning with the arrival of Chinese laborers in the mid-nineteenth century, the study traces the development of cross-border population movements from China to Peru through different phases, including the period following the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1971 and the new transnational flows that emerged after China's reform and opening-up. It analyzes the cultural, economic, and political contributions of Chinese communities to Peruvian society, highlighting their influence in cuisine, agriculture, infrastructure, commerce, education, and politics. Furthermore, the paper explores how Chinese associations and transnational networks have facilitated Sino-Peruvian relations by acting as bridges for cultural exchange and bilateral cooperation. Through a multidisciplinary lens, this research underscores the transformative role of the Chinese diaspora in shaping both Peruvian society and contemporary Sino-Peruvian ties.*

Keywords: Sino-Peruvian relations; Cultural integration; Chinese diaspora.

1. Introduction

Chinese migration to Latin America has attracted growing scholarly attention over the past decades, particularly in the context of China's expanding global presence and the intensification of South-South relations. Within this broader field, Peru occupies a distinctive position. As one of the earliest Latin American destinations for Chinese migrants and one of the first countries in the region to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, Peru offers a unique case through which to examine the long-term interaction between migration, social integration, and bilateral relations.

Existing studies on Chinese migration to Peru have primarily focused on the nineteenth-century coolie trade, emphasizing systems of labor exploitation, racial discrimination, and anti-Chinese sentiment in the early republican period. While this body of scholarship has been essential for understanding the historical foundations of Chinese presence in Peru, it has also tended to frame Chinese migration as a phenomenon confined to a specific historical phase characterized by coercion and marginalization. As a result, the continuity of Chinese migration into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as the evolving social roles of Chinese migrants and their descendants, has received comparatively less systematic attention.

At the same time, research on contemporary Sino-Peruvian relations has largely concentrated on state-level diplomacy, trade agreements, and investment flows, particularly since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement in 2010 and Peru's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. While these studies illuminate the macroeconomic and geopolitical dimensions of bilateral relations, they often overlook the social and historical foundations that underpin such interactions. The role of migrant communities as long-term social actors and informal intermediaries between states remains underexplored.

This article seeks to bridge these two strands of scholarship by examining Chinese migration to Peru as both a historical

process and a contemporary social force. It argues that Chinese migrants and their descendants have not only contributed to Peruvian society through cultural, economic, and social integration, but have also played a significant role in shaping Sino-Peruvian relations beyond formal diplomatic channels. By adopting a long-term perspective, the study highlights how migration-generated networks, associations, and cultural practices have functioned as enduring links between China and Peru.

Methodologically, this research draws on existing historical studies, demographic data, and secondary literature on migration and diaspora, with particular attention to community organizations and cultural institutions. Rather than providing an exhaustive quantitative account, the article adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to trace patterns of continuity and transformation within the Chinese Peruvian community. This approach allows for an analysis of migration not merely as population movement, but as a dynamic process of social embeddedness and transnational interaction.

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the historical origins and early development of Chinese migration to Peru, situating it within broader global and regional contexts. The second section examines the social and cultural integration of Chinese migrants and their descendants in Peruvian society. The third section analyzes the role of the Chinese diaspora in fostering Sino-Peruvian relations, with particular attention to community associations and cultural exchange mechanisms. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the Peruvian case for studies of migration, diaspora, and transnational relations in Latin America.

2. Evolución histórica de la inmigración china en el Perú

2.1 Historical Origins

From 1849 onward—with the promulgation by Ramón Castilla of the so-called “Chinese Law” — Peru began the large-scale recruitment of Chinese workers (“coolies,” from the Chinese 苦力 *kǔlì*) to remedy labor shortages following

the abolition of slavery and to supply manpower for sugar and cotton plantations, guano extraction, and infrastructure projects. Many migrants were driven by crises in southern China. Maritime transport lasted 120–150 days, and conditions both onboard and at their destinations were brutally harsh: overcrowding, hunger, violence, induced opium consumption, and high mortality rates. Although formal eight-year contracts existed, practices of capture, fraud, and sale turned many voyages into forms of semi-slavery; public criticism led to intermittent bans and regulations. Between 1849 and 1874, official figures record 247 ships and 91,052 Chinese arrivals in Peru, the majority from Guangdong; after 1874, migration continued in freer forms and increasingly focused on small-scale retail trade, until new restrictions and waves of anti-Chinese sentiment emerged in the twentieth century.

2.2 Chinese Immigration after the Establishment of China – Peru Diplomatic Relations

In 1971, the People's Republic of China and Peru established diplomatic relations, and the Peruvian government relaxed restrictions on the entry of Chinese nationals. 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 who went to Peru to visit relatives and friends, to invest in businesses, and to settle in the country increased considerably. Most immigrants before this period came from Guangdong, with a small number from Fujian. However, after 1980, the majority of Chinese immigrants arriving in Peru came from the province of Fujian. This is an important characteristic of the new wave of Chinese immigration.

In his article, Hoef presents four types of immigration that occurred 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 founded their own businesses; others joined the local Chinese organizations known as "huiguans," became their directors, or joined the Chinese Charity (Beneficencia China). Their business success turned them into a local Chinese elite. The second group consisted of Fujianese who arrived in the late 1980s. They created the association "Hokkien Gongsi" and founded the famous chain of Chinese restaurants known as chifas, which are now present throughout the country. They did not get along well with immigrants from Guangdong. The third group was smaller and came from northern and central regions of China, such as Hubei, Anhui, Liaoning, Beijing, and Sichuan. These migrants were themselves quite wealthy, with substantial resources, and came to Peru mainly to invest and import. The fourth type of immigrant was illegal migrants, originating from various regions of China, who worked in low-paid jobs in Peru such as cooks, waiters, and cashiers in Chinese supermarkets. (van der Hoef, 2015: 32–33).

3. The Impact and Contributions of Chinese Migrants to Peruvian Society

Beyond the historical evolution of migration patterns, the presence of Chinese migrants in Peru also produced profound and lasting effects on the host society. The influence of Chinese immigrants on Peruvian society is undeniable and is

reflected in multiple dimensions, ranging from everyday culture to socioeconomic development.

3.1 Cultural Influence and Social Integration

When Chinese coolies worked on plantations, landowners often allowed them to maintain the dietary habits and cultural traditions they had brought from China. Rice was the staple food of the Chinese, and they continued this custom after arriving in Peru. Plantation owners sometimes even paid rice as part of their wages. In addition, some Chinese worked as domestic servants in Peruvian households, performing cleaning and cooking tasks. In this way, Chinese cuisine subtly influenced Peruvian gastronomic culture. Although the dishes prepared by Chinese domestic servants were Peruvian in origin, they were often cooked or seasoned in an Oriental manner.

After the liberation from labor contracts, an increasing number of Chinese restaurants were opened in Peru. In 1872, nearly half of the lower-end restaurants in Lima were owned by Chinese immigrants. Later, the chain of Chinese restaurants known as chifas spread throughout large and small Peruvian cities and even became a popular choice for local birthday celebrations. According to statistics, there are more than 4,000 Chinese restaurants in Peru, over 3,000 of which are located in Lima, accounting for approximately 30% of the local catering industry. Chinese restaurants are popular among locals not only because of their culinary techniques and flavors, but also due to their affordable prices and attentive service, which has led to the deep integration of Chinese cuisine into everyday Peruvian life (Cui and Xu, 2018: 166). The most popular Chinese dishes in Peru are fried rice and stir-fried noodles, which are served in nearly every Chinese restaurant, sometimes with modifications to suit local tastes. The diffusion of Chinese cuisine also promoted the importation and cultivation of Chinese vegetables (Rodríguez Pastor, 2004: 127).

Beyond food, the celebration of the Chinese New Year represents another important manifestation of Chinese cultural influence in Peruvian society. The Chinese New Year is the most significant traditional festival in China and the most festive time of the year, when families gather for a reunion dinner to welcome the new year. Even the poorest families make efforts to buy new clothes and prepare a proper meal on this occasion (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 30). Chinese immigrants in Peru, unable to reunite with family members thousands of kilometers away, often invite local acquaintances to celebrate with them. Over time, traditions such as New Year parades and dragon and lion dances have emerged. Today, Chinese New Year celebrations have become part of the local social landscape (van der Hoef, 2015: 25). The spread of Chinese food and culture has facilitated the identity formation and integration of Chinese immigrants, subtly making them an integral part of Peruvian culture.

3.2 Socioeconomic and Political Contributions

Chinese immigrants have also made significant contributions to Peru's socioeconomic development. First, the large number of coolies employed in railway and road construction contributed to the modernization of Peru's transportation

system. In 1871, during the construction of the Central Railway of Peru, records indicate that among approximately 10,000 workers, half were Chinese, while the rest were Peruvians and Chileans. This railway crossed the Andes at an altitude of 4,800 meters under extremely harsh natural conditions. At the time, it became the highest railway in the world and a marvel in the history of global engineering. In recognition of the contributions of the coolies, the Peruvian government granted Chinese immigrants the privilege of free or half-price travel on this railway in 1927.

Second, Chinese immigrants contributed to the development of Peruvian agriculture. They cleared land and cultivated large estates, facilitating the rapid growth of sugarcane, cotton, and nitrate production and exports. They also introduced agricultural expertise, including rice cultivation. Moreover, during the nineteenth century, the strong demand for guano from European countries such as Great Britain and Germany led many coolies to work in guano extraction, where they were required to extract up to five tons per day. According to statistics, guano production increased dramatically from 7,000 tons in 1830 to approximately 400,000 tons in 1860, becoming a major source of revenue for the national treasury.

After completing their labor contracts, many Chinese immigrants demonstrated remarkable entrepreneurial abilities. A considerable number accumulated capital rapidly and achieved economic success. As Rodríguez Pastor observes, many displayed “their commercial skills, competitive capacities, organizational talents, creative intelligence, and notable adaptability and capacity for rapid learning” (Rodríguez Pastor, 2004: 120). Chinese families often lived where they worked, rising early and working daily except during the Chinese New Year. Business ownership was passed down through generations, reinforcing economic stability within the community.

The economic impact of Chinese immigrants became even more evident during the era of free immigration. Taking advantage of opportunities created by economic globalization, many Chinese entrepreneurs established companies in Peru. One prominent example is Erasmo Wong, whose descendants developed the largest supermarket chain in the country. By the 1990s, the Wong family operated numerous supermarkets catering to different income groups, achieving remarkable commercial success and becoming deeply embedded in Peruvian society. Another notable figure is Mr. Shen, who transitioned from plastic manufacturing to entertainment, becoming a leading contributor to Lima’s leisure industry and one of the city’s largest taxpayers (Cui and Xu, 2018: 167).

Chinese families have traditionally emphasized education. Many descendants, after receiving higher education, entered elite professions such as law, medicine, academia, and finance, while others became involved in politics. Their social status rose accordingly, allowing them to play important roles in Peru’s economic, social, and political life. Notable figures include Olga Lock Sing de Ugaz, former president of the Peruvian Chemical Society, and Max Chion, a third-generation *tusán* and General Manager of RIMAC (Cui and Xu, 2018: 168). The Chinese diaspora has also made significant contributions to Peruvian education and scholarship, exemplified by figures such as philosopher

Víctor Li-Carrillo Chía and archaeologist Alejandra José Chu Barrera (Córdoba Toro, 2018: 12).

In recent years, Chinese Peruvians have become increasingly active in politics. More than ten individuals of Chinese descent have been elected to parliament. José Chang served as Peru’s second prime minister of Chinese origin and also held the position of Minister of Education. Other Chinese Peruvians have occupied important governmental roles, including President of Congress and Minister of Health (Cui and Xu, 2018: 185; Méndez Morán, 2019: 17).

Whether as entrepreneurs, educators, or politicians, the success of Chinese Peruvians serves as the strongest testament to the transformation of the Chinese community in Peru. No longer perceived merely as poor immigrants running small shops, they have become prominent contributors across multiple fields, playing a vital role in Peru’s development and in Sino-Peruvian relations in the new century.

4. The Impact of Chinese Immigration on Sino-Peruvian Relations

While the previous chapter focused on the impact of Chinese migrants within Peruvian society, this chapter shifts the analytical lens to the transnational level, examining how Chinese immigration has influenced Sino-Peruvian relations.

4.1 Building Bridges Between Two Countries: Chinese Associations in Peru

The period following the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century marked a time of national humiliation for China. The Qing government was forced to open ports, cede territory, and sign unequal treaties, leading hundreds of thousands of people from the lower social strata to leave their homeland in search of better lives overseas, including in Latin America. In an unfamiliar environment, mutual assistance became essential for survival and social stability, making the formation of associations an effective strategy for Chinese migrants.

In Peru, early Chinese associations were primarily public-service organizations established during the process of immigrant integration. Their main objective was to unite local Chinese communities, providing mutual support for both long-settled residents and new arrivals. These organizations also organized cultural and historical celebrations and invited local Peruvians to participate, thereby promoting intercultural interaction (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 229). Over time, as the Chinese community became one of the most influential ethnic groups in Peruvian society, its associations evolved into important social actors. They now serve not only to improve the community’s position within Peruvian society but also to maintain transnational ties with China, functioning as bridges between the two countries.

Chinese associations in Peru were established relatively early. For instance, the Kong Chau Society, founded in 1868, was composed mainly of migrants from Guangdong, while the Tong Sing Society, established in 1889, brought together Hakka migrants from Fujian. Later, the Peruvian-Chinese Association, founded in 1999, became more directly involved in facilitating cultural exchange between China and Peru

(Aquino Rodríguez, 2020: 11).

According to Rodríguez Pastor, early Chinese associations in Peru can be broadly classified by function: general mutual-aid associations; organizations dedicated to specific services such as education and funerary assistance; political associations linked mainly to the Guomindang; hometown associations composed of migrants from the same locality; organizations facilitating commercial activities between China and Peru; and associations focused on sports or the arts (Rodríguez Pastor, 2017: 230). With changing political and economic conditions in Latin America, some associations declined, others expanded, and new ones emerged, particularly as bilateral relations between China and Peru deepened.

Tamagno and Velásquez identify three major types of Chinese associations currently active in Peru. The first category consists of ethnic and social support associations founded mainly by first-generation migrants, using Chinese as their working language and focusing on mutual aid, business, religion, and social activities. The second category comprises *tusán* associations created by second- and third-generation Chinese Peruvians, which promote social integration and intercultural understanding through sociocultural activities. The third category includes associations dedicated to promoting bilateral investment and cultural exchange, playing an important role in strengthening Sino-Peruvian relations.

Among these organizations, the Sociedad Central de Beneficencia China (SBCH), founded in 1886, stands out as the most influential institution within the Chinese community in Peru. Since its establishment, SBCH has played a comprehensive role in protecting the rights and interests of overseas Chinese, preserving traditional Chinese culture, facilitating social integration, and promoting bilateral exchanges. It has provided social assistance and welfare services, organized cultural and festive activities, supported educational initiatives, and engaged in philanthropic efforts that enhanced cooperation between the Chinese community, the Peruvian government, and local society. Through its long history and sustained activities, SBCH has consolidated a unique position as a key intermediary linking China and Peru. Together with numerous other Chinese associations, it forms a dense network of social and cultural connections between the two countries.

4.2 Sino-Peruvian Exchanges in the New Century: Economy and Culture

Contacts between China and Peru predate modern migration by several centuries. From the mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the Manila Galleon trade connected Spanish America with Asia, facilitating exchanges of silver and agricultural products from the Americas for Chinese silk and porcelain via Manila and Macao. These early interactions laid the foundation for later bilateral relations.

Formal diplomatic ties were first established with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation between the Qing government and Peru in 1874. In 1971, Peru became one of the earliest Latin American countries to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Since China's economic reform and opening-up, and

particularly in the twenty-first century, bilateral cooperation has expanded significantly, with China emerging as one of Peru's most important international partners.

The signing of the China-Peru Free Trade Agreement in 2010 marked a turning point in economic relations, institutionalizing trade and investment cooperation. In recent years, Peru has also formally joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, further enhancing opportunities for collaboration in infrastructure development, trade, and connectivity. These frameworks have contributed to the deepening of Sino-Peruvian relations at the national level.

Beyond economic cooperation, cultural exchange has played an increasingly important role. Confucius Institutes have become a central platform for promoting Chinese language and culture in Peru. Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in the country in 2009, Chinese language education has expanded rapidly, complementing earlier efforts by Chinese associations and schools. These institutes provide structured and institutionalized programs for learners of different ages, reflecting growing interest among Peruvians in Chinese language and culture (Tang Unzueta, 2019: 18–19).

At the same time, academic exchange has also developed. Research centers dedicated to Peruvian studies have been established at Chinese universities, contributing to mutual understanding and scholarly cooperation. Together, these educational and cultural initiatives demonstrate that Sino-Peruvian relations in the new century are no longer limited to economic exchange but are increasingly characterized by multidimensional interaction.

In sum, Chinese immigration has exerted a lasting influence on Sino-Peruvian relations by creating social organizations, cultural institutions, and transnational networks that connect individuals, communities, and states. Through Chinese associations, educational initiatives, and cultural exchange mechanisms, the Chinese diaspora has functioned as a vital intermediary, strengthening mutual understanding and cooperation between China and Peru.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the historical trajectory and contemporary significance of Chinese migration to Peru from a long-term and multidimensional perspective. By tracing the evolution of Chinese migration from nineteenth-century contract labor to post-1971 voluntary and diversified mobility, the study demonstrates that Chinese migration to Peru should be understood not as a series of isolated episodes, but as a continuous and adaptive process shaped by both global structural forces and local social conditions.

At the societal level, the findings reveal that Chinese migrants and their descendants have exerted a sustained influence on Peruvian society through cultural integration, economic participation, and upward social mobility. The diffusion of Chinese culinary practices and festive traditions illustrates a form of everyday cultural hybridization, while Chinese engagement in agriculture, infrastructure construction, commerce, and entrepreneurship highlights the community's

long-term contribution to Peru's economic development. Over time, increasing access to education enabled later generations of Chinese Peruvians to enter professional and political spheres, thereby challenging earlier stereotypes and reshaping the social positioning of the Chinese community within Peru.

Beyond the national context, this study underscores the importance of the Chinese diaspora in Peru as a transnational actor in Sino-Peruvian relations. Community organizations, business networks, and prominent individuals of Chinese descent have functioned as social and cultural intermediaries, facilitating people-to-people exchanges and complementing state-led diplomatic and economic cooperation. In this sense, migration emerges as a crucial non-state dimension of bilateral relations, offering insights into how diasporic communities contribute to the deepening of China-Latin America ties.

By situating the Peruvian Chinese experience within broader debates on migration, diaspora, and transnationalism, this article contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it enriches the literature on Chinese migration in Latin America by emphasizing long-term continuity and internal diversity within migrant communities. Second, it highlights the role of everyday social practices and economic activities in shaping host-society integration. Finally, it demonstrates how diaspora communities can act as enduring bridges between states, linking migration studies with international relations scholarship.

Taken together, the case of Chinese migration to Peru illustrates how migrant communities evolve from marginalized labor groups into influential social actors whose impact extends beyond national boundaries. This trajectory not only deepens our understanding of the Chinese diaspora in Latin America but also invites further comparative research on migration-driven transnational relations in the Global South.

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