

Sixth Grade Lesson on Asian Migration to Latin America by Sohyun An

GA Social Studies Standards

SS6H1 Explain conflict and change in Latin America.

b. Describe the influence of the Spanish and the Portuguese on the language and religions of Latin America.

Background Information

The history of Latin America has focused on the interactions of Indigenous people, Europeans, and Africans—the Natives, the invaders, and the kidnapped. Asian migrants have barely been discussed in the study of Latin America.

However, Asians are not strangers to Latin American history. Columbus, after all, was seeking a new route to Asia. He hoped he'd arrived in *Las Indias*, the Indies, hence the confusion ever since over the European naming of Indigenous people of the Caribbean, and then North and South America, as *Indians*.

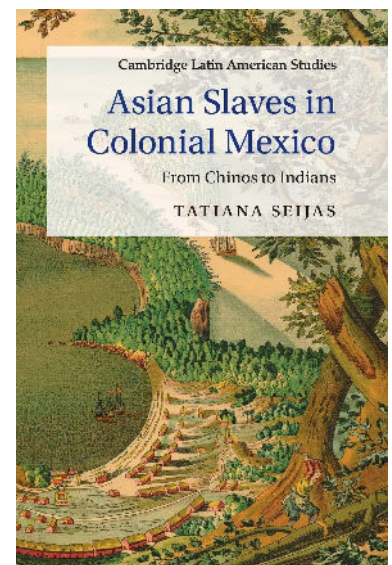
When Spain colonized the Americas, it also made the Philippines as its colony. Therefore, many Filipinos came to the Americas in the 16th century as sailors, soldiers, indentured servants, or enslaved laborers along with the Spanish conquistadors.

Manila Galleons were the Spanish trading ships that linked the Viceroyalty of New Spain (today Mexico) with Spain's colonies in Asia. The galleons made yearly round trips between Acapulco in Mexico and Manila in the Philippines for 250 years (1565 to 1815), carrying people and commodities on board in both directions.

An estimated 20,000 to as high as 100,000 Asians arrived in Acapulco in the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century, spreading out throughout New Spain and southward to Peru. The 1613 census of Lima in the Viceroy of Peru noted "Indians of China and Manila," "Indians of Portuguese India," and "Indians of Japan."

From the nineteenth century, Asians started arriving in more significant numbers as countries in Latin America became independent of Spain. Migrants from Europe and Asia were welcomed to populate and work the land. Particularly, following the abolition of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean, Chinese and South Asians were highly demanded as replacements for enslaved labor.

[Cuba's sugar-based economy](#), for example, was heavily dependent on [Chinese laborers called *culies*](#).

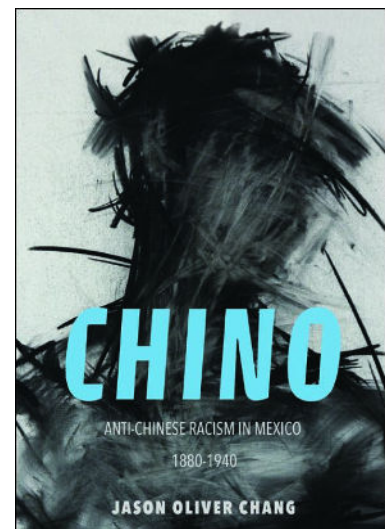


Anti-Asian immigration policies and discrimination in the United States also spurred Asian migration to Latin America. For example, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act of the United States pushed Chinese laborers to go and work in Central America, Peru, Cuba, and especially northern Mexico with its long border with the United States.

Besides European and US empires, the Japanese empire was also behind the Asian migration to Latin America. After the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese government sponsored its citizens to move to Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Mexico, and Cuba. After Japan colonized Korea in the early 1900s, many Koreans left for Yucatan, Mexico, becoming the first Korean migrants to the Americas. These migrants, who were falsely promised wealth and prosperity by Mexican and Japanese labor brokers, were sold into indentured servitude to planters in the Yucatan. This initial migration spurred Korean diasporas in Cuba, Guatemala, and other parts of Mexico as some of these migrants and their descendants left Yucatan. Others stayed and formed a Korean-Mayan community centered around Merida. Some of these migrants also fought on different sides of the Mexican Revolution.

Settling in Latin America as Asian immigrants was not easy. They faced racism and discrimination.

- In 1635, Mexico City limited the number of Chinese barbers.
- During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), anti-Chinese violence frequently flared up in Mexico, including the massacre of 303 unarmed Chinese laborers and shopkeepers.
- Jamaica had anti-Chinese riots in 1918, 1938, and 1965.
- In the 1930s, Brazil and other countries followed [the model of the US](#), placing restrictions on Asian immigration.
- Cuba incarcerated Japanese and Okinawans in 1931, following Japan’s invasion of Manchuria.
- 1940 saw anti-Japanese rioting in Peru.
- The ethnic cleansing campaign in El Salvador in the 1930s and 40s led to deportation of Chinese and Black peoples.



During WWII, Peruvian authorities rounded up some 18,000 people of Japanese descent and shipped them to U.S. incarceration camps for Japanese Americans. Most Latin American countries followed suit. When the war ended, Latin American governments did not allow those deported to return, forcing them to stay in the U.S. as undocumented immigrants. Others had chosen deportation to Japan, instead of incarceration in U.S. concentration camps, and were killed in Japan during the war. Some perished in the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The documentary film, [Hidden Internment: The Art Shibayama Story](#), provides an illuminating exploration of the tragic experiences of Japanese-Latin Americans during World War II, and the violent dismissal of their experiences by the governments.

Indeed, there is a long and complex history of Asians in Latin America. Its legacies are plenty.

- Havana in Cuba has its own Chinatown
- Peru has one of the world’s largest Japanese communities outside of Japan. In 1990, Alberto Fujimori, child of Japanese immigrants, became president of Peru.

- The Caribbean *roti*—a wrap-style sandwich—has its roots in the flatbreads of India.
- The Cuban *trompeta china* was originally a Chinese woodwind musical instrument.
- In Mexico, a traditional type of women’s clothing called *china poblana*, is supposed to be inspired by Catarina de San Juan, a slave brought from India.
- Mexicans enjoy their *pan chino* with coffee for breakfast
- Cubans love the lottery game they call *la charade china*.

Likewise, Asian immigration to Latin America has been marked in popular culture and everyday life on the continent and the Caribbean islands. Food, music, language, literature, and art have all been influenced and intermixed. The terms like Afro-Asian, Chino Latino, Hispanic Asian, Chino-Cubano, Indo-Caribbean show the global migration and cultural fusion.

Instructional Suggestions and Resources

There are many short video clips that introduce the long and complex history and its legacy today of Asian migration in Latin America. Use below sources to engage students to learn about and discuss.

1. [Latin Asians](#) talk about the Magellan Gallegan, Asian diaspora, Asian Latinos today and their cultural pride.
2. [Why Is Peru’s National Dish Chinese?](#) tells about Chinese migration to Peru and its historical legacy of Peruvian cuisine and culture.
3. [Peru’s Asian Infusion](#) shows Chinese and Japanese immigration to Peru and its impact on food culture in Peru today.
4. [Chinese Immigrants in Cuba](#) shows the history and legacy of Chinese immigration to Cuba and Chinatown in Havana.
5. [Chinese influence in Mexican Cuisine](#) explains Chinese migration to Mexico and its impact on food culture in Mexico.
6. [The Art Shibayama Story](#) talks about the life of Art Shibayama and other Japanese Latin Americans who were sent to the US and incarcerated to be used as political pawns between the US and Japan.
7. [Why Are There a Lot of Japanese in Brazil - Japanese Brazilian Documentary](#) shows a history of Japanese immigration to Brazil.
8. [Tracing the tracks of a Chinese community in Brazil](#) shows Chinese immigration to Brazil
9. [Asians in the Caribbean](#) shows Asian migration to the Caribbean.