

First Grade Lesson on Chinatowns in the U.S. and Latin America

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GA Social Studies Standards:

SS1G2 Identify and locate the student’s city, county, state, nation (country), and continent on a simple map or a globe.

SS1G3 Locate major topographical features of the earth’s surface.

- a. Locate all of the continents: North America, South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, Antarctica, and Australia.
- b. Locate the major oceans: Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific, Southern, and Indian.

Background Information:



In the 1800s, many Chinese left their homes to come to the United States, particularly young men from the poverty-stricken Guangdong Province. The first Chinese immigrants came during the Gold Rush, while others came a couple decades later to work on the Transcontinental Railroad. While their labor was essential to the completion of the railroad, Chinese workers were often viewed very negatively by their Irish counterparts and by U.S. citizens broadly. This led the U.S. government to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers. Consequently, prospective Chinese sojourners looked for other places to immigrate for work to support their families at home.

Many Chinese opted to emigrate to Latin America and the Caribbean. Chinese laborers who still hoped to eventually reach the United States migrated to northern Mexico, first arriving in 1876. At the time, dictator Porfirio Diaz eagerly opened Mexico’s doors to foreign investment, while a diplomat named Matias Romero advocated strongly for Chinese immigration to build railroads in Mexico as they had done in the U.S. Most Chinese workers were not inclined to live in the remote coasts and jungles of Mexico, where there were no transportation systems and the weather was inhospitable. Instead, the majority of Chinese immigrants lived and worked in the northern and Pacific states. Unlike Chinese workers in the U.S., who labored on the railroad or worked in restaurants and laundries, Chinese in Mexico had a much wider range of occupations. Most working class laborers worked in agriculture or in unskilled jobs in cities, while a larger proportion of Chinese were merchants and skilled artisans. Some only intended to stay in Mexico for a short time, later crossing the border into the United States.

Although there were only 1,023 Chinese in Mexico in 1895, after an official treaty was established between Mexico and China in 1899, the numbers rose quickly from 2,835 Chinese in 1900 to 13,203 Chinese by 1910. By 1926, there were 24,218 Chinese in Mexico, making up the second largest foreign population after Spaniards. However, as in the United States, anti-Chinese sentiment grew due to economic concerns during the Mexican Revolution, particularly in the state of Sonora, which passed laws that relegated Chinese houses and stores to specific neighborhoods (known as **barrios chinos**) and required that



Mexicans make up 80% of the workforce for foreign-owned businesses. These anti-Chinese views ultimately led to the expulsion and deportation of Chinese across the country to different degrees. Some Chinese fled the northern and Pacific states and headed inland to Mexico City, where they built businesses around the city's historic center and formed a small *barrio chino*, or Chinatown.

Prior to the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese contract laborers (popularly known as coolies, although the term is now considered offensive) were recruited after the end of the slave trade to fill labor shortages on sugar plantations in Cuba and sugar and cotton plantations as well as guano mining in Peru. Between 1847 and 1874, 125,000 Chinese immigrated to Cuba to work on plantations; thousands more immigrated to work in commerce and other areas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries after Cuban independence. The Peruvian coolie trade lasted from 1849 to 1874, during which 91,412 Chinese worked almost exclusively on plantations. After labor contracts ended, some Chinese returned home while others stayed and signed new contracts or worked as free laborers. Chinese who settled in Cuba and Peru created ethnic enclaves where they established businesses. Havana's *barrio chino* had a second wave of about 5,000 Chinese immigrants who fled the U.S. due to anti-Chinese legislation between 1860 and 1875, making its Chinatown the largest in Latin America. In Lima, Peruvian Chinese built a neighborhood around large import companies.



Unfortunately, like many Chinatowns around the world, *barrios chinos* in Mexico, Cuba, and Peru have mostly gone into decline as fewer ethnic Chinese continue to live in them due to other economic and housing opportunities, although some governments have chosen to capitalize on their tourist appeal and are attempting to revitalize these neighborhoods. Recent Chinese immigrants have settled in Argentina and Brazil, where they have created Chinatowns in Buenos Aires and São Paulo, in addition to smaller Chinatowns in Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, French Guiana, and Venezuela.

Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

1. **Introduction:** Ask students if they have been to a Chinatown or have heard of one. If they have visited a Chinatown before, ask what they might have seen, heard, or experienced. If there is a Chinatown or local Chinese enclave in your community, you may want to share images of this location with students. Let students know that in the past, Chinese people were forced to live in Chinatowns because they were not allowed to rent or buy homes in other parts of the city; students may make connections to their prior knowledge of racial segregation. Today, Chinatowns still have Chinese residents but can be home to all kinds of people and may have businesses that are not Chinese-owned or focused.
2. **Instructional Activity:** Read aloud *Ten Blocks to the Big Wok: A Chinatown Counting Book* written and illustrated by Ying-Hwa Hu. Ask students to volunteer some of the things and places that were found in the Chinatown featured in the book; if you have previously discussed the five senses, the book may inspire students to think of what they might see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in Chinatown. Record student observations on chart paper or on the board. According to the author, the book was inspired by the Chinatown in New York City. Share this detail with students, and let them know that Chinatowns exist all over the world. Then show students the [Chinatowns in Latin America slidedeck](#). Begin by asking students to identify which continent they live on, and then to identify all seven continents. Several maps are provided in the slidedeck to meet

different geographic skills, such as demonstrating migration routes from China to the Americas. Depending on which Latin American Chinatowns you choose to highlight, you may want to identify different countries before on the maps. Before progressing through the images of different Chinatowns in Latin America, let students know you want them to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts to what they saw in *Ten Blocks to the Big Wok*. After finishing the slideshow, they should be ready to add to their list or confirm that the illustrations in the book reflect items and places in real Chinatowns.

3. **Assessment:** In a journal or on a sticky note, have students write a 2-4 sentence description of Chinatowns. Depending on your focus, this may center examples they observed in the book, slidedeck, or both.

Images Used:

1. Map of Latin America, open access via Wikimedia Commons
2. Barrio Chino, Mexico City, Mexico, Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata (open access via Wikimedia Commons)
3. Barrio Chino, Mexico City, Mexico, Beatriz Zarzoza (open access via Wikimedia Commons)