

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

GA Social Studies Standards:

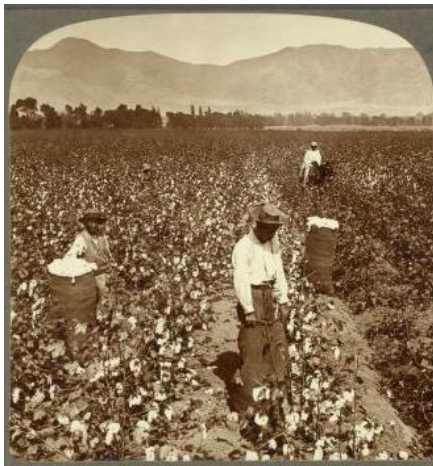
SS6H1 Explain conflict and change in Latin America.

SS6G3 Explain the impact of location, climate, distribution of natural resources, and population distribution on Latin America.

Full-Length Lesson

Background Information:

In the 1800s, many Chinese, particularly young men from the poverty-stricken Guangdong Province, left their homes to become sojourners in search of economic opportunities after the British opened treaty ports following the Treaty of Nanking at the end of the First Opium War. This lesson provides an overview of Chinese immigration to Peru and Mexico and highlights Chinatowns found in each country as a place where this immigration history is commemorated today.



In 1807, British Parliament passed an act abolishing the slave trade. In 1810, the slave trade to Peru ended, followed by the formal abolition of slavery in the country in 1854. After Peruvian independence in 1821, the highland silver mines that were most economically significant during the colonial period became less so. Instead, the economic focus shifted to the coast, to the sugar and later cotton plantations north and south of Lima, and to offshore guano deposits. This new coastal economy of guano attracted foreign investors, especially from England, but post-slavery, there were not enough laborers to meet the growing demand. This led to the recruitment and importation of Chinese contract laborers (popularly known as coolies, although the term is now considered offensive). Between 1849 to 1874, 91,412 Chinese immigrated to Peru and worked almost exclusively on plantations. After their labor contracts ended, some Chinese returned home while others stayed and signed new contracts or worked as free laborers. Chinese who settled in Peru created ethnic enclaves where they established businesses. In the capital city of Lima, Peruvian Chinese built a neighborhood around large import companies.

The first Chinese immigrants to the United States 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 Díaz 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 and settling in nearly every state and territory. 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. Unfortunately, like many Chinatowns around the world, barrios chinos in Mexico and Peru have mostly gone into decline as fewer ethnic Chinese continue to live in them due to other economic and housing opportunities, although the Mexico government wants to capitalize on barrio chino’s tourist appeal and is attempting to revitalize the neighborhood.



Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

Day 1: Chinese Immigration to Peru

1. Provide students with background or a refresher about the slave trade and the reasons behind Chinese emigration and contract labor.
2. Play [this video](#) which includes a historical overview of Chinese immigration to Peru, including some clear examples of the deceptive tactics used to bring immigrants under false pretenses. A notecatcher is provided below. Content Warning: At 2:18, the narrator says “bird shit” instead of guano.
3. To review the contents from the video, discuss the primary sources featured in [this slideshow](#) using whatever historical thinking or discussion-based questions are typical in your classroom.

Day 2: Chinese Immigration to Mexico

1. Show [this video](#) about Chinese in Mexicali, which describes why some Chinese laborers left the U.S. to come to Mexico. While historically most Chinese lived on the Mexican side of the U.S./Mexico border, especially in the states of Sonora and Baja California, by 1910, Chinese lived in every state and territory of the country except Tlaxcala. Students can view images of Chinatowns in Mexicali and Mexico City in [this slideshow](#).
2. If you have already discussed anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S. during the 1800s in class, review

common stereotypes and misconceptions about Chinese from that era. If not, select a few images to highlight attitudes toward the Chinese in the U.S., such as those found at <https://thomasnastcartoons.com> or the Library of Congress, like “[The Great Fear of the Period](#)” and “[The Chinese Invasion](#).” Then compare them to the cartoons by Mexican illustrators José Ángel Espinoza and Ríos found at the end of [this slideshow](#) and ask students to consider how the Chinese were viewed in similar ways in both the U.S. and Mexico at different time periods. You or your students may also make connections to portrayals of Chinese as diseased and posing a health threat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Provide students with a Venn Diagram to note similarities and differences between views of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the late 1800s to views of Chinese immigrants in Mexico in the early 1900s.

For more information about Chinese immigration to the U.S., Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn’s *[Exclusion and the Chinese American Story](#)* offers engaging, approachable text for middle school readers.

Chinese Immigration to Peru Video Notecatcher

Why did Chinese immigrate to Peru?	How were Chinese were misled/deceived into immigrating to Peru for work?
What are some ways that Peruvians have added their own local spins to traditional Chinese food?	Where does the word “chifa” come from?
What do Chinese Peruvians call themselves?	What is lomo saltado and how is it related to Chinese immigration to Peru?

Images Used:

1. Chinese Laborers in Peru circa 1900, via Brown University Library
2. Barrio Chino, Mexico City, Mexico, Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata (open access via Wikimedia Commons)
3. Cartoon by José Ángel Espinoza depicting Chinese as Carriers of contagious diseases: “The terrible men of the East, easily contagious, that the Chinese mask with spotless clothes when they work as waiters, launderers, or dependents.”