

THE FIRST ASIANS IN THE AMERICAS

The First Asians in the Americas

A Transpacific History

DIEGO JAVIER LUIS

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For my parents, William Luis and Linda Lee Tracey

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The terms *asiático / a* and *Asia* (for *Asian* and *Asia*) do not consistently appear in Spanish colonial sources. In colonial Mexico, one phrase commonly used to refer to the lands across the Pacific was *la china*. Since people of Asian provenance became known as *chinos* upon arrival, *Asian* and *Asia* are the most accurate translations for “chino / a” and “la china” in Mexico. Thus, this book uses *Asian* and *Asia* in their contemporary meanings as shorthand for the great diversity of peoples in this history and the locales from the Indian Ocean World to East Asia, respectively.

Filipino is a similarly complicated term, since nothing resembling the contemporary Filipino national identity existed in the early modern period. In fact, during the late colonial period, *Filipino* often referred to Spaniards born in the Philippines and not to the land’s Indigenous inhabitants.¹ Most often, Spanish sources characterized Philippine peoples as *indios* (Indigenous vassals) or *moros* (enslavable Muslim enemies). In some cases, colonial-era authors differentiated among specific ethnic groups like Tagalogs, Kapampangans, Visayans, Ilocanos, and so forth. When it is possible to identify the ethnicity of an individual or community, I use labels that privilege specificity. When this is not possible or when I refer to a group consisting of multiple ethnicities autochthonous to the Philippines, I use “Philippine” with a corresponding noun.

The goal is to avoid, as much as possible, reproducing the colonial rhetoric of “indio / a” (*indiyo* in Tagalog) unless the reference is to its specific employment in primary sources and / or Spanish colonial systems of categorization. This word is derogatory not only in contemporary Tagalog but also in many areas throughout Latin America.² I have also placed the names of other *castas* (castes) of New Spain—including “chino / a”—in

quotes to cite the language of colonial sources. In a similar vein, I refer to enslaved or formerly enslaved peoples by either first name or first and last names and not solely by their last names (e.g., “Catarina” in lieu of “San Juan”), which were often markers of possession.³ These are imperfect approaches to irresolvable issues of colonial nomenclature and power that, for the sake of intelligibility, are nonetheless essential to the narration of this history.

THE FIRST ASIANS IN THE AMERICAS

INTRODUCTION

AT 4:04 A.M. ON JANUARY 5, 1688, Catarina de San Juan breathed her last in Puebla de los Ángeles, Mexico.¹ Her ascetic life of perpetual suffering had reached its holy and inevitable end. A few devotees carried the corporeal relic that was her body from her dilapidated home (containing only one small room) to the house of Hipolyto del Castillo y Altra “to have in death a more decent place” for the customary postmortem washing and shrouding.² In the blue light before sunrise, the Jesuit fathers rang the bells of the College of the Holy Spirit to announce her passing. They prepared a palm leaf and a crown of flowers to honor Catarina as a virgin.³

Word spread quickly, and by 5:00 a.m., the city had swelled with “innumerable people” from miles around hoping to catch a glimpse of the sacred corpse.⁴ Nobles and the poor alike hurried to the home of Castillo y Altra, so that it looked like “a church on Maundy Thursday, where the public of the entire city enters and exits and performs the stations [of the cross].”⁵ However, this orderly procession did not last for long. As eager spectators converged on the home, their patience waned, and they rushed the door. The doorframe groaned and split, and the pious mob crowded around the body, eager to kiss Catarina’s hands and feet, touch her rosaries, take flowers from her shroud, and even cut off her fingers and pieces of flesh to keep as holy relics.⁶

In this state, Catarina’s body remained on display until the next afternoon, when a religious procession arrived to inter her in the main chapel of the Jesuit college. According to one of her confessors and hagiographers, Alonso Ramos, “The large crowd that gathered and attended the burial is

inexplicable . . . even on the rooftops, balconies, and windows of the houses that correspond to the doors of the temple of our College of the Holy Spirit, there appeared a multitude of men and women.”⁷ As the pallbearers approached the college, they needed to extract Catarina’s body from the coffin, which had to be rotated to fit inside the narrow doorway. When the crowd spotted her holy figure, they stormed in “to rob her of the few decorations that had remained on the deceased.”⁸ They grasped the last shreds of her tunic, hair, and flesh and the final flowers from her shroud, and they even made off with her shoes.

Within the chapel, the undeterred Jesuits buried Catarina by a presbytery in a vault that also held stillborn infants—similarly valued for their purity. Two keys sealed the vault. In a speech given shortly after her interment, the Jesuit Francisco de Aguilera proclaimed that “all that the world adores as most precious, it makes holy, without claiming it, nor searching for it, [it found] a poor little *china*, slave, foreigner, who made us fill our tongues with her praises, our hearts with jubilation, and even our eyes with tears.”⁹

But for all the acceptance she eventually found among Puebla’s denizens, Catarina continued to be a “a poor little *china*” (the colonial Mexican term used to refer to any Asian person) and a “slave, foreigner.” This was so although she had lived almost seventy years in Puebla, most of them as a free woman. Those who knew Catarina speculated that she might have been born on the Arabian Peninsula or lived in her youth as a princess of the Mughal royal family in India. The Jesuit Joseph del Castillo Graxeda’s conjecture was the least ambitious and, therefore, perhaps the most persuasive: “Catharina was native to the Mughal Kingdom. The place where she was born is unknown, and even she did not know it for being such a young age when she was taken from it.”¹⁰ As a child, Catarina had been a victim of a Portuguese slave raid in South Asia. She was eventually sold in Spanish Manila. Then, at the nearby port of Cavite, she was made to board a Spanish galleon destined for Mexico. The journey across the world’s largest ocean on an early modern ship, even one advanced for its time, lasted many months under horrid conditions. In 1621, Catarina disembarked at the port of Acapulco in chains and was sent overland to Puebla. There, she eventually gained her freedom and, through her piety, became a renowned symbol of holy virtue and global Catholic hegemony.¹¹

Despite her celebrity, Catarina—the person behind the reputation—remained an unknown and unknowable entity, a “Thesaurus absconditus” (hidden treasure) in the words of the Jesuit Antonio Plancarte.¹² For the funerary procession, Plancarte painted a dark, sealed box of Asian design and penned a poem to accompany it:

Here from *china*, you see
 my color; inside the gold
 I save as greater treasure,
 that hidden here you will find.
 Although the more turns you give
 the key, it will not open, none will understand it;
 since the cipher only God
 knows, for you
 [only] in his time will he reveal it.¹³

According to Plancarte, the inner quality of Catarina’s soul lay beyond the human grasp. What those attending her funeral perceived, instead, was her exotic difference—her body “here from *china*” (meaning Asia) now laid out before them. Catarina remained inextricably tied to the thousands of hands seeking to defile and consume her, desiring to turn the key that would expose her interior, yearning for the total submission she withheld in life and reserved for the Holy Trinity alone. As silent as stone, Catarina had become her foreignness.

Today, Catarina de San Juan is erroneously known by another name, the China Poblana (the “china” of Puebla). In his 1897 book *Historia de la Puebla de los Angeles*, the Mexican historian Antonio Carrión conflated the China Poblana, a popular nineteenth-century form of dress that was a symbol of Mexican femininity, with the distant memory of an Asian woman who had once lived in Puebla.¹⁴ He wrote that the women of Puebla had known Catarina de San Juan as “la *China*, which they called her affectionately,” and thus, Catarina had become the China Poblana.¹⁵ The allure of the *castor* (patterned skirt), white slip, white blouse, and shawl of the China Poblana melded with Carrión’s resurrection of an Asian-infused Baroque past. From this orientalist conflation of the two “chinas,” Catarina de San Juan shape-shifted into folklore.¹⁶

The coordinated efforts to suppress Catarina de San Juan's story shortly after her death enabled Carrión's invention and others like it.¹⁷ From 1689 to 1692, Alonso Ramos published an ambitious hagiography of Catarina in three enormous volumes that commemorated his confessant as a religious icon and made a daring case for her beatification (figure I.1). Because it celebrated Catarina's celestial visions and ethereal visitations with the Holy Trinity, however, Ramos's hagiography aroused inquisitorial suspicion. Throughout the post-Tridentine (1563–) Catholic world, the worship of persons who had not been formally beatified or sanctified was strictly prohibited.¹⁸ In the end, Ramos's dream of crafting a holy figure to elevate Puebla as a sacred site of the Catholic world was not to be realized. He had overplayed his case by prematurely declaring that Catarina had performed miracles and other acts of God: only the Sacred Congregation of Rites and the pope could make this determination. Even one of the theologians who supported Ramos's first volume warned that Catarina's "visions, revelations, and prophecies" could make a reader "sea-sick."¹⁹ In 1692 the Spanish Inquisition banned Ramos's magnum opus for "containing revelations, visions, and apparitions [that are] unfit, implausible, full of contradictions and comparisons [that are] inappropriate, indecent, reckless, and that *sapient blasphemiam* (that reveal or that nearly are blasphemies)."²⁰

Ramos's hefty three-volume work was the longest text ever published in colonial Mexico, and hardly anyone would read it.²¹ The New Spanish Inquisition confirmed the Spanish ban on printing and distribution in 1696 and dismantled the public altar in the little room where Catarina had lived.²² Inquisitors then confiscated most of the remaining publications about her and burned them.²³ From the outstretched hands that had despoiled her body to the suppression of her devotion, Catarina had become a myth within a decade of her passing. In the words of Kate Risse, she was "too spectacular, too unorthodox, too popular."²⁴ She was also, I would add, too foreign.

Yet although Catarina de San Juan was distorted by her erstwhile hagiographers and modern eulogizers, she remains one of the very few Asians in the early modern Americas whose name has endured. In this sense, she is exceptional. Although thousands of Asian people traveled to and through the colonial world during this period, Catarina's life was recorded with a level of detail afforded to few others of her time. Her commemoration is



I.1 Portrait of Catarina de San Juan

This portrait appeared in the first volume of Alonso Ramos's hagiography of Catarina de San Juan (1689) and is the only historical image that survives of an Asian individual who lived in New Spain. By 1691, an inquisitorial edict outlawed the circulation of this and other portraits of Catarina, which had already become images of popular devotion thought to have healing power. The caption reads, "The virgin Catarina de San Juan of the Great Mughals died at the age of eighty-two on January 5 of 1688 in Puebla de los Angeles of New Spain. She was buried in the College of the Holy Spirit of the Company of Jesus (La v[irgen] Catharina de S[an] Ioan del g[ra]n Mogor murio de edad de 82 años a 5 de enero de 1688 en la Puebla de los Angels de Nueva España. Enterrose en el Colegio del Espíritu Santo de la comp[añ]a de Iesvs)."

Alonso Ramos, *Primera parte de los prodigios de la omnipotencia y milagros de la gracia, en la vida de la venerable sierva de Dios Catharina de San Joan* (Puebla, Mexico: Imprenta Plantiniana de Diego Fernandez de Leon, 1689), Sig. 3 / 18733, 1:1. Reproduction courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional de España.

even more remarkable given that her identity as a formerly enslaved Asian woman made her an unlikely candidate for remembrance.

While she had achieved a rare degree of fame by the end of her life, in many ways Catarina's story is also more broadly emblematic of other Asian peoples in the early Americas, about whom only fragments survive. Catarina was one of many people who boarded a Spanish galleon in the Philippines—either voluntarily or in captivity—and crossed the tempestuous Pacific to reach a strange land beyond the horizon. Once they arrived in New Spain, the haggard survivors of this journey faced a new challenge: the violent colonial realities of the Spanish Americas. Collectively, these free and enslaved Asians represented a new kind of migrant in global history, and their experiences shifted endlessly along a continuum between the two poles of coming and going, bondage and freedom, assimilation and foreignness, and recognition and repudiation.

How many of their histories have been lost to human memory or to infinite entombment as a decaying shred of discarded paper in the archives of a dead, Baroque empire? The experiences of Asian peoples in colonial Mexico and the Spanish Americas are neither folklore nor myth: they are history. The traces of their lives that can be recovered from the oblivion of time and the fickleness of human memory populate this book and constitute a history of unlikely survivals, perseverance against prejudice, and spectacular convergences of distant peoples.

The First Asians in the Americas is the first book to examine the mobility of both free and enslaved Asians to and through the Americas during the 250 years that Spanish ships sailed the Pacific Ocean between the Philippine port of Cavite and Acapulco, Mexico. The book's scope is necessarily global, and its approach attends to the grain of lived experience. At the heart of this story are the desires both to understand what Asians made of their new lives in new lands and to uncover how regimes of difference making impacted the search for just treatment in a deeply race-conscious colonial world. Regardless of their origin, the vast majority of Asians who disembarked in Acapulco became known as "chinos," like Catarina. This invented term slotted Asian peoples into New Spain's *casta* (caste) system, alongside more familiar *casta* designations that variously defined Afro-Mexican and Indigenous peoples as "indios," "mulatos," and "negros." Formally, becoming "chino / a" conditioned Asian peoples' status within the New Spanish social order. It restricted their ability to work in certain

trades and made them legally vulnerable to enslavement and the Inquisition.²⁵ Informally, in the ears of Spaniards, the word “chino / a” alone often conjured up the expectation of servitude, criminality, and un-Catholic behavior. Even Catarina’s popularity could not overcome her nature as a “*china*, slave, foreigner” in the eyes of her admirers.

Facing these perils, “chinos” recalibrated their social relationships and blended into existing Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities as they sought to secure their freedom, acquire sustenance, and live with dignity. From the bustle of Manila to the rural rhythms of the Costa Grande, and from the height of Spanish imperial power to the early struggles for independence in Mexico, this book tracks the little-known forms of Asian mobility that defined the deep entanglement of the Pacific world with the colonial lifeblood of the Spanish Americas. From archival shadows, it produces names, networks, and communities. And from the locked sepulcher of Catarina de San Juan, it offers not a new cipher as in Plancarte’s vision, but a multitude of epigraphs, attesting to the lives of other people—just as extraordinary and just as worthy of our attention, analysis, and empathy as Catarina—hundreds of years after they passed from earthly memory.

Through this history, it is my aim to offer three interventions: the first geographic, the second temporal, and the third methodological. First, I join a growing cohort of scholars invested in restoring the importance of the Pacific to the history of colonial Latin America, a field traditionally focused on the Atlantic.²⁶ Rooted in the passage of Spanish galleons sailing between the Philippines and Mexico, the history of transpacific Asian mobility presents a strong case for adopting a Pacific orientation in the study of Latin America. Second, I make a chronological intervention in the long history of Asian migration to the Western Hemisphere. While the story of Asian migration conventionally begins in the nineteenth century, this book builds on a recent turn in the scholarship to the importance of the early modern period. The story that I tell unfolds between the late sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To the history of Asians in the Americas, it offers a new inception, one in which mobility was free and forced.

Third, this book focuses methodologically on the racialization of mobile, non-Spanish communities in Hispanic colonies. Through the use of the word “chino / a”—and the numerous sociolegal repercussions of that designation—the colonial bureaucracy effectively collapsed the diverse ethnolinguistic groups that made the Pacific passage into a single, racialized

collective. We have not yet completed the picture of how this legal form of difference making developed, or of how it impacted the day-to-day lives of Asians in the Hispanic World. Similarly, we have yet to uncover the full range of Asian responses to racialization. Many Asian peoples sought to differentiate themselves from “chino / a” stereotypes to achieve social mobility, while others engaged in multiethnic collaborations with Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities to mitigate the conditions of bondage. This book tracks the evolution of both colonial praxes of difference making and Asian peoples’ adaptations in the face of this adversity to reconstruct the human experience of long-distance mobility across the world’s largest ocean during the early modern period.

The Spanish Pacific

By the late sixteenth century, the Spanish Crown had created the world’s first transpacific empire. The vessels that connected the Asian and American ports of this domain between 1565 and 1815 are widely known today as Manila galleons, though the name is somewhat misleading for several reasons. First, the port of Cavite, near Manila—not Manila itself—was the ships’ most frequent point of embarkation and disembarkation in Asia. Second, Spanish records from the period refer to the ships not as *galeones de Manila* (Manila galleons) but as *naos de china* (Asia ships). Third, the ships often varied greatly in size from small galliots to full-sized galleons, and during the last half century of the trade route, they consisted solely of mid-sized frigates. In total, this transpacific line comprised roughly 332 departures from Mexico to the Philippines and 379 from the Philippines to Mexico.²⁷ The most consistent periods of transpacific navigation occurred from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, while significant disruptions transpired during the 1650s, 1670s, 1680s, 1740s, and 1760s. Of course, even during decades of relative stability, many ships never reached their destinations. Captaining a galleon on the formidable Pacific crossing certainly required a degree of hubris.

During the years of their operation, the Manila galleons constituted a critical lifeline from Spanish-held regions in the Americas to those in Asia. This enormous zone fell under the governance of Mexico City, the seat of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. In the eyes of one governor of the Philippines, Manila “is a fort or outpost of New Spain,” more a colonial Mexican

territory than a Spanish one.²⁸ At the orders of New Spanish viceroys, Spaniards in the Philippines conducted diplomatic missions with nearby kingdoms, assigned missionaries to convert wary Indigenous populations, and launched violent incursions into neighboring regions with limited success. By the same token, New Spain “was as much an American entity as an Asian one.”²⁹

Over the past fifteen years, scholars in the new field of Spanish Pacific studies have argued that colonialism in the Americas cannot be fully understood without attending to the global nature of the sprawling Spanish empire.³⁰ While this scholarship has begun to demonstrate the importance of the Pacific to the Hispanic World, the entanglements of Spanish imperial ambition, the fragility of colonial societies in Pacific littorals, and the experiences of free and enslaved Asian subjects remain imperfectly understood. The task at hand, then, is to delineate the human experience of the Spanish Pacific from the perspective of its most marginalized subjects.

It is now widely recognized that reaching Asia was the principal aim of early Iberian overseas voyages, beginning with Portuguese navigators who sought a route to India in the fifteenth century. The Genoese Christopher Columbus was no exception, though he sought to emulate Marco Polo by sailing across the Atlantic instead of traveling east from Europe. In 1493, he returned to Barcelona, claiming to have found a new route to Asia. Thereafter, generations of millenarian missionaries, imaginative officials, and covetous merchants continued the dream of reaching distant Asian kingdoms by sailing westward into the setting sun. As the American continents slowly gained recognition as distinct landmasses, they became an inconvenient obstruction separating the Iberian Peninsula from the silks and cloves of China and the Spice Islands.

The Pacific would similarly prove to be a significant barrier in the quest to reach Asia. Spaniards reluctantly acknowledged the ocean’s colossal size during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and consequently, most aspiring colonialists eventually reoriented their ambitions toward the Americas, their Indigenous populations, their natural resources, and the profitability of the transatlantic slave trade. Understandably, the Atlantic World has dominated oceanic historiographies of the Americas for these reasons. The Atlantic framework has produced a rich scholarly discourse on the multidirectional movement of people and ideas, the blending of borderlands between empires, and—more recently—the lives of African,

Indigenous, and mixed peoples facing captivity or pursuing a tenuous freedom.³¹ Yet this framework struggles to accommodate the full global connectedness of the early modern world.³²

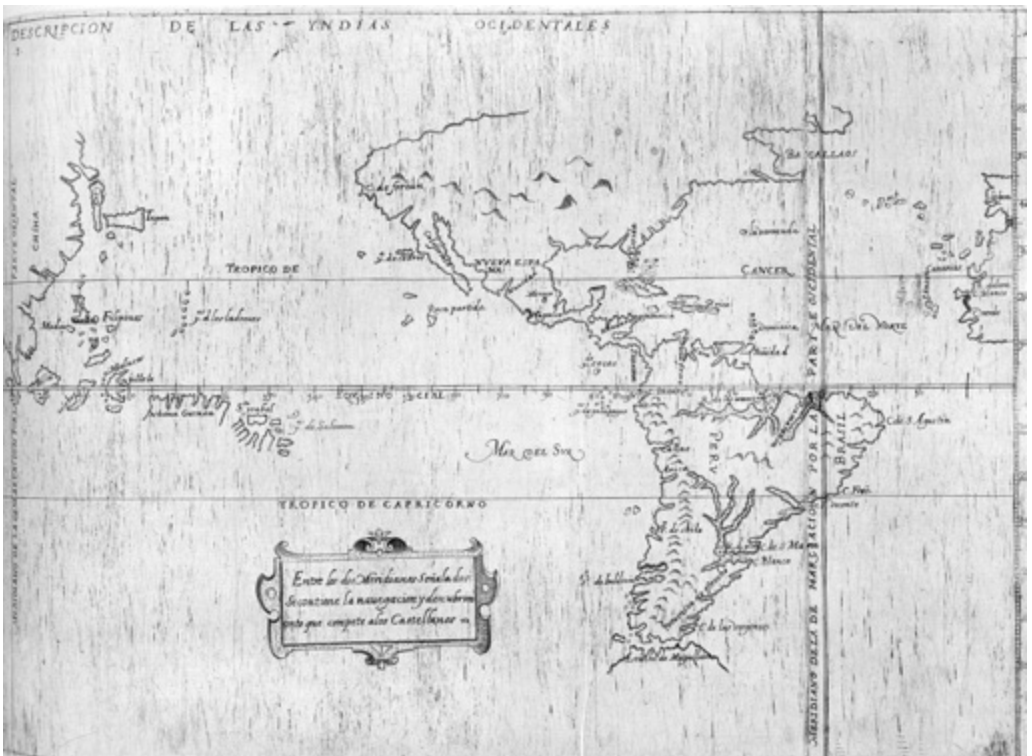
An earlier generation of historians fostered a more expansive view of empire, though they were not without their limitations. The US seizure of the Philippines in 1898 ignited Anglophone academic interest in its new and distant territorial possessions. Perhaps the most prolific scholars of this wave of Pacific-facing research were Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson. From 1903 to 1909, they published a staggering fifty-five volumes of translated documents, manuscripts, and books pertaining to the Spanish period in the Philippines.³³ Robertson was a librarian at the National Library of the Philippines in Manila from 1910 to 1915. On his return to the States, he helped create the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, and he served as the journal's editor in chief from its founding in 1918 until his death in 1939.³⁴ Also in 1939, William Schurz published a groundbreaking monograph on the Manila galleons that drew attention to the Pacific as a generative force in early modern history, as well as the historical connections between the Americas and the Philippines.³⁵ This subject became more popular among historians in the latter half of the twentieth century, when world-system theorists began connecting the flows of silver from the Americas across both the Atlantic and the Pacific to the formation of a global economy and the rise of capitalism.³⁶

While the Pacific turn has its origins in historicizing long-distance economic circulation, it has recently come to encompass the movements of people, cultural exchanges, literary imaginaries, and institutional adaptations to transpacific trade.³⁷ According to Christina Lee and Ricardo Padrón, Spanish Pacific studies conceives of a space that “is not precisely physical and certainly not natural” but that nonetheless “helped produce a social, cultural, and political space whose frontiers were ragged and whose borders were malleable.”³⁸ While limited in its reach, the Spanish Pacific created a new zone of global encounter and exchange that linked Asia and the Americas materially, demographically, and culturally. The transformative implications of these contacts for the early Americas have often been understated, but Déborah Oropeza makes a case for examining transpacific movement most explicitly: “if the Asian population that integrated into New Spanish society is not considered, then our vision of New Spain is incomplete.”³⁹ This book is likewise grounded in the understanding

that transpacific mobility is foundational to the history of the Spanish Americas.

The importance of the Pacific Ocean to the Hispanic World is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the 1601 map of the royal chronicler Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, “Descripcion de las Yndias occidentales” (Description of the West Indies; figure I.2).

Herrera y Tordesillas’s maps were the official cartographic representations of the Spanish empire at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁴⁰ As Padrón points out, the “Descripcion” reinforced the long-standing claim



I.2 Description of the West Indies

The cartouche reads, “The two marked meridians contain the navigation and discovery of all that pertains to the Castilians” (Entre los dos Meridianos señalados se contiene la navegacion y descubrimiento que compete a los Castellanos).

Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, “Descripcion de las Yndias occidentales,” in *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las islas i Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano* (Madrid: En la Emprencia Real, 1601), 4:1–2. Reproduction courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

that all lands and waters between the two meridians designated by the Treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Zaragoza (1529) belonged to the Spanish Crown.⁴¹ This enormous territorial assertion encompassed fully half of the globe and all the peoples residing therein. To represent this domain visually, the map put New Spain in the center, featured the Pacific prominently (although compressing its true size to extend the Zaragoza meridian on the left side of the map), and even marginalized the Iberian Peninsula (placing it in the upper right) to accommodate the colonial domain.⁴² In the words of Padrón, the map “make[s] central what was peripheral to everyone else.”⁴³

For Herrera y Tordesillas, the ships that made a Spanish presence possible in these far-flung possessions had allowed Spain to surpass the glory of the ancients.⁴⁴ In exemplifying this claim, he cited four key trade routes, the newest being the transpacific galleon line that connected Asia to the Americas. The addition of this route extended his conception of the “West Indies” from the Western Hemisphere all the way to Southeast and East Asia, since all Hispanic colonies were “western with respect to Castile.”⁴⁵ In this new imperial imaginary, New Spain became the crossroad of the Atlantic and Pacific, a nexus of grandeur, wealth, and new embarkations to ever more distant lands. In Herrera y Tordesillas’s conception, the nature of Spain’s early modern empire was unequivocally global.

Yet his projection reveals disturbingly little about the on-the-ground realities of this colonial world. In truth, Spanish presence was minimal outside of a handful of urban settlements. Spain’s outlandish claim to the entirety of the Pacific was actualized almost solely through the passage of a couple of ships sailing in either direction each year.⁴⁶ Strictly speaking, the Spanish presence in the Pacific during most of the colonial period existed within a narrow navigational corridor, a transpacific space “as shallow as the amount of seawater displaced by the weight of Iberian sailing vessels.”⁴⁷ In the words of Lee and Padrón, “Spanish Pacific studies begins by recognizing that Spain’s presence in the Pacific was always slim, tenuous, and contested.”⁴⁸

Despite the extremely limited scope of the Spanish encounter with the Pacific, it sufficed to facilitate “an unprecedented global *mestizaje* [intermingling and intermixture]” in the movement of thousands of free and enslaved Asians to the Americas for the first time.⁴⁹ During their 250 years of operation, the Manila galleons confronted the most challenging seafaring conditions of their era to ferry merchandise and people between Cavite in

the Philippines and Acapulco in Mexico. The survivors of this arduous journey were forever marked by it.

The people disembarking in Mexico's torrid Pacific port had come from Gujarat to the southwest, Nagasaki to the northeast, and everywhere in between. Most sailors and free migrants were born on Luzon in the Philippines, while captives had often been ensnared throughout the Philippines or, like Catarina de San Juan, by Portuguese enslaving operations in the Indian Ocean World.⁵⁰ Smaller concentrations came from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Japan, or China.

Though most remained in central Mexico after they disembarked in Acapulco, many dispersed further afield on long journeys to Central America, Peru, and even across the Atlantic to Spain. The pioneering scholarship of Edward Slack, Melba Falck Reyes, Héctor Palacios, Oropeza, Tatiana Seijas, and Rubén Carrillo Martín has established the study of these early Asians in Mexico as a distinct field of inquiry.⁵¹ Focusing primarily on the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these authors have examined a wide range of questions pertaining to the scale of Asian transpacific movement, Asian integration within New Spanish society, Asian experiences under regimes of bondage, and the ways in which colonial institutions and officials adapted to the entry of this new population.

Despite these important advances, there is much left to uncover about the history of the earliest Asians who migrated or were displaced to the Spanish Americas. Fundamental questions remain unanswered: What propelled Asian mobility across the Pacific? How did the "chino / a" label emerge? How did Asians respond to incipient colonial forms of race making? Moreover, the full range of early modern Asian movement to and through the Americas has yet to be articulated. It extended far beyond Mexico, the geographic focal point for the current historiography. In addition, this movement continued into the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which are regarded as periods when Asians largely disappeared from the archival record in colonial Mexico. How might these elongated trajectories reshape the emerging historical canon on Asians in colonial Mexico?

In answering these and other questions, this book takes an expansive archival approach to locate the extant shards of information on Asian subjects of Spanish empire. It draws on documents from archives and libraries across Spain, Mexico, the United States, and the Philippines. Often, the

relevant fragments are few and far between: an examination of thousands of pages of accounting records at the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, for example, turned up sparse notations on Asian galleon crews and port laborers in Cavite and Acapulco. These transactional memoranda—along with parish, matrimonial, criminal, licensing, manumission, inquisition, ordinance, and land-claim records—represent the canonical genres of social history for the colonial period. Where possible, as in the case of Catarina de San Juan, I paired these fragments with printed narratives, manuscript accounts, official correspondence, and private letters. As historians of transatlantic enslavement have long remarked, such a broad range is ultimately required to write the history of fundamentally marginalized colonial populations.⁵²

In every instance, I endeavor to restore the human element to expansive yet vacuous imperial imaginaries, like that of Herrera y Tordesillas. In so doing, I rely heavily on the methodologies of global microhistory, which use the stories of highly mobile individuals to arrive at new metanarratives that challenge the Eurocentrism of traditional global histories.⁵³ In John-Paul Ghobrial's formulation, global microhistory turns our attention to the border crossers, the links between movement and identity, and the space between belonging and unbelonging.⁵⁴ The fragmentary nature of the Spanish Pacific archive lends itself to this approach, whereby minuscule details of individual lives—in the words of Matt Matsuda—“take on full meaning only when linked to other stories and places.”⁵⁵ People embodied the Pacific connection to the Spanish Americas, and the varied ways in which they lived their lives defined the human realities of global empire in the early modern era.

Asians in the Americas

Traditionally, the historiography of Asian diasporic movement to the Americas has focused on the United States from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. These temporal and geographic biases are especially present in the field of Asian American studies, which has often overlooked hemispheric histories of Asians based in Latin America—to say nothing of those histories rooted in the early modern period. Early social histories of colonial Mexico did little to ameliorate this problem. They often sidelined the experiences of “chinos” due to the assumption that these people were

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