

The First Asians in the Americas: A Transpacific History

DIEGO JAVIER LUIS

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Diego Javier Luis's *The First Asians in the Americas: A Transpacific History* is a monumental work of scholarship. Devoted to tracking the experiences and transformations of Asians in the Americas, the book sheds much needed light on a topic that has until relatively recently remained one of the dark spots of global history: the Transpacific connections that permeated across the Hispanic world and beyond. Luis joins a flourishing scholarship—embodied by the work of Tatiana Seijas, Deborah Oropesa, and Cristina Lee—focused on uncovering the human side of this exchange.

The First Asians in the Americas is an ambitious project. It seeks to reconstruct the experience of Asian migrants—free and forced—in the Americas and their changing identity and cultural alignment across the centuries of the early modern era in the colonial context of the Hispanic Monarchy. Through the experiences of individuals as they appear in the archives, the book reconstructs the transformation of Asian travelers into *chinos*—and the process of cultural imposition that this transformation entailed—while revealing the strategies of cooperation and resistance, careful bargaining, strategic displays of loyalty toward colonial hierarchies, and knowledge exchange with other minorities that Asians in the Hispanic world resorted to in order to survive and prosper. In the process, Luis also retraces changes in the cultural perception and identity of Asian migrants. This dual approach puts the human subject of the study in conversation with the changing cultural environment and provides a dynamic analysis that is best exemplified by the illuminating transformation of Asians into *chinos*, the caste designation through which colonial bureaucracies—mostly in New Spain, but to a different degree in other parts of the empire—made sense of the arrivals from across the Pacific Ocean and placed them within a broader imperial ordering.

Underpinning this grand ambition is Luis's masterful use of language, which enables him to equally transmit complex concepts and to impress the reader with vivid narrations of life in the seventeenth century. The section on the Pacific Passage in Chapter 2 of the book shall remain one of the most artful reconstructions of life within the Manila Galleon. The second pillar upon which the book is built is excellent research work. Anyone familiar with sources on the Spanish Empire will appreciate the wide range of primary sources that inform Luis's analysis. This depth of research has enabled the author to perform one of the most difficult tasks of modern scholarship with a measure of success.

Yet, despite the amazing scholarship displayed in this volume, the reader cannot fail to notice certain shortcomings. These relate mostly to the strength of the argument developed by Luis in relation to the ambitious goals of the book. The research follows John-Paul Ghobrial's methodology of global microhistory (p. 14; see Ghobrial 2019) by necessity given the scattered nature of the information contained in the sources. This in itself is a logical choice, but microhistory is limited

in the types of empirical claims that it can make. When it comes to tracing the evolution of *chinos* as a caste—the identity and cultural transformations taking place for Asians in the Hispanic world—the collection of case studies is only half of the story. The book would have benefited from placing this type of evidence and narrative alongside a more structuralist analysis of the racial and social policies of the Spanish Empire and its legal scaffolding. Sadly, while the hidden imperial structure is constantly referred to, it is not dissected in depth. Spanish policies, race-making, and imperial goals are secondary in the book.

This is completely understandable given Luis's objective of giving a voice to the volume's Asian subjects, but it is necessary to have a more structural approach to contrast the claim that imperial imposition played a fundamental role in the transformation process of Asians in the Americas, especially given the wide scope of the research, both chronologically and thematically. This imbalance in analytical terms is compounded by the framework of the study. Luis eschews Rebecca Earle's criticism that modern race theory is difficult to apply to Spanish imperial frameworks. Instead, he favors Geraldine Heng's Foucauldian characterization of race as a relationship of power, extending racial theory to religion, culture, and sexuality (p. 21). Alas, race is not religion or sexuality. They are their own categories, and this is especially important in the case of the Hispanic world, where religion plays a fundamental role in allocating one's place in society. This is observable in the evidence contained in the book. The use of blasphemy as a legal strategy to restrain slave owners rested on the fact that there was an expectation on the part of the enslaver to instruct their slaves on the principles of the faith. That this strategy worked implies that courts of law gave precedence to religious matters over ownership in this regard and means that religion could bypass racialized social dynamics (pp. 151–156).

A flexible approach to race is the current norm in the United States, where race's primacy as an engine of history is undisputed. The book itself is very reliant on methodologies, debates, and literature of the North American historiography. But to be fully convincing, the claim that race was the fundamental dynamic driving the experience of Asians in the Hispanic world needs a more structured comparison to the "imperial race-making" policy. Connected to the case of religion is that of privileges and duties in what essentially was an early modern society. The cases of race fluidity, in which Asians would strategically claim to be either *indios* or *chinos*, betray the fact that rather than a straightforward stratification of society based on race, there was a distinction of duties and privileges. For example, *indios* were liable to pay the *tributo* but were exempt from the Inquisitorial jurisdiction and from paying *alcábalas*. Spanish descendants held the privilege to openly carry weapons but in return fell under the control of the Holy Inquisition. As *chinos*, Asians could be enslaved legally—until the emancipation of 1672—which explains their interest at times in being considered *indios* (p. 119). Without a proper structural analysis, there is no conclusive way of proving whether the ultimate dynamic at work in Spanish American societies was social stratification based on race imposed by imperial authorities, or compartmentalization with differing

privileges and duties based on *nationes* (a canonical and historical term for racial groups in the Middle Ages and in scholastic thought) under a common divinity as was the case with medieval scholastic politics. Once again, a clear definition of what imperial race-making was and how it operated is fundamental to keep track of the claims. The assertion that Spanish suspicion and fear of the Chinese community—which led to the 1603 massacre of *sangleyes* in Manila—was the catalyst for the classification of Asian subjects in the empire sits at odds with the evidence provided by Immaculada Alva Rodríguez (1997, 66) that in 1604 the governor ordered citizens to accommodate Chinese sojourners in their own homes for the trading season. Similarly, racialized fear and distrust after the uprising of Afro-Mexican troops in Veracruz in 1645 led to a renewed prohibition on carrying arms that included *chinos* (p. 117). Yet in the eighteenth century, two battalions of black and *chino* militias appeared as the only garrison protecting the town of Acapulco, the terminal for the Pacific trade and a harbor of vital importance for the exertion of Spanish control over the Philippines (p. 214). If fear was the prime mover in the racial categorization of Asians in the Hispanic Monarchy and racialization was the prime organizer of social relations and hierarchies, how can we explain these contradictions?

Finally, the book misses a golden opportunity to address the Marxist challenge that class above all things—including race, gender, and religion—determined the distribution of power and the stratification of society. Admittedly, this is not a goal of the author, and it is not necessary to address this somewhat antiquated conception of social history. Not everything is necessarily dialectical materialism. But the wealth of information contained in this book certainly puts it in a strong position to add to this larger theoretical debate more forcefully. Yet, with the focus on Asians as players in a racialized environment in which power structures are portrayed as skewed against them, the instances of *chinos* as *encomenderos*, slave owners, and even town officials, as subjects capable of seeking legal redress all the way from the local authorities to the king and the Council of the Indies, even capable of starting litigation against Sebastián Hurtado de Corcuera (pp. 196–197)—a nobleman and an ex-governor of the Philippines, no less—are left unexplored. What can the legal agency and capacity to rise in the social scale of certain *chinos* tell us about the power mechanisms of the Spanish Empire, especially in a comparative setting? Could the same petitions, complaints, and litigations have been successful—or even raised—in the case of the British and Dutch Empires in Asia, where power and political capital were determined through corporate hierarchy and mercantile patronage? It is easy for a reader to demand more, but those unfamiliar with Spanish sources should be mindful of the difficulty simply of compiling the information that the book contains. Yet, it is also easy to see that the volume could have expanded its reach beyond the North American debates. The capacity of Asians to contest their enslavement is in direct conversation with the work of Chloe Ireton (2020) on slavery in the Spanish Americas, and the question of whether economic rationale could trump religious and racial prejudices speaks as well to recent works on early modern trade (Trivellato *et al.* 2014, especially the chapter by

Giuseppe Marcocci, pp. 91–107).

In short, *The First Asians in the Americas* is a work of scholarship that will soon find its place in Transpacific literature, and it has the potential as well to contribute to debates beyond its geographical focus. Its faults are simply based on the question of whether it lives up to the ambitious goals it has imposed on itself. And the ambitiousness is perhaps understandable given the need for this incipient field to establish itself more solidly in the scholarship. To this end, *The First Asians in the Americas* represents a confident step forward. One does not need to agree with the book's core argument to find it extremely valuable. Luis may not have provided a final answer to the debate over Transpacific connections, but he has certainly built bridges for others to raise new questions.

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