From Area Studies to Ethnic Studies: An Approach to the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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I am very pleased and honored to be given this opportunity to address this distinguished international gathering of scholars, researchers, archivists, librarians and aficionados of the study of the "Chinese Overseas." I am indeed grateful to Dr. Liren Zheng and his colleagues at the Dr. You-Bao Shao Overseas Chinese Documentation and Research Center for inviting me to participate, and I am proud to have been an advisor to this Center shortly after its inception. I wish also to note that, in all my years attending conferences about the "Chinese overseas," I know of no other meeting devoted primarily to the stated goals of this gathering, that is, to promote cooperation among institutions and libraries in the collecting, preserving and sharing of materials relating to overseas Chinese. For this reason, I an confident that this conference will establish itself as a landmark in the field of overseas Chinese studies.

Now approaching twenty years, I have been studying the history of migration and settlement of the Chinese in a part of the world not commonly associated with Chinese overseas studies. Although the Chinese in the United States and even in Canada have constituted a central focus of the field, the rest of the Americas--that is, Latin America and the Caribbean--have been largely ignored until very recently. Even then, the region is still very under-represented at international conferences, including this one. At all international conferences on the overseas Chinese, I am usually the lone or at best one of

a handful of scholars presenting papers on the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is true even at a recent conference held in Havana, Cuba, organized as a regional meeting of arguably the preeminent international organization of overseas Chinese studies, ISSCO (International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas). Hence the very intricate, complex, and divergent histories of Chinese migration and settlement in various Latin American/Caribbean countries are little known--not by general historians of Latin America/Caribbean, even among those whose primary interests are in social history, demographic history, or even immigration history; nor by historians of overseas Chinese--so-called *huaqiao shi*--predominantly ethnic Chinese themselves based in the PRC, in Taiwan, Southeast Asia (scholars such as the eminent Wang Gungwu and Leo Suryadinata to name just two among many very distinguished historians, sociologists, and in other disciplines), but also including many well-known non-Chinese scholars in places such as the UK, Canada, and Australia (such as Edgar Wickham of Canada and Anthony Reid of Australia, again among many distinguished scholars across a range of disciplines).

A very small group of scholars and writers in Latin American and Caribbean countries have studied the Chinese in their respective societies, but their impact has not been large, in part because of their relatively small number of publications and their very limited dissemination outside their own immediate region. After all, Spanish (and even less so, Portuguese) is not a language on the radar screen of overseas Chinese studies scholars. More importantly, interest in the Chinese in this region has been spurred by scholars in the United States; indeed, so many U.S. based scholars have assumed as their primary area of research and publishing the study of Chinese settlement in different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean that there is a veritable "boomlet" on the horizon, although our impact on the field of "overseas Chinese" is still limited.

For the rest of my talk this morning, let me suggest some reasons why interest on the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean are growing in the U.S., and

paradoxically, why U.S. based scholars with this interest are still largely un-connected to overseas Chinese studies elsewhere around the around, hence limiting their impact on the field, and visa versa. Let me begin by sharing with you how I got into this area of research, which is also the history of how I and others of my academic generation in the U.S. began our graduate studies in a Cold-War creation called "area studies," then transitioned to a postmodern, eventually also post-colonial, field called "ethnic studies."

Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS) as a field of "area studies" emerged in U.S. universities in the post-war era, and given critical impetus by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of the 1960s and 70s that funded critical language and cultural studies in response to perceived Soviet incursion (to a lesser extent "Red Chinese" influence) in the "non-aligned" Third World. (The other area studies are African and Middle Eastern Studies, and Asian Studies.) For LACS, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 led by Fidel Castro who soon afterwards embraced socialism, further stimulated its growth. In other words, area studies was part of the U.S. Cold War political project to contain communism in the Third World.

As an undergraduate at Stanford University in the mid sixties, I was sent to Brazil as an exchange student, then returned after graduation on a Fulbright. I became thoroughly inspired by liberation theology, then being articulated by archbishop Dom Helder Camara of northwest Brazil, the same region that gave rise to twin empowerment movements for the poverty-stricken peasants based on land and literacy, led respectively by Francisco Juliao and Paulo Freire. I learned Portuguese and eventually Spanish as well, then received one of the very lucrative NDEA fellowships to take my Ph.D. in Latin American/Caribbean history at the University of Texas at Austin on an accelerated course of study, bypassing the M.A. straight to the doctorate. For my dissertation, I crossed the border from Texas to Mexico to research and write a 500-year history of an indigenous American people called Yaquis, whose home base straddled both sides of the international border as they waged a relentless struggle against loss of land, identity and

autonomy, against first Spaniards, then Mexicans, followed by "gringos." During this time, while traveling extensively throughout Brazil and Mexico doggedly pursuing my pre-defined goals, I could not help but observe that there were Asians all over these countries, yet rarely was their presence noted in the hundreds of books I read, nor in the myriad lectures I attended as a graduate student, let alone conference papers I heard in my early academic career.

Actually, if one searches hard, one can find passing references to Asia and Asians in LACS. When this occurs, it is usually in the context of the Manila Galleon trade of the 16th to 18th centuries between the Spanish colonies of Mexico in the New World and Las Filipinas in the Far East. Sometimes, a brief mention would be made of the large Chinese coolie trade to Peru and Cuba in the late 19th century. In a general history of the Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century, some reference may be made to the massacre of Chinese in northern Mexico during this tumultuous period, but not to the expulsion and subsequent expropriation of Chinese property during the Depression of the thirties. In a general history of modern Brazil, one might encounter some discussion of Japanese immigrants.

If LACS was remiss in paying much attention to Asians in its region, I soon discovered that Asian Studies was equally negligent, in that it generally ignored the question of Asian out-migration and re-settlement elsewhere, preoccupied as it was only with internal questions of Asian countries and with state-to-state relations. Lately, the Asian American Studies Association appears ready to make amends by inviting leading Asian Americanists to dialogue with Asianists at their annual meetings.

My personal encounter with Chinese and Japanese individuals and communities throughout Brazil and Mexico coupled with their almost complete absence in the field of Latin American/Caribbean studies, led me to start filling in the gap by turning my own academic work in that direction. It was a natural decision, given my solid training in the histories and languages of the countries of the region, and given my own realization that

I am a "diasporic" Chinese (more on the idea of "diaspora" later). Coincidental with this decision, and fortuitously for me, I discovered ethnic studies, specifically Asian American studies, an emerging field like area studies in the U.S. academy but with a very different epistemological base and political trajectory.

Asian American Studies--which together with Black Studies (now African American studies), Chicano Studies (now Chicana and Chicano studies) and American Indian Studies constituted the origin and core of what is generally known as ethnic studies--grew out of the Civil Rights movement of the mid-60s to correct omissions and distortions in higher education curricula. These ethnic-specific and community-based studies began with a strong dose of identity politics and were heavily nurtured by cultural nationalism. Their original foci were also largely limited to the political confines of the United States, although some Black Studies programs soon broke away to embrace the broader configuration of the *black diaspora* following the pattern established by the Atlantic slave trade that distributed African slaves throughout the Western Hemisphere. In other words, early on in Black Studies, the common history of slavery in the Americas compelled scholars to adopt a new paradigm that was transnational and comparative. Borrowing the idea of "Diaspora" from Jewish history, they adapted it to their needs and particularities.

When I first encountered Asian American studies in the mid seventies and tested its receptivity to the study of Asians in Latin America and the Caribbean, I found the field still largely U.S.-centric. When early on I began to use the concept of "diaspora" for my study, I found little resonance among Asian Americanists at the time, although there was no overt resistance either. Most of all, the term was simply not used in Asian American studies, which preferred the immigration model to examine movements of Chinese (and other Asians) to the United States. Nor was it embraced by overseas Chinese studies scholars, who to this day find it difficult to deal with the term, having no word in Chinese to capture its essence. (Prof. Ling-chi Wang's rendition of "diaspora" as

luo-di-shen-gen may be better than simple "immigration" but does not do the job.)

Furthermore, from its inception and given its origins in the Civil Rights movement, ethnic studies has always been open and up front about its liberatory political project and its commitment to social justice. Therefore, ethnic studies is fundamentally interested in issues of race and race relations, and in the process known as racial formation, where "race" is understood as a historically contingent and socially constructed phenomenon that is constantly being destabilized and redefined, and where racial hierarchies are fundamentally about power and privilege.

With few exceptions, Latin Americanists and Asian Americanists, admittedly two very distinct groups of scholars, have been largely unmindful of each others' existence and uninterested in each others' work. They have not interacted with each other, exchanged research ideas and results, or learned from each others' methodological approaches.

The study of the Asian diaspora presents an opportunity to bridge the two fields and bring them closer together. For LACS, the study of Asians in Latin American will focus on their legitimate place in history and their contributions to the formation of Latin American/Caribbean societies and cultures. If the presence of Asian immigrants to this region had not been properly acknowledged at one time, with the election of Alberto Fujimori, son of Japanese immigrants, to the presidency of Peru in 1990, that history can no longer be denied. As for Asian American studies, extending itself to include the examination of Asian experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean will broaden the scope of the field, complete our understanding of Asian immigration to the Western Hemisphere, and complement our already considerable knowledge of the Asian experiences in the U.S.

In the specific case of the Chinese, by taking a hemispheric and thus comparative approach to their history, many hidden facets of their experience come to light. Furthermore, within this broader perspective where the Chinese leaving from one

common point of origin (south China in the vast majority of cases) ended up in many different locations across the Americas, while a few returned to China, many more re-migrated to other places within the Americas, producing varied and often surprising patterns of settlement and integration into local societies. For example, among the first Chinese in New York City were re-migrants from Cuba, following a well established and well traveled path across the waters from Havana to New York. Chinese coolies on Cuban plantations were also introduced to Mississippi plantations to fill an acute labor shortage in the 1860s. Chinese on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border crossed the international boundary frequently, while Chinese merchants in San Francisco and Los Angeles invested and opened branch businesses in Mexico, Cuba, Lima (Peru). Chinese exclusion in the U.S. notwithstanding, California Chinese acted as labor contractors to introduce Chinese workers to Baja California, Mexico, to open up land for large scale commercial agriculture (cotton) in the Mexicali Valley. As we come to understand more of this complex history of the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean, the traditional immigration paradigm predicated on analyzing simple push-pull factors of the sending and receiving nations seem too rigid and limited.

As with the Chinese to the U.S., Chinese to Latin America and the Caribbean share the common experience of being immigrants (*huaqiao*) cheap labor (*huagong*), shopkeepers and traders (*huashang*), as well as relative newcomers to already multiracial societies that were nevertheless dominated by European ethnicities and white power structures. But the laws and customs towards inter-racial relations produced vastly different results, patterns and consequences for the Chinese in different parts of the Americas. One of the most interesting environments for Chinese in 19th century Latin America was found on the Cuban plantations, where one was either black or white, slave or free. Given their low status as coolie or contract laborer assigned to work alongside slaves, the Chinese worker would be initially assigned the racial status of black; however, an occasional lucky individual would win the lottery, gain a small fortune, and

have his status changed to "white" in anticipation of marriage to a local white towns-woman.

Another very significant factor affecting Chinese integration and social relationships with others between the United States on the one hand, and the rest of the Americas on the other (including Canada) was the sharp contrast in economic development: By the time Chinese were recruited to work in the U.S., it had become a powerful, autonomous and expansionist capitalist society, completely free of political and economic domination by England, the former colonial power. Their need for cheap free (wage) labor prompted railroad and agricultural entrepreneurs in the American West to recruit mostly Chinese men, while the country simultaneously beckoned unprecedented numbers of diverse European immigrants who came with families to settle the expanding frontier carved out of the territorial incorporation of Indian and Mexican land. European immigrants, constructed as "white," were promised land, freedom and citizenship, but the Chinese were denied these same rights while joining already racialized Blacks, Indians and Mexicans as inferior, "non-white" minority groups.

By contrast, the Chinese experience in Latin America and the Caribbean has had to be framed within the context of first European colonialism, followed by U.S. imperialism or neocolonialism in the region. While this may seem suggestive of the situation in Southeast Asia, which was also under European colonial rule during the time of massive and continuous Chinese migration (as early as the 17th century and continuing into the 19th and even 20th centuries), one major difference between the European colonial pattern in Asia and in the Americas was that the Asian colonies did not become settler colonies; rather, they were exploited almost exclusively for their natural resources. Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean, by contrast, were settler colonies, more like the U.S. in this regard. Thus Chinese were brought into Cuba as contract laborers in the mid-19th century to work alongside black slaves at a time when Cuba remained a Spanish colony long after most of the rest of Spanish America had

become independent. Thus they were allowed to migrate to Mexico, especially the region that bordered the U.S. in the north precisely during the time that the U.S. began investing heavily in mining and railroads in the border region (around 1880s, coinciding with the beginning of Chinese Exclusion in the U.S.) In this case, the Chinese were desired not so much to provide cheap labor--there were plenty of Mexicans to do that--as to build a commercial infrastructure to provide commodities and services for a local population making a partial transition from a peasant (subsistence) economy to a dependent capitalist economy of wage labor and export markets. In proliferating as shopkeepers, peddlers, itinerant traders, fruit and vegetable farmers, small manufacturers, they dominated the local economy where small retail trade was concerned, becoming in effect the regional petite bourgeoisie. Again, some profitable and interesting comparison can be made between the Chinese in northern Mexico and their compatriots in Southeast Asia under the British and the Dutch, and even in the Philippines under the Spaniards, but I suspect initial commonalities would soon break down because the much larger European settler presence in the Americas severely limited the growth of Chinese economic power into large scale and wholesale trade, commerce, and manufacturing.

I hope the point of this brief discussion is obvious by now: by abandoning the old immigration model for a diasporic model-that is, by examining the experiences of the Chinese hemispherically, thus comparatively, we can bring the best of area studies, in this case Latin American/Caribbean studies, and ethnic studies, specifically Asian American studies, to bear on the study of Chinese experiences in the Western Hemisphere, in the process also enriching and frankly, revitalizing both of those fields that have shown signs of growing stale.

It should also be obvious by now that this model asks us to eschew using the term "overseas Chinese," because it does not privilege China as the inevitable starting point and continuing focal point of the experiences of those identified as ethnic Chinese in the Americas. Rather, it asks us to examine these experiences from multiple vantage and focal points.

This also exposes, however, the fact that many of us who have taken up the study of the Chinese in Latin America from an area studies or ethnic studies background, do not know much about China itself--its history, culture, laws, customs, and most importantly, its languages (spoken and written)--for lack of any formal and systematic training. Not surprisingly, we are much better versed in the European languages of the hemisphere's colonial powers--English, Spanish, Portuguese, French--and much better trained in the histories of the United States and Spanish American countries from pre-Columbian times to the present.

This shortcoming has come into sharp focus precisely at a moment when impressive numbers of young Latin American and Caribbeanists and Asian Americanists have embraced the study of the Chinese (and Japanese, to a lesser extent, the South Asians and Koreans) in just about every corner of this extensive region. Joining the few old-timers such as myself, we can now legitimately lay claim to a field called "Chinese diaspora studies." While we certainly do not privilege identity with China and a primordial or essential "Chinese-ness" as central and essential to diasporic communities and experiences, our range of analysis is often severely constrained by our inability to penetrate the Chinese background of these immigrants and through at least the first generation experience after their resettlement in the Americas.

This leaves all of us one obvious conclusion to draw: the field of overseas Chinese studies with its international cohort of scholars but whose historical disinterest to studying the Chinese experiences in the Americas outside of the United States and Canada, and the field of Chinese diaspora studies in the Americas which is filling this vacuum with a younger cohort of scholars from backgrounds in Latin America/Caribbean area studies and Asian American/ethnic studies backgrounds, must now join hands in a more collaborative, cross and inter-disciplinary way to advance all of our understanding of this global Chinese phenomenon.