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*A People without a Nation:
Anti-Chinese Campaigns and Violence in Northern Mexico (1900-1940)*

ABSTRACT: *This article explores the experiences of the Chinese diaspora in northern Mexico between 1900 and 1940. From their economic contributions in the late Porfiriato era (1900-1911) to Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary persecution and systemic oppression, this ethnic community changed the region's socio-political and racial makeup. The economic success of Chinese individuals and businesses in Mexico's northern states created resentment and distrust among native Mexicans who absorbed "antichinista" ideologies that manifested themselves in race separation laws, expulsions, and massacres. The author shows that organized anti-Chinese tensions in northern Mexico preceded systemic "mestizaje" which granted some people citizenship while ostracizing the ethnic Chinese as "non-Mexicans."*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Mexico; northern states; Chinese; immigration; diaspora; antichinismo; Torreón massacre (1911); mestizaje; José Ángel Espinoza*

Introduction

As Mexico entered the twentieth century, the country headed toward a wave of political, economic, and social reforms. While these changes provided opportunities of prosperity for the nation as a whole, ethnic Chinese living in Mexico soon faced an era of persecution and marginalization. The northern part of the country experienced anti-Chinese hostilities as a blend of economic resentment that manifested itself in Sinophobic nationalism, anti-Chinese organizations, and demonstrations, albeit tempered by diplomatic relations with China and a dependency on Chinese labor and business. Since the Chinese population was heavily concentrated in the northern regions of Mexico, this area felt the respective changes the most. In the northern states and Baja California territories, Chinese men owned land, composed the majority of the labor force, established crucial merchant trade and businesses, and married native and *mestizo* women.¹ Mexicans viewed the Chinese economic success and status in their communities with envy and soon condemned their presence as threatening to the nation and to *mexicanidad* ("Mexican-ness"). Even though Sinophobia—fearful or belittling attitudes toward China, its people, and culture—spread to several regions in Mexico, the north witnessed the foundations of *antichinista* ("anti-Chinese") movements. Attempts to curtail and restrict the Chinese presence in these regions originated in the later part of the Porfiriato era (1900-1911).² However, Mexican Sinophobia reached a new level during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) when Revolutionaries embraced *mestizaje*—*mestizo*

¹ Verónica Castillo-Muñoz, *The Other California: Land, Identity, and Politics on the Mexican Borderlands* (2016; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 48-49.

² The Porfiriato era is named after José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori, President of Mexico between 1876 and 1880, and between 1884 and 1911.

identity – as part of Mexican nationalism.³ This ethno-national identity triggered an aggressive persecution of Chinese communities, especially in the north where over three hundred Chinese lost their lives in the city of Torreón in the state of Coahuila between May 13 and 15, 1911.

Exclusion of the Chinese continued after the Revolution ended in 1920. Intellectuals, as well as regional and state politicians, articulated notions of the Chinese as a race genetically inferior and detrimental to the country's prosperity and progress. Sinophobic propaganda depicted the Chinese as disease-carrying and intellectually inferior.⁴ Crimes, boycotts, and anti-interracial marriage laws further pushed the ethnic Chinese toward the margins of Mexican society. Some states in the north even expelled their Chinese populations, for example, the state of Sonora (northwestern Mexico, mostly bordering Arizona). Yet, despite their social tactics and systemic restrictions, the *antichinistas* did not achieve their vision of a Chinese-free Mexico, as some regions resisted and defied *antichinista* movements and offered a safe haven for Chinese communities exiled elsewhere. The northern states economically depended on Chinese labor and businesses, and the central government was well aware of the possible repercussions with China should the nation expel every Chinese person.

Existing scholarship on the Chinese in Mexico and anti-Chinese hostility in the country dismisses the particular role Mexican northern states and territories played both in the cultivation and defiance of anti-Chinese movements. Robert Chao Romero, a historian at UCLA, utilizes a diasporic method of analysis in his 2010 monograph *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*, and claims to explain the Chinese in Mexico “within the context of the broader global Chinese diaspora of the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century.”⁵ Romero's approach dismisses the unique identity and impact Chinese communities had specifically in Mexico, even though similarities across the different Chinese diaspora communities could certainly be found at the turn of the century. Other scholars encounter the opposite problem, namely, by extrapolating from a particular location to interpret the climate of the entire northern region. In *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (2012), historian Grace Peña Delgado (at the time at Penn State, now at UC Santa Cruz) situates her research of the Chinese in the northern Mexican borderlands but does not elaborate on the areas outside the Arizona-Sonora region.⁶ The focus of this article is to create a holistic narrative and to include several northern states

³ Jose Vasconcelos, “The Cosmic Race,” in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15-20.

⁴ José Angel Espinoza, *El ejemplo de Sonora* (Mexico: D.F., 1932), 92.

⁵ Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 5.

⁶ Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

and the North Territory of Baja California to come to a better understanding of the Chinese in northern Mexico. It expands on the theory of Jason Oliver Chang, an Ethnic Studies scholar at the University of Connecticut, according to which *antichinismo* did not develop from *mestizo* nationalism, but rather incorporated the Porfiriato's economic tensions that incited ethno-national rhetoric during and after the Revolution.⁷ These economic and national components can be seen in both regional and federal legislation that did not expel the Chinese from Mexico entirely but placed them outside the Mexican citizenship and the benefits offered by the Revolutionary government.

I. Beginnings: Chinese Prosperity in the North and the Roots of Sinophobia

President Porfirio Díaz sought to modernize every corner of the country.⁸ Importing foreign labor to northern Mexico to achieve rapid industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century set the stage for tensions between Chinese populations and *antichinista* movements in subsequent decades. Chinese immigrants settled in the northern states and territories, especially in border towns. For Porfirio Díaz and his political circles, modernization meant to improve underdeveloped economic, social, and political structures in the country by encouraging the growth of industrial capital as well as political stability. The Porfiriato regime strove to emulate European nations – urban, industrial, wealthy, and even establishing empires abroad. Interest from the consortia of global trade would create competition for economic relationships with Mexico, which in turn would strengthen the nation even more. These economic modernization projects included the development of factories and industrial transportation networks. Porfiriato policy makers pushed for foreign capital and a European labor force to occupy rural and frontier lands like Mexico's northern regions.⁹ They believed European arrivals would bring and share their farming and labor methods to help speed the modernization process. Much to its disappointment, the Porfiriato regime found itself unsuccessful in attracting large-scale European immigration due to the country's lack of transportation resources and due to many Europeans refusing to settle in rural areas.¹⁰

Determined to modernize the nation but unable to recruit large number of immigrants from Europe, whom Mexicans called *colonos blancos* ("white settlers"), Porfirio Díaz initiated an open-door immigration policy with China to fill low-density rural areas with Chinese migrant workers. Large-scale arrivals from China began in 1880 and continued into the early years of the twentieth century with China holding a "most favored nation" status, meaning that Chinese immigration

⁷ Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 14-16.

⁸ Chang, *Chino*, 33.

⁹ Romero, *Chinese in Mexico*, 25.

¹⁰ Romero, *Chinese in Mexico*, 25.

was not subject to a threshold or quota.¹¹ The 1899 “Treaty of Amity and Commerce” between Mexico and China contained amicable language to convey the solidarity between both nations, which included the protection of each other’s representatives and workers. For example, the treaty’s Article IV (“Chinese Travelers to Mexico”) allowed the Chinese to freely travel and settle anywhere in Mexico as long as they abided by Mexican law.¹²

As Chinese workers were crossing the Pacific, the Porfiriato regime prepared the northern regions for industry that would use Chinese labor. That included the removal of the Indigenous. In northern states like Sonora and the territory of Baja California, the government forcefully removed or pushed back the resident Yaqui Nation, as well as the Cocopah, Apache, and Tohono O’odham from the Colorado Delta. These would soon find themselves on the “Indian” reservation in Yuma, Arizona, across the U.S.-Mexico border and away from their ancestral homelands.¹³ The removal of the Indigenous had begun decades earlier and continued after the arrival of Chinese laborers and American businesses who were investing in these lands for profitable agricultural and industrial projects.¹⁴ Thus, Mexican officials had found an answer to their “Indian” problem: relocating the Indigenous from usable land would push Mexico closer toward modernity. Years later, the *antichinistas* cited these same land “repatriations” as a justification to expel the Chinese from Mexico, accusing the latter of having altered the allocation of landed property that rightfully belonged to native Mexicans.

As Chinese laborers populated the north, they soon found economic success in several industries and trade. The Chinese dominated agricultural labor thanks to investments from the United States. American companies like the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC) acquired 840,000 acres of land to cultivate cotton in Baja California. The CRLC anticipated opposition from an empowered native Mexican labor force that would eventually dictate the company’s decisions in the region. Thus, fearing a potential takeover from the Mexican working class, the CRLC hired thousands of Chinese farmers and laborers instead.¹⁵ Chinese workers incorporated their knowledge in silk weaving into the cotton industry, which

¹¹ “Treaty of Amity and Commerce, December 14, 1899,” in *Treaties and Agreements with and Concerning China: 1894-1919*, ed. John V. A. MacMurray, vol. 1 (Manchu Period: 1894-1911) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1921), 214-220 (no. 1899/7), here 214. During the Porfiriato era (1876-1880, 1884-1911), Mexico maintained diplomatic relations with the Qing dynasty which had ruled China since 1644.

¹² “Treaty of Amity and Commerce,” 214.

¹³ Jeffrey M. Schulze, *Are We Not Foreigners Here? Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 3-4; Castillo-Muñoz, *Other California*, 13.

¹⁴ Chang, *Chino*, 42-43.

¹⁵ Scott Warren, Wan Yu, and Donna Ruiz y Costello, “La Chinesca: The Chinese Landscape of the Mexico-U.S. Borderlands,” *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 77 (2015): 62-79, here 65.

made them significant assets to the cotton industry and other agricultural industries. Chinese immigrants also found work with other American companies that lacked a manual labor force, such as railroad and mining operations in the American West. Aside from manual labor, the Chinese ventured into trade as well, both for produce and for human smuggling. While Chinese merchants were providing fresh produce and other goods to their neighbors in states like Sonora, the United States passed Chinese Exclusion Laws in the 1880s that greatly limited immigration from China.¹⁶ However, Chinese immigrants in Mexico continued to attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to move north, and the Chinese in Mexico took advantage of a rigorous underground smuggling system to send fellow Chinese immigrants to the United States. These profitable ventures earned Chinese individuals a prominent place in the economy of the borderlands.

The Chinese presence in the northern states and territories caused alarm and resentment from a few Mexican groups and individuals who would channel their disapproval of the Chinese in the northern regions into a synchronized *antichinismo* and nationalism in later years.¹⁷ The Mexican military suspected Chinese workers of helping the Indigenous to undermine the central government's authority. Railroad companies like the Southern Pacific Railroad of Mexico recruited Chinese laborers to extend the transcontinental railroad into the state of Sonora, which meant it would cut through Yaqui territory and disrupt the preservation of their land. To make matters worse, many Chinese railroad workers settled where they had built the railroad line and interacted with women from the Yaqui, Mayo, Kumeyaay, and Cocopah nations.¹⁸ While Indigenous men were fighting in the "Indian" wars, Indigenous women stayed behind, and Chinese workers intermingled with them. Mexican soldiers interpreted the Sino-Indigenous collaboration as a conspiracy to resist military authority and plan future attacks. Marriages between Chinese men and native Mexican women, Indigenous or not, would be questioned, and over the following decades Chinese men were routinely accused of corrupting Mexican women.

Apart from the military, the Mexican merchants, too, despised the Chinese as their neighbors, especially due to the latter's success in trade and commerce. However, Mexican merchants did not claim envy as the reason behind their resentment. They looked for other pretexts to warn Mexico of Chinese vices and diseases. The Mexican consular representative in Chile, José Díaz Zulueta, accused Chinese merchants of being greedy and guilty of other vicious deeds; some accusations associated with Chinese immigrants focused on diseases and lack of

¹⁶ "The United States Passes Chinese Exclusion, 1882," in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands: Documents and Essays*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011), 351-355; Grace Peña Delgado, "Neighbors by Nature: Relationships, Border Crossings, and Transnational Communities in the Chinese Exclusion Era," *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (August 2011): 401-429, here 407, 411.

¹⁷ Chang, *Chino*, 72.

¹⁸ Chang, *Chino*, 72.

hygiene, which was based on fears stemming from Mexico's recent past.¹⁹ In 1903, a plague broke out in the northern port city of Mazatlán in the state of Sinaloa, and many blamed the Chinese arrivals for importing the epidemic.²⁰ Even though a commission report had speculated that the plague had traveled via animals in cargo, probably from San Francisco, Mexicans in the region were determined to consider the Chinese arrivals as disease-carrying threats. Under the protection of the Mexican government, Chinese communities continued to live in peace, and tensions with other groups did not escalate into outright hostilities just yet. However, the success of Chinese ventures over other businesses in the north and Mexicans' general anxiety over replacement and its corresponding ostracizing, which had begun in the late Porfiriato era, carried over to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), when nationalism became the trigger of public and violent outbursts against the Chinese-- especially in northern Mexico.

II. Revolution: The Torreón Massacre (1911) and "the Cosmic Race"

Within months after the Revolution had begun, the state of Coahuila witnessed the biggest anti-Chinese atrocity in the Americas. In the southern city of Torreón, Revolutionary *maderistas* (i.e., followers of Revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero) seized the city for its significance in commerce and transportation. However, the *maderistas* had another agenda once they arrived in the city on May 13, 1911. For three gruesome days, the Revolutionaries, a total of 636 men, massacred 303 Chinese people in the most grotesque ways.²¹ Chinese and American officials employed the law firm Wilfley and Bassett to investigate the incident. One of the attorneys, Arturo Bassett, described how soldiers on horseback dragged a Chinese man through the streets, while another grabbed a small boy and brutally beat his head against a lamp post.²² The newspaper *El Criterio* in the northern Mexican state of Durango printed a summary in which Bassett stated that, before the outbreak of the Revolution, the Chinese settlers in Torreón had been "peaceful and attentive to the law" and that they "did not own arms prior to May 15 [1911]."²³ Overall, the Torreón reports distinguish between Revolutionary resentment and the resentment of the Chinese in Mexico.

News of the chaos soon reached American newspapers across the border.²⁴ Despite unfavorable views many Americans held toward the Chinese, the press

¹⁹ Chang, *Chino*, 82, 94.

²⁰ Eduardo Liceaga, "The Bubonic Plague in the Port of Mazatlán, State of Sinaloa, Republic of Mexico," *Public Health Papers and Reports* 30 (1905): 226-237, here 234.

²¹ Chang, *Chino*, 100-103.

²² Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 105.

²³ "La matanza de chinos en Torreón: informe de dos comisionados," *El Criterio* (Durango, Mexico), September 17, 1911.

²⁴ "Chinese Official Report Says Torreón Victims Did Not Resist," *El Paso Morning Times* (El Paso, Texas), September 21, 1911, 7.

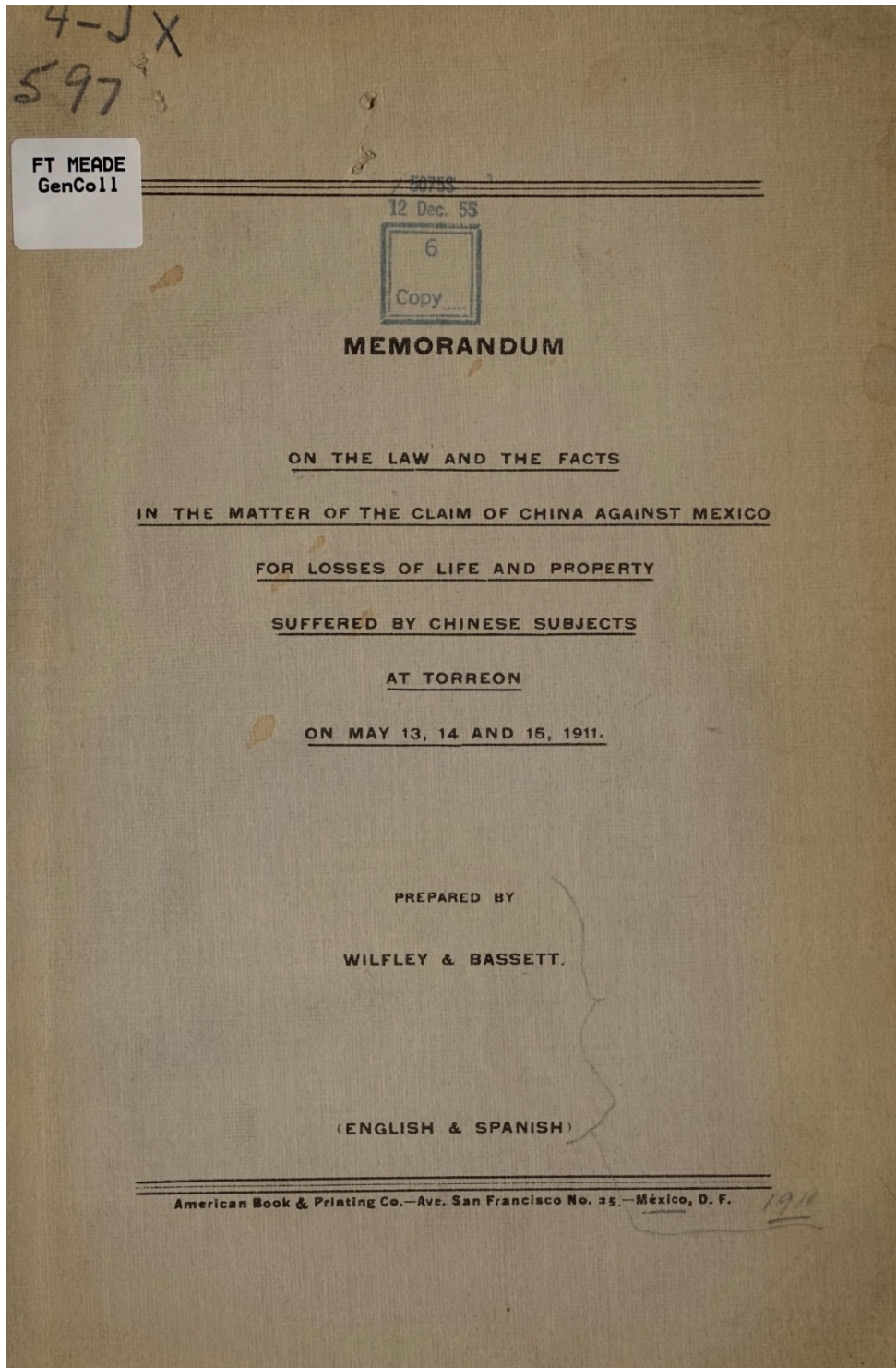


Figure 1: Wilfley and Bassett [law firm], “Memorandum on the Law and the Facts in the Matter of the Claim of China against Mexico for Losses of Life and Property Suffered by Chinese Subjects at Torreón on May 13, 14, and 15, 1911” (San Francisco: American Book & Printing Co., 1911), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, General Collections, 4JX 597, accessed May 26, 2020.

reports of the Torreón incident portrayed the Chinese as the true victims. A Texas based newspaper, the *El Paso Morning Times*, claimed that “[the Chinese] did not

resist.”²⁵ The article cited Bassett’s account and further defended the Chinese victims of the massacre by questioning the integrity of soldiers who would attack the unarmed. Other American newspapers specified particular victims by name and profession: the *Bellingham Herald* (based in Washington state) mentioned a banker in Torreón by the alias “Dr. Lim” who had been murdered during the massacre. Given these accounts, arguably only the Revolutionaries believed that the Chinese posed any threat at all. The Chinese, meanwhile, found themselves at the Revolutionaries’ mercy (or lack thereof). In light of the international attention, it was only a matter of time before the Chinese government would respond to what had happened to Chinese nationals in Mexico.

The tragedy in Torreón prompted the Chinese government to investigate the matter and demand reparations from the Mexican government. A judge, Lebbeus Wilfley (of Wilfley and Bassett), spent months composing a memorandum to submit to the Chinese minister Chang Yin Tang regarding “the injuries inflicted upon Chinese subjects by Mexican citizens” at Torreón.²⁶ The crimes at Torreón did not just include homicide. The memorandum also mentions the valuables lost by the Chinese during the attacks: private homes, businesses, and stores of the Chinese had been “completely wrecked and robbed.”²⁷ The memorandum’s attention to the property lost by Chinese nationals reflects its main objective, for Wilfley used the record of possessions lost to induce Mexico to pay reparations to China. Mexico would pay over one million dollars of reparations on the grounds of “injuries inflicted on neutral aliens by soldiers.”²⁸ Offering the Chinese government monetary compensation while masquerading the motives behind the Revolutionaries’ homicidal attacks against the Chinese in Torreón rendered the latter casualties of war and not victims of a genocide rooted in Sinophobia.

However, the carnage was far from over. Other parts of the nation reported the killing of Chinese as well, including Mexico City and Piedras Negras in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, raising the death toll to about 500 Chinese individuals for 1911 alone.²⁹ While these atrocities may not have been the sole catalyst, the Chinese living in these areas left in an exodus for other locations, such as Mexicali in Baja California, or crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. The *antichinistas* drove out Chinese people from certain parts of the north, thus supposedly providing relief for some of the discomfort felt since the last years of the Porfiriato.

The atrocities against the Chinese did not occur in a vacuum, nor did they follow impulsively from the nationalistic rhetoric of the Revolution. While these

²⁵ Chang, *Chino*, 72.

²⁶ Wilfley and Bassett [law firm], *Memorandum on the Law and the Facts in the Matter of the Claim of China against Mexico for Losses of Life and Property Suffered by Chinese Subjects at Torreón on May 13, 14, and 15, 1911* (San Francisco: American Book & Printing Co., 1911), 3.

²⁷ Wilfley and Bassett, *Memorandum*, 5.

²⁸ Wilfley and Bassett, *Memorandum*, 10.

²⁹ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 105.

attacks on Chinese people and businesses might seem driven by xenophobia and racism, they still involved the economic anxieties that Mexicans had been feeling since before the start of the Revolution. During the raids in Torreón and other cities with considerable Chinese populations, the perpetrators routinely looted Chinese businesses. The *maderistas* knew the economic value of Torreón. They did not initially target random Chinese residents in the city. They first sacked Chinese-owned farms and demanded money, food, and other resources from Chinese businesses, banks, and stores, before shooting Chinese owners and workers.³⁰ The Revolutionaries certainly held racist views toward the Chinese. Yet, had the *maderistas* or other Revolutionaries targeted Chinese communities out of xenophobia alone and with no regard to the economy, Chinese casualties might have been even higher and distributed perhaps more randomly.

As hostilities continued throughout the last phase of the Revolution, Mexican businessmen in Sonora campaigned to aid Mexican merchants and reduce competition from Chinese businesses. Enamored of *antichinista* rhetoric, these businessmen claimed Chinese merchants unfairly monopolized the consumer market with their inferior products sold at lower prices, which they claimed left native Mexican businesses unjustly out of the competition.³¹ According to the Revolutionaries, scams by Chinese merchants reflected the latter's ethics and did not correlate with Mexican moral values. One such accusation claimed that the Chinese could afford to sell cheap merchandise, unlike Mexicans, because Chinese migrants arrived without families and therefore did not need to earn a high income as they only had to take care of themselves. Given the wide range of Chinese-owned businesses in Sonora, many products could be targeted. A 1913 directory lists several cities in Sonora, such as Guaymas and Cananea, with Chinese-owned groceries, shoe stores, laundry services, and general services.³² Sonora's Mexican businessmen hoped their fabricated myths of Chinese low-quality products and lack of business ethics would lay more blame on Chinese communities, and maybe purge the Chinese from Mexico once and for all.

However, claims of economic disadvantage alone would not win popular approval and support for *antichinista* movements. A more persuasive strategy needed to be devised to convince the rest of the nation that the "Chinese" problem did not just affect merchants or others in direct contact with the Chinese, but the nation as a whole. Intellectuals and regional political sympathizers served as bridges between the *antichinistas'* hidden goals and popular support. They incorporated inferior-superior race concepts to label certain groups as genetically incompetent and not contributing to the nation. During the Revolution, Mexican nationalism came to define all Mexican people as one homogeneous race entitled

³⁰ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 105; Chang, *Chino*, 100-101.

³¹ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 106.

³² Wong Kin, *International Chinese Business Directory of the World for the Year 1913* (San Francisco: International Chinese Business Directory Co, Inc., 1913), 1578-1581.

to inherit the land and the protections under the Constitution. Noted scholar José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) talked about a “fifth race” found in the Americas that would serve as the quintessential model for the future: *la raza cosmica* (“the cosmic race”).³³ According to Vasconcelos, the mixing of European and Indigenous blood, or *mestizaje*, would produce people crucial for Mexico’s progress toward modernity. With this concept, Indigenous communities previously ostracized under Porfirio Díaz’s regime found a place in Mexico’s new national order. Vasconcelos advocated for the inclusion of the Indigenous in Revolutionary projects as they carried half of the Mexican modern identity, especially in the countryside. Meanwhile, Vasconcelos and other intellectuals like him strove to keep Mexico’s ethnic heritage protected from other races and ethnicities that could corrupt the core of Mexico’s hope for a better future. He condemned the mixing of other races, particularly the Chinese, with *mestizos*.³⁴ Vasconcelos’s theory of *la raza cosmica* offered the leverage businessmen and intellectuals needed to convince the rest of the nation to expel the Chinese from Mexican soil.

To further strengthen Vasconcelos’s cosmic race theory on a national level, the *antichinistas* revived conspiracy theories of the Chinese as racially inferior and as a disease threat. Many foreigners, labor workers, and large businesses had to face hostilities and ostracizing during and after the Revolution. For example, officials in Mexicali forced CRLC shareholders to surrender their lands to the state.³⁵ However, both Revolutionaries and *antichinistas* declared the Chinese the biggest threat to Mexico, resulting in much more serious consequences for the latter. Toward the end of and after the Revolution, Sinophobic demonstrations were less physically threatening but continued to deliver messages that the Chinese communities lingering in Mexico were detrimental to the nation’s progress to prosperity, especially in the north which still featured sizable Chinese populations. A state representative from Cananea in the state of Sonora, José Ángel Espinoza, led the eugenics campaign against the Chinese. Espinoza joined other *antichinistas* at a convention in 1925 that addressed the “Chinese” problem on the grounds of business competition and health risks.³⁶ Espinoza claimed the Chinese were vulnerable to vices such as the consumption of opium and heroin. He later published his theories in *El ejemplo de Sonora* (1932), and one of the color images in his book depicts Chinese individuals with syphilis, trachoma, and leprosy, and the caption reads: *Los terribles malas del Oriente, del fácil contagio, que los chinos encubren con ropajes limpiísimos cuando desempeñan trabajos de mozos de café, lavaderos o dependientes.* (“The terrible evils from the Orient, easily contagious, which the Chinese cover up with clean clothes when they work as coffee waiters,

³³ Vasconcelos, “Cosmic Race,” 18.

³⁴ Castillo-Muñoz, *Other California*, 50.

³⁵ Castillo-Muñoz, *Other California*, 76.

³⁶ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 169.

laundrymen, or clerks.”)³⁷ According to Espinoza, the Chinese did not just carry any illnesses; they carried contagious ones that were beyond remedy. The message was clear: these disease-infested people had to be kept at bay to avoid diseases and the moral contamination associated with these same diseases.

III. Women: Eugenics and National Duties

Espinoza’s fearmongering of Chinese disease and inferiority specifically targeted Mexican women. Aware of the Mexican-Chinese intermarriages in the northern states, *antichinistas* warned Indigenous and especially *mestizo* women of the health risks they brought on themselves and, by extension, the nation should they pursue marriage and children with Chinese men. In *El ejemplo de Sonora*, Espinoza included cartoons that showed the detrimental consequences women in intimate unions with Chinese men would have to endure. One image, titled *La noche de bodas ... y cinco años después* (“The wedding night ... and five years later”), depicts a Mexican woman in two phases of her marriage to a Chinese husband.³⁸ On the left side (“The wedding night”), she is healthy and happy, standing semi-dressed in front of a mirror, while her new Chinese husband is waiting behind a vanity screen with a big smile. On the right side (“five years later”), she looks aged, haggard, and depressed, is wearing an apron, and is surrounded by three little children, while her Chinese husband, dressed in a suit, is walking away from her. The image warns women that, should they give in to Chinese suitors, they would be exposed to their new husbands’ vices and unhygienic habits, and their health would decay beyond recognition. According to Espinoza, the diseases and immoral vices these Chinese immigrants brought from their homeland would rub off on others, especially those who shared their households.

By rejecting Chinese suitors, so the *antichinistas* maintained, Mexican women not only saved themselves from physical and moral deterioration, they saved the prosperity of the Mexican nation. Mexico had in the past already experimented with eugenic theories. Porfirian elite technocrats, or *científicos*, had advised President Porfirio Díaz on how to modernize the country via a social hierarchy based on a person’s biological heritage.³⁹ The *Científicos* encouraged bringing European immigrants to Mexico, for European blood “is the one with whom [Mexico] must attempt the crossbreeding of [the] Indigenous groups” for the sake of progress and modernization.⁴⁰ They aimed to increase European immigration to outbalance the inferior groups in the country, like the Indigenous populations who, at that time, were still seen as the burden of Mexico. The *antichinistas* used

³⁷ Espinoza, *Ejemplo de Sonora*, 93.

³⁸ Espinoza, *Ejemplo de Sonora*, 36.

³⁹ Chang, *Chino*, 50; Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 31.

⁴⁰ Justo Sierra [Méndez (1848-1912)], “The Present Era,” from *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People* (1900-1902) [selections], in *Nineteenth-Century Nation Building and the Latin American Intellectual Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 275-289, here 289.

similar rhetoric to further separate Chinese men and Mexican women. In Espinoza's *El ejemplo de Sonora*, there is a cartoon, titled *La Mestización* ("Miscegenation"), which compares a *mestizo* boy (on right) to a boy of Sino-Mexican heritage (on left).⁴¹ The healthy, well-fed twelve-year-old *mestizo* boy (*Mestizo indo-latino de 12 años*) stands tall with a big smile, is wearing what seems like a boy scout outfit (complete with hat, backpack, and hiking staff), and is outside in nature, while his hunched over, malnourished fourteen-year-old Sino-Mexican counterpart (*Producto de la mezcla chino-mexicana de 14 años*) is at least a foot shorter (even though he is two years older), seems to be shivering, and stands in a corner. Espinoza suggested that underdevelopment, deformity, and social disgrace would be the fate of children born to parents who were Mexican and Chinese. To twenty-first-century viewers, Espinoza's *mestizo* boy resembles a person of European heritage, certainly not one of Mexican Indigenous descent. The boy's "Western" or "white" facial features and light skin, as well as his boy scout-like outfit, make him appear unlike any ethnic Mexican. Mexicans in the early twentieth century, however, would have viewed the same boy as a handsome, strong youngster of a preferable mixed race and the figure next to him as a the unfortunate result of forbidden race-mixing (hence his label: *Producto de la mezcla*).

Espinoza's teachings and illustrations would have appealed to *antichinista* women who were repeating his message of a purified national *mestizo* race. María de Jesús Valdez, a prominent schoolteacher, gave speeches and lectures in Sonora, condemning the Chinese presence in Mexico and reminding Mexican women of their national purpose. She blamed the Chinese for the nation's poor economic productivity and moral corruption, and she advocated for her ultimate goal, namely, the removal of the Chinese to the point where they "cannot obstruct the path of prosperity" (*donde no pueda obstruir la senda de la prosperidad*), ending her speech with *Abajo los chinos!* ("Down with the Chinese!")⁴² Prior to 1952, women in Mexico did not have the right to vote. But with speeches like Valdez's, Mexican women felt empowered as mothers of the nation and compelled to contribute to their country's future. The anti-Chinese campaign apparently reached multitudes in the northern states, irrespective of gender and class. The "national" message of the *antichinistas* soon impacted laws and regulations and targeted Chinese communities throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

IV. Systemic Oppression: Laws Limiting the Rights of the Chinese

Antichinistas increased their following with the blessing of those in power, influential individuals who identified with their cause or were *antichinistas* themselves. The federal government, for example, sympathized with the popular disapproval of the Chinese presence in Mexico. Post-Revolutionary presidents like

⁴¹ Espinoza, *Ejemplo de Sonora*, 36.

⁴² Anti-Chinese Speech by María de Jesús Valdez, 26 November 1917, University of Arizona Library, Special Collections, MS 009 (José Maria Arana Papers), Box 1, Folder 1: 1904-1916.

Álvaro Obregón (in office 1920-1924) needed a scapegoat as a distraction from the failed agrarian reforms that did not guarantee fertile agrarian land for farmers and rural workers.⁴³ Instead of tackling the agrarian issues directly, putting blame on the Chinese, especially those involved in agricultural businesses, seemed like a win for both *antichinistas* and a post-Revolutionary government that refused to admit fallibility. The Chinese became associated with the Porfiriato regime, reminding Mexicans that during the Porfiriato only certain people had benefited from the country's industrialization, namely, the Mexican elite and foreign investors. According to this narrative, a major portion of profits trickled down to Chinese immigrant laborers recruited by American companies. Therefore, those Chinese remaining in Mexico after the Revolution came to be viewed as the reason why land reforms could not succeed.

The *antichinista* movement reached new heights when Obregón's successor, Plutarco Elías Calles (in office 1924-1928), became the first *antichinista* president. Calles agreed with Obregón that the Chinese needed to be restricted. On the other hand, both Obregón and Calles anticipated negative economic and diplomatic consequences should the Chinese in Mexico be deprived of their full protection by the state.⁴⁴ At the time of the Mexican Revolution, China had also faced domestic unrest and civil war, resulting in the end of the Qing dynasty's rule (1911). The following year, the Nationalist Party or *Kuomintang* (KMT) ascended to power, forming the government of the new Republic of China with Sun Yat-sen as China's provisional president.⁴⁵ Chinese political leadership had changed but that did not negate treaty obligations toward the Chinese diaspora. Should another Torreón-like massacre occur, Obregón and Calles feared that China and the United States might investigate Mexico again and publicize their findings. Chinese officials in Mexico knew well the hostilities toward Chinese nationals in the country and wrote letters to the Mexican government, urging it to abide by the 1899 "Treaty of Amity" and fulfill its duty to offer protection and rights to the Chinese living in the country. By 1926, 24,218 Chinese immigrants were living in Mexico.⁴⁶ Both Obregón and Calles curbed *antichinista* demonstrations and laws but compromised by limiting Chinese immigration in 1921 and again in 1927.⁴⁷ The

⁴³ Chang, *Chino*, 121.

⁴⁴ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 158.

⁴⁵ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 159; Thomas Crump, *Asia-Pacific: A History of Empire and Conflict* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 4. Exiled in 1916, Sun Yat-sen (KMT) returned to power as Premier of China and ruled again from 1919 until 1925, at the time when Obregón (1920-1924) and Calles (1924-1928) served their respective terms as President of Mexico. The KMT would rule China until 1949 when the Communist Party of China (CPC) took over.

⁴⁶ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 159; Romero, *Chinese in Mexico*, 183.

⁴⁷ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 158, 178. Under President Calles, the Immigration Law of 1927 did not specifically restrict immigration from China but from the Middle East. It gave Calles a reputation of advocating for the ethnic Mexican working class.

federal government thus averted an international crisis but on the domestic level the *antichinista* movement now turned to other methods to remove the Chinese.

Antichinistas in the north were not satisfied with merely restricting Chinese immigration, which they resented and interpreted as a lack of support from the central government. Since federal law would not support their platform they took matters into their own hands. Much to the *antichinistas'* surprise, the Chinese population in northern Mexico had grown in the 1920s – despite the Revolutionary era's massacres and expulsions. Thus, the northern regions experimented with and promulgated laws that limited economic and social protection for the Chinese. The state of Sonora established *antichinista* laws, hoping that neighboring states and the Baja California territory would soon emulate them. *Antichinista* groups in Sonora pushed for laws in accordance with the new Mexican Constitution which declared that “states are free and sovereign in all internal matters and on that basis, can legislate on any subject.”⁴⁸ With this legal leverage to pass state laws that did not require the federal government's consent, the state of Sonora imposed systemic legal restrictions on the Chinese. Emulating ideas provided by José Ángel Espinoza in *El ejemplo de Sonora*, the state passed laws that forbade marriages between Chinese and Mexicans, stating that illicit unions “shall be punished by a fine of \$100.00 to \$500.00 [pesos].”⁴⁹ If the Chinese population could not be expelled for fear of international economic repercussions, their presence in Sonora could at least be restricted to enclaves and separated from the rest of the Mexican population. For *antichinistas* in Sonora and elsewhere, laws banning the Chinese from mingling with native Mexicans would push the former to the margins of society – to the point of encouraging them to leave Mexico altogether.

Antichinistas in Sonora further limited the Chinese through other laws that undermined Chinese-owned businesses. They distrusted stores and other businesses run completely by Chinese owners and employees. This distrust was based on allegations that the Chinese sold cheaper products and recruited more Chinese to work in Sonora, eventually pushing native Mexicans to seek employment elsewhere. In 1931, the state of Sonora passed the “Labor and Social Provision Law,” also known as the “Eighty Percent Law.” It required foreign-owned businesses to hire at least eighty percent employees of Mexican descent.⁵⁰ Even though the law targeted foreign companies regardless of their country of origin, *antichinistas* used it to attack Chinese businesses that failed to meet the Mexican worker quota. Cities like Magdalena and Hermosillo threatened Chinese businesses who failed to comply with the new employee-equity law. Other cities,

⁴⁸ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 158.

⁴⁹ “Sonora Legislative Bans Mexican Chinese Marriage, 1923,” in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Hämäläinen and Johnson, 355.

⁵⁰ Fredy González, “Chinese Dragon and Eagle of Anáhuac: The Local, National, and International Implications of the Ensenada Anti-Chinese Campaign of 1934,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2013): 46-68, here 57; Espinoza, *Ejemplo de Sonora*, 74.

like Guaymas, imposed taxes that targeted Chinese merchants.⁵¹ Some stores and businesses owned by the Chinese had no alternative but to close permanently. These economic and legal repercussions did the trick. *Antichinistas* used intimidation to the point of causing the Chinese to leave their cities altogether.

Across the northern states, *antichinistas* advocated for and sometimes initiated legal platforms that undermined or weakened Chinese businesses and labor forces. They reached out and lobbied state and local politicians for land reforms and repatriation. They also used this maneuver to reach out to the peasant and working classes to join the anti-Chinese national campaign.⁵² *Antichinistas* reminded other Mexicans that Chinese laborers had acquired land from other Mexicans, especially from Indigenous populations in the northern part of the country. Since the Indigenous were now considered part of the *mestizo* identity and the agrarian reforms were intended to nationalize land, the *antichinista* objective for the northern states of Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas focused on agricultural expansion and targeted Chinese-owned agrarian lands.⁵³ *Antichinista* chapters from Sonora and Coahuila aided their counterparts in Tamaulipas to pass land reform laws. Members of the anti-Chinese group *Torreón Comité Anti-Chino* (“Anti-Chinese Committee in Torreón”) delivered speeches on the state’s congressional floor and gained support from the state’s governor, Emilio Portes Gil (1890-1978). Portes Gil had initiated agricultural expansion projects and sympathized with peasant unions in Tamaulipas like the “Agrarian League” (*Liga Agraria*).⁵⁴ When twelve Chinese faced deportation for their alleged role in the failure of the agrarian reforms, they received no protection from President Calles. Thus, deportations of Chinese individuals in essence masqueraded as agrarian reforms, ultimately helping the *antichinistas* to achieve their goal to expel more and more Chinese from Mexico.

Situated to the south of the U.S. state of California, the Mexican territory of Baja California witnessed a form of land reforms that aggressively pushed Chinese workers from their own properties or shareholdings in favor of giving privileges to “Mexicans by birth.” In 1921, the Chinese comprised forty percent of the population in cities like Mexicali.⁵⁵ By the 1930s, nativist movements with *antichinista* social values were pushing for national legislation that would elevate Mexicans over those they considered foreigners, whether the latter became naturalized citizens or not. Organizations like the *Federación de Sindicatos y Uniones Obreras de Tijuana* (“Syndicate and Trade Union Federation of Tijuana”) advocated that native Mexicans be given priority when it came to land ownership and employment. Baja California held territory status at the time, meaning it did not

⁵¹ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 119.

⁵² Chang, *Chino*, 152.

⁵³ Chang, *Chino*, 153.

⁵⁴ Chang, *Chino*, 154.

⁵⁵ González, “Chinese Dragon,” 67.

have the same political autonomy as a state. Therefore, the central government compelled the governing body in Baja California to abide by the federal law which prohibited hostilities against Chinese individuals or communities.

After 1923, Baja California governor Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1889-1967) upheld federal law in the territory but pursued *antichinista* methods to curtail Chinese workers, like CRLC's labor force, and drive them out of Baja California. Rodríguez promoted cotton-growing operations to recruit more domestic workers and reduce Chinese competition. To accomplish this, the governor encouraged the tensions between two Chinese political organizations, the masonic society *Chee Kung Tong* (CKT) and the *Kuomintang Partido Nacionalista China de la República Mexicana* (KMT), who were feuding publicly in the Mexicali-Imperial Valley region,⁵⁶ ultimately leading to violence in Chinese-owned casinos and to the deportation of thirty-two organization leaders.⁵⁷ Rodríguez was hoping that removing the leaders of Chinese organizations would lead to a reduced Chinese presence in his territory. However, the Chinese persisted. Many Mexican laborers did settle in the territory during these schemes against the Chinese, but Rodríguez's initiatives for a predominantly native Mexican labor force did not have the infrastructure or profit earnings to permanently unseat their Chinese counterparts. Acknowledging the profits earned by the Chinese laborers and their contributions to the territory, Rodríguez eventually made no further attempts to reduce the Chinese population. His *antichinista* goals remained unfulfilled until the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (in office 1934-1940), when the "Union of National Identity, Labor, and Land Benefits" forced the administration in 1937 to nationalize CRLC property and distribute it for good.⁵⁸

With stronger labor laws enacted in Sonora, the state achieved by the early 1930s what *antichinistas* across the nation were hoping to achieve at a national level, namely, the expulsion of all Chinese. José Ángel Espinoza and other *antichinistas* formed the *Comité Directivo de la Campaña Nacionalista Antichino* ("Steering Committee of the Anti-Chinese Nationalist Campaign") that pushed to implement Sonora's eighty-percent labor law at the national level.⁵⁹ There, however, the new law would require businesses to hire up to ninety percent domestic labor. The law reached Mexico's House of Representatives (*Cámara de Diputados*) and passed in 1931.⁶⁰ The new quota affected many companies but it especially affected Chinese businesses in the north with a predominantly Chinese

⁵⁶ Although it had the term "Kuomintang" in its name, the Mexican KMT merely supported the new Nationalist Party in China while the CKT showed loyalty to China's imperial heritage. Both groups were private organizations and did not serve as official extensions of any political entities in China. See Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 159.

⁵⁷ Chang, *Chino*, 160.

⁵⁸ González, "Chinese Dragon," 67.

⁵⁹ Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 187.

⁶⁰ Romero, *Chinese in Mexico*, 25.

labor force. Some could not meet the percentage requirement and were forced out of certain states.

Sonoran *antichinistas* considered their state as an example of successful racial cleansing that other states should emulate. In *El ejemplo e Sonora*, Espinoza included a map that showed Sonora all white and clear while all other states appeared with yellowish-orange stains, representing a Chinese presence. The caption urged: *Mexicano: El color amarillo que ves en la carta geográfica de tu patria, es la demostración del dominio mongol. Ves a Sonora limpio de la mancha asiática, pues sigue el ejemplo de este pueblo batallador y pronto harás de tu patria chica una entidad que podrás llamar tuya y de los tuyos.* (“Mexican: The yellow color you see in the geographical map of your fatherland is the demonstration of Mongol dominance. You see Sonora clean of the Asian stain, so follow the example of this battling community and soon you will make your small country an entity that you can call your own and of your own [people].)⁶¹ The color choices underscored the *antichinistas*’ perception of the Chinese presence: the whiter a state appeared on the map, the purer and more “Mexican” it was. That Espinoza likened the Chinese presence in Mexico to a Mongol domination shows the *antichinistas*’ fear-mongering. By 1940, only 92 out of the 3,571 Chinese who had been in the state in 1930 remained: just over 2.5 percent. The Chinese who had left Sonora resettled in other states or territories in the north of Mexico and even crossed into the United States, despite the latter’s immigration ban against the Chinese. Sonora certainly experienced the largest Chinese exodus, but other states saw a similar phenomenon. The Chinese population in Coahuila, for instance, decreased by eighty-three percent, while sixty percent of the Chinese in Chihuahua left the state in 1932.⁶² Thus, the *antichinistas* were gradually achieving their goal of a “Chinese-free” Mexico.

Yet, despite the violence, campaigns, and legislation, the native Chinese and Chinese Mexicans stood their ground. They formed organizations and challenged *antichinista* accusations and proposed laws in court. While the majority of the respective legal decisions favored *antichinista* platforms, some provided safe havens for Chinese communities in some parts in the north, including Baja California: this northern territory welcomed Chinese settlers that had been expelled from other states like Sonora and Sinaloa. However, by 1934, *antichinistas* in Baja California were campaigning vigorously to drive the Chinese out of business and out of Mexico. In Ensenada, the city’s largest *antichinista* organization, the Nationalist League, sought to confiscate Chinese businesses and even blocked entrances in some locations.⁶³ The movement’s chapter in Ensenada applauded the Chinese exodus from the state of Sonora and believed that the

⁶¹ Espinoza, *Ejemplo de Sonora*, 187.

⁶² Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 187.

⁶³ “Chinese Flee Mexican Drive: Score Leave Ensenada for Safety of Border Cities, Persecuted Aliens Protest Against Discrimination, Stores Closed as Result of Trade War Outbreak,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), February 23, 1934, 8.

Chinese in their city and potentially in all of Baja California could be removed as well. Some *antichinistas* entered Chinese-owned stores and businesses and forced the owners to close them. Some even warned Chinese residents to leave their property within three months.⁶⁴

As intimidating as the *antichinistas* presented themselves, Baja California's Chinese organizations would not tolerate these raids and rapidly reacted to the situation. The "Chinese Association" 中華會館 (*Zhōnghuá huìguǎn*) hired attorneys to defend Chinese clients affected by the public hostilities and advocated for their legal right to own businesses and private property in Ensenada.⁶⁵ The same organization reached out to the Chinese vice consul to visit Ensenada and investigate the situation, and the news even reached the Chinese consul in Los Angeles who condemned the anti-Chinese campaigns. This local incident drew international attention, with three federal governments becoming involved. After pressure from China and the United States, the message was clear: Should legal and public hostilities toward Chinese residents and workers in Ensenada continue Mexico would face serious consequences. The Chinese government sought to protect its nationals abroad, while the United States sought to control the situation to avoid further Chinese immigration into their states north of the border.⁶⁶ Pressure from both countries persuaded Mexico to put a stop to hostilities against Chinese nationals in Baja California. Agustín Ochoa, the governor at the time, banned anti-Chinese activities, and Chinese businesses in Baja California reopened, averting any further threats to Mexico's national sovereignty and Ochoa's own political career.⁶⁷ This did not end Sinophobia in Mexico, but it effectively ended the campaigns to drive the Chinese out of the country.

Conclusion

Between 1900 and 1940, the Chinese in northern Mexico faced the worst manifestations of Sinophobia in the country despite their crucial business and mercantile contributions to the region's economic prosperity. Instead of being regarded as valuable players by regional and national bodies, their success singled them out among other foreigners in Mexico and earned them distrust and resentment. Organized forms of Mexican Sinophobia survived the end of the Porfiriato regime and synchronized with nationalist rhetoric that targeted Chinese communities and individuals during the Mexican Revolution. At that time, anti-Chinese groups used any excuse they could to intimidate the Chinese, both through violence and through legal force. Although physical and fatal assaults

⁶⁴ González, "Chinese Dragon," 58, 62.

⁶⁵ González, "Chinese Dragon," 58-60. 中華會館 roughly translates to "Chinese Association."

⁶⁶ González, "Chinese Dragon," 60.

⁶⁷ González, "Chinese Dragon," 60, 63. Because Baja California held territory status and was therefore under federal jurisdiction at the time, governors were appointed by the federal government and elected via a democratic process, which meant that the government in Mexico City could dismiss territorial officials at will. See González, "Chinese Dragon," 58-59.

decreased after the Revolution, Sinophobia in Mexico continued. By the 1920s and 1930s, state laws like Sonora's labor and marriage laws further ostracized Chinese individuals to the point of driving them out of the state.

As Sinophobia reached its peak in Mexico's northern states and territories, so too did Chinese resistance against systemic oppression. Chinese communities and organizations in the Baja California territory stood their ground despite the waves of *antichinismo* that reached places like Ensenada. Their decisive action kept *antichinistas* at bay but also signaled their sentiments that the Chinese belonged in Mexico. In 1911, the Chinese government had responded to the Torreón massacre with international pressure. In 1934, it intervened again after the anti-Chinese campaign in Ensenada; this time Chinese organizations even brought the United States to persuade the federal government in Mexico to end the local hostilities against the Chinese. Initiatives seeking to limit Chinese immigration to Mexico continued into the 1940s.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the Chinese prevailed. They had proved they were in Mexico to stay.

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⁶⁸ Romero, *Chinese in Mexico*, 189.