

Constructing Chinese spaces in Mexico City: the case of the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood

Rivera, Sergio Martínez

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rivera, S. M. (2024). Constructing Chinese spaces in Mexico City: the case of the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 53(1), 111-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026241242488>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Constructing Chinese Spaces in Mexico City: The Case of the Viaducto Piedad Neighbourhood

Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

2024, Vol. 53(1) 111–129

© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/18681026241242488

journals.sagepub.com/home/cca**Sergio Martínez Rivera** 

Abstract

This article analyses new tendencies in the construction of Chinese spaces within Mexico City. Traditionally, the Barrio de Dolores (Cuahutemoc borough) is identified as the main Chinese point of reference; however, over time it has become a space dedicated more to exploiting the so-called Chinatown brand for commercial purposes than to fostering a sense of community. Based on a recent pilot study, it is argued that in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood (Iztacalco borough), where Chinese immigrants have been arriving since the early 1990s, a different pattern of urban integration has emerged. Members of the community live in the area, where they carry out religious and recreational activities; some of them are business owners or employees, and their children attend local schools. That is why the area can be considered Mexico City's new Chinatown.

Manuscript received 4 April 2022; accepted 9 March 2024

Keywords

Chinatown, Viaducto Piedad, Chinese spaces, Mexico City

Facultad de Economía-CECHIMEX, UNAM, Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico

Corresponding Author:

Sergio Martínez Rivera, Facultad de Economía-CECHIMEX, UNAM, Av. Universidad S/N, Alcaldía Coyoacán, Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico.

Email: semariv@unam.mx



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Introduction

The objective of this article is to present a brief analysis of the social and economic dynamics of Chinese immigrants in Mexico City at the spatial level. Particularly, the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood in the Iztacalco borough of Mexico City is presented as a case study. From the early 1990s, the area began to stand out because of the arrival of immigrants there from China, who over time set up different commercial and service activities locally. But, above all, notable was how they developed a sense of community by living in the place and engaging in social activities educational and religious in nature. From the above, it is proposed to discuss whether the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood can be considered Mexico City's "new Chinatown." Traditionally that designation has been bestowed instead on Barrio de Dolores (Cuahutemoc borough) since its foundation in the 1950s.

This issue is especially important since the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood has been a highly relevant location in the concentration of Chinese residents in Mexico City. In a very specific way, it is about a diagnosis that brings us closer to knowing the dynamics of this Chinese community, especially because today specialised literature on the subject is practically non-existent. The notion of "neighbourhood" is used here since this conceptualisation allows us to delimit in physical terms a unit of analysis where: (a) an ethnic group meets, sharing customs, religious beliefs, geographical origins, and similar; and (b) it is possible to perceive how activities and functions of various kinds are deployed among its members and with groups other than its own. In this context, the study of Chinatowns in Mexico has focused on the experience of localities in the north of the country, with Mexicali being perhaps the most documented example since its formation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Chinese migrants and their descendants are present throughout the Mexican Republic, they are usually dispersed and there are no specific places where they sufficiently concentrate and reproduce socially to be said to constitute a "Chinatown" of sorts.

The article is composed of three parts. In the first part, a brief exposition is provided based on the literature related to the concept of "Chinatown," Chinese neighbourhoods in Mexico, and Mexico City. The focus of the second part is a diagnosis of Chinese migration to Mexico City in the context of the relationship between the home country and the host one's capital city. The third part describes the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood and presents the results obtained in the pilot study. Finally, a series of conclusions and perspectives on the analysed case study are offered.

Approaches to the Concept of Chinatown

Talking about "Chinatown" leads to conceptual debates and even ideological and political positions, with one's interpretations depending on the discipline within which this phenomenon is examined (Urbanism, Economics, Sociology, or Anthropology, to name just a few). It cannot be argued that there is a prototypical Chinatown or that there is only one methodology for its classification, since there are multiple relevant

experiences and case studies here of apposite neighbourhoods in rural, suburban, and purely urban areas alike. Table 1 presents a proposal of concepts and interpretations about Chinatown from different authors, who identify a series of relevant functions fundamental to the development of Chinese immigrants’ lives past and present:

- The most immediate function is to serve as a means of protection against the stigmatisation and hostility Chinese immigrants face in the host society.
- Development of economic endogeneity is another function that allows them to subsist without dissociating themselves from their environment locally, nationally, or internationally.

Table 1. Conceptualisation of Chinatown.

Author	Concept and interpretation
Chen (2018)	Geostrategic enclaves that allow the multiplication of commercial and cultural ties with regions where China intends to consolidate its influence. Space to create a more Chinese environment, isolated from Western influence for the diaspora residing there and share interests among compatriots.
Eng Menendez (2021)	An urban area characterised by the presence of Chinese immigrants and their descendants often has a variety of businesses, such as restaurants, shops and markets. It also serves as a cultural centre for the Chinese community and as a tourist attraction. It is comprehensive and self-sufficient, with residential functions supplemented by other basic functions such as work, education, services, cultural activities and recreation. It is also characterised by its ethnospatial segregation and its ability to resist cultural assimilation.
Ang (2019)	Physical space that detonates a “Chinese enclave” outside China, where Chinese emigrants have grouped together and created a “home away from home.” These areas are seen as essentially “Chinese” and are often regarded by locals as “areas of otherness,” inhabited by self-contained Chinese communities who maintain their own cultural traditions in a foreign land.
Kiyomi (2013)	It is an area outside of China where ethnic Chinese reside and maintain economic, social, and cultural facilities. Chinatowns arise through the contact between Chinese culture and the culture of the host society of the region where ethnic Chinese live. Therefore, Chinatowns in various regions are a reflection of how ethnic Chinese adapt to their host society.
Zhou and Logan (1989)	Ethnically enclave economy opens up opportunities for its members, for example, in the housing, labour, and capital markets; They partially protect members of the ethnic group from competition from other social groups, from discrimination and abuse because of their origins, and from government surveillance and regulation. In many respects, these boundaries around the enclave provide tangible benefits to group members and seem to offer a positive alternative to assimilation.

Source: Own elaboration based on the cited authors.

- Chinatowns are identified as meeting spaces that spread culture both for the Chinese *avecindados* (“neighbours”) inside and outside their perimeters and for the rest of the population.
- They serve housing needs, by way of providing essential infrastructure and basic urban equipment that allow local Chinese residents to reproduce socially and culturally: namely, in the form of education centres, recreational spaces, medical offices, shops, and similar.

Authors such as Ang (2020) and Dittgen and Chungu (2019) highlight that, in the context of globalisation, the development tendencies of the diaspora are intensifying the emergence of new Chinese spaces. These range from the simplest ones driven by small entrepreneurs with retail businesses and restaurants to the participation of large corporations. Dittgen and Chungu (2019: 3) emphasise here the so-called nature of contextual realities, in seeking to explain how in countries with Chinese immigration the development of Chinese spaces for housing, commercial, or cultural purposes depends on the relationship that China has with the receiving country.

From the above, it can be concluded that Chinatown is a social construction that has evolved over time around the world. The form it acquires in each country is influenced by phenomena of a global and national nature. Above all, however, we must not ignore the interest that Chinese migrants themselves have in the development of their own spaces – regardless of the functions that are going to be assigned to them.

Background to the Neighbourhood and the Chinese Colonies in Mexico and Mexico City

Sinologists dedicated to the study of Chinese migrant communities around the world are keen to learn about their characteristics, dynamics, and forms of adaptation in spatial terms to the territories where they have settled. Specifically as regards Chinatown (or *barrio chino* in Spanish), an area within cities outside China where its citizens reside either permanently or temporarily. From an empirical point of view, the recent scientific production of texts on this community and related neighbourhood developments in Mexico City has been limited.

At the aggregate level, in Mexico, there is a predominance of historical themes from the first decades of the twentieth century that account for the arrival of Chinese workers in the country’s north (Xu, 2007), and the flourishing therewith of Chinese communities in Mexicali, Sinaloa, and Sonora (Hu-Dehart, 1985). There are collections of specific studies on the anti-Chinese movement initiated in Torreon (Coahuila), among which the works of Gomez Izquierdo (1991) and Botton Beja (2008), for example, stand out. These texts conclude that the presence and development of Chinese communities in Mexico were highly limited for decades.

Although to date there has been no work documenting in detail the existing neighbourhoods of Chinese immigrants at the national level, there has been research done by

Martínez Rivera and Peters (2016), “La diáspora china en México: asociaciones chinas en el Distrito Federal, Mexicali y Tapachula.” This article describes the role of associations created by Chinese migrants and their descendants in Mexico for multiple purposes: providing a network of support and protection, developing businesses, promoting Chinese culture, teaching Mandarin and Spanish, and similar. Around sixty-one Chinese associations with different profiles, members, and activities were identified by the two authors.

Finally, there have been case studies on families or individuals based on their respective life experiences, though often failing to account for trends or behaviour at the systemic level. An informal approach (academically speaking) that has given an account of the phenomenon studied is examining the digital social networks that Chinese migrants and their descendants have developed. These are the online sites where stories, social, cultural, and sports activities, opinions, and the like are presented. Such is the case, for example, with the Facebook network “Inmigraciones Chinas a México,” which currently has 1,114 members (Facebook, n.d.).

In the specific case of Mexico City, the body of scholarly work on Chinatowns or Chinese neighbourhoods there is similarly limited. A traditional point of reference here is Dolores Street in Cuauhtémoc borough. There are records indicating that the place has been occupied by Chinese residents since the 1950s, but it was not until the 1970s that it would become fully established.

According to Cinco Basurto (2015a), although a certain level of socialisation and community life was achieved in this place, the expansion of the city led to the relocation of the already established and recently immigrated Chinese to other places. Thus, the Dolores Chinatown remains only a commercial and tourist space that benefits businesspeople (both Mexican and Chinese) and the local government of Mexico City itself. Since 2006, different streets in the area have been rehabilitated so that, year after year, Chinese festivities and cultural activities take place (Chinese New Year, the Moon or Mid-Autumn Festival), as well as seeing the promotion of Chinese gastronomy and the trade in Chinese products (arts and crafts, medicinal products, groceries, and similar).

Documentation of the increase in the number of Chinese residents in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood is still in its infancy. Outstanding for her contributions to this phenomenon is Cinco Basurto, namely in her works *Espacios de sinidad* Cinco Basurto (2015b) and *Cristiandad china en la Ciudad de México* (2019), respectively. In both, Cinco points out that said neighbourhood is recognised by the city’s own Chinese as the new Chinatown of Mexico City since, unlike the old neighbourhood of Dolores, it has currently developed greater articulation and social networks among Chinese migrants beyond just economic/commercial areas. This is because they reproduce a community life by living there permanently and practising recreational, religious, and educational activities on-site (Cinco Basurto, 2019: 163). On the other hand, Jessica Da Costa Dantas (2020), in her work “La inclusión de estudiantes chinos al sistema educativo mexicano: reflexiones sobre el caso de la Ciudad de México,” documents how the children of different Chinese families in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood attend local elementary schools. Through interviews, da Costa reveals the situations (positive and negative)

faced by Chinese students within the Mexican education system, particularly in the area analysed.

Within the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood, there are Chinese people who have their wholesale and retail businesses in the well-known neighbourhood of Tepito, an economic space with a long-standing commercial tradition in Mexico City where they enjoy a strong presence. The work of Alba Villalever (2020) reports, from a gender perspective, how Chinese women participate in the local economy, recounting therein their lived experiences – sometimes adverse, sometimes positive. This is another example of their social integration with Mexicans, even with the limitations and disadvantages they face as foreigners. It is worth highlighting this aspect since, notwithstanding that Chinese society is currently more accepted in Mexico, there is a certain anti-pathology from other Mexicans when the Chinese participate in economic spaces at the micro level, since their presence is interpreted as negative: they fear a loss of jobs, the bankruptcy of local businesses, unfair competition, and similar (we must not forget that Mexico experienced an anti-Chinese movement between 1911 and 1934, which deeply entrenched xenophobic perceptions of the Chinese citizen for decades to come).

A more recent work by Martínez González (2023), meanwhile, documents how businesses managed by Chinese immigrants have advanced quantitatively and qualitatively in Tepito, now coming to occupy squares and commercial buildings of Mexico City's historic centre in less than a decade. This has driven greater integration between Chinese and Mexicans. However, according to Alba Villalever (2020), it is necessary to distinguish between the physically delimited spaces where Chinese immigrants develop their lives and the social spaces they build through their daily interaction with others. This argument is particularly significant for the development of current Chinese communities in Mexico, as different from those Chinese neighbourhoods that developed at the beginning of the twentieth century in the north of the country. What distinguishes Chinese society in Mexico is a relatively high migratory mobility among its members: students and academics, employees of the China government and transnational companies, and those who seek to establish a small business or to simply stay with family.

Chinese Immigration to Mexico City

Kritz and Zlotnik (1982) argue that the arrival of immigrants to a given country must be explained through different contexts and situations in the political, economic, social, environmental, and military-conflict realms. All this at different scales: global, national, regional, or local.

Chinese immigration to Mexico City dates back to 1895, when agreements between the two governments (with China's at the time representing the last imperial dynasty) were signed to bring Chinese labour, initially for the construction of railroads, to the north of Mexico. These workers settled throughout the country, mainly in Sonora, Sinaloa, Baja California Norte, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, Veracruz, Yucatan, and Chiapas. At that time, forty-three Chinese were documented in Mexico City; fifteen years later, by the end of 1910, the number had grown to 1,482. However, as is well-

known, the country's anti-Chinese movement marked the gradual yet significant departure of Chinese residents from throughout the country, so that by 1970 only 447 were recorded in Mexico City (Xu, 2007: 49).

According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census (INEGI), there are around 1,198 million foreigners living in Mexico. INEGI 2020 was strongly conditioned by the COVID-19 health crisis since it forced confinement at home worldwide for about two years. Although, the census was carried out from 2 to 27 March, by that time sanitary measures such as social distancing had already entered into force that inevitably caused the reluctance of different sectors of the population to be registered – particularly the Chinese population.

Of the total number of foreigners recorded, 66 per cent were United States nationals and the remaining 34 per cent corresponded to other countries – among which Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras stand out. The number of Chinese residents at that time was 10,547 – equivalent to 0.88 per cent of all foreigners. The federal states home to the majority of this population were: Mexico City 36.9 per cent; Baja California 15.6 per cent; Jalisco 5.2 per cent; State of Mexico 4.6 per cent; and Nuevo Leon 4.2 per cent (see Table 2). In the specific case of Mexico City, it was identified that of the sixteen municipalities that make up this state, three stand out regarding the concentration of Chinese immigrants there: Miguel Hidalgo borough 27.7 per cent; Cuauhtemoc borough 27.5 per cent, and Benito Juárez borough 10.2 per cent.

It is noteworthy that even though two boroughs (Cuauhtemoc and Miguel Hidalgo) are home to about 50 per cent of the Mexican capital's Chinese immigrant population (Table 3), there are no registered spaces of high concentration (streets, neighbourhoods, and similar). However, it is known that there are four municipalities where a Chinese presence continues to flourish: Dolores Street and Morelos Colony (Cuauhtemoc borough), Del Valle Colony (Benito Juarez borough), Santa Fe (Cuajimalpa borough), and Viaducto Piedad Colony (Iztacalco borough).

Mexico City, in addition to being the country's political capital, acquires a particular relevance in Chinese immigration to Mexico. Here, accordingly, you can find the Embassy of the People's Republic of China as well as the executive offices of important Chinese transnational companies such as ZTE, HUAWEI, Hutchinson Ports, or the Bank

Table 2. Chinese in Mexico, 2020.

	Total	Participation %
National	10,547	100.0
Mexico City	3889	36.9
Baja California	1646	15.6
Jalisco	551	5.2
State of México	483	4.6
Nuevo Leon	439	4.2

Source: INEGI (2020).

Table 3. Chinese in Mexico City, 2020.

Borough	Total	Participation %
Alvaro Obregon	50	1.3
Azcapotzalco	226	5.8
Benito Juarez	398	10.2
Coyoacan	78	2.0
Cuajimalpa de Morelos	120	3.1
Cuauhtemoc	1072	27.5
Gustavo A. Madero	223	5.7
Iztacalco	242	6.2
Iztapalapa	88	2.3
La Magdalena Contreras	5	0.1
Miguel Hidalgo	1080	27.7
Tlalpan	55	1.4
Venustiano Carranza	245	6.3
Xochimilco	7	0.2
México City	3889	100

Source: INEGI (2020).

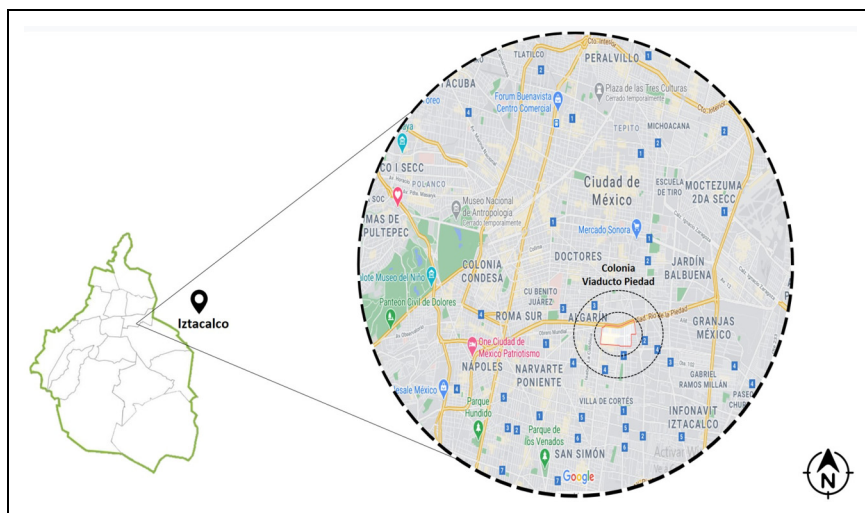
of China – from where their activities are coordinated for Mexico and the wider Latin American region. It is also possible to find important institutions such as the Zhonghua Business Association in Mexico and the Hong Kong Trade and Development Council, among others.

Different segments of the Chinese immigrant population have dispersed throughout Mexico City, particularly those working in the service sector (restaurants, retail and wholesale products, travel agencies, translation services, and similar). This is also true in the education sector. On the one hand, the teaching and promotion of Chinese culture via the Confucius Institute encourages the arrival of teachers of Chinese origin; on the other hand, Chinese students come to learn Spanish – for example by enrolling at the Teaching Center for Foreigners (CEPE) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico or in exchange programmes with higher education institutions offering language courses at undergraduate and graduate level.

Relations between China and Mexico City are currently quite modest, diplomatically speaking; there are no relevant joint projects in which both governments or the Chinese provinces participate. Only under the administration of Marcelo Ebrard Casaubón (2006–2012) were important cultural and political cooperation projects promoted by the two nations. Particularly at the para-diplomatic level, a twinning agreement was signed (2011) between Beijing and Mexico City, which sought to attract investment and cooperation as well as development programmes for the improvement of both cities in the economic, scientific-technological, cultural, and environmental fields, among others. Unfortunately, since 2012, subsequent Mexico City local governments have no longer considered the relationship with China a priority within their respective political agendas.

Dolores Street has, as noted, traditionally been considered the city's most representative Chinatown. Today, however, it no longer fulfils the function of providing only housing and social cohesion, as in the 1970s – since instead Mexican, Chinese, and Mexican entrepreneurs of Chinese descent interact to develop small businesses selling food, handicrafts, and various Chinese products. After Dolores Street, there is the case also of the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood – an upper-middle-income town with a large number of commercial establishments operating in the service sector. According to Market Data Mexico (2020), there are around 550 production units. Within this town, Coruña Avenue has been home to most Chinese immigrants and residents since the 1990s. Among the different explanations for this is the fact that its location is ideal for the development of economic and commercial activities. This place has a wide range of public services, excellent traffic routes, and adequate means of public transport – such as the underground train (Metro Line 2) – to travel to different parts of the city, including the centre of town (Map 1).

From the above, about thirteen restaurants, a hairdresser, a beauty shop, five mini-markets selling Chinese products (both dry goods and fresh produce), as well as a



Map 1. The Viaducto Piedad Neighbourhood, Mexico City. *Source:* Author's own elaboration, based on Google Maps (n.d.).



Map 2. Chinese Businesses in the Viaducto Piedad Neighbourhood as of 2023.

stationery store were identified. There are references to the existence of other businesses in the area that are owned by Chinese but are not visible because they do not use outdoor advertising or place ads outside their houses in Mandarin. These retail stores sell electronics, clothing, and other products. There is also a business selling fish, seafood, and vegetables, as well as an informal mahjong and billiard establishment (Map 2).

Further to the economic/commercial function already described, within the colony, there is also the Chinese Christian Church of Mexico founded in 2005. According to Cinco Basurto (2019), this institution has allowed for the greater integration of the Chinese community: “The Chinese Christian Church of Mexico is one of the multiple communities that constitute the Chinese diaspora in Mexico, it is a group that constitutes a moral community where religion is the element that produces cohesion” (pp. 15–16). An element of cohesion and integration has been identified in Chinese children’s attendance at local schools. Da Costa Dantas (2020) documents, for instance, how forty Chinese children were enrolled at Erasmo Castellanos Quinto Elementary School – one of the two schools serving the Chinese population in the neighbourhood – during the 2019/2020 school year.

The Chinese Community in Viaducto Piedad Neighbourhood: First Approximations

Within the framework of the project “How is China Affecting Day-to-Day Life in Latin America and the Caribbean?” coordinated by The Asian Studies Center of the University

of Pittsburgh and the Academic Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC-China Network) developed from March to November 2020, it was proposed to explore the dynamics of the Chinese immigrant community in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood of Iztacalco borough. Because the literature on the subject is, as mentioned, limited, then a pilot study was launched among the Chinese living in the area. The project initially considered a statistical sample of seventy-three people out of a total of 300 Chinese migrants for the year 2020. This number was provided unofficially by the Canadian pastor of the Chinese Christian Church of Mexico, Wu Jin, from his church's attendance records. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the whole project unfortunately had to be radically changed. Given the worldwide lockdowns decreed and a strong reluctance on the part of the Chinese community to be interviewed in person, it was decided to undertake the survey electronically instead (via email and hand-held devices).

In order to generate trust and accessibility among the Chinese community, two types of endeavour were carried out: the first was an interview with Pastor Wu, with the aim of making the project known and therewith seeking to convince his Chinese parishioners from the colony to answer the survey. Second, a virtual informative talk was held with some members of the Chinese community of the colony so that they could disseminate the survey among their WhatsApp groups.

Methodological Note on the Sample Calculation

Since there is no information on the population with which to compare, it was decided to use a standard sample with the following characteristics:

Z = 95% confidence level (area under the curve) = 1.96

p = Probability (ratio) of success = 50% = 0.5

q = Probability (proportion) of failure = 50% = 0.5

E = Maximum permissible error (of the investigator) = 10% = 0.1

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{E^2} = \frac{1.96^2 (0.5 \times 0.5)}{0.1^2} = 96.04$$

Even if adjusted with the population size (300) that is known and considered valid, an adjusted sample size is recalculated as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq N}{N E^2 + Z^2 pq} = \frac{1.96^2 (0.5 \times 0.5) (300)}{(300 \times 0.1^2) + (1.96^2 (0.5 \times 0.5))} = 72.68$$

A total of twenty-five survey submissions were ultimately obtained, representing 34 per cent of the calculated sample. Given that the intention was to have a non-random pilot sample (since there is no valid database that allows selecting a random sample of participants) as an initial way to learn more about the characteristics of the local population, we consider the exercise to be valid as a case analysis providing new information on the subject to hand.

Thus, it was found that:

- (a) Forty per cent of the population referred to comes from Guangdong, 16 per cent from Beijing; 12 per cent from Gansu; 8 per cent from Guangxi; and the remaining 24 per cent from provinces such as Hebei, Heilongjiang, Hong Kong, Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Anhui.
- (b) Thirty-six per cent have a postgraduate degree; 28 per cent a bachelor's degree; 24 per cent a baccalaureate; 8 per cent a secondary education; and 4 per cent a primary education.
- (c) Sixty-eight per cent of respondents reported that they had lived in Mexico for five years or more; 20 per cent from three to five years; 12 per cent from one to three years. Ninety-two per cent reside in Mexico City; only 8 per cent reported living in Morelos and the State of Mexico. Of those in the capital, 39.1 per cent live in Iztacalco borough; 26.1 per cent in Benito Juárez; 13 per cent each in Cuauhtemoc and in Alvaro Obregon; and the remaining 8.7 per cent in Coyoacan.
- (d) Regarding the interviewees who live in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood, 80 per cent have been there five years or more; 10 per cent from three to five years; another 10 per cent from one to three years.

Chinese Micro-Entrepreneurs

Of the total number of interviewees, nine reported being business owners. Of these, five have their businesses in the borough of Cuauhtemoc, two in Coyoacan, and two in Iztacalco. All business owners reported that they had been running their establishments for at least five years or longer. The types of businesses that interviewees reported having include:

- Chinese restaurants (3)
- Translation services, Chinese teaching, healthcare, and services in general (1)
- Sale of textiles, footwear, costume jewellery, and clothing accessories (1)
- Sale of handcrafted and traditional Chinese products (1)
- Electrical household goods (1)
- Electronic goods (1)

Those same owners reported that their establishments have an average of one to ten workers. Two owners reported that all their workers were Chinese; two said that half of their employees were Chinese workers and the other half Mexicans. Five owners said that one-quarter of their workers are Chinese and the rest all Mexican.

Regarding the average monthly salary that they pay, these business owners reported how:

- Four of them pay more than USD 329.
- Three from USD 235 to 329.
- One from USD 141 to 235.

From the perspective of these micro-entrepreneurs, their main economic contribution to Mexico City is seen in offering a wide variety of products at affordable prices to the Mexican population and in generating local employment. They consider their business activity in the capital to be mainly affected by high taxes, certain laws and regulations, as well as by the complex legal requirements for opening a business. Also, albeit to a lesser extent, by Mexican culture, since, first, there is not a total acceptance of Chinese products and, second, because Mexican workers do not have the same labour discipline as Chinese workers.

Finally, the pandemic impacted their businesses, mainly as a result of reduced sales given the temporary closure of their establishments – affecting profits and causing lay-offs. One factor that they highlighted, although not significantly, is that there was discrimination against them for being Chinese.

Social Integration of the Chinese Community in the Viaducto Piedad Neighbourhood

In general, as mentioned, the respondents assessed the Chinese presence in Mexico City to be of benefit to the local economy not only by generating jobs but also by contributing tax revenue. Regarding social aspects, they pointed to a broader cultural diversity and social development as well as to improved relations between Mexico and China. It is also worth noting that, regarding the integration of Chinese families and individuals into Mexican society, the respondents reported the following:

- Occasional participation in neighbourhood meetings (eight respondents).
- Children studying in Mexican public or private schools (twelve respondents).
- Occasional attendance of Mexican cultural, recreational, or sports events (14 respondents).
- Improving their Spanish proficiency frequently with Mexican teachers (twenty-three respondents).
- Attending a religious centre (nine respondents).

Survey respondents were also asked what factors they considered decisive for the Chinese community to be able to integrate widely in Mexico City and Mexico at large. In this regard, they responded that, first, discrimination continued to be the main element complicating integration, which was aggravated after the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus-2; second, the language; third, the legal requirements for entry and permanent residence in Mexico; and, fourth and finally, they considered that certain Chinese themselves likely decided not to fully integrate.

Two main aspects were suggested that could help improve this situation: the Chinese Embassy being more inclusive in its services, with the bulk of Mexico's Chinese population living in the capital city. This aspect is relevant since one of the prevailing perceptions among different segments of the Chinese community is that the Chinese Embassy has a much closer relationship with citizens from the main Chinese metropolises (Beijing,

Hong Kong, and Shanghai), with those who work in the main Chinese transnational companies, as well as with employees of government, radio, and television. Four respondents proposed that the existing Chinese associations should promote cultural and community projects with the authorities of the local government and the Mexico City government itself. Three interviewees thought that new associations (based on province, business type, or similar) should be created that Chinese migrants could identify with.

In general, the Chinese community of the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood is a dynamic and active social entity that until 2022 remained relatively far from the spotlight. That situation changed in January 2023, when for the first time the first celebration of Chinese New Year (water rabbit) was held on the esplanade of Iztacalco borough and on Coruña Street in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood. The event saw the surrounding streets decorated with Chinese cultural motifs, the presentation of the lion and dragon dance, a martial arts exhibition, and the sale of Chinese food and goods. These events have served to promote with greater vigour the Chinese community of the neighbourhood. It can thus be concluded that this space is indeed a Chinatown, since it fulfils the functions of habitability, is an economic/commercial enclave, a space of protection, and a site of Chinese culture's promotion.

Conclusion

In this article, the issue of Chinese immigrants' presence in certain parts of Mexico City has been examined, notable for the size of the Chinese population observed and the types of activities they practise. The Chinatown approach was used as a way of explaining how, in the urban space of Mexico City, Chinese migrants have managed to develop a sense of community that immediately distinguishes them. Traditionally, Dolores Street was considered the only Chinatown in Mexico's capital; since the late twentieth century, however, a process of housing occupation, business openings, and community integration of Chinese migrants has begun to take shape in the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood. This has led the latter to be considered a new Chinatown, since, in line with the different interpretations of sinologists, this locality upholds the minimum scope of functions that accredit it as such.

Because the literature on this case is limited, it is an object of study that must be approached in a multidisciplinary manner since anthropological and sociological analyses predominate. This is what motivated a pilot survey to be carried out among the Chinese who live and work in this colony: namely, to obtain information about this ethnic group in areas such as the province of origin, schooling, occupation, time living in the area, level of integration, and extent of community development. Among the main findings here were:

- (a) The main province of origin is Guangdong (40 per cent of all respondents), but there are also at least nine more relevant provinces, with Beijing standing out (16 per cent).

- (b) Thirty-six per cent of respondents have a higher education (undergraduate and graduate); 28 per cent a bachelor's degree; 24 per cent a baccalaureate; 8 per cent a secondary education; and 4 per cent a primary education. This tells us about a new generation of migrants with a high rate of schooling that contrasts with those Chinese of yesteryear rural and illiterate.
- (c) This community is positioning the Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood as an economic/commercial enclave of reference for other Chinese in Mexico City as regards the types of businesses that have been opened to meet the mainly Chinese demand for agro-industrial goods. But also, healthcare, beauty, or recreational services.

From the above, the 2020 INEGI found that although boroughs such as Cuahutemoc and Miguel Hidalgo are home to the largest Chinese populations, the Chinese living there were not observed to carry out community activities among themselves or that they are distinguished by their concentration in certain streets or colonies – therewith making them identifiable as Chinatowns.

- (d) A point of note is that, despite the Chinese living in the Viaducto Piedad colony for almost thirty years now, no popular acts or celebrations had been carried out to commercially promote Chinese culture – as done in Dolores Street – until January 2023. On that occasion, activities to celebrate the Chinese New Year were convened for the first time. This may be the beginning of a new stage of development for the Chinese community of the colony because of the implications of them formally promoting this space as a Chinatown.
- (e) Community participation is limited. Survey responses reveal that it is difficult for the Chinese of this neighbourhood to integrate openly with Mexican society other than for basic activities (attendance of Chinese children in local schools, study of Spanish, and religious worship).
- (f) The contribution of the Chinese community to the neighbourhood, to Mexico City, and to the country at large is mainly economic due to the supply of products, the generation of small-scale jobs, and the payment of taxes.

Mexico is, seemingly, very distant from developing Chinatowns similar to those of North America, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world: Especially notable are some cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Washington, Los Angeles (US, with an estimated number of at least one Chinatown in about fifty cities); Vancouver and Montreal (Canada), Paris (France), London (England), Singapore, Bangkok (Thailand), Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Jakarta (Indonesia), Kobe (Japan), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Sydney (Australia), Mauritius, Buenos Aires (Argentina), Lima (Peru), Havana (Cuba), Panama, and San Jose, Costa Rica (Ng Baez, 2016). This is mainly explained by their scale, organisation, and influence on political and economic life in the receiving country, as well as by the development of institutions providing different types of support to Chinese immigrants and promoting the Chinese presence among locals. As a hypothesis, this can be explained by several factors at different levels:

1. The political and economic relationship that Mexico has built with China has been a necessary condition for the attraction of new migrants. In the speech of the Government of Mexico, it can be read that cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened (taking as parameters bilateral trade and investment volumes). However, macroeconomic activities are not exactly a catalyst for the arrival of Chinese who are looking for a new place of residence. To this, we must add the US's geopolitical influence and the conditions established by the trade agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the US (USMCA).

On the other hand, on 8 August 2023, current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador strongly rejected Mexico's joining of the group of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS):

We are not going to participate in this bloc (BRICS), in this association. Of course, we celebrate that other countries do so. However, for economic, neighbourhood, and geopolitical reasons, we are going to continue strengthening the alliance of North America and all of America. (Lopez Obrador quoted by Forbes, 2023).

2. The stage of development and modernisation at which China currently finds itself has not prevented the constant departure of Chinese; on the contrary, the country has become more dynamic through its financing and implementation of projects (energy, infrastructure, mining, and agriculture) worldwide, student and academic mobility, the establishment of regional offices of Chinese companies, and similar. That is why other countries acquire greater relevance and interest compared to Mexico. In this sense, it is positioned as a transit country to North America rather than as a final destination.
3. During the design and dissemination of the survey, Chinese migrants, without being statistically representative, identified a topic that is omitted in certain debates: namely, how certain segments of the migrant population are simply not interested in developing more complex spaces than those in which they are currently living. The reasons for this range from public safety, the privacy of their family and social environment, and avoiding being in the spotlight regarding the media and politicians. This includes not participating in research projects as the object of study. In the words of some, "not being one more statistic." With this in mind, the reason why there has not been extensive academic work done on these Chinese migrants despite there being boroughs in Mexico City home to a large number of them becomes clearer.

In short, answers to what the future of the Chinese diaspora in Mexico will be and whether new spaces will be configured wherein the Chinese presence is part of national life remain pending. Although the atmosphere of racism against the Chinese and other ethnic groups that persisted during the twentieth century seems to have been forgotten, it is an unfortunate fact that it has not been completely eradicated. This is the context in which the presence of Chinese migrants is still viewed with some suspicion at the

social, institutional, and business levels. Chinese communities are seen as challenging rather than a potential opportunity to contribute to local growth and development.

It is also important to be very self-critical about the treatment and interpretation of the notion of “Chinatown” in the twenty-first century beyond the academic field. Politicians, businesspeople, descendants of Chinese immigrants, and non-Chinese society have all materialised projects regarding old and new neighbourhoods here that, according to Kiyomi (2013: 247), are oriented more towards having ultimately a touristic and economic function. The profile of each neighbourhood in question depends largely, though, on the interests of Chinese immigrants and of public and private actors in the respective locations worldwide. Ang (2020) states that in several countries the idea of economically exploiting the “Chinatown” brand and taking advantage of the influence that China is exerting worldwide has taken hold.

As a recommendation, more in-depth studies and initiatives are required to understand the characteristics and contributions of the Chinese community beyond just the promotion of tourism and culture. For this, it is of the utmost importance that institutions such as the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of Mexico in its different guises, as well as the descendants of Chinese immigrants themselves, show a willingness to collaborate on studies of this nature. The academic field currently faces serious restrictions in accessing relevant information here, and indeed the community itself.

The different Chinese organisations founded by these immigrants and their descendants must facilitate greater accessibility to make known their invaluable contributions and participation in Mexican society. But above all, as in the US, institutional structure and/or networks must be developed that meet their daily needs and promote community projects. That is, to have physical spaces (specialised offices) vis-à-vis cultural or educational matters, legal advice, and similar – functions that are not necessarily within the scope of the Chinese Embassy’s competencies.

In 2021, the Government of Mexico celebrated the “Year of Independence” and the “Greatness of Mexico.” Among the activities taking place on this occasion, Mexico apologised to China for the violent death of 303 Chinese in 1911 during the revolutionary movement in Torreon (Coahuila). This act may not substantially alter the Mexican collective imaginary’s interpretation of the Chinese presence in the country but it is, at least, a good start regarding the transformation that Mexico must undergo in the face of globalisation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Sergio Martínez Rivera  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5721-2800>

References

- Alba Villalever, Ximena (2020) Women and migration, new expressions of a globalized world: experience of Chinese merchants in Mexico. *REDCAEM* 15: 5–25.
- Ang, Ien (2019) Chinatowns and the rise of China. *Modern Asian Studies* 54: 4.
- Botton Beja, Flora (2008) La persecución de los chinos en México [The persecution of the Chinese in Mexico]. *Estudios de Asia y África* XLIII(2): 477–486.
- Chen, Meng Jin (2018) La Diaspora China [The Chinese Diaspora]. *El orden mundial*, 18 September, China–Mexico Studies Center of the UNAM, School of Economics. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/la-diaspora-china/> (accessed 22 July 2022).
- Cinco Basurto, Monica (2015a) Espacios de la Sinidad [Sinological spaces]. In: Federico Besserer and Nieto Raúl (eds) *La Ciudad Transnacional Comparada: Modos de Vida, Gubernamentalidad y Desposesión* [The Transnational City Compared: Ways of Life, Governmentality and Dispossession]. UAM & Juan Pablos, pp. 151–173.
- Cinco Basurto, Monica (2015b) Espacios de Sinidad: Comunidades Chinas en Mexico [Spaces of Sinity: Chinese Communities in Mexico]. Paper presented at the China-Mexico Studies Center of the UNAM, School of Economics. November 21.
- Cinco Basurto, Mónica (2019) Cristiandad china en la Ciudad de Mexico [Chinese Christianity in Mexico City]. *Cuadernos de Trabajo del CECHIMEX* 3: 1–19.
- Da Costa Dantas, Jessica (2020) La inclusion de estudiantes chinos al sistema educativo mexicano: reflexiones sobre el caso de la Ciudad de Mexico [The inclusion of Chinese students in the Mexican educational system: reflections on the case of Mexico City]. *Cuadernos de Trabajo del CECHIMEX* 2: 1–17.
- Dittgen, Romail, and Gerald Chungu (2019) (Un)writing “Chinese space” in Urban Africa. of city-making, lived experiences, and entangled processes. *China Perspectives* 4: 3–7.
- Eng Menendez, Yrmina (2021) De los barrios chinos en Latinoamerica y el Caribe. [From Chinatowns in Latin America and the Caribbean]. *RUMBOS TS* 16(24): 151–166.
- Facebook (n.d.) Inmigraciones Chinas a Mexico. [Chinese immigration to Mexico]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/324051971001285> (accessed 20 December 2023).
- FORBES (2023) Mexico descarta unirse a los BRICS para enfocarse en Norteamerica [Mexico rules out joining the BRICS to focus on North America]. *Forbes*, 8 August. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com.mx/mexico-descarta-unirse-a-los-brics-para-enfocarse-en-norteamerica/> (accessed 5 January 2024).
- Gomez Izquierdo, Jorge (1991) El movimiento antichino en Mexico (1871–1934). Problemas del racismo y del nacionalismo durante la Revolución Mexicana [The Anti-Chinese Movement in Mexico. Problems of Racism and Nationalism During the Mexican Revolution]. National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico.
- Google Maps (n.d.) Neighborhood map, Viaducto Piedad neighborhood. Alcaldia Iztacalco-Mexico City 2023. *Google Maps*. Available at: https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1tD6AnJoY1Bd7_cARRILQOOIE11O2FPk&usp=sharing (accessed 20 March 2021).
- Hu-Dehart, Evelyn (1985) La comunidad china en el desarrollo de Sonora [The Chinese community in the development of Sonora]. *Historia General de Sonora, tomo IV: Sonora Moderno 1880–1929*. Government of the State of Sonora, Mexico.

- Instituto Nacional de Geografía e Informática (INEGI) (2020) Population and housing census 2020. Mexico.
- Kiyomi, Yamahashi (2013) A comparative study of Chinatowns around the world: focusing on the increase in new Chinese immigrants and formation of new Chinatowns. *Japanese Journal of Human Geography* 65: 527–544.
- Kritz, Mary M., and Hania Zlotnik (1982) Global interactions: migration system, processes and policies. In: Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim, and Hania Zlotnik (eds) *International Migration Systems a Global Approach*. England: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–16.
- Market Data Mexico (2020) Colonia Viaducto Piedad, Iztacalco, Ciudad de Mexico [Viaducto Piedad neighbourhood, Iztacalco, Mexico City]. Available at: <https://www.marketdatamexico.com/es/article/Colonia-Viaducto-Piedad-Iztacalco-Ciudad-Mexico> (accessed 3 August 2020).
- Martínez González, Paola (2023) Dinámicas actuales del comercio chino en Tepito y el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México [Current dynamics of Chinese trade in Tepito and the Historic Center of Mexico City]. *Cuadernos de Trabajo del CECIMEX* 4: 3–20.
- Martínez Rivera, Sergio E., and Enrique Dussel Peters (2016) La diáspora china en México. Asociaciones chinas en el D.F., Mexicali y Tapachula. [The Chinese diaspora in Mexico: Chinese associations in the Federal District, Mexicali and Tapachula]. *Migración y Desarrollo* 26(14): 111–142.
- Ng Baez, Rosa (2016) *El barrio chino de Santo Domingo* [Santo Domingo's Chinatown]. Republic of Santo Domingo: Institute of Chinese Culture.
- Xu, Shicheng (2007) Los chinos a lo largo de la historia de México [The Chinese throughout the history of Mexico]. In: Enrique Dussel Peters and Yolanda Trapaga Delfín (eds) *China y México: Implicaciones de una Nueva Relación* [China and Mexico: Implications of a New Relationship]. Nuestro Tiempo, La Jornada, pp. 51–68.
- Zhou, Min, and John R. Logan (1989) Returns on human capital in ethnic enclaves: New York City's Chinatown. *American Sociological Review* 54(5): 809–820.

Author Biography

Sergio Martínez Rivera PhD in Economics from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Full-time professor at undergraduate and graduate levels at the School of Economics, UNAM. Researcher at the Center for China–Mexico Studies (Cechimex) Member of the National System of Researchers (SNI) level I of the National Institute of Science and Technology of Mexico. Member of the Academic Network of Latin America and the Caribbean on China. Research interests: urbanisation processes in emerging economies with emphasis on Mexico and China; growth and environment from the perspective of ecological economics and Chinese migration in Mexico in the twenty-first century.