Fabiana Chiu-Rinaldi

11 China Latina

After I had finished a presentation on the history of Chinese in Peru at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, a member of the audience stood up and commented that he had been to Peru and indeed had not seen any Chinese there. His assertion took me by surprise, especially because it is estimated that 15 percent of Peru's population, or 3.5 million Peruvians, have some Chinese blood.

What could his assertion mean? What are the implications of not being counted, of being invisible to some and overly visible to others? As I considered the possible responses to his statement, five generations of my family's history in Peru flashed before my eyes. Was my one-hour lecture, accompanied by more than eighty slides, not enough? As a Chinese Peruvian, I realized that with a story as little told and considered as ours, it is almost as if we do not exist. Our lives have not been lived, our contributions not recorded or appreciated by ourselves or anyone else.

I left Peru at age twenty-one with little knowledge about the hows and whys of my own family's history. Nothing I had packed prepared me for what was to come. In the United States I faced a set of questions to which I had never been subjected to in Peru. Latinos were asking me how I came to speak Spanish so well, and everyone else wondered why I didn't speak a word of Chinese—questioning my strong sense of "Latinidad" and heightening a growing interest in my Asian background. Unfortunately, retelling the miniscule piece of history I was taught in Peru about my own community invited questions for which I had no answers.

Most of the information one finds about Chinese Peruvians is limited to research conducted by non-Chinese Peruvians on the "coolie trade," a phenomenon that brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese to work Peru's difficult terrain in the 1850s. Their arrival came at the end of slavery and provided the Peruvian elite with a way to maintain their status. Thousands of Chinese lost their lives picking guano, the rich organic fertilizer that seabirds left behind in many of Peru's coastal islands; building Peru's Ferrocarril Central, the railroad into the high sierras of the Andes mountains; and working the vast coastal sugar and cotton plantations. Beatings and whippings were commonplace for those who didn't perform as required by their eight-year contracts.

The Chinese were often vilified, seen as untrustworthy, stupid, dirty, ugly, and racially inferior. They staged revolts and uprisings, and many reputedly fled to the United States looking for better treatment. Present-day reminders of those harsh experiences persist. Phrases like *Chino cochino*—a derogatory sing-song rhyme that means "filthy Chinese," and *No me Chine-es,* a phrase that means "Don't try to make a fool of me," giving the word *chino* the connotation of fool—can still be heard in Lima's streets. That's how the Chinese Peruvian community started—at the bottom, looking up at all they had to accomplish and gain.

Growing up in Lima, I remember how uncomfortable I used to be when the history teacher would discuss the only chapter in Peruvian history where we Chinese are mentioned. There we were, frozen in time as indentured servants or "coolies," and there I was, suffering from a seemingly communitywide amnesia, with no known connection to a history no one seemed to want. This changed recently, when I met Humberto Rodriguez Pastor, a researcher of Chinese Peruvian history, who suggested that according to the date of my great- grandfather's arrival in Peru, there was a good chance that he had been a "coolie." "A coolie?" I asked, alarmed. "Well, an ex-coolie," he explained. I became determined to uncover a more personal history that would help me explain a period that started with but moved beyond the "coolie" chapter. So I began to look into the photographs, family albums, letters, and diary journals my father had saved for more than fifty years. Wanting to reclaim a difficult past, I was looking for clues and for answers that would help me respond to those questioning my community's history.

Faded Photos, Blurred Memories

I have been around photographs since I can remember. By the time I was born in Lima in 1964, three generations of our family's history there had passed, and my father's photographs and journals served as the only tie to people I had never met. Dad has been a photographer at heart and by profession. Born Victor Lizardo Chiu Yipmantin in Lima's El Barrio Chino on 10 October 1926, he has spent more than half a century documenting his life and times. No gathering was ever complete until his tripod was set up and the camera's timer had begun its countdown. Whether they were studio photographs or snapshots, they were all carefully orchestrated by Dad, who often managed to position himself deftly in the right spot before the timer could trigger the shutter. Without his keen desire to capture his family on film, much of this story would be hard to tell today.

Surely, many of the photos were taken to be sent back to China to tell paternal great-aunt Chiu Kam Lin, whom Dad had never met, that he and the family were doing well. In the last letter my father received from her, she writes in Chinese: "The photos you sent were taken quite a long time ago and their colors are blurred and fading. I hope you can send me some recent ones so that I can look at them as if we met." Sadly, all contact with our Chinese family was lost in the 1960s. "It's because we no longer knew people who we could ask to write for us in Chinese," Dad explained.

From China to Peru

One hundred and fifteen years ago, my paternal great-grandfather, Agustin Yipmantin, set sail from Nanhai, Canton, for Lima. In the oldest photograph I've seen of him, he is seated in a studio with his two daughters: my grandmother Rebeca and great-aunt Manuela. These two sisters were born in different worlds, one in China, one in Peru. Their mother, Rosa Michelena, remains a mystery. Was she Chinese? Indigenous? Black? Or none or all of the above? Furthermore, no one in the family seems to know much about my great-grandfather, what his occupation was, or why, of all places, he ended up in Peru.

My grandfather Lizardo Chiu Jim, the eldest son in his family, was born in Nanhai, Canton, in 1887 to a family of potters. He married my grandmother Rebeca in Lima in 1919 and had three boys and two girls: Maria Luz, Rebeca Paulina, Rodolfo Andres, Victor Lizardo (my father), and Agustin. According to Peruvian custom, their last name, Chiu Yipmantin, reflected both their paternal and maternal lineage, although no one seems to know why the official last name that appeared in their early records was not Chiu Yipmantin but the puzzling Avila, a Spanish surname.

Grandfather did everything he could to make ends meet. He was a cook at Hacienda Boza in Huaral, a locale north of Lima, and he sold Chinese vegetables from the *chacra, a* vegetable garden he rented in Lima. He was also a tinsmith and a doctor of Chinese medicine. Dad also recalls the many times when his father would wake up in the middle of the night to bake Chinese pastries he would later sell out of a street cart in Lima's Mercado Central. From cook to tinsmith, my grandfather never really talked about China or those he left behind. When he died, he had twenty dollars to his name, all of which was sent to his family in China.

Baptized in the Catholic Church as Fabiana Leonor Chiu Cheon, I am the third of four daughters. Some of my earliest memories are of sneaking into my parents' bedroom while they were out at work and climbing onto a stool to reach for the old family photo albums stacked high up in their closet. Since Mom and Dad seemed to be always working, I spent many afternoons secretly reading Dad's journals and matching his detailed entries to the corresponding photographs, many of which were also carefully annotated.

In a picture taken in August 1967 during a family outing (Fig. 11.1), I am the three-year-old wearing a poncho decorated with llamas. My sister Vilma is holding the portable National short-band radio brought for us to dance and sing along to hits like "La Bamba," "Guantanamera," and mambo master Perez Prado's "El Taconazo."

Together with Mom, Dad, and Laura, my eldest sister, we are all pointing our left foot out, angling our knees to create a more "pleasing" pose, waiting for the camera to click. The mountains behind us add an exclamation point to another slightly chilly August winter in Peru.

Boarding the old Chevrolet, we would drive for two hours, the Central Andes beckoning us, only to stop short of the foothills in Chaclacayo, a town that was home to the Centro Vacacional Huampani, a modest country compound with a swimming

FIGURE 11.1. August 1967, Chaclacayo, Peru. Victor Lizardo Chiu Yipmantin and Maria Leonor Cheon de Chiu with children *(from left)* Vilma Celinda, Fabiana Leonor, and Laura Matilde Chiu Cheon at the Centro Vacacional Huampani beneath the foothills of the Andes.

pool, and plenty of clean air. It was a change from polluted Lima, a chance to experience a sunny day.

In the photo, Mom is five months pregnant with our younger sister Milagros. Mom and Dad were always hoping for the arrival of *el varoncito,* or baby boy, the Chinese son who would carry the family's name and legacy. Since he never materialized, we daughters were taught the many things Dad would have passed on to his son, from how to fix appliances and splice wires to how to take photographs. Pushing us to accomplish what they had only dreamed of for themselves, Mom and Dad worked tirelessly so that each of us could go to college in Peru.

While many of Dad's old photos show his family dressed in their Sunday best, the pictures seem to depict the success they imagined for themselves. Extreme poverty and limited access to education more accurately described their situation. Between world wars, his family lived in El Barrio Chino, Lima's old Chinatown, in a *callejon de un solo cano,* an alleyway where dozens of other Chinese Peruvians lived, sharing a makeshift sink and a faucet. Rebeca Yipmantin, my grandmother, who was born in Lima in 1899, was a seamstress and a teacher of Spanish to Chinese immigrants. She had

FIGURE 11.2. February 1950, Hacienda Arona, Cañete, Peru. *Una Cadenita* (little chain links), *left to right,* Lucy Wong Chiu, Victor Lizardo Chiu Yipmantin, Sergio Chuypon Chiu, and Rodolfo Andres Chiu Yipmantin.

two older siblings, both born in China: Augusto and Manuela. During the world depression of the 1930s, Manuela and her husband went back to China. Grandmother was devastated. She feared she would never see her sister again. She was right.

A photograph that my father titled *Una cadenita,* "little chain links," was taken in February 1950 at Hacienda Arona, a coastal plantation near San Vicente de Canete, south of Lima. It shows my oldest cousin, Lucy Wong Chiu, my father, my cousin Sergio Chuypon Chiu, and my uncle Rodolfo (Fig. 11.2). Already third- and fourth-generation Chinese Peruvians, they pose against the sky, holding hands, forming a determined and solid human chain. What they might not have known was that had this picture been taken a hundred years earlier in the same location, it would have depicted real chains and the widespread mistreatment that the Chinese endured as indentured servants in Peru.

In the almost cinematic shot, *Una cadenita* symbolized the hopes and dreams my family members had for themselves. United, they took control of their destinies. They were young and healthy and had found freedom in Arona.

Hacienda Arona in the 1950s produced mostly cotton and corn and was being rented by Wing On Chong y Compania, a prosperous import company headquartered in

Lima's Barrio Chino and run by Cantonese from Nanhai, our family's ancestral village. Since the 1940s, my father had worked at Wing On Chong's store on Plateros de San Pedro, a street next to Lima's historic Plaza de Armas. During the day, he sold silk, porcelain, and cloisonné gift items. At night, he arranged the display windows and kept the store's inventory. In his free time, he studied to be a radio repair technician and moonlighted with his best friend, Carlos Unyen, who owned the Casa Musical Babalu, an outfit that rented sound equipment also known as "pick-ups" for dance parties.

El Barrio Chino

To be born in Peru and not in China, Dad recalls, was sometimes considered an automatic demotion within the ranks of Chinatown's class structure. At Chinese-owned businesses, many Peruvian-born Chinese were denied access to upper management positions. In El Barrio Chino, Peruvians of Chinese descent were and are still known as *injertos,* a term that in its worst connotation could mean "half-breed." Spread over many square blocks in the shadow of Lima's legendary Spanish-colonial government buildings, members of the Chinese community opened countless Chinese restaurants; *encomenderia*s, or small grocery stores; print shops for community newspapers; fraternal organizations, schools, and temples; and fine import stores that sold the latest porcelain and silk products from China.

Although Dad had never been to China, he learned to speak such good Chinese that in school language contests he would win over many Chinese-born students. Through hard work, he also managed to be trusted as one of their own at Wing On Chong and qualified for many of the special benefits reserved for those born in China. On special occasions, such as El Dia de la Independencia Nacional del Peru on 28 July, he would secure permission from his bosses and rally the family for a three-hour trip in a hired car for a weekend of rest and relaxation at Hacienda Arona.

Dad's journal entry of 9 February 1948 details one of these visits. "This morning we rode some horses through the wide cotton fields which are almost ready to be harvested. On the way back to the 'Casa Grande,' we took several photos posing as 'jockeys' and 'cowboys.' In the evening we all gathered around the radio to listen to 'El Programa Coca Cola' featuring 'Xavier Cugat y su Orquesta,' who played 'La Bamba,' 'Tio Tico' and 'Chio Chio Chon.'"

The next day, according to the diary, they boarded a truck to go into town to see an American movie titled *Our Very Own,* starring Ann Blyth, Farley Granger, and Jane Wyatt. The amateur movie critic in Dad writes, "*Una pelicula donde se reflejan el sentir y las costumbres del pueblo americano, incluyendo un baile con algunos pasos nuevos de Bugui Bugui* [a film that reflects the feelings and customs of the American people, including a new dance called the boogie-boogie]." ("*Bugui Bugui*" is his phonetic translation of what he understood the name of the dance to be.) For Dad, these movies were not only entertainment but also a way to learn more about a culture that had captured his imagination.

Jackson Studios

Although it had been Dad's original intention to go into the radio repair business, he decided to put his life's savings toward what already was an established family business. His robust, tall, and China-born uncle Augusto Yipmantin had founded the Fotografia Yipmantin in Lima in the late 1920s. His son Arnaldo ran the Instituto Fotografio Yipmantin out of it. It was a school where many Peruvian would-be photographers learned their craft. Arnaldo gave his cousins two scholarships so that they too could learn the business.

After six years at Wing On Chong, Dad cashed in his company stock and, together with uncle Rodolfo, opened Jackson Studios in Lima's El Porvenir neighborhood. The year was 1951 and Dad was twenty-five years old.

Jackson Studios got its name from Dad's feeling that a U.S.-sounding name would carry extra cachet and bring more business. The other stores on the block followed suit and became Tienda de Repuestos de Automovil Wilson, which sold auto parts, and the Sastreria Boston, a tailor shop. The studio's customers reflected Peru's diverse population of chinos, mestizos, mulattos, and *blancos,* many of whom came in to discover that "Mr. Jackson" looked very Chinese.

Soon, Dad recalls, Jackson Studios became the *fotografos casi oficiales de la Colonia China,* the unofficial photographers of the Chinese community. One finds evidence of this by examining the names of some of the people they photographed: Don Alfredo Tay Chy, Felipe Chang, Julio Ching, Don Alberto Yip Chen Yui, Rodolfo Lock, Carlos Pun, Luis Chang Ji, Don Aurelio Chang Tac, and Francisco Lam—tongue-twister names born out of the encounter of two cultures. Among other achievements, Jackson Studios enabled Dad and Uncle Rodolfo to move their recently widowed mother out of the cramped and unsanitary living conditions of the Calle Huanta tenement in Chinatown, near the city's busy Mercado Central.

Lima in the 1950s was a sprawling city that attracted U.S. businesses and tourists alike. Firms such as the Grace Company, Dupont, Sherwin Williams, Kodak, and Sears, Roebuck established solid footholds in Peru. Film companies like Warner Brothers, Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Twentieth Century Fox owned lavish movie theaters in Lima. In addition, magazines such as *Life, Popular Mechanics,* and *Reader's Digest* offered Dad a glimpse of progress "American- style."

Jackson Studios became the perfect place to implement his own vision of prosperity, shown in a December 1952 photo (Fig. 11.3) in which a large sign he made wished his customers "*Muy Felices Pascuas y Prospero Ano Nuevo, Desean a Ud. Jackson Studios,*" a "very Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year from Jackson Studios." To the left of the counter, a blonde, blue-eyed cardboard beauty wearing a swimsuit and a Kodak camera around her neck invited shoppers to buy Kodak film and cameras.

In the photo, Jackson Studios employee Manuela Soplin, my father, and my cousin Lucy are surrounded by the caramel-colored wooden paneling and cabinets that Dad designed for the store. Whether in the darkroom or on the studio set, he always added

FIGURE 11.3. Christmas 1952, Lima, Peru. Interior shot of Jackson Studios. *Left to right:* employee Manuela Soplin, studio co-owner Victor Lizardo Chiu Yipmantin, and his niece Lucy Wong Chiu.

his special touch. One year he painted a life-sized Jesus handing out a piece of holy bread. He drew it, cut it out, and placed it strategically so that parents would bring their kids to get their first-communion pictures taken. The studio also transformed sepia-toned photos into full-color works of art, hand coloring hair, eyes, and dresses in colors requested by the customers. While Uncle Rodolfo stayed at the store, Dad took the camera on the road, hoping to bring in extra *soles,* the Peruvian currency. He photographed weddings, social dances, baptisms, and many store openings. While at it, he witnessed a whole generation of Chinese Peruvians getting married. As he took pictures at Julio Kuangfung's wedding, Dad fell in love with Maria Leonor Cheon Salas, one of the maids of honor and the bride's youngest sister. He figured that if he took beautiful pictures of this shy twenty-year-old, she would fall in love with him. He was right.

My mother's story echoes those of many other Chinese Peruvians. With few China-born women in Peru, many Chinese men formed families with local Peruvian women. Born in Arequipa, Peru, in 1931, my mother was the youngest of Manuel Cheon's and Maria Salas's three daughters. When asked why she married a Chinese man, Maria, known to us as Apocito (a name that combines the Cantonese word for grandmother

with a Spanish ending), replied that after witnessing the physical abuse her own mother, Juana Aldecoa Arrospide de Salas, had endured from her Peruvian husband, she hoped that a Chinese man would make a kinder husband. While spousal abuse knows no ethnic boundaries, her intuition paid off.

As time went by, Mom and Dad began to put in seven-day workweeks. Family outings became infrequent, so photographing them became a way to make cherished moments last longer. Some trips, however, remain vivid in our memories for other reasons. During a family trip to Ica, a sunny city south of Lima, some men around the Plaza de Armas started calling us *chinos* to our faces. The first two letters of the word seemed to be coming out of their mouths angry, deliberately harsh. While the word *chino/a* means nothing more than Chinese man or woman, they were using the word as an insult. Dad's indignation was such that he said we should have worn big signs saying "Si, *somos* chinos,"—"Yes, we *are* Chinese." I was eight years old. Incidents of this sort made me suspect that a *china* was perhaps not an ideal thing to be.

From Peru to the United States

My memories of Peru are both sweet and sour. More than half of my life in Peru was spent under two military dictatorships. One of the dictators, General Juan Velasco Alvarado, was a man who, like many Peruvians of indigenous descent, had "slanted" eyes and was widely referred to as "El Chino Velasco." In 1990, Peru gained world attention by electing Alberto Fujimori, the first national president of Asian descent outside of Asia. Ever since, I have been teased, being called President Fujimori's cousin, daughter, or niece. In fact, in Peru, as in many Latin American countries, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, are all called *chinos*.

Still, I remember proudly raising our Peruvian flag during holidays and singing the national anthem. Despite displaying the racism and stereotyping that overseas Chinese faced in many countries they emigrated to, Peru is also a place where my presence was never questioned, where my proficiency in Spanish and things Peruvian was never doubted, where the flavorful Latin American and Chinese cuisines come together at the *chifas*—the popular Chinese Peruvian restaurants, named from the Spanish pronunciation for "eat rice" in Cantonese.

As Peru's economy sharply declined in the 1980s and Shining Path terrorism became rampant, each of my sisters, my parents, and I moved to the United States. Although we are immigrants for the first time in our lives, our arrival here feels strangely like a continuation of the journey my great grandfather Agustin Yipmantin started more than 115 years ago when he left Canton. And it seems that our story is not much unlike that of others who continue to immigrate to Peru from China. Many may be on their way to the United States through a smuggling route connecting Asia to the United States via Latin America. By the time they get to the States, possibly on their third or fourth family migration, they face the daunting challenge of defining their identity.

When I applied for a new Social Security card in Brooklyn, the form instructed me to check only one racial/ethnic category. I decided to be accurate and checked both Hispanic and Asian. Minutes after I turned in my form, the clerk and later her supervisor called me to their desks to try to persuade me to choose between the categories. After my tiresome recitation about who my parents were, what language we spoke, and what our last names were, they—fully confused—shrugged their shoulders and left the form unchanged. Unwilling to give in, I wanted every part of my identity, China/Peruana/Asian/Latina/American, to be counted and accounted for.

Today, with a 150-year legacy in the Americas, Asian Latinos represent a unique link between two of the largest immigrant groups in the United States. We, like the photos in our family albums, offer a window into our little-known history.

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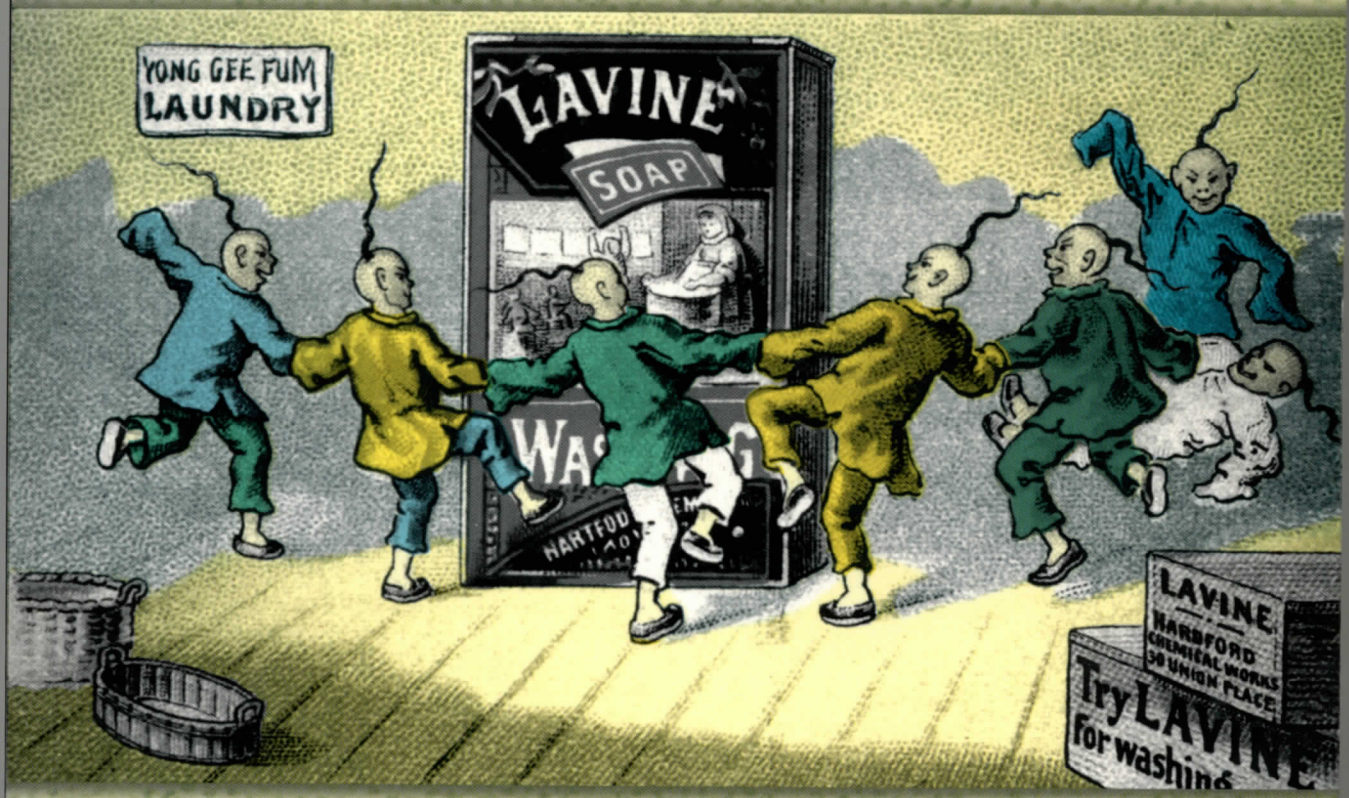
ESSAYS IN CULTURAL HISTORY



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