



HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN
LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA

China in Argentina

Ethnographies of a Global Expansion

Edited by
Máximo Badaró

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Historical and Cultural Interconnections between Latin America and Asia

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Editor

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FOREWORD

The rush to judgment by scholars, pundits, and journalists prognosticating what China's so-called rising presence in the global capitalist economy presages—often for North America and Europe—has created an echo chamber that, by its sheer repetitiveness, has made these assertions seem transparently true. Pulling one's way out from under these speculative declarations is vital in order to gain more nuanced understandings that allow us to see the full complexity of the range of people and practices involved in China's transformed global initiatives, especially in the Global South.

Fortunately, *China in Argentina* offers us exactly the lifeline we need to breathe the air of new insights. Refusing to offer reductive and monolithic representations, these essays instead provide rich empirically based research about the wide range of actors, situations, investments, and socio-cultural negotiations among Chinese and Argentinians. This research enables a scholarly examination of social, cultural, and economic life that shows their systematicity as well as their contingencies. We come to understand the dynamic yet non-deterministic processes of China's more visible presence in Argentina.

The authors featured here capture one of the central characteristics of China's varied political and economic endeavors over the last century and a half: their experimental nature. China's goals have historically been clear—strengthening the nation in the face of Western colonial powers—and the political discourse is quite well-defined today—to create a vital economy in China. Yet the means of attaining those goals have always been a process of provisional experimentation. Indeed, as these essays

reflect, the search for profit and resources has historically never been linear or based in certainty. These essays demonstrate exactly how ambivalent courses of action and deep misunderstandings in the “contact zones” lie at the heart of China’s endeavors in Argentina, as elsewhere in the Global South.

At this moment of deep transformation (not merely “rise”) in China’s worlding projects, it is more important than ever to look beyond official government pronouncements, anxious prognostications, and one-sided research approaches. These richly empirical essays enable us to understand China’s ongoing experiments in engaging with the global capitalist economy by focusing on how the dynamic forces at work in Chinese-Argentine interactions arise through their encounters with one another rather than being solely imposed on them by a structural outside. They reveal the breadth and diversity of actors and types of enterprises, the multiplicity of those who make claims about the “way things are done” by Chinese; and the economic inequalities in which Argentinians are not mere passive recipients.

Anyone who seeks to gain a richer appreciation of China’s heterogeneous global activities in the twenty-first century will need to read this book.

Santa Cruz, CA, USA

Lisa Rofel

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Introduction: China in Argentina— Ethnographic Perspectives of a Global Expansion

Máximo Badaró

The phrase “China in Argentina” can have multiple meanings. In this book, it refers to the circulation, encounters, tensions, and negotiations between people, capital, objects, and images of Chinese origin or associated to China with other people, institutions, and representations in Argentina. Although it is evident that China and Argentina have defined territorial, normative, and political contours, they are also heterogeneous and changing social, economic, and cultural entities. The category “China” also designates a mobile entity whose social, cultural, and economic boundaries are constantly expanding globally. In this sense, Argentina and China represent both a delimited analytical starting point as well as an open analytical question.

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The “China in Argentina” that we present in this book is not focused on providing a detailed or updated list of the bilateral trade figures and diplomatic agreements between the two countries. The commercial relationship between Argentina and China is an unequal relationship on many levels. For Argentina, the trade balance with China is largely in deficit: what China sells to Argentina is always greater than what it purchases. Argentina exports mostly raw materials to China, while China exports manufactured products to Argentina. This asymmetry in trade exchanges can also be found in China’s relationship with the rest of Latin America.

Much has been written and speculated about China’s global expansion and its projects in Latin America (Dussel Peters & Armony, 2015; Hearn & Manriquez-León, 2011; Jenkins, 2019). In the case of Argentina, some observers consider that relations with China, based on the exportation of minerals and agricultural commodities, foster a primarization of the economy and produce new forms of economic and political dependence (Bolinaga, 2015a; Oviedo, 2015; Slipak, 2014;). Other studies focus on the economic complementarities of these relations and the opportunities that they present for Argentina in terms of diversification of the sources of external financing and the expansion of the international markets for its products (Moneta & Cesarin, 2012).

In this book we do not subscribe to the dependency/complementarity dichotomy that prevails in most analyses of the trade and political relations between Argentina (or Latin America) and China; nor do we regard the Chinese presence and interests in Argentina (or Latin America) as univocal and uniform. We adopt a different analytical perspective. First, we conceive the global expansion of China as a heterogeneous and changing assemblage of political, social, and cultural projects that involve actors of different national origins (Armony & Strauss, 2012; Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Oliveira & Myers, 2020). Second, far from assuming the internal coherence that many academic, political, and journalistic analyses tend to assign to China’s global expansion, we highlight its inconsistencies, improvisations, and tensions.

China is learning to play a leading global role. This may not be evident if we only direct our gaze towards the documents and official discourses of the Chinese state; nor is it completely apparent in the global ubiquity of Chinese companies and products. However, if we pay attention to the daily interactions of actors and institutions of Chinese origin in different countries of the world (civil servants, expatriates, businessmen,

immigrants), we find experiences, professional careers and corporate projects marked by uncertainty and tensions with local societies and states.

In the same way, the Chinese diaspora in the world is also discovering its global role. In Latin America, immigrant communities from mainland China and Taiwan, which, until a few decades ago were ignored by the Chinese state and discriminated against by states and local societies, have recently begun to make their national origins and cultural practices more visible; moreover, local political and economic actors have started to court these immigrant communities in search of support and connections for their commercial projects with China. For many Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Latin America, their cultural and national origin has become a tool for gaining economic and political status, even if many of them continue to be objects of discrimination and segregation.

The rest of the world is also learning to deal with China's global prominence. A proliferation of manuals, courses, and experts have emerged that promise to provide the keys to deciphering the cultural codes for doing business in China; there is also a growing global interest in the Chinese language and "Chinese culture." Until just a few decades ago, the attraction that China awakened in the world was limited to specific groups: Sinologists, enthusiasts of oriental cultures and languages, tourists, chroniclers, adventurous businessmen, some transnational corporations, and political officials. But today, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, this situation has radically changed. China is no longer synonymous with exoticism and alterity or a promise of future growth that only the visionaries, the risk-takers, and the big players in global economics could decipher. On the contrary, China has risen on a list of privileged destinations to study, work, do business, incubate new companies, or explore new life experiences. Chinese universities, for example, are full of young foreign students; Chinese cities receive professionals, entrepreneurs, and workers from all nationalities, ages, and disciplines seeking professional, economic, and personal development.

In Argentina, the drastic economic and social transformations and global expansion of China awakes admiration and attraction as well as concerns and doubts. In the media and social digital networks, for instance, it is not unusual to find xenophobic comments about Chinese immigrants. At the same time, news related to Chinese investment projects in Argentina arouses all kinds of fears as well as fantasies of economic salvation.

In this book, we avoid the demonization or the idealization of Argentina's relations with China. Instead, we focus on the analysis of the

concrete practices and ideas of the people and institutions that embody the daily presence of China in Argentina. The book explores “encounters” (Faier & Rofel, 2014) among differences, that is, situations in which some cultural, social, and national dimensions of people and groups become relevant to establish differences, comparisons, conflicts, and alliances with other people and other groups. The chapters of the book show that people’s differences (cultural, national, professional, gender, etc.) are not completely prefigured before the encounters but become particularly salient in specific contexts of interaction.

ARGENTINA–CHINA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL AND MIGRATORY RELATIONS

Bolinaga (2015b) identifies three major stages in Sino-Argentine diplomatic relations. The first stage began in June 1945, when the Argentine state “established diplomatic relations” with the Republic of China, and lasted until 1972. During this stage, Argentina and China maintained cordial relations but these were not particularly relevant, either politically or commercially. The second stage began in 1972, when the Argentine government and the People’s Republic of China decided to “normalize diplomatic relations,” which led to an increase in political and commercial exchanges between the two countries. It should be noted that in 1980, during a military dictatorship in Argentina, the country’s *de facto* president, General Jorge R. Videla, made an official visit to China, a first for a Latin America head of state. In the following decades, the two countries intensified their political and trade relations as China deepened its process of openness and reform and accentuated its global role.

The last stage, which continues to the present day, began in 2003 with the election of Nestor Kirchner to the presidency. Kirchner gave a strong impetus to Argentina’s political and commercial relations with China. In November 2004, during Hu Jintao’s visit to Buenos Aires, the Argentine and Chinese governments signed a “Memorandum of Understanding on Trade and Investments.” This agreement established a strategic association between the two countries which implied an increase in the value of Argentine exports to China, Argentine recognition of China as a “market economy,” and an increase in Argentine diplomatic representation in China. Since then, bilateral relations between the two countries have not

stopped growing and diversifying, transforming China into Argentina's second largest trade partner.

The development in the relations between the two countries has a correlation in the migration flows from China to Argentina. Although Argentina began to receive Chinese immigrants from the end of the nineteenth century, they were small groups of single men who occasionally settled in the country (Bogado Bordázar, 2002). The largest presence of persons of Chinese origin arrived from Taiwan at the end of the 1970s. These Taiwanese families founded the first Chinese community institutions in Argentina, including schools, temples, and civil associations; they were able to achieve some economic prosperity (Bogado Bordázar, 2002). Throughout the 1990s the number of Chinese immigrants arriving in Argentina, especially from mainland China, continued to rise. At the end of this decade, unofficial data estimations indicated that there were between 40,000 and 45,000 Chinese immigrants in Argentina, half of them of Taiwanese origin (Bogado Bordázar, 2002).

The severe economic, social, and political crisis that Argentina experienced at the end of 2001 and the first semester of 2002 reduced the flow of Chinese immigrants to the country. Moreover, a significant number of Chinese immigrants living in Argentina returned to China and Taiwan or migrated to other countries (Bogado Bordázar, 2012). However, the economic recovery that took place since 2004 and the signing of a strategic partnership between the governments of Argentina and China fostered a new wave of Chinese immigration to Argentina, mainly from the Chinese province of Fujian.

Since then, immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have far exceeded those of Taiwanese origin. Calculations of how many Chinese immigrants have entered the country differ according to the source consulted. The Argentine Immigration Department indicates that 60,000 Chinese immigrants have settled in Argentina since 2005 (Oviedo, 2017). Almost a decade later, in 2016, sources from the Chinese Embassy in Argentina stated that 180,000 immigrants of Chinese origin were living in the country (Ng & Restivo, 2018). In terms of labor and employment, most immigrants who arrived in the 1990s worked as owners of small supermarkets, restaurants, and workshops that sold cheap products imported from China. In the last decade, the working activities of Chinese immigrants have expanded into a diverse range of commercial and professional fields.