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Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory

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Asian American studies in which the ‘American’ refers to Latin America have seen a considerable growth in recent years. Building up on the pioneering work of Evelyn Hu-DeHart, new monographs on Chinese Cubans and Chinese Mexicans are now bringing much needed attention to transnational histories that remain relatively marginalised in mainstream English-language scholarship.⁽¹⁾ Perhaps surprisingly, Brazil, which hosts one of the largest Chinese populations in Latin America, remains considerably under-researched. Ana Paulina Lee’s *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory* is thus a much-welcome addition to the field.

Mandarin Brazil proposes to investigate ‘the ways in which cultural constructions of Chineseness structured a symbolic national coherence’ (p. 7) through the analysis of ceramics, visual culture, performance arts, music lyrics, and others. Focusing on the legacy of slavery’s racial regimes in shaping modern ideas of race, the author reflects on how, ‘racial ideologies intertwined with liberal ideals of liberty and wage labour’ played a critical role in framing Brazilian narratives of emancipation and citizenship (p. 9; p. 161). The author states that *Mandarin Brazil* is ‘not a migration history’ (p. 7) but it does make a valuable contribution to that field. Central to the project is the idea of ‘circumoceanic memory’, a term Lee adapts from Joseph Roach and Paul Gilroy’s ‘circum-Atlantic memory’. She explains it as ‘transpacific passages that connect the histories of once distant places through the shared experience of racialized exploitative labor and the networked cultural processes that produce racial subaltern subjects’ (p. 10). Semantics does matter, and Lee traces the circulation and fluid meanings of words (as well as place names) that illustrate expressions of power relations. The word ‘mandarin’ in the book’s title is one of the terms addressed: a 16th-century ‘Lusophone invention’ that came to have ‘a range of different and even contradictory meanings’ and that ‘nods towards the shared economic, political, and social histories of China, Portugal, and Brazil’ (pp. 68–9). It is no coincidence that another key term to be unpicked is ‘coolie’, that came to mean indentured and other ‘unskilled’ labourers from China and India who crossed oceans to fill in labour demands in the aftermath of abolition of slavery – despite the fact that only a small percentage of migrants were indentured, with many actually paying for their own passage. The globalised term ‘coolie’ as ‘a product of the colonial imagination’ (p. 4) had itself close links to the Lusophone world. *Mandarin Brazil*’s opening setting is precisely Macau’s Coolie Street (Rua dos Cules), of which the different Chinese toponym prompts a reflection on the competing ‘layers of memory’ around a place (p. 2). This location is not devoid of meaning: most of the

Chinese transported to the Americas in the infamous 'coolie trade' departed from the small Portuguese-ruled enclave in South China.

Mandarin Brazil is comprised of six chapters as well as a rich introduction and conclusion and includes a variety of illustrations that are discussed in the text. Chapter one traces back the origins of the exclusionary devices in independent Brazil to its colonial past. It addresses the context of Portuguese imperialism in which the first ideas about China and Chinese material culture reached the Americas in networks of global trade of which violence was an integral part. The circulation of images of Chineseness gained new meanings in the process. With particular attention paid to porcelain, Lee makes a compelling analysis of the Chinese influence on Portuguese culture (although there were other key precedents in its ceramics production, notably Islamic ones). This includes the armillary sphere – a motif that has existed in China since the second century – which was adopted as a national symbol in the 16th century and is still present in the Portuguese flag. However, this is not a story of beautiful things, but of the violence inherent in their circulation. Alongside 'porcelain teacups destined for the royal palace in Lisbon' came 'trafficked slaves who would disembark in Brazil' (p. 21), where 'the largest slave markets in the world' operated (p. 25). Brazil – independent since 1822 – only abolished slavery close to the 20th century, in 1888, having been the last country in the Americas to do so. Chinese migration to Latin America might have only started in earnest in response to labour needs after the abolition of slavery but the relationship between the Iberian overseas empires and human trafficking from East Asian is an older and largely overlooked one. Chinese and Japanese people had been moved to other parts of Asia and Europe as slaves in the early modern period, a practice opposed by both Chinese and Japanese authorities.⁽²⁾ How did the colonial legacies of slavery intersect with the process of creating ideas of Chineseness? Lee's analysis details how the 'transoceanic movement of goods and human labor among Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas also produced overlapping processes of racialization' (p. 28).

How Chineseness was imagined in post-abolition republican Brazil is the topic of the second chapter, which addresses the anxieties and hopes caused by the Chinese presence (real or projected) in the debates on using immigrant labour to replace that of the enslaved. The chapter makes use of both Brazilian and Qing sources to highlight the contradictory ideas they forged of Chinese labourers 'as both the colonizing settler and the newly enslaved population', seen by some as a possible 'solution for the labor crisis' while 'their deemed unfreeness made them unsuitable for Brazil's whitening liberalism' (p. 37). For Brazilian republican abolitionists, the idea of the Chinese labourer was constructed as something incompatible with the liberal values they proclaimed. These ideas were not coming out of nowhere, they grew in a global context of 'yellow peril' fears and anti-Chinese legislation in the United States that 'caused a ripple effect in other countries' (p. 40). Indeed, as Adam McKeown demonstrated, the forging of a global system of border control was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in tandem with the exclusion of Asians – particularly Chinese – from white settler colonies.⁽³⁾ In *fin-de-siècle* Brazilian intellectual debates on labour issues, the Chinese were referred to by different racialised terms: 'yellow race', 'yellow labor', 'coolie race' (p. 50). They were perceived as a threat to the ideology of *branqueamento*, defined in the book as a 'white supremacist belief that advanced the project of whiteness through racial mixing rather than racial purity' (p. 14) that was quite influential as Brazil became a republic. Visual culture assumes particular relevance here. The author delves into representations of Chinese migrants in the respected late 19th-century pictorial *Revista Illustrada* which came to embody 'unfree labor' (p. 52), 'a substitute for black slavery' (p. 63), and a threat to national whitening (p. 57). In the newly formed Brazilian republic, the Chinese were excluded from ideas of 'liberty and nation' (p. 64). Lee argues that this became a dominant and enduring discourse. Studies for other Latin American countries – notably Mexico – reveal similar exclusionary rhetoric on the supposedly impossibility of 'assimilation' by Chinese migrants. Popping up at different points in the book is the comparison between the Chinese in Brazil and the much better-known Japanese community, the largest outside of Japan.⁽⁴⁾ The book suggests that active protection and support from the Japanese state, that Chinese migrants largely lacked, were crucial in dispelling negative stereotypes and ensuring that Japanese immigrants were well perceived and welcomed in Brazil (pp. 42–3). Still, that didn't prevent Japanese migrants from facing discrimination, particularly virulent in the 1930s and 1940s. Nobuko Adachi's concept

of 'diasporic racialisation', developed to interpret the experience of Japanese Brazilians, might be of interest to understand Chinese migration as well.⁽⁵⁾ On the role of the state, it is important to note that we remain considerably ignorant of how Chinese authorities, especially in the Republican period, interacted with Chinese communities in most countries. In other contexts, Chinese diplomats were quite active in promoting a positive vision of China internationally and in dispelling negative stereotypes. It is possible to venture that future studies with access to untapped sources by Chinese diplomats in Brazil in this period may reveal similar efforts, regardless of their practical effects.

Mandarin Brazil does not cover Nationalist China diplomacy in depth but it does elaborate on late Qing perspectives. In one of the few parts of the book that directly addresses the views of Chinese officials, the author details the official visit to Brazil of Fu Yunlong, a senior secretary in the Qing Ministry of War, in his fact-finding mission to six American countries. Fu left an extensive written record of his journey which Lee credits as 'playing a pivotal role in transforming insular Qing views and attitudes regarding Chinese emigration' (p. 44). The official saw Brazil as a 'hospitable place for Chinese settlement' (ibid.). Similar views were held by Kang Youwei, a leading reformist thinker of the late Qing. Kang envisioned the possibility of the Chinese building 'a new China in Brazil' (p. 47). Other favourable remarks were expressed by Chinese diplomats of the late Qing and early Republican periods, which reveal a clear attention to Japanese settlement in Brazil as a good model to emulate (pp. 47–8). Did these imagined futures materialise? The book suggests they were only 'successful to a small extent'. In his study of the Chinese in São Paulo, Josh Sternberg noted that the present-day community is 'overwhelmingly a product of post-1949 migration'.⁽⁶⁾ *Mandarin Brazil* adds important elements to the preceding decades – only briefly covered in Sternberg's article – and on other parts of Brazil. Between 1810 and 1812, 750 Chinese agriculturalists were sent to Rio de Janeiro to begin an experiment in tea cultivation in a botanical garden. The experiment failed and the men, unable to return to China due to the cost of the passage, remained in Brazil working as cooks and peddlers (p. 5). Observers of this early community had a positive impression. Jeffrey Lesser mentioned the German traveller Johann Moritz Rugendas who saw the tea planters in his visit to Brazil in 1835 – a copy of his print serves as cover of the book. He believed it advantageous for Brazil to have 'vast Chinese colonies' and noted that many married Brazilians.⁽⁷⁾ Fu Yunlong was told that there had been 'more than a thousand settlers in Rio' that were reduced to about two hundred in 1889 (p. 46). In 1919 about a hundred businessmen set up the Chinese Social Centre of Rio de Janeiro, that still exists today (pp. 48–9). Even if the history of Chinese migration to Brazil is not the prime concern of the book, it introduces a variety of interesting details which pave the way for other studies. The 'Chinese' might have been a constructed monolith in the minds of some Brazilian and Portuguese intellectuals in the late 19th and 20th century but the real people on the ground were far from it. The preface vividly illustrated the diversity found in the Liberdade neighbourhood of São Paulo through community spaces such as associations, cultural centres or churches: Hakka, Shanghainese, Cantonese, Taiwanese, some with ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), some closer to the Republic of China (Taiwan), living and working side by side with the 'largest Japantown in the world' (p. XVIII). The reader is left curious to know more about these different histories of migration and how they intersected in their Brazilian home over time.

Chapter three makes – together with chapter six – perhaps the most original use of primary sources in the book, uncovering and deconstructing discourses about Chineseness in Brazilian popular culture. Focusing on the practice of racial impersonation known as 'yellowface' in *teatro de revista* (revue) performances in Rio de Janeiro at the turn of the century, Lee investigates how theatre 'was a critical site to deliberate citizenry and Brazil's future' (p. 65). The chapter includes long excerpts of translated passages from the scripts where Chinese characters – both Qing officials and working-class migrants – reflect the political debates of the time and how issues of labour intersected with race and gender.

A prolific source of inspiration was Tong King-sing (Tang Jingxing), an important businessman who visited Rio in 1883 to survey the possibilities of Brazil taking in Chinese labour migration in the aftermath of the US Chinese Exclusion Act. One of the plays to depict him was *O Mandarin* (The Mandarin), written by the famous playwrights Artur Azevedo and Moreira Sampaio, and performed for the first time in 1884. It was paradigmatic of the plays Lee addresses in the chapter, voicing 'a range of hopes and fears about Chinese

labor' (p. 74) and emphasised the racialised othering by portraying 'Chinese gender and sexuality as ambiguous, bizarre, and comedic' (p. 75). This approach is particularly illuminating for as sexuality has been central to studies of race in Brazil, as these have often ignored representations of Chineseness.

Chapter four builds upon the analysis of cartoon and *teatro de revista* adding interlinked cultural products: the public writings of two towering figures of Luso-Brazilian literatures, Machado de Assis and Eça de Queiróz. Both were renown intellectuals and civil servants and their writings addressed the 'Chinese question' of the time, that is, the racialised fear towards migration and labour conditions. Machado de Assis covered the 'Chinese question' in different genres, with depictions made in a variety of derogatory ways, some extremely dehumanising. For Lee, 'Machado's references to China, Chinese culture, and Chinese labourers illuminate how he not only condemned slavery but also keenly and cynically showed that the culture of slavery, the ideological structure of paternalism, scientific racism, and Social Darwinism, would transfer successfully and damagingly into Brazil's transition to a republican state' (p. 105). Eça de Queiróz's writings on Asia are analysed in both chapter four and five, with the author noting how his 'linguistic dehumanization tactics and the use of violence metaphors in relation to Asians' (p. 110) have been overlooked by literary studies. His actions as a diplomat in Cuba are also given a revisionist treatment. In 1872, Eça de Queiróz took up his post as consul in Havana and went on to investigate the circumstances of more than 100,000 Chinese laborers that had arrived there mostly from Macau. Eça recommended that the labourers be regarded as Portuguese subjects and granted official Portuguese protection. Lee, building up on the analysis of José Suárez (8), argued had less to do with humanitarian concerns and more with Portugal's 'economic self-interest' to gain a foothold in Cuba's sugar production (p. 107). By taking aim at two venerated literary giants of Portuguese-language, *Mandarin Brazil* has obvious potential to spark a lively debate as the unpacking of these Sinophobic writings shakes up widely held assumptions of these authors' work.

The link between literary production and geopolitics is addressed in chapter five, where other works by Eça de Queiróz are put in the spotlight alongside those of Brazilian novelists and diplomats Aluísio Azevedo and Luís Guimarães Filho. For Lee, orientalist representations 'function as both sociohistorical and aesthetic texts that produce Chineseness with which to arbitrate geopolitical and economic situations' (p. 115). Her sharp analysis of Eça's short story 'Singularidades de uma Rapariga Loura' (rendered in the book as 'Peculiarities of a blonde-haired girl) as a reflection on 'the immoral character of colonial projects' (p. 117) is particularly compelling and would make useful reading for students of Portuguese literature. Nevertheless, its direct imagining of China is perhaps vaguer than in other texts considered in the book.

Chapter six on 'The Yellow Peril in Brazilian Popular Music' moves firmly into the 20th century, focusing on sambas and marchas in the 1930s and 1940s 'golden age of Brazilian radio' (p. 140). It delineates clear continuities with representations of Chinese in the nineteenth century but also important changes, in tandem with political shifts at the domestic (the rise of Getúlio Vargas' Estado Novo) and international levels, notably a global World War Two that found Brazil and China on the same Allied side. The period under analysis in the sixth chapter contrasts with earlier ones for this was a time of state-sponsored 'mestiço nationalism' known as *brasileidade*. As other scholars have noted, the 'belief in racial democracy' in Brazil coexisted with 'widespread racist practices'. (9) Vargas' government passed immigration restriction laws modelled on the US and policies 'targeted unassimilated immigrants by prohibiting ethnic institutions, language schools, and foreign-language presses' (p. 141). Through the analysis of song lyrics of the period, Lee examines their significance in the forging of a national(ist) discourse that excluded the Chinese while at the same time reflecting on new international dynamics, notably a strengthening bilateral relationship with China. The result was an ambiguous combination. Musicians and songwriters represented the Chinese as 'strong and trustworthy' allies in the fight against Japan while at the same time they remained 'the unassimilable and inscrutable Other in relations to Brazilian racial democracy' (p. 142), 'never fully integrated into Brazilian mestiço national identity' (p. 143). One of the common devices to stress their difference, also mentioned in other chapters, was to mock an accented pronunciation of certain Portuguese words, a discriminatory practice that lingers on to this day. Yellow peril tropes continued to be recycled to reveal anxieties about economic competition that were expressed through metaphors of sexual impotence.

Like the plays of Chapter Three, these songs continued to ‘depict Chinese sexuality as inadequate, bizarre, or threatening in some way’ (p. 139). The combination of sexualised and racialised language could be deployed even in songs whose aim was pro-Chinese, then by dehumanising its key wartime opponent: Japan. A curious example of this – which will be of some interest to scholars of World War Two cultural history – is the carnival song ‘China pau’ [China wood], recorded by Columbia Records in 1943 and including a reference to the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek. In this tune, references to Chinese military prowess were made in gendered ways (p. 149). The book doesn’t address this in detail – as its main concern is not with diplomacy – but the Second World War marked a time of key high-profile contacts between China and Brazil, including an often-overlooked visit of Chiang Kai-shek’s influential wife, Song Meiling, to Brazil for two months in 1944.⁽¹⁰⁾ The history of Brazil’s connections with the Republic of China (it only established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1974) is yet to be written with the detail that have recently merited other Latin American cases.⁽¹¹⁾ Wartime songs analysed here offer interesting clues for original primary sources to illustrate them.

Whilst mainly focused on music, the sixth chapter also looks at novels and plays to illustrate how the global circulation of Fu Manchu-like xenophobic images also found its way into Brazil where it came to represent ‘a complex and uneven multilateral relationship between Brazil and the threat of new forms of colonialism’ (p. 152). To illustrate this, Lee analyses the ambiguous case of the 1933 experimental play *O homem e o cavalo* (the man and the horse) by Oswald de Andrade, where Fu Manchu appears as a fluid character who is subverted to ‘perform postcolonial critiques’ (p. 154). This use of China references to ‘expose continuing forms of colonialism’ in Brazil (p. 162) is well illustrated in the first part of the concluding chapter which looks at the work of Antônio Gomes do Carmo and, particularly, Gilberto Freyre.

The conclusion briefly touches upon the present-day echoes of some of the anxieties discussed in the book by looking at alarmist media reports on dire labour conditions of some recently arrived Chinese immigrants in perpetuating ‘stereotypes about the Chinese as antithetical to liberty’ (p. 173). A promising paragraph on resistance to these forms of racialisation and other discriminatory practices is too brief and leaves the reader wanting to know more. *Mandarin Brazil* proposed to ‘bring together an archive of the migrant stories of people who were scripted into race’ and whose past ‘remains in the material and symbolic ruins of memory and survives in unpredictable cultural expressions’ (p. 16). If the latter is uncovered superbly well, the actual voices of the people are less thoroughly accounted for. The book provides some glimpses of what can be reconstructed from their actual lived experience beyond the racialised imaginings of prominent intellectuals, but future works might tackle the history of Chinese migrations (plural) in Brazil more openly, perhaps in similar ways as studies of Chinese Mexicans have done. How did migrants from China contested exclusionary discourses and made Brazil their home is certainly one story (or many stories) that deserve further attention. The organisation of international conferences for the study of Chinese immigration to Brazil in 2018 and 2019 suggests a vibrant research field in the making of which this book will no doubt be a seminal reference.

Mandarin Brazil is a thought-provoking work of scholarship relevant to a variety of fields: Brazilian history and culture, Asian American studies, migration history, the history of Portuguese imperialism, post-colonial studies, Lusophone literatures, and others. Many of the specific case studies Ana Paulina Lee discusses will be new to English-language readers and likely to most Portuguese-language readers as well. For historians, this work also sheds light on the stimulating possibilities of often-overlooked primary sources, such as songs, in transnational and global history studies.

Notes

1. Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013); Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson, AZ, 2010); Julia María Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migrations and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the US-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford, CA, 2012); Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico*

- (Oakland, CA, 2017); Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880–1940* (Chicago, IL, 2017).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, C. R. Boxer, *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550–1770* (London, 1948 (repr. 1968)); Thomas Nelson, ‘Slavery in medieval Japan’, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 59, 4 (2004), 463–92; Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (Cambridge, 2014).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Adam McKeown, *Melancholic Order: Asian Migration and Globalization of Borders* (New York, NY, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. On Japanese Brazilians see, for example: Stewart Lone, *The Japanese Community in Brazil, 1908–1940: Between Samurai and Carnival* (Basingstoke, 2001); *Searching for Home Abroad: Japanese Brazilians and Transnationalism*, ed. Jeffrey Lesser (Durham, NC, 2003); Jeffrey Lesser, *A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960–1980*. (Durham, NC, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Nobuko Adachi, ‘Japonês: a marker of social class or a key term in the discourse of race?’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 43, 3 (2004), 48–76.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Josh Sternberg, ‘The Chinese of São Paulo: a case study’, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 1, 8 (2012), 106–7.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Jeffrey Lesser, ‘Neither slave nor free, neither black nor white: the Chinese in early nineteenth century Brazil’, *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 5, 2 (1994) <<http://eial.tau.ac.il/index.php/eial/article/view/1213/1241>> [2] [accessed 25 April 2019].[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. José I. Suárez, ‘Eça de Queiroz: defender of the Chinese coolie in Cuba’, *Luzo-Brazilian Review*, 52, 1 (2015), 61–76.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Sueann Caulfield, ‘Interracial courtship in the Rio de Janeiro Courts, 1918–1940’, in *Race & Nation in Latin America*, ed. Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), p. 168.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*. (Cambridge, MA, 2011), pp. 276–7.[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. For example, Justina Hwang, ‘Cold War courtships: authoritarian anti-communism and developmental diplomacy in Latin America and the Republic of China, 1960–1975’, PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2017 (with a focus on Peru, Paraguay, and Panama); González, *Paisanos Chinos*.[Back to \(11\)](#)
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