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MEXICALI'S CHINATOWN*

JAMES R. CURTIS

ABSTRACT. This article chronicles the circumstances that were pivotal to the establishment of a Chinese community in Mexicali, Mexico. The community is reconstructed as a place in 1925, when its population peaked. After assessing the dynamics of recent change and continuity the article concludes that Chinatown in Mexicali arose because of a particular set of intersecting local and external factors, including political, social, and economic considerations, that operated largely between the first and third decades of the twentieth century. Key words: Chinatown, Chinese immigrants, ethnicity, Mexicali, Mexico.

The United States–Mexico borderlands are typically portrayed as a bicultural region, a dynamic interface between Hispanic and Anglo cultures. Largely ignored or marginalized in discussions of development in the region and its social geography is the presence of many other ethnic groups. Indeed, as a symbol not only of territorial sovereignty but also of economic opportunity and freedom, since its creation with enactment of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 the border has attracted peoples of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Whether singly or in groups, settlers have come from as near as the six Mexican states and four American states that front the international boundary and from countries as distant as Germany, Russia, India, China, and Japan. Some immigrants established agricultural colonies in the rural areas; others formed distinctive, frequently segregated enclaves in the emerging cities. Although most of these colonies and enclaves have blended into the host community, some have persisted to the present; all have left a historical imprint. At a juncture when the geopolitical and economic significance of the borderlands is attracting global attention, there is need to assess and depict accurately the important role that minority populations have played in shaping the region. The Chinese in Mexicali are a compelling case in point.

Located 120 miles east of San Diego and Tijuana, adjacent to the American border community of Calexico, Mexicali is the capital of Baja California and a booming city of more than 600,000 residents (Fig. 1). In its historical core, only blocks from the main border crossing, lies one of the largest Chinatowns in Mexico. Locally called La Chinesca, the district was formed shortly after the founding of the town itself in the first decade of the twentieth century, when Chinese were imported to help in the establishment of the cotton industry. Although in Mexicali today there

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are perhaps fewer than 2,500 full-blooded Chinese and three times that number of mixed Chinese-Mexican ancestry, the Chinese influence remains substantial. From its beginning, Chinatown has been the crucible of Chinese ethnicity in this desert city. But more than that, the district illuminates many of the social, economic, and political forces that have operated not only in Mexicali but also along the entire border.

This study chronicles the circumstances that were instrumental in the founding and growth of the Chinese community and district in Mexicali and offers a theoretical context in which to evaluate them. To convey the sense of the historical significance of Chinatown as both a place and a phenomenon, I reconstruct La Chinesca as it existed in 1925. Finally, the study examines the recent past and the contemporary situation to assess the dynamics of change and continuity in the enclave.

BACKGROUND

Only in the context of a particular set of intersecting local and external factors that operated largely between the first and third decades of the twentieth century is it possible to understand the Chinese settlement in Mexicali and environs; arguably it could not have occurred at any other time. Among the most immediate of the endogenic or locally derived forces was the need for a cheap supply of labor to participate in the establishment of irrigated, commercial agriculture in the undeveloped and vastly underpopulated Mexicali Valley. The impetus occurred with formation of the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC), a syndicate controlled by southern California tycoons Harrison Gray Otis and his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, publishers of the Los Angeles Times. Already involved in development of the neighboring Imperial Valley, the CRLC
acquired the sprawling Andrade tract in 1902 (Chamberlin 1951, 44–45). It encompassed some 832,000 acres, more than 80 percent of the Mexicali Valley, and extended from the seared slopes of the Sierra de los Cucapás on the west to the Colorado River on the east. Though on the northern edge of the harsh Sonora Desert, where summer temperatures can soar as high as 48° C and annual rainfall averages a scant 12 centimeters, the thick, nutrient-rich alluvium of the Mexicali Valley required only irrigation to become agriculturally productive. By 1908 Colorado River water was flowing through a new and rapidly expanding network of irrigation canals, built by a potent combination of political maneuvering and the infusion of American capital. Less than ten years later, the amount of land under irrigation had risen from 7,000 acres to 118,500 acres, planted mainly in cotton (Hundley 1975, 35).

Along with land, water, and capital, labor and market demands were needed for development. They were exogenic or contextual factors originating outside the immediate locale. At the grandest scale, the effect of World War I was crucial. The dramatic rise in demand for American agricultural exports prompted a corresponding expansion in production. Yet, because of the war effort, unemployment plummeted, while European immigration dwindled to a near halt. The consequent labor void, especially for low-wage, unskilled farm workers, coupled with the prospect of higher wages in the United States, galvanized immigration from Mexico. In the Mexicali Valley, where land had to be cleared and prepared for initial cultivation, levees constructed, and irrigation canals dug, workers were in short supply. Thus, in the absence of an adequate domestic labor force, the CRLC, among others in the valley, eventually turned to immigrant Japanese, East Indian, and, especially, Chinese workers.

The Chinese in Mexicali

Political factors, at both the national and regional levels in Mexico, facilitated and encouraged Chinese settlement in northern Baja California. Immigration from China was institutionalized in 1893 by the bilateral Treaty of Amity and Commerce, which accorded “most favored nation” status and gave Chinese in Mexico the same legal rights as Mexican nationals. A few Chinese immigrants had arrived somewhat earlier and had established small colonies in the northern Mexican ports of Guaymas and Ensenada, but by 1895 fewer than one thousand Chinese resided in Mexico (Hu-DeHart 1984, 193). By 1930 their number had mushroomed to nearly 18,000. For Baja California Norte, the census reported 188 Chinese in 1900 and 2,982 in 1930; of the latter figure only 63 were women. By 1940 the official number had plummeted to 618. Although these census data fail to account for the many illegal Chinese immigrants and seasonal workers and must be considered extremely conservative, they nonethe-
less illustrate the constricted time frame in which the Chinese settlement began and was effectively terminated.

The Chinese began migrating to the Mexicali Valley as early as 1902, but not until late 1910 did a contingent in excess of fifty arrive. The peak was reached in 1919, when an estimated 5,000 to 11,000 Chinese resided either permanently or temporarily in and around Mexicali. A principal contributing factor to that growth came in 1915, when Colonel Esteban Cantú became governor of the territory. During his administration concessions were granted to individuals and companies, prominently including the CRLC, to import Chinese laborers as a means of mitigating the labor shortage and fostering regional development (Chamberlin 1951, 46–47). Cantú, who one scholar suggested had "a genius for confusing state funds with his private property," profited handsomely from his involvement by collecting a personal commission of $35 to $40 per head (Cumberland 1960, 198). In total, several thousand Chinese were allowed to enter the territory during the Cantú regime, more than 2,000 in 1919 alone.

The Chinese came to the Mexicali Valley from three source areas: California; elsewhere in Mexico, especially Sonora and Sinaloa; and directly from China. To appreciate the spatial and social dynamics of that migration stream, still other exogenic political factors must be taken into account, as must the nature of land tenure in the Mexicali Valley. The CRLC and other large landowners did not attempt to clear and farm the land themselves. Instead, the common strategy was to lease parcels of up to one thousand acres to individuals, who assumed complete financial and managerial responsibility for land clearance and agricultural production, including the provision of labor. In many if not most cases, the lessees were Chinese. Prominent among them were wealthy Chinese from California, specifically San Francisco and Los Angeles, who had not only the necessary assets but also the acumen to arrange for the importation of contract "coolie" labor from China. In addition, other Chinese businessmen leased land and imported field workers by borrowing venture capital from associates, especially from American cotton-ginning companies. A third approach evolved in which poor Chinese, including contract laborers, eventually formed cooperatives. They pooled their resources, borrowed money, subleased parcels that they then worked themselves, and shared profits. By the peak harvest season of 1919, an estimated fifty Chinese ranchos occupied nearly 75,000 acres and accounted for about 80 percent of the cotton crop in the valley (Auyón Gerardo 1991, 50).

A political factor that unquestionably influenced the greater regional ethnic pattern was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese from legally entering the United States either directly or from a third country. Arguably, the Chinese might not have been attracted to the Mexicali Valley in the first place or settled in it permanently thereafter, if
this restrictive legislation had not been enacted. In addition to precluding legal immigration to the United States, the Exclusion Act affected the manner in which the Chinese arrived in the valley. Among those who immigrated directly from China, nearly all came from Canton (Becerra Becerra 1990, 53). San Francisco was the main port of debarkation, but because the act prohibited Chinese from landing in the United States, they had to be bonded through the city and on to Mexicali, mainly by railroad. In other cases they sailed to Mexican ports, including Ensenada, Guaymas, and San Felipe, and from there proceeded overland to Mexicali. Stories abound of Chinese who perished attempting the desert crossing (Aguirre Bernal 1966, 175).

Especially after 1915, an increasing number of Chinese migrated to Mexicali from the Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa. The catalyst for that movement also involved political factors, coupled with economic considerations, both of which stemmed fundamentally from racist attitudes and a growing xenophobia toward Chinese settlement.

REACTION TO THE CHINESE

The collective perception and treatment of the Chinese in northern Mexico, especially after 1910, was not unlike what they experienced in California during the second half of the nineteenth century (Saxton 1971). They were initially welcomed into an underpopulated frontier society that on one hand needed inexpensive manpower to fuel the emerging labor-intensive economy but on the other hand offered them opportunities for financial gain. The overseas Chinese proved to be hardworking, frugal, mutually supportive, and, frequently, proficient as entrepreneurs not only in agriculture but also increasingly in petty commerce and services. However, as their numbers quickly reached a crucial threshold vis-à-vis the local population and as some of them attained monetary success, albeit relatively modest, resentment mounted on both sides of the border. The virulent anti-Chinese campaigns that ensued were galvanized by the shocking massacre of more than 300 Chinese in mid-May 1911 in Torreón, Coahuila (Terán Lira 1989). Beginning in 1916 Sonora, where relatively large numbers of Chinese had been imported to work primarily in agriculture but quickly came to dominate the merchant class, became the principal arena for those pogromlike campaigns (Trueba Lara 1990).

Bowing to intense pressure from the powerful political leadership of Sonora, the Mexican federal government in 1921 canceled further immigration from China; eight years later all foreign manual laborers were denied entry into Mexico. By the early 1930s the anti-Chinese movement had shifted to northern Baja California, but it was not embraced with the fervor that was characteristic in Sonora (Hu-DeHart 1985–86, 21). For all practical purposes, the end of that era in the Mexicali Valley came in 1937,
when President Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated most of the CRLC’s landholdings as part of his agrarian reforms and forced thousands of Chinese off more than thirty ranchos and into Mexicali city or out of the country altogether (Sánchez Díaz 1990, 66). Many were repatriated to China; others went illegally to the United States; some few, in debt and facing deportation, committed suicide (Martínez Zepeda and Romero Navarrete 1991, 59).

A complex fusion of political, social, and economic factors contributed to the deep animosity and outright hostility toward the Chinese (Monteón González and Trueba Lara 1988). From a political perspective, their treatment must be seen against the chaotic and emotion-charged backdrop of the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910. Although anti-Chinese sentiment had been voiced in Mexico prior to the revolution (Izquierdo 1985, 22), it intensified thereafter as surging patriotism and nationalism sparked xenophobia that culminated in multifaceted efforts to “Mexicanize” the country and its economy. Nowhere was this more evident than in northern Mexico, where American investments and influence had escalated to unprecedented levels during the regime of President Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1911. Indeed, one historian has concluded that the persecution of the Chinese was “a peculiarly norteño phenomenon” (Cumberland 1960, 210). Though perhaps only regional in practice, it had national policy implications because of the political clout of the north at the time, especially during the 1920s, when two presidents—Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles—came from Sonora.

Identical to the racist-inspired propaganda disseminated earlier in the United States (Miller 1969), a component in the polemic against the Chinese included vitriolic criticism of reputed personal and social habits, ranging from hygiene practices to recreational activities, including vices such as gambling and the smoking of opium. The Chinese were blamed for spreading diseases, for degenerating the Mexican race, for corrupting morals, for inciting civil unrest, and generally for undermining Mexico’s social and political fabric (Angel Espinoza 1932). Their reluctance or even resistance to assimilate into the mainstream of Mexican society, whether real or only perceived, probably contributed to such fallacious accusations.

Among the reasons for persecution of the Chinese, the scholarly consensus is that economic factors were of utmost importance. North of the border, farmers in the Imperial Valley, already embittered by having to share Colorado River water, complained that low-wage Chinese laborers reduced production costs in the Mexicali Valley, which resulted in comparatively higher prices on the world market for United States-grown crops. In Mexico, labor supply and relative labor competitiveness were central to the economic argument. Whereas the first Chinese arrived in a largely vacant area, by 1920 the valley was experiencing a labor
surplus, exacerbated temporarily by the sudden collapse of cotton prices. The labor-supply reversal came as Mexicans from outside Baja California, many displaced from employment in mines and petroleum fields due to a curtailment in those industries, were attracted by the development in the Mexicali Valley. They were joined by Mexican nationals who had been repatriated from the United States as labor shortages there diminished with the end of World War I. As part of the emerging Mexicanization movement, the sentiment arose that jobs be reserved for Mexican workers; various state and federal laws to that effect were enacted subsequently.

What heightened the rancor of Mexicans toward the Chinese even more than their contributing to an oversupply of labor was the issue of job competition. One scholar has stated categorically that “Mexican inability to compete effectively with the Chinese in local commerce constituted the basic motivation behind the [anti-Chinese] campaign” (Hu-DeHart 1985–86, 24). The entrepreneurial and financial success that the Chinese had enjoyed in establishing small businesses, especially grocery and general-merchandise stores, laundries, sewing and clothing operations, and restaurants, was widely attributed to unfair competition. Chinese merchants were blamed for illegal lending practices, for relying on Chinese supply networks that often originated in the United States, for eliminating wholesaling by overcrowding their retail outlets, which posed safety hazards, for selling tainted food, and for employing only cheap Chinese labor. Not all of those accusations were false: several were traditional Chinese business strategies that may have provided a competitive advantage, but whether they were unfair in the context of a capitalistic economy is problematic. Nonetheless, the general perception of the host society was that the Chinese were depriving Mexican citizens of jobs and economic opportunities in both agriculture and commerce. That perception probably was the source of most resentment against the Chinese and both provoked efforts to restrict their employment and led to calls for their expulsion from Mexico.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Among the many possible theoretical explanations for the relative success the Chinese enjoyed in small-business enterprise, three merit consideration because they not only illuminate crucial economic factors but also provide a conceptual framework within which to analyze important social and cultural aspects of the Chinese experience in Mexicali. All three portray the Chinese as a middleman minority yet offer cultural, structural, or situational critiques of why they came to occupy such a position.

The pariah capitalism thesis, for example, assumes a cultural approach that emphasizes group values and behavioral patterns (Bonacich
1980; Light 1980). This hypothesis contends that although individual traits, such as hard work, motivation, and frugality, are important, the success of outsiders’ business activities is based fundamentally on in-group solidarity and ethnic networks. Instead of operating in an impersonal and “rational” economic format, as does modern capitalism, pariah capitalism is a premodern form of commerce. With respect to the Chinese in Mexicali, evidence in support of this hypothesis includes employment characteristics, financial practices, and patterns of local economic integration. The Chinese established informal and reciprocal work relationships by employing their countrymen, who provided cheap and loyal labor and at the same time benefited by acquiring merchant skills and knowledge in addition to their salaries. As a means of amassing capital and extending credit, the Chinese organized informal lending institutions, or hui, in the ethnic community. Ethnic networks were also relied on to integrate vertically all phases of the Chinese local economy, from producers and importers to distributors to retailers to customers. The existence of thirty Chinese mutual-support societies in Mexicali by the early 1920s undoubtedly aided in the formation and functioning of those ethnic networks (Auyón Gerardo 1991, 90).

A second relevant construct is the status-gap thesis, which takes a structural approach and stresses the importance of the social and occupational structure of the host society instead of the cultural traditions and traits of an immigrant group (Rinder 1959; Loewen 1971). This thesis asserts that immigrant ethnic businesses emerge and prosper because of the gap in status between the group in power and the subordinate populations. In the absence of an indigenous intermediate group, the holders of power bridge the gap by allowing an immigrant workforce to distribute goods and services to the masses. From the turn of the century to the land expropriations of the 1930s, there was little doubt that the CRLC and other American interests controlled the Mexicali Valley. The Mexican population, largely devoid of a middle class, lacked a diversified social and occupational structure. Accordingly, by this interpretation, the Chinese were afforded an opportunity to exploit the status gap between the socioeconomically dominant American group and the local Mexican population.

The sojourning thesis assumes a situational approach. It rests on the hypothesis that sojourners, or temporary residents in a society who plan on returning eventually to their home countries, are themselves responsible for their occupational adjustments (Bonacich 1973). Sojourners tend to concentrate in occupations, such as commerce and trade, that have a high cash turnover and that are easily liquidated or transportable. The participants avoid long-term investment strategies and may defer maintenance and exhibit other forms of thrift to accelerate the accumulation of capital. Socially they are distinguished by a high degree of group
solidarity, and, because assimilation is not a goal, they assiduously maintain their cultural traditions and traits. Accounts from personal correspondence and oral histories suggest that sojourning was clearly the intent of many if not most Chinese in Mexicali (Auyón Gerardo 1971). Although its significance as a motivation and adaptation strategy no doubt declined over time, at least during the formative stages of Chinese settlement it likely was a viable force that helped shape the city's particular social and occupational structure. Like the other two theses, sojourning may also shed light on the spatial and landscape character of Chinese place making in the valley.

**Mexicali in 1925**

Chinatown arose in Mexicali with the establishment of the city as a municipality in 1903. Despite the fact that a majority of the Chinese resided in agricultural camps until the land expropriations of 1937, La Chinesca served from its beginning as the uncontested hub of Chinese settlement in the valley. Although it was the product of a specific time and place, the district functioned as did other Chinatowns in many different settings: it provided residential shelter; it offered a base for economic pursuits; and it served as a social center (*China Geographer* 1976). For most of the Chinese it was a kind of refuge that afforded a measure of social cohesion and cultural coherence, of social and economic support, where ethnic identities could survive in the midst of an alien and at times hostile milieu. Thus, despite the existence of discriminatory attitudes and policies and segregative practices on the part of the host society and despite persistent overcrowding and poverty, La Chinesca should not be conceptualized solely as a victimized and powerless minority colony. A cartographic reconstruction of downtown Mexicali in 1925, when the first detailed fire-insurance maps of the city were drawn by the Sanborn Map Company (1925), reveals the spatial character and landuse pattern in Chinatown at or near its historical peak (Fig. 2). It also provides additional insight into how unusual historical circumstances, in this instance the prohibition era in the United States, affected the border economy and culture.

At the quarter century, Mexicali was a growing city with a relatively modern urban form (Arreola and Curtis 1993, 59–70) and a population that had increased from only 462 in 1910 to approximately 12,000. Because of serious undercounting and seasonal fluctuation, the Chinese component cannot be fixed with any precision, but the number certainly was several thousand.

Spatially the Chinese were concentrated in a swath across the southern margin of the commercial core that began a few short blocks southeast of the main gate. Though an accessible location, La Chinesca was plagued by disamenity features, including most prominently the river and the
railroad-industrial corridor that cut diagonally across the urban fabric. Then, as now, the main commercial strip in Chinatown was the two blocks of Avenida Juárez between Calle Azueta and Calle Morelos. The core of the enclave focused on the block bounded by Avenida Guerrero on the north, Calle Azueta on the west, Calle Altamirano on the east, and Avenida Juárez on the south. The Sanborn maps indicate that this block was "occupied entirely by Chinese." Because it was a bachelor society, virtually all the Chinese lived in barrack-like quarters or on the premises of the commercial establishments they owned or worked in. The Sanborn Company identified several types of Chinese residential units, including seventeen bunkhouses, four compounds, four shacks, and four adobe houses. The number of men these units accommodated cannot be determined, but overcrowding and marginal or even deplorable living conditions in them were commonplace. Such conditions likely contributed to the loss of many Chinese and an estimated three million dollars in property damage that resulted from a fire which razed much of Chinatown in May 1923 (Becerra Becerra 1990, 54; Auyón Gerardo 1991, 56).

In addition to residences, La Chinesca contained a variety of commercial and cultural-institutional properties. In the latter category were two Chinese theaters that regularly presented touring Cantonese opera companies, a Chinese masonic temple, a Chinese Methodist Episcopal church, a hospital, and an insane asylum. Reportedly the asylum was built for
homesick Chinese men bereft of female companionship who "went mad from the sight of a [Chinese] female on [the theater] stage" (Weisman 1986, 166). There also were benevolent societies, some of which maintained permanent structures. Those mutual-support groups were organized by ideology, such as the chapter of Sun Yat-sen's Chinese nationalist party, the Kuo Min Tang; by region of origin; and especially by common surname and clan associations. The most significant of them was the China Association, the Chung Wah Wooey Goon, or Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Society, which from its founding in 1919 had served as the nexus between the Chinese and the Mexican communities. Its two-story building near the corner of Juárez and Altamirano was, and remains, the principal social center in the enclave.

In 1925 Mexicali was prospering. The Palacio Municipal was inaugurated; a new bridge was built; a water-delivery system began operating; a public library and municipal theater were constructed; and a major bank opened (Auyón Gerardo 1991, 57–58). The economies that fueled the prosperity were twofold: cotton production and the "culture of sin" associated with prohibition in the United States (Martínez 1988, 114). In response to the new moral order, during prohibition Americans in large numbers headed "down Mexico way" in search of booze, sex, gambling, and supposedly nefarious sports such as bullfighting, boxing, and cockfighting (Curtis and Areola 1991, 340–341). The Mexican border cities thus boomed sans gêne as convenient foreign playgrounds for a nation gone dry and straitlaced. In Mexicali, the Chinese and La Chinesca were inextricably linked to that economy of vice.

The city housed a bull ring, a boxing arena, a cockfighting shed, a whiskey still, pool halls, casinos, and a variety of cabarets, dance halls, and beer gardens. Although many of the clubs clustered tightly around the main border crossing, Chinatown was the focal point especially of prostitution and gambling establishments, including most notably El Casino Chino. Not visible on Figure 2 are the series of tunnels, some leading to subterranean bars, brothels, and opium dens. The fire of 1923 had exposed these tunnels to reveal that at least one burrowed under the international boundary and surfaced in Calexico, perhaps for the benefit of bootleggers (Weisman 1986, 166). Coupled with political disagreements, control of commercialized vice contributed to the conflicts between Chinese tongs that erupted periodically in the streets of Mexicali beginning in 1921 and accelerated after 1926 (Martínez Zepeda and Romero Navarrete 1991, 7–8). Those skirmishes and general involvement in the vice trade did little to endear the Chinese to the Mexican populace.

In addition to specialized economic activities, Chinese businessmen were involved in grocery and other low-order retail and service operations, especially laundries; the Sanborn Company identified eleven of them. Widely distributed around the city center, those hand-laundry
operations catered to a non-Chinese clientele. Although restaurants became a mainstay of the enclave, at that time they were essentially kitchens that served Chinese customers almost exclusively. Business was generally good in La Chinesca in 1925, but the anti-Chinese campaign was gaining momentum. Health and building codes, for example, were being selectively enforced against Chinese merchants and landlords. Of even greater concern was enactment of a new federal employment standard, the Lerdo de Tejada, which mandated that all employees in commercial establishments be of Mexican origin. The survival of Chinatown appeared less than certain.

**Chinatown Revisited**

Seventy years later, a Chinese community abides in Mexicali. Demographically, its population has stabilized at around 10,000, including persons of both full-blooded and mixed Chinese ancestry. Rates of out-marriage have increased substantially in recent years as anti-Chinese sentiment has subsided greatly, if not dissipated entirely. Culturally, in the face of accelerating assimilation the community has endeavored to sustain its traditions by founding a Chinese-language school and an institute for the study of Chinese culture. The China Association has in excess of 600 members, remains actively involved in social and civic functions, and sponsors cultural-enrichment programs. Economically, the community collectively has prospered as Chinese businessmen have continued to exhibit considerable entrepreneurial proficiency. A study conducted in 1989 found that in the Mexicali municipio Chinese were registered owners of nearly one thousand residential properties and almost five hundred commercial or service properties (González Félix 1990, 39–40). Areas of greatest economic specialization include ownership of more than sixty restaurants, retail trade establishments, especially grocery stores, currency exchanges, real estate, and commercial land developments, including principal ownership of the $60 million La Cachanilla Mall, one of the largest enclosed shopping centers in Mexico (Hillinger 1990).

La Chinesca has suffered from infrastructure deterioration, physical neglect, and abandonment, however, all consequent to a lack of capital reinvestment due to a shift in the direction of urban growth and development. The district looks run-down, even seedy. The decline began in the 1970s, when governmental functions began to decentralize by moving from the traditional urban core southeastward along Boulevard López Mateos, the main commercial spine that parallels the railroad tracks. Concurrently, there were concerted efforts to clamp down on prostitution and other forms of vice that had long contributed to the economy of the city center. Despite those cleanup efforts and the opening of a new border crossing, the anticipated boom in downtown tourism did not occur.
Following the governmental lead, commercial-retail decentralization, including many Chinese-owned businesses, accelerated in the 1980s and continues to push progressively eastward and southeastward along several new or expanded thoroughfares.

In an attempt to counter the decline of La Chinesca and to bolster tourism in el centro, a "historic Chinatown" district was championed, but the project failed to materialize. In the late 1980s Chinese merchants built an integrated shopping complex that encompassed an entire city block on the eastern edge of the enclave. Located at the busy intersection of Avenida Juárez and Boulevard López Mateos, the center featured Chinese structural and decorative elements, including tall, arched gateways. Despite its attractive exterior facade, the complex did little to revitalize the area, and by the mid-1990s several shops had closed and disrepair was evident.

Although La Chinesca may not be as vibrant as it once was, it remains the pivot of Chinese life in Mexicali, with more than twenty Chinese restaurants and many other Chinese businesses, professional offices, and social organizations. However, like older inner-city ethnic enclaves in the United States, Mexicali’s Chinatown has lost its residential appeal, especially for the middle class; few Chinese now live in the district. Instead, they are dispersed widely throughout the urban area, and where they reside is largely a reflection of their income. In recent years some more affluent Chinese have moved across the border to Calexico but have retained business ties in Mexicali. As well as any measure of social adjustment, this lack of residential concentration suggests that, after nearly a century of residence in the city, the Chinese have finally found accommodation.

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