CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHINESE OF CENTRAL AMERICA: DIVERSE BEGINNINGS, COMMON ACHIEVEMENTS

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Introduction

A walk through Belize City offers an array of Chinese restaurants, and hardware, fabric, and general dry goods stores. In any visit to the shores and islands of Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua, one cannot help noticing its Chinese stores or restaurants. And a major political writer notes that one of the more salient aspects of Costa Rican society is its Chinese population. The Chinese came to Panama to build its railways and dig its canal, and today control the cargo ports at both ends of that canal. Given that Chinese migration to each of these countries was at one time or another prohibited, the Chinese presence there today, in such numbers, is remarkable.

And yet, as Lok Siu has noted, there exists a “paucity and unevenness of scholarship on the Chinese in the region.” She goes on to point out how this state of affairs makes it “difficult to provide any substantive comparative analysis” (Siu 2005: 518). This article will attempt to address this concern by focusing on the Chinese in Central America, an area which itself goes largely unnoticed by scholars except when there is a major upheaval in the region. The period under study — from the beginnings of Chinese presence in the area to the surge in Chinese migration in the early 1980s — saw the establishment of the basic structure of Chinese existence in the region that allowed for the subsequent absorption of the new Chinese with greater ease than might otherwise have been possible. We begin with an examination of the indentured labor experience, which established a Chinese presence in the area from the second half of the 19th century. The discussion will address common themes in this experience such as flight, suicide, illness, and working conditions.

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We will then address the post-indenture Chinese presence, again looking for commonalities and seeking the first steps in the evolution of the Chinese settlement leading to the emergence of the Chinese merchants and the establishment of Chinese associations, and eventual integration of the Chinese into the societies of the region. The primary focus is on Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Belize.

Three groups of Chinese went to Central America. The first of these to be documented was made up of contracted laborers brought in to work on major railway construction, as in Panama and Costa Rica, or agricultural work, as in Costa Rica and Belize. The second phase in Chinese migration to the area was that of the independent laborers and small businessmen. This was easily the most far ranging of the groups, establishing themselves from Panama in the south to Belize and Guatemala in the north. This phase was also the longest lasting, beginning in the last two decades of the 19th century and continuing to the present day. The third phase was that of the wealthy investors, primarily from Taiwan, whose heyday was the decade of the 1990s but whose presence is still being felt (Lau 2007: 9). If there is a fourth, it is the steady increase in immigrants from the PRC since the mid-1980s. However, unlike the Taiwanese investors of the 1990s, the last group is made up of more small business people akin to those who came in the first half of the 20th century.

The Indenture Experience

Origins

The origins of a Chinese presence in Central America before the 1850s remain uncertain. Chinese have been in the Americas since the 16th century and there are indications of Chinese in Honduras after 1650 (Anaya 2002: 54) and in Panama since the 18th century (Siu 2004: 80). However, the first documented Chinese in Central America in modern times came in response to the spread of a plantation-style economy in Belize and Costa Rica and to efforts at railway building in Costa Rica and Panama. In the late 1820s, as the newly independent states of Central America attempted to change what they perceived as backward social and economic conditions, they sought the diversification of agriculture and the introduction of non-Hispanic and non-Amerindian labor, particularly the introduction of yeoman farmers from northern Europe. Indeed Central America imported English, Irish, German, Bel-