

Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians. Tatiana Seijas. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 300 pages. ISBN 9781107063129.

Although at first glance *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico* may appear to fit in Latin American Studies—it was, after all, published in the Cambridge Latin American Studies series—its subject matter also places it firmly in Asian Studies, Asian American Studies, or Global Asian Studies. Tatiana Seijas—now an Associate Professor of History at Rutgers University—explores the fascinating trajectory of the slaves of Asian descent in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, particularly how they navigated Spanish ethno-legal categories to transform their ethnic identity to achieve freedom. In many ways, it may act as a companion piece or prequel to Rick Baldoz’s *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946*. Both deal with the movement of Asian peoples across the Pacific—with Filipinos as the main component—within the frameworks of empire and racialized categories of labor. Also, in both volumes, race and the imperial state’s ways of seeing play major roles. Nevertheless, while the (Anglo) American imperial state emphasized the exclusion of Asian immigrants, the (Hispanic) American Viceroyalty studied by Seijas favored the mass inclusion of Asians into the classification of native *indios*, which eventually led to the almost complete disappearance of their communal identity.

As pointed out by Seijas, from the 16th century onwards, the Spanish and Portuguese began exporting enslaved people from Asia to the Americas—particularly Mexico—where labor was highly demanded as a result of the demographic collapse that took place because of the conquest. This network straddled the Indian and Pacific Oceans, especially during the years of the Iberian Union, when Portuguese traders shipped enslaved people to Manila from East Africa, India, and East and Southeast Asia in exchange for Spanish silver. The Spanish themselves bought enslaved

individuals from the already slave-owning colonized local élites, or captured them during warfare or slave raids from the unconquered Muslim sultanates of the southern reaches of the archipelago. Despite the comparatively small size of the Pacific slave trade in comparison with that of the Atlantic—Seijas proposes a conservative estimate of at least 8,100 individuals traded between 1565 and 1700 (84)—the ways crown and church officials handled these individuals and their efforts to seek freedom illustrate the important mechanisms exercised by the Spanish empire, as well as how slavery became increasingly racialized exclusively towards those of African origin.

The most fascinating aspect of Seijas' book is her discussion of the categories used by the Spaniards for Asians, and how they eventually manipulated them to attain freedom. Filipinos were the key element in this transformation. Technically, as free vassals of the Spanish Crown, Filipino natives should have been classified as *indios*—much like the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico or Peru—who enjoyed protection from slavery. However, all Asians—including Muslims enslaved by the Spanish in Mindanao, or by the Portuguese in other parts of Asia—were categorized as *chinos*. These people, considered as “foreigners,” could be legally enslaved, so long as they met certain requirements, mainly having been captured in a conflict considered a “just war” under Catholic jurisprudence. As the decades went by, the category of *chino* became increasingly entwined with that of the *indio*, and debates ensued regarding the desirability of enslaving *indio* rebels or those who remained unconquered. As the pendulum swung against the legal enslavement of *indios*, Filipinos classified as *chinos*—and hence, exposed to enslavement—increasingly insisted that they, too, were *indios*, given their origins in the Spanish Philippines. Church and crown officials gradually agreed, and in 1672, the category *indios* included all *chinos*, thus granting them protection from enslavement. The same goes not only to those originally hailing from Spanish Philippines, but also those from outside the Spanish empire, such as Goa, Cochin, Malabar, Bengal, Malacca, Java, Makassar, Ternate, Timor, Macao, and Japan. This, in turn, led to the hardening of the borders around the

enslavement of those of African origin. Unlike *chinos*, they were never granted the same benefits that the *indio* enjoyed, even if they attained freedom (via manumission, self-purchase, lawsuits, etc.) and paid tribute. *Indios*, because of their lighter skin color and Spanish perceptions of their weaker frames compared to Africans, led them to be employed in urban or domestic occupations that made manumission, self-purchase, or resort to the courts more readily available.

Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico won the Berkshire Conference Book Prize in 2014. For Asianists, it fills the research gap on Asian and Filipino presence in the New World during the colonial period by going far deeper into the colonial archives than Floro Mercene's more journalistic *Manila Men in the New World*. Far from being inscrutable to non-Latin Americanists, Seijas' book provides a thorough explanation of the context necessary to understand the trajectories of enslaved Asians, such as the debates about the enslavement of *indios* (215–221). *Asian Slaves'* comprehensiveness and interesting subject matter makes it a worthy inclusion in classes on Asian-American Studies that seek to go beyond their usual timeframes of the 19th and 20th centuries, the narrow definition of "American," or the classification dealing with the Filipino diaspora at large. It would certainly be worthwhile for university presses in the Philippines to look into publishing a local edition to enable it to reach a wider scholarly audience in Asia.

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