

HUGO WONG

America's Lost Chinese

*The Rise and Fall of a
Migrant Family Dream*

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Guadalajara, Mexico. Photo by Arturo J. Gonzalez.

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FOREWORD

I grew up in Paris and Mexico City, between a French father and a Chinese-Mexican mother. Despite my mother's Asian features, she does not speak a word of Chinese, nor has she much knowledge of her native culture and country. For in 1938, when she was barely three years old, she had to flee the International Settlement of Shanghai ahead of the Japanese invaders, seeking refuge in Mexico. The only ties that connected her to China and her past were now buried in an old trunk containing age-yellowed photographs and family documents, many of which dated back to the nineteenth century when her Chinese ancestors left China for the United States and then Mexico. These old family stories had been long forgotten, memory being selective and no one in my family being willing to remember the massacres and humiliations of the past.

Almost a hundred years later, searching for my roots, I immersed myself in the contents of this trunk. From it, came to life the curious history of my family, which began in the Chinese province of Kwangtung (Guangdong) in the mid-nineteenth century and continued on the other side of the Pacific. Despite their distance from China, my migrant ancestors retained strong ties with their clan (that is, their extended family) and country of origin, and remembered their place in the family tree. This book traces the lives of two of these ancestors, Wong Foon Chuck (the older brother of my great-grandfather, Wong Yun Wu) and Leung Hing (my other great-grandfather, latterly known as Jorge Hing Leon). In 1875, at the tender of age of twelve, Foon Chuck fled natural disasters, famines and violence in the province of Kwangtung in the south of China to seek fortune in California. Five years later, aged fourteen, Hing followed him. This book, however, is more than a family memoir. It narrates the turbulent history of the Chinese in North America, using the lives of my two ancestors as a lens to view it

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with. This is history told from a personal and family perspective, made possible thanks to the untouched documents left behind by my ancestors.

In the nineteenth century, Chinese migrants arriving in the Americas experienced a culture shock and a sense of uprooting unique in their history. Foon Chuck and Hing both settled at first in San Francisco, which contained the first US Chinatown, a ghetto where Chinese culture predominated. While studying in a missionary school, Foon Chuck witnessed the anti-Chinese riot of 1877, before seeking fortune in the Wild West. Both of these early migrants were ultimately driven out of the United States by violence and by anti-Chinese exclusionary laws, some of which remained in place until 1968. In the 1880s, they began their careers as, successively, butlers, waiters, cooks, laundrymen, railway workers and street vendors, before being among the first Chinese to seek refuge and settle in Mexico. Both built large fortunes but they followed distinct paths. Foon Chuck stayed in the north of Mexico—the “Mexican Wild West”—where he built a commercial empire with the help of his multiple political and transnational connections, and became a world-famous community leader, among the first Chinese millionaires in the Americas. Hing, on the other hand, made Mexico City his home and became a dealer of Chinese art, introducing the art of China to Mexico’s bourgeoisie for the first time.

The story of these two migrants is quite unique. They were involved in one of the only attempts in North American history to establish an organized Chinese colony, with huge farms, an international bank, the largest sugar refinery in the country, a school for the children of Chinese migrants, a publicly listed company, a chain of hotels, a retail network, a newspaper, and even a tramway company. Most of these enterprises served the local Mexican population as well as Chinese immigrants. Never had a group of Chinese managed to yield such economic influence over a Western territory; it would take more than a hundred years for such a phenomenon to reoccur. All this was only possible because Mexico and its government encouraged Chinese investment and migration. The colony was built under the aegis of Kang Youwei, a Chinese reformer, politician and philosopher, as part of his political movement. An advisor to the Guangxu Emperor, he was condemned to exile by Empress Dowager

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Cixi for his attempt to introduce reforms in China. Fearing that China would disintegrate along with the decaying Qing Dynasty and turn into a colony run by Western nations, Kang sought to unify the Chinese diaspora, leading a transnational political movement as well as becoming Foon Chuck's business partner.

Kang's Chinese colony did not survive long, sacrificed to the Mexican Revolution, which lasted for ten violent years (1910–20), killing nearly one in ten Mexicans. Over a thirty-year period, the Chinese diaspora in Mexico suffered violence unmatched in its history in the Americas, causing its almost complete extinction. The brutality began with the Torreón Massacre of 1911, one of the deadliest anti-Chinese pogroms in the Americas. During the ensuing decade further massacres followed throughout the country. In 1923 the Chinese became subject to harsh racial laws, worse than those suffered in the United States, illustrating the spread of fascist ideas in the Americas. Finally, the Chinese suffered from mass confiscations and expulsion from Mexico. These events, through which my family lost most of its fortune, are now unimaginable in a country like Mexico, and are largely forgotten.

In 1929, by their marriage, my grandparents united the two families of Foon Chuck and Hing, and took the road of exile again, but in the opposite direction from their parents. Fleeing the violence and exclusionary laws in the New World, they took refuge in Shanghai. This gave them a new culture shock, as the city was a symbol of modernity and of the future in China, a country that until then had mostly looked towards its past. After living for twenty-five years in a state of ignorance about China, and ashamed of her Chinese origins, my grandmother, one of the first women of mixed Asian and European descent in the Americas, finally found her place and could flourish in this "Paris of the East." This was the ultimate migrant city, a place of cultural fusion, where my grandparents for a few short years enjoyed a joyful existence. Ironically, they were victims of racism even there, finding themselves foreigners in their own country, illustrating the absurdity of an era that was about to be thrown into the flames of nationalism and war on all continents, forcing my family, once again, to go into exile, this time completely destitute.

This book spans a century, from 1860 to 1960, a period marked by unprecedented political and social convulsions in China, the

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United States and Mexico, including revolutions, civil wars, global pandemics and natural disasters. People's lives were transformed by the advent of the steam engine, making possible mass migrations over every world ocean and habitable continent. This new world geography, in which time and distance had shrunk, was a source of unprecedented exchanges between cultures, but also corresponded with the rise of nationalism, militarism and imperialism in every corner of the globe. Like many of today's migrants, Hing and Foon Chuck can be seen as straddling a fence, considered outsiders (or worse) by both their birth country and their adopted country, their allegiance always questioned by both, and their lives in the West affected by events in the Far East. For that reason, despite their many accomplishments, having lived in the margins of and between three nations, their histories had fallen into oblivion.

The main theme of this book is how migrants responded and adapted to their environment and the resulting exchanges between two different worlds, Chinese and North American. Confronted with an alien and at times hostile culture, early Chinese migrants asked themselves for the first time what it meant to be Chinese, trying to understand in what ways they were different from the populations found in the United States and Mexico. In our interconnected modern world, this theme remains relevant, forming an invisible thread throughout the narration. This discovery of new cultures was mutual, as it was also the first time that North Americans saw Chinese people. As an emerging power, China is widely discussed in the West today, but mostly at an economic and political level, much less from a human and cultural perspective. This historical testimony, of a time when returning to China was less possible for Chinese emigrants, is essentially a human narrative. It should help understand and put into perspective this early model of Chinese emigration based on family and diaspora, while highlighting cultural traits still shaping Chinese society today.

The history of Chinese–Western relations has been marred by political misunderstanding, distrust and ignorance for hundreds of years: yet there is a parallel history of a minority of individuals in both China and the West (whose lives are discussed in this book), who have gone against the current by seeking to understand each other, and proving the shared humanity between those two peoples.

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The historian John K. Fairbank (1907–1991), credited for building the field of Chinese studies in the United States, blamed himself and his colleagues for “one of the greatest failures in history,” when they failed to anticipate and understand the 1949 Communist victory in China, setting the stage for the complete isolation of China from the West in the following three decades. He wrote: “We had no knowledge [...] and no way to gain any knowledge, of the life of ordinary Chinese people [...]. Our reporting was very superficial. We could not educate or illuminate or inform the American leadership in such a way that we could modify the outcome.”¹ If Western expatriates in China—who mostly lived in ports governed by international treaties, like Shanghai—were ignorant of the realities of such a vast country, the same could be said of Chinese emigrants living in the West, where anti-Chinese immigration policies since 1880, while allowing a few students in, had made it extremely difficult for Chinese immigrants to settle and prosper, my two ancestors being notable exceptions. This inhibited the development of much pluralistic dialogue with China, paving the way for future conflicts. One purpose of this book, written at a time of heightened geopolitical tension between China and the West, is thus to provide an example of such cross-cultural dialogue in the past and to promote dialogue in the future.

The book includes a selection of vintage photographs from family albums, some from the nineteenth century. They are a living representation of the stories told and go hand-in-hand with them. The cover photograph, particularly quirky and distinctive in its embrace of cultural diversity, was taken in Mexico in 1909, and shows Hing in a Western suit, his Mexican wife in a Chinese robe and their children (some in dark uniforms, some in fluffy white gowns) with a church decor in the background, making it impossible to guess this strange family’s whereabouts. My grandmother is the three-year-old girl with a ribbon looking intently at the camera in the lower-left corner. The photograph shows a joyful and confident migrant family, unaware that only a year later a violent revolution will shatter their world and bring into question their very existence in Mexico.

Many readers may recognize themselves or their loved ones in these journeys through previous centuries and across cultures and continents. While writing this book at home, I certainly felt trans-

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ported to other places and times. I sincerely hope that readers have the same feeling and that this book gives them a desire for distant travels. Beyond my large diasporic family, it is dedicated to all readers who, whether themselves or through their ancestors, have experienced uprooting. It is written with a sense of purpose and duty towards the memory of all the characters whose lives are mentioned. Although not a historian by profession, in my family life and my professional career I have experienced and researched Chinese and Mexican societies for over twenty years. The portraits of Foon Chuck and Hing are based principally on family documents, interviews, and the memories of relatives, as well as on the work of other historians and sinologists. I have used a degree of artistic licence in imagining their states of mind and some of the details of their early lives, while always staying true to the sources and the work of historians and contemporary social commentators. For historical accuracy, for some common Chinese names and places, instead of Mandarin, I have used the Cantonese or English transliteration in use at the start of the twentieth century. I have strived to present a balanced and lively account, putting in perspective the social and political environment which may, to some extent, explain the events described. I take full responsibility for all the opinions that are expressed in this book and apologize for any possible mistakes or omissions.

PREFACE

Almost 150 years ago, my ancestors Wong Foon Chuck and Leung Hing departed from Guangdong province to seek fortune in the Americas. Their whole lives, they kept their homeland close to their heart, never forgetting their origins and longing to return one day. When they passed away, their decision to be buried away from their ancestors was a difficult one. Yet they knew America was their new home and the place their descendants would cherish their memories. Today, the publication of their memoir by Hong Kong University Press feels like a homecoming. Hong Kong is not only the place their journey started at the end of the nineteenth century, but also where they always hoped a trans-pacific liner would one day bring them back.

My ancestors would feel proud by how wealthy their home province has become, a tribute to the sacrifice of many migrants. Yet, while Foon Chuck would feel reassured that the same rice paddies and river still surround his village near Kaiping, Hing would be puzzled by the manufacturing plant now standing on his ancestors' land in the hills near Jiangmen. They would both find hard to understand how, despite that new wealth, an increasing number of Chinese migrants are still making today the same perilous journey through Mexico to seek fortune in the United States, exactly like they had witnessed a century earlier. With sadness, they would recognize how border guards are still keeping those unwanted aliens away, what had once happened to them. They would also find familiar the recurring Western criticism against their people and their so-called cheap labour, which they continue to compare to slavery, exactly like in the past century.

What would surprise them most is the new world order, the realization that, after a century of humiliation, China has risen amongst world nations. That humiliation is what my two ancestors

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had to contend with so many times during their migrant lives. Having built the first Chinese infrastructure in Mexico more than a century ago, they would recognize themselves and their legacy in those glittering new factories or roads that China is now building across Latin America, part of what is now coined as the Global South. They would also feel proud that the diaspora's memory is still cherished today, as seen in the period architecture around Kaiping or the new and imposing Museum of Overseas Chinese in Jiangmen. Yet, they would worry that so many old rural clans have now all disappeared, reflecting on what that means for China's heritage.

With their tradition of ancestors' worship, the Chinese share with other nations an acute sense of history and destiny. The story of my two overseas ancestors and their deeds in America constitutes a modest contribution to the legacy of the diaspora, which continues to build bridges between East and West, bringing exchange, peace and understanding between nations.

INTRODUCTION

China is a country with a centuries-long history of migrations, not only across its external borders but also between its many provinces, continuing to this day. In 2019 there were approximately eleven million people born in China but living abroad, including 2.7 million in the United States;¹ there were fifty million people with Chinese ancestry outside China,² the so-called Chinese diaspora, two-thirds of which live in other Asian countries; and there were a staggering 290 million internal migrant workers within China itself.³ This means that almost one in four people in China is an internal migrant, while about one in every 130 people outside China is of Chinese descent. The distinctive role of migration in China continues to be an important source of dynamism for its society, and the study of migrations and migrants is therefore an interesting angle from which to try to understand and analyze the Chinese world.

This, however, does not mean that emigration is hoped for or well regarded within Chinese society, by either migrants themselves or the authorities. Many Chinese people remain deeply attached both to their customs and, through their spiritual beliefs, to the land of their ancestors, meaning that emigrating is often a traumatic experience, only justified by economic or political considerations. Historically, Chinese emperors preferred farmers, as they remained on their land and paid stable taxes, to merchants associated with human movement and representing a less reliable tax base. In addition, migration signified poverty and instability, with people tending to emigrate only when they were hungry. It was therefore seen as a possible sign of future rebellions against the emperor. Finally, Confucius wrote that while their parents are alive, children should not travel too far.⁴ It is not surprising that one of China's most famous poems, "Thoughts on a Quiet Night" by Li Bai (701–762 CE), known by heart by many Chinese, is about yearning for one's home:

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Before my bed the moonlight is bright.	床前明月光
I imagine frost on the ground.	疑是地上霜
Looking up, I gaze at the moon.	举头望明月
Bowing my head, I think of my hometown.	低头思故乡

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, large population movements occurred within China, including migrations to most of its peripheral regions in the north, the southwest and the south, such as the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien. Meanwhile, from those southern regions surrounded by mountains, emigrants tended to take the direction of the sea, mostly towards Southeast Asia and, later, as the use of steamships became widespread, towards the Americas. The largest wave of emigration from China thus began in the mid-nineteenth century, driven by a phenomenal population explosion. Between 1650 and 1851, China's population more than tripled from about 130 million to 410 million, while the population of the rest of the world only doubled. The result of a long period of peace, improved hygiene and health care, and a buoyant economy, this population explosion was not accompanied by a parallel increase in productivity or agricultural resources, as the corrupt Qing Dynasty failed to implement any reforms. The large Qing bureaucracy had not grown in line with the population either, so there were not enough civil servants to provide the most basic services, such as water management or road maintenance. Civil servants found themselves being constantly solicited by the growing population, resulting in endemic corruption, made worse by the low official salaries they received and the sale of government jobs. While the population tripled during this 200-year period, the area occupied by cultivated land only doubled, creating a problem of land scarcity. Worse, as agricultural techniques became more efficient, there was a scarcity of jobs, causing a decline in wages.

Poverty was exacerbated in China's south because there more than ninety per cent of peasants were either tenants or employed laborers, whereas in the north most farmers owned their land.⁵ Only three to five per cent of the population in Kwangtung owned fifty to sixty per cent of the land.⁶ For tenants, the shortage of arable land led to an increase in rents. In the overcrowded province of Kwangtung, where the population almost doubled from sixteen to twenty-eight million between 1787 and 1850,⁷ the soil could barely

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yield enough crops to feed a third of its people.⁸ Burdened by taxes and rents, many tenant farmers became heavily indebted, having no choice but to pawn or sell all their belongings—and even their children (their young daughters first), either for adoption, slavery or prostitution. During the late Qing dynasty, that practice became so widespread that various towns periodically held an open market for the purpose, child trafficking only being banned by law in 1935 but still practiced until the Communist Revolution of 1949.⁹ Peasants unable to settle their debts could be arrested, beaten and jailed by local officials, and they often died in jail before their case came up for judgment. The drafting of *corvée* laborers for large public projects, a common form of taxation in Chinese history, created further resentment from the overburdened populace.¹⁰ A popular folk song of the period tells of two swords weighing on a peasant's shoulders, high rents and high interest rates, and the three roads open to him: escape, prison or suicide.¹¹

Such miserable conditions were often a source of rebellions, violently repressed by inept and corrupt officials. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) caused more than twenty million deaths, while the Red Turban Rebellion of 1854–56 caused one million deaths in the province of Kwangtung alone. The impact of seasonal floods and droughts was exacerbated by this incessant fighting, with local populations unable to maintain their infrastructure of dams and canals. A US missionary observed that public property was seldom taken care of by the local population and was often robbed for private use, a common joke being that “no one in China is so imposed on and cheated as the emperor.”¹² To cope with overpopulation, land scarcity and unemployment, many families turned to exporting their male offspring to other parts of China or overseas, while maintaining their village base. For a salary, these migrants could hawk goods on poles, run small shops, manufacture handicrafts, or work on large government infrastructure projects.

Since the fifteenth century, Chinese emperors had kept the doors of the empire completely closed, both for potential emigrants and for foreigners trying to get into the country, whose influence was believed harmful. However, following the First Opium War (1839–42) the so-called unequal treaties imposed on China led to the opening of ports controlled by foreign nations, such as Canton (Guangzhou

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in Mandarin), Shanghai and Hong Kong. Those treaties exacerbated unemployment in Kwangtung province, with cloth merchants driven out of business by cheaper Western imports and 100,000 boatmen and port employees losing their job after the opening of treaty ports further north.¹³ On the other hand, while these new ports provided Westerners access to the Chinese market, including for their opium, they also gave would-be Chinese emigrants the ships they needed to seek their fortune abroad.

As a result, between 1848 and 1888 more than two million Chinese emigrated to Southeast Asia, the Americas and Australia.¹⁴ By the turn of the century, more than five million had already left, and by the 1920s the number of overseas Chinese stood at eight million.¹⁵ Nearly one in fifty Chinese had emigrated, and close to one in ten in the province of Kwangtung. A common Chinese saying, which still rings true, states that “everywhere there is sea, you will find Chinese people.” Of those early Chinese emigrants, more than ninety-five per cent settled in Asia, mainly in Formosa (Taiwan), Java (Indonesia) and Siam (Thailand),¹⁶ only a small minority having sought their fortunes further afield, including 155,000 in South America and, later, 87,000 in North America.¹⁷ If there was mass migration, it was mostly contained within Asia, as most Western countries started to constrain Chinese immigration and migrants naturally preferred closer and less costly destinations, where ethnic assimilation would prove easier. My ancestors, by choosing to emigrate to North America and not Asia, are therefore an exception, being among the very last who managed to enter the United States before it shut its doors. Undertaking such a long and perilous journey required audacity: one had to be either rich and with independent means or simply more desperate than most to make money.

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Hing's work takes him all over Mexico. He stays in each city for periods of a few days to a few weeks depending on their size, often renting a room in the house of a local family. He enjoys talking with his hosts and enquiring about their city, while they, in turn, question him about China. In 1898, Hing arrives in Acaponeta, a small town in the state of Nayarit, near the Pacific coast. While he is selling his products there, he lives in the modest home of an old man in the town. In this house he meets a young girl with fair skin, long black hair and intelligent eyes, working diligently in the kitchen. Perceiving his curiosity, his host explains to Hing that the girl, Cruz Rivera Nava, is sixteen years old and a distant niece, who has recently moved into his home. She is an orphan, having lost her mother two years earlier and never having been acquainted with her father. Hing is immediately attracted to this shy young woman.

He has sought a Mexican spouse for years, but whenever he has felt attracted to someone, he has been rejected. Most of the fathers he speaks to simply refuse to see their daughter marry a Chinese man. Hing tactfully mentions to them the betrothal money he is willing to offer—the “Engagement Gold,”¹ as it is called in China, where it is still customary today—but he is then rebuffed with even greater contempt. Hing realizes that being a successful businessman and now a naturalized Mexican is simply not enough to be accepted in his new country. He has considered bringing a wife from China but does not believe any woman will like trading her land there for a lonesome existence in a foreign country, especially since he is constantly traveling for his business. He also wants to fully integrate into Mexico, and feels that marrying a local woman is the best way

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to achieve this. Besides, he hopes that a Mexican wife will help his business, assuring his clients that he has truly become one of them and is worthy of their trust.

Cruz has never seen a Chinese person before. A few years earlier, the nuns in her Sunday school had explained that the Chinese were yellow-skinned people living far away, ignorant of Jesus, wearing silk robes and pointy hats, but her knowledge of China stops there. Like most young women in Mexico, she only knows how to decipher a few dozen words, the literacy rate in Mexico being only twenty-five per cent at the time, and even lower in the countryside and among women. The price of a newspaper, the main reading material of the laboring class, is higher than the average daily worker's salary,² and Cruz has no interest in these, preferring to chat with her relatives after her housework is finished. She is surprised to see that Hing is so well dressed and groomed, unlike some of the men in her town, who have made indecent proposals to her. When he smiles at her, he looks reassuring and respectful. While he asks her about her life, his Spanish, although strange to the ear, is not unpleasant. Yet part of her feels scared: he remains mysterious to her, and she thinks about what strange places he must come from. Besides, he does not seem to know anything about Jesus.

Realizing that his host is poor and cannot afford to take care of Cruz, Hing explains to him that he is a prosperous and recently naturalized Mexican with serious intentions. In addition, he is ready to give him a generous engagement gift if he allows Cruz to marry him. Cruz's uncle is impressed when he sees Hing's naturalization document, but carefully considers his niece's options, pondering what she can aspire to become. He knows Cruz is a serious and charitable person, but he also knows that without the protection of a father, a surname and a dowry, she is unlikely to find a good husband among any of the respectable families in the region. He can only imagine Cruz entering a convent or perhaps becoming a servant in one of the haciendas, and he fears what might happen to her there. He thinks for a whole day about the right course of action, praying to God for guidance, and keeping in mind the money promised. In the end, Cruz's uncle reluctantly agrees to let Hing marry his niece.

Cruz is stunned when her uncle explains to her that she will leave his house the next day to marry Hing. She feels ashamed to be forced

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into this relationship with a foreigner, but she knows that she can say nothing and that she has nowhere else to go. She also fears that no priest will ever agree to marry them, so that she will be subjected to the double infamy of an illegitimate relationship with a Chinese. She cries as she thinks about the great injustices to which she is again victim: first the absence of a father, then her mother's death, and now this pagan Chinese man. When Hing explains to her that he sells Chinese handicrafts for a living, Cruz is surprised that people are interested in such things, which she finds strange and useless.

There is no wedding ceremony; she simply packs a small bag with personal belongings, embraces her uncle and relatives one last time, makes the sign of the cross before the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and leaves Acaponeta, never to return. From a Chinese perspective, they are now married, Hing having gained the agreement of Cruz's uncle. He sees the marriage as a business transaction, as is customary in China, where spouses, especially second wives or those from poor backgrounds, are bought from a family through a civil contract, without any religious ceremony, marriage certificate or entry in a public register. From the perspective of Mexican law and the Church, however, they remain unmarried. Hing has not felt so happy and light in a long time; he reflects that this marriage is the best deal he has ever made. Years later, one of my aunts remembered, he would even advise his own sons to marry orphaned women, as he had done, so that they would not have to feed additional mouths. He has already led a lonely itinerant life for two decades, feeling the pressure and responsibility to continue the Leung family lineage, knowing that the greatest impiety for an eldest son is to be without sons himself. Over the following months, Hing tries everything to please his new wife, buying her new clothes and speaking with excitement about his plans for his growing business. Although the marriage lacked a romantic beginning, he is nonetheless in love with Cruz and knows how important it is that she now falls in love with him in return.

* * *

From Acaponeta, Hing and Cruz traveled one hundred miles north, settling in the port of Mazatlán, in the state of Sinaloa. This had been

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Hing's point of entry into Mexico a few years earlier, and it would now be their first home. Mazatlán was a prosperous city of about 10,000 people on the Pacific coast. During those years, the city experienced strong economic growth, gaining various buildings in the style of La Belle Époque, including a grand theater. Being an international port, it had a small foreign community which, based on the city archives of 1895, numbered 170 people, of which fourteen were Chinese, mostly farmers. The choice of a city with regular ships bound for San Francisco and China as a place to start his family was no coincidence, reflecting Hing's desire to keep a connection with his native country and to source Chinese goods for his business more easily.

There is no wedding photo of Hing and Cruz: they remained officially unmarried most of their lives, which did not bother Hing but remained a burden on Cruz's Catholic conscience. At that time, marriages and births were more a matter for the Church than the state, often only being recorded at the registrar's office many years after they occurred. According to an aunt, Hing and Cruz, probably ashamed of their situation, sometimes sent their maid to register their newborns at the civil registry. Hing did not understand the religion of the Mexicans: how people could invoke God's name to look down on them, or how the Church could have so much power. He saw no harm in his union with Cruz, but did not mind her going to church alone (and later with their children) if that made her happy. Hing came from a land where people's daily lives were shaped by many different rituals, religions and traditions. The Chinese were known to be Taoist while tending their garden, Confucian in front of their sovereign, and Buddhist on their death bed; and Chinese students had a god of literature, soldiers a god of war, and merchants a god of wealth. The fertile Chinese imagination filled every lake and river with spirits, every street and house with ghosts, and every wood and mountain with deities.³ Confucianism is a moral and practical philosophy rather than a spiritual belief system: although the spirit of Confucius was revered in temples and schools across China, he was not seen as a deity in the Western sense, and his teachings were not in conflict with the other Chinese religious beliefs. Unlike the West, which has experienced so many religious wars, syncretism has been the basis of Chinese society and

CONCLUSION

Writing this book has been a journey of discovery into my family's history and that of the Chinese, Americans, and Mexicans. I will always remember how I felt when I first heard about Foon Chuck, his Chinese school, his farm, and his association with Kang Youwei. Those stories had long been forgotten in my family, leading me on a long journey of research to bring them back to life. The many historical connections between facts, like lost puzzle pieces, have formed little by little a coherent image. While Foon Chuck and Hing spent their lives preserving or building roots in three countries, I fear they would have disliked a book where the history of these nations is judged. They would have probably reminded me of the famous Chinese saying: "family disgrace should never be aired in public."¹ Yet the history of China, the US and Mexico during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is still rich in teachings for today, as a lot has changed since then—and not so much.

Like most educated Chinese of his generation, Foon Chuck was guided all his life by his Confucian education, to which he later added a solid Christian foundation. By contrast, the Chinese born after the Communist Revolution and until the reform era of the 1990s, which was mostly concerned with economic growth and modernization, grew up in a society which openly rejected Confucius' moral and political legacy, as well as any other spiritual faiths. Before that, the Nationalists blamed Confucius and religion in general for China's lack of development, while the Maoists criticized him as the father of feudalism. Since 2000, Chinese regimes have brought back Confucius' moral teachings, in both education and politics. In parallel, Chinese intellectuals and the educated class have made fashionable again the study of the country's ancient sages. This has happened only after China experienced a period of economic growth, which created a newly affluent class. Less

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concerned about daily subsistence than their forefathers, this class has now time to dwell on China's ancient culture and other contemplative and spiritual pursuits, which I hope reflects the future for Chinese society.

The attempt to establish a Chinese colony in Mexico differed in significant ways from the experiences of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia or more recently in Africa. The lives of my ancestors involved an attachment to two distinct cultures and a desire to get the best of both worlds, as Kang Youwei had dreamt. Returning to or even simply reconnecting with China was more difficult for my ancestors than for Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia or young Chinese emigrants today. Over a fifty-year period, China has modernized and enriched itself in exceptional ways, making travel between East and West much easier. The choices available to Chinese emigrants today therefore differ from those that presented themselves to my ancestors. The latter faced difficulties in their journeys that made their destinations seem more exotic than would be the case now, while old China was a dangerous place, to a degree that is almost unimaginable for contemporary migrants. In the future, as the Chinese population ages and becomes wealthier, there will likely be much less emigration from China. Thus, the experience of this Chinese colony in Mexico is almost impossible to replicate today, given the radical changes in the global political and social context: the magic of history is that it presents unique circumstances and exceptional phenomena. Foon Chuck and Hing suffered and struggled all their lives but at the same time were explorers and cultural pioneers, whose courage, journeys and unique experiences can only be admired.

The reception Foon Chuck and Hing received in the United States directly impacted their future relationship with that country. Foon Chuck was welcomed by Reverend Loomis, and he spoke English and made American friends throughout his life, thus contributing to the expansion of the United States' presence in Mexico. On the other hand, Hing failed to establish any human connection with the United States, and had no interest later in doing business with Americans. Although the generalization may not always apply, this illustrates the long-term economic benefits on a host country of an investment in migrants' education, both practical and spiritual.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that Foon Chuck's exceptional life achievements can be explained in part by his formative years with Reverend Loomis, who set him on a path never trodden before by any Chinese.

Hing and Foon Chuck's stories thus display two types of Chinese migration. Hing's story exemplifies a purely mercantilist model of migration; this was the most widespread kind of Chinese migration. Foon Chuck's experience, involving agriculture, infrastructure and finance, along with a more complex relationship with local populations, exemplifies a rarer kind of migrant story. His path was more ambitious, but also more controversial, especially for Mexico as his host country, since it resembled the Western model of colonization. In his case, through his marriage, friends and projects, Foon Chuck displayed an attachment to his host country rather than a desire to exploit it for the sole benefit of his home country. He reinvested most of his money in Mexico and employed both Chinese and Mexicans (the latter also being his main clients), and had many local associates who helped him throughout his life.

Foon Chuck and Hing also diverged in terms of their approach to integration, although both of them formed mixed families. While Foon Chuck strove to preserve his language and culture for his children, recreating a Chinese world in America, Hing made a different choice by forbidding his children from learning Chinese or traveling to China. These were difficult choices and maybe they both regretted them, Foon Chuck during the revolution, seeing the dangers of not assimilating, and Hing when he got to Shanghai, seeing his daughter flourish by reconnecting with her roots. There is no right or wrong choice or ideal mix between two cultures; it remains a personal decision of second- or third-generation migrants to reconnect or not with their culture of origin. An interest in one's cultural background is not necessarily an obstacle to proper integration into a host culture, but on the contrary can be a source of mutual enrichment. Fortunately, migrants today are freer to choose as they please, whereas the choice was more difficult for migrants and their children in the last century, with circumstances often forcing them in one direction or another.

By today's standards, two aspects of Foon Chuck's life may be considered questionable: his role as a labor supervisor and organizer, especially in mining, and his involvement with politicians to

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