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Chinatowns in Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

There are seven Chinatowns, whose names (in alphabetic orders) are Buenos Aires, Havana; Lima; Mexico City; Panama City; San Jose; Santo Domingo, involved in this essay. They are grouped together for this writing, neither by their geographic closeness, nor by their identical native language. Rather, there are two interesting similarities, according to literature and my personal observations, shared by them. One is that they all are, ironically, known as “Chinatowns *without* Chinese”, and, the other, they all possess gorgeous archways, and “political influence” seemed deeply rooted behind their erections.

Since above points seem to present important angles in the development of Chinatowns in the world, so, in my opinion, they are noteworthy for further explorations by those who are interested in research. The following approaches are my remarks to objectively understand above narratives.

BOUNDARIES

From the onset to present, there have been numerous relocations for most Chinatowns. From my literature search and to the best of my knowledge, the following is the current locations for each Chinatowns included in this essay.

1. Buenos, Aires, Argentina

There are about 5 blocks from the intersection of Arribenos and Mendoza. It is the area of Belgrano, Buenos Aires.

2. Havano, Cuba

It is located at a small strip called Cuchillo Street

3. Lima, Peru

There are several blocks around Jiron Ucayali, to the east of Avenida Abancay. Its heart is called Calle Capon.

4. Mexico City, Mexico

It is situated at Dolores Street, near Palacio de Bellas Artes, south of Alameda Central

5. Panama City, Panama

It is in the neighborhood of San Felipe, beginning in Carlos Mendoza Street, covering Veraguas Street and part of the Alfaro and B Avenue

6. San Jose, Costa Rica

It starts at the 2nd Avenue and 11th Street, and ends at 14th Street

7. Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

It is centered around the stretch of Avenida Duarte, bounded by the streets of Avenida Mexico, Jacinto de la Concha, Avenida Mella and Calle Jose Marti.

WHEREABOUTS OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

As a travel lover, I have visited most, except Havana, of those cities. Needless to say, Chinatowns were usually on top of my agendas for things to do while there. My intent of touring around Chinatowns was multilateral. Along with Chinese cuisine and sightseeing, I intended to use a trip as a ready-made to talk to Chinese descendants from locales to have firsthand impressions about life styles of overseas Chinese.

With this objective in mind, before I embarked those trips, I had done demographic studies to have general idea whether most Chinese groups are residing in Chinatowns and vicinity. My methods sound elementary, and, of course, they are, but they provided me with a solid foundation to start my journeys.

My preliminary researches were not so promising. For instance, in Mexico City, there are over 3000 Chinese families, but none of them lives in the designated Chinatown area. Meanwhile, the photographs show that the hub of that Chinatown is well decorated, and the front façades of restaurants or gift shops are quite tourist oriented. These facts led me, unfortunately, to the presumption that the existence of this Chinatown is more for tourists than as living quarters for Chinese Mexicans. Nevertheless, I had been still optimistic about possible encounters with Chinese workers in the facilities such as restaurants or gift shops, etc., before I found myself in those target areas.

When a restaurant waiter had to resort to their kitchen to get the chef out to talk to me in Chinese; the owner of a gift shop had to show me the amount on her calculator because she could

not “tell” me in Chinese how much I should pay for the item, my hope of speaking Chinese on those environs was dashed ever since.

Tracing my interests among all the themes of Chinatowns in Latin America, verbal communications with Chinese immigrants and archways were supposedly my favored topics. The luck was not upon me for my first wish, but the beauty of their archways served my passion quite well.

REGARDING ARCHWAY

Archway, also known as gateway, or Paifang in Chinese, was originally referred to the passageway of a building complex or a town. Moreover, since later in Chinese history it has been treated as a decorative monument with beautiful designs and colors. In addition to its beauty, it also signals good fortune to the place with its presence. In the meantime, it was often bestowed to a territory when an emperor wished to extol achievements of the local government.

In Beijing, where is nicknamed as “Kingdom of Paifang”, there are hundreds of archways scattered all over the town. Outside China, gateways are often associated with traditional Chinatowns. Why is there this connection? To make a long story short, in all likelihood, the rationales could be all of the above scenarios about the birth of archways. Besides, eliciting from particular gateways, there are also cries of other “political motivation”, which was not accounted for in ancient China.

In an attempt not to make assumptions myself for things which have not been officially declared, this essay is not directed into any discussion in the context from perspectives as depicted in some literature. Moreover, I also have no regard to the details of gateways’ designs or styles, because my knowledge at this component is not resourceful enough to do the justice of their complexities.

With this understanding, the following is only some basic information and pictures of those splendid gateways. It is my sincere hope that they will be appreciated as much as I had for them.

1. Buenos Aires

Location: Intersection of Arribenos and Juramento Street

Year of erection: 2009

This was a gift from China



2. Havana

Location: On Avenue Dragonos and Cuchillo Street

Year of erection: 1995

This was a gift from China



3. Lima

Location: At the corner of Ucayali and Andahuaylas

Year of erection: 1971

This was a gift from Taiwan



4. Mexico City

Location: Dogollado Plaza, about 50 feet away from Chinatown

Year of erection: 2008

This was a gift from China



Panama City

Location: Across the street from the fish market, in the neighborhood of San Felipe

Year of erection: proximately 1998

This was a gift from Taiwan



5. San Jose

Location: 2nd Avenue and 11th Street

Year of erection: 2012

This was a gift from China



6. **Santo Domingo:**

Location: Duarte Avenue and Benito Gonzalez Street

Year of erection: 2006

There are two gateways. The 1st one was a gift from Taiwan. The 2nd one was from funding provided by The Ministry of Public Works



CONCLUSION

As a final leg of each trip to these Chinatowns, I often perched myself on a place near the Chinese archway, trying to have another good close-up view of the masterpiece. Oddly enough, after this move, the feeling of loneliness, which had been plagued with me when I failed to find a person speaking my language, dissipated. My explanation for this mood change is that the amazing attraction of the archway charmed me with incredible emotional focus which had the effect of letting me feel engaged with Chinese arts and culture, flourishing in foreign lands, even lacking verbally interactive with Chinese immigrants. Overall, experiencing this intellectual achievement was my goal for visiting those target places.

An important piece, which I gladly took away when I stepped out of those Chinatowns, is that Chinese ethnic enclaves are as dynamic as local people in their host countries, and they seem to have been holding themselves together very well without being confined to Chinatowns as early Chinese emigrants in North America did. I strongly believe that it really doesn't matter where they make their home, but it's much more important what they do for the communities after they step outside their houses.

Furthermore, viewers of Chinatown archways should appreciate the structures' beauties and meanings with open minds without being trapped in the notion of their possible political involvement, because they function as a spiritual fortress to Chinese descendants of the town regardless of how they came into being.

When being asked about the expectations from the readers, the great author Philip Pullman once said "*The meaning is only what emerges when the book and the reader meet*". With this intent, I respectfully present this essay to you.

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