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Spring 2016

# Instead of Silence: Chinese Nicaraguans and the Formation of Identity across Two Cultures

Lisa Lee

*SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad*

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Instead of Silence: Chinese Nicaraguans and the Formation of  
Identity across Two Cultures

Lisa Lee

Academic Director: Aynn Setright

Advisor: Fabio S. Lau

Brown University  
Creative Writing

Managua/Nicaragua

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Literacy and Media, SIT Study Abroad

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## **Abstract**

This project studies the ways in which Chinese Nicaraguans have developed their identity while living in a country that is not their motherland. It investigates the divided history and experiences between the Chinese Nicaraguans that lived in the Atlantic coast and those that lived in the Pacific side. Also, it researches how the experiences of Taiwanese immigrants differed from those of the Chinese Nicaraguans who came from mainland China. By examining interviews done with Chinese Nicaraguans today, the essay will compile the long and unknown history of the Chinese Nicaraguans, as well as their many experiences of belonging and displacement in their chosen country. The project is interested in how the Chinese Nicaraguans maintain a connection to their homeland, and it will try to portray the history and the experiences of the Chinese Nicaraguans in the context of diasporic studies. Finally, the essay will try to use Grounded Theory to identify the unique aspects that make up the Chinese Nicaraguan identity.

Este proyecto estudia la manera en que los chinos nicaragüenses han desarrollado su identidad mientras viven en un país que no es su patria. Se investiga la historia y experiencias divididas entre los chinos nicaragüenses que vivían en la costa atlántica y los que vivían en el lado pacífico. También, se investiga cómo las experiencias de los inmigrantes taiwaneses diferían de las de chinos nicaragüenses que vinieron de China continental. Por hacer entrevistas a chinos nicaragüenses hoy en día, se compila la historia larga y desconocida de los chinos nicaragüenses, así como sus muchas experiencias de pertenencia y desplazamiento en una cultura elegida. Al proyecto también le interesa cómo los chinos nicaragüenses mantienen un vínculo con su patria, y se trata de retratar la historia y las experiencias de los chinos nicaragüenses en el contexto de los estudios de diásporas. Al final, el proyecto va a usar la teoría fundamental para identificar los aspectos únicos de la identidad china nicaragüense.

## **Dedication**

To all the Chinese transplants\* who are in the process of transition, (not be) longing in a land that is not your homeland but is your only home.

\*To my mother.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Aynn Setright, Fabio Lau, all of my interview participants, my host family, the participants of my program, Maria Theresa, Xander, Gabe and *La Rizoma*, Alvaro, the Chinese Nicaraguan School and the Chinese Nicaraguan School.

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## Introduction

One of the opening paragraphs of an article in *La Prensa* begins with a scene of a protest against the Nicaraguan canal. The workers leave their homes and parade down the streets holding posters full of Chinese imagery, then begin shouting a chant that was related to the politics of the canal, but only indirectly: “No queremos chinos.”<sup>1</sup> In another scene in a book related to Latin American and Chinese relations, a brick comes hurtling through the window of a Chinese-owned store in Tijuana, Mexico, shattering glass and accompanied by shouted slurs against the owners of the store.<sup>2</sup>

These initial visceral images, along with the plethora of Chinese restaurants and Chinese-made goods, such as automobiles or even the very conception of the trans-isthmus canal, were what piqued my interest in investigating the history and experiences of the Chinese in Nicaragua. Although there was a seemingly significant Chinese community, as evidenced by the restaurants and further backed up in the casual conversations I had with *mestizo* Nicaraguans, I saw very few Chinese people during my time here. Furthermore, the constant racialized cat-calling of “*chinita*” put tension on my racial identity and on my identity as foreigner to the dominant culture of Nicaragua. Given my own personal experiences of being a Chinese American, insider and perpetual outsider to United States society, I began to wonder how other participants of the Chinese diaspora, specifically those who have made their home in Nicaragua, navigated the overlapping spaces of their identity, memory and language between the two cultures of China and Nicaragua. What were the similarities and differences in the experiences of discrimination and assimilation between the Chinese of the Nicaragua and those of the United States or elsewhere in the diaspora? How

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<sup>1</sup> "Los Otros Chinos." *La Prensa*. February 11, 2014. Accessed May 03, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hearn, Adrian H. *Diaspora and Trust Cuba, Mexico, and the Rise of China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

did they experience belonging and displacement in their chosen country? How did they construct a sense of home while existing between the two cultures of Nicaragua and China?

Chinese Nicaraguans occupy a very specific space shared with Afro-Caribbean Nicaraguans and even indigenous Nicaraguans, like the Miskitu. Despite their long history within the country, the Chinese Nicaraguans remain a marginalized group with very little coverage or attention from the dominant society because they are transplants ethnically from another culture or stand outside the dominant culture of the *mestizaje*. Yet at the same time, this stands at odds with the economic realities of Nicaragua, which is increasingly becoming more reliant on investments from China and Taiwan, causing increasing distress and reactionary protests by some Nicaraguans against this new “form of colonialism.”<sup>3</sup> These protests, as evidenced above, can take on racialized or jingoist tone, forsaking the reality that most Chinese Nicaraguans are already deeply assimilated. Additionally, the dynamic between Chinese Nicaraguans and *mestizo* Nicaraguans is complicated by the recent robust immigration of Taiwanese into Nicaragua, who may not identify as Chinese or with the current Chinese communities, but are nonetheless grouped together under the general term, “chino.”

This essay will attempt to trace the history of the Chinese in Nicaragua, starting with their first arrival in 1884 in the Atlantic coast, then through the subsequent exodus following the Sandinista revolution and finally to today’s current climate, with the constant new waves of Taiwanese immigrants. Importantly, it will also give space to portraying the many unspoken narratives and personal experiences of Chinese Nicaraguans in regards to their identity, home and memories of growing up. The essay will use Grounded Theory in order to formulate and draw out thematic connections between the various interviews and

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<sup>3</sup> "Los Otros Chinos." La Prensa. February 11, 2014. Accessed May 03, 2016.



observations, and this analysis will be contextualized and placed in comparison with the larger framework of Chinese diasporic studies. Rather than simply focus on the exclusive relationship between Chinese Nicaraguans and Nicaragua, the essay will attempt to take on a diasporic perspective that would contextualize this relationship within the larger global connections, networks, activities, and consciousnesses of Chinese migration. In doing so, it will be able to specify which trends of migration, assimilation, and displacement belong to grander global trends, and which are specific to the experiences of the Chinese in Nicaragua.

### Literature Review

In order to ground my research within a historical context, I have put together the history of the Chinese in Nicaragua from various secondary sources. These include news articles from the national newspapers like *La Prensa*, as well as online articles and blogs. Additionally, I have found literature detailing the history of the Chinese since 1884, specifically Fabio Lau's *Chinos En Nicaragua 1884-2014: Conmemorando 130 Años De La Presencia China En Nicaragua*. For my research into diasporic studies, I draw from landmark articles such as Adam McKeown's "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949," and Baron Pineda's "The Chinese Creoles of Nicaragua: Identity, Economy, and Revolution in a Caribbean Port City."

### **Methodology**

My primary method of obtaining information was conducting a series of interviews with Nicaraguans of Chinese descent. I obtained a list of Chinese Nicaraguans from my advisor, Fabio Lau. Many of them were subjects that he had used for his own research in reconstructing the history of Chinese Nicaraguans. Everyone on the list was a man, reflecting the historical trend of Chinese men migrating to Nicaragua and the United States instead of

women. Additionally, many of the Chinese Nicaraguan people who held positions in the Chinese Nicaraguan Association or who were well-known were men, reflecting too the patriarchal aspects of Nicaraguan society. In general, the majority of the people I interviewed were men, though I managed to find one Nicaraguan woman of Taiwanese descent.

Many of the interviewees were familiar with one another through the Chinese Nicaraguan Association, and had worked formally worked together at some point or other. Fabio Lau gave me their phone numbers, and I subsequently scheduled interviews with each of them. My interviews were recorded and I took notes while the interview was taking place. The majority of the interviews took place in Managua, where the majority of the Chinese Nicaraguan population lived. In order to get a wider range of interviews, I also traveled to Bluefields on the Caribbean coast in order to view the Chinese community there. I spent two and a half days on the Caribbean coast conducting interviews.

I had a set list of questions that I asked during the interview about the interviewee's history and experiences:

1. Where is your family from?
2. How would you describe the community of Chinese in Nicaragua?
3. How do you feel about your identity as a Chinese Nicaraguan?
4. Do you identify with one side of your identity more than the other?
5. How was your experience of growing up in Nicaragua?
6. Have you confronted racism and/or discrimination for your identity?
7. What would you consider your home?
8. Do you think the community of Chinese Nicaraguans has changed, or is continuing to change?
9. In your opinion, is there a difference between Chinese and Taiwanese identities?
10. Is there tension between the two communities?
11. What Chinese activities (like festivals or celebrations) are offered by the community?
12. Do you keep in touch with your relatives who still live in China?
13. What type of job do most Chinese Nicaraguans do?
14. Do you know someone who is a new immigrant?
15. Ultimately, how do you feel about your identity?

In addition to interviewing participants, I also did some light observing of how they interacted with the *mestizo* population. I took note of how they were treated by other people and what kind of social economical class they generally were in.

While the vast majority of the interviewees were men, the vast majority of interviewees were also second or third generation Chinese, whose ancestors had come from mainland China or Hong Kong. I interviewed two recent arrivals from Taiwan, but was also confronted by the politics of differentiating between Chinese and Taiwanese. As the term “Chinese” can indicate both an ethnic group and a national identity, I was hesitant to ask many Taiwanese about their sense of identity as Chinese Nicaraguans. Most Taiwanese people are ethnically Chinese, but refuse to self-identify as “Chinese” due to the intense political oppression of Taiwan by the People’s Republic of China. In my essay, I make sure to differentiate between those who had come from mainland China and those who had arrived from Taiwan. When speaking specifically about those of Taiwanese descent, I will either reference their place of origin as “Taiwan” or “the Republic of China,” but as a whole, I will include Taiwanese and Chinese within the same category of “Chinese Nicaraguan” due to the overlapping cultural and ethnic similarities shared by the two groups.

The main method I will use to analyze my findings will be through Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is an inductive methodology which proceeds first with very little preparatory research or literature before gathering data through intensive interviews and observations, and finally constantly comparing data and highlighting frequent themes that appear across the data.<sup>4</sup> I will use Grounded Theory to highlight the aspects shared by the vast majority of Chinese Nicaraguans and induce the foundational components that make up

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<sup>4</sup> Simmons, Odis E. "Grounded Theory Institute." - The Grounded Theory Methodology of Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D. July 20, 2014. Accessed May 04, 2016.

the Chinese Nicaraguan identity. Additionally, I will use other research from diasporic studies as a form of comparison and contextualization.

### Potential Bias

As a Chinese American conducting research on Chinese Nicaraguans, my analysis may be biased by own my personal experiences and perspectives. While conducting my investigation, I subconsciously compared the Chinese Nicaraguan experiences with my own experiences or with the generalized experiences of other Chinese Americans. Since I have lived my entire life in the United States, my base of knowledge is derived from my experiences growing up and the classes on Asian American literature and identity I have taken at my university. It may be hard to separate the personal from the academic, but I also believe this bias may provide a useful perspective in understanding and pinpointing larger cross-cultural trends in Chinese immigrant identity.

### **Research Findings**

#### Historical context, 1884 – current day:

One of the important steps to understanding the experiences of the Chinese Nicaraguans is to contextualize their history. The Chinese began arriving on the Atlantic coast in 1884, and then on the Pacific coast in 1892.<sup>5</sup> Many of the Chinese arrived from areas in southern China, such as Canton (or Guangzhou), Fujian, and Hong Kong, and they spoke the local dialect of those areas, which was Cantonese instead of Mandarin.<sup>6</sup> From a global perspective, the wave of Chinese migrants arriving in Nicaragua was part of a larger movement of southern Chinese leaving from port cities, such as Hong Kong, to cities such as

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<sup>5</sup> Fabio, Lau S. *Chinos En Nicaragua 1884-2014: Conmemorando 130 Años De La Presencia China En Nicaragua*. 2nd ed. Managua: Publicaciones "El Mandarin", 2014, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Quant, Guillermo A. Consultant. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaragua. 13 April 2016. His house, Managua.

San Francisco, Manila, Havana and Lima.<sup>7</sup> Although the southern Chinese were partially motivated to move by poverty, lack of opportunity, and warfare, the huge concentration of international migrants from these specific regions was caused in part by the opening of Hong Kong as a major international port city under British control, which allowed for increased exposure to foreigners, and the precedence of other villagers leaving setting groves for further mobility.<sup>8</sup>

Although the typical narratives place San Francisco and the Gold Rush as the main destination of migration, Chinese people were often the willing and unwilling participants of a pre-determined migration flows dictated by non-Chinese needs. A hundred thousand Chinese “coolies,” or indentured servants, were sent to work in the mines and plantations in Peru<sup>9</sup>, and a larger amount were sent to work on the sugar plantations of Cuba.<sup>10</sup> As Adam McKeown said, the rise of Chinese labor came with the demise of using Africans as slaves, as colonial bosses tried to use the indentured Chinese laborers as mediators in the transition from slavery to free labor for fear of massive civil unrest. Additionally, when their migration patterns were influenced and controlled by non-Chinese interests, the Chinese migrants were more like to be in “dispersion,” rather than integrate into their new community and remain in the country after the termination of their labor contracts.<sup>11</sup>

During the mid-1800’s, the majority of the Chinese arriving in the Americas were arriving in the United States, Cuba, and Peru. Yet during 1882, access to the United States

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<sup>7</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306-37. doi:10.2307/2659399.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hu-Dehart, Evelyn. "Chinese Coolie Labour in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labour or Neo-slavery?" *Slavery & Abolition* 14, no. 1 (1993): 67-86.

<sup>11</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306-37. doi:10.2307/2659399.

was cut off for the migrants by the Chinese Exclusion Act, which specifically targeted Chinese people. New destinations for immigration began to surface, including Mexico and Central America, which were new territories not yet inhabited by Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, some Chinese in the United States were driven to leave by discriminatory practices and laws, which among other things, prevented them from being employed by corporations and state, local and municipal governments and prohibited them from becoming nationalized citizens. In 1884, two years after the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first Chinese person arrived in the Atlantic Coast.<sup>13</sup> Following that initial arrival, Chinese would begin arriving in the Atlantic Coast in droves, drawn by the plentiful corporations, such as the United Fruit Company, who were more likely to employ them and black Caribbean migrants over the local population.<sup>14</sup> Another draw was the beginning of construction on the Panama Canal, which would provide plentiful, if grueling jobs for the Chinese.

In the Atlantic coast, the Chinese quickly established businesses and stores up the coast and acted as the trade intermediaries between the colonial giants and the Nicaraguan people. Within time, the Chinese replaced the older West Indian merchants, and “by 1925, with 60 firms, they controlled all but two stores in the city.”<sup>15</sup> Although they frequently worked as entrepreneurs, they found employment in almost any profession, even as fishermen. They accompanied and significantly contributed to the period of time between 1930 and 1970 called the “golden years” of the Atlantic coast, in which Bluefields and other

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<sup>12</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306-37. doi:10.2307/2659399.

<sup>13</sup> Fabio, Lau S. *Chinos En Nicaragua 1884-2014: Conmemorando 130 Años De La Presencia China En Nicaragua*. 2nd ed. Managua: Publicaciones "El Mandarin", 2014, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Pineda, Baron. "The Chinese Creoles of Nicaragua: Identity, Economy, and Revolution in a Caribbean Port City." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 201.

<sup>15</sup> Lai, Walton Look, and Chee Beng. Tan. *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010, 116.

cities such as the Puerto Cabezas rose to become significant trading ports. During this time, the region experienced the effects of the “banana boom,” as well as booms in the lumber, mining, rubber and tuno industries, and access to North American-made goods was relatively attainable.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, this time also saw the rise of United States companies such as the United Fruit Company, which associated with Chinese merchants and employed Chinese workers, along with West Indians.

According to Walton Look Lai, in eastern Nicaragua, where gold was discovered and mines were established, the Chinese merchants were quick to follow and provide goods and materials at lower prices than the company commissaries. When the mines were closed, the laborers were displaced without the materials to relocate. When they turned to agriculture, the Chinese were quick to supply equipment and food, resulting in the “establishment of a major agricultural community in an area previously undeveloped.”<sup>17</sup>

On the Pacific coast, the Chinese often found success as well, working as entrepreneurs and restaurant help in communities such as Jinotepe, Matagalpa, eventually focusing on the capital, Managua. From 1930 to 1960, the Somoza government tended to protect Chinese interests and repealed in 1944 the anti-Chinese legislation laid down since the beginning of the century.<sup>18</sup> Rather than be the laborers, the Chinese were quickly becoming the owners and managers of production, and by 1950, the Chinese merchants “had controlled about 90 percent of the local [Managua] grocery stores.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Pineda, Baron. “The Chinese Creoles of Nicaragua: Identity, Economy, and Revolution in a Caribbean Port City.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 209-33.

<sup>17</sup> Lai, Walton Look, and Chee Beng. Tan. *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010, 117.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Many of the Chinese migrants who arrived in Nicaragua began integrating into the culture here rather than resisting assimilation. Plenty changed their surnames or adopted new Spanish names, and as the vast majority of Chinese immigrants were single men, or had wives left behind in China, they married local Nicaraguan women. Additionally, they refused to teach their language to their children, the second generation of Chinese Nicaraguans, for fear of limiting the opportunities available to their children, or subjecting their children to intense bullying due to their accented Spanish. On the western part of the country, the mixed-Chinese Nicaragua generation after the first wave of immigrants ending up having very strong national sentiments towards Nicaragua<sup>20</sup>.

However, while many Chinese had successfully settled in Nicaragua, where they worked and raised families, the changes arriving with the beginning of the Nicaraguan revolution proved too much for many Chinese families to handle. Some fought on the side of the revolution,<sup>21</sup> although the large majority of Chinese Nicaraguan families emigrated at the beginning of the Sandinista revolution, moving to Costa Rica, Panama and Miami like much of the rest of the upper middle class Nicaraguans. On the Atlantic coast, where they owned the majority of businesses, the Chinese either sold their businesses or they left them in the care of trusted friends who stayed. Then the Chinese Nicaraguans sought political asylum in Los Angeles and Miami,<sup>22</sup> where they integrated themselves into Chinese and Nicaraguan communities.

There are various explanations for this mass exodus. Some said the Chinese perceived the Sandinista revolution as another attempt to install a form of Communism in Nicaragua,

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<sup>20</sup> Lai, Walton Look, and Chee Beng. Tan. *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010, 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny Mendoza. Strobel. *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999 50.



which had been happening in the revolutions of many other Latin American countries at the time. The Chinese Nicaraguans were already wary of Communism after hearing stories about the Communist Revolution in China,<sup>23</sup> and it was easier to immigrate to wealthier, more developed Western countries like United States or Australia since most had repealed their Chinese exclusionary laws by the mid 1940's. Furthermore, the tense political and economic situation in Nicaragua was exacerbated by the natural destruction of the earthquake of 1972, which devastated many Chinese stores and homes.<sup>24</sup>

However, another significant motivation for their migration was the enraged or distrustful sentiments against the Chinese caused by a rise in Nicaraguan revolutionary nationalism<sup>25</sup> and their protection by the Somoza government. Although not specifically targeted by the Sandinista government, the Chinese, who as merchants acted as the impartial middle men between the Nicaraguan locals and the international trading economy, received the brunt of the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist anger that was brewing at the time.<sup>26</sup> For many, they were seen simply as foreign exploiters of the natives and the native resources. As Pineda Baron says, the Chinese have a propensity to obtain economic success in a country without assuming political power in their host societies, leading to their political vulnerability and outright targeting in societies undergoing decolonization, such as in Southeast Asia, Jamaica and Mexico.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quant, Guillermo A. Consultant. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaragua. 13 April 2016. His house, Managua.

<sup>24</sup> Quant, Guillermo A. Consultant. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaragua. 13 April 2016. His house, Managua.

<sup>25</sup> Pineda, Baron. "The Chinese Creoles of Nicaragua: Identity, Economy, and Revolution in a Caribbean Port City." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 211. doi:10.1353/jaas.2001.0033.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

In the case of the Atlantic coast, the Chinese Nicaraguans who tried to stay during the Revolution were subject to “expropriation and in many cases looting of many of their stores and property.”<sup>28</sup> However, it is interesting to note that African Nicaraguan creoles and Chinese were considered equally suspect by the Pacific-led Nicaraguan revolution, which perceived any “ethnic minority” from the Atlantic Coast, even Miskito Indians and Sumu Indians, as counter-revolutionary.<sup>29</sup> Thus African creoles and the Chinese Nicaraguans were stuck in the same situation, or in this case, the same metaphoric and literal boat.

Furthermore, this movement from Nicaragua to the United States belongs to a well-noted pattern of “remigration” within the Chinese diaspora from countries within Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean to Australia, New Zealand and the United States.<sup>30</sup> These new destinations were more economically developed than the former regions, but they were also politically and ideologically stable, a relief from the political turmoil occurring in the initial destinations.

However, it should be stated again that the second generation of Chinese Nicaraguans felt a great deal of nationalism for Nicaragua, and many fought in the Sandinista revolution. One famous example is Arlen Siu Bermudez, who was considered one of the first female martyrs of the Revolution and later called, “La Chinita de Jinotepe,” referring to her ethnicity and home city.<sup>31</sup> Her father was from Guangdong, Guangzhou, and he had fought in the Communist Revolution before coming to Nicaragua.<sup>32</sup> After coming to Nicaragua he became a successful businessman and Arlen grew up in a prosperous family. Arlen Siu was already

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hamer, Ramos. "Arlen Siu, Un Ejemplo De Lucha Y De Solidaridad Con Los Más Pobres." *El Pueblo Presidente*. March 14, 2014

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

well-known by the time she joined the Sandinista revolution for her talented singing, songwriting and guitar skills.<sup>33</sup> She was killed in 1975 in combat by the Somoza forces when she was twenty, already then a well-known Sandinista leader,<sup>34</sup> and her image was used widely in protests afterwards and then immortalized by a famous photo by the American photographer, Susan Meiselas. Later articles about her life would emphasize her “love and dedication” for her “*patria*” or homeland, which was suggested to be Nicaragua rather than China,<sup>35</sup> as well as her focus and concern for those in poverty. One Nicaraguan said the Siu family was known for being fair and giving to anyone in need.<sup>36</sup>

The Chinese flight from Nicaragua severely decimated the Chinese population in Nicaragua. Currently, Nicaragua has around 14,000 inhabitants of Chinese descent<sup>37</sup>, the lowest number of Chinese people residing in its borders in Central America,<sup>38</sup> while Panama and Costa Rica have the highest. However, the demographic of ethnic Chinese immigrants is rapidly changing due to the relationship between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Nicaragua. Nicaragua is one of the few countries to maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, forgoing even a diplomatic relation with the People’s Republic of China for the sake of the Taiwanese relationship.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni, Rajini Srikanth, and Leny Mendoza. Strobel. Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Hamer, Ramos. "Arlen Siu, Un Ejemplo De Lucha Y De Solidaridad Con Los Más Pobres." El Pueblo Presidente. March 14, 2014. Accessed May 04, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> "Nicaragua :: Joshua Project." Nicaragua :: Joshua Project. Accessed May 07, 2016. <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/NU>.

<sup>38</sup> Quant, Ivan. President of the Association of Chinese Nicaraguan. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaraguan. 8 April 2016. La Cocina de Doña Haydee, Managua.

<sup>39</sup> Shu-ling, Ko. "Ortega Open to Dual Ties with Taipei and Beijing - Taipei Times." Taipei Times. August 29, 2007. Accessed May 07, 2016.

This strong diplomatic relationship means that many of the new immigrants arriving in Nicaragua are from Taiwan. Many move here permanently to start new lives, though others are only diplomats who are here for a short term. However, the diplomatic relationship between Taiwan and Nicaragua is complicated also by the prospect of the Nicaraguan canal, which was supposedly supposed to be financed by a Hong Kong billionaire. Although Nicaragua is still tied to Taiwan, it has not stopped participating in major business transactions with mainland China. Some of these projects include a \$300 million satellite purchased by the Nicaraguan government from China, as well as financing from Chinese banks, and a mobile telephone network operated by a Chinese company.<sup>40</sup>

#### Interviews:

*While uncovering the history of Chinese Nicaraguans, I interviewed around 10 people in scenarios both casual and formal. In this section, I will select to highlight a couple to demonstrate the various sentiments seen in different demographics of Chinese Nicaraguans, ranging from those who were born here to newly arrived immigrants from Taiwan.*

Interview: Guillermo A. Quant, April 13, his home in Managua

I met with Guillermo in his family home, where he worked out of as a consultant. He was elderly, almost eighty-four years old, but he still worked and seemed very young and healthy. We spoke in English, mainly due to his surprising fluency of the language, which he learned while studying abroad in the United States. His family originally came from Guangdong, which meant their primary spoken language was Cantonese. Because his father and mother both arrived, Guillermo grew up in an environment where Cantonese was actually spoken, but the skill was rusty due to a lack of practice.

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<sup>40</sup> "Nicaragua, a Taiwan Friend, Warms to China Investment." Terra Daily. September 23, 2013. Accessed May 07, 2016.

In 1909, his father, a kitchen helper with no knowledge of Spanish, arrived to Nicaragua. He went from a kitchen helper to a traveling merchant and salesman, who rode by horseback and cart across different cities taking orders and delivering merchandise imported from China. After attaining some level of success, his father went back to China and found a wife, who was to become the mother of Guillermo. He brought her back to Nicaragua, where they stayed for most of their life. His father never talked too much about his time in China, but luckily, his mother talked a lot. Although his father never really became a fluent speaker of Spanish, he spoke well enough to be understood.

Guillermo then grew up and went on to study in the United States in 1951. He studied at a university in Boston, while his brother studied in the University of Boston. He knew much about the history of Chinese in Nicaragua, and explained to me about how the Chinese would embark from Hong Kong, with stops in Japan, Hawaii and San Francisco. Many Chinese, he claimed, traveled down to Mexico, and then further south, while in the Caribbean, Chinese arrived in Bluefields from New Orleans. The Atlantic coast had a lot of major companies, including United Fruit Company and Long Line Pine, both of which exported their products to the United States.

Guillermo spoke more about the personal experiences of being Chinese Nicaraguan. In regards to their identity, he said Chinese Nicaraguans know their Chinese descent, yet in the normal day-to-day aspects of their lives, many forgot about it. However, while some of the traditions may have been lost, many relate their identity a great deal to food. Chinese food, its flavors and the tradition of it, brings many Chinese Nicaraguans closer to their identity. When I asked him how his family managed to make Chinese food, he admitted it was hard to find the proper ingredients. Nicaragua was too tropical to grow many of the necessary vegetables or fruits, but Chinese Nicaraguans found other methods to cultivate their vegetables. Chinandega, which has a colder climate, was the site where people would

grow Chinese vegetables used to colder temperatures, like winter melon or daikon. Chinese Nicaraguans would make their own soy sauce, using beans found here instead of the traditional red beans. For tofu, they would substitute almost similar foods like cheese, and for the certain vegetables that were simply unobtainable, they would substitute local vegetables.

Finally, Guillermo showed me many of the photos he had of his family. Many of the photos were lost in the earthquake of 1972, because not only was there an earthquake, there was a fire that destroyed many things. Guillermo told me about the apartment he and his brother had invested in mainland China, and showed me photos of it. He has returned a couple of times and met his extended family. Currently, he rents the apartment out, but he knows it will always be there if he needed to go back.

Interview: Ivan Quant, April 8, in a restaurant owned by his father in Managua

I spoke with Ivan in a restaurant owned by his father. Although Ivan and his father are Chinese Nicaraguans, his restaurant serves conventionally Nicaraguan cuisine due to his Nicaraguan mother's amazing cooking abilities. Ivan, a significant figure in the Chinese Nicaraguan community, represents the third generation of Chinese Nicaraguans. Unlike many of the other interviewees I have had, Ivan is still relatively young. His grandfather was the first arrival, and he came from Canton, which is currently known as Guangzhou, in the 1940's. During that time in this region, China was undergoing a war with Japan, so he left through Hong Kong with plans to come to San Francisco. Eventually he ended up in Mexico, and continued traveling down. His grandfather came by himself, and he married a local Nicaraguan woman, although he left behind two children in China. At that time, the Chinese in Nicaragua were bullied or discriminated against for speaking Spanish with an accent, so he elected not to teach his children his native tongue. The Chinese language was completely lost in his family by the time Ivan grew up.

While growing up, his family tried to eat Chinese food, although his mother was Nicaraguan. However, the inaccessibility of ingredients and spices, like Chinese sausages, made it hard to cook Chinese food authentically, so they only had Chinese food once a week, or for special Chinese holidays. Ivan also mentioned a level of derogatory stereotyping of Chinese people by Nicaraguans. Chinese people were perceived as cheap and dirty, though that perception may be changing. When I asked whether Chinese Nicaraguans were happy to be here, Ivan explained that the majority had come to Nicaragua poor and without options, and since arriving, worked hard and became very successful. The vast majority of Chinese Nicaraguans found themselves in better situations than they had been in China, or would have been in China. So many felt a deep sense of dedication and debt to the country.

Yet that did not stop the majority from also leaving Nicaragua once the Revolution began. Ivan gave the rough estimate that over eighty percent of Chinese Nicaraguans left during the Revolution. The Revolution and Contra War lasted for decades, ruining their restaurants and businesses. By 1990, the end of the Contra War, many had settled into their new homes and did not want to return to the devastated Nicaraguan economy. However, 1990 was also the year Nicaragua formally recognized Taiwan, inviting the beginning of a new wave of migration to Nicaragua. In 1992, the Association of Chinese Nicaraguans was founded in order to promote the Chinese culture, its language, and its traditions through organizing large-scale events and celebrations of important Chinese holidays. Although the new immigrants were ethnically Chinese, they identified with being Taiwanese, and so formed their own groups that were distinct from the Chinese Nicaraguans. Still, the two demographics could work together to found institutions such as a Chinese language school, which taught Chinese language classes on weekends and held primary school education on weekdays.

Currently, there is a certain level of tension between the Chinese Nicaraguans and the rest of Nicaragua. Due to identity of the main funder of the canal, some people express sentiments against all Chinese in general, regardless of whether a Chinese person identified as Nicaraguan and had lived here his entire life. Additionally, although Ivan knows his grandfather had two sons in China before leaving, he no longer has any ability to contact them. He's written letters, but without addresses to send them to. In regards to his homeland, Ivan says his father has visited China, and Ivan has only visited Taiwan. According to him, the majority of Chinese Nicaraguans have visited China at least once. After all, "there is always a desire to know where you come from."

Interview: Danilo Tao, April 4, in Casa de Café in Managua

I met with Danilo in a café in Los Robles. I had arrived on time, at our agreed 7 PM meeting time. He arrived around 25 minutes later. In our interview, Danilo would claim that he had adapted to a more "Nicaraguan" time, specifically pointing out his earlier lateness as an example, and he admitted that he particularly enjoyed the more relaxed culture of Central America, which permitted more leeway for deadlines.

Danilo was a Taiwanese diplomat, the first Taiwanese person I interviewed for this investigation. He was at first hesitant to interview with me because he thought I would be asking about the history of Chinese in Nicaragua, which he actually knew little about due to his short time here, but I assured him whatever information he gave me about his personal experiences here would be adequate. He has been in Nicaragua for four years, with another two years left on his diplomatic mission. Previous to Nicaragua, he had been on a diplomatic mission in Mexico. He brought his family of a wife and two children here in 2012. He spoke Spanish well, though clearly not as fluently as the other interviewees who had lived here longer. He had learned the language while in Taiwan, a requirement for being a diplomat.



Both of his children were born in the United States, but had lived their entire lives in Taiwan until they arrived to Nicaragua at the relatively young ages of seven and five years old.

He was working here as diplomat because Nicaragua is one of the 23 countries in the world that have diplomatic relations with the Republic of China, or Taiwan. Taiwan, he told me, “no es un país reconocido,” or is not a recognized country. In Nicaragua, he worked to continue to strengthen the diplomatic relations between the two countries. I asked him whether the Chinese factories here and the Chinese investments complicate the matters between Taiwanese relations with Nicaragua, and he assured me that there were no factories from China here. There were however, businesses from Koreans and Taiwanese who moved here to start a new life.

In terms of whether he likes Nicaragua, he says that the people here are very nice and friendly. He reconnects with home through food, and he typically goes to Chinese restaurants with colleagues from work and other friends. He says that there is a presence of a Taiwanese community here. His children like Nicaragua a lot as well, and have adapted well to the culture. Additionally, the advancements in technology have helped bridge the gap between Taiwan and Nicaragua, allowing Danilo to reconnect with his family through Skype and free text messaging apps.

Although Danilo’s story provided some insights into the experiences of Taiwanese people in Nicaragua, his experience is a little different due to the temporality of his stay. Danilo would not be able to describe himself as a Taiwanese Nicaraguan, but simply, as a Taiwanese living in Nicaragua. However, Danilo still has contributed to building great connections between Nicaragua and Taiwan, and the Chinese Nicaraguan School bears his name as a contributing founder.

Interview: Hugo Sujo, April 14, his office in Bluefields

I met Hugo through the list given to me by my adviser. He worked in an office in Bluefields, in a room all for himself. He seemed of high importance, and he was referred to as a “*profesor*” by the office workers. His father was from Canton and had arrived in Bluefields alone. In the past (no date specified), a large number of Chinese immigrants were arriving in Bluefields, and of those number, almost none were women. In the past century, almost the whole central area of Bluefields were run by Chinese. They ran most of the retail businesses, specializing in wholesale. The Chinese men who came married local women, and their children contributed to the great creole ethnic diversity of Bluefields and the Atlantic coast. In Bluefields, the Chinese mixed in with the rest of the people, because Bluefields at the time was a very cosmopolitan city and had people from practically everyone, like Jewish or Middle Eastern people.

When the Sandinistas took over in 1979, most of the Chinese panicked and migrated, confusing the Sandinistas for Communists. Before that time, the Chinese had their own specific club, where they gambled and celebrated famous holidays. When the Chinese left, they left their stories in the care of friends and colleagues who stayed. One such friend still remains here today, and he is still well-known. However, since then, the economy worsened, and many never came back.

However, as owners, they were very fair, employing native people and locals. They went into every conceivable business, from exporting and importing to even fishing. They spoke both English and Spanish, even the language of the Miskitus, though Spanish was hard for many of them because of the prevalence of the “r,” which does not exist in Chinese. I asked about one famous story I heard, about a Chinese man named Santiago who apparently never learned to speak neither English nor Spanish and instead still lived alone in Bluefields without communicating. Hugo corrected me and said it was not that he never learned to speak the language here, he simply speaks it terribly. No one can understand him.

Chinese food is still present in the Caribbean culture, like chop suey and noodles. There is a kind of dish in the Atlantic coast, called *pajarito*, which is meat wrapped in dough that is derived from their food, probably from dumplings. Although Chinese food was famous, there are no more Chinese restaurants in the coast, but curiously, there are non-Chinese restaurants that still sell Chinese food.

Today, there are a lot of people with Chinese blood, which can be told by their Chinese surnames. There are black “Chiu’s” and black “Lang’s.” Perhaps like Hugo, these people had never really connected with their homeland, because Hugo’s father never talked much about his past life or taught him the Chinese language. However, Hugo said that although the Chinese who came to Nicaragua experienced great hardship, many had risen to significant and successful positions in politics and commerce. Hugo at this point was referring to himself a little, given his high position as a politician and teacher.

Interview: Vivian Peng, April 23, the *Colegio China Nicaragüense*

I met Vivian while at the Chinese Nicaraguan School on Saturday. Saturday was when they ran their Chinese language program every week. Vivian was young, only 25 years old, much younger than most of my other interviewees. She was Taiwanese, and she taught Mandarin in the school every weekend to primary school children, and she was currently working towards a degree in international politics in the *Universidad Americana* (American University). Her family came around ten years ago, when she was thirteen years old, in order to set up a business here. She did not know Spanish or English at the time when she came here, but she learned to be relatively fluent in both by the time I talked to her. We spoke in English during my interview.

I asked her if learning Spanish was very hard, and she admitted it was. She said sometimes people would bully her, because her Spanish was very bad and she had an accent.

However, she thinks that the age of arrival really mattered as well. She had arrived when she was thirteen, while her sister was much younger, maybe 6 or 7 years old. Therefore, her sister speaks Spanish with no accent at all.

Her parents currently own a restaurant here in Nicaragua serving Taiwanese food. However, working a restaurant is very tiring. I asked her how her parents knew about Nicaragua, she said the country was well-known to Taiwanese businessmen. Some even call it, “the Nicaraguan dream.” When I asked Vivian if she liked Nicaragua more than Taiwan, she quickly affirmed this statement. Although she missed Taiwan, she liked Nicaragua more. She said, “The life here is more simple, uncomplicated, and the people are too.” The Nicaraguan people were friendlier and less catty than the Taiwanese people. Taiwanese people, she said, always gossiped and wanted to know everything about you. They were always busy and working all the time. This aspect of Taiwanese culture made her reluctant to continue a relationship with Taiwan. She has not returned once since coming here, although her younger sister and brother are currently studying in Taiwan now.

Her family do not exactly hold the same sentiment as her. Her parents definitely miss their home country. But for Vivian, Nicaragua is definitely what she considers her home. In terms of her identity, she feels evenly both Taiwanese and Nicaraguan. Her Taiwanese friends tell her that she seems different, and definitely has adapted to Nicaraguan culture. But her Nicaraguan friends tell her that she definitely still retains a large part of her Taiwanese identity and culture.

#### Cultural observations:

Many of the Chinese people I interviewed seemed to be in high positions of power or socioeconomic status. For my interviews with Hugo and Ivan, the *mestizo* Nicaraguans in the office and restaurant, respectively, treated them with a certain level of respect. My encounter

with Danilo made me imagine he had a certain level of wealth compared to the locals.

However, in other cases with interviews not listed, the Chinese Nicaraguans seemed right at home in their stores or restaurants, and there was no sense of pretention or imbalanced power dynamics. However, of all the Chinese Nicaraguans I interviewed, none seemed to be facing financial hardship. Since many were born of Chinese and Nicaraguan parents, many of my interviewees looked as if they could pass as a regular *mestizo* Nicaraguan.

#### The Chinese Nicaraguan School:

The Chinese Nicaraguan School, or *El Colegio chino nicaragüense* is a beautiful school set on a road off the Masaya Carretera around twenty minutes out of the main center of Managua. Groomed flowers were set in the walkway, impervious to the raging sun and heat, and two main buildings. The main building is mostly empty, a large space seemingly for performances, speeches, and celebrations. The remnants of the oversized costumes from lion dancing lie in the corners.

The other building, set off to the side, holds the classrooms. There are many classrooms, though on Saturdays, only three are filled. On Saturdays, the school only has classes to teach Mandarin and English, and during the weekdays, there is an after-school program for kids in primary school that only teaches English. For their Mandarin classes, three teachers each teach a different level. There are two teachers who were born in and had emigrated from Taiwan, and one teacher who was Nicaraguan but had studied Mandarin.

The main objectives of the school are to promote “the union of the Chinese and Nicaraguan communities in terms of civil, cultural, social and intellectual character.”<sup>41</sup> It works to promote the global languages of Mandarin and Chinese, as well as develop

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<sup>41</sup> "Colegio Chino Nicaragüense." Colegio Chino Nicaragüense. Accessed May 07, 2016. <http://www.colegiochinonic.com/>.

academic programs to help facilitate academic development. It was founded by the Chinese Nicaraguan Association on November 12, 2011, which was inspired by the national day of “la Etnia China,” or the ethnic Chinese in Nicaragua.<sup>42</sup> Looking at the plaque with the names of the contributing founders, I saw a great many of the people whom I interviewed, both Taiwanese and Chinese.

The vast majority of the students at the school are ethnically *mestizo* Nicaraguan. I interviewed one of them, who was twenty years old but chose to remain anonymous, about why he was interested in learning Mandarin. He said Mandarin is really important because of how important globally and economically China is. He believed it was “language of the future,” one that people had to know in order to help their country progress and gain access to newer technology. I asked him if it was challenging to learn Mandarin, and he admitted it was. The tonal system, as well as the system of writing, were particularly abstract to him, and it was hard to get a good grasp of either when the classes were set a week apart. He also did not have much opportunity to practice much. He found out about the school after becoming the friend of the sister of one of the teachers, the sister who is currently studying in Taiwan. However, while he did face complications while studying Mandarin, he also seemed enthusiastic about it because he was studying international relations in the UAM, and hoped to one day travel to Asia.

### **Discussion/Analysis**

To study the history of Chinese in Nicaragua is to study ghosts, the remnants of a large number of who people who once called Nicaragua home, but now have left behind only their surnames and stores; it is a study of how larger global processes shape indefinitely our

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

options and our experiences, even what we may refer to as our identity. Although Chinese Nicaraguans make up a very small section of the population of this country, and have in many ways composed only a small part of the history of Nicaragua, their history and continued existence are still significant to this land. The research uncovered the many ways in which the ethnic Chinese have impacted the economy and culture of Nicaragua, and the many ways in which historical processes have shaped the lives of this small ethnic group of people.

Although the experiences of ethnic Chinese Nicaraguans have many overlapping qualities with the experiences of Chinese in other countries, such as the United States, by no means are they the same experience. For many Chinese Nicaraguans, Nicaragua was a land where they could build businesses and start new lives, a blank slate where they could work steadily to prosperity. It was possible for Chinese immigrants to intermarry and integrate into the culture without giving up their own identities or cultures. Additionally, because ethnic Chinese people willingly came to Nicaragua of their own accord, rather than as indentured servants, or “coolies,” as was the case for many in Cuba or Peru, this sense of free choice and agency might have contributed to why many Chinese and Taiwanese Nicaraguans staunchly call Nicaragua their home.<sup>43</sup>

While conducting interviews with Chinese and Taiwanese Nicaraguans, I noticed various thematic motifs that continuously popped up in our conversations. Many immigrants had similar experiences of memory, history, food, language, which can be drawn together to produce a fuller picture of a Chinese Nicaraguan identity. These common experiences can be used to categorize what might be a distinct mixed, or even creole, identity among the Chinese

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<sup>43</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306-37. doi:10.2307/2659399.

Nicaraguans, which is separate from a purely Chinese or Taiwanese identity, or even another merged identities such as other Chinese American or Chinese Mexican identities.

Memory, in my interviews, was the main component that my research was built on, yet was also the most unreliable and elusive component of this project. As my project tried to uncover the individual and collective history of Chinese Nicaraguans, it relied on first-hand accounts of history and experiences based off the memories of individuals, which can be notoriously unreliable. Yet for many Chinese Nicaraguans, memories were all they had to connect to the Chinese side of their identity. For most of my interviewees, who had never lived in China, their memories of childhood, of food and traditions, of their father, remain a foundational component of their lives and sense of being. Yet each generation away from the first immigrant became gradually more and more diluted, until the memory and sense of having a Chinese identity disappeared between the generations or became engulfed by the dominant cultural identity, like what had happened on the Atlantic coast.

As the memory and the “authenticity” of the Chinese experience became more diluted, this allowed for the rise of a more mixed, even creole, identity that successfully combined components of two cultures into a new separate culture. Although the Chinese Nicaraguan identity had not reached the level of “creole,” it certainly had aspects of a mixed culture, in which local, inherited ingredients are incorporated into traditional recipes, and old traditions are adapted to local settings and standards. However, what might have been preventing Chinese Nicaraguan identity from becoming a “creole” identity, in which “the formation of new identities and inherited culture evolve to become different from those they possessed in the original cultures,”<sup>44</sup> is the specific fixation on a certain “authentic” or correct Chinese experience.

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<sup>44</sup> Cohen, Robin. "Creolization and Cultural Globalization: The Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power." *Globalizations* 4, no. 3 (2007): 369-84. doi:10.1080/14747730701532492.



The Chinese on the Pacific side, scattered and unaware of one another, largely underwent the process of assimilation individually, and would not have been able to form a unified sense of identity. On the opposite side, the few hundreds of Chinese on the Atlantic side, due to closer contact and communication, would have been able to band together enough to coordinate the celebration and preservation of their culture. The process at least seemed to be undergoing up until the beginning of the Revolution, which saw the departure of nearly all the Chinese in the area and the complete fall-out of Chinese cultural memory and preservation, leading to the current phenomenon of swaths of the Coastal population carrying Chinese surnames with little personal identification with the heritage.

Memory still is a vital component of being Chinese Nicaraguan, if not the most vital, as seen by the loss of cultural memory and therefore identity on the Coast. The participants of my research were all engaged in some form of “remembering” their Chinese experiences and actively fighting against the insidious forgetting or loss of their culture and identity. They would eat Chinese food once or twice a week, even though it would be easier simply to make Nicaraguan food. They were often a part of the Chinese Nicaraguan Association, and actively participated in the select Chinese holidays that were celebrated. Many even visited China or Taiwan, hoping to meet relatives known and lost. This active, concerted attempt to retain some part of the Chinese identity is what qualifies the claim that Chinese Nicaraguans are part of a diaspora. Although they do not wish to return to the “homeland,” the tie is nevertheless there, unshakeable.

One of the main problems was that Chinese Nicaraguans had very little institutional memory, and up to 1992 with the founding of the Chinese Nicaraguan Association, no institution that would serve as a collective point of reference. So much of history was lost when the Chinese fled Nicaragua during the war, in addition to the historical damage and toll from the earthquake and revolution. Additionally, the influx of Taiwanese immigrants has

complicated the history, because many of these immigrants were born and had lived in Taiwan. Their relationship to their homeland, as well as to their memories and identities as Taiwanese Nicaraguans, differed wildly from the descendants of the mainland Chinese. Yet there were certain aspects of culture that Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants would find overlap, such as food.

Food remains one of the most important and effective ways that Chinese immigrants keep in touch with their homeland. While interviewing my participants, nearly all of them felt a strong connection to Chinese food, and fondly recalled their memories of the food they would eat while growing up. Food was a form of bonding and a return to home, even if the Chinese food was not “authentically” the same Chinese food found in China.<sup>45</sup> In many ways, this connection and affection for Chinese food is shared by many of the participants of the Chinese diaspora, including in the United States. Not only that, but the production of food, specifically Chinese food, is the major method many Chinese immigrants find employment and financial security, such as in the case of Ivan and his family.

Food also plays a significant role in Nicaraguan society. Second to Nicaraguan restaurants, Chinese restaurants appear to be the most abundant restaurants I have seen. Many Nicaraguans have in some way eaten Chinese food, and it still remains very popular today. In the United States, Chinese food is a form of comfort food for many Americans, but in Nicaragua, it is an exotic, but always available, break away from the ordinary. Certain dishes, such as chop suey, have even assimilated into Nicaraguan culture as a common dish, made and eaten by more *mestizo* families than actually ethnic Chinese ones.

As with food, language is another form of connection with one’s ethnic identity, but in many ways, it can also serve as a reminder of distance and loss. The majority of Chinese

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<sup>45</sup> Quant, Guillermo A. Consultant. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaragua. 13 April 2016. His house, Managua.

Nicaraguans never learned or have forgotten their immigrant parent's native language. Chinese immigrants, fearing discrimination or bullying, actively decided to not teach the second generation their mother-tongue,<sup>46</sup> which was essentially a decision to let the language die out. In some ways, I imagine the gap in language ability could have perpetuated distance between child and parent, as many parents also refused to talk about their former lives in China.<sup>47</sup> As a group, the Chinese Nicaraguans do not have their own language, and they do not have the language of their heritage either. This may explain why they are not a cohesive group with a unique identity, like the creoles. For many Chinese people in diaspora, the loss of language has been tantamount to losing their sense of a unified self-identity.

Currently, however, the Chinese Nicaraguan School is a return to the Chinese language. Supported by Chinese and Taiwanese alike, its focus on teaching the Mandarin language is a step towards reconnecting Chinese Nicaraguans with the language of their homeland.<sup>48</sup> Although billed as focusing on promoting the international languages of Mandarin and English for Nicaraguan students, the school acts as an institutionalized resource for any new Chinese or Taiwanese immigrants or the children of these immigrants. In the past, when these immigrants came, there was no way for them to recover their diminishing grasp on the language, or to formally teach the next generation Mandarin or Cantonese, which are famously hard to learn due to the written language. Additionally, its focus on Mandarin signals a shift in the immigration patterns and perception of the Chinese

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<sup>46</sup> Quant, Ivan. President of the Association of Chinese Nicaraguan. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Chinese Nicaragua. 8 April 2016. La Cocina de Doña Haydee, Managua.

<sup>47</sup> Sujo, Hugo. Professor and former politician. Interview re: the history of the Chinese on the Atlantic coast. 19 April 2016. Bluefields.

<sup>48</sup> "Colegio Chino Nicaragüense." Colegio Chino Nicaragüense. Accessed May 07, 2016. <http://www.colegiochinonic.com/>.

language—Mandarin is now considered a necessary language for the Nicaraguans to continue living in a competitive global economy.<sup>49</sup>

These various components of the Chinese Nicaraguan identity serve to point out that the Chinese Nicaraguans are indeed participants of a self-inflicted, but nonetheless real, diaspora of Chinese bodies and culture. According to McKeown, “for the diaspora to be a useful and coherent category it should describe cultural bonds, ties to a homeland, transnational organizations, or networks linking people together across geographic boundaries and organizations.”<sup>50</sup> Starting from the mid-1850’s, the Chinese were the continuous participants of a mass migration, which included both a dispersion of their culture and an integration of foreign influences and cultures. The existence and experiences of the Chinese in Nicaragua cannot be seen only in “trans-regional and trans-national continuities,”<sup>51</sup> which in this case would concern only the differences in experiences of the Chinese from the Atlantic coast and the Pacific side, and the solitary connection between China and Nicaragua.

Instead, the history of the Chinese, in Nicaragua and across the world, has been shaped by global economics in which the basic theory of labor “supply and demand” dictated the flow of human traffic; nationalist politics and policies enforcing racist and exclusionary agendas; and cultural norms re-enforcing the precedence of certain Chinese villages traveling to certain destinations.<sup>52</sup> Even the continued migration of Chinese out of Nicaragua, propelled

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<sup>49</sup> Anonymous. Student of the Chinese Nicaraguan School. Interview re: his thoughts about the Chinese in Nicaragua. 23 April 2016. The School of Chinese Nicaragua, Managua.

<sup>50</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 309. doi:10.2307/2659399.

<sup>51</sup> Pineda, Baron. "The Chinese Creoles of Nicaragua: Identity, Economy, and Revolution in a Caribbean Port City." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 228. doi:10.1353/jaas.2001.0033.

<sup>52</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 309. doi:10.2307/2659399.

by the instability of the intensifying Sandinista revolution, cannot be limited to the scope of a Nicaragua-focused perspective. The revolution itself was part of a wave of revolutions against the U.S. controlled dictatorial governing and economic domination of the Central and South America. The Chinese Nicaraguan's individualistic decision to immigrate from Nicaragua to the United States is not a decision contained within that moment. Instead it belongs to a larger history that ironically sees the Chinese Nicaraguan desiring to leave the country he was forced to choose to reside in in favor of the country that first installed the racist, exclusionary policies that diverted his journey south, and which had also contributed to the very war that destabilized his life and motivated his leaving.

As we move into the current day, the global processes, economic incentives, political agendas, and cultural trends remain ever influential in impacting the migratory trends of the now Taiwanese entering into the country. In many ways, the Taiwanese arriving in the country are operating as a spiritual extension of those initial Chinese immigrants, but they should be observed with a new sensitivity to the current-day politics and specificities of the state of Taiwan in the international stage. Yet, the complex internal conversations of identity, memory, and cultural preservation are still taking place in many of the Taiwanese who now call Nicaragua home, though with a little less tension due to the modern ease of travel and accessibility of technology for communication.<sup>53</sup>

For the other descendants of mainland Chinese, the culture of Nicaragua has both allowed for a preservation and even celebration of Chinese culture, and the domination of that identity by the majority *mestizo* culture. In the past, the separated and disparate Chinese Nicaraguans gave their next generation not a cohesive, unified identity as a realized Chinese Nicaraguan, like in the creole cultures that exist in parts of the Caribbean, but a mixed

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<sup>53</sup> Tao, Danilo. Diplomat. Interview re: his experiences and history as a Taiwanese in Nicaragua. 13 April 2016. Casa de Café, Managua.

identity, in which the subject identifies parts of himself as belonging to the separate and distinct Nicaraguan and Chinese sides. Certain foods and traditions recalled the Chinese part of the subject's identity, but these memories could only be contrived through the active participation of the Chinese Nicaraguan in these specific activities. Otherwise, the dominant mestiza culture would overwhelm the "part" of the subject that is their Chinese identity. As Taiwanese immigrants integrate into the Nicaraguan culture, navigating this sometimes tense boundary between assimilation and preservation, remembering and forgetting, will also become part of the process of forming their identity and conception of home.

### **Conclusion**

McKeown pointed out the stereotype of "the difficulty of severing off the Chinese soul within those living abroad."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, many of the descendants of Chinese living abroad do look towards China with some sense of longing or yearning, but not necessarily for the continuation of "a Chinese soul." Rather, they want to be able to better place their identity and appearance, their heritage and history, along a framework that is understandable. They are responding to the threat of forgetting, which is equivalent to a form of erasure.

This project discovered multiple ways in which the Chinese Nicaraguans fight against the erasure of their existence, as well as their own erasure of their Chinese identities. After the loss of the majority of the Chinese living in Nicaragua, the creation of an institutional space, represented by the Chinese Nicaraguan Association, is part of an effort to finally institutionalize their existences and experiences, and carve out connections cross-culturally in Nicaragua and transnationally across Central America and even China. The formation of a Chinese language school represents a desire to celebrate and maintain a link to the Chinese

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<sup>54</sup> McKeown, Adam. "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 303-337. doi:10.2307/2659399.

language, which was so inaccessible to the vast majority of Chinese Nicaraguans growing up. The devotion to Chinese food presents another form of remembering and reestablishing their ethnic identity—although most Chinese Nicaraguans have never had Chinese food outside of the context of Nicaragua, they remain attached to it as a cultural artifact of their identity. Chinese food also shows how an ethnic identity can be mixed with influences from the dominant culture, as well as how an ethnic food can be adopted and integrated into a foreign culture.

On the other side, the Atlantic coast showed how an entire ethnic group can nearly entire vanish from a community as the silent consequence of powerful global movements. Although the Chinese community was especially robust and influential in the Caribbean coast, their attachment to the land and community was not enough to withstand the larger forces of nationalism and economics that conspired to drive them out. Now, the Atlantic coast is a land of forgotten memories and artifacts, where Chinese shop names and last names were made meaningless by the disestablishment of institutional memory and the dilution of cultural identity over time and the generations. In the cultural, ethnic mix so idiosyncratic of the Caribbean coast, the Chinese cultural contributions were simply swallowed up without a continuous group of Chinese to uphold their values or identity. In most Caribbean households, dishes like “chop suey” are served generously without explanation; they have been passed down over time until they became essentially Nicaraguan or Caribbean in nature. Maybe, there will be a simply brief statement to mark the food’s heritage such as: “Once there was a large community of Chinese who lived here.”

The research performed both on the Atlantic and Pacific sides demonstrates how identity and migration cannot be removed from history. While so much of thought surrounding identity is focused on the internal processes of the subject group and their intranational interactions, the role of historical and economic processes concerning more than

China and Nicaragua should not be discounted. The historical interactions of the global economy and politics of nations outside of Nicaragua have played a major role in deciding the specific region that Chinese people would leave from, the destinations they would travel to, whether they stayed, even the kinds of jobs they would most likely take. These global forces continually shape the Chinese Nicaraguan identity even today, motivating the Taiwanese to move to Nicaragua instead of the mainland Chinese, and yet additionally complicating their relations with the economic incentives of Chinese businesses and investors.

More than anything, this project shows how an ethnic identity may be shaped and preserved even against the constant pressure of assimilation to a dominant culture. Moreover, the research sheds light on how deeply an ethnic group can accept a new country as their new home. Although Chinese and Taiwanese Nicaraguans perform activities that recall their ethnic and cultural identity and homeland, it is Nicaragua that they chose as their home. Many of the second generation and third generations grew up with a sense of Nicaraguan nationalism, and many fought and died for the Sandinista revolution. The Chinese Nicaraguans who stayed, who have continued to live here, consider themselves undeniably Nicaraguans who are also Chinese, who eat Chinese foods and celebrate Chinese holidays. Speaking in a mix of Spanish and English, expressing a yearning to know their heritage but never leave Nicaragua, to eat sweet and sour chicken with *tostones*, all my interviewees eschewed purist conceptions of identity with bold spirits that were remarkably Chinese-Nicaraguan.



## **Glossary of Terms**

*Mestizaje* – the dominant culture of Nicaragua, which takes influences from a range of cultures, predominantly from indigenous cultures and the Spanish colonial culture

*Mestizo* – the adjective form of being of mixed heritage, with ancestry in Spanish colonists and the native indigenous people, and part-taking in the *mestizaje* culture. Most people are *mestizo*.

Chop suey – a common dish created by Cantonese immigrants which combines various ingredients with noodles; not typically eaten in China

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