1 Prohibited Race / Ideal Citizens

The Social History and Background of the Chinese in Panama

Anyone visiting Panama today will immediately notice the extensive presence of the Chinese community.[1] With an estimated 175,000 Chinese living in the Republic,[2] they make up about 6.5 percent of the total population of 2.7 million. Their roots run deep, reaching back more than 150 years, and they are to be found everywhere in the country. The majority of Panamanian Chinese now live in Panama City and the surrounding suburb of Chorrera. Meanwhile, Colón and Bocas del Toro—which used to be two major centers for the Chinese—have been affected by out-migration. Today, the Chinese in Panama could not be more diverse. They range in generational, class, religious, occupational, linguistic, and regional backgrounds, not to mention their extremely diverse racial-ethnic makeup and cultural identifications, attitudes, and behaviors. Despite this diversity, they maintain a collective identification with being culturally Chinese, broadly defined, and at the same time, they feel deeply connected to Panama. This, no doubt, informs the kinds of social institutions they build, and, in fact, makes possible their distinct cultural formation.

From constructing the transisthmian railroad to developing commercial distribution networks to forming Chinatowns, diasporic Chinese have played a key role in Panama's economic, sociopolitical, and cultural development. Chinese labor and entrepreneurship have extended the reach of the global market into all parts of the country. Chinese social institutions have expanded the nation's civil society, and Chinese culture, food, and art have contributed to the cultural diversity of Panama. In fact, certain Chinese items and practices have become so integral to Panamanian everyday life that they have lost their ethnic association and are considered simply to be "Panamanian." *Ma fa*, a dessert made of sugar-coated fried dough, is a case in point; and *ñapa*, the shopkeepers' practice of giving candy in place of monetary change or as a token of apprecia-

tion, is another example. Conversely, some institutions have become so commonly identified with ethnic Chinese that they are automatically associated with them, such as *tiendas*, or family-run convenience stores. Indeed, throughout Panama, in cities and towns and along the highways, virtually all *tiendas* are run by Chinese families.

In Panama City, the Chinese presence is particularly pronounced. In many cities throughout the world, Chinese distinctiveness is manifest in Chinatowns, and Panama City has two: Barrio Chino is located in the old part of Panama City and a new Chinatown is thriving in the neighborhood of El Dorado. Moreover, Chinese have been active in mainstream Panamanian politics. A number of them have been elected to legislative office, and the posts of minister of public works, minister of immigration, and mayor of Panama City have been held by Chinese Panamanians.

Despite their vivid and inescapable presence in everyday Panamanian society, diasporic Chinese remain glaringly absent in most people's knowledge of Panama and Latin America more broadly. In essence, a gap exists between dominant perceptions of Panamanian nationhood and the reality of Panamanian society. This chapter—and the book overall—attempts to address this gap by offering an overview of the history and current situation of diasporic Chinese in Panama. With a discussion of migration practices, transnational family formation, religion, language and education, and community organizations, this chapter also explores the ways in which Chinese Panamanian cultural and social life reflect their evolving engagement with not only Panama and mainland China/Taiwan but also the United States and the larger diaspora.

"Bridge of the World, Heart of the Universe": Panama as Global Nexus

Strategically located between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and connecting North and Central America with South America, Panama has played a critical role in global capitalism. Indeed, it has been one of the most important transit points in international trade for the past 500 years. Given its strategic location and with the thinnest strip of land separating the two oceans, it was destined to become a main transit point for people and goods traveling east and west, as well as north and south. As early as the 1500s and for almost 300 years (with minor interruptions), Panama served as Spain's sole official Pacific terminal and transfer point of all shipment to and from the Crown for all territories south of Mex-

ico.[3] It also attracted a number of contenders seeking partnership in, if not control of, its geographical advantage. Meanwhile, the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade linked China and Japan to Europe via the Philippines and Mexico, exchanging New World silver for Oriental luxury goods such as porcelain, textiles, tea, and spices.[4] With these flows of exchange came people as well.

While a canal across the Isthmus had been of interest since the 1500s, the first transisthmian project was the railroad. Constructed during the California Gold Rush in response to the demand for safer and faster transportation, the transisthmian railroad served as the most popular route for people traveling between the East Coast of the United States and California. With the success of the railroad, the dream of a water passageway was revitalized. The French made the first attempt at building the canal, and after its failure, the United States took over the task, but not before first helping Panama gain its independence from Colombia. Under the watchful eye of the American navy, only one cannon was fired by the Colombian ship *Bogotá* in this effort, killing a "Chinaman and a donkey" near the old market of Panama City.[5]

The Republic of Panama was formed in 1903, and to the resentment of isthmian patriots, it was a Frenchman, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, chief engineer of the sea-level canal project, who signed the canal treaty with the United States, wrote the Panamanian declaration of independence and constitution, and designed the Panamanian flag. To add insult to injury, the signed treaty gave the United States sovereignty "in perpetuity of the use, occupation, and control" of a sixteen-kilometer-wide strip of land for the canal and three nautical miles into the sea from each terminal. Within this designated canal area, the United States would possess all the rights, powers, and authority as "if it were the sovereign of the territory within which said lands and waters are located to the entire exclusion of the exercise by the Republic of Panama."[6] In essence, Panama became a virtual protectorate of the United States "through two provisions whereby the United States guaranteed the independence of Panama and received in return the right to intervene in its domestic affairs."[7] Panamanians, left with no apparent alternative, had no choice but to ratify the treaty and the constitution. These terms, as history has shown, became a major source of contention between Panama and the United States throughout the twentieth century.[8] A cursory glance at the major events shaping Panamanian history and consciousness shows the centrality of American intervention: the student protests against American colonialism

in the 1960s that led to American use of military force and the deaths of several people; the momentous signing of the Carter-Torrijos Treaty in 1977 that initiated the gradual handover of the Canal Zone, U.S. military bases, and the Canal itself to Panama; the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989; and the final return of the Canal in 1999.

Not unlike many of its Central American neighbors, Panama has had a sordid and complicated political history. In addition to American colonialism, dueling interests between the different classes and racial groups, and between the urban and rural segments produced tremendous instability throughout the twentieth century. Many exceptional studies have elaborated on Panama's political history,[9] and I shall simply highlight a few points here to illustrate the kind of domestic conditions faced by Panamanians. In its short history of just over 100 years, the Republic of Panama has had four different constitutions; one president (Arnulfo Arias) was elected three separate times and was removed from office within two years all three times. Between 1940 and 1949, seven different people were elected to the presidency. From 1968 to 1989, Panama was ruled by two different military regimes; the second ended with the U.S. invasion and the arrest of its dictator, Manuel Noriega. Clearly, Panama's governance has not been the most stable, and this has produced much cynicism among Panamanians.

With the completion of the canal in 1914, Panama solidified its position as a major global transit hub in the modern world. Today, the canal remains one of the most important routes for transporting cargo across the oceans. In the latter half of the twentieth century, other developments in Panama helped bolster the nation's importance in international commerce and finance. In 1953, Panama opened the Colón Free Trade Zone, where products from all over the world are processed and distributed throughout the Americas. Today, the Colón Free Trade Zone has grown to be the largest in the Western Hemisphere, with China and Hong Kong producing the highest volume of goods passing through the zone. In international finance, Panama is widely recognized as an offshore banking haven. With its bank secrecy and tax-exempt laws passed in 1959 and 1970, respectively, Panama has attracted many international financiers and traders.[10] Moreover, since Panama uses the U.S. dollar as its unit of exchange, there is little risk of currency devaluation. In 1997, one hundred and sixteen banks had branches in Panama City.[11] Another noteworthy contribution to Panama's economy is made by its corporation and ship registries. In the late 1980s, approximately 100,000 companies

had been incorporated in Panama,[12] and in terms of ship registration, Panama is ranked number one in the world's merchant fleet, with more than 13,600 ships registered under the Panamanian flag. All these developments have reinforced Panama's centrality in the global economy.

Panama, "Bridge of the World, Heart of the Universe"(Puente del Mundo, Corazón del Universo), has always prided itself on being a passageway that connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.[13] By stressing constant movement, flow, and circulation, Panama has represented itself more as a path or a route and less as a destination, a place where people settle and create community. But one of Panama's most noteworthy, if often overlooked, aspects is its ethnic and cultural diversity, enhanced by centuries of immigration from all over the world. In addition to its mestizo, white, West Indian,[14] and indigenous[15] populations, Panama is home to Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Jews, Arabs, and Indians from India (referred to there as Hindus).[16] While their exact numbers are difficult to gauge (since national censuses conducted after 1940 do not record racial and ethnic categories), the numerous temples, mosques, ethnic shops and restaurants attest to these ever-growing communities, each of which has left its mark on Panamanian society.

At the end of the twentieth century, Panama entered another phase of rapid transformation. On December 31, 1999, the United States returned the Canal and its surrounding areas to Panama and ended its military occupation. In response to globalization pressures to open its borders and neoliberal pressures to privatize, Panama began offering many of its previously U.S.-administered properties for international investment and privatized some of its major state-run services. With the diversification of foreign investments and the expected decrease of U.S. influence on the nation's domestic and foreign policies, the Panamanian state is taking a bolder and more decisive stance. One prime example of this is Panama's newly established (albeit unofficial) relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). As a longtime ally of Taiwan (ROC), and in keeping with U.S. Cold War containment policies, Panama did not have formal interstate relations with the PRC until recently. Panama's move on the eve of the U.S. demilitarization to negotiate commercial relations and establish mutual commercial offices with the PRC in 1996, while maintaining official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, was the nation's first significant foreign relations step. Simultaneously having relations with both of the two Chinas was hard to achieve, and they may be even more challenging to maintain. Another example of Panama's determination to distance it-

self from U.S. control occurred in March 1997, when the Panamanian government uncharacteristically rejected a contract proposal from the U.S. corporate giant Bechtel to lease Panama's Balboa and Cristóbal ports. Despite pressure from the U.S. ambassador, William Hughes, to "deal with the U.S. investors' complaints [against the Panamanian government for impeding their investment and trade],"[17] Panama remained firm in its decision to give Hong Kong-based Hutchinson Port Holdings the leasing rights to the ports. As reflected in both these instances, Panama is clearly projecting a more confident image as it repositions itself with its newfound independence and responds to the changing conditions of the global political economy. Instead of looking primarily to the north, it has now turned its attention to the east.[18]

Routes and Roots: Migration and Settlement

To get a sense of the scope and duration of the Chinese presence in Panama, one must first have a sense of Chinese migration within the larger framework of Latin America. As mentioned above, by the sixteenth century, Spain had established the Manila galleon trade, linking China and Japan, via the Philippines and Mexico, to Europe, which lasted for almost three centuries without a break and undoubtedly facilitated the circulation of people as well as goods along the galleon's transcontinental routes. As early as 1635, we find evidence of a burgeoning Chinese settlement in Mexico City, when a group of Spanish barbers filed a complaint against Chinese barbers for excessive competition.[19] Then, it was not until 1802, when the British began experimenting with the exportation of Chinese contract labor to its overseas colonies,[20] that 192 Chinese male workers landed in Trinidad, becoming the first organized Chinese settlement in the Americas (Lai 2004).

The earliest documentation of Chinese migration to Panama (then part of the Spanish colony of New Granada) was in 1854,[21] when a group of 705 Chinese came as contract laborers for the construction of the transisthmian Panama Railroad, a project organized by a group of New York financiers known as the Panama Railway Company.[22] These laborers, along with several hundred others who followed shortly thereafter, came as part of the mid-1800s Asian labor migration to the Americas. To speak in terms of push-and-pull migration factors, the end of the African slave trade created a critical labor demand throughout the Americas. This pull coincided with the push for Asian emigration, primarily from China and

India, followed by Japan and Korea. China's defeat in the Opium Wars in the mid 1800s, along with a series of environmental disasters, had left the country economically weak, and large numbers of Chinese men resorted to signing labor contracts to work in the New World. Between 1847 and 1874, over 250,000 Chinese were sent to Peru and Cuba alone, with thousands more sent to Panama, Costa Rica, and the British West Indies.

When the first group of 705 Chinese laborers arrived in Panama, they were confronted with unimaginable challenges.[23] The environmental and working conditions were so unbearable that within six months, over 500 laborers had died and the remainder were sent to Jamaica in exchange for West Indian workers. Unlike in Peru and Cuba, then, indentured Chinese labor was short-lived in Panama, and it was not until the late 1800s, at the height of banana production and the construction work on the French Canal, followed by the building of the American Canal, that signs of Chinese cultural and commercial life began to flourish there. The Chinese who migrated during this period came not as contract laborers but as independent workers and merchants.[24] They went into all sorts of industries, including farming, retail and wholesale vending of household goods, textiles, restaurants, bars, bakeries, and laundry services. Notably, they were most successful in the small retail market, and as early as the mid 1880s, they already had become a formidable force in this sector. It was during this period that sizable Chinese communities emerged in Panama City and Colón, the Canal's two terminal cities, as well as Bocas del Toro, home to the United Fruit Company. To a large extent, Chinese commerce spread alongside American expansion: Chinese entrepreneurial efforts sustained and fulfilled the needs of the labor force working on American projects. This mutually beneficial economic relationship between the Chinese and the Americans would come to nurture their sociopolitical ties. Throughout the twentieth century, Panamanian Chinese and the U.S. Canal Administration maintained a rather friendly relationship. This alliance is underscored by the fact that the American administration, upon the request of the Chinese government, provided consular representation for diasporic Chinese in Panama during the early 1900s.

Before 1903, immigration laws in Panama were quite lax. Upon becoming a republic, however, Panama adopted many of the same laws as the United States, thereby inheriting its restrictive immigration laws against the Chinese.[25] This is not to say that Panama adopted these laws blindly. In fact, since the 1880s, substantial public pressure against Chinese immigration and commercial competition had been mounting. The

institutionalization of Chinese exclusion laws was thus not unexpected. Despite official policy, however, the Chinese population continued to grow, and Panamanians soon realized that they had little control over the enforcement of immigration policy, since the United States had sovereignty over the sea terminals. In essence, immigration to Panama was left in the hands of the U.S. authorities, and the Americans had little interest in enforcing Panamanian immigration laws. With time, the Chinese community grew, their businesses expanded, and they began inserting themselves culturally and politically into Panamanian society.

Meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiment continued to grow. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Sociedad Anti-China (Anti-Chinese Society) had been established, rousing popular support and waging campaigns against Chinese immigration. With the formation in 1923 of Acción Communal (Community Action),[26] an organization consisting mostly of urban professionals, nationalist, racialist, and xenophobic sentiments were articulated into political discourse, which in turn quickly became incorporated into political platforms. This nationalist movement culminated in 1940, when Arnulfo Arias Madrid was elected president and a new constitution was ratified, redefining Panamanian nationhood in terms of *mestizaje* and Hispanic culture, while disenfranchising Chinese and non-Hispanic blacks, among others. A popular movement against these groups was then fully unleashed. Now backed by official decree, many local Panamanians took the law into their own hands, and many Chinese lost their properties and livelihoods as a result of threats and violence by Panamanian civilians. These kinds of anti-Chinese movements were not uncommon in Latin America and the Caribbean. They occurred in Mexico, Trinidad, and Jamaica at different times throughout the twentieth century and often coincided with nationalist movements that inspired heightened nativist sentiment paired with racism and xenophobia.[27]

In the aftermath of these catastrophic events, local Chinese leaders in Panama reorganized the community's governing structure and developed a new agenda of integration. Their aim was to strengthen their sense of political and cultural belonging in Panama. In light of China's closing of its borders after the communist revolution in 1949, any dreams of returning to the homeland had evaporated, and the reality of creating a home in Panama had gained new urgency. In the next few decades, the Chinese leadership focused on building cohesion among the Chinese in Panama, asserting a Chinese presence in national politics, and extending

transnational networks throughout the Americas. A number of local and transnational organizations were formed during the 1960s and 1970s (see below), and the first Panamanian of Chinese descent was elected to the Electoral Tribunal in 1964. Since then, a number of Panamanian Chinese have been elected to public office and have served in government cabinets (see below).

Chinese immigration between the 1950s and the early 1980s was considerably slower than in previous periods. After the early 1950s, when Panama received a wave of Chinese fleeing the communist regime, Chinese immigration from mainland China decreased tremendously. During the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of Chinese immigrants came primarily from Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was not until the mid 1980s that Chinese immigration rose dramatically again. During the Noriega regime, thousands of Chinese from mainland China arrived in Panama. Some came to settle, but the majority used Panama as a point of transit into the United States. During this period, Panama was only one node within the global network of Chinese human trafficking. The *Golden Venture*, which ran aground off New York City in June 1993, was among the many ships that carried hundreds of mainland Chinese to the United States, Europe, Canada, and Latin America.[28]

The majority of the Chinese who arrived in Panama during this period were primarily Hakkas from the Canton (Guangdong) region, and they can be divided roughly into two groups: those who paid their passage in full and those who came with three-year work contracts. Also, for the first time in Panamanian history, a large number of single Chinese women were among this group of immigrants. It is important that these immigrants to Panama not be confused with the Hong Kong elites who immigrated directly to the United States and Canada during this same period.[29] Indeed, while Hong Kong elites used investment visas to immigrate, those who came to Panama had less capital and had to resort to using so-called snakeheads, or Chinese human trafficking agents.

After the American invasion and the ousting of Noriega in 1989, it was estimated that the Chinese population had doubled during the Noriega regime. No doubt, the invasion momentarily disrupted the communication and business-as-usual practices of trafficking networks, which in turn caused many unintended migrants to be stranded in Panama without legal documentation. Demonization of recent immigrants as criminals and accusations that they had used illegal means to enter Panama quickly led to demands for official investigations. Within a few months

of the new government being established, a surprise police raid of Chinese homes and businesses was ordered. Hundreds of Chinese throughout Panama were arrested, and the Chinese community at large was outraged. Thanks to the efforts of community leaders, however, the situation was resolved, and the recent immigrants were redocumented and allowed to remain in Panama. With the doubling of the population in less than five years, the social dynamics of the Chinese community changed radically in a very short time, producing intense friction between local Chinese and the newcomers. Further exacerbating these tensions were the cultural, class, and ideological differences that persisted well after the process of redocumentation.

Since their first arrival at least 150 years ago, then, Chinese in Panama have been met with prevailing sentiments of restriction, confinement, and even prohibition. From the 1904 constitution to Arnulfo Arias's policy of prohibition to the 1980s police raids, the sense of belonging of diasporic Chinese in Panama has been challenged continually. This is not to say that ethnic Chinese were in no way accepted by or integrated into Panamanian society. They were, with varying degrees of success. However, these experiences were often punctuated by violent reminders of their marginality and exclusion, and acceptance was not the attitude espoused by most official documents.

It was not until 1997, with changes in Panama-China relations, that perceptions of Chinese belonging improved significantly. For the first time in Panamanian history, ethnic Chinese began to be hailed as ideal citizens of Panama. Indeed, shifts in the global political economy had transformed China into an important economic ally of the Panamanian nation-state, and ethnic Chinese saw their status shift from that of tolerated foreigners to that of valued cultural-economic bridge builders of globalization. Today, the perception of ethnic Chinese could not be any more different from what it was in earlier decades. And Chineseness—those cultural characteristics associated with being Chinese—has acquired special status. Panamanians are not only realizing the importance of learning Mandarin but are also taking an interest in feng shui (Chinese geomancy), Chinese medicine, and kung fu. (While this drastic transformation is one of the underlying currents motivating this book, I want to underscore that my intention is not to depict a process in which gaining acceptance into Panamanian society is the end point, but rather to illustrate that each critical moment of transformation is generated by a combination of local-transnational circumstances and that ethnic Chinese

have developed certain strategies and created a variety of cultural forms and practices in the process of living through these moments.)

Although the 1990s were a slow decade for Chinese immigration, the increasing economic and political presence of both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China would seem to point to increased immigration from both nations in the years ahead.

Families Spanning the Pacific and the Americas

One of the most notable aspects of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese migratory movements to Panama is that while some immigrants came directly from China, a large number migrated from different parts of the Americas and the Caribbean, including Peru, Jamaica, British Guiana, and Nicaragua. To be sure, many migrated from other parts of the world as well. However, what is significant about their movements within the Americas and between China and Panama is that they were often circular and continuous migrations.[30] These ongoing travels and movements created a fluid and complex web of activities and networks that reflect characteristics of what some scholars have called migrant circuits, transnational migrant communities, and diasporas.[31] More important, they gave rise to family ties spanning the Pacific and throughout the Americas, laying the basis for other networks. While Chinese migration and transnational family formation engendered diasporic sentiments and institutions that linked the collectivity more closely together, these same processes—embedded in structures of gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity—also produced new cultural and social hierarchies in Panama.

Given the harsh frontier conditions of Panama in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Chinese immigrants of that time were chiefly young men who considered their move temporary. To them, the rugged, undeveloped, and disease-infested environment made Panama inappropriate, even dangerous, for women and children. Under these conditions, transnational split households emerged. Most immigrants who came directly from China adopted this type of transnational family formation in which the men came alone to Panama while their families remained in China.[32] The Chinese who migrated to Panama from other parts of the Americas, on the other hand, were more likely to bring along their families, who were presumably already in the Americas.

Over time, the men began to set down roots in their adopted home.

Those who were able to earn enough to do so had the choice of bringing their wives and other family members to Panama. Those without the means either maintained this split-household arrangement indefinitely or formed new families locally. However, even with this tendency toward establishing a home in the new country, transnational split households did not go away; rather, what had formerly been a matter of necessity became a matter of choice. Families that achieved a certain economic status began to send their children to China to obtain a Chinese education and learn Chinese practices, behavior, and discipline. In such cases, the mother and children would be sent to the Chinese home village, and once the children reached a certain age, they would return to Panama. In short, the transnational split household facilitated and enabled the reproduction of Chinese cultural knowledge and became a practice of choice among wealthy Chinese. It evolved into a strategy of cultural capital accumulation. This endeavor, as might be expected, was not inexpensive. Indeed, it was very much a class-based phenomenon, which also mapped loosely onto racialized differences among diasporic Chinese. With the lack of single Chinese women in Panama during the early migration periods, only those with capital had the option of sending for brides from China (which many did), while others with less capital married local Panamanians. Hence, class not only determined the possibility of gaining Chinese cultural capital but also correlated with marriage partners and the reproduction of (supposed) Chinese racial purity.

To a large extent, then, transnational family formations helped convert economic capital into sociocultural capital in Chinese Panama, thereby producing a new cultural and social hierarchy among diasporic Chinese. To summarize this point succinctly: economic class determined (1) who had the option of marrying a Chinese woman and (2) who was able to establish and maintain a transnational split household. And through these practices, particular families were able to accrue Chinese cultural capital in the form of racial purity, language, education, and everyday knowledge, which, in turn, reproduced and sustained sociocultural status and divisions within the Chinese community. Chinese women, in many ways, embodied and performed a certain class status as cultural and biological reproducers of Chinese purity. And the racial delineation between "pure Chinese" and "mixed Chinese" served as a general marker of social class difference. Indeed, these forms of Chinese cultural capital remained the most significant markers of sociocultural status until the 1940s. After the Chinese communist government closed its borders in 1949, however,

transnational family formations between mainland China and Panama were made virtually impossible, disrupting their racial and cultural correlation with class.

Today, while the tendency to assert Chinese purity as idealized diasporic Chineseness still exists—most notably expressed in parents' preferences as regards their children's marriage partners—the correlation between race, cultural competence, and class no longer adheres so well. Moreover, the desire for Chinese cultural capital shifted in the 1940s when ethnic Chinese began to look toward the United States, the rising global superpower, and toward American culture as both a vehicle for social mobility and the preferred marker of cultural distinction. Transnational family formations continued, but members were now split between the United States and Panama. This time, mostly young men and women were sent abroad for education and work opportunities. Many returned after a period of time, but some chose to stay, thereby further extending their family networks.

The United States remained the central source of cultural and economic aspiration for Panamanian Chinese until the 1990s, when China entered the global imagination as a major contender for economic hegemony. Today, while the United States remains the main emigration choice for Panamanian Chinese, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are becoming more popular as alternative destinations. Whether they will be temporary locations or permanent homes is yet to be determined.

Transnational family formations facilitate a constant flow of remittances, the exchange of cultural ideas and practices, and continuous migratory movements and travel. While this discussion has focused primarily on the China-Panama corridor, other routes within the Americas and the Caribbean have also been significant, particularly since the Chinese communist revolution, when transnational relations shifted away from Asia and toward the Americas. Although these ties with the Americas have been less systematic and predictable, they are no less impressive, not just generating a set of intercontinental social institutions and kinship networks but also inspiring a cultural imaginary and shared consciousness connected to various locales. Places like Peru, Jamaica, Brazil, British Guiana, and Nicaragua often emerged in the stories and memories of people I talked to in the course of my research. To be sure, neither their conception nor experience of community is confined to the borders of the Panamanian nation-state.

LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Two of the earliest Chinese organizations in Panama, formed during the 1880s, were the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, whose primary goal was to protect Chinese business and commercial interests, and the Way On Association, whose main objectives were to care for elderly Chinese, to arrange for funerals and the transportation of bones and ashes back to China, and to maintain the Chinese cemetery. With increasing immigration, native place associations emerged in the 1890s, and they continue to exert substantial influence today. With the exception of a few hundred Taiwanese Chinese, the majority of Chinese in Panama (even those who immigrated via Hong Kong) can trace their ancestral lineage to the Canton (Guangdong) region of China, and the five largest native place associations in Panama are the Fa Yin, Gou Kong Chow (Say Yap), Chung San, Sam Yap, and Hok San.[33] While the latter four associations represented most of the population until the 1980s, the recent influx of immigrants has tipped the scale, making Fa Yin the largest group in Panama. In general, native place association meetings are conducted in their specific dialects and are dominated by men, since native place affiliations are traced through patrilineal descent. As in most diasporic locations, the immigrant generation is the most active in these organizations, while Panamanian-born Chinese tend to participate in other organizations that are more bicultural and bilingual.

Among the larger and more significant organizations formed by Panamanian-born Chinese are the Asociación de Profesionales China-Panameña (Chinese Panamanian Professionals Association), or APROCHIPA, which offers lectures, workshops, and network-building opportunities; a sociocultural organization called Agrupación, or Agrupa, which sponsors activities like the Panamanian Chinese Debutantes' Ball, the Friendship Dance, and the Mother's Day Cultural Performance; and the Asociación de Jóvenes Chinos (Chinese Youth Association), which primarily hosts social activities like field trips, karaoke nights, and dances. While there is a slight overlap in the constituencies of these groups, their leaders come from different segments of the community and have developed distinct profiles for each organization. Religious organizations also exist, though they have not been as active as the abovementioned organizations. The Yan Wo Association is in charge of caring for the Yan Wo Buddhist Temple, and the Asociación Católica China de Panamá (Chinese Catholic Association of Panama) was formed recently.

These local organizations form the basic units of the national organization, the Asociación China de Panamá (Chinese Association of Pana-

ma), and their elected officials serve as its voting members. Formed after Arnulfo Arias's presidency, the Chinese Association of Panama was established in order to develop a more efficient process of decision making and community mobilization. Today, it is recognized as the central governing structure of the Chinese community in Panama, and it represents the community not only in national affairs but also in the transnational politics of the larger diaspora.

Since the mid 1960s, Panamanian Chinese have extended their reach on various transnational levels. While the abovementioned native place associations form one kind of transnational organization, which ties diasporic Chinese to both their native place and to one another via their affiliation with the same native place, the transnational organizations established in the 1960s have a different emphasis. The Federación de Asociaciones Chinas de Centroamérica y Panamá (Federation of Chinese Associations of Central America and Panama) was established after a series of joint meetings held by the presidents of Chinese associations in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Their common ground as diasporic Chinese was based less on where they were from than on where they had ended up. The 1950s and 1960s were decades of tremendous turmoil in Central America and Panama, and diasporic Chinese already had reason to feel vulnerable, having lost their "state" with the closing of mainland China's borders in 1949. Sharing similar conditions of uncertainty, then, the Chinese of Central America and Panama purposefully formed a regional organization to pool their resources to deal with any political and/or economic emergencies. In short, the federation was established in place of a fully functioning Chinese state that could protect the interests of diasporic Chinese. While at first the organization was not affiliated with either of the two Chinese governments, it soon established ties with the Republic of China in Taiwan, the Chinese government that is still officially recognized by countries in this region. With financial support from Taiwan, the federation hosts a rotating annual convention, though its headquarters are based permanently in Panama City.

Soon after the founding of this federation, two other transnational organizations were formed. The Federation of Chinese Associations in the Americas established a network among Chinese throughout the American continent, and the Global Association of Cantonese further extended these networks. Both of these were initiated with the endorsement and support of the Republic of China in Taiwan, and meetings are held regularly on an annual and biennial basis, respectively.

RELIGION

Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion are the four major religions practiced by Chinese in Panama. While most immigrants from mainland China arrive in Panama practicing a combination of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion (often consisting of a mix of Taoism and Confucianism), those who came in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often converted to Catholicism, and some did so without relinquishing their Buddhist and Chinese folk religious beliefs. In addition, many children of immigrants from the mid to late twentieth century have also converted to Catholicism. More than just being the dominant religion of Panama, Catholicism is woven into the social fabric of Panamanian society. For many of the early immigrants, embracing Catholicism meant not only religious conversion but also social integration and access to important resources. As many interviewees commented, marrying non-Chinese Panamanians and attending Catholic schools required religious conversion. Moreover, several mentioned the significance of the institution of *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship that involves children and their godparents),[34] which helped broaden and solidify kinship, social, and economic ties with non-Chinese Panamanians. This was particularly important for business owners seeking the patronage of non-Chinese. Their parents being Catholic, the following generations of Panamanian-born Chinese were baptized Catholic by default. Hence, while degrees of religious belief and practice vary, most of the descendents of the early immigrants tend to be Catholic. Among Chinese in Panama, then, Catholicism is perhaps the most widespread of the four religions.

The first Buddhist temple was built in Bocas del Toro as early as 1886. It was destroyed by a storm in the 1990s, and the only remaining temples are located in Colón and Panama City. Buddhism and Chinese folk religion are today practiced mostly among the immigrant generation from mainland China and Taiwan. With the recent influx of new immigrants from both places, they are experiencing a period of revitalization.

Finally, Protestantism is practiced mostly by Chinese immigrants from Taiwan, and since the Chinese Taiwanese population is relatively small, numbering in the low hundreds, and since some of those are Buddhists, its constituency is quite few in number.

LANGUAGE

Since Spanish is the official language of Panama, most of the Chinese there speak at least some Spanish. Naturally, too, the immigrants and

some of their descendants speak Cantonese and/or Mandarin, and English is also widely spoken, as we have seen. A breakdown of the different combinations of language use is quite complex, since immigrant generation, place of emigration, place of settlement in Panama, and education are all important determinants.

Most Chinese are bilingual in Spanish and English or Spanish and Cantonese or Mandarin. A small trilingual minority tend to be either immigrants from Hong Kong who arrived with English and Cantonese skills and acquired Spanish in Panama or mainland Chinese immigrants who lived in the U.S. Canal Zone or cities on the Atlantic coast (areas where English predominates) before moving to Panama City. Panamanian-born and -raised children of pre-1980s immigrants tend to be Spanish-speaking monoglots or bilingual in Spanish and English. A few may be able to speak some Cantonese and/or their village dialect. Differentiation among this group depends primarily on two factors: the kind of educational institution they attended and whether they were raised on the Atlantic (English-speaking) or Pacific (Spanish-speaking) coast. Among the Panamanian-born children of the 1980s immigrants who are now in their late teens or early twenties, most tend to be bilingual in Spanish and Cantonese (and/or a village dialect), although some have also learned English at school. Chinese from Taiwan generally speak Mandarin and Spanish or Mandarin and English, depending on how long they have been in Panama and what kind of educational backgrounds they had before immigration.

Education and Occupation

For Chinese in Panama, education is the key to social mobility. Panama offers a number of public and private schools, and Panama City has several universities. As mentioned above, before the 1940s, it was common practice for the children of wealthy families to go to China to acquire language and cultural skills before returning to Panama. For those who did not go abroad, an after-school Cantonese program operated during the 1930s and 1940s in the heart of Panama City's Chinatown. After it closed, it wasn't until the early 1980s that the Instituto Sun Yat-Sen (Sun Yat-Sen Institute) opened, offering state-approved curricula for grades kindergarten through twelve. What distinguishes the institute from other private schools is its list of offerings in Chinese language, Chinese dance, and kung fu. Cantonese was first offered as the Chinese language course, but soon thereafter, the school decided to teach Mandarin instead. The switch occurred not without controversy and was opposed by most of the

community, because Cantonese is not only their native language but also what many immigrant families speak at home. To their dismay, however, Taiwanese officials insisted that since Mandarin is the official language of both Taiwan and the PRC, Mandarin is the language of choice. Here is a clear example of the homeland state asserting influence on the cultural development of the diaspora.

After the 1940s, the pattern of sending children to China shifted to one of young adults going to the United States to pursue university degrees. While the former strategy helps reproduce family businesses, the latter enables access to job opportunities in the Canal Administration and in multinational companies. This shift facilitated the expansion of the professional class and perpetuated the class differentiation between those who worked in the Canal Zone (receiving U.S.-equivalent salaries) and those who worked in Panama (receiving a lower Panamanian salary). In general, studying abroad was and still is a practice of the middle class and elite in Panama, and although China and the United States, at different periods, have been the two main destinations, other countries in Europe and Latin America have also been popular. Those who wish to study in Panama can attend a variety of schools. The two most popular are the public University of Panama, opened in 1935, and the private University of Santa María la Antigua, established in 1965. Today, receiving an American university degree remains a key route to social mobility. More and more, however, these sojourns are becoming migrations. With limited opportunities in Panama and the increasing demand for skilled labor in the United States, graduates are likely to stay in the United States if they can find employment.

As any Panamanian will note, the most visible occupation among ethnic Chinese is small (family) business ownership. Particular businesses associated with Chinese include convenience stores, produce markets, electronics stores, laundries, and restaurants. In fact, virtually every convenience store in Panama is owned and run by ethnic Chinese. It is also worth noting that these businesses are supported by wider networks of Chinese farmers, distributors, wholesalers, and importers/exporters. Most often, the small businesses were founded by early immigrants and either passed down to the next generation or sold to newcomers. Panamanian-born Chinese who do not operate family businesses most often go into engineering, medicine, accounting, law, or architecture. Most are employees of larger firms, but sometimes a family of doctors will form a private medical practice together, or families of engineers and architects will establish their own integrated companies.

For recently arrived immigrants, employment can always be found in the many established Chinese businesses, and women often find jobs as domestic workers and caretakers in Panamanian Chinese homes. Some of the more educated immigrants go into teaching or administrative work at the Sun Yat-Sen Institute, or into news reporting for the Chinese newspapers, *El Expresso* and *El Diario Chino*, or the Chinese radio station. With a combination of hard work, business know-how, and luck, a few have been able to accumulate enough capital to start their own entrepreneurial ventures.

Political Involvement in the National and Diasporic Spheres

Chinese in Panama have engaged in national and transnational politics since the late nineteenth century, mostly in response to measures aimed at restricting their immigration and commercial competitiveness. Throughout the twentieth century, laws were passed to contain these or, after it became clear that it was futile to attempt to do so, to regulate them. In response, the Chinese have organized themselves, recruited support from both the Taiwanese and U.S. consulates, and mobilized for collective action. Indeed, this sustained struggle between the state and the Chinese population over immigration and commercial freedom is the backdrop against which the issue of Chinese belonging in Panama has played out. Compared with diasporic Chinese communities elsewhere in the Americas, the Chinese in Panama have been able to acquire significant political influence, which, in turn, has helped sustain their gradual growth as a community.[35] This can be attributed not only to their ability to obtain American and Chinese state support throughout most of the twentieth century, but, more important, to their strategic planning and political organization. Chapters 4 and 5 elaborate on the nuances of these points.

Despite their continual struggle with the state, ethnic Chinese have not shied away from participating in national politics. In fact, since 1964, at least nine Panamanian Chinese have been elected or appointed to government posts. They have served in a variety of capacities, including as legislators, deputy of the national assembly, minister of government and justice, director of the Colón Free Trade Zone, minister of public works, director of customs, vice mayor of Panama City, minister of immigration, and vice minister of commerce and industry.[36] In addition to these official forms of political involvement, certain leaders of the Chinese community have served on various occasions as informal advisors to top government

officials. In the national political sphere of Panama, then, ethnic Chinese have been extremely visible and active. Yet this has not translated into full citizenship.

In terms of their political involvement in the global Chinese diaspora, it is worth noting again that Panama houses the headquarters of the Federation of Chinese Associations of Central America and Panama. Chinese Panamanians' role as custodians of this regional organization reflects their relative power within the larger diaspora. Moreover, among the twenty-eight countries with which Taiwan has official relations, Panama is arguably its strongest and perhaps also most significant ally. As a result, the Taiwanese government has placed tremendous emphasis on bolstering relations not only with the Panamanian state but also with the diasporic Chinese living there. Through community development projects like the Sun Yat-Sen Institute, the Panamanian Chinese Cultural Center, Friendship Park, and co-sponsorship of various national and transnational conventions, the Taiwanese government has been able to maintain strong ties with diasporic Chinese. In turn, the Chinese in Panama have been among the most vocal supporters of the Taiwan government.

In sum, over the past 150 years, diasporic Chinese have developed a form of belonging in Panama that is thoroughly embedded within webs of transnational relations. For them, local integration goes hand in hand with maintaining transnational links with mainland China/Taiwan, the United States, and other Chinese communities dispersed elsewhere in the Americas. In fact, these dual processes are intimately woven together in their everyday lives. Not only do they actively practice transnationalism through migration, kinship, and social organization, but the transnational has always been present locally in Panama, in the sense that the United States had sovereignty over the Canal Zone for almost a century and the Chinese governments have maintained relations with the diaspora. Indeed, as reflected in all aspects of their cultural and social life, diasporic Chinese identity and ways of belonging are thoroughly informed by their ongoing relationships with Panamanian, Chinese, and American cultural forms and social institutions. Their multiplicity of expressions in cultural mixedness and political maneuvers, both coextensive and over time, illustrate their divergent and shifting modes of relating to this constellation of cultural and political reference points. What comes across clearly is that diasporic Chinese integration into Panamanian society has

always involved an active process of engaging and drawing upon transnational links as alternative resources. Faced with uncertain conditions of belonging in Panama, diasporic Chinese cultivated strategies, including the accumulation of different forms of cultural capital and the formation of transnational networks, to expand the parameters of what is possible, both in terms of their effort to create a home in Panama and, if this becomes untenable, the ability to create a home elsewhere. Of course, what sometimes works in their favor also at times works against them. Diasporic Chinese citizenship, then, reflects and articulates this particular form of belonging that emerges from the cultural and political crosscurrents emanating from their dual process of local integration and transnational engagement.

The following chapters of this book are organized around various moments of "rupture" in which the tensions between local formulations and transnational forces are clearly revealed and the exercise of diasporic citizenship can be identified. Chapter 2 situates Chinese in Panama within the larger context of Chinese in Central America. Using gender as the primary lens of analysis, I examine the beauty contest of the Convención de Asociaciones Chinas de Centroamérica y Panamá (Convention of Chinese Associations of Central America and Panama) to tease out the critical issues confronting diasporic Chinese of this region. The involvement of Panamanian Chinese in this regional organization marks one important transnational component that informs their diasporic citizenship. My intent is to show how gender performance, racial and cultural embodiment, and national difference all become key elements in debates of diasporic Chinese identity and belonging within this region network. The remaining chapters focus on other instances of social ruptures and include analyses of migration stories, Arnulfo Arias's "prohibited roots" policy and its effects on diasporic Chinese, the massive influx of Chinese immigration during the Noriega years and the criminalization of diasporic Chinese, and the dramatic refashioning of diasporic Chinese from tolerated foreigners into Panama's ideal citizens in the late 1990s. How have diasporic Chinese managed these vastly different yet equally powerful social ruptures that have constantly shifted their parameters of belonging, redefined notions of identity and community, and destroyed or opened possibilities of making a "home" in diaspora? How, in short, have the Chinese in Panama engaged diasporic citizenship and made it theirs?