

Discovery of his roots leads him to track history of Chinese in Mexico

Growing up in a predominantly white Los Angeles County suburb, Robert Chao Romero, an assistant professor of Chicana and Chicano studies, learned to hide his Chinese background.

The son of a Chinese mother and Mexican father, Romero recalled starting the first grade in Hacienda Heights and a classmate telling him an anti-Chinese joke.

“It was just a dumb kid’s joke, but it sort of sent the message to me that being Chinese is bad,” he added.



Romero, 38, didn’t learn to appreciate his Chinese background until he enrolled in law school at UC Berkeley.

“When I went to law school, my mind-set was ‘I want to be rich and famous, powerful and drive a Ferrari,’ ” he said. “But I had a real Augustinian experience in law school, and it changed everything for me.” He felt a deeper calling to choose a career that wasn’t just focused on making money but on reaching more altruistic goals.

At the same time, he began to realize that his Chinese grandfather had played a pivotal role in establishing a Christian church in China.

A friend had invited Romero to attend a Chinese church in the Bay Area. When he told some church members that his grandfather was Calvin Chao, a prominent Chinese Christian, they were in awe.

Chao was the founder of the Christian student movement in China starting in the 1930s. Romero subsequently learned that the magazine Christianity Today had published an article about Chao that dubbed him “the Billy Graham of China.”



“I met one couple several years ago that told me that anyone that is 40 years or older in China and a Christian would know who my grandfather was,” Romero added. “They told me my grandfather’s writings are standard theological texts that you can find on any pastor’s shelf in China or Taiwan.”

In the 1950s, Chao received death threats from the Chinese Communist Party that had just gained power, and he was forced to flee his native country.

Chao came to the United States and continued his work as a theologian and pastor. Many Chinese Christians in this country still revere his name to this day: The Chinese for Christ Calvin Chao Theological Seminary in Alhambra, for example, ensures that he

won't be forgotten.

As Romero learned about his family's history in China, his interest in his Chinese background was awakened.

One tidbit that had always intrigued Romero was that his parents knew a Chinese family who had lived in Mexico for many years. He decided to look into the history of Chinese Mexicans and discovered that although Spanish professors had written about the population, he could not find a book about Chinese Mexicans in English.

"The more I explored the topic, the more I realized this is a rich history that's a forgotten history for the most part," Romero said. "And I think a large part of the reason it's forgotten is because it's a dark chapter, unfortunately."

Years later, Romero completed "[The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940](#)," (University of Arizona, 2010) book which details the tragic history of Chinese immigrants in Mexico.

About 60,000 Chinese entered Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of them intent on gaining illegal entry into the United States, which had barred Chinese immigrants in 1882.

By the 1920s, Chinese immigrants who had settled in Mexico were the second largest immigrant group in the nation — after Spanish immigrants — with a population of 26,000.

But a nationalist fervor swept Mexico in 1910, the year in which the Mexican Revolution started. Revolutionaries largely viewed foreigners in Mexico as a detriment to the nation's economy, blaming them for becoming rich at the expense of humble Mexicans.

Revolutionary forces launched an attack against the Chinese neighborhood of Torreón in Northern Mexico. About half of the neighborhood's population, 300 people, perished. In the 1930s, the State of Sonora also passed restrictive laws against Chinese-owned businesses, which eventually forced many Chinese to return to China.

A small handful went to more hospitable areas in Mexico, such as Mexicali in Baja California, which is still known for its many Chinese restaurants, Romero noted.

"Despite the violence perpetuated against Chinese immigrants, they continued to persevere and have contributed to Mexico's diversity," Romero noted. "It is a great testament to their courage and will to survive in spite of great adversity and prejudice against them."

Studying the history of the Chinese in Mexico helped Romero understand how far Mexican and Chinese societies have come.

For instance, when his parents married in the 1960s after meeting at a Christian church gathering in Los Angeles, many of their relatives were supportive of their decision to marry.

And Romero said he also is more comfortable in his own skin.

"I've come to realize that I don't have to choose one culture over another," Romero said. "My Chinese culture represents a rich cultural treasure, and my Mexican heritage does as well."