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“THE SPANIARDS OF ASIA”: 
THE JAPANESE PRESENCE IN COLONIAL MEXICO

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Abstract

Curiosity about Japan in New Spain peaked during the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the modern immigration of the Japanese to the Americas that began in the late nineteenth century after the re-opening of Japan to the West has received scholarly attention, considerably less is known about the Japanese colonial diaspora. Through the analysis of seventeenth-century written and visual sources this essay provides insight into the Japanese presence in colonial Mexico.

Resumo

A curiosidade sobre o Japão atingiu o seu auge entre os finais do século XVI e XVII. Embora a imigração moderna de Japoneses para as Américas, que teve início no final do século XIX, após a reabertura do Japão ao Ocidente, tenha recebido atenção por parte dos estudiosos, sabe-se muito menos sobre a diáspora colonial Japonesa. Através da análise de fontes escritas e visuais do século XVII este ensaio faz luz sobre a presença japonesa no México colonial.

要約

日本への関心の頂点は16世紀後半から17世紀末にかけてみられる。17世紀の文献及び視覚的情報による分析を通して、この論文では植民地時代のメキシコでの日本人の存在に焦点をあてている。

Keywords:

New Spain, japanese diaspora, San Felipe de Jesus, colonial Mexico, Manuel de Arellano, San Francisco Xavier

Nova Espanha, diáspora japonesa, S. Felipe de Jesus, México Colonial, Manuel de Arellano, S. Francisco Xavier

新イスパニア、日本人の国外移住、聖フェリペ・デ・ジェズス、植民地時代のメキシコ、マヌエル・デ・アレラノ、聖フランシスコ・ザビエル
Between 1565 and 1815, trans-Pacific trade between Spanish America and East Asia facilitated the exchange and dispersal of material goods, peoples and natural resources on a global scale. Spain’s American viceroyalties, positioned at the international crossroads of both trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific trade, were more exposed to and influenced by Asian material culture than any other region in the Western world. Curiosity about Japan in New Spain peaked during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as many Creole friars joined the missionary efforts in East Asia, and literature on Japan proliferated throughout the viceroyalty. However, while the vast majority of sources published during the period documents the activities of Europeans in Japan\(^1\), less is known about the sojourn of the Japanese embassies of 1610 and 1614 to Mexico, or the presence of Japanese Christian converts in the colony after the national ban on Christianity was issued by Japan’s ruling Tokugawa Shogunate in 1614.

While the modern immigration of the Japanese to the Americas that began in the late nineteenth century after the re-opening of Japan to the West has received scholarly attention, considerably less is known about the Japanese colonial diaspora\(^2\), namely because their numbers were proportionally smaller, and because they tended to adopt Christian names upon baptism, rendering their identification in colonial documents difficult.\(^3\) In addition, unlike the Spanish, Indian or African populations of New Spain, Asians were not classified as one of the racial groups of eighteenth century \textit{casta}.


This essay will examine how Iberian enthusiasm for the Japanese was generated by the early letters of Francis Xavier and the ensuing missionary literature. These sources were influential – and pointedly strategic – in forming a favourable public opinion of the Japanese, to add credence to the missionaries’ cause, and likely enabled Japanese Christians of a certain social status to enjoy a place of privilege in colonial Mexico. A reading of 17th century sources, coupled with a re-evaluation of the pictorial output of the colonial period provides new insight into the documentation of Asians – specifically Japanese – in Mexican colonial painting and their presence in colonial Mexico.

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In his recent book, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, the historian Timothy Brook looks at the dawn of globalization in the 17th century by examining the paintings of the Dutch artist Johann Vermeer. The beaver felt hat of a wooing officer in the painting *The Officer and the Laughing Girl* launches Brook into a discussion of the 16th century beaver trade in Canada and the bold search for a passage to China across the North American continent. A Chinese porcelain bowl filled with fruit atop a Turkish carpet in Vermeer’s *Young Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window* initiates the journey through the corridor of trade of routes, from Delft to China in the 17th century. Brook posits that, “paintings are not “taken” like photographs; they are “made,” carefully and deliberately, and not to show an objective reality so much as to present a particular scenario”. As such, paintings in one way or another can open doors for examination, introspection and investigation.

On April 30, 1709 at the foot of the hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City, a new church was inaugurated and dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The transfer of the venerated image of the Virgin to its new home was a

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4 For a comprehensive study of the genre of *casta* painting, see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth Century Mexico* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). Racial classifications were often difficult to comprehend; while individuals identified as “chinos” are classified in *casta* paintings of the eighteenth century, Nicolas Leon’s classification of Mexican racial types or *castas* lists “chino” as the offspring of an Indian woman by a quadroon, a classification that was used as early as the sixteenth century. However, this classification does not apply for the seventeenth century. See Nicolas Leon, *Las castas del Mexico Colonial o Nueva España* (Mexico: 1924), p. 9. To complicate matters, in seventeenth-century New Spain, Filipinos were commonly referred to as *chinos* or *indios chinos*. In seventeenth-century archival documents, the term *chino* is frequently used in a very general manner identifying natives of the Philippines, China or Japan.

momentous event, documented in Manuel de Arellano’s painting *Transfer of the Image and Inauguration of the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Guadalupe* (Fig. 1). The scene vividly illustrates the pageantry and spectacle of religious festivals, and reveals the highly orchestrated social and political machinations, integral to colonial celebrations.⁶ In his large canvas, Arellano captures the precise moment in which the procession has paused for a musical interlude – complete with a chorus of singers and musicians – to sing hymns to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose protective gaze is projected southward, towards the viceregal capital.⁷

![Fig. 1 – Attributed to Manuel Arellano, Mexico, active c. 1691-1722, *Transfer of the Image and Inauguration of the Sanctuary of Guadalupe*, 1709. Oil on canvas. 69³/₈ x 102½ in. (176 x 260 cms). Collection of the Márques de los Balbases, Madrid. Photo by the author.](image)


⁷ Arellano included a cartouche on the bottom right of the canvas with identifying letters and numbers that correspond to the events in the painting. Marked with the number 16, the scene of the Virgin of Guadalupe is identified as follows: Sitio donde se canto la salve mirando N. S. a Mexico.
Among the crowd of spectators, seated atop the guardhouse directly to the left of the blessed image, is a group of Asian men, clearly recognizable by their distinctive robe-like garments and traditional hairstyle finished in a type of top-knot pigtail (Fig. 2 detail). In this section of the painting, the artist chooses to illustrate an interesting exchange between one of the Asian men atop the guardhouse and a government official, dressed in a Hapsburg-style black suit (Fig. 2 detail). Recalling Brooks’ comment that paintings are carefully and deliberately made to present a particular scenario, why is it that the artist chooses to highlight this exchange in the painting? Are we to interpret that it is the Asian man gesturing to the official below, or the official gesturing to the man above? The presence of this group of Asian men in

Fig. 2 – Detail of Fig. 1
Arellano’s painting, seated in a prominent position along the processional route, is striking and baffling. Who were these foreign observers taking part in what was one of the most significant religious milestones of the period, and why were they included in the painting? To understand this query, it is important to consider the context of the early perceptions of the Japanese in colonial Mexico. Using this painting as a springboard, this essay will consider the history of Japanese-New Spanish relations and the privileged status conferred upon the Japanese during the 17th century, which may provide context for their reception in colonial Mexico and the nature of their representation in this painting.

1. **Early Perceptions of the Japanese**

The relationship between Japan and New Spain is a subject that has been studied primarily by historians of religion, who have examined the Christian century in Japan, and economists, who have investigated the global impact of the silver trade and the roles played by both Japan and New Spain during the early modern period. A logical starting point for the history of East-West relations is the Jesuit missionary activity of the sixteenth century. As early as 1543, contact between Iberia and Asia was initiated by the expansion of the Jesuit missions. Direct communication between Spain and Japan began when the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506-1552) landed at Kagoshima, in August 1549, and led Portuguese missionaries to Japan – an event that marked the formal introduction of Christianity into Japan. The ensuing period of Jesuit activity, known as the “Christian Century”, from about 1549 to 1641, was decisive for the development of Japan’s relations with Iberia and Spanish America.


The arrival of the Jesuits and the establishment of the missions in Japan were possible only because their arrival coincided with an era of political instability known as the *Sengoku Jidai*, or “Age of the Country at War” (1467-1568). When the Jesuits arrived in Japan, the chaotic state of affairs and unfamiliar system of Japanese politics confused them. In Japan, the traditional system of government and its various levels of hierarchy contributed to the internal dissension witnessed by the Jesuits upon their arrival. For the Jesuits, the volatile political situation of Japan proved to be challenging for their propagation of Christianity. However, after a slow and difficult start, the Jesuit mission flourished and by 1583 there were more than 150,000 Christians in Japan.

European enthusiasm for Japan began with Francis Xavier’s landing and the ensuing proliferation of Jesuit missionary activity and literature in the Far East. Jesuit publications that detailed the Society’s activities in East Asia were part of a larger publicity campaign to garner papal support for their missions. In 1585, the Jesuits managed to secure a monopoly on activities in the East. However, in 1600, after years of conflict regarding the prohibition of the mendicant orders in China and Japan and the jockeying for power by the various orders, the papal bull of 1585 sanctioning the Jesuits dominion over the Far East was revoked. Therefore, many of the publications that detailed their success in Asia can be viewed as part of a larger publicity campaign to promote the success of their missions in Asia as the Franciscans had in Mexico. In addition, individuals preparing for a governmental career in Iberia or the Spanish American colonies read these tracts to familiarize themselves with the politics of the expanding empire. Subsequently, numerous books and pamphlets appeared throughout Iberia and Spanish America that chronicled a number of key events in Asia, including the martyrdom of Christians in Japan, the Japanese embassies of the seventeenth century to Europe and New Spain, the canonization of Francis.
Xavier in 1622, and the beatification of Mexico’s protomartyr Saint Philip of Jesus (San Felipe de Jesús) in 1627.

The encounter between the Jesuits and the Japanese was markedly different from that of the Amerindians of the New World, whose “humanity” was the subject of debate in intellectual circles. According to the art historian Gauvin Bailey, “the Far Eastern missions brought Renaissance Europe face-to-face for the first time with cultures that it considered to be technological and intellectual equals. For a Europe that quite literally divided the world into black and white, and believed that the former was doomed to some form of natural servitude, the discovery of non-European peoples they judged to be ‘white’ and ‘rational’ forced missionaries to revise their attitudes toward the Other.” The Jesuit missions in East Asia witnessed some of the Society’s greatest victories and defeats, among them, the mission to Japan. As early as 1549, Francis Xavier extolled the virtues of the Japanese when he wrote “we shall never find among heathens another race equal to the Japanese.”

In the eyes of the West, especially for the Jesuits and other religious orders that were the first to embark on religious and cultural activities in Asia, the Japanese aroused the greatest admiration. The historian Luís Filipe Thomaz maintains that initial Portuguese impressions of the Japanese were positive, and noted that “perhaps this was essentially due to the fact that in Japan, they met an aristocratic society, dominated as in medieval Europe by a warlike nobility, with a sense of honour that they found similar to their own.” However, it must be said that while many of the observations made by the missionaries praise the traits and qualities of the Japanese, they also encountered difficulties in their quest to evangelize. Much of the literature,

15 Bailey, Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, p. 52.
17 From a letter written by Francis Xavier to the Jesuits at Goa, dated Kagoshima, 5 November 1549, cited in Boxer, The Christian Century in Japan, p. 401; also refer to M. Joseph Costelloe (ed.), The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier (St. Louis, Mo.: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), p. 297; for more on this idea of the European view of the Japanese, see Moran, The Japanese and the Jesuits, pp. 95-114, and Bailey, Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, chapter 3.
idealized and biased in nature, was intended to demonstrate the success of the Far Eastern missions to their critics, as well as encourage followers to join them.

The Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), the overseer of the Jesuit missions in Asia, played a significant role in praising the virtues of the Japanese in his numerous writings, among them the *Sumario de las cosas de Japón* (1583): “The people are all white, courteous and highly civilized, so much that they surpass all the other known races of the world.” This type of racial distinction and classification of the Japanese as both “white” and “civilized” was influential in forming public opinion on the character of the Japanese. The Spanish Jesuit scholar and polymath Baltasar Gracián (1601-1658) dubbed the Japanese as “los Españoles de Asia” or “the Spaniards of Asia”, thereby distinguishing the Japanese as superior among the Asian nations while simultaneously equating them with Spaniards. The views espoused by Gracián undoubtedly left a mark in Spanish popular culture, bleeding into missionary literature of the succeeding decades. The Augustinian missionary Gaspar de San Agustín (1650-1725) recalled Gracián’s words in his *Conquista de las Islas Filipinas* (1698), noting that “the Japanese, as learnedly stated by Gracián, are the Spaniards of Asia, and the Chinese, with their knowledge of politics and love of writing, appear different, even though they have a history, are the same as the Indians.” Indeed, Gracián’s classification of the Japanese at the top of the Asian hierarchy was foreshadowed by Valignano and his fellow Jesuits and, confirming the high esteem in which they were held by the Jesuits, the Japanese were the sole Asiatic peoples allowed to be ordained as priests and clergy.

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19 See Alessandro Valignano, *Sumario de las cosas de Japón* (1583); *Addiciones al Sumario* (1592), J. L. Alvarez-Taldriz (ed.) (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1954). He made his first of three visits to the Jesuit missions in Japan in 1579, from which his *Sumario* is based.


22 “Los Japoneses que son, como doctamente dijo Gracían, los Españoles de Asia, y los Chinos, que con la cultura de la politica y amor á las letras, parecen diversos, aunque tocados á la piedra de la experiencia, son lo mismo que los Indios”. See Casimiro Díaz, O.S.A., *Conquistas de las Islas Filipinas: La Temporal por las armas de nuestros Católicos reyes de España, y la espiritual por los religiosos de la Orden de San Agustín* (Valladolid, 1890), vol. 2, p. 57. The first volume of Gaspar de San Agustín’s *Conquista de las Islas Filipinas* was published in Madrid in 1698; the second volume was left in manuscript form in the Philippines until it was published in Madrid in 1890.

The admiration of the Japanese – especially their racial bias – and overarching desire for evangelization led the Jesuits to seek the support of the ruling classes in their fervent promotion of Christianity. In Japan, the Jesuits “top-down” strategy of religious conversion met with success, as many of their initial converts were the *daimyo* (or warlords) and members of the ruling class, who brought their subjects with them. As such, it is possible that those Japanese Christians who were able to seek asylum in New Spain may have belonged to the Japanese nobility, thereby establishing an elevated place within the colonial social ladder. A recently restored painting by the Mexican artist Juan Correa, titled *St. Francis Xavier Baptizing*, c. 1700 (Fig. 3),

![St. Francis Xavier Baptizing](image_url)
in the Templo de Santa María de Cuevas in Chihuahua, Mexico, may allude to the Jesuits “top-down” strategy of conversion. In the painting, St. Francis is depicted baptizing an Asian man, identified as a king by his attributes of the crown and sceptre that lie at the base of the baptismal font. To St. Francis’ right, an indigenous couple with their young child observes the scene, recalling the colonial Mexican genre of casta paintings that would appear later in the century, of heathen “Chichimec” Indians of Mexico’s northern frontier. This carefully and deliberately made composition is striking, as St. Francis never set foot in the Americas, nor the Chichimecs in Asia; here, the Asian “king”, likely someone from Japan, identified by similarities in dress and hairstyle that will be seen in later paintings of the period, is a likely allusion to the “rational” nature of the Japanese people who saw the virtue of conversion, as espoused by the Jesuits.

2. The Japanese and Local Devotion in New Spain / St. Philip of Jesus

In Manuel de Arellano’s painting, the notable presence of the group of Asian men seated atop the guardhouse and the link with Japan may be better understood in relation to the devotion to St. Philip of Jesus, Mexico’s first Creole saint and one of the ill-fated group of twenty-six Christians martyred in Nagasaki, Japan on 5 February 1597.25 In 1596, the San Felipe, a Spanish galleon travelling from Manila to Acapulco was shipwrecked off the south-eastern coast of Japan. Convinced it was a Spanish invasion, the Japanese shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) immediately ordered the confiscation of the ship and its cargo. The historian Charles Boxer maintains that Jesuit advisors informed the captain and crew of the San Felipe that Hideyoshi had no desire to jeopardize the prospect of trade with the Philippines by keeping the Spanish cargo.26 The Spanish captain, however, in an imprudent effort to intimidate Hideyoshi’s commissioners with the power of the Spanish monarch, threatened to appeal to the king of Spain to invade Japan. Upon hearing the threat, Hideyoshi became convinced of the “political menace of Christianity”, and on 5 February 1597, ordered the crucifixion

25 The Creole identity of Felipe de Jesús lent most fervour to the celebration of his cult in Mexico. See Baltasar de Medina, Vida, martyrio y beatificacion del invicto proto-martyr de el Japón, San Felipe de Jesús, patron de Mexico, su patria, su imperial corte de Nueva españa, en el nuevo mundo (Madrid: En la imprenta de los herederos de la viuda de Juan Garcia Infanzon, 1751); Lauro López Beltrán, Felipe de Jesús, primer santo de América: cuarto centenario de su natalicio 1572-1972 (Mexico City: Editorial Tradición, 1972); and Eduardo Enrique Ríos, Felipe de Jesús, el santo criollo (Mexico City: Ediciones Xochitl, 1943).

26 Ibid., p. 165.
of twenty-six Japanese and foreign-born Christians in Nagasaki. This event reverberated throughout New Spain, since the Franciscan Philip of Jesus was the sole member of the twenty-six born in Mexico City. Moreover, an eyewitness account of the tragedy by fray Marcelo de Ribadeneira, first read and edited in Mexico City in 1598, spread the horrendous news in the capital.

After his death, several miracles were attributed to Philip of Jesus, and countless sermons, biographies, and images were produced in his honour to further the cause of his canonization. The Creole identity of Philip of Jesus and the intense devotion to the Nagasaki martyrs lent considerable fervour to the celebration of his cult. Stories not only of Philip of Jesus and the Nagasaki martyrs, but also of the thousands of Japanese Christian martyrs circulated throughout New Spain. Devotion to the saint reached its pinnacle during the period leading to his beatification in 1627 and his declaration as patron of Mexico City in 1629. A sermon published in 1782 by Baltasar de Medina provides clear evidence that St. Philip was a personal hero of the *criollos*, referring to him as “*nuestro Joven* Mexicano Felipe de Jesús.” Although he was not canonized until 1862, Philip of Jesus was treated with all the reverence of a saint.

Pictorial representations of the twenty-six martyrs of Nagasaki flourished in Spain, Italy, Latin America and the Philippines, as prints and written accounts circulated throughout the Christian world. In Mexico, among the most celebrated are the series of anonymous seventeenth-century murals in the nave of the former Franciscan church of Cuernavaca, today the city’s Cathedral. A 1640 engraving of the martyr, published in Mexico, served as the frontispiece to a sermon in the saint’s honour written by Miguel Sánchez (Fig. 4). The engraving portrays Philip of Jesus with the palm and wreath

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32 *Sermon de San Felipe de Jesús al señor Doctor Don lope de Altamirano y Castilla… de el Bachiller Miguel Sánchez*. Con licencia en México por I. Ruyz, 1640, in the Biblioteca Nacional de México.
Fig. 4 – Miguel Sánchez, Sermon of San Felipe de Jesús, 1640.
of martyrdom. At his feet are two of his Japanese executioners, one who gestures to the crucified saint, and the other who pierces his chest with a lance. It is interesting that Sánchez also penned a 1648 sermon to the Virgin of Guadalupe; both the cults of Guadalupe and St. Philip were crucial for a rising sense of Creole pride, and that Sánchez should write first about St. Philip confirms that Guadalupe was not always the most important and prominent devotion in the city, but part of a construction in which these two cults played a role. Among the images commissioned for the promotion of his cult were a series of paintings in the chapel of San Felipe de Jesús in the Cathedral of Mexico City, among them *The Deposition of Saint Philip of Jesus* (Fig. 5) and a sculpted image of the saint. A portrait of his martyrdom

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 5 – The Martyrdom of San Felipe de Jesus.**

Oil on canvas. Dimensions unknown.

Chapel of San Felipe de Jesús, Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City. Photo by the autor.

is included in a series commemorating the martyrs of Japan in the former Franciscan Apostolic School of Propaganda Fide in Zacatecas, today the Museo de Guadalupe (Fig. 6). In both series of paintings, the portrayals of the Japanese are strikingly similar, from their physiognomy to their costume. In fact, the Zacatecas images appear to have been drawn almost directly from the 1640 engraving.

Fig. 6 – The Martyrdom of San Felipe de Jesús, c. 1650.
Oil on canvas. 152.4 x 121.9 cm.
Museo Regional de Guadalupe, Guadalupe, Zacatecas.
Photography ©Francisco Kochen
The devotion to St. Philip of Jesus is evident in the painting by Manuel de Arellano. As patron of the Guadalupe festivities, the sculpted image of the saint (Fig. 7 detail) – clearly identified by the number seventeen according to the key at the bottom right of the painting – is carried by a group of Franciscans who lead the procession to the doors of the new sanctuary. It should come as no surprise that Japanese Christians in New Spain would hold special reverence for the saint, as his fate and that of other Nagasaki martyrs – Japanese Christians included among them – was ultimately linked to the expulsion of the religious orders from Japan. With the Tokugawa Shogunate’s edict banning Christianity in 1614, many prominent Christians were killed or forced to renounce Christianity for fear of execution, or were exiled to the Portuguese and Spanish outposts of Macao and Manila, respectively. Later, when Japan enacted its Sakoku, or “closed-door policy” of self-isolation from the western world in 1640, many Christians in Japan were martyred, forced to convert or leave the country, some fleeing to New Spain via the Philippines. The stories of the Japanese Christian martyrs circulated through-

35 See Boxer, The Christian Century in Japan, chapter 7. For more on the role of Christianity in Japan and a painting of the 1622 martyrdom in Nagasaki, see Levenson, Encompassing the Globe, p. 335.
out the viceroyalty, and local interest in the tragic events across the Pacific manifested itself in concrete ways. In Sonora, a Jesuit mission rectory was named the "Mission of the Japanese Martyrs", and in Mexico City, the lay Congregation of Our Lady of Cumi, "whose members dedicated themselves to prayer for the martyred souls of a Jesuit Congregation in Japan", was established. The members of the Congregation of Our Lady of Cumi were moved by the bravery and zeal of their Japanese brothers and sisters who lost everything and sacrificed their lives in "defence of the Catholic faith."

3. The Japanese Spectacle in New Spain

The Spanish art historian Joaquín Bérchez suggests that the group of Asian men depicted in Arellano’s painting of the inauguration of the new sanctuary of the Virgin of Guadalupe are members of a Japanese embassy. While it is known that Japanese delegations visited the Mexican capital on two occasions, in 1610 and 1614, is it possible that they are depicted in the painting? In his written work that has come to be known as the Diario, the Nahua historian Chimalpáhin provides an eyewitness account of the visits made by the Japanese delegations in 1610 and 1614, highlighting their activities in the viceregal capital, the reasons behind their diplomatic mission, as well as the author’s perception of the foreign visitors.

40 Bérchez, “Traslado de la imagen y estreno del santuario de Guadalupe”, in Los siglos de oro en los virreinatos de América, 1550-1700 (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 1999), p. 149.
From 1593 to the mid-1620s, Chimalpáhín lived in Mexico City. Unlike other native writers of the period, like Fernando de Alva Cortés Ixtlilxochitl (ca. 1568-1648) and Bartolomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (ca. 1597-?), Chimalpáhín was not from the Nahua nobility, and remained peripheral to indigenous high society. Thus, his works offer an insightful contrast to those written by other Aztecs who were members of the indigenous elite. The *Diario* covers the years 1589 to 1615, and contains a series of entries concerning events in Mexico City and things relating to New Spain. The historian Susan Schroeder notes that Chimalpáhín made entries for only those dates he considered important, writing that “one particular event might take up several pages, while another (for example, his notice of the death of Pope Sixtus V) warrants hardly more than one line.”

Chimalpáhín records numerous entries of the sojourn of the Japanese in New Spain – the first related to the 1610 trip in the company of the explorer and diplomat Rodrigo de Vivero and the second related to the Hasekura Mission of 1614, named after the appointed Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga (Fig. 8), 1571-1622, a trusted vassal of the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. His multiple observations confirm the importance placed on their visit in the context of the local history of Mexico City.

Like his European counterparts during the Christian century in Japan, Chimalpáhín was awestruck by the physical appearance of the Japanese, and in his diary he provided a remarkably detailed description of their appearance:

“They were all dressed up (...) as they are [in Japan]; they wear something like an ornamented jacket, a doublet, or long blouse, which they tie at (...) their waist; there they place a *catana* (...) of metal, which counts as their sword, and they wear something like a *mantilla* [headdress for women]. And their footwear is (...) softened leather called chamois, like foot gloves they put on their feet. They seem bold, not gentle and meek people, going about going around toward the nape of their necks. They are long-haired; like eagles. And their foreheads are very bare because they closely

42 Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the Kingdoms of Chalco*, p. 7. The large body of nine Nahuatl texts has been recently analyzed in James Lockhart, Susan Schroeder and Doris Namala (eds.), *Annals of His Time: Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpáhín Quauhtlehuanitzin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
44 The author records seventeen entries on the activities of the Japanese between the period of 15 November 1610 and 7 March 1611, and between 4 March 1614 and 20 April 1614. See Chimalpáhín, *Diario.*
Fig. 8 – Anonymous, *Portrait of Hasekura Tsunenaga, 1615.*

Oil on panel. 196×146 cm.

Private Collection, Rome, Italy
shave their foreheads, making the shaving of their foreheads reach the middle of their heads. Their hair just begins at the temples, all their hair reaches to their necks from letting it grow long. They cut only the tips (…) [and] they look like girls because of the way they wear their hair (…) they put together something like a *piochtli* [pigtail] which they tie in twisted, intertwined fashion, reaching to the middle of the head with close shaving. It really looks like a tonsure that they display on their heads, because long hair goes around from their temples to the nape of their neck. And they do not have beards, and they have faces like women, and they are whitish and light, with whitish or yellowish faces. All of the people of Japan are like that, that is how they look, and they are not very tall (…)

The arrival of these ambassadors was undoubtedly one of the most celebrated diplomatic events of the early seventeenth century in Mexico. Mexico City witnessed a number of public spectacles to commemorate significant events, among them viceregal entrances, patron saints’ days, and royal births and marriages. Chimalpáhin notes that when the Japanese entered Mexico City, they were lavished with similar pomp and ceremony, demonstrating the importance of the esteemed foreign guests to the Mexican populace. The historian Miguel León-Portilla notes that the arrival of the Japanese embassy was certainly momentous and underscores that...
Chimalpáhin’s inclusion of it in his *Diario* confirms the extraordinary nature of their visit to Mexico City.\(^{47}\)

Among the events that took place on 23 January 1611, Chimalpáhin writes that citizens of the capital, including the monastic orders of the city, gathered at the Church of San Francisco El Grande to witness the baptism of the Japanese visitors: “The first to be baptized was the noble lord from Japan, who received the baptismal name of Don Alonso (…) and the second Japanese to be baptized received the name Lorenzo (…). They were baptized on the feast day of San Ildefonso (…) and the next day, Monday, another Japanese was baptized with the name Felipe (…).”\(^{48}\)

In an entry dated “Holy Monday”, 24 March 1614, Chimalpáhin notes that a second embassy entered the capital. During the following month, Mexican religious officials witnessed the mass baptism of forty-four Japanese, over half of whom were baptized by Archbishop Juan Pérez de la Serna.\(^{49}\)

Bérchez’s suggestion that the Asian men in Arellano’s painting are part of an official Japanese embassy is therefore purely speculative, especially considering that Arellano’s painting records the specific events that took place on 30 April 1709, almost a century after the first visit of the Japanese to Mexico. It is possible to consider, however, that the men are Japanese Christians, either living in exile after the anti-Christian edicts of the seventeenth century, or descendants of the Hasekura Mission that numbered over one hundred and fifty – among them members of the Japanese nobility, the samurai class and merchants – who Chimalpáhin records as having remained in New Spain. Among the members of the 1610 entourage, Chimalpáhin identified some who were “already Christians” and others who were “still pagans, because they had not been baptized.”\(^{50}\) Of special note is Chimalpáhin’s observation that some members of the delegation were already Christians prior to their arrival, inviting speculation as to whether or not those individuals would wish to remain in New Spain, given the tumult of the preceding years in Japan and the persecution against Christians there. The arrival of the foreign ambassadors to the viceroyal capital must have been quite impressive; Chimalpáhin writes that accompanying Hasekura were over one hundred and fifty attendants, and dressed in their traditional costumes, they surely attracted throngs of curious spectators.

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47 León-Portilla, “La embajada de los japoneses en México, 1614”, p. 146.
49 Chimalpáhin, *Diario*, pp. 367 and 371.
50 “De los japoneses que vinieron, unos eran ya cristianos, y otros todavía paganos, pues no estaban bautizados”, Chimalpáhin, *Diario*, p. 219.
Looked at as a whole, the revelation by Chimalpáhin’s that Japanese nationals remained in New Spain, the depiction of the Asian men in Arellano’s painting, and the documented presence of individuals in historical accounts of the period provides new insight into the Asian diaspora during colonial times.

4. Asian Immigration to the Americas

Asian immigration to the Americas dates to the sixteenth century during the initiation of the Manila Galleon trade. The ensuing centuries witnessed the influx of thousands of Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese and other peoples from across East Asia to Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1625, the Dominican friar Thomas Gage wrote of the talents of some of these immigrants observing that “the Indians and people of China that have been made Christians and every year come thither, have perfected Spaniards in [the trade of goldsmithery].”51 According to seventeenth-century chroniclers in Mexico City, Asian immigrants not only utilized their entrepreneurial skills as merchants in the viceregal capital, but also constituted an important part of the labour force during the colonial period, frequently working as slaves for Creole and Spanish masters.

The trade route from Manila to Acapulco was much more than a commercial link; the connection was also cultural and demographic.52 Throughout the epoch of trans-Pacific trade, New Spain witnessed the migration of thousands of Africans, Asians and Europeans. The accessible ports, the prospect of employment and the prime geographic location of the vice-royalty made it an attractive locale.53 Such was the case for “Juan Antonio”, a Japanese national with an adopted Christian name in Manila, who between 20 and 22 March 1624 filed petitions asking to be named as an interpreter (presumably because of his knowledge of Japanese and Spanish) and for a return passage to New Spain.54 In his petitions, he writes that after his parents and two siblings “died in defence of the Catholic faith,” he fled to New Spain, where he spent two years living in Mexico City. While his

reasons for returning to Manila are unknown, it is likely that the case of Juan Antonio is just one of many during the seventeenth century.

While many of the Asians were free, a proportion were brought to New Spain from the Philippines as slaves of Spaniards and, during periods of chronic labour shortages, formed an integral part of the work force, especially in the domestic realm. According to Jonathan Israel, “[Asian slaves] (...) were not prized for social reasons in the way that Negroes were, but they were valued for their quickness and aptitude in the crafts and humble professions.”

While most of the Asian passengers were Filipinos, some were Japanese, many were Chinese or some combination of Chinese, Filipino and Spanish extraction. In 1626, a royal order directed to Viceroy Cerralvo regarding unpaid import duties on slaves brought from the Philippines estimated that approximately “6,000 Orientals were entering the colony each decade.” The free Asian population that resided in Mexico City was divided between the “Spanish Republic” of the traza and the outlying “Indian Republic.” Spaniards incorrectly identified the general Asian population of New Spain as part of the Indian demographic, a situation that Israel describes as arising from the “Spanish conception or definition of Asians as ‘Chinese Indians.’” A fitting example can be found in Jesuit records


56 In seventeenth-century New Spain, Filipinos were commonly referred to as chinos or indios chinos. In seventeenth-century archival documents, the term chino is frequently used in a very general manner identifying natives of the Philippines, China or Japan. Nicolas Leon’s classification of Mexican racial types or castas lists chino as the offspring of an Indian woman by a quadroon. However, this classification does not apply for the seventeenth century. See Nicolas Leon, Las castas del Mexico Colonial o Nueva España (Mexico: 1924), p. 9.

57 Research regarding the Asian presence in seventeenth-century New Spain is complicated by the fact that they adopted Christian names after baptism.

58 Israel, Race, Class and Politics in Colonial Mexico, p. 76. The royal order claimed that the Spanish crown was losing 15,000 pesos annually in unpaid import duties. See CDHH, II, 1, 291-2. Schurz says that many lived in Acapulco.

59 Ibid., 76. The traza, an approximately thirteen-square block section of the center of the city, marked off by the conquistadors in the sixteenth century, was primarily reserved for Spanish occupancy, while the outlying areas were reserved for Indian occupancy. The region surrounding the traza, San Juan de Tenochtitlán, was allocated for Indian and non-Spanish residences and communities. The Spanish government tried to resolve the traza population’s mistrust of the natives through segregation. See R. Douglas Cope, The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 10.

60 Israel, Race, Class and Politics in Colonial Mexico, p. 76. N. F. Martin also gives an alternate phrase, ‘indianos de Filipinas’ in his study, Los Vagabundos en la Nueva España siglo XVI (Mexico: 1957), p. 105. For example, on 24 January 1661, Antonio de la Cruz, an “indio chino”,
that state that the Chinese and Japanese men who attended San Gregorio, a Jesuit college for Indians in Mexico City, were classified as the “indios” of China and Japan, distinguishing them from the “indios naturales”, who were native to Mexico.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, subsequent administrations during the colonial period continued to categorize official administrative requests from the Asian population under the institutional sector of the ‘Indian republic.’\textsuperscript{62} Official solicitations by the Asian population regarding matters such as the obtaining of permits to sell goods or to possess arms were petitioned within the ‘Indian republic.’

In Mexico City, Asians (predominantly the Chinese) were prominent as barbers, and their constant clashes with their Spanish counterparts ultimately resulted in a 1635 appeal to the viceroy to “drive the oriental barbers out of the Plaza Mayor and fashionable districts and to confine them to more plebeian areas.”\textsuperscript{63} However, this did not deter them from practicing their profession, and ultimately, the municipal government decided to restrict them to “eight shops within the city and requiring them to make an annual contribution to the barber’s cofradia.”\textsuperscript{64} The knowledge that the municipal government allowed the ‘oriental barbers’ to continue working reveals the possibility that Asians, as well as castas, may have practiced trades often restricted by city ordinances, including artisanry.

The commercial community of seventeenth-century New Spain included the converses – Asian or Jewish – a term that encompasses converts who considered themselves Christian and converts who may have secretly practiced their native religions.\textsuperscript{65} Louisa Schell Hoberman notes that complete

was granted permission to sell “goods from China” in Mexico City. See AGN, Indios, vol. 19, exp. 336, fols. 190-190v, 24 January 1661.

\textsuperscript{61} ARSI, Mex 15, Carta Annua 1615, fol. 11v, cited from J. Michelle Molina, “True Lies: Athanasius Kirchner’s China Illustrata and the life story of a Mexican mystic, p. 379, n. 1.

\textsuperscript{62} Cope, discussing the system of government based on the division of New Spanish society writes that "by the mid-sixteenth century, the Spanish crown officially recognized two sectors of society – the republica de los españoles and the republica de los indios – and (in theory) provided each one with the institutional arrangements most suited to its needs”. See Cope, The Limits of Racial Domination, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{63} Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de Mexico, xxx, fol. 24 (54 volumes). Cited in Israel, p. 76; Cope, p. 21; and Homer H. Dubs and Robert S. Smith, “Chinese in Mexico City in 1635”, in The Far Eastern Quarterly, vol. 1, no. 4 (August 1942): 387-389. According to Evelyn Hu-Dehart, at the core of the conflict between the Spanish and Chinese barbers was the decision of the Chinese to work on Sundays and to undercut their prices to beat their Spanish and Creole competitors. From a talk by Evelyn Hu-Dehart, given at the Denver Museum of Art Symposium "Asia and Spanish America”.

\textsuperscript{64} Archivo Histórico de Notarias, vol. 3, 857, Francisco de Rivera, Escribano real no. 559, 3 September 1660, fols. 16r-19v. Cited in Cope, The Limits of Racial Domination, p. 21.

or partial assimilation into colonial society was important for many converso merchants, and “one stimulus for this was their business relations with Old Christians.” Accordingly Chimalpáhin mentions that during the visits of the Japanese, merchants that accompanied both Rodrigo de Vivero in 1610 and the Hasekura Mission in 1614 were baptized; perhaps this was a method to facilitate their business transactions during their stay in the capital.

A glimpse into the globalized consumer culture of seventeenth-century Mexico City and the role played by Japanese merchants remarked upon by Chimalpáhin reveals not only a liberalization of racial attitudes, specific to the Japanese, but also how readily available Japanese commodities were to Mexican consumers. In the entry dated 29 May 1614, Chimalpáhin writes that a number of Japanese merchants who had arrived with the Hasekura Mission two months earlier remained in Mexico City to conduct business with local merchants. On 14 October 1614, Chimalpáhin notes that Japanese merchants who had remained in Mexico after Rodrigo de Vivero’s homecoming in 1610 “were returning home to Japan”, after a four year sojourn in the capital, where they had “sold all of the merchandise in Mexico City that they brought with them from Japan”. On 7 February 1615, Chimalpáhin makes note of yet another ten Japanese merchants departing Mexico City to return home. Chimalpáhin’s testimony that Japanese merchants lived and worked in Mexico City during the years 1610 to 1615 is remarkable. Indeed, the disclosure that they transported merchandise from Japan to New Spain and successfully participated in the commercial activities of the viceregal capital underscores the globalized taste and consumer culture in seventeenth-century New Spain. While it is impossible to determine the inventory of the Japanese merchants without documentary evidence, it is likely that biombos, painted folding screens – highly portable and traditionally given as gifts – were among the items brought to New Spain. Boxer notes that painted gold-leaf folding screens, made by the leading artists of the Kano and other contemporary schools, were regularly executed for wealthy Japanese merchants who participated in foreign trade.

Chimalpáhin’s revelation adds new insight into the availability of Japanese commodities to New Spanish consumers and artists. Indeed, the emer-

66 Ibid. In Spain, the same applied to merchant conversos who continued to practice Judaism in private. The suspected Jewish practices and the wealth of some conversos made them a vulnerable and controversial group within colonial society.
67 Chimalpáhin, Diario, p. 377.
68 Ibid., p. 389.
69 Ibid., p. 397.
70 Boxer, Fidalgos in the Far East, p. 22.
gence of biombos (folding screens) and enconchados (paintings inlaid with mother-of-pearl) and other works that bear witness to the influence of Japanese art in New Spain would be inexplicable unless viewed as a response to Japanese sources. While the apparent success of this group of documented Japanese merchants who lived and worked in Mexico City reveals the liberalization of racial attitudes regarding the Japanese population at this time, the existence of a small diaspora in Guadalajara confirms these sentiments.

5. “Blancos de honor” or “Honorary whites” in New Spain

Perhaps the most interesting case of the seventeenth-century documents a small group of Japanese Christians living in the city of Guadalajara as active participants in the financial sector of colonial society, who the historian Thomas Calvo classified as “honorary whites.” Among the documented ethnic Japanese in Guadalajara, one “Luis de Encío” made his living as a distributor of mescal. His son-in-law and fellow Japanese national, Juan de Páez, worked as a financial manager to numerous prominent individuals in Guadalajara, and ultimately managed the financial accounts of the Cathedral of Guadalajara, which granted his family burial rights there. Páez was a person of significant means, as he left behind 6,000 pesos to endow a chapel for perpetual masses in his family’s honour, and other monies to cover expenses for the church. What is interesting is that Páez married the daughter of Encío (Luis de Encío married a native-born Mexican woman) maintaining a tie to his Japanese heritage through this marriage. Since the individuals of this Japanese diaspora may have been limited to a small group, the historian Calvo posits that Luis de Encío may have had some connection to the members of those mentioned by Chimalpáhin who remained in New Spain. Modern Japanese immigrants to Latin America made determined efforts to maintain their shared cultural traditions in their new adopted homelands. The same could be said for the colonial diaspora, and the marriage between Páez and Encío may have worked favourably to maintain the cultural solidarity of the Guadalajara diaspora community.


72 Ibid., p. 544.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., p. 536. Calvo suggests that this documented group of Japanese in Guadalajara may have a connection to Sebastián Vizcaíno because he resided in the province of Avalos in Jalisco.

75 Masterson and Funada-Classen, The Japanese in Latin America, p. xii.
Calvo’s most telling discovery is the notarial record that identifies the aforementioned Luis de Encío as being from Japan: “Luis de Encio, de nación japón,” dated 1634.76 In the document, Encío supplemented his Christian name – its spelling in hiragana (the Japanese system of writing based on syllables) pronounced “ruisu de incio” – with his birth name written in kanji (the Japanese system of writing based on ideograms), “Soemon Fukuchi”.77 This entry is surprising, because as indicated earlier, most Japanese adopted Christian Hispanicized names after being baptized, rendering their identification in archival records extremely elusive. This particular example is one of a kind.

Encío’s self-conscious inclusion of his birth name, seemingly irrelevant in the archival record context, not only identifies him as “Japanese”, but may also reveal the elevated social status of his family in his native Japan.78 The Japanese scholar Eikichi Hayashiya writes that in the Japanese language, the suffix “-emon” is common in surnames of the samurai class, or of a family of a certain standing.79 It is possible that the elevated social standing of Luis de Encío, if he was in fact linked to the one of the Japanese embassies that travelled to Japan, prior to his arrival in Guadalajara, may have therefore influenced his position within Guadalajara’s society. Nevertheless, as a foreigner, Encío managed to achieve some level of success in New Spain.

Within the context of a Spanish colonial society classified by race and social standing, Calvo’s reference to the Japanese as “blancos de honor” or “honorary whites” in the title of his article that published his findings is revelatory, especially when viewed against the historical perception and Jesuit classification of the Japanese as “white” or Gracián’s reference to the Japanese as the “Spaniards of Asia”. Calvo writes that his use of the term “honorary whites” stemmed from the contemporary controversial classification of the Japanese who resided in South Africa during Apartheid, at the time the article was written in 1983. He further states that while this designation was not used in colonial Mexico, “the reality is that this term is not too far off from what it was like at that time.”80 The ability for those documented

77 See Eikichi Hayashiya, “Los japoneses que se quedaron en México en el siglo XVII. Acerca de un samurai en Guadalajara”, in México y la cuenca del Pacífico, vol. 6, núm. 18 (Jan-Apr 2003), Departamento de Estudios del Pacífico, (Guadalajara: Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades): 10-18.
78 Ibid., p. 11.
79 Ibid.. Interestingly, the name of the ambassador of the 1614 embassy to New Spain, Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga, similarly contains the “-emon” suffix.
80 Calvo, “Japoneses en Guadalajara”. 
Japanese in Guadalajara to succeed as business owners or to be granted burial rights in the Cathedral demonstrates a certain level of upward social mobility and a selective liberalization of racial attitudes as it pertained to their ethnic group. Further, it initiates a discussion for a better understanding of how the colonial Japanese diaspora attained a measure of political power within Guadalajaran society, and a new picture emerges of the status enjoyed by this small diaspora in colonial Mexico in Guadalajara, when seen in relation to the success of Luis de Encío and Juan de Páez.

Concluding thoughts

This brief introduction into the Asian presence in colonial Mexico is but a prelude to the subject of Japanese migration to Latin America that began in the late nineteenth century after the reforms of the Meji Era (1868-1912) witnessed the reopening of Japan to the Western World. However, unlike the first Japanese who arrived to Mexico, the first modern wave of Japanese immigrants to Mexico arrived in the late 1890s as cheap manual labour because the demands were not met by the native population. Called the “unknown immigrants” of Latin America, today, there are approximately 30,000 people of Japanese ancestry who live in Mexico, and more than one million throughout Latin America who have established their communities with so little fanfare that few outside of Latin America were even aware of their presence until the election of the Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in 1990.

Manuel de Arellano’s *Transfer of the Image and Inauguration of the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Guadalupe* can be read as a microcosm of the diversity of colonial Mexico. The artist’s painstaking rendition of the strict structure of colonial society is evident in the close attention paid to the hierarchical order of the procession and its participants. The inclusion of the Asian men in the painting in a prominent position along the route thus sheds light not only on the possible existence of a Japanese Christian diaspora, but also on the privileged status they enjoyed within colonial society. Arellano’s portrayal of the men in native dress serves as a cue to the diaspora’s cultural ties to Japan, a fact further demonstrated by Luís de Encío’s inclusion of his Japanese name as a supplement to his Christian name in colonial documents.

82 Ibid., p. 290.
The Jesuit classification of the Japanese as “white [and] civilized” and Gracian’s description of them as the “Spaniards of Asia” was influential in forming public opinion on the character of the Japanese in colonial Mexico. Further, the imagery depicted in Juan Correa’s painting of St. Francis Xavier’s baptism of the Japanese “king” served to promote the Japanese as a people with the rationality and capacity for conversion. A strategic move on the part of the missionaries, the successful conversion of a “rational” nation demonstrated to Christendom the power and might of the Iberian missionaries, and ultimately allowed a select group of the Japanese Christian diaspora to insert themselves into a comfortable position in the social hierarchy of colonial Mexico.