The story of the people who journeyed from the Philippines to Mexico begins in the sixteenth century, when the conquest of Mexico stirred Spaniards’ long-standing interest in establishing a stronghold in Asia.¹ The realization that Christopher Columbus had not fulfilled his ambition of reaching China had temporarily halted efforts to join East and West. This changed with Ferdinand Magellan’s relatively successful voyage to the Spice Islands by way of America, which showed that Europeans could indeed sail westward to reach the riches of Asia, rather than having to round Africa. Having seen the *Mar del Sur* (Pacific Ocean), the conquistador Hernán Cortés wrote to Charles V with plans to outfit ships on the western coast of Mexico to continue explorations.² His efforts were unsuccessful, as was an ill-fated expedition in 1541. In spite of these failures, the allure remained, so Philip II supported yet another attempt under the direction of Miguel López de Legazpi, who finally established a colony for Spain in the Philippine Islands in 1565. Legazpi’s interpreter on this voyage was a certain Bengali named Jerónimo Pacheco, “originally from the eastern islands.”³ He was one of the first *Chinos* to live in Mexico, having traveled to the New World by way of Spain.⁴ Notably, the thousands of other

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¹ For an overview of Mexico’s role in fostering Spain’s relations with East Asia, see: Lothar Knauth, *Confrontación Transpacífica: El Japón Y El Nuevo Mundo Hispánico 1542-1639* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1972).


³ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) Mercedes-5-275v (1561).

⁴ Individuals from throughout Asia were called *Chinos* in Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Another early resident was Juan Núñez, a slave from Calicut, India, who belonged to Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the
people from Asia who were sent to Mexico in the wake of this expedition had a less circuitous
journey, for in 1565 Legazpi’s pilot found a return route across the Pacific (previous voyages had
circumvented the globe).\(^5\)

This first passage from the Philippines to Mexico constituted the beginnings of the
Manila Galleon, which linked the economies of Asia and Spanish America for the next 250
years. The name Manila Galleon refers to the trade route, which ran to and from the ports of
Manila and Acapulco, as well as to the ships that yearly plied the waters of the Pacific.\(^6\) The
royal treasury financed the Galleon infrastructure in order to support the outlying colony, whose
economy depended on exporting Chinese goods to the New World in return for its silver. The
Crown meant to regulate the trade, but government enforcement was slack at the local level,
which led to heavy contraband.\(^7\) Under the permiso (government permission), the Manila
Galleon was supposed to consist of two ships weighing 300 tons each, carrying merchandise
worth 250,000 pesos on the way to Mexico and 500,000 silver pesos or bullion on the return.\(^8\) In
reality, westward ships weighed on average 1,000 tons, and they carried back two million silver


\(^7\) There were occasional crackdowns, such as in 1635, when the efforts of the visitador (judge) Pedro de Quiroga disrupted regular trade for several years. Archivo General de Indias (AGI) Filipinas 8-3-66 (1636).

\(^8\) The decree capping the amounts of merchandise and silver allowed on the Manila Galleon was issued in 1593 and re-issued in 1604 and 1619; *Recopilación De Leyes De Los Reynos De Las Indias, Mandadas Imprimir Y Publicar Por La Majestad Católica Del Rey Don Cárlos II*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Consejo de la Hispanidad, 1943), 9-45-6. The return amount included the situado or subsidy sent from Mexico to the poorer colony to pay for its governance and protection.
pesos (50 tons). Ship registries were commonly falsified on both sides of the ocean so that the Manila Galleon could embark with as much merchandise as possible. From the Philippines, the smuggled cargo included slaves. In this way, the Manila Galleon served as the medium for the transpacific slave trade from the end of the sixteenth and through the seventeenth century.

The Galleon slave trade relied on a plentiful and diverse slave market in the city of Manila, where Mexico-bound merchants made their purchases. Many of the available slaves were foreigners to the Philippines, brought there by Portuguese traders from as far away as India. Others were native to islands in the Philippines under direct Spanish control, as well as from surrounding islands, which were primarily inhabited by Muslims who resisted colonization. Based on demographic data regarding 190 individuals, we can estimate that the greatest number of slaves came from present-day India (39 percent), specifically from the Malabar Coast and Bengal. Portuguese supplied lesser number of slaves from the present-day countries of Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and few from China. The Philippine Islands (38 percent) was the other principal region of origin, with most slaves listed as being from Manila.

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11 We know the origins of 190 individuals (from a larger database of 819 Chinos found in documentation in numerous archives in Mexico and Spain). Nineteen slaves were from Malabar and twenty seven from Bengal.

12 Fifteen slaves were from Indonesia (9 were from Makassar, which had an important slave market), 13 from Japan, 10 from Malaysia, 4 from Sri Lanka and 2 from China.

13 Thirty four slaves were from the city of Manila.
As in the Atlantic slave trade, however, sale deeds oftentimes noted the embarkation point rather than a slave’s place of birth, so we cannot be certain about their provenance. Significantly, after the 1640s, when the Portuguese went to war with Spain and were hence banned from disembarking in Manila, the number of foreign slaves shipped declined and there was a related increase in the export of indigenous slaves. When the Portuguese influx of foreign slaves diminished, the traders of the Manila Galleon progressively were forced to rely more heavily on a local supply.

The experience of slaves who fell prey to Portuguese slavers is brought to life by Catarina de San Juan, a celebrated beata (lay religious woman), whose story was recorded in two hagiographies. She told of the Portuguese, who “under the pretext of being merchants, sailed the seas and lands in the condemnable pirating of goods and people.” They captured her when she was a little girl and took her to Cochin to join a large slave cargo that embarked to the Philippines. There she was sold at the Manila slave market and finally shipped to Mexico on the

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A remote political event in Europe partly explains the prominence of Portuguese slave traders in the Pacific context. In 1578, Portugal suffered a succession crisis when king Sebastian I died without an heir. Philip II of Spain took this opportunity to invade the country and seize the Portuguese Crown. During the period termed the Iberian Union or the Spanish Captivity (1580 to 1640), a Spanish king governed the two empires, though most government structures remained separate. This change in sovereignty gave Portuguese traders access to the slave market in the Philippines. They claimed “it was just for them to trade and contract in Manila,” as they had become “vassals of the Spanish king.”

The Portuguese easily met the demands of the Manila slave market because they had traded in slaves throughout the region decades prior to the Spaniards’ arrival. According to the chronicler António Bocarro, ships would leave Goa to Manila with slaves "in which there was much profit." Portuguese traveled extensively as part of a far-flung network that joined the *Estado da Índia* (the term for Portugal’s colonial holdings in Asia). From the 1580s, Manila simply became one more port of call in their *comercio de India a India* (often translated as country trade). Portuguese coastal traders would, for example, take “white and brown sugar, tortoise-shell and gold” from the Philippines to exchange “for slaves and cloth” in Malacca (in present-day Malaysia).

Spaniards expressed a desperate need for slaves from the beginnings of the colony. In the main, colonists considered that working with their hands was dishonorable and took every

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16 AGI Filipinas 41-16 (1636).


opportunity to have slaves labor in their stead. They particularly welcomed foreign slaves with specific skills, for there was a general perception that male slaves from India, Malacca and the Moluccas were “industrious and serviceable and many good musicians,” while the women were “great seamstresses, cooks and very orderly and clean in their service.” Spanish colonists also relied on local slaves, who were long available despite the efforts of the Crown to abolish indigenous slavery.

In fact, there was a protracted dispute on the matter. A 1526 decree by Charles V was the first, and often repeated, law that mandated that his Indian vassals (i.e., indigenous peoples of newly colonized lands) could not be enslaved. The policy derived in part from an Iberian tradition of requiring conquered peoples to accept vassalage, which meant paying homage in return for peace and protection. In the context of Spain’s overseas colonies, this political arrangement was solemnized during baptismal ceremonies, which symbolically transformed indigenous people into Christian vassals who could not be enslaved. The Crown had a religious obligation to protect its Christian vassals from slavery, as well as an economic incentive to ensure that free vassals pay tribute to the royal treasury. The Crown could not allow predatory colonists to enslave the indigenous population for their own benefit and profit. Notably, this prohibition was particularly controversial in the Philippines, where colonists, including Church leaders, defended indigenous slavery through the end of the seventeenth century. The bishop of Manila, for example, freely admitted to owning Indian slaves, even as he acknowledged that the

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20 The decree was summarized as law one of the section De la libertad de los indios (liberty of the indios) of the 1680 Recopilación. Spaniards called Filipinos Indios (Indians) in the same way that they referred to the indigenous peoples of America.

21 This model of vassalage was first applied to colonized Muslims in the Iberian peninsula, where Christian kings carried out a Reconquista (reconquest) against Muslim rulers from the eighth to fifteenth centuries.
Crown had ordered all Spaniards to free their captives.\textsuperscript{22}

One of the problems was that indigenous slaves were readily available, as slavery had a long history in the Philippines.\textsuperscript{23} Saleable slaves (considered chattel), called *alipin* in Tagalog and *oripun* in Visayas, entered bondage through captivity in war, debt, judicial punishment and inheritance.\textsuperscript{24} A contemporary observer wrote that indigenous slaves were the colony’s “greatest property and wealth” and “very useful and necessary.”\textsuperscript{25} For over a century, local government officials argued that immediate abolition would cause an economic and social crisis and simply refused to implement the prohibitions. In the words of governor Guido de Lavezaris, “the land could not be conserved” without such slaves.\textsuperscript{26} The availability of foreign and indigenous slaves in Manila facilitated the Galleon trade, but the Crown did show some ambivalence.

From the end of the sixteenth century, the Crown issued contradictory decrees that regulated the number of slaves who could be shipped from Manila, as well as others that encouraged the collection of duties in Acapulco to benefit from their import. The first concern was with limiting the quantity. As early as 1597, Philip II ordered that only certain “honorable persons” were to be allowed to board with slaves, ranging from two to six slaves per traveler.\textsuperscript{27} In the following decades, various decrees banned all female slaves to prevent “offenses to

\textsuperscript{22} AGI Filipinas 74-37-179r-182v (1590).

\textsuperscript{23} For an overview of slavery in the Philippines prior to and after the arrival of Spaniards, see William Henry Scott, *Slavery in the Spanish Philippines* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991).

\textsuperscript{24} For a discussion of these terms and subdivisions (levels of dependency), see ———, "*Oripun and Alipin* in the Sixteenth Century Philippines," in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

\textsuperscript{25} Antonio de Morga, *Sucesos De Las Islas Filipinas* (Madrid: Ediciones Polifemo, 1997), 279.

\textsuperscript{26} AGI Filipinas 6-2-16 (1573).

\textsuperscript{27} The governor could have six, judges four, and notable merchants and treasury officials got two. *Recopilación*, 9-45-54.
God.”

Mariners, however, continued to board with female slaves, as did regular passengers. One official, for example, went to Mexico with fifteen concubines, prompting great outrage when some of these women became pregnant during the voyage. Faced with increasing numbers, and in recognition that it was common for “many slaves” to come on the Galleon and “eat all the provisions,” the Crown limited the number in 1620 to one slave per passenger. The decrees had little effect, and many more slaves continued to make the crossing.

The majority of traders who boarded the Galleon with slaves did not register them in order to avoid paying the required duty, which was set at 50 pesos per slave. The Crown showed great concern, estimating an annual loss of 15,000 pesos from the contraband passage of 300 slaves. From the Crown’s perspective, officials at Acapulco were mañosos (crooks), who allowed “great numbers” of slaves to enter “under the protection of the generals, admirals… and passengers,” which defrauded the caja real (royal treasury). To prevent this, the Crown directed notaries not to draw up sale deeds for Galleon slaves if the sellers did not provide proof of payment of duties and ordered officials to “give guarantees that they would not bring slaves without declaring them.”

The Crown’s greatest challenge to implement such restrictions was the notorious corruption of customs officials, who accepted bribes and allowed all matter of merchandise to ship fuera de registro (unregistered).

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29 Archivo General de Simancas (AGS) Filipinas 67-6-27 (1619).

30 Recopilación, 9-45-55.

31 The duty was 400 reales, which equals 5 pesos.

32 This was a considerable exaggeration as the ships of the Manila Galleon could only hold upwards of 400 people, most of whom were sailors, so it would have been nearly impossible to carry more than a total of 100 slaves.

33 AGI México 1066-8-68r-69v (1626).
Slaves generally boarded the Manila Galleon individually as the property of merchants, officers, and mariners, serving as their servants during the voyage and being sold on arrival in Acapulco. Thus, in 1650, the pilot Juan Garibo bought a ten-year old slave in Manila named Lucas de Arauso and promptly sold him upon landing. Other owners took their slaves to Mexico City where they were sure to sell at higher prices, or kept them for continued service. For instance, Marco Antonio Ferrer went from the Philippines all the way to Spain with his fourteen-year old slave named Ventura Juárez. Some residents of Manila also sent slaves to sell in Mexico “for the highest price available” as a direct investment. They contracted with passengers and mariners who agreed to “provide food and beverage and comfort” to the said slaves in return for one third of their sale price. Such was the case of a sailor who agreed to transport a slave named Gaspar from the Malabar Coast on somebody else’s account. Finally, slaves also traveled to fulfill special orders from individuals in Mexico. In 1619, for example, Francisco de la Torre arranged to take a slave named Francisco for his brother Pedro de Arellano, who procured slaves for a Jesuit hacienda. Torre agreed to cover the expense of feeding Francisco and the cost of releasing him in case “a failure occurred, and [officials] tried to seize him or had difficulties in disembarking him.” As evident in this clause in the transport contract, slave handlers could encounter considerable obstacles to landing their cargo, especially if they tried to evade duties. It was a risky business to carry slaves on consignment, but apparently a well-established practice.

34 AGN Inquisición 583-5-520r-567v (1661).
35 AGN Indiferente 4182-10-1r-14r (1613).
36 AGN Historia 407-321r-321v (1642).
37 AGN Historia 407-321r-321v (1642).
38 AGN Historia 407-166r-168v (1619).
The profits to be made from bringing slaves on the Manila Galleon to sell in Mexico were undeniable. Andrés, a Chino from Cochin, could remember the name of all his former masters and the prices that were paid for him: in Malacca he sold for approximately nineteen pesos; in Manila for 50 pesos; in Acapulco for 150 pesos; and in Veracruz for 250 pesos.39 Similarly, Adrián sold in Manila for 37 pesos in 1628 and in Mexico for 200 pesos a year later.40 On average, the price paid for a slave in the Philippines was less than 75 pesos and more than 200 in Mexico.

The transpacific slave trade was a late sixteenth and seventeenth century phenomenon, which depended on a variety of factors to occur. First, the Spanish Empire had to extend as far as Asia in order for traders to have a base from which to acquire a supply of slaves and organize for their sale overseas. Second, there needed to be a means of transport, which was provided by the Manila Galleon infrastructure. Third, the international political climate had to allow for Portuguese traders with access to faraway regions to deliver slaves for this transoceanic market. Fourth, the local colonial government in the Philippines had to facilitate the export of foreign and indigenous slaves, which included ignoring the enslavement of Spanish vassals and turning a blind eye to contraband. Officials in Mexico had to be equally fraudulent. Finally, the Crown had to permit the slave trade at some level, acknowledging that the colonies needed additional labor and that great profits could be made from such commerce.

39 AGN Inquisición 456-2-55r-98v (1650).
40 AGN Historia 407-230r (1629).
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