The First Asians in the Americas

A Transpacific History

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INTRODUCTION

AT 4:04 A.M. ON JANUARY 5, 1688, Catarina de San Juan breathed her last in Puebla de los Ángeles, Mexico.[1] Her ascetic life of perpetual suffering had reached its holy and inevitable end. A few devotees carried the corporeal relic that was her body from her dilapidated home (containing only one small room) to the house of Hipolyto del Castillo y Altra "to have in death a more decent place" for the customary postmortem washing and shrouding.[2] In the blue light before sunrise, the Jesuit fathers rang the bells of the College of the Holy Spirit to announce her passing. They prepared a palm leaf and a crown of flowers to honor Catarina as a virgin.[3]

Word spread quickly, and by 5:00 a.m., the city had swelled with "innumerable people" from miles around hoping to catch a glimpse of the sacred corpse.[4] Nobles and the poor alike hurried to the home of Castillo y Altra, so that it looked like "a church on Maundy Thursday, where the public of the entire city enters and exits and performs the stations [of the cross]."[5] However, this orderly procession did not last for long. As eager spectators converged on the home, their patience waned, and they rushed the door. The doorframe groaned and split, and the pious mob crowded around the body, eager to kiss Catarina's hands and feet, touch her rosaries, take flowers from her shroud, and even cut off her fingers and pieces of flesh to keep as holy relics.[6]

In this state, Catarina's body remained on display until the next afternoon, when a religious procession arrived to inter her in the main chapel of the Jesuit college. According to one of her confessors and hagiographers, Alonso Ramos, "The large crowd that gathered and attended the burial is

inexplicable . . . even on the rooftops, balconies, and windows of the houses that correspond to the doors of the temple of our College of the Holy Spirit, there appeared a multitude of men and women."[7] As the pallbearers approached the college, they needed to extract Catarina's body from the coffin, which had to be rotated to fit inside the narrow doorway. When the crowd spotted her holy figure, they stormed in "to rob her of the few decorations that had remained on the deceased."[8] They grasped the last shreds of her tunic, hair, and flesh and the final flowers from her shroud, and they even made off with her shoes.

Within the chapel, the undeterred Jesuits buried Catarina by a presbytery in a vault that also held stillborn infants—similarly valued for their purity. Two keys sealed the vault. In a speech given shortly after her interment, the Jesuit Francisco de Aguilera proclaimed that "all that the world adores as most precious, it makes holy, without claiming it, nor searching for it, [it found] a poor little *china*, slave, foreigner, who made us fill our tongues with her praises, our hearts with jubilation, and even our eyes with tears."[9]

But for all the acceptance she eventually found among Puebla's denizens, Catarina continued to be a "a poor little *china*" (the colonial Mexican term used to refer to any Asian person) and a "slave, foreigner." This was so although she had lived almost seventy years in Puebla, most of them as a free woman. Those who knew Catarina speculated that she might have been born on the Arabian Peninsula or lived in her youth as a princess of the Mughal royal family in India. The Jesuit Joseph del Castillo Graxeda's conjecture was the least ambitious and, therefore, perhaps the most persuasive: "Catharina was native to the Mughal Kingdom. The place where she was born is unknown, and even she did not know it for being such a young age when she was taken from it."[10] As a child, Catarina had been a victim of a Portuguese slave raid in South Asia. She was eventually sold in Spanish Manila. Then, at the nearby port of Cavite, she was made to board a Spanish galleon destined for Mexico. The journey across the world's largest ocean on an early modern ship, even one advanced for its time, lasted many months under horrid conditions. In 1619, Catarina disembarked at the port of Acapulco in chains and was sent overland to Puebla. There, she eventually gained her freedom and, through her piety, became a renowned symbol of holy virtue and global Catholic hegemony.[11]

Despite her celebrity, Catarina—the person behind the reputation—remained an unknown and unknowable entity, a "Thesaurus absconditus" (hidden treasure) in the words of the Jesuit Antonio Plancarte.[12] For the funerary procession, Plancarte painted a dark, sealed box of Asian design and penned a poem to accompany it:

> Here from *china*, you see
> my color; inside the gold
> I save as greater treasure,
> that hidden here you will find.
> Although the more turns you give
> the key, it will not open, none will understand it;
> since the cipher only God
> knows, for you
> [only] in his time will he reveal it.[13]

According to Plancarte, the inner quality of Catarina's soul lay beyond the human grasp. What those attending her funeral perceived, instead, was her exotic difference—her body "here from *china*" (meaning Asia) now laid out before them. Catarina remained inextricably tied to the thousands of hands seeking to defile and consume her, desiring to turn the key that would expose her interior, yearning for the total submission she withheld in life and reserved for the Holy Trinity alone. As silent as stone, Catarina had become her foreignness.

Today, Catarina de San Juan is erroneously known by another name, the China Poblana (the "china" of Puebla). In his 1897 book *Historia de la Puebla de los Angeles*, the Mexican historian Antonio Carrión conflated the China Poblana, a popular nineteenth-century form of dress that was a symbol of Mexican femininity, with the distant memory of an Asian woman who had once lived in Puebla.[14] He wrote that the women of Puebla had known Catarina de San Juan as "la *China*, which they called her affectionately," and thus, Catarina had become the China Poblana.[15] The allure of the *castor* (patterned skirt), white slip, white blouse, and shawl of the China Poblana melded with Carrión's resurrection of an Asian-infused Baroque past. From this orientalist conflation of the two "chinas," Catarina de San Juan shape-shifted into folklore.[16]