

The *china* and the *ranchero*

Typecasting Mexicanness from Nineteenth-Century *costumbrismo* to Classical Mexican Cinema

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Abstract

This article traces the historical background of social typecasting in Mexico, i.e., the historical usage of social types to represent what is thought to be this country's socio-cultural identity. It argues that nineteenth-century local *costumbrista* artists originally created a set of social types as a means of promoting a sense of national collective distinctiveness. It shows how these artists benefited from global and local transformations of the modes of production and circulation of entertainment and knowledge to install in the collective imaginary the idea of a homogeneous local identity and culture despite evident racial and social differences. I analyze in particular two social types—the *ranchero* and the *china*—from the collection *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*, one of the most important achievements of Mexican *costumbrismo*. In doing so, I demonstrate how the *costumbrista* artistic project was similar to that of the Mexican filmmakers of the first decades of the twentieth century in terms of circumstances of origin and political-ideological agenda. In the process, I also reveal the extent to which Mexican *costumbrista* artists influenced modern perspectives of ethnic and cultural identity in Mexico. And more importantly, I show how a dominant class of intellectuals has attempted, at different times in the history of Mexico, to structure a social imaginary that models national identity based on an arbitrary selection of “typically Mexican” socio-cultural features.

Introduction

Nations are cultural elaborations, for, as Benedict Anderson points out, building up a nation implies formulating a network of imaginary elements seemingly shared by a community (1983: 52). Therefore, “the image—or narration—of the nation might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary

language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west” (Bhabha 1990: 1). Westerners or not, the narration of the nation has also been the project—and inescapable challenge—of several Latin American countries that have sought to articulate a sense of distinct and unique identities in order to legitimize themselves as independent nations since their political break with Spain and Portugal.¹

Mexico has not been exempted from undergoing such anxiety. Ideological discourses that have appealed to the recognition of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness), i.e., to the essence of Mexican character, have been fundamental to the project of Mexican identity. These discourses have sprung from several areas, but they have flourished profusely in the field of artistic expressions, which have always been quite dynamic in the making and dissemination of a Mexican imaginary.

Much of what has been written on Mexican nationalism by scholars has focused on the first half of the twentieth century, when, shortly after the Revolution (1910-1920), the arts proved to be fundamental in the strategy of the Mexican state and its institutions to stabilize, homogenize, and align the country with novel ideas and parameters of modernity and progress. It has been convincingly demonstrated by many specialists that classical arts such as painting, literature, and music played an important role in aesthetically reconstructing the nation.² Yet, it was the formats and genres of a differentiated rising cultural industry that ultimately enabled the incorporation of the Mexican masses into the project of the creation of the modern nation (Martín-Barbero 2010: 169; Acevedo Muñoz 2002: 26; Shohat and Stam 1994: 101).

Mexican films produced during the so-called Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1933-1959) were particularly vital participants in the dissemination of totalizing pedagogical discourses on reconciliation, social cohesion, and national identity in post-revolutionary Mexico.³ The 1930s constituted the first

1 Whether or not Latin America is a constitutive part of the so-called Western world is, to date, a subject of debate among scholars and intellectuals from various disciplines. See Citric et al. 2007; Fuentes 2004; Huntington 1996.

2 Of particular importance within the mentioned categories was muralism—with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros as leaders of this artistic movement—, novels dedicated to the Mexican revolution, and folkloric musical compositions known in Spanish as *corridos* and *ranchera* songs. See Anreus et al. 2012; Guerrero 2007; Monsiváis 1981.

3 The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, known in Spanish as *La época de oro del cine mexicano*, refers to a historical moment in which the Mexican film industry reached

decade of political stability in the country since the end of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in 1911, and as Acevedo Muñoz notes, this stability in the 1930s "coincides with methodical efforts [of the Mexican intelligentsia] to invent the 'cultural nation' by means of an original cinematic style based on a specific set of 'revolutionary' topics, genres, and heroic figures" (2002: 26).⁴ Such an assertion was certified by the national and international success of films of the so-called *comedia ranchera* genre, such as Fernando de Fuentes' *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Out at the Big Ranch, 1936). This film evades the socially and politically tense atmosphere of the recent past even as the story takes place during the years of the Revolution, and in return, it "evokes an idyllic rural world without social and moral fractures" (Díaz López 1999: 185). More specifically, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* presents a microcosm in the form of a *hacienda* where masters and servants are respectful of the caste system and gender roles dictated by religion and where the only conflicts and tensions between people are those related to love.⁵ All of this exists in a mix with folkloric rural elements, such as music, food, tequila, horses, landscapes, and costumes, which were intended to define a national(istic) iconography (Belmonte Grey 2016: 179, 200). Thus, a socially conflicted and culturally heterogeneous world such as the Mexican one was depicted on the screen through idealized tropes and a limited set of provincial social types.⁶ Out of this set of social types, the ones that stand out are the *charro*—the cinematic version of the *ranchero*—and the *china*; these characters were soon claimed by other filmmakers and presented in their films—as in the case of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*—as the great pillars of the sought-after new national identity. In the plots of such films, the *charro* would generally be portrayed as a tough, violent, brave, and gallant man, i.e., as the

high levels of production, economic success, and quality to the extent that Mexico became the center of commercial film production in Latin America.

- 4 Citations from secondary literature in Spanish were translated to English by the author. Original citations from primary literature are given in footnotes.
- 5 In a way, such idealistic imagery disseminated by *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and the *comedia ranchera* genre in general was also a Mexican attempt to reverse the image of Mexico that Hollywood movies had been creating and promoting since the 1920s. In such movies, Mexicans were almost always depicted in the form of negative stereotypes—greasers and bandits in the case of men and *femme-fatales* or exotic ladies in the case of women. See Maciel 2000; see also Silva Escobar 2011.
- 6 I use the concept of social types to refer to archetypal characters meant to encompass and represent behaviors, personality traits, physical qualities, and/or the social status of a particular group of people.

embodiment of Mexican masculinity. The *china*, on the other hand, would generally be portrayed as the embodiment of Mexican femininity, i.e., as a beautiful, flirtatious, yet submissive and obedient woman.

In this article, rather than delving further into how classical Mexican cinema aimed at creating a sense of collective distinctiveness based on a limited stock of characters, I track and analyze the historical background of the phenomenon of social typecasting in Mexico; that is, the historical usage of social types to represent the quintessence of this country's national identity. I look back into the nineteenth century to demonstrate that Mexican *costumbrista* artists of this period formulated, before anyone else, a set of social types as a means of deliberately promoting a sense of national unity and identity. I show how, similar to the makers of Mexican classical cinema, *costumbrista* artists also benefited from global and local transformations in the modes of circulation and production of entertainment and knowledge to shape the perception of Mexico's national identity. I analyze in particular the cases of two social types—the *ranchero* and the *china*—from the collection *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*, one of the most important achievements of Mexican *costumbrismo*. In doing so, I thus demonstrate how the *costumbrista* artistic project and that of twentieth-century filmmakers are akin in terms of circumstances of origin and political-ideological agenda. I also expose the extent in which Mexican *costumbrista* artists influenced modern perspectives of ethnic and cultural identity in Mexico. And more importantly, I show how in Mexico a dominant intellectual class has tried at different times in the history of this country to structure a social imaginary that models national identity based on an arbitrary selection of “typically Mexican” socio-cultural features.

Abbreviated genealogy of *costumbrismo* and the construction of social types

Costumbrismo was an artistic trend with several aesthetic and thematic affinities to nineteenth-century Romanticism. It emerged during the same years in various modes of artistic expressions, such as painting, lithography, and literature, and sought to reflect on the folklore, institutions, and mannerisms of a given society (Losada 2014: 333). *Costumbrismo* has been traditionally associated with the Hispanic scene, although individual and collective manifestations of it also appeared in other European countries, as discussed in a subsequent section. *Costumbrismo* also defers from Romanticism in other

important aspects, such as its attention to local customs in the present and its claim of maintaining objectivity and realism. Romantic artists focused predominantly on the past and on making geographical landscapes correspond to the mood of the fictional characters; however, costumbrista artists preserved Enlightenment's educational and pedagogical principles as well as Enlightenment's rational and systematic approach to the natural world and society and with it, its generalizing concept of the typical (Hamnett 2011: 15). Thus, *costumbrismo* acted as an instance of typecasting and as a sort of special "technology of description and classification for the construction of racial and social typologies" (Domínguez 2016: 138). In this capacity, *costumbrismo* was also "a powerful mental tool for building—or consolidating—nations during the nineteenth century and for imagining those communities that were worth belonging to in the future" (Teuber 2018: 138).

At first, representations of social types appeared as a constitutive part of the so-called *artículos de costumbres*, which were short prose articles elaborated to represent landscapes, customs, habits, and paradigmatic individuals of a specific social group, usually with a markedly satirical tone and a critical and pedagogical intention.⁷ These *artículos de costumbres* primarily proliferated through Spanish newspapers and illustrated magazines. Progressively, the creation of social types became a differentiated artistic trend. Social types as independent compositions were more methodical and focused. They were constituted by a graphic image of a certain type—dressed in a representative costume and immersed in an environment associated with his or her occupation—which was accompanied by a brief text with information about the character's regional origin, values, and habits.

As mentioned previously, *costumbrismo* flourished throughout the nineteenth century; yet, it is important to point out that descriptions of collective life through social types can be traced all the way back to the eighteenth century, and these descriptions were not a unique Spanish phenomenon. Social types had been represented graphically in the collections of costumes⁸

7 I speak of a pedagogical intention in the sense that by means of these descriptions of social life, as Martínez-Pinzón and Soriano Salkjelsvik have pointed out, the *costumbrista* authors sought to enable the readers to come to terms with the social order that they sought to implement (2016: 14).

8 For example, see *Colección de trajes de España* (1777) and *Costumes of England* (1805).

and the collections of Cries,⁹ publications which circulated abundantly both in Spain and other European countries. The purpose of these publications was to present a set of prints with the most interesting or picturesque types of a given country or city. The weight fell entirely on the image, which was accompanied by a minimal narrative that could refer to the name of the province from where the character originated, his or her (street) business, or the specific products advertised by the type in question.¹⁰

The extraordinary expansion of the written press during the nineteenth century ultimately led to the evolution of the social type into an artistic composition where a graphic image and a more detailed written description were offered. Individual compositions of this kind found a home in the journalistic press, while collective works came together in the form of anthologies and serials. The collection *Heads of the People: Or, Portraits of the English* was launched in installments in 1838 and then published as a book in two volumes between 1840-1841. Inspired by this collection, *Les français peints par eux-mêmes*, i.e., France's own collection of types, appeared across the Channel; it began to be published in installments in 1839 and was later edited in eight volumes, which were released between 1840 and 1842. Not too long after, the collection *Los españoles pintados por sí mismos* appeared in Spain. It followed an editing and publishing process that was similar to that of its predecessors in England and France. It was first published in installments throughout 1842 and, then, as two sequential volumes in 1843 and 1844.

The compilation method, content, and internal structure of all these artistic works were very similar. They were all collective projects in which an extensive number of writers and graphic artists participated. The types in these collections were each made up of a vivid textual description with at least a one-page lithograph or some vignettes interspersed throughout the text. The primary intention of the authors was to present a general image of society through a group of selected characters (Pérez Salas 1998: 169). Thus, in these collections, one finds figures from different social classes, differentiated by their unique profession, physical appearance, and psychological attributes.

9 For example, see *Les Cris de Paris* (1737), *Los gritos de Madrid* (1798), and *The Itinerant Traders of London* (1804).

10 For more on the evolution of the representations of social types, see Schwab 2018; see also Pérez Salas 1998.

***Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos:* Forging a Mexican identity amid political turmoil**

Both costumbrismo and the fashion of collecting social types quickly expanded to the Americas, setting roots in the Spanish-speaking portions of the region as early as the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹ Specifically, in Mexico, local writers and visual artists saw in the conception of *artículos de costumbres* and the representation of social types a timely and practical measure to cope with the various socio-political problems the country was facing at the time. *Costumbrismo*, as mentioned previously, was oriented toward the gathering of folklore, customs, and traditions. Such conceptual premises fully addressed the needs and feelings of a nation that was seeking means to attain socio-political stability and express its individuality vis-à-vis other nations after achieving its independence from Spain in 1821. During its first three decades as an independent country, Mexico had more than forty different presidencies, each lasting less than a year on average. Additionally, the so-called Mexican-American war took place from 1846 to 1848. After the war, the Mexican government was forced to concede more than half of the country's territory to the United States. Thus, in view of socio-political and territorial instability, the need among the ruling Mexican elites to redesign the meaning of the "nation" was truly urgent, and local *costumbrista* artists—who belonged to this social group—played a significant role in the execution of the task.

Although the representations of Mexican life made by Mexican *costumbrista* artists did not openly allude to the great socio-political conflicts that afflicted the country, issues pertaining to the discursive construction of the nation and national identity were at the core of their works, which had an important impact on public opinion at the time. Since the early nineteenth century, the printed press in Mexico had been enjoying a certain growth and freedom. The proclamation of the *Constitution of Cadiz* in 1812 and its article 371—which established that "all Spaniards have the freedom to write, print, and publish their political ideas without the need of any license, revision,

11 Although most Latin American countries had become politically independent from Spain by the mid-nineteenth century, Spanish cultural trends still set the tone for artistic expression in the region. For more on the influence of Spanish *costumbrismo* throughout Latin America, see Hamnett 2011; Pérez Salas 1998; Lía Barrios 1994; Watson-Espener 1979.

or approval”¹²—favored the emergence and proliferation of periodicals in the Hispanic colonies (cit. by Fernández 2010: 77). This was the case “even in territories such as Yucatan, Mexico, which had never had them before” (Fernández 2010: 77). By the mid-nineteenth century, Mexican independence had been achieved, and values of a more republican nature had been put into practice, prompting the Mexican press to become “the highest tribune to debate and to create a public opinion on national problems” even if it was often “under the shadow of the ruling political parties and their ideological principles” (Fernández 2010: 79). Such a development of journalism and editorial activity in Mexico facilitated the circulation of *artículos de costumbres* and representations of social types—for they were mostly published in newspapers and weekly magazines—along with the circulation of ideas about the nation that enabled and legitimized it.¹³

Published in installments throughout 1854 and, soon after, as a volume in 1855, *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos* is the most emblematic example of a collection of social types in Mexico and one of the most important in Latin America.¹⁴ It closely followed the model of European collections of social types not only in terms of form and style but also in that it claimed—as it was natural for these works—to be exclusively dedicated to the representation of the existing state of domestic culture through the display of vernacular social types. Before the appearance of this artistic work, some Mexican weekly newspapers had already shown interest in social types, including *El Mosaico Mexicano* (1836-1837), *El Museo Popular* (1840-1842), and *Museo Mexicano* (1843).¹⁵

Los mexicanos was prepared as a book by the M. Murguía y Compañía Press, which was located in Mexico City and was well-respected in the local publishing sphere (Pérez Salas 1998: 191). It features thirty-three entries, one for each of the types included in the volume. At the time, its written part

12 “[...] todos los españoles tienen la libertad de escribir, imprimir y publicar sus ideas políticas sin necesidad de licencia, revisión o aprobación alguna.”

13 For a detailed study on the relationship between the rise of the vernacular press and the emergence of national(istic) consciousnesses during the nineteenth century in a global context, see Anderson 1983.

14 Examples of other important collections of social types in Latin America include the Cuban *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos* (1852) and the Colombian *Museo de cuadros de costumbres* (1866).

15 In addition to offering articles on local types and customs, these newspapers provided a great diversity of texts, such as biographies, studies on flora and fauna, and even essays on physical anthropology.

was presented as an anonymous work, while the lithographs were all signed by the illustrators Hesiquio Iriarte and Andrés Campillo. The authors of the texts were unknown until 1935 when the writer Enrique Fernández Ledesma identified them to be Hilarión Frías y Soto, José María Rivera, Juan de Dios Arias, Ignacio Ramírez “El Nigromante”, Niceto de Zamacois, and Pantaleón Tovar (González Reyes et al. 2015: 182). All of these individuals belonged to a small and privileged group of creole *letrados*¹⁶ (lettered men) who embraced liberalism and thus “were convinced that their role in society was to guide incapable individuals—intellectually and politically speaking—along the path of civilization and progress” (Cortés Guerrero 2013: 19). In *Los mexicanos*, one can immediately perceive such a liberal stance in the written description of the first type that appears in the collection, the *aguador* or water carrier; the author Hilarión Frías y Soto addresses the water carrier directly to explain to him why he exists as a type in the collection. The author-narrator says, “[s]ince you cannot write nor make your own portrait, I have appropriated that obligation.” (1855: 2)¹⁷ As Pérez Salas has observed, this liberal and progressive will to change society is also reflected in the fact that the authors excluded indigenous people, nobles, and military and ecclesiastical groups from the anthology (1998: 193). In other words, they excluded social types that together reflected the still-in-force colonial caste system that these Mexican intellectuals wanted to disrupt.

In addition to being liberals, these lettered men were patriots who sought to use their abilities to position Mexico in the world arena as a sovereign and culturally unique nation.¹⁸ The frontispiece of *Los mexicanos* is the first example in the collection of such efforts. In this illustration, just as in the frontispieces of European collections of types, a group of characters appears around another character in charge of hanging a blanket with the album’s title. In the Mexican version, however, this blanket is flanked by flora that, at the time, was identified with the lush vegetation of the American continent:

16 *Letrados*, according to Ángel Rama in his book *La ciudad letrada*, were men of letters who served the Spanish monarchy by assisting in the evangelization of the masses and the administration of its institutions in Latin America during the colonial times. Paradoxically, in the nineteenth century, creole *letrados* such as the *costumbristas* used writing to configure and consolidate the independent American nations. See Rama 2002.

17 “Cómo tú no puedes escribir ni hacer tu retrato yo me he apropiado esa obligación.”

18 According to Pérez Salas, several authors of *Los mexicanos* even took up arms in defense of the Republic. See Pérez Salas 2005: 281–288.

a palm and a banana tree. As Pérez Salas noticed, such graphic details were abundantly present at the time in graphic works on Mexico produced by European traveler-artists for whom it was a way of offering instances of cultural difference to their European audiences (1998: 194-196). Thus, the emphasis of their images was on the picturesque and exotic aspects of Mexico and its people.

In a way, the presence of a front image that alludes to the exoticism and exuberance of Mexico and Mexicans in *Los mexicanos* reproduces the prejudices and stereotypes conceived by foreign travelers. Yet, as Mey-Yen Moriuchi has pointed out, the frontispiece of *Los mexicanos* could also be interpreted as a phenomenon of transculturation, which refers to the ways in which subordinate groups willingly—and not passively—absorb the modes of representations developed by dominant cultures.¹⁹ So, even if these subordinated groups cannot control what emanates from the dominant culture, they can determine, to some degree, what they absorb into the local culture and how it is used (Moriuchi 2018: 32). In this respect, it is important to note that among the group of characters that appear in *Los mexicanos*' frontispiece, one can see a *ranchero* and a *china*, i.e., types of Mexican origin, which are pointed toward with the finger by another character who looks directly at the viewer as if indicating that the book is not an exact copy of the European collections but a collection of local types who will now talk about themselves.

19 The term "transculturation" was first employed by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to refer to a form of cultural contact that results in a dynamic process of selection, interaction, transformation, and creation between the parties involved. This is in opposition to the understanding of cultural contact as a unilateral and unidirectional relationship where the dominant culture would act as the donor and the subordinated culture as the recipient. See Ortiz 1995.



Fig. 1: Frontispiece, 1855.

Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos. México D. F.: Manuel Porrúa.

With regard to the rest of the social types that build up *Los mexicanos*, a quick look at their denominations makes it clear that despite the frontispiece's announcement, most of these figures are not specifically of Mexican origin.²⁰ In fact, only the *ranchero* and the *china* are exclusive to nineteenth-century Mexican society, while the rest of the characters are urban figures that could

²⁰ See the collection's index.

likely be found in any city at the time, and thus, they also appear in the European collections of types. One possible explanation for such a strong focus on urban types is the highly “metropolitan nature of journalism” and the readership (Lauster 2007: 5). Another possible explanation, as Cortés Guerrero has suggested, is that the authors of *Los mexicanos* subscribed to the idea of homogenizing the country with the city as the epicenter (2013: 31). Such an idea, according to Ángel Rama, was related to the notion of progress and modernity that Latin American *letrados* embraced throughout the nineteenth century (2002: 41-69).²¹

A closer inspection of the types that make up *Los mexicanos* allows us to see that the differences between this collection and its European equivalents—apart from the inclusion of actual local types—are found in graphic features, such as the details of the costumes, poses, and physical appearance as well as textual comments that ensure the national specificity of the portrayed figures. This can be clearly perceived when comparing the *aguador* featured in *Los mexicanos* with the *aguador* that appears in *Los españoles*. As Moriuchi (2018: 70-71) has noted in her comparison of these two types, the Spanish water carrier illustrated by Alenza has a dark complexion, is somewhat obese, and short in stature. His facial features are rough and sharp, so they denote anguish over the work he performs. His humble clothing, correspondingly, provides evidence of his working-class status, as he wears a triangular shirt, a short jacket, and visibly worn-out pants and boots. On the other hand, the Mexican water carrier illustrated by Hesiquio Iriarte is represented as a mestizo man with dark hair, dark eyes, and facial features that show more pleasure and pride in his profession than anguish. He is also taller and thinner than his Spanish counterpart and appears in erect posture wearing finer and cleaner clothes: shoes instead of boots, a white shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and pants made of two fabrics. Such differences between the Mexican and the Spanish water carriers are reinforced by the texts that accompany the images. Abenamar, the author of the text that supplements the illustration of the Spanish *aguador*, emphasizes the poverty and intellectual deprivation of his character by saying, “[t]ruth, when looked at well, is but a world of atrocities. Moreover, it is the mirror in which human miseries are seen in all their nakedness, and the man who

21 Rama uses the term *ciudad letrada* (lettered city) to refer to the urban origin, privilege, and epistemological violence exercised by *letrados* since the colonial times in the way they interpret and represent their societies. See Rama 2002.

looks at himself like that must lament, out of necessity, not to have died at birth. If the water carriers were men of wit, they would not be water carriers.” (1843: 140)²² On the other hand, Frías Soto, the author of the text on the Mexican *aguador*, exalts the dedication of this type to his work and the dignity with which he faces the adversities that life presents to him. “This is the water carrier”, writes Frías Soto, “[who is] restrained, devoted to work, almost always a good father and not so bad [a] husband [and who] spends half his life with a *chochocol* [a big clay vase] on his back as an emblem of the hardships of life [...]. He makes out of his misery a shield to his needs, and since these are so few, so are his demands.” (1855: 2)²³

The rest of the types in the Mexican collection went through a similar refinement process, which, according to Moriuchi, expresses the clear intention of the authors to reverse the denigrating representations of Mexicans that foreign traveling artists had created for years, particularly in the case of Mexicans of mixed race and lower class who “were almost always represented as careless and uncivilized” (Moriuchi 2018: 71).²⁴ Yet, their work not only aimed to change the image of Mexico and Mexicans for a foreign audience but, more importantly, it aimed at changing the image that the Mexican society had of itself. Hence, they did not want to represent society as it really was but rather as it should have been. Among the set of social types that they proposed as markers of their sought-after Mexicanness, two of them—the *china* and the *ranchero*—effectively became, over time, major emblems of national identity and the gender roles within it in the Mexican collective imagination.

22 “La verdad, bien mirada es en el mundo una atrocidad. Es más todavía, es el espejo en el que las miserias humanas se ven en toda su desnudez, y el hombre que así se ve tiene que sentir por necesidad no haberse muerto al nacer. Si los aguadores fuesen hombres que pensasen, no serían aguadores.”

23 “Este es el aguador, comedido, entregado al trabajo, casi siempre buen padre y no tan peor esposo, pasa la mitad de su vida con el chochocol a la espalda, como un emblema de las penalidades de la vida [...]. Hace de su miseria un escudo a sus necesidades, y como estas son tan pocas, lo son también sus exigencias.”

24 Moriuchi offers a detailed analysis of representations of Mexico and Mexicans by traveler-artists such as Claudio Linati, Carl Nebel, Johann Mortiz Rugendas, and Édouard Pingret. See Moriuchi 2018: 31-61. For more on the topic, also see Vázquez Mantecón 2000.

The *china*: Visualizations of “Mexican femininity”

While there is no record of the precise origins of the *china*,²⁵ it is known that by the third decade of the nineteenth century, this character began to feature in the works of European traveler-painters as a provincial mestizo Mexican woman characterized by a peculiar way of dressing, an attractive figure, seductive talents, and an independent spirit.²⁶ For these artists, as the studies by Moriuchi (2018) and Vázquez Mantecón (2001) have shown, the *china* was a means of locating and offering a sense of cultural and social otherness to their European audience.²⁷ “As someone of mixed Spanish and Indian race”, Moriuchi notes, “[the *china*] exemplified Mexico’s unique culture, all the while serving as an exotic Other who could not be found in Europe” (2018: 42-43).

The attributes associated with *china* women were also recorded by the traveler-writers of the time. In his book *México, lo que fue y lo que es* (Mexico, What It Was and What It Is, 1844), the German-born author Brantz Mayer wrote about the *china*’s “andar de reina”, i.e., their “queen-like walking style”, even as they were, he added, “de las mujeres más vulgares”, i.e., “the most vulgar of women” (cit. by Vázquez Mantecón 2000: 128). In a somewhat rectifying tone, he has dedicated some adulatory verses to the dark color of the *china*’s complexion and noted her seductive use of the fan and her piercing eyes “which more than once forced many intrepid hearts to ask for mercy” (cit. by Vázquez Mantecón 2000: 128).²⁸ Similarly, the Frenchman Lucien Biart, in his work *La tierra templada, escenas de la vida mexicana 1846-1855* (Temperate Earth, Scenes of Mexican Life, 1859), referred to *china* women as “ardientes hijas del trópico” or “ardent daughters of the tropics” and euphorically described them as lively, cheerful, affectionate, seductive, and neat (1859: 250). He also exalted the *china*’s “ondulaciones felinas” or “feline undulations” as if to confirm the assumed primitive and exotic nature of these women (1859: 251).

25 It is worth mentioning that the *china* is also known as *china poblana*. The epithet *poblana* refers to the Mexican state of Puebla, which some scholars consider the geographical origin of this social type, yet without offering any conclusive evidence.

26 María del Carmen Vázquez Mantecón attributed much of the creation and popularization of the *china*’s image to Carl Nebel whose book *Viaje pintoresco y arqueológico sobre la parte más interesante de la República Mexicana* (1835) features some *poblana* women dressed as *chinas*. See Vázquez Mantecón 2000: 129-130.

27 See Moriuchi 2018: 32-59; see also Vázquez Mantecón 2000: 125-134.

28 “[...] que más de una vez forzó a muchos corazones intrépidos a pedir merced.”

The *china* in *Los mexicanos* is equally a victim of an objectifying and exotizing male gaze, which appears to reproduce the stereotypes associated with Mexican women that were disseminated by European traveler-artists. José María Rivera, the author of the text dedicated to this type, insists on the *china's* sensual nature when he describes her as “a set of temptations capable of making me abandon my peaceful, circumspect, and good-natured customs” (1855: 90).²⁹ Yet, in Rivera's text, unlike the graphic and written descriptions of European traveler-artists, there is a manifest effort to constructively value the *china* and place her as a national figure. At the beginning of his text, he refers to the *china* as his “tipo nacional y predilecto”, i.e., his “favorite national type”, and proudly presents her as a paradigm that opposes equivalent European types (1855: 90). “Away with the Spanish *majas* and *manolas* and the French *grisettes*”, demands the narrator (1855: 90).³⁰ To this, he adds, “[i]f you ask a writer, he will answer you that the *china* is a version of the Spanish *maja*, and the scholar will say that she is nothing more than a bad sketch of the *manola*. For me, being neither [a] scholar nor [a] writer, the *china* is the legitimate and beautiful daughter of Mexico [...]” (1855: 90)³¹ Rivera then talks about the *china's* anatomical proportions—very tight waist, curved arms, and tiny feet—which, one can say, conformed to the ideals of European beauty at the time. Yet, he also stresses the attributes of this figure that are meant to document and verify that she is, in fact, the legitimate daughter of Mexico. He talks about her “ojos negros y subversivos” or “black, subversive eyes” and her “tez morena y aterciopelada” or “dark, velvety skin” as if reaffirming her ethnic status as a mestizo woman of mixed Spanish and Indian blood (1855: 91). Thus, even if the *china* is objectified by the author's male gaze, it is also clear that for him, she is also a medium to help Mexico “gain credibility as an independent nation on the global political stage”, as suggested by Mary Coffey (2016: 143).

Rivera also emphasizes the cleanliness and the order that one can find in a *china's* house, particularly in the kitchen where pots, pans, and other

29 “[...] un conjunto de tentaciones capaz de hacerme abandonar mis costumbres pacíficas, circunspectas y bonachonas”

30 “¡Fuera las *majas* y *manolas* de España y las *grisetas* de Francia!”

31 “Si preguntas a un literato, te responderá que la *china* es una versión de la *maja* española, y el erudito de dirá que no es otra cosa más que el mal bosquejo de la *manola*. Para mí, que no soy ni erudito ni literato, la *china* es la legítima y hermosa hija de México [...]”

beautifully crafted utensils hang symmetrically aligned on the walls along with a couple of prints of catholic saints (1855: 94-95). Such descriptive details reveal two things: first, Rivera's status as a *letrado* attempting to raise Mexican women to the level of European civilization by associating them with enlightened views of hygiene and order; second, virtues that the patriarchy of the time intended for Mexican women, such as home care.



LA CHINA.

Fig. 2: Hesiquio Iriarte, "La China", 1855.
Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos. México D. F.: Manuel Porrúa, 90.

The lithograph of the *china* in *Los mexicanos* by Hesiquio Iriarte is consistent with Rivera's written description of this figure, as the illustration also inserts the *china* within a nationalist discourse and a patriarchal order. One can also see that while her anatomical proportions are meant to conform with ideals of European beauty—tight waist, curved arms, and tiny feet—her rather dark eyes and skin are meant to project her ethnic specificity as a mestizo woman. Hence, as in the written description, the illustration exposes the creator's eagerness to equate the *china* with its European counterparts by highlighting her particular ethnic features, which are thought to be representative of Mexican ethnic distinctiveness. The *china's* psychological characteristics and social functions, on the other hand, are registered by her pose and the figurative elements that surround her image. Her alleged intrinsic sensuality and independent spirit are reflected by the fact that her left hand rests provocatively on her hips while she holds a cigarette with her right hand. In contrast to this, one can see a kitchen in the background, which is recognizable by the perfectly aligned pots and pans that adorn the walls. That is, there are a number of symbols that connect the *china* with enlightened views of order and hygiene and, simultaneously, to traditionally female household chores.

The *ranchero*: Visualizations of "Mexican masculinity"

While it is complicated to trace the origins of the *china*, it is as complicated to outline what a *ranchero* is in a Mexican historical context, mainly because the term itself contains multiple meanings. However, Barragán and Linck have identified the two most conventional definitions. In the first one, "the *ranchero* is perceived from the point of view of his status, his social position; *ranchero* men tend to see themselves as a stratum, a simple component of rural Mexican society seen through a class structure" (1994: 12). That is, the *ranchero* is viewed as a symbol of the Mexican agrarian middle class and as an intermediary between the peasant and the landowner. The other definition—of a more cultural nature—is primarily concerned with "investigating *ranchero* identity", which implies that the *ranchero* has to be something more than a simple social or economic category (Barragán and Linck 1994: 12). In line with this second definition, Faustino Aquino Sánchez has described *ranchero* men as "Mexican mestizo or creole horsemen of the post-independence period [from 1821 onwards] who, at that time, were distinguished by their peculiar equestrian

clothing" (Aquino Sánchez 2019). He further differentiated the *ranchero* from social types with which the *ranchero* is often confused, such as the *charro*, the *cuerudo*, and the *chinaco*:

Creoles and mestizos who lived in the countryside [...] were generally good horsemen and called themselves *rancheros*; *charro* was an honorary title because only the *ranchero* man who was skilled in the lots of tailing bulls, lasso bullfighting, and cavalry's weapons was worthy of it. The man who wore the *ranchero* suit made entirely of chamois leather was called *cuerudo*, and the man who wore the *ranchero* suit with carelessness or poverty and lacked education was called [the] *chinaco*. (Aquino Sánchez 2019)

By the mid-twentieth century, the figure of the *ranchero* in its *charro* version was consolidated by means of the *comedia ranchera* films as the greatest emblem of Mexican identity. There, he was seen as "an invincible national hero" thoroughly "integrated with the ideas of manhood, nationhood, and power" (Nájera-Ramírez 1994: 4). Mexican *costumbrista* artists from the previous century were, to some extent, responsible for the fate that awaited this imaginary figure.

As in the case of the *china*, by the time the *ranchero* appeared in *Los mexicanos*, other artists had already promoted this social type as a national symbol. However, in the case of the *ranchero*, along with foreign travelers, Mexican local artists had also shown interest in depicting him as a representative of Mexican culture. Domingo Revilla was one of the first to do so among these Mexican artists. In his essay "Los Rancheros", published in *Museo Mexicano* in 1844, he openly refers to the *ranchero* as a "tipo nacional" and moves on to offer a detailed description of the clothing worn by these individuals, highlighting their extravagant *chaparreras* or leather pants and their wide-brimmed hats (1843: 551). He then talks about the different activities and responsibilities of *ranchero* men whom he splits into two ethnic categories: the indigenous type that works mainly on the fields and for whom the author feels pity due to his deplorable living conditions and a mestizo type that attends to the conservation and care of horses and other animals and lives in considerably better conditions—a remark that concomitantly documents the endurance in independent Mexico of the racial hierarchy instituted during colonial times (Revilla 1843: 551-552).

The accompanying lithograph by Joaquín Heredia aligns with Revilla's written depiction of *ranchero* men. On it, a mestizo-looking *ranchero* rides a visibly distressed horse and wears the infallible leather *chaparreras*, a

blanket of printed wool, and a wide-brimmed hat. He converses with another *ranchero*—presumably, an indigenous man—who stands on foot and is calm despite the proximity of the horse. He wears a long dark *manto* that almost reaches the floor along with decorated trousers, high-heeled boots with spurs, and a wide-brimmed hat. While the clothing and posture of both men suggest elegance and virility, the illustrated scene also exposes the racial dynamics of the time.



Fig. 3: Joaquín Heredia, “Los Rancheros”, 1845.
El Museo Mexicano. México D.F.: Ignacio Cumplido, 551.

In the lithograph entitled “El Ranchero” by Hesiquio Iriarte, which appears in *Los mexicanos*, we no longer find two variants of this type. We see a man of mixed-race appearance and medium stature with a slim figure and a strong complexion. He is standing erect with his head elevated and looking to the side. He wears a round hat with a wide brim, and in his right hand,

he holds a bow as a symbol of his occupation and virility. His clothes also project the degree of elegance associated with this character. He wears a short jacket decorated with embroidery, a white shirt, trousers with silver buttons, *chaparreras*, bell boots, silver spurs, and an ornamented *sarape* hanging over his left shoulder. In the background, one can see an open landscape that shows some particularities of the rural life of these men. One can see the *ranchero's* horse, another *ranchero* who rides his own horse, a church, and a *nopal* or cactus pear, which was most likely added as a symbol of the national vegetation.³²



Fig. 4: Hesiquio Iriarte, "El Ranchero", 1855.
Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos.
 México D. F.: Manuel Porrúa, 192.

32 From 1821 to the present day, the emblem located at the center of the Mexican flag has displayed a golden eagle standing on a *nopal* cactus while devouring a serpent.

The text accompanying Iriarte's illustration of the *ranchero* was also written by José María Rivera, who offers an account of this figure in a demonstrative rather than explanatory manner. The text begins with a conversation between the narrator—an alter ego of Rivera—and Don Alonso, a *ranchero* visiting Mexico City. Don Alonso invites Rivera to visit his ranch to see for himself what a *ranchero* is. The author-narrator accepts the invitation, and days later, accompanied by Pancho, Don Alonso's son, he sets off on his journey to a ranch located in an unnamed rural region.

At the beginning of his text, Rivera maneuvers his representation of *ranchero* men in the manner of European travelers, i.e., on the ideological axis of civilization-barbarism where he, as an urban intellectual, represents civilization and the *ranchero* men represent barbarism.³³ This is made evident immediately by the separation of linguistic registers in certain sections of the dialogue. On the one hand, there is the cultivated language of the narrator; on the other, the language of the *ranchero* characters, which appears full of regionalisms and phonetic exaggerations. Evidence of such a class-based interpretation scheme is also found in specific passages of the story, such as when the narrator recounts Pancho's refusal to sleep on a mattress the day before their trip to Don Alonso's ranch. The author writes, "Don Alfonso's son arrived yesterday and spent the night in the patio, lying on the horse's hoods because it was impossible for me to make him lie down under a roof and on a mattress." (Rivera 1855: 195)³⁴

Once at the ranch, the derogatory assessment of otherness—which the *ranchero* men represent to the narrator—is progressively diluted in favor of a series of specific attributes and ideals that the narrator claims to have discovered in the life and conduct of the people of rural Mexico. For instance, he euphorically praises the exquisite, peculiar, and varied nature of *ranchero* cuisine:

33 In 1845, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento formulated an interpretation of Argentine society through an apparent conflict between civilization and barbarism, where civilization was identified with the city of Buenos Aires and barbarism with the Argentinian pampas. This polarizing scheme served as the basis of the interpretation of Latin American societies during the rest of the nineteenth century. See Sarmiento 2003.

34 "El hijo de don Alfonso llegó ayer y ha pasado la noche en el patio, echado sobre los sudaderos del caballo, pues fuéme imposible hacerle acostar bajo de techo y encima de un colchón."

The meal consisted of a chicken in mole, a culinary novelty for me, a roasted goat, a casserole of green chili with cheese, a pot of very tasty jocoque [sour milk], cheese and butter in abundance, several cottage cheese, well-seasoned beans, white tortillas, thin and steaming, and a bowl covered with the stalks of a honeycomb in whose cells shone iridescent honey. The service at the table was humble but very clean, which together with the appetizing food, the good seasoning, and the cordial frankness, made me savor the first delights of peasant life. (Rivera 1855: 196)³⁵

The world of cooking, as Sidney Mintz has noted, is a territory full of meanings and symbols through which communities create and reproduce their identities in the sense that the techniques used to find, process, prepare, serve, and consume food vary culturally and have their own stories (Mintz 2013: 28).³⁶ Evidently, Rivera was also aware of the relationship between food and identity construction. He not only documents the gastronomic universe of the *ranchero* people but makes it desirable to his audience via the detailed description that he offers. The underlying drive—one could say—was to fashion such a multiplicity of textures, smells, and tastes into an ideal of Mexican cuisine. The richness of such a Mexican cuisine, as Rivera's account implies, is due to its mestizo nature, which combines autochthonous elements—corn, chili, and bean—with elements that came to the Americas from Spain—roasted goat, cheese, and butter.

In the same flattering tone, Rivera's narrator refers to the colorful infrastructure of Mexican ranches and the integrity of their inhabitants. Rivera writes: "[i]n the afternoon, when the sun had fallen, I walked with Don Alonso around his ranch, which seemed quite picturesque to me, and I saw the successive arrival of the various cattle that were part of the wealth of the honest

35 "La comida se componía de una gallina en mole, novedad culinaria a que había dado origen mi persona; un cabrito asado, una cazuela de chile verde con queso, una olla de sabrosísimo jocoque, queso y mantequilla en abundancia, varios requesones, frijoles bien sazonados, tortillas blancas, delgadas y humeantes, y una palangana cubierta con las pencas de un panal de abejas, en cuyas celdillas brillaba una miel tornasolada. El servicio en la mesa era humilde, pero limpiísimo, lo cual unido a las viandas apetitosas, al buen sazón y la cordial franqueza, me hicieron saborear las primeras delicias de la vida campesina."

36 In his culinary studies, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1970) argues that cooking is a language in which each society codifies messages that ultimately signify parts of what it is.

peasant.” (1855: 197)³⁷ Moreover, he exalts the bravery and virility of these men. He describes an afternoon of social interaction where Don Alonso's sons and Don Alonso himself are celebrated for their courage and cowboy skills:

The fight [between rider and bull] became fiercer and fiercer, and soon, from the center of a cloud of dust, came the exciting cries of the indefatigable D. Alonso who enflamed with them the bravery of his adversary. In short, after a few minutes of combat, the beast, dejected, gasping, [and] astonished, fell at the feet of the impassive contender [D. Alonso] who returned to the fence amid a thousand cheers and hurrahs. (Rivera 1855: 200)³⁸

In a humorous closing passage of Rivera's text on the *ranchero*, the narrator decides to prove his own bravery by riding a calf, which immediately drops him to the ground amid the laughter and mockery of the audience. This act of self-ridicule is but a discursive maneuver by the author that entails a double end. On the one hand, the scene reaffirms the Mexican model of masculinity by contrasting the effeminate figure of the urban intellectual with that of the brave rancher. On the other, it aims at soothing through humour the marks and tensions of class and race and the power of vision of the urban creole *letrado* on the rural otherness.

By way of a conclusion

During the nineteenth century, many countries sought to determine and/or consolidate their national identities, and the development of print media led to the rise of newspapers and other periodical publications, which decisively contributed to the discursive construction of the nation. It was through these circumstances that Mexican *costumbrista* artists put into circulation ideas that sought to highlight cultural, social, and historical elements that distinguished

37 “En la tarde, cuando el sol había caído, recorrí con don Alonso los alrededores de su rancho, que me parecieron bastante pintorescos y vi llegar sucesivamente los diversos ganados que formaban parte de la riqueza del honrado campesino.”

38 “La lucha se encarnizaba más y más, y en breve del centro de una nube de polvo, salían los gritos excitantes del infatigable D. Alonso, que enardecida con ellos la bravura de su adversario. En fin, después de algunos minutos de combate, la fiera abatida, jadeante, anonadada, cayó a los pies del impávido contendiente, que volvió a la cerca entre mil vivas y parabienes.”

their homeland from Spain and other nations and, thus, assisted in the legitimization of its political sovereignty. Their works, published either in periodical installments or as volumes, also aimed to inculcate in the reader's mind a desire for collective identity and integration. The inclusion of idealized local mestizo types such as the *china* and the *ranchero* in works such as *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos* evoked and projected a sense of ethnic virtuosity and specificity, albeit fictitious, useful for creating a sense of national cohesion after the wars for independence (1810-1821) and for positioning Mexican cultural originality on a global scale.

In the twentieth century, after the first two decades of revolution and power struggles, the Mexican State was in need, once again, of a new great structure that could be used to mount a new nation—this time a nation aligned with the parameters of modernity and progress of the emerging world. Cinema, which had recently appeared as a new and effective mass-colonizer, would serve those purposes. The *comedia ranchera* genre, articulated along the patterns of nineteenth-century *costumbrismo*—with its representations of landscapes, customs, collective beliefs, and rural social types—was particularly decisive in the large-scale distribution of the signs of identity. As several scholars have pointed out, between the 1930s and the 1950s, the majority of the Mexican population still lived in the countryside, and the *comedia ranchera* genre showed a universe of symbols that was close to these people through idiomatic patterns, representations of social types, and rural scenarios (Belmonte Grey 2016: 190; Díaz López 1999: 193).³⁹ The film *Allá en el Rancho Grande* is only the trunk of a family tree with countless ramifications. That is, it is the trunk of a family tree that will signal a pattern in the social imaginary of what is established as “typically Mexican” where characters such as the *ranchero* and the *china* are, again, consolidated as

39 It is important to point out that between the 1930s and the 1950s, there was a strong migration of people from the countryside to the Mexican cities. Thus, it is somewhat strange that the most successful cinematic genre of the time was set in the countryside. One plausible explanation, as suggested by Silva Escobar, is that the *comedia ranchera* was responsible for safeguarding that which was considered “traditional”. He says, “[i]n a society that is undergoing dizzying changes, paradoxically, cinema is actively involved, on the one hand, in installing a modern spirit and, on the other, in providing models of life based on traditional beliefs and customs” (2011: 25).

personified emblems of Mexicanness and gender roles in Mexico (Silva Escobar 2011: 25).⁴⁰

On the screen, however, both the *ranchero* and the *china* underwent a few conceptual amendments. The *ranchero* was known as the *charro*, i.e., the *ranchero*'s illustrious version who, as mentioned before, received such a denomination as honorary recognition for his outstanding equestrian and cowboy skills. The filmmakers also "optimized" the ethnicity and social status of this figure. Although the *ranchero*—now *charro*—culturally remained a mestizo man on the screen, this mestizo man underwent a process of racial *blanqueamiento* or whitening.⁴¹ In other words, the desire to define and imagine a homogeneous national identity and culture was, once again, as in the case of the *costumbrista* artists, in conflict with the existing multiculturalism, this time leading to the exclusion not only of indigenous people but also of all those with non-white complexion. Moreover, most of the time, the *charro* appeared in the movies as a landowner who was skilled in singing, dressed in a typical *ranchero* costume but one of gala, and with a crew of servants of indigenous appearance under his command. As scholars have explained, such changes from the *ranchero* to the *charro* were due to a desire to make the *charro* a sort of metaphor for a government that protects its people in a nation that, except for Benito Juárez, has always been ruled by white men.⁴² "In the *comedia ranchera*", says Belmonte Grey, "the *charro* was depicted as a sort of regional boss in parallel with the official authority", and accordingly, the *haciendas* were depicted as "places of [a] pleasant life where the boss and his workers have no problems of understanding and they all live according to their own caste" (2016: 190).

The case of the *china* in classical Mexican cinema shows—as was the case in *Los mexicanos*—that the place designed for Mexican women in the national imagery has always been very different from that of Mexican men. She also

40 After the great commercial success of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, many subsequent films such as *¡Así es mi tierra!* (This is my Country, 1937), *Jalisco nunca pierde* (Jalisco Never Loses, 1937), and *¡Ay Jalisco, no te rajes!* (Ah Jalisco, Don't Back Down!, 1941), to name a few, subscribed to the thematic and structural narrative of Fuentes' film and enjoyed similar national and international success.

41 The *charro* was interpreted on the screen by actors such as Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, Abel Salazar, and Luis Aguilar, all of white European appearance.

42 Benito Juárez (1806-1872) served as the 26th president of Mexico from 1857 until his death in 1872. He was the first and only Mexican president of indigenous (Zapotec) origin.

appeared abundantly in the cinematic discourse of the time, and the costume designers continued to dress her in her traditional nineteenth-century outfit. Yet, her presence on the screen was mostly confined to the background in the role of a submissive, beautiful, and obedient woman. Furthermore, the *china's* sensual and libertine features, as detailed in *costumbrista* images and texts, were withdrawn from her in the movies in favor of a more conservative image; an image more suitable to the attitudes and values of the *charro*. This was an image that corroborated the hegemony in the so-called modern Mexican State of the catholic clergy whose doctrine, as Monsiváis argues in his studies of Mexican cinema, preached during those years that the female sector of society should “adhere [to] their public and private virtues (abnegation, devotion, sacrifice, resignation, passivity, [and] extreme loyalty) [according] to the demands of their men or their ‘spiritual fathers’” (1981: 41).

Certainly, discourses about identity as social practices cannot be dissociated from the formats that carry them. As the formats evolve over time, the modes of processing and circulation of knowledge change. That was clearly the case in Mexico where advances in the written press in the mid-nineteenth century and the emergence of cinema in the early twentieth century impacted in their own way the production and circulation of discourses about the nation and about what it meant to be Mexican. Yet, the underlying vision in both cases was to overcome times of socio-political crisis and to express a vision of national unity and a common national future; that is, the vision of how Mexico's educated artistic elites wished to present a renewed nation.

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