



Chinese Migration to Latin America and the Caribbean

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Foreword

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to present “Chinese Migration to Latin America and the Caribbean,” a new report by Jacqueline Mazza, senior adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS in Washington, DC and former principal labor markets specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank.¹

The report provides an exceptionally useful and timely overview of Chinese migration to Latin America in recent decades. Mazza indicates that as in other parts of the world, Chinese migration to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) was driven in large part by foreign labor demands, transnational ties, and forced migration. The report also pays considerable attention to the uptake in often temporary flows post-2005, in association with growing Chinese investment in the region. The author is careful to note, however, that Chinese migration to LAC is relatively limited in comparison to other migrant flows to LAC, and also in comparison to Chinese flows to other regions. Even as growth slows in China, the pattern and dimensions of Chinese outward migration are not expected to shift substantially.

This report serves as valuable background for a series of forthcoming analyses on Chinese migration to specific countries in Latin America, which will be conducted by the Dialogue’s Migration and Remittances and China and Latin America programs.

The Dialogue’s China and Latin America program engages and informs academics, policymakers, and private sector leaders in China, Latin America, and the United States on evolving themes in China-Latin America relations. The Inter-American Dialogue’s Migration, Remittances and Development Program seeks to leverage migration and remittances for development. It focuses on policies governing the flow of remittances, private sector financial and remittance services, and financial access for migrants and remittance recipient families.

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Chinese Migration to Latin America and the Caribbean

INTRODUCTION

Chinese migration to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has deep historical roots, embedded in the region's railroads, Chinatowns, and grocery chains. This legacy of migration, along with its dark images of snakeheads and coolies, is now being remade and remolded by new types of migrants, this time driven by China's outward economic expansion and related liberalization of exit regulations. Chinese migrants now come to Latin America and the Caribbean by diverse means: across porous borders, as part of construction crews, and some against their will, brought by smugglers or left in boats offshore. They are both openly welcomed and observed with caution in a regional labor market that suffers from its own oversupply of unskilled workers, poor quality employment, and high rates of outmigration.

Chinese migration to Africa, Europe, and East Asia has been the subject of recent books and articles,ⁱ but relatively little has been written about recent Chinese migration trends in Latin America and the Caribbean. This report draws on the research of Oxford scholar Biao Xiang, who has analyzed the drivers of greater Chinese investment in the region (Xiang 2006), and on documentation of Chinese investment and migration to the region by Evan Ellis (2009 and 2011), among other academic literature (e.g., DeHart, 2015). It also draws on official migration data, interviews with regional migration officials, and press accounts.

The report begins with a historical overview of Chinese migration to the region then addresses more recent flows brought about by growing Chinese investment in LAC and other factors. It makes note of an increase in permanent Chinese migration to LAC following the post-1985 loosening of Chinese exit rules,ⁱⁱ followed by an uptake in often temporary flows post-2005, in association with growing Chinese investment in the region.

EARLY CHINESE MIGRATION TO LAC

Like the United States, LAC's early population growth was fueled by the importation of labor, principally from Europe, but later from Japan and China. Historic Chinese migration to Latin America can be traced to the period from 1868 to 1939, which was often characterized by troubling accounts of Chinese "coolie" labor working in near slave conditions, imported to build railroads and work on plantations. As slavery was abolished in the region, predominantly male Chinese laborers moved into indentured, low-wage labor in the region's fields and plantations, later migrating to the cities for work in the services sector, where they opened grocery stores and restaurants (e.g., *chifas* in Peru). Over many decades, Chinese communities transformed into now-established Chinese-Latino communities, with a strong presence in local markets, but fairly loose ties to their homeland. The historic contribution of Chinese migrants to Latin America in the mid-20th century is documented in a series of works (see Zhang H.. 2013 and Cho, 2000).

By 1970, LAC had shifted from a net labor importer to a net labor exporter. European migration to the region slowed markedly (post-1950), migration to the U.S. was growing and would rise considerably (especially among Mexicans and Central American populations) in the 1980s, and intra-regional migration was increasing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Much of the ethnic Chinese migration to LAC in the post-WWII period came from Taiwan or Hong Kong and not from the Chinese mainland.

Like European migration, Chinese migration to the region also slowed dramatically in the early mid-20th century, except for an upswing following the Chinese civil war in the late 1940s. Official migration from China all but halted during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. China restricted both internal (rural to urban) and outward migration as a form of social management and in order to control foreign exchange. As result, much of the ethnic Chinese migration to LAC in the post-WWII period came from Taiwan or Hong Kong and not from the Chinese mainland.

Biao Xiang has noted key changes in China's migration policy in 1979, around the same time that China established Special Economic Zones in Shantou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Xiamen, and on Hainan Island.^{iv} Xiang describes the development of a new "mobility regime" that supported China's ambitious economic reforms by permitting various forms of labor export. Western nations were also promoting of freer migration from China around this time. In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter asked China's premier to liberalize its immigration policy. To this Deng Xiaoping replied, "We'll let them go. Are you prepared to accept tens of millions?"^v

With the liberalization of Chinese exit rules during China's era of "reform and opening-up," many Chinese migrants traveled to Latin America and the Caribbean on their own to work or to establish businesses. This independent migration was focused on the services sector (e.g., shops and restaurants) and on work in fisheries. It also appeared to dovetail with existing Chinese communities in Latin America. Region-to-region/city flows observed by scholars and regional migration officials included Shanghai (1970-90) and

Fujian (after 2000) to greater Buenos Aires; Guangdong to Sao Paulo and Rio, Brazil; Guangdong and Fujian to Santiago and Northern Chile for mining work; and Fujian to Venezuela.^{vi} Hong Kong and Taiwanese entrepreneurs also came to the region in the 1980s and 1990s. Textile entrepreneurs from Hong Kong and Taiwan set up factories in Jamaica, for example, to take advantage of US textile quotas.

NEW ARRIVALS

In addition to independent migration evident during China's reform era, a separate form of Chinese migration became apparent as Chinese companies began a process of "going global." Growth in overseas investment resulted in the periodic use of Chinese construction workforces in Latin America and other regions. These flows have generally been temporary and project-specific, however, distinguishing them from previous examples of labor migration.

China's exportation of labor, or *laowu shuchu*, was originally associated with overseas aid programs. But as the country's overseas investments accelerated in the 1990s, workforces began accompanying Chinese investments as part of agreements with Chinese companies or banks, which in some cases have preferred to employ workers who speak Chinese or have experience working with Chinese companies. In the cases where importation of Chinese labor is authorized in agreements with host nations, these workforces are provided with short-term visas by host countries with the expectation that they will return China after completion of construction or other work.

By the mid-1990s, as Xiang indicates, East and Southeast Asia became the top recipients of this form of official Chinese labor, displacing the Middle East. Africa also saw increases in official labor transfers. The trend is more recent in Latin America, although project-specific Chinese laborers have been apparent throughout the region since 2005.

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The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Center for China and Globalization indicated in 2012 that 87,436 Chinese workers traveled to Latin America that year for "labor or workforce related issues."^{vii} This represents a 3.6 percent increase over the CASS/CCG figures for 2011. These figures do not include the Caribbean, although the report notes an increase in Chinese migration there as well, or Chinese workers who have come to the region on their own. The CASS and CCG estimate of Chinese workers in Latin America is relatively close to unofficial estimates of the number of Chinese official workers in Africa, which Emmanuel Ma Mung (2009) estimated at 80,000 in new flows between 1985 and 2009, 90 percent of which worked for state-owned companies.

Whereas some of China's labor or workforce-related migration to LAC is by high-skill workers or managers, low-skill workers have also traveled to the region to work primarily on Chinese construction projects. The data below provides Chinese estimates of personnel abroad for engineering projects and labor services, albeit without information on the relative skill levels of these two sub-groups.

PERSONNEL ABROAD FOR ENGINEERING PROJECTS AT YEAR-END, 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Asia	142,741	157,113	150,496	156,276	166,523
Africa	161,336	195,584	152,038	154,542	168,586
Europe	8,939	8,810	7,606	10,202	10,280
LAC	10,187	10,570	8,908	18,177	19,735
North America	785	742	461	511	1,072
Oceania and Pacific	2,862	3,680	4,491	4,715	3,933
Other	11	11	18	195	15
Total	326,861	376,510	324,018	344,618	370,144

PERSONNEL ABROAD FOR LABOR SERVICES AT YEAR-END, 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Asia	385,257	397,694	420,443	417,465	396,417
Africa	26,020	34,380	29,041	37,910	45,948
Europe	26,632	26,466	27,421	24,990	15,569
LAC	3,983	4,379	4,341	16,106	17,181
North America	4,387	3,726	3,172	2,271	1,540
Oceania and Pacific	3,727	3,179	3,742	5,237	5,348
Other	271	271	249	1,584	608
Total	450,277	470,095	488,409	505,563	482,611

TOTAL PERSONNEL ABROAD (SUM OF TABLES ABOVE), 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Asia	527,998	554,807	570,939	573,741	562,940
Africa	187,356	229,964	181,079	192,452	214,534
Europe	35,571	35,276	35,027	35,192	25,849
LAC	14,170	14,949	13,249	34,283	36,916
North America	5,172	4,468	3,633	2,782	2,612
Oceania and Pacific	6,589	6,859	8,233	9,952	9,281
Other	282	282	267	1,779	623
Total	777,138	846,605	812,427	850,181	852,755

Source: China Trade and External Economic Statistical Yearbook 2014, Tables 11-22, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2014/indexeh.htm>.

China's highway project and Trelawney Stadium in Jamaica is reported to have employed about 200 Chinese workers, whereas the Patuca III hydroelectric facility in Honduras has employed approximately 750.^{viii} Many of these were low-skill laborers. China's official donations to the region, including sports stadiums or government buildings, have included the use of Chinese construction workforces. Stadiums in Costa Rica, Grenada, Antigua, Jamaica and St. Kitts, and public buildings in Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname were also built using Chinese labor. On average, these projects have employed 500-700 workers by means of short-term construction work visas.^{ix}

The presence of low to mid-skilled Chinese workers in Latin America and the Caribbean has generated some controversy in recent years. This is centered on a perception that low-skill Chinese laborers are being employed instead of capable local labor. A degree of labor-related controversy was associated with the Baha Mar hotel investment in the Bahamas, for example. The contract with China Construction Americas provided for up to 7,000^x Chinese workers in stages,^{xi} although fewer actually came to the Bahamas. The Bahamian Contractors' Association objected to the universal use of Chinese construction workers, indicating that they were not consulted about opportunities for Bahamian workers, who are highly experienced in hotel construction.^{xii} Press reports document local tensions over limited jobs spillover associated with the \$3.6 billion project.^{xiii} Tensions generated by the use of Chinese labor have also surfaced elsewhere in the Caribbean, as well as in Central America, Venezuela, Guyana, and Suriname, among other LAC nations. Suspicions are perhaps heightened by the fact that workforce agreements are rarely made public by host governments.

There are also concerns that some Chinese workers are overstaying their temporary visas. Long after the July 2007 completion of the Trelawny soccer stadium in Jamaica more than 200 Chinese laborers were still living on the housing compound in order to begin work on the Montego Bay convention center.^{xiv} A

Chilean Foreign Ministry official noted increased entry of low-skill Chinese nationals on family visas or investor visas. Some of these workers later migrated to the north of Chile to work in the country's mines.^{xv} Evan Ellis reports from interviews that an estimated 4,300 Chinese entered Ecuador in 2007 during a period when visas were not required, but only an estimated 700 (largely tourists) returned.^{xvi}

Migration officials in the Southern Cone and the Andean region indicate that they have seen an increase in Chinese migration across borders.

In addition to China's exportation of labor to Latin America, a wave of independent migration also occurred after 2007, when Ecuador, Colombia (for one year only), and Venezuela lifted visa requirements for many countries, including China. By one estimate, Ecuador's removal of visa restrictions led to a 500 percent increase in Chinese migration in 2007 alone.^{xvii} Migration officials in Southern Cone and Andean countries (e.g. Chile and Peru) indicate that they have seen an increase in Chinese migration across borders.^{xviii} They attribute this rise to the relaxation of visa requirements in Ecuador and Venezuela, although flows of intra-regional migration are difficult to determine with certainty.

Official inflows of Chinese to Mexico also increased—from 600 in 2007 to 2,000 in 2009. This made China the second largest source of migrant flows to Mexico, although Chinese in Mexico make up only a small portion of permanent residents. Immigration officials have also noted Chinese migration from Guyana and Suriname to Brazil and Argentina and Ecuador to Peru and Chile.

Chinese workers or investors who use Latin America or the Caribbean for transit to the United States are difficult to track, but have been of some concern to US officials. Wikileaks documents indicated concern on the part of US officials that Chinese workers on the Baha Mar hotel complex would find their way to the United States, given the proximity and limited migration controls between the two countries.

THE CHINESE FOOTPRINT IN CONTEXT

Despite some growth in Chinese labor export to the region in recent decades, as well as some examples of temporary workers who have overstayed their visas, the Latin American and Caribbean region is still not a primary destination for permanent Chinese migrants. Chinese still constitute only a small percentage of the total foreign-born population in LAC. In most LAC countries the largest groups of foreign-born are from other countries in the region (e.g., Bolivians and Paraguayans in Argentina).

Chinese continue to migrate primarily within the Asia-Pacific region (see table below). While there has been great attention on Chinese laborers in Africa, United Nations (UN) data reports higher numbers of Chinese migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean beginning in 1990. These figures refer strictly to mainland China—they do not include migrants from Taiwan or Hong Kong, who generally came to the region in earlier decades. Regional comparisons are complicated by the difficulties in capturing different types of migration flows, however. In the African case especially, statistics often do not capture a trend known as migration for trading where Chinese traders migrate temporarily (for 1-3 years) to sell Chinese goods and then return home. This trend is evident in Latin America as well, though likely to a lesser degree, although it hasn't been well documented.

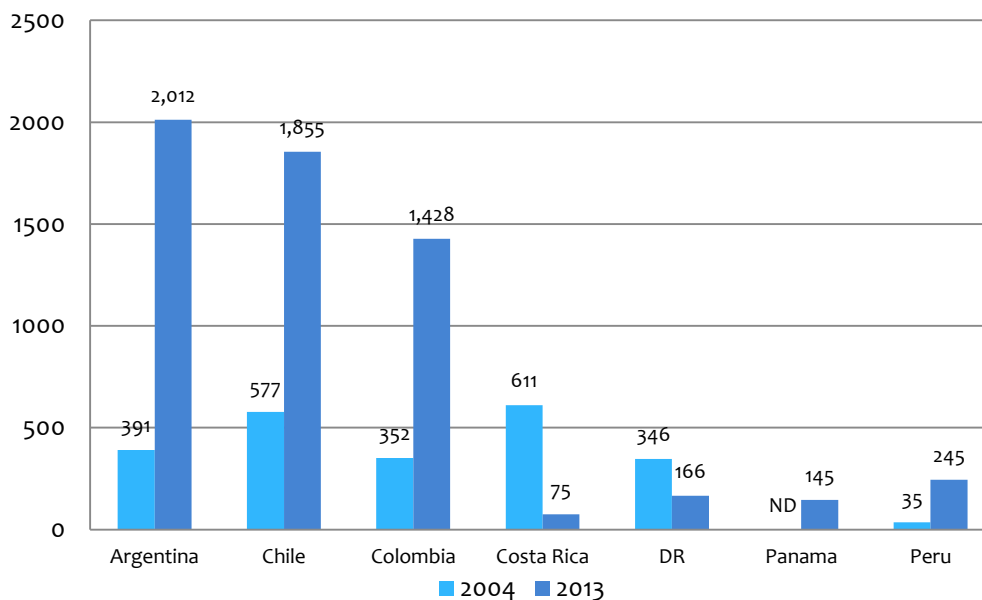
CHINA-BORN RESIDENTS OF LAC, 1990-2013

Region	Number of Migrants and Geographical Distribution					
	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
World	4,227,807	4,901,412	5,753,739	7,192,592	8,598,028	9,546,065
Africa	21,622	24,298	31,874	32,326	38,960	49,332
Asia	2,842,685	2,995,871	3,238,615	3,962,694	4,554,364	4,968,299
Europe	259,106	371,607	486,073	725,960	975,713	1,042,187
North America	942,103	1,310,426	1,727,406	2,071,156	2,464,622	2,815,132
Latin America & Caribbean	50,447	57,549	66,830	82,341	99,448	118,714

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013.

The Organization of American States' migration data system tracks a smaller subset of permanent legal migration from mainland China. It indicates an increase in Chinese migrants holding permanent residency visas, with a notably large increase in Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, in particular, from 2004 to 2013. In the Argentine case this likely coincides with national efforts to regularize foreign workers, as well as gradual improvements in LAC data collection.

INFLOWS OF LEGAL PERMANENT CHINESE MIGRANTS BY COUNTRY, 2004 AND 2013



Source: "International Migration in the Americas: Third Report of the Continuous Reporting System on International Migration in the America," SICREMI, 2015. Brazil, Venezuela, and Ecuador data unavailable.

A lack of reliable data limits further analysis of Chinese migrant populations. Labor market profiles of Chinese migrants can only be garnered from the census data of select countries which provide detail of gender, age, and education of foreign-born residents. Official census data by its very design often undercounts foreign-born populations, however, as they tend to cluster in certain cities and regions. There are major discrepancies among other data sources. Chinese government data of official labor migrants accompanying Chinese investments to Latin America in 2013 (excluding the Caribbean) far exceeds the UN estimate of Chinese migration that year to the entire region. Border crossing data in the developing world is also limited. In those countries where Chinese migration is reportedly high – e.g., Guyana, Suriname and Venezuela – data is simply unreliable or unavailable, although one press report from Suriname reported that an estimated 40,000 Chinese workers had come to work on Chinese investment projects there.^{xix}

Available census data is nonetheless helpful in characterizing some specific populations. Brazil, which records the largest number of Chinese migrants, indicates that 54 percent of its Chinese migrant population is male and that these migrants have lower education levels than other Asian migrants—only 24 percent had tertiary-level education as opposed to 70 percent of Indian migrants,² although the majority had completed upper secondary schooling.^{xx}

²The 2010 census records only 881 Indian and 19,396 Chinese migrants. These numbers are likely undercounted.

The table below demonstrates the wide range of available estimates of foreign born Chinese in nine LAC countries. The numbers below represent the stock of ethnic Chinese immigrants over time but do not distinguish between migration from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. As indicated below, Evan Ellis estimates that there are 300,000 in Brazil alone. However, based on interviews with Chinese and Taiwanese embassy officials, he puts the total figure at closer to one half million.^{xxi}

ESTIMATES OF CHINESE MIGRANT POPULATIONS IN SELECT LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES BY SOURCE: 1980-2010

	Year	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	CR	Ecuador	Mexico	Panama	Peru	Venezuela	TOTAL
1	1980	2,000	11,200	2,000	6,000	12,800	20,000	33,000	52,000	14,000	153,000
1	1990	20,000	10,000	13,000	22,000	15,000	20,000	100,000	500,000	15,000	805,000
2	2000	30000	149,570	5,000	63,000	20,000	30,000	130,000	1,300,000	50,000	1,777,570
3	*2008	30,000	200,000	4,000	20,000	16,500	10,700	ND	ND	ND	281,200
4	*2009	70,000	300,000	7,000	60,000	50,000	ND	150,000	ND	130,000	767,000

1. Poston, Xinxiang Mao and Yu Mei-Yu, "Global distribution of overseas Chinese around 1990," *Population & Development Review*. This study presents findings from surveys conducted in 1980 and 1990.

2. "Shao Center Distribution of the Ethnic Chinese Population around The World," Ohio University Libraries, 2010.

3. Biblioteca Nacional del Congreso de Chile, "La realidad de los chinos en Latinoamérica,"

<http://asiapacifico.bcn.cl/reportajes/chinos-en-latinoamerica>, 11 Nov. 2008.

4. R. Evan Ellis, *China in Latin America. The Whats and Wherefores*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009.

ND = No Data; * = Date Published; CR = Costa Rica

STRENGTHENING TIES

The many linkages generated by Chinese migration to LAC in recent decades are of possible benefit as countries in the region seek to strengthen their economic ties across the Pacific. Chinese migrants have in some cases directly embraced these linkages to build market relationships with home country suppliers. Cross-Pacific ties would be further promoted by effective policy-making and the implementation of confidence-building measures by Chinese and Latin American officials and industry representatives.

Official LAC government disclosure of the number of authorized Chinese construction workers on new investment projects would be an important step towards reducing persistent concerns in LAC regarding Chinese workers. Deborah Brautigam indicates that some African countries, such as Angola, have made public announcements of the number of Chinese and local jobs generated by specific projects in an effort

to alleviate concerns about displacement of local workers.^{xxii} This process would be further aided by clear delineation in Chinese contracts of jobs that can be filled by local labor and/or by subcontracts to local

companies. Chinese investment in the training of LAC workers and youth, whether under existing apprenticeship programs or in partnership with national vocational technical institutes, would also be of considerable benefit to local communities and Chinese companies seeking a sustainable presence in the region.

On the Chinese side, officials have made note of negative responses in LAC and other regions to inflows of Chinese laborers. An urgent memo published in 2015 by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, and State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) indicated that labor and capital disputes have the potential to negatively affect local populations, China's own business interests, and China's overseas image. Chinese statistics indicate a decline in labor export globally in recent years, although official LAC statistics have increased marginally.

FOOTNOTES

ⁱ See Alden, 2007; Mung, 2008; Park, 2009; Pieke and Speelman, 2013; Xiang, Xiang, Yeoh and Toyota, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Xiang, Biao. "A New Mobility Regime in the Making: What does a Mobile China Mean to the World?", presented at Development Assistance and Emerging Countries workshop, *Seminaire Regulier*, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mazza, Jaqueline and Eleanor Sohnen. "Crossing Borders for Work", Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, D.C., 2011.

^{iv} Xiang, Biao. "A New Mobility Regime in the Making: What does a Mobile China Mean to the World?", presented at Development Assistance and Emerging Countries workshop, *Seminaire Regulier*, 2006.

^v Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983.

^{vi} Author interviews (2010-2012); Ellis, R. Evan "The Expanding Chinese Footprint in Latin America: New Challenges for China, and Dilemmas for the US", *Institut Français: Center for Asian Studies*, Feb. Vol. 49, 2012.

^{vii} Center for China and Globalization (CCG) and the Social Sciences Academic Press, *Annual Report on Chinese Immigration*, January 2013. CCG reports 2012 data on annual flows from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics. Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration of the Ministry of Public Security (公安部出入境管理局) Chinese Ministry of Commerce, and Chinese International Contractors' Association information was also accessed.

^{viii} Ellis, R. Evan "The Expanding Chinese Footprint in Latin America: New Challenges for China, and Dilemmas for the US", *Institut Français: Center for Asian Studies*, Feb. Vol. 49, 2012.

^{ix} Mata, Alonso. "Constructora china cancela operaciones comerciales en el país", *La Nación*, July 1, 2010 <http://www.nacion.com/2010-07-01/EIPais/UltimaHora/EIPais2431771.aspx>; Ellis, R. Evan "The Expanding Chinese Footprint in Latin America: New Challenges for China, and Dilemmas for the US", *Institut Français: Center for Asian Studies*, Feb. Vol. 49, 2012.

^x Minister of Social Services for the Bahamas, Ms. Loretta Butler-Turner estimated the number closer to 8,000 Chinese who would be in and out of the Bahamas for the construction of the project (author interview, June 2012).

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- ^{xi} McCartney, Juan. "Baha Mar, Bahamas Resort Complex: Backed by Chinese Government," *The Huffington Post*, February 21, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/21/baha-mar-bahamas-resort-c_n_826205.html
- ^{xii} Author Interview with Bahamian Contractors Association, 2012.
- ^{xiii} Karmin, Craig and Matt Wirz. "China's Bahamas Project Hits Hurdles," *Wall Street Journal*. September 30, 2014.
- ^{xiv} Frater, Adrian. "Trelawny Stadium Intact", *Jamaica Gleaner*, July 9, 2007, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20070709/sports/sports10.html>
- ^{xv} Author interview with Chilean Foreign Ministry, 2010.
- ^{xvi} Author interview with Evan Ellis, March 2012.
- ^{xvii} Logan, Samuel. "Ecuador: Back door to America", *The International Relations and Security Network*, 29 January 29, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?Ing=en&id=95896>
- ^{xviii} Author interviews with migration officials in Chile and Peru, 2010-2012.
- ^{xix} Tomero, Simon. "With Aid and Migrants, China Expands Its Presence in a South American Nation," *New York Times*, April 10, 2011.
- ^{xx} Author calculations of "foreign-born population 15 years of age or over by country/area of birth, educational attainment and sex" using UNDESA 2013 data.
- ^{xxi} Ellis, R. Evan. *China in Latin America: the Whats and Wherefores*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 2009.
- ^{xxii} Author interview with Deborah Brautigam, November 2013; Mohan, Giles and May Tan-Mullins. "Chinese Migrants in Africa as New Agents of Development? An Analytical Framework," *European Journal of Development Research*, 21(4): 588-605, 2009.