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Hermosillo Journal; Scornful and Scorned, the New Yorkers of Mexico

By LARRY ROHTER, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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In Mexican slang, a chilango is a native of Mexico City. The capital's 20 million or so residents often employ the term affectionately to describe themselves - people who speak differently than Mexicans from the provinces and are accustomed to a more driving, competitive way of life.

But to many Mexicans outside the capital, the word chilango, or the commonly used derogatory epithet "guacho," is synonymous with arrogance, braggadocio, pompousness and a general know-it-all attitude.

"Those guachos believe they are the only true Mexicans," said Francisco Santa Cruz, a print shop owner here who is forced to travel to Mexico City on business more often than he would like. "If they are not popular with the rest of us, it is because they are so damn overbearing."

"In the capital, if you ask for directions, they send you somewhere else on purpose," Mr. Santa Cruz continued. "The cabdrivers like to rip you off by driving you around in circles. In the provinces, people are frank and open, but down there, I tell you, they are a different breed." Strong Resentment in North

Popular sentiment against chilangos runs strong in areas as widely separated as Yucatan in the far south and Guadalajara in the west, but is believed to be strongest in Mexico's northern states. The satirical Tijuana-based magazine Zeta last year organized a Committee to Eradicate Chilangos, and a regional best seller about to go into its third printing is called, "The Hunter of Guachos."

"It's a very serious problem here," said Gerardo Cornejo, director of the Colegio de Sonora, a research institute here. "Regionalism may be a normal phenomenon in any country, but when it takes on such ugly and blind characteristics and comes to divide a nation that needs to be united, it becomes a dangerous force."

Occasionally the dislike explodes into violence. Last year a 9-year-old boy who had moved here from Mexico City died in this city, capital of the northern border state of Sonora, after classmates beat him severely because of his accent and background.

The boy, Juan Israel Bucio Benegas, was said to suffer from epilepsy, and his death came several months after the schoolyard beating. But an aunt publicly attributed his death to "an exaggerated regionalism" that "puts stupid ideas into the heads of children," and the case touched off a wave of concern and guilt-ridden debate throughout the country.

The complaints other Mexicans make about natives of the capital sound remarkably like the stereotypes Americans often harbor about New Yorkers. In "The Hunter of Guachos," the author, Jose Teheran, describes the chilango as a "plundering species" that is "contemptuous of the habits and

customs of others; indifferent, impudent, infallible and excessively cunning of tongue; underhanded, greedy and capable of anything."

An American diplomat, in fact, tells of taking a group of hard-driving New Yorkers to a meeting with officials of an important ministry. Afterward, her offer of an apology for the visitors' brusque and aggressive behavior was waved away. "Oh, that's all right," she recalled being told. "We understand. New Yorkers are the chilangos of the United States."

Provincial resentment of the capital is nothing new, and indeed goes back to the days before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors when Indian tribes in outlying areas of the Aztec empire united against their rulers. But many Mexican sociologists and political scientists believe the phenomenon has intensified as a consequence of the severe economic recession that began six years ago.

As Mexico's industrial center, the capital has been especially hard hit by the economic crisis, which has swelled the ranks of the unemployed. But cities in the north such as Hermosillo, Tijuana, Mexicali, Juarez and Chihuahua have continued to prosper, resulting in a migration of chilangos to good jobs.

Here in this city of 450,000 people, for example, Ford opened an automobile plant in 1986. The factory was welcomed as being good for the local economy, "but a lot of people still complain that too many chilangos were brought in and not enough local people hired to the best jobs," a local journalist said. A Protest Against Centralism

On another level, the disdain for chilangos can be seen as a protest against the capital's dominance of every aspect of Mexican life.

"The decisions about what goes on here, be it in the political, economic or cultural sphere, are taken in the capital," said Jorge Bustamante, director of the College of the Northern Border, a research institute in Tijuana. "We hate that centralism, and we struggle against it."

For that reason, politicians running for state and national office are careful to avoid the taint that can arise from being labeled a chilango. President-elect Carlos Salinas de Gortari, for instance, was born and educated in Mexico City, but campaigned as a son of the northern state of Nuevo Leon, where his parents were born and where his family has deep roots.

The cultural and social differences also appear to play a part in fomenting the hostility felt toward people from Mexico City. Chilangos speak differently, eat differently, drive their cars differently and grow up with a different outlook on the world, most Mexicans from both groups agree.

"People from the capital are accustomed to making their way in a more competitive environment, so they adopt a more hostile attitude, whereas people from the interior are used to a more tranquil environment," said Gregorio Meraz, news director at a Tijuana television station. "When they see a chilango ignoring pedestrian crosswalks and traffic rules, the reaction is one of rejection."

Mr. Meraz said that when he arrived in Tijuana from Mexico City in February, "there was a lot of skepticism about me, a lot of people wondering if this chilango was going to throw his weight around." But when "word got around that I was really from Durango, it opened things up for me."