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Chinese Cubans:
Transnational Origins and Revolutionary Integration

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The Chinese legacy in Cuba exists in a dual state, at once both a fundamental aspect of the Cuban people and nationality while also an oft-overlooked strand in the fabric of Cuban society and culture. While today the official number of Chinese-born Cubans in Cuba has decreased to just below 150, the number of Chinese-*descendants* in Cuba may well number in the hundreds of thousands given the presence of large numbers of Chinese in early stages of Cuban history.¹ This duality merits exploration, as it sheds light on the unique experiences of Chinese Cubans and Chinese-descendants through several Cuban historical periods. Most interestingly, the role and presence of Chinese Cubans in the Cuban Revolution provides unique insight on the impact of the Cuban Communist Revolution—as this movement and its policies served as watershed moment for the integration of visible and cultural Chinese into greater Cuban society. As a transnational group, “*colonos asiaticos*” existed neither inside of the black-white racial binary standard in Cuban culture nor within the niche this paradigm provided to “mulatto” Cubans or other “mixed” Cubans of African-descent. While assimilation and various racial re-classifications offered some degree of integration, Chinese Cubans often appeared as wholly foreign to Cuban society until the extensive participation of Chinese Cubans in the Communist Revolution as well as implemented Revolutionary racial policies finally legitimized and normalized the Cuban peoplehood and nationhood of Chinese Cubans.

Understanding the pivotal role of the Revolution and post-Revolution concepts of Cuban national identity, and thus the inclusion of Chinese Cubans into greater Cuban society, requires an overview of the common themes in the Chinese Cuban experience up until the Revolution. The beginning of the Chinese presence in Cuba, as well as the nature of their arrival, shaped a lasting perception of Chinese in Cuba that would persist for nearly the next two centuries. While

¹ Carrie Stetler, "As Chinese-Cuban Population Dwindles, Traditions Die," *Rutgers* (New Jersey), Oct. 18, 2013.

a small community of Chinese had been present in Cuba since around 1830, the arrival of significant numbers of Chinese only began in the mid-19th century.² Abolition policies in the British Empire initiated a decline in the worldwide trade of African chattel slaves—a necessary component of the labor force for Cuba’s dominant and globally important sugar industry. After unsuccessful attempts to recruit and retain Europeans and indigenous people of the Yucatan as exploitable labor for the sugar fields, the Cuban planters learned they needed to find a source of labor that would remain bound to their work.³ Essentially, this meant sugar planters needed a labor force with all the characteristics of slavery, namely “no legal protection by a Western power; a large source of supply; and significant cultural differences.”⁴ Cuban planters needed a people group that would not be able to leave the cane fields and assimilate themselves into Cuban society.

The Spanish thus began following the precedent of the British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese Empires by importing Indian and East Asian workers to address labor shortages. The first recorded arrival in Cuba of these “coolies,” as these workers would come to be called, involved the arrival of 206 Chinese on June 3, 1847 and an additional 365 Chinese nine days later.⁵ The Cuban “coolie trade” soon proved itself to be enormously profitable, as Chinese coolies were cheaper to obtain and could be “purchased as indentured servants but used as slaves.” By 1874, over 125,000 Chinese had been brought to Cuba, mostly Hakka and Cantonese

² Kathleen López, “The Revitalization of Havana’s Chinatown: Invoking Chinese Cuban History,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 5, no. 1 (2009): 178.

³ Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵ Evelyn Hu-Dehart, “The Chinese of Peru, Cuba, and Mexico,” In *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*. Ed. by Robin Cohen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 221.

from the province of Guangdong.⁶ The inception of the Chinese community in Cuba, grounded in the economic need for an exploitable “other” in the Cuban society and economy, would have long-term ramifications for the Chinese Cuban experience.

The demographics of these successive waves of Chinese coolies, as well as their East Asian origin, also served as important factors in shaping the perspectives of the Chinese Cubans held by other Cuban communities before the Communist Revolution. Men made up the majority of Chinese coolies brought to Cuba, with many successive shipments of Chinese almost exclusively male. Attempts to recruit Chinese women, or at the very least set a minimum ratio of women to men brought by the coolie trade, were unsuccessful; only 100 Chinese women arrived in China as coolies.⁷ The presence of the Chinese in Cuba as a single gender demographic contrasted with Cuban social and cultural norms of community, further distancing them from “Cuban-ness.” As one mid-19th century observer of the sale of Chinese coolie labor noted:

The importation [of Chinese coolies] has not yet existed eight years. So the question, what will become of these men, exotics, without women or children, taking no root in the land, has not yet come to a solution. The constant question in, will they remain and mix with the other races? Will they permitted to remain? Will they be able to go back?⁸

This sentiment speaks to a larger phenomenon in Cuban society, in which the many Cubans perceived the Chinese as physically present on the island but not to be counted as a part of the Cuban people. This statement indicates that the intersection of “exotic” and “bachelor” created a stronger degree of separation of the Chinese from Cuban culture than either characteristic would have alone. Even after Chinese women began to arrive in significant numbers, this formative

⁶ Lopez, *Chinese Cubans*, 126.

⁷ Elliot Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 59-63.

⁸Richard Dana, “The Trade in Chinese Laborers,” 1854, in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 81-82.

perception of Chinese Cubans would continue to understand them as a vagrant group that moved throughout Cuban society without necessarily being a part of it.

This paradigm of coolies, and ultimately Chinese Cubans, as separate and “other” from the Cuban people was not solely held by the white Cuban community. If anything, the impact of the sugar trade—which depended on the continued subservience of exploited labor in harsh working conditions—sought to pit African slaves and Chinese coolies against each other and prevent any attempt at cooperative rebellion. These tactics saw some success in creating distance between the Chinese and other Cubans of Color.⁹ In the memoirs of Esteban Montejo, an African-descended slave on a sugar plantation, both black and white Cubans saw the Chinese as existing on the social margin. In recounting one specific memory, he states, “There were some black coopers who made the sticks in the shape of bottles and the wooden balls for playing. It was an open game, and everyone could join in. Except for the Chinese, who were pretty standoffish.”¹⁰ The perceived failure of the Chinese to engage in interaction with the Afro-Cuban people can be interpreted as speaking to a wider perception of displacement, or a lack of belonging, directed at the coolies.

When describing a memory of a community dance, in which both the white overseers and the black slaves participated, Montejo mentions that he “noticed the ones who were the least involved were the Chinese. Those bastards didn’t have an ear for drums. They were standoffish. It was that they thought a lot. In my opinion they thought more than blacks. Nobody paid them

⁹ *Chinese Emigration: Report of the Commission Sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba*. (Shanghai: Imperial Maritime Customs Press, 1876) Available at <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/44812135>, Accessed on 20 October 2016, 24-39.

¹⁰ Esteban Montejo, interview with Miguel Barnet, “Biography of a Runaway Slave,” Transcript, 1964, in *The Cuba Reader*, 60.

any mind.”¹¹ These allegations of the inability of the Chinese to participate in the dance reinforces a view of the “outsider status” of Chinese in Cuban culture. Furthermore, Montejo describes the Chinese as not merely choosing to participate but as decisively unable to engage in Cuban culture—thus literally and figuratively consigned to “standing off” at a distance. This distinction can be read as a perception of Chinese not marginalized by their own choosing per se, but unable to integrate into Cuban culture due to their fundamental “otherness” and incompatibility with Cuban culture.

While divisions between coolies and other Cubans of Color certainly continued to impact the experiences of later generations of Chinese Cubans, the Chinese in Cuba meanwhile made strategic alliances with other Cuban communities—especially with Cuban women. These relationships, most often with Afro-Cuban women, offered one of the few chances for Chinese coolies and Chinese Cubans to put down roots in Cuba and begin the process of building a new life with greater autonomy.¹² Following the end of their oft-extended indentured servitude, many ecclesiastical records beginning in the 1880s indicate that several Chinese coolies sought and formed marriages with Afro-Cuban women.¹³ Lisa Yun holds that these marriages in fact represented only a small portion of the Afro-Chinese-Cuban conjugal and marital-style relationships, as the ambiguous racial status of the Chinese in Cuban culture made official marriage licenses hard for Chinese to obtain. Yun states that common-law marriages were thus easier for these mixed-race couples to pursue. Marriages to white Cuban women were much less

¹¹ “Biography of a Runaway Slave,” in *The Cuba Reader*, 62.

¹² Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, “Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, no. 1 (2008): Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055220>. [Accessed on 19 September 2016], 17.

¹³ Hu-Dehart and Lopez, “Asian Diasporas,” 18.

frequent, as the nature of the coolies' grunt labor alongside slaves and exotic view of their culture and physical appearances placed them in a class lower than whites.¹⁴ Consequently, the legacy of arriving as coolie workers facilitated the Chinese into more numerous relationships with Afro-Cuban women given their typical associations with non-whiteness and foreignness.

Yun continues, however, that these relationships—and the children borne out of them—usually came at the sacrifice of the Chinese cultural identity.¹⁵ Records of these Afro-Chinese-Cuban children indicate that they were often classified as *mestizo*, *pardo*, or identified as a *libres de color*, or free people of color, all of which often denoted only African heritage.¹⁶

Additionally, the Chinese fathers rarely transmitted the Chinese language to their mixed-race children, and these children resultantly often did not retain a significant degree of Chinese cultural or spiritual practices. Instead, these the children of these Afro-Chinese unions typically espoused the Afro-creole culture of their mothers, who frequently took the lead in child-rearing.¹⁷ Yun's examination of Cuban court and notary documents in the 1890s, when many of these children began coming of age, indicates that only those Afro-Chinese Cubans with obvious East Asian features were described with the additional terms *asiatico* or *achinado*.¹⁸ Thus unlike the Communist Revolution, these interracial alliances largely offered a path of assimilation into the Afro-Cuban community rather than the integration of the Chinese cultural and ethnic identity into Cuban society.

¹⁴ Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 183-188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187-190.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190-192.

The participation of many Chinese Cubans in Cuba's Communist Revolution in 1959, which included Chinese Cubans in high positions of leadership in the rebellion, dramatically changed the dynamic of Chinese isolation and Chinese "otherness." The Chinese community in Cuba, which by this time was nearly twelve thousand and included more the recent Chinese merchant immigrants as well as the coolie-descendants who had retained Chinese identities.¹⁹ For the waves of Chinese that had arrived in the 1940s, the Cuban Communist Revolution was understood through the lens of their experiences with the Chinese Communist Revolution—had also received support from some Chinese Cubans. Some of the more recent Chinese merchant immigrants, however, became some of the first Cubans to leave the island during the early days of the Cuban Revolution as the Cuban Communist Revolution represented yet another attack on their economic agency and capitalist pursuits. For the same reasons, the large Chinese Cuban grocer community organized resistance to the Cuban Revolution.^{20 21} Of the Chinese who stayed in Cuba instead of joining the wave of remigration to other parts of Latin America and the United States, however, the engagement in the Communist Revolution—and the implementation of Revolutionary policies on race and nationality, catalyzed an entirely new national identity for Chinese Cubans that did not marginalize them due to their Chinese ethnicity or heritage.

Chinese Cubans involved themselves in the earliest inceptions of the Cuban Revolution. Several Chinese Cubans took part in the 1959 raiding force on the Macada Army Barracks in Santiago de Cuba in 1953, an effort led by Fidel Castro.²² Luis Li and Juan Mok featured among

¹⁹ Lopez, *Chinese Cubans*, 230.

²⁰ *Photograph 3*, n.d. Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe. <https://repository.asu.edu/items/26362>. [Accessed 23 October 2016]. [See Photo 3 in the Index].

²¹ Lopez, *Chinese Cubans*, 222-223.

²² *Ibid.*

these Chinese Cuban rebels, and their participation in the rebel movement and in the famous battle on the 26th of July—arguably one of the most important and defining moments in the Cuban Revolution—demonstrate how the intersection of their ethnic identities and their Revolutionary involvement created and legitimized an entirely new nationality for Chinese Cubans. Li, from Havana, used his family connections in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to recruit more Chinese Cuban revolutionaries. An active member in the *Partido Socialista Popular*, he also routinely used Chinese spaces in Cuba to promote and further the aims of the Revolution. His actions included holding clandestine Communist Rebel meetings in the Chinese grocery store on Washington Street in Havana.²³

Mok, like Li, was arrested several times by the Cuban government for his Revolutionary involvement. He also turned to Chinese cultural spaces in Cuba to advocate for the Revolution in Cuba, writing supportive pieces in the Chinese-language Cuban newspaper, *Kwong Wah Po*.²⁴ Chinese Cubans involved in the Revolution war effort made a name for themselves amongst the other rebels for their singular reputation as highly dedicated to the Revolutionary cause. They drew on the reputation of the Chinese Cuban independence fighters during the 1895 Cuban War for Independence about whom they reminded themselves, “there was not a single Chinese Cuban deserter; there was not a single Chinese Cuban traitor!”²⁵ For these Chinese Cubans, mostly youth of a variety of backgrounds and from differing generations of Cuban residency, the Revolution offered a chance to validate their presence and belonging on the island through a demonstration of loyalty to the Cuban people.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 227.

²⁵ Ibid, 229

Chinese Cubans also served as famous leaders in the Revolutionary effort, fighting and strategizing alongside the famed Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. In their memoir, former Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces Generals Armando Choy Rodriguez, Gustavo Chui Beltran, and Moises Sio Wong recounted their experiences as fighters in the 26th of July Movement and as Cubans of Chinese descent. Their stories relate how their involvement in the Revolutionary effort intersected with their Chinese identity to form a revolutionary Cuban national identity. When asked about how his ethnic Chinese background influenced the development of his Cuban Revolutionary consciousness, Moises Sio Wong replied, “I joined the movement as a Cuban. I thought like a Cuban, not like someone from China.”²⁶ While this achievement of a validated Revolutionary identity appears to have subsumed his Chinese ethnic identity, it is noteworthy to realize that Wong was able to decide this status himself. Unlike former generations of immigrants and coolies, externally consigned to “outsider status” with the hope that their mixed-heritage children could fully assimilate, Wong achieved inclusion into Cuban nationality even though he exhibited an East Asian physiognomy and was of pure Chinese descent. His statement proves that he was not precluded from Cuban nationality based on his “racial deviation” from the previous Cuban black/white/*pardo* racial norms, but that he used his rebel involvement to catalyze the Revolutionary validation that Chinese phenotypes and the Chinese “race” was fully and essentially Cuban to the same degree as the African-descendent and European-descendent Cuban communities.

In other ways, however, Chinese Cubans participating in the Cuban Revolution proudly leveraged their Chinese heritage when contributing to the Revolutionary effort and expressing

²⁶ Choy, Armando, Gustavo Chui, and Moisés Sío Wong, *Our History is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution* (Atlanta, Pathfinder Press, 2005), 33.

solidarity—both actions that further served to affirm their belonging to Cuban nationhood. Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement received vocal support in the January 1959 issue of the bilingual Chinese retailer magazine *Fraternidad*.²⁷ In 1960, Chinese Cubans hosted a banquet in Barrio Chino—Havana’s Chinatown—in celebration of the Castro brothers’ assumption of political office.²⁸ In 1959, a variety of left-wing Chinese organizations in Havana re-organized into the *Alianza Nueva Democracia China in Cuba*, or the Chinese New Democracy Alliance in Cuba. This organization participated with many Cuban demonstrations of solidarity with Castro and the 26th of July Movement. When voicing support at a rally to oppose U.S. attempts to align Latin American countries in opposition to Cuba, the *Alianza* organization famously carried a sign that read “Resident Chinese Support the Cuban Revolution And It’s Leader Fidel Castro.”²⁹

In February of 1960, several second-generation Chinese Cubans such as Luis Liu and Pedro Eng Herrera organized militias to support the Revolution, which included the *Milicia Popular China* (Chinese Popular Militia). They also organized the *Brigada Jose Wong* (Jose Wong Brigade)—recalling a Chinese Cuban victim of the Batista regime in the 1930s. Even after these all-Chinese forces merged into the Cuban National Militia, they continued to use their Chinese heritage to inform their understanding and expression of the Revolutionary effort. The most notable example of this occurred when they fortified the Isla de Pinos just off the Southern Cuban coast in the name of “preventing it from becoming another Taiwan.”³⁰ These very visible mergers of Chinese ethnic identities with political and military support for the Revolution served

²⁷ Alejandro de la Funete, *Envisioning Cuba: A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Lopez, 231.

as an important signal to greater Cuban society that the Chinese people formed a vital component of the Cuban people as well.

The Revolutionary government's policies concerning race, status, and nationality also contributed heavily to the integration of Chinese Cubans into greater Cuban society. In a speech given on January 23, 1960, Castro stated:

We feel that our Revolution will help eliminate those prejudices and injustices that remain latent. For the time being, we have given proof in our revolutionary struggle in the absolute identification and brotherhood of men with all skin colors.³¹

In this statement, Castro dedicates the Revolutionary regime to equal inclusion of all Cubans who wanted to partake in the Revolutionary national effort—which included the country's ethnic minorities. Wong later confirms this transformation in social status for Chinese Cubans when he states, “What is the difference in the experience of the Chinese in Cuba versus other countries of the diaspora? The difference is that here a socialist revolution took place. The revolution eliminated discrimination based on the color of one's skin.”³² The Revolution's aim to implement ubiquitous non-discrimination meant that Chinese Cubans loyal to the state would no longer need to feel foreign or rejected from Cuban nationality by the Cuban government due to their ethnic Chinese origin and appearance.

The impact of the Revolutionary government's receptiveness to Cubans of Chinese origin contributed in fundamental ways to how later scholarship, both within Cuba and in other countries, would perceive and define the transcultural national character of the Cuban people, whose origins would be recorded to include “even the Yellow Mongoloid.”³³ Images dating to

³¹ Carlos Moore, “Silence on Black Cuba,” in *The Cuba Reader*, 419-420.

³² Choy, et al, *Our Story Is Still Being Written*, 36.

³³ Fernando Ortiz, “‘Transculturation’ and Cuba,” in *The Cuba Reader*, 27.

post-Revolutionary society show continued acknowledgement of Chinese or mixed Chinese heritage without inferred preclusion from Cuban culture.^{34 35 36} The images provide evidence of Chinese Cubans of a variety of backgrounds proudly engaging in Chinese cultural activities within the Cuban context. These images also demonstrate that Chinese ethnic consciousness persisted in the post-Revolutionary Cuban society that, while officially “post-racial,” allowed for Chinese Cubans to participate in Cuban society as fully Cuban and proudly Chinese.

As evidenced by the dynamics of Chinese Cuban involvement in the Cuban Communist Revolution and the experiences of Chinese Cubans in the post-Revolutionary Cuban society, the integration of Chinese Cubans in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary period of Cuban history actualized and progressed on an unprecedented scale due to the Cuban Revolution. Reviewing the historical experiences and perspectives of Chinese Cubans and the descendants of Chinese coolies, as well as the very origins of this community, indicates that the Cuban Revolution brought about societal inclusivity for Chinese Cubans that contrasted sharply with previous circumstances of Chinese marginalization and invisibility in Cuban society. More so than any other moment in Cuban history, the Communist Revolution ultimately established the essential and acknowledged Cuban peoplehood of Chinese Cubans.

³⁴ *Photograph 1*. n.d. Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe. <https://repository.asu.edu/items/26376>. [Accessed 23 October 2016]. [See Photo 1 in the Index]

³⁵ *Photograph 2*. n.d. Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe. <https://repository.asu.edu/items/26372>. [Accessed 23 October 2016]. [See Photo 2 in the Index]

³⁶ *Photograph 4*. n.d. Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe. <https://repository.asu.edu/items/26370>. [Accessed 23 October 2016]. [See Photo 4 in the Index].

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1. Picture 1. Caption: "The Cubans never had assimilated perfectly the significance of "Chen Min". This woman, for example, does not appear very convinced of the presence of the ancestors around her, nor that these received tobacco and packs of cigarettes that she and her friend smoke but contribute with respect and enthusiasm to perpetuate the traditions of the Association of Chinese Settlers [sic]."



2. Picture 2. Caption: "This pretty little youth lights a 'sin jeon,'[sic] sticks of sandalwood perfume, to the grandfather that never knew her and will let him know that his descendants did not forget him. The Chinese cross the barriers of time and space to respond on this day to the silent call of the blood and the people."



3. Picture 3. Caption: "Celebrating the victory of anti-communism and promoting the propaganda of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)."



4. Picture 4. Caption: "They start to appear the baskets of spices. They are brought plates. The original custom mandates they eat dinner in the cemetery around the grave of family. Now the food is brought to fulfill the ritual: the spices they take after to the asylum, or they eat them for dinner that they celebrate in the distinct societies."



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