

## *Remaking Havana's Barrio Chino*

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In March of 2002 Felipe Luis, a 98-year-old Chinese former bodega owner, had not left his second-story Havana apartment in five years. Yet he was fully aware of the changes occurring in his neighborhood, the *barrio chino* or Chinatown. News of the construction of a Chinese government-funded portico marking the entrance to the *barrio chino* and of the annual festival of overseas Chinese had reached him, despite his inability to roam the streets as in former days. Like Luis, many members of the aging community of native Chinese in Cuba are often mere observers of the government-sponsored “revitalization” of Havana’s Chinatown, spearheaded by “mixed” descendants of Chinese. After providing historical context to Chinese migration to Cuba and the formation of the *barrio chino*, this essay interrogates the formation of a “Chinese Cuban” identity and the contradictions inherent in the revitalization project. The aspirations of the community of aging native Chinese and the goals of the state-sponsored Havana Chinatown Promotion Group have resulted in a complex set of interactions between the two groups. Compounding the picture even more is the involvement of multiracial descendants of Chinese who maintain varying notions of a “Chinese” identity.

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### *Chinese migration and the formation of the barrio chino*

The first major migration of Chinese to Cuba began in 1847 with a massive scheme to import low-cost workers for Cuban sugar plantations prior to and during the period of gradual abolition of slavery in the Spanish colony. Approximately 142,000 men, mostly from southeastern Guangdong province, left for Cuba between 1847 and 1874. Roughly 17,000 died on the journey due to sickness, violence, and suicide.<sup>1</sup> The “coolie trade” ended after a

Chinese imperial commission investigated abuses in the system in 1874.<sup>2</sup> After the end of the coolie trade, the population of Chinese in Cuba declined due to secondary migration to the United States and other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, a relatively small return migration to China, and deaths.<sup>3</sup> Those who remained continued working as day laborers on sugar plantations, in construction, and on shipyard docks. As early as 1858 some former coolies laid the foundations for Havana's *barrio chino*. Buoyed by the arrival of Cantonese immigrants from California and directly from China, Chinese settlements began to take shape in towns throughout Cuba during the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Restricted during the United States occupation from 1899 to 1902 and the early years of the Cuban republic, Chinese labor immigration was re-initiated in response to a demand for agricultural workers to boost sugar production during World War I. By the early twentieth century, Chinese had formed bustling communities across the island. Havana's Chinatown was lined with small commercial establishments such as restaurants, bodegas, laundries, shoe and watch repair shops, bakeries, photography studios, and pharmacies. In addition to district, clan, occupational, and political associations, there were also theaters, four newspapers, a cemetery, two bilingual schools (one Catholic and one Presbyterian), a hospital, and a residence for the elderly. Unlike the majority of Chinese coolies from the previous century, the newer migrants were better able to maintain political, economic, social, and cultural links with their hometowns in China.

Chinese migration to Cuba dropped significantly during the depression and after World War II, when the United States eased restrictions on Chinese entry and sugar prices dropped. After 1949, Chinese fleeing the political upheaval in the aftermath of China's Communist revolution produced a brief resurgence in migration. In the years following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which nationalized Chinese-owned businesses, a significant secondary

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1. Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Los culies chinos en Cuba (1847-1880): Contribución al estudio de la inmigración contratada en el Caribe* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2000 [1967]), 179.

2. From 1847 to 1874 about 100,000 Chinese also signed contracts to work in Peru. See China, Zongli geguo shiwu yamen, *Chinese Emigration: Report of the Commission sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba, 1874* (Shanghai: Imperial Maritime Customs Press, 1876; reprint ed., Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Company, 1970). See also the paperback reissue of this document, *The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba*, Intro. by Denise Helly (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

3. Between 1865 and 1874, only 2,000 Chinese returned to China. Helly, Intro. to *The Cuba Commission Report*, 25. By 1899, official census data reported 8,035 Chinese laborers in Cuba (8,033 males and 2 females). U.S. War Department, *Report on the Census of Cuba 1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 472-75.

4. According to Pérez de la Riva, approximately 5,000 "Californians" went to Cuba between 1860 and 1875 for business opportunities. Pérez de la Riva, *Los culies chinos en Cuba*, 178-83.

migration of Chinese Cubans to Miami, New York, and Toronto was part of the larger exodus. Today the remaining Chinese are mostly elderly men who came to Cuba in the 1950s. With little new immigration since 1959 and the loss of private businesses, the *barrio chino* fell into decline.<sup>5</sup>

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### *The revitalization of the barrio chino and ethnic identity*

Today the Chinese Cuban community is composed of two major groups: the *chinos naturales* or native Chinese, most of whom are men who came to Cuba before 1959, and the *descendientes*, or children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Chinese, most of whom are descendants a Chinese man and Cuban woman. In addition to the few hundred elderly native Chinese who remain, it is these mixed descendants who form contemporary Chinese Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Both in Cuba and the United States, Cubans continually join the Chinese Cuban community after learning they have a Chinese grandfather or great-grandfather.<sup>7</sup>

With the end of subsidies from the former Soviet Union, a severe economic crisis in the early 1990s forced Cuba into reforms resulting in a "mixed socialist economy" and the legalization of the U.S. dollar. The ongoing revitalization project in Havana's Chinatown coincides with the Cuban government's efforts to develop tourism as a solution to its economic prob-

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5. For the history of the Chinese in Cuba, see Antonio Chuffat Latour, *Apunte histórico de los Chinos en Cuba* (Havana: Molina y Cia., 1927); Duvon C. Corbitt, *A Study of the Chinese in Cuba, 1847-1947* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury College, 1971); Denise Helly, *Idéologie et ethnicité: Les Chinois Macao à Cuba: 1847-1886* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1979); Juan Jiménez Pastrana, *Los Chinos en la historia de Cuba: 1847-1930* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983); Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Chinese Coolie Labour in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labour or Neo-slavery?" *Slavery and Abolition* 14:1 (1993): 67-86; Baldomero Álvarez Ríos, *La inmigración china en la Cuba colonial: El Barrio Chino de la Habana* (Havana: Publicigraf, 1995); José Baltar Rodríguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba: Apuntes etnográficos* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 1997); Pedro Cosme Baños, *Los Chinos en Regla 1847-1997: Documentos y comentarios* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1998); Napoleón Seuc, *La Colonia China de Cuba (1930-1960): Antecedentes, memorias y vivencias* (Miami: Ahora Printing, 1998); Pérez de la Riva, *Los culies chinos en Cuba*; Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *De la memoria a la vida pública: identidades, espacios y jerarquías de los chinos en La Habana republicana (1902-1968)* (La Habana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2003); and Kathleen López, "'One Brings Another': The Formation of Early-Twentieth-Century Chinese Migrant Communities in Cuba," in Andrew R. Wilson, ed., *The Chinese in the Caribbean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), 93-127.

6. According to Casino Chung Wah President Alfonso Chao Chiu, in 1998 there were about 430 remaining ethnic Chinese, with an average age of about 80, and about 3,200 descendants of Chinese. Angus MacSwan, "Cuban Chinatown enjoys revival but lacks Chinese," Reuters, 9 December 1998. There are also a handful of ethnic Chinese that were born in Cuba.

7. A similar phenomenon exists among Jewish Cubans. See Ruth Behar's documentary on the search for identity and memory among Sephardic Jews with Cuban roots, *Adio Kerida*, VHS, 82 min., Women Make Movies, New York, 2002.

lems and to attract foreign investment. The priority of the Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino de la Habana (Havana Chinatown Promotion Group) has been to transform the historic *barrio chino* into a tourist attraction. For five days every spring, the “Festival de Chinos de Ultramar” commemorates the arrival of the first ship of Chinese coolies in Havana on June 3, 1847, with Cuban and international scholars, businessmen, and community members participating. The theme of the “Fifth Festival of Overseas Chinese” held in Havana in May of 2002 was “Chinatowns of the World as Zones of Tourist Attraction.”

In addition to promoting tourism, the Cuban government organization was formed to “recover” Chinese culture, customs, and traditions for the Cuban community. Its projects include a center for Chinese arts and traditions, an evening language school with native Mandarin speakers, a martial arts club, a clinic for traditional Chinese medicine, celebrations of festivals, food stands and Chinese restaurants on the pedestrian walkway (Calle Cuchillo), and the publication of a magazine.<sup>8</sup> The Promotion Group sponsors a residence for elderly Chinese who do not have family to assist them. In addition to accommodations, the residence arranges excursions and provides medicine and food. Promotion Group Director Neil Vega Paneque emphasizes that the entire community living in Havana’s Chinatown benefits from the organization’s social work, such as street repairs and building renovation.<sup>9</sup>

The Promotion Group’s efforts to “recover” or maintain Chinese culture are not completely novel. Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese attempts to retain “Chineseness” have existed alongside incorporation into a notion of *cubanidad*. Chinese migration to Cuba was almost exclusively male.<sup>10</sup> Although a small number of Chinese merchants brought their wives with them or sent for wives from China, the Chinese in Cuba maneuvered in a multiracial society, forming unions with black, *mulata*, and even white Cuban women. Thus, the majority of second-generation Chinese in Cuba

8. Map and pamphlet “Presencia China en Cuba” (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino, Ediciones GEO, 1999); Álvarez, *La inmigración china en la Cuba colonial*, 49-54; Isabelle Lausent-Herrera, “El renacimiento de la comunidad china en Cuba,” *Oriental* (December 1998). The inaugural issue of *Fraternidad 2* was published in May, 2002. The magazine *Fraternidad* was originally founded in 1934 as the official organ of the Unión de Detallistas del Comercio de la Colonia China en Cuba (Union of Commercial Retailers of the Chinese Colony in Cuba).

9. Neil Vega Paneque, interview by author, March 2002, Havana.

10. Scholars have attributed this skewed gender ratio in Chinese migration to bureaucratic hurdles and legal restrictions to entry, the prohibitive cost of transportation, the desire among labor recruiters for unattached male workers, patriarchal standards that confined Chinese women to the home, and economic strategy on the part of Chinese families. Although Chinese migrants lived in “bachelor societies” in the Americas, the majority of them either were married or intended to marry upon return China. The general pattern in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was for women to remain in home villages in China.

have a Chinese father and a Cuban mother and grew up speaking Spanish.<sup>11</sup> Given the gender imbalance, the loss of Chinese language and culture among second generation Chinese Cubans was felt almost immediately. These descendants began to adapt to their Cuban setting in creative ways. In the early 1940s a "crisis" of Chinese theater in Havana ensued when Chinese actors departed with traveling troupes from the United States. As a solution, music teachers founded the Ópera Chung Wah and three other theater companies in Havana. In an effort to preserve this element of Chinese culture, "mixed" female descendants from age eight to 28 who did not speak Chinese were trained to sing Cantonese opera. They memorized a phonetic pronunciation written next to the Chinese characters in the libretto. Also, according to informants, some participants "were not Chinese nor children of Chinese, but *apadrinados* [godchildren] of these, although the cases were minimal."<sup>12</sup>

After the end of World War II, many Chinese decided to establish themselves permanently on the island, as evidenced by an increase in marriages between Chinese and Cubans registered from 1940 to 1950.<sup>13</sup> Mixed descendants of higher economic strata were admitted to participate in some of the political and fraternal associations, including the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and Triads (Minzhidang). These associations promoted musical bands, dance groups, and martial arts teams formed with "mestizos."<sup>14</sup> The participation of mixed descendants in theater companies and associations are examples of the early formation of a "Chinese Cuban" identity.

Today, the Promotion Group's goal to strengthen political and economic ties with the People's Republic of China and "to improve relations between the Chinese people and the Cuban people" gels with that of the Cuban government. Official relations between Havana and Beijing have warmed, especially after Fidel Castro's visit to China in 1995. With the improved relationship, China has become a major exporter of food products and manufactured goods to Cuba. In a symbolic display of *amistad*, China funded the construction of a traditional-style portico on Calle Dragones at the entrance of the original barrio chino. The Promotion Group has also focused efforts on renewing commercial exchange with diasporic Chinese, especially in the Americas. Some restaurants on Calle Cuchillo are backed by Chinese Canadians (Americans are banned by the embargo from investing in Cuba). The

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11. Jesús Guanche, *Componentes étnicos de la nación cubana* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 1996), 84-87; Baltar, *Los Chinos de Cuba* 100-05.

12. Baltar, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 159, based on interview with ex-actress Yolanda Eng, who in her childhood and adolescence worked in two companies. For Chinese Cuban opera troupes, see Chen Kwong Min, *Meizhou huaqiao tongjian (The Chinese in the Americas)* (New York: Overseas Chinese Culture Publishing Co., 1950), 649-50; Baltar, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 156-66; Álvarez, *La inmigración china en la Cuba colonial*: 74-76.

13. Baltar, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 157, referring to the Registro de Matrimonios for Havana, North Havana, Matanzas, Sagua la Grande, Morón, and Camagüey.

14. Baltar, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 157-58.

Promotion Group director has visited Cuban exchange students in China and toured Vancouver's Chinatown to promote business ties. Luciano Wong, president of the Minzhidang (a Chinese fraternal association in existence since 1902) in Cárdenas, exemplifies the diasporic ties of Chinese in the Americas. He is a Cuban citizen, and his two brothers are citizens of Canada and the People's Republic of China, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

The Chinese Embassy works closely with the Promotion Group, providing Chinese products, medicine, furniture, paintings, ornamentation, books, newspapers, and magazines to the associations and supporting the renovation of association buildings. In addition, the embassy supplies the Chinese-language school with books, pencils, and notebooks and the new restaurants with supplies. For the restoration of the famous Cantonese restaurant "El Pacífico," the embassy sent an architect and two culinary masters to instruct Cuban chefs. It also donated utensils, ornamental tables and lamps, and a wood carving of a dragon. Members of the Chinese community are invited to celebrations of festivals with Chinese lanterns, food, singing, and dancing. The embassy has also reached beyond Havana to descendants of Chinese in other provinces. For example, it donated a dragon, lion, and drums to the Chinese association in Santiago de Cuba.<sup>16</sup>

The Promotion Group supports the preservation of Cuba's only remaining Chinese newspaper, an important component in community building.<sup>17</sup> Today *Kwong Wah Po* has bi-weekly circulation of about 600.<sup>18</sup> It contains articles mostly on Cuba and China and has a section in Spanish for descendants who are unable to read Chinese. The turn-of-the-century U.S.-made printing press stands in a small room surrounded by shelves containing thousands of metal Chinese characters that must be typeset by hand. Through this laborious process the Chinese newspaper, with its delayed news of China extracted from a Hong Kong newspaper, remains an important link in the maintenance of transnational ties to the homeland. Representative of the resilience of such ties is a Chinese former bicycle repair shop owner in Rodas (near Cienfuegos). Like many other Chinese, Ricardo Chao came to Cuba in the early twentieth century, but he was never able to return home. Despite this long-term separation from his homeland, in March of 1999 he enthusiastically relayed to me the latest developments in the transition of Hong Kong and Macao back to China, events he had read about in the Chinese newspaper.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Neil Vega Paneque, interview by author, March 2002, Havana; Luciano Wong, interview by author, May 2002, Havana.

16. Zhao Tiesheng, Consul, Embassy of the People's Republic of China, interview by author, March 2002, Havana; Álvarez, *La inmigración china en la Cuba colonial*, 51-55.

17. Neil Vega Paneque, interview by author, March 2002, Havana.

18. Before the revolution *Kwong Wah Po* was published daily and had a circulation of 1,500. In addition, there were three other Chinese-language newspapers in Havana.

19. Ricardo Chao, interview by author, March 1999, Rodas, Cuba.

Facing dwindling memberships and funds, the remaining Chinese clan and regional associations have opened their doors to “mixed” descendants. Descendants of Chinese may apply for a permit to open a small business, such as a food stand or shop. The associations have also received permission to open restaurants in former meeting rooms. One of the most well-known restaurants in the *barrio chino* is Los Tres Chinitos. Although originally a Chinese association, it is the restaurant’s pizza that draws long lines of Cubans outside. Profits generated from these restaurants have enabled some Chinese to renew ties to their home villages in China through visits, which until recently were an impossibility. The Zhongshan Regional Society (Sociedad Regionalista Chung Shan) operates the restaurant/bar Los Dos Dragones, offering “original” Chinese food. Francisco Lee, the association secretary and restaurant proprietor, has recently made four trips to China. Although he has family in China, Lee has decided not to return permanently, because as he states, “I am accustomed to Cuba.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite criticism of the government’s “revitalization” from both within and outside of the Chinese community, many feel that it has benefited descendants of Chinese in Cuba, especially economically. Chinese descendant Juan Seuc, now living in Miami, had received a permit to open a food stand in Havana. He explained, “The old Chinese were living in poor conditions. There was no special attention given them. I think it’s a good idea. For the young people it’s an opportunity to make some money.” He continued, “You have the interests of the Chinese people and their descendants on the one side and the interests of the government on the other side. It is difficult to balance the two.” In Seuc’s opinion, although there is room for improvement, the changes since the Promotion Group began operating have overall been positive. He states, “I noticed a change since the Grupo Promotor started working, and it’s a change for the better.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Chinos naturales**

Tensions are inherent within a project that, on the one hand, claims to promote the interests of the Chinese community and an “authentic” Chinese culture, and on the other hand, actively promotes Havana’s Chinatown as a tourist attraction to boost the Cuban economy. Efforts from above to impose an homogenizing coherence on the Chinese Cuban “community” can be both exclusionary and artificially inclusive. Ironically, those excluded are often the native Chinese themselves, mostly retired men who spend their days sitting in the associations. During the last Festival of Chinese Overseas, the original community members were present at the opening ceremony, but absent during the debates over the incorporation of the *barrio chino* into

20. Francisco Lee, interview by author, March 2002, Havana.

21. Juan Seuc, interview by author, September 2000, Miami.

Cuba's tourist industry. Yet these same Chinese are being "commodified" as part of the tourist circuit, with visits to the associations included in the official festival schedule.

On the one hand, the native Chinese are receiving some material benefits from the Chinese Embassy and the Promotion Group. But some Chinese Cubans (both ethnic Chinese and descendants) expressed concern that the group's ends are more economic than cultural. One native Chinese who is active in the community is doubtful that the Chinese residents will benefit from the tourist impetus. "The old Chinese men are living in poor conditions. Overseas Chinese should come to help us revive the Chinese community rather than participate in a festival," he said.<sup>22</sup>

These tensions have not gone unnoticed by the Promotion Group. The director declared, "The biggest challenge we have encountered is to make it understood—above all by the native Chinese—that the Promotion Group's project is not economic, but cultural, and to achieve unity of action to perfect the work." When further questioned about the push for tourism, he responded, "The project is not essentially economic," but recognized the tourism impetus. His goal is to build a coalition between the elderly native Chinese, younger descendants, and the Promotion Group. The director speaks of a good relationship marked by "cooperation and respect" between the Promotion Group and the 13 associations.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than festivals, what it seems that it would take for an "authentic" revival to reach these elderly native Chinese is a return to some form of entrepreneurial autonomy. Retired Chinese lament the devastating impact of losing their businesses (and livelihood). Both Santiago and Felipe Luis are former bodega owners who vividly recalled the *barrio chino* of the old days: ice cream made with fresh fruit, a plethora of Chinese food and products, and Sunday cockfights after the shops had closed.<sup>24</sup> Today, like many other Cubans, elderly Chinese survive on government-issued ration cards and a monthly pension paid in pesos. Chinese tea and medicine are sold in shops in the *barrio chino*, but only for dollars (and, as of November of 2004, pesos convertibles), which are difficult to come by. The wooden drawers of the traditional Chinese pharmacy are usually empty. Instead, Santiago depends on medicine mailed from friends in Hong Kong.<sup>25</sup> Cuisine has also suffered a major impact. Santiago prepares "Chinese-style" dishes with the food and

22. Abel Fung, interview by author, June 2000, Havana.

23. Neil Vega Paneque, interview by author, March 2002, Havana.

24. For an interview with Felipe Luis before he died in September of 2003, see Mitzi Espinosa Luis, "*Si tú pleguntá, a mi gusta hacé cuento*. 'If you ask, I'll be happy to tell you': Felipe Luis narrates his story," (translated by Kathleen López) in Andrew R. Wilson, ed., *The Chinese in the Caribbean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004), 129-142.

25. Santiago Luis, interview by author, March 2002, Havana.

condiments available, carefully slicing one piece of bok choy to make it last over several meals.

### Descendientes

As the Promotional Group seeks to encompass native Chinese and mixed descendants within the rubric “Chinese Cuban,” some members of this group themselves question how they can identify themselves as Chinese. One descendant in Havana describes his “mixed” father as follows: “He was not raised by his [Chinese] father. People call him ‘chino’ because of his last name, but he’s a Cuban. I know how to use chopsticks better than him. I look more Chinese than him.”<sup>26</sup>

In her discussion of Asian American identity, Lisa Lowe analyzes a short story in which two Asian American women together explore their guilt at not being “authentically” Chinese enough. Lowe states, “The story suggests that the making of Chinese American culture—the ways in which it is imagined, practiced, and continued—is worked out as much ‘horizontally’ among communities as it is transmitted ‘vertically’ in unchanging forms from one generation to the next. Rather than considering ‘Asian American’ identity as a fixed, established ‘given,’ perhaps we can consider instead ‘Asian American cultural practices’ that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences.”<sup>27</sup>

Today a “Chinese Cuban” identity based on ancestry and incorporating blacks, whites, and *mulatos* (in addition to native Chinese) has been created. Many descendants subscribe to markers of “Chinese” culture, religion, and language, even without these “ethnic gestures” promoted by an official organization. They cook Chinese food in the home, know a few words of Cantonese, have a statue of San Fan Con, or participate in painting and calligraphy or martial arts classes.<sup>28</sup> For example, Maria Isabel León, the granddaughter of the former president of the Chinese Association of Lajas, recalled that her

26. Julio Tang Zambrana, interview by author, June 2002, Havana.

27. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 68.

28. In the nineteenth century a syncretic religious tradition known as “San Fan Con” developed, mixing elements of Afro-Cuban *santería* with the cult of Guan Gong, who was transformed into a protector of Chinese immigrants in Cuba. San Fan Con was a development particular to Cuba, and from May to September related festivals took place throughout the provinces. For an analysis of how San Fan Con became monotheistic and Confucian in its Cuban setting, see Frank F. Scherer, “Sanfancón: Orientalism, Self-Orientalism, and ‘Chinese Religion’ in Cuba,” in Patrick Taylor, ed., *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 153-70. According to Ernesto Alay, who was born in Cuba to two Chinese parents, San Fan Con today is practiced in the home by burning incense and does not necessarily involve public display. Ernesto Alay, interview by author, June 2002, Havana.

Cuban mother “learned to cook Chinese food.” She proceeded to relate the recipe for a marinated “100-year-old egg.”<sup>29</sup>

Beneath this outside surface is another layer of “Chinese” identity, marked by childhood memories and attachments to the homeland (although most of the descendants have never been to China). Even third-generation descendants of Chinese in Cuba have created imaginative ties to an ancestral homeland. Blas and Santiago Pelayo Díaz are descendants of a Chinese indentured laborer and a slave in Cuba. In 1859 at age 15, their grandfather Tung Kun Sen (Pastor Pelayo) arrived in Cuba from Dongguan County, Guangdong for work on a sugar plantation. Pastor Pelayo eventually became a contractor of Chinese laborers in Cienfuegos and purchased the freedom of his wife.<sup>30</sup> In March of 1999, strolling down the dusty streets of the former Chinese neighborhood in Cienfuegos, Blas and Santiago Pelayo shared their family history with me. They pointed out the building of the former Chinese association “La Gran China,” of which Pastor Pelayo was president in 1884, and its patio where a theater company rehearsed during the evenings.<sup>31</sup> The dilapidated skeletons of Chinese shops and associations highlight the stark contrast between the tourist-oriented “revitalization” of the *barrio chino* in Havana today and the reality of the former Chinese communities throughout smaller Cuban towns. We proceeded to the cemetery “La Reina” where Pastor Pelayo was buried in 1913, now overgrown with weeds and inundated with water from the adjacent bay. Blas Pelayo has “poco a poco” (little by little) raised money from family members to refurbish his grandfather’s grave and erect a memorial plaque. Although he maintains good relations with the Promotion Group, Blas had developed an interest in his Chinese ancestry (and his African ancestry) long before the revitalization project. Extremely proud of his Chinese heritage, Blas has researched his family tree, learned elementary Cantonese (as opposed to the Mandarin that is currently being emphasized in the *barrio chino*), and is writing a novel based on the life of his grandfather.<sup>32</sup>

Given the economic and cultural incentives, it is not surprising that descendants of Chinese are finding their way to the *barrio chino*. The “pull” of the revitalization project has even reached those who previously had little knowledge of their Chinese heritage. However, this does not mean that these expressions of Chinese ethnicity are a fabrication. As Lynn Pann states in her history of the Chinese diaspora, “Clearly the Chinese, like any ethnic minor-

29. Maria Isabel León, interview by author, July 2002, Lajas, Cuba.

30. Enrique Edo y Llop, *Memoria histórica de Cienfuegos y su jurisdicción*, 3rd ed. (Havana: Ucar, García y Cía, 1943), 626–27.

31. Blas and Santiago Pelayo Díaz, interviews by author, Cienfuegos and Havana, Cuba, March 1999 and December 1999.

32. Parroquia “La Purísima Concepción” S.I. Catedral de Cienfuegos, Libro de Bautismos, Tomo 15, Folio 242, Número 698.

ity, lead lives that are balanced on an invisible see-saw between two or more identities. Circumstances, the nature of their audience, and calculations of risk and benefit dictate whether their 'backstage' or 'frontstage' identity is to the fore in any particular situation."<sup>33</sup>

Within the broad, supposedly inclusive category of Chinese Cuban, subtle racialized distinctions are nonetheless maintained. While native Chinese are still viewed in a sense as "foreign," Cuban-born descendants fall into the full spectrum of racial categories that exist in Cuba. Whiteness and blackness thus figure into the formulation of a "Chinese Cuban" identity. Although a black Cuban may be just as "Chinese" as a white Cuban and equally attracted by the economic and cultural "pull" factors of the revitalization project, the difference is often implicitly or explicitly noted. Several of the Afro-Cuban youths who participate in the martial arts and language classes were pointed out to me as "negrito," a racialization of difference that emphasizes their blackness over both Chinese ancestry and ability to speak Chinese.

Although the 1959 Cuban revolution embraced the notion of *cubanidad* and declared an end to institutionalized racial discrimination, it failed to achieve a color-blind society. As the editors of *Afrocuba* state, "It is our contention that few countries can boast the advances made in Cuba since the Cuban Revolution in breaking down institutionalized racism. It would, however, be shortsighted to think that racism has been eliminated."<sup>34</sup> Since the revolution, the question of race has been subsumed under a nationalist and socialist (often imagined as raceless and classless) umbrella.<sup>35</sup> As Cuba enters an undetermined future with the reforms of the past decade, the unresolved question of race and *cubanidad* resurfaces. Within the hegemonic Cuban social formation, individuals incorporated into the ethnic formation "Chinese Cuban" continually change as negotiations between state interests and those supposedly included are played out. The multiracial nature of societies in Latin America and the Caribbean, coupled with the fact that the "revitalization" of the *barrio chino* in Havana is government-sponsored, allows for a project that is more inclusive, drawing in white, black, and mulatto descendants who have made varying claims on their own "Chineseness."

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33. Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora* (New York: Kodansha International, 1990), 247.

34. Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afrocuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture* (Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 1993), 7..

35. Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 322-29; Pérez and Stubbs, *Afrocuba*, 9

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## Conclusions

The Promotion Group brings together native Chinese and descendants, providing organization, public space, and in a restricted society, an outlet for personal expression. However, alongside the project of the Havana Chinatown Promotion Group exists another phenomenon, one that is marked by a lack of neat categories. The “restoration,” if there is such a thing, is around rather than on Calle Cuchillo, and even beyond Havana in other provinces. What transpires in private interactions and within individuals is a matter often outside of the hegemonic construction of a “Chinese Cuban” identity.

Alongside the government-sponsored “revival,” the University of Havana has established the School of Studies on Chinese Migration in Cuba (Cátedra de Estudios sobre la Inmigración China en Cuba, Casa de Altos Estudios Don Fernando Ortiz) to promote the study of the Chinese presence in Cuba. Recent work by Cuban scholars has reached beyond the traditional scholarship on Chinese coolies in Cuba, utilizing oral interviews and archival documents for investigations in history, anthropology, literature, and linguistics.<sup>36</sup> These publications have stimulated new interest in the Chinese in Cuba, as well as in China itself. Two great-grandchildren of a Chinese from Cienfuegos are reading a book on Chinese legends written by the wife of the former Cuban ambassador to China.<sup>37</sup> Books published in Cuba remain one of the few remaining products that are affordable to Cubans who only earn pesos. Cuba maintains a high literacy rate, and with the lack of varied programming, many Cubans are avid readers and flood local book fairs.

The remaining native Chinese in Cienfuegos are discussing the possibility of reviving Chinese associational life. However, they face the challenge that according to Cuban law, no new associations may be formed; only branches of existing associations may be established. Besides Havana, associations remain in Cárdenas, Santa Clara, and Santiago de Cuba. Although dilapidated, these regional associations never lost their original buildings.

Without significant new immigration, the future of Havana’s Chinatown remains uncertain. Jorge Alay, in his presentation on the history of the *barrio chino* at the Fifth Festival of Overseas Chinese, described it as a “Chinatown without Chinese” (*barrio chino sin chinos*). However, the possibility of a new trickle of Chinese immigration exists, as relations between the Cuban and Chinese governments are solidified and niches open up for Chinese entrepreneurs. The Alay brothers are three relatively young ethnic Chinese who live in Havana. Their parents, who came to Cuba in 1949 for business,

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36. Examples of this research are a special issue of the Fundación Fernando Ortiz’s journal *Catauro* dedicated to the Chinese presence in Cuba, *Catauro* 1:2 (2000); and, most recently, Herrera and Castillo, *De la memoria a la vida pública*.

37. Mercedes Crespo, *Leyendas Chinas* (Havana: Editorial SI-Mar S.A., 2001). Crespo spent a decade in China accompanying her husband, the former Cuban ambassador.

stressed the importance of learning Mandarin (mainland China's official language). Now, Jorge proclaims, not only can he communicate with Chinese in China, but he can teach Mandarin to descendants of Chinese in the *barrio chino*. His brother Ernesto, who is in the tourist industry, recommends the establishment of a Chinese museum that would fulfill both tourist and community needs.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than being restored to an approximation of what it once was, the Chinatown is being "remade" into something new, both out of demographic and economic necessity. During the course of this government-sponsored project, second-, third-, and fourth-generation descendants of Chinese, by taking advantage of special economic opportunities and learning about and participating in Chinese traditions, are claiming an ethnic and cultural identity and redefining themselves. In the process, they are ultimately forging new spaces along the margins, where the expression of identity and the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity may develop.<sup>39</sup>

An unchanging *barrio chino* in Havana is unrealistic. In a different political and economic context, Chinese migration to Cuba would likely reflect the types of changes that have occurred elsewhere in the diaspora. As Lisa Lowe states, ". . . rather than representing a fixed, discrete culture, 'Chinatown' is itself the very emblem of shifting demographics, languages, and populations." In the 1950s, the composition of the *barrio chino* was similar to that of other "bachelor society" Chinatowns in cities such as San Francisco and New York. These Chinatowns have since been transformed due to a continual flow of immigration from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as movement to the suburbs.<sup>40</sup>

The "revival" of Havana's Chinatown has largely left behind the native Chinese, providing them only incidental economic benefit. While it has not

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38. Jorge Alay, interview by author, June 2002, Havana.

39. Compare to Frank F. Scherer, who makes a connection between the phenomenon of "self-Orientalism" and the remobilization of Chinese-Cuban "saint" Sanfancón. Scherer states, "It is my contention that the recent revival of 'Chinese' ethnicity in Cuba is based both on a number of Euro-American Orientalist assumptions of a distinctive and essential Chineseness, and on the 'Oriental' use of Orientalist discourse, which perfectly illustrates the 'indigenous' employment of what I call *strategic* Orientalism. While the former is being promoted, somewhat ambiguously, by the Cuban state and its *intelligentsia*, the latter is articulated by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans. In this way, the very process of reintegrating, re-creating, and re-ethnicizing the Chinese Cuban 'community' is marked by the peculiar practice of self-Orientalization (Ong 1993; 1997; Dirlik 1996). This complex discursive practice, complete with Confucian ideas and certain capitalist aspirations, facilitates the articulation of difference conceived in ethnic and cultural terms by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans and allows—at least in Cuba—for the opening of alternative spaces, where the construction of identities other than those prescribed by the Cuban state can take place." Scherer, "Sanfancón," 153-54.

40. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 65. See Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, N.Y.: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979) and Timothy Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, CA* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

attracted new Chinese immigrants, the “revival” has created economic and cultural “pull” factors to draw descendants who may have had little prior “Chinese” identity into the *barrio chino*. In this manner the *barrio chino* continues to evolve as have other Chinatowns, although not quite in the same way. Also, the revival program has enabled connections between native Chinese and descendants.

Mitzi Espinosa Luis is the granddaughter of Chinese merchant Lü Fan (Francisco Luis), who had come to Cuba in 1918. Through remittances and return trips, Francisco Luis also maintained a family in China. He actively promoted communication between his Cuban daughters and his Chinese daughters, shaping their conceptions of family and identity. When Francisco Luis died in 1975, the correspondence ceased. In the summer of 2001, with information provided by the Cuban daughters and the assistance of the local overseas Chinese affairs office, my research assistant and I were able to locate and meet the elderly Chinese daughters. They still live in Lü Village and maintain the house that their father built upon his first return trip from Cuba in the early twentieth century. Since then, communication with their Cuban relatives has resumed. Lü Fan’s Cuban daughter Violeta Luis and granddaughter Mitzi Espinosa Luis have been integral to this renewal of family ties.<sup>41</sup>

Back in Havana at a Chinese New Year festival, Mitzi approached members of the Chinese community, inquiring if there were others with the surname Lü. Armed with photos, she located Felipe and Santiago Luis, who also come from Lü Village in Xinhui County.<sup>42</sup> In a display of “fictive kinship” for fellow villagers from the other side of the ocean, they recognized Mitzi as a granddaughter. Mitzi’s desire to establish contact with her Chinese relatives in China, coupled with a public event sponsored by the Promotional Group that brought together native Chinese and descendants, provided the opening for this reunion to occur.

Matthew Frye Jacobson suggests that a diasporic imagination and attachments to the homeland are linked by a “cultural thread” to descendants of early-twentieth-century Irish, Polish, and Jewish immigrants in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Like the Pelayo brothers, Lü Fan’s Cuban granddaughter Mitzi Espinosa Luis possesses such an imagination. Although she has no “lived

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41. I extend my deepest appreciation to Chen Liyuan and to the Daze Overseas Chinese Affairs Office for their role in reuniting the two sides of the Lü family. Lü family, interview by author, Xinhui County, China, August 2001.

42. Felipe’s grandfather brought him to Cuba in 1926, and Santiago came in 1952. While Felipe had family in Hong Kong, Santiago never married in China or in Cuba.

43. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5.

experience” in China, she hopes to visit her relatives in person, though political and economic restraints in Cuba remain a barrier.

Another more fleeting encounter is Blas Pelayo's connection with native Chinese in the *barrio chino*. Following is an excerpt from an essay Pelayo wrote for the Chinese Cuban community chronicling the visit of China's President Jiang Zemin to Havana's Chinatown in 1993. He compares the official visit to the imperial commission that came to Cuba over 100 years earlier to investigate the abuses in the coolie trade. The essay expresses the sense of connectedness a descendant of a Chinese migrant experienced with his own family history, with the Chinese Cuban community, and with the remaining elderly native Chinese. The significance of President Jiang Zemin's visit varied for different segments of the population: for Cubans, it held the promise of improved diplomatic relations and material goods in a time of scarcity; for Chinese in Cuba, it re-established a connection with a homeland that had been severed for nearly half a century; and for descendants of Chinese, it may have been a “cultural thread” linking their past with the present.

I only await the next day, which promises to be filled with emotions because of the economic and political significance of the visit of the president for our country; once again, as when the first time a state leader from the former Celestial Empire came to Cuba . . . Chen Lanbin, with the specific mission to learn about the problems from the mistreatment and abuses of Chinese coolies. . . .

The moment is significantly emotional: the native at my side yells immediately in Cantonese “Forever China!” Even though I do not know that language, perhaps out of ethnic instinct and solidarity, I repeat it in Spanish.

In another very old native, I was surprised to see his tired eyes filled with tears of emotion and joy, so rarely expressed among Chinese.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Blas Pelayo, “Breve crónica sobre la visita del presidente de La República Popular de China, Jieng Ze Ming a La Habana, del 21/11/93 al 22/11/93, ambos inclusive” (Short Chronicle of the Visit of the President of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin, to Havana, from November 21, 1993 to November 22, 1993). Translation by author.

