CHAPTER 16

The Chinese Presence in Cuba: Heroic Past, Uncertain Present, Open Future

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A Heroic Past

Between 1847 and 1874, some 140,000 young Chinese men were loaded onto Western steamships and frigates bound from China and Macao for Cuba. Just under 125,000 landed after long, arduous voyages lasting up to six months through the Indian Ocean, around Africa's Cape of Good Hope and up the Atlantic to the Caribbean. They went under invariable eight-year contracts, with some 80 % destined for sugar plantations to work alongside a dwindling African slave labor force. Cuba provided a unique laboratory in the history of human migration and labor history to study racial formation and race relations, and to also ask about the critical transition from slave to free labor in the history of global capitalism.

It is easy to demonstrate and argue that Chinese contract labor—*la trata amarilla* or the yellow trade—constituted a barely disguised form of slavery, that it was an extension of slavery that Cuban planters had practiced for three centuries, or that it was a new form of slavery, or neo-slavery. Lisa Yun makes a persuasive argument for the equivalency of coolie and slave, as do other scholars (Yun 2008; Jiménez Pastrana 1983). After all, coolies were sent to plantations to supplement slave labor, doing the same jobs, living

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under the same conditions, subjected to discipline, punishment and abuse by the same majordomos, overseers, administrators and planters. In fact, in some ways their daily lives might have been even more miserable, their sorrow more unrelenting, as they were bereft of spousal and familiar relationships, being almost all male, and they experienced severe language and cultural barriers. So it is not at all surprising that scholars tend to conflate the two. When one reads the thousands of gut-wrenching testimonies of coolies working on plantations presented to the Qing fact-finding commissioners in 1873, it is difficult not to draw that conclusion (Cuban Commission Report 1876). Indeed, on a daily basis the coolies' work and lives on the plantations while under contract certainly appeared comparable to slavery, although a more fine-tuned analysis reveals significant divergences, as I go on to show.

On the other hand, a close examination of the coolie system as actually practiced uncovers signs suggesting that coolies constituted the beginning of the transition from slave to free labor, and that many of them succeeded in gaining the right to live and work as free men in Cuba well before the end of the coolie trade and the total abolition of slavery there at the very end of the nineteenth century.

Coolies were recruited from the two southern coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian with treaty ports in Canton (Guangzhou) and Swatow (Shantou) in the former, and Amoy (Xiamen) in the latter. There, local authorities and merchants were experienced at dealing with Europeans and Americans. Nearby is the Portuguese colony of Macao, taken in the mid-sixteenth century as an entrepôt for trade with China, and the newly acquired British port of Hong Kong, ceded after China was defeated in the First Opium War (1839–1842). Southern Fujian and especially the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong were densely populated regions experiencing tremendous social turmoil, including the Red Turban Rebellion and especially the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s, which uprooted many young men from their villages. In addition, the regions suffered periodic natural disasters such as famine and floods. However, the hardy and hardworking villagers were highly skilled in agriculture and crafts, having developed for centuries the sericulture that had helped undergird China's silk trade with the West since the sixteenth century, not to mention the back-breaking work of wet-rice cultivation, planting two, even three, crops per year. Furthermore, they were quite familiar with sugar cane cultivation and the technology of cane sugar manufacture, even exporting sugar to USA in the eighteenth century. The hot and humid weather in South China and Cuba were also quite comparable. In many ways, Cuban plantation owners could not have found a more propitious labor pool to draw from.

Chinese immigrant labor was recruited to capitalist enterprises around the world in the nineteenth century—the western USA, Australia and New Zealand, Southeast Asia and even Africa from the mid- to late nineteenth century. Those sent to the Caribbean went with formal contracts, and only those sent to Cuba (and Peru in South America) were armed with bilingual Spanish and Chinese versions. Migrant labor from the British colony of India to the Caribbean also had contracts. These testified to the central role played by the colonial state in organizing, regulating and supervising an indentured labor system.

In the Chinese case, the formal contract of indenture was technically a civil contract between equal parties: the contracting agent in China and the prospective migrant, with the obligations of each party clearly spelled out. With some variation over time, the contracts assumed a standard form (Look Lai 1993, ch. 3). The Spanish and Chinese versions of the coolie contracts to Cuba diverged in language and orientation in one critical way, as we shall see.

The Cuban government agency charged with overseeing the coolie trade was the supremely misnamed Comisión de Población Blanca (Commission of White Settlement), an agency of the powerful Real Junta de Fomento y Colonización (Royal Board of Development and Colonization). It was presided over by one of the island's leading sugar planters, Julian Zulueta, whose uncle, Pedro Zulueta, in the London office of the family's multinational enterprise first went to China to set up the coolie trade from that end. When the commission's original plan to attract Spanish or other Catholic European immigrants—white and free—to work on Cuban plantations failed dismally, the colonial government turned to China for indentured labor but kept up the illusion of colonization and settlement.

Officially, the contracts in Spanish invariably titled the project "Libre emigración china para la isla de Cuba" ("free Chinese immigration to the island of Cuba"). Accordingly, in the contract the Chinese labor recruit was termed a *colono asiático*—Asian settler or colonist. Things become interesting, however, when examining the Chinese version of the contract, which clearly labels it a labor contract (*gugong hetong* 雇工合同 or *gongzuo hetong* 工作合同). Individuals signed on to work overseas (出洋) on the island of Cuba (often identified as Luzon or Manila by recruiters, invoking a familiar place not far from home, whereas Cuba was a totally unknown entity), and they went "voluntarily" (*ziyuan* 自愿). The recruit was correctly identified as a "contract signer"—the contracted person (*li hetong ren* 立合同人)—who signed his name in Chinese to signal his willingness to accept and abide by the contract.

The rest of the Spanish contract, as with the Chinese contract, spelled out the exact terms of work in Cuba, indicating in some detail the obligations of both worker and employer during the eight years of indenture. In other words, it was difficult, if not impossible, to keep the illusion of immigration and settler consistent because, in fact, the Chinese were sought after and tolerated precisely and only for their value as cheap labor, not as colonists leading to citizens. Thus the so-called *colono* (settler) had to obey a Cuban *patrono* (boss or employer). The Chinese translator made the necessary adjustment, where the worker (*gongren* 工人) was required to obey the employer (*dongjia* 东家).

Throughout the 25 years of the coolie trade, the basic terms of the contract remained constant: the eight years of servitude never varied, nor did the wages of 4 pesos a month. In addition to salary, the coolie received food (salt meat, sweet potato or other "nutritious vegetable," rice, fish), clothing (two changes of work garments yearly, a wool shirt or jacket and a blanket), housing and medical attention. He got three days off at New Year and Sundays, except during the critical harvest season. The contracts made clear that during the indenture period the coolie was under the total control of his employer, who was responsible for discipline and punishment for the coolie's failure to meet his labor obligations. How the coolie spent his time, even when not working, was left to the discretion of the boss. Some contracts even included a clause that baldly asked the coolie "to renounce the exercise of all civil rights which are not compatible with the fulfillment of contract obligations." He lost all freedom of mobility, being forbidden to leave the estate without permission, or risk being branded, pursued and arrested as a *cimarrón* (runaway).

Things became worse in 1860 when new regulations required coolies who had completed the original eight-year term to recontract with the same or another employer or leave Cuba at his own expense, two months after contract expiration. Practically none was able to save enough from their paltry wages for the return fare, so most stayed and recontracted. At first glance, this new regulation seemingly nailed the coffin for coolies, as it consigned them to an unremitting life of toil alongside slaves on plantations. There is no doubt that Cubans compelled recontracting in order to keep as many members as possible of this semicaptive, foreign labor force working on plantations for as long as possible by, in effect, creating a new labor pool. Had the recontracting requirement been scrupulously followed, it would have resulted in the Chinese being kept in servitude in perpetuity, which

would have lent further credence to the equivalency of this system of labor to slavery.

Through successive recontracting, some Chinese might have been entrapped to extend servitude well beyond eight years. However, a large number managed to get out of contract labor permanently after recontracting just once. They began applying for and receiving the valuable residency paper—*cédula de vecindad* or *carta de domicilio*—and registered as "foreign residents." A few years after receiving the residency permit, some went on to achieve naturalization (*carta de naturalización*) and become Spanish subjects (*súbdito español*), Cuba being a Spanish colony at the time. By the 1870s, another option became available to ex-coolies to regularize their status in Cuba: they applied to the newly established Chinese Consulate of Imperial China (serving the Qing government) to certify their Chinese citizenship.

Living like slaves and in the proximity of slaves, Chinese coolies were nevertheless not slaves. Despite not knowing Spanish and being isolated on the plantations, many of them did know their rights and appealed to courts and authorities local and national to obtain them. They were aware that slaves and free blacks were fighting to end slavery as part of seeking independence from Spain, and hundreds of them joined the *mambí* (freedom fighter) ranks in the decades leading up to Spanish surrender in the early twentieth century (García Triano and Eng Herrera 2009). Juan Jiménez Pastrana, a Cuban historian who studied Chinese coolies closely, argued that the coolie was "theoretically not a slave because he was waged. As such, he represented an early step in the rise of our working class. The Chinese *colono* was really an agricultural worker, on a miserable wage, whose socioeconomic situation must be included in the history of the Cuban labor movement" (Jiménez Pastrana 1983, pp. 2–4).

Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Cuba's pre-eminent historian of sugar, added: "The Chinese constituted the first step in solving the labor problem, a step that permitted the beginning of the industrialization of sugar; that brought about the transition from manufacturing to industrial production" (Moreno Fraginals 1978, p. 155). He was referring to the noticeable differentiation of plantation tasks between Chinese coolies and slaves. Ramón de la Sagra noted in his account of the workforce on his plantation La Ponina as early as 1860 that 430 coolies worked in the *casa de calderas* (boiler house) of the *ingenio* (factory), compared with only 252 slaves, and that 250 coolies compared with only 28 slaves worked in the *casa de purga* (purging room), both tasks that were mechanized and required more skills.

By contrast, slaves vastly outnumbered coolies, by 189 to 35, in the unskilled manual labor of transporting cane from field to factory (De la Sagra 1862, p. 95).

The ever-observant and often amused American Eliza McHatton-Ripley, who followed her husband from the south of the USA to own and manage the plantation Desengaño ("Disillusionment") in central Cuba, noted in her diary in 1866:

> The Chinese, when once acclimated and accustomed to the routine, were docile and industrious; they could not stand the same amount of exposure as an African, but they were intelligent and ingenious; within-doors, in the sugar factor, in the carpenter-shop, in the cooper-shop, in driving teams, they were superior to the negro.

Furthermore, after completing their contract terms, "they were allowed to flock into cities and villages [...] and readily found employment as brakemen on railroads, or in any occupation other than digging in the ground" (McHatton-Ripley 1896, p. 177).

There is irrefutable evidence that after the original eight-year service as a captive labor force alongside slaves on plantations, Chinese migrant laborers' experience began to diverge from slavery in concrete and discernible ways. They followed a clear path to earning a living as legal free residents, earning market-determined wages to support families, or, as many of them did, establishing little businesses in towns big and small. By the late 1850s and 1860s, coolies in the first shipments of the late 1840s and 1850s had completed their eight-year contracts and moved away from the plantations to provincial towns and to Havana, where they established the first *barrio chino* (Chinatown) just outside the city wall, along the *zanja* (trench) that carried water into and out of the city. While changes in the coolie regulations forced them to recontract indefinitely, beginning in 1860, enough had won their freedom to live in Havana, where they worked as employees or set up their own small businesses, married and formed families.

By 1867, Havana Chinatown had enough critical mass for the Chinese to form the first associations or *huiguan*. These urban Chinese often provided leadership for others, especially those still under contract and those about to complete their contract and seeking the all-important residency permit, or those trying to escape continuous recontracting. By 1872 a remarkable

14,409 ex-coolies had become naturalized Cubans or registered as foreign residents. The first *huiguan*, Kit Yi Tong (The Union), was formed to bring together all the Chinese residents of Havana. Founding members bore quintessentially Spanish names such as Saturnino Saez, Marcos Portillos and Juan Lombillo, an indication of baptism and assimilation, or at least a willingness to appear assimilated. This was soon followed by the Hen Yi Tong (Brotherhood), which included not only Havana residents but all the Chinese in Cuba, including those still under contract (Chuffat Latour 1927, p. 8).

Hakkas must have felt less than fully welcomed, for they responded with their own association, which they named pointedly the Yi Sen Tong (Second Alliance) (Chuffat Latour 1927, p. 18). All three associations had affiliations with Hung men (a major triad organization) in Guangdong (Helly 1979, p. 204).

While Chinatowns were forming in Havana and throughout the island, Cuban patriots embarked on a long and tortuous path toward independence from Spain. Not surprisingly, many slaves answered the call to join the revolution and with it gain an end to their bondage, and so did hundreds of Chinese coolies. During the first major push for independence, the Ten Years War (beginning 1868), the first major battle between rebels and colonial forces took place in Las Villas province, the site of major plantations employing thousands of slaves and coolies. It was recorded that most of the 500 Chinese who fought in this battle were Hakkas from Fujian, and their leader, Lam Fu Kin (Lin Fujian林福建), known locally by his Spanish name Juan Sánchez, had fought with Hong Xiuquan in the Taiping Revolution (García Triano and Eng Herrera 2009, p. 5; Chuffat Latour 1927, p. 28), so he "knew about war" (*conocía la guerra*)—that is, he was an experienced warrior.

Also reported was the generous assistance of Carlos Cartaya Chung Yuen (Zhong Yuan钟元), a Hakka merchant known as a philanthropist, in the town of Remedios in Las Villas province. As president of the Sociedad Asiática (Asia Society), he fed up to two meals a day to as many as 800 rural residents who were forced by colonial policy to concentrate in the town so they could not give aid and support to the rebel fighters, thus depriving them of access to food. In 1902, after independence (1895), Cartaya Chung remained in Remedios where he opened several businesses, including a money exchange, and was appointed honorary governor of Las Villas province by the new Cuban government and honorary consul when the Qing government briefly located its consulate in his hometown of

Remedios. He also received an imperial degree. He sent his four sons born in Cuba to his Chinese wife back to China for their education (Chuffat Latour 1927, p. 112; López 2013, p. 131; García Triano and Eng Herrera 2009, p. 22). Cartaya Chung was one of a growing number of successful Chinese merchants in Cuba who were active Cuban citizens while at the same time remaining attached to the Chinese government, in his case the Qing.

In other independence struggles during the Ten Years War, stories circulated of runaway coolies who engaged in "guerrilla warfare" learned from their past participation in the Taiping Rebellion. "Not a few had been bandits in their homeland" (Corbitt 1971, p. 22).

In the next major battle, the Little War (La Guerra Chica) in 1879, many Chinese veterans of the previous Ten Years War again served the rebels. They included the military leader José Tolón (Lai Hua 赖华), who was reputedly also Hakka and also a Taiping, given his exceptional military prowess and strategic mind. He shared a surname with Hong Xiuquan's wife. Tolón went on to distinguish himself militarily in the final and successful push for independence in 1895–1898, after which he married a Cuban woman and had two daughters and a successful business career (García Triano and Eng Herrera 2009, p. 13).

A few so distinguished themselves as leaders on the battlefield that when independence was won, they earned the right to be candidates for the presidency of the new republic. Notable among them was José Bu (Hu De 胡德). A monument was erected to these Chinese *mambises* (freedom fighters), carved with the stirring tribute that "There was no Chinese deserter; there was no Chinese traitor" (*No hubo chino desertor; no hubo chino traidor*).

An Uncertain Present

Despite the eligibility of a few heroic independence leaders, no Chinese ever sought the Cuban presidency. Instead, they spread themselves from Havana to all the provinces, big towns and small, building a *barrio chino* (Chinatown) wherever a critical mass was reached. More Chinese associations, or *huiguan*, were formed in Havana, with chapters in many provincial towns across the nation. The Chee Kung Tong (Zhigongdang) was established in 1902, and the Kuomintang (Guomindang) in 1921. Together these were the main overarching organizations that complemented the Casino Chung Wah (Zhonghua Huiguan) established in the waning days

of the colonial period in 1893 (López 2009). Located just outside historic Old Havana (where the Chinese were forbidden to reside or operate businesses), by the 1920s, Havana's Chinatown had grown to 44 city blocks, making it the largest in Latin America.

During the 1920s, a particularly prosperous time fueled by prodigious sugar harvests, Cuba attracted some 20,000 free immigrants from Guangdong—mainly the Siyi counties (Taishan, Xinhui etc.)—at a time when China's economy was racked by continuous civil war and social calamities. Fathers, uncles, sons and nephews, mostly men, came to set up small businesses in Havana and the sugar-rich provinces, sending money home regularly through established remittances channels. Eventually, women and families migrated as well, so that the Chinese communities took on the semblance of normal community life, with schools, newspapers, recreation centers and clubs. Much of the growth in families was the result of Chinese men and Cuban wives producing the next generations of mixed-race *chinos cubanos* or *chinos mestizos*.

Havana's Chinatown participated actively in Cuba's growth as a prime Caribbean tourist destiny. In addition to the perpetually warm and sunny weather, the pristine beaches and crystal blue waters, Cuba's attraction for North American tourists relied heavily on gambling, prostitution, opium and other illicit thrills, with Havana's Chinatown serving as a main site for bordellos, cabaret shows, strip clubs, porno theatres and so forth. During the 1950s, close to 0.5 million tourists flocked to Cuba annually, and tourism became the country's second source of national revenue after sugar (Hearn 2012b). During this time, much of Chinatown's businesses, both the above-board and below-board kinds, operated in the informal economy or black market.

Given the essentially petit-bourgeois nature of Cuba's Chinese communities—their entrepreneurial spirit and the family labor behind the small business-driven prosperity—and the turn to communism and an alliance with the Soviet Union by Fidel Castro's anti-US imperialist revolution, the two soon clashed. At first, some young Cubans supported the revolution, forming the Chinese militia known as the José Wong Brigade. In October 1968, the militia, led by the trade unionist Pedro Eng, occupied the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang [KMT]) building and raised the flag of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the first time in Cuba. They also closed down the brothels, gambling dens and opium dens in Chinatown. In 2015, the Alianza Socialista de China en Cuba (Socialist Alliance of China and Cuba) occupied the old KMT building. In the 1960s, the revolutionary

regime began nationalizing big and small businesses—from the large plantations to the small shops and truck farms of the Chinese communities throughout the island, a process that was completed in 1968. Their businesses shuttered and their livelihoods shattered, most Chinese Cubans left the country, moving mainly to Miami, New York City and other points in the USA, while some returned to China.

In 1980 the Casino Chung Wah's own census counted only 4302 Chinese, most of them Cuban-born and of mixed heritage. By 2002 that number had dwindled to 2866, and only a handful, few more than 100, were Chinese-born and spoke Chinese (mostly Taishan or Xinhui dialect; a few had learned Mandarin), most of whom are now in their late 60s or older. Very few new immigrants have arrived to revitalize the population, in part because the state-directed command economy has created practically no incentives for individual Chinese to migrate to Cuba, a situation exacerbated by the cool relationship between Cuba and China for the long period of Cuba-Soviet Alliance, 1960–1990. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 plunged Cuba's economy into deep despair when Soviet subsidies ended, but that moment also signaled an opportunity for the Sino-Cuba freeze to begin to thaw (López 2009; Hearn and Alfonso 2012; Hearn 2012a).

During the difficult days of the "special period" in the 1990s, a group of young Cuban Chinese leaders created a new state enterprise named the Group to Promote Chinatown (Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino). Led by university student Yrmina Eng of the mixed-race second generation, and Carlos Alay and his two brothers, whose parents were both Chinese and who themselves spoke Chinese, the group labored for a decade to revitalize Chinatown on the basis of tourism, centered on a small restaurant lane off the old Chinatown thoroughfare of Zanja Street. They marshaled what limited community resources remained, together with some investment from family members in China, to open new restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and to provide language classes in Mandarin. They established a home for the elderly, and promoted festivals and celebrations directed by the Casa de Artes y Cultura Tradicionales (Center of Traditional Arts and Culture) (López 2009). An enterprising mixed Cuban, Roberto Vargas, having studied martial arts in China, opened the Wushu academy in the barrio, next to the Min Chi Tang building, and that is one of the major successes of the revitalization project. Meanwhile, the Cuban government also allowed the 13 or so remaining *huiguan* to open their own restaurants and earn some income from tourism. The group persuaded the PRC to

finance the erection of a new gateway to the barrio. In 2006, the Office of the Historian of the City took over the Grupo Promotor, presumably to assert greater state control over the development of Chinatown. Since then, not much has happened there.

In 2015, probably every Cuban in Havana had a daily encounter with China, as did most foreign tourists. That is because Cubans and tourists ride the thousands of Chinese Yudong (中国宇通) buses that provide most of the public transport in the city, as well as all the modern, brightly colored, air-conditioned tourist buses roaring through the city streets of historical Old Havana and the upscale hotel neighborhoods of El Vedado and Miramar. Cubans and foreign residents with an account at a Cuban bank withdraw money from Chinese ATM machines, some of which are emblazoned with Chinese characters.

The relatively small number of Cubans who own cell phones likely use a China-made Huawei apparatus. Some of the even smaller number who own a car may drive a China-made Geely. Cuban television has several CCTV channels, including a Spanish-language one.

The University of Havana has enrolled a relatively large number of Chinese and other Asians (primarily Vietnamese), and the Confucius Institute affiliated with the university provides the larger Havana community with Chinese language and culture classes for all age groups. There are now more than 300 Chinese medical students on the campus.

Almost every Cuban household has one or more Chinese-made appliances, including refrigerators, washing machines, pressure cookers, rice cookers and televisions, as well as smaller products such as a water filter systems and espresso coffee makers.

The last time China had such an obvious presence in everyday Cuban life was in the mid-1990s, during the times known as the *período especial* (the "Special Period in a Time of Peace," as Fidel Castro called it), when Cuba suffered after the withdrawal of Soviet and Eastern bloc subsidies (notably food and petroleum) after the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War came to a close. The public transport system practically fell apart until China came to the rescue with up to a million Chinese bikes.

In 2015 I found it extremely difficult to do research on the new, revitalized Chinese presence in Cuba, which at one time had a large and vibrant Chinatown. This Chinatown was established slightly before those of San Francisco and New York, and rivaled them in size and prosperity. It survived the initial phase of Castro's revolution, but when the revolution began nationalizing their properties and businesses in the 1960s, most

Chinese left for the USA or returned to Hong Kong and China. The old Chinese community now consists mainly of old men living out their remaining days in the government-run retirement home, or in their own homes, whiling away their time in the remaining associations, such as the Min Chi Tang, which provide them with breakfast and lunch with money from the Cuban government. Most of those who identify with the Chinese community are mixed-blood descendants of Chinese men and Cuban mothers. On major holidays, such as Spring Festival/Chinese New Year and *Dia de los Muertos*/Qing Ming, the community and the descendants spread out through the city to celebrate, and then retreat back into their daily routines around the city and in the provinces.

An Open Future

Today (2015) the Chinese embassy occupies a whole city block in the upscale Vedado neighborhood. A fellow socialist country that became estranged from Cuba when Cuba allied with the Soviet Union in the early days of the Castro revolution, China has now re-emerged on the scene, more confident and assertive than ever, as a rising power. Chinese-Cuban state-to-state relations have warmed since the 1990s, when Castro sought China's help, given Cuba's economic woes. Relations have deepened in the course of the last decade or so. President Hu Jintao visited Cuba in 2008, and in July 2014 President Xi Jinping also stopped by to greet Fidel, by then in poor health and retired, and his younger brother, Raúl, currently in charge of the Cuban state. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, also visited the island in April 2014. China is Cuba's second trading partner behind Venezuela (although that may soon change given the near collapse of the Venezuelan economy), and Cuba is China's leading partner in the Caribbean, with bilateral trade of a little over USD2 billion, according to Chinese government data. China imports nickel from Cuba and may in future import petroleum, although Cuba's petroleum deposits are far from developed. China's relationship with Cuba is economically driven, as is the case with all of Latin America (Hearn and León Manríquez 2011). It is similar in many ways to China's growing relationship with Africa, where large-scale migration followed massive Chinese investment. In Cuba and the rest of Latin America, migration and small-scale private investment are also likely to follow Chinese state investment.

Since the late 1990s, China has invested USD1.3 billion in Cuba, mostly in large-scale projects such as onshore and offshore oil exploration (there

has been no drilling yet), the expansion of Cuba's largest oil refinery in Cienfuegos (Cuba currently produces a small quantity of low-quality crude oil) and the development of the new deep-water port in Mariel (near Havana), which has been declared a "free trade zone" and whose large container port (not yet fully operating) has been developed with Brazilian capital. China is modernizing the eastern port city of Santiago, building entire dock facilities, new restaurants and so on. Chinese state companies are building different kinds of power and energy plant throughout Cuba, from the traditional kind to wind energy. China is building hospitals, and in May 2015 the Beijing Enterprise Group signed an agreement with the Cuban Ministry of Tourism to build a golf course as part of a large-scale tourist resort complex of hotels, condos, amarina, shopping malls and so forth. Currently, Cuba has only one 18-hole golf course but it plans to have at least 12 (Frank 2015).

As a result of this investment, Chinese engineers, business managers, technicians, translators and other experts have arrived in Cuba. In April 2015 I had lunch in Havana with Seaman Dai, business manager of the China Machinery Industry Construction Group, Inc., of Beijing and Guangzhou, and six engineers (hydraulic, mechanical) plus one interpreter. The team travels periodically to Cuba to check on the energy plants they are constructing in collaboration with Cuban engineers, who have also visited China. Dai visits Cuba four or five times a year for two weeks at a time to check on the energy projects in progress. Chinese design and import the machinery; other materials, such as cement, may be imported from Mexico.

Cargo ships from China (Cosco and subsidiaries) deliver machinery and other parts to the port of Mariel. They are few in number but visible in Santiago and other places where big Chinese projects are located. On May 2, 2015 in Havana I met Captain Li of the Guangzhou Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd., a subsidiary of Cosco. He had just delivered a shipment of construction machinery to Mariel.

However, Cuba today has few of the non-governmental Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs, tourists and labor migrants found throughout Latin America, notably in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, where they have arrived in large numbers in the wake of bilateral development and trade agreements, and state and private Chinese investments, following a pattern already well established in Africa, parts of Europe and the USA. An estimated 750,000 Chinese live in Africa. They are mostly entrepreneurs and shopkeepers but include some workers (*mingong*) attached to Chinese state-sponsored development and infrastructure projects. In Argentina, to

give just one example, an estimated 75,000 *xin yimin* (new immigrants) are now residents and they have taken over the supermarket sector (they own and operate some 8900 supermarkets, and have formed their own trade association) (Cardenal and Araújo 2013, p. 68).

Cuba, however, is different. It lacks this "army of tireless entrepreneurs, [. . .] astonishing human beings with an unlimited capacity for self-sacrifice who venture out into the world driven only by the dreams of success and who go on to conquer impossible markets which Westerners never dared to tackle" (Cardenal and Araújo 2013, p. 5). In Cuba, only a handful of new Chinese immigrants have followed in the wake of Chinese state-funded development projects.

So far, the closest thing to new Chinese immigrants in Cuba are the thousands of Chinese students who have arrived since 2006. Between then and 2013, 3584 Chinese students studied Spanish in Cuba on Cuban government scholarships at a special campus on the north coast just outside Havana (Talala, near Guanabo). Since then a handful of self-funded students have arrived to study tourism, journalism, architecture and other subjects. Medical students have continued to arrive in Cuba for its vaunted medical education. In 2015 there were still 474 medical students on Cuban government scholarships (Eng 2016). One of the language graduates of the Talala School is Patricia Chan, who now works for Seaman Dai and the Chinese Energy Company. However, most of the students who have studied in Cuba will probably return to China, as Chan plans to. At present there are few economic opportunities for Chinese graduates of Cuban higher education, but some will elect to stay.

I also made the acquaintance of Wu Qingli (吴庆利) and Han Qingshan (Antonio), who co-own and manage the Tianbo International Travel Agency (天博) in Havana and Beijing. Wu of Urumqi has been in Cuba for 18 years, traveling back and forth to China, and Han for 12 years, married to a Cuban. Recently his brother Raúl, younger by about 10 years moved to Cuba to work with him in the travel business. According to them about 30,000 Chinese visitors entered Cuba in 2014, and their company handled about half of them. Nearly all the visitors are Chinese government and business clients rather than tourists in the traditional sense. They are representatives of Chinese companies with large projects in Cuba who come to check on these projects. A small number come as "tourists" to scope out investment opportunities, even though, as foreigners, they are not currently able to invest in property and small businesses.

Like other foreigners, they find opportunities blocked by Cuban government policies regarding property ownership. Big investors such as the Spanish hotel chain Meliá "co-owns" 22 hotels in Cuba with the Cuban government, the government owning the hotels proper and the Spanish company managing the hotel business. In other words, these are joint ventures. So it is with all other large foreign investments, including the big Chinese development and infrastructure properties. At present, only Cubans can own property, including—and this is significant—Cuban immigrants to the USA, Spain and elsewhere who have held on to their Cuban passports and nationality, or who have family in Cuba who serve as their business partners. These are the only people outside Cuba who are buying up choice real estate and opening up fancy restaurants serving the growing tide of tourists and Cubans with access to dollars. Apart from hotels and restaurants, and a few companies selling machinery (Chinese) and construction materials (Italian), there are no retail businesses or storefronts selling consumer goods other than government-owned stores. With the normalization of USA–Cuba relations, starting with the re-establishment of embassies and the exchange of ambassadors, and the lifting of the US-led embargo, these restrictions would have to be softened if not eliminated, or foreign investors would be reluctant to trade with Cuba and establish businesses there, and US banks would be unwilling to extend credit to Cuba or to US businesses in Cuba. When these changes take place, not only Americans but Chinese and other entrepreneurs will be poised to jump into Cuba, one of the last remaining frontiers to capitalist expansion in the Americas and in fact the world.

Each year some 350,000 Cubans from the diaspora (primarily in the USA but also in Spain and other parts of Europe and Latin America) visit their families in Cuba. They constitute the largest flow of visitors. Another 100,000 non-Cuban Americans visited Cuba in 2014, and the number was growing fast as Barack Obama continued to relax travel restrictions. In the wake of the imminent end of the US embargo, more tourists from Europe and Canada (already the largest tourist sending nation) were about to flood into Cuba.[1] With the widening of the Panama Canal near completion (2015), and with the container port and deep-water harbor of Mariel, as well as the free trade zone, ready for business anytime, Cuba would be ready for takeoff if and when the state removes restrictions on foreign investment and property ownership. To attract new Chinese immigrants to Cuba, the same kind who have been going to Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America, these are the necessary changes. Many, but not all, of the tourists

from the USA, China, Europe and Latin America are business or entrepreneurial tourists, interested primarily in scoping out investment and business opportunities.

In preparation for that day, a few Chinese *xin yimin*, who label themselves as such and who are conscious of their pathbreaking role, can be found in Cuba in 2014:

1. Kagita Chen (陈秀连) is an attractive woman in her 40s who wandered around Europe before discovering Cuba 14 years ago. She is from Zhongshan. She drives a beautiful late model Mercedes and lives in an upscale neighborhood far from Old Havana and old Chinatown. With her Cuban residency status and Spanish fluency, she and her older sister operate a fancy Chinese restaurant outside Chinatown in the University of Havana neighborhood. To maintain ties with the old Chinatown, they also manage a restaurant there, as well as serving as officials of the Zhongshan Association (huiguan).[2] Kagita has built relationships with important revolutionary figures, and cultural and art institutions far beyond Chinatown, including the former minister of culture, Armando Hart, who is currently president of the Cuban Cultural Society José Martí. She has also cultivated relationships with some of Fidel's sons, several of whom have visited China and like Chinese food. She calls herself a *xin yimin* who makes a unique living for the moment as a "business entrepreneur" and acts as intermediary between prospective Chinese investors and as a consultant on behalf of Chinese companies doing business in Cuba.
2. Leo Xiang (向) from Chongqing went to Cuba seven years ago, around 2007, to study medicine. After receiving his MD he would like to stay in Cuba to do an MA in public health and then, with Kagita Chen as a role model, open up a consultancy (*agencia informativa*) to promote private Chinese businesses in Cuba, especially in pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, medicine, and products and services related to public health.

Other Chinese students similarly aspire to stay in Cuba and pursue business opportunities for themselves and other Chinese investors, using the cultural capital they have acquired in the country as their calling card.

Finally, what of the Cuban Chinese, not necessarily the 100 or so very elderly Chinese immigrants but their descendants? How has a rising China affected their prospects in a changing Cuba? Since most are of mixed

Chinese heritage with very little Chinese cultural capital, are they equipped to capitalize on the developing relationship between Cuba and China?

Among the Cuban-born generation, Carlos Alay, an exceptional Chinese-Cuban entrepreneur who owns three restaurants in Chinatown, speaks Mandarin and Cantonese and sent his two mixed-heritage children to Tianjin to study for three years. With a degree in food sciences from the University of Havana, he worked in a food science lab before going to Havanatur (the largest of several state tourist agencies) to work as a tour guide for Chinese tourists for a few years. Today, with his restaurants, he continues to hustle for tourist "businesses" with Havanatur and other places (although he would not be specific with me). He lives well by Cuban standards but earns far less than Wu and Han earn from their China travel agency.

Carlos still lives in Chinatown, but other mixed-heritage Cubans living outside have made names for themselves and developed contacts with China. Foremost among them are probably the Cuban Chinese artist Flora Fong and her son and daughter, Li and Liang Dominguez Fong (their father is a well-known Cuban artist who runs his own gallery where the children also exhibit.) All three have made numerous trips to China and exhibited in galleries in Shanghai, Beijing and elsewhere there.

José Antonio Choy is an eminent contemporary Cuban architect and painter who has also visited China, land of his father and father-in-law. Like the Fong family, he and his wife and two daughters, all architects, live far from Chinatown in an upscale neighborhood. However, he is proud of his Chinese heritage and has some entrepreneurial abilities. If the opportunity arises, he, the Fong family artists and Carlos Alay may be among the Cubans who can profit from the further development of China–Cuba relations, but they have relatively little capital to invest in a new Cuban economy, and the inability of most of them to speak or read Chinese may limit their usefulness as intermediaries and consultants, let alone as partners, of future Chinese investors, who are more likely to turn to the likes of Kagita Chen and Leo Xiang.

Postcript

Since this chapter was finished (September 2016), Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro has died on November 25, that year. This came shortly after Donald Trump became the president-elect of the United States on November 6. His position on the normalization of relations with Cuba is

undoubtedly influenced by the anti-Castro position of most Cubans in Florida, which he narrowly won with the help of their vote. A reversal by Trump of Obama's détente with Cuba would constitute a setback to the renewal of trade and commercial relations between two historical partners separated by only 70 miles of water in the Gulf of Mexico. According to the *Wall Street Journal* of November 30, should this happen, China is best positioned to expand its growing economic presence on the island in the absence of serious competition from US investors and businesses (*Wall Street Journal* 2016). Moscow is unlikely to return to Cuba in any serious way to resume its old partnership. Thus in the near future the coast appears clear for China to forge ahead with plans to increase its presence in Cuba, continuing with state-sponsored investment projects, likely to be followed by streams of entrepreneurial *xin yimin* with private capital to invest, the pattern that is already well established in other parts of Latin America and Africa.

Notes

1. The US embargo, which was imposed as executive action by President Eisenhower in 1960, has since been taken over by Congress in the Helms-Burton Act of 1995. This means that the president cannot unilaterally lift the embargo; only Congress has the power to do so. The act also imposed sanctions on third countries doing business with Cuba if they wanted also to do business with the USA. As Stipulated by the embargo, Cuba remained on the US list of terrorist-sponsoring nations, along with Syria, Iran and Iraq, until a few weeks ago . While Cuba remains on the list, US banks cannot extend credit or open up branches in Cuba, and US credit cards are not accepted. Thus one of the great burdens and risks of American tourists and study abroad programs such as the one I directed for Brown University is that most businesses are transacted in cash. (Exceptions can be granted by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which enforces the embargo. From the Cuban perspective, the embargo is called a "blockade."
2. The Chinese restaurant that the sisters operate in Chinatown, named in true Orientalist fashion Los Dos Dragones (The Two Dragons), belongs to the Zhongshan Association. As with all surviving *huiguan* in Havana Chinatown, the association owns and operates restaurants that sell a mixture of Cuban and Chinese food, from pizza to fried rice.

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