

# CHINESE CUBANS



*A Transnational  
History*

KATHLEEN LÓPEZ

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# CHINESE CUBANS

**ENVISIONING CUBA**

*Louis A. Pérez Jr., editor*

## Note on Names and Terminology

To the extent possible, names of local people, places, and institutions are rendered as they appear in the relevant sources of the era. Most Chinese migrants in Cuba had at least two names, a Chinese name and a Western or hybrid name (e.g., Tung Kun Sen and Pastor Pelayo), and used both in daily interactions, depending on the context. I generally use both names, when known, upon first mention.

For proper Chinese names, I use the standardized pinyin transliteration system adopted by the People's Republic of China (e.g., Taishan). However, in several instances I retain nonstandard spelling (e.g., Chee Kung Tong, *Kwong Wah Po*) to reflect the form of the name adopted by the migrants themselves in their local setting. For the names of well-known Chinese figures such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, I retain the more common transliterations. For the names of Chinese people in general, the last name comes first (e.g., Chen Lanbin). A glossary lists Chinese characters for the significant terms in this study.

I use the term "Chinese Cuban" throughout the book in a broad sense, referring to Chinese migrants in Cuba, ethnic Chinese born in Cuba, and at times, mixed descendants.

When quoting from primary documents, I retain the original spelling, punctuation, and word usage.

# CHINESE CUBANS

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# A Transnational History

## Two Lives

In 1859, the fifteen-year-old Tung Kun Sen (Dong Gongcheng), a native of Dongguan County in Guangdong Province, China, was kidnapped and taken to the Spanish Caribbean colony of Cuba as part of the infamous coolie trade. He signed a contract of indenture that obligated him to work for eight years on a sugar estate in Cárdenas, Matanzas Province. There he was baptized and given the name Pastor Pelayo, after Cuban planter Ramón Pelayo. After completing his term of service, he was forced to recontract for another eight years.

When Pastor Pelayo finished his indenture, he was in his thirties and had no hope of returning to China. He migrated eastward to the sugar districts of central Cuba. There he moved from estate to estate, earning wages as part of a *cuadrilla*, or work gang, and eventually became a labor contractor. Recently out of bondage, the former indentured laborer came into daily contact with enslaved African men and women on the cusp of emancipation. Through earnings from his work gangs, he managed to accumulate enough money to purchase freedom for a domestic slave named Wenceslaa Sarriá and her brothers. Pastor Pelayo and Wenceslaa Sarriá entered into a common law union and had nine children together, who they raised among a network of people of Chinese and African descent in the town of Cienfuegos.

Pelayo emerged as a leader among the local Chinese, establishing an immigrant association and a theater. Both Pelayo and his first Cuban-born son, Blas, supported the War for Independence from Spain in 1895 and registered as eligible voters after the establishment of the new Cuban republic. In 1913 Pastor Pelayo died, insolvent due to a penchant for gambling. He is buried in a plot at La Reina Cemetery in Cienfuegos, much of which today is inundated with water and overgrown with weeds.

Just a few years later, when the Cuban government permitted the war-time importation of contract labor, a second major wave of Chinese laborers crossed the Pacific. Among them was Lui Fan (Lü Fan), who in 1918 at age eighteen emigrated from his village in Xinhui County, Guangdong Province. Lui Fan initially worked on a plantation to fulfill Cuba's need to increase



Lui Fan (far right) with Lui villagers in Havana, Cuba, 1929. (Courtesy of Violeta Luis)

sugar production during World War I. He soon abandoned the estate and began peddling vegetables in the town of Cienfuegos. Carrying two baskets on a bamboo pole balanced on his shoulders, Lui Fan became a familiar sight in his Cuban neighborhood, where he was known as Francisco Luis.

A decade passed before Lui Fan made his first trip to his home village in China. He built a new house and married, with all of the villagers celebrating at an extravagant banquet. After his second return visit in 1930, his daughter Baoqing was born, but he was unable to see her until another return visit in 1932. His second daughter was born later that year, after he had departed for Cuba. From overseas, he named her Mali, after the Western name María or Mary.

Lui Fan never again returned to China, leaving his two daughters to grow up in the village without their father. Both married and had families of their own, but they maintained their father's ancestral home in Lui Village, near the market town Daze. Lui Fan dutifully sent home remittances once or twice a year, and for special occasions such as the birth of a grandchild, he sent home more money than usual.

Back in Cuba, Francisco Luis developed a relationship with a Cuban woman, with whom he also had two daughters, Lourdes and Violeta, each of which he also gave a Chinese name, Guiguí and Guipó. The domestic ar-



Francisco Luis (Lui Fan)  
with his Cuban daughters,  
Lourdes and Violeta Luis,  
in Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1952.  
(Courtesy of Violeta Luis)

rangement deteriorated, however, when their mother abandoned the family after three years. Luis raised his two Cuban daughters on his own, while continuing to support his Chinese family. He encouraged a relationship between his Cuban daughters and his Chinese daughters by sending photos and writing letters on their behalf. His Cuban daughters believed that they were corresponding with Chinese cousins. From the beginning, however, his Chinese daughters knew that they had half-sisters in Cuba and referred to them as “Third Sister” (*sanmei*) and “Fourth Sister” (*simei*).

In addition to maintaining a transpacific family, Francisco Luis belonged to the fraternal organization Chee Kung Tong and an occupational guild, read Chinese newspapers, donated to China’s resistance against the Japanese occupation in World War II, and attended Cantonese opera performances. He raised his Cuban daughters in a strict Catholic environment but taught them complementary points in the philosophies of Confucius and Laozi. After Francisco Luis died in Cuba in 1975, his Cuban daughters were unable to transfer his remains back to China for burial. Across the ocean, fellow villagers emphasized that the Lui women needed to depend on themselves, and communication between the four sisters ceased for over a quarter of a century.

## The Chinese in Cuba

Different layers of migrations produced the multifaceted Chinese Cuban community over the course of a century. The expansion of Western economies and European imperialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas pulled multitudes of men like Tung Kun Sen into an orbit of international labor migration. Between 1848 and 1888 more than two million Chinese, the majority from southeastern Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, boarded ships bound for plantations, railroads, and mines in the Americas, Australia, and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> In one stream of this migration known as the coolie trade, approximately 142,000 Chinese signed contracts of indenture to work in Cuba (and another 100,000 in Peru), providing a crucial segment of the labor force prior to and during the period of gradual abolition of African slavery, which did not end in Cuba until 1886. Beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, several thousand free Chinese arrived as merchants and craftsmen, many of whom had spent time in California. Nineteenth-century Chinese migration to Cuba coincided with a nationalist uprising, bookmarked by the unsuccessful Ten Years' War (1868–78) and a U.S. intervention and Spanish surrender in 1898.

Despite an official ban on the entry of Chinese laborers imposed by the United States in 1899, they continued to migrate to Cuba throughout the republican period (1902–59). A second major wave of Chinese migrants entered Cuba after 1917, when restrictions on labor immigration were lifted to promote sugar production during World War I. The global depression of 1929 and nativist policies in Cuba led to a decrease in the Chinese migrant population. Chinese continued to enter on a smaller scale until the Cuban Revolution of 1959, when the Communist government took power.

This book examines the transnational history of these migrants and their multiple identities as Chinese and Cuban. Whether indentured or free, most migrants ultimately aimed to accumulate resources and return to China, rather than settle permanently in Cuba. The coerced nature of the coolie system, however, left little possibility for return. Free Chinese migrants in the republican period worked to maintain transnational ties to China, but many of them came to identify themselves as Cuban.

The Chinese in Cuba did not experience institutionalized discrimination to the same extent as their counterparts in the United States, which maintained a policy of exclusion from 1882 to 1943, or Mexico, where anti-Chinese campaigns led to their violent expulsion from the northern state of Sonora in 1931. Nor were they victims of sustained anti-Chinese riots, as in Peru and Jamaica. Rather, Chinese participation in the Cuban wars for independence

spanning 1868 to 1898, their successful formation of cross-racial alliances, and the professed dedication of the Cuban republic to an ideal of a racial democracy, created the conditions for their incorporation into the national citizenry. At the same time, however, a negative view of Chinese developed in the Cuban press, in government and police reports, and in popular attitudes. As elsewhere in the Americas, they were described as clannish, corrupt, diseased, and unassimilable and were accused of competing unfairly with native Cuban workers. Such attitudes call into question the inclusive nature of Cuban national and cultural identity.

Historical scholarship on the Chinese in Cuba has traditionally focused on the period of the coolie trade from 1847 to 1874, leaving unexplored the transition of Chinese from indentured to free laborers in the late nineteenth century and the formation of transnational communities in the early twentieth century. Spanning the two major migrations, this book examines how racist ideologies in a multiethnic society, class stratification, gender imbalance, kinship and business networks, and generational differences converged to shape Chinese identities in Cuba. Situated between the Spanish and Qing empires, or the Cuban and Chinese republics, the Chinese in Cuba did not conform to political and legal definitions of national identity and citizenship. Chinese migrants themselves altered both official and popular conceptions of what it meant to be Chinese or Cuban in different contexts.

The constant presence of Asians in debates on the ideal composition of a nation demonstrates their centrality for the region. The story of the Chinese in Cuba lends insight into broader issues of labor and society in the post-emancipation era, the relationship between race and citizenship, and the interconnectedness of national and transnational identifications.

## Africans and Asians in the Americas

The nineteenth-century system of Asian indentured labor must be examined within the context of slavery and colonial empires in the Americas. As the shackles of African slavery came undone, from 1791 in French Saint Domingue (Haiti) to 1888 in Brazil, the demand for labor in the European colonies and newly independent republics of Latin America and the Caribbean remained high. The recruitment of Asians under contract offered a potential solution to the approaching end of slave labor. African slaves and Asian coolies therefore became historically linked through a global network of international labor migration, “kinsmen and kinswomen in that world created by European masters.”<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the nineteenth-century Caribbean, “coolies” referred to Chinese and East Indians bound by labor contracts, generally five years in the British colonies and eight years in Spanish Cuba and independent Peru. In Cuba, Chinese were primarily inserted into the sugar, railroad, mining, and construction industries, while in Peru they worked on coastal sugar plantations and guano pits. The contract between worker and employer detailed the obligations of both parties. The laborer was to receive a minimal monthly wage combined with food, clothing, lodging, and medical attention and was to be released from all obligations upon termination of the contract period.

In practice, though, the coolie system approximated a “new system of slavery,” incorporating mechanisms of oppression and control inherited from over three centuries of African bonded labor. The coolie traffic to Cuba and Peru so closely resembled Atlantic slavery that it became known as the “*trata amarilla*” (yellow trade). Chinese laborers suffered abominable conditions and treatment until an international investigation in 1874 resulted in the ending of the trade. A number of scholars have highlighted the significance of Asian indentured laborers as a supplement to or replacement for slavery and their insertion into multiracial Latin American and Caribbean societies.<sup>3</sup>

This book expands current scholarship by moving beyond the period of indentured labor to demonstrate the mechanisms by which Chinese in Cuba made the transition to free wage earners and entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup> Like African slaves, Chinese coolies protested the labor regime through forms of resistance and rebellion, engagement with the legal system, marriage and godparenthood, interracial alliances, and participation in ethnic associations. I probe the historical connectivity among diasporic Asians and Africans in the Americas, in particular through the relationships Chinese built across racial and ethnic lines (and the limitations of these alliances in a hierarchical society).

After the end of slavery, Chinese continued to circulate throughout Latin America and the Caribbean with the advent of new export economies in the late nineteenth century. Histories of immigrant workers in this period emphasize ethnic tensions. Thomas Holloway, for example, finds that national and regional distinctions among coffee laborers in São Paulo, Brazil, limited working-class alliances. Due to high turnover of the rural labor force, geographical isolation of plantations, rudimentary development of noneconomic institutions, and planter control, a common status as coffee worker proved inadequate for breaking down distinctions between Italians,



Spaniards, Portuguese, Japanese, Syrio-Lebanese, and Eastern Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Walton Look Lai also finds a lack of labor solidarity between Chinese, Indians, and blacks in the British West Indies.<sup>6</sup> Planters and industrialists used racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural divisions among their work force to their advantage. Depicted as clannish and passive, Chinese were thought to be unlikely to mix with native workers or to resist poor labor conditions.

Those in power did play upon ethnic divisions in factory and field, but behind the headlines about anti-Chinese riots and labor strikes, another story emerges, which can be traced only in marriage and baptismal records, the deeds to houses, and other archival records. In the day-to-day interactions of nonwhite peoples, Chinese migrants were forming alliances. My work follows recent scholarship in labor history and ethnic studies that, instead of focusing on a single ethnic group, investigates how those identified as minorities “of color” have interacted with each other or have been racialized in comparison with each other.<sup>7</sup> I examine interracial interactions and alliances that although often small-scale, cumulatively had a great impact on the development of the Chinese community and the process of incorporation into the Cuban nation.

## Immigration and National Identity in Latin America and the Caribbean

The relationship between Asia and Latin America extends back 250 years to the Manila Galleon trade, a global exchange system between Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Goods from China were transported through the Spanish colonial port cities of Acapulco in Mexico and Manila in the Philippines, bringing the first Asian settlers to the region. The massive influx of Asian laborers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century altered the economic and cultural development of Latin America and the Caribbean; yet, as Evelyn Hu-DeHart reminds us, the Asian presence has received relatively little attention from historians.<sup>8</sup> Scholarship on immigration in the region has been concerned principally with the transition to wage labor, development of export economies, and assimilation of ethnic groups into mainstream society.<sup>9</sup> Studies of ethnic minorities and nation building, meanwhile, have focused primarily on the struggles of African and indigenous peoples to play a political role in the emerging nation states, usually in the shadow of elite discourses of *mestizaje* (racial or cultural mixing) that often sought to incorporate marginal groups while disempowering them.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, however, scholars have embarked on a project to expand research