“El Morro y la Muralla”: Mapping Representations of Chinese Cuban Identity

by

Eliza Jiaping Kingsley-Ma
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. 3

INTRODUCTION.............................................................................................................................. 4
Chinese Cuban Diaspora: All Too Fixed and All Too Fluid ...................................................... 7
Chinese Diaspora in Latin American Multiculturalism ........................................................ 10
Negotiations in Chinese Cuban Identity .................................................................................. 12

CHAPTER ONE: Selective Memory: Legacies of Chinese Coolies in the Cuban Wars for Independence .......................................................... 14
Historicizing the Coolie in Cuba ............................................................................................. 17
José Martí: A Raceless Republic .............................................................................................. 20
Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui: Praise for the Coolie ......................................................... 32
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 41

CHAPTER TWO: Renewal in the Special Period: The Revitalization of Havana’s Chinatown .................................................................................. 43
Top-Down Reconstruction: Cuba’s Transition into Urban Renewal ...................................... 46
Bottom-Up Revival: From Auto-Marginalization to Auto-Recuperation ............................... 56
Building El Portico: A Transnational Bridge and Barrier ....................................................... 70
Conclusion: Gateways to New Beginnings ............................................................................... 72

CHAPTER THREE: Retratos y Representaciones: Two Visions of Chinese Cuban Identity .................................................................................................................. 75
Pedro Eng Herrera: Excavating History .................................................................................. 77
Chinese First, Spanish Second: Growing up in el Barrio Chino ........................................... 85
“La Procesión de Guan Gong en El Barrio Chino” ................................................................... 88
Flora Fong: Routing Calligraphy in the Caribbean ................................................................. 95
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 105

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................ 108

WORKS CITED................................................................................................................................ 111
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1918 Mrs. Huie and I visited Havana, Cuba, partly for pleasure, partly on business. We found a large and substantial Chinese community there numbering about five thousand, mostly engaged in retail trade, in restaurants and on plantations. Some of the largest grocery stores were owned and run by our people. Many of the early settlers came from China as slaves, having been kidnapped and forcibly shipped there to work on the plantations. In Havana there used to be a hospital or asylum where slaves too old to work were kept until they died. By dint of hard work and native intelligence, these settlers and their children have risen to a comfortable and assured position in the economic life of the country, at the same time contributing much to its economic development. Nearly everybody hailed originally from my old home, Sunning in south China, and so we were warmly received everywhere.

– Reverend Huie Kin, Reminiscences (1932)

In 1918, Reverend Huie Kin and Louise Van Arnam traveled from New York to Cuba to visit the Chinese Mission in Havana’s Barrio Chino. At the time of their trip, Havana hosted the third largest Chinatown in all of the Americas, and the largest in Latin America. Not unlike their own Chinatown in New York City, Huie describes the small, local businesses owned by Chinese immigrants in Havana’s Barrio Chino. Huie refers to the Chinese community in Havana as “our people” and expresses pride for the community’s prosperity and growth. Huie also references the Coolie Trade – the origins of Chinese immigration in Cuba – emphasizing the community’s transition out of enslavement. Encountering immigrants from Sunning, today’s Taishan, Reverend Huie Kin finds familiarity in Cuba. His comfort and adaptability reveal the greater network of Chinese Diaspora that connected Reverend Huie Kin, a resident of New York City, to Havana’s community of Chinese Cubans.

1 Huie Kin, Reminiscences (Peiping, China: San Yu Press, 1932), 82-3.
Fifty years prior to his visit to Havana, my Great-great grandfather, Reverend Huie Kin began his journey to the Americas, arriving in the Bay Area, at fourteen years of age.\(^2\) Over the course of his life in the United States, Reverend Huie Kin walked the streets of America’s oldest and grandest Chinatowns in San Francisco, Oakland, and New York City.\(^3\) Huie spent the majority of his life in the United States; he began work as a houseboy and dairy farmer, and gradually worked his way to become a leader in the American Christian community. Reverend Huie Kin was “the first Chinaman to be ordained to the Christian ministry in New York.”\(^4\) In 1889, Huie married a Dutch-American woman, Louise Van Arnam with whom he had nine children.\(^5\) The Huies eventually returned to China for the last years of their life. Reverend Huie Kin successfully assimilated into American life while maintaining a distinct transnational consciousness within the Chinese Diaspora.

Huie’s description of Havana is excerpted from his autobiography, *Reminiscences*. Huie Kin’s narrative has been self-preserved through his own words and recollections. My family treasures Huie’s *Reminiscences*. From adolescence to adulthood, I navigate questions of identity by often returning to the story of Huie Kin, finding comfort in his legacy. I repeat his story because it brings direction to my own ambivalent identity. There is no absolute origin in one’s ancestry, yet we often crave the structure of a pre-history. My family tree starts with Huie Kin, because that is where I have chosen my beginning.

\(^2\) Ibid., 24.  
\(^3\) Ibid., 25.  
\(^4\) Ibid., 60.  
\(^5\) Ibid., 73.
One year ago, I began to trace Huie Kin and Louise Van Arnam’s footsteps and investigate the presence of Chinese immigrants in Cuba. Studying in Havana for a semester, I was challenged by the alienation of living in a foreign space and searched for a window into the familiar. Unlike Reverend Huie Kin, I did not find an immediate shared community in Havana’s Barrio Chino. An initial tour of Havana’s Barrio Chino revealed contradictory narratives regarding the Chinese community’s revitalization and their disappearance. I began to explore the ambivalent representations of identity in Havana’s community of Chinese Cubans. As I stretched back through the history of Chinese Cubans, a pattern of historic moments for Chinese immigrants in Cuba aligned with monumental events in Huie Kin’s life. In 1868, the Cuban Wars for Independence erupted just months before Huie Kin’s arrival to the United States. The Cuban Commission Report was published in 1874, condemning the Coolie Trade and initiating its abolition. The testimonies of Chinese coolies were revealed the same year of Huie Kin’s baptism in Oakland, California. In 1918, during the hey-day of Havana’s Barrio Chino, Huie Kin traveled to Cuba, one of three countries he would visit in his lifetime, apart from China and the United States. Huie Kin did not intimately know life in Cuba, yet he became a guide, helping me to contextualize legacies of Chinese diaspora beyond the Untied States.

Huie’s own representation of Havana’s Barrio Chino resembled so little from how the neighborhood appears to me almost a century later. The small shops and large population of Chinese immigrants have mostly disappeared. Today, Havana’s Barrio Chino advertises its ethnic particularity to the outsider, yet there are few
Chinese Cuban patrons or employees in the services offered to the wandering tourist. The plaques of *el Barrio Chino*’s oldest mutual-aid associations are set into the walls of crumbling buildings, marking abandoned spaces with the vestiges of power and structure. I began to explore how representations have erased and preserved, constructed and collapsed Chinese diasporic identity within Cuba’s complex nationalism. What could I find of Huie’s vision for the Chinese in Cuba? Moreover, how do Chinese Cubans today, represent themselves?

**Chinese Cuban Diaspora: All Too Fixed and All Too Fluid**

Chinatowns are rooted in maps, guidebooks, and neighborhoods, established globally as a feature of the modern metropolis. Chinatowns present racialized spaces, where ethnic identity is preserved, hybridized and performed, while national identity is simultaneously claimed and negotiated. In the Americas, Chinatowns first took seed in the late nineteenth-century. Neighborhoods rose up along the periphery of major ports, as pockets of property and small plots of land. Chinese immigrants began as coolie laborers, contracted labor that resembled enslavement. Following the abolition of the Coolie Trade, Chinese immigrants shifted from agriculture to small businesses and began to claim space, build a community, construct transnational relationships and share a cultural identity. The tropes of growth and expansion provide a narrative for the birth of Chinatown, yet the genealogy traces its origins to infrastructures of colonialism. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the colonial triangle opened its doors to the east as ships packed with Chinese, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders traversed a deadly passage to the Americas. Coercion and deceit drove the migration of thousands of Chinese coolies to build the railroads, mine the
guano, till the land, pick the cotton, and cut the sugar cane. The urban enclaves that created Chinatown began as sites of protection for a population that participated in building the nations that later came to exclude them.

Popular narratives throughout the United States paint Asian Americans as middlemen, translators and bridge-builders among immigrant societies. The archetype of the model minority historically situates Asian immigrants and their descendants as successful outsiders who coexist silently as a foreigner within the United States. Scholar of Asian diaspora and Latin American multiculturalism, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, expands on the middling of Asian Americans. Hu-DeHart explains that immigrants from Asia “interposed themselves between colonial masters and colonized natives by functioning as traders and entrepreneurs, and occasionally as government contractors and civil servants.” Asian immigrants have been historically placed between the roles of colonizer and colonized, rendering them a foreign subject to the racial castes that the colonial system constructed. Sinophobia follows patterns of Chinese immigration in the Americas marking Chinese immigrants for their “ethnic distinctiveness, clannishness, and foreign-ness.” The Americas imported Chinese immigrants to fill a need for labor. Reverend Huie Kin recalls traveling freely into the United States during the Gilded Age. Yet as recession approached, Chinese immigrants quickly became scapegoated for the nation’s economic conflicts.

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7 Ibid.
8 Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870s to 1930s," in The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 1.
through violence and exclusion. Perceptions of Asian Americans as perpetually foreign, have allowed nations to easily subsume and exclude Asian immigrants.

Throughout this text, I work against fixed perceptions of Chinese immigrants as “middlemen” and examine Chinese Cuban identity within the broader context of Chinese “diasporic” identity. Khachig Toloyan, a diasporan intellect, traces the evolution of the term diaspora, following a “transformation from dispersal into diaspora.” Tensions arise from this shift in terminology. Dispersal implies spread out and wide reaching, the opposite of consolidation. Diaspora, however, is neither fixed nor fluid. Diaspora suggests the expanded web and movement captured in the term dispersal, but it also provides some structure of community. Diaspora offers the opportunity for a network and a narrative for a migrating individual. Tölöyan argues that the reclamation of the term diaspora has consequently expanded the word’s meaning to subsume citizens, refugees, immigrants, ex-pats, and ethnic and transnational communities all into one category. Diaspora is generally thought of as a movement of people connected by a shared origin, however each diaspora carries its own set of expectations and characteristics that limit an individual’s mobility.

Chinese diaspora becomes especially complicated in the context of Cuba. The Coolie Trade frames Chinese Cuban diaspora within a fraught history of modern enslavement. The legacy of forced labor robbed workers of their identities, dehumanizing the first generation of Chinese immigrants in Cuba. Furthermore, Chinese Cuban diaspora faces the limitations in Cuban immigration policy. Chinese

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10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 16, 17, 28.
immigration was formally excluded during the United States occupation in the early
days of the Cuban Republic. Upon the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Cuba sealed
its doors to immigration, while waves of Chinese Cubans emigrated in response to the
Revolution. Both a subsuming national identity and the restricted mobility of
immigration greatly fragmented the original structures of Chinese Cuban diaspora.
Today, Chinese Cuban diaspora is changing form yet again, as circuits between China
and Cuba strengthen. The Chinese diaspora takes on a completely distinctive set of
challenges and characteristics in Cuba.

The representations of Chinese Cuban identity that I examine challenge the
ambiguity of an all-encompassing diaspora by revealing the particularity and intricacy
within the Chinese Cuban diaspora. I explore the limitations that Chinese immigrants
and Chinese Cubans face when trying to imagine themselves outside of their
homeland. By pushing against the overly fixed and completely fluid positions, I
locate the tensions that more specifically situate ambivalence for Chinese Cubans.

**Chinese Diaspora in Latin American Multiculturalism**

The rise of multiculturalism and Asian, Asian American Studies in the United
States has dominated the field for Asian Diaspora studies. However, in recent years,
Historians, have begun researching the effects of Asian diaspora in Latin America.
The Asian-Pacific triangle and the triangular trade of the Atlantic have been
reconsidered to incorporate their historic and cultural merging in Latin American
multiculturalism. Latin America became a significant site for Asian immigration
beginning in the nineteenth century. Hu-DeHart argues that while race and ethnic
studies are central to scholarship in Latin America, research on immigration in Latin
America, let alone from Asia, has been largely peripheral. I follow in the footsteps of historians, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Lisa Yun, Kathleen López, Isabelle Lasuent-Herrera, Adrian Hearn and Ignacio López-Calvo, to expand Latin American multiculturalism in order to excavate the effects of Chinese immigration throughout Latin America. China’s rise as a major global leader has increased their economic and political presence throughout Latin America. As of recent, China pledged to invest $250 billion dollars into the region. China’s role in Latin America has ignited diplomacy and scholarship to further investigate relationships between the regions. In the past seven years alone, four North American monographs on Chinese diaspora in Cuba have been published and widely celebrated. Broadening the field of Asian Diaspora studies to all of the Americas requires a renewed linkage between American Studies and Latin American Studies. The Caribbean, specifically, maintains an ambivalent position between North, Central and South America. Cuba’s proximity to the United States resulted in a shared population of immigrants. The U.S. imported immigration laws into Cuba and further spread sinophobia from the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). In this text I draw on theorists from both fields to understand patterns of Asian migration in the Americas. Theoretical work drawn from Lisa Lowe’s writings on San Francisco’s Chinatown sits alongside Yrmina Eng

Menéndez’s theories of Havana’s *Barrio Chino*. I refer to research produced throughout the Western Hemisphere to further examine the interstitial spaces and “awkward position of presence” that cultivate Chinese Cuban identity.¹⁶

**Negotiations in Chinese Cuban Identity**

Throughout my thesis, I dismantle perceptions of Chinese immigrants as occupying a fixed, middle position. I analyze ambivalence in Chinese Cuban identity by examining the structures of power that have situated Chinese immigrants within and outside the Cuban nation. The construction of a perpetually foreign identity elides the permanent contributions made by Chinese immigrants to Cuban nation formation. In contrast to a fixed position for Chinese immigrants, I trace shifting representations of Chinese Cuban identity in three pivotal stages of Cuban history. I argue that Chinese Cuban identities have shifted in response to the exigencies of Cuban history. Representations from the Cuban Wars for Independence, the Special Period, and Cuba’s current state of transition reveal how Chinese Cuban identity has been constructed based on the constraints of Cuban history.

**Chapter One** reads the opposing positions of two dominant narratives from the Cuban Wars for Independence. Cuban icon, José Martí excludes Chinese coolies from his visions of a raceless Cuban Republic, despite their contributions to Cuba’s fight for independence. Martí’s student and disciple, Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui performs the opposite in his narratives of Cuba’s rebellion against Spain. Although Martí and Quesada apply different strategies, both of their narratives elide any agency on behalf of Chinese soldiers. Representations of Chinese immigrants in Cuba’s Wars

for Independence prioritize the construction of a successful, stable Cuban Nation regardless of the role of Chinese immigrants.

**Chapter Two** examines a community’s representation of Chinese Cuban identity through the physical space of Havana’s *Barrio Chino*. During Cuba’s Special Period in the 1990s, a combination of top-down state initiatives, bottom-up community organizing, and transnational investment gave way to the revitalization of Havana’s *Barrio Chino*. By analyzing the work of *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*, I explore the oppositional forces that produce *el Barrio Chino*. I apply a dialectic framework of exclusion and exhibition to Chinatown and trace the relationship of ethnic identity as a cultural resource.

**Chapter Three** turns to Cuban visual artists and their mechanisms of self-representation in Cuba’s current state of transition. Pedro Eng Herrera and Flora Fong García present opposite methods of representing Chinese Cuban identity. Eng paints historical narratives that depict Chinese Cuban identity, while Fong integrates Chinese and Cuban iconography in Caribbean landscapes. Eng’s paintings reveal his vexed relationship with the past, while Fong abstracts the past completely. Both artists build new pathways from which to imagine Chinese Cuban identity, and further reveal that some representations are easier to read than others.
CHAPTER ONE
Selective Memory: Legacies of Chinese Coolies in the Cuban Wars for Independence

The origin story for Chinese Cubans begins as one of displacement, labor, war and independence. The birth of Chinese Cubans intersects with the birth of the Cuban Republic. Chinese immigration to Cuba began with the Coolie Trade. From 1847-1878, over 125,000 Chinese coolies entered Cuba’s ports as indentured laborers, contracted to work on plantations throughout the island. The Coolie Trade was formally abolished by the end of the Ten Year’s War (1868-1878), yet waves of Chinese immigrants continued to arrive from Southern China and the United States. The fight for Cuban independence began on October 10th, 1868, when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes freed his slaves, inciting rebellion and proclaiming independence from Spain. The Cuban Wars for Independence (1868-1878 and 1895-1898) stretched over thirty years of struggle, ending ultimately in the United States occupation of Cuba. The history of Chinese coolies stands out as an alternative narrative woven within the history of Cuba’s independence movement. Chinese coolies were situated in a fraught position; coolies were bound by contract to cultivate the land that was under dispute. Furthermore, Cuba’s struggles for freedom, implicated Chinese coolies in fighting for a nation they had just encountered. The intersection between Cuba’s independence movement and the Coolie Trade reveal the ambivalent origins for Chinese Cubans.

18 Ibid., 134.
The leaders of Cuba’s independence movement struggled to incorporate Chinese coolies into the new Cuban nation. In his text “Imagined Communities,” Benedict Anderson explores the construction and nature of nationalism. Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community.”¹⁹ Anderson writes that a nation “[i]s imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²⁰ Anderson claims that a nation’s limits are defined by the imaginations of their own citizens. The boundaries that envelop and exclude are malleable, defined differently within each individuals’ mind. This chapter examines how Cuban leaders imagined and incorporated Chinese coolies in the early days of Independence. In the process of Cuba’s nation building, rebels and revolutionaries had to invent a new community and then convince the masses to sacrifice themselves for this imagined nation. The Cuban Wars for Independence present the moment in which Chinese coolies were first imagined as part of the new Cuban nation. Historian Kathleen López writes about the transformation from Chinese coolies to Chinese mambises, (freedom fighters), in the Cuban Wars for Independence.²¹ In her text, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History, López identifies various contradictions between the representations and the actual roles that Chinese coolies assumed in Cuba’s rebellion against Spain. Many of these contradictions reveal Chinese Coolies relegated to peripheral roles in the insurgency

²⁰ Ibid.
and later as marginalized in the Cuban Republic. López also reveals the inconsistencies in the rhetoric used by José Martí to build a new Cuban nationalism. Martí, the “architect of Cuba’s freedom” often omitted the contribution from Chinese coolies in the Wars for Independence. Martí limited his visions of racial unity for the new Cuban nation within a racial binary of black and white, excluding Chinese immigrants.

From the legacy of the mambí to Martí, López illuminates moments of ambivalence for Chinese coolies in Cuba’s struggle for independence. Ultimately, López reveals Cuba’s independence movement as an opportunity for Chinese coolies to participate, even if marginally, in the project of nation formation. López’s argues that by joining in the fight for independence from Spain, Chinese coolies were incorporated into discussions of the Cuban nation. López even defends Martí critiquing scholars who have accused Martí of complete “Orientalist erasure.” López claims that despite Martí’s ambivalence toward Chinese immigrants in Cuba, he “welcomed” Chinese “freedom fighters” into the Cuban nation, “under the guidance of white Cubans.”

I extend the work of Kathleen López by further defining ambivalence for the Chinese coolies in Cuba’s fight for independence. López negotiates between moments of ambivalence and opportunities for integrating Chinese insurgents into Cuba’s nation building. Among the many contradictions that López reveals, I have chosen two opposing narratives to frame my analysis of ambivalence for Chinese

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21 Ibid., 122.
22 Ibid., 118.
23 Ibid., 125.
24 Ibid., 125.
25 Ibid., 126.
coolies in Cuba’s independence movement. I draw on the comparison between Cuban patriot, José Martí and his disciple Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui, to provide a more in depth reading on the nature of ambivalence in particular moments of erasure of Chinese coolies. Martí omits Chinese coolies from his vision for the new Cuban nation, while Quesada praises the coolie, subsuming their identities entirely. Both representations elide the complex history of the Chinese coolie in order to serve the construction of the new nation. The comparison between Martí and Quesada further reflects the leaders’ positions in Cuba’s independence movement. Martí’s ambivalence towards Chinese coolies reveals his fear of building a fractured Cuban nation. Quesada writes his narratives after the wars have ended, privileging the memorialization of Chinese coolies who have already died, sacrificing themselves for Cuban independence.

**Historicizing the Coolie in Cuba**

The first representation of the Chinese in Cuba is based on the archetype of the coolie. The term, *coolie*, carries layers of historical context and contradiction. The word is an umbrella term that is both racialized and classed.\(^{26}\) In her text, *The Coolie Speaks*, Lisa Yun traces the term to the English.\(^{27}\) England’s colonies imported large populations of contracted laborers from China and from their colonies in India. During the early arrival of Chinese laborers in Cuba, the Chinese were called *los chinos* or *los contratados*.\(^{28}\) Yun employs the term coolie in reference to a wide variety of descriptions including: indentured labor, the merchant, diplomat, and

\(^{26}\) Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba*

\(^{27}\) Ibid., xix.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
broadly to a definitively Asian community. Yun’s range of definitions for coolie reveal the particular, yet heterogenous histories woven into the word. Branded by the contradiction between “voluntary” and enslaved, coolie implies the structure of the contract, which, for Yun, defines the coolies’ ambivalent nature. Throughout this text I will be employing the term coolie in reference to the racialized, economic role that thousands of Chinese immigrants filled in the latter half of the nineteenth-century in Cuba.

The Coolie Trade began in response to disjuncture in the colonial model. Colonial economies depended on enslaved African labor to cultivate primary resources from the colonies. The transition away from the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade forced colonial powers to confront the impossibility of capitalizing on natural resources in the periphery without an exploitable labor force. Chinese immigrants were contracted to replace enslaved Africans as a new source of disposable labor and as a temporary solution to the “color” problem that Cuba faced. The desire for an indentured Chinese labor force dates back to the Dutch in the early seventeenth-century. In 1620, Jan Pierterzoon Coen, the governor of the Dutch East Indies believed that the Chinese would be the optimal source for production and service in the Dutch colonies of current day Indonesia. It wasn’t until the nineteenth-century, however, that China became a source of labor and trade for the greater European metropoles. Britain led the trade, shipping mainly young Chinese men to their former colony in Singapore and eventually to the Caribbean. In 1806, 192 Chinese coolies were taken to Trinidad and three years later, Britain erected an embargo on the trans-Atlantic slave}

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29 Ibid., xx.
31 Ibid., 6.
By 1820, the coolie trade bound individuals from China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands into oppressive labor contracts in British, Portuguese, Spanish and French colonies throughout the Caribbean. On June 3rd, 1847, the first shipload of Chinese coolies arrived into the docks of La Habana. Between 1847 and 1878, approximately 125,000 Chinese men were coerced or deceived into coming to Cuba. By 1840, the island’s population had exceeded one million and with a large population of color. Still under Spanish monarchial rule, Cuba did not cease the importation of African slaves, yet viewed Chinese labor as a cheaper alternative. Great Britain implemented high tariffs on the Atlantic slave network, marking the decline of the African slave trade. Chinese labor also appeared as an alternative method to dilute Cuba’s population of color.

Cuba’s racial hierarchy had to adjust to additional, and yet, ambivalent color, triangulating coolies between criollo and African. During the Haitian Revolution, the slave rebellions dismantled Haiti’s dominant sugar industry. The collapse of Haiti’s sugar trade enabled Cuba to rise as one of the top producers of sugar, consequently increasing the demand for coolie labor. Chinese coolies placed into the plantations, were both positioned against and at times aligned with enslaved Africans. Contract labor under the Coolie Trade required patterns of dehumanization, violence, and labor conditions not unlike slavery. Chinese immigrants did not only arrive to Cuba through the coolie trade. In fact “[b]etween 1860 and 1875…5,000 Chinese fled to

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.,16.
34 Ibid.
Cuba from the United States to escape new anti-Chinese laws and general sinophobia.\footnote{Anne Fountain, José Martí, the United States, and Race, (University Press of Florida, 2014). 102.} Cuba served as a charco, a puddle that many Chinese immigrants hopped over en route to, or as an escape from, other destinations.\footnote{Pedro Eng Herrera, interview by Eliza Kingsley-MaJanuary, 2015.} Following the Cuban Wars for Independence, in the early twentieth century, the development of *el Barrio Chino* in Havana attracted multiple new waves of Chinese immigration. Free entrepreneurs and businessmen from the United States and Southern China migrated to the growing Chinese community in Cuba.

**José Martí: A Raceless Republic**

José Martí imagined the Cuban Republic by building a nationalism that subsumed racial boundaries. The Cuban Wars for Independence stretched over three decades and multiple attempts to oust Spanish colonial rule. The first attempt - the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) - failed in large part due to the rebel’s discord over abolition. In 1868, Manuel De Céspedes released his slaves, proclamation freedom and initiating the Ten Year’s War. *El Grito de Yara*, as the event was called, symbolized the beginnings of a long transition towards emancipation for the enslaved and independence for Cuba. The ambivalence over abolition, however, persisted as a point of weakness for the rebellion. Rebecca Jarvis Scott explains the rebel’s attempt to terminate slavery in Cuba.

In February 1869, the Revolutionary Assembly of the Central Department, rejecting Céspedes’s leadership, called for the abolition of slavery, promising future indemnification…When the different rebel groups joined at the Assembly of Guáimaro in April 1869, they drew up a declaration proclaiming
that “all inhabitants of the Republic are entirely free.” Henceforth all slaves were to be considered *libertos*, freed men and women.\(^{38}\)

The declaration of rights for all, signed in 1869, did not achieve the intended goal of emancipation throughout the island.\(^{39}\) Former slaves, now labeled *libertos*, remained in the shadow of their former owners, or, *patronos*.\(^{40}\) *Libertos* could attain wage, land, and the rights to build a home, but they remained under the dominion of their *patronos*.\(^{41}\) Additionally, *libertos* were automatically added to a list of possible recruits for the insurgency.\(^{42}\) For many years, leaders believed that the Ten Year’s War successfully emancipated Cuba’s remaining enslaved population. However, the relationship between *libertos* and *patronos* revealed the vestiges of slavery, fracturing a unified and stable insurgency. The rebels failed to prevail over Spain partly because they could not promise absolute emancipation for all men in the Cuban Republic. José Martí believed that Cuba’s independence depended on the full support of enslaved Africans and people of color, who could imagine themselves as free and empowered citizens in the Cuban Republic. After the failure of the Ten Year’s War, Martí ideologically reframed the fight for independence, re-imagining a raceless Cuban Republic.\(^{43}\) Formerly divided racial and economic communities would unite under a new Cuban identity. Martí campaigned for a shared fraternity on the battlefield and in the classroom, in which all men, white, black and mulatto, could imagine their selves as emancipated citizens in the new nation.


\(^{39}\) Fountain, *José Martí, the United States, and Race*. 125-6.

\(^{40}\) Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*, 47.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* 119.

Neither liberated nor enslaved, Chinese coolies remained outside the discussions of emancipation. As indentured laborers, the Chinese coolies were implicated in the rebels’ indecision on abolition. The coolie laborer was advantageous for, what historian Kathleen López describes as, the “cross-racial discourse” of Cuba’s nation formation.44 Slaves and coolies active in the insurgency shared a trajectory of identities as bound laborers, turned into cimarrones, escaped slaves, and eventually mambises, freedom fighters.45 López reveals that the Chinese mambi displayed great loyalty and bravery, but often from a noncombat or auxiliary role, associated with that of women and/or Afro-Cubans.46 Even in their sacrifice, Chinese coolies could not escape a racialized identity. In war, the coolie was strategically placed alongside the enslaved African and beneath the banner of an all-encompassing Cuban Republic.47 Yet in his visions for the new Cuban nation, José Martí ultimately did not choose to integrate both Afro-Cuban and Chinese soldiers. The ambivalent origins of Chinese coolies, as neither enslaved nor free, challenged leaders, like Martí, to dismantle a system of marginalization that was not clearly defined. José Martí struggled to integrate Chinese coolies’ racial ambivalence into his image of racial unity. Martí feared trying to incorporate a population that had been stereotyped as “clannish and foreign,” within his visions for national unity.48 Martí placed Chinese coolies outside the “raceless” nation, considering them a disruption to the imagined “harmony between whites and blacks.”49

44 López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History  118.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 126.
49 Ibid.
José Martí has become known as the “Architect of Cuba’s Freedom,” for his leadership in Cuba’s independence movement. From exile, Martí rose as a great leader for Cuba’s second war for independence in 1895. Martí’s legacy lies in his multifaceted identity as a modernist, journalist, humanist, and patriarch of Cuba. Committing his life to ridding Cuba of colonial rule and fighting against North America’s imperial shadow, Martí died a martyr. He has been immortalized as Cuba’s patriarch and icon. Martí joined Cuba’s fight for independence at the start of the Ten Year’s War (1868). By 1870, Martí had been imprisoned and exiled to live in Spain. After studying in Spain for four years, he traveled throughout the Americas as a journalist, building his own social and ideological framework for Cuba’s renewing Cuba’s fight for independence. Martí moved to New York in 1881 and lived there until his return to Cuba in 1895. In March 1884, Martí split away from the new Cuban Independence Movement led by leaders from the Ten Years War, Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo. Martí looked to lead his own independence movement built from the support of the Cuban populace and not beneath the order of Cuban military generals. On January 5th, 1892, Martí founded El Partido Revolucionario Cubano, the Cuban Revolutionary Party. Through the creation of new societies and publications, Martí assembled a network of Cuban exiles and supporters to participate in his new party. One of these societies, La Liga, founded by Martí and Rafael Serra,
served as an educational network and training school for poor, black, Cubans exiled in New York City. Martí taught and worked to empower students at La Liga. La Liga exemplifies Martí’s objective to unite with and gain support from Cuba’s popular classes. Historian Philip Foner summarizes:

[T]he new struggle for Cuba, Martí pointed out, must not be a war of landed classes as in 1868, but a people’s war. To achieve this, the Negro had to be treated “according to his qualities as a man” and the worker “as a brother with the consideration and rights which must assure peace and happiness as a nation. Martí’s Revolution required patriotism to rise from lo popular. Martí committed to redefining the role for enslaved Africans and persons of color through the terms of the new nation. Chinese coolies, who were neither African nor enslaved, remained primarily absent from Martí’s strategies to integrate the full Cuban populace. As we will see below, Martí was not unaware of the presence and participation of Chinese coolies, yet he quietly omitted them from his designs for the Cuban Republic.

Martí’s rhetoric on race and citizenship consolidated the diverse populations of the island to unite under a new Cuban nationalism. Martí, however, revealed the limitations to a raceless Cuban Republic by omitting the Chinese coolies from his nationalist rhetoric. Abolition took hold as a central qualification for the Cuban Republic. Martí’s promise of citizenship created roles for enslaved Africans and persons of color within the fight for independence. Martí’s “raceless” Cuban Republic was predicated upon a racial mixture of white, black and mulatto men. Martí managed Cuban-racial politics within a fixed racial binary. In 1893, Martí published

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 18.
his writings on race in *Patria*, the platform publication for the Cuban Revolutionary Party. Martí subsumes racial distinction in his definition of the new Cuban Man:

In Cuba there is no fear whatever of racial conflict. A man is more than white, black, or mulatto. A Cuban is more than mulatto, black, or white. Dying for Cuba on the battlefield, the souls of both Negroes and white men have risen together. In the daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood, and shrewdness, there has always been a Negro standing beside every white man. Negroes as well as white men classify themselves according to their characteristics: bravery or timidity, selfishness or unselfishness.\(^{59}\)

Martí unites white and black men under the umbrella of fraternity. National solidarity subsumes any possibility for racial conflict. Martí describes the men by their souls instead of their skin in order to unite them under a raceless patria. Martí defines the new Cuban man, by the Revolutionary Party’s own values: “defense, loyalty, brotherhood, shrewdness.” In the final sentence, Martí extends the opportunity for men to define themselves by: “bravery or timidity, selfishness or unselfishness.” The power to choose the right virtue will define the man, white, black or mixed, as a citizen of the New Republic. The racial binary that Martí sets forth makes no mention of Chinese immigrants. Martí’s omission of Chinese communities subsequently erases their presence from the national spaces that Martí introduces in this passage. Martí acknowledges the presence of white, black and mulatto men on the battlefield, and in daily life throughout Cuba. The Chinese are extracted from these Cuban scenes. Moreover, Martí has removed Chinese immigrants from any possible calculation of racial conflict, revealing his own conflicting beliefs. Martí’s commitment to racial unity reflects his fear that racial divisions would dismantle the

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 313.
insurgency. It appears that Chinese immigrants contribute to Martí’s fear of racial fragmentation. Martí does not articulate concern regarding the role of Chinese immigrants as either disruptive threats or promising citizens. Yet their absence speaks loudly to Martí’s inconsistency. Despite Martí’s contradictions, López argues Martí did not commit an act of total “orientalist erasure”. López excerpts the few moments in which Martí acknowledged the Chinese presence in Cuba, defending him from complete erasure. López highlights Martí’s writing on Chinese plight in the United States. During his time in exile, Martí wrote about United States’ sinophobia and critiqued the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. López reveals that these articles communicate Martí’s sympathy towards Chinese immigrants who suffered in the face of United States’ racism. While Martí condemned these actions, each of these events also contributed to an image of Chinese immigrants as targets for racist attack. By examining Martí’s reflection on Chinese immigrants, one can more carefully identify Martí’s own prejudices against Chinese immigrants in Cuba. Martí’s ambivalence towards Chinese coolies in Cuba reveals his fears of fracture in the Cuban Republic.

Martí sympathized with the social and cultural challenges Chinese immigrants faced in the United States. By the time of his exile from Cuba, Martí had witnessed the effects of the Coolie Trade. Chinese immigrants had not yet founded el Barrio Chino in Havana, but Martí had witnessed coolies participating in the Ten Year’s War. Historians, widely recognize Martí’s negligence and elision of Chinese laborers in his imagined Cuban Republic because it stands in direct opposition to Martí’s entire political and ideological campaign. However, Martí’s ambivalence towards

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60 López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History 125.
61 Ibid.
Chinese immigrants in Cuba grows even greater when we consider his interactions with Chinese communities outside of Cuba. Martí spent a third of his life in the United States. During his time living throughout the Americas, Martí greatly critiqued the United States for the suffering and poverty that he witnessed specifically in immigrant communities. Historian Anne Fountain argues that the complex race relations Martí witnessed during the Gilded Age in the United States grounded his beliefs to build Cuba as a raceless Republic. Among his reports on Chinese immigrant communities, Martí references orientalist characteristics of Chinese immigrants. Fountain excerpts Martí’s representation of Chinese immigrants in the United States:

[ t]he Chinaman does not have a wife, lives on trifles, dresses cheaply, works hard, and is faithful to his customs.

Martí represents Chinese workers mainly through economic terms. Martí provides a stereotypical description of the Chinese as hardworking, traditional, and passive characters. As Fountain observes, Martí highlights the frugality of Chinese immigrants – that is he primarily associates them with their lacking. Although this short description does not carry an overt tone of either critique or admiration, Martí diminishes Chinese immigrants by measuring them in only economic terms. Martí observed patterns of sinophobia that scapegoated Chinese laborers for economic conflict throughout the United States. As a journalist, Martí reported on the massacre in Rock Springs, Wyoming, when a gang of angered, white miners murdered 150

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62 Fountain, *José Martí, the United States, and Race*. 126.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 103.
66 Ibid.
Chinese miners. Sinophobia, as argued by historian Evelyn Hu-DeHart, is historically driven by perceptions of Chinese immigrants as economic threats. “Job stealers”; “inassimablable”; “morally corrupt” bachelors and businessmen; these are just a few of the descriptions that have fueled patterns of racial hate directed at Chinese immigrants. Martí witnessed multiple accounts of hate crimes committed against Chinese immigrant communities. He both sympathized with their suffering and took note of the racial violence that could grow from economic instability. Martí’s sympathy demonstrates that he did not believe in scapegoating the Chinese, yet he could testify to the pattern of sinophobia that followed economic instability. Martí’s ambivalence reveals his desire and fears for the Cuban Republic. Martí, himself, is caught between his commitment to racial unity and subsequently his fears of racial disruption.

In one of his rare mentions of the Chinese in Cuba, Martí relegates Chinese soldiers as non-threatening and undesirable. In the passage below, Martí recounts an anecdote honoring one of the great Generals from the Ten Years War, Ignacio Agramonte. In this anecdote two men are in dialogue over the honorable Agramonte. The men highlight Agramonte’s valor by describing an interaction between Agramonte and one of his generals, Hernández. In the story, General Hernández complains to Agramonte for having to lead a brigade of Chinese rebels. Agramonte is depicted as a strong leader by refusing General Hernández of his request. Through this story, Martí positions the “Chinamen” as a non-threat and yet an object of conflict and punishment.

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67 Ibid., 102-3.
68 Hu-DeHart, "Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870s to 1930s," 66.
Was Ignacio Agramonte a good man? I remember when Rafael Hernández, the captain of the Chinese, one of those blue-eyed, red-bearded fellows, drew a knife on a Chinamen one day, I don’t know why, because the Chinese were fine patriots; there’s not a case of a Chinaman who ever turned informer; with a Chinaman even if they capture him, there’s no danger: ‘no savvy.’ That’s all they can get out of him: ‘no savvy.’ Rafael Hernández went to see Agramonte to ask to be relieved of the Chinese. The conversation took place beside a tree, and the Major’s hand went up and down, as though the salting was a good one. Afterwards we asked Hernández, curious to know what had happened:

“How did it go? Did the Major relieve you of the Chinese?”

“Relieve me? If I’d known what was going to happen to me, I’d never have gone to him. I’ll never go near the man again. If I ever went back, I’d wind up the father of those Chinks.”

Through the eyes of Rafael Hernández, the Chinese soldiers are not only depicted as undesirable but even more so, they are his punishment. Martí depicts Ignacio Agramonte’s power through Agramonte’s control over the fate of Hernández, and two tiers below, the fate of the Chinese soldiers. The beginning of the anecdote depicts Hernández irrationally threatening a Chinese soldier with a knife. The narrator responds in surprise to Hernández’s brutality and defends the Chinese soldier, regarding the Chinese as “fine patriots”. In the attempt to defend the reputation of a Chinese solider, Martí praises the Chinese soldier in terms of his silence. The Chinese patriot is depicted as trustworthy for their broken Spanish skills: “no savvy” – “no sé” – “I don’t know”. Martí recognizes the Chinese patriot for their loyalty, but he expresses it through their performance of ignorance. Unlike Martí’s previous texts featured above, which ignore the presence of Chinese soldiers, this anecdote acknowledges, praises, and diminishes the Chinese soldier all in one. The anecdote leaves the reader with an honorable depiction of Major Agramonte, a dissatisfied Hernández, and a completely ambivalent depiction of Chinese soldiers. On the one

69 Martí, Our America, 203.
hand, this anecdote reveals Martí acknowledging the contribution of Chinese soldiers, so as far to label them as patriots. Yet, on the other hand, after reading this narrative, we are left even more perplexed on Martí’s stance on Chinese coolies. These narratives demonstrate that Martí did not fully erase Chinese coolies, yet he did render them illegible for his own project of nation building. Chinese coolies were neither free nor enslaved, neither white nor black. Martí did not fear Chinese coolies as economic threats or unfaithful patriots. Rather, Martí feared Chinese coolies for their ambivalent positions in Cuba’s transitioning community.

Adopted as the icon of Cuba’s independence movement and subsequently by every Cuban leader of the twentieth century, Martí has evolved into a myth, representing more symbolically than he could have ever articulated in his lifetime. Historians of Martí, stress that one must bring caution to their analysis of Martí’s words and life. Anne Fountain, whose writing on Martí and race in the United States is featured throughout this chapter, reminds her readers how removed we are from the life and the milieu that Martí lived through.70 We cannot hold Martí to the myth that has been constructed in his name over the course of the past century. We must face the limitations of imagining Martí only through his words. However, despite our inability to fully know the intellect or humanity of José Martí, it is our job to highlight the inconsistency and ambiguity that remains, often hidden in his legacy. Martí believed in building Cuba towards equality and stability, separate from the oppressive dominion of Spain and North America. Yet multiple scholars have brought to our attention the limitations that Martí faced in building “a nation for all,”

70 Fountain, José Martí, the United States, and Race. 127.
specifically regarding the position of Chinese coolies. Martí demanded racial equality as a requirement for an independent Cuba. He distinguished his revolutionary campaign from the Ten Year’s War by organizing a fight that all could participate in.

A letter from Martí to General Antonio Maceo reveals his desires clearly:

Nor do I have time to tell you, General, why in my view the solution to the Cuban problem is not a political but a social one, and why this can be accomplished only by that mutual love and forgiveness on the part of both races, and by that every worthy and every generous wisdom with which I know your proud and noble heart is animated.

From his time as a journalist in the United States to his role as a revolutionary leader, Martí crafted his legacy as a social activist and humanist. Martí believed that the path towards independence required a social revolution of “love and forgiveness,” yet Martí confined his desires for a raceless nation within a racial binary. Upon the time of Martí’s return to Cuba in 1895, over 125,000 Chinese coolies had arrived in the ports of Havana. Many of these Chinese coolies died serving Spanish and criollo masters, and many died on the battlefields fighting for Cuban independence. Sugar cane cutters, contracted laborers, silent patriots, perpetual foreigners, the Chinese coolie inhabited multiple roles. José Martí chose not to define a place for Chinese immigrants in the Cuban Republic, perpetuating a perception of Chinese coolies as liminal figures in Cuba’s landscape. Martí is celebrated as a visionary and a humanist. In order to sustain this legacy, He is not historically remembered for his narratives on Chinese coolies.

72 Martí, Our America, 208.
Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui: Praise for the Coolie

In direct opposition to Martí’s resounding ambivalence, Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui praises the Chinese coolies in Cuba’s Wars for Independence, subsuming them entirely into the nation. One of Martí’s disciples, Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui contributed to the founding of Cuba’s Revolutionary Party. Quesada was born in Cuba in 1868 and grew up exiled in New York, where he met José Martí. Quesada learned under and supported Martí, carrying out Martí’s dreams for Cuba and for “Nuestra América” after his death in 1896. Quesada worked as a Cuban diplomat and served as the Cuban ambassador to Germany from 1910-1915, where he experienced his early death. Outside of his relationship with José Martí, Gonzalo de Quesada y Aroteguí is remembered largely by his memorialization of the Chinese coolies in his monograph, *Los chinos y la independencia de Cuba*. Through the text, Quesada highlights stories of bravery and loyalty on behalf of Chinese *mambises* asserting their Cuban identity.

Quesada’s text praises Chinese coolies in order to subsume them completely within Cuba’s national imaginary. In the opening pages of *Los chinos y la independencia de Cuba*, Quesada introduces his text proudly, claiming that no one ever before has shared the story of the Chinese veterans of Cuba’s Wars for Independence. We can trust that Quesada’s text contributed to a dominant narrative of the Chinese coolies as *mambises*, freedom fighters, in the fight for independence. Yet, as witnessed through Martí’s account of the honorable Agramonte, Quesada’s book, *Los chinos y la independencia de Cuba*, was not the first account of Chinese

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74 Ibid., 3.
coolies in the Wars for Independence. Quesada in fact depicts the same story between
Agramonte and Hernández as did Martí, yet reveals an alternative narrative from
which to imagine the Chinese soldiers. Quesada reorients Martí’s narrative from
Hernández’s resentment towards Chinese soldiers to his newfound pride.

Some days before [the fall of Agramonte], Commander Hernández, Agramonte’s first boss, was unsatisfied with the insubordination that he had suppressed with an iron fist, exclaimed in anger: “I am tired of these Chinese people”, and asked the General to be reassigned to a different group of soldiers. Agramonte knew the reason for which Hernández came to see him and was convinced that this was a temporary issue; Hernández understood the Chinese best, because they loved him with a childlike affection and Hernández also liked them as well. When the Commander, athletic and with a handsome beard, entered the General’s headquarters, he [Agramonte] received him with warm affection and before he could speak, he said: “How proud you must be of your battalion! How brave they fought in the last battle, and all because you, your energy, the tact and respect that they have for you! “The commander lowered his blue eyes; he did not have the courage to accuse those who were subject of fair praise for their desire was what spared them. When he left the General’s camp, he proudly exclaimed: “Even I feel Chinese” [emphasis added].

While Martí’s anecdote emphasizes Hernández’s anger and discontent with his undesirable Chinese soldiers, Quesada describes Hernández proudly assuming a

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75 Ibid., 7.
paternal relationship with his Chinese battalion. Quesada describes Hernández with gentler terms than Martí, revealing his frustration but not his violent anger. Instead of pulling a knife on an innocent Chinese soldier, Hernández, like a strict father, disciplines “with an iron fist.” Quesada further depicts Hernández as a paternal leader by infantilizing the Chinese soldiers: “they loved him with a childlike affection”.

Agramonte convinces Hernández to accept his Chinese battalion by manipulating Hernández through flattery and praise. Hernández is moved to accept his position, after Agromonte praises him as a good and respected leader. The tone of Quesada’s anecdote is opposite of Martí’s. In Martí’s version of the same anecdote, Hernández concludes resentfully: “If I ever went back, I’d wind up the father of those Chinks.” Instead Quesada concludes with Hernández’s exclamation: “Even I feel Chinese.”

Between the two depictions, Hernández has transformed from hatred to empathy. Quesada has aligned Hernández to his Chinese soldiers, so much that Hernández has dissolved the racial boundaries and can imagine himself Chinese. Despite the transformation that Quesada describes in Hernández’s acceptance of his Chinese soldiers, the actual role of the Chinese in both Martí and Quesada’s texts has not changed. The Chinese soldiers continue to occupy a point of discussion in Quesada’s description, without their own voice or form of self-representation. Quesada describes the Chinese as “childlike” and loyal, the same way that Martí emphasizes Chinese soldiers by their ignorance and trust. In both texts, the Chinese soldiers are placed under Hernández’s paternalistic ownership. Quesada, however, has framed his anecdote through Hernández’s pride for the Chinese soldiers and not his resentment.

\(^{76}\) Martí, *Our America*, 203.
Through Quesada’s tale of Agramonte and Hernández, the reader is guided through a tale of fraternity. Hernández imagines himself to feel Chinese, yet really his ego has been boosted and his newfound pride enables him to assume his position over the Chinese soldiers. The Chinese coolies are subsumable but only with pride for and commitment to the greater cause of Cuba’s independence.

Quesada honors the Chinese coolies for their contribution to Cuba’s Wars for Independence, by depicting them solely by their sacrifice and courage for la patria cubana. Never are the Chinese soldiers praised by their ethnic particularity, rather De Quesada memorializes fallen Chinese coolies as loyal fighters, sacrificing themselves for the nation that subsumes them. One such anecdote exemplifies one Chinese soldier’s sacrifice and transformation from coolie to Cuban.

Más de una vez bajo la sombra de un exuberante mango, el blondo Representante por las Villas le dio lecciones al chino, al humilde teniente del Ejército. ¡Qué bello cuadro de fraternidad, la obra de la Revolución! En Rosa María fue hecho prisionero. El oficial español, al verlo exclamó con desprecio: “Este es un chino de Manila.” Tancredo que estaba apoyada contra un árbol impotente para tenerse en pie debido a las heridas recibidas al escuchar estas palabras se irguió y de su pecho, junto a su corazón, donde lo conservaba como un tesoro, y título de orgullo, sacó su diploma de Oficial Cubano: miró a su adversario frente a frente y con voz vibrante replicó: “Él no es un chino de Manila, no: él es un Teniente del Ejército Libertador de Cuba…” ¡Mátame!77

More than once, beneath the shade of the lush mango, a blonde Representative for las Villas gave lessons to a humble Chinese Army lieutenant. What a beautiful picture of fraternity, the work of the Revolution! In Rosa María, the lieutenant was taken prisoner. The

77 Quesada, Los Chinos Y La Independencia De Cuba 10.
Spanish officer, upon seeing him, exclaimed with contempt: “This is a Chinese from Manila.” Upon hearing these words, Tancredo, who was leaning helpless against a tree in order to stand up due to the injuries he received, raised himself up. From his chest, by his heart, where he stored like a treasure, his title of pride, he took his Cuban Official certificate: he looked at his enemy face to face and replied with a vibrant voice: “He is not Chinese from Manila, no: he is a Lieutenant in the Liberation Army of Cuba...Kill me!

Quesada’s recreation of Tancredo’s courage and loyalty speaks as much to Quesada’s admiration for the Chinese participation in the war as it does to the glory of the war itself. Quesada depicts humble Tancredo positioned in the shade of a mango tree listening to a lecture from a blonde, high-ranking criollo official. Quesada exclaims what a beautiful image of fraternity this is, brotherhood produced by the war. This image, however, appears more like paternity than fraternity; Lieutenant Tancredo inhabits the assigned role as student learning about the Cuban nation from his white superior. Quesada praises Tancredo for respect and diligence, but one could re-interpret this through the asymmetrical positioning of el chino y el criollo. Tancredo’s silent sitting contributes to the valued stereotype of the coolie as ignorant, docile and apolitical. The second half of the anecdote demonstrates Tancredo’s power in claiming la patria cubana. The Spanish have taken Tancredo prisoner and he has been left leaning on a tree. When the Spanish scornfully call him “a Chinese from Manila,” Tancredo transforms, incited by rage and rises to face his enemy. Quesada describes that the description not only angers Tancredo, but also wounds him. Tancredo brandishes an official Cuban Insurgency certificate over his heart, and yells,
“he is not a Chinese man from Manila, no, he is a lieutenant in the Cuban Army of
Liberation…Kill me!” Tancredo is able to bravely face his captors only by claiming
his Cuban identity. He not only transforms his physical appearance, but his statement
demands dying as Cuban rather than imprisoned as Chinese. His declaration of Cuban
identity subsumes him into death.

Tancredo’s use of the paper certificate as a justification for his Cuban identity
highlights the abandonment of his Chinese identity. In The Coolie Speaks, historian
Lisa Yun discusses the important role of paper constructed by the coolie and their
contract. Bondage, freedom, identity, and power are all brokered through the
contract. The contract distinguishes coolies from slaves, yet simultaneously
exemplified their bondage. Coolies’ identities were bound within the paper that
labeled them with hispanicized names. Many of the contracts were recycled from
former coolies who had died before finishing their eight-year terms. Names of dead
coolies were assigned to new bodies. Through reading written and oral coolie
testimonies collected in the Cuban Commission Report, Yun identifies the hierarchy
of paper that bound and racialized coolies. Yun explains, “Papers — contracts,
certificates, permissions, permits, passes, passports, identification papers — were not
so much things being referenced as they were commodities to be endlessly pursued,
as described by the coolies.” Coolies were tortured in the maze of documents that
tangled their rights into disposable wisps of paper. Considering the coolie’s legacy
and their binding contract, Tancredo depends on his Army certificate to defend

78 Ibid.
79 Yun, The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba
80 Ibid., 126.
81 Ibid.
himself. Tancredo legitimizes his Cuban identity through an Army certificate in place of a coolie contract. Tancredo brandishes the certificate as his dying act, rendering himself still bound by a contract.

Quesada memorializes Tancredo through honor and bravery. Yet, Tancredo claims national identity through his self-annihilation. We can situate Tancredo’s demonstration within Gayatri Spivak’s logic in her narrative “Can the Subaltern Speak?.” Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, reconsiders the role of the subaltern in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak criticizes former subaltern studies by claiming that no methodology or autonomy could be placed on the subaltern individual without subsuming the subaltern’s subjectivity. Spivak sets up a colonial paradigm in which the subaltern, a Sati Indian woman, is caught between being “saved” by her white colonizers’ modern narrative, or by dying subsumed in a ritual that requires women’s subservience. Caught between modernity and tradition, the subaltern can make no option that asserts her subjectivity. Ultimately the subaltern rejects either option. She violently kills herself, leaping into suicide as her only way to “speak.” Re-reading Quesada’s anecdote through a Spivakian lens, Tancredo, as the subaltern, rises for Cuban patria in direct opposition to both his colonizer and his Chinese identity. In Quesada’s account, the Spaniard’s words, pierce Tancredo. Verbally inscribing Tancredo as Chinese wounds his pride, and physically diminishes his subjectivity. Against the backdrop of war, the wound symbolizes Tancredo’s sacrifice for Cuban patrimony. Quesada’s juxtaposition of Tancredo “el chino” sitting

83 Ibid.
docile under the mango tree against Tancredo “el cubano,” raising his self in the face of death, demonstrates a distancing between Chinese and Cuban. In Quesada’s memorialization, Tancredo cannot coexist as el chino and el cubano. El Chino – the subaltern – is silenced as Tancredo leaps into death.

A large, black monument in Havana honors the Chinese mambises who fell in war, but offers nothing for the thousands of coolies that hung themselves from the ceiba trees or who threw themselves into large pots of boiling sugar to escape bondage. Martí’s bust exists in all corners of Havana’s streets. His iconic face is a constant reminder of the quotidian patria that pervades every Cuban pedestrian’s path. Yet Martí failed to encompass Chinese immigrants and descendants within Cuba’s raceless republic. Martí and Quesada represent two pivotal leaders for Cuba’s independence movement, however only one of them is remembered for memorializing the Chinese coolies who fought in the Cuban Wars for Independence. Quesada’s praise for Chinese coolies endures in a monument inscribed with Quesada’s famous quote: *there was not a single Chinese Cuban deserter, there was not a single Chinese Cuban traitor!* The words are immortalized, engraved on a public monument in Havana. The large black obelisk, in honor of Chinese mambises, stands tall imposed upon the lush vegetation and aging mansions that characterize the surrounding neighborhood of el Vedado. The monument stands five blocks westward from la Avenida de los Presidentes, (colloquially known as Calle G, a main ventricle in Havana), and appears distinctive and separate from the towering stone bodies of famous Latin American leaders: Benito Juárez, Salvador Allende, Simón Bolívar, and

85 Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba*
José Miguel Gómez. Stretching down Calle G, habaneros sit beneath the bodies of the Presidents, drinking ron on the steps at night or seeking shade in the heat of day. But there is no place to closely gather around the monument for los chinos. Benches surround the monument, which is closed off by a small, chained circle. The monument is not located within or even adjacent to Havana’s Barrio Chino, and does not appear to serve as a daily gathering space for Chinese Cubans in particular. The legacies of mambises who fought and died for Cuba remain uninhabitable by the everyday pedestrian. There is no right way to interact with the monument, making it difficult to discern whether the average habanero notices it. However, a frequent visitor and witness to the monument, is the pale, sweaty traveler. Foreigners snap photos and squint at the statue’s epigraph, proudly checking off a historic site in their guidebook. Tourism packages Chinese Cuban legacies into exhibitions like this monument. The history of the Chinese surprises many foreigners, and yet the tourists frequent this site of memory with wonder.

Figure 1: “Este monumento es erigido a la memoria de los chinos que combatieron por la independencia de Cuba” 10 de Octubre de 1991.
Conclusion

The legacies produced from Cuba’s Wars of Independence exhibit alternative modes of eliding Chinese coolies, by omitting or subsuming them into the new Cuban nation. Martí excluded the coolies from his imaginings of the Cuban Republic. Martí was unable to imagine the ambivalent positions of Chinese coolies as possible citizens for the new Cuban nation. For Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui, coolies transformed into Cubans when they fought in the war, subsumed by the nation. Quesada inscribes the loyal Chinese *mambi* as an assimilable figure, fitting within the boundaries of Cuba’s imagined community. Cuban leaders historically position Chinese immigrants based on their articulations of the nation’s identity. The opposite narratives shared by Martí and his disciple, Quesada reveal the illusions within an imagined communities. Martí and Quesada produced their narratives at different stages of the war revealing the limitations of history. Martí, narrated the building stages of Cuba’s Republic and struggled with incorporating Chinese coolies into a future. Quesada memorialized the *mambises* after the wars were over: proving that it is easier to create a martyr than to create a new citizen.

Martí died before he was able to witness the Cuban Republic, and perhaps he would have reacted in horror to the United States occupation and imperialism that succeeded Spanish rule. One of the many consequences of the United States’ occupation was the importation of United States’ immigration policy. Chinese immigrants became repositioned, yet again, by institutionalized sinophobia trickling down from the North. Today, we can read the stories of Agramonte, Hernández, and Tancredo - the only named Chinese soldier in this chapter – yet these anecdotes teach
readers how to incorporate Chinese soldiers. Representations of the Wars for Independence fail to reveal the complex position for Chinese immigrants and the coolie’s contribution to Cuba’s greatest moments of national sacrifice. Instead, the coolie is remembered through the narrative that best positions them as distinctively within or outside the national imaginary.

Cuba’s independence eventually enabled Chinese coolies to move from the plantation into a new liminal space: Chinatown. Rather than examining the historical narratives of Chinese coolies, the next chapter reveals the physical barriers and subsequent opportunities for waging identity in an ethnic space.
CHAPTER TWO
Renewal in the Special Period: The Revitalization of Havana’s Chinatown

El Barrio Chino in Havana, Cuba was once Latin America’s largest Chinatown. Today, el Barrio Chino stands out as a peculiar landmark for visitors and outsiders of Havana. The neighborhood is often marketed to tourists through the superficial tagline: “the Chinatown without Chinese.” For many residents, el Barrio Chino is little more than an extension of the narrow, busy streets of Havana’s commercial center, Centro Habana. Fewer than three hundred Chinese-born Cubans remain throughout the entire island. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of Chinese entered Cuba through the Coolie Trade. Cuba’s Chinese population increased in the late 19th century (1868-1898) as many Chinese immigrants fled to Cuba in the face of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Into the twentieth century, waves of immigrants arrived from China, fleeing the rise of the Communist movement in China’s Civil War. El Barrio Chino served as a sanctuary for Chinese immigrants but also became a destination for travelers, like Huie Kin and Louise Van Arnam, visiting from the United States for business and pleasure. El Barrio Chino became known for its famous theatres and Chinese opera halls like el Teatro Pacífico and la Águila de Oro y Coral. Upon the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba sealed its doors shut to immigrants. Meanwhile, conditions for the Chinese in Cuba worsened as President John F. Kennedy’s US Trading with

86 López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History 237.
88 Ibid.
89 Kin, Reminiscences
the Enemy Act diminished US tourism from 323,000 visitors per year in the 1950s to 3,000 in 1963.\textsuperscript{91} The decrease in tourist revenue combined with the nationalization of commerce catalyzed a path of emigration for Chinese Cubans. The majority of commerce in \textit{el Barrio Chino} comprised of small businesses and services like: tailors, cobblers, barbershops, Laundromats, pool halls, cafés, grocery stores, fruit and vegetable stands, and ice cream shops.\textsuperscript{92} Small businesses closed down and their owners left Cuba heading, mainly, for the United States. For three decades following the triumph of the Revolution, the Cuban populace dedicated themselves to the project of the Revolution and rebuilding the Cuban nation. A subsuming nationalism left little room for the development and preservation of Chinese Cuban identity. The Chinese Cuban population in \textit{el Barrio Chino} diminished and the neighborhood fell into decline.

The decline of the USSR in the late eighties produced a unique historic moment for the remaining Chinese Cuban community in \textit{el Barrio Chino}. The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, known as the “Special Period,” produced a new impetus for the revitalization of \textit{el Barrio Chino}. During this time, Cuba’s centralized state faced new, growing challenges. The country was thrown in to economic crisis, entering a decade of economic and political restructuring. Despite the challenges the Cuban Revolution posed for the development of Chinese identity, the Special Period opened up an opportunity for ethnic groups, specifically Chinese Cubans, to create business and generate capital for their own community. In the throes of the Special Period (1991), a movement to reanimate \textit{el Barrio Chino} began

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Yrmina Eng Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project,"(Habana, Cuba El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino 1995), 10.
among the remaining thirteen Chinese mutual aid associations. In 1993, a “grassroots promotional organization,” called *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino* was born. *El Grupo Promotor* gained support from the associations and recognition from the state to undertake an economic and cultural reanimation of *el Barrio Chino*.\textsuperscript{93} *El Grupo Promotor* gained privileges from Central Havana’s municipal government in 1995 to facilitate the opening of private retail shops, representing one of the earliest Cuban communities to execute market reforms since the start of the Cuban Revolution.\textsuperscript{94}

Today, *el Barrio Chino* represents an ambivalent space of ethnic and national identity. The neighborhood bears witness to abandoned buildings posed against attempts to resurrect a bustling neighborhood. History fades faster than commerce and culture develop. Within *el Barrio Chino*, local, national, and transnational efforts attempt to preserve culture and rebuild identity. The consolidation of municipal, national and transnational relations has created a complicated web of motives and governance for reanimating *el Barrio Chino*. In this chapter, I will be looking at three structures of power that determined the course of *el Barrio Chino*’s urban renewal. In the 1990s, *El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino* serves as my case study, representing an organization that had to mediate top-down, bottom-up, and transnational authorities in order to revitalize *el Barrio Chino*. The Cuban state’s top-down motives for urban renewal during the Special Period expanded the opportunity for open market reform in *el Barrio Chino*. Simultaneously, *el Barrio Chino*’s bottom-up community organizing explained the financial strategies specific to a marginalized ethnic community. Lastly, transnational investment contributed to

\textsuperscript{93} Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform."

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
reconstructing *el Barrio Chino*, fortifying a relationship between Cuba and China. The confluence of these three bodies of power further reveals the historic limitations and negotiations that Chinese Cuban identity evolves from. Cuba’s “Special Period” of chaos and reorganization, catalyzed disjuncture and opportunity, enabling a disappearing neighborhood of Chinese Cubans to claim identity once more.

**Top-Down Reconstruction: Cuba’s Transition into Urban Renewal**

The founding of *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino* stems from a dual mechanism of top-down, state sponsored urban renewal and bottom-up grass-roots community development. During the Special Period, driven by Havana’s Office of the City Historian, the Cuban government made large efforts to convert neighborhoods throughout Cuba’s capital into sites for urban, tourist development. *Habana Vieja* evolved as the most prominent neighborhood of this era. While the leaders of *el Grupo Promotor* did not explicitly frame their efforts in this way, their project to revitalize *el Barrio Chino* during the Special Period are in many ways analogous to the reinvention of *Habana Vieja*. Historians and economists, Adrian H. Hearn and Félix J. Alfonso have already demonstrated the links between these two neighborhood revitalization movements. Hearn and Alfonso examine methods of liberalization that occurred in the renewal of *Habana Vieja* and *el Barrio Chino*. By 2000, both *Habana Vieja* and *el Barrio Chino* implemented market reforms and expanded the informal sector demonstrating early models for decentralization in Cuba’s changing economy.

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 227.
Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba has largely reconstructed economic policy in the search of a new, “updated” Cuban socialism. In 2007, Raúl Castro began a process of economic reform, resulting in one of his largest policy proposals to date: los Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido de la Revolución, (the Guidelines on Economic and Social Policy). Los Lineamientos, for short, demonstrated a major shift in Cuba’s socialism under new plans for economic restructuring. According to Hearn and Alfonso however, the local, municipal projects in Habana Vieja and el Barrio Chino served as a “roadmap”, for the policymakers introducing Los Lineamientos.97 During the Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, Raúl Castro announced the new reforms in a speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Invasion of the Bay of Pigs on April 19, 2011.98 The economic liberalization proposed in Los Lineamientos, contrasted against the celebration of Cuba’s socialist resilience during the Bay of Pigs, reveals a new paradigm within Cuba’s “updated” socialism. Los Lineamientos institutionalized a national economic overhaul, enacting market reforms to expand the informal sector and open opportunities for non-state actors to engage in private and collective enterprises.99,100 Critics question the legitimacy of the Cuban government’s new socialist practices under los Lineamientos, aligning Cuba’s adoption of open

97 Ibid.
100 Economist Camila Piñeiro Harnecker defines non-state enterprises as balancing cooperative and private business objectives. While administered by non-state institutional representatives, non-state enterprises may still respond to expectations and regulations set by the state. Camila Piñeiro Harnecker, "Nonstate Enterprise in Cuba," Latin American Perspectives 41, no. 4 (2014).
economic policy with China’s economic model.\textsuperscript{101} Los Lineamientos attempted to integrate market principles under the control and containment of the state, thereby “raising national income and productivity…to address poverty and inequality, and ensure the survival of the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{102} Hearn and Alfonso claim that the free market steps taken in los Lineamientos were influenced by China and modeled off of the success and failures produced in Habana Vieja and el Barrio Chino’s redevelopment.

*Habana Vieja* and *el Barrio Chino* sit alongside one another - *el Barrio Chino* begins at the spine of *el capitolio*, Havana’s old National Capitol Building, (modeled off of the United States’ Capitol). Tourists can hop into outdated horse-drawn carriages and ride from their stately, restored hotels at the edge of *el prado*, (a major boulevard in *Habana Vieja*), passing *el capitolio* and trot under the large portico entrance of *el Barrio Chino*. In the beginnings of *el Barrio Chino*, the neighborhood developed from the periphery, enveloped in the shadows of Cuba’s grand Capital building and Havana’s city center. *Habana Vieja* represents the area that encompassed Havana during the Colonial Period. In 1982, the traditional neighborhood received the title as an UNESCO World Heritage Site and represents today’s tourist center of the capital.\textsuperscript{103} During the reconstruction of *Habana Vieja*, Havana’s city historian, Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler, attempted to revitalize the neighborhood economy through tourist development, and specifically, by marketing

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\textsuperscript{101} Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform," 227.
\textsuperscript{103} Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform," 227.
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the neighborhood’s cultural and historical features to foreign visitors. Cuban architects emphasize Dr. Leal’s role, in both preserving and developing Habana Vieja: “[b]y using conferences, workshops, street fairs, mass media, and the City Museum, Dr. Leal educated both the local community and politicians about the value of Habana Vieja.” Dr. Leal created the company, Habagüanex (1994), reinvesting profit gained from tourism in Habana Vieja into social-cultural development for residents in the neighborhood as well as historic preservation.

The circumstances of the Special Period enabled Dr. Leal economically and politically to undertake an early model of state controlled decentralization. The privileging of Habana Vieja as a ‘Priority Zone for Conservation’ (1993), and later, a ‘Zone of High Significance for Tourism’ (1995) allowed the Office of the Historian to accumulate foreign investments and open private businesses. Hearn and Alfonso demonstrate the success created by Habana Vieja’s new infrastructure and economic privileges.

Old Havana’s earnings since 1993 have been reinvested in capital reproduction (45 per cent), housing, health, and education services (35 per cent), and urban revitalization, including cultural activities and infrastructure (20 per cent). Decentralization has enabled the creation of 11,000 jobs, 60 per cent of which are occupied by residents of Old Havana and its neighbouring municipalities. Women represent 34 per cent of these employees, and 59 per cent of technical specialists. Artisanal production for the tourism market and other secondary services have generated a further 2,000 jobs.

105 Ibid., 332.
106 Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform," 231.
107 Ibid., 231-2.
The Office of the Historian found success for both tourist and community development, by increasing employment for the inhabitants of Habana Vieja, and then reinvesting those earnings in the local community. Residents of Habana Vieja were instructed to use cultural resources and history to generate economic development. However, consequences emerge when cultural exposition depends on foreign capital. Hearn and Alfonso account an exemplary model of conflicting state and non-state motives developed through informal entrepreneurship and cultural production through the portrayal of Miki.\textsuperscript{108} Miki was a community leader, involved in the Afro-Cuban religious community in Habana Vieja. Miki opened a local, folkloric rumba show in Habana Vieja, and with permission from the Office of the City Historian, Miki began hosting a cultural gathering to showcase rumba performances in his home.\textsuperscript{109} Gradually, other members of the neighborhood took advantage of this opportunity to attract more visitors, converting the space into an entertainment show that lured in tourists and charged an entrance fee.\textsuperscript{110} Soon both mojitos and/or accompaniment could be purchased at these culture shows.\textsuperscript{111} Miki faced consequences for violating his privileges to “showcase ‘cultural revitalization’” and was caught in a struggle to formalize and regulate the performance space without abusing his privileges to profit from his own cultural exhibition.\textsuperscript{112} Miki’s “successful entrepreneurship ultimately require[d] civic responsibility.”\textsuperscript{113} Cultural performances converted into entrepreneurship, conflates ownership of both business and culture.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 232.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 233.  
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
Miki’s entrepreneurial freedom depended upon his loyalty and responsibility to the state. Cultural revitalization, although operated by local community members, like Miki, must clearly contribute to the greater nation.

Miki’s cultural performance reveals the conflicting local and state pressures that arise for non-state actors in running their own business. Hearn and Alfonso pose Miki as an example to reveal the complex social and political negotiations that arise when a centralized government attempts to regulate a process of liberalization. We can read even further into the state’s methods of regulation and see the sacrifices individual actors, like Miki, are forced to make. We must examine the cultural performance, itself, as Miki’s greatest negotiation of identity and capital. The owner of an ethnic enterprise mediates three objectives: generating revenue, following in toe with the state’s regulations, and lastly, selling authentic representations of identity.

Miki opened a space to the community and to a growing tourist population. Miki assumes responsibility for the audience and actors at his cultural showcase. Standing on both sides of the transaction, Miki faces contradictory definitions of success. Miki requires revenue in order to maintain his business and support the performers who contribute to his show. Yet, moving up one level, Miki’s success is measured by his contribution to the state and the neighborhood’s development. Miki must contribute to both the local and state economies, which do not always align. However, before Miki can allocate his earnings, and even before he earns money, Miki must successfully sell his ethnic identity. Miki and his community of performers must commercialize an authentic display of identity, while convincing their audience that they are worth the title of a “UNESCO World Heritage Site.” Miki’s opportunity to
open a private business reveals the state as privileging Miki for his ethnic
particularity. Yet this privilege is highly regulated. Without his Afro-Cuban identity
or religious practice, Miki would not have the cultural capital required to invest in his
community or the greater Cuban state. The pressure to package, sell and maneuver
ethnicity compounds in *el Barrio Chino* as an entire neighborhood labeled by ethnic
identity.

In the case of *el Barrio Chino*, the neighborhood carries the added
expectations to showcase a specific and yet familiar cultural history. The urban
reanimation in *Habana Vieja* shares similarities to the strategies undertaken by *el
Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*. As outlined through their objectives, *el Grupo
Promotor* balanced a two-fold strategy to produce new economic and tourist activity
while developing and preserving a disappearing community. *El Grupo Promotor*
faced new challenges operating in an urban neighborhood marked specifically as an
ethnic space. Modern Chinatown maintains a dialectic structure, showcasing a foreign
and exotic, yet recognizable and inviting cultural experience. *El Grupo Promotor*
attempted to represent an authentically Chinese yet also authentically Cuban identity.
Their projects attracted foreign investments while promoting national pride. In
addition, *El Grupo Promotor* further articulated oppositional objectives mechanized
by the state’s power from above and the community’s mobilization from below.

The creation of the Group guarantees the authenticity of the project, that with
only the representation of Chinese and descendants is it possible to conserve
this valuable patrimonial legacy, integrating social, cultural and commercial
objectives. *El barrio chino* should convert itself into a new and important
product, to be added as one of strongest sites to supply tourism to Cuba.\(^\text{114}\)

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\(^{114}\) Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project," 11.
This brief statement of purpose demonstrates *El Grupo’s* position in between *patrias*. The first sentence asserts the importance of authenticity that only Chinese or Chinese descendants could provide through revitalization. “This valuable patrimonial legacy” is not clearly defined as Chinese or a Chinese Cuban patrimony, revealing the interstitial rifts between different generations. The generational identity for Chinese Cubans is measured by one’s relationship to China. “Natural born” Chinese make up the oldest generation of Chinese Cubans, defined as those who emigrated from China to Cuba. “Natural born” Chinese formed kinship societies based on their hometown regions and carried over a Chinese patrimonial legacy that their ancestors would never intimately know without returning to the homeland. Many first generation Chinese Cubans who were born in *el Barrio Chino* before the Cuban Revolution, grew up hearing Cantonese on the street, possibly attending Chinese schools and sharing ties to relatives back in China. Chinese Cubans born after the Revolution, even in *el Barrio Chino*, were more estranged from China and their Chinese ancestry. From the 1960s to the 1990s, young Chinese Cubans would have been raised in the most nationalizing time since Cuba’s independence movement. The population of “natural born” Chinese decreased by almost half from 11,350 people in 1953 to 5,710 in 1970.\(^\text{115}\) *El Barrio Chino* did not remain an exclusively Chinese place after the Cuban Revolution. The second and third generations of Chinese Cubans were detached from a thriving Chinese Cuban community. *El Grupo Promotor* represented a group of community members even more removed from the golden era of *el Barrio Chino*. *El Grupo Promotor* was comprised mainly of Chinese Cubans born outside of

\(^{115}\) Guanche, "Presencia China En Cuba."
*el Barrio Chino.* *El Grupo* did not carry the extensive patrimonial history that the mutual aid associations contained through their “natural born” Chinese members. *El Grupo*’s founder, Yrmina Eng Menéndez and her siblings joined *el Barrio Chino*’s community later in life. Eng explains, that as *el Grupo* expanded, they began to look towards other overseas Chinese communities to visualize the future of *el Barrio Chino* in Havana. Overseas Chinese participated as another generation of Chinese contributing to the conceptualization and reconstruction of *el Barrio Chino* despite their position outside of Cuba. *El Grupo Promotor* looked to a greater diasporic network for assistance in recuperating their local Cuban neighborhood.

Different generations of Chinese Cubans hold competing imaginations of *el Barrio Chino* complicating the process of physical, urban resurrection. The culture shift in *el Barrio Chino* during the Cuban revolution paints a distinct picture of generational rifts between Chinese Cubans. *El Barrio Chino*’s bustling opium houses under Batista in the 1940s, transformed completely during the Cuban Revolution. In the 1960s, the José Wong militia brigade, the only, entirely Chinese Cuban army unit in the Revolution, conducted a campaign against opium and gambling.116 The new generation of Chinese Cuban nationalists banned the cultural practices and entertainment for older generations of Chinese Cubans. Through urban renewal, *el Barrio Chino* assumes a different appearance and serves a different role for the community living in the neighborhood. However, individuals’ memories and the bones of old buildings continue to testify to the neighborhood’s prehistory. By the 1990s, the inhabitants of *el Barrio Chino* included only a small minority of Chinese

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and Chinese descendants. Given these conditions, \textit{el Grupo} was forced to create a vision of how a modern “Chinatown” should develop; how to preserve and rescue the tradition and culture from the specific history of Havana’s \textit{Barrio Chino}; how to support and involve the non-Chinese inhabitants of \textit{el Barrio Chino}; and how to expand as a tourist center to generate capital and further develop a depressed neighborhood.

\textit{El Grupo Promotor} carried a dual responsibility to both conserve the history of \textit{el Barrio Chino} and convert the neighborhood into a economic and socially revived community. The generation gap between \textit{el Grupo Promotor} and the few remaining members of the older generation, made it so that converting \textit{el Barrio Chino} into something new, was less vexed than trying to conserve or restore the neighborhood to its past life. We can understand the strains of these dual motives by returning to the statement articulated by \textit{el Grupo Promotor}.

The creation of the Group guarantees the authenticity of the project, that with only the representation of Chinese and descendants is it possible to conserve this valuable patrimonial legacy, integrating social, cultural and commercial objectives. \textit{El barrio chino} should convert itself into a new and important product, to be added as one of strongest sites to supply tourism to Cuba.\textsuperscript{117}

The second sentence sharply redirects the reader from the initial focus of the “patrimonial legacy” to the creation of a “new and important product” in Cuba’s tourist industry.\textsuperscript{118} The transition in word choice between the two sentences marks the change in tone. The opening sentence emphasizes representation, conservation, and integration, placing value on the past. The second sentence jumps from a dialogue of

\textsuperscript{117} Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project," 11.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
conservation to conversion. The entire passage presents an argument for the value and importance of *el Barrio Chino*. However, while the first half frames the Grupo’s objective to recognize the neighborhood’s historic value for the Chinese and Chinese descendants, the second sentence transforms *el Barrio Chino* into a product capable of supplying direct monetary value to the rest of Cuba. The gaps between these two objectives raise the question as to who will serve as the larger beneficiary. Are these objectives completely in opposition to one another, or is it possible for both a Chinese Cuban patrimony and a Cuban patrimony to benefit from *el Barrio Chino*’s revitalization?

The stability of Cuba’s patrimony shifted during the economic restructuring of the Special Period. Cuba’s new economic position without the Soviet Union necessitated decentralization and liberalization. The Cuban state’s attempt to regulate urban revitalization and simultaneously cede power reveals how state formation can both promote and constrain the process of cultural production. In *el Barrio Chino*, the Cuban state yielded economic privileges crucial to *el Grupo Promotor*’s project of revitalization. *El Grupo* carried out their civic responsibility to contribute towards Cuba’s growing tourism industry, while also developing autonomous, grassroots-community building strategies that unified the Chinese Cuban community.

**Bottom - Up Revival: From Auto-Marginalization to Auto-Recuperation**

“*Primero, se crea un movimiento, no el grupo promotor, nunca me refiero tanto el Grupo Promotor como el movimiento del proyecto para la reanimación del Barrio Chino de la habana.*”

- Yrmina Eng Menéndez (2015)

“First, there was a movement, not *el Grupo Promotor*, never do I refer so much to *el Grupo Promotor* as the movement for the reanimation of *el Barrio*...”
El Grupo’s founder, Yrmina Eng Menéndez emphasizes that the revitalization movement began before the founding of el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino, arising from interests produced by and for the Chinatown community.¹¹⁹ Eng’s description of the founding of el Grupo Promotor illuminates el Grupo’s evolution from a local effort to unite community and recuperate tradition in el Barrio Chino, that later morphed into a project of urban development with mounting national and international influence.

Beginning in the 1980s, el Barrio Chino dipped into depression. For two decades, commercial activity and the Chinese population diminished in size, reducing the neighborhoods’ influence and strong cultural identity. By the mid-eighties, fourteen mutual aid associations remained, led by the oldest, el Casino Chung Wah, but with shrinking memberships. Although there were efforts to salvage and preserve the Chinese community’s artistic traditions in el Barrio Chino, without a substantial community body, many associations could no longer offer services, host activities or generate income.¹²⁰ With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the entire island encountered severe economic crisis. The country was thrown into famine and basic items were rationed to smaller and smaller portions. The Special Period extended over the 1990s; thirty years of centralization collapsed as the state could no longer fulfill the fundamental needs of their Cuban citizens. On a national level, el pueblo cubano was forced to turn inward for essential resources.

¹¹⁹ interview by Eliza Kingsley-Ma January, 2015.
¹²⁰ María Lam, interview by Eliza Kingsley-Ma January, 2015.
Paradoxically, the deprivations of the Special Period helped to inspire urban revitalization, in *el Barrio Chino*, not only by forcing the State to relax economic regulations, but also by galvanizing the local community. The severity of Cuba’s economic circumstances in the nineties served as a driving force to unite members of the Chinese community in *el Barrio Chino*. The movement began in 1991 when community leaders from the Min Chi Tang association mobilized to offer a meal service and communal space for elderly Chinese living in *el Barrio Chino*.¹²¹ The Min Chi Tang is now the most powerful and active association in Havana’s *Barrio Chino*. María Lam, the current President of the Min Chi Tang, recalls participating on this early team of organizers as the only Chinese descendant and one of the only female organizers. Lam grew up in *el Barrio Chino* and recalls from childhood the long tables covered with food, surrounded by community members that frequented the main hall of her own kinship association. Lam’s old association had closed down by the time of her adulthood in the 1990s, but she joined up with the leading members of the Min Chi Tang to tend to the needs of remaining Chinese Cuban community members. Lam had just graduated from the University of Havana and was motivated to rebuild the empty and abandoned spaces of her childhood. Lam explains that her first role was to go out in to the community and barter for any food items she could – cookies, sodas, yogurt – that could be served for the elderly community members to come and eat.¹²² Little by little, Lam gathered resources through artful methods to provide simple, yet consistent food items for the elder generation. Quickly, Lam explains, Chinese residents began to arrive at the Min Chi Tang daily for food and

¹²¹ Ibid.
¹²² Ibid.
community. Lam emphasizes her satisfaction upon gaining the attention of “natural born” Chinese residents to approach a rebuilding community space. The restoration of a community hub grew out of the resourcefulness and persistent efforts from a small, local group of dedicated community leaders. Lam and the Min Chi Tang leadership team hoped to convince the elderly, first-generation Chinese immigrants, through these daily gatherings, to stimulate the revival of the Min Chi Tang association. Through a concrete service – simple, free meals – the Min Chi Tang community began to unify and rebuild.

Lam’s testimony on the rebuilding of the Min Chi Tang marks one of multiple beginnings of resurgence in El Barrio Chino. Lam explains that, motivated by the economic crisis, other mutual-aid Associations in the neighborhood began to work together, and resurface as communal spaces in el Barrio Chino, despite histories of political friction and regionalism.123 The Min Chi Tang began to construct a home for the elderly and to aggregate income for the growing association. As they expanded, the movement to unify and better the community in el Barrio Chino spread to a different group of Chinese descendants. In 1993, two years following the start of Lam’s work with the Min Chi Tang, the Casino Chung Wah, Havana’s oldest mutual-aid association, celebrated their 100th anniversary. As a group of Chinese descendants gathered to organize a proper celebration for the Casino’s centennial celebration, El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino was founded.

The bottom-up mobilization illuminated in Lam’s narrative reveals a dynamic of auto-recuperación. Yrmina Eng Menéndez, a sociologist by training has

123 Ibid.
documented a history of auto-marginalization and auto-recuperation in her studies on Chinatown spaces. Eng defines Auto-recuperación as a method for sustaining a neighborhood’s economy through a range of private businesses owned and managed by the local community. The resourcefulness highlighted in Lam and Eng’s interviews resurrect a historical pattern of economic success among small business owners in el Barrio Chino. In the era of the Republic, el Barrio Chino thrived off of private businesses and entrepreneurs who served demands specific to the Chinese immigrant community. The economic success that occurred in el Barrio Chino came out of the neighborhood’s condition as a marginalized and ethnic space. Eng argues that the concept of Chinatown itself is born from a result of auto-protección and auto-marginalización. Eng writes:

Con los barrios chinos se muestra una de las formas de reacción más perfeccionadas que los procesos de marginalización han creado, en este caso, de la mano de la automarginación, en forma de autoprotección y defensa del grupo etnosocial. Una etno-cultura de Resistencia, marcada por la distancia entre la cultura de la sociedad anfitriona y la de la comunidad insertada o inmigrante.  

Chinatowns demonstrate some of the most sophisticated reactions to marginalizing structures, in this case, auto-marginalizing as a form of auto-protection and ethno-social defense. An ethno-culture of resistance marked by the distance between, the culture of the host society, and the inserted, or immigrant community.

Eng describes that ghettoized communities, like Chinatowns, resort to building their own barriers for protection. Marginalization carries cyclical consequences resulting in

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125 Ibid., 3-4.
exclusion and subsequent insularity. Resistance from the Chinese community stems from the need to protect and defend against the dominant culture. Hearn and Alfonso expand on the exclusionary origin story of *el Barrio Chino*. “Forbidden by law to live within the former city centre (Old Havana), the Chinese community developed the adjoining district as ‘an independent sector that sought to be the Cuban extension of the province of Canton.’”

*El Barrio Chino* was born literally outside of Havana’s city limits. As Eng argues auto-marginalization builds off of the physical exclusion that create Chinatowns. Furthermore, Eng asserts that auto-marginalization is part of the nature of Chinatowns around the world. Chinatowns serve the varied needs of an “autochthonous Chinese population,” because that is where the community has been relegated. Eng describes the dual purpose that Chinatown serves for a floating population that enters and exits in search of cultural and commercial needs. Eng’s description resurrects the dialectic of exclusion and exhibition. The neighborhood is marked by a cultural distancing, separating the inhabitants and the outsiders of Chinatown. The dominant culture built barriers, displacing *el Barrio Chino* in the periphery. But in doing so, Havana’s *Barrio Chino* community gained autonomy and developed a model for economically sustaining themselves. Through isolation and mechanisms for self-protection, the neighborhood eventually produced their own ‘independent sector.’ This independence has persisted in the nature of *el Barrio Chino* from its founding to its revitalization.

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126 Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform," 234.
127 Menéndez, "Etnicidad Y Autorecuperación: La Comunidad China En Cuba Y El Barrio Chino De La Habana " 3.
128 Ibid.
A historic pattern of *auto-marginalización* and *auto-recuperación* within *el Barrio Chino* provided a framework for bottom-up activism within the community. Additionally, the Special Period created a historic opportunity for state supported urban renewal. The merging of these bottom-up and top-down forces is exemplified in the creation of *El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*. *El Grupo’s* economic privileges, granted by the state, demonstrated how decentralization and independence created opportunities for renewal. *El Grupo’s* practices of *auto-recuperación* differ from that of *Habana Vieja*, by mobilizing from an entire ethnic community in addition to top-down structures of state power. Economic independence developed as an ethnic marker, growing from the marginalization of Chinese immigrants, and later enabled the community to mobilize in order to preserve their cultural identity. *El Barrio Chino’s* distance from the state, demonstrated how bottom-up marginalization develops into independent, economic success.

*El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino* began within *el Barrio Chino’s* community in 1993, and for ten years (1995-2005) they existed as a state sponsored organization dedicated to the economic, cultural and social development of the neighborhood.\(^{129}\) *El Grupo Promotor* worked with the resurfacing associations, renting office space from the Min Chi Tang and networking with the associations that had undertaken efforts to rebuild themselves. The organization gained status as a state supported entity, and earned economic privileges from the state to invest in and build private commerce. Hearn and Alfonso describe the rise of *el Grupo Promotor*:

Using the Grupo as an administrative platform, they [the “activist entrepreneurs”] persuaded the Central Havana municipal government to

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\(^{129}\) Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project."
permit Chinese Cuban entrepreneurs to set up retail outlets for shoes, clothes, kitchen equipment and other items imported directly form China. Under their supervision, Barrio Chino hosted one of the first legal farmers’ markets of the 1990s, inspiring international media reports on the way Cuba may implement market reforms to overcome the deepening economic crisis.\(^{130}\)

As a “state entity with an entrepreneurial nature,” \textit{el Grupo Promotor} pioneered implementing new market reforms to re-instigate economic activity. \textit{El Grupo Promotor} published a presentation outlining the objectives, strategies and plans for \textit{el Barrio Chino}.\(^{131}\) In this inaugural publication, \textit{el Grupo Promotor} articulated the efforts of the organization, which “linked the members of the Chinese community with the different governmental applications to achieve a process of integral revitalization.”\(^{132}\) In their introduction, \textit{El Grupo} committed to develop programs centered on Chinese culture and society and the Chinese presence in Cuba by promoting cultural activities ranging from Martial arts and Cantonese Opera to language studies and courses on Chinese culture.\(^{133}\) \textit{El Grupo Promotor} believed in the revival and preservation of tradition through the expansion of festivals, commercial spaces, and centers for study and research. Financially, \textit{el Grupo Promotor} would support their cultural endeavors through income generated from the private, local commerce they created. Their initial project to build a Chinese market area for members of the community, served as a starting model for their economic stimulation.\(^{134}\)

\textbf{Early Ambitions for \textit{el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino}}
Today, a walking tour through *el Barrio Chino* requires a stroll down *el Cuchillo*. Framed by a small archway reading, 中国成 – Chinatown – *el Cuchillo* serves as a centralized hub for *el Barrio Chino*, concentrated with travelers. Red lanterns dangle above the small alleyway that makes up *el cuchillo*. Restaurants on either side sport awnings painted with both Chinese characters and Spanish words that have been *orientalized* by sharp calligraphic strokes. Tourists squeeze alongside one another on the pedestrian-only pathway. The end of the alleyway intersects with *San Nicolás*, where the important buildings of a bygone era stand: the once, grand *hotel Pacífico*, and *el Barrio Chino’s* oldest Chinese neighborhood newspaper, the Kong Wah Po. *El Hotel Océano Pacífico* once belonged to the Chiong Dao and company. The building held three floors and hosted meals on the roof. At one point in time, the only Chinese bank was on the ground floor of the building, while the top floor served as an opium den for men came to gamble and smoke. Today, one can interact with the Kong Wah Po and the *Hotel Pacífico* by imagining what they once were. Signs outside of both buildings commemorate their historic significance, but doors to the inside remain closed. On the contrary, along *el cuchillo*, Cuban women dressed in *qipao* with chopsticks in their hair, beckon visitors into restaurants. Men in *changshan* point to menus and highlight delicacies like *mariposas* (wonton) or *rollitos de la primavera* (spring rolls). Many of the businesses are vacant. The majority of the seating is outside and patrons eat their food simultaneously spectating the activity of the alleyway. Nearing the end of *el cuchillo* sits one restaurant with a steady flow of customers, *Tien Tan*. The restaurant claims to host the only Chinese

136 Ibid.
Chef in all of Havana – (which is a difficult assertion to confirm). The waiters, promoting the services of *Tien Tan*, advertise loudly that it is the only restaurant with Chinese patrons. Passer buyers scan the crowd to confirm or deny this truth. The clashing geographies of *El Cuchillo* and *San Nicolás* exemplify *el Grupo Promotor’s* challenge to both conserve and develop *el Barrio Chino*.

*El Cuchillo* de Zanja served as the heart of *el Barrio Chino’s commercial zone* for *el Grupo Promotor*. *el Cuchillo* strategically connects to larger avenues like *Galiano* and *Zanja*. *el Cuchillo* began as one of eight proposals introduced in *el Grupo’s* inaugural publication, and yet remains only one of four projects still in use within *el Barrio Chino*. *El Cuchillo* targeted the development of independent commerce through opening up private restaurants and businesses. *El Grupo’s* proposal described that it should be “refurbished and revived” yet while still maintaining “a traditional look.” The early designs and renderings of *el Cuchillo* imagines the street adorned with traditional lanterns, and open as a pedestrian walkway. An early design sketch features the alleyway decorated for the 150th anniversary commemorating the arrival of the first Chinese in Cuba in 1997. A large banner holds the number 150 parallel to the emblem of *el Grupo Promotor del barrio chino* – visitors enter the alleyway of Chinese restaurants and shops framed under a legacy that stretches back to servitude. Today, *el Cuchillo* guides the pedestrian through a cramped “chinesey” alleyway, opening up to *San Nicolás*, a historic epicenter for the old *Barrio Chino*. The restaurants in *el Cuchillo* are mainly empty, yet they are open eagerly waiting for business. Meanwhile on *San Nicolás* the

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buildings are unused. *El hotel Pacífico* has since been refurbished, but it remains closed, as is the old print shop for the Kong Wah Po newspaper. A sign, branded by the seal of the City Historian, labels the old newspaper press a historic site for preservation and restoration, yet the gate is locked shut. The contrast between the restaurants of *el Cuchillo* and the closed-down print shop on *San Nicolás* illuminate the stark reality as to who are the intended patrons of *el Barrio Chino*. In order to preserve the community, *el Grupo Promotor* must first develop for the outsider.

Among the other seven proposed projects, *El Grupo* designed their objectives to greatly extend the area of *el Barrio Chino* adding four hectares of invested space to the thirty hectares of the existing neighborhood. The projects included the reconstruction and development of:

1. *La Manzana*
2. *Las Columnas*
3. *El Cuchillo de Zanja*
4. *El Mercado Chino*
5. *Centro de Medicina Tradicional*
6. *Escuela Cultural China*
7. *Casa de Artes y Tradiciones*

Four of the proposed projects (*la Manzana, las Columnas, el Cuchillo de Zanja and el Mercado*) presented new opportunities to boost the commerce and renovate public spaces in *el barrio chino*. *El Grupo* claimed that, “the most attractive sectors for the development of the Town are trade, tourism and real-estate.”

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139 Ibid., 6.
141 There exists some discrepancy between the “Proyecto Integral del Barrio Chino de la Habana” and “Havana’s Chinatown Comprehensive Project.” In the English translation, “Havana’s Chinatown Comprehensive Project,” other projects for revitalization are introduced that remain outside of the initial eight proposals. These include the opening of a drug store, the repairs to the newspaper press and the construction of Chinese community housing. Ibid.
142 Ibid., 12.
commercial centers would offer spaces for new housing, commerce and office space. *La Manzana* was a design for a new multi-purpose building between *Salud* and *Dragones*, two main avenues in *el barrio chino*. *La Manzana* would host multiple services including commercial businesses, housing and administrative offices. Similarly, *las Columnas* mapped out an expansive interior mall that would serve as a large commercial center offering office space and a *discoteca*.\(^{143}\) *El Mercado chino* would offer an outdoor market structure for temporary set-ups.\(^{144}\) Located along the spine of the *Cuchillo, el Mercado*, would provide locals to trade their products in a covered, temporary, outdoor commercial center. In theory these spaces would function for not just tourists, as does *el Cuchillo*, rather they would stimulate shared economic spaces for the many residents of the neighborhood.

Following the expansion and modernization of the commercial spaces (comprising half of the proposed projects), cultural centers would offer space for cultural development and preservation. *El Centro de Medicina Tradicional China*, would provide health services while simultaneously promoting the teaching and research of the specific field and contributing to the welfare of the community. The promotion of health care fits within a larger national movement to integrate health tourism into the city’s offerings.\(^{145}\) *La Escuela Cultural China* would present a union between the Ministry of education and the Chinese Cuban community, creating a space for youth, especially, to learn about Chinese culture and history. *La Casa de Artes y Tradiciones Chinas* filled a similar design to that of *La Escuela*. *La Casa de Artes y Tradiciones* focused exclusively on the development of Chinese traditional

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\(^{143}\) "Proyecto Integral Del Barrio Chino De La Habana," 17.
\(^{144}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{145}\) "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project," 16.
art. *La Casa* would serve as a developing space and resource for artists to gather, network, and to disseminate the traditions of Chinese arts.\(^{146}\) *La Casa* would offer lessons on cultural practices that community members, Chinese or not, could participate with. Lastly, *El Grupo* attempted to preserve a special Chinese Cuban authenticity through the construction of *La Escuela de Artes Marciales, Deportes y Juegos Tradicionales*. The role of Martial Arts was aligned with the role of coolies as *mambices*, freedom fighters, in the war. By stretching a positive legacy of the Chinese coolie fighting for Cuban independence, *La Escuela de Artes Marciales, Deportes y Juegos Tradicionales* presented an opportunity to preserve ethnic identity and contribute to the nation’s legacy.

**The Product: Executing Ambitions**

*El Grupo Promotor* carried large ambitions for balancing the commerce and cultural production in *el Barrio Chino*. There exists a gap in my research for tracking the *Grupo’s* initial proposal, the completion of the proposed projects, and the current status of these projects. Founder, Yrmina Eng Menéndez, stressed, in our interview, that *el Grupo Promotor* and *el Barrio Chino* has passed through different eras since that proposal was first drafted. Eng asserts that the era of *el Cuchillo’s* beginning did not appear the same as it does today, marked by a performance of culture now, rather than a resurrection. *El Grupo’s* unique position enabled them to take action and come into being during the changing climate of the Special Period. However, their legacy as shown through the survival of their projects, raises new questions to their successes and failures.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 18.
Of the eight, original proposals, *el Cuchillo* and *la Casa de artes y tradiciones* remain active and used by both the community and by foreigners. *La Casa de artes y tradiciones*, is fondly referred to as *la Casona*. *La Casona* hosts the largest public archive of *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*. They have collected over 800 documents from those who participated in the formation and organization of *el Grupo*. Beyond their archive and greater library, *la Casona* is a hub for community members of all generations. The bottom floor hosts an exhibition space for old pieces of furniture and porcelain that belonged in wealthy Chinese homes in the early twentieth century. In an adjoining gallery, intricate origami is on display, made by students in that workshop. Chinese brush paintings hang on the second floor made by youth in the community. A large outdoor lecture room is often in use, many times by other organizations renting the space. Chinese culture, dance, and language classes are also administered at *la Casona*. *La Casona* simultaneously fulfilled the role of the proposed *Escuela Cultura China*. While, *el cuchillo* hosts mainly tourists, *La Casona* is dedicated to Chinese culture, art, and is filled by the residents of *el Barrio Chino*.

The construction of commercial centers – *La manzana, las columnas, y el Mercado Chino* contains much more ambivalent concerns. In an economic overview of 2003, *el Grupo Promotor* documents the earnings of *las columnas* showed the highest earnings for any of the shopping stall areas. *El Grupo promotor* created three complexes of small shopping stalls throughout *el Barrio Chino: las columnas, complejo L, and el portico*, (from most to least successful). ¹⁴⁷ *La muralla*, was a restaurant also constructed and used to generate income. The existence and execution

of these commercial centers justify *el Grupo*’s economic mobility and emphasis for *el Barrio Chino*. However, within the economic overview of 2003, Cuba’s economic challenges have left small business people outside of larger, more fluid markets. The presentation writes that 80% of Cuba’s products are imported and access to suppliers and distribution remain too slow and inefficient. Businesses in *el Barrio Chino* cannot offer enough, resulting in high demand and low supply. This structural impediment demonstrates the limits to Cuba’s top-down liberalization. Even within an economic infrastructure that would allow small business owners to exist, the shadow of the embargo and Cuba’s economic stasis, especially amidst the financial crisis in 2003, rendered *el Barrio Chino* vulnerable. I gathered even more doubt for the financial success in these small commercial shopping stall structures. When passing the “L,” only half of the stalls were even open. The streets of *el Barrio Chino* were full of bicitaxis and pedestrians, yet *el Grupo*’s commercial spaces appeared relatively empty.

**Building *El Portico*: A Trans-national Bridge and Barrier**

*El Grupo*’s original proposal concludes by outlining three main objectives: (1) the need to preserve the Chinese community in Cuba and *el Barrio Chino*, both of which face the danger of disappearing; (2) [to] contribute to the city-wide attempt to find solutions for improving the traditional appearance of Havana; and (3) [to] complete a recuperation of the formerly authentic, “oriental” ambiance mixed with a contemporary Cuban atmosphere that will enrich the representation of China and

148 Ibid., 21.
overseas communities in the current day.\textsuperscript{149} The first objective refers to \textit{el Barrio Chino}’s bottom-up movement to preserve a marginalized, but independent cultural identity through community development. The second object points back to the top-down power structure that contextualized \textit{el Grupo} within a national project of stimulating tourism through market reforms. The third objective highlights the significant role transnational influences played in \textit{el Grupo Promotor}’s revitalization projects. \textit{El Grupo} would need to look outside of the Cuban State in order to receive substantial investments. Stated in their proposal, “[The p]romotion Group [\textit{el Grupo Promotor}] should concentrate on joint investments and business, attracting Chinese investors and businessmen, making them feel confident due to their ethnic, family and cultural links which are the base of the socioeconomic Chinese organization.”\textsuperscript{150} By highlighting ethnic similarities, this passage justifies the need for shared investments between Chinese citizens and Chinese Cubans. Business and entrepreneurship are emphasized as a shared ethnic quality between Chinese immigrants. Drawing again from Hearn and Alfonso’s argument, \textit{el Barrio Chino}, was conceived as a “Cuban extension of the province of Canton.”\textsuperscript{151} \textit{El Barrio Chino} inherently carries qualities as a limb of a completely different patrimony. In order to maintain this connection, transnational relationships were essential for \textit{El Barrio Chino}’s revitalization.

The construction of \textit{el portico}, the traditional arch and entrance to \textit{el Barrio Chino}, models the significance of transnational influences in \textit{el Grupo Promotor}’s efforts to reanimate. The project was first born during a visit from the Minister of Construction of the People’s Republic of China in 1995, at the height of the Special

\textsuperscript{149} Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project," 19.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{151} Alfonso, "Havana: From Local Experiment to National Reform," 234.
Period. In 1997, the project was confirmed, demarcating an important step for the budding partnership between China and Cuba. The collaboration between the China State Construction Engineering Corporation and the **Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino** demonstrated the transnational nature of urban renewal for *el Barrio Chino*. Standing at the intersection of *Dragones y Amistad*, (Dragons and Friendship), the Portico was completed on February 28, 1999. At the time of its completion, the portico was the largest of its kind in the entire world, providing new structure and boundary for *el Barrio Chino*. Representing both a separating boundary and an opening doorway, *el portico* marks *el Barrio Chino* through the dialectic of exclusion and exhibition. The arch presents a gateway, breaking a historic seal of auto-marginalization for *el Barrio Chino* in Havana’s landscape. The arch also serves, however as a bridge between *el Barrio Chino* and China. The phrase, “Barrio Chino,” written in Spanish and Chinese on the arch, reveals the metonymic qualities that the portico imposes. Chinatown – China’s town. Through the portico, *el Barrio Chino* lies beneath the brand of a Chinese diasporic history and a future entrance towards a diplomatic alliance.

**Conclusion: Gateways to New Beginnings**

*En las contradicciones está el desarrollo.*

– María Lam (2015)

As the narrator of this history, the translation, analysis and observations stem from my own encounter with *el Barrio Chino*. As I walked under el portico and through *el Barrio Chino* looking for signs of animated cultural restoration, I was

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152 La Casa de Artes y Tradiciones, “El Pórtico” (Habana, Cuba: La Casa de Artes y Tradiciones).
153 See the end for Portico image.
154 Lam, “Interview with María Lam”. 

72
searching for features of my own Chinatown. Clement St. “San Francisco’s second-Chinatown,” was a template from which I looked for ethnic expression. In linking this cultural bias and privilege with all Chinatown spaces, I clouded my expectations. Havana’s *Barrio Chino* was created from within margins and overtime the community garnered economic independence while mediating exclusion. The Cuban Revolution later consumed this independence and the public exercise of ethnic identity. The founding of *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*, exemplifies an organization created from highly local conditions, based on a national moment of crisis. *El Grupo Promotor* grew out of an ethnic, historical and cultural legacy, but the subsequent successes and failures they faced came very directly from the isolated realities of existing on the island. In order to revitalize, one must bring with them a consciousness of what existed before, or what exists outside the site of excavation. During an interview, Yrmina Eng Menéndez bluntly corrected my phrasing of “*Chinos Cubanos,*” asserting that *Cubanos* always comes first.

Una conciencia de *Cubanos* chinos, no es chino cubano. Que somos cubanos con origen chino. Y por lo tanto allí se marca muy clara la diferencia, muy claro, porque el etnos cubanos está primero, y este montaje de la doble identidad no está doble ni está conflicto. No hay ningún conflicto de identidad en una sociedad como está.\(^{155}\)

A Cuban Chinese consciousness, not Chinese Cuban. We are Cubans with Chinese origins. Therefore, the difference is clearly marked, very clearly, because Cuban comes first, and the make-up of a double identity is neither double nor in conflict. There isn’t any tension with identity in a society like this.

\(^{155}\) Menéndez, "Havana's Chinatown Comprehensive Project," 12.
The directness and agency in Eng’s response rattled the ambivalence I had collected in my own encounters with *el Barrio Chino*. For Yrmina Eng Menéndez, utilizing ethnic identity as a cultural resource to build community, and expand a neighborhood economy in no way compromises the intactness of her identity. Upon crossing through the portico, a visitor can pick out paradoxes among the different representations of Chinese Cuban identity. The portico, alone, is one of the most modern, well-kept structures throughout the neighborhood. Yet how can one reconcile when their doorway is stable, yet the rest of the house is crumbling? We choose to look through the portico and focus our gaze on the contradictions riddling the streets of *el Barrio Chino*. Or, we can look through the portico and simply see the potential that an open gateway offers us to move forward or retreat back. *El Barrio Chino* was both conceived and revitalized through oppositional forces. Chinese Cuban and Cuban Chinese, both straddle contradiction. It is within the inconsistencies, however, that opens up for mediation and growth.

Figure 2: El Portico del *Barrio Chino*, January, 2015
CHAPTER THREE
Retratos y Representaciones: Two Visions of Chinese Cuban Identity

Urban renewal in El Barrio Chino ignited both rupture and regrowth in order to preserve the historical and cultural significance of Havana’s Chinese community. *El Grupo Promotor’s* revitalization of El Barrio Chino redefined the presence and position of the Chinese Cuban community in Havana. *El Grupo Promotor* dissolved after thirteen years of community organization, but their legacy lives on as *el Barrio Chino* gathers importance within Havana’s tourist network. Through the efforts of *El Grupo Promotor*, El Barrio Chino gains authority as a site of historical and cultural display. Yet beyond *el Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*, other representations of Chinese Cuban identity exist. These representations do not oppose those produced by *el Grupo Promotor*; rather, each testimony provides a new mechanism for imagining Chinese Cuban identity. Individuals have their own methods of preservation, challenging the erasure within large structural change. In this chapter, I will explore a variety of visual artworks about Chinese Cuban identity, produced within and outside the Chinese Cuban community in Havana. These paintings and portraits provide alternative narratives through Chinese Cuban self-representations. The art featured in this chapter reveal diverse representations of Chinese Cuban identity, inflected by different historical circumstances.

History emerges through a process of construction and retrieval. In Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book, *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot reveals a necessary ambiguity in
the dual mechanisms within history.\textsuperscript{156} “[H]istory means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts: both “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened”\textsuperscript{157} Trouillot argues that history maintains a duality as body of knowledge and “history as social process”.\textsuperscript{158} Trouillot claims that within this process, silences are built into the base of each historical narrative. Compounding the kinds of silence Trouillot describes, in the Chinese Cuban community, older generations are actually disappearing without any new Chinese immigration. Silence in the Chinese Cuban community grows as the older generations disappear with age.

In chapter one, I compare two opposing narratives of Chinese coolies living during Cuba’s Wars for Independence. While José Martí excludes the Chinese presence from the Cuban Republic, Gonzalo de Quesada praises the coolies for their sacrifice and patriotism. Both of these official narratives erase the Chinese coolies themselves, subsuming them into larger narratives of Cuban history. In chapter two, I looked at efforts to craft a Chinese Cuban history and presence by the citizens of El Barrio Chino themselves. In this chapter, I continue to explore Chinese Cuban efforts at self-representation by turning to the work of two Chinese Cuban artists who articulate different narratives of Chinese Cuban identity. Both artists work to excavate silences in Chinese Cuban history by creating alternative archives through their paintings. Each painting preserves their personal histories and representations of Chinese Cuban identity.

\textsuperscript{156} Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 23.
Pedro Eng Herrera and Flora Fong paint new visions of Chinese Cuban identity. Eng paints to preserve the past with the eye of a documentarian. Eng builds his visual archive narrating individual and community histories, and his paintings emanate from a tortured engagement with the past. On the one hand, Eng’s paintings depict a hybridized Chinese Cuban nationalism. On the other hand, Eng’s works are mired in the history of a lost Chinese Cuban community. While Eng embeds his representations within history, Fong uses language to abstract and harmonize Chinese Cuban identity. Fong integrates Cuban and Chinese by placing Chinese calligraphy within Caribbean landscapes. Fong merges Chinese and Cuban through fragmentation, distancing her abstract paintings from particular histories. Eng has attached Chinese Cuban to the local settings of el Barrio Chino, but Fong locates Chinese Cuban within the expanse of diaspora. Eng and Fong present opposite methods for recuperating a history riddled with silence. While Eng holds on to the details of the past, Fong abstracts the past completely. Both artists face limitations, yet their paintings offer us greater understanding of the tensions at stake for Chinese Cubans.

Pedro Eng Herrera: Excavating History

“Para que sepa el testimonio, para que no olvide la historia, yo hecho mis obras. Yo me voy, pero quedan mis obras. Para un futuro, mis obras, tienen sus comunicaciones - pueden hablar, no de mí, pero de historia, de lo que fue este lugar.”

- Pedro Eng Herrera (2015)

“In order to know the testimony, so as not to forget the history, I create my paintings. I will go, but my work will remain. For the future, my paintings have their own communication, they can speak, not of me, but of history, of what this place was.”

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159 Herrera, "Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera."
Guanabacoa lies seventeen kilometers east of el Barrio Chino, one of Havana’s fifteen municipalities. Pedro Eng Herrera’s house is easily recognizable to the wandering passerby. The residential streets of Guanabacoa are empty in comparison to Havana’s dense city center. Walking by the rows of modest faded houses, one house stands out. Eng’s home appears almost out of place, adorned with vibrant murals. A large painted warrior stands beside the front door, framed by Chinese characters and quotations from Che Guevara.\textsuperscript{160} Upon entering, the sitting room opens up to a gallery of frames and artwork created by the owner of the house, painter and historian, Pedro Eng Herrera. The \textit{salón} serves as a living museum – one can sit, examining the art – large framed paintings, woodcarvings, family photographs and small portraits. Eng’s living room exhibits years of work, providing a private and intimate display of his personal collection. During my visit to Pedro’s home, I noticed one especially striking painting, hiding by the door in a 10 x 8” frame. On the left side of the painting, a white rose lies beneath four columns of black Chinese characters. To the right, the iconic face of a young, serious José Martí stares off into the distance. It is not unusual to find busts or renderings of Martí in Cuban households. Martí is the most widely produced icon in all of Cuba, more so than even Fidel himself. Yet Eng’s painting offers a highly unusual juxtaposition, aligning a familiar face with a foreign text. Sitting alongside Cuba’s most recognizable face, Eng’s Chinese characters form an impenetrable wall for most Cuban readers. For the rare viewer who does read Chinese, the poem reveals itself as a translation of the famous Martí poem for which the painting is named, “Cultiva una rosa blanca.” The

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{160} López, \textit{Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History} 247.}
painting thus combines Cuban iconography and Chinese characters integrating Chinese identity within Cuban nationalism. Eng interrupts cubanidad by appropriating Martí’s words and translating them into a Chinese idiom. Eng makes a bold gesture, re-interpreting Martí in order to hybridize Chinese and Cuban. In the end, however, Eng’s attempt does less to incorporate Chinese, but rather reveals the limitations of Martí as an icon of Chinese Cuban identity.

![Figure 3 Cultiva una rosa blanca, Pedro Eng Herrera](image)

We can easily split the painting into two halves dividing the right from the left: portrait vs. poem; familiar vs. unfamiliar; Cuban vs. Chinese. I will first compare the right and left as separate entities, contextualizing the icon of Martí and excavating Eng’s adaptation of Martí’s famous poem, “Cultiva una rosa blanca.” Following my comparison, I will consider how Eng prompts us to read his work as a layered
composition. Eng’s juxtaposition presents an integrated representation of Chinese Cuban identity, yet also reveals tensions that preclude Chinese from being Cuban.

Chapter one explored José Martí’s legacy as a war hero and a symbol of patria for the Cuban Republic. Martí’s extensive writings persist as a national narrative for contemporary Cuba. It is not just Martí’s words that have been immortalized, but also the face and bust of José Martí have been adopted as a symbol of Cuba’s stability and unity. Emilio Bejel analyzes a greater discourse of power by investigating the construction and preservation of Martí as an icon. In his book, José Martí: Images of Memory and Mourning, Bejel interrogates an archive of Martís, or rather, the evolution of a singular, iconic Martí. Bethel argues that beginning in the twentieth century, Cuban leaders have employed Martí as an image of unity. Bejel cites Lillian Guerra’s work on the myth of Martí as a mechanism of state power. Bejel writes:

Actually, as Guerra asserts, the more unstable the country was the more the state resorted to the use of Martí’s image to centralize its power. This process continued during subsequent governments, including those of Carlos Prío Socarrás and Fulgencio Batista, and reached its zenith during that of Fidel and Raúl Castro.

The Cuban state has depended on the image of Martí as a centralizing figure for more than a century. Opposing political leaders have continuously used Martí’s body and legacy. From Batista to Castro, Martí has been manipulated as a metonym for patria. Different leaders craft patria, or nationhood, under different terms, yet the nation grows out of the body of Martí. Bejo argues that the State maintains an official image

\[^{161}\text{Bejel, José Martí: Images of Memory and Mourning.}\]
\[^{162}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{163}\text{Ibid., 3.}\]
of Martí, producing an uncontested space for recognition and reverence. The viewer has been trained to look at Martí’s face and recognize sacrifice, innocence, sincerity and courage. Eng recalls Martí’s martyrdom but inverts our expectations by placing Martí as the actor in a multi-ethnic scene. Disrupting the narrative that regulates Martí as a unilateral, subsuming Cuban patriarch, Eng appropriates Martí, as an emblem of Chinese Cuban identity.

Moving from the right to the left, we see a wall of characters layered upon a white rose. The white rose alludes to Martí’s most poem, “Cultivo una rosa blanca”, which Eng has borrowed for the title of his painting. Found as poem XXXIX in Martí’s collection, Versos Sencillos, “Cultiva una rosa blanca” is celebrated for its simplicity, humanity and beauty. The poem echoes Martí’s legacy as one of brotherhood and forgiveness.

_Cultivo una rosa blanca,_
En julio como en enero,
Para el amigo sincero
Que me da su mano franca.
Y para el cruel que me arranca
El corazón con que vivo,
Cardo ni oruga cultivo:
Cultivo una rosa blanca.

- José Martí (1891)

I have a white rose to tend
In July as in January;
I give it to the true friend
Who offers his frank hand to me.

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164 Ibid., 5.
And to the cruel one whose blows
Break the heart by which I live,
Thistle nor thorn do I give:
For him, too, I have a white rose.

- Manuel Tellechea (1997)166

The original poem has eight verses and follows an enclosed rhyme scheme. Martí narrates the first half, nurturing a white rose for his loyal friend. The second half highlights Martí’s tolerance and strength. He extends to his enemy, his oppressor, a white rose identical to one that he cultivated for a sincere friend. Martí demonstrates a Christian forgiveness by pardoning his enemy.167 His pardoning acts reflect his message of “guerra sin odio,” war without hate.168 The emotions and relationships within the poem humanize Martí, demonstrating his friendship, suffering and forgiveness. Literary historian, Alfred López further describes what the poem reveals about Martí’s character:

Here we find crystalized Martí’s complex rhetoric of passivity, purity, and a strange kind of heroic stoicism; the speaker endures spectacular (or at least spectacularly described) pain at the hand of one who is “cruel” and apparently malevolent, yet responds not with thistle or thorn but with the same “rosa blanca” he extends to the “amigo sincere” [Emphasis added].169

Martí is mythologized for his dreams of solidarity and unity for Cuba. Throughout his career as a journalist, Martí wrote extensively about the character and conducta of the citizens of the Americas, especially within the United States.170 Martí critiqued the

166 Ibid., 111.
168 Ibid.
170 Conducta - behavior
United States for their divisive racial politics, emphasizing unity as key to the success of Cuba’s fight for independence. Martí envisioned a new Cuban nation capable of integrating all of Cuba’s citizens. As observed in the first chapter, Martí’s legacy as promoting a raceless Cuban nation does not fully encompass his ambivalent feelings towards the Chinese in Cuba. Nevertheless, Martí is revered for his tireless commitment to an independent Cuban Republic. The innocence and sincerity captured in “Cultivo una rosa blanca” poem echoes Martí’s early death. Only weeks after Martí returned to Cuba from exile and joined in arms on the battlefield, he was killed at age 42. The “heroic stoicism” captured in his famous poem, reflects the greater martyrdom that preserves Martí’s legacy.

Eng has excerpted the first half of the poem, about nurturing the rose, to extend Martí’s Cubanidad to include Chinese Cubans. We assume that the first person voice in Eng’s poem is directly attributable to Martí’s character. Eng promotes the preserved image of Martí as a grower and a giver, by defining Martí by his friendship and selflessness. Eng omits the second stanza, which dwells on difference, and instead focuses on Martí as a friend. Eng has directly translated Martí’s words, yet takes his own artistic liberties to frame and construct a new text. Below is Eng’s translation as it appears in his painting “Cultiva una rosa blanca”:

無論在六月還是一月
我栽培着一棵白色玫瑰
要獻給我那誠摯的朋友
是他向我伸出慷慨的手

Pedro Eng Herrera (2009)\(^{171}\)

\(^{171}\) Pedro Eng Herrera, *Cultivo Una Rosa Blanca* 2002. Acrilico sobre cartulina Canson, 26 x 20 cm.
Eng manipulates the structure of the poem by re-writing the first four verses within two rhyming couplets instead of an enclosed rhymed scheme. He has deviated from the official representation of Martí, recasting the icon in a new light and language. The Chinese characters lie on top of the white rose, a symbol of solidarity and universality. Eng’s choice to layer the rose beneath the Chinese characters, help non-Chinese readers bridge Martí’s face with Eng’s characters. Eng’s depiction however, faces inconsistencies and limitations; Eng has chosen words that reflect Martí’s universal kindness, and then has altered the words into a language that even Martí would not be able to understand. We can perceive the juxtaposition as claiming that Martí’s words serve as universal truths. Yet, we have already witnessed the limits to Martí’s vision for a unified, free Cuba: Martí did not extend the white rose to his Chinese patriots. Or, perhaps we see Eng claiming ownership by configuring Martí’s words so that they can no longer speak for themselves. Eng’s reinterpretation of Martí’s poem presents Cuban patrimony embraced and rearticulated through a different language. The painting reveals an immediate, explicit visual contrast that crudely reads, (for a Western audience), Chinese on the left, Cuban on the right. Power is redirected to the viewer and his or her capacity to understand the link between both sides of the painting. The painting ultimately suggests that Chinese and Cuban are not just aligned visually, but can be imagined as intertwined identities in the poem through Eng’s words. Eng illuminates a sincere correlation that Martí’s words contain the possibility of translation and adaptation. Yet we can only imagine this possibility after Eng modeled it for us. Eng has to adapt Martí’s words in order for them to be considered assimilated to a Chinese Cuban representation. “Cultiva
**una rosa blanca**” is a poem about forgiveness and unity. Perhaps Eng is in fact forgiving Martí in this painting, extending a rose to the fallen martyr and pardoning him for his fault and erasure on behalf of Chinese in Cuba. Eng’s gestures towards integration, but in doing so, he reveals the asymmetries and hypocrisy between an immortal man and a disappearing history.

**Chinese First, Spanish Second: Growing up in el Barrio Chino**

What history produced this imagination of Chinese Cuban identity? Pedro Eng Herrera was born in Havana’s *Barrio Chino* in 1935. Eng was raised and educated in *el Barrio Chino* by his father and a Chinese couple. For the first five years of his life, Eng only spoke Chinese. It was only after starting school at *El Colegio Chung Wah*, that Eng began to learn Spanish. *El Colegio Chung Wah* was administered by the Casino Chung Wah, and provided a bilingual education to the Chinese descendants within *el Barrio Chino*. In the mornings school was administered in Chinese and in the afternoons Spanish. Eng emphasized that he acquired Spanish within the realm of school and not in his home or the streets of *el Barrio Chino*. While growing up, Eng learned about his Chinese family from his father and imagined the possibility of returning to China to visit them. Eng was raised in Confucianism, adopting Confucian doctrine in practice and ideology. Each personal anecdote Eng shared with me illuminated the dominant influences of Chinese culture and consciousness he encountered during his childhood. Eng’s

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173 "Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera."
174 Ibid.
Chinese ancestry was fortified in his identity through the ideologies and cultural practices upheld by the Chinese community that surrounded him. In the epilogue of her book, Chinese Cubans, Kathleen López argues that: “Eng’s works epitomizes how an overarching national ideology of cubanidad incorporates different ethnic and cultural identities.” [Emphasis added.]¹⁷⁵ Paintings like “Cultiva una rosa blanca” demonstrate Eng’s attempt to incorporate Chinese Cubans into Cubanidad. Other works by Eng shift the focus from Cubanidad and zoom in on historic events specific to El Barrio Chino. In his pursuit to preserve an authentic image of the past, Eng depicts scenes from his experience growing up in a bustling Chinese Cuban community. Eng claims repeatedly that without a large Chinese immigrant community, like the one he was raised in, el Barrio Chino is no longer Chinese. Despite his desire to incorporate Chinese Cubans within Martí’s Cubanidad, Eng remains mired in the memories of his local Chinatown history.

Pedro Eng Herrera creates historical texts through his paintings. Eng is formally classified as a naïf, or naïve, painter. Eng defines the genre of naïve art as characterized by an artist’s lack of formal training: art that lies outside the academy. The origins of naïve art range from descriptions of “primitive” painting, dating back to the earliest cave drawings, to a formally recognized movement of European naïve artists emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century.¹⁷⁶ At first glance the term naïve implies a debasement for both the producer and the product, suggesting a lack of sophistication. The relationship between naïve and primitive art has been described as intertwining with the historical era that came to recognize it.

¹⁷⁵ López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History 246.
It was the energy of this primitive stratum of art, which nurtured every naïve artist of the twentieth century. More significantly, the naïve artists were rescued from their obscurity on the crest of a wave of enthusiasm for all things ‘primitive’ and all things ‘wrong’ which had no ties to any specific geographical or chronological framework.\(^{177}\)

Despite the patronizing title, scholars and artists have found it difficult to provide an alternative label for naïve art without referencing a specific school of thought.\(^ {178}\) Naïve art has grown out of an outlying position, independent from other movements and genres.\(^{179}\) The correlation between the classifications of naïve art and Eng’s paintings implies a folkloric style to the identity that Eng produces. Eng’s representations of Chinese Cuban identity remain canonized within a genre distinguished for popularizing “the other”. Naïve art provides outsiders with a structure from which to analyze Eng’s content and self-taught technique. From a naïve perspective, Eng’s paintings stem from an exotic expression and simplistic art form. Naïve art is produced from an element of freedom, detached from formal trainings and portraying the unexplored or uncalculated. The question of classification emphasizes how an outsider reads Eng’s works. However, in Eng’s own words: “[y]o, no soy pintor naïf. Para mí, no estoy pintor naïf, [soy] un pintor autoridad.” “I am not a naïve painter. For me, I am not a naïve painter, I am a painter with authority.”\(^ {180}\) Eng does not classify his work as enigmatic or obscure. Naïve art is archived based on its ambiguity, yet many of Eng’s paintings convey the opposite. In this next painting we will see that Eng meticulously catalogues specific details of a

\(^{177}\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^{178}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{179}\) Ibid.  
\(^{180}\) Herrera, "Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera."
singular moment in history. As snapshots from his memory, Eng’s paintings claim accuracy and authenticity that naïve art fails to recognize.

“La Procesión de Guan Gong en El Barrio Chino”

“Cultiva una rosa blanca” revealed Eng’s attempt to incorporate Chinese identity by translating the words of Cuba’s national icon, José Martí, into Chinese. While in “Cultiva una rosa blanca” Eng drew on Martí for unity, in “La Procesión de Guan Gong en el Barrio Chino de La Habana,” Eng depicts Guan Gong as an emblem for stability and protection for the Chinese Cuban community. Eng departs from Cuban nationalism and offers a vision of cultural unity in El Barrio Chino specific to Eng’s vision of Chinese Cuban. The painting maps the socio-political landscape of el Barrio Chino in the mid-twentieth century, revealing the neighborhood at its apogee. The painting features a procession in the Chinatown community following and worshiping Guan Gong, the religious icon of Chinese Cubans. As a cultural narrative, Eng demonstrates Guan Gong’s role as a popular, transnational icon used by the political leaders of el Barrio Chino. Eng celebrates el Barrio Chino in a moment of power and prosperity.

La Procesión de Guan Gong en el Barrio Chino de la Habana illuminates the careful choices Eng makes in order to depict a historically accurate scene of el Barrio Chino and the Chinese Cuban community. Eng’s representation grows from his own memory of the event. The process of looking at the painting inspires subsequent storytelling and remembering. Eng’s explanations of his painting evolves into linked memories of el Barrio Chino. In the midst of describing the backdrop of the painting, Eng pauses on one of the buildings. Eng traces his finger down the small rendering of
the *Hotel Pacífico*, the painting depicts a man’s jump from the tallest floor of the hotel. The man had lost all of his money gambling. Eng watched as he threw himself from the top floor to the bustling city street. Eng’s memory is embedded within his paintings. El Hotel Pacífico serves as a landmark for Eng, reminding him of the young Chinese men who found themselves alienated and stuck in Cuba. The act of reading his own painting opens a vault in Eng’s memory, a vault of the dead ends and shadows where Chinese immigrants lost their voices. The painting carries its own narrative as a time capsule, entangles Eng in the details of the past.

Figure 4: *La Procesión de Guan Gong en el Barrio Chino de la Habana*
Pedro Eng Herrera (1996)

“*La Procesión de Guan Gong en el Barrio Chino de La Habana*” documents a
procession that took place in 1954, during the inauguration of the Casino Chung Wah’s new facilities. Eng’s depiction of the event memorializes Chinese Cuban culture during a moment of defining prosperity and power. El Casino Chung Wah was founded in 1893. As the first, and most powerful mutual aid association in Havana’s Barrio Chino, the Casino Chung Wah received a large Guan Gong statue as a gift from Guangzhou, China. Eng recounts that the procession followed Guan Gong, as it was moved from an altar in the Lung Kong Association to an altar in El Casino’s new building. López explains that the Casino Chung Wah’s new building was “so opulent that it became known as “the palace” of the Chinese community.” The inaugural procession marks the only procession that occurred in el Barrio Chino. The celebration illuminates the elevated wealth and power wielded by the Chinese associations. Eng’s mixed composition paints a backdrop of the social and political structures that existed within el Barrio Chino. The painting features three of the most important buildings in el Barrio Chino standing alongside one another: the Casino Chung Wah, the Lung Kong Association and the Hotel Pacífico. Eng’s composition does not offer an accurate geographic representation of each building’s locale, but instead centralizes and frames them at the top of the painting. The Hotel Pacífico, standing in the center, represents a historic and emblematic building for el Barrio Chino. The hotel was built during the 1920s, during el Barrio Chino’s most substantial period of immigration, to provide incoming Chinese with a place to stay. Eng explains the irony in the building’s name; pacífico translated in Spanish implies

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181 Ibid.
182 López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History 223.
183 Ibid.
184 Herrera, "Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera."
tranquility. The caricature of a tranquil, passive Chinese immigrant is contrasted against the persistent waves of Chinese travelers flooding from the pacific and into a bustling Barrio Chino. El Hotel Pacífico served as a prominent, multipurpose hub in el Barrio Chino, offering fine dining and gambling for wealthy members of the Chinese community. The building represents the wealth and abundance of the growing Chinese community.

Eng’s explanation for the Hotel Pacífico and his story of the jumping man, are just two examples of the many stories that Eng shared when showing me this painting. Eng extracted a memory from each painted detail, layering his images with both nostalgia and an urgency to share every story. Eng defends the authenticity of his depiction, even when his own community members question his artistic choices. For instance, viewers have criticized Eng for painting Taiwan’s national flag instead of the flag for People’s Republic of China in the background of the painting. Eng’s unwillingness to replace the Guomindang’s flag points to his strict adherence to history. Along the balconies of the buildings, Eng has painted two flags. To the left, hangs the Cuban flag, joined to its right by Taiwan’s national flag. Eng justifies his choice by explaining the political climate within the historical context of his painting. In 1954, although leftist political parties were gaining influence in the Chinese Cuban community, the Guomindang party persisted as a political force among institutions in el Barrio Chino. The Guomindang ruled China form 1928 until 1949, when leader General Chiang Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan. The Communist Party of China took over after defeating the Guomindang in 1949 at the end of the Chinese Civil War. Despite

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185 López, Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History 222.
the relocation of the Guomindang, many of the wealthy Chinese Cubans remained supportive of General Chiang Kai-Shek until the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. Chinese Cuban support for the Guomindang and General Chiang Kai-shek dates back to the 1920s. Political mobilization within the Chinese nationalist movement solidified many Chinese immigrants’ relationship to China and to an imagined transnational identity.\textsuperscript{186} During the 1950s, on the eve of Cuba’s revolution, many Chinese immigrants in Cuba shifted their political ideologies in support of Mao’s communist revolution. The “wealthier merchant classes,” however remained dominant and supportive of General Chiang Kai-shek.\textsuperscript{187} The Guomindang and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce consolidated power among the associations, and held control over the Casino Chung Wah.\textsuperscript{188} The rise of the Cuban Revolution, just years after the procession in 1954, marked stark changes for \textit{el Barrio Chino}: by 1960 the Guomindang had fallen and \textit{el Barrio Chino} emptied as waves of Chinese Cubans left Cuba.

Eng’s controversial choice to include the Guomindang’s flag is even more surprising considering Eng’s role as a Chinese Cuban militia leader in the Cuban Revolution. Eng was instrumental in carrying out the nation’s project of Revolution within the Chinese Cuban community. In 1960, Eng co-founded the Chinese Popular Militia, José Wong Brigade, the only revolutionary militia unit comprised entirely of Chinese Cubans.\textsuperscript{189,190} The 47 members of the José Wong Brigade seized control over the Guomindang Party and the Casino Chung Wah in October 1960, raising Mao’s

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 184-5.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 222.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{189} "Ayer - Hoy."
\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History} 226.
red, five star flag, in solidarity with Communist China.\(^{191}\) In 1954, however, few recognized the People’s Republic flag in \textit{el Barrio Chino}.\(^{192}\) Despite his revolutionary leadership, Eng honors the political sphere and preserves the details of life in \textit{el Barrio Chino} in 1954. Eng discursively highlights how Chinese national politics and transnational capital consumed much of \textit{el Barrio Chino}. To this day, Eng treasures the details from 60 years ago that unified \textit{el Barrio Chino}, even if they stand in opposition to his role as a Cuban nationalist.

Eng emphasizes cultural unity in \textit{el Barrio Chino} through Guan Gong, the emblem of the Chinese Cuban community. Guan Gong, the God of War, is venerated as both a saint and a warrior for Chinese diasporic communities around the world. Like the Chinese immigrants in Cuba, the Guan Gong statue in \textit{La Procesión}, traveled originally from China. Guan Gong traversed a similar path and was presented to the community as a physical relic from the homeland. Despite his transnational background, Guan Gong also exemplifies a distinct, hybridized Chinese Cuban identity that has evolved based on local patterns of syncretism. Guan Gong has been incorporated within Yoruba and \textit{Santería} religious practices, aligned with the saint Changó. In her book, \textit{The Coolie Speaks}, Lisa Yun references local legends that featured Guan Gong’s role in Chinese Coolies’ experience in Cuba. Yun writes:

\begin{quote}
[I]n China the legend of Guan Gong emphasized teachings of honor, courage, justice, and integrity. Guan Gong’s counsel in Cuba, however, highlights his views regarding race, as he declares that the Chinese have their gods, as do whites, blacks, Indians, and Malays, but the true God is not white, Chinese, black, Indian nor Malay, but is an omnipotent God…The local emphasis on ethnic catholicity
\end{quote}

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 227.
\(^{192}\) Herrera, "Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera."
bears the mark of the Cuban context and its enfolded in a Chinese folk religion that historically appealed to the masses.\textsuperscript{193}

Guan Gong thus offers a transnational identity embedded within the Coolies’ local immigrant experience. Invoking the folkloric appeal, Eng has painted an image of Guan Gong among the masses. As the statue is passed from one patriarchal association to another, Guan Gong graces the streets of \textit{el Barrio Chino}, uniting the community in worship of his image. Eng omitted the vehicle that helped carry the Guan Gong statue from his painting.\textsuperscript{194} Instead, Guan Gong is both carried by, and leading forward the masses. The title of the painting, “\textit{La Procesión de Guan Gong en el Barrio Chino de La Habana},” emphasizes Guan Gong as the spiritual leader and symbol of growth for \textit{el Barrio Chino}. Celebration of economic and political power takes the form of veneration and worship of Guan Gong. This depiction preserves a memory when \textit{el Barrio Chino} was economically prosperous, politically powerful and culturally unified. The wealthy associations consolidated their influence onto the popular figure of Guan Gong, centralizing power within the Chinese Cuban community.

Eng’s urgency to pass on a disappearing history riddles his work with desire, loss and undoing. Eng believes that his paintings will speak of the history that he can no longer tell after he passes. The symbols of Cuban nationalism in “\textit{Cultiva una rosa blanca}” disappear in Eng’s nostalgia for \textit{El Barrio Chino} in 1954. Small, labored details, like the Guomindang’s flag and Guan Gong’s pathway through the procession, reveal Eng’s strife to preserve past representations of Chinese Cuban. Eng’s method

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Yun, \textit{The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba} 207.}
\footnote{Herrera, ”Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera.”}
\end{footnotes}
of preservation weakens as his generation dies off. Identity faces limitations when it is based purely on the past and Eng’s archive is quickly receding. Fewer Cuban viewers can read his calligraphy or remember the day that the community marched through the streets of *el Barrio Chino*, following Guan Gong. Eng has painted a rich archive of memories. However, he is the only one that can conjure up these recollections. Eng fails to subsume Chinese within the image of Marti’s *Cubanidad* because he is trapped in the nostalgia of Guan Gong’s procession. Eng is a Cuban nationalist, mired in the disappearance of his *Barrio Chino* community. The average Cuban reader cannot read Eng’s calligraphy or recognize a scene from 60 years ago. Eng creates his paintings to speak on his behalf. Yet it is Eng’s very desire to pass down his history that amplifies his loss.

**Flora Fong: Routing Calligraphy in the Caribbean**

Flora Fong García imagines a future of Chinese Cuban hybridity in her abstract paintings. While Pedro Eng Herrera is recording memories of a lost past, Flora Fong is highly acclaimed for her work that harmoniously merges Chinese and Cuban. Fong integrates Chinese calligraphy with her own collection of Cuban motifs in Caribbean landscapes. Fong’s work has graced the stage of the international art world, displayed throughout the Americas, Europe and East Asia. Fong was born in Camagüey, Cuba in 1949.195 Her father immigrated to Cuba from Canton in the late 1920s and married Fong’s mother, a Cuban woman descended from Spain.196 From a young age, Fong became interested in painting. Fong studied at the Provincial Fines Arts School in Camagüey and followed on to train at the National Art School in

196 Flora Fong García, interview by Eliza Kingsley-MaJanuary 2015.
Havana.\textsuperscript{197} Fong later became a professor and has developed her career representing Cuban artists in expositions around the world. Fong is considered a member of the generation of vanguard Cuban artists, who emerged in the 1970s, marking the era of \textit{Nuevo Arte Cubano}, “New Cuban Art”. In 1971, art became an official priority within the project of the revolution. The state’s desire to advance art pressured artists to produce work that balanced the ideological objectives of socialism and honored the integrity of their own work.\textsuperscript{198} In 1988 Flora Fong was honored with distinction in “National Culture” by the Cuban government and in 1989 the Federation of Cuban Women awarded Fong with the “23\textsuperscript{rd} of August Distinction.”\textsuperscript{199} Fong has contributed to murals, videos, kite making and global expositions, experimenting as a painter, drawer, ceramicist and sculpture artist.\textsuperscript{200} Contrary to Eng, Fong did not initially explore Chinese Cuban identity explicitly. It wasn’t until later in her career, beginning in the late 80s, that Fong began to explore Chinese diaspora through the use of Chinese calligraphy.\textsuperscript{201}

In 2009, Flora Fong hosted an exhibit in Havana’s \textit{Plaza de la Revolución} celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. The exhibition, \textit{De China al Caribe}, featured nine large, colorful canvases that stood below a monument of José Martí.\textsuperscript{202} Throughout the exhibition, Fong visualizes different stages of the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean, mainly in Cuba. The most striking aspects of Fong’s paintings are the Chinese characters that pervade her landscapes.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Hortensia Montero Méndez, "Pensar Los 70," in \textit{La Jiribilia} (Habana, Cuba: La Jiribilla 2007).
\textsuperscript{199} Flora En Los 90, Habana, Cuba.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{201} García, "Interview with Flora Fong García ".
\textsuperscript{202} Rojas, "De China Al Caribe."
Ren 人, shan 山, and men 门, the Chinese words for person, mountain, and door, frame the painted scenes, harmonizing with the motifs that occur throughout her paintings: La palma (the palm tree), el platanal (banana tree), and el girasol (the sunflower), icons of the Cuban landscape. Fong explains that the sunflower offers a duality, “bridg[ing]” western materiality with eastern concepts.\textsuperscript{203} Chinese characters enable Fong to integrate a transnational voice into scenes of the Caribbean. For example, Fong combines the character for tree, 木 (mu), in her renderings of palm trees – the symbols become extensions of one another, supporting each other in form. Fong explains her methodology as visually translating calligraphic expressions into a Caribbean language.\textsuperscript{204} Fong collapses the symbols, employing them as her own language of representation and identity. Through an alignment of natural resources and Chinese characters, Fong suggests that a language of integration can grow within the natural landscapes of the Caribbean. In “Cultiva una rosa blanca” Eng faced the limitations of borrowing Martí’s poem, by forcing Martí’s words into a foreign context. On the contrary, Fong successfully merges language and translation, partly by using individual characters, disconnected from a greater narrative. Fong cradles her characters in nature, not in history, allowing her to contextualize Chinese Cuban hybridity in a more optimistic light. Fong’s ability to merge forms creates a more cohesive visual incorporation of Chinese into Cuba. Yet Fong’s method of fragmentation consequently abstracts Chinese Cuban history to a point that it becomes hidden in her paintings.

\textsuperscript{203} “Leslie”, "Flora Fong from West to East,” in OnCuba(OnCuba, 2012).
\textsuperscript{204} HITNTelevision, "Enlace Cuba Flora Fong,” in Enlace Cuba(2009).
Flora Fong’s paintings traverse a transnational passage, and yet settle in a Caribbean landscape. *Me siento en deuda de mis ancestros*” 205 “I feel indebted to my ancestors.” Fong paints across a linear trajectory stretching back to her origins and examining the process of habitation in the Caribbean. Fong’s paintings allude to her ancestor’s passage across the Pacific, yet Fong maintains a distance from history in her paintings. While Eng places the viewer within his vision of history, Fong opens the gateway for abstract interpretation in a timeless world. Eng re-imagined the social and political histories of Chinese Cuban community, while Fong excludes people from her depictions. Fong turns to nature and landscape in order to explore the process of encounter, settlement and community. The following images display Fong’s diasporic reach from *China al Caribe*.

*Es preciso cruzar las grandes aguas* - *It is Necessary to Cross the Wide Seas*

![Figure 5: Es preciso cruzar las grandes aguas - Flora Fong (2009)](image)

205 Ibid.
Fong sets up two parallel scenes in *Es preciso cruzar las grandes aguas*. The character 男人 (men), doorway, frames the aligned worlds. To the left, Fong has rendered 人 almost identical to its standard ideographic form. The first stroke on the far left has been altered, reconstructed as one of Fong’s signature *palmas*. The *palma* is the same aqua blue that characterizes Fong’s scenes of the Caribbean Ocean. At the base of the *palma* sits the outlined character for tree, 木 (mu). A small boat rests on the top of the frame, designating a point of embarking. It is unclear the nature of the ship’s cargo, but we can imagine that the vessel carries bodies – perhaps early Chinese explorers who found themselves in the Antilles in 1491, or maybe Coolies contracted into servitude.²⁰⁶ The boat sets sail from the east, heading through the pacific passage and down into the Caribbean. Within the doorway, Fong has depicted a world of red and rooftops. The absence of nature makes even more striking the buildings layered on top of one another. Among Fong’s encyclopedia of motifs, roof can be re-read as 人 (ren), people, holding up the 门 (men), doorways of each building. Fong represents China as a population of houses and people. Fong’s emphasis on the manmade shelters reveals her conceptions of structure, as domestic and densely populated in China. Contrasted with her scenes of the Caribbean, there are few natural resources in her vision of China. Rooftops and 人 fill the space, and the viewer is left to imagine whether people are coming or going from their homes.

The doorway to the west is made up of a backwards 门. The two sides bordering the snapshot of the Caribbean are made up of palm tress and the top is open, exposed to the light and wind that shape the frame. The open gateway into the

²⁰⁶Rojas, "De China Al Caribe."
Caribbean suggests a linear trajectory from left to right: east to west. The gateway to China has closed and the movement of people is forced westward. Fong’s Caribbean scene exposes the vulnerability of natural resources central to the Caribbean habitats. The Caribbean appears as a place of high variability. Fong aligns the change in geographic climate with the surmounting unknown for the approaching ship.

A moon cycle divides the painting, denoting both distance traveled and the passage of time. The moon’s cycle embodies the dynamic rhythm of a wave rolling through the pacific. It stretches down like an imperfect spine, waxing and waning against the Pacific Ocean. Critics suggest that the moon cycle “unites” the two scenes, bridging “here and there.”207 The moon’s rotation draws attention to the earth’s orbit, and thus illuminates movement of people as part of a greater continuity of cyclical movement. The title - “It is necessary to cross the wide seas” – provokes the viewer to consider the consequences within migration. The underbelly of Fong’s declaration hints at the danger and fear that lie within the sea. The moon cycle appears as a necessary obstacle, an imminent threshold for the traveler to cross. The journey between the East and West requires the passages of time and transition. Fong’s title leaves room to question which direction the crossing is confined to and what invisible fronteras exist within the wide seas.208 Fong captures movement through her stroke-work, bringing to life both 人 and the blowing tops of the palm tree. The philosophy of Chinese calligraphy considers the execution of each character as important as the meaning of the character. Fong extends a bridge between the gateways to China and to Cuba by creating a system of language that communicates her representation of

207 Ibid.
208 Fronteras - borders
both places. Fong exercises her own crossing by recreating the voyage from east to west. Fong crosses the wide seas through the act of painting and by using her imagination to visualize the passages of her past. Fong embraces the movement of migration and memory in her painting.

Many of the paintings featured in, *Del China al Caribe*, capture patterns of movement as seen in *Es Preciso Cruzar las grandes aguas*. Fong paints lyrically gesturing to form and nature. Time and history are merged together in an abstract, but familiar, Caribbean landscape. Fong’s method of painting poetics expands our perspective on migration allowing us to view diaspora through patterns of symbols and space. Fong’s paintings encourage the viewer to open their imaginations in order to conceptualize Chinese Cuban diaspora. Fong invites her audience to create their own narratives for crossing “the wide seas.”

While Eng revealed limitations when appropriating Martí’s words into a Chinese text, Fong’s painting, *La Montaña*, demonstrates an alternative method of rooting Chinese characters within Cuban ideals. *La Montaña* merges the Sierra Maestra, a symbol of the Cuban Revolution, with the Chinese character for mountain. Fong layers the two forms on top of one another, making it difficult to claim which symbol came first.
La Montaña - The Mountain

The Chinese character shan (shan), shoots up the spine of the mountain and lies beneath, supporting the base of Fong’s La Montaña. The exhibition literature interprets La Montaña as representative of the Sierra Maestra in Cuba. The Sierra Maestra was first used as a sanctuary and stronghold for Fidel Castro and his army during the Cuban Revolution. The Sierra Maestra served as a safe haven for Fidel and his supporters during Fidel Castro’s return to Cuba on the infamous Granma in 1956. In early November of 1956, Castro returned to Cuba from exile in Mexico aboard La Granma, a small yacht filled with 82 revolutionaries. Three days following the yacht’s arrival on the banks of Oriente, President Batista’s soldiers attacked the boat, driving a small group of survivors, including Fidel and Raúl Castro, up into the Sierra

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209 Rojas, "De China Al Caribe."

From 1956 until 1959, the Sierra Maestra hosted Fidel, his closest supporters, and a growing guerrilla army. In the beginning months of the Revolution, Castro remained quiet and hidden in the Sierra Maestra. After months of silence, a famous interview between Castro and New York Times reporter, Herbert L. Matthews, revealed to the world that Castro was alive and mobilized in the sanctuary of the mountain. Matthews writes:

Fidel Castro, the rebel leader of Cuba’s youth, is alive and fighting hard and successfully in the rugged, almost impenetrable fastnesses of the Sierra Maestra, at the southern tip of the island. President Fulgencio Batista has the cream of his Army around the area, but the Army men are fighting a thus-far losing battle to destroy the most dangerous enemy General Batista has yet faced in a long and adventurous career as a Cuban leader and dictator.

Castro directed the military strategies and the spread of propaganda that fueled the victories of the Cuban Revolution from the reaches of the Sierra Maestra. The image of the Sierra Maestra became part of the mythology built around Fidel Castro. We can read Matthews’ description of the mountain’s “rugged, almost impenetrable fastnesses” as an apt description of Castro’s personality. The Sierra Maestra became an icon for physically and symbolically nurturing Castro and his rebellion. Fong’s representation of the Sierra Maestra captures the tenacity and power of Castro through the use of Chinese calligraphy.

Fong roots the sacred depiction of the Sierra Maestra within her own iconography of power and history. Embedded within the landscape of the mountain, １１１ represents strength despite the mountain’s variable climate. Rain falls on the left

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211 Ibid.
side of the mountain, under the shadow of the central pillar. The right side is green and lush; a small house designates co-habitation. The changing climate and swaying forests do not threat the mountain’s stability. Fong refers to “I Ching,” “The Book of Changes” to represent the mountain’s stability and resistance. In honor of Cuba’s Revolution, Fong communicates strength by combining Chinese and Cuban iconography. Fong applies an organic technique within each line of her painting, creating quick gusts of tropical wind, pools of light, and strong bases of characters. Fong leaves her individual mark with each stroke. *La Montaña* features not just a Caribbean landscape, but also, it serves as an iconic geography for Cuba’s nationhood. Fong uses her own language to construct Cuban landscapes, entwining Chinese language within Cuban patrimony. Calligraphy serves as a powerful and malleable tool of communication for Fong. Representing images, words, and a long tradition of craft, each Chinese character contributes layered interpretations within Fong’s paintings. As Chinese calligraphy derives from a philosophy of rules and aesthetics, Chinese has often appeared illegible to outsiders. Mao implemented simplified Chinese, in the 1950s and 60s to increase literacy for Chinese citizens. Fong reclaims the illegibility of Chinese calligraphy by inscribing Chinese characters into an iconic Cuban landscape. In contrast to Eng’s painting that aligned Chinese characters next to Martí’s face, Fong has embedded the calligraphy within the face of the mountain, making it difficult to disentangle the symbol from the land. Fong’s successful merging of the two forms visually, buries the tensions that might arise in her juxtaposition. Visually and aesthetically the calligraphy and landscape fit into

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each other. However, this union is less realistic when considering the relationship between Castro’s rise and the subsequent emptying of *el Barrio Chino*. Castro’s strength did not translate into stability for Chinese Cuban communities. Fong’s painting depicts the symbols in unity, yet Castro’s nationalism ultimately subsumed any form of Chinese Cuban identity.

*De China al Caribe* opened in 2009, commemorating both the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC and the fiftieth anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. As a Chinese descendant and as a woman, Fong claims the legibility of her own Chinese Cuban identity by working within a language that is preserved in patriarchy and patrimony. Fong doesn’t only make her identity more legible for herself, but also her paintings render the Chinese diaspora more accessible to Cuba’s populace in the new millennium. Anyone can read Fong’s images and find optimism for Chinese Cuban hybridity. Yet, as exhibited in both “*Es preciso cruzar grandes aguas*” and “*La montaña,*” Fong distances her work from specific, historic narratives. Fong offers new ways to imagine hybridity but does not reveal the rich complexities of the past. Fong’s fame in Cuba and throughout the world enhances the visibility of her narrative. Her Chinese Cuban identity has enabled Fong to complete the passage from West to East by exhibiting her work in China and participating in a larger diasporic network.

**Conclusion**

Pedro Eng Herrera and Flora Fong García open new possibilities and reveal new tensions in their representations of Chinese Cuban identity. Based on their generational divide, Eng and Fong display opposite modes of self-representation in
their paintings. Both artists were raised in Cuba and born into multi-racial families. Although Eng and Fong are both the first generation of Chinese Cuban descendants in their respective families, the age gap shared between Eng and Fong speaks to their distinctive styles. Eng was born in *el Barrio Chino* and watched Havana’s Chinese Cuban community contract from a prominent minority to an invisible minority. Eng spoke Chinese before Spanish, and led a brigade of Chinese Cubans to fight on behalf of Cuba’s revolution. Eng depends on sixty-year-old scenes from *el Barrio Chino* to sustain his Chinese Cuban identity. The stakes are higher for Eng to represent the rich details of his past and to speak on behalf of what is disappearing. Eng has lost his community first-hand, he handles a vexed history that cannot be easily translated or imagined in the current lives for Chinese Cubans. Eng does not desire to assimilate a representation of Chinese Cuban identity that will fit the present day; rather his interest lies in preserving an accurate, detailed depiction of the past.

Fong approaches Chinese Cuban in a completely different form from Eng. While Eng narrates history, Fong creates fragmented narratives through an abstraction of words and motifs. Fong was born in Camagüey, far away from Havana’s *Barrio Chino*. Although her father, like Eng’s, was a Chinese immigrant, Fong did not learn Chinese as a child. Fong began to use language and Chinese calligraphy later in life, and later in her career. Furthermore, Fong’s representation of Chinese Cuban identity distances itself from history. Fong frames her work against large, ambiguous Caribbean landscapes. Her collection of words and symbols expand the passage, stretched between China and the Caribbean, as a place of interpretation. Fong’s timeless scenes avoid the barriers of age and generation that hamper Eng.
There is more opportunity to find harmony between Fong’s free-floating symbols, yet we also sacrifice excavating the narratives of those who crossed the passages that Fong creates. Without seeing people in Fong’s paintings, we are also less inclined to notice the silences within Fong’s art. It is easier to imagine Chinese Cuban as a union of mu and palma, but in doing so we bury histories’ voices within the swaying leaves and great gusts of Caribbean wind.

Pedro Eng Herrera and Flora García Fong preserve and animate Chinese Cuban identity by constructing their own forms of authentic narration. The limitations revealed in both artists’ collections illuminate the complexity of articulating a disappearing history. Both Eng and Fong produce valuable visions of Chinese Cuban imagination. Yet, their respective artistic careers reveal what aspects of identity are more consumable for their audiences. Viewers hold on to the optimism and vitality in Fong’s creations. We can lose ourselves in the blue-greens of the Caribbean ocean, feel the powerful wind pushing on us, and imagine Chinese Cuban through nature’s push and pulls and not through social structures of loss and ambivalence.
CONCLUSION

Cuba is in a state of transition and China plays an important role in Cuba’s current development. Although there is not substantial resurgence of Chinese immigration on the island, Chinese Cuban communities, like Havana’s Barrio Chino, have taken their own steps towards claiming identity through Chinese Cuban diplomacy. Chinese Cuban identity has risen as a subject of interest for those outside of Cuba. During my visit to Havana in January 2015, I became quickly aware of the many researchers investigating the presence of Chinese Cubans. El Grupo Promotor’s founder, Yrmina Eng Menéndez expressed exhaustion from a full schedule of journalists, foreign students, and social scientists asking her to tell her story. One afternoon, while I was sitting in the renovated office in the Min Chi Tang, four different researchers came knocking on the door with questions and expectations. As China and Cuba continue to support one another, their shared history gains significance.

The increased interest in China and Cuba has privileged the research that is expanding Latin American multiculturalism. However, amidst the excitement of growing scholarship and interest in Chinese Cuban narratives today, we are prompted to pause and consider whose narratives are rising to the surface and why? Representations of power have been entwined within each narrative of Chinese Cuban identity featured in this text. Throughout the three stages of Cuban history that I have written about, one narrative from each chapter endures histories’ limitations by defending its role in the present day. In chapter one, the words of Gonzalo de
Quesada y Aróstegui inscribed on the tall, monument persist as the dominant narrative memorializing Chinese coolies in the Cuban Wars for Independence. Quesada enables us to remember Chinese coolies through honor and sacrifice. In chapter two, the portico stands out as the current landmark for *el Barrio Chino*. The stability of the gateway depicts a historic entrance for a neighborhood that began in the margins. Lastly, in chapter three, Flora Fong’s paintings are being displayed in exhibitions around the globe. Her images tempt the viewer to imagine a harmonious hybridity for Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean.

Each of these representations of Chinese Cuban identity offers a space of reflection on the past or hope for the future. The monument commemorating the *mambises* can be seen and touched by anyone who wants to. The monument’s visibility and simplicity preserves an honorable legacy for the Chinese coolie. There is no room for doubt in Quesada’s words: *there was not a single Chinese Cuban deserter, there was not a single Chinese Cuban traitor.*

Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba*

214 The portico offers a universal quality despite its ethnic distinctiveness. Anyone can walk through its gates and cross a new threshold out or into *el Barrio Chino*. It symbolizes a bond of fraternity with the transnational Chinese community that built it specifically in Havana. Like the portico, Flora Fong creates gateways in her paintings. She opens up a world of nature and balance that entices the viewer to imagine distinctive elements merged together. These three representations of Chinese Cuban identity endure, remaining seen and heard to the public because they provide stability, mobility and hope. The monument sits literally in stable ground, ensuring that the narrative will not
be forgotten. The portico brings freedom and mobility to the current malleable boundaries of *el Barrio Chino*. Lastly, Flora Fong’s paintings offer hope and opportunity to witness harmony between Chinese and Cuban.

Throughout this thesis I have observed and analyzed the ways in which history privileges specific representations of Chinese Cuban identity. In this historic moment, as China and Cuba continue to support each other stepping into new futures, the portico and Flora Fong’s gateways in particular, enable us to imagine Chinese Cuban through a hopeful lens of ambivalence and openness. The relationship between both nations produces an aperture for Chinese Cuban identity to continue to develop. We fall for representations that present possibility. It is more difficult to grapple with Marti’s contradictions and to witness the abandoned projects of *el Grupo Promotor*. It takes greater effort to uncover each story buried within Pedro Eng Herrera’s paintings. Yet the process of listening to complex narratives and digging for new representations illuminates the many ways to imagine our own identities and ambivalence.
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