Monuments of a Hidden Past: Deconstructing the Historical Narrative of the Chinese in Cuba, 1847-1959

by

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A Note on Names and Translation

I have received translation help from many professors and my parents. However, any error regarding translation is my own.

For names and places translated from Chinese to English, I use the standardized pinyin transliteration. In several instances, I retain nonstandard spelling (i.e: Chee Kong Tong) to reflect and respect the designation adopted by the Chinese in Cuba. Most Chinese in Cuba have two names, a Chinese one or a hybrid Chinese and Spanish name. When known, I generally use both.
Introduction:

Historical Memory, Forgetfulness, and a Narrative Reconfigured

Yesterday and to-day I noticed in the streets and at work in houses, men of an Indian complexion, with coarse black hair. I asked if they were native Indians, or of mixed blood. No, they are the coolies! Their hair, full grown, and the usual dress of the country which they wore, had not suggested to me the Chinese; but the shape and expression of the eye make it plain. These are the victims of the trade, of which we hear so much. I am told there are 200,000 of them in Cuba, or, that so many have been imported, and all within seven years. I have met them everywhere, the newly-arrived, in Chinese costume, with shaved heads, but the greater number in pantaloons and jackets and straw hats, with hair full grown.

Two of the cooks at our hotel are coolies. I must inform myself on the subject of this strange development of the domination of capital over labor. I am told there is a mart of coolies in the Cerro. This I must see, if it is to be seen.

Richard Henry Dana, To Cuba and Back, 1859

In January of 1847, two ships embarked from the Chinese port of Amoy with a total of 612 Chinese on board. Following exactly 131 days at sea, the Spanish ship Oquendo docked with 206 Chinese on board. Shortly thereafter, the English ship Duke of Argyll arrived with 365 Chinese. The journey of the Chinese to Cuba began in the port cities of China. The Chinese were often recruited by flattery, force, or deception to sign

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3 Riots occurred in port cities like Amoy as a result of the coolie trafficking. In 1852, the British consul in Amoy investigated the riots. Depositions were recorded and published. The depositions were given by various British missionaries, British merchants, assistants in the “coolie” trading firms, and natives of Amoy among others. Wu-tsang, a native of Amoy and the servant of a reverend, recounted his experience with a Chinese man detained in the barracoons. In his deposition, Wu-tsang claims the man was deceived by promises of work. Refer to Great Britain. Foreign Office. *China: A Collection of Correspondence and Papers Relating to Chinese Affairs 1842-1855*. N.p, 44.
labor contracts. Upon signing, the Chinese were housed in barracoons while awaiting departure for Cuba or Peru. If they survived the passage, infamously known for its high mortality rates, they would be housed - once again - in depósitos in Cuba until their contracts (or they are) sold their patrons to work in large numbers on sugar estates alongside African slave labor. Thus began the infamous “coolie trade” to Cuba and equally as unfortunate, marked the tragic beginnings of the history of the Chinese in Cuba.

Beginning with the tragedy of their enslavement, the narrative of the Chinese in Cuba starts - and ultimately ends - as a story of their suffering and its resulting valorization. This thesis examines the malleability of Chinese Cuban historical memory while critiquing the creation and emergence of the Chinese Cuban historical narrative. Their narrative can be boiled down to three plot points: Chinese suffering and enslavement, the transcendence of their suffering through military participation, and their eventual acceptance into Cuban society. As I collated my primary and secondary sources material, I realized this narrative was being repeated by Chinese Cubans themselves, Chinese newspaper articles, Chinese cultural associations in Havana, and historians of the Chinese in Cuba. That is to say, the narrative plot consisting of the same three main events have been disseminated transnationally and throughout this

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4 For examples of coolie trafficking and the circumstances under which they occur, refer to the selected appendices of Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba.*

academic field. It was then I realized how deeply the narrative of the transcendence of suffering had been ingrained and entrenched in the historical memory of the Chinese in Cuba.

Hayden White’s historiographical emplotment theory provides a sturdy framework to critique the Chinese Cuban historical narrative. It is in part the historian’s responsibility and human inclination toward storytelling to imbue a certain set of events with a kind of story. Every history, as White explains, however synchronic, is emplotted in some way. White introduces four different modes of emplotment: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire. The romance is fundamentally a drama symbolized by the hero’s transcendence and triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness. In the Comedy, “hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds.” Such reconciliations are often of men with men and men with their society. The end of the comedy signals the harmonizability of these elements. Such reconciliations are also possible at the end of tragedies; however, they are much more somber and could be categorized instead as resignations of men with themselves and the conditions in which

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6 150,000 is the number of “coolies” conventionally given. All of my oral interviewees acknowledged some understanding of the “coolie” trade and the onerous labor they performed. They even estimated the amount of “coolies” that has participated in the economic and slavish trade. Their estimates were comparable to those mentioned in published primary and secondary sources.
7 By historical memory, I mean the way in which nations, communities, and groups construct, identify, and propagate particulate historical events in a collective manner. Collective memory is a subset of national memory, in fact, it is a form of socially sanctioned memory. In the case of the Chinese in Cuba, they had the agency to develop the narrative that would take hold in their collective memory.
9 White, Metahistory, 8
they labor and live in the world.\textsuperscript{10} When that narrative is analyzed and critiqued through the framework of White’s theory of emplotment, the kind of story is revealed to be a romance, the mode of argument is organicist, and the mode of ideology is radical, effected by revolutionary participation. Ultimately, the narrative of the Chinese in Cuba resembles a tragicomedy.

**Surprises From the Field**

This thesis has been largely informed by my visit to Havana’s Chinatown (hereafter Barrio Chino) during the summer of August 2017. At one point, Havana’s Barrio Chino was one of the largest in Latin America.\textsuperscript{11} At the entrance of Barrio Chino sits an archway which symbolically recalls the grandeur and the livelihood of a once thriving ethnic enclave.\textsuperscript{12} Today, Havana’s Barrio Chino is known as the “Chinatown without Chinese.” During my visit, I began to understand why the neighborhood received this truthful, yet unfortunate designation. I spent my days in Havana walking through Barrio Chino in search of Chinese Cuban interviewees. Often times, as I walked down the side streets, I was met with shouts and whistles. “Chinita!” “China!” Severely conscious of my light skin and my Chinese features, my heart quickened and I walked on. It was moments like those that I felt the most Chinese, the most alone. It was then I questioned where I was and why I was there. Walking past the exaggerated Chinese

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 9

\textsuperscript{11} Adrian H. Hearn, “Chinatown Havana: One Hundred and Sixty Years Below the Surface” in *Chinatowns Around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis, and Cultural Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 163

\textsuperscript{12} Refer to the Figure 6 in the appendix.
restaurants and the indiscernible cultural associations, I could not describe the oddity of
the Barrio Chino and its purpose.

An initial ethnographic approach led me to search for Chinese Cuban residents. I
focused my interviews on difficult questions regarding identity, migration, and diaspora.
I had hoped for my interviewees to detail the shifts in their identity from Chinese to
Chinese Cuban. Needless to say, the answers that I expected my interviewees to give did
not surface. Identity as a category of analysis, to my eventual dismay, does not exist in
Cuba as it does in our American imagination. Frances Bu, a Chinese Cuban woman,
completely disagrees with the notion of Chinese hyphen Cuban. The interviewer asked
Bu: Did you ever feel different because you were part Chinese or was that just accepted
[in Cuba]? Bu responds:

No. I hate to say that but that’s an American hang up. That has nothing to do…
One of the things I hated the most when I came to this country and my brother too is to
have to fill out an application where it tells you ‘race”. My brother used to put “human”
all the time, all the time… And it’s terrible because I think in this country it doesn’t
matter what nationality you’re in if you’re smart and you work hard you’ll succeed yet
they got to know what your race is. And everybody was human. I don’t recall ever, “hey
sure, people used to call me Chinese girl or something like that but they’re not…they
were not condescending - it was not a derogatory comment.” … But no, that is a United
States of America hang up - I never felt any different. I actually didn’t even realize I
wasn’t Cuban. I understand myself as Cuban.13

During our conversations, each of my interviewees recounted nearly the same
story, constantly reaffirming their Cuban identity. In the minds of my interviewees,
similar to Bu, they understand themselves as Cuban. They do, however, recognize their
Chinese heritage, often referring to their connection to their Chinese parent or

COL-STOR AV1 6-3. New York, New York, USA.
grandparent with pride. Standing firm in their self-identification as Cuban, my line of ethnographic questioning soon became moot, indicating a need to change my approach and research questions. What began as an ethnographic approach led me to be skeptical of and critique the narratives recounted to me. While this experience is emblematic of the surprises I would continue to encounter in my exploration of the field, this initial oversight opened up a process of experimentation that was not confined by the rigidity of research questions. In challenging the static methodological field of research, it resulted in the opening up of new possibilities. That is to say, I don’t think the product of this thesis would have been as fruitful if I had found the exact answers to my initial questions. The conjunction of accidental events and flexibility has yielded a more success understanding of how to do research and how to handle unexpected results.

In conducting site research, I encountered several obstacles that would later determine my historiographical approach. The first uncertainty was access into Cuba. The timing for this project occurred between the cusp of presidential orders. The second limitation was access into the archives and access to sources published exclusively in Cuba. A special academic visa was needed to access the national archives. The third limitation was the lack of informants or reliable sources on the ground. With limited access to Internet and unreliable email addresses, it was difficult to build connections on the ground. The fourth limitation was time. I questioned whether there was enough time to cultivate a sense of reliability, trust, and network of sources in the limited two and a half weeks that I was there.
Taking into consideration this range of research limitations, I acknowledge the gaps in the sources I examine. In an effort to overcome these limitations, I’ve attempted to recreate the archives. In part, to “recreate the archives” meant challenging my pre-existing notions of how an archive looked and where an archive could be located. Furthermore, the effort behind recreating the archive was a creative solution to collate my sources in order to emplot them with a kind of narrative. To do so, I began to think of bookstores, cultural associations, and the people occupying those spaces as part of my historical archives. As I walked the moved through the geographical space of the Barrio Chino, I witnessed the ways in which the various elements - the people and the organizations - interacted with one another. As my project is primarily about understanding the creation and propagation of the Chinese Cuban historical narrative, secondary sources became my primary sources in that process. It soon became clear, in a review of the secondary literature, the historians at the forefront of this field were all interacting with the same select sources.14 This selection of carefully preserved sources is all that remains and even more unfortunately, they are fragmentary in nature. Paradoxically, it was through the fragmentation of the sources that revealed a sort of narrative continuity, allowing me to understand the reasons this historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba has survived through the centuries.

14 From this limited set of sources include Antonio Chuffat LaTour, Apunte Histórico de los Chinos en Cuba (Havana: La Molina y Cia, 1927), Juan Jiménez Pastrana, Los Chinos en la historia de Cuba: 1847-1930 (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983), and Juan Pérez de la Riva, Los Calles Chinos en Cuba 1847-1880: Contribución al estudio de la inmigración contratada en el Caribe (Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 2000).
A Review of Scholarship

The Chinese in Cuba have been the subject of considerable scholarship. Moreover, the interest in this topic has grown exponentially in the previous decades. The following is a partial overview of some of the major works that focus mainly on the Chinese in Cuba, all of which have proved incredibly helpful in my research. Each book, with their distinct narrative framework, have attempted to analyze and understand this specific demographic of people from a variety of perspectives. Lisa Yun’s *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* examines the perspectives of 2,841 Chinese “coolies” in Cuba, all of whom left behind incredibly insightful accounts of their experiences in written and oral testimonies. Her investigations sought to coordinate a dialogue between the history of slavery, the literature of bondage, and the philosophy of contracted labor. Yun’s compendium of testimonies genuinely sought to give a voice to the Chinese indentured servants in an attempt to comprehend how the “coolies” themselves narrated and understood their own experiences. Kathleen López’s book, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* focuses on the transnational connections between China and Cuba. López’s book has been widely credited for bringing the topic of Chinese Cubans into the national spotlight. While historical scholarship has focused solely on the period of the “coolie trade” from 1847-1874, López extends her research well into the early twentieth century in order to explore the impact the transnational connections had on the identity of the Chinese Cubans. In a genuine effort to connect both Chinese and Cuban histories, the epilogue recounts the author’s journey to China in an attempt to locate the Chinese ancestors of a dear Cuban friend, Mitzi Espinosa Luis.
Spoiler: in 2009, Mitzi’s dream to meet her Chinese relative came true! Mauro García Triana and Pedro Eng Herrera’s fundamental book, *The Chinese in Cuba: 1847-Now,* attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of the Chinese in Cuba. The majority of this book is dedicated to tracing the trajectory of the Chinese in Cuba with a special emphasis on the Chinese fighters (better known as the Chinese mambises) in the struggle for Cuban liberation, and the general Chinese contribution to Cuban food, arts, and music. Antonio Chuffat LaTour is a second generation Cuban born Afro-Chinese author. His racial identity has lent *Apunte Histórico de los Chinos en Cuba* a unique perspective on the Chinese in Cuba. Published in Cuba and for a Cuban audience, LaTour attempts to provide a historical and legal perspective of the Chinese. Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana’s compiled *Contested Communities: Identities, Spaces, and Hierarchies of the Chinese in the Cuban Republic* provide great insight into the development of the Chinese community in Havana’s Barrio Chino. They dedicate the majority of the book to the various institutions, such as large trading firms and cultural associations, that have dictated the formation of the Barrio Chino and the construction of class conscious Chinese groups. Armando Choy, Moisés Sío Wong, and Gustavo Chui, three Chinese Cuban generals, share their story of military participation in the Cuban Revolution and its impact in *Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution.* The investigations have sought to shed light on Chinese participation in all stages of Cuba’s history. Lastly, the field of Chinese in Caribbean has been pioneered by the abundance of scholarly materials by Evelyn Hu-DeHart. Her interest in Chinese immigration to Cuba and Peru has opened up the
dialogue regarding migration, diaspora, and transnationalism. Her work puts into question the fragility of legal categorizations between the terms: coolie, free laborer, and indentured servant.

Taking into account the myriad of approaches, the originality of my project derives from its deconstruction of the strategically crafted historical narrative and its complete amalgamation in the collective memory of the Chinese Cuban community in Havana.

**Terminology**

A discussion and analysis on the subject of “coolie” labor cannot begin without the discussion of this socio-politically loaded word. The word “coolie” has roots in various countries and cultures that were implicit in the transnational trade of laborers such as Britain, Spain, Singapore, and Malaya among others. When translated into Chinese, the word “coolie” becomes “kǔ lì.” A pinyin translation of this word denotes the definition of “bitter strength” or “bitter work”, pointing to labor that is physically demanding. The term “coolie” was overly prevalent in the contemporaneous discourse relating to contract labor and indentured servitude. Many, if not all, of the secondary source scholars devote an introductory section of their text to describing their choice in the usage of this specific word.15 The conventional narrative of the “coolie” adopted follows one of the two splits: either they willingly contracted themselves into indentured servitude or they were abducted onto ships headed for Cuba or Peru. Robert L. Irick

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15 Refer to the introduction of Lisa Yun’s *The Coolie Speaks* and Kathleen López’s *Chinese Cubans*. 
suggests, “Despite the early general use of the terms, there have been attempts from shortly after the beginning of the coolie trade down to the present day to confine its use to denoting only those emigrants who were taken abroad by deception or force.”

Irck used this term to describe a succinct dichotomy between the Chinese emigrants that migrated willingly and those who were forced into emigrating, while other historians use this term to generalize the entire population of Chinese that migrated overseas to Cuba or Peru under contract. Not only has the term raised questions about categorization, the widespread usage of this term has generated connotations that can no longer be separated from the term, such as the connotations of “coolie” as unskilled laborers, which have been debated and debunked. Lisa Yun states, “the testimony reveal coolie labor to be drawn from widely diverse professional fields, including academia, medical practice, civil service, and business. Class-based notions of privilege and freedom are complicated by the fact that even highly skilled or educated workers were in bondage.”

To reiterate, coolie labor indicates an complex relationship between race, class, and skill level. Historians of the Chinese in Latin America have gravitated indescribably toward this word; each of them have come up with their own definitions and understandings of this word. However, in examining the primary source material (ie: shipping records of transatlantic voyages, the population censuses, etc.), there is nothing in the sources that

16 Robert L. Irck, Ch’ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade, 1847-1878. Asian Library Series ; No. 18. (Taipei: Chinese Materials Center, 1982), 5
17 Irck, Ch’ing Policy Toward the Coolie Trade, 6
18 Benjamin Nicolas Narvaez,“Chinese Coolies in Cuba and Peru: Race, Labor, and Immigration, 1839-1886, ” (Master’s thesis, University of Texas Austin, August 2010).
19 Yun, The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba, 66
suggest that the Chinese laborers used this term to reflect their occupation, explicitly suggesting that they were not self-conscious of this term in relation to themselves.\(^\text{20}\)

For the entirety of my research thus far, this term has done more to confine my research than to help it. The primary sources were able to confirm that this term was not how this select group of people identified themselves. The questions becomes: how did the term “coolie” emerge in labor discourse? Why do the historians working with the Chinese in Latin America all gravitate toward this word? In an attempt to provide an answer to those questions, we must do two things: engage with this group of historical actors on their terms and reiterate the primary source documents faithfully. The “coolies” were not labeled as such in Cuban primary documents; rather, they were labeled *colonos asiatico*. An English translation roughly translates to Asian colonists. Even though, there is a sweeping generalization in the term Asians, it is assumed to mean Chinese. The term colonist imply a sense of settling and permanence, especially in the context of a colony. *Colonos asiaticos* was a deliberate strategy on the part of the governmental authorities to assign a new group of people a sense of political, social, and economic significance. That is to say, this categorization helped the Spanish and the Cuban authorities to make sense of a new addition of socio-economic and racial group into their society. In a society that is dependent on the institution of slavery, there needed to be a difference (at least, legally) in the placement of this new race into their social space. In order to retain a racial and economic hierarchy, the slaves could never be *colonos*. Unlike slaves, the “coolies” were brought to Cuba under the legal protection of

the contracts, had the option to work off their contracts in theory, and inherent in the terminology of their namesake is the suggestion that they will eventually be incorporated into Cuban society through settling.

Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of three main chapters. Ultimately, the essence of this project can be distilled in three guiding questions. It is said that these three questions can provide both the thesis writer and their readers a comprehensive understanding of the significance and originality of this capstone project. And all year, I've struggled with exactly this. The three questions are:

1) What is this project about?

2) What is this project really about?

3) What is this project really really about?

These questions are deceptively simple on first glance. And finally, it is mid-March and I have come to understand the purpose behind telling this story. While it was tempting to rewrite those questions in a more academic manner, I decided against it simply because these questions - phrased as they are - help to reveal what is at the core of this thesis.

This thesis is about the Chinese in Cuba. Even more so, this thesis is the story of Chinese suffering in Cuba and the valorization of their suffering. And even more profoundly, this is a story about historical memory and the cultural authorities as the forces behind the carefully constructed, everlasting narrative of the Chinese in Cuba.
Chapter One, The Contract: Chinese Labors and Colonial Regulations, uses the contract - in a legal manner - to answer questions about the enforceability of a long distance contract, Chinese labor in Cuba, and their economic livelihoods. Yet, in the historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba, the contract has come to symbolize their economic enslavement and their tragic beginnings.

Chapter Two, Los Chinos Patrióticos: Chinese Mambises and the Chee Kong Tong, explores the juncture of change from Chinese indentured servants to fighters in the string of revolutionary endeavors, beginning with the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) and leading into the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898). The image of heroic Chinese fighters has been ingrained in the collective memory of the Chinese in Cuba. Chinese revolutionary fervor and their military participation in the wars allowed them to transcend their status of indentured servitude. In conjunction with the cultural authorities, such as the Chee Kong Tong, the Chinese in Cuba were able to carefully craft their narrative. While historians have highlighted the Casino Chung Wah as the principle cultural authority, I analyze the impact of smaller cultural associations that are equally dedicated to crafting and maintaining the romantic narrative of the Chinese in Cuba. Fundamentally, this second chapter aims to understand the romantic transcendence of the fate of the Chinese and how the Chinese associations aided that transcendence.

Chapter Three, Chinese Cubans: On Citizenship, Necropolitics, and Acculturation, analyzes the concept of Chinese citizenship and acculturation through the lens of the Chinese cemetery and necropolitics. As the Chinese fought in the string of
revolutionary wars, the Cuban perception of the Chinese began to shift. They were no longer indentured servants, but were now slowly acculturating into Cuban society. While fighting in the revolutionary wars allowed the Chinese to break off their shackles of servitude, the Cubans took the Chinese revolutionary participation to mean that they were performing their loyalty to the forthcoming Cuban republic. In the political act of dying and burial, the Chinese used their lives to stake their citizenship claim.

The conclusion considers the endurance of this narrative. I question the limitations to future scholarship in the face of this persistent historical narrative.
Chapter One

The Contract: Chinese Labor and Colonial Regulations

Chinese immigration to Cuba was regulated through labor contracts. The contract, beginning with the name of the laborer, their age, and their home village, detailed the terms of agreement between the Chinese laborer and their patron in Cuba, to whom their contract would later be sold. The contract, a legal feature in the globalization of labor in the Caribbean, was the method by which the Chinese entered Cuba.21 I argue that the contract existed in two different ways. In a legal manner, the contract can answer vital questions about Chinese economic and legal livelihood in Cuba. Yet, in the historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba, the contract has been taken to symbolize their tragic beginnings and was later the symbol upon which the valorization of their suffering was built. In this chapter, I will use the contract as both a lens through which to critique the tragic narrative of Chinese enslavement, as well as a tool to answer questions on labor. Moreover, the secondary source literature has been complicit in the creation and propagation of this narrative by its disproportionate focus on themes of victimhood and helplessness, even though an understanding of such

21 Historians have used the case of the Chinese laborers as a category of analysis in between slave and contract laborer in order to prove an advancement and inclination of a modernizing society toward free labor. The claim that Chinese laborers were crucial in making the transition from slave to free labor cannot be denied. Evelyn Hu-DeHart’s widely studied essay titled Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century debates this exact question. She concludes that the “cooler” trade in Cuba “in spite of their abject condition on the plantations, constituted a transition to free labor, which they considered essential to industrialization” as cited in Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or Neoslavery?" Contributions in Black Studies 12 (1993): 48.
themes is necessary in painting a comprehensive view of onerous labor and cruel treatment. I will focus on answering these three guiding questions: a) What was the purpose of these contracts and to what extent were they enforceable in Cuba? b) What was the impact of these contracts on the lives of the Chinese laborers? c) How do we measure this impact in both the lived experiences and in the historical narrative thereafter? Or rather, does the contract and the onerous labor experience uphold the tragic historical narrative? To do this, I will analyze the inadequacies of long distance, transnational contracts. I will apply theories of labor and legal history in order to question the impact (or lack thereof) and enforceability of long distance contracts. Lastly, I will examine the similarities in which select secondary sources have framed and narrated the Chinese beginnings. This portion of their tragic history will soon thereafter be taken up by various cultural institutions who helped craft and propagate the historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba founded on suffering and the valorization of their suffering, as explored later on in Chapter Two.

Production of the Contract and Labor Recruitment

An analysis of the construction of the contract will be fundamental to the understanding the legality and the enforceability of the contract. How and in what way

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22 Long distance trade, as defined by Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and Roy Bin Wong is the “exchange of goods where buyers lived 200 kilometers or more from sellers,” as quoted in Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and Roy Bin Wong, Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 70
were the contracts assembled and drawn up? Who selected and delineated the
regulations that the “coolie” and the patron must abide by when they sign the contract?
The contracts were printed in both Chinese and Spanish. More importantly, they were
issued in duplicate, “one to the coolie to be kept on his person for the duration of his
servitude and one to the contracting agency; the latter was transferred to the [patron]
who bought the contract.”23 Some factors that remained consistent throughout the labor
contract include: the eight year of servitude, the payment of 1 peso a week or 4 pesos a
month, the promise of two changes of clothing, one set of blankets, and a specified
housing and food.24 Judging by the consistency of the terms of the contract, the
contracts seemed to be mass-produced. The contracts, both the Spanish and the Chinese
versions, were printed in boilerplate fashion and in clear type delineated the name, age,
and home village of the indentured servants. The name of the on-site agent, contracting
agency in Havana or Lima, and the signatures (or official stamps) of the Spanish consul
or Portuguese authorities in Macao were common features on the contract.25 In essence,
such contracts were Spanish contracts. Although the contracts were printed in both
Chinese and Spanish, the majority of the contracts do not bear any Chinese

24 The responsibilities of the patron to provide food and clothing are delineated in the Spanish clauses that follow: “Áque se me suminis tre de alimento cada día ocho onzas de carne salada y dos y media libros de boniatos o de otras viandas sanas y alimenticias” and furthermore, “Áque se me den dos mudas de ropa, una camisa de lana y una frazada anuales” and lastly, “El mismo Señor me adelantará la cantidad de ocho pesos fuertes en oro o plata para mi abilitacion al viaje que voi a emprender”. Translated from the Spanish based on the Yong Wong Labor Contract, Image. April 17, 1874. From the Chinese Immigrants in Cuba Collection: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection in the ASU Digital Repository. https://repository.asu.edu/items/24085 (accessed April 4, 2017)
25 Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “La Trata Amarilla” in Many Middle Passages, 170
administrative stamps. In conjunction with strict Qing emigration policies, this puts the Chinese contract laborers in a troublesome legal situation. Who do they go to if they want to adjudicate their legal woes? Does signing this contract suggest that the Chinese are now under the legal protection of the Spanish authorities? Even so, under the long-distance framework suggested by Rosenthal and Wong, the contract will be difficult (if not impossible) to enforce by the Spanish authorities over the long distance. Although these contracts should theoretically afford the Chinese laborers a sense of legal protection, the implication is that the legal protection by a colonial administrative body is nowhere to be found.

The issues of legality and enforceability are further questioned during the embarkation process. Superintendents of emigration supervised the embarkation of Chinese laborers from the barracoons to ascertain voluntary emigration, after which they were to sign the contracts with their name or an X, if illiterate. The contracts were to be read to the Chinese in the appropriate Chinese dialect, and by signing, he signified acceptance of the contract and understood its terms and conditions. Francisco Abella, a local agent for the Cuban importer company Ibáñez and Company in Havana, recounts the inspection and embarkation process by Portuguese authorities in Macau:

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26 Emigration under the Qing administration was illicit; however, due to Qing preoccupations with internal political conflict concerning the Taiping uprisings and aggressive British trade relations, resulting in China’s economic and political concessions to the British, it became difficult to trace Chinese emigration. Simply put, the Qing administration did not have in place a proper legal system to manage emigration, especially after Chinese concedes treaty ports to British and Spanish imperial powers. For more information read, Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008) and Robert L. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy Toward the Coolie Trade, 1847-1878* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1982).
The Portuguese authorities would address a group of coolies through an interpreter, who often knew only one of the eleven dialects spoken in China, asking them if they were willing to embark. Silence on their part was taken for consent, or sometimes the native recruiting offers would mingle in the group and, with full knowledge of the agents and the Portuguese authorities, shout affirmative answers to all questions in such thunderous tones as to drown out the voices of any who replied in the negative. Then, after giving their own names and ages, they would send other Chinamen on board the transports in their place, paying then $8 and promising them to come on later and rescue them. On the other hand, if the Chinaman raised objections to embarking they were thrown into the street to get back to their homes as best they could. Ragged, starving and shivering with cold, some through false promises, they were persuaded to return to the barracoon and others were waylaid and maltreated by the recruiters until they were willing to return and sign their contracts.  

The process of embarkation demonstrated the absolute deficiency of the contract as a legal document. The contract acted more as a facade to the legal enterprise. Officially, this illicit trade can be characterized as none other than a colonization project.  

The production of the contract in practice began with Pedro Zulueta’s proposal to import 1000 Chinese laborers from the southern provinces in conjunction with the Comisión de Población Blanca of the Junta de Fomento y Colonización (The Commission for Settling of Whites as part of the Board of Development and Colonization). Pedro Zulueta was a Spanish merchant with a complicated history in the African slave trade, who was in fact, implicated by British officials for his participation in the African slave trade. The name Zulueta surfaced frequently in texts. Yun, states,

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28 Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “La Trata Amarilla” in *Many Middle Passages*, 171
30 Zulueta was involved in a trial for the transportation of slaves. For further reading on this trial, refer to: Pedro De Zulueta and William Brodie Gurney. *Trial of Pedro de Zulueta, jun.: on a charge of*
“To launch the coolie trade in Cuba, Cuban planters used a company called the Real Junta de Fomento y Colonización (The Royal Board of Development and Colonization). [They] then engaged Julieta y Cia of London headed by cousins Julián Zulueta and Pedro Zulueta, who devised the plan to transport coolies from China to Cuba.”

Julián Zulueta, a Basque from Spain, came to Cuba in the 1820s to work for his uncle Tiburcio de Zulueta. While in Cuba, Julián became invested in the slave trade with the assistance of another uncle, Pedro Juan Zulueta de Ceballos. Furthermore, Zulueta was the chief shareholder of the “Expedición por Africa” (Expedition for Africa) which owned about 20 ships. With this economic and familial kinship support, Pedro and Julián opened up consistent trade routes for the Chinese in the Pearl River Delta to Havana. Thomas states:

“Scheming to augment slave labor, the Zululetas initiated the coolie trade to Cuba in 1847 and brought the first coolie shipment under the auspices of Zulueta & Co. of London and the Junta de Fomento. With representatives and offices in London, Liverpool, Spain, China, and Cuba, the powers of family and state were consolidated in global empires of political economy.”

Of the main brokers or agents employed under the Zulueta business was the Tait, a part of Tait and Company and Syme based in Amoy (present day Xiamen). The interests of the Zulueta were of the planter elite - they were economically and socially

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31 Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 15
33 Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, 646
invested in the fate of their *haciendo*. With the oncoming imperial powers to abolish
African slavery, the Zulueta were willing to pursue any tangible method that could
prolong their livelihood. With the advent of slave emancipation, the landholding elite
brainstormed methods for replacing the slave population. Pedro Diago, a Cuban planter
and owner of the Ingenio Santa Elena, agreed that it would be advisable for the
inflowing immigration to substitute the lack of African labor, to which the Board of
Development responded, it’s not only convenient, it’s also indispensable. Furthermore,
they claimed it might be the only method to supply labor.  

In the eyes of the governmental development board, the Chinese laborers were
seen as the continuation of the slavery system without the title of slavery tacked to the
act. The “newly invented system” of Chinese indentured labor was being grafted onto an
existing slave labor structure with no intention of change. Within the context of gradual
abolition, the “coolies constituted the source of labor replenishment, delaying the crisis
that would have set in with the end of the slave trade, and making it possible for the
plantation economy to continue to prosper.” With the objective of substituting and
finding a labor replenishment, the Cuban planters briefly considered free white laborers
from Europe. However, “the planters were forced to recognize that the monthly salary
they would pay for each free worker they added would equal the wages paid to industrial
workers in Europe.” Denise Helly claims that a couple thousand of European laborers

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34 Hu-DeHart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century”, 45. The original
Spanish is as follows: “*no solo conveniente, sino indispensable*” and “*el único recurso para proporcionar brazos.*”

35 Hu-DeHart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century”, 42

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
were brought to the plantations to work, but fled the plantations shortly after they arrived. “The Spanish authorities fearing pressure from the countries of origin were reluctant to subject them to conditions of coercive employment.”37 There isn’t enough research on these European laborers to demonstrate whether they were indentured servants or free laborers. However, there was no legal method to constrain the free white workers to the plantations they had been assigned to. Any coercive methods might alert the Spanish crown that its subjects were being harshly treated. With this, they concluded that free white laborers couldn’t be used. After this unfruitful experience, the Cuban planters mentally compiled a list of qualifications that could prolong the process of enslavement while avoiding critique from imperial powers. Essentially, a new source of labor (with the same characteristics of slave labor) needed to be found. The criteria needed to include “no legal protection by a Western power, a large source of supply, and significant cultural differences, to attempt to insure that these working conditions would be accepted.”38 The list of criteria leads us to the only viable option: Chinese laborers.

Inadequacies of Long Distance Contracts

Using contracts as a lens, scholars are able to reconstruct the daily lives of people, determine their relationship with one another, and to understand the strands of legal interconnectivity between various groups of people.39 The question becomes, what

38 Helly, The Cuba Commission Report, 9
39 Contracts in the Chinese context included both an oral and a written component. Often, Chinese folk of all social classes were able to utilize contracts, in transfers, or sales, or exchanges relating to property, grain, etc. For more information, read Valerie Hansen, Negotiating Daily Life
happens to the contracts when they cross transnational borders? The labor contracts contained multiple signatories (Spanish, Cuban, and Chinese) at various international ports, with no governing authoritative body reigning over its production or enforcement. Simply put, contracts over long distances were difficult - if not impossible - to regulate and control.40

Without the appropriate institutions to uphold the integrity of the contract, contracts simply lose their value and enforceability over a long distance. Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and Roy Bin Wong detail the strand of economic divergence along the lines of formal and informal market institutions.41 Before delving into the significances and differences between the two systems, Wong and Rosenthal define the two categories: formal and informal mechanisms. They state, “formal ways of enforcing agreements rely on government officials (ie: judges) to decide disputed points and impose coercive or financial penalties when contracts are broken. Informal mechanisms, in contrast, require that private parties decide when contracts have been broken and what penalties to exact, whether that means shunning offending parties or other sanctions.”42 Formal institutions operate well in individualist societies whereas informal institutions flourish well in group

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40 Hugh T. Scogin refers to a phenomenon called “the regime of the contract” suggesting again that the society needs to have certain systems that first, allow its subjects to enter voluntarily into a contract, second, to understand the inner workings of a contract and the responsibility of the contractor and contractee, and lastly, the society needs to have institutions in place that would be willing to uphold the integrity of such a document, as mentioned in Hugh T. Scogin, “Civil ‘Law’ in Traditional China: History and Theory” in Civil Law in Qing and Republican China. Law, Society, and Culture in China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 32.

41 Rosenthal and Wong, Before and Beyond Divergence, 67

42 Rosenthal and Wong, Before and Beyond Divergence, 69
oriented societies. The authors impart a crucial lesson: not all market exchanges can be supported by formal mechanisms.

Prompted by reports of abuse of Chinese laborers on Cuba’s sugar plantations, the Qing government sent an imperial mission to investigate. The commission was an honest attempt by the Qing governmental administration to ascertain the wellbeing of their own subjects and to enforce formal market mechanisms, but unfortunately, the reality was such that the Qing did not have the necessary power to enact punishment or impose justice. Bearing a facade of administrative power, the Commission did not have any legal avenues to pursue - most importantly, they could not “impose coercive or financial penalties when contracts are broken.” The power of the contract did not lie with the Chinese officials, but rather with the Spanish, who conducted business while in Chinese ports. The contracts, ultimately, did not allow for mediation between formal and informal institutions as there were no structures in place to execute a mediation process nor were there persons to perform the cross-cultural mediation process. The inability to enforce transnational contracts demonstrate that political boundaries were less important than the element of sheer distance.

In the cases that formal contracts were trivial or in the case that third parties could not observe the contract, informal meant the “reputation and repeated interactions [could] serve to sustain markets and their implicit credit relationships.” Using the method of comparison, scholars of economic history have criticized Qing China’s shortcomings in developing a legal infrastructure that could support not formal

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43 Ibid., 69
44 Ibid., 67
contracting and commerce. The explicit difference in the types of market transaction enforcement is demonstrated in the differences of the economic environment, especially in the scale of long distance trade. Such commerce exchange could include trade between foreign merchants and local consumers (or vice versa) and interregional trade.

“Political boundaries may be less important than sheer distance. Most Chinese merchants carried out the entirety of their business within the confines for their empire, and they could nominally have relied on imperial administrators to settle disputes. But they, like their European and overseas Chinese counterparts, preferred to remain in the informal realm. The reason is not that the empire failed to provide an appropriate institutional structure; rather, courts are just not very efficient at enforcing contracts over long distances.”

Even though the merchants could go to court to resolve this matter, distance made this formal enforcement expensive, troublesome, and unprofitable. It isn’t the case that the formal systems were more strictly enforced or worked more effectively, in fact, the Chinese and Europeans (in Rosenthal and Wong’s comparative model) both deployed formal and informal institutions - the only difference was their relative importance and their preference. The most important sentiment is simply: courts and similar formal institutions were not effective at enforcing contracts over long distances.

Thus far, the legal documents and the second source literature have highlighted the Chinese laborers as victims. This narrative of emphasizes the lack of power that the Chinese had in the various stages of recruitment, embarkation, and labor. While the Chinese did undergo onerous labor and cruel treatment, this narrative of victimhood completely dismisses any agency they might have had. The Chinese, as authors were

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45 Ibid., 72
quick to point out, had more agency than was accurately attributed to them. The creation and propagation of the victim narrative becomes crucial to the narrative of the Chinese in Cuba as a whole, as this is the foundation of the tragedy on which they rely. While their tragedy cannot be undermined, it's clear that by isolating these tragic events, putting them on a pedestal, the Chinese valorized this specific portion of their history. Paradoxically, the historians have attributed a certain amount of agency to the Chinese laborers, just to turn around to propagate their suffering. Historians have bought into this myth of the Chinese as victims. The propagation of this narrative has given it authority. Any attempt to disprove or disagree with this narrative is to go against the power of collective memory. The contract, as the physical and material object, stands to confirm the suffering of the Chinese.

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46 Suicides on sugar estates became one of the most utilized methods by Chinese laborers as an exercise of their agency. Suicides were so common on sugar estates such that the Cuban planters were encouraged to find methods to alleviate and end Chinese suicides, before accruing major losses. For more information, read Louis A. Pérez, To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 53-64 and Lisa Yun’s chapter “The Petitions: Writing as Resistance” in The Cookie Speaks (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).
Cost-Benefit Analysis and Economic Livelihood of Chinese Laborers

Estimated Costs of Indentured and Free Chinese Labor, 1874

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDENTURE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of one &quot;coolie&quot; under contract for 8 years</td>
<td>$ 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest on capital invested for 8 years at 12%</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 8 years at $4 per month</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance for 8 years at $15 per month</td>
<td>1,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$2,608</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FREE LABOR</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 8 years at 35 cents per day</td>
<td>$1,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance for 8 years at $15 per month</td>
<td>1,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$2,448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The question of why the colonial government turned to Chinese laborers is further complicated by a cost benefit analysis of the “coolie system” versus the “free labor system”. Duvon Clough Corbitt’s table attempts to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of indentured labor versus free labor. The balance in favor of free labor is $106. The first cost under the indentured category is the “cost of one ‘coolie’ under contract for 8 years” averages out to be $400. There are Chinese laborers who have been sold for higher or lower. The choice of Corbitt to use $400 is his alone. The interest on the capital (ie: the Chinese laborer) for the following 8 years will cost $384. These two
costs combined end up pushing over the balance, tipping the balance in favor of free labor. The wages for 8 years at $4 a month is the cheaper option up front.\textsuperscript{47}

The majority of Chinese laborers worked on sugar estates.\textsuperscript{48} It is known that sugar cane is a fickle product because the “cane had to be cut when the proportion of the sucrose in the juice was the highest, and above all, the juice had to be extracted within 24-28 hours to prevent spoilage.”\textsuperscript{49} The natural limitations of the product required the integrated format of the sugar mill in order to maximize product, meaning that every aspect of life occurred on the sugar plantation.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, the “harvest on Cuban plantations lasted for several months during the winter and early spring and was the period of peak labor demand.”\textsuperscript{51} The rest of the year, the slaves and laborers worked on maintenance projects, tending to the animals, etc. The seasonality of sugar production brought issues of labor to the forefront, mainly that slaves represented an investment of capital and required yearlong maintenance, constantly needing to be worked. The fear of an idle slave, or worse, an idle slave community evoked the paranoia of the white slave owners.\textsuperscript{52} The white plantation owners came to recognize that their slaves were simultaneously the basis of their economic prosperity and a threat to their wellbeing. The

\textsuperscript{47} Similar economic calculations have been made about Chinese laborers in Peru. Peru, like Cuba, participated in the coolie trade. For more information, read Watt Stewart, \textit{Chinese Bondage in Peru} (Duke University Publications. Durham: Duke University Press, 1951).

\textsuperscript{48} Moon-Ho Jung, \textit{Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 7.


\textsuperscript{51} Scott, \textit{Slave Emancipation in Cuba}, 24.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 9.
solution of free laborers came at a fortuitous time, assuaging the paranoia of slave revolt and year-long economic strains - free laborers could be disregarded after the production season. Free laborers could have had the option to leave the plantation during the off season of sugar production to find work on the railroads or in a domestic field.

Retrospectively, the economic cost of the Chinese laborers would have been cheaper if they were hired under the free labor model and perhaps the transition into Cuban society would have been much easier if they were categorized as such. However, the fact that the Cuban society advanced the “coolie system” instead suggests that the majority of the Cuban planter elite were dependent to the slave system and desired to continue without any changes, except to the namesake.

The economic lives of the Chinese laborers on the sugar plantations is clearly recounted in the testimonies they provided to the Cuban Commission Report. While the terms of the contract suggest a uniformity of conditions, such as 4 pesos a month in terms of pay, one cannot help but wonder how much was 4 pesos worth on a plantation? What was the purchasing power of 4 pesos? Piecing together certain accounts from the Cuban Commission Report, we can begin to build an image of the economic lives of the Chinese laborers. Young begins by stating, “The salary of four dollars a month in Cuba may have seemed like a lot for Chinese emigrants, but the high cost of living in Cuba meant that in real terms the salaries did not allow the coolies to save much of anything at all.” The phrase “the high cost of living in Cuba” does not begin to explore the economic exploitation that the Chinese laborers faced on behalf of their pseudo-slave

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existence on the sugar plantations. The contracts kept them bound to a single patron and a single sugar estate for the duration of their contract. They did not have the social or economic freedom in how they fed and clothed themselves. The patron’s responsibilities include providing two sets of clothing, certain ounces of plantains, rice, beef, etc. The paternalistic overtone does not begin to explain the lived reality of the Chinese laborers. Upon arrival at their respective sugar estates, the Chinese laborers realize just how inadequate their economic situation was. Liang A-hsiu states,

“...I and 23 others, driven by hunger and by a consequent weakness which disabled us for labour, begged our employer’s son to increase the allowance of food, and for so doing we were all chained and beaten. On the plantation also there were no habitations for us, and we were told to provide them ourselves. Our monthly wages were but $3, and as even a grass hut for two would cost $10, it was not in our power to obey. We explained this to our employer’s son who became very wrathful, struck us indiscriminately, and together with certain negroes, seizing knives killed one of our number...”

Furthermore, the economic subjugation continues. The Chinese laborers are promised, in accordance to the contract, a certain wage every month. Instead of distributing the laborers’ wages in silver or tangible money, the patrons distributed money scripts that spelled out the name of the Chinese laborer, the amount, and the purpose (usually monthly wages). The objective of the money scripts is quite clear. This method of doling out wage allowance handicaps the laborer’s economic agency. T’and ming kwei states, “...monthly, as wages, we receive four tickets, which can only be employed in payment of purchases at the plantation shop. Elsewhere they cannot be used, nor is it possible to change them for bank notes.” Not only are these money scripts an illusion.

55 Refer to Figure 13 the appendix.
of monthly wages, more importantly, these symbolic pieces of paper restricted the movement of the Chinese laborers, confining them to the premises of the sugar plantation. Again, the insufficiency of the wages are demonstrated by other Chinese laborers. “The $4 wages, is observed in the petition of Pan Tai and 89 others, are insufficient for support, the cost of all being so great. Chiang A-lin deposes, although the wages are nominally larger than in China, the paper currency is so much depreciated and prices are so high, that $8 or $10 do not represent more than $1 or $2 would there.”

When questioned by the Cuban Commission Report, numbers of Chinese laborers claimed they would rather be a beggar in China than be a worker in Cuba.

Three Sets of Regulations

In 1849, 1854, and 1860, the Spanish colonial administration issued three sets of regulations in an attempt to reaffirm the original contract and tighten control over the Chinese laborers. The question is not simply to analyze the original contract, but to analyze the ways in which the contract has been manipulated and changed due to the regulations. How were the lives of the Chinese contract laborers affected by the installment of these sets of regulations? What changes or progression can we explicitly mark in the legal lives of the Chinese contract laborers based on these regulations? The regulations, as frankly put, regulated an existing document while altering and overwriting certain clause in favor of newer clauses that helped to maintain and further oppressed the Chinese laborers.

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57 Ibid., 65
58 Ibid., 114
The first set of regulations (1849) came two years after the arrival of the first shipment of Chinese laborers. In comparing contracts of different years before and after the different sets of regulations, especially after the 1854 regulation, a new clause appeared in the contracts that were printed in Cuba. The translation is as follows, “I the undersigned am in agreement with the stipulated salary, although I know that free laborers and slaves of this island of Cuba earn much more, because I feel this difference is justified and compensated by other benefits that my patron has bestowed upon me, which are spelled out in this contract (emphasis mine).” The wording in this clause is crucial to understanding where and how the Chinese laborer fits into the paradigm of labor. Already stated in the writing was an acknowledgement and concession that the coolies occupied a blurry and contested category. The suggested pay-off is that their patrons would compensate them by doling out other benefits that will make up the payment. Denise Helly, more explicitly states the benefits, “These advantages [or benefits] consisted of free transport to Cuba, the provision of lodging, medical assistance in the case of illness not lasting more than two weeks, the distribution of two and a half pounds of vegetables and eight ounces of salt meat eat day, and the provisions of two

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59 Wong Weng Labor Contract. Image. April 17, 1874. From the Chinese Immigrants in Cuba Collection: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection in the ASU Digital Repository. https://repository.asu.edu/items/24085 (accessed April 4, 2017) The transcription and original Spanish translation is as follows: Yo ______ conformo con el salario estipulado, aunque se y me consta que es mucho mayor el que ganan los jornaleros libres y los esclavo de esta isla de Cuba, porque esa diferencia la juzgo compensada con las otras ventaja que he de proporcionarme mi patrono y son las que aparecen de esta contrata. Refer to Figure 8 in appendix for an image of the Spanish and Chinese contract.
suits of clothing and one blanket each year.60 The economic stipulations of the contract from the perspective of the patronos is paternalistic.

Kathleen López states, “The 1849 regulations limited mobility and permitted corporeal punishment, with disciplinary measures such as flogging, leg shackles, and confinement in stocks derived directly from the world of slavery.”61 Evelyn Hu-DeHart corroborates this point by emphasizing that the 1849 regulations explicitly implied a difference between the Chinese laborers and the slaves. Hu-DeHart states, “One stipulated that whenever there were ten coolies on any one estate, the planter must assign a white overseers to supervise and care for them, and help them with their work. Another stipulated that only the white overseers could mete out corporal punishments to coolies, and never in the presence of slaves.”62 This set of regulations did not question the authority of the overseer to mete out punishment, however, there were cautioned against punishing the Chinese laborers in front of the African slaves as not to upset the delicate social hierarchy in which the Chinese assume a slightly superior racial positioning. Chinese laborers and African slaves working side by side on the same sugar plantation called for administrative caution. The Cuban government worked tirelessly to manage racial relationship in the fear that the two groups would collaborate and rise up

60 Helly, The Cuba Commission Report, 10
61 Kathleen López, Chinese Cubans, 37
en masse against the plantation owners. This fear and paranoia led to the decision that Chinese contracts could not be sold to blacks. 63

The colonial administration made explicit their agenda in maintaining racial and social hierarchy. This speaks to the concept of “natural” superiority and inferiority. The Chinese laborers, to some degree, were self-consciously aware of this constructed hierarchy and attempted to adhere to it.

Lisa Yun recounts one instance in which a Chinese laborer was forced to drink the urine of a black female slave as an act of debasement, inversion of masculinity, and the ultimate sign of subordination. A Chinese laborer by the name of Liang Aren recounts,

“Later I was sold to a sugar plantation where I was always beaten. The owner was atrocious. If the [Chinese] worker was sick, the owner would ask a black woman to urinate and then force the worker to drink it. If the worker drank the urine, then he would be considered really sick and could have a rest. Otherwise, he had to keep working.” 64

Not only was Liang forced to drink urine, he was forced to drink the urine of a black female slave as a part of the spectacle turned ritual inscribed into this constructed hierarchy “presented by the white management as the lowest or the most denigrated form of the body.” 65 Such an instance, does not only reflects the unthinkable torture endured by the Chinese contract laborers, but it demonstrates the weakness of a contract. In blatant disregard for the wellbeing and humanity of the Chinese contract laborers, spectacles turned entertainment have played a recurring role in the lives of the laborers.

63 Elliott Young, Alien Nation, 77
64 Lisa Yun, The Coolie Speaks, 154
65 Lisa Yun, The Coolie Speaks, 154
In stark contrast are examples recorded by the petitions that demonstrate that the Chinese laborers began to realize they have an inkling of legal control over themselves and their situation by knowing their rights - not in the sense that they could refer to the specific clause that was violated, rather, in the sense that some injustice has been committed. In such cases, Chinese laborers formed violent gangs to kill the fiscal administrator or in less gruesome cases, they unsuccessfully fought for wage recuperation through legal channels. Certain cases from the commission report make it clear that the Chinese laborers were in fact conscious of the distinction between slave labor and free labor. Many felt that they were being treated as slaves when in fact they say themselves as free men. Aggrieved and resentful, some Chinese laborers resorted to acts of violence in an attempt to end their mistreatment:

We stabbed to death the administrator, on account of his cruelty. We, 24 in all, proceeded to the jail and surrendered ourselves. Our master, by an outlay of $680, induced the officials to order 12 of our number to return to the plantation, and on our refusal, an officer of low rank discharged firearms, wounding nine and killing two. There are 22 still in jail, and we consider it preferable to the plantations.\(^6^6\)

Others persistently appeals for their own rights under the law:

My master owed me $108, and when I complained to the official I was brought back and again forced to labor for five months, still receiving no money. As he stated that, as a punishment for my bringing a charge against him, he would sell me to a sugar plantation, I and two others proceeded to Havana in order to renew the complaint, and were there placed in confinement in the depot, where I have now worked without wages during seven or eight years. My master has never been called upon to reply to my accusation.\(^6^7\)

\(^6^6\) Scott, _Slave Emancipation in Cuba_, 33
\(^6^7\) Cuba. China, _The Cuba Commission Report_, 58
\(^6^8\) Cuba. China, _The Cuba Commission Report_, 24
Instances, such as the ones demonstrated above, dispel the narrative of the Chinese laborers as victims. While they might be defenseless in a system created with the purpose of subjugating them, they found ways to offer resistance, however futile. Trapped in such a system, violence wasn’t their only answer; rather it was the answer that allowed them the most escape in the most reasonable amount of time. Their attempts at violence, arguably quite successful, demonstrate moments of exception. As Yun demonstrated, petition writing was a form of resistance. However, the appeal to various chains of authority proved to be less fruitful than taking action into their own hands. These moments of violent exceptionality demonstrate an effort to transcend their suffering.

**Conclusion**

In the end, there remains the desolate story of the Chinese indentured servants. In an effort to regain their agency, the Chinese wrested the tragic narrative from the nation, and gave themselves the power to decide how they wanted to tell their stories. Loyal to the historical events, the Chinese used the power of perspectivism to change the way in which they presented themselves to Cuban society and changed the way in which Cuban society viewed them. They romanticized their tragedy and used the sole historical document - the contract - to aid them in upholding their tragic narrative. Rather than wiping it from their collective memory, the power of the Chinese is derived from their collective ability to reexamine their narrative and ultimately use their tragic beginnings to gain entrance into Cuban society.
Chapter Two

Los Chinos Patrióticos: Chinese Mambises and the Chee Kong Tong

Figure 2: A street view of the Min Chih Tang, located on Marique Street in the heart of the Barrio Chino. At present, the Min Chih Tang functions as both a cultural association for the Chinese in Havana and as a restaurant that serves a mixture of Chinese and Cuban cuisine. (Image courtesy of Huiying B. Chan via her blog: https://rememberingourlight.wordpress.com/2017/12/28/an-aging-chinese-cuban-community-fights-to-preserve-its-chinatown/)

If I wandered down Zanja Street, one of Barrio Chino’s largest through streets, made a left at Manrique Street, and walked half a block more, I would find myself standing in front of the large double doors of the cultural association, Chee Kong Tong (presently known as the Min Chih Tang). The doors open to reveal both a cultural association and a restaurant that serves Chinese Cuban cuisine. Even though this cultural association is located in the heart of Havana’s Barrio Chino, it is indistinguishable from
the rest of the buildings, save for the white plaque that explicitly states, “Min Chih Tang.” This association, like many others in the surrounding blocks have blended in well with its Cuban surroundings, making it hard for the viewer to distinguish its presence. The Chee Kong Tong, as a cultural association and a historical site, stands at the intersection of cultural memory and monumental significance. The building stands to represent the enduring presence and the perseverance of the Chinese community on the island.

In an act of commemorating the Chinese in Cuba, the Min Chih Tang published a book, *Huellas de China en Este Lado del Atlántico*, to pay homage to the 170th anniversary of the arrival of the first Chinese laborers.\(^{69}\) Upon glancing at the table of contents, the book seemed to be a synoptic overview of the Chinese narrative in Cuba. What initially seemed to be a pseudo-propagandistic piece reflecting on the history and the ever persistent narrative of the Chinese in Cuba proved to be a significant puzzle piece in explaining the significance of the present-day Min Chih Tang and the organization’s history.\(^{70}\) The book represents a portion of the historical narrative written by an organizational authority on the Chinese in Cuba.

The Chee Kong Tong functions not only as a figure of cultural authority on the Chinese in Cuba, but also as a transitional space. First, they set out to help the former Chinese indentured servants acculturate into Cuban society, by creating a socio-political

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community for them to participate and perhaps had a hand in the creation of small jobs, such as fruit peddling. Second, they set out to help the Chinese revolutionaries (hereafter also known as the Chinese mambises) transition back into civilian life and continue to acculturate them into Cuban society.\(^7^1\) The new-found glory and heroism of the Chinese mambises had begun to take hold in the historical memory of the Chinese and the Cuban community, making the process of acculturation less difficult. The Chee Kong Tong’s support of the Chinese was especially prominent during the transitional stages, in the scenes before and after the revolutionary frenzy. In viewing the Chinese mambises and the Chee Kong Tong in conjunction allows us to examine the narrative of change of while anchoring the phases on transition in a historic site.

As the Chee Kong Tong witnessed this trajectory of change, the organization transformed itself into a place and figure of authority. With this information, they began to construct a narrative. When the narrative of the Chinese Cubans is deconstructed and critiqued through the framework of White’s theory of emplotment, the kind of story is revealed to be a romance, the mode of argument is organicist, and the mode of ideology is radical, effected by revolutionary participation.\(^7^2\) The Chee Kong Tong has the agency and authority to propagate this specific story of the Chinese. The fact that their narrative is not comprehensive nor does it attempt to contribute other perspectives of the Chinese soon becomes irrelevant. While their narrative is based on partial truths and historical

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\(^7^1\) As defined by the Royal Spanish Academy of Language dictionary, the word mambí (plural: mambises) refers to the participants in the insurrection against Spain in Santo Domingo and Cuba in the 20th century. The word evokes connotations of heroism and patriotism. Initially, the word specifically referred to Afro-Cuban fighters, but eventually came to encompass Chinese fighters as well.

\(^7^2\) White, *Metahistory*, 30
events, the Chinese have become historical actors in the narrative of the Chee Kong Tong. That is to say, the Chee Kong Tong, through their role as a witness, can testify to their version of the truth. The romantic narrative of the Chinese mambises in Cuba has been collated and fortified by this organization. The strength of their narrative is derived from the sentiment it evokes from its listeners. There is a phenomenon that occurs through the oral retelling of the romantic narrative of the sacrificial Chinese soldiers. That is to say, the memory of the Chinese who have suffered for their people and their country evokes a sense of pride whenever the story is told, further reinforcing the fabricated narrative.

The romantic story of the Chinese revolutionaries has persisted without seldom being questioned by both the Chinese in and out of Cuba. This romantic narrative, its transnational propagation and persistence, distinguishes this group of Chinese in Cuba from other diasporic Chinese communities elsewhere in the world. This search for distinction and self definition among the Chinese can only be successful if their romantic framework is upheld. The Chinese Cuban narrative has been repeated endlessly and will continue to persist indefinitely, meaning that the identity of the Chinese in Cuba will be eternally intertwined with the constructed narrative. It is clear that the Chinese do not want to part with this narrative - the legacy of their livelihoods almost depends on the upkeep and propagation of this heroic narrative. Ultimately, the story of the Chinese is about valor and suffering, more aptly, the valorization of suffering. The Chee Kong Tong and Chinese mambises are reliant on one another to uphold the romantic narrative they have conjured up together. That is not to say this narrative is false. No, this
narrative choice simply says to the Chinese Cubans and other Chinese diasporic communities: this is the story we’ve chosen to tell; this is the story that we want to be remembered by.

Chinese military participation in the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) and later in the Cuban Wars of Independence (1895-1898) has allowed them to transcend their status as indentured servants. With the help of cultural associations, especially the Chee Kong Tong, the Chinese were able to craft a romantic narrative around the themes of sacrifice and patriotism. This chapter will delineate the intricate connection between the Chinese revolutionary fighters and their connection to the Chee Kong Tong. I intend to analyze the physical space of the Chee Kong Tong, not only as a point of transnational connection between Cuba and China during the revolutionary years, but as an agent of cultural authority on the Chinese in Cuba. Chinese cultural organizations, as the socio-political organ of Chinese life, are fundamental in answering these guiding questions: a) how did Chee Kong Tong enable (or doesn’t) revolutionary fervor among their members? b) how does the history of the Chee Kong Tong intertwine with the historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba? In order to do this, I will first trace the

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73 The existing scholarship regarding the transition from indentured servant to revolutionary relies on and can be traced back to a singular source, Antonio Chuffat LaTour. He suggests that this transition was aided by a group called the Californias: a group of wealthy Chinese from either the United States or California specifically that came to lay the foundations of Barrio Chino. For more information, please read Antonio Chuffat Latour, *Apuntes Históricos de los Chinos en Cuba.*


75 The trend of examining the Chinese population through the lens of cultural associations is not new. For more information, read Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study.* Issued under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (London, Kuala Lumpur, 1969).
robust history of the organization, its revolutionary connections to political organizations in China, and the organization’s effort in incorporating and assimilating the Chinese Cubans in their social and political agenda. Undeniably, cultural associations enacted measurable change in the lives of the Chinese laborers and were crucial in helping the Chinese laborers maintain (or rebuild) their political and social identities on the island, while helping them to reconnect politically with kinship and political groups in China.
Historical Memory

**Figure 3:** (top) The lobby of the Min Chih Tang taken from the entrance way. The photo frames details various seminal figures and events that have occurred in the organization’s history. (Photo by author, August 2017)

**Figure 4:** (bottom) A line drawing identifying and deconstructing each element of the photo.
Through the association’s large double doors is the grand lobby. From the doorway of the main entrance, the visitor encounters the lobby of the Min Chih Tang. A conglomeration of symbols and images greets the visitor. In examining the organization and the placement of each element clearly marks this as an altar to the Chinese in Cuba, raising questions of historical memory and re-remembering. The photo can be deconstructed into its various elements.

The Chinese characters on the red flag roughly translate to China Hongmen Democratic Party, Cuba Main Branch. Whereas the right, in Spanish, translates to Min Chih Tang National Association. Even though the flags should theoretically demonstrate identical translation, each of the flags connote a different meaning. The flag in Chinese characters connotes a political party, its democratic values, and the location, and the role of the overseas Chinese in this regional branch. Whereas, the Spanish flag simply states the organization’s name and its role in a national association. The question then becomes, why are the translations different? What is the significance? The most pragmatic answer deals with Cuban censorship and rigorous oversight of Chinese political organizations. In order to prevent oversight and paying high taxes, most Chinese organizations in Havana registered under a club of recreation. In this way, the Hong Men Min Chih Tang was able to create a distinct Chinese community and culture, exclusively for the population they want to serve. The Chinese flag served to represent the first wave of Chinese immigrants and workers. The Spanish flag becomes almost

76 Organization were formally registered with the government as educational and recreational societies as mentioned in Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Community*, 62
superfluous and seemed to be added as an afterthought for the descendents of the Chinese, who could not speak or read Chinese characters.

The photos in the middle form a centerpiece and act as a roadmap for the history of the Chinese in Cuba. The row of three plaques (two gold and one black plaque) delineate each of the organization’s name changes. The plaque (top) is thought to be the first plaque of the organization. The second plaque (middle) indicates a new denomination, dated in 1927. The third plaque (bottom) was placed on the facade of the building in 1947 with the motive of creating a new denomination. The name changes denote change in political values and (re)alignments.

The layout of the photos represent the critical junctures in the Min Chih Tang’s history; it is not simply a portrayal of who is who and what the events are. Rather, the layout provides a lens for visitors into how the organization views its own history. The prominence of the photo spread - front and center in the main lobby - forces the gaze of the visitor, guiding them in an organized sequence, and using the photos to tell them the history of the Chinese in Cuba. The power of the layout comes from its uniformity and its inherent desire to tell its own story. Each element is not necessarily evocative on its own, but together, the wall brings forth a narrative that has been ingrained in the minds of the association’s members and those who come to visit.

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77 The photos at the cultural association were unlabeled. Using Mitzi Espinoso Luis and María Lam Lee’s Huellas de China en este Lado del Atlántico, I was able to cross reference the photos from the photo spread and label them accordingly. As noted before, the book in and of itself is a commemorative tool. The objective behind the altar and the book are one in the same: commemoration.

78 For more information on the theory of narratology, please refer to Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. 3rd ed. (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009)
The roadmap begins in the top left corner with a photo of Li Sheng Zhen, one of the founders of the secret society, Sanhehui. Right next to it, is the front and back of a monetary bonus collection, worth five pesos. The photo below features the longest sitting president, Federico Chi Casio. Casio occupied the position for 20 years. During that time, Casio witnessed the change in organizational denomination and the physical relocation of the organization’s building.

The next photo features the Min Chih Tang board members discussing the purchase of the new building. The photograph captured the moment the deal was closed, with then sitting President Federico Chi Casio signing the deal, dated January 18, 1945. The occupation of a new building in the Barrio Chino signified the growing financial and cultural importance of the Min Chih Tang.

The next event in the roadmap celebrates the delegates of the Second Panamerican Congress of the Min Chih Tang celebrating in Havana, dated September 1-3, 1947. Another celebratory event honors the ritual of Chinese funerary practices with the inclusion of a photo of the organization’s pantheon at the Chinese cemetery on the outskirts of the city center.

Following the roadmap, the organization seemed to have a relatively stable time period as represented by the abundance of photos celebrating the cultural events. The entire bottom of, consisting of six photos, showcases events such as lion dancing, staff

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80 For more information on Federico Chi Casio, read Triana García and Herrera Eng, *The Chinese in Cuba, 1847-Now* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 75-79
setting up the grand salon in preparation for dinner and performances, Chinese opera singing, and second or third generation Chinese Cubans practicing mixed martial arts. Furthermore, as we move back up the roadmap, the photographs of the newspaper printing workshops and original newspaper pieces demonstrate the organization’s allegiance to the information revolution in Cuba through the production of its left leaning newspaper: Hong Men Kong Po. Several left leaning newspapers were printed and distributed from the basement of the Min Chih Tang, signaling their dedication to the revolutionary efforts not only on the war fronts, but as a crucial player in the information revolution.\textsuperscript{81}

Lastly, the bottom right of the photo demonstrate two important items. The characters on the white rectangular box indicates that it is a donation box. It has no slot and the only opening is by key. It is unclear who is donating to the organization. Right next to the box is a statue of a Chinese fruit peddler. Oddly enough, the insistence of the Min Chih Tang to perpetuate their tragic beginnings with indentured servants might indicate the usage of the figure of a “coolie” instead. Rather, they chose the figure of the fruit peddler. The inclusion of the fruit peddler statue signals a change in Min Chih Tang’s membership base. No longer were they aiding or demobilizing the Chinese indentured servants back into civil society, the Min Chih Tang’s membership began to consist of more low wage workers who paid low membership fees.\textsuperscript{82}

The altar to the Chinese stands as physical representation of the carefully crafted historical memory. The deconstruction the identity, memory, and culture of the Chinese

\textsuperscript{81} Rolando Chiong Chang, interview by Hai Lun Tan, August 19, 2017, transcript
\textsuperscript{82} Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, \textit{Contested Community}, 69
in Cuba is strategic and ultimately, effective.\textsuperscript{83} What’s more impressive is the authority of the organization to propagate and regulate a carefully crafted narrative for generations, continuing into the present day.

The lobby of the building featured plaques and framed photos that delineate the history of the cultural association. On the two sides of the framed photos and plaques was a poster. The poster states,

The secret society Chee Kung was created in 1673. The patriotic Chinese group in Cuba founded, in 1887, the society San He-Hui to help the Chinese residents in the country by attempting to insert them better into Cuban life while defending their rights. In 1902, the society joined the Hong Men Chee Kung Tong and adopted their symbols and their principles. During 1945, before the growing number of members and the rising prestige, they created a commission in order to acquire a new property and build a new headquarters. The building was inaugurated on the 16th of December, in this same year, after months of arduous labor. In an agreement made by the General Assembly of Associates, on the 16th of April of 1947, the society changed its name to Hong Men Min Chih Tang. In actuality, our society maintained the principles of friendship, loyalty, justice, for the benefit of everyone (\emph{emphasis mine}).\textsuperscript{84}

The most crucial line on this poster is, “The patriotic group of Chinese in Cuba was founded, in 1887, the society of San He-Hui in order to help the Chinese residents

\textsuperscript{83} For more information on deconstructing historical narratives, its implications, and shortcomings, refer to Ethan Kleinberg, \textit{Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

\textsuperscript{84} The message has been translated from photo taken by the author of the poster in the association. The original Spanish is as follows: La sociedad secreta Chee Kung se creó en 1673. El grupo patriótico chino en Cuba fundó en 1887, la sociedad San He-Hui para ayudar a los chinos residentes en el país y contribuir a su mejor inserción en la vida cubana, al tiempo que defendía sus derechos. En 1902, la sociedad se une a hong Men Chee Kung Tong y adopta sus símbolos y sus principios. Durante 1945, ante el creciente número de miembros y el prestigio alcanzado, se crea una comisión para adquirir un nuevo terreno y edificar una nueva sede. El edificio fue inaugurado el 16 de diciembre de ese mismo año, después de 8 meses de arduo labor. Mediante acuerdo de la asamblea general de asociados, el 16 de abril de 1947, la sociedad cambia su nombre al actual Hong Men Min Chih Tang. En la actualidad nuestra sociedad mantiene los principios de amistad, lealtad y justicia, en beneficio de todos.
in the country by attempting to insert them better into Cuban life while defending their rights.” This singular sentence in the poster makes clear three things: a) the Chinese residents could mean no other than the Chinese contract laborers who remained on the island because they could not pay their passage back to China b) the Chinese were already making progress in the process of acculturation c) cultural associations’ roles included both acculturation while helping Chinese defend their rights.  

This poster advocates the founding myth and temporal trajectory of the Chee Kong Tong. While the poster delineates a polished timeline of dates and crucial events, a careful examination of the dates demonstrates a gap in the narrative continuity. In other words, there is an uncounted for gap of 43 years between 1902 and 1945. Starting in 1902, this poster claims that the society joined the Hong Men Chee Kung Tong and adopted their symbols and principles. Suddenly, the timeline jumps forward to 1945 in which the organization’s membership and prestige have grown exponentially. In that same year, the poster boasts of a new building and an organizational name change. The temporal gap suggests an omission of the organization’s history and their socio-political agenda. Perhaps, this narrative discontinuity is purposeful and suggests an ineffable portion of their history that cannot be easily interwoven into the polished tale they have created of the organization’s history.  

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85 Chinese were beginning to own sweetmeat shops and gain acculturation economically, although most times, they were forced to sell on credit and face harassment when asking for payment. Refer to China. Cuba Commission. *The Cuba Commission Report*, 112.
86 For more information about revolutionary overseas Chinese and efforts to mobilize overseas support, read Marie-Claire Bergère and Janet Lloyd, *Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).
The historical timeline of 1902-1945, on both sides of the Atlantic, is riddled with revolutionary activity and fervor, beginning with the string of Cuban Wars of Independence and leading up to the Chinese Revolution (both in 1911 and in 1925) and the Chinese Civil War. The revolutionary fervor that gripped China had both direct and indirect transnational effects on the overseas Chinese Cuban community. This narrative discontinuity during the crucial timespan of four decades can shed light onto how the overseas Chinese in Cuba were participating in revolutionary activity in Cuba as a way of demonstrating allegiance to both their ancestral homeland and their imagined communities. Moreover, an analysis of the organizational name changes helps to measure the shifting political allegiances of the Chee Kong Yong and its members during the phase of transatlantic revolutionary fervor. The organization’s name suggests political alignments and realignments. To track these name changes is to examine the shift in political ideology and from there, an analysis of contemporary events can contextualize the reasoning behind the organization’s political direction will surface.

While this poster stands to represent the organization’s comprehensive history, it fails to mention the prevalent history of revolution. The Chee Kong Tong’s history cannot be separated from the revolutionary discourse that dominated both China and Cuba. To exclude it, as they have done on their poster, nullifies the importance of the transnational politics. An analysis of the revolutionary fervor through the socio-political lens can help make clear the transition of the Chinese in Cuba during these years. While small enterprises, such as sweetmeat shops and fruit stalls, were beginning to populate

the streets, the majority of the Chinese were still shackled to sugar estates and poverty. The “coolie trade” officially ended in 1874, but that did not stop vessels, captains, and crimps to continue recruiting Chinese indentured workers from China nor did it stop administrative authorities in Cuba to implement methods to prevent Chinese freedom.\footnote{Even if the Chinese indentured servants worked off their contracts, they were still not technically free. To be “free”, they needed to purchase the “freedom paper” which indicates the completion of the contract. However, in order to purchase said freedom paper, they needed to first purchase the “Release from Contract Paper” or “Complete Contract” paper. Lisa Yun describes this circuitous route toward freedom as the paper chase, alluding to the endless struggle for freedom. For a comprehensive list of “papers”, their functions, and the methods to obtain them, refer to Lisa Yun, \textit{The Coolie Speaks}, 112-115.}

Historians have generally agreed that Chinese participation “in the Cuban struggles for independence from Spain that enabled the Chinese to be included as an integral component in the public discourse on the Cuban nation.” The public discourse surrounding the Chinese participation in the Cuban Wars of the Independence have been glorified by figures like Gonzalo de Quesada and cemented in a public monument dedicated to their involvement. This black marble column is located at the interaction of Calle L and Línea, miles away from Chinatown.\footnote{For more information on monuments and memorialization, read Sanford Levinson, \textit{Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).} Engraved on the marble is the phrase, “There was not a Chinese-Cuban defector, there was not a Chinese-Cuban traitor.”\footnote{Refer to Figures 9 and 10 in appendix.}

This bold statement has positively colored the entirety of the public discourse surrounding Chinese participation in the Cuban Wars of Independence. Quesada’s bold claims presumes a sort of fidelity and loyalty that the Chinese militants had in order to help Cuba transition from a colony to a nation. Why is it that Chinese loyalty was not questioned? Did they, to some degree, know that their participation would yield positive...
results, like gaining enough respect to be considered a part of the fabric of Cuban society?

While Chinese participation in the Cuban Wars of Independence was an integral component to their eventual acceptance into Cuban society, the glorification of Chinese fighters was a selective process. The historical narrative of these wars was built around a handful of seminal figures whose names and heroic actions are still praised in oral stories and in the collective memory of Chinese Cubans. These figures, such as José Bu Tak and José Tolón, were and still currently regarded favorably in Cuban nationalist discourse.

The romantic narrative of the suffering of the Chinese revolutionaries has been symbolized and glorified in *Huellas de China en Este Lado del Atlántico*. With Mitzi Espinoza Luis, as the compiler and María Lam Lee as the coordinator, the book consisted of compiled essays from authors at various universities and various organizations that are dedicated to the progression and perseverance of the Chinese Cuban community. The second chapter titled, “Hong Men Chee Kong Tong of Cuba, the history and the present of a centenary society” is written by Mitzi Espinosa Luis and Violeta Luis Quintana, both of whom work at the Min Chih Tang currently. They begin the chapter by acknowledging and propagating the narrative of “coolie” victimhood. As they suggest, the Chinese indentured workers were able to actively rise up from that narrative through enacting (reconstructing as they call it), “a type of institution of ancient tradition in southern China: the secret societies.”

Already, this assertion raises serious questions about the beginnings of this specific practice and the establishment of “ancient

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91 Mitzi Espinosa Luis and Maria Lam Lee, *Huellas de China en este lado Atlántico*, 32
traditions” overseas. Luis and Quintana assert that such secret societies have made their way to this side of the Atlantic, and their establishment has imbued this group of Chinese Cubans with the political and social agency to overwrite their narrative of victimhood and ease them into the fabric of the Cuban society. In their phrasing, Luis and Quintana suggest an inherent agency and strength in the Chinese who were able to “reconstruct” the secret societies. The notion of reconstructing explicitly suggest rebuilding, as if the models and the principles of the secret societies in China have been transported to Cuba through the memories and lived experiences of the Chinese in Cuba. Yet, they suggest a distinction between the Chee Kong Tong in China and the association in Cuba. According to Luis and Quintana, the primary objectives of these societies in China is to combat the Manchu Dynasty and the feudal regime of the Mandarins, whereas in Cuba, such associations “maintained the external forms of the ritual, functioning like fraternal unions in order to aid the necessary compatriots, to promote liberty and remove the persecution of the authorities looking for employment and lodging.”

Understandably, the objectives of the Chee Kong Tong in Cuba are driven and defined by the circumstances and politics of that specific region, however, I argue the fundamental beliefs of the Chinese freemasonry transcends nations and regional differences. It’s commonly believed that the majority of such secret societies flourished in the Southern provinces of China, especially in the Pearl River Delta region - the same region that the Chinese indentured servants emigrated from. Upon their arrival, they most likely did not shed their political and religious beliefs, leading to the plausible

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92 Mitzi Espinosa Luis and Maria Lam Lee, *Huellas de China en este lado Atlántico*, 31
explanation that they secretly constructed societies with similar fundamental anti-Qing sentiments, leading to their future involvement against the Qing Dynasty. With much of the history of the secret societies obscured, various theories have surfaced as to how the Hongmen and the Chinese freemasons are connected.\(^3\) Luis and Quintana suggest that “some Hongmen societies have added the name of Chinese Freemasons (francmasons chinos) to their denomination and have adopted their masonic emblem of the stone and the compass, perhaps because, they share common features of fraternity, brotherhood, and benevolence.” However, in the author’s own research, they plainly states that they did not encounter documents that point to the motive or the date in which the freemason symbol became the emblem of the Chee Kong Tong, despite the symbol’s prevalence in the association: on the plaques, the banners, the flags, official documents, and the spine of this very book. In the context of the obscure history and origins of secret societies, the lack of documents and dates is not in the least surprising. Even with this hazy understanding of the historiography of secret societies, volumes of text have been written in order to better understand the dichotomy, the purpose, and the origins of such organization. The Chee Kong Tong was neither a revolutionary organization with the mission of protest and dissent, nor was it simply a friendly mutual aid organization to help the marginalized. The roles of such organizations ebbed and flowed

and changed depending on the political and social environment and the need of the population they serve.

**Revolution and Independence**

It remains unclear how many Chinese persons fought in the wars since the majority of the Chinese registered with their Spanish names. The name change could been interpreted to mean that the Chinese were beginning to reimagine their place in Cuban society and among their Cuban counterparts. The end of the Ten Years’ War was marked by the Pact of Zanjón, a truce made based on the understanding of mutual exhaustion. Recalling the exchange of freedom for military participation, “a general amnesty pardoned insurgent Cubans and guaranteed unconditional freedom to all African slaves and Asian indentured workers registered in the ranks of the Liberation Army in 1878.” The series of military conflict between Cuba, Spain, and later the United States, was far from over. Soon thereafter, unresolved conflict and a separated nation, led to the Cuban Wars of Independence that would lead to the founding of the Cuban Republic in 1902.

The Cuban Wars of Independence (1895-1898) evoked the same revolutionary fervor among the Chinese community, and once again, the Chinese took up arms

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96 Pérez, Louis A. *Cuba between Empires, 1878-1902* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), 4
alongside their mulatto and Cuban counterparts. García Triana and Eng Herrera argue that the “Chinese had shaken off the contracts that tied them to a place of work and an owner, so war was no longer the only way of achieving a dignified existence.”

While war may not have been the singular method nor the most sought after to achieve a dignified existence, the inclusion of the Chinese in Cuban society was nowhere near completion. While the glory and heroism of Chinese participants in the previous wars carried over, the Cuban Wars of Independence represented a turning point of remembrance in the Chinese-Cuban collective memory. In other words, this revolutionary event and its seminal Chinese figures would be recalled and remembered even in their death - their military achievements and valor is now commemorated in the Chinese cemetery in Havana. Names and the lived experiences of figures like José Bu Tak and José Tolón will be etched permanently into the geopolitical space of the cemetery and the city.

The Cuban Wars of Independence were preceded by the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) and the Little War (1879-1880). The conventional chroniclers of the Ten Years’ War have attributed the initial step into the revolutionary era to Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a member of the elite class and the owner of a sugar mill in the Matanzas district. On the morning of October 10th, 1868, Céspedes emancipated the slaves and indentured workers on his sugar estate and set off the armed struggle against Spain with the proclamation of the Grito de Yara (Shout of Yara), in the city of Yara, Cuba.

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97 Triana García and Herrera Eng, *The Chinese in Cuba*, 15
98 Triana García and Herrera Eng, *The Chinese in Cuba*, 119
In the months that followed, the insurrection gained momentum, enough so that other Cuban planters followed the lead of Céspedes in emancipating their slaves and indentured servants. Undoubtedly, the promise of freedom through revolution was enticing. Joining the insurgent groups offered a path to emancipation in exchange for their service and loyalty. In analyzing the stories of hundreds and possibly thousands of Chinese indentured servants accepting military service begs the question: why did the Chinese care about freeing Cuba (the country that enslaved them) from Spain?

There are various angles in which we can attempt to understand the motivations of the Chinese workers. First, the promise of emancipation seemed to provide a clearer understanding of their own future in this country. For decades, since the Chinese arrival on the island, they have been subjugated to this specific role of indentured servitude with absolutely no possibility of breaking free. While a handful of Chinese indentured servants became the head of work gangs, cuadrillas, and were able to purchase their own manumission from the extra earnings through the work gangs, the majority of the Chinese were stuck in the liminal space between indentured servitude and free labor. Paradoxically, in an attempt to break the cyclical legal and economic subjugation, the Chinese resolved to fight on behalf of the same country that enslaved them. Underestimating the promise of freedom that might eventually lead to societal acceptance would be exactly that, an underestimation. Secondly, a economic hierarchy was beginning to disrupt the Chinese workforce. Documents, such as money orders paid to the Chinese in charge of cuadrillas from the owner of the sugar estate, prove that
certain Chinese workers were beginning to gain an economic upper hand.\textsuperscript{99} Perhaps, in the context of extensive kinship groups, there might have existed a notion that one elite member could elevate the rest of their group. Kinship groups played an immensely crucial role in explaining the relationships between the Chinese overseas and their ancestral homeland.\textsuperscript{100} Similarly, self-interest cannot be underestimated. Thirdly and most optimistically, the Chinese fought alongside their black counterparts with Cuba against Spain because the Chinese were beginning to develop a sense of a diasporic community and home in Cuba. Perhaps, this is where the abstract definition of a diasporic homeland has begun to develop through the shared labor experience. Perhaps, Chinese participation can be explained through a conjunction of the three reasons.

Gonzalo de Quesada, a key architect in Cuba’s Independence movements alongside Martí, framed the Chinese decision to participate in an altruistic sense. From this excerpt of his pamphlet titled, \textit{Mis Primera Ofrenda}, he states:

Exile, threats, jails, could not destroy what was in all hearts, an on the 10th of October 1868, on the memorable field of Yara, the white slave unfurled the flag of equality and fraternity, under the folds of which could be sheltered all those who had been slaves and who henceforth aspired to freedom. The Chinese could not fail to see that this flag meant his vindication: his intelligence led him to understand quickly that it meant liberty, his heart responded and told him, ‘You must go with those who try to uplift you to the condition of a man of dignity!’ Spontaneously they joined the insurgent ranks, and afterwards they cleverly entered the cities to recruit among their race… When the Cuban forces caused the plantation hands to rebel, the Chinese officers explained to them the reasons


\textsuperscript{100} The strongest ties maintained between the overseas Chinese and China were based on kinship, common ancestry, and common regions. For more information, read Michael Szonyi, \textit{Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and David Faure, \textit{Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
of the war and enthusiastically they swore to serve the flag of the Republic. Years of
demoralizing servitude had not destroyed the fibres of nobility in their souls; they would
fight against the flag which enslaved them; they would be
companions and friends in need of those who - like them - had borne the
colonial yoke.\textsuperscript{101}

Quesada seemed to truly believe that Chinese participation stemmed from an inherent
sense of loyalty and fondness for Cuba that seemed to follow their personal and
economic vindication. This narrative speaks to the strength of commiseration of those
who “had borne the colonial yoke. In a sense, Quesada seems to remove the burden of
responsibility off of Cuba’s shoulders. Rather than condemning the Cuban nation for
their past involvement with slave-like practices, he shifts the blame to the larger imperial
power, Spain, as the general force of subjugation. Furthermore, Quesada paints the
Chinese as inherently loyal peoples and extremely forgiving even to those who had
formerly enslaved them.

The Wars of Independence, in the most general sense, accomplished two things.
Firstly, the Chinese who participated in the war were able to gain their manumission.
Secondly, Cuba received its independence from the United States and was now a
functioning republic. With the emergence of Cuban national and the vindication of the
Chinese, there seemingly was no further reason to continue fighting. No longer was this
a revolution for nationhood nor was this a revolution for personal freedom, the
demands of both national and personal freedom had been met. Yet the question
remains: Why did the Chinese stay on? How was their cohesion maintained? One
possible answer, one that I’ve previous disallowed and did not attribute more

\textsuperscript{101} Gonzalo de Quesada, \textit{Mi Primera Ofrenda} accessed through García Triana and Herrera Eng, 
\textit{The Chinese in Cuba, 1847-now}, Appendix 2
significance is: altruism. Barrio Chino, in its present day, is known as a “Chinatown without Chinese.” It is difficult to imagine this phrase in conjunction with the knowledge that Havana’s Barrio Chino was at one point the largest Chinese ethnic enclave in Latin America, rivaling only Peru and Mexico. We cannot underestimate the power and influence that Havana’s Barrio Chino had over its residents and international networks in the early 19th century. The power and influence exuded by wealthy importers and merchants in Barrio Chino is precisely what led to the creation of social, political, and economic organizations such as the Chee Kong Tong. That is to say, the foundation of the Barrio Chino - with its mutual aid associations, brotherhood fraternities, import firms, and peddlers - had been laid. As easy as it can be to dismiss altruism as a reason for coherence (especially taking into account the history of Chinese struggle for freedom), altruism was a choice. Altruism was an active choice, perhaps, one of the few choices the Chinese were presented with after the wars. While Chinese participation cannot be explained as Quesada quotes, by “the fibers of nobility in their souls”, we cannot disregard their desire to maintain coherence in an imagined community by continuing to cultivate the Barrio Chino. While the Chee Kong Tong, a socio-political organization, might not have played as significant of a role in fueling revolutionary fervor as the Casino Chung Wah does not diminish their importance in this narrative - rather, an exploration of the Chee Kong Tong as a less prevalent organization helps to expand our understanding of Chinese mutual aid associations and fraternity brotherhoods in

102 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Community*, 113
103 The various number of cultural associations, Chinese restaurants, and laundromats prove the solidification of a thriving enclave. Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Community*, 31.
Cuba within a grand narrative. While the connection between the Chinese revolutionaries and the Chee Kong Tong isn’t comprehensively traced, the complete dismissal of this linkage would be tragic. The last line of the mission statement poster states, “... our society maintained the principles of friendship, loyalty, justice, for the benefit of everyone.” From this statement, the intended mission of the Chee Kong Tong is to cultivate and foster a link not only between the Chinese and Cubans, but between the Chinese-Cubans and their descendents, the Chinese-Cubans and Cuban society at large, between Havana’s regional branch of the Chee Kong Tong to other regional branches in Cienfuegos and Matanzas, and lastly to build a transnational network of the Cuban Chee Kong Tong chapter to San Francisco and the Overseas Committee in China. The traits and characteristics (ie: friendship, loyalty, and justice) of the Chee Kong Tong are universal concepts with the intention of benefiting everyone. The Chee Kong Tong, as a cultural association and historical site, stands at the intersection of benevolence, altruism, and cultural memory. In a sense, by agreeing to become a member of the society, the Chinese pledge to these rules. Their role in the revolutionaries wars was not only to secure the independence of their persons, the nation, but of the ever-enduring values of their Chinese community.

We need to harken back to the question previously posed: why did the Chinese continue to fight? How did they maintain (or not) their cohesion? While the Chinese fight for independence in Cuba proved successful, China was simultaneously undergoing its own age of revolution and the Chinese community (more specifically, the Chinese

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104 Refer to page 48 for the author’s translation of the poster.
overseas) were not sitting idly by as they began to be affected by global and transnational changes in political ideologies. That is to say, China was also at a critical juncture. The tension between warring political ideologies, the Nationalist Guomindang and the Communist Party, were beginning to rupture. This turning point would determine the political and economic methodology in which China would be ruled as well as redefine the relationship between China and their overseas Chinese population. The Chinese in Cuba found themselves at the forefront of an ideological war, in which, they were mandated to consider their loyalties and ultimately, take up arms to demonstrate their patriotism and loyalty. While transnational connections have been weakened as a result of time and geographical distance, the connections had not been severed completely.

Class Stratification and the Valorization of Suffering

In order to understand Chinese participation in the Chinese Revolutions and the Civil War from an overseas perspective, we need to first understand the emerging class stratification of the Chinese in Cuba as the result of a new wave of Chinese immigration in the 1930s. In analyzing the Chinese in Cuba, it has becoming increasingly easy to categorize them as if they were a homogenous group. In the era of post-contractual labor, Chinese importers, bankers, and influential members of commercial firms began to view Cuba as an economic haven for trade among the Americas. In piecing together this historical narrative, I find it compelling to continue in the tradition of an enduring depiction of the Chinese as fruit peddlers and low-wage laborers. While this remained

105 Havana’s Barrio Chino received a new wave of affluent Chinese merchants in the 1930s, as mentioned in Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Community*, 139.
accurate for the majority of the Chinese in Havana, there is also a narrative of economically successful Chinese in Cuba who have undeniably manipulated the social landscape of the country and reinvented the social perspectives of the Chinese. By the end of the 1930s, the majority of Chinese has moved away from the rural areas such as Camaguey, Matanzas, Pinar del Río, which had become the country’s backwater, and sought to build their lives and business ventures in the urban Havana.  

The Chinese merchant class had been steadily growing during the mass migration from the rural to the urban. As early as the mid-1920s, Chinese merchants were beginning to attract the attention of their Cuban counterparts. In 1924, a survey done by Policía Cubana to demonstrate the distribution of Chinese hired by their Chinese merchant counterparts highlighted the growing Chinese merchant class in the Barrio Chino. Chinese merchant, Quong Hing Chong whose business was located on Drágones 40 employed 79 Chinese workers. Another Chinese merchant, Pedro Ley, whose business was located on Drágones 9, employed 46 workers.  

Embodying the definition of small business models, these Chinese merchants worked predominantly in the fruit stand and the laundry business, closely followed by hotel and grocery ownership. This class of budding Chinese commercial elite continuously challenged the existing economic structures, creating tension not only among their Cuban counterparts but also creating a socio-economic rift among the Chinese population, leading to the

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106 By comparing census data and tracing the category of colonos asiatico, the number of residents living in Havana grow exponentially larger than the other regions as alluded to by the census in Jacobo de la Pezuela, Diccionario geográfico, estadístico, histórico, de la isla de Cuba (Madrid: Imprenta del Establecimiento de Mellado, 1863).
107 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, Contested Communities, 30
108 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, Contested Communities, 31
beginnings of a class stratification. Gregor Benton notes that “the Chinese commercial elite was politically conservative, but a growing minority of employees and petty entrepreneurs began sympathising with the nationalist Guomindang.” Inevitably, the commercial elite’s growing polarization isolated them from the larger and poorer Chinese community. With the emergence of wealthier merchants, there grew a divide between Chinese associations as well. Unlike early nineteenth century associations founded by former indentured servants, associations like the Casino Chung Wah began to receive enormous amounts of financial support from the wealth Chinese merchants. In fact, the leaders of Casino Chung Wah came from the highest strata of Chinese merchant society in Cuba.

**Left Wing Factions and the Information Revolution**

In the 1920s, the primary left-wing force on the island was the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Founded in 1925 by Julio Antonio Mella and other leftists, the PCC targeted immigrant workers and intellectuals. Anti-imperialism was a central pillar in the PCC’s founding ideology. In that the year, Mella established the Cuban branch of the Anti-Imperialist League (LAI). Mauro García Triana suggests that the Cuban Guomindang and the affluent Chinese casino, Casino Chung Wah, made financial donations to the Anti-Imperialist League. In an effort of international solidarity, Cuba’s

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110 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Communities*, 31
111 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Communities*, 138
112 Ibid., 74
leftist Guomindang joined various political student and workers’ groups in the
Anti-Imperialist League to support the Guangzhou-Hong Kong worker’s strike, also
contributing financially to their cause. Meanwhile, in China, ideological tensions were
reaching the zenith, representing an ideological split between the Chinese Communist
Party and the National Guomindang in 1927. The following year, in 1928, as the
Guomindang became increasingly conservative and authoritarian, the Chinese radicals in
Cuba founded the Revolutionary Alliance of Overseas Chinese in America Protecting the
Workers and Peasants (Alianza Revolucionaria Protectora de los Obreros y Campesinos),
a labor organization. The Alliance was soon driven underground by the Machado regime.
Shortly thereafter, the Chee Kung Tong too changed its name to Min Chih Tang
(Partido Democrático Chino, Chinese Democratic Party) and eventually chose in
keeping with other sections of the organization throughout the world to align with the
Chinese Communist Party in China and abroad.\textsuperscript{113} The emergence of workers’ parties
and other patriotic and revolutionary groups will continue to appear throughout the
latter half of the 20th century.

While the emergence of such revolutionary groups was not entrenched in the
history of the Chee Kong Tong as it had been with the Casino Chung Wah, the Chee
Kong Tong’s role in the creation of a social space and knowledge center should be not
diminished. The revolutionary era isn’t simply referring to an era of physical warring, but
should encompass the emergence of the information revolution through newspapers.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} Benton, \textit{Chinese Migrants and Internationalism: Forgotten Histories, 1917-1945}, 44
\textsuperscript{114} Mitzi Espinosa Luis and María Lam Lee, \textit{Huellas de China en este lado del Atlántico}, 35-41
By the beginning of the 1920s, there emerged a divergence of political thought and ideology by the Chinese community brought on by the new waves of Chinese immigration from both the United States and directly from China. It can be presumed that these new immigrants constituted a new category of Chinese laborers, a class of wealthy and business oriented Chinese that altered the structure and hierarchy of the Barrio Chino, bringing not only their economic networks, but bringing contending political ideologies as well. In Barrio Chino, two political organization contended for the unification of the Chinese in Cuba: the Nationalist Guomindang and the Republican Chee Kong Tong. It wasn’t until 1927 that the communist leaning Chinese Cuban Revolutionary Alliance Protecting Workers and Peasants would incite political support. Despite the handful of newly formed associations, the Casino Chung Wah maintained its political monopoly of representation among the Chinese due to their intimate dealings with the Chinese embassy in Cuba. Throughout the first three decades of the Cuban Republic, the Casino and the Embassy cooperated in the trafficking of contracted Chinese manual laborers, using the Casino as a smuggling channel. The Register of Associations (Registro de Asociaciones) produced a table of the detailed incomes of the Casino in 1915. The primary source of income, valued at $1,517.33 is the sale of contract labor certificates, followed by resident certificates, donations by private individuals, and consulate passport fees, etc.\textsuperscript{117} From this table, it becomes clear that the Casino was


\textsuperscript{117} Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Registro de Asociaciones, Leg. 658 No. 17 591 (accessed through Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, \textit{Contested Community}, 11).
financially dependent on such transaction to support the maintenance of the Chinese
cemetery and support their daily functions. The wealthy business elites were the ones
most likely to profit from the Casino’s financial endeavors and therefore held a stake in
their governing structure and political policy.

The Guomindang and the Chee Kong Tong despite their common objective of
unifying the Chinese in Cuba, significant and severe political ideological differences
surfaced. Havana’s Guomindang sought to “conserve the Republic of China by peaceful
means and in accordance with the laws… and to provide instruction and a place of
entertainment.”118 While the Chee Kong Tong sought “to foster unity and fraternity
among its members, as well as to spread the ideals of the Republican cause and to
provide the member with instruction in accordance with modern methods.”119 Surely,
this marked the beginnings of a class struggle in Havana. Generally speaking, the
Guomindang attracted wealthier Chinese business leaders (read: new wave of Chinese
immigrants) and the Chee Kong Tong attracted the working class individuals (read:
Chinese indentured servants or their children). To view the Chinese in Cuba as a
homogenous group would be an inaccurate categorization. That is to say, the Chinese
revolutionaries with a complicated history of indentured servitude are distinctly separate
from the influx of wealthy Chinese merchants. The story of the Chinese, at the critical
juncture, is more than an economic narrative of class struggle - rather, it is a narrative of
political heroism and valor. At its core, the story of the Chinese is one of suffering and

118 Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, Contested Communities, 74
119 Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba, Secretario de la presidencia, Leg. 25. No (accessed
through Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, Contested Communities, 74 )
the valorization of their suffering. From the perspective of the Chinese indentured servants transformed into revolutionaries, they are convinced that they’ve risen through the ranks of Cuban society and received recognition from their Cuban counterparts by means of their own merit. The arrival of the wealthy Chinese seemingly undermines the narrative of hard work and self-sacrifice of the Chinese revolutionaries; that is to say, the Chinese revolutionaries have internalized their suffering and it has very much become part of their socially constructed identity. There’s an unresolved anger and frustration on the part of the Chinese revolutionaries, as if to say, “How dare they overwrite our suffering? They have not suffered, whereas we have.” Then, the social stratification is in part a distinct separation of the Chinese revolutionaries from the wealthy Chinese merchants as a way to hold onto their constructed narrative.

To express their contending political views and to seek self-definition, many associations printed their own newspapers funded by membership fees. In an interview with the sitting president of the Min Chih Tang, he mentions four newspaper publication that ran out of the basement of the Min Chih Tang. One of the most successful and popular was the Hoi Men Kong Po. Decades later, in the 1951, the Editorial Company of the Chinese Democratic Party Min Chih Tang, lists a detailed budget for the continuation of the Hoi Men Kong Po with support from the then-president, Federico Chi Casio. The budget for the newspapers, presumably for the year, is $4020. Fast forward to the contemporaneous present, a Chinese news sources, Xinhua Net, reports

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120 Rolando Chiong Chang, interview by Hai Lun Tan, August 19, 2017, transcript.
121 Mitzi Espinosa Luis and María Lam Lee, Huellas de China en este lado del Atlántico, 41
on the (re) opening of the Chinese printing house. The newly reopened printing house will reinvent the Kwong Wah Po, under the administration of the Casino Chung Wah. They plan to print monthly issues and distribute the copies to provinces all over Cuba where there are active communities of Chinese Cubans. Collated from various sources, there are at least a dozen of left leaning papers produced by various cultural associations. From a thorough search, newspapers such as People’s Livelihood News, Chinese Commercial Paper, Workers and Peasants Voice, Cuba Chamber of Commerce Monthly, reveals the deep-seated interest in the economic and social prosperity of the Chinese in Cuba. Furthermore, the sheer number of Chinese language publications spanning from 1910 to the 1990s demonstrates the sustained effort (primarily by the left-wing) in this political war. While members of associations are not all fighting in the battlefields of rural Cuba, they’re utilizing the function and the power of the press to transcend geographical boundaries to bridge the physical space and maintain diasporic links across communities. Through their various Chinese language publications, the Chinese continue on their journey of seeking self definition and distinction.

Conclusion

The stories of the diasporic Chinese in Cuba seem unchanging, as if to say, their image as indentured servants and low wage workers is still the image that surfaces in collective memory of the Chinese in Cuba. Allowing perspectivism to enter as an agent

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of critique truly allows the deconstruction of the supposedly unchanging narrative. There is change - in fact, very formative change - occurring below the surface. Instead of propagating a static narrative, the disruption and deconstruction of the events help showcase the change and continuities of this narrative. The cultural associations play a large role in maintaining the romantic narratives - their reluctance to part with their narrative suggest that it has become a part of their identity, both on the island and transnationally.

Reflecting on the case of the Chinese in Cuba through the theories of perspectivism demonstrates this case’s uniqueness. Seemingly, there are at least two perspectives at play: the internal and the external perspective. The internal perspective, as represented by my interviewees and by the cultural association, does not see the need to remind themselves of conversations about identity and diaspora that, in their minds, has already passed and is already solved. That is to say, the Chinese Cubans understand themselves as Cuban. Whereas the external perspective wonders about the gaps in their narrative and why they don’t speak about their identity, even though its promoted constantly by Cuba’s Chinese cultural associations. The Chinese Cubans are excited to talk about their Chinese heritage and culture and this excitement indicates the possibility of mediation between the two perspectives, allowing for great understanding on both sides.
Chapter Three

Chinese Cubans: On Citizenship, Necropolitics, and Acculturation

Following the end of the Cuban Wars of Independence and the founding of the Republic of Cuba, the public consciousness of the Chinese in Cuba had undergone a significant shift. No longer were they considered indentured servants, but their involvement in the war as generals and soldiers indicated an acculturation into Cuban life and society as residents of the country. This sense of acculturation has been documented through the erection of monuments and the construction of a Chinese cemetery. Located on the outskirts of Havana’s city center, the cemetery holds the bones of members of cultural associations, of second and third generation Chinese Cubans, and their family members. In thinking of the cemetery as both an archive and a memorial, it serves to condense the whole of Chinese Cuban history into a singular symbol with the unified narrative. The Chinese cemetery functions as a site of public memory that brings forth larger questions of necropolitics and sovereignty. More importantly, the cemetery will serve as a physical anchor to discuss Chinese citizenship in Cuba. As Katherine Verdery, states, “A dead body is meaningful not in itself but through culturally established relations to death and through the way a specifically dead person’s importance is (variously) construed.”

Examining the cemetery as an anchor to discuss the intertwining themes of necropolitics and citizenship would help us answer these guiding questions: a) How do the Chinese in Cuba conceive of citizenship? That is to

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say, are they citizens? b) In what ways is the cemetery an exploration of Chinese citizenship and permanence in Cuba? c) What role does the cemetery play in the construction of the national narrative, rather, in the narrative of Chinese Cubans? In the cemetery, certain bodies are attributed more significance over others. For one, the bodies of seminal Chinese generals, such as Jose Bu Tak, are memorialized in the cemetery. In part because, Cuban society has attributed significance to this figure, but more importantly, their burial and commemoration signify a triumphant end to the story of suffering.

**Citizenship**

The concept “Chinese Cuban” is an categorical invention. Categories define the ways in which a person or group navigates and interprets the society they live in. Much like the categories of “coolie” or “mambises”, the category of Chinese Cuban was invented by the Chinese in Cuba as both a demonstration of their socio-political agency, as well as a result of the sense of acculturation they felt in Cuba. The categorical spaces that the Chinese in Cuba occupied in the historical memory was the very vehicle that granted them access into the larger Cuban society. However, the very vehicle that offered them manumission and freedom alluded to some clear limitations. They simply could not be “mambises” forever. At a critical juncture, the Chinese in Cuba decided that their participation - more importantly, the suffering that had resulted from their participation - was their ticket for entry and acceptance into the larger Cuban society. That is to say, in the Chinese Cuban historical narrative, their participation in the
revolutionary wars have been made synonymous with the suffering they have experienced. However, it is not enough for the just the Chinese Cuban alone to propagate this narrative, the larger Cuban society has to accept and recognition their contribution. I argue that through the monuments and the various attempts to revitalize the Barrio Chino, Cuban society have recognized the incredible role the Chinese have played in the country’s journey toward freedom. As the Chinese receive state recognition and continued support from the cultural association, their suffering is memorialized in the historical memory, resulting in their acceptance into the country and their forthcoming citizenship status.

Through the telling and retelling of the Chinese in Cuba narrative, it becomes everlastingly clear that they have renegotiated the criteria sufficient for citizenship. In fact, it seems that the Chinese in Cuba have generated an entirely new subset for citizenship consideration: suffering. It is unclear whether or not the Chinese in Cuba could have calculated or predicted this exact result. What is clear is that their firm adherence to this narrative is not accidental; rather, it has become part of their livelihood. The conversation of citizenship cannot be generalized to include the entirety of the Chinese community in Cuba. At the end of the 1920s, Cuba experienced a new wave of Chinese immigrants from China. In direct contrast to the indentured experience, this new wave of wealthy Chinese merchants formed a category and division of Chinese in Cuba distinct from the existing Chinese community. While the socio-economic differences were apparent, the greatest difference between these two

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125 Havana’s Barrio Chino received a new wave of affluent Chinese merchants in the 1930s, as mentioned in Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, *Contested Community*, 139.
communities of Chinese lay in how they perceived themselves. The first group of Chinese, the residents, arrived on the island as indentured servants and offered their lives in the struggles for Cuban revolution. Their history on the island is entirely defined by the sacrifices they have made to the country, in hopes the country they’ve fought for would free them and ultimately accept them. The second group of Chinese, the merchants, arrived in the aftermath of colonial regulations, not undergoing the same economic restrictions or physical suffering. They saw Cuba and Latin America, in general, as part of a wealthy international network in which they could increase their fortunes and return to China. While Cubans were skeptical of the wealth and prosperous business ventures of the new wave of Chinese immigrants, they simply did not undergo the same economic obstacles as the first group. The underpinning of the two groups of Chinese rests on entirely different principles. The distinction boils down to a very clear and pitiful explanation: one group suffered while the other did not. The Chinese residents have built their entire identity and narrative on this line of argument. That is to say, they want their suffering to be recognized by their Cuban and Chinese counterparts. As a result, among the Chinese residents, there sprouted a new fear. They were afraid the newcomers would dismantle their carefully constructed narrative and disregard their suffering. Their suffering remains their distinguishing factor and without it, a fundamental part of their collective identity would have been lost. Ultimately, the Chinese in Cuba - rather, the Chinese Cubans - is a culmination of and a concocted category meant to glorify their history of suffering in the country.
The Chinese Cemetery

Figure 5: The entrance to the Chinese cemetery. The cemetery remains often unfrequented by the Cuban population, even on festive Chinese holidays. The cemetery was nationalized, but the sources conflict. The cemetery, as a whole, is in a terrible condition and has not received sufficient funding or care. (Photo by author, August 2017)

About 5 kilometers southwest of the Barrio Chino lies the Chinese Cemetery.

The Chinese cemetery sits in the shadow of the venerated and frequently toured

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126 Mauro García Triana and Pedro End Herrera state the cemetery was nationalized July 13, 1967. Whereas Mitzi Espinosa Luis and the compilers state the cemetery was nationalized in 1996. The two authors do not address their sources in the footnotes and from my personal research, I was unable to find evidence to collaborate either of the dates.

127 As part of the Havana Chinese cemetery project, Jook Leong (photographer) has created a virtual and interactive 360 degree view of the Chinese cemetery. Using my own photos in conjunction with the virtual representation has allowed me to piece together a more comprehensive view of the cemetery. Jook Leong. Filmed 2017. Havana Chinese Cemetery Virtual Tour. http://360vrcuba.com/havana-chinese-cemetery2/?startscene=0&startactions=lookat(-64.94,12.01,79.62,0,0)
Cristobal Colon Cemetery, just two blocks away. Obscured by the Colon Cemetery, and out of the general view, the Chinese cemetery remains unknown and unvisited by the Cuban public. The entrance of the Chinese Cemetery is marked by a yellow arch at the corner of Calle 26 and Calle 18, a rather busy intersection. The tall arch painted with Chinese characters stands out amidst the shorter residential apartments and store fronts. The characters (中華總義山; zhong hua zong yi shan) written in traditional Chinese characters, roughly translates to the General Chinese Cemetery. To analyze it further, the first two character (中華; zhong hua) refers to the Chinese races or the Chinese nation. 

The last three characters (總義山; zong yi shan) refers to a general and all inclusive burial site. The totality of the phrase alludes to a resting place for Chinese peoples, regardless of place of origin or surname. While funerary ritualistic customs in late imperial and modern China place a strong emphasis on kinship and common surname, the funerary space in Havana alludes to a common burial space, one that transcends the pragmatics of religion, class, and politics. That is to say, the Chinese cemetery in Havana stands as an outlier in which death becomes both a transcendental experience as well as a process of glorification. In this space, bodies of political leaders of the ideological battle (1920s) between the Nationalist and Communist parties are able to transcend their political beliefs in order to be buried in a common space. And simultaneously, the bodies of Chinese generals from the Wars of Independence are glorified through the erection of monuments and elaborate headstones. In an attempt to

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render this space legible, we can trace which portions of the historical narrative are being upheld, which are being obscured, and why. In order to answer the why portion of the question, we need examine what this is about, what is this really about, and what is this really really about. Simply put, this story is about the Chinese in Cuba. However, it's more than that. This is a story of historical memory, collective memory, and the manipulation and reconfiguration in the minds of the Chinese in Cuba. Fundamentally, this is a memorialization and valorization of suffering. The Chinese used their lives to claim citizenship in a country that they’ve been acculturated into. Through death, the cemetery helped this group, divided by opposing political and kinship relations, to forge a common identity. Through the politics of death, this group set the foundation for the newly defined category. Their lives, either defined by the heroism of the war or through the onerous work of being an indentured servant, were used to forge a new and hopefully stable category: Chinese Cuban.

The layout of the cemetery is rather simple. Upon entering, the first building on the right houses both the cemetery’s maintenance crew (of one) and a historian. There are two paved paths on either side of the cemetery. Directly behind the office is a row of pantheons dedicated to housing the bones of their respective members. Based on my count, there were six pantheons. While I was unable to capture a photo of the facade of the first pantheon, the material objects inside the pantheon can provide great insight into who is housed there and how this particular pantheon functions now and functioned then. In the middle of the small space stands a table with several ceramic vases, acting as

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130 Refer to Figure 14 in the appendix for the author’s hand drawn map of the cemetery as an effort to render the space legible.
an alter to the various people stored in marble and tin boxes. To the right, is an open
doorway consisting of approximately nine rows of stacked tin boxes, one neatly atop
another. Consistently throughout the tin boxes is the format in which the box is
labeled. On the left hand side, from top to bottom, is their place of origin, meaning, their
local villages or provinces. On the right hand side, again from top to bottom, is the name
of the deceased. From the names alone, it is unclear whether each box belonged to a
woman or a man. Also unclear is the marriage status of these tombs. From the surname,
it becomes clear that this pantheon is dedicated to the Wong clan and their ancestors.
The base theory is such that these shallow burials (if one can call it that) are a temporary
solution. While the inscription of the name and place of origin would have been crucial
in identifying the remains in each box, it’s even more plausible these two pieces of
information were used as a mailing address. That is to say, if the association or their
immediate family had the monetary funds to send the box back to their birthplace or
village, the information would be used as an address to properly deliver the remains back
to China. This theory is further supported by Horacio Molina, an undertaker to the
Chinese in the late 1930s. Molina recounts his observances and experiences with the
Chinese cemetery to novelist, Enrique Serpa:

I regularly deal with burials and dispatching the remains to China. I am
happy to do business with the Chinese. They have taught me to esteem them.
You should see the solidarity among these people. They have no problem with

\[131\] In order respect and honor the dead, I will refrain from mentioning specific sets of
bones and tin boxes by name. Rather, I’ll be using their surname and a number.
\[132\] For more information on Chinese burial rituals and mourning, read Alan Norman Kutcher,
*Mourning in Late Imperial China : Filial Piety and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press,
1999) and for a general understanding of Latin American traditions of mourning, Lyman L.
of New Mexico Press, 2004).
disease or burial. They have a highly developed sense of respect and solidarity among compatriots. They get together and calculate what a burial will cost and each pays an equal part, whoever it is. Afterwards, they make sure the remains get to China. It seems that to achieve eternal rest, Chinese must be buried in their own country. For that reason, the pantheons are full of remains conserved in small zinc boxes. For a long time, there have been no sailings. The last one I did was in 1940. Then the World War started, and they could no longer be sent. Now we are waiting for a ship to China. I imagine more than 2,000 boxes will go. However, many will not rest in Chinese soil. These are those who married Cuban women and had Cuban children. Their wives and children want them to stay here forever, so their relatives can pay tribute to them.  

From the tin boxes, it’s clear that the ritualistic aspect of funerary purposes is absent, meaning, the “coherent package of actions, routines, and performances which constitute the structure of Chinese rites” is completely missing. From an anthropological perspective, the ritual of death has not been complete, leaving the exchange between the living and the dead unfulfilled. With the need to fulfill this need, postburial action is required for the deceased to refind harmony. Chinese ties to their respective cultural associations are strong even in the face of death. That is to say, the Chinese have a responsibility to their respective members of their shared cultural associations not only to honor their legacies and memories, but also to maintain the historical narrative that is contingent upon both the Chinese and the cultural associations for survival.

The name plaque of the second pantheon (Linxia Tang Gongli Fen) roughly translates to a public burial place. The third pantheon is an open structure, with a roof

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and no walls. The name plaque roughly translates to Shamei Township Traveling Public Cemetery. This pantheon is dedicated to the township and people who originate from Shamei who emigrated to Cuba and is now a public site for the Shamei people who have traveled to Cuba from China. The fourth pantheon is the first of the six to have both simplified Chinese characters and the Spanish words on the plaque. In Spanish, the Panteon de la Sociedad “Yi Si” Octubre 1942, refers to the Pantheon of the Yi people and is dedicated to them and their descendents.

The nameplate of the fifth pantheon is almost illegible due to damage done by weather, most likely rains as the paint of the characters is almost wiped clean. From this, it is clear that the name of this pantheon had been painted on rather than engraved onto the stone. From the general cemetery, the disarray and the poor maintenance is evident. Similarly, immediately upon entering this pantheon, the bones of the deceased are stored in refined sugar bag, left out in the open. Moreover, the small space of the pantheon is unable to hold sheer amount of tin and marble boxes filled with bones, resulting in to a sense of overcrowding. The structure of the pantheon was clearly decrepit due to a lack of care and maintenance. The seeming neglect of the pantheon and its dead struck a sense of sadness that was mirrored by the stone couplets. This specific couplet expresses anguish about the conditions of their pitiful death in a country that is not theirs. Floating off in the distance, the souls see the burning of paper money from the

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135 Refer to Figure 11 the appendix.
136 Refer to Figure 12 the appendix.
137 In traditional Chinese culture, there are two types of couplets: the antithetical couplet and the spring couplet. The two couplets serve two purposes. The antithetical couplet is used for sorrowful situations, such as death. While the spring couplets are used to celebrate festive occasions such as a wedding or the birth of a child.
neighboring pantheon, which look remarkably similar to monarch butterflies. Their souls are trapped, they wander endlessly, and wait in the hope that they will one day rest peacefully in their home country, but the souls understand that they have no way of leaving. In the end, there is a sense of inescapable sadness.

In the middle of the space stands a cement slab with a partially disintegrated photo of a man. The marble plaque on the side suggests his name was Ignacio Tam, who died April 4, 1877. The photo of Ignacio is the only photo in the pantheon. In analyzing the placement of the photo and the date of his death leads me to believe that he was among one of the first indentured servants to be buried in the Chinese cemetery. His photo cements the tragic narrative of the indentured Chinese workers in Cuba, beginning with 1847. The pitiful couplets mirror the numerous oral testimonies many indentured servants gave to the Cuba Commission Report, indicating a meaningless and wretched life in Cuba. Again, in an attempt to render the space legible, the cemetery acts as a physical map to accompany the narrative trajectory of the Chinese in Cuba. Ignacio Tam’s photo in conjunction with the couplets cement the tragic beginnings of the Chinese in Cuba.

The sixth pantheon, comparably smaller than the rest, says Chiong Lock On Tong. Again, this suggest a burial space for the fraternal organization of the Chiong clan. This pantheon, like all of the rest, display a Christian cross.

When taking the entire row of pantheons into account, a kaleidoscopic image of regional surnames and cultures begins to appear and the original theory of this cemetery

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as a transcendental space becomes even more prominent. While I do not have access to
the primary sources that detail the list of each society in Havana, the secondary sources
suspect that the pantheons were built from the membership fees collected from the
association's members.\textsuperscript{139}

The manner of describing the pantheons, in a laundry list, reflects the odd
structure and alignment they occupy in the cemetery. In an effort to understand the
specific ordering of the pantheons, I turn to the secondary source scholarship on clan
associations in Cuba specifically.\textsuperscript{140} The pantheons are located side by side, with little to
no room in between each building. In this way, they occupy the estimated space of a
medium sized sidewalk. Each community is neatly contained. This neat containment
overwrites the social and political tensions of each organization and perniciously
homogenizes the space in order to demonstrate a well-regulated social order in the
cemetery. Does the ordering of the pantheons signify a harmonious balance achievable
only in death? Even the designation, the Chinese in Cuba, fails to convey the multiplicity
of differences in the group. Not only were there differences and tensions between rich
and poor, old and new immigrants, Communist and Nationalist, there were regional and
their resulting cultural differences at play, especially between the Hakka and the
Cantonese. The structure and the intention behind the creation of the cemetery seems to
suggest that the differences within the Chinese in Cuba are not significant in death. In a
way, traditional Chinese funerary rites are blatantly overlooked in an attempt to

\textsuperscript{139} Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana, \textit{Contested Community}, 70, 81-82
\textsuperscript{140} List of clan associations and their addresses in Chinese in Cuba found in the introduction of
Mauro García Triana and Pedro Eng Herrera, \textit{The Chinese in Cuba: 1847-Now} (Lanham: Lexington
Books, 2009), xxxvi
transcend differences in a foreign land. That is to say, however much the Chinese consider themselves to be Cuban, authorities such as Molina recognize that in order for Chinese to achieve eternal rest, they must be buried in their own country. Even in death, the Chinese have chosen to sacrifice their traditional funerary rites in order to stake a claim to Cuban citizenship. This is not to say that Chinese and Cuban identities aren’t compatible, but from the perspective of the Chinese in Cuba, *cubanidad* had priority and they temporarily relegated their Chinese identity. Metaphorically, the Chinese have given up eternal rest in order to stake their claim their citizenship. Ultimately, this cemetery represents the choices each organization has made in an attempt to honor their members.

Rounding the back corner of the cemetery lies the Pantheon of the Chee Kong Tong. Separating the Pantheon of the Chee Kong Tong and the Pantheon of the General Jose Bu Tak is a tiled and mass public grave. The pantheon of Jose Bu Tak is gated and guarded with two marble lions on either side. As it was said, Jose Bu Tak was one of the men eligible to serve as President of the newly formed Cuban Republic. The privilege and consideration is available only to those who fought in all three Wars of Independence; it speaks to an effort to memorialize the heroic efforts made by the Chinese. It is unclear whether this offer was legitimate or simply a symbolic gesture. Nonetheless, the intention was to valorize the suffering. The ornate headstone and grave is one way to memorialize the history of a general in the collective memory of the Chinese in Cuba.

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141 López, *Chinese Cubans*, 117
Again, this is to reaffirm - to themselves, to outsiders, to the new wave of 
Chinese immigrants that did not suffer - the type of story they want to tell. That is to say, 
they want to align themselves with a romantic story that idealizes the Chinese mambí. 
Without such idolization of seminal figures in the Chinese Cuban collective memory, the 
statue would not be as affective and would not evoke sentiments of pride. That is to say, 
the grave of Jose Bu Tak and even his body is attributed meaning through the power of 
collective memory constantly reminiscing on the valorous past. The cemetery is a 
physical display, a show-and-tell (if you will), of the historical memory. Much like the 
Chee Kong Tong acts as a cultural authority on the Chinese mambíses, the necropolitics 
of the Chinese cemetery attempts to do the same, with even more rigor and conviction. 
The Chinese used their lives and now, through their dead bodies, are staking their claim 
of citizenship on the Cuban landscape. Even though the cemetery often unvisited and 
generally unknown of, the Chinese in Cuba seemed to have accepted that the memory of 
them has only reached a select percentage of the population. As the population of 
natural born Chinese decreases and will one day diminish, their descendents and in-laws 
will be drawn to and compelled by the post-memory of their ancestors.\textsuperscript{142} It is through 
the concept of post-memory that the second, third, and even fourth generation of 
Chinese Cubans will be affected. It is with them that the constructed narrative of the 
tragedy turned romance of their ancestors will be remembered.

Three Chinese Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution

The story toward citizenship and belonging does not end with Chinese generals participation in the Ten Years’ War or the Cuban War of Independence; rather, the same tone has been taken to explain the Chinese involvement in the Cuban Revolution. The story about the three Chinese generals speak of the same incidents of racial discrimination and the need to prove their Cuban-ness, even half a century later. The three generals - Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, and Moisés Sío Wong - reflect on their Chinese ancestry and their experience growing Chinese in Cuba. When asked by Waters, the interviewer, to give a history of the Chinese in Cuba, Sío Wong starts by stating, “The story begins in 1840…” followed by what reads as a rehearsed narrative, with intentional segments delineating the War of Independence to the creation of the Chinese community.143 The story of the Chinese generals in the Cuban Revolution does not seem all that different than the story of the Chinese generals in the Cuban War of Independence. Albeit, the Chinese are no longer fighting for manumission from their indentured servitude; however, the Chinese participation in both circumstances can be understood through the lens of performance theory. And while they’re not seeking violent death as the Chinese did in the War of Independence, the Chinese still fought as a demonstration of a political spectacle. In the War of Independence, the Chinese were performing as an act to gain entry and acceptance into the forthcoming Cuban Republic. In the Cuban Revolution, the Chinese are undergoing another military endeavor to

143 Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, Moisés Sío Wong, and Mary-Alice Waters, Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution. 1st ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 2005), 55
prove, beyond a doubt, their loyalty to the country that has accepted them. Their
adopted nation was, again, at the crossroads of a pivotal political moment and the
Chinese were expected to demonstrate their loyalty.

The Chinese generals seem to think that Cuba can act as an exemplar for other
countries that have a large population of diasporic Chinese. They understand Cuba a
cohesive utopic and the distinction between the Chinese experience in Cuba and in other
countries is differentiated by a Socialist Revolution. Sío Wong states,

> The difference is that here a socialist revolution took place. The revolution eliminated discrimination based on the color of a person’s skin. Above all, it eliminated the property relations that create not only economic but also social inequality between rich and poor. That’s what made it possible for the son of Chinese immigrants to become a government representative, or anything else. Here discrimination - against blacks, against Chinese, against women, against the poor - was ended. Cubans of Chinese descent are integrated… And that difference is the triumph of a socialist revolution.144

While a socialist revolution is one of the distinguishing factors, I argue that the desire for acceptance and their want to perform their loyalty still reigns strong in the hearts and minds of the Chinese Cubans. The revolution resulted in an arguably more cohesive Cuba. In drawing attention to a cohesive Cuba, the Chinese are in effect claiming they are the ones that helped to create a unified nation. Sío Wong seems to suggest that the end of discrimination was in part due to their participation. They’ve elevated their own participation, so much so, that the generals are putting the Chinese in Cuba upon pedestal. Sío Wong highlights the possibility of Chinese social mobility. More notably, he states, “Cubans of Chinese descent” have completely integrated into Cuban society. This

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144 Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, Moisés Sío Wong, and Mary-Alice Waters, *Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution*. 1st ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 2005), 75
is a glimpse into the perspective in which the Chinese in Cuba see themselves. In an effort to identify themselves as simply Cubans, there is a reluctance to call themselves Chinese Cubans, even though they embody and continue to tell the romantic narrative of the Chinese in Cuba.

The discussion on citizenship have revolved around one of two models: the republican or liberal model. Now, in an era of citizenship no longer constrained by the limitations of nation-state boundaries, emerges the concept of a global citizenship. Citizenship consists of more than just a political community and the duties one has to perform for the country. Citizenship is as much about belonging and social identity. In this sense, to be a citizen, “you must consider yourself to be a member of your society as well as be considered to be so.”

The Chinese, as demonstrated through their military participation, considers themselves a member of the Cuban society. However, that’s only half of the equation. They need the recognition and acceptance of their society in order to be considered to be so. In their continued allegiance through performative citizenship, they strive to be recognized. No longer are the simply fighting for their rights on the island during the Cuban Revolution; they are fighting on behalf of their country in Angola in order to be considered global citizens. The fight for political freedom has moved beyond the borders of their nation-state and has taken on an internationalizing quality. While they are performing the duties of military service for their country, the fight for acceptance continues on an international scale.

Their mission as global citizens is another way to uphold the tragic narrative. To interview then write their stories is a way of re-remembering. Sío Wong states, “You’ve already heard our stories. You could write a book about Chui, about where he lived, where he worked. About how his father supported his family. The same with Moisés and how he was exploited by his brother in law. We know these things. We lived them. We suffered them (emphasis mine).”

Their mission, as they have lived through it and suffered through it, is to enforce their own tragic narrative and teach it to future generations. As the result of the Cuban Revolution and their socialist efforts, future generations will never experience any of the “-isms” as they had.

Chinese military involvement in internationalist missions in Angola and Venezuela brings conversations of global citizenship and socialism to the forefront. The three Chinese Cuban generals understand their role in the socialist revolution as having transformative impacts on the healthcare and the educational systems. Moreover, they want others to understand their motivations and the degree to which their participation made a socialist difference in international communities. Sío Wong reflects on the altruistic nature of their internationalist missions by stating, “Since the triumph of the revolution we’ve been educated in socialism. We’ve been educated in selflessness: to be capable even of giving our lives for another people. That’s the highest expression of human selflessness.”

Similarly, the Chinese were expected to give their lives for the Cuban people in the ‘Ten Years’ War. In exchange for their military performance, the state awarded them citizenship. The ultimate exhibition of sovereignty lies, largely, in the

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146 Choy, Chui, Sío Wong, and Waters, Our History Is Still Being Written, 165
147 Choy, Chui, Sío Wong, and Waters, Our History Is Still Being Written, 163
power and capacity to dictate who is allowed to live and who dies.\textsuperscript{148} In thinking of biopower and state sanctioned violence, “War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill.”\textsuperscript{149} The Chinese fighters drew on their historical narratives to afford themselves the agency and purpose to fight, they become the ones that “understand the justice of their cause and were later proud of their mission.”\textsuperscript{150}

**Conclusion**

The Chinese cemetery represents, rather solidifies and reaffirms, the Chinese Cubans as citizens. Their military participation in the Ten Years’ War and later in the Cuban Revolution have legitimized their suffering. The Chinese in Cuba have successfully performed their roles as fighters of the Cuban nation and their society has in turn, recognized their valor and have granted them citizenship. The story of the Chinese generals and their internationalist missions demonstrate an embodied understanding of the tragic beginnings of the Chinese in Cuba. The Chinese fighters, both then and now, leading up the the generals, are fighting for something larger than a people and a nation - they’re fighting for global citizenship and recognition from both their homeland and Cuba.

\textsuperscript{149} J.-A. Mbembé and Libby Meintjes, “Necropolitics,” 12
\textsuperscript{150} Choy, Chui, Sio Wong, and Waters, *Our History Is Still Being Written*, 103
Conclusion

The interest in Chinese Cuban history and identity has increased for those outside of Cuba. During my visit to Havana in the summer of 2017, I was quick to realize the amount of researchers investigating Chinese Cubans. Funnily enough, I was mistaken for another Chinese female student who was there a few weeks before I was. Still, when I tell people about the Chinese in Cuba, I receive the same follow up question without a beat: “There are Chinese in Cuba?” In response, I find myself co-opted into telling their narrative, despite my intentionality in bringing a sense of nuance to the storyline. I tell them of the Chinese indentured servitude beginning in the 1840s, the transcendence of their suffering through military participation, and finally of their eventual acceptance into Cuban society. Each time I recount their story, I am both surprised and saddened - surprised by the power of their historical narrative and simultaneously saddened by the retelling of a static narrative.

In this conclusion, I do not seek to hypothesize about the fate of the Chinese in Cuba or about the future of the Barrio Chino. Rather, I want to reflect on the persistence on the carefully crafted historical narrative, explore the limitations this poses on future research endeavors about the Chinese in Cuba, and question what this could mean for studies and endeavors about the Chinese in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Amid the enthusiasm of research and interest about Chinese Cubans today, we’re forced to consider the narratives that have surfaced and encouraged to consider the
audiences they target. Ultimately, suffering and the valorization of their suffering lays at
the heart of this story. The story of the Chinese in Cuba, despite the exaltation of their
history upheld by cultural associations and monuments, is one of sadness. The power of
this group relies on their ability to valorize their sacrifices. Unfortunately, the Chinese
population in Cuba has severely declined and now, Chinese in Cuba has been labeled as a
“forgotten diaspora”.151 Now, the responsibility and the desire to maintain, to adhere,
and to act in accordance with this narrative is essential to their livelihood. The following
generations of Chinese Cubans will continue to propagate this narrative, perhaps,
recounting the stories in a romantic light allowing the memory of the Chinese in Cuba
will persist long afterwards. In this way, the story of the Chinese in Cuba is one of
persistence and perseverance.

From the beginning, I had been focused on exploring identity and memory. A
large part of this project has been fueled by a personal longing to understand my own
identity as a Chinese-American. Are there parts of the Chinese Cuban story that can be
generalizable? That is to say, can we generalize the experience of the Chinese Cubans to
reflect the experience of Asian Americans? In the corpus of works exploring the
Asian-American identity, in the increase of academic departments focused on
Asian-American studies, in the Asian-American museums dedicated to portraying the
Asian-American experience, there surfaces a clear narrative of alienation and victimhood
that parallels the Chinese-Cuban chronicle.

(accessed March 31, 2018)
An even more significant part of this project has been propelled by the frustration induced by the silence and simultaneous noise. In conducting interviews with the Chinese-Cuban residents about their cultural and personal identity, I was met with a silence and a reluctance to genuinely confront the truth. That is to say, every single interviewee told me the same story. Even more frustrating, all of the secondary source authors repeated the exact story. While the loyalty to their story is a form of perseverance in an of itself, I couldn’t understand the reasoning - that is, until the completion of this project. The Chinese in Cuba adhere so close to this narrative because one, this is the story they’ve collectively constructed, and two, they haven’t considered who they could be or how they could identity outside of this constructed narrative. Their crafted narrative, at one point, gave them both freedom and access into Cuban society.

Authors have begun to dedicated more time and energy to understand the Chinese in others parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. During my time at the Min Chih Tang, Mitzi - one of the authors of *Huellas de China en Este Lado del Atlántico* and administrative assistant of the Min Chih Tang - tells me a story of Paula Williams Madison and her journey to find her Chinese grandfather in a book titled: *Finding Samuel Lowe: China, Jamaica, Harlem*. Mitzi hands me the book off her bookshelf and I’m immediately immersed. I read about her childhood in Harlem, her surprise when she learned of her Chinese ancestry, and her happiness when she was able to reunite with her Chinese family members in her grandfather’s village. As much as the story is a woman’s path of self-discovery and uncovering her own family’s hidden history, the story is ultimately about the transcendence of race, geographical space, and the power of family
regardless of such obstacles. Reading Paula’s story on the Chinese in Jamaica - perhaps with a historical narrative of their own - has me allowed to understand larger themes of human interconnectivity and transnational communities.

Deconstructing the historical narrative of the Chinese in Cuba, amid their contradictions and complexities, has helped me to understand their fundamental desire to belong, the motivations behind their patriotic sacrifices, and the power they’ve derived from their imagined community. The narrative they’ve created and enforced has been promoted for centuries. And ultimately, one has to wonder if this is the way in which the Chinese in Cuba want to be permanently remembered.
Appendix

Figure 6: The archway marks the previous entrance to Havana’s Chinatown. It stands as a nostalgic monument that marked, at one point, the beginning of one of the largest Chinatowns in Latin America. (Photo by author, August 2017)

Figure 7: The Min Chih Tang’s main events room is in frequent use for teaching Chinese language and culture classes, martial arts classes, and domino games. (Photo by author, August 2017)
Figure 8: A labor contract will have both the Spanish and the Chinese translations. This labor contract was signed by the Chinese indentured servant, Yong Wong in 1856 in which he agreed to emigrate from China to Cuba to work as a laborer for eight years. The contract spells out the responsibilities of the Chinese laborer, as well as delineates the duties of the Cuban patron. The terms and conditions stay consistent throughout. Most commonly, in exchange for eight years of servitude, the Cuban patron will provide the Chinese indentured servant a payment of 1 peso a week or 4 pesos a month, the promise of two changes of clothing, one set of blankets, and specified housing and food.

Images on this page from the “Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection”. Arizona State University Digital Repositories, unpublished collections.
Figure 9: The front of black marble column. The plaque states that this monument was erected in the memory of the Chinese who fought for Cuban Independence. This monument serves to cement the heroic segment of the Chinese Cuban historical narrative. The column can be located at the corner of Calle L and Línea, about 3km from the center of Barrio Chino. (Photo by author, August 2017)

Figure 10: The back of the black marble column. The plaque is a quote by Gonzalo de Quesada, stating that there was not one Chinese Cuban desertor; there was not one Chinese Cuban traitor. (Photo by author, 2017)
Figure 11: Many pantheons had boxes of bones that were uncovered and left in the open air, indicating a lack of caretaking. Boxes were often stacked on top of one another, indicating an abundance of boxes and a lack of space. (Photo by author, 2017)

Figure 12: An example of a Chinese antithetical couplet, usually reserved for sorrowful instances like death. This couplet laments the lack of a proper burial; as a result, their souls are going to wander endlessly. (Photo by author, August 2017)
Figure 13: A money script, worth 5 pesos, written out to a Chinese indentured servant named Ventura. The money scripts were an additional form of economic enslavement. Banks did not accept such money scripts and were unable to convert them to currency or silver.

Image from the “Chinese Immigrants in Cuba: Documents from the James and Ana Melikian Collection”. Arizona State University Digital Repositories, unpublished collections.

Figure 14: 
Author’s hand drawn map of the Chinese cemetery in Havana. The cemetery alludes to a common burial space, one in which transcends the pragmatics of religion, class, and politics.
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