

Kathleen López. *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 339 pages.

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Interest in the presence of Asians in Latin American and their role in nation building has been on the rise among American scholars during the last several years. Such attention may be partially attributed to the popularity of postcolonial studies and to the universal economic impact of countries like China, Japan, and Korea. Kathleen Lopez's *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* is the latest of recent studies on the history of Chinese migrants, immigrants, and their descendants in Cuba. It significantly improves on *The Chinese in Cuba, 1847-Now* (2009) by Cuban historians Mauro García Triana and Pedro Eng Herrera, a selective and tedious compilation.

Chinese Cubans features an Introduction (A Transnational History), three parts (From Indentured to Freed; Migrants between Empires and Nations; Transnational and National Belonging), and an Epilogue. All three parts are subdivided into chapters. Chapters 1-3 trace the nineteenth-century Chinese experience on the island, first as coolies (1847-1874), then as free laborers and merchants. Chapters 4-5 examine the Chinese situation in Cuba during U.S. intervention (1898), after the founding of the Republic of Cuba (1902) and at the end of the Qing dynasty (1912; not 1911 as stated in the book). The remaining three chapters cover the rise of Cuban Chinese "transnational communities," how these individuals and their descendants become Cuban, and how the Chinese and Cuban revolutions of the mid-twentieth century adversely impact on further immigration to the island and on their home visits. The "study concludes with an epilogue discussing the current situation of the fewer than two hundred native Chinese in Cuba today and the descendants of Chinese migrants" (12).

This book brings together, though not exclusively, the historical revelations of three earlier Cuban studies: Antonio Chuffat Latour's old, but veritable, *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba* (1927); Juan Pérez de la Riva's extensive *Los coolies chinos en Cuba, 1847-1880*:

contribución al estudio de la inmigración contratada en el Caribe (2000); and that by García Triana and Eng Herrera. Unlike these last two authors, as well as Pérez de la Riva, López, a non-Cuban scholar, refrains from making the ideological observations that researchers in a totalitarian society must include in order to have their studies published. She appropriately reveals these authors' dogmatic views when she tersely notes that "contrary to later Cuban scholars' depiction of transnational Chinese merchants as 'antirevolutionary,' Chuffat views them as contributing to an anticolonial Cuban identity" (103)—the sole objective of the Ten Year's War was "independence," not "revolution." In the Epilogue, perhaps the best section of the study, López expresses the obvious flaws inherent in a state-run revitalization of Havana's *Barrio Chino* "Chinatown" in the subsection titled "Chinese Cuban Ethnicity and the Role of the State": "Efforts from above to impose a homogenizing coherence on the Chinese Cuban 'community' can be both exclusionary and artificially inclusive. . . . For a restoration of an 'authentic' *Barrio Chino*, a return to some form of entrepreneurial autonomy would probably accomplish more than festivals" (241)

Most readers will find this book well written and meticulously researched. López apparently devoted over a decade to consulting pertinent sources, traveling to research sites, seeking oral and written testimonials in China and Cuba and, extraordinarily, trying to add a human face to the Cantonese diaspora and the subsequent longstanding exploitation of these unfortunate beings. To this end, she intersperses throughout the pages of the book the life stories of Tung Kun Sen (Pastor Pelayo), a nineteenth-century coolie turned free laborer, of Lui Fan, who came to work the sugar fields after the outbreak of World War I created an increase demand for this commodity, and of their descendants in socialist Cuba. A revealing outcome of her research is that remittances sent by these migrants enabled their relatives to have a better life, built communities known as *qiaoxiang* "overseas home areas" in Guangdong and Fujian provinces upon their return home, and that Cuba often served as a stepping stone on their migrations to other New World countries, the United States in particular.

Regretfully, as hinted, this study exhibits a singular flaw: careless editing. While it is true that López shares part of the blame for oversights and conflicting data, it is to the editors that the larger responsibility falls for ensuring as accurate a publication as corresponds a prestigious press. This expectation is here more preponderant given that it is a historical study, published under the "Envisioning Cuba" series, an area-specific imprint.

Examples of discrepancies abound. For example, in Table 1 (23), López questions de la Riva's 1856 coolie-deaths-in-transit figures. She implies that de la Riva's source was the *Boletín de Colonización*, the proper source; nonetheless, she questions his accurateness by alleging that "Pérez de la Riva gives 1,084 . . .; however, the correct number should be 1,184" (23). No further explanation is provided—strangely, she ignores a disparity between de la Riva's number of coolies in 1869 Cuba-bound ships (6,729) and hers (6,720). She then mentions that de la Riva "gives 141,391 as the total number of Chinese departures and 124,873 as the total number of Chinese sold in Havana; the correct total of the number of the figures provided are 141,515 and 124,793. His figures may reflect a minor typographical or mathematical error" (23). However, though she states that her Table figures come from the three 1873 issues of *Boletín de la Colonización*, the source of her 1874 figures is missing. (De la Riva includes the *Boletín's* May 1874 issue as a source of his figures.) Another inconsistency in López's numbers is that, if 16,578 deaths are subtracted from 141,515 embarked coolies, the difference is 124,937, not the 124,793 she furnishes for sold coolies. De la Riva's figures, on the other hand, do hold up.

The next pages pose another conundrum to the reader. In 1872, The *Comisión Central de Colonización*, a colonial board overseeing Chinese matters, disclosed the presence of 58,400 Chinese on the island in (44). Table 2, specifically addressing ethnic population numbers for Santa Clara Province and Cienfuegos District as per the 1899 census, reveals a total of 14,857 Chinese in Cuba, 0.9 percent of the overall population (56)—Table 6 lists this population, claimed to be derived from the same census, at 14,863 (147). Although de la Riva believes that the figures of the 1899 census, taken under U.S. supervision, are more reliable than those of the *Comisión* (192), a question suddenly arises: if, according to Table 1, 124,793 Chinese were sold in Havana between 1847 and 1874, what became of approximately 110,000 Chinese by 1899? What adds to this mystery is that "only a small number [of coolies in Cuba] were able to return to their home villages" (81). A partial answer is found in an earlier passage that discusses the high mortality rates among coolies in the town of Regla: "The investigatory commission of 1874 [The Cuba Commission Report] estimated that over 50 percent of Chinese who arrived in Cuba perished before the end of their contract" (29). The 1872 numbers, however, insinuate a higher death rate; those of 1899, a much higher one. The ensuing large decline in the Chinese population is more perplexing given that the coolie trade ended in 1874 and work conditions slightly improved.

Given the importance of race composition to national consciousness, such demographical differences should have been carefully addressed. If nothing else, de la Riva's detailed explanations of numerical disparities (192-196) should have been mentioned.

When it comes to the translated quotations in the text, only the last endnote of the book reveals López as the translator of the passage. All other translations, and there are many, go unclaimed; it must be inferred that they were done by her. All are good with few exceptions, e.g., "Shout (Proclamation) of Yara" (119). However, occasionally, López introduces a term in Spanish and assumes that all readers will know its meaning. For instance, she includes *ropa vieja* ("old clothes" 234) among dishes served at Chinese Cuban restaurants, but does not explain that it is a "shredded beef in tomato sauce" popular Cuban entrée. Other terms are translated correctly in their general sense, but not within a Cuban context, e.g., *notario*, *criollo*, *fonda*. The origin of the label *chino manila* is inaccurate. The names of Wifredo Lam and Antonio María Romeu, two renowned Cuban artists, are misspelled. "No salvarlo ni el médico chino" is solecistic and its translation, "Not even the Chinese doctor can salvage him/her/it" (216), unidiomatic.

As observed, these inconsistencies and errors should have been detected and corrected during the editing process and thus should not reflect exclusively on the author. There is no reason why a second thoroughly revised edition of *Chinese Cubans* should not yield the definitive work on the extraordinary impact that this ethnic group, for decades maligned and exploited in Cuba, has had on that nation's contemporary identity.