

The *Chino Cubano* Complex: Five Artists' Strategic Self-Orientalization and Reclamation of Chinese Identity

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Abstract

This article explores how five Cubans of Chinese descent have represented their personal and collective identities through the cultural products that they have created. It also investigates how their individual backgrounds and prevailing racial politics at the time have affected their representations. The Chinese first migrated from various parts of China to Cuba in the mid-19th century as indentured laborers in Cuba's sugar plantations, and then settled and formed a sizeable and vibrant community, participating economically, politically, and socially as Cuban citizens in Cuba. Their distinct cultural legacy lives on through Cuba's texts, art, music, and cultural practices. Using the frameworks of textual and visual analysis, as well as the theories of the politics of representation, I analyze the products of five different Chinese Cubans. While previous studies on the politics of representation of Chinese Cuban cultural production examined individual art forms, this article compares products across different mediums alongside each other to construct a broader understanding of their conditions of production to demonstrate how each producer represents their Chinese identity amidst Cuba's diverse ethnic and cultural influences.

Keywords: Self-Orientalization, Self-Orientalism, Chinese Cuban Cultural Production, Chinese Cuban Cultural Producer, Chinese Diaspora in Latin America, Chinese Identity, Flora Fong, Wifredo Lam, Regino Pedroso, Zoe Valdes, Pedro Eng Herrera

Introduction

The presence of the Chinese in Cuba, often disregarded on the level of global consciousness and even within Latin America, began in 1847 and has endured to this day. From the mid nineteenth century to World War One, Chinese nationals, overwhelmingly male, migrated to Cuba for economic imperatives to replace the terminated African slave trade and work as *culis* (coolies) in the sugar plantations under Spanish rule. The Chinese immigrants integrated into and influenced Cuban society—politically by participating in the Cuban Wars of Independence and the Cuban Revolution, and socioeconomically by establishing Chinese-oriented organizations and businesses. They also indelibly altered the demography of Cuba by intermixing with African immigrants and *mulattas*, producing mixed-race descendants. While there are currently only around 200 pure Chinese natives registered in Cuba, there are over 3,000 Cuban descendants who can claim Chinese heritage. The Chinese contributions to Cuba have largely gone unrecognized, but the idea that the Cuban racial identity is

composed of the Spanish, African, and Chinese respectively is reflected in seminal literary texts and academic discourse.

This article focuses upon how Chinese-Cubans construct their personal and collective Chinese-Cuban identity in their artistic and cultural products by examining the evolution of the features and the provenance of these selected products, and how they reflect the Chinese imprint, both subtle and manifest, on national Cuban culture. By analyzing examples from the visual arts of Pedro Eng Herrera, Flora Fong, and Wifredo Lam, and the written works of Regino Pedroso and Zoé Valdés, I examine how their representations were affected by the biographical events of the producers' lives and the prevailing racial politics of their time. While these five producers are not necessarily representative of all Cubans artists of Chinese descent, they were chosen for their varied backgrounds, mediums, and time periods, as well as their achievement of relative prominence in their fields. The analysis of their products would be a starting point to be applied to a wider range of works.

The existing literature on the Chinese presence in Cuba has mainly examined the community through an isolated anthropological, literary or historical lens. This article investigates how these representations, which span across different mediums, have changed over time alongside the changing circumstances and character of the Chinese community in Cuba, from the first Chinese peoples' arrival to contemporaneity.

Theories on Representation

William John Thomas Mitchell defines representation as the definitive human activity to express one's will, at once aesthetic and political, for aesthetics are never purely imaginative but inextricably bound to the political conditions in which the producer is mired (11). Gayatri Spivak takes this further by applying it to the subaltern, a marginalized group subordinate to a hegemonic power, but not fully submitted to its point of view. She theorizes that they cannot represent themselves in ways that is not a product of the dominant discourse pre-established by hegemonic powers, because their subjective consciousness is constructed by that selfsame discourse (275-85). Applied to the Chinese Cuban mestizo community, indeed their aesthetic representations are products of their sociopolitical positions, which have been marginal to the dominant discourse of European Spanish colonialism and even Afro-Cuban identity.

The arts are a means through which one may represent, but the result, the *sign*, is ultimately a dislocation from and may misrepresent the original will, which may not even be a coherent entity, and needs to be in conversation and in context with a larger network of signs in order to represent

(“Representation” 11-13). To represent is not just the simple will to express something in material or immaterial form, but other motives are bound in what the producer is trying to achieve and make their viewer feel, in this way the producers attempt to exert control over their representations. Representations may also defy the will of the producer and acquire new exogenous meaning, but nonetheless still explicate the producers’ sociopolitical positions, and this is especially clear in the visual artist Wifredo Lam’s case, as elaborated upon in the section “Strategic Self-Orientalization.” Furthermore, Mitchell also argues that representations have been restricted in every society, whether explicitly through the law or implicitly through informal power networks (“Representation” 15). Hence, I will be attempting to determine the time periods during which the Chinese-Cubans were allowed and forbidden to represent themselves through their cultural production, how they were restricted by the extant power structures, and how they may have used symbolism to mask their intentions.

For the purposes of this article, I define “Chinese-ness” as any overt or implied reference to the ethnicity, identity, and aesthetic of the Chinese. With regards to this claimed ethnicity of Chinese-ness, Werner Sollors elaborates that ethnic identity is constructed and claimed by a people with previously distinct identities but a growing sense of community due to circumstances such as conflict, enslavement, or mere coexistence, a process termed “ethnogenesis” by Andrew Greeley (Werner 57). Generational factors also affect the process of ethnogenesis. The American historian Marcus Lee Hansen articulated a law stating that the first generation’s religion, which may be considered in terms of ethnicity or attachment to a place, will often be rejected by the second generation, which has never experienced the place of origin, only for the third generation to reaffirm their inherited ethnicity through abstract and imagined attachment (Sollors 216). This law applies to all the cultural producers under inspection, as they are all second or third generation Chinese Cubans. These second and third generations inevitably experience a sense of double consciousness, which W.E.B Du Bois’s establishes as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” to describe the Negro’s perennial state of self-consciousness and negotiation of their double selves in America (Du Bois 3). This also describes the conditions under which the Chinese Cuban artists in this article operated. Sollors expanded upon this to describe how ethnic authors engage in a double consciousness arising from their ethnic dualism in their attempt to appeal to various types of audiences (252-55). As a subset of their presumed audience would consist of outsiders unfamiliar with the particularities of the writer’s ethnic culture, the producers translate and mediate their culture for them, evidenced by their strategic

choice of language, descriptive explanations, and even certain plot elements. This may be motivated by the political desire to gain cultural currency, to increase readership, or even to maximize the new possibilities arising from this unique voice. Sollors cites examples of ethnic writers who use their double consciousness as a tool to playfully tease their readers into doubting the reliability of the writer's ethnic representation, a technique that Pedroso used in his cryptic poems and will be elaborated upon later (252).

Constructions of Chinese Identity in Cuba

The sociopolitical position of Chinese immigrants in Cuba relative to that of the Spanish, Africans, Indians, and subsequent immigrant groups has shifted in progressive stages from their arrival to contemporaneity, from the time of the slave and coolie trades, the Wars of Independence, the U.S. Intervention, the founding of the Republic of Cuba, the 1959 revolution to today. Imported Chinese coolies became the Spanish colony's new source of sugar plantation labor in 1847, and more than 142,000 Chinese indentured laborers were transported to Cuba mostly from the southeastern Guangdong and Fujian Provinces over 27 years of the coolie trade (López 4, 24). Their overseers subjected the easily replaceable and legally defenseless Chinese coolies to slave-like working conditions, and the experience had indelible social and psychological effects on indentured Chinese workers and African slaves long after the end of the slave and coolie trade, as did continued racial discrimination yet forced cultural assimilation, as evident in the coolie testimonies of trafficking and servitude collected in Lisa Yun's *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (54-62). A new type of Chinese worker was later injected into Cuba when five thousand Chinese from the United States nicknamed the Californians, mostly rich and capitalistic, fled to Cuba from 1860 to 1875 to evade the United States' anti-Chinese laws, forming an urban Chinese community and laying the institutional groundwork for Havana's *barrio chino* (López 66-69, 266).

After the Chinese gained legal status and settled in Cuba when slavery was abolished by Spanish royal decree in 1886, they frequently intermixed with African and Creole women, with whom they occupied common social spheres (López 45). The rich were able to marry white Cuban women and tried to improve their social station by Hispanicizing themselves, adding the prefix "Don" to their names and even attempting to change their children's legal race to "white." (López 97-98). The social position of the Chinese continued improving during the Wars of Independence against Spain, first from 1868 to 1878 and then from 1895 to 1898, with almost 5,000 Chinese men recognized for their

participation and incorporated into the idea of cubanidad in seminal texts such as *Mi primera ofrenda* by Gonzalo de Quesada (López 126).

However, the Chinese remained marginal to the Cuban racial discourse in the early twentieth century, with Fernando Ortiz's groundbreaking polemical writings on black empowerment activating a mostly binary scheme of the dominant white man and noble black savage, mostly mentioning the Chinese in exoticizing and vulgar terms, according to Frank Scherer (152-167, 155). Native laborers and Spanish merchants resented the economic success and perceived isolation of the Chinese shop owners, especially during anti-foreigner sentiments and collapse of sugar prices of 1920s to 30s Depression era (López 192, 220). However, certain sectors extolled the Chinese for their past toil as laborers, and the Chinese themselves too sought to organize themselves favorably to gain acceptance in society, publishing the Spanish and Chinese magazine *Fraternidad/Lian He Yue Kan* in 1934 for an all-inclusive readership (López 206). In 1944 President Grau and the Chinese minister Li Dijun unveiled a monument on which is engraved "No hubo un solo desertor chino cubano, ningún traidor chino cubano" (There was not a single Chinese Cuban deserter, nor a Chinese Cuban traitor) in honor of the Chinese soldiers in the Wars of Independence (Yun 32-33).

The 1959 Revolution strengthened the black and mestizo components of cubanidad. Several Cuban-born Chinese created the *Milicia Popular China* led by José Wong to defend the revolution (López 226). The end of the Cold War marked the revival of the Chinese in Cuba from the 1990s onward, and demonstrates the impact of the Cuban state's political agenda on the Chinese role in Cuban identity. The resumption of friendly diplomatic relations between Cuba and China removed social restrictions on public expressions of the Chinese culture, with the start of academic research on Chinese migration in the University of Havana and the creation of *El Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino de la Habana* (The Havana Chinatown Promotion Group) in 1995 to revitalize Chinatown as a tourist destination (López 237-38). This created a strategic economic incentive for Chinese Cubans to reclaim their Chinese-ness, through the conscious highlighting of Chinese aspects of Cuban popular traditions, such as the Lion and Dragon dance performances at the Havana carnival, Chinese medicinal practices and restaurants, and the practice of Tai Chi, which had never actually been practiced by the Chinese Cuban community before (Personal Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera). Today, there no longer exists a distinct Chinese community, with thousands of descendants fully integrated into Cuban society, and the extinction of Chinese-run private companies.

I hypothesize that during the initial period of pervasive Sinophobia in Cuba, a result of the way in which the Chinese were inserted into society, their economic competitiveness, and their

perceived alien culture, cultural producers who could claim Chinese Cuban heritage did not actively reflect their Chinese-ness in their work. However, during times of increasingly favorable geopolitical conditions that incentivized the recognition of Chinese contributions to Cuba, such their contribution of economic and social goods, participation in political affairs, and Orientalized appeal of mixed-blood descendants, Chinese-Cuban producers capitalized upon this to strategically self-Orientalize, negotiate their transculturation of Chinese beliefs and practices with African and Latin cultures, and assert the Chinese component of Cuban identity in their representations.

Market forces ultimately often played a dominant role in the cultural producers' identity construction; I do not believe that portraying their Chinese-ness was an autonomous decision on their parts. I explain two seemingly contradictory themes that play out simultaneously—the producers' strategic self-Orientalization, alongside their assertion of Chinese identity. How each producer constructed Chinese identity in their works depended on the degree to which the producers' families transmitted Chinese culture to them, their incentive to self-Orientalize in response to market factors, their desire to assert and reclaim the Chinese identity in Cuba, and the utility of using their Chinese identity to achieve other political goals.

Familial Transmission of Chinese Identity

All the producers had Chinese family members, but the degree to which these family members imparted their knowledge of Chinese culture to the producers varied greatly. Pedro Eng Herrera's father was highly educated with strong transnational ties back to China, becoming a relatively wealthy businessman and marrying a white Spanish woman. Hence, he was able to pass down aspects of the Chinese culture, such as the art of calligraphy, to Pedro, which was an instrumental influence for Pedro especially given the early death of his Spanish mother. Flora Fong García was born in Camagüey to a Cuban mother and native Chinese father from Canton, a well-educated man who imparted Chinese craft knowledge such as kitemaking on to Fong (Fong 126). Wifredo Lam's father was similarly educated and cultured, however his death when Wifredo was relatively young and the strong African influences of Wifredo's mulatta mother possibly mitigated the Chinese influence upon Wifredo. The privileged and educated Chinese, more so than coolies, had the wherewithal to culturally transmit Chinese culture to their children and assimilate into Cuban social and professional circles, and this affected the degree and manner in which the producers later constructed their Chinese identity in their works.

Regino Pedroso had almost the same racial mixture and familial circumstances as Wifredo Lam, with his father being absent during his formative years leaving him to be raised by his African mother. However, Pedroso primarily activated his Chinese identity in his poetry instead, and did not focus on Africa-related themes, while Lam did the opposite. This suggests the importance of other intervening factors after childhood and during adulthood.

Zoé Valdés is the only third generation Chinese, the rest of the producers being second generation, suggesting greater relative distance from her Chinese culture. Furthermore, her grandfather hardly spoke during his older years, and never about his coolie experience, hence Valdés could not have conceivably learnt much about Chinese history or culture from him. These examples suggest the necessity of considering familial context to evaluate how each cultural producer demonstrated their Chinese-ness in their work, amidst other intervening factors.

Strategic Self-Orientalism

Self-Orientalism, as developed by Arif Dirlik in relation to the Chinese, and by Frank Scherer even more specifically in relation to Chinese Cubans in his article “Sanfancón: Orientalism, Confucianism and the Construction of Chineseness in Cuba, 1847–1997,” is the articulation by the Oriental subjects of their own essentialized and distinct traits based on the Western Orientalist assumptions. The concept is derived from Western Orientalism, first fully developed by Edward Said and used in discourse as the Eurocentric Western gaze upon and construction of the Orient and its peoples, often exoticizing, othering, and essentializing them, rendering them peripheral to the European center of power. Said also writes that this deprives the Orientalized of the ability to speak for themselves (7-9). Dirlik strongly suggests that Asian subjects too participate in and legitimize the process of Orientalism by accepting and incorporating the West’s Orientalist images and “invented traditions” into their self-conception (96-118, 104–12.). This self-Orientalism allows the producers to strategically capitalize upon and benefit from new circumstances that reward those who can claim an Oriental identity. These favoring circumstances include the new diplomatic and economic relationship between China and Cuba birthing opportunities for the capturing of cultural capital and tourism dollars. Although the term “self-Orientalism” may appear to be a criticism of the producers who engage in it given the negative connotations of the term Orientalism, I argue that these producers are simultaneously reclaiming Chinese identity from its previously marginalized position and reshaping the discourse of Orientalism.

In this context, in order to gain the benefits of self-Orientalism, a Cuban producer of Chinese culture must be able to legitimately claim descent from the Chinese. Flora Fong, a second-generation Chinese-Cuban visual artist, takes great pains to do so. In publishing her book *Nube de otoño* in 1997, a semi-autobiographical collection of her works and critic's essays, she painstakingly makes her Chinese descent clear, including a photograph of herself holding a photograph of her Chinese grandparents. She explicitly states that the title is a Spanish translation of her Chinese name, spells out her Chinese influences, and purposefully includes essays that valorize the Chinese components of her work, inserting herself into the canon of Chinese-influenced art (Fong, *Nube de Otoño* 6). This intentional highlighting of her Chinese-ness was not so much an organic result of her upbringing, but instead self-constructed during her adult years and professional life.

When Fong began her painting career in the 1970s, her work did not yet display any overt Chinese-ness, and were rendered relatively realistically. She began to turn to Surrealist abstraction to representing powerful internal forces, with storms and strong winds in *Papalote atrapado* (1984) and *Huaracán* (1979) with bold strokes and patches of color. Only in 1987 did Fong embark on a full exploration of Chinese themes in her art, after her first trip to China, during which she studied Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting, and produced earthenware porcelains in a joint project with the Federation of Artistic and Literary Circles in China (Fong, *Nube de Otoño*, 3-6). This event allowed her to claim an experiential insider perspective of China, and legitimately incorporate it in her painting. She explicitly states on the first page of *Nube de otoño* her connection to the foundational Han dynasty, and that "Chinese characters were an essential part of my art since the early 1980s" (Fong, *Nube de Otoño*, 1). Her vigorous, black outlining brushstrokes have morphed into literal calligraphic words such as 木 (meaning wood, pronounced "mu") in *Bosque tropical* (1990) and 人 (meaning person, pronounced "ren") in *De China al Caribe* (2005). The international and national commercial success that Flora Fong has achieved with her Chinese-influenced works is proof of the efficacy of and incentives for her self-Orientalizing. The famous Min Chih Tang Chinese restaurant in Havana's *barrio chino* is bedecked with her work, and the prestigious Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, also in Havana, temporarily installed in 2006 her black steel, large format sculptures which featured adapted Chinese calligraphy and square characters. Her Chinese-ness has given her access to Asian markets, with even Beijing's Forbidden City featuring her work, and she gained opportunities to exhibit in China and Japan on top of her frequent exhibitions in the United States and Cuba. Most art critics have unequivocally accepted and romanticized the Chinese-ness of Flora Fong, with the exceptions of Graziella Pogolloti and Adelaida de San Juan describing it as a conscious effort of hers (Fong, *Nube de*

Otoño, 56, 119-21). Miguel Barnet, the author of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, lyricizes her personality, saying “I see Flora Fong’s Chinese face behind a pile of cut stones” and “the blood running through Flora Fong’s veins marked her painting before she made the voyage that took her to the land of her grandparents, the Taoist China of the lotus root and jade” (Fong, *Nube de Otoño*, 124). Piñera too describes her physical appearance and “ojos oblicuos.” There is clear incentive for her to expediently capitalize upon this positive reception and excitement at her supposedly Eastern origins. If she had solely employed Caribbean influences, which many artists in Cuba had already utilized to some extent, she would have had fewer means with which to distinguish herself.

Regino Pedroso, in his anthology of Chinese poems *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* published in 1955, too constantly references his Chinese “abuelo,” directly establishing this familial lineage to give himself the legitimacy to speak of and for the Chinese. In an interview, he invokes childhood memories of his Chinese father and the Chinese casino where the Oriental imagery fascinated him (Arias de la Canal 130-21). The Cuban historian Mario Castillo considers Regino Pedroso’s Chinese-themed poetry an original contribution to Latin American literature, as he infuses material from his actual contact with Chinese culture from his childhood (Castillo 15). However, I question if this did indeed happen organically, or if Pedroso consciously chose to Sinicize his poetry due to other contextual political factors, and not out of inherited ethnic and filial obligation. In fact, he could not have received extensive cultural knowledge from his Chinese father, who abandoned his Cuban family before Pedroso was even a toddler. He would have had to deliberately study Chinese history and culture in adulthood in order to use it as material for his poetry, and only gained actual experience in China much later in life as a diplomat to Beijing in 1962. He claims to have translated the dialogues from Chinese to Spanish for the reader in the prologue of *El ciruelo*, raising doubts as to whether he could actually have read the original Chinese language and translated it into Spanish, or if it is a figurative translation that he refers to (Pedroso 21). Flora Fong too strategically translates all the Spanish essays in *Nube de otoño* into English, which suggests her desire to reach a wider audience. These translations of their culture into understandable terms for their audiences demonstrate their practicing of Sollors’s ethnogenesis, previously discussed as the reconstruction and reclaiming of ethnic identity due to their desire for cultural currency.

Pedroso’s earlier poems featured the Chinese only marginally, instead focusing on Socialist themes. López-Calvo describes Pedroso’s ethnic turn as partly a result of the early twentieth century Negrismo movement, during which it became popular to capitalize upon an ethnic background (López-Calvo 80). He first mentions the Chinese in two poems in his famed poetry anthology *Nosotros*

in 1930; he uses well-worn Western stereotypes and idealizations of the Chinese to recreate his Chinese-ness. In a poem in *Nosotros* titled “Conceptos del nuevo estudiante,” he portrays Chinese as peaceful, ceremonious and wise, in the lines “En el misterio de las pagodas/mi vida transcurría armoniosa y serena:/dulce como los lotos de los estanques/dulce como un poema de Li-tai-po”, using imagery such as “Ataño bebí el té de hojas maduras de Yunnan/en finas tazas de porcelana”, and making mention of legendary Chinese intellectuals such as Lao-tseu, Meng-tseu, Kung-fu-tseu (7-10, 2-3). By the time Pedroso had published his fully Chinese-themed *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* in 1955, there was already a greater measure of Chinese community cohesion and social integration into Cuban society. They were given recognition for their participation in the wars of independence, although their continued marginalization can be gleaned from certain unfavorable presentations in the Cuban press. Chinese businesses were flourishing, with fine goods in Cuba deemed to have originated from countries from the Orient. Pedroso does indeed dramatically highlight the luxury goods of China in his poetry, such as the jewels, marble swans, fans, lanterns, bamboos, plum wines and erotically exotic women. 1955 would have been conceivably good timing for a writer in Cuba with Chinese ancestry to claim their Chinese identity—Pedroso himself by then had gained substantial renown, having had his anthologies published pre-revolution and been endorsed by the Communists, hence he could have had more clout to explore other topics.

Pedroso also used the Chinese to further his other political goals. After his state persecution in the early 1930s for his politically provocative writings, he may have been gradually incentivized to use more innocuous metaphors to make his political arguments less explicit in order to avoid repercussions. The title of “Salutación a un camarada culí” is reminiscent of Rubén Darió’s 1905 poem “Salutación del optimista,” a seminal piece of work defending Spanish America against U.S. imperialism, establishing its revolutionary overtones. The final resounding lines of “Salutación a un camarada culí” are a call to a pan-America revolution, with “¡Hasta que llegue el alba que en gesto comprensivo/del mástil de los Andes sus cables rompa al viento/de nuevos postulados/la nave de la nueva Revolución de América!” (63-66). In “Conceptos de Nuevo Estudiante,” he subverts the stereotypical image of the passive Chinese character, by having him violently awakened to an emboldened new consciousness. This metaphor for his social and political awakening is evident in the lines “Yo fui hasta ayer ceremonioso y pacífico,” “hoy marchó hacia la cultura de los pueblos/ejercitando mis dedos en el gatillo de máuser” and “Una inquietud curiosa ha insomnizado mis ojos /oblicuos” (1, 30-1, 36-7).

A unique feature in some self-Orientalizing works under observation is the producers' double-consciousness – their acute awareness of their positions as outsiders and fragile claim to Chinese-ness. Regino Pedroso acknowledges in the prologue to *El ciruelo* the imperfections involved in translating the Chinese spirit of Li Po to the Spanish language, having had to reconcile two distinct cultural spheres. He questions if Master and Disciple are both real human beings of flesh and bone and if they are authentically Chinese, apparently mimicking the vagueness and enigma of Chinese philosophical styles, and in doing so subtly acknowledges his construction of them and possibly his own Chinese-ness (Pedroso, *El ciruelo*, 17). In his poem “Salutación a un camarada culi” published in 1930, he expresses consciousness of his absorption of Chinese culture through a European lens, in “aunque hasta mí llegaste vestido a la europea” (14). He also makes generalized and absolute claims about the “Amarillo”, describing their materialism along with their ephemeral and philosophical treatment of life's vicissitudes with a singular wisdom (Pedroso, *El ciruelo*, 18-19). This is a result of his assimilation to the larger Cuban culture and distance from his Chinese ancestors, hence resulting in certain glaring inaccuracies in his representations of the Chinese.

Zoé Valdés had written several novels from 1986 onwards in Paris that explored themes such as romantic love, sexuality, femininity, and nostalgia for Cuba, before embarking upon the fully Chinese-themed *La eternidad del instante* in 2004. The Chinese featured but marginally in her earlier novels, with passing mentions of Sanfancón, the syncretized Chinese deity of Cuban Santería, in *Querido primer novio* (1999) and the Chinese mulatta protagonist Cuca Martínez in *Te di la vida entera* (1996). This begs the question of why, eight years later, she decided to make a full novelistic exploration of the Chinese in Cuba. A powerful impetus for her would have been the contemporary twenty-first century literary trend for Latin American novelists to explore Asian themes, as apparent in Isabel Allende's *Hija de la fortuna* in 1999, *Retrato en sepia* in 2000, and Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting* in 2003. It is worthy of note that these authors live outside of their countries of origin in Latin America, establishing a dialogue amongst an uprooted people reflecting upon their countries' ethnic realities. Whether motivated by profit motives or not, Valdés did attain considerable commercial success with *La eternidad del instante*, winning the III Premio Ciudad de Torrevecija prize which came with a substantial 360,000 euros prize. Perhaps her well-established literary fame by 2004 was added incentive for her to explore new topics.

Like Pedroso, Zoé Valdés too demonstrates self-awareness of her flawed representation of Chinese-ness. She absolves herself of blame in her inaccurate renderings of the Chinese culture in *La eternidad del instante*, with a disclaimer that her story is a fictional reimagining of her grandfather's life,

and hence inevitably betrays the actual details of his life (Moltó n.pag.). Within the story, she displays an understanding of her strategic self-Orientalizing through her character Won Sin Fon, a Chinese acrobat who fakes a strong Cantonese accent when it is useful, but drops it in serious situations. She almost satirizes her own essentializing of Chinese culture in the line “El anciano, además, dotado de una gran paciencia, china por supuesto, escuchaba sin protestar su perorata cotidiana” (Valdés 261).

This does not, however, necessarily mean that she and the other producers are hence poor representatives with less authority to speak to being Chinese. While second and third generation producers, distanced from their Chinese origins, inevitably committed errors in rendering the Chinese culture, and their attempt to assert their new ability to represent themselves has traces of Western Orientalism, this is inevitable considering that they were born and raised in Western environments. This, in fact, demonstrates more acutely their position as active re-creators and negotiators of their unique circumstances and origins, a response to their relatively newfound freedom to represent their ethnic origins for public consumption, however distant or close those origins are.

In Wifredo Lam’s case, external sources have attributed Chinese sensibilities and influences to his work, despite himself having never declared them. Miguel Barnet claims that Lam used Chinese calligraphic ink and strokes in his etchings, as Fong does (Fong, *Nube de Otoño*, 125). His work evidently acquired exogenous meaning, which inevitably happens to all representations once others interpret them. As early as in 1950, Fernando Ortiz in his monograph *Wifredo Lam y su obra vista a través de significados críticos* speaks of the African-ness and Mulatto-ness of Lam’s paintings, and also ruminates upon the “delicadez y la finura de su ejecución” from “esa cultura sónica” which Lam received from China (9). Ortiz also claims that Lam’s childhood knowledge of Chinese ideographic writing translated into his tendency to use symbolism, which sounds uncannily similar to what Flora Fong attributes to herself. Lydia Cabrera, a close friend of Lam’s, said that his Asian and African lineage was expressed in his art, which was not “exotic” or “vulgar” (Balderrama 47). His Chinese heritage appears to be romanticized as giving Lam the almost indiscernible sensibility to approach other subjects which are more easily and visually detectable in his works.

That being said, certain critics and friends of Lam have countered that it is misguided to understand his work solely through the lens of his mixed heritage. Michel Leiris, for one, argues that nothing about Lam need be explained by his race (Fouchet 1986, 11-12). Other artists who possess the same heritage may not have expressed the same tendencies in their work at all. Indeed, there exists a tension between understanding an artist as an ethnic artist, and understanding their work without imputing ethnic influences. Since Wifredo Lam produced his work before the full commercialization

of the Chinese culture was underway in Cuba, and was exposed to so many other cultural influences in his adulthood, I postulate that he had no strong incentive to Orientalize himself. Perhaps the retrospective Orientalizing of Lam by others was motivated by the desire to coopt one of the most treasured Cuban artists into the Chinese canon in order to lend credibility to the Chinese presence in Cuba. Wifredo Lam is a counter-example to other self-Orientalizing cultural producers—while he may not have Orientalized his own work, his audience endowed Chinese-ness onto it demonstrates the same strategic incentives that motivated the other producers.

While we may recognize the self-aggrandizing motivations behind Orientalizing their own culture and work, the producers at the same time exercise their right to reclaim their Chinese identity. I do not believe it is judicious to make definitive claims about their intentions, and moreover these isolated examples are too few to enable making broad generalizations about all Chinese Cuban producers, however the extracted themes are still useful as evaluative frameworks to consider representations of Chinese Cuban identity.

Assertion and Reclamation of the Chinese presence in Cuba

Despite the fact that some of the producers practiced self-Orientalization, they never fully conformed to Western Orientalist methods, and often skillfully subvert Orientalist assumptions of the Chinese. They have also addressed the discrimination and marginalization that they as Chinese in Cuba had experienced, and in doing so, they reclaim their identity and distinguish themselves from any literary tradition of representing Asians without incorporating the voices of Asians themselves. Especially in this contemporary context, which allows and celebrates the exploring of multicultural identities, a safe space has been opened for the producers to exercise their self-explorations of their Chinese roots. This typically only occurred later in adulthood when they presumably had the intellectual and mental confidence and maturity to do so, after previously refraining from demonstrating their Chinese identity for fear of being marginalized.

Pedro Eng Herrera, for one, has expressed his disapproval of this commercialization of Chinese-ness for personal and economic benefit, and said that his personal reason for depicting Chinese culture in art is to spread awareness of the Chinese in Cuba and to safeguard his Asian lineage through a “vaso comunicante” (Personal Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera, 5 Mar. 2015). While his paintings have been exhibited nationally and in the 1991 Havana Biennial, he no longer sells his art, and appears to be less of a commercial artist than an academic documenter of the Chinese in Cuba. He has participated in academic conferences in Guangdong and Hong Kong, and this intellectual

engagement suggests personal motivations beyond profit and glory in the art world. As an amateur historian, he has overseen projects documenting the history of the Chinese migration. His house in Guanabacoa exhibits his artworks and recounts the Chinese contributions to Cuba. He also painted a revolutionary mural on the front porch of his house listing the names of all the Chinese *mambises* and members of the Bolivia's Independence Army, containing quotes from Che Guevara, maps of South America and Guevara's guerilla organizing in Bolivia. (Fighters for Cuban independence from the Spanish). His personal participation in the revolution, leading an all-Chinese platoon to the Isle of Pines for the Bay of Pigs defense operation, and even commanding a team to crack down on the rampant vice in *barrio chino*, supports and provides experiential material for his artistic endeavors (López-Calvo 127). *Estrellas chinas en el ejército mambí* (1998) is a portrait of José Bu Tack, a general he personally fought alongside with during the Revolution, sporting a Confucius-like beard and wearing his army uniform with the Cuban flag (see fig. 1). He also demonstrates sensitivity to the discrimination and suffering that the Chinese immigrants experienced, and one of his paintings depicts a Chinese lottery man in front of the Gran China cinema from 1952, a personal friend of his who had contracted syphilis from a prostitute (Personal Interview with Pedro Eng Herrera). He actually spoke Chinese before learning Spanish, because his Spanish mother died when he was an infant, leaving him to be raised by his Chinese father, and has extensively incorporated Chinese calligraphic inscriptions into his paintings, whose entire poetic content carry literary meaning and do not function solely as visual motifs, as Flora Fong's Chinese characters do.



Fig. 1. *Estrellas chinas en el ejército mambí*. Pedro Eng Herrera. 1998. Acrylic on cardboard

Pedro Eng Herrera also incorporated Chinese elements in his work since the beginning of his painting endeavors in 1956, instead of only claiming it later when it was more strategic to do so; one of his first pieces is of a vase with a woman dress in Chinese garb on it, painted in an impressionistic style (see fig. 2). He taught himself to paint, and his naïve style of painting, in which subjects and techniques are considered childlike and not technical, and lack of abstruse symbolism and Surrealist influences suggest that he has not prioritized artistic excellence and precision to gain renown. Unlike Fong, he provides no translations for Chinese calligraphic inscriptions of poetry on the canvas, indirectly excluding the non-Chinese reading audience and leaving the reader to understand it themselves. His relative lack of double consciousness and strategic self-Orientalizing in this instance suggests the purity of his intent.



Fig. 2. *No Title*. Pedro Eng Herrera. 1956. Acrylic on cardboard.

Beyond her Orientalizing and stereotyping, Zoé Valdés's novel manages to subvert certain stereotypes of the Chinese. She addresses the practice of foot binding, but instead of condemning it from the typical Western perspective of it being oppressive of women, it is deemed by the character Sueño Azul as a source of pride, even containing magical powers. She subverts the stereotype of submissive Chinese women by characterizing the women as sexually liberated and defiant of their parents' authority, perhaps suggesting that these women have adopted more flexible sexual values (López-Calvo 77). Her graphic descriptions of the initial sexual encounters between Li Ying and Mei Ying, Mo Ying's parents in China subvert the stereotype of sexual timidity (Valdés 45). Valdés portrays Maximiliano Megia as a handsome man courted by women, challenging the stereotype of asexual Chinese masculinity. She emphasizes the heroisms of the Chinese mambises, listing them name by name, and historically references how the Spanish colonizers tried to whiten, or perhaps in this case yellow, the population with Chinese laborers, recounting the racial discrimination that they faced (Valdés 205). She also employs the popular Cuban saying which valorizes Chinese medical practice, "no te salva ni el médico chino" (Valdés 235).

While second and third generation producers, distanced from their Chinese origins, inevitably committed errors in rendering the Chinese culture, this does not necessarily mean that they are hence poor representatives and have less authority to speak to being Chinese. This, in fact, demonstrates more acutely their position as active re-creators and negotiators of their unique circumstances and origins, a response to their relatively newfound freedom to represent their ethnic origins for public consumption, however distant or close those origins are.

Conclusion: Does Chinese-Ness Exist in Cuba Anymore?

Intended or not, artistic and cultural products unfailingly reveal the sociopolitical positions of the creators. Throughout this article, I have demonstrated how Cuba's racial politics, the shifting position of the Chinese in Cuba, as well as aspects of their own personal lives have affected the producers' representations of the Chinese in their work. Ethnic makeup, political beliefs, degree of exposure to Chinese culture, and other competing influences of their upbringing whether Afro-Cuban or Surrealist, all need to be considered in order to analyze their work.

This research yielded a few main conclusions. There were several sociopolitical factors that initially disincentivized Chinese Cuban producers from representing themselves in their work, as evidenced by the absence of Chinese representations during the period of their political and social marginalization in Cuba at the early stages of Chinese immigration. Chinese-born artists were oftentimes more likely to be exposed to and other competing influences aside from Chinese influences. Later, when the Chinese began to be accepted as part of Cuban society as a result of their political and socioeconomic contributions and new market demand for ethnic representations rewarded those who represented the Chinese, this catalyzed the artists' reclamation of Chinese identity from the Western Orientalists, although they still displayed signs of Western Orientalism in their representations. They were also incentivized to strategically and subversively use Chinese identity to achieve other political goals, such as masking a call for socialist revolution. This self-Orientalization resulted in work layered with intention, occasional inaccuracy, and yet cultural pride, and an interpreter of those works would be remiss to assume that the Chinese identity represented stems solely from the artists' ethnicity.

What is the underlying, transcendental takeaway here? I had initially set out to identify a unified and broadened discourse within the study of the Chinese in Cuba with regards to their cultural production. However, this research has instead led me to conclude that "Chinese Cuban Cultural Production" as a well-defined, categorical framework simply does not exist. There is no useful singular and unified schema with which we can evaluate and understand their work, given the complexity of their conditions of production. Now that the Chinese have become almost completely assimilated into Cuban society, any activation of a Chinese identity by a Cuban is undoubtedly self-conscious. One would be hard-pressed to find any Cuban today who actively practices Chinese culture, but it would be fairly common for a mention of a distant Chinese great-grandparent or relation in conversation. There is no way to verify the truth of such a claim, and there would be no point in doing so either. Chinese ethnic identification in Cuba, as it exists in its fragile and malleable form, is at this point self-created.

Should an aesthetic representation be labeled as "Chinese Cuban" with distinguishable Chinese influences simply because it is created by someone with a claim to Chinese heritage? Perhaps the broader lesson here is that one will always run the risk of misinterpretation when using an ethnic group as the sole categorical framework for cultural analysis. Hence, one should remain vigilantly aware of the tenuousness of that framework, and always venture to utilize other frameworks to deepen their understanding and understand the other forces acting upon the producer.

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