

## The Unique History of Chinese in Cuba

Presentation by Mary-Alice Waters at New Zealand 'Rising Dragons, Soaring Bananas' international conference on Chinese diaspora

Ten years ago, in December 1999, a conference much like this one took place in Cuba. Sponsored by the University of Havana, the University of California at Berkeley, and the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas, its focus was the Chinese diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The massive outflow of émigrés from China during the mid-nineteenth century beginning in the 1830s and accelerating in the years following the 1842 defeat of the Qing dynasty by British colonial forces in what is, even to this day, generally known as the first Opium War—was part of the development of a truly world capitalist market.

Pushed by intolerable living conditions on the land and in the cities in China, and pulled by capitalism's unquenchable and ever-expanding need for labor power, many hundreds of thousands of Chinese peasants and workers left their native villages or large cities for the "new world." Some went voluntarily, others taken through deception or dragooned against their will. "Shanghaied" is a term known to English speakers the world over. Following several centuries of what had been the even more lucrative African slave trade, the British-dominated "coolie trade" played no small role in the primitive accumulation of capital that fueled the industrial revolution.

This massive Chinese migration changed the course of history not only in Cuba but in other countries of the Western Hemisphere as well. Yet even *the fact* of that massive migration is so little known that I have never once spoken on this subject without someone in the audience commenting afterward: "I never had any idea there were Chinese-Cubans!"

### The Chinese in Cuba

The focus of this presentation today is not the Chinese diaspora in general. There are many of you participating in this conference whose knowledge of that rich and complex history is far greater than mine. I will

concentrate on one question: some of the *unique* elements of the history of the Chinese in Cuba and why these elements are important.

At the Havana conference I referred to, Wang Gungwu, the founding president of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas, posed a question to Brigadier General Moisés Sío Wong, president of the Cuba-China Friendship Association. Both of Sío Wong's parents were born in China. They came to Cuba from the village of Zengcheng, in Guangdong province. Wang asked Sío Wong:

“How is it possible that you, a descendant of Chinese, occupy a high government post, are a deputy in the National Assembly, and a general of the Armed Forces? How is that possible?” Your experience is so different from that of Chinese descendants elsewhere throughout the world.

And Sío Wong answered:

The answer doesn't lie in the degree of Chinese participation in the war of independence. That *is* worth studying, since nothing similar happened in any other country where Chinese indentured workers were taken. But here too, before the triumph of the revolution, we Chinese were discriminated against.

What's the difference in the experience of Chinese in Cuba and other countries of the diaspora? 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.

To historians and others who want to study the question, I say that you have to understand that the Chinese community here in Cuba is different from Peru, Brazil, Argentina, or Canada.

And that difference is the triumph of a socialist revolution.

Sío Wong tells this story in the book *Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution*, based on interviews I did with Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, and Sío Wong

between 2002 and 2005. All three, like dozens of other young Chinese-Cubans, most still in their teens, joined the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the U.S.-backed military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista more than fifty years ago. To this day Choy, Chui, and Sío Wong continue to carry heavy leadership responsibilities in Cuba.

That book was published in English and Spanish in 2005 by Pathfinder Press. And the Chinese-language edition was released last year. All three are available at the conference book table here.

### **Fighting to change the world today**

If I start with Sío Wong's conclusion, it is to emphasize its immediacy and relevance to the struggles we are discussing at this conference, struggles against racist discrimination and exploitation *today*. It is to emphasize the importance of Sío Wong's answer for those of us who refuse to adapt to that world and, instead, fight to change it.

The fact that Cubans of Chinese ancestry are found everywhere in Cuba today, spread throughout all occupations and at all levels of leadership, is indeed unique, as Wang Gungwu noted. To cite but a few Cubans of Chinese descent who today hold positions of high responsibility, I would mention Lázaro Barredo, editor of *Granma*, the main daily newspaper in Cuba, and Esteban Lazo, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Cuba. Both Nicolás Guillén, Cuba's national poet, and Cuba's most famous twentieth-century painter, Wifredo Lam, had Chinese forebears.

It can truthfully be said that in Cuba today there is no "glass ceiling" for Cubans of Chinese ancestry. They no longer live concentrated in Chinese barrios, nor are they restricted to a few economic livelihoods such as shopkeepers, fruit vendors, or laundry and restaurant workers. They are no longer excluded from universities and social clubs, nor oppressed and discriminated against in so many other ways blatant and subtle based on the color of their skin or shape of their eyes.

How has anti-Chinese racism, and the even more deeply rooted anti-Black racism, been rolled back by Cuba's working people? Why has Cuba's socialist revolution remained true to its proletarian course for more than fifty years? How has it set an example for the toilers of the world?

The answers to these burning questions are deeply rooted in a century of struggle against Spanish colonial and U.S. imperialist domination battles totally intertwined with the struggle for the abolition not only of slavery but of bonded labor of every kind. The lessons learned and the leadership forged

in the process of those battles are at the center of the unique history of Chinese working people in Cuba.

### **Two little-noted facts**

Many of the basic facts are well known to participants in this conference:

- The “coolie trade” that shipped more than 140,000 Chinese to Cuba between 1847 and 1874 as the Spanish and colonial sugar plantation owners sought alternatives to their dwindling supply of Black slaves shipped as cargo on the inhuman “middle passage” from Africa.
- The mutinies by Chinese toilers on board those vessels, where mortality rates on each crossing *averaged* 10 percent to 15 percent. Some were higher.
- The near-slave labor conditions of life and work imposed on the Chinese contract laborers, which led even the imperial Chinese government to send a commission in 1874 to investigate the treatment of its subjects in Cuba.
- The resistance and rebellions, the Chinese who survived as individual *cimarrones* in the forests and joined with other escaped slaves in their hidden mountain settlements called *palenques*.
- The size and commercial vitality of Havana’s Chinatown, surpassed in the Americas in the nineteenth century only by San Francisco’s.

I want to underscore two facts that are often little noted.

First, in proportion to the size of the population, mid-nineteenth century Chinese immigration to Cuba was greater than anywhere else in the Americas, including the United States. While virtually the same total numbers went to each country, the population of Cuba was 1.4 million while the U.S. population was 38 million. Not surprisingly, on the streets of Havana and elsewhere, you will often hear it said that the Cuban people are one-third African, one-third Chinese, and one-third Spanish. The reasons are obvious.

Secondly, it is not accurate, as is often reputed, that the treaty between the governments of China and Spain ending the “coolie trade” in 1877 came in response to growing revulsion in bourgeois public opinion over the treatment of Chinese indentured laborers, as documented, among other places, by the Chinese imperial commission. The truth lies elsewhere.

With the outbreak of Cuba's first war for national independence from Spain in 1868, thousands upon thousands of Chinese indentured laborers joined the liberation army, as did similar numbers of former slaves. No one knows how many Chinese fought in the liberation army because most had adopted Spanish names. But the records are full of references to Chinese units, some as large as 500. In face of this massive rebellion, the Spanish crown took steps it hoped would end a mortal threat to its continued rule.

As Sío Wong noted in his answer to Wang Gungwu, nowhere else in the world had Chinese indentured laborers in their vast majority joined in a national liberation war as they did in Cuba a war that was at the very center of the forging of the Cuban nation.

The untarnished record of the Chinese in Cuba's independence struggle against Spain is captured in the famous words of Gen. Gonzalo de Quesada inscribed on a memorial to the Chinese *mambises* in Havana. "There was not a single Chinese-Cuban deserter. There was not a single Chinese-Cuban traitor." Not one!

When Cuba's first war of independence ended without victory in 1878 and the infamous Pact of Zanjón was signed, the only meaningful concession that had been wrung from the Spanish crown was "freedom for the slaves and Asian contract laborers who are today in the ranks of the insurrectional forces."<sup>1</sup>

I think you would have to say that the Spanish rulers were simply recognizing reality. These were men and women who had conquered their freedom. They would never go back.

### **Washington snatches fruits of victory**

When independence from Spain was finally won in 1898, after thirty years of struggle, the fruits of that victory were snatched by the rising imperialist colossus to the north. With Washington's protectorate came elements of the Jim Crow system of anti-Black terror that reigned across the former Confederate states of the South in the wake of the defeat of post-Civil War Radical Reconstruction—as well as new codifications of anti-Chinese racism also imported from the United States.

On May 15, 1902, the U.S.-imposed governor of Cuba, Leonard Wood, signed Military Order No. 155, banning all Chinese immigration. Although the ban was briefly set aside from 1917 to 1922 in an attempt to increase sugar production in light of U.S. imperialism's needs during World War I, it remained in force, as did similar laws elsewhere in North America—and

New Zealand and around the world until the anti-Japanese World War II alliance with the Chiang Kai-shek government of China dictated a political change.

### **Chinese-Cubans: no separate history**

Whatever the unique details, however, there is no separate history for Cubans of Chinese ancestry. Their stories are inseparable from the class struggle that has shaped Cuba today. And that is why the stories of Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, and Moisés Sío Wong as told in *Our History Is Still Being Written* are so useful.

Each was born in the mid-1930s, growing up in a semicolonial capitalist Cuba disfigured by ever increasing U.S. economic domination, the venal corruption of bourgeois politics; spreading control of casinos, drugs, and prostitution by North American organized crime; and more. They were part of the generation that was attracted to and identified with the wave of victorious national liberation struggles that swept through Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean during and after World War II.

Most important, they were part of the generation that simply refused to bow down to the indignities and brutalities of life under the Batista dictatorship that came to power in 1952.

Born into families of shopkeepers in three different parts of Cuba, each came from a slightly different social strata of the Chinese-Cuban population. Chui, for example, whose father was Chinese and mother a Black Cuban working-class woman, was literally kidnapped from his mother and prevented by his father from even knowing of her—because of the anti-Black prejudices that prevailed within the Chinese community.

When all other means of struggle were exhausted, each of the three took up arms, as did hundreds and eventually thousands and tens of thousands of their generation, including untold numbers of Chinese-Cubans. Choy pointed out to me that there were six Cubans of Chinese descent in the famous column led by Che Guevara that marched from the mountains of Oriente and led to the victory in the decisive battle of Santa Clara, central Cuba's largest city. In six years of revolutionary struggle in city and countryside, in which more than 20,000 died, the Batista dictatorship crumbled, its army and police force destroyed.

The men and women of the victorious revolutionary forces of the July 26 Movement and Rebel Army—like Choy, Chui, and Sío Wong—did not initially set out to make a socialist revolution. They wanted a world with

greater equality and social justice. They wanted to narrow the divide between the obscenely rich and the desperately poor.

As promised, the new revolutionary government organized Cuba's workers and farmers to carry out a land reform, provided loans and cheap credit to farmers, mobilized 100,000 students to wipe out illiteracy, nationalized housing and slashed rents, made discrimination in employment and public activities illegal, closed the casinos, opened the door to employment and greater equality for women, and led millions of unemployed Cubans in the building of homes, hospitals, schools, and other vitally needed public facilities.

As they took these elementary democratic steps—steps seen as immediate necessities by the toiling millions—working people in Cuba came into head-on confrontation not only with the country's small capitalist class, but more decisively with U.S. ruling-class families who owned the vast bulk of productive property in Cuba, and with the government of those families in Washington. At the time of the revolution, U.S. families or corporations controlled by them owned, or held on long-term leases, 90 percent of the cultivated land in Cuba; 90 percent of the mineral wealth; all of the oil resources and refineries—100 percent!; 80 percent of public utilities such as electricity and telephones; and more than 40 percent of sugar production.

As the confrontation unfolded, the working people of Cuba simply refused to back down to the demands of the U.S. rulers. They stood their ground in the face of sabotage, invasion, assassination, embargo, and blockade.

That, in short, is the origin of what became the first socialist revolution in the Americas. That, in short, remains to this day the reason for Washington's seemingly inexplicable determination to punish the people of Cuba, to make them pay for their insufferable affront to U.S. capital.

It's the reason five Cuban revolutionaries have spent nearly eleven years in U.S. prisons, held hostage to the refusal of the Cuban people to adopt "changes" Washington would deem acceptable.<sup>2</sup>

To end where we began.

In the United States today one often hears the assertion that there are no Chinese in Cuba any more, that they all fled the country to escape the revolution. The truth is far different, of course.

**Class divisions before 1959**

There *were* profound class divisions within the Chinese-Cuban population. Of the wealthiest layers of business owners, bankers, and professionals, many with ties to the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party) in Taiwan, the large majority left Cuba for the United States during the first years of the revolution, as, of course, did most of their non-Chinese peers. Other capitalist property owners left following the nationalization of small commercial enterprises in 1968.

According to the official Cuban census figures, there were nearly 12,000 Chinese in Cuba in 1953. Some 6,000 remained in 1970. The category of “Chinese” in Cuban census figures, however, includes only those born in China who retained their legal status as Chinese subjects. While the number of Chinese in Cuba who maintain Chinese citizenship has continued to decline steadily ever since, and is barely a few hundred today, that fact alone—a fact often misleadingly cited by opponents of the revolution—would lead one to hugely erroneous conclusions about the dynamic of the Cuban Revolution.

At the time of the revolution, far from fleeing the country, the vast majority of Cubans of Chinese ancestry were ordinary working people (the product of generations of intermarriage). Like Choy, Chui, and Sío Wong, they enthusiastically supported the revolution and organized to defend it, including within the Chinese community. The all-Chinese José Wong Revolutionary Militia Brigade, for example, was instrumental in taking leadership of the Barrio Chino out of the hands of the Kuomintang supporters who had long dominated its leading societies such as the Chung Wah Casino. It formed part of the Revolutionary National Militia that defeated the U.S.-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

Today, pride of Cubans in their Chinese ancestry, along with interest in retaining and reviving their traditions, is expanding not disappearing, a fact registered by the increasing activity of Chinese associations across the island.

What measures did the Cuban Revolution take to eliminate discrimination based on the color of a person’s skin?

“The greatest measure against discrimination was the revolution itself,” Sío Wong answers.

Working people took political power and *used* it to advance that objective. It remains a work in progress, far from perfect and far from



complete—the latest chapter in the unique history of the Chinese in Cuba. A history that is still being written.

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1. Article 3 of the Pact of Zanjón, cited by Juan Jiménez Pastrana, *Los chinos en las luchas por la liberación cubana* (1847-1930), (Havana: Institute of History, 1963), p. 82.

2. This coming September marks the eleventh anniversary of ten arrests by the FBI, which claimed it had discovered a “Cuban spy network” in Florida. In June 2001, five defendants—Fernando González, René González, Antonio Guerrero, Gerardo Hernández, and Ramón Labañino—were each convicted of “acting as an unregistered foreign agent.” Guerrero, Hernández, and Labañino were also convicted of “conspiracy to commit espionage,” and Hernández of “conspiracy to commit murder.” Sentences were handed down ranging from fifteen years, to a double life term plus fifteen years. The five revolutionaries had accepted assignments to enter counterrevolutionary groups in the United States and to keep the Cuban government informed about terrorist attacks being planned against the Cuban people. Each of them has been named a “Hero of the Republic of Cuba.”

In August 2005 a three-judge panel of the federal appeals court in Atlanta reversed the convictions and sentences and ordered a new trial in a different location, ruling that “pervasive community prejudice against Fidel Castro and the Cuban government and its agents and the publicity surrounding the trial and other community events combined to create a situation where [the defendants] were unable to obtain a fair and impartial trial” in Miami-Dade County. The court ordered a new trial. Its decision, however, was overturned a year later by the full twelve-judge appeals court. On June 15 of this year, the U.S. Supreme Court refused, without comment, to review the case of the Cuban Five.

Mobilizations worldwide have condemned the convictions, sentences, and harsh conditions of detainment and to demand their release.