

Multiple Identities: The Chinese Diaspora in Puerto Rico

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- **Arthur Chung**
- **First President of the Republic of Guyana**
- **1970 - 1980**

Overall objectives

“to correct the practical erasure of Asia and Asians from the master narrative of Latin American/Caribbean history”

To move “beyond the study of the Asian presence in the Americas or the Asian contributions to individual nations. We ask instead how Asians complicate narratives about race relations and identity, independence and nation-building, and family and migration.”

Source: Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen Lopez 2008

The Chinese in the Caribbean

- **Andrew Wilson and Walton Look Lai have published a few books about the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad, i.e., the “English-speaking” Caribbean.**
- **Kathleen Lopez and Evelyn Hu-DeHart are well-known for their work the Chinese diaspora in Latin America, especially Cuba.**
- **The disproportionate attention afforded to Cuba is quite understandable, since the island was by far the single biggest recipient of Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean, and the contributions of this community to syncretic forms of cuisine, religion and music have all been fairly well documented. Not much, however, has been written about the history and impact of Chinese migration to Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. And these migration tales are different in interesting ways.**

Cuba

- Chinese worked alongside African descendants in the plantations and fought side by side in the revolutionary struggles
- “Whether as a hero or villain, savior or scapegoat, patriot or spy, the Chinese became an integral component of Cuban political and social discussions” (Kathleen Lopez, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History*)
- Author Severo Sarduy identifies the three “races” that compose the Cuban nation as white European, African and Chinese.

Dominican Republic

Despite official anti-Asian policy, the Dominican Republic encouraged Chinese and Japanese immigration as part of its nation-building project, one that was defined in opposition to “Haiti” and “black.”

Edith Chen (2008)

A different migration story: Puerto Rico

- **As a consequence of uprisings against the plantation masters, many Chinese accused of murder were condemned to 10 years of imprisonment overseas (i.e. outside of Cuba)**
- **Between 1865 and 1880, over 340 Chinese immigrants arrived to Puerto Rico, not as contract laborers but as convicts**
- **About a third of them eventually achieved their freedom and continued living in Puerto Rico**
- **“Theoretically locating the study of the Chinese in Puerto Rico during the 19th century is extremely complex. They did not come to the island directly in search for work, they did not arrive as foreigners but as convicts. This complexity which characterizes the presence of the Chinese in Puerto Rico, makes it difficult to encapsulate them in a specific theoretical framework.”**

Source: Jose Lee Borges

The second wave

The link to Cuba with respect to Chinese immigration became active once again in the 1960s, when Puerto Rico began to receive thousands of Cuban refugees each year in the wake of Castro's Revolution. According to the Encyclopedia of Puerto Rico by the Puerto Rican Humanities Foundation, between 1960 and 2002 the INS registered 33,970 Cuban immigrants. Most second and third-generation Chinese residents of Puerto Rico trace at least part of their ancestry to Cuba rather than directly from China.

Lisa

- ***Father: born in China, first language Cantonese, second language Spanish, does not speak English, migrated to Cuba as a young man, never went back to China***
- ***Mother: Cuban, only speaks Spanish, came to Puerto Rico in the late sixties with her Chinese husband***
- ***Lisa: born in Cuba but came to PR at the age of two, first language English, speaks Spanish as a second language***
- ***None of them are US citizens (permanent residents)***
- ***Is Lisa Cuban-Chinese? Is she Puerto Rican? Is she Caribbean?***
- ***Is she American?***

The creolization narrative

Creolization has been at the heart of historical, linguistic, social and literary discussions of the Caribbean for several decades. Whereas the discourse in North America has centered on 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism,' Caribbean writers have opted for other terms to describe their complex reality: in addition to 'creolization' and 'creoleness,' writers in the Spanish and French often speak of mestizaje/ métissage. However, as Glissant has argued, while mestizaje/métissage may be limited to the fusion of cultures that took place at a historical point in time, creolization is an ongoing act of genesis, not limited to the sociohistorical context of the colonial-era Caribbean: "If we assume that métissage is generally the result of an encounter and a synthesis between two different components, it seems to us that creolization is a métissage without limits the elements of which are manifold, its outcomes unpredictable)

Where is the Chinese immigrant in discourses of Caribbean identity?

- Chamoiseau, Confiant, Bernabé (*Éloge de la créolité*):
 - *“Neither Europeans, not Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles”*
 - *“the aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian and Levantine cultural elements that the yoke of history has united on the same land”*

Puerto Rican “transnationalism”

- **Puerto Rico may well be considered a "postcolonial colony" in the sense of a people with a strong national identity but little desire for a nation-state, living in a territory that legally "belongs to but is not part of the United States."**
- **Massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland over the past five decades - Diasporic communities are an integral part of the Puerto Rican “nation” because they continue to be linked to the Island by an intense circular movement of people as well as capital. The Puerto Rican “nation” is no longer restricted to the Island but instead is constituted by two distinct yet closely intertwined fragments: that of Puerto Rico itself and that of the diasporic communities settled in the continental United States.**

The Chinese in PR today

- **An “invisible” community?**
 - **Restaurants in every town**
 - **No data on: Exactly how many are there? How many intermarry? What languages do they speak?**
- **Perceived as an undifferentiated mass: “They are all the same”**
 - **No recognition that the Chinese are in fact a diverse group that includes individuals from a variety of social and economic classes, even ethnic and linguistic groups**
- **No outreach programs**
 - **Common belief is that it is the Chinese themselves who self-segregate**
 - **Limited legal protection services**
 - **Wave of crimes targeting the Chinese community in 2012 went largely unreported and remain unsolved**

Fictional representations of the Chinese in Caribbean literature

- V.S. Naipaul (*Miguel Street*); Elizabeth Nunez (*Bruised Hibiscus*); Sylvia Wynter (*Hills of Hebron*); Sam Selvon (*A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger*); Helen Atteck (*Bound for Trinidad*); Margaret Cezair-Thompson (*The True History of Paradise*); Patricia Powell (*The Pagoda*)
 - the Chinese shopkeeper stereotype: “Mr. Chin”
 - Race, ethnicity and economic disparity are intertwined. In the post-plantation power structure, in the division between the "haves" and the "have nots," the Chinese are perceived as part of the former.
 - In addition to their portrayal as financial "predators," many authors use these characters to explore the link between economic power and sexual exploitation.
 - The shop counter as metaphor for the separation (“us” vs. “them”).

Source: Anne-Marie Lee-Loy. *Searching for Mr. Chin: Constructions of Nation and the Chinese in West Indian Literature*

Recent literary works featuring the Chinese experience in PR

- **Simone by Eduardo Lalo (2012)**
- **Barra China by Manolo Nuñez Negrón (2012)**
- **Flor de Ciruelo y el viento (novela china tropical) by Rafael Acevedo (2011)**
- **“¿Es posible escribir cuando la identidad no es compartida por nadie, cuando la inmensa mayoría de la gente no puede ni siquiera concebirte?” (from *Simone*)**

Preliminary conclusions

- **Additional research is needed on the subject of the Chinese as well as other minorities in the Caribbean – their tales deserve to be heard in order to arrive at the complete picture of Caribbean societies**
- **In Puerto Rico specifically, it is only recently that we have begun to take notice of this “invisible” community. I maintain however, that although the authors should perhaps be recognized positively for being among the first to draw attention to the history and plight of the Chinese community in Puerto Rico, their novels continue to characterize Chinese men and women as “Others,” and perpetuate images of Chinese people as exotic, distant, and ultimately outside the formula of inclusive hybridity of cultures and ethnicities that purportedly defines Caribbean societies.**

Preliminary conclusions

- It seems promising that Puerto Ricans are beginning to question the official discourse determining a person's "Puerto Rican-ness." We must allow other voices to enter the conversation about who can legitimately claim to be part of Puerto Rican society.
- Puerto Ricans can and should draw lessons from their own experience as a transnational community
- Awareness is needed that we continue to "other" Asians in spite of our complacent belief that, "unlike the Americans," we Puerto Ricans "are not racist" or discriminatory, and stop blaming the immigrant communities for their perceived "unwillingness" to integrate
- First and foremost, there needs to be an acceptance that one can simultaneously be Chinese and Cuban and black and Puerto Rican and American, and that these multiple identities are not necessarily incompatible.



Thank you!

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