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# Book Review: Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History, written by Kathleen López

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**Kathleen López**

*Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. ix + 339 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

In 1847, the Spanish ship *Oquendo* and the English ship *Duke of Argyle* brought the first cargoes of Chinese contract laborers to Cuba. Thus began a complicated, transoceanic history of the Chinese to Cuba. Kathleen López's *Chinese Cubans* is a finely researched study that takes into account the earliest migrations, the next generation of migrants and community builders, and the present-day members of Chinese Cuban families and their distant relatives in China. It fills a gaping need in several fields: Caribbean, Latin American, Asian and Asian American, Chinese diaspora, labor and indenture, and migration studies.

Amid global interest in Chinese diasporic communities and scholarly studies on ethnic diversity of the Caribbean and Latin America, López's work is timely. With archival research in Cuba, China, and the United States, along with oral interviews and detailed social histories from sources in three languages (Spanish, Chinese, English), she has marshaled a rich combination of skills and sources.

The book is composed of three parts: "From Indentured to Free," "Migrants Between Empires and Nations," and "Transnational and National Belonging." The introduction, "A Transnational History," opens with stories of three Chinese men, each entering Cuban history at different times. This microhistorical approach sets the pattern for the book as it loops from the local to the global and back. "[The] collected histories in this book demonstrate nuances and layers in Chinese migration to Cuba from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present" (p. 248).

Part I provides a useful overview of the early Chinese "coolies" to Cuba. López is attentive to the ways in which the Chinese challenged existing social categorizations related to race, class, and marriage. Importantly, she brings attention to a shift, a window of time when Chinese took opportunities to form *caudrillas* (work gangs) and in some cases became contractors of Chinese labor. Researching records from estates, including the Soledad Estate in Cienfuegos, she concludes that while the system did not alter the plantation hierarchy, *caudrillas* "played a key role in the colony's gradual transition from slave to free labor" (p. 56).

Part II moves beyond indenture and attends to the rise of Chinese entrepreneurship and the formation of Chinese families and communities. López provides several angles for examining this new stage. On one hand, she registers the economic emergence of small-scale traders, peddlers, free wage laborers,

Chinese societies and ethnic associations, and eventually, a merchant class. On another, she notes the intermarriages and baptisms of Chinese that indicated mixing yet still bore traces of racialism. This section also takes up the history of Chinese freedom fighters who participated in wars for Cuban independence from Spain. López outlines their remarkable bravery yet also notes the racial lines that Chinese confronted on the battlefield and in their appeals for veterans' pensions and recognition. Referring to records of military service and suffrage, and including views from period author Antonio Chuffat Latour, she demonstrates the irony of Chinese patriotism in Cuba alongside a continued struggle for belonging.

The Chinese in Cuba would also face another phase of Cuba's history, that of U.S. imperial intervention and Yellow Peril discourse. López adeptly weaves in her knowledge of Asian American history to register the effects of anti-Chinese discourse and policies of exclusion, a pattern that had already emerged elsewhere in the Americas, such as in Mexico and California. By linking the Cuban case to a hemispheric history, she continues her pattern of linking the local to the global.

Part III moves through the 1920s to the present day. Bringing in her knowledge of overseas Chinese history, López provides insight into Chinese community life in Cuba: remittances and returns, transnational families, transpacific publications and organizations, transnational educational institutions, and importantly, forms of overseas nationalism. At the same time, she shows how the Chinese continued to face discrimination that limited the degree of their integration into the Cuban republic. Valued for their labor and heroism in the nationalist struggle, the Chinese continued to face racial prejudice and nativist ideology in the twentieth century.

López pairs her study of Chinese Cubans with study of relatives and communities in China. Using interviews, photographs, remittance records, and correspondence, her account expands our understanding of kinship. Especially fascinating is her account of ties and breakages in the midst of political tides, which had profound consequences for these communities in China and in Cuba. With the rise of the Goumindang, China's Communist Revolution, and the Cuban Revolution, families faced sweeping changes. López traces the steps of those who remained in Cuba and those who left to places like Miami and New York, with some families separated by circumstances or conflicting loyalties. The accounts reveal again the intensely transnational nature of Chinese diasporic histories and identities. López also follows later generations in Cuba, in this case Chinese of largely mixed descent, facing different ethnic choices and national identifications, yet also maintaining ties to their heritage through ethnic associations, schools, and familial emphasis on cultural preservation.

The book's epilogue brings the history up to the 2000s, with a look into the *barrio chino*, and ending with three vignettes: one of a Chinese Cuban visiting her grandfather's village in China; another of a Chinese Cuban descendant who refurbished the grave of an ancestor of his, an indentured laborer; and finally one of China's former president Jiang Zemin visiting Havana. In this way, the history comes full circle.

Packed with references and well written, the text should be required reading for Chinese diaspora studies, Asian American studies, and the study of the Chinese in undergraduate and graduate courses on Cuban, Latin American and Caribbean history. It is also highly recommended for courses on indenture and slavery, labor and migration, race and ethnic studies.

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