

CHINATOWN HAVANA

Enrique Labrador Ruiz

THIS IS A LONG STORY, which I shall give you in a nutshell. Chinese have lived in Cuba for many years now. The first came to work as cooks, servants, or valets. Since most of them arrived by way of the Philippines, they knew some Spanish and had been baptized. Beginning around 1845, large groups came to work the fields—in vegetables, sugar cane, fruit—with a four-year contract providing a wage of four pesos a month, one change of clothing, and food. The diet offered them was poor, consisting of rice and vegetables, with only an occasional piece of jerked beef. They sailed from Amoy wearing their wide trousers and oilcloth shirts, with their elegant queues carefully greased. They brought their abaci and some of their household goods, but not their wives. The colonial laws barred the women, and later the young republic followed the same procedure, so the poor beloveds remained sighing in their distant villages, or in some cases saw the faithful man return after some years with a fortune.

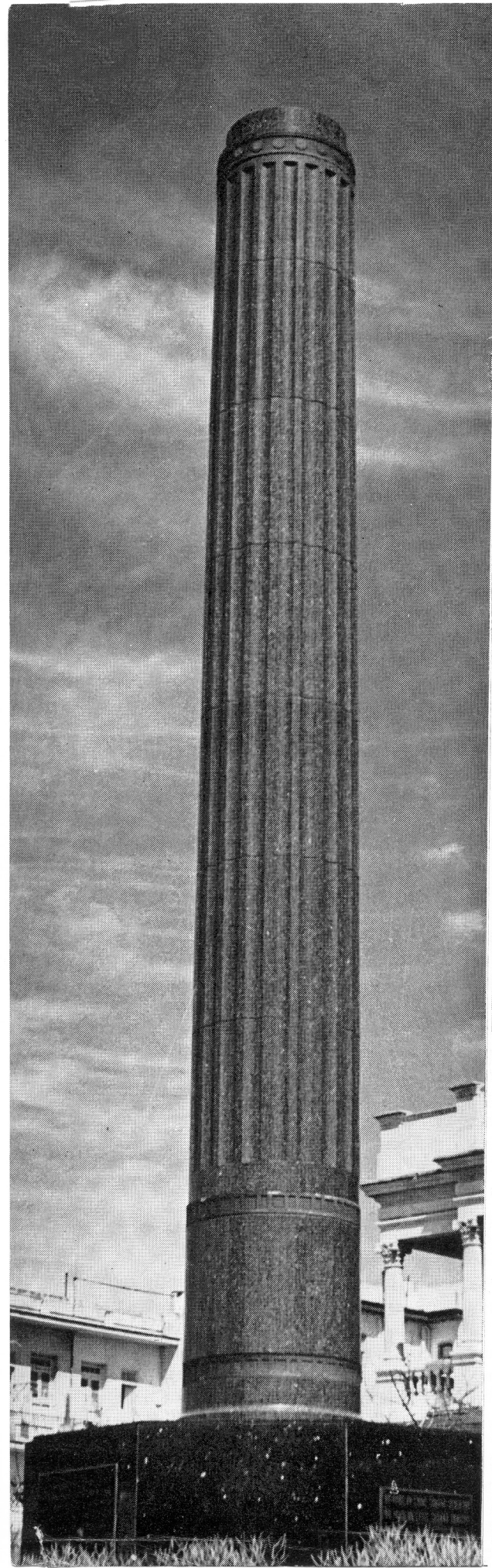
These workers were organized in groups under a captain or head man called a *barangay*. The shrewd chief made the original contract with the employer and received the wages for the whole band, redistributing them among his men, generally with obvious prejudice and abuse of their rights. But their natural defenselessness, unfamiliarity with the system of work, and fear of the clauses of the contract that had somewhat mysteriously won them residence in the new land, all made them hold their tongues. If we could hear them from beyond the grave they would be saying, "Yes, captain; yes, captain."

"Captain" is a term that has survived. They call any kind of owner, anyone who buys and pays for anything, a captain. The white man is captain, and so is the present-day boss, now that the *barangay* of hateful memory no longer exists. When a Cuban of Spanish stock

addresses a Chinese for any reason he also calls him "captain." It is a courtesy, a way of returning a compliment. Seldom is the Chinese addressed as plain "*chino*," which seems insolent, and very rarely nowadays as "*pasana*," for "*paisano*"—fellow countryman. (*Paisano* should be used domestically, where there is a close relationship.) Those of the same clan consider each other "cousins." This grouping includes people related only by the onomatopoeia of a certain name, or those who came from a given region, even if they do not know each other well. The "cousins" went on to found recreation societies, aid centers, and commercial relations within the community. The clan idea is still in effect as a way of resisting adversity and taking advantage of prosperous times.

In the war for Cuban independence the Chinese played a noble role, serving Cuba and not Spain. Martí's secretary, Gonzalo de Quesada, said of them, "There was not a single Chinese deserter or a single Chinese traitor." He went on: "There were few of them in the eastern part of Cuba, but practically all joined the rebel ranks, among them one, called Liborio, who distinguished himself as a field doctor. . . . The Chinese proved their valor in an encounter with Valmaseda at Cauto-Embarcadero. . . . In the Villas army, Juan Díaz distinguished himself. He was the Apollo of the group, almost white and with a long, silky mustache. . . . Pancho Moreno was outstanding in the capture of Mayajigua. . . . It was Chinese Juan Anelay, speaking in the name of the troops from Villas, who demanded more arms for his companions from the people of Oriente and Camagüey provinces, before representatives of the Executive and the Chamber of Deputies [of the Republic in Arms]. . . . They say that Commander Siam, when he ran out of ammunition at Guáimaro, used his rifle as a bludgeon." Quesada was talking about the 1868 campaign. In the 1895 revolt, José Bú fought under Máximo Gómez and attained the rank of commander. Captain Saturnino Achong was a hero; José Tolon an active partisan. In a park in Vedado, a residential district of Havana, a memorial column reminds us of these heroes and their most notable achievements. Today the Chinese play a useful role in Cuban life. They own restaurants, laundries, fruit stands, small grocery stores, and wholesale food houses. Rich and poor alike make the best of their keen business sense. You find them selling lottery tickets, notions, medicine.

The large immigration between 1899 and 1908 established the basis of the present colony in the country. Today it numbers some thirty-five thousand people, more than half of them naturalized citizens, who are found in all kinds of occupations. There are at least ten thousand in Havana, mostly Cantonese, although several different dialects are spoken, and their ranks are divided politically on the basis of their attitudes toward the Chinese Nationalist government. These good citizens have produced a large number of professional men, musicians, singers, and poets. A painter of world renown, Wifredo Lam, must be mentioned as an outstanding product of the alliance between Chinese and



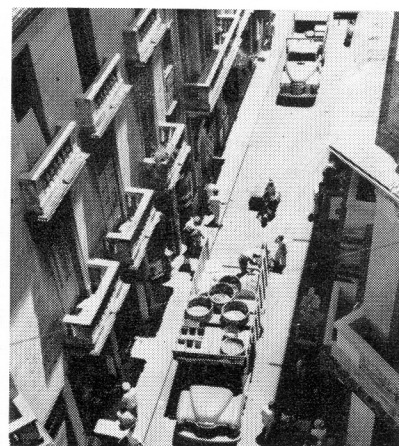
Cuban—including both Hispanic and Negro forebears on the Cuban side. Mario Kuchilán, the son of a Chinese, writes Cuba's most popular newspaper column, in *Prensa Libre*.

These Orientals belong to a multitude of societies, all federated in the Casino Chino, with headquarters in the consulate. They have a good health center, the Kav-Kong Association (named for a Chinese city), a rice market, and an old people's home on the outskirts of the city that receives support from the Cuban Government. A large number of tradesmen and workers belong to a Masonic lodge, and two Taoist temples and a Presbyterian and an Adventist church have their congregations in Havana's Chinatown.

Fittingly embedded today between the streets labeled Rayo (ray, or flash of lightning), Zanja (ditch), San Nicolás, and Dragones (dragons), this section once extended to Sitios and Escobar, to Galiano and Reina, when everything was gardens and farms, and the *zanja real*, a brook that flowed across this land, gave it life. In this neighborhood mango and other previously unknown fruits were planted commercially in Cuba for the first time. Several species of vegetables were similarly introduced. The Chinese living here worked in humble occupations: some were old-clothes men, others carted



The author examines porcelain figure in Chinese emporium of art and edibles



Produce stands line sidewalk on shady side of street in heart of Chinatown

bones to be made into buttons and glue, and at one time they held the contract for collecting the city's garbage.

The neighborhood today is still picturesque, even though the traditional Chinese garb is missing. A typical Oriental smell hangs in the air. Until mid-morning, a little market covers the sidewalks of this oddly shaped zone with baskets of vegetables, fish, pork, and strange fruit. A swarm of buyers emerges from the half-open doors (for the unmarried Chinese live piled up in small quarters) and bargains energetically until an adjustment is reached between purchasing power and appetites. Watching them, you realize there is a sort of tacit regulation that produces agreement. The many Chinese from outside the neighborhood and even outside Havana who come to the market take advantage of these visits to greet friends. You hear the salutations of people who

Monument in Vedado residential section honors Chinese heroes of Cuba's war for independence

have not seen each other in a long time, effusive reminiscences, cries of joy, and idle chitchat. And we should not forget the circumspect pharmacies (there are at least four), where you can find such weird concoctions as marrow of lion's bones, leopard's claws, powdered Spanish fly, and mysterious powders for success in love and business. Nearby live doctors who specialize in treating Chinese, and even some Chinese doctors.

There was a very famous one in the early years of this century: Dr. Chambombian. A man of solemn mien, with a large mustache and a red umbrella, he was skilled in punctures, bloodletting, and the use of herbs. He specialized in treating hopeless cases, people who were on the point of going on to a better life; he performed miracles. Because of his repeated success with his hoops and bracelets, the people adopted this saying for extreme emergencies: "Not even the Chinese doctor can save this one. . . ."

The neighborhood has had its poets, who have sometimes movingly sung its praises. Also its humorists. The following story is told of one, who is fortunately a rare type. I won't mention his name. He worked in a bank (not the Chinese Bank of Havana). For years he was in charge of making arrangements for his fellow countrymen to send drafts and bills of exchange abroad. Suddenly he decided to dispense with the institution's regular procedure, to his own profit. Immediately he ran into difficulties. News of his default spread, and soon he had beating on his door a multitude of claimants, the people he had defrauded with his vain cleverness. How do you suppose he answered them? Very simply: it was at least three months since he had accepted the batch of drafts, and the disagreeable information had arrived that none of the beneficiaries had received them. In his admirable accent the upright employee merely remarked: "Patience, gentlemen. . . . Much patience. . . . Cable running bad, in all certainty." The cable, which dispatches the most complicated transactions no matter how far in a matter of minutes, was running badly—three months behind! Now and then I find him musing philosophically over his former splendor (these days he plays dominoes all alone) and I feel like asking him maliciously how the cable is working.

"Why don't we go in here?" a friend suggests, pointing out one of the colorful stores that abound in the neighborhood. Here you find figures in porcelain, catalpa wood, red cherry, and shining ebony, representing demi-gods and warriors, virgins and hermits, wanderers and beggars, monks and wise men. Also displayed are incense burners for driving away evil spirits, rich silk, embroidered slippers, ornamental masks, sandalwood fans, parasols, and a thousand more things made of clay, ivory, or terracotta: pagodas, skies captured in lanterns, Buddhas with all kinds of expressions, symbolic towers, travelers borne on litters—a world of art that exchanges its best work for a handful of rice. Not to mention carved agate, volcanic rock, bamboo, and pine wood in as many other proofs of patience.

The artist must have worked months on the severe print I have of Li Tie Kouai, the elegant man of the

world who retired to the mountains to live the life of an anchorite, studying Taoism among the stars and spirits. Legend has it that one day, knowing his mother was sick, he told his disciple: "Take care of my body. I am going to visit her in my spirit. I shall be back within a week." The week passed and the master had not returned; the disciple thought him dead and abandoned the body. On the ninth night Li's soul came back, looking for his body. Only a few traces remained to show that tigers had devoured it. Not knowing what to do, he looked for another body in which to incarnate himself, and found only the corpse of a lame beggar who had just died. He entered it, giving it life, and in this form he went on to the end of his days, known by the nickname of "The Iron Crutch." I repeat: how long the gouge and chisel must have been used on the block before this image was ready to go to market for a trifle! That is China and its moral for unbelievers.

The common folk exchange gossip in the doorway of these sumptuous shops while bargaining goes on over coriander, eels, balsam apple seeds, heavy sharks' fins, tea, and peculiar confections made of black beans or peas, with castor oil and repugnant-sounding secretions of mollusks.

The smell of the Orient, sticky, peculiar, penetrating, dances in the air, and we would be on the point of confirming the old idea that the Chinese have no sense of smell if we did not know it as an established fact that the Chinese nose knows more, much more about the four fundamental elements of smell than ours does. What happens is that with their habitual modesty they pretend they can't smell at all.

After the shopping we went to eat and I got involved in an unimportant problem that seemed monumental at the time. "Since the Chinese language is monosyllabic, without conjugations or declensions," said the most important restaurant owner of the neighborhood, who is also an educated man and a philosopher, "you must be very well up on tones. For example. . . ."

He launched a whistling note, then another and another. "Any sound," he explained, "can be modulated in five distinct ways, and these tones make the word's meaning clear. Do you understand?"

"Obviously not," I replied. And my companion reproached me for my ignorance and impudence with a disdainful glance. She was a lady who was not accustomed to this sort of dispute, and I tried to smooth things over. "But I do know, for instance, how to ask for my chicken with almonds, or that delightful swallows' nest that the lady would prefer today, or perhaps the ever-popular fried butterfly. . . ."

"Let's not be materialists," my host gently responded, "it's not necessary. For your palate to be regaled with those humble dishes that my modest house offers, you need only choose, as your whim dictates, with your hand, without a murmur. The venerable K'ang-ki dictionary with its forty-four thousand characters for making up a sentence would tell me less, much less. What would you like?"

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CHINATOWN, HAVANA

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While we sipped our tea I asked about theaters in Chinatown. "There is nothing but moving pictures nowadays," he replied. From time to time some worthwhile show—comedy or dance—is performed on the stage of one of the movie theaters. But it's not like it used to be, when that big, somber house on Zanja Street used to present mile-long plays that sometimes outlasted the year. In those performances, the stage was bare, without props or spotlights, and the stagehands would move alongside the actors carrying little symbolic decorations. The outbreak of war would be announced by a certain gesture of the left hand, a broken straw, or a wink of the eye, depending on the circumstances. Peace was similarly declared, but with the right hand, or by showing the audience the back of a green turtle or the sandal of a mandarin who had become a saint. A stretched rope signified great difficulty; a fallen one, someone's happiness in danger; a waving one, the ups and downs of life. I don't remember what they did to indicate that someone was being hanged.

I understand the classic theater was founded in 1875, and continued until 1923, when an invasion of—I won't say bad taste. . . . Anyway, the tourists prefer the new style to the way it used to be. They got very bored, the present theater owners say, with those unendingly tedious outpourings. A horse represented by a tassel of corn, and no women on the stage!

The restaurant owner passed me a newspaper: "Let's see what the paper says about the pictures. Can you read it? They were filmed in China and deal with love, criminal plots, and war. How beautiful the actresses are!"

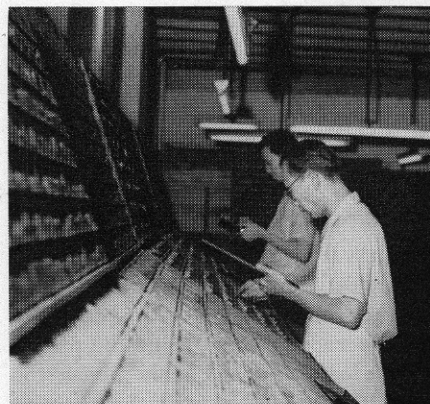
These Chinese newspapers have always interested me very much. I have made several excursions to see how they are put together. There are three papers, two political and one financial. Their combined circulation isn't over twelve thousand copies, but you should see the work that goes into printing them! Some one thousand characters must be moved into place for any ordinary piece, and more than fifteen hundred for a feature or literary article. There are no linotype machines for Chinese, so the compositor sets the type by hand, one character at a time, moving up and down, left and right, in all directions, like a veritable acrobat, along the high Chinese wall of type cases. I understand that these journals receive a San Francisco news service report on affairs of China, but for the most part they give a fairly extensive résumé of Cuban activities. The life of the Chinese colony is amply covered, and there are big advertisements, sometimes in both Chinese and Spanish. Many familiar products appear, but there are no displays of cosmetics or women's styles. No one in the colony is interested in them.

The papers, which are read backward, from right to left, appear in their readers' hands toward dusk, all over the neighborhood: on the street corners, in the mobile cigar and fan stands. Agile distributors quickly bear them to the subscribers; they are not hawked verbally.



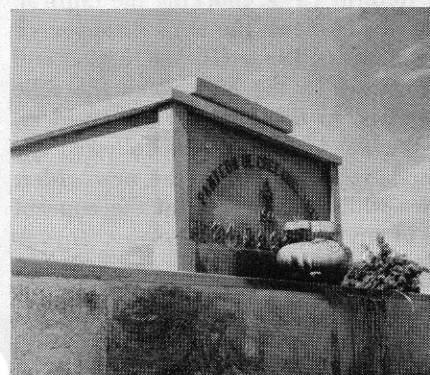
Image in one of the district's two Taoist temples

Chinese columnist Mario Kuchilán is Havana's Walter Winchell



Typesetters for one of three Chinese papers pick out characters one at a time

Movies in Chinese have replaced classic dramas the public found tedious



A family mausoleum in Havana's Chinese cemetery

Once in a while news bulletins appear on blackboards in front of the newspaper offices. When this happens, the curious and the impatient, observers and commentators, gather round, and generally verbal battles soon break out; their subject we can only guess from the gestures that accompany the tirades. The three papers are called *Man Sen Yat Po*, *Hoy Men Kong Po*, and *Wah Man Sion*. There is not a line in any of them about sports—no reporter would fill his sheet of silk paper with news of such events. But there are extensive stock-market quotations (local and foreign) and prices on the commodity exchange. The brushlike pens, according to the prevailing criterion, do not waste their time.

Whom do the Chinese marry? Why, they marry white Cuban girls, *mestizas*, and the daughters of Chinese. But the married Chinese don't go on living in Chinatown. They move some distance away, where they maintain exemplary homes. They are famed as fine husbands and self-denying fathers. It is nice to know that in general their offspring are brought up in the Cuban way, but learn Chinese and Spanish side by side. This custom produces the capable translators who will work on the newspapers, in the courts, and in business offices. A Chinese secondary school teaches both languages. The best proof of how deeply they love Cuba lies in the pamphlets they have published in Chinese—for China—on the good fortune they have enjoyed on the island, on its business possibilities, on potential industrial or medicinal uses for Cuban plants, and on the island's geography. Many articles on various Cuban subjects, which frequently appeared in the Chinese press, complete the picture.

The Chinese is not a fervent believer, by our standards, but he goes to his temples and keeps up his ceremonies. In the Taoist sanctuary, with its retablo of rosewood and twenty-two-karat gold, they worship their divinities in the morning. Veiled melodies rise from a sort of samisen, and beneficent fumes from an antique bronze vase. Perhaps that ancient tome opaquely displayed on the lectern is a copy of the *Li-Ki*, the Book of Rites, or of that invaluable *Hiao-King*, the compendium of filial piety.

I asked a friend if they had to contribute alms for the cult. "A great cult ours—friendship," he said. "Heaven sees and hears everything. If a man is good, he will be saved."

At the time of the vernal equinox, or generally a couple of weeks before Easter, a big celebration is held in Havana's Chinese cemetery. It is a communion with the dead, in which the faithful carry food, drink, sweets, and other presents to the tombs of their relatives or friends. All this is preceded or followed by dancing and carousing, for to them, apparently, death is not such an unhappy event as it is generally considered in the West. They also leave generous gifts and toys for children who have died. All these things will have disappeared by morning, no one knows how. Evil thoughts attribute this outrage to disrespectful profaners. The Cantonese barbers who shave the Chinese and clean their ears could tell something about this if they chose.

We know that when a Chinese dies a coin is placed in his mouth to pay for his voyage—the classic obolus. Nowadays the coins are of small denomination, perhaps to avoid leaving attractive loot for rude hands, although there seems to be just one well-known funeral home that serves the whole community. From time to time bones and ashes are gathered from the cemetery to be sent to China, where they are deposited in the family pantheon.

In the Chinese New Year celebration, the people come vigorously to life. They set off an enormous number of rockets and firecrackers and parade through the streets in the garb of a gigantic green dragon and ferocious warriors. It is amusing to see many of those who entered the country as "students," when the immigration laws barred farm workers, wheedling the king of the festival, whom they crown as Emperor amidst *vivas* and detonations accompanied by flutes and rattles. Sometimes they produce impressively beautiful floats, whose effect is enhanced by the tones of the K'ing, a magical, liturgical instrument made of musical stones.

It is said that opium is smoked in Chinatown and that there is heavy gambling. Whether or not this is true, such disorders are not visible to the world. The people are sober and honest, and as I take leave of their neighborhood I am moved to say, in the memorable phrase: "I shall not dare to leave your merits in shadow. . . ."

I have left for the end of this note something that passes for the most characteristically Chinese thing in Havana, but which the Chinese no longer have anything to do with: the betting game of "Chinese charades." Undoubtedly it must have come originally from Macao, with its thirty-six "creatures" scattered around on the figure of a grotesque man with a large mustache, wide trousers, oilcloth jacket, and so on. The banker's witty "verses" were the bait to trap customers. As he shook a bag containing numbered balls, which represented the thirty-six lucky figures, the banker might call out: "Elephant that doesn't make any noise," and then draw out number two, which is "butterfly." What an elephant! Or again, "A thief in love" might prove to be number twenty, which is "pedigreed cat." The combinations and tricks are infinite. This game, originally rather simple, today involves one hundred numbers with four different columns of meanings for each, under the headings "Chinese," "Indian," "Cuban," and "American," and they tell me there is even a "Matanzas" charade. That's logical, since the bankers, whose numbers keep growing, make a mockery of the law, taking bets on the last numbers of the official lottery drawing. The charm of the "verses" is gone, along with the mystery of the little bag. The game's tie with its origin has been broken. As it is today, the Chinese neither understand it nor play it.

I asked one of my Chinese friends, "Number twenty-nine is mouse, isn't it?" "Who knows?" he replied in that characteristically irrefutable manner of theirs.

"It's also cloud, hutia, and stag," I persisted. "But it is mouse in the 'Chinese' column, isn't it?"

"Who knows, boy!" came the answer again. And that is just as far as he would go.