

CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN CUBA

BY DUVON C. CORBITT

A long-standing affront to the Chinese people was finally removed last year, when the Cuban Republic agreed to do away with immigration restrictions based on racial discrimination. A new treaty between the Chinese Government and Cuba, which was promulgated on April 10, 1943, was signed on November 12, 1942 by Dr. José Agustín Martínez and Dr. Ti-tsun Li. The most significant section is Article V, which asserts: "The nationals of each of the High Contracting Parties are at liberty to enter or leave the territory of the other on the same terms as the nationals of other countries." Complementary to this was Article VI, which states:

The nationals of each of the High Contracting Parties, residing in the territory of the other, shall enjoy the full protection of the laws and regulations of the country in respect to their persons and goods.

They shall have the right to travel, reside, work or engage in industries or commerce in all places where the nationals of any other nation may do so, subject, nevertheless, to the laws and regulations of the country.

They shall have the right of assembly and association, freedom of the press, conscience and religion, and the right to burial and the construction of cemeteries according to the laws and regulations of the country.

With respect to this Article, the laws and regulations of each of the High Contracting Parties shall establish no discriminatory measures against the nationals of the other.

In agreeing to these provisions the Cuban Republic took a significant step toward the realization of those ideals for which the United Nations are fighting. It was altogether fitting that Cuba should take the lead in the Western Hemisphere in this matter for, although she was not the first nation to adopt the obnoxious restrictions, it was in Cuba that Chinese coolies made their Western debut.

Need for Cheap Labor

The rapid development of the sugar industry in Cuba during the early years of the nineteenth century created a great demand for labor. At the same time increasingly stringent enforcement of treaties with England (1817 and 1836), designed to stop the slave trade, obliged planters of the island to cast about for a substitute for Negro slaves. Experiments ranged from the importation of Spaniards and Canary Islanders under contract, to the purchase of kidnapped In-

dians from the Yucatan. In the midst of this search a famous Cuban slave smuggler suggested the importation of coolies from Chinese ports opened by the treaty of 1842 following the Opium War. He was allowed an experimental shipment of some 600 coolies in 1847, and in 1853 the trade began in earnest. Before importations stopped in 1874 some 125,000 had been brought in and sold into eight years of servitude under conditions which differed little in theory and not at all in practice from those which obtained for the slaves.

End of Slave Trade

The questionable recruiting methods used by the coolie traders, the unwholesome conditions on the transport vessels, and the harsh treatment on some plantations, led to violent attacks on the trade by humanitarians. The efforts of the reformers availed little, however, until events in Cuba convinced both planters and Spanish officials that further importations were not only undesirable but dangerous. This happened during the Ten Years' War (1868-1878) when the coolies and slaves escaped in large numbers and joined the ranks of the insurgents. A decree, issued in 1871 by the Spanish Government, upon the recommendation of the Captain General of Cuba, forbade importation of any more Chinese contract laborers. This was a war measure and might have been reversed later had not attempts to reopen the trade been forestalled by the negotiation of the Treaty of Peking (November 17, 1877), which prohibited the transportation of Chinese to Cuba under labor contracts.

This treaty provided, however, for the free migration to Cuba of Chinese, with or without their families (with reciprocal privileges for Spanish subjects in China), and for their treatment in the island on equal terms with the subjects of the most favored nation. Thus matters stood legally until the end of the Spanish regime in Cuba. Private individuals, however, did not consider the Chinese as equals, and showed their feeling of superiority in many ways, as has since been true under the Republic. Meanwhile, all of the coolies finished their terms of service, and some returned to China, while others established themselves in the island as the Spanish laws allowed them to do. A number of the latter sent for their families but some sought Cuban wives. There were also some Chinese who entered Cuba for commercial purposes during the two decades following 1878, a few of them coming from the Chinese colonies in the United States. There was, however,

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no great influx, and when the United States military authorities took over the island in 1899 after the Spanish-American War they found fewer than 15,000 Chinese.

Nothing in the Chinese situation in 1899 suggested either economic or social problems, but the American authorities, influenced by the views held in their own country, immediately decreed the application of the restrictions in force in the United States; that is, the complete exclusion of Chinese as provided for in successive acts of Congress. In this way all entry of Chinese except that of diplomats, merchants, students and tourists under limited conditions into Cuba was forbidden. These restrictions, embodied in the famous military order number 155, were to continue in force after 1902 under the Cuban Republic. The authorities, however, proved rather liberal in their interpretation of the words "merchants," "students" and "tourists," so that the entry of Chinese between 1902 and 1917 was about equal to that of the closing days of Spanish rule, with nearly enough arrivals to replace losses from death and emigration.

Position of Contract Workers

The great demand for sugar and molasses during World War I led to another period of rapid expansion of the industry and a consequent increase in the demand for labor. The sugar producers appealed to the government for relief, and a law was passed in 1917 which permitted the importation of contract workers, including Chinese. This permission was valid until two years after the war, when the law expired by limitation. Chinese entrance then reverted to the legal status prescribed in the military order number 155. So great was the need for labor, however, that the influx continued unabated until the depression years. Economic conditions in Cuba then produced a great exodus of Chinese from the island, the population of the colony in Cuba dropping from over 100,000 to about 30,000, around which figure it has remained.

Regulations concerning the Chinese who had completed their terms of labor between 1847 and 1877 varied. A decree of the Captain General in 1858 obliged the coolies to make new labor contracts or leave the island within sixty days. The ostensible purpose of this move was to prevent crime and vagrancy, but in reality it was designed to press them back into the service of the plantation owners. Two years later the period was extended another thirty days. After 1862 the Chinese were given the legal right to obtain letters of residence and to follow their own inclinations about the work by which they earned a living, although there is evidence that local officials used intimidation to force a number of them to enter into second and even third labor contracts with planters. Beginning

in 1871 legal restrictions were again placed on those whose contracts were expiring. This was another war measure designed to prevent their joining the rebels and was applied during the remainder of the Ten Years' War. After the promulgation of the Treaty of Peking in 1879, and the establishment of a Chinese consulate in Havana under its provisions, legal discriminations against the Chinese ceased.

In spite of restrictions, legal or otherwise, the Chinese have made a place for themselves in Cuban life. Today the growing and distribution of green vegetables is largely in Chinese hands; they compete successfully with the Spanish immigrants in the operation of groceries and general stores; they enjoy a monopoly of commercialized laundering. So widely distributed is their business that there is scarcely a town or important village in Cuba without some enterprise owned by Orientals. The Chinese have been successful as truck-farmers, and in a few instances have taken to large-scale agriculture. Neither in this, nor in the establishment of business firms, have they been hindered in the acquisition and ownership of real estate or other property. Nor have there been legal or other limitations to prevent their acquiring citizenship and aspiring to the highest places in the political realm. Some have become important in local politics, and a few descendants of Chinese have reached high positions in the national government. All public schools are open to them or their children and there are no zoning restrictions to prevent their taking up residence in any section or district which their financial resources permit.

Cuban-Chinese Relations

Race prejudice against the Chinese is to be found, but this is easier to sense after long residence in the island than to see through study or observation. It is not, however, a feeling of bitterness. The good terms on which almost all Chinese live with their Cuban neighbors, and the relatively numerous marriages between the races, would seem to belie the fact that prejudice exists; nevertheless, close contact with the situation will reveal that the Cubans generally look on the Chinese as social, and even intellectual inferiors. This feeling is sometimes found among the Negroes. The explanation may be found in the fact that the first Chinese to arrive were looked on as slaves, or that the majority of those who came either as coolies or as free immigrants were from depressed groups in China. Prejudice against the Chinese lends sometimes to petty annoyances from private individuals and from the lower ranks of office-holders and police agents. Perhaps the chief grievance of the Chinese in Cuba is the rather frequent unfair application to them and their businesses of sanitary and police regulations. Here,

however, they are not discriminated against more than other classes of foreigners, and in most cases suffer no more than native Cubans.

During the depression many Cubans began to resent the fact that a large number of jobs were held by foreigners. The Chinese came in for their share of this resentment which crystalized in the confused period that followed the overthrow of the dictator Gerardo Machado in August 1933. A "Cuba for the Cubans" movement developed under the administration of President Ramón Grau San Martín (September 1933-January 1934) which resulted in a series of laws that required at least 50% of the employees in any establishment to be native Cubans. Succeeding laws have raised the requirement to 80%.

During the campaign to obtain and to enforce these laws agitators sometimes fulminated against Chinese laundries or other establishments because no Cubans were employed, but there was even greater criticism of sugar producers for employing Jamaicans and Haitians. Subject to attack were the Spanish business firms which had long followed the policy of importing employees from the Peninsula. Foreign employers, Chinese or Westerners, found it necessary to adapt themselves to the new situation and most of them did so. Chinese restaurants, laundries, fruit stalls, grocery stores, etc., began to show an increasing number of Cuban workmen, while owners and operators sometimes took out citizenship papers in order to comply with the new legislation. The Chinese sometimes escaped because in some cases their businesses were owned and operated by the workmen on a cooperative basis. After several months of tension between Cubans and foreign elements, acceptable plans were worked out in practically all establishments coming under the laws, and this with much less friction than at first appeared possible. The Chinese residents proved themselves adept in getting adjusted to the new situation.

Partners Among United Nations

One factor that has tended to improve the status of the Chinese in Cuba is the gallant stand made by the Chinese people against Japanese aggression. Increased knowledge of China and the Chinese, and admiration for their bravery, have gone far in erasing the feeling of superiority that was a relic of the days of the coolie trade. This was further promoted when the spread of the world war placed China and Cuba in partnership among the United Nations. This association threw into bold relief the Cuban restrictions that were in contradiction to the stated aims of the enemies of the Axis.

In regard to immigration, the Chinese are now on the same footing as the citizens of the Western nations.

This does not signify that there will be a great influx of Chinese into Cuba at the end of the war, or at any time in the future. On the contrary, it is likely that the number of entries will be small. Throughout most of its history Cuba has been in need of an ever-increasing number of laborers. This is no longer true, and the Cuban people are now disposed to restrict immigration rather than to encourage it as in years past. But under the present agreement the Chinese will not be discriminated against when they attempt to enter Cuba, but will find themselves on equal terms with immigrants from Occidental nations. Cuba, in taking this step, anticipated the United States by a year, for it was not until December 17, 1943 that the American Congress removed the laws after which Cuba's exclusion order was modeled.

PACIFIC MISCELLANY

CHINA'S HOUSING NEEDS

To re-house the war refugees of China approximately 12,000,000 new homes will be needed. The Chinese have projected an extensive program calling for the erection of simple structures 13 x 16 feet and 12 feet high, of wooden framework with walls and roof of Chinese materials, and floors of concrete. Although timber requirements will be met as far as possible from domestic sources, other materials will have to be imported. Translated into the terms of the business man, this means a market for about 35,846 short tons of nails, 35,000 short tons of hardware such as clasps, window and door hinges, 100,000 tons of carpenter's hand tools and 24 billion feet of framing lumber. In addition, the lack of adequate Chinese timber resources probably means that, should the building program be carried out, a heavy volume of low-grade lumber would move to China from Oregon, Washington and British Columbia for construction purposes. "Were purchasing power a guaranteed factor," says *The Timberman*, "the possibilities for post-war export trade with China would be enormous."

Source: *The Timberman*, June 1944.

AUSTRALIAN GIRLS LEARN ABOUT AMERICA

Brides of American Marines were among the first and most eager clients of the United States Information Library opened on March 29 in Melbourne, Australia. It is not surprising, therefore, that of the thousand reference books and five hundred government pamphlets that form the bulk of the collection the *American Guides Series* — perhaps the least disputed literary product of the lamented W.P.A. — are read the most; for sooner or later these Australian girls will have to face their American husbands' families in their own habitat. The library is conveniently accessible to the newspapers and also serves those inquirers, sometimes coming from a long distance, who wish to know more of our peculiar laws and institutions.

Source: *Publishers' Weekly*, June 10, 1944.

FAR EASTERN SURVEY