

Settlement Orientations and Ethnic Identifications of the Chinese Cuban Diaspora: The Case of the Eng Herrera Family

Alice Bai, History

Mentored by Prof. Duygu Oya Ula, English and First Year Foundations

Introduction

From the days of coolie importation in the mid-nineteenth century to successive waves of voluntary migration in the 20th century, the Chinese presence in Cuba has created a significant Chinese Cuban diaspora community. This paper seeks to explore the settlement orientation of Chinese Cubans against the framework of sojourner theory in order to gain deeper insight into the motivations and experiences of Chinese Cuban migration. This analysis further seeks to reconstruct the rich fabric of Chinese Cuban life in the twentieth century, with an emphasis on transnational connections and identity formation.



Theoretical Background

Sojourner theory:

A sojourner is “a stranger who spends many years of his lifetime in a foreign country without being assimilated by it” (Siu 34).

Transnationalism:

The process “that links together people, groups, and institutions across national borders” (Yang 131).

The Eng Herrera Family

Guillermo Eng : immigrated to Cuba from Guangzhou in the early 1910s, first Chinese Cuban generation.

Elvira Herrera Perez: white Cuban wife of Guillermo.

Pedro Eng Herrera : sole surviving son of Guillermo and Elvira, mixed Chinese and white descent.

Belkis Ramos Trejo: wife of Pedro.

María (Lay Sim) Magdalene Eng Ramos : daughter of Pedro and Belkis.

Vladimir Eng Ramos : son of Pedro and Belkis.



Pedro, Guillermo, Belkis, & Lay Sim in 1960

Lay Sim & Vladimir as children in 1965



Conclusions & Further Questions

The family chronology of the Eng Herreras across three generations demonstrate a complex picture of settlement orientations. Guillermo, the first generation to reach the island, remained a lifelong sojourner in his psychological orientation despite developing new commitments and attachments to his Cuban family. His son Pedro, a native Cuban who dedicated his life to the revolutionary cause, lays claim to a transnational identity that strongly emphasised his Chinese background alongside his commitment to Cuba.

As for Pedro’s children, Lay Sim and Vladimir, the question remains open. The involvement of a diverse array multiracial descendants with varying notions of “Chineseness” has complicated the question of Chinese Cuban identity as cultural heritages and practices are remade and redefined, forging new spaces outside of the mainstream that serve to open novel avenues for “Chinese Cubanness” in the future.

References

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