Chino Latino Restaurants: Converging Communities, Identities, and Cultures

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As I was told many times, New York City is a “walking city.” So, on my first visit there in 1999, I decided to stroll down Broadway from 110th Street to as far as my legs could carry me. I crossed a number of neighborhoods, deciphered a variety of languages spoken in the street, and was dazzled by the unruly cosmopolitanism of the city. Of all the unexpected things I encountered, it was the “Chinese Latino” or “Chino Cubano” or “Chino Creole” restaurants that intrigued me the most. Up until then, I had not seen this particular concept or, more precisely, the commercial branding of this mix of “Chinese” and “Latino/Creole/Spanish” food. The notion of a Chinese Latino community did not surprise me, as I had known about the continued migration of Chinese to Latin America since before the mid-1800s, but what exactly is “Chino Latino” food? How did these cultural institutions come about? What does it take to create and sustain these restaurants? And what do these restaurants represent for different people?

Walking into La Caridad 78 restaurant, I quickly recognize the familiar signs of Chino-Latino culture. Above an alcove near the register sits the shrine of Guan Gong, the Taoist God of War, while the place settings on the tables have a map of Cuba printed on them. The menu showcases the restaurant’s distinctive bicultural cuisine, with several pages listing Chinese dishes followed by another few pages of Latino food; the entire menu is written in Chinese, English, and Spanish. At La Caridad 78 and other Chino Latino restaurants like it, one can pair chop suey with tostones or lo mein de la casa with chuletas fritas. And the Cuban Chinese waiters—with their sun-kissed faces and hair parted on the side and neatly gelled—are dressed in their crisply starched white shirts and black slacks. Their presence gives La Caridad 78 a sense of chino cubano “authenticity” that other similar restaurants simply cannot replicate. Approaching the waiters, I address them first in Spanish, and with lit eyes, they respond, “Yes, we are from Cuba” (Waiters). Pointing to the map on the tray, they assert, “I am from Camagüey. Do you know where it is?” “I am from Matanzas.” “And I am from Cienfuegos.” One of them elaborates, “I was born in Guangdong. I lived in Cuba for twenty years before moving to New York” (Waiter 1). Switching to Cantonese, I ask, “Why did you move here? Why New York?” He responds, using
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a combination of Cantonese, Spanish, and English, “We had to leave. When Castro came into power, we lost everything. I had a cousin in New York, so I came here. I’ve been here for over thirty years now” (Waiter 1). As we converse, a few customers walk in. A woman in her sixties, after putting in her “usual order” in Spanish, joins the conversation. “I am Cuban Chinese too. My grandfather was Chinese. I don’t look like it, but I am Chinese” (Patron 1). She smiles gleefully.

Nowhere are Chinese Latinos (Chinese from Latin America) more visible in New York City than in these restaurants. Given the racial framework of the United States, in which they are automatically assumed to be either Chinese or Latino depending on phenotype, the complexity of their cultural identity is often invisible to the general public. Their presence, in fact, would go unnoticed were it not for these cultural institutions, which boldly announce their existence by claiming a distinct ethnic cuisine and cultural space within the urban landscape of New York City. The few remaining Chino Cubano and Chino Latino restaurants scattered in the upper West side of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx not only attracts a variety of visitors curious about this exotic pairing of two seemingly disparate cuisines, but they also have become a kind of hub or gathering place for Latinos of Chinese and non-Chinese descent alike, who are looking for the comfort food that reminds them of home: a healthy serving of ropa vieja and arroz frito, and maybe a café con leche and a smooth, milky flan to top it off.

This essay offers a preliminary exploration into Chino Latino restaurants in New York City. It is part of a larger ethnographic project exploring the cultural formation of Asian Latinos in the United States and Canada. While the scholarship on Asians in Latin America and the Caribbean has grown in the last decade, little is written about the remigration of Asian Latinos to the United States and Canada (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo; Hirabayashi et al.; Hu-DeHart; Khan; Look Lai; Rustomji-Kems; Siu; Wilson). With the exception of a few scholarly articles (Meyer; Park 1999, 2002; Ropp) and novels such as Cristina García’s Monkey Hunting and Sigrid Núñez’s A Feather on the Breath of God, most of the materials published on Asian Latinos in the United States—and more specifically, Chinese Latino restaurants—have been in newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, Miami Herald, and New York Times. Not surprisingly, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York are the three cities where most Asian Latinos—primarily of ethnic Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and South Asian descent—have settled in the United States. Given the limited scholarship on the subject matter and the early stage of my research, this essay will provide some historical context for understanding Chinese Latinos in New York City and offer a preliminary discussion about the various meanings this restaurant holds for different sets of people.
The Emergence of Chino Latino Restaurants in New York

The widespread awareness of Chino Latino restaurants can be traced back to the 1970s, when several restaurant reviews were published in the *New York Times*, showcasing Chinese Cuban restaurants as the latest and newest cuisine in New York City. Although Chinese Cubans were not the only Chinese Latinos involved in this business, they were by far the most visible, if not also the most numerous, among Chino Latino restaurant owners. Indeed, Cuban Chinese were the first group of Chinese Latinos that came in large numbers during this period. With the success of these early experiments, later flows of Chinese remigrants from mainly Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela joined in, offering similar foods described as “Chinese Creole,” “Chinese Spanish,” or “Chinese Latin” in all five boroughs of New York City. Since the late 1990s, however, with gentrification in Manhattan and the aging immigrant generation of Chinese Latino restaurateurs, these cultural landmarks are slowly disappearing from the cityscape of New York, though a handful of them continue to attract a strong and dedicated clientele. Today, most of the restaurant owners and workers are non-Cuban Chinese Latinos, reflecting the continued shift in Chinese remigration from Latin America.

To get a better sense of the historical migration of Chinese to Latin America and their subsequent migration to the United States, let me offer the example of Chinese Cubans.

*Serial Migration: Chinese Migration to Cuba and from Cuba to the United States*

The history of Chinese migration to Cuba reaches back to the mid-1800s. Between 1847 and 1874, close to 125,000 indentured or contract Chinese laborers arrived in Cuba; the laborers or coolies were almost exclusively male, and most were destined to work on sugar plantations alongside enslaved Africans (Baltar Rodríguez; Hu-DeHart, "Latin America"). The contracts issued to the Chinese laborers stipulated eight years of servitude with the pay of one peso a week (Hu-DeHart, "Opium"). Many died before finishing their initial term. In fact, their work conditions were so bad that it drew international attention, compelling the Chinese government to send a special convoy to investigate the situation. Generated by this investigation, the *Cuba Commission Report* documented the testimonials of Chinese laborers who spoke at length about the inhumane treatment they received under the hands of their Cuban overlords. In 1874, as a result of the report, the coolie trade officially ended.

The Chinese coolies who survived their initial work contracts eventually became free men. A few returned to China or migrated to other parts of the
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Americas, but most settled in Cuba and established families of their own. Of those that remained, many joined *cuadrillas*—work crews consisting of day laborers—and worked for a negotiated salary on sugar plantations, constructions, and shipyard docks (López; Hu-DeHart, "Opium"). Some former coolies took up other forms of labor, working as domestic servants, peddlers, launderers, cigar makers, and shopkeepers. In addition to those who came under the coolie system, Chinese from California began arriving in Cuba via Mexico and New Orleans after 1860, and by 1875, an estimated 5,000 Chinese "Californians" as they were called had settled in Cuba⁴ (Baltar Rodríguez; Pérez de la Riva). With the majority of them being merchants, these "Californians" brought capital with them and were among the first to establish businesses in Cuba.

Throughout the wars for Cuba independence (1868–78, 1895–98), Chinese migrants and their descendants fought alongside whites, blacks, and mulattos. In fact, their contribution is commemorated by a monument in Havana; inscribed on the monument are the words, "There was no Cuban Chinese deserter, there was no Cuban Chinese traitor." Despite their contribution to the war and their recognition as *chinos mambises*, or Chinese freedom fighters, Chinese migration was restricted after 1899. In 1902, with pressure from the United States, legislation was passed to prohibit the entry of Chinese workers (Herrera Jerez and Castillo Santana, Jiménez Pastrana). This did not last long. As demand for labor quickly increased with the onset of World War I, followed by the expansion of American commerce in Cuba, immigration laws changed in 1917, allowing the entry of Chinese laborers. However, with economic depression starting in the 1920s, Chinese labor migration was once again prohibited in 1922.⁵ While these policies sought to regulate the entry of Chinese workers according to Cuba's labor demands, they did not affect the Chinese who came as students, tourists, merchants, and government officials; nor was the government able to control clandestine forms of immigration. Indeed, Cuba, by the turn of the twentieth century, was quickly becoming a major transit point within the global network of human trafficking (Herrera Jerez and Castillo Santana 26). And Chinese migration to Cuba continued, though in uneven flows, throughout the twentieth century.

As early as the beginning of the 1900s, burgeoning communities of Chinese emerged in Havana and in various towns throughout Cuba. Occupying six city blocks, Havana's Chinatown was filled with restaurants, cafes, bakeries, barber ships, and pharmacies. It was known throughout the Chinese diaspora to be one of the biggest and most vibrant Chinatowns in the Americas. Indeed, Chinese migrants—who were predominantly male⁶—formed unions with Cuban women of various backgrounds, and with these unions also came generations of interracial
children. In fact, throughout Cuba today, it is not uncommon to find people who, despite their lack of Chinese phenotype, can trace their connection to a Chinese grandfather, great grandfather, or great, great, grandfather. With increased out-migration and decreased Chinese immigration, the majority of the Chinese population in Cuba today is comprised of mostly mixed-raced Chinese. Contrary to popular perception that Cuban Chinese culture is disappearing with the shrinking “Chinese” (meaning Chinese immigrant) population, I was pleasantly surprised to learn in 1999, while attending a Chinese diaspora conference in Havana, that Cuban-born Chinese continue to sustain various Chinese cultural practices, including Chinese opera, dance, and martial arts.

Certainly, the massive exodus of Chinese from Cuba after the 1959 Cuban Revolution had tremendous impact on the Chinese community there. The Castro government, which undertook a massive nationalization of the private economy, did not bode well for many Cuban Chinese who had become small business owners of bodegas, restaurants, cafés, and bakeries to barber shops, pharmacies, and shoe stores. Of course, it goes without saying that, like the rest of Cuba, the Chinese community was split along ideological lines, with some supporting Castro and others not. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of Cuban Chinese had remigrated to the United States, with New York City and Miami being the most popular destinations. It was not until then that “Cuban Chinese” emerged as a culturally distinctive identity group in the United States, with their presence made visible by their chino cubano restaurants.

The case of Chinese migration to Cuba and from Cuba to the United States is quite distinct and cannot be generalized to the experience of other Chinese Latinos. I offer it as an example to show the extent of Chinese migration to Latin America and the kinds of historical circumstances that shape their remigration. Without reviewing in detail the local-national conditions that inspire the remigration of Chinese from other parts of Latin America, suffice it to say that political and economic instability in countries like Peru, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Ecuador have played a key role in determining the flow of migration northward.

Cultural Significance of Chino Latino Restaurants

One of the main reasons why the Chino Latino restaurants intrigued me is precisely because they are the only public spaces that make visible this otherwise invisible community. The dominant racial structure of the United States, which has long operated on presumptions of racial purity and the binary between black and white, not only has obscured the complex racialization of Latinos and Asians, but it has also diminished the everyday occurrences of racial and cultural mixing and

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interaction among different groups. Asian Latinos, depending on their phenotype, therefore are perceived and can be easily categorized as either Asian or Latino; there is little room for them to assert their distinct culturally mixed identity. The restaurants, hence, offer an important exception to the rule by boldly announcing and affirming the existence of this community. In the larger project, I explore both the production and consumption processes involved in the formation of these restaurants. For the remainder of this essay, however, I will focus my discussion on the cultural significance of these restaurants, asking how different sets of people perceive these restaurants and the nature of their relationship to them.

Cultural Center and Economic Livelihood: Chino Latino Owners and Workers

When Mr. and Mrs. Lau fled Cuba and arrived in New York City in 1960, they decided to open a restaurant. After all, they knew the business well, having owned two restaurants in Cuba. However, unlike their previous ventures, they decided not to open just another Chinese restaurant. With a well-established Chinatown in New York City, where Chinese restaurants are plentiful and, in fact, are known by their regional specialties, the Laus decided to do something different. They opened a Chino Cubano restaurant, not in Chinatown but on the upper West side.

When asked why they decided to open such a restaurant, the Laus explained that they are proud of their mixed cultural heritage, and they wanted to open a restaurant that would help sustain it. Interestingly, at home, Mr. Lau prefers to eat Chinese vegetables and fish, while his wife and American-born children prefer beefsteak, fried plantain, and black beans. Perhaps that is where the idea of opening a Chino Cubano restaurant took root.

In a sense, way before fusion cuisine came en vogue, Chino Cubano and, later, Chino Latino restaurants were serving a bicultural, if not fusion, cuisine since the 1960s. I should be clear that the food they offer is not "fusion" per se; the dishes are not original inventions created by mixing Chinese and Latino culinary traditions. A more accurate description of the menu is the coexistence of conventional Chinese and Latino dishes, like chow mein and shrimp with black bean sauce, and ropa vieja and plátanos maduros. The difference lies in the ability for one to order from both sets of offerings at once.

For the Chinese Latino waiters, these restaurants are their first and primary sites of employment and social-economic entry into the United States. It is where they share information and gather resources, like where to find the Chinese Cuban Association or the Chinese Venezuelan Association. The restaurants, in a sense, function as the starting ground and a center where newcomers learn to navigate their newly adopted home. Most of the waiters I interviewed, whose ages ranged
from thirties to sixties, have worked in Chino Latino restaurants ever since they arrived to the United States; they circulate from one restaurant to another, through introductions by fellow compatriots. Many of them, I have found, are life-long friends and keep in close contact with one another despite their change in work place. Despite their places of origin, their strong identification with being Chinese and Latino creates a strong bond between them. They understand that they are different from Chinese immigrants from China; at the same time, they do not identify simply as Latino. One waiter elaborates, “I came to the U. S. with my mother and older sister when I was eleven. Because I grew up in Venezuela, I strongly identify with Latinos, and because my mom is Chinese, I also grew up speaking Chinese [. . . ]. When we arrived to New York, the first job I got was working for a Chino Latino restaurant in Brooklyn. I’ve changed jobs a few times, but I’ve always worked at these restaurants” (Juan). When I ask why he has not worked for other Chinese restaurants, like the ones in Chinatown, he switched to Spanish and, with his eyes pointing toward some of the other Chinese waiters in the restaurant, said, “I’m different from the Chinese from China. We don’t really mingle. I mean, I am Chinese, but I am also Latino. Outside of work, I prefer to hang with Latinos” (Juan). He goes on to explain that all his friends are Latinos; his ex-wife and current girlfriend are both Latinas, and his favorite spots to visit on his days off are Latino bars and dance halls. He loves watching fútbol, and even the ring tone on his cell phone features a Latino rock song. For a number of Chinese Latino waiters, this was a common scenario: they utilize Chinese Latino networks for employment, but their social activities revolve around Latino cultural spaces. They circulate comfortably between these two cultural worlds, blurring the presumed cultural-racial boundaries separating Asians and Latinos.

“There’s Something for Everyone”: Patrons and Tourists

The seemingly unexpected pairing of Chinese and Latino food inspires much curiosity across different populations in the city. For most New Yorkers and tourists alike, these restaurants represent their first introduction to the Chinese in Latin America. Upon their first encounter, most people respond in astonishment, “I didn’t know there were Chinese in Cuba!” And thus begin their series of questions about how they got there, how long they have been there, and so on and so forth. The restaurant waiters and owners are happy to explain their migration route from China to Latin America to the United States. They talk about the bustling Chinese community in Cuba in the 1930s and 1940s, the Castro regime, their displacement from Cuba and their arrival to New York. Others speak about their less dramatic itineraries from Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador. For many Latino patrons from the
Caribbean and Central America, however, the waiters’ migration routes come as no surprise, as they remember well the Chinese restaurants in their respective homelands. They come for the flexibility of getting Chinese and Latino food at the same time. “There is always something for everyone,” one patron said as he points to the different members of the family (Patron 2).

On more than one occasion, some Latino patrons have mentioned that these restaurants remind them of home, which I had found odd at first, until one person explained:

The food, the waiters, everything about this restaurant reminds me of Barrio Chino in Havana. I remember so well going to Chinatown as a kid and ordering the same kind of dishes that I can get here. It’s the closest thing to what I can remember Havana to be. Other Cuban restaurants just aren’t the same. They are too Americanized. This [...] the chilada and arroz frito with the BBQ pork [...] this to me is authentically Cuban,

Another man tells me that his father, who lives in Houston, Texas, always insists on visiting Chinatown and eating at a Chino Latino restaurant when he visits New York. He suggests that, for his father, visiting these sites evokes fond memories of his years in Cuba. When I probe further, he explains, “It isn’t that they are the same thing, of course. We are not fooling ourselves here. It’s that they offer just enough similarity to remind him of the Barrio Chino back home. Just enough of the same dishes, with the same kind of waiters who speak Spanish and Chinese. They are not the same, no [...] but they are similar enough” (Patron 4). These are some of the common narratives that Latino, and especially Cuban, patrons repeated. For them, the food and the restaurants that serve them represent the perfect cultural tension between familiarity and difference, perhaps even familiarity through difference. What they express as familiar in these scenarios are their encounters with analogous forms of difference, in this case, encounters with diasporic Chineseness that are at once similar and different regardless of time and geographical location. It is this double-ness of similar difference—embodied by the food, the waiters, the Chinatowns—and their relationship to that double-ness that help conjure memories of their homeland, memories whose details are not fully fleshed out. It is the uncanniness of that similar difference represented by diasporic Chineseness that allows their imagination to fill in the gaps, to link Chino Latino restaurants in twenty-first-century New York with those in 1940s Cuba.

Conclusion

To a large extent, these restaurants explicitly represent a cultural crossroads where Chinese and Latino cultures come together, interact, and intersect. In reality, it is a contact zone where people of different racial, cultural, and national
backgrounds commingle. Speaking Spanish, English, and Cantonese, Chino Latino owners and waiters interact with their primarily Latino and white American patrons. They exchange greetings, conversations about the latest fútbol games or political events in their countries of origin; they joke about Fidel Castro’s retirement and the future of Cuba under Raúl’s rule.

Chinese Latinos make up an important albeit largely invisible part of both the Chinese and Latin American diasporas. Not only do they share the experience of displacement from both China and Latin America, but the cultural work of Chinese Latinos, made particularly salient through their cuisine and restaurants, also plays a critical role in recreating and sustaining both Chinese and Latino cultural forms abroad. More importantly, by inventing this new bicultural pairing, they have created something distinct in the process, and it is this very distinctiveness that challenges our conventional notions of what/who is Latin American and what/who is Chinese, as well as the idea that they are disparately separate in not only geographical location but also cultural formation. Indeed, these Chino Latino restaurants offer an important social, cultural, and economic site for people of different backgrounds to come together and interact. It is there that east and west, and north and south converge and collide.

Notes

1 An earlier and shorter version of this essay was published in Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced, edited by Andrea O’Reilly Herrera (Albany: State U of New York P, 2007).
2 Pseudonyms and general titles are used in this essay for all interview informants in order to retain their anonymity.
3 It is estimated that a total of 141,515 had left China, and 16,578 had died in route to Cuba (Baltar Rodríguez 20).
4 Precise numerical data for this migration of Chinese from California is not available, as customs registered them according to their last port of exit, which was either Mexico or New Orleans. Although the largest number came between 1865–75, they continued to arrive afterwards. See Pérez de la Riva 178–83.
5 Inscribed in Spanish, “No hubo un chino cubano desertor; no hubo un chino cubano traidor.”
6 There are several records indicating different numbers of Chinese entering into Cuba during these years. For instance, according to the Secretary of Housing, there were 373 Chinese arriving between 1903 and 1916, and 11,311 between 1917 and 1924. These numbers are drastically smaller than the ones offered by the Chinese Consulate in Havana, which indicated a total of 6,258 Chinese arriving in Cuba between 1903 and 1916, and 17,473 between 1917 and 1924. A reason for the discrepancy may be the fact that illegal immigration was widespread. This may help explain why official Cuban records,
both from the Secretary of Housing and the Census, indicate much smaller numbers than the ones provided by the Chinese Consulate (Herrera Jerez and Castillo Santana 23–28).

7 Based on the official census between 1861 and 1970, the number of Chinese women ranged from as few as 49 in 1899 to as many as 484 in 1953. In terms of proportion to the Chinese male population, their percentage ranged from 0.17% in 1861 to 4.09% in 1953 (Baltar Rodríguez 90).

8 Since the 1950s, the number of Chinese living in Cuba has dropped dramatically. According to the official census, there were only 5,892 Chinese living in Cuba in 1970, compared to 11,834 in 1953 (Baltar Rodríguez 90).

9 In regard to Chinese remigration from Cuba to the United States, the earliest documentation dates back to the 1860s, when Cubon Chinese came to New York by way of Cuba—New York trade routes and were hired as cigar rollers. Making “clear Havanas” and “seed and Havanas,” Cuban Chinese were the most highly paid cigar rollers of the time (Tchen 227–28). By the early 1900s, with Cuba being a central transit point in the human trafficking of Chinese, it is likely there was a steady stream of Chinese remigration to the United States. What is unknown is whether it consisted mostly of Cuban Chinese who had been in Cuba for a substantial amount of time or Chinese migrants passing through Cuba. Most probably, it was a combination of both.

Works Cited


“Juan.” Personal interview. 2007.


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“Mr. and Mrs. Lau.” Personal interview 2007.


“Patron 1.” Personal interview. 1999.

“Patron 2.” Personal interview. 2007.

“Patron 3.” Personal interview. 2007.

“Patron 4.” Personal interview. 2007.


“Waiter 1.” Personal interview. 1999.
