

***La China Poblana* and Other Constructions of Asian Latinos/as**

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She is

The same image that moves and captivates us in all the national celebrations, the same one who in foreign lands has inspired waves of enthusiasm, the same one who has made tears of intense emotion stream from our eyes, seeing her in North America or in Europe in festivals or in theaters marvelously execute the steps to the *jarabe tapatio* [Mexican Hat Dance] in her silk slippers conclude by finishing her typical dance with the ingenious steps of “*El Palomo*,” under the proud wing of the braid-trimmed sombrero of her *charro* [her male counterpart].¹

She is *la china poblana* (the Chinese woman of Puebla), “the national archetype for Mexican women,” a legend whose creation began in the twilight years of the nineteenth century, accelerated during the 1920s in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, quickly became institutionalized and even memorialized by a national monument in 1941. She is now widely recognized throughout Mexico and wherever Mexican people and commerce have ventured in the diaspora. How the national emblem of Mexican womanhood was linked to a *china* (read Chinese woman for now) is a question that begs to be asked. And when asked, most Mexicans can summon something about an Oriental princess who embroidered and wore the colorful blouses worn by their iconic symbol. Few seem aware, however, that the legend can be traced back to a

¹ Gillespie, Jeanne L. 1998, “Gender, Ethnicity and Piety: The Case of the China Poblana,” in Eva Bueno and Terry Caesar, eds., *Imagination Beyond Nation. Latin American Popular Culture*. Pittsburgh: U. Pittsburg Press, pp. 19-37, 267-68 (endnotes).

seventeenth century immigrant/exile/expatriate (she could fit any of these categories of “outsider”) from Asia, a unique flesh-and-bone historical personality known as Catarina de San Juan.² Although this figure from Asia had lived in New Spain during the early colonial period, and centuries later informed the construction of Mexico’s post-Revolutionary female national symbol, her place in the Mexican imagination has not led to general recognition of the Asian Latina as a cultural or social formation in Mexico. We shall return to this story and explain this strange paradox.

Turning our attention to the United States, where peoples from Asia have constituted old and new waves of immigrants, and peoples from Mexico and Latin America have never stopped coming while also being territorially incorporated as the U.S. expanded its borders westward into Mexico and eastward into the Caribbean, it seems inevitable that these Asian and Latino diasporas would connect and collide, producing images and voices of Asian Latinas and Latinos. To date, these voices have not been systematically captured, hence elusive, but their mere presence has actually been acknowledged recently. Despite their omission, if not outright erasure, in the academic literature on *mestizaje* or race mixture,³ their presence has been clearly annotated in recent U.S. censuses if one actively looks for it. In the 2000 census, according to the U.S. government, the category of “Hispanic” (the official term of the U.S. government), unlike white, black or Asian, was not a racial category; rather, as an ethnic or cultural category, Hispanics could and, indeed, were asked to self-identify racially any way by choosing one of the prescribed racial categories. Thus, for those who checked Hispanic, a racial

² Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni 2002, “Mirrha-Catarina de San Juan: From India to New Spain,” in *Amerasia* 28:2, pp. 29-36.

³ Gaskins, Pearl Fuyo 1999, *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People*. New York: Henry Holt; Root, Maria P.P., ed. 1992.

follow-up question was posed. Among the 35,305, 818 Hispanics in 2000, about half (16,907,852) chose to identify as white, another 710,353 as black, and, notably, 119,829 as Asian, considerably more than the 45,326 individuals who chose to identify as American Indian. Thus, from the perspective of Hispanics in the U.S., many of whom in 2000 were immigrants and new American citizens; an Asian heritage was prominently noted.

The question of Asian Latinos and Latinas can also be explored from the Asian perspective in the census. When, in 2000, they were given the option for the first time of checking more than one racial category, fully fifteen percent of Asians chose to express their multiracialism, much higher than the six percent of Hispanics who did so (with blacks at five percent and whites at only 2.5 percent). Furthermore, while 52 percent of multiracial Asians identified “white” as their other heritage, and only six percent identified with blacks and eight percent with Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, an impressive fifteen percent identified with Hispanics and other “races,” totaling almost 249,000, compared to the 119,829 Hispanics who identified with an Asian heritage. In the absence of other available count of this elusive category, we can accept the two figures from the 2000 census as the range of the size of the Asian Latina and Latino population in the U.S. In the self-reported census figures and implied social formations, we perceive how inevitably these two large immigrant flows converge in some places to form the Asian Latino.⁴

In order to locate the material origins of Asian Latinos/as as well as trace their various shapes and meanings, I embarked on a project of historical excavation to begin to unearth

⁴ LEAP (Leadership Institute for Asian Pacifics) 2002, “Census 2000 and Asian and Pacific Islander American Basic Facts.”

evidence and constructions of Asian Latinos and Latinas, presenting my preliminary findings here. Some of these poignant and striking, maybe even apocryphal, narratives begin to tell the story of how Asian Latinos have come into being across time and space in the Americas. They are the embodiment of border crossers, in the physical, cultural and metaphorical senses. As such, the Asian Latino construction is necessarily transnational.

Stories gathered from both the historical record and contemporary sources suggest that Asian Latinas and Latinos are of two major types: They are either a unique kind of *mestizaje* that brings together Asian with Latino, or a special group of immigrants or border crossers from Latin American countries who were originally Asian immigrants to those countries or acculturated descendants of those immigrants. The two are actually closely related, for many of the Asian immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean were already racially mixed, the result in turn of the heavily male Asian immigration to those multiracial regions with, moreover, racial practices that were more relaxed than the rigid legal system of hypodescent (the one-drop rule) and segregation that prevailed in the U.S. through the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement at home began to dismantle official apartheid at home and immigration reform lifted the decades-long ban against immigration from the non-European, non-white world.

The history linking Asia with America began, of course, with Columbus, who set out to explore “Las Indias” and got lost in what we now call the Caribbean. He insisted, however, that Cuba, which he partially explored, was really “Cipango,” or Japan, and insisted on naming the natives he encountered “Indians,” a homogenizing misnomer that has persisted to the present. Shortly after the Spanish empire established itself in Mexico

as New Spain, she inaugurated the highly lucrative trans-Pacific commercial enterprise known as the Manila Galleon Trade, exchanging Mexican silver for mostly luxury items from Japan and especially China, using the Spanish colony of Manila in the Philippines as entrepot. The sailors manning these ships were *chinos de Manila*, some of whom jumped ship and settled in Mexico City, setting up small businesses such as barbershops. So aggressive were they in competing for business that a group of Spanish barbers in 1635 petitioned the viceroy to banish them to the outskirts of the city. As many as five to six hundred of these Manila *chinos* or Filipinos were reportedly living in Mexico City, Puebla and Acapulco by 1670.⁵

According to some accounts, other *chinos de Manila* who escaped from the onerous tasks of galleon crew made their way up the Caribbean coast to Louisiana, where they formed the earliest Filipino American settlements with names like Manila Village.⁶ An equally astounding story concerns one Antonio Rodriguez, whom the writer of popular history Stan Steiner describes as a “Mexican of Chinese blood,” who, accompanied by a handful of ethnically heterogeneous companions, wandered to the far north of the Spanish empire from Mexico City and founded a frontier outpost they grandiosely named *Ciudad de Los Angeles* (City of Angels) in 1781, long before the mid-nineteenth century gold rush brought the Chinese to California directly from China.⁷

⁵ Dubs, H.H. 1942, “The Chinese in Mexico City in 1635,” in *Far Eastern Quarterly* vol. 1, pp. 387-89.

⁶ This story has been so widely accepted and repeated, even by eminent scholars, that few thought of challenging its veracity. The source appears to be Marina E. Espina’s *Filipinos in Louisiana*. Finally, a decade after its publication, Malcolm Churchill exposed the sloppiness of the book, which provided no evidence to support her contention that Filipinos who jumped ship on the Manila Galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco settled down in the Louisiana bayou. Churchill concludes that available evidence do show that it was highly unlikely that Filipino sailors who jumped ship could have made their way to Louisiana until much later in the 19th century. See Churchill, Malcolm H. 1999, “Louisiana History and Early Filipino Settlement: Searching for the Story,” in *Bulletin of the American Historical Collection Foundation*, vol. 25, no. 2 (April-June), pp. 25-48.

⁷ Steiner, Stan 1979, *Fusang: The Chinese Who Built America*. New York: Harper and Row. This story is also not accurate, the result of Steiner’s misreading of a colonial terminology for a darkskinned

In mid to late nineteenth century, Chinese male laborers or coolies were recruited in massive numbers to work the plantations of Cuba and Peru; in the case of Cuba, they supplemented a dwindling African slave labor force, and in the case of Peru, they replaced slaves who had been freed. It is unlikely that many poor Chinese in Peru made their way to the U.S. given the great distance, but in the 1850s the first Chinese in New York City found their way there from Cuba, while other coolies a decade later were sent by their Cuban masters as a generous gesture of good will to work the plantations of Louisiana during a period of severe labor shortage in the American south when slavery was gasping for its last breath. Although barely on history's radar screen, these early Asian Latinos reinforced the notion of border crossing as common practices in the Americas.

By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, at a time when the U.S. enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) to ban Chinese immigration, they turned to Mexico to work and settle, mostly amassing along the vast northern border with the U.S.⁸ This space where two frontiers collided was becoming vibrant with economic development spurred by U.S. investments in mines and railroads. Denied entry to the U.S. after their compatriots had opened mines, cleared land and built the railroad, Chinese laborers and merchants went to Mexico instead, congregating along the border, where other Chinese had already established businesses in California, Arizona and Texas, just on the other side of the international line. If they look, historians can easily locate the appearance of

mixed race person, *chino*, which at that time usually did not mean a person from China. Given Antonio's companions, all described in racial terms, it is clear that the motley crew which founded Los Angeles in the late 18th century were lower-class men of various mixed race heritages or *castas*.

⁸ Hu-DeHart, Evelyn 1980, "Immigrants to a Developing Society: The Chinese in Northern Mexico, 1875-1932," in Journal of Arizona History, vol. 21 (Autumn), pp. 275-307, 2002.

Asian Latinas and Latinos in this long and wide border region because Chinese from Mexico routinely crossed the border to work and do business with both Chinese and American merchants and employers in the U.S. Because they were forbidden to enter the U.S., Chinese in Mexico took out Mexican citizenship papers and crossed the border as Mexicans, with surprising facility in most instances. They also married into or had other family ties with established Chinese in the Imperial Valley of California and throughout Arizona, towns such as Nogales, Tucson, and Phoenix. During the mining boom of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, some Chinese in Arizona moved to Mexico to capitalize on new commercial opportunities. There, they established families with Mexican-born wives, both Mexican and Chinese, later moving the families back to Arizona. Along the Texas-Mexico border in cities such as El Paso, Chinese merchants operated on both sides, with some eventually forming families with Mexican wives in Mexico, later moving the family back to the United States. In 1932, the prosperous Chinese community of Sonora was actually expelled from Mexico, their businesses and properties confiscated and Mexicanized.⁹ Many were deported back to China, but others managed to reestablish themselves in the United States.

Consider the story of Marian Lim, born in Guaymas, Sonora, and brought back to Nogales, Arizona as a child with her parents and siblings. She spoke Spanish, grew up along the border, and always considered herself culturally Mexican, although she felt the sting of being taunted by Mexican children as being different. From the beginning, these Asian Latinas and Latinos were binational, bicultural border crossers with transnational families, businesses, and social relationships; in this regard, they were no different from Mexicans and other immigrant groups who lived in the same multiracial, multicultural,

⁹ *Supra* a la nota 8.

and politically contested space. But more than Mexican and Mexican-Americans, they occupied a deeper layer of in-between space that tended to marginalize them and often rendered them invisible.

We used to have problems in Nogales when we were going to school. The Mexican kinds used to tease us because we were Chinese. There were some Mexican boys in our neighborhood who could always take my brother and beat him up. My brother Frank, who was smaller and younger, would cry. One day I told them that if they didn't stop bothering him, I was going to go after them. So they didn't believe me. One day they teased my brother so much I went after them and I beat one up something terrible. Oh, I just beat them to a 'fare thee well.'¹⁰

Other examples of Asian Latinos and Latinas emerging along this contested border can be crudely described as “collateral damage,” in that they were victims of larger actions and policies that entailed their forced removal and displacement. In 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson sent General John Pershing into Chihuahua, Mexico, to hunt down the popular revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, he enlisted some five hundred Chinese men in Mexico to provide food and services for his 6,000-strong army. When he retreated one year later—*sans* Villa—he petitioned the U.S. government for a special relaxation of the anti-Chinese immigration ban so as to allow these Chinese men to enter the U.S. with his army, knowing they would suffer retribution from Villa if they had stayed. Most of these Chinese were sent to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, where they quadrupled the small Chinese community already established there. In 1921, the

¹⁰ Fong, Lawrence Michael 1980, “Sojourners and Settlers. The Chinese Experience in Arizona,” in Journal of Arizona History, vol. 21 (Autumn), p. 19.

U.S. Congress granted the right of residency to the 365 remaining Chinese, and today their descendants are still known around San Antonio.¹¹

More poignant than the story of how the “Pershing Chinese” contributed to the formation of Asian Latinos in the U.S. concerned the internment of 2,118 Latin Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. As a corollary to the internment of Japanese immigrants and their U.S.-born citizen children, the U.S. military extended the dragnet to twelve different countries in Central and South America, with the vast majority (84 percent) from Peru. They were interned in Texas and New Mexico in two camps designated just for them by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services. In 1949, rubbing salt on an open wound, the U.S. government accused them of being “illegal aliens.” Almost all returned to Japan, but 365 internees remained in the U.S. and built new lives in the face of enormous challenges and hardships. Seiichi Higashide and his family were among those who stayed. Shortly before the war, he had immigrated as a young teacher to Lima, Peru, where he met his wife, born in Peru of immigrant Japanese parents, making their children, Elsa, Carlos and Irma, third generation Peruvians on one side. Years later in the U.S., he spoke of making the transition from Japanese and Peruvian to Japanese American:

In our family, too, the language spoken in our home gradually shifted from Japanese to English as our children grew up. At some imperceptible point, English became the common language in our home. Of course, when my wife and I led the conversation we mainly used a brand of broken Japanese that embraced an odd mixture of English and Spanish. But even that gradually lost its

¹¹ Rhoads, Edward J.M. 1977, “The Chinese in Texas,” in Southwestern Historical Quarterly 81:1 (July), pp.1-36.

ability to communicate or thoughts and feelings accurately. After a certain point, if we wanted to communicate with our children at all, we were forced to rely on the English language.¹²

In the moving words of Higashide, the loss and gain in languages represented dramatic shifts during his tumultuous life, as young immigrant from Japan to Peru where he worked as a teacher, married his Peruvian-born wife of Japanese descent and started his family, then forced into exile in the U.S. where he eventually settled permanently. By then, Japanese and Spanish had given way to English in the family, especially after the birth of two children in the U.S. camp joined the older three born in Peru. To signal their Peruvian heritage even while unable to maintain the Spanish language in the family, they named them Arturo and Marta.

If the Higashides represent a kind of cultural mixing, a unique example of racial or ethnic mestizaje are the almost forgotten Punjabi-Mexicans of California. Between 1899 and 1914, 6,800 Punjabi men—Hindus, Muslims and especially Sikhs, noted for wearing their uncut hair in an elaborate turban—arrived to work the land of California's Imperial Valley. They were immediately racially marked and had difficulty accumulating enough savings to finance their families' emigration from India, but soon began to form families with women newly arrived from Mexico, brothers and good friends often marrying Mexican sisters. Most of their offspring bore names reflecting their dual heritage--the ubiquitous "Singh" that all Sikh men use combined with Spanish first names. Isabel Singh Garcia has just this kind of Punjabi-Mexican name:

¹² Higashide, Seeichi 1993, Adios to Tears. Memoirs of a Japanese-Peruvian Internee in U.S. Concentration Camps. Honolulu: E&E Kudo.

I also wanted to let you know that the first generation of Hindus that came here married Mexican women and there are a large amount of half-breed children born from these marriages. The East Indian o today would like to forget we exist, because they are ashamed that their people came to this country and found the Mexican women very compatible with them... Our fathers and mothers lived a very rich life. They raised us to be very proud, and gave us the best ad the finest quality of life that one could hope for.¹³

Raised mainly by their Mexican mothers and their families, the children of these marriages were for the most part Catholic and Spanish-speaking but proud to claim their East Indian and Sikh heritage. However, given their small numbers and their estrangement from the East Asian immigrant communities that formed after their Punjabi fathers' generation, they have not invented a Punjabi-Mexican tradition that can be passed on, so it may well fade out after Isabel's generation.

Meanwhile, new mestizo constructions arise to replenish the pool. Mexican-Filipino Rudy Guevara has named his own particular mixture the "Mexipino." Having Spanish surnames and brown complexions has complicated the identity issue for Mexipinas and Mexipinos in California where most reside, Guevara points out, for usually they are perceived as Chicanos/as. Unlike the Punjabis who preceded them to California, the Filipino community in the state is made up largely of women. Hence, Filipina and Filipino Americans and mixed-race Filipinos/as have strong cultural traditions that compete for attention and space with the equally assertive Chicano identity in the Mexipino/a imagination. "As a rule," Guevara notes, "we all grew up in both cultures,

¹³ Leonard, Karen Isaksen 1992, Making Ethnic Choices. California's Punjabi Mexican Americans. Phila: Temple U. Press.

knowing that we were Mexican and Filipino, Chicano and Pinoy” (this second pair of terms representing political identities from their respective civil rights struggles). In practice, some feel they have “the best of both worlds” while others struggle with an “ambiguous identity.” Yet, unlike few others in American society, they can enjoy or deploy the option of “multiple passing,” being also perceived as Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Polynesians.

I ‘m not the brown unknown

But a Filipino dragon flying high up in the clouds

I’m the ancient serpent of pre-Columbian

Cultures,

Among the warriors of the inner cities and

yuppies of the suburbs

I am your illusion, your reality, your future

Mestizo you call me,

But what the hell is that?

Does that include all of me?

My Asian, Indian, African, and Spanish roots?¹⁴

The majority of Asian Latinas and Latinos are recent immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, descendants of earlier Asian immigrants or re-migrants from Asia.

They are a diverse lot, and also the most self-consciously Asian Latino and Latina in identity, having arrived in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement to step

¹⁴ Guevarra, Rudy P. Jr., 2003, “Clueless” [Poem], in Marc Coronado, Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., Jeffrey Moniz and Laura Furlan Szanton, eds., Crossing Lines. Race and Mixed Race Across the Geohistorical Divide. University of California Santa Barbara Multiethnic Student Outreach, pp. 14-17.

right onto the stage of liberal multiculturalism and American pluralism, where a benign idea of ethnic diversity is supposed to trump racial formations and racist systems.

Frances Bu, born in Havana of Chinese parents shortly before the Revolution, now a resident of New York City, expressed frustration with America's racial politics:

I hate to say that, but race is an American hang-up...And one of the things I hated the most when I came to this country, and my brother too, was to have to fill out an application where it asks your "race." My brother used to put "human" all the time—I mean, all the time. It would bug the heck out of him to have somebody ask him, "What race are you?" Yet they've got to know what your race is. And in Cuba, everyone was Cuban...I never felt any different. I actually didn't even realize that I wasn't in Cuban. I always thought of myself as Cuban.¹⁵

Fabiana Chiu-Rinaldi, third generation Peruvian Chinese born in Lima, Peru, resident of New York City since the 1980s, married to an Italian American, insists on claiming all her ethnic heritages:

When I applied for a new Social Security card in Brooklyn, the form instructed me to check only one racial/ethnic category. I decided to be accurate and checked both Hispanic and Asian. Minutes after I turned in my form, the clerk and later her supervisor called me to their desks to try to persuade me to choose between the categories. After my tiresome recitation about who my parents were, what language we spoke, and what our last names were, they—fully confused—shrugged their shoulders and left the form unchanged. Unwilling to give in, I

¹⁵ Lee, Cynthia Ai-fen 1998, "Our Histories in Conversation," in Tomie Arai. Double Happiness [Exhibit catalogue with essay and photos.] The Bronx Museum of the Arts, April 16-August 23.

wanted every part of my identity, China/Peruana/Asian/Latina/American, to be counted and accounted for.¹⁶

They may be transnationals, but the younger generation of Asian Latinos born in the Americas are less decidedly diasporic, in they do not yearn so much for the taste of the homeland as much as desire American flavors. New Yorker Lamgen Leon, born in Azua, Dominican Republic, captures this ambivalence sensually:

While studying in Hong Kong, we always missed our rice and beans. At the beginning, we didn't know how to speak Chinese, so we always said, "We want *arroz y habichuelas*. We want our rice and beans, rice and beans." We cried for our rice and beans. Because there were no beans in Hong Kong, so we missed our rice and beans, our beef stew, our Dominican food.¹⁷

Cuban Chinese, who probably constitute the largest group of Asian Latinos when they arrived as part of the large Cuban political exodus to the U.S. after Castro's revolution in 1959, have helped change America's eating habits in the *restaurantes chinos-cubanos* dotting the culinary landscape from Miami to New York and Los Angeles. Few Chinese other than those from Cuba patronize these restaurants because they serve mainly Cuban food made in the Chinese way, or Chinese food inflected with Cuban flavors adapted to the Cuban palate, in short, a hybrid product. Other Americans, however, always eager to tease their tastebuds, have gravitated for years to the Chinese Cuban restaurants. Mike Yip, owner of *La Caridad* in New York City, had to expand his establishment to accommodate the large crowds. Born in Cuba of Chinese parents, Yip is fluent in

¹⁶ Chiu-Rinaldi, Fabiana 2002, "China Latina," in Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim and Yuko Matsukawa, eds., *Re/Collecting Early Asian America. Essays in Cultural History*. Phila: Temple U. Press.

¹⁷ Cited in C. Lee, *supra* a la nota 15.

Spanish, Cantonese and English, “sometimes cramming all three languages into one short sentence.”

For Cuban Americans in general, such as the celebrated writer Cristina García, whose new novel *Monkey Hunting* describes the Chinese experience in Cuba from their arrival as coolies in the mid-nineteenth century through several generations to the early part of the twenty-first century, these cherished everyday habits captured by Chinese Cuban cooks help preserve Cuban culture in the U.S. For Chinese Cuban-Americans themselves, such as Iris and Mike Louk of Miami and their grown children Sandra and Wayne, this was one way to maintain their unique identity as Cuban Americans of Chinese descent. As American born Sandra describes it, she was born in an environment that was “*chinocubano y Americano*.” And when it came to her identity, she expressed it best in her native Spanish:

*Nunca me he podido sentir parte de un grupo, ni con los **chinos**, ni con los **americanos**, ni con los **cubanos**. Pero me identifico mas con los **chinoamericanos**, aunque ellos me ven como **chinacubana**.* (boldface added)¹⁸

(I have never been able to feel part of a group, not with the Chinese, nor with the Americans, nor with the Cubans. But I identify most with Cuban Americans, although they see me as Chinese Cuban.)

In her clever wordplay with these identity labels, Sandra signals her identity options and dilemmas, capturing all the possibilities and challenges of being Asian Latina. What Sandra may not know is that she is hardly the first or only Chinese Cuban who has

¹⁸ Villaverde, Minuca 1995, “Feliz Año del Jabalí,” *El Nuevo Herald*, January 29, pp. 1E and 5E.

exposed the multiple hybridities of *cubanidad* (Cuban-ness), and caught herself feeling both pride and anxiety in this in-between space.

The best known *chinocubano* is unquestionably the world renowned modern painter Wilfredo Lam, whose celebrated representations of *afrocubanidad* hang in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and museums throughout the Western world. As the embodiment of a multiracial Cuba, his works are permanently exhibited in a museum dedicated just to him in downtown Havana, keeping his name and his art vividly alive for Cubans and international visitors alike. Who was this Asian Latino, and why was he endowed with the fertile imagination to capture the soul of Cuba?

Born in 1902 in the town of Sagua la Grande in the heart of Cuba's sugar plantation zone, Wilfredo's birth coincided with that of the Cuban nation. Along with his six sisters and one brother, he grew up with both parents and knew his father well, having spent considerable time with him as a child in the "*barrio de asiáticos*" where the family led a comfortable life. His father was a Chinese immigrant named Lam Yam (known locally as Enrique Lam) who could read Chinese. Later in life, Wilfredo remembered his father as "*muy culto intelectualmente y sus paisanos le tenían much respeto*" (well educated and much respected by his compatriots). Baptized Catholic at age 5, his godfather was the shopkeeper Guillermo Glenn, whose maternal grandfather was Chinese and mulatto grandmother was Wilfredo's godmother. A Chinese uncle owned a restaurant, where Wilfredo learned to eat Chinese food. In other words, Wilfredo's childhood was filled with Chinese and mixed-Chinese Cubans, and he even learned a few Chinese words from his father. Because his father retained his Chinese citizenship, according to Cuban law

Wilfredo was Chinese by nationality until he gained Cuban citizenship at age twenty-one.¹⁹

The key to Wilfredo's subjectivity, his Cuban identity and cultural mooring came from his mother, a mulatta named Ana Serafina Castilla--described as dark-skinned and very proper—and her family. Despite hanging out with his Chinese father and his friends in his early youth, Wilfredo was most profoundly influenced by his maternal aunt, Mantonica Wilson. A *lucumí* priestess commonly known as *santera*, she served as his spiritual guide and infused young Wilfredo with the Afrocuban cultural and religious beliefs so central to his formation as an artist, and which lay at the heart of Cuba's national identity as a people and a culture forged by four centuries of slavery.²⁰

Through his large, vibrant, colorful and visually intense paintings, Wilfredo Lam disseminated Cuba's national identity to the world, especially to Europe where he met and worked with Picasso and other great modernists of that generation. Dozens of books have been written about Wilfredo Lam, in English, Spanish, French and Italian. While commenting on his prodigious artistic production, his biographers inevitably note his "*mestizaje*" (race mixture), as the "offspring of Chinese, white and black."²¹ Those who attempt to discern any obvious Chinese influence in his art, however, particularly in the absence of explicit Chinese motifs or imageries, find the search elusive. Some see the Chinese in his methods and style, others in the underlying philosophy of his art. While he always kept a photo of his father in his room, he remarked, "For me, this man, my father, was a great mystery." On being *chinocubano*, Wilfredo had this to say: "I have

¹⁹ Núñez Jiménez, Antonio 1982. *Wilfredo Lam*. Havana: Letras Cubanas, pp. 41-53.

²⁰ Herzberg, Julie P. 1992. "Wilfredo Lam: The Development of a Style and World View," in María Balderrama, ed., *Wilfredo Lam and His Contemporaries, 1938-1952*. [Exhibit essays and catalogue] New York: Studio Museum of Harlem.

²¹ Núñez Jiménez, p. 14.

quite a lot of Chinese blood in my veins, but I have never felt Chinese.” He always insisted he was Cuban.²²

To explain what it means to be Cuban, Wilfredo could have borrowed an expression from his contemporary Cuban artist, the poet Severo Sarduy, who also claimed Chinese blood coursing through his veins, as well as black and white. Indeed, Sarduy’s words have become engraved in the Cuban national consciousness: “Three cultures, at least, have been superimposed to constitute the Cuban—Spanish, African, and Chinese.”²³ He helped popularize the notion of the tripartite Cuban nationality that includes the Chinese.

Or, as Nicolás Guillén said about the poetics of Regino Pedroso, another Cuban poet who also claimed some Chinese ancestry: “Here, one can see it flow like a wide and slow river whose waters pass through Asia and Africa before arriving in Cuba.”²⁴ Cuban American writer Cristina García, in explaining why her new novel about Cuba has a Chinese as its central character, refers to Chinese-Cuban subculture as a “huge part of the island that most people are not even aware of outside of Cuba,” but in Cuba, “they take it for granted.” In other words, given Cuban history and culture, it is not improbable that a *chinocubano* like Wilfredo Lam would be so closely identified with articulating the essence and meaning of *cubanidad*.

We conclude by turning our attention back to where we began, with the story of *la china poblana*, and how she came to embody the “very essence of Mexicanness,” representing specifically the national image of Mexican womanhood. In performing this role, “She has many faces and no face. She is ageless—we do not know when she was

²² Núñez Jiménez, p. 56.

²³ Sarduy, Severo 1994. *From Cuba with a Song* (Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine of *De donde son los cantantes*). Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press. See Translator’s note.

²⁴ Guillén, in Pedroso, Regino 1975. *Poemas*. Havana: Bolsilibros Unión, p. 7.

born, nor when she will die.” But one thing is sure: “She is the product of innumerable images, legends, myths and fantasies.”²⁵

And the legend begins with the mystic and ascetic Catarina de San Juan, who lived a long and saintly life in the City of Angels (*Puebla de los Angeles*), where she died in utter poverty in 1688 and revered for her saintliness. Born with the name Mirrha (“Bitterness”) to nobility in India during the Mughal empire, she was captured by Portuguese buccaneers as a young girl, forever separated from her parents and homeland, taken to the Malabar Coast where Jesuits baptized her as Catarina de San Juan, later purchased in the Manila slave market by a Mexican military man, who took her home to Puebla in 1625. When Captain Sosa and his wife died shortly afterwards, she went to live with the priest Pedro Suárez. Though married off to a “Chinese” slave (he was probably a Filipino who came over with the Manila Galleon trade), she did not consummate the marriage in order to remain a virgin. Once widowed, she devoted herself to a life of penitence, fasting, prayers, and divine visions, making prophesies and performing miracles that made her famous in her own time.²⁶

Her extreme humility caused her to refer to herself as “a Chinese foreigner” who did not learn Spanish well enough to speak it. She dressed like a Capuchin nun, a brown wool dress and a shawl made up of the “thickest and coarsest material.” The people of Puebla venerated her as a saint, but the intense devotion exhibited by the common people and excessive proliferation of her image so alarmed the Inquisition that, thirteen years after her death, the Church banned “on pain of excommunication” any portrait of

²⁵ Orellana, Margarita de 2003, “Para vestirse de mexicana,” in *Artes de México*, no. 66 (Special issue on ‘La china poblana,’ with English translation).

²⁶ Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni 2003. “Las raíces olvidadas de Mirrha-Catarina,” in *Artes de México*, no. 66; Tibón, Gutierrez 2003, “Las dos chinas: Catarina de San Juan y la atractiva mestiza,” in *Artes de México*, no. 66.

Catarina and her very popular contemporary Spanish humanist, the Bishop Palafox of Puebla.²⁷ Efforts to canonize them faded, and they fell into obscurity until the last years of the nineteenth century.

In 1896, a new chronicler of Puebla, Colonel Antonio Carreón, wrote his version of the city's history which, critics charged, contained historical falsifications. The story of *la china poblana* which he invented was taken up by others, spread quickly and simply took hold. In this construction, when Catarina's portrait was banned, "The underprivileged classes of the city of *Puebla de los Angeles* lost their guardian angel, but the people, ever grateful, noble and good, conserved the memory of the saint, imitating her style of dress, and that is the origin of the *chinas*."²⁸ In this story, her sackcloth was transformed into the colorful, flirtatious, free and seductive costume of Mexican femininity.

Today, *la china poblana* celebrates the common Mexican woman, the peasant and the *mestiza*. The costume she wears can be traced to styles worn by plebeian women in Puebla in the nineteenth century. When Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the British wife of the Spanish ambassador to Mexico in 1840, was tempted to dress like Puebla women to a ball, she was told by an elderly gentleman that "the dress of a *poblana* is that of a woman with no character (*femme de rien*)," that is, of maid servants and wanton women of loose reputation.²⁹

The uneasy tension between *las dos chinas*, the saintly and the secular, the noble and the common, is at the crux of this myth, constructed around the idea of "her noble Oriental origin, her status as a slave sold by pirates, her exotic beauty, her life in Puebla

²⁷ Tibón.

²⁸ Tibón.

²⁹ Tibón.

and her virtue.”³⁰ In the Mexico of the post-Revolutionary twentieth century and beyond, infusing Mexican womanhood with the figure of the lowly but free spirited *mestiza* is politically necessary, but her wild and colorful nature and common origins made middle and upper class Mexicans uneasy and must be tempered. Providing a convenient solution to this dilemma is the semantic ambiguity embedded in the term *china poblana*, because it means both the humble *mestiza* servant girl (*china*) of the village (*puebla*), and the Oriental Princess of the city of Puebla (*la china poblana*), renowned for her virtue and self-abnegation. By merging the two entirely different *chinas* into one body, Carreón and other mythmakers created a safe national symbol. In the words of Mexican social anthropologist Ricardo Pérez Monfort, “Her submissive character, the adoption of Catholic morality and her assimilation into the standards of traditional life in colonial Puebla were, according to legend, the elements that made her *both Mexican and an example for other Mexican women*” (italics added).³¹ Thus, far from perpetrating a deliberate historical falsehood, as detractors charge, I believe Antonio Carreón in 1896 and later co-conspirators knew exactly what they had to do. Furthermore, in the invention of the myth of *la china poblana* in her colorful costume, they had to resurrect Mirra of India from Mexico’s faded historical memory, in so doing also identifying the first real Asian Latina that we know by name and origin.

The Asian Latino/a construction is an old phenomenon historically speaking, but an emerging new identity that is still in the process of formation, fueled in the U.S. by new immigrants of the post-Civil Rights era in which Americans of all races and heritages claim space on the crowded multicultural stage. In finding their voices to celebrate

³⁰ Monfort, Ricardo Pérez 2003. “La china poblana como emblema nacional,” in *Artes de México*, no. 66.

³¹ Monfort.

cultural traditions and protest against discrimination and injustice, they may yet build a self-conscious community of Asian Latinos and Latinas which does not currently exist (except in small pockets in place like Flushing, Queens, New York City). In Latin America, vague awareness of Asians as an integral part of national identity has, ironically, rendered them indistinctive, hence practically invisible. The trade-off, of course, is that in Mexico and Cuba, Asians form the basis for, or create the expressions of, their national identities.