CHAPTER SIX

Chinatown Havana:
One Hundred and Sixty Years below the Surface

Adrian H. Hearn

As the sun beat back the chill of a January morning in 2006, a group of approximately fifty journalists, local administrators, community leaders, and central government officials met behind the colorful walls of the Cuban School of Wushu in Havana’s Barrio Chino (Chinatown). Under discussion were the dissolution of the district’s coordinating body, the Grupo Promotor de Barrio Chino, and the assumption of its administrative responsibilities by the Office of the Historian of the City. The Grupo Promotor, rooted in the (then) 113 year-old institutional representative of the Cuban-Chinese community, the Casino Chung Wah, would henceforth serve only as an advisory committee for an external team of professional urban development officers and neighborhood administrators. Everything from foreign donations to proposals for cultural festivals would now be assessed and regulated by the Office of the Historian, signifying a total reorganization in the conduct of local business and politics.

The Office’s takeover was the latest in more than a century of upheavals in Barrio Chino. Since the establishment of the district’s first businesses in the 1850s, Chinese Cubans had experienced booms and busts conditioned as much by local politics as international relations. In the early 20th century Barrio Chino flourished, recognized alongside its counterparts in New York and San Francisco as one of the most dynamic in the Americas. Twelve Chinese ethnic associations, meticulously structured according to members’ family names and region of origin, supported restaurants, fruit and vegetable markets, laundromats, and theaters.

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1 I was invited to attend the event by the President of the School of Wushu, Roberto Vargas Lee, who at the time was co-authoring a chapter for my book on community development in Cuba (see Montes de Oca Choy and Vargas Lee 2008).
The success of the Chinese community did not go unnoticed by other Cubans, particularly during the frustrations of the Great Depression. Like other Latin American governments in the 1930s, the Grau San Martín administration responded to public pressure by imposing hiring and operational restrictions on Barrio Chino’s businesses. If suspicion of their activities posed challenges for Chinese entrepreneurs and the Cuban-born descendants, the economic consequences of the 1959 Cuban Revolution proved insurmountable. Within ten years most of their businesses had been nationalized, spurring a mass emigration to the United States. Those who remained in Barrio Chino not only faced commercial restrictions, but also broader stigmatization resulting from political tensions between Cuba and China over allegiance to the Soviet Union. It was not until the late 1980s, with the demise of the Soviet system, that Sino-Cuban relations began to warm once again.

Since the bilateral rapprochement took hold in the early 1990s Barrio Chino has seen further changes, the most significant of which involved the creation of the Grupo Promotor in 1994 as the organization responsible for the district’s economic and social development. Under the leadership of the Chinese-Cuban administrator Yrmina Eng Menéndez, the Grupo persuaded the government of Central Havana to allow it to develop a small private sector for the expansion of Chinese restaurants, trade in agricultural produce, and retail of imported Chinese clothes, kitchen items, and artisanal goods. These activities stimulated the revival of the neighborhood’s twelve Chinese associations and their coordinating body, the Casino Chung Wah. Hosting one of the first legal farmers’ markets of the Special Period, Barrio Chino drew the attention of international media eager to report on the way Cuba might implement market reforms to overcome the deepening economic crisis of the time (Strubbe and Wald 1995; Xinhua 1994).

Limited economic reforms throughout Cuba in the mid 1990s provided a basis for the expansion of tourism and the widening of consumer retail in U.S. dollars and Cuban Convertible Pesos. This brought an influx of hard currency and provided opportunities for employment, while cooperation with Venezuela and China led Cuba out of the Special Period and into economic recovery. In 2011 bilateral trade between Cuba and China reached $1.9bn (down from a pre-GFC high of $2.27bn in 2008, but up from just $314 million in 2000). Cooperation with China has stimulated an overhaul of Cuban industrial infrastructure and facilitated exchanges between Chinese and Cuban military personnel, diplomats, business people, and university students (Ratliff 2004). It has also fomented new partnerships in Barrio Chino through Chinese investment in the local restaurant sector, collaboration in cultural and educational programs, and commercial linkages in the neighborhood’s informal sector, known to residents as the “mercado chino”.