Capitalist Expansion, Republican Legislation, and Chinese Immigration

The French visitor Charles Berchon once described the social complexity of the new Cuban Republic. The urban population, he wrote, contained “disparate foreign elements, ranging from the worship of Buddha to the strange Ñángos sect... There are too many opposing ideas, colliding beliefs, [and] discordant realities.” Havana, which contemporaries inevitably described as exotic, maintained a rigid separation between social classes and races. Blacks and Europeans had their own dances, music, and coffee shops. The former attended Club Atenas, El Progreso, la Gardenia, Unión Fraternal, and other such centers. The latter maintained their own institutions, such as the Centro Gallego, Centro Asturiano, and Asociación de Dependientes.

But republican Havana—with its progressive boulevards, street lamps, and trams—was not entirely regimented. There were many spheres where racial rigidity unraveled, including makeshift homes, poor neighborhoods, markets, and backstreets during Carnival. In describing relations between blacks and Chinese, Israel Castellanos wrote:

Since the times of slavery, the Blacks and the Chinese have been in contact. Yesterday they worked together on the plantations... and today they are fused together in misery within poor neighborhoods... They have uninterrupted contact at the fruit stand and in the taverns, where buying side dishes or food-to-go is common. And the well-known Asian peddlers of silk and ornaments are seen daily in their makeshift homes and outbuildings, where they chat with one another and discuss lines of credit as they try to close the sale.

Within these spaces, the most authentic expressions of Cubanidad—or Cubanism—were constantly recreated and intermixed with the traditions of

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1 Charles Berchon, A Través de Cuba: Relato Geográfico, Descriptivo y Económico (Sceaux, France: Impr. de Charaire, 1910), 45.
2 These associations are important because, like the Chinese associations discussed later, they were also organized around region, class, and occupation.
3 Israel Castellanos, El Apodo de los Delincuentes en Cuba (Havana, Imprenta y Papeleria “La Universal,” 1926).
the city’s poorest residents. The governing “white culture” reluctantly accepted cultural plurality, but believed social integration required subordinating revolutionary changes to the dominant republican classes. For them, the reconstruction of a racist ideology was fundamental, undermining the racial equality that had been promised during the wars for independence. The Association of Store Clerks and Retailers, which in 1924 had a European majority, called for a defense of Hispanicism, which clearly meant the hegemony of the white race in Cuba. By conserving Spanish traditions in the Americas, its members believed they were saving the fate of the family and ethnic ideals for the future.

To be considered black or colored was not only a distinction of perceived distance from the African race, but also a function of class and occupation. The petty-bourgeois “colored” individuals gathered in societies, participating in the contempt and discrimination to which they were subjected. Racism was enabled by the low self-esteem of the excluded. Therefore, as Alberto Arredondo Gutiérrez pointed out, “the outstanding Black . . . dances the waltz, scorns the Afro-Cuban song and dance, uses academic and stale language, and in the end disdains Black culture. They fight and battle for assimilation, to be like the White man, to gain entry where he goes.”

It was within this social context that Cuba’s Chinese immigrants organized and created a Chinese community. They did so by developing representative institutions, participating in segments of the island’s economy, and fashioning an extensive (though troubled) process for drawing members into the community. By the republican period, Chinese already had a long and rich history in Cuba. The first Chinese arrived in 1847. Under contract with the Cuban sugar oligarchy, these contract laborers—or indentured servants—worked side by side with African slaves. At the end of the 1870s, a new type of Chinese immigrant made his way to Cuba. Coming primarily from California, these individuals were leaving behind the violence and discrimination they faced in that state. These “Californians” brought with them a small amount of capital and an entrepreneurial spirit. Soon they established shops and stores throughout Cuba, stocking them with Chinese products and adding to the sociocultural

5 For further information on nineteenth-century Chinese immigration to Cuba, see the work of Juan Pérez de la Riva and Denise Helly.
6 As early as 1858, the California legislature made it illegal for Chinese to enter the state. Though the state Supreme Court overturned the law, anti-Chinese sentiment quickly spread throughout the American West, culminating with the US Exclusion Act of 1882. See Mark Kanazawa, “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California,” *Journal of Economic History*, 65.3 (September 2005): 779–805.