

The Chinese in Cuba: From Indentured Laborers to Inmates

José Lee-Borges

My childhood was not all that wonderful, nor was that of my parents. During my childhood, it was complicated to explain that my father was Chinese and my mother Cuban. Also, my older brothers were born, one in Cuba and the other in Spain, while I was born in Miami. Imagine having to explain all of this as a kid living in Puerto Rico. Some found it funny because they had no idea how painful a migration process like this could be.

Between 1847 and 1874, more than 142,000 Chinese emigrated from China to Cuba. At least those are the ones we know about, but I'm sure there were many more than that. My father was not one of those Chinese who arrived during the 19th century, but, as those before him, he arrived in Cuba as part of a migration process that forced many to search for better opportunities in distant lands. Of the 142,000 Chinese who came as indentured laborers, few returned home. The laws were made in a way that it became almost impossible for Chinese workers to fulfill their contracts and have the opportunity to return home. A number of Chinese workers who stayed in Cuba established Havana's Chinatown, one of the most important contributions of the 19th-century settlements by Chinese citizens. These economic and ethnic enclaves that the Chinese were able to establish in various parts of Cuba facilitated the arrival of more Chinese citizens later. My father, who arrived in the 1950s, benefited from this, as he went to live with an uncle who arrived in Havana before him.

Today, I wonder how indentured labor, a cruel and savage commercial practice, was able to mobilize so many people. In Cuba, indentured workers suffered abuse and exploitation

while being taunted. In some instances they were treated almost as badly as African slaves, when the voluntary condition of their labor was ignored. In the end, the optimism, perseverance, and entrepreneurship of many Chinese migrants allowed them to build success stories from such hazardous beginnings. One element of this complicated process is what I will discuss here, why so many Chinese workers ended up in prison. In addition to those who died in farms and to the hundreds who committed suicide, many others were confined in various prisons in Cuba.

It was a common practice for landlords to ignore the agreements signed with Chinese workers. Coexistence with African slaves produced grudges and serious conflicts. And, because they were paid for their labor, sometimes they were required to work longer and harder than slaves.

Consequently, many Chinese revolted against the violence and abuse they suffered. They started denouncing the abuse and demanding their rights, but were not heard. Without justice and, having nowhere to turn to enforce the agreements, many took justice into their own hands and sought revenge. They murdered those who abused their power, killed their overseers (*mayorales* and *contramayorales*, slave assistants to whites), planters, and slaves.

Incarceration was the immediate consequence of the uprising and revolt of Chinese workers against their abusers. Many were convicted of murder and sentenced for up to 10 years in prisons outside Cuba, with several years of additional detention and with the stipulation that they could not return.

Hunger was one of the main conditions that led the Chinese to commit murder. The landowners restricted food consumption to save money. The resulting scarcity of food led them to kill.

On the night of September 21, 1871, Alberto, Alejandro, and Ladislao—Christian names acquired in the haciendas—decided to steal some chickens belonging to the *ingenio* (sugar mill) *Providencia* in Guanajay. (From now on, I will refer to the sugar mill using the word *ingenio*, which better illustrates the systematic exploitation suffered by workers, in the sugar industry). During the robbery, Alejandro approached Simón, the slave on duty, and shared their plan with him. Simón objected and wrestled with the Chinese to prevent the theft. During the altercation Simón was killed. Afterwards, they roasted and ate some of the chickens. Months later, on February 17, 1872, Alberto, Alejandro, and Ladislao were sentenced by the Honorable Praetorian Court in Havana to 10 years of overseas imprisonment and were banned from returning to the island. In addition, they had to pay a compensation of 200 pesos to Simón's owner and pay the cost of the chickens. According to the testimony of the Chinese, the food at the ranch was scarce.¹

A similar case was that of Angel, Antonio, Melchor, and Rafael from *ingenio Antilla*. On the morning of October 24, 1868, they left their barracks with their machetes and went to get some yams and other vegetables from the storage area. However, Isidoro, who was on duty, shouted and threatened to report them to the *mayoral*. Antonio begged him not to call for help but Isidoro ignored him. Hunger led Antonio to kill Isidoro with his machete.²

Unfortunately, landowners, *contramayorales*, or hacienda owners were not the only ones to abuse Chinese workers. Slaves, men and women, abused the Chinese as well. For example,

¹ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Alberto 1ro en caja 16, expediente 485; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Alejandro 3^{ero} en caja 15, expediente 487; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Ladislao en caja 15, expediente 484. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

² Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Antonio 2do en caja 13, expediente 305. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

in Cárdenas, on August 27, 1869, Hilario and José Antonio were tried for the murder of the black nurse Carmen Carabalí, belonging to *ingenio Admiración*. The Chinese accepted having killed the nurse. They justified their act arguing that the nurse treated them with cruelty, demanding money for services she should have provided for free. Also, they claimed she humiliated and mocked them repeatedly. The court sentenced Hilario and José Antonio to 10 years in prison and required payment for the loss of the slave to his owner and the costs of the legal process.³

In another incident, Cornelio, Israel, Cristóbal, Romualdo, Gervasio, Eusebio, and Esteban took justice into their hands by killing the black *contramayoral* Aniceto. They alleged Aniceto extorted money from them for not abusing them at work. The Chinese were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.⁴

Fatigue and overwork were additional causes for retaliation of the Chinese against their abusers. On December 11, 1867, in the city of Matanzas, Balero, Augusto, Eleuterio, and Claudio, workers at the *ingenio Las Marías*, were sentenced for the murder of the slave Baltasar. They confessed to being the perpetrators of the murder. They claimed that they had stopped by the road to rest, instead of going back to their quarters to sleep. While there, Baltasar saw them and told them he would accuse them of escaping and notify the *mayoral*.

³ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado José Antonio en caja 161, expediente 347. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

⁴ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Gervasio 2do en caja 11, expediente 231; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Eusebio en caja 163, expediente 675; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Israel en caja 161, expediente 234, después se cambió el nombre a José Benito cuando se bautizó; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Esteban en caja 12, número de expediente ilegible; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Cornelio en caja 12, expediente 196; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Cristóbal en caja 12, expediente 202. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

Faced with the threat of Baltasar and punishment as fugitives, the four, armed with machetes, killed him.⁵

However, the most violent acts involving the greater number of Chinese workers were committed against the foremen of the haciendas. For example, we have the case of 13 Chinese workers from the *ingenio Alava*, accused of murdering the *mayoral* Federico Carballo.⁶ At first, they were sentenced to death by *garrote vil* (club) due to aggravating circumstances of treachery and premeditation in the death of the *mayoral*. Later, they were granted clemency and their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment overseas.⁷

Another example is that of 14 Chinese workers, accused for the murder of foreman Juan Badell, from the *ingenio Santa Teresa*. The foreman allegedly mistreated them, pushed them at work, and gave them small amounts of food. They were sentenced to 10 years in prison overseas.⁸

These are just some of the many cases that describe the life and circumstances of the Chinese in Cuba. During their questioning at trial the most common complaint was that the

⁵ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Balero en caja 161, expediente 843; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Eleuterio en caja 12, expediente 217; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Claudio Iro en caja 12, expediente 240. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

⁶ About the *ingenio Alva*, see Justo Germán Cantero, Eduardo Laplante, Luis Miguel García Mora, and Antonio Santamaría García, *Los ingenios: Colección de vistas de los principales ingenios de azúcar de la Isla de Cuba* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios y Experimentación de Obras Públicas, 2005), 35–37.

⁷ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Alonso 2do en caja 13, expediente 386; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Anselmo José en caja 13, expediente 387; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Anselmo Rosario en caja 175, expediente 389; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Felipe Román en caja 13, expediente 390; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Miguel María en caja 159, expediente 391; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Adolfo, en caja 13, expediente 388, después conocido como Adolfo 2do; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Hipólito en caja 154, expediente 887; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Paulino en caja 157, expediente 394; hoja histórica-penal del confinado Valentín en caja 13, expediente 395. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

⁸ Hoja histórica-penal del confinado Emilio en caja 7, expediente 104. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Serie Justicia, Fondo Confinados.

landlords did not fulfill the agreements signed with the workers. They were not paid their wages in full, food was scarce, and they were punished excessively by the *contramayorales* and *mayorales*.

This led to many Chinese becoming confined contractual workers. Chinese imprisoned in Cuba were forced to work in infrastructure projects and cleaning communal areas. Over time, most of the Chinese inmates in Cuba were transferred to the Dominican Republic, during the War of Restoration (1861–1865). There they were in charge of distributing food to the Spanish military regiments, both in Santo Domingo and in Samaná. Others worked in housekeeping in military hospitals.

Once the conflict ended in the Dominican Republic, some of the inmates were transferred to Puerto Rico. A group of over a hundred Chinese from the Dominican Republic reached Puerto Rico on July 1, 1865.

Their criminal records accompanied them, thus allowing us to get a sense of their stories: where were they born (Canton, Macao), who were their parents, their original names, and what they did before arriving in Cuba. The records also showed in what *ingenio* they worked in Cuba: *Santa Rosa*, *Alava*, *Santa Teresa*, or *Flor de Cuba*, among others.

Their marks and scars showed how they were mistreated. For example, Juan Tercero arrived at the prison in Puerto Rico with two large scars on his right arm and two in the back of his skull. Alejo Quinto came with a scar on the left side of the forehead and a number on his back, while Feliciano had two severed ears.

This first group of Chinese and others that followed, who came directly from Cuba, worked mainly in the construction of the Central Highway, now called Highway Number 1, which traverses the island from north to south. For many experts it was one of the best

roads built in the Americas during the 19th century. The workers' skills and hard work were recognized by some of the engineers supervising the project. Other Chinese inmates were also featured in the construction of the Culebrita Lighthouse, located on the island of the same name. Others tended to gardens, worked as cooks in the prison, or worked for the Bishop of San Juan.

Most died during their stay in prison in Puerto Rico, victims of tuberculosis, chronic enteritis, cerebral anemia, elephantiasis, chronic diarrhea, and pernicious fever, but a third managed to serve their sentences and, of those, the majority stayed in Puerto Rico, where they established restaurants and other businesses while starting families. A small number returned to Cuba, hoping to restart their life in familiar surroundings and among thousands of Chinese who lived there, even though many of them were forbidden from returning.

This is the story of a group of Chinese who, looking for prosperity, found confinement. It is no wonder that living conditions on the plantations were not appealing; indentured Chinese laborers were seen as subjects to be dealt with in ways that benefited the landlords, which led to the violation of their rights. During their incarcerations, they were treated worse than before. Many spent over 20 years in various prisons in the Caribbean. In the end, they reached countries like Puerto Rico, in which the system of indentured laborers was never implemented, and that ushered the Chinese community across the area.

To conclude, I want to share a letter, written in 1882, by inmates from Puerto Rico, Jacinto Primero, Juan Roque, Esteban Primero, Matías Primero, Narciso, Leandro Primero, and Amalio Segundo:

In 1863 we were unjustly sentenced in Sagua La Grande Court in Cuba. We were accused of a homicide at the sugar mill, where we worked among a multitude of Chinese. We were not involved in the killing as we were working far away the day the crime

occurred. Ignorance, loyalty to our peers, and language difficulties were the causes that implicated us in this affair. Alongside the real culprits, we were sentenced to ten years in prison with retention. We started serving our sentence on April 30, 1863 at the Presidio of Havana, shortly moved to the Presidio of Samaná, in the Dominican Republic, and on December 31, 1864, to the one in Santo Domingo. Then, we arrived on July 1, 1865, at the Presidio of Puerto Rico.

During our captivity, of almost 20 years, we have lived a rough time and were overwhelmed by the hazards of life in prison, surrounded by perverse criminals of a provocative character. We have demonstrated our patience and our resignation about our miserable fate. We eagerly await our return to society and the opportunity to lead an honorable life. We live with the uncertainty of knowing if we will be released someday or if we will die in prison.⁹

I will end where I began. My childhood was not all that wonderful. I was surrounded by tragic stories, not fairy tales or *cuentos chinos* as people usually think. They were stories of exile, war, communism, and hunger, some similar to the ones I have just told you about. As we have seen, behind the success stories and iconic Chinatowns founded in America, like the one in Havana, there is a much more complex and still unknown historical reality of the Chinese diaspora.

⁹ Cartas de Felipe Méndez de Vigo, 20 de mayo de 1882; 12 de junio de 1882 y 16 de octubre de 1882. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección: Ultramar, legajo 2075, expediente 20.