
CHINESE RELIGIONS AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION: A CASE STUDY OF THE GUAN YU CULT

M a j a M a r i a K o s e c

Introduction

Syncretism between Christianity and Chinese and African religions began in the second half of the 19th century as a result of the ethnic mixing of the Spanish, African¹ and Chinese populations in Cuba. As a result of a long process of transculturation and syncretism of religious systems, a large number of syncretic deities also began to form an important part of Cuban popular religion.² As a result of the syncretism between Chinese religions and Afro-Cuban religions, new cults and deities developed, the most famous example being Guan Yu (关羽), best known in Cuba as San Fancón.³ As the coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism was commonplace in China, Chinese im-

¹ The Yoruba religion, the Regla Arará, and the Palo Mayombe were all religions of African origin that gradually integrated into Cuban society. Today they are closely linked and to a large extent syncretized with Christianity – known as Santería. Most people are followers of more than one of these religions and do not draw a clear line between them.

² Hugo García, «Santería Decoded: An Approach to Understanding the Formation of an Afro Cuban Religion,» Youtube video, filmed 1 February 2018 at Dean's Lecture Series at WWU College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Washington, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWP9N9wXWOA>.

³ Mercedes Crespo Villate, *Los Chinos en la Habana* (Havana: Editorial Gente Nueva, 2016), 59–66; Federico A. Chang Pon Frank F. Scherer and Keith Lowe, «Chinese Caribbean Religions,» in *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions*, eds. Patrick Taylor and Frederick I. Case (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 156–164.

migrants were also open to mixing their own beliefs with the ritual practices of the islanders.⁴

The specific issue of religious practices within the Chinese diaspora in Cuba only became increasingly debated within Chinese studies in Latin America after the 1990s. Scholars such as Jose Baltar Rodriguez⁵ argued that the only instance of Chinese religious syncretism in Cuba was when the Confucian ancestor Guan Yu became a new Sino-Cuban deity, San Fancón. Frank Scherer⁶ later argued that San Fancón was merely the result of decontextualised Confucianism as part of the project to re-ethnicise the Chinese diaspora in Cuba.

This article discusses the factors that had the greatest impact on the changes in the role of Guan Yu in the Chinese community in Havana, based on the historical background of Chinese migration to Cuba. It examines how the descendants of Chinese immigrants understand the cult of Guan Yu and the syncretism between Guan Yu and Afro-Cuban religion including its influence on the development of the cult. It also analyses the impact of the Cuban Revolution and the state atheism after it on the cult. This paper is based on related documents and interviews conducted in Cuba in 2020. During the research from 2020, 27 China-born immigrants, their children, and grandchildren were interviewed. Conducting these interviews in 2020 was of utmost importance, because most of the China-born immigrants and the first generation of Cuban-born descendants are already elderly, and the number of those currently alive is decreasing daily. During my last visit to Cuba in 2022, I was unable to conduct further interviews because the elders familiar with the Guan Yu cult have already passed away, while their descendants are leaving the country in large numbers due to the severe economic crisis present there. In addition to the above-mentioned interviews, I conducted research at

⁴ Mauro García Triana and Pedro Eng Herrera, *The Chinese in Cuba, 1847–now*, trans. Gregor Benton, (Lanham and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), 124.

⁵ José Baltar Rodríguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba: Apuntes etnográficos* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 1997), 83.

⁶ Frank F. Scherer, «Sanfancón: Orientalism, Self-Orientalization, and ‘Chinese Religion’ in Cuba,» in *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, ed. Patrick Taylor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 163.

the Lung Kong Clan Association (Longguan qinyi zonggongsuo 龙关亲义总公所)⁷, Min Chi Tang Association (Min zhi dang 民治党), Casino Chung Wah (Zhonghua zonghuiguan 中华总会馆), House of Chinese Art and Tradition (Casa de Artes y Tradiciones Chinas), the Chair of Research on Chinese Migration to Cuba, the Fernando Ortiz Foundation (Fundacion Fernando Ortiz) and the Faculty of Arts (Facultad de Artes y Letras) of the University of Havana. In 2020 all of the above organisations kindly allowed me to speak with Chinese-Cuban professors and researchers working in the field of Chinese migration to Cuba. Most of the existing written sources focus on the data provided by previously written sources. Therefore, I believe that my field research might open new perspectives on the understanding and significance of the cult of Guan Yu in contemporary Cuba.

Historical background of Chinese migration to Cuba

The ethnic composition of Cuba as we know it today is a result of the many migratory influxes of people who arrived on the island in the mid-16th century. When the Spanish arrived in 1511, there were about 100,000 indigenous people living in Cuba most of whom virtually disappeared within a generation due to the massacres and hard labour forced on them by the Spanish. The Spanish began to replace the labour force by importing slaves from Africa, thus ensuring the island's economic boom. By 1850, Cuba's total population had risen to 1.2 million due to the importation of slaves from Africa.⁸ The first migration wave of Chinese contract workers (coolies) came to Cuba replacing increasingly expensive slave labour from Africa between 1847 and

⁷ The Lung Kong Clan Association is an association present in the Chinese diaspora around the world. It is historically based on the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in which the three heroes Liu Bei 刘备, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei 张飞, who were loyal to the Han (汉, 206–220), supposedly took a vow in the peach garden and were later joined by Zhao Yun 赵云. Today, the descendants of these four surnames Lau (刘, Liu), Kuan (关, Guan), Chiong (张, Zhang) and Chiu (赵, Zhao) see themselves as brothers with a common past, also united under the umbrella of Lung Kong Clan Associations.

⁸ Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Los coolies chinos en Cuba, 1847–1880: contribución al estudio de la inmigración contratada en el Caribe* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2000), 23.

1874.⁹ During this period, about 150,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in Cuba, mainly from the Canton area.¹⁰ This migration was characterised primarily by fraud in the signing of eight-year labour contracts, inhumane travel conditions, slavery-like working conditions, and an enormous number of deaths and suicides during and after their arrival in Cuba.¹¹ Although the coolies had initially been despised by society, their hard work and active participation in the Cuban wars of independence (1868–1898) greatly improved their social reputation.¹²

Between 1865 and 1885, the coolies were joined by a second wave of Chinese immigrants from California. Following the propaganda of the California Gold Rush, these groups first immigrated to the United States and became a thorn in the side of racist American society in the 1860s.¹³ Thus, in the 1860s and 1870s, large numbers of Chinese began to leave the United States. Most of them arrived in Cuba between 1865 and 1875, but the influx also continued afterward. In the absence of precise data, we can only rely on demographic analysis, which suggests that about 5,000 people arrived in Cuba before 1875.¹⁴ The Californians settled in the emerging Barrio Chino (Chinatown) and in Havana Vieja (Old Havana), where most of the business opportunities existed.¹⁵ As their capital formed the basis for the flourishing of many Chinese organisations throughout Cuba, second-wave immigrants played an important role in the development of the Chinese community in Cuba, both economically and culturally.¹⁶

⁹ Duvon C. Corbitt, »Chinese Immigrants in Cuba,« *Far Eastern Survey* 13, no. 14 (1944): 130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3022650>.

¹⁰ Pérez de la Riva, *Los coolies chinos en Cuba*, 24–30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64, 195.

¹² García Triana and Eng Herrera, *The Chinese in Cuba*, 9–10.

¹³ Pérez de la Riva, *Los coolies chinos en Cuba*, 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 191–192.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192. Most of the information cited below is based on Pérez de la Riva, whose only source was Chuffat Latour. The latter was a member of the Chinese community and mainly recorded the knowledge of the community, often without specific sources. To gain deeper knowledge and understanding of who exactly the so-called Californians were and what their exact contribution to the Chinese diaspora in Cuba was, further historical research should be conducted in the Cuban and Californian archives.

As the demand for labour in Cuba increased daily with the outbreak of World War I, another wave of contract workers entered the country in 1917.¹⁷ During the third wave, about 30,000 Chinese arrived in Cuba, but many of them soon migrated to the United States,¹⁸ which was the main intended destination for most of them. Although the financial situation of the members of the second and third wave was much better than that of the coolies, it is interesting to note that the third wave of Chinese immigrants was also predominantly male.¹⁹

Due to the economic crisis and stricter regulations, the number of Chinese immigrants began to decline in the late 1920s. The Chinese population in Cuba was estimated at just over 30,000 in 1931.²⁰ In the 1940s, Chinese immigrants did not live in worse conditions than Cubans. Some established themselves in local politics, while others were able to reach the level of state government.²¹ As the majority of Chinese people settled in Havana, most outlets were concentrated in the so-called Barrio Chino. Numerous Chinese organisations such as clan associations, regional associations, business associations, secret associations, political associations, art associations, sports associations, and national associations supported their members in almost all aspects of daily life, while the Casino Chung Wah (*Zhonghua zonghuiguan* 中华总会馆) acted as an umbrella organisation for the entire Chinese population in Cuba.²²

The end of nationalist rule in China was the reason for the resettlement of many Chinese nationalists who had not fled to Taiwan with Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石, 1887–1975) in 1949. Some of them also fled to Cuba. Between 1950 and 1959, about 3,000 Chinese people arrived in Cuba, including a large number of Catholic priests and officials from the Chinese national government.²³

¹⁷ Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 156.

¹⁸ Corbitt, »Chinese Immigrants in Cuba,« 131.

¹⁹ Pérez de la Riva, *Los coolies chinos en Cuba*, 192.

²⁰ Félix Julio Alfonso López, *La Ciudad Amarilla* (Havana: Oficina del Historiador, 2004), 10–11.

²¹ Corbitt, »Chinese Immigrants in Cuba,« 131.

²² García Triana and Eng Herrera. *The Chinese in Cuba*, 58.

²³ López, *Chinese Cubans*, 221–222.

For Cuba, the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 marked the beginning of a new social order. Immediately after the victory of the revolution, the new government received active support from the Chinese diaspora, who also participated in a rally in 1959 to protest the US political attacks on Latin American countries.²⁴ The victory of the revolution and the subsequent political, social, and economic reforms drastically changed life in Cuba. The new revolutionary government officially recognised the government of the People's Republic of China in 1960,²⁵ which had a positive impact on economic exchange. China provided strong financial and military support, but not to the same extent as the Soviet Union, which gave even more support to the Cuban government, hoping that Castro would not interfere in the Sino-Soviet conflict.²⁶ However, the Sino-Soviet conflict over Stalinist ideology reached its peak in 1966, followed by the severance of contact between China and Cuba, with the exception of the annual trade in rice and sugar.²⁷ In the period of cooled relations and drastic political and social changes in the country, many Chinese and Cuban families left Cuba, especially in 1968, when the government reached the final stage of nationalisation of private commerce and subsequently closed down the remaining private companies.²⁸ The number of members of the diaspora declined sharply, and the Chinese community in Cuba slowly began to shrink. The economic situation of those who remained, as well as the supportive attitude they had previously received from the Cuban government, changed dramatically. As Carlos Alay Jo and Julio Hun Calzadilla noted in an interview, Cuban bureaucracy never officially banned Chinese festive and cultural events, but by the late 1960s, it simply stopped issuing

²⁴ Kathleen López, »The Revitalization of Havana's Chinatown: Invoking Chinese Cuban History,« in *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, eds. Look Lai Walton and Chee-Beng Tan (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 218.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁶ Yinghong Cheng, »Sino-Cuban Relations during the Early Years of the Castro Regime, 1959–1966,« *Journal of the Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3 (2007): 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110–112.

²⁸ López, »The Revitalization«, 221.

permits for them. Of course, that did not stop the activities, as they just took place behind closed doors.²⁹

In the 1990s, however, the situation changed again. Due to the decline in membership in all Chinese associations, policies began to change. Organisations such as Casino Chung Wah, which had previously not allowed mixed-ethnic Chinese, changed their policies in 1986 and allowed mixed-ethnic Chinese to join for the first time. Soon, other organisations followed the Casino's example.³⁰ In 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, Cuba, and China resumed contact. China again assumed the role of financial supporter of the Cuban government, and with the thaw in relations, the Chinese community in Cuba was also revived. An injection of funds from the Chinese government in 1995 also contributed to the Barrio Chino revitalisation project. This renovation project, run by descendants of Chinese immigrants, turned Barrio Chino into one of the capital's main tourist attractions, thus encouraging members of the diaspora to revive Chinese ethnicity, and in the case of some descendants, even rebuild it. The government, which at the time of the revolution emphasised the exclusive universal belonging of all islanders to Cubanidad, began to promote the reintegration and re-ethnicisation of the Chinese community in Havana because of the need to improve relations with the People's Republic of China and the associated financial opportunities.³¹

Today, the Chinese diaspora consists of two groups: a few dozen Chinese born in China, also called natural Chinese (*Chinos naturales*), and numerous children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, mostly of mixed ethnic origin. Since the original Chinese immigrants are now mostly over 80 or 90 years old, the development of Barrio Chino, the leadership of the organisations, and the preservation of the Chinese tradition are now entirely in the hands of their descendants.³²

²⁹ Carlos A. Alay Jo and Julio G. Hun Calzadilla, Personal communication with author, 4 February 2020.

³⁰ Kathleen López, «Remaking Havana's Barrio Chino,» in *Cuba Today: Continuity and Change since the 'Periodo Especial'*, ed. Mauricio A. Font (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 2004), 157.

³¹ Scherer, «Sanfancón,» 153, 161.

³² López, «Remaking,» 157.

The role of the Cult of Guan Yu for the Chinese community in Havana

Guan Yu (c. 160–220 AD) was a historical figure, namely a general from the end of the Eastern Han period 东汉 (25–220 AD). Because of his courage, loyalty and exceptional military skills, Guan Yu remained famous even after his execution. The Chinese began to revere him, initially out of fear of hungry ghosts or the souls of soldiers who had died violent deaths. As a result of the plight of Buddhist monks who feared the attack of the Confucian elite, Guan Yu became an element of Sinicised Buddhism and took on the role of a bodhisattva. His popularity in Buddhism also established Guan Yu's position in Taoism, which crowned him a faithful god and demon exorcist and completed Guan Yu's external appearance. The rapid spread of the cult led to Guan Yu being integrated into the state cult, where he served each dynasty in its own way. During the Qing Dynasty, he was fully »Confucianised« by the government, placed alongside Confucius in the state cult, used as a lever to control the people in times of crisis, and worshipped by the people like a god, for whom they lit incense and candles. The former historical figure thus became a bodhisattva, a divine emperor, a general of demonic hell and a popular god of loyalty, wealth, literature and the protector of emigrants, peddlers, actors and members of secret societies.³³

Upon his arrival in Cuba, Guan Yu resumed his previous role of protector of all Chinese immigrants and became the basis for the establishment of the first Chinese clan association in Havana – the Lung Kong Clan Association (Longguan qinyi zonggongsuo 龙关亲义总公所). Like other clan associations in China and abroad, the purpose of the association was to provide mutual support to its members, organise transitions, socialise and worship the clan ancestors of a particular clan, in this case, the ancestor Guan Yu.³⁴ Chuffat Latour also mentions annual festivals celebrated by the Chinese in various parts of Cuba in the 1880s: the

³³ Prasenjit Duara, »Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War,« *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1988): 778–795.

³⁴ Baltar Rodriguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 91.

festival of Guan Yu was celebrated in Colon in May, in Cimarrones in August and in Isabela de Sagua in June. A public dance was held at the Sagua railroad barracks, with the participation of Chinese delegations from all over the island. The festivities lasted three days.³⁵ Maria del Carmen Kouw Matamoros³⁶ and Rosa Chiu³⁷ recall similar celebrations in Havana that took place in June or July, depending on the lunar calendar. Guan Yu, alone or accompanied by Liu Bei and Zhang Fei, was usually seen as an altarpiece in laundries, cafeterias and stores, while two larger statues brought from China in the 19th century still stand at the Lung Kong Clan Association and Casino Chung Wah.³⁸ In the eyes of Juan Luis Martín, the three soldiers, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei became comparable to the Holy Trinity, which is why he called them the Chinese Trinity.³⁹ During the time of Spanish rule in Cuba, conversion to Christianity was a necessary part of the process to obtain a residence permit. Immigrants, therefore, considered this conversion to Christianity a formality, but it did not seem to be an obstacle to maintaining their customs.⁴⁰

Ethnic diversity and the recontextualisation of traditions, cultures, and magico-religious beliefs within these different ethnic groups became a springboard for the syncretic fusion of mythical entities in Cuba.⁴¹ This leads us to the syncretism of Guan Yu. Since he is usually depicted with a red face, symbolising life, loyalty, and fidelity, this color and his reputation as an exceptionally loyal and capable military leader led him to be syncretised with the *orisha* Changó⁴² of the Santería tradi-

³⁵ Antonio Chuffat Latour, *Apunte historico de los chinos en Cuba* (Havana: Molina y Cia, 1927), 86.

³⁶ Maria del Carmen Kouw Matamoros, Personal communication with author, 22 January 2020.

³⁷ Rosa Chiu, Personal communication with author, 8 February 2020.

³⁸ Crespo Villate, *Los Chinos en la Habana*, 61–62; Baltar Rodriguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 91.

³⁹ García Triana and Eng Herrera, *The Chinese in Cuba*, 127.

⁴⁰ López, *Chinese Cubans*, 104.

⁴¹ Baltar Rodriguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 174.

⁴² *Orishas* are different kinds of deities of the Yoruba. Changó is considered the deity of thunder and lightning and the possessor of music and dance. His legend dates back to the time of the fourth king of the Yoruba people. Changó, who is usually depicted in red clothing, also rules over economy, fire and politics. In rituals, various types of food and animals are sacrificed

tion and with Saint Barbara⁴³ of the Christian tradition in Cuba.⁴⁴ The syncretism of the *orisha* Changó and Saint Barbara in Cuba began as early as the 16th century and gradually led to the two being considered one and the same religious entity in the context of Cuban religion. Most written sources⁴⁵ dealing with Guan Yu explain that he is also syncretised with both. However, field research has shown that his syncretism with *orisha* Changó is acknowledged (although often disagreed with), while his syncretism with Saint Barbara was denied in all the interviews conducted. Members of the Chinese diaspora do not recognise them as one and the same. As for syncretism with Changó, interpretations also differ. During the research in Havana, a Chinese-Cuban *babalawo*⁴⁶ called Carlos Antonio Alay Jo told that in his opinion Guan Yu should actually be syncretised with *orisha* Orunla⁴⁷ and not with *orisha* Changó. In his opinion, Orunla and Guan Yu actually have much more in common than Guan Yu and Changó.⁴⁸ Guan Yu was also revered in the context of Chinese magic, where it was the custom to »light a lamp for San Fancón that shone but did not burn«. ⁴⁹

As we can see from this quote from the 1990s, the name San Fancón is used instead of Guan Yu. It is also interesting to note that in 1927 Chuffat Latour⁵⁰ mentions him only by the name Guan Yu and does not yet mention the name San Fancón in his text. This name does not appear until the book by Baltar Rodríguez⁵¹, published in 1997, which

to him. See Diane Elizabeth Cuadrillo, »Prayers to the Orishas: A look at Santería,« accessed 7 May 2019, <https://thesevenworld.wordpress.com/2015/11/02/prayers-to-the-ori-kra/>.

⁴³ Saint Barbara was an early Christian virgin martyr venerated in the Middle Ages. She was the patron saint of armorers and artillerymen. See Peter Gahan, »Bernard Shaw's The Glimpse of Reality and the Iconography of Saint Barbara,« Shaw 38, no. 2 (2018): 134.

⁴⁴ Crespo Villate, *Los Chinos en la Habana*, 61–62; Baltar Rodríguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 91.

⁴⁵ Sources from authors like Baltar Rodríguez, López, García Triana and Eng Herrera, and Crespo Villate, etc.

⁴⁶ *Babalawos* are priests of the Ifá divination system, which is an important part of Santería.

⁴⁷ The *orisha* Orunla or Orunmila in Santería is one of the sons of the supreme god or creator Olodumare. Orunla, also called Ifá, is the *orisha* responsible for divination. See Molefi Kete Asante and Abu S. Abarry, *African intellectual heritage: a book of sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 45.

⁴⁸ Carlos A. Alay Jo, Personal communication with author, 4 February 2020.

⁴⁹ Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1993), 27.

⁵⁰ Chuffat Latour, *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba*.

⁵¹ Baltar Rodríguez, *Los Chinos de Cuba*, 83.

states, among other things, that San Fancón is a deity known only in Cuba. The discrepancy between the appearance of the first sculptures of Guan Yu in Cuba (in 1883 and 1893), sources about Guan Gong 关公 (Lord Guan) (in 1927), and the first written mentions of San Fancón in the 1990s raises the interesting question of when (and if) this ancestor actually became a Cuban deity.⁵² But how did the name change in the first place? Guan Yu, also known as Guan Gong, was often referred to by immigrants as Shen Guan Gong (神关公, God Lord Guan) or Sheng Guan Gong (圣关公, Holy Lord Guan), which later changed phonetically to San Fancón. There are several explanations for the change of the word »shen« or »sheng« to »san«: the most likely seems to be a Hispanicisation of the word god or revered into holy (Santo in Spanish). However, Scherer and Chang Pon also point out the possibility that the word »san« «is actually still a Chinese word meaning the number 3 (san 三), which would include the fact that San Fancón is a saint, a god, and a sage. The number three could also refer to the fact that iconographically he was usually depicted in the company of Liu Bei and Zhang Fei, that is, in a trinity.⁵³ However, this explanation does not seem plausible because it does not coincide with the Chinese script. The syllable »guan« was most likely changed to »fan« because of its Cantonese pronunciation.⁵⁴

As we will see later, most members of the diaspora equate Guan Yu with San Fancón and explain that San Fancón is just a Spanish translation of the Chinese name. But some disagree.

⁵² García Triana and Eng Herrera. *The Chinese in Cuba*, 127.

⁵³ Chang Pon Scherer and Lowe, »Chinese Caribbean Religions,« 162.

⁵⁴ Gregor Benton, »Guangong yu guanyin: liangge zhongguo minjian shen zai Guba de bianxing [关公与观音：两个中国民间神在古巴的变形] (The Metamorphosis of Two Chinese Folk Gods in Cuba),« in *Cong qiyue huagong dao gaige xianfeng [从契约华工到改革先锋] (From indentured Chinese workers to the pioneers of reform.)* eds. Huang Zhoucai [黄卓才] and Yuan Yan [袁艳], trans. Yang Yanlan [杨艳兰], (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 199–200.

The syncretism and the meaning of Guan Yu for members of the diaspora

In Cuba, Guan Yu or San Fancón appears in various contexts: as part of ancestor worship, as syncretism with local religions, and as part of Chinese magic. Since very little is known about the latter, most research has focused on the question of syncretism with Afro-Cuban and Catholic religions and on the role of San Fancón in the revival of »Chinese-ness« in Havana's Chinatown. As we now know, many overseas Chinese diaspora communities virtually equate Confucianism with Chinese culture, many perhaps even with Chinese religion.⁵⁵

In 2020, I conducted most of my interviews at the Lung Kong Clan Association's Day Care Center for the Elderly. The association houses a large ancestral altar dedicated to the previously mentioned four heroes from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. For a long time, access to this ancestral altar was allowed only to immigrants and the children of both Chinese parents, provided, of course, that they belonged to one of the four family names with which the Lung Kong Clan Association was associated. The situation did not change until the 1990s, when the association granted membership to all descendants of Chinese immigrants, including those from ethnically mixed families.⁵⁶ I discussed the understanding of the worship of Guan Yu and the altar of Guan Yu in the Lung Kong Clan Association with the former president of the association, 92-year-old Mr. Leandro Perez Asion:

⁵⁵ To regard Confucianism as one of the Chinese religions is, so to speak, a commonly accepted misconception based on a lack of understanding of Chinese intellectual history. What has led to this misunderstanding is the cult of ancestors. This tradition, which originated in the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC) and is associated with the belief in an afterlife and the worship of the spirits of clan ancestors and is therefore understood as a religion, passed to the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BC) and became part of Confucianism. However, since Confucius was agnostic, it is only appropriate in the context of Confucianism to view ancestor worship as a moral rather than a religious ritual of venerating the dead. See Jana S. Rošker, *Kjer vlada sočlovečnost, je ljudstvo srečno – tradicionalne kitajske teorije države (Where humaneness rules, the people are happy – Traditional Chinese Theories of the State)*, (Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, 2013), 30–31.

⁵⁶ Leandro Perez Asion, Personal communication with author, 28 January 2020.

Actually, we go to the altar to greet them [the four ancestors] and talk to them. When we ask them for something, it's the same whether it's at the altar or here. When I ask my father and grandfather, they are just the intermediaries. /... / When we go to the altar to greet them, we greet all four of them, because the four of them are equal, they are brothers. /.../ When we greet them, we greet the whole family. That is, we greet the four families. /.../ I am speaking to Zhao Zilong [赵子龙] because my last name is Zhao and I will ask Zhao Zilong for help. I ask my family because I am sure my father and mother will help me with my request. /.../ In our philosophy, any of the four hero brothers can represent our family. For example, I do not have a picture of Zhao Zilong, but I have a picture of Guan Gong.⁵⁷

Leandro Perez Asion was born into a Cuban-Chinese family and has always been interested in Chinese cultural heritage. He was familiar with the legend of Guan Yu from the literary work *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which he read in translation. Although he does not speak Chinese, he knew a lot about the legend of Guan Yu and showed great interest and respect for his parents' culture. However, this kind of deep understanding is very rare among members of the diaspora. Most Chinese men – despite their desire to marry Chinese women – could only marry local women, because the number of Chinese immigrant women was very small. However, in ethnically mixed marriages, the influence of Chinese tradition on their children's education and their ability to participate in the activities of Chinese associations was much smaller. These children were exposed to the racism that prevailed in both Chinese and Cuban societies. They were not even allowed to become members of Chinese societies, which were an important space for cultural exchange and the preservation of Chinese national and ethnic identity. The other seniors I talked to at the Lung Kong Clan Association mostly did not know much about Guan Yu's history. They know he is called Guan Yu or Guan Gong in Chinese, and in Cuba, they know him as San Fancón. Few really believe in him, but many remember that their parents, who usually had a statue or picture of him at home, did. Some still preserve and venerate these objects today. While most, including Leandro Perez Asion, assure me that San Fancón and Guan Yu are one and the same, I get a different interpretation from Rosa Chiu:

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

For me, there is a difference between San Fancón and Guan Gong: San Fancón is a Cuban saint, and Guan Gong is a Chinese ancestor. In my family, we believe in Guan Gong, but not in San Fancón in the sense of a saint. My parents and I used to light incense for Guan Gong and ask him to help us. Often, I just walk by the altar to greet him. When I light incense for him, I also light one for my father, one for my grandfather and one for the first ancestor of my lineage. I ask for good health and well-being.⁵⁸

For the oldest members of the association, who are over 90 years old, the memory of San Fancón is for the most part, more vivid. Some of them see him as a god, while others see him as a revered ancestor. Leandro Perez Asion told me:

San Fancón is not a god. Santa Barbara and Changó are saints. And San Fancón as an ancestor helps us when he can, not as a saint, but as a father.⁵⁹

Some members of the diaspora in Cuba also remember the legend of Guan Gong of Cimarrones⁶⁰, who appeared to promote virtue, honour, diligence, justice, mercy for the helpless, respect for friends, prudence, and peace. Undoubtedly, we can recognise many elements of the Confucian tradition, but the same is true of the presence of the teachings of Christianity. Scherer even compares the teachings of San Fancón to the Ten Commandments⁶¹. He believes that the emergence of San Fancón

⁵⁸ Rosa Chiu, Personal communication with author, 8 February 2020.

⁵⁹ The informant wants to emphasise here that he does not understand San Fancón as a god or a saint. He considers him merely a venerated ancestor. (Leandro Perez Asion, Personal communication with author, 28 January 2020)

⁶⁰ The legend, which first appeared in written form in 1927 in the book of Chuffat Latour, is as follows: »I am the prince that travels through space. I bring happiness to the good children who remember the homes they left. The God of Heaven will reward all those who are virtuous, honest, hardworking and just towards their brothers. Happiness and good fortune will befall you if you carry out charitable deeds. Share your rice with those who need it. Refrain from acting violently, take care not to meet with misfortune. If you appreciate a friend, do not speak of his acts in ways that might offend him. Do not give credence to calumnies or lies. If you wish to be happy, stay away from all bad things. The Chinese has his God, the white, the black, the Indian, the Malayan, all have their God. The true God is not white, Chinese, black, Indian or Malayan, it is the all-powerful God. Do not despair in this. Remember you are in transit, you brought nothing, you will take nothing. You have no property, the sole truth is your fall. Think well and you will be convinced. All-powerful God requests nothing, he wants neither gold nor gifts from us. He is almighty, great, just, good; he has neither fear nor hatred. If you have faith, he will save you from all evil.« See Chuffat Latour, *Apunte historico de los chinos en Cuba*, 88.

⁶¹ Scherer, »Sanfancón,« 166.

as a Cuban-Chinese deity is »inextricably linked to bringing ‘Chinese religion’ into an orderly Hispanic pantheon, or at least into a mentality, occupied by ‘Christian’ gods so as to become intelligible even to the non-Chinese mind.«⁶² In the centuries since the cult of Guan Yu appeared in Cuba, it has been confronted with Catholicism, as Scherer says, but also with Afro-Cuban religion and with the political events of the second half of the 20th century.

The impact of the Cuban Revolution and the period of state atheism on the cult of Guan Yu

To broaden the context of understanding the Guan Yu cult in Cuba, we need to look again at the historical circumstances that have shaped the current situation of the Chinese community in Havana. Among the younger members of the Lung Kong Clan Association, the response of Ramon Wong, whose parents came to Cuba only after the communist revolution in China, stands out:

I do not have a San Fancón at home and I do not believe in him. My parents grew up during the communist era, so they did not bring any religious faith [from China]. I believe that the knowledge of Guan Gong in Cuba has certainly changed due to the effects of the ban on religion after the Cuban Revolution.⁶³

As we can see, the understanding of San Fancón among the members is quite different. Some of them see him exclusively as an ancestor or as a memory of their parents, others worship him like a god or a saint. Nevertheless, the influence of the Cuban Revolution on the Guan Yu cult in Cuba is certainly not to be neglected and, like the political events of the 1990s, represents an interesting starting point for further research. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government renewed its friendship with the People’s Republic of China, which led to a resurgence of the Chinese diaspora and Barrio Chino. Consequently, political developments in the second half of the 20th century also influenced the study of the diaspora in Cuba. Frank Scherer’s discussion

⁶² *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶³ Ramon Wong, Personal communication with author, 1 February 2020.

of Confucianism in Cuba specifically addresses the impact of the boom in this type of research after 1991. He looks at the presence of Chinese-ness and Confucianism in Cuba from the perspective of Orientalism and self-orientalisation.⁶⁴ Considering the revival of Confucian doctrine that has taken place in East Asia during this period, we can ask ourselves, as Scherer does, should we speak of the self-orientalisation of the diaspora and the emergence of a decontextualised Confucianism in Cuba? Scherer answers as follows:

The case of the Chinese-Cuban community in Cuba has produced a unique situation in which an Orientalist discourse of basically Eurocentric orientation cooperates and, at the same time, competes with the strategic 'Oriental', or self-centred, one.⁶⁵

He also states that:

[San Fancón] ... being used in the name of an essential and distinctive Chineseness as well as being pressed into service by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans (who were 'formed in the Revolution') for the promotion of a 'new' Confucianism reveals the strategic quality of his reappearance in Chinese society and on the streets of La Habana's Chinatown.⁶⁶

Scherer exposes Guan Yu (whom he strictly calls San Fancón) as the product of a »distinctive and essential Chineseness«, an Orientalist essentialism promoted by the Cuban government to further expand economic ties with China. Although the exposure of Guan Yu (and even the emergence of his new Hispanised name San Fancón) in post-1990 research and the opening of San Fancón Square (Plaza San Fancón) in 2019 may indeed be the result of political strategies, this is by no means the only context in which this cult appears in Cuba.

»'Chinese religion' in Cuba today has less to do with long-standing 'Chinese' traditions or even a return to 'religion' per se, but everything to do with the subaltern employment of strategies that allow for the opening of alternative spaces in which the construction of identities other than those prescribed by the state takes place,«⁶⁷ concludes Scherer.

⁶⁴ Scherer, »Sanfancón,« 162.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

According to my research, however, this does not seem to be entirely correct. Belief in Guan Yu seems to be present among the oldest members of the diaspora, in a form not altered by any state strategy. Those who inherited the belief in and knowledge of Guan Yu from their parents hold it in high regard, while on the other hand, this cult has no emotional significance for those who did not inherit it. As Scherer points out, the younger generation grew up during the revolutionary period, which undeniably had a strong impact on them, their ethnic identity, and their religious beliefs.

The consolidation of the Marxist-Leninist system after the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 undoubtedly marginalised religious institutions in particular, which was relatively easy since the Catholic Church had not previously played a major role in Cuban society.⁶⁸ Along with the new restrictions, Chinese ritual practices were also placed in a new position. Although popular religions also stood in the way of the state's plan to develop the Marxist mentality, the benefits these religious communities offered to the people eventually outweighed the estimated level of danger to the system. The state acted pragmatically in the 1960s, attacking Afro-Cuban and other religions less than the Church.⁶⁹ It was not until the 1970s, in a campaign against popular religion, that Castro declared Afro-Cuban religious practices a source of anti-revolutionary views. He called on people to eradicate these practices and punish those who would pass them on to younger generations.⁷⁰ However, the government's attitude toward religion also influenced the position and transmission of Chinese ritual practices between generations. While the new generations grew up in the atheistic spirit of communism, the older generations resorted to alternatives that were not as heavily persecuted by the state. Carlos Antonio Alay Jo mentions this and says:

⁶⁸ Margaret E. Crahan, »Cuba: Religion and Civil Society,« *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2017): 390.

⁶⁹ Teresita Pedraza, »This Too Shall Pass: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba,« *Cuban Studies* 28 (1999): 24–25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

In the period before the Cuban Revolution, statues and paintings of Guan Gong could be purchased. With the banning of religion after the revolution, Afro-Cuban religions were also banned, and so some bought a statue of San Fancón and placed it in the place of Changó.⁷¹

With this, the connection between Changó and Guan Yu became closer than before. We must realise that the syncretism between Guan Yu and the Afro-Cuban religion was quite different from the syncretism between the Afro-Cuban and Catholic or Chinese and Catholic religions. The Chinese and the Africans were equal in society, while the Spanish were historically in a much better position. Rauhut says that at this stage, therefore, we can speak of horizontal syncretism between practices that enjoyed a relatively equal social position in the setting at the time and vertical syncretism between practices that were not treated equally in society.⁷² The conditions for the practice of religion were released in the 1980s with the reintegration of religious institutions into Cuban civil society.⁷³ In the 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting crisis of the Cuban economy and socialist ideology on the island brought many innovations in the relationship between the state and religion. The reunification between the Catholic Church and the state after 1991 was intended, among other things, to strengthen the moral values of the people, which were no longer supported by the ideology of the socialist bloc.⁷⁴ In the 1990s, Afro-Cuban religions were recognised for the first time as one of the official religions in Cuba.⁷⁵ With the emigration of many Cubans abroad and the opening of Cuba to tourists, Afro-Cuban religions have also embarked on a path of commercialisation. Maria Dornbach, therefore, accuses the Cuban Yoruba Cultural Association of being inconsistent with its uniform lists of *orishas*. She specifically mentions San Fancón, which was added

⁷¹ Carlos A. Alay Jo, Personal communication with author, 2 February 2020.

⁷² Claudia Rauhut, «La transnacionalización de la Santería y su renegociación en Cuba,» *Temas* 76 (2013): 46.

⁷³ Aurelio Alonso, «The Catholic Church, Politics and Society,» *Estudios Avanzados* 25, no. 75 (2011): 109.

⁷⁴ Kali Argyriadis, «Religión de indígenas, religión de científicos: construcción de la cubanidad y santería,» *Desacatos* 17 (2005): 96–97.

⁷⁵ René Rubí Cordoví, «Actualización de la Regla de Ocha-Ifá: Religión y poesía afro-cubana,» (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2018), 103.

to the list of orishas in 2005, although it is actually only recognised within the Chinese diaspora on the island.⁷⁶ Ephraim, a Chinese-Cuban *babalawo* whose paternal grandfather came from China in the early 1900s, confirms that the descendants of Chinese immigrants are also involved in the process of making money through the commercialisation of their religious practices.

A lot of people are casting *brujería* [witchcraft/sorcery] here, they see that you have something they don't and they get jealous, they go to *fulano* [someone] to bring you down, throw powders, put your name to bind you and your progress. I use Sanfancón to undo that. I call Sanfancón and make a *resguardo* like I would do for any orisha.⁷⁷

During the religious persecution, Changó and San Fancón became closer than before, and thus San Fancón was partially integrated into the Afro-Cuban religion. My research indicates that this integration occurred only within the Afro-Chinese community and is unknown outside the Chinese or Afro-Chinese diaspora. However, since the rapid popularisation of Afro-Cuban religion occurred at the same time as the revival of Chinese religion, some took the opportunity to make money by commercialising their religious practices. Although such cases exist, we should look at the developments of Chinese and Afro-Cuban religions from a broader perspective.

The rise of Afro-Cuban religions that we have witnessed in recent decades was primarily a reaction to the past centuries of Spanish colonialism.⁷⁸ In evaluating the position and importance of Afro-Cuban religions in contemporary Cuban society, we must consider this religious anthropological protagonism as a way for Cubans to oppose the «white» and Eurocentric hegemonic power. Therefore, their effort to re-evaluate these religions in relation to the global panorama must be viewed from

⁷⁶ Maria Dornbach, «Nuevas tendencias transculturales en la Santería Afrocubana,» *Americana – E-journal of American Studies in Hungary* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2015), accessed 22 July 2020, <http://americanajournal.hu/vol11no1/dornbach>.

⁷⁷ Martin a. Tsang, «*Con la mocha al cuello: The Emergence and Negotiation of Afro-Chinese Religion in Cuba,*» (PhD diss., Florida International University, 2014), 144–145.

⁷⁸ Cordoví, «Actualización de la Regla de Ocha-Ifá,» 103.

a decolonial perspective.⁷⁹ So why should we not re-evaluate the position of Chinese ethnic revival from the same perspective?

Conclusion

The ethnic mixing of Chinese immigrants with the native population has understandably changed the meaning of Guan Yu in the daily lives of the second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants. While belief in Guan Yu was strong among the immigrants, it is present among their descendants primarily in the form of Confucian respect and remembrance of their parents and their faith. The cult of Guan Yu has definitely changed a lot among the ethnically mixed families and those who lived in other parts of the city, while its Confucian understanding has remained strongly present among the first- and second-generation Chinese descendants who lived in Barrio Chino. Therefore, the role of Guan Yu in the Chinese diaspora in Cuba cannot be understood only in terms of a desire for self-orientalisation of the members of the diaspora or one-sided acculturation to the Catholic faith, as Frank Scherer points out. Nor can the revival be attributed solely to the need of the Cuban government and members of the diaspora in Havana to improve economic relations with China. Although the revival of San Fancón may also be partly related to the economic interests of the Chinese and the Afro-Chinese community, as well as the Cuban government itself, we must be aware of the broader historical, social, and political context. The attitudes of members of the younger generation of the Chinese diaspora, especially those from ethnically mixed marriages or who are children of immigrants who came from China after 1950, were undoubtedly strongly influenced by a communist society that did not encourage religious beliefs. The banning of religion after the Cuban Revolution and the subsequent reopening of Cuban society to religion in the late 1980s had multiple effects on Afro-Cuban, Afro-Chinese and Chinese descendants, as well as on the Cuban population as a whole. After the lull caused by the persecution of religion and the decline of the Chinese diaspora, Guan Yu returned to the surface in the 1990s, along

⁷⁹ Rauhut, «La transnacionalización,» 53.

with the opening of Chinese associations to ethnically mixed diaspora members and the resurgence of religion, the rise of Afro-Cuban religions and the improvement of relations with the Chinese government after the fall of the socialist bloc. In assessing the Guan Yu cult and its role in Cuba in the 20th and 21st centuries, all of these factors should be considered. They all contributed to the strengthening of Guan Yu's role even partly among members of African-Chinese ethnically mixed families. Since the 1990s the affiliation with Afro-Cuban religions has served many Cubans as an element of cohesion, pride, and identification and at the same time as a way of resisting slavery, neo-colonialism, and racism that has permeated Cuban society for centuries. The revival of Chinese culture and the cult of Guan Yu (or San Fancón), which emerged in Havana's Chinatown at the same time, should be evaluated in a similar context.

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