



SANFANCÓN: ORIENTALISM, CONFUCIANISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESENESS IN CUBA, 1847 - 1997

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Prepared for publication in Patrick Taylor (ed.),
Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean.

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Abstract:

The recent revival of "Chinese" ethnicity in Cuba is based both on a number of classic, Euro-American Orientalist assumptions of a distinctive and essential Chineseness, and on the "Oriental" use of Orientalist discourse which perfectly illustrates the "indigenous" employment of what I call strategic Orientalism. While the former is being promoted, somewhat ambiguously, by the Cuban state and its intelligentsia, the latter is articulated by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans. In this way, the very process of reintegrating, re-creating, and re-ethnicizing the Chinese Cuban "community" is marked by the peculiar practice of self-Orientalization. Furthermore, the phenomenon of self-Orientalization feeds, apparently, not only into familiar Euro-American Orientalist discursive formations, but also on the revival of "Chinese religion" in Cuba, and with it, on the recent remobilization of the Chinese Cuban "saint" Sanfancón. In all, the overt reappearance of Orientalism, self-Orientalization and "Chinese religion" in Cuba remain inextricably linked to the profound ideological, political, economic, social and cultural transformations that the island is currently undergoing.

Ellos dicen, según yo tengo entendido, que cuando ellos mueren, van directamente a China

Chinese dreams are being dreamt in the island of Cuba. There are, on the one hand, those dreams indulged in by a Cuban political elite which is willing to introduce economic change without allowing for social and political change. These efforts in trying to keep a traditional power base intact are reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping's precedent¹ and should be understood, additionally, in the context of the particular significance that the People's Republic of China holds – after the demise of the Soviet-Cuban alliance in 1991 – for the only socialist state in the western hemisphere. On the other hand, and intimately linked to the above, there is the announced “revitalization” of Cuba's Chinese community (Grupo Promotor 1995; Strubbe 1995), a project that includes not only the restoration of La Habana's Chinatown for tourist consumption, but, simultaneously, a not so subtle and rather unexpected return to notions of difference conceived in ethnic and cultural terms.

It is my contention that the recent revival of “Chinese” ethnicity in Cuba is based both on a number of *classic*, Euro-American Orientalist assumptions of a distinctive and essential Chineseness, and on the “Oriental” use of Orientalist discourse which perfectly illustrates the “indigenous” employment of what I call *strategic* Orientalism. While the former is being promoted, somewhat ambiguously, by the Cuban state and its intelligentsia, the latter is articulated by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans. In this way, the very process of reintegrating, re-creating, and re-ethnicizing the Chinese Cuban “community” is marked by the peculiar practice of self-Orientalization (Ong 1993; 1997; Dirlik 1996). This complex discursive practice, complete with Confucian ideas and certain capitalist aspirations, facilitates the articulation of difference conceived in ethnic and cultural terms by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans and allows – at least in Cuba – for the opening of alternative spaces, where the construction of identities other than those prescribed by the Cuban state can take place.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of self-Orientalization feeds, apparently, not only into familiar Euro-American Orientalist discursive formations, but also on the revival of “Chinese religion” in Cuba, and with it, on the recent remobilization of the Chinese Cuban “saint” Sanfancón. In all, the overt reappearance of Orientalism, self-Orientalization and “Chinese religion” in Cuba remain inextricably linked to the profound ideological, political, economic, social and cultural transformations that the island is currently undergoing.

I shall begin with some reflections on a body of critical literature concerned with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), an influential study, which, though pointing to essentializations based on a fundamental distinction between “East” and “West,” has itself largely ignored the responses and challenges of the peoples involved. The sharp criticism brought forth by Marxist scholars, for example, Aijaz Ahmad, will be interrogated and juxtaposed to those criticisms of Said's *Orientalism* that themselves come from “de-centered” and postcolonial perspectives, such as that of James Clifford. But, more importantly, I want to show how Sadik Jallal El-Azm, Aihwa Ong and Xiaomei Chen were able to reach beyond Said's paradigmatic contribution, trying to expand the concept of Orientalism into a dialectical one so as to incorporate the part that “Orientals” may actually have in its making.

Thereafter, I want to discuss forms of modern Orientalism as expressed by the Cuban government as well as by members of the Chinese Cuban community. I shall approach these discursive practices from three different angles: firstly, by exploring the history of Cuban Orientalism as well as the concurrent impact of Euro-American Orientalist discourse as promoted by Cuban officials, journalists, writers and others; secondly, by examining the peculiar practice of self-Orientalization, and in the Cuban context, the links, imagined or real, that exist with the icon Confucius; and thirdly, by analyzing the contemporary presence and significance of “Chinese religion” in Cuba and, in particular, the recent resuscitation of the Chinese Cuban “saint” Sanfancón.

Hybrid Strategies

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) stands out as a seminal work that, though being confronted with harsh criticism, has nonetheless managed to maintain much of its paradigmatic stance. While we can recognize the significance of its political and academic positioning, it has not succeeded in dispelling an array of logical, ontological, epistemological and methodological shortcomings. Yet, *Orientalism* is forbidding and enabling at the same time: forbidding for the monolithic "Occidentalism" that emerges in its pages, and enabling for the critical potential that this text has unearthed. This enablement is one of the reasons why it was, and still is, so enthusiastically received by many scholars in the social sciences and humanities.

At the same time, the popular and academic usage that is sometimes made in the name of Said's *Orientalism* appears to be uncritical and little aware of a number of contradictions that undermine the force of this founding contribution to the development of postcolonial theory. While Said's rather flexible theoretical positionings may be confounding to some, to others, it is precisely this double-sidedness that constitutes the strength of Said's rethinking the concept and practice of Orientalism. However, it is not Said's unfortunate failure to do away with essentialisms of the Occidental/Oriental kinds, but it is his reinforcement of those categories by entrenching them further into his own text and, most significantly, his complete oblivion and unreflexive erasure of those concerned, the "Orientals," that is at issue here.

A closer look at *Orientalism*, and particularly at Said's definitions thereof, will help to explain why the contradictions, the double-sidedness of this work are of so much importance. Hence, it is within the very first pages that Said offers no less than three definitions of Orientalism:

[1.] Orientalism is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its

civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other... The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style...

[2.] Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"...

[3.] Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, by settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (1978: 1-3)

As indicated by Ahmad, we are facing here not just pressing ontological and epistemological problems, but an important issue of periodization. If there is an *uninterrupted* discursive history – as Said, notwithstanding his own arguments, claims on the same pages – that can be traced from Aeschylus to Dante to Marx to Lewis, then the post-Enlightenment eighteenth century can hardly figure as that "roughly defined starting point" of Orientalist discourse (see Ahmad 1994: 179-81). Another crucial issue is the relationship that exists between Orientalism and colonialism. Prioritizing textuality, Said argues that Orientalism "produced" (1978: 3) the Orient, which is to say that colonialism is a product of Orientalism itself. Ahmad opposes such views by pointing to the fact that this "narrative of convergence between colonial knowledges and colonial powers simply cannot be assembled within cultural studies itself, because histories of economic exploitation, political coercion, military conquest play the far more constitutive

part; those other histories are the ones which provide the enabling conditions for the so-called 'Orientalist Discourse' as such" (1994: 164). In addition, there is Said's complete neglect, and thus the erasure, of the subaltern voice. As Ahmad states:

A notable feature of *Orientalism* is that it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite in isolation from how these textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown, or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries; not as an undifferentiated mass but as situated social agents impelled by our own conflicts, contradictions, distinct social and political locations, of class, gender, region, religious affiliation, and so on – hence a peculiar disjuncture in the architecture of the book. (1994: 172)

The major theoretical as well as methodological influences apparent in Said's work are twofold, with the result that a typical quality of *Orientalism* is its "hybrid strategy." On the one hand there are Said's "humanist" claims, while on the other there is his introduction and use of Foucauldian discourse analysis, later taken up by cultural studies, postcolonial theory and anthropology. Emerging from a formational background in comparative European literatures, Said seems to be inspired especially by German comparativists such as Auerbach, Curtius and Spitzer who had been busy in creating an aura of "High Humanism" around their academic endeavors (Ahmad 1994: 162). This humanist stance reemerges in Said's *Orientalism* in the form of a totalized European history which traces its beginnings, and its "Orientalisms," all the way back to Greek classics. An idea has been countered in sharply critical ways by many contemporary postcolonial theorists, including Bhabha (1994) and members of the Subaltern Studies Group (Prakash 1990; Spivak 1996). How can Said reconcile conceptualizations of "High Humanism" with ideas of "anti-humanism," so rigorously observed in Foucault's work? Underlying this problem, Clifford makes an effort to reach beyond Said's

ambiguous *lacunae*, attempting to save what can be saved. He points out that "Said's humanist perspectives do not harmonize with his use of methods derived from Foucault, who is of course a radical critic of humanism. But however wary and inconsistent its appeals, *Orientalism* is a pioneering attempt to use Foucault systematically in an extended cultural analysis" (1988: 264). It is of no help to Said's *disorientations* when, shortly after corroborating his indebtedness to Foucauldian discourse theory, he introduces Gramscian notions of hegemony, which are subsequently woven into his text. Said's text is hybrid. He depends for his strategy on a flexible positionality, continuously vacillating between humanist and anti-humanist paradigms.

***Orientalism* and Beyond**

We have, then, not only theoretical and methodological contradictions accompanied by hybrid strategies, but also an incisive obliteration, that is, the silence around those involved – "the Orientals" – which has confronted Said's *Orientalism* with the devastating charge of "Occidentalism." Said essentializes Europe and the West, the "Occident," as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will, and the "Orient" as no more than its silenced object. Accordingly, "Said's discourse analysis does not itself escape the all-inclusive 'Occidentalism' he specifically rejects as an alternative to Orientalism" (Clifford 1988: 271).

It is, in my view, this reversed charge of "Occidentalism" which has motivated other writers to look for ways to go beyond *Orientalism* and to find alternatives that may help to conceptualize, in the place of silence and neglect, a dialectic which would include those involved. Even Said himself, after revisiting *Orientalism*, felt prompted to think about "Resistance Culture" (1994: 209-220). But how is one to think of Orientalism as an expandable concept, one that takes into account the ways in which Orientalism is received, accepted, modified, rejected, or otherwise challenged by the subaltern? Moreover, how does one

conceptualize a critique of Orientalism that includes the subaltern voice, and that can thus conceive of Orientalism in terms of difference and differentiation? To reach beyond *Orientalism* means, then, to employ this critical tool in strategic ways while tapping its *enabling* potential, that is, the acknowledgment of a plurality of Orientalisms as well as the examination of Orientalist dialectics. In fact, a number of authors have made efforts towards a differentiation of Orientalism(s), not just in the sense of its “national” histories and conditions, but rather in terms of moving away from a monological, one-sided discourse to one of multiplicity and multivocality. This is of summary significance as such a move makes space for the subaltern voice by opening new terrains of struggle and contestation.

The pertinent literature reveals an impressive variety of refinements of Said’s monolithic creation. Yet, once again, Said himself set the precedent by introducing us to notions of *ontological/ epistemological* and *manifest/latent* Orientalism(s): the former pair indicates *what* is distinguished and *how*, that is, the “Orient” from the “Occident” by way of essentializing; the latter pair points our attention to the recognizable and hidden elements of Orientalist discourse. However, the possibilities are far from exhausted. El-Azm (1981), for example, reiterates Said’s *ontological/epistemological* types and adds two more sets, the *institutional/cultural academic* and the *proper/in-reverse*. The first of these is employed as in Said. The second indicates “a whole set of progressively expanding institutions, a created and cumulative body of theory and practice, a suitable ideological superstructure with an apparatus of complicated assumptions, beliefs, images, literary productions, and rationalizations” and, in a more restricted sense, “a developing tradition of disciplined learning whose main function is to ‘scientifically research’ the Orient” (5). The third, finally, opposes “Orientalism proper” to what El-Azm coins “Orientalism-in-Reverse.” This last concept is used in the context of the essentialization of *the Orient* by secular Arab nationalists as well as by the movement of Islamic revival, reminding us of Said’s early warning not to apply the readily available

structures, styles and ontological biases of Orientalism upon others or upon oneself.

Ong (1993) differentiates between *grand* and *petty* Orientalist discourses, where the former stands for “those which reached supreme authority under the British Empire,” and which remain “dialectically linked” to the latter, described in terms of an alternative terrain that is “generated in the transnational context of corporate and media circulation and that rework Anglo-European academic concepts into confident pronouncements about Oriental labor, skills, deference, and mystery” (746). The *petty* type is then quite identical with her notion of a “self-Orientalizing discourse” (Ong 1997: 181), underlining two neglected elements of Orientalism. On the one hand we have a “dialectic” between *grand* and *petty* Orientalism(s), and on the other there is the “Oriental” self. This exemplifies an instance where differentiation acknowledges those who are involved, namely “the Orientals.” But the main point is that the authoritarian Orientalist discourse that emanates from Western voices, be they institutional, intellectual or popular, is always-already adopted, modified, challenged or rejected.

Another important differentiation is offered by Chen (1995) who explores different and divergent discursive levels, not of Orientalism but of its opposite, by using labels of *official/anti-official* Chinese “Occidentalism[s].” The *official* discourse is articulated by the Chinese government, “not for the purpose of dominating the West, but in order to discipline, and ultimately to dominate, the Chinese self at home” (5). In contrast and in response to the former, there is its counterpart “which can be understood as a powerful *anti-official* discourse using the Western Other as a metaphor for a political liberation against ideological oppression within a totalitarian state” (8). But where the *official* Occidental discourse must still rely for its existence on Orientalist discursive formations, the *anti-official* Occidental does not necessarily.

Most interestingly, here, Chen goes a step further when she rejects mere binaries by highlighting their overlaps. In this way, she points to a third kind of discourse in which “the anti-official Occidentalism overlapped with the

official Occidentalism of the early post-Mao regime” (25). Clearly, Chen’s emphasis rests with “the failure to recognize the indigenous use of Western discourse and the great variety of conditions that might provide the focus for its utterance” (15). This last point cannot be overemphasized and remains of essential importance to this essay. The insights gained from the works of El-Azm, Ong and Chen are crucial for an evaluation of Cuban Orientalism, self-Orientalizing discourse and “Chinese religion” in Cuba to which we will now turn.

Cuban Orientalism

To Cuba’s colonial inheritance of slavery and racism, one could add the historical Spanish obsession with the “Orient,” an Orientalism that originated with “centuries of domination by the Moors from Northern Africa” (Kushigian 1991: 2) and that continued, after the *reconquista*, through sustained encounters with the Arabic Other. In stark contrast to these medieval adventures, modern Orientalism in Cuba finds its beginnings in the nineteenth century transition from slave-labour to wage-labour and represents, indeed, a dark chapter that was opened just previous to the arrival of the first ship filled with contract workers, or “coolies,” from southern China in 1847.

The century and a half of Cuban Orientalist discursive production that followed was shaped in particular by authors such as Ramón de la Sagra (1861), the utilitarian, who saw in Chinese “coolies” little more than a docile labour force for the insatiable needs of Cuban sugarmills; Gonzalo de Quesada (1896), once Cuba’s ambassador in Berlin, and recognizably influenced by German Orientalists, who compiled the first scholastic and *sympathetic* study of “Los Chinos,” thus marking an important discursive variation on the same theme; the renowned Cuban historian and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1947), whose blatantly racist views of “yellow Mongoloids” perfectly reflected the “scientific” discrimination against Chinese immigrants that was instilled during the period of U.S. domination; Juan Jiménez Pastrana (1963), whose “revolutionary” task it was to rewrite *their* history along

(Communist) party lines; one could even add the contemporaries Baldomero Álvarez Ríos (1995), Jesús Guanche Perez (1996) and José Baltar Rodríguez (1997), all of whose sinological intimations about “Chinese” tradition, folklore and ritual remain crucial to any serious historical reconstruction of the development of Orientalism in Cuba.²

Considering this incisive historical pattern, contemporary expressions of Cuban Orientalism often present themselves in disguise and may reach us from the most unexpected corners. To give but one striking and typical example, a newspaper article, published in the international edition of Cuba’s party organ *Granma*, commented on the renowned Chinese Cuban painter Flora Fong on the occasion of her second trip to China. While the article begins and ends with citations from Miguel Barnet, celebrated author of *Biography of a Slave*, the signing journalist must have been aware of the awkward contradiction that characterizes them. I shall offer both here, so as to illustrate how official Cuban pronouncements regarding “transculturation” and hybridity are lined up, and possibly even confused, with the racist essentialism inherent in Euro-American Orientalist discourse. The opening paragraph runs like this:

It is impossible to separate in her art what is oriental from what is occidental. One is the result of the other and both come together in a legitimate process of transculturation. That is what fascinates me in Flora Fong’s painting. (Barnet qtd. in *Granma* 13 January 1991: 11, my translation)

This is, no doubt, a clear reminder of the fact that the Cuban nation, as well as the state it engendered, was constructed on the basis of a hybrid process of “transculturation,” a notion originally formulated by Fernando Ortiz (1995: 97-103).³ Thus, be one of Caribbean, European, African or Asian descent, transculturation, or, as Fernández Retamar (1971: 4) would prefer, *mestizaje*, is what constitutes and supposedly unites all Cubans in a classless, raceless society. And yet, after dwelling for the most part on Flora Fong’s felicitous encounter with members of her “extended” family in Canton, the article

concludes, to no little surprise, with this paragraph:

The blood that runs in Flora's veins marked her painting well before she made the voyage that would bring her to the soil of her ancestors, Taoist China, [the land of] the Roots of the Lotus, and the Imperial Jade. (Barnet qtd. in *Granma* 13 January 1991: 11, my translation)

This sudden and unexpected turn from Caribbean hybridity to Orientalist essentialism reveals the extent to which even "revolutionary" authors may in fact slip back into antiquated Eurocentric discourses. Here, I chose the term "antiquated" so as to point to discursive formations that find their origins with nineteenth century power relations where the "East" is represented as the inferior Other, and where the "West" takes the place of the dominant Self. Although this may have been the case in the past, it is no longer applicable to the present. As a result, the ambiguity and double-sidedness of Barnet's comments stand out as particularly characteristic of contemporary Cuban Orientalism, betraying not just the pitfalls of its revolutionary (un)consciousness, but indicating, rather, the persistence and longevity of its colonial burden.

Obviously, Orientalism is not a thing of the past, but alive and well in many places. Arif Dirlik, in this context, and to mimic E.P. Thompson, reverses the Eurocentric, and later Euro-American, perspective and poses the valuable question: "Is orientalism a thing or a relationship?" (1996: 99). An essential argument of this paper consists precisely in the rejection of clear-cut distinctions between Euro-American and "Oriental" representations of Chineseness in Cuba, but, instead, to view them in terms of dialectics (Ong 1993; 1997). Thus, in sharp contrast to Said's *Orientalism* and the unfortunate failure to erase ontological distinctions between "Orient" and "Occident," Orientalism is here treated as a relationship and not as a monolithic construction that solely belongs to the "West."

But how is this relationship to be conceptualized? Simply by repeating binaries such as colonizer / colonized, oppressor /

oppressed? Or, instead, is it by locating points of contact, encounter, even dialogue, that we might find some answers? In this sense, we will now discuss the topic of self-Orientalization and the complex dialectics that are at work in Chinese Cuban Orientalist pronouncements. The term "self-Orientalization" is here understood in as an emic category, rather than as a label of purely western fabrication.

"Self-Orientalization" and the Icon Confucius

After considering the history of Cuban Orientalism, and after pointing to its present expressions, often hidden or in disguise, by using Miguel Barnet's ideas about Flora Fong's paintings, it might be worthwhile to consider Flora Fong's own ideas in this respect (for my representational concerns rest not so much with China-born immigrants as with their offspring, that is, first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans – like Flora Fong). In regards to her artwork, she explains in her most recent catalog and artbook, *Nube de otoño*:

In very ancient times, the Han nationality of China created pictographic characters inspired by the tracks left by birds and animals, which evolved in several aspects. In regard to style and form, brushstrokes slowly replaced drawings, symbols replaced pictographs, and simple forms replaced complex ones... I consider this explanation necessary, in that Chinese characters were an essential part of my art since the early 1980s. (1997: 6)

Thus, the task of representing Chineseness begins in her first line, where she opts to evoke a timeless Chinese antiquity, the cultural inheritance of the Han period (surprisingly, without ever mentioning her own Cantonese origins), as well as the exoticism and mystique that Chinese "brushstroked" characters continue to hold for western audiences. Not only does Flora Fong emphasize the notion of timelessness, but also the observation of nature (a known Confucian principle), as well as the "essential" importance of Chinese characters in her painting, all of which points to an

understanding of Chineseness as essence. Is this, then, simply the reflection of Flora Fong's artistic sentiment and her striving for a personal style, or are we facing a vivid example of what Dirlik (1996) recognizes as the Orientalism of "Orientals"?

The use of self-Orientalizing discourses, that is, Chinese Cuban articulations of an essential and distinctive Chineseness which allow for conceiving of "difference" in ethnic and cultural terms, has (re)appeared in Cuba only very recently. Together with the need to improve official relations with the People's Republic of China (after the end of the Soviet-Cuban alliance in 1991) came also certain economic interests in the touristic redevelopment of La Habana's Chinatown. Thus, an officially promoted campaign of re-essentializing people ("the Chinese") and places ("Chinatown") is now in progress. This initiative is evidently based on Orientalist notions of a distinct "Chineseness," which have, as we noted above, a long history on the island. Although undertaken by the Cuban government within a larger, national framework of "touristifications," its modernizing policies are being implemented through the *Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*, a governmental agency that is run by first- and second-generation Chinese Cuban professionals (see Grupo Promotor 1998; 1995).

In a transnational but mainly U.S.-informed context, Ong clearly rejects "Asian modernist imaginations that insist upon their cultural and spiritual distinctiveness," as she detects in them little more than "contradictory, self-Orientalizing moves" (1997: 194). Dirlik, in stark contrast, and in the attempt to further develop Said's *Orientalism*, suggests instead that contemporary tendencies of self-orientalization among Asian intellectuals are "a manifestation not of powerlessness but of newly-acquired power" (1996 : 97). This last point remains central to the developments in Cuba's Chinese Cuban community.⁴ In this context, it is interesting to observe how a series of interviews, conducted with Chinese Cubans (in La Habana, Villa Clara, Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba from 1995 to 1998), indicates some of the assumptions that are at the basis of self-Orientalizing discourses. Surprisingly,

independent of age, gender, professional background or location, the vast majority of interviewees emphasized the significance that certain "Chinese" values, such as honesty, courage, fidelity, perseverance, austerity, hard work, respect for the ancestors, filial piety, mutual aid and beneficence, hold for them. These references to Confucian values are all the more remarkable when we consider that:

Today, the Chinese Cuban community, integrated by Chinese immigrants (now only a few hundred), but also by thousands of first- and second-generation Cubans, who were formed in the Revolution, and who are thus culturally and professionally capable, work to recuperate and to enrich the contributions made by the Chinese over a century and a half to Cuban patrimony and nationality. (Grupo Promotor 1993: 7, my translation)

What is the particular interest that "culturally and professionally capable" Chinese Cubans, who are, in addition, "formed in the Revolution," find with Confucian values and with representations of themselves that are formulated in terms of an essential "Chineseness"? How does this new, decontextualized "Confucianism" inform the practice of self-Orientalization in Cuba?

Clearly, the concept of "self-Orientalization" is a complex one that remains inextricably linked to Orientalism itself. That is, if we conceptualize Orientalism as an entirely western construct, without accounting for the dialectics involved in a process that was shaped all along by both westerners and "Orientals," then, in fact, we may conclude, erroneously, that Asians had simply no say in the making of Orientalism. However, it is by investigating the notion of "Confucian values" that we are enabled to reconceptualize our ideas of what constitutes a self-Orientalizing discourse.

Such a reconceptualization is offered by Jensen, who develops the idea that "East and West have become bound by commerce and communication and joined, more importantly, in imagination" (1997: 3). In his recent work, *Manufacturing Confucianism* (1997), he explains how the arrival of a detachment of

Jesuits in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1579 resulted in the fact that “Confucianism is largely a Western invention, supposedly representing what is registered by the complex of terms *rujia* [*ru* family], *rujiao* [*ru* teaching], *ru xue* [*ru* learning] and *ru zhe* [the *ru*]. Presuming that the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius (known to the Chinese as Kongzi) is the source of this complex, it takes his figure as its focus” (5). Jensen points out “that Confucius assumed his present familiar features as the result of a prolonged, deliberate process of manufacture in which European intellectuals took a leading role. Our Confucius is a product fashioned over several centuries by many hands, ecclesiastical and lay, Western and Chinese” (5).

Thus, both in the “West” and the “East,” and owing to the untiring efforts of Jesuits, sinologists, Chinese nationalists and, not to be forgotten, the Overseas-Chinese community, the icon Confucius soon became equated with “Chinese Culture” in general, and with “Chinese Religion” in particular. After the demise of the Ch’ing dynasty in 1911, it offered itself as an ideal image of essential “Chineseness” to Chinese nationalists who did not hesitate to appropriate this icon in their struggle to define culture, history and identity, providing in this way “a conceptual vernacular that would unite the diverse cultural constituencies of a new nation” (Jensen 1997: 4). Obviously, there is a link between Chinese nationalism and the cultural nationalism of Overseas-Chinese.

In the meantime, Confucius’ significance has not lessened, but, on the contrary, Confucianism has been promoted throughout the last two decades by Southeast Asian nations, and in particular by Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew, as the ethico-spiritual “foundation” of their socio-economic success. This latest Confucian revival translates, therefore, not only into the complete reversal of Weber’s Eurocentric pronouncements on Confucianism (1968: 142-170), but also into the articulation of an indigenous subjectivity which lends itself to be used as a counter-discourse to Euro-American Orientalist positionings. In fact:

The Confucian revival of the past decade, I suggest, is an expression not of powerlessness, but of a newfound sense of power that has accompanied the

economic success of East Asian societies who now reassert themselves against an earlier Euro-American domination. In this sense, the Confucian revival (and other cultural nationalisms) may be viewed as an articulation of native culture (and an indigenous subjectivity) against Euro-American cultural hegemony. (Dirlik 1996: 113)

At the same time, Dirlik does not ignore the self-defeating aspects of employing self-Orientalizing strategies:

The part that self-orientalization may play in the struggle against internal and external hegemony, and its claims to alternative modernities, however, must not be exaggerated. In the long run, self-orientalization serves to perpetuate, and even to consolidate, existing forms of power... Self-essentialization may serve the cause of mobilization against “Western” domination; but in the very process it also consolidates “Western” ideological hegemony by internalizing the historical assumptions of orientalism. At the same time, it contributes to internal hegemony by surpressing differences within the nation. (1996: 114)

But where he affirms that the use of self-Orientalizing discourse “contributes to internal hegemony by surpressing differences within the nation,” he must have been thinking of the People’s Republic of China, and not of the little known situation of a “minority” in the Caribbean. The case of the Chinese Cuban community in Cuba has produced a unique situation in which a *classic* Orientalist discourse of basically Eurocentric orientation cooperates and, at the same time, competes with a *strategic* “Oriental,” or self-centered, one. Thus, the post-1991 battle for political and economic survival in Cuba appears to have opened up new discursive terrain (and there was very little during almost forty years of de-ethnicization) in which claims for ethnic and cultural difference can be articulated. These new discursive spaces are increasingly taken up by first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans who show, simultaneously, great interest in resuscitating

“Chinese values,” or a “new” Confucianism in Cuban attire. To explore these ethico-spiritual discourses a little further, we will now turn to “Chinese religion,” the figure of the Chinese Cuban “saint” Sanfancón, and the “Chineseness” of Confucianism in Cuba.

“Chinese Religion” in Cuba

The question of religion in Cuba has been discussed mainly in terms of Spanish Christianity, African religions, and their syncretic expressions (see Ortiz 1975; Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 1993). Contemporary ideas surrounding the concept of *Cubania*, or Cubanity, rest on similar assumptions of, and even a certain fixation with, a Euro-African version of hybridity⁵ in which “the Chinese” hardly ever appear. Even though the Cuban Revolution has insisted not just since 1959 on its *mestizo* character, which is supposedly based on four main groups such as “Indio,” Spanish, African and Chinese, the disproportionate obsession with Afro-Cuban “cults,” shown by historians, sociologists and anthropologists alike, has left little space for the exploration of “Chinese religion” in Cuba.

One of the earliest commentators, Ramón de la Sagra, a Spaniard, Christian and staunch defender of Cuba’s “scientific revolution,” noted how “[t]hese Chinese show no religious disposition whatsoever, but they like to go out on Sundays” (1861: 150, my translation). The white supremacist José Antonio Saco insisted that “the Chinese race [remains] different in its language and color, in its ideas and feelings, in its uses and customs, and in its religious opinions” (1881: 186, my translation). These descriptions of essential incomprehension and radical Otherness coincide with the Eurocentricity of many nineteenth-century Spanish and Cuban writers. The reason, then, why these descriptions are so biased resides in the Eurocentric and “Christian” perspectives of observers who had obviously great difficulty in conceiving of religion in non-Christian terms.

In this sense, it is particularly revealing how the making of a syncretic Chinese Cuban “saint,” Sanfancón, remains 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. Eventually, Sanfancón entered a symbiosis with other saints and deities of Euro-African extraction. Thus, even followers of Santería continue to pay respects to Sanfancón in some of the remaining Chinese societies, and popular culture has it that Santa Barbara (Spanish) is Changó (African) is Sanfancón (Chinese).

According to Orientalist knowledge, the name Sanfancón, also San Fancon,⁶ San-Fan-Con or San Fang Kong, represents a western corruption of Cuan Yu, who, after his death, became the “Venerated Ancestor Kuan Kong” and eventually the “patron” of all Chinese immigrants to Cuba. This mythical figure is traced to the Han period (ca. 220-280 A.D.) when a brotherhood was formed between three legendary ancestors/warriors/philosophers named Lau Pei, Cuan Yu and Chiong Fei (here given in hierarchical order by age). These were later joined by a fourth member, Chiu Chi Long. But it is the second of these, Cuan Yu/Kuan Kong, who became crucial to the Cuban invention of Sanfancón. Interestingly, the appearance of Sanfancón coincides with the establishment, in the year 1900, of the first clan society on the island, the Lung Con Cun Sol. This society brought together members with the last names Lao, Chiong, Chiú and Kuan (Baltar Rodríguez 1997: 180). But what kind of values does Sanfancón represent?

The type of “Chinese values” that are conveyed by Sanfancón have become accessible through Antonio Chuffat Latour’s remarkable work *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba* (1927). Chuffat Latour had been working between 1885 and 1892 for several Chinese consulates on the island, when, at the turn of the century, he became the secretary of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuo Min Tang, in Cienfuegos. His study of “the Chinese in Cuba” represents a unique compilation and an outstanding testimony of the Chinese presence in Cuba. The author collected his data from the numberless conversations held with Chinese immigrants to Cuba, be they workers, shopkeepers or entrepreneurs. Recorded in Matanzas province, his rendering of “the legend

of Kuan Kong in Cimarrones” (85-9), in which one Chung Si was sitting in his house when a powerful spirit entered his body and began speaking “Chinese” to him, contains a number of Confucian-style prescriptions:

- 1) God in Heaven will reward those who are virtuous, honest, hard working and just with your brothers.
- 2) Happiness and good fortune will accompany you if you do acts of charity. Share your rice with those in need.
- 3) Do not be violent in your acts and be very prudent so as to have no regrets.
- 4) If you appreciate friends, do not speak of their acts in ways that could offend them.
- 5) Do not believe in slander nor in lies. If you want to be happy, keep away from all bad [influence].
- 6) The Chinese have their God, the White, the Black, Indian, Malay, each has their God.
- 7) The true God is not White, Chinese, Black, Indian, nor Malay, it is God Almighty.
- 8) Do not despair [in this world]. Remember that you are in transit, you brought nothing and nothing you shall take.
- 9) You have no property, the only one, the real, is the one of your fall. Think well, and you are going to be convinced.
- 10) God Almighty asks us nothing, he wants no gold, no payments. It is God Almighty, great, just, good; he has no hate and no defect. If you believe in God, he is going to be with you; if you have faith, he is going to save you from all bad. (Chuffat Latour 1927: 87, my translation)

These Confucian⁷ values show, indeed, a great concern with “God Almighty.” Although “Chinese religion” consists not only of Confucianism but also of Taoism and Buddhism, forming what is known as the “Three Ways,” it is difficult to find in any of these doctrines the monotheistic prevalence so characteristic for Christianity. Yet the Chinese Cuban invention of Sanfancón, and especially the built-in flexibility of his triple function as

sage, saint or god, reflects the need to satisfy typically “Christian” preoccupations with monotheism. Thus, it is this “Western” reading (and writing) of Sanfancón that may explain Chuffat Latour’s “Ten Commandment” version of Confucian values.

We may ask, finally, of what quality is the “Chineseness” of Confucius in Cuban garb, and how essentially and distinctively “Chinese” can Sanfancón possibly be? Apparently, as the Cuban historian and ethnographer Baltar Rodríguez found out – after consulting the available sources and after conducting a number of interviews with non-Cubans – the figure Sanfancón is not known in China or among members of its Overseas community elsewhere (1997: 182). Clearly, Sanfancón is as Cuban as can be.

His 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 societies and on the streets of La Habana’s Chinatown. “Chinese religion” in Cuba today has less to do with long-standing “Chinese” traditions, or even a return to “religion” per se,⁸ 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. It is, then, Cuba’s “transition to somewhere” which explains the recent rearrangements of its ideological, political, economical, social and cultural spheres.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Since 1994, the anniversary of the Chinese presence in Cuba is celebrated again around June 3, the day of the arrival of the first ship to bring Chinese workers to the island in 1847. But the months of May and June do not fit in well with the tourist season, which is mainly from November to April, and so it was decided by a governmental agency, the *Grupo Promotor del Barrio Chino*, that from 1999 onwards, it will be held in the first week of

November, now coinciding with the anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Although this choice may not conform to the history of Chinese immigration to Cuba, its deliberate decontextualization perfectly illustrates the priorities, as well as the "Chinese Dreams," of the Cuban government and of first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans. Perhaps only a minor occurrence, but, in my view, this example makes quite clear how meanings, metaphors and discursive formations are shifted, and even pushed, around so as to channel them into more or less convenient directions.

In our discussion of Orientalism, we have seen how the employment of "hybrid strategies" makes it possible to offer enabling perspectives, even though Said's *Orientalism* completely neglects the people involved, that is, the "Orientals." This opens space for a further exploration that leads us "Beyond *Orientalism*" and towards more sophisticated developments of Said's precedent, in which we find an opening for the "indigenous" use of, and its complicity in, Orientalist discourse. In this way, we can identify both Euro-American and "Oriental" Orientalist discourses.

Cuban Orientalism not only consists of historical manifestations but, moreover, is also found in contemporary discourse in Cuba. The apparent ambiguity and double-sidedness of these discourses reveals how even "revolutionary" writers succumb to their (un)conscious colonial burden of racism and Orientalism. By contrast, the Orientalism of "Orientals," particularly when seen in the context of Confucian thought, addresses precisely what Said's *Orientalism* leaves out: that Orientalism is not simply a monolithic construction of the "West" but, rather, is a dialectical relationship that includes the "East."

Our incursion into the intricacies of "Chinese Religion in Cuba" and, with it, into the figure of the Chinese Cuban "saint" Sanfancón not only points to the contemporary uses of a decontextualized Confucianism, but also shows the extent to which first- and second-generation Chinese Cubans are willing to activate an essential and distinctive "Chineseness" in the service of a return to notions of difference in ethnic and cultural terms. These unexpected articulations, made within the confines of a

socialist state, are indeed surprising, especially after almost forty years of revolutionary de-ethnicization in which Orientalist erasure dominated the picture. Contemporary Orientalist discourse in Cuba should, therefore, be grasped in the context of rearrangements of a Cuban society in "transition to somewhere."

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End Notes

¹ Jorge I. Domínguez' interesting but largely conservative comments in his chapter, "Cuba in the 1990s: The Transition to Somewhere" (1998: 173-202), speculate about possible scenarios that could be envisaged for Cuba's mid and long-term future. See also *Informe central. Discurso de clausura. V congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Castro Ruz 1997: 149-51).

² These works could be juxtaposed, for example, to a number of "Chinese" voices such as can be found in *The Cuba Commission Report* (Cuba 1993 [1876]), an oral history that comprises over a thousand interviews and individual petitions recorded from Chinese contract labourers near the end of Cuba's first national struggle, the Ten Years' War. Another significant emic view is reflected in Antonio Chuffat Latour's *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba* (1927), a unique compilation that is based on the author's conversations with Chinese (that is, mainly Cantonese) workers and entrepreneurs resident in Cuba.

³ Curiously, the inventor of the concept of "transculturation," Fernando Ortiz, referred himself to Chinese immigrants in overtly racist terms: "And still other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins arrived, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn: Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions of the sometimes Celestial Kingdom" (1947: 113).

⁴ There are other such communities in South Florida, New York and New Jersey (García 1996: 43), but also in Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, Peru, Macao and Hong Kong (Bastos da Silva 1994: 157-79).

⁵ Although both José Martí's *Our America* (1977 [1898]) and Fernández Retamar's *Caliban* (1971) make place for the vanished American "Indian" (that is, Taino or Carib) in their arguments concerned with *mestizaje*, they consistently ignore, and thus continue to erase in proper Orientalist fashion, the presence of Chinese immigrants on the island.

⁶ Curiously, the linguistic Christianization of "Chinese religion" is already recognizable in the first three letters of the name San Fancon, that is, in the title *San*, which means three or three people in Mandarin, while also being used as an abbreviation for the Castilian term *Santo*, or saint.

⁷ In regards to the complicity of western intellectuals in *manufacturing* Chineseness and Confucian values, Jensen suggests that "[b]y the late

eighteenth century, as Europe acquired an 'Enlightened' cultural self-consciousness, Confucius was firmly entrenched in contemporary Western culture as a sage, and his followers were called 'Confucians', a term that evoked a panoply of associations: deference, urbanity, wisdom, moral probity, reasoned and not slavish classicism, and a learned, paternal authoritarianism. These qualities, like the figure who embodied them, were the desiderata of Europeans doubtful of the institution of monarchy and despairing of religious war" (1997: 8).

⁸ I should mention that discussions of religious practices in the Chinese Cuban community in Cuba often develop along lines of B.C./A.C., that is, Before Castro and After Castro, in as far as the Cuban Revolution marked a major change by building an atheistic state that was antithetical to religion. Its Marxist-Leninist conception of religion as "mystification" allowed for little religious tolerance until the Cuban Constitution was rewritten in 1992. Cuba is now a "secular" state, government and church are separated, religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, and even Pope John Paul II came to visit the island in January 1998 (see also *Constitución de la República de Cuba* [Cuba 1992: 5]).