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Resting in a Distant Land: The Chinese General Cemetery in Havana

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It is a responsibility for everyone at all times to safeguard the historical and cultural heritage of a nation. Cuba has well structured and designed policies for the heritage conservation, but needs economic support and qualified personnel. For this reason it is important to seek alternatives for funding and projects of collaboration.

Despite the fact that our country has a legal framework, Law No. 1 on Protection of Cultural Heritage and Law No. 2 on National and Local Monuments, both approved in 1977 in the National Assembly of People's Power, it is difficult to achieve optimal results because in any part of the world, the conservation, restoration, and protection of heritage is expensive. (Appendices 1 and 2)

The case under consideration is the General Cemetery of the Chinese of Havana, declared to be a national monument in 1996.

I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CEMETERY

Chinese traditional society has always been characterized by rites related to the world of death and spirits, and we find this influence in Chinese communities overseas.

In Cuba through an official request to the **Higher Government** (Gobierno Superior) on December 11, 1882, the Chinese Consul in Havana Liu Liang Yuan solicited authorization to construct a cemetery for the subjects of his nation. The response was negative, on the grounds that in Colón Cemetery there was space in its southwest corner, with an independent entry, dedicated to non-Catholics.

After 11 years, on May 20, 1893, authorization was granted for the construction of the cemetery, which was inaugurated in October of that year.

The cemetery was located in the land purchased by Consul Tam Kim Cho from the wealthy Federico Kohly, an area of 9,000 square meters in the property "Las Torres" 101 meters to the southwest of Colón Cemetery. Its construction was under the architect Isidro A. Rivas, and its administrator was Raoul J. Cay.

The land was purchased at the rate of 90 cents [centavos] (gold) per square meter and cost 8,100 dollars [pesos]. The work of the fence, gate, and building reached 13,000 dollars [pesos] (gold); the road of 94 meters long by 7 wide from the southwest corner of Colón Cemetery, 600 dollars [pesos]. Also purchased from Federico Kohly was the entire road from the public road of Chorrera and Estancias to the entry of the establishment, 2,000 dollars [pesos]. In total, the work costs 23,700 dollars [pesos].¹

The architectural engineer of Colón Cemetery, Enrique Martínez, in 1928 published in his book the following description of the Chinese cemetery:

The gateway is situated in the northern part of the locale, and its middle part is of Chinese style with an inscription in Chinese characters "San Yu Chun Wah Chung" that translates as: Chinese General Cemetery.

*To the sides are two halls: the one on the right serves as residence of the cemetery guard; the one on the left is the room where the medical inspector, the illustrious and exemplary Dr. César Masino, does the examination of the cadavers; in this place are substances and devices to return life in the case of apparent death and spray **[de Genester]** for disinfecting the mortuary cars.*

The interior of the cemetery is divided into four equal quadrants by two perpendicular roads, one leading from the entry to the south and the other from east to west, both well constructed of stone and with bushes and flowers on both sides.

¹ García Triana, Mauro. Los chinos de Cuba y los nexos entre las dos naciones. La Habana : Boletín de Estudios Filosóficos, 2003. T.1. p. 172

To the east of the cross street is found a small brick room one and a half meters high by one wide, with a roof of French tile and without a door, which serves for burning papers, that has in its middle a silver or gold piece, so that the dead do not lack money for the long journey they must begin, if they wish it, and also light small candles from their country and burn sandalwood; this room has come to be something like the chapel of our saints.

To the south on the right side of the Street from the entrance to the other side of the cemetery is found the garage for the car that transports the poor and the stables, and in the southwest corner the hall for depositing cadavers, the same place for autopsies in case they are necessary.

To the left of the abovementioned central road and in front of the garage and stables is the ossuary. Individual graves occupy the surface of the plots, not using the common grave, nor burial without case. It is customary to celebrate three festivals per year in the cemetery, one in a distinct day in March, the other on June 14, and the last on September 9.²

With the passage of time the political, regional, and surname associations that were founded solicited parcels of land whose size corresponded to the payment of agreed upon taxes.

Of vital importance was the work of the Casino Chung Wah in sustaining and preserving funerary rites.

In the cemetery are found the pantheons of the following associations:

- HongmenChee Kung Tong, constructed in 1903, remodeled in 1944, with the name change Collective Pantheon of the Members of the Hongmen Chee Kung Tong (Panteón Colectivo de los Socios de la HongmenChee Kung Tong).

- Lung Kong Kung Sol

- National Association Kuo Min Tang (Asociación Nacionalista del Kuo Min Tang)

- Long Sai Li, constructed in 1909

- Chang Wen Chung Tong

- Wong Kong Ja Tong

- ChikTak Tong

- SueYuenTong

- Collective Pantheon of Deceased with Li Surname (Panteón Colectivo de los fallecidos de apellido Li)

- Socialist Alliance of Cuba (Alianza Socialista de Cuba)

- ChiuSaiLukGeon Con Sol

- HangFukKiuTin

- Lui Wei Pin Con Sol

- Hoy Yin Con Sol

- Leon Chung Jao Tong

² Martínez y Martínez, Enrique. Sucinta descripción de los cementerios de la antigüedad, primitivos de la Habana y de Cristóbal Colón. La Habana, septiembre de 1920. p. 37-40.

- Fong ChihPeng Tong
- Yip Nam Yang Tang
- Loo Yi Chiong Tong
- Yiu Men Con Sol
- ChiangWin Yang Tang
- Say Jo Jon
- ChiongLokOn Tong
- ShungShang
- Yong Chen Pak Tong
- On Teng Tong
- Sa Tui Kong AnZhiHui

In 1965, the board of directors of the Casino Chung Wah considered necessary the creation of a collective pantheon of wall recesses for burials and established the budget for all of the construction work in the cemetery. Under this agreement the first 410 recesses were built.³ In 1967 560 recesses and 560 ossuaries were made.⁴

On July 13, 1967 the cemetery was nationalized, and since then it is attended to by Colón Cemetery and the Casino Chung Wah.

³ Casino Chung Wah. Acta No. 16 de 1965.

⁴ Casino Chung Wah. Acta No. 23 de 1967.

II. QINGMING FESTIVAL清明

In ancient China, funerary rites consisted not only of making offerings of food to the gods and ancestors, but of depositing enormous quantities of food, drink, and vessels in the tomb to accompany the deceased to the other world. These feasts not only honored the dead, but also favored the survivors, giving them the opportunity to express their filial piety, demonstrate their wealth and social position, and strengthen the ties that unite family and friends.

According to Chinese thought, the condition of the souls of the dead in the other world is completely dependent upon the living. Through ritual food, sacrifices, and offerings, relatives provide all that is necessary for survival in the other world: food, clothing, money, houses, furniture, servants, etc. Without the charity of the living, the souls are in the most horrible misery. The means of making all of these objects visible is through combustion; the material with which it is done is paper, which is burned in a ritual. The foundation of Chinese religion is precisely this act of filial piety toward the ancestors.⁵

Each year around the 5th of April, one of the main Chinese traditional festivals is celebrated: Qingming清明 (Día de la Limpieza y la Claridad), known in Cuba as the Chinese Day of the Dead(Día de los Fieles Difuntos Chinos). On this day the doors of the Kingdom of the Dead (Reino de los Muertos) are opened, which is favorable for cleaning the tombs and depositing offerings to ancestors.

In Cuba, all of the associations go to their pantheons with flower arrangements, roast pork, chicken, sweets and liquor, incense and candles, and burn ritual money with the conviction that the deceased will be content.

On this day the Chinese community of Havana also deposits flowers at the base of the monument situated on Linea and L in Vedado that perpetuates the memory of the Chinese freedom fighters fallen in the wars for independence against Spanish colonialism.

⁵Martínez Robledo, María Isabel. Supersticiones y ritos funerarios en China : Capítulo 45.—España : Universidad de Granada. – 15 p. (Documento en online)

III. NATIONAL MONUMENT

What are understood to be National Monuments are all urban historic centers and all construction, sites, or objects that because of their exceptional character and their historic, artistic, environmental, natural and/or social value for the nation merit conservation, as declared by the National Commission on Monuments.⁶ (Appendix 3)

The National Commission on Monuments of Cuba assessed and determined that the Chinese Cemetery constitutes a homogenous architectural group [conjunto arquitectónico homogéneo], one of a kind in our country, **in which the process of death is accepted as natural, represented formally in the treatment of humans, at the urban and architectural level, and in the identification with nature through the placement of the body in the ground, lending a ritual value to the vegetation that contributes to an almost familiar and intimate environment.**

This cemetery has also become an exceptional and inexhaustible source of documentation and evaluation in anthropological and paleodemographic studies of race in our nation.

For such reasons the National Commission on Monuments through Resolution No. 133 on May 8, 1966 resolved:

To declare the Chinese Cemetery a National Monument, civil construction of significant historical value. Also directed the Provincial Commission on Monuments of Havana that, according to the guidelines of the National Commission of Monuments...said civil construction be inscribed in the Registry of National and Local Monuments for its necessary protection, and finally resolved to give notice of said Resolution to the Minister, Vice Ministers, and Directors of Culture, President of the Provincial Assembly of People's Power, to the Provincial Commission on Monuments and to the Provincial Board of Directors of Culture of the City of Havana and to other natural or legal entities.⁷ (Appendix 4)

⁶ Decreto no. 55. Publicado en la Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba. Edición Ordinaria Número 40 de fecha 18 de diciembre de 1979.

⁷ Resolución no. 133. Cementerio Chino. 8 de mayo de 1996. En www.cnpc.cu Portal del Consejo Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural.

IV. BURIALS, EXHUMATIONS, AND REPATRIATIONS

Thanks to the work of Enrique Martínez y Martínez, we know that the first burial in the Chinese cemetery took place on October 29, 1893 with the cadaver of Braulio López that occupied the first grave. His remains were exhumed on November 3, 1898. The different Chinese associations were little by little constructing their pantheons and tombs. The first of these was marked with the letter A of Rufino Aman, April 18, 1898. The oldest was of Tung Chek, who died of yellow fever on December 12, 1895. The first tomb to the right was occupied by the remains of Joaquín Asin, who died of cardiac hypertrophy on December 8, 1893. The last cadáver buried in the 19th century was on December 25, 1900 of the Asian José Estré, native of Canton, single, 79 years old, who died of acute dystentery. During the 19th century through December 31, 1900, 2,716 Chinese were buried. The first cadaver buried in the 20th century was the Asian Julián Núñez, who died of arteriosclerosis.⁸

The burials continued, and the moment came in which there was practically no space for the containers [ossuaries] in the Casino Chung Wah pantheon. For this reason, in January 2017, one of the gravediggers [sepultureros] of the cemetery sent the following note to all of the Chinese associations and to the Chinese community in general:

To all members who have relatives who have died three or more years ago, buried in the Casino tombs [nichos] in the Chinese Cemetery, you are notified that you must go with urgency to exhume their remains.

Please call David at the Chinese Cemetery telephone.

7831 16 45 for scheduling, a reasonable time will be given before the exhumations begin, if relatives who should do so do not present themselves.

We appreciate your cooperation. Thank you.

After this communication, only two members of the National Association Min Chih Tang proceeded to transfer the remains of their relatives in the tomb [nichos] of the Casino Chung Wah to the pantheon of the association.

An expression of the ever-present wish to return to one's native place was the repatriation of remains or secondary burials of Chinese who died overseas, managed by the associations in Cuba. The Chinese Cemetery of Havana was initially considered a temporary resting place, which became important during the period in which Japan occupied China (1937-1945) and there were no means to transport the remains of deceased Chinese.⁹

According to Li San, who compiled information about the history of the Chinese Cemetery, the first transport of mortal remains to China occurred in 1920 under Sr. Yi Qixi.¹⁰ In this year over 400 metal cases of remains were transported through a shipping company to Hong Kong, after

⁸ Martínez y Martínez, Enrique. Sucinta descripción de los cementerios de la antigüedad, primitivos de la Habana y de Cristóbal Colón. La Habana, septiembre de 1920. p. 37- 40.

⁹ López, Kathleen. Remesas y retornos: importancia de la migración a Cuba para los pueblos cantoneses. *En* : Huellas de China en este lado del Atlántico / comp. Mitzi Espinosa Luis. La Habana: Editorial José Martí, 2016. p. 172.

¹⁰ Yi Qixi, procedente del distrito de Panyu, administrador del diario chino Wah Man Yat Po y presidente de la Hong Men Chee Kung Tong y Casino Chung Wah. Para el año 1925 residió en New York, USA.

which they were sent to China to be received by their relatives. The second shipment of more than 900 remains was in the spring of 1937 under Federico Chi Casio.¹¹

The Cuban novelist Enrique Serpa in his 1949 article “Commemoration of Ancestors Fills Chinese with Fervor,” interviewed Horacio Molina, who informed him that the funerals of almost all of the Chinese who died in Havana took place in the Molina funeral home of which he was proprietor, located on Rayo Street No. 119 between Zanja and Dragones. Molina was in charge of the burials and later transfer of the remains to China. Molina declared that the last shipment was realized in 1940 because the war had impeded continued shipments, and because of this the pantheons were filled with over 2,000 remains in small zinc boxes, waiting for the opportune time to be transported to China.

Without further details, it is said that Federico Chi Casio fulfilled the responsibility of sending the funerary boxes to China, according to the testimony of Pedro Eng to Mauro G. García Triana.¹²

Currently transfers are realized by relatives who come to Cuba to obtain permission for China or another country.

In 2017 one cremation and departure from the country took place. In 2016 there were 8 burials and 2 exhumations.¹³

It should be clarified that registries do not exist in Colón Cemetery of the exhumations and transfers from the collective pantheon of the Casino Chung Wah to other pantheons of associations within the Chinese Cemetery. For these actions permission of Colón Cemetery is not needed; because of this the gravediggers [sepultureros] do them under the authorization and directions of the Casino Chung Wah and the associations in question.¹⁴

The Chinese Cemetery of Havana has a relevant and singular importance in highlighting the spirit of the Chinese presence in Cuba and its fusion with the nation through blood and culture. It follows that it can be a valuable source of investigation and information for students and researchers of funerary heritage.

Nevertheless, currently its necrological documentation cannot be accessed due to lack of burial books, causing an enormous vacuum impossible to fill.

One way to alleviate the loss of documents would be the recovery of information through the inscriptions on the tombs, pantheons, and cases [ossuaries] to create a database that allows for the preservation of information.

¹¹Li San. Breve reseña histórica del cementerio chino. Documento mecanografiado, noviembre de 2005.

¹²García Triana, Mauro G. Nexos entre Cuba y China. La Habana : Boletín de Estudios Filosóficos, 2002. T. I. p. 342. Federico Chi Casio. Presidente del Chee Kung Tong (1944- 1964). Eminent leader of the Chinese community in Cuba.

¹³ Información ofrecida en Junio de 2017 por Greysi Pérez González, secretaria del cementerio de Colón y David Yañez del Castillo, sepulturero del cementerio chino.

¹⁴ Información ofrecida por los sepultureros del cementerio chino David Yañez del Castillo e Ignacio Valdés Martínez. Junio de 2017.

V. STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE CEMETERY

In 2012, the Casino Chung Wah solicited from the Group on Chinatown Investment Projects of the Office of the Historian of the City (Grupo de Inversiones Proyecto Barrio Chino de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad) a diagnostic to identify the conditions and problems in the cemetery and elaborate the actions and strategies to undertake for its restoration from the architect Mayelín Alfonso Rodríguez. Nevertheless, the report and the proposed actions could not be approved or executed because the Chinese Cemetery is not administered by the Casino Chung Wah, but by Colón Cemetery, belonging to the Provincial Company of Communal Services of Havana (Empresa Provincial de Servicios Comunes de La Habana).¹⁵

At any rate, the project of the architect Mayelín Alfonso Rodríguez still is valid in that the same problems are found, of which we can mention the following:

*General deterioration of the site, lack of protection during nighttime, the perimeter walls do not offer protection, scarcity of light, lack of care of the green areas that cause deterioration of the burial places, lack of maintenance in the tombs, chapels, etc. (leaks, corrosion, collapses, obstructions), problems of drainage, nonexistant historical information and references and services for Chinese rituals, such as sale of flowers, incense, etc.*¹⁶ (Appendix 5)

Other organizations linked to the cemetery such as the Institute of Agroforestry Research also carried out a survey in 2012 under the forestry engineers Digna Velázquez Viera and Marta Marina Jiménez Águila as well as Dr. René López Castilla. (Appendix 6)

In the general evaluation of the Chinese Cemetery, they observed a considerable deterioration of the burial sites due to lack of maintenance and use which resulted in the spontaneous growth of plants (trees, bushes, and other herbaceous species).

They found the wooded area in general to have good plant health condition except for the older trees such as ficus, savins, and evergreens [tujas] that presented with insect damage.

Others, above all mastic trees, presented with damage in the bark produced by people. Additional observations were tree stumps recently cut, presumably illegally for use of the valuable wood, aerial roots affecting monuments, plants growing on roofs, tombs affected by trees, and the presence of vegetable waste.

According to the diagnosis, general recommendations were elaborated, among them: to preserve the architectural works of interest, to maintain the health of the wooded area, to eliminate all trees structurally impacted, sick, or that damage the monuments, to eliminate the ficus to avoid damage of the pantheon roofs, to undertake gardening in individual pantheons and on sidewalks, to prune trees, etc.¹⁷

¹⁵ Información ofrecida por la ingeniera María Isabel Martínez, Jefa de inversiones del Proyecto Barrio Chino de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad. 23 de junio de 2017.

¹⁶ Alfonso Rodríguez, Mayelín. Alcances generales de la inversión, obra: Cementerio General de China San Yu Chun Wah Chung. La Habana : Grupo de Inversiones Barrio Chino. Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, 2012.

¹⁷ Ver Anexo. Ing. Forestal Digna Velázquez Viera, Ing. Forestal Marta Marina Jiménez Águila y Dr. René López Castilla. Diagnóstico para las áreas verdes del Cementerio Chino, incluyendo: la composición de especies arbóreas existentes, la valoración del estado fitosanitario del arbolado y la propuesta de manejo, que incluye, las podas, las talas y sustitución de especies. La Habana: Instituto de Investigaciones Agroforestales, 2012.

This project did not materialize either, only small maintenance work by owners of vaults and the administration of the cemetery and of communal services.

At present the administration of Colón Cemetery contracts a worker from the hygiene cooperative who is in charge of maintaining cleaning and small gardening works.

In 2013 some Chinese associations handled the repair of their pantheons, such as the National Association Min Chih Tang and the Wong Kong Ja Tong, which each contributed around \$5,000 CUC for the reconstruction.

The Chinese community of Cuba as well as volunteers from among other Chinese overseas communities are concerned about the state of conservation and protection of the cemetery and have demonstrated a profound interest in collaborating economically to carry out the required work.

In January of this year, Paula Madison, Howard Williams, Brayer Lee, Keith Lowe, the photographer Jook Leung, and Jared Lee visited Havana to participate in the festivities for the 130th anniversary of the National Association Min Chih Tang. They had the opportunity to visit the Chinese Cemetery and afterward held a meeting with General Gustavo Chui, president of the Casino Chung Wah, where they exchanged thoughts on the topic and on creating concrete strategies and actions in the future to return to the Chinese Cemetery the splendor of this patrimonial jewel.

Also, Nugabi García, director of Colón Cemetery, has carried out proposals and has expressed his interest in conversing with the leaders of the Chinese community and with Paula Madison and other colleagues.¹⁸ (Appendix 7)

In the face of the alarm signals of deterioration that can be felt for years, it is necessary to raise awareness among the members of the Chinese community, conservation and heritage organizations, and all institutions that can support the project of restoration and conservation.

Beyond its patrimonial value, it is necessary to remember that our ancestors, our friends, deserve an adequate site to rest in peace and that the Chinese Cemetery, one of a kind in Cuba despite its deterioration, continues to be a special place.

One might ask: Do the dead have no one, or in a short time will we see the Chinese Cemetery die?

¹⁸ Ver Anexo de la entrevista de Mitzi Espinosa Luis con Sr. Nugabi García, director del Cementerio de Colón. 13 de junio de 2017 y Licencia de Enterramiento.

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Entrevista con Greysi Pérez González, secretaria de la Necrópolis de Colón. 6 de junio de 2017.

Entrevista con Nugabi García Adul. Director de la Necrópolis de Colón. 13 de junio de 2017.

Entrevista con Osmani Morell García. Jefe del Departamento de Archivo. Necrópolis de Colón. 19 de junio de 2017.

ANEXOS

- I. Ley no. 1. Ley de protección al patrimonio cultural.
- II. Ley no. 2. Ley de monumentos nacionales y locales.
- III. Decreto no. 55
- IV. Resolución no. 133. Cementerio Chino.
- V. Alcances generales de la inversión, obra: Cementerio General de China San YuChunWahChung.
- VI. Diagnóstico para las áreas verdes del Cementerio Chino, incluyendo: la composición de especies arbóreas existentes, la valoración del estado fitosanitario del arbolado y la propuesta de manejo, que incluye, las podas, las talas y sustitución de especies.
- VII. Entrevista al Sr. Nugabi García, director del Cementerio de Colón.
- VIII. Modelo de Licencia de enterramiento.