

## **Chinese in Cuba: From “People without History” to People with a Historical Legacy<sup>1</sup>**

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Wilfredo Lam (20) may well represent the best example of successful miscegenation in Cuban artistic history. His mother was of African and European descent. His father, Lam Yam, born in China, worked on the intercontinental railroad in the United States. Lam wrote of him that he possessed “the memory of all sorts of landscapes: Siberia, Mongolia, Tartary, the drama of Asia and the China Sea. In his eyes you could see the sunrise of an island in turmoil fighting for his freedom.” Wilfredo Lam was born in 1902 when his father was 84. He was his eighth child. He left for Spain to study art in 1923. From the beginning of Lam’s artistic career he produced works that broke with colonial culture, particularly with racism. When the Spanish Civil War began, he fought for the Republic. He got out of Barcelona in advance of the Franco forces, reaching Paris in 1938, where he became a close friend of Picasso, and other painters and literary figures; among them, André Breton, Luis Buñuel, Aimé Césaire, Sédig Senghor. In 1940 he illustrated Henri Breton’s *Fata Morgana*. His has variously been called Primitivism, Modernism and Surrealism. Throughout his career he blended Afro-Cuban, as well as Chinese and European elements. He may be said to be Cuba’s foremost artist. He stood for the end of Colonialism, as well as for artistic and personal freedom. The Germans declared his art degenerate. Lam returned at various times to Cuba; he was committed to the Revolution, and to political change. In 1966 he returned to Havana and painted “The Third World” for the former Presidential Palace, now the Museum of the Revolution. Later, he continued to live in Paris, and in Albisola Mare, Italy. His fame has continued to grow as evidenced by prizes, books, and films about his

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<sup>1</sup> This text constitutes the last two paragraphs taken from the complete article as the title indicates. The article was published in China, and it is used here by permission of the author (February 10, 2010). The second, and last, paragraph quoted here is to be understood as the conclusion to the entire article. The article was published in *Translating Global Cultures*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2008: pp.392-409.

works. He died in 1980, having achieved universal fame as a Chinese Cuban committed to freedom and to art.

Thus, just as the great ethnographer, Fernando Ortiz, declared that Cuba would not be Cuba without the blacks, I hope that my brief survey of the contributions of Chinese to Cuba, might lead readers to feel that Cuba would also not totally be Cuba without the Chinese.

Joseph Schraibman, Washington University in St. Louis  
Missouri  
2009

### **Note**

20. See Wilfredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, Lowery Stokes Sims. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003), and Wilfredo Lam, Max-Pol Fouchet (Barcelona, Ediciones Polígrafa, 1976)