

Origin of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Cuba in the 19th Century from Its Main Exponents and Some Notable Medical Descendants in the 20th Century

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Abstract

The Cuban people are made up of three major migratory currents, the Chinese are one of them. They brought their culture, the methods, and procedures of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in the 19th century. Few were able to return and so they created families in Cuba; some of their descendants dedicated themselves to medicine. In order to investigate the practices that were predecessors of TCM in Cuba in the 19th century, a qualitative phenomenological research was carried out, reviewing what was published by various sources, applying documentary analysis, logical historical analysis, abstraction, synthesis, and systematization of the results on the regularities of the work and human behavior of Chinese doctors in the Cuban 19th and 20th centuries. This made it possible to identify six Chinese doctors in the 19th century in Cuba who gave rise to the beginning of some practices of TCM in Cuba, and five from the 20th century, descendants of coolies who dedicated themselves to other specialties of medicine. It was found that despite their geographical and time disperse, they were all notorious for their outstanding professional and human behavior, with a trail of accumulated successes in achieving “almost the impossible” with the patient. They have left their mark on Cuban culture.

Keywords: Chinese doctor; Coolies; Popular phrase; Immigrants; Professional behavior; Human behavior; History

1 Introduction

The Chinese civilization has been the only one of antiquity that has maintained its registered historical continuity.¹ Since prehistory, the medicine of this country is documented and, as part of its culture, it traveled the world with its emigrants. Latin American countries such as the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, have recorded in their history important waves of immigrants from China between the 19th and 20th centuries.²

The beginning of Chinese migration to Cuba began in 1847 and lasted until 1874, in Cuba colonized by

Spain.³ The Chinese came to this country in conditions of semi-slavery, under inhuman contracts, called coolies for this condition, to replace or work alongside the already declining African workforce, in the sugar cane fields and other fields crops.⁴ Among them came Chinese doctors, almost all herbalists or practitioners of Chinese methods of treatment. Several Chinese doctors, well-known figures for their professional and human work,⁵ remained in the national imagination and history, most of them practitioners of herbal medicine. Derived from this task, phrases, customs, poems, popular songs have remained, which show the impact of the presence of the Chinese doctor in Cuban culture, to this day.^{4,6-8}

The researchers intend to investigate the origins of practices of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in Cuba by some exponents, the causes and conditions of the migratory waves to Cuba in the 19th century that caused the arrival of the first coolies in Cuba and their herbal doctors, exponents documented in the practice of TCM and, to highlight some eminent Cuban doctors of the 20th century, children or grandchildren of Chinese emigrants who in this country have left their mark on the history of contemporary Cuban medicine in this country.

2 Methods

A qualitative research, of a phenomenological type, was carried out, which from an epistemological point of view, aimed to investigate the origins of practices of TCM in Cuba by some exponents in the 19th century,

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and highlight some eminent Cuban doctors (descendants of Chinese emigrants) in the 20th century. Theoretical methods were used, such as documentary analysis from publications of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries indexed in Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Virtual Health Library of Cuba, Google Scholar, and those stored in the “José Martí” National Library, the library of the House of Chinese Traditions, the National Archives, press of the time, serial publications and books, the evidence that refers to Chinese emigration and the performance of the Chinese doctor. The logical historical analysis allowed us to locate the events in time and to study the context in which the Chinese doctors worked in Cuba. The subsequent abstraction, synthesis, and systematization allowed establishing the regularities of the work and human behavior of Chinese doctors in the Cuban 19th and 20th centuries. The triangulation of the results allowed obtaining sufficient evidence to assume the positions and conclusions that the research provided.

3 Developing

3.1 Chinese immigration in Cuba

Since the 16th century, the news about Chinese residents in Cuba colonized by Spain have appeared in notarial protocols. The aboriginal Indians had also disappeared due to inhuman exploitation in jobs and the arrival of diseases from the European continent. Almost all Chinese were native Cubans, not descendants of colonists. It was unusual that they made families with settlers, but with Creoles or Chinese women (those who emigrated were men and very few women). The massive emigration of the Chinese population began in the middle of the 19th century and continued until the first decades of the 20th. Internal and external factors affect this exodus.

As a result of the two Opium Wars of 1839 and 1860, Britain and France forced the Qing dynasty government to authorize the mass migration of workers to Western countries and their colonies to replace black slaves. It was when the dispersion of Chinese migrants around the world began, from Southeast Asia to America, Africa, Europe, and Australia.⁹ In the middle of the 19th century, from the cultural and demographic point of view, the fear of the “Africanization” of the island arose. This resulted in a “whitening” policy.⁹ For this reason, the Patriotic Society of Friends of the Country of Havana discussed the convenience of balancing the white population through white colonization projects, introducing white settlers to balance the entry of enslaved Africans.^{10,11}

Slavery had not been abolished, but it was condemned to disappear and labor was necessary in the fields, fundamentally for the production of sugar cane. Therefore, it was necessary to replace slave labor in some way. In the debates of the Economic Society of Friends of the Country on the type of workers needed, all agreed that

Asians were the most suitable workers for their “industry, intelligence, docility and frugal customs to meet the current needs of the industry in Cuba.”^{12,13} In the 19th century, Cuba was the great recipient of coolies, hired semi-serfs in slavery conditions similar to those of African slaves, who worked hard in the sugar cane fields.⁹

In this semi-serf status, Chinese coolies were hired to replace or work alongside African slaves on agricultural plantations for an 8-year “temporary” job concept. Six months after the contract ended, they had to return on their own, something that was practically impossible with the monthly salary of four silver pesos they earned.⁶

There were three currents of Chinese emigration to Cuba: the first between 1847 and 1874. It was the most important not only because of its volume of 150,000 Chinese, but also because of the influence it exerted on colonial society, at a time when the system was in crisis of production based on slave labor. The second, that of the “Californian” Chinese, of 5,000 individuals, named in allegory to the place where they went during the Gold Rush and from where they were forced to flee after the Sinophobic demonstrations that took place in this US territory.¹³ The third and last notable influx would occur between the 20s and 30s of the 20th century (1919–1925), when about 30,000 individuals entered.^{14,15} Zapata points out a fourth wave in 1950.¹⁶ In the groups of Chinese coolies who arrived as farmers, some said they were doctors or had knowledge of medicine and attended to the health problems of their fellow countrymen on the plantations; according to Pérez de la Riva, they toured the plantations.¹⁷ Some began their practice as professionals in the Cuban population and gained much prestige for their results.

3.2 Origins of the TCM

The millennial history of Chinese medicine includes in its evolution, from the early times of the Protohistoric period (beginning around 2000 BC), the doctrine of Tao, a theory that belongs to the psychocultural approach of ancient China and that manifests itself phenomenologically in the two antagonistic and dynamic principles, present in everything that exists: the Yin-Yang.¹⁸ In the period of the Old Kingdom, this comprises from the year 220 BC. Until 589 AD, descriptions were made of the solid viscera and the vessels that conducted energy, and as external causes of diseases, they had the wind, heat, humid cold, alterations in the diet, sexual excesses, violent emotions, and traumatism. Clinically, the Chinese doctors of this period used the interrogation, the examination of the pulse, and the examination of the patient.¹⁸ In the third period or the Chinese Middle Kingdom (589–1367), contemporary with the European Middle Ages, the Great Medical Council was created, which institutionalized the practice of medicine, established five groups of medical specialties and created the

condition of the examination prior to the exercise of the profession. Then, the first national public health system in the world began and the history of the organization of public health began.¹⁸

Chinese medicine began to spread in Europe through the chronicles of missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries. The medical matter of the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (《本草纲目》 *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica*) was spread in the first half of the 18th century and at the same time acupuncture and moxas, although indirectly due to accounts of Dutch travelers in Japan.^{19–21}

TCM has its origin in Huang Di (黄帝), known as the Yellow Emperor, who gave substance to the concept of medicine. It is based on the philosophical basis of observation and knowledge of the fundamental laws, according to which these would govern the functioning of the organism. He stands out for maintaining the precepts of Chinese philosophical thought, for his commitment to the human condition, caring for other people and saving their lives.²² The two great currents of thought that have most influenced Chinese culture are Confucianism and Taoism. Both are distinguished by their commitment to the human condition, a fundamental value is given to human life and health, the care of others and the family, which makes health an important issue. These sources of thought contribute to possessing a wisdom that allows them to solve difficult cases.²²

With these characteristics in their behavior, they arrived as coolies in the 19th century in Cuba, the first practitioners of TCM. Then began the history of Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese doctors in Cuba.

3.3 Chinese doctors in Cuba in the 19th century

Numerous researchers have focused their study on the Chinese doctors who arrived in Cuba in the 19th century, assuming that, with their arrival and their practices, the origin of TCM began in Cuba. Many literary publications have also addressed their characteristics, their work, and the impact they had on the Cuban population.^{23–28} It was at the end of the Modern Empire Period (the 19th century), that the first hired coolies began to arrive and their botanical doctors.¹⁸ The researchers have identified six of them from the sources consulted. There must have been many more, but they found no information about them.

3.3.1 Chang Pon Piang (Cham Bom-biá or Juan Chambombián)

The most notable of them and to whom the Cubans dedicated couplets and phrases that are used to this day was Chang Pon Piang, known in his Castilianization as Cham Bom-biá or Juan Chambombián. A native of Manila and belonging to the Jakka ethnic group, he had constant residence in Cuba since 1854, when he was granted a residence permit in Havana.⁶

In the capital, he worked as a cigar maker and practiced traditional botanical medicine using products prepared by himself with Cuban plants or with components imported from San Francisco, California.^{6,29} He had studied botany in his country and had great knowledge of the flora Cuban and Chinese.^{30,31} He was known as a healer, but due to his wisdom and successes in treating the sick, he was recognized as a remarkable man of scientist of oriental culture, who mixed his deep knowledge in Cuba and Chinese flora, as a wise herbalist with Western medical advances.^{6,32,33}

He was a cultured man, he also spoke Chinese, English, and Spanish, and was careful to dress when he did with the typicality of his land or the prevailing fashion in Europe, with a top hat and morning coat. In his treatment, a correct gentleman could be noticed with broad gestures emphasizing his figurative and pompous language.^{6,17} Apparently he did not have academic degrees, however, he cured not only bodily ills, he was able to treat afflictions and treated ailments such as dysentery, choleraform fever, asthma, exhaustion, blindness, and other ailments.^{30,32,33} The successes in his performance caused several reactions in the communities in which he lived, fundamentally by the native and Spanish doctors for whom he represented a difficult competition to overcome, since he saved patients who declared incurable or terminally ill. For this reason, and using the excuse of importing components for his products from San Francisco, California, without a license, and illegal practice of medicine, he was accused and put on trial in Havana, in the year 1863 (Fig. 1).^{23,32,33}

He was then forced to leave Havana, going to Matanzas where he also apparently suffered persecution and harassment by peninsular doctors.³¹ He then moved to Cárdenas, where there was an important Chinese community. He lived alone in a house that still exists, next to the old Fire Station, today the Museum of the Battle of Ideas. There he had a home, office, and dispensary.²⁵ He lived there until his death, on an unspecified date and in conditions that leave doubts as to whether it was of natural causes, suicide, or homicide (Fig. 2).^{25,34,35}

He was a very dear person among Cuban families, leaving pleasant and lasting memories for all those

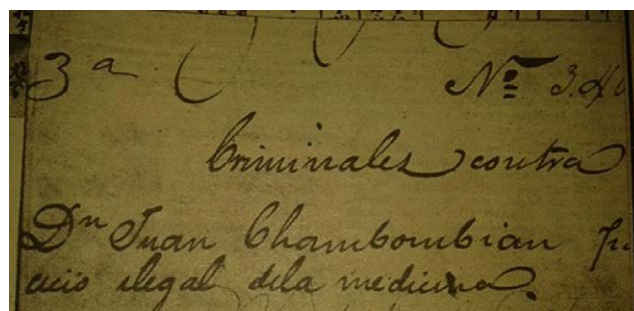


Figure 1 Fragment of the file opened against Don Juan Chambombian for illegal practice of medicine (source from: *Bohemia Magazine*. July 3 1981; 73).



Figure 2 Interior corridor of the house of Juan Chambombiá in Cárdenas (source from: the authors).

who were treated him at that time. He came to have great popularity in Cárdenas and throughout the island, becoming the supreme pontiff of medicine, the same yesterday as today, as the popular phrase that expresses him “to that not even the Chinese doctor saves him.”¹⁸ This phrase has a history that reveals that although it is Chambombiá to whom it is attributed, it is a recognition by the Cuban people of the successful performance of the Chinese doctor in our country.⁸

3.3.2 Kan Shi Kong

Botanical doctor who practiced in Shan Shian, Canton, arrived in Cuba after Chambombiá, however, he is the first known. He enjoyed prestige in Havana, devoted his youth to extensive Botany studies and had great knowledge of Cuban flora, having traveled our mountains in search of leaves and tree bark. He never revealed the great secrets that he possessed medicines to the Cubans; for which his studies on the Cuban flora were lost.²⁹

These manuscripts of the Cuban flora were in the possession of his colleague, Dr. Li Chi Chong, a Chinese botanist who lived on Egido Street in 1882, next to the “La Campana” inn, where there was a Chinese apothecary.³⁰ The great botanist discovered the remedy for gangrene, chlorosis, and impotence.³⁰ The historian Chuffat Latour knew him, was his patient and wrote about his

successes in the book *Historical Notes on the Chinese in Cuba*.³⁰ He cured the author himself of smallpox, the young Damián Hernández, considered a hopeless case of consumption. He says that “never had to regret any case, no matter how lost”.³⁰ He lived for several years in Galiano 116 (Fig. 3).

The researchers found that in 1881, with the same name on page 89, he was mentioned as a man of letters, being the first editor in 1882 of the newspaper *La voz del Pueblo*, author of a series of Chinese verses and poems where reflects his suffering for the black slave. He was a cultured man, he knew several dialects.³⁰ In March 1885, the famous Asian botanist died on Rayo Street, on the corner of San José. His compatriots made funerals with great pomp for the illustrious hero, one of the most enlightened Chinese who came to Cuba.^{26,30}

3.3.3 Ramón Lee

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the first years of the Republic, it offered medical consultations, located in the vicinity of Zanja and Soledad in the heart of Havana’s Chinatown.³⁶ He had academic training and practiced several techniques of TCM, with a lot of success in acupuncture.⁷

The only daughter of an important merchant of Vedado in Havana and Ramón was seriously ill. Lee was called to treat her. He stayed for days in the care of the young woman, healed her, and love for her arose between them.³⁶ The family refused to accept the relationship and sent the young woman to New York when the doctor wanted to make the courtship official. Ramón went there, and after finding her beloved managed to go with her to San Francisco, where he settled in the famous China Town of the populous city.³⁶ Unfortunately, this love affair alienated the prominent Chinese doctor from Cuban soil.³⁶ Thus ended the story of Ramón Lee in Havana, with a love story between Chinese and Cuban.

3.3.4 Siam (Sián-Juan de Dios de Jesús Siam Zaldivar)

He appeared in 1848, a native of Pekin, as a doctor. Unlike most immigrants to the island, when he arrived in the nascent city he brought 20,000 pesos in Spanish gold as a base capital, something is very unusual in Chinese emigration.²⁸ At that time, the residents of Havana had suffered from illness and death for years, so their arrival was initially well received.³⁷

The wealthy Mojarrieta family took him in, paid him a salary, provided him with an interpreter and a consulting room where he merged the Chinese pharmacopoeia with the Cuban one, which he already had from the Spanish and the African.^{28,37}

He achieved great notoriety and some resentful colleague of his success denounced his work and therefore the guard came to demand the title. But Siam had left him in his country, so they prevented him from practicing



Figure 3 House at 116 Galiano Street, where the enlightened doctor Kan Shi Kong lived in Havana (source from: the authors).

medicine.³⁷ For this reason, he moved to Santa María del Puerto del Príncipe, an important city at the time, the current province of Camagüey.

According to the historian from Camagüey, Amparo Fernández y Galera, in an interview granted to the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, in June 1848, he became the first teacher of TCM in the city. Despite the successes obtained in curing patients, the lack of knowledge of his professional practices generated the fear of some people considering him a healer. Furthermore, he was a Buddhist and was denigrated for not practicing the Catholic religion.³⁶ Roberto Méndez, in his book *Legends and Traditions of Camagüey*, underlines³⁸:

“Before the arrival of Siam, a wooden box with a single inscription: Veracruz, had been discovered in the waters of Nuevitas. There was an image of Christ crucified inside. The fishermen who made the discovery considered it miraculous. A coherent explanation was never given about that image, which could be destined for some of the temples of the Villa Rica de Veracruz, in Mexico, or that could have some splinters of the ‘true cross’, the wood where Jesus was tortured.”

The image was put up for sale and acquired by a wealthy couple of Ignacio María de Varona and Trinidad de la Torre Cisneros; during Holy Week, its owners took it to the city’s Parroquial Mayor and from there it was taken out in procession on Good Friday.²⁸

On Good Friday of 1850, while the Veracruz procession was going through the most central streets, Sián suddenly appeared, dressed in rich oriental garments, and solemnly knelt in the middle of the road in front of the image. In this way, he had converted to Christianity. He received baptism on April 25, 1850.³⁸ He adopted the name Juan de Dios Siam Zaldívar.³⁸ He signed in his own handwriting as Sián, which differentiates him from other Asian families settled in the city with the surname Siam.²⁸ In her interview with *Juventud Rebelde*, historian Amparo Fernández y Galera highlights Sián as a very intelligent man, merged in the labors with another doctor and they did tests to cure leprosy, but

“Since he didn’t have a title, he couldn’t sign off on the investigation.”³⁸

He had descendants through two lines: one legitimate with a white woman, and the other created in concubinage with a black woman, and the descendants of both branches still live in Camagüey, proud of their Asian ancestry and their so famous relatives (Fig. 4). A part of the offspring has been dedicated to the pharmaceutical profession.^{3,37} Díaz Montalvo,³⁷ assures that he traveled to Puerto Rico, got married and had two daughters. He then entered the world of lending and made more fortune. He died on March 23, 1885, at the age of 74, but the burial place has not been found, at least in Camagüey.^{36,37}

3.3.5 Wong Seng (Liborio Wong Seng)

He was a botanical doctor of Chinese farmers in the vicinity of Manzanillo, with a cubanized name, Liborio Wong Seng.³⁹ Historian Juan Jiménez Pastrana⁴⁰ describes their performance in the Ten Years’ War: “In the year 1869, the Chinese insurgents emulated heroic deeds with their native comrades, in all the areas where the war was raging. One of those heroes, in the East, was Captain Liborio Wong (Wong Seng), who had been a botanist for a crew near Manzanillo.”

Captain Wong was an assistant to Major General Modesto Díaz, and he always fought with singular bravery, his participation in the actions at Cauto Embarcadero, Mina de Tuna, and Guáimaro being famous, the latter being the place where Modesto Díaz’s forces deeply harassed Valmaseda in his march to reconquer Bayamo.”³⁰ Gonzalo de Quesada y Aróstegui said: “He was a model of patriotism and loyalty as a Chinese.”⁴¹ When the Zanjón Pact was carried out, Captain Wong Seng was one of those who saved the honor of Cuba, by staying with the forces of Major General Antonio Maceo, participating in the Baraguá Protest.^{42–44}

He was considered a Hero of the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878). We have not been able to obtain the death data.

3.3.6 Damián Morales

Maggy Guatty Marrero affirmed that Dr. Damián Morales arrived in Santiago de Cuba at a time when the city was devastated by cholera in 1852, and gained great fame in the treatment of this disease in those affected.⁴⁵ She related that: “The doctor’s treatment consisted of pressing the tendons of the armpits with the index finger and thumb until they vibrated, then he pulled the skin until causing a large bruise. Immediately, with a Chinese coin, he rubbed the patient’s hamstrings, arms, shoulders, and backbone with great energy...”⁴⁵

In the last cholera epidemic in the country (1867–1872), he successfully treated his patients with massage



Figure 4 Great-grandchildren of Médico Chino Siam together with the historian Amparo Fernández (from left to right, she is second in the photo) (source from: Yahily Hernandez Porto. *Juventud Rebelde Newspaper*. Digital Edition. January 3 2017).

in the axillary regions, a practice reflected in a classic work of the 16th century, the *T'uei na pi-kieu*, or *Treatise on the Massages*.^{42,44}

4 Traces of the Chinese doctors of the 19th century in Cuba

As a result of the investigations carried out, some characteristics were identified in the Chinese doctors of the 19th century that become behavioral regularities and can give an insight about not only their preparation and successful performance in medical practice but also their human behavior and some of the vicissitudes that they experienced in Cuba:

- Most of the Chinese doctors had a wide culture, highly educated communication with their patients and relatives, had an academic title, had a scientific or literary production in Cuba, and for this reason they earned the recognition of the people and some members of the wealthy social class or foreign officials, having successfully treated them for health conditions. The researchers Crespo Villate,⁶ Ferrer y Morejón,²³ Chouffat Latour,³⁰ and Roig de Leuchsering⁴⁶ attest to these characteristics in their publications.
- They frequently saved the lives of those who had been evicted by the rest of the physicians, with

extraordinary certainty. Emilio Roig de Leuchsering, historian of the city of Havana, in a publication of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, in the year 1965 points out that in the city of Cárdenas and Havana, “they carried out marvelous cures on evicted patients by famous doctors, restoring their health, sight, and the use of their limbs.”³² Damián Morales played an important role in controlling the cholera epidemic in Santiago de Cuba.^{42,44} Their cures were basically through herbal medicine, but they also practiced acupuncture, massage, and moxibustion.

- They combined the medical practice of the Asian continent with that of the West.
- It was not the remuneration for their service that was fundamental, they showed disinterest and altruism. They generally charged those who could pay for their services and treated the poor free of charge with an absolute detachment in service to their fellow men, something not common at that time.^{6,46} For this reason, among other reasons, only a few made a fortune.
- Many were persecuted by the authorities in addition to the denunciations made by non-Chinese colleagues, jealous of their successes.⁸

The consequence of the successful performance, professional and human behavior of the Chinese doctors of the 19th century, until nowadays it has remained in the

Cuban culture, nourishing the historical memory and the social memory, phrases, couplets derived from the work of these Chinese doctors.

An example of this is the phrase “Not even the Chinese doctor saves that one”, for his success in diagnosing and treating patients evicted by peninsular doctors, who managed to save the impossible, phrase product of a process of Canarian-Cuban transculturation and that is still used in Cuba with the same or other meanings,⁸ and one of the street songs:

“Manila Chinese,
Cham Bombiá;
five tomatoes
for a rea”⁴⁶

In the “Simple Verses” of José Martí, the national apostle, there is recognition of the virtue of the doctor, in addition to the intrinsic characteristic of the race:

“The yellow doctor came
Give me your medicine.
With a sallow hand
And the other hand in the pocket”⁴⁷

5 Some notable Cuban doctors of the 20th century, descendants of Chinese immigrants

Few researchers have conducted study on Chinese-descendant physicians in Cuba. The researchers did not find information referring to Chinese descent in Cuba at the moment, particularized to doctors descending from Chinese immigrants. Therefore, we will emphasize the most outstanding in Cuban medicine in the 20th century, knowing that they must have existed.

Physicians of Chinese descent in the 20th century were educated in Western medicine and none devoted themselves to TCM. However, they were eminent in their career and profession, some international recognition; part of it is due to the culture of their parents of Chinese origin. This remained in the Cuban culture, which recognizes the Chinese doctor (even if he was trained in the West), a triumphant professional who surely obtained success in the treatment of his patients.

According to reference to the researchers by Dr. Felipe Chao, president of the Chinese Mud Health Commission, members dedicated to TCM were and are few who practice or have specialized in it.

With the formal independence of Cuba in 1902, the doors of the University of Havana were opened to Cuban youth without racial discrimination, which allowed a few children of Chinese immigrants, possessors of economic resources, to enroll in university careers, mainly in the Faculty of Medicine.

Among the graduates, some became outstanding figures of Cuban medicine. They were the brothers, doctors Israel (1891–?) and Agustín (1902–2001) Castellanos González, and Pedro Manuel (1899–1958)

and Francisco (1904–1960) León Blanco, and Armando Seuc Chiu.

The historian of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health, Dr. Gregorio Delgado García, publishes interesting questions about these brothers.¹⁸

The Castellanos doctors were grandchildren through the paternal line of a Chinese farmer, of Cantonese ethnicity, who arrived in Cuba at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century and although he married a Mexican woman, his son inherited marked Asian traits, as did his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all children of Cubans. His surname Castellanos comes from the family that brought the contracted grandfather, who was a native of the city of Güines, Havana province.

Dr. Israel Castellanos González⁴⁸ was born in the island's capital on November 25th, 1891, and from a young age began to publish works on policing, ethnology, and anthropology in the important medical journal *Vida Nueva*, from Havana, which earned him great prestige. As a way to complete this knowledge, he graduated as a Doctor of Medicine from the University of Havana, where he was awarded the degree on October 17th, 1923. From that moment on, his research and publications, also as a forensic doctor, gave him international prestige and a few countries in the Americas requested his services in clarifying very difficult forensic cases, including assassinations. It is noteworthy that despite his eminent qualities as a researcher, he was never able to find the Asian names of his grandfather in documents, to which he dedicated many years.²⁰

His brother, Dr. Agustín Castellanos González,⁴⁹ was also born in Havana on September 12th, 1902. His studies at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Havana were of extraordinary brilliance and he finished, with the second transcript of his course, on July 14th, 1925. Recently graduated, he was called by his Master, Professor Dr. Ángel A. Aballí Arellano, creator of the Cuban School of Pediatrics and one of the most important pediatricians in America at the time, to work with him as his chair of the University of Havana. Due to his investigative work since 1931, he is considered by many to be the creator of angiocardiology, for contributions such as radiopaque angiocardiology, superior cavography, inferior cavography, and retrograde aortography. He is one of the four Cuban doctors who have been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine and his figure appears in the famous mural by Diego Rivera at the National Institute of Cardiology in Mexico, inaugurated in May 1944, along with the great masters of world cardiology.¹⁸

The León Blanco doctors were descendants through the paternal line in the fourth generation, of a Chinese farmer with a Hispanic surname, living in the former province of Guantánamo, Oriente, whose original Asian names are also unknown, also graduated from the University of Havana, who became among the best pathologists in Cuba.

Dr. Pedro M. León Blanco⁵⁰ was born on April 28th, 1899. He graduated as a Doctor of Medicine on December 12th, 1923, and immediately joined the chair of Normal Histology and Embryology as a graduate assistant, where he developed a long career teaching and research until the moment of his death occurred in Havana on April 8th, 1958. Dr. Delgado García recounts “I had the honor of being his student and I remember him as a teacher of great modesty, always attentive to clarify any doubts his disciples had, very considerate and respected among his colleagues and collaborators, as well as among Cuban pathologists.”¹⁸

His brother, Dr. Francisco León Blanco,⁵¹ was born in Guantánamo on July 4th, 1904. He received his degree on April 5th, 1934. Unlike his brother, he briefly held the position of associate professor of Anatomy and Pathological Histology, to go to Mexico in 1938 where he carried out important research on Mal del Pinto, Pinta or Carate, an endemic disease in the Aztec country, with which he demonstrates to the evidence the pathogenic role of treponema (*Treponema carateum*) found little before by doctors José Alfonso Armenteros and Juan Grau Triana in Havana. He also carried out a complete study of the disease experimentally in man, beginning by self-inoculating treponema to suffer from the disease and describing the clinical aspects of this spirochetosis. The results of his research published in important medical journals in the United States, Mexico, and Cuba have immortalized his name in the field of medical sciences. An outstanding figure as a professor of descriptive anatomy, Full Professor, Consultant Professor, and Professor of Merit at the University of Medical Sciences of Havana, Dr. Armando. Seu Chiu was born on June 10th, 1922, a descendant of Chinese immigrants on both his paternal and maternal branches and from marked Asian features.¹⁸ Graduated as a doctor of medicine with the second record of the 1947–1948 academic year, Dr. Seu Chiu was a student and internal doctor by file at the “General Calixto García” University Hospital, a resident doctor by opposition of the hospital itself. Between 1952 and 1959, he worked as a substitute doctor at the “Kow Kong” Chinese Clinic and from 1955 at the Cruz Azul Clinic as a zone doctor.⁵² After the year 1959, it was incorporated that he joined the military medical services as a surgeon at the Hospital “Dr. Carlos J. Finlay” and when the Institute of Basic and Preclinical Sciences (ICBP) “Victoria de Girón” was created, he became assistant professor of Anatomy at that center where he developed a commendable work training generations of Cuban doctors for more than four decades, to be considered one of the most important figures of basic medical sciences in Cuba in the period after 1959.⁵² In 1968, he travels to the Anatomy Institute of Magdeburg, Germany, to carry out the study and in 1978–1979, he lends internationalist collaboration as professor of Anatomy at the University of Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy in Aden, Democratic Republic of Yemen.⁵²

During his professional life, he carried out various investigations, fundamentally on human foot measurement. He appears in the Foundation Act of the Cuban Society of Morphological Sciences among the 40 founding professionals, for the science of Anatomy.⁵³ He had a high recognition as a teacher in Medical Sciences and received multiple medals and decorations.⁵³

The researchers were his students in the subject of Anatomy. Brilliant teacher, with a great power of observation, he was very demanding in the anatomy knowledge as a academy discipline with his students. He inspired great respect for his qualities and wisdom. On May 10th, 2003, he died while still active in the ICBP “Victoria de Girón”. His funeral honors were held in the Aula Magna of the University of Medical Sciences of Havana.⁵²

6 Conclusions

The practices that were predecessors of TCM in Cuba date back to the 19th century, with the arrival of basically herbalist doctors, who arrived as farmers in conditions of semi-slavery. Their arrival was conditioned by internal and external factors, linked to the substitution of black slave labor. Six notable Chinese doctors were found in the 19th century from the west to the east of the island, successful in their performance, leaving in couplets and phrases the impact of their work nowadays. They were characterized by their extensive culture, the incorporation of Western and African Medicine to Asian Medicine. Emigrants generally founded families in Cuba and among their descendants, some were identified as Cuban doctors, who have remained in the history of Cuban medicine as prestigious personalities for their successful performance, professionalism, and human values, just as those immigrants from the 19th century. None of them practiced TCM.

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This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by either of the authors.

Author contributions

Lourdes Bárbara Alpizar Caballero participated in the research design, writing of the article, conducting the research, and data analysis. Lourdes de la Caridad Borges Oquendo participated in the writing of the article, conducting the research, and data analysis.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no financial or other conflicts of interest.

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