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**BOOK REVIEW**

**Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui and Moisés Sío Wong, *Our History is Still Being Written : The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution* (New York and London: Pathfinder Press, 2005), pp. 216, \$20.00 ; £14.00, pb.**

**Reviewed by HAL KLEPAK | Royal Military College of Canada**

Once again Mary-Alice Waters of Pathfinder Press has dared to move into the sometimes difficult waters of collections of interviews. This contribution is a companion volume to her earlier *Making History: Interviews with four generals of Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces*. Here she examines the unlikely topic of the reminiscences of three generals of Chinese origin and their role in the Cuban Revolution.

It is rare enough, especially in English, to have published accounts of the thinking of the generals of any Latin American armed forces. But the 'siege mentality' which Cuba has developed in the face of the visceral opposition of the United States over nearly half a century has made that country, and especially its armed forces, even more anxious to keep senior officers from giving away any secrets about the state of national defence.

All the more surprising then that on three occasions in less than a decade the FAR (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*) have been keen to have senior officers share their views on a wide array of issues, and especially on their own revolutionary experience in the military domain, with a wide audience. The first of these was loyalist Luis Báez's groundbreaking *Secretos de Generales* in 1996. That writer interviewed no fewer than 40 generals and one admiral of the FAR on their lives in the revolutionary military.

The *cúpula* of the FAR must have been pleased with the result for it encouraged the two books by Waters. While in works of this kind one is hardly likely to encounter highly critical comments about either Cuba's forces or government, it is nonetheless true that we have here valuable windows into some at least of the inner workings of the FAR which are not available anywhere else. This is especially true as the havoc wreaked by the Special Period following the collapse of Soviet assistance in 1990–91 has meant that the institution is no longer publishing on a regular basis its in-house magazine *Verde Olivo* or other specialist periodicals for FAR officers and reservists.

Few of the readers of the interviewer's other book can have expected the sequel to be another on, of all things, three generals of Chinese extraction. The Chinese connection in Cuba is a century and a half old. Concerned that Spain would soon abolish slavery, leaving them without sufficient cheap workers for the still labour intensive sugar industry, Cuban slave owners hired indentured workers who came on contract to Cuba and joined the slaves in the fields. While in theory their conditions were to have been better than those of black slaves, virtually all accounts of their lives on the island would suggest that there was little difference between the two.

The generals, Armando Choy Rodríguez, Gustavo Chui Beltrán and Moisés Sío Wong, all served in the anti-Batista forces, two in the Sierra Maestra and one in the Escambray Mountains of Central Cuba. Thus their revolutionary credentials are excellent and they are close to being *figuras históricas* of today's Cuba. All continued to serve in the FAR after their professionalisation not only in the heady days of the early 1960s, when the US military threat was extremely direct, but also through the long years of the complete re-making of the FAR which involved the wholesale acceptance of Soviet doctrine, strategy and tactics,

organisation, uniforms, equipment and weaponry of the late 1960s and seventies.

They then took part in the creation of the massive reserves of the FAR, expanded in the early 1980s as part of the *Guerra de Todo el Pueblo* strategy aiming at deterring the US from invasion in the wake of President Reagan's posturing on the need to 'roll back' communism. However, undoubtedly the most challenging for them and Cuba has been the Special Period, that sustained, unparalleled belt-tightening that has changed all life on the island, and whose ending is unknown.

Since 1990 the FAR have once again been asked to take on roles in the economy that are far from normal for highly professional military institutions. Their role in running industries, managing agricultural pursuits, handling the expanding tourism of the country, and much else have placed them front and centre in the national effort for recovery.

These three generals talk here about their origins, lives, revolutionary experience before 1959, and military service writ large since. This gives us insights into Chinese-Cubans that are highly illustrative of what that community has faced while also telling us much about the Revolution at war and at peace. The degree to which these truly *revolutionary* armed forces are expected to respond to the *comandante's* orders even in the most military scenarios is observable in their interviews. General Choy, after commanding all manner of military units (from infantry to air force!) became an ambassador and currently heads the organisation responsible for the cleaning, conservation and development of the Bay of Havana. Gustavo Chui served at home, in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Angola and is now a retired officer who serves as director of the Association of Ex-combatants of the Cuban Revolution. Moisés Sío Wong was founder of the military police, became aide to Minister of the Armed Forces Raúl Castro, and

subsequently was made head of the programme of small-scale urban farming (now extended, with his assistance, to Venezuela). He was head of the State Reserve system for two decades, responsible for preparing the island for sustained resistance to invasion as well as natural disasters.

For those thirsty to have yet another look inside the extraordinary institution that is the Cuban armed forces, this book is essential reading. But for those interested in today's Cuba in general, it is a useful work not seen every day.