

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Our History is Still Being Written**

*The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution*

BY ARMANDO CHOY, GUSTAVO CHUI, MARY-ALICE WATERS, MOISÉS SÍO WONG

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**Reviewed by:** Dorothea A.L. Martin, Appalachian State University

This book chronicles the military service of three Cuban-Chinese generals - Choy, Chui and Wong - as told through a series of interviews conducted by a panel of interviewers. The panel was headed by Mary-Alice Waters, Pathfinder Press president and editor of *New International* [a journal promoting Marxist politics and theory]. Their stories as the children of Chinese immigrant parents who arrived in Cuba a century ago as part of the international labor Diaspora are dedicated to "the new generation of fighting 'men and women from nowhere' now emerging around the world for whom the example of Cuba's socialist revolution shows the way forward." (p. 8) This seems a strange dedication, considering that most of the world is waiting news of Castro's death in hopes that Cuba will follow a new path more like that taken by the People's Republic of China [PRC] since Mao passing. However, given the strong emphasis on the role of these three Chinese generals in Cuba's military aid to Angola, the notion of an emerging international socialist military force charged with aiding others in their fight against perceived hegemonic forces as well as crushing poverty in Latin America can be seen as the underlying thrust of the book.

There are three main parts to the book. Part I includes a brief biographical sketch of the three men followed by a more in-depth look at their family backgrounds and how they came to participate in the July 26 Movement. This section also has what amounts to an ethnographic study of Chinese immigrants and their roles - both as soldiers and as material supporters - in Cuba's 19th century struggles against Spain. Discrimination against Chinese was also part of the picture and the socio-economically stratified Chinese community. The 1959 victory polarized the Chinese with many of the rich leaving as did other wealthy businessmen and merchants. Sio Wong, however, asserts that "the majority of the Chinese ... joined the revolution." (p. 70)

Part II covers the service of these generals as part of Cuba's "volunteers" in Angola and the crisis in Cuba in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Angola mission, as told from their vantage point, focuses on the strategic victory against South African forces at Cuito Cuanavale. After this, according to General Wong, South Africa "had to come to the negotiating table, grant independence to Namibia, free Nelson Mandela, and accelerate the process that soon led to the destruction of the apartheid system itself." (p. 100) Obviously, this is a very different take on Cuba's participation in Angola than usually heard. There are no references to Cuba's forces being used as surrogates for Soviet troops in this post-colonial cold war struggle, although there is mention of U.S. backed Angolan and South African forces, nor is there any hint of the PRC's support for a third faction in this fight. The end of the Angolan mission coincided with the loss of Soviet economic support after 1991 and the tightening of the economic blockade by the U.S. in 1992, ushering in the so called

"Special Period." The Chinese generals played an active role in overseeing domestic strategies to deal with the drastic reduction of resources. Sio Wong, who had been made head of the National Institute of State Reserves in 1986, had an even more significant role since the start of the Special Period. Relating a cautionary tale with a self-effacing tone, Wong speaks of his days as head of the army's reserves, when the resources under his control amounted to only ten 325- pound bags of unrefined sugar, 5 cartons of condensed milk and 5 boxes of canned sausages. Unwittingly Wong passed out all but 6 bags of the sugar in a week. Consequently, he was put in charge of meat distribution - a joke since there was no meat available. Wong soon realized that those reserved bags of sugar could supply 200 fighting men with 1200 calories a day in sugar water, enough to fight for 2 months without outside support. Now as head of the State Reserves, Wong has the difficult task of cutting waste and parceling out scarce resources.

In Part III, recent policy changes in dealing with the growing food crisis and also the emerging relationships with other socialist leaning governments in Latin America, especially Venezuela under Hugo Chavez Frias are addressed. On the domestic front, Wong and Choy relate the new trends toward using small urban plots to grow vegetables, a loosening up of strict market controls to accommodate and encourage more production and the new growth industry in organic gardening to meet increased demands from tourists. Restoring parts of Havana for tourism and making efforts to clean up the water supply and deal with reforestation are also part of their jobs. Sio Wong has also served as one of Cuba's point-men in building relations with Venezuela. In his opinion, "What's developing [there] is a revolution." (p. 147) While Cuba has few products to offer in return for Venezuela's oil, iron, bauxite, etc., it does have teachers, doctors, and dentists, etc. who have been enlisted in a kind of social services army to help Venezuela address its pressing poverty by bringing education and health care to the rural and urban poor. They have even exported the urban small plot orgaoponic agricultural program to help supply food to cities. In the closing section titled "The Battle of Ideas," both Choy and Chui speak of their roles in Cuban Revolutionary Army veterans' organizations that make rounds to schools to tell their story. They are living history texts. But they admit that their work is not primarily about the past. And as these old soldiers take on new challenges, they proclaim: "Our history is still being written." (p. 165)

The book also includes photos, a map of Cuban action in Angola, speeches by both Castro and Mandela on the Cuban efforts in Angola and a helpful glossary. It will be useful to researchers interested in an insiders' perspective on how Cuban Chinese have made a place for themselves and for their view of the history that they have helped to make. Students will find the personal stories easy to grasp but would need a more complete context of the Cuban Revolution in which to evaluate these exceptional lives.