

Chinese, Tusan and Kuei: the representation or chinese peruvian identity in Siu Kam Wen's short stories*

Antonio Paoliello**

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which Chinese Peruvian writer Siu Kam Wen portrays Chinese identity in the short stories contained in El Tramo final (The Final Stretch). Siu Kam Wen is considered one of the most important authors of the Generation of 1980 and the collection analysed in the present article represents a milestone in Peruvian literature. Published in Lima in 1985, El tramo final is the first work by a Peruvian narrator of ethnic Chinese background to depict the Chinese Peruvian experience from within. Through this article, I aim at investigating how the short stories by Siu help us understand the specificity of Chinese Peruvian life, especially in Lima's Chinese Quarter, and to what extent they invigorate and/or refute the ideas on ethnic Chinese people that prevail in mainstream Peruvian society.

Keywords

Siu Kam Wen; El tramo final; chinese identity; Lima's Chinatown; sino-peruvian literature.

Resumo

O artigo explora as maneiras pelas quais o escritor sino-peruano Siu Kam Wen representa a identidade chinesa nos contos de El Tramo final (O trecho final). Siu Kam Wen é considerado um dos autores mais importantes da Geração do 1980 e a coleção analisada no presente artigo representa um marco na literatura peruana. Publicado em Lima, em 1985, El tramo final é o primeiro trabalho escrito por um narrador sino-peruano que descreve a experiência chinesa no Peru desde dentro. O objetivo deste artigo é investigar como os contos de Siu nos ajudam a entender a especificidade da vida chinesa no Peru, especialmente no bairro chinês de Lima, e em que medida eles revigoram e/ou refutam as idéias sobre os chineses que prevalecem na sociedade peruana.

Palavras-chave

Siu Kam Wen; El tramo final; identidade chinesa; bairro chinês de Lima; literatura sino-peruana.

* Artigo recebido em 12 de fevereiro de 2013 e aprovado em maio de 2013.

** Teaching Fellow in Chinese Studies at the Department of Asian Studies, The University of Edinburgh. From 2007 to 2011, Paoliello was Doctoral Fellow at the Department of Translation and Interpreting, UAB, where he also taught courses in Chinese language and culture (from history to literature to translation).

COMMUNITIES OF PEOPLE OF CHINESE DESCENT CAN BE FOUND across continents and countries from Southeast Asia to Europe, from Oceania to Africa and North America. Central and South American countries too host ethnic Chinese communities differing both in size and in the ways in which they interact with other ethnic groups. The Chinese experience in Latin America and the Caribbean is probably one of the lesser studied phenomena related to the ethnic Chinese living outside of the Greater China region, despite its historic significance.¹ Among all Latin American countries, Peru has undoubtedly one of the most sizeable ethnic Chinese communities, as also noted by López-Calvo (2008, p.73),² and also one of the oldest. As Evelyn Hu-DeHart explains, “[i]n the middle of the nineteenth century, Peru, which became independent of Spain, [...] actively promoted the importation of Chinese coolies or contract laborers to work on sugar plantations” (2007, p.31). Chinese labourers were not only active in the coastal plantations and later as retailers in urban areas, but they also actively contributed to the development of the inland regions of the country, far from the major coastal cities and from the main transportation hubs. For instance, by the second decade of last century, many remote areas “were now served by a stream of Chinese traders and peddlers constantly transporting goods back and forth and readily offering advances and credit” (MCKEOWN, 2001, p.54).

However, the important role played by the ethnic Chinese population of Peru in the economic life of the country has not always been acknowledged. This contribution could have been “deliberately suppressed in official Peruvian historiography due to a prevailing nineteenth-century Peruvian attitude that only European pioneers were capable of bringing ‘civilization’ to the jungle” (HU-DEHART, 2007, p.40). The Chinese experience in Peru, especially in Lima, is brilliantly documented in many of the literary works by Siu Kam Wen, a Peruvian writer of ethnic Chinese background. Agreeing with López-Calvo when he states that there has only been limited scholarship on the portrayal of the ethnic Chinese in Peruvian literature so far (2008, p.73), with this article I aim at shedding some light on how Siu Kam Wen depicts the daily life of Lima’s ethnic Chinese dwellers and on the ways in which Chinese identity is

¹ The importance of the ethnic Chinese population of Central and South America is also proven by the fact that already in the early twentieth century, the Chinese Empire dispatched a minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary not only to the United States, but also to Cuba and Peru. This diplomat, Wu Tingfang, an ethnic Chinese from Singapore, visited Lima in 1909 (MCKEOWN, 2001, p.135).

² According to figures published in Poston, Mao, and Yu, in 1991 Peru was home to 500,000 Chinese Peruvians and hosted the third largest ethnic Chinese community in the Americas, where only the U.S. and Canada had a bigger number of people of Chinese ancestry (1990, p.636).

represented in his earlier short stories from the 1980s, which appear in *El Tramo Final* (*The Final Stretch*), published for the first time in 1985.

This article also attempts at reflecting upon how the short stories by Siu can help us understand the specificity of the Chinese Peruvian experience which the author masterfully illustrates. Moreover, by paying special attention to the issue of Sinitic language maintenance which appears to play a central role in many of Siu Kam Wen's stories, I suggest that the author himself and not only his works can be seen as an example of transculturation.

Born in the Chinese village of Nanwen, in the southern province of Guangdong in 1951, Siu Kam Wen, whose real name is Xiao Jinrong,³ arrived in Lima at the age of 9, after living a few years in the then British colony of Hong Kong. Siu Kam Wen attended the "Sam Men" Chinese school (known in Spanish as Colegio Peruano Chino "Diez de Octubre") before enrolling in the Accounting programme of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, officially the oldest university in the Americas and Peru's leading institution of higher education. Unsatisfied with his university choice, the author confesses that those years were mainly spent at the Faculty of Letters, where he befriended renowned writer Cronwell Jara who introduced him to literary circles and to creative writing (SIU, 2009). Siu Kam Wen and his family left Lima in 1985 and moved to Hawaii, where the writer still resides today.

As Maan Lin recalls, the decision was prompted by two frustrating and interconnected situations: the difficulty in securing a satisfactory job in Peru and the impossibility to obtain Peruvian citizenship, due to the strict immigration and naturalization laws of the country. Lin states that Siu considers himself a "triple exiled" (2004, p.5). However, Siu seems to have a rather clear view of his own identity as a Peruvian writer, even though he is Chinese by birth and American by nationality (SIU and SOTOMAYOR, 2009). The writer affirms that he considers himself "a Peruvian writer because almost everything [he has] written is about Peru, about its people, about [his] experience in Peru" (BLANCO BONILLA, 2009). Siu has remained faithful to Spanish throughout the years and interestingly enough he has never published in his heritage Sinitic language, which he masters. Far from being a mere anecdotic fact, the

³ In his personal blog, the Chinese Peruvian writer gives a brief and entertaining account of how he became known as Siu Kam Wen. He recalls that before being able to join his family in Lima, he had to apply for a passport. The officer who handled his application only knew Cantonese; therefore he spelled the future writer's name following the Cantonese pronunciation of the three characters constituting his name.

consistency of such a linguistic choice confirms Siu Kam Wen's position within and attachment to the mainly hispanophone Peruvian literary sector.

Siu Kam Wen is a rather prolific writer and "is considered, along with Alonso Cueto, Cronwell Jara, and Guillermo Nino de Guzman, one of the best narrators of Peru's Generation of 1980" (LÓPEZ-CALVO, 2008, p.87). Apart from the already mentioned *El Tramo final*, he has also published *La primera espada del Imperio* (1988), a collection of short stories as well. In 2004, three other works were put to press: two novels (*La estatua en el jardín* and *Viaje a Ítaca*⁴) and *Cuentos completos*, a collection containing the short stories already published in the 1980s together with previously unpublished stories.⁵ Three years later yet another novel saw the light: *La vida no es una tómbola* and in 2010 the crime novel *El furor de mis ardores* was published in Peru. *El verano largo*, his newest work and also a novel, is available since May 2012 thanks to Casa Tomada, a Peruvian publishing house that also reprinted *El Tramo final* within its collection of "Clásicos peruanos contemporáneos" (Peruvian contemporary classics).⁶ Siu Kam Wen is also the author of *Deconstructing Art* (2007), an English-language essay between aesthetics and art theory.

El tramo final, the collection on which this article focuses, contains twelve short stories and can be considered a milestone in Peruvian literature and in the study of the Chinese community in the Andean country from a literary perspective, since it is "[t]he first work to portray the Chinese community from the inside" (HIGGINS, 2002, p.304). Thanks to its publication, "Peruvian readers could for the first time penetrate this world which they had only seen from afar without understanding it. For the first time Lima's Chinese quarter was viewed with compassion but also from a critical perspective" (LAUSENT-HERRERA, 2011, p.78). Therefore, one could argue that Siu's stories play an important social role and, without forgetting that they are works of fiction, they also function as a sociological portrait that sometimes invigorates sometimes refutes the widely accepted "images of Chinese as honorable and diligent workers, skillful

⁴ As the author confirms in his personal blog, *Viaje a Ítaca* was originally written in English during his fifth year in the United States. The book he had written in English in the early 1990s, *A Journey to Ithaca*, was more centred on Peru itself, rather than on the tragicomic love affair between the semi-autobiographical protagonist and Rosa portrayed in the Spanish version. Among the reasons for this change in topic, there could also be the difficulty of self-translating the work into Spanish, as the author himself suggests.

⁵ Due to the difficulty of finding the first edition of *El tramo final*, direct citation from the stories will be based on *Cuentos completos*, which reprints all the stories from the 1985 edition.

⁶ In the same collection, one also finds the experimental novel *El escarabajo y el hombre* by renowned writer and professor of literature Oswaldo Reynoso, first published in 1970.

merchants, and immigrants open to assimilation into Peruvian society” (MCKEOWN, 2001, p.176).

According to Maan Lin, Siu’s stories collected in *El tramo final* deal for the most part with the process of transculturation experienced by the ethnic Chinese population of Lima (2004, p.6). In fact, many of the stories depict what Ortiz would consider a process of synthesis between cultures that is the ultimate stage experienced by the immigrant who is uprooted from his native land, constantly moving between disruption and adjustment through various phases of deculturation (*desculturación*) and acculturation (*aculturación*) (ORTIZ, 1940, p.93). While Lin perceptively uses the concept of transculturation to refer to the Chinese Peruvian experience depicted by Siu, he also states that ethnic Chinese of second and later generations are gradually becoming *Peruvianised* (2004, p.6), which means that they are gradually relinquishing their Chineseness (*deculturation*) and embracing Peruvianness (*acculturation*). However, as Ortiz clearly stated and as Mary Louise Pratt explains, transculturation as a term and as a concept is envisioned as a means “to replace the paired concepts of acculturation and deculturation that described the transference of culture in reductive fashion” (1992, p.228) and could therefore prove useful in analysing the stories by Siu Kam Wen.

The short story that gives title to the collection is probably among the best portraits of transculturation in the Chinese Peruvian context and is also a literary testimony of the ethnic Chinese response to the changes in Peruvian society. Moreover, it is the first piece of fiction written by Siu in the language of Cervantes.⁷ “El tramo final” is the account of the Peruvian experience of Ah-Po, a mother stubbornly anchored to her Chinese background, while her family adjusts itself to life in a society which many Chinese people were leaving behind. In fact, the years in which the short story is set were years of great changes for Peruvian society that also affected the ethnic Chinese community, as Isabelle Lausent-Herrera reminds us. In the years following the establishment of a leftist military government by General J. Velasco (1968-1975), “[t]he wealthiest [Chinese] businessmen fled to the United States and Canada out of fear of communism, leaving behind a politically and culturally disoriented population” (LAUSENT-HERRERA, 2011, p.78). When writing about the genesis of this short

⁷ Siu talks about his beginnings as a Spanish-language writer and about the birth of his first story in such language in a short article written in 2009.

story, Siu Kam Wen affirms that the title is “muy apropiado porque en esos años, que eran la segunda fase del velasquismo, todo el mundo estaba haciendo lo que las ratas en un barco que se hunde: salir nadando a toda costa.

La colonia china había perdido tantos de sus miembros que parecía estar realmente en su tramo final.” (*very suitable, because in those years, which constituted the second phase of the Velasco government, everyone was doing what mice in a sinking boat do: swim away as fast as they could. The Chinese community had lost so many of its members that it really seemed as it was in its final stretch*) (SIU, 2009).⁸ The narrator of “El tramo final” informs the reader that “[e]n aquella época muchos de los residentes chinos habían emigrado a los Estados Unidos, a Australia o a Centro América, o se habían vuelto a Hong Kong y a Macao, en el temor de que el país se iba a convertir en un estado comunista.” (*During that time, many Chinese residents had moved to the United States, to Australia or to Central America, or had returned to Hong Kong and Macao, in fear that the country might become a communist state*) (SIU, 2004a, p.34-35). This short passage not only bears witness to the gradual shrinking of the ethnic Chinese community in Peru, of which Lima’s Chinese Quarter had always been the pulsing heart, but it can also be read as evidence of two different trends within the Chinese Peruvian community.

On the one hand, there were those who decided to migrate to other Spanish-speaking countries (Central America), thus seeking better economic prospects still within the Hispanic linguistic and cultural world. On the other hand, there were those Chinese residents who sought a better life in the Sinophone linguistic and cultural haven of colonial Hong Kong and Macao or in two Anglophone countries with sizable ethnic Chinese communities, the United States and Australia.

However, Lima’s Chinatown was also being abandoned by those ethnic Chinese people who were eager to show their economic success. For instance, one of Ah-Po’s sons, *lou*⁹ Chen, who has become wealthy thanks to his microbus and moneylender businesses, proclaims his new economic status by moving away from his Chinatown apartment and into a new mansion in Monterrico, an upscale district of Lima. As noted by Lausent-Herrera, “[t]he young and the China-born Peruvians sought to leave the quarter, partly to mark their rising social status and partly to be near to their new

⁸ All translations from Spanish are mine, unless otherwise stated.

⁹ *Lou* (*lao* in Mandarin Chinese) is a Chinese expression which literally means “old” and is often used as a prefix to the surname of a person in order to show familiarity or affection.

Chinese-Peruvian schools and the new clubs which had been moved outside the Chinese quarter to new residential areas” (2011, p.78).

Lou Chen can be considered a perfect example of the process of transculturation which in turn leads to cultural hybridity,¹⁰ a peculiar status which springs from the difficulty he has, as a Chinese Peruvian, to reproduce the exact patterns of behaviour of people belonging to mainstream Peruvian society and also from the impossibility of keeping his Chineseness intact. The sentences Siu Kam Wen uses to describe this culturally hybrid character are charged with ironic overtones. For instance, the enormous trouble he takes in order to appear as grand as his new mansion are exemplified by changes in his appearance (dyed hair and trendy clothes). The moneylender together with his Peruvian wife and their *Tusan*¹¹ sons who being “los ocupantes de la nueva y elegante mansion estaban a tono con ella, o se esforzaban fervorosamente por estarlo.” (*The dwellers of the new and elegant mansion were in tune with it, or zealously tried to be*) (SIU, 2004a, p.28).

Although *lou* Chen *zealously* tries to appear elegant like his new abode, his “castellano chapucero” (*sloppy Spanish*) (Siu, *Cuentos completos* 29) betrays his origin as an outsider to Lima’s upper class. *Lou* Chen inhabits an in-between space, an interstice that “provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate[s] new signs of identity” (BHABHA, 1994, p.2). His “sloppy Spanish” and his “new and elegant mansion” are the signs of a new identity in formation, both cultural and social. Siu Kam Wen vividly portrays *lou* Chen as a link between his old mother who holds tight to her Chineseness and the other family members. He also serves as language mediator between the mother who “nunca aprendió a hablar más de tres o cuatro expresiones en castellano, ya que jamás tuvo necesidad de lo contrario” (*She never learned how to say more than three or four Spanish expressions, since she had never needed to*) (SIU, 2004a, p.36) and the rest of the family. Ah-Po who is taken to live in the new mansion by *lou* Chen cannot adjust to the new environment, since the process of transculturation has never started for her. In

¹⁰ While “[a]mong postcolonial theorists, there is a wide consensus that hybridity arose out of the culturally internalized interactions between ‘colonizers’ and ‘the colonized’ and the dichotomous formation of these identities,” (YAZDIHA, 2010, p.31) the term is also useful to describe non-colonial migrant situations such as those recounted by Siu in *El tramo final*.

¹¹ Isabelle Lausent-Herrera states that “[t]he term *tusan* (*tusheng*) is commonly used in Peru to designate the children of Chinese parents born in Peru as well as children born of a Chinese father and a Peruvian or mixed race mother. Restricted in use initially it now refers to three generations of Chinese ancestry” (2011, p.69).

fact, her interaction with mainstream Peruvian and Spanish-speaking society has been virtually non-existent, since she “permaneció recluida en un departamento del Barrio Chino cerca de veinte años, y no hablaba con nadie más que con sus coterráneos” (*She remained confined to a Chinatown flat for almost twenty years, and she would only talk to her compatriots and no one else*) (SIU, 2004a, p.36).

Moreover, her appearance too does not show any signs of the transcultural process through which his son is shaping a new identity. In fact, she “llevaba sus cabellos grises a la manera de las mujeres de origen *hakká*, recogidos en un moño. Sus vestidos eran anticuados, incluso comparados con los de otras ancianas de su edad. Prefería usar pantalones en lugar de faldas” (*She put her grey hair up in a bun, according to the Hakka tradition. Her clothes were old-fashioned, even when compared with those of old women her age. She preferred to wear trousers rather than skirts*) (SIU, 2004a, p.28). The fact that she puts her hair up in a *Hakka*-style bun and that she still prefers to wear trousers instead of skirts as most elder women of Peruvian mainstream society are other two clear indicators of Ah-Po’s obstinate rootedness in the Chinese customs she has carried along with her across the Pacific.

Unable to get used to her life at the mansion, Ah-Po decides to move in with her other son, Ah-Séng, who lives in the humble family house and who used to work in a *chifa*¹² now out of business. Located in the Rímac neighbourhood, the old house is within walking distance from *lou* Chen’s old shop now run by the Choy family. The old lady pays regular visits to the family and rejoices in the company of the Choy’s three daughters. The girls, who all attend the “Sam Men” Chinese School (the same school attended by Siu Kam Wen), are fluent in Cantonese and are considered by Ah-Po as the finest example of the attachment to Chineseness that new generation of ethnic Chinese and *Tusan* alike should show. However, the narrator suggests that their attachment to Chinese identity through regular use of a Sinitic language might be the result of a family imposition, rather than a practice stemming from the girls’ free will. In sum, the Choy girls too are not immune to transculturation, and as their Chineseness interacts with mainstream Peruvian identity, they inhabit an interzone, “a liminal place, a border territory, a region in dispute or under negotiation, a field of interaction, but always a

¹² *Chifa* (from the Chinese *chi fan*, which means “to eat”) is a Peruvian idiom that denotes local Chinese restaurants. According to Rodríguez Pastor, in the Americas Peru is second only to the United States when it comes to the number of Chinese restaurants, and Cantonese cuisine in Peru is a phenomenon like no other (2006, p.79-80).

‘zone’, a whole field, not a line between two entities, but something ‘in-between’ them” (HOTZ-DAVIES, 2010, p.28).

Nevertheless, the old woman cannot help but compare the three Choy girls with her own grandchildren, “lamentando que no fuesen como ellas: ni Juan Carlos ni Francisco José entendían una jota del cantonés o hakká” (*Regretting that they were not like them: neither Juan Carlos nor Francisco José understood even a tiny bit of Cantonese or Hakka*) (SIU, 2004a, p.32). Mr. Choy, however, reminds Ah-Po that she cannot expect her grandchildren to speak a Sinitic language since they are *Tusan* and not fully ethnic Chinese. However, the old woman regrets the fact that they have not attended the Chinese school, a fact which could have prevented their *ruin*. The author puts the expression “echarse a perder” in the mouth of Ah-Po and, showing wit and admirable mastery of the Spanish language, with such a strong phrase he is able the woman’s nostalgic attachment to language as a means to maintain Chinese identity alive. Hence, in Ah-Po’s system of values, language maintenance seems to be of the highest significance and desirability.

The issue of language is also mentioned, albeit briefly, in “Los compadres,” another short story collected in *El tramo final*. In this story one of the two China-born protagonists who “entendía algunas palabras y expresiones corrientes” (*He understood a few words and common expressions*) (SIU, 2004a, p.60) marries a *Tusan* woman who in turn “[h]ablaba una curiosa mezcla de cantonés y castellano, con la que sin embargo se entendía perfectamente con su marido” (*She spoke a funny mix of Cantonese and Spanish with which, however, her and her husband understood each other perfectly*) (SIU, 2004a, p.61). The woman, a *Tusan* like Ah-Po’s grandsons, has communication competence in a Sinitic language (Cantonese), although she mixes it with Spanish.

A multiracial person, the woman can also be seen as a site where transculturation gives birth to an independent and original reality, which in the specific case is considered at least linguistically endearing by the narrator, as shown by the use of the adjective “curiosa” (*strange, odd, but also funny* in a likeable way). This positive light in which the narrator presents what one could call linguistic transculturation in “Los compadres,” contrasts greatly with the mockery of *lou* Chou’s linguistic transculturation who is described as “chapucero” (*sloppy, slapdash*). The narrating voice in *El tramo final* has thus an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the process of transculturation of the Chinese Peruvian community (LIN, 2004, p.10).

In the short story “La conversión de Uei-Kuong,” language plays a central role. In this story about Lau Uei-Kuong, a Westerner¹³ who was born and raised in southern China, and who works as a clerk in Uncle Keng’s Chinese shop, language and not ethnicity or physical appearance allows Uncle Keng to regard Uei-Kuong as belonging to the ethnic Chinese community. In fact, the clerk is only proficient in Cantonese when first starts working in the shop and even later “Uei-Kuong aprendía el castellano con gran lentitud y dificultad” (*Uei-Kuong learned Spanish at a very slow pace and with much difficulty*) (Siu, *Cuentos completos* 78). His proficiency in a Sinitic language is the only sign of reassurance for Uncle Keng, and to his eyes it is the only aspect that converts an untrustworthy *kuei* into a member of the Chinese Peruvian community. As a matter of fact,

[c]uando permanecía en silencio, inexcusable la expresión de su rostro, o cuando se expresaba con lo poco que sabía del castellano, al Tío Keng le asaltaban temores y recelos repentinos [...] La ilusión de que Uei-Kuong fuera un chino se desvanecía, y el Tío Keng se veía obligado a aceptar la ingrata realidad.

(*When he remained silent, with a mysterious expression on his face, or when he expressed himself with the little Spanish he knew, Uncle Keng would be taken by sudden fear and distrust. [...] The illusion that Uei-Kuong was a Chinese would fade away and all Uncle Keng could do was to accept the unpleasant reality.*) (SIU, 2004a, p.78).

Through the portrayal of a Westerner who follows most of the expected behavioural patterns that constitute a clear Chinese identity, including, but not limited to language, “[t]he author also explores the essence of Chineseness” (LÓPEZ-CALVO, 2008, p.87). Uei-Kuong’s proficiency in Cantonese and inability to speak Spanish are clear signs of his Chineseness for Uncle Keng, who apparently shares the vision of language as a core element of identity and proof of uncorrupted mores with Ah-Po. Not only proficiency in a Sinitic language, but also lack of adequate communication skills in Spanish is, in Uncle Keng’s opinion, a marker of Chinese identity, which makes Uei-Kong similar to “cualquier otro chino” (*any other Chinese*).

A sus ojos, su empleado se parecía cada día más a un chino nativo que a un *kuei*. Al igual que un chino, Uei-Kuong no podía hablar decentemente ni siquiera el castellano más elemental, pese a los cuatro años transcurridos. Su vocabulario se reducía a los nombres de los artículos que se vendían en la tienda y a unas cuantas expresiones de uso común, y su pronunciación era tan deplorable como la del Tío Keng o incluso peor. El Tío Keng siempre había creído que los chinos eran las personas con menos aptitud natural para aprender lenguajes [...] Uei-Kuong, para

¹³ The term used in the text by Siu to describe Uei-Kuong is *kuei* (*gui* in Mandarin Chinese), which literally means “ghost” but is most often translated as “devil. It is a derogatory expression used to denote foreigners in general and Westerners in particular.

quien el cantonés era su lengua materna y no el español, padecía de esa ineptitud de la misma forma que cualquier chino.

(To him, his employee looked more and more like a real Chinese rather than a kuei. Just like a Chinese, Uei-Kuong could speak not even the most basic Spanish decently, despite his four years there. His vocabulary was limited to the names of the items sold in the shop and to a bunch of common expressions, and his pronunciation was as poor as Uncle Keng's or even worse. Uncle Keng had always thought that Chinese were the people with the least natural propensity to learn languages [...] Uei-Kuong, whose native language was Cantonese and not Spanish, suffered from such lack of aptitude just like any other Chinese) (SIU, 2004a, p.81).

However, for other members of the Chinese Peruvian community, language alone is not sufficient to accept a *kuei* among them. Uei-Kuong's difficulty in finding a wife within the ethnic Chinese community is a proof of this, which he, under Auntie Keng's suggestion, tries to overcome by making others believe that he is actually a *Tusan*, despite his entirely Caucasian phenotype. Uei-Kuong's behaviour constitutes a clear attempt at racial passing and his situation bears a striking resemblance (in reverse), despite the incomparable cultural, political and social peculiarities, with a coloured practice during apartheid South Africa through which "not only did individuals attempt to pass as White, they had to be accepted by others in the white community. This performance is commonly known as passing, and in South Africa it is largely referred to as 'playing white'" (LYTLE, 2012).¹⁴

Ethnic Chinese *Lou Koc* agrees to give his daughter in marriage to Uei-Kuong after he had listened to him speaking "en cantonés fluido y verlo comportarse con timidez – cualidad o defecto que difícilmente puede esperarse de un *kuei*." (*In fluent Cantonese and after seeing how he acted with shyness, a quality or a flaw that can hardly be expected from a kuei*) (SIU 2004a, p.83). Uei-Kuong's "playing Chinese" is thus accepted by the ethnic Chinese community. In the aforementioned passage, the narrator does not give any value judgement on shyness, which can be a "cualidad o defecto," however he does identify it as a marker of Chineseness and, in *lou Koc*'s opinion it can be seen as *the* trademark of what it means to be Chinese.

Ah-Po from "El tramo final," Uncle Keng and Uei-Kuong himself share a negative view on the process of adaptation to the host country undergone by younger generations of Chinese Peruvians and *Tusan*. As mentioned above, Ah-Po wishes her two grandsons had attended Lima's Chinese school so that they could be proficient not

¹⁴ Racial passing and the coloured practice of 'playing white' are central to renowned South African writer Zoë Wicomb's novel *Playing in the Light*, published in 2006. The social and personal implications of what can be considered a racial performance or lie are analysed in an article by Annette Horn as well as in a conference paper by Lytle.

only in Sinitic language(s), but also well versed in Chinese culture, a condition which would have prevented their “echarse a perder.” In “La conversión de Uei-Kuong,” during a visit that the former shop clerk, who is now a farmer and lives in the coastal province of Chincha, south of Lima, pays to his former employer, both Uncle Keng and Uei-Kuong express their negative attitude toward what they perceive as *Tusan* assimilation into mainstream Peruvian society.

Uei-Kuong’s first-born is now in his fourth year of a state-run primary school, and that is a pity, according to Uncle Keng who says with disappointment: “Lástima que no puedas ponerlo en el *Sam Men* y que en Chincha no haya un colegio chino.” (*It is a pity that you cannot enrol him in Sam Men School and that there are no Chinese schools in Chincha*) (SIU, 2004a, p.85). Uei-Kuong agrees with resignation, thus showing his preference for Chinese culture over mainstream Peruvian culture. In a statement supportive of this viewpoint, the narrator adds that

[e]l único inconveniente en vivir lejos de Lima siempre había sido para él el no poder colocar a sus hijos en el colegio chino. Los chicos fueron puestos en una escuela pública, y ni Uei-Kuong ni su mujer estaban contentos con este hecho. La mujer de Uei-Kuong sostenía que, estudiando al lado de chicos *kueis*, sus propios hijos corrían el riesgo de ser ‘estropeados’ por aquéllos. Uei-Kuong mismo no estaba lejos de sentir lo mismo.

(*For him, the only drawback of living far from Lima had always been the fact that he would not be able to enrol his children in the Chinese school. The children were sent to a public school, but neither Uei-Kuong nor his wife were happy about that. Uei-Kuong’s wife argued that studying with kwei children, his very own children were at risk of being ‘ruined’ by them. Uei-Kuong himself had thought more or less the same*) (SIU, 2004a, p.85).

The terminology used by Uei-Kuong’s wife is similar to that used by Ah-Po when talking about her grandchildren. “Echarse a perder” in the case of the old lady, “estropeado” in the case of Uei-Kuong’s wife both have the meaning of “ruin, to be ruined, to go bad or rotten.” As we have already noticed, this terminological choice by Siu Kam Wen powerfully states that righteousness of maintaining Chineseness, which they consider *the* morally acceptable behaviour. Therefore, Uncle Keng, Uei-Kuong and his ethnic Chinese wife share with Ah-Po and the Choy family from “El tramo final” the idea that Chineseness should be maintained at all costs. While in “El tramo final,” the Choy daughters speak Cantonese more out of obligation rather than personal choice and under strict parental control, similar coercive and punitive methods do not seem to produce the desired outcome in the case of Uei-Kuong’s son. In fact, when Uncle Keng suggests more strictness in dealing with the *unChinese* child, Uei-Kuong reveals that

“Por más que le pego no quiere hablar cantonés en casa [...] y no nos tiene respeto ni a mí ni a su madre.” (*No matter how much I hit him, he doesn't want to speak Cantonese at home [...] and he doesn't have respect for his mother nor for myself*) (SIU, 2004a, p.85). What is deplorable to Uei-Kong's eyes is not only his child's unwillingness to speak Cantonese, but also his lack of respect towards his parents, sign of the loss of the most important Confucian virtue a child should possess: filial piety.

The centrality of language in these stories allows us to reflect upon the linguistic choice of Siu Kam Wen as a writer. As I have already suggested, Siu Kam Wen and his literature consistently in Spanish represent a perfect site of transculturation. Therefore, I propose that Siu Kam Wen's linguistic practice be seen as trespassing the reductive choice between deculturation and acculturation that people who express themselves in a language other than their mother or heritage tongue have at their disposal. Ah-Po, Uncle Keng and Uei-Kuong's stubbornness in maintaining their Chineseness through language paired with their contempt for those who don't clearly shows one side of the Chinese Peruvian experience: there is a clear-cut division between the Sinophone ethnic Chinese and the Spanish-speaking ones. Language maintenance and language shift are seen as the only available options at the disposal of the Chinese Peruvian subject.

However, the three Choy sisters and even more so the real life of Siu Kam Wen suggest a different approach to the connection between language and Chineseness by downplaying the role of the former in determining the latter. From what we learn from “El tramo final,” the Choy sisters are perfectly bilingual, proficient in Cantonese as well as in Spanish, while Siu Kam Wen is a polyglot who, in addition to these two languages, also speaks English. Siu has deliberately chosen to use Spanish as his writing language, but this has not impeded him to become the literary voice of the Chinese Peruvian community, the one who depicts it from the inside (HIGGINS, 2002, p.304). He is therefore acknowledged, at least in Peruvian literary circles, as an exponent of the local ethnic Chinese community, despite the fact that his stories are not written in any Sinitic language.

Hence, by writing in Spanish about the experience and the values of the Chinese Peruvians, in his stories Siu Kam Wen combines the Chineseness of the content with a hispanophone form. It is this hybridity, this being here and there, inside and outside that allow Siu Kam Wen to break free from the confining options of deculturation and

acculturation and become a true transcultural writer, more than simply a Peruvian writer of Chinese background and more than a hispanophone Chinese writer.

Retaining Chinese culture and identity is not only a family matter, but it also becomes a spatial issue. In fact, in both “El tramo final” and “La conversión de Uei-Kuong,” Lima’s Chinatown is seen as the geographic space in which Chinese culture is kept alive. It is the place where Ah-Po returns after leaving his son’s new mansion and it is there where she feels more comfortable. The Chinese quarter is where the Choy girls, an example of Chineseness according to the old woman, live and attend the *Sam Men* Chinese School. It is also the place where the villager Uei-Kuong goes back to simply have a stroll or buy Chinese products. As the narrator informs us, “[s]e dijo para sí que después de despedirse del Tío Keng aprovecharía la ocasión para ir a dar unas vueltas por Paruro y por Capón, y que antes de marcharse de regreso iría al Sen Chun Wa a comprar una lata de té y una botella de salsa de marisco.” (*He decided that after saying goodbye to Uncle Keng he would go for a walk around Paruro and Capón streets, and before leaving he would buy tea and oyster sauce at Sen Chun Wa*) (SIU, 2004a, p.84).

However, the view Ah-Po has of the *Barrio Chino* (Chinese quarter) as the treasure chest for Chineseness is a nostalgic image distant from the actual situation in which Lima’s Chinese quarter had plunged in the late 1970s. As it was already mentioned earlier, in the very same “El tramo final,” Siu Kam Wen writes about the ethnic Chinese people who are leaving Lima’s Chinatown and the country in search of more favourable economic conditions. Among those who leave, there is also the Choy family who leaves for El Salvador. As argued by Lausent-Herrera,

[t]he number of Chinese-born continued to decrease as members of the older generation passed on and there were fewer incoming migrants. Lodgings that were left vacant were taken up by the Peruvian mixed bloods and newcomers like the Lebanese. The young and the China-born Peruvians sought to leave the quarter, partly to mark their rising social status and partly to be near to their new Chinese-Peruvian schools and the new clubs which had been moved outside the Chinese quarter to new residential areas such as San Borja (2011, p.78).

The outflow of ethnic Chinese would be partially replaced by a reduced number of new immigrants, whom Siu Kam Wen refers to as *sén-hák* (*xin ke* in Mandarin Chinese, which literally means “new guest, newcomer”). However, “[l]ittle by little the outward appearance of the quarter began to change because of the visibility of the new immigrants (easily recognizable by their physical appearance, clothing and ignorance of

Spanish)” (LAUSENT-HERRERA, 2011, p.83). Despite a common ethnicity and in most cases also a shared language (most of the earlier new immigrants too arrived from the province of Guangdong), new comers were considered outsiders by local Chinese Peruvians. For instance, the two newcomers who took over Mr. Choy’s business are seen with distrust by Ah-Po who does not take a liking to them (“no le simpatizaban”). The lifestyle of the two new immigrants is in striking contrast to that of Mr. Choy, who was very family-oriented. In fact, the two *sén-háks* “[t]rabajan solos, no tenían esposas ni hijos, y en sus noches libres se marchaban regularmente a los prostíbulos del Callao.” (*They worked alone, they had neither wives nor children, and on their nights off they would regularly go to the brothels in Callao*) (SIU, 2004a, p.35).

In a short story written in 1979, “El deterioro,” whose main themes and characters will appear again in his 2007 novel *La vida no es una tómbola*, described by López-Calvo as “the adventures of a Chinese teenager, lost between two worlds, who fears that he is destined to a life of obscure mediocrity” (2008, p.78), mention is made to the conditions of the *sén-háks* and their relationship with the Chinese Peruvians:

A los *sén-háks* se les pagaba con poco menos que el sueldo mínimo fijado por la ley, cosa que los mismos *sén-háks* no prestaban demasiada importancia, ya que a la mayoría de ellos les interesaba más aprender el oficio, el vocabulario necesario en la atención al público [...], y experimentar lo que es ser dependiente de alguien fuera del círculo familiar. Al cabo de un año o dos de este tipo de aprendizaje, los *sén-háks* renunciaban a su trabajo, conseguían algún préstamo de sus familiares y empezaban un negocio por su propia cuenta o en asociación con otros *sén-háks*, cuando el préstamo por sí solo no alcanzaba a cubrir todo el capital.

(*Sén-hák were paid slightly less than the minimum wage set by law, a fact to which the very same sén-hák didn't give too much importance, since most of them were interested in learning the job, the basic language that they needed to serve customers, [...] and in experiencing what it was like to be a shop assistant to someone outside of the family network. After one or two years of this kind of training, sén-hák would quit the job, borrow money from their relatives and start their own business or one in association with other sén-hák, if the money borrowed was not enough to cover the whole capital*) (SIU, 2004a, p.21).

The mistrust with which Ah-Po looks at the new immigrants is shared, in this other story, by Don “Augusto” Lau, the ethnic Chinese owner of the shop where most of the action of “El deterioro” takes place. When Don Augusto falls ill, he is obliged to urgently find someone who could run the shop. The *sén-hák* is seen only as a temporary replacement and is not taken into serious consideration as a serious candidate to a longer term position, since the shop owner “a medida que se integraba gradualmente a las rutinas de la tienda, empezó a acariciar la idea de despedir al *sén-hák*.” (*As he was*

getting back into the routine of the shop, he started flirting with the idea of firing the sén-hák (SIU, 2004a, p.23).

Through this article, I aimed at pointing out that the importance of Siu Kam Wen's short stories and novels lies in the fact that they give, for the first time, a literary voice to the Chinese Peruvian community. What is most praiseworthy in Siu Kam Wen's toil as a Peruvian writer is his ability to depict the complex realities of the ethnic Chinese experience in Peru through an objective voice, which Maan Lin sees as ambivalent, constantly swinging between Peruvian mainstream society and ethnic Chinese community. Sometimes, it is a critical voice, sometimes it is the advocate voice of the Chinese Peruvians (Lin 9).

In Siu's works one finds the nostalgic voice of the older generation, as well as the objective description of the many degrees of Chineseness which vary across generations (the elderly and the young), across racial background (the "fully" Chinese and the *Tusan*), across linguistic choices (the Sinitic speakers and the Spanish speakers), and across immigration patterns (the old immigrants and the *sén-hák*). The skilful representation of the multiple ways of being or not being Chinese in Peru is also the portrayal of "clashes that create fissures and boundaries within communities that are widely known for their ethnic solidarity" (LÓPEZ-CALVO, 2008, p.88). These clashes are not only the symbol of the tensions that run through the ethnic Chinese community of Peru, but they are also the symbol of its dynamic nature.

Additionally, I also attempted to demonstrate the importance of Siu Kam Wen's linguistic choice in literature, which transforms him, and not only his literary works, into a site of transculturation, where he is able to masterfully combine Chinese Peruvian content with hispanophone linguistic forms. Putting such a combination into practice makes Siu Kam Wen not only a pioneer in Peruvian letters, but allows us to consider him a truly transcultural writer, a condition that trespasses Siu Kam Wen own's definition of a Peruvian writer as well as the somewhat simplistic and often suggested idea of an ethnic Chinese writer who chose to use Spanish and who happens to write about Peru.

Works cited

BHABHA, Homi K. *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

- BLANCO BONILLA, David. Writer Siu Kam Wen back in the public eye in Peru. *Latin American Herald Tribune* 4 Mar. 2009. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.
<<http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=13003&ArticleId=329023>>.
- HIGGINS, James. *The literary representation of Peru*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2002. Print.
- HORN, Annette. The Specter of Tokkie – Facing the Past, Inventing the Future: Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*. *Kritika Kultura* 18 (2012): 127-33. Web. 20 Sept. 2012.
- HOTZ-DAVIES, Ingrid. The 'Interzone' as a Place of the Mind. Charting the Interzone Conference, Bergamo, 20 Jan. 2011. Conference Presentation. Web. 22 Sept. 2012.
<<http://www.data.unibg.it/dati/bacheca/676/54572.pdf>>.
- HU-DEHART, Evelyn. Latin America in Asia-Pacific Perspective. *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*. Ed. Rachel S. Parreñas and Lok C.D. Siu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. 29-62. Print.
- LIN, Maan. A Modo de Prefacio. *Cuentos Completos*. Siu Kam Wen. Morrisville: Lulu, 2004. 5-12. Print.
- LAUSENT-HERRERA, Isabelle. The Chinatown in Peru and the Changing Peruvian Chinese Community(ies). *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7 (2011): 69-113. Print.
- LÓPEZ-CALVO, Ignacio. Sino-Peruvian Identity and Community as Prison: Siu Kam Wen's Rendering of Self-Exploitation and Other Survival Strategies. *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27.1 (2008): 73-90. Print.
- LYTLE, Chyntia. De/constructing Home in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*. Tenth International Conference on Women's Studies, UCM Madrid, 16-18 May 2012. Conference Presentation.
- MCKEOWN, Adam. *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.
- ORTIZ, Fernando. *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar*. Habana: J. Montero, 1940. Print.
- POSTON, Dudley L., Mao Michael Xinxiang and Yu Mei-yu. The global distribution of the Overseas Chinese around 1990. *Population and Development Review* 20.3 (1990): 631-45. Print.
- PRATT, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- RODRÍGUEZ PASTOR, Humberto. La pasión por el 'chifa'. *Nueva Sociedad* 203: 79-88 (2006). Web. 19 Sept. 2012.

SIU Kam Wen. *Cuentos completos*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu, 2004a. Print.

_____. El origen de *Viaje a Ítaca*. *Tierra de nadie*. 17 Dec. 2008a. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.
<<http://siukamwen.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/el-origen-de-viaje-itaca.html>>.

_____. 'El tramo final' y yo, 10 Jan. 2009. Web. 19 Sept. 2012.
<<http://www.editorialcasatomada.com/index.php?id=10#81>>.

_____. No soy chino soy kitán. *Tierra de nadie*. 7 Dec. 2008b. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.
<<http://siukamwen.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/no-soy-chino-soy-kitn.html>>.

_____. *Viaje a Ítaca*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu, 2004b. Print.

SIU Kam Wen, and Carlos Sotomayor. Entrevista a Siu Kam Wen. *Letra Capital*, 26 Feb 2009. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.
<<http://carlosmsotomayor.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/entrevista-siu-kam-wen.html>>.

YAZDIHA, Haj. Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid. *Formations* 1.1 (2010): 31-38. Web. 19 Sept. 2012.