CHARLIE AHEARN'S INSIGHTFUL VIDEO THE CLONES OF BRUCE LEE CONCLUDES WITH a noteworthy incident that occurred during a dinner party held in Martin Wong’s honor at a New York Chinatown restaurant. Amid the din of laughter and applause, graffiti artist Arron Goodstone, aka Sharp, is cajoled by the group to lead a karaoke version of “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” one of Wong’s favorite songs. As Sharp takes the mike, he dedicates the song to “Chino Malo” (Bad Chinese Man), a singular nickname that acknowledges Wong’s acquisition of a Chino-Latino identity with attitude.

I find the piecemeal way that Wong went about recovering his Latino heritage most touching. Although he has often said that he felt “like a tourist” in the midst of the mostly Puerto Rican community on the Lower East Side, his connection to Latinidad can be traced to a distant extended family member who was Mexican. However, no one in his immediate family spoke Spanish or imparted to Wong a sense of duty to recognize the Mexican roots of his family tree.

Wong’s process of acculturating into the barrios of New York was therefore much the same as that of thousands of Chinese immigrants who landed in the Caribbean and Latin America in the mid- to late nineteenth century to work in mines, build railroads, develop agriculture, and act as tradespeople.
Wong started learning the language from scratch by picking up pidgin Spanish from neighbors and copying words for his paintings from Spanish-language plays, novels, comic books, signs, and paraphernalia. On the other hand, his knowledge of Latino art was fairly advanced. As a California resident during the 1960s and 1970s, he witnessed the rise of the Chicano art movement firsthand. His profound appreciation of pre-Columbian artifacts and popular art forms like murals and graffiti allowed him to assume that he shared certain aesthetic affinities with his neighbors.

Indeed, just as Wong has integrated aspects of San Francisco’s Chinatown into his New York Chinatown paintings, his Puerto Rican subjects can sometimes be mistaken for Chicanos or Mexicans. Often it is only the depiction of an ethnic-specific item, such as a Puerto Rican flag, that discloses the sitter’s identity. This is not a criticism of Wong’s abilities as much as a recognition that his conception of the Latino body is syncretic and cross-cultural. “Authenticity” in a narrow sense is not his objective. A case in point is his persistent use of Arron Goodstone as his ideal Latino model. In fact, Sharp is not Latino at all but Black and Jewish.

How did Wong earn the tag Chino Malo? Both personally and professionally, he dared to cross boundaries. As my colleague Lydia Yee observes, his street scenes, which are populated by Latino homeboys, hip-hop dancers, boxers, firemen, policemen, and inmates, “defied what is typically expected, according to a reductivist logic, of an artist who is Chinese-American.” Credit for his paintings’ unusual subject matter partly belongs to the late poet/playwright Miguel Pinero, who functioned as Wong’s soul mate on the Lower East Side. A unique figure in Latino arts and letters, Pinero wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Short Eyes, while serving time in prison. Pinero’s stories about underclass Puerto Ricans struggling to overcome poverty and drug addiction and his outrageous tales of daring stickups and brutal prison fights fueled Wong’s imagination and led to the creation of a cast of urban characters that merges fact and fiction.

But as if granting himself poetic license to portray a group of firemen rescuing a boxer knocked out by his opponent or a homeboy making an escape through the heavens on his bike were not outlandish enough, consider the way Wong depicts a banal subject. Sanja Cake (1991) is a transitional painting that carries motifs from the Lower East Side paintings of the 1980s into the Chinatown series of the 1990s. Here a cake label imprinted with both Chinese and American lettering bears the stamp of two dark-skinned Latino firemen passionately kissing each other against a heart-shaped brick backdrop. An allusive self-portrait, Sanja Cake literally represents itself as the product of a gay Chino-Latino sensibility. It suggests that while Wong may have left his heart in San Francisco when he moved to New York, he found new love and a new identity on the Lower East Side.
In *Sanja Cake*, Wong presents a distillation of a completely and uniquely American identity. Ensconced in a brick-filled heart at the center of a label for Chinese American “Sanja Cake,” two Latino firemen engage in a passionate kiss. This image is transgressive in several ways. The same-sex kiss alone is a challenge to heteronormativity and common conceptions of masculinity in both Latino and Chinese American cultures; the fact that the men are firemen, civil servants and ultimate emblems of protective masculinity, further intensifies this transgression. However, Wong has fully integrated this challenging tableau into the center of a brightly colored commercial label for a benign Chinese American product. The heart-shaped frame and heraldic banner create an upbeat and celebratory setting for the kiss, while the dual Chinese and English lettering inserts it into a distinctly Chinese American context. The symmetry of the firemen’s heads reinforces the overall symmetry of the label design, further naturalizing the appearance of the firemen on the label, while the sweetness implied by *Sanja Cake* reflects the tenderness expressed between them. That the frame is a commercial label for a consumer product pushes the painting into the realm of kitsch, calling for a level of public recognition and acceptance of its imagery. The fact that it is a label for a Chinese American product suggests that this recognition occurs outside of Anglo-dominated mainstream culture, across two marginalized American cultures: Latino and Chinese. By inserting a transgressive image into a familiar commercial context, Wong uses simple means to assert and legitimize a complex gay and cross-cultural identification.