Extension of Slavery or Transition to Free Labor?
Chinese Contract Laborers in 19th-Century Cuba

Lecture by Evelyn Hu-DeHart

Tuesday, April 7, 2020 | 12:00 PM | FIU Modesto A. Maidique Campus | Deuxième Maison (DM) 353

Using Cuban archival material (including many documents acquired by private U.S. collectors), this lecture examines the lives of Chinese contract laborers in Cuba—”coolies”—who worked alongside African slaves on sugar plantations in the second half of the nineteenth century after they completed their original eight-year contracts and subsequent shorter forced re-contracts. Dr. Hu-DeHart’s research moves the argument beyond the usual assumption that Chinese coolies merely replicated or prolonged slavery on Cuban plantations to offer a view of the transition from slave to free, from plantation to towns, from agriculture labor to urban work, during the period when slavery itself was in decline and a labor market was emerging.

Dr. Evelyn Hu-DeHart is a Professor of History, American Studies, and Ethnic Studies at Brown University. In 2014–15 and again in 2019, she was Director of the Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad in Havana, a Brown study-abroad program. Her own research and current book project is on “The Chinese in the Spanish Empire: From Manila in the 16th century to Cuba in the 19th century.” In 2018–2019, she was the Centennial Fellow in the Dynamics of Place of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). She is also the author of three books (one in Spanish) on the Yaqui Indians of northwestern Mexico from the 16th century to the 20th century.

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