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"Degrees of freedom and Chinese contract laborers ('coolies') on Cuban sugar plantations in the 19th century: extension of slavery or transition to free labor?"

Abstract:

In the labor history of the Americas, Cuba created a unique situation in the second half of the nineteenth century, when 125,000 male Chinese laborers under eight-year contracts were brought into the Spanish island colony to work alongside enslaved African men and women on the flourishing sugar plantations. At no other point in world history did indentured Asians, all men, and enslaved African men and women encounter each other as co-workers in the same space and time. This unprecedented confluence of unfree laborers raises several questions regarding race, class and gender: were the Chinese black or white, slave or free? How did the absence of Chinese women affect race relations between Asians and Africans? Exploring these questions shed light on the key one: were the Chinese 'coolies' slaves like their black co-workers, which would extend slavery in Cuba, or did they make the transition to freedom? This lecture seeks answers by examining critical primary documents from Cuban archives.

Bio:

Evelyn Hu-DeHart has degrees from Stanford University (B.A. Political Science) and the University of Texas at Austin (PhD Latin American/Caribbean History). She has taught at Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Michigan, City University of New York, New York University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and currently, at Brown University where she is Professor of History, American Studies and Ethnic Studies. She received an Honorary Degree of Law from the University of Notre Dame, and was elected as an International Fellow by the *Academia Mexicana de la Historia*. She has published over 20 journal articles in five languages and four continents, three books on the Yaqui nation of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and is currently writing a book on "The Chinese in the Spanish Empire, from Manila in the 16-17th Century to Cuba in the 19th Century." She has received funding as the Centennial Fellow of the American Council of Learned Scholars (ACLS) and as a Heinz Heinen Fellow of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS).