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Lisa Yun. *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008. xxiii + 311 pp. $56.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59213-581-3; $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59213-582-0.

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Between 1847 and 1874, Cuban planters imported more than 125,000 Chinese indentured laborers, or "coolies," as part of the "yellow trade." Chinese contract laborers were recruited to work on sugar, tobacco, and coffee plantations, and they supplemented the diminishing supply of African slave labor following the abolition of the African slave trade in 1862. According to the traditional historical narrative, Chinese coolies facilitated the Cuban transition from slave labor to free, and they occupied an economic and racial position somewhere between that of African slave and free white laborer.

In *The Coolie Speaks*, Lisa Yun challenges this traditional "narrative of transition" based on an examination of nearly three thousand written and oral testimonies that were given by Chinese coolies in 1874. She argues that these testimonies "provide an alternate perspective to the 'transitional' narrative, which has facilitated the modern teleology of slave to free, black to white" (p. 1). Moreover, she asserts: "these testimonies can be read as 'narratives' that display certain tropes and conventions and that also contain certain themes and arguments" (p. xvi).

Drawing from this rich collection of testimonies, Yun provides a wonderful and vivid depiction of coolie life in Cuba from the perspective of the Chinese indentured laborers. Her work builds on, but far surpasses, the breadth of perspective provided by the testimonies included in *The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba* (1993, edited by Denise Helly). Whereas *The Cuba Commission Report* offers a meaningful record of the experience of coolies in Cuba based on hundreds of depositions, Yun's work draws from 2,841 Chinese-language petitions and depositions contained in the fourteen-volume set of *Guba huagong chengci* (Testimonies given by Chinese labor in Cuba) and the four-volume set of *Guba huagong kougongce* (Volumes of testimonies given by Chinese labor in Cuba). Both volumes are housed in the Library of Ancient Books at the National Library of China in Beijing.

Yun offers the reader an unprecedented social history of Chinese coolies in Cuba. Although such scholars as Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Juan Perez de la Riva have produced important studies that examine the economic history of the coolie trade and that compare the treatment of Chinese coolies vis-à-vis the African slave population, Yun is the first to present a detailed picture of the lives and personal stories of Chinese coolies. Prior studies tend to paint the coolies in broad strokes as poor Chinese laborers who were tricked into signing contracts of indentured servitude and who were exploited as "quasi-slaves." Yun fills in this picture with rich and wonderful detail that complicates this traditional analysis. For example, she shows that the coolie population hailed from diverse occupational backgrounds and included aristocrats, doctors, government workers, teachers, cloth weavers, merchants, and animal drivers. Speaking of this broad range of occupational backgrounds, one coolie stated: "I was a first-degree licentiate, graduated from Zhangbaikui Institute. Then I became a teacher. During an upheaval, I was deceived and told that there was [a] teaching job in Macao. After arriving at Macao, I was forced to go abroad and later was sold to be a slave in a tobacco shop. Others of us were peasants, scholars, woodcutters, fishermen, or small retailers in China" (p. 249).

Yun also includes the testimony of a former doctor who was tricked into coming to Cuba: "I trained to become a doctor since I was young.... Mr. Yang said a foreigner asked him to find a doctor to treat people on a foreign ship until it arrived at the city.... I then went to Xinhe Hang with him.... I signed a contract, which stated I was responsible for medical treatment on the ship, and

after arriving [at] the destination, I could return by taking the same ship … however, the owner of the ship was evil! He tricked me to give him the contract…. The suffering and humiliation I experienced cannot be described with words…. Whoever hears about our experience of being hired labor will cry, and whoever sees us being hired labor will grieve" (p. 69).

Yun examines these various coolie testimonies as writings of "resistance." She argues that Chinese workers submitted petitions to a Chinese governmental commission in 1873 as a form of active resistance to their conditions of forced labor. She also states that these petitions were each unique reflections of the voice, style, and peculiarities of their respective author. Some were written in a literary fashion, others were penned in a vernacular style; some were long and well crafted, and others were short and pithy. A special strength of this book is that Yun–a professor of English and Asian American studies–provides impressive textual analysis of the coolie testimonies and petitions.

One minor critique of Yun's work is that it does not deeply engage with the broader literature on Asians in Latin America. Although Yun does refer to the work of such scholars as Hu-DeHart, Jeffrey Lesser, and Erika Lee, she does not address the burgeoning historical literature on Asians in Latin America in great depth. Notwithstanding this small critique, *The Coolie Speaks* should be a standard text for all undergraduate Latin American history courses on the history of Cuba. The book also contains an appendix entitled "Addendum: Selected Petitions," which could be especially useful as a tool for undergraduates to learn about primary historical research. Finally, *The Coolies Speaks* is also ideal for advanced undergraduate or graduate level courses examining the Chinese diaspora or Asian immigration to the Americas.

In summary, *The Coolie Speaks* makes a signal contribution to the historiographies of several academic fields, including Latin American studies, Asian American studies, and Chinese diasporic studies. It should be considered the standard text on the topic of Chinese coolie migration to Cuba.

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