

EMISFÉRICA

The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba. Yun, Lisa. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008. 336 pages; cloth, \$37.50.

By Manuel Barcia | University of Leeds

A few years ago Gayatri Spivak posed a question that has haunted many social scientists ever since: Can the subaltern speak? Is it possible to “hear” the voices of marginalized people? Do we have the necessary tools to grasp the real meaning of their words and gestures, of their music and religious beliefs? Certainly the task is a daunting one, particularly for historians working with subaltern subjects who have been dead for decades or centuries. In *The Coolie Speaks* Lisa Yun has sidestepped Spivak’s question and embraced the challenge of “listening” to the subalterns’ voice with energy and imagination.

The Coolie Speaks is another addition to the Asian American History and Culture series at Temple University Press. The book is divided into five chapters in which Yun first situates the historical background of the Coolies and then goes into detail offering a wide range of examples of the Coolies’ voices, which include testimonies, petitions and depositions. She finally concludes by looking at her own bit of personal history, in what she has aptly called “An Afro-Chinese Author and the Next Generation.” Yun’s main primary source is a collection of testimonies given by Chinese workers in Cuba, which she located in the Library of Ancient Books at the National Library of China in Beijing. These testimonies are rich in content and show a side of the history of these men, women and children of which we have known next to nothing until now.

The book goes to examine in as much detail as possible the experiences of these Chinese indentured laborers and their interactions with the African slaves who constituted the main labor force in Cuba at the time the testimonies were recorded. Yun argues that the Coolies were active protagonists in transforming the course of their own lives in Cuba rather than passive witnesses of their times. She highlights the importance of language and culture while reading and trying to “hear” their voices more than a century later, and succeeds in placing her subjects of study in the market, the street, the plantation, and the criminal court.

Although at times Yun uses unsuitable and probably contradictory terms, as when she talks about “spectacular subordination” just after discussing the Coolies wide range of forms of overt and covert resistance, for most of the book her arguments are solid and profound. Equally, the book could have benefited from some extra research in the Cuban National Archive where a vast array of documents containing Coolies testimonies and depositions from 1849 till the end of the nineteenth century are hosted. Perhaps in future studies Yun will be able to add this significant body of information to any new work she conducts on the experience of the Coolies in Cuba.

Overall, these minor shortcomings do not hinder the final result. Yun has made an important contribution to the history of the Coolies in Cuba and by looking at their relationship with the African slaves, she has provided us with a fresh approach to the history of repression, resistance and solidarity of nineteenth-century Cuba.