

World Christianity Studies & Asymmetrical Dependency (WCSAD)

Working Group

Monthly Table Talk

Chinese Contract Laborers in Cuba in the 19th Century: The Role of Religion in Their Transition from Bondage to Freedom with Prof. Dr. Evelyn Hu-DeHart

Date: Tuesday, November 19th, 2024

from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. (CET)

Location: Hybrid, Lounge (Niebuhrstr. 5) and Zoom

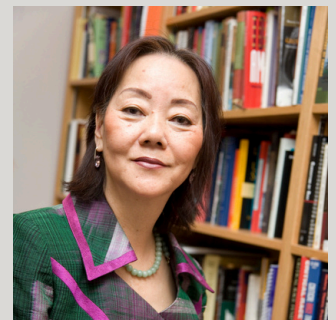
Registration: To register, please email

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Between 1847 and 1874, almost 125,000 Chinese men landed in Cuba, most of them destined to work alongside enslaved African men and women in sugar plantations. The plantation owners did not have religion on their minds when they trafficked these people. They conceived of these workers—colloquially known as “coolies”—as a temporary stop-gap measure to shore up the diminishing labor of enslaved Africans. Nevertheless, most of these men survived the harsh life of plantation labor and stayed in Cuba. Despite regulations that sought to force those who had completed the original eight-year contract to ‘recontract’ indefinitely, many found ways to become free residents of the island. In the process of obtaining their freedom, parish priests played a critical role. Thus, in this month’s Table Talk, Prof. Hu-Dehart will explore the concrete roles of priests in the process used by coolies to press for their freedom. In addition to Christianity, religious practices brought to Cuba from Africa also played a role in the lives of Chinese migrants. Specifically, Prof. Hu-Dehart will note the role of religious practices of African origin that are commonly known today as “*santería*.” This sharing of religious practices should not come as a surprise because Chinese and Africans worked and lived in close proximity and intimacy with one another on plantations. Their relationships continued after the “coolies” had finished their contracts: many even formed families together. In the context of world Christianity studies and asymmetrical dependency research, this historical analysis will help us explore the complex relationship between religion, asymmetrical dependencies, and intercultural experiences of diaspora.

Optional Pre-Circulated Readings: Martin A. Tsang, “La Caridad, Oshún, and Kuan Yin in Afro-Chinese Religion in Cuba” in *Religious Diversity in Asia*, Jørn Borup, Marianne Q. Fibiger, and Lene Kühle, eds. (Brill: Leiden, 2020).

Prof. Dr. Evelyn Hu-DeHart is Professor of History, American Studies and Ethnic



Studies at Brown University in the United States. She will join the BCDSS team as a Heinz Heinen Senior Fellow next year. From 2002 to 2014, she was the director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America (CSREA). In addition to her work at Brown, Prof. Hu-Dehart has taught at universities across the United States and around the world, including the City University of New York System, New York University, Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Arizona, and the University of Michigan. She has also lectured at universities and research institutes in Mexico, Peru, Cuba, France, Spain, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Since the publication of her first monograph (in 1981) on the history of Spanish contact with the Yaqui Indians of Northwestern New Spain, she has been a leading expert in the history of Latin America and the Caribbean.