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Vocabularies of Violence:

The Chinese Coolie Trade and the

Constitutive Power of its Conceptual Vocabularies, 1847-1907

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Elizabeth Evans Weber

2015



ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Vocabularies of Violence:  
The Chinese Coolie Trade and the  
Constitutive Power of its Conceptual Vocabularies, 1847-1907

by

Elizabeth Evans Weber

Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Shu-mei Shih, Chair

This project is concerned with the foreign-executed trade in contracted Chinese labor (the “coolie trade”) to the Americas that spanned from 1847-1876. The first part of the project explores the many violences that the coolie trade visited upon Chinese persons, whether those who were themselves directly victimized by the trade, or those who suffered more indirectly (persons whose families were torn apart, who lived in fear of kidnapping, or who were forced to contemplate the meaning of foreign-imposed racial hierarchies, commodification of racialized Chinese labor, and the general decline of late Qing China’s geopolitical position). As Chinese from a variety of backgrounds began to respond to and apprehend these traumatic violences, they gave rise to a set of “conceptual vocabularies”—including terminologies, subjectivities, conceptions of racial and geopolitical hierarchies, and understandings of servitude and personal liberty—that gave voice both to the ongoing traumas, and to the shock and simmering outrage that resulted therefrom.

The second part of the project then details how nationalist authors writing in the early twentieth century were able to repurpose and manipulate these powerful, already-extant, shared vocabularies of violence in order to urge a crystallizing reading public to take an interest in the future of an endangered China. In the respective moments of the 1905 Anti-American Boycott and the 1904 Movement to Enlighten the Lower Classes in Beijing, several pieces of “coolie fiction” emerged, making use of the traumatic memory of historic coolie trade violences to advocate immediate political agendas—in this case anti-foreign activism and socially-oriented educational reform. At the same time, however, these pieces also gestured on a much broader level toward the formation of a “people” united by a collective memory of victimization, and shared determination to prevent further subjugation by foreigners in the contemporary moment. The coolie trade vocabularies would ultimately prove a very effective means first of eliciting a strong, unified emotional response from a media-consuming public; and second, of offering prescriptive visions for how a Chinese “people” might condense around particular social and political challenges and anxieties in the twentieth century.

The dissertation of Elizabeth Evans Weber is approved.

Jack W. Chen

Robert C. Romero

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2015

To My Family (Inclusive)

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I have been the fortunate recipient of financial support from a number of sources. This project would not have been possible without a Fulbright-IIE fellowship for my research year in China, or a grant from the UCLA International Institute. A grant from the Mellon Foundation

funded a small project several years ago that turned out to be the seed from which my interest in the coolie trade and coolie fiction would emerge. I am especially grateful to UCLA for support in the forms of a Dissertation Year Fellowship, Graduate Research Mentorship, Summer Research Mentorships, TAships, fellowships, and Chancellor's Prize.

I incurred a number of debts while conducting my Fulbright research in Beijing: to the History Department and Professor Wu Xiaolan of Peking University for sponsoring my research trip; to Professor Xia Xiaohong, also of Peking University, for allowing me to sit in on her class on Liang Qichao; and to Janet Upton who administered the Fulbright-IIE program in China and greatly facilitated the transition to life there. Conducting research can be a lonely task, but Emily Mokros, Patrick Wilson, Wang Meng, Zoe Ma, and Brent Powis all helped keep me sane in one way or another.

My family (and family-in-law) has been a great source of support and understanding over the years. Living thousands of miles away from some of the people I love the most, I have had to miss event after event—holidays, births, weddings, reunions, funerals—and have always wished that I could be with them at these times of togetherness, to share in person these moments of happiness and sorrow. For this reason, I am dedicating this project to them, that it might in some small way make up for my many absences.

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I suppose there is one other person who has understood the difficulties involved in bringing this project to fruition, and that is the person who has had the misfortune of living with me while I endeavored to make it happen. Thomas Weber has patiently endured with great equanimity the many vicissitudes of being married to a humanities PhD student, and has offered unending support since before this project began. He became my family when my own was far away, and in a way, he is imbedded in every page of the text that follows. I am extremely proud of his own numerous accomplishments, and can only strive to be deserving of the faith he has in me.

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Entries on “coolie trade” and “contract laborers” in *Chinese Americans: the History and Culture of a People*, Jonathan H.X. Lee ed., (ABC-CLIO). Forthcoming 2016.

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“Violent Participation and Verbal Contestation: the inscription of the Chinese ‘Coolie’ as Historical Subject in Colonial Cuba,” (Life and Identity in Asian Contact Zones) CSU Long Beach, CA. Mar. 18-19, 2011.

“Coolie Encodings: representations of the coolie/emigrant figure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese fiction,” (WCILCOS 5<sup>th</sup> annual conference) Vancouver, BC, Canada. May 16-19, 2012.

“挽回苦工的歷史：以出洋華工的創傷為民眾的鼓舞/Retrieving the History of *kugong*: using the symbol of the Chinese laborer overseas to stir public activism,” (Traumatic Memory and Cultural Symbols: How Literature Writes History) Capital Normal University, Beijing, China. Presentation given in Mandarin. May 27-28, 2013.

“Bearing the Burden of History: the symbolic significance of the coolie laborer in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese boycott literature,” (China in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Young Scholars’ Conference) Peking University Dept. of History, Beijing, China. June 15-16, 2013.

In Violent Terms: The Coolie Trade as a Site of Meaning Creation in 19th-Century Southern China,” (WCAAS) Tempe, AZ. Oct. 3-4, 2014.

## Introduction

### Vocabularies of Violence:

#### The Coolie Trade and the Constitutive Power of its Conceptual Vocabularies

*Just around this time, long red posters advertising employment opportunities in Cuba began to appear, plastered along every street and alleyway [in Guangdong]. At first, there were some who, as shrewd and as wicked as can be, looked deep within themselves and became determined to be the first to take advantage of the situation, hoping to become very rich by [selling others into bondage]. In so doing, who knows how many families they shattered, how many lives they cut short? Though they didn't think much of what they were doing at the time, [their actions would eventually] call forth an unparalleled group of heroes, and result in the founding of a hitherto undreamed of world.<sup>1</sup>*

By the mid-nineteenth century, planters and traders in a number of the Euro-American New World colonies were facing a major predicament: the transatlantic slave trade, which had long provided a major component of the colonial labor force, was dying a violent, protracted death. The Haitian Revolution at the beginning of the century had made it clear that continuation of old slaving practices was not only inhumane but dangerous;<sup>2</sup> and as abolitionist fervor caught on in Europe and the Americas, slavery and the slave trade were becoming ever more difficult to defend.

Fighting a losing battle against abolitionism, but simultaneously desperate not to lose the productive advantages of slavery, traders and slave owners (and in several cases their governments) in places like Cuba, Peru, and the British Caribbean began to consider other potential sources of labor. One such source was the mid-nineteenth century trade in indentured Chinese labor (“the coolie trade,” 1847-1876). The coolie trade was initially proposed as a system of contracted indenture similar to the system that had previously been used to encourage immigration of European laborers to New World colonies; and Euro-American coolie trade proponents argued that it was precisely this system of contractual—and

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1. Biheguan zhuren, *Huangjin shijie [Golden World]*, in *Kushehui/Huangjin shijie*, Mao defu ed.,: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1985), 143.

2. See C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, second edition, revised (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

thus ostensibly voluntary—employment that would prevent the coolie trade from becoming a monstrosity like the slave trade.

Though heralded as a “humane” alternative to the increasingly unpopular and ethically untenable trade in African slaves, the coolie trade would prove itself to no less problematic than its predecessor. Contracts and regulation could diminish, but never prevent, the plethora of abuses inherent to such a system of labor recruitment. For one thing, it is well documented that a substantial minority of the men who would become coolies did not do so voluntarily. For another, the coolie ships (some of which were remnants from the dying slave trade) were cramped and unhygienic, and due to the length of the passage from China to the Americas, mortality rates were often higher than those on ships transporting African slaves.<sup>3</sup> Of nearly 300,000 men who were recorded as having departed China under this scheme, somewhere around 265,000 arrived—suggesting that average mortality was somewhere around 11 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Upon arrival at their destinations, coolies were frequently abused by foreign overseers and denied the protections nominally guaranteed in the contracts (it was not uncommon for a coolie to be forced to re-contract himself upon completion of his original term, for example, or to be denied certain provisions necessary for daily life). Physical and emotional abuse aside, coolies often performed such dangerous and physically demanding work as mining guano and harvesting and processing sugar, and as such, mortality rates on the plantations/mines were extremely high as well. (As Evelyn Hu-Dehart notes, the small Chinese businesses that sprang up in former sites of coolie labor in Cuba and Peru in the early 1900s were much more likely

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3. Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2008), 18.

4. Based on data from Arnold Meagher, *The Coolie Trade: the Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America 1847-1874* (N.P.: Xlibris, 2008), 372-406.

to have been founded by later waves of “free” immigrants than by the few survivors of the experiment in coolie labor.)<sup>5</sup>

This trade, designed to continue feeding colonial plantations’ insatiable demand for consumable human fuel as the transatlantic slave trade contracted, spanned approximately three decades. By the 1870s, rising humanitarian concerns and public outcry—both in China and abroad—coupled with the rising expenses of trying to make the trade conform to the standards of “humaneness” promised by its early advocates, had caused the trade to stall. By 1874, the Chinese coolie trade to the Americas and the Caribbean had declined sharply, with records indicating only a few shipments of coolies to these locations after this time.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty years later, however, the figure of the coolie sent to the Americas as a laborer would reappear in an unexpected context: beginning in 1904, and spanning a period of several years before the dramatic fall of the Qing dynasty, a few pieces of what I call “coolie fiction” emerged. Amidst the activist fervor of the 1904 Movement to Enlighten the Lower Classes in Beijing (*Beijing xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong* 北京下層社會啟蒙運動) and the 1905 Anti-American Boycott in Shanghai (*Fanmei huagong jinyue yundong* 反美華工禁約運動), early twentieth century authors found in the figure of the coolie and his history deep symbolic meaning that could be deployed to rouse their readerships to political action. As I will argue, the substantial attention paid to the symbolic potential of the coolie trade in these belated novels—and the assumptions the novels make about modern readers’ shared knowledge of and projected emotional responses to the execution of the trade—demonstrates the extent to which the coolie trade as phenomenon had already begun to be transformed into a cultural and social touchstone, a rhetorical tool with great allusive and emotive power. The “coolie”

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5. Evelyn Hu-Dehart, “Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870s to 1930s,” in *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 71.

6. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrant to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), 48-49, 43.



as such was no longer simply a historical artifact, but rather an evocative symbol of national weakness and suffering; and his very concrete travails produced vocabularies and shared meaning that could be used to give voice to a number of social and political problems far beyond the scope of the trade itself.

## Goals and Approach

This project is concerned with two primary themes: first, I set out to discover how the prosecution of the coolie trade in mid-nineteenth-century coastal China impacted not just those persons sent to labor overseas, but even those who were perhaps only witnesses to the trade's brutality. To this end, I have analyzed contemporary government reports, media accounts, and testimonies of those who were directly involved, so that I might better understand the ways in which the violences of the coolie trade caused shifts not only in the political or economic situation in China's coastal cities, but simultaneously gave rise to whole new modes of expression and thought as Chinese attempted to process and reject the numerous violences being visited upon them by foreign governments and parties to the trade.

Indeed, I see the coolie trade not just as a historical phenomenon, but as a phenomenon that created different kinds of meaning in different contexts. Most immediately, I argue that the execution of the coolie trade in China produced certain "conceptual vocabularies" among onlookers and consumers of popular media. By "conceptual vocabularies," I mean both literal terminologies used to describe phenomena associated with the trade (words like "coolie," "crimp," "pig," "piglet barn," etc.),<sup>7</sup> as well as conceptions of externally-imposed racial hierarchies, international power relations, class positions, and identity that resulted from the establishment of the coolie trade. I begin by tracing the

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7. "Crimp" refers to the local man-sellers who served as middlemen between foreign coolie traders and prospective enlistees. "Pig" and "piglet barn" are slang terms for coolies and coolie detention centers (in which prospective coolies were held, often against their will, until embarkation) respectively.

development of these vocabularies from their emergence at the beginning of the coolie trade to the Americas in 1847, and show the ways in which they reflect resistance to and rejection of the victimization of Chinese, racist imputations of Chinese inferiority (and its corollary in the imperial economic system, commodifiability), as well as of foreign attempts to undermine Chinese sovereignty. The numerous vocabularies that emerged out of the coolie trade provide clear evidence of the extent to which the trade was a fount of traumatic meaning.

Significantly, these vocabularies, once created, could later be deployed to convey multiple layers of meaning. To elucidate this point, I trace the usage of the vocabularies through the fictionalization of the trade that occurred during the first decade of the twentieth century and ask how and why these vocabularies retained such power over the public imagination. I contend that reinvestment in these vocabularies was related to rising nationalist (whether narrowly-defined Han ethno-nationalist or broader Qing nationalist) sentiments during this period; and I show precisely how activist authors hoped to use these vocabularies to call forth from among their respective readerships a particular kind of “people” that would work together to manifest their various visions for a stronger future China. In particular, I examine the lingering potency of these conceptual vocabularies and explain why the coolie novels published in the early twentieth century, drawing as they did upon the latent shared vocabularies of the historical coolie trade, were such powerful vehicles for a variety of nationalist and activist issues not directly related to the trade itself. As I argue, the coolie trade occasioned the intersection of a number of controversial and socially-relevant issues—nationalism, anti-foreignism, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, human trafficking, opportunism—which in turn made the set of coolie trade vocabularies, once forged, multiply allusive and evocative. These vocabularies could thus be repurposed within the later novels to “represent” issues that had plagued China in the nineteenth century, while in fact alluding to the extent to which those issues persisted into the twentieth century. By

couching these social and political critiques as historical fiction, the novels bore less risk of being branded subversive or treasonous; but more importantly, the latent—and inflammatory—coolie trade vocabularies could be relied upon to elicit a particular set of powerful emotional responses from readers with regard to a wide variety of important social issues.

More specifically, I believe the invocation of the coolie trade has to do with the authors' desire to engender a particular *kind* of nationalist “people” among their readership. In an era in which the journal-reading population “was now projected (or imagined) to be a large reading public that, when identifiable as a nation, was also called upon to be the central political agent in history,”<sup>8</sup> nationalist/anti-imperial fiction such as the coolie novels can tell us a great deal about the various types of “nation” that were being called into existence by different authors/thinkers. The novels are able to use the allegiances and identities of their populations in order to gesture toward the composition of ideal “peoples”—in terms of political alignment, race, ethnicity, class, and even gender.<sup>9</sup>

In some places, where the coolie trade vocabularies themselves are insufficient to encapsulate all of those concerns, the authors take creative license, manipulating the vocabularies in such a way as to give voice to the full range of their convictions. To put it another way: the discrepancies between earlier non-fictional and later fictional accounts of the coolie trade are in fact sites where additional layers of meaning have been created. In comparing the vocabularies used by the authors of coolie fiction to those in which original reportage on the coolie trade was couched, it becomes possible to delineate the different

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8. Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 50.

9. In late Qing racial/ethnic discourse, the term *race* could be applied to what we tend to accept as “racial categories” (“white,” “black,” “yellow”) as well as what we would today describe as “ethnic” subcategories of a race (“Han,” “Manchu”). I treat Han and Manchu as ethnic, rather than racial categories; however, where I am citing an argument made by someone who considered Han and Manchu to be races, I will use “race” (in scare quotes) in order to try to convey the sense in which the source was discussing these categories.

ways in which both “organic” reactions to the coolie trade and fictional representations thereof could be instrumentalized in service of political or diplomatic goals. Much as Paul Cohen provocatively attempted to demonstrate that history could be understood in “three keys” (“event,” “experience,” and “myth”),<sup>10</sup> I distinguish between two different modes of the coolie trade—the coolie trade as “phenomenon” (i.e. lived or witnessed event) and the coolie trade as “rhetorical tool.” Each of these modes contained multiple layers of meaning, and in order to dissect the “rhetorical” mode (with its attendant nationalist aspirations), I must first clarify the context within which that rhetoric was being deployed and understood. Only then is it possible to comprehend how the coolie trade vocabularies reinforced and challenged the political and social discourses alongside which themselves were being recirculated.

The coolie trade, though a catastrophic chapter of China’s history, resulted in the development of particular conceptual vocabularies that enabled people contemporary to the trade to process and reject the trade and everything it implied. I argue that these vocabularies emerged largely as a response to the numerous traumas (humanitarian, positional, psychological/emotional, and sovereign) that the trade introduced to coastal China. In my discussion of the coolie novels, I then show that these vocabularies, once created, could later be repurposed or manipulated to intentionally elicit a very particular type of emotional/nationalist response from readers—most immediately to garner support for political activities. More importantly, however, I also argue that the multiply-allusive coolie trade vocabularies provided a vehicle via which the authors could express more abstracted nationalist dissatisfaction with, for example, foreign and Manchu regimes of power, or lack of social unity and the betrayal of Han by other Han. In other words, in tracing the development and crystallization of the conceptual vocabularies of the coolie trade, I identify how they

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10. Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997).

became part of a shared public pool of referents; once thus ingrained in the public psyche, these powerful vocabularies could, in turn, be mobilized not just to garner support for specific events, but to narrate an activist Chinese “people” (of particular class and ethnic composition, as well as particular racial and political convictions) into being.

I will be using the terms “coolie novels” and “coolie fiction” more or less interchangeably throughout this manuscript to refer to pieces of fiction that make use of the tropes of the coolie and the crimp, if not necessarily taking the coolie trade as their sole focus. I have chosen to limit my discussion to the coolie novels in particular because the element of foreign coercion/sponsorship in the coolie fiction allows these novels to provide insight on this particular aspect of the often-violent semi-colonial dynamics of China’s treaty ports, presenting a more complicated picture than one of simple anti-Chinese racism (as is portrayed in other works in the broader categories of *huagong* (“Chinese laborer” 華工) or late Qing fiction. The coolies’ loss of agency in the novels reflects contemporary anxieties over the potential of China’s total subsumption to foreign mastery in a way that other novels do not. Specifically, the coolie novels, as I will discuss below, betray early twentieth century intellectuals’ fear of a total loss of sovereignty to foreign control.

While late Qing anti-imperialist literature was never consumed in the same quantities as purely “popular” fiction,<sup>11</sup> coolie fiction and more general *huagong* fiction were very influential in the political moments in which they were produced.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the somewhat marginal status of coolie fiction in contemporary studies of late Qing literature belies the genre’s complexity and historical social and political significance. In the relatively few recent essays in which works of coolie fiction are discussed (usually among other works of *huagong*

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11. A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980), 52.

12. A Ying, “Introduction” in *Fanmei huagong jinyue wenxue ji*, ed. A Ying (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962); Guanhua Wang, *In Search of Justice: The 1905-1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2001), Chap. 6.

literature), the narrativization of negative coolie or laborer experience overseas tends to be discussed as a straightforward manifestation of anti-foreign nationalist sentiment.<sup>13</sup> However, in this project, I push the question of nationalism further, asking not “How is coolie fiction nationalist in nature?” but “What does coolie literature tell us *about* nationalism in this period?” and “What were the predominant anxieties to which these nationalists were responding?” Thinking about the *kind* of nationalism reflected/given voice by the coolie fiction has also raised additional questions of class, race, ethnicity, social inclusivity, and loss of sovereignty with which my project engages. In particular, I use the lenses of the coolie trade and coolie fiction to bring into focus the ways in which nationalism intersects with all of these issues at a crucial moment in late Qing history.

## Implications

As mentioned above, the coolie trade was the site of confluence of a number of important social and political phenomena. As I intend to demonstrate, this project occupies a unique niche among coolie trade studies and studies on late Qing nationalism, race, ethnicity, and class, due both to the ways in which these numerous threads come together in the tapestry of the set of coolie trade vocabularies, as well as to the project’s focus on the broad societal impacts the trade unleashed within China. In this, I include not just the coolies who ultimately went overseas, but the affected population that remained behind—and even the much-reviled crimps.

## *Coolie Trade Studies*

There is a small but growing body of literature on the coolie trade and Chinese labor movements overseas. A substantial portion of this scholarship has focused on the trade as

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13. A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi*, Chap. 5; Lai Fangling, “Lun wan Qing de huagong xiaoshuo” in *Wan Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu*, ed. Li Mingde (Taipei: Lianjing cheban shiye gongsi, 1988).

historical and commercial phenomenon, documenting logistical mechanics, geographic trajectories, and international political and legal impacts of the trade.<sup>14</sup> These works have provided crucial information for this study, particularly those that make extensive use of historical documents. In particular, Arnold Meagher's *The Coolie Trade* represents a Herculean research effort, and has proven to be a veritable treasure trove of data and documentary interpretations. Yen Ching-hwang's *Coolies and Mandarins* is a somewhat unique departure from the others in that Yen presents the coolie trade from the perspective of the Qing government and tries to unpack the (often-minimized) complexities of the court's responses to the trade.

However, it has been notoriously difficult to obtain in-depth first-person perspectives on the trials and tribulations faced by coolies overseas, and humanities-oriented scholars seeking to understand the lived experience of these persons have had to resort to a number of different tactics to craft meaningful person-centered narratives. Attempting to look beyond the coolie trade as mere mercantile phenomenon, such scholarship has tried to assess its emotional, cultural, and social impacts on those who experienced it. In other words, there has been a sort of effort to “humanize” the history of the dehumanized coolie, to re-tell his story in such a way that he remains its subject, rather than its object. Indeed, though the history of the coolie trade is partially a history of a particular type of commerce—and is often presented as such—there remains work to be done on uncovering the full human impact of the trade's machinations.

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14. Persia Crawford Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire* (London: P.S. King & Son, Ltd. 1923); Watt Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru: a History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru, 1849-1874* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1951); Robert Irick, *Ch'ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade, 1847-1878* (Taipei: Chinese Materials Center, 1982); Arnold Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*; Yen Ching-hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period, 1851-1911* (Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, 1985); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar; Moon-ho Jung, Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006).

There are a number of outstanding works in this vein. In her inspiring monograph *The Coolie Speaks*, Lisa Yun focuses on the coolie testimonies collected by a tripartite fact-finding mission sent to Cuba in 1874—one of the few records that documents coolie experience firsthand. Yun demonstrates that the testimonies often served the dual purpose of relaying one’s own suffering and of bearing witness for others who had already perished.<sup>15</sup> The testimonies are thus not only extemporaneous legal documents, but indelible records of loss and other traumatic experiences. Evelyn Hu-Dehart performs a close reading of coolie contracts and related labor laws in Cuba in order to demonstrate the many ways that “free” coolie laborers were in fact (legally) treated as chattel by their employers, highlighting the numerous mechanisms via which coolies were denied their autonomy and personhood. If the coolie testimonies provide the clearest window into coolie experience in Cuba, study of the contracts and Cuba’s legal code helps illustrate the precarious social positions that coolies occupied in the New World colonies.<sup>16</sup> Walton Look Lai similarly attempts to document what life was like for Chinese working on colonial plantations, and also makes use of colonial legal and official documents in order to better understand the complex dynamics that influenced how Chinese laborers were treated and perceived in the British Caribbean.<sup>17</sup> Experience-focused studies are challenging to perform, given that the shortage of detailed first-person coolie accounts means one must approach the subject somewhat laterally; but they are crucial to better comprehending the enormity of the coolie trade in terms other than numbers.

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15. The fact-finding mission (“The Cuba Commission”) and its findings will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 80-84.

16. Evelyn Hu-Dehart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or Neoslavery?” *Contributions in Black Studies* 12, no.1 (1994): 38-54, <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/5> (accessed 16 Oct. 2011).

17. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*.



My project seeks similarly to understand the human cost of the coolie trade. However—while it is unquestionable that the coolies themselves paid the greatest price—this cost was not limited to the persons who experienced the trade. There were in fact substantial collateral costs as well: to families who lost husbands and sons; to coastal populations that no longer felt safe walking their own streets; to a popular psyche that had long believed in a narrative of Sinic superiority in East Asia and in the world; and even to the integrity of the Qing Chinese state. As such, while I consider the mental and physical price paid by the coolies and their families, I also extend my analysis to persons who suffered more indirect traumas of racial displacement, geopolitical disempowerment, as well as fear of kidnapping or of deception by trusted acquaintances (or by friendly strangers) who might turn out to be crimps. (Indeed, the crimp himself is another factor of the trade who has previously received little attention, but one who, I have found, raises many fascinating questions of his own.)

But I add still another layer of depth to previous understandings of the coolie trade, in attempting to understand the symbolic potential of the fictional coolie in twentieth century literature. Indeed, the question of why the figure of the coolie overseas was so compelling to educated authors specifically at this time has not yet been raised. What was it about the coolie and the coolie trade that gave them both such symbolic currency at this time? By emphasizing the instrumental role coolie novels played in appealing to activist peoples in particular political moments, I demonstrate that the significance of the figure of the coolie had long ceased to be simply historical; rather, his reincarnation, the coolie-as-rhetorical-tool, held a very deep, multifaceted kind of meaning for early twentieth-century readers. Having attained an almost-legendary status, the “coolie” was not only widely recognizable as a martyr to foreign violence, but a symbol of Qing China’s “slavish” capitulation to foreign masters. At the same time, the fictional coolie’s victimization by local crimps also posed a critique of internecine Chinese-on-Chinese (or Han-on-Han) violence at a time when it was

crucial for the people to work with, rather than against, one another. As such, the fictionalized coolie histories are an obvious bid to remind readers of foreign abuse, Qing misgovernance, and the need for a “people” to come together to provide protection against Qing impotence and the designs of predatory foreigners (and locals).

In later discussions on general *huagong* (“Chinese laborer”) fiction that had emerged in the early twentieth century, the focus tends to be primarily on the nationalist content of the stories, taking them as somewhat straightforward expressions of discontent with social problems (poverty, government corruption, American Exclusion, e.g.).<sup>18</sup> A Ying’s (阿英, pen-name of Qian Xingcun 錢杏邨 1900-1977, a radical intellectual and scholar on late Qing literature) discussion of *huagong* fiction in *A History of Late Qing Fiction* consists principally of plot summaries and commentary on the publication of the works in question. More than just interpreting the historical significance of the trade or the nationalist surface content of the novels—which, without question, are both important components to the novels—I investigate the reason the authors chose to write about coolies and felt them to still be relevant to the conversation. What does the invocation of the figure of the coolie say about trends in nationalist discourse at that time? This burst in the production of coolie fiction, albeit in relatively small quantity, requires further explanation.

#### *Late Qing nationalism and the formation of a “people”*

For one thing, allusion to the issues surrounding the historical coolie trade gave the coolie novels substantial ammunition with which to critique the contemporary moment, in which similar social and political issues persisted. Indeed, the coolie novels that I analyze in this study very neatly encapsulate a number of the multiple political and ideological discussions that were part of public discourse at the time. As a result, this project, too,

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18. A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi*, 52-63; Lai Fangling, “Lun Wang Qing de huagong xiaoshuo,” 155-84.

necessarily engages with prevalent political and social trends of the early twentieth century, ranging from rising nationalist sentiment to racial, ethnic and class dynamics associated with that nationalism.

The late Qing empire experienced a number of setbacks and staggering defeats (many violent) in rapid succession, which combined to cast significant doubt on the ability of the Qing court to protect its people and to maintain a strong independent state. Explosive population growth, two Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1858-1860), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and Hakka-Bendi feud (1854-1868) in the south, famine, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the failed Hundred Day Reform (1898), and the foreign suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1901) each contributed to the growing lack of confidence in the Manchu-dominated Qing court. All but the penultimate caused large-scale internal migration. Growing concern regarding the ability of the Qing court to adequately govern and protect China led, in turn, to the kindling of a new kind of nationalist fervor rooted in anxiety over China's survival. For some, this meant urging the Qing court to reform itself; while for others, it meant fomenting the total overthrow of the extant system of governance. Indeed, the economic and political instability of this period gave birth to tremendous ideological and intellectual shifts.

Because the emergent vocabularies of the coolie trade reflected a number of different kinds of destabilization connected with the trade specifically (and more subtly connected to the domestic context more generally because the trade could never have taken place without the instability of this period), my interpretation of these vocabularies has relied upon situating my own research within the larger body of research on China's turbulent nineteenth century. Similarly, because many of the key nationalist thinkers of the early twentieth century were caught up in figuring out ways for China to move forward out of this instability, it has also been necessary that I build upon scholarship that outlines the intellectual trends

and preoccupations of that era in order to better interpret the ways in which these coolie trade vocabularies were being mobilized.

Particularly, after dramatic losses in both Opium Wars, Chinese intellectuals began to consider the source of their woes: what had caused this rapid reversal in China's global position? Why had foreign militaries defeated the Qing armies so handily? And could anything be done to reverse China's apparent decline? Though many of the people concerned about China's future lacked the power or social position to argue for any kind of "official" policy change, the gradual broadening of a so-called "public sphere" around this time meant that, increasingly, Qing subjects could come together to discuss their grievances and attempt to solve local problems that the government was either unwilling or unable to address.<sup>19</sup> (The emergence of an extra-governmental space in which a variety of educated elites and merchants could work together to discuss common social goals provided an alternative forum in which the voices of interested—if otherwise powerless—men could be heard, and provided such men the opportunity to attempt to effect social reform on their own terms. Similarly, the increasing tendency for broad swathes of the hitherto un-enfranchised population to understand themselves as participating in a shared "community of affect" as appealed to in popular media resulted in the simultaneous expansion of a "literary public sphere."<sup>20</sup> The crystallization of the literary public sphere made it possible for even those with no economic or political clout to imagine themselves as having a role to play in the future of an embryonic public.

This idea of the literary public sphere is critical to my own research. As I will argue in the latter half of this manuscript, part of the reason that the coolie fiction is so significant is

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19. Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 7; Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992), 61-62.

20. Haiyan Lee, "All the Feelings that are Fit to Print: the Community of Sentiment and the Literary Public Sphere in China, 1900-1918," *Modern China* 27: 291-327, <http://mcx.sagepub.com/content/27/3/291.full.pdf+html> (accessed 30 March 2010).

precisely because its authors obviously believed that they could reach out to and coalesce a cohesive, mutually-supportive “public” or “people” around the content of the novels. Three out of the four novels I discuss are quite clearly mission-oriented, where their immediate goal is to garner popular support for particular activist projects; while the fourth is a novel of broader social critique. Indeed, in 1902, Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873-1929) had already issued his famous challenge to authors that popular fiction should be used as a medium to educate, inspire, and govern the people;<sup>21</sup> so it should not be terribly surprising that by 1904 and 1905, emboldened activist authors were already attempting to do just that. It is not even necessarily unique that the authors of coolie fiction were attempting to use fiction in such a utilitarian way; rather, the question of greater interest is this: what do the narratives and the populations contained in the coolie novels tell us about the literary public sphere—and the public—that these authors hoped to conjure together? And what is unique about the coolie trade vocabularies that they could enable such a conjuring to take place?

Though the “people” being discussed at this time was defined differently—and believed to have different purposes—by different actors, there was at least one thing upon which most proponents of a unified “people” could agree: as Rebecca Karl has shown, the “public” or “people” was gradually coming to be understood first and foremost as the critical unit of national-level political action. As Chinese intellectuals observed popular anticolonial uprisings around the world, they began to internalize the idea that a unified people was the only unit with the potential to resist imperialist designs. If a Chinese people failed to come together, they reasoned, China might find itself in the same position as colonized India or partitioned Poland. The inability to unite to resist imperialism gradually came to be seen as a precursor to inevitable “slavish” capitulation and forfeiture of sovereignty to imperial

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21. Liang Qichao, “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi,” in *Yinbingshi quanji* (Taipei: Wenhua tushu gongsi, 1970), 270-74.

powers.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, while the threat of foreign domination was a terrifying prospect for late Qing reformers and revolutionaries alike, Jing Tsu has argued that this idea that China was following in the footsteps of other failed nations was also paradoxically empowering. Tsu demonstrates that there was a particular brand of nationalism that appealed to a sense of shared national humiliation or “failure,” and argues that intellectuals’ “preoccupation with failure” allowed them to accept responsibility for past events, thereby making themselves, rather than the West, the agents in their most recent history. In this way, “they continued to invest in an identity of themselves, even if disparagingly.”<sup>23</sup>

As I will demonstrate, the tropes of colonized “slavishness” and “humiliation” are part of the reason that coolie trade vocabularies—as used in the coolie novels—were such an effective way to mobilize nationalist public sentiment in the early twentieth century. The coolie trade itself was humiliating both for the individuals forced to endure sub-human treatment at the hands of their employers and overseers on foreign plantations, as well as for those persons who remained in China who merely had to consider the trade’s impact on a more intellectual level. This subjugation of Chinese persons to foreign employers, and treatment of Chinese more generally as an inferior brand of human was devastating; and when twentieth-century authors appealed once again to the brutality and shame that the coolie trade had imposed upon Chinese persons, it was not surprising that readers should react very strongly to this resurrected memory of Chinese suffering.

Such humiliation was implied both in the general state of servitude for a class of Chinese who believed themselves to be categorically above such treatment, as well as in the frequent positing of coolies’ status on colonial plantations as parallel to or worse than that of

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22. Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2007), 33-34, Chap. 5, 160.

23. Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: the Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 22.

freed blacks or former black slaves (the prevalence of this complaint suggests that this was a shock for many, and indeed, such comparisons of the coolie trade to regimes of enslavement often took on a defeatist air of self-pity, rather than of solidarity with those who had shared a similar fate). However, Chinese had begun to understand that they had more in common with the global South not just because Euro-Americans had staked claims upon their territory but more terrifyingly because Euro-Americans had begun to stake claims upon their very bodies. Positing “humiliating” coolie experience as equivalent to slave experience was another way that Chinese were able to understand their changing geopolitical position vis-à-vis foreign powers; however, at the same time, comparison to the precedent set by the slave trade (and its abolition) simultaneously emphasized the egregious violence of the coolie trade and highlighted the need for its eradication.

There was still another reason for Chinese authors to feel anxious in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the treatment of Chinese laborers in the US. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act had prevented immigration of new laborers to the US, while at the same time making it increasingly difficult for those who had previously entered the US legally to travel between the US and China. Aspiring immigrants (and even those who had been living in the US for years) could be held in the makeshift barracks at San Francisco’s Angel Island, where they could be detained for weeks or months without explanation. Chinese miners and laborers in the American west also faced discrimination in employment and in housing, and were frequently the victims of violent nativist attacks. In 1905, concerns over the treatment of Chinese in America, coupled with successful efforts by the US government to strong-arm the Qing government into signing a treaty that renewed and strengthened the terms of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and general anxiety about China’s “semi-colonial” status, boiled over into a boycott of American goods in Shanghai and other major cities.

Perhaps because the boycott fizzled out without achieving its ambitious goal of forcing a change in the treaty terms, it tends to be mentioned only in passing,<sup>24</sup> with only a few scholars attempting to demonstrate that it had lasting significance for Chinese nationalism and politics. However, monographs on the boycott have emphasized its importance both as one of the earliest manifestations of popular support for a political/nationalist cause, and as reflective of broad structural societal changes that allowed such a manifestation to occur in the first place.<sup>25</sup> A Ying similarly believed in the significance of the boycott, and compiled a collection of all published materials (fiction, poems, essays) related thereto.<sup>26</sup> Two of the four novels with which this project is concerned (*Bitter Society* [*Ku shehui*, 苦社會] and *Golden World* [*Huangjin shijie* 黃金世界]) were written in the moment of the boycott, and would likely have been long forgotten by now were it not for their inclusion in said anthology.

Just a year prior to the boycott, a very distinct political movement had erupted in Beijing: the undertaking to “Enlighten the Lower Classes” of Beijing. Partially in response to the violent upheaval of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901, members of Beijing’s intelligentsia and media determined that the city’s lower classes—many of whom had been seduced into rebellion by the superstitious mythology of the Boxers—were receiving insufficient education to make informed, responsible choices. As such, the goal of the movement was to encourage education and support for the oft-neglected lower classes, in order to ensure that they might someday become participants in, rather than burdens on, a future Chinese nation.<sup>27</sup> The third

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24. Theodore Hutters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 129; Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, 53.

25. Sin Kiong Wong, *China’s Anti-American Boycott Movement in 1905: A Study in Urban Protest* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Guanhua Wang, *In Search of Justice: the 1905-1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2001).

26. A Ying, *Fanmei huagong jinyue wenxueji*.

27. Li Xiaoti, *Qing mo de xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong: 1901-1911* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 6-11.



novel I discuss, *Diary of a Pig* (*Zhuzai ji* 豬仔記), which bemoans the unbridled ignorance and willful self-destruction of its protagonist, emerged out of this political moment.

A detailed understanding of the intellectual and social climate in which both nationalism in general and the coolie literature in particular began to emerge has been imperative to my project, as this contextualization has allowed me to demonstrate how the trends and perspectives expressed in the novels fit into the broader social and political milieu. Indeed, though the novels are ostensibly about the travails of a handful of beleaguered protagonists, the coolie trade vocabularies were in fact a useful set of tools with which these authors could address a wide range of contemporary fears, anxieties, and aspirations for the future nation and the persons who would (hopefully) both populate and govern it.

#### *Race and Ethnicity in the Context of Late Qing Nationalism*

Yet late Qing nationalism was not just a simple matter of posturing between purely political states. After all, the states on either end of these conversations were, almost from the moment of contact with the other, *racialized* states. As such, the discourse of nationalism in late Qing China was very much informed by the contemporary understanding of race and ethnicity and the respective “positions” of different groups in the world. Increasingly pervasive discourses of white-dominated global racial hierarchies would, over time, make it possible for Euro-American pseudoscientists and policymakers to claim that a “yellow” Asiatic race was inferior,<sup>28</sup> thereby justifying its “edification” and management by “whites.” This mentality would, in turn, make the coolie trade possible. Late Qing nationalists would be faced with the task of attempting to debunk and dismantle these insidious discourses of Asian

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28. Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), Chap. 2.

inferiority vis-à-vis a “superior” “white” race;<sup>29</sup> and the coolie trade vocabularies, which carried a more-or-less explicit condemnation of Euro-American-imposed racial hierarchies, would provide one means of challenging the white-centered imperial world order.

Discourses of race and ethnicity in late nineteenth and early twentieth century China were very heavily colored by the utilitarian idea of “Social Darwinism” and the doctrine of “survival of the fittest,” which had recently begun to take hold thanks to Yan Fu’s translations of a number of sociological texts such as Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* and Herbert Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology*.<sup>30</sup> James Reeve Pusey provides a detailed account of the ways in which different political groups chose to approach and appropriate Social Darwinism, and demonstrates that reformers tended to invoke Social Darwinism to support the idea of the need of the yellow race to cooperate in order to stand up to the white race; revolutionaries, on the other hand, would invoke Social Darwinism to support pro-Han, anti-Manchu ideology.<sup>31</sup> Frank Dikötter similarly emphasizes the importance that more ruthless “Spencerian” theories of “racial competition (*zhongzu jingzheng*) and racial survival (*baozhong*)” had on the unfolding discourse of race.<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Karl, too, speaks of a “Spencerian” mode of Darwinism being operational in China, emphasizing its relationship to the discourse of “nation” via the indirect route from “race,” and “struggle,” to “nation-statism” and “ethno-nationalism.”<sup>33</sup> After all, the Euro-American powers maintained that it was the strength of their own respective “nations,” (and the white race that predominantly

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29. A note on racial designations: I have tried throughout this project to keep in mind at all times the constructedness (and often, external imposition) of racial “categories.” For the sake of visual de-cluttering, I have opted not to use the scare-quoted versions of these terms (“white” “black” “yellow”) in all occurrences; however I do understand that these and other designations of otherness and self are entirely contingent and subjective, rather than universally and objectively absolute.

30. James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard Univ., 1983), 6-8.

31. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, Chaps. 6-7.

32. Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 98-101.

33. Karl, *Staging the World*, 14-15.

comprised them), that legitimized their imperial projects and occupation of “lesser” nations or territories.<sup>34</sup> The conceptual linking of the discourses of “Darwinism” and nation in assertions of Euro-American dominance resulted in the belief among Chinese intellectuals that the strength of the “nation” or the “people” could be taken to be a measure of (Spencerian-) Darwinian racial fitness, and that lack of a strong Chinese nation could spell the doom of the race.

Part of the reason that race as a discourse became more visible in the late nineteenth century was because the violent incursions of white imperialists into China had caused certain intellectuals, such as Yan Fu, to worry that this white-yellow confrontation—similar in many ways to the white interaction with black Africans—was merely a precursor to the indiscriminate enslavement (and possible extinction) of the Asiatic race.<sup>35</sup> As Michael Keevak points out, this fear was not wholly unfounded: by the mid-nineteenth century, white imperialists themselves had already begun the process of “othering” the Chinese,<sup>36</sup> not necessarily for the *purpose* of dominating them, but providing ample justification for those who wished to do so. And indeed, the establishment of the coolie trade offered confirmation that the white semi-colonizers intended to treat Chinese the same as they had treated the other peoples they colonized.

While the preservation of China and her populace (whether defined inclusively as the entire population of China vis-à-vis the rest of the world, or more exclusively to the majority Han ethnicity vis-à-vis the ruling minority Manchus and the foreigners) was paramount, recent research has demonstrated that the experiences of other colonized or “exterminated” peoples around the world would be important educational resources for Chinese intellectuals,

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34. Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 48.

35. Dikotter, *Discourse of Race*, 75.

36. Keevak, *Becoming Yellow*, 34-39.

whether by demonstrating the totality of the destruction of which white imperialists were capable, or by providing inspiring examples of anti-colonial resistance. Chinese intellectuals began increasingly to concern themselves with questions of race beyond their own experiences with white imperialism. For example, Tsu discusses a Sinitic script novel in which “brown” and “red” colonized persons are the protagonists, which she argues is demonstrative of a sense of common fate;<sup>37</sup> Dikötter observes that Filipinos (previously “black”) and Vietnamese (previously “brown”) could pragmatically be reconstrued as “yellow” when rhetorically expedient for Chinese nationalists;<sup>38</sup> while for Karl, as already mentioned, the efforts of educated Chinese to learn from others’ colonial experiences had a major impact on their own ideas of nationalism. In this vein, though the coolie novels place violent “white”/“yellow” conflict at the fore of their narratives, they do at the same time echo and commiserate with earlier depictions of slave experience in the Americas.

The rise of anti-colonial awareness in China not only emphasized the need to resist the white imperialists, but for more revolutionary thinkers would also result in an increasingly anti-Manchu stance. Indeed, the perceived failure of the Qing court to adequately govern China had provided a nucleus around which the fervent Anti-Manchu sentiment of two centuries earlier would re-condense.<sup>39</sup> Research on this resurgence of anti-Manchu sentiment in the late Qing has pointed to a rising sense of Han ethno-nationalism in the wake of national defeat by foreign powers, particularly due to government inability to protect its territory and its people,<sup>40</sup> as well as a sense that the Manchus were themselves an alien empire, actively

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37. Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism and Literature*, 71-74.

38. Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 84-85.

39. The years immediately following the Manchu conquest of Ming China in 1644 had also seen a tremendous outpouring of anti-Manchu sentiment, which had largely dissipated over the course of the Qing dynasty.

40. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 319-324; Kauko Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism in the late Qing Dynasty: Zhang Binglin as an Anti-Manchu Propagandist* (London: Curzon Press, 1990).

oppressing their Han “others.”<sup>41</sup> Of the two opposing, if vaguely defined, intellectual groups (“reformers” and “revolutionaries”) that emerged in the late Qing, the more radical “revolutionaries” were much more likely to support anti-Manchu activities. In general, reformers were more moderate, advocating, at the most extreme, a system of power-sharing in which the Manchu court remained in place under a system of constitutional monarchy. However, because the revolutionaries believed that the Manchu court was to blame for China’s decline, they advocated the complete dissolution of the Qing government—by violent means, if necessary.<sup>42</sup> Falling back on the newly popular discourse of Social Darwinism, staunchly anti-Manchu Han intellectuals like Zhang Binglin increasingly posited ethnicity in China (where the domestic “races” are mainly restricted to Han vs. Manchu) in “Darwinian” terms of fitness and survival, where the Manchus, inherently weaker than the Han, needed to be overthrown lest they take the Han down with them.<sup>43</sup> For revolutionaries, resistance against the Manchu court would continue beyond the failure of the boycott; but the boycott literature, in attempting to assemble various visions of activist “peoples” seems at least to have recognized the importance of the sense of cohesive, empowered “nation” to which the revolutionaries would also appeal.

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41. An example of this oppression is the fact that the dramatic population increases over the previous century meant that competition for scarce official appointments among educated Han became increasingly fierce. Thus, while Manchus received preferential treatment from the government in terms of employment or stipends, educated Han were finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet or to feel that they had a stake in Qing China. Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2000), 16-17, 48, Chap. 1; John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (London: Picador, 1988), 63-64.

42. Because each of these groups comprises notable personalities, there is no shortage of materials on either, or on the tensions between the two. See, for example, Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*; Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space*; Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1980-1911* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987); Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism*; Audrey Wells, *The Political Thought of Sun Yat-sen: Development and Impact* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) to name but a few.

43. Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism*.

In addition to very clearly staking out the anti-(white)-foreign sentiment contained in the novels, my project also investigates the anti-Manchu tensions that are visible, if not explicitly named, in the coolie fiction. For example, in the novel *Golden World*, the establishment of a utopia led by scions of the (Han) Ming dynasty (1368-1644) provides an alternative “Chinese” history—one in which the Manchus had never conquered the Ming, and, it is suggested, in which the legitimate (read: Han) rulers would never have capitulated to the foreigners. While the anti-Manchu sentiment of the novel is posited as pro-Ming sentiment, the message is far from subtle—particularly when considering that one of the most popular anti-Manchu slogans of the day was “Overthrow the Qing, reinstate the Ming!” (*fan Qing fu Ming* 反清復明). Anti-Qing criticism in *Bitter Society*, though more limited, is suggestive of the same kind of tension; Wu Jianren’s 吳趼人 (pen-name of Wu Woyao 吳沃堯 1866-1910) *The Secret to Getting Rich* (*Facai mijue* 發財秘訣, to be discussed in Chapter Four), also suggests that the Manchus are imperfect, but are preferable to the foreigners. Meanwhile, a fourth coolie novel, *Diary of a Pig*, was published in the imperial capital in a slightly different political moment and was focused instead on educational reform, and therefore took a more or less apolitical stance with regard to Qing governance.

In my analysis of the novels, I demonstrate that even during the 1905 Anti-American Boycott, when the nominal target of criticism was the US (or more generally, white imperialist powers), authors were simultaneously taking aim against the declining Manchu court—and indeed, the coolie narrative was the perfect vehicle in which to launch this two-pronged attack. While the primary goal of the novels is clearly criticism of foreign abuses of Chinese, the underlying message is that it is the Qing government that has allowed these abuses to occur. Six years prior to the fall of the dynasty, boycott authors were using the immediate context of the boycott to make (not-so) veiled references to the culpability of the Manchu court. As David Wang has noted in his discussion of chivalric/court fiction (*xiayi*

*xiaoshuo* and *gong'an xiaoshuo*) of the late Qing, educated authors had by this time come increasingly to lose faith in the ability of the government to administer justice and maintain law (which is why vigilante heroes are often summoned in such novels).<sup>44</sup> Similarly, I demonstrate that the historical position of the coolie allowed these authors to write novels that were simultaneously a critique of foreign rapacity and a vote of no confidence in the ruling Manchu court.

The coolie novels provide still another avenue by which we may come to understand various prevalent views regarding racial and ethnic fitness: the establishment of the coolie trade had made manifest the intersection of a number of the complex racial and ethnic dynamics (white victimization of Asians, Manchu inability to stand up to white foreigners, apparent Manchu disregard for the wellbeing of Han subjects), and any retelling of the experiences of the trade must necessarily make reference to these upsetting and controversial phenomena. Thus, when activist authors depicted the coolie trade in their novels, they paid ample attention to interracial and intercivilizational dynamics—with a somewhat milder emphasis on Han-Manchu ethnic tensions, usually in the form of lamentations about China's dismal fate (which would have been interpreted by Han ethno-nationalists as the result of poor Manchu governance). The novels' Chinese protagonists persevere in the face of foreign abuse, and repeatedly prove themselves to be spiritually superior to morally-bankrupt foreign characters. In illuminating the inhuman bearing of the foreigners, the coolie novels raise the question: why should China strive to attain a "Western" level of civilization when the westerners can hardly be said to be civilized themselves? In sharp contradistinction to Euro-American racist posturing of the nineteenth century, in the novels it is the Chinese, not the foreigners, who are the arbiters of reason; and as long as the

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44. David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), Chap. 3.

people can come together to fight for the common cause, we are left with the sense that it is Chinese (thought not necessarily Qing) civilization that will ultimately prevail.

### *Class*

In addition to painting a fascinating picture of racial and ethnic dynamics in the early twentieth century, the use of the historical position of the coolie by these authors also provides us a glimpse into another aspect of late Qing nationalism: class dynamics. Because the authors of these novels are at the very least educated, their choice of the (generally lower class, historically speaking) coolie as the object of their narratives is significant. The invocation of the coolie by educated authors suggests that these authors both found something to be unique about the relationship between coolies and foreigners, and thought that the coolie in particular would make a compelling symbol for the boycott-era readership. As I have stated earlier, this project focuses on the ways in which the conceptual vocabularies of the coolie trade evolved over time to contain certain nationalist meanings; but another important facet is to explore the significance of the inscription of meaning onto a subaltern figure/position by an educated author, and to determine what this power-to-inscribe says about the relationship between the educated class and the subaltern in the late Qing.

Alterity operated on a number of different levels in the late Qing city, and has increasingly become a topic of academic interest. The urban poor, rural migrants, criminals, illiterates, and prostitutes (to name a few) were each on the margins of society in their own way, and scholars have attempted to resuscitate their histories as counternarratives to hegemonic elite histories. In *Creating Chinese Ethnicity*, Emily Honig explains that in Shanghai, rural migrants from Subei were looked down upon to such an extent that many found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle: being deemed suitable only for low-class work by nature of their Subei origins, and then being deemed low-class by nature of the low-class



employment they were able to secure.<sup>45</sup> Janet Chen's study on the late Qing urban poor has chronicled the rise of the idea of "managing" the urban indigent population at the end of the nineteenth century, with various leaders proposing the establishment of workhouses for the rehabilitation of criminals and providing skills-training for the poor. However, she notes, the combination of workhouses with labor rehabilitation centers often had the effect of blurring the lines between criminals and non-criminal poor, whether in terms of real daily interaction between the two groups within the institutions, or in terms of elites' imagination of these two groups.<sup>46</sup> Though the workhouses' immediate goal was to "reform" the urban indigent population, their continued use led to a de facto "criminalization" of poverty in China's urban spaces in the late Qing.<sup>47</sup> Beyond material empowerment, a number of other attempts to "reform" cities' poor or illiterate populations focused on political involvement or intellectual engagement with contemporary social issues. Li Xiaoti's (李孝悌) extensive research into the 1904 movement to enlighten Beijing's lower classes demonstrates that such efforts, often supported by intellectuals or college students, could include posters, speeches, performances, *baihua* ("vernacular" 白話) newspapers, and newspaper study groups in order to encourage participation of the literate and the illiterate alike.<sup>48</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising that the first era during which the poor as a class gradually came to the attention of the educated and official classes was also the first era during which

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45. Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity: Subei People in Shanghai, 1850-1980* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 58.

46. Janet Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012) Chap. 1.

47. *Ibid.*, 44.

48. The third of the novels I study, *Diary of a Pig*, was produced out of this movement rather than out of the Shanghai boycott, and its provenance is made very clear in its use of the coolie vocabularies to exhort its readers against profligacy and ignorance, rather than taking an explicitly anti-foreign or anti-Manchu stance.

it became acceptable for fictional protagonists to be members of the subaltern class.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as studies on “depravity fiction” (*xiaxie xiaoshuo* 狹邪小說) demonstrate, the social subaltern was increasingly deemed a suitable object (if not necessarily subject) of representation in the late Qing.<sup>50</sup> Though they were perhaps not written about with as much imagination or flourish as were prostitutes or bandits, the men who would become coolies were also members of the subaltern social milieu. Many (though by no means all) were poor and illiterate, and no small number of those who had been kidnapped were rural migrants unfamiliar with the dangers of the treaty ports. Crimps, too, tended to be members of the lower class, and as testimonies indicate, they often became involved in kidnapping out of financial desperation.<sup>51</sup>

Because both the coolie and the crimp tended to be of poorer class background, members of each group were (both historically and in terms of historical/fictional representation) more likely to have been “managed” by elites. In *Dangerous Pleasures*, Gail Hershatter outlines the difficulty in attempting to give “voice” back to a subaltern people whose history has previously been so “managed”: the fictional or second-hand statistical accounts of the subaltern by the educated class are always riddled with biases, subjective assessments, and defensive omissions. As an example, Hershatter describes the process by which literature on prostitution gradually shifted in tone, from romanticized nostalgia to criticism of prostitution as a social evil. In this way, cultural producers were able to shape

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49. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “Introduction,” in *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Doleželová-Velingerová (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980).

50. David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, Chap. 2.

51. “Depositions or Confessions of Twenty-Three Kidnappers,” in *British Parliamentary Papers, Area Studies: China, vol. 4* (hereafter *BPP4*): *Correspondence and returns respecting the emigration of Chinese coolies, 1859-1892* (Shannon Ireland: Irish Univ. Press, 1971), 136-44; Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 77.

and change the popular perception of prostitution. It is from this hegemonic elite-written history that Hershatler attempts to excavate an experiential history of the prostitutes.<sup>52</sup>

In a way, I am faced with a similar task, in that the coolies and crimps tended to be objects of writing, rather than the writers of their own histories. Even their testimonies, whether written or verbal, have almost certainly been mediated to some degree by the officials who recorded and transmitted them, or else by the fact that (for the crimps) the act of testifying would bear immediate punitive consequences. The question then remains: what does it mean for educated authors to write a historical or fictional account of lower class coolies (or crimps)? Unlike later authors such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (pen-name of Zhou Shuren 周樹人 1881-1936) who would find themselves unable to narrate the experience of the subaltern without acknowledging their own participation in repressive social regimes,<sup>53</sup> the authors of coolie fiction do not seem to be aware of or make any allowance for their own social position vis-à-vis those whose experience they would narrate.

Indeed, the only suggestion of class difference between representer and object of representation is in the fact that in the novels, many of the victims of the coolie trade are erstwhile educated men or *liangmin* 良民 (“good people,” usually in distinction to *jianmin* 賤民, or “bad, low-class people”) who have fallen on hard times, rather than true uneducated urban poor as many of the historical coolies were. Of course, the protagonists are surrounded by *supporting-role* subaltern people, and yet the authors have largely chosen relatively privileged characters to serve as the lenses through which the reader views the trade and concomitant experiences.<sup>54</sup> This suggests that the authors were unsure of how to represent a

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52. Gail Hershatler, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), Chap. 1.

53. Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 91.

54. As analysis of the novels in Chapter 3 will reveal, *Golden World* does actually begin with a subaltern woman (!), Ms. Chen, as its focal point.

class with which they were unfamiliar, and/or that the authors were in fact writing for an educated audience rather than a popular one, and hoped that the coolies thus written would be more sympathetic protagonists. If the latter, it would seem that the broadly applicable symbolism of the (classless) coolie as victim of a failing nation is of greater use to the author than the historical reality of the coolie as socioeconomic subaltern. In either case, the ready availability of the coolie trade vocabularies permitted the authors to make use of the idea of the coolie (while perhaps replacing his socioeconomic substance), all without diminishing his symbolic significance to readers. Where *liang* and *jian* simultaneously conferred ethical *and* class substance, it became necessary for authors to treat victims as necessarily (ethically) *liang* and perpetrators as necessarily (ethically) *jian*, in order to establish ideas of guilt and innocence—even though these two groups were in fact more likely to have inhabited the same *jian* social sphere.

Indeed, this distinction was true even in contemporary coolie trade reportage: victims' socioeconomic *jian*-ness was minimized, while that of crimps was exaggerated and oversimplified via discourses of exteriority and criminality. I therefore interrogate in detail the way the generally-subaltern crimps were discussed, both in contemporary media reportage in the nineteenth century, and later in the coolie novels. The crimps, historically, tended to be dismissed as simplistic, irrational (and specifically rootless) criminal actors; but in analyzing crimp testimonies and fictional representations of crimps, I show how these simplifications are reflective more of the (relatively privileged) speakers' own anxieties than of the crimps' actual priorities or motivations.

## Overview of Chapters

Though the coolie trade itself may appear at first glance to be a fairly niche topic, it intersects with other historical, political, and social phenomena in such a way as to make it

an event of great significance in late Qing literary, historical, and nationalist studies. Given the twin foci of this project, the manuscript can be considered to comprise two halves: Chapters One and Two each deal particular phenomena related to the coolie trade as it was being executed, while Chapters Three and Four focus on different aspects of the coolie literature that was produced in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The project is organized as follows: in Chapter One, I discuss the development of the Chinese coolie trade vis-à-vis the moribund trade in African slaves, demonstrating how the former came to be constructed largely in the image of the latter (in terms of ideology, infrastructure, and law). I trace the racist inclination to convert “otherable” labor into ownable goods, starting with the origins of the transatlantic trade in African slaves up to the extension of those practices to the trade in Chinese labor, in order to determine to what extent the commodification of, and demand for, racialized/racializable labor shaped the relationships between China and the Euro-American powers. I then perform a Marxian analysis of the different mechanisms by which African slaves and “free” coolie laborers alike were converted into chattel goods, explaining the role that the spread of discourses of white-dominated global racial hierarchies had to play in that conversion.

In Chapter Two, I go on to identify and analyze the “conceptual vocabularies” that came to surround the coolie trade as it was being carried out. Again, by “conceptual vocabularies,” I mean not just lexical developments and new terminologies, but shifting ideas of power relations, new conceptions of racial hierarchies and geopolitical position, as well as predominant narratives that emerged as a result of the trade. I argue that the trade was traumatic in a number of ways, each of which resulted in feelings of displacement—whether geographic, diplomatic, political, racial, civilizational or social. This displacement was, in turn, reflected in the shifting vocabularies that emerged in contemporary media accounts, government reports, and coolie testimonies, as Chinese of various backgrounds attempted to

understand and grapple with the changes they observed. The coolie trade vocabularies gave voice to the fear and frustration caused by the trade, while at the same time giving rise to a space within which Chinese could apprehend and reject the violences that Euro-American powers were attempting to inflict upon them.

These sometimes-troubling, always-provocative vocabularies were powerful both in the contemporary moment, and indeed, in future decades. Once these vocabularies were incorporated into the shared pool of public referents, they could be—and were—reapplied allegorically to great effect in later coolie novels in which activist authors sought to dramatize the possibilities for a strong, unified nationalist public. The focus of Chapter Three thus shifts away from the historic coolie trade and toward the novels that made use of the trade’s vocabularies and their attendant emotive power in the early twentieth century. The novels that are central to my project include: *Bitter Society* (Anonymous, published in 1905), *Golden World* (by Biheguan Zhuren 碧荷館主人, published in 1907), *Diary of a Pig* (by Hang Xinzhai 杭辛齋, serialized in 1904) and *The Secret to Getting Rich* (by Wu Jianren, serialized in 1907-8), which range in their representations of the trade from lengthy fictional accounts of coolie experience, to a shorter, but very interesting account of a thief-turned-crimp. I first discuss the political and intellectual climate in which the novels were being produced, and explain why it was that the vocabularies of the nineteenth-century coolie trade were so effectively mobilized to address twentieth-century problems. Having established the novels’ immediate contexts, I then go on to analyze the content of each novel specifically, in order to better understand the ways in which the events, coolie populations, and phenomena presented in the novels were instrumental in communicating particular political and nationalistic messages to readers. I argue that because the coolie trade itself had been implicated in so many thorny issues—racism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, and classism—the

coolie-trade-as-allegory in the 1900s could similarly be utilized to simultaneously speak to each of these still-problematic issues.

Finally, my fourth chapter deals almost exclusively with the character of the Chinese crimp (“man-seller”) in the coolie novels. I seek to determine not only what symbolic role the opportunistic crimp might have been expected to fulfill in the context within which the novels were produced; but at the same time, I investigate how the fictionalized crimp differs from his historical counterpart, and why those differences are critical to the novels’ narratives. Indeed, the criminal crimp seems largely to allude to an opportunistic anti-social element that complicates twentieth-century activists’ bids for solidarity. Interestingly, however, he also seems to present an incontrovertible counterpoint to the stalwart-hero type glorified in novels like *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳): his victimization of the people, reminiscent of the parasitic behavior of the romanticized bandits of *Outlaws*, forces the reader to consider whether there is still room for anti-social heroes in a society longing to remake itself into a coherent people.

As I endeavor to show, the violences concomitant to the coolie trade were simultaneously destructive and productive—on the one hand, causing endless suffering and outrage; on the other, giving rise to a very particular “community of sentiment”<sup>55</sup> that found empowerment in that outrage. While the conceptual vocabularies first conveyed senses of shame, of confusion, and of betrayal, they were transformed by popular use into vocabularies of resentment, of inspiration, and of resolve. To refer to a coolie as a “slave” was at first to pity him; but with time, such a designation would carry with it acrimonious condemnation of those who had effected his servitude. This project emphasizes for the first time the depth of popular meaning produced by this violent phenomenon, and shows how these rhetorics of historic wrongdoing were ultimately mobilized to encourage unity among idealized “publics”

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55. Lee, “All the feelings that are fit to print.”

(however defined), in the name of preventing any more such victimization of Chinese persons in the future.



# 1

## Racism and the Human Commodity: slaves and coolies in the New World

*“And a money-making matter it appears to be, Mr. N., if one may judge from the numbers [of men] engaged in [the coolie trade]. Still I consider it a lasting disgrace to any Christian nation which permits its ensign to fly at a ‘slaver’s’ masthead, for slavery, de facto, I consider this trade to be.”*

*“Well, Mr. D., call it by whatever name you please, but answer me this question. What is to be done with the countless thousands this cursed land [China] cannot support? Is it not better to carry off the surplus myriads in this manner, than to leave them at home to lead lives of misery, starvation, and crime?”*

*“It might be, Mr. N., if the unscrupulous kidnapper would confine himself to the starving and criminal portion of the population.”*

*“The majority of them are composed of that class and are benefitted, Mr. D.”<sup>1</sup>*

The transatlantic trade in slaves taken from Africa was responsible for the transportation of somewhere between 10 and 15 million persons to locations throughout the Americas over the course of over three hundred years. And as that trade—which had begun with one-off exchanges between European and African traders along Africa’s west coast—grew into a complex, systematized institution in the Age of Empire, so too did the utilitarian mindsets and racist ideologies necessary to justifying participation in such an abhorrent scheme become ingrained among those who dealt in human lives. The persistence of international markets in slaves depended upon traders’ ability to consider the “othered” slave as an exchange value rather than as a human being, and upon the conversion—via purchase or exchange—of these enslaved others into fungible commodities to be “spent up” in the colonial plantation apparatuses.

In this chapter, I not only outline the process by which this system reduced the enslaved African person to a commodity;<sup>2</sup> I also demonstrate how the existence of the African

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1. Don Aldus, *Coolie Traffic and Kidnapping* (London: McCorquodale & Co., 1876; San Bernardino, CA: ULAN Press, N.D.), 96. Citation is from ULAN Press edition.

2. The slave trade had widely-varying impacts for individuals, for different African societies, different regions of Africa, as well as for different receiving locations—and over the course of multiple centuries. While I take care to bear this complexity in mind, due to limitations of space, I am unable to treat this sensitive and powerful subject with as much nuance it deserves here. Readers hoping to learn more about the particulars of the trade are encouraged to avail themselves of the wide range of scholarship that has been produced on the subject to date. David Brion Davis’ *Inhuman Bondage: the rise and fall*

trade as a model would make it both easy and desirable for Euro-American colonial planters to apply, in some cases wholesale, similar “slaving” practices in the recruitment of different types of racialized labor—in this project, contracted Chinese coolie labor—even as the transatlantic slave trade itself began to be dismantled. In particular, I argue that competing discourses of abolitionism and non-white racial inferiority that emerged from debates over the slave trade would pave the way for a paradoxical system of exploitation in the coolie trade: on the one hand, given increasingly slavery-averse publics and governments, advocates of the coolie trade would have to prove that laborers were being recruited voluntarily; but on the other, the crystallization of the idea that Chinese (like blacks) belonged to an inferior race made permissible, or at least excusable, coercive labor-retention measures that rendered many an ostensibly “free” laborer into *de facto* chattel. Even while Enlightenment ideals of humanism and free will were spreading through Europe, interested parties were able to justify unequal application of those ideals in the case of blacks and Chinese (among other non-white groups), treating them as lesser humans who were unable to rationally or responsibly exercise true free will—precisely because such infantilizing depictions made it possible for proponents of trades in human bodies to justify continued custodianship over and exploitation of racialized laborers.

There is some debate among scholars of the slave trade with regard to whether anti-black racism preceded the slave trade or arose as a result of it—which I address in my detailed discussion of the origins and ideologies of the transatlantic slave trade below. However, in the case of the later coolie trade, anti-Chinese racism had unequivocally already emerged prior to the establishment of the coolie trade, in parallel to anti-black racism as part of a pseudoscientific “ranking” of the races. Thus, I am able to show that anti-Chinese racism predated this commodification of Chinese persons by foreign traders; furthermore, by

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*of slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) presents a very thorough, detailed overview for those interested in learning more.

that token, I demonstrate that because the trade emerged belatedly, it was always already mired in bigotry and racist assumptions about Chinese individuals and society. Though the coolie trade was touted as a means of recruiting “free” labor on par with earlier white indentured laborers, this was obviously a case of specifically seeking out *racializable* labor—because the model of non-white-laborer-cum-fungible-commodity was both profitable and comfortable for those planters and colonial plantation societies already accustomed to exercising absolute proprietorship over cheaply-acquired black slaves.

As I will argue, the commodification of racialized labor was integral both to the successful execution of the transatlantic slave trade and to the later trade in contracted Chinese labor. In recoding “people (like us)” into “goods (ownable/exchangeable by us)”—and at an exchange value that was artificially low for the quantity of labor thereby acquired—Euro-American participants in the slave trade were able to assert their “right” to complete control over and extraction of utility from the persons who had become *de jure* property. At the same time, they were able to ignore the human impact and full social and opportunity costs of their recruitment and employment activities. The slave trade had made such nefarious practices acceptable and profitable on a large scale; and in spite of growing opposition to slavery as an institution as well as shifts in white labor markets toward free wage labor, certain colonial administrators and plantation owners in the Americas and the Caribbean still believed that recruitment of a cheap, racializable (and thus commodifiable, alienable, possessable, and absolutely controllable) workforce was crucial to the success of their colonial economies. Thus, even as proponents of the trade in Chinese coolies touted it as a more ethical, less coercive alternative to its predecessor, traders and employers alike were loth to change what had proven to be a very profitable formula. Ultimately, they would find a variety of legal and illegal ways to effect the commodification of Chinese and thereby maximize their own profits; but because the coolie trade had to *look* different from the slave

trade, that commodification was implemented in the form of manipulable contracts and legislation that limited coolies' freedom, rather than outright legal purchase.

In this chapter, I first outline the basic routes and infrastructure of the slave and coolie trades, in order to acquaint the reader with the similarities between the two, and the ways in which—structurally, geographically, ideologically—the latter was largely built in the image of the former. I also discuss the roles of racialist and racist discourses in the commencement and perpetuation of each of these trades, by way of piecing together a narrative that demonstrates how shifting patterns of anti-black racism gradually came to inform Euro-American ideas on the racial inferiority (and as a result the commodifiability) of Chinese laborers. This narrative is a crucial foundation for my analysis, in the final section of the chapter, of the mechanisms by which these systems reduced their (either already- or soon-to-be-racialized) prey to resaleable non-human objects. I perform a Marxian analysis of the two trades in order to demonstrate numerous ways, intentional and incidental, in which the enslaved or indentured racialized laborer was object-ified and commodified, whether *de jure* (slaves) or *de facto* (coolies). In so doing, I illustrate how racism and rampant commercialism reinforced and enabled one another in both the creation and maintenance of these markets in non-white human beings.

## **The Transatlantic Slave Trade**

### *Background: demand for labor in the New World colonies*

Following Spain's explosive conquest and colonization of sections of the New World at the end of the fifteenth century, colonial administrators were excited by the potential fortune that could be extracted from those apparently bountiful lands. In the first Spanish colonies, colonizers had not only brutally slaughtered millions of natives—Caribs and Taino/Arawaks in the Caribbean, Incas, Aztecs, and Mayans, and others in South and Central

America—but also compelled the terrorized survivors to work under brutal conditions, mining precious resources such as gold and silver, and setting up infrastructure for the sugar plantations that would later overshadow most other industries in the New World. The natives proved to be a less than ideal source of forced labor, however: first, their mortality when exposed to Old World diseases such as smallpox and plague was extremely high—one estimate suggests approximately 50% of the indigenous population died after exposure to European diseases;<sup>3</sup> but second, because they were still very much grounded in their own social, cultural, and spatial milieus, those who survived the initial invasion and the foreign diseases had the connections and the support to resist enslavement and European cultural norms whether by escape or by violent confrontation.<sup>4</sup>

And so, European colonizers began to experiment with the transportation of external laborers to the New World. Europe itself provided one source of such labor: though intra-European and Middle Eastern markets for white indentured or slave labor originating in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean had existed since the thirteenth century, the range and scale of these markets had begun to shrink by the fifteenth century, due in part to Europe's massive population decline following the outbreak of the Black Death.<sup>5</sup> Unable to secure white slave labor on a sufficient scale to maintain or expand production, colonial administrators began to recruit indentured laborers from the large body of poor

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3. However, given that estimates of the pre-Columbian population of Hispaniola (the island upon which Columbus first landed) vary as widely as 60,000 and 8 million, estimates of mortality even for Hispaniola, much less for the entirety of the Caribbean and South America are notoriously unreliable. Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 15-24; Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*, 31st edition, (Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores, 1981), 15-26.

4. Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 20; Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 30.

5. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 233, 82; William D. Phillips, Jr., "The Old World Background of Slavery in the Americas," in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, ed. Barbara Solow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 48, 57.

underemployed Europeans in hopes of replacing the decimated native population. Economic instability at home, coupled with the promise of great wealth to be earned in the New World, attracted European indentured laborers and convicts alike (both those “transported” involuntarily as punishment for their crimes and those attempting to escape justice at home), and promised large profits for the remaining kidnappers and man-sellers from throughout Europe.<sup>6</sup>

However, Europeans also proved to be an imperfect source of labor. For one thing, white laborers had high expectations for their future participation in the New World colonies. Upon completion of their contracts, they demanded citizenship and property in the colony, which the colonizers were often loath to grant (reluctant as they were at this time to grant equal rights and privileges to the socially “low” and possibly ethnically distinct former indentured servants).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, European states were growing increasingly concerned about potential economic stagnation resulting from flight of their own lower-class laborers to the New World.<sup>8</sup> The costs, both in terms of recruitment/transportation costs paid to hire voluntary white labor and the opportunity cost of a declining home population—coupled with increasing demand for labor in the New World as those colonies moved gradually toward larger and larger scale production—were simply too high for colonial powers to attract white labor a high enough rate to sustain the various colonial productive apparatuses in the New World.<sup>9</sup>

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6. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994), 9-16.

7. Audrey Smedley, “Science and the Idea of Race: a Brief History,” in *Race and Intelligence: Separating Science from Myth*, ed. Jefferson Fish (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002), 152; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 144.

8. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 16.

9. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 15; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 22, Phillips, “Old World Background,” 47.

At the same time, the high rates of attrition suffered by the native enslaved population in the first decades following the Spanish arrival in the Americas had also caused certain members of the colonizing population such as Spanish friar Bartolomé de las Casas to conclude that such treatment of the local populace was inhumane, and to suggest that labor be sought from Africa instead. Entreaties against the exploitation of the native population eventually moved the Spanish crown to outlaw the enslavement of Native Americans in Spanish colonies in 1542.<sup>10</sup> With white labor having been deemed too costly, and exploitation of native labor immoral, imperial powers would begin to consider las Casas' suggestion. Enslaved African labor—which up to that point had comprised only a small part of the colonial workforce—would soon be viewed as an ideal alternative to both.

The earliest shipments of African labor to the New World had begun just a decade after Columbus' fateful journey west, but had remained relatively small at the outset. However, rising sugar prices resulting from increasing consumption in Europe encouraged more potential suppliers to enter the market; this in turn led to a rise in demand for cheap labor, as these new suppliers each began to hire their own labor forces.<sup>11</sup> The annual volume of slaves transported to the New World—which had shown gradual, steady increases over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—rose sharply in the early eighteenth century, and peaked in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> Over its four-century span, the trade would ultimately result in the transportation of somewhere between 10 and 15 million Africans to the Americas and Caribbean.<sup>13</sup> But the use of African slave labor had not

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10. Robert J. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow: Slavery, Race, and Law in the American Hemisphere* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2013), 36; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 73, 98.

11. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 111.

12. Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 19; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 58; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 93.

13. These estimates are still contested today, but many scholars seem to agree that the number is 10 million or higher (Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 4; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 80; Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 104) however, to understand the true magnitude of the human impact of the

originated with the Atlantic slave trade. In fact, just as in Europe, slavery and a slave trade had existed in Africa prior to the European collision with the New World: not only had an intra-African trade in slaves existed for centuries,<sup>14</sup> but had been preceded by an “external” trade to Arab (and later, European) sugar-producing regions in the Mediterranean (and east Atlantic).

In explaining the origins of the Arab trade in African slaves, Patrick Manning argues that slaveholding had become common practice in certain Islamic civilizations in the Middle East and northern Africa; and that this in turn led to the expansion of an Arab trade in African slaves into northern Africa in the second half of the first millennium CE and gradually into Sub-Saharan Africa during the medieval period.<sup>15</sup> Islamic societies around the Mediterranean had already begun to establish labor-intensive sugar production operations by the ninth century, and required large quantities of labor.<sup>16</sup> Thus, enslaved Africans were brought in to work on these precursors to the large, commercial sugar plantations that would later be established in the Caribbean and Latin America. As J.H. Galloway has suggested, it appears that even from this early point sugar and African slavery had already become inextricably linked.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Europeans’ first experience with employing African slave labor for plantation-style agricultural production was also tied to sugar: as Portugal and Spain sought to

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slave trade, it is important to consider the violent mechanisms by which slaves were created and exchanged. Between the violence of the “capture activities,” long marches from the hinterland to the coast, weeks (to months) spent in coastal barracoons awaiting embarkation on European ships, Thomas F. Buxton estimated in 1840 that up to 71.4% of slave deaths occurred before they had ever even *left* Africa. In other words, the 10-15 million slaves who arrived in the New World represent *less than thirty percent* of the total number of persons captured/acquired/killed by slaving activities. Cited in Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, “Long-term trends in African Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity, and Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis and David Richardson (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 39.

14. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 7.

15. Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 28-29.

16. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 27-29.

17. Cited in Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 29.



recruit labor for nascent sugar enterprises on Madeira and the Canary Islands in the eastern Atlantic in the fourteenth century, they, too, had sought to populate their plantations with African labor.<sup>18</sup>

Within Africa, enslavement had gradually become a common way of dealing with prisoners of war captured during conflicts with other groups. Eventually, the idea of the captive as possessable slave became so well entrenched that slaves were not just seen as units of production, but actually came to be one of the primary indicators of a ruler's wealth. Unlike in Europe where private capital was amassed primarily in the form of land holdings, in Africa, land tended to be considered the property of the state. As such, accrual of slaves was one of the few means by which a ruler could hope to showcase or consolidate his personal power.<sup>19</sup> However, while female captives in Western Africa could be incorporated into the victors' society (though often as unassimilated concubines or slaves), male captives were generally viewed as more of a threat to social order. Initially, such leftover male captives were often killed; but eventually it would be discovered that trading them to outsiders was a far more lucrative means of disposing of them.<sup>20</sup>

Though the early Portuguese traders who first began sailing down Africa's west coast initially hoped to trade their European finished goods for African gold,<sup>21</sup> the ready availability of "excess" male captives, coupled with the growing demand for labor in the New World Iberian colonies, would gradually make slaves the number one export from Africa.<sup>22</sup> While it was ravenous European-American demand for laboring bodies that drove the Atlantic slave

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18. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 13.

19. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 74, 91; Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 157-58.

20. Hilary McD. Beckles, "Female enslavement and gender ideologies in the Caribbean," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, Paul E. Lovejoy ed., 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2009), 164-65.

21. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 54.

22. Bailey, *African Voices*, 72; Phillips, "Old World Background," 57; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2011), 98-99.

trade, it was largely locals who provided the supply. For example, in what has since become one of the most famous slave autobiographies, former slave Olaudah Equiano describes how in 1756, strangers (who are not described as white, and thus may be presumed to be Africans themselves) broke into his home in Benin and kidnapped himself (then eleven years old) and his sister while their parents were away tending to crops. Equiano was moved from place to place and sold and resold between other Africans numerous times, but did not encounter white men until he was brought on board a foreign slave ship on the coast half a year after his kidnapping.<sup>23</sup> The willingness of locals to acquire persons for sale, transport them to the coast (often from the hinterlands), and ultimately sell them to foreigners was crucial to the establishment and long-term development of the slave trade: no European merchant crew possessed the military wherewithal to force locals to participate, and it was rare—though not unheard of—that these merchants would themselves venture away from the coasts to take their own captives.<sup>24</sup>

In many cases, European slave dealers seem to have operated with the blessing, tacit or otherwise, of powerful local rulers whose private wealth was augmented by the luxury goods these traders brought from Europe.<sup>25</sup> But as the Atlantic trade became more entrenched and it became increasingly clear that “excess” enslaved populations could be sold to the Europeans for a profit, said profits—and the luxury goods that could be obtained by selling slaves to Europeans—became a major consideration in mounting intra-African warfare

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23. Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 31-32; 43.

24. Bailey, *African Voices*, 61; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 53.

25. I would reiterate, however, that though I do not have the space for as nuanced a discussion as the subject deserves, it is important to keep in mind that not all African societies responded to the slave trade in the same way. For example, at various points in their histories, Dahomey and Kongo had royally-sanctioned slave trades, while Benin would initially impose a ban on slave trading until finally being cajoled into permitting a trade from its shores. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 64-65, 67; Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 80.

that could in turn generate more saleable captives.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in addition to textiles and ceramics, Europeans also traded firearms and other kinds of weaponry for slaves, thus setting off a veritable arms race between different groups: if one was to avoid being captured and sold into slavery by one's enemies, it was necessary to capture and sell slaves oneself, and thereby guarantee one's own access to European weaponry.<sup>27</sup> Of course, there had long been interethnic and inter-clan tension between local groups, and as John Thornton points out, it is difficult to discern retrospectively whether a given war was fought for the calculated "economic" purpose of acquiring and re-selling more slaves;<sup>28</sup> however, it is hard to ignore the possibility that the potential profits and other material benefits to be reaped by dealing slaves to Europeans prodded these groups into more frequent conflict to create captives.<sup>29</sup> As in the case of the Sagbadre War (1784) in which Danish traders sided with several ethnic groups in armed conflict against a mutual rival, longstanding historical enmities could be simultaneously exploited and exacerbated as opportunistic Europeans sought to meet sharply-growing demand for slave labor.<sup>30</sup> The vicious cycle that ensued not only diverted Africa's limited human resources (relative to available land) away from agriculture and other productive industries, but destroyed families and uprooted entire societies in the process.<sup>31</sup> Though slaves were cheap for Europeans to purchase, the total cost borne by the slaves' families and societies was incalculably high.

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26. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 7; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 60.

27. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 188; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 123.

28. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 98-99.

29. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 79.

30. Bailey, *African Voices*, 177-80.

31. Agriculture as a whole suffered as slave trading flourished: even those who were not kidnapped were afraid to leave their homes to work agricultural plots, lest they be kidnapped while exposed in the fields. Francine Shields, "Those Who Remained Behind: Slave Women in 19th-century Yorubaland," in Lovejoy, *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, 184-85; Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 99.

### *Slave Trade Infrastructure and Routes*

While the vast slave trading networks that spread throughout the African continent and across the Atlantic were far too vast for me to discuss in very fine detail here, it is important that the reader have a sense of some of the logistics that were involved in the execution of the trade. The majority of the slaves exported from Africa to the Americas moved through ports on the west coast of Africa. David Eltis and David Richardson cite data that suggest that up to 48% of the African slaves carried across the Atlantic from 1595-1867 embarked from somewhere along a roughly 1000-mile stretch of coast spanning between the Bights of Benin and Biafra (between modern-day Benin and Gabon), and that upwards of 80% of the slaves who embarked for the New World between 1661 and 1867 were collected at a small number of ports in the two bights, the Gold Coast, and West Central Africa.<sup>32</sup> Though some of the victims of the trade were captured in these coastal regions, many more of them were captured further inland and marched out to the coast (which is one of the reasons that scholars emphasize that slave mortality began with imprisonment, rather than with the Middle Passage). Again, because foreigners were ill-equipped to conduct slave raids in the hinterlands, the trade was dependent upon African slave traders who were able to continually replenish the supply of new slaves in the coastal areas.

Once arrived at the coast, slaves were often kept in “barracoons” (from the Spanish “*barracón*” meaning “barrack”) where they might wait days, weeks, or months before being loaded onto ships. The barracoon was usually filthy, crowded, and poorly ventilated, and the slaves were usually physically restrained or otherwise confined within its walls.<sup>33</sup> In some locations, barracoons resembled ramshackle sheds; but in some of the more profitable slave

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32. Eltis and Richardson, “West Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade: New Evidence of Long-Run Trends,” in Eltis and Richardson, *Routes*, 17; Eltis and Richardson, “The Numbers Game and Routes to Slavery,” in *Ibid.*, 6.

33. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 7-8.

ports, like Elmina and the Cape Coast in Ghana, slaves were held in “slave castles” with fortified walls, sentry towers, and cannons to ensure that waiting slaves could not escape or rise up to liberate themselves.<sup>34</sup> The barracoon system allowed traders to amass a large number of slaves in one location, also referred to as “bulking.” With slaves thus concentrated at certain spots along the coast, a captain hoping to fill his ship with slaves to carry to the Americas might do so more quickly (taking perhaps three months instead of six), thus decreasing the amount of time his ship sat uselessly in the harbor. (Quick lading would become especially important once certain legs of the trade had been made illegal and British ships began scouring the African coast for violators.)<sup>35</sup> As many as one in five might die while waiting in the barracoons,<sup>36</sup> and indeed, between the march to the coast and the time spent languishing in barracoons, up to 50% of those slaves initially captured inland might perish.<sup>37</sup>

The length of the average slave voyage depended upon a number of variables: first, of course, there is the question of the distance to be traveled. Ships carrying slaves from the east coast of Africa had to first sail south and west around the Cape of Good Hope before sailing northwest toward their destination, and thus might take almost three times longer to reach the Caribbean than a ship simply sailing due-west from West Africa. For example, in the period 1776-1830, the average voyage from the eastern coast of Africa to the Caribbean took about 130 days, while a voyage from Upper Guinea on the west coast might average about 45 days.<sup>38</sup> Second, the duration of one’s voyage was dependent upon the Atlantic currents. A

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34. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Wonders of the African World: Episode Three, The Slave Kingdoms* (Documentary), PBS October 1999; Bailey, *African Voices*, 169.

35. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 125.

36. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 8.

37. J. E. Inikori, “Introduction,” in *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies*, ed. J.E. Inikori (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1982), 27.

38. It must be kept in mind that the following estimates of length or journey and of shipboard mortality are estimates based on an incomplete data set, and therefore can only hope to approximate, rather than accurately pinpoint these historical values. Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 177.

route that cleaved closely to the prevailing ocean currents might take weeks, while a route that ran against them or ventured into stiller waters (sometimes more than once per journey) might take three months.<sup>39</sup> The route from Upper Guinea to the Caribbean followed the currents very closely, and looking at the period from 1701 to 1775, we see that this voyage took roughly 52 days; however, routes from the Bights of Benin and Biafra (perhaps 33% and 50% longer in terms of distance, respectively) had to cross through several zones with no current, and thus averaged 93 and 86 days (79% and 65% longer, in terms of time), for the same period.<sup>40</sup> Finally, technological innovations that became available in later years of the trade (such as the steam engine or improved sailing techniques) could also drastically reduce the amount of time spent at sea. The voyage from eastern Africa that had taken an average of 130 days toward the beginning of the trade averaged 67 days—almost half the time—between 1831-1864.<sup>41</sup>

Mortality was often, but not as a rule, correlated to the duration of the journey. Higher mortality rates tended to accompany the longer journeys—whether from southeastern Africa, or along routes that had to traverse substantial swathes of relatively still ocean. For the period 1776-1830, for example, Eltis and Richardson estimate that ships sailing from southeast Africa to the Caribbean had an average mortality rate of 21.9% over 130 days, while the next highest average mortality rate in the same period, from the trade out of Biafra, was 14% over 66 days.<sup>42</sup> More generally, mortality was determined by the health of the slaves that embarked upon the ships, and the hygienic and nutritive conditions on board. Ships were generally packed tightly with slaves in order to maximize sales at the destination port. In such

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39. Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 160.

40. *Ibid.*, 172.

41. *Ibid.*, 180.

42. Eltis and Richardson indicate that few records exist from ships carrying slaves from southeast Africa, however. The estimate of 21.9% mortality given above is based on data from only fifteen ships, compared to the hundreds of ships from other regions for which data is available. *Atlas*, 177.

close quarters, often with nowhere to dispose of waste, the spread of disease could be quick and deadly. It was not really the length of the journey per se that caused high mortality; rather, it was the extended incubation period for disease, and the possibility of malnutrition resulting from food shortages after months at sea, that made the longer routes more deadly.

Once across the Atlantic, slaves were distributed among any of a number of New World ports: Rio de Janeiro, Salvador de Bahia and Recife in Brazil; Kingston, Jamaica; Barbados; Havana, Cuba; Charleston, South Carolina; Port-au-Prince, Haiti; Callao, Peru, and many others.<sup>43</sup> As many as 45% of the slaves brought to the New World were destined for Brazil; and if we consider Brazil and the Caribbean together, that figure rises to 90%.<sup>44</sup> Upon arrival, those who had survived their traumatic journey were sold to slaveholders, whether via privately-arranged sales or in public slave markets—where they might be poked, prodded, and subjected to various kinds of humiliating treatment in order to determine their “value.”

## The “racist turn”

### *Anti-black racism*

There are different opinions as to whether the transatlantic slave trade, as described very briefly above, was necessarily racist from its inception. A number of scholars on the slave trade argue that racism had no part to play in the origins of the trade in African slaves, and only emerged in response to anti-slavery challenges (as we shall see below). However, David Brion Davis has produced a wealth of research indicating that anti-black racism both in the Middle East and on the Iberian peninsula predated the rise of the transatlantic trade.<sup>45</sup> Davis also cites an argument made by David Eltis: if race had been a non-issue the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, why did the trade in white slaves become taboo while the

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43. Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 24.

44. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 4; Eltis and Richardson, “The Numbers Game,” 6.

45. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, chapter 3.

trade in black slaves thrived?<sup>46</sup> I would add that if we understand “racism” not in the very limited sense of belief in race-based superiority/inferiority, but rather as a worldview that permits the preferential or discriminatory treatment of a race depending on its similarity to or difference from the self, it becomes apparent that racism did indeed begin to play a role starting at a fairly early point in the trade’s history; it was only racism of the more limited type that would not emerge until later.

For one thing, black slaves were preferable because of their “alienability,” made possible both by geography and by race. As Orlando Patterson argues, enslavement even just within Africa was often seen as the “commutation” of a violent (somatic) death sentence, and resulted instead in the “social death” of the subject—i.e. the severance of all social ties that had once moored him. The abjection of social death, according to Patterson, removes the slave from his own lineage and strips him of the right to feel loyalty or obligation to anyone but his master.<sup>47</sup> This slave was no longer a social subject, but an asocial object hovering on the periphery of his master’s society. Slaves traded across the Atlantic also suffered this kind of social death: not only were they stripped of their previous identities via cruel colonial practices as renaming and the punitive separation of nuclear families, but indeed, most would never again see their homes or their families in Africa.<sup>48</sup> Whereas the surviving native peoples of South and Central America had remained more or less entrenched in their own social and cultural environments, plantation owners throughout the Americas hoped that African slaves, severed as they had been from their own societies, would lack the support and sense of unity to offer any kind of resistance.<sup>49</sup> Such atomization speaks to the spatial component of the

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46. Cited in Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 77.

47. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 5-8.

48. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 55-57.

49. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 195.



slave's alienability; but there was a racial component as well. Whereas white laborers (indentured or enslaved) could aspire to some day become part of the society to which they had submitted themselves, enslaved blacks were so visibly "other"—in the US more so than in Latin American colonies—that it would be possible to prohibit their participation in the white-dominated social order.<sup>50</sup> It was hoped that this dual ungrounding—from their homes and from their host societies—would create laborers who were meek, tractable, and isolated, while at the same time ensuring that the white governing apparatus remained the sole curator of social power.

At the same time, the gradual spread throughout Europe of Enlightenment ideologies of human progress, ethics, and individual liberty in the eighteenth century had begun to make the enslavement of European laborers seem unethical. Formerly-"other" Eastern Europeans became increasingly easily identifiable with the "us" of empire-building Western Europe—via shared religion and shifting perceptions of who could be included in "whiteness."<sup>51</sup> This in turn had resulted in the contraction of the market for slaves of European origin in the seventeenth century. Persons of African heritage, meanwhile, were apparently considered to be physically and culturally "other" enough from the Euro-American governing class that they could be quietly excluded from contemporary Enlightenment narratives of (white) personal liberty—some American slaveowners even made efforts to prevent the conversion of their slaves to Christianity, lest the line between "us" and "other" start to become blurred.<sup>52</sup> Simply put, (white) humanism had dictated that the enslavement of European laborers was no longer acceptable; but at the same time, any humanitarian rights that could simultaneously

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50. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 98-99.

51. Davis conjectures that the Crusades and other religious conflicts in Europe and the Mediterranean played a significant role in the reification of the categories "white Christian" Us and "non-white heathen" Them in the popular European imagination. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 77-78; Smedley, "Science and the Idea of Race," 149.

52. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 85.

have been extended to blacks—had the two groups been considered equal—were overlooked in the interest of retaining access to cheap, plentiful labor.

As already suggested, racism defined broadly—wherein the others’ “difference” makes it permissible to treat them differently—was a key factor in the unequal application of certain Enlightenment humanist doctrines in the early days of the trade. However, when it comes to the more obstreperous, overt anti-black bigotry and discourses of racial inferiority with which students of the slave trade are familiar, a number of scholars have claimed that such racism would emerge somewhat belatedly, and as a result of slavery, rather than at its inception. These scholars argue that the initial decision to seek labor from Africa was primarily made on economic, rather than racist grounds, and that black slaves were initially chosen because they were cheaper than other alternatives and were plentiful in supply—not due to any entrenched sense of European superiority over Africans.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, at its outset, the trade does seem to have arisen primarily as a matter of opportunistic symbiosis between trading partners rather than because of any belief in European primacy. According to Walter Rodney, the kind of deep-seated vitriolic anti-black racism normally associated with the slave trade was more a side-effect of slavery than a cause:

Occasionally, it is mistakenly held that Europeans enslaved Africans for racist reasons. European planters and miners enslaved Africans for *economic* reasons, so that their labor power could be exploited. Indeed, it would have been impossible to open up the New World and to use it as a constant generator of wealth, had it not been for African labor ... [and once] having become utterly dependent on African labor, Europeans at home and abroad found it necessary to rationalize that exploitation in racist terms as well. Oppression follows logically from exploitation...<sup>54</sup>

For Rodney and others, to assume that race played a major role in the growing transatlantic demand for (black) labor is to downplay the profit-obsessed pragmatism of

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53. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 29; Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 24-25; Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 88-89; Robert Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 81-87.

54. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 88-89. Emphasis in original.

imperialism. Furthermore, such an assumption erroneously and teleologically takes for granted that the racism that would be used to justify the continuation of the slave trade near its end must also have existed and served the same function in the trade's beginnings. As they argue, the kind of anti-black racism that is so commonly associated with slavery in the Americas played no role in the establishment of the trade itself; rather, in British colonies and the US, racism developed later as a *reactionary response to abolitionist criticism* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;<sup>55</sup> while in Spanish colonies, it emerged as a means of maintaining white power over a large (and growing) free black and mixed population.<sup>56</sup> If we suspend our earlier, broad definition of racism and redefine racism more narrowly as the belief in racial superiority/inferiority (and the actions stemming from such belief), we can begin to understand why so many scholars pinpointed the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (rather than an earlier period) as the beginning of what might be called a "racist turn." It is certainly true that that period would witness the emergence of a very ugly, explicit, and tenacious discourse on racial hierarchy and civilizational fitness.

In the early days of the Atlantic slave trade, for example, black slaves had been treated much the same as the white indentured servants who worked alongside them: in terms of transportation, the shipment of African slaves had actually been modeled after earlier shipments of indentured laborers from Europe. And not only could the shipboard experiences of white indentured laborers could be just as horrifying as those suffered by blacks, but black slaves and white laborers were initially treated roughly the same in the

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55. Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 164; Smedley, "Science and the Idea of Race," 154-55.

56. It bears noting that not all racism was the same. As Robert J. Cottrol argues, because Spanish colonies and Brazil guaranteed slaves the right to (eventual) manumission, these colonies had significant black populations that had purchased their own freedom or else earned it by fighting in wars of independence; as such, though these colonies were certainly not immune to anti-black racism themselves, their understanding of blackness tended to be in terms of a "spectrum" rather than in the more exclusionary black-versus-white terms seen in the racism of the US and British colonies. *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 40, 29, 39, 42.

receiving colonies.<sup>57</sup> Robert J. Cottrol notes that in colonial Virginia, for example, black slaves and white indentured servants had actually lived and worked closely alongside one another until their solidarity in Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 moved employers to drive a wedge between them (usually by privileging whites over blacks) to create animosity.<sup>58</sup>

Early discussions of race in the context of the slave trade had also tended to focus on the "desirable" attributes of the African laboring body, rather than on any perceived negative attributes. For one thing, plantation owners and colonial governments reasoned that Africans were already accustomed to and better suited for living and working in tropical temperatures (unlike hypothetical white laborers who might be recruited from Europe);<sup>59</sup> second, it was posited that Africans, having already been exposed to Old World tropical diseases, would succumb less readily than had the Native Americans to the illnesses the Europeans brought with them. When coupled with the fact that many Africans also already had valuable skills in fields like metalworking and husbandry,<sup>60</sup> it was determined that Africans would be an ideal replacement for the rapidly shrinking native labor supply. Even before the emergence of tropes of racial superiority/inferiority that would plague later discourse on the trade, assumptions made by Euro-American governments and plantation owners regarding the suitability of this entire non-white race to the difficult tasks involved in plantation labor erased the social, cultural, and political diversity of the African continent and discursively reduced "black Africans" to a homogeneous monolith well-adapted for servitude. This reductionist understanding of Africans and African society would in turn pave the way for the

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57. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 14; Smedley, "Science and the Idea of Race," 153; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 131.

58. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 86-88.

59. Though as Williams (*Capitalism and Slavery*, 23) points out, the belief that black slaves were needed to work in hot climates as whites simply were not designed for such conditions was disproved by the success of white laborers in Australia. Philip D. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *Political Science Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (Jun. 1968): 193-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2147089> (accessed 14 June 2014).

60. Phillips, "Old World Background," 46-47; Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 78.

much more pernicious race-specific generalizations used to challenge abolitionists in the following centuries.

By the late eighteenth century the moral and humanitarian opposition to the dehumanizing and abusive practices connected to slavery and the slave trade had already started to gain momentum, primarily in Britain, before spreading into the US in the nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Despite the fact that Britain and the US outlawed their respective slave trades in 1807 and 1808, however, abolitionists would concede that their work was far from over: contrary to abolitionists' hopes, slaveholders were still finding ways to facilitate the purchase of slaves, even in the absence of an international trade. The US, for example, experienced the expansion of an intra-national slave trade facilitating the relocation of extant slaves from areas of low demand to areas of higher demand in order to compensate for labor shortages resulting from the abolition of the international trade. The same sort of internal recirculation would also occur later in the century in Brazil after it, too, had ended its own international slave trade.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, most children born to slave women became slaves themselves, thus contributing to the perpetuation of a native-born slave population. It was not until the early-to-mid-nineteenth century that it became clear that abolition of the slave trade was insufficient, and the abolitionist movement was forced to shift its focus to the emancipation of slaves if it hoped to end slavery altogether.<sup>63</sup>

As the institution of slavery in general came increasingly under fire on humanitarian and religious grounds, beneficiaries and other proponents of slavery needed to find ways to justify its continuation to themselves and others. One of their major defenses of slavery would be presented in the form of paternalistic custodianship. When Enlightenment thinkers had argued for the possibility of civilizational progress and human "perfectibility," they had,

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61. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 234, 250-52.

62. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 75.

63. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 237.

at the same time, implied the possibility of “backwardness” (i.e. stagnation or failure to approach “perfection”).<sup>64</sup> Proponents of slavery were able to make use of the idea of backwardness by first dramatizing the “savagery” of the African, then positing enslavement as an integral phase in his “civilization.” As a result, tropes that emphasized the “primitiveness” of Africans—like intellectual inferiority, childishness, animalistic hypersexuality, and servility—began to gain traction in the popular imagination. Slave owners and other pro-slavery advocates paternalistically argued that blacks were by nature “simple” and “childlike,” and thus it was the responsibility of the white “father-figure” to protect and edify them (via labor, of course, usually not via actual education—in some slaveholding societies it was illegal to educate slaves lest they become too willful or intelligent), thereby helping them approach the “perfect slave” ideal. The African, now recast as a “noble savage,” innocent but wild, could only be civilized under the patronage of a white master.<sup>65</sup>

Such paternalistic arguments would unfortunately be bolstered by studies put forth by prominent scientists in the emerging fields of physical anthropology and sociology. Indeed, some of the most powerful tools of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment movement—scientific method and modes of inquiry—would also produce a pernicious type of racism that would linger well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and which lamentably still has its adherents today). In the name of scientific innovation, anthropologists, sociologists, and naturalists sought to explain what they believed to be inherent differences between races. Prominent naturalists Johann Freidrich Blumenbach and Johann Freidrich Gmelin argued that all humans belonged to a single species that could be subdivided into approximately five races differing principally

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64. Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 164.

65. Smedley, “Science and the Idea of Race,” 158; Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 246.

in terms of skin color and physiognomy.<sup>66</sup> Carl Linnaeus (father of the system of binomial nomenclature of species) similarly delineated five races as subunits of the species *homo sapiens* based on geography, and attempted loose characterizations based broadly both on phenotypic and “character” traits. Though Linnaeus did not go as far as to explicitly rank the races he had delineated with regard to “superiority” or “inferiority,” his characterizations of Africans as “crafty, indolent, [and] negligent,” as compared to the “gentle, acute, [and] intuitive” European leave us in no doubt of his own biases. Further, his proposed scheme did also contain a separate secondary species, *homo monstruosus*, which seems to have included what today might be considered aboriginal groups living on the margins of more dominant local societies.<sup>67</sup> Even while maintaining the then fairly progressive idea that Europeans, Native Americans, Asians and Africans (and an unclear “wildman” category) all belonged to the same “sapient” species, pseudoscientifically-entrenched racial divisions within *homo sapiens* and crude, obviously racist descriptions of the “character” of each as proposed by Linnaeus and others provided a foundation for later classificatory systems in which stereotypical characteristics of different races would be used as criteria for ranking them more explicitly.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast to the one-species model, other European thinkers had already, as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ventured theories of multiple origins of blacks and whites, wherein blacks were posited as a completely different species. Due to its blatant challenge to the Biblical idea of monogenesis (i.e. that all human life is descended from the

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66. George-Louis Leclerc (Comte de Buffon), *Buffon's Natural History of the Globe and of Quadrupeds, with additions from Cuvier, Lacepede, and other eminent naturalists*, trans. unk. (New York: Hurst & Co., 1879), 136; Keevak, *Becoming Yellow*, 59-60.

67. For example, Linnaeus lists “Africans” under *homo sapiens*, while he lists “hottentots,” (a coinage for a particular African ethnicity frequently deemed by naturalists to be less civilized [“most defective,” in the words of French naturalist René Primevère Lesson] than other Africans) as members of the species *homo monstruosus*. Leclerc, *Buffon's Natural History*, 136-40.

68. Smedley, “Science and the Idea of Race,” 157.

originary union between Adam and Eve), this so-called theory of “polygenesis” had been deemed heretical, and was largely ignored until it gained a new audience in the eighteenth-century US. Convinced that the genetic difference between whites and blacks was far greater than Linnaeus and his ilk had claimed, adherents of polygenetic theory analyzed a variety of pseudo-scientific data (such as cranial size, physiognomy, etc.) to support a variety of claims about the separate origins of the black race.<sup>69</sup> Well-respected scientists and public figures even went so far as to decry miscegenation, saying that it could only result in inferior, sterile (and thus evolutionarily unfit), offspring.<sup>70</sup>

Still others, like British physician Charles White, uncomfortable with the heretical premise of polygenesis, sidestepped the issue by positing the origins of the black race as “monogenesis plus degradation,” wherein blacks and whites had started out the same, but over time, blacks had allowed themselves to deteriorate in such a way as to become inferior to their erstwhile equals.<sup>71</sup> In an interesting juxtaposition of science and Christian faith, proponents of this viewpoint could, in addition to their “scientific” conclusions, even proffer a passage from the Bible as an explanation for why this “degradation” had occurred: in Genesis 9:18-27, one of Noah’s sons, Ham (father of Canaan), sees Noah naked and mocks him. As punishment for this monstrous betrayal, Noah then curses Ham’s progeny: “Cursed be Canaan; [a] servant of servants [h]e shall be to his brethren.”<sup>72</sup> David Brion Davis points out that this passage contains no explicit discussion of race; however, starting in the centuries preceding the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, as various trades in black slaves to Europe and the Mediterranean flourished and black slaves became more visible, interpreters of the

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69. Smedley, “Science and the Idea of Race,” 147-48.

70. Paul Broca, *On the Phenomena of Hybridity in The Genus Homo*, ed. Carter Blake (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1864), 2, 19.

71. Smedley, “Science and the Idea of Race,” 158.

72. Genesis 9:25, The Holy Bible, New King James Version, (N.P.: Thomas Nelson Bibles, 1982), 9-10.



above passage made bolder assumptions about the race of Ham and Canaan. Some reasoned that since Canaan was cursed to be forever a slave, and blacks were more commonly being submitted to positions of servitude, Canaan must in fact have been black—while for others, relegation to “blackness” was part of the curse—thus, the enslavement of blacks was justifiable as divine punishment for an original black sin.<sup>73</sup> The “degradation” of the blacks into a race of slaves was thus construed as just retribution for the weak character of an ancient progenitor. And so, proponents of “monogenesis plus degradation” in the nineteenth century had a powerful arsenal at their disposal: not only could modern “scientific” data analysis be used to “confirm” their belief in black inferiority, but in appealing to the “Curse of Canaan,” they could argue that the enslavement of blacks was inevitable, just, and even sanctioned by God.

Though it is not the case that all of the arguments presented above were intentionally formulated with an eye to supporting the pro-slavery cause, the reality is that the pseudoscientific methodologies they employed—applied loosely to confirm hypotheses that had been formulated more upon pre-existing subjective social biases than upon rigorous investigation<sup>74</sup>—would provide popular racism with a redoubtable façade of scientific objectivity for a long time to come. In attempting to explain black servitude as a “natural” condition, the structures conceived by such scientists had begun to enshrine a much larger sense of global racial hierarchy in which non-white races were, invariably, determined to be inferior.<sup>75</sup> For all these reasons, Rodney and Manning are able to assert that anti-black racism as they seem to define it—the hierarchy-obsessed belief in black inferiority—emerged only *alongside* the slave trade as a justification of its continuance. While it does seem to be the

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73. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 67, 64-67.

74. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 73.

75. Indeed, even into the twentieth century, “science” (in the form of racially-biased IQ tests) was being used to perpetuate stereotypes of black intellectual inferiority. See Jefferson Fish ed., *Race and Intelligence* for discussions of IQ testing in the twentieth century.

case that the deterministic trope of blacks as inherently inferior and servile did emerge and flourish largely in response to abolitionist activity, I would reiterate that race-based generalizations about African suitability to harsh labor—disguised as claims about climactic adaptation—coupled with the convenient exclusion of othered blacks from the developing discourse of (white) humanism, permitted the continued commodification of African laborers into slaves at a time when whites were being recruited increasingly as free wage laborers or decreasingly as indentured laborers. Thus, even before the rise of mainstream abolitionism or the emergence of racism of the more hierarchy-obsessed reactive type, blacks had certainly been treated differently, and for reasons very much tied up in their otherness to established white power.

The high exploitability of black slaves in white colonial societies (due at first to their spatial/social alienation, then to their early exclusion from the humanist reforms to labor recruitment that favored increased autonomy for white labor, and finally to their relegation to the position of savage in need of white edification), coupled with their low cost as compared to free white wage or indentured laborers made slavery a highly profitable enterprise. But as the rising tide of abolitionism began to take its toll on the trade in the mid-nineteenth century, slave owners and slaveholding colonies hoping to continue business as usual began to seek new sources of otherable, alienable, and possessable (i.e. racialized) labor. Crystallizing ideas of racial hierarchy and white managerial impunity, coupled with a taste for all the social and financial benefits imparted by the employment of a commodifiable, racializable workforce, led a number of plantation owners and colonial governments to develop, support, and/or patronize often-violent, sometimes-coercive trades in Asian laborers even as global condemnation of the Atlantic slave trade continued to grow.

### *Anti-Chinese racism*

Though not the earliest manifestation of racism as such, the dogmatic pseudoscientific racist turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would shape discussions of race for the near future. Bolstered by the appearance of scientific objectivity, pernicious assertions of non-white inferiority would hardly be limited to blacks, or to the Americas: scientists and proponents of anti-black racist discourse had in fact created a schema and a rationale by which any non-white race—once defined as such—could just as easily be ranked, evaluated, and denied parity with whites. As has already been mentioned above, the post-Enlightenment impulse to “explain” what had been accepted by many to be “inherent” differences between races had led to the entrenchment of a racist Eurocentric worldview wherein the white race represented the pinnacle of human civilization, and all other races were considered “lesser,” “inferior,” or even as separate species. As I endeavor to demonstrate below, the Qing dynasty and its subjects would within short order find themselves involuntarily implicated in the racist structures that had originated on the other side of the world. I argue that such racialized othering of Chinese persons was a prerequisite to the nineteenth century Euro-American commodification of Chinese laborers, and was crucial to the establishment and prosecution of the coolie trade. Experience with black slaves had taught plantation owners that their labor had to be cheap, alienable, and plentiful; and experience in anti-black racism had taught them that the subjugation and total control of a non-white labor force would both be easier to justify and perpetuate, and would produce less public outcry, than if the laborers were white.

Europe’s early impressions of “China”<sup>76</sup>—in reality, the Yuan and Ming dynasties—and its people had been favorable, not least because of China’s surprising comparability to the

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76. I will use “China” and “Chinese” fairly loosely in my discussion to mean the territory and populations of various dynasties that inhabited parts of the region thought of today as “China.” I am making no assertion with regard to ethnicity or sense of nationalism; I also acknowledge that subjects

white civilizations with which European merchants and missionaries were familiar: Italian explorer Marco Polo was “overawed” by the bustling metropolis of Hangzhou under the Yuan, and described the city in such glowing terms that Europeans who had not seen it for themselves found his reports difficult to believe.<sup>77</sup> Portuguese traders and missionaries exploring Asia in the early sixteenth century sent home reports describing the cultural and civilizational accomplishments of East Asian peoples, who they proclaimed to be “white like us.”<sup>78</sup> Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who resided in Ming China for almost thirty years spanning the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, “was greatly impressed by the sophistication of Chinese civilization and wrote favorably about China’s greatness and wealth, as well as about its refined culture and orderly political institutions.”<sup>79</sup> He, too, described the peoples of northern China as “white” (while describing southern Chinese as “darker”).<sup>80</sup> Jesuit reports of their contact with Ming China trickled back to Europe, resulting in “a surge in European interest in Chinese thought, institutions, and art” in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>81</sup> Prominent European thinkers like Voltaire and Albrecht von Haller were fascinated by Confucianism and its application to governance and political discourse in China.<sup>82</sup>

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of the Yuan dynasty, for example, would not have thought of themselves as “Chinese.” I merely use “Chinese” as shorthand, despite the limitations it presents in terms of historical accuracy.

77. Charles O. Hucker, *China to 1850: A Short History* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1978), 116.

78. Keevak (*Becoming Yellow*, 27-28) cites Ramusio ed., *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, 2nd ed., (Venice, 1554-1559) 1:372v.

79. Mario Poceski, *Introducing Chinese Religions* (London: Routledge, 2009), 218.

80. Keevak argues that this qualification made by Ricci likely had less to do with perceived “climatic” bases for color (north versus south), and more to do with the fact that Ricci found southerners more averse to religious conversion, and thus less “civilizable” than their northern counterparts. *Becoming Yellow*, 30.

81. Poceski, *Introducing Chinese Religions*, 219.

82. Gregory Blue, “Gobineau on China: Race Theory, the ‘Yellow Peril,’ and the Critique of Modernity” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 93. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078751> (accessed 2 April 2014); Ernst Rose, “China as a Symbol of Reaction in Germany, 1830-1880,”

However, such interest in and respect for the “civilization” of the Chinese was far from universal. Indeed, even as the earliest reports of European interactions with cultured “white” Chinese (and Japanese) mentioned above had begun to trickle back to Europe, certain other missionaries and merchants had started to emphasize that Chinese may be white, but “were not so white as *the Europeans*,”<sup>83</sup> already suggesting the secondariness (because not truly white) of the Chinese and their civilization. Some of the Europeans emphasized that East Asians were a “sallow” white or a “deadish” white, suggesting illness or poor health; while others insisted that the Chinese were black.<sup>84</sup> Handicapped by a worldview in which the uninterrogated categories of black and white had been reified as natural and absolute (albeit with various shades of “olive” and “brown” in between that could be designated as subcategories of either white or black as necessary), European traders and missionaries found it difficult to categorize the Asian continent with its vast array of peoples and cultures. For many, it was only possible to attempt to describe these new cultures by analogy to the cultures with which they themselves were familiar—hence the association of Chinese with civilizational “whiteness” or “blackness.” Comparisons to whiteness, however, were threatening in that they suggested another possible locus of civilizational supremacy. Thus, those who found themselves comparing Chinese to whites were often wary of conceding true whiteness to these distant heathens, already offering hedged descriptions of Chinese in terms of whiteness that was never *really* white, and as a result never *really* comparable to that of Europeans.<sup>85</sup>

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*Comparative Literature* 3, no. 1 (Winter, 1951): 57. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1768593> (accessed 5 June 2014).

83. Keevak, *Becoming Yellow*, 35-36, 39. Emphasis added.

84. *Ibid.*, 39, 29.

85. *Ibid.*, 38-39, 44.

As the pseudoscientific assertions of white (Euro-American) superiority over blacks began to take hold in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question of how to fit Asia into the developing race hierarchy also became more pressing. Just as the entire complex, multi-ethnic population of Africa had been discursively reduced to an oversimplified “black” monolith, so too were European anthropologists and naturalists eager to reduce the vastness of “Asia” to a knowable (and, we might say, “masterable”) quantity. For example, where (as we saw earlier), Linnaeus claimed that Africans were “crafty, indolent, negligent [and] governed by caprice” as compared to Europeans who were “gentle, acute, intuitive [and] governed by laws,” he simultaneously claimed that the Asiatic race was “severe, haughty, covetous [and] governed by opinions.”<sup>86</sup> Linnaeus, reducing entire continents to a handful of stereotypical characteristics, posited Asians—now set apart from European whites and African blacks as “yellow”—as almost the precise opposite of whites: they were greedy, insensitive, and perhaps worst of all, their society was ordered not by reason, but by irrational and presumably self-serving “opinion.” In 1795, Blumenbach, disapproving of Linnaeus’ geographically delimited races, attempted instead to categorize races based on their phenotypic similarities. Blumenbach argued that the whites (“Caucasians”), spanning across Europe and Central Asia, were the originary race—all other races were simply “degenerate” forms of whiteness. Based upon his measurements of the cranial capacities of skulls of different origins, he further asserted that the peoples of East Asia (whom he had designated “yellow Mongolians”), and black Africans had degenerated from the white ideal more than any of the other non-white races.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, in the mid-nineteenth century, French intellectual and racial theorist Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau would also claim these three races to be inherently unequal: blacks were unintelligent and suited to hard manual labor; Asians

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86. Leclerc, *Bouffon’s Natural History*, 136.

87. Keevak, *Becoming Yellow*, 62-65.

were physically lazy except in their pursuit of private gain; and of course, the obviously-superior whites were intelligent, strong, and had a “pronounced taste for liberty.”<sup>88</sup> He also insisted that white Aryans from India had created Chinese civilization as such, and that it was the influx of other yellow groups (such as Mongols and Manchus) into China that had caused the stagnation of the once-vibrant (white) civilization.<sup>89</sup>

By the nineteenth century, the same trope of human progress (and backwardness, its inverse) that had been bandied about for justification of white supremacy over blacks was also trotted out to talk about the “yellow Mongolian” race. In particular, it appears to be the case that perceptions of the “stagnation” of the once-exalted Chinese civilization—especially when compared to an innovative, industrializing, modern (white) Europe reveling in the glory of its imperial conquests<sup>90</sup>— were simultaneous with the discursive shift of Chinese from “white” to “yellow” in European intellectual circles and popular debate. Just as it had seemed necessary to explain the “primitiveness” of black Africans, so too did foreign policymakers and philosophers feel a need to understand the newly-perceived backwardness of the now-yellow Chinese: their despotic emperor who insisted upon his own superiority to foreign diplomats; their rigid, non-democratic, Confucian social hierarchy; their stubborn resistance to Christian teachings; their low intellectual capacity as “evidenced” by their lack of an alphabet; and their “failure” to continue to make mathematical and scientific innovations beyond the medieval period.<sup>91</sup> Convinced that centuries of misplaced chauvinism

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88. Gobineau’s extreme positions on white superiority would be adopted by the German National Socialist Party in the twentieth century. Blue, (“Gobineau on China,” 97, 100-101) cites Gobineau, *Ouvres*, J. Galumier et al. eds., (Paris: Gallimard, 1983-1987), vol. 1, 339-41.

89. Blue, “Gobineau on China,” 104, 108.

90. *Ibid.*, 94; Rose, “China as Symbol,” 57-59.

91. James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: the Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 65; Lydia H. Liu, *The Clash of Empires: the Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 183-84; Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: a documentary survey, 1839-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 12-15.

and complacency had brought about the decay of this once-great people, Europeans showed increasing disdain for the Chinese. Such anti-Chinese animosity would reach a peak in the decades between the first Opium War (1840-1842) and the First World War (1914-1918).<sup>92</sup> As Europeans attempted to set themselves apart from the other races, the stagnation they believed characterized the Qing dynasty (despite the fact that the Qing dynasty had actually overseen one of the greatest campaigns of territorial expansion in the region's history)<sup>93</sup> was extrapolated into the degeneracy of an entire race. Thus, the pseudoscientific racist discourse of non-white racial inferiority that was so necessary to the continued justification of the Atlantic slave trade was gradually extended just as eagerly and unreflexively to an imagined homogeneous "Asian" race as it had been to an imagined homogeneous "African" race before it.

## **The Rise of the Nineteenth-Century Coolie Trade**

### *Prologue: racialized labor, racialized freedoms*

Just as in the case of anti-black racism, anti-Asian (here, specifically anti-Chinese) racism was not simply an abstract ideology, but resulted in concrete violence and very real exploitation of its objects. There were a number of factors, both internal and external, that led to the rise of the trade in Chinese labor out of Qing China; but as I argue below, more specifically it was the rapidly-congealing discourse of pseudoscientific racial hierarchy, coupled with the model of the transatlantic trade in African slaves, that made it possible for Euro-American employers and governments to recruit, control, and understand Chinese labor differently than they did white labor—even when both were posited as ostensibly "free." Not only had the transatlantic slave trade provided the methodologies, experience, and

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92. Blue, "Gobineau on China," 94.

93. Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Belknap Press, 2005).



infrastructure that would support and facilitate a trade in contracted Chinese labor; but the normalization of assumptions regarding inherent racial traits and races' positions in the natural order permitted the racist reduction of Chinese laborers (as it had the blacks before them) into an other to whom the bare minimum of rights afforded to lower-class white laborers could be denied. Such would not necessarily have been the case had Chinese remained discursively "white" in the European imagination.

By the nineteenth century, different definitions of "freedom" were already being applied to different races of laborer. For example, the idealized "free" white wage laborer must have been recruited voluntarily, must voluntarily remain in the service of his employer, and must have *legal standing equal to that of his employer* in the event of a breach of agreement (i.e. either party had the right to hold the other accountable for such a breach). Due to this changing definition of (white) freedom, the use of indenture contracts in the recruitment of white labor had fallen out of favor, as the necessity of a long-term contract implied that the laborer would otherwise not stay of his own volition (i.e. was being compelled by the contract to remain), which ran counter to the ideal of the free white laborer.<sup>94</sup> Of course, through the Industrial Revolution and beyond, the reality faced by lower-class white laborers in Europe and the Americas was often different from the ideal: they too could be the victims of abuse and outdated legal codes that left them at the mercy of their employers.<sup>95</sup> But most significantly, whereas white laborers could be caught up in these obsolete vestiges of more oppressive labor regimes that had simply not yet caught up with changing social mores, contracted Chinese coolies would be ensnared in new legal frameworks and legislation designed *specifically and contemporaneously* for that purpose.

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94. Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008), 68-70.

95. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 233.

I have chosen to focus on the coolie trade—the mechanics and structure of which will be described in more detail shortly—despite the fact that compared to other flows of Chinese labor, it was responsible for a relatively small volume of Chinese laborers who ventured to the Americas. Indeed, coolies may have comprised as little as 11-12% of the total Chinese population flow to the Americas.<sup>96</sup> However, the coolie trade is still an important historical phenomenon, first because it, like the slave trade before it, resulted in the buying and selling of racialized human bodies, converting persons into fungible goods over which certain types of “ownership” could be asserted. Second, the fact that Euro-American traders and governments were able, intellectually and materially, to support such a trade even as the transatlantic slave trade was being scrutinized and dismantled is demonstrative of the extent to which pernicious ideas of racial inferiority and adequacy of what I will call “second-class freedoms” for non-whites had insinuated themselves into foreign and domestic policy. The potential profitability of a system of commodified labor still outweighed the laborers’ rights as people; and as long as coolies could be spoken of as “free,” it was not necessary for the time being to interrogate whether that freedom was in all ways equivalent to the freedom to which white men were entitled.

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96. It should be noted that the coolie trade was just one type of Chinese labor recruitment, used primarily by employers and colonial governments to recruit labor for their own plantation and mining projects in the Caribbean and Latin America. There also existed a much larger “credit-ticket” system of labor recruitment wherein the cost of transportation was laid out either by friends/family of the laborer or by a Chinese company in the destination country (places like the Western US and Australia where vast stretches of unclaimed land, the discovery of gold, and high demand for labor to execute large infrastructure projects promised opportunity for China’s enterprising urban poor). The credit-ticket laborer, though bound to repay the cost of transportation, and often targeted by discriminatory taxation, anti-miscegenation, and naturalization legislation, could at least come and go as he pleased; the coolie, on the other hand, often lived much as the African slaves did: he was unable to leave his assigned work site, his time was very strictly regimented, and he could be transferred like chattel between different employers. The credit-ticket sojourner owed his creditor only a certain quantity of money; but as discussed below, the “coolie” had—perhaps voluntarily, perhaps not—essentially forfeited his autonomy for the duration of his contract. The credit-ticket system was responsible for the movement of many more laborers than the coolie trade. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 38.

The Chinese contracted laborers would certainly not be the first to be extended a limited version of freedom. Emancipated black slaves in the American colonies, too, had been pronounced “free” without enjoying many of the trappings of white freedom. Immediately following emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies colonies in 1834, for example, Parliament approved systems of mandatory “apprenticeship” for ex-slaves, wherein now-“free” slaves were made to work for no compensation for a period of four years to “facilitate” their transition into freedom (but in reality to ensure that plantations did not suffer precipitate labor shortages); in the US, southern Black Codes passed in the mid-1860s dictated that free blacks must contract themselves to an employer or be arrested for vagrancy; in Hispanic America, expressions of African culture or community could be suppressed by the police; and in Brazil, though free blacks were granted citizenship, they faced a number of discriminatory employment practices and found themselves shut out of most forms of stable employment.<sup>97</sup> Though they were no longer slaves, the white-dominated power structures still denied emancipated blacks social parity, permitting them only “second-class freedom”—wherein they were ostensibly free from forced labor, but were permitted less room for personal choice than their white counterparts. (It goes without saying that those blacks who were still toiling under the bonds of slavery in the US, Brazil, and Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century did not even enjoy freedom in this limited sense.)

Similarly, Chinese coolies too, would often be granted only such “second-class freedom,” precisely because like slaves, they were primarily viewed as alien factors of domestic production, rather than people and future citizens. Despite their ostensible freedom, they were often spoken of by Euro-American officials and plantations administrators (in the context of the coolie trade specifically) in terms of their need/ability to be “managed”: According to one British informant, for example, the Chinese were an “industrious” and

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97. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 238; Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow*, 178, 116, 78, 153.

“temperate race,” but needed to be “firmly but kindly looked after.” According to another, “a race more docile under proper discipline, and more likely to become unmanageable if misunderstood and misgoverned, than the Chinese, is certainly nowhere to be found.”<sup>98</sup>

Cuban intellectual Urbano Feijoo Sotomayor was of the opinion that the Chinese in general were useless and “indolent”;<sup>99</sup> but moreover, if interested parties in Madrid were to permit the importation of Chinese laborers to Cuba, Sotomayor urged caution on the grounds that the Chinese were by nature schemers and malcontents:

[O]ne should never relax one’s vigilance, because most Chinese harbor ideas of insubordination, and conspiracies against the lives of others are common among them. Thus, I consider that their alliance with the blacks could be catastrophic for us. That is to say, it is best that [the Chinese] live in isolation, in a single housing unit so that they may all be observed vigilantly.<sup>100</sup>

Tabling the racist assumptions about whether Chinese as a whole were or were not suited to the demanding labor of the colonial plantations, we see that there was a strong (equally racist) tendency among those debating the merits of the coolie trade to make assertions regarding the “docility” or “controllability” of the prospective Chinese workforce. The Chinese were “docile” enough under while control, but “unmanageable,” “insubordinate,” and dangerous if the employer should falter in his vigilance. In depicting the Chinese as a whole as a people in need of control and supervision, such tropes not only perpetuated the idea that the Chinese were distinctly “other,” and could not be expected to adhere to Western ideas of order or propriety if left to their own devices; but they also anticipated the language of the “yellow peril,” which would paint the Asians in one stroke as devious,

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98. “Consul Alcock to Dr. Bowring,” (1 Sept. 1852), in *British Parliamentary Papers, Area Studies: China, vol. 3: Correspondence and returns respecting the emigration of Chinese coolies, 1852-58* (hereafter BPP 3) (Shannon, Ireland: Irish Univ. Press, 1971), 26-27; “Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury,” (1 Oct. 1852), in *Ibid.*, 33.

99. Urbano Feijoo Sotomayor, *La Isla de Cuba: inmigración de trabajadores españoles, documentos y memoria escrita sobre esta materia* (Madrid: Imprenta de Julián Peña, 1855), 50. Google Play: [https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=W\\_4HcORv5F0C&pg=GBS.PA91](https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=W_4HcORv5F0C&pg=GBS.PA91) (accessed 12 Aug. 2014). Author translation.

100. Sotomayor, *La Isla de Cuba*, 91.

unpredictable, and potentially disruptive to the extant (white) social order. The claims themselves are obviously such broad generalizations as to be completely meaningless as information; the only real purpose that could possibly be served by such alarmist assertions was justifying, in the minds of those already so disposed, the restriction of the personal freedom of the contracted Chinese laborer for the “protection” of society at large.

As a matter of fact, the ideas of custodianship and control were central to the decision to take on Chinese as contracted labor, rather than wage labor. This sentiment was expressed quite frankly by British administrator Dr. Charles Winchester, writing from Xiamen shortly prior to the beginning of the trade to British colonies: “I do not think it would be *safe* as a commercial speculation to leave the Chinese *free and unfettered* to seek work on their arrival in the West Indies.”<sup>101</sup> Winchester goes on to suggest that without the terms of employment spelled out explicitly so as to entice the Chinese, they would not be able to recognize the great opportunities that awaited them in the New World, and would not embark of their free will. As he sees it, the contract is necessary both to entice the “Chinese idler” to act in what is so obviously (to British eyes) his own self-interest, and to compel him to continue working in pursuit of that “interest,” thereby preventing him from defaulting on his side of the arrangement with the colonial authorities. Winchester not only suggests that “free” Chinese would act contrary to their own interest, implying their irrationality; but more importantly, in positing “free and unfettered” Chinese—rather than a lack of sufficient positive inducements to attract and retain such “free” Chinese laborers—as the potential problem, he also betrays his unease regarding the introduction of racialized labor that was not explicitly under white control.

The need for white control over Chinese labor could be rationalized in a number of ways. Despite the fact that indenture contracts had been determined to unjustly constrain

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101. “Note by Dr. Winchester,” (26 Aug. 1852) in *BPP* 3, 22. Emphasis added.

the free will of the white laborer, coolie contracts were accepted by proponents of the trade as evidence of volition for Chinese laborers—thus, the freedom-limiting contracts could be defended as much-needed “protection” for the embarking coolie. Paradoxically, however, Chinese willingness to indenture themselves over to others was in turn understood as proof that Chinese were either too ignorant or too desperate to truly understand or take responsibility for the gravity of their own freedom. As such, to many Western observers and commentators, whether for or against the trade, the Asian laborer was so ruled by his baser needs and fears that he was assumed to be incapable of rational free choice as exercised by white laborers. Those in favor of the trade manipulated this argument to assert paternalistically that both indenture to Western employers, and the contracts specifically, were necessary for the Chinese—as the “apprenticeship” system had been for freed blacks—in order to help “civilize” the Chinese as a race while keeping them under control and ensuring their smooth assimilation. Left to make their own decisions, they simply could not be trusted to adapt themselves to the modern world.<sup>102</sup>

While it is impossible to speak to every individual coolie experience—which, indeed, could have fallen anywhere along a spectrum of coercion from “free” to “unfree,” depending on circumstances of recruitment, retention, and employment—<sup>103</sup>—it is important to note that that whatever “freedom” had been promised to the coolies, as supposedly ensured by their

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102. McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 70-71.

103. Most of the coolies who embarked under contract for places like Cuba, Peru, and the British West Indies did so voluntarily. Certainly, a non-negligible percentage of contracted laborers were kidnapped or otherwise coerced into indenture: according to an 1886 estimate published in *Shenbao*, this number was approximately 30%; while in the case of Cuba, up to 80% of those who provided testimony to the Cuba Commission (see Chapter Two for more detail) reported having been kidnapped. However, even if a laborer embarked voluntarily, coercion could occur at any number of other points during his employment, or indeed, at none at all. (For an in-depth discussion of the perils of falling into the “free vs. unfree” trap, see McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, Chap. 3.) “Lun tongshang zhi youyi yu Zhongguo,” *Shenbao*, no. 4893 (27 Nov. 1886): 1. All *Shenbao* articles accessed via Green Apple database: <http://spuc.egreenapple.com/WEB/index1.html> (accessed winter 2013); The Cuba Commission, *Report of the Commission Sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba* (Shanghai: Imperial Maritime Customs Press, 1876), 3.

contracts, was in many cases a qualified, “good-enough,” second-class freedom, tightly controlled both by the contracts that were supposed to ensure said freedom and by legislation that targeted them specifically as persons-under-contract. In particular, I argue that in spite of the Enlightenment emphasis on the dignity of “free (white) labor,” the always-already-racialized coolie laborer could be quietly excluded from such considerations as a number of colonial planters and mine operators obviously preferred to continue operating as they had done previously—by claiming absolute (or almost absolute) ownership of the racialized laborer and his body. The coolie contract—which was supposed to serve as a safeguard against the coercive recruitment practices of the slave trade and an assurance of coolies’ liberty—was in fact understood by a large number of employers as a surrogate for the Chinese body, serving less as a legal document conferring mutual protection than it was a manipulable and multiply-renewable receipt of sale. Even as those who had advocated the coolie trade to their governments had spoken of “buying contracts,” colonial employers would still speak of “buying Chinese.”<sup>104</sup> The persistence of the pro-slavery mentality and slavery-dependent productive infrastructure ensured that there was still advantage to be gained by the acquisition of racializable, commodifiable laborers—where their race implied “backwardness,” and “backwardness” could in turn be used as justification for more or less absolute control over, and *de facto* possession of, their persons.

### *The Chinese coolie trade: origins*

The coolie trade might not have been possible at all, had the mid-nineteenth century not been a time of great change and upheaval for China. For one thing, China had, over the course of two centuries, experienced rapid, sustained population growth: even just from the late eighteenth century to the 1850s, the total population of China had increased by a

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104. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 85.

dramatic 41% from about 270 million to roughly 380 million.<sup>105</sup> In a similar period of time, the population of Guangdong alone shot up by almost 63% from 16 million to 26 million.<sup>106</sup> And while extensive efforts were made to increase acreage of arable land, the increase in arable footage still lagged behind the rapid growth of the population.<sup>107</sup> The decrease in per-capita arable land created substantial pressure on the limited land that was available, resulting in inflation, particularly of the price of rice. Periodic natural disasters such as drought and flooding made an already thinly-stretched food supply even more insecure.<sup>108</sup>

Domestic economic problems would be exacerbated by international ones. A massive trade imbalance between China and Britain (caused largely by soaring British demand for Chinese tea) had forced Britain to pursue other commodities that could be sold for a profit within China. Having already established a large mercantile presence in India through the British East India Company, British merchants found that they had large quantities of Indian-grown opium at their disposal, and began plying China's markets with the addictive substance.<sup>109</sup> "By the early 1820s," notes Peter Fay, "the number of chests [of opium] leaving India had passed five thousand a year—and almost all of that volume went to China" despite the fact that it had been illegal there for almost a century.<sup>110</sup> In 1839, Governor General Lin Zexu (1785-1850), well-versed in the minutiae of the trade, took a hardline stance against foreign traders and locals involved in the trade, and confiscated and destroyed twenty

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105. Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 13.

106. Frederic Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966), 179-80.

107. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 13-14.

108. Yen Ching-hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese During the Late Ch'ing Period, 1851-1911* (Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, 1985), 33-34.

109. Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 39.

110. Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 42, 43.



thousand chests of British-held opium that had been intended for sale in China. British merchants began to speculate that the loss of two and a half million pounds sterling of opium profits, if not compensated by the Qing government, would likely drive the two countries to war.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, not long thereafter, the question of compensation, coupled with Lin's attempts to blockade the Guangdong harbor to prevent further British trading of the drug set off what would come to be known as the first Opium War (1839-1842).<sup>112</sup> This, China's first major military confrontation with a European power, ended in defeat and the signing of one of a series of humiliating "unequal treaties." The Second Opium War (1858-1860), this time against Britain and France, would end much the same.

In the interim between the two Opium Wars, there arose a disruptive force of much greater magnitude: the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). The chaos of the first Opium War had resulted in economic instability and spikes in unemployment and inflation rates; this in turn led to unrest in and around Guangdong. This unrest rippled into Guangxi, where various militias and self-defense units began to coalesce in attempts to protect their members from the spreading disorder and violence. It was out of one such unit—comprised of discontents, members of secret societies, and underprivileged members of society such as ethnic Hakkas—that the Taiping Rebellion was born.<sup>113</sup> Led by Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), a religious zealot who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ, the Taipings hoped to establish a Christian "Heavenly Kingdom" (*tianguo* 天國) that would replace not only the Manchu governing apparatus, but the entire existing social order within China. Over the course of fifteen years, and numerous battles between the rebels and government forces, civilian populations desperate to escape the violence were displaced from their inland homes

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111. Fay, *The Opium War*, 129, 160, 163.

112. Jean Chesneaux et. al, *China from the Opium Wars to the 1911 Revolution*, trans. Anne Destenay, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 63.

113. Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate*, 127.

and fled into China's coastal cities. Estimates for the death toll for the entire rebellion—including civilian deaths—range between ten and twenty-five million.<sup>114</sup>

The internal instability and straitened economic conditions of the mid-nineteenth century would prove to be key factors in the successful prosecution of the coolie trade. Not only did a large displaced, unemployed population find itself concentrated in coastal cities from which they might be “recruited” or kidnapped, but financial desperation had made many of these people easy targets for honest and dishonest “recruiters” alike. Indeed, Chinese had been suggested as a potential source of colonial labor since at least the Dutch founding of Batavia in Southeast Asia and the Cape Colony in South Africa in the seventeenth century; and the British had already had some success with a similar trade in contracted Indian coolies in the previous decade.<sup>115</sup> Now with a foot in China's door, other European powers concerned with shrinking labor supplies in their New World colonies (because of the abolition of certain legs of the Atlantic slave trade), would begin to imagine the lucrative possibilities for China's sizeable population.

Furthermore, the treaty terms reached after the Opium Wars would create and expand legal protections for foreigners keen on establishing large-scale recruitment operations. In fact, though there was a longstanding imperial ban on egress in place (discussed further in the next chapter), the terms of the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing and 1843 Treaty of the Bogue insisted upon by England after the first Opium War had already made it possible for foreign recruiters to circumvent the imperial prohibition on egress. The Treaty of Nanjing had ended the war, granted British subjects mercantile and residential access to several of China's major port cities, ceded Hong Kong to Britain, and imposed a massive indemnity on China. The subsequent Treaty of the Bogue declared that only British government representatives

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114. Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate*, 5; Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 40.

115. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 5; Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: a History of the Chinese Diaspora* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994), 35; Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 30.

had the right to try British subjects for breaches of (British) law within the designated British zone—effectively denying the Qing legal apparatus the power to prosecute British subjects for any crimes against the Qing legal code within that space.<sup>116</sup> The creation and expansion of such havens of legal immunity (also called zones of “extraterritoriality”) in foreign concessions would allow foreign recruitment companies to begin sending Chinese overseas without fear of prosecution for breaking the injunction against the movement of Qing subjects abroad—so long as such activities took place within the foreign zones in treaty ports where the Qing government had been forced to forfeit its jurisdiction.

Shipments of contracted Chinese laborers to a French colony near Madagascar in 1845, and to Spanish colony Cuba in 1847, are generally regarded as marking the inception of the coolie trade.<sup>117</sup> The trade would flourish first in Xiamen in coastal Fujian; however, in the early 1850s, increasing hostility toward coolie brokers there would push the trade out of Xiamen and cause it to spread to other ports through southern China.<sup>118</sup> For a brief time, the new hub of the trade was coastal Guangdong (including Swatow, which was not a treaty port, but out of which foreign coolie brokers were still able to operate with little obstruction)—but rising anti-trade sentiment there, coupled with increasingly strict regulation issued by the colonial British government in Hong Kong, would ultimately make Portuguese colony Macao a more attractive option. From roughly 1856 until the end of the trade in the mid 1870s, the bulk of the trade would move, almost entirely unregulated, through Macao.<sup>119</sup>

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116. Hevia, *English Lessons*, 5.

117. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 42; Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 135. Yen states that the French colony in question was the Isle Bourbon (modern-day Réunion); Meagher gives it as Mauritius.

118. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 8.

119. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 54-56.

### *Organization and structure of the coolie trade*

In order to avoid accusations that it was merely a second slave trade, the coolie trade was proposed as a system of contractual indenture, which would in theory ensure that all laborers so engaged had decided to do so of their own volition. Even so, the trade was an extremely controversial issue among humanitarians and residents of the prospective receiving locations, for a variety of reasons ranging from the selfless (concerns over violence and coercion of Chinese) to the selfish (xenophobia and fear of competition); but their voices were overpowered by the clamor of colonial interests bent on recruiting enough labor to vie for supremacy of the expanding global markets for sugar. The British government would eventually establish its own “Emigration Houses” in Hong Kong from which colonial administrators would oversee and regulate the trade to the British colonies, hoping that such efforts would be sufficient to prevent abusive recruitment tactics and satisfy those making complaints on humanitarian grounds. The trades to Cuba and Peru, largely run out of Portuguese Macao and predominantly reliant upon private shippers and organizers, would become much more notorious for dishonest recruitment and victimization of laborers.

As in the recruitment of African slaves, European traders were largely unable to recruit Chinese labor on their own, and employed local agents to procure potential recruits (Westerners called these agents “crimps,” just as they had called the recruiters of African slaves; locals called them *ketou* 客頭 or *zhuzaitou* 豬仔頭).<sup>120</sup> Unlike the African case, however, China’s southeastern coastal cities were already so populous (especially after the Taiping Rebellion) that crimps did not have to venture into rural areas to find credulous prey—which meant that the cost of “conversion” borne by the Chinese crimp was even lower than it had been for his African counterpart. In the early years of the trade, it was legal for foreign trading houses to offer “per head” bounties for each recruit a crimp brought in. The practice

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120. The etymology of *zhuzai* (“piglet”) in *zhuzaitou* (“piglet head”) is discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 2. Hu-Dehart, “Chinese Coolie Labor,” 45.

of offering “per head” compensation had encouraged crimps to prioritize quantity of recruits over volition, and although the majority of recruits voluntarily signed the contracts presented to them by the crimps, a large minority was compelled by the crimps into doing so involuntarily—sometimes by force, sometimes under threat of violence, blackmail, or as repayment of a large debt. These practices resulted in such extensive fear and disruption among the coastal populations of southern China that in 1860 the British government began to press for the discontinuation of per-head payments practice, in hopes of eliminating some of the more dishonest recruiting behaviors.<sup>121</sup>

Once recruited, the almost exclusively male Chinese laborers were gathered into barracoons near the coast—a practice and terminology inherited directly from the slave trade—for ease of surveillance and embarkation. The barracoons, again, were squalid, cramped, and at least partially populated by persons who were there against their will.<sup>122</sup> While foreign recruitment companies continued to champion the practice of contractual indenture as a “free” form of labor recruitment, the reality was that often, as soon as a laborer had signed his contract (and sometimes even when he had not), he was thrust into the barracoon and not permitted to leave until it was time to embark.<sup>123</sup> Traders argued that because the laborers had already been given advances against future pay, it was necessary to keep them in the barracoons, lest they abscond with the advance and never return.<sup>124</sup> A given laborer might be trapped in a barracoon for weeks or months prior to embarkation; thus, he might be weakened and ill even prior to descending into a dark, cramped cargo hold for the long sea voyage to the Americas.

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121. “The Allied Commanders-in-Chief to the Consuls at Canton,” (12 Jan. 1860), in *BPP* 4, 201-202; “Mr. Bruce to Lord J. Russell,” (26 Feb. 1860), in *BPP* 4, 231.

122. “Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury,” (26 Nov. 1852), in *BPP* 3, 40-41.

123. “Guba huagong shiwu gejie, di si ce,” in *Huagong chuguo shiliao huibian* 1.2, (hereafter *HCSH* 1.2) ed. Chen Hansheng (Beijing: Zhonghua zhujū, 1995), 732; Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 124.

124. Arnold Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 124.

Not only were the coolies packed into ships' holds much in the same numbers and density as slaves had been; but some of the ships transporting coolies to the Americas were in fact retired slavers that, having been made redundant in the dying transatlantic trade, were easily turned to the transportation of Chinese laborers.<sup>125</sup> The Spanish, Peruvian, and French shipping industries were heavily involved in the trade for almost its entire duration; American shippers, also heavily involved initially, were forced to withdraw from—or hide their involvement in—the coolie trade when the US government, deeply embroiled in the Civil War, passed a law prohibiting further US involvement in the coolie trade; while British shippers would also participate eagerly until the collapse of the British Emigration House system in Hong Kong in the 1860s meant they were no longer legally able to carry Chinese laborers abroad.<sup>126</sup>

There were several routes a coolie ship might take from Xiamen, Hong Kong, or Macao to the New World, depending on destination and time of year. The annual monsoon system that swept along coastal Asia from September to May provided northwesterly winds favorable for Pacific crossings; but from May to September, when the monsoon season had subsided, the winds shifted and made Pacific crossings much slower and much more perilous.<sup>127</sup> When the winds were adequate, the most direct route to destinations like Peru on the west coasts of the American continents was, of course, to traverse or skirt the Pacific.<sup>128</sup> However, the Panama Canal had not yet been constructed, which meant that captains bearing cargoes for the Caribbean or east coasts of the Americas had to decide between two significantly longer routes: either sailing east across/around the edges of the Pacific then south around Cape

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125. Hu-Dehart "Chinese Coolie Labor," 45.

126. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 372-406; Robert L. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 152-53.

127. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 150.

128. Steam ships had the power to do the former; but more conventional sailing vessels had to do the latter to keep abreast of the Pacific currents. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 150-52.

Horn and finally north to their destinations, or else sailing southwest across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, and finally north and west across the Atlantic. As one British official expressed in 1852, the harsh weather and cold temperatures of Cape Horn—which lies a full twenty latitudinal degrees further south, and far closer to Antarctica, than the Cape of Good Hope—made its circumnavigation far too risky a prospect.<sup>129</sup> And so, the Indian Ocean-to-Atlantic Ocean route, probably very similar to the route utilized by British merchants carrying Indian coolie laborers to the West Indies, was important for captains bringing Chinese coolies to the Caribbean, as well. Captains undertaking this passage made stops at African ports like Capetown and Saint Helena—each of which had been closely tied to the Atlantic slave trade—to take on fresh supplies before proceeding across the Atlantic as slaving vessels had done before them.<sup>130</sup>

After roughly four or five months at sea, coolie ships reached former slave trade destinations like Havana, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Callao.<sup>131</sup> In some cases, an employer had arranged in advance for the entire shipload of contracted laborers to be brought to his plantation or mine, where he would take ownership; in cases where coolies had been gathered and transported at the behest of speculators, their contracts (read: the coolies) were sold at markets upon arrival, much as the slaves had been. (The very existence of such speculators, I might add, speaks quite plainly to the fact that Chinese coolies were considered to be a lucrative commodity, valued by some purely as potential exchange value.) In the coolie markets of Callao, for example, those men who had not already been spoken for were subjected to humiliating physical examinations in full public view. If chosen, they would be

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129. “Note by Dr. Winchester,” in *BPP* 3, 22.

130. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 151; Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 11; Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies, 1806-1995: A Documentary History* (Barbados and Jamaica: The Press, Univ. of the West Indies, 1998), 135.

131. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 150.

marched from the market to their new site of employment.<sup>132</sup> Upon arrival at their new worksites, coolies in would toil long hours in the tropical heat—amidst the toxic fumes of guano mines in Peru, or in the cane fields and among boiling vats of sugar in refineries in Cuba and the British colonies. They could be beaten for missing quotas or appearing to be slacking off. Where black slaves had been seen as a long-term “investment,” the temporal limitation of the coolie contract encouraged some employers to drive their Chinese laborers even harder than slaves, to ensure that every ounce of utility had been squeezed out of them before their contract terms ended.<sup>133</sup>

### A Tale of Two Commodities

As the foregoing analyses demonstrate, the slave and coolie trades occurred at a nexus of complex racial, political, and market forces. It was predominantly economic concerns and questions of colonial productivity that first gave rise to the idea of transporting external laborers *en masse* to the colonies; but developing discourses of racism made it acceptable, and as the more paternalistic saw it, *morally virtuous* (in a distinctly “White Man’s Burden” sense), to continue importing non-white labor under regimes that had already become discredited for white labor recruitment. Virulent anti-black racism had emerged in order to shield the colonies’ (and plantation owners’) economic interests from the threat posed by abolitionism; and that virulence resulted in the facile extension of similar discourses to other sets of non-white peoples.

This large-scale conversion of each of these groups of laboring persons into fungible goods—into commodities easily traded from one person to another—requires interrogation. Indeed, the astute reader may by now be wondering: if the coolie trade was supposed to be

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132. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 80-82; Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 31.

133. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 218; Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 84.



*different* from the slave trade, how was it that interested parties were able to treat Chinese laborers much the same as they had African slaves? The key to resolving this quandary resides in the mode of commodification experienced by each of these groups. Below, I consider first the various mechanisms by which slave traders and even slave trade infrastructure perniciously eroded the personhood of their quarries, priming them for recodification as exchangeable objects. Then, I go on to consider the impact this precedent of (racialized) commodification had in terms of the later—and similar—commodification of Chinese laborers. More specifically, I argue that rapacious commercialism, coupled with the popularization of discourses of white-dominated racial hierarchies, had made it desirable to recode blacks and Chinese as possessable property. In the case of black slaves, that recodification ultimately happened on the level of colonial property law (i.e. the slave became property in the act of purchase), while in the case of the Chinese coolies, it occurred on multiple levels: that of the individual contract, that of employer’s exertion of certain “rights” over his employees, and that of legislation governing the movements of aliens. Though the coolie was never *legally* the “property” of his employer, end result was much the same.

Because the executors of slave and coolie trades were primarily concerned with profit (both from the trade itself and in terms of maximizing colonial production), I believe it is relevant to consider the capitalist “business” practices that allowed these men to ignore the human impacts of the trade they plied by effecting the recodification of human beings into goods. As Karl Marx (who lived and wrote contemporarily to each of these trades) was already extremely wary of capitalism’s tendency to dehumanize even free laborers and convert their life-energy into material wealth to be accumulated by the *haves*,<sup>134</sup> I have decided to make use of a number of Marx’s thoughts on labor and “exchange value” as a means of

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134. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Estranged Labour,” Martin Milligan trans., reproduced in *The Marx -Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), 70-81.

contemplating the mechanisms by which the enslaved or indentured laborer was also effectively dehumanized by these imperialist “industries”—or more specifically, object-ified and commodified—even in cases where such was no longer supposed to be possible.

### *On slaves*

I begin with Marx’s definition of a commodity as an object whose (exchange) value is expressed in terms of some abstract unit of social value unconnected with the object’s use value—usually the quantity or quality of labor that went into its production.<sup>135</sup> But perhaps more important for my definition of the “commodity” than the object’s exchange value is its resultant position as an inherently *exchangeable* (and thus possessable) object. For Marx, for example, the labor of a wage laborer can be considered as a commodity, as the laborer owns it and is able to exchange it for wages; while in the case of the slave, the object that is exchanged is the slave himself, and thus he becomes the commodity:

The continuance of [the relationship between laborer and employer] demands that the owner of the labor-power [the laborer] should sell it only for a definite period, for if he were to sell it rump and stump, once for all, *he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity*. He must constantly look upon his labor-power as his own property, his own commodity, and this he can do only by placing it at the disposal of the buyer [employer] temporarily, for a definite period of time. By this means alone can he avoid renouncing his rights of ownership over it.<sup>136</sup>

Per Marx, the primary difference between a wage laborer and a slave is the fact that the wage laborer sells his *labor* as a socially-valued commodity, in discrete units and in exchange for capital that can in turn be used to purchase other commodities; whereas the slave is unable to withhold his labor from the employer, and thus the unit being bought and sold is not the slave’s labor (which is already taken for granted), but rather the *slave himself* as the vessel in which that labor inheres. The employer takes possession of the slave’s body—

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135. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, in Tucker, *The Marx -Engels Reader*, 308-9.

136. *Ibid.*, 337. Emphasis added.

and thereby of all his future labor—whereas his arrangement with the wage laborer entitles him only to a certain number of hours of labor for which he must offer compensation. Thus, the wage laborer is a purveyor of a commodity, while the slave becomes one himself.

Let us consider the temporally-overlapping cases of white indentured laborers and African slaves in the New World. As mentioned previously, white bodies, too, had been available for sale since at least the thirteenth century; yet, despite the existence of such a precedent for markets in white slaves, the preferred means of recruitment of white labor to the New World colonies had, by the early seventeenth century, taken the form of indenture rather than slavery. Indeed, as the transatlantic slave trade had not yet grown into the behemoth it would later in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Eric Williams notes that “[t]he immediate successor of the [enslaved American native] was not the Negro, but the poor [indentured] white.”<sup>137</sup> In exchange for passage to the Americas, lower-class white indentured laborers and convicts were contracted to work for a certain length of time, or until they had repaid the cost of their transportation. Though they were bound to a particular employer, and were often treated similarly to slaves while under contract, they never became “property” of the employer, and their indenture was always understood to be temporary.<sup>138</sup> In the case of black slaves, on the other hand, the slave himself was always the unit of sale; he was rendered into “property,” just as a cow or a horse might have been. The black slave, now a possession rather than a free man, received none of the contractual protections granted to white indentured laborers. He was viewed less as a human than as a mere factor of production with a tantalizingly low price tag.

In fact, it was that low price tag (read: exchange value) that made the purchase of slaves a more appealing option for planters and traders than was the hiring of free or

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137. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 9.

138. *Ibid.*, 18.

indentured white labor. As Philip Curtin has noted, part of the reason the transatlantic trade in African slaves flourished was because the cost of “creating” (and thus obtaining) a slave was significantly lower than the cost of either maintaining the free wage laborer or raising a laborer of any type from childhood. In the case of the kidnapped/captured slave, the captor sets a price equal to the very modest amount of labor the captor himself has performed in the conversion of free man to slave (kidnapping and transportation), rather than the much more substantial labor of converting a child into an adult.<sup>139</sup> Thus, while the theoretical “exchange value” of a given adult human—defined as the amount of labor that went into producing him—would normally comprise the years of nourishment, edification, and shelter that helped him reach adulthood, the exchange value of the slave is artificially low. Where, in Marx’s view, a wage laborer who sells his own labor as a commodity would settle for no less than an amount sufficient to maintain and reproduce himself,<sup>140</sup> the slave seller puts himself at an advantage by selling the slave at a price far below the actual cost of his re/production. The buyer is never responsible for the full social cost of his purchase, as the much larger part of the cost has already been borne by the family and community of the slave. The buyer need only make sure that he has made the kidnapper’s time worthwhile. Thus, though race was dictating who could and could not be made into a slave, it was economics that made the slave (who in this case was now predominantly black) more cost-effective, and therefore more desirable, than free labor.

And indeed, slaves were not only cheaper, but once understood to be “possessable,” could be treated as disposable non-person goods. The reader is sure to be familiar with the inhumane treatment, cruelty, and humiliation that were visited upon so many slaves; the

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139. Philip D. Curtin, “The African Diaspora,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 6 no. 1, (Summer 1979): 14-16. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41330417> (accessed 13 May 2014); Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 34.

140. Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 340.

slaves, in turn, considered more as property rather than persons by law (consider the US Dred Scott case, for example), had no legal recourse to challenge such treatment. I would point out that such dehumanization of black persons into “non-person” commodities by the slave system is further evidenced in several of the terminologies and units that were used in accounting for them—and which effectively reduced them to exchangeable quantities of goods wholly abstracted from their personhood. The records kept by slave traders often accounted for slaves in pragmatic bulk units that facilitated colonial planning and calculation of gross profits, but which overlooked the most natural unit of enumeration—the individual—in favor of more abstract measures of projected “value.” Slaves transported to Spanish colonies in the Americas were accounted for in “*piezas de India*,” a unit created to express the quality of labor that might be expected from a particular slave.<sup>141</sup> While “a young adult male meeting certain specifications as to size, physical condition, and health” would be counted as one *pieza*, women, children, the elderly, and the unfit or infirm were counted as fractions of a *pieza*. Thus, a shipping company that carried roughly 4,000 slaves to the Iberian Americas in a year might only indicate in its records that it had transported 2,500 *piezas*.<sup>142</sup> The individual laborer was ostensibly distilled into a projected use-value, and the use-value of each laborer was in turn agglomerated into an indistinguishable labor-mass. Traders considered only the gross quantity of labor, rather than the number of human beings, they were transporting. The

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141. The abstraction of individuals into these artificial units of work resembles a use value, and indeed, according to Marx’s definition, in order for an item to be considered a commodity, that item must be treated as an exchange value rather than a use value (i.e. valued for the quantity of labor that went into it, rather than for the usefulness to be derived from it). However, we must recall that in the case of the slave, the amount of capital or goods laid out in his acquisition is not equal to his *true* use value. After all, the projected productive labor (use value) of an individual to be enslaved for the remainder of his/her life must be greater than the small amount of non-productive predatory labor expended in his or her capture and transport to the slaving vessel (exchange value). Though a given slave might be ranked by use value among other slaves, the choice to employ slaves rather than free wage laborers was ultimately still rooted in the artificially low cost of production and reproduction (exchange value) of slaves as compared to free laborers.

142. Depending on the composition of the slaves transported, a total of 2,500 *piezas* could represent many more or fewer slaves than 4,000 as well. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a census* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 22.

*pieza* not only allowed traders to ignore the human impact of the trade by using non-person units of quantification, but in “counting” many slaves as fractions of *piezas*, this system also insidiously suggested that the intrinsic value of a black person who was a less-than-ideal slave was less than one. Rather than using personhood as the default criterion for “wholeness,” by this reckoning the black person is not whole simply by *being*, but instead can only be whole if he fulfills all the conditions of being an ideal slave. All others are reduced to “partial” units.

The *pieza* was not the only accounting measure that reduced human beings to abstract goods. When purchasing slaves in Africa, European traders usually did not appraise each person individually, but rather negotiated for a “lot” of slaves. In such cases, it was common for the European traders to record the value of the lot not in terms of the sum of their individual exchange values, but in terms of “prime cost,” or the value of the European goods that had to be traded to acquire the lot. Each individual slave had at one time had his own distinct use value, and even an individual, if dehumanizing, exchange value; however, “prime cost” accounting—wherein the value of the individual was then expressed as the total “prime cost” plus cost of transportation divided by the number of slaves shipped<sup>143</sup>—reduced each slave to a perfectly equivalent (in the literal sense of “equal value”) unit in a homogeneous mass. It seems likely that such abstraction of human beings into purely economic units may have initially resulted from simple pragmatism and a desire for efficient accounting; however, such practices also make explicit the belief held by planters and slave traders alike that slaves were commodities, mere vessels of exchange value to be traded, bought, sold, and even speculated upon, rather than unique persons shaped by their experiences and their histories.

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143. Manning, *Slavery and African Life*, 93; David Eltis, “The Relative Importance of Slaves and Commodities in the Atlantic Trade of Seventeenth- Century Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 2 (1994): 239, 240 FN5, 247. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/183218> (accessed 18 May 2014).

The profitability of the slave trade and slavery-dependent mode of production incentivized traders and owners alike to ignore or minimize the human impact of their activities: traders by accounting for slaves as either non-human or less-than-human vessels of value; and owners by valuating slaves in terms of artificially low exchange value rather than in terms of the full human/social cost of their capture, translocation, dehumanization, and eventual consumption by the plantation apparatus. I have demonstrated that such commodification of the slave and willingness to ignore his humanity—two sides of the same coin—would be key components in the slave trade to the Americas and in the development of those colonial economies that relied upon slavery. For one thing, the othering of the black African made it possible to continue enslaving him at a time when such treatment was no longer acceptable for white laborers; for another, artificially low prices for slaves meant higher profit margins as compared with the hiring of free white laborers; and finally, the slave owner's ability to deprive the slave of social capital (because the slave was alienable and excludable) and right to exert complete legal control over the slave (because he was possessable), in theory meant minimal threat to the social hegemony of the governing classes. It is evident that the normalization of these practices and attitudes toward black labor was instrumental in establishing a precedent wherein the racialized laborer could be inexorably consigned to a position of abject servility, even as the lower-class white laborer was increasingly being elevated from such.

### *The case of the coolie*

Because the abominable treatment of blacks under slaveholding regimes became well known (and increasingly reviled), future trades in foreign labor to colonies in the Americas would have to be more cautious—with respect both to how such labor was acquired, and to the legal standing of that labor at the site of employment. Ironically, the coolie trade

contracts, which had been suggested as a means of guaranteeing the autonomy and proper treatment of Chinese laborers (and which, again, had fallen out of favor in the recruitment of white labor because such contracts were determined to impinge upon the liberty of the “free” white worker), could themselves become instruments of a type of oppression very reminiscent of that of the slave trade. Of course, the contracts seemed fairly innocuous at first glance, stipulating formulaically: the name and age of the signee; the number of years he was to work (usually five in British colonies, eight in Spanish colonies); the amount of his monthly wages; the rations and clothing with which he was to be provided; the size of the advance he was to be paid before embarkation; the terms on which he would repay said advance; the number of days he could be absent due to illness before his wages would be withheld; and his general acquiescence to life and work under the control of the employer.<sup>144</sup> However, though the contract as a document was fairly straightforward, the role the contract played in the operation of the coolie trade is far more complicated than one might initially assume.

Far from being a simple guarantor of coolies’ volition, as proponents had argued, the contract was in fact often manipulable. Thus, as evidence of the coolie’s willingness the contract was unreliable, as it was very difficult to ascertain whether a signature on a contract had been forged, whether one man had been substituted for another, whether the signee had been made to sign under duress, or whether he even understood what he had signed. (The British “emigration houses” were established expressly for the purpose of preventing some of these more obvious transgressions, though the more determined crimps easily got around such measures by telling kidnap victims that the foreigners would beat or kill them if they tried to tell the truth of their deception/kidnapping.)<sup>145</sup> In some cases, new contracts were

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144. Much of the language is similar between contracts (uncannily so in some cases, considering that they might be contracts written a decade apart for two laborers going to completely different sites in the New World).

145. “*Shu Min Zhe zongdu You Feng zou yichuan guaipian huagong shizhi liuqiu yangmian naoshi banli qingxing zhe*,” (26 Feb. 1864), in *Huagong chuguo shiliao huibian* 1.1 (hereafter *HCSH* 1.1), ed. Chen



substituted for old ones, unbeknownst to the coolies; in others, no contract had ever been drawn up in China and one was produced only when the coolie had already been transported to the New World and had no ability to decline its terms; some contracts left the specifics of wages and rations blank, to be determined later.<sup>146</sup> The contract, touted as a safeguard against the victimization of involuntarily-recruited coolies, was far from foolproof or inviolable.

As originally conceived, the contracts should also have satisfied Marx's stipulation for "free labor" (i.e. that the "free" wage laborer remains free only insofar as he sells his labor in strictly delineated quantities): after all, five or eight years was a long time, but it was finite. Furthermore, the coolie was being offered a monthly salary, unlike the African slave who received no monetary compensation at all. Thus, the relationship between the contracted coolie laborer and his employer could be construed as a longer-term version of the relationship between a wage laborer and his employer. However, between the terms of the contracts themselves, and employers' expectations that they would be able to treat this new influx of racialized labor almost exactly as they had previously treated (or were still treating) black laborers, this was often not the case. A large number of contracted coolies found themselves victims of machinations, both legal and financial,<sup>147</sup> that converted them from "temporary laborers" into "to-death laborers"—whenever "death" might be. And far from protecting them, it was often the contract itself that came to be the means of their oppression.

For one thing, given the brutal conditions in which they were compelled to toil day after day, it was extremely common for coolies to die from exposure, exhaustion,

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Hansheng (Beijing: Zhonghua zhujū, 1995), 14; "Guba huagong shiwu gejie, di si ce," *HCSH* 1.2, 732; "Zongshu shoudao wei juming zhe jilai Aomen guaipian huagong qingxing batiao," (Tongzhi N.D.) in *HCSH* 1.1, 249-50; "Depositions of Kidnapped Coolies Brought from Whampoa," in *BPP* 4, 202-23.

146. Lai, *Indentured Labor Caribbean Sugar*, 58-60; Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 31.

147. Hu-Dehart "Chinese Coolie Labor."

malnourishment, injury, or abuse long before the initial contract term was ever completed. It is obvious that where the employer is not contractually responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of the coolie, faces no legal consequences for literally working the coolie to death, and can with impunity deprive said laborer of his life, said employer already exercises a *de facto* form of enslavement and ownership. The coolie who does not outlive his contract may still be a temporary laborer—and more temporary than others, at that—yet where the master or the plantation complex takes complete proprietorship over the coolie’s body, his health, and his very survival, he is reduced to a simple good that, once paid for, may be disposed of as the purchaser wishes. The “finite” term of x years was in reality the less determinate term “x years or until death”; but since it was largely the master or overseer who determined when death might occur (by inflicting beatings or denying adequate nourishment, rest, or medical care, for example) the coolie’s term was not dictated by the contract so much as by the caprice of his employer—who, by virtue of holding that contract, had in fact become the custodian of the coolie’s life. Suicide or marronage were the only means available by which a coolie could actively retake ownership of his person.

A coolie did not have to die prematurely for the employer’s proprietorship to become evident. For example, it was not uncommon for Cuban employers to use methods of questionable legality to perpetuate their ostensibly temporary control over their laborers. Some employers refused to provide the documentation that would prove that a coolie had served out the terms of his contract. Without these documents, any free-walking person of Asian phenotype, regardless of his actual legal status, could be arrested for “vagrancy” and forcibly contracted or re-contracted. As such, many coolies whose contract terms had ended (but who had been denied their freedom papers) felt they had no choice but to remain on the plantations and re-contract themselves.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, unlike the case of the free white

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148. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 111-116.

laborer, who was by this time expected to enjoy the same legal status of his employer in the case of a dispute, the coolie was at a legal disadvantage: in cases of contract disputes, an offending employer could only ever be accused of a *civil* offense and fined; while a coolie allegedly in breach of his contract could be accused of a *criminal* offense and imprisoned (and forced to re-contract himself).<sup>149</sup> This legal imbalance once again meant that coolies who could not prove that they had finished their contract terms could be claimed to be “in breach” of that contract and forcibly retained—and indeed, made appealing to local law in the case of such a dispute a very risky prospect for the coolie. The employer, on the other hand, stood to lose very little in bringing such a suit to court.

Other Cuban employers docked the coolies’ nominal monthly pay in order to recuperate the cost of his transportation, shelter, food, and other contingencies. Once these deductions had been made from the coolie’s meager wages, the coolie might find himself *owing* money to his master. If the coolie was unable to discharge this debt by the end of his term, his master then had leverage to force the coolie to re-contract himself.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, in Peru, a number of nefarious methods were used to “extend” the term of the coolie’s contract, such as claiming that the coolie owed money for missed work hours, or for compensation for losses resulting from any criminal activities of which the coolie could be accused.<sup>151</sup> Positing such coercive labor-retention practices in terms of “extension of contracts” maintained the pleasant fiction that the laborer still had agency in the decision; but the end result was that the victims of these practices were inexorably converted into infinitely renewable resources.

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149. Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 12.

150. This, despite the fact that a number of contracts stated that debt could not be used to force the laborer to re-contract himself—suggesting either that the laborers were not as familiar with the terms of their contracts as their recruiters and employers insisted, or else that employers simply knew that the coolies had no legal recourse to ensure that employers abided by those terms. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 30.

151. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 117.

Not only do the insufficient wages provided by the employer seem to have been designed to perpetuate the employer's grasp over the "temporary" laborer; but digging a little deeper, we must also consider the ways that the coolie who spends eight years of his life slaving away on a colonial plantation thousands of miles from his home only to wind up *in debt* is being denied the basic reproducibility so necessary to the perpetuation of a system of free wage labor. According to Marx, the maintenance of the wage labor system requires that the laborer be compensated a sufficient amount to ensure the reproducibility (or "perpetuation") of himself and his labor:

The owner of labour-power is mortal. If then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous conversion of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself "in the way that every living individual perpetuates himself, by procreation." The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power.<sup>152</sup>

Marx continues:

The minimum limit of the value of labour-power is determined by the value of the commodities [such as food and shelter], without the daily supply of which the labourer cannot renew his vital energy, consequently by the value of those means of subsistence that are physically indispensable. If the price of labour-power falls to this minimum, it falls below its value, since under such circumstances it can be maintained and developed only in a crippled state.<sup>153</sup>

The free laborer must be provided, at a bare minimum, the financial wherewithal to sustain and eventually replace himself; if he is not, he will either perish, or more probably, seek other employment. On the other hand, the above-mentioned indebted coolie is not even paid enough to keep himself alive—much less provide for his replacement—but rather than being able to quit, finds himself ever more tightly bound to his employer. Where the exchange value for the coolie's "labor" (read: body) is so obviously below the amount required for reproduction, it becomes clear that he is valued only as a consumable, rather

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152. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 340.

153. *Ibid.*, 341.

than a renewable, resource. In denying the coolie's essential right to sustenance (and instead forcing the coolie into perpetual servitude to achieve sustenance), the employer once again asserts a type of ownership over the coolie's body. In a way, he even asserts his interests over the coolie's progeny: while the coolie's employer has no legal power to explicitly deny a coolie the right to biological reproduction,<sup>154</sup> neither does he have any vested interest in permitting the coolie the means to procreate (as the employer of either free laborers or slaves would have). The child of the coolie is not born into servitude as the child of a slave would be; and at the same time, as we already saw in Curtin's discussion of the economics of enslavement, it is cheaper for the employer to purchase outright an additional adult laborer than to pay to raise a new (potential) laborer from childhood. In sum, not only is the coolie himself a wholly consumable means to the employer's ends; but the maintenance of any offspring he produces represents the inefficient use of the employer's money (which could be better spent buying new adult laborers). Thus can the employer justify to himself compensating the coolie at a level far below that of "reproducibility": replacing one coolie with a second is cheaper than making provision for either the long term maintenance or procreation of the former. To the employer, the coolie is merely combustible fuel to be burned up by the plantation apparatus with murderous efficiency. Traces left behind would mean that his combustion had been inefficient.

Though some of the more gross restrictions on the coolie's liberty (such as survival-threatening garnishing of wages and capitulation to the will of the employer) were posited within the terms of the contracts themselves, certain receiving locations went even further, passing targeted coolie- or immigrant-specific legislation that further reinforced their objectification and commodification. To give one example, in 1854 the Spanish government passed

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154. However, the coolie did have to seek the permission of his employer if he was to get married. Hu-Dehart, "Chinese Coolie Labor," 44.

by royal decree the Regulation for Introduction and Control of “Colonists” in Cuba.<sup>155</sup> The Regulations put forth several more restrictive clauses that would have to be contained in all labor contracts going forward, such as Article 6.7: “the colonist is obligated to repay his employer for working hours missed due to his own negligence.”<sup>156</sup> As had been the case for employers in Peru, this language made it possible for a Cuban employer to claim that the coolie owed “back labor” at the end of his contract, thus justifying “extension” or re-contracting.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, the vagueness of the phrase “working hours missed due to his own negligence” (Is falling ill “negligence”? What about an injury sustained as a result of a work accident?) permitted employers a great deal of latitude in the invocation of this clause.

Article 6.9 of the Regulations further stated that “[The contract must include] a clause containing the following terms: ‘I, [name], agree to the stipulated salary, even though I am aware that it is lower than that earned by free day laborers and slaves within Cuba, because I recognize that this difference is commensurate with the other advantages that my patron must bestow upon me, and which are enumerated in this contract.’”<sup>158</sup> The Spanish government seeks here not to rectify, but to *codify* the gross undervaluation of Chinese labor/ers, further undermining any efforts the coolie laborer might make to contest a salary so artificially low that he cannot even sustain himself. The two articles, taken together, again speak to the possibility of “proprietorship” of the coolie: the first creates the legally-unassailable possibility that the contract may be “extended” without the coolie’s consent

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155. The euphemism “colonist” (*colono*) was often used to talk about coolies in Cuba; this legislation covers Chinese coolies in addition to other “colonists” from Spain and the Yucatan Peninsula (possibly central America more generally), but as Evelyn Hu-Dehart points out, it seems to have been primarily targeting Chinese laborers (“Chinese Coolie Labor,” 43).

156. *Legislación ultramarina: concordada y anotada*, vol. 2, ed. Joaquin Rodriguez San Pedro (Madrid: Imprenta de los Señores Viota, Cubas y Vicente, 1865), 432. Google Play: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=28WmtGYo9f0C&pg=GBS.PA431> (accessed 10 July 2014). Author translation.

157. Hu-Dehart “Chinese Coolie Labor,” 42.

158. *Legislación ultramarina*, 432. Author translation.

(and possibly without any actual wrongdoing on his part); while the second explicitly compels the coolie to waive his right to a competitive wage, thereby placing his sustenance and his solvency at the mercy of his employer.

The Regulations also established legislation—quite separate from the contracts—to which the laborers, by dint of being contracted outsiders, would also be made subject. Article 19 states quite bluntly that all contracted colonists “renounce all civil rights not compatible with the completion of the obligations to which they have contracted themselves, unless expressly decreed in these Regulations.”<sup>159</sup> And significantly, Article 13 provides that “Those who introduce the colonists [into Cuba] will be permitted to confer them upon other businessmen, plantation owners, or individuals under conditions which they deem to be expedient, as long as [the recipients] are obligated to complete the contracts entered into with said colonists, and are subjected to the terms set forth in these regulations.”<sup>160</sup> The selling of the contracts—contracts whose terms now took legal precedence over the coolie’s “civil rights”—was no different from selling their bodies outright.<sup>161</sup> Though many of the contracts to different locations already contained language that had made the contract’s transferability quite obvious,<sup>162</sup> this legislation ensured that the coolies’ conversion into fungible others took place not simply on the level of the individual bound by his unique contract, but on the much broader level of *all coolies subject to Spanish law in Cuba*.

Cuba was not the only place to see the “contracted immigrant laborer” (read: coolie) as uniquely legislatable. In British Guiana in August of 1851, Governor Henry Barkly boasted that

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159. *Ibid.*, 433. Author translation.

160. *Ibid.* Author translation.

161. Juan Pérez de la Riva, “La situación legal del culí en Cuba : 1849-1868,” *Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien*, no. 16 (Cuba: 1971): 17. Author translation; Hu-Dehart “Chinese Coolie Labor,” 44.

162. Similarly, contracts to Peru and British colonies also contained language that suggested that the holder of the contract had the right to transfer it as he saw fit.

upon arrival in British Guiana, any Chinese coolie would happily choose to dissolve his contract because he would be sure to find the state of free wage labor to be more than satisfactory:

There can be no doubt that such contracts, by whomsoever entered into, will prove a mere matter of form upon the arrival of the immigrants here, for they will all embrace the option to be afforded them of cancelling their agreement and claiming the current rate of wages of the colony, an option in fact which, as the law stands, is given to all immigrants, whether expressly stipulated or not.<sup>163</sup>

If we are to believe Barkly, the role of the contract was merely to provide potential migrants with a measure of security prior to their departure for the New World; such legal encumbrances would no longer be necessary once the laborers had arrived in British Guiana and seen for themselves the opportunities to be had. However, just two years later, Barkley attempted to pass an ordinance (Ordinance 3 of 1853) overhauling many of the policies regarding contract laborers. One clause of the Ordinance read: “[E]very *Chinese immigrant*, not already under written contract with some individual, shall, upon arrival in this colony, enter into a written contract, or shall be indentured by the Immigration Agent-general [...] for a period of five years from the date of his arrival.”<sup>164</sup> Whatever his reasons, Barkly had obviously determined in the space of those two years that it was in the colony’s interest to make sure that Chinese immigrants *specifically and categorically* were controlled by contracts of some kind, rather than allowed to make their own ad hoc arrangements. Perhaps Barkly had only belatedly realized the power that could be wielded in the guise of those contracts he had previously dismissed as a “matter of form.” Indeed, the shift in Barkly’s attitude is demonstrative of the belief of white colonial administrators that while it was necessary to

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163. “Copy of a Despatch from Governor Barkly to the Right Hon. Early Grey,” (26 August 1851), in *BPP* 3, 127.

164. Emphasis added. It should be noted, however, that this ordinance was struck down by Parliament. Clause 35, “An Ordinance to repeal certain Ordinances now in force for the Regulation and Encouragement of Immigration into this Colony, and to make other Provisions in lieu thereof (British Guiana Ordinance No. 3),” (31 Jan. 1853) in *BPP* 3, 304; “Copy of a Despatch from His Grace the Duke of Newcastle to Governor Barkly,” (14 May 1853) in *BPP* 3, 239.



import foreign racialized labor that was ostensibly “free,” the contract system was in fact necessary for placing limitations on such laborers’ liberty, such that they may not present a threat to white social hegemony and the financial interests of the colony (presumably by attempting to leave or by choosing some form of employment other than the grueling manual labor it was intended they should perform).

Eleven days prior to passing Ordinance 3, Barkly had also passed British Guiana’s “Employers and Servants Ordinance,” (Ordinance 2 of 1853) which would govern the relationships between coolies and their employers (among others). Though Ordinance 2 does make several allowances for protections of those on the “serving” end of things, more of its terms are geared toward protecting the priorities of the employers and the colonial government. In particular, one clause arrogates for the office of Governor the right to re-contract to new masters those foreign laborers whose first employers are guilty of “gross or repeated ill-usage or ill-treatment” of their laborers.<sup>165</sup> While the previous clause does also grant local judges the power to dissolve a contract altogether,<sup>166</sup> it is interesting that in the case of the abused laborer in particular, the government asserts its right to re-“indent,” rather than simply free, the person in question. Depending upon the contract, the coolie might have signed on either with a particular employer or with the colonial government more generally. In the former case, despite the fact that the original contract should have been abrogated by the bad faith of the employing party, this legislation insists that the coolie paradoxically remains “contracted” by dint of his participation in and non-completion of the

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165. The length of such a secondary contracting was not to exceed the remainder of the original contract term. For example, if a coolie had served three years out of five for his first master before being removed by the court, his second contract period would be limited to two years. It should also be noted that the wording of this clause of the Ordinance leaves the reader to draw the unsettling conclusion that there was a threshold of “acceptable” suffering below which the government would not intercede. “Copy of a Despatch from Governor Barkly to his Grace the Duke of Newcastle,” (11 Feb. 1853) in *BPP* 3, 151; Clause 14, “An Ordinance for Regulating the Rights, Duties, and Relations of Employers and Servants in the Colony of British Guiana (British Guiana Ordinance No. 2),” (20 Jan.1853), in *BPP* 3, 296-97.

166. *Ibid.*, 296.

now-void original contract. In the latter case, the legislation emphasizes that despite the bad faith of the employer to which the laborer was lent out by the colonial government, the coolie still remains under contract to the colony, and is eminently transferable. Rather than being granted his freedom in recognition of the “gross” suffering he has already endured, the coolie in each of these scenarios becomes (or remains) the property of the colonial government, and can be disposed of in whatever way the governor finds most expedient.

Such “reassignment” seems to have been fairly a standard response to abuse in British colonies. Over ten years later, an infamous case would occur in British Honduras: a number of Chinese laborers were seized and redistributed when the British Honduras Company by whom they were employed was found to be unusually cruel and negligent.<sup>167</sup> In these cases, much like a bank that repossesses the assets of a customer in arrears, the colony effectively confiscated “immigrant” laborers from delinquent employers and applied them elsewhere to ensure that the colony did not bear the costs of the employer’s “default.” The abused contracted laborer thus stripped from his employer was treated much more like a transferable asset than a victimized human being. The fact that this practice of reassignment rather than emancipation of abused coolies spanned over a decade—when, if abuses were so rampant, it might have been more productive to question whether the trade itself was inherently abusive—seems to be further evidence that British colonial policy was in general more concerned with retention and control of already-paid-for laborers than it was with their protection or liberation.

The crystallizing sense of Eurocentric racial hierarchy had already led to determinations that the “yellow” Chinese were inferior to “white” Europeans; but this belief in Chinese inferiority and irrationality in turn enabled the rise of a system of Chinese labor

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167. Lai, *Indentured Labor*, 105.

recruitment that relied on a long term contract-based framework already deemed unethical in the recruitment of white labor. Though the coolie was never meant to become “property” in the same way the African slave had, the coolie trade almost from its very outset granted the employer various custodial/possessive rights (whether contractual, legislative, or *de facto*) over the ostensibly free coolie’s person: both because the “racially-inferior” Chinese could credibly be posited as being incapable of rationally exercising their own free will and thus being in need of white custodianship; but also, more simply, because such practices had become indispensable to profit maximization and assertion of white hegemony during the later years of the slave trade.

There were certainly cases in which the contractual system functioned exactly as it was meant to: the prospective laborer decided that he wished to contract himself, went to the New World, served out the term of his contract, and was released from his bondage. However, it is also true that coercion was rife within the system, and that those who did not encounter coercive measures were luckier than others. It was the precedents established by the transatlantic slave trade—both in terms of coercive mechanisms and racism—that allowed such coercion to be posited as either “acceptable” (as certainly there was no need to treat non-whites according to the same standards as whites) or as “aegis” (since non-whites were so obviously in need of white guidance and edification), and in either case consistent with the limited “freedom” that was assumed to be sufficient for people like them. The purchasable, transferable nature of the contracts had already made it possible to turn coolies into a class of fungible “mobile slaves” (to borrow Lisa Yun’s phrase),<sup>168</sup> but the fact that coercive behaviors on behalf of employers were given an implicitly racially-justifiable “pass” meant that in certain circumstances, the employer was able to exercise *de facto* ownership over the coolie, whether by extending his contract indefinitely, by transferring him like a fungible

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168. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, xx.

good, or else by dictating with impunity the terms under which he might die. In any case, the coolie thus commodified ceased to be a long-term “equivalent” of the free wage laborer and could instead, like the slave, be rendered in(de)initely exploitable. Though the coolie was never legally “sold” or “owned,” the multiple ways in which his employer or colonial governments exercised sovereignty over his person is proof enough that he was often considered just as possessable and in need of “management” as his African counterpart.

## Conclusions

Though the mechanisms of commodification were very different in the African slave trade and the coolie trade, it was the rise of the transatlantic slave trade that ultimately made a schema wherein racialized labor could be construed as possessable objects a veritable *sine qua non* of economic competitiveness in the New World colonies into the nineteenth century. The transatlantic trade had taught the Euro-American shipping industries and colonial plantation complexes much about the successful acquisition, transportation, utilization, and retention of racialized laborers. And when, in the mid-nineteenth century, it was decided that Asia might yield the next wave of such laborers, the logistical lessons learned during the transatlantic trade were put to use: locals, rather than foreigners, were relied upon for the recruitment of laborers; ships were packed tightly to maximize the number of persons to be sold in the New World; some coolie ships availed themselves of established slave trade routes and resupply points across the Atlantic; and most coolie ships arrived at ports that had received slave ships in the previous centuries and which had well-established markets for the resale of human beings.

More significantly, in the wake of the post-Enlightenment humanist turn, the fate of the transatlantic slave trade had taught those who would continue to support the importation of external labor that going forward, it would be necessary to at the very least pay lip service

to the emerging ideals of free choice and individual rights. At the same time, however, the slave model had been so productive and so profitable for slave owners and colonial economies that these parties were loth to relinquish their “right” to profit at the expense of possessable non-white human labor forces. Luckily for those hoping to justify the continued acquisition and impune exploitation of non-white labor, the crystallization of racist ideologies and pseudoscientific notions of racial fitness meant that the definition of “freedom” as afforded to post-emancipation blacks and to Chinese coolie laborers could be different from that which white men of various class backgrounds were coming to enjoy. With the coolies’ race (and all the defects assumed to be concomitant thereto) providing sufficient justification for restricting their free choice, planters and colonial governments were able to create contracts and laws that, designed for the purpose of *limiting* the coolies’ freedoms by binding them into service under particular terms, also made possible (though not inevitable) the wholesale conversion of the ostensibly free coolie into a commodified object possessable by his employer. In many cases, such commodification allowed much-vaunted “guidance” and “supervision” to quietly give way to legal custodianship and more outright *de facto* proprietorship; but it was assumed that unlike freedom-loving white men, the intellectually simple “yellow” subjects of a despotic emperor would neither notice the difference nor miss the freedoms they had been promised. Though different from the slave trade in appearance, the coolie trade was in fact largely more of the same.

However, news of the presumed inferiority and poor treatment of Chinese laborers abroad in general, coupled with the impunity with which foreigners and foreign recruitment companies operated in Chinese treaty ports, would cause no small amount of outrage among the Chinese press and Qing government officials. As we shall see in the next chapter, officials, journalists, and even coolies themselves would protest—cautiously at first, and then with steadily increasing vociferousness and confidence—the violence and racist ideologies that

bolstered the coolie trade. As I argue, the exploitation of some of China's most vulnerable populations, and the agendas and ideologies that enabled such exploitation, would be traumatic at both the individual and national levels. At the same time, these traumas would be productive, forcing officials and the public to contemplate and to challenge the mechanisms by which the victimization of their countrymen had been allowed to occur.

## 2

### **Conceptual Vocabularies of the Coolie Trade: The Trade as a Site of Meaning-Creation**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the coolie trade was essentially built upon the ruins of the slave trade—in other words, for the foreign powers, it was the business of empire as usual, with a few modifications. In China, however, the rise of the trade marked the beginning both of a very real departure in terms of longstanding Qing policy and of a major disruption to social order in southern China. Foreign governments cared little for the turmoil they visited upon China, so long as they could make a profit in her markets while continuing to obtain bodies to feed into their imperialist machinery; but for the Chinese, the racist determinism, kidnapping, abuse, and fear that accompanied the trade were new, alarming experiences that needed to be processed—and ultimately, confronted.

I argue that four overlapping types of trauma were concomitant to the execution of the coolie trade in China: the immediate traumas of physical cruelty and emotional terror, the traumas of dehumanization and de-positioning, the trauma of dis-ordering, and the traumatic loss of sovereignty. By “physical cruelty” I refer to the bodily harm sustained by coolies during recruitment, transport, and employment; by “emotional terror,” I refer to the pain experienced by coolies resulting from separation from families or distance from one’s home as well as the fear of kidnapping among southern China’s coastal populations. “Dehumanization” is, quite simply, the reduction of the Chinese person to laboring body and commodity; while “de-positioning” refers to the somewhat more complicated dynamic whereby the abjection imposed by the trade forced Chinese to reconsider previous narratives of their own racial or ethnic superiority. By “dis-ordering,” I mean the social disruption and fear caused by the crimps who preyed upon the populations of southern China’s coastal cities. And finally, by “loss of sovereignty,” I refer to the Qing court’s inability to enforce its own laws, particularly with regard to emigration of its subjects. As I see it, attempts at processing

the trade would focus, first and foremost, on understanding these numerous violences; thus, the “conceptual vocabularies” that emerged out of the trade would necessarily reflect the exploitation, victimization, and fear that characterized the trade itself. These vocabularies of violence were multiply deployable as various segments of the Chinese population attempted to apprehend and cope with the changes that China was undergoing.

Indeed, I argue that within the spaces blasted open by these traumatic violences, there was also room for previous power dynamics to be upset, for longstanding perceptions of self and otherness to be threatened, defended, or altered. By analyzing a number of contemporary government communications media reports and testimonies, I uncover emerging conceptual vocabularies of the trade—encompassing not just new terminologies, but shifting worldviews, perceptions of power relations, and ideas of social responsibility—that reflected both the shocking confrontation with the violence of the trade and attempts to overcome or process that violence. In this way, I show that the traumatic violences of the coolie trade were simultaneously destructive and constructive: each kind of violence elicited a unique response from its victims, and as such, the conceptual vocabularies that emerged out of the coolie trade, though most obviously reflecting the regimes of violence that inhered to the trade, simultaneously enunciate challenges to those violences. I map out these challenges—in the various forms of popular protests, mutinies, evolution of a critical semantics of the trade, the disowning of those complicit in it, and even governmental resistance thereto—to facilitate the fuller understanding not only of contemporary responses of the trade, but also of the processes by which these vocabularies were incorporated into the reservoir of public referents. Only then can we begin to understand the kinds of baggage that these vocabularies would be commonly assumed to carry both contemporaneously and into the future.



In order to achieve this understanding, I break down more specifically the four principal types of trauma (“trauma” in the sense of a troubling, unanticipated shock that lingers subconsciously in the psyche of those who experience it)<sup>1</sup> that I believe were occasioned by the coolie trade: humanitarian, positional, emotional, and sovereign. In my discussion of each type of trauma, I analyze contemporary media and official reportage (as well as coolie and crimp testimonies) and draw out the conceptual vocabularies that emerged both as text and as subtext within those documents. By highlighting the vocabularies that inhered—both explicitly and implicitly—in discourses on the trade, I show not only how the coolie trade affected the populations of southern China in the moment of the trade itself, but also how those vocabularies would gradually become public tools by which speakers could refer to a shared history of fear, abuse, and (semi-)colonial experience.

### **The trauma of humanitarian violence**

The coolie trade visited a number of types of violence upon the population of southern coastal China, but the most obvious form of violence was the bodily harm perpetrated against the people who were directly victimized: the coolies themselves. For one thing, the trade often infringed upon the physical liberty of its targets: indeed, a large minority of coolies were recruited against their will, whether deceived, coerced, or kidnapped outright. For example, in just two operations between 1859 and 1860, Chinese authorities rescued, prior to sailing, 148 coolies who claimed to have been kidnapped or otherwise deceived into boarding ships. In the testimonies these men give, just under three-quarters claim to have been deceived or tricked into being captured, while just over one-quarter claim to have been the

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1. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, standard edition, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961), 10-11, 36-39.

victims of outright bodily force.<sup>2</sup> For men like these, involvement in the coolie trade was from the very beginning a violation of their personal physical autonomy: they had gone, usually quite precipitously, from being free men to the subject of other men's wills.

To make matters worse, the barracoons (sometimes sheds on land, sometimes small boats) which were supposed to be simple collection-areas for "voluntary migrants" were often sites of coercion themselves. As one of the Cuban coolies later deposed: "When I was nine years old, someone tricked me down to Macau, and into a 'pig-shed.' I was not willing to go overseas, so the crimp (*zhuzai tou* 豬仔頭) kept forcing me under water over the course of two days to compel me to sign the contract."<sup>3</sup> According to another, "I was a shipbuilder in Hong Kong. Someone called me to come do some work on their ship, but when I boarded, I knew it was a coolie ship. They shackled me in the hold for twenty-seven days before transferring me to a foreign ship."<sup>4</sup> Even voluntary migrants found themselves physically barred from leaving the barracoons and began to have doubts about the "free" regime to which they had consigned themselves; but for those men who had been brought against their will, confinement to the barracoons only served to emphasize their newfound state of captivity. Any coolie who attempted to escape, to contest his capture, or to inform the authorities, could be beaten or killed.

The public's outrage over coercive and violent recruitment practices in China's coastal cities very quickly manifested in riots and anti-trade demonstrations. In 1852, for example, the boiling over of anti-foreign resentment—and in particular, public outrage over widespread kidnapping—led to days of violent rioting in Xiamen. Lin Huan, a well-known crimp in the employ of British recruiters Syme, Muir & Co., had been arrested by local police for engaging

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2. "Depositions of Forty-one Kidnapped Chinese," [1859], in *BPP* 4, 128-35; "Depositions of Kidnapped Coolies Brought from Whampoa," [1860], in *BPP* 4, 202-23.

3. "Guba huagong shiwu gejie di si ce," in *HCSH* 1.2, 733.

4. *Ibid.*, 766.

in (apparently quite prolific) kidnapping. When Mr. Syme (who, as a foreigner, was himself immune to Qing law) attempted to free Lin from prison, an angry mob gathered and attacked several foreigners in the street. Syme's attempt to subvert what limited justice might have been possible in this case so enraged the crowd that the small mob swelled into a full-scale riot. The people of Xiamen had evidently grown weary of witnessing crimps and foreigners terrorize their friends and neighbors with impunity; and in this rare case of one of the perpetrators having been apprehended, the thought that he might be shielded from punishment by a foreigner who was just as implicated in crimes against the people of Xiamen must have been too much to bear. At the same time, Xiamen residents used this surge an anti-trade sentiment to their advantage, taking the opportunity to condemn the evils of the trade more broadly. They beseeched the community to come together to "repress these practices" and not take part in the "schemes of wicked traitors" that had been contributing to the "destr[uction of] our righteous people." They even declared that in the future, any Chinese caught kidnapping others would be dealt with according to vigilante justice rather than turned in to the authorities.<sup>5</sup> By the time the riots were suppressed by British troops several days later, the rioters had attacked crimps as well as foreigners, and staged an assault on Syme's business offices.<sup>6</sup> Though relatively short-lived, the violence and precipitous manifestation of anti-foreign resentment were enough to frighten foreign brokers into moving their operations out of Xiamen<sup>7</sup>—a tactical victory over the coolie trade, to be sure.

A similar riot occurred in Shanghai in 1859. Qing official He Guiqing explained to the emperor that the riots were a direct consequence of foreign kidnapping,<sup>8</sup> and when the riots

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5. "Proclamation issued by the Scholars and Merchants of Amoy," "Proclamation issued by the Inhabitants of the Eighteen Wards," [1852], trans. John Morrison in *BPP* 3, 83-84.

6. "Mr. Harvey to Dr. Bowring," (22 Dec. 1852), in *BPP* 3, 51-55.

7. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 8.

8. "Qinchai dachen He Guiqing zou Shanghai yangren guaipian huagong jicheng zhongnu shiye jing fenbie banli pian," (28 Aug. 1859), in *HCSH* 1.1, 21.

had finally been suppressed, the Qing government informed the foreign governments that the best way to prevent such violent attacks in the future was to discourage their nationals from participating in the trade in any way. The Qing government did concede that the rioters were legally in the wrong for attacking the foreigners;<sup>9</sup> however, in proposing that foreigners cease trading in coolies if they wished to avoid further violence, the Qing government was essentially warning the foreigners that even though the riots had ended, the public sense of injustice was not likely to subside until the trade itself had ended. (In the aftermath of the Shanghai riots, France and the US were amenable to reconsidering their participation in the trade—after all, they were primarily shippers, not employers of coolies; Britain, who stood to lose more as both a shipper and end user, would prove more intractable.)<sup>10</sup>

While the riots were largely a result of indignation over violent recruitment techniques, recruitment was only one violent phase in a larger brutalizing system. Shipboard conditions during transportation could be just as squalid and oppressive as during the African slave trade—so bad, in fact, that coolies sometimes took it upon themselves to resist the fate to which they had been condemned. Particularly in cases where a critical mass of men aboard a coolie ship had been kidnapped, the supplies on board were insufficient for the voyage, or perhaps the men discovered that rather than heading for San Francisco they were being conveyed to Cuba or Peru (where they were much more likely to be worked to death,) it was not uncommon for a large contingent of the coolies in the hold to revolt.<sup>11</sup> In the Xiamen and Shanghai riots described above, the rioters were reacting against the destabilization of their communities, the abduction of their family members, and the constant state of fear in which

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9. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 74, 73; Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 83-84.

10. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 74-77.

11. Kidnapping was a very common reason for mutiny; the latter two examples are the justifications given for mutinies aboard the *Rosa Elias* (1853) and the *Lady Montague* (1850), respectively. Arnold Meagher lists a total of 68 such mutinies aboard coolie ships between 1850 and 1872 (*The Coolie Trade*, 176-77).

the crimps and foreigners had reduced them to living; the mutineers, on the other hand, were generally either attempting to free themselves from wrongful indenture, or else reacting preemptively against the future violence to which they knew they were to be subjected.

Such mutinies not only made participation in the trade seem all the more risky, but because they often resulted in excessive loss of life (in 1855, for example, 251 coolies suffocated to death in the hold of the *Waverly* after the captain closed all the hatches in response to an uprising en route to Cuba; in 1870, 600 coolies perished in a fire set on board the *Dolores Ugarte* destined for Peru),<sup>12</sup> they also contributed to increasingly dismal views of the trade in public opinion.<sup>13</sup> In fact, as observers came to better understand the violence inherent to the trade, mutinies would come to be viewed with increasing sympathy. For example, Chinese coolie mutineers aboard the *Calyati* in 1868 and the *Nouvelle Penelope* in 1870 were not charged for their parts in their respective uprisings, owing partly to the historical precedent set by the 1839 not-guilty ruling for mutineers aboard the African slave ship *Amistad*.<sup>14</sup> Over time, humanitarian condemnation of the trade would cause mutineers to go from being viewed as no better than “pirates” to being considered prisoners fighting for their own liberation.

Those coolies who survived their journeys around the globe were subjected to all kinds of unspeakable torments and humiliations upon arrival in their new destinations. Coolie testimonies, though not collected systematically until the 1870s, offer a chilling retrospective look at how Chinese had been treated over the course of the trade. Consider the following two examples:

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12. “*Waweili chuan tangke shoucan lu*,” *Xia'er guanzhen*, No. 29, (1 Dec. 1855), in *Xia'er guanzhen: fujiyeti, suoyin*, ed. Song Puzhang et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2005), 278; Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 92, 96.

13. See Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 23-24.

14. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 175, 178. For more information on the case of the *Nouvelle Penelope*, see footnote 58 of this chapter.

Mai Jinqun deposes: I am from Heshan county, Guangdong. In the seventh year of Tongzhi (1869) I was lured to Macau and forced to board a boat to Peru, where I was sold to work in the mountain cotton plantations. Every day at 4am they rang the bell and everyone lined up for roll call. Everyone was given one pound of rice, but we had to provide our own vegetables. Once per week we were given beef or pork, and every day we carried the pans down to the fields where we cooked our own food. At 6am we started work, stopping at noon to cook and eat our food, and rest for half an hour. Before long, we were back to work, and didn't stop again until 6pm. On Sundays, we got a half-day off, three days off for the New Year, and one day for major holidays. While working, we suffered extraordinary hardship. There were two head overseers and several assistant overseers, and a specially-designated black overseer who carried a whip and beat us fiercely. Not long after starting the workday, everyone had been beaten at least once, even those who were already weak. Over ten took their own lives, being unable to bear watching others being abused. Somewhere around eighty died of illness, and all of those who became ill did so due to the insufficiency of the food and clothing [provided], coupled with the extremity of the abuse. I was born with a relatively weak constitution, and one time they assigned me too much work, and I couldn't finish it. The black overseer violently and indiscriminately beat me. I was nearly beaten to death. I also saw sixty-some people who had already completed the eight years of their contracts compelled by whips to continue working without being freed. Finally, a Chinese overseer went to Lima to complain, and they were released. I spent 150 foreign dollars to try to redeem my freedom, but the master wrote on my papers that I had only paid 72. It must be that he is intentionally cheating me, but none of the workers dares to argue with him. I work on the [Lengda?] Mountain plantation in Huacho county, the master's name is Salinas. What I have deposed is true.<sup>15</sup>

Wen Changtai deposes: I am thirty-nine years old, from Xinhui county in Guangdong. I was still a student, only nineteen years old, when I came [to Cuba]. I was brought by someone to Jiangmen under false pretenses, and boarded a small boat to Macau. There, I met with a foreign [emigration] official, was given a contract, and one foreign dollar. In the twelfth month of the third year of Xianfeng (Jan. 1854), the ship sailed. When we arrived in Havana, I was sold onto a sugar plantation. Of my cohort of seventy-five, only fifteen remained after the eight-year term was completed. I saw nine men hang themselves, one throw himself into a vat of [molten] sugar, and twelve die of beatings so severe that their flesh, torn and rotten, became infested with maggots. There were also those who escaped only to starve to death in the mountains; there were others who escaped the plantation, but whether they lived or died, I do not know. When cutting sugar cane, I often encountered human bones. There were those who died with their flesh and their throats torn to bits by dogs. There were all kinds [of deaths], all of which I have witnessed with my own eyes. When I completed my contract term, my employer had me bound up and sent to prison. Only after I had signed a new contract and worked for another year—without pay—did he finally release me. I signed yet another contract and worked for another year at a different sugar plantation, earning \$8.50 each month. I had to spend three gold dollars to buy my freedom papers. [...] I then went in search of work in Sagua. For the past seven years, they have been building a church across from the Chinese housing. And whether

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15. "Zhaolu Rong Hong suocha huagong gongci jianzheng," in *Huagong chuguo shiliao huibian* 1.3 (hereafter HCSH 1.3), ed. Chen Hansheng (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 1055-56. Author translation.

a Chinese man has his freedom papers or not, he is compelled to work there. Many of them lack shoes, and the ground is littered with sharp stones, so their feet are bloodied and festering. There is one white overseer for every four Chinese, if the Chinese slow down even a little, they are beaten. As a result, many kill themselves. One time within a fifteen-minute period, seven people drowned themselves in the well. I saw it with my own eyes. Those who were beaten to death, or hanged, I cannot count. In this place, the whites treat Chinese worse than dogs. The reason I have come to testify is in hopes that you can find a way to save them.<sup>16</sup>

The above testimonies, though only two of hundreds, give an idea of the cruel treatment and traumatic experiences that coolies were made to suffer through. Other testimonies recount very similar tales, making frequent reference to beatings, abuse, physical restraint and incarceration, suicide, insufficient pay, insufficient food and clothing, long hours, and denial of freedom at the end of contract completion. They speak of “hearts [...] absolutely shattered” (*lingren xindan jusui* 令人心膽俱碎) by violence, of “the extremity of [their] sadness” (*beican zhi zhi* 悲慘之至), of “unbearable pain” (*kutong nan'ai* 苦痛難捱) and of “injustice that [they] had no ability to report to anyone” (*yuan wuke su* 冤無可訴).<sup>17</sup> Their physical and emotional anguish is evident.

There is evidence in popular media that by the early 1870s journalists and indeed their readers were already at least somewhat aware of the kind of treatment that Chinese overseas were receiving. A letter submitted by a reader of *Shanghai Xinbao* in 1871 notes that “Once [the coolies] are tricked onto the foreign boats going to strange places, their bodies no longer belong to themselves, they must take orders from others; they are not treated as Chinese men, but are used as animals. They experience the utmost in difficulty and hardship. The bitterness of their labor, the cruelty of their deaths... truly, the eye cannot bear to look, the ear cannot bear to hear.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, an 1872 article in *Shenbao* paints a fairly faithful depiction of life working as a guano miner on Peru’s Chincha Islands: “The toxic fumes form a

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16. “Guba huagong shiwu gejie di si ce,” in *HCSH* 1.2, 734-735. Author translation.

17. “Guba huagong chengci jielu di er ce,” in *Ibid.*, 659, 661, 667, 66, 670. 675.

18. “Qinjin mairan chuyang,” *Shanghai Xinbao*, (4 Aug. 1871). Microfilm. Author translation.

poisonous miasma that assaults [the workers]. In under a year, they die. [Because of this high turnover] every laborer eventually, after several years of working in Peru, ends up being sent to work on that island. They are only ever seen to go; they are never seen to return. The Peruvians all know how dangerous it is, and refuse to go; they only send Chinese.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the nature of contemporary reportage—especially in *Shenbao*, which reported frequently on the trade—suggests that for many, the coolie trade would first and foremost be associated with ideas of physical and emotional suffering.

While it is obvious that the southern urban populations of China were aware of the violence involved in recruitment from an early stage in the trade’s operation, whether they had access to detailed accounts of coolie experience overseas in the early years of the trade is less apparent. However, in the mid-1870s, a tripartite commission (“The Cuba Commission”) consisting of Qing, British, and French representatives was dispatched to Cuba in order to determine the living conditions of Chinese there. Arriving in Cuba in March of 1874, the Commission carried out interviews with Chinese in plantations, prisons, and trading depots, and also received numerous written petitions and depositions from men who were unable to be interviewed in person. The resultant interviews and petitions revealed that as many as 80% of Chinese laborers in Cuba had been kidnapped or decoyed there;<sup>20</sup> even more shocking were the first-person accounts of a degrading system wherein Chinese men were worked to death, frequently beaten for minor transgressions, and provided with scarcely enough food and clothing to survive. The Commission’s staggering findings would, in under a year’s time, be widely distributed within the Qing Empire, providing audiences with a chilling glimpse into the lives of Chinese on Cuban plantations.<sup>21</sup>

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19. “Lun Piluguo fanren weinu shi,” *Shenbao*, no. 146. (17 Oct. 1872).

20. The Cuba Commission, *Report of the Commission*.

21. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 302.



The harsh physical treatment and humanitarian abuses experienced by coolies would quite obviously render any future discussion of the trade first and foremost a discussion about violence, fear, pain, and anger caused first and foremost by foreigners, but with help from certain unscrupulous locals. However, this was not simply a case of Chinese persons being made to forfeit their autonomy and their bodies; we must also recall that this reductionism was enabled by the racist ideologies that had permitted the commodification of the Chinese body, that had made ethically tenable for employers to choose to cheaply replace a laborer rather than pay slightly more to maintain him. While the physical and humanitarian costs of the trade were staggering, it also becomes necessary to ask what effect the relegation to “chattel,” or to “beast of burden,” would have both on those who were so relegated and upon those who witnessed such relegation from afar.

#### **Trauma of dehumanization and de-positioning: on “zhuzai” and “slaves”**

Though the physical and emotional trauma wreaked by the coolie trade became the primary driver behind popular action and outpouring of sympathy, other forms of trauma brought on by the establishment of the coolie trade would result in a somewhat more introspective interrogation of position—particularly as other recent phenomena had demonstrated that the Qing dynasty might be losing its mandate. China, which had long been the monolithic center of a vast East Asian tributary system, was losing its centrality to the East Asian economic sphere as the Qing government grew weaker and former tributary states began to develop their own trading networks.<sup>22</sup> To make matters worse, the Qing government had also been forced by defeat in the two Opium Wars to reevaluate its military dominance there. The indemnities imposed after these military defeats, coupled with begrudging

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22. Takeshi Hamashita, “Tribute and Treaties: East Asian Treaty Ports and Networks in the Era of Negotiation, 1834-1894,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2002): 59-60.

acknowledgment of China's inability to compete with Western military technology, had disastrous effects on the local economy and on public morale in general.<sup>23</sup>

While military defeat, indemnities, a weakening grip on East Asian hegemony, and the fear of intellectual obsolescence were each demoralizing, the dehumanization and positional unmooring resulting from the coolie trade would be devastating in its own way: by disrupting the narratives of ethnic and racial civilizational superiority that had both enabled and relied upon the continuation of the tributary system, as well as informed much of the Qing court's response to the early physical and economic incursions of foreigners (referred to variously in terms like *yiren* 夷人 “barbarians” and *yang guizi* 洋鬼子 “foreign devils”) into China's coastal cities.<sup>24</sup> The facile racist determinism so necessary to the Euro-American justification and execution of the coolie trade (as the slave trade before it) would begin to impose its own insidious narrative wherein Chinese laborers were being “rescued” from a life of destitution in their failing, “backward” home country.<sup>25</sup> The attempted imposition of this new narrative would create a psychic crisis of identity for some—not so much because they believed in the

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23. In the 1860s, advocates of the nascent *Yangwu* (“foreign matters”) movement would argue that these technological shortcomings were not insurmountable, that in fact much of the technology wielded against China by the West had originated in China—the West had merely put it to better use in the interim. Thus, they set about translating foreign scientific treatises, adapting Western military technology for use in China, and revamping educational curricula in order to “reclaim” their technology and make China competitive with the West. However, try as the *Yangwu* movement might to modernize China's military into competitiveness, they could not prevent China's humiliating 1895 defeat by erstwhile vassal Japan in the Sino-Japanese War. At that point, it became clear to intellectuals such as Yan Fu that the *Yangwu* movement had been shortsighted in its belief that the simple adaptation of Western technology—without simultaneous overhauls of social and intellectual systems—could ever have restored Qing China to preeminence. Huters, *Bringing the World Home*, 24, 45-46, 52; Michael Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals and the Revolution of 1911: the Birth of Modern Chinese Radicalism* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1969), 7-8.

24. Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 36. Dikötter uses the fascinating term “diabolization” to describe the “conceptual elimination” of the foreigner as a potential threat by instead casting him as an evil non-human external to the realm of normal interactions (36-37).

25. This rhetoric of rescue was also prevalent in debates over how to recruit Chinese women to Caribbean colonies, with British officials claiming that women in China are essentially in the “position of purchasable concubines,” whereas if they were to enlist as laborers in the British colonies, they could aspire to be “free wives.” “Copy of a Despatch from Governor Barkly to His Grace the Duke of Newcastle,” (26 Feb. 1853), in *BPP* 3, 160; “The Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners to Mr. Merivale,” (27 Sept. 1854), in *Ibid.*, 375.

inferiority imputed upon them by the white foreigners, but because they were forced to process what it meant to have been made the target of such imputations. Indeed, British officials often discussed “the Chinese” as an essential collection of attributes to be held up as either favorable or unfavorable compared to other (equally essentializable) races: “they are a race well adapted for labour in warm climates, and any comparison with the Indian coolies who have been sent to the West Indies would be a gross injustice to the Chinese. [...They are] well made, and sufficiently robust and strong for ordinary agricultural labour,” notes one official.<sup>26</sup> A British colonial surgeon, upon observing those Chinese who were ill upon arrival in British Guiana, asserts that the “vital *organism* of the Chinese is exceedingly strong,” and estimates that “double the mortality would have occurred among Africans or [Indian] coolies exposed to equal hardships”—clearly, it is his medical opinion that the Chinese race is comprised entirely of superior physical specimens.<sup>27</sup> Such racist reductionism was common, and the concomitant negation of individual personhood would be crucial to the execution of the trade.

As evidenced in contemporary newspaper articles and coolie testimonies, the people who experienced, reported on, and related the evils of the coolie trade attempted, in their discussions, to cope with and dispute the racial inferiority imputed upon Chinese coolies by white beneficiaries of the trade. Within these discussions there emerged two related, but slightly different, tropes: that of the coolie as “*zhuzai*” (豬仔 “piglets” or “pigs”) and that of the coolie as “slave” (*nu* 奴). Each would, in its own way, help victims and witnesses alike grapple with the horrors of the trade. The former would speak directly of the tendency of the trade and its prosecutors to dehumanize their prey, reducing the Chinese coolie to fungible, laboring body; and the latter would situate the experience of coolies within the larger

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26. “Note by Dr. Winchester,” in *Ibid.*, 20-21.

27. “Copy of a Despatch from Governor Barkly to His Grace the Duke of Newcastle,” in *Ibid.*, 158. Emphasis added.

historical context of forced labor, highlighting the hypocrisy of Euro-American support for the trade while providing a precedent for the way forward.

### *Zhuzai* (“pigs”)

Anxiety over the victimization and dehumanization of Chinese men manifested itself quite strikingly in one of the key words used as slang for contracted coolies going overseas: *zhuzai*. Explanations for the origins of the term abound. Lin Zexu first encounters this term in 1839 during his investigation into the allegations of child trafficking related earlier: according to Lin, the men who go overseas to work for foreigners are called “*zhuzai*” because during feeding time on the ships, they are summoned to eat by a call very similar to that used by rural swineherds feeding their hogs, then eat out of a communal wooden bowl.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the 1871 *Shanghai xinbao* letter cited above states that the use of “*zhuzai*” stems more immediately from the fact that the price for a given coolie is pegged to his physical strength, just like a goat or a pig;<sup>29</sup> and similarly, in an 1872 *Shenbao* article, the author notes that the term refers to the way that men are trussed up to be sold at the coolie market.<sup>30</sup> The summoning of the Chinese men as if they were animals, and the commodification and physical restraint of their bodies are all so essentially tied up in the dehumanization of Chinese by crimps and foreigners as to be essentially the same thing: they are called “pigs” because they are treated like pigs.<sup>31</sup> In stark contrast to British communications at this time, in which

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28. “Lin Zexu zou chaming waiguo chuanzhi piandai huamin chuyang qingxing zhe,” (1 Sept. 1839), in *HCSH* 1.1, 7.

29. “Qinjin mairen chuyang,” *Shanghai Xinbao*.

30. “Zhuzai tanyuan shuo,” *Shenbao*, no. 154 (26 Oct. 1872): 2.

31. Yet another (somewhat more dubious) explanation of the term is offered by an 1855 article in Hong Kong newspaper *Xia'er Guanzhen* published by the London Missionary Press: that the disparaging use of “*zhuzai*” to describe laborers going overseas largely emerged because onlookers were “jealous” of the opportunities and profits of which these men were availing themselves, and thus used the word to disparage their presumed greed. It should be kept in mind, however, that as a British missionary newspaper, it was in *Xia'er Guanzhen*'s interest to promote emigration to British colonies. Indeed,

coolie laborers are consistently referred to euphemistically as “emigrants,” locals living in the shadow of the trade did not mince words. The implementation of the coolie trade gave birth to a whole set of related terminology such as *maizhuzai* 賣豬仔 (“selling pigs”), *zhuzaiquan/zhuzaihang* 豬仔館/豬仔行 (“pig shed” or barracoon), *zhuzaitou* 豬仔頭 (“pig-head” or crimp), *zhuzai chuan* 豬仔船 (“pig boat” or coolie ship) that would be widely used in government documents, popular media reports, and by the coolies themselves.<sup>32</sup>

The plight of the *zhuzai* was a frequently-visited theme in the early years of the influential Shanghai-based *Shenbao*, despite the fact that the majority of those victimized by the trade were from further south. The term appeared most often in the context of raising awareness for the conditions of Chinese laborers overseas, or arguing that the kidnapping and violence inherent to trade itself needed to end. In a letter printed in August of 1872, for example, a reader laments that the trade in *zhuzai* in Guangdong is one of the greatest causes of suffering there, and advocates seeking out the kidnappers and destroying the dens out of which they operate.<sup>33</sup> The case of the *Maria Luz* that same year, in which a coolie ship destined for Peru was forced by a storm to seek safe haven in the port of Yokohama (where it was subsequently discovered by Japanese authorities that a large number of the coolies had

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several of its articles seem to have been actively encouraging indenture. As such, this explanation of “*zhuzai*” may be a somewhat dishonest attempt to allay the fears of people who had heard more troubling explanations for the origins of the term, while simultaneously suggesting that there was great wealth to be obtained by participating in the trade. “Chuyou waiguo lun: On emigration, and the rules for emigrant ships to be enforced in Hong Kong,” *Xia'er Guanzhen* (1 Feb. 1855), in Song, *Xia'er Guanzhen*, 558.

32. There is one important exception: though the coolies who offered oral testimonies to the investigatory commission sent to Cuba in 1874 are clearly aware of the use of “*zhuzai*” in association with the trade, and make frequent use of the such set phrases just listed, they almost never use “*zhuzai*” to refer to themselves or to other individuals. They do repeatedly *compare* the treatment they receive to that of animals, but almost never *equate* themselves with pigs, even metaphorically. I hypothesize that this is because for the coolie, providing official testimony was about making a record of his and others’ existence, preserving their individual stories, lest they end up reduced to anonymous corpses lying among the sugarcane (See Lisa Yun’s discussion of the testimonies as a form of “witnessing” [*The Coolie Speaks*, 80-87]). To call oneself a “pig” would require acceptance of the foreigners’ appraisal of one’s value; but the very act of testifying, believing in the intrinsic worth of one’s history, is a direct challenge to that valuation.

33. “Lingnan dufeng zhuzai yijin lun,” *Shenbao*, no. 95, (19 Aug. 1872): 1.

been kidnapped) is reported in *Shenbao* as “the *zhuzai* affair”;<sup>34</sup> and in another article in which a hypothetical dialogue demonstrates how coolies could be deceived into boarding ships, the coolie-interlocutor is scripted simply as “*zhuzai*.”<sup>35</sup>

The above reportage raises an interesting detail: somewhat paradoxically, quite a few *Shenbao* authors unabashedly use “*zhuzai*” and its related terminologies to talk about the very men for whose dehumanization they were seeking redress. Through the 1870s, formulations like “the suffering of the *zhuzai*” (*zhuzai zhi huan* 豬仔之患), “save the *zhuzai*” (*qiujiu zhuzai* 求救豬仔), or “the people who were *zhuzai*” (*zhuzai zhi ren* 豬仔之人) in which *zhuzai* was used in a specific, nominal sense were not uncommon.<sup>36</sup> Part of this likely had to do with the fact that by this time, *zhuzai* was already convenient, widely-recognized shorthand for talking about the trade. But it is obvious that some writers are making intentional use of the inflammatory potential of the word. When compared, for example, to the much more neutral “*huagong*” 華工 (“[Han] Chinese laborer”), “*zhuzai*” is evocative on a much more visceral level, making it impossible to forget the humiliation the men were made to endure. While there may have been a number of different anecdotal explanations for the emergence of the term, it is quite clear that they were all tied to the way the men were treated by others (by foreigners, primarily, but local crimps are implicated in this as well). As such, continued use of the word “*zhuzai*,” though appearing on its surface to be disparaging toward the Chinese laborers, seems rather to be a condemnation of the foreigners who would treat Chinese men thus—insisting that the reader remember the position that so many Chinese men had been made to assume:<sup>37</sup>

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34. “Zhuzai an hui Shen,” *Shenbao*, no. 151, (23 Oct. 1872): 3.

35. “Zhuzai tanyuan shuo,” *Shenbao*.

36. “Chen dujue zhuzai guaiyou fengyi,” *Shenbao* No. 163, (6 Nov. 1872): 1; Lian Tangsheng, “Bian Dongyang bao yu shichen lai yi Taiwan chengxiong shi,” *Shenbao*, no. 286, (5 Apr. 1873): 1-2.

37. However, there seems to be no self-conscious reflection with regard to the further potential dehumanization of human subjects that might arise from continuing to refer to one’s countrymen—and

When the foreigners put up the capital to hire [Chinese] laborers, they did not originally harbor ill intentions or desire to drive their workers to desperation and death; but evil people [*jianren* 奸人] plotted among themselves, and there were instances of selling [men]. The money that an employer would have provided as a salary thus became instead the payment for the sale of bodies. [The recruiters] used various deceptions and strategies to lure the men onto the ships. This is called “selling pigs,” [*and it reduces] men to livestock.*<sup>38</sup>

Though the quote myopically blames the evils of the trade on the avarice of a few wicked individuals and thereby glosses over the fact that they are the natural consequence of an inherently violent system reliant on the exploitation racialized labor, it does pinpoint one of the most vicious aspects of the trade: as discussed in the previous chapter, the coolie trade reduced human men to the status of beasts of burden, fungible chattel passed between sellers and buyers. The selling of individual children by their parents—to become servants or as adoptive heirs to other families—was not unheard of in nineteenth-century China;<sup>39</sup> but the wholesale reduction of hundreds, thousands, of men to anonymous fodder for the insatiable imperial machine was a terrifying development.

Through the 1880s and even 1890s, in addition to the standard qualifying/nominal uses of “*zhuzai*” in print media as have already been discussed, the experience of the *zhuzai* would also come to be invoked comparatively. The historical treatment of coolies gradually became a metric against which that of other laborers or trafficked or mistreated persons could be measured. For example in an article written in 1886, a writer argues that the recruitment of Chinese labor to go overseas had caused more suffering than any other aspect of the foreign governments’ efforts to open China to trade. He then compares the current

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countrymen who were likely of lower class standing, at that—as “pigs” in such articles. Thus, I do not entirely rule out the possibility that such usage also implies classist disparagement of the coolies themselves.

38. Emphasis added. “Lun jin liumang yu zhaogong huxiang biaoli,” *Shenbao* No. 1888, (21 June 1878): 1. I have translated the phrase “名為豬仔” as “this is called ‘selling’ pigs,” because “*zhuzai*” was occasionally used to refer to the larger *phenomenon* of selling coolies, not just the coolies themselves. See “Lingnan dufeng zhuzai yijin lun,” *Shenbao*.

39. “Qing kai jizi maibi jinling bing,” *Shenbao*, no. 2351, (15 Nov. 1879): 2-3.

plight of Chinese in San Francisco with the *zhuzai* previously brought to labor in Cuba: both were supposed to be “opportunities” for Chinese to seek stability and happiness overseas, but had resulted in abuse and humiliation for the coolies and physical intimidation and violence for those in San Francisco, respectively. Whereas special envoy Chen Lanbin was at least able to reach a compromise with the Spanish government of Cuba and end the trade there, the author writes that the American people are so unreasonably xenophobic that they refuse to change their behavior toward Chinese, regardless of how compassionate the government there might be.<sup>40</sup> The author offers only a very brief description of events in Cuba, suggesting that he assumes his readership will already be familiar with the barbarity that transpired there. Indeed, he obviously anticipates that “*zhuzai*” already has sufficient currency that positing the situation in San Francisco as subsequent to—but possibly more hopeless than—the coolie trade to Cuba will make immediately apparent the extent of the terror being employed there.

But as “*zhuzai*” gained more traction in the popular imagination, it could even be invoked in discussions of more indirectly related matters. In an 1889 article, an author discussing female infanticide and the practice of *tongyangxi*<sup>41</sup> writes:

I have heard that in this world, there are three great inhumanities: the way the old treat the young; the way a madam treats her prostitutes; and the way a gaoler treats a prisoner. Today, in many trades, the master is inexplicably cruel to the student; *the people in Guangdong deceived and sold “zhuzai” to go overseas, and the bitterness of their situation was absolute. It may be surprising, but when compared to the above, the bitterness of tongyangxi is even greater.*<sup>42</sup>

Thus, it is obvious that the experience and language of the coolie trade, once added to the pool of public knowledge, were easily converted into tools for the analysis of other similar

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40. “Lun tongshang zhi youyi yu Zhongguo,” *Shenbao*.

41. 童養媳: an arrangement whereby a young girl, upon becoming betrothed, is sent to grow up in her future husband’s household, where she is educated and provided for in exchange for essentially becoming a servant to the man’s family.

42. Emphasis added. “Jin ninü shuo,” *Shenbao*, no. 5663, ( 21 Jan. 1889): 1.



circumstances. “*Zhuzai*” had become synonymous with abuse and humiliation to such an extent that it was now an indelible data point on the spectrum of exploitation: the coolie trade was no longer simply a literal historical event, but had already begun the slide into comparative rhetorical tool. In coining and repeating the term “*zhuzai*,” witnesses to and commentators on the trade had both expressed their immediate outrage and created a lasting, shared metaphor for victimization.

### *Coolies as “slaves”*

Another way people attempted to cope with and understand the violent dehumanization of the coolie trade was by tying it into the broader narrative of global racialized labor. In particular, comparisons to its predecessor, the African slave trade, proved useful: such comparisons would not only unravel the carefully-woven shroud of euphemisms by which advocates of the coolie trade had attempted to set it apart from the slave trade; they would also highlight the hypocrisy of Euro-American support for the trade, and offer a precedent—and therefore hope—for confronting the violence of human trafficking. Such confrontation was of course necessary to put an end to the physical and emotional violence of the trade, but would also help victims and onlookers alike process what it meant to have been dragged into the Euro-American mercantile apparatus. As with “*zhuzai*” and its related vocabulary, the rhetorical power of the language and experiences of slavery was so compelling (and unfortunately, the comparison so apt) that references to the coolie trade as another slave trade could be found in statements made by coolies, news media, and government officials alike. While Chinese had practiced certain forms of slavery and servitude in a more general sense long before the advent of the coolie trade,<sup>43</sup> the horrific experiences of coolies as expressed in the terminologies of slavery, and as compared to the experience of

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43. “Nuli,” *Hanyu da zidian*, haiwai edition, vol. 4, ed. Luo Zhufeng (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1990), 268. See also the “Dis-ordering” section of this chapter.

African slaves, would cause such terminologies to take on an additional sense of racialized exploitation.

As might be expected, the most distressing accounts come from the coolies themselves. In the responses submitted to the Cuba Commission, even where coolies do not explicitly compare themselves to slaves, the living conditions they describe are certainly very much in keeping with slaving practices (indeed, in Cuba, slavery only ended in 1886, so there was a period where coolies and African slaves were being imported and were working on plantations at the same time).<sup>44</sup> The coolies describe hostile working conditions and limited food supplies; they report receiving frequent and draconian punishment for minor infractions, such as taking a moment's rest during an arduous task.<sup>45</sup> As with the slaves before them, they are reduced to laboring bodies, which causes many to make references to being treated like or worse than animals: "we are treated/seen as worse than pigs or dogs";<sup>46</sup> "when people come to buy us, they pull off our clothes and will not make a purchase until they have inspected the body in its entirety, it is no different from buying horses or cattle."<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the dehumanization they experience at the hands of overseers and employers is so complete that they must take it upon themselves to re-humanize one another. As Lisa Yun points out, when commenting on the amount of death (whether by exhaustion, sickness, violence, or suicide) they have witnessed over their years as laborers, many of the coolies attempt to recount the names of the men who have perished, as if the gesture of reporting the names of the fallen might preserve their memory from the inexorable oblivion of history.<sup>48</sup> The coolie testimonies demonstrate that the coolies not only intuited the ways in which the plantation apparatus

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44. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 23, 7.

45. "Guba huagong shiwu gejie, di si ce," 727-59.

46. "Xuanzi 'Guba huagong kougong ce' wei 'Guba huagong shiwu gejie' suo weilu," in *Ibid.*, 784; "Guba huagong shiwu gejie, di si ce," in *HCSH* 1.2, 727, 728.

47. "Xuanzi 'Guba huagong kougong ce'," 785.

48. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 80-84.

was attempting to rob them of their personhood, but indeed made formidable attempts to cope with—and combat—that denial.

But perhaps one of the most unbearable conditions of life in Cuba was the denial of promised freedom by a number of cheap and coercive practices such as denial of “completion papers,” claims that coolies owed debts, and forcible re-contracting (as discussed in the previous chapter).<sup>49</sup> Thus, coolies saw themselves as “slaves” not only in terms of the brutality of the labor and the harsh treatment they received, but because many of them were essentially under perpetual indenture, and would find release only in death: “I have been here for 27 years, and the people who arrived after me were treated even more cruelly: upon completion of their terms, they were denied their completion papers, they are treated the same as blacks, they will be slaves their entire lives with no possibility of ever freeing themselves.”<sup>50</sup> Another man laments, “I have my ‘proof papers’ [from my employer], but can’t obtain my ‘completion papers’ [from the local government]. The people here truly desire that Chinese should be slaves for life.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the ostensible purpose of the contracting system was to protect the Chinese from abuses such as these; yet many found themselves victims of such machinations. As is written in one of the depositions: “the Cubans only spoke of ‘recruiting’ and ‘hiring,’ of ‘selling contracts’; They never said anything about selling people into slavery!”<sup>52</sup> And another: “When we disembarked in Havana, they stood us in a line to appraise us, the humiliation was unbearable. Only then did we know that we were not to be hired as ‘laborers,’ but that in reality we were all being sold as slaves.”<sup>53</sup> Deception as to the conditions of labor was one thing; the complete deprivation of individual liberty was

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49. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 111-116.

50. “Guba huagong shiwu gejie, di si ce,” 728.

51. *Ibid.*, 729.

52. “Guba huagong chengci jie lu: di er ce,” 661.

53. *Ibid.*, 694.

quite another. For the coolies in Cuba, comparing themselves to slaves seems to have helped them enunciate the extent of their own victimization, both with regard to physical and emotional suffering resulting from labor, violence, and separation from their families, as well as the more psychic suffering of unanticipated denial of personhood and individual agency.

The power of the language of enslavement, even for those who were not immediate victims of the trade, was undeniable. For example, Qing official He Guiqing (何桂清), who had been sent to Shanghai to investigate the outbreak of the anti-foreign riots in 1859, reported to the court that the deception and “buying of men as slaves” (*mairen weinu* 買人為奴) by countries like Spain and France was the impetus. He spent a substantial portion of his report describing the way the “unemployed barbarians” deceived their prey.<sup>54</sup> In positioning a general body of foreign “thuggish devils” (*liumang guizi* 流氓鬼子) as buyers of “slaves” rather than of “laborers,” He Guiqing implied that the rioters, though still legally culpable, felt impelled to resist the spread of a system widely denounced as exploitative. As an official, he must (and ultimately does) punish the use of violence against foreigners; but given the enormity of the activities carried out by foreigners, he did not condemn the sense of vigilante justice that had driven the rioters to attempt to hold foreigners responsible for their actions in the absence of Qing jurisdiction.

The Qing government would even appeal to the discourse of slavery more directly in its communication with foreign governments. In 1866, the rising tide of humanitarian concern surrounding the coolie trade impelled the Qing court to take a more systemic-level approach to protecting future potential laborers overseas. In the winter of that year, the Qing court (represented by Prince Gong) initiated a process of negotiation with British and French representatives, the product of which was the Beijing Regulations (*Xuding tongshang gekou*

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54. *Yiren* 夷人 literally means “barbarian,” but was also applied more generally to foreigners at this time, giving it a combined sense of “foreign barbarian.” “Qinchai dachen He Guiqing,” in *HCSH* 1.1, 21.

*zhaogong zhangcheng* 續定通商各口招工章程) which consisted of twenty-two terms aimed at protecting Chinese laborers.<sup>55</sup> The Regulations were signed by both the British and French representatives in March of that year; however, their home governments balked at the concessions contained therein (British planters in the colonies were particularly distraught at the thought of the expense of shorter work weeks and of repatriating all future Chinese laborers upon completion of their contracted terms, while the French shipping industry stood to lose money due to the decrease in demand for Chinese labor that would likely be brought on by those same expenses), and the terms were never fully ratified.<sup>56</sup>

Out of concern that the European governments would fail to follow through on their representatives' promises, the Zongli Yamen sent a letter to the British delegation complimenting Britain's previous role in "prohibiting the forcible selling of Africans as slaves," and in the same breath suggesting that the British government must therefore be pleased to help China's efforts to protect its people.<sup>57</sup> Suggesting the equivalence of the coolie trade with the slave trade appears to have been a move toward laying the groundwork for a humanitarian defense of the Regulations: in the event that the British government refused to ratify the Regulations, the Zongli Yamen could then force it into the difficult position of being unable to deny that it was choosing its interests over its ethics. Though the Qing government may have lacked the military strength or diplomatic currency to force Britain to comply with the Regulations, the Zongli Yamen understood the coercive power of reminding Britain that it had been Britain who had set the tone of the conversation on abolition of the slave trade. A

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55. "Convention to Regulate the Engagement of Chinese Emigrants by British and French Subjects," Reproduced in *Treaties between the Empire of China and Foreign Powers, together with regulations for the conduct of foreign trade*, William Frederick Mayers, ed. (Shanghai: North China Herald, 1897), 32-36. Google Play: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=MBbgAAAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PA32> (accessed 2 Dec. 2013); Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 107.

56. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 111-12.

57. "Zongshu wei fei tongshang kouan huo wei liyue zhi guo zhaogong xu zhao ershierkuan zhangcheng banli shi zhi Yingguo zhaohui," in *HCSH* 1.1, 163.

precedent with regard to human trafficking had already been set—by Britain itself—and within that precedent, the Zongli Yamen found the resolve to insist that Britain extend the same protections to Chinese as it had ultimately (though belatedly) done for Africans.<sup>58</sup>

Not to be outdone, Chinese media, too, wielded the provocative rhetoric of enslavement. For example, when the British Parliament talked about the “coolie trade,” “trafficking,” and “kidnapping” in 1872,<sup>59</sup> *Shenbao* uniformly (and somewhat antagonistically) translated these phrases as “selling slaves” (*fannu* 販奴 / *fanren weinu* 販人為奴);<sup>60</sup> the following year, *Zhongwai xinbao* attempted to shame the Portuguese administrators in Macao by pointing out to its readers that Portugal was the only Western government involved in the trade that had apparently remained unmoved by the fact that “the Chinese deceived into going abroad as laborers were [treated worse] than slaves (過於奴隸),” and were abused like livestock.<sup>61</sup>

On the one hand, having access to a ready referent to which to compare one’s experience may have given rise to a particular kind of empowerment—particularly when coupled with the sharply-defined sense of historical injustice concomitant such coolie-slave comparisons. But on the other hand, the conceptual collapse of “coolies” into “slaves” would

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58. A landmark case in 1870 would further support China’s position in this regard. A mutiny had broken out aboard the French ship *Nouvelle Penelope* carrying coolies from Macao, resulting in the death of nine foreign crew members. When Kwok A-sing, who was deemed to have been one of the ringleaders, was brought to trial in Hong Kong, Judge John J. Smale dismissed the charges against him. Smale controversially ruled that the coolie trade was tantamount to a slave trade, and that Kwok had therefore been within his legal rights to violently resist imprisonment. The verdict was hotly debated, but the end results of the entire affair were increases in public disapproval and in pressure to regulate or end the trade out of Macao. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 48-51.

59. “Chinese Coolie Traffic: motion for an address,” *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates (Authorized Edition)*, vol. 209, ed. William Cobbett, Thomas Carson Hansard (London: Cornelius Buck, 1872), 529-548. Google Play: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=CtcMAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PT8> (accessed 20 Oct. 2013).

60. Emphasis added. “Xia yiyuan gongyi fan huamin weinu shikuan,” *Shenbao*, no. 11, (14 May 1872): 2-4. Note that even the title of the article translates “Coolie Traffic” from the previous citation as “*fan huamin weinu*” (販華民為奴, selling Chinese as slaves).

61. “Yingguo da yiyuan lun huaren yonggong chuyang shi,” *Shenbao* no. 392, (7 Aug. 1873): 2, reprinted from *Zhongwai xinbao* (16 June 1873).

also destabilize the long-standing Chinese conception of racial hierarchy in which the Asiatic race inhabited the highest sphere, and blacks inhabited the lowest. In China, blackness had been associated with slavery and low social position since long before the coolies were exposed to Africans in the Americas.<sup>62</sup> These assumptions did not change substantially over the intervening centuries, and indeed, as Rebecca Karl points out, by the mid-nineteenth century, Africa was still considered by certain Chinese thinkers to be “the last truly unhistorical place of the modern world, an unhistorical place peopled, moreover, entirely by ‘slaves.’”<sup>63</sup> In 1848, scholar Xu Jiye suggested that Africa was a wasteland and its black inhabitants, no better than animals; he then went on to say: “It is scorching, miasmatic and pestilential. *Its climate and its people are the worst of the four continents.*”<sup>64</sup>

For some, then, the trope of coolie vs. black slave summed up the problems of the trade in that not only had the trade quite obviously reduced Chinese to a state of slavery, but it had also subjected particular Chinese to a hitherto-unexperienced state of structural blackness. Such sentiment is exemplified in an article first published in Hong Kong’s *Huazi ribao*:

When comparing Chinese to the black slaves, the intelligence [of the Chinese] is apparent. China is the mightiest of all the countries of the world, and her people are the people of a great state. When the Westerners were still living in caves in the wilderness, in China education was already widespread. But now that the Chinese have been deceived into laboring as slaves, they are [reduced to being] no different from black slaves.<sup>65</sup>

As far as the article’s author is concerned, the coolie trade is a direct affront to China’s undeniable racial/civilizational superiority in that it allows Chinese to be treated badly by, and worse than, whites and blacks respectively—when they should in fact have

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62. Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 15-17.

63. Karl, *Staging the World*, 121.

64. Cited in Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 45. Dikötter trans. Emphasis added.

65. “Lun Aomen zhuzai lu Xianggang *Huazi ribao*,” *Shenbao*, no. 325, (21 May 1873): 1-2, reprinted from *Huazi ribao* (3 May or 6 Apr. 1873).

supremacy over both. Thus, rather than using the language of enslavement to express the injustices experienced by Chinese coolies in the greater context of contemporary and historical injustices suffered by blacks, this author expresses instead his dismay at the externally-imposed racial re-positioning of Chinese that has occurred as a result of the trade. He takes no issue with the systemic violence of human trafficking in general (as did many others, he seems to accept “black slaves” as a natural category that requires no interrogation)—it is only the alarming position to which *Chinese* are relegated within that framework that rouses him to anger.

In a number of the Cuban coolie testimonies, too, men claim explicitly and repeatedly that they are treated worse than “blacks” or “black slaves”: “the manager [of a sugar refinery] treats Chinese worse than black slaves. We are often beaten.”<sup>66</sup> Another man complains: “Chinese here suffer much bitterness, we are treated worse than black slaves. And so I beg that you come up with a way to rescue us.”<sup>67</sup> And another notes wistfully that “here, when the Chinese die, they are not provided with coffins; when black people die, they are provided with coffins.”<sup>68</sup> In one of the written petitions, the signees write: “Imagine: people from all countries of the world come to Cuba, they are all free to come and go at their leisure, they engage freely and honestly in trade. We don’t know how it is that Chinese alone should suffer such abuse, and in fact rank below even the blacks.”<sup>69</sup> Implicit in these complaints is the belief that Chinese should have been treated either equally to, or better than, the blacks who worked on the plantations. As such, the fact that they were made to work alongside blacks, often under black overseers, seriously destabilized their expectations of what their position

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66. “Xuanzi ‘Guba huagong kougong ce,’” 769-70.

67. *Ibid.*, 829.

68. *Ibid.*, 839.

69. “Guba huagong chengci jielu: di er ce,” 651.



within the local racial hierarchy was to have been.<sup>70</sup> For one man, comparisons with slaves and/or blacks might, by helping him put the injustice of his situation into historical perspective, enable him to cope with the physical and mental horrors of being reduced to an unfree laboring body; but for another, such comparisons could simultaneously precipitate a crisis of racial position and identity.

The dehumanization and subjugation inherent to the coolie trade—the treatment of men like anonymous bodies and the denial of their personal freedoms—forced coolies, journalists, and government officials alike to decry the injustice of the situation. While both “*zhuzai*” and comparisons to the slave trade were being used increasingly to articulate outrage over the inhuman practices associated with the coolie trade, the invocation of the slave trade and its vocabulary seems to have been aimed more specifically at challenging the legitimacy of the coolie trade as an institution. How could any system built upon the morally reprehensible foundations of the slave trade, reliant not only upon the same practices, but upon the same exploitative philosophies, ever be anything other than reprehensible itself? “*Zhuzai*,” an organic, locally-coined phrase, gives voice to frustration over inhuman treatment while implying the impatience of an interlocutor still waiting to engage in a discussion regarding the future of the trade; but talking about “slaves” instantly places the discussion of the coolie trade into a greater historical context, in which the conversations have already been had, conclusions have already been reached, and all that remains is for action to be taken. The future abolition of any trade in *slaves* must be a foregone conclusion.

The irrefutable provocative power of these terminologies, and the outrage with which they were invoked, ensured that they would be internalized by popular imagination and incorporated into the public’s shared conceptual vocabularies. The possibilities for the future

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70. It was fairly common for employers to use black overseers to manage Chinese laborers and vice versa, in order to stoke racial enmity between the two groups, thereby preventing any organization or joint uprising between them. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 164-65, 121-22.

application of “*zhuzai*” or “slave” as rhetorical or symbolic tools will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter, but for the moment it should be noted that the rhetorical power of the language of the coolie trade and “*zhuzai*” was such that the figure of the indentured Chinese laborer carried against his will to Cuba or Peru would remain relevant in the early twentieth century. “*Zhuzai*” was still in circulation by then, and was used to talk about Chinese laborers currently overseas, or about the historical phenomenon of the coolie trade.<sup>71</sup> Even today, “*zhuzai*”-related terminology as shorthand for talking about the historical coolie trade is not only far from obsolete,<sup>72</sup> but because of its origins, remains irrevocably implicated in the imperialist violence of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, comparisons between the coolie trade and the slave trade, which had served to blur the semantic line between widely-reviled “slavery” and widely-accepted “coolies” or “emigrants,” would also remain relevant even into the early twentieth century— particularly as Lin Shu’s 1901 translation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would introduce a new generation of thinkers to the experience of enslavement and force them to consider what China’s future as a semi-colony might hold.

### The trauma of dis-ordering and the erection of partitions

Just as in the execution of transatlantic slave trade, it was not only foreigners who bore responsibility for the victimization and dehumanization of the men who would become coolies: local man-sellers (“crimps”) were an integral part of the supply chain. Thus, I

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71. “Daili Xinjiapo zonglingshi Sun Shiding wei Wendao huagong beinüe shi zhi waiwubu shencheng (fu huagong bingwen),” in *HCSH* 1.1, 313; “Waibu zixing yancha zhuzai,” *Shenbao*, no. 12071 (11 Nov. 1906); “Mengxing ge: Manzhou qibing rongxi,” *Jinghua Ribao* (N.D.) no. 362, (appx. Aug.1905).

72. To this day, “*zhuzai*,” “*mai zhuzai*,” and “*zhuzai guan*” still appear as key terms in scholarly discussions of the historical trade. See Dong Conglin, *Huagong shiyu* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011), 12-19. Anecdotally speaking, while conducting research in Beijing in 2013, this author got into a conversation about the current project with a 30-something stranger in a non-academic field of employment. After the author described the project in terms of *huagong* (華工, “Chinese laborers”) being sent overseas, lest the stranger be unfamiliar with the specific terminologies, the stranger then volunteered: “Ah yes. We call that ‘*mai zhuzai*’.”

propose that in addition to physical violence, dehumanizing humiliation, and the threat of de-positioning, the coolie trade introduced southern China to a third kind of crisis: the traumatic dis-ordering—destabilization of the extant social order—perpetrated by local crimps in the selling of other Chinese.<sup>73</sup> Rumors of violent coercion associated with crimping activities were so widespread that men were afraid to walk the streets alone, and because anyone—friends, acquaintances, neighbors, kin—could be looking to earn a few dollars by selling the not-so-proverbial pound of flesh, southern coastal cities were beset with mutual suspicion and fear. No one was safe: even persons who had managed to escape the vagaries of lower-class life due to education, to family connections or to wealth were at risk, and could find themselves kidnapped or deceived into virtual slavery just as easily as a pauper or petty street vendor might. Thus, the vocabularies of the trade would necessarily speak to the senses of destabilization and fear that permeated the coolie trade period.

Enslavement and servitude were not new ideas in Chinese society; but historically speaking, only the lower classes and criminals had tended to become slaves, and for a particular set of reasons (to be elucidated below). Thus, though kidnapping or other forms of coercion were traumatic for any class of victim, the literate middle and upper classes in particular registered great intellectual shock that “upstanding” persons like themselves could be made into slaves in total contravention of extant norms. Not only did the activities of crimps create a pall of fear and mistrust in southern coastal China; but I argue that the behavior of the crimp had, to the alarm of many, violated longstanding social norms that dictated who might be made into a slave and in particular how such a conversion might be effected.

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73. By “crimp,” I refer to any person who served as an agent in the selling of another man into labor. While there were many “professional” crimps, there also seem to have been many cases in which a desperate individual kidnapped and sold a single acquaintance in a one-off exchange—I include such men in my use.

As a result of his disruptive activities, the crimp would come to be portrayed in media and governmental reports as the embodiment of personal gain at the expense of public order and personal security. The crimp, who had in many cases turned to this illicit practice in order to meet pressing financial obligations in an unforgiving and unstable economy, was unflinchingly reviled in these outlets: he was depicted as an aberrant, irredeemable other whose criminality was an innate part of his character rather than a desperate stop-gap measure. The reductive vilification of the crimp speaks, on the one hand, to the depth of the paranoid fear that his activities had induced in the publics of southern coastal China; on the other hand, such one-dimensional reportage also served to establish a narrative wherein the crimp was always a known (and therefore less frightening) quantity. While it would have been more productive to contemplate the process by which an honest man decides to become a criminal, while simultaneously attempting to address the public policy problems that had driven crimps to desperation in the first place, purveyors of such dismissive discourses on the “wicked” crimp chose instead to put stock in the more palatable narrative of the crimp as necessarily “evil” outsider.

In so doing, the writers of these accounts not only acquitted their own “good” social cohort of involvement in crimping activities, but also effectively denied that the crimp could be a rational actor. The economic situation in southern China had become so untenable that many chose, coolly and after much thought, to turn to kidnapping; but in ignoring the crimp’s decision-making process in favor of the discourse of his criminality, discussants were able to comfort themselves that kidnapping was some aberration external to themselves and their own social order, rather than a terrifyingly rational response that any man might make to the otherwise inescapable poverty of the day. The activities of the crimp inflicted very real traumas of spatial and social dis-ordering; but the minimalist caricature of the crimp fabricated by government and media in response to that trauma suggests that they were not

yet ready or willing to confront the possibly more troubling moral/social problems that had made crimping an attractive option to begin with. The “crimp” as incorporated into the public imagination had been so heavily editorialized as to become a symbolic, rather than wholly descriptive, category.

### *The crimps: background*

There is not a large body of material detailing the activities of individual crimps, but much of what is available comes down to us in the form of legal confessions given upon crimps’ arrest or else from brief accounts offered by coolies. Across a total of ninety-two crimp confessions this author has encountered to date (not a large enough number to be statistically significant to the trade as a whole, but at least interesting to consider), the number of persons in whose deception or kidnapping a given crimp was involved ranged from one to twenty-nine (!). The average number of victims per crimp in this sample was slightly above five, but forty-one of the crimps—just under 45%—only admitted to having recruited either one or two men.<sup>74</sup> Sixty-nine confessions recorded by the Guangdong provincial government are brief and formulaic. For example:

I, Zhang Yabao, confess that in Zengcheng District, I did myself conceive the idea to deceive a group of four people, including Zhang Liji of the same surname but different lineage; I then further conceived the idea to deceive a person whose name I do not know; so that I might sell them to go overseas. I brought them to Macao to sell them to foreigners, altogether I received payment a total of two times.<sup>75</sup>

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74. However, it bears noting that these data come from criminal confessions; thus, it is in the crimps’ self-interest to under-report. It should also be noted that many of the crimps arrested had operated in collusion with one another, so while I have made the above calculations with regard to each individual’s “guilt-load,” the actual number of victims involved is smaller than adding up how many kidnappings each man had a part in (thus, while at an average of five kidnappings apiece one might expect the total number of victims of these 92 men to approach 460, in reality, the number is smaller than this). “Depositions or confessions,” *BPP* 4, 136-144; “Liangguang zongdu Rui Lin yi zhan jiaojue guaifei wushiliu ming zi zongshu wen,” (10 Nov. 1869), in *HCSH* 1.1, 61-73; “Liangguang zongdu Rui Lin wei chengbao nahuo guaifei jiudi zhengfa shi zi zongshu wen,” (9 Feb. 1870), in *HCSH* 1.1, 74-78; “Liangguang zongdu Rui Lin wei chengbao nahuo guaifei jiudi zhengfa shi zi zongshu wen,” (16 May 1870), *HCSH* 1.1, 78-81.

75. “Liang Guang zongdu Rui Lin yizhan jiaojue guaifei,” 63.

I, Huang Yaman, confess that in Longmen District, I did myself conceive the idea to deceive Yang Yachen; I then further assisted in the kidnapping of another person whose name I do not know; so that I might sell them to go overseas. We brought them to Macao to sell them to foreigners, altogether I received payment a total of two times.<sup>76</sup>

The formulaic nature of these accounts suggests that they are not spontaneous admissions of guilt, but are rather presiding officials' distillations of more detailed testimony into the simple, indictable facts of the abduction. That these accounts were taken purely for purposes of judgment is further indicated by the fact that each accused crimp is made to explicitly address whether he had "conceived of the idea" (*qi yi* 起意) or just "assisted" (*tingcong* 聽從) another crimp, as the severity of punishment (whether decapitation or mere strangulation) depended upon the degree of initiative the crimp had shown in the entrapment of his victims.

However, there is also a small sample of twenty-three longer, more detailed, open confessions sent by a British official in Guangzhou to Edmund Hammond of the British Foreign Office in 1859. Whereas the local government seems to have been primarily concerned with establishing guilt and meting out punishment and thus recorded only the facts necessary to secure a conviction, the more detailed nature of this latter set of records suggests that those who recorded them may have been more interested in learning about crimping as a phenomenon. These confessions often contain descriptions of the crimp himself, such as his age, living family members, former occupations, how he arrived at the decision to kidnap others, as well as the methods that he used:

Dong Ze deposes: Am 30 years of age, from Sanjiang in Zengcheng district; a small shopkeeper by trade. My father is dead; my mother, whose family name is Mao, is 58 years of age. I have neither brothers, wife, nor children. Being in great poverty, and scarcely able to earn a livelihood, on the tenth of the fourth month I, of my own accord, formed the resolve of sooner or later decoying, at Shilong, the ten men named Li A-hao, Liang A-si, Li A-sheng, Yao A-dong, Li A-hao, Liang A-ba, Chu A-gai, Chu A-bi, Zhong A-bao, He A-si, to whom I lied, saying I would take them on board a large vessel

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76. Ibid.

to get employment. On the same day I hired a small boat at Dongguan, on board which I put Li A-hao and the others and set off. On the twelfth we reached Changzhou, where I sold Li A-hao and the others on board the vessel of a coolie-broker, whose name I do not know, which was anchored there. I received twelve dollars for each man, 120 dollars in all, which sum I have spent. [...] I declare that I have only once been guilty of kidnapping, and have never been accused of crime before.<sup>77</sup>

Of the twenty-three crimps whose confessions were recorded in this level of detail, a very small number describe themselves as having been craftsmen or having performed other kinds of skilled labor such as surgery, medical consultation, or metallurgy prior to their foray into human trafficking; meanwhile almost half describe themselves as petty merchants or day or agricultural laborers with no other marketable skills. Ten report having elderly parents—nine of them with widowed mothers in particular, like Dong Ze—to care for, perhaps indicating that their crimes were motivated by filial desperation to care for elderly parents, rather than by simple greed. A handful note explicitly that it was only because their poverty was so great that they felt compelled to take such drastic actions.<sup>78</sup>

According to coolie testimonies, one method of recruitment involved crimps falsely promising employment opportunities to men who were down on their luck; the victims, too excited by the prospect of finding work, would unassumingly follow the crimps onto boats to Macao, or into barracoons, from which there was then no escape.<sup>79</sup> As people grew warier of the trade, voluntary—or credulous—recruits became harder to find, particularly to destinations like Cuba and Peru which were already becoming notorious for the brutality of their labor regimes. Thus forcible abduction, too, was prevalent. According to one set of coolie testimonies, cases where a victim was overtaken with bodily force were likely to

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77. As far as possible here, I have replaced Wade-Giles romanizations with pinyin orthography. "Depositions or Confessions," 140-41.

78. *Ibid.*, 136-44.

79. Again, the 1852 Xiamen riots had pushed the bulk of the trade to Macao, where it was permitted to operate by the Portuguese colonial government. If a crimp could successfully lure a victim to Macao, the most difficult part of his task was already complete. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 205.

involve gangs of three or more abductors—and according to one claimant, could involve as many as twenty or thirty.<sup>80</sup> Where a good measure of circumspection might help one guard against deception, there was almost nothing one could do if set upon by a group of ten kidnapers in the street. By the late 1850s in Macao, abduction “was so rife that individuals feared to go [outside] even in daylight.”<sup>81</sup>

Those who abducted by physical force had the luxury of choosing from either strangers or acquaintances; while those who chose deceit were more likely to prey upon acquaintances (or perhaps strike up opportune acquaintances with strangers) who would trust their promises of employment or remuneration. Numerous coolies testified that they were previously acquainted with their kidnapers, and were able to provide the names of the crimps.<sup>82</sup> A significantly smaller number note explicitly that they were kidnapped or deceived by friends, neighbors, or even relatives. Interestingly, several crimps noted in their confessions that their victims were “of the same surname, but different lineage,” (*tongxing buzong* 同姓不宗) as if anticipating that they might be accused of a more grievous crime for having victimized someone who appeared to be a member of their own family. Indeed, it is rare to see an account in which the crimp victimized a family member, which suggests the possibility that while for certain crimps there was obviously no line too sacred to be crossed, others held themselves to a slightly higher moral and filial standard. However, it bears repeating that these confessions are all self-reported by captured crimps who likely hoped that appearing to operate within the social mores prescribed by society (caring for elderly parents, showing proper respect for family members) would result in a more lenient sentence;<sup>83</sup> as such, it is

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80. “Depositions of kidnapped coolies,” 202-23.

81. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 205-206; “Zongshu shoudao wei juming zhe jilai Aomen guaipian huagong,” in *HCSH* 1.1, 250.

82. “Depositions of forty-one kidnapped Chinese,” in *BPP* 4, 128-135.

83. Indeed, “filial” crimes could be treated with more lenience than “unfilial” crimes. Thomas Buoye, “Filial Felons: Leniency and Legal Reasoning in Qing China,” *Writing and Law in Late Imperial China*:



possible that these accounts are less-than-honest with regard to the crimps' claims to filial motivations for their crimes, as well as with regard to potential violations of that same filial order.

### *The crimp as coping mechanism*

There were two kinds of response to the phenomenon of crimping. The first was immediate and political: efforts to curb the dangers presented by crimping emerged both within the government and in the public arena. As we shall see below, Qing officials did on several occasions issue proclamations making kidnapping illegal and imposing the harshest of punishments for violators. Sub-prefect Wang of Xiamen had issued such a statement in 1852,<sup>84</sup> Governor-General Bo Gui issued another in 1860. By the late 1860s, any Chinese caught participating in kidnapping was to be summarily executed, with the extra humiliation of beheading being reserved for those who had initiated kidnap plots.<sup>85</sup> As far as the general public was concerned, the 1852 Xiamen riots offer a telling example of how locals responded to crimps: as mentioned above, so enraged were the people of Xiamen by the possibility that the crimp Lin Huan might escape justice that they “[took] the law into their own hands, by assaulting every [coolie] broker they [met] in the streets.”<sup>86</sup> (However, such displays of public sentiment—and even government threats—were not sufficient to deter the crimps; as long as there were buyers, crimps would attempt to satisfy their demand.)

The second kind of response to the dis-ordering caused by crimps was more psychological in nature, and less immediately apparent: among contemporary government and

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*Crime, Conflict, and Judgment*, ed. Robert E. Hegel and Katherine Carlitz (Seattle: UW Press, 2007), 109-24.

84. “Official Notice by Wang, Sub-prefect at Amoy,” N.D. *BPP* 3, 93.

85. “Liangguang zongdu Rui Lin yi zhan jiaojue guaifei,” in *HCSH* 1.1, 62-63.

86. “Mr. Harvey to Dr. Bowring,” (22 Dec. 1852), in *BPP* 3, 55.

media reports, there was a rather heavy-handed tendency to disown and partition off the crimps, to distinguish these “wicked people” (*jianmin* 奸民) from the “good people” (*liangmin* 良民, also “people of good background”). Reports on crimps made frequent but cursory reference to the crimps as “brigands” (*feitu* 匪徒) who “lusted for profit” (*tanli* 貪利) and entrapped the *liangmin* with their “evil scheming” (*jianji* 奸計);<sup>87</sup> they were “wicked and sneaky people” (*jianhua zhi min* 奸滑之民) who took advantage of the “ignorant masses” (*yumin* 愚民).<sup>88</sup> A number of government reports quite simply branded the crimps as *neidi feitu* or *neidi guaifei* (內地匪徒, 內地拐匪 “backwater thugs” or “hinterland fraudsters”).<sup>89</sup> Similarly, a letter published in *Shanghai xinbao* described them as “a treacherous lot,” (*jianzha zhi bei* 奸詐之輩),<sup>90</sup> while an extract of a Zongli Yamen report published in *Shenbao* accused them of having been “seduced” by foreigners into “breaking the law and betraying [their own kind]” (*zuojian fanke* 作奸犯科).<sup>91</sup> Portrayal of the crimps in such black-and-white terms obfuscated more complex social dynamics, papering them over with a stark, unreflexive binary of good-versus-evil, victim-versus-victimizer. No questions were asked about who the crimps were as people, because their personhood was now secondary to their criminality.

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87. “Liangguang zongdu Lao Chongguang zhunxu geguo zhaogong chuyang zhaohui,” (19 Feb. 1860), in *HCSH* 1.1, 9; “Liangguang zongdu Lao Chongguang wei *Mixinzha* chuan guaiyun huagong shi zhi Meishi Hua Ruohan fuzhao,” (8 Jan. 1860), in *Ibid.*, 23; “Jinzhi mai nüer bing zai bengang zaike wang Shanghai raoluan shi,” *Xia'er guanzhen*, no. 25 (1 Aug. 1855), in Song, *Xia'er guanzhen*, 493; “Qinhua guaifei,” *Shanghai xinbao*, no. 787 (4 Nov. 1872).

88. “Liangguang zongdu Mao Hongbin zouni jiang lüemai renkou zuifan chu zhanzhe,” (3 Sept. 1864), in *HCSH* 1.1, 50.

89. “Henandao yushi Yang Rongxu zouqing yanzhi lüemai liangmin feitu zhe,” (Apr. 1860), in *HCSH* 1.1, 48; “Guangdong xunfu Qi Ling zou zunzhi shou guaimai renkou feitu ji xing zhengfa zhe,” (8 July 1860), in *Ibid.*, 49; “Zongshu wei yancheng guaifan shi zhi Liangguang zongdu ziwen,” (17 July 1869) in *Ibid.*, 55.

90. “Qinjin mairen chuyang,” *Shanghai xinbao*.

91. “Jielu Zongli yamen kan Guba huayong bingci zhailu,” *Shenbao*, no. 881 (15 Mar. 1875): 3.

Such typification of the crimp as one-dimensional “miscreant” was not necessarily borne out in reality. As mentioned above, a number of the twenty-three arrested crimps providing detailed testimony often pointed out that they had turned to crime not for the “selfish” accumulation of wealth, but because they had lost their jobs and had wives and children to feed, or elderly parents to care for. Over half of this group of interviewees explicitly claimed that they had never before been guilty of any kind of crime.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, in testimonies given by coolies—who had the greatest reason of any to resent the crimps—crimps are often evaluated surprisingly neutrally: “I encountered an acquaintance who deceived me onto a boat,” they often say; or “A friend asked me if I was looking for work”; or “Someone tricked me into going to Macao.” While certainly, there were those coolies who described their captors as “thugs” or “villains,” such criminalization of crimps in coolie testimony was far from universal.<sup>93</sup> This may be due in part to the fact that many coolies were in fact victimized by people they knew—which made it impossible for them to think of the crimp as the faceless criminal abstraction into which the media and government would spin him. It is undeniable that by dint of their activities these men had indeed become criminals; but considering the actual complexity of the real-life crimp and his decision to participate in the trade, why was condemnation of the crimps by contrast so simplistically absolute, so superficial, so unquestioning?

This knee-jerk vilification of the crimps had in part to do with the terrifying kind of disruptive power that the largely subaltern crimp had unintentionally arrogated to himself: for one thing, the crimp effected the immediate social disempowerment of any victim by

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92. With the exception of one who notes he has previously confessed to other kidnappings, the remainder do not explicitly raise the question of previous criminal behavior. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, however, the crimps had an obvious incentive to under-report their crimes to these tribunals, or else to couch their crimes in terms of socially-acceptable filial values such as caring for elderly parents, so these confessions cannot necessarily be accepted at face value. “Depositions or confessions,” 136-44.

93. Though again, these accounts come to us through testimonies and depositions mediated by government inquiry panels and as such, the testimonies as recorded may not be entirely reflective of the testimonies as originally given.

severing him almost completely from his prior social milieu. This meant not only physical separation from family and friends, but near-total divestment of his social identity. For example, fourteen coolies who had been lured away from their studies at the Guangzhou prefectural school by a crimp promising well-paying work in Macao submitted a joint petition from their ultimate destination (Havana), lamenting: “No matter how much education we had in China, once we arrived [in Havana] we had no option but to work as laborers; no matter what our social position (*shenfen* 身份) in China, once we arrived, each and every one of us became slaves.”<sup>94</sup> These students obviously believed that as educated persons of presumably middle- or upper-class background, they had no place in such an exploitative regime (simultaneously implying that it is not the exploitation *per se* with which they take issue, but rather that persons such as themselves should be exposed thereto). Where the upper and middle classes might once have considered themselves to be external to the vagaries of criminal activity or above the manual labor by which the lower classes eked out their sustenance, the crimp was a terrifying sort of equalizer, reducing any person he chose, regardless of social position, to the shameful status of coolie.

More specifically, any clever schemer or man with enough strength to drag someone on board a ship suddenly had the power to convert anyone else—whether pauper, merchant, literatus—into a “slave” of the foreigners. For the *liangmin*, the possibility of such forcible servitude was especially traumatic and incomprehensible on two levels: first, there was a long historical legal tradition under which enslavement was imposed as punishment for serious criminal offenses. According to historic penal codes, a sentence of slavery might be imposed upon a person who had committed a very serious crime such as treason. Depending on the severity of the crime, the sentence might be extended to include the criminal’s family as

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94. “Guba huagong chengci jielu: di er ce,” 650.

well.<sup>95</sup> Second, issues of criminality aside, the condition of enslavability was otherwise supposed to be reserved almost exclusively for the lower-class *jianmin* 賤民 (lit., “cheap persons,” “low persons”), or at the very least persons who volunteered to sell themselves.<sup>96</sup> The Qing legal code had made illegal the enslavement of “sons and daughters of good families” (*liangjia zinu* 良家子女) by commoners—and only a person already born into slavery (and therefore already “lowly”) or a person submitting himself voluntarily could be sold as a slave.<sup>97</sup> Even far prior to the Qing legal code, as early as the Han dynasty, the enslavement of a *liangmin*—i.e. his involuntary reduction to a “lowly” *jianmin*—was considered a monstrous crime.<sup>98</sup> To summarize, then, enslavement was in many cases tied to criminality—as a form of retributive justice geared toward reestablishing social balance in the wake of criminal activity of a very serious nature—but even where it was not, it was absolutely tied to a very low social position. So for a lower-class *jianmin* who was perhaps poor but honest, being made into a coolie against his will would have resulted not just in the more obvious physical suffering and social alienation that we might expect, but likely added the additional traumatic humiliation and confusion of being treated as though he were a criminal. On the other hand, for a middle class *liangmin* who must have imagined himself to be above the crude machinations of lower class society, sudden simultaneous debasement to *jianmin* and “criminal” statuses would have been an enormous shock.

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95. Marinus J. Meijer, “Slavery at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” in *Essays on China’s Legal Tradition*, ed. Jerome A. Cohen et al, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 328.

96. *Jiànmín* 賤民 (lowly people, people who occupy the lowest social strata), is not to be confused with *jiānmín* 奸民 (wicked people) mentioned previously. I dare say there is a bit of slippage between these homophones, but the “lowly” *jianmin* only *implies* a low moral standard as concomitant to low social status, where the latter “wicked” *jianmin* is solely a comment on (lack of) morality. For the remainder of this chapter, unless otherwise noted, I use *jianmin* to denote 賤民, “the lowly people.”

97. Meijer, “Slavery,” 330-31.

98. E. G. Pulleyblank, “The Origins and Nature of Chattel Slavery in China,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1, no. 2 (Apr. 1958): 206. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3596015> (accessed 2 April 2014).

Indeed, such wrongful enslavement or criminal-like treatment of the coolies is a common theme in petitions and testimonies submitted by coolies in Cuba. The fourteen students mentioned above went on to state more explicitly that they and others had been sold into servitude *despite being guilty of no crime*: “What crimes had we Chinese committed (*huaren hegu* 華人何辜) to endure such suffering?”<sup>99</sup> (Once again implying that such suffering might have been justifiable, had the victims of the coolie trade in fact been criminals). Still others echoed these sentiments: “We have repeatedly sustained harm without having committed any crime (*lulu wugu shouhai* 屢屢無辜受害),”<sup>100</sup> “We are abused as if we were prisoners (*shoumo ru zuo laoyu* 受磨如坐牢獄),”<sup>101</sup> “We try to observe the rules, and our feet are put in shackles. But for what crime (*ci nai hegu* 此乃何辜)?”<sup>102</sup> These protestations of innocence are not only demonstrative of the coolies’ belief in the unjustness of their torment (because they themselves were undeserving of it, not necessarily because such torment was inherently unjust); but more importantly, because these excerpts came from testimonies presented to the intergovernmental commission on the coolie trade to Cuba, such declarations seem to be desperate pleas to any potential listener back in China that the “innocent” coolies not be stigmatized—and dismissed—as criminals by dint of their having been made into virtual slaves.

Within China as well, the rising discourse of coolie-as-slave, in addition to marking the similarity of the plight of the coolie with that of the African slave as discussed in the previous section, was also demonstrative of general public alarm at the senseless conversion of law-abiding *liangmin* into “slaves” of essentially criminal or base status. It was likely because of this alarm that there was such emphasis on the crimps’ now-enslaved victims as *liangmin*—

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99. “Guba huagong chengci jielu: di er ce,” 650-51.

100. *Ibid.*, 654.

101. *Ibid.*, 677.

102. *Ibid.*, 658.

good people, or people of good background—despite the fact that in reality, crimps had also targeted gamblers, opium addicts, and persons who had themselves previously been involved in the kidnapping of others. The crimps' activities were always disruptive to the social order, but caused the greatest amount of disruption—as far as those doing the writing were concerned—when they violated the social and legal norms that prohibited the victimization and enslavement of *liangmin*. As such, rhetorical insistence upon the *liangmin* status of the crimp's victims probably reflected the authors' concern over the plight of *liangmin* victims in particular, while emphasizing the shameless audacity of the order-flouting crimp.

At the same time, insistence upon the simplistic, unmitigated criminality of crimps made it possible for the government and media alike to cope with the traumatic dis-ordering caused by crimps by ignoring the true depth of its implications: in characterizing such dis-ordering as the straightforward result of inborn criminality rather than as a side-effect of catastrophic economic instability, they denied the crimp's rational agency in the crime as if the crime was an inevitable manifestation of his wicked character. Rather than seeking to understand the terrifyingly logical calculus that might have led a desperate but otherwise honest man to become a criminal, they assumed that the crimp's behavior was dictated by his basest reflexes. Indeed, in the above formulations, crimps were reduced to a static, well-defined totality the baseness of whose motivations was so self-evident that there was no need to attempt to understand them further. Such insistence upon the essentially evil character of crimps easily dismissed the necessary question “Why?” with the tautological “*Because they are criminals.*”

There is a certain schizophrenic quality about this neat compartmentalization of crimps into “criminals,” and “backwater thugs”—as if literati and officials of metropolitan Shanghai and Hong Kong *needed* to assert the crimp's externality to their own polite *liangmin* societies. Indeed, as David Ownby points out in his study of Qing dynasty bandit literature,

“approximations” of criminals—overly simplistic assessments that reduce these “others” to knowable, condemnable quantities rather than attempting to fully understand them—made it easier for societies to reject such criminal pariahs outright.<sup>103</sup> In Ownby’s opinion, such segregation and rejection occurred largely because “orthodox society” found the possibility of reincorporating criminals among themselves to be troubling, as successful reintegration would mean that the distinction between *liangmin* and criminal had in fact always been less absolute “than many liked to believe.”<sup>104</sup> Similarly, partitioning the crimp off as an irredeemable criminal “other” thus allows the self-pronounced *liangmin* to preserve (for themselves) the illusion of “criminal” and “*liangmin*” as eternal, absolute categories. By insisting upon the immutable difference between these two categories, the one noble, the other ignoble, the writers struggled to maintain the division that the crimp had already begun to erase as he turned erstwhile *liangmin* into *jianmin* and slaves, while seizing for himself, an imputed *jianmin*, a surprising amount of power. The *liangmin* could no longer control the crimps except in discourse; asserting the shallow knowability of the “morally-bankrupt” crimp was the only way they could continue to pretend they had some kind of mastery over the situation.

Meanwhile, these authors were suggesting that persons of their own social standing had only ever been *victims*, not perpetrators, of these crimes; they thereby attempted to absolve their own cohort of any responsibility in enabling such transgressions. In this way, such partitioning obviates any inquiry on the part of the Qing government into whether some failing on its part—failure to combat poverty, for example, failure to protect its people from the violence and devastation of the Taiping Rebellion, or to resist foreign incursions—had

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103. David Ownby, “Approximations of Chinese Bandits: Perverse Rebels, Romantic Heroes, or Frustrated Bachelors?” in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 231. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt4f59q2wj/> (accessed 17 Dec. 2013).

104. Ownby, “Approximations,” 226.



created the desperate economic and political climate wherein desperate crimps felt compelled to take advantage of others, and thousands of other desperate men volunteered themselves into foreign servitude. For that matter, there was no need for the editorial staff of a British missionary-run publication like *Xia'er guanzhen* (who had themselves extolled the benefits of the coolie trade) to interrogate the roles they and their home government had played in enabling or promoting such practices; or indeed for metropolitan, literate consumers of *Shenbao* to consider the circumstances that might drive others to crime. By ascribing the criminal actions of crimps simply to an innate “wickedness,” the authors are able to pre-empt other questions about culpability and social responsibility.

The surge in kidnapping and deception as the trade became established resulted in terror and, I hypothesize, a sense of traumatic dis-ordering among the people of southern China. Anti-coolie trade anxiety was therefore not directed only at the foreigners and the Qing government, but was also directed back onto those Chinese who had a hand in the trade. While the fear manifested itself in political and legal action against crimps, I have demonstrated that the trauma of disruption would cause the media and the government to decry local involvement in the trade and to craft representations of the crimp as criminally and irredeemably other. Ostensibly, this was part of the process of coping with and understanding the perpetration of such violence and social reversal by Chinese against Chinese; but in reality, such representations supported the comforting illusion that kidnapping was simply a manifestation of individual criminal delinquency, rather than of systemic government failure or greater social instability of which the rise of the crimp was in fact a symptom.

The “crimp” that became a part of the shared public conceptual vocabulary of the trade was thus quickly reduced to a type: a soulless other defined primarily by his presumed criminality—an irredeemable monster who, for lack of other avenues of retribution (against

the foreign brokers, for example), could be made to bear the brunt of local frustrations with and culpability for the trade. As we will see in Chapter Four, the figure of the crimp had come to hold a very particular kind of meaning in popular imagination; and early twentieth-century authors of coolie fiction would in turn make use of the symbolic currency that had been imparted upon on the figure of the benighted crimp, choosing either to adhere to or depart from earlier characterizations, in commenting on the problems of their own age.

### **Traumatic loss of sovereignty and the battle for moral authority**

If the greatest threat the coolie trade posed to the individual was loss of physical freedom and social position, it also posed a significant threat to the Qing state: loss of sovereignty. Indeed, from its very inception, the coolie trade had been an affront to Qing governance. As early as 1656, fearing that travel and trade outside the boundaries of the recently established Qing empire might allow Qing subjects to contribute to clandestine Ming loyalist resistance, the Shunzhi emperor had outlawed egress for purposes of foreign travel or commerce. Over the course of the following two centuries, this proscription of foreign travel or emigration would be reiterated and revised by several other imperial edicts: in the early eighteenth century, the Yongzheng emperor would not only prohibit the return of merchants or travelers who had broken the injunction against egress, but also noted that he believed such people to have “deserted” the Qing empire;<sup>105</sup> in 1836, the government of the Daoguang emperor issued a proclamation to governors and governors-general along China’s coast, instructing them to detain and investigate the “domestic traitors” (*neijian* 内奸) who were attempting to find passage overseas.<sup>106</sup> This long-standing injunction against egress of Qing subjects from within state borders would remain in effect until the 1860 Peking Conventions

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105. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 20-22.

106. “Yu yanhai ge dufu yanmi shicha sicang huowu jiadai renkou chukou chuanzhi,” (10 Dec. 1836), in *HCSH* 1.1, 4.

imposed by England and France in the aftermath of China's Second Opium War defeat.<sup>107</sup> The terms of the Conventions guaranteed (at the insistence of Britain and France) Qing subjects' right to "emigrate" freely; however, the law that banned egress was never formally repealed until 1893. Thus, the right to egress, though now assured by the terms of the Conventions, would technically be at odds with the still-active ban for a period of more than thirty years.<sup>108</sup>

As we will see in the next chapter, accusations that the Qing government was either too weak, or had made too little effort, to stem the abuses of the coolie trade would later become fodder for the revolutionary movement to remove the Qing government from power. However, Yen Ching-hwang convincingly argues that such retrospective depictions of Qing indifference toward its subjects were often exaggerated for the sake of revolutionary propaganda.<sup>109</sup> In his opinion, though the Qing court may have remained relatively inactive in defending its subjects from the evils of the coolie trade in the early stages of its development, the 1860 Conventions would force it to take a much more active approach. Until that point, Yen argues, the Qing court had been able to delude itself into believing that the already-extant laws prohibiting egress meant that no further legislative action was necessary on its part to prevent the horrors of the trade from spreading—surely, all that was needed was better enforcement of existing laws.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, prior to the Conventions, the fragile ego of the Qing court required that further "regulation [of emigration and of the opium trade...] be avoided because it would constitute acknowledgment" of the failure of the government's extant policies.<sup>111</sup>

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107. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 137.

108. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 100.

109. *Ibid.*, 348.

110. *Ibid.*, 99, 72, 81.

111. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 14.

While there does appear to be a shift in Qing policy that occurs in the 1860s, it is productive to think about these two different phases not so much as “inactive” versus “active,” but more as periods of “ad hoc” versus “systemic” approaches. As I demonstrate, there is evidence that even prior to 1860, though the court itself may not have been attempting to issue new legislation or negotiate new protocols with regard to the trade, high-ranking local officials were taking initiative to challenge the trade in other ways. The devastating outcome of Lin Zexu’s bold attempt to prevent the expansion of the opium trade had made it obvious that Qing China lacked the military power and diplomatic weight to enforce any decisions that appeared to be too aggressive or to have been made unilaterally; but local officials (in particular, the successive governors-general of Guangdong and Guangxi [*liang Guang zongdu* 兩廣總督]) leveraged the terms of China’s treaties with other powers and manipulated local factors over which they still had control (for example, by issuing harsher sentences for Chinese crimps or finding in favor of victims of kidnapping in local courts) in order to help rectify some of the problems created by the trade. In this sense, there was in fact quite a bit of activity at high administrative levels—after all, the local governors-general who appear to have been the primary agents on the Chinese side involved in challenging the legality of foreign “recruitment” efforts, though not members of the court, were in fact part of the central government apparatus, responsible to the emperor himself.<sup>112</sup> However, based on the legal restrictions imposed on Qing officials by international treaties and the imbalance of power between the parties, such activity was largely directed at handling individual cases as they arose, rather than attempting to change the nature of the system as a whole. Though the court itself may have turned a more or less blind eye in the early years of the trade, it is important to emphasize that there were also high-level local officials attempting to combat

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112. Charles O. Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1985), 95.

the trade on an ad hoc basis within the limitations of their office and the restrictions of the unequal treaties that had been imposed upon them.

As the trade progressed and the humanitarian fallout became too obvious for the court ignore, the Qing government could no longer continue its ad hoc tactics of insisting that the other powers adhere to the terms to which they had agreed; rather, it would finally attempt to establish a new set of terms. In the mid-1860s and into the mid-1870s, the Qing government stopped pleading with foreign governments to fulfill their legal obligations, and started insisting that new commitments be made: first to limit the abuses of the trade, and ultimately to end it altogether. It is apparent that the humanitarian imperative to end the coolie trade not only pushed the Qing government to adopt a more assertive “systemic” approach to the trade, but made it increasingly difficult for foreign powers to stand by their previous positions—particularly as the populations of China’s southern coastal cities grew increasingly resentful of the trade and the foreigners who had brought such fear and instability into their lives.

Given the restrictions within which the mid-nineteenth century Qing government had to operate with regard to blatant violations of its own laws, its responses to the emergence of the coolie trade are interesting on a number of levels. As I will demonstrate below, the ways in which the government engaged with the issues surrounding the coolie trade were both revelatory and constitutive of its relationship to foreign powers. Though initially, negotiations over the trade would be rendered relatively one-sided by unequal treaties and an imbalance in military capabilities, the Qing government would gradually come to assert its right to protect its subjects. Indeed, the humanitarian toll taken by the trade was such that it would provoke not just the popular anti-coolie trade uprisings in major coastal cities and mutinies aboard coolie ships as we have already seen; it also spurred high-level diplomatic activity. I argue that in this way, humanitarian trauma created the tools with which the Qing

government could contest—to a small extent—its traumatic loss of sovereignty. As a result, this sense of (albeit limited) redemption and vindication would also be included in the coolie trade vocabularies going forward.

### *Using the local power base*

Before the trade can be said to have begun in earnest, there were already suspicions that the foreigners had intended to kidnap and sell Chinese. In the summer of 1839, the Qing Minister of State had sent a letter to Lin Zexu and Provincial Inspector Wu Wenrong of Fujian, ordering them to investigate reports that foreigners were buying and selling Chinese children in Guangdong and in Fujian. While the nationalities of the foreigners in question and the destinations and occupations to which they were ostensibly sending the children are not made clear, the Minister notes: “It is forbidden to export rice, millet, gold, and silver; how much more so [is it forbidden] to fling our naïve babes away to far-off lands [and persons] of inscrutable motivations. Local officials have the responsibility to act as parents to these people, how is it that they can sit unmoved as if they have not heard [of this problem]?”<sup>113</sup> The reports mentioned by the Minister also allege that the number of children involved in any given instance of trafficking could range from ten to over a thousand.<sup>114</sup> In his response, dated about two months after the Minister’s letter was sent, Lin Zexu informs the Minister that yes, Chinese were being illicitly carried overseas; but no one was selling children outright.<sup>115</sup> Lin’s source informs him that in reality, the persons being carried overseas were in fact “being hired, not selling themselves.”<sup>116</sup> While this case may or may not have been a false alarm with

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113. “Zhu Liang Guang zongdu Lin Zexu deng fencha Yue Min liangsheng yiren shoumai youhai shangyu,” (27 June 1839), in *HCSH* 1.1, 5.

114. *Ibid.*

115. At least, not on the kind of scale suggested by the original reports—but it was possible that some were being sold between families in one-off transactions.

116. “Lin Zexu zou chaming waiguo chuanzhi,” 7.

regard to outright purchasing of bodies,<sup>117</sup> the Minister's letter demonstrates that there was already high-level awareness/suspicion of foreign recruitment of Chinese labor; furthermore, it reveals the Minister's unwavering belief in the government's responsibility (and ability) to enforce the letter of the anti-egress law and to prevent foreigners from taking advantage of the local population.

Though high-level officials such as Lin Zexu and his successors would increasingly find themselves investigating alleged cases of illicit human trafficking as the trade took hold, their ability to implement system-level enforcement of the anti-egress law while offering only domestic legal statutes as justification was very limited. As such, any intervention tended to be ad hoc and responsive, rather than more broadly preventative. By 1852, five years after the first sporadic shipments to Latin America had begun,<sup>118</sup> it was so apparent that no major government inquiry or policy reform was forthcoming that when the British Foreign Secretary issued a questionnaire to British consuls in each of the Chinese treaty ports in order to determine how risky it might be to establish coolie recruitment depots at each location, the responses were unanimous: the threat of Qing government interference was essentially non-existent. Charles Winchester, the consul at Xiamen, states that in spite of the illegality of egress,<sup>119</sup> local officials in fact "connive at emigration" to rid themselves of their excess poor population, and adds that if officials were to take any action against the trade, it would be

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117. Unless one considers the distinct possibility that "hiring" as reported to Lin was only semantically different from (i.e. was just a euphemism for) "buying," rather than substantively different. Without knowing the sources providing information to Lin's informant, or the destination of these men, it is difficult to ascertain the true conditions of their egress.

118. Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 88.

119. Winchester goes to far as to mock the law restricting egress: "It is one of the pleasant fictions of the Chinese Government that no child of the great Emperor can withdraw himself from the paternal rule; and that to leave his dominions and settle elsewhere permanently is a crime. There is, therefore, a general prohibition of emigration..." "Note by Dr. Winchester," 19.

limited to prosecution of Chinese crimps, not of foreign recruiters.<sup>120</sup> As far as the British consuls were concerned, the court's tendency to ignore the problem meant that it was open season on Chinese labor.

Because the court itself was not inclined to confront the reality of the coolie trade at this time, quite a bit of the burden of dealing with the trade fell upon the office of the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi. But as the role of governor-general was mainly military and logistical rather than legislative or diplomatic,<sup>121</sup> often his only recourse for challenging the trade was to appeal to extant international agreements, or else make use of the local legal apparatus on such occasions as was jurisdictionally permitted. This latter technique is illustrated in the case of a violent uprising aboard the US coolie ship *Robert Browne* in 1852. The case involved 475 Chinese men (many of whom claimed to have been deceived) aboard a coolie ship heading for San Francisco.<sup>122</sup> Those who were not killed by disease or violent beatings finally revolted, resulting in the deaths of over a dozen men, including foreign crewmembers and Chinese. The surviving Chinese men took control of the ship, then forced the remaining crew to land on one of the Ryūkyū Islands, where they were taken care of until foreign military ships arrived and brought them back to Hong Kong and Huangpu ("Whampoa") to be interrogated.<sup>123</sup> Over the course of two years, a number of intricate negotiations and machinations took place between the American chargé d'affaires

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120. "The Earl of Malmesbury to Dr. Bowring," (12 June 1852), in *BPP* 3, 11; "Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury," (17 May 1852), in *Ibid.*, 12; "Consul Elmslie to Dr. Bowring," (25 Aug. 1852), in *Ibid.*, 17-18; "Note by Dr. Winchester," in *Ibid.*, (19-25); "Consul Alcock to Dr. Bowring," in *Ibid.*, 26-28; "Acting Consul Backhouse's Answers to Queries," (N.D.), in *Ibid.*, 29-30; "Vice-Consul Hague to Dr. Bowring," (14 Sept. 1852), in *Ibid.*, 31-32.

121. Hucker, *Dictionary*, 534; Purdue, *China Marches West*, 317.

122. Robert Irick notes that if this were true, this would be a somewhat anomalous case in which contracted coolie labor (as opposed to credit-ticket labor) was brought from China to the US (*Ch'ing Policy*, 16). He argues instead that the ship was in reality probably destined for South America (where contract labor was more common and conditions so harsh that few potential laborers might want to go there), and speculates that discovery of the ship's true destination may have contributed to the outbreak of the mutiny (33, fn 39).

123. "Shu Min Zhe zongdu You Feng zou," in *HCSH* 1.1, 14-16.



Peter Parker and local government counterparts, Governor-General Xu Guangjin and Guangdong Governor Bo Gui. Parker insisted that the mutineers have a “fair” trial (as long as it ended with their execution); however, the local officials refused to be cowed by Parker’s demands. After carrying out their own investigations, they ultimately sided with the mutineers, citing lack of evidence on which to try them.<sup>124</sup> While the local tribunal lacked the authority to try the foreigners for their part in the escapade, it was at least able to intervene to save the Chinese mutineers from what it perceived to be wrongful execution.

High-level local administrators were also able to make use of their limited legislative capacity to defend locals against the designs of predatory foreigners. In the spring of 1858, British and French representatives had successfully pressured Bo Gui into pronouncing that voluntary egress would be permitted under regulation. At the same time, however, Bo Gui issued an announcement that any Chinese found to be participating in the kidnapping of other Chinese would be dealt with in the harshest of terms.<sup>125</sup> (Indeed, two similar proclamations regarding the illegality of kidnapping had already been issued in 1855 and 1856, evidently with limited success).<sup>126</sup> So even while the machinations of labor-hungry foreign governments and recruiters—coupled with unrest and displacement of large populations in the south due to the ongoing Taiping Rebellion—were making it more and more difficult for the Qing government to enforce any kind of ban on egress, Bo Gui reasserted his government’s right to prosecute and punish any of its own subjects who knowingly deceived or kidnapped others. In addition to being a genuine declaration of his intent to prosecute any Chinese caught in the

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124. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 34-41. It is worth noting that it was not until two years later in 1854 that the emperor was even informed both of the events of the mutiny itself, and the ensuing diplomatic and legal sparring. And rather than expressing any dismay over the events of the mutiny or inquiring further about the circumstances under which several hundred men might all have been deceived into indenture, the emperor responded with an almost-disinterested “Acknowledged” (“硃批:知道了”). “Shu Min Zhe zongdu You Feng zou,” in *HCSH* 1.1, 16. Such a response seems to have been fairly representative of the court’s attitude toward instances of trafficking at this time.

125. See “Proclamation,” (9 April 1859), in *BPP* 4, 109.

126. Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 78.

act of kidnapping, the statement was likely also meant to give foreign operators a jolt: as the recruitment of coolies (voluntary or otherwise) absolutely relied upon the efforts of local crimps, Bo Gui's reassertion of the government's jurisdiction over this key component of the trade probably ruffled a few feathers. Considering the tremendous concession he had just been pressed into making regarding voluntary egress, Bo Gui's position on kidnappers may seem like a last-ditch attempt to save face by asserting that the Qing government had not been rendered impotent in its battle against egress. But by this time, China was engaged in a second Opium War, and was dealing with the chaos and large internal migration brought about by the Taiping Rebellion, so the truth is that Bo Gui likely had very little power to resist foreign pressure. This draconian stance on local kidnappers, then, though it may seem like relatively minor resistance, may in fact represent the entirety of the force he was able to muster at this time.

The only other option available to Qing officials at this time seems to have been to appeal to already agreed-upon treaty terms. For example, by the autumn of 1859, the British, Spanish, and French governments had reached agreements with local authorities to establish foreign-operated "emigration houses" in order to oversee and facilitate "voluntary" egress of Chinese men.<sup>127</sup> The purpose of the emigration houses, as presented by their foreign advocates, was to rein in the rampant kidnapping associated with the trade by requiring that the voluntariness of each potential laborer be systematically vetted by government staff. In January of 1860, however, several months after this policy was enacted, it was brought to the attention of new Governor-General Lao Chongguang (勞崇光) that ships of American and other nationalities were floating off the coast of Changzhou (長洲) near Hong Kong, attempting to circumvent the regulatory oversight of the emigration houses. According to Lao's information, these ships meandered through Hong Kong's coastal waters, gathering kidnapped men from a

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127. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 108, 110.

number of sites before ferrying them to other ships that would carry them out of Chinese waters. In a letter to US Minister to China John Elliot Ward, Lao demands to know why the American ships (in particular, the *Messenger*) are participating in the kidnapping of Chinese men, even after the establishment of (quasi-)legal emigration houses as per the agreements with Britain and France.<sup>128</sup> A protracted correspondence ensues, over the course of which Ward insists that the Americans are simply middlemen, and as such are not responsible for the *actual* kidnapping and are therefore doing nothing illegal.<sup>129</sup> Lao, for his part, insists that Americans must adhere to the US government's earlier promises not to harm or kidnap Qing subjects.<sup>130</sup> Ultimately, Ward concedes and after an inspection, releases all coolies on board the *Messenger* involuntarily. (The American crew, however, is never prosecuted for its part in attempting to ferry these kidnapped men to larger coolie vessels.)<sup>131</sup>

Throughout the exchange, Lao appears to be aware that the only demand he can make of Americans is that they fulfill the responsibilities to which they have already agreed. Ward, for his part, is patronizingly civil; but even in his initial response to Lao, he is cautious about making concessions that might suggest the US had any responsibility to China beyond specific duties stipulated in the treaty. In taking this stance from the very beginning of their interaction, Ward is clearly already hedging against having to take any kind of responsibility for the actions of the American crewmen—probably because he is aware that the Qing government lacks the ability to unilaterally hold the US responsible for any behavior which he himself does not first concede as having been in violation of the treaty. Though Lao does

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128. “Liang Guang zongdu Lao Chongguang wei *Mixinzha*,” 23.

129. “Meishi Hua Ruohan zhaofu liang Guang zongdu Lao Chongguang wei *Mixinzha* chuan huagong bei bieguo qiqu nengfou hui yishu nanding,” (12 Jan. 1860) in *HCSH* 1.1, 28.

130. “Liang Guang zongdu Lao Chongguang zhi Meishi Hua Ruohan hui: *Mixinzha* chuan huagong buneng wei wuyi bei bieguo chuan qiqu,” (17 Jan. 1860) in *Ibid.*, 29-30.

131. “Meishi Hua Ruohan zhi Yuedu Lao Chongguang hui: *Mixinzha* chuan huagong yi quanbu zhuihui qingxun ming dao guanlingpai chukou,” (3 Feb. 1860) in *Ibid.*, 31-32; “Acting Consul Winchester to Mr. Bruce,” (8 Feb. 1860), in *BPP* 4, 225; Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 94; Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 27-28.

eventually secure the release of the *Messenger's* kidnap victims, his victory does not extend beyond forcing the US government to abide by promises made explicitly in extant treaties between the two powers.

The above developments are of interest in that not only do they quite clearly demonstrate that high-level local administrators did make a number of ad hoc attempts to protect the populace in the early period of the trade—both by resorting to domestic legal apparatuses and by attempting to leverage the terms of treaties—but that the constraints on their ability to do so reflects the power dynamics between the governments involved. In 1839, before China's decisive defeat in the first Opium War, the Minister of State still obviously believes that China has the absolute authority to investigate and prevent the buying and selling of its people; by 1852, in contrast, a demoralized Qing court would ignore such problems rather than admit its own inability to challenge foreign recruitment efforts. Receiving no support from the court, the governors-general would thus have to operate within the limited scope of their own authority: Bo Gui had to recognize that the Qing government no longer possessed the power to challenge the foreign governments over the question of exporting labor, and could only address those aspects of the trade over which its jurisdiction was still uncompromised; several years later, Lao would rely upon repetition of America's contractual obligation as codified in a treaty rather than making a humanitarian plea, because he knew that he could not expect the US government to make any concessions beyond those it was already contractually bound to make.

The governors-general, simultaneously constrained by the powers of their office and by the resistance of foreigners doggedly determined to maximize their profits by acquiring (in the case of Britain, Spain, Peru) and shipping (in the case of the US and France) indentured Chinese labor, could only attempt to rectify individual cases. Perhaps they hoped that a given

case might serve as a precedent for others in the future, or that they could at least curb the disgraceful behavior of Chinese crimps. However, they could not yet hope to effect any major change to the international climate that had first dreamt the coolie trade into being.

Recognizing that the Qing court's ability to take action was circumscribed by the contemporary power differential, and that they could not anticipate voluntary concessions from the foreign governments, Bo Gui and Lao had no choice but to begin to combat the trade from within the more limited purview of the authority of the Governor-General's office.

### *Moral authority and systemic change*

However, as the enormity of the abuses resulting from the trade became impossible to ignore, the Qing government began to consider the trade not merely as an imposition on its sovereignty, but indeed, a real threat to the lives and livelihoods of its subjects. By the mid-1860s even the court would finally be forced to recognize that ad-hoc approaches to the trade were not enough—a more systemic approach geared toward providing humanitarian protections was necessary. As I argue below, the humanitarian abuses resulting from the trade had become such an explosive political issue that “moral authority”—the conscientious desire to act in the interests of the people—was often invoked to justify the way certain players chose to respond to/participate in the trade. Britain had, from the early 1850s, attempted to posit itself as protector of the Chinese people and thereby justify its intervention in the trade (see below); however, even under the auspices of British regulation, abuses would persist. As such, the Qing government finally decided it was time to stage an intervention of its own. For a time, the Qing government's (albeit belated) decision to position itself as the protector of the people would grant it a sort of moral empowerment even vis-à-vis militarily superior Britain. Where humanitarian outrage had played a significant role in the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, so too would the Qing government

leverage its newfound moral authority over the question of coolie trade abuses to simultaneously reclaim a modicum of sovereignty while demanding an end to the trade.

In the earlier years of the trade, British administrators had found it advantageous to claim such moral authority: in 1852, Dr. John Bowring (the consul at Guangdong and future governor of Hong Kong) had argued that the lack of Qing government oversight of and investigation into instances of trafficking (or of voluntary egress, for that matter) might be considered justification for increased British oversight at points of departure. As Bowring saw it, the Qing government apparatus was “powerless and unwilling [...] to interfere” in matters of emigration,<sup>132</sup> and the British government could hope for “no aid or co-operation ... from the Chinese authorities [in] check[ing] the frauds and irregularities to which the cupidity of the Chinese crimps and agents is so disposed to minister.”<sup>133</sup> Though he expresses what appears to be sincere unease at the thought of facilitating the violation of the Chinese anti-egress law, Bowring ultimately reasons that because the Chinese government cannot be relied upon to enforce its own laws with respect to egress, British officials should

be entrusted with a considerable amount of authority to protect the legitimate interests of commerce and our present and future amicable relations with the Chinese functionaries and people from the *consequence of abuses*, many in number and great in amount, connected with the irregular and fraudulent shipment of coolies abuses which even now are not far from placing the coolie emigration in the category of another Slave Trade.<sup>134</sup>

For Bowring, the apparent disinterest of the Qing court in administering over rampant coolie trafficking had created a vacuum in authority into which the British colonial government could insert itself. Note that Bowring does not argue that Chinese people need to be protected from the abuses of the trade as an end in and of itself; merely that the *consequences* of such abuses will negatively impact Britain’s commercial and diplomatic

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132. “Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury,” (17 May 1852), in *BPP* 3, 12.

133. “Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury,” (25 Sept. 1852), in *Ibid.*, 16-17.

134. Emphasis added. “Dr. Bowring to the Earl of Malmesbury,” (24 Dec. 1852), in *Ibid.*, 43.

interests. Yet, in invoking the brutality of the coolie trade, Bowring pays lip service to the very real humanitarian issues surrounding it, setting those abuses up as a Trojan horse by which Britain might insinuate herself into the trade in the future. Apparent apathy on the part of the Qing court with regard to uniform enforcement of the anti-egress law not only gave the impression that the Qing government apparatus could no longer effectively govern its populace (egressors and facilitators of egress alike),<sup>135</sup> but indeed, allowed Britain to assume for itself the moral imperative to become involved in the “protection” of potential migrants—even when the lives and liberty of those people were in reality of secondary or tertiary concern at best. Despite occasional bouts of conscience about the ethics of trading in people or violating the laws of another sovereign state, Britain would continually assert its “duty” to facilitate the trade—all rationalized by claims that the Qing government was essentially a negligent parent who could not be trusted to ensure the safety of its own children.

In the years following the establishment of the emigration house system, however, it would become evident that the system, which had been touted by the British government as the best way to moderate the abuses of the trade, had been largely unsuccessful at doing so. This failure could be attributed to two factors: first, stricter regulations in Hong Kong and Guangdong—including the emigration house system, as well as earlier regulations such as Britain’s Chinese Passenger Act of 1855 which required that all ships carrying Chinese passengers out of Hong Kong allot a certain amount of space and supplies per person<sup>136</sup>—rather than bringing the trade under tighter control, had simply contributed to driving the bulk of the trade to Macao where there was still a very active (and very profitable)

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135. I use “egressor” to refer to the general category of border-crossers, regardless of destination, intention or associated political status. Coolies or credit-ticket sojourners are subsets of this broader category.

136. “Chinese Passengers Act, 1855,” reproduced at Hong Kong Legal Information Institute, Historical Laws of Hong Kong. Web. [www.hklii.org/hk/other/ord/historical/1912/89.pdf](http://www.hklii.org/hk/other/ord/historical/1912/89.pdf) (accessed 16 Sept. 2011).

unregulated trade. Second, even after initiation of the emigration house system, one of the biggest problems with the trade remained unaddressed: the abuse of laborers upon arrival at their respective destinations. Guano mining operations in Peru's Chincha Islands had quickly become notorious for harsh conditions and high mortality rates: not only was the heat of the Peruvian climate oppressive, but Chinese guano miners were made to excavate Herculean quotas of toxic guano under constant threat of whippings and beatings, all while malnourished and poorly rested.<sup>137</sup> Meanwhile, Chinese laborers employed in the Cuban sugar industry weren't faring much better: suicide was extremely common among these men, with some even opting to hurl themselves into boiling vats of sugar rather than continue working on the plantations.<sup>138</sup> For that matter, despite Britain's attempts to establish itself as an enforcer of humanitarian protections, conditions for Chinese laborers in British colonies could be just as deplorable: as already mentioned in Chapter One, for example, Chinese in British Honduras (modern Belize) in the mid-1860s were treated so abominably that the government ultimately took them away from their employers and found them employment elsewhere.<sup>139</sup>

As we have already seen, the Qing government was able to use the discourse of slavery to levy not-so-subtle criticisms of the coolie trade and foreign governments' involvement therein. Recall, for example, the case of the 1866 Regulations in which the Qing court attempted to push the British and French governments to accede to increased protections for Chinese coolies overseas. Debate over the Regulations gave rise to a flurry of communication between Chinese officials and their foreign counterparts, and within a few days of the signing of the convention, the Zongli Yamen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) sent a letter to the British government. In that letter, the Zongli Yamen lays out its intention to make even non-treaty nations conform to the terms of the Regulations. The author of the letter then notes the

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137. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 96-100.

138. Yun, *The Coolies Speaks*, 147-50.

139. Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 105.



extent to which he admires the benevolence of the British government in its earlier decision to outlaw the trade in African slaves, and goes on to say “No part of [the Regulations] is aimed at anything but protecting Chinese laborers. If there is a situation where someone is [dishonestly] luring and hiring Chinese, I believe your government would be most pleased to forbid it entirely.”<sup>140</sup> In initiating the Regulations, the Qing government had finally recognized the advantage to be had in claiming the humanitarian high ground that had for so long been occupied by Britain under less than entirely selfless pretenses. In this letter the Zongli Yamen uses this newly attained moral position to somewhat manipulatively mention the precedent Britain had itself set in the case of the African slave trade, and, by extension, its no less compelling moral obligation to prevent the involuntary trafficking of Chinese persons. After all, how could a “benevolent” government that had determined the slave trade to be morally abhorrent continue to allow the trafficking of Chinese persons under very similar circumstances (without being blatantly hypocritical, that is)? Both in language and in stance, the Qing government was making it clear that it would no longer sit idly by while its subjects were being kidnapped or abused.

Whereas the Qing government had recognized the inadequacy of its functionaries’ surgical enforcement of the terms of previous treaties and instead decided to take a broader humanitarian tack, Britain abandoned its earlier pseudo-humanitarian stance and chose instead to invoke international law in an attempt to discredit the Regulations.<sup>141</sup> In 1868, two years after Britain and France had refused to ratify the original terms of the Regulations, the British, French and Spanish governments drew up a fifteen-point counter-offer that was essentially an attempt to restore the trade to its pre-regulation form: their proposal would weaken Chinese officials’ ability to regulate the trade from their own side by reassigning

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140. “Zongshu wei fei tongshang kou’an,” 163. Author translation.

141. This did not prevent Britain from using the language of humanitarianism to criticize the continued trade from Macao, however. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 212-13.

jurisdiction over emigration to the foreign Emigration Officer. It also excluded any reference to the protection of Chinese once overseas.<sup>142</sup> In the introduction to the new terms devised by the foreign governments, they note that “The [1866] Regulations contain several clauses that are not only cumbersome to carry out, but if [the trade] were to be administered according to these terms and hindered Chinese laborers from going overseas, it seems that [the Regulations] would be in contravention of [other pre-existing] agreements between each state.”<sup>143</sup> In reality, the Regulations had made no attempt to prevent voluntary laborers from emigrating; most of the terms were aimed at prevention of kidnapping—still attempting to curb the kind of recruiting that Britain had promised the emigration house system would do away with seven years earlier—or of abuse upon arrival at destinations overseas. But now that it was becoming apparent to the foreign governments that humanitarian problems could no longer be parlayed into justification for advancing their own diplomatic and pecuniary interests, they gave up the veneer of trying to “protect” innocent Chinese people.

In a series of letters sent a few months after the proposed changes of 1868, the British ambassador continues to assert that the Regulations violate the clause of the Beijing Convention of 1860 that guaranteed Chinese the right to voluntary egress. British consul Alcock volunteered yet another set of counter-proposals that would further weaken the Regulations as agreed upon in 1866.<sup>144</sup> This proposal, coupled with the 1868 proposal, demonstrates quite clearly the fact that European powers—and Britain in particular—still

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142. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 190; “Zongshu wei songqu tuiguang zhaogong xinzhang zhi Yingguo zhaohui,” (23 May 1868), in *HCSH* 1.1, 189-91.

143. “Ying, Fa, Ri shi wei yuan ershier tiao youai zhaogong ling xinni gongzhang zhi Zongshu zhaohui,” (1 Apr. 1868), in *HCSH* 1.1 183.

144. “Ying shi Aliguo jianchi zhao suosong lingni xinzhang banli zhaogong zhi Zongshu zhaohui,” (30 May 1868), in *HCSH* 1.1, 192; “Ying shi wei ershier tiao qiangyu tuifan ‘Xuding tongshang gekou zhaogong zhangcheng’ er yi qianding jiuzhang wei youxiao zhi Zongshu zhaohui,” (6 Feb. 1869), in *Ibid.*, 194; “Ying shi wei Qing ting ji jianchi zhao ‘Xuding tongshang gekou zhaogong zhangcheng’ zhide jida benguo heyi zhi Zongshu zhaohui,” (24 Mar. 1869), in *Ibid.*, 196; “Ying shi Aliguo jiang Yingguo suoti zhaogong xinzhang song Zongshu zhaohui,” (23 Sept. 1869), in *Ibid.*, 202-7.

believed they had the power and the right to unilaterally dictate what should have been bilaterally agreed-upon terms. Furthermore, haggling over and excision of some of the most powerful terms of the Regulations in proposals submitted by European representatives show that improving the actual treatment of Chinese persons abroad was of a lower priority for them than ensuring the continuation of the trade under European management.

Unlike in years past, the Qing government, empowered by its humanitarian mission, did not cave to the insistence of the foreign demands. In fact, in its response to Alcock's 1869 counter-proposal, the Zongli Yamen rebukes the British government for its attempts to single-handedly control the conversation on the coolie trade:

Your ministers are set on recruiting labor, and thus wish to amend the previous agreement [the Regulations] to be more suitable [to their needs]; but China's ministers have a responsibility to protect their subjects, and even more so must amend the previous agreement [to suit our own needs]. Thus, when we speak of changing the agreement, both sides should deliberate on the matter together; it is no longer possible for foreign countries to be the sole and total arbiters as they have been in the past. I think, Minister, you will understand the fairness of this logic.<sup>145</sup>

The Zongli Yamen was obviously losing patience with European attempts to strong-arm it into sacrificing the parts of the Regulations that it viewed as most paramount to the protection of Qing subjects. After all, the unilateral imposition of terms had been the stuff of the post-war treaties, and had no place in negotiations between two ostensibly friendly powers attempting to prevent illicit human trafficking. In positing its own position in terms of its "responsibility" to the local populace, the Zongli Yamen implies that the governments behind the counter-proposals to the Regulations feel no such compunction, and thereby suggest that any moral authority that Britain and France had once claimed had all but evaporated. This reassertion of Qing sovereignty, couched in a commitment to the humanitarian protection of its subjects, stands in stark contrast to its earlier *ad hoc* approach to combating the violences of the trade.

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145. "Zongshu wei gongzhang yuxing xiugai yi weibian quanyou waiguo zhuanzhu zhi Yingguo zhaohui," (29 Sept. 1869), in *Ibid.*, 210-11

If we compare the Zongli Yamen's stance on the Regulations to that taken by Governor-General Lao during the *Messenger* affair discussed above, we see a complete shift in strategy: all Lao could do (or dared to attempt) was request that the American government abide by terms to which it had itself already agreed. He seems to have felt that China was guaranteed certain protections under international law, but did not necessarily have the right (or the military power) to demand that those protections be expanded. Several years later, however, despite the fact that the French and British governments had never actually ratified the Regulations, the Zongli Yamen rejected their attempts to dispose of the Regulations and replace them with terms more favorable to their own interests. Where earlier foreign machinations to facilitate the trade had simply resulted in loss of face as the Qing government eventually had to acknowledge its inability to enforce of its own anti-egress law, things were different now. The inhuman violence and suffering inherent to the trade could no longer be denied or glossed over—indeed, in 1868, in the midst of these negotiations, reports emerged that a Peruvian plantation owner had branded 48 of his coolies in case they managed to escape, causing an international outpouring of public opprobrium that led Macao to temporarily suspend the trade from its ports.<sup>146</sup> Not only would failure to stand firm on the terms of the Regulations inevitably have meant further abuse of Chinese subjects, but the behavior of Britain and France in these negotiations demonstrated that the Qing government could no longer allow these governments, whose interests were primarily economic, to dictate the terms of what was now quite obviously a humanitarian issue.

The Qing government challenged the local hegemony of the foreign powers and refused to allow any recruitment that did not adhere to the terms of the 1866 Regulations, despite prolonged and repeated volleys from those powers. Ultimately, “[f]or six years, the British and French [...] tried to coerce, badger, and threaten Peking into changing the 1866

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146. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 237-38.

code. By 1872, however, it was apparent [...] that such tactics would not succeed.”<sup>147</sup> For the first time, the Qing government seemed to be making headway. By positioning itself as protector of its people, the Qing government was able to enjoy some of the moral authority that had begun to accrue to Euro-American abolitionists a few generations earlier. Though such authority was initially not recognized by the foreign governments, it seems to have given the Qing government sufficient confidence in its own agenda to persist in its refusal to concede on the Regulations. Britain finally relented in 1873, and its emigration houses, which had been closed since the non-ratification of the 1866 Regulations, re-opened briefly before being closed down permanently<sup>148</sup>—portending, perhaps, the impending death of the trade altogether.

Indeed, other events in the early 1870s suggested that the trade would not last much longer. As mentioned above, stricter enforcement of anti-kidnapping laws and implementation of the emigration house system in Hong Kong and Guangdong in the 1860s had pushed the center of the trade Macao, a Portuguese colony that was subject to neither set of legislation. In 1873, the Qing government abandoned its relatively *laissez-faire* attitude toward the trade out of Macao and began cracking down on kidnappers. The next Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, Rui Lin, ordered the formation of “a virtual blockade on all the entrances to Macau harbor,” and the seizure and inspection of suspicious ships leaving or entering.<sup>149</sup> The Portuguese government, aware of the damage the continuance of the trade was doing to its reputation, finally decided in December of 1873 that it would end the trade from its harbor the following year.<sup>150</sup>

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147. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 196.

148. *Ibid.*, 197.

149. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 291-292; Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 408.

150. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 293.

It was around this time that the so-called “Cuba Commission,” tasked with investigating living conditions for coolies in Cuba, was formed. A disagreement had arisen between Spain and the Zongli Yamen with regard to whether recruitment of labor for Cuba was still legal, given the abuses that were occurring there. The Zongli Yamen asked other European ministers in Beijing to weigh in on the matter, and eventually it was agreed that a commission would be sent to Cuba to investigate the reports of abuse and high mortality rates that had been commonplace since the early days of the trade.<sup>151</sup> The Qing government selected Ambassador Chen Lanbin to head the investigation, accompanied by representatives of the British and French governments. After considering testimonies and depositions generated by over two thousand individuals,<sup>152</sup> the Commission concluded that living conditions for Chinese in Cuba were tantamount to slavery, and that most coolies would never be able to free themselves from the oppressive system. Even though the three members of the Commission unanimously agreed to condemn the trade, Lisa Yun notes that “[d]espite appearances, the Chinese offices were frustrated by the British and European powers which were ultimately reluctant to further embolden the Chinese in the balance of power” by supporting any anti-trade measures that may have been indicated by the conclusions of the report.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, it was only after a lengthy process of negotiation, filled with recriminations and intra-European diplomatic alliances aimed at keeping China in check, that a treaty ending the trade to Cuba was ratified by China and by Spain in 1878. Not surprisingly, the Europeans used their leverage throughout this process to once again attempt to force China to abandon the 1866 Regulations; and while China did ultimately concede, many of the protections of the

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151. Irick, *Ch'ing Policy*, 293-94. Similar investigations were mounted in British Guiana in 1870-71 (Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 100-101), as well as in Peru in the early 1870s. Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru*, 140-41.

152. Lisa Yun states that 1,176 coolies gave oral depositions, while 1,665 coolies submitted or signed written petitions, for a total of 2,841. *The Coolie Speaks*, 60.

153. *Ibid.*, 48.

Regulations were built into the new legislation, leading Robert Irick to conclude that “[i]t is true that China made concessions, but a survey of the negotiations and the final convention clearly shows that China came out on top in the negotiations.”<sup>154</sup>

As demonstrated above, the conversations and negotiations taking place between the Qing government and its European counterparts initially reflected the unequal power dynamics between them, where Chinese officials had very little power to influence or challenge the behavior of the foreign governments; but later, the humanitarian urgency of the trade would give the Qing government the moral imperative to take a proactive approach to regulating and eventually ending the trade, thereby redefining its relationship to the European governments. Where the victors of the Opium Wars had levied debilitatingly unequal treaties upon the Qing government, the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the trade would force the Qing government to reclaim its agency, with regard to this particular issue, precisely by recasting itself as advocate for the people. Thus, not only had the rising discourse of foreign-instigated violence spurred on political change, but the resultant assumption of moral authority by the Qing court also inserted into contemporary coolie trade discourse a vocabulary of the legitimacy of humanitarian-driven political intervention.

The appalling humanitarian ravages perpetrated within the framework of the coolie trade undoubtedly comprise a major—if not *the* major—part of the trade’s legacy in China; but out of that violence, secondary narratives of resistance and mutual protection would emerge. Just as the populations of affected cities—and even coolies themselves—came to feel justified in taking a stand (to the extent that they were able) against predatory recruitment practices and other abuses associated with the trade, so too did horror over humanitarian wrongdoing finally compel the Qing government to take a systemic approach to curbing the trade’s abuses. And while no given riot or mutiny had the immediate effect of ending the

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154. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 303-316, 308-309; Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 48.

trade, the outrage with which these groups confronted the prosecution of the trade forced the foreigners to concede that its evils were too great for the Chinese people to allow it to continue peaceably. The foreign governments did not all necessarily agree with the humanitarian criticisms of the trade as presented by locals (at least, not in the same way that they would later acknowledge the validity of complaints lodged by the Qing government), but they would have to recognize the mobilizing power of those criticisms, and reevaluate whether they were willing to risk making themselves the targets of further anti-foreign violence. Indeed, growing humanitarian outrage over the evils of the trade created a space in which the people were empowered with a moral imperative to protect themselves and their brethren; but the Qing government, too, could assert its moral imperative to protect its subjects. The lasting humanitarian vocabularies of the coolie trade thus included not only physical violence and emotional abjection, but also resistance to that abuse as manifested both in popular uprisings against the trade and the (limited) reversal of the power dynamics between the Qing and Euro-American governments.

## **Conclusions**

I have argued that the rise of the coolie trade resulted in four different kinds of trauma for Qing officials and residents of southern China: the humanitarian trauma of either experiencing or witnessing the physical victimization and abhorrent treatment doled out by recruiters and foreign overseers; the trauma of dehumanization and de-positioning resulting from having non-personhood and racial inferiority imputed upon Chinese by foreigners; the trauma of social dis-ordering and disruption caused by opportunistic crimps; and finally, the traumatic usurpation of sovereignty by foreign governments. The vocabularies that arose as people attempted to describe and understand these phenomena, whether evidenced in



government reports, media articles, public or diplomatic action, or coolie testimonies, are a testament to the extent to which lasting meaning was created out of this inhuman practice.

I argue that these vocabularies, both verbal and ideological, were instrumental in helping Chinese process and cope with the dramatic changes that the coolie trade ushered in: in the space created by humanitarian crisis, the Qing government came to see itself as “protector” and was finally able to couch its responsibilities to its subjects in such a way that the Euro-American powers eventually had no choice but to acknowledge the Qing court’s moral legitimacy; similarly, though anti-trade rioters in Xiamen and Shanghai would be punished for the damage they caused, the foreign governments had to accept that the humanitarian-based outrage that had bubbled over into violence would continue churning beneath the surface as long as the trade continued. The verbal terminologies that came to be associated with the trade—“*zhuzai*” and “slave”—also reflected the processing of new relationships of exploitation and resistance thereto. These sets of terminologies most obviously point to the way Chinese are treated by foreigners and the sub-human qualities imputed upon them; but the disdain and sometimes despair with which the terms are used by different parties speak to the ongoing struggle, both of the coolies themselves and of external observers of their plight, against dehumanization. I have also argued that emphasis on the criminality of local crimps in official and media reports responding to the trauma of social disordering betrays an eagerness to vilify them not just for their own crimes, but perhaps also to distract from/compensate for governmental and social failings. This reduction of crimp to othered criminal—“thug” or “brigand”—gives his crime a quality of (retrospective) inevitability, thereby erasing the governmental or social failings that contributed to his decision to commit it, and exonerating those who might have prevented it but didn’t.

The violence with which the coolie trade exploded into the lives of residents of southern China destroyed innumerable lives and families, and threw an entire social system

into disorder. The physical wounds of survivors would eventually begin to heal; so too, through the process of articulating and denouncing the evils of the trade, would the emotional and psychic scars begin to set. These scars on the public's consciousness—the altered or newly risen conceptual vocabularies that emerged through this process of healing—would remain an indelible testament to the horrors they had witnessed and endured. The particular circumstances of the coolie trade and local responses thereto would thus give rise to conceptual vocabularies that implicitly contained all of the elements discussed above: violence, dehumanization, de-positioning, and dis-ordering; as well as resistance (to varying degrees) against each of these phenomena.

I have used the idea of “trauma” somewhat loosely to characterize the alarming experiences of the trade, as I found Freud's idea of trauma as unanticipated shock to be thought-provoking. But perhaps even more striking is Cathy Caruth's further elaboration: that “the return to the traumatic experience ... [is the signal of the] attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”<sup>155</sup> Indeed, the violences that the coolie trade visited upon southern China and her people could not have been anticipated, nor their enormity fully comprehended at the time; but as I will endeavor to show in the following chapters, the revisitation of the original trauma in the writing and reading of twentieth-century coolie fiction would help later authors and audiences process and re-evaluate those violences; at the same time, this revisitation would allow for the mobilization of those narratives of historic violence in nationalist efforts to construct a stronger, unified, unassailable national psyche. Certainly, public memory of the trade was still so acute that these vocabularies, when invoked by nationalist authors, would elicit a very powerful response from their audiences.

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155. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 62.

### 3

#### **Imagining the Post-Slave: constructing a “people” as a site of civic activism in late Qing coolie fiction<sup>1</sup>**

Having already detailed the discussions surrounding the literal laboring body of the coolie in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, I endeavor in this chapter to demonstrate the ways the coolie trade vocabularies and terminologies of enslavement that emerged would be re-invoked in a symbolic sense at the beginning of the twentieth century. I argue that in the rapidly-changing intellectual and political environment of the last decade of the Qing dynasty, the coolie-cum-slave reemerged as a figurative embodiment of the need for a Chinese public to rally together to strengthen itself and thereby defend China from foreign incursion and Manchu weakness. The discourse of “enslavement” would grow pervasive, appearing in a number of political tracts written by prominent intellectuals attempting to plot China’s forward trajectory. For some, enslavement referred primarily to a condition of servitude and ingratiating that Chinese had imposed upon themselves in their eagerness to accommodate foreign interests; while others would use the discourse of enslavement to decry the prejudicial and oppressive treatment of Han by the Manchu ruling class. In each case, the discourse of enslavement would prove a provocative means of condemning the spiritual, political, and material subjugation of particular segments of the Chinese population to the will of others.

It was around this time that the theme of coolie-as-slave would be put to use in a number of works of fiction, as well. Much as Benedict Anderson has famously claimed that written works help form “imagined communities,”<sup>2</sup> I will demonstrate that in particular

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1. Sections of this chapter have previously been presented as conference papers. I am especially grateful for very thoughtful feedback I received at the “20 世纪的中国”青年学术论坛日程 conference held at Peking University on June 15-16, 2013.

2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), Chap. 3.

political moments—the boycott in Shanghai and the lower-class enlightenment movement in Beijing in the first decade of the twentieth century—these works of coolie fiction (*Bitter Society*, *Golden World*, and *Diary of a Pig*) provided visions of an imagined “people” that must rise together to combat its enslavement or perish. Their authors accomplish this both in the more general composition of the novels themselves, but more importantly in particular by making use of the symbolic currency of historic coolie trade vocabularies and by inserting themselves and their novels into the ongoing conversation that invoked the uniquely powerful trope of the victimized (read: enslaved) Chinese laborer as a symbol of national weakness.

The coolie trade and its associated vocabularies would prove an efficient way to capture the public imagination broadly, while garnering more immediate support for more immediate political activities. Our novels’ engagement with the different modes of historic trauma discussed in the previous chapter is part of what made them such powerful vehicles for the messages of political and social reform in the contemporary moment. The protagonists experience, whether directly or indirectly, each of the traumas associated with the trade; and it is the invocation of those traumas that would have made the content of the novel resonate, on a visceral level, with contemporary readers.

The events that unfold within the novels speak simultaneously to physical and emotional suffering; to a loss of identity and social (and national) status; to government impotence; and to general destabilization caused by crimps’ usurpation of social capital (though we shall leave discussion of this latter phenomenon for the following chapter). As I will demonstrate, the authors of coolie fiction used and manipulated those extant coolie trade vocabularies to prescribe an ideal form of public activism and at the same time an ideal future Chinese “people.” Indeed, in calling back to those vocabularies, the authors ask their readers to revisit historical wounds and beseech them to come together to combat parallel

contemporary violences in a way that the embryonic “public” of the mid-nineteenth century had lacked the ability to do.

In order to better understand the type of “people” being constructed within the worlds of the novels, this chapter begins with a discussion of the political and intellectual currents of the early to mid-1900s, from the emergence of a public sphere and the rise of key intellectual figures, to the growing emphasis on the “people” as a site of political resistance and the ways in which several leading intellectuals posited their competing visions of that “people.” I also go on to consider the reemergence of the discourses of “slavery” and “enslavement,” and their invocation by these men. By bringing the terminology of “slavery” into play rhetorically in national political debates, these men simultaneously alluded to historical servitude as well as to more contemporary understandings of the perils of national enslavement in the age of empire. Indeed, references to slavery had already been imbued with substantial currency in the imperial context (as seen in the previous chapter) and in reviving these vocabularies, these men speak simultaneously to fear of corporal and intellectual/political servitudes.

Informed by contemporary discursive use of coolie trade terminologies in intellectual circles, the figure of the fictional coolie/slave must be more than just a straightforward reminder of the historical (and contemporary) abuses suffered by Chinese at the hands of outsiders; rather, I argue that the slave—the coolie depicted in the novels—also represents the intellectually-indifferent and/or politically-submissive Qing subject who can only become a true activist participant in a future China by revolting against his erstwhile masters (whether foreign or Manchu) and wresting back political and intellectual agency for himself. The authors of the novels revisit the idea of traumatic historic enslavement in order to suggest political activism and awareness as the only means of avoiding spiritual and political enslavement in the contemporary moment. In detailing the emancipation of the erstwhile

coolies, these authors dared to imagine a world in which an oppressed Chinese people can liberate itself from its victimhood.

### Social developments

By the early and mid-1900s, the political and social atmosphere in urban Qing China had undergone a number of dramatic shifts that would set the stage for increased popular participation in local governance and for nationalist activist efforts. For starters, since the late Ming, small pockets of liminal space along the boundary between state and private interests—encompassing such issues as “water control... welfare... famine relief, militia, [and the construction/maintenance of] roads, ferries, bridges, and temples or shrines,”<sup>3</sup> which abutted both the state and private spheres, but were fully under the purview of neither—had increasingly come to be administered by groups of non-governmental “public” actors working on behalf of their communities to fill lacunae in government provision.<sup>4</sup> Referred to today as the “public sphere” (after the influential and controversial study of the emergence of similar European spaces by Jürgen Habermas),<sup>5</sup> these spaces had come into being as like-minded groups of men external to the government apparatus came together in order to discuss matters of interest to themselves or to the local populace. In the Chinese case, economic diversification within China’s treaty ports would play a significant role in promoting the creation of a wider variety of opportunities for educated men. The once-rigid divide between “scholar” and “merchant” would gradually give way as these two groups came increasingly to share common “public” interests. This increase in cooperation would eventually lead to the formation of a new class of gentry-merchant (*shenshang* 紳商) with a wider (albeit still elite)

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3. Mary Rankin, “The origins of a Chinese Public Sphere: Local Elites and Community Affairs in the Late Imperial Period,” *Études chinoises* 9, no. 2, (1990): 21. <http://www.afec-etudeschinoises.com/IMG/pdf/9-2Rankin.pdf> (accessed 17 Sept. 2013).

4. Mary Rankin, “The origins of a Chinese Public Sphere: Local Elites and Community Affairs in the Late Imperial Period,” (*Études chinoises* vol. 9.2, 1990) 18-21.

5. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

base of power than either group had previously enjoyed individually. These actors could then work in concert with the growing set of out-of-work intellectuals or with guilds of skilled laborers.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, these groups met purely intellectual needs, allowing locals to share opinions and seek edification in certain matters; in others, such as the massive reconstruction efforts following the protracted Taiping Rebellion in the south, people outside the government pulled together to provide goods and services (what Mary Rankin calls “public management”<sup>7</sup>) that state or local governments were unable or unwilling to provide.<sup>8</sup>

Contributing further to the solidification of these extra-governmental “spheres,” albeit somewhat belatedly, was the 1905 abolishment of the civil service examinations that had, for over a millennium, provided aspiring intellectuals and officials the chance to compete for government positions.<sup>9</sup> Highly intelligent, well-read men who had spent years (or, in some cases, decades) of their lives attempting to earn prestigious degrees suddenly found themselves adrift professionally with no immediate hope of employment and nothing to show for their many years of assiduous study. For some men, this meant a desperate turn to a life

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6. Rankin, *Elite Activism*, 7; Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 61-62.

7. Rankin, “Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere,” 15.

8. Rankin, *Elite Activism*, Chap. 3. It should be pointed out that there has been much debate over how well Habermas’ Europe-derived model may be applied to the case of Qing China, and that the terminology of Habermas’ “public sphere” may be an imperfect way of talking about the liminal spaces in which these coterie flourished. Frederic Wakeman, for example, believed that the autonomy of the public sphere from the Qing state apparatus as presented by Rankin and others (such as William Rowe), had been vastly exaggerated. In reality, he argued, the phenomenon being referred to as a “public sphere” could only have functioned in conjunction with, and with the consent of, the state. Meanwhile, Philip Huang found the stark Manichean opposition of “state” against “society” to be too simple, and prefers to think of the “public sphere” as a more nuanced “third space” between state and society that is permeable to the influences of both. For our purposes, however, it is most important to remember that these spaces, though loosely defined, were a fairly recent development and were crucial to much of the activism witnessed toward the end of the Qing dynasty. Wakeman, “The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture,” *Modern China* (1993:19): 108-38. <http://mcx.sagepub.com/content/19/2/108> (accessed 15 Sept. 2013); Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1984); Huang, “‘Public Sphere’ / ‘Civil Society’ in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society,” *Modern China*, (1993:19): 216-40. <http://mcx.sagepub.com/content/19/2/216> (accessed 15 Sept. 2013).

9. David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle splendor*, 194.

of crime and thievery in order to survive.<sup>10</sup> For others, however, the abolishment of the examination system would provide the opportunity to participate in their societies in new ways, whether by encouraging them to become involved in a diverse range of mercantile and other expanding sectors,<sup>11</sup> or by pushing them to remake themselves as non-governmental intellectuals. As a result, the abolishment of the examination system not only contributed to the dissolution of the class and occupational line that had for so long separated the literatus from the workingman,<sup>12</sup> but also gave rise to a new wave of activists, journalists, and even novelists willing to participate in the expanding realm of “public” affairs.

Newspaper and periodical articles continued to be important media for this emerging critical/creative body;<sup>13</sup> however, works of fiction, whether serialized or published as holistic volumes, would also become key vectors for the transmission of contemporary intellectual and societal trends. As David Wang notes in *Fin-de-siècle splendour*, different genres of fiction could be used to lodge critiques against contemporary political and social institutions, and to expose to the reading public the uglier side of the world they inhabited. The “grotesque exposé” novel, for example, was “[a]imed at revealing social abuses and indicting political corruption,” laying bare the wanton behavior of officials, the selfish connivance of common people, and in general the complete collapse of urban morality.<sup>14</sup> “Chivalric” novels, too, while ostensibly about the adventures of errant swordsmen who become extra-legal

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10. Joan Judge, “Publicists and Populists: Including the Common People in the Late Qing New Citizen Ideal,” in *Imagining the People: Chinese Intellectuals and the Concept of Citizenship, 1890-1920*, ed. Joshua Fogel and Peter Zarrow (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 172.

11. Karl, *Staging the World*, 154; Rankin, *Elite Activism*, 20.

12. Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals*, 16-17.

13. According to Li Xiaoti’s calculations, the number of *baihua* newspapers in publication exploded from just two in 1897 to over 130 by 1911. Another estimate given by Leo Lee and Andrew Nathan (cited by Haiyan Lee) claims that between 1900 and 1910, there were over 295,000 subscriptions to various publications (being re-circulated to between 2 and 4 million readers). Li, *Qingmo de xiaceng shehui qimeng*, 17; Lee, “All the Feelings that are Fit to Print,” 294.

14. David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle splendour*, 183; Chap. 4.



heroes by adhering to their own moral code, were a way of protesting corruption in the court system and criticizing the shortcomings of the established norms and processes of justice.<sup>15</sup>

But even novels that upon first glance appear to be completely devoid of political content could serve a secondary social function beyond mere entertainment. As Haiyan Lee notes, thanks to “a rising literacy rate and expanding print culture” in the final decade of the Qing dynasty, a growing pool of authors was able to share their visions of society with ever-wider readership.<sup>16</sup> As Lee demonstrates, even literature deemed to be politically-shallow (such as the affective “butterfly fiction” she analyzes) can help a community to crystallize—in this case, around a common sense of sentiment.<sup>17</sup> In anticipating particular emotional responses from their audiences, authors simultaneously presuppose and instill a common sense of value/morality. The “literary public sphere”<sup>18</sup> peopled by authors, editors, publishers, readers, and even second-hand or indirect consumers<sup>19</sup> of texts, becomes another key axis—unique from the more general socio-political “public sphere”—along which a sense of community and mutual responsibility could develop.

The potential influence of fiction—and in particular, the novelistic form—on society did not go unnoticed. In 1902, reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) published his well-known essay “On the relationship between the novel and mass governance” (*Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi* 論小說與群治之關係). In it, he outlines the power that fiction can exert over its readers: fiction more than any other genre can truly permeate the reader (*xun* 熏), immersing him (*jin* 浸) in a new world that can both jolt (*ci* 刺) and inspire (*ti* 提) him. “These four

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15. Ibid., Chap. 5.

16. Lee, “All the Feelings,” 295.

17. Ibid., 295.

18. Ibid., 294.

19. For example, an illiterate person who has a story recounted to him by a friend or by a volunteer at a newspaper reading society.

powers,” Liang goes on to say, “are capable of shaping the world as well as establishing and nurturing the various norms of society.”<sup>20</sup> Liang charges lurid, sensationalist fiction with having produced a people that is “frivolous and immoral”;<sup>21</sup> but he hopes that a revolution in fiction might raise the political consciousness of its readers and produce a citizenry that is better equipped for participation in its own governance.<sup>22</sup> Because fiction is such a pervasive and influential element in the lives of the people, he reasons, any attempt at reforming the state can only be successful if fiction is reformed first so that it might inculcate an indifferent, imperfect populace with the political and social values necessary to public activism.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, *exposé* and chivalric fiction had already demonstrated that the fictional form could be instrumental in revealing political and social problems. With Liang’s encouragement, fiction—and indeed not just novels, but plays and other popular forms—were reconceived as an outlet for political discontent; and the sentiment these pieces could elicit from their readership came to be seen as the key for both instilling their readers with political subjectivity and binding them together as a community of shared values. As we shall see later in this chapter, the coolie novels present one very particular case in which authors were able to mobilize fiction in the interest of giving voice to the predominant intellectual anxieties of the day.

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20. Liang Qichao, “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People,” in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk Denton, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 78.

21. *Ibid.*, 80.

22. *Ibid.*, 81.

23. *Ibid.*, 74. It is worth noting, however, that thirteen years later, Liang would publish another article, “Accusing fiction writers,” (告小說家) in which he declared that fiction actually was to blame for the continued degradation of morality in China, pinpointing 1905-1906 (just three years after his earlier essay) as the beginning of that decline. David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle splendor*, 25.

## Key intellectual currents

### *Social Darwinism and the “people” as the unit of natural selection*

It was not for no reason that social unity and “community” were among the great preoccupations of the moment. As Rebecca Karl demonstrates in her monograph *Staging the World*, the turn of the century had brought to Chinese intellectuals an increased consciousness of their own geopolitical position and caused them to view their own semi-colonial plight as part of a global, rather than merely national, phenomenon. At the same time, however, the resistance of other colonized peoples against their respective colonizers also gave China hope: both the 1898-1903 uprising in the Philippines (against US imperialism) and the 1899-1903 Boer War in the Transvaal (against colonial Britain) provided for Chinese intellectuals a model of a type of modernity based not in parity with European standards thereof, but rather in the ability of “the people” to unite and resist imperialist domination.<sup>24</sup> Between observed uprisings overseas and the increasing visibility of local activism in the name of “public interest” as mentioned above, a discourse of “the people” (*min* 民)/ “the citizenry” (*guomin* 国民) / “society” (*qun* 群) began to emerge in Qing China. As public intellectuals began to hash out the significance and the responsibilities—as well as the political potential—of these social coalitions, it became clear that a unified “people” with common goals and values could be far more powerful than a simple agglomeration of imperial subjects.

Some of this debate on the need for national cohesion was also informed by the translations of foreign works like Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (*Tianyan lun* 天演論, trans. 1896), and Herbert Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* (*Qunxue yiyen* 群學肄言, trans. 1903 [Now translated as *Shehuixue yanjiu* 社會學研究]) by prominent translator and thinker Yan Fu. Yan’s translations of these pieces had introduced Chinese thinkers to two distinct views on Social Darwinism—the idea that the strong will prosper, while the weak must

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24. Karl, *Staging the World*, Chaps. 4-5, 121, 137.

perish.<sup>25</sup> Huxley argues that natural selection is a dangerous force that favors strong, selfish individuals over weaker, altruistic individuals who might bring greater benefit to society as whole. In Huxley's opinion, natural selection can only be kept in check by a constant process of "ethical" evolution within a given community. The "social progress" that comes about as the result of this evolution is the only bulwark against the brutal conscienceless-ness of the struggle for self-preservation. Intra-civilizational fitness is predicated not on brute strength or military capabilities, but on said civilization's ability to evolve ethically to *resist* natural selection—"not so much [on] the survival of the fittest, as [on] the fitting of as many as possible to survive."<sup>26</sup> Yan translates this idea for twentieth-century Chinese readers as follows:

[E]xcelling at protecting all of society [*qun* 群] is often beneficial to [civilizational] survival; not excelling at protecting all of society often leads to extinction. This is an unavoidable force. The shallower the morality of governance, the greater the threat presented by evolution [i.e. If less-fit but ethical men are not protected, the survival of the whole society will be jeopardized]; only as the morality of governance increases [to protect the less fit] does the threat presented by evolution diminish [...] [In an ethical society] not only the fittest survive. Everyone within the people's power to protect and preserve, will all be brought to a state of fitness, so that each survives.<sup>27</sup>

The word *qun* that Yan uses here—meaning "society" or group"—is borrowed very consciously from Warring States era philosopher Xunzi.<sup>28</sup> Xunzi discusses his idea of *qun* in one of his treatises, noting that "when the way of forming community (*qun*) is properly practiced," society will flourish in harmony.<sup>29</sup> And indeed, in using *qun* in his translation of Huxley to

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25. As Benjamin Schwartz notes, however, these works are colored by the "preoccupations" of their translator, and are not entirely faithful to the original. *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), 97-98.

26. Thomas. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, English/Chinese paired volume (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009), 66-68.

27. Yan Fu trans., *Tianyan lun [Evolution and Ethics]*, English/Chinese paired volume (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009), 95-96. Author re-translation of Yan's translation.

28. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 62-63.

29. Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc, 2005), 268.

emphasize the importance of protecting the social organism as a whole (where Huxley's version of the text seems to emphasize the importance of protecting the ethical individual who can in turn help his society advance) Yan "grasped with uncanny appropriateness the perfect watchword for Chinese Social Darwinism as a whole [...]or if there was anything, and there was not much, that almost every Chinese Social Darwinist shared, it was the predilection for the *ch'ün* [*qun*] as *the* important element in the struggle for existence."<sup>30</sup> So whether one agreed with Huxley's take on Social Darwinism or not, the re-introduction, via Yan's translation, of the *qun* as a meaningful social unit would have a tremendous impact on contemporary political discourse.

The Spencerian take on Social Darwinism, in contrast to Huxley's, would revolve around the role that a "high [level of] organization" played in ensuring the continuation of a given lineage in competition with others. As translated by Yan:

Thus, on the matter of evolution, predator and prey, [by competing with one another] both perfect their forms, and together they advance. Not only their physical form advances, but the wisdom of their cohorts does, too. He who is alert knows immediately when he has encountered danger; he who is foolish only realizes too late that he has reached a critical moment. He who knows immediately can spread and prosper; he who realizes too late is gradually exterminated.<sup>31</sup>

Where two societies are evenly matched, conflict between them allows each to constantly improve itself; however, where one is strong and the other weak, conflict can only result in strong societies becoming stronger while weak societies are either absorbed or destroyed. The better "organized" (i.e. more cohesive and cooperative) a society, the better its chances at survival vis-à-vis external competition. So while Huxley advocates ethical reform in order to create a civilization that functions and thrives unto itself, Spencer focuses on the need to organize in order to overcome external threats. Each of these two very

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30. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 63. Emphasis in original.

31. Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology/ Shehui xue yanjiu*, English/Chinese edition, Yan Fu trans., (Shanghai: Shijie tushu chubanshe, 2012), 278. Author re-translation of Yan's translation.

disparate takes on Social Darwinism left its mark on the imaginations of turn-of-the-century intellectuals, who were attempting not only to understand China's historical weakness, but trying to develop a framework by which China might avoid even greater catastrophes in the future. At this time of upheaval and uncertainty, these disparate visions of social progress and strengthening appealed to and influenced different thinkers in different ways as they attempted to formulate their respective visions for China's future.

Reformer Liang Qichao, for one, was deeply influenced by Huxley and believed that society needed ethical reform if it was to remain functional.<sup>32</sup> Concerned by the violence of China's recent past and cautionary tales of other nations that had been brought to their knees by western imperialism,<sup>33</sup> Liang actively endorsed the establishment of a constitutional monarchy so that China's citizens might become more invested in the future of their state while retaining the expertise of the ruling Qing court.<sup>34</sup> After the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 in which he and his mentor Kang Youwei had been involved, Liang and Kang both fled to Japan, which served as their temporary base in exile. From there, they worked to establish the Society to Protect the Emperor (*Baohuang hui* 保皇會), as well as the reformist periodical *Journal of Pure Critique* (*Qingyi bao* 清議報). During this period of exile, Liang spent a number of years traveling extensively throughout Asia and the Americas, appealing for emotional and financial support for the *Baohuang hui* from overseas communities.<sup>35</sup> Liang argued against the total overthrow of the Manchu Qing court (as supported by others, to be discussed below); indeed, he believed that any revolution that brought a new, inexperienced

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32. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 89-94.

33. Karl, *Staging the World*, 39-40.

34. Rankin, *Elite Activism* 249. Karl cites Hao Chang, *Liang Chi'ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), 202.

35. Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawai'i, 1900-1936* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001), 87-88.

government into power would further jeopardize China's sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Instead, he favored shoring up and maintaining a strong central government (while guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of the people in a constitution) in order to ensure China's survival in an increasingly hostile international environment.<sup>37</sup>

For Liang Qichao, the people (*qun* (群)) that would be so crucial to the strengthening of China vis-à-vis Euro-American imperialists was more or less ethnicity- and class-inclusive (though necessarily led by educated elites).<sup>38</sup> The most important part, as far as Liang was concerned, was to shape this people in such a way that it could handle the responsibilities of citizenship, but would not challenge the continued leadership of the Qing court. In his series of essays "On the New Citizen" (*Xinmin shuo* 新民說) written between 1902 and 1906, Liang describes at length the priorities and worldview of the ideal citizen (*min* 民/ *guomin* 國民) and the role he would play in a functioning nation (*guo* 國).<sup>39</sup> For example, one of Liang's primary concerns was the continued encroachment of foreign powers. He reminds his readers of the imperialist exploits of western powers in places like Siberia, Turkey, Asia Minor, South Africa, Hawai'i, Cuba, and the Philippines, and warns that as soon as the foreigners realize the true extent of government corruption and popular civic weakness in China, they will cover the vast tracts of her fertile land in antlike droves.<sup>40</sup> Liang then offers a multi-pronged approach for how the Chinese populace might come together to prevent such an absolute invasion. The

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36. Karl, *Staging the World*, 142-43.

37. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: questioning narratives of modern China* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 171.

38. Karl, *Staging the World*, 99; 118.

39. I choose to translate Liang's 國 (state, nation, country) as "nation" in this selection, as his ideal 國 contains a sense of social unity that I think is better captured by the idea of "nation" than by more geopolitically defined "state" or "country." It should be noted however, that this "nation" is distinct from a "nation" in the sense of a single unified ethnic group (民族), as not only does it have physical political borders, but as Liang envisions it, it is comprised of multiple ethnic groups.

40. Liang Qichao, "Xinmin shuo: lun xinmin wei jinri Zhongguo diyi jiwu," in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 4.

first prong is the development of a sense of “public morality” (*gongde* 公德), without which there can be no real public:

When everyone only behaves morally with respect to themselves, that is called ‘private morality’; when everyone behaves morally with respect to society [*qun* 群], that is called ‘public morality.’ Each is a tool that cannot be lacking from a person’s life. Without private morality, [a nation] cannot be established: if you amass countless numbers of despicable, hypocritical, cruel, stupid, and cowardly men, that is not sufficient to make a nation. If there is not public morality, then [a nation] cannot come together: even if you have countless numbers of judicious, self-aware, modest, hardworking, sincere men, that is still not sufficient to make a nation.<sup>41</sup>

The reason that China is in such a state of decline, he reasons, is that there are many men who are moral in a private sense, but who enjoy the rights afforded to them by society without in turn fulfilling their own responsibilities to society. He goes on to say that the relationship between a man and his nation is like that between a child and his parents; if the man does not use his life, wealth, wisdom and ability in service of the nation, he is committing a kind of impiety.<sup>42</sup> The relationship between the nation and the people is reciprocal: if the people wish to receive the benefits of membership in the nation (rights, strength vis-à-vis foreign powers), the people must dedicate themselves to the greater social body in return. This includes, as Liang goes on to discuss, recognition of the rights of others,<sup>43</sup> as well as development of and belief in a meaningful sense of nation.

For Liang, the nation—a group of people with similar political thoughts and the competence to govern themselves<sup>44</sup>—is defined against four other entities: the individual, the court, foreign powers, and the world at large. In his discussion of the Qing court more specifically, Liang likens it to the management office of a company or the local guild organization of a small city, in that without the oversight of these specialized managerial

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41. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun gongde,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 12.

42. *Ibid.*, 14.

43. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun quanli sixiang,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 34-43.

44. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun guojia sixiang,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 17.



institutions the larger entities they serve (the company, the town, and of course, the nation) would perish. “That [our] nation cannot be without a court is obvious. Thus, I often encourage love of the nation to be extended to love of the court. This is just like the saying, ‘Loving a person and feeling love for their whole household; loving the household and feeling love even for the crows.’”<sup>45</sup> Realizing that the court has grown unpopular among many segments of the population, Liang attempts here to remind his audience of the important function that the court serves (and possibly even to suggest that even those who are against the Manchu court should still participate in the “household,” regardless of their feelings for “the crows” who are largely external to it).

Thus, in addition to being politically active/aware, the “new citizens” that comprise Liang’s ideal society are also persons who possess a strong sense of public morality and mutual responsibility, and would stand up for the rights of themselves and others before giving them up to outsiders in exchange for short-term benefits (despite the fact that Liang’s support of the Qing court would likely be seen as just that by revolutionaries). Indeed, in not singling out the Manchus for criticism and speaking in general terms like “society” and “the people,” rather than in terms of ethnicity where “Manchu” is opposed to “Han,”<sup>46</sup> Liang implies that Manchus are not excluded from his definition of citizenry—provided that they can meet the other requirements.

Other thinkers, however, would adopt a more Spencerian stance, arguing that rather than mutual strengthening and support, the nation’s primary target should instead be to eliminate weakness in order to shore up its defenses against external threats posed by foreigners (where “foreign” included the Manchu Qing court). Indeed, where Liang and other

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45. *Ibid.*, 18.

46. However, even Liang would occasionally allow himself to make this ethnic distinction in moments of great frustration with the Qing court. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 181-182; Rhoads, *Manchus & Han*, 3-4.

reformers preferred that the court remain intact to provide a strong governing core, revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen and Wang Jingwei favored a catabolic approach, wherein the crumbling Manchu apparatus must first be wholly dismantled before China could once again be refashioned into a functioning state. Evidence of the decline of Qing China over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was plentiful: defeat in two Opium Wars, the attrition of the protracted Taiping Rebellion, and, most shockingly, defeat by erstwhile vassal Japan in the Sino-Japanese War ending in 1895 had each contributed to an increasing sense of doubt in the Manchu court's ability to rule. And while foreign aggression was still a factor in the development of nascent Chinese nationalism, the Manchu government itself became the major target of nationalist activity, both for its inability to ward off said foreign aggression, and for what came increasingly to be seen as its irreconcilable foreignness.<sup>47</sup> The Empress Dowager Cixi's 1898 seizure of power and arrest and execution of thinkers involved in the Hundred Days' Reform also inspired further anti-Manchu radicalization among men already inclined to foment change.

Attributing China's woes to the "alien" Manchu court was not without precedent. Indeed, anti-Manchuism had first emerged with the Manchu conquest of Ming China; however, it had gone through a period of decline in the middle of the Qing dynasty as elites and commoners alike came increasingly to view the Qing court as "orthodox" (if authoritarian) rulers.<sup>48</sup> Toward the end of the Qing dynasty, however, this anti-Manchuism was revived, and became a major focus of revolutionaries—men like Sun Yat-sen, Wang Jingwei, as well as more radical revolutionaries like Zhang Binglin and Zou Rong—who believed that many of China's recent calamities were a direct result of the Manchu arrogation of power. Thus, Sun Yat-sen and his followers were simultaneously concerned both with surviving foreign

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47. Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism*, 50; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), 21.

48. Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism*, 20, 29, 34.

aggression and with dismantling the ineffectual Manchu ruling apparatus. As far as Sun was concerned, the Chinese “people” (*min* 民) was almost entirely comprised of ethnic Han; and he staunchly believed that the only way to ensure the preservation of that Han Chinese “people” was ethno-nationalist resistance against all foreign interlopers—this, of course, included both the Euro-Americans and the Manchu barbarians.<sup>49</sup> Sun would later articulate that it had been a lack of Han ethnic solidarity that had allowed the Manchus to conquer them (even though the so-called Han, he argues, had outnumbered the Manchus four thousand to one) in the first place;<sup>50</sup> and that the Han must to come together and fight to reclaim their birthright. For these radical thinkers, the only way to prevent China from collapsing completely under the weight of an ineffectual, illegitimate government on one hand and mounting foreign pressure on the other, was to dispose of the Manchus—in some more drastic cases, even urging that they be slaughtered the way that Han men and women had been slaughtered during the Manchu invasion of the Ming over two hundred years earlier<sup>51</sup>—before establishing a new (non-Manchu) government.

In his 1905 *Minbao* article “Ethnic Citizens” (*Minzu de guomin* 民族的國民) Wang Jingwei 汪精衛 (1883-1944), close friend and disciple of Sun Yat-sen, as well as darling of Sun’s Revolutionary Alliance society (*Tongmeng hui* 同盟會),<sup>52</sup> laid out a vision for the Chinese people that was vastly different from the one proffered by Liang Qichao. In the very first sentence, Wang opposes the Manchus to “my [ethnic] people” (*wo minzu* 我民族—meaning the

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49. Karl, *Staging the World*, 118; Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 123-25.

50. Sun Yatsen, *Sanmin zhuyi* (Taipei: Haiwai chubanshe, 1962), 35.

51. Zou Rong, “Geming jun,” [“Revolutionary Army”], in *Zou Rong ji*, ed. Zhang Mei (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2011), 49.

52. Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals*, 53. Wang would later be vilified as an infamous pro-Japanese collaborator in the 1930s and 1940s, a legacy that has largely overshadowed his earlier contributions to Sun’s revolutionary activities.

Han<sup>53</sup>), setting the tone for the entire piece. He begins by defining an “ethnic group” as a people with a continuous sense of unity who have shared blood lines, language, territory, customs, religion, and “spirit” (*jingshen* 精神).<sup>54</sup> Wang is already making clear his stance that the community in which he is interested is defined by blood—something so immutable that even otherwise assimilated Manchus must be excluded. It is immediately apparent that unlike Liang’s “citizenry” which is defined primarily by its civic responsibility, the “citizenry” that Wang is envisioning is to be demarcated primarily by ethnicity.

In his discussion of the political status of the Han, Wang lays out the relationship between subjugation, assimilation, and extinction in the creation of mono-ethnic states from multi-ethnic polities. This framework, as pointed out by Prasenjit Duara, “can be seen to represent the methodology for comprehending the different lines of evolution (or nonevolution) of races into nations the world over.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Wang seems to follow a somewhat more adversarial, Spencerian brand of Social Darwinism than Liang, arguing that the Han are in danger of being driven to extinction by assimilation into a Manchu state, and must organize to survive. For Wang, the natural order of things is for the Han to assimilate

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53. The origins of ideas of “Han-ness” are very much disputed: some scholars, such as Xu Jieshun, claim to have traced “Han” as an ethnicity back to the “Qin-Han period”; while others, such as James Leibold and Suisheng Zhao, believe that “Han” as an ethnicity in distinction to “Manchu” was more or less invented in the late nineteenth century in response to the same “Social Darwinist” discourse of “superior” versus “inferior” races that had caused such anxiety with regard to Western imperial powers. Xu, “Understanding the Snowball theory of Han Nationality,” in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China’s Majority* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012), 116; Leibold, “Searching for Han: Early Twentieth-Century Narratives of Chinese origins and Development,” in *Ibid.*, 211-13; Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 22.

Whatever its provenance, the category of “Han” would even be employed by the relatively conservative Liang Qichao—whose idea of nationalism was based more in a sense of Pan-Asianness than in the Han-centric ideology of the revolutionaries—to express his dissatisfaction with the current division of power between “Manchus” and “Han.” Use of these divisive categories was obviously not limited to radicals. (However, the more radical thinkers would use the category of “Han” to incite much more aggressive action against the “Manchus.” Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, 181-82; Rhoads, *Manchus & Han*, 3; Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, 22, 64.

54. Wang Jingwei, “Minzu de guomin, pt. one,” [1905] in *Wang Jingwei ji*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guangming shuju, 1930), 1.

55. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 36-37.

other, smaller ethnic groups like the Manchus, rather than the other way around.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout the essay, he criticizes various unfair techniques used by the Manchus to attempt to force the Han to assimilate, including: the wearing of queues, the inclusion of a Manchu language portion of the examinations at the Hanlin Academy, and denial of Han military rights.<sup>57</sup> “As far as the Ming dynasty was concerned,” he writes, “the Manchus were just the next dynasty in the cycle of succession; but as far as China is concerned, and as far as my people (*wo minzu* 我民族) are concerned, [the Manchus] are in reality vile enemies who will destroy our country and wipe out our *entire race* (*wangguo miezhong* 亡國滅種).”<sup>58</sup> By forcing the Han to abandon their own customs for Manchu ones, and by denying them the power to govern themselves, the Qing court had effectively condemned the Han ethnicity to gradual extinction, either by assimilation or—equally terrifying—by the violence of foreign colonization permitted by Manchu weakness.

Even the constitutional monarchy endorsed by Liang, argues Wang, is just another way for the Manchus to continue to subjugate the Han. While in its most perfect form, a constitution could perhaps ensure equality between the two groups, the current structure of power means that the Han must approach the Qing court as supplicants, begging the Manchus to grant them this equality. For this reason, Wang rails against those who consider a constitutional monarchy to be any kind of victory, noting that he “cannot help but detest the way Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao use seductive words to delude the masses.”<sup>59</sup> Wang’s ideal ethnic citizen cannot accept any sort of power-sharing agreement with the Manchus, for to

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56. Wang Jingwei, “Minzu de guomin, pt. one,” 8-9.

57. *Ibid.*, 17, 13.

58. *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis mine. It should be noted that for Wang, “race” seems to be equivalent to “ethnicity”—or is at least an “Asian race” that excludes the Manchus as “others.” This slip in usage is illustrated more clearly when Wang accuses (Han) men who favor a constitutional monarchy that leaves the Manchus in power of forgetting their “racial awareness” (26).

59. *Ibid.*, 24-26.

give the Manchus a say in future governance is already to concede defeat. Where Liang's ideal citizen had only to actively participate in a community under the continued governance of the court, Wang's ideal citizen must be willing to help the Han assume and execute leadership of the government. (It bears noting, however, that while this particular essay seems primarily to be aimed at encouraging anti-Manchu sentiment and provoking thoughts of self-governance, some of Wang's other essays would focus more explicitly on inciting revolution.)

In the second part of the essay, which he claims focuses more exclusively on political issues than on ethnic ones, Wang also rails against the autocratic, elitist nature of the government. For six thousand years, he complains, China has suffered under the autocratic rulership of monarchs (*junquan zhuanzhi* 君權專制); and in the most recent 260 years, under the unfair aristocratic (*guizu* 貴族) rule of the Manchus. Aristocratic governance created inequality, and, he goes on to say, "while there are some scholars who defend the idea of autocratic government, absolutely no one attempts to defend *aristocratic* government."<sup>60</sup> Wang then describes the current social order, wherein Manchus are first-class subjects, and Han civilians constitute the *fourth* class, after Mongol bannermen and Han bannermen. As it turns out, Wang's idea of "class" as a social signifier is inseparable from ethnicity. And while it is undeniable that bannermen categorically enjoyed many privileges that were not extended to Han civilians,<sup>61</sup> Wang's relatively one-dimensional formulation ignores glaring class divisions that existed within the ethnic groups he lists: truly aristocratic Manchu courtiers vs. often relatively poor Manchu bannermen, for example;<sup>62</sup> or Han intellectuals and nouveau-riche merchants vs. uneducated Han laborers. Because class is primarily an ethnic issue for Wang, he declares that (ethnic Han) nationalism is the only way to overturn this

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60. Wang Jingwei "Minzu de guomin, pt. two," [1905] in *Wang Jingwei ji*, 31-32. Emphasis mine.

61. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han*, Chap. 1.

62. *Ibid.*, 49-51.

aristocratic system that has for so long favored Manchus over Han.<sup>63</sup> However, because Wang seems to be appealing to *all* Han regardless of socio-economic status, it can be argued that the ethnic dividing line is the only one that matters to him, and any socio-economic class of Han man would be a welcome participant in the new China he envisions.<sup>64</sup>

Wang Jingwei's vision for a future ethnic state in which the Han have liberated themselves from the control of the Manchus has much in common with that endorsed by the more radical revolutionary Zou Rong 鄒榮 (1885-1905)—a young protégé of the virulently anti-Manchu Zhang Binglin. Zou's 1903 *Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun* 革命軍), in which he decries Manchu abuses against the Han and demands the violent overthrow of the Qing court would, according to Michael Gasster, "become one of the most famous and influential writings of the Chinese revolution."<sup>65</sup> Zou's ultimate goals are not dissimilar from Wang's in that he hopes for a Han-led government following the removal of the Manchus from power. Similar to Wang's vision of the nation, Zou's vision includes a thinking Han populace that is ready to take action. However, in *Revolutionary Army*, Zou calls upon that people to take *violent* action: he calls not only for the overthrow of the "barbarian" government of the "criminal Manchus" (*zei manren* 賊滿人) in Beijing, but for the forcible removal or murder of Manchus living in Han territory, and the execution of the Manchu emperor as a warning against future tyrants.<sup>66</sup> To put it briefly, Zou's ideal citizen—and Revolutionary Army member—is a member of the Han ethnicity who can be stirred to retributive action on behalf of his people and the historical transgressions they have suffered.

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63. Wang Jingwei "Minzu de guomin, pt. two," 46.

64. Of course, the uneducated poor could not read his essays, so they might be excluded in a *de facto* way.

65. Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals*, 38-41.

66. Zou Rong, "Gemin jun," in *Zou Rong ji*, 49.

Taking the above essays of Liang, Wang, and Zou to be definitive representations of the ideologies of their respective groups would of course be a vast oversimplification. Not only did many different viewpoints exist within each of their groups, but over time the positions of groups and individuals within them would evolve as well. However, what I hope to have demonstrated here is the *kind* of debate over the development of a national “people” that was occurring in the early-to-mid 1900s, and offer a potential range of qualities that an activist might hope a future “people” would possess. Liang’s “new citizenry” is fairly heterogeneous: “In ‘*Xinmin shuo*,’ in particular, instead of [reiterating] the prevailing view that regarded the people as the multitude, and as opposed to those in the ruling class, Liang staged the people as encompassing the entire populace of China regardless of the social classes, ages, or genders, at least in theory.”<sup>67</sup> Following Huxley, Liang is primarily concerned with the ethical and social priorities of his “people,” rather than with drawing a line between who is allowed to participate and who is not. Furthermore, as evidenced by his extensive travels and solicitation of support from communities of Chinese sojourners and immigrants around the world, Liang’s imagined “citizenry” could be extended to encompass persons overseas if they proved willing to participate. And while Liang does make several mentions of class issues (particularly in the section on persons who bring benefit to society and persons who only share in the benefits provided by others),<sup>68</sup> class—whether upper class or lower class—does not seem to be a defining characteristic for him. As long as individual members of this citizenry can act with both private and public morality (while still governed by the Manchu court), Liang believes that China can avoid the destruction faced by other failed countries.

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67. Makiko Mori, *Toward a Literature of the Nation: China’s New Intellectual and Literary Discourses of the People from the 1890s through the 1920s*, PhD Dissertation, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 2009. Accessed via ProQuest, October 2012.

68. Liang Qichao, “*Xinminshuo: Lun shengli fenli*,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 83-96.



Wang Jingwei, on the other hand, envisions a “people” that, in a more Spencerian sense, must organize and struggle against that which would assimilate it (the Manchus) if it wants to survive. His ideal people is, first and foremost, a Han people that is struggling to reclaim China for itself. For Wang, “class” is also an important issue inasmuch as he perceives class to be primarily a function of ethnicity (i.e. is another reason for the Han lower class to rise against the Manchu aristocracy); yet he makes no meaningful class distinction within the enormous body of Han civilians, suggesting that Han of any socio-economic status would be welcome participants in his future China. And with regard to geographic proximity, just as Liang Qichao made frequent and lengthy visits to sites overseas to find support, so too, did revolutionaries: Sun Yat-sen in particular spent a great deal of time traveling in search of backing for his *Tongmeng hui*,<sup>69</sup> suggesting that a revolutionary “people” could be just as geographically flexible as was Liang’s reformist one. Finally, the “people” as envisioned by the radical revolutionaries like Zou Rong was very similar to that espoused by Wang, with the exception of increased indignation and militancy.

### *On Enslavement*

But perhaps even more important to the analysis of the coolie novels is an understanding of contemporary discussions surrounding servitude and enslavement. After all, the coolie novels are, at their very core, narrativizations of human experiences of subjugation and deprivation of autonomy. Yet, given the political moment in which the novels were written, it is crucial to understand how these vocabularies were being mobilized to effect a response not just on the visceral, emotional level of individual sympathy, but on the broader level of concern for the future of a state that has been denied the ability to determine its own fate.

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69. McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks*, 89-90.

Another key translation would feed into the conversation intellectuals were having regarding China's recent fate in the early twentieth century: Lin Shu's 1901 translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would emphasize that China and Chinese were neither insensitive nor irrelevant to the ongoing international discourse of "slavery" and "liberation." In his preface to the translation, Lin paints a very grim vision of China's recent past and even more troubling future, all in shades of African slavery: "Recently, the yellow race has gradually come to be treated the same way the black race was treated [...] Because the novel describes [in its depiction of the enslavement of blacks] the future downfall of the yellow race, it is even more tragic."<sup>70</sup> Contemporary commentator Ling Shi likewise noted:

All the peoples of the world are controlled by the whites.[...] Are any of us [in a position] different from the blacks? Thus, this book is not only representative of [the experiences of] the entire black race, it can also be considered representative of [the experiences of] all those races who are controlled by others. When my yellow brethren read this, how can it be anything but awakening from a deep, muddled dream?<sup>71</sup>

Interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was quote obviously related to growing fears that the Chinese would ultimately end up in the same position as black slaves. According to Jing Tsu, it was Lin's translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that was responsible for the transformation of "slave" (*nu* 奴) into a meaningful empathy-inducing category in China;<sup>72</sup> however, as I have already demonstrated, "slave" as a sympathetic (and racially-implicated) category as used in the context of the international coolie trade predated Lin's translation by several decades. If anything, Lin's translation would draw upon the extant social currency of the terminologies of enslavement—and perhaps contribute to a growing sense of urgency—rather than imbuing such currency himself.

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70. Lin Shu, "Preface," in Lin Shu trans., *Heinu yutian lu*, [*Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe], (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1981), 1. Author re-translation; Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, 57.

71. Ling Shi, "Du *Heinu yutian lu*," in *Wan Qing wenxue congchao: xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu juan*, A Ying ed., (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chubanshe, 1960). Facsimile copy: (Taipei: Xin wen feng chuban gongsi, 1989), 280.

72. Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, 56-57.

This is not to downplay the significance of Lin's translation—indeed, the novel was widely read and widely cited.<sup>73</sup> However, as discussed previously, the coolie trade vocabularies and terminologies of enslavement had remained very powerful discursive tools far beyond the moment of their inception, and Lin's decision to translate *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could only serve to reinvigorate those terminologies within contemporary discourse. Recharged vocabularies of “slavery” and “enslavement” obviously offered a poignant means of discussing, in literal terms, the abuse and conditions of servitude suffered by Chinese (and black) laborers at the hands of foreign overseers; at the same time, they allowed for a more figurative discussion of the fate of a China that lacked the ability to think or act on its own behalf—whether due to intellectual or political impediments. Confronted by sociological imperatives to strengthen/liberate society or perish, intellectuals reappropriated this discourse of enslavement which so powerfully encapsulated both a sense of past/imminent bodily subjugation and future potential loss of political autonomy.<sup>74</sup> In fictional and in non-fictional contexts alike, thinkers would similarly draw upon the terminologies of enslavement to rouse their readership to action—or at the very least, to thought.

Opinions varied, however, with regard to what form of enslavement was the most fearful, and even what exactly constituted slavery in the contemporary moment, and. For Liang Qichao, the trope of enslavement operated on a number of levels. With respect to foreign countries, Liang declares that he would prefer the death and bloodshed of a

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73. Ibid., 56-65; Tian Han, “Tan *Hei nu hen*,” (1961), in *Tian Han quanji*, vol. 16 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 477-480.

74. Though I refer throughout this chapter to the “symbolic” or “figurative” discourse of enslavement in the early 20th century, this is not to assert that this discourse was wholly divorced from enslavement in the literal sense. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in my discussions of essays by revolutionaries Wang Jingwei and Zou Rong, Chinese thinkers at this time were still (quite rightly) afraid of the possibility of physical enslavement and real extermination: the threat of Western colonization was still looming very large, and intellectuals at this time could not have known that China would remain a semi-colony only. As such, though I do base much of my analysis on an interpretation of the political and intellectual symbolism within the discourse of enslavement, I am also very aware that any more abstract “symbolic” meaning was not necessarily devoid of fear of enslavement of a more literal kind.

protracted defensive war to the thought of sacrificing even the slightest of rights to the control of foreigners (*tazu* 他族 “other clans,” “other groups” –though by “他族” he seems to mean only westerners, not Manchus).<sup>75</sup> Though he does go on at length in one of the other essays in *Xinminshuo* about the successes and strengths of the white race,<sup>76</sup> he exhorts his readers not to simply prostrate themselves under the power of foreigners,<sup>77</sup> and is extremely critical of those who would do so:

[Some men say:] ‘If someone can make me rich, I am willing to ingratiate myself to him; if someone can help my social position, I am willing to kowtow to him.’ Must we really ask how this [behavior] originated? The reason that men develop this disease has nothing to do with geography or doctrines. Even if geography and doctrines change completely, the basic *slavish* nature (*nuli genxing* 奴隸根性) [of these men] will never change.<sup>78</sup>

The willingness to subjugate oneself to foreigners in the name of status or material benefit is less about geopolitical positioning or about the wisdom of the subjugator’s philosophies than it is about sycophancy and an innate lack of self-respect. It is this “basic nature,” not the immediate territorial issues or philosophical doctrines, that must be changed if a nation that can withstand external threats from others is to be established.

However, for Liang, the relatively concrete enslavement of one man by another is not the most fearful to him. Rather, the most fearful form of enslavement is when one enslaves himself within his own mind—because that is the most difficult type of slavery to escape. In the ninth chapter of *Xinmin shuo*, entitled “On Freedom” (“Lun ziyou” 論自由), Liang discusses four types of metaphorical enslavement to which the minds of the Chinese people have fallen victim: first, enslavement to the ideas of the ancients; second, enslavement to

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75. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun guojia sixiang,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 18.

76. Including their “love of action,” their “willingness to struggle,” and their tendency toward “progress.” Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: jiu yousheng liebai zhi li yi zhang xinmin zhi jiegou er lunji qufa zhi suoyi,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 10.

77. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun guojia sixiang,” in *Yinbingshi quanji* 18.

78. *Ibid.*, 23. Emphasis added.

custom; third, enslavement to circumstances; and fourth, enslavement to sentiment and desire.<sup>79</sup> In using the words “slave” (*nuli* 奴隸) and “enslaved to,” (*nuli yu* 奴隸於) Liang asserts that the mind unable to surmount these obstacles exists in the same state of servitude as physical laborers denied their personal freedom. The inability to think for oneself, to overcome unexpected challenges, or to suppress base human emotions is not just a problem, it is *enslaving* the people. Just as a nation cannot be strong if its people are willing to subjugate themselves to foreigners, neither can it be strong if the peoples’ minds are in shackles. Because enfeeblement is preclusive to true participation in the nation, Liang’s ideal citizen, then, is either free both in body and mind, or is at least in a state of enlightened post-slavery. In the four types of enslavement outlined by Liang, the enfeebled person (whether his servitude is physical, mental, or more sycophantic) is ultimately responsible for his own predicament. And until such time as he either frees himself, or changes his “slavish” nature, he cannot be a true participant in the nation. The discourse of slavery as Liang uses it—as a close equivalent for intellectual myopia and political lethargy—is geared primarily toward domestic critique, rather than toward criticizing any kind of systemic victimization of Chinese by outside forces. Though the end result is subjugation by outsiders, Liang’s primary concern is the basic intellectual shortcomings that makes Chinese men enslavable in the first place.

For others, however, the most fearsome form of slavery was less abstract, and more immediately physical and colonial. For example, in keeping with his strong anti-Manchu stance, Wang Jingwei also resorts to the discourse of enslavement—to describe not intellectual and emotional feebleness as does Liang, but rather the deprivation of power and rights experienced by Han under the Manchus. Wang repurposes these rhetorics of anti-(external)-colonization and wields them against an *internal* colonizer. In his lengthy

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79. Liang Qichao, “Xinmin shuo: lun ziyou,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 49-52.

discussion of various kinds of assimilation that occur within national boundaries, he notes that in the case where a subjugator forces another group to assimilate (as the Manchus had done to the Han), the subjugator assumes for himself “the position of master,” leaving the other no option but to accept “the position of the slave.”<sup>80</sup> Because the Manchus were themselves unwilling to assimilate into the Han majority, he goes on to say, they attempted to assimilate the Han in the hopes that the Han would lose their own sense of “ethnic awareness” (*minzu sixiang* 民族思想) and become more tractable slaves (*xunfu zhi nuli* 馴伏之奴隸).<sup>81</sup> For Wang, then, enslavement is not an intellectual abstraction, but is rather the more concrete real denial of identity and the right of self-determination. Viewed in this light, the physical enslavement of Han men during the coolie trade can only be understood as a symptom of an oppressive system wherein Han subjects were deemed unworthy of protection by the Manchu rulers. Slavery as invoked by Wang has both a victim and a perpetrator, and the only way to overcome it is for the ethnic Han nation to rise together against their common subjugator.

Similarly, Zou Rong also focuses on this particular kind of “enslavement”: that of the Han by the Manchus. In the extremely polemical *Revolutionary Army*, Zou takes the metaphorical discourse of slavery to a new level: just for an idea of scale, Zou uses the word *nu* (奴) meaning “slave” in various permutations (奴隸 [slave], 黑奴 [black African slave], 奴於 [enslaved to], and others) over 90 times over the course of a relatively brief 52 pages. Like Liang Qichao, Zou argues that Chinese men suffer from a “basic slavish nature” (奴隸之根性);<sup>82</sup> and for Zou, this “nature” is similarly problematic because it results in political obsequiousness and victimization by outsiders. However, as far as Zou is concerned, this “nature” is also the reason that Han men are impelled to voluntarily subjugate themselves to

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80. Wang Jingwei, “Minzu de guomin, pt. one,” 7.

81. *Ibid.*, 17.

82. Zou Rong, “Gemin jun,” in *Zou Rong ji*, 41.

the Manchus (and the foreigners) in exchange for wealth or prestige. As such, where some might consider the advancement of a Han official to a high position within the Qing government to be the result of hard work and ambition, Zou sees only the shame of voluntary enslavement:

Zeng [Guofan], Zuo [Zongtang], and Li [Hongzhang] are the best representatives of Chinese who have become slaves. Zeng, Zuo, and Li go, Zeng, Zuo, and Li come, they are gentle and yielding, they toe the line, they do not call attention to themselves, they are obedient, they serve as officials, and they become wealthy—they are like China's manual for how to create slaves! In this entire country, no one is not a slave; in this entire country, no one is not the slave of slaves. Two thousand years ago, we were all slaves, and two thousand years from now, we will certainly all still be slaves!<sup>83</sup>

For Zou, these men are detestable for betraying their own people (each of these three men had also been involved in his official capacity in the suppression of the anti-Qing Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>84</sup>) in the name of wealth and professional stability—and in a way, they doubly betray their people by serving as extremely public positive examples of the kind of life that is obtainable through servitude.

Of course, far more chilling examples of Han subjugation are to be found in the experience of China's lower classes: peasant farmers toil their lives away just to raise the tariffs that are demanded of them by the government, for example. Zou even explicitly links the experiences of the pitiable *zhuzai* and other laborers overseas to Manchu oppression: they have fallen victim to abuse by foreigners as a result of neglect by their own government. According to Zou, oppression-by-tax and willful neglect of the suffering of Han in other countries are just another set of tools the Manchus use to keep the domestic Han population under control.<sup>85</sup> And although Zou raises these examples as cases in which the Manchus oppress the Han (as opposed to the case of the officials in which Han voluntarily submit

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83. Ibid., 45.

84. Editor's footnote, Ibid., 44.

85. Ibid., 20.

themselves), the deeper implication is that the Manchus are only able to use these tools because the Han, in their submissiveness, still allow them to be used.

Zou ends his discussion on the need to eradicate the “basic slavish nature” of Han men with the reprinting of a tongue-in-cheek poem (*Nucai hao* 奴才好 or “It’s great to be a slave!”)<sup>86</sup> written from the perspective of a slave describing how happy he is to be such. After having served the Manchus as a slave, the speaker cheerfully serves the foreigners who need help digging mines or raising an army. He is prepared to perform any task for any master: “I’ve already been a Manchu slave, now I’ll be a foreign slave—my slavish nature (奴性) goes all the way to my core.”<sup>87</sup> The poem becomes absurd in its repeated assertions that “It’s great to be a slave!” but this absurdity is only possible because the slave in the poem is so aware of his own subject position. He knows that he is a slave, and he is *proud* of it. In contrast, real-life Han men who serve the Qing or who serve foreigners—even men like Liang who are, in Zou’s eyes, slaves themselves—may unironically boast about positions that are equivalent to servitude without the same sense of absurdity, because these men lack the self-awareness of the man in the poem. To Zou, however, their pride is no less ridiculous.

For Zou, the challenge is twofold: not only are the men of China inherently enslavable, but most do not even seem to know that they have been enslaved. If their “slavish nature” is truly to be eradicated, then, they must first be made aware of their enslavement; only then, and only via revolution, can they end their servitude and remold themselves into functioning participants in the future Han state.

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86. James Reeve Pusey attributes this poem to Jiang Zhiyu, and points out that it first appeared in the reformist *Qingyi bao* (rather than in a revolutionary publication) in 1901. (*China and Charles Darwin*, 184).

87. Zou Rong, “Gemin jun,” in *Zou Rong ji*, 46.



Each of these three thinkers contributed to an emerging discourse of enslavement that was tightly bound up with their interpretations of Social Darwinism. The trope of enslavability could be used to powerful effect, both to explain Qing China's historical weakness and to predict her future challenges. As they saw it, China's future survival would rely upon the eradication of systemic enslavement that had prevailed in recent decades. For Liang, the most dangerous form of enslavement was of the non-reflexive individual to old thoughts, customary ways of life, and base human instincts; and its outcome was intellectual inflexibility and selfish behavior, both of which were detrimental to civilizational stability. Thus pegged as an intellectual/emotional issue, Liang's "enslavement" must also be addressed by intellectual or educative means—only social and political reform, not revolution, can prevent Chinese society from collapsing upon itself. For Wang, on the other hand, "enslavement" was externally imposed—it was the more concrete denial by Manchus of rights and privileges for Han. If China was ever to become a strong state, the Han would have to cast off their shackles and resist Manchu domination. Zou Rong's take is again similar to Wang's, with the exception that Zou emphasizes that the fate of the Han is partly due to their own "basic slavish nature," and that the Manchus would not have been able to take such advantage of the Han if the Han themselves had not allowed it. So for Wang and Zou, social reform that empowers the erstwhile slave is not sufficient: to be really free, the slave must also struggle against the master for his own survival. For each of these three men, then, freedom from variously-defined "enslavement" would be crucial to the creation of any meaningful future citizenry of China.

Because the idea of "slavery" as an intellectual and political condition preclusive of membership in an activist "people" gained traction through usages such as those presented above, I will argue that contemporary novels that depicted the liberation and enlightenment of the enslaved/involuntary coolie laborer must be read as an exhortation that Chinese raise

themselves out of intellectual, emotional, political, or even occupational servitude and remake themselves from passive political objects into activist advocates for change. From a reformist perspective, this would mean helping to educate the easily-exploitable and encouraging a broadly-inclusive body of Qing subjects to actively oppose foreign domination; from a revolutionary perspective, this would mean coaching ethnic Han to contest the weak, exploitative Manchu leadership that had resulted in both their physical and spiritual enslavement.

In the following discussion of the novels, I demonstrate how the extant discourse of slavery and the coolie trade vocabularies were not just deployed in order to make very particular prescriptions in terms of various permutations of a future “people,” but more importantly insisted that that future “people” be absolutely free from physical, social, and intellectual impediment. The more general political concerns of the era (race, ethnicity, class, form of governance) are obviously reflected within the novels as well; but it is specifically on the level of the coolie trade vocabularies and of the deeply-entrenched symbolism of enslavement that the most important messages of the novels are conveyed.

### **Two Southern Boycott Novels: *Bitter Society* and *Golden World***

The first two novels to be discussed both emerged out of a very particular phenomenon: the 1905 boycott against American goods. Originating with the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce in the spring of 1905, the boycott would eventually spread, to varying degrees, throughout China’s trading ports and urban centers, as well as to Chinese communities in other countries.<sup>88</sup> A number of factors had contributed to the decision to implement this boycott against American goods: first, there was the general mistreatment of Chinese in the US, both individually and institutionally, coupled with an evident lack of

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88. Guanhua Wang, *In Search of Justice*, 108-115.

respect for China as manifested in the US government's behavior toward Chinese since the beginning of large-scale immigration. Then had come the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred entrance of Chinese laborers, but not laborers of other nationalities. The 1888 Scott Act then revoked Chinese laborers' right to return to the US after brief trips abroad; the Geary Act of 1892 not only renewed Exclusion for another 10-year term, but also required all Chinese in the US to register with the government.<sup>89</sup> In 1901, the anti-foreign Boxer Uprising was decisively quashed by a coalition of eight foreign armies (including the US) who would demand an exorbitant indemnity from China. In 1902, Exclusion came around for renewal yet again in the US, and this time, would remain in place for 60 years.<sup>90</sup>

More immediately, however, 1904 brought heated debates over what to do in the impending expiration of the 1894 Gresham-Yang Treaty between the US and China, which had "provided for the absolute exclusion of Chinese laborers for ten years and placed further limits on Chinese returning to the United States."<sup>91</sup> The Chinese community in the US, anxious over what might result from further restrictions on immigration, began to petition the Qing government via wire and telegram, begging it not to accede to American pressure.<sup>92</sup> On the eve of the Gresham-Yang Treaty's expiration, the Qing government, facing mounting pressure both from Chinese in the US and from the domestic public, decided not to renew the one-sided treaty; the US government, for its part, continued to push the Qing government to accept a new treaty that left intact most of the terms of the old one. Disagreements over the handling of these negotiations were the spark that ignited the boycott that began in Shanghai in 1905 and spread through southern China over the course of several months.<sup>93</sup> While the

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89. *Ibid.*, 32-33.

90. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 218.

91. Wong, *China's Anti-American Boycott*, 20.

92. Wang, *In Search of Justice*, 81.

93. Wong, *China's Anti-American Boycott*, 20-30.

Qing government initially adopted a policy of non-interference with the boycott, US diplomatic pressure, coupled with fear that the boycott would flare up into a wider social movement, forced the court to come down in opposition to the boycotters by the fall of 1905.<sup>94</sup>

Short-lived though it may have been, the boycott resulted in a flurry of activity: though there were some disagreements within the movement (for example, over whether merchants should simply cease to order [*buding* 不定] new American goods, or whether all consumers should refuse to use [*buyong* 不用] even those American goods that had already been purchased),<sup>95</sup> many segments of urban society came together to carry out the campaign. Businessmen stopped carrying American goods, consumers stopped using them, and men of letters spread word about the boycott via handbills, plays, and even novels to ensure that information on the boycott was available to broad segments of the population.<sup>96</sup> The resulting works of fiction and drama attempted to impress the importance of the boycott upon their audiences in a number of ways; the novels with which we are concerned today attempted to do this by connecting, in their readers' minds, contemporary anti-foreign sentiment with the familiar tale of foreign abuse and humiliation of Chinese during the years of the coolie trade.

Historic coolie trade experience had already been so heavily encoded with all of the traumatic vocabularies discussed in the previous chapter that any novel invoking coolie experiences would necessarily evoke a sharp sense of injustice and historical violence; but even more significantly, those vocabularies would resonate among a forming public whose leading intellectuals were already expressing concern about the very real threat of foreign (whether Euro-American or Manchu) dehumanization and enslavement of all Chinese. The

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94. *Ibid.*, 178-181.

95. Wang, *In Search of Justice*, 132-133.

96. *Ibid.*, 112, 135.

novels, then, are not merely reflections upon traumatic historical experience, but rather give voice to the as-yet-unassuaged fear that foreign powers would colonize China in its entirety and convert all of its subjects into a disposable, anonymous labor force. As such, for the boycott-era reader, this narrativization of violences related to the historical trade would not only have evoked a strong emotional response as a reminder of past injustice, but would also have been read as analogous to the precarious contemporary situation. Thus, while depiction of each type of trauma would contribute to the overall effectiveness of the novel as a vehicle for pro-nationalist ideology, the reason that those traumas would resonate so intensely with readers was very much tied up in the fact that those traumas were all manifestations of the greater phenomenon of enslavement (whether by foreigners or by Manchus) which at the time was still perceived as a very real threat to the survival of a Chinese society.

### *Bitter Society*

*Bitter Society* was printed by the Shanghai Book Integration Office (上海圖書集成局), and distributed by the *Shenbao* publishing house in 1905.<sup>97</sup> By the 1870s and 1880s, the *Shenbao* newspaper had already made its name as a “progressive and even slightly disruptive publication that fostered elite activism.”<sup>98</sup> *Shenbao* reported actively on the widespread famine of 1878 and published the names of aid donors in order to elicit private donations in the absence of effective relief efforts from the central government.<sup>99</sup> During the 1880s, *Shenbao* articles had made arguments supporting a more representative form of government, and vociferously protested French aggression during the Sino-French War (1884-1885); after the end of the disastrous Sino-Japanese War in 1895, another *Shenbao* article declared that the “people” would not stand by while the Qing court and its officials allowed China to be

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97. A Ying, “Guanyu,” in *Fanmei*, 11.

98. Rankin, *Elite Activism*, 142.

99. *Ibid.*, 145-146.

victimized; in 1900, a *Shenbao* editorial criticized the Manchu court and its support of the Boxers, which had made China vulnerable to foreign incursion once again.<sup>100</sup> Editorials in the paper briefly took a more conservative turn after the 1898 purge following the failed Hundred Days Reform, at which time editor Huang Xiexun undertook a fairly active personal campaign to criticize the reformist ideas of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao; however, in 1904, due to his rising unpopularity at the paper, Huang would be replaced by the more revolutionary-minded Jin Jianhua. *Shenbao* would not only come to disown its previous opposition to reform, but would once again “express an anti-Qing revolutionary sentiment.”<sup>101</sup> That *Shenbao* elected to take on the distribution of *Bitter Society* just one year later suggests that the publishing house felt the novel’s aims to be compatible with its own relatively radical agenda at this time.

The *Bitter Society* that is today extant comprises only the first half of what was intended to be a two-part novel (the incompleteness of the novel may perhaps an indication of waning tides of the boycott).<sup>102</sup> The authorship of the novel is unknown, but the preface to the original states that it was written by Chinese who had traveled to the US.<sup>103</sup> Mao Defu, editor of a 1985 republication speculates in his foreword that the character Li Xinchun is most likely the fictionalized persona of the author.<sup>104</sup> However, Guanhua Wang offers a more interesting possibility, arguing that “the work’s content and linguistic style suggest instead that [...] it is a collaborative effort by Shanghai writers and Chinese American informants.”<sup>105</sup>

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100. Ibid., 163, 151-156, 166-167, 195.

101. Song Jun, *Shenbao de xingshuai* (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1996), 60-68.

102. Anon., *Ku shehui [Bitter Society]*, [1905] in *Kushehui/Huangjin shijie*, Mao Defu ed., (Zhongzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1985), 139. Ed. note.

103. A commenter at a conference claimed that the novel was written by Wu Jianren; however, this author has been unable to verify that claim.

104. Mao Defu, “Foreword” to *Kushehui/Huangjin shijie*, 3.

105. Wang, *In Search of Justice*, 136.

With this latter possibility in mind, the choice of the coolie trade and credit-ticket immigration to the US as the backdrop for the novel is an interesting one in that if Wang's analysis is correct, the mainland writers and US contributors alike must have expected the events of the novel to resonate with the domestic Chinese readership. This would in turn suggest that the writers in Shanghai expected their readers to be moved by the fate that befell the coolies, and that the US contributors still felt their experiences to be relevant to readers back in China.<sup>106</sup> If the novel was indeed written collaboratively, its authorship seems to gesture optimistically toward a sense of common cause among these two apparently disparate groups. Even if the novel was not written collaboratively, the social milieu of the novel and the range of characters and situations presented therein are suggestive of a desire for solidarity among different classes and social groups in response to foreign domination and feebleness of the Qing court.

The novel is preceded by a short vignette that is in fact a thinly-veiled adaptation of the historical myth about the virtuous brothers Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊. In the original version of the legend, chronicled in the biographies (*liezhuan* 列傳) of the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), Boyi and Shuqi are two brothers from the Shang dynasty. After each attempts (out of a sense of personal ethics) to defer their father's estate to the other, they run away together to the neighboring state of Zhou, where they have heard the ruler is wise and benevolent. When the king dies his son decides, against mourning etiquette, to attack the Shang before completing the mourning period for his father. Boyi and Shuqi are appalled at this lack of filiality, and refuse to eat the grains of a land now governed by such a ruler.<sup>107</sup> They subsist for a time on wild greens, but ultimately, they die of starvation in the wilderness. Boyi and Shuqi are lionized for posterity as paragons of righteousness, having chosen on more

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106. This is not to suggest that all Chinese immigrants to the US felt this way, I am merely speculating on what the motivations may have been for the hypothetical contributors, specifically.

107 Sima Qian, "Boyi liezhuan," in *Shiji*, reproduced at The Chinese Text Project, <http://ctext.org/shiji/bo-yi-lie-zhuan> (accessed 20 July 2015).

than one occasion to sacrifice their own material comfort rather than compromise their personal ethics.

In the *Bitter Society* adaptation, two brothers from Qingzhou (Gubo 古伯 “Ancient Bo” and Gushu 古叔 “Ancient Shu”) venture away from home to make a living together after (as in the original version) having each selflessly refused to accept the family’s limited assets for himself. However, wherever they go, Gubo and Gushu are taken advantage of and cheated, and they are horrified to discover that money is the only “friend” or “family” that anyone cares about anymore. Defeated, the brothers return to Qingzhou to eke out a meager existence, foraging for food in the wild. This anecdote sets the tone for the novel that follows: in contemporary society, there is no room for the old exemplars—revered as they may be in principle, in reality there is no place for virtuous men to make an honest living in a China where everyone seeks to improve his own status at the expense of others. (Furthermore, since the original parable of Boyi and Shuqi is about refusal to be complicit in the immorality of a usurping dynasty, it seems fair to read this vignette as quite probably a critique against the Qing dynasty, and at the very least a refusal to eat the grains of an inhumane, venal society that has usurped the one that they knew before.)

The main story begins by introducing Ruan Tongfu, an educated but impoverished member of a family with Suzhou origins, who has lived elsewhere for most of his life. Unable to make ends meet, Ruan decides to return to his familial hometown, only to find work to be just as scarce there, and his relatives cold and unwilling to help him. Ruan’s neighbor Li Xinchun, a schoolteacher, is likewise having difficulty supporting himself and his family, and the two men eventually decide to go to Shanghai in search of better economic opportunities.<sup>108</sup>

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108. *Ku shehui* [*Bitter Society*], 7-25.



Meanwhile, the once-wealthy wunderkind Teng Zhuqing, from Nantong in Jiangsu, has had disastrous luck in two business ventures (the first was the failure of a legitimate venture; the second, the collapse of some kind of illegal scheme to which he merely lent his once-good name). His friend, Zhuang Mingqing, whisks him away to Suzhou just in time to avoid suffering violent consequences at the hands of his shady business partners. Like Ruan and Li, Teng and Zhuang also decide to leave Suzhou for Shanghai, where they see posters from a Guangdong-based company recruiting laborers to go overseas. The two men make their way to Guangdong, and are delighted when they encounter Lu Jiyuan, an acquaintance from Suzhou. When Teng daydreams about serving as a middleman for the company, recruiting laborers from as-yet-untapped Jiangbei (in Teng's words, Jiangbei men are "more capable of enduring suffering" than men from Guangdong), Lu insists that this idea seems ill-conceived, as coolies from Jiangbei would be at a linguistic disadvantage among a largely Cantonese-speaking population. However, the three men do eventually go together to a recruiter's office, hoping to find secretarial work on board one of the coolie ships. The recruiter happily enlists them, but when they are locked into a dark cabin on a ship to Peru, they realize that they have been duped, and have fallen victim to the very system by which they had hoped to profit. As they soon discover, they are not the only people from Jiangsu aboard the ship, however: Ruan and his wife and daughter are also on board.<sup>109</sup>

Aboard the ship, the coolies are treated abominably by Chinese and Peruvian overseers alike. One of the Chinese overseers, from Guangdong, is even cruel to other people from Guangdong (who comprise the majority of the coolies), to whom (Lu Jiyuan naively believes) he should be showing place-based loyalty. The overseers administer beatings with the least provocation, and by the time the ship arrives in Callao, the death toll is high. The unfortunate

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109. *Ibid.*, 26-57.

Ruan Tongfu, one of our protagonists, is among the deceased.<sup>110</sup> The state of the hold as overseers attempt to lead coolies off the ship is described in a particularly gruesome scene worth quoting at length:

There were some who could truly not walk, and stumbled onto the floor; they were kicked [by the Chinese deck hands], resulting in gaping, bleeding wounds on their heads, and not allowed to rest. A group remained behind, pressed against each other, in a chaotic heap. Upon seeing them, the [Chinese] deck hands yelled, “What’s going on? Get the fuck up!” The heap gave a low moan in response, but remained motionless. The deck hands felt that there was something strange about this, then noticed the putrid stench. They clamored up to the deck, and with a nauseous feeling in their throats, they reported it to the foreign overseers. The foreigners first applied some disinfectant under their noses before approaching, and called the [Chinese] deck hands to pull off the top layer [of people]. Before they started pulling, the [whole pile] was motionless. But as soon as they began to pull, even those with hearts of steel wanted to cry. The faces of the 70 or 80 bodies lying flat at the bottom [of the pile] were covered in blood and grime, and it was impossible to tell whether they were covered in [filthy] clothes or [rotting] flesh. All that was visible in the puddles of congealed fluids and blood was that the chains that had been locked around their wrists and ankles were off. The foreigners bent to look closer, and realized that [the coolies] were dead; they had torn the skin off their hands and feet, they had broken their bones [trying to remove the shackles]. [The foreigners’ mouths] suddenly flooded with saliva and they vomited uncontrollably.<sup>111</sup>

The Peruvian overseers recover almost instantly from their shock, however, and order the Chinese deck hands to dispose of the bodies. When the stunned deck hands protest, saying that some are still alive, the foreigners kick and beat them until they do as they are told. Later on, we find out that the Chinese deck hands are beaten again and imprisoned as punishment for having allowed so much loss of potential profit.<sup>112</sup> Whereas the coolies see each death as the loss of an individual and a fellow victim, the administrators of the coolie trade deal in numbers. Despite the harrowing experience of the discovery of the pile of bodies, the foreign overseers are only temporarily shaken from their resolve; whether alive or dead, the Chinese body is only an object of profit (potential or lost) to the foreigners, rather than a person whose passing is to be mourned.

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110. Ibid., 58-77.

111. Ibid., 74-75, author translation.

112. Ibid., 75-76.

Those who have managed to survive the journey find themselves in horrifying circumstances of a different kind: on their first night in Peru, they sleep cramped up on the floors of tiny thatched huts, chained by the neck to other Chinese. Rain comes in through the thatched roof, and there is no door to keep out the cold night wind. The next morning, they are led in chains through the forests to Lima to be sold. In the city, onlookers gawk at them, calling to their friends to come look at the “Chinese convicts.”<sup>113</sup> Regardless of who any of them might have been in China, they all now share equally in the humiliation of servitude.

The coolies’ story ends here, before they ever start working—thus sparing the reader from the litany of accounts of barbarity and death that would surely have ensued. There is a parallel story arc, however: once the ship has dropped off its human cargo in Peru, it returns to Hong Kong, where it picks up a different class of passenger: those who are able to pay their way to the Americas, or have had their passage paid for via credit-ticket system. Whether laborers or small businessmen, these passengers are able to move about freely, and are seen to chat and laugh. On this trip, we meet again with Li Xinchun, who is on his way to San Francisco for business. When he arrives, he and a friend set up a tailor’s shop in Chinatown.<sup>114</sup> The work is pleasant enough, but the times are dangerous for Chinese in California:

Every day, there were people throwing rocks or bricks at the door, causing such a ruckus that one couldn’t enter or leave the building. At night, all one heard was the endless cacophony of gunshots, explosions, and screams for help [救命]. In the morning, upon inquiry, one would always find that several people had been injured or robbed. Indeed, there was hardly a day that passed peacefully, hardly a night of restful sleep.<sup>115</sup>

This passage speaks to a kind of warfare, both physical and psychological, carried out by white Californians: never allowed a moment of peace, never sure when they might be

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113. *Ibid.*, 77-79.

114. *Ibid.*, 86-100.

115. *Ibid.*, 100, author translation.

attacked, Li and his friends were never allowed to feel truly comfortable in their new surroundings, and were forced to remain constantly on guard, lest the enemy take advantage of a moment of inattention. Furthermore, no mention is made of attempts to seek compensation or police assistance, so it seems that Li and his friends felt that they had no recourse to legal protection. As mentioned previously, violence against Chinese in the US was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century; and while large-scale mob violence did eventually catch the attention of the Qing government, there were probably innumerable smaller-scale attacks on Chinese that went unreported and unpunished, whether for fear of retaliation, or resignation to the fact that their appeals to justice would be ignored.

After they have been in San Francisco for about a year, a friend informs the pair that the Chinese government has just signed a treaty preventing the immigration of Chinese laborers to the US, and that within fifteen days, all Chinese immigrants already in the country would have to register.<sup>116</sup> Frustrated, Li responds, “How can this be? How is it that our government has agreed to these terms without even investigating the reality of our situation?”<sup>117</sup> Shortly thereafter, an acquaintance named A-shuang, who has legitimately registered, is caught without his paperwork in a surprise interrogation. He and his family are soon deported.<sup>118</sup>

Xinchun and his friends in the US have a number of discussions about the Qing government and any hopes they might have for support from China. However, those prospects are extremely dim: Xinchun recounts a story about a Qing diplomat who is assaulted by police in San Francisco (and who is so humiliated that he later commits suicide). Wang Bofu dejectedly responds, “[our government and ministers] can’t even protect themselves; how

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116. *Ibid.*, 100-101.

117. *Ibid.*, 100.

118. *Ibid.*, 101-4.

can they protect us?”<sup>119</sup> In a later conversation, the friends discuss the priorities of the court, lamenting that “China’s officials’ love for money [is so great] that no other person even comes close [to such avarice]; so what do they care whether China is being humiliated [by foreigners] or not?”<sup>120</sup> While the Chinese far away in America suffer, the court in Beijing lives in opulence, handing out empty titles and living in veritable cities unto themselves. Furthermore, as Xinchun points out, European heads of state only travel for very important business and send emissaries to settle lesser concerns; meanwhile, Qing princes cavort around the world for inane meetings that, if they had any sense of dignity, they would send ministers to attend. It seems to Xinchun that the princes care more about traveling and having fun than effectively carrying out their duties.<sup>121</sup> While the characters never go as far as to suggest that the Qing court should be removed from power, they do on several occasions register their discontent with what they perceive to be its weakness and venality.

Xinchun and the others ultimately decide to return to China to warn others not to risk their lives and their livelihoods by coming to the US. While on the boat back to China, they meet a group of Chinese students: some have been kicked out of the US for having worked part time while at university, and thus have been reclassified as illegal “laborers”; others never even stepped foot on American soil, having been turned back in the port for not having brought enough money with them to cover full tuition for their entire degree. One of the students laments: “Everywhere we Chinese (*huaren* 華人) go, we are the whipping boys for others; the Americans have their knives at our throats even worse than the others do. Our government is too weak to be relied upon, and the words of our ministers are insufficient to bring about any change. We must ensure our own safety, that is our only recourse.”<sup>122</sup>

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119. Ibid., 120.

120. Ibid., 126.

121. Ibid., 126-27.

122. Ibid., 133-34.

Xinchun and the student debate the best way forward, and decide to start a movement to cease all trade with Americans (an obvious reference to the actual boycott) while bringing home as many laborers from the US as possible and creating employment for them. If the Chinese laborers overseas can be rescued, and “if we can establish the necessary infrastructure to create prosperity [for all],” Li argues, “then in ten or twenty more years, wouldn’t China become a *golden world*?”<sup>123</sup> On the novel’s final page, Lu Jiyuan and the beleaguered Teng Zhuqing re-enter the narrative—much to Li’s joy—and it is implied that they too will commit themselves to Li’s ambitious plan to save China and Chinese abroad from further victimization.

#### The Coolie Trade Vocabularies and Political Activism

The ideology behind the novel is made clear in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is the choice to express its principal conceit in the vocabularies of the coolie trade—a phenomenon that had long been understood as synonymous with slavery in the public imagination. The novel is, first and foremost, about the present danger posed by foreign colonialism and a lack of cohesion among the populace of China. The coolie trade vocabularies allow the author to criticize the foreign powers responsible for China’s geopolitical decline (whether Euro-American or Manchu) while simultaneously demonstrating that the Chinese populace must take responsibility for the nation’s redemption. The sense of violence that inhered in the coolie trade vocabularies meant that the author could be sure to elicit an emotional response from his readers; at the same time, by slightly manipulating actual coolie experience and intentionally crafting a narrative that embellished upon certain aspects of that experience, he could in turn foster a particular sense of public/community

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123. Ibid., 137-38. Emphasis added.

that might not have arisen organically from straightforward reportage on original violences themselves.

The humanitarian violences caused by the trade—physical abuse, emotional hardship, and a general sense of fear—are a significant component of the narrative itself, and indeed comprise a major reason that the genre of “coolie fiction” struck such a powerful chord with its readership. Before they even arrive at their destination, the men experience fear of what awaits them, the emotional distress of being separated from their families, concern over what will happen to their families if they are never able to return to China, and the horror of watching men die all around them in the hold of the ship. They begin almost immediately to process and lament their situation. Yet, the physical violence they endure and to which they bear witness both on the ship and upon arrival in Peru is more horrifying still. The sheer amount of suffering portrayed (and implied) in the novel demands that the reader sympathize with the plight of the protagonists—regardless of their previous shortcomings. Indeed, even Teng Zhuqing, who was not only at best irresponsible and at worst a crook, but who once dreamily considered selling men into cooliehood himself, becomes immediately and universally sympathetic as a result of this violent victimization.

As the men begin to comprehend the fate to which they have consigned themselves, they also begin to intuit the extent to which the foreigners view them as disposable or as inhuman animals. The author’s descriptions of the coolies’ newfound circumstances reflect an attempt on the part of both the author and his fictionalized subjects to grapple with the externally-imposed dehumanization so crucial to the profitable execution of the trade: on board the ship, for example, the coolies are fed only rock-hard bread—and never enough of it to ever be full—in a manner that “can only be called ‘feeding pigs.’”<sup>124</sup> A short time later, the “shelter” with which the coolies are provided in Peru is described as “truly, not equal to a pig

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124. *Ibid.*, 72.

shed.”<sup>125</sup> These unfortunate human *zhuzai*, though perhaps subaltern members of their own population, are experiencing for the first time what it means to be reduced to non-humans by others. They are provided with the bare minimum (and for many, even less than the bare minimum) required for physical sustenance, while denied, because “inhuman,” dignity, compassion, and personhood. In the protagonists’ cognizance that they are being treated as sub-human, the author nods to earlier discourses on the dehumanization inherent to the trade, expecting these vocabularies to resonate with his readership on two levels simultaneously: the level of historical injury and of the level of contemporary outrage over similar treatment of Chinese in the US.

The depiction of these two forms of violence—physical/emotional violence and denial of personhood—is crucial to the aims of the novel. On one level, these portrayals provoke a strong visceral response from an indignant reader, ensuring that he becomes emotionally involved in the fate of these men (and their country); and indeed, the cruelty the protagonists endure is what makes them all sympathetic characters, in spite of what or who they might have been prior to their victimization. On another level, however, these portrayals reinforce circulating tropes of anti-foreignism, which would be of particular significance in the moment of the boycott. In emphasizing foreign brutalization of Chinese persons in two discrete environments, the novel criticizes not just these two particular foreign powers, but more abstractly a global system wherein any Euro-American power is free to treat Chinese as less-than-human. The boycott, though ostensibly about American mistreatment of Chinese, can thus also be seen as a more general (belated) response to foreign mistreatment of Chinese more broadly and an attempt to reclaim a sense of moral imperative in the wake of widespread anti-Chinese discrimination and intimidation.

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125. *Ibid.*, 78.



In addition to physical violence and demeaning treatment at the hands of foreigners, the coolies also experience de-positioning at multiple points during their journey. The first instance of de-positioning occurs during their capture. The quick, deceptive reversal in Teng, Zhuang, and Lu's position, wherein they go from hoping to be employed in administering the trade to becoming victims themselves, is both a comment upon the danger inherent in trusting anyone in this new, corrupt society, as well as a marker of the beginning of the protagonists' conversion into fungible commodities. By dint of their education and previously-held social positions, they had assumed themselves to be entitled to participation in the trade on the level of traffickers, rather than as traffickees. (Our protagonists are far too stunned by this reversal to appreciate its irony, however.) Upon their arrival in Peru, the fact that they are ultimately perceived as "criminals" and "convicts" as they are marched through the streets of Lima only serves to reinforce the complete negation of any previous social status they might once have held. As mere outsider-"criminals" in a strange land, they become more or less deprived of any sense of social identity. They are completely alienated from the lives they once lived as well as from those lives they had *hoped* to live via participation in the trade.

And yet, it is this traumatic loss of position, when coupled with the violence the men experience and witness, that effects the total rupture between their past and their present. First, because they are no longer preoccupied by self-centered concerns about profit, about paying the rent, about feeding themselves—that is to say, because their own immediate survival is no longer in their control—these men become free to consider much larger issues of public morality, of China's global position and what their potential roles might be in improving that position. Secondly, whatever socioeconomic or political or geographic position these men may have held previously, the coolie trade is a great equalizer, and has erased any and all of the differences that might have once separated these men from one another. As

coolies, they are now all on equal footing: regardless of place of birth, class, education, or even geographic proximity, any man victimized by the coolie trade (or by foreign oppression more generally) shares in the new common identity of “us” as pitted against the foreign “them.”

For example, though the majority of the coolies on the ship are, as has been noted, Cantonese speakers from Guangdong and its surrounding areas, Zhuang, Teng, and Ruan each hail from various locations in Jiangbei 江北 (lit. “North of the River”). All three pass from Suzhou to Shanghai (the base of *Shenbao* and its readership, incidentally) before proceeding to Guangdong where they board the coolie ship. According to Emily Honig, by the late nineteenth century, people from the vaguely defined region of “Subei” (understood by many as anywhere in Jiangsu north of the Yangtze River) comprised their own “ethnic” group in Shanghai; though they came from the same “Han” stock as Shanghai residents, and were distinguishable only by language, *Subei ren* 蘇北人 came to be categorically looked down on as poor, unsophisticated, tacky, and low-class by their neighbors. In the wake of the devastation of the Taiping Rebellion, people from Jiangbei flocked to Shanghai in increasing numbers, seeking both refuge and opportunity, a phenomenon the local population tried desperately to discourage.<sup>126</sup> Thus, though these characters are from an imagined space that was, for the Shanghai readership, synonymous with backwardness, the reader is clearly supposed to identify with them. True, each of the men is educated, so we know that they are not of a low class intellectually speaking; however, it is highly likely that the contemporary reader would not have been able to help but to identify and empathize with these men, who in other contexts would be viewed as a despicable social other. The focus on subaltern groups (both the *Subei ren* and the coolies, who in general tended to be of lower class background) suggests that where the survival of the country is at stake, the “people” has a responsibility

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126. Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity*, Chaps. 1-3.

to support and seek support from all walks of life, and should not be concerned with the class composition of its membership. Though perhaps led by activist elites, the “people’s” power could only come from widespread popular support and participation; as such, *Jiangbei ren* and *Shanghai ren* would have to put aside their differences and focus on what they had in common: the victimization of China and her people.

The de-positioning that takes place over the course of the novel also erodes the implied class distinctions between two distinct groups of Chinese in the Americas: the indentured coolies in Peru, and the credit-ticket passengers who went to the US. While a continent away from the coolies, Li is not unconnected from the world they inhabit—he is a friend of Ruan Tongfu, and is acquainted with others who find themselves aboard the coolie ship (and even travels to the US on a later voyage of that same ship!). The personal intimacy of these characters and the palimpsestic reuse of the ship forces these two events—abuses related to the coolie trade to Latin America and abuses related to immigration and Exclusion in the US, events that might have been understood as separate phenomena, affecting different classes of Chinese—into the same cognitive space. In this way, the experiences of the poor victims of the coolie trade and of the (somewhat) wealthier victims of discrimination in the US are combined into a single category of “overseas” experience that is symptomatic of China’s weak geopolitical position. The imagined “people” rallies around both groups, even if one tends to be of lower social standing and is slightly removed from the proximate causes of the boycott.<sup>127</sup>

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127. It is important to note, however, that despite the varied socio-economic class position of the principal characters in the novel, the two most significant male characters are both educated: Ruan Tongfu is a doctor of Chinese medicine; Li Xinchun used to teach at a local school. Because the average person kidnapped or tricked into indenture appears to have been a day laborer or a petty merchant of some kind,<sup>127</sup> the intentional choice of more intellectual protagonists is significant. One possible explanation is that Ruan and Li are simply reflections on the identities of educated authors/informants; another is that they were written to create maximum impact for the novel’s readership. I suspect that this gap between the “average” coolie/overseas laborer and these fictionalized versions is the space wherein the authors attempted to create a deeper connection for literate readers who might have had less compassion for uneducated protagonists.

In addition to gesturing toward a “people” in which both class and educational background are elided, violent de-positioning also disrupts the idea of geographical proximity as a necessary condition of membership. *Shenbao*’s readership would have had to realize that Chinese in China and in the US alike shared in China’s victimhood: the Qing government’s inability to protect its territory from foreign incursion had resulted in humiliation, the cession of territory, and steep indemnities; and its inability to withstand diplomatic pressure from the US government had resulted in the Exclusion Act and other discriminatory legislation against Chinese in the US. When appeals sent by Chinese in the US to the Qing government asking it to reject American restrictions on Chinese immigration ultimately proved unsuccessful, intellectuals and merchants in China took up the torch on their behalf—and thus the boycott was born. As both the activism of the boycott and this novel that came out of it demonstrate, Chinese in the US could still be imagined as part of the Chinese “people”—violence against them was cause for concern, despite the geographic distance that separated the two continents. It is not surprising, then, that a number of Chinese emigrants throughout the Americas (and parts of Asia) could in turn imagine themselves to be a part of this “people,” supporting the activities of Liang or Sun and making generous contributions to political movements in China.<sup>128</sup>

Thus, the traumatic violence and de-positioning experienced and witnessed by victims of the trade—and of American legislation—in fact create common ground among persons who might previously have considered themselves to have nothing in common. Writ large, of course, this complete divestment of social position can be interpreted as a plea to those who remained within China to similarly disregard any superficial hindrances to unity and to focus instead on the commonalities that would make a future “people” strong.

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128. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, 126-27. This is by no means to assert that all Chinese abroad supported Sun Yat-sen. Some Chinese in the Americas would oppose Sun and support more moderate reformers like Kang Youwei, while others likely took no sides at all.

Of course, the primary task that faces this idealized future people is the seizure of political power and defense of those who are unable to defend themselves. This is not to say that the author favored revolution outright, but that there is a clear sense in the novel of political impotence (both of the Qing court vis-à-vis the foreigners and of the Han vis-à-vis the Qing court), and an overall need to reclaim some of the sovereignty that had been traumatically arrogated by outsiders. Though the novel itself is not explicitly anti-Manchu, there is a clear sense not only that the court has failed in its duty to protect the polity, but also that popular (Han-led) activism might at least provide an alternative to the disappointing governance of the Qing.

For starters, the author reflects upon the drastic change in China's global position that has occurred over the course of the Qing dynasty. After his timely promotion from coolie to deckhand, Lu Jiyuan learns of the recent case of the *Maria Luz* (a coolie ship carrying Chinese bound for Peru, which was forced by inclement weather to stop in Yokohama) and discusses it with A Da, another deckhand.<sup>129</sup> Conditions aboard the ship were so unbearable that several coolies had jumped overboard in the Yokohama harbor in hopes of getting the attention of foreigners there. When the Japanese authorities eventually boarded the ship, they discovered not only that the Chinese quarters were not up to the standard required by current regulations, but also that many of the men were on board involuntarily. As a result, Japan held the ship and refused to let it continue to its destination (most of the men were ultimately returned to China). A Da is amazed that the Japanese government has so much power when confronting a western government: "I have heard that Japan is a great deal smaller than China; how is it that *they* are not afraid of Peru? How is it that *they* are outraged by this injustice carried out against China [while] our own officials cannot come up with a way to prevent their own people from being humiliated, and instead turn a deaf ear and a

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129. The chronology of the novel is at times difficult to trace, but inclusion of the *Maria Luz* incident places the starting year of the novel as 1872 at the latest.

blind eye?”<sup>130</sup> Indeed, A Da’s and Jiyuan’s conversation serves to highlight the fact that in spite of its size and its resources, China now occupies a substantially weaker geopolitical position than it ever had before, and as such is unable to do anything to help Chinese overseas.

Several months later, a similar conversation takes place between Li Xinchun and his friend Wang Bofu in San Francisco. The men have just learned that Tan, the Chinese attaché in San Francisco, has been mistreated and humiliated by American police who mistook him for a laborer (Tan is so humiliated that he eventually kills himself). Wang dejectedly responds that “We businessmen and laborers, having suffered the abuse of the Americans, only have to look at the consuls and at our government; looking today, if they cannot even protect themselves, how can they possibly protect us?”<sup>131</sup> Even high-ranking government officials, in other words, are treated as inferior beings; how can common Chinese expect to be treated any better? Each of these conversations is about China’s inability, because of its newfound weakness vis-à-vis other powers, to do anything in service of its population overseas. While the speakers express outrage at the government’s numerous failings, they simultaneously concede that the government lacks the power to defend even itself, as if beginning to resign themselves to the fact that the current Qing government will *never* be able to serve the basic function they and so many others require of it.

Thus in a way, each of these complaints is also a comment on the government’s traumatic loss of sovereignty as related to the coolie trade and protection of overseas subjects. It is China’s loss of respect within the international community that has made it impossible for Chinese officials to make any progress in the defense of their people. Indeed, in an earlier conversation between Xinchun and his friend Zifeng, Zifeng notes that if the US were to treat

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130. *Ku shehui* [*Bitter Society*], 87. Emphasis added.

131. *Ibid.*, 120.

nationals of any other country the way Chinese had been treated, the US would have a war on its hands. He then goes on to compare the case of Chinese in the US to that of Japanese in the US:

the Japanese spirit is such that they 'take advantage of softness and aren't afraid of hardness.' If they experienced [the same kind of] mistreatment, they would all rise up in a life-or-death struggle, and their officials would not be willing to sit on the sidelines and watch their countrymen suffer. So even if they were to experience the same mistreatment [as Chinese] in the US, they would respond to it with much greater strength.<sup>132</sup>

Again, Zifeng here points out the Qing government's inability or unwillingness to intervene on behalf of its subjects. Japan, in spite of being much smaller and a former vassal state of China, is at least willing and able to prioritize the protection of its overseas population. In China's case, however, there is simply too great a disconnect between the court and the people it governs, and the people are left to fend for themselves.<sup>133</sup>

However, in addition to reflecting upon China's loss of sovereignty vis-à-vis other powers between the Ming and Qing dynasties, the author also points out that a deterioration of domestic politics and quality of life for Han Chinese has also occurred during the same period. For this, he obliquely blames the Qing government. For example, when famine strikes Nanxuzhou, desperate farmers go en masse to the yamen to ask for assistance, only to be dispersed by troops while being told that this kind of organization is seditious.<sup>134</sup> And later in the story (as mentioned above), Li demands to know how the government could agree to unfair treaty terms without considering the impact it would have on the lives of Chinese in the US. Li and his friends frequently lament that China's weakness has caused them to be treated so badly. While the novel stops short of making overtly ethnic anti-Manchu or pro-Han

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132. Ibid., 95.

133. It should be emphasized, however, that this is somewhat of a dramatization: as Yen Ching-hwang (*Coolies and Mandarins*) argues, (and as already addressed in Chapter Two), the Qing court did in fact make a number of efforts to challenge the coolie trade, albeit with limited success.

134. *Ku shehui* [*Bitter Society*], 46-47.

claims, characters do sometimes refer to themselves and their brethren as *huaren* 華人 which in its more classical meaning refers specifically to the Han ethnicity.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, in Xinchun's exchange with the student at the end of the novel, it is not really "We Chinese [nationals]" (我輩中國人), but "We [ethnic] *huaren*" (我輩華人), who have suffered and who must therefore be the instigators of anti-American action. Given the surge in anti-Manchu sentiment we know to have been occurring (and to have been espoused in *Shenbao*) at the time the novel was published, and the fact that anti-Manchuism was, for many, a logical extension of the kind of anti-foreignism appealed to in the novel, *Bitter Society* is quite clearly anti-Qing (the governing institution), and is also very likely anti-Manchu (the non-Han ethnic group).

There appears to be another criticism of the Manchu Qing dynasty posited in the brief vignette presented at the very beginning of the novel: after all, the story of Boyi and Shuqi to which it alludes is not only one of personal integrity, but is also one of dynastic succession (Shang to Zhou). Similarly, Gubo's and Gushu's refusal to remain within the corrupt society they encounter outside of their hometown makes a statement not just about loyalty to a previous way of life (read: dynasty) or about the failure of the new society, but also about the perceived illegitimacy of the usurping ruling house (which is responsible for allowing society to deteriorate to this point). Gubo and Gushu are virtuous remnants of an old society that no longer exists—and it is the usurpation of the Han Ming by the Manchu Qing that has resulted in the extinction of the ethical world in which they could have belonged.<sup>136</sup>

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135. “華:[...] 漢族的古稱,” see “華,” *Wang Li gu hanyu zidian*, Wang Li ed., (Beijing: Zhonghua zhuju, 2000), 1068. Compare to more modern definitions where *huaren* is given as equivalent to *Zhongguoren* (Chinese nationals): *Xiandai hanyu cidian*, Chinese-English Edition (Beijing: Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 2002), 833.

136. It should be noted that the period/dynasty during which Gubo and Gushu live is intentionally left vague, perhaps either to give their story a sense of “universality,” or perhaps to avoid making too overt a case against the Qing.



## On enslavement

But for all of the more straightforward criticisms conveyed by the novel's thematic conceit, the most powerful indictment contained in the novel is made somewhat indirectly. The author's juxtaposition of two modes of transportation—the coolie vessel and Li's voluntary trip to the US—and the nationalist coalition that presumably forms among disparate groups of victims of foreign abuse at the end of the novel serves to erase the superficial differences between these various modes of overseas experience. More specifically, in insisting upon the relevance of the coolie trade to the contemporary phenomenon of credit-ticket movement to the US, the author asserts that even ostensibly voluntary credit-ticket movement is a form of enslavement. Not only are Li and his friends in the US deprived of their physical security and autonomy because of racist violence there, but in deciding to go to the US in hopes of making a profit, they have also forfeited their own spiritual and political agency. By the end of the novel, it is clear that the solution is to *return* to China and make *China* wealthy and strong—a perspective that only emerges as a result of the de-positioning that has forced them to see beyond their own immediate mundane needs. Echoing the sentiments of Liang Qichao's criticism of profit-seeking, the decision to seek profits in the US, even as a legally-“free” entrepreneur, is simply another form of relinquishing one's will to a foreign master. But ironically, enslavement and the psychic break it precipitated seem to have been necessary preconditions to the awakening of a political agency these men had never realized they possessed.

The novel thus seems to suggest that there is a lesson to be gleaned from the imperialist violence of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a lesson that, in the immediate context of the coolie trade itself, was evidently not immediately forthcoming, as Chinese men continued to offer themselves up to foreign masters by other means. Where the coolie trade violences of the previous century had been shocking and traumatic, the passage

of time would make it possible to consider those historic violences a starting point from which Chinese could begin to assert a newfound sense of agency and need for political participation. Simply put, China's only hope for revitalization and redemption of her previous position was for all the energy spent haphazardly in the pursuit of immediate individual benefit to be spent instead in a mass effort to make China a place that could in the long term provide said benefits to all. In this way, *Bitter Society* draws a very clear line from the brutality of the trade to a brand new kind of bottom-up activism.

The horrors of enslavement that are depicted in the novel offer a powerful reminder to contemporary readers of the potential fate of a China that cannot defend itself from foreign depredation. And while the narrativization of the experience of the “enslaved”/indentured laborer in *Bitter Society* contributes in several ways to the crystallization of a sense of an activist “public” or “people,” the most immediate of these is very much connected to the violence these people suffered. The fate of the coolie is so tragic—and so tied up in China's weakness as a state—that the coolie becomes a “universally sympathetic” character, regardless of characteristics (class, education, or geographic location) that in other circumstances might alienate him from the reader/greater public body. Indeed, the fictional narrativization of “slave” experience—as opposed to the more symbolic use of the terminology of enslavement in political discourse as discussed earlier in this chapter—illustrates the suffering of the coolie laborer in such brutal detail that it is almost impossible not to sympathize. A wealthy Shanghai merchant or a barely literate Guangdong shopkeeper could each be moved by the fate of characters who are (respectively) poorer and less metropolitan, or more educated but speakers of a different regional language compared to themselves—not just because of the sheer cruelty the coolie must endure, but because once forcibly stripped of all the social characteristics that once individuated him, the one-dimensional coolie-as-foreign-slave embodies the most dreaded potential fate of the

“everyman” subject of the failing Qing government. Though I have already demonstrated that the ideal “people” that could be moved by and rally around the protagonists of *Bitter Society* would be fairly inclusive with regard to class, education, and geography, it is in no small part due to the shocking violence and erasure of difference suffered by these characters that this inclusivity becomes possible. For those who survive their ordeals overseas, the privations they endure in enslavement awaken them to the possibility of their own political agency, and by the end of the novel they recognize the importance of participation in unified, selfless political action in the name of protecting society at large. Re-forged into social and political advocates in the crucible of slavery, these once-imperfect characters—whose sins are ultimately forgivable—become activist role models for a reading public that still fears its own enslavement.

### *Golden World*

A second piece of coolie fiction that emerged just two years after *Bitter Society* makes similar use of the powerful coolie trade vocabularies. Indeed, in its depiction of physical and emotional violence, social and national de-positioning, and loss and reclamation of sovereignty, *Golden World* also sets out to mobilize an activist people—albeit one that is slightly different from that appealed to in *Bitter Society*. *Golden World* was published in 1907 in Shanghai by *Xiaoshuo lin* (小说林).<sup>137</sup> The goal of *Xiaoshuo lin*'s editorial staff was to disseminate fiction among a reading public and encourage the novel to flourish as a literary form in late Qing China. Because scientific development and educational reform were progressing too slowly, they believed, only fiction could provide the necessary edification for

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137. A Ying, “Guanyu,” in *Fanmei*, 13. However, as the novel does not appear as a serial among any of the 12 volumes of *Xiaoshuo lin*'s literary journal, it must have been printed separately.

a citizenry engaged in the process of preparing for self-governance.<sup>138</sup> And as one contributor noted, so-called “new fiction”—which was not only developing more quickly than other artistic forms, but was much better suited to contemporary mores than was “old” fiction—was the best means of bringing this edification to the masses.<sup>139</sup>

Limited information is available about the author of this novel, who used the pseudonym “Master of the Emerald Lotus House” (*Biheguan zhuren* 碧荷館主人) for both this and his more famous novel *New Era* (新紀元 *Xin jiyuan* [1908]). Though the author remains somewhat of a mystery biographically, the availability of another text against which to compare *Golden World* does provide some helpful insight for our analysis of its earlier counterpart: *New Era* is set in a future time (1999), in a China that has regained much of the military and diplomatic power that had been wrested from it by the West over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Localized conflicts between China and a unified white western front eventually foment into worldwide racial war, white versus yellow. Chinese communities in the US, Australia, and other countries around the world secede, forming their own separatist Chinese nations loyal to their homeland. Ultimately, the yellow race, with its superior technology (and moral imperative), emerges victorious and imposes a unilateral treaty upon the whites, “[a]lmost all twelve clauses [of which] bear some relation to the series of humiliating treaties to which China had been subjected since the Opium War.”<sup>140</sup> The plot of *Golden World* is not quite so militant in the way it chooses confront China’s foreign (and domestic) situation in that the protagonists never take aggressive action against the foreigners; yet the protagonists of *Golden World* are ever-aware of the complex

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138. Mo Xi, “Xiaoshuo lin fakan ci,” *Xiaoshuo lin* 1 (1907): 1. Available at Hathi Trust: [http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b347619;view=1up;seq=3](http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b347619;view=1up;seq=3) (accessed 12 Sept. 2013).

139. Jue Wo, “Lun shuo: yu zhi xiaoshuo guan,” *Xiaoshuo lin* 9 (1908): 1. Available at Hathi Trust: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/shcgi/pt?id=uc1.b3961311;view=1up;seq=572> (accessed 12 Sept. 2013.)

140. Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, 93-95; 95; David Wang, *Fin-de-siècle splendour*, 307-213.

international, political and social milieux that they must navigate and are extremely outspoken when it comes to issues of discrimination and arrogation of sovereignty. They negotiate with issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, all while remaining peaceful and above all, supporting Chinese laborers and ultimately saving them from continued abuse abroad.

The action of *Golden World* begins in 1905—*yisi* 乙巳 in the hexagenary *ganzhi* 干支 cycle. In a quick flashback, the narrator informs us that in the previous *yisi* year (1845), the foreign presence in Guangdong had increased markedly, and that very shortly thereafter, large posters recruiting Chinese laborers to Cuba began to appear all over the city. The narrator laments the number of families and lives that would be ruined by these recruitment efforts, but goes on to foreshadow the messianic, utopian tone of the latter half of the novel: “they [persons involved in recruitment] were not concerned about [the damage they were causing]; however, as a result of this, they would [inadvertently] call forth a group of unparalleled heroes, and create a world of which no one had yet dreamed.”<sup>141</sup>

Returning to 1905, the initial protagonists of the novel—who, as I discuss below, later give way to more idealized characters—are poor Guangdong boat-people Madame Chen (*Chen Shi* 陳氏) and her husband Zhu Ajin 朱阿金. Unfortunately, Zhu has a very serious gambling problem, and finds himself in debt to the scheming owner of a gambling den, Qian Xiaogui (錢小鬼—“little money devil”). Unbeknownst to Zhu, Qian is in cahoots with a foreigner named Braga (*Bolaige* 勃来格) who is attempting to recruit labor for his plantation in Cuba. One of Braga’s crimps informs Zhu that if he cannot repay his debt, he will be sent to Cuba where he can earn the money back. Chen decides that rather than go into hiding, she and Zhu should both go to Cuba, provided that they can live and work together. The two then turn themselves over to Braga’s crimps and are shown onto the ship that will take them to Cuba.

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141. Biheguan zhuren, *Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], in Mao Defu ed., *Ku shehui/Huangjin shijie*, 143.

As in *Bitter Society*, *Golden World* depicts the conditions aboard the coolie ship in grim detail—many are there involuntarily; food is not provided and must be purchased at inflated cost by people who already have very limited financial means; there is widespread sickness with little chance of receiving treatment; and there are frequent beatings by overseers who are capricious and cruel. When Braga’s lustful eye falls upon Chen, he attempts to bring her to his quarters. She slaps him, and he orders her to be stripped and thrown overboard. The other coolies in the hold valiantly rush to her aid, but when the dust finally settles after the ensuing melee, it is discovered that Chen must have been among the dead and her body has already been thrown into the ocean.<sup>142</sup>

After Chen is thrown overboard, the novel takes on a more fantastic twist. Chen has in fact not died, and instead eventually washes ashore on a tiny island (*Luo Dao* 螺島, Snail Island) somewhere just north of the Antarctic Circle.<sup>143</sup> There, she is rescued by inhabitants of the island who, we are informed, are all descended from a small boatload of Ming loyalists who landed on the island over 260 years earlier in their attempt to escape the tyranny of the conquering Qing armies. The current leader of the island is himself a descendent of the Ming ruling clan, named Zhu Huaizu 朱懷祖 (where Zhu 朱 is the family name of the Ming emperors and Huaizu 懷祖 means “embrace the ancestors”).<sup>144</sup>

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142. *Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], 154-55.

143. The geographic location of the utopian island as described by the author is inconsistent. The island is described as simultaneously “between 65 and 66 degrees south latitude,” and “near the Antarctic Circle,” (both of which are consistent with one another); however, it is also “40 degrees from Guangdong” (Guangdong is at 23 degrees north latitude, which would put the island in the tropics, at about 17 degrees south latitude). (*Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], 166, 169) Because the first set of facts are so specific and consistent with one another, it seems plausible to me that the author mistakenly made the latter calculation based on the assumption that Guangdong was located at 23 degrees *south* latitude rather than *north* latitude. As such, I operate on the assumption that the first pair of descriptions is the accurate one. The island itself would then in reality be over 80 degrees from Guangdong.

144. *Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], 166-69.

Until Chen's arrival, the island has been completely isolated from the outside world, living in peace and serenity, "only measuring the seasons by the blooming of flowers and falling of leaves; only knowing sadness and joy in [the natural cycle of] death and birth."<sup>145</sup> Having come into contact with Chen and heard her tragic story; however, several of the inhabitants of the island—including Zhu and his wife, Madame Zhang (*Zhang Shi* 張氏)—are horrified by the ugliness that exists in the outside world and resolve to help Chen find her husband. Sailing upon the ship that once carried their ancestors away from the violence of Manchu conquest, Chen, Zhu, and Zhang travel around the globe, from Cuba (to search for Zhu Ajin), to England (where they decide to attend university), and finally to China so Zhu Huaizu and Zhang can see their ancestral homeland.<sup>146</sup> During these travels, the focus of the novel shifts from Chen and Zhu Ajin to Zhu Huaizu and Zhang, who often engage in lively debates with other characters regarding US Exclusion of Chinese laborers, the implementation of the boycott, and more generally, the future of China.

Unlike in *Bitter Society*, the major female figures in *Golden World* are well developed as characters, strong both intellectually and emotionally, and are very much involved in the political debates that comprise the majority of the second half of the novel. Zhang, for example, becomes a spirited activist and leads a local movement trying to pressure the Qing government to refuse the terms of Chinese Exclusion in the US. At one point, as Zhang is preparing to give an Anti-Exclusion speech at a women's rally, she teases Zhu Huaizu that she has already recruited several ardent (female) followers, while Zhu has only found a single male friend with whom he can discuss the boycott. Zhu sadly responds, "I honestly did not

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145. *Ibid.*, 168.

146. *Ibid.*, 172-96.

expect that our homeland (*zuguo* 祖國) would have so few real men (*zhuen nanzi* 真男子). Is it not strange?”<sup>147</sup>

When the Qing court fails its subjects once again by refusing to stand up for them in the face of these discriminatory foreign laws, our heroes can think of only one solution to the crisis of foreign abuse of Chinese laborers: to send ships to collect them and bring them all to Snail Island. In the end, so overwhelming is the response of Chinese laborers around the world to the offer of relocation made by Huaizu and the others that it becomes necessary to find four extra ships in addition to the old Ming ship to carry them all. The new population of the island includes 240 Chinese who had been studying in England: scientists, engineers, drivers, officials, lawyers, and businessmen, as well as over 25,000 laborers rescued from overseas.<sup>148</sup> The novel closes by reflecting on what a perfect society now exists on the island, and on the great fortune of all those who live there in harmony with one another, without fear of abuse or exploitation. Indeed, in what seems almost to be an unofficial sequel to the unfinished *Bitter Society*, the protagonists carry out Li Xinchun’s proposed rescue of Chinese overseas, ultimately resulting in the “golden world” that he prophesied at the end of *Bitter Society*.

#### The Coolie Trade Vocabularies and the Emergent Post-Slave

Once again, the violence of coolie experience renders the Chinese protagonists in *Golden World* immediately and unquestionably sympathetic, while simultaneously painting the foreigners as wholly and irrevocably vile. The faintest glimmers of self-sufficiency among the Chinese are brutally punished: when the captive coolies attempt to cook for one another rather than purchasing expensive food on board the ship, the overseers whip them mercilessly; when two minor crimps are caught discussing raising a common fund for medical care and

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147. *Ibid.*, 216-66.

148. *Ibid.*, 292-96.



burial expenses for the coolies, Braga has them beaten and left for dead in the forests of Cuba. The fact that the coolies in the hold of Braga's ship are willing to challenge the violent methods of the foreigners foreshadows one of the primary lessons of the novel: the potential strength of a unified Chinese front. The violence they suffer is of course horrifying; but it also serves to consolidate the population of the ship's hold into a stronger, emotionally-supportive unit. Only when they move as one do the coolies in the hold, or indeed, Chinese more broadly, have any hope of combating foreign violence.

However, that violence also takes the form of dehumanization of Chinese persons. When Chen, Huaizu and Zhang embark on their quest to find Ajin in Cuba, they encounter a young man named He Qufei and his father, Tunan. As they become acquainted, Qufei reveals that he is returning to China after having been deceived into laboring on a plantation in Brazil. He then goes on to detail how, in Brazil, he was made to perform exhausting physical labor, much as "an ox or a horse," and yet was given lodgings that would have been inadequate for even those animals. The meals he describes are shamefully meager—three portions daily of raw black beans. "Though it is not quite the same as eating grass," he sighs, "is this really any different from the diet of mules or horses?"<sup>149</sup> Qufei's repeated assertions that Chinese in Brazil are treated worse than farmyard animals insists that the reader acknowledge the foreigners' dehumanizing project; but they also register the growing resentment Chinese felt toward foreigners who so debased them.

As in *Bitter Society*, de-positioning occasioned by traumatic violence works similarly to bring together erstwhile distinct and mutually-disinterested populations. Indeed, there is a great degree of overlap between characters of different classes who participate in different kinds of labor circulation: Chen and Zhu Ajin are poor, relatively uneducated persons from Guangdong who end up on a coolie ship headed for Cuba; another character, Xia Jianwei (夏建

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149. *Ibid.*, 162-63.

威 “May China build up its power”) has been working for several years as a businessman in the US, and encounters the others while en route back to China to help with the boycott efforts.<sup>150</sup> Considering the fact that the coolie trade to Cuba had officially ended in 1878,<sup>151</sup> the author’s decision to overlay the historical trade to Cuba onto the more immediate context of the 1905 boycott and contemporary abuse of Chinese in the US suggests to that he felt it necessary to connect these two phenomena concretely in the mind of his readership. In so doing, he renders the historical suffering of people like Chen, Zhu Ajin, and He Qufei indistinguishable from the suffering of Chinese in the US (whether laborers, businessmen, or something in between). As a result, each group becomes a locus of sympathy and compassion for the contemporary reader, who would then be forced to consider his or her own relationship to these characters and their real-world analogues. Not only does each group become worthy of the protection of—and membership in—“the people,” but the plight of each (which is ultimately the same plight) also becomes an equally legitimate reason to support the boycott.

Curiously, this de-positioning also has the effect of making women and men equals in this idealized activist society: put simply, the violence of the trade is so shocking that entrenched gender hierarchies are rendered more or less obsolete by the need for greater social cohesion. As mentioned earlier, *Golden World* differs from *Bitter Society* in that it features two very strong, independent women—the courageous and willful Chen, and the intelligent, charismatic Zhang. (Whereas the only major female character in *Bitter Society* is the wife of Ruan Tongfu who commits suicide after her husband’s death so as not to

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150. Ibid., 159-63.

151. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 36. However, Cuba was well known to be particularly cruel in the treatment of Chinese laborers, so it is possible that the author felt that using Cuba as the destination would be more moving to the readers.

“humiliate” him, presumably by being raped by the foreign crew aboard the coolie ship.)<sup>152</sup> Chen and Zhang, very distinct from one another in terms of social, educational and political background, are quite obviously set up to serve as role models for a female readership, whether actual or (more likely at this time, given low female literacy rates leading into the twentieth century)<sup>153</sup> desired. It is the blurring of gender lines precipitated by violent trauma that make Chen and Zhang’s participation in political activities acceptable.

The case of Chen is an interesting one: historically, women comprised only a very small fraction of coolies sent overseas (though many were impacted by the abduction of their husbands, sons, brothers, etc.).<sup>154</sup> While it is not a wholesale fabrication for Biheguan zhuren to have included Chen as a female victim of the trade, the case of a husband and wife going into indenture together is certainly not representative of the experience of the majority of coolies. In focusing on Chen, a rare female (would-be) coolie, the author seems to be intentionally constructing a rallying point for a female readership, and particularly one that is likely to identify with Chen’s socio-economic standing, or at least the sense of financial desperation or conjugal affection that cause her to make the fateful decision to embark for Cuba with her husband. Chen, who is initially lower class and uneducated but very strong-willed, inspires on an emotional level by her sheer determination and perseverance. Her strength does not just lie in her determination to support and stand by her husband—it is also made clear in her capacity for forbearance, her ability to withstand suffering (*chiku* 吃苦).

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152. *Ku shehui [Bitter Society]*, 68-69. Historically, a woman’s reputation was inextricably tied to her chastity: rather than a sympathetic victim, the raped woman was seen as a disgrace, and became a social outcast. Many female rape victims thus committed suicide, as this was the only means available to them to redeem the “personhood” that had been stripped from them by their assailants. In preemptively committing suicide, Ruan’s wife ensures that her chastity, and thus her honor, remains intact—which could be considered a form of resistance, albeit a normative, gendered one. Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004), 197-98.

153. Li Xiaoti, *Qingmo de xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong*, 24. Li cites Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*, (Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1979), 140.

154. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 82-91.

She inspires by emerging from hardship all the more determined to learn, to overcome her educational disadvantages, in order to contribute as much as she can to a new society.

Though Zhang, a descendent of Ming aristocracy, has not shared in Chen's traumatic enslavement, she too undergoes a sort of relative de-positioning in taking up the battle cry of the oppressed Chinese laborer overseas. From a relatively early point in the novel, Zhang becomes involved in the public discussion surrounding Chinese victimization and the Exclusion Act, and encourages the women she encounters to resist the system of abuse on a societal, rather than an individual/bodily level. She very quickly becomes a leading figure, beseeching her audience: "Sisters! Are we women not the mothers of the citizens of China (*guomin zhi mu* 國民之母)? ... For the mothers of the people, whether our children are upper class, middle class, or lower class, though there may be differences between them, in a mother's eyes, they are only our children, we do not see class distinctions."<sup>155</sup> Zhang's words serve to remind the reader of the importance of a class-inclusive approach to defending China against foreign incursions/abuse; but her very presence (and the presence of the "sisters" she addresses) is also an important indicator of the fact that the author believed in a more active role for women in politics and society—even if that role was largely predicated on the somewhat conservative trope of "woman as wife/mother to citizens" rather than "woman as citizen in her own right." Zhang no longer belongs to a rarefied elite class of Ming descendants; she is transformed, because of her own passionate dedication to the cause, into a partner and social equal. Despite (or perhaps because of) the very different social positions they occupy and roles they play, Chen and Zhang each demonstrate the importance of the participation of women in general to the success of the contemporary social movement, and more specifically emphasize that women of all classes and backgrounds will be equals in the effort to make China stronger.

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155. *Huangjin shijie* [Golden World], 225-26.

Though Chen makes a significant amount of progress in her studies from the beginning to the end of the novel, Zhang and her husband Zhu Huaizu are probably the most politically-involved characters. When they travel back to China for the first time since their ancestors fled centuries before, Zhang and Zhu are very quickly spurred into action when they see how badly their ancestral state (*zuguó* 祖國) and its people are being treated by the rest of the world. On the level of their words and ideas, Zhang and Zhu are fairly straightforward (and very passionate) advocates for the boycott and the overturn of Exclusion; however, their significance is actually considerably deeper than this. Because they are descendants of Ming elites who have lived for over two and a half centuries in a world untouched by the Qing government, Zhang and Zhu represent a pure, *pre-Manchu* ideal of Han sovereignty. While it is true that the “Manchus” are never set up as an adversarial ethnic group in the novel, anti-Manchu slogans such as “Overturn the Qing, restore the Ming,” (*fan Qing fu Ming* 反清復明) “Eliminate the Manchus, raise up the Han,” (*mie Man xing Han* 滅滿興漢),<sup>156</sup> were popular at the time of the novel’s publication. The deliberate choice to feature an unbroken Ming lineage, while not explicitly anti-Manchu, would certainly have been understood as such by an anti-Manchu readership.

Indeed, the very existence of the pre-Manchu utopia on Snail Island—reminiscent of Six Dynasties poet Tao Yuanming’s secluded “Peach Blossom Spring” where the descendants of refugees from the violent upheaval of the Qin dynasty have lived in peace for generations—gives us a glimpse of what China could have been had the Ming dynasty not been usurped, and forces the reader to consider an alternate history. Not only is society on the island much more functional than the society that has victimized a large number of principal and minor characters, but we are also led to believe that under patriotic Ming leadership such as that exhibited by Zhang and Zhu Huaizu—whose *de facto* assumption of leadership over the group

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156. Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism*, 32.

is not only never contested, but indeed, feels almost natural—China would never have suffered such humiliating loss of sovereignty to foreigners, or indeed, had to live with the mistakes made by an incompetent court.<sup>157</sup> It is noted in passing—and more by way of introduction than anything else—that Zhu Huaizu and Zhu Ajin share a surname, that of the Ming imperial family.<sup>158</sup> While Zhu Huaizu and the civilization on Snail Island represent an idyllic (and idealized) continuation of the righteous empire of old, Zhu Ajin (“Goldie”) and his experiences in Guangdong and abroad represent the fall of that once-great clan into a world of greed, pettiness, and exploitation of others. It is almost as if we are looking at “before” and “after” photos of the Zhu lineage, where the period in between is marked by the reign of the decadent Manchu Qing court. (The same could be said of the intellectual and political differences between Zhang and Chen, where Zhang represents where China’s women could be today if not for the Qing regime.)

While the imaginative utopian elements of *Golden World* led A Ying (1900-1977), a major twentieth-century scholar of late Qing literature, to claim that the novel’s primary weakness was its overindulgence in utopian fantasy,<sup>159</sup> it is precisely within those elements that one of the novel’s primary criticisms is most effectively leveled. By offering a counter-historical alternative to Manchu rule in China, Biheguan zhuren attempts both to highlight the micro-level damage the Qing loss of sovereignty has caused to the lives of its individual citizens, and to build a concrete vision of the potential for greatness that was lost when the Manchus usurped the Ming dynasty. Indeed, it is only under the guise of “fantasy” that Biheguan zhuren is able to make such a strong statement—the final retreat to the pre-Manchu utopia on Snail Island effectively “removes” the Qing court from power without having to

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157. *Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], 262.

158. *Ibid.*, 178.

159. A Ying, “Guanyu,” in *Fanmei*, 14.

venture into the politically seditious territory of staging a fictitious revolution within the pages of the novel.<sup>160</sup>

On the post-slave

As in *Bitter Society*, the narrative of enslavement and victimization in *Golden World* functions on multiple levels: again, its sheer emotive power renders immediately and universally sympathetic to the reader those protagonists who have been victimized by impressment, regardless of social, educational, or economic status; it raises awareness for the more immediate goals of the boycott by reminding readers of historical injustices and connecting those injustices to the contemporary political climate (in this case by overlapping the coolie experience with political debates over Exclusion); and finally, it obviously runs parallel to the more general contemporary discourse of slavery, fully implicating the novel in that conversation. On the one hand, we see over the course of the development of Chen's character just how critical intellectual enrichment is to the empowerment of the previously- or potentially-enslaved (indeed, Chen's rare strength of character is sufficient to remove her very quickly from the threat of enslavement by getting her thrown overboard; but had she and Ajin had a real political education from the outset, it is unlikely that either would ever have found themselves in that position). As Chen and others around her strive to "enlighten" themselves, raising themselves up from petty provinciality to inspired activism, their mandate becomes stronger. Never again do they confront the risk of enslavement—even if they cannot

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160. While anti-Manchuism is not an explicit focus of Biheguan zhuren's *New Era* (which, again, focuses predominantly on a future yellow-white race war), the "emperor" in 1999 is only ever called "the Great Chinese Emperor," [*Zhongguo da huangdi* 中國大皇帝] and presides over a constitutional monarchy, complete with parliament and local legislatures (Biheguan zhuren, *Xin jiyuan*, [Guangxi: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008], 3). So while not explicitly mentioned, it seems that the flourishing of Chinese society in *New Era* is due to the off-screen replacement of the Manchu Qing court by a new (Han) court. Considering the two novels together, it is possible that Biheguan Zhuren hoped for 1) in a world where the yellow race could come together to defeat the white, but 2) believed that that yellow race could only be led to victory by a Han-ruled China.

change international politics, they are now aware enough and determined enough that they can remove themselves from an oppressive situation if necessary. In following Chen's journey from "slave" to "post-slave," the reader is thus shown the extent to which his/her own empowerment is possible (and indeed, necessary). Of course, the average reader did not have recourse to university education in England, or to an island untouched by the Qing. However, what is most important in Chen's development is her desire to improve herself and to contribute actively to social progress—something to which any reader could aspire, albeit in more limited form.

On the other hand, the tropes of domination by foreigners and abusive neglect by the Qing court of its Han people are also very obviously at play. The protagonists seek to free themselves from the former via educational rallies and political organization; and ultimately (in this novel, at least) can only remove themselves from the latter by extracting themselves from Qing China altogether. As they grow increasingly aware of their plight, they strive to organize their society in such a way that it can avoid continued subjugation by these external enemies. By participating in the contemporary political discourse of enslavement, then, the novel is able to encourage the reader to strive not just for self-improvement, but for self-improvement as a requisite to participation in the creation of a society that could viably defy foreign imperialism and challenge the decaying Qing infrastructure (if not militarily via revolution, at least in execution of sound governance for its people).

In the novel, as in contemporary discourse, a coherent "people" is the primary unit of resistance to enslavement. Author Biheguan zhuren makes clear his vision for a public that is no longer vulnerable to subjugation by either Westerners or to Manchus: this "people" would feel anti-American outrage as well as class-, education- and geography-blind sympathy for the beleaguered protagonists. At the same time, this people is anti-Qing, and can also be inferred to be anti-Manchu. We are not told explicitly that the Manchus as an ethnic group are a



problem; but the author's opinion of them is very clear. Finally, however, where *Bitter Society* does not even make a gesture toward the question of gender (though perhaps, in its silence on the matter, *Bitter Society* is tacitly giving its opinion on the role of women in the strengthening of China), *Golden World* not only includes women in its people, but shows them to be just as capable and dedicated as—and at times more so than—their male counterparts. While the women are still framed as the “wives and mothers” of China, Biheguan zhuren doesn't stop at merely including this often-ignored segment of the population in his cry for action, but indeed has it leading the way forward.

In the novel, the transition from slave to post-slave is precipitated by a traumatic break between the isolated, formerly enslavable self and the new politically-aware and socially-invested self. At first, Chen suffers acutely because of her own naïve vulnerability; in time, she and her cohort are able to take meaningful but academic intellectual refuge in the company of like-minded individuals they encounter over the course of their travels. Ultimately, however, it is in assembling a new activist “people” from the broken pieces of a failed society and in turn offering refuge to those who have not yet learned how to free themselves that Chen and the others realize their true potential for greatness.

### **A Northern Social-Reform Novel: *Diary of a “Pig”***

The two novels discussed thus far have each had one immediate activist end in mind: anti-foreign resistance via participation in the boycott. In this section, I turn to a third piece of coolie fiction, whose provenance is quite different from the previous two, and whose goal was also distinct. The unfinished novella *Diary of a “Pig”* (*Zhuzai ji* 豬仔記) wields the powerful narrative of enslavement in an altogether distinctive way from *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*: in this case, where the victim of enslavement is in fact a villainous anti-hero whose complete lack of morality and empathy is symptomatic of a society in decay. Serialized

in Beijing's *Jinghua ribao* 京話日報 ("Daily Talk from the Capital") in the months preceding the boycott (roughly October 1904-January 1905), *Diary* is a product of what has been referred to as the "late Qing movement to enlighten the lower classes" (*Qing mo xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong* 清末下層社會啟蒙運動),<sup>161</sup> rather than the anti-American boycott. As I will outline below, the particular social goals of the Enlightenment Movement, as well as of the editorial staff of *Jinghua ribao*, resulted in a coolie novel whose protagonist, narrative, and indeed, entire focus was wholly distinct from those discussed so far.

Though authorship of *Diary* is not made clear in the pages of *Jinghua ribao* itself, Wang Hongli credits it to Hang Xinzhai 杭辛齋 (1869-1924), brother-in-law of *Jinghua ribao* chief editor Peng Yizhong 彭翼仲 (1864-1922), as well as editor and major contributor to the publication himself. Prior to taking his position at *Jinghua ribao*, Hang had also been involved in editing a number of other publications, such as *Guowen bao* 國聞報 (*National News*, in cooperation with Yan Fu), *Baihua bao* 白話報 (*Vernacular News*), *Nonggong zazhi* 農工雜誌 (*Journal of Agriculture and Labor*), *Hanmin bao* 漢民報 (*News for the Han People*), and others. Hang was also a member of Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance, and was arrested at least once for having angered the Qing court with the subversive nature of his publications.<sup>162</sup>

The Enlightenment Movement out of which *Diary* and countless other social reform-oriented pieces were born rippled throughout China starting in 1901, and would be at its most active for the ten years following its inception. Inspired in large part by the repercussions of the failed Boxer Rebellion, the Enlightenment Movement took as its aim the education of the lower (primarily illiterate) classes—specifically, in order to fill what was perceived to be the

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161. Hereafter: Enlightenment Movement.

162. Wang Hongli, *Qingmo Beijing xiaceng qimeng yundong—yi Jinghua ribao wei zhongxin*, PhD dissertation, (Department of Chinese, Peking Univ., 2010) 3; Guo Daoping, "Gengzi zhi bian yu Peng Yizhong de kaizhi shiye," *Han yuyan wenxue yanjiu* 3, no. 1 (2012): 42, FN 6. Wanfang Database, (accessed 20 June 2013); Chen Yutang ed., *Zhongguo jinxiandai renwu minghao dacidian* (Zhejiang: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1993), 568.

lower classes' ethical and moral vacuum, into which flimsy Boxer myths and superstition had diffused so easily.<sup>163</sup> Ultimately, the goal was to produce a Chinese public more capable of rational, socially-responsible behavior.

Though the Enlightenment Movement did extend throughout China, resulting in the establishment of newspaper-reading societies and various other educational campaigns in a number of major cities,<sup>164</sup> its momentum was strongest in northern China, where it peaked in 1905-6.<sup>165</sup> In Beijing, *Jinghua ribao*, under the editorship of Peng Yizhong, would become both a major proponent of the Enlightenment Movement and the most influential Beijing newspaper of its time.<sup>166</sup> In fact, within three months of publishing its first issue, *Jinghua ribao* was already selling more copies than any other newspaper in Beijing, and for the next year, its readership would expand steadily.<sup>167</sup> Published in in easy-to-understand vernacular *baihua*, *Jinghua ribao* championed the cause of “expanding the people’s knowledge” (*kai minzhi* 開民智). To that end, its editorial staff encouraged its readership, regardless of occupation, social standing, or ethnic background, to send in letters on current affairs for publication.<sup>168</sup>

One of the most unique features of *Jinghua ribao* was that where more radical publications had taken to publishing overtly anti-Manchu articles, *Jinghua ribao* attempted to discuss Han-Manchu relations objectively, and in so doing drew a large readership from among

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163. Li, *Qingmo xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong*, 6-13.

164. *Ibid.*, 48.

165. Wang Hongli, *Qingmo Beijing xiaceng qimeng yundong*, 2, 10.

166. Guo Daoping, “Gengzi zhi bian,” 52.

167. Shang Weiwei, “*Jinghua ribao* yanjiu,” academic dissertation, (Nanchang Univ., 2011), 10. It is impossible to guess how many individuals may have read *Diary*; however, it is interesting to note that Sichuan-born author Guo Moruo read *Diary* at some point in his youth, and it left such an impression on him that he recalls it in his 1928 memoir. Guo Moruo, *Wo de tongnian*, (Hong Kong: Wenxu chubanshe, 1968), 42-43.

168. Wang Hongli, *Qingmo Beijing xiaceng qimeng yundong*, 5-9 ,15, 22.

Beijing's Manchu bannermen. Manchu readers frequently sent in self-critical letters entreating other bannermen to take part in social campaigns, such as the drive to raise donations to help pay off the Boxer Indemnity. Others attempted to disabuse Han readers of the stereotype that all bannermen were wealthy and indolent, arguing that many bannermen in fact were on the brink of poverty themselves.<sup>169</sup> Given the social and political environment in which *Diary* was published—in the capital city, close to the court—and the composition of *Jinghua ribao*'s readership, we must assume its relationship to and position on the Qing court to be different from, for example, the more obviously anti-Manchu *Golden World*. While Peng and his staff did press for reform in certain key areas such as education, opium abuse, and footbinding, *Jinghua ribao* never adopted an overtly political anti-court or anti-Manchu stance. Whether this was due to self-censorship, to closer identification with the government and its policies, or to a desire not to alienate Manchu readers, is difficult to ascertain. As it was, even the fairly moderate social-reformist agenda of Peng and *Jinghua ribao* would ultimately get Peng into trouble with the government and force him into exile in Xinjiang for a number of years.<sup>170</sup>

Try as proponents of the Enlightenment Movement and publications such as *Jinghua ribao* might to educate the public, Wang Hongli argues that the movement, though successful at stirring up popular sentiment and public support, ultimately failed in its mission to extend education, morality, and public values to the lower classes.<sup>171</sup> Though the movement itself might have failed, the large body of letters encouraging donations to the Indemnity fund, essays arguing in favor of building more schools and extending schooling to female children, and even short stories and novellas like *Diary* published at its height suggest the extent to

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169. Ibid., 8-9, 24-25, 33.

170. Ibid., 95; Ellen Johnston Laing, "Reform, Revolutionary, Political, and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no. 2, (Fall 2000): 123-175. Jstor: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490831> (accessed 24 June 2013).

171. Wang Hongli, *Qingmo Beijing xiaceng qimeng yundong*, 127.

which journalists and common people alike earnestly believed in the reformist zeitgeist and hoped to effect a fundamental transformation in Chinese society.

From its first pages, *Diary* makes very plain its position on the state of China's educational system. The opening segment of the novel is a brief prologue in a didactic, rather than a narrative mode, asserting the superiority of the Western universal educational system:

Those who are open-minded, strong, and ambitious often occupy high social positions; those who are narrow-minded, weak, and petty often occupy low social positions. But knowledge, strength, and character are not inborn traits; rather, they depend on the education one receives starting in one's childhood. Currently, each of the Western nations has schools all over the place, and everyone attends school. Regardless of gender, everyone begins attending school at the age of eight years old.<sup>172</sup>

The Westerners, the narrator reasons, are not stronger because of inherent biological traits, but rather because of the fundamental physical and intellectual education they receive starting at a young age. As might have been guessed based on the social and political goals of *Jinghua ribao* as outlined above, this novel is already somewhat different from the previous two: it takes as its object not so much resistance against foreign aggression or internal division, but the need for educational and social support systems that might prevent less fortunate Chinese nationals from being victimized by foreigners and each other. Indeed, in the narrator's opinion, it is precisely the lack of common education in China that is to blame for the conversion of Chinese men into foreign-dominated *zhuzai*:

The word "*zhuzai*," is local Cantonese slang that essentially means "piglet," and just the fact that these men are referred to as "pigs" or "little pigs" is an indication of the ignorance of their class of person. But they are still people, with five senses and four limbs like any other, with hearts and lungs and brains—how is it that they can have become so thoroughly stupid? It's all because we lack common education.<sup>173</sup>

The narrator continues: "Those who would become 'pigs' were certainly not *all* ignorant, how is it that [those who were not] were willing to work as 'pigs'? Perhaps it was

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172. [Hang Xinzhai,] *Zhuzai ji*, in *Jinghua ribao*, bound facsimiles (Beijing: Quanguo tushuguan wenxian weisuo fuzhi zhongxin, 2006), 201. The novel was serialized and as a result there are gaps between subsequent installments, hence the curiously discrete pagination below.

173. *Zhuzai ji*, 205. Translation mine.

because they were young and inexperienced and were easily deceived by evil people.”<sup>174</sup> As he sees it, the entire tragedy of the coolie trade could likely have been prevented, if only there had been in place an educational system that gave Chinese men the means to ensure their own survival without resorting to either selling themselves or selling others into cooliehood. A substantial part of the problem, according to the narrator, is that the average commoner is ill-equipped to protect himself against the sinister designs of others, whether foreigners or locals. It was this lack of training in self-sufficiency that made the wide-scale victimization of Chinese men possible in the first place.

The narrative of *Diary* begins with lengthy descriptions of the deplorable conditions encountered by a group of coolies: in the barracoons, the coolies are crammed together in groups of 100 or 200, divided into “superior” and “inferior” specimens according to their age and physical strength, as if they were no different from livestock.<sup>175</sup> On board the ships, the *zhuzai* even share cargo space with livestock, sleeping on damp straw and befouling their living space with their own waste; they are fed half-cooked sweet potatoes through the iron gratings separating them from the rest of the ship. Upon arrival at their destinations, they are given ratty clothing, they are herded about by overseers with long whips, and the meager rations of potato they are given to eat are dumped on the ground for them to wrestle over.<sup>176</sup> Those who fell ill were still expected to work; and if the illness became serious, the overseers would not even wait for the sufferer to die before throwing him into a pyre in hopes that it would prevent the disease from spreading to other laborers. In short, death—by a variety of means—was so prevalent that none of the men could ever hope to return to China.<sup>177</sup>

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174. *Ibid.*, Translation mine.

175. *Ibid.*, 209.

176. *Ibid.*

177. *Ibid.*, 213.

Eventually, the plot is set in motion when a group of Chinese coolie laborers in Sri Lanka encounter a “person of the same race” (*tongzhong de ren* 同種的人), the smartly-dressed Hua Rixin 華日新 (“Renovate China”). Hua thinks to himself that the bedraggled, muck-coated laborers are “more repulsive-looking than Indians,” and originally takes them to be South African savages. One of the laborers, Zhong Chengzu 鐘承祖 (“Inherit from the Ancestors” Zhong),<sup>178</sup> recognizes 23-year-old Hua as being from the same village as himself, and throws himself at Hua’s feet, begging to be saved. Hua, who is returning to China after graduating from a London university, reflects upon the refinement of his classmates in England, and wonders, “How is it that my fellow Chinese have sunk so low as this?”<sup>179</sup> Hua, though of relatively limited financial means, then undertakes to acquire Zhong’s freedom from the foreign (presumably British, though this is not made clear) master, who is portrayed as amiable, if overly eager to justify to Hua his involvement in an inherently exploitative system. Hua’s exchange with the foreigner is civil, even warm, in stark contrast to interactions with foreigners in the previous two novels.<sup>180</sup> Hua is able to reach an agreement with the foreigner to secure Zhong’s liberty, but at great personal cost to himself.

The next section of the novel is a flashback that comprises almost half of the entire narrative, and indeed is more than twice as long as the sections devoted to describing Zhong’s plight as a coolie. The extended flashback fills the reader in as to precisely what kind of man Zhong Chengzu had been in his earlier days. It turns out that unlike Ruan Tongfu and Li Xinchun in *Bitter Society*, or Ms. Chen in *Golden World*, all of whom are extremely sympathetic characters whose misfortunes are largely due to circumstances beyond their

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178. Zhong (if we take 鐘 is a homonym for 中) and Hua (華) taken together mean “China.” So the names Zhong Chengzu (“China [that] freeloads on the ancestors) and Hua Rixin (China [that] renovates itself) posit each character as representing a competing version of China: Zhong represents a stagnant, decadent China; while Hua represents an innovative, progressive China.

179. *Ibid.*, 213, 217, 223.

180. *Ibid.*, 235, 239, 243, 247, 251.

control, Zhong is in fact a wastrel—a layabout from a wealthy official family who never had to do a day of work in his life, and who was addicted to opium by the age of thirteen. Zhong’s older half-brother Zhong Chengzhi 鐘承志 (“Relying on one’s Aspirations” Zhong) who has spent years studying modern telegraphy is cut out of the family fortune by Chengzu’s mother when their father dies; meanwhile, Chengzu is babied and is never made to pursue any kind of profession or course of study.<sup>181</sup> Spoiled as a child and useless as an adult, Zhong Chengzu gradually pawns all of the family possessions—including items from the family tombs—to support his lavish lifestyle, even resorting to selling his own sister into prostitution to make a quick profit. Ironically—but perhaps symptomatic of the times—even as Zhong deceives his sister into bondage, the broker to whom Zhong sells her simultaneously cheats and bilks Zhong out of most of his share of the earnings, leaving Zhong with just over one quarter of the total money received for sale of his sister.<sup>182</sup>

The small sum Zhong earns from this escapade doesn’t last long, and he quickly turns to burglary, and later gambling to make ends meet. Eventually, he accrues such large gambling debts that he has no choice but to sell himself into indenture, ultimately ending up in Sri Lanka.<sup>183</sup> The flashback ends here, and we return to the present of Zhong’s and Hua’s encounter. Even after he is told that Hua is in the process of negotiating the purchase of his contract from the foreigner, Zhong, rather than feeling grateful for and humbled by Hua’s help, begins to boast to the other coolies of his official family background, and begins to treat them as his own personal slaves. When one of the coolies calls him “Elder Brother Zhong,” in a show of deference, the haughty Zhong spits in his face and screeches, “You goddamned *zhuzai*, you don’t even know your Second Master Zhong! Who are you [daring] to call ‘elder

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181. Ibid., 255.

182. Ibid., 259, 263, 267, 271, 275, 279, 283, 287, 291, 295, 299, 303, 307.

183. Ibid., 335, 341, 345, 349, 353, 357, 361, 365, 369, 373, 377, 381, 385, 389, 393, 397, 401, 405, 409, 413, 417, 421, 433, 437, 441.



brother'?"<sup>184</sup> The other coolies come to detest him so much that they attempt (unsuccessfully) to murder him in his sleep.<sup>185</sup>

Though the novel is unfinished, the final ten segments or so of the extant version detail a lengthy conversation between Hua and the foreigner over the ethical implications of the employment of coolie labor. The foreigner not only understands Hua's reservations about the employment of coolie labor—primarily that the harm it causes outweighs the profits to be earned—but raises many of them first, much to Hua's surprise. The foreigner then goes on to praise US President Abraham Lincoln's role in the abolition of slavery in the US. Hua replies that if the foreigner were to divide up his large estate and grant the coolie laborers tenant rights, he too could be as great as Lincoln. The foreigner is excited by this prospect; however, this is the final segment of the unfinished novel, so it is impossible to know how the author might have intended to proceed from here.<sup>186</sup>

That the focus of this novel is different from the previous two is made very clear in two sections of meta-commentary: the first is in the brief prologue touting the strengths of the Western educational system, as mentioned above; the second is embedded in the middle of the novel. In this latter section, the didactic narrator laments that Zhong's mother sheltered and spoiled him so much in his youth, which resulted in his complete uselessness and lack of morality. The narrator then continues:

Someone who really loved his or her child would train him well starting at a young age, and lead him to walk a just path. And even though we might not be able to speak about 'virtuous education,' 'holistic education,' or 'erudite education' in so complete a way as in foreign education systems, the child would at least be made to learn rationality, and to learn something of the ways of the world. [With this kind of

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184. *Ibid.*, 445.

185. *Ibid.*, 441, 445, 449, 453, 457, 463.

186. *Ibid.*, 479, 483, 487, 495, 531, 599, 603, 607. It should be noted, however, that Hua has racial biases of his own: in the midst of his exhortations, Hua also reminds the foreigner that "to keep coolies is even more an affront to the principles of Heaven than was the keeping of black slaves!" (495).

education], how could [a child like Zhong] ever come to sell off the family's possessions, bring shame upon his household, sell his sister into prostitution, and ultimately fall into the ranks of the wild beasts?<sup>187</sup>

Where the general tone of each of the previous novels is one of political reform—attempting to encourage popular participation in a hitherto inaccessible political system and thereby force the Qing government to stand up for its citizens—the major problem identified in *Diary* is a social one: inadequate education of the population. As laid out in *Diary*, culpability for the victimization of the common people does not lie with the foreigners who take advantage of and abuse them: indeed, in contrast to the previous two novels, though the foreign overseers in *Diary* are still violent and cruel, the foreign plantation owner is depicted as overtly genial, if somewhat insincere. Even when he tells Hua that the laborers are only beaten because otherwise they *take advantage* of his leniency, Hua seems to accept the foreigner at his word without offering any kind of challenge.<sup>188</sup> The owner is never presented as a villain, even where corporal punishment is involved. Neither, for that matter, is the victimization of the common people presented as a result of the Qing state's inability to protect them against such aggression. Rather, the blame lies with the lack of adequate education and discipline among the common people. In spite of (or in this case because of) a privileged upbringing, Zhong lacks any sense of responsibility for his actions or the people they harm, and his unbridled avarice and self-serving nature make him eminently enslaveable. Because people like Zhong have never been educated in ethics or social justice, they not only are able to victimize others with almost no sense of compunction, but in their short-sighted haste to make quick profits also make gullible prey for victimizers in turn. In blaming this shortcoming on parents, rather than on any state apparatus, the author suggests that it is up

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187. *Ibid.*, 283. Author translation.

188. *Ibid.*, 243, 247.

to society and the individuals that comprise it, rather than up to the government, to effect a change in this area.

#### The Coolie Trade Vocabularies: A Cry for Reform

Given that *Diary's* immediate goal is so different from that of the boycott novels, it makes sense that its invocation of the coolie trade vocabularies and discourse of enslavement would also be different. For one thing, *Diary* engages very differently with the humanitarian traumas of the trade: as already mentioned, the first few pages relate the tremendous suffering experienced by the coolies both on board the ship to Sri Lanka, and on the plantations once they arrive. And while the reader's immediate response would be compassion for these victims of the trade, the prolonged flashback detailing the multitude of Zhong's sins makes it difficult to understand his ultimate victimization by the trade as anything but his own fault. Where the victimization of protagonists in the other novels results largely from their naiveté and subsequent deception by others, the unfolding flashback in *Diary* makes it obvious that Zhong's enslavement is merely the nadir of his self-inflicted downward cycle of debauchery and brutality. Physical and emotional violence is not the sole purview of foreigners, and indeed the novel emphasizes that Zhong is equal parts victim and perpetrator of violence. Thus, violence is not simply a marker of foreign cruelty or Qing ineptitude in preventing foreign abuse; it also demonstrates the depths to which locals have allowed themselves to sink in their own pursuit of selfish gain.

The fact that Zhong is capable of inflicting violence on others (where among our other protagonists, only Teng Zhuqing even considers such a course of action) is interesting in and of itself. Not only is Zhong responsible for the sale of his sister into prostitution, but when faced with the possibility of rescue, he immediately turns around and victimizes the very men for whom he should feel a strong sense of solidarity. The de-positioning that occurs when

Zhong becomes a coolie is still not sufficient to awaken him to the necessity of political re-orientation; despite the fact that he has lost more than any of the characters in the other novels (by virtue of having started with so much more), he remains just as short-sighted and self-serving as ever. Zhong is so hardwired for selfish gain that even the drastic reduction to coolie is not enough to force him to change his outlook—rather than causing an irreparable rupture from his past life, enslavement seems to Zhong to be just another setback among others, and when his condition of enslavement is reversed, he goes straight back to being exactly as he was before. Given that Zhong has made zero emotional or intellectual progress by the time the novel is cut off, we can only imagine that the author must have intended for Hua to intervene in Zhong’s social edification at some later point—otherwise, Zhong seems wholly irredeemable.

The question of Zhong’s social position and his failure to learn from his own fall is an interesting one. Though *Jinghua ribao* was actively supporting the ongoing Enlightenment Movement at this time, the novel does not focus exclusively on lower-class individuals within society: Zhong, for one, is not originally a member of the lower class, but is rather a fallen member of the upper class. In focusing on such a character, *Diary* could appeal to official- and middle-class readers, who might not be so moved if the protagonist were unambiguously a member of the lower class. In particular, these readers could easily recognize in Zhong their own potential social decline, or else their own potential victimization by desperate people like Zhong. The choice of a person like Zhong as protagonist highlights the fact that current educational practices had failed not only the lower classes, but society at large—and as such, were a problem that required the attention of society at large, as well. Though the lower classes were to be the principal beneficiaries of the Enlightenment Movement, certainly the spread of education and an ethics of social responsibility would yield benefits for all, in the form of a heightened level of public discourse, or at the very least of a decrease in the kind

of predatory behavior so often resorted to by Zhong and his ilk. It is clear that the intelligent, compassionate Hua would have made a much more natural protagonist for *Diary*; but the liminal figure of Zhong, neither truly upper class nor lower class, both victimizer and victim, simultaneously provides a focal point for a number of different perspectives, in a way that is not possible for the upright, ethical (but one-dimensional) Hua.

In this vein, it becomes slightly easier to feel compassion for Zhong (in spite of his reprehensibly immoral behavior) if we understand him not simply as an abhorrent individual, but as the product of a failing society. Equipped only with the get-while-the-getting's-good mentality he observed in his forebears, there is no way Zhong will ever enter into any kind of altruistic or mutually beneficial relationship with other members the society of which he is a part. While Zhong is, of course, absolutely responsible for the decisions he makes, his complete lack of moral compass guarantees that the decisions he makes will only ever be in pursuit of his own self-interest (and generally only his *short-term* self-interest, at that). Yet rather than dismissing people like Zhong as criminal aberrations, the author allows the reader to see through Zhong's eyes, demonstrating that there is a certain degree of self-preservationist logic at play in the decisions that Zhong makes. As such, if people like Zhong are to be reformed, they must first be introduced to a different logical calculus.

It is important to recognize that while there are a number of external drivers—famine, wars, foreign diplomatic pressure—that precipitate the indenture of the protagonists in *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*, Zhong's fall from grace is entirely his own doing. There are no extenuating circumstances presented, just a series of increasingly irresponsible and ultimately self-destructive choices made by Zhong. In short, *Diary* focuses less on governmental impotence/loss of sovereignty, and more on individual impotence as illustrated

in Zhong's inadequate preparation to positively direct his own destiny.<sup>189</sup> Though China's weak geopolitical position is ultimately what has made the coolie trade possible (and thus it must still be assumed to remain a background theme of the novel), it is the average man's inability to break out of a deeply-entrenched system of decadent or parasitic social values, rather than foreign armies, that presents the greatest threat to a future China. More positively put, the education of China's common people and inculcation of new pro-societal values would be China's only chance for survival in the modern world. It is thus necessary for Zhong's downfall, unlike that of the protagonists in the other two novellas, to be clearly and absolutely his own fault: indeed, by making Zhong the primary agent of his own victimization, the author suggests that his fate is merely the result of poor decision-making (correctable!), rather than of externally-driven geopolitical circumstances (potentially insurmountable). Zhong's agency in his self-destruction suggests the possibility that, offered adequate support and education, people like Zhong could also be the agents of their own empowerment. The fact that Zhong has simply made terrible choices at every fork in the road means that his plight, that of people like him, and that of China more generally, could be prevented or reversed in the future via education campaigns and inculcation of proper social values.<sup>190</sup>

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189. Again, this may be due to the fact that *Jinghua ribao* was published in the capital, and its editors might therefore have been hesitant to proffer criticisms of the Qing ruling apparatus, whether out of fear of reprisals or of alienating their large Manchu readership.

190. In a way, *Diary* almost seems to anticipate Lu Xun's *True Story of Ah Q* 《阿Q正傳》 (1921-1922), albeit without the benefit of Lu Xun's scathing satire. The protagonist in each story is an anti-hero, resorting to whatever means are necessary to survive, and paradoxically endangering his very survival in so doing; both men are uneducated, and either barely literate (Zhong) or wholly illiterate (Ah Q): in fact, when Zhong signs his indenture contract, he is unable to read its terms because of its highly stylized calligraphy, and is only able to sign his own name with an x, calling to mind the "watermelon seed" Ah Q famously uses to sign a confession he doesn't understand. Mired in a social system they neither understand nor have the power to change, both Zhong and Ah Q can only ever act within the confines of that system without ever successfully navigating it; their only recourse is to take advantage where they can find it. In reading the two novels in parallel, one comes away with the distinct impression that in spite of the Enlightenment Movement and indeed, the Republican revolution, the outlook for the future of China's common people—as reflected in the fate of these anti-heroes—had not changed substantially between 1904 and 1921.

I suspect that perhaps one final reason that Zhong, rather than foreigners, must be responsible for his own calamity in *Diary* is that in the context of the Enlightenment Movement, the simultaneously scheming and credulous Zhong was never really meant to be understood as a coolie, but rather as a Boxer analogue. Indeed, the vast majority of victims of the coolie trade were from a few counties in Fujian and Guangdong in southern China,<sup>191</sup> so the figure of the coolie would not necessarily be very meaningful on a personal level for a northern audience. However, that same northern audience would have had much stronger personal feelings on the aftermath of the failed Boxer Rebellion. So where the audience of the southern novels would feel a very immediate sympathy and outrage on behalf of the coolie protagonists, the audience of *Diary* is guided to feel a relatively sterile, intellectually-justified pity for Zhong (read: Boxers whose “backwardness” resulted in the siege of Beijing by foreign armies)—not as a victim, but as a self-destructive delinquent who nevertheless must be rehabilitated.

#### On enslavement and redemption

Whether Zhong himself is actually redeemable is another question. Having seen that his normal, predatory behavior has ultimately resulted in his own impressment into involuntary labor—one of the cruelest conditions a human may be made to endure—one would expect him to reevaluate that behavior when presented with a second chance. And yet, we see no such change when he is rescued by Hua. It is possible that Zhong was to be redeemed under the tutelage of Hua in the final missing chapters of the novel; however, where the extant chapters leave off, the reader is given no evidence of any kind of maturation or moral development on the part of Zhong, which makes it somewhat more tempting to conclude that he might never change. On the other hand, given *Jinghua ribao*'s support for the

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191. Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 41.

Enlightenment Movement, it seems unlikely that the ultimate message of the novel would be that Zhong and people like him are unsalvageable. So while it is impossible to say what his true fate was to have been, it does seem that Zhong must *somehow* be remade into an honest man—or else, more bleakly, be removed from society in a more permanent manner).

Here as in the other novels, the trope of enslavement functions as a threat in response to which a “people” must form (albeit not explicitly within the novel itself). Given that the social goals of the Enlightenment Movement were so different from those of the boycott in Shanghai, it is not surprising that a novel emerging from it would tailor this powerful trope to fit its own aims; nor indeed is it surprising that the “people” it calls forth from its readership would also be quite different. First and foremost, it is a “people” that recognizes the degeneracy of its members, and is more concerned with reversing that degeneracy than with taking action against those responsible for it (which, you will recall, was the impetus behind anti-Qing sentiment in the southern novels). It is a “people” that sees the case of Zhong and, rather than writing him off or pretending not to see him, asks “What went wrong? How can we prevent this from happening again?” Indeed, this public is primarily an introspective one. Granted, both *Bitter Society* and *Golden World* also made the case for education as a means to encourage social reform from the bottom up, but the primary moral target of their efforts is external, whether the foreigners or the Manchus. Indeed, the “people” as imagined by *Diary* doesn’t really need to be anti-foreign—or even anti-Manchu—as much as it needs to be pro-society.<sup>192</sup>

The “people” to whom the Enlightenment Movement and *Jinghua ribao* hoped to appeal was broadly inclusive, incorporating not just the Manchus who lived in the capital, but

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192. As far as *Diary* is concerned, the Manchus and the Qing court might as well not even exist—they are never mentioned, even in passing, as being responsible for China’s social decline.



any Chinese overseas who might be moved to contribute to the cause.<sup>193</sup> And while the ultimate “people” toward which the novel gestures is class-inclusive (for we must presume that Zhong and the other victimized coolies must eventually be allowed membership), it would seem that the burden of creating that public would fall disproportionately upon the literate middle and upper classes (like Hua) who have the wherewithal not only to read the novels but to implement the changes deemed necessary to social reform.<sup>194</sup> *Diary* suggests that the success of the Enlightenment Movement will rely heavily upon men like Hua mentoring and enlightening men like Zhong, rather than upon men like Zhong spontaneously liberating themselves from their own disgrace. Author Hang Xinzhai prioritizes, in keeping with the goals of the Enlightenment Movement, the protection of as many as possible from enslavement; but at the same time, he seems to have believed that certain members of society would be more responsible for this transformation than others.

Whereas in the other two novels, enslavement would have certainly marked even a somewhat flawed character (like Zhu Ajin in *Golden World*) as immediately sympathetic and ultimately redeemable, the trope of enslavement as it is applied to Zhong functions somewhat differently, making it even more difficult to make predictions about his future potential redemption. To start, not even the indignities of enslavement can render Zhong

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193. One potential justification for the wide disparity between the “public” imagined by *Diary* and that addressed by the two novels discussed previously—particularly with regard to its non-stance on ethnicity and/or the Qing court—is that *Diary* was the product of the northern political and social climate. Geographic proximity to the court and heightened fear of reprisals may have influenced Hang’s decision not to offer a criticism of the Manchus or the Qing ruling apparatus; however, Hang’s declination to incite ethnic partisanship seems more likely to have been made out of respect for the novel’s presumed readership: *Jinghua ribao* had attracted a mixed Han/Manchu readership and frequently published articles on general social welfare and education of Han and Manchus alike. So it seems possible that Hang and the editorial staff of *Jinghua ribao* would have preferred to include (reformed) Manchus in any vision of a reformed China, rather than making them the target of a Han ethno-nationalism.

194. This can be said to some extent of each of the novels. Given that each was printed, rather than performed (for example), their audiences are limited to literate people (or illiterate people who are able to have the stories retold for them). As such, though the novels imagine publics that are indeed class-inclusive, there is a discrepancy between the class composition of the “people” being imagined and that of the “audience” that is receiving the novel.

“universally sympathetic” to the reader—his base, immoral character makes it difficult to sympathize with him in any sense. Indeed, where the other two novels would later rely very heavily upon the emotional sympathy of readers with blameless or at least relatively ethical victims of the coolie trade like Ruan Tongfu or Ms. Chen, *Diary* gives itself a much more difficult task: to push the reader to *look past* Zhong’s infuriatingly self-serving character and more objectively evaluate his plight as the result of a systemic failure of late Qing social policy instead. In this case, the narrativization of enslavement is not aimed at instilling in its readers an immediate affective response to foreign or Manchu oppression of essentially decent people; rather, enslavement here presents itself as a worst-case scenario—a “rock-bottom,” as it were—for shameless men like Zhong who never learn to act in the interest of the larger public. Those who lack this sense of public morality are ultimately doomed to live their lives on someone else’s terms.

Though there is hope for men like Zhong as long as men like Hua can be moved to pity them, the task of liberation is not simply a question of release from bondage. After all, as outlined above, Zhong celebrates his own impending freedom by visiting abuse upon other laborers: not only has he not learned anything from his situation, but given the slightest chance, he turns the servitude of others to his own advantage. (And for their part, the other coolies actually put up with no small amount of Zhong’s baseless abuse before they finally reach their breaking point. In the case of these “double slaves,” outrage over their condition eventually pushes them to free themselves from Zhong’s tyranny, even while Zhong remains ever insensible to the suffering he causes.) Simply removing a man like Zhong from his condition of bondage, then, is not sufficient. He must be given the proper moral tools to ensure that he never again gives into the self-serving and self-destructive forces that would drive him back into his bonds. Much as in Liang Qichao’s understanding of slavery as discussed above, enslavement as presented in *Diary* is not simply the denial of one man’s freedom by

another; rather, it is occasioned by the lack of social values in the impessee that allows him to become subjugated by his own venal desires. Where the novel ends, Zhong is still trapped in the same self-serving, sociopathic mentality that has already gotten him into trouble so many times; and if this remains the case, there will be no place for him among the imagined activist public (comprised of men like Hua) striving to move beyond the intellectual and emotional myopia that once plagued it. Without opening themselves to meaningful programs of edification in the value of social altruism and public morality, men like Zhong can only ever hope to be “released slaves,” materially free, but chained soul and spirit to their own corruption. Without education, they can never become “liberated post-slaves,” who, free both in body and in mind, and wiser for having processed their own experiences, can contribute actively to the formation of the new public.

## Conclusions

In a time when expectations for fiction’s ability to foment social and political change were heightened, the three novels discussed above were able to make use of the narrativization of the coolie trade in order to raise awareness and support for one of two major causes: the anti-American boycott of 1905, and the 1901-11 movement to enlighten the lower classes. Both *Bitter Society* and *Golden World* featured overt references to the ongoing boycott (the protagonists of *Golden World* also take strong stances in the debate over unfair treaty terms between the US and Qing China); and while *Diary* does not make overt reference to the Enlightenment Movement, its intent is made clear in the narrator’s exhortations for better education for the lower strata of Chinese society.

Yet behind the immediate goals of each of these pieces lies an ulterior motive—or, rather, a secondary goal that would not only be instrumental to the first, but indeed, would feed into other larger political movements in a matter of years. The creation of, or at least

the gesturing toward, a sense of a “people” united in their political and social priorities was an important step for garnering support for revolutionary and reformist platforms alike. Stirred by debates over the future custodianship of China and inspired by examples of mass anti-colonial resistance in other parts of the world, authors and public intellectuals began to imagine what sort of “people” would need to be mobilized in order to ensure the future survival of the Chinese state. For some, like Liang Qichao, that “public” would be primarily defined by its sense of civic responsibility and its ability to protect its less-fit members; for others, like Wang Jingwei and Zou Rong, membership in the “people” was predicated first on (Han) ethnicity, and on willingness to struggle against external forces for survival.

The “peoples” gestured to in each of the novels are also distinct from one another, depending on the personal views and political preoccupations of their authors. The respective “peoples” of *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*, for example, have several facets in common (anti-foreignism, anti-Qing sentiment, classlessness); however, they differ in that the ideal society conjured by *Golden World* has a very clear place for women to participate, and is perhaps more strongly anti-Manchu than that of *Bitter Society*. The “people” imagined by *Diary*, on the other hand, is notably different from the other two, in that it is neither strongly anti-foreign nor anti-Qing and is classless to the extent that all classes can eventually be included in its ranks—though it is primarily the educated classes who must endeavor to elevate the lower illiterate classes.

While their respective visions are distinct (*Bitter Society* and *Golden World* were written in support of a popular movement geared toward wresting back political power for China’s common people; while *Diary* urged broad educational and social reform), I have considered these three novels together because each makes use of the trope of the involuntary enslavement of laborers in the imagining of its ideal public. As I have demonstrated above, the trope of enslavement and its traumatic violences functions first on a

very immediate, visceral level to engender feelings of sympathy, respect, or perhaps outrage, in the readers of *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*. (In *Diary*, too, Zhong's enslavement does at least earn him our pity, if never quite our admiration.) Characters in all three novels have been failed by the status quo, and undergo traumatic de-positioning as a result of that failure. Once the protagonists are thus rent from their former lives, their previous subject positions are more or less wiped clean; the protagonists become blank nationalistic slates, each having the potential for re-inscription with the preoccupations and values becoming of a future member of an activist people.

However, in addition to the baggage conveyed by the extant coolie trade vocabularies, the discourse of enslavement at this time also had intellectual and political currents swirling far beneath the more immediate sympathy and outrage that rippled across its surface. As demonstrated in the writings of just three important political figures from this time, discourses of "slavery" and "enslavement" were also being used to express the very real fear of future political subjugation by foreign powers on a national level, or else of continued intellectual subjugation to outdated doctrines and the baser tendencies of human nature. On a more symbolic level, then, the coolies' journey in the novels is about the transition from intellectual slave and passive object of political policy to free, thinking, socially-involved post-slavery civic activist. After all, the enslaveable man can only ever be an imperfect member of the "people," and it is only in his awakening—in the novels, during the process of physical servitude and the forcible denial of his liberty—that he comes to realize the true insidiousness of his less-apparent intellectual and political subjugation. Indeed, he has always had the power to resist; but he has been so conditioned by the status quo that it has never occurred to him to do so. In *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*, the surviving protagonists ultimately find a renewed sense of purpose in their commitment to preventing the abuse of others like themselves. Though this transformation is not carried to completion in *Diary*, the

goals of the Enlightenment Movement out of which *Diary* emerged suggest that either Zhong would eventually find redemption by taking his place as a reformed member of a liberated public, or else those who were more willing to reform themselves would move forward without him.

Only through the process of enlightenment can the subjugated man free himself and become politically invested in the future of China. He thereby comes one step closer to remaking himself in one of the images of an “ideal citizen” as put forth by Liang, Wang, or Zou. While the majority of the readers of these novels likely never experienced the trauma of physical enslavement (or at least, to the same extent) as had the protagonists of the novels, they could still vicariously be lifted from what contemporary intellectuals considered to be a state of intellectual and political submission as they followed the gradual process of enlightenment undergone by the protagonists. The readers could also then imagine themselves to be participants in the new political and social order in which passive bystander becomes civic activist. This is what made the narrativization of slavery and enslavement so powerful at this time: not only did it draw on tragic historical experience to encourage the crystallization of an ideal people; but in engaging with the contemporary intellectual discourse on enslavement, it becomes an entreaty to the reading public to participate actively in the prevention of its own potential subjugation.

Of course, the transition to an activist public was not always easy, particularly where certain individuals could benefit more from maintaining a broken system than from the prospect of reforming it. I have thus far discussed the use of positive role models in the novels as a means of encouraging readers to become participants in a renovated “people” that protected its members from abuse; in the next chapter, however, I move on to discuss the novels’ negative role models, as it were—the Chinese crimps who betrayed their countrymen in order to enrich themselves—and the way in which the earlier facile

characterization of these men as self-interested outsider-mercenaries in fact belied their complicated origins. The representation of crimps in coolie fiction would re-complicate the image of the historic crimp; at the same time, however, the novels would also suggest that even men who had once been vilified as completely devoid of any kind of ethics could in fact play a role in the consolidation of the “people,” as long as they could first be edified in the ways of “public morality.”

## 4

### Selling out the nation:

#### the didactic function of the crimp in twentieth-century coolie fiction

Discourses of enslavement in the early twentieth century conveyed more than just fear of imminent subjugation—they also registered fear of and concern over those Chinese who would effect the enslavement of their countrymen. Indeed, the coolie’s scheming counterpart, the crimp (“man-seller”) played a substantial role in the conversion of free man into slave; and given his role as victimizer, the symbolic implications of his inclusion in coolie fiction are unique from those suggested in narrativization of coolie experience. Indeed, the political, ethnic, and ethical implications of the coolie novels cannot be fully explored without an understanding how the figure of the crimp is being utilized therein. In this chapter, I consider the function of the crimp character in the novels already discussed (*Bitter Society*, *Golden World*, *Diary of a Pig*), as well as *The Secret to Getting Rich* by famous late Qing author Wu Jianren, in order to better understand the complete spectrum of meaning contained in these novels. I argue that crimps are more than simply additional characters; rather, they stand in for those persons militating (whether intentionally or unintentionally) against the coalescence of a unified, mutually-supportive nation. In portraying the crimps as violators not just of the law, but of an essential public moral code, authors of coolie fiction offer constructive criticism of the type of selfish behavior to which the crimps have been driven in the name of self-preservation and personal enrichment. In some cases, the ability of crimp characters to seek redemption—usually by edification and realignment with the nationalist cause—offers further insight into the varied perspectives these authors had on the role of the erstwhile subaltern in a modern society. In the imagination of the nation, even negative role models needed to be explicitly dealt with; the inclusion of crimps in these narratives thus offers a glimpse into the authors’ respective imaginings of the nation and the delimitation of its



membership. Thus, I seek to better understand the narrative and didactic function that the crimp plays when drawn out as a distinct character within these worlds in order to better understand how the novels' readerships would have been expected to interpret the criminal crimp and the potential future role of any such traitor within the new nation. Indeed, the depiction of the crimp is crucial to the authors' definitions of their respective idealized "peoples" in that treatment of the crimp is indicative of the extent to which formerly deceitful or treacherous elements might be afforded membership.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the figure of the crimp associated with the coolie trade in the nineteenth century had become a type of shorthand: in official and media reportage on the trade, the crimp was discursively reduced to an unreflective, one-dimensional criminal who victimized his countrymen in the name of private benefit. As I argued, this simplification of the crimp into "menace" obfuscated the more complex social and governmental failings that had left a wide swathe of the urban (or post-rural, in the case of those who fled to cities after the Taiping Rebellion) population feeling desperate and unable to provide for themselves and their families. The discourse of crimp-as-criminal obviated discussions of crimp-as-victim-of-instability, and thus also obviated discussions of where responsibility for that instability lay.

The crimp was a man who found himself for whatever reason violating social norms in being the agent of enslavement of free "good" men (*liangmin* 良民) and their unjust, *de facto* conversion into undesirables (*jianmin* 賤民, of which "slaves" were a subcategory). Often a member of the lower economic class, the crimp's relationship to *liangmin* society was usually already tenuous: he was unskilled, uneducated, and usually poor, which made him the social inferior of anyone writing about him; and by treating him as "criminal" rather than "person," approximations attempted to effect his total cleavage from society by characterizing him as

utterly bankrupt of public morality as well.<sup>1</sup> The question of how he had come to lose or compromise his morality was moot; by asserting his othered criminality, approximations instead presented him as someone who had always been incapable of sharing in local public morality. Thus the crimp could be wholly partitioned off from the society whose moral code he violated.

But the criminalization of the crimp in the public imaginary was not as spontaneous or as organic as one might imagine. As I will show, the imputed position of the crimp in civil society was actually a permutation of a more general “subaltern outcast” or “unmoored criminal outlaw” status that had long been posited as the “outsider” counterpart to law-abiding, mainstream, permanent society. Though these peripheral persons were referred to in a number of ways over the centuries, it is obvious that extant discourses on criminality and externality played a role in shaping the emerging discourse on the relatively new phenomenon of crimping. Discursively, the branding of crimps as “hinterland fraudsters” both set this category of person apart from the permanent urban population of a given city, and as I have already noted, made it possible to write off their criminality as a product of the aberrant immorality of the “other,” rather than the result of complicated social and political phenomena.

Thus, I argue that the presumed exteriority of the crimp had still another effect beyond that already discussed: casting the crimp as a specifically *outsider*-criminal had the consequence of establishing him firmly as a subset of “itinerant wanderers” and “transient migrants” about whom there already existed a long and variable oral and textual tradition. By thus categorizing the crimp, commentators and onlookers had created a kind of allusive code for how the crimp’s behavior should be understood—not simply as individual acts of

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1. If you will recall, “approximations” is a term coined by David Ownby, indicating the oversimplification of criminal types in order to assert their otherness. An explanation of the term can be found on page 147.

criminality, but as akin to the behavior of order-threatening opportunistic drifters who had been banding together for mutual benefit since the Song and Yuan dynasties. This historical depiction of crimps as outsider-drifters simultaneously marked them as both *anti-*(mainstream)-*social* and as potential members of a threatening society of their own. By the twentieth century when activist authors were attempting to bring together a functional, mutually responsible public, it became even more imperative that persons who violated or disrupted the social code be identified and either punished or reformed. As such, the order-violating crimps could be mobilized—fictionally—as a warning against this type of selfish, anti-social behavior.

The discursive connection between crimps and mobile/ethically ungrounded populations becomes especially significant when we consider different popular receptions of and inclinations toward such populations. Though much of the discourse surrounding peripatetic persons cast them as untrustworthy or dangerous, it must be remembered that one of the seminal works of historical fiction to emerge during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, *Outlaws of the Marsh*,<sup>2</sup> lionizes, rather than condemns, precisely such a group of socially-unmoored misfits. As such, I seek to determine both how the extant discourse of uprooted criminals came to bear in discourse of the crimp more specifically, as well as the extent to which twentieth-century fictional depictions of crimps may have been in conversation with works like *Outlaws* in which warriors-errant were held up as heroes rather than villains.

I will argue that the characterization of crimps as opportunistic but potentially reformable displaced rogues in twentieth-century coolie fiction was partially a response to the widespread popularity of novels like *Outlaws* and the romanticization of criminal outlaws

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<sup>2</sup> The original title, *Shuihu zhuan*, literally means *Chronicle of the Water Margin*. In this chapter, I will refer to this work as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, which is translator Sydney Shapiro's rendering of the title. [Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong], *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Sydney Shapiro trans. (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2001), 1-16.

into heroes. While in *Outlaws* any support for the emperor (read: nation) is only ever secondary to the bandits' rigid code of hyper-masculine solidarity, the meta-role of the crimps in coolie fiction is first and foremost to insist that masculinist survivalism is no longer sufficient in the modern nation. A new type of *public* hero is required. That is to say, from a twentieth-century perspective, anti-status quo activities can only ever be "heroic" if they militate in favor of strengthening the public as a whole; and the activities of the crimps highlight the social cost of the self-serving vigilantism that had once been lauded in the name of heroic loyalty.

In order to parse the significance ascribed to the figure of the crimp (both in contemporary reportage and in later works of coolie fiction), I begin with an analysis of the equation of crimps with (always presumed to be potentially criminal) "wandering strangers" or "floating populaces." Why had crimps been associated with this particular type of potential criminality? What impact did this association have on popular understanding of crimps? I go on to do a close analysis of the figures of crimps in several pieces of coolie fiction, outlining the functions that they were designed to play in the novels' respective social and political contexts, then proceed to consider several perspectives on the treachery and betrayal of the nation in the twentieth century. Finally, I consider how the figure of the crimp might have been used to push back both against the popular mythology of stalwart-as-hero and against the anti-societal values that such hero-worship had emphasized.

## **Understanding the Crimp: popular discourse**

### *On vagabondage*

The existence of peripatetic peoples of no fixed residence in China has been documented as far back as the turtle shell divinatory inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty

(roughly eighteenth century BCE-twelfth century BCE).<sup>3</sup> The philosophical text *Guanzi*, attributed to Warring States-era intellectual Guan Zhong (but edited during the Han dynasty),<sup>4</sup> uses the phrase *youshi* 游食 (“seeking food”) to describe those persons who had to travel to find work to feed themselves. The text also makes reference to *liumin* 流民 (“drifting persons”) and *ximin* 徙民 (“mobile persons”) to describe the phenomenon of unstable mobile populations.<sup>5</sup> By the time the *Classic of Poetry* was compiled in the sixth century BCE, there was also in use the social category of *meng* 氓,<sup>6</sup> which was used generally to refer to floating populations of persons without particular trades or occupations (and in some cases whose unmooredness was viewed as potentially destabilizing to the rest of society).<sup>7</sup> In other words, even from a very early point in the history of Sinic civilization, there was not just the awareness of transient or fluid populations as a meaningful category of person; but there was also a developing sense that such a person (or a group of such persons) might be a source of disruption for governance and for society at large.

It is conceivable that for a stable population, the influx of transient “migrants” might be threatening for a number of reasons: for one thing, their lack of permanent or even long-term employment seems to have made them subject to assumptions that they were likely to turn to extralegal forms of employment at the expense of the “honest” *liangmin* classes.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, as groups of criminal *yumin* 游民 (“floating persons”) began to consolidate themselves in urban centers (for easier access to victims), “conflicts” between locals and

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3. Lu Deyang, *Liumin shi* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1997), 1-2.

4. Victor Mair, ed. *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000), 12.

5. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua yu Zhongguo shehui*, expanded edition (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 2007), 13. Wang cites *Guanzi*, “四時.”

6. Now *mang* in Mandarin.

7. Wanyan Shaoyuan, *Liumang de bianqian: Zhongguo gudai liumang shihua* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 1-2.

8. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 14, 16.

outsiders became commonplace.<sup>9</sup> The activities of these small *yumin* societies would result in the broader *yumin* population being eyed with suspicion and mistrust.

Indeed, a major part of the reason that wanderers were in general assumed to harbor ill intentions was the common belief that itinerant laborers and vagabonds were perceived as not being bound by the same social and ethical norms as the permanently settled population. In removing themselves geographically from the Confucian relationships that were supposed to govern their behavior, *yumin* were presumed to have divested themselves completely of the ethical order to which more permanent “normal” society adhered. As such, the act of labeling outsiders as itinerant *liumin* or migrant *yumin* was more than just to innocently describe their ambulatory tendencies; indeed, implicit in that label was a valuative judgment about the presumed lack of moral responsibility on the part of these strangers—and thus not only the lack of shared values more generally, but specifically the flouting of a key part of the public morality that was supposed to keep society in order.<sup>10</sup>

While the ungrounded (and presumed-to-be opportunistic) individual had long been perceived as threatening to society at large inasmuch as he was threatening to the *liangmin* individual, widespread fighting during the Song (960-1127 CE), Jin (1115-1234 CE), and Yuan (1264-1368 CE) dynasties had also led to shifts in composition and perception of the category of *yumin* as a whole. For one thing, the violence of repeated dynastic upheaval resulted in large refugee populations forced to leave their homes in search of physical and nutritional security. Furthermore, in the Jin and Yuan dynasties, minority ruling houses (Jurchens and Mongols, respectively) imposed oppressive laws on non-co-ethnics, resulting in unrest and even greater displacement across large swathes of the population. As displaced persons grew in number, they began to band together for mutual protection and support, rendering them a

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9. Lu, *Liumin shi*, 143-144; Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 223-24.

10. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 293.

much more powerful social force than the dispossessed individual *yumin* had ever been.<sup>11</sup> A large mobile population had long been considered an indicator of a dynasty's poor health,<sup>12</sup> but the large-scale rise of such anti-society bands over the course of several centuries also suggested the possibility of alternative loci of power. This demographic shift was very troubling, both for ruling houses and for those communities who had managed to remain intact and who viewed these roving bands of *yumin* as a threat to their own stability.

The emergence of the term *guanggun* 光棍 (literally “bare stick,” which could be used to refer simply to a “bachelor” or more pejoratively to an unmarried trouble-maker, and is commonly translated as “rootless rascal” in the latter context) by the Yuan dynasty<sup>13</sup> demonstrated that this category of “ungrounded” person continued to be a source of great anxiety for those who encountered him. *Guanggun* as used in the pejorative sense was primarily a comment on the individual's social displacement, rather than strictly on his bachelorhood. Whether voluntarily or involuntarily, such a *guanggun* had become cut off from his family, and thus was like a tree with no roots or branches. The atomization of the individual *guanggun* meant to onlookers that he was more likely to breach the established legal and moral codes of his host society, as it was assumed that he had “little obvious stake in the social and moral order” by which locals lived.<sup>14</sup> He had no responsibilities to anyone but himself, and could not be assumed to be bound by the same sense of familial pride or shame that discouraged more permanent, grounded populations from engaging in illegal or dishonest activities.

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11. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 12, 177-78; Wanyan, *Liumang de bianqian*, 170.

12. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 1.

13. “Guanggun,” in *Kangxi da cidian*, reprod. at *Handian* <http://www.zdic.net/c/9/143/312419.htm>. *Guanggun* has since taken on a more neutral meaning, and young singles in China now celebrate the eponymous *guanggunjie* (“Singles’ Day”) as a rebuttal to the couple-centric Valentine’s Day.

14. Matthew Sommer, “Dangerous Males, Vulnerable Males, and Polluted Males: The Regulation of Masculinity in Qing Dynasty Law,” in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: a Reader*, ed. Brownell and Wasserstrom (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 71-72.

The violence of the Ming conquest of the Yuan, followed in turn by the violence of the Manchu overthrow of the Ming and a series of expansive military campaigns into the western reaches of the continent, similarly resulted in even further displacement of Han and non-Han peoples throughout Qing territory and adjacent areas. Raging turmoil throughout Qing territory in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as already discussed in the previous chapters, would have similar effects on the populace.<sup>15</sup> In decades of empire-wide crisis, refugees flooded into China's urban centers to escape violence and famine elsewhere. And as I will demonstrate below, the facile conflation of the externality of these new arrivals with potential (or inevitable) criminality would be indicative of the extent to which the problematic discourse of outsider-as-criminal had already solidified in public consciousness.

#### *The crimp as outsider in nineteenth century discourse*

I wish to briefly revisit the question of the externality of the crimp, as already introduced in Chapter Two, so that I might call attention to one particular aspect of contemporary reportage on crimps: namely, that such reportage had made frequent use of the extant vocabularies of impermanent residence and unmooredness, highlighting their geographic externality to the community at large. Even more importantly, however, these reports insisted upon the crimps' ethical externality to a society of *liangmin* who (presumably) continued to adhere to the socially-prescribed moral code. In addition to being condemned by government and media reports more generally as *jianmin* 奸民 ("traitors"),<sup>16</sup> *hanjian* 漢奸 ("Han traitors")<sup>17</sup> and *guaipei* 拐匪 ("kidnapping crooks")<sup>18</sup> who *zuojian fanke* 作奸犯科

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15. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 177-78; Lu, *Liumin shi*, 86-90.

16. "Hu Guang zongdu guanwen yi Fa lingshi wei qizhou jinzhi zhaogong gaoshi zudai qi zhaogong shi zhi zongshu ziwen," (3 Feb. 1866), in *HCSH* 1.1, 44-45; "Zongshu zou yu Yingguo huiding zhaogong zhangcheng ershier kuan jingguo qingxing zhe," (12 Mar. 1866), in *HCSH* 1.1, 155.

17. "Lin Zexu zou chaming waiguo chuanzhi," in *HCSH* 1.1, 7.

18. "Guafeng yi'e," *Shenbao*, no. 6366 (7 Jan. 1891).



(“behave treacherously and break the law”),<sup>19</sup> crimps were also often referred to as *guntu* 棍徒 (“ruffians,” reminiscent of the previously-mentioned *guanggun* 光棍),<sup>20</sup> or *neijian* 内奸 (“rural traitors”).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the adjective *neidi* 内地 (“rural,” “hinterland”) was frequently used in urban reportage to mark the crimps as outsider-criminals in permutations like *neidi jianmin* 内地奸民 (rural traitors),<sup>22</sup> *neidi feitu* 内地匪徒 (hinterland fraudsters),<sup>23</sup> and *neidi guaipei* 内地拐匪 (hinterland deceivers).<sup>24</sup> One government report goes so far as to blame the success of the trade entirely on these *neidi feitu*: “If it weren’t for these hinterland fraudsters’ greed, which motivates them to sell Chinese overseas, how could these ships carrying men overseas ever be filled?”<sup>25</sup> Such vilification of crimps both drew heavily on the deeply entrenched discourse of wanderer-as-threat, and simultaneously suggested the perception of a deep ethical rift between rural and urban where the coastal residents assumed the dislocated (and specifically rural) individual to be inherently immoral and threatening.

While it is certainly the case that many such crimps were in fact rural outsiders, coolie testimonies also state that in many cases crimps were acquainted with or friendly with their

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19. “Zhujiang xiaxun,” *Shenbao*, no. 6910, (July 1892).

20. “Lingnan dufeng zhuzai yijin lun,” *Shenbao*.

21. “Yu yanhai ge dufu yanmi shicha,” in *HCSH* 1.1, 4.

22. “Xingbu zi zhongli yamen qing ru Mao Hongbin suozou jiang lüemai renkou zuifan chuzhan wen,” (3 Nov. 1864) in *HCSH* 1.1:, 51; “Liang Guang zongdu Rui Lin deng zou shoucong guaifan jishi zhengfa zhe,” (1 Dec. 1866), in *Ibid.*, 54; “Liang Guang zongdu Rui Lin, Guangdong xunfu Zhang Zhaodong zouqing jiang heyoun renkou chuyang zuifan fa jibian chongjun zhe,” (24 Sept. 1872), in *Ibid.*, 59; “Beiyang dachen Li Hongzhang zou jianmin youguai renkou maiyu yangchuan liangwei biantong banli,” (21 Aug. 1872) in *Ibid.*, 87; “Min Zhe zongdu Li Henian wei zhangquan yidai guairen chuyang chenggong ni zecheng difangguan yanmi jicha bing yanding gongguo zhi zongshu ziwen.” (28 Jan. 1873) in *Ibid.*, 90; “Zongshu wei Fa shi suoni zhaogong xinzhang rengnan zhaoban shi, zhi Fa shi Luoshuya zhaohui.” (9 Apr. 1871), in *Ibid.*, 216.

23. “Liang Guang zongdu Lao Chongguang zhunxu geguo zhaogong chuyang zhaohui,” in *Ibid.*, 9; “Henandao yushi Yang Rongxu,” in *Ibid.*, 48; “Guangdong xunfu Qi Ling zou,” in *Ibid.*, 49.

24. “Zongshu wei yancheng guaifan shi,” in *Ibid.*, 56.

25. “Henandao yushi Yang Rongxu,” in *Ibid.*, 48.

victims—in other words, not outsiders at all. That being the case, why did the modes of characterization described above become the default way of talking about crimps? For one thing, as I argued previously, the characterization of the crimp as outsider likely had much to do with making sense of his motivations—again, making him a “knowable” quantity by asserting that he was innately other, and thus innately capable of criminality, rather than a *liangmin* turned bad. Such a narrative suggests that commentators believed (or wanted to believe) that it was precisely because of this rural externality that crimps were able to participate in these immoral activities to begin with; surely no long-time urban residents could treat their neighbors so heartlessly. Certainly, categories like *guanggun* and *liumang* tended to foreground the question of the subject’s ambiguous morality and ungrounded character; and thus presumed to have no stake in the stability of their host societies, the crimps’ participation in such a heinous crime was easily explained away.

Yet, the reflex to partition off the crimps from the rest of society was more complex than that. Not only had displaced persons been considered problematic for millennia because of their willingness to operate outside of established legal and moral codes as a means of ensuring their own survival, but the coalescence and flourishing of informal counter-culture *yumin* alliances in recent centuries had made *yumin* a potentially powerful social category. In the specific case of the crimps, foreign recruitment firms often worked with large networks of crimps rather than relying upon single individual crimps in order to maximize efficiency. The desire on the part of foreign companies to establish such networks meant that an individual crimp might be called upon to recruit not just potential laborers, but other crimps from among his friends and acquaintances as well. In a way, then, the success of these networks of kidnapers and other undesirables was not just proof of the power that unscrupulous individuals held over their unsuspecting neighbors, but could also be taken as evidence of the power that could be wielded by well-connected criminal organizations. The

successful exploits of the crimps seem to have offered further anecdotal confirmation of the consolidation of illegitimate power among these mutualistic covens of “itinerant criminals.” Crimping networks, now characterized as comprising masses of rural *guanggun* and *neidi feitu*, were perceived as terrifyingly organized parasocial criminal conspiracies threatening the coast, rather than loose, ad hoc associations of individual opportunists. Indeed, contemporary reportage suggested that the average crimping apparatus might include a vast web of nefarious outsiders all working together to victimize city residents.

It is worth noting that the crimps themselves seem to have been aware of the unfavorable discourse that surrounded their presumed lack of ethical grounding, and attempted to deflect some of the condemnation levied against them. For example, in criminal confessions, several crimps note that they are responsible for the kidnapping of a person who is *tongxing bu zong* 同姓不宗 (of the same surname but different lineage) and only very seldom admit to having kidnapped a kinsman or a relative. A number of the crimps whose confessions are recorded claim to have taken up crimping in order to earn money to take care of elderly parents (particularly widowed mothers). The confessions themselves are obviously not entirely reliable, as it was in the crimps’ interest to under-report or to make themselves appear more sympathetic. However, a few observations may be made: first, that the crimps either truly did tend to avoid victimizing kin and relations, as they felt it to be too great a transgression of their own ethical beliefs, or else committed these types of kidnappings but knew that they would be judged more harshly by the authorities, and thus tended not to confess to them; and second, similarly, we may imagine that crimps either were indeed moved to commit criminal acts out of a sense of filial obligation, or else that they hoped that in offering such filial motivations for their crime, they might be treated with

somewhat more leniency than if they cited only private greed as their motivation.<sup>26</sup> The crimps' testimonies suggest an awareness of public opinion surrounding ethical behavior in general and crimping more particularly, and further suggest that the crimps themselves understood the extent to which they had been depicted as ethically unmoored. Thus, whether sincerely or disingenuously, many of the crimps seem to resist their own simplistic categorization as self-serving *guanggun*.

### **The crimp as character: fictional representations**

Fiction, too, would attempt to re-complicate the overly-simplified figure of the crimp—albeit for entirely different reasons than the crimps themselves. The distinct modes of characterization of crimps in the novels provide an interesting window into how the authors intended for a range of such opportunistic figures to be understood. The crimp is a small but integral character in coolie fiction, not least because he precipitates much of the action by launching the voyage on which the protagonists depart. More importantly, however, the crimp represents a particular moral category in the world of the novel. The fate of the crimp—and protagonists' responses to that fate—speaks volumes to the authors' personal beliefs regarding the role that the unethical or formerly-unethical social subaltern could or should be allowed to play in these idealized publics, the rehabilitability of those who have betrayed their publics, and the responsibility of the middle or upper classes to edify or otherwise support their subaltern brethren. In presenting a variety of different crimp characters, coolie fiction re-introduces some complexity and ambivalence back into discourses on the crimp, reversing some of the simplification effected by earlier approximations.

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26. Thomas Buoye demonstrates, for example, that under Qing law, it was common for criminals who had acted with filial motivations to be given more lenient sentences than those who had acted in self-interest alone. "Filial Felons," 109-24.

At the same time, these characterizations, and protagonists' responses (or in one case, the narrator's response) thereto make it possible to imagine a modern nation that is strengthened by inclusion of erstwhile opportunists and (threatening) vagabonds who had themselves previously been neglected or victimized by extant power structures. Punishing or disowning the crimps for their roles as victimizers is never as important as dismantling the social and political structures that made it possible or imperative (from a survival standpoint) for them to engage in that behavior. So long as such persons can be provided the necessary guidance and social resources to reform themselves from their victimizing ways, their origins as victimizers can at the very least be pitied, and possibly even forgiven.

### *Bitter Society*

Unlike in some of the other novels to be discussed below, *Bitter Society* does not set aside much time to discuss the role of the crimp who is responsible for the protagonists' imprisonment and contracting. Teng Zhuqing, Zhuang Mingqing, and Lu Jiyuan see recruitment posters and decide to enlist themselves in the service of the coolie traders as secretaries and letter-writers; the crimp they approach—a man called Xie—is only a factor inasmuch as he promises the trio desk jobs when in fact he intends to enlist them as laborers like all the rest.

There are a few responses to this relatively undeveloped category of crimp character in the text. For one, Lu Jiyuan registers naïve shock at the fact that the crimps-cum-overseers aboard the ship—Cantonese speakers—are willing to abuse their co-linguals, despite place-based and language-based loyalties he believes they should hold for one another.<sup>27</sup> Jiyuan himself has already been deceived by a Guangdong-based recruiter, so he should not be surprised by the duplicity and cruelty of the crimps; and yet for some reason he can accept

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27. *Ku shehui* [*Bitter Society*], 60.

his own victimization (as an outsider Jiangbei-*ren*) more easily than that of the other Guangdong-*ren*. Jiyuan projects his own particular ethical line onto the crimps, then is surprised that they cross it.

When the ship arrives in Peru, the crimps are beaten and imprisoned as punishment for the high mortality rate suffered en route. Lu Jiyuan and Teng Zhuqing reflect gleefully on this reversal of fortune; however, the sagely Xie Lü'an (unrelated to the crimp Xie above) admonishes them: "You are mistaken. The crimps are of course detestable; but if we want revenge taken on them, we should take it ourselves. If they are being punished by the foreigners, it should be a case of 'When the fox dies, the rabbit mourns, each is saddened by the loss of his own kind.' You should feel pity for them, not joy!"<sup>28</sup> Zhuqing, Jiyuan, and the others are sobered by his words. The crimps, in spite of their opportunism and selfishness, are still part of a Chinese "us" that should be unified against the foreign "them." Though the crimps deserve to be punished for their behavior, the fact that it is the foreigners who mete out the crimps' punishment (and not in the interest of justice, but as retribution for lost profits) only highlights the Qing court's impotence regarding the enforcement of its own laws and the exertion of foreign sovereignty over its subjects. For true justice to be done, the crimps should be held accountable for their betrayal, and *by those they have betrayed*. Xie's assessment of the situation and criticism of Zhuqing's and Jiyuan's rejoicing reminds the reader that the crimps are in fact merely a symptom of a much greater set of problems. Nothing meaningful is gained in the foreigners' punishment of the crimps; in fact, this display is just another way that the foreigners are able to assert their mastery over Chinese persons. To some extent, the crimps, too, are victims of foreign designs, and cannot be held accountable for all the evils of the trade. Though the novel's author is perhaps not keen to immediately forgive those who have betrayed their countrymen, neither is he swift to

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28. Ibid., 76.

abandon them to the whims of vindictive foreigners. Real justice can only occur where China reclaims its mandate to exercise legal and political sovereignty over its own subjects.

While the above is one way the novel tackles the question of the role of crimps (read: traitors to the nation), the more interesting engagement with crimping occurs *prior* to the men's contracting. To recount: almost from his introduction, Teng Zhuqing is set up as opportunist, seeking out schemes to make quick profits. Though he was bright and ambitious as a boy, circumstances catapult him a little too quickly into positions of power, and he begins to dream of ways to enrich himself. However, his attempts at business fail not once but twice: the first time, he simply overextends himself in a market in which there is insufficient demand; while in the second case, he lends his name to a friend's enterprise whose (doomed) financial workings are not revealed to Zhuqing until "he" already owes all the stakeholders an insurmountable debt. The irate shareholders place Zhuqing under house arrest until his friend Zhuang Mingqing arrives and spirits him away to Suzhou.<sup>29</sup> In each case, Zhuqing goes into hiding rather than make good on the debts he has incurred.

After Mingqing rescues Zhuqing, the pair moves on to Shanghai hoping to find more opportunities there. While in Shanghai, well before they ever decide to offer themselves as secretaries, Zhuqing suggests to Mingqing that they travel to Guangdong so that they might exploit the coolie trade by helping the foreigners recruit laborers from their home region of Jiangbei, hitherto more or less untouched by the trade's predations. Zhuqing reasons that he and Mingqing, as speakers of the Jiangbei dialect, are well situated to recruit others into cooliehood. In fact, he goes so far as to say, "The foreigners don't know the situation in Jiangbei, that is the only reason they don't go there [to recruit labor]. Once I've spoken to them, and they hear that Jiangbei-*ren can withstand even more suffering and are more hard-*

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29. *Ibid.*, 26-29.

*working* than the Cantonese and Fujianese, won't they all be delighted?"<sup>30</sup> Zhuqing thinks only of his own opportunity for self-enrichment, despite obviously being aware of the suffering that would be inflicted upon his proposed victims—and indeed, he plans on offering up Jiangbei people precisely *as more capable of bearing suffering*. In response to Zhuqing's enchantment with the idea of this "opportunity," the manager of the hostel at which the trio is staying reminds Zhuqing: "That Jiangbei-*ren* have not yet been brought to foreign countries, and have not been made to endure endless abuse, is in fact a *good* thing!"<sup>31</sup> Zhuqing does not acknowledge the innkeeper's point, and merely responds that his plans are not yet set in stone. (Lu Jiyuan's later naïve horror at Cantonese crimps' betrayal of other Cantonese men can only seem somewhat ironic when the reader reflects upon the fact that Zhuqing, despite being one of our protagonists, had already entertained similar dreams of selling his co-linguals.)

Zhuqing hungers for profit, but assumes none of the responsibility for the failures of his enterprises. He is an opportunist and a coward. However, the reader has thus far been given no reason to expect him to be capable of the reprehensible man-selling he suggests. But perhaps that is the point: perhaps the ease with which Zhuqing pivots recklessly from one venture to another more dubious one is meant to illustrate how quickly morality deteriorates when there is neither legal accountability nor economic stability. In a matter of only a few years, he has gone from precocious wunderkind to aspiring crimp. Though his acquaintances gently admonish him for harboring thoughts of crimping, they also give no indication that they perceive his proposal to be as totally repugnant as contemporary reportage suggested (it bears mentioning, however, that Mingqing was also a petty embezzler, so his own moral standards are not particularly high either). Either because they understand his circumstances,

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30. *Ibid.*, 51. Italics added.

31. *Ibid.*, 51-52.



or because they themselves have already begun a moral slide in which criminality is relative rather than absolute, Zhuqing's endorsement of crimping is less palatable than his fraud, but is not sufficiently "evil" for these friends to turn away from Zhuqing.

Zhuqing is precisely the kind of wandering criminal (whose errancy is precipitated by his criminality) that crimps were presumed to be. Yet, while he does fit into the outsider-criminal paradigm, it is interesting to note that as with the Guangdong crimps, Zhuqing is willing (and in fact *prefers*) to victimize persons with whom he has a linguistic or place-based connection. Thus, on the one hand, we see the full extent of Zhuqing's self-serving nature: his linguistic affinity to the people of Jiangbei, rather than instilling him with a sense of loyalty thereto, creates, in his mind, a uniquely exploitable opportunity of which he can take advantage. On the other hand, the author reminds us more generally that those who are already willing to victimize other people are unlikely to draw a line between persons in their own group and "others"—suggesting that in fact, that the paradigm of the "outsider-criminal as inherent threat to local-*liangmin*" is flawed. Locals, too, can be criminals; and outsiders can be victims just as easily as they can be victimizers.

Though Zhuqing does not ever engage in crimping, his consideration of the possibility clearly marks him as morally degenerate as far as the reader is concerned. And yet, having shown this propensity to victimize others, Zhuqing is not excludable from the future version of the nation. Indeed, the novel ends with Li Xinchun (the protagonist who went to the US), returning to China to help spread the word of the anti-American boycott. Upon his return, he encounters Lu Jiyuan and "the long-suffering" Zhuqing, both of whom are welcomed warmly. Though it is not stated explicitly, we must infer from this warm greeting that Zhuqing (having survived his experience as a coolie in Peru) and Jiyuan (having been hired as ship's crew when his weak constitution caused coolie traders to fear that he would not survive the voyage in the hold), each having shared in the traumatic experience of transnational labor flows, will

necessarily share the ideological values that result from foreign abuse and the witnessing of great suffering. As such, it is implied that Zhuqing and Jiyuan—despite having themselves been complicit either intellectually or professionally with the trade—are redeemable, as long as they are able to re-align themselves with the forces of justice after the fact. They have made poor, utilitarian choices, but this does not preclude their active membership in the nation, so long as they are willing and able to change.

In the context in which the novel was written, the crimps and Zhuqing's brief flirtation with the idea of crimping seem to serve two principal allegorical functions: first and foremost, of course, the novel condemns those persons who behave selfishly at the expense of public welfare (violators of the boycott, perhaps, or more generally those who resist the formation of a future potential nation in order to protect their own status quo interests, i.e. Han officials serving under the Manchus); but secondly, the novel shows, through Zhuqing's story arc, how easy it can be to make the slip from *liangmin* to criminal, how the outsider was once an insider elsewhere. It is natural that the crimps should be vilified, but the author enjoins his readers to remember that crimps, opportunists, and those who more generally frustrate the ambitions of a cohesive public should be encouraged to add their energies to the cause. With adequate education and experience, such persons may yet be reincorporated into the public they once betrayed.

### *Golden World*

In *Golden World*, by contrast, the narrative function of the crimp is somewhat different. For one thing, there are several crimps with varying degrees of characterization and development. The principal crimp is Bei Furen (貝蕪仁, “benevolence engulfed by the weeds of monetary concerns,”), a gambler and general ne'er-do-well who has snuck off to Macao to avoid prosecution for various petty crimes he has committed in more rural areas (內

地犯事 *neidi fanshi*). Bei finds himself presented by a mutual acquaintance as an underling to the foreigner Braga, recently arrived from Cuba to recruit labor for his plantation. Bei is not permitted to decline, and Braga's violent threats against his person immediately terrify Bei into submission.<sup>32</sup> Shortly after their first meeting, Bei sets out to attempt to recruit laborers, but he is largely unsuccessful. Braga beats him mercilessly for this failure.

On the advice from an acquaintance, Qian Xiaogui ("little money devil"), Bei enlists the services of several sub-crimps to make his task easier: the relatively undeveloped (as characters) Big Rong, Second Di, Third Wan, and Fourth Ni. When Bei, now designated the "head crimp," introduces these four "major crimps," to Braga, he explains: "They are all wide-eyed, quick-fingered, crafty, widely-renowned *stalwarts* (*haohan* 好漢)."<sup>33</sup> There are also at least ten "minor crimps" serving under each of the "major crimps," but who are evidently too insignificant to introduce to the foreigner. It is major crimp Fourth Ni who will later be responsible for the recruitment of protagonists Zhu Ajin and Ms. Chen by calling in Zhu's outstanding gambling debts.

The crimps meet with varying fates over the course of their employment. Bei, for his part, is reduced to the personal servant of the foreigner Braga. He becomes responsible for the total care of Braga's Pekingese dog (*haba gou* 哈巴狗, slang for "toady," coincidentally). During the journey to Cuba, Bei is made to bear the humiliation of feeding it directly by mouth (literally "mouth-to-mouth") which conjures an interesting image of a figurative "dog" staring into the face of his literal mirror double.<sup>34</sup> The dog, it bears mentioning, receives better treatment than any of the Chinese persons on the ship (Bei included), and shortly after Braga's ship arrives in Cuba, Braga orders that Bei be beaten for having in some way

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32. *Huangjin shijie* [Golden World], 145.

33. "都是眼睜睜、手長長、玲瓏尖利、有名的好漢。" I will be returning to the idea of *haohan* later in this chapter. *Huangjin shijie* [Golden World], 146. Italics added.

34. *Ibid.*, 143.

imperfectly executed his responsibilities as dog-feeder. Even Bei, as the highest on the crimping ladder, was never safe from the violent temper of the foreigner; and indeed, he is the first of the five principal crimps to be killed.<sup>35</sup> It was Braga who was responsible for converting Bei from a petty criminal into a villain in the first place; and in the end, having given himself over wholly to Braga's will, Bei is just as disposable to Braga as any of the others. Ultimately, Bei is just as enslaved as are the coolies.

By the time that Chen and Zhu are reunited later in the novel, three of the four "major crimps" have died by various means. Only Fourth Ni, the man responsible for Chen's and Zhu's plight, has survived. He can hardly be said to be alive, however: he "is only three parts man, seven parts ghost [...] He is just waiting to die now." Upon hearing this even Chen, one of Ni's victims, cannot help but feel sorry for him.<sup>36</sup> The ravages of their involvement in the trade—including beatings by Braga's other employees—have taken a heavy toll even on the crimps, despite the fact that their position in the enterprise was relatively privileged. Whether Ni has simply suffered too much physical abuse or whether he is haunted by what he has seen (or done) is unclear; but (unlike in *Bitter Society*), none of the protagonists can bring him or herself to gloat over the fate that has befallen Ni and the others. After all, even the crimps once belonged to the vulnerable subaltern class; they have merely chosen to cope with that position in a violent, self-serving way.

However, the most telling facet of the crimp story has to do with one of the "minor crimps." During the voyage, it is revealed that over two-thirds of the original forty minor crimps have perished, leaving only thirteen. One of these remaining minor crimps makes an impassioned plea to the coolies: namely, that the minor crimps themselves had been deceived as to the terms of their own employment, and that they had not benefitted from the

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35. *Ibid.*, 183.

36. *Ibid.*

coolies' victimization to nearly the same extent as had Bei and the principal crimps (however, this conveniently glosses over the fact that the minor crimps had obviously *intended* to reap greater benefits at the others' expense, and only claim solidarity with the coolies now that their own ambitions have been thwarted). The speaker beseeches his listeners:

We are the same race [*tonglei* 同類] as all of you; now that we have left home, we must care for one another as family. The heat of the plantations will be even worse than sitting on this boat. If Braga won't call a doctor for us, we must call our own; if he won't provide coffins for our deceased, we must provide our own. The only problem is whether our money is sufficient, but if we have enough, there's nothing for us to fear.<sup>37</sup>

He then goes on to propose that a collection be taken up to help buy necessary supplies for the sick and dying. The minor crimps, he volunteers, will donate a larger portion, out of the payments they have received from Braga. Those who listen are moved to tears.<sup>38</sup> In this situation, the earlier self-serving intentions of the crimps can (and must) be forgiven in order to craft a stronger, unified whole.

Upon arrival in Cuba, Braga overhears two minor crimps discussing their plan to create this fund for collective support (presumably one of these men is the speaker described in the previous paragraph, though that is not stated explicitly). Braga has the two men beaten by the major crimps and left for dead in the Cuban jungle. However, one of them—who is only introduced to us much later as Third Pocky Hu—survives. We are informed, via a flashback that occurs later in the novel, that when Hu finally regained consciousness several days later, there was no trace of the other crimps or the coolies. Unsure of his surroundings, he dazedly stumbled through the jungle until he encountered the home of a reclusive former coolie living in isolation. The recluse took Hu in and, several months later when a terrified, malnourished

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37. *Ibid.*, 156.

38. *Ibid.*

Zhu Ajin managed to escape from Braga's plantation, Hu similarly offered Zhu shelter and respite.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, in saving Zhu's life, Hu demonstrates his capacity for humanity, despite his previous involvement in the victimization of others (albeit to a lesser extent than the higher-up crimps). Hu remains a minor character throughout the rest of the novel, and via his acquaintance with the other, more activist characters, he gradually remakes himself. From a crimp of few or perhaps weak convictions, Hu is transformed via education and intelligent dialogue into a member of the activist people that emerges by the end of the novel. The nameless minor crimp who makes the impassioned plea onboard the ship (whether he was supposed to be Hu or someone else) enunciates the need for those with a shared plight to come together; and Hu is the embodiment of this hope. Though rough around the edges, and unable to participate fully in the drawn-out political debates between the other more educated protagonists, Hu can—and does—redeem himself for his past misdeeds by realigning himself with the interests of the masses.

In more concrete terms, then, it is evident that author Biheguan Zhuren interpreted the function of the crimp in a number of ways. For one thing, the crimps of higher rank, despite having engaged in reprehensible behavior, are ultimately to be pitied rather than scorned. We may hate Bei or any of the other crimps for their role in the recruitment of coolies, but in the end, they too are victimized by this brutal system. We sense, then, that the real burden of guilt lies not with the vagabond Bei, or with the four major crimps, but with the foreigner Braga, the manipulative Qian Xiaogui (who was responsible for Bei's involuntary placement with Braga in the first place), and indeed with an impotent Qing government unable to prevent the exploitation of its own subjects (this last aspect is, if the reader will recall, made clear in this novel by the heroic protagonism of heirs of the Ming

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39. *Ibid.*, 157; 179-80.

dynasty). While the crimps are obviously guilty of violent crimes against their countrymen, no single crimp can be held responsible for the systemic violence of the trade; it is the foreigners, mercenary Chinese like Qian who operate on a larger scale than the crimps, and a disengaged, powerless Qing court that have made possible the orchestration of such an exploitative scheme. Thus, in the context of the Anti-American Boycott, the author directs blame for China's current international standing and the treatment of Chinese overseas away from those uneducated individuals who engage in opportunistic behavior out of desperation—though they are of course a problematic population—and directs it instead toward those parties who are more broadly responsible for (and who benefit from) the deterioration of Qing sovereignty and self-sufficiency.

Moreover, as Hu's story arc suggests, a former traitor should be able to redeem himself by conversion to the national cause. Though perhaps it is significant that Hu is a minor crimp rather than a major crimp (who might have been beyond salvation), there is never any doubt among the other characters that he deserves the chance to remake himself and reintegrate himself into their society. Similarly (as we saw when Hu rescued the escaped Zhu Ajin), those who have made errors in judgment but who are not necessarily "wicked" can, once reformed, prove themselves to be great assets to the cause.

### *Diary of a Pig*

Somewhat similarly to *Bitter Society*, *Diary of a Pig* comments on crimping and the victimization of others from two positions: there is of course the actual crimp ("Black Dog Chao") who is the agent of other men's enslavement; but a powerful statement on crimping is also made via the behavior of the protagonist Zhong Chengzu who, though technically not actually a crimp, does sell his own sister into prostitution before falling victim to man-sellers himself. Like Teng Zhuqing in *Bitter Society*, Chengzu learns firsthand the barbarity of

becoming a commodity in a market that exchanges human bodies—despite the fact that Zhuqing and Chengzu previously had each been in the position of exchanger (or prospective exchanger, in Zhuqing’s case). Though Chengzu does not specifically sell his sister as a coolie, I still consider his behavior as “crimp-like” within this analytical framework because it effects the conversion of a free person into an exchangeable object. I believe it is crucial to understand Chengzu’s own “coolification” as the inverse of his previous commodification of his sister: a reversal of his position in the transaction, that should (but alas does not) force him to reconsider the suffering that he himself caused another.

Chengzu’s decision to sell his sister into prostitution comes after an extended period of profligacy and financial difficulty. Having already sold off most of the family possessions and burned through the proceeds in his numerous visits to opium dens and brothels, Chengzu eventually falls ill from what is quite possibly a venereal disease. During a long period of convalescence, he itches for further exploits, but realizes that he has nothing left to pawn. Finally, it dawns on him:

He had a younger sister, five years younger than himself. She’d be sixteen years old now, her frame and her visage were charming and spritely. If he could sell her onto a “flower-boat,” she could be taught to be a singing girl, wouldn’t that bring him a windfall? Furthermore, couldn’t he turn that relationship to his advantage in the future [presumably to consort with other prostitutes, or else use his sister’s position to curry favor with her patrons]? The more he thought about it, the more excited he became.<sup>40</sup>

Having conceived of this genius plan, Chengzu almost miraculously “forgets about” his illness and goes to a teahouse in search of a friend who can help him make the necessary arrangements. He encounters an unscrupulous cousin, Li A-gui, a “grave robber and tomb burglar, a seller of men and a peddler of women” who is capable of any number of wicked deeds.<sup>41</sup> Together, Chengzu and A-gui plot to abduct Chengzu’s sister during a visit to the Guanyin temple. The irony of this choice of venue—the temple of the bodhisattva of

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40. [Hang Xinzhai] *Zhuzai ji* [*Diary of a Pig*], in *Jinghua ribao* (2006), 259.

41. *Ibid.*, 263.



compassion—as the site of his sister’s victimization is lost on the likes of Chengzu and A-gui. After Chengzu and his sister arrive at the temple, he wanders off from her, which is the cue for a host of co-conspirators to jump out and tie her up and gag her. While his helpless sister is being carried away in ropes, hoping desperately that her brother will discover what has happened and rescue her, Chengzu is already on his way to collect his payment.

There is only the slightest indication that Chengzu is even aware that his behavior is unacceptable: namely, after the kidnapping of his sister, he determines that this transgression is so great that he can never return home to his mother. Chengzu has demonstrated himself to be a no-good wastrel from the very beginning, but it is with the sale of his sister that he voluntarily and consciously exiles himself into *guanggun*-hood. Chengzu is so desperate for money that he commits an act of familial betrayal so heinous that he can no longer return to his home. Where the average *guanggun* might be assumed to have caused harm to his family in the act of deserting them, Chengzu is even worse than that, compelled to desert his family *because* of the great harm he has perpetrated against those to whom he has the greatest ethical obligation. As Wang Xuetai notes, the murder of a family member in violation of established social norms of filiality is associated with the presumed *yumin* mentality;<sup>42</sup> similarly, in Chengzu’s case, even in selling (rather than killing) his sister, he effects the complete dissolution of the family unit and begins his life of true vagabondage.

With the sale of his sister bringing so much less money than anticipated, Chengzu soon turns to gambling and petty crime to sustain his lifestyle. And it is because of this gambling that he becomes indebted to gambling house owner Black Dog Chao. Despite the fact that he overhears another client at an opium parlor discussing how Black Dog Chao sells *zhuzai* more cheaply than any other agent in the area (the canny reader would recognize that this is probably because Chao is able to use gamblers’ debts to compel them to contract themselves),

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42. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 9.

Chengzu is so obsessed with gambling and sustaining his lifestyle by anything but honest means that he still allows himself to fall under the power of this very dangerous man. Unlike some of the morally-ambiguous crimps discussed in the preceding novels, Chao is unequivocally bad. He never receives comeuppance of any kind, and thus is never made to process or show contrition for the violence he commits against others. He is irredeemable and uncomplicated in his villainy.

Where in the other novels the protagonist is usually the contrasting figure to the villainous crimp (here, Black Dog Chao), Chengzu cannot (yet) perform that function. He, too, is wholly corrupted. While we get the distinct sense that the plot is leading up to Chengzu's eventual redemption, the novel is discontinued before we ever find out. Indeed, the tone of the novel (between the narrator's repeated meta-commentary on the plight of China's uneducated masses and the pity that Hua, Zhong's prospective rescuer, feels for the debased coolies) implies that Chengzu must eventually receive the reeducation that will make him a productive member of the society in which he has never yet truly participated; but at the same time, at the point where the novel leaves off, we have not yet seen in Chengzu even the faintest glimmer of public-mindedness or morality that would be necessary to such a fundamental change in his character.

In many ways, Chengzu represents the absolute worst of society—he has no skills, no ethics, no shame, and when faced with adversity, he refuses to learn or grow in any way. He has had numerous advantages since birth because of the official standing of his family, and yet he proves himself time and again to be completely devoid of morality or principle of any kind. It is more difficult to feel compassion for Chengzu than for other characters he encounters because we know it is his own dissolution, rather than social or economic misfortune, that is to blame for his downward spiral. And yet Student Hua, precisely because he is unaware of Chengzu's history, is able to feel compassion for him—the same place-based

compassion that Jiyuan idealizes in *Bitter Society*. Perhaps the point of Hua's intervention in Chengzu's fate is to emphasize the necessity of unconditional support and assistance for the subaltern, regardless of whatever their previous transgressions might have been. We will never know whether Hua's efforts to help Chengzu were to have proven misguided, but given the context of the Enlightenment Movement during which the novel was printed, it seems likely that Chengzu was ultimately destined for redemption in spite of himself.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Secret to Getting Rich*

By contrast, most of the characters in satiric author Wu Jianren's 1907-08 episodic serialized novel *The Secret to Getting Rich* (also titled "*Unofficial History of Yellow Slaves* [黃奴外史 *huangnu waishi*]"),<sup>44</sup> seem unlikely ever to find redemption. The novel is set in the years leading up to and following the foreign sacking of Guangzhou in 1857, and characters move between Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and more rural areas on their outskirts. The focus of *Secret* is not the unfortunate men who were sold into cooliehood, but rather the unscrupulous, conniving men who have taken advantage of political instability and foreign largesse in China to profit themselves at the expense of the greater good. *Secret's* protagonists hail from a number of different walks of life, but the one thing they have in common is that they are constantly on the make, always bleeding value out of society without ever contributing anything themselves.

The cohort of the novel is a collection of self-interested fraudsters and shameless profiteers. For example, one of the principal characters, Ou Bing 區丙, is a rural man who moves to Hong Kong hoping to strike it rich. He does eventually make a small fortune by first

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43. It is also possible, though seems less likely, that the message of the novella was that a certain class of person was simply too far-gone to ever be redeemed. Without having access to the final chapters of the novella, however, it is impossible to know for sure.

44. Chi Chongqi, "Foreword to *Facai mijue*," in Wu Jianren, *Facai mijue* [The Secret to Getting Rich] (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1986), 1.

pandering to foreigners and debasing himself by playing the part of buffoon in order to sell them cheap trinkets; but later, he secures his position in nouveau-riche society by becoming an informant for Earl Elgin, leader of the allied foreign armies during the Second Opium War. In this role, Ou Bing not only passes along reconnaissance that helps the foreign armies storm Guangzhou, but makes possible the capture and exile of Qing governor-general Ye Mingchen 葉明晨 (a real historical personage who was indeed exiled after the Second Opium War).<sup>45</sup> Ou Bing and the friend who recruited him to this task are the most blatant and literal traitors in the novel, facilitating the military defeat and further humiliation of the Qing government and its subjects.

While this quick sketch of Ou Bing's behavior provides an idea of the moral lassitude of the society that Wu Jianren has set out to critique, this kind of political/military treason is not the only type of betrayal perpetrated by the novella's conniving protagonists. Indeed, for our purposes, there is a character of even greater interest: Hua Xueqi 花雪畦. Hua is first introduced to some of the novella's other protagonists—Ou Bing's son A-niu, and foreign interpreter-cum-toady Tao Qingyun—at an informal gathering in Hong Kong. Shortly after this meeting, A-niu returns to his home village to work in Ou Bing's family shop. One day, A-niu glances out the shop window and sees a criminal procession moving through the streets. A bound criminal is being beaten in rhythm with the smashing of a gong. A-niu discovers that the criminal being beaten is none other than his recent acquaintance Hua Xueqi, who is accused of stealing pigs from a farmer (the farmer, we are told, lest we feel too sorry for him, has long been aware that Hua has been stealing from him, and has only waited for the most personally advantageous moment to report it to the authorities). After Hua is released, the naïve A-niu takes pity on him and gives him money to return to Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup>

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45. *Facai mijue* [The Secret to Getting Rich], 22-25.

46. *Ibid.*, 34-39.

Once back in Hong Kong, Hua's seedy contacts persuade him to make the transition from stealing literal pigs (*zhu*) to kidnapping metaphorical pigs (*zhuzai*). Shifty gambler A-san, having suffered substantial losses, announces to Hua that he has no choice but to resort to pig-selling. He has a relative in a coolie-trading house, he explains, and asks whether Hua might be interested in taking up pig-selling, too. Hua demurs to A-san's face and pretends to "consider" the offer, but in reality, "he had long harbored in his breast a desire to sell 'pigs,' the only problem had been that he'd never known anyone in the trading houses. After talking with A-san, he had an urgent desire to go meet [A-san's] relative."<sup>47</sup> Hua undergoes several months of training before being assigned to work the door at a notorious gambling house in the outskirts of Hong Kong. In this way, he helps his employer prey upon gambling addicts who are unable to repay their debts, and after a year, Hua has helped sell innumerable men into servitude. Eventually, he has saved so much money from his role in the illicit contractings that he is able to open his own gambling establishment, where he continues the practice.<sup>48</sup>

In one dramatic case, Hua's business partner Gao A-yuan has unwittingly sold the prodigal (but indebted) son of a local official into labor overseas. As the young man's father begins to throw his weight around and demand that his son be returned, Hua grows anxious. Gao suggests that Hua go to go away for a little while until the affair has blown over. Hua agrees, but is so mistrustful even of his own partner that he does not involve Gao in his travel plans: "On the offchance that he reneges on this apparent 'concern' and tries to sell even me," Hua worries, "what would I do then?" He decides to board a steamship for Shanghai, thereby evading any legal responsibility for his role in the trafficking of the official's son or,

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47. Ibid., 40-41.

48. Ibid., 41.

for that matter, anyone else.<sup>49</sup> Even Hua, well acquainted with all the inner workings of the system, is still afraid of being caught up in its snare—how much more so must the average innocent resident of the city have been.

While in Shanghai, Hua spends time socializing with several of the other unscrupulous protagonists. In one conversation, erstwhile translator Tao Qingyun (now a wealthy Shanghai comprador), brags that he and others like him have driven such hard bargains with the mountain tea farmers that countless farmers have been driven to destitution and have committed suicide as a result. Rather than receiving this news with horror, Hua thinks to himself with admiration, “Their tactics are even more brutal than the ones I use to deceive and sell ‘*zhuzai*.’ From now on, I must try with diligence to learn more from them!”<sup>50</sup> Hua is incapable of considering the human toll of such predatory practices and mindsets, and thinks only of augmenting his own (already sizeable) ill-gotten fortune.

Hua’s behavior must be understood in terms of the overarching theme of the novel, perhaps best expressed in its opening couplet: “Recollecting how things used to be, our tears are as big as pearls; nine out of ten people have been led astray; all Han men must distinguish who among them are the masters, and who the slaves.”<sup>51</sup> This line dovetails with the alternate title of the novella, *An Unofficial History of Yellow Slaves*: Wu Jianren is criticizing not only the willingness of certain men to victimize one another, but the voluntarism with which such men are willing to subjugate *themselves* to the foreigners and foreign interests. Though men like Hua Xueqi, Tao Qingyun, and Ou Bing believe that they are merely acting in their own interests, the reality is that they have ingratiated themselves to the foreigners, and in so doing have betrayed not just their nation but their very personhood. Hua, the seller of *zhuzai*, is merely a different kind of slave than the men he sells into physical bondage.

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49. Ibid., 42-43.

50. Ibid., 57.

51. “往事追回淚似珠，十人中有九糊塗；致令一樣須眉漢，硬要從中判主奴。” Ibid., 7.

Similarly, author Wu Jianren's call that Han men pay close attention to the difference between slavery and self-determination and reevaluate their own positions is once again suggestive of the broader contemporary discourse of Han ethno-nationalism as discussed in the previous chapter: physical and financial autonomy are not mutually exclusive to spiritual/intellectual servitude, and Wu calls upon his readers to make their own ideological choices rather than blindly follow money or foreign trade. Wu seems generally to have taken a relatively mild stance concerning the Qing government and Manchus,<sup>52</sup> as is reflected in the mixed attitudes of the protagonists: most are disdainful of officials like Ye Mingchen; however, the sole voice of reason in the novella, Leng Yanshi 冷雁士 (a pun on "a dispassionate view" *lengyan shi* 冷眼視) tries to explain to the others that Qing functionaries like Ye are still preferable to the foreigners. Unfortunately, all the others care about is the influx of foreign money into the treaty ports.<sup>53</sup>

Wu Jianren lampoons those Han men who make their decisions in accordance with simple self-interest that paradoxically enslaves them to increasingly powerful foreigners. In caricaturing the type of man who allows himself to be enslaved in this manner, he forces his readership to recognize the dangers inherent to such toadyism and self-serving behavior. In the world presented by a cynical Wu, there is no sense that men like Hua Xueqi are redeemable or forgivable (or for that matter, that they themselves would ever seek redemption); and indeed, the redemption of such men seems to be beside the point. All hope for contemporary society seems lost; the best that might be hoped for is perhaps that the younger generations (represented in the novel by naïf A-niu) will not follow the examples set by corrupt predecessors.

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52. Hutters, *Bringing the World Home*, 140.

53. *Facai mijue* [The Secret to Getting Rich], 71.

At their best, the crimps, even in their depravity, can serve as examples of man's ability to improve himself and the society of which he is a part. Teng Zhuqing and Third Pocky Hu are both examples of the possibility of such reform: Teng, it is implied, will overcome his previously-demonstrated tendency toward irresponsible victimization of others; Hu, on the other hand, takes upon himself an active role in the support and rehabilitation of those to whose suffering his and other crimps' activities had contributed. Each comes to recognize, as a result of his own suffering, the enormity of the violence inflicted by crimping, and each is ultimately forced to reconsider the mindset that had once made it possible for each to participate (or dream of participating) in the trade. They can be moved to atone for their prior misdeeds and lapses in judgment if given the opportunity and adequate support.

At worst, crimps are paragons of wickedness whose example must be rejected. The crimps in *Bitter Society* and *Golden World* are villains who can perhaps be forgiven for their misdeeds, but who are ultimately still deserving of punishment in the interest of justice; that they are instead beaten by vindictive foreigners is no less tragic than the abuse of the coolies. The crimps in *Diary* and *Secret*, on the other hand, are portrayed even more cynically as craven opportunists with no redeeming qualities, and certainly not deserving of the readers' sympathy. Indeed, only Zhong Chengzu of *Diary* is presumably salvageable—though that is due less to his own (non-existent) reflexivity than to the naïve and unconditional sponsorship of Hua, his rescuer. In either of the above cases, we are presented with two visions for the participation of erstwhile opportunists in the future nation—either they must be re-educated and reincorporated into the public, or else must be punished and condemned wholesale by those would commit themselves to the formation of a cohesive, modern nation.

Though each of the novels discussed above presents crimps/would-be-crimps differently, it is fascinating to note that most of the crimps who are at all developed are indeed written in the *yumin* mode: Teng Zhuqing is a fraudulent-businessperson-turned-



*youmin*; Bei Furen is similarly a criminal-turned-*liumang*; Zhong Chengzu effects his own unmooredness when he runs away from home after the selling of his sister; and Hua Xueqi travels between Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangdong, and rural areas in search of more people to exploit. However, it bears noting that the protagonists, too, are often *youmin* displaced by economic circumstances. Thus, in the novels, *youmin*-ness is thus not necessarily a marker of evil or immoral intentions, but is simply the result of political and economic circumstances. How one then chooses to behave as a *youmin* is entirely up to individual character. In the wake of the massive internal migrations resulting from protracted military violence and political instability of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the imputed ethical distinction between “local” and “*youmin*” is no longer meaningful or useful. What is more important is individual character and commitment to the improvement of the nation as a whole.

*Youmin*, whether originally of “good” or “wicked” character are, by the end of *Bitter Society* and *Golden World*, able to participate in the emerging pro-boycott public. These erstwhile outsiders (whether geographic-outsiders, or, in the case of boat-people Chen and her husband Zhu, class-outsiders) prove that they have just as much stake in the boycott and in greater society as anyone else. Thus, writing protagonists who are predominantly *youmin* of one type or another could solidify in the public imagination the fact that just as an insider elsewhere can become an outsider elsewhere, so too can an outsider gradually become an insider so long as his interests align with the rest of society.

In this way, the investment the positive former-*youmin* protagonists choose to make in their new home societies (most obviously by supporting the boycott), demonstrates the great potential for such former outsiders to contribute to the nationalist movement. Regardless of their origins, they too can do their part to make the rising public stronger. The *youmin* as such should not be automatically treated as pariahs, but rather should be counted as a

tremendous potential resource in the building of the new nation—especially when considering the vast number of *yumin* that the violence of the previous half-century had produced. More specifically, the message seems to be that those who once thrived within an asocial sub-structure (whether the excluded subaltern or the criminal opportunist) might actually make the transition to a different type of anti-status-quo organization (i.e. reform or revolutionary movements) with relative ease, so long as they were supported rather than shunned.

### **The crimp as code: condemnation of the self-preservationist instinct**

In the immediate socio-political context in which the novels were published, the fictionalized crimps perform a number of interesting functions. For one thing, we can understand the fictionalized figure of the crimp to be somewhat straightforwardly analogous to contemporary opportunists (whether compradors, foreign toadies, Qing loyalists, or others) whose opportunism was directly responsible for injury to the nation (however defined) and to the individuals who comprised it. In the specific context of Beijing's 1904 Enlightenment Movement, the figure of the crimp could have been read allegorically as any person who used his advantage over others, however slight, to maximize his own profit or comfort. In particular, this might mean anyone who, rather than working to support and empower the social subaltern, chose instead to take advantage of and victimize them. For supporters of the 1905 Anti-American Boycott, on the other hand, the crimp is very easily read as any opportunist who chooses self-enrichment over the socially-minded goals of the boycott: namely, any merchant or supplier who chose to continue selling contraband American goods rather than stand behind the other boycotters.

In each case, the crimp stands quite obviously for someone who betrays a larger social cause while in pursuit of his own security. That is to say, the crimp as presented in the fiction is the ultimate embodiment of the self-preservationist logic that values the survival of the

self over the other in both literal and figurative terms. Considering this logic in light of the larger political context of the early twentieth century—a moment in which intellectuals were hoping to bring together their respective unified peoples—it becomes clear that such selfish behavior could only be detrimental to the formation of a cohesive public. The establishment of a proper “people” required first and foremost the individual’s allegiance to the whole, and the petty survivalism of the opportunist’s personal ethics would in general undermine the mutual responsibility and support necessary to the fostering of a functional “public.”

And yet, it is worth noting that there is more than one way to read the behavior of the fictional crimp: authors could have anticipated that the crimp characters would resonate in unique ways among the adherents of different ideological conceptions of the “people” or the “public.” Indeed, the self-preservationist tendencies that the fictional crimps embodied would have been problematic to each imagined “people” in distinct ways. I discussed these “peoples” at length in the previous chapter, but I wish here to demonstrate more explicitly the ways in which persons who believed in these visions for the future nation might have understood the fictionalized depictions of crimps. In so doing, I provide a baseline mapping of possible twentieth-century interpretations of the fictional crimp as an individual and more generally as a social function. In their fictional representations of crimps, the authors created characters that were once again multiply-interpretable within different ideological paradigms; and in fleshing out these paradigms’ respective views on selfish and self-preservationist activities, we can begin to assess some of the other key layers of meaning with which the fictionalized crimp had been inscribed.

### *Integrative reformism*

In his short essay “Lamenting Slavery,” (a response to another article of the same name) Liang Qichao addresses the idea of enslavement explicitly. He first enumerates the

ways in which China and the Chinese populace have become enslaved, then goes on to say: “It is not only the Westerners who so abuse and humiliate my people; those Chinese who sport Western dress, those who are Chinese but who work in service of the foreigners, become ‘*ravens familiars*’ (*huchang* 虎俵) of the foreigners, and might as well be called ‘Westerners’ themselves.”<sup>54</sup> In short, those Chinese who betray their own countrymen in order to curry favor with foreigners are just as culpable as the foreigners themselves, and to Liang, are just as deserving of censure for their role in the subjugation of the people. Liang’s position on such persons is quite unambiguous, and he ends the article with the bitter resolve of a man determined to end any and all enslavement of his people: “For those of us who are enslaved, I grieve; and toward those who enslave us, I am vengeful.”<sup>55</sup>

The fictional crimps were clearly in violation of both the public and private moralities that Liang espoused as crucial to the development of a mutually-supportive public. Most obviously, crimps trespassed upon the liberty of their individual victims; however, their activities also contributed directly to the mutual suspicion, terror, and upset of the normal familial order (via disappearance of young and middle-aged sons/fathers) that destabilized their immediate communities. In Liang’s words, unvirtuous, selfish behavior would “destroy public safety and public progress,”<sup>56</sup> and indeed, the historic crimp’s activities had precisely this effect on southern China’s coastal populations.<sup>57</sup> Read in this mode, then, the fictional crimp is a reminder that the formation of an inclusive nation depends not just upon the

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54. *Huchang* is more literally the ghost of a person eaten by a tiger who in turn helps the tiger victimize others. Emphasis added. Liang Qichao, “Bei nu pian,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 774.

55. *Ibid.*, 774.

56. Liang, “Xinminshuo: lun side,” in *Ibid.*, 110.

57. Furthermore, crimps’ facilitation of the trade also had the unanticipated effect (as discussed in Chapter Two) of reifying the Euro-American-driven narrative of Chinese as servile laborers that officials and literati from throughout the nation would labor to dispel.

edification of the disadvantaged *liangmin*, but also upon the re-education of those opportunistic elements whose short-sightedness threatens to derail the process of reform.

Crimps were in the paradoxical position of having been both slave (materially to foreigners, or intellectually to short-sighted, self-preservationist logic) and enslaver simultaneously. Whether reformers believed that proper edification could redeem these compromised individuals, or whether they simply advocated education and support as a means of preventing other members of China's subaltern classes from following a similar path in the future is difficult to determine; but from this social-reformist perspective, the fictional crimp would at best have represented the misguided desperation of an individualist, survivalist mode of interaction with others; and at worst, the evils that the unedified could intentionally—and shamelessly—inflict on their countrymen. In either case, Liang argues that if social “debtors” (those who take from society without ever giving back) “day and night corrupt our society, dividing up the spoils, using it all up without ever replenishing it, how can [society] last?”<sup>58</sup> From a reformist standpoint, the seeking of private benefit at public expense was one of the principal threats that Chinese society had to confront if it was to survive; and the fictional accounts of crimping could thus have been read as an exhortation to edify the masses in the evils of such self-serving behavior.

### *Revolutionary ethno-nationalism*

For Han ethno-nationalists like Wang Jingwei and Zou Rong, on the other hand, the fictional crimps' selfish machinations would have been troubling because crimping was a clear-cut example of internecine violence perpetrated by Han against other Han. The very existence of crimps and crimping was suggestive of the wasteful expenditure of Han energies on individual self-preservation (at the expense of one's Han brethren) at a time when they

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58. Liang, “Xinminshuo: lun gongde,” in *Yinbingshi quanji*, 14.

ought to have been focused on Han self-preservation (vis-à-vis the “parasitic” Manchus). Like Liang, Wang is very critical of the self-preservationist tendency, but in Wang’s case, it is specifically because such opportunism often took the form of Han (whether criminals, soldiers, or Qing officials) victimization of other Han.

More generally, Wang laments situations in which Han end up struggling against one another for survival and perceive one another (rather than the Manchus) as the enemy:

My people rose up and attempted to reclaim [sovereignty from the Manchus], but couldn’t vie against the strength of the Manchus. And so the Manchus raised their pennants against my people, and sent [Han soldiers] to kill [Han rebels]. In battles for territory, our corpses littered the countryside; in struggles for cities, our corpses filled the streets. This is purely a case of my people killing one another, the Manchus were hardly involved at all. Alas! [...] When the combined armies of Hunan and Anhui battled against the Taiping armies, it was [another] case of [Han] killing one another; lamentably, it resulted in the consolidation of the Manchus’ position, and left us divided from our [Han] neighbors.<sup>59</sup>

That the Han employed in the imperial army are compelled to take up arms against Han rebels is a cause of great sadness for Wang. Rather than either group struggling against their Manchu masters, their energies are all spent massacring the very people with whom they should be forming a nationalist political coalition. Indeed, in Wang’s mind, the impassioned nationalism that is born out of a strong sense of common ethnicity is the only way the Han can ever hope to free themselves from aristocratic Manchu governance;<sup>60</sup> but as long as self-interest and preservation of the status quo (or one’s relatively privileged position within the Qing governing apparatus) continues to outweigh ethnic allegiance, the Han will myopically continue to struggle among themselves for power and resources, rather than against the Manchus.

Indeed, Wang felt a very strong sense of responsibility to the “common people” (*pingmin* 平民), and detested any who sought to benefit themselves at the expense of the

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59. Wang Jingwei, “Minzu de guomin, pt. two,” in *Wang Jingwei ji*, 42.

60. *Ibid.*, 46.

masses. In a later (1910) essay “Lun geming zhi qushi” 論革命志趨勢 (“On the Revolutionary Trend”), Wang would assert that the only people who would support a constitutional monarchy that left the Manchus in power are “those who make their livelihood by victimizing the common people, who would have nothing to wear if not for skinning the hides from the people, who would have nothing to eat if not for sucking the blood of the people.”<sup>61</sup> Though Wang speaks here of Qing officials and their supporters, men like crimps and other opportunists who made their living off the common people in a more literal way are similarly guilty of a kind of intra-ethnic cannibalism.

At the same time, however, the presentation of the crimps in the novels reminds us that many of the crimps would themselves have been included in the systemically-victimized and underprivileged *pingmin*. As such, it also seems likely that an ethno-nationalist reading would have taken greater issue with the systemic oppression and official discrimination on the part of the Manchu ruling apparatus that had allowed for the emergence of the crimp than with the crimp himself.<sup>62</sup> (Indeed, Zou Rong’s 1903 anarchist tract *The Revolutionary Army* [*Geming jun* 革命軍] offers some confirmation of this perspective: Zou explicitly discusses the fate of *zhuzai* sent to Cuba, and blames the Manchus for their role in allowing the coolie trade to occur, but he makes no mention of the Han crimps who facilitated the transfer of their countrymen to foreigners.<sup>63</sup> We must assume, then, that it is either the case that Zou wishes to gloss over Han involvement in order to create an unambiguous narrative of Han victimization by Manchus; or else that he considers Han involvement to have been such a small part of the problem that it is not worth mentioning.) The Han crimp had of course

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61. Wang Jingwei, “Lun geming zhi qushi [1910],” in *Wang Jingwei ji*, 56.

62. *Ibid.*, 59-60.

63. Zou Rong, “Geming jun,” in *Zou Rong ji*, 73.

betrayed his own kind, but it was after all the Manchus who were responsible for allowing Han lives to become so disposable, so “cheap” in the first place.<sup>64</sup>

Considering all of the foregoing, Han ethno-nationalists might have felt somewhat conflicted about the fictionalized crimp figure. On the one hand, they would almost certainly have argued that such opportunists had been driven into desperation by poor Manchu governance, and as such were merely a symptom of a greater problem; however, it was undeniable that such opportunistic elements were militating against the establishment of a unified Han front, and as such still needed to be dealt with. Furthermore, for Wang, the opportunists comprised not just lower-class Han who took advantage of one another, but very highly-placed Han officials and military officers within the Qing governing apparatus. Where for Liang, the upper and intellectual classes simply needed to take the lower classes under their wing, for Wang the question is more complicated: what happens when those upper classes are themselves complicit in the systemic oppression of the Han *pingmin*?

With that in mind, it becomes possible to imagine a Han ethno-nationalist reading of the novels wherein the major crimps represent “corrupted” Han officials serving the Manchu court, while minor crimps represent the lower-class Han who have been tainted by the gradual diffusion of that high-level corruption. After all, in almost all cases, the major crimps in the novels inhabit a privileged position relative to the lower crimps and the coolies—a position not dissimilar to that enjoyed by Han in the official employ of the court. Meanwhile, it is only lower-level crimps like Third Pocky Hu who, perhaps as a result of having lived in close proximity to the suffering coolies, are capable of repenting for their part in the coolie trade violence and taking steps to atone for the role they played. *Golden World* in particular, as the most obviously Han ethno-nationalist of the coolie novels, lends itself to an interpretation wherein collusion with the foreigners (whether Manchu or western) at high

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64. Wang Jingwei, “Lun geming zhi qushi,” in *Wang Jingwei ji*, 59-60.



levels of power within the apparatus, and at the expense of one's powerless Han brethren, is unforgiveable. Meanwhile, lower-level opportunists had the potential to remake themselves as reliable members of the Han "people" so long as they were able to prove themselves capable of converting fully to the pro-Han cause. Desperate *pingmin* criminals would likely have been allowed a certain amount of latitude, while the traitorous collaborator "aristocracy" is more severely condemned.

Given the political and intellectual climate surrounding the boycott and Enlightenment movements, the crimp in the stories was in fact inscribed with multiple layers meaning, some general, some ideologically-specific. First and foremost, the crimp is a selfish opportunist who places greater emphasis on his own survival than on social progress. Read from a reformist perspective, this selfishness would be an indication that the crimp lacks not only private morality (in that he victimizes other individuals) but public morality as well (in that he feels no compunction about the chaos he and other crimps wreak within communities they victimize). From a revolutionary standpoint, on the other hand, the crimp might be said to represent more specifically the cannibalistic consumption of Han by other Han.

In either case, however, the crimp himself was also clearly a victim of the greater political and social imbalances that had allowed such a system to emerge in the first place. The crimp would have been understood by each side as a symptom of much wider-reaching social dysfunction; but depending on one's political leanings, that dysfunction could be interpreted as the result either of a lack of social responsibility on the individual level or of Qing malfeasance on the level of government. It is clear from either perspective that merely punishing the perpetrators is insufficient; the entire social structure that drives such men to criminal behavior must instead be reevaluated and either reshaped or dismantled entirely. And a crucial challenge to implementing either type of change would be convincing the

traitors themselves (whether actual or potential) that they owed their allegiance to a higher cause.

*On Haohan 好漢 and Hao de hanren 好的漢人: Outlaws of the Marsh*

To almost any reader, the fictionalized crimp would have been above all an opportunist whose need for self-preservation destabilizes the rest of society around him. At the same time, it is clear that the authors of coolie fiction had very particular ideas about the “anti-status-quo” parasocial organizations peopled by criminal opportunists, as well as for what the roles of reformed opportunists could or should be in society at large. Indeed, in addition to performing a necessary supporting narrative role in these fictional representations of coolie experience, the reformable crimp (in particular, characters like Teng Zhuqing and Third Pocky Hu who undergo substantial ethical transformations) seems to have been designed specifically to draw the reader’s attention to changing expectations for acceptable social behavior—both in terms of how society should react to former victimizers and, perhaps more interestingly, how the victimizers themselves should perceive the damage they have inflicted upon society. As I argue below, the authors’ treatment of crimps in the novels—whether redeemable like Zhuqing and Third Pocky Hu, or irredeemable like Black Dog Chao or Hua Xueqi—gestures toward the emerging idea of a “public code” of which the harmful anti-social behaviors of the crimps are in violation. Predation of society’s vulnerable, while always immoral, is particularly threatening to an emergent public that hopes to bring together persons of a wide variety of backgrounds and classes. Such behavior must be condemned if society is to move forward.

In fact, it is apparent that the inclusion of the crimps as characters in the novels (when the coolie-centered stories could have been told with only passing reference made to the crimps) is specifically concerned with reversing the romanticization of rebellious, anti-

societally oriented *guanggun* and *liumang* into heroes. While this type of martial-stalwart made frequent appearances in late imperial popular literature, I wish here to consider specifically the diehard bandit society made famous in *Outlaws of the Marsh*, a novel that lovingly chronicled the exploits of the brotherhood of Liangshan Marsh during the Northern Song dynasty.<sup>65</sup> It has been suggested that *Outlaws* solidified into something resembling its current form around the time of the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties, and has—in spite of occasional official censorship during the Ming and Qing due to its glamorization of the bandits’ lawlessness—remained a popular favorite via textual/oral transmission and public performance. Indeed, the novel’s wide popularity has resulted in the spawning of countless imitations, parodies, unofficial sequels, and reinterpretations over the centuries.<sup>66</sup> It is partly because of this tremendous popularity and staying-power into the Qing dynasty that I have chosen to discuss *Outlaws* specifically; however, I acknowledge that this discussion might in future be benefitted by the consideration of other texts that make similar use of the martial-stalwart figure.

Though the charisma of the bandits in *Outlaws* is ostensibly based in well-established codes of righteousness and loyalty, the Liangshan bandits are in reality forces of social disorder and violent retribution who only serve a greater social purpose at the end of the novel. I argue that the reimagining of crimp as potential citizen as presented in coolie fiction not only resists this popular ideal of violent stalwart as hero but insists rather that such a man can only be a true hero when acting on behalf of a cause greater than himself. Indeed, such characterization even urges a re-imagining of the goals and values of the ideal anti-government or counter-cultural coalition. Where the romanticized society formed by the Liangshan bandits seeks to protect only themselves and others of their kind, the modern anti-

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65. Attributed to Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong. However, *Outlaws* has existed in numerous different versions and editions since the Ming, probably shaped over time by a number of different storytellers and transmissions. Shi Changyu, “Introduction,” in *Outlaws*, 4-6; 15-16.

66. *Ibid.*, 1-8.

government (or reformist) society must show empathy for the common people and take responsibility for the strengthening of society at large. In other words, it was time not just for a new type of hero, but for a new type of extra-societal coalition as well.

*Outlaws* begins with a self-important government functionary Hong visiting a monastery on official business. When his mission is completed, Hong takes a tour of the monastery and comes across a hall designated for the imprisonment of demons. His curiosity piqued, he threatens the monks with beatings and prison if they do not open the hall for him to examine it. The terrified monks have no choice but to obey. Hong then demands that the monks dig up a large slab inlaid in the earthen floor of the hall, and when they do so, a fearsome black cloud emerges from a deep pit below and spreads throughout the sky. Shaken, Hong asks the monks what has happened, and in great sadness the monks reply that he has just unleashed a band of over one hundred demons—“thirty-six stars of Heavenly spirits and seventy-two stars of Earthly fiends”—upon the world.<sup>67</sup> As the reader eventually finds out, each of these demon-stars will come to manifest itself as one of the brave leaders of the destructive “gallant fraternity” (translator Sydney Shapiro’s rendering of *jianghu* 江湖, literally, “streams and marshes,” a reference to the fact that the bandits live rough and away from established society) of Liangshan Marsh bandits. The remainder of the novel details their violent exploits and their gradual—and preordained—reunion. Throughout their adventures, Song Jiang (the bandit leader) holds out hope for a government pardon so that he and his motley crew of murderers and thieves may one day serve the emperor and be reintegrated into society. Eventually, they are indeed granted amnesty and are given the opportunity to prove their valor in helping the imperial troops drive off a Tartar invasion force. The bandits are of course successful, and thereby secure the emperor’s good graces.

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67. *Outlaws of the Marsh*, 1-16.

The members of this “gallant fraternity” come about their membership in a variety of ways. Many are on the lam after having committed some kind of crime (usually murder or theft) and, having nowhere else to turn, seek out the company and security of the Liangshan community. Often, these crimes are posited in terms of fulfillment of filial or ethical duty: the killing of a brother’s (or “sworn brother’s”) adulterous wife and her lover (Wu Song, Shi Xiu), the slaughter of a lascivious local ruffian (Lu Da), or the murder of a blackmailing mistress (Song Jiang). In other cases, the crimes committed have no basis in personal ethics, and are more straightforwardly malicious in nature: the robbing of a convoy carrying a wealth of birthday gifts (Wu Yong, Chao Gai, the Ruan brothers, Gongsun Sheng, Liu Tang, and Bai Sheng), beating men to death with no explanation offered (Li Kui, Du Xing). In short, many of the men who seek membership in the gallant fraternity have committed brutal crimes, some retributive, others more purely selfish in nature. (In certain other cases, however, innocent men are framed for crimes by petty officials or by the privileged aristocracy and seek to join the bandits out of desperation.)

Membership in the gallant fraternity is not always voluntarily arrived at, however. There are a number of instances throughout the novel in which extant members coerce courageous but hitherto law-abiding men to join their outlaw band. A common strategy adopted by the bandits is to commit a heinous crime in such a way that the innocent man will undoubtedly be implicated; he then must choose between certain death at the hands of police or giving up his entire life to join the bandits. In one case, for example, when the bandits want to recruit General Qin Ming, they dress up as Qin and his troops and massacre an entire village of innocent civilians to ensure that Qin has no choice but to defect;<sup>68</sup> similarly, when attempting to recruit Zhu Tong, they murder the small child for whom he is responsible so that he will become a wanted man and can never return to his employer (the child’s

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68. *Outlaws*, 712

father).<sup>69</sup> In still another case, the bandit leaders pay an “innocent” visit to Li Ying, another man they hope to recruit. Their visit alone is enough for the local authorities to come down on Li and give him no alternative but to flee to Liangshan—all part of the bandits’ plan.<sup>70</sup> Lu Junyi is tricked into writing a seditious poem on his wall, and is ultimately forced to flee to the bandits’ mountain lair, despite his previous adamant assertions that he wanted nothing to do with them.<sup>71</sup> Doctor An Daoquan, who has already acquiesced to joining the bandits, is framed for multiple murders to ensure that he doesn’t change his mind.<sup>72</sup> The bandits care little about how difficult they make things for their potential quarries, so long as they are successfully ensnared.

As a result of their own (or others’) criminal actions, the bandits have no choice but to cut themselves off from the families and friends of their former lives. It is for this reason that they must band together, forming a society unto themselves. The primary function of this society is self-preservation in a world in which such men would otherwise be the targets, rather than the wielders, of power. In coalescence, these outcasts and criminals find not just common strength, but common values that allow them to persist as an enclave of banditry. The level of security and power they attain would have been unattainable for the individual uprooted criminal. Indeed, we see throughout the novel what happens to individual stalwarts when they become separated from the pack—they are often captured and must be rescued by the others. It is when they are together that they are at their strongest; and the bandits’ society is so strong precisely because their loyalty to one another takes precedence over almost all other types of moral code. Many of the bandits, including Song Jiang the bandit

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69. *Ibid.*, 1092.

70. *Ibid.*, 1068.

71. *Ibid.*, 1286-1314.

72. *Ibid.*, 1390.

leader himself, either abandon their earlier filial and social responsibilities completely or struggle to fulfill those responsibilities without sacrificing their new lifestyle.<sup>73</sup>

Viewed from within, the bandits are counter-culture visionaries, establishing their own values and social order, and building an enormous power base that enables them to flout, for a time, the government-dictated order. Viewed from without, however, these men are a terrifying swarm of brigands who descend from their mountain fortress to feed. That the bandits' moral codes diverge sharply from public morality is evidenced by the number of villages (not to mention villagers and government troops) to which they lay waste in their exploits. As already mentioned, for example, in one particularly striking incident, the bandits lay siege upon a town and murder its innocent inhabitants while disguised as highly revered General Qin Ming and his troops, solely so that Qin Ming will be condemned as a traitor to the emperor and left with no option but to join the bandit forces (or be executed).<sup>74</sup> The bandits obviously value the recruitment of this single skilled stalwart over the hundreds of innocent lives they snuff out to malign him. Their moral code is almost wholly unconcerned with public order, and emphasizes instead the strengthening of their own tribal society by incorporation of worthy individuals.

In a further demonstration of their disregard for the greater public good, the bandits frequently kill hundreds of civilians and government and police troops in efforts to save a single "gallant." At one point in the story, for example, Song Jiang is captured, and the rescue operation mounted by the bandits results in the deaths almost two thousand people

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73. It is true that Song Jiang values loyalty to the emperor and constantly strives to earn his and the other bandits' way back into the court's good graces; but Song's pro-establishment zeal is a constant source of contention among the bandits, many of whom prefer to remain in Liangshan where they are their own masters rather than submit themselves to the throne. Paradoxically, it is their loyalty to Song Jiang, rather than to the emperor himself, that ultimately compels them to surrender to the imperial forces.

74. *Outlaws*, 705-10.

and the burning of hundreds of homes.<sup>75</sup> Over two hundred soldiers are killed in a similar rescue of Hua Rong,<sup>76</sup> and thousands more are massacred in a later rescue of Song Jiang and Dai Zong.<sup>77</sup> In their rescue of Lu Junyi (who has been imprisoned because the bandits have framed him in order to force him to join them), over five thousand innocent civilians—half of the civilian population of an entire town—are slaughtered or injured.<sup>78</sup> Over the course of the novel, the bandits kill no fewer than ten thousand innocent civilians, despite occasional declarations by bandit leaders that no civilians are to be harmed. The number of government soldiers they kill is sure to be substantially higher than this, as indeed, there is no injunction against the killing of men in the government's employ: the troops and their commanders are in fact vilified for their attempts to bring these violent anti-social criminals to justice (and thereby maintain public order), because the brigands' moral code based on loyalty and courage leaves very little room for "justice" as defined by the state. The reader is guided to understand the sacrifice of soldiers' and policemen's lives as completely justified because their slaughter was carried out in fulfillment of the bandits' particular brand of macho morality—despite the fact that it is almost always at odds with a morality concerned with public welfare.

In some cases, the violence wreaked by the bandits is given a socially-based justification, but often *after* the atrocities have already been committed: the entire households of the allied Zhu and Hu families and their employees are slaughtered because the Zhus had taken brotherhood member Shi Qian prisoner after an altercation.<sup>79</sup> At one point,

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75. Ibid., 688.

76. Ibid., 698.

77. Ibid., 843-48.

78. Ibid., 1415.

79. Shi Qian steals and eats a rooster belonging to the Zhu family. When Shi Qian is confronted over this theft, brotherhood member Shi Xiu burns down the Zhu family inn, setting off the larger confrontation. Ibid., Chaps. 47-50.



Song Jiang explains that the massacres are warranted because the Zhus are “boors” who are “always picking on the people of [the bandits’] mountain stronghold”;<sup>80</sup> however, it is only after the village heads and their families are brutally murdered (and Song Jiang seizes enough grain to last the bandits “four or five years”)<sup>81</sup> that we are told that the village heads were also “oppressors” and unjust rulers.<sup>82</sup> It is as if the author only belatedly realizes that his characters are acting like villains, rather than heroes, and must give a more satisfying explanation for their violent sacking of the two villages. The deaths of these civilians are all a direct result of the bandits’ enforcement of their peculiar “moral” code. (And according to Song Jiang, this mass slaughter is the result of *restraint* on the part of the bandits: if it hadn’t been for the assistance rendered to the bandits by an elderly local, the bandits “would have obliterate[d the] village and every family in it.”<sup>83</sup>) To make these deaths seem just, it becomes necessary to suggest, in a passing sentence, that Song Jiang was also concerned that the village heads were mistreating their populaces. The outrageous behavior of the bandits must be given *some* social rationalization in order to maintain the somewhat flimsy narrative that they are in fact alternative arbiters of justice.<sup>84</sup>

However, the bandits’ emphasis on gallantry and heroism over other values is made clear in their frequent reference to themselves and one another as *haohan*—stalwarts or righteous gallants. These assertions take a variety of forms: for example, the narrator uses

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80. *Ibid.*, 1051.

81. *Ibid.*, 1001.

82. *Ibid.*, 1066.

83. It bears noting that the Hu family is murdered by Black Whirlwind Li Kui in direct violation of Song Jiang’s orders to spare them. Despite Song Jiang’s “righteous” leadership, the bandits—and Li Kui in particular—frequently leave such unintended or peripheral casualties in their wake. *Ibid.*, 1066.

84. Given *Outlaws*’ murky provenance as a text and its long history of transmission and retransmission, it is difficult to know whether, when, or by whom this fleeting reference to public justice might have been added belatedly to the text; but the fact remains that at some point in the story’s history either an author or later contributor deemed it necessary to include at least a modicum of ethical justification for the bandits’ otherwise wholly self-serving actions.

*haohan* to describe the bandits (“the assembled *haohan* all rejoiced”), and various characters they encounter (“Wu Yong and Zhu Gui invited the nine *haohan* to disembark”).<sup>85</sup> Various members of the gallant fraternity also frequently use the phrase *haohan*, both nominally to refer to themselves and each other in passing: “We *haohan*”; “the *haohan* of the marshes and streams”; “this *haohan*”; “Isn’t that *haohan* the Black Whirlwind?” “If I need you to carry me [to bed after too much alcohol] I can’t be called a *haohan*!”<sup>86</sup> It is also used frequently as a form of singular titular address: “*Haohan*, be calm”; “*Haohan*, please go in and be seated.”<sup>87</sup> So much emphasis is placed martial ability and courage among the brotherhood that “*haohan*” supplants other commonly-used polite forms of address we might expect to see such as *jun* (君 “my lord,”) or *xiansheng* (先生, “sir,” “master”) whose emphasis is on class, rank or education. The characteristics that would command respect in normal society are of little interest to the bandits—distinction within their community is not marked by status, wealth, or even Confucian ethics; rather, it relies almost entirely on heroism, loyalty, and bravado.<sup>88</sup> Other value systems are discarded more or less wholesale in favor of a social system based almost entirely on martial prowess and willingness to stand by the brotherhood in any situation. The *haohan* is a man more concerned with “justice” based upon vengeance and loyalty to the brotherhood than with justice in a classical legal sense. Thus, the stalwarts of Liangshan Marsh came to be lauded as courageous heroes even as they flouted public morality at almost every turn.

To return to the coolie novels, Bei Furen (*Golden World*) introduces the four “major crimps” to the foreigner Braga as *haohan* (“stalwarts,” “gallants,” or “rogues”) he is drawing

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85. [Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong] *Shuihu zhuan* [*Outlaws of the Marsh*], (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1970), 402, 339.

86. *Shuihu zhuan*, 265, 267, 268, 269, 393, 212.

87. *Ibid.*, 280, 281.

88. Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 111.

on a discourse of macho courageousness rather than one of heroism based on moral principle (Confucian or otherwise). However, far from the Heaven-sent “stars” of *Outlaws* whose actions, no matter how brutal, must be understood as preordained, Bei’s so-called *haohan* are mere earthly lowlives and crooks. And yet, these men are not so different in essence from the denizens of Liangshan Marsh: they enrich themselves at the expense of others; they are a drain on society, using their energies to steal things of value rather than produce them; and they have a brutal disregard for human life. Bei’s *haohan*, similar to the bandits, are even responsible for cutting more or less guiltless men off from the lives they once knew by violently coercing them to embark on a new way of life to which the innocent men were not previously disposed. They infringe upon the lives and liberty of others, without regard for what the others stand to lose.

That these “*haohan*” are later responsible for the victimization hundreds of coolies raises the question: if, in the tradition of the bandits of Liangshan Marsh, this kind of self-interested criminal can be referred to without irony (on Bei’s part—there is almost certainly irony on the author’s part) as *haohan*, is it not perhaps time for a more meaningful category of hero to replace it? Is it not time for men who sacrificed public good for private benefit to be reviled rather than respected? In the twentieth century, as there were any number of groups and associations striving to construct functional publics in China’s urban spaces in order to provide public goods or fight for political powers that the Qing dynasty was unable or unwilling to confer, the *haohan* of Langshan Marsh, popular as they might be with readers, had become an outdated role model. Indeed, this need for a new heroic archetype is explicitly addressed on the very first page of *Golden World*, which claims that a class of brand-new “unparalleled” heroes will emerge by the end of the novel.<sup>89</sup> (These heroes are, of course, the protagonists who rescue suffering Chinese from around the world and ultimately

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89. *Huangjin shijie* [*Golden World*], 143.

form a utopian pre-Manchu society on Snail Island.) In other words, being a *haohan* was no longer sufficient to commend one as a hero; the modern hero could not rely upon violence and bravery alone, and must instead strive for the betterment of society as a whole and China as a nation.

I argue that the romantic ideal of *haohan*, evocative of courage and martial cunning but not necessarily any kind of broad ethical social responsibility, was being put on trial in the coolie novels. Though only *Golden World* explicitly equates crimping with the *haohan* mentality, the self-serving opportunism of the crimping networks (and among Wu Jianren's "yellow slaves") does very closely resemble that of the bandits' predatory mini-society. Living only by preying upon their vanquished foes (sometimes literally, in the case of the bandits, who indulge in light cannibalism from time to time), both the bandits and the crimps seek to maximize their own profit and security while producing a net drain on society at large. Though the bandits might claim to be protesting corrupt governance, this struggle is usually only secondary to the more immediate goal of preserving their own liberty in the face of punishment for crimes or execution as traitors. The end result of all their self-preservatory machinations is that they in fact cause a great deal of collateral damage to common people who have done nothing wrong. The crimps (and the modern "traitors" they represented in the novels) are similarly out for self-enrichment and, in their own short-sighted quests for money and personal security, inflict insecurity upon others. As such, the behavior of the crimps as documented in the novels seems quite clearly to be aimed at discrediting the hitherto glamorized feats of self-serving or clannish brigandry, and emphasizing the importance of either reincorporating erstwhile anti-social brigands into a rising, inclusive anti-status-quo nation, or else prosecuting them on the nation's own terms.

In the era of the boycott and the Enlightenment movement more particularly, intellectuals like Liang Qichao and Wang Jingwei were attempting to determine what the role

of the Han should be in the future Chinese state (and whether that state was to be Manchu- or Han-administered). It is especially poignant that crimps in *Golden World* should be described specifically as *haohan* (好漢, “rogue” or “stalwart” as in the discussion above, but literally “good Han”) in a moment when intellectuals and activists were attempting to redefine not just the political role of the Han as a group, but what it meant to be a meaningful participant in that group (i.e. a *hao de hanren*, 好的漢人 “good Han person”). The tension between the literary *haohan* and the literal *hao de hanren* is obvious, particularly as the plot of *Golden World* unfolds—the novel’s four “*haohan*” provide a striking antithesis to the contemporary ideal of a *hao de hanren* as embodied by the protagonists. Regardless of whether one personally supported reformers or revolutionaries in the late Qing struggle for national identity, the self-interested machinations of these purported *haohan* can only be understood as destructive to efforts to establish a cohesive nation of *any description*.

In the context of the Enlightenment movement, any *haohan*-type who chooses self-preservation at the expense of those who are socially less-fit than himself will necessarily impede the progress of much-needed social reforms; while a *hao de hanren* would make efforts to edify and protect the vulnerable. In the moment of the boycott, a single renegade “*haohan*” choosing to buy or sell contraband American goods would weaken the broader effort to make the US acknowledge its mistreatment of Chinese; while a *good Han* would, of course, participate freely and passionately in the boycott, and possibly even express dissatisfaction with a do-nothing court that had largely been unable to prevent such abuses from taking place.

Though the stalwarts of Liangshan Marsh may have provided an inspiring model for the consolidation of an alternative society in a China desperately in need of political and social reform—indeed, a number of underground revolutionary societies borrowed heavily from

*Outlaws'* iconography, mottoes, and social structure<sup>90</sup>—their concern with individual or clan honor over broader public welfare ultimately makes them too dated to be any kind of role model in a modern society. By the early twentieth century, a true *hao de hanren* as envisioned by leading intellectuals and authors had a responsibility to adhere to a crystallizing code of broad public conduct, rather than merely act upon his sense of vigilante ethics and self-preservation. The figure of the crimp as presented in the coolie novels allowed activist authors to disrupt the romantic ideal of anti-social brigandry by demonstrating the kind of damage that such a worldview could inflict upon those ill-equipped to protect themselves; and at the same time, the fates suffered by crimp characters (and protagonists' responses thereto) allowed the authors to imagine ways in which the erstwhile *haohan* might be redeemed as a much more positive *hao de hanren* role model for others.

## Conclusions

The fictionalized crimp, far more than simply a literary representation of a historical figure, actually bears a great deal of symbolic meaning in the context in which the novels were produced. First and foremost, of course, he stands in for those who would betray their country and their brethren in a moment of national crisis, for those to whom personal comfort and security were more important than the successful coalescence and mobilization of the public in the name of the greater social good. But more than this, he was used in more than one instance as a symbol of the potential for such people to change for the better. Many of the crimps, just as the people they victimized, were themselves victims of economic and political circumstances beyond their control. As such, those who were willing to reform themselves deserved a chance at redemption and inclusion in the modern nation.

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90. Wang Xuetai, *Youmin wenhua*, 18-19; 224; 523; 543.

The crimps' frequent depiction as *youmin* or outsiders in the novels—coupled with the fact that many of the protagonists are *also* outsiders—similarly reinforces the idea that not all outsiders should be understood to be inherently and irreversibly untrustworthy. Following the tumultuous political upheaval and violence of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of *youmin* in China's coastal cities skyrocketed and locals grew suspicious of these “others” in their streets. However, as the coolie fiction points out, each outsider is in control of his own morality. It is undeniable that the crimps have compromised that morality, but it is possible and even desirable that those who have recognized the error of their ways should be permitted to re-enter and contribute to society. It may have been easy enough to indulge in unfavorable discourse regarding the influx of vulnerable rural strangers into China's urban centers; but the *youmin* protagonists and reformed crimps in the novels urge metropolitan readers to view the desperate subaltern as vulnerable but edifiable potential future citizens, rather than simply a menace to local *liangmin* society.

Finally, I have argued that the crimp as written in the novels serves to discredit the popularly-accepted brand of heroism ascribed to vigilante brigands such as the *haohan* of Liangshan Marsh. Indeed, the crimps form a sort of ignominious fraternity that engages in much of the same type of self-serving behavior as the “gallant fraternity” of the legendary *haohan*. As twentieth-century authors enjoined their readers to choose more positive, activist role models, it became clear that the scheming, violent *haohan* of Liangshan Marsh were no longer a sufficient mode of hero for a burgeoning nation. The fictional portrayal of crimps in the above novels re-characterized outdated modes of rakish thug-heroism as a form of anti-social violence; at the same time, the crimp narratives suggested that the modern nation would demand either the reformation or the punishment of those who operated in violation of the crystallizing public moral code.

## Conclusions

### Out of the Ashes: the coolie trade as ideational crucible

My principal goal in weaving together this narrative has been to elucidate the lasting effect that the coolie trade had on a developing public psyche in late Qing China. As I have demonstrated, the trade was such an important, disruptive part of the history of the late Qing era that it not only influenced political and diplomatic perspectives in the contemporary moment, but would later inform activist bids to consolidate cohesive, aware networks of proto-citizens in the name of greater public welfare.

The execution of the trade had depended upon white traders' and politicians' ability to "yellow wash" the Chinese populace, rendering them so other that it became possible to treat them according to completely different standards than those in place for the employment of white labor. As with African slaves before them, it became possible to conceive of Chinese bodies as fungible "goods" rather than vessels in which humanity inhered. This racially-biased disconnect made possible (and perversely "defensible") the abominable treatment of Chinese, and the resulting traffic was catastrophic in terms of the sheer number of Chinese lives lost, of families torn apart, and of scars left on the national psyche. But the trade was also traumatizing in terms of China's shocking loss of jurisdiction (and thus to an extent, its loss of sovereignty) over egress of its subjects, and the general societal and physical chaos that the trade introduced into southern China's coastal cities.

Even as these traumas were being perpetrated, however, Chinese intellectuals, officials, journalists, and the coolies themselves began to struggle with what it meant for foreigners to suddenly arrogate for themselves the power to both determine the value and take possession of Chinese persons. That struggle took the form of reportage and testimonies that responded to and rejected the traumatic violences concomitant to the trade; and as these persons attempted to make sense of the international and domestic circumstances that



had made possible such an inhuman traffic, they gave birth to powerful vocabularies that simultaneously gave voice not just to the violences that Chinese had experienced and witnessed, but the shock and outrage that those violences precipitated.

The vocabularies that emerged from efforts to reject foreign-imputed inferiority and expendability of Chinese would eventually bleed over into later efforts to contest other forms of (ideologically related) anti-Chinese violence and discrimination that had become prevalent by the early twentieth century. As it happened, the allusive tools provided by pre-established, shared coolie trade discourses in the nineteenth century would make it possible for twentieth-century writers to frame unfair treatment of Chinese in the contemporary moment as simply a continuation of older racist or ethnocentric ideologies practiced by foreigners (whether western or Manchu). On the one hand, the coolie novels emphasized that Chinese laborers around the world were still being treated by Euro-Americans much the same as coolies and slaves had been before them, which is to say that the Euro-centric racist hierarchies responsible for the victimization of Chinese coolies were still very much in operation in spite of the decades-old moratorium on the trade itself. On the other hand, the coolie novels similarly encouraged their readership to reflect upon the Manchu court's systemic privileging of Manchus over Han and its historic and present inability (or perceived unwillingness) to protect its Han subjects from foreign threats. In other words, the coolie trade vocabularies were the perfect tool to simultaneously give voice to two very different, yet intertwined, modes of anti-foreign resentment. At the same time, the authors of coolie fiction were grounding their activism not just in the public outrage of the contemporary moment, but in a sense of historical injustice as well. The rehashing of these old wounds and lingering fears would prove to be a very productive means of evoking among readers a sense of shared sentiment and common fate.

The coolie fiction of the boycott and Enlightenment movements, while speaking to immediate political and social issues, relied upon already-extant (and incendiary) coolie trade vocabularies of violence, resentment, and perseverance to effectively rally an activist readership to their respective causes and to offer prescriptive visions for how the common people (whether *liangmin* or *jianmin*, locals or outsiders) might come to have a hand in popular governance or critical social reform. In a moment in which intellectuals were very much afraid that China would go the way of other “enslaved” nations or peoples, these vocabularies and tropes of enslavement could be used to suggest trajectories for an emerging people struggling to define itself in terms beyond shared trauma and fear of further violence. By first appealing to that sense of shared trauma and fear to capture the attention of a broad audience, then demonstrating how a wide variety of characters could come together to respond to those violent stimuli, the authors insisted that public activism and its corollary, the publicly-oriented hero, would play crucial roles in the strengthening of an erstwhile weak China.

I stated earlier that this project would have implications for the field of coolie trade studies, among others. Indeed, the coolie trade and vocabularies of coolie trade (hi)stories have provided a unique lens through which to understand Chinese responses to violence, racism, imperialism, nationalism, and internal strife in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ultimately, the trade was far more than just a historic event; it was a fount of meaning both for those victimized by it and for those who bore witness to its barbarity. From their incipience alongside the trade, the emergent vocabularies performed the critical function of documenting in concrete terms and preserving for social posterity the more ephemeral individual outrage and pain that arose from execution of the trade, ensuring that even as survivors passed away or moved on, those shared experiences and sentiments would be indelibly imprinted on the mnemonic and linguistic fabric of society.

That authors were later able to reinvigorate and manipulate those historically-inflected vocabularies to create meaningful (and widely-consumed) comparisons between historic and contemporary experience is emblematic of the rich meaning with which the vocabularies had been invested: on the one hand, the resonance of these metaphors for their readers speaks volumes to the depth and the power of common feeling that had remained indissolubly (if perhaps latently) linked to the painful memory of the trade and its dehumanizing brutality; on the other, that contemporary fears of foreign domination were still expressed in terms of enslavement is suggestive of the concern that China had not yet entirely succeeded in extricating itself from the social and political nadir of foreign subjugation that the historic coolie trade epitomized. In each case, the vocabularies are expressive of anxieties and wounds that far exceed their simple referents. Ultimately, the coolie trade vocabularies, reinforced over time with multiple layers of nuanced social meaning, could in the contemporary moment just as in previous decades be mobilized in the continued struggle to simultaneously reject and confront anti-Chinese violences—while simultaneously giving form to the “people” that might rise from the ashes of an empire set aflame from both within and without.

The coolie trade was, unfortunately, not an isolated phenomenon; indeed, it was, as suggested in Chapter One, merely one of a number of such patterns of coerced labor acquisition. Human history contains countless other cases of enslavement and exploitation, each with its own particularities and geographic or economic circumstances. In each case, there remain untold stories of individual experience, whether of those who were taken away or those who were left behind. Unpacking these individual stories of exploitation or of bearing witness to exploitation can present a more realistic, holistic picture of the full extent of the damage that predatory labor recruitment practices inflict upon the societies they tear apart.

In the case of the coolie trade, there were numerous psychic ramifications and societal opportunity costs that might not be accounted for in a more straightforward economic or geographic assessment of the legacy of the trade. Similarly, the question of “what did the coolie trade *mean* within China?” has yielded fascinating results with implications that extend far beyond a simple response to the trade as it was carried out. In re-centering the exploited and the society of the exploited in this project—by analyzing local discourses and literary production on the trade—I hope to have highlighted the usefulness of a decolonized approach to understanding imperial (or neo-imperial) human trafficking. Such an approach will continue to be necessary so long as we hope to avoid privileging grandiose (hi)stories of Empires over the infinitely more personal, devastating (hi)stories of the myriad people whose lives became the raw materials in the building thereof.

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