



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor of Neoslavery

Item Type	article;article
Authors	Hu-Dehart, Evelyn
Download date	2025-04-23 23:32:54
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7427

Evelyn Hu-DeHart

CHINESE COOLIE LABOR IN CUBA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: FREE LABOR OR NEOSLAVERY?

FROM 1847 TO 1874, as many as 125,000 Chinese indentured or contract laborers, almost all male, were sent to Cuba.¹ This is no small number, considering the time span of just 27 years. Eighty percent or more were destined for the sugar plantations. The Chinese were imported while African slavery was still in effect though undergoing "gradual abolition," and worked alongside this traditional form of plantation labor. (During this same period, Peru also imported Chinese coolies — about 95,000 — for its sugar plantations. In the case of Peru, however, slavery was being abolished just when coolies were being introduced, essentially supplanting slave labor on the revived coastal plantations, although initially they did work with or under free blacks.)

Was coolie labor another form of slavery, or was it a transition to free labor? This paper will examine *la trata amarilla* [the yellow trade] from its inception to its dissolution in light of these apparently opposing propositions of free labor or neoslavery.

THE INTERNATIONAL COOLIE TRADE

The British were the first to experiment with the exporting of first Chinese, then East Indian, laborers under contract to their overseas colonies. As early as 1806, at precisely the time when the British ended the slave trade, 200 Chinese were sent to Trinidad. Although this experiment was a failure, British entrepreneurs continued to press for the export of Asian labor, turning from China to India by the 1830s. By 1838, some 25,000 East Indians had been exported to the new British East African colony of Mauritius and successfully adapted to the plantation system there. In 1845, the first cargo of East Indians was shipped to British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica in the West Indies. They were under contract to the plantations for five years, a period known euphemistically as "industrial residency," after which they could presumably ask for passage home, or remain in the colonies as free men. During the same time, the French also acquired Indians under indenture to their colonies in East Africa and the Caribbean.

Thus was initiated a forced international labor migration of immense proportions, the official, recorded count totaling over half a million between 1842 and 1870,

Reprinted by permission from *Slavery and Abolition*, 14:1 (1993).

© 1993 by Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.

to Mauritius, Demerara (British Guiana), Trinidad, Jamaica, Natal, Reunion and other small French colonies.² The British, who condemned slavery and pressured the French, Spanish and Portuguese to follow their lead in ending the African slave trade, also led the way to develop, sanction and profit from this new system of forced labor. The Spanish and Cubans, and the Peruvians, quickly followed their example, faced as they were with the same dilemma of the end of slavery when the plantation economy continued to flourish.

This became the infamous coolie trade, referring specifically to Chinese and East Indians bound under contract to provide service for a specified period of time — five years under the British system, eight in Cuba and Peru. The contract was a legal document between a free person and an employer, and spells out the precise obligations of both parties. The coolie was to be paid during the period of contract, usually a combination of wages and in kind (food, clothing, lodging and medical attention). After completing the term of indenture, the coolies were to regain their total freedom. However, there was an immense gap from the very beginning between theory and practice, which was probably unavoidable given the context in which the system developed.

British historian Hugh Tinker describes coolie labor as “the lowest layer of the industrial labor force,” whose creation was directly linked “to the emergence of Western . . . economic exploitation of the raw materials of the tropics.” The coolie system enabled the plantation industry “to draw upon a pool of cheap labour with the minimum of restrictions and the maximum of leverage against the workers.” It emerged in direct response to the end of the African slave trade and of slavery as the preferred system of labor on plantations, and at a time when plantations were becoming more mechanized and industrialized, so that one could speak of the plantation as “industrial agriculture,” or “factory in the field.”³

THE COOLIE TRADE TO CUBA

Between 1763, the year the British captured and occupied Havana for 10 months and opened up this Spanish colony to international trade and the emerging North American market, and 1838, when the Cuban industry mechanized significantly, Cuban society was transformed from “the relatively mixed economy based on cattle-ranching, tobacco-growing, and the small-scale production of sugar” to the “dominance of plantation agriculture based on the large-scale production of sugar and coffee.”⁴ It had surpassed her British West Indian neighbors to become the preeminent sugar producer in the world. Along with new markets, improved technology, capital availability, a responsive political climate, a modern, entrepreneurial spirit among the planters, and other factors, African slave labor was crucial to the success of the plantation economy. The slave population had grown from 38,879 (22.8% of the total population) in 1774, to 436,495 (43.3% of total population) by 1841. Despite British efforts already underway to end the international slave trade, Cuba continued to import large numbers of Africans during the early nineteenth century, reaching as high as 25,841 in 1817.⁵

The transformation of Cuban society was not just an economic phenomenon; it was social as well, for the population became not only increasingly slave and colored, but the planter class — often *hacendados* [landowners], *esclavistas* [slave owners] and *negreros* [slave traders] all in one (e.g. Zulueta and Aldama) — reigned supreme, with their interests driving most policy-making, and their authority, particularly on their estates, largely unquestioned.

Planter interest was represented by the powerful Real Junta de Fomento y de Colonización, presided by the eminent landowner and international businessman Julian Zulueta. An agency of the Fomento was the Comisión de Población Blanca, charged at first with promoting the immigration of free European workers to Cuba, as these farsighted planters were already preparing for the imminent end of Africa as their source of labor and the need to adjust to free white labor. But free men and women in Europe were not attracted to a plantation society with slave labor. So, in 1844, when the British coolie trade was in full swing, the Junta sent an agent to China to study the possibility of importing Chinese coolies. The Spanish Government was also familiar with Chinese agricultural labor in their Phillippines colony. An agreement was sealed sometime in 1846 between Zulueta and Company in London and the British in Amoy, a treaty port in Fukien Province, South China. On June 3, 1847, the Spanish ship *Oquendo* docked in Havana with 206 Chinese on board, after 131 days at sea. Six died at sea and another 7 shortly after arrival. Nine days later, another British ship, the *Duke of Argyle* arrived with 365 on board, after 123 days at sea.⁶ Thirty five had died at sea. Both human cargoes were consigned to the Junta de momento, which proceeded to distribute the coolies in lots of 10 to a group which included the island's most prominent planters and one railroad company.

Initial response to the Chinese as workers in Cuba was not enthusiastic. Cuba suspended the trade after the first contract with Zulueta, and spent the next few years promoting other forms of immigrant labor, including Yucatecos (Mayan Indians) from Mexico, Gallegos, Catalans and Canary Islanders from Europe. While some came from all these places, they failed to meet the ever growing labor demand. The trade was officially resumed in 1853. By then, in response to harsh international criticism of an already infamous human experiment, the British prohibited their subjects from participating in the particularly notorious passage to Cuba and Peru, forcing the trade to the Portuguese colony of Macao off the China coast, where

Portuguese colonial authorities for the right price fully cooperated with the European coolie traders until 1874, when even Portugal succumbed to international pressures to end it. By then, over 200,000 Chinese had been sent from Macao, although, of course, the actual origins of the Chinese remained in South China, in Canton and Fukien provinces. The following table summarizes the figures for the duration of the trade to Cuba and Peru, correlated with slave importation and sugar production.

A clear correlation can be observed in these figures. As the African slave trade wound down and ended with the last shipments in 1865 and 1866 of just 145 and 1,443 slaves, the size of the coolie imports rose markedly, reaching as high as 12,391 and 14,263 in 1866 and 1867. From 1865 to the end of the coolie trade in 1874, 64,500 coolies

TABLE 1
Coolie Imports to Cuba (1847-1874)
Correlated with Slave Imports and Sugar Production

<i>Year</i>	<i>Slaves</i>	<i>Coolies</i>	<i>Sugar (m. tons)</i>
1847		571	
1848			
1853	12,500	4,307	391,247
1854	11,400	1,711	397,713
1855	6,408	2,985	4,629
1856	7,304	4,968	416,141
1857	10,436	8,547	436,030
1858	19,992	13,385	426,274
1859	30,473	7,204	469,263
1860	24,895	6,193	428,769
1861	23,964	6,973	533,800
1862	11,254	344	454,758
1863	7,507	952	445,693
1864	6,807	2,153	525,372
1865	145	6,400	547,364
1866	1,443	12,391	535,641
1867		14,263	585,814
1868		7,368	720,250
1869		5,660	718,745
1870		1,227	702,974
1871		1,448	609,660
1872		8,160	772,068
1873		5,093	742,843
1874		2,490	768,672
	Total	124,813	
1875			750,062
1876			626,082
1877			516,268
1878			553,364
1879			775,368
1880			618,654
1881			580,894
1882			620,565

Sources: Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*, 10, 36, 250; Pérez de la Riva, "Demografía," 60 (Scott reproduced these figures on 29, and corrected an apparent mathematical mistake in the total, from 124,793 in the original to the correct figure of 124,813.)

The *Boletín de Colonización*, in issues I:14 (15 August 1873), I:15 (30 August 1873), I:16 (15 September 1873), and I:17 (30 September 1873), contains a very detailed record of the entire coolie trade from China and Macao, listing the following information: 1) date of departure; 2) name of ship; 3) flag of ship; 4) number of coolies disembarked in Cuba; 5) length of voyage; 6) Port of exit in China or Macao; 7) Consignatory (agent receiving the cargo in Havana).

arrived, constituting over 50% of the total number imported. During this period, sugar production climbed steadily, reaching a high of 768,672 metric tons in 1874. Coolies constituted the source of labor replenishment, delaying the crisis that would have set in with the end of the slave trade, and making it possible for the plantation economy to continue to prosper. It is also noteworthy that, after 1875, when both the slave and the coolie trade had ended, sugar production displayed a pattern of general decline, a crisis brought on certainly in large part by the shortage of available labor.

THE COOLIE CONTRACT AND COOLIE REGULATIONS

From the very beginning of the trade, Cubans rarely referred to the Chinese as coolies, or even as workers, but as *colonos asiaticos*. Those who bought their contracts were referred to as *patrón* or *patrono*. (Significantly, however, the Chinese government itself preferred the term “employer,” which certainly was more appropriate given the coolies’ legal status.) The contract [*contrata*] had the heading *Emigración China para Cuba*, which probably explains the reference to the Chinese as “colonists.” In Chinese, however, the heading can be translated as “Labour Employment Contract” (*Gu-kong-he-tong*), making no allusion to immigration, but, rather, to work.⁷

All coolies were issued a contract before embarkation for Cuba. Cuban planters employed agents to handle the trade for them in Macao. The Portuguese authorities in Macao oversaw the loading process and legalized the documents. The contract was to be read to the coolie in the appropriate Chinese dialect, so that he fully understood its terms, and by signing signified conformity with these terms.

The contract was printed in both Chinese and Spanish, and issued in duplicate: one to the coolie to be kept on his person for the duration of his servitude, and one to the contracting agency, which transferred it to the *patrono* upon selling it. Printed in clear type in both the Spanish and Chinese versions, and usually on a fine blue paper, the contract includes details such as the name, age and home village of the coolie, the name of the on-site agent as well as the contracting agency in Havana, sometimes the name of the coolie ship, and signed by the Spanish consul and the local authorities (Portuguese in the case of Macao.)

Throughout the years of the trade, some of the basic terms remained constant: the eight years of servitude almost never varied; the pay of 1 peso a week, or 4 a month, also remained constant; in addition to salary, coolies were paid in food and clothing — usually some specified amount of rice, meat or fish, yams or vegetables, as well as two changes of garment, one jacket and 1 blanket a year. Housing was also provided. The contract specified three days off during New Years, and usually Sundays as well, although this was rarely honored even when stipulated. Furthermore, the contract provided for medical attention, although it also stipulated under what conditions the *patrono* could withhold pay until recovery. The *patrono* was also assured of fully eight years service, so that the coolie was obligated to make up for lost days by extending his service beyond the 8 calendar years. In addition, the coolie was advanced 8 to 14 pesos at time of departure (for passage and a new change of clothing), which constituted a debt to the *patrono* to be repaid by deduction from his salary at the rate of 1 pesos a month.

The initial contracts were reinforced by the first coolie regulations issued on 10 April 1849, entitled “Government Regulations for the Handling and Treatment of Asian and Indian Colonists.”⁸ In issuing these rules, Governor-General Conde de Alcoy bluntly stated the need — in addition to “protecting the rights of the colonists’ — for rules that also assured their “subordination and discipline, without which they could hurt instead of benefit agriculture.” Since nowhere in the contract was corporal and other forms of punishment mentioned, the 1849 *Reglamentos* clearly spelled out the conditions — insubordination and running away — under which corporal and other forms of severe punishment could be meted out, including floggings [*cuerazos*], leg chains or shackles [*grillete*], confinement in stocks [*cepo*]. Cuban historian Juan Pérez de la Riva, one of the severest critics of the coolie system, pointed out in his study of the legal condition of the coolies in Cuba, that the rules regarding corporal punishment was lifted almost verbatim from those designed to discipline and punish slaves.⁹ On the other hand, the 1849 Regulations also contained two articles clearly implying distinctions between Chinese coolies and slaves. Article 10 stipulated that whenever there were 10 coolies on any one estate, the planter must assign a white overseer [*mayoral blanco*] to supervise and care for them, and to help them with the work. Article 17 stipulated that only the white overseer could mete out corporal punishment, and never in the presence of slaves [*negros*].

When the trade was resumed in 1853, a new set of regulations were introduced in 1854, and the contract itself was modified. This was the “Regulations for the Introduction and Control of Spanish, Chinese and Yucateco Colonists on the Island of Cuba.”¹⁰ Although the regulations included all colonists, it was clearly aimed primarily at governing Chinese coolies. First of all, in view of the violent reaction of the first coolie arrivals to corporal punishment, it was specifically prohibited in the 1854 regulations and all subsequent ones. There is no shortage of evidence to demonstrate that this prohibition was largely ignored by the planters and their administrators.¹¹

A new clause was inserted towards the end of the new contract, in which the *colono* declared “I am in agreement with the stipulated salary, although I know that free workers and slaves make much more, because I feel that this difference has been compensated by other benefits which the *patrono* has given me, and which are spelled out in this contract.” Just above this statement was another which clearly stipulated that upon completion of the eight-year term of service, “I will be free to work as I wish without being forced to extend this contract, not even under the pretext of debt, obligations or promises that I might have made.” This rather peculiar juxtaposition, on the one hand conforming to the international understanding of contract or indentured labour that frees the worker upon completion of the agreed upon term of service, while on the other coercing the coolie to accept a lower than going salary rate, suggests an unresolved conflict in the minds of those who designed the coolie system in Cuba.

This dilemma was eventually resolved against the coolie, in the 1860 “Regulations for the Introduction of Chinese Workers to the Island of Cuba.”¹² The new law required a change in the contract that required coolies who completed their original term of service to *recontract* with the same or another master. Otherwise, they were obligated to leave Cuba within two months of termination.

The 1854 regulations, a lengthy document containing 66 articles, made clear two things, which were in fact contradictory. On the one hand, it attributed a legal personality to the coolie, who was, after all, a free man. On the other hand, during the eight-year term of servitude, he was clearly the property of the master. Regarding his rights as a free man, the *colono* could contract marriage; control his reproduction as well as assume parental authority over his offsprings and preserve his marital relationship and familiar obligations (married *colonos* with children could not be forcibly separated); acquire and dispose of private property; bring charges against his *patrono* in court, and had recourse to the colonial authorities in the event of abuse, which, when severe enough could result in the rescision of his contract.

Most important of all, the regulations spelled out precisely his right to freedom. Upon reaching 25 years of age, or upon completing six years of service, the *colono* had the right to have his contract rescinded by providing a fair indemnization to the *patrono*. Furthermore, all *colonos* could buy out their contract under carefully spelled out conditions in Article 28. These included: the original purchase price of the contract; a fair indemnization for the balance of the contract; the cost to the *patrono* for the services provided the coolie (such as clothing, job training, tools); cost of inconvenience to the *patrono* while looking for a replacement. One exclusionary clause was inserted: the *colono* could not avail himself of what was essentially “coartation” during the *zafra* [cane harvest] or when other urgent tasks were needed.¹³

In other respects, the contract as well as the series of regulations made it clear that during the eight-year servitude, the coolies were the property of the *patronos*, constituting moreover a fixed capital investment in his enterprise. Despite various recourses legally available to the coolie to complain against abuses, excesses and violations of the contract, other stipulations made it clear that the daily life and work of the coolies were pretty much left to the discretion of those who bought their contracts. Various clauses also made clear that the contract — and by extension the rights and needs of the *patrono* — took precedence over rights and needs of the *colono*. Article 19 stated that the *colono*, upon signing the contract, “renounces the exercise of all civil rights which are not compatible with the compliance of contract obligations.” He had very little freedom of mobility, for the *colono* was specifically prohibited from leaving his place of work without the written permission of the *patrono*; otherwise he could be arrested by the authority as a *cimarrón* or runaway. Many of the personal rights accorded the coolie, such as marriage and acquisition of property, had to have the approval of the *patrono*. While coartation was permitted, the terms were so difficult that it was very difficult, though not impossible (as discussed below). The selling and buying of contracts, as well as the renting out of contracts, in practice was very little different from slave transactions. The laws, in effect, particularly on the plantations, were flagrantly disregarded, the contract a mere piece of paper.

COOLIE CONDITIONS IN CUBA

From the beginning, critics and cynics in Cuba noted and decried the hypocrisy they perceived in the use of the term *colono*. If “colonist” implied settling the land and

working it independently, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that such was far from the minds of those who acquired Chinese coolies and who viewed them simply as *brazos* or cheap, unskilled labor. Cuban planter Pedro Diago, owner of the Ingenio Santa Elena, remarked at the time of the first shipload in 1847, “*creo que convendrá su inmigración para sustituir la falta de brazos africanos,*” to which the Junta de Fomento later added, “*no solo conveniente, sino indispensable*” and “*el único recurso para proporcionar brazos.*”¹⁴ Although no more than 20% of the total imported went into domestic service, public works, and small industries, the vast majority, 80% or more, were sent directly to the plantations.¹⁵ In practice and in some of the laws, the Chinese were denied most of their rights as free men under contract and after the contract period, and were hardly regarded by other members of either society as immigrants or colonists. Most of all, the critics of this system — both contemporary observers as well as historians examining it retroactively — have focused on the actual physical conditions of work and daily life on the plantations for the Chinese coolies. There, of course, the Chinese were confronted with the tradition of slavery, their *patronos* seasoned slave owners. In Cuba, the Chinese working alongside slaves, performing basically the same unskilled tasks, with some small number assigned to more skilled labor.

Coolie traders as well as the planters made little attempt to readjust the system or even to change the terminology. In South China, hapless Chinese, mostly poor young men, were “recruited” by force and deception by their own countrymen commonly called by the Westerners crimps or runners [*corredores*] — just as their counterparts in Africa were called. While waiting to be embarked in Macao, these recruits were housed in “barracoons.” Many of the same ships and captains used in the African slave trade now transported Chinese coolies, packing them on board in the same way as slaves, across a “Middle Passage” that was even longer in distance and more arduous. Mortality rates on these coolie ships — known also as “floating coffins” — were as high as 25 or 30%, and averaged 16% for Cuba.¹⁶

Upon their arrival in Havana, the coolies were locked up in the *depósitos* until they (technically their contracts) were auctioned off in lots in the same market used to sell slaves. In the plantations, the coolies were housed in the same quarters as slaves or former slaves. The administrators resorted to the same methods of control and punishment — stocks and metal bars [*cepo and barras*], leg chains [*grillete*], whippings [*azotes*], jails and lockups, even executions. Notices appeared in the local newspapers regarding *chinos cimarrones* (*cimarrones* being a term that specifically applied to runaway slaves) or *venta de chinos*, although legally, of course, neither the contract nor certainly the person of the Chinese could be sold.¹⁷

In the actual treatment of the coolies, it is clear that the *patronos* lived the legacy of slavery: “They thought only in terms of a slave system; they could not think beyond that system, and they did not want to go beyond.” The coolie system was erected upon the foundations laid by slavery. As with slaves, the planters enjoyed “absolute power” over the coolies.¹⁸

The coolies, for their part, also responded to the harshness of the plantation regime much as slaves did. They rebelled, individually or collectively; they protested to the authorities whenever possible though usually with little effect against the over-

whelming power of the planters over the judicial system in spite of certain laws; they ran away; they resorted to suicide. They even joined insurrections against Spain in Cuba's Ten Year War in order to bargain for their personal freedom.¹⁹

On the part of contemporary observers turned critics of the coolie system, as well as of twentieth century historians examining the system, many viewed this treatment of legally free men, albeit under contract for eight years, as no different from chattel slaves, thus concluding that coolies were slaves or *semiesclavos* and the system another form of slavery. In many of the critics, an undertone of moral outrage is quite audible.

EXTENSION AND ADJUSTMENTS TO THE COOLIE SYSTEM

When the coolie trade was cut off in 1874, many of those already in Cuba still had to work off their terms of servitude. Moreover, mechanisms were put in place to extend the term of service, to force or otherwise entice the Chinese to continue working under some kind of contract primarily on the plantations, where demand for labor continued to be high.

In Cuba, forced recontracting began early, with the *Reglamento* of 1860 discussed above, which obligated those coolies who had completed their first 8 years to recontract (for an unspecified period of time) or to leave Cuba at their own expense. Only those whose contracts expired before 1861 were exempt. To critics such as Pérez de la Riva, recontracting simply further confirmed his conclusion that the coolie system was slavery, in that compulsory and successive recontracting perpetuated servitude indefinitely to the point that the legal distinction between indenture and slavery became truly blurred by the practice.

There is no doubt that the Cubans issued the recontracting regulation in order to keep as many as possible of this captive alien labor force on the plantations, knowing full well that very few of the coolies could have saved enough from their meager wages to pay for their passage home. Equally undeniable a factor was racism, for the question of race definitely figured into this decision to keep the Chinese unfree. Cuban slavers and abolitionists alike had trouble dealing with a free nonwhite population, and concerned about the further mongrelization of Cuban society with the admission of another undesirable coloured race (see below). Recontracting succeeded well as a device to keep Chinese labor in agriculture for as long as possible. The 1872 Cuban census noted 58,400 Chinese, of whom 14,046 were "free," i.e. men who had completed their original contracts. Nevertheless, of this number, 10,044 remained in agriculture.²⁰ Records uncovered by historians in the People's Republic of China, using Chinese records, reveal that from 1880 to 1885, a period when many of the coolies sent to Cuba and Peru during the height (also the last thrust) of the coolie trade in the first half of the 1870s would have completed their original contracts, only 1,887 of the Chinese managed to make their way back home to China. This was an insignificant number, given the over 100,000 who left China in 1870-74 alone for Cuba and Peru.²¹

Recontracting took a further, and significant new turn beginning as early as 1870 in Cuba. While the original recontracts were signed between the individual coolie

whose contract had just expired, and the planter or his administrator, usually the same ones who held the original contracts, a new contracting system involved a free Chinese — operating as an *enganchador* (labor contractor or broker) — who engaged and organized fellow free Chinese [*chinos libres*] into *cuadrillas* or gangs. This entire group of *cuadrilleros* was then hired out to a plantation for a specified period of time or a specific piece of work, such as the evaporating room [*casa de calderas*] in the *ingenios* [sugar factory on the estate] of Cuba.²²

The Chinese *enganchador* negotiated all terms of work for his squad and handled all aspects of employment for the workers, including obtaining the advances from the planters to pay them, handing out tools, arranging for lodging and food, responsible for discipline, control, supervision. He also assumed the risks of all losses and damages. He was likely once a coolie himself, now an independent merchant trading in goods and men.

By the census of 1872, 14,064 coolies had completed their original contracts, become naturalized or registered as a “foreign resident.” Under contract were 34,408 coolies; 7,036 were runaways still missing, 864 were captured runaways, and 684 were sentenced criminals. Awaiting recontracting in the *depósitos* [holding cells] were only 864.²³ Thus, the planters welcomed the Chinese *cuadrillas* in 1870 as an innovative device to keep the Chinese working on their estates after their contracts expired. But they also realized that the presence of these *chinos libres* posed a severe problem of control over slaves and especially coolies still under contract. An editorial in the *Boletín de Colonización*, an official organ of the colonial government that represented sugar interests, concerned about the high rate of *marronismo* or runaways, charged that these *cuadrillas* were the principal cause of flight. The writer asserted that the runaways could easily hide among the other *cuadrilleros*, and that their presence “demoralized the workers.”²⁴ Thus, the colonial authorities banned the use of *cuadrillas*, choosing the necessity of control over economic flexibility. But they were revived in 1879, at the end of the Ten Years’ War. The coolie trade as well as slave imports had been terminated for several years, and labor in short supply.²⁵

For the Chinese, given the 1860 regulation forcing them to recontract or leave the island, joining one of these *cuadrillas* was one way to stay in Cuba without resorting to the much hated individual contract with a *patrono*. And as in Peru, the Chinese contractor accumulated capital for business through this process.²⁶

As the decade of the eighties drew to a close, Cuba saw the end of dependence on slave and coolie labor on the plantations. The old plantation system gave way to the *colonos* or independent small farmers who cultivated and supplied the newly modernized mills with the raw canes. Many of these *colonos* were new immigrants from Europe (mostly Canary Islanders and Gallegos).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

If one focuses strictly on the eight year term of servitude that the Chinese coolies bound themselves to by signing the contracts — specifically the condition of work; the actual physical treatment they received at the hands of planters, administrators,

overseers; the denial of personal freedom; the spatial proximity to slavery — there is no escaping the conclusion that the coolie system very closely resembled plantation slavery. Such was the strong indictment issued by critics such as Cuban historians Juan Pérez de la Riva and Juan Jiménez Pastrana, both of whom have written extensively on aspects of the coolie trade and coolie life. Pérez de la Riva accused the Cuban planters, the Spanish slave and coolie traders [*negreros*] and their allies — who had profited immensely from the coolie trade — of wanting to convert the coolie into a “permanent slave” [*esclavo permanente*]. In studying the legal status of the coolie, he detected a strong “slave mentality” [*espíritu esclavista*] underlying the legislation, and denounced the hypocrisy of a system that brazenly flaunted the law in order to protect the interests of the elite.²⁷ In all his writings on this controversial, complicated subject, Pérez de la Riva remained firm in his conviction that the coolie system was more properly speaking *esclavitud china*.²⁸

Jiménez Pastrana, the other Cuban historian most associated with the study of the coolie system, also concluded that in their practice the Cuban planters and coolie traders reduced the system to “a disguised slavery,” and that “*colono*” was a euphemism for a labor force that was cheaper than slaves. However, he also agreed with another colleague, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Cuba’s most eminent historian of the sugar industry, that the coolie “theoretically was not a slave, because he was salaried. And, as such, he represented an early step in the rise of our working class. The Chinese *colono* was really an agricultural worker, with a miserable salary, whose socioeconomic situation must be included in the history of the Cuban labor movement.”²⁹ Or, in Moreno Fraginals’ words: “The Chinese constituted the first step in solving the labor problem which permitted the beginning of industrialization of sugar: to effect the transition from manufacturing to industrial production.”³⁰ In other words, Moreno Fraginals and Jiménez Pastrana recognized that the Chinese, in spite of their abject condition on the plantation, constituted a transition to free labor, which they considered essential to industrialization — meaning mechanization and modernization with a skilled, free labor force.

Rebecca Scott took issue with Moreno Fraginals’ assertion that modernization required a free and skilled labor force. In her study of Cuban slavery during its last stage of “gradual abolition,” which was also the period of the coolie trade, she concluded that the plantations survived and thrived with a mixture of different labor systems — slave, indentured and free — and involving several racial groups — blacks, Asians, whites, American Indians and mixed-bloods — “without repudiating slavery itself.”³¹ Far from incompatible, the slave plantation regime was maintained under capitalist industrialization. And far from destroying slavery, the undeniable importance of Chinese labor in the survival and developing of the Cuban sugar industry also ensured the perpetuation of slavery for several more decades. She found that most coolies performed the same type of unskilled, backbreaking agricultural tasks as slaves, that sugar mills mechanized heavily in the 1860s and 70s using both slave and coolie labor interchangeably, and that technology did not render the slave undesirable. If coolies were not substantially different from slaves, Scott argued, then one cannot assume that they were essential to mechanization. The fact that coolie contracts were bought and sold, and that coolies had

to be housed, clothed and fed at all times even when their labor was not needed, meant that economically for the planter, they constituted a form of fixed capital just like the slaves, not variable capital as wage laborers would have been. Moreover, she observed, most planters and administrators treated coolies as “virtual slaves.” At best, then, “they were debt peons of a sort, but debt peons always at risk of being reduced to the status of those alongside whom they worked: slaves.”³²

French Canadian ethnologist Denise Helly, who also studied the Chinese coolies in Cuba and thus confronted with the question of whether they were slave or free, tends to support Moreno Fraginals’ contention that the Chinese were employed in larger numbers in the more skilled work — “les installations modernisées des usines centrales.” She cites Ramon de la Sagra’s description of the work force of the ingenio La Ponina in 1860, where 430 Chinese worked in the casa de calderas (evaporating room), compared to 252 blacks, and 252 Chinese compared to only 28 blacks in the casa de purga (purging room). Both these tasks were mechanized and hence required the most skills. By contrast, on this plantation blacks vastly outnumbered Chinese, 189 to 35, in the less skilled task of transporting cane from the field to the factory.³³

Although the technicians in the boiling and purging houses were usually white men from Europe and the U.S., the coolies were often assigned to them as aides. Their wages, however, at 4 pesos per month, were considerably lower than that earned by the white technicians, usually 30 pesos per month. Nevertheless, “the organization of production integrates the coolie at the side of the salaried group on the plantation, placing them in an inferior echelon to that occupied by whites.”³⁴ Moreover, Helly asserts, their salaried status gave them a framework for voluntary association (regroupement volontaire) leading to collective action and protests. By contrast, planters preferred to keep the black slaves in agricultural work, because they were able to cut 400 arrobas of cane per day compared to the average 200 arrobas cut by the frailer Chinese.³⁵ Contrary to Scott, who argued that a varied labor force helped keep slavery alive, Helly maintains that “the simultaneous utilization of slave and contract labor demonstrated the transformation of a slave society to a capitalist society.”³⁶ It was Chinese labor that in part made possible this capitalist transformation to industrial technology and free labor in the production of sugar. While acknowledging that the “Chinese immigrants” were “cruelly exploited, physically maltreated and their rights as free men often denied by the bosses,” their material condition resembling that of slaves, Helly concluded that the Chinese “should be classified at the bottom of the hierarchy of free workers according to the wages received and tasks performed.”³⁷

But even for Scott, the question of Chinese labor was more complex than equating it to slavery. Regardless of how they were actually treated, legally, the indentured laborers occupied an intermediate position in the labor hierarchy, “a third category between slave and free,” and were occasionally perceived as especially suited for working with machinery.³⁸ She also conceded that the cuadrilla system of labor contracting, described above, exhibited some clear signs of free labor, as the Chinese in this system were free men who remained free, and who collected a wage (often without any additional payment in kind) for only the work performed. Sometimes, the cuadrillas

sought work by advertising in local newspapers.³⁹ Although technically no longer coolies when they formed the *cuadrillas* under a Chinese broker, they were for the most part coolies at one time. Coolies with expired contracts, and some runaway coolies, fed the *cuadrilla* system as recruits.

Although recontracting was coercive and abusive, an examination of the recontracting agreements reveals some variation in the terms. A batch of recontracts in 1868 indicates that the terms were short, generally 6 months or 1 year. The pay varied greatly, from a low of 4 pesos 2 reales per month for 1 year, to 13 pesos per month for 1 year. Others were paid 8-1/2 pesos, 12 pesos, 12-3/4 pesos. Some were given food, clothing and medical attention in addition to cash. Two workers who recontracted with the same *patrono* were offered quite different wages of 8-1/2 pesos and 12 pesos respectively.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, no other information was provided in these agreements to help explain the wide differential in pay during the same year, and sometimes on the same estate. Presumably factors such as age and skills played a part. These recontracts also suggest that the planters were not able to dictate uniform terms, and that, more importantly, the coolies appeared to have had some leverage in negotiating the terms. If this were true, then some labor market forces seemed to be at work here.

The other side of recontracting revealed its extremely coercive and abusive nature. Among 1,176 Chinese whose depositions were taken by the Chinese Commission which visited Cuba in 1874, many of whom were serving out a recontract, many testified that they were forced into successive recontracting. Cuban authorities and planters were determined to keep the Chinese in the labor market by denying them the *cédula*, or certificate of completion of contract, which would have permitted them freedom of mobility and occupation. When freed from the plantation, the Chinese preferred to move to the cities and enter petty commerce. Between contracts, those unable to meet the demands of local authorities — who, instead of issuing the *cédulas* free of charge, as provided by law, extorted illegal payments of 17 to 140 pesos for the precious document — were sent to the municipal *depósitos* [holding cells]. There they awaited to be recontracted, or were put to work on public works construction at no pay whatsoever. In this sense, the *depósitos* served a function of holding a labor reserve for the planters or anyone else in need of temporary help at low cost.⁴¹

But regardless of how they were treated at work, the Chinese were keenly aware that they were free men under contract, very distinct from the slaves who were chattel for life. The National Archives of Cuba contain numerous protests and complaints filed by coolies against *patronos* and local authorities whom they felt had violated the contracts or some regulations, for example, those forbidding corporal punishment. Of the 1,176 depositions taken from coolies by the Chinese Commission in 1874, most demonstrated an awareness and deep frustration that, while legally free and protected from abuses, they were in fact not properly treated, neither by the *patronos* or by the authorities charged with protecting them.⁴²

In addition to occupying an intermediate position between slave and free on the labor hierarchy, as neither slave nor free, the Chinese also occupied an intermediate position on the color scale, between black and white. Tension developed between blacks

and Asians, and was quickly understood and manipulated by the whites. Such antipathy was exemplified by the sentiments of Esteban Montejo, the runaway slave immortalized by Cuban writer Miguel Barnet. Montejo characterized the Chinese as aloof and separatists.⁴³ Chinese testimonies and criminal records show numerous conflicts, including assaults and assassinations, between Chinese and blacks on the plantations.⁴⁴

According to Helly, who studied the issue of ethnicity in depth, the introduction of an Asian race into Cuban slave society really upset the creole ideological code, which divided society into black and white, slave and free. Throughout the entire coolie period, Cuban society never quite decided how to deal with the Chinese race — as white and free, or colored and unfree. For example, in the official censuses the free Chinese were lumped into the white category, distinct from blacks, which included both free and slave.⁴⁵ In the rare instances when coolies became baptized and married free Cuban women, they were registered in the matrimonial books as “whites.”⁴⁶ A judge in the Consejo de Administración in 1868 ruled that it was undesirable for blacks to own coolies (i.e., buy their contracts), as that would upset the social order, noting that the Chinese “considers his race superior” to the black.⁴⁷

Concluding this discussion on the Chinese in Cuba, a lack of agreement on the question of whether they were slave or free, and whether and how they contributed to the transition from a slave mode of production to a capitalist mode, only points up the ambiguity of the coolie situation: indentured labor implanted in the midst of very entrenched slavery. The coolie system coexisted with slavery during the latter’s last twenty-five years, both dying out at the same time. Whether coolie labor reinforced slavery during its last gasp for life, or whether it facilitated the process of gradual abolition and the transition to freedom, is still subject to further research and analysis.

To be sure, very little evidence can be found to mitigate the generally harsh picture of the lot of the Chinese coolies. Nevertheless, even while recognizing that laws were ignored or openly flaunted, it is important to separate actual physical treatment from legal status. A well treated slave was still a chattel for life by law. By the same token, the horrendous conditions of the British working class in the early days of the industrial revolution, as immortalized by Charles Dickens and other critics of the time, does not detract from the fact that this was a wage-earning labor force of free men and women with a greater capacity to change and improve their condition than slaves ever enjoyed. In the study of coolie labor as a form of indentured servitude defined by law and a contract that coexisted with or succeeded slavery, regardless of the actual treatment they received, their legal status cannot be ignored. While this status might have had little ameliorating effect on their day-to-day existence on the plantation, the fact that this intermediate status between slave and free was formulated at all could have represented a significant ideological shift on the part of the planters towards imagining a free labor force. Finally, much work still needs to be done to examine in greater detail the coolies’ relationship to production, both while under the original contract and especially during the recontracting and outside contracting (*cuadrilla* or *enganche*) periods.

NOTES

¹ During this period, about 1.5 million Chinese went overseas, to Southeast Asia, North America, as well as South America and the Caribbean, and other parts of the world. See Arnold Joseph Meagher, “The Introduction of Chinese laborers to Latin America and the ‘Coolie Trade’, 1847-1874.” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (U.C. Davis, 1975), 55. (This is an excellent piece of

research that should have been published as an important contribution to an aspect of the international migration of labor in the 19th century.)

The approximately 225,000 Chinese who went to Cuba and Peru were almost exclusively male. So few women went under contract that they were statistically insignificant. A few women went as prostitutes (possibly sent from California by enterprising California Chinese businessmen) or free women. The Cuban census of 1872 noted 58,400 Chinese, of whom only 32 were females, 2 under contract and 30 free. Of the 34,650 noted in the 1862 census, 25 were females. Of the 24,068 in the 1877 census, 58 were females (some possibly born in Cuba and Peru). These figures taken from C. M. Morales papers, vol. 3, #19, Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti, Havana: Vidal Morales y Morales, "Inmigracion de chinos en la Isla de Cuba. Datos que ha proporcionado el que suscrita a Mr. Sanger, Inspector General del Censo." (Collection of clippings, n.d.)

- ² Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 113. If Ceylon, Malaysia, the trade before 1842 and after 1870, and illegal exports were all included, Tinker estimates the number of East Indians taken overseas to be at least 1 million, possibly as high as 2 million; 114-5.
 - ³ Tinker, xii-xiii, 20-1.
 - ⁴ Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970, 6.
 - ⁵ Knight, 22.
 - ⁶ Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC). Junta de Fomento, 147/7278. Also: Juan Jiménez Pastrana, *Los chinos en la historia de Cuba, 1847-1930*. Havana: Ed. Ciencias Sociales, 1983, 13-17.
 - ⁷ ANC. Gobierno Superior Civil, 635/20078, is a copy of an 1847 contract, signed in Amoy, China. A reproduction of a Cuban contract can be found in Jiménez Pastrana, "Materia grafica" section between 106 and 107.
 - ⁸ "Reglamento del Gobierno para el Manejo y Trato de los Colonos Asiaticos e Indios." 10 de abril de 1849. Reproduced in Jiménez Pastrana, pp. 153-161.
 - ⁹ Juan Pérez de la Riva, "La situación legal del culí en Cuba," in *El Barracón. Esclavitud y capitalismo en Cuba*. Barcelona: Ed. Crítica, 1978, 111-140. Originally published in *Cahiers du Monde Hispanique et Luse Bresilien*, Carabille, no. 16, 1971.
 - ¹⁰ "Reglamento para la Introduccíon y Régimen de los Colonos Españoles, Chinos o Yucatecos en la Isla de Cuba." Real Decreto de 22 de marzo de 1854. Reproduced in Jiménez Pastrana, 161-174.
 - ¹¹ Pérez de la Riva, "Situación legal," 117.
 - ¹² "Reglamento para la Introduccion de Trabajadores Chinos en la Isla de Cuba." 6 de julio de 1860. Reproduced in Jiménez Pastrana, 176-192. Note the unusual use of the word *trabajador* (worker) instead of the customary *colono* in this document.
 - ¹³ The term "*cohartación*" was used by the judge in the 1852 case of *asiático Pablo*, who petitioned, unsuccessfully, to have his contract rescinded before expiration of the 8 years. ANC Gob. Sup. Civil, 635/20078.
- The ANC contains numerous petitions from coolies to have their contracts rescinded before expiration, including a few interesting cases of coolies who had won lotteries, hence the means, to buy their freedom. In these cases, the petition was often granted. One case involved "*Eloy colono asiático soltero*," in 1858. Another case occurred in 1860, when Ah Nie won a lottery worth 12,500 pesos, changed his name to Don Antonio José María Gil (note not only the proper Spanish name, but also use of the title Don, usually reserved for gentlemen of substance and property!), and bought out his contract for 357 pesos. He received a residency permit, rented a room on Aguacate no. 55, Havana, and began "living independently." ANC Gob. Sup. Civil, 637/20195.
- ¹⁴ Jiménez Pastrana, 43-49.
 - ¹⁵ According to the testimonies of coolies themselves, the great majority were employed on sugar

plantations, a few on tobacco and coffee estates. Those disposed of for service in Havana and other cities were employed in "sugar warehouses, and in cigar, shoe, hat, iron, charcoal, bakers' confectioners', stone-cutters', and carpenters' shops, and in bricklayers' and washing establishments, in railways and gas works, and as municipal scavengers, in brick-kilns or board cargo-boats, and as domestics and cooks. There are some, also, who have obtained Letters of Domicile, and have engaged in a trade of small proportions." These testimonies, 1,176 in all, were gathered in 1874 by a Chinese Commission which visited Cuba to investigate voluminous and troublesome reports of extreme abuses against the coolies. The detailed report compiled by the Commission constitutes one of the most important primary documents of the coolies in Cuba. The Cuba Commission. "Chinese Emigration. Report of the Commission Sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba." Original edition published by The Imperial Maritime Customs Press, Shanghai, 1876. Reprinted (English and French versions) by Ch'eng Wen Publishing Co., Taipei, Taiwan, 1970. Above quotation on 52. Hereafter referred to as "The Chinese Commission." It was composed of Ch'en Lanpin, the officer in charge of the Educational Mission abroad, based in the United States, and two Englishmen in the service of the Imperial Chinese Government, A. MacPherson, Commissioner of Customs at Hankow, and A. Huber, Commissioner of Customs at Tientsin (both treaty ports).

- ¹⁶ Denise Helly, *Ideologie et ethnicite*. Les Chinois Macao á Cuba, 1847-1886. Montreal: Les Presses Universitaires de Montreal, 1979, 131. On Macao and the passage, see Watt Stewart, *Chinese Bondage in Peru. A History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru, 1849-1874* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1951), 25-76.
- ¹⁷ The *Boletín de Colonización* of Cuba in 1873 contains many lists of "chinos cimarrones" in various municipal *depósitos* or holding cells.
- ¹⁸ Tinker, pp.2-3, making the observation about West Indian and Mauritanian planters *vis-à-vis* East Indian coolies.
- ¹⁹ For Chinese response and resistance to the coolie system, see the Chinese Commission testimonies, scattered throughout the document; Helly, 211-229, Jimenez Pastrana, 81-128. Also, there are many *expedientes* in the ANC, *Gobierno Superior Civil and Miscelánea de Expedientes* (unclassified documents) on coolie runaways, suicides, assaults on administrators and overseers, complaints, protests and uprisings.
- ²⁰ *Boletín de Colonización*, I:18, 15 October 1873. The *Boletín*, published in 1873 and 1874, was the official organ of the powerful Junta or Comisión de Colonización, which had jurisdiction over the coolie trade and the coolies, whom it always and consistently termed *colonos* or *immigrantes*. The president of the junta was the prominent planter and international businessman, Julián Zulueta, the same who introduced the first coolie cargo to Cuba in 1847. Zulueta exemplified what might be termed "vertical integration" in the sugar industry of Cuba.
- ²¹ Zhang Kai (), ("Chinese Labor in Cuba and Establishment of Sino-Cuban Diplomatic Relations") *Huaren Lishi Yanjiu (Overseas Chinese History Review)* 4 (1988), 3-11.
- ²² Antonio Chuffat Latour, *Apunte histórico del los Chinos en Cuba*. Havana: Molina y Cia, 1927, 93. *Boletín de Colonización* I:9, 30 May 1873, contains an editorial on the cuadrillas, describing them as dedicated "*colectivamente a las faenas de la finca.*"
- ²³ *Boletín de Colonización* I:18, 15 October 1873. By law, anyone residing in Cuba but not naturalized but be registered as an alien or foreign resident. As most Chinese in Cuba embarked from Macao, they registered generally with the Portuguese consul in Havana. Besides, there was no representation of the Chinese government in Havana at the time of the census (1872).
- ²⁴ *Boletín de Colonización* I:9, 30 May 1873, Editorial; Helly, 231-237.
- ²⁵ Rebecca Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 99-100, 110, 120.
- ²⁶ Helly, 237-240.
- ²⁷ Pérez de la Riva, "Situación legal," 135. He denounced the contracts as a "monumento de

- hipocresía y mala fé, obtenido por medio del engano y la coacción.” Under these conditions, he did not see coolie labor in Cuba as consistent with a process of transition to free labor, or proletarianization.
- ²⁸ Juan Pérez de la Riva, “Demografía de los Culiés Chinos en Cuba (1853-74),” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* 57:4 (Oct-Dec. 1966), 57-86; see also his third major article on the coolies: “Aspectos económicos del tráfico de Culiés Chinos a Cuba (1853-1874),” in *El Barracón*, 89-110.
- ²⁹ Jiménez Pastrana, 2-4.
- ³⁰ Manuel Moreno Fragnals, *El Ingenio*. Havana: Comisión Nacional Cubana de la UNESCO, 1964, 155.
- ³¹ Scott, 85.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 30.
- ³³ Ramón de la Sagra, *Cuba en 1860* (Paris, 1862), p.95.
- ³⁴ Helly, 199.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144-6.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.283-5.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ³⁸ Scott, 31, 109.
- ³⁹ Scott, 99, 109-110, 234.
- ⁴⁰ *ANC. Misc de Exp.*, 4193/Cs.
- ⁴¹ The Chinese Commission, 21-22, 41-50. In the *Boletín de Colonización* I:1, 30 January 1873, there is a long list (*Relación*) of *colonos asiáticos* in the Depósito Municipal de Cimarrones de la Havana. The status of the vast majority of this group in 1872 were free (*libre*), with only a handful still *contratado*. Their occupations were also quite varied, ranging from the expected *campo* (agriculture), *peon*, *jornalero* (rural day laborer), *carretero* (cane carrier), to many different types of skilled, semi-skilled, craft and artisan work (brick-layer, cigar and cigarette maker, cook, painter, baker, charcoal maker, confectioner, shoemaker; also *fogonero* (working in the steam engine), *maquinista*, (mechanic), street vendor, truck farmer (*cantero*).
- ⁴² The Chinese Commission asked the coolies many specific questions regarding their treatment, such as: “Do employers treat coolies kindly?”; “Does the law authorize Employers to punish the employed — how and why?”; “Some employers are cruel by nature and harsh to the employed; others are kindly and treat coolies well; what remarkable cases illustrate each side, and what is the general state of the relations between employers and employed?”; “Is the condition of coolies during agreement time as good as they have a right to expect?” Note the Commissioner’s use of the word “employer” rather than the customary *patron* (equivalent to boss or master) — a pointed reminder, it would seem, that the Chinese coolies were supposed to be free workers.
- ⁴³ Miguel Barnet, ed., *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave: Esteban Montejo*. New York: Vintage Press, 1973, 94-96; Helly, 196-7.
- ⁴⁴ The Chinese Commission testimonies contain many details on conflicts and tensions between Chinese and blacks, slave and free. ANC Gobierno Superior Civil also contains numerous expedientes (especially *causas criminales*) on this issue.
- ⁴⁵ Fé Iglesias notes this important point in her article “Características de la población cubana en 1862,” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí* 71:3 (Sept-Dec. 1980), 95.
- ⁴⁶ Such is the interesting case of *asiático Julián Guisen*, whose marriage to Dona Crescencia Pérez in 1861 was registered in the *libro de matrimonio de blancos*. ANC Gob. Sup. Civil 641/20.248. In instances of Chinese being baptized (a prerequisite to acquiring residency permit), however, most were registered in the *libro de bautismo de color or de pardos*. *ANC Misc. de Exp.*, 3864/G, 4144/Cd.
- ⁴⁷ *ANC. Consejo de Administracion* 8/605. Gob. Dpto. Oriental to Consejo de Administración.