Coolie Trade

Coolie is the term Europeans in India and China gave to native, hired laborers. Its derivation may be Indian or African, but it mainly was used to describe peasant workers who were Chinese. The coolie trade was part of a vast migration that carried hundreds of thousands of people from South China to Southeast Asia and the New World between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century.

Most Chinese emigrants, including nearly all who went to North America, paid their own passage or borrowed money from friends and relatives; on arrival at their destinations, they were free people. In the nineteenth century, however, one-fourth of those who went to Southeast Asia and nearly all who went to Peru, Cuba, and Hawaii went as contract laborers under the "credit-ticket" system, or coolie trade. Labor brokers, usually Chinese themselves, worked in Macao and other cities in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. There they made contact with young men, luring them with tales of riches and easy living abroad. If that ploy failed, kidnapping was the recruitment device of choice.

In theory, these men were voluntary emigrants, indentured for a period of service in return for passage. In fact, they lived in conditions little better than slavery. They often were kept in large cages while ashore. Sometimes they were taken to ports other than the ones for which they had contracted. They were passed from broker to broker; with each transaction their debt increased and the term of their service lengthened. Whether they tapped rubber trees in Malaysia, harvested sugar cane in Cuba, or worked the mines of Peru, they were driven to back-breaking work without much hope of release.

Although the center of the coolie trade was Portuguese Macao, much of the traffic was carried in British ships. After about 1850, the British government began to take steps to curb the trade. Officials inspected ships and interviewed coolies to make sure they were not being held against their will. Such steps met with only limited success. In the 1870s the Portuguese also started to back away from the trade, closing their export facilities for human cargoes. The Chinese government belatedly awakened to the nature of the trade in the 1880s. Thereafter, the Chinese and British cooperated in trying to bring an end to the practice. Few workers left China under oppressive contracts after the turn of the century, but thousands continued to go as free, not indentured, emigrants. The coolie trade had ended, but the Chinese diaspora continued.
FURTHER READINGS

- Persia Crawford Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire* (1923; reprint, 1969).


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