

Slave Trade: Coolie Trade

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The word **coolie**, which refers to unskilled cheap labor from Asia, is believed to have its origin in India, Turkey, or Africa. Its transliteration in Chinese means "bitter labor." The term has been widely adopted to describe the Chinese who moved to foreign lands as contract laborers or indentured laborers in modern times. However, some scholars have rightly limited its use to the Chinese contract laborers who were brought to Latin America from the 1840s to the 1870s. The Chinese **coolie** trade was triggered by two events that occurred during the same period: the Opium War, which forced China to open several seaports to the West; and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, which drove many western countries to seek alternative sources of labor. The **coolie** trade started in the mid-1840s in southern China. It first flourished in Xiamen (Amoy) and then spread to other cities in southern and eastern China, including Hong Kong, Macao, Shantou (Swatow), Guangzhou (Canton), and Shanghai. Foreign companies monopolized the **coolie** trade, working through Chinese agents--the so-called **coolie** crimps, who were paid for each **coolie** they recruited. Countries whose territories or ships were involved in the trade included Britain, the United States, Spain, Peru, Italy, France, and Portugal. **Cuba** and Peru were the two largest markets for Chinese coolies. It has been estimated that from 1847 to 1874, 143,000 coolies were shipped to **Cuba** and 120,000 to Peru. Other destinations included the British colonies in Latin America, Brazil, Panama, Chile, and Ecuador.

Both contemporary observers and present researchers have frequently mentioned the similarities between the Chinese **coolie** trade and the African slave trade. Many coolies were first deceived or kidnapped and then kept in barracoons (detention centers) or loading vessels in the ports of departure, as were African slaves. Their voyages, which are sometimes called the Pacific passage, were as inhumane and dangerous as the notorious Middle Passage. Mortality was very high. For example, it is estimated that from 1847 to 1859, the average mortality for coolies aboard ships to **Cuba** was 15.2 percent, and losses among those aboard ships to Peru were 40 percent in the 1850s and 30.44 percent from 1860 to 1863. At their destinations, they were sold like animals and were taken to work in plantations or mines under appalling living and working conditions. The duration of a contract was typically five to eight years, but many coolies did not live out their term of service because of the hard labor and mistreatment. Those who did live were often forced to remain in servitude beyond the contracted period. The coolies who worked on the sugar plantations in **Cuba** and in the guano beds of the Chinchas (the islands of Hell) of Peru were

treated brutally. Seventy-five percent of the Chinese coolies in **Cuba** died before fulfilling their contracts. More than two-thirds of the Chinese coolies who arrived in Peru between 1849 and 1874 died within the contract period. Among the four thousand coolies brought to the Chinchas in 1861, not a single one survived! Because of these unbearable conditions, Chinese coolies often revolted against their Chinese and foreign oppressors at ports of departure, on ships, and in foreign lands.

However, there are also significant differences between the Chinese **coolie** trade and the African slave trade. First, despite the many recorded cases of deceiving and kidnapping coolies, probably not all coolies were forced into bondage, though it is difficult to know what percentage of the total number was represented by voluntary coolies. Owing to famines, wars, and shortages of land, many southern Chinese chose to go overseas to seek a better life. Second, not all coolies remained in bondage for life. Some of them became free men after serving out their contracts; a few even managed to return to China. Third, coolies received wages, although usually they were paid much less than local workers. Fourth, although there are reports of ships carrying women and children, the great majority of the Chinese coolies were men. Finally, the Chinese government, although not able to give the coolies as much protection as they needed, showed concern for them. Both central and local governments tried continuously to regulate and curb the **coolie** trade; at one point, the central government even sent inspectors to America to investigate conditions and intervene on the coolies' behalf. The Chinese government also took an active part in the final elimination of the **coolie** trade in 1874.

The flow of coolies to Latin America was not the only emigration of laborers from China in the nineteenth century. However, Chinese emigration to other parts of the world took varying forms. The Chinese in Southeast Asia were mostly free immigrants and indentured laborers brought to that region through the so-called *zhuzai* ("human pigs") trade system. Although there were cases in which the zhuzais were forced to work under miserable conditions, the zhuzai system differed from the **coolie** trade in several ways: it was run by the Chinese themselves; the zhuzais signed their contracts after they arrived in Southeast Asia rather than before the voyage; the duration of indenture was much shorter (usually no more than three years); and because the voyages were much safer, revolts seldom occurred on the zhuzai ships.

In the United States, Canada, and Australia, the so-called credit-ticket system was adopted as the major form of immigration. This differed from the **coolie** trade even more than the zhuzai trade because immigrants to these countries were usually sponsored by Chinese companies or organizations based in China, the immigrants were admitted individually, and much more effort was made to ensure that immigration was voluntary.

It is generally agreed that the Chinese coolies in Latin America in the nineteenth century, particularly those in **Cuba** and Peru, suffered much more than other Chinese immigrant workers.

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FURTHER READINGS

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