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The Chinese Coolie Labor Trade and the Philippines: An Inquiry

ELLIOTT C. ARENSMEYER

The story of Chinese emigration to the Philippines in the years between 1850 and 1898 is generally well-known. What has not been probed in this story is the possibility that in some way the increased traffic from the Chinese ports was linked to the nefarious contract labor trade which developed out of the improved facilities for emigration accorded the Chinese during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In mid-nineteenth century the essential stability of Chinese society had been upset by a population explosion, declining agriculture, a devastating civil war, increasing corruption and incompetence among the late Ch'ing officials, and the advent of Western trading practices on the southeast littoral of China. Both Western and Chinese enterprise offered the poor of coastal China new opportunities to emigrate. A vast majority of those emigrating were able to do so with a fair degree of lasting benefit to themselves, but a considerable number were carried to places such as Cuba, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the sugar islands in the Indian Ocean under circumstances of cruelty and deception. It is the purpose of this inquiry to question whether or not the increased emigration to the Philippines in the last half of the nineteenth century bore any of the hallmarks of the contract labor trade.

EMIGRATION TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Until the late 1840s, Fukien and Kwangtung Chinese had emigrated to Southeast Asia — to Cochinchina, Java, the Malay archipelago, Cambodia, Siam, and the Philippines — through arrangements exclusively conducted by Chinese interests, although the business servicing the emigrants had begun to be sought by West-

ern entrepreneurship. The thriving Chinese community in the Philippines dated from the sixteenth century, although trade between the Islands and mainland China can be traced back to pre-Hispanic times. A general depression in the luxury trade following the end of the galleon voyages deflected a number of Chinese from the Philippines to Batavia and the Straits Settlements for a time after 1815.¹

It was the growth of an agricultural export economy consisting of sugar, abaca, coffee, and indigo which induced Spanish officials to promote immigrant Chinese labor, although they were never at ease with the Chinese presence. Starting in 1850 Chinese immigration and Chinese business enterprise accelerated throughout the remaining years of Spanish occupation. More to the point, the mechanics of the emigration from China were no longer exclusively in Chinese hands. European-owned or operated vessels and, by the 1870s, steamships, sought a share in the increased Chinese voyages to the Philippines as well as to other parts of Southeast Asia. Although the Spanish sought agricultural labor almost exclusively they were forced to watch the Chinese enter new areas of the expanding economy. Because of the large familial and clan network at work in Chinese society, the new immigrants were able to evade agricultural labor and take refuge in the cities and villages where they became artisans, peddlers, and small shop owners. Foreign businessmen, particularly the British, encouraged Chinese entrepreneurship in interisland trading and middlemen activities in an effort to increase the export trade in agricultural commodities.² These conditions, which assured the dramatic increase of Chinese immigrants, were noted as early as 1854 by Act-

1. See George Henry Weightman, "The Philippine Chinese" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1960), p. 126. In a recent article by James F. Warren, "Sino-Sulu Trade in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," (*Philippine Studies* 25 [First Quarter 1977]: 50-78), it has been suggested that there was considerable emigration from the Straits Settlements to Sulu after 1860. Of particular interest to this study are the statistics given by Warren suggesting that a third of the immigrants were unskilled laborers.

2. The Spanish themselves were involved in a scheme to develop virgin soil in Bata-nes and Babuyan islands and sought to import 600 Chinese laborers out of Amoy with the help of British merchant enterprise. (Public Records Office [PRO] Foreign Office [FO] 228/134, Consul Charles Winchester to Governor John Bowring, Amoy, 26 August 1852.) Furthermore, there was an aborted scheme to develop copper mining by using imported Chinese labor. See a discussion of the Sociedad Cantabro-Filipina in *Joint Business Ventures in the Philippines: A Group Study* (New York: Columbia University, 1958), p. 115.

ing United States Consul Peirce, and ably confirmed by Spanish data which indicates that by 1895, immigration in the last half of the nineteenth century from China had multiplied ninefold.³

METHODS OF EMIGRATION

The usual method by which a Chinese emigrant could secure his passage to the Philippines, as well as to other parts of Southeast Asia, was by the "credit ticket system." If the would-be voyager could not purchase his ticket outright by selling property or by borrowing from relatives, he could acquire the passage from a junk captain who would be repaid by monthly deductions from the emigrant's future wages.⁴ After 1842 the credit ticket system was often abused. As European entrepreneurs throughout Southeast Asia felt the increased need for laborers, both they and the network of Chinese emigrant businessmen made virtual bondsmen of the increasing number of Chinese who wished to leave their country. However, although passage to Southeast Asia and Australia was often obtained under dubious conditions, the majority of emigrating Chinese understood where they were going. They had friends or relatives waiting for them, and although the circumstances of their employment were somewhat less than satisfactory, the terms arranged were generally honored.

In contrast, the method of securing emigrant services in what came to be known as the contract labor trade involved agreements of which those who were manipulated into signing were wholly ignorant. The contract trade involved "kidnaping by fraud and force . . . the seduction by false representation and the conveyance on board emigrant ships without consent and in ignorance of the conditions of shipment."⁵ For the most part, Chinese contract labor was recruited and purchased by Western entrepreneurs aided by a network of local Chinese interests. Those Spanish and Latin American business interests which sought contract labor were responding to the dearth of "willing" hands which resulted from the

3. Peirce to Secretary of State W. Marcy, Manila, 24 April 1854, Vol. 4 T433 No. 33. See also "Los Chinos Manila," Institute of Asian Studies, U.P., Project 102, 1967.

4. For an excellent discussion of the credit ticket system, see Sing-gu Wang, "The Organization of Chinese Emigration, 1848-1888," (M.A. Thesis, Australian National University, 1969).

5. PRO FO 228/136 No. 133, Bowring to Frederick Harvey, Hong Kong, 9 December 1852.

emancipation of African slaves, a drawn out procedure which lasted from the 1830s to the late 1880s throughout tropical and subtropical America. The British who were involved in the contract labor trade, aside from those officially represented by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission which openly recruited labor for British Guiana and Trinidad, were generally in the carrying business.

The extreme fluidity in emigration from China to the Philippines led to confusions between what constituted a fee-paying passenger with what might be termed in modern day parlance a "pre-arranged employment." This often involved a coercive scheme to attract rootless emigrants whose services would be sold at the Philippine end to the highest bidder. In the 1870s the specter of coolie contract labor was raised by the British Consul in Manila, W.G. Palgrave, who wrote a confidential memo to the Foreign Office reporting that the only foreign subjects truly tolerated by the Spanish were a limited number of Chinese under "coolie contracts."⁶ It is of some interest to speculate on what aroused Palgrave's suspicions.

BRITISH CONCERN OVER COOLIE TRADE

British official concern over abuses in the Chinese labor trade had surfaced in the early 1850s but had been, until 1855, largely confined to those emigrants who were being coerced into leaving China for the notorious guano mines off the coast of Peru, as well as for the sugar and tobacco plantations of Cuba. The growth of British entrepreneurial activity in the Philippines, had alerted government officials to the increased Chinese emigration to the Islands and to the potentially disruptive nature of an uncontrolled influx, given the habitual Spanish mistrust of the Chinese presence. At the same time the British were aware of the profitability of carrying Chinese to the Philippines in British-owned or operated ships. The British Consul in Amoy, G.M. Morrison, wrote Governor Bowring in Hong Kong:

Few are able and none willing to pay for their passage at more than a minimum rate, in return for which, however, they enjoy infinitely greater comfort and security and accomplish their voyage much more speedily than

6. PRO FO 881/3388, Palgrave to Derby, Manila, 29 September 1877.

could be done in Chinese junks. In the British vessels engaged in the trade they are much better accommodated also than in most of the Spanish vessels likewise running hence to Manila in which the Chinese passengers are often excessively overcrowded.⁷

It appears that although in 1852 the British owned eighteen ships and controlled the operations of sixty-one others flying different flags engaged in the China-Philippines run, the profitability of these runs was never clearly established. The British firm of Jardine Matheson made numerous attempts to secure a regular passenger run from the China coast to Manila in the 1870s. Their rival, Butterfield Swire, made a similar attempt in the 1880s. In addition, the British Consul in Manila, John Farren, worked overtime in the 1850s trying to arrange a regular run from Hong Kong for the Peninsular and Orient Steamship Company, all to no avail. The capricious nature of Spanish port duties and the lack of a steady flow of first and second class passengers between China and the Philippines discouraged the "giants" of British enterprise in the Far East.⁸ It is clear from the listings in the *Gaceta de Manila* that from the 1860s through the 1890s a number of ships flying flags under British auspices embarked a not inconsiderable number of Chinese travelers for the Philippines. In short, large scale operations were never thought worth the trouble and expense, yet as many as 310 Chinese came as steerage passengers in one ship operated under British charter.⁹ Under the circumstances, it is interesting to note the lingering suspicions that a form of the coolie labor trade was being conducted from China to the Philippines.

CASES OF COOLIE ABUSE

Two incidents in 1854 and 1855 made British officials focus their attention on the type of Chinese emigration being conducted

7. PRO CO 129/60, Morrison to Bowring, Amoy, 12 August 1856.

8. The unpublished Jardine Matheson archives at Cambridge University and the unpublished correspondence of Butterfield Swire (now John Swire and Son Ltd.) in their London office clearly show that both companies sought for some time in the 1870s and 1880s to secure a permanent run to the Philippines. For John Farren's negotiations on behalf of the P&O line, see Elliot C. Arensmeyer, "John William Farren: First British Consul to the Philippines, 1844-1864," (M.A. Thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1971), pp. 133-35.

9. See *Gaceta de Manila*, various issues 1868-98.

to the Philippines. The first involved the discovery of the British ship *Inglewood* in the Chinese port of Amoy. Upon the investigation of British Consul Charles Winchester, the *Inglewood* was found to be harboring forty-three little Chinese girls under the age of eight who were said to be bound for the Spanish cigar factory in Manila. The *Inglewood* case sparked a British Consular Court of Inquiry investigation and was used by British officials in China and London to secure prohibitions, first in the Chinese Passenger Act of 1855, and then in the Amendment to the Act in 1858 against British mercantile interests involving themselves in the contract labor trade. It must be admitted, however, that in the exhaustive Court of Inquiry into the *Inglewood* case, it was never clearly established whether the little girls were bound for Manila, Havana, or Macao.¹⁰

The other case which alerted British officials to the dangers of the coolie trade and its possible link to the Philippines concerned the loss of between 200 and 300 Chinese on board the American ship *Waverley* in 1855. The ship was bound for Peru out of the Chinese port of Swatow, but was forced to put into Manila due to several emergencies on board. The discovery that the coolies had died of suffocation in the aftermath of the disorders aboard the ship brought the attention of British officials in Manila and China to the evils of the coolie trade and led them to focus on the Philippines as a possible destination point in contract emigration. Consul Farren was alerted by the *Waverley* incident to the dangers of any British participation in the shipping of coolies. Farren worked for over a year to secure the release of the British crewmen aboard the *Waverley* who had been imprisoned by the Spanish along with the rest of the crew, and who were threatened by Spanish law with punishment in a Spanish penal colony in Africa.

Because of the difficulties in obtaining the release of British subjects involved in the coolie trade, Consul Farren was suspicious of the British vessels which arrived in 1856 with Chinese emigrants aboard. Although the ships numbered only two, the number of Chinese on board, 354, was unusual at that time. The Consul determined to discover the status of these emigrants and report to

10. PRO FO 228/184, Minutes of the Court of Inquiry, Amoy, 23 March 1855. The various depositions of those serving on the *Inglewood* contradict each other, naming the ships' eventual destination as variously, Manila, or Havana for the cigar factories, and Macao for the possibilities of selling the children as servants.

John Bowring in Hong Kong whom he knew to be influential in securing the legislation of 1855.¹¹ Rightly or wrongly, Bowring insisted on naming the Philippines as a destination point of contract labor.

During the Farren-Bowring correspondence concerning the two ships, *Fortuna* and *Ferozepore*, it was discovered that their charterers at the China end were two British companies in Amoy: Syme Muir and Company, which was one of the two chief offenders in the contract labor trade during the early 1850s, and Tait and Company, run by James Tait who had been the charterer of the *Inglewood* though he vehemently denied any role in the coolie trade. He wrote to John Bowring during the investigation of the *Inglewood*:

We have never committed any abuses in connection with cooly emigration nor were we in the slightest degree connected with the shipment of children on the *Inglewood* – no grounds for suggesting we were! We were no more involved than your Excellency!¹²

Tait's connections with the Philippines were of long standing. Apparently he had begun shipping operations out of Manila in the early 1830s and continued there as a partner of the prominent firm of Baretto and Company until the late 1840s when, for reasons unknown, he moved his operation to Amoy.¹³ His connection with Jardine Matheson enabled him to keep business operations going when most small concerns such as his had disappeared in the cutthroat competition on the China coast in the period following the opening of the Treaty System. Tait was also the agent involved in rounding up the 600 coolies for the Spanish scheme to develop Batanes and Babuyan islands. It may, indeed, have been the suspicious frequency of Tait's connections with questionable emigration schemes which turned Bowring's attentions to the Philippines.

11. John Farren was a dedicated, if eccentric, servant of the British Crown. One of his eccentricities was a refusal to deal with his immediate superior, the Governor of Hong Kong, on all issues other than the *Waverley* and *Fortuna* and *Ferozepore* incidents. In twenty years of correspondence from Manila, Farren never wrote Hong Kong except in these matters. See Arensmeyer, "John William Farren."

12. PRO FO 228/188, Tait to Bowring, Amoy, 10 October 1855.

13. In an undated letter from Tait to Matheson's agent in Amoy, he wrote, "I would be most happy to leave Amoy and I would like to return to Manila if Baretto is willing to give me a modest share of his business." (Jardine Matheson Archives, Amoy Boxes B2 1-11 No. 50). There is a considerable volume of correspondence between Tait and various employees of Jardine Matheson. In fact, it is possible to document a fair amount of *ad hoc* participation in the coolie contract trade by Jardine's, largely through the agency of Tait and Company.

RESULT OF INVESTIGATION

The upshot of Consul Farren's investigation of the Chinese coolies who arrived on the *Fortuna* and the *Ferozepore* was a reluctant understanding that the Chinese were fee-paying passengers and not coerced, ignorant coolies. Being of a mercurial temperament, Farren immediately sought to further promote British involvement in carrying voyagers from the China coast to the Philippines, although he sweetened his correspondence with Bowring with assurances that the Chinese who came to the Islands "were rarely sent. . . as coolies and for the most part were mechanics or petty traders who came on their own account."¹⁴ It was further evident to both Farren and the China coast consuls that ships such as the *Fortuna* and *Ferozepore* had been running between China and the Philippines for some time with no complaints from the passengers whose journeys were arranged by kinship or village connections and who were often not permanent emigrants, but only travelers back and forth in pursuit of business.¹⁵ Farren wrote, "A very large number of Chinese pass between China and Manila as passengers. There are few, very few, who come here as coolies. . . between China and Manila. There is an extensive trade in passengers and none, I may say, in coolies."¹⁶

Although there is some evidence that touting in the Chinese ports for the Philippines did exist, it seems to have been on an *ad hoc* basis. The United States Commissioner to China, Peter Parker, dramatically claimed to have seen coolies in China ports with "P" for Philippines painted on their breasts and his fellow officials confided to him that shipments of Chinese laborers for Latin America were modeled on shipments to the Philippines.¹⁷ Conversely, Parker was convinced that abuses connected with the coolie labor trade to the Americas were spilling over into the transportation of Chinese to the Philippines and the Hawaiian

14. PRO CO 129/60, Farren to Bowring, Manila, 3 June 1856.

15. Consul Morrison in Amoy stressed that these passengers knew from previous experience what to expect and paid a set rate of cash for passage money, brought their own food, and had their water provided. (PRO CO 129/60, Morrison to Bowring, Amoy, 12 August 1856.)

16. PRO CO 129/60, Farren to Bowring, Manila, 20 October 1858.

17. Edward Gulick, *Peter Parker and the Opening of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 72.

archipelago, but he was vague about his evidence. There is some indication that circulars to promote emigration to the Philippines were used by various Western shipping companies in the 1860s, but such promotions fell short of the abusive tactics used by the network of interests engaged in the contract labor trade.

DEVELOPMENT OF COOLIE RECRUITMENT

The so-called coolie-broker system of labor recruitment developed in the Philippines after 1870 and may have been responsible for Consul Palgrave's concern. The demand for labor was in direct response to foreign business needs. The triangular steamship route between Amoy, Manila, and Hong Kong allowed the development of a kind of contract labor trade directed by Chinese interests, but there is no reason to believe that European steamship companies which plied the route saw their Chinese passengers in any other light than that of first, second, or steerage class customers. It is possible that some of the steerage class passengers had been recruited by foreign contractors under less than favorable circumstances, but there is no concrete evidence to confirm this.

Mestizo entrepreneurs at the Philippine end occasionally sent steamers to China for the express purpose of bringing back coolie labor. They offered the loan of passage money to those Chinese who wished to emigrate and who were not part of the familial and clan network which had established itself in the Philippines. Once the passage debt and the entry tax had been paid off, the laborers were free to come and go as they chose.¹⁸ In the 1880s the Chinese Imperial authorities began to offer protection to their overseas communities, and the stevedores and warehouse laborers who came in the last years of the Spanish occupation came under less arduous circumstances than those in the seventies.¹⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese emigrant had become

18. See Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life, 1850-1898* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 112, 176. Wickberg predicates that those Chinese who had no connections in the Islands were victims of *cabecillas* (coolie conductors) who paid up to thirty pesos a head for new arrivals and then sold their services to various entrepreneurial enterprises.

19. See John Foreman, *Philippine Islands* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1899), p. 644. Foreman claims that foreign commercial houses had to import Chinese coolie labor to load and discharge vessels because native Filipinos refused to provide labor of this sort.

essential to the well-being of the Philippine economy and there was less need than ever for bringing him under coercive circumstances.²⁰

Evidence that contract labor was being recruited out of the Philippines for Cuba remains inconclusive. British consular officials in Havana believed that Manila was an embarkation point in the coolie trade to Cuba.²¹ It was unofficially reported that between 1847 and 1862 boats left Manila for Cuba carrying 325 Chinese.²² In the Cuba Commission Report of 1876, undertaken by the Chinese government with the guidance of British and French officials in Peking, Manila is specifically mentioned as a port of embarkation for the coolie run to Cuba.²³ The Chinese commissioners had taken the deposition of one Wei Lêng who stated that he had been kidnaped along with others from the Philippines. In a letter to the Spanish Overseas Ministry from the Spanish Consul in Canton, a complaint about the difficulties of obtaining coolies for Cuba is voiced and a suggestion made for recruitment out of the Philippines.²⁴ The British Emigration Officer working for the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission in the early 1850s who was charged with obtaining contract labor for British West Indian sugar enterprises, suggested that a Spanish agent in China purchased ships in China for the purpose of dispatching them to Manila where Chinese coolies were waiting to be shipped to Cuba, but there is no evidence to substantiate this.²⁵ The difficulties of developing business between China and the Philippines in the 1840s are borne out by correspondence between the notorious coolie shipper, James Tait, and the Spanish company in Manila, Matia and Company.²⁶ If Tait could not persuade

20. In his deposition before the Schurmann Commission in 1902, a British banker declared that "for the industrial advancement of the country, Chinese labor was absolutely necessary." For whatever reasons, the great influx of Chinese emigrants in the latter decades of the nineteenth century bears the hallmark of volunteerism.

21. Area Studies, No. 3, *Coolie Emigration*, vol. 3 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971), p. 13.

22. "Emigration and the Coolie Trade in China," *Westminster Review* (July 1873): 91.

23. *Report of the Commission to Ascertain the Conditions of Chinese Coolies in Cuba, 1876* (Taipei, 1970), p. 8.

24. Ministerio de Ultramar, Caja 105 No. 75 121, 9 October 1848.

25. *Coolie Emigration*, vol. 3, p. 13.

26. In a largely undecipherable letter written in Spanish, a spokesman for Matia wrote Tait denying that there was any future in shipping an unnamed commodity between China and the Islands. We are at liberty to speculate that Tait, who had first sent a ship-

his old contacts in the Philippines to take on business from China, coolie or otherwise, it is unlikely that such business was a possibility. There may have been isolated cases of kidnaping and coercion from the Philippines to Cuba, but the fact of the matter is that there was no superfluous Chinese population in the Philippines eager to leave for fresh pastures. Those who were settled there were well integrated into the Philippine economy. It is true that in their few remaining overseas possessions, the Spanish remained distrustful and resentful of the alien Chinese, but the outbursts of violence which had characterized Sino-Hispanic relations in the early centuries of Spanish occupation no longer occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²⁷

PHILIPPINE ROLE IN COOLIE TRADE

It is probable that the increased British vigilance in the early 1850s to the dangers of a new system of slavery, which replaced African labor with Chinese, accounted for the belief that the Philippines figured in the contract labor trade. The Philippines remained on the British "books" as a destination point in the trade. The infrequent mention of the Spanish Islands as a destination point for the coolie traders, and British consular concern in the China ports, Manila, and Havana, coincided with the great numerical upsurge of Chinese immigration into the Philippines. From an examination of the available evidence it seems possible to conclude that the Philippines was never involved in the contract coolie labor trade at any serious level. There is every reason to believe that if certain British, Chinese, or Spanish operatives in the trade could have changed the circumstances of Chinese life in the Islands, the Philippines could have become a natural adjunct to the trade, especially for the Cuba run.

In all, the thriving and well-integrated Chinese community in

load of coolies from Amoy to Cuba in 1847, was trying to bring the Philippines into the carrying business. (Jardine Matheson Archives, Box 101 No. 4063, 2 June 1847.) See also a letter from Tait to Baretto and Company requesting information on business possibilities (Jardine Matheson Archives, Amoy Boxes B2 1-11 No. 50 [undated]).

27. The religious orders in the Philippines continued to object to the Chinese presence and addressed a pamphlet to the Queen Regent in Spain complaining that Spanish business interests who continued to utilize Chinese labor ignored the fact that the Chinese were virtually impossible to Christianize. See Ministerio de Ultramar, Reel 8, Manila 1 June 1886.

the Philippines, the capricious attitude of the Spanish toward foreign trade and, above all, the traditional organization of the passenger trade from China to Manila, made the coolie labor trade unnecessary. British concern for British merchant involvement in the contract trade helped turn suspicious eyes toward the Philippines in the 1850s and early 1870s, but these suspicions proved to be unfounded to any significant degree. Tentative efforts may have been made toward including the Philippines in the contract labor trade but they were never effectively put into action.