

**Exploitation of Freedom,
Relocating Chinese Coolies in the 1860s' U.S.**

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Abstract

What made the term “coolie” a synonym of resonating slavery in America was an institutional oppressing of the Chinese in labor market well ahead of the Civil War. Landing on American territory, the Chinese laborers’ suspicious contracts were in fact derived from a Republican constitution throughout the Civil War and even Radical Reconstruction. Before being caught in an egalitarian call back to Republican conception of contracts and “free labor”, the term “Chinese coolie” had stimulated competing interpretations of the necessity for freedom in different groups of people in the 1860s. By encapsulating the coolie labors’ incompatibility with self- liberalization into the 1860s’ America, this essay provides a perspective to review what laid the foundation for Chinese Exclusion Movement because this crowd of immigrant laborers was made an expediency to exercise franchise by the Republican liberal stance.

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Introduction

On Oct. 8th, 1858, Karl Marx commented to the *New York Daily Tribune* that “the particular task of bourgeois society” is the “establishment of the world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon the world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonization of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan.”¹ Marx’s prospective was based on advances in the age of capital, when industrial capitalism’s control was fueled and justified throughout global transportation and communication. What came along was the “world-wide modern racialized division of labor” assigning the Asian “coolies” a certain distance from liberal humanity together with “Indian,” “Black,” and “Negro,” whose indentured status all were parts of the genealogy of modern liberalism”².

In the United States, the exclusion of immigrants of Asian descent should be traced back to the integration of the coolie question in Republican liberal ideology in the Republican- led Congress during the 1860s. Years before the Pacific Mail Steamship Company launched its transpacific service between Hong Kong and San Francisco in 1867, Chinese laborers were made a separate group from “free laborers” and had legal paths to liberation.³ By what process could Chinese indentured labors, or Chinese “coolies” be assigned as opposition to freedom, equality, and the ideal contract laborers during the time of the Civil War (1861-1865)? Symbolic of labor

¹ Marx To Engels, October 8, 1858, See *Marx on China, 1853-1860 Articles from the New York Daily Tribune* (London: Lawrence & Wishart), 1951, Introduction, XVI

² Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015), 8

³ Moon Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 95

bondage in post- emancipation 1860s in what ways did the coolies negotiate the social stigma of being cheap laborers with their voluntary status in both emigration and labor contracting? Coolies were thought cheap laborers, but they had legal voluntary status in both emigration and labor contracting.

To answer the two questions, this essay brings up a coolie labor controversy in Chinese immigration history in the United States, which reveals a racist dilemma in Republican's liberal notion of guaranteed contracting freedom leading to "free labor."⁴ By arguing for the inevitability of a deteriorating status of Chinese indentured laborers or the Chinese coolies, the essay questions whether there is a incompatibility between a developing capitalist economy and Republicans' ideal social order during the 1860s in the United States. Although widely in use, the term Chinese coolie had ambiguous meaning in the 1860s' American public opinion. Keeping this in mind, this essay defines "Chinese coolies" as a semi- enslaved labor force that included railway laborers, plantation hands, and strike breakers. The 1870s saw a rise in anti- Chinese sentiment targeting these coolies which led to a generalization of stigma of the bonded labor to whole ethnicity. No matter what varied independence Chinese coolies had in labor contract negotiation with their employers, the imagination about the "coolie question" threaded together freedom and slavery in the 1860s America.

⁴ Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 28-35

Whether a reinforced slavery is inimical to the post emancipation nation, or a weakest link in the chain of liberation of labor relations in industrial capitalist development, Chinese coolies became relevant during Pan-American reconstruction. For Republican politicians in the United States asking, “Who should be called real free laborers?” Chinese immigrants were gradually alienated from “freed” status throughout the Civil War and the postbellum melodramas. Relocating Chinese coolies can be a reminder that the 1860s is not just a time of great divergence for the various historiographical traditions of Southern history and U.S. history, but also a transformation of the place and role of the South in the Americas;⁵ The construction of semi- slavery status of Chinese laborers, on the other hand, provided a perspective to navigate the many approaches to dealing with Chinese coolies in the American south, California, and Republican- led Congress during this transformation. Although it may seem risky to assume that the “coolie question” is the most relevant incident elucidating the new realities of the postbellum US, it’s still important. While California was the point of entry for Chinese immigration, the final destinations of many in the United States were the Southern plantations which replaced slave labor with semi-enslaved labor in form/ figure of the coolie.

While it may be more common to suppose that the Republican liberal impulse against slavery included Chinese coolies in the post emancipation era, this essay holds the view that Republican liberalism was responsible for scapegoating Chinese

⁵ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 11

laborers by deliberately nurturing them as substitutes of African laborers and white laborers. The freedom of contracting coolie labor had already become an expediency before the coolie clipper ships taking offshore and anchoring deeply in global labor redistribution of Chinese immigrants. The labor redistribution established racial order in the United States.

The ambiguity of the “voluntariness” of both labor contracting and immigrating autonomy of the Chinese immigrants, was inevitably embroidered into Republican liberalism throughout the Civil War and elaborated until the systematic exclusion of the Chinese ethnicity, in the postbellum era. This essay analyzes the process by which the Republican disdain of slavery reframed the party’s regard for free labor. In this circumstance, it is predictable that the Republican- dominated Congress would pass an immigration restriction measure on a certain ethnicity (the Chinese).⁶ For the structure of the essay, Part 1 “Contracting Coolies’ Freedom” traces the Chinese coolie question to the 1850s. Part 2 “The South-West Scenario- On plantations and Railroads” draws a picture of coolie experience in America’s south and west. Part 3 “Meeting Burlingame in Memphis”, as a conclusive part, summarizes some thoughts and potential areas to explore on the coolie question.

Part 1 Contracting Coolies’ Freedom

In June 1869, the Latin American-based Chinese gospel preacher Tye Kim Orr addressed the nation’s first Chinese labor convention in Memphis, which was attended

⁶ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 219-221

by several hundred delegates from southern states and California, representing planters, business leaders, and railroad companies. “The Chinese workers,” Orr claimed from his firsthand experience as an intermediary, “can be procured through proper agents. They are easily managed, being patient, industrious, docile, tractable, and obedient.”⁷ Receiving a public hearing, Orr’s proposal refashioned the “Asian immigrant laborers” issue, which was framed as an exclusive Peruvian and Cuban agenda throughout the Civil War. Thus, the Chinese leader “Mr. Orr”, who was born in the Straits settlements and had resided in British Guiana until 1867, became a leader in the movement to introduce the Chinese to the South.⁸

How could Tye Kim Orr’s enthusiasm in importing Chinese coolies gather momentum in the Memphis Convention of 1869? According to a record from British Guiana, “Mr. Tye Kim Orr, as one of the best qualified in any parish,” was an “universally esteemed gentleman of Chinese descent, who received a thorough education in England, and would fill the position of professor in a college with honor and ability.”⁹ By actively participating in coolie importation, Orr had no idea about broader political struggle over antebellum debates and Reconstruction. The coolie problem in America echoed the internalized racial prejudice of labor contracting in a Republican-dominated post-emancipation scenario. Although Republican policy during the war years revealed a party committed to nationalizing the principles long espoused

⁷ Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 66-72

⁸ Cecil Clementi, *The Chinese in British Guiana* (Georgetown, British Guiana, 1915), 284-96

⁹ Thibodaux, *Sentinel*, August 28, 1869; See Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 143

by the emancipation, the more consistent antislavery agenda arose in the next wave of constitutional racial rectification during the 1860s. The coolie question, however, became an awkward embodiment of labor bondage alerting that the idea that “there must be no racial discrimination in citizenship and civil rights”¹⁰ was ungrounded.

i . Where did Tye Kim Orr Stand?

On February 21, 1840, the Boston-based abolitionist periodical *The Liberator* published an article reporting that the unexpected high mortality rate of Asian coolies in the Caribbean “amounted originally to two hundred and thirty-eight.” The article continued to describe high mortality that “thirty-four had died at the date of the inspection” from a disease caused by some minute bug called chino that “insinuates itself under the skin and produces pain and irritation.”¹¹ As the American Northern Republicans competed with the British for economic interests in China, they endeavored for an America-Sino system based on the liberal free trade and wage labor ideology that predominated the treaty system after the Second Opium War. The treaty system exemplified that where Great Britain encountered an obstacle, the United States found its opportunities by applying liberalism as needed. Although Chinese coolie transportation was actively connived among the Northern merchants and Republicans who dealt with clipper ships during the mid-nineteenth century, the coolie question was not taken as a domestic one since they were mainly transported to Cuba in the Caribbean

¹⁰ Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done America's First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 269

¹¹ Garrison, William Lloyd, and James Brown Yerrinton. "The liberator." Newspaper. Boston, Mass.: William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp, February 21, 1840. Digital Commonwealth, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/8k71q7702> (accessed October 14, 2019).

and later to Peru, where American abolitionists condemned Britain's use of coolies as a variant of slavery.

However, by the mid-nineteenth century, American ships had become the main carriers of Chinese coolies under "charter-party contracts upon foreign accounts" and soon out-paced the other countries by huge tonnage and high speed. Coolie trade to Peru during 1856 was boasted by American merchants in the *Report of the Secretary of State* as a helping hand to Peru, which was "suffering inconvenience owing to the liberation of the slaves, which has increased the prices of labor and food, and rendered them both scarce and costly." American merchants sanguinely explained that their participation in the coolie trade in Peru was "beneficial to the coolies themselves," and Chinese coolies there were "well fed and clad, and appear contented and happy..." However, they could not deny these coolies' tasks were by no means easy under eight-year contracts for their service made in China.¹² It is estimated that between 1847 and 1873, 124,873 to 150,000 Chinese coolies arrived in Cuba.¹³ Between 1847 and 1873, about 100,000 Chinese laborers boarded ships bound for Peru.¹⁴ Take the example of the year of 1855 in the port of Swatow, China: five American ships carried 3,000 coolies out of there, which roughly amounted to one-half of that port's human "export" for that year. The revenues of selling 270 Chinese coolies to Cuba was in total \$33,750-

¹² *Report of the Secretary of State, Transmitting A Statement from the Superintendent of Statistics of the Commercial relations of the United States with Foreign Nations, for the Year Ending September 30, 1856.* (Washington: Cornelius Wendell, Printer, 1857), 225

¹³ Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), note 20 at 16, also See Arnold J. Meagher, *The Coolie trade The Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America 1847-1874* (Xlibris Corporation, 2008), note 20, at 88

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Yun note 20 at 7, Meagher, note 20 at 222.

\$135,000, deducting expenses and allowing for 10% mortality at sea. The net profit would reach \$6,150- \$81,900.¹⁵ In Peru, the profits were also spectacular.

During 1847 to 1874, about one voyage of the Chinese “coolie trade” to South America and the West Indies in every eleven experienced a mutiny.¹⁶ The tragedy on the *Waverly* happened in October 1855, which upset the American public and led to the federal government’s first formal criticism of the coolie trade from Peter Parker. Filled with 450 Chinese coolies, the ship *Waverly* was pulled into Manila Harbor for quarantine, deviating from its scheduled route from Swatow to Callao. The surviving captain testified that onboard Chinese coolies attacked the crew and then “killed one another” until only 150 coolies remained alive. Though it’s not clear what really happened, the moral concern about the disaster cast doubts on Republican’s liberal trade stance, which made the commercial access to coolie trade slide to its antithesis of slavery, which the country could not accept especially during the antebellum era.

On January 10, 1856, commissioner Peter Parker issued a public notification condemning the coolie trade as “replete with illegalities, immoralities, and revolting and inhuman atrocities, strongly resembling those of the African slave trade in former years” and instructed U.S. citizens “to desist from this irregular and immoral traffic.”¹⁷

Although Parker’s condemnation of the coolie trade did not make American ships

¹⁵ N. B. Dennys ed., *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan: A Complete Guide to the Open Ports of those Countries, together with Peking, Yedo, Hongkong and Macao* (Hong Kong: A Shortrede & Co. 1867), 228

¹⁶ Arnold J. Meagher, *The Coolie trade The Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America 1847-1874* (Xlibris Corporation, 2008), 179

¹⁷ Peter Parker to Messrs. Sampson and Tappan, in 1856 form notes of Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 23

withdraw from making profits, it inspired the idea of Sino-America cooperation to regulate the coolie trade. As the legitimacy and morality of the coolie trade was doubted, Sampson persuaded Parker that legalized and supervised emigration should be carried out at the forthcoming treaty revision talks with the Chinese authorities.

When the well-known New York-built clipper ship *Sea Witch*—owned by Howland & Aspinwall Co. and making a speed record from Hong Kong to New York in 78 days—wrecked on a reef 12 miles off Havana with 500 Chinese coolies on board, public anger finally pushed the Republican Congress to take action on the infamous coolie issue. On April 7, 1856, Mr. Humphrey Marshall inquired into the expediency of declaring the engagement of American ships in the Chinese coolie trade to be illegal, and Mr. Benjamin Pringle, a Representative from New York requested that the President of the United States communicate to citizens of the United States that were engaged in this “slave trade.”¹⁸

ii. Outlawing the Coolies

By the spring of 1860, Chinese contract laborers were described as a reenacted horror of African slavery by Thomas D. Eliot, a famous Republican from Massachusetts, in the *New York Times*: “Kidnapped by the agents of American mercantile houses, huddled into the unventilated holds of American clipper-ships.” Eliot warned that America’s abuses of the coolie trade in Asia would “seriously compromise our position in that quarter of the world,” and that nothing can “compensate us for this national

¹⁸ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, 1855-1856.*

risk.”¹⁹ Outlawing the coolie trade on American vessels emerged as a convenient solution. Under the lobby of Republican politicians from the Northeast represented by Eliot, the coolie trade was connected to the slave trade, and the idea of banning of the coolie trade on American ships was prevailing in the Republican-dominated Congress when the Civil War began. On July 13, 1861, Eliot requested that the President communicate to the House of Representatives about the Asiatic coolie trade: “Let us here, by legislation, declare it illegal,” he argued, “yet no statute pirate who has brought slaves from the coast of Africa more truly, in my judgement, deserves execration than those men who...have engaged in the work of bringing coolies from their native homes to the island of Cuba.”²⁰

Eliot’s lobby for banning the coolie trade on American vessel, accepted it extensively as another form of slavery in the U.S. Congress.²¹ His intransigent negotiation resonated more as the Civil War proceeded. Eliot differentiated the morally degraded and uniquely inhuman coolies from free immigrants, insisting that only the latter deserved welcome to the United States. On February 19, 1862, the Republican-dominated Congress passed “An Act to Prohibit the ‘Coolie Trade’ by American Citizens in American Vessels,” which outlawed the Chinese coolie trade on vessels flying American flags:

“No citizen of the United States coming into or residing within the same... build,

¹⁹ Ibid, “The American Coolie-Trade,” April 21, 1860, sec. 4.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 33

*equip, load any ship or vessel...for the purpose of procuring from inhabitants or subjects of China, known as 'coolies', to be transported to any foreign country... for any term of years or for any time whatever, as servants or apprentices, or to be held to service or labor.”*²²

The Chinese coolies were not only the counterpoint to the whites; they sometimes also acted as the counterpart of African labors, a relationship that proved to be the antithesis of Republican’s so-called dedication to universal equality in the decades following the Civil War. However, the interjection of the Chinese question in the debates caused Republicans to slip into uneasy contradictions while the treatment of coolies demonstrated the limits of Republican majority’s commitment to racial equality.²³

iii. Resuscitated Slavery within Freedom

During the era of emancipation, working for wages for the US government became an important step toward becoming free. The *Liberator* confidently described some escapees from slavery who helped build the ring of forts that eventually surrounded Washington: “To engage a person as a laborer, giving him the usual wages of labor, is to acknowledge and declare his rights as a man.”²⁴ The situation of Chinese laborers was more complicated, though. Under those auspicious definitions perfectly connecting

²² “An Act to Prohibit the ‘Coolie Trade’ by American Citizens in American Vessels” on February 19, 1862. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/37th-congress/session-2/c37s2ch27.pdf>

²³ Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 100

²⁴ *Report of William J. Mullen, 13-14*; “A Visit to Washington Jail,” *The Liberator*, Dec. 13, 1861. Newspaper. Boston, Mass. ed by Garrison, William Lloyd and Knapp, Isaac.

freedom and wage labor, all persons from Chinese descent could not be freedom-seekers in overlaid transformation of labor contracting and voluntary immigration in the 1860s' United States. A free man was defined as a man with power over his own labor, and only free men could be the foundation of a free nation. At the same time, free will was represented as no longer an instrument of subjection and dependence but an act of personal freedom and consent.

It is important to note that what Thomas D. Eliot precluded in the Coolie Act of 1862 was the very existence of coolieism in the United States, since section 4 of the Act stated that the act should not be constructed to apply to or affect any free or voluntary emigration of Chinese subjects.²⁵ In other words, American officials in China (the majority were Northern Republicans) accordingly separated the infamous coolie trade designated to Cuba and Peru from the voluntary emigration of Chinese laborers to California by enabling American officials to check and verify the blurry “voluntary nature” of all Chinese emigrants to the United States, or the certificates issued from the U.S. consular agent at ports.

On the surface, Chinese indentured emigration was severely curtailed by America's effective ban on her involvement in the coolie trade, while the incompetence of the Chinese government and the greed of labor recruiters (with complicated the international context due to taking place across multiple frontiers) contributed to thousands of Chinese laborers with a fluid “voluntary nature,” departing from China,

²⁵ H.R. 109, in *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d sess. (Jan. 15, 1862): 350-52.

Macao, and Hong Kong to a variety of destinations that included Hawaii, Peru, and British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies. This movement made the restrictive set of the Coolie Act merely a condemnation of the “coolie trade” under an excited emancipation atmosphere.²⁶

The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* announced in an editorial that otherwise reversed the promising prospect of freedom in searching for a remedy to labor shortages in the 1860s. The “coolie system,” as this Southern press pronounced, was itself a trenchant criticism towards inapplicability of the Coolie Act of 1862: “There is nothing in this act which would forbid the immigration of this people [Coolies] to this country, and the making of contracts for labor with them, when each laborer yields his full and voluntary assent to such agreement.”²⁷ Recasting the infamous Chinese coolie trade in domestic terms resuscitated a nation-wide worry about slavery because the Coolie Act of 1862 subjected all Chinese people to the suspicion of being fugitive slaves.

The construction of a voluntary Chinese immigration and the outlawing of the coolie trade were two sides of the same coin that mirrored the complexity America faced in differentiating the indentured Asian laborers from the emancipated African laborers in a global context. Paradoxically when taken as voluntary immigrants having free will in contracting their labor (imagined as Northern Republican agency in China), Chinese coolies in fact never had control over their own labor under the very liberal

²⁶ Adam Mckeown, *Melancholy Order, Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 77

²⁷ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 79

stance. Although coolie labor was theoretically buried out of American soil in the heated atmosphere of the Civil War and emancipation, all Chinese immigrants under labor contracts in the United States were condemned to be suspicious “coolies” by their lack of control and low qualifications to “independent manhood”²⁸.

Part 2. The South-West Scenario- On plantations and Railroads

During the 1860s when Chinese laborers flooded into America, the meaning of a valid labor agreement was under transformation. It did not imply transferring property in form of labor across hierarchical relationships from employee to employer. Rather, it implied an agreement between equals, each with the freedom to live up to their own promises.²⁹ Once the crusading vanguard for freedom and racial justice, federal regulations on immigration rushed into labor contracting which soon filled the void of the nationwide abolitionist conscience. On July 4th 1864, the U.S. Congress approved “An Act to Encourage Immigration,” which condemned any contract that created in “any way the relation of slavery or servitude.”³⁰ Ironically, in accordance with the ban on coerced contract labor in the Coolie Act of 1862, the 1864 Immigration Act established that unlike Chinese laborers whose contracts inherently put them in a position of servitude. European immigrants could legally come to the United States on similar contracts made by (European) emigrants on foreign soil. This act legalized that emigrants pledged up to one year’s worth of labor in exchange for transportation

²⁸ Republican senator John Sherman of Ohio’s defense of the would-be Alien Contract Labor Law/ Foran Act of 1885

²⁹ Adam Mckeown, *Melancholy Order; Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 68, 77

³⁰ An Act to Encourage Immigration (July 4, 1864), U.S. Statutes at Large 13 (1866): 386

to America, like most of Chinese laborers did.

During the Civil War and postbellum era, the coherence the meaning of labor contracting dissolved into component elements, and “strands of the free labor ideology were adopted by contending social classes, each for its own purposes.”³¹ One of the “contending classes”, broadly speaking, were the southern plantation owners who attended the Memphis Chinese Labor Convention of 1869. The Chinese coolie importation interested journalist Whitelaw Reid of exploiting the peculiar racial traits in the “cheerful industry”- ideal for plantation labor across the South: “We can drive the niggers out and import coolies that will work better, at less expense, and relieve us from this cursed nigger impudence.”³² In California, workers’ campaigns and unions lashed out at the nature of contracts under which the imported Chinese laborers were working. Since Californian white laborers had constructed themselves the imagine of “free workers”, the servility of coolie was framed as target for attack. East of the Rockies, Republican politicians clothed protest against Chinese coolies in the rhetoric of the right of contract itself, arguing that the right of contract, one of the vaunted privileges of free laborer, could be a badge of slavery rather than a hallmark of liberty.³³ Therefore the “Coolie question” closely reflected the hypocrisy in which Republican liberal orthodoxy was not in line with the inclusion of capital, labor

³¹ Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 126

³² Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865-1866*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (1866; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 417, See Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 79, note 13

³³ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 96

contracting, and racial equality.

i. Elaborating the Coolie Question in the postbellum American South

In 1865, in the face of “the sudden development of material wealth”, an editorial of the *New York Times* declared that as a population “befouled with all the social vices”, the Chinamen had “no knowledge or appreciation of free institutions or constitutional liberty”. What’s more, the editorial expressed deep concern about the realization of democracy in America,

*“Now we are utterly opposed to the permission of any extensive emigration of Chinamen or other Asiatics to any part of the United States... We have four million of degraded Negroes in the South... and if there were to be a flood-tide of Chinese population...we should be prepared to bid farewell to republicanism and democracy.”*³⁴

The Southern media, on the contrary, had more pragmatic consideration about why coolie trade would last through the Civil War. In 1858, an interpreter of southern social, economic, intellectual, and political institutions and aspirations- J. D. B. De Bow, famous as the editor of *De Bow’s Review*- speculated that if a successful abolitionist-inspired insurrection of the African American laborers were about to result in their freedom, the coolie trade would receive strong impetus. “Abolition has greatly benefited the planters of Cuba and the South, by enhancing the price of their products,” De Bow asserted that the European and the New England laborer had to pay three-fold

³⁴ “The Growth of the United States Through Emigration- The Chinese,” *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1865

for the necessities of life produced by slave labor, that's why "... coolie traders are vainly endeavoring to extricate."³⁵

De Bow in this article dismissed the possibility that ships from England and the northern states would promote the recruitment of thousands of Chinese laborers for the Southern plantations. He argued that no central government has the power to command it (coolie trade), and the cheapness of the species of labor ironically intimidated voters in any given Southern State. The concerned old planters thought that whenever coolies came in, the slaves would be killed by starvation, hence, they preferred to keep the value of slavery for safety.³⁶ De Bow's conclusion should be supplemented by two other opinions revealing contradictions in abolitionism. Prior to the Civil War, some American abolitionists had identified coolies as a "conduit to freedom, a free wage labor to help transit slavery to free laborers in the Americas. In contrast, southern proslavery ideologues depicted coolieism as a degrading method of enslaving free workers, one that demonstrated the hypocrisy of wage labor and abolitionism.³⁷ The contrast of these two opinions shows the discord among the Abolitionists.

Soon enough in the post-Civil War South, as effective labor-saving machinery, the Chinese laborers became a route to self-sufficiency, as well as a weapon against black

³⁵ "The Coolie Trade: From the Singapore Straits Times of March 21, From the Friend of China of March 15." 1857. *De Bow's Review and Industrial Resources, Statistics, etc. Devoted to Commerce, Agriculture, Manufactures (1853-1864)*, Jul 01, 30.

<https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/docview/89637486?accountid=14434>

³⁶ J. D. B. De Bow, "The Coolie Trade; or the Encomienda System of the Nineteenth Century," *De Bow's Review*, XXVII (September, 1859), 296-321, 319-20.

³⁷ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 4, 5, 9, 13-33, 38, 77

independence by “teaching the negro his own place” by forcing them to compete in the labor market with the Chinese. ³⁸ “Give us five million of Chinese laborers in the valley of the Mississippi,” enthusiastically wrote a planter’s wife, “and we can furnish the world with cotton.” What’s more, the coolies’ arrival, by swarming the labor market, was expected to enforce the emancipated blacks to accept reduced wages, from “‘forty acres and a mule’ to ‘work nigger or starve.’” The “natural” docility and disciplinary of Chinese laborers were made up to degrade Black laborers, for example, “...it is acknowledged that the negro is a better field-hand than the Chinaman, though the Chinaman is a better factory-hand than the negro.”³⁹ The subjugation of Chinese laborers not only paralleled that of African American laborers, but also was assigned a role as supplementary to machinery and capitalism, which later would ignite the fear that white laborers had of their own jobs being taken. Long before the post-Civil War campaign to exclude Chinese immigration, the conceptualization of “coolie” as a mutable class and racialized construction was an active process already underway.

ii. United the South to California under Coolie Question

At almost the same time when tenacity of post- Civil War racial prejudices was adapted into the South, in February 1865, following a wage strike among Irish laborers, Charles W. Crocker, the Central Pacific Railroad (CPR) partner who was in charge of construction, introduced 50 Chinese into the work force. Within six weeks,

³⁸ William Hones to John and Joseph Le Conte, January 14, 1868, *Le Conte Family Papers*, in Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge, Mass, 1964), 188; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 419-420

³⁹ *Ibid*, 212- 213

between 2,000 and 3,000 more Chinese were hired. By 1868, when the Central Pacific line was almost completed, Chinese workers had made up 90 percent of the massive army and 10 percent were Irish and American foremen, many white laborers got promoted to supervisory positions.⁴⁰ A decade later, Crocker concluded the labor relations on the CPR that the Chinese were “a mighty good substitute for white labor, when you could not get such labor.”⁴¹

Soon the Chinaman heard from California’s first Republican governor, also the founder and president of the Central Pacific Railroad- Leland Stanford, that there needed to be a decisive action against their “inferior [Chinese] race.”⁴² In a report to President Andrew Johnson in October 1865, Stanford declared that the Chinese were “quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious, and economical” and “ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work required in railroad building.”⁴³ Since theoretically Chinese coolies’ labor contracts were supervised by certain government emigration agents, in accordance with the Coolie Act of 1862 and the 1864 Immigration Act, Chinese laborers’ economic advantages could be realized under minimized exploitation through a tolerable contract system. However, the Chinese laborers’ ability to receive economic advantages was probably impossible.

In 1867, De Bow expressed great surprise over “the dismal howl of the

⁴⁰ See Charles W. Crocker’s testimony in U.S. Senate, *Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration*, 666-68; and that of his superintendent, James H. Strobridge, *ibid*, 723-28.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 677

⁴² Gordon H. Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain, The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad*, (Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 63

⁴³ Najia Arim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 81

Republican press at the arrival in New Orleans of twenty-three coolies. It was so “humanitarian” to remove them from Cuba, the editor confessed in sarcasm, that it made him feel “very much like an abolitionist. . . . The Northern cousins of ours are determined that the common and poor men of tawny hue shall not be permitted to come here. . . .”⁴⁴ Again beyond De Bow’s expectation, there was a plan under way introducing more Chinese laborers into America. In the same year, Anson Burlingame, the first American minister to the Manchu court in Peking, had been appointed to be the Chinese government envoy to all the powers with which China had negotiated treaties, to promote “commerce and peace in the interest of the whole human race.” Representing the residue of the Republican’s radical Reconstruction, Burlingame’s mission in fact made clear that the solicitude bestowed on the Chinese was inspired by their potential role as a non-residential/ non-citizen labor force in the Reconstruction plan.

Given a grand banquet by the leading citizens of the State of California, representatives of American as well as Chinese businessmen, the Burlingame mission was given an egalitarian welcome and Godspeed. The signing of the Treaty of Trade, Consuls, and Emigration, commonly known as the Burlingame Treaty from late July 1868 justified America’s privileges that were established in previous Chinese-American treaties. Article 5 of the Burlingame treaty provided reciprocal rights of trade and residence to Chinese and American subjects in each other’s country, this

⁴⁴ *De Bow’s Review*, IV (1867), 151-152, 160

“emigration” provision for the first time turned America’s consideration of the interchange of commodities from a matter of foreign affairs into an internal challenge of both race and population. Not allowing naturalization, the clause permitted the importation of labor through unrestricted immigration, the treaty implicitly acknowledged that involuntary Chinese subjects may flood into the United States.⁴⁵

Given the foreseeable presence of voluntary Chinese immigrants in the southern plantations and Pacific states as well, the coolie question further distanced America from the liberal ideology of freedom. As a troublesome group of immigrants, laborers, and racial others, Chinese immigrants became the suitable measuring unit for American demands for the redefinition of the qualifications of migration, working, and voting. Because capital would hardly relinquish Chinese workers as such an economical labor force, no matter whether these Chinese came in barracoons or as first-class travelers, their bondage became part of America’s remodeling of its self-image. America would definitely make the “best” out of Chinese laborers.

iii. Chinese immigrants in the south

In 1867 the first batch of Chinese laborers were introduced to the South to supplement the work of emancipated slaves by a small group of planters who were neighbors in the parish of Natchitoches, the oldest white settlement in Louisiana.⁴⁶ By the end of March, 1867, neighboring plantation owners around Natchitoches including

⁴⁵ “The American Diplomatic Service,” *Nation*, Feb. 27, 1868, 166, See Armstrong, William M., *E. L. Godkin and American foreign policy, 1865-1900* (New York, Bookman Associates, 1957), 40, note 11; 119-120

⁴⁶ Milton Dunn, “History of Natchitoches,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, III (January, 1920), 26-56; See Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 52-3

Jules H. Normand and Benjamin W. Bullitt, brought about 90 or so Chinese laborers whose term of contract had expired in Havana. Bullitt indicated that when these Chinese workers eight-year terms of service in Cuba expired, they were willing to contract to come to the South “for two or more years for monthly wages of \$12.00” plus daily subsistence rations of 2.5 lbs. of pork and 4 lbs. of rice.”⁴⁷ In June, 1867, Bullitt and Normand advertised that there was a fast steamer bringing Chinese from Cuban ports to Louisiana in about 200 coolies per trip and their office was open to taking orders for the new laborers in New Orleans. One month later, Thomas Savage, the vice consul of the United States in Havana, brought to the Secretary of States’ attention the fact that “certain parties in the State of Louisiana had been and were still engaged in the business of importing into that State from Cuba, Chinese or Coolies under contract to serve on stipulated wages for a specified time.”⁴⁸

Vice consul Savage’s concern was supported by the last clause of Section 2 of “An Act to Encourage Immigration” of 1864 stipulating that although contracts by emigrants pledging their wages to repay expenses of relocation were valid in the courts: “Nothing herein contained shall be deemed to authorize any contract contravening the Constitution of the United States, or creating in any way the relation of slavery or servitude.”⁴⁹ The suspicious introduction of Chinese laborers apparently added to the fear of “slavery or servitude” in the States, according to Savage. From a bird’s eye view,

⁴⁷ Plaquemine *Weekly Iberville South*, April 13, 1867; See Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 55-9

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, “An Act to Encourage Immigration,” July 4, 1864, 386

the coolie question was enveloping the country as hundreds and thousands of ominous Chinese immigrants worked on the Pacific railway, mined for minerals, and labored in the agricultural fields of California, and now sweated in cane and cotton plantations of the South. How could these coolies, who should have contracted their labor voluntarily, appear as free agents at the cheapest price available in the labor market in 1860s Americas, where the coolie trade supposedly did not exist?

According to the 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 census data of 425 Chinese living in Bolivar County, Mississippi, three were born in the 1830s, 14 in the 1840s, 16 in the 1850s, and 45 were born during the 1860s, making up 18.35% of the sample. There were 86 women, 44 of them recorded as “wife” to the head of the household, 41 of them were “daughters,” one was a “daughter in law,” whereas there were 69 “sons” in the house, so there was a significant imbalance between the number of male and female family members. There were only six lodgers among 425 people, and most of the men were “married” but not living with their wives or relatives; they themselves were the head of houses. The most common occupation of these Chinese immigrants was “grocer salesmen” or “retail merchants.” As historian Moon-Ho Jung demonstrated, the coolie question was “a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined.”⁵⁰

Part 3 Conclusion: Meeting Burlingame in Memphis

Among the divided opinions toward the Burlingame Treaty, unheeded were the

⁵⁰ “Introduction”, Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolie and Cane Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006)

arguments that “coolieism” implied slavery and should not be applied to the voluntary Chinese immigrants who alone were permitted to enter the United States.⁵¹ Uneasily contemplating the public dismay which had greeted the treaty, E. L. Godkin, the editor of the *Nation* conceded that it may have been unwise for the country to rush so precipitously into the Burlingame Treaty. As usual, he had no remedy to offer. “It is too late,” he observed with characteristic irony in the *Nation*, “to have the Mongolian blood analyzed, and the low condition of Chinese morals exposed.” For Godkin, the country had already gone too far in entrusting such things to Providence “to go back now and attempt to construct protective machinery.”⁵² In July 1870, when 75 Chinese contract laborers arrived in North Adams, Massachusetts, Godkin, in his editorial for the *Nation*, pointed out that the New England organized laborers opposed the importation of these Chinese strike breakers because they would undercut the wages of white laborers. The white laborers skillfully manipulated the Chinese laborers into being a symbol of why white workers should have an eight-hour day: “If the contract were prohibited, no Chinamen will come, so the labor reformers were given credit of being spread-eagle democrats keeping the labor-market to themselves”⁵³

i. Mapping Coolies in 1860s’ America

From 1862 to 1870, from the Pacific states to the Southern Atlantic seaboard,

⁵¹ The editorial protest in the *New York Times*, July 31, 1869; “Our Labor System and the Chinese,” *Scriber’s Monthly*, II (1871), 61-70

⁵² “The American Diplomatic Service,” *Nation*, Feb. 27, 1868, 166, See Armstrong, William M., *E. L. Godkin and American foreign policy, 1865-1900* (New York, Bookman Associates, 1957), 123, note 83

⁵³ *Armstrong, William M., E. L. Godkin and American Foreign Policy, 1865-1900* (New York, Bookman Associates, 1957), 124, note 87

Washington D.C, and Memphis, the preeminence of the “Chinese question” reignited the nation’s apprehension of slavery. It had been vigorously debated and led to contradictory sociocultural definitions of liberal progress, and led to more questions about how the United States viewed slave versus free labor, white versus non-white residents, hardworking versus lazy and rebellious citizens, civilized versus morally degraded inhabitants.⁵⁴ Chinese “coolies” had been pawns of any competing political powers and easy targets for labor contracting operations, which continuously conjured the degradation of human bondage. The “Free Labor” and “Antislavery” movements were knitted together and reinforced by the “coolie question” throughout the Civil War because of the conflict between wage-system of labor and the ideal republican freedom of laborers.⁵⁵ During the Civil War and after, the ultra-radicalism of Republicans connected the South and California by way of a Republican led Congress that reinforced the hypocrisy of a supposedly free nation where involuntary Chinese laborers still worked. As Congress connived at this new form of bondage, the connotation of the Chinese “voluntarily” contracting their laborers in practice betrayed the whole construction of the “coolie question” as an economic and political expediency in the 1860s.

The decades of most intensive anti-Chinese agitation were burdened with problems of railroad, land, and other monopolies, and anything smacking of

⁵⁴ Ibid, Introduction

⁵⁵ *Declaration of the International Labor Union, 1873* in THE LABOR MOVEMENT: THE PROBLEM OF TODAY 161 (G. McNeill ed. 1886) (hereinafter cited as International Labor Union] 25

monopoly was certain to incite instant antagonism from united white laborers. The Chinese were charged with contributing to monopoly in connection with the great landholders and the railroads, especially the latter and or that had received large grants from the government. While the great landowners had acquired the Spanish and Mexican holding, and were included in the general anti-monopoly agitation, they were regarded as worse than the plantation owners of slave days.⁵⁶ Far from mere substitutes for Negroes, the Chinese laborers from the 1850s to 1860s constructed as target as an “necessary evil” sabotaged every possible imagination of voluntary immigration, free labor, and even naturalizable race, of course, at no cost of violating essential business of the rapidly developing economy.

A dominant Republican party and a more forceful federal government during the late 1860s and early 1870s continued to try to move the “coolie question” away from slavery and racial inequality during Reconstruction.⁵⁷ By incorporating coolies into the ideal republican government with conditions of independent citizens and economically equaled society historically under a comprehensive definition of “free labor” ideology, Republicans admitted that it’s difficult for Republicans to incorporate coolie laborers into free labor ideology because it was hard to attain if the unconcealable servility of substitutes of slavery in imported Chinese coolies had put an enormous strain on the Republicans’ adherence to the professed egalitarian creed- abolitionism and racial

⁵⁶ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1939), 32-33

⁵⁷ Jung, 36 22

equality during the age of emancipation.⁵⁸ The interjection of the “Chinese question” in the debates caused Republicans to slip into uneasy contradictions while the treatment of the Chinese issue demonstrated the limits of Republican majority’s commitment to racial equality.”⁵⁹

Scholar Lisa Lowe critically pointed out that the “world-wide modern racialized division of labor” permitted the Asian “coolies” a certain distance from liberal humanity together with “Indian,” “Black,” and “Negro,” whose indentured status were all integral parts of the genealogy of modern liberalism”⁶⁰. As Historian Moon-Ho Jung concluded that there was not a dichotomy of “slavery” and “freedom” because there’s not a sharp ideological opposition called “slavery” against “freedom,” rather, the definition of freedom and slavery depended on variants of “freedom” coexisting in the world full of indentured laborers, for example, the Chinese “coolies”.

ii. What could have been done

To answer the question: Were the abuse of contract system thwarted or not, had I more chance for a research trip to archives at New England historical society/ business receipts; Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University there should be a comparison between Chinese laborers’ contracts on plantations and railroads which may shed some light on the divided opinions on “coolies” of Republicans,

⁵⁸ Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 12

⁵⁹ Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 10, AND Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 100

⁶⁰ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015), 8

Southerners and Californian Democrats, and even geographical political dynamics among Eastern states, the South, California, and Latin America. By discussing the repeal of the 1864 Act to Encourage Immigration in 1868. My ability of reading Chinese could help with studying the working contracts made in foreign countries too. What's more, there is a need to analyze to what extent foreign contract labor remained authorized and enforceable by local laws at the practical level, I also need to learn from professionals in specific areas. For example, the Burlingame Treaty legitimized the semi-slavery of Chinese "coolies" by labeling them as "voluntary" immigrants. I want to know how it led to anti- Chinese sentiment in postbellum period.

Chinese immigrants, while trying to prove themselves totally free, such as the statement republished by the Six Companies in newspaper underlining that their "credit ticket system" was different from slavery according to Cleveland's report, had not changed that Chinese immigrants were systematically excluded from any promise of their own voluntariness. Unlike Negroes, the deprivation of Chinese coolies' voice in postbellum era had controversially defined the meaning of "voluntariness" for the crowds either at Chinese ports, on coolie ships flying multinational flags, the vehicles of Republican ideologies, even Californians' especially Democratic white laborers. From persistently rising taxes were levied exclusively on Chinese in gold mines and Chinatown, to the national wide exclusion of Chinese, in the labor pool, Chinese contract laborers was systematically targeted by all other groups together no matter how much they contributed to the future of capitalist development in postbellum

America.

Besides locating the Chinese coolie question into unilateral racial methodology, I want to bridge it to a labor contracting question, too. Some scholars like Amy Dru Stanley's points on the *Slaughter-House Cases*, which concluded the transformation from "Bondage" to "Contract", showing the central aspect of these battles was actually lying in the struggles waged in the courts and political culture over the meaning of the republican legacy on contracts and freedom. In the aftermath of slave emancipation, ideas of freedom were disseminated through the language of contract. That language reflected traditions of common law, Anglo-American political economy and political theory, and Puritan theology. It was the debate over slavery and emancipation - the endeavor of defining the rights contrary to bondage - that rooted contract principles in everyday thought and speech while at the same time exposing the ambiguities and contradictions of contract freedom.⁶¹ For example, the courts found freedom of contract, shared by workers and industrialists, as a constitutional bar to legislation they deemed paternalistic. Organized labor, however, repudiated "liberty of contract" as simply "wage slavery" and forged an alternative republican constitutionalism and an alternative vision of industrial cooperation. The courts' liberal orthodoxy and the pro-labor movement's interpretation had a common origin. They represented the increasingly divergent strands of the republican discourse that had dominated American political thought since the Revolution.⁶²

⁶¹ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2

⁶² William E. Forbath, "The ambiguities of free labor: labor and the law in the gilded age", *Wisconsin*

Racial formation as an epistemological object, was calling for the *comparative* history of racialization. Coolieism originated with Asiatic's emergence in colonial Cuba and became an Atlantic word.⁶³ The bondage of coolieism existed in a never clearly obtained labor consent from freed Chinese coolies, as well as Indian laborers, when slave emancipation became the major impulse for the large population of Asian contract laborers- the "coolies"- who were transported to the New World as substitutes of African slaves. The difference between Chinese and Indian coolies and their daily working and living with slaves has been studied by some historians in details on their labor contracts signed with the employers. What I want to do is, in a word, elaborating the coolie question into American history to dispel a myth once hung over my thesis writing:

The myth is- Throughout the Reconstruction, the indentured servitude of subjects of China, known as "coolies" were harnessed together with the lashing out organized laborers' campaign and unions as an arising "Democratic issue", rather than a Republican issue. In the thesis, I tried to answer- How the Republican antislavery declarations were capitalized against Chinese immigration? To integrate the abolitionist and racial equality legacy into the increasingly contradictory strands of continuous "Chinese Coolie question" throughout the Civil War, it's the vexing characteristics of Chinese coolies, basically as suspicious revival of the slave system, safeguarded the Free-Labor Republicanism from the national abolition of slavery to its logic result of

Law Review, University of Wisconsin Law School, 1985-07-01, Vol.1985 (4), 767-769

⁶³ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, Introduction.

the Chinese exclusion, throughout the period from the passage of “An Act to Prohibit the ‘Coolie Trade’ by American Citizens in American Vessels” in 1862 to the onset of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

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