

Chinese Indentured Labor and Coolie Petitions in the
Straits Settlements, 1877–1894

An Honors Thesis for the Department of History
Sean Z. Ong

Tufts University, 2020

For Luke

Contents

Glossary	iv
Note on Names, Spellings, and Translations	v
Introduction.....	1
Coolies in the Straits Settlements	3
Coolie Petitions as Sources.....	7
Historiographical Framework	11
Chapter One: A Textbook of Petitions.....	15
Language and Colonial Power	15
Reading the Petitions in Context.....	23
Petitioning Traditions in China and India.....	30
Chapter Two: Coolie Writings.....	35
The Recruitment Process	39
Coolie Depots	46
Contracts and Wages	56
Chapter Three: Petitions of Power	63
From a Depot Keeper.....	63
From a Shipmaster	68
From an Employer	72
Conclusion	79
Bibliography	84
Archival Material and Primary Sources.....	84
Secondary Sources.....	85

Glossary

Kyshe	James William Norton Kyshe, ed., <i>Cases Heard and Determined in Her Majesty's Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements</i> , also known as Kyshe's Reports
NAS	National Archives of Singapore
NLS	National Library of Singapore
SSGG	Straits Settlements Government Gazette
SSLCP	Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings
<i>lau kheh</i>	Hokkien, experienced coolie, lit. "old guest"
<i>sin kheh</i>	Hokkien, newly arrived coolie, lit. "new guest"

Note on Names, Spellings, and Translations

Most Chinese names in this thesis were formatted with the last name followed by the given name. For instance, in the name “Lo Ban Tsai,” “Lo” is the last name; “Ban Tsai” is the given name, which is also a double name. All Chinese names were also romanized. Where available, the romanized spellings were preserved from their original sources. Where a source based its romanization on a regional Sinitic language other than Mandarin, such as Hokkien, Teochew, or Cantonese, an equivalent romanization of the name in standard Pinyin was also included in parentheses, e.g. “Lo Ban Tsai (*Lu Wencai*).”

Historically significant Chinese terms, such as *sin kheh* or *lau kheh*, were transliterated and romanized. The spelling of those terms was based on either the original sources that they appeared in or the preferred spellings that can be found in other scholarly literature on the topic. All other Chinese terms, including the text of the coolie petitions, were translated by the author. Chinese is a highly figurative and idiom-heavy language, so not all terms were translated literally. Where necessary, a literal translation of the term was included in parentheses, alongside a romanization of the term in Pinyin.

Similarly, the spelling of historically significant English terms was based on the original sources, even when that spelling differed from the current convention in American English, e.g. the 1890 Straits Settlements Labour Commission. The same practice applied to direct quotations of primary sources.

Introduction

On October 2, 1890, James Young Kennedy, a private member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council and prominent business leader, moved a motion in a council meeting, requesting the governor to appoint a commission to investigate issues surrounding labor in the Straits Settlements and the protected Malay states. To justify this proposal, Kennedy expressed his concerns that the supply of fit and healthy indentured laborers, or coolies, from China and India to the Straits Settlements was shrinking and allegations of the unjust treatment of laborers by employers were increasing — concerns that Kennedy said were shared by many others in society. Kennedy felt that a commission was “necessary ... not on account of any class, but of all classes ... for the merchant as much as for the planter and the miner, as well for the Chinese and Tamil labourers as for their employers ... for the future development of this Colony, and for the protection of our labourers as well as for their employers.” His motion, seconded by fellow private member of the Legislative Council James Montague Bent Vermont, carried unanimously, and thus, a “Commission of Enquiry into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected Native States” was established by the governor of the Straits Settlements on October 3, 1890.¹

The 1890 Straits Settlements Labour Commission published its report in the following year, and the report was tabled and discussed at a Legislative Council meeting on March 7, 1891. According to the report, the commission did

¹ October 2, 1890, B69–71, R.M. I E/24, Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings (SSLCP), National Archives of Singapore (NAS).

extensive research to ascertain the details of the immigrant labor situation in the Straits Settlements, holding 36 hearings with 96 witnesses, sending questions to and obtaining written responses from 42 other individuals, and conducting 19 visits of inspection to various estates where laborers were employed. However, the commission's witnesses and respondents did not include any coolies. The commission wrote that the evidence that coolies could provide were "more readily obtained during visits of inspection" to places of employment, yet it seemed that the commission was not genuinely interested in learning about how the coolies were treated during those inspection visits "except in so far as their treatment may affect the number [of coolies] obtainable."² This disinterest deviated heavily from Kennedy's original intentions in calling for the establishment of the Labour Commission. He had stated rather emphatically that the commission was to carry out its mandate for the benefit of everyone regardless of social status, including coolies. Somehow, amidst its investigations, the commission seemed to have determined that it was not its responsibility to conduct a detailed examination into the living and working conditions of coolies, and so left the coolies out of its in-person hearings and written interviews.

Leaving coolies out of the 1890 Labour Commission's investigations seriously hampered the ability of the commission to comment more precisely and specifically on the experiences of the coolies, from recruitment to arrival and to employment. Instead, the commission could only speak of allegations of coolie exploitation and ill-treatment in broad and general terms without ascertaining

² "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected Native States," March 7, 1891, paras. i-vii, R.M. I E/25, SSLCP, NAS.

those claims. While the report cited the individual testimonies of government officials, recruitment agents, depot keepers, brokers, and coolie employers, it could only refer to the experiences of coolies in the abstract, without providing any direct evidence. On the experiences of Chinese coolies, the commission commented:

There are many points on which we have not been able to obtain precise information, for a number of members cannot often obtain statements of value by questioning Chinese coolies through an interpreter; indeed the coolies could probably only be induced to speak freely by an officer speaking Chinese fluently, and able to talk to them at sufficient length to gain their confidence.³

The gaping omission of the direct testimony of coolies from the 1890 Labour Commission report raised several questions: When and how did coolie voices get heard in the Straits Settlements bureaucracy, if not through a platform like this commission? Given that the Straits Settlements government relied heavily on coolie labor to develop the colony and grow its economy, how did coolie voices fit into its approach to colonial governance? Did the coolies' grievances and allegations of exploitation matter at all to the colonial government, or were they largely ignored?

Coolies in the Straits Settlements

These questions about the role and place of coolies in the Straits Settlements are especially pertinent given their status as unfree laborers, mostly working under contracts of indenture. Whether or not coolie voices were taken seriously by the colonial government would matter significantly to the welfare of

³ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 110, SSLCP.

the coolies, whose individual humanity and subjectivity was otherwise ignored and suppressed within the oppressive labor system. The Straits Settlements — comprising the port cities of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore — was established under the auspices of the British East India Company in 1826, and its growth as an important and prosperous colony in the British Empire was deeply associated with the ever-expanding presence of immigrant coolies on its shores, many of whom came from China and India. The migration of coolies to the Straits Settlements was part of a broader pattern of Chinese and Indian labor migration to places across the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean region, especially British, Dutch, and French colonial territories; this regional pattern was itself part of the global phenomenon of mass migration in the 19th century.⁴ Within the Straits Settlements, coolies became a cheap and stable supply of labor for business owners, planters, miners, merchants, traders, etc., and they quickly formed the backbone of the colony's economy. From the 1870s onward, as the British Empire extended and centralized its control of other territories in the Malay Peninsula, Chinese and Indian coolies arriving in the Straits Settlements were also sent to those colonies to meet their emerging labor needs.⁵

As the coolie population grew, colonial officials fretted over how to effectively govern these coolies, from implementing a more systematic process of immigration and employment, to setting up regulations and penalties to punish

⁴ Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 44–65.

⁵ Carl A. Trocki, “Singapore as a Nineteenth Century Migration Node,” in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, ed. Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 198–224.

errant coolies and employers, and even to considering the experiences of coolies when developing or modifying labor policies. The British undertook a racialized approach to governing coolies in the Straits Settlements. Coolies from China were under the purview of the protector of Chinese immigrants, whose office came to be known colloquially as the Chinese Protectorate; coolies from India were managed by the protector of Indian immigrants. These officials were not only empowered to manage all aspects of immigration, particularly coolie immigration, in their designated community, but they were also responsible for ensuring the general welfare of the coolies while working and living in the Straits Settlements. While it may seem that governing Chinese and Indian coolies separately was sensible, owing to the different conditions of immigration and employment that characterized each group of coolies, this mode of racialized governance assumed that a uniform experience was present across all coolies who had migrated from the same place. Instead, the opposite was true: There was great diversity of experiences among Chinese coolies, as there was among Indian coolies.⁶

Perhaps because of this mode of racialized governance, previous scholarship on coolies in the Straits Settlements typically focused on either Chinese coolies or Indian coolies, and rarely both. The scholarly literature on Indian coolies has drawn attention to how their migration was contested and regulated across borders by both the Indian and Straits Settlements governments, producing inter-governmental clashes over the welfare of coolies under indenture

⁶ Charles Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology," *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (March 1986): 330–61; Edwin Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore, 1867–1914* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991).

and their rights to citizenship in the Straits Settlements. Scholars have highlighted the formation of diasporic connections across the Indian Ocean, particularly among Tamil-speaking Indian coolies.⁷ One study even adopted a quantitative approach to examining how the grueling conditions of indenture resulted in high mortality rates for Indian coolies.⁸ Similarly, the scholarly literature on Chinese coolies has focused on how their migration to the Straits Settlements created communities and networks of capital, kinship relations, and other diasporic ties spanning the South China Sea, and how their significant presence as immigrants provoked the anxieties of the colonial state concerning issues of both domestic governance and foreign relations.⁹

However, much of the previous scholarship did not seriously consider the role of coolie voices in understanding the experiences of indenture. Instead, scholars relied heavily on sources from the colonial archive, such as reports of the various labor commissions, proceedings of the Straits Settlements Legislative

⁷ Sunil S. Amrith, "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya 1870–1941," *Past & Present* 208, no. 1 (August 2010): 231–61, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq027>; Sunil S. Amrith, "Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 547–72, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.3.547>; David S. Chanderbali, "Indian Indenture in the Straits Settlements, 1872–1910: Policy and Practice in Province Wellesley" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1983).

⁸ Ralph Shlomowitz and Lance Brennan, "Mortality and Indian Labour in Malaya, 1877–1933," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 29, no. 1 (1992): 57–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469202900103>.

⁹ W. L. Blythe, "Historical Sketch of Chinese Labour in Malaya," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 1 (June 1947): 64–114; Chen-tung Chang, "Chinese Coolie Trade in the Straits Settlements in Late Nineteenth Century," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology*, no. 65 (Spring 1988): 1–29; Maurice Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (October 1960): 25–48; Eddie Tang, "British Policy Towards the Chinese in the Straits Settlements: Protection and Control 1877-1900 (With Special Reference to Singapore)" (master's thesis, Australian National University, 1970); Ching-Hwang Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851–1911)* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985); Siew Yoong Ng, "The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (1961): 76–99.

Council, as well as documents from the offices of the two immigrant protectors. One notable exception was James F. Warren's *Rickshaw Coolie*, which utilized death records and coroner reports to paint a chilling picture of the lives of a specific group of Chinese coolies in the Straits Settlements — those who worked as rickshaw pullers in colonial Singapore.¹⁰ The few scholars that have written about both Chinese and Indian coolies in their works have also focused more on unpacking the intricacies of colonial governance in the Straits Settlements, without seeking out coolie voices to closely examine conditions of indenture.¹¹

Coolie Petitions as Sources

The absence of coolie voices throughout much of Straits Settlements historiography was rather striking. It replicated the omission of coolie testimonies from the colonial archive, as exemplified by the report of the 1890 Labour Commission that was examined earlier in this introduction. The absence yet again denied coolies their subjectivity, as it produced an analysis of indentured labor that was filtered through the lens of the colonial state whose economic fortunes rested heavily on continuing the exploitation of coolie labor. It is precisely that historiographical absence that this thesis seeks to fill, by closely analyzing one specific expression of coolie voices: petitions. These were petitions written by and about Chinese coolies in the Straits Settlements and addressed largely to the Straits Settlements government via the protector of Chinese, who was the colonial official responsible for governing these coolies. This set of petitions, written in

¹⁰ James F. Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940*, rev. ed. (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya"; Lee, *The British as Rulers*.

Chinese, have hitherto been ignored in scholarly research, even though they contained authentic and detailed descriptions of indenture provided by coolies themselves — a perspective that is otherwise missing from the colonial archive.

These coolie petitions were discovered as part of a collection of Straits Settlements documents written in Chinese, which was published in three volumes in 1894. The collection was titled, *A Text Book of Documentary Chinese Selected and Designed For the Special Use of Members of the Civil Service of the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States* in English, and *Sanzhoufu wen jian xiu ji* (lit. “Collection of Straits Settlements Documents”) in Chinese. The collection was compiled by a colonial official named George Thompson Hare, who was the assistant protector of Chinese in Singapore at the time that the collection was published in 1894, and who later became the secretary for Chinese affairs in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States.¹² The documents in the collection were divided into seven chapters, with each chapter containing documents of a similar type; besides petitions in the first chapter, the collection also contained government proclamations (chapter two), letters (chapter three), miscellaneous documents (chapter four), forms (chapter five), official government dispatches (chapter six), and memorials (chapter seven).¹³

The collection contained 118 petitions in total, dealing with various issues in the affairs of the Chinese community in the Straits Settlements. Of these 118

¹² Lee, *The British as Rulers*, 179; Ching-Hwang Yen, *Ethnicities, Personalities and Politics in the Ethnic Chinese Worlds* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016), 463–64.

¹³ G. T. Hare, ed., *A Text Book of Documentary Chinese Selected and Designed For the Special Use of Members of the Civil Service of the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States*, 3 vols. (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1894).

petitions, 12 of them were written by Chinese coolies or their relatives about instances of coolie abuse and exploitation, while three of them were written by individuals who were in positions of authority over Chinese coolies — a depot keeper, a shipmaster, and an employer respectively — seeking to entrench or extend their power over the coolies. These 15 petitions were a rich and unparalleled source of first-hand accounts of the coolie experience. They shed light on the hardships faced by Chinese coolies in the Straits Settlements, even after the colonial government had established the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 to oversee their safety and welfare. They told vivid stories of fraudulent recruitment, barracoon-like detention in arrival depots, physical abuse by employers and depot keepers, and contract disputes. They also revealed details of what individual coolies faced when working under indenture, rather than just presenting these experiences in purely abstract or aggregate terms.

More than just forming an authentic record of the conditions of indentured labor in the Straits Settlements, the petitions could also be interpreted as acts of resistance performed by Chinese coolies to make their grievances legible to the colonial legal system and pursue freedom and restitution. The petitions chronicled the coolies' attempts to demand the Straits Settlements government to provide for better living and working conditions. In recounting the various injustices that they endured, the coolies also advanced an implicit critique of the colonial state for tacitly endorsing the indentured labor system despite claiming to protect and provide for the coolies. This implicit critique revealed that Chinese coolies were not just passive subjects laboring under indenture, but instead possessed an astute

legal consciousness and actively demonstrated their agency. Thus, the petitions, as the voices of Chinese coolies in the Straits Settlements, could be read both as first-hand accounts of indenture and as acts of resistance against labor indenture and colonial exploitation.

The coolie petitions were all addressed to the protector of Chinese, which indicated that the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 was connected to the emergence of petitioning as an act of coolie resistance in the Straits Settlements. In other words, even though coolies were not seen by the colonial government as individuals worthy of liberty and protection, after 1877, they could turn to petitioning as a form of legal protest to make themselves and their grievances legible to the colonial state. Petitioning as a form of colonial protest was not unique to the Straits Settlements but was instead a transnational phenomenon. For instance, petitioning was also a prominent feature of interactions between the colonial state and its subjects across much of British India, especially as the colonial bureaucracy became increasingly formalized in the 19th century. However, the emergence of coolie petitions did not just begin and end with British colonialism. In fact, the coolie petitions from the Straits Settlements were similar in form and genre to petitions written in Qing China during the 19th century, which implied that there was a shared cultural and linguistic tradition of petitioning in Chinese that the coolies were a part of. Petitions emerged in other situations of indenture too, most notably with Chinese coolies in Cuba, for whom petitioning also became a tool for asserting agency and enacting resistance against labor exploitation.

While the contents of the petitions were rich in interpretive potential, the form in which they were discovered — as abstract documents in a colonial language textbook — was lacking. There did not seem to be any surviving record of the petitions elsewhere in the Straits Settlements archive, including in the annual reports of the protector of Chinese, to whom most of the petitions were addressed. Instead, the petitions were only found in the documentary collection that was edited by Hare, and within the collection, they were stripped of all paratextual clues that might have showed how the colonial government had received, processed, and handled them or responded to the grievances that they contained. Even though there was scant information on the petitions as they were first presented to the Chinese Protectorate, their inclusion in what was effectively a Chinese textbook for colonial officials revealed much about their “afterlife” in the colonial bureaucracy. While the petitions contained distressing accounts of coolie exploitation and emotional pleas for assistance, colonial officials who read the collection would have encountered the petitions only as abstract documents to help them learn Chinese, and mastery of the language was a means of improving the effectiveness of coolie governance. The compilation of the petitions into a language textbook thus enacted a kind of epistemic violence, as the petitions as expressions of coolie agency and resistance were subverted and became tools for reinforcing colonial power.

Historiographical Framework

This thesis adopts Hugh Tinker’s view of indentured labor as a “new system of slavery” as its starting point. Tinker argued that after the abolition of

slavery in Britain in 1833, the system of indenture emerged to replace slavery in meeting the labor needs of Euro-American capital by creating a class of ostensibly “free” contract laborers who were, in fact, exploited and subjugated.¹⁴ While Tinker originally studied Indian indentured laborers, the same analysis has since been applied by scholars onto other systems of indenture, including that involving Chinese labor, to show how deeply unfree the indentured laborers were and how global the practice of indenture truly was.¹⁵ Similarly, this thesis seeks to analyze the petitions as the first-hand accounts of Chinese coolies and other non-state intermediaries in the labor system that detailed the conditions of indenture in the Straits Settlements, particularly the exploitative practices that persisted even after the colonial government had made claims to protect the welfare of Chinese coolies by establishing the Chinese Protectorate in 1877.

This thesis also draws on more recent scholarship on indentured labor that has centered coolie voices, i.e. petitions and testimonies from coolies themselves, as a way of restoring the subjectivity that coolies had previously been denied while working under indenture. Often, a closer examination of coolie voices revealed that coolies held complex and radical views on their conditions of indenture and the possibilities for freedom. For instance, Chinese coolies in Cuba wrote petitions that demonstrated their faith in employment contracts as legally binding documents that could guarantee their rights, as well as petitions that

¹⁴ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹⁵ Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

expressed their dissatisfaction with those same contracts for protecting them from abuse and exploitation only in name and not in practice.¹⁶ This thesis aims to illuminate a similar complexity in the coolie petitions of the Straits Settlements, to demonstrate how coolie agency was neither simplistic nor uniform.

A note on terminology: It bears acknowledgement that the term “coolie” carries a derogatory connotation. Previous scholarship has been sensitive to the implications of referring to indentured laborers as “coolies,” a term that had historically been used to denigrate and dehumanize these laborers as lowly and undeserving of protection. Where scholars chose to use the term “coolie,” it was to align their works with a specific body of historical sources or a particular scholarly and historical context that had also referred to indentured laborers as “coolies.”¹⁷ Similarly, this thesis takes its cue from its sources and adopts “coolie” as a historically specific term, with certain connotations for class, race, and occupation, to refer to Chinese indentured labor in the Straits Settlements.

This thesis takes an explicitly comparative approach to reading the coolie petitions. By analyzing the petitions alongside other colonial sources, the petitions are placed in their historical context, and the role of petitioning as both a tool of labor resistance and a technology of colonial power can be clearly elucidated. A

¹⁶ Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem, 2002); Evelyn Hu-Dehart, “Chinese Coolie Labour in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labour or Neo-slavery?,” *Slavery & Abolition* 14, no. 1 (April 1993): 67–86; Kale, *Fragments of Empire*; Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 11–38; Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), xv–xvi; Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, xix–xxi.

key source for comparing the petitions against would be the report of the 1890 Labour Commission in the Straits Settlements, as it was an in-depth investigation into indentured labor from the perspective of the colonial government and other individuals who had power over coolies in the labor system, and it was published just a few years before the petitions were published in Hare's collection, making them contemporaneous sources. The rest of the thesis forms three chapters, as follows:

The first chapter, "A Textbook of Petitions," focuses on Hare's collection as a colonial language textbook and reads the petitions within the context, as legal abstractions of individual coolies and their specific labor grievances. The chapter explores how the abstraction of the petitions enabled the colonial government to enact greater control over coolie lives. It also looks at the transnational context in which these Straits Settlements coolie petitions were produced.

The second chapter, "Coolie Writings," examines in detail what the living and working conditions were for Chinese coolies in the Straits Settlements, as told by their stories of indenture and freedom recorded in the petitions. It offers a straightforward analysis of the content of the petitions and uses the coolies' grievances and complaints to supplement previous scholarship on labor indenture in the Straits Settlements that had relied predominantly on colonial sources.

The third chapter, "Petitions of Power," analyzes the petitions that were written not by coolies, but by the labor intermediaries who had power over coolies, to highlight how petitioning, as a legal tool, was capable of both resisting and also entrenching the system of labor indenture in the Straits Settlements.

Chapter One: A Textbook of Petitions

The 1890 Straits Settlements Labour Commission omitted from its report the perspectives of coolies, the very group whose conditions it claimed to have investigated. This omission was deliberate and not for want of coolie voices in the Straits Settlements government record, as a set of coolie petitions to the protector of Chinese has revealed. However, the petitions were discovered as part of an 1894 colonial Chinese textbook edited by an official in the Chinese Protectorate, and they did not seem to have been kept anywhere else in the colonial archive. Read in this context, the petitions were transformed from expressions of coolie agency into tools for colonial officials to master the Chinese language and strengthen their control over the coolies' lives.

Language and Colonial Power

The textbook in which the coolie petitions were discovered, titled *A Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, was in fact a collection of official and semiofficial documents that aspiring colonial officials used to learn the Chinese language, of which petitions written by members of the Chinese community, including coolies, to various government officials formed a single chapter. The collection was published in 1894 under the auspices of the Straits Settlements government and edited by G. T. Hare, who was the assistant protector of Chinese at the time. Hare stated that it was his deliberate choice to include petitions in the collection. In a memorandum that prefaced the collection, he wrote:

For practical work-a-day purposes in the Straits, experience shows that what one wants is a fair general knowledge of "business" Chinese. The

matter found in these papers is intended to impart some general knowledge as this, and I have attempted to make the work as practical, useful and interesting as possible, by furnishing papers that deal largely with the affairs and circumstance of the Chinese living in the Colony and Native States, or with other questions in which the Government and the Chinese here are interested in China. ... Very many of the local papers refer to events that have, at one time or another, created no little excitement and stir amongst the Chinese living in these parts, and a knowledge of these events is most valuable to any one who wishes to make himself useful among the Chinese in the Straits Settlements.¹

From this memorandum, two things were clear. One, Hare saw petitions as “practical, useful and interesting” records of the concerns and grievances of the Chinese who lived in the Straits Settlements and the “Native States” of Malaya. Two, Hare believed that colonial officials who aspired to be “useful,” i.e. successful and popular, among the Chinese in the Straits Settlements should strive to acquire “knowledge” of the day-to-day lives of the Chinese community, as contained in the petitions. On one hand, this ethnographic reading of the petitions was not distorted and befitted the petitioners’ original intent: The petitions were addressed to established authorities, like the protector of Chinese or the governor of the Straits Settlements, and they raised issues that demanded official assistance, intervention, or resolution. Petitioners penned these documents to be heard, and the colonial officials who read Hare’s collection were precisely hearing out the petitioners’ concerns, albeit years after the petitions were first presented.

On the other hand, the existence of the collection alone cannot be taken at face value as indicative of a sincere attempt by Straits Settlements officials to understand the concerns of the people whom they govern. In compiling the documents found in the collection, Hare’s main aim was to provide his fellow

¹ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:iii–iv.

colonial officials with more comprehensive and relevant material than was previously available for learning Chinese for the main purpose of enhancing the colony's capability to effectively govern its Chinese immigrant residents. In the memorandum, Hare wrote that he was inspired by similar collections of Chinese documents compiled by Thomas Francis Wade for British diplomats as well as by Friedrich Hirth for British customs officials in China, and even selected some of their documents to include in his own collection.² Undergirding the creation of such collections by Hare and his counterparts was a belief in effective colonial governance through language, that is, colonial officials can better govern and control a colonized population by gaining greater fluency in the language that they speak, especially in plurilingual colonies.³

This belief that a strong command *of* language could lead to stronger command *through* language was not unique to British interactions with China and Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements; it extended to British rule in other places, most notably in India. Through the creation of grammars, dictionaries, and other standardized materials, the British, across both periods of company and crown rule in the 19th century, used Indian languages as “instruments of rule to understand better the ‘peculiar’ manners, customs, and prejudices of Indians, and

² Hare, 1:iii–iv. In the memorandum, Hare wrote that Wade's and Hirth's works “are excellent, and selections have been made from them for insertion in the present compilation.” See F. Hirth, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese, with a Vocabulary, For the Special Use of the Chinese Customs Service* (Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1885); Thomas Francis Wade, *Wen-Chien Tzu-Erh Chi, A Series of Papers Selected as Specimens of Documentary Chinese, Designed to Assist Students of the Language as Written by the Officials of China* (London: Trübner & Co., 1867).

³ The use of “plurilingual” to describe the use of many diverse languages in a territory or by an individual is borrowed from Rachel Leow, who used “the word plurilingual to distinguish from multilingualism ... [which is] a specifically political concept and more distinctly associated with policy.” See Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2n2.

to gather information necessary to conciliate and control the peoples of India.”⁴ The publication of collections of Chinese documents by Hare et al. was part of that same impetus of strengthening colonial conquest and control through the accumulation and promulgation of a regularized set of knowledge. In particular, Hare wrote in the memorandum to his collection that the previous mix of materials used by Straits Settlements officials to learn Chinese — pamphlets, classical literature, missionary compilations, and official documents — “is confusing and does not teach any one kind of Chinese in particular,” which drove him to create a more standardized collection of documents that was tailored for governing Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements.⁵

Building colonial officials’ fluency in foreign languages such as Chinese was obviously a difficult project, but the British pressed on with it anyway, because it came to trust only its own officials and no one else to be reliable translators. Straits Settlements officials initially relied on community leaders, known as “kapitans,” to govern and communicate with the populace and on local interpreters to conduct legal and judicial business involving the Chinese.⁶ However, among officials, there was a racialized perception of most Chinese immigrants as inherently venal, unreliable, not sufficiently educated, and incompetent — all qualities that made them unfit in British eyes to hold positions

⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 16–56.

⁵ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:iii–iv.

⁶ Cheng Han Tan, “Private Ordering and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Straits Settlements,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 11, no. 1 (July 2016): 33–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2016.11>; Ching-Hwang Yen, “Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911,” *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 1987): 417–45.

of leadership or responsibility, particularly in a court of law.⁷ These linguistic anxieties compelled the British to stop relying on Chinese translators and develop a Chinese-fluent bureaucracy, by training colonial service cadets using resources such as Hare's collection.⁸ In fact, Hare himself was one such cadet who received special training in Chinese before being appointed to the Straits Settlements civil service.⁹ In this context, for Hare to then include petitions in his collection explicitly to add "local colouring" and make "the study of the written language really interesting and instructive" was the ultimate distortion of the petitioners' intent.¹⁰ By reading the petitions linguistically rather than ethnographically, colonial officials, who were seen as more trustworthy than the Chinese, transformed them from expressions of petitioners' concerns and grievances into mere tools for asserting and expanding colonial control.

Yet even as Hare included the petitions to add a touch of authenticity and realism to his otherwise dull set of documents, he also expressed doubts about their true educational value for colonial officials aspiring to be fluent in Chinese. In the memorandum, he singled out the petitions for criticism, saying that "as far as literary style and finish goes, the composition ... often leaves much to be

⁷ For a first-hand look at some prevailing colonial perceptions of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements, see, e.g. J. D. Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: Mission Press, 1879).

⁸ Michelle T. King, "Replicating the Colonial Expert: The Problem of Translation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Straits Settlements," *Social History* 34, no. 4 (November 2009): 431–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020903257000>; Leow, *Taming Babel*, 29–44. Both King and Leow made clear the failures of language learning, which disrupted the illusion of a competent and orderly colonial bureaucracy.

⁹ Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell, eds., *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1921), 133.

¹⁰ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:iii–iv.

desired... Unfortunately no little amount of Chinese one deals with here, is not put together well.”¹¹ By drawing a contrast between the informal vernacular contained in the petitions and the professional language used in most of the other documents in the collection, Hare looked down upon the petitions and, in turn, the petitioners for being inferior and of limited utility for the language learning efforts of colonial officials. As such, the inclusion of petitions in the collection could not have only been for linguistic reasons; it also implied that the collection itself was less of a language textbook and more of an ethnographic guide to the concerns of Chinese immigrants, as they were being expressed on the ground.

To the average colonial official who perused Hare’s collection, the verisimilitude of the petitions might indeed have added to his understanding of the conditions of the colonized. Among all the distinct types of documents contained in the collection, only petitions consistently recorded the grievances and pleas of ordinary Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements, especially the most vulnerable among them, i.e. coolies, women, and children. Unlike petitions, many of the other documents in the collection originated from official or semiofficial sources, including the protector of Chinese, the governor of the Straits Settlements, and local merchant elites.¹² The petitions found in the collection shed light on a wide range of quotidian experiences, including labor grievances, business and personal disputes, family relations, secret societies, vice activities,

¹¹ Hare, 1:iii–iv.

¹² Hare, 2:iii–v. Even for the private letters in Hare’s collection that demanded assistance or redress in the same way that the petitions did, many of them were exchanged between ordinary members of the Chinese community rather than addressed to the colonial government or other established authorities.

and legal appeals.¹³ Furthermore, petitions in general were not alien to Straits Settlements officials. Throughout the 19th century, Straits Settlements officials received and responded to petitions from the populace that made various demands, e.g. an end to the transfer of convicts and mutineers from India, colonial administration of Islamic law, and reform in the penal labor system.¹⁴ It is thus possible that the petitions in Hare’s collection did enable British colonial officials to better understand the conditions of the colonized, more so than learn Chinese, thereby making the collection less of a language textbook.

However, for British colonial officials, even greater knowledge of the conditions of the colonized would not necessarily be treated as knowledge for its own sake. Any knowledge that officials would have gained from reading those petitions was likely instrumentalized for the benefit of colonial rule. Throughout the empire, and especially in India, the British exerted colonial power by accumulating and promulgating bodies of knowledge.¹⁵ Colonial officials often conducted scholarly research, either of their own accord or on behalf of the colonial service, about the places and communities that they were actively colonizing and dominating. The knowledge accumulated from such research was then transmitted through networks of so-called “scholar-officials” across the

¹³ Hare, 1:v–viii.

¹⁴ On how petitions from other communities have been dealt with in the Straits Settlements, see, e.g. Anoma Pieris, “The ‘Other’ Side of Labor Reform: Accounts of Incarceration and Resistance in the Straits Settlements Penal System, 1825–1873,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 453–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr082>; C. M. Turnbull, “Convicts in the Straits Settlements 1826–1867,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 43, no. 1 (1970): 87–103; Nurfadzilah Yahaya, “Craving Bureaucracy: Marriage, Islamic Law, and Arab Petitioners in the Straits Settlements,” *The Muslim World* 105, no. 4 (October 2015): 496–515, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12108>.

¹⁵ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 3–5.

empire to inform the shape and substance of various colonial policies.¹⁶ Hare was one such scholar-official. In addition to editing the documentary collection in question, Hare also wrote extensively on the affairs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements, including a book on the use of Hokkien as a vernacular language, an article on the gambling card game of *chap ji kee* (*shi er zhi*, lit. “12 cards”), and another book on the Wai Seng lottery. The latter two works, in particular, were used as the basis for implementing stricter anti-vice policing measures targeted at the Chinese community.¹⁷ Ethnographic research produced elsewhere in the Malay States was used in a similar fashion to quell instances of resistance and rebellion among native Malay communities.¹⁸ In the same vein, officials in the Straits Settlements likely read the petitions contained in Hare’s collection ethnographically, but then instrumentalized their findings to inform the government’s response to grievances, complaints, and other forms of resistance from colonized populations, including coolies.

Hare certainly intended for his collection to be of use to as many colonial officials and for as long a time as possible, but evidence on its actual use in the

¹⁶ On the relationship between information, knowledge, and imperial power in the British Empire, see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

¹⁷ Kah-Wee Lee, “Las Vegas in Singapore: Casinos and the Taming of Vice” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 51–56. See also G. T. Hare, “The Game of Chap-Ji-Ki,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 31 (July 1898): 63–71; G. T. Hare, *The Hokkien Vernacular*, 2 vols. (Kuala Lumpur: Straits Settlements and Selangor Government Printing Office, 1897–1904); G. T. Hare, *The Wai Seng Lottery* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1895).

¹⁸ Daniel P. S. Goh, “States of Ethnography: Colonialism, Resistance, and Cultural Transcription in Malaya and the Philippines, 1890s–1930s,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 1 (January 2007): 109–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417507000424>.

Straits Settlements was scant and scattered. The entry on Hare in *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, a 1921 encyclopedic volume that commemorated Singapore's centenary as a British colony, noted that the collection was "still in use in the examination schemes for Cadets studying Chinese."¹⁹ Furthermore, the specific copy of Hare's collection reviewed for this thesis bore the stamps of the Chinese Protectorate and its successor organization in the colonial bureaucracy, the Secretariat of Chinese Affairs.²⁰ These property stamps indicated that the collection was part of the protectorate's, and later the secretariat's, official library, where it would have been accessible to and likely perused by colonial cadets and officials, before it was accessioned by the National Library in Singapore, where it now resides. Besides these clues, there is little else that confirms the use of Hare's collection by colonial officials. The collection has also rarely been cited in previous scholarship, both in English and in Chinese. Besides a handful of citations in studies of overseas Chinese communities in the Straits Settlements, Hare's collection, and the petitions it contained, seemed to have been largely forgotten and rarely studied.²¹

Reading the Petitions in Context

Hare's collection contained 118 petitions in all, and this thesis will focus on the 15 petitions that engaged with issues concerning indentured labor in the

¹⁹ Makepeace, Brooke, and Braddell, *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1:133.

²⁰ Email message from reference librarian at National Library in Singapore to author, October 10, 2019.

²¹ For citations of Hare's collection, see, e.g. Bak Lim Kua, "'Sanzhoufu wen jian xiu ji': bai nian qian Ying zhi min guan de Hua wen du ben ['Text Book of Documentary Chinese': the Chinese textbook of British colonial officials a century ago]," *Lianhe Zaobao*, April 23, 2017, weekend edition; Yen, "Class Structure and Social Mobility"; Yen, *Ethnicities, Personalities and Politics*; Ching-Hwang Yen, "Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya 1877–1912," *Modern Asian Studies* 16, no. 3 (1982): 397–425.

Straits Settlements, written by both coolies and others in the labor system who had power over coolies. A summary of the 15 petitions, their authors, and their titles as found in the collection is provided in Table 1.

Despite Hare's promise that "notes and translations of the more difficult pieces [in the collection] will be furnished," the documents appeared unadorned with any kind of commentary or explanation, except for the English titles that were assigned, presumably by Hare, to each document in this collection.²² Most of the documents, including the petitions, did not have a Chinese title or header, so Hare seemed to have constructed an English title from the opening phrases of each document, indicating that the creation of this collection was not just a simple, passive act of collation, but an active process of interpreting the documents and evaluating them for their linguistic and ethnographic value. Even the petitioners' names were not rendered in a standardized manner. The name of each petitioner was given, within the petition's text itself, in Chinese characters, not in English. Hare chose to spell the Chinese names phonetically in English according to how they would be pronounced in Hokkien.²³ It was possible that Hare had sufficient expertise on Hokkien to produce accurate transliterations, seeing as he would publish *The Hokkien Vernacular* just a few years after publishing the collection.²⁴ Yet Hokkien was but one of the many regional languages used by Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements, so the pronunciation of names could vary widely depending on the petitioner's place of

²² Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:iii–iv.

²³ Hare, 1:iii–iv.

²⁴ Hare, *The Hokkien Vernacular*.

Table 1. Titles and authors of 15 labor-related petitions from Hare's collection.

No.	Title
Petitions from coolies or their family members, addressed to the protector of Chinese in the Straits Settlements	
3	From Ng Bu Leng and another asking for the return from Penang of certain Chinese immigrants who are alleged to have been engaged to labour under false pretences
5	From Chhng Fok Kham bringing a charge of torture and kidnapping to Deli against the Loan Heng Depot, Singapore
13	From Song Chu Kang asking for assistance to recover wages and commission from his late employer
18	From Phin Liu Chhun asking for assistance to remove his property from the premises of his employer
19	From Ten Ah Ek bringing a charge of fraud against three men
46	From Chia U Te regarding the kidnapping of his brother
47	From Li Ang Tiong asking for his release from the Ban Goan Liong Immigrant Depot
52	From Liau Seng asking for assistance in getting employment
67	From Lau Hong Seong bringing a charge against Tat Chhoan for selling into slavery certain ship-wrecked Chinese
109	From Si To Chhng and three others complaining that eleven of their fellow villagers who had made contracts to work in a certain Dutch colony are being detained there after the expiration of their term of service
111	From Ten Jun complaining that the manager of a certain theatre is in unlawful possession of his son as a play actor and that he refuses to pay the boy wages for his play acting
118	From a certain woman asking that the proprietor of a certain firm may be ordered to send back a certain Sinkheh to China because the petitioner's son is in prison charged by the Sinkheh's mother with kidnapping the Sinkheh

Table 1 (*continued*)

No.	Title
Petitions from figures of authority over coolies, addressed to the protector of Chinese in the Straits Settlements	
48	From Lo Ban Tsai applying for a license to keep a Lau Kheh Depot
53	From Ong Se Thong asking for the further detention of certain Sinkhehs to enable him to recover their passage-money
Petitions from figures of authority over coolies, addressed to the Chinese consul in the Straits Settlements	
72	Claiming a sum of money embezzled by a certain employee and asking that he may not be received as a convert by certain missionaries

Source: Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:v–viii.

origin.²⁵ These regional Sinitic languages also lacked a standardized form of romanization at the time, so the names provided by Hare might not even be consistent with how these petitioners may have been identified elsewhere in the colonial record.

The specific copy of Hare's collection reviewed for this thesis contained several markings in the margins of the documents made in pen and pencil (Figure 2). These markings seemed to highlight certain phrases or add punctuation to the otherwise unpunctuated documents, confirming that the collection was indeed actively perused, most likely by its intended audience of colonial officials in Straits Settlements. Most Chinese texts from the late imperial period lacked consistent punctuation, and the documents in Hare's collection, including ones originating from within the Straits Settlements, i.e. outside of China, were no exception. Yet, because a single phrase or sentence in Chinese is not usually clearly separated from another, adding punctuation would be crucial to allow a reader to interpret coherent and consistent meaning from a text, and it was a reader's responsibility to do just that.²⁶ The absence of printed punctuation throughout the collection implied that the documents were collated by Hare in their original format with no modification. The handwritten punctuation marks revealed that colonial officials were reading the documents with a keen focus

²⁵ Leow, *Taming Babel*, 28–29; Lau-Fong Mak, *The Dynamics of Chinese Dialect Groups in Early Malaya*, Asian Studies Monograph Series 1 (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1995); Vaughan, *Manners and Customs of the Chinese*, 85–88. On referring to Hokkien as a regional language rather than a dialect of Chinese, see Leow, *Taming Babel*, 28n12; Victor H. Mair, "What Is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'?: Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 29 (September 1991).

²⁶ Li Yu, "Learning to Read in Late Imperial China," *Studies on Asia*, series III, 1, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 19–22.

3 第三件

具稟人潮陽縣招修都玉石鄉黃武龍吳田等為慘遭誘騙拐鬻出洋弱息難歸乞賜旋里事竊於上年九月間有葛州鄉人黃順孝託言檳榔嶼埠有洋商招工前往該埠種蔗每名每月工銀七元按月準該工家屬在汕支銀四元其餘則原人在埠支給當時同赴是役者百有餘人計去數月能否平安均未知悉乃近日忽有同伴鄉人辭工歸里詢及情形據述各工人到埠後慘遭凌虐飢餓不堪伊幸逃回免亡異地且云各工人現墮黃順孝計中已轉鬻別洋以後斷難旋鄉等語其事若確情何以堪伏思黃武龍等有倚閭望切之仰今一旦禍遭酷騙家小無依用特披瀝迫切情叩乞

仁天俯念中外和交無非赤子迅賜函達該埠商人令其早飭各工過歸故里則感

激鴻恩寔同再造矣迫切 上稟

大人臺前恩准施行

4 第四件

具稟潮民王得福暨妻牛麼等稟為受恩莫報願將已女過繼養育事竊民素居

Figure 2. Petition no. 3, from Ng Bu Leng, about Chinese laborers who were kidnapped and sent to Penang to work under inhumane conditions. This petition has been annotated in the margins with various punctuation symbols and other handwritten markings, which suggests that it had been read closely by at least one individual, presumably a colonial official. Reprinted from Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:3. Courtesy of National Library Board Singapore.

on the technicalities of the language, as had been envisioned by Hare and the editors of other similar documentary collections.

In highlighting the marginalia found in a copy of the collection, this thesis is taking its cue from Ann Laura Stoler's suggestion to "read along the archival grain." Stoler argued that in writing a history using archival documents, a historian must not only be attendant to what the documents contained, but also the ways that the documents were or were not used, transmitted, and even archived, based on the layers of "watermarks" that were left on the documents by those who came into contact with them. By critically interrogating the colonial archives in this manner, new details about colonial order and disorder would emerge from the documents — not from the text itself, but in its marginal markings and paratextual elements.²⁷ For the specific copy of Hare's collection, the marginal markings did not reveal the details on how the documents were read or exactly who read them. However, in the absence of more substantial evidence, the markings were important in showing that the documents were indeed actively read by Straits Settlements officials, although the preponderance of punctuation indicated that readers focused primarily on the collection's linguistic value, rather than the content of its documents. Thus, the petitions in the collection were not just static, one-dimensional wellsprings of colonial truth. The markings formed a historical layer atop the collection as it was circulated and used by colonial officials, revealing how the colonial state handled, or rather, mishandled, the petitions.

²⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1–53.

Petitioning Traditions in China and India

The petitions found in Hare's collection reflected patterns of state-engaging petitioning from China in the late imperial period, which indicated that the Chinese community in the Straits Settlements wrote and structured their petitions, at least in part, according to established norms of state-society interactions from their homeland.

First, Qing petitioners in the 18th century were careful to emphasize their loyalty and filial piety to the emperor, especially in seeking the emperor's injunction or relief in moments of crisis. The petitions contained rhetoric that appealed to Confucianist ideologies, such as the Qing emperor's "paternalist obligation" to care for his subjects, or the societal hierarchy that required petitioners to make their claims with respect and humility, "just as children pleaded for the loving care of their patriarch."²⁸ In several petitions that complained about abuse or inaction from local officials, petitioners even leveraged on their fealty to the emperor to appeal to his responsibility to oversee and discipline local officials, which demonstrated the petitioners' shrewd use of Confucianist ideology and the structure of the bureaucratic hierarchy in making their claims.²⁹

Second, despite Qing petitioners having different social and occupational backgrounds, their petitions articulated a collective, uniform identity as imperial subjects who were entitled to protection and care from the emperor or the imperial

²⁸ Ho-fung Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 76–77.

²⁹ Hung, 97.

state, rather than the diverse identities that were embedded in their everyday lives. The petitioners used self-identification rhetoric to declare their disjoined imperial identity and stake out a collective claim to imperial intervention, thereby transcending the parochial. At the same time, the petitioners still respected the Confucian hierarchy and never sought to completely reject their embedded social identities.³⁰

Third, even when petitions dwindled in prominence and efficacy toward the end of the 19th century, petitioners still trusted the moral authority of the Qing emperor and directed their claims to him in the form of “capital appeals.” Rather than just relying on rhetorical techniques, Qing petitioners would travel to the capital and lodge a complaint with an imperial representative, even though such appeals often did not lead to actual relief from the state.³¹ Nevertheless, the petitioners retained a view of the Qing emperor as morally righteous and compassionate toward his subjects, leading to the persistence of petitions that were directed at the highest imperial authority.³²

These features of petitioning in Qing China combined to produce a form of state-engaging politics; that is, petitioning was a mode of proactive political action that called upon the state to guarantee or extend petitioners’ rights, rather than just a mode of reactive resistance that responded to a violation of those rights. These state-engaging petitions emerged as the Qing state, at the height of

³⁰ Hung, 98–101. For a deeper discussion of embedded and disjoined political identities, with reference to Western Europe in the 19th century, see Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 217–23.

³¹ Qiang Fang, “Hot Potatoes: Chinese Complaint Systems from Early Times to the Late Qing (1898),” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 4 (November 2009): 1122–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809990714>.

³² Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics*, 166–67.

its stability, expanded its paternalistic authority and actual governing capabilities to provide greater protection and care for its people.³³ Such patterns of petitioning reflected a unique Chinese political modernity, pushing back against the dominant narrative in Western historiography that modern collective action started from the early modern period in Europe before spreading to the rest of the world.³⁴

The petitions found in Hare's collection also reflected patterns of state-engaging petitioning found in British India, especially in the period of the British Raj. These parallels suggested that similar colonial conditions in both India and the Straits Settlements produced a rich legal tradition of petitioning as a form of colonial protest within the British Empire.

There was a robust history of petitioning across a range of social classes, occupational groups, and urban and rural areas in colonial India. In some cases, petitions emerged as the only "legally cognizable" form of political action when other kinds of protests were quelled; in particular, British officials tried to assimilate destabilizing, violent protests into petition documents that fit nicely into existing bureaucratic channels.³⁵ In other cases, petitions escalated to mass gatherings and protests when petitioners perceive that the colonial state did not adequately address their demands.³⁶ Often, Indian petitions had to conform to the

³³ Hung, 58–67. The typology of reactive and proactive forms of political action again originated from Tilly with reference to Western Europe; it was adapted by Hung for the Chinese context. See Charles Tilly, "Major Forms of Collective Action in Western Europe 1500–1975," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1976): 365–75.

³⁴ Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics*, 3–17.

³⁵ Aparna Balachandran, "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001135>; Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 161–64.

³⁶ Prashant Kidambi, "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 238–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555>.

language of submission and civility as well as the procedural rules that were demanded by the colonial state, forming a kind of textual supplication that underwrote the authority of the officials to whom the petitions were addressed; a failure to conform to these standards would have been cause for a petition to be rejected by a colonial official, thus forcing petitioners to adhere to the terms set by the colonial state in order for their grievance to be heard.³⁷

Yet, at the same time, Indian petitions also contained cogent articulations of ordinary petitioners' agency and political consciousness. For instance, petitioners who signed on to a group petition often expressed a collective identity and formed new solidarities that were contingent upon the particular claims of the petition, much like how petitioners in Qing China emphasized their disjoined identity as an imperial subject over their embedded social identities. Petitioners also claimed their entitlement to protection or redress from the colonial government, predicated upon their marginal and exploited positions as laborers, servants, sepoys, etc.³⁸ Some petitioners even negotiated with and creatively adopted the abstract language of submission and civility that the colonial bureaucracy demanded, by threatening to withdraw their respect and labor if their

³⁷ Balachandran, "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State," 155–56; Raman, *Document Raj*, 182–91; Bhavani Raman, "Civil Address and the Early Colonial Petition in Madras," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 133–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000944>; Robert Travers, "Indian Petitioning and Colonial State-Formation in Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 95–96, 120–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000841>.

³⁸ Balachandran, "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State," 152–57.

specific demands were not met, or repeatedly insisting that the state exercised personalized discretion to fulfill their intimate pleas for assistance.³⁹

Across studies of petitioning in both Qing China and British India, a common theme emerged: that petitions did not just contain descriptions of the concerns and grievances of the governed, but also reflected both the power of the state and the emerging political consciousness of the ordinary petitioners. These studies revealed the duality of petitions as both re-inscribing and unsettling colonial power.⁴⁰ With the petitions in Hare's collection, just considering how they came to be included in a language textbook for colonial officials alone hints at this duality. The petitions, despite containing valuable insights on the very real concerns and grievances of Chinese immigrants, including coolies, were read only to increase colonial officials' proficiency in Chinese and improve the effectiveness of colonial rule in the Straits Settlements. As the rest of this thesis delves into the content and form of the petitions themselves, the dual quality of petitions with respect to colonial power will be made even more evident.

³⁹ Raman, "The Early Colonial Petition in Madras," 132–33; Julia Stephens, "A Bureaucracy of Rejection: Petitioning and the Impoverished Paternalism of the British-Indian Raj," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 198–200, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001160>.

⁴⁰ Kidambi, "The Petition as Event," 206.

Chapter Two: Coolie Writings

Twelve out of the 15 petitions in Hare's collection that dealt with issues of indentured labor came either from coolies themselves or from their family members. The petitions were significant because they contained, as far as could be ascertained, the real voices of coolies in the Straits Settlements, which no other documents had recorded, not even the report of the 1890 Labour Commission.¹ The petitions did not necessarily offer new details about the conditions of indenture that these coolies experienced, but they offered valuable first-hand accounts of the grievances that coolies had, ranging from wage disputes, to accusations of physical and verbal abuse by employers and depot keepers, and to stories of being kidnapped and sent to unknown ports. While colonial reports like the one produced by the 1890 Labour Commission had aggregated the experiences of thousands of coolies into abstract statistics and statements, the petitions resisted that logic and presented the full human cost of indenture in raw, full, sometimes distressing detail. In other words, what was noteworthy about the petitions was not necessarily the content that they contained, but the fact that they existed at all but yet did not become an enduring part of the colonial record on indenture in the Straits Settlements.

What was even more significant about the 12 petitions was that they formed part of Hare's collection, which was a Chinese language textbook for aspiring Straits Settlements officials. Colonial officials who were reading the

¹ See the introduction, as well as the evidence taken before the Labour Commission in Appendix I of "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," SSLCP.

collection had to encounter the first-hand accounts of indenture that the petitions contained, most of which laid bare the inhumane conditions that coolies had to live through in the late 19th century. The annotations found in the margins of some of the petitions indicated that they were indeed read and thoroughly analyzed, presumably by those colonial officials. Even if the petitions did not form a prominent part of the colonial record, in the same way that evidence from employers, depot keepers, and officials did in the 1890 Labour Commission report, colonial officials still had to read through them as part of the process of learning Chinese. In fact, the officials had to do so rather closely and intimately to understand how Chinese was used in. While the colonial record was ultimately silent on what effects the petitions had, either on the colonial officials who received them, or the colonial officials who had to confront them in Hare's collection, the petitions already did much to unsettle the colonial logic that enabled the large-scale exploitation of indentured labor, by recording the harsh realities of indenture in excruciating detail.

On the other hand, the petitions were also significant in the way that they re-inscribed colonial power. The exploitation of indentured laborers that the 12 coolie petitions recorded was enabled by the Straits Settlements colonial government, which endorsed the system of indenture to meet the labor needs of the colony's growing economy, from plantations, to shipping firms, and to construction sites. However, the petitions examined here appealed to the colonial government, and specifically the protector of Chinese, for assistance or intervention, which effectively legitimized the government's authority to oversee

and regulate the lives of coolies, in spite of its role in upholding the system of indenture. The only criticism contained in the petitions were directed largely at errant individuals involved in the system of indentured labor, such as various employers, depot keepers, brokers, and recruiters. Otherwise, the coolie petitions were written with a tone of deference and respect to the government official whom they addressed, just like petitions to the Qing imperial court in China during the 19th century, as explored in the previous chapter.² The coolie petitions even often contained explicit praise of the colonial government for its benevolence and competence, as part of the petitioners' expression of faith in the state's ability to protect coolies from abuse and exploitation. It was plausible that the petitions were structured to carry a tone of respect and deference because they were based on Chinese traditions of formal addresses, rather than being spurred by the petitioners' actual respect for colonial officials.³ Nonetheless, the fact that coolies directed formal appeals against their conditions of indenture to colonial officials revealed the pivotal role that they perceived the Straits Settlements government to play in protecting them from abuse and exploitation, regardless of the government's own role in perpetuating that same abuse and exploitation.

The 12 coolie petitions can be classified into three equal groups based on the topics that they covered: exploitative recruitment and brokerage, abuses at coolie depots, and employer and contract-related disputes (Table 3). Collectively, the topics of the petitions spanned the entirety of the coolie experience in the

² Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics*, 97.

³ Yuling Pan and Dániel Z. Kádár, *Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese* (London: Continuum, 2011), 40–51, 61–65.

Table 3. Classification of 12 labor-related coolie petitions

No.	Title
Exploitative recruitment and brokerage	
3	From Ng Bu Leng and another asking for the return from Penang of certain Chinese immigrants who are alleged to have been engaged to labour under false pretences
52	From Liao Seng asking for assistance in getting employment
67	From Lau Hong Seong bringing a charge against Tat Chhoan for selling into slavery certain ship-wrecked Chinese
118	From a certain woman asking that the proprietor of a certain firm may be ordered to send back a certain Sinkkeh to China because the petitioner's son is in prison charged by the Sinkkeh's mother with kidnapping the Sinkkeh
Abuses at coolie depots	
5	From Chhng Fok Kham bringing a charge of torture and kidnapping to Deli against the Loan Heng Depot, Singapore
19	From Ten Ah Ek bringing a charge of fraud against three men
46	From Chia U Te regarding the kidnapping of his brother
47	From Li Ang Tiong asking for his release from the Ban Goan Liong Immigrant Depot
Employer and contract-related disputes	
13	From Song Chu Kang asking for assistance to recover wages and commission from his late employer
18	From Phin Liu Chhun asking for assistance to remove his property from the premises of his employer
109	From Si To Chhng and three others complaining that eleven of their fellow villagers who had made contracts to work in a certain Dutch colony are being detained there after the expiration of their term of service
111	From Ten Jun complaining that the manager of a certain theatre is in unlawful possession of his son as a play actor and that he refuses to pay the boy wages for his play acting

Source of petition authors and titles: Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:v–viii.

Straits Settlements, from when they decided to emigrate from China, to when they fulfilled their initial term of indenture as a *sin kheh*, or newly arrived coolie, and even to when they found employment again as a *lau kheh*, or experienced coolie. The broad range of concerns recorded in the petitions revealed the extent to which coolies were vulnerable to exploitation at every stage of their experience under indenture and by every individual whom they encounter along the way. The rest of this chapter will examine the coolie petitions in those groups, ordered chronologically based on the way that coolies would have experienced it.

The Recruitment Process

The first group of coolie petitions detailed the way that coolies were tricked in the recruitment process, whether as newcomers to the Straits Settlements or as experienced coolies taking on new employment contracts. Three of these petitions came from coolies themselves; the remaining petition in this group came from a family member of a recruitment agent based at a coolie port in the Chaoshan region of Guangdong, China. Together, they revealed that even the initial stages of the coolie recruitment process were rife with exploitation that the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 was unable to get rid of.

In two of the recruitment petitions, the coolie petitioners accused brokers and recruiters of kidnapping or selling them into indenture. The petition by Ng Bu Leng (*Huang Wulong*), no. 3 in the collection, chronicled how over 100 coolies, including Ng, were enticed to emigrate by a recruitment agent's promise of lucrative work on sugar cane plantations in Penang, only to have been sent to work in other ports instead. The petition by Lau Hong Seong (*Liu Fangxiang*)

petition, no. 67 in the collection, recorded an incident in which several shipwrecked coolies were sold by their shipmaster into indenture in the Straits Settlements and other ports. In both cases, it seemed that the petitioners were deceived (*you pian*) into emigrating to the Straits Settlements. Ng and his fellow passengers had thought that they were emigrating to Penang as wage laborers on a sugar cane plantation, but instead they found themselves being sent to other unknown ports with no way of making a return journey home and likely forced to work under indenture with no wages.⁴ Similarly, Lau and others had thought that they were emigrating to Singapore as free laborers, but their shipmaster instead sold them to various recruiters after they were shipwrecked, and Lau ended up detained in a *sin kheh* depot in Singapore together with four other coolie passengers.⁵ Both petitions forcefully labelled this deception as acts of kidnapping (*guai yu*, lit. “abduct and sell”); Lau went even further to strongly criticize the shipmaster’s actions as highly immoral (*tian li he cun*, lit. “disregarding natural law”) and unconscionable (*liang xin an zai*).

Ng’s petition highlighted the issue of recruitment agents in China falsely advertising the nature of the employment that was available in the Straits Settlements to entice unsuspecting individuals. Another example of false advertising was found in a petition, no. 118 in the collection, from an anonymous individual, who was only identified in the petition’s text as the mother of a recruitment agent. This petitioner’s son, a recruitment agent, had been imprisoned by a local official after being accused of kidnapping (*you guai*, lit. “trick and

⁴ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:3.

⁵ Hare, 1:54–55.

abduct”) someone to be sent to the Straits Settlements as a *sin kheh*, possibly against his will or without his family’s knowledge.⁶ Such cases formed part of a broader pattern of exploitative recruitment practices that was present in the system of indentured labor, a pattern that colonial officials were aware of. The 1890 Straits Settlements Labour Commission found that agents often took advantage of the lack of “reliable information” to engage in “misrepresentation regarding the country and work” when recruiting potential coolies. While the commission did not label that misrepresentation as “kidnapping,” and even went so far as to declare that there was no “evidence to show that kidnapping is carried on” and imply that the Chinese were somehow irrationally fearful of the possibility of kidnapping, the commission’s report clearly verified the three petitions’ separate descriptions of exploitative recruitment. The report also confirmed that it was common for the relatives of a *sin kheh* to accuse a recruitment agent of kidnapping and demand, by writing a petition to the protector of Chinese, that their *sin kheh* relative be sent back to their hometown, just as this anonymous petitioner had done.⁷

In its report, the 1890 Labour Commission blamed this rampant misrepresentation on the recruitment agents being “generally of the most worthless class ... quite unsupervised ... [and] free to obtain men” using any means. It also pointed out that the Qing government’s strategy of restricting, rather than sanctioning and regulating, emigration only had the effect of ensuring

⁶ Hare, 1:99.

⁷ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 69, 84–86, SSLCP.

that coolie recruitment would be carried out by unsavory, unsupervised recruitment agents.⁸ In other words, the Straits Settlements government actively placed the blame for exploitative recruitment on corrupt and immoral recruiters, such as the imprisoned recruiter identified in the anonymous petition, who would apparently engage in unrespectable behavior just to make a profit in the coolie trade. Yet, as the petition showed, recruiters themselves were vulnerable and perhaps not always to blame for making their living from recruiting coolies for overseas employment.⁹ What was really to blame instead was the inhumane realities of indenture that recruiters had ostensibly misrepresented. After all, recruitment was only truly exploitative because the employment conditions that the coolies were subjected to were themselves abusive and exploitative.

Ng's and Lau's petitions did capture some of the coolies' thoughts on who or what to blame for deceptive recruiting practices. While the petitioners called the recruiters "kidnappers," they also noted that part of the deception was the situation that they were recruited into: Ng reported that the coolies were abused (*ling nüe*) and starved (*ji nei*) during their stay in Penang, while Lau reported that the coolies were detained unfairly in a *sin kheh* depot in Singapore.¹⁰ The petitions did not elaborate on what the coolies' living and working conditions were like, but from what other sources have established, Ng, Lau, and others who emigrated with them likely entered into *sin kheh* contracts, where they had to work under indenture to pay off the debt they owed to brokers and recruitment agents for their

⁸ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 83, 87, SSLCP.

⁹ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:99.

¹⁰ Hare, 1:3, 54–55.

passage money and other expenses incurred.¹¹ The petitions thus revealed that the issue of exploitative recruitment went beyond just the recruiter's acts of deception and kidnapping and extended into the inhumane conditions of indenture that awaited the coolies at the other end of their emigration journey.

A fourth petition in this group, no. 52 in the collection, showed that exploitative recruitment practices were not just confined to China, where the coolies came from, but continued in the Straits Settlements, particularly with *lau kheh*, or experienced coolies who had fulfilled their initial indenture contracts and were free to take on new employment. The petitioner, Liao Seng (*Liao Sheng*), was tricked by a broker named Ren Shaochun into signing a contract to work at a tobacco plantation, which turned out to have had a reputation for poor living and working conditions (*shui tu bu he*, lit. "the water and soil are not conducive for life") and a high mortality rate among its workers. Ren did not mention the plantation's conditions to Liao and instead, only focused on the monthly wage that Liao would earn; yet, Ren prevented Liao from backing out of the contract and returning to the place of his prior employment, leaving him with no way out of this predicament. Ren even charged Liao a commission of \$40 — about five times the monthly wage that he was promised.¹² It seemed that Ren engaged in the same kind of misrepresentation as Ng's and Lau's recruitment agents, by enticing coolies with talk of a lucrative job and omitting the inhumane conditions that they would have had to endure. The petition revealed that Liao, despite being a *lau kheh*, was still susceptible to the actions of unscrupulous recruiters like Ren.

¹¹ Blythe, "Chinese Labour in Malaya," 79–80; Ng, "Chinese Protectorate in Singapore," 86.

¹² Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:44–45.

This situation of exploitative recruitment in the Straits Settlements was not unusual: The hiring of *lau kheh* coolies was almost entirely facilitated by recruiters and depot keepers who were looking to make a quick profit by brokering new contracts between coolies and employers. While *lau kheh* coolies were ostensibly free to choose their employment, the recruiters could take advantage of the coolies' lack of knowledge of who employers were and what jobs were available to con them into signing an bad contract, just as Ren did with Liau.¹³ Notably, Liau emphasized in his petition that he had little support as a *lau kheh* from the state in finding suitable employment to make a living, which explained how he even fell prey to Ren's deception in the first place.¹⁴

The four recruitment petitions all appealed to the protector of Chinese for assistance, indicating that there was a common perspective in the Chinese community that the protector had oversight of coolie recruitment and had an obligation to rid the process of exploitative practices. The three coolie petitioners, Ng, Liau, and Lau, all expressed some variation of the sentiment that coolies in the Straits Settlements were often lonely and without networks of support to rely on, unlike how they would have had connections with family and friends in their hometown villages, and thus they especially needed the assistance of the protector. They also declared their respect and gratitude toward the protector and urged the protector to demonstrate benevolence and kindness by acting on their appeals.¹⁵ Separately, the anonymous petitioner seemed to recognize the

¹³ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 132–33, 138–40, SSLCP.

¹⁴ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:44–45.

¹⁵ Hare, 1:3, 44–45, 54–55.

protector's ability to use his enforcement powers to compel an employer to repatriate a specific *sin kheh*, with the aid of the Chinese Protectorate's records of coolie arrivals and employment contracts.¹⁶ From the wording of these four petitions, it was clear that the petitioners had faith in the authority and mandate of the Chinese Protectorate to provide for Straits Settlements coolies.

However, the findings of the 1890 Labour Commission made apparent the failure of the Chinese Protectorate to rid the recruitment process of these exploitative practices. Its report found that acts of misrepresentation, deception, and kidnapping by recruitment agents and shipmasters had existed in the Straits Settlements coolie trade from the beginning, but the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 did not prevent that exploitation of coolies from taking place during recruitment. In fact, it seemed that local officials in Qing China had taken their own measures to protect potential coolies from exploitation, even going so far as to behead a broker who was found guilty of kidnapping several coolies to Singapore and later selling them to employers in Deli, Sumatra.¹⁷ Despite the Chinese Protectorate's lack of effective intervention to curb exploitative recruitment practices, it seemed that coolies still had considerable faith in the protector to regulate and supervise the recruitment process and prevent agents and brokers from taking advantage of coolies, at least from the four petitions reviewed in this chapter thus far.

¹⁶ Hare, 1:99; "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 69, SSLCP.

¹⁷ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 2–14, 21–30, 70–71, SSLCP.

Coolie Depots

A second group of coolie petitions detailed the abuses that occurred in or around coolie depots located in the Straits Settlements. Two of these petitions came from coolies themselves, while two others came from individuals who were petitioning on behalf of their coolie relatives. Each petition noted an incident of physical abuse, fraud, or exploitation that a coolie suffered at the hands of a depot keeper, who had control over the lives of the coolies for the duration that they were housed there. Straits Settlements officials could not have imagined a more different picture when coolie depots were first established in 1877 under the Chinese Immigrants Ordinance to register and house all newly arrived coolies until their passage money was paid and an employment contract was secured.¹⁸ These petitions showed the extent to which the depots, thought to have been safe houses for the coolies, were effectively government-endorsed detention centers or barracoons where coolies faced rampant abuse and exploitation.¹⁹

The two coolie petitioners both detailed incidents of physical abuse that they suffered while being housed in the depots. In one petition, no. 5 in the collection, Chhng Fok Kham (*Zhuang Dukan*) wrote about his experiences in Loan Heng (*Luan xing*) depot in Singapore, where he suffered repeated beatings from the depot keeper after telling a colonial official who was inspecting the depot that he was being forced into an employment contract against his will, which prompted the official to order for Chhng's immediate repatriation to

¹⁸ Chinese Immigrants Ordinance, 1877, compiled in "Straits Settlements Government Gazette (SSGG) No. 13," in *SSGG, No. 1–26 (Jan. 1–June 29, 1877)* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1877), 228–29, National Library of Singapore (NLS).

¹⁹ Blythe, "Chinese Labour in Malaya," 75.

China.²⁰ In another petition, no. 47 in the collection, Li Ang Tiong (*Li Hongzhong*) wrote about his experiences in Ban Goan Liong (*Wan yuan long*) depot, also in Singapore, where he was put in solitary confinement and repeatedly beaten up by the depot keeper after requesting to return to China.²¹ Both accounts showed that resorting to physical violence was not beneath the depot keepers, especially when dealing with coolies like Chhng and Li, who did not adhere to everything that they were expected to do or say.

From both petitions, it seemed that the depot keepers were explicitly punishing coolies who needed or wanted to be sent home to China, because, in their eyes, one fewer coolie in their depot meant lost revenue and additional costs. Not only did the depot keepers collect fees for providing coolies with food and lodging — often added to a coolie’s overall debt obligation — but they also earned a healthy commission for their role in brokering contracts on behalf of coolie employers.²² Furthermore, depot keepers, as well as recruitment brokers, might have been made liable for covering the cost of repatriating a coolie. The depot keepers must have been compelled to physically punish Chhng and Li for jeopardizing their profits by needing or wanting to be repatriated. Indeed, Chhng noted that the only reason he survived the beatings was because he changed his response to say that he was, in fact, willingly entering an employment contract (*wei ren yuan ze sheng, bu ren yuan ze si*, lit. “saying I am willing means life, not saying I am willing means death”). However, these coolie petitions contradicted

²⁰ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:4–5.

²¹ Hare, 1:40–41.

²² “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 77, 94–99, SSLCP.

what the Straits Settlements government had claimed. The 1890 Labour Commission affirmed in its report that “the coolies [were not] beaten or otherwise ill-treated” in the depots, although the accuracy of this claim was highly questionable, given that the commission did not directly collect any evidence from coolies, as explained in the introduction.²³

Chhng’s petition, as well as petition no. 46 written by Chia U Te (*Xie Yudi*), also showed that the depot keepers had a role to play in forcing coolies to sign contracts for work in places other than their original intended destinations. In Chhng’s case, it seemed that the keeper of Loan Heng depot, where he was held, had arranged a contract for employment in Deli, Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies without his prior knowledge. It was precisely over this contract for Deli that Chhng was beaten up by his depot keeper, after he plainly told a colonial official that he was being forced into this contract against his will; the depot keeper’s coercion in the form of physical beatings implied that the keeper had much to gain if Chhng could be coerced into signing the contract.²⁴ In Chia’s case, he wrote that his brother was sent to work as a coolie in Sandakan, Sabah in British Borneo after being detained in Cheng Li depot in Singapore — all of which occurred without his family’s knowledge.²⁵ The petitions revealed that the Straits Settlements, especially Singapore, was a central hub in the Chinese coolie trade where brokers and employers from other colonies in Southeast Asia found the coolies that they needed to meet their labor needs, and yet coolies were often

²³ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” para. 95, SSLCP.

²⁴ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:4–5.

²⁵ Hare, 1:40.

unaware of the possibility that they could be hired to work at some unknown location other than where they first landed or where they had originally intended. The petitions also suggested that depot keepers, as the people directly supervising the coolies in the period immediately after their arrival in the Straits Settlements, wielded considerable power over the coolies' fates, which they did not hesitate to use to their advantage, as they could earn a hefty commission for the successful employment of each coolie in their depot.

While the Straits Settlements government did not acknowledge that the coolies suffered from physical abuse at the hands of their depot keepers, they did acknowledge that depot keepers had undue influence over the employment contracts that the coolies signed. The 1890 Labour Commission wrote in its report that a depot keeper could easily compel a coolie to "accept the employer from whom he can obtain the highest profit."²⁶ It reached this conclusion based on the testimony that it had collected from various depot keepers and brokers; for instance, a depot keeper named Kho Joo Chia had said:

If coolies wish to go to places where they are not required, and cannot be persuaded to go elsewhere, they have to be released after ten days, and the Singapore agent loses his money. I have had such cases this year, and lost about \$20 per head; the cases are not entered in my books.²⁷

Chin Fui Lan, another depot keeper, had also said:

I have lost about 200 Khehs [coolies] this year before they had signed contracts; some escape, and some were discharged by the Protector. For those who ran away I paid \$20, for those discharged \$10, and for those returned to Hongkong nothing... They will agree to go anywhere for work if they cannot get work in the places they prefer. If they refuse to go their

²⁶ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 96, SSLCP.

²⁷ Appendix I of "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 74, SSLCP.

relations must redeem them, and if not we must let them go after ten days.²⁸

From Kho's and Chin's testimonies, it was evident that depot keepers had an incentive to strongarm a coolie into accepting an employment contract that was most profitable to them, rather than most beneficial for the coolie, even if the contract was for a location other than the coolie's intended destination. This undue influence was reflected in the petitions from Chhng and Chia: It was clear that Chhng was forced — even physically abused — to accept an employment contract for Deli against his will and to lie to the depot inspector that he had willingly agreed to the contract, and that Chia's coolie brother was likely sent to work in Sandakan against his and his family's wishes.

Chhng's petition also highlighted the crucial role of the Straits Settlements government to inspect coolie depots and monitor the welfare of the coolies who were housed there. Chhng had initially told a colonial official inspecting his depot that he was being sent to work in Deli against his will before the depot keeper intervened to coerce Chhng to change his tune. The authority to inspect depots had been delegated to the protector of Chinese or his staff in the Chinese Protectorate by the 1877 Chinese Immigrants Ordinance— the same ordinance that first established these depots.²⁹ The 1890 Labour Commission was somehow confident that the regular inspection of depots was sufficient to ensure that most depot keepers were not exploiting, physically or otherwise, the coolies whom they housed, even though it was possible that some amount of exploitation would still

²⁸ Appendix I of "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 323, 332–33, SSLCP.

²⁹ Chinese Immigrants Ordinance, 1877, compiled in "SSGG No. 13," 228–29, NLS.

take place because the Chinese Protectorate was often overworked and understaffed and the depot keepers themselves had somewhat questionable character.³⁰ Indeed, Chhng's experience demonstrated that mere inspection alone was insufficient to protect him from an abusive and coercive depot keeper, because the depot keeper easily beat him into submission, and yet Chhng still had enough faith in the government to petition the Chinese Protectorate to fulfill its duty of care to the coolies, as well as to investigate the incident of abuse.

On the issue of coolies being sent to work in unknown locations, while the petitions seemed to show that coolies and their families were deeply distressed by that issue, it seemed that the Straits Settlements government thought otherwise, since coolies were supposedly offered more lucrative terms in their employment contracts for work in places outside the Straits Settlements, like Borneo or Sumatra. According to the report of the 1890 Labour Commission, a typical *sin keh* contract for plantation work in the Straits Settlements or native Malay states provided no advance and \$30 in annual wages, while a typical contract for work on a tobacco plantation in Borneo or Sumatra included an immediate cash advance of \$10.50. The commission acknowledged that there were multiple reports from coolies that their cash advance was stolen by a broker or depot keeper, but then dismissed the reports as largely unsubstantiated and the theft as “an abuse which may be expected to continue so long as the present system prevails and large advances are given.” It seemed like the common perception in the government was that even if coolies did not choose to work in those places,

³⁰ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 97–100, SSLCP.

they — and not just their broker — certainly benefited from the more lucrative terms in their employment contracts.³¹ This perception appeared to have persisted well into the 20th century: In 1947, then-Secretary for Chinese Affairs in Malaya Wilfred Lawson Blythe wrote that “the terms of the Sumatra contracts were more attractive than those of local contracts... [and] the cash advance must have proved a strong inducement not only to the broker who would fleece the coolie of as much of it as possible, but also to the coolie who might retain some few dollars.”³² If anything, the colonial government was only concerned that the labor demand in these other places had put a strain on the supply of coolies in the Straits Settlements, causing trouble for employers and the colony’s economy.³³ The petitions were ultimately silent on whether there truly were benefits that the coolies accrued from working in places outside of the Straits Settlements.

A fourth petition in this group, no. 19 in the collection, showed another side to the abuses that depot keepers carried out. The petitioner, Ten Ah Ek (*Zheng Ahye*), was tricked out of some money that he had wanted to use to redeem his nephew from a coolie depot. Ten wrote that he was asked to hand over the money, amounting to about \$18, before he could be reunited with his nephew, but the fraudsters disappeared with the money and his nephew was nowhere to be found. The situation was deeply humiliating for Ten, who said that this act of fraud robbed him of not just his money, but also his dignity (*ren cai liang kong*,

³¹ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 104, 107–8, SSLCP.

³² Blythe, “Chinese Labour in Malaya,” 80.

³³ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 62–63, SSLCP.

lit. “personhood and money both disappeared”).³⁴ Ten’s petition revealed that the system of coolie depots exposed the family members of coolies to exploitation as well, particularly those who wanted to redeem their coolie relatives out of continued detention in a depot.

The fact that the system of coolie depots allowed individuals like Ten to purchase their relatives’ freedom by repaying a debt of passage money and other fees showed that the detention of coolies was used merely as a means to ensure that depot keepers and brokers earn their profits from the coolie trade, rather than to guarantee that employers had a stable supply of coolie labor or that the Straits Settlements government had a centralized place to register and protect the welfare of all newly arrived coolies. So long as depot keepers were able to recover and profit off their initial investment in a coolie’s debt, the coolie could be released, no matter if it were an employer or a concerned relative who was paying. The Straits Settlements government acknowledged as much about the intentions of the depot system: Based on a strict interpretation of the original Chinese Immigrants Ordinance of 1880, the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements ruled in 1890 that a coolie who no longer owed his passage money to a shipmaster could not be detained in a depot, even if the debt was now owed to a depot keeper. The court’s decision led the government to modify the Chinese Immigrants Ordinance, also in 1890, to allow depot keepers to continue detaining coolies until their passage money debt could be fully recovered.³⁵ This sequence of events revealed that the

³⁴ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:21–22.

³⁵ Fox v. Tan Heng Wee, (1890) 4 Kyshe 604; “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 18–20, 29–30, SSLCP. See also Chinese Immigrants

overriding motive behind the operation of coolie depots was to obtain a profit off the backs of coolies, as well as potentially their concerned relatives who would try to redeem their freedom from detention in coolie depots.

Chia's petition also showed that the exploitative nature of depot detention extended beyond the coolies to affect their family members. In Chia's case, his brother being lured into a coolie depot and forced to work in Borneo caused much anguish for their 80-year-old elderly mother and his brother's wife and son, all of whom were not informed of his brother's whereabouts and likely depended on his brother's coolie wages to survive. Chia added in his petition that his family members yearned for his brother to return (*yi lü wang qie*) and reunite as one family (*gu rou chong feng*).³⁶ These perspectives made the two petitions from Ten and Chia stand out from the rest. Ten's and Chia's petitions served as reminders to colonial officials who read Hare's documentary collection that coolies were not anonymous laborers who could be commodified and traded, but individuals with aspirations of a better life abroad and family networks that spanned oceans and extended across borders. In other words, Ten and Chia, through their petitions, resisted the logic of the colonial state to only see coolies as faceless laborers who were without families or livelihoods to think about.

Like other coolie petitions, the four petitions that covered the issue of abuses in coolie depots all appealed to the protector of Chinese for assistance,

Ordinance 1880, updated 1891, compiled in John Augustus Harwood, ed., *The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, from the 1st April 1867 to the 1st June 1896; Together with Certain Acts of Parliament, Orders of Her Majesty in Council, Letters Patent, and Indian Acts in Force in the Colony of the Straits Settlements*, vol. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1886), 692–96.

³⁶ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:21–22, 40.

which further showed that the petitioners had faith in the Straits Settlements government's ability to care and provide for coolies who were in distress. In making a plea for assistance, the petitioners often emphasized the colonial state's responsibility to assist the poor and the vulnerable, especially coolies who underwent perilous emigration journeys and were powerless against abusive depot keepers. For instance, Chia wrote that he was prompted to present his petition only because he knew that the Straits Settlements government practiced enlightened and benevolent rule (*fa zheng shi ren*) and that the protector was committed to provide for Chinese immigrants like they were his children (*bao min ru chi*). Similarly, Li wrote that he was appealing for the protector to demonstrate virtue and rescue his "insignificant" coolie life (*jiu min yi ming*) from the humiliation of being physically abused by his depot keeper.³⁷ No matter the possibility that the colonial government was complicit in perpetuating the exploitation of coolies, the petitioners consistently turned to the protector for assistance in their appeals, which worked to legitimate the authority of the Chinese Protectorate to control and police coolie lives.

The petitioners were also careful to frame their appeals as seeking investigation into an allegation of abuse or injustice by a depot keeper, rather than just requesting punishment or retribution for the depot keeper. Despite most of the four petitions containing a lengthy description of the wrongs that their depot keepers had committed, the petitioners Chhng, Ten, and Li stopped short of making a certain accusation, and instead requested that the protector launch his

³⁷ Hare, 1:40–41.

own investigation into the matter.³⁸ It seemed that the coolie petitioners recognized that the colonial government needed to follow due process in responding to their appeals, which demonstrated that they had a sophisticated understanding of legal procedure as it pertained to petitioning.

Contracts and Wages

The third group of Straits Settlements coolie petitions detailed the disputes that occurred between employers and coolies concerning wage payments and contract violations, including employers denying the freedom of movement to coolies who had completed the term of service stipulated in their indenture contracts. Three of these petitions came from coolies themselves; the remaining petition came from the father of a coolie whose employer was exploitative. Collectively, the petitions showed that despite the efforts of the Chinese Protectorate to ensure that coolie contracts were adhered to and conditions of employment were acceptable, coolies remained susceptible to exploitative employment situations and had little avenues for redress. Nevertheless, coolies retained their perception of the protectorate as a reliable arbitrator of disputes and enforcer of employment contracts, as demonstrated by these petitions.

Of the four petitions, two of them — one from a coolie himself, no. 13 in the collection, and another from the father of a coolie, no. 111 in the collection — raised the issue of employers withholding wages from coolie employees. Song Chu Kang (*Song Zijiang*), a coolie, wrote that his employer had promised him a

³⁸ The petitioners used words like *cha jiu*, *zhui jiu* (both lit. “investigate and ascertain”), and *xun wen* (lit. “interrogate”) to describe their requests for further investigations. Hare, 1:4–5, 21–22, 40–41.

wage raise and a commission payment based on his performance, but then failed to deliver on both promises.³⁹ Similarly, Ten Jun (*Zheng Yayang*) wrote that his son, Zheng Cidong, was promised a raise in wages, but his son's employer eventually reneged on that promise.⁴⁰ In both cases, these missing wage payments did not seem to be formally stipulated on any employment contract. Instead, Song and Ten both relied on the word of their employer as binding. Their petitions emphasized the power imbalance between a coolie and his employer and condemned these untrustworthy employers in rather strong terms for taking advantage of vulnerable coolies who depended heavily on the wages. Ten denounced his son's employer for being greedy and evil (*tan e xi guan*) for not paying the wages that had been promised. Likewise, Song claimed to have been hardworking and did not expect his employer to be so heartless as to deny him his wages for the sake of greater profits (*wei fu bu ren, jian li wang yi*, lit. "forgo benevolence for wealth, forget one's morals for personal benefit").

Both Song's and Ten's petitions clearly stated that the coolies were relying on the missing wage payments to support their families, especially their elderly parents. This sentiment was not surprising to find in Ten's petition, given that he was a father petitioning on behalf of his coolie son. Ten wrote that he was compelled to petition about the missing wages that was owed to his son because, being 70 years of age, he counted on his son for financial support.⁴¹ This sentiment also appeared in Song's petition. Song wrote that he was poor and was

³⁹ Hare, 1:13–14.

⁴⁰ Hare, 1:92–93.

⁴¹ Hare, 1:92–93.

counting on the wages to not only support himself, but also to take care of his elderly mother back home in China in her retirement.⁴² In both petitions, there was a strong sense of the coolies as individuals who lived in poverty and emigrated from China to work overseas in pursuit of a better life, not just for themselves but also for their families, to whom they hoped to be able to remit their coolie wages. Indeed, previous scholarship on indentured labor in the Straits Settlements has established that coolies were pushed to emigrate from Qing China because there were more lucrative employment opportunities overseas, in places like the Straits Settlements, than within China. At the time, China also faced a severe problem with overpopulation that caused food shortages and inflation in crop prices due to the increased pressure on agricultural production.⁴³ For coolies who made sacrifices or took out loans to emigrate and work outside of China, being denied their wage payments would have been devastating for their livelihoods and their families' survival. Both petitions also highlighted the importance of filial piety for these coolies. They implied that the employers, by refusing to pay the previously promised wages, were preventing the coolies from carrying out their filial duties to their parents, which worsened the immorality of the employers' actions.

From the wording of these two petitions, it also appeared that the missing wages were part of wage raises that the employers had verbally promised to the coolies but had not put in writing. The situation described in these petitions highlighted a weakness in the system established by the Straits Settlements government to protect the welfare of the coolies who pass through its ports. While

⁴² Hare, 1:13–14.

⁴³ Lee, *The British as Rulers*, 75–76; Yen, *Coolies and Mandarins*, 33–36.

an employment contract with a specified wage must be signed in the presence of an official from the Chinese Protectorate prior to the coolie's departure from the depot, there was no mechanism to ensure that employers followed through with the contract's terms or would fulfill all promises outside of the contract, including raising wages or paying a commission, after the coolie had begun working. In fact, the 1890 Labour Commission noted that:

The unsatisfactory condition of the Chinese labourer is due almost entirely to the absence of inspection. Up to the date on which he signs his contract he is looked after and cared for, and much has been done for him, but from this point, so far as the Protectorate is concerned, he disappears. His name remains on the register but that is all. With the carrying out of the contract terms or his release on its expiration the Protectorate does not concern itself.

It went on to recommend that the Straits Settlements government put in a place a system for inspecting the welfare of all coolies at their places of employment to ensure that the terms stipulated in the contract were adhered to and address any other complaints, including unpaid wages, that had emerged.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, in the case of the two petitioners, such official inspections were evidently not sufficient to prevent employers from taking advantage of coolies and cheating them of their wages.

Ten's petition raised another issue of employers further detaining and not releasing coolies, even after they had completed the term of indentured service that was stipulated in their contracts. According to Ten, his son's employer not only withheld wages, but also refused to release his son even though his son's three-year employment contract had expired, which Ten was particularly upset

⁴⁴ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 36, 119, 152-61, SSLCP.

about because he had wanted to be reunited with his son.⁴⁵ Similarly, a petition from Si To Chng (*Situ Zhuang*) and several other coolies, no. 109 in the collection, detailed how their employer had continued to detain them even after they had completed their term of service of 3 months, and even subjected them to repeated physical abuse (*fu si qi ling, bian ta li zhi lit.* “repeatedly bullied, non-stop beatings”).⁴⁶ This problem of extended detention was certainly not unique, even though there were only these two petitions from Hare’s collection that explicitly mentioned its occurrence. In most employment contracts, it was stipulated that coolies were only obliged to work until they earned enough wages to repay the debt that they owed to their employer for their passage money and other fees incurred during the emigration process; for *sin kheh* in the Straits Settlements, the typical term was 360 days, or about one year, of work. However, the Labour Commission’s report stated that coolies “were frequently detained long after the year has expired for which they contracted, and after they have done more than 360 days’ fair work.”⁴⁷ This problem indicated that the system of drawing up employment contracts under the auspices of the colonial government was insufficient to prevent employers from taking advantage of coolies. It was easy for an employer to simply extend a coolie’s indenture obligation by giving him an advance on his wages and adding that to his debt, thus allowing the employer to continue restricting a coolie’s freedom even after his employment contract had supposedly lapsed.

⁴⁵ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:92–93.

⁴⁶ “Si To” is a Chinese compound surname, equivalent to *Situ* in standard Pinyin. Hare, 1:90–91.

⁴⁷ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 104–8, 113, 117, SSLCP.

A fourth petition, no. 18 in this collection, rounded out this group of petitions that concerned disputes between employers and coolies. The petitioner, Phin Liu Chhun (*Peng Liucun*), claimed that his employer had framed him for fraud and released him from his contract, but held on to Phin's personal belongings. Phin appealed to the protector of Chinese for help with guaranteeing that he can safely retrieve his belongings from his employer, as he was afraid of being abused (*ru da*). Like Song and Ten, Phin was unequivocal in his criticism of his employer for taking advantage of vulnerable *sin kheh* like himself by falsely accusing them of crimes that they did not commit. It seemed that Phin had no way of defending himself against the false accusation or seeking recourse against his employer in the moment, and as a result, he was forcibly released from his job.⁴⁸

Collectively, all four petitions from Song, Phin, Si To, and Ten appealed to the Straits Settlements government to act against these employers for alleged abuse and exploitation of their coolies. The petitioners pitted the immoral and unjust employers against the benevolent and merciful state and urged the latter to act in the interest of the vulnerable coolies. For instance, Song confidently declared that the British colonial government practiced kind, unbiased governance (*da ying shan zheng, guo fa wu pian*),⁴⁹ while Phin expressed hope that the protector of Chinese would weed out wrongdoing and protect the law-abiding coolies (*chu bao an liang*, lit. “remove violent and protect kindness”).⁵⁰ Similarly, Si To wrote that the protector was compassionate (*ce yin, ai chi zhi xin*, lit. “heart

⁴⁸ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:20–21.

⁴⁹ Hare, 1:13–14.

⁵⁰ Hare, 1:20–21.

of sympathy and love for the people”) and had a responsibility to provide for the welfare of Chinese coolies,⁵¹ while Ten complimented the protector on his boundless generosity in considering the appeal.⁵²

To address the problem of abuse and exploitation from employers, the petitions called for greater intervention from the colonial government in coolie lives, reflecting the coolies’ faith in the state as an infallible protector, even though it was complicit in the wrongdoing of employers by facilitating the system of labor indenture in the Straits Settlements. Even as the petitioners criticized their employers for not respecting the employment contracts and taking advantage of coolies in general, they also legitimized the authority of the colonial government by addressing their petitions to officials like the protector of Chinese.

⁵¹ Hare, 1:90–91.

⁵² Hare, 1:92–93.

Chapter Three: Petitions of Power

While most of the labor-related petitions in Hare's collection came from coolies themselves, several of them were written by people in positions of authority over coolies, e.g. employers, brokers, and depot keepers. The fact that these individuals would pen their grievances down in this form seemed to confirm that petitioning was a legitimate form of political expression that was used widely throughout the Straits Settlements, and not only by the disenfranchised or marginalized members of society such as coolies. The presence of these other "petitions of power" alongside the coolie petitions thus placed the coolies on the same level as their employers, brokers, depot keepers, etc., in terms of using petitioning as a form of legal protest. Despite the petitions being written by people with greater power and standing, at least over coolies, they still had to adhere to the colonial state's established norms of petitioning. They were largely identical to the coolie petitions in their structure and their use of the language of submission and civility. However, while the coolies appealed to the colonial government for protection from abuse or exploitation, these persons of authority appealed more for officials to allow for them to continue exploiting coolies, albeit under the guise of correcting an injustice that they ostensibly had suffered at the hands of the coolies.

From a Depot Keeper

The first of these petitions of power, no. 48 in the collection, was written by a man named Lo Ban Tsai (*Lu Wencai*), who was appealing for a license to

open a coolie depot for *lau kheh*, or experienced coolies who had already been released from their initial *sin kheh* employment obligation by their employer. Lo claimed that the Straits Settlements attracted many coolies seeking employment and that adding a *lau kheh* depot would provide free coolies who were currently unemployed with a place to stay as they seek another employment contract.¹

Indeed, in this period, *lau kheh* depots were run by private operators who were licensed by the Chinese Protectorate under the Crimping Ordinance of 1877, much like the *sin kheh* depots.² As of 1891, there were 14 *lau kheh* depots across the Straits Settlements that were licensed to house a total of 872 coolies, made up of eight depots in Singapore and six in Penang that can accommodate 592 and 280 coolies respectively.³ Even though the *lau kheh* were not wide-eyed new arrivals and had already gained some experience as coolies, depot keepers still sought to exploit them. A depot keeper would act as an agent for both the coolie and the employer and insist on taking a commission from either party, or even both parties, for every single employment contract that he successfully brokered. With their commissions at stake, depot keepers would use cash advances and other incentives to force the *lau kheh* to give up their status as free coolies and join their depot, where lodging and food was provided, but at the coolies' own expense. Once in the depot, the coolies would be forced to sign a contract that maximizes the depot keepers' profits rather than the coolies' own welfare, or worse, even

¹ Hare, 1:41–42.

² Crimping Ordinance, 1877, compiled in Harwood, *Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, 1:683–86.

³ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 94–99, SSLCP.

lead the coolies into an abusive or exploitative job. However, the *lau kheh* had no recourse to break a contract and leave an untenable employment situation without losing their cash advance or facing criminal prosecution. Some depot keepers would also induce an unwilling *lau kheh* to sign a contract for work in places outside of British Malaya, such as in Borneo or Sumatra, as was often the case with the *sin kheh* too.⁴ Clearly, *lau kheh* depot keepers were as unscrupulous as *sin kheh* depot keepers in exploiting coolies; in fact, there was likely great overlap between the two groups because of the economies of scale that were associated with operating multiple coolie depots.

In the petition, Lo revealed little information about himself, unlike other petitioners who would state their place of origin in China and their age. He only identified himself rather pejoratively as a “commoner” (*yi min*); yet someone who would apply for a license to run a coolie depot would have likely already established themselves as a business owner or merchant, or even owned other coolie depots in the Straits Settlements.⁵ In reality, depot keepers had considerable power to influence the fates of the coolies whom they housed, as explained in the previous chapter. They also had plenty of social connections to employers, recruiters, and other brokers within the ecosystem of indentured labor in the Straits Settlements, which allowed them to maximize profits at the expense of the coolies.⁶ By belittling himself as an ordinary man and a humble petitioner, Lo

⁴ Lee, *The British as Rulers*, 78–85; Ng, “Chinese Protectorate in Singapore,” 85; “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 130–34, SSLCP.

⁵ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:41–42.

⁶ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 94–99, SSLCP.

sought to present himself as a man whose appeal was worthy of the colonial government's consideration and intervention, rather than as an affluent and well-connected businessman who did not actually need further assistance from the colonial government.

The main reason that Lo gave to support his petition for a depot license was that unemployed *lau kheh* would benefit from having a roof over their heads and some assistance with their search for new employment. From what has been uncovered about the extractive nature of *lau kheh* depots, that reason seemed especially disingenuous. Lo claimed that *lau kheh* who were without employment seriously desired a labor contract to be self-sufficient (*zi shi qi li*, lit. "rely on one's own strength to make a living"); yet, in his view, it was difficult for unemployed *lau kheh* to secure a long-term contract that would allow them to make a living and support their family in China, apparently because coolies had flocked to the Straits Settlements in the tens of thousands, causing the supply of coolies to far outstrip the demand for labor. Lo then framed his potential depot as filling a specific need to provide *lau kheh* with assistance in seeking out employment contracts.⁷

The situation of *lau kheh* unemployment that Lo had sketched out to support his petition did not match what was described in the report of the 1890 Labour Commission. The commission had declared that the main problem was, in fact, the scarcity of *lau kheh* coolies, which it chalked up to, at least in part, employers unfairly detaining *sin kheh* and retaining their labor even after their

⁷ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:41–42.

contracts have expired. The commission also blamed depot keepers and other intermediaries for extorting high broker fees from employers who wanted to hire *lau kheh*, thereby raising their labor costs. In fact, it seemed that the commission leaned in favor of cutting depot keepers and other middlemen out of the process and allowing for “more direct means of communication between the employer and the coolies seeking work,” seeing as the *lau kheh* were ostensibly free coolies who could make their own decisions on where and how to earn their keep and the employers could recruit independently of the brokers. Additionally, the commission even offered a strongly worded recommendation to “abolish the licensed depots and brokers” to resolve the concern over the exploitation and scarcity of *lau kheh* coolies.⁸ Considering the sentiments of the Straits Settlements government, as contained in this report, perhaps Lo felt an urgent need for a written appeal to obtain a depot license because he felt that his income and livelihood as a depot keeper was under serious threat.

Given the supposed precarity of being a depot keeper, Lo was careful to emphasize just how benevolent and effective British colonialism in the Straits Settlements had been, so as to make a compelling case for a depot license and, by extension, the continued presence of depots. He made no mention of previous rejections, if any, by the Chinese Protectorate of his application for a license, and he did not reveal any resentment at having to present a detailed petition in order for his application to be heard. Lo even stated that the reason the Straits Settlements was such a popular destination for coolies in general was because of

⁸ “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” paras. 132–33, 138–40, 162–95, SSLCP.

its reputation as being effectively governed by the British (*zheng jian xing qing*, lit. “simply governed, crime-free”), which encouraged these coolies to embark on arduous emigration journeys (*ti shan hang hai*, lit. “climb mountains and sail the seas”) to reach the Straits Settlements.⁹ Perhaps Lo had hoped that by praising the colonial government, he could convince the protector of Chinese on the merits of his appeal for a license and the government as a whole on the necessity of *lau kheh* depots for both coolies and employers. Thus, in content as well as in tone, Lo’s petition seriously mischaracterized the *lau kheh* employment situation and the benefits of coolie depots, making his claims highly suspect.

From a Shipmaster

The second of these petitions, no. 53 in the collection, was written by a shipmaster named Ong Se Thong (*Weng Shitong*), who was seeking permission to further detain a group of 168 *sin kheh* who apparently owed him a large amount in passage money — over \$9,500. Ong wrote that the *sin kheh* had yet to find employment and, hence, could not repay the debt they had incurred for their journey from Hainan to the Straits Settlements on his ship.¹⁰

Ong’s petition was brief and perfunctory, with almost an exclusive focus on the debt that he was owed by the *sin kheh*. The absence of any further explanation might point to how mundane and typical Ong’s request would have been to the colonial bureaucracy. Indeed, there were many coolies who arrived in the Straits Settlements as “unpaid passengers,” i.e. they arrived on a credit ticket which placed them in debt to the broker or shipmaster for the cost of their

⁹ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 41–42.

¹⁰ Hare, 1:45.

passage; in 1889, Singapore and Penang saw a total of 21,213 such *sin kheh* arriving at their ports.¹¹ Upon the coolies' arrival, the broker or shipmaster was then permitted to detain these indebted *sin kheh* in a licensed coolie depot for 10 days or until the debt was paid in full, as stipulated in the Chinese Immigrants Ordinance of 1880.¹² The only way for a *sin kheh* to repay his passage money was for a willing employer to hire him and pay an advance on his wages, so if the *sin kheh* could not find employment — as it seemed to be the case with the coolies whom Ong had ferried — his debtor might appeal to extend the detention until such time as the debt could be repaid.¹³ Given that detaining *sin kheh* who arrived on a credit ticket was a common and institutionalized occurrence, Ong's petition was likely one out of many other similar appeals from brokers and shipmasters to the protector of Chinese, which explained its brevity.

The situation that Ong described — shipmasters ferrying coolies to the Straits Settlements and extending their own credit — was highly unusual by the time Hare's collection was published in 1894. The 1890 Labour Commission wrote in its report that most steamships no longer brought passengers to the Straits Settlements directly on credit; instead, coolie brokers would pay shipmasters for the coolies' passages ahead of time and then try to secure a profit by handing the coolies over to a willing employer or recruiter upon their arrival. However, there was one exception: ships from Hainan ("Hailam") were still

¹¹ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 32, SSLCP.

¹² Chinese Immigrants Ordinance, 1880, updated 1891, compiled in Harwood, *Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements*, 1:692–96.

¹³ Blythe, "Chinese Labour in Malaya," 72–76; Ng, "Chinese Protectorate in Singapore," 82–84.

transporting coolies to the Straits Settlements, especially Malacca, on a direct line of credit without the involvement of middlemen, and this seemed to be the exact situation that Ong had described. The report seemed to attribute the persistence of this direct credit ticket system to the fact that many coolie employers in Malacca were Chinese tapioca planters who could hire coolies directly by relying on their own recruitment and shipping networks in China and thus dispense with the brokerage.¹⁴ Even without the brokers, it seemed that the *sin kheh* were still forced into indenture and could be detained indefinitely if there were no jobs for them and no employers who were willing to take on their debt to shipmasters like Ong.

Ong's petition also revealed his lack of care for the welfare of the *sin kheh*, which was typical of the intermediary brokers involved in the transport and recruitment of coolies. In the first place, Ong was making a speculation on human lives by bringing the Hainan coolies to the Straits Settlements on his ship and hoping to turn them over to willing employers for a profit. While Ong's petition did not offer any details on how the emigrating coolies were first recruited, brokers were known to falsely advertise the destination and nature of employment to prospective emigrants, or to recruit coolies for the general market rather than a particular occupation, all with the sole interest of making a quick profit.¹⁵ Ong was probably not any different. By focusing on the debt that the *sin kheh* owed, Ong showed that he was only concerned about making a profit from the speculation he made in bringing 168 coolies from Hainan to the Straits

¹⁴ Blythe, "Chinese Labour in Malaya," 82, 92; "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 33–35, 39–40, SSLCP.

¹⁵ Blythe, "Chinese Labour in Malaya," 76; "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 83–84, 129, SSLCP.

Settlements, with no regard for their lives. In fact, if Ong did later recover the passage money from the *sin kheh* after extending their detention, they would have been released from the coolie depot, only to become indentured to their employer for at least a year with no reasonable way of breaking the contract without penalty. In the way that Ong worded his petition, he implied that the coolies would have their freedom as soon as they cleared their debt with him and did not acknowledge at all that indenture was what awaited them outside of the depot.

Ong's appeal to further detain the *sin kheh* elided any mention of the living conditions in the depot where they would be kept. Coolie depots were tightly-packed and cramped spaces: In testimony provided to the 1890 Labour Commission, Protector of Chinese Francis Powell said that every coolie had an enforced minimum allowance of 20 square feet of space in the depot.¹⁶ All 168 of the coolies who owed Ong their passage money were likely confined to a single room in a depot. The conditions in the depots were also unhygienic, with sanitation facilities that were poorly ventilated or located too close to cookhouses, yet it seemed like the conditions were not severe enough to warrant any concern or action from the colonial government at the time.¹⁷ The poor living conditions that the coolies were subjected to contributed to frequent outbreaks of diseases like cholera and smallpox, which had a real impact on their morbidity and mortality.¹⁸ Extending the detention of *sin kheh* meant prolonging their experience

¹⁶ F. Powell, December 9, 1890, quoted in appendix I of "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," para. 2155, SSLCP.

¹⁷ "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour," paras. 48, 94, SSLCP.

¹⁸ Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76–85; Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space:*

of such inhumane conditions, which made Ong's petition more like a request to further subject coolies to ill-treatment.

Even in his brief petition, Ong did not dispense with praise for the colonial state. In the last line, Ong declared that the protector of Chinese was extremely generous (*hai liang wang han*, lit. "generosity is as limitless as the sea") and kind (*hong en mi ji*, lit. "endless imperial kindness"), and thus would grant his appeal to further detain the *sin kheh*.¹⁹ Such effusive language followed the established norms of petitioning, but it stood out when included in a petition that was as brief and routine as Ong's, which provided only the essential details of the debt that was owed to him by the *sin kheh*. It seemed that a petition to the state in the Straits Settlements remained a formal document, with expectations of civil and submissive language, even if the appeal might be ordinary, or the petitioner might have social or economic power.

From an Employer

The third and final one of these petitions, no. 72 in the collection, was written by an anonymous business owner, who claimed that one of his former coolie employees, surnamed Chen, absconded to China after embezzling \$1,700 and attempted to seek refuge from his debts by converting to Christianity. Unlike the previous two petitions from Lo and Ong, this anonymous petition was addressed to the Chinese consul in the Straits Settlements rather than a British colonial official, and it called for the consul to instruct the relevant missionaries to

Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 90–101.

¹⁹ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:45.

reject Chen as a convert on account of his status as a fugitive.²⁰ The author of this anonymous petition emphasized that he deliberately addressed it to the Chinese consul after having previously brought the case to British officials in Penang, which shed light on how the two powers jostled for influence over the Chinese in the Straits Settlements in this period.

According to the petitioner, the embezzlement occurred in Penang, where he had opened a tobacco and liquor business and hired Chen. After the theft was discovered and reported to the local officials, Chen was arrested, but he was later released on account of a plea from his older brother and fled home without returning the money that he had stolen. It seemed that the petitioner saw this as a miscarriage of justice and, as a result, lost his faith in the colonial government to compel Chen to return the embezzled money, which prompted him to write to the consul with his appeal.²¹ The petitioner felt that the Chinese consul perhaps had a greater ability than local officials to resolve this legal dispute and bring Chen to justice, revealing his perception that, in this case, the colonial government's effort to protect the Chinese community had failed, while the consul's overtures had succeeded, despite British perceptions that the consul was overexerting his extraterritorial influence and subverting local rule.²² In choosing to address the Chinese consul, the petitioner explicitly acknowledged the consul's influence and

²⁰ Hare, 1:58–59. For a deeper discussion of the patterns of conversion into Christianity for political or legal reasons in southern China during this time, see Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

²¹ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:58–59.

²² Tang, "British Policy Towards the Chinese in the Straits Settlements," 179–222.

implicitly condemned the colonial government's incompetence in handling the case of embezzlement.

The anonymous petition also differed from others in not having a tone of submission and admiration toward the addressee. It contained a detailed narration of how the embezzlement occurred and what else took place leading up to the moment of petitioning; in other words, it was neither brief nor perfunctory, unlike Ong's petition, yet it did not offer any compliments or words of praise for the consul. Instead, the petitioner emphasized that he was appealing to the consul only after Straits Settlements officials were unsuccessful in resolving the case, as a last resort.²³ Perhaps petitions from the Chinese community to the protector or other colonial officials needed to engage in praise to appear more convincing, or else the petitioners, who were not always seen as full-fledged subjects of the British Empire, might be ignored, especially if they were coolies. On the other hand, petitions to the consul did not need to contain such flattery, because petitioners could rely on the *raison d'être* of the consulate — its obligation to render assistance to all members of the Chinese community.²⁴ The observation here that the anonymous petition did not contain any flattery toward the consul further highlighted the tone of submission and praise that was found in other petitions addressed to the protector, which showed how petitioning the Straits Settlements government could have had the unintended effect of validating the colonial hierarchy that placed British rulers above Chinese immigrants, whereas petitioning the Chinese consul did not.

²³ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:58–59.

²⁴ Tang, "British Policy Towards the Chinese in the Straits Settlements," 166–78.

Throughout the appeal, the petitioner labeled Chen as dishonest (*you dao ni qing*, lit. “has intention to steal and hide”) and the act of embezzlement as a severe breach of trust, but he failed to consider the circumstances that would compel Chen to steal the money in the first place. The petitioner wrote that he initially hired Chen at least partially out of pity, because Chen could not find lodging or employment upon arriving in Penang (*wu chu qi shen*, lit. “no place to stay”), which implied that Chen was likely to have been a *sin kheh*, or newly arrived coolie, available for hire under indenture.²⁵ The petition did not provide more details on Chen, but other sources had pointed out that coolie brokers would sometimes send *sin kheh* off to Penang against their will, either because Penang employers were paying more for coolie labor than employers in Singapore, or there just was no employment to be found for the *sin kheh* elsewhere, so it was possible that Chen fell into this group of *sin kheh* who were unwillingly sent to Penang.²⁶ From the petition alone, it was not clear what drove Chen to steal the \$1,700 from his employer, but it might have had to do with him being in a foreign place against his will and working under indenture. The petitioner also mentioned that Chen’s older brother pleaded for Chen’s release, which suggested that Chen might have been trying to support his family — a near-impossible task under indenture.²⁷ While the petitioner framed Chen as an evil thief, it was more likely that Chen was forced to embezzle the money under circumstances of indenture that the petitioner, as an employer of coolies, was himself complicit in.

²⁵ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:58–59.

²⁶ Blythe, “Chinese Labour in Malaya,” 74; “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour,” para. 37, SSLCP.

²⁷ Hare, *Text Book of Documentary Chinese*, 1:58–59.

Overall, these three petitions, authored by a depot keeper, a shipmaster, and a coolie employer respectively, showed that petitioning was a legitimate form of political expression for the Chinese community in the Straits Settlements. Assuming that Hare's collection was truly representative of Chinese language petitions in the Straits Settlements, then its inclusion of petitions by individuals who had socioeconomic power showed that petitioning was a broadly valid way of seeking assistance from and voicing grievances to a government official, and that petitioning was not restricted to a particular group or class in society.

The three petitions reviewed all gave voice to personal pleas for bureaucratic flexibility. Lo's and Ong's petitions appealed to the protector of Chinese to exercise his discretion to grant a depot license or permit the detention of *sin kheh* beyond the statutory maximum. The anonymous petition appealed to the Chinese consul to make an extraordinary intervention in a criminal case involving the embezzlement of money. Collectively, these petitioners insisted that specific government and consular officials make exceptions to the norm and carry out their requests on account of their specific set of exceptional circumstances. They did not accept the colonial bureaucracy as an abstract power over their lives that could not be resisted and instead sought personalized assistance from the bureaucracy, in the same way that petitioners in British India persistently did, even when they faced overwhelming and repeated rejection.²⁸ In the case of the anonymous petition, the petitioner even sought assistance outside of the colonial bureaucracy from the Chinese consul, which indicated that not only was the

²⁸ Stephens, "A Bureaucracy of Rejection," 198–200.

consul able to provide assistance to Chinese immigrants in the Straits Settlements, but also that there was no recourse available from within the bureaucracy for the petitioner to be repaid and the embezzler to be punished.

Even as the petitioners Lo and Ong resisted colonial power by seeking bureaucratic flexibility, they still wrote their petitions using submissive and civil language to refer to colonial authorities. They were effusive in their praise of the protector of Chinese and expressed their faith in the benevolence of the colonial government to grant them their appeals. Notably, Ong did not skimp on this language even though his petition was brief and direct. The use of such submissive language made their petitions come across as sincere and respectful appeals to figures of authority rather than as direct challenges to colonial rule, even though the petitions certainly conveyed their resistance to specific colonial policies. The language of the petitions had the effect of confirming the colonial hierarchy that placed British officials above the Chinese population and all other colonized people in the Straits Settlements.

These petitions made clear that not only did coolies face exploitation from many intermediaries across all parts of the system of indentured labor, but also that those intermediaries would take the additional step of petitioning to expand that exploitation without much hesitation. Both Lo and Ong made a living by profiting off coolies, and the overriding concern that they expressed in their petitions was about securing their livelihoods. Lo justified his appeal for a depot license by claiming that his depot would be beneficial to the idle, unemployed *lau kkeh* who were desperate to make a living, while he conveniently omitted how he

could use his influence as depot keeper to force a *lau kheh* to sign an employment contract that would give him the greatest profit. Similarly, Ong wanted to detain several *sin kheh* further because he only cared about collecting the passage money, while he showed no concern for the inhumane conditions under which the *sin kheh* would be detained. Even with the anonymous employer, his petition did not consider the possible circumstances of exploitation that might have pushed Chen to embezzle. While each of the petitioners expressed a personal grievance and plea that displayed a form of resistance against the impersonal and inflexible colonial state, their petitions were ultimately driven by parochial and individualistic concerns, which perpetuated the broader system of indenture and labor exploitation that was present in the Straits Settlements at the time.

Conclusion

In 1877, the Straits Settlements government established the position of the protector of Chinese and empowered the protector with the powers of regulating and monitoring the immigration of Chinese coolies to the Straits Settlements. Setting up the Chinese Protectorate had been the government's response to the findings of an 1876 commission that investigated the exploitative conditions of indenture in the Straits Settlements. The protectorate was made responsible for ensuring that coolies would not have to endure those exploitative conditions and that coolie voices would be considered in the colonial government's labor policies. Thus, the protectorate became the channel through which coolies could submit petitions to express their grievances with all aspects of the labor system and seek assistance with obtaining freedom or restitution from, e.g. depot keepers, employers, and recruitment agents.¹

The petitions examined in this thesis confirmed that coolies in the Straits Settlements did turn to the Chinese Protectorate as their advocate and assister in dealing with the abuse and exploitation that they faced. The existence of the protectorate had established a mechanism by which coolies were able to express their grievances in the form of a petition — a kind of legal document that the colonial bureaucracy understood and could respond to. It also gave the coolies a person, the protector of Chinese, to whom they could express their concerns, thus personalizing the otherwise abstract and obtuse colonial bureaucracy.

¹ Lee, *The British as Rulers*, 78–85.

However, the coolie petitions also showed that the protectorate had been highly ineffective and toothless in fulfilling its original mandate of weeding out coolie exploitation from the Straits Settlements. As shown in chapter two, coolies, especially *sin kheh*, were often vulnerable to the greed of the intermediaries in the labor system, such as their recruiters and depot keepers, who would resort to deception, kidnapping, and even physical beatings just to maximize the profits that they can earn off of the back of the coolies. Employers were also known to deny coolies their wages or their freedom after the expiry of their contracts, which made a mockery of the Chinese Protectorate's effort to protect the rights of coolies by verifying and authenticating their employment contracts. These exploitative practices did not disappear after the Straits Settlements government had established the position of protector in 1877, as the petitions overwhelmingly demonstrated, even though the protectorate was supposed to regulate coolie immigration through frequent inspections and strict licensing regimes.

While the Chinese Protectorate had evidently failed to protect the welfare of coolies, the coolie petitioners still consistently appealed to the protectorate for assistance and even used submissive and civil language to address the protector. The coolies heaped praise on the protector for being benevolent and generous and, most notably, invoked the language of patriarchal protection in requesting for the colonial government's assistance, which echoed the petitioning tradition in Qing China, wherein petitions to the emperor often featured Confucianist rhetoric and expressed sincerity and deference. Not once did a Straits Settlements coolie petitioner criticize the protector or the government for failing to protect their

welfare in the first place, even in the case of Chhng Fok Kham, whose petition, no. 5 in the collection, had pointed out a major failing on the colonial government's part — that the colonial official inspecting Chhng's depot was unaware that physical beatings were taking place and that the depot keeper was forcing coolies into employment contracts against their will.

At the same time, recruitment agents, depot keepers, and employers seeking to further exploit coolies for greater profit also wrote petitions to the protector of Chinese, drawing attention to the colonial government's dual and highly contradictory roles in protecting coolies and in facilitating the exploitation of coolies. These petitions of power, analyzed in chapter three, shared the same language of submission and civility as the coolie petitions, which gave the petitions a veneer of being respectful and sincere, even as they made specific criticisms of the colonial government's labor policies. At the same time, these powerful petitioners made rather personalized pleas for flexibility and assistance from the colonial bureaucracy, e.g. to grant a license to operate a *lau kheh* depot or to permit a shipmaster to prolong the detention of his coolie passengers, thus enacting a form of resistance to the existing labor policies. However, the pleas of these powerful petitioners were ultimately driven by parochial concerns that sought to perpetuate the exploitation of coolies in the Straits Settlements. Not only were these petitioners complicit in coolie exploitation, but they would not hesitate to petition the colonial government to allow them to expand on those exploitative practices. Ultimately, the presence of these petitions of power indicated that petitioning, as a form of political and legal protest, was not limited

to just coolies, but widely practiced by members of the Straits Settlements' Chinese community regardless of social class or occupational background, resembling the way that petitioning was also a prominent part of the political cultures of both Qing China and British India in the 19th century.

While the coolie petitioners appealed to the Chinese Protectorate in a submissive and civil way that effectively re-inscribed colonial hegemony, the individual experiences that they wrote about also represented ruptures in the abstracting and dehumanizing logic of the colonial state. For instance, many petitions made mention of or were even written by the family members of coolies, thus resisting the dominant view of coolies as faceless, disconnected labor commodities without any social lives. Further, the instances of abuse and exploitation that the petitions described were not only distressing and heartfelt, but also highlighted the individual coolie's experience in a way that challenged the tendency for the colonial government to only ever consider coolie suffering in aggregate, statistical terms. The petitions, as records of coolies' grievances that revealed the true human cost of indenture, could be interpreted as demonstrations of coolie agency and resistance within a labor system that had consistently failed to address their exploitation.

Unfortunately, the impact of the petitions on the Straits Settlements government was unclear. The petitions were eventually compiled by G. T. Hare in 1894 into an official documentary collection, so they were certainly successfully presented to the Chinese Protectorate, but no trace of the petitions seem to exist in the remaining records of the Straits Settlements, whether the annual reports of the

Chinese Protectorate, the proceedings of the Legislative Council, or the published Government Gazette notices. The 1890 Labour Commission, working just a few years prior to the publication of Hare's collection, did not collect any testimony from coolies or consider any existing coolie petitions, even though it was established precisely to investigate the conditions of indentured labor in the Straits Settlements and coolie voices would have been especially pertinent to that mission. That the petitions were ultimately discovered within Hare's collection — intended for use by cadets and officials in the Straits Settlements civil service as a Chinese language textbook — indicated that the colonial bureaucracy saw the petitions as nothing more than just mere tools to improve the effectiveness of British governance of Chinese coolies. The petitions contained personal accounts of the abuse and exploitation that coolies suffered, yet colonial officials who encountered the petitions through Hare's collection would have been more concerned about the mechanics of their language than the details of their content, requiring unimaginable levels of cognitive dissonance on the officials' part. Despite the abstract form, the petitions nonetheless represented a formidable display of agency by the coolies, both in affirming the colonial hierarchy by lavishing praise on and seeking protection from the colonial government, as well as in asserting their rights against continued exploitation within the system of indentured labor. Ultimately, the petitions revealed that there was duality and complexity in coolie agency, being neither solely critical of nor acquiescent to the Straits Settlements government.

Bibliography

Archival Material and Primary Sources

Hare, G. T., ed. *A Text Book of Documentary Chinese Selected and Designed For the Special Use of Members of the Civil Service of the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States*. 3 vols. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1894. National Library of Singapore.

———. “The Game of Chap-Ji-Ki.” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 31 (July 1898): 63–71.

———. *The Hokkien Vernacular*. 2 vols. Kuala Lumpur: Straits Settlements and Selangor Government Printing Office, 1897.

———. *The Wai Seng Lottery*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1895.

Harwood, John Augustus, ed. *The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, from the 1st April 1867 to the 1st June 1896; Together with Certain Acts of Parliament, Orders of Her Majesty in Council, Letters Patent, and Indian Acts in Force in the Colony of the Straits Settlements*. Vol. 1. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1886. National Library of Singapore.

Hirth, F. *Text Book of Documentary Chinese, with a Vocabulary, For the Special Use of the Chinese Customs Service*. Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1885.

Norton Kyshe, James William., ed. *Cases Heard and Determined in Her Majesty's Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements*. 4 vols. Singapore: Singapore and Straits Printing Office, 1885–90. National Library of Singapore.

Straits Settlements Government Gazette. National Library of Singapore. Also available at The National Archives of the United Kingdom under Colonial Office Records, Series 276 (CO 276).

Straits Settlements Legislative Council Proceedings. National Archives of Singapore. Also available at The National Archives of the United Kingdom under Colonial Office Records, Series 275 (CO 275).

Wade, Thomas Francis. *Wen-Chien Tzu-Erh Chi, A Series of Papers Selected as Specimens of Documentary Chinese, Designed to Assist Students of the Language as Written by the Officials of China*. London: Trübner & Co., 1867.

Secondary Sources

- Amrith, Sunil S. "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya 1870–1941." *Past & Present* 208, no. 1 (August 2010): 231–61.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq027>.
- . "Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal." *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 547–72.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.3.547>.
- Balachandran, Aparna. "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India." *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 150–76.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001135>.
- Bayly, C. A. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Blythe, W. L. "Historical Sketch of Chinese Labour in Malaya." *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 1 (June 1947): 64–114.
- Carter, Marina. *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University Press, 1996.
- Carter, Marina, and Khal Torabully. *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*. London: Anthem, 2002.
- Chanderbali, David S. "Indian Indenture in the Straits Settlements, 1872–1910: Policy and Practice in Province Wellesley." PhD diss., Australian National University, 1983.
- Chang, Chen-tung. "Chinese Coolie Trade in the Straits Settlements in Late Nineteenth Century." *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology*, no. 65 (Spring 1988): 1–29.
- Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Fang, Qiang. "Hot Potatoes: Chinese Complaint Systems from Early Times to the Late Qing (1898)." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 4 (November 2009): 1105–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809990714>.
- Freedman, Maurice. "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Singapore." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (October 1960): 25–48.

- Goh, Daniel P. S. "States of Ethnography: Colonialism, Resistance, and Cultural Transcription in Malaya and the Philippines, 1890s–1930s." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 1 (January 2007): 109–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417507000424>.
- Hirschman, Charles. "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology." *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (March 1986): 330–61.
- Hu-Dehart, Evelyn. "Chinese Coolie Labour in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labour or Neo-slavery?" *Slavery & Abolition* 14, no. 1 (April 1993): 67–86.
- Hung, Ho-fung. *Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Jung, Moon-Ho. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Kale, Madhavi. *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Kidambi, Prashant. "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914." *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 203–39. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555>.
- King, Michelle T. "Replicating the Colonial Expert: The Problem of Translation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Straits Settlements." *Social History* 34, no. 4 (November 2009): 428–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020903257000>.
- Kua, Bak Lim. "'Sanzhoufu wen jian xiu ji': bai nian qian Ying zhi min guan de Hua wen du ben ['Text Book of Documentary Chinese': the Chinese textbook of British colonial officials a century ago]." *Lianhe Zaobao*. April 23, 2017, weekend edition.
- Lee, Edwin. *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore, 1867–1914*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991.
- Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei. *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Lee, Kah-Wee. "Las Vegas in Singapore: Casinos and the Taming of Vice." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012.

- Leow, Rachel. *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Look Lai, Walton. *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Mair, Victor H. "What Is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms." *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 29 (September 1991).
- Mak, Lau-Fong. *The Dynamics of Chinese Dialect Groups in Early Malaya*. Asian Studies Monograph Series 1. Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1995.
- Makepeace, Walter, Gilbert E. Brooke, and Roland St. J. Braddell, eds. *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919*. Vol. 1. London: John Murray, 1921.
- Manderson, Lenore. *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870–1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- McKeown, Adam. *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Ng, Siew Yoong. "The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900." *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (1961): 76–99.
- Pan, Yuling, and Dániel Z. Kádár. *Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Pieris, Anoma. "The 'Other' Side of Labor Reform: Accounts of Incarceration and Resistance in the Straits Settlements Penal System, 1825–1873." *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 453–79. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shr082>.
- Raj, Kapil. *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Raman, Bhavani. "Civil Address and the Early Colonial Petition in Madras." *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 123–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000944>.

- . *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Richards, Thomas. *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Shlomowitz, Ralph, and Lance Brennan. “Mortality and Indian Labour in Malaya, 1877–1933.” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 29, no. 1 (1992): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469202900103>.
- Stephens, Julia. “A Bureaucracy of Rejection: Petitioning and the Impoverished Paternalism of the British-Indian Raj.” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 177–202. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001160>.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Tan, Cheng Han. “Private Ordering and the Chinese in Nineteenth Century Straits Settlements.” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 11, no. 1 (July 2016): 27–53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2016.11>.
- Tang, Eddie. “British Policy Towards the Chinese in the Straits Settlements: Protection and Control 1877-1900 (With Special Reference to Singapore).” Master’s thesis, Australian National University, 1970.
- Tilly, Charles. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- . “Major Forms of Collective Action in Western Europe 1500–1975.” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1976): 365–75.
- Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Travers, Robert. “Indian Petitioning and Colonial State-Formation in Eighteenth-Century Bengal.” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 89–122. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000841>.
- Trocki, Carl A. “Singapore as a Nineteenth Century Migration Node.” In *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, edited by Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder, 198–224. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011.
- Turnbull, C. M. “Convicts in the Straits Settlements 1826–1867.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 43, no. 1 (1970): 87–103.
- Vaughan, J. D. *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements*. Singapore: Mission Press, 1879.

- Warren, James F. *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940*. Rev. ed. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003.
- Yahaya, Nurfadzilah. “Craving Bureaucracy: Marriage, Islamic Law, and Arab Petitioners in the Straits Settlements.” *The Muslim World* 105, no. 4 (October 2015): 496–515. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12108>.
- Yen, Ching-Hwang. “Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaya 1800–1911.” *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (July 1987): 417–45.
- . *Coolies and Mandarins: China's Protection of Overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing Period (1851–1911)*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985.
- . *Ethnicities, Personalities and Politics in the Ethnic Chinese Worlds*. Singapore: World Scientific, 2016.
- . “Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya 1877–1912.” *Modern Asian Studies* 16, no. 3 (1982): 397–425.
- Yeoh, Brenda S. A. *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Young, Elliott. *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.
- Yu, Li. “Learning to Read in Late Imperial China.” *Studies on Asia*, series III, 1, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 7–28.
- Yun, Lisa. *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.