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“The Very Class for Our Country”: How the Cuban Exploitation of Chinese Coolie Laborers Inspired Louisiana Sugar Planters

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Abstract

Sugar planters in Louisiana during Reconstruction needed to replace the enslaved labor force that had fled the plantation system after the Civil War. These Louisiana planters took inspiration from the system of coolie labor in Cuba, wherein exploited Chinese indentured servants would work on sugar plantation alongside enslaved Africans. The white Cuban planters' goal was to racially dilute their plantation labor force, thus making the existing power structures easier to maintain while avoiding Haitian-style slave uprising. Sugar planters in Louisiana intended to recreate the Cuban system to compel Freedmen to work for less than their worth by importing Chinese laborers, whom they thought would work for lower wages than Freedmen would have accepted otherwise. The Louisiana coolie experiment was an economic failure for sugar planters due to Republican intervention, white supremacist rhetoric, and resistance from the Chinese themselves.

Key Words: Coolie; Chinese; Louisiana; Cuba; sugar plantation; Reconstruction

Introduction

On March 8, 1866, the Italian cargo ship *Napoleon Canevero* was making her way from China, specifically the Portuguese colony at Macao, destined for the Peruvian city of Callao. On board, the vessel housed a crew totaling forty sailors, four hundred tons of cargo containing eight thousand boxes of Chinese firecrackers, and six hundred sixty-three Chinese coolie laborers under contract to toil in the lucrative guano caves of Peru.[1] Several hours after setting sail, the Chinese interpreter on board informed the ship's mate, Mr. A. F. Faw, that the coolies in the hold had hatched a plot to take the vessel by force. The plan involved the Chinese cooks in the galley, who were to poison the water supply used for the officers' tea, after which the coolies would overpower the leaderless crew and take command of the ship. However, due to the interpreter's information, the officers rounded up four of the ringleaders and had them summarily flogged on the deck with stiffened bamboo canes. The next morning, the officers discovered that over two hundred of the laborers were complicit in the mutiny plot, and also the ringleaders, in fact, numbered thirteen in total. The thirteen leaders were placed in irons and confined to the brig; nevertheless, at around 5:15 that evening, the mutiny proceeded as planned. The coolies on board the *Napoleon Canevero* broke apart their sleeping benches in order to use the planks of wood and protruding nails as weapons against the crew. Some were even armed with knives and spades, as well as a few cutlasses stolen from their guards. Thirty coolies were killed during the first offensive by a volley of musket fire from the crew. Ignoring the captain's calls for surrender, the enraged and emboldened coolies began setting fire to the lower decks, and by then

[1] For the purposes of this introduction, historiography, and the remainder of this thesis, the term "coolie" will be used to specifically reference indentured Chinese laborers on plantations in both Cuba and the American South. Scholars of Chinese indentured labor use the term "coolie" to distinguish these laborers from other types of Chinese laborers; for example, those who worked under the credit-ticket system in California (See: "Historiography" section). Additionally, the bulk of primary documents refer to Chinese indentured labor in this manner.

it was clear that they would take the ship or die trying. As the fire raged, the crew lowered three longboats into the sea in an attempt to escape the inferno, but only one of the boats avoided being swamped by the rough waves of the Pacific Ocean. The crewmembers that were killed in the uprising included the ship's doctor and the interpreter who had first informed the officers of the plot. The captain, his mate, and the majority of crewmembers were able to escape in the surviving longboat. Shortly thereafter, the fire raging through the lower decks of the *Napoleon Canevero* finally reached the eight thousand boxes of firecrackers in the cargo hold. None of the six hundred sixty-three coolies on board survived.[2]

This harrowing story of mutiny aboard a Chinese coolie transport ran in both *The New Orleans Times* and *Times-Picayune* in late June, 1866, adding to the growing body of newspaper articles referencing Chinese coolies in Louisiana after the Civil War. This interest in the international coolie trade, especially for New Orleans newspapers and the wealthy Louisianans that read them, is a symptom of how white sugar planters began circulating the idea of importing a new labor force to work on their plantations, at least as early as November, 1865.[3] After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era had become a period of intense transformation in the power structures that had governed the antebellum plantation society in Louisiana. Economically, Louisiana's defeat in the Civil War meant that the immense prosperity and wealth that white sugar planters had previously enjoyed was in severe jeopardy due to the sudden lack of a stable, predictable, and cheap labor force since the Thirteenth Amendment had freed enslaved people from bondage. Antebellum sugar plantations produced the second most profitable crop in the slaveholding South, and the hundreds of enslaved people who worked on these plantations were

[2] "Terrible Fight with Coolies," *Times-Picayune*, June 21, 1866; "Burning of a Coolie Ship—Six Hundred and Seventy-Two Lives Lost," *New Orleans Times*, June 22, 1866.

[3] "The Coolie Question," *Times-Picayune*, November 7, 1865.

almost as economically valuable as the sugar that their labor produced.[4] Socially, white supremacy's powerful grip on Louisiana's plantation society had started to loosen as freedmen began to demand fair compensation for their labor, and outright refused to work for less than they were worth. Newspapers throughout Louisiana vilified these freedmen, calling them lazy and insisting that Black Americans could not exist without white guidance. They concluded that freedmen could only be compelled to work by force or coercion, and white Louisiana planters began to look for a means to reclaim the labor force over which they had once held supreme authority.[5]

White Louisianans soon found inspiration in the plantation system in Cuba, as well as in the credit-ticket labor system that was developing in California. These two labor systems, although different in overall structure, both relied on imported Chinese workers to fulfill their agricultural demands. Louisiana sugar planters were particularly interested in the Coolie system employed in Cuba, another lucrative sugar economy. In Cuba, white sugar planters procured indentured Chinese laborers, usually under contracts of five to eight years, in order to work alongside enslaved Africans on their sugar plantations; however, many Cuban planters routinely extended or renewed these contracts by nefarious means in order to exploit these coolies indefinitely. White Cuban planters began adding coolies to their enslaved plantation labor force in order to prevent a Haitian-style slave uprising in Cuba. Their goal was to racially dilute the enormous enslaved population by pitting the Chinese laborers against their enslaved African counterparts in order to significantly reduce the possibility of a unified labor force that could overthrow the white power structures in place in Cuba. Reports from Cuba indicated to white

[4] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 2, *Secessionists Triumphant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20-21.

[5] *Times-Picayune*, November 7, 1865; *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.

Louisiana planters that Chinese laborers were more docile, industrious, and harder working than the enslaved Africans, and above all, they would accept tremendously low wages without complaint. These reports convinced many Louisiana sugar planters to begin the process of acquiring indentured Chinese laborers to work in the sugarcane fields of south and central Louisiana. Their reasoning for employing Chinese coolies was similar to that of the Cuban planters, as the white Louisiana planters intended to use Chinese laborers to undermine freedmen's attempts to gain economic and social equity within the Reconstruction plantation system. The Louisiana planters' intentions for Chinese coolies on sugar plantations were threefold. First, since they believed that the Chinese would work for extremely low wages while under contract, the planters foresaw the opportunity to introduce a new ethnic working class on their plantations, one that paternalistic white supremacy could exploit. Second, by employing Chinese laborers for exceedingly low wages, the planters could rob freedmen of their economic leverage and force Black laborers to accept minimal wages equal to the Chinese coolies. Third, because Chinese coolies worked under contract, Louisiana planters could once again have a captive labor force that could be guaranteed for at least five years, and these workers could not seek employment elsewhere without either first receiving permission from the planter or buying out their individual contracts themselves.[6]

Resistance in the United States to the so-called "coolie trade" came from government, the American citizenry, and the coolies themselves. The United States government grew concerned over the coolie trade making its way onto American shores due to fears of white Southern planters attempting to reinvigorate the slave trade with a new ethnic group. American officials

[6] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869; "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865; "The Coolie Question," *Times-Picayune,* November 7, 1865.

had been reporting on the deplorable conditions used to transport and house Chinese coolies since before the Civil War, and they drew comparisons to the conditions of enslaved people in the United States. The United States government formally outlawed the coolie trade in 1862; however, Louisiana planters argued that the imported Chinese laborers were not coolies by definition, as they had come to Louisiana not by way of coercion, but under their own volition. In addition, Republicans in both the Louisiana and Federal Legislatures, along with Black leaders, recognized the intentions Louisiana planters had for using Chinese labor, and Republicans argued that the planters' plans were a means to economically disenfranchise freedmen. Racism also played a factor in resistance to Chinese labor in Louisiana, as some in both the Democratic and Republican Parties viewed the Chinese as uncivilized and ethnically inferior to white Americans, and that the addition of a new racial group would upset the already delicate racial landscape of Reconstruction-era Louisiana. They argued that the Chinese were un-Christianized and morally corrupt, often engaging in homosexuality, drug abuse, theft, and violent actions. The greatest form of resistance to coolies in Louisiana came from the coolies themselves. Upon their arrival to Louisiana, coolies quickly learned that the same power structures that had exploited them in Cuba were attempting to exploit them in the same manner on domestic sugar plantations. However, they also soon realized that Federal and State Government agencies were not interested in enforcing these power structures in the same way that the government in Cuba had. Coolies routinely asserted their agency by engaging in work stoppages or abandonment without fear of arrest or enforcement of their contracts by the United States. As a result, the practice of coolie labor in Louisiana halted as abruptly as it began as sugar planters began to realize that the Chinese were not nearly as docile as they had originally believed. This Chinese resistance to exploitation, coupled with the government's lack of

willingness to enforce planters' nefarious labor contracts caused sugar planters in Louisiana to suffer further losses to their already dubious economic standing, and they quickly abandoned any attempt to recreate the exploitative coolie labor system of Cuba in Louisiana.

Historiographical Review

Scholarly work on Chinese labor in both Latin and North America has examined how the addition of indentured Asian workers to current and former slave economies affected the social geographies and international relationships among the nations and societies that participated in the so-called "Coolie Trade." Prominent scholars like Lisa Yun, Kathleen López, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Benjamin Narvaéz, and Moon-Ho Jung have all lent their individual perspectives to the study of the importation of contracted Chinese labor and its effects on the Americas. Race relations, local and global economics, political hypocrisy, and even international intrigue are all cogs in the wheel of this particular body of historical scholarship. The global reach of the coolie trade was vast, involving a cast of characters including seafarers from New England, Her Majesty's Coroners in British Hong Kong, Southern Planters from the recently defeated Confederate States, bat guano dealers in Peru, and revolutionary freedom fighters in Spanish Cuba. For the purposes of this review, as well as in the interest of brevity, the focus will primarily remain on indentured Chinese laborers in Cuba and Louisiana.

Historical background is important in any scholarly pursuit, and geographer Richard Campanella and scholar Melinda Chow provide adequate background information on coolie migration to Louisiana. Campanella acknowledges the Louisiana connection to Cuba, asserting that Louisiana sugar planters "sought guidance from their Caribbean peers on how to replace 'their' labor force" because defeat in Civil War meant "freedom came to the sugar fields."[7] Melinda Chow's work agrees with Campanella inasmuch as "Chinese men replaced slave labor at sugar plantations in Jefferson Parish," but she makes no mention of the Cuban origin of these

[7] Richard Campanella, "Chinatown, New Orleans," *Preservation in Print* (November 2013): 16.

Chinese laborers.[8] These articles provide an adequate basis for understanding the history of the coolie trade, but a number of other scholars are able to shed more light on the Cuban system of coolie labor and how it relates to the sugar plantations of Louisiana.

Both Louisiana and Cuba were highly racialized societies during the mid-nineteenth century, and the scholarship on the subject tends to agree that both the Cuban and United States' governments had difficulty in deciding how to racially classify Chinese laborers. Chow asserts that the Chinese in the American South were legally "considered 'colored'," but that society "in the Mississippi Delta came to see the Chinese as having a social identity 'between black and white'."[9] Evelyn Hu-DeHart agrees with Chow's assessment as to where the Chinese fit in the racial hierarchies of Cuba and the American South. Hu-DeHart goes further, contending that powerful white planters in Cuba saw the Chinese as "ensuring the continuation of the colonial enterprise by forming a class 'in-between' whites…and Africans…at the bottom of society."[10] They also contend that whites in Cuba "perceived Asian migrants as more industrious, more economical, and less threatening than Africans."[11] Kathleen López also agrees with this idea of racial buffering, contending "the Chinese held an ambiguous position in the…racial and social hierarchy" in Cuba, and the "Spanish colonial government did not have a plan for Asians, legally classified as white but socially considered *de color*."[12] Scholar Oriol Regué-Sendrós writes, "the

[8] Melinda Chow, "Chinese," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, vol. 24, *Race*, ed. Thomas C. Holt, Laurie B. Green, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 200.

[9] Melinda Chow, "Chinese," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 200.

[10] Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: an Historical Overview," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, no. 1, *Afro-Asia* (Spring 2008): 16.

[11] Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean," 16.

[12] Kathleen López, "Afro-Asian Alliances: Marriage, Godparentage, and Social Status in Late-Nineteenth-Century Cuba," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, no. 1, *Afro-Asia* (Spring 2008): 61.

exclusion of the Chinese population from the rights of white people was legally enforced because they challenged the fundamental pillars of colonial society."[13] Benjamin Narvaéz expands this idea by explaining that government officials used race as a justification to begin bringing coerced Chinese labor to Cuba as early as the 1840s. The goal, Narvaéz writes, was to dilute the enormous African slave labor force in Cuba in order to prevent a Haitian-style rebellion. The Cuban government endorsed this racially presumptive solution partly because "Chinese workers…were neither European…nor black, which assuaged racial anxieties."[14] Regué-Sendrós agrees with Narvaéz, stating, "since the allegedly planned slave revolt of 1844…Spanish metropolitan authorities and planters conceived of the overall black population…as a threat to existing social and imperial arrangements" and that Spanish officials "promptly invoked the policy of the balance of the races as soon as they began their discussion on the Chinese Migration."[15] Lisa Yun also echoes this "spectre of another…revolution," arguing that "the radicalized…Haiti that led to the overthrow of the white elite provided lessons to the Cuban landowning class."[16] In all, it seems that most scholars on the subject of coolie labor in the Americas agree that Chinese laborers served as a racial buffer between black and white, mainly due to fears of Black resistance and revolution.

While the ambiguous racial status of coolies may have assuaged the fears of white authorities in Cuba, the historiography suggests that the consensus among white Southerners during the decade before the Civil War was initially more hostile to Chinese labor. Lisa Yun

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[13] Oriol Regué-Sendrós, "Chinese migration to Cuba: Racial Legislation and Colonial Rule in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Spanish Empire," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 24, no. 2, (August 2018): 282.

[14] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State: Cuba, Peru, and the United States during the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *The Americas* 76, no. 1 (January 2019): 10.

[15] Oriol Regué-Sendrós, "Chinese migration to Cuba," 281.

[16] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 12.

argues that "the Asian laborer was a vexing figure for American politics: neither black nor white, Asian laborers were ostensibly voluntary yet involuntary."[17] According to Narvaéz, "during the 1850s, a minority of Americans looked to Cuba…and advocated Chinese indentured labor for the South."[18] However, Narvaéz also admits that most Southerners during this period "temporarily joined the chorus against Chinese immigration and coolie labor."[19] According to Narvaéz, this anti-Chinese sentiment was due to the general complacency of labor among Southern planters provided by the highly successful and lucrative system of slavery that was well established by the 1850s. Southerners also voiced concerns that the Chinese "represented an uncivilized race that would morally corrupt slaves," seemingly the opposite of the idea of racial dilution adopted by Cuban planters.[20] The seminal work on the subject of Chinese indentured labor in Louisiana is *Coolies and Cane*, by historian Moon-Ho Jung. Jung outlines the economic ideology behind importing Chinese labor to Louisiana, as well as the social and political ramifications of incorporating a new ethnic group into an already highly racialized society. Moon-Ho Jung echoes the findings of Narvaéz, namely that Southern elites thought that trade in coolies would undermine the African slave system in the United States, as they "demanded the exclusion of coolies from American shores so as to preserve domestic slavery."[21]

Defeat in the Civil War soon changed these notions, and after the slave system of the South collapsed and freedmen demanded higher wages, Louisiana planters began to look to coolies as an alternative labor force for their sugar plantations. Jung acknowledges the important cultural and economic relationship between Cuba and Louisiana, and he asserts that these ties

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[17] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 22.
[18] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 16.
[19] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 17.
[20] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 17.
[21] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 35.

"deepened immediately after the Civil War, with many Confederates finding a haven in the Spanish Colony."[22] Benjamin Narvaéz agrees that some Southerners looked to Cuba as a model for delaying or remedying the growing tide of emancipation during Reconstruction. He explains how Southerners believed they "could delay the rise of free labor," as well as upholding the notion that the Chinese "were inexpensive, hardworking, intelligent, and skilled" when compared to freedmen.[23] He also asserts that the Southern "rhetoric switched from coolies undermining slavery to coolies saving the social and economic order," and Southerners "insisted that the Chinese would create labor competition and force freedmen to accept lower wages."[24] Yun agrees with Narvaéz's assessment, writing, "plantation society of the American South became occupied with possibilities for Chinese labor, with the Caribbean Chinese coolies playing a significant part in the debates and in plantation cultural and economic logic."[25] Jung also notices this shift in the Southern opinion of Chinese labor, as "the landing of Chinese workers in postemancipation Louisiana by way of Cuba magnified the ambiguities surrounding coolies in American culture," and planters began to see the Chinese as "an ideal migrant labor force, much superior to Louisiana's freedpeople."[26] Narvaéz explains "by [1867], labor recruiters from Louisiana succeeded in introducing a few hundred Chinese workers from Cuba" and that "various Southern labor conventions…promoted coolie labor, and planters…formed joint-stock companies dedicated to recruiting these workers."[27] Jung agrees with Narvaéz and his assessment of planter interest in coolies, stating "Louisiana planters and merchants simultaneously set out to import coolies en masse, fully expecting an endorsement of their

[22] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 76.
[23] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 16.
[24] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 18.
[25] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 22.
[26] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 84.
[27] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 31.

project from the state legislature."[28] This newfound market niche for coolie labor saw "various merchant houses [that] took concrete steps to supply and profit from the bourgeoning market for coolies."[29] Although Louisiana planters scrambled to import coolies to work on their sugar plantations, the Republican-led government in Washington was not keen on allowing coolie labor into the Reconstruction Southern States. Narvaéz presents evidence that "Republicans passed resolutions in both houses of Congress condemning coolie labor in the United States and the rest of the Americas."[30] Jung's findings mirror those of Narvaéz, citing "unanimous resolutions against the coolie trade by the House and Senate" led by Charles Sumner and Secretary of State Seward.[31] This resistance from the federal government prompted northern journalists to compare the coolie trade to an attempted renewal of Southern slavery "that resonated with antebellum images and fears" among the residents of the North.[32] Richard Camapnella suggests "the U.S. Government…viewed it as a dangerously close substitute for slavery."[33] Furthermore, the Reconstruction-era Louisiana legislature was equally hostile to the importation of coolie labor. Narvaéz suggests "a relatively strong US federal government and its Republican allies in state government…were generally anti-planter, increasingly feared the Chinese as a racial group, and believed coolie labor was akin to slavery."[34] Jung agrees that, in Louisiana, the government desired to quell Chinese immigration while boosting European immigration due to fears of a new racial influence. He suggests that "Louisiana worshipped the gospel of white immigration" during Reconstruction, and that many saw the Chinese as "unfit for

[28] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 77.
[29] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 78.
[30] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 32.
[31] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 80.
[32] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 85.
[33] Richard Campanella, "Chinatown, New Orleans," 16.
[34] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 6.

the drudgery of the constant…toil of the plantations."[35] He goes further, suggesting "in Louisiana…coolies solidified 'immigrants' as European and white in the age of emancipation, the latter's arrival acclaimed as the key to the redemption of the region and the nation."[36] Camapnella continues this idea of white immigration, writing "Louisiana planters by the early 1870s began to look elsewhere for contract labor—to Spain, Portugal, Greece, and finally Sicily."[37] According to the historiography, Republican mistrust of both the Southern planters and the Chinese immigrants themselves, Northern fears of slavery's resurgence, and white Southern insistence on European immigration are the factors that created an increasingly hostile environment for the coolie trade in the United States and Louisiana.

Although the scholars writing about this subject agree that the Chinese coolie laborers created a racial buffer between black and white in Cuba, as well as inflamed Republican hostilities in the United States, they also recount that the treatment of the laborers was often brutal, their life expectancy was short, and their existence was riddled with hypocrisy. Lisa Yun's research suggests "coolies endured slave conditions, due to the unenforceability of a contract that provided for certain conditions…subject to the interpretation of the master."[38] She addresses the staggering death toll among coolies in Cuba: "over 50 percent…died *before* their eight-year contract ended."[39] Yun concludes her grim assessment of coolie life in Cuba by suggesting that they "became maximally exploited" and "could be disposable or unfree at any time, depending on the vagaries of the system and the master."[40] Narvaéz admits that Cuban officials had passed laws designed to protect coolie laborers from mistreatment, ensuring "ships

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[35] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 172-174.
[36] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 163.
[37] Richard Campanella, "Chinatown, New Orleans," 16.
[38] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 29.
[39] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 29.
[40] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 31.

were not overcrowded and had proper ventilation and sufficient food, water, and medical supplies;" however, in practice, "Cuban officials inspected ships, but rarely criticized or punished coolie traders for high fatality rates."[41] Narvaéz also agrees with Yun on the basis of predatory contracts, and that, by signing these contracts, coolies "temporarily gave up civil rights," and, what few rights they had "were poorly defined, which opened the door to abuse."[42] He compares Cuban laws intended to protect coolies in Cuba to the laws governing the movements of enslaved Africans. The "colonial government…strove to keep Chinese laboring while under contract" and it created a registry to prevent planters "from forcing coolies to work beyond the contract, but…also made it easier to track down runaways."[43] Similarly, Hu-Dehart and López draw parallels between the Chinese coolie trade and African slave trade. They comment on how "Chinese coolies and African slaves were transported on the same ships, labored on the same plantations, and engaged in similar means of resistance."[44] These scholars agree that life and labor for the Chinese coolies in Cuba was harsh and full of legal hypocrisy and loopholes designed to take their freedom well past the end of their eight-year period of servitude. The mistreatment they endured from their employers was congruent to that of enslaved Africans, and their death tolls were staggering as a result.

Racial disparities and mistreatment in any society spark class conflict, and the historical consensus suggests that the Chinese coolie experience was no different, especially in terms of organized resistance. Coolies engaged in various forms of resistance both in Cuba and Louisiana, as well as on the very ships that transported them to their places of employment. Lisa

[41] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 19-20.
[42] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 21.
[43] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 22.
[44] Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean," 16.

Yun cites the coercion by Cuban and Spanish sailors as an impetus for coolie resistance, leading to "rebellion…on ships because methods of procuring coolies primarily involved kidnapping by force and deceiving individuals to board ships—then entrapping them."[45] She notes how "the captive Chinese violently resisted their circumstances, causing embarrassing reports that were published and sensationalized."[46] She concludes that many coolies turned to violent forms of resistance, explaining that during the Ten Years' War in Cuba, many "Chinese escaped the plantations and made the 'transition' to free labor through mass rebellion and war."[47] Kathleen López also acknowledges the Ten Years' War as a "struggle that enticed slaves and indentured laborers with the promises of freedom in exchange for their services and loyalty."[48] She continues on this point in another article, along with Hu-DeHart, writing "contrary to their image as weak and docile, Asians resisted oppression from the beginning."[49] Ritual suicides could also be seen as a form of Chinese resistance, especially for coolies in Cuba. Margaret Mih Tillman, *et al.,* acknowledge, "plantation elites could characterize suicide as 'heathen' behavior, [but] suicide from a Chinese perspective could be seen as voicing active protest against an unjust system."[50] Narvaéz gives even more examples of the various forms of coolie resistance, citing how they "slowed their work, struck, practiced sabotage, stole, petitioned officials, saved money to buy out contracts and purchase certificates of freedom, forged documents, ran away, committed suicide, and individually or collectively attacked and murdered their superiors."[51] He

[45] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 18.
[46] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 28.
[47] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 33.
[48] Kathleen López, "Afro-Asian Alliances," 60.
[49] Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean," 16.
[50] Margaret Mih Tillman *et al.*, "Chinese Immigrants in Cuba Repository Collection," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (January 2016): 17.
[51] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 15.

suggests that these actions had success in that they "cumulatively weakened this labor system by making Chinese suffering visible to domestic and international eyes."[52] Richard Campanella mentions that these types of Chinese resistance measures at least partly led to the coolie system failing in Louisiana. He contends that "planters themselves were displeased to discover that the allegedly 'docile' Chinese were in fact willing and able to fight for what was rightfully theirs" and that "disparate pay and ill treatment were met with confrontation, work stoppage, and lawsuits."[53] Narvaéz also agrees with Campanella on coolie resistance in Louisiana, adding "the Chinese demonstrated a refusal to work under harsh labor conditions and resentment of violations of their contracts," and this resistance proved economically destructive to planters as "the investment in Asian workers turned into a major loss."[54] Jung agrees with Narvaéz and Campanella on the subject of coolie resistance in Louisiana. He recounts how the "honeymoon between Chinese recruits and their employers did not last long on most plantations."[55] He also suggests that coolies resisted labor conditions in Louisiana by simply leaving their employers' plantations for greener pastures, and that they "engaged in a strike…with their feet."[56] This type of resistance action escalated when coolies realized that their employers were almost powerless to stop the laborers from leaving, as "these movements, so at odds with the long-term contracts that had brought them to Louisiana, became commonplace."[57] Jung revels in this ease of movement, arguing that it "was a testament to the social integration of these so-called coolies into Louisiana's multilayered, multifaceted class struggles."[58] In all, coolie resistance took many

[52] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 15-16.
[53] Richard Campanella, "Chinatown, New Orleans," 16.
[54] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 37-38.
[55] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 185.
[56] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 183.
[57] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 184.
[58] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 184.

different forms both in Cuba and Louisiana. From armed resistance to work stoppages to simply running away, coolies asserted their agency over those who sought to disenfranchise them and exploit their important labor capacity.

The historiography of Chinese indentured labor in Cuba and Louisiana contains a small but dedicated group of scholars who tend to agree on nearly all aspects of coolie life in the Americas. Their work has brought to light the resilience of these laborers as they sought to earn a living in foreign and often hostile environments. Both foreign governments and wealthy white elites attempted to exploit them, treat them as expendable slaves, and take advantage of their seemingly "docile" nature. Although many coolies perished under the extreme conditions and mistreatment thrust upon them, especially in Cuba, their insistence on agency, fair labor practices, and the use of both violent and non-violent forms of resistance demonstrate how the study of these laborers can aid historians in gaining a deeper knowledge of race, white supremacy, immigration, and collective action within the context of nineteenth century plantation societies.

Section One: Cuban Exploitation of Coolie Labor

The Cuban sugar economy of the nineteenth century was one of the largest, if not the largest, in the Americas. During the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba accounted for 21 percent of world sugar production, around 161,000 tons annually. By 1870, sugar production in Cuba had reached an annual figure of 703,000 tons (41 percent of world production), dwarfing the next largest sugar economy, Puerto Rico, which had produced 105,000 tons the same year.[59] In order to increase sugar production, Cuban planters supplemented their more expensive slave labor force with more inexpensive coolie laborers. Coolies in Cuba were cheaper to hire and required less capital and investment on behalf of the planter than African slaves. Between 1851 and 1855, the average price of an African slave in Cuba was 410 pesos, whereas the average price of a coolie hovered around 150 pesos.[60] Coolies were less expensive to buy and more expendable than African slaves, given the nature of their contractual indentured status.

The conditions coolies faced, both on the passage from China and once in Cuba, were indeed difficult and brutal. The Chinese laborers endured long voyages and squalid conditions on coolie ships, as well as harsh treatment and backbreaking labor on the sugar plantations of Cuba. Officials designed laws to keep coolies working indefinitely, even after their period of indenture was complete, and they were also subject to cruel punishment if they escaped their captivity.[61] The wartime United States Congress passed anti-coolie legislation in 1862 propelled by fears that the practice reflected the slave trade "at a time when the Cuban planters were

[59] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 12-13.
[60] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 17.
[61] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 29; Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 20-22.

largely adding to their laboring force by the purchase of this class of workers."[62] Not only did coolie labor in Cuba resemble slavery, many of the coolie traders transporting laborers from China had, as Benjamin Narvaéz suggests, "direct connections to the Atlantic slave trade," seemingly validating congressional fears about introducing the coolie trade in any capacity to the United States.[63] Cuban officials created further parallels to the African slave system by passing a series of codes governing the movement of coolie laborers around Cuba. The laws required planters to register any coolie labor in their employ with the government, which seemed like a measure intended to reduce coolies working beyond their contracted period of indenture; however, in practice, the system aided planters in the tracking of runaways and deserters. Likewise, port officials reacted to high mortality rates aboard ships with apathy and indifference, siding with the coolie traders even when mortality neared fifty percent. Furthermore, the government in Cuba installed a colonial police force designed to suppress coolie and slave rebellion; more often, they tracked runaway coolies for wealthy planters, using methods akin to the slave patrols of the American South. Harboring coolie runaways also carried harsh penalties and fines, even for white Cubans. If one harbored a runaway coolie and was discovered by the colonial police, he or she would be fined up to 500 pesos, which was an enormous sum to most everyday Cubans during the nineteenth century. In 1860, the government in Spain passed, by royal decree, that coolies had two months to either re-contract or leave Cuba under threat of forced hard labor. Because of this, Benjamin Narvaéz concludes, "ex-coolies had virtually no

[62] "The Law Against Coolie Importations," *The Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, SC), July 28, 1869.

[63] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 19.

money for passage home, so this law essentially sentenced them to perpetual servitude" in one facet or another.[64]

This slave-like treatment was the focus of a scathing article in the *New York Herald,* which reported that twenty-three coolie laborers had arrived in New Orleans in July 1867, ready to begin work on the sugar plantations of Louisiana. More importantly, however, the article quotes the correspondent from Havana who reported on the living conditions coolie laborers faced in Cuba. He reported "the number of Chinese coolies that died on the passage to this port between the years 1847 and 1866 was 11,291 out of 90,019 shipped from Macao."[65] Additionally, "out of 11,462 that shipped this year from February 2 to June 30 the number that died at sea was 1,360 souls" and "in one instance only 140 arrived out of 320 shipped."[66] This report enumerates the staggering death toll for coolies making their way to Havana. Furthermore, the coolies were "jammed into sheds, and die like rotten sheep" and "in some cases the mortality after landing has reached seventy-five per cent of the cargo…in no case does it average less than thirty-three per cent."[67] The remainder of the article further demonstrates the fears of the return of Southern slavery that many in the North possessed:

> Such is the picture in Havana. Shall we photograph it for the United States in the face of our efforts for the negro, who was treated like a god in comparison to the coolie? The coolie is generally engaged, for a short term of years, and in that period the owner—no other term but owner applies—true to the inexorable exactions of his money in his efforts to gain interest, crushes out and demands every unit of physical force that can be found in the bone and sinew of the worse than slave that yields to his power. Torn from his home under false representations, packed into the pestilential hold of a ship for a voyage of four or five months, fed on putrid beef and worm-eaten biscuits, brutally abused in most cases by the officers of the ship, landed in the old slave markets of the West Indies and our Southern States, and doomed to see his fellow sufferers sink

[64] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 19-23.
[65] "The Coolie Trade in the South," *The New York Herald,* July 27, 1867.
[66] "The Coolie Trade in the South," *The New York Herald,* July 27, 1867.
[67] "The Coolie Trade in the South," *The New York Herald,* July 27, 1867.

> around him at a rate of one out of every three after landing, we can find the misery of no living human being that cries to humanity with a louder voice of agony than the coolie.[68]

The comparison to the slave trade in the Southern United States in this article is clear, and the writer uses the anguish that he witnessed from coolies in Cuba to stoke the fears of those in the North into becoming wholly against the emergence of the coolie trade in the United States. It also illuminates the brutal, slave-like conditions that coolies faced daily in Latin America.

Additionally, Peter Parker, the United States Commissioner and Minister Plenipotentiary to China created a report investigating coolie treatment in China and Latin America. The report highlighted an incident that took place on one particular coolie transport ship in October of 1855. The report recounted how the coolies had made for the longboats after docking at Manila, wrongly thinking that they had reached their destination, which caused the captain to order his crew to fire upon the Chinese for supposed desertion. The crew then forced the coolie men into the hold, closed all the hatches, and did not open them again for "some twelve or fourteen hours" after which "it was discovered that nearly 300 of the unfortunate beings had perished from suffocation."[69] Furthermore, the report assessed that many of the coolie laborers were "procured by purchase, and are as truly the subject of barter and sale as the negroes on the coast of Africa," while native Chinese "brokers" were complicit in the sale of their countrymen.[70] "Native Chinese are employed to entice [the Coolies] from their homes," and they were also "persuaded from hope of profit to leave their friends" and "sometimes beguiled, sometimes kidnapped."[71] The report also includes that "over fifty thousand" coolies were shipped to Cuba from 1852 to

[68] "The Coolie Trade in the South," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1867.
[69] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[70] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[71] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.

1860 and that "the total number of deaths…during the period named was 7,842."[72] Normally, the period of indenture for coolie laborers spanned "from five to eight years," but it seemed that many were retained longer than the contracted terms, and "those who have served in the first term are powerless in the hands of a man who would desire to retain them if valuable, and who would not be bound to support them if too enfeebled to work."[73] Parker's report concludes by focusing on the chilling monetary incentive for planters in Cuba to, quite literally, work their coolie employees to death. The Chinese were lured to Cuba under promises that "at the end of eight years, they would possess $384," which was an enormous incentive for poorer Chinese laborers, "to whom a cent a day is a very reasonable competence."[74] However, many planters in Cuba had no intention of paying their indentured laborers at the end of their contract. "If their owners wear them out in eight years, so that they die, he, of course, has nothing to pay," or if they somehow survive, the planter "sends them to some distant plantation, or sells them again for another eight years."[75] Certain Cuban planters also trade in dead coolies. The planters would falsely claim that a particular coolie had died, after which they could resell still living coolie to another plantation under a new name for profit.[76] The grim conclusion of Parker's report was that Chinese indentured laborers in Cuba almost never escaped their period of coerced labor, many were seen as more valuable if they died, and most did not survive more than eight years under the harsh conditions of the sugar plantations. In total, between 1847 and 1860, the death

[72] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[73] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[74] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[75] "Horrors of the Coolie Trade," *The Press and Tribune* (Chicago), April 20, 1860.
[76] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 31.

rate for coolies aboard ships from China to Cuba was around 12.5 percent, and the death rates of coolies on sugar plantations is wholly unknown.[77]

The passage of an 1854 body of regulations in Cuba surrounding coolie labor further compounded this problem. These new laws were seemingly designed to give coolie laborers more autonomy, allowing them to buy out their contract at any time during their period of indenture; however, in practice the regulations put more financial strain on the coolie laborer. Coolies were now required to compensate their employer for any work missed due to injury or illness as well as clothing and food, deducted from their monthly four-peso salary. If a coolie were somehow able to earn and save enough of his salary to buy out his contract, he would have to pay out current value of a coolie contract, rather than his contract's original value. Due to this monetary finagling by the Cuban planter class, many coolies were still financially indebted to their master well after the end of his eight-year contract.[78] This was the system of control and oppression that the planters of Louisiana and the South wanted to introduce to the United States as a replacement for slave labor after the Civil War. The Cuban sugar economy was indeed successful due to coolie labor, but this system required the exploitation of its labor force by coercion, breach of contract, and outright cruelty in order to reach its high level of economic success.

While journalists of a number of prominent newspapers reported on the horrors of coolie labor in Cuba and elsewhere, some newspapermen of the period, wholly dismissed the claims of coolie mistreatment in China and Cuba, in direct opposition to the prevailing reports and arguments of their colleagues. Coolies and their treatment are examined in another *New York Herald* article from July 1869, exactly two years after the previous *Herald* article highlighting

[77] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks,* 19-20.
[78] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 30.

the gross mistreatment of coolies was published. The writer of this curious article paints a wholly different picture of coolie life than the previous article from the same newspaper. The writer's exact motivations are unclear, yet the article reads more like an advertisement for the coolie trade and its inherent benefits for the American South and West than a report on actual coolie practices. "That this coolie emigration enterprise will ultimately be perfectly successful no one can doubt," the article explains, and the writer predicts "the next ten years will give us an enormous Chinese population, particularly in the South."[79] The writer acknowledges the anti-coolie legislation passed by Congress in January 1862, but asserts that the legislation was a Northern conspiracy and that it came about due to "a general state of ignorance" among "the leading men in the New England states," nothing more.[80] In direct opposition to the previous article, the writer comments the unparalleled safety, enormous size, and wealth of provisions supposedly aboard the coolie ships. "The ships carrying coolies…are the best ventilated and provisioned of any ships in the world," the writer boasts, and they were provisioned "better than any other class of emigrant vessels."[81] On mortality, the writer admits that death "sometimes takes place in coolie ships," but he blames dysentery from coolies eating undercooked rice for high death rates on some ships. He cites practices stemming from "some captains' sole ideas of cleanliness are that the coolies…should be continually splashed with salt water" which "results in the certain death of a large percentage of passengers."[82] The article mentions Cornelius Koopmanschap as a main broker and "an oracle" on the subject of the coolie trade.[83] A native of Holland, Koopmanschap had developed connections in California, the West Indies, New York,

[79] "The Chinese Labor Question," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1869.
[80] "The Chinese Labor Question," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1869.
[81] "The Chinese Labor Question," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1869.
[82] "The Chinese Labor Question," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1869.
[83] "The Chinese Labor Question," *The New York Herald*, July 27, 1869.

and Hong Kong, eventually developing a thriving business as a Chinese labor contractor in San Francisco. He had already imported over thirty thousand Chinese laborers to California by 1869, and he sought to do the same in the American South, particularly in Memphis. Koopmanschap and Company estimated that the cost of transporting laborers from China to the South would equal roughly $100 per laborer, which was a relatively low sum compared to the cost of enslaved people before the Civil War.[84] The *Herald* article reads as a hit piece about Koopmanschap's plans to import Chinese labor, rather than a truthful report on the realities of coolie labor.

The realities for Chinese laborers in Cuba involved not only harsh labor conditions and exploitation from the ruling class, but also racial tensions marred by the ambiguous racial status of the Chinese in Cuban society. In order to differentiate Chinese laborers from enslaved Black Cubans, officials in Cuba routinely categorized them as persons who were legally white, but their treatment by white Cubans suggests that they were seen as *de color* in practice. Their occupational status in close proximity to slaves and the fact that they were controlled and employed under contract saw their movements regulated as if they were enslaved Africans.[85] Cuban planters saw them as easily exploitable because of their status as non-white and non-European, and they did not number as much as enslaved Africans, which meant that they were less prone to organized rebellion. The attitudes of the white Cuban public mirrored those of white Southerners during Reconstruction. Whites viewed the Chinese as either positive or negative based on whatever the convention of the day indicated. Many whites in Cuba saw the Chinese as industrious workers who were a more positive social element than enslaved Africans. At the same time, whites also saw the Chinese as racially inferior, physically weak, un-Christian, and immoral. The Cuban government's insistence on Catholicism as the official creed of the

[84] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane,* 102-104.
[85] Kathleen López, "Afro-Asian Alliances," 60-61.

colony created a tense atmosphere for many Chinese, who were often viewed as idolaters. This allowed Cuban officials to exclude Chinese from white society based on racial as well as religious status. This added to the status of Chinese coolies as racially and religiously ambiguous, excluding them from white society altogether. As a result of this exclusion, coolies were racially and socially inferior and new laws governing coolies greatly resembled slave codes in intention and practice.[86] In addition, many whites feared white Cuban and Chinese interracial marriage. Since the Chinese coolie population was overwhelmingly male, Cuban officials perceived that it was only a matter of time before more race mixing occurred in a society where race mixing was largely prohibited. Cuban officials began to promote the importation of Chinese women, as well as encouraging the Chinese population to convert to Catholicism.[87]

By racializing the Chinese in this way, white Cubans were able to justify their treatment and inhumane living conditions, both on ships and on the plantations. Another motive for the introduction of coolie labor to Cuba was to assuage racial anxieties centered on slave rebellion after the Haitian Revolution of 1791 to 1805. Coolies were cheaper and more expendable than enslaved Africans, and having them work alongside slaves with white manipulation could prove to dilute any spark of rebellion among the plantation labor force.[88] This tactic seemed to have worked, for a time, as tensions often flared between indentured Chinese workers and enslaved Africans, and planter often manipulated this racialized environment for the benefit of control. Overseers, when administering corporal punishment, would often force enslaved Africans to hold down a coolie for flogging, or vice versa, thus elevating the racial tensions among the

[86] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 11-12; Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean," 16-17; Oriol Regué-Sendrós, "Chinese migration to Cuba," 282.

[87] Oriol Regué-Sendrós, "Chinese migration to Cuba," 284-288.

[88] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 11-12.

plantation labor. This racial divide only ended with the Ten Years' War (1868-78) where Chinese and Africans found a mutual enemy in the colonial forces that controlled Cuban interests.[89] For the Chinese in Cuba, rebellion could mean freedom from the harsh realities of life on the plantations, as well as status as full and free members of society.[90]

Racist ideology among whites in Cuba, as well as cultural differences, led to the Chinese coolies and enslaved Africans becoming a target for an 1864 decree labeling the Chinese as immoral and in need of Christianizing. African slaves were prohibited from interacting with free Blacks and *mulatos* for fears that they would promote unwanted ideas as well as further race mixing. The Chinese, on the other hand, were seen as morally and sexually depraved, having engaged in homosexual acts, which was often a normal act in Chinese culture. This behavior was seen more as a curiosity, as it would be impossible for the Chinese to increase their number in this way. The more concerning vices attributed to the Chinese were thefts, murders, and gambling.[91]

By ethnically targeting the Chinese and classifying them as racially inferior, the Cuban officials were able to keep them under their control and subject them to harsh treatment, slave like conditions, and never ending servitude. They allowed racial anxieties surrounding the enslaved African population to justify the importation of a new racial class that would be equally exploited and also not enjoy the same economic, societal, and racial status as Cuban whites. Coolie laws resembled slave codes both on paper and in practice, and slave patrols often rounded up both Chinese coolies and enslaved Africans attempting to escape to freedom. Finally, it took all out rebellion and the Ten Year's war to give Chinese coolies and enslaved Africans a glimmer

[89] Kathleen López, "Afro-Asian Alliances," 60.
[90] Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 34.
[91] Kathleen López, "Afro-Asian Alliances," 62-3; Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean," 16.

of hope at a life as full members of Cuban colonial society. The Coolie System in Cuba was exploitative in intention and practice, and it would serve as an inspiration to white sugar planters in Louisiana who were attempting to recuperate their economic losses that they brought about by the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War.

Section Two: The Coolie Experiment in Louisiana

Antebellum sugar planters in Louisiana had once enjoyed one of the most lucrative agricultural industries in the United States. Estimates suggest that the value of Louisiana sugar rose around 150 percent during the 1850s, making it one of the most valuable Southern crops, second only to South Carolina's Sea Island cotton. The wealth these planters gained from sugar in the decade before the Civil War was compounded by a significant increase in the value of enslaved people in the Lower South. The average monetary value per enslaved person increased from $925 in 1850 to $1658 after 1856. This shows a 79 percent increase in not only individual value per slave, but also overall wealth for the Louisiana sugar planters with stable crops and large holdings of enslaved people.[92] By looking at these staggering numbers, one can see why sugar planters in Louisiana were intent on finding a cheap labor force in order to rebound from the enormous economic strain and financial uncertainty that defeat in the Civil War and Emancipation had caused.

The newspapers of New Orleans during the early Reconstruction period demonstrate the growing uncertainty of white Louisianans as they witnessed their low-cost plantation labor force evaporate with the emancipation of the enslaved Black population after the defeat of the Confederacy. White Louisianans came to understand that "the agricultural interests of the South have hitherto been almost entirely dependent upon negro labor," and they lamented "the recent war has, however, tended to render such labor altogether uncertain and unreliable."[93] White planters and journalists began to spread the notion that Freedmen refused to work on the plantations because they were morally bankrupted, lazy, and lacking in character. Newspapers

[92] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 2, *Secessionists Triumphant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20-21.

[93] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.

insisted that "the negro, having acquired his freedom, will not work unless compelled to do so," citing racist beliefs that requesting a fare wage for labor created "a life of idleness and dissipation."[94] At any rate, Freedmen's refusal to work for low wages resulted in a large number of planters fearing that their plantations would sit idle if they did not find a way to coerce laborers to work for them. By 1865, planters in Louisiana began to worry about the future of their plantations because they had concluded that the newly emancipated "freedmen cannot be depended on in the cultivation of the staples on a large scale, without the introduction of some competing industry."[95] Planters needed a new labor force, and correspondence accounting Chinese labor in California began to find its way into Louisiana newspapers. White Louisianans took notice of these articles, especially those specifically detailing that the Chinese would work "twelve to fourteen hours a day, without even asking for Sundays," and that the Chinese were "patient, submissive, enduring, and teachable."[96] These articles placed the blame for the economic and labor troubles in Louisiana on freedmen and the Republican-led government, asserting that freedmen, "owing to the bad teaching of our Radical politicians, who…are rendering them useless as laborers" would always fall short of Louisiana planters' expectations, thus "Chinese laborers will soon receive serious attention."[97] Because of freedmen's insistence on fair labor practices, many planters in Louisiana had come to see them as a nuisance that cost money through both high wages if they were working, and low yields if they refused to work. Louisiana planters, albeit begrudgingly for some, began to look to coolie labor as an alternative to Black labor. They took inspiration from the economic success and racially exploitative

[94] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.
[95] "The Coolie Question," *Times-Picayune*, November 7, 1865.
[96] "Chinese Labor," *The Weekly Advocate* (Baton Rouge), May 29, 1869.
[97] "Chinese Labor," *The Weekly Advocate* (Baton Rouge), May 29, 1869.

methods of the coolie labor system on sugar plantations in Cuba. The island became a starting point for the importation and implementation of coolies to Louisiana.

Sugar was the staple crop in both Louisiana and Cuba, so it is not surprising that Louisiana planters received word from Havana about the so-called success of coolie labor. The precedent for this Southern interest in Cuba took place during the decade before the Civil War, wherein both filibusters and slaveholders in the Southern States pushed for the United States to annex Cuba in order to expand their slaveholding territories after the Mexican War. In 1854, James Buchanan, then minister to England under President Franklin Pierce, attended a conference at Ostend, Belgium, where he, along with two other American ambassadors, issued the Ostend Manifesto, formally calling on the United States to purchase Cuba from Spain under threat of war, and create new slaveholding territories for the United States. President Pierce, perhaps remembering congressional division the Mexican War or possibly recoiling from the threat of another Wilmot Proviso, instead pursued the Gadsden Purchase the same year as a suitable alternative. During his tenure as president, James Buchanan again entertained the idea of purchasing or annexing Cuba, but Congress ultimately disapproved of the measure.[98] Because of this antebellum interest in bringing Cuba into the United States, one can readily assume that Southerners knew about the systems in place in the plantations of the island, and remembered them after the Civil War. Even international writers had debated the merits of purchasing Cuba in 1859. The *New York Herald* reprinted an article from the French newspaper *La Patrie*, which argued that the "only means of effectively destroying the [slave] trade was to assure the planters cheap labor" and to "introduce coolies into Cuba."[99] This entrenched interest in Cuba, coupled with reports that "the introduction of coolies into Cuba has enabled planters of that island to

[98] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 145-147.
[99] "Affairs in Cuba," *The New York Herald*, February 20, 1859.

double their productions" reached the ears of Louisiana planters, and they began to seriously consider importing coolie labor to work their sugar crop.[100] Louisiana planters saw the necessity of introducing coolies onto their plantations in order to recuperate their losses from the economic instability brought about by the Civil War. They also intended to use the Chinese as an ethnic group to coerce the submission of Freedmen, just as white Cuban planters had intended to use the Chinese to racially dilute their African slave population.

Quick to respond to Southern interest in importing coolies from Cuba, advertisements for Chinese immigration companies aimed at "Planters of the South" appeared in Louisiana newspapers, advertising that the solution to their labor problem could be "most readily found in the vast and overflowing population of China," and that "the cheapness of coolie labor" could aid in the "production of Southern staples."[101] It seemed as though white Louisianans were in agreement that Chinese coolie labor would be a viable option to restore Louisiana sugar production to its former high economic status. They argued that coolies were cheaper to pay and more docile than freedmen, but still racially inferior, creating a labor pool ripe for exploitation. The low wages offered to Chinese labor would also, in turn, force freedmen to accept lower wages themselves, or be priced out of the labor market altogether.[102]

Newspapers in Louisiana were also convinced that "the negroes will never work on the plantations voluntarily, as long as they know they constitute the only class upon which the planter can rely for the cultivation of their plantations."[103] They wrote that planters were in need of "other labor" to "compel the negro to habits of thrift and industry…by means of competition."

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[100] "The Coolie Question," *Times-Picayune,* November 7, 1865.

[101] "Chinese Immigration Company of St. Louis, Missouri," *Weekly Advocate* (Baton Rouge), June 12, 1869.

[102] Benjamin N. Narvaéz, "Abolition, Chinese Indentured Labor, and the State," 16-18.

[103] "The Coolie Question," *Times-Picayune,* November 7, 1865.

[104] In other words, they believed that it was necessary to force Black laborers to accept lower wages for more work by creating false competition from a newly imported racial group in the form of the Chinese. More reports from California, where the Chinese population numbered over 100,000 by 1869, strengthened Southerners resolve to incorporate coolie labor into their plantation system. A letter printed in the *Times-Picayune* from Judge Dargan of Mobile, Alabama, to General Clanton in Montgomery about his experiences with the Chinese in San Francisco outlines the vision many Southerners had for the future of labor on plantations. Dargan fervently believed that Chinese labor would be the way forward for the South, and the addition of coolies would return plantations to their former high economic standing, and the "rich farms now lying idle would bloom again, our commerce would flourish, and we would talk of 'hard times' as things that had been."[105] The Alabaman echoes the feelings of many Louisiana planters, namely that the South should introduce a new racial class for labor on the plantations, and his report concludes that the Chinese are "skillful workingmen, and industrious and frugal," and also "the very class for our country."[106] He continues by explaining how the Chinese can be used to undercut the wages of other laborers, thus creating more wealth for the employer. He argues, "they can be employed to great advantage, and at exceedingly cheap rates."[107] Dargan goes further, writing that "once employed, [the Chinese] will work faithfully, and not bother themselves about suffrage;" an assertion that the Chinese are a more easily manipulated racial group, and, unlike Freedmen, would not demand full participation in governmental processes.[108] He concludes his correspondence by informing General Clanton

[104] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.
[105] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869.
[106] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869.
[107] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869.
[108] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869.

that, with his help, he hopes to import coolies into the South to "recover from the fearful state it is now in."[109] Politically, many Southern Democrats saw the importation of coolie labor as a way to challenge the Fifteenth Amendment by introducing an undesirable voting class that would cause Republicans to regret granting the vote to all American men. These Democrats sought to use the Chinese as an economic weapon against Freedmen and a political weapon against their Republican adversaries.[110] "Admit to our principle and you will exclude the African and the Asiatic; deny it in regard to the African and adhere it to the Asiatic, and you proclaim yourselves arrant knaves and hypocrites," the *New Orleans Times* proclaimed.[111] Based on these newspaper articles and personal correspondence, one could argue that Louisiana sugar planters seemed to revel in the idea of introducing a new labor force to their plantations that would secure both cheap labor from the Chinese and cheaper labor from the freedmen.

[109] "Chinese Labor," *Times-Picayune*, August 8, 1869.
[110] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 109.
[111] *New Orleans Times*, August 6, 1869.

Section Three: Resistance from All Sides

Although many planters, journalists, and businessmen argued that coolie labor could help jumpstart the Louisiana sugar industry during Reconstruction, many whites in the South were opposed to introducing this new Asian ethnic group on racial grounds. Opposition to the so-called "Coolie Question" was often fierce, especially during the early years of Reconstruction in Louisiana. Some white Louisianans did not look at the Chinese as a viable labor force, but as an alien ethnic group that would upset the already tense racial atmosphere of early Reconstruction Louisiana. Racist attitudes related to the ethnic status of the Chinese as a non-white, non-European influence on Southern society began to arise, and many Southerners began to let longstanding racial prejudices guide their thinking, rather than the reality of harsh labor conditions and disenfranchisement often found in sugar plantation society. An article in *The New Orleans Times* warned, "we can only regard the introduction of this element of Asiatic life into our country as one fraught with the most disastrous consequences to its best interests."[112] The writer continues his prejudiced assault, suggesting that the Chinese were "debased heathens, half human, half devil, which the ameliorating influences of Christianity could never elevate to the standard of common decency."[113] Others argued that Chinese laborers would be far too alien to employ in the South. In June 1867, the *Daily Picayune* suggested that "the negro slaves were…very far from being a highly enlightened class," but, unlike the Chinese, Black laborers still "possessed the elements of the English language and the Christian religion."[114] The writer states that "not one of these advantages belongs to the laborer from the Orient," and a coolie "comes from his home physically as well as mentally depressed, with constitutional tendencies

[112] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.
[113] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.
[114] "Coolie Labor," *Daily Picayune*, June 12, 1867.

and propensities foreign to our clime and race."[115] Many in the United States, both in the North and South, viewed the Chinese as racially inferior to whites and incapable of living in a "civilized" society like war-scarred Louisiana. Consequently, many in Louisiana began to suggest that sugar planters look to Europe to meet their labor needs on plantations.[116] The White League added to this outcry for European labor solidarity, and they began to use their Democratic allies to push planters to employ European laborers over Chinese laborers and Freedmen.[117] Fears of upsetting the racial order led to the belief that "Germany, Ireland, France and the other nations of Western Europe…will find themselves…provided with permanent situations, and compelled to labor, or willingly do so under the stimulus of competition."[118] Those advocating for white labor argued that a "good class of agricultural hands as Europe can boast is likely to be furnished to portions of the country heretofore suffering labor dearth."[119] White, European laborers, they argued, would prove to be a better alternative than Chinese coolies on the Louisiana sugar plantations, based on preconceived notions of race and social hierarchy. These Euro-centric labor advocates created further hostility for sugar planters interested in employing Chinese coolies.

The death-knell for the coolie system of Louisiana came from the Chinese themselves. Planters had believed that coolies would be more agreeable and easier to manipulate than Freedmen, but these preconceived ideas of coolie temperament soon disappeared as Chinese laborers asserted their agency by refusing to be exploited like they were in Cuba. These laborers began demanding days off and rest periods, to the chagrin of their plantations employers. They

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[115] "Coolie Labor," *Daily Picayune*, June 12, 1867.
[116] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 172-173.
[117] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 214-217.
[118] "The Future of Southern Labor," *New Orleans Times*, November 12, 1865.
[119] "Coolie Labor," *Daily Picayune*, June 12, 1867.

also demanded food and beverage rations, in addition to their labor wage, and refused to work if these demands were not met. One incident that led to a riot and attack of an overseer on Millaudon Plantation in 1870 demonstrated the tensions that arisen between the Chinese and their overseers. During an argument with the Chinese laborers, an overseer fired a pistol and struck a coolie in the arm. The entire company of Chinese attacked the overseer with cane knives, and the other whites on the plantation had to help the overseer escape or be killed. The Chinese refused then to work until the overseer had been arrested. Similar violent confrontations between Chinese laborers and white employers at plantations across Louisiana ensued during the early 1870s, many followed by Chinese strike or desertion. In some cases, Chinese laborers even testified in open court against their white employers, something that would have been unheard of in antebellum Louisiana.[120] In the end, the Chinese had turned out to be less docile and more resistant to exploitation than the Louisiana planters had originally hoped. Violent confrontations, strikes, higher wages, court proceedings, and desertion had all taken their toll, both economically and psychologically. These Chinese resistance measures, coupled with growing political pressure from both Republicans and Democrats, caused many planters to abandon their respective Chinese coolie experiments by the mid-1870s.

[120] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 184-192.

Conclusion

It is rarely disputed that Louisiana sugar planters faced economic downturn immediately following the Civil War. They had lost their entire enslaved workforce and much of their investment wealth with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which in turn led to vacant sugarcane fields and lost crops. These planters had held control over the bodies, labor, and lives of enslaved people for generations, and they had amassed enormous wealth by engaging in abusive and exploitative practices. In the end, the plantation system was so ingrained in the social fabric of South Louisiana that these planters' solution was to seek another non-white ethnic group to exploit. These Sugar Barons found kindred spirits in the planters of Cuba, and they sought to imitate the brutal Cuban plantation system that had ruined countless Chinese and enslaved Africans, only to regain the wealth they had previously enjoyed from the forced labor of their enslaved populations. They sought out what they thought would be a labor force that could be easily manipulated for their own economic, social, and political gain. The Chinese, however, would not be so easily controlled. They would not allow these planters to exploit them, and they asserted their agency through both violent and nonviolent actions. Their refusal to give up their dignity forced the sugar planters to abandon their attempts to create a new and economically exploitable racial class in Louisiana that would also be pawns in economically controlling the agency of laboring Freedmen on plantations.

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Vita

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