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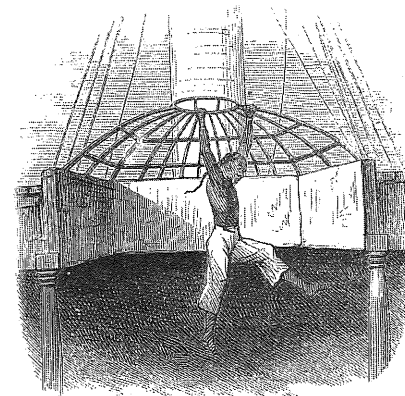
Gary Y. Okihiro, *Cane Fires: The Anti-Japanese Movement in Hawaii, 1865-1945*

Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*

THE COOLIE SPEAKS

CHINESE INDENTURED LABORERS AND
AFRICAN SLAVES OF CUBA

Lisa Yun



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF COOLIE TRAFFIC TO THE AMERICAS

We heard that the Chinese government has reconciled with those big foreign countries and those countries have prohibited the trade of Africans; how come no one tries to save the Chinese in Cuba? Why? The officials have made ways to make us slaves over and over . . . In all, when we die, we will have no coffin or grave. Our bones will be burned and mixed with ox and horse bone ash, and then used to whiten the sugar (Petition 54).

—Ren Shizen, Dai Renjie, Liang Xingzhao (1874)

THE NARRATIVE OF TRANSITION

In 1874 there were 2,841 Chinese coolies who stepped forward to give written and oral testimonies of their experiences in Cuba. Of some quarter million Chinese sent to Cuba and Peru in bondage, this would be one instance of their mass protest via testimony. The perspectives of those such as Ren Shizen, Dai Renjie, and Liang Xingzhao complicate narratives of slavery and freedom and can be placed in comparison to contemporary historiographic interpretations on the subject of Asian migration. Their accounts provide an alternate perspective to the “transitional” narrative, which has facilitated the modern teleology of slave to free, black to white. In historical analyses of mass Asian migration to the Americas, particularly that of the Chinese, a *narrative of transition* has provided currency for explaining their emergence and function as subjects in slave and free economies and as mediums for “progress” and modernization. The utility of Asians in a “transition” narrative goes hand in hand with the racialized figuring of Asians as functional “intermediaries” between slave and free, black and white and has enabled the continued entrenchment of these binaries.¹ Manuel Moreno Fraginals’s explications, which have served as a linchpin of Cuban studies and studies of sugar economies, map one version

of the transition narrative in his portrayal of Chinese wage workers as constituting the transition from slavery to modernization. He came to the following conclusion:

The slave trade did not allow for the modernization of productive mechanisms. Though this has been a highly controversial topic in modern historiography (especially since Fogal [sic] and Engerman's studies), a detailed study of sugar technology confirms that sugar mills were unable to take advantage of any of the new production techniques developed by their European counterparts . . . The most illustrious economists and industrial technicians of the time came to the conclusion that it was impossible to establish a scientific system of industrial production using slave labor. The sharp drop in Negro contraband and rise of the consumer market coincided with sugar's industrial revolution . . . The key to success was in Chinese immigration.²

At the same time, Moreno noted that the treatment of the Chinese was "a brand of slavery similar to that of the Negroes." But the dictates of this treatment, he explained, were determined by the economic necessities of production, and by neither the "philanthropic nor perverse" intentions of the owners. Moreno emphasized that "in the eyes of the owners, the men who came to work on their plantations were production factors."³ While this analysis explicates the logic of transition to industrialization, it also reveals the tenuousness of the transitional narrative. The narrative rests upon the submergence of lived experience or at least some normative justification of that experience, as anything else would complicate the imperatives of "progress" and modernization. In the nineteenth century, narratives of "transition" also lent themselves to characterizations that supported the clarity of moving forward from slavery. In nineteenth-century Brazil, various factions saw Chinese labor as constituting the "step forward" from slavery to postslavery. Jeffrey Lesser has noted that rationales included those by "progressive plantation owners who saw the end of slavery approaching and looked simply to replace African slaves with another servile group, abolitionists convinced that Chinese contract labor would be a step forward on the path to full wage labor, and still others who fervently believed that Chinese workers had some inherited

ability as agricultural laborers and would help make Brazil a more competitive player in the world market."⁴

Many critiques have been forwarded that implicitly or explicitly complicate a transition narrative. Some directly address Asians in the Americas, such as critiques by Dale Tomich, Rebecca Scott, and Gary Okihiro. In a critique of Morenó, Tomich argues that linear narratives of transition obscure the complex integration of world economy and reproduce a simplified dualism of slave labor and modern technological labor. Tomich also takes issue with the assumptions of African labor as "unskilled" and Chinese labor as "skilled," noting the essentialist undertones of defining racialized labor. He considers "the ways in which the opposed elements of capitalist modernity and slave labor are constitutive of one another."⁵ In a study of slavery and abolition in Cuba, Rebecca Scott also disturbs entrenched categorizations of slave versus free labor and notes the underlying racism in assumptions regarding internal contradictions between advanced technology and slavery.⁶ "Under the circumstances," she argues, "it is difficult to see in what way the economic motivations of planter and Chinese contract laborer, in their work relations, would have been substantially different from those of master and slave. If they were not substantially different, this casts doubt on the idea that juridically "free" workers—in this case the Chinese—were essential to mechanization. Indeed, many of the Chinese were not employed with machinery at all but were used as agricultural workers, performing precisely the same tasks as slaves."⁷ She further notes that while "some of the Chinese became efficient workers is testimony to their own sense of order and hope for full freedom, combined with the effects of coercion, it was not inherent in their fictitious intermediate legal status, which often allowed them to be systematically reduced to virtual slavery. It would thus be misleading to place great weight on their formal status as wage laborers in an explanation of how they could help plantations mechanize."⁸ Tomich and Scott point out the theoretical and methodological problems precipitated by ideological rigidities inherent in narrations of national and liberal progress. Though not examining sugar economies specifically, Gary Okihiro critiques representations of Asians-as-intermediates in a related context, in his examination of global histories of "East-West" binaries. He points out the ideological bases carried over several centuries in the

Replace
slavery
with
technology

racism

racism =

constructions of Asians “as intermediate, not Black and not White, yet bearing resemblances to both the ‘savage’ African and the ‘civilized’ European.”⁹

The three critiques—one of world systems, one of slavery and abolition, and another of global race discourses—help illuminate the stakes for a reading of Chinese coolie testimonies, with recognition that modern interpretations of Chinese migration speak directly to its ideological significance in liberal teleologies and theories of race and emancipation. The most thorough critique and historiography regarding Cuba’s Chinese coolie labor comes via Cuban scholar Juan Pérez de la Riva, whose extensive studies of this subject and of African slavery conclude that ideologies of colonial slavery, the system of social legislation, and ingrained practices of sugar elites overtly colluded to coerce contract labor into a system of enslavement in perpetuity.¹⁰ A “transition” in Pérez de la Riva’s work emerges as a further extension of slavery. Scott arrives to a related though less unequivocal conclusion via different arguments, by noting that contract labor did not *necessarily* shorten the course to abolition. Scott also notes the *resilience of slavery as a system with mixed and complementary labor forms, such as indenture.*¹¹ Pérez de la Riva’s examination of Cuba’s legal codes, along with the similar studies of Denise Helly and Juan Hui Huang in this regard, offers a view of the structural and regulatory forces behind what would be called a “transition” from slavery to wage labor. In separate analyses, they similarly concluded that the Chinese were installed under codes that explicitly removed their civil rights and attempted to meld contract labor to slavery ideology. Pérez de la Riva points to the overall spirit of slavery that dominated the legislation or “*el espíritu esclavista que predomina en la legislación.*”¹² Comparing the slave codes and the Spanish regulations for Chinese, he emphasized that while Chinese were cast as free persons, or “*hombre libre,*” under contract, the legislation “effectively reduced the Chinese to perpetual bondage,” or “*todo eso equivalia a reducir a los chinos a una esclavitud perpetua.*”¹³ Juan Huang Hui also came to a similar conclusion with an analysis of Spanish legislation and notes that regulations for Chinese coolies were equivalent in substance to those applied to African slaves. Huang Hui’s position concurs with observations of Roberto Mesa, who noted the similarities between the legislation regarding the Chinese laborer of Cuba in 1860 and legislation for African slaves in 1842.¹⁴

The Chinese codes included laws that required permission from the owner for coolies to marry, laws that designated the status of any children of a coolie to be inherited from that of the mother (thus the child of a coolie or slave mother would be born into bondage), laws that denied freedom to Chinese who completed their contracts or who arrived after 1860, with the latter laws being framed as “recontracting” regulations. The re-contracting system emerged as one of the main preoccupations and themes in the coolie testimonies and presents a challenge to conceptual and philosophical arguments of freedom. I argue that these themes of the coolie testimonies concern a peculiar and efficacious perversion of the contract institution, producing “consent” based upon potentialities of “future” freedom in the context of a racialized social contract (see Chapter 3).

First, what were the conditions of “transition” for the Chinese and how is this significant to our present narratives of race and global labor? The first part of the question occupies us here, though it is a question that is necessarily contextualized by multinational, multiethnic, and transnational histories. What follows then is a situating of Chinese coolies in historical contexts, without which it would be impossible to understand how coolies’ self-representations were and continue to be located.

THE EARLY EXPERIMENTS

Before mass Asian labor arrived on the coasts of North America and Hawaii, experiments with and the importation of Asian labor had occurred in colonies in Asia and would eventually reach the Caribbean and Latin America. During the 1620s, Jan Pieterzoon Coen, governor of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), already considered acquiring Chinese for the Indies: “No people in the world can do us better service than the Chinese. It is requisite by this present monsoon to send another fleet to visit the coast of China and take prisoners as many men, women, and children as possible. . . .”¹⁵ Later in 1662, Jan van Riebeeck, who founded “Cape Colony” of the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa), wrote to Dutch authorities that he wanted Chinese labor sent.¹⁶ In the 1800s, however, Chinese labor began being exported in sustained efforts. Chinese labor arrived in the colonial Malay Peninsula, and by the mid-1800s the Chinese were the largest ethnic group of the former British colony of Singapore. In 1806 the Chinese were brought to labor in the Caribbean, with an early

experimental group of 192 Chinese taken to Trinidad. This experiment did not take root, as only twenty to thirty of them stayed on into the 1820s.¹⁷ In 1810 several hundred Chinese were brought to Portuguese Brazil to grow tea. Although for various political reasons in Brazil, a consistent Chinese migration “program” did not materialize.¹⁸ In 1838, however, the British experiment to bring Chinese to the Caribbean took shape and lasted until the last shipments of Chinese labor came to the West Indies in the 1880s. Significantly, while mobilizing to abolish the transatlantic slave trade, the British were establishing themselves as dominant traffickers of Indian and Chinese coolies. The Chinese appeared in the West Indies in addition to a large majority of Indian coolies going to the West Indies, while British colonial control over India was consolidating. (The British East India Company arrived in India in 1784, and in 1858 Britain asserted official political dominion over India.) Following the British example, the French brought Chinese to the French Caribbean, though in markedly smaller numbers. During the nineteenth century, the traffic in Chinese labor to the Americas included destinations such as Cuba, Peru, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Panama, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Brazil. The traffic in Indian labor to the Americas, which extended into the early twentieth century, was directed to Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, as well as to the islands of St. Croix, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, and Tobago.

During the same period that the initial “experiment” began in Trinidad, the British Empire, through its navy, began imposing a unilateral embargo on the transatlantic transport of African slaves in 1809. This embargo became more formal when England and Spain signed a treaty in 1817 aimed at abolishing the slave trade.¹⁹ The British suppression of the transatlantic African slave trade did not fully deny Spanish access to African slaves, but it continued to force traders toward more clandestine methods, which drove up the purchase price of slaves. The increased purchase price of African slaves pushed Cuban sugar planters to search for alternate sources of labor and forced the Cuban planters to confront a fundamental production problem of cost. Despite increases in the production of sugar and their increased prosperity, Cuban planters were continually beset by the challenge of lowering their labor costs to remain competitive in world commodities markets. Slave imports dropped from 10,000 Africans in 1844 to 1,300 in 1845, and then to 1,000 in 1847—a 90 percent drop in the importation of African slaves. It was in the mid-1800s that the Euro-

pean and American powers undertook massive coolie trading to the Americas and to Africa. During this nadir in 1847, the intensive trafficking of Chinese coolies to Cuba began, and two years later, there would be coolie trafficking to Peru. For the next thirty years, just under a quarter million Chinese would be taken to Cuba and Peru as part of the coolie trade. There were 100,000 coolies taken aboard ships to Peru and 142,000 to Cuba, though with a mortality rate of 12 percent (a higher rate than the African slave trade) fewer actually landed. These numbers account only for those who were documented, with some studies indicating several thousand more shipped as contraband.²⁰ In the case of Cuba, coolies were directly installed into a social and economic system *where slavery had not been abolished*. In fact, African slave importation to Cuba *increased* during the coolie period, complicating any argument that the increased need for contract labor is predicated upon the absence of slave labor. When coolies were introduced to Cuba in 1847, slave importation had indeed reached a nadir. Yet as coolie imports commenced and increased after 1847, slave imports *also* greatly increased, with yearly as high as 30,473 in 1859 alone and continued highs in the 1860s.²¹ The coolie was not simply a “replacement” for the slave. Coolie and slave economies were clearly concomitant and coproductive.

CHINESE AND INDIAN COOLIE LABOR

The history of the Americas, with its Spanish, English, French, and American colonial legacies, and the distinct histories of indigenous peoples, cannot be homogenized. Likewise, the subject of mass bonded labor in the Americas—in this case, both East Indian and Chinese—cannot be homogenized and oversimplified.²² The experiments and sustained migrations of Asian labor involved multinational and multiethnic histories. For example, the conditions and types of coolie labor in nearby Jamaica, Guyana, or Trinidad, compared to Cuba or Peru, were not the same. What emerges is a widely varied picture of what “coolie” and “indenture” mean.

The term coolie generalizes Asian laborers in a spectrum of ethnic cultures, histories, material conditions, and political contexts. Coolie labor was utilized not only in the Americas but also in other parts of the world, such as Mauritius, Australia, Fiji, and the former colonies of Malaysia and Singapore. The coolie trade was a global one, with Chinese and Indian

labor sent to all regions of the world, with overlapping colonial trajectories of political economies and imaginaries, enmeshed in a world system of capital flows. An example of this overlapping is when Spain proposed importing time-expired Indian coolies from the British colonies of the West Indies to the Spanish colony of Cuba. This was rejected by the British for a host of reasons. Still, the fact that this idea was proposed and debated is an example of the naturalized linking of Asian subjects/subjection in colonial imaginaries and economies.²³ In some instances Chinese and Indians did meet on the same grounds, such as they did in South Africa. Great Britain imported 64,000 Chinese coolies to work the Transvaal gold mines in South Africa in 1904. The ensuing solidarity of Chinese labor with Indian labor, though still formulated along ethnic lines, led to a shared movement of Chinese-Indian passive resistance led by Leung Quinn and Mahatma Gandhi, who was in South Africa during this period.²⁴ Chinese and Indian labor also overlapped in parts of Caribbean, such as in Guyana and Trinidad. However, Indians comprised a significantly larger number of the coolies imported to the British colonies, with many also being sent to the French colonies. The Chinese were also sent to the British and French colonies, but were mostly sent to the Spanish colonies. The British dominated the Indian coolie trade, but American, French, Spanish, and Portuguese involvement, on the other hand, was most prominent in the Chinese coolie trade.

The contrasts between the Chinese and Indian coolie trades arise partly due to the demarcations of empire, labor economy, and local developments in emigration. While the British dominated the Indian coolie trade, the British, Americans, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch led in the Chinese coolie trade.²⁵ Different imperial agendas, systems of migration, and of course, cultural and local politics, created distinct coolie systems. Major differences arose in routes and destinations, labor conditions, transport economics, "contract" constructions and administration, and gender ratios. Whereas Chinese coolie ships took 99 percent males, Indian coolie ships, by contrast, brought men, women, married couples, children, and families. These different gender characteristics led to a host of social and cultural developments that mark the Chinese and Indian diasporic patterns as clearly distinct when examining the descendant generations of Chinese in Cuba versus, for example, those of East Indians in Guyana. The differentiation between Chinese and Indian coolie systems, however,

does *not* easily correlate to normative judgments as to which system was necessarily "better or worse." The "better or worse" comparison incurs simplistic presumptions of what constitutes "force" and "coercion." Both the oppressive force of the British colonial system in the West Indies and that of the Spanish colonial system in Cuba emerged in particularized forms of coercion and were subject to contestation by laborers in bondage (and in some instances, were challenged by abolitionists). In some cases, narratives regarding Indian coolie trade revealed similarities with the Chinese coolie trade, wherein rationalized codes such as "contract," "indenture," "law," and "emigrant" were semantics for regularized systems of deception and fraud.

Narratives of the Indian passage reveal this kind of deception from the outset. In 1858 Captain and Mrs. Swinton brought the coolie ship *Salsette* from Calcutta to Trinidad and kept a journal. Their journal recorded the particulars of this voyage, during which over half of the 324 coolies died from disease and poor diet. When investigated, the Captain could not be reproached, as he unflinchingly observed British "codes" of safe passage during the voyage. Yet "regulations" did not necessarily translate to more humane conditions. Furthermore, Mrs. Swinton wrote that most of those aboard were lured with inflated "fine promises" and did not truly "know where they were going or what is to be their occupation." In her words, the Indian coolies were "emigrants" who "were entrapped."²⁶ The rationalized language of willing "emigrants" dissembles when assumptions of foreknowledge and consent are contradicted by practices of entrapment. The experience of passage was also a gendered one. In one example of the passage experience, colonial court documents reveal that a woman called "Maharani" died after being raped by the crew. Verene Shepherd points out that rape was just one of many exploitative practices that were regular features of the coolie passage.²⁷ On land, investigations, such as a commission (1870) investigation in Guyana, exposed contradictions and brutalities in the indenture system—a system designed to disempower Indian laborers supposedly "protected" by contracts and regulations. These inquiries, on the other hand, did not necessarily produce or lead to ameliorative steps, or did so with the effect of deferring or managing conflict.²⁸

Indenture conditions changed over time and under various colonial offices. Practices and regulations were implemented, ignored, or revised. They were subject to conflicting interpretations, vested interests, and political

debates. Chinese and Indian laborers confronted their predicaments with various means of resistance, such as withholding labor, desertion, violent retribution, organized strikes, and formal challenges to juridical bodies. Still, generalized understandings of indenture mask ironies and contradictions, and comparisons of Chinese and Indian indenture are useful but must be specified and contextual. While it is tempting to draw a broad equivalency among "Asian" labor histories, Chinese and Indian indentured migrations were rooted in cultural and political circumstances that reveal similarities as well as important differences. Besides the baseline comparative analysis of free and coerced Asian migration to the Americas by Walton Look Lai, a sustained comparative study of indenture is sorely needed in this respect.²⁹

Types of labor also led to unique specificities of coolie experience. In Peru, for example, Chinese coolies labored on plantations and on mammoth mountains of Peruvian guano, contributing to the hugely profitable fertilizer market of which the Americans and others partook. As shippers waited in the harbor for their guano loads, Chinese coolies slaved amid poisonous fumes. As one American consul wrote: "I have been informed by American Captains, trading to the Chincha and Guañapa Islands that many of them too weak to stand up are compelled to work on their knees picking the small stones out of the guano, and when their hands become sore from the constant use of the wheelbarrow it is strapped upon their shoulders, and in that way they are compelled to fulfill their daily task . . ." ³⁰ The same consul went on to describe the "constant employment of guards" to thwart the repeated suicide attempts of enslaved coolies.³¹ For coolies of Peru, the struggle became a grim battle for daily survival that was also contextualized by the particular kind of labor that they were forced to undertake. While it is certainly possible and fruitful to compare Cuban and Peruvian coolie histories and experiences, this author cautions against homogenizing or occluding distinct national histories and conditions (Cuban history and Peruvian history) via a study of diaspora (Chinese). With an enduring politics of indigenism and the legacy of Simón Bolívar, Peru had distinct conditions of race, labor, and postslavery politics and economy. Peru had its own unique relations to Spain, China, and South America (especially Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador). Peru declared its independence from Spain in 1821, finally ousted colonial control in 1824, and declared the abolition of slavery in 1854. Yet Peru fought Spain again in 1863–66 and was

deeply embroiled in struggles with and against its South American neighbors. Cuba underwent thirty years of war and became independent from Spain in 1898, but then came formally under American occupation in 1899. Cuba would not end slavery until the 1880s. Periodizing is not prescriptive of lived conditions; but the sequence of events and the local histories of nationalist projects had bearing upon the particular politics of race and labor in each location.

The type of coolie system and the conditions of labor in Cuba raise challenging questions, with features of hypermobility (with coolies often having several masters) and state ownership (with widespread use of coolies in public works and prison works), operating in the context of racial hierarchy in a slavery system (with contract coolies under the control of black overseers). Theoretical and philosophical questions arise regarding the hybrid marrying of contract and slavery. Cuba's Chinese coolies constitute a unique history of a mass movement of resistant labor being forcibly shipped to Cuba where slavery had not yet been abolished. Slavery did not expire until 1886 in Cuba, which was over forty years after the arrival of the Chinese. Cuba was second to last in abolishing slavery in the Western hemisphere, with Brazil ending slavery in 1888. Elsewhere, in Jamaica and Trinidad for example, coolie labor was installed after slavery had been abolished.³² The fact that Chinese coolies arrived in the midst of an ongoing slavery system greatly affected their lived experience and motivated their considerable role as insurgents in the Cuban war for independence. Chinese coolies arrived when the politics of economy and labor and the politics of class and race converged during a critical period of history: the overlapping and then final dismantling of African slavery, the war for independence, and the beginnings of a Cuban nation.

CHINESE COOLIES AND "TEA WITH SUGAR"

On the Spanish side, coolie labor was desirable because of economic and production demands, but there were other considerations that made it attractive as well. While the higher costs of African slavery were the bane of planters' daily concerns, at the same time, the anxiety of the planter class grew as the numbers of Africans grew. As the African presence increased in Cuba, alarmist sentiments arose among resident whites concerning the color disparity. By 1841 the white population was in the

minority.³³ The racialized revolution in French colonial Haiti that led to the overthrow of the white elite provided lessons to the Cuban landowning class. The spectre of another Haiti-like revolution, one led by a black majority population, never seemed far away. Planters thought that using coolie labor might help alleviate multiple problems, with the most attractive factor being the low cost and widespread availability of Chinese labor.

The control of costs and the control of racial labor became dual concerns.

Before the Haitian Revolution (1791–1805), Haiti was the primary producer of sugar for the world market. Cuba seized the lead in sugar production after Haiti and other competing sugar producers emancipated slaves (or the slaves freed themselves) and competitors' sugar production dropped. The following table reflects changes in Haitian and Santo Domingan sugar production before and after the Haitian Revolution. After the Haitian slave revolt and revolution, European states imposed a punitive embargo on Haitian sugar, driving Haiti out of the sugar market. In 1791 Haiti's sugar production had reached 78,696 tons. After the revolution, sugar production steadily dwindled, down to a half ton in 1835.³⁴ With Haiti displaced, the colonized territories of Jamaica, Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico rose in prominence.³⁵ At first, Cuban sugar production began modestly. During the 1780s Cuba produced only 18,000 tons of sugar per year. Sugar production in Cuba began in earnest in 1798.³⁶ The 1830s, however, revealed the flourishing of the sugar economy. During the mid-1830s, Cuba first obtained parity with Jamaica as a sugar producer and then surpassed Jamaica when that country emancipated its African slaves during the late 1830s.³⁷ The emancipation of Jamaican slaves drove up labor costs for Jamaican planters, placing them at a comparative disadvantage with Cuba's sugar planters, who still maintained access to African slave labor at this time. Because of its labor cost advantages, Cuba quickly outpaced Jamaica in sugar production. By the 1840s Cuba had become the preeminent producer of sugar in the world (161,000 tons), accounting for 21 percent of world production—outdistancing Jamaica, Brazil, and Puerto Rico. From the 1840s to the 1870s Cuba leapt forward with even more phenomenal growth precisely during *the period when Chinese coolies were introduced and installed on Cuban sugar plantations*. In 1830 Cuba produced 105,000 tons of sugar. Forty years later, Cuba produced almost seven times more sugar (703,000 tons) while its closest competitors produced approximately 100,000 tons. By this time, Cuban sugar accounted for 41 percent

TABLE 1.1 SUGAR PRODUCTION FIGURES FOR JAMAICA, BRAZIL, CUBA, AND PUERTO RICO (TONS)

	CUBA	PUERTO RICO	JAMAICA	BRAZIL
1830	105,000	20,000	69,000	83,000
1840	161,000	36,500	26,500	82,000
1850	295,000	50,000	29,000	110,000
1860	429,000	58,000	26,000	57,000
1870	703,000	105,000	24,500	101,500

Sources: Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar, I* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949), 112, 126, 131, 199; Alan Dye, *Cuban Sugar in the Age of Mass Production* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 27; Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El ingenio: complejo económico social cubano del azúcar*, 3 vols. (Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1978), 3:36, 37; and Andrés Ramos Mattei, *La hacienda azucarera: Su crecimiento y crisis en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: CEREP, 1981), 33.

of world output.³⁸ During this period, Cuba used a substantial coolie system grafted onto a continuing slavery system that involved clandestine slave importation.

During this period, the British consumed approximately one third of the world's sugar and also were the dominant Western consumers of tea. It is a likely assumption that these two facts are linked, as the British always consumed their tea with sugar. As Sidney Mintz has traced in an examination of sugar in modern history, sugar was an item of mass consumption, and one of its major uses was for sweetening tea.³⁹ With some irony, the British predilection for tea and sugar led to a worldwide movement in capital and labor. "Tea with sugar" instigated a wide circle of capital flows and trade imbalances of the era, and involved competition over labor as well. Spanish Cuba benefited from Britain's "opening up" of a Chinese labor market. At the same time, Spanish Cuba chafed under British restrictions against African labor. While the British controlled access to a worldwide Asian coolie market, they implemented measures against the African slave trade in international waters. This dual approach enabled British maneuverings over labor and economy, ultimately affecting the price of labor. Denise Helly situates the Chinese coolie trade as a confluence and sifting of global rivalries and alignments involving European nations, the United States, Africa, and China, and the control of slave and coolie labors, with a particular rivalry taking place between Britain and Spain in relation to Cuba and sugar.⁴⁰

While Britain occupied a major role in the coolie trade (they began withdrawing from coolie trafficking to Cuba in 1858), they were not the only colonial interests involved.⁴¹ The ease of introducing Chinese coolie trafficking into the world system was due to multicolonial access, domestic conditions, and control of labor migration. Beginning in the 1840s, Britain and its allies effectively “opened” a valuable labor market in southern China. Losing the Opium War and the subsequent Arrow War, China opened twelve major ports to the British, French, and American settlements and handed over Hong Kong to the British. One result of the wars was deregulation of Chinese emigration. From 1840 to 1875 approximately one million Chinese left Guangdong province (southern China) as part of Western labor traffic (not including numbers from other provinces), with just under a quarter million going to Cuba and Peru.⁴²

COOLIES ON SHIPS AND THE PASSAGE: INTERNATIONAL TRAFFIC AND THE PASSAGE “UNDER THE LID OF HADES”

Early in their considerations, Cuban planters had discussed the immigration of free whites from Europe. When free white laborers from Europe proved unwilling to work in sugarcane fields, however, Cuban landowners opted to import labor from China. The Cuban sugar elite began seriously discussing the need to import Chinese laborers from British-controlled ports in 1844.⁴³ Initially, the Spanish bought Chinese coolies through British traffickers. Eventually, a multinational network emerged, consisting of shipping companies and agents, businesses, prominent families, and governing agencies. These varied entities turned to the trafficking of coolies and collaborated to realize enormous profits, while continuing to purchase—with increased difficulty and costs—African slaves from the complicated, “clandestine” African slave trade. The network of coolie brokers, shippers, buyers, and investors crossed lines of colonial empires, including moneyed interests of the British, Americans, Portuguese, French, as well as the Spanish Cubans. While original financing for this labor-acquisition venture originated in Cuba, supplemental financing came from a multinational network of banks and firms in New York, Boston, London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Liverpool.⁴⁴ Participating commercial interests were the same as those that financed the African slave trade.⁴⁵

Therefore, the passage of slavery and “voluntary” contract labor were underwritten by similar sources and ensconced financial relationships. To launch the coolie trade in Cuba, Cuban planters used a company called the Real Junta de Fomento y Colonización. The Real Junta de Fomento then engaged Julieta y Cia of London, headed by cousins Julián Zulueta and Pedro Zulueta, who devised the plan to transport coolies from China to Cuba. Pedro was the son of the London-based banker/slave trader/planter Pedro Juan Zulueta de Ceballos who amassed such a great fortune that he died the wealthiest man in the entire Spanish empire. The aligned machinery of private ownership and colonial power was exemplified in the appointment of Julian de Zulueta as Mayor of Havana during the coolie era. Zulueta headed the most powerful Cuban family in the mid-nineteenth century, with a fortune built upon sugar plantations and railways, shipping and ports, and all industries fed upon slave and coolie labor. Not surprisingly, the Zuluetas were infamous slave traders. At one point, Pedro Zulueta was accused, tried, but acquitted of slave trading in London in October 1843.⁴⁶ Scheming to augment slave labor, the Zuluetas initiated the coolie trade to Cuba in 1847 and brought in the first coolie shipment, under the auspices of Zulueta & Co. of London and the Junta de Fomento. With representatives and offices in London, Liverpool, Spain, China, and Cuba, the powers of family and state were consolidated in global empires of political economy. The two main labor agents based in Asia were Fernando Aguirre based in Manila and a Mr. Tait based in Amoy (Xiamen).⁴⁷ The Zuluetas engaged Tait and Company and Syme Muir and Company, both based in Amoy (Xiamen) and Guangdong, to obtain the first set of Chinese coolies to be shipped to Cuba.⁴⁸ After first working with Aguirre and Tait, the Cubans replaced them in 1855 with their own labor agents and opened their own offices for this trade in Havana, London, Manila, Macao, and Amoy (Xiamen).

It was entirely plausible for coolie traffickers to criticize black slavery and condemn the coolie traffic while engaging in one or both of these activities. Nicolás Tanco Armero exemplified this kind of paradox, as he made public claims under the mantel of modern liberal tradition, however questionable his commitments. Tanco, originally from a prominent Colombian family, published an article condemning the coolie traffic, and he also published a book recounting his travels, with complete omission of the coolie trade or his role in it.⁴⁹ He further criticized black slavery and

its inequalities, characterizing it as the inheritance of a backwards Spain left to an emergent modern *criollo* nation.⁵⁰ Tanco, partnered with Francisco Abellá Raldiris, was the most notorious of the coolie traffickers. From 1855 to 1873 Tanco and his partner oversaw the buying, selling, and exportation of over 100,000 Chinese coolies to the new world.⁵¹ Most of the prominent slaveholding families on the island (including the Zulueta, Torices, Drake, Aldama, O'Donnell, Diago, Pedroso, Sotomayor, Baró, Ferrán, Colomé, Ibáñez, Pulido, Moré, Alfonso, Almendares, Francisco, and Morales families) were involved in the coolie trade.⁵² Many of them operated plantations in Matanzas, the central part of Cuba, where the most coolies were sent. The finance and insurance firm La Alianza entered the coolie trade in 1859, providing much of the essential financing for Chinese coolie importation. La Alianza then formed a powerful alliance with the Empresa de Colonización (owned by Rafael Rodríguez Torices, Marcial Dupierris, Antonio Ferrán, and Juan A. Colomé). Together, these two firms (La Alianza and the Empresa de Colonización) dominated the trade along with the Zuluetas. Others in the Cuban sugar planting elite were heavily involved in Chinese coolie trafficking. Among those who were prominent in this "trade" were the firms (and families) of Villoldo, Wardrop y Cía, Pereda Machado y Cía, Don Santiago Drake y Cía, José María Morales y Cía, and du Pierris y Cía.⁵³

On June 3, 1847, the ship *Oquendo* arrived in Havana after 131 days at sea. Its cargo hold contained 212 Chinese men. Upon disembarkation, they were sold for 170 pesos per head to their new masters, Cuban landowners.⁵⁴ This cargo of Chinese, brokered by British traffickers and Spanish Cuban buyers, constituted the first significant trafficking of coolies to Cuba. According to several sources, 124,873 to 150,000 Chinese coolies arrived in Havana on 342 ships from 1847–1873.⁵⁵ The money to be made was considerable. O'Kelly, the *New York Herald* correspondent, observed: "The 900 human beings brought to the market in the ship I visited were worth some \$450,000 to the importers; and, as they had cost originally less than \$50,000, the anonymous society (corporation) had some \$400,000 as a result of the voyage to meet expenses. Never in the palmiest days of the African trade were such tremendous profits realized. . . ."⁵⁶ Travel writer Henry Murray observed speculation by mercantile houses and individuals on the coolie trade driven by incredible profits.⁵⁷ A ship of 500 coolies required an average investment of 30,000–50,000 pesos but yielded

TABLE 1.2 AVERAGE PRICES FOR COOLIES AND SLAVES, 1847–1875

YEARS	AFRICAN SLAVES (PESOS)	CHINESE COOLIES (PESOS)
1845–1850	335	125
1851–1855	410	150
1855–1860	580	370
1861–1865	585	310
1866–1870	450	410
1871–1875	715	420

Sources: Laird W. Bergad, Fe Iglesias Garcia, and Maria del Carmen Barcia, *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 162–73; Du Harthy, "Une Campagne dans l'extreme Orient" in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, T. 66, 1866, 417; J. Pérez de la Riva, "Aspectos económicos del tráfico de culies chinos a Cuba, 1853–1874," 269; E. Phillip Levene, "A Quantitative Analysis of the Impact of British Suppression Policies on the Volume of the Nineteenth Century Atlantic Slave Trade," in *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, eds. Stanley I. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 56 (51–81).

an average of 100,000–120,000 pesos, resulting in fantastic gains at the time.⁵⁸ Even with the costs and overhead of coolie procurement, coolie mortality, coolie shipping, and the overall profit from coolie sales to Cuba was tremendous, amounting to some 80 million pesos.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Murray argued that in addition to coolie labor, this influx of liquid capital was also a factor in helping to industrialize the Cuban economy. The coolie market took on wild characteristics, with investors taking advantage of this newest commodity. The financing of the slave and coolie trades was made possible by profits from the sale of sugar. Although sugar prices fluctuated wildly from 1855 to 1857, prices steadily climbed in the 1860s and 1870s, during the height of coolie trafficking.

In comparative cost terms, Chinese coolies were simply much less costly than African slaves. In crude terms, the coolies were easier to procure and cheaper to purchase, making them an enormously profitable commodities. Furthermore, they could be brought in as indentured laborers, but eventually used as slaves. The table above tracks the difference in prices between African slaves and Chinese coolies from 1847–75. As production at the sugar plantations and *ingenios* increased during this period, the demand for labor intensified, and the importation of African slaves resumed after initially having fallen. With the coerced labor of both coolies and slaves, the Cuban sugar economy boomed.

The “transition” narrative of slave to wage labor is one of great human cost. The Chinese coolie passage incurred a markedly higher mortality rate than the African slave passage, as ethnographer Jesus Guancho asserts.⁶⁰ The journey stretched from four to eight months. The British ship *Panama* provided an especially sobering example of the Chinese coolie middle passage to the harsh “new world”: Of 803 coolies taken aboard, only 480 survived. The American ship *Challenger* took 915 coolies on board, but only 620 survived. These few facts merely scratch the surface of the Chinese coolie period in Cuba, which was a penetrating history of human loss for some and a time of profit for others. Approximately 16,400 Chinese coolies were documented as having died on European and American coolie ships to Cuba during a twenty-six-year period⁶¹ with some ships formerly used as African slave ships.⁶² Mortality rates hovered around 12–30 percent while sometimes reaching as high as 50 percent, which was the case of the Portuguese ship *Cors* in 1857. Rebellions, crew assassinations, suicides, thirst, suffocation, and sickness occurred upon the “devil ships,” as the Chinese called them.⁶³ Writer Alexander Laing called the Chinese coolie passage “a Dantean dream: it had become the lid of Hades, and the damned were below . . .”⁶⁴ A table of the mortality rates for coolies from 1847–73 follows.

Names of coolie ships reflected the legacy of the African trade, such as *Africano* and *Mauritius*. Still others bore incongruous, and in retrospect, ironic names such as *Dreams* and *Hope* (British ships), and *Live Yankees* and *Wandering Jew* (North American ships).⁶⁵ Ships hailed from twelve European states (England, Spain, France, Denmark, Holland, Portugal, Germany, Austria, Italy, Norway, Russia, Belgium) and the United States. The six primary shippers of Chinese coolies (the French, Spanish, British, Americans, Portuguese, and Dutch) were the same top six leaders in the trafficking of African slaves.⁶⁶ The French and Spanish led in total numbers of coolies transported to Cuba and in numbers of coolie ships, though in the first half of the trade, the British and Americans led the trafficking, until they discontinued the practice.

Resistance and rebellion occurred on ships because methods of procuring coolies primarily involved kidnapping by force and deceiving individuals to board ships—then entrapping them. An overwhelming majority of Chinese coolies declared that “Spanish vessels come to China, and suborning the vicious of our countrymen, by their aid carry away full cargoes

TABLE 1.3 CHINESE BROUGHT TO CUBA, 1847–73

	NO. SHIPS	TONNAGE	CHINESE EMBARKED	CHINESE DIED	CHINESE LANDED	% DEATHS
1847	2	979	612	41	571	6.7
1853	15	8,349	5,150	843	4,307	16.4
1854	4	2,375	1,750	39	1,711	2.2
1855	6	6,544	3,130	145	2,985	4.6
1856	15	10,677	6,152	1,182	4,970	19.2
1857	28	18,940	10,101	1,554	8,547	15.4
1858	33	32,842	16,411	3,027	13,384	18.4
1859	16	13,828	8,539	1,332	7,207	15.6
1860	17	15,104	7,227	1,008	6,219	13.9
1861	16	15,919	7,212	290	6,922	4.0
1862	1	759	400	56	344	14.0
1863	3	2,077	1,045	94	951	9.0
1864	7	5,513	2,664	532	2,132	20.0
1865	20	12,769	6,810	407	6,403	6.0
1866	43	24,187	14,169	1,126	13,043	7.9
1867	42	26,449	15,661	1,247	14,414	8.0
1868	21	15,265	8,400	732	7,668	8.7
1869	19	13,692	7,340	1,475	5,865	20.1
1870	3	2,305	1,312	63	1,249	4.8
1871	5	2,820	1,827	178	1,649	9.7
1872	20	12,886	8,914	766	8,148	8.6
1873	6	4,786	3,330	209	3,121	6.3
Total	342	249,065	138,156	16,346	121,810	11.8

Source: Report of British Consulate General, Havana, September 1, 1873. (The table does not include figures through 1874.)

TABLE 1.4 CHINESE IMPORTED TO CUBA BY NATIONALITY OF CARRIER, 1847-73

	NO. SHIPS	TONNAGE	CHINESE EMBARKED	CHINESE LANDED	CHINESE DIED	% DEATHS
British	35	27,815	13,697	1,457	2,240	16.3
United States	34	40,576	18,206	16,419	1,787	9.8
Austrian	3	1,377	936	864	72	7.7
Belgian	3	2,482	1,199	1,182	17	1.4
Chilean	4	1,702	926	743	183	19.8
Danish	1	1,022	470	291	179	38.0
Dutch	19	14,906	8,113	7,132	981	12.1
French	104	64,664	38,540	33,795	4,745	12.3
German	8	4,207	2,176	1,932	244	11.2
Italian	5	5,586	2,832	2,505	327	11.2
Norwegian	5	2,296	1,366	1,104	262	19.2
Peruvian	6	4,979	2,609	1,999	610	23.4
Portugese	21	15,847	8,228	7,266	962	11.7
Russian	12	9,857	5,471	5,093	378	6.9
Spanish	78	47,604	31,356	28,085	3,271	10.4
Salvadoran	4	4,145	2,031	1,943	88	4.3
Total	342	249,065	138,156	121,810	16,346	11.8

Source: *Report of British Consulate General, Havana, September 1, 1873.* (The table does not include figures through 1874.)

of men."⁶⁷ Other candidates for coolie procurement included gullible young men who went to "recruitment agents" only later to discover that "we were not to be engaged as labourers but to be sold as slaves."⁶⁸ Numerous Chinese were so desperate to escape their fate that they committed suicide or jumped overboard. The forced passage and the later coercion of Chinese in Cuba are extensively recorded in *Report by the Commission Sent by China* (1876) and the coolie testimonies (see Chapter 2, "The Coolie Testimonies").

The unabated presence of coolie ships incensed the Chinese public, and rumors abounded that the white "barbarians" of Cuba not only abused the Chinese, but ate them as well (similar to African rumors of their fate during the slave trade). Beginning in 1858, the British began capitalizing on the popular outcry of southern Chinese against the coolie traffic to Cuba. In response, Chinese officials began executing Chinese "runners" who were collaborating with the trade to Cuba. The British eventually ceased their coolie trafficking to Cuba—a traffic that had significantly aided their rivals, the Spanish, in the world sugar economy. The British turned away Spanish coolie ships in Chinese ports and stopped sending British coolie ships to Cuba. While the demand for coolies in Cuba continued to rise, obtaining coolies was complicated by the new opposition to coolie traffic. As a result, coolies were smuggled out through the Portuguese and Spanish colonies of Macao and the Philippines, rather than from Hong Kong, Amoy (Xiamen), Swataw (Shantou), which were under British supervision. In 1859 records reveal this noticeable shift, with almost all ships departing from Macao. Coolie trafficking continued without apparent British participation—with ships hoisting different national flags. In 1865 the British publicly denounced the Spanish coolie traffickers for engaging in a coerced labor system.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the British did not cease transporting Indian and Chinese coolies to their own colonial territories in the West Indies.

COOLIES ON AMERICAN SHIPS

By 1860 there were more Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean than in North America.⁷⁰ American investors and American coolie shippers had much to do with that fact. In 1895 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts proudly upheld the American record of expansion: "We

have a record of conquest, colonization and expansion unequalled by any people in the Nineteenth Century. We are not about to be curbed now."⁷¹ Lodge, a key figure in American political history, mapped a vision of "Americanism" as one of commerce, trade, and global dominance. This would be the age of "modern times," he noted. Those modern times had been underwritten by commerce and trade with Asia, and in fact, included American coolie trafficking. However, the Americans officially halted their Chinese coolie "trade" activities, though it would take an act of Congress that specifically banned the trading of Chinese coolies by American citizens on American vessels. This occurred only after a great amount of debate among vested parties and labor protectionists, and after protestations from American consular officials in China. The most vociferous critic was the U.S. Commissioner to China, Peter Parker, who demanded that the American government stop the trafficking.⁷² The conflicted issue of "coolie labor" warranted mention in presidential addresses and Congressional debates during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the mounting controversy, Congress enacted the Prohibition of Coolie Trade Act of 1862. Until that point, the Americans had taken the lead in Chinese coolie shipping, surpassing the British, Spanish, French, and Portuguese in the number of ships and coolies in the trade.⁷³

The Asian laborer was a vexing figure for American politics: neither black nor white, Asian laborers were ostensibly voluntary yet involuntary. American politicians would engage in heated "coolie debates" against Chinese immigration to California, with anticoolie views stemming from labor platforms, nationalist politics, anti-Chinese sentiments, and paternalist arguments. The specter of Cuba and Peru served to liberalize American arguments, as it exposed the evils of coolie slavery in the "South" (Cuba, Peru, and elsewhere). The darker cousin of the Chinese coolie had been relegated to narratives of the Caribbean, Latin America, and South America—a constructing of the "Other." Still, 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. This has been elaborated in separate studies by Lucy Cohen, Matthew Guterl, Najia Aarim-Heriot, and most recently, Moon Jung Ho, who examines in depth the relation between the coolie debates and the events in Louisiana.⁷⁴ After the Civil War, some 145 Chinese coolies from Cuba and some 400 Chinese coolie

laborers from China arrived in the New Orleans port between 1869 and 1870.⁷⁵ Cries of "coolie labor" sensationalized their presence.

Furthermore, the coolie's unique transnational history suggests an outlaw narrative of northern American modern identity, with the "North" actually having been the *proponent of* and participant in captive labor markets abroad, while hypocritically preparing for civil war to ban slavery within American borders. At stake is the recitation of an American North as exceptional and free, bolstered by the freely migrating Asian laborer that figures in contrast to the African slave (though with historiographic nuances made regarding the credit-ticket system to San Francisco and contract system to Hawaii).⁷⁶ In a little-known but detailed dissertation on the Chinese coolie traffic to Cuba (1953), Marshall K. Powers was the first to query what I have called an outlaw narrative of northern liberalism. He wrote, "A careful study of the reports of the American consuls in the treaty ports of China involved in the coolie traffic indicates a large number of American vessels of Boston and other New English registry, active in the Chinese coolie trade. The names of the owners correspond to the names common in the literature of the abolitionist movement in the pre-Civil War period. The evidence is purely circumstantial; however, the fascinating possibility that at least a portion of the financial reserve of the abolitionist movement came from profits earned in the coolie traffic, present an intriguing historical paradox."⁷⁷ Powers's query and period references to Northeastern participation in captive coolie traffic disturb a legend of abolitionist liberalism and citizenry.⁷⁸ Coolie labor was transported, sold, and utilized by American interests in an expanding empire outside country borders. Coolie trafficking by American firms saw prominent families reaping profits from shipping coolies to Cuba and Peru. This would not be surprising given that Americans were also underwriting the Cuban plantation economy. Franklin Knight noted that "in Cuba, planters soon found themselves heavily indebted not only to merchants in Havana and Matanzas but also to the large consortiums in New York and Boston."⁷⁹ Family businesses flourished through the shipping of coolies, such as Howland and Aspinwall.⁸⁰ The substantial interests of American firms in coolie trafficking resulted in frequent consular dispatches and protracted Washington maneuverings over how to handle (or not handle) the issue.⁸¹ Regarding American profiteering in the whole affair, historian of consular relations Eldon Griffin noted:

*Certain leading American merchants along the Atlantic seaboard who were financially interested in the business were no less quick to assert their moral convictions, but lacking personal touch and administrative concern with the immediate vexations of the business, they were more hesitant than officials in the Orient to recognize the evils to which these convictions were applicable. Hampered by uncertainty and hesitation at home, American mercantile agents and shipmasters in China—quite apart from the quality of their individual ethics—were placed in an ambiguous position when compelled to choose between orders from their owners and the counsel of the official representatives of their country.*⁸²

Americans weighed their conscience on one hand and the lure of profits on the other, against a backdrop of American abolitionist politics. Traffic in coolies, added to the transport chain of Chinese goods and trade, seemed to be a coeval twin of such profit that it could not be ignored. Apparently, “profits to owners and associates were considerable. It is not possible to isolate and total up the profits made by Americans in this international enterprise, in which there were many hidden factors, but figures show that it produced a large income.”⁸³ American consul William Robertson, corresponding with the U.S. Secretary of State, recorded coolie ships arriving at Havana port and the ships’ owners being registered in New York, Boston, and Connecticut. He went on to insert his own sentiments: “For my part, I assure you that I regret very much to see vessels under our flag engaged in such a traffic.”⁸⁴ Later he would write, “There seems to be a rage at this time for speculating in Chinese; and from recent developments, the trade, which gives enormous profits, is engaging the attention of the first commercial houses and the largest capitalists of this city. Chinese are coming in fast . . .”⁸⁵

In 1860 the congressional Committee on Commerce pointed out American involvement in the coolie trade to Cuba and Peru, stating:

It is a mortifying fact that up to the present time American shipmasters and northern owners are found willing to connect themselves with a trade in many of its features as barbarous as the African slave trade. In one respect it is more abhorrent to an honorable mind than that trade which the civilized world condemns as piracy. The captured African is not made to believe that he is changing his condition for the better; but

*the Asiatic coolie is trapped and deceived by false pretences of promised gain into the power of men who, having cheated him of freedom, enslave him for gain.*⁸⁶

While states in the Union made slave trafficking illegal within the states, an arena remained open for ownership and investment in activity undertaken in non-American ports.⁸⁷ With ambiguous laws regarding the “carriage of passengers in American vessels from one foreign port to another foreign port,” consuls and citizens entered a gray area of international trafficking.⁸⁸ This legal loophole left an opening for American involvement in trafficking captive labor that seemed unthreatening to the domestic identity of American exceptionalism, until brought to a head in 1862.

American officials in foreign service expressed confusion over how to deal with American coolie traffickers, and they also revealed anxieties about the meanings of an American antislavery stance in the face of American involvement in what many saw as another form of slave trade. The question of race and color shadowed their thinking. Peter Parker appealed to abolish the trade on grounds of *humanity* while his successor William Reed appealed to abolish the trade in terms of *legal* precedents regarding the slave trade (though it would be a mistake to misconstrue Parker’s and Reed’s sentiments as a desire to curtail American empire). Reed’s analysis circled around questions of race and *color*. Regarding Chinese coolies, Reed concluded that they were “people of color” and were treated as slaves, like African slaves. Reed referred to the Slave Trade Act of April 20, 1818. The purpose of the act was to curtail slave traffic to American ports. The penalties applied to citizens who transported “any negro or mulatto or person of color” for the purposes of slave labor:

Any citizen or citizens of the United States, or other persons resident within the jurisdiction of the same, shall, from and after the passage of this act, take on board, receive, or transport from any of the coasts or kingdoms of Africa, or from any other foreign kingdom, place or country, or from sea, any negro or mulatto or person of color, not being an inhabitant, nor held in service by the laws of either the State or Territories of the United States, in any ship, vessel, boat, or other water-craft,

*for the purpose of holding, selling, or otherwise disposing of such person as a slave, or to be held to service or labor . . .*⁸⁹

Reed argued that such laws applicable to the African slave trade should then apply to the transport of unfree Chinese laborers and defined Chinese as “persons of color.” He wrote the following in 1858:

*In the act of 1818 the words ‘person of color’ is used as distinguished from negro or mulatto. In the act of 15th May, 1820, the words ‘person of color’ are omitted. If, instead of the question arising on the modified color of the Chinese, it arose on a cargo of the black sepoys one meets in the streets of Hong Kong, or the Malays and Javanese of the Archipelago, there could be little doubt about it. They would be clearly within the act of Congress. The Chinese cooly, is to the sense at least, a person of color. As to the tenure of labor or service for which these poor people are destined there is still less question . . . The word by which the cooly is described in this ordinance [Spanish] is equivalent to ‘laborer’ in English, or it may mean ‘imported laborer.’ It does not mean ‘free day laborer,’ for which another term is used, or slave. They are imported under a contract for a term of years. They are the subject of transfer, with no volition of their own, and no provision is made for their return to their native country. To this time none have returned. All these elements combine to make the Chinese cooly a man of color, to be disposed of to be held to service in Cuba . . . I have thus considered the trade only in its relations to the laws of the United States.*⁹⁰

Reed’s argument pointed to Chinese coolie traffic as “clearly within the act of Congress,” noting that “The Chinese cooly, is to the sense at least, a person of color.” But his writing exposed the ambivalent and conflicted core of American worldviews toward free and unfree people. The “problem” of the coolies was a problem of *racial perception*, exacerbated by “the modified color of the Chinese.” Reed compared the Chinese to “black sepoys one meets in the streets of Hong Kong, or the Malays and Javanese of the Archipelago,” and concluded that in the latter cases, there “could be little doubt about it.” Yet weighed against those examples, the Chinese raised the “problem” of racial definition. In Reed’s writing, *racial definition*, “to the sense at least,” is revealed as the most challenging

problem for Americans in formulating global policies on slavery. In political history and racial imaginary, debates regarding the coolie in the Americas were intimately entangled with the impulse to define, fix, contain, and maintain the borders of “blackness” and “whiteness,” historically efforts that would be continually disturbed and frustrated by Asian bodies.

The impulse to contain color, and the practicalities of subduing involuntary bodies of color, were manifested in the transformation of slave ship to coolie ship. The new ships to China were celebrated for their speed, heralded as symbols of modern progress and achievement, and linked to manifest destiny upon the seas. The American public heralded the next finest and fastest ship, as each builder tried to outperform the other. Captains were treated as celebrities of the day.⁹¹ The American maritime economy reached its halcyon days in the mid-nineteenth century with ships being launched to China from the coasts of New England, New York, and San Francisco. The Chinese trade of tea, spices, silks, porcelain, woods, and dry goods had not only a shadow market of opium but also a market of labor and materials stemming from the highly profitable guano and sugar trades—made possible by Chinese coolie labor. Shipping goods *and coolies* to the Caribbean and South America, American ships were registered and built in the North, and continually refined for transport and speed.⁹² One of the refinements to new American ships, however, had nothing to do with enhancing speed: rather, it made holding coolies in captivity easier. The infamous iron hatch was utilized to imprison coolies below the deck and to insure the protection of the armed crew above. The hatches were symbolic of Chinese coolie traffic as pirated slave traffic. Like other coolie ships, the American ship *Kate Hooper* was renovated with hatches and more at the cost of over twelve thousand dollars.⁹³ Obviously its owners, a prominent Baltimore family, predicted that the profit from coolie labor would more than make up for the cost.⁹⁴ The hatches in coolie ships were reinforced by bars, grating, cage doors, and barricades. Maritime historian Basil Lubbock noted that

a rising of the coolies was the one terror that ever stalked behind the captain of a Chinese coolie ship . . . the decks and hatchway openings were barred and barricaded like the old convict ships. Over each hatchway a semi-circular grating of stout iron bars was bolted to the coamings. In the centre of this there was a circular opening 8 or 9 inches at

*the most in diameter, and through the cage door was the only way on deck for the coolies below. In many ships a barricade was built athwartship from rail to rail a few feet in front of the break of the poop, which was some 10 feet high, and thick enough to stop a bullet. On top of this barricade it was often necessary to post an armed sentry.*⁹⁵

As one example of ship modifications, the coolie ship *Norway* left the port of New York loaded with coal for a U.S. naval squadron and returned with a cargo of Chinese under the hatches. A ten-foot-high barricade was built that stretched from rail to rail, with an armed guard to prevent against coolie rebellion. Despite having barricaded themselves in with firearms, the crew of sixty was overwhelmed when the 1,037 Chinese undertook a violent and sustained mutiny at sea.⁹⁶

The “transition” to free labor was a violent one, and the implied mythology of liberal “progress” and willing participation is contravened by accounts of the passage. The captive Chinese violently resisted their circumstances, causing embarrassing reports that were published and sensationalized in publications such as *Harper's* and *Cornhill* magazines. During this period, both slaves and coolies were linked in their quest for freedom on land and at sea. A fitting illustration is provided by foreign policy scholar Gaddis Smith who once compared the ships *Amistad* and *Robert Browne*, one containing kidnapped Africans and the other containing kidnapped Chinese, both bound for the Americas.⁹⁷ The Chinese mutinied on the American ship *Robert Browne* in 1852, killing the captain and crew, and were eventually captured and brought to trial. Britain's Sir B. Robertson declared that Chinese coolie mutinies at sea were “a fearful record . . . I venture to say it could not be matched in the palmiest days of the slave trade.”⁹⁸

COOLIES ON LAND: COOLIE SLAVERY

In 1923 Persia Campbell offered the first global examination of Chinese indenture under British imperial rule.⁹⁹ She detailed British administrative politics and the Chinese coolie systems that arose in Cuba (since the British were active in the trafficking to Cuba), Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Guyana, South Africa, Samoa, and Malaysia. Campbell concluded that under certain circumstances, the indenture system should be

abolished: “The story of the past makes it apparent that this system is subject to abuse. . . . It may be questioned whether, under such circumstances, the indentured labour system should be allowed to continue if the end to be attained through social organization is the welfare of man rather than the accumulation of ‘cities and money and rich plantations.’¹⁰⁰ Campbell's criticisms of the system, especially Cuba's system, were based upon her assessment of abuses in the coolie system and violations of the contract. Yet she did not reject the contract system as being inherently problematic. In her analysis, the system in Cuba emerges as a special example of egregious abuse. I argue, nonetheless, that the Cuba case reveals that the *contract institution* itself, if taken to its logical extreme, is capable of being one of enslavement (see Chapter 3).

The Chinese coolie situation was desperate—in surface terms, the Chinese coolie was a contract laborer, with Cuban contracts lasting for “eight years.”¹⁰¹ Yet, experts on Cuba and slavery, such as Philip Foner and Franklin Knight, respectively conclude that “the Chinese and Yucatecan workers were bought, sold, and transferred like slaves, and treated as slaves,” and “Chinese labor in Cuba in the nineteenth century was slavery in every social aspect except the name.”¹⁰² The coolies endured slave conditions, due to the unenforceability of a contract that provided for certain conditions of “employment” subject to the interpretation of the master. The coolie therefore could be exploited with little investment in maintenance. In 1860 the women's rights activist and abolitionist Julia Ward Howe commented insightfully on the coolies in Cuba: “men will treat a hired horse worse than a horse of their own.”¹⁰³ Contemporary Cuban scholars further concluded that the treatment of a Chinese coolie was worse than that of an African slave.¹⁰⁴ Because of malnourishment and abusive conditions, or because of their disposability, over 50 percent of coolies died *before* their eight-year contract ended.¹⁰⁵ The average life span of an African slave on a sugar plantation was twenty years. The percentage of coolie attrition due to voluntary exit (coolies who were able to exit Cuba) was negligible.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the “eight-year” limit was illusory. “Indenture,” in this case, was undermined because of the unenforceable nature (or acceptable violation) of the “contract.” The coolie contract was routinely ignored in Cuba. The gap between theory and lived experience disturbs North American paradigms of “contract,” “coolie,” “slave,” and “indentured labor.” The “contract” behaved as a globalizing institution that punitively enslaved

new global labor: the coolies. How does the experience of Chinese coolies in Cuba bring into question and politicize notions of language—what is the meaning of *contract*, *slave*, *coolie*?

The 1854 regulations concerning the Chinese permitted them to purchase the remainder of their contract at any time—but only after they had compensated their master for the purchase price. The worker was responsible for value added since the time of their purchase, which meant any clothing, loss of labor time due to sickness, and the inconvenience of finding a replacement for the Chinese laborer. Of course, these conditions were subject to interpretation by the master. Through legal sophistry and machinations of the contract and its ostensible representation of consent, the planters created a hybrid slave system involving Chinese coolies who worked in tandem with African slaves. The contracts with Chinese coolies were patently deceptive. Coolies supposedly were paid four pesos monthly. From this four peso “salary,” deductions were made by the master for the cost of travel from China, provisions like clothing and food, sickness or lost labor time, and a host of other “costs” to the master. Therefore, by the time a coolie’s eight-year term expired, if he survived (over half perished), the coolie wound up owing his master. It is no wonder that few Chinese coolies could discharge this cost for the purchase of freedom. The 1860 regulations explicitly closed off options for freedom and forced Chinese into sequential slavery, under the guise of “recontracting” rules. Those who did not re-sign would be arrested. The master could invoke a “renewal” clause in the contract, thus keeping the coolie unfree until his death. The notion of the Chinese coolie in Cuba being described under the generic term of “indentured labor” (meaning labor stipulated by legal contract and terms, with the possibility of freedom upon the end of the term) becomes problematic if terms for “indenture” were illusory or patently engineered to prevent the possibility of freedom. The folly of quoting contracts as actualized history is revealed. Contracts were, in fact, veiled representations beholden to empowered institutions and persons. The coolie experience in Cuba exposes the nature of language, historical terms, and legal categories as contingent—the varied conditions of “slave,” “coolie,” and “contracts” need greater examination.

“Recontracting” at the mercy of the master was not exceptional but was common. In rare instances, some indentured coolies did manage to escape the island. Caribbean historian Walton Look Lai notes that “there was

even one unusual case of a Chinese man who found his way to Trinidad in 1866 all the way from Cardenas in Cuba, after having escaped an attempt to reindenture him.”¹⁰⁷ Coolies, who were thought to be passive, also displayed a defiant nature and resorted to plantation rebellions, cane field burnings, assassination of overseers, escape, or suicide. While Cuban laws stipulated “rules” or guidelines for the treatment of African slaves and Chinese coolies, and whereas methods of resistance (and even attempted legal recourse) were undertaken by slaves and coolies, clearly they were disempowered under the Cuban slave and coolie systems. Those coolies who attempted escape were arrested and punished. The condition of the African slave in Cuba and the servitude of the Chinese coolie in Cuba resulted in deprivation of liberty and life. The standard labor contract also provided for the sale of a labor contract. Coolies could then be sold as property or recontracted without recourse. The coolie contract also involved rampant misrepresentation of the coolie, with said coolie being put under contracts and renewed contracts under different names. Planters could also divert contracts by false claims that the coolie under contract had died; the “now-dead” coolie could then be resold to another Cuban employer under another name. Chinese coolie runaways, called *cimarrones* (like their African counterparts), could be captured and sold by the Cuban police. Also similar to their African counterparts, Chinese were sold at marts and auctions.¹⁰⁸ Chinese coolies repeatedly testified to being kept and treated as slaves. Typical of the coolie testimonies was one by Wen A-fa who asserted, “After eight years are completed they refuse us the cedula and we are forced to remain slaves in perpetuity.”¹⁰⁹ Among many eyewitness accounts of the treatment of coolies was one from *New York Herald* correspondent in Cuba, James O’Kelly, who observed that a Chinese coolie “contrary to the representations made about the traffic in Asiatics was treated in every respect the same way as his sable companions in misfortune.”¹¹⁰

Given the condition of being “contracted” at the mercy of the master, the Chinese coolie became maximally exploited, and the meaning of “contract” became illusory. The Chinese coolie could be disposable or unfree at any time, depending on the vagaries of the system and the master.¹¹¹ The innocuous description of coolies as supposed “contract employees” or “Asiatic colonists” neatly allowed coolie traffickers to sidestep accusations of slave trading. Noel Deerr, technologist and historian of sugar,

TABLE 1.5 CHINESE POPULATION IN CUBA (BY REGION), 1861–77

PROVINCE	1861	1872	1877
Pinar del Rio	2,221	3,396	3,137
Havana	9,456	11,365	10,108
Matanzas	15,782	27,002	20,054
Santa Clara	6,274	15,878	13,301
Puerto Principe	341	297	94
Santiago de Cuba	754	462	422
Total	34,828	54,400	47,116

Sources: 1861: Cuba, Centro de Estadística, *Noticias estadísticas*, “Censo de población según el cuadro general de la Comisión Ejecutiva de 1861”; 1872: Expediente General Colonización Asiática, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 87; 1877: Iglesias, “El censo cubano.”

made this observation: “To avoid the charge of slavery[,] the coolies before sailing signed a contract of eight years indenture, and on arrival at Havana or Lima they were sold in a way differing in a manner but little from a public auction and were at once reduced to the status of slavery.”¹¹² An in-depth examination of these conditions follows in the subsequent chapters, with analysis of testimonies and arguments presented by the coolies themselves and of materials disclosed by other relevant sources of the period.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s Chinese were prevalent in the *ingenios* or sugar mills. On the smaller plantations, Chinese sometimes accounted for 50 percent of the labor force. However, on the larger plantations they constituted a smaller percentage.¹¹³ In Cuba, Chinese coolies were a minority in a larger population of African slaves and were concentrated in the sugar plantations of Matanzas, the central province of Cuba, and secondly in Las Villas.

One might assume that coolie history occupies a lesser role in the history of labor and production in Cuba, given the total number of Chinese coolies versus the overwhelming numbers of African slaves. However, this assumption has been complicated by the recognition that coolie labor was a critical force in reorganizing the Cuban sugar economy and its systems of production, and furthermore, constituted an implicit challenge to entrenched paradigms of race and nation. Some scholars, such as Evelyn

Hu-Dehart, have examined the coolies in terms of their relation to racial constructions in Cuba.¹¹⁴ Others, such as Moreno, emphasize coolie labor as crucial to an economic transition from slavery to wage labor.¹¹⁵ Scott asserts, on the other hand, that the use of coolies as slavelike property in Cuba could have aided in prolonging the institution of slavery.¹¹⁶ It is generally agreed, however, that coolie labor was significant in a political economy that was moving toward different modes of production and capital acquisition. In effect, the use of coolie labor contributed to the industrialization and mechanization of the *ingenios*, though the question here is how paradigms of “transition” are explanatory yet lacking in a more thorough accounting of ideological and material complicities and of living history.

One aspect of this “transition” was the major insurgency of Chinese and Africans in the wars for liberation, during which Chinese escaped the plantations and made the “transition” to free labor through mass rebellion and war. Two major events disrupted the coolie labor on plantations. The first was the coolie/slave insurgency in the wars for liberation that began in 1868. At one time, Madrid itself called for an end to coolie imports because coolies were aiding rebels in eastern Cuba.¹¹⁷ The Cuban patriot Gonzalo de Quesada wrote the most enduring words about the Chinese freedom fighters of Cuba, recalling that there was never a traitor or deserter among them: “*No hubo un chino cubano traidor; no hubo un chino cubano desertor.*”¹¹⁸ His words are inscribed on a still-extant black marble monument in Havana. This monument is a dark obelisk that is distinctive yet mysterious. Little is known about the coolies’ ages, names, or the plantations they came from.¹¹⁹ The Chinese participation in the wars for liberation spanned a remarkably long period of thirty years: with their role in the fighting beginning with *la Guerra de los Diez Años* (The Ten Years’ War of 1868–1878) through *la Guerra Chiquita* (The Little War of 1878–1879), and to the end of *la Guerra de Independencia* (The War of Independence 1895–1898).¹²⁰ Testimonies of commanders and comrades, interviews with survivors, memoirs by Cuban insurgents, and newspaper accounts of the period help reconstruct what amounted to the extraordinary history of Asians who took up arms in a prolonged battle to overthrow a colonial system of slavery in the Americas. For the Chinese, the struggle for Cuban liberation was the struggle for freedom from slavery, and their stake in it was on grounds mostly linked to their own emancipation. In 1870 the

Cuban rebel government promised liberty to any *chinos* and *negros* who joined the insurrection against Spain. Before the 1870 declaration, however, both coolies and slaves were already escaping the plantations to join in force. Despite the *ranchadores*—ubiquitous man-hunters whose job was to capture runaways—*los chinos* responded to the call for insurrection within the first days.¹²¹

A second event, occurring after the advent of the insurrectionary wars, was the historic investigation of coolie conditions in Cuba by a commission sent by China in 1874. The report of the commission led to the eventual banning of Chinese coolie traffic to Cuba. The subsequent section is devoted to this episode. The cessation of coolie traffic to Cuba, and later, the United States barring of Chinese immigration to their shores under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, resulted in a marked decline in Chinese migration to the Americas. In Cuba, the cessation of Chinese coolie traffic after 1874 and the additional costs of Cuba's independence wars had an impact on the Cuban economy. With developments resulting from the long wars, labor restrictions, and important advancements in technology, slavery would finally be dismantled, though planters hung on via a patronage system, which bound slaves and coolies to their masters as apprentices. Because of ingrained attitudes towards slavery, planters found it difficult to change their ways. Also, most of the available free white laborers were unwilling to do the hard work on the sugar cane plantations. That work was to be left for slaves and coolies, those still bonded or formerly bonded. Besides the unavailability of free wage laborers, the planters lacked sufficient capital to finance a transition to free labor. The engagement of free labor on the sugar plantation would have driven up labor costs at a rate higher than the planters could have withstood. The transition to free labor, therefore, was a risky venture for planters who were accustomed to the old way of engaging labor. In this economic context, Chinese had begun brokering coolie work gangs called *caudrillas*, which filled a need for controlled, contracted labor, though these would eventually be banned by the colonial government because the *caudrillas* became sanctuaries for runaways. But moreover, as I suggest in the following sections, they constituted competition for the most profitable brokers of Chinese labor on the island—the officials and police themselves.

The factors of production in the sugar economy continued transforming, and large sugar plantations were slowly breaking up by the 1880s. The

large landowning families either sold their properties to newcomers or began entering the business of processing sugar only, which they did in *centrales* (large scale sugar mills). The cultivation of sugar cane was then turned over to sharecroppers who replaced the slaves and the coolie system. By the beginning of the twentieth century, even more efficient refining machinery was introduced to the Cuban sugar industry, leading to economies driven by technological innovation. New technology lowered the cost of production, leading to renewed profitability in the sugar industry and the recovery of the efficiencies lost when coerced labor was eliminated in Cuba.

Today, it is the images of the Chinese freedom fighter and the Chinese merchant that are generally known by the Cuban people, with the coolie being a more distant historical figure in the national memory of labor and independence. There are multiple histories of nineteenth-century Chinese Cubans that follow hybridized lines of class, culture, and race (mixed race and “pure” Chinese). However, the initial histories of the Chinese in Cuba were composed by Chinese Cuban clan associations and a generation of entrepreneurs.¹²² As the makers of social representation, they necessarily interpreted their history by focusing on the accomplishments of their communities and their contemporary relevance. As a result, the history of the coolies and the context of their bondage have been dimmed by the more recent narrative of the Chinese immigrant struggles and contributions. Consequently, the coolie story has been called “la historia de la gente sin historia” (a history of a people without a history).¹²³ This work revisits the coolie story, an extraordinary story of people who endured and overthrew one of the last standing systems of colonial slavery in the Western hemisphere.

3

 THE PETITIONS:
 WRITING AS RESISTANCE

Edward Jenkins, a British barrister, noted that during a commission investigation into indenture in Guyana, he received petitions from Chinese that came in a variety of forms: “Besides the many deputation of Coolies [*sic*] from the estates, all persons who were in any way connected with the Commission became the suffering recipients of many letters and petitions. Some of these in Chinese I still possess, written on all sorts of paper—brown, straw, candle-box, cartridge, etc., one on a tiny slip of scarlet torn off a wall or cut from a book. The woes contained in such documents were naturally unfathomable to me, but I sent them to the Commission, on whose application the government interpreter translated them into English.”¹ It is not difficult to imagine that those Chinese in the former British Guiana wrote their petitions on whatever materials available. In Cuba, given the conditions for coolies, it would have been a challenge for the coolies to find the means and opportunity to write. Materially impoverished, with restricted freedom, under a brutal regime of labor extraction—how did the Chinese manage to write petitions? How did they get the time and materials to write them? Most certainly the petitions were written in secret. The commission made note of the petitions as clandestine testimony:

The following extracts from petitions supply additional information. Liang A-te, in service at Matanzas, declares, “I last night intended to in person lay my story before the Commission, but I was dragged back and placed in irons by my employer, and I am in consequence compelled to hand in this written statement.” Pan To-li and 2 others in service in the neighborhood of Cardenas declare, “hearing of the inquiry which you are instituting we intended to in person present our statement, but our employer said he would only allow (other) eight men to visit you, and as his severity is great we did not dare to disregard the order and therefore transmit this written petition.”²

Those coolies who were chosen to appear may have, in all likelihood, later informed their fellow coolies of the procedures and makeup of the commission, the demeanor of the members, and their discovery that commissioner Chen and members of his team were natives of Guangdong, the home province of the majority of coolies. Those who were prevented from appearing would have become further emboldened to send in petitions. How were the petitions delivered? Exactly how the petitions got from plantations (or labor sites) to the commission is unknown. It is likely that coolies discovered when the commission was arriving and passed on information about the commission’s itinerary. Potential petitioners aimed to get their petitions delivered on the exact dates when the commission was stationed nearby. Dates and location of submission are indicated on each petition, with one or two petitions trickling in on some days, but as many as eight were submitted on another day. The petitions then were transcribed by a Chinese secretary, whose role was made transparent by the uniform opening and ending affixed on all transcriptions, opening with “According to the petition of . . .” and ending with “as quoted.”³ “As quoted” could also be translated as “et cetera.” Either translation, “as quoted” or “et cetera,” indicates the possibility that information was omitted from the petitions. Some petitions came to abrupt endings, either due to circumstances or decisions of the writer or the transcriber. Also it is possible that human errors were made in the transcription process. Yet for some petitions, there would have been limits to rescripting them, particularly with regard to those with sections in poetic verse. In some cases, rescripting one detail or word would have meant rearranging and rewording sections of the petition with considerable effort. The rhyme, rhythm,

length of lines, word order, caesura, and tone (as Chinese is a tonal language and rhetorical phrases were fashioned with this in mind) maintain the integrity and meaning of passages particularly in instances of verse. Changing or omitting a word would have meant rewriting and recreating the structural integrity.

Each petition reflected the unique voice, style, and peculiarities of the authors, though not all petitions displayed wholly complex compositions. Some petitions were written in a more literary style and some displayed a more vernacular style. Some were lengthy and well crafted, others were short and pithy. Overall, however, all were written in forms reserved for formal writing, different than spoken Chinese; and commonly, many employed terms that no longer appear in the modern Chinese language lexicon. The testimonies also employed terms that were created by the coolies to address their unique situation. And some terms were phonetically transliterated forms, such as terms for Spanish-language and English-language places and names, such as the much mentioned “dou la zha” and “cou la zha,” which apparently meant *La Trocha* in Spanish, literally meaning “the trail.” Apparently, this forced labor site entailed the clearing of forestry and constructing a railway, and was especially dangerous. Coolies spoke of it with dread, noting the high attrition rate and their overexposure to the elements. As one coolie explained, “There was no house so I had to live in the forest. I had to chop trees, dig ditches, and construct the railway” (Deposition 244). Some terms were conceived to describe their particular conditions, such as “Washing Head” to denote baptism, “Selling People House” to denote the place of coolie auctions, “Runaway Company” to denote the detention and forced labor of Chinese who were deemed runaways, and “Official Workshop” to denote a place of forced labor run by officials and local government. As expected during this period of the Qing dynasty, the testimonies were written using traditional Chinese characters, a form no longer in use and now supplanted by simplified Chinese and the modern lexicon.

In his report, Chen referred to the coolie testimonies as *bing* (稟). *Bing* was a term used to denote a report from subordinate officials to their superiors.⁴ However, the term can also be used as noun and verb. As a verb, “bing” could also mean “telling” and the giving of information from people of lower social status to those of higher status (this was a term that once caused a diplomatic dispute in British-Chinese relations).⁵ As one

coolie stated to the commission, “I came especially to tell you my poor condition here” using *bing* to denote the social context of his telling (Deposition 19).⁶ One petition, for example, was composed by four military officers who began their petition with the term *zhi deng* (职等), a term used when lower-level officers or officials reported to higher-level officials (Petition 11). Such Chinese called upon their previous knowledge of *how* epistemic authority could be established in testimonies. The four military officers, now reduced to coolies, made clear their former status: “Zhang Luan, a military officer from Guangdong, former Commandant of the Right Brigade in Tingzhou City who was awarded the rank of Brigade Commander because of military merits; Cheng Rongling, a Jiangsu native and Expectant Appointee for Police Chief; Mo Rongxian, a Commandant in the Jinxian County, Guangdong; Chen Xuezhou, a Squad Leader by Recommendation from Guangdong Province . . .” The first, Zhang Luan, held significant rank as commander of a brigade, a unit of some 500 soldiers in the Qing army. Their petition bore the perspectives of officers, as they presented views regarding principles of both good and bad governance. They deplored the collusion of both Chinese and foreign agents in the trafficking of coolies and lamented the costly losses to Chinese society and kinship. In their new world of bondage, scholarly and official rank, not to mention achievements in literature and martial arts, were treated with disrespect, they wrote. They also offered some brief comments relating to Cuba’s civil war. Zhang, as it turns out, also appeared and testified orally. His testimony revealed careful attention to details that would affirm his identity. He stated, “In the eleventh year of Xianfeng (1861), I went to suppress the bandits in Jiangnan with Officer Zhenhai Lai; then I went to Fujian and worked with Officer Zuo. In the eleventh year of Tongzhi (1872), I went home to see my father, Yong Zhang. Then I met a soldier, Xiong Zhu, who was in my old troop. He invited me to Macao; however, I was abducted into Tong Fa Pigpen and locked in it by him” (Deposition 1050).

How a deposition was stated or how a petition was written, was as important as its factual content, as was the social rank of the person testifying. These factors determined whether the testimony would be seriously considered by the magistrate. The testimonies demonstrated types of formal address and conclusions that were customary in address to a Chinese juridical body and included expressions of humility and respect to the

reader. Florid and respectful writing, seemingly excessive in a modern English translation, was not unusual in Chinese address to superiors. But this flowery writing was also part of the coolies' strategy to establish epistemic authority and persuade elite authorities to read their petitions. Some gestured to the commissioner or to the emperor with respectful homage, such as the ninety-six petitioners who closed their petition with "His Majesty's kindness is like a wide ocean, extending to corners of the world. We are like grass and trees that benefit from his rain-like generosity, which is a rare grace in thousands of years. We, as ordinary civilians, are humble and foolish laborers with misfortune. Youths trapped in a land faraway from home; adults wasting their lives in a foreign country. We regret that we are poor and sickly. We feel woeful that the harsh government here is making more cruel policies. That is why we dare to voice our grievance to you" (Petition 25).

Despite limitations of language and of not knowing "where to bring an action against them [masters]," the Chinese attempted to take the juridical route in Cuba before appealing to the commission. The testifiers made it clear that previous to the commission's visit, they felt themselves to be law-abiding persons and had sought justice through local law and government in vain. Their challenges to authority followed four main actions: on-site resistance, running away, and appealing to local officials (and joining the insurrectionary wars, though not mentioned). Yet they understood that the juridical system was entwined with colonial business interests against Chinese labor. There were 131 petitioners who asserted, "Officials never hear the case. Even if they try to appeal, officials never look at the case" (Petition 55). Seventeen petitioners protested, "If we report an incident to the government, no one cares. We hate them but we are helpless" (Petition 38). Another four coolies wrote, "We appeal to the mayor; however he does not care at all. When we report to the government, officials do not look at the case. We are fined and have no place to voice our grievance" (Petition 43). Others observed that "policemen and officials are bent solely by profits" (Petition 53) and "the government has made ways to make use slaves over and over" (Petition 54). Officials obstructed and deferred cases, and used some cases to arrest and re-bond Chinese. The former military officers of Petition 11 said, "On top of it all, most of the Cuban officials are businessmen; sugar plantation owners always collude with the government officials. If owners apply brutal punishments, officials pretend that

they do not know anything about it. If owners beat laborers to death, officials do not ask about it."

Many petitions contained direct appeals for rescue. "I now appeal to you to save my life" was a typical appeal, like that of Lu Aguang (Petition 7). Small groups such as Diao Mu, Li Xiang, Liu Quan, and Jiang Jiu, similarly pled, "We are hoping that your honor has a plan to save our lives" (Petition 53). Others begged plainly, "We beg your honor to show pity on our ant-like lives. Save us and right this injustice" (Petition 84). Yet others went farther and aimed at *systemic change*. This type of testimony correlated with a unique aspect of the petitions, which is the presence of not only group signatories but also mass signatories indicting the bondage system. These groups seized the opportunity to speak out on a range of subjects beyond their immediate, individual fates. Reflecting the imprint of collective protest, these petitions contained larger arguments that analyzed systemic exploitation and sought to abolish the coolie system. Thirty-four percent of the petitions were signed by ten or more coolies and 12 percent were signed by groups of eighty or more. The petitions from the largest groups came with signatories in the following numbers: 90, 95, 97, 107, 124, 129, 131, 131, and 164. The writing of a petition not only represented a way to voice their grievances, but in the case of group petitions, also incurred collective action via the clandestine writing and signing of these petitions. The feature of raising consciousness and forming resistance via writing is especially significant given the repressive measures to sever Chinese from communication with the outside world and prevent them from forming alliances *with each other*. Group actions or attempts to organize were treated as seditious acts. In dozens of petitions and depositions, coolies described the retributions for speaking, congregating, and walking in groups of two or more. There were 124 petitioners who repeated the common refrain, "if several Chinese talk in the street, the police will claim that they are planning a riot" (Petition 55). Zheng Amao and others wrote, "We were not allowed to gather three or five people together to talk" (Petition 85). Likewise, another coolie bemoaned the restrictions against Chinese as preemptive, declaring that even "the ones who are not supposed to be locked up are all locked up; the ones who did not run away are accused as runaways" (Petition 11). Fourteen petitioners noted that "we always think of writing letters to warn other Chinese not to be deceived into coming to Cuba again, but we find no way to send them

out" (Petition 2). Another 159 petitioners ended with the following: "Since we cannot send letters back to our families, we have no way to voice our grievance" (Petition 80).

The surveillance of coolies was accomplished not only via the collusion of local officials and owners but also via collusion of foreign consular officials such as those from Portugal. Profiting from the coolie trafficking through their colony of Macao, the Portuguese also profited from recycling coolies in Cuba. Captured Chinese were accused of planning "revolt," and as such, could be turned in by almost anyone and then resold. Describing these suppressions and alliances, the Chinese indicated awareness of their subject positions as imbedded in multisided collusions and conflicts. The Chinese described their attempts to form organizations for collective action and the retaliatory measures against them. They sought out non-Cubans, such as British and Americans, who might be sympathetic to their cause, while consistently referring to Portuguese as local conspirators with the Spanish. However, it should be noted that testifiers also indicated that the British, Americans, and Europeans were active slave and coolie owners. One coolie recounted: "My owner is British, who treated me badly. After working for one month, eighteen people and myself killed a white overseer, who is a native. We couldn't bear his bullying and torture anymore, so we tried really hard to kill him" (Deposition 436). Coolies demonstrated an awareness of being sited in a multinational field of strategic alliances and rivalries. Thirty-one petitioners stated with mounting anger the following: "Several years ago, because of no doctors for the ill, no graveyards for the dead, no way to send letters home, and no definite date to return home, with donations from every county and from righteous foreigners, the Chinese planned to set up an association and elected leaders. Unexpectedly, the Portuguese government wanted to break the morale of the Chinese. They colluded with Chinese traitors and accused the Chinese of revolt. Later, Portugal's vice-consul lured the Chinese with fake freedom papers in Cardenas. At the same time, he secretly contacted patrols to check their papers and extort them" (Petition 11). Another eleven petitioners described similar failed efforts to organize: "British and American officials saw the hardness we have been through and tried to help us set up an organization. By the time the organization was almost set up, the local thugs framed us by accusing us of trying to help the rebellion, so the organization was disbanded" (Petition 84). There were 133

petitioners who declared that British and Americans "negotiated with local officials so that we can still be alive" (Petition 15). Alliances with British and Americans were also mentioned in Petitions 2, 10, 25, 37, 40, 53, 84, and in the one below:

In the night of the tenth day of the ninth moon in 1871, tyrannical local officials arrested all of us who had completed working contracts, whether or not we had freedom papers. Later we were all sent away and locked up in official workshops and jails. Fortunately, officials from Britain and the United States could not bear to sit back and watch without doing anything, so they went to negotiate with local officials; therefore, we were released gradually. Yet, local precinct chiefs often spy on us. If we stay in a house or gather together and chat in a group of three or five, precinct chiefs would accuse us of gambling, or smoking, and then demand that we turn in our freedom papers. We are bullied, blackmailed and punished. If we refuse to be extorted, they arrest us and lock us up or make us work. During that time, a morally courageous American named "Langluofu"ⁱ could not bear to stand idly by and donated money to help us set up an association to mediate disputes. However, the rich and powerful local thugs ganged up and wrongly accused us of using that money to help rebels. As a result, the association was broken up. We are still bullied by those rich and powerful locals. The bullying seems to last forever; we utterly detest it. Nowadays, every county has set up official workshops. People who are about to complete contracts are either sent to those official workshops to work, sent away to work in mountains, or forced to sign another contract. They are fed like fowls or dogs, reprimanded and forced to work like oxen or horses. The misery and sorrow are extremely unbearable. As quoted. (Petition 23)

Some petitioners even asked the commission to get local foreign consulates to take them in, such as those in Petition 10: "We beg earnestly to be taken care of by the embassies of other countries so that we can escape from this disaster. Please save our lives." The petitioners also mentioned strategic attempts to obtain papers through British and Portuguese consulates by claiming that they were formerly residents of Hong Kong (British

i. Transliteration.

colony) or Macao (Portuguese colony), though the responses of the Portuguese were portrayed by the coolies as decidedly unfavorable. The depiction of alliances, in the face of retribution, reveals an avenue of resistance fashioned beyond the plantations. By describing such avenues of resistance, the Chinese brought into the open an awareness of their cause as directly linked to rival views concerning coolie labor in Cuba. The petitions emerge here as protest literature situated in the context of multilateral disputes and negotiations; and at minimum, the testimonies offer a portrait of migration and bondage as regionally and globally entangled. The petitions and depositions referred to the following cities and countries: Britain, United States (San Francisco and New York), France, Spain, Portugal, Macao, Philippines, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia (Jakarta and Semarang), Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur), and Australia (Melbourne). Aside from the strategic alliances sought by coolies, the trajectories of diaspora and imaginaries associated with going abroad led to easy deception of those such as Li Wencai, a former fish seller who said, "They did not translate the words in the contract to me, and I thought it was only something about working in San Francisco" (Deposition 116).

THE WITNESS PETITION: SHOUTING OUT THE NAMES

Some Chinese articulated their experiences by writing in the tradition of witnessing. Some expressed themselves by writing poetically of spiritual and emotional trials and others by presenting an analytical argument. These types of written testimonies—the witness petition, the verse petition, the argument petition—represent some of the diverse and strategic approaches undertaken by the coolies who adapted the testimony platform to suit their own purposes. We begin by reading examples of witness petitions, which are then followed by verse petitions and argument petitions.

Yuan Guan submitted a brief but exacting "witness petition" in Colon. He utilized a form of listing and bluntly enumerated the injustices he witnessed. He boldly named names and particularized incidents. Yuan Guan's testimony focused upon seeking justice by presenting oneself as a witness to "unrighted wrong" as visited upon others. His and others' similar testimonies forced the inquiry into facing the most extreme consequence of the coolies' "conditions": the violent loss of human life. The coolies described

kidnapping, beating, torture, murder, suicide, and psychological terrorism that had gone unpunished. Yuan Guan stated that he was kidnapped and sold, and he gave the names of his owner and plantation in transliterated terms known among the coolies. The petition by Yuan Guan, Yong'an County, Guangdong Province reads as follows:

In the year of 1858, I was kidnapped to Macao. There were more than a hundred people on the ship. The ship arrived in Havana in April of 1859. Until mid-June, we were sold to a white foreigner named "Lang Bei Lu" and then we were brought to a sugar plantation named "Jiu Bi Jia Shan A Huai." Until 1860, the owner had bought sixty Chinese to work for him. Unexpectedly, in 1864 the old owner died and all the managers and overseers were changed. The new ones are as vicious as wolves and tigers. Their hearts are like snakes. There was a person named Chen Azao in the plantation. He was so depressed that he jumped into the sugar hot pot and died. Another person named Lian Axing had weak-foot illness. But he was forced to work. Later he hung himself. Another person named Liu Bairen was beaten by the overseers till he spat blood and died.⁷ Another person named Hong Afu did not do enough work and tried to escape secretly. However, he was caught by the overseer at night. He was beaten to death in the house with the big chimney. Later he was burned. People from outside didn't know about it until someone saw the human figure inside the window. Another person named Zhang Abing was sick and took poison to kill himself. Another person named Zhou Shilan was beaten to death by the overseer on the fifteenth day after he reached the sugar plantation. As quoted. (Petition 60)

Like African slave narratives, the coolie petitions were a *writing into history* of a previously suppressed history. In Petition 60, Yuan's naming and writing about the fates of his fellow countrymen—"Hong," "Chen," "Lian," "Liu," "Hong," "Zhang," and "Zhou"—demonstrated that he was keenly aware of his pressing role as the surviving witness who would be inscribing an otherwise suppressed history. Yuan's petition is a brief history of lives otherwise expunged from colonial records and colonial language. His petition was more about other people and his observations of them, than about himself. Without Yuan's intervention, the fate of Hong,

who was tortured and burned in the “house with the big chimney,” would have gone unrecorded.

The witnessing testimonies take on significance in the context of a system wherein simply giving testimony could be deadly for the Chinese. The Chinese who informed were punished. As noted in Petition 20, “No one goes to the law against the owners. Even so, government officials merely come to take a look and get through it perfunctorily. Some of us, who . . . have witnessed a murder, do not dare to tell the truth. If we ever do so, we would be killed immediately.” The witnessing petitions emerge as acts of intervention and resistance in the official record of history that was part of a system obstructing coolies from “informing.” One petitioner wrote that he could not tell of the crime and have it recorded, even though the crime was known unofficially: “Last year, laborer Zeng Aji was beaten to death. I couldn’t inform. Yet we knew about it far and wide” (Petition 33). A deponent typically described a coolie being beaten to death and made sure to note, “No one knows that dead person’s name is Afu” (Deposition 225). While only remembering the first name, a common name “Afu,” the deponent made the point of claiming it, nonetheless. Some testifiers desired to “inform” even if they did not know the names at all, revealing the existence of “someone”: “I do not remember his name, but I remember he was clubbed to death using a wooden rod” (Deposition 877). Another declared, “Two people could not stand the torture and hanged themselves, which happened when I had been on the sugar plantation for two months. Although I could not remember those two person’s names, I saw it happen with my own eyes” (Deposition 244). Wen Azhao said with anguish, “I couldn’t remember these dead people’s names, for I was almost dying at that time, and I was too collapsed to remember. I could only remember two dead acquaintances’ names. One is Ah-Lai who was locked up, beaten with a handspike, poked with a knife, and beaten to death; the other is Ah-San who hanged himself. Both of them couldn’t take the misery anymore and gave up their will to live” (Deposition 50). The importance of remembering and reclaiming history as a witness, even the act of stating “I do not remember the name,” is a recurrent trope of the testimonies. Despite not remembering “the names,” the reiteration of “someone’s” existence calls attention to the politics of claiming identity and memory in histories of bondage and resistance. As can be found in histories of African slavery, Chinese coolies were either re-named with Spanish names, or they bore some appellation assigned to them by sellers, owners, or

overseers. The naming and renaming of coolies take on a more perverse significance in references made by coolies to their being forced to take *names of the dead* (see further elaboration in “Chasing Freedom”). Repeatedly, the Chinese mentioned being forced to take on another name. As narrated in Petition 41, “I was whipped many times; my name was changed.” The renaming of Chinese appeared in Cuban newspapers that regularly advertised Chinese for sale and posted runaway notices. Even in the months during and after the commission visit, newspapers continued to run ads offering cash rewards for turning in or providing information on the whereabouts of Chinese runaways. A perusal of *Diario de la Marina* reveals the regular advertisements for Chinese runaways alongside those for escaped slaves, such as a Chinese named “Fernando,” described as an escaped cook of approximately eighteen to twenty years of age, having large eyes, and bearing a scar on his head now covered over by hair.⁸ Another advertisement offered a reward for a Chinese named “Largio,” described as hairless, of regular stature, having a lesion on one leg, and having just escaped from the *barracón*.⁹ Another advertisement listed “Ramon,” a Chinese escapee aged eighteen.¹⁰ The colonizing practice of renaming, and the nature of subordination through renaming, such as in the cases of “Fernando,” “Largio,” or “Ramon,” raises the practical epistemological question of how history is remembered, how it was recorded, and how it might be reconstructed.

The advertisements, which exhibit the public renaming of Chinese, contrast with the testimonies by the coolies who instead referred to each other as Yuan did: “Hong,” “Chen,” “Lian,” “Liu,” “Hong,” “Zhang,” and “Zhou.” The trope of naming in the testimonies—purposefully naming names, reclaiming one’s name, or conversely, emphasizing the importance of naming and the acts of forgetting/remembering/renaming of names—brings to mind the motif of naming in African slave narratives. For example, Olaudah Equiano recounted his being renamed “Gustavus Vassa” (a Swedish name) by his first master, in Equiano’s narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789). Frederick Douglass described being renamed several times under different masters until he escaped slavery and named himself, in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Naming also figured into Douglass’s rhetorical strategy of establishing the authority and veracity of his narrative. He purposefully affixed names and places throughout his autobiography. And at the same time, he indicated that had he been

prevented from knowing certain markers, such as his birthday. "Naming" and the listing of events emerged as sites of struggle and reclamation in slave narratives. Likewise, naming and listing emerge in the coolie testimonies as tropes of struggle and reclamation.

The witnessing-style testimonies also are contextualized by a pressing condition that underwrote the coolie predicament, that being *expendability*—a theme that runs throughout both Yuan's petition and throughout the majority of coolie testimonies. Coolie life was filled with brutality although ubiquitous in the testimonies, this brutality seemed mundane and routine. Take this statement by Liang Yayou, for example: "unexpectedly, the owner locked me up and cut off my left ear" (Petition 68). A statement such as "the overseer took a knife and chopped four of my fingers off," was also commonplace in the testimonies (Deposition 1035). Death and torture appear as the main themes in Yuan's petition, conveyed in a numbing litany. His petition reflected the coolies' expendability in daily life, as the attrition rate for Chinese was extremely high. In addition to death from beating and torture, the death rate from coolie suicides alone resulted in Cuba having the highest suicide rate in the world.¹¹ From 1850–1860 suicides per million inhabitants in Cuba included 5000 Chinese, followed by 350 Africans, and 57 whites.¹² The battle to survive under ubiquitous deadly conditions and the heightened awareness of expendability were consistent themes in the testimonies. Besides the petitions, the theme of death was dominant in the depositions, with an emphasis on death appearing in 953 of the 1,176 oral testimonies. In one petition, 164 petitioners described the precariousness of their lives: "We do not know in the morning what may happen in the evening; we do not know when our lives will be ended" (Petition 20). In another, ninety-eight petitioners declared that arbitrary violence pervaded their lives: "you could die easily like an ant" and "no one knows what is going to happen to us . . . the police are bent solely on profit and oppress the Chinese" (Petition 40). Other statements such as "you could die easily like an ant or cricket" (Petition 80), and coolies admitting to being "treated as dogs and pigs" (Petition 26), stood out as the most common self-descriptions of the Chinese in the testimonies, conveying their owners' disregard for their lives. "Pigs" and "pigpens," *zhuzai* and *zhuzai guan*, had become common terms in Chinese for the pig (coolie) trade and pens that imprisoned the Chinese to be shipped and sold.

Being exploited and disposable, the coolies were "boiling with resentments" (Petition 40). The entwined factors of expendability and anger contribute to the themes and tropes of the testimonies. One theme concerned the burning desire to inscribe their fates before arbitrary death should occur. The witness-type testimony represented an alternate means of protest in a context wherein urgent appeals to the Spanish juridical system were unheard or dealt with punitively. The Chinese repeatedly challenged the system, though the stipulated route for complaints operated as a system of obfuscation and was entirely unfavorable to the Chinese. Perez de la Riva notes cases in 1852–1854.¹³ The first case brought to trial by a coolie occurred in 1852 and was initiated by a Chinese laborer named Pablo who filed suit in an effort to gain his freedom, only to lose the case and take his own life in protest. Four others would follow with similar legal action in 1854, and this time the coolies were successful. And still others continued to press for freedom and were successful due to a fortunate confluence of circumstances, including a sympathetic Captain General who heard the cases. However, in 1858, the colonial government began establishing rules to close off legal loopholes and routes to freedom for the coolies, followed by the 1860 legislation written for that purpose. The apparatus of "protection," to which the coolies were supposed to appeal, was described by coolies as a system of surveillance and exploitation, a different perspective from that of colonial government, which couched the need for "protection" in paternalistic phrasing such as "for their good government and for their police supervision."¹⁴ Procedures of complaint required coolies to apply to the "Protector" of the Chinese, who was actually the island's colonial administrator and policing agent, the Captain General, who would decide whether the complaint had merit or not, as stipulated in the Royal Decree of 1860, Section III.¹⁵ The Captain General's office was the same office that meted out punishment to coolies. When punishments from employers "prove insufficient" for coolies and "when immigrants on the estate mutiny, or offer an active and united resistance to the orders of their superiors . . ." the Protector implemented discipline.¹⁶ The Protector of the Chinese was not, by any means, an office that protected the welfare of the Chinese. According to regulations, the penultimate route of complaint was through the employer: "The representatives of employers are empowered to exercise a similar disciplinary jurisdiction . . ." and "In all cases of liability under criminal or civil law in which the

competence of employers to act as judges ceases, the ordinary tribunals shall be resorted to . . .”¹⁷ The “competence” of employers and ordinary tribunals offered little assurance to the Chinese. Besides, legislation plainly stipulated that all Chinese laborers entering the island *must forfeit their civil rights*, a point already underscored by Pérez de la Riva, Denise Helly, and Juan Hung Hui, in their separate critiques of Cuba’s legal codes vis-à-vis Chinese coolies. In fact, the decree of 1860 stipulated plainly that “immigrants, when signing and accepting their contracts, renounce all civil rights which may not be compatible with the accomplishment of the obligations . . .” and required permission from the “employer” to marry. The decree also stated that if children were born to a mother under contract, they would also be considered bonded until the age of eighteen.

Another example of the witness petition is that of Xu Axiang. Unlike the listing style of Yuan Guan’s petition, Xu Axiang’s witness petition conveyed a sense of dread more reminiscent of a ghost story. His account concerned a gruesome death and its cover up, which doomed the victim and witnesses to unrest in this world and the next. Xu described the discovery of a murdered coolie who had been secretly buried in a forest. A “loathsome smell” floats in the wind, and “flocks of crows” appear near a forest. The petitioner and a fellow coolie have the premonition of “something dead over there.” A crowd gathers. The victim’s hat is found on the ground. Soon thereafter, a band of coolies begin digging and discover the victim’s body only a few inches under the ground. By focusing upon this tale of secrecy and murder, Xu specifically located the treatment of coolies as *criminal*, thus turning the commission’s investigation of labor “conditions” into a confrontation with “crime.” Despite all methods used to silence him, Xu Axiang was determined to testify, as he gave both a petition and a deposition (Deposition 282). Added to his account of murder was his added attention to the criminalization of those who witnessed and spoke the truth. Xu himself was imprisoned for trying to “report the injustice.” Xu’s testimony underscored the acts of coolie-witnessing and speaking as perilous and resistant acts. Thus, his memorable testimony mourned the unjust death of his acquaintance; but moreover, he portrayed coolies as resistant subjects, not silent victims.

On the second day of the third moon, according to the petition by Xu Axiang from Kaiping County, Guangdong Province: In the eighth year

of Tongzhi (1869), I was abducted by a villain and was sold to a sugar plantation in Cuba named “Luo liang ji li du.”ⁱⁱ The injustice I suffered starts from an incident in the tenth year of Tongzhi (1871). An acquaintance of mine, named Li Aliu, started working in the morning and did not come back until late at night. We could not find him anywhere and the crowd started to discuss and guess about it. After ten days, one day on my way taking the ox back to the sugar plantation, I ran into a Chinese named Ali, who pointed to a forest not far away. The wind carried a loathsome smell. Flocks of crows gathered. Something dead seemed to be there. Then I walked another mile or so and ran into the other workers who gathered together. I told them and a man named He Zhangyou what I saw. He went to the forest right away. He recognized Aliu’s hat there and reported it to the deputy. He then led some Chinese and dug only a few inches before finding Aliu’s body. The deputy reported it to the official in the town immediately, and then the official came with some soldiers to arrest and investigate us. The official asked, “The body was buried under the ground. Who knew about it?” People pointed to me, and then I was interrogated and tortured. They accused me of murdering for money and did not allow me to explain. I was escorted back to the yamen with He Zhangyou. Without any investigation and interrogation, I was sent to prison in Cardenas. I tried to report the injustice many times, and it has been two years already, but my case has not been decided. I thought painfully: if I didn’t report the evidence of this injustice, then the murder would be covered up forever. I reported this murder, and I almost got myself killed. Looking into the sky, I cannot reach it. Looking down at the ground, I cannot rest in peace. My gut is being cut by knives. My heart is being burned by fire. How sad and desperate I feel. As quoted. (Petition 49)

THE VERSE PETITION: “THOUSANDS OF WORDS ARE UNDER THE SWEEP OF OUR BRUSHES”

Petitioners wrote poignantly of the difficulty of describing their experiences, sometimes expressed in lyrical and poetic ways and sometimes in lengthy verse forms. Thus, while crafting their testimonies, petitioners

ii. Luo Liang Ji Li Du is a transliterated name of a sugar plantation.

were acutely aware of the power of language, but they also became more aware of its limits. They described the painful challenge of comprehending, defining, and articulating what had befallen them. Almost at a loss to describe their predicament, Huang Fengji provided a terse petition, and summed up his testimony as follows: “We have experienced astonishing calamity” (Petition 75). “It is difficult to vent our grievances; it is impossible to pour out our woes,” wrote He Aying in his verse petition (Petition 73). Liu Ashou and his four companions graphically articulated their painful experiences, but what had occurred was beyond comprehension: “The overseers are like wolves and tigers. If we slow down a bit, they lash our backs or let big dogs bite us. Blood and flesh are dripping. We wonder why we have to bear this misery. There is no response if we cry to the sky; there is no reply if we beseech the earth. Some could not bear the suffering and committed suicide. Some are dead from injuries. It is really hard to describe” (Petition 79). Fang Tianxiang also wrote of the difficulty in putting his experience to words: “I was abducted and sold to Cuba and the harshness cannot be fully described by words” (Petition 45). Chen Ming similarly wrote that “the suffering and humiliation I experienced cannot be described with words” (Petition 9). As a theme, the struggle with language displayed itself in several forms: the limits of linguistic representation in the face of trauma; oppression due to foreign language barriers; and the profound instability of language as a stable signifier of “contract,” consent, and agreement—the basis for a free labor market. The frustration with language was most keenly expressed in anger regarding hierarchy and justice. “Lots of us don’t know the language,” one verse petition typically stated, “and don’t know where to bring an action against them” (Petition 40). Likewise, Li Yisong declared, “Because we did not know the language, we could do nothing about the injustice” (Petition 6). Another coolie expressed outrage and regret that he could not appeal for the dead, because he did not know the language (Deposition 178). Lin Jin and his companions lamented, “We suffer great injustice without chances to express ourselves” (Petition 14). The oral testimonies similarly expressed the sense of powerlessness due to “not knowing the language.”¹⁸ Zhang Luan described this disempowerment as one of the biggest obstacles in his struggle to *inform*: “I do not know foreign language, so I cannot tell the name of the sugar plantation, the owner or the manager” (Deposition 1050).

Despite their struggles with language and material deprivation, some petitioners were more attuned to the persuasive possibilities of literary composition. These authors produced verse petitions, which exhibited a range of literary allusions, historical references, antitheses, parallelism, metaphors, colloquialisms, and rhetorical constructions. The use of poetic forms and the stylistic diversity of the petitions illustrate how these individuals thought of themselves as more than passive respondents to an inquiry. The verse petitions featured literary references and figurative language to a greater extent than others, with a few petitions being entirely or mostly written in verse, or with some containing a few sections in verse. Two attributes that appear in verse petitions are antithesis and parallelism. These literary devices generally take subtle forms in colloquial and written Chinese, but appear in the petitions as chief features. Because of their cadence and affected language, the verse petitions were some of the most effective appeals. Antithesis and parallelism in Chinese are somewhat different than their rhetorical applications in Western literary traditions. Antithesis in Chinese literary composition, as in “对偶” or *dui ou*, requires the same number of words and matching grammatical structure in two sentences to express opposite or similar meanings (whereas in English literature, antithesis is only related to oppositional meanings) and requires a strict accounting of rhythm and tones (as Chinese is also a tonal language). Parallelism, as in “排比” or *pai bi*, is composed of a series of phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structures, line lengths, related meanings, and similar moods.¹⁹ Shi Zhihe and his fellow petitioners provided these antithetical verses: “Thousands of words are under the sweep of our brushes, but they are too many to be put down in writing. Whips lash our backs; shackles chain our bodies. The young and strong can merely live with starvation; the old and weak die with unrighted wrong. From now on, if we remain alive, we will be cold and hungry men; if we die, we will be ghosts of the starved” (Petition 4). A group of 133 coolies, including seven women, also provided verses to describe their bondage and deprivation:

What kind of crime have we committed to deserve being chained when we repair the roads? What kind of deed have we done to deserve being stoned when we walk the street? We are humiliated but whom can we appeal to? Food is no better than plantain and corn; person is no better

than ox and horse. Pause for a moment, and they lash and reprimand us; stop for a rest, and they surely lock us up. We are birds in a cage that cannot fly with wings; fish in a net that cannot swim in a deep lake. People commit suicide by hanging themselves, by drowning themselves, by swallowing opium, by jumping in the hot sugar cauldron. Misery is beyond language. We hope your honor can control Macao, prohibit abductions, release our souls. If so, you will open a new world for us. (Petition 15)

The verse-type petitions appealed to the reader aurally and emotionally in different ways than the witness petition. Rather than focus upon naming names, listing incidents, or detailing specific crimes, the verse petitions relied more upon figurative language, poetic effect, cadence, rhyme and rhythmic construction, images of suffering, motifs of captivity, and the coolies' desire to be set free. Distilled in the above Petitions 4 and 15 are some of the most oft-repeated figures of speech used in the testimonies. In Petition 15, the analogy to "birds in a cage" and "fish in a net" emphasized their captivity, and their acute desire to be freed was expressed in "release our souls," a phrase originating from the Buddhist saying, "Release my soul from purgatory." Often, the testifiers made analogies to themselves as domesticated and enslaved beasts of burden, or "oxen and horses," as in Petition 15. Their anguished refrain, "Misery is beyond language," appears in several of the petitions. The "whips and shackles" in Petition 4, and the "suicide by hanging themselves, by drowning themselves, by swallowing opium, by jumping in the hot sugar cauldron" are litanies in the testimonies that present their most common forms of punishment and suicide. Complementing such images of suffering are motifs that contrast the "predators" from the "prey," which appear throughout the petitions. The coolies repeatedly referred to their oppressors as ruthless "wolves and tigers." Cai Heng and his co-petitioners wrote, "Some of us chop trees in the forests; some of us cut cane in the fields. Toil by wind and frost; errand into day and night. Moreover, when we work, the overseer watches us with whip and club in his hands and machete and gun on his belt. When he yells, his voice is like thunder and lightning; when he raises his hand, he is ferocious as a tiger and wolf. He relies on the owner's power and considers us as horses and sheep. People whom he likes will live; people whom he hates will die" (Petition 67). Chen Gu described his

oppressors in the following terms: "Managers and overseers, who are like wolves and tigers, hold machetes and carry guns all the time. If we worked a bit slower, we would be lashed till our blood stains the ground. Some people, who run away and are caught later, are locked up with no faint hope of being released; some are forced to starve to death in the mountains, and others hang themselves or throw themselves into rivers. The misery is too great to be described with mere words" (Petition 22). One group of coolies described Cuban government officials as mythological beasts of terror, *qiongqi* and *taotie* (Petition 25). *Qiongqi* appeared in Chinese mythologies in protean guises: as a fearsome beast, shaped like a cow, with hedgehog hair, making noises like a wild dog; as a beast shaped like a tiger with wings that eats humans from their heads, with another name *congzu*; and as an evil god who encourages bad deeds. *Taotie* has appeared as a terrifying figure since the Shang Dynasty. Associated with eating and satisfying the dead, the image of the *taotie* has graced sacrificial vessels and has also appeared as a greedy human-eating monster, having a goat's body, a human face, eyes under its armpits, tiger teeth, and human fingers.

The motifs of suffering and captivity, and the desire to be freed, are most poignantly expressed in Petition 41, which included the extended metaphor of birds being caged. The author wrote the following: "My flying wings were pinned down" and "I couldn't escape even if I had wings on my back." The only thing that flies in his depiction is "ashes." In fact, of all the petitions, Petition 41 and Petition 21 provide the most useful illustrations of the verse form used to very different effects. The former was written by a feng shui expert, Ren Shizen, and the other was written by a teacher, Li Chengxun. Ren Shizen's long petition is one of the most heartrending of the testimonies, as it poetically communicates spiritual anguish and emotional intensity. Abounding with evocative metaphors and references to legendary figures, Ren's writing reveals that he was an educated man. Ren crafted his petition entirely in parallelisms, with matching line lengths and word order, in the basic unit of four characters per clause. Reminiscent of the *fu*-style poetry of Han Dynasty, his petition reads like a prose poem. Ren's parallelisms may be poetic, but they are also imperfect. At times, his composition lacks the consistency that Li Chengxun displayed in Petition 21. However, while Ren's testimony is sometimes irregular in the formalist sense, it is powerful and emotionally

affecting. His is a narrative of trauma that, in the end, does not make a plea for help. Instead, his testimony describes the piercing realization that no one would likely be coming to his aid. He wrote of "crying and gazing at the end of the world" and lamented that no one "could possibly know about my situation from the beginning to the end." Ren's petition is filled with images of irreversible loss, though he displayed a flash of anger when vowing to "stay with hatred in the netherworld." His writing was despondent, yet Ren was also tenacious. Ren turned in two petitions—he was author of 41 and coauthor of Petition 54—in which his name appears first. In the latter submission, Ren and two fellow Chinese, who were former business owners in China, submitted a critique of the coolie system from a distinctly business point of view, emphasizing rights of ownership and property. The threesome weighed coolie contributions against extreme losses and abuse, making similar revelations as the groups of coolies from Petition 40 and 43, who attested to becoming small retailers yet found "free" life to be one of persecution and torment. But it is Ren's solely authored petition that most directly addressed the question: What does it feel like to be in bondage?

Ren's vision of Spanish Cuba, or the "Lusong" colony, was of a dark frontier that lacked morality. "*Lüsong*" and "small *Lüsong*" appeared in the testimonies as appellations for Cuba, and the term "big *Lüsong*" apparently referred to the Philippines. Undoubtedly, the term for Cuba was conceived in reference to the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Luzon is the largest island in the Philippines and historically where the greatest number of ethnic Chinese were (and still are) concentrated in the archipelago. Ren's themes were of colonial expansion, extraction of natural resources, the drive for profit, religious coercion, and human exploitation. Profiteering from the land was described by Ren as not simply an enterprise driven by sugar barons but one marked by widespread systemic corruption. Regardless of the existence of contracts, Ren described himself and fellow Chinese as being forcibly and systemically worked to death. Writing of hypocrisy at the highest levels, Ren pointed to the government and a paternalistic church. He protested coerced baptism and conversion as a mode of controlling the Chinese, noting that "we always have to get our heads washed and become Catholic. We have to prepare gifts for (the godfathers) in order to be our 'relatives' or 'elders.' If we do not follow this rule, we will be accused of committing a crime and will not

be able to get away with it." Meanwhile, Ren noted that the most sacred of rites, the burial, was disregarded for the coolies, as "bones of Chinese pile up like a small hill." Similarly, other testimonies stressed religious coercion, such as that by Zhang Yuan and his group: "We had to beg for a godfather to keep ourselves safe. We had to get a document for going to church to chant and wash heads. Then we had to go to a foreign officer to sign a proof so that we could work in other places to make a living. The owner would send people who did not get their heads washed to the government. Those people would be forced to work in an official workshop with no payment but endless misery" (Petition 59). Furthermore, Ren denounced the government as enforcing laws that bound Chinese in perpetuity, noting that "some of us were fortunate enough to survive after eight years and were looking forward to escaping from this disaster. Government officials locked us up and forced us to be slaves forever."

Most striking are Ren's expressions that convey the smallness of human life, which was compounded by consignment to an island across the ocean and an agonizing desire to escape to freedom: "The beach is so wide and boundless that a single person cannot be seen. Seawater surrounds the city. Trees grow wildly and form a canopy . . . Now I try to gulp down my sobs. My life is held in the manager's hand. In this dense forest and remote mountains, thousands of people are being whipped . . . The ocean is boundless and the sea is vast. I could not escape even if I had wings on my back." Nature is portrayed as overwhelming and endless to those who labor under the lash attempting to tame it. Similarly, the poetic writing of Xie Shuangjiu and certain other fellow coolies described their suffering and vulnerability: "We worked under the canopy of the stars and the moon; we were washed by the rain and combed by the wind" (Petition 69). Complementing the overpowering landscape of nature is Ren's landscape of spiritual desolation, with the "dry grass and flying ashes." Witnessing the insignificance and disposability of their lives, Ren, like many others, would have had to struggle for hope. Images of hunger, thirst, ghosts, graveyards, sobbing, and weeping fill Ren's soliloquy. His images are linked to the upturning of a social order as he knew it. Emphasizing the degradation of his position, Ren wrote, "My hair is disheveled and my face is dirty. My pants are worn-out and my shirt is moldy. When I am alive, I work like a bull or a horse; when I am dead, I am worthless as mole crickets and ants." The theme drawn by Ren concerned demoralization

arising from dehumanizing circumstances of slavery. Implements associated with slavery—chains, shackles, rods, and whips—were always present, while food was not. He exclaimed, “There are shackles around my ankles and chains about my neck. I had to carry dirt and fill up holes. I drew cakes to allay hunger and thought of sour plums to quench my thirst.” Drawn from Chinese classics, Ren’s cakes and plums refer to an antithetical idiom in Chinese that reads as follows: “Hope to stop hunger by drawing a cake; wish to stop thirst by thinking about plums.” Ren’s reference refers to the power of imagination, although it also implies the chasing of illusion. Both contribute to Ren’s saving grace but also to his extreme depression. In a classic Chinese text, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the drawing of cakes appears as false and fleeting: “We should not recommend anyone for official service just because he has fame, for fame is like a cake drawn on the ground, which is inedible.” The fantasizing of plums appears in a legend regarding Cao Cao, a military commander. Cao Cao’s troops were suffering from unbearable thirst due to a long march with no water in sight. At one point Cao Cao inventively declared there was a plum orchard ahead. Imagining sour plums, the troops began salivating, thus quenching their thirst. They marched farther, eventually reaching a water source. In Ren’s petition, however, hunger and thirst are not only deprivations of food, but also deprivations of dignity and freedom. The promise of freedom seems hopeless and illusory. Ren depicted the bleakness of mere survival and wondered “where good things will ever come from.” Symbolic staples of daily life, such as a “lamp oil and a bowl of rice,” were stripped away, as were familial bonds. Families disintegrated and bonds broke like “rotten trees, which do not have any leaves or branches in this world.” Wives, children, parents, and brothers are like one’s own “feet and hands” yet would never know “whether we are alive or dead.”

It is no small detail that Ren mentioned the loss of his name. The loss of name, the certainty of unmarked death, the impossibility of preserving his family and lineage, is the loss of future for Ren. His allusions and references convey the erosion of spirit and cultural traditions due to the breaking of familial and cultural bonds. The traumatic rupture of familial and cultural bonds is figured in Ren’s references to historical figures associated with exile, Li Ling and Su Wu (or “Ziqing”). Li Ling and Su Wu were trapped in territory of the Xiongnu, a nomadic tribal people who dominated northern China during the second and third century B.C.E.

Li Ling was a general in the Han Dynasty who was captured by the Xiongnu and eventually became a collaborator. As punishment for this, Li Ling’s mother, wife, and children were executed under orders of the Chinese emperor. While there are several versions of the episode, all emphasize that Li remained in Xiongnu territory for the rest of his life, unlike his countryman Su Wu, who was an ambassador detained by the Xiongnu for nineteen years. Unlike his peer Li, Su Wu refused to collaborate despite various forms of hardship and deprivation placed upon him. The final parting of Li Ling and Su Wu, the former who remained in exile and the latter who finally returned to his homeland, was dramatically portrayed in literary and historical narrations. Ren’s references signaled his knowledge of literature and history but were also deployed in ways that underscored themes of captivity, betrayal, and exile. Betrayal marked the coolie experience, as close friends and relatives sold their loved ones into the traffic, and “wicked civilians” colluded with foreigners. “These wicked grew a lotus under their tongues but hid a sharp blade in their stomachs,” Ren wrote. The lotus flower, symbolic of beauty and purity in Chinese classical poems, is subsumed into an image of greed and corruption. From Ren’s perspective, the tenets he most identifies as inviolate have been violated: family ties, honorable behavior, bravery, and loyalty. And in his eyes, cultural models of strength and intelligence have been rendered powerless. “At this place,” he lamented, “even Wu Huo could not use his incredible strength; even Yan Yan could not use his extraordinary intelligence.” Wu Huo was a brave warrior during the Warring States period in China who was known for legendary strength (it was said he could lift a ton), and Yan Yan was Confucius’s best student in literature and was a famous scholar during the Spring and Autumn period in China (770–476 B.C.E.).

By drawing upon such inspirational figures, Ren expressed his profound disillusionment and despair, implying that even such heroic figures would be diminished under brutal enslavement.

On the first day of the third moon in the thirteenth year of Tongzhi (April 16, 1874), according to the petition by Ren Shizhen, Nanhai County, Guangdong Province: I was deceived into going abroad. I regret it all year long. So I write down my experience of going abroad in short: The beach is so wide and boundless that a single person cannot be seen.

Seawater surrounds the city. Trees grow wildly and form a canopy. Look around in the mountain: laborers are needed to cut trees and open wasteland for development in the border regions. There are thousands of sugar plantations here that need laborers. This is why the Lüsong people are hiring laborers. They are crafty in their hearts and greedy and cruel in their nature. Since the land is vast and scarcely populated, they are rich and deceitful. Their ships go into China and collude with wicked civilians. Their companies are in the district of Macao and recruit foolish people. China's population is growing day by day; China's trading with other countries is growing day by day. Some people used up thousands of gold pieces and were ashamed to go back to their hometowns. Some people were very poor and looked for a job alone. They met friends on their way. Some of these friends were heartless. These wicked people pointed falsely at a gold mountain and promised to show the way. They tricked many people, no matter who were their close friends or relatives. They grew a lotus under their tongues but hid a sharp blade in their stomachs. They deceived people into traps in order to make a profit. They lured people to a foreign land and didn't care about family loss and lineage. I didn't realize that I was tricked until the ship sailed to the middle of the river. It is difficult to pull back your horse if you are on a plank road along a cliff. At this place, even Wu Huo could not use his incredible strength; even Yan Yan could not use his extraordinary intelligence. Once I entered the cage, my flying wings were pinned down for eight years. Once I was victimized by the scheme, I could not return love and care to my parents in the remaining years of my life. Even if my body should be sold, my parents' signature should have been required. I try to gulp down my sobs. My life is held in the manager's hand. In this dense forest and remote mountains, I was whipped many times; my name was changed and I had to suffer many sicknesses by wearing shackles. Countless people were persecuted to death or ran away. Every meal is less than two dishes. I am fed with yam, corn, and green bananas all year long. All the salary for the day is not even enough to buy lamp oil and a bowl of rice. Li Ling could not go back to his country; Su Wu was trapped in a foreign land for a long time. My parents must be longing for me at the entrance of their alley every day. They will never know that their efforts are futile. Who will take care of my wife and children? Who will care whether they have

enough food or clothes? There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers in Lüsong, while there are hundreds of thousands of sorrowful families in China. Some of us are fortunate enough to survive after eight years and are looking forward to escaping from this disaster. However, government officials lock us up and force us to be slaves forever. There are shackles on my feet and chains around my neck. I have had to carry dirt and fill up holes. I have drawn cakes to allay hunger and thought of sour plums to quench my thirst. If I give something as a bribe to the overseer, he will allow me to slow down; if I give nothing to him, he will beat me with rods. My hair is disheveled and my face is dirty. My pants are worn-out, and my shirt is moldy. When I am alive, I work like an ox and a horse; when I am dead, I am worthless like crickets and ants. When my life reaches an end, who will pity a hungry ghost with no coffin? Where is the graveyard? All I will have is dry grass and flying ashes. I will remain with hatred in the netherworld. Bones of Chinese pile up like a small hill. We always have to get our heads washed and become Catholic. We have to prepare gifts for the godfathers in order to be our "relatives" or "elders." If we do not follow this rule, we will be accused of committing a crime and will not be able to get away with it. Only if we spend hundreds of gold on them, would we be safe. All my savings in years will be gone in one use. Every year, we have to renew our freedom paper with great effort. Whatever we do is restricted, who wouldn't feel sad? Sigh! We were all good civilians. Who didn't have parents? Their guidance, support, love and care. We fear they cannot live long. Who didn't have brothers, who were like feet and hands? Who didn't have spouses, who were like friends and guests? Is there anything good about being alive? What did we do so wrong that we were all deceived? Whether we are alive or dead, our families do not hear anything about it. Maybe someone will pass a little information about us to our families, who would half believe and half doubt. Everything is pitiful and tragic; who wouldn't weep sorrowfully? Our messages don't reach them at all; we are crying and gazing at the end of the world. Goods here are as expensive as jewelry. If I stopped working, I would have nothing to eat. I am like a rotten tree, which does not have any leaves or branches in this world. I wonder where good things will ever come from. I am just waiting for my death to come. Who in China would know about my situation from the beginning to the end? The

ocean is boundless and the sea is vast. I couldn't escape even if I had wings on my back. I just hope that one of my peers can be fortunate enough to go back to China and deliver my message to everyone: Don't be deceived into coming here. As quoted. (Petition 41)

According to Ren's petition, enslavement was constructed upon a host of conditions: corporal punishment and restraints, extortion, religious conversion, and state-enforced slavery, under collusion of business, church, and state. Notably, the wage was barely mentioned. Ren's brief mentions of the wage were only in the context of starvation and extortion. Having a wage did not seem to help the coolie's position, but only led to further extractions of labor under punitive circumstances. His most intriguing point referred to the constant "renewal(s)" for freedom papers, resulting in exorbitant and seemingly endless payments. What were these renewals about? Ren's petition suggests that *getting nominally free from under contract-bondage* was a small possibility, but *remaining free* seemed to be impossible. As verse petition #4 stated, "Even if the contract is finished, we will still not be released." In another verse petition, He Aying wrote, "People who finished their contracts would be humiliated for no reason or be caught for no reason" (Petition 73). What was the experience of "freedom" as experienced by the Chinese coolies? The role of the contract, the basis of "free" labor and liberal philosophies, and the twin challenges of getting free and remaining free, are more deeply and extensively displayed in the petitions of the "paper chase" (see "The Paper Chase Petition").

Taking a different strategy, the teacher Li Chengxun focused upon establishing authority and veracity by making moral character the focal point in his Petition 21. Li Chengxun exhibited refined restraint and crafted his petition entirely in pentameter, with five characters per clause, and two clauses per sentence. Like *yuefu* poetry, this form of writing would be called "pentasyllabic ancient song," which refers to the poetic style popular before the Tang dynasty (618–907). Unfortunately, a translation cannot capture the rhythmic (and difficult) construction of this style. Instead, the translation provided here effects a representation of content. Thus, the admirable movement and effects of its narration are entirely lost. Told that he would be employed as a teacher for a wealthy family, Li recounts that he was deceived and forced abroad at knifepoint. Li goes on to say, "Since I

arrived in the island of Cuba/I have become the same as other slaves." Still, he dedicates only three lines relating to his condition in Cuba. Instead, Li's rhetorical strategy was to emphasize his proper upbringing and social standing, and key aspects of virtue and respect in Chinese traditions. The beginning of his petition acknowledged his father's strict teaching and his father's passing. Li recounted great sacrifices to provide his father with a proper funeral. The mention of borrowing money for the funeral is important, as it indicated dedication to one of the most important aspects of proper Confucian upbringing. According to Mencius, "The funeral of a parent is an occasion for giving of one's utmost," and according to Tseng Tzu (Zeng Zi) one should "serve your parents in accordance with the rites during their lifetime; bury them in accordance with the rites when they die; offer sacrifices to them in accordance with the rites; and you deserve to be called a good son."²⁰ Like many of the testifiers, Li stressed unfulfilled responsibilities to an "old mother" and his "wife and children," and the breakdown of social cohesion, families, and friendships. An "old acquaintance" of Li's sold him into the coolie trade: "He took out a sharp dagger/saying that if I didn't obey, I would lose my life/I thought about my old mother at home/and my wife and my children./If I lost my life/who could my entire family depend on?/I was forced to obey/sighing and weeping that I had such misfortune." Similarly, Ren Shizen had written the following in his petition: "My parents must be longing for me at the entrance of their alley every day. They will never know that their efforts are futile. Who will take care of my wife and children? Who will care whether they have enough food or clothes? There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers in Lúásong, while there are hundreds of thousands of sorrowful families in China" (Petition 41). Yao Wenxian was preoccupied with his inability to care for his mother: "I came to this foreign country at the age of fifty-five. I am sixty-three now. I have an old mother in my home. Right now, whom can my eighty-four-year-old mother depend on?" (Petition 57). As shown in previous examples, broken family and social disintegration were major preoccupations in the testimonies. The Chinese expressed grave concern over obligations to parents (particularly those mentioning aged and infirm parents), children left behind, loss of communication with family, betrayal by friends, loss of names, collapse of lineage, and the denial of death rites.

These thematic threads regarding social cohesion and continuity raise the possibility of testimony as a vehicle for preserving family history and for communication with family. The testimonies suggest that coolies viewed the inquiry as not only an instrument of investigation but, more importantly, as a potential instrument of communication. Through the coolies' testimonies, it was hoped that news would reach their loved ones and also the world. Teacher Li focused upon his father, mother, wife, and children, rather than on his peers in Cuba. Like many of the testifiers, Xian Arong took the opportunity to give the exact address of his shop in China, his family status, the name of the person who sold him, and a host of specificities of his conditions: names, dates, locations, a description of his owner, the owner's brother, hours of work, types of torture, and so on. He ended his testimony with what may have been his last known words: "My Father's name is Axing Qian. This sugar plantation is in Cardenas and the name is Recreo" (Deposition 297). The intended audience was most immediately the commission, but implicitly, the hope was that the audience would eventually include families and villages. As the coolies commonly stated, they were expendable and their chances of getting back to China were slim. Their responsibilities to family weighed heavily upon them. Conveying news of their fates to their families weighed just as heavily on their minds as protesting their circumstances and contemplating the slim chance of being saved. "After the abduction, for tens of years, our families have no idea of whether we are alive or dead and of our whereabouts," wrote one Li Zhaochun. "Our families do not know about it; the government does nothing about it. The society is so decadent that even relatives and friends try to cheat each other. The Spanish are destroying human relations and rotting people's sympathy in China. This peril has no end and is no trivial matter" (Petition 20). Ren Shizen maintained that "whether we are alive or dead, our families do not hear anything about it" (Petition 41), and in his second petition with Dai Renjie and Liang Xingzhao, he declared, "Nobody in our family will have the chance to know where we are" (Petition 54). Another group of petitioners despaired that families had not heard of their fates: "We cannot even send letters back to our families. We cry to heaven, but there is no reply; we appeal to earth, but there is no entry" (Petition 80).

The coolies transferred to the commission the responsibility of making public what was previously unknown, and placed special importance on the fact that their families did not know what had happened to their missing and dead. Sanders puts forth a notion of "transference" in his study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. In a close reading of testimony, he notes that "replying to the questioner, the witness seems not only to address him or her as another but to address an other, or others, *in* the questioner . . . The Commission acts, so to speak, as an engine of 'transference.'" ²¹ Sanders's notion of transference applied to a particular historical moment when a "truth commission" was charged with restoring "the human and civil dignity of such victims." Sanders suggests the meaning of transference is related to responsibility and ethics, as in commission responses to petitions for funeral rites and to the need for special women's hearings. This notion of transference is helpful, as it regards the power of testimony to engender collaborations and complicities. Compared to the South African Truth Commission, the 1874 testimonies emerge from a different era and with different delineations of a commission's power and purpose, yet the testimonies bear out coolies' strategies of pushing the investigation of labor "conditions" into a confrontation with losses to the fabric of larger society. The "family" appealed to an extended sense of social responsibility and social cost. In fact, Li's petition mentioned much more about his family than about his own immediate suffering. At one point, he wrote, "If I can go back to my country to see my mother and my children/All my descendants will be grateful to you." Li's overall petition limned "transference" as a strategy, as he addressed traditional "values" that would speak directly to the moral duties and sympathies of a Chinese commissioner: lineage, family, filial duty, education (the "teacher"), and social standing. Li's petition was not focused on the unrighted wrongs done to others (such as Yuan Guan's and Xu Axiang's witness petitions), nor the trials endured in slavery (such as Ren Shizen's verse petition), but dwelled more on the concerns of social virtues and stability. By displaying virtuous traits and by crafting an entire petition in verse, Li demonstrated his respectability as a teacher—a profession linked to substantial social status in China. Poor but virtuous, Li displayed a proper humility, modestly writing "I am sorry that my pen is short and my writing is poor." Notably, Li elaborated upon his social standing as it once

was and refrained from elaborating upon the humiliations of what his station had become, which he briefly summarized as like a “dog” and like “other slaves.” By underscoring the fact that this humiliation could happen to a person of correct upbringing, such as a teacher, Li emphasized injustice in terms of social class. Li’s petition implicitly argued that it was Li himself who was most deserving of respect and whose petition should be taken seriously. Other petitioners also stressed social standing and pointed out that their groups included the relatives of officials: “We could not appeal this misery; we could not voice this injustice. Moreover, Wu En, who is the nephew of former Governor of Hubei and Hunan Provinces (who was also from the Imperial Academy in Guangzhou), is now in ‘Shahua’ Sugar Plantation; Ye Shengzu, who is the nephew of Ye Qianlan from the Imperial Academy, is now in ‘Simalongpu’; Yang Yujing, who is the nephew of Yang Yi from the Imperial Academy in Gaozhou Prefecture, is now in an ironworks. Three of them cannot come and see your honor in person” (Petition 67).

Due to his preceding emphasis upon Confucian virtues and social standing, Li’s closing claim to truthfulness, “Everything I have said is the truth/Nothing I have said is false,” is made more persuasive. Rhythmically and admirably crafted, Li’s long verse provided little elaboration upon the structures of exploitation that he faced. Yet his strategy was prescient due to the fact that after the commission inquiry, the Qing government inquired after any coolies who were of scholarly standing.

On the eighteenth day of the second moon of in the thirteenth year of Tongzhi [April 4, 1874] according to the petition by Li Chengxun, Xinhui County, Guangdong Province:

When I was young, my family was poor/I followed my father’s strict teaching.

When I was eighteen years old I became a teacher in Jiangmen County.

In the year of Ren Shen (1872), my father passed away/It was mid-May.

I asked for help from fellow villagers/I received 3000 wen I thanked them at the alley/and went back home for my father’s funeral.

Because of my father’s death, I lost my teaching job/My family became so poor that we didn’t even have a grain of millet for food.

I was willing to go to a relative’s place/just to find a place to stay.

I met Agao Liang on the way/He was a civilian in Xiaozhe County.

We were old acquaintances and talked about the past/We chatted happily and inquired after each other’s family well-being.

He told me that there was a dragon family in Macaoⁱⁱⁱ/The family was quite wealthy.

They would pay eleven yuan/for a family teacher.

I believed in him/and followed him to the port of Macao.

He pointed at a foreign ship/saying that my employer was on the ship.

To get to the ship, I took a small boat/On the way, (he) revealed his real purpose.

He said that the ship was going to Lūsōng/I didn’t want to listen in the beginning.

He took out a sharp dagger/saying that if I didn’t obey, I would lose my life.

I thought about my old mother at home/and my wife and my children.

If I lost my life/who could my entire family depend on?

I was forced to obey/sighing and weeping that I had such misfortune.

Since I arrived at the island of Cuba/I have been the same as other slaves.

The work is extremely heavy/Oxen and dogs are ten times better off than I am.

I am sorry that my pen is short and my writing is poor/I cannot tell everything from the beginning.

I sincerely hope that your honor has a little mercy^{iv}/and can save me and other fellow Chinese.

If I can go back to my country to see my mother and my children/all my descendants will be grateful to you.

Everything I have said is the truth/Nothing I have said is false.

As quoted. (Petition 21)

iii. Dragon family: The name for families living on boats in Southern China.

iv. “Your honor” is not literally present in the sentence but is inserted here, as in other translated petitions of this study, to signal the markedly humble and respectful address, which would indicate “your honor,” “your eminence,” or similar address. The simple address of “you” would not suffice.