

## **The Coolie Trade, 1838–1916: The Migration of Indentured Labor from India and China**

Although the British have always liked to think of themselves as exceptional, however unfounded and delusional that may seem at times, any consideration of the migration of government-sponsored indentured labor following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire can only be understood in the context of similar migration patterns from other colonial powers.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the so-called coolie trade from Hong Kong, Portuguese Macau was a major rival to the British for Chinese emigrant labor, and the experience of Macau offers interesting parallels and contrasts to the experience of the British colony. At the same time, the British experience of exporting Chinese laborers to its colonies is only to be understood alongside the contemporary migration of labor from India to the British colonies. Such migration originated from economic needs as European powers built up their colonies and, in order to do so, exploited the availability of non-European peoples who saw migration as a route out of their poverty at home. Whatever their origin, the experiences of forced migrants were very similar.

The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in British colonies in 1833 meant that cheap labor could no longer be bought in Africa and shipped across the Atlantic to the colonies. Sugar planters in the West Indies saw their wealth threatened and put pressure on the British government for aid. Bringing indentured emigrant labor from India, China, and Polynesia to the West Indies, Mauritius, and South America was seen as the solution to this labor shortage. This new trade in the shipment of indentured labor began in 1834 when 41,056 workers sailed from Bengal to Mauritius.

European emigrants were generally not considered suitable for labor on plantations in the tropics (except as overseers) because of their delicate constitutions, whereas Africans were seen as much more resilient in the heat and so suitable for heavy plantation work.<sup>2</sup> However, with emancipation came the question of how to ensure a good supply of labor suited to work in sultry climates. In many respects, the resulting system of indentured labor differed little from the slavery

system it replaced, but it greatly differed from previous systems of indentured labor in the British colonies, where many of the men on contract were white overseers or skilled tradesmen rather than replacements for slaves. Prospective workers now signed up for a fixed period of five to eight years, during which time they were supposed to receive a monthly wage, housing, food, and clothing. At the end of their first or second term of service, they were entitled to receive tickets home, paid for by their employers. During the period of their indentures, they may as well have been slaves. Nevertheless, many of the Indian migrants who had returned home after their first or second terms subsequently remigrated, often bringing new recruits with them. Other indentured laborers never returned home but settled in Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Natal, creating substantial and visible Indian communities that reflected the burgeoning internationalization of the imperial labor market.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the early indentured laborers later complained that they had been lured on board ship under false pretenses. J. P. Woodcock, a Bombay civil servant, was a passenger on the *Drongan*, sailing to Mauritius in 1841, on a voyage lasting two months. According to him, the ship was carrying “a cargo of rice and sixty-six Coolies,” and he commented that “Mauritius was described to them in glowing terms, and advantage taken of their ignorance to provoke the belief that every necessary of life was cheap, labour light, and that the voyage would only occupy them ten days.” According to observers on the *Whitby* in 1838, many of “the men appeared to have no conception as to where they were going and the length of the voyage; they said they had been told...that they were to go on board for two or three days, and then land and march the remainder of their journey.”<sup>4</sup>

The reality of conditions on board was a shock to these men, who came from “every variety of caste from the Brahmin to the Choman” and were mixed together without any sensitivity toward the caste system.<sup>5</sup> In particular, many of the coolies “complained of being seduced from their own country by fine promises; and, they had no idea, when they consented to come down, that they would of necessity lose caste.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, they were considered less valuable than the other cargo on board. Woodcock noted that “the lower decks of the *Drongan* were stowed with rice, and the Coolies were disposed in the waist between the gangways and the forecastle, where, if the weather had not been remarkably fine, they might have suffered, being unprotected from every change of weather.”<sup>7</sup> In many instances “the proper allowance of food for the voyage has not been provided, medical inspection [had] not taken place previous to embarkation, nor medical

attendance been furnished during the voyage,” all of which contributed to the coolies’ unhappiness.<sup>8</sup>

As early as 1837, Thomas Fowell Buxton and Lord Brougham, politicians prominent in the abolition of slavery, were condemning such abuses in the system. As a result, in 1838, the East India Company banned any further shipments of coolies. J. P. Grant, a member of the committee appointed to investigate the conditions under which the coolies were being shipped and employed, pressed for legislation to regulate the system so that emigration would be restricted to particular ports and supervised by a protector of emigrants. In 1842, an Order in Council provided for the appointment of responsible emigration agents in India and a protector of immigrants in Mauritius. In 1844, emigration to Jamaica, British Guiana, and Trinidad was also sanctioned. All laborers had to satisfy a magistrate that they had chosen to emigrate and understood their contracts. During the next decade 107,000 coolies were sent through the agency of East Indies government officers, mainly from Calcutta, to Mauritius.<sup>9</sup>

Before embarkation, the coolies were herded together in guarded depots so that they would not attempt to escape after having signed their contracts and where they could be examined by the protector of emigrants, who was charged with ensuring that they were well-looked-after, fed, and adequately clothed ahead of the long voyage. All laborers were weighed, and a record was kept of whether they had gained or lost weight during their stay in the depot.<sup>10</sup> Note was taken of “the slender form, lank limbs and obvious muscular weakness of most natives of India, as contrasted with Europeans.”<sup>11</sup> A native doctor was employed to check the emigrants for signs of venereal disease or ruptures before they were examined by the ship’s medical officer. It was also the responsibility of the protector of emigrants to make sure that the ship was seaworthy before it sailed.

In a large number of cases, the desire of families to emigrate together meant that sick or ailing emigrants and young children got through the medical inspections held just before embarkation. The able-bodied coolies would not leave their families behind, so the old and infirm were allowed to embark; otherwise, there would have been very few emigrants. When typhoid and dysentery killed ten men, eight women, and six children on the *Wellesley* on its voyage from Calcutta to Demerara in 1856, “it is believed that the evil originated in the depot at Calcutta,” though the emigration agent, the assistant protector of emigrants, and the medical officer at the depot claimed that, “with the exception of a few old people, who were objected to, but embarked in consequence of their being

members of families, the coolies were fair average lots, and in good health at the time of leaving Calcutta.” Similarly when cholera struck aboard the *Bucephalus* a few weeks later, soon after it had sailed from Calcutta, officials argued that this was unrelated to conditions at the depot:

The occurrence of cholera in the passage down the river is no proof that the emigrants were in a bad state of health when they embarked, as similar outbreaks of that inscrutable malady have happened in troop ships, and vessels of all kinds and class, among robust healthy Europeans, strong bodied Lascar crews, pilgrims to Mecca, and even in boats with natives on board, who constantly live on the river, and are proof against all the ordinary exhalations and miasmata incident to its banks.<sup>12</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, there was more rigorous selection at the depots, and increasing numbers of emigrants were rejected on medical grounds. In 1894, the protector of emigrants noted in his report that, out of 26,707 registered emigrants, only 14,865 actually embarked for the colonies. The few not dismissed on health grounds ran away, frightened by the harshness of the depot, where the slightest hint of infection could change it into “a place of sickness and death.”<sup>13</sup> By 1897, the protector of migrants at Port-au-Prince could comment that “the immigrants that have arrived this year are an exceptionally good lot and indicate a more careful selection at Calcutta.”<sup>14</sup>

Depots known as barracoons (a term originally used in the African slave trade for the enclosures in which the slaves were confined) were also established in Hong Kong and the Chinese ports for the collection of coolies before embarkation. Compared to the government-sponsored depots in India, conditions here were more akin to those that slaves had experienced. Once in the barracoons, the emigrants were sold to shipping companies or ship captains at so much a head and marked with a stamped or painted letter on their breasts to indicate their destination, such as C for California or P for Peru.<sup>15</sup> Since 1855, the Chinese Passengers Act had laid down that all British ships carrying passengers from Chinese ports should be inspected by an emigration officer to ensure that the migrants were emigrating of their free will and the ships were well ventilated and free of disease.<sup>16</sup> Yet the barracoons remained full of unwilling emigrants, kidnapped or conned into making unwitting agreements; and despite successive measures to stop abuses, the exploitation of the coolies remained a scandal. Emigrant brokers were required to be licensed and bonded, the barracoons had

to be licensed and be operated under rules laid down by the governor of Hong Kong, permits were necessary for passengers and ships, and contract laborers leaving from Hong Kong could only be taken to British colonies.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, regulation of contract emigration from Hong Kong remained weak because the West Indian planters needed labor, and the city's merchants were involved in the supply and fitting up of ships sailing not only from the British colony of Hong Kong but also from Portuguese Macau and mainland China.<sup>18</sup>

Before the Opium War of 1839–42, Canton had been the only trading port open to foreign traders and served as imperial China's main point of contact with Europe. It had also developed as a center for emigration, at first mainly to Southeast Asia via Macau but later, after 1848, also to California and Peru. In the early years of the coolie trade, the Cantonese authorities had not interfered with emigration, which was openly advertized, but by the 1860s kidnapping by crimps was becoming common. Governor-General Lalou in Canton feared that this increase in enforced emigration was the "offspring of the receiving ship system." Smaller boats would deliver emigrants to receiving ships anchored off the coast. In 1859, there were three receiving ships flying the U.S. flag moored at Whampoa, the deep-water anchorage downstream from Canton, as well as individual vessels registered in Peru, Oldenburg, and the Netherlands. All of them acted as feeders for the barracoons of Macau. If an emigrant received by one of these ships insisted that he had been kidnapped, he would be returned to the crimps and tortured so brutally that, when presented to another ship, he would be too terrified of the crimps not to embark.<sup>19</sup>

Local Cantonese mobs, outraged by the growth in the number of kidnappings, took the law into their own hands if they found a crimp attempting to coerce someone into emigrating, often lynching or beating him to death.<sup>20</sup> As a result of pressure from the West, Peh-kwei, the governor of the province of Kwangtung, not only made kidnapping an offence punishable by death but also took the radical step of authorizing voluntary emigration for anyone compelled by poverty to seek work overseas. This was a complete reversal of the imperial government's long-standing policy but meant that an attempt could be made to prevent the horrors of the crimping system. Yet, as long as shipments of emigrants continued without adequate supervision at Macau and Hong Kong, crimps remained active.

At Macau, the Portuguese authorities attempted to enact ordinances to check these abuses committed by the crimps. In 1853, Governor Isidoro Francisco

Guimarães imposed sanitary regulations for both ships and depots and decreed that any emigrants rejected on the grounds of ill-health or old age should be returned to their homes at the expense of the crimps. In 1855, he directed that all contracts of emigration should be registered and that all emigrants should be inspected on shore by the procurator and on ship by the harbormaster. In 1856, he required all emigration brokers to be licensed. Nonetheless, he admitted to John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong, that it was almost impossible to eliminate the existing abuses so long as the crimps remained in control of the business of emigration.<sup>21</sup>

In 1860, Guimarães created the post of superintendent of emigration at Macau, who was paid by the government and independent of vested interests. Moreover, he insisted that emigrants should not be confined to the barracoons but must be free to enter and leave as they wished. The British consul Charles Winchester was impressed by the Macau barracoons, calling them “exceedingly well arranged and worthy of imitation,” Their 480 occupants were “stout men and boys well lodged and well clothed and looking clean and comfortable.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the barracoons in Macau continued to be heavily guarded by sentries with heavy clubs.

Furthermore, the 1866 Emigration Convention signed by China, the United Kingdom, and France limited emigration to the treaty ports and prohibited emigrants from going to any country that did not have diplomatic relations with China. This should have ruled out trade from the Portuguese colony of Macau, but it continued to be a center of emigration for Chinese going to South America. Finally, in 1874, pressure from the Chinese government led to a Portuguese ban on emigration from Macau. Jui-lin, the governor of Kwangtung, had demanded the immediate closing of the Macau barracoons in 1873 after his war junks on patrol in the waters between Canton and Macau had stopped three ships with sixty kidnapped Chinese emigrants and the Portuguese captains had admitted to working for the barracoons.<sup>23</sup> Jui-lin had responded by issuing a proclamation warning against kidnapping and had blamed the Portuguese for this abuse.<sup>24</sup> The ending of emigration from Portuguese Macau removed a major rival to Britain’s trade in Chinese emigrant labor.

For emigrants embarking for a new world, whether from India or China, the journey was painfully long. The average length of the voyage from Calcutta or Bombay to the West Indies was twenty weeks. The voyage took nineteen weeks from Madras, with ships usually calling at Cape of Good Hope and Saint Helena en route. Ships took twelve weeks to travel from Calcutta to Natal and ten weeks from Calcutta to Mauritius. Voyages from Hong Kong to Peru took about 110

days; to the West Indies, about 120 days. Steamers could have shortened these journeys by ten to twenty days, but the shipowners saw no profit in using newer or faster ships.<sup>25</sup> Often the coolies had no idea how long they would be at sea or indeed that they would be so far from land. Rahman Khan, travelling to Surinam in 1898, “had the impression that land would be more or less visible throughout our journey” but soon realized he was wrong. Succumbing to seasickness, he noted that “many of us became dizzy and had to vomit.”<sup>26</sup>

The ships on which the Indian coolies sailed were more crowded and less comfortable than the ships on which European emigrants sailed to the Americas and Australia. It was widely accepted that the coolies were not accustomed to western ways and comforts and so did not need them.<sup>27</sup> There was little concern about how they would use most efficiently the limited space available to them. Women and children slept on bamboo-work platforms raised three feet above the deck, while the men slept below them on the deck. Western observers saw this as an unhealthy arrangement, claiming that “Indian women and children are more dirty in their personal habits than the men of the same race, and, their sleeping above the men must have been productive of nuisances injurious to health and destructive of cleanliness.”<sup>28</sup> Don Aldus, a writer and adventurer, traveling on a coolie ship from Macau to Havana in the 1860s, noted that “each shelf simply represented one hundred and fifty in a bed.” While the legal minimum of sleeping space allotted to each man was between twenty and twenty-four inches, “they are not over particular in this matter as they seldom exceed twenty one inches.”<sup>29</sup> The space was enough to allow a passenger to lie on his back in discomfort. The 1852 Passenger Act regulation that British ships could carry only one passenger for every two tons registered was generally ignored, and the governor of Hong Kong admitted that any attempts to enforce this provision would drive shipping to non-British ports, to the detriment of the city’s trade. Pressure from shipowners led to an 1853 amendment to the Act that allowed for “twelve instead of fifteen superficial feet to be sufficient space for natives of Asia and Africa who may be conveyed from Hong Kong through the Tropics.”<sup>30</sup>

Ships transporting Chinese coolies from Hong Kong to South America were invariably cargo vessels modified for the purpose in a very similar manner to slave ships: “they are (to use the phrase known in slave ships) ‘packed and sold,’ and merely ‘paddy’ (unclean rice) and oil put on board for their food.”<sup>31</sup> In Joseph Conrad’s novella *Typhoon* (1899), Captain McWhirr, who is shipping two hundred Chinese coolies home from Southeast Asia, merely mirrors the views of many



real-life captains when he says he has “never heard of coolies spoken of as passengers before.” He regards them as little more than the sacks of rice and other commodities also crammed below deck.<sup>32</sup>

European tastes in food rarely appealed to Indians; observers thought that the Bengalese coolies suffered when fed on sea biscuits because they were more used to rice, just “as is often the case with Irish and Scotch Emigrants who have been accustomed to potatoes.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, these dry biscuits were considered “not suitable food for a woman nursing, as bread is considered most injurious for all emigrants, as being the main cause of bringing on dysentery.” Rice and dried fish would have been acceptable to many of the passengers, but sago was more common, and most disliked it. There was also the danger that emigrants would eat too much at mealtimes or “hide what they cannot eat, and, before they eat it, it turns sour, and brings on diarrhoea; though every means were used to prevent them hiding any.”<sup>34</sup>

Some British government tenders stipulated that salt fish, chilies, dal, ghee, and spices such as turmeric and tamarind should be carried on board to make the food palatable to the tastes of the emigrants and that dry provisions should be stocked for use when cooking was impossible in bad weather.<sup>35</sup> The supply of tinned milk was considered especially important for infants because, “from sea sickness, the unaccustomed life at sea and the total change in their habits, women, with children at the breast, rapidly lose, and, in the majority instances, do not again recover their milk.”<sup>36</sup> Tinned mutton was provided in lieu of carrying live sheep on board because “the pens take up valuable space; the urine and dung get under the pens and are hard to remove and become very offensive.”<sup>37</sup>

On ships carrying Chinese coolies, rice, tea, and salt fish and meat were supplied to the emigrants, which they could cook in their own fashion in “smelting pots” set up as communal galleys on the upper deck. However, this food soon became putrid, and diarrhea and scurvy were a common result. Some ships took on fresh vegetables and live pigs and sheep at ports en route; but for emigrants accustomed to lifelong starvation, a sudden change to a plentiful diet often caused dysentery, which they were unable to fight, given their weakened and emaciated state.<sup>38</sup>

Water supplies were as inadequate as the food, and the situation was made worse by the difficulties of obtaining fresh water in Indian and Chinese ports. Water was often taken on board at Anjer, Cape Hope, and Saint Helena. To conserve these supplies, passengers were rationed to between a pint and a gallon a day. Water was stored in casks with reeds inserted in them, which emigrants



used as straws when they wanted a drink. On one ship, the water supplies were treated twice a week with six gallons of port wine and one gallon of “anti-scorbutic medicine.” Officials claimed this prevented scurvy and wrote that the emigrants drank it with “great avidity and enjoyment.”<sup>39</sup>

Ships from China were heavily armed to keep the passengers under control. The movement of passengers from the between-decks to the main deck was controlled by crossed iron bars, arched in the center with a small opening at the top, fitted over the hatchways. The hatches leading to the provisions stores of tea, fish, and rice in the hold were surrounded by iron bars fitted to both decks to prevent theft, and also serve as cages for armed guards in the event of a mutiny. The captain’s cabin was protected by a barricade firmly bolted to the deck with sixteen-pound cannons poking through the defenses. This defensive structure resembled a “floating menagerie for wild beasts,” and from it a small number of guards could command the entire deck and subdue the passengers.<sup>40</sup>

Crews sailing in the China seas had long feared piracy, and they widely believed that Chinese pirates were volunteering as emigrants to South America in order to hijack the ship.<sup>41</sup> As a result, “in the *Fei Ma*, the Chinese passengers are put down in the hold twelve feet deep and the ladder is taken away” while “a sailor keeps guard over them with a drawn cutlass.” Similarly, “one of the Yankee ships has an iron cage on deck into which the Chinese passengers are invited to walk and are then locked up.” There was only one way to feel secure from hijacking: “the *Peninsular and Orient* boat has a better but more costly precaution; she carries no Chinese passengers.”<sup>42</sup>

There was a real danger of mutiny on these ships. Between 1850 and 1872 there were at least sixty-eight mutinies on ships carrying Chinese contract laborers bound for Cuba, Peru, British Guiana, Australia, India, and the United States. Some of the mutineers had been effectively kidnapped; others regretted having agreed to emigrate; some were reacting to the harsh treatment they received on board; a small number wished merely to plunder the ship.<sup>43</sup> E. Holden, a passenger on the *Norway*, which was carrying 1,038 Chinese laborers to Cuba in 1859, witnessed a mutiny in which the participants wrote, in blood, their demand to be taken to Siam. After an initial attack on the crew was repulsed, they attempted to set the ship on fire:

The foiled wretches, maddened at defeat from the outset, rushed with furious yells from one hatch to another, swinging lighted firebrands or striving

to wrench away the iron bars that covered them, or hurling bolts and clubs at every face that peered down at them from above. The red glare of the flames lit up the sky, reflecting grimly against the swelling sails, and in spite of a constant stream of water from the pumps seemed scarcely to diminish.<sup>44</sup>

As in the heyday of slavery, floggings were a common punishment. On ships carrying Chinese emigrants, they were also used as a deterrent to mutiny. A dozen lashes were given for smoking below deck, theft, or illegal gambling. Up to two dozen were given for perjury, fighting, or “depositing filth between decks.” The worst punishments were reserved for challenges to authority: “any coolie or coolies discovered conspiring to mutiny, shall, when found guilty, be punished with the cats not exceeding four dozens and afterwards be handcuffed and chained to the ringbolts of the deck during the master’s pleasure.”<sup>45</sup>

A more effective way of keeping the coolies under control was to keep them “employed in any way to prevent them from thinking and drooping.” Chinese coolies were notorious for spending their time on deck playing dominoes and cards, but arguments over gambling often ended in fighting. Music served as an alternative entertainment, with passengers playing one-stringed violins, clarinets, cymbals, gongs, drums, and trumpets. Sometimes these instruments were provided as part of a ship’s equipment, but many passengers brought along their own.<sup>46</sup> On the *Salsette*, traveling from Calcutta to Trinidad in 1858, Captain Swinton and his wife Jane “found exercise, such as their native dances, very useful in keeping up a good state of health—an experiment which we tried. Music is also very desirable.” However, they took care not to encourage immorality among the younger passengers, who “have no morality whatever: if they fancy each other they become man and wife for the time being, and change again when they please.”<sup>47</sup>

Keeping the passengers entertained depended very much on the cultural characteristics of different groups of coolies. Emigrants from the Madras area were seen as sociable and eager to be involved in what was happening on board: “The Madrasee is a lively, singing merry fellow, who delights in remaining on deck, seldom stays below if he can help it, day or night, is always ready to bear a hand in pulling ropes or any other work going on in the ship, and is much less troubled with prejudices of any kind.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast, emigrants from Bengal were seen as much less cheerful and active: “The Bengali is so much given to remaining below that compulsion is necessary to bring him on deck. He rapidly gives way to sea sickness and depression; when taken ill, always imagines that he must die; and remains in

an apathetic state of torpid indifference, the very reversal of the mercurial propensities of the Malabar.”<sup>49</sup> Europeans also applied such crude racial stereotyping to Chinese migrants. Jane Swinton preferred Indian coolies to the Chinese, whom she considered “a most determined and self-willed people, who thought a great deal of their joss, and were quite opposed to the others in character.”<sup>50</sup>

Much depended upon the attitude of the captain and his crew to the passengers. It was in his interest to look after the migrants because the death of a coolie represented a loss of £13 from the shipowners’ charter money as colonial authorities in Trinidad would only pay for coolies who landed alive.<sup>51</sup> Jane Swinton believed that it was “most unjust and illiberal to the owners of any Coolie-ship to be paid only for such as are landed alive, particularly when put on board in such a diseased state by the emigration office in Calcutta.” She questioned “Why have one law for our Indian emigrants to the West India colonies, and another for our English emigrants to Australia?”<sup>52</sup> Yet the same system also applied to ships carrying Chinese emigrants.<sup>53</sup>

On British government-sponsored ships, as on emigrant ships from Britain to Australia, a qualified surgeon superintendent was always on board. The captain of a chartered ship was required to “on all occasions, when practicable, attend to any of the suggestions of the surgeon calculated to promote the health, comfort or well-being of the emigrants.”<sup>54</sup> The surgeon superintendent was in charge of the coolies and responsible for keeping them under control and healthy. Inevitably, many of these appointees were not always of the highest quality. European doctors considered service on a coolie ship to be demeaning. Surgeons on these ships were also less well paid than their equivalents on government-assisted passages to Australia because the West Indian colonies could not afford such generous fees. Barbados officials recognized that “there can be no question as to the advantage of employing competent surgeons on board emigrant vessels...but I fear that the adoption of the Emigrant Commissioners’ [advice]” to increase their remuneration and recruit a superior class of surgeon “would very materially increase the expenses of emigration, already high.”<sup>55</sup>

As a result, many Indian-born and -educated doctors took these posts, and European officers and even Indian crew members tended to look down on them. Robert Sinclair, the surgeon superintendent on the *India*, shipping coolies from Calcutta to British Guiana in 1879, made himself unpopular with the captain and crew when trying to carry out his duties:

It was mainly in insisting on the rights of the emigrants in my charge and endeavouring to control abuses that I got myself into disfavour with the crew and others aboard. The simple fact is that the commander and officers could not control the crew in their ill-treatment of the emigrants, the crew being an unruly lot, recruited from the back slums of Calcutta, and utterly beyond restraint; and their repugnance to me, in my efforts to defend the emigrants from their ill-treatment, is the surest proof of my determination not to tolerate abuses in spite of the odds against me.<sup>56</sup>

Sinclair was scorned as a “native surgeon,” but highly placed government officials supported him in denying this label: “the Lieutenant Governor cannot understand how Mr Sinclair is spoken of as a native. He is in appearance a decidedly fair European, though his education was received in the Calcutta Medical College.”<sup>57</sup>

Not all surgeon superintendents were as determined as Sinclair to stand up for their status and the rights of their charges. On the *Bucephalus*, “the surgeon was a mere boy, and unfit to be entrusted with so serious a duty.” A fellow doctor commented on his inexperience: “I knew him during the whole period of his study in the Medical College of Calcutta and am aware that he was a lad of ability who was well acquainted with his profession; but I should not on that account have considered it right to entrust him with the management of so large a body of emigrants” as the 389 on board the *Bucephalus* in 1856. One of the reasons for sickness among the coolies was “the excessive and mistaken kindness which induced the surgeon to allow the people to remain below the greater part of the voyage.”<sup>58</sup>

Although native surgeon superintendents were despised as inferior to European doctors, many did have the advantage of being able to speak to their charges in their own language depending upon which part of India they came from. On the *Blue Jacket* in 1857, “the surgeon was well accustomed to the management of natives and spoke their language fluently.”<sup>59</sup> The ships did carry interpreters, known as *sirdars* or *chokedars*, who were essential for communication between the surgeon superintendent and the coolies. An Indian apothecary could be a helpful intermediary between the doctor and his charges, especially in helping them overcome prejudices against western medicines. Otherwise, “the ship [had to] be supplied with the herbs used by the natives in sickness, as it is next to an impossibility to get them to take our medicine.”<sup>60</sup>

Chinese migrants were also suspicious of western medicine and preferred to treat dysentery, scurvy, dropsy, fever, and opium withdrawal with traditional

Chinese remedies. Although from the 1850s onward, emigrant ships were supposed to have qualified surgeons, a hospital, and adequate medical supplies, these regulations were often ignored. In many cases, the only doctors who could be obtained were Chinese practitioners unfamiliar with European medicine who often extorted money from the sick in return for favors or opium.<sup>61</sup>

Without coolie emigration from India and China, there undoubtedly would have been severe labor shortages in the colonies and in South America. Such emigration was also accepted by the Indian government as a safety valve for those of its people who could not be provided with work at home. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, there was growing concern about the exploitation of Indian migrants. Within a year of his 1898 appointment as viceroy of India, Lord Curzon refused a petition from Caribbean planters for the general abolition of the Indian laborers' right to free return passage at the end of their five-year contracts. Meanwhile, the indentured community was protesting against some of the abuses of the system. In Natal, resistance was led by the young Indian lawyer Mohandas Gandhi, who convinced the Indian public that emigration was detrimental rather than beneficial for India. His fellow campaigner, the lawyer Henry Polak, described the treatment of Indians in South Africa as "a record of shame and cruelty that has no counterpart within the confines of the British Empire."<sup>62</sup>

The British government favored reform of the indenture system rather than its abolition. Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, asserted in 1897 the right of the self-governing colonies to control the influx of Indian and Chinese migrants who were "alien in civilization, alien in religion, alien in customs" but insisted that it was necessary "also to bear in mind the traditions of the Empire, which makes no distinction in favour of, or against, race and colour."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the days of the indenture system were numbered, thanks to a combination of exclusionist policies among the white dominions, rising Indian and Chinese nationalism, and the changing world economy in the aftermath of the First World War. Falls in the profits of sugar plantations made the importation of contract laborers less commercially viable, especially now that there was a pool of settled labor in those colonies. In 1916, indentured emigration was banned by the government of India, bringing to an end a far from glorious period of imperial migration but one in which the coolie ships had built up the economy of the British Empire and fostered a multicultural world.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Portugal had ceased to be a major rival to Britain for Chinese emigrant labor since 1874, but there had been many similarities in its approach to the shipping of indentured labor with that adopted by the British in sending both Indian and Chinese coolies to its colonies. In many ways the treatment of the indentured laborers had differed little from the methods adopted by the defunct slave trade, most notably in the use of depots based on the barracoons of the slavers. In attempting to check the notorious abuses perpetrated by the crimps in Macau, the Portuguese authorities in the 1860s instituted the post of superintendent of emigration, which was very similar to the role of the protector of emigrants for Indian migrants. Very little consideration was given to the cultural and social customs and beliefs of the migrants, whether Indian or Chinese, in the rush for the cheapest transportation. Just as in the slave trade, the well-being of the migrants was a secondary consideration to their economic worth. The main difference between the Indian and Chinese experience was that the British ruled in India, whereas the colonial officials in both British Hong Kong and Portuguese Macau had to comply, sometimes reluctantly, with Imperial Chinese policies on the mainland. Whereas in India the British controlled the indentured labor market and its shipping, whether privately owned or state-sponsored, in China the trade in indentured labor was more international in nature with vessels of the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and Peru all acting as feeders for Macau. Any consideration of the coolie trade has to look beyond national boundaries for it to be seen in its wider context in colonial development, just as its impact was to be multicultural.

### NOTES

1. This essay revisits material discussed in Kevin Brown, *Passage to the World: The Emigrant Experience, 1807–1940*. Seaforth (Barnsley, 2013), 113–35.
2. J. Lind, *An Essay on Diseases Incidental to Europeans in Hot Climates* (1808), p. 8; J. Hunter, *Observations on Diseases of the Army in Jamaica and on the Best Means of Preserving the Health of Europeans in that Climate* (1788), p. 24.
3. I. M. Crumpson, 'A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910', *Population Studies* 10 (1956), 158–65.
4. House of Commons Papers, 1841, vol. 16, p. 60, 1841
5. British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, *Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies and Other Labourers to Mauritius* (1842), p.33.

6. House of Commons Papers, 1841, vol. 16, p. 60, 1841
7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. K. Brown, *Passage to the World: The Emigrant Experience 1807–1940* (2013), p. 118.
10. TNA, CO 384/107, register of emigrants waiting to board *Golden Fleece*, British Empire, Essex, Brechin Castle and St. James at Trinidad Depot, 1874.
11. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
12. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
13. H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (1974), p. 141
14. TNA, CO 295/387, Report of W.H. Combes, Protector of Migrants, Port-au-Spain, 7 January 1897.
15. TNA, FO 17/873, letter from Mayers to Alcock, 1 November 1866.
16. *Ibid.*, FO 97/101, Chinese Passengers Act, 1855.
17. *Ibid.*, FO 17/877, Foreign Office to Governor of Hong Kong, 14 December 1869.
18. A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade* (2008), pp. 105–6.
19. *Ibid.*
20. TNA, FO 881/894, letter from Alcock to Bowring, 12 April 1859.
21. *Ibid.*, FO 97/102A, letter from John Bowring to Lord Clarendon, 27 June 1856.
22. *Ibid.*, FO 97/1023, letter from C.A. Winchester to J. Bowring, 22 July 1855.
23. *Ibid.*, FO 17/882, letter from Robertson to Wade, 23 April 1873.
24. *Ibid.*, FO 881/2445, proclamation against kidnapping, 6 August 1873.
25. TNA, FO 97/102B, letter from Parkes to Hammond, 21 May 1860.
26. R. Khan, *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer* (2005), p. 83.
27. 'Indian Emigration', *Chambers Journal*, 43 (1866), 395–394–7.
28. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
29. D. Aldus, *Coolie Traffic and Kidnapping* (1876), p. 31.
30. A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade* (2008), pp. 155.
31. Captain and Mrs Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad* (1859), p. 16.
32. J. Conrad, *Typhoon* (2003), p.23.
33. TNA, Co 318/220, letter from J.W. Murdoch to H. Merrivale, 11 August 1858.
34. Captain and Mrs Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad* (1859), p. 13.
35. TNA, CO 318/165, Dietary Scale for Emigrants from India to the West Indies, 1845.



36. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
37. TNA, CO 295/387, Report of W.H. Combes, Protector of Migrants, Port-au-Spain, 7 January 1897.
38. TNA, FO 881/744, Report to Emigration Commissioners, 10 December 1853.
39. D. Aldus, *Coolie Traffic and Kidnapping* (1876), p. 325.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
41. W. Speer, *The Oldest and the Newest Empire* (1870), p. 483.
42. G.W. Cooke, *China and Lower Bengal* (1861), 67.
43. A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade* (2008), pp. 176–7.
44. E. Holden, 'A Chapter on the Coolie Trade', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 29/169 (June 1864), 7.
45. D. Aldus, *Coolie Traffic and Kidnapping* (1876), pp. 51–2.
46. E. Holden, 'A Chapter on the Coolie Trade', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 29/169 (June 1864), 5.
47. Captain and Mrs Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad* (1859), p. 14.
48. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Captain and Mrs Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad* (1859), p. 14.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
53. TNA, FO 97/102B, Testimony of Doctor on the Norwegian ship *Norma*, 1860.
54. TNA, Co 318/165, tender for the conveyance of Indian emigrants to the West Indies, 1845.
55. TNA, CO 101/117/28, dispatch from Lieutenant Governor Cartwright to the Governor of Barbados, 1 June 1861.
56. TNA, CO 318/261, Report on Mortality among Indian Emigrants Shipped from Calcutta to British Guiana, statement of Robert Sinclair, 15 March 1879.
57. *Ibid.*, Lieutenant Governor's Comments, 15 March 1879.
58. TNA, Co 318/218, Report on Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies, 1856–7.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Captain and Mrs Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad* (1859), p. 13.
61. D. Aldus, *Coolie Traffic and Kidnapping* (1876), p. 218.

62. H. Polak, *The Indians of South Africa* (1909), p. 90.

63. Proceedings of a Conference between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Premiers of the Self Governing Colonies, June and July 1897, C 8596, 1897, p. 12.

64. D. Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (1995), p. 145.

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