The Chinese Coolie Trade

1845-1875

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By the terms of the Treaty of Ghent of December, 1814, the United States and Great Britain bound themselves to do all in their power to extinguish the African slave trade. In the 1830's England entered into agreements with the French for the mutual right of search within certain seas – which most of the major powers acceded. By the terms of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, Great Britain and the United States agreed to maintain joint squadrons off the west coast of Africa. By these measures the slave trade, so far as it was carried on under the flags of European nations, or for the supply of their colonies, ceased to exist. So it was that the more unscrupulous shipowners and masters including Americans as well as Englishmen, turned to a more lucrative source of profit – the transportation of Chinese coolies to North America, the West Indies and South America.

The Chinese had prohibited by Imperial decree their subjects from emigrating. But for "ages past Chinese had migrated for a season to the East Indies and Malaya," but this movement was voluntary – as it continued to be to the United States. However, with western shipping abundant in South China "it now enabled the teeming population to go further afield" the result was the coolie traffic.¹

The term coolie belonged to the tribe living near the Gulf of Cutch in Africa – but as applied to the trade, it was merely a European title for the lowest class of laborers in most Eastern countries. There seems to be no connection between the two names.²

There was a great demand for labor in Peru, Panama, Chile, Demarara, Cuba and other West Indian islands, and to a less extent California and Australia. In Peru, the Chinese were used to work the mines, the haciendas or plantations, factories, homes, railroads, and the guano beds. The worst place in South America were the Chinchas – the islands of Hell – a group of islands off the Peruvian coast, about a hundred miles south of Callao. The attraction

was guano a fertilizer which the Peruvians mined with the aid of coolie labor. These laborers were "doomed to work in yellow dust" and were always breathing the "ammonia fumes," and often bled from the nose or ears "because of the strength of the inhalation." The only thing that afforded the laborer protection were simple handkerchiefs which "they tied around their mouths to keep from choking."2

The "emigration" to Peru fell into two periods. The first existed from 1845 to 1856 and during that time several thousand Chinese laborers were shipped to the country. There were many critics of the importation of coolies and the Peruvian government finally prohibited the further importation of Asiatics on March 6, 1856.3 This decree did not entirely stop the flow of coolies into Peru as a considerable number of "Chinese continued to be brought in, though much fewer than prior to the abrogation of 1856."4

However vested interests, who advocated more importation, won the day when on March 1, 1856 a new law was promulgated in which more coolies were authorized to be imported. Thus began the second phase which saw a "greater number of coolies brought to Peru ... than in the earlier period of importation."5 It has been estimated that from 1849 to 1874 between 80,000 and 100,000 Chinese arrived in Peru and less than one-third lived out their term of service.6

In the West Indies the coolies were used in the cultivation of sugar.7 Most of the laborers came from South China and were supposed to be under contract for service for a number of years, but actually it was virtual slavery. This flourishing business began on the South China coast in the middle 1840's at Amoy and later developed at Swatow.8 By 1860 the best area for this trade was the Portuguese Island of Macao.9 Chinese in large numbers were kidnapped from their homes by procurers or crimps who were native Chinese, the agents

1 Guano were deposits of bird manure that were found on the islands along the coast of Peru. In the 1840's it was discovered that guano was of great value as fertilizer. See Dana G. Munro, The Latin American Republics: A History. New York: 1960, pp. 254-57.
3 Stewart, Chinese Bondage in Peru, p. 21.
4 Ibid., p. 23.
5 Ibid., p. 30.
7 John W. Foster, American Diplomacy in the Orient. Boston, 1903, p. 275. (Hereafter cited as Foster, American Diplomacy).
9 S. Wells Williams, The Middle Kingdom (2 vols.), II. New York; 1907, p. 662. (Hereafter cited as Williams, The Middle Kingdom).