

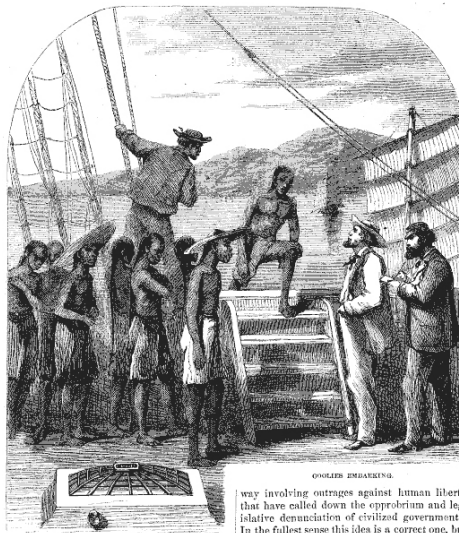
# *The Chinese Commission to Cuba (1874): Reexamining International Relations in the Nineteenth Century from a Transcultural Perspective*

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A CHAPTER ON THE COOLIE TRADE.



IN view of one of the greatest problems of the age—the finding an efficient substitute for slave labour—a very brief account of the great experiment termed the “Coolie Trade” may be interesting, in connection with that of the mutiny which forms the chief subject of the present article. Almost every one has imbibed the indefinite idea of it as a gigantic wrong, in some

way involving outrages against human liberty that have called down the opprobrium and legislative denunciation of civilized governments. In the fullest sense this idea is a correct one, but it does not cover the whole truth.

Gigantic outrages have been enacted; but more than this, an old form of slavery has been instituted under a new name, and many a deluded Coolie is to-day under a more hopeless and terrible bondage than the African from the Gaboon. The plans for substituting a temporary for a life-long servitude have been as varied as the minds of men, and as ancient as the Prole-

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1864, by Harper and Brothers, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York.  
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**Fig. 1:** Cover page of Harper's New Monthly Magazine, June 1864, Vol. 29. (Cornell University Library)



As the abolitionist movement gained momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century, agricultural producers in Cuba and South America urgently began looking for substitutes for their African slaves. The result was a massive growth in the “coolie trade”—the trafficking of laborers known as coolies—from China to plantations overseas.<sup>1</sup> On paper, the indentured workers were abroad legally and voluntarily and were given regular salaries, certain benefits, as well as various legal rights not granted to slaves. In practice, however, coolies were often kidnapped before departure and abused upon arrival. Their relatively low wages and theoretically legal status attracted employers in agricultural production around the world. Virtually all the European colonies employed coolies; from the Spanish sugar plantations in Cuba to the German coconut fields in Samoa, coolies were a critical source of labor. For the trade in coolies between China and Latin America, a handful of Spanish conglomerates, such as La Zulueta y Compañía and La Alianza, held the monopoly. Assisted by Spanish diplomatic outposts, these conglomerates established coolie stations along the south Chinese coast to facilitate the transportation of laborers. Their branches across the globe handled the logistics, marketing, and finances of the trade. The substantial profits accrued from the high demand for labor encouraged the gradual expansion of the trade after 1847, with the highest number of coolies being shipped to Cuba and Peru in the 1860s and 1870s. By 1874, over 260,000 indentured Chinese workers had embarked for the ports of Havana (140,000+)<sup>2</sup> and Lima (120,000+)<sup>3</sup>, and in due course these workers had an enormous impact on global agricultural production.<sup>4</sup>

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The approach pursued in this study has greatly benefitted from the debates on transcultural interaction in the Cluster “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” at Heidelberg University as well as from the advice and support of Rudolf Wagner, Hans van de Ven, Gabriela Ramos, Andrea Hacker, Antje Fluechter, Frank Gruener and Martin Dusingberre, as well as valuable comments by two anonymous readers. All remaining errors are mine.

1 In addition to the coolies from China, a significant number of coolies also came from India and from various islands in the Pacific. For the purposes of this paper, however, the term “coolie” refers to the Chinese laborers, as they represented the overwhelming majority of human “products” that were being sent to Cuba and South America in the nineteenth century.

2 Juan Perez de la Riva, “Demografía de los culies chinos en Cuba (1853-1874),” *El barracón y otros ensayos* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales), 471.

3 Arnold Meagher, *The Coolie Trade: The Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America, 1847-1874* (Bloomington: Xlibris), 222.

4 This impact was not merely a substantial growth of the agricultural production (sugar, above all) in Latin America, but also the transition of the production mode from a manual-based agriculture to the much more efficient, machine-based production. See Mary Turner, “Chinese Contract Labour in Cuba, 1847–1874,” *Caribbean Studies* 14 (July 1974): 66–81; Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940) (Madrid: Cátedra, 2002); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

The lucrative coolie trade between China and Latin America came to an abrupt end in the 1870s after allegations of abuse in the international press were subsequently confirmed by Western diplomats.<sup>5</sup> A series of diplomatic struggles ensued between the Qing Dynasty and the Spanish Crown over the treatment of the coolies. Five nations— England, Russia, France, Germany, and the United States—mediated between the two, but ultimately, they supported the Chinese case. These diplomatic disagreements resulted in the dispatch of a Qing delegation to Cuba to investigate the allegations of mistreatment. Its final report described the appalling working conditions of the Chinese coolies in the Spanish possessions. After the report was made public, resistance to the trade grew in Southern China, and the Spanish government was forced to end the trade in laborers between China and Latin America before both governments had even signed a final written agreement banning it.

The Qing delegation to Cuba, which ultimately brought down the global coolie network between China and the Spanish-speaking world, was covered extensively by the Chinese and international press throughout much of the 1870s.<sup>6</sup> Information about the creation of the Commission, its journey, and the final report appeared in newspapers across the globe. As was already evident in contemporary assessments, the delegation's journey was of historic significance, and many predicted it would have a huge impact on the Sino-Spanish coolie trade and on international agricultural production. Moreover, unlike repeated Chinese defeats at the hands of foreign powers, the Commission represented one of the few instances in the nineteenth century when the Qing Dynasty scored a diplomatic victory against a European nation. Yet, despite its great historical significance, rather surprisingly, the Chinese Commission to Cuba has not been thoroughly examined by historians; as a consequence, the general public remains relatively unaware of the Commission and its significance.<sup>7</sup> For the same historical period, historians of Sino-foreign

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5 Most of the Chinese coolies were sent to Cuba and Peru. The coolie trade to these two locations was stopped in 1874. The Qing government signed a separate agreement with Peru for another investigation to take place in Peru. See "The Treaty between China and Peru," *North China Herald*, August 8, 1874.

6 The Chinese press in this paper refers to the newspapers printed in China at the time, including both Chinese-language and English-language periodicals. In the 1870s major papers published in China included the Chinese-language *Shenbao* 申報 (1872–1949), the *Wanguo Gongbao* 萬國公報 (1868–1907), and the English-language *North China Herald* (1850–1951) in Shanghai, and the *Xunhuan Ribao* 循環日報 (1874–1947), as well as the *China Mail* (1845–1974) in Hong Kong. For further discussions on newspapers and public sphere in China during this period, read Rudolf Wagner, ed., *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). For a specific study on the *Shenbao*, see Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

7 In addition to the negative responses gleaned from casual discussions with my Chinese acquaintances, my review of a few Chinese textbooks found no mention of the Commission or of the 1877 treaty between Spain and China.

relations have instead focused their attention on the Treaty of Nanking (1842), the Treaty of Tientsin (1858), and the Convention of Peking (1860). It is therefore worth asking why this extraordinary Chinese Commission to Cuba and the resulting Sino–Spanish treaty of 1877 have been largely ignored by scholarship as well as by the public. Seeking to address this lacuna in the scholarship, this paper examines the origin of the Commission, its investigation, and the consequences of its findings. Furthermore, in view of the primary sources that have been made public in Spanish and Chinese archives during the last decades, the history of the Commission suggests that a basic reexamination of Sino–foreign relations in the nineteenth century is called for. Of no less importance, the apparent exclusion of the Commission in the historiography of the period is indicative of the processes of reconstruction of public memory in China today.<sup>8</sup>

### From conventional to transcultural historiography

Although the Chinese Commission to Cuba is rarely the subject of specialized examination, it does belong to the larger history of coolies,<sup>9</sup> which is an integral part of the historiography of the Qing dynasty and of Sino-foreign relations. Despite some fundamental differences of opinion, many Chinese and Western historians have agreed on a number of operational assumptions concerning

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8 Scholarly literature that touches upon the Chinese Commission to Cuba has largely utilized a similar corpus of primary sources. From the Chinese perspective, the coolie history has been written on the basis of *Chinese Emigration: Report of the Commission Sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba* (Shanghai: Imperial Maritime Customs Press, 1876, <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/44812135> [Accessed 24.11.2014]), and the coolie petitions, dispositions, and letters reproduced in Chen Hansheng 陳翰笙 ed., 華工出國史料彙編 [Collection of Historical Materials on Overseas Chinese Laborers] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985). From the Western perspective, a great deal has been written based on the US and British diplomatic correspondence, parts of which were published in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1861-) (hereafter: Foreign Relations) and *British Parliamentary Papers* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968) (BPP). Little use has been made of Spanish archival materials, especially the correspondence between Madrid and its representatives in China. Autobiographical writings of the Spanish coolie trade company representatives in China also deserve further exploration in the studies of the coolie trade. These papers are located in El Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN) and El Archivo General de la Administración (AGA).

9 Critical examinations related to Chinese coolies have been written in English and Spanish. In English, see Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or Neoslavery,” *Contributions to Black Studies* 12 (1994); Robert Irick, *Ch’ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade, 1847–1878* (Taipei: Chinese Materials Center, 1982); and Arnold Meagher, “Introduction of Chinese Laborers to Latin America,” (PhD diss. UC Davis, 1975). For Chinese-language studies, see fn. 8. In Spanish, see Manuel Moreno Friginals, *El Ingenio: Complejo Económico Social Cubano del Azúcar* (Barcelona: Critica, 2001); Juan J. Pastrana, *Los Chinos en las Luchas por la Liberación Cubana, 1847–1930* (Havana: Instituto de Historia, 1963); Juan J. Pastrana, *Los Chinos en la historia de Cuba, 1847–1930* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983).

nineteenth-century Qing Dynasty and Chinese–Western diplomatic relations. For decades, historiographical approaches to the study of Sino–Western relations have seen the two “sides” as distinct monolithic entities. The Western “impact” and the corresponding Chinese “reaction” described in the scholarly literature is heavily based on this East–West dichotomy.<sup>10</sup> This causal reasoning corresponds well with arguments made in modernization theory about China’s path to the modern world. Furthermore, coolie history is widely assumed to be indicative of the last Chinese imperial dynasty’s weakness in confronting the Western powers. For instance, the Zongli Yamen—the Office of the Qing Dynasty, which was created to handle foreign affairs—is often described as inexperienced and as submitting to the wishes of the Western nations; as being a form of Chinese bureaucracy that merely received imperial orders or acted upon the direct commands of its chief, Prince Gong. Rarely have historical studies focused on the collaborations among and between the Chinese and foreign diplomats, and their collective influence on eventual Qing policies vis-à-vis Western countries.

Beyond these preconceived notions of monoliths, duality, and causality in coolie history, both Western and Chinese accounts have reconstructed the past of the coolie trade as part of the larger narrative of China’s victimization. Particularly vivid in the 1960s and 1970s, virtually all PRC publications related to the Chinese coolies have depicted the coolie trade, along with the Chinese Commission to Cuba, as further proof of Western imperialism’s impositions upon the Chinese people. The Chinese coolies, their families, and the entire nation were seen as helpless victims in Western hands, and the crimes of the coolie trade were laid at Western feet alone.<sup>11</sup> These absolute depictions of Western victimizers and Chinese victims are part of a public and academic rhetoric, albeit more subdued, that is heard in the People’s Republic of China to this day.<sup>12</sup>

10 See Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954); John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the Chinese Coast* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

11 For example, see Ding Zemi 丁則民, “Meiguo pohai Huagong shiji” 美國迫害華工史輯 [Historical Chronicle of Chinese Workers under American Oppression], *Lishi jiaoxue 歷史教學* 3 (1951): 5–8; Zhang Zhilian 張芝聯, “1904–1910 nian Nanfei Ying shu Delansiwai zhaoyong Huagong shijian de zhenxiang” 1904–1910 年南非英屬德蘭斯瓦爾招用華工事件的真相 [The Truth about the Employment of Chinese Workers in British Transvaal in South Africa, 1904–1910], *Beijing daxue xuebao 北京大學學報* 3 (1956): 77–96; Shi Jun 史軍, “Du yidian shijie shi” 讀一點世界史 [Reading Some World History], *People’s Daily*, April 9, 1972. Such portrayals continued even shortly after the Cultural Revolution, see Luo Rongqu 羅榮渠, “‘Nuli’, ‘kuli’ de xuelei shi—“奴隸”、“苦力”的血淚史—Ya Fei La bei yapo minzu de gongtong kuman 亞非拉被壓迫民族的共同苦難 [“Slaves” and “Coolies”: Sufferings Shared by the Oppressed Asian, African, and Latino Peoples], *People’s Daily*, November 13, 1977.

12 Li Nanyou 李南友, “Haiwai Huagong xuelei shi” 海外華工血淚史 [History of Blood and Tears of Overseas Chinese Workers], *People’s Daily*, November 27, 1983; also see the documentary, *Huagong juntuan 華工軍團* [Army of Chinese Laborers], 6 episodes, first broadcast in 2009 by CCTV. Directed and written by Guilin Zhang, Xiaobin Wang, Yongqing Chen, and Zhihong Ren. <http://jilu.cntv.cn/humhis/huagongjuntuan/videopage/index.shtml> [Accessed 03.12.2014].

However, some recently released sources indicate that the coolie trade was never a one-sided venture involving only the Spaniards.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, both Chinese and Spanish agents were heavily involved in creating, expanding, and maintaining the international network in human trade. This paper intends to demonstrate that the Commission to Cuba in 1874, which eventually resulted in the end of this trade, was also an outcome of a close cooperation between Chinese, Westerners in Chinese employ, and Western diplomats who were willing to work across national boundaries to achieve goals that were beyond their particular state interests. From the planning of the Commission to the execution of its duties and securing the consequences for its report, the “West” was in fact heavily involved, in most cases even on the Chinese side. The leadership of the Zongli Yamen invited participation from known and trusted foreign colleagues working in the Chinese customs; Prince Gong, the chief of the Zongli Yamen, knew full well that the complicated diplomatic encounters between China and Spain which resulted from the allegations of coolie abuse could be best resolved with assistance from a team of Westerners such as Robert Hart, A. MacPherson,<sup>14</sup> and Alfred Huber, all of whom worked in the Chinese customs. In this respect, the state and the institutions of state in the late Qing period merit further examination since the national labels, categories, and boundaries that have until now framed their analysis appear to be at odds with the historical record.

### **The Spanish coolie trade and the creation of the Chinese Commission**

Although Chinese laborers had been going abroad to work since the eighteenth century,<sup>15</sup> the institutional structure and global organization of the coolie trade first materialized in the 1840s. Taking advantage of the newly signed Treaty of Nanking, British firms such as Tait & Co. and Syme, Muir & Co. dominated the human trade between China and the British possessions abroad in the 1840s and early 1850s. Coolie stations were established along the Chinese coasts, but coolie recruitment was largely delegated to local Chinese crimps. When the British Parliament passed legislation against the coolie trade in 1855, the

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13 In the last decade, the reorganization of the Spanish national archives has made access to the primary sources of the coolie trade from the Spanish perspective possible. Particularly relevant is the archival material from the Ministry of Overseas Affairs (Ministerio de Ultramar), which sheds light on the four-decade-long diplomatic negotiations between Madrid and Peking over the coolie trade.

14 In all the Spanish, Chinese, and English sources, I have yet to come across the full first name of MacPherson.

15 One of the first organized Chinese mass migrations followed a Dutch initiative in the seventeenth century. See Army Vandenbosch, “A Problem in Java: The Chinese in Dutch East Indies,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 11 (November 1930): 1001.

dominant position in the trade was taken over by Spanish firms—for instance, La Zulueta y Compañía and La Alianza—whose agricultural operations in Latin America required manpower far beyond what the African slave trade could provide, even if it had not been hampered by the British navy's efforts to cut off the supply lines. The sugar industry in Cuba and guano fertilizer excavation in Peru were labor-intensive businesses, and their continuation and expansion was seriously threatened by a lack of workers. Thus, in the entire two hundred year-history of the international coolie trade it was during the 1860s and 1870s that these Spanish companies imported the largest number of laborers.

Growing in tandem with this huge importation of Chinese indentured laborers, were voices opposing the coolie trade. From coolie recruitment and treatment onboard transport ships to working conditions in Latin America, local Chinese officials, Western diplomats, and newspapers inside and outside of China made their objections known. Of particular concern were Sino-Spanish recruitment practices, which were seen as the most barbarous offense, since the majority of coolies were lured to Latin America under false pretenses. In the early 1850s, as many coolies later testified to the Commission, many Chinese in Southern China were aware of the cooperation that existed between the Spanish agents and their Chinese counterparts:

Spanish vessels come to China, and suborning the vicious [sic] of our countrymen, by their aid carry away full cargoes of men, of whom 8 or 9 of every 10 are decoyed.<sup>16</sup>

The kidnapping and luring of Chinese males into the barracoons or onto coolie ships caused widespread turmoil in various places in Southern China, particularly near the ports opened for foreign residence and foreign trade through the 1842 Treaty of Nanking. Local petitions asked for help from the public, and printed reports in newspapers described the disappearance of Chinese men and the subsequent destruction of families.<sup>17</sup> Equally important to the local officials who took up the matter was the fact that the economies in these regions suffered as a result of the coolie trade. In 1860, for example, Lao Chongguang 勞崇光 (1802–1867), Viceroy of Liangguang, staged a raid on a Spanish ship in Canton, from which more than one hundred chained Chinese coolies were rescued.<sup>18</sup> By then, most British firms had already been prompted to withdraw from the coolie trade, and British diplomats now pressured

16 *Cuba Commission Report*, 7.

17 Wu Jianxiong 吳劍雄, *Shijiu shiji qianwang Guba de Hua gong* 十九世紀前往古巴的華工 1847–1874 [Chinese Laborers Heading to Cuba During the Nineteenth Century] (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1988), 9.

18 *British Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 4: 202–203.



the Qing government to ban the trade with Spain, citing unrest in Southern China.<sup>19</sup> Among the most vocal diplomats campaigning against Spanish coolie trade was Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897), the British minister to China from 1865 to 1869. During his tenure in Peking, the British government signed the Emigration Convention of Peking (1860), which provided safeguards for the well-being of Chinese coolies contracted by British firms.<sup>20</sup>

The US envoys in Peking were equally adamant in their resistance to the coolie trade. Many based their arguments on humanitarian grounds. One representative, Peter Parker (1804-1888), who had been an ordained Presbyterian minister and medical doctor in China before beginning a diplomatic career, reiterated that the trade should be banned primarily on humanitarian and religious grounds. During his tenure as the American minister to China between 1855 and 1857, Parker was confronted with repeated reports about this human trafficking, much of it involving American ships. In 1856, he publicly denounced the coolie trade, appealing to all Americans in China not to be part of it. Labeling it as “irregular and immoral traffic,” Parker argued that this inhumane business would eventually damage the relationship between China and the United States altogether. He found further support in the rhetoric of the growing American abolitionist movement. For him, features of the coolie trade “strongly resembled those of the African slave trade in former years... exceeding the horrors of the ‘middle passage.’”<sup>21</sup> Parker also raised concerns about the treatment of the coolies in Cuba and Peru to his colleagues from the Zongli Yamen.

However, it would be naive to argue that these anti-coolie trade sentiments were solely grounded in humanitarian concerns. Economic and pragmatic considerations also played an important role in driving the opposition against the Sino-Spanish coolie trade. Some American diplomats, such as Humphrey Marshall, argued that it was in American economic interests to stop the Chinese coolie trade immediately. Marshall, the first US Commissioner to China, explained that American agricultural production, particularly in the South, would be threatened by Latin American competitors who were continually employing “cheap Chinese labor.”<sup>22</sup> Himself a planter from Kentucky, Marshall wrote to the Secretary of State in 1853 with an estimate that each Chinese coolie cost eighty dollars per annum to employ, “far below the cost of slave labor, independent of the risk which the planter runs in his original

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19 Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 21.

20 After the signing of the convention, the costs of coolie procurement became so high that many British planters decided to stop importing more Chinese coolies. See Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*, 249.

21 “Public Notification of Peter Parker,” January 10, 1856. *Parker Correspondence*, 625–626.

22 *House Executive Document* 123, 33<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 78–85, 104–107, 116–121.



investment.” In addition, Marshall argued that the Chinese were “patient of labor, tractable, obedient as slaves,... [and] will compel from the earth the maximum production.”<sup>23</sup> In his conclusion, he claimed that the coolie trade, if allowed to continue, would challenge American political and economic power; he thus recommended that the president promote policies that would ban the involvement of American ships in the coolie trade.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these humanitarian and economic motives, the US diplomatic corps in Peking was also concerned that the coolie question would affect overall Sino-Western relations and, perhaps more importantly, damage the Westerner’s image in China. Benjamin Parke Avery (1828-1875), Chief American Envoy to the Qing Empire between 1874 and 1875, summarized it succinctly:

Apart from the motives of humanity, growing out of our desire to ameliorate the condition of the Chinese now in Cuba and to effect a reform for the future, we feel that a failure to settle the pending dispute on a basis that will remove all causes of complaint about the treatment of Chinese by Spain would react against foreigners generally, in the estimation of the people of this empire, and by intensifying their hatred for us, lead to increased difficulties in our relations with them.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these calls to action by American and British diplomats, initial reactions from Qing officialdom were tepid throughout the 1860s.<sup>26</sup> This indifference, however, changed in the early 1870s, when Prince Gong was faced with two key incidents and realized that he needed to address the issue directly. First, the Spanish consul in 1871 requested permission to open a coolie recruitment center in Canton, which had already been approved by the local governor. In the following year, the Spanish consul once again asked the Zongli Yamen to approve his plan to open more recruitment centers across Southern China. Upon approval, a Spanish coolie agent, Francisco Abella of the Zulueta Company, petitioned the local officials in Amoy for permission to open his own recruitment center. However, Abella’s specific petition was refused by the local governor because of abuse allegations against the Zulueta

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23 Ibid., 78–82.

24 Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 19.

25 Avery to Fish, No. 168, *Foreign Relations*, July 7, 1875.

26 In fact, this was the observation made by both the American and Spanish envoys in Peking at that time. See Williams to Fish, No. 134, *Foreign Relations*, November 6, 1873; AHN, Ultramar, 5198, Exp. 6.

Company that had surfaced in the press. The Spanish minister then demanded that Abella be reimbursed the sum of \$300,000 for his loss. The Zongli Yamen refused, but the Spanish diplomats continued to exert pressure.<sup>27</sup>

At around the same time, the already abysmal conditions among Chinese coolies became so serious that the coolies themselves appealed to the American consul in Lima for help; he in turn forwarded their petitions to the US State Department, where they were turned over to Samuel Wells Williams. Williams then presented the actual petitions written in Chinese by the coolies to the Zongli Yamen. These petitions described the oppressive circumstances under which the coolies were working and living every day, and the coolies themselves asked the emperor to do whatever was possible to save them from their misery. As Williams added,

The condition of these laborers is very lamentable. Far off in a distant land, they have met this suffering and misery, and they are like birds in a cage out of which there is no escape... [I would suggest] that you may devise deliverance and succor.<sup>28</sup>

Although it was not exactly a requirement of his position, and he was certainly under no obligation to do so, Williams urged the staff of the Zongli Yamen to demonstrate that the emperor was not altogether overlooking the petitions of his people in Peru. He further suggested that, before the Qing government could send its own envoy to Peru to protect its citizens, the American ambassador in Lima might be able to help on behalf of the Chinese officials. But Williams also pointed out that although the American diplomats could help, the Zongli Yamen had to first ask the US president for this courtesy directly.<sup>29</sup> At first, the reaction was subdued. As Williams recalled,

These officials expressed their sympathy with their suffering countrymen, regretted that they should have been inveigled into such a miserable, cruel, servitude, and hoped that the evils would soon be mitigated, but they had no vivid sense of their own responsibilities in the matter, and made no inquires as to the most desirable means of doing anything.

Soon afterwards, however, Williams received a much more positive response directly from Prince Gong, who signaled his awareness of the matter and indicated that he would deliberate as to what solutions were at his disposal.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Prince

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27 Irick, *Ch'ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade*, 249–250.

28 Prince Gong to Williams, No. 37b, *Foreign Relations*, July 17, 1871.

29 Williams to Fish, No. 37, *Foreign Relations*, July 26, 1871.

30 Prince Gong to Williams, No. 37b, *Foreign Relations*, July 17, 1871.

Gong had already decided to act. He first contacted most of the foreign envoys in Peking to corroborate the allegations of coolie abuses in Latin America. The envoys for Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States all received a letter from Prince Gong asking their opinion on the Sino–Spanish coolie trade, inquiring into the allegations, and seeking suitable suggestions for resolving the problem. But no one would confirm the allegations on the record, and Francisco Otín, the Spanish Chargé d'Affaires to China, even vehemently denied them.<sup>31</sup> Some diplomats said that evidence was the key to determining what course of action the Qing government should take. Mr. Fergusvan, the Dutch Minister in China, expressed that

every country has the right to see that its subjects who emigrate to other lands are well treated there; and if China has undoubted proof that the laborers who have gone abroad have been cruelly treated, no matter in what country, she has the right to inform the high officials of that country that Chinese coolies can no longer be allowed to go there.<sup>32</sup>

Several foreign diplomats as well as foreigners working for the Chinese Maritime Customs Service urged Prince Gong in one way or another to send a delegation to Cuba to investigate the abuse allegations. After listening to these opinions, Prince Gong finally asked Emperor Tongzhi in 1873 for approval to send an investigative team to Havana. In his memorial to the emperor, Prince Gong specifically mentioned the advice given by Robert Hart, the Inspector-General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Custom Service,<sup>33</sup> to create a team of suitable experts for this purpose. Significantly, it was also Hart, who prepared a standard questionnaire with fifty-one items for the Commission to follow.<sup>34</sup> True to Hart's academic training in Belfast, which had included legal and humanist studies,<sup>35</sup> his instructions to the Commission presented a specific, systematic set of questions that was intended to elicit facts as well as personal experiences. The answers to these and other inquiries ultimately formed the basis on which the Qing government acted to put an end to the Spanish coolie business.

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31 AHN, Ultramar, 5194, Exp. 39.

32 Avery to Fish, No. 151, *Foreign Relations*, March 31, 1875.

33 *Chouban yiwu shimo* 籌辦夷務始末 [The Management of Barbarian Affairs in its Entirety], Vol. 91, 27–29.

34 Avery to Fish, No. 151, *Foreign Relations*, March 31, 1875.

35 Quite different from today's college major selections, Hart's undergraduate degree at Queen's University in Belfast followed a liberal arts program in which he studied a wide variety of subjects such as languages, history, and philosophy. Importantly, his program included a year-long legal training before he graduated in 1853. See Queen's *College Calendar of 1853*, located at the Special Collections at the Queen's University of Belfast, which indicates Hart's graduation and academic program.

Hart was anything but a narrow-minded customs bureaucrat. He appears to have had a personal interest in the success of the Commission as well as in making sure that the public knew of its work. In addition to developing the questions to elicit information from the coolies, Hart used the newspapers in China and abroad to promote the agenda of the upcoming Commission. Familiar with the power of the press in the West, he contacted all major newspapers in Shanghai, urging the editors to print news concerning the Commission to Cuba.<sup>36</sup> He must have been pleased to see that many newspapers in China frequently published reports about the Commission and the coolie situation in Latin America. Even before its start, the Commission received wide coverage in the Chinese and foreign press.<sup>37</sup> National newspapers, such as the *New York Times* in the United States, the *Shenbao* in China, *el Diario de la Marina* in Cuba, and the *Times* in the United Kingdom, all frequently reported on the Imperial Commission. Some of these Chinese and foreign newspapers would later receive materials concerning the Commission's findings from Robert Hart directly.<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the Commission and details about its members<sup>39</sup> the complaints of the coolie "slaves,"<sup>40</sup> and finally the Commission's activities in Cuba,<sup>41</sup> all were subject of detailed reports in the newspapers. The English-language newspapers in particular, many of which had connections to Hart, provided extensive coverage on the team members, particularly on Chen Lanbin 陳蘭彬 (1816–1895), the chief commissioner.<sup>42</sup>

### The members of the Chinese Commission to Cuba

In the minds of Prince Gong and Robert Hart, the Commission (see Table 1) had to be international in nature. Prince Gong first selected Chen, who at that time was the Chief Officer of the Chinese Educational Mission in

36 Hart to Campbell, No. 149, *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, 1868–1907* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), April 21, 1876.

37 For reports prior to the return of Cuba Commission, see *North China Herald*, October 4, 1873 (vol. 28, issue 0335), February 12, 1874 (vol. 29, issue 0354), May 2, 1874 (vol. 29, issue 0365).

38 Hart to Campbell, No. 149, *Letters of Robert Hart*, April 21, 1876. In this letter, Hart gives instructions to his associate to whom the materials should be delivered.

39 "Arrival of Chinese Commissioners," *New York Times*, February 20, 1874.

40 "Cuba: The Chinese Commission—Slaveholder's Alarms," *New York Times*, February 21, 1874.

41 "Zhongguo pai shichen fu Guba guo" 中國派使臣赴古巴國 [China Sends Special Envoy to Cuba], *Shenbao*, October 10, 1873.

42 For coverage on Chen Lanbin see, for example, *China Mail*, December 18, 1873, and *North China Herald*, December 25, 1873. Various transliterations of Chen's name appear in contemporary English and Spanish publications: They include "Chin Lan Pin," "Chin Len Pin," and "Chan Lan-pin."



**Fig. 2:** Chen Lanbin 陳蘭彬 (1816–1895), Chief Commissioner of the Cuba Commission. (Wikimedia Commons)

the United States, where he managed the educational program for a select group of Chinese schoolboys in Hanover, New Jersey. The choice of Chen to head the Commission seemed advantageous. First, he was one of the very few Chinese officials who had diplomatic experience abroad. Moreover, Chen came from Guangdong Province, where most coolies originated, and could communicate with them in their local languages and dialects.<sup>43</sup> On the advice of Hart, Prince Gong nominated A. MacPherson, a British national, and Alfred Huber, a French national, as the other two commissioners. Both had been working under Hart in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service for years. At the time of their nominations to the Cuba Commission, MacPherson was the Commissioner of Customs at Hankou, and Huber held the same

43 Williams to Fish, No. 134, *Foreign Relations*, November 6, 1873.

position in Tianjin. Both were able to read and speak Chinese fluently<sup>44</sup> and were well known in the foreign community in China.<sup>45</sup> Prince Gong's selection of these three individuals was not arbitrary or without purpose. In his memorial to the emperor in June 1873, he indicated that foreign nationals were included in the planned Commission with two specific goals in mind. First, the Commission, especially through the presence of MacPherson and Huber, should be familiar with Cuba and the Cuban people [不至有人地生疏之慮]; and second, in order to preempt Spanish complaints of partiality, an international delegation would provide unbiased observers whose final assessments would win approval from other nations [足以關日國之口而服各國之心].<sup>46</sup>

On September 21, 1873, imperial approval for the delegation was granted, and Prince Gong announced the establishment of the Cuba Commission with a core membership made up of Chen, MacPherson, and Huber. The appointment of the rest of the delegation was left up to Chen, who received this news while stationed in Hartford, Connecticut. Having worked in a diplomatic and educational capacity for some years, Chen already had staff in the United States upon whom he could rely. His deputy in Washington was Yung Wing 容闈, the first Chinese graduate of an American University.<sup>47</sup> Yung Wing recruited two Americans to the Commission, Luther Northrop, who in New Haven had played host to two boys from the China Educational Mission, and Henry Terry, both of whom had legal knowledge and knew Spanish. Chen's confidant in the United States, Zeng Laishun 曾蘭生, a Singaporean with Chinese heritage, went to Havana to prepare for the Commission's upcoming trip.<sup>48</sup> In February and March 1874, Chen, MacPherson, and Huber traveled separately from Washington D.C., Hankou, and Tianjin to Havana, where they began a two-month investigation into the allegations of abuse of Chinese coolies.

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44 Ibid.

45 MacPherson apparently enjoyed a good relationship with the American legation in Peking. Samuel Wells Williams, the American chargé d'affaires in Peking at that time, directly provided MacPherson with a copy of the decree of O'Donnell in 1860, and the recent law of Valmaseda, ordering the reengagement of coolies in the United States. See Williams to Fish, No. 134, Foreign Relations, November 6, 1873.

46 *Chouban yiwu shimo*, Vol. 91, 29. “日國” denotes Spain.

47 Yung Wing (1828–1912), graduated from Yale University in 1854. While Chen and his international team were travelling to Cuba, Yung was accompanied by two Americans who were heading to Peru for another investigation of the working conditions for coolies there.

48 Edward J.M. Rhoads, “In the Shadow of Yung Wing: Zeng Laishun and the Chinese Education Mission to the United States,” *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (2005): 19–58.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position in Delegation</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Position Outside Delegation</b>
Chen Lanbin 陳蘭彬	Chief Commissioner	Chinese	Chief Officer of the Chinese Educational Mission in the US
A. MacPherson 馬福臣	Commissioner	British	Commissioner of Customs at Hankou, China
Alfred Huber 吳秉文	Commissioner	French	Commissioner of Customs at Tianjin, China
Luther H. Northrop <sup>49</sup>	Translator	American	Interpreter of Spanish, West Haven, Conn., US
Henry T. Terry <sup>50</sup>	Member	American	Attorney, Hartford, Connecticut, US
Ye Yuanjun 葉源濬	Member	Chinese	Chinese language instructor, Hartford, Connecticut, US
Chen Lun 陳論	Member	Chinese	Student, Hartford, Connecticut, US
Zeng Laishun 曾蘭生	Member (arrived in Cuba before the Commission to make preparations)	Singaporean Chinese with Malaysian descent	Translator, affiliated with the Chinese Educational Mission in Hartford, US.

*Table 1: Membership of the Chinese Commission to Cuba.*<sup>51</sup>

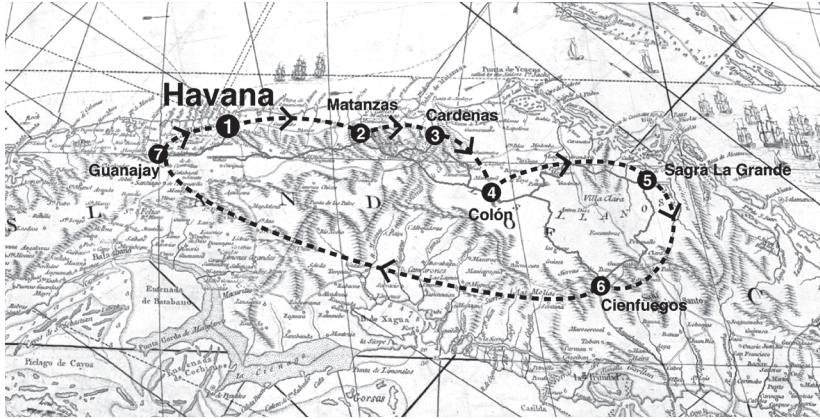
<sup>49</sup> *El Diario de la Marina*, March 18, 1874; "Arrival of Chinese Commissioners," *New York Times*, February 20, 1874.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> The exact roster of the Commission is not clear. While the listed members had participated in the Commission's activities in Cuba, there were probably more assistants (Chinese or otherwise) accompanying the Commission. One Cuban newspaper reported that the Commission had ten assistants. See *El Diario de la Marina*, April 10, 1874.



### Journey and investigation of the delegation in Cuba



*Fig. 3: The Commission's Journey in Cuba. Map: Detail from Thomas Jeffreys, The Island of Cuba with part of the Bahama Banks & the Martyrs, 1775. (David Rumsey Map Collection)*

On March 17, 1874, the full Commission convened in Havana, where they first met with the Spanish Governor General in Cuba. Immediately afterward, they paid visits to all Western diplomats in Cuba to consult with them concerning their investigation.<sup>52</sup> Consular representatives from Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Portugal were all informed of the Commission's purposes in Cuba.<sup>53</sup> While the conflict was strictly between China and Spain, this important move to involve all the Western powers most likely came from discussions between Commission members Chen, Huber, and MacPherson, as well as others. Among these meetings, of particular importance was the discussion between the Commission and José Maria de Eça de Queiroz, the Portuguese consul in Cuba and a known opponent of the introduction of coolies. To Chen Lanbin, the Portuguese consul gave a detailed depiction of maltreatments suffered by Chinese coolies in Cuba, expressing his special concerns about the unethical practice of re-contracting, which was employed by the Spanish planters after the end of the original term of eight years.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Cuba Commission Report*, 2–4. This route of the Commission in Cuba is an approximate drawing, according to the descriptions stated in the *Cuba Commission Report*. The Commission visited numerous plantations in all key agricultural sites, where coolies were heavily populated.

<sup>53</sup> *Cuba Commission Report*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> The Portuguese diplomat remained outspoken on the coolie trade, despite repeated attempts by the planters to buy his silence in front of the delegation. See Eduardo Marrero Cruz, *Julían de Zulueta y Amondo: Promotor del Capitalismo en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 2006), 76.

After meeting with foreign diplomats in Havana, the Commission began interviewing Chinese coolies in same city over a period of nineteen days. To form a deeper understanding of the coolies' living situation, it spent five days in Matanzas, three in Cardenas, three in Colon, three in Sagua, four in Cienfuegos, four in Guanajay, and one in Guanabacoa. The Commission completed a trip through the most important sugar-producing cities of Cuba, where they were able to see, talk with, and observe the Chinese coolies firsthand, in plantations, warehouses, refineries, and prisons.<sup>55</sup> Chen and the others also discussed matters with the local Spanish sugar planters and with Julián de Zulueta, the most important oligarch in Cuba and owner of much of the Sino-Spanish coolie trade.<sup>56</sup>

While in Cuba, the Commission strictly complied with diplomatic protocol. During its investigations, local Spanish officials determined all the hours of visiting the warehouses and prisons. Visits to the plantations would take place only after prior arrangements with business owners had been made. Thus, except for the conversations they had with coolies on the street, the results of the Commission's investigation were no surprise to the Spaniards. Although the interviews were conducted in Chinese and usually led by the Imperial Commissioner, the Western members were present and understood the accounts through a translator.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the verbal accounts, the Commission members were able to see with their own eyes the wounds inflicted on the coolies. Verified by personal inspections, current and past wounds of the coolies were noted. The Commission documents included the narratives of individual coolies and the injuries allegedly inflicted upon them by their masters: the loss of ears, loss of sight, loss of fingers, loss of teeth, and so forth, as a result of beatings by their employers.<sup>58</sup> These documents—both the testimonies and the final report—were all the more telling, as the coolies talking with the Commission were facing potential retaliations from the Cuban planters.<sup>59</sup>

On May 8, 1874, the Commission concluded its investigation and left Havana. Shortly after its departure, the Spanish newspapers in Cuba summarized its journey on the island. The sugar planters appear to have had no illusions about the eventual results of the report. It would, the editorials argued, place the Cuban planters and the entire Spanish coolie trade in an unflattering light. One

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55 *Cuba Commission Report*, 3.

56 "Cuba: The New Decrees—Immigration to the United States—The Chinese Commission," *New York Times*, May 14, 1874.

57 *Cuba Commission Report*, 4.

58 *Cuba Commission Report*, 39.

59 Yun, *The Coolie Speaks*, 45-48.

Cuban newspaper, *El León Español*, succinctly described local sentiments shortly after the Commission had departed from Havana:

Neither is it probable that the visit of the commissioner Mr. Chan Lan Pin will stop producing its impacts nor was it done for the fun of making the trip. And, frankly speaking, since his upcoming reports to his country must be unfavorable to us, one should believe, without venturing much, that the arrival of the Asian colonists, as has been verified until today, will either stop completely or be significantly restricted.<sup>60</sup>

The editorial was correct. The written and oral testimonies from the Chinese coolies collected by the Commission constituted a scathing indictment of the Cuban sugar planters and the Spanish authorities on the island. Based on 1,176 individual testimonies made by the coolies, the Commission argued that the employment contracts were virtually meaningless because neither the Spanish authorities nor the Cuban business owners complied with the terms allegedly agreed upon.<sup>61</sup> Almost 90 percent of the Chinese coolies testified that they had been sent to Cuba without their consent. Additionally, upon termination of the contract, the coolies were not freed or provided a means of returning to China; instead, they were held with the assistance of the local Spanish authorities and continued to work in Cuba. Without hope of ever returning to China or gaining their freedom in Cuba, many coolies committed suicide. As a result of these circumstances, less than 2 percent of all Chinese coolies ever saw their homes in China again.<sup>62</sup> With their stacks of documents, the Commission headed back to Washington D.C. to compile and translate its final report.

Chen returned to Peking in late 1874, armed with the final written reports regarding the allegations of coolie abuse.<sup>63</sup> After much discussion within the Zongli Yamen, contacts were resumed between the Chinese foreign office

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60 *El León Español*, May 17, 1874. “[...] la visita del comisionado Sr. Chin Lan Pin, ni es probable que deje de producir sus efectos ni que se haya hecho por ganas de pasear; y como, hablando con franqueza, sus informes al llegar a su país deben sernos poco favorables, se puede creer, sin tener que aventurarse mucho, quela venida de colonos asiáticos como se ha verificado hasta el día, o cesará del todo o se restringirá notablemente.” As cited in José Luis Luzón, “Chineros, diplomáticos y hacendados en La Habana colonial: Don Francisco Abellá y Raldiris y su proyecto de inmigración libre a Cuba (1874),” *Boletín americanista*, N°. 39-40 (1989), 148. My translation.

61 *Cuba Commission Report*, 3.

62 Evelyn Hu-Dehart, “Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century,” *Contributions in Black Studies* 12 (1994): 3; *Cuba Commission Report*, 150–151.

63 It is unclear if MacPherson and Huber returned to China before Chen did. Archival documents only indicate that Chen went back to China with Ye, who was also a member of the Commission. See Irick, *Ch'ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade*, 301. In any case, the final Commission Report and their translated copies, which are dated to October 20, 1874, were signed by all three commissioners.

and Western diplomats in Peking in February 1875.<sup>64</sup> Prince Gong sent a package of materials to the Spanish envoy, the diplomats of the Five Powers and—deliberately violating his original agreement with the Spaniards—to representatives of other Western powers. In the package the Zongli Yamen staff included the damning report about the Spanish coolie trade written by Chen, MacPherson, and Huber, along with a significant number of coolie testimonies.



Fig. 4: Editorial condemning the coolie trade, Shenbao, March 17, 1875. (Library of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Heidelberg)

Not only did the Zongli Yamen send the materials to the diplomats in Peking but the Chinese diplomatic staff also forwarded the Commission report, which included a Chinese version besides English and French, to many officials

64 Avery to Fish, No. 151, Foreign Relations, March 31, 1875.

throughout the country. This act, coupled with the efforts of Robert Hart to alert the media about the report, spread the news about coolie abuses to all the major Chinese cities, where newspapers reprinted the key findings of the report and added editorial commentaries.<sup>65</sup> Shortly thereafter, the international press also reacted to the Commission's report with extensive coverage.<sup>66</sup>

### Consequences and aftermath

Francisco Otín, the Spanish envoy in Peking, visited the Zongli Yamen in March 1875 and registered three separate official protests. First, he complained that an American jurist had been added to the team (since Terry had not been included in the original list). Second, he criticized the absence of Chen, MacPherson, and Huber in Peking for cross-examination by the Spanish legation and demanded their presence. And third, he insisted that the definitive final report should be written in both English and Spanish instead of Chinese because the Spanish representatives did not read Chinese.<sup>67</sup> He further added that the Zongli Yamen should not have sent the report to all the embassies in Peking.<sup>68</sup> A rumor also began circulating that Spain was getting ready to take military action against China and would particularly target Taiwan.<sup>69</sup> Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, the senior statesman in Peking, and Ding Zhenduo 丁振鐸, the Viceroy of Minzhe, believed that Spanish threats were just “empty words”;<sup>70</sup> nevertheless, both men began making military preparations in anticipation of a Spanish landing in Taiwan or Southern China. The Zongli Yamen, for its part, refused to accede to Spanish demands, since Prince Gong had been informed by Hart that on the coolie question China was enjoying the advantage in diplomatic circles as well as, according to assessments of the media coverage, in the eyes of the public.<sup>71</sup>

65 “Jielu Zongli Yamen chaban zhao gong chu Yang shi laiwen” 節錄總理衙門查辦招工出洋事來文 [Summary of the Zongli Yamen's Inspection on the Worker Recruitment for Overseas], *Shenbao*, March 10–16, 1875. Also “Shu shichen deng bing fu chakan Guba Hua yong qingxing bingce gong jie hou” 書使臣等稟復查勘古巴華傭情形稟冊供結後 [Conclusion of the Inspection of the Chinese Laborers in Cuba], *Shenbao*, March 17, 1875.

66 For instance, see “Suppression of the Coolie Trade,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1877 and “El fin de la colonización asiática,” *El Diario de la Marina*, January 28, 1877.

67 AHN, Ultramar, 5194, Exp. 39.

68 *Chouban yiwu shimo*, vol. 91, 27–29.

69 Irick, *Ch'ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade*, 293–294. The Spanish legation had repeatedly used military threat as a threat. See Hart to Campbell, No. 66, *Letters of Robert Hart*, October 9, 1873.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Hart to Campbell, No. 66, *Letters of Robert Hart*, October 9, 1873.

After publication of the Commission report, a number of Western diplomats wrote to their home countries reporting on the public reaction in China. Their writings suggested that the moral standing of all Westerners had suffered damage. The US Minister to China, William Evarts, to give one example, wrote to the Secretary of State,

a great deal of information in regard to the sufferings of the Chinese in Cuba has been given to this government and scattered around the empire, and the good name of all Western peoples has been more than compromised in consequence.<sup>72</sup>

After reading the report and witnessing the Chinese reaction to the matter, the members of the Western diplomatic corps in Peking seem to have distanced themselves from their Spanish colleagues. In communications to their home countries, these diplomats expressed their conviction that the report was factually correct and voiced support for the Chinese cause. The American diplomat Avery, for example, indicated that along with other Western diplomats, he would be willing to act as a mediator between China and Spain and to facilitate efforts on behalf of the Chinese to obtain redress for the abuses, protect the coolies, and stop the continuation of the Spanish coolie trade. He was certain that his colleagues in other Chinese ports would join in efforts to prevent further illicit coolie trade.<sup>73</sup>

Negotiations between China and Spain did, in fact, take place in Peking between 1875 and 1877, and were conducted under the auspices of the Big Five. Finally, on June 1, 1877, the Spanish ambassador in Peking signed a new treaty with the Qing government. It officially put an end to the Spanish coolie trade, which for all practical purposes had stopped in 1874.<sup>74</sup> In the final ratified agreement “concerning the emigration of Chinese subjects to the island of Cuba,”<sup>75</sup> Spain agreed that in the future it would not recruit coolies by force or trickery.<sup>76</sup> China was to send a permanent mission to Cuba to monitor the condition of the coolies,<sup>77</sup> while Spain was forced to pay for the return of

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72 Seward to Evarts, No. 78, *Foreign Relations*, January 10, 1878.

73 Avery to Fish, No. 151, *Foreign Relations*, March 31, 1875.

74 The details of the Sino-Spanish negotiations and diplomatic ruptures were reported by the Spanish envoy to the Ministry of Overseas Affairs in 1877. See AHN, Ultramar, 5221, Exp. 50.

75 AHN, Ultramar, 279, Exp. 4. “Convenio relativo a la emigración de súbditos chinos a la isla de Cuba.”

76 *Ibid.*, Article 1.

77 *Ibid.*, Article 2.



former coolies to China.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, all Chinese coolies still in Cuba were to be released following ratification of the treaty.<sup>79</sup> In 1879, the first permanent Chinese consulate in Havana was established, allowing Chinese officials to observe and regularly report back to Peking on the well-being of those coolies who had yet to finish their contracts into the 1880s.

### **Concluding remarks: revisiting the dichotomy in Sino-foreign relations**

This paper has discussed the Chinese Commission and its trip to Cuba in 1874, the reasons for its establishment in response to the Spanish coolie trade, the identities of its members, its investigation in Cuba and subsequent report, and the aftermath of its activities, including an eventual formal ban on Sino-Spanish human trafficking in 1877. At every step in the process, the Commission was the product of a series of interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese: The coolie trade between China and Latin America started with cooperation between Chinese crimps and Spanish agents; the decision to dispatch an investigative commission to Cuba was the result of the exchange of information and opinion involving Qing officials, Westerners in the employ of the Qing customs, and Western diplomats; although the Commission was chaired by a Chinese with overseas experience, the majority of the Commission's members were foreigners in Qing employ, and their involvement in the investigation in Cuba was critical to its ultimate success; the extensive coverage by the international press, which increased the impact of the Commission and its findings considerably, was the result of Hart's making use of his extensive contacts with the editors of Chinese and foreign language papers published in China as well as with the international press. Thus, in the end the substance of the Commission to Cuba differed markedly from a conventionally understood "Chinese" delegation. The history of Chen and his team demonstrates that none of the traditional units, such as "China," "the West," "the Zongli Yamen," "Great Britain," or the "United States" can serve as suitable explanatory tools with which to explain the motivations and actions of the individuals involved. As the work of the Commission suggests, foreigners working as Qing officials were willing to act in the Chinese interest even outside their contractual duties in the customs for the following reasons: independent of the attitude of the country of their citizenship, they agreed with the basic thrust of the Commissions' work; diplomats were willing to support a Chinese cause against one of their "Western" members because they agreed with the public opinion in their home countries that the Chinese indeed had a

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78 *Ibid.*, Article 4.

79 *Ibid.*, Article 16.



case; because the growing public Chinese clamor against the abuses threatened to endanger the standing of foreigners in China altogether; and because doing the right thing might be useful in shielding their own agriculture from the competition of cheap indentured labor. In this context the traditional units of analysis are largely meaningless. I suggest that they conceal rather than reveal the transnational nature of the process in which this Commission came about and worked, as well as the transcultural interaction in the articulation of the values that carried it to success.

On an individual level, foreign diplomats were rarely unrelenting imperialists or virtuous saviors of the Chinese coolies. Instead their actions appear to have been guided by a number of motives, including personal experiences, and were driven only partly by national interests. The private advice given by Western diplomats to Prince Gong, the mediation provided by the diplomats of the Big Five, and the consular assistance of the European representatives in Lima and Cuba were all part and parcel of the humanist beliefs and pragmatic goals of these diplomats. The line between Chinese and non-Chinese diplomats was often—if not always—contested. Robert Hart, A. MacPherson, Alfred Huber, and Samuel Wells Williams were certainly “foreign” in the sense that they held British, French, or American passports, but they also worked tirelessly for a “Chinese” cause. As the work of Prince Gong, Hart, Chen, MacPherson, Huber, and Williams illustrates, national boundaries and state affiliations in the late imperial age remained entangled constructs with changing features.

An even more problematic aspect of the traditional historiography is that it has reduced Sino–foreign interactions to a dualistic simplification of historical events like the coolie trade, which necessarily entailed a Western “impact” and a corresponding Asian “response.” Equally critical is the notion that the West and China assumed their roles as oppressors and victims, respectively. Under this East–West dichotomy, research questions such as “Why was China unprepared for Western contact?” and “How did the Western powers use diplomacy and war to gain power in China?” have surfaced; this kind of framework does not allow for analysis other than one driven by the anachronistic racial or national agendas that may have never been primary considerations for most actors.

Certainly, one can attribute the relative neglect of the Commission to Cuba in both academic circles and public debate to a number of factors. Primary materials concerning the Commission are scattered across different continents and are written in different languages. Furthermore, Spain has long been regarded as having played a largely insignificant role in the Asia–Pacific region and as being a lesser power in Europe. But the most important factor, I would argue, appears to be the incompatibility between the history of the

Commission and the master narrative of late imperial Chinese history. To be sure, the perception of a major Chinese diplomatic victory against a European power in protecting Chinese citizens abroad does not correspond well with the storyline of a victimized, weak, and helpless Qing Empire.

The study of the Commission to Cuba as an integral part of Sino–foreign relations in the nineteenth century provides a critical angle to the prevailing master narrative and offers some crucial lessons: that we not let an essentially cross-border phenomenon be falsely observed through the lens of the nation-state; that we ought to pay more attention to the ways in which Western and non-Western actors interacted in the nineteenth century, particularly in the context of Sino–foreign relations; and that racial and national labels may not always adequately explain the motivations governing the actions of people. A different approach to examining Sino–foreign relations in late imperial China might better serve us in truly understanding the period. At a time when human trafficking is still a booming business in many parts of the world, a revision of traditional, preconceived notions might provide a fuller explanation of the driving forces and operational mechanisms behind such illicit trade.