

‘Unwanted Scraps’ or ‘An Alert, Resolute, Resentful People’? Chinese Railroad Workers in French Congo

Julia Martínez

University of Wollongong, Australia

Abstract

In the late 1920s, the colonial government of French Equatorial Africa decided to employ Chinese workers to complete their railway line. The employment of Chinese indentured labor had already become the subject of considerable international criticism. The Chinese government was concerned that the French could not guarantee worker health and safety and denied their application. However, the recruitment went ahead with the help of the government of French Indochina. This article explores the nature of Chinese worker protest during their time in Africa and their struggle against French notions of what constituted appropriate treatment of so-called “coolie” labor.

On August 29, 1929, Mang-Kam, a young worker from Guangdong, was interrogated in an impromptu police court at M'Boulou in the Mayombe region of French Equatorial Africa (Afrique Equatoriale Française, or AEF). He had been in the colony just one month, working on the construction of the Congo-Océan railway line. Mang-Kam gave testimony against Gendarme Combes, who, he said, had kicked him twice after accusing him of walking too slowly to retrieve a bucket from the middle of the river. On witnessing this attack, his Chinese coworkers were outraged and had threatened to retaliate against Combes. They finally agreed to meet the next morning to discuss the incident with the camp superintendent, Captain Le Reste. However, when he questioned the men, Le Reste was more concerned with their refusal to work than with the alleged attack. Mang-Kam told Le Reste firmly, “We did not come here to be hit, but to work.” His protest and the supporting testimony of his coworkers fell on deaf ears.¹

In 1929 it was possible to imagine that the worst abuses of the “coolie” labor system were at an end; contracts of indenture no longer made provisions for corporal punishment or penal sanctions.² As Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds discuss, by the 1920s internationalists were proclaiming that the era of the coolie was over. A.J. Brown wrote in 1928: “All over Asia the time has gone when a foreigner can with impunity kick a coolie. No longer does the white man face a cringing, helpless Asia, but an alert, resolute, resentful people.”³ While this shift in European thinking was a positive step, it nevertheless reminds us that the real problem was the long-standing assumption by Europeans that Asian workers were inherently docile, even in the face of evidence to the contrary.

According to Moon-Ho Jung, the term coolie, which generally referred to Indian or Chinese laborers, had during the late nineteenth-century taken on a

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more specific connotation in the Caribbean context, denoting “the systematic shipment and employment of Asian laborers on sugar plantations formerly worked by enslaved Africans.”⁴ In 1880s’ America, the racialized figure of the Chinese coolie became a “potent symbol of chattel slavery’s enduring legacy.”⁵ Mae Ngai argues that coolieism in the United States “imagined Chinese as servile without individual personality or will.”⁶ Lisa Yun, in her work *The Coolie Speaks*, asks instead how “coolies narrate their own experiences,” using evidence from oral testimonies of Chinese workers in Cuba in 1874 as “radical critiques of the contract institution.”⁷

While most of the literature on the coolie is grounded in the specificity of the mid- to late-nineteenth century experience, there was an ongoing struggle by Chinese workers to overcome these entrenched attitudes well into the twentieth century. Tu Huynh describes how skilled Chinese workers were dismayed to find their skills ignored in the Transvaal in the early 1900s.⁸ Between 1904 and 1907, some 63,000 Chinese workers were indentured to work in South African gold mines. The working conditions were harsh, and, as Gary Kynoch has shown, Chinese miners who were disciplined with corporal punishment responded with organized protest. When their legitimate complaints were ignored, they turned to violence and riots.⁹ In this article I extend this analysis of Chinese protest. I consider how a new generation of Chinese workers expressed their discontent with the French colonial labor system and sought to push back against practices that carried the reminder of earlier abuses. The sources for my analysis are drawn from colonial documents held in the French archives in Nantes and Aix-en-Provence. These archives draw together colonial correspondence between Indochina, AEF, and Paris and represent a record of Chinese responses to their treatment as indentured laborers. Consideration of Chinese indentured labor in the French Congo is largely absent from the global literature on Chinese labor. While the scale and severity was not equal to that of the Transvaal, there were similar patterns of repression and protest. This continuity is all the more surprising given the changes in global labor practices that had occurred in the intervening decades.

Chinese Indenture in the 1920s

The historiographical debate over indentured labor has shifted in the last decade from a liberal critique of slavery and exploitation to a focus on worker agency. Yoshina Hurgobin and Subho Basu argue that workers actively sought the opportunity “to engage in transcolonial migration.”¹⁰ While there was no firm evidence to suggest that the 786 Chinese workers who embarked for the Congo in 1929 had not freely chosen this venture, we do know that the 600 men who had been recruited from Hong Kong had originally been destined to travel to British colonies in Southeast Asia. It seems reasonable to assume that Chinese workers would have preferred to travel to British North Borneo or Malaya, knowing that there they would have joined an established Chinese community with the possibility of permanent settlement.¹¹ For those

Hong Kong recruits with knowledge of English, going to work under a French administration may have been an additional disincentive. The Congo was also an unknown destination compared to Southeast Asia, meaning that even willing recruits could not have given informed consent.

The Chinese government had been acting to curtail the abuses of the coolie trade for decades. The Qing government sought to regulate labor recruitment through the 1904 Emigration Convention, while further attempts were made to eliminate labor exploitation by the new Republic after the 1911 Chinese Revolution.¹² In the early 1920s, under the influence of the initially left-leaning *Guomindang* (Chinese Nationalist Party) there was an expanding union movement and numerous cases of strike action by Chinese workers both in China and Hong Kong. In 1925, during a protest over the shooting of a Chinese worker, a British officer gave the order to shoot into the crowd, resulting in the deaths of nine students. This incident became the May Thirtieth Movement, which led to a fervent anti-imperialist boycott of the British.¹³ The strain placed on Britain's relationship with the government of China led to a block on British recruitment in southern China in 1929. Sophie Loy-Wilson notes that strike action was also taken against the factories of Butterfield and Swire, a company that held a virtual monopoly in the provision of indentured labor to British colonies.¹⁴ Historian Gregor Benton concludes that British access to Chinese indentured labor was restricted as a result of these negative encounters.¹⁵ According to information provided by the French Consul at Xiamen (Amoy), however, the British had merely been limited to recruitment of workers from Xiamen.

These developments from 1926 to 1927 were set against the backdrop of political turmoil in China as the *Guomindang* moved further to the right and split with the Chinese Communist Party. Communist-inspired strikes were ruthlessly suppressed as the government sought to stamp out communist power bases.¹⁶ It seems likely that at least some emigrants in 1927 would have been communists fleeing the country, but there is no indication that the political strife increased the overall number of emigrants. The number of emigrants from Amoy peaked in 1926, reaching 225,729, but fell in 1927 to 98,870 and again in 1928 to 78,575. The number of emigrants rose somewhat to 85,011 in 1929. In 1930, with the Depression affecting the plantations of the Straits Settlements, the British imposed a monthly limit of 1,833 Chinese leaving from Xiamen for their colonies.¹⁷ According to Adam McKeown, overall Chinese emigration peaked in 1928 at nearly 700,000 immigrants, and the majority of these were destined for Southeast Asia.¹⁸

Whatever grievances were held against the British, their indentured contracts were used as models by the Chinese authorities. In 1928, when the Spanish government tried to recruit 2,000 Chinese workers for the island of Fernando-Pô, C.T. Wang, minister of foreign affairs, refused, arguing that their request lacked the appropriate details regarding the hours and type of labor. The Spanish had proposed paying twelve gold dollars per month, which was far below the British standard wage of thirty dollars per month, and did not include food, accommodation, or free medical treatment.¹⁹ The reputation

of Spain regarding forced labor recruitment was not good: In 1930, the League of Nations investigated Spanish involvement in forced labor traffic from Liberia.²⁰

The French application to the Chinese government to recruit workers from Guangdong for Africa was denied. They decided to go ahead with the recruitment, using the port of Fort Bayard in Kouang-Tchéou-Wan (Guangzhouwan) in southern China, which had been a French territory since 1898. The British similarly sought to use their territory of Weihaiwei in northern China to recruit labor for South Africa in 1905.²¹ The administration for the Congo project was under the joint authority of the governor generals of Indochina and AEF. Finding that they could only recruit some two hundred men from Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, they gave the task of recruiting the rest to Lapique, a French shipping company based in Haiphong in Vietnam. Lapique in turn used their British connections to obtain a further six hundred workers from Hong Kong, who were mostly from Guangdong.

Chinese in Africa

The decision to employ Chinese workers in AEF followed precedents set not only by Britain in Southeast Asia, but also France's own practices in New Hebrides (Vanuatu) in the Pacific. The Chinese government had specifically denied their request to recruit workers for the Congo, not because of a disagreement over wages or hours, but because AEF itself was an unknown and potentially dangerous destination. There was no Chinese community for workers to join in the Congo and no local knowledge to be gleaned from returned immigrants. The fact that there was no Chinese consular representative in the Congo to protect the interests of workers was of particular concern to the Chinese authorities.²²

This was by no means the first time that the Chinese had travelled to Africa as indentured laborers on railway building projects. In the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century there were a number of such projects across Africa that drew on Chinese labor. In Senegal from 1883 to 1885, Chinese laborers worked on the Dakar-Saint Louis railway. From 1899 to 1904 Chinese laborers were again employed for the Kankan-Conakry railway.²³ Finally, German colonial authorities recruited Chinese laborers to build two railways in Tanganyika (Tanzania) from 1891 to 1914.²⁴

The Belgium Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo) employed 529 Chinese workers from Macau to work on the Matadi-Stanley Pool railway in 1892. The Belgium railway followed a path roughly parallel to that proposed for the French Congo. That project had been notoriously dangerous. By March 1893 there were only 296 Chinese men left working, the others having died, escaped, or been repatriated.²⁵ The British had recruited 764 Chinese indentured workers for Madagascar, including 280 workers for the Antananarivo railroad in 1901. That project reported a 77 percent fatality rate among the Chinese workers over 10 months.²⁶

Compared to these projects, the Chinese recruitment for the South African gold mines was both far larger in terms of numbers as well as highly controversial, particularly because the Chinese workers faced opposition from a hostile and organized white labor movement.²⁷ A different case of racial antagonism was seen on the Gold Coast from 1874 to 1914, where historian Kwaben O. Akurang-Parry has highlighted African opposition to Chinese labor. Colonial authorities there encouraged a racialized division between African and Chinese workers, which was exacerbated by claims about the superiority of Chinese over African labor.²⁸ In the case of the French Congo, however, there was very little evidence of either white labor protest or conflict with African workers. The French took precautions to segregate the Chinese laborers in an attempt to avoid such controversies.

We cannot know how much of this long and varied history of labor migration was known to the potential Chinese recruits in 1929. The French authorities would later imply that some of the younger workers embarked for the Congo merely out of a sense of adventure. The opportunity to earn some money, or adventure, were possible motives, or perhaps they were communists driven by a need to escape the volatile political situation in China. A final motivation might have been permanent migration as colonists to AEF, a possibility for those with a pioneering spirit but not one encouraged by authorities. Some French opinion did favor free migration, but most of the AEF officials seemed more concerned with acquiring a temporary pool of unskilled manual labor.

The Cost of the Congo-Océan Railway, 1922–1934

According to the literature on colonial Africa, the French had three main reasons for the controversial construction of the Congo-Océan railway that cost the deaths of more than 17,000 Africans.²⁹ Savorgnan de Brazza, the first commissioner of French Congo in 1886 supported the idea as an alternative means of transport to cross the rainforest and mountains of the Mayombe massif. River transport could not reach as far as the sea, and the only alternative was human portage, which had been decried at the 1876 Brussels conference in the context of the suppression of the slave trade. The conference recommended that trains replace porters in Africa. By 1898 the Belgians had completed the 386 km line between Léopoldville and Port of Matadi, a project which itself took many thousands of lives.³⁰

The second reason for building the railway was economic. After 1898, the French emphasized the economic exploitation of natural resources in Africa, granting concessions to private companies and enabling them to operate with relative impunity across French Congo, with disastrous effects on the local populations. In 1910, in an effort to impose greater control over the region, Paris oversaw the creation of French Equatorial Africa, a federation of four territories, Moyen-Congo, Gabon, Oubangui-Chari, and Tchad. A governor general was appointed to administer the AEF from the capital city of Brazzaville in

Moyen-Congo.³¹ The railway project was approved in 1909, and after 1914 permission was given to borrow ninety-three million francs for the construction of the railway from Brazzaville and another four million for the new port at Pointe Noire.³² For Albert Sarraut, then minister of colonies, this project was also about national prestige. The Congo-Océan railway line would demonstrate that French colonialism was the equal to that of Britain or Belgium. In addition, the French would no longer need to negotiate with their Belgian neighbors for transport.³³

Construction on the railway began in 1922 and was completed in 1934. The *Société de Construction des Batignolles* (SCB) was in charge of building the line from Pointe-Noire to Mayombe. The SCB brought virtually no machinery with them and relied on African manual labor for the heavy digging and earthworks. It was difficult to find willing recruits for such dangerous work.³⁴ The last section of the line from Mindouli to Brazzaville was constructed under the direct control of the governor general.³⁵ Raphael Antonetti was governor general from 1924 to 1934. Egyptian-born and Paris-educated Matteo Alfassa was acting governor general and of particular help to Antonetti, given his experience in the area of labor management.

French colonial labor policy in this period caused considerable controversy at the international level. Forced labor in AEF gained publicity in the lead up to the passing of the League of Nations 1926 Slavery Convention. In addition, when the International Labor Organization (ILO) called for a vote on the Forced Labour Convention of 1930, neither the French government nor French employer representatives supported the ban, leaving only the French worker representatives to vote in favor of the ban.³⁶ Criticism of the appalling toll on African lives on the Congo-Océan railway project appeared in contemporary colonial and communist journals. Stories were published about villages where every able-bodied young man had been taken away, only to face death by hunger and exhaustion due to maltreatment.³⁷ It was in response to this widespread publicity that the minister of colonies, Maginot, wrote to the Brazzaville government in 1928 announcing that he wanted to trial Chinese workers. He recognized that the building of the railway was essential, but he was concerned over the death rate among African workers. He claimed that his plan would save lives.³⁸ In this aspect, the experiment was regarded as a success. The recorded death rate for African workers on the railway was 49.6 percent in 1926, but this figure dropped to 17.34 percent in 1929, the year that the Chinese workers arrived in the Congo.³⁹ In comparison, from July 1929 to November 1930 the French authorities claimed a deathrate of just four percent among the Chinese workers.⁴⁰ These improved statistics did not acknowledge that it was not the shift to Chinese labor that had made the difference, but rather the implementation of new regulations concerning the food, accommodation, healthcare, and working hours for workers. It is likely that some of these new innovations carried over to African workers, explaining their improved health.

Another indication of progress in the recruitment of Chinese labor was the voyage from China to Africa. A total of 786 Chinese immigrants including four

women and one child shipped out on the steamship *Dupleix* on June 1, 1929. They arrived at Pointe Noire on July 13, 1929. During the forty-three-day voyage there were two deaths—one woman, who had embarked clandestinely and avoided the medical examination, died of tuberculosis, and one of the overseers died as the result of a fight.⁴¹ There is no doubt that in terms of safety this voyage demonstrated that this was indeed a new era for labor immigration. The *Dupleix* had been especially fitted out to transport troops during the war and there was none of the overcrowding that had been so dangerous in the past.

An Experiment in Chinese Labor

What is striking about the historical literature about the Congo-Océan railway is that scholars who are otherwise sympathetic to the plight of African workers on this dangerous project are dismissive of the Chinese contribution. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff wrote in 1960 that this “brief experiment in using imported Chinese labor was a dismal failure.”⁴² Gilles Sautter, in his 1967 essay on the railway, uses the subheading “Chinese interlude” for the two pages he devotes to the arrival of “a contingent of Chinese coolies,” describing the recruitment of “*le rebut des indésirables*” or the “unwanted scraps” of Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Canton).⁴³ Drawing his imagery from colonial sources, he presents the Chinese in ugly caricature, as violent and dirty who, despite being spoilt with special food and entertainment, were unhappy. He repeats without hesitation, the common French refrain that these workers suffered from “*mauvaise volonté*” or “bad attitude”.⁴⁴ He concludes, with the words of Governor General Antonetti, that the most serious problem was their effect on the African workers who watched the Chinese “laziness” and “lack of discipline” and began to follow their example.⁴⁵

Rita Headrick’s detailed study of health in AEF, published in 1994, similarly takes a negative view of the moral and physical worth of Chinese workers. Taking evidence from an unpublished account by Kerboriou, the French pharmacist in Mayombe during the construction period, she implies that there was a wide problem of opium addiction among the workers. She similarly concludes that “the experiment was not a success.”⁴⁶

The most significant addition to the history of the railway project has been undertaken by Fabrice of Congo on his website, which includes many photographs from the period as well as his own photographs of the sites as they are today. One of his photographs shows the entrance to a small cemetery at Pointe Noire that holds the graves of ten Chinese from this period, including two women.⁴⁷

Health and mortality were certainly at the forefront of contemporary concerns in 1929. The French minister for colonies in Paris, André Maginot, had only given permission to go ahead with recruitment in January 1929, after advising the governor generals of Indochina and Equatorial Africa that past mistakes were to be avoided. The contract offered by the French to the Chinese workers was as generous as any offered by the British at the time. Workers would travel

to Africa on a two-year contract where they would earn the very respectable wage of 30 piasters or 360 francs per month, for a set working day of 9 hours, with guaranteed French and Chinese holidays. In addition, they would receive free food, clothing, medical attention, and accommodation. Only Chinese were to be recruited freely and in the best of health, Maginot wrote. One European and one Chinese doctor were to accompany the workers. He insisted that the provision of food be carefully considered, recommending that they use as a model the military rations that had been provided to Indochinese soldiers during the war, and that extra care be taken to prevent dysentery and beri beri (caused by a deficiency in Vitamin B1). According to Maginot's plan, recruitment and transport would be carried out with military efficiency and workers would be given identity disks, a medical booklet, and all the necessary vaccinations.⁴⁸

In considering the social aspects of life in the Congo, Maginot assumed that Chinese workers would be segregated from the African population. To create a self-sustaining community, he encouraged the Chinese to bring their wives—provided they could pass the medical examination—and married couples were to be given private huts. In the end, only three Chinese women arrived in the Congo. He also requested that provision be made for the repatriation of the bodies of the deceased, but that recommendation was also not followed, as workers were buried on-site. One of his most important requests, from the point of view of creating an historical archive, was that he was to be kept informed of every aspect of their progress in minute detail.⁴⁹

Penal Sanctions

Even though Maginot's desire to ensure the health and well-being of the Chinese workers suggests an attitude of French benevolence, this impression is quashed by the fact that both Paris and Brazzaville officials insisted that it was necessary to reinstate penal sanctions. The ability to send a worker to prison with hard labor for refusal to work had been the most notorious aspect of the indentured labor system. Studies of the nineteenth-century indenture system have been critical of the "legal anomaly" by which a civil contract was enforceable by criminal sanctions.⁵⁰

In the Transvaal in 1904, twenty-four percent of the indentured Chinese were prosecuted for violations of contract.⁵¹ By 1929, however, changes to the penal sanctions clause had already been introduced in British colonies. It is generally accepted that the British Colonial Office banned Chinese indentured labor in 1914, at least for British Malaya. According to Hugh Tinker's study of Indian labor, Malaya abolished penal provisions in 1921 and 1923, while Bruno Lasker describes the use of penal sanctions for Javanese in 1932.⁵² Certainly, in terms of the French colonies, the demand for penal sanctions for both indigenous and Asian labor remained strong in 1929.

Maginot recommended in January 1929 that the penal code for contract labor should be made uniform across all the colonies to avoid confusion. He

specifically referred to Article 408 of the penal code, which dealt with the refusal to work after having accepted an advance on a contract. Punishment, he recommended, should be by imprisonment with a minimum of two months to a maximum of two years.⁵³ Nevertheless, the AEF contract itself made no mention of penal sanctions. The British contracts on which it was based were similarly vague, citing only that penalties were according to particular government regulations of the receiving countries. It seems likely that the Chinese workers were unaware of the possibility of penal sanctions when they signed on in Hong Kong.

Worker Protest at Mayumbe

The workers began protesting very soon after their arrival in the Congo. After landing at Pointe Noire, some 294 Chinese were allowed to remain there on the coast. The other 288 workers, including 3 women and a child were sent inland to Mayombe. The difficult terrain of Mayombe posed the greatest risk for workers, both in terms of the physical challenges, and the potential for disease and lack of health services. The Chinese workers were set up in a camp in a clearing at km104, 200, not far from M'Boulou.⁵⁴ The camp had its own doctor, Dr. Hing Hou, who had studied in Hanoi, but workers called into question his dedication to his patients.

Work on the railway commenced on August 2, 1929. The first day the Chinese were divided into two groups, assigned to either the morning or afternoon shift of four hours each. They were expected to do light duties around the camp when not working on site. Captain Houdré, the camp commandant, took the first group of six teams made up of 117 men, three overseers and one interpreter, to Mr. Ray to commence work. The two other teams, of forty-five men with one overseer, were taken by Gendarme Alary and assigned to Mr. Borney. This second group quit after two hours, claiming that the wood they had been asked to cut was too hard.

At the midday assembly, Captain Houdré told the men, via Interpreter Hip (Ip-Lan-Hing) that the fifth and sixth team had only completed half their task and would receive only half their wage and should return half of their food rations according to Article 7 of their contract. Many of the men came to complain to him, speaking through Hip, but he was adamant that he would not change his mind. They left, refusing to continue working. Hip told Captain Houdré that the workers had decided to call a strike for the following day. Houdré went to find Dr. Hou, and together they approached the workers who were sitting in a circle listening to two of their group speaking. With Dr. Hou acting as interpreter, Houdré found that Hip had told them that it was useless to go to work, as they would never be paid. The workers became convinced that Hip was to blame for the situation. They requested that he be removed from the camp and replaced with Interpreter Yock. Captain Houdré took Hip to the office at M'Boulou, to De Poyen, director of labor services, and asked that Hip be charged with "obstruction of freedom of work" under

Article 414 of the Penal Code. They sent him to Pointe Noire, telegraphing the Pointe Noire camp to announce his arrival and recommending that he be segregated from the other Chinese.⁵⁵

The expulsion of Hip did not have the desired effect. Director De Poyen in M'Boulou reported that the men were meeting every evening to discuss the claims that they would put to the captain the following day. They had nominated a delegate to speak for them, but De Poyen told Captain Houdré to have nothing to do with him on the grounds that their activities seemed very much like communist methods.⁵⁶

Governor General Antonetti wrote concerning this problem to the minister of colonies in Paris complaining:

We didn't get Chinese peasants, used to working with a pick and shovel, but people of all professions, factory workers, intellectuals, even communist agitators, like Hip, who according to Dr. Hing Hou, had been deported from California and New Hebrides and who, as an interpreter, was inciting the Chinese to resistance.⁵⁷

In his opinion, the problem was that for "these intellectuals and tradesmen, it is a comedown to be employed like the blacks." He decided to interrogate all those Chinese "who are manifestly not coolies to determine their profession and social situation."⁵⁸ De Poyen had already wondered what kind of service these men could expect to provide in Mayombe given that their professions included laundrymen, fishermen, hairdressers, and merchants. De Poyen blamed the anarchy in China where poor people led a "profoundly troubled existence."⁵⁹ Most likely these men had intended to emigrate to Southeast Asia where their skills would have been welcomed.

Antonetti's assessment of the attempted strike shows that the term coolie was associated in his mind with workers who would obey commands without question. That he viewed this in racial terms is clear from his reference to black workers. But any simplistic racial categorizing was now complicated by other factors such as education or skill, which could make workers unsuitable for the role of coolie. In addition, his rejection of Hip as a "communist agitator" suggests that he thought they could use the charge of "communism" to dismiss the idea of equal treatment of workers regardless of race. Antonetti had protested the accusation that the AEF "is a hell where bad treatment is common currency."⁶⁰ Nevertheless he had very little concept of what might constitute "good treatment" given that even the most basic right to voice complaints without fear of reprisal was ignored.

The inspector general of colonies, Kair, who had visited the Chinese camp in Mayombe, wrote to the governor general on August 21, 1929. He stated that Engineer Martin was not interested in employing men who worked when and how they liked and considered the Chinese workers useless if they could only provide two cubic meters of gravel, where black workers could provide thirty cubic meters. He recommended that the workers should be put under European guard with sufficient armed force in order to compel them to

work.⁶¹ It appears that the idea of using force was a popular one, given that it was just one week after this recommendation that young Mang-Kam was kicked by Gendarme Combes. That same morning sixty men had reported sick at roll call, a degree of absenteeism which suggests that tensions were already high. The colonial expectation that a European order was absolute meant that there was no tolerance for any form of disobedience. Gendarme Combes testified that when he gave the order, Mang-Kam had turned and laughed in his face, after which Combes had pushed him toward the river and made a motion to kick him.⁶² Combes felt that he was being ridiculed. A similarly outraged Antonetti wrote to Paris complaining, "In truth they are mocking us."⁶³

Some days after the Mang-Kam incident, Wong-Kouai, the thirty-four-year-old Cantonese overseer in charge of Mang-Kam, wrote to Houdré stating:

I have the honour to come, very respectfully to ask you to resign. The job of overseer is insupportable ... I dare to come before you to beseech you to have pity on me to grant me my request, for which I would be infinitely grateful.

Your devoted servant, Wong-Kouai.⁶⁴

Wong-Kouai had previously worked as a domestic servant, and while Hong Kong servants were known to be very active in terms of worker protest, his tone suggests that he preferred not to become involved.⁶⁵ He was a married man with two daughters at home in Guangdong and had every reason to want to return home safely. He was not permitted to resign, however, and days later, on September 4, 1929, another incident occurred on his watch. After being ordered to shovel gravel by Wong-Kouai, a worker called Loi Yong refused to get up. When Captain Houdré ordered him, he again refused, saying he had no tools. Then, when the captain brought him a shovel, he again remained seated. The captain then asked Interpreter Piou to take his identity disk.⁶⁶ When Captain Houdré described the incident to De Poyen, he noted that Loi Yong not only remained seated but continued smoking his cigarette. The "gravity of this act of indiscipline," Houdré remarked, was that Loi Yong did so in the presence of more than one hundred other workers and was clearly trying to provoke them to strike.⁶⁷

Faced with these and many other similar cases, the authorities decided to send a number of Chinese workers to Brazzaville, to appear in court before Judge Darius Roux. Captain Houdré claimed in court that the overseer Wong-Kouai was responsible for these acts of protest. Wong-Kouai, he alleged, had asked overseer Lim No Lou to join their two teams together to attack Coombes.⁶⁸ Wong Kouai was accused and convicted of rebellion. When asked what he had to say in his defense, he replied, "All this is false. I would never dare to revolt against a Frenchman."⁶⁹

Several other men were also convicted. They had all been recruited in Hong Kong but from quite different professions. Tsang Tang had been a docker; Hao Mei, a street vendor; Chiu Shiu, a hawker; and Ly Tsint, a domestic

worker. Only Loi Yong and Tsong Tey, only sixteen years old, had been previously employed as coolies. Given the period and location, it seems likely that the term coolie here referred to general household servant or menial laborer.⁷⁰

When twenty-year-old Ly Hang from Guangdong stood before Judge Roux, he was read a list of charges including refusal to work and having taken money from the colony that was intended to be for salaried work according to his contract. This was, he was informed, an offense under Articles 406 and 408 of the Penal Code of Indochina, by decree of December 31, 1912. In addition, he was charged with verbally threatening an overseer and an interpreter, an offense punishable under Article 308 of the Penal Code. After hearing these charges, he was asked, “What do you have to say?” He responded, “I had my feet covered in *chiques* and I couldn’t walk. I never threatened anyone.”⁷¹ A separate note alleged that Ly Hang was a student who had engaged as a *terrassier* (navvy) with the intention of not working. He was described as dangerous and intelligent and a leader among his fellow workers.⁷² The *chiques* (*Tunga penetrans*) to which he referred were ticks that burrowed into the feet. They were found on the beaches of Pointe Noire—ironically said to have been introduced from South America by slaving ships. Untreated, *chiques* would become swollen and painful and would indeed have prevented Ly Hang from being able to walk. They could also become dangerously infected, as was the case for several Chinese workers.⁷³

During the court hearing, twenty-four-year-old Ly Tsint, previously a domestic servant, spoke with deliberation: “I always worked on the *chantiers*. I never threatened anyone, not the overseer, not the Africans, not the interpreter, not the French.” His overseer, Lao Vihn San, had described him as having a “particularly dangerous spirit.” He claimed that on numerous occasions Ly Tsint had told him, “I will not work. I am here as a laugh. The French know that well.” He also claimed Ly Tsint had said, “Put me in prison if you want.” He also accused Ly Tsint of threatening to hit him, claiming that Ly Tsint had previously worked in England and had hit many English. The overseer who gave this testimony was only twenty-six years old himself, and though of Chinese ethnicity, was born in Moncai (Mong Cai) in northern Vietnam, on the Chinese border where a large French garrison was located.⁷⁴ By recruiting overseers and interpreters who spoke French from among their trusted subjects in Vietnam, the French may have inadvertently created more friction among the workers.

In his report of September 1929, Dr. Lasnet, inspector of health services, tried to explain why they had been unable to control the Chinese workers. He noted that Captain Houdré, who was alone in charge of the 431 men, had previously served in Algeria and was not experienced in managing African, let alone Asian, workers. He supported Houdré’s request for an additional ten subofficers. Lasnet was also concerned that the interpreters were all young men, who had “just finished their studies” and had “no influence over the coolies.” He was also critical of Dr. Hou, writing,

The Chinese doctor had no influence with the coolies and didn't try to have any. He did not see them apart from during medical visits and avoided all other contact and never set foot inside the camp. He only agreed to accompany them so that he could go to France and acquire a diploma of medicine.

He remarked that Dr. Hou, having lived in Hanoi in northern Vietnam, was more Vietnamese than Chinese. The Chinese workers believed that Dr. Hou was a typical bourgeois who was disdainful of the workers.⁷⁵

Dr. Hou's own words suggest that even before they commenced work, he had anticipated trouble. He wrote to the authorities in Mayumbe on July 25, 1929, asking if he could purchase and carry a gun, a 7.65 calibre Browning, admitting his fear of "being isolated, all alone in the mountains, one kilometre from all police and in the middle of Chinese workers." He added, "To assure my personal security and to give me courage, it is necessary that I possess some means to legitimately defend myself."⁷⁶

In trying to prove that the Chinese workers were deliberately aiming to spread communist doctrines, the French also called on African overseers to give testimony. N'Gati, speaking through interpreter Albert Mavoungou, told how the Chinese would come to visit them while they were working and would take their shovels and mime working slowly. N'Gati said that he "always told the Chinese to leave us to command our men" but that they didn't speak the same language and didn't understand. When asked why he didn't make them leave he said, "I would have happily made them leave ... but we regard them the same as whites ... I wouldn't dare do it. We are all afraid of them."⁷⁷ Even though this seems to create the impression that the Chinese were not friendly with the Africans, other evidence given suggested that was not the case. The French were taking great pains to keep them divided, because, as Antonetti informed Paris, there were former army officers among the Chinese, and they could potentially arm themselves and inspire the Africans to resistance.⁷⁸

Antonetti was determined to rid himself of workers with such anticolonial "bolshevik [sic] mentality."⁷⁹ Given the widespread evidence of communism and anticolonial sentiments in both Indochina and Hong Kong, it is likely that many workers were indeed "bolsheviks [sic]." On the other hand, this term was clearly used by the French as a means to justify harsh reprisals against protesting workers. He sent Governor Alfassa and Dr. Lasnet to gather evidence against them but complained that the existing legislation did not allow him to impose the penal sanctions. He also noted that it would not be worth the expense to bring workers from Mayumbe to trial in either Pointe Noire or Brazzaville if they were to be fined just a few francs or given a few days' prison sentence.

While Antonetti's opinions dominate the colonial records, there were other French voices raised in support of the Chinese workers. Captain Pariac, who was employed by Batignolles, spoke English and was able to communicate with the workers, and he found they worked well. Also Laparge and Garnier reported that the Chinese showed good will even if they were inexperienced in the use

of the machines.⁸⁰ Lasnet reported to Paris that he had found that some who were working as navvies were in fact qualified to work on machinery. Maginot wrote to Brazzaville in response to these reports and asked that those workers be moved so they could be of better service. He added, rather pointedly, that this would also avoid discontent on the part of the workers.⁸¹

After the Brazzaville trials, the government decided to repatriate a number of Chinese workers. In December 1929 they sent 172 Chinese back to China. The tensions in Pointe Noire in the previous month resulted in another protest by Chinese workers, which ended with the police claiming that a Chinese crowd had threatened them on November 4, 1929. The crowd was dispersed but, according to reports, the men had returned to camp and decided to form a “secret society” to coordinate their response.⁸² The first group of men to be deported were forty-seven workers accused of rebellion, threats towards police, and having formed a union. The second group of some fifty to sixty workers were said to be guilty of breach of contract. The third group were individuals whose physical condition was regarded as deficient, particularly opium users.

Antonetti had asked that the first two groups be sent before the Tribunal of Kouang-Tcheou-Wan, and the results relayed back to those still in AEF as a moral lesson.⁸³ Governor General Pasquier in Indochina replied that it would be impossible. He recommended that they give up on any idea of judicial action and simply deport them. He also advised that they limit the number of deportees, being particularly mindful of how the Chinese press would respond when the men returned home.⁸⁴

While most of the unionists had been deported in December 1929, in February 1930 the court at Point Noire sentenced a number of Chinese to three months’ imprisonment for attempting to incite a strike. It was decided to set up a penal camp at kilometer 120 in Mayumbe to house the 50 prisoners. It was to be surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and to be guarded by a Sergeant Obame, two corporals, and twenty guards. The Chinese inmates would be provided with food but no salary, even though they were expected to work the same number of hours as the “free” workers.⁸⁵ This decision to impose hard labor on protesting workers constitutes a reversion to the original coolie system. In May 1930 when Lieutenant Colonel Allut requested a reduction in penalty for four of the Chinese prisoners for good behavior, Alfassa responded that conditional liberty could not be considered but that they could be offered a salary. Alfassa also advised against clemency, which, he wrote, “might be taken for weakness on our part.”⁸⁶ It is this language of control that appears to have tainted all their dealings with Chinese workers. Other reports from May 1930 suggest that the food rations may also have been reduced, with a report of twenty-seven Chinese men dying of beri beri. In addition the hospital in M’Boulou reported twenty hospitalized with work injuries. Malaria, they claimed was being controlled with daily doses of preventative quinine. Despite these evident problems, in the conclusion of his report to Indochina

Alfassa claimed, that Chinese were writing that they were better treated in Africa than at home in China.⁸⁷

Repatriation in 1931

Rather surprisingly, in February 1931 the French government was considering the possibility of recruiting a new contingent of Chinese workers for AEF, this time from Xiamen. The French consul at Xiamen recommended they return some of the Chinese from Africa to help disprove the alarming claims in the Chinese-language newspapers of the previous year of a deadly climate and poor hygienic conditions.⁸⁸

Later that year they did indeed repatriate a large group of workers who had completed their two-year contract. An unknown number (perhaps 200) had signed on for a second two-year contract and did not return until 1933. Once again the *Dupleix* was used for transport in 1931. It was a sixty-four-day voyage to China, via Bordeaux with the ship arriving in Vietnam on September 17, 1931. Again the voyage was relatively uneventful, though the two deaths on board are suggestive of more hidden problems. One man committed suicide and the other died of black water fever. The doctor at Haiphong reported that of the returnees, five were suffering from beri beri, four with mental problems, and four with syphilis. Despite the daily quinine dosage, fifty-seven men had malaria.⁸⁹

When the *Dupleix* berthed in Saigon, five men had successfully jumped ship. A further 200 men tried unsuccessfully to leave the ship at Saigon. Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) had a large Chinese immigrant population and would be an attractive destination for workers. The next stop was Haiphong, but police were brought to the port to prevent any similar escape attempts.⁹⁰ There were some 20,000 Cantonese living in Haiphong, so it would also have been an attractive prospect. But an earlier experiment with Chinese indentured labor in Haiphong had sparked, so some argued, the anti-Chinese riots of 1927, so local authorities would have hesitated to encourage further immigration.⁹¹ At Haiphong the workers were transferred over to the steamer *Kiung Chow*, owned by Butterfield and Swire, with 46 to return to Kouang-Tchéou-Wan and 321 to return to Hong Kong.⁹²

Bride, the administrator of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan wrote glowing reports about the return of the men to that territory. Intending to encourage further immigration, he claimed that once home in their villages, the workers had praised their experiences in Africa, the country, the people, and their working conditions. They had all agreed they would return, he wrote, particularly because they had made profits of \$500 to \$2000.⁹³

The Hong Kong landing was less positive. Four of the returning workers had suffered amputations from accidents during an explosion in the tunnel of Cella at kilometer 103.900. Two men were permanently disabled—Tsang-Fat, with a facial fracture, and Wong-Hing with an amputated arm. The explosion had occurred just six days before the ship departed, and when the men

arrived in Hong Kong, they were still in need of medical attention. They were taken in and given a bed by a shocked Dufaure de la Prade, the French consul general of Hong Kong. He was appalled that nothing had been arranged for their arrival in Hong Kong, and he immediately requested that a suitable amount be paid to them in compensation. He wrote to Pasquier, governor general of Indochina: “You will agree with me that apart from humanitarian considerations, the interests of the Colony are to grant an equitable reparation, in order to avoid recriminations, which could be exploited by the ‘xenophobic’ Chinese press, against France and AEF in particular.”⁹⁴

They were given compensation of 7,500 francs and 8,000 francs, respectively.⁹⁵ Some time later it was also agreed that the heirs of Tsang-Ym-Ying, who had died in the same explosion, should be paid 5,000 francs.⁹⁶

Conclusions

There are many unfinished stories in this brief overview of Chinese worker experiences in the Congo. Perhaps most surprising, in light of the existing literature’s reports of “failure,” is that the French government was so anxious to recruit more Chinese workers. While the reports from Antonetti were littered with complaints, there was little discussion of the successes or the extent of the contribution the Chinese had made to the building of tunnels and bridges and railway stations. More research is needed also to discover whether some Chinese did indeed become permanent immigrants.

As a study of the final years of the indentured labor system, the Congo case is a stark reminder that the process of abolition is always fraught and rarely conforms to a linear timetable. Despite international attention being drawn to the eradication of indentured—and most importantly—forced labor, there was a long way to go before Chinese workers could be described as free. The term coolie had a longevity that apparently lasted as long as the colonial aspirations of European masters. The seemingly unshakeable belief that a white man should command absolute obedience from nonwhite workers was certainly tested by the brave and determined Chinese protestors. There seemed to be a certain French nostalgia for the supposedly traditional coolie who understood the meaning of hard work. Certainly Antonetti was unwilling to come to terms with the new world of labor organization. It also seems that there was a pervasive fear that if worker resistance were left unchecked, it might lead to a widespread revolt. This was indeed the logic of slavery. It should be noted, that independence for the colony of AEF did not take place until 1960.

Finally, these testimonies remind us that we cannot imagine this simply as a racial struggle between European and Chinese. The politics of workers’ rights found support in the most unexpected allies. It is in those moments of collaboration and concern that we can glimpse how together they might be beginning to imagine a working relationship that moves beyond the coolie question.

NOTES

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