



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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**Thinking Labour Rights through the ‘Coolie’ Question, ASSA Workshop
University of Sydney, Camperdown, 17th-19th September 2015**

How can the history of Asian indentured labour systems help us better understand contemporary debates over labour rights and labour migration?

Conveners: Sophie Loy-Wilson (University of Sydney) and Marilyn Lake (University of Melbourne)

Themes and Participants:

Globalisation and Labour Rights: Laurence Brown, Moon-Ho Jung, Warwick Anderson

Legacies of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Audrey Pepper, Clare Corbould

Indentured Labour Legacies in the Australian Colonies: Paul MacGregor, Margaret Slocomb, Sophie Loy-Wilson

Plantation Labour in Queensland: Kirstie Close-Barry, Emma Christopher

Liberal Critiques of unfree labour: Bill Mihalopoulos, Phil Griffiths

Workers’ Rights: Zach sell, Sascha Auerbach, Julia Martinez

Twentieth Century Politics of Exclusion: Mae Ngai, Nadia Rhook, Ethan Blue

Reframing Labor Rights in the ILO (International Labor Organisation) and other International Contexts: Diane Kirkby, Mei-Fen Kuo,

Migration and Labour Rights, Then and Now: Leon Fink

WORKSHOP REPORT: *Migration and Labour Rights in Historical Perspective*
Sophie Loy-Wilson, University of Sydney

Background

This workshop was co-convened by Sophie Loy-Wilson (University of Sydney) and Marilyn Lake (University of Melbourne) as a response to what we perceived to be a critical juncture in the history of labour rights in the context of rising anxieties worldwide over globalization and labour migration. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) the number of international migrants worldwide – people residing in a country other than their country of birth – was the highest ever

recorded in 2015, at 244 million (up from 232 million in 2013). 2015 also saw the highest level of forced displacement worldwide. Local communities have responded to these shifts by manifesting alarming levels of xenophobia. One of the key issues around which these racial tension coalesce is labor rights.

The globalization of the modern labour workforce, for good or for ill, has become a central issue in political discourse, economic policy and social experience. The rights and status of workers in this context have also risen to the fore, and are intertwined with concerns about immigration, acculturation and national identity. Yet the long history of this process, and the crucial ways in which it shaped Europe's relationship to Asia, Africa and the Americas remains all but unexamined. In particular, the history of "indentured labour"—a semi-coerced, long-term contract labour system that succeeded slavery—remains poorly understood

We felt that given these global trends there is now a need to broaden and re-think the field of labour rights history and that one way to do this is by focusing on the global response to the problem of coolie trade, what became known as 'the coolie question,' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The period of the coolie trade extends from approximately the early 1840s – one consequence of the ending of slavery in the British Empire - to the 1920s. The idea behind the coolie trade was a simple one. It sought to extract labour from China, India and the Pacific Islands and transport it to locations across the world, where it was in short supply, through systems of indenture. However the system that developed was widely condemned as inefficient, exploitative and often as akin to slavery.

In the process, all the nations involved in this episode of human migration responded with domestic and transnational debates that produced new definitions of labour rights as human rights. WP Reeves in his preface to Australian economist Persia Campbell's 1923 publication 'The Coolie Question,' wondered how such 'sinister experiments, so unattractive at their best, so repulsive at their worst, came to be tried in civilized countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.' Singaporean historian Wang Singwu claimed in 1970 that there was little difference between Chinese 'coolies' and African 'slaves' and much historiography since has explored that proposition.

Around the world, 'the coolie question' became a touchstone for economists, intellectuals, trade unionists, socialists, liberal free traders and protectionists engaged in experiments in nation-building and labour rights. Thinking through the 'coolie question' anew provides a useful framework and methodological tool for examining the global intellectual history of labour rights and economic internationalism in a world history context.

Discussion

So what are the legacies of Chinese coolie labor? What were the conditions of this labor and how is this related to our present understanding of labors right in the humanities? These questions become critical as we asses present narratives of

human experience at a time when labor categories consistently fail to capture the complexity of race relations and power relations within emerging capitalist systems and at a time when types of abusive labor relations – such as recent scandals linked to south Asian workers in Australian Seven 11s, of with Asian fruit pickers on Australia farms for example - continue despite the existence of celebrated regulatory mechanisms designed to protect workers.

As Lisa Yun argued in *The Coolie Speaks*, the ‘coolie’ should become a major figure in the study of non-white migration precisely because the term is so slippery and poorly defined. The term coolie, Yun, and others have argued, has served as a palimpsest for anxieties over the transitional gap between categories of free and forced labor. As Yun puts it: there was “a widely varied picture of what coolie of indenture meant – the Asian coolie labourer was a vexing figure from colonial politicians – neither black nor white, ostensibly voluntary, and yet involuntary, not a slave and yet not free .” As Moon Ho-Jung puts it, the ‘coolie’ was a vexing anomaly, whose contested status worked within political discourses to re-make other categories around rights and labor

The ‘coolie question’ has been conceptualised in two main ways – as an offshoot of histories of slavery and anti-slavery and in the context of studies of migration to colonies of the former British and Spanish empires. Discussion of the ‘coolie trade’ has thus proceeded in two distinct historical fields. This symposium sought to bring these two historiographies into conversation to reflect more broadly on the implications of ‘the coolie question’ for transnational and global histories of labour rights as human rights.

The discussion that arose during the workshop grappled with this complex historiographical relationship – between slavery, indenture, labor and race-based exclusion – and generated three broad questions for further research and discussion

1) What was the social, economic, political, legal and cultural dimensions of the “indenture” system (aka “Coolie labour”)?

Laurence Brown (University of Manchester and Australian National University) shaped our discussion around this question in his opening paper, “Mapping the Globalisation of Indenture.” Taking a ‘big picture’ approach, he showed how the migration of 1.6 million indentured workers across the British and French empires directly fuelled the expansion of plantation labour regimes in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and the Pacific during the nineteenth century. His findings – based on archival sources from Martinique, Trinidad, Mauritius, Réunion, Fiji, New Caledonia, and Queensland – showed how indentured migration was legitimized as a system of free labour through its contractual nature, and by the 1860s a common form of contract had emerged that was applied across empires and ethnic groups.

Drawing on recent mobilities scholarship, his explored the role of global economic and imperial networks in the formation of indentured labour systems in the Indian Ocean, Caribbean and Pacific. Comparative histories of nineteenth century migration

focused on standardized imperial statistics have rarely explored the disjunctions caused by the insertion of indentured immigrants into differing agrarian labour regimes. During the economic crisis of the 1880s, South Asian migrants were travelling to plantation economies that were in stagnation (Caribbean), decline (Mascarenes) or construction (Pacific) which produced radically different mortality rates, material conditions and levels of labour conflict. Focusing on the connections between colonies on the periphery of empire, and on the relationships between forms of migration, enables a new global history of the “coolie question” and the plantation complex.

Paul MacGregor (Chinese Studies Group Melbourne) also dealt with the question of contracts his paper ‘Chinese perspectives on their own rights as indentured labourers - Southeast Australia, 1840s and 1850s.’ He showed how the Chinese employed in these arrangements in Southeast Australia viewed the nature of their employment conditions. Far from evincing the 'docility, patience, untiring industry, frugality and perseverance' as advertised by those promoting the use of Asian workers, Chinese labourers often demonstrated concern for their working conditions, umbrage at low wages, and indignance at mistreatment. Many absconded from their positions; some even threatened suicide. Their concerns, recorded in the colonial press and court reports, were often couched as direct responses to individual circumstances, and framed in British debates about labour and humanitarian rights. Importantly, MacGregor also drew attention to a *Chinese* history of practice and discourse on labour rights, and abuse, which informed the Chinese protagonists in their complaints to employers and authorities. Chinese and British views of rights enmeshed in the colonial Australian labour landscape.

Zach Sell (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) shifted attention to the agency of indentured laborers in his work on the indentured labor system in British Honduras. From 1863 to 1870, histories of Chinese indenture, African American emancipation, contested Maya sovereignty, and white southern plantation expertise converged in British Honduras. Drawing upon letters written by Chinese laborers as well as archives in Belize, the United States, and England, this paper follows the developing rightlessness of 475 indentured Chinese laborers brought to the colony in 1865. Chinese indentured labor arrived in British Honduras after a failed project to bring emancipated African Americans to settle in the colony. Ideas of colonial progress soon became inextricably bound to arriving Chinese laborers. Yet, when sugar plantations did not emerge as planned, such ideas of progress gave way to ideas about colonial and cultural decay brought by laborers. This created an environment where indentured laborers increasingly became seen as surplus and rightless. By October 1868, 108 Chinese immigrants in British Honduras had died with one planter known especially for his “monomaniacal hatred” of these laborers. The situation worsened when the colonial government looked toward white former slave-holding planters from the American South to make plantations and extract hitherto unobtainable surplus from Chinese immigrants. Against such developing histories of violence, Chinese immigrants sought rights outside and against the colonial state. Nearly one hundred Chinese laborers abandoned plantations in British Honduras to join the Santa Cruz Maya in Mexico. When the colonial government

sought their return, the Santa Cruz Maya refused claiming that the Chinese amongst them were “Indians like themselves.” Through this history, Sell ultimately considers unexpected anti-colonial disruptions of liberal notions of personhood and argues that such ideas forming at the limits of liberal capitalism have been too often ignored despite an abundance of archival material.

‘Coolie’ resistance to labor right’s abuse was also touched upon by **Margaret Slocomb (University of Southern Queensland)** in her paper, ‘Preserving the Contract: the experience of Indian, Chinese and Melanesian indentured labourers in the Wide Bay and Burnett Districts in the Nineteenth Century.’ She demonstrates that in the latter half of the 1840s, squatters in the Northern Districts of New South Wales, like the rest of their peers recently deprived of cheap assigned convict labour, dreamed of the shepherd that could be bought for ten pounds per annum, with rations. In the remote northern Burnett and Wide Bay districts, gazetted in 1848, this aim was realized by the importation of so-called Asiatic labourers, first from Bengal (the Indian Hill Coolies) and then from China. The men who were shipped from Amoy harbour in Fujian Province were called “celestials”, the term of address, “coolie”, having been already reserved for those labourers from the sub-continent. In the 1860s, when the Northern Districts had become Queensland, thousands of South Sea Islanders (the “kanakas”) would join the coolie ranks, labouring on the coastal sugar plantations but also, briefly, as shepherds on the pastoral runs in the hinterland. Each of these experiments with imported coloured labourers was deemed a failure by the white capitalists who exploited them.

2) What was the impact of indentured labor migration on labor rights discourse and human rights discourse in host societies such as Australia?

Mei-fen Kuo (University of Queensland) and **Sophie Loy-Wilson (University of Sydney)** directly addressed this question in their papers. Kuo’s paper, ‘From coolies to God’s labour: reframing labour right, Christian philanthropy and enterprising Chinese Australians and in the early 20th century,’ traced how the concept of ‘labour’ for Chinese in Australia was defined and constructed socially and culturally. In For Chinese Australians, reframing labour right was about organizing a new effective society in order to protect low class countrymen under the exploitation of hierarchy within the community and racial discrimination in the host societies. From late 19th century Christian mission and philanthropy provided a space for Chinese Australian labour to unite and excise its impact.

By analysing public narratives and records we know the lessons of informal grouping and religious philanthropy had taught Chinese Australians to build their own labour unions and to reconstruct social ethics for their needs. The consequence did not boost social reform of labour right under legislative protection but affect enterprising Chinese Australians with international Christian networks in the early 20th century. Christian values such as benevolent love and equality were translated to Chinese to react as God’s labour to embrace humanitarian values. For Chinese

Australians reframing labour rights in association with Christian philanthropy strengthened the idea of social control and solidarity rather than reform.

Sophie Loy-Wilson addressed this question from the perspective of colonial politicians in gold rush era New South Wales. Her paper followed debates over ‘coolie’ labor in the Australasian colonies at the height of the gold rushes, uncovering Chinese and white settler memories over failed ‘coolie’ transportation schemes, revealing the ways in which the legacies of ‘coolie’ migration shaped debates in the Australian colonies over mobility, rights and fair taxation.

3) What is the relationship of indentured labour to its historical precedent, slavery, and its connection to free migratory labour, both then and now?

Emma Christopher (Anti-Slavery Alliance Australia) has clearly demonstrated a connection between Atlantic slavery and attitudes to Indigenous labor in her work on Race, Sugar and the Economy of Queensland. Her paper, ‘The Work of Blackfellows,’ found resonances between attitudes to racial difference and the construction of labour regimes in colonial contexts. This theme was also taken up by **Kirstie Close-Barry (Deakin University)** in her paper on sugar plantations in Far North Queensland. She showed that while scholarship has suggested that Aboriginal people have generally been excluded from Queensland’s sugar industry, at the end of the nineteenth century there were certain sites where Aboriginal people were employed in this industry in significant numbers alongside ‘coolies’ and Chinese labourers. Close-Barry examined sources from the late nineteenth century that describe one such site, the Vilele sugar plantation at Bloomfield River just outside of Cooktown in far north Queensland to show continuities between the use of indigenous labor and slavery. It was on this plantation that the Bauer family employed Asian and Aboriginal workers to labour on their sugar plantation, run under the auspices of the Bloomfield River Sugar Company. Government policy regarding ‘coolie’ and ‘native’ labour translated into the lived experiences of people at Bloomfield River. The lifespan of this plantation, from 1882 to 1902, coincides with significant debates about the role that Aboriginal and foreign labourers should play in the Queensland economy and workforce. These debates culminated with the establishment of the *Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* in 1897. This watershed legislation reflected Europeans fears of ‘coolie’ contamination of the ‘native’ population. It brought definition to existing racial categories, and sought to separate Aboriginal from Asian peoples.

4) What are the long-term legacies and contemporary meanings of these migrations?

Julia Martinez (**University of Wollongong**) and Diane Kirkby (**LaTrobe University**) took up this question in different ways in their papers dealing with the ILO (International Labor Organisation). Martinez showed how In the 1890s, when the infamous 'coolie' system was still flourishing, King Leopold of the Belgium Congo imported hundreds of Chinese workers from Macau to help construct the Matadi-Stanley Pool railway line. Like the African workers before them, Chinese workers succumbed to malaria, dysentery, beriberi and smallpox with unimaginably high death rates. In the 1920s, just two decades later, the employment of Asian indentured labour was already under coming under considerable international criticism from the ILO. Despite this, the French colonial government was actively transporting Asian workers to their various colonies - colonies that were excluded from ILO labour conventions. Like the Belgium government before them, when faced with the problem of completing the railway line in French Congo the French turned to Chinese labour. Martinez highlighted how the importation of Chinese workers to the Congo in the late 1920s was from the very start rejected by the Chinese government. The 'coolie' system was still fresh in the minds of the people and they were rightly concerned that the French could not guarantee worker safety. Despite this the French government pushed on, sparking a wave of protest from Chinese officials and workers.

In contrast, **Diane Kirkby** traced Labor law in India in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s the Indian parliament debated a proposal for training seafarers that I use to open up discussion of the decade as a moment of rethinking an international labour rights framework for seafarers. Legislative efforts to improve their status had particular significance for Indian seafarers, who were known as 'lascars' or the seagoing equivalent of 'coolies'. They were among the poorest seafarers in the world, largely employed as the lowest ranks of the crew, on British-or European owned ships where the officers were English or European. Efforts to introduce training for Indians to become officers with 'nautical careers' is revealing of efforts to reverse this situation. Kirkby looked at how the new legislative frameworks for regulating and training Indian maritime labour appeared in comparison with other moves in Australia. She therefore assessed the changing nature of seafarers' working conditions in the new international context following the establishment of the ILO and its Joint Maritime Commission.

5) How can the history of Chinese and Indian labour migration can inform current discussions of race and immigration, and how an arts and humanities perspective can contribute to these debates?

In his concluding discussion, **Leon Fink (University of Illinois, Chicago)** addressed continuities between the 'coolie' question and contemporary concerns over labour rights by suggesting we now live in an age of 'the first precariat,' which has seen 'the return of capitalism without a human face.' Fink showed how transformation of global capitalism, labor, and class relations in our own day is having a marked effect

on how we study those subjects historically. Yet, as happens repeatedly in the historical discipline, insights gained from the juxtaposition and recognition of deep structural affinities between the present and the past also carries the risk of a distorted mirror effect. What questions we carry to the past and what lessons we, in turn, extract from it must be handled with care. As couriers between worlds of time as well as space, our work inevitably reflects the ignorance as well as intelligence attending the message (as well as the messenger) of the given moment. With these caveats in mind, workshop participants examined the link between today's global crisis in worker welfare--perhaps most commonly summoned up by the twinned terms "neoliberalism" and the "precariat"--and a new historical preoccupation with coerced laborers of the past. Examining the analytical connection between the Coolie Question, as it developed in the 19th and early 20th century, with the plight (and possible strategies) of low-wage global workers today allowed us to shed explanatory light on both.

There were links between Leon Fink's paper and the work of **Ethan Blue (University of Western Australia)**. Blue mapped the growth of the US deportation regime. In the nineteenth century, Chinese railroad workers laid the material infrastructure that linked the US hinterland to global markets and facilitated the United States' rise as a global political-economic power. A generation later, the US used those same rail lines to expel the railroad workers' descendants. Though immigration controls and the deportation regime were intended to protect white workers' rights against transnational capitalist monopoly and exploitation (not least from railroad operators), the deportation apparatus facilitated new modes of unfreedom and novel coercive labor relations for citizens and non-citizens. The threat of deporting radicals constrained the possibilities of labor's collective action while assuring that genuinely transformative politics would be driven from American shores. Deportation also gave employers significant control over undocumented workers, exacerbating the realities of their unfreedom along a spectrum of coercive labor relations.

Blue employed digital humanities and spatial history methods to make these arguments, mapping migrants' routes through space and time, portraying means by which they were captured, and depicting their paths of exile across the planet. By examining the spatial histories of migrant labor and the coercive mobility of deportation, we can see how the territorially-bound nation-state, as guarantor of liberal rights and illiberal exclusions produced new forms of unfreedom for migrant and denizen workers, citizens and aliens alike.

OUTCOMES

As a way of widening discussion over these questions, participants have agreed to write up their discussion papers into reflective articles in order to circulate our findings to a wider audience. These papers will be published in a Special Issue of *International Labour and Working Class History* (ILWCH) published out of Columbia

University in New York. Prof Mae Ngai and Sophie Loy-Wilson will co-edit this Special Issue which will be published in Spring 2017. This Special Issue is provisionally titled *Thinking Labor Rights through the 'Coolie' Question*. It is the first global treatment of the 'coolie' question and includes articles on the French Congo, South Africa, New South Wales, Queensland, the United States, India, South China, British Honduras and the West Indies.