

“NOT AS SLAVES...BUT AS FREEMEN”:
COOLIES, FREE LABOR, AND RECONSTRUCTION IN THE AGE OF
EMANCIPATION

by

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ABSTRACT

During the years known as Reconstruction, the Southern United States transitioned from slavery, along with many other societies throughout the world. Southern planters and reformers debated how to deal with this post-emancipation society. As formerly enslaved individuals fought to gain rights as citizens, their former owners looked for ways to construct a new system of labor that would reestablish control in the South. Many advocated the importation of Chinese laborers, often referred to in the nineteenth century as “coolies.” Opponents argued that this was an attempt to reinstitute slavery in another form. However, supporters argued that the workers would not be “coolies,” but rather free contract laborers. Using Southern newspapers from 1860-1870, especially the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, this thesis explores an often unheard of movement for Chinese labor in the South, the eventual failure of the movement, and how this movement informs our understanding of Reconstruction in the Age of Emancipation.

PREFACE

My interest in this topic first began when I ran across the subject of coolies while reading Matthew Pratt Guterl's book *American Mediterranean*. In a later class paper, I decided to take a look through online newspaper databases to see how prevalent this discussion of "coolie" labor was in the South. I was amazed to find hundreds of references to coolies in Southern newspapers during the 1860s and 1870s. This was something I, and many of my colleagues, had not heard about in regards to Southern history. As I pursued the subject and asked for advice from advisors and professors, I was encouraged to pursue the topic further, which resulted in this thesis.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Myers-Shirk who first encouraged me to pursue this topic after reading my first class paper. Without this initial support, my work on the subject could have ended there. Dr. Ashley Riley Sousa was also one of the early encouragers of my work and has been more than helpful in my graduate studies and as a second reader for my thesis. And thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Robert Hunt, without whose support and provision of knowledge regarding the South and Reconstruction I would have been unable to write this thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Alaina, who has been patient, reassuring, and understanding as I spent many hours on this thesis. In the event of a future dissertation, I thank you again in advance.

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INTRODUCTION

I shall not advise my friends to go to the South. We have all heard what outrages have been perpetrated in Peru and Cuba on Chinese coolies, and, though I do not know it, I am afraid that the same thing might happen in the South. You see they had slavery in the South, and now they want coolie labor to take its place! If coolie labor is to take the place of slavery, will they not expect it to be something pretty near like slavery?¹

—Choy Chew, “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration” (1869).

In 1869, Choy Chew and Sing Man were interviewed by a correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* in San Francisco. Chew and Man were two successful Chinese merchants from California who had just finished visiting the eastern United States. During their visit, while in Chicago, Chew gave a number of speeches in which he defended Chinese immigrants, applauded the United States for its “generosity” and “hospitality,” and looked forward to a continued agreeable relationship between the United States and China.² After Chew and Man returned to San Francisco, reporters asked the two what they thought about the plan suggested by Southern leaders to use Chinese laborers in the South. Their response was published widely throughout the South, which was “read with interest by all parties.”³

¹ “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration,” *Memphis Daily Appeal* (hereafter *MDA*), October 24, 1869.

² “A Chinaman on the Chinese Question,” *Scientific American* 21, no. 9 (August 1869): 131. Accessed December, 2016. <http://www.ccamuseum.org/index.php/en/research/research-before-1900/146-1869-the-first-californian-chinese-in-chicago>

³ “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration,” *MDA*, October 24, 1869. Other Southern newspapers to feature information provided by Chow Chew and Sing Man include: *Charleston Daily News*, July 31, August 10, 19, 1869; *Maryville Daily Appeal*, July 21, August 8, 1869; *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, August 3, 8, 1869; *Wilmington Journal*, August 27, 1869. Lucy Cohen argues that Chew and Man remained speculative about the whole venture and wanted to send people to make reports on the conditions of work in the South that incoming Chinese workers would encounter. They believed the Chinese had a unique opportunity to wait for reports from pioneers to the region before making the decision to work there.

After the end of the Civil War, a significant number of planters in the Southern United States proposed to import thousands of Chinese laborers into the South. The plans they proposed usually dictated that these Chinese laborers would work under contract for a certain number of years after which the laborers would return to China with the profits they had garnered. Many Southern journalists who had been previously invested in reforming the system of slavery were now interested in reforming the post-war South and its labor systems. Several of these “journalist reformers” supported plans to import Chinese contract laborers. In many cases, these laborers were called “coolies.”

In the nineteenth century, the use of the term “coolie” was generally assumed to refer to a contracted worker from East Asia dedicated to menial labor, such as plantation work or mining. Most of these workers arrived in the western hemisphere from China. By the 1860s, “coolie” almost always referred to a male Chinese worker, though it could sometimes refer to an Indian or other Asian laborer if indicated. The term carried many pejorative assumptions and typically indicated that the laborer was in a state of degradation and/or servitude.⁴

Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1984), 81.

⁴ Historians of labor and Chinese-American history debated in the twentieth century whether Chinese people deemed “coolies” should be considered voluntary laborers or involuntary laborers. However, the consensus among scholars today is that no one was ever actually a coolie. Moon-Ho Jung describes the use of the term as a “conglomeration of racial imaginings,” and a way for nineteenth-century individuals to project their “manifold desires” regarding labor. Moon-Ho Jung, “Outlawing Coolies: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (September 2005): 678-79. Mae Ngai argues that the assumption by scholars that Chinese labor was inherently unfree, with or without the use of the term coolie, perpetuates negative stereotypes and is “orientalist in nature.” Mae M. Ngai, “Chinese Gold Miners and the ‘Chinese Question’ in Nineteenth Century California and Victoria,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 4 (March 2015): 1083-084, 1095. For older interpretations of Chinese labor in the United States, see Mary Coolidge, *Chinese Immigrants* (New York: Arno Press, 1909); Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); and Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge:

The idea of coolie labor in the South created a problem for Southern reformers and planters who were looking to restore the region and evade Northern interference. Opponents saw it as a scheme to reinstitute slavery. By the end of the 1860s, proponents of this plan were determined to convince opponents that the laborers would not be coolies in the southern United States, but would be free laborers working under contract. In fact, they held that Chinese workers could be improved and uplifted by their work in the South.

Despite these claims, when Chew and Man responded to the interviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*, they were hesitant to participate in what they saw as a return to slavery. While they encouraged continued migration between the United States and China, they believed that their fellow countrymen who traveled to the South would not have “the protection of good and equal laws...in a country where there [had] been slavery.” They doubted the fate of any Chinese worker in the cotton or sugar fields of the South, in which he would receive “a low figure of compensation” and be in “competition with the negro.”⁵

When Chew and Man were interviewed in 1869, the Southern United States was in transition from slave labor to free labor, but it was not alone. Many scholars refer to the nineteenth century as the “Age of Emancipation,” as slavery was abolished throughout the world, either through peaceful methods or violent conflict. International

Harvard University Press, 1964). Any use of the term coolie in this thesis is meant to reflect the language, ideologies, and perceptions of the nineteenth century and is not meant to indicate an unfree status, or any other meaning inherent to the term, on any Chinese person or group of persons.

⁵ “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration,” *MDA*, October 24, 1869.

efforts to outlaw the slave trade began early in the century. The British Empire ended slavery in its colonies in 1833, serfdom was outlawed in Russia in 1861, and the people of many other nations brought about an end to slavery as they gained independence from colonial empires. Leaders throughout the world began to view slavery as antiquated. Christian abolitionists pressured these leaders to outlaw what they saw as a plague.

Responding to this movement, nations throughout the world transitioned from slave labor to free labor in varying ways and with different results. In Rebecca Scott's juxtapositional study of Louisiana and Cuba after emancipation, she describes the variance of possibilities resulting from the same general event (i.e. emancipation) as "degrees of freedom." Scott argues that "two broadly similar systems can evolve over time into dramatically different end states."⁶ The post-war period in the United States commonly known as Reconstruction (1865-1877) must be understood in this context. It was only one of many post-slavery transitional phases occurring throughout the world in the nineteenth century.

Considering Reconstruction as a transition from slave labor to free labor, leads one to question the legitimacy of the beginning and end dates of 1865 and 1877. Eric Foner and others have located the beginning of Reconstruction earlier during the Civil War, seeing this time period as the beginning of the transition from slavery to free labor.⁷ Others like David Blight and Steven Hahn have called these dates into question by

⁶ Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 6.

⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Updated ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), xxv.

locating the end of Reconstruction many decades later and even calling into question the use of such a demarcation as “Reconstruction.” Hahn argues that scholars use such terms because they “comport with the frames defined by conventional national political narratives.”⁸

The complete, and rather sudden, abolition of slavery by a conquering federal government left Southern planters embittered and desperate for a means of reestablishing control of labor and production on their plantations. The federal government’s restrictions on Chinese immigration throughout the 1870s, as well as state and local resistance from other Southerners and Chinese laborers, denied planters the use of significant sources of Chinese labor. Thus the story of Chinese labor in the South ends in the early 1870s, long before the definitive Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted Chinese immigration nationally.

Southern planters and reformers in favor of Chinese labor were not only hindered by laws and regulations from the federal government, but also by those looking to reform American society and its individuals. Susan Pearson has argued that the post-war period, rather than being *laissez faire*, was actually a time of intense regulation. She refers to this as “statebuilding,” when “moral reformers” formed temperance societies, expanded religious institutions, reformed marriage and ideals of domesticity, and instituted strict

⁸ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4-5. For more on this issue of dates and the demarcation of Reconstruction, see Thomas J. Brown, “Introduction,” in *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States*, ed. Thomas J. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

and pervasive racial codes like segregation and anti-miscegenation laws.⁹ Resistance to Chinese labor was part of this statebuilding. Chinese workers were portrayed as non-Christian heathens and a people prone to despotic influences. Moral reformers also pointed out that most Chinese immigrants were single men without families, which indicated a susceptibility to depravity. Southern planters and reformers countered these attacks by arguing that Chinese workers would instead be influenced by American ideals of republicanism and Christianity.

Chapter I looks at the movement for Chinese labor, specifically in Memphis and the Mississippi Valley. This chapter centers on the defense of Chinese labor by the *Memphis Daily Appeal* and its planter allies, ending with the Memphis Labor Convention in 1869. Chapter II describes the end of the movement for Chinese labor in the South as the *Appeal* and its planter allies were submerged under anti-Chinese sentiment. After these advocates lost the support of Tennessee lawmakers and other influential Southerners throughout the region, the movement was abandoned.

Chinese labor in the South never came to fruition as it did in other parts of the United States and in many places throughout the world. Though the South experienced a similar condition of emancipation during war that other nations and regions experienced, the particular circumstances it encountered as it reintegrated with the United States meant that it did not make significant use of Chinese labor. The fact that Chinese labor was considered, and even occurred in some places, in the Southern United States, should not come as a surprise to those familiar with larger events in the post-emancipation world.

⁹ Susan Pearson, "A New Birth of Regulation: The State of the State after the Civil War," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 3 (September 2015): 424-25.

Chinese labor was used by many planter societies attempting to wrestle with the loss of slavery. The Southern push for Chinese labor and its ultimate failure, demonstrate how the United States is both exceptional and typical in its response.

Chinese labor, as coolie labor, was a way for many in the early nineteenth century to project their desires regarding slavery, labor, and progress. Most nineteenth century opponents of slavery found it anachronistic, and opposed to progress and modernity. However, the reactions to coolie labor complicate the proslavery/antislavery debate. Chinese coolie labor was a way for many slaveowners to combat the uncertainties and potential losses due to emancipation. For example, the British Empire compensated its slaveowners in the West Indies for their losses. For a few decades, the British even supported the importation of Chinese labor. There was no bloody war in Jamaica or Barbados that brought about an abolition of slavery, but an economic agreement between the authorities and planters.¹⁰ American defenders of slavery pointed to the hypocrisy of the British who fought to put an end to slavery throughout the globe, but made use of coolies in their colonies. George Fitzhugh, one of the most ardent of slavery's defenders, wrote in 1857 that "the Abolitionists will probably succeed in dissolving the Union...but they should recollect that whilst they are engaged in this labor of love, Northern and English merchants are rapidly extending and increasing slavery, by opening daily new markets for the purchase and sale of Coolies."¹¹ However, many abolitionists were quick

¹⁰ The British Empire used an apprenticeship system to transition from slave labor to free labor in its colonies. For more on this, see Kathleen Mary Butler, *Economics of Emancipation: Jamaica and Barbados, 1823-1843* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

¹¹ George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1857), 337.

to condemn the trade as well. Edgar Holden of *Harper's Weekly*, a staunchly abolitionist paper, published several reports describing the horrific conditions of the coolie trade.¹²

In the United States, emancipation was thrust upon slaveowners who were unwilling to accept that slavery was an outdated system. Most of these planters continued, with some success, to argue that slavery was a system capable of functioning effectively in a modern industrial society.¹³ Antebellum slaveholders had believed that slavery would be improved and vindicated by the Civil War and a Confederate victory. However, Northern Republicans, along with many observers throughout the world, saw the outcome of the Civil War (after 1863, at least) as a necessary step in eliminating a foreign and destructive system of labor.¹⁴ After the Civil War ended, and Southern slaveholders were defeated, much of the impetus behind their promotion of Chinese labor was to counter the schemes of Northern Republicans and their politicized freedmen allies. Considering this, it would be more appropriate to associate the desires of Southern planters with Cuban planters, which Matthew Pratt Guterl and others have done.

According to Guterl, southern slaveholders before the Civil War were part of a transatlantic “fraternity” of slaveholders who were connected by “institutions, cultures, and ‘structures of feeling’ that were not contained by the nation-state.” Despite these

¹² Edgar Holden, “A Chapter on the Coolie Trade,” *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, June 1864.

¹³ For more on the compatibility of slavery with modern industrialism and capitalism, see *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*, ed. L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ For more on the international context of the American Civil War and emancipation, see Andre M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Timothy Mason Roberts. *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

bonds of affinity that Southern planters felt they shared with Cuban planters, the use of coolies was a point of divergence upon which Southern planters staked a claim of superiority.¹⁵ After the war, Southerners in favor of Chinese labor vilified Cuban planters for using coolies. Moon-Ho Jung argues in his book *Coolies and Cane* that, “after 1865, those who had been among the most vehement critics of coolieism, slavery’s defenders, became its fervent champions.” On the contrary, this thesis finds that by 1869, many Southern planters in favor of using Chinese workers drew a clear distinction between coolie labor and free labor, advocating the latter. In advocating this free labor, they pointed to the contract as proof.

During the Civil War, in 1862, the Lincoln administration passed an “anti-coolie law” as part of a desire on the part of Northern Republicans to eliminate all forms of slavery. However, the law was put in place at a time when few Southerners were actively seeking Chinese labor or coolie labor in any form. As a result the wording of the law was ambiguous and did not define what exactly a coolie was. The law was a response to the internationally criticized coolie trade taking place in the Caribbean and South America, and was meant to prohibit the involvement of American ships and ship captains. It did not prescribe limitations on the use of Chinese labor in the United States. While Jung’s claim

¹⁵ Many in the United States, North and South, argued for the annexation of Cuba throughout the nineteenth century. Before the Civil War and emancipation in the United States, Southern slaveowners observed systems of slavery in Cuba with some admiration, leading the more disillusioned to abandon their home country and move there. However, many also noted practices of “miscegenation,” a lack of clear white supremacy, and other perceived inferiorities of Cuban society. The use of Chinese labor as coolie labor was one of many noted inferiorities of Cuba, and ironically many Southern proslavery observers opposed Cuban planters’ use of coolies as an evil, which further complicates the abolition and proslavery debate. Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1-2, 15, 28-29; and Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 32-33.

that the defenders of slavery inverted their arguments is a matter of contention, he demonstrates the fact that this “anti-coolie law” was a product of the coolie trade in the Caribbean, not the Chinese immigration taking place in California. According to Jung, “Asian migrants had already become a fixture along the West Coast for close to two decades, also suffering under the racial epithet *coolies*, but they had been generally divorced from the debates on coolie shipments to the Caribbean that had led to the federal law against the coolie trade.”¹⁶

When most historians describe Chinese labor in the United States during the nineteenth century, the emphasis is typically placed on the West Coast, specifically California. This is justifiable considering the relative number of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the area, and the effect of anti-Chinese popular opinion on the nation in the 1860s and 1870s. Coolie labor, prostitution, and other forms of labor in the region were seen as products of racially inferior Chinese immigrants and threats to the white population of the United States.¹⁷ The Naturalization Act of 1870, the Page Law of 1875, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 resulted primarily from the influence of leaders from the West Coast. These laws were passed in the name of freedom and were defended as a means to preserve American society and free labor. They were not in reaction to a coolie trade in the Atlantic, but in reaction to various forms of contract labor in the West, which were perceived as unfree coolie labor.¹⁸ As is the case with other issues, the

¹⁶ Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 75.

¹⁷ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 3-6, 10-12.

¹⁸ Historians in the twentieth century have supported the common perception that California and the western United States in the nineteenth century were inherently more “free,” than the East, especially in

nation's federal attention in the 1870s shifted from the South to the West. While the later anti-Chinese laws from the federal level were meant to hinder West Coast immigration from the Pacific, they took many of their cues from the Atlantic world's coolie trade.

The Southern United States during the 1860s and 1870s was a site of international and transhemispheric intersection at which the debates of the West Coast concerning Chinese labor met the debates of the American Mediterranean concerning coolie labor. Because of its place at this intersection, the South experienced the transition from slave labor to free labor in ways different from similar post-emancipation societies throughout the world. As the South reclaimed its place in the nation, Southern planters attempted to navigate the plethora of federal laws that emerged in an effort to wrest control from the North and restore the Southern economy to its prewar prominence. Some argued that Chinese labor was the way to do this. Southern advocates of Chinese labor argued that

regards to resisting forms of unfree labor. Much of this may be due to the rhetoric of Republican "Free Soilers" that dominated the political realm during the time of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and to the intransigence of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "Frontier Thesis." However, recent literature has called this line of thinking into question. One of the last influential works to argue that California or the West was inherently more "free," or opposed to forms of slavery, was Tomas Almaguer's *Racial Fault Lines*. In this work, Almaguer argues that white Californians were opposed to black workers, Chinese workers, and others on the basis that they were seen as inherently unfree. Almaguer says, "There emerged during this period a strong symbolic association between different minority groups, on the one hand, and various precapitalist economic formations on the other hand. White antipathy toward [these minorities] was typically couched within the rubric of this 'free white labor/unfree nonwhite labor' dichotomy." Tomas Almaguer *Racial Fault Lines: The Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14-15. However, Stacey Smith argues that the contract, combined with the near limitless opportunities and open geography of the West, actually produced less freedom rather than more. In her book *Freedom's Frontier*, Smith argues that California's labor systems during the nineteenth century existed on a varied scale of "bound and semi-bound" labor including "labor systems ranging from peonage, to contract labor, to prostitution." She argues that various workers from other nations, including Chinese workers, bore the signs of freedom, such as the contract or evidence of free entry into the country, but Free Soilers argued they were "coolies" and "peons" who were essentially slaves guilty of driving down the wages of white workers. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 5. Ironically, as Alexander Saxton and others have noted, white society became dependent on Chinese labor, making the Chinese workers "an indispensable enemy" to white residents of the West Coast. See Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

there would be no coolies in the South, but only free labor working under a mutually beneficial contract. In the South, they argued, Chinese workers would not be prone to heathenism and despotism as they were on the West Coast, but rather they would be uplifted, improved, and civilized.

CHAPTER I

But just when we are in this quandary, God in his wisdom, has shown us a solution of the problem, and opened up the way to an immense population—a high and a ‘celestial’ people, who are to take the place of our slaves—not as slaves, however, but as freemen.¹

—John Martin, Kentucky Delegate to the
Memphis Labor Convention, (1869).

When Martin delivered his speech in support of Chinese labor to the Memphis Labor Convention in 1869, the South had experienced four years of Northern Reconstruction. It had been four years since the South emerged defeated from the Civil War, with its vaunted system of slavery destroyed. Planters who had defended this system argued that it was capable of civilizing a race of people who they believed were naturally prone to violence and savagery. As Michael Bernath argues, few Southern defenders of slavery claimed that it was a perfect system, but rather that it was a superior system of social organization than that possessed by the North. Furthermore, these antebellum defenders argued that any flaws inherent in the system of slavery could be fixed by way of internal reform (i.e. the Confederacy), not through Northern abolitionism.² The resounding defeat of the Confederacy and its system of slavery did not necessarily alter that line of thinking, nor did it sway the commitment of Southern planters to remain free of Northern interference.

¹ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

² Michael T. Bernath, *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 43-45, 204.

The Civil War and emancipation transformed these proud and defensive planters into a bitter and desperate group that was perhaps even more hostile to Northern interference. The war created a people who were now in effect “masters without slaves.”³ These planters debated incessantly about the “labor problem” that they perceived to be a result of emancipation and Radical Reconstruction. Foner describes this “labor problem” as one arising from a clash between planters who wanted to preserve their “old forms of domination” and freedmen who wanted to “carve out the greatest possible independence for themselves and their families.”⁴ Planters complained that the black population would not work and was too involved in politics, social organizing, and religion to develop the post-war Southern economy through their labor. They believed that Northern Republicans equipped with their ideology of free labor were the behind the “Negro problem.” In addition to planters, many journalists featured their complaints and recommendations for labor reform in Southern newspapers. One group of these “journalist reformers” in Memphis, Tennessee published a regionally influential paper titled the *Daily Appeal*.

The Memphis *Daily Appeal* was a Democratic newspaper that operated between 1847 and 1886. Prior to the war, the paper remained staunchly in favor of the Confederacy, even reportedly being used to encourage Confederate troops before battle.

³ This term is credited to James Roark, who noted in 1977 that historians of the South have tended to split Southern history and the study of its planter class into two halves: prewar and postwar. Roark argued for the intellectual continuity of Southern planters saying, “to some degree, of course, wars and revolutions distort and refract traditional values and behavior, but more significantly, they magnify essentials.” James L. Roark, *Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1977).

⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 136.

Under the editorial leadership of secessionists John McClanahan and Benjamin Dill, the *Appeal* evaded Union troops, moving from city to city throughout the South, and continued to publish pro-confederate reports for the duration of the war.⁵ McClanahan and Dill died soon after the war was over and the paper passed through the hands of various owners during the late 1860s and 1870s. The two primary editors during this time were John M. Keating and Matthew Gallaway.⁶ Keating was born in Ireland and moved to the United States in 1848 after receiving an education as a printer. He worked at several different newspapers before becoming managing editor at the *Appeal*. Gallaway was First Lieutenant and aide-de-camp to General Nathan Bedford Forrest during the Civil War. Before the war, Gallaway made an offer to buy out the *Appeal* from McClanahan in 1857. After his offer was rejected, Gallaway started his own Democratic paper, the *Memphis Avalanche*, through which he attacked McClanahan for not advocating strongly enough in favor of secession.⁷ After McClanahan's death in 1866, Gallaway became editor at the *Appeal*. While Keating may have been more moderate in his political views, both he and Gallaway remained true to the *Appeal's* legacy as the

⁵ Barbara G. Ellis, *The Moving Appeal: Mr. McClanahan, Mrs. Dill, and the Civil War's Great Newspaper Run* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 1-2.

⁶ The post-war ownership of the paper, after John McClanahan died, was a matter of contention for many years. Carolina Dill, the former wife of the now deceased Benjamin Dill, attempted to take control, or perhaps maintain control, of the paper from the descendants of McClanahan. This resulted in a drawn out court case that was never officially resolved until the first decade of the twentieth century. Ellis, *The Moving Appeal*, 7, 9-10. While the activities of the "moving Appeal" during the war have garnered much attention from scholars and Confederate enthusiasts, the post-war *Appeal* lacks the same attention. Therefore it is not as clear who exactly was in control of the paper during this time. Despite this lack of specificity, the paper remained an important source of news and support for the Democratic party in the region.

⁷ Ellis, *The Moving Appeal*, 90-99; Thomas H. Baker, "Refugee Newspaper: The *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 1862-1865," *Journal of Southern History* 29, no. 3 (1963): 344; "About *Memphis Daily Appeal*," *Chronicling America*, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045160/>

“Voice of the Confederacy” as they opposed Radical Reconstruction and Northern interference in Southern labor issues. While opposition to the North may not set the *Appeal* apart from dozens of other Southern newspapers, under the editorial leadership of Gallaway and Keating, the *Appeal* remained one of the strongest journalist advocates for Chinese labor in the South for the first decade after the Civil War.

Situated on the Mississippi River and at the crossroads of the Mississippi Valley, Memphis occupied an important position from which residents with a journalistic mind for reform could pontificate on the status of Southern labor and suggest improvements. The Mississippi Valley was at the center of agricultural and industrial innovation and development. Far from being a tranquil and antiquated “dreamland” occupied by genteel masters and a contented workforce, the Mississippi Valley in the late nineteenth century was at the cutting edge of industrial agriculture and its wilderness was only commanded to produce by a ruthless extraction of labor from the population.⁸ As Sven Beckert argues in his book *Empire of Cotton*, the cotton plantations like those found in the Mississippi Valley developed into a highly specialized production area that together with global merchants and British factories, “created modern capitalism.”⁹ The *Appeal* and its readers occupied an important location amidst all of this where a diverse range of people and ideas circulated. Though it was not the only Southern paper to feature discussion concerning Chinese labor, the fact that the paper was located in this unique milieu,

⁸ “Dreamland” is from the following quote by Mark Twain, “And it [the Mississippi Valley] is all as tranquil and reposeful as dreamland, and has nothing this-worldly about it—nothing to hang a fret or a worry upon.” It is clear that Southern planters would not have agreed with this assessment in 1865. See Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1883), 568-69.

⁹ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books), 204-05, 352-53.

combined with the fact that the *Appeal* remained a consistent supporter of Chinese labor during the late 1860s and the first half of the 1870s, means the paper provides a significant window into the issue of Chinese labor in the South.

In addition to the *Appeal* and other daily newspapers, journalist reformers and planters featured their opinions in periodical magazines intended to inform Southern planters about new developments in agricultural methods and technology. These periodicals emerged during the cotton crisis of the 1830s when many in the South argued that slavery needed to be reformed. The *Southern Cultivator* and the *Rural Carolinian* are two such publications. The *Southern Cultivator* is, in the words of Michael T. Bernath, “the Confederacy’s oldest, strongest, and intellectually most impressive agricultural journal.”¹⁰ The journal did not cease publication after the war and continued to advise planters on various issues until 1872. The *Rural Carolinian* is another periodical that was devoted to advising planters of agricultural developments, and though it was relatively short-lived, it devoted a portion of its attention to the Chinese labor issue. Both of these journals present the laborers of various races as more suited to certain types of work and less suited to others. Though the *Southern Cultivator* and the *Rural Carolinian* might not be as influential and well-known as *De Bow’s Review* or the *Southern Literary Messenger*, their emphasis on improvements in agriculture make them an important source for understanding how Chinese labor in particular, and labor in general, was viewed by labor managers in terms of progress.

¹⁰ Bernath, *Confederate Minds*, 86.

Labor managers, as David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch define them, include “planters, plantation mistresses, overseers, women supervising domestic hired help, military occupation forces, foremen, guards of convicts, captains of industry, and of ships, and more.” This particular study primarily focuses on planters, but also discusses others like labor immigration agents. In the book, *The Production of Difference*, Roediger and Esch demonstrate the ways these people participated in “race management” within the structure of capitalism in order to maximize profits. They emphasize three primary “themes” concerning the role of labor managers and race management: (1) Labor managers made elaborate and competing claims as to their knowledge of racial differences that were seen as vital to managing the workplace. (2) Race management bifurcated into two parts: Race was sometimes used to play one race off of the other and was also used as a justification of the entire labor regime by claiming that the regime was necessary to improve and uplift the laborer. (3) These labor managers obsessed with creating ratios of productivity, comparing one race to the other.¹¹ Both labor managers and journalist reformers participated in these activities when discussing Chinese labor in the South.

In order to justify the labor regime as a whole, journalist reformers and labor managers argued that there was more at stake than just developing the land. It was

¹¹ Roediger and Esch apply these three themes specifically to plantation managers and slavery in the antebellum South. They then move their post-bellum emphasis to the West. However, there is no reason why these three themes would not also apply to post-bellum labor managers in the South. David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8-9, 14-15. Tomas Almaguer argues that scholarly understandings of race and labor have tended to exist along a black/white binary and have assumed that racial divisions typically coincide with distinctions of class (e.g. white slaveowner/black slave). He argues that California disproves these “simplistic assumptions.” Even in the South, these “simplistic assumptions” can be more complicated than they appear. Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 2-3.

necessary that the laborer be developed and uplifted too. This was part of the ideology of liberal empire. The British were perhaps the most self-declared practitioners of this ideology, but Americans participated as well. In terms of labor, liberal imperialism holds that laborers can be improved through ideals like the free market, contracts, and mobility, and that these ideals can and should be spread through force. These ideals were signs of progress and civilization to the nineteenth-century white Euro-American and the idea of spreading them across the globe through colonization or missionary work was popular throughout the Western world.

In the United States, Northern Republicans during Reconstruction held up the newly emancipated black worker as the ideal free labor citizen who could be put back to work on plantations through liberal reform. With the help of military occupation, Northern Republicans used tools like the Freedmen's Bureau, schools, and the Constitutional Amendment, to improve and uplift the black laborer. While the ultimate goal of Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats was the same—to compel black laborers to return to work on the plantations across the South, most Southern planters and labor reformers viewed the efforts of Northern Republicans as a politicization of black workers and a continued interference in a Southern way of life, not the development of a viable labor source. Some planters and reformers proposed ridding the South of black workers entirely, and others emphasized white immigration from the North or Europe.¹²

¹² Michael Bernath demonstrates that many antebellum intellectuals referenced a lack of immigration into the South as an advantage against the North. The South was homogenous and united; the North was a mixture of all kinds of people and therefore fragmented. After the war, this view changed as immigration was frequently sought by Southerners from various viewpoints, whether that immigration be European, Chinese, or otherwise. Bernath, *Confederate Minds*, 56.

Either way, they did not believe black workers capable of civilization without the “uplifting” bondage of slavery. Some journalist reformers and labor managers proposed a third option: importing Chinese laborers into the South in large enough numbers to either compel black southerners to work, or to replace them entirely. They proposed that a Chinese laborer, working under contract, would not only be cheap and industrious, but also docile and capable of being developed and uplifted.¹³

A Black Labor Problem and a Chinese Solution

After the Civil War ended and it was clear that slavery had been abolished in the United States, the South was faced with what some saw as, “one of the greatest problems of the age—the finding of an efficient substitute for slave labor.”¹⁴ Slaveowners in the antebellum South had used a paternalistic ideology to maintain and justify their labor power. This ideology held that black men and women were childlike and that slavery was a “positive good” in the lives of slaves. This argument served to bolster pro-slavery ideologues and buttress a system which was in reality a system that extracted the most labor possible from a group of people.¹⁵ While some elements of paternalism may have

¹³ Whatever the case might have been if Chinese coolie labor had actually replaced slave labor in the South, the importation schemes suggested by many Southern reformers and managers who argued for Chinese labor in the 1860s never fully came to fruition. A small amount of Chinese laborers did arrive in the South during this time, but they were swiftly grafted into larger populations, eventually identifying, or being identified, as either white or black. As the title of Lucy Cohen’s book phrases it, these workers and their descendants became “a people without a history.” Cohen and others have told their stories from sources produced about them and the sparse set of sources produced by them. However, this chapter will focus on the idea of Chinese coolieism in the South and how labor reformers and managers attempted to craft a labor system within a post-slavery society. See Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*.

¹⁴ Edgar Holden, “A Chapter on the Coolie Trade,” *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, June 1864.

¹⁵ Many historians have addressed the paternalist ideology of slaveowners and how this ideology formed an intellectual defense of slavery. One could begin with the work of Eugene and Elizabeth

died in the minds of planters, the dominant elements remained, one of which was the idea that planters should have absolute control over the labor force. Planters resented having to negotiate with their former slaves in a free labor market, a relationship which planters insisted that black men and women were not capable of operating in.¹⁶ Therefore some proposed an outside migrant labor force in the form of Chinese coolies. These Chinese laborers could undercut black laborers through competition or possibly even replace them. They could also return some of the control the planters had lost. The years 1865-1868 mark a time of bitterness and frustration more than deliberate planning in terms of Chinese labor. However these years reveal a great deal about what planters and journalist reformers were seeking.

Many Southern labor reformers and managers thought that the importation of Chinese coolies into the South would solve the problems with black labor by creating competition with black workers. The *Appeal* featured an article from the New Orleans *Picayune* which complained that Southern plantations were “untilled and unoccupied” and presented the importation of coolies as a way to encourage the freedmen to work. The *Picayune* went on to say that the importation of coolies “would secure to our people the wholesale influence, now greatly needed, of competition to operate on our freedmen in securing from them more regular and efficient labor than can at present be expected of

Genovese who together and separately have written a multitude of works. Also, Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South 1840-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). For more recent works on the topic, see Michael O’Brien *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

¹⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 130-32.

them.”¹⁷ In the Southern view, black workers were under the influence of Northern Republicans who were using them for their own political ends. Under this influence, argued many observers, black workers simply needed competition to return them to the state of efficiency that they had possessed during slavery. The *Appeal* featured this article to argue that planters should not expect efficient work from the freedmen they employed as long as they were operating under the influence of the Northern Republicans. In 1867, John Burnside, one of the wealthiest antebellum planters in the South, voiced his support of this plan saying that competition with coolies would “bring the niggers to their senses.”¹⁸ As a Southern labor manager and former slave owner, Burnside believed that black laborers now lacked the energy and efficiency that they had possessed under slavery and proposed that Chinese laborers would improve their condition by freeing them from the stupor of Northern interference.

The *Appeal* argued that the importation of coolies would diminish the demand for “negro labour,” and make it the “slave of capital.” The paper argued that the landowners of the South should “dispense with negro labour” as soon as possible because the work of Northern Republicans had made them “perfectly worthless” as laborers. Coolies would either encourage black laborers to work, or perhaps make them flee North from reduced wages, in which case the North would soon grow “sick of the Negro.”¹⁹ In the immediate

¹⁷ “Proposed Importation of Coolies in the South,” *MDA*, November 19, 1865.

¹⁸ Quoted in Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 86.

¹⁹ “Labour,” *MDA*, April 24, 1867; Even Choy Chew remarked that Chinese workers who went to the South would be in “competition with the negro population.” Both Chew and Southern labor commentators agreed that the importation of Chinese laborers would result in competition. However, Chew saw this as an adverse factor when considering the condition of Chinese labor in the South, while Southern

aftermath of the war, the *Appeal* was concerned with the deleterious effects of emancipation on black labor. Countering the effects of Northern Republicanism in the South was the primary objective of the editors.

J.A. Craig, a formerly enslaved man, spoke out against the plan to import coolies at a “Radical” meeting in New Orleans. He claimed that coolies were “ignorant beings, particularly as regards our peculiar civilization” and that they would come into “direct conflict with the natural tillers of the soil.” Appealing to white labor managers’ sensibilities, Craig argued that black men were naturally suited to perform the agricultural work of the South. Craig received a response from the *Western Democrat*: “If the colored people don’t want to lose their places as laborers, they must pay more attention to work and less to politics. If Negroes do not discharge their contracts faithfully, it may be expected that a different class of laborers will be introduced in the South.”²⁰ While clearly a threat directed at black laborers like Craig, the response also reveals the concern held by Southern journalists that black laborers were being used as pawns of the Northern Republicans. One obvious course of action from this line of reasoning would be to find a “different class of laborers,” i.e. Chinese coolies, who would not be susceptible to political influence and thereby remain efficient in performing their duties.

Southern planters and journalist reformers recognized that black men had gained freedom from slavery. But what did that freedom entail? The *Appeal* argued that black

labor reformers saw it as a way to improve the efficiency of black labor. “Chinese Immigration,” *Wilmington Journal*, August 27, 1869.

²⁰ “City Snobism,” *Western Democrat*, November 12, 1867.

workers were exercising their freedom in such a way that they were avoiding work. The *Appeal* reasoned that the South needed a massive importation of Chinese labor to counter this most egregious problem brought about by emancipation. “Import half a million of coolies” the *Appeal* argued, “Then the negro *must* work, *if he can get work*, or starve, instead of hanging around towns, attending political meetings, and becoming a general nuisance.”²¹ Black workers had freedom, but for planters, this freedom was only a freedom to work. The *Appeal* argued that Chinese labor was the solution to what its editors saw as two of the most detrimental and interconnected effects of Reconstruction: Northern Republican interference and black efforts to carve out economic independence.

The transition from slavery to free labor was not unique to the Southern United States, but what was unique was the support that freedpeople received from Northern Republicans. Emancipated men and women throughout the western hemisphere made the transition from slavery to free labor by abandoning the plantation and taking up subsistence-oriented labor through which they could own their own land and provide directly for their families. Because this largely aligned with Republican free-labor ideology in the United States, Northern Republicans attempted to aid freedpeople by developing and uplifting them through such efforts as the Freedmen’s bureau. Other emancipated men and women throughout the Americas rarely had the opportunity to take advantage of similar support systems and often found themselves in direct conflict with their former owners.²²

²¹ “Labour,” *MDA*, April 24, 1867. (Italics by the original author)

²² Foner, *Reconstruction*, 133-34. See also Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

Foner argues that these black workers who transitioned to subsistence-oriented farming were the primary targets of attacks by planters who needed workers to maintain their plantations.²³ The *Appeal* featured the testimony of one “intelligent planter” who complained that black laborers refused to work during critical periods. He complained that he was “forced to employ other labor” amounting to forty workers who picked “in three months what ten would have picked before the war.” This planter believed that the lack of efficiency was due to emancipation and Northern Reconstruction efforts. “His head is wool gathering about politics and political meetings;” argued the planter, “he only thinks of party organization, and, resting in the midst of rapidly growing grass, upon the handle of his hoe, he pictures out some happy land of Canaan, where labor is unknown.” It was not “laziness” or lack of work on the part of the freedmen that troubled planters like this one, who claimed, “The negro now won’t do.” The issue was the labor that freedmen chose to do.²⁴

Journalist reformers were keenly aware of how much the South was dependent on its plantation economy and the labor required to maintain such an economy. One journalist for the Charleston *Daily News* remarked, “In the South our dependence is on Negro labor, and the Negroes... become less numerous every day. We have not now more than one half of the labor force that we had in 1860, and coolie labor is all that we have to look to as the means of increasing the yield of cotton and rice”²⁵ Whether by

²³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 133.

²⁴ “Immigration: How Shall it be Encouraged?” *MDA*, August 14, 1867.

²⁵ “What will they Cost,” Anderson *Intelligencer* (quoting from Charleston *Daily News*), July 8, 1869.

actually moving out of the South, or by moving into another form of labor, the black labor force upon which planters had once been dependent was no longer available after 1865 as it had been. Though the article did not explicitly mention why coolie labor was better, it implied that it was preferable to be dependent on a labor force that could be controlled.

After featuring the complaints of the “intelligent planter,” who claimed to represent “ten thousand” like him, the *Appeal* suggested the immigration of laborers to the South. Among other suggestions, coolies from China were presented as a cheap and efficient alternative to dealing with the freedmen who were now “infected with the Freedmen’s Bureau.” The *Appeal* also made it clear in 1867 that they wanted not only efficient labor, but non-black voters in the South. White voters who would oppose the “Bureau-spoiled Negro” were preferable, and the editors of the *Appeal* even offered to sell their own land to white migrant settlers. However, the *Appeal* also deemed coolie labor suitable for these needs. Realizing the ultimate goal of the Northern Republicans was universal male suffrage, the *Appeal* reasoned “If congress insists on making voters of them, *they’ll* not vote against their employers.”²⁶

One can see the survival of paternalism in the early reports of the *Appeal* as it encountered the free labor ideology being imposed on the South by Northern Republicans. Black laborers were increasingly portrayed in written accounts as opponents, rather than dependents. However, the *Appeal* argued with a patronizing tone, “It is easy to foresee that the whole race is doomed to ultimate extermination: and that

²⁶ “Immigration: How Shall it be Encouraged?” *MDA*, August 14, 1867.

other laborers must take the place of free- negroes.” Echoing the beliefs of planters across the South who believed that black men were incapable of operating the political and economic landscape of freedom, the *Appeal* claimed, “Indeed, the men are to be hereafter too much occupied with the heavy responsibilities of freemen exercising the right of suffrage to have any time to devote to the unimportant business of earning a living.”²⁷ Without slavery’s “uplifting” influence, and under the “heavy responsibilities” dumped on them by Northern Republicans, the *Appeal* and many labor managers in the South felt that “free-negroes” could not thrive. If these conditions were not altered, they argued, the freedmen would perish.

In 1867, the plan to import Chinese labor into the South was still in an infantile state, but it was readily used by the *Appeal* to point out the hypocrisy of Northern Republicans, some of which advocated laws forbidding the entry of coolies. This report from the *Appeal* shows the continuity of planter thought before and after the war, as Chinese labor continued to be used to attack the North and the contradictions of its schemes:

What rightful power has congress to forbid this? Do we not want more citizens and voters? Why should not the Massachusetts marine once engaged in the slave-trade, now engage in the profitable business of bringing over *free* Africans, Malays, Coolies and Hottentots? What is to prevent our planters hiring them, and contracts with them being sold?” Why should not a larger infusion of the rich blood of the tropical races be desirable in the cold and frosty North?²⁸

²⁷ “Lascars and Coolies,” *MDA*, February 6, 1867.

²⁸ “Lascars and Coolies,” *MDA*, February 6, 1867.

Howard University, which was opened in 1867, was one of many important educational institutions made available to freedpeople in the South by Northern efforts. About two months before Howard University opened, the *Appeal* claimed, “all their Howards and preachers cannot change African instincts, tastes, and ideas.” Just as the Freedmen’s Bureau was seen by journalist reformers and planters as a something that hindered the efficient labor of black workers, they believed that educational institutions were also responsible for encouraging black laborers toward idleness. “The great study and ambition of the race is to avoid labor,” argued the *Appeal*, “Their African instincts and radical teaching are fast leading them to extermination.” African instincts were best molded through labor, white Southerners held, not radical teachings and education. “Large farms and coolie labor may save the land,” reasoned the *Appeal*.²⁹ It was not only the perceived inefficiencies of the black race that drove Southern planters toward a desire for coolie labor, but the Reconstruction efforts of Northern Republicans who sought to uplift the laborer through politicization.³⁰ The *Appeal* reasoned that coolie labor, meaning Chinese contract labor, might be the answer because the Chinese worker would be free from Northern radicalism and uplifted through the power of the contract.

In addition to seeing Chinese coolie labor as more efficient, many journalist reformers reported how much less expensive it could be. A report from the New Orleans *Crescent* outlined the estimated cost of importing coolie laborers from Cuba to Louisiana

²⁹ “General Business,” *MDA*, January 24, 1867.

³⁰ It is best to avoid using racism as a simple answer for why people in the nineteenth century, or any century for that matter, did certain things, such as importing or rejecting Chinese laborers. As Eric Foner puts it, racism should never be seen as an independent “deus ex machina,” but rather an intrinsic part of the process of historical development, which affected and was affected by changes in the social and political order.” Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxiv.

saying it would cost from “fifty to sixty dollars” with monthly wages as low as twelve dollars. The *Crescent* reported their food intake as “two and a half pounds of pork a week and ten ounces of rice daily.”³¹ The *Appeal* found that “Negroes, in some vicinities, were already demanding \$40 dollars a month.” In comparison, the paper stated, “The coolie will work for less than half that, and it costs much less to feed him.”³²

The *Southern Cultivator* also advised planters that coolie workers required far less food for a superior amount of work when it claimed that coolies, “subsisting on rice, can outwork our bacon-fed negroes.”³³ These reports are examples of the emergence of modern capitalist logic and the mechanization of the worker. The worker in the free labor market was viewed in competitive terms. The *Appeal* is even careful to note what Chinese coolies did with their spare time. “They are the most frugal and ingenuous people in the world—are never idle, but have fish traps and game traps set in every possible locality, and are employed during their leisure hours in making toys, domestic implements, bird snares, or fishing nets.”³⁴ This is in stark contrast to black freedmen who the *Appeal* described as not only less efficient, but also prone to involvement in political meetings and organizations which they were deemed racially unsuitable for.

³¹ “Weekly Review,” *MDA*, April 3, 1867.

³² “Labour,” *MDA*, April 24, 1867. Much of the information on wages and costs at this point was likely speculation and hearsay. However, it turned out to be mostly consistent with later reports at the Memphis Labor Convention and similar meetings, such as those from Butler Anderson, who employed Chinese workers in his mining operations. Anderson claimed at a preliminary meeting to the convention that the Chinese laborer would work for “one-fourth to one-third of a white man’s wages.” “John Chinaman,” *MDA*, July 1, 1869.

³³ “Rural Hygiene,” *Southern Cultivator* 19 (January, 1861): 54. accessed December 20, 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/southerncultivat00augu#page/n5/mode/1up>

³⁴ “Weekly Review,” *MDA*, April 3, 1867.

Chinese coolies were an alternative to this situation as they were reported to spend even their free time engaged in some form of beneficial labor.

Early proponents argued that coolie laborers could be more efficient, and less expensive than black workers who were carving out a measure of economic independence in the free labor market with the help of their Northern allies. However, a third major issue involved the status of the Chinese laborer once he was here. As James Loewen argued in his book *The Mississippi Chinese*, frequent references in Southern writings of the 1860s to the apolitical nature of the coolie as a non-citizen indicated a belief held by many that the adoption of coolie labor would be a “step back toward the more docile labor conditions of slavery times and would also destroy all arguments about the indispensability of Negro labor to the Southern way of life.”³⁵ Evidence of this can be found in the assurance given to planters by the *Rural Carolinian* that there was “little fear of any of them troubling themselves about political matters, or becoming naturalized citizens of America.”³⁶

The *Appeal* presented an alternative vision of Chinese labor, one that involved a politically active, albeit controllable, coolie labor force. One 1867 article in the *Appeal* grumbled that the states should have held out longer against federal pressure, instead of “caving in” so quickly. It pointed to the thousands of young Southern men at the end of the war who would have soon reached voting age and crushed “radicalism and negroism together.” The article asked its readers, “Could we not have endured until that day?” The

³⁵ James Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 23-24.

³⁶ “The Coolie and Coolie Labor,” *Rural Carolinian* 1, no. 3 (December, 1869), 133.

article closed with a second question, but one that looked forward: “Can we not import coolies and make voters of them?”³⁷ Another article in the *Appeal* published a few weeks later answered this question and argued that since the coolies who were to be imported would be counted under the new constitutional amendments as citizens, they could help restore the power of the Southern states through increased representation in Congress. The *Appeal* recognized that even though the wealthy planters might be disfranchised for their service to the Confederacy, Chinese coolies, together with the “several hundred thousand young men annually coming of age,” could “soon revolutionize the South and restore it to political power.”³⁸ This plan rested on the assumption that these coolie laborers would ally themselves politically with their employers, as well as future generations of white Southern men. The *Appeal* remained confident that they would and noted, “it will be a new thing in the world if their employers cannot control their votes.”³⁹ Another article from the *Appeal* claimed, “If congress insists on making voters of them, they’ll not vote against their employers.”⁴⁰

The threat of using Chinese laborers for political ends was not merely a Southern delusion. In fact, the growth of the Chinese population in the Western states, combined with the many propositions for Chinese importation to the South, created quite a stir in New England during the late 1860s. The *Daily Phoenix* in Columbia, South Carolina reported that there were plans to carve up Massachusetts, Maine, or some of the other

³⁷ “Festina Lente,” *MDA*, April 17, 1867.

³⁸ “Labour,” *MDA*, April 24, 1867.

³⁹ “Labour,” *MDA*, April 24, 1867.

⁴⁰ “Immigration: How Shall it be Encouraged?” *MDA*, August 14, 1867.

New England states in order to provide more representation in the Senate to combat what some saw as a “political deluge” that would “submerge” the politicians of New England.⁴¹ The nature of the Chinese laborer as a potential citizen of the United States formed the crux around which arguments swirled in later years. But during the initial years of Reconstruction in the South, less concern was devoted to the idea of a Chinese citizen worker. Instead, the emphasis was on temporary contract workers who could improve the Southern landscape without being influenced by Northern Republicans.

Opposition and Evidence

While Chinese coolie labor appealed to journalist reformers at the *Appeal* and to many planters who wanted to revive their overgrown plantations, some found this option less than desirable in the immediate years after the Civil War.⁴² For example, one “old South Carolina planter” argued that the introduction of coolie labor would raise production of cotton, dropping its price, which would only profit the mills and factories of the North. In fact, he went as far as to say the whole idea for Chinese coolie importation might be another scheme of Northern invention intended to hurt the white Southern elite.⁴³ Overproduction was, of course, a serious problem, especially for an

⁴¹ “New England Getting Alarmed,” *Columbia Daily Phoenix*, July 27, 1869.

⁴² One brief blurb in the *Appeal* in 1865 had the following to say about coolies: “The coolies are as profligate and licentious; extremely loose in morals; possessed of most disgusting and demoralizing practices, regulated by no principle but selfish interest, and restrained only by the fear of condign punishment from the perpetration of crime.” There is little in the way of explanation in this brief claim and it does not describe any particular group. Future reports from the *Appeal* counter this view, even in that same year. It is likely that this does not reflect the stance of the *Appeal*. “Untitled,” *MDA*, November 26, 1865.

⁴³ “Correspondence of Southern Enterprise,” *Southern Enterprise*, August 4, 1869.

economy dependent on a small number of export crops, primarily cotton. In fact overproduction did occur at various times in the South. While it is unlikely that Northerners planned to import Chinese labor to hurt the South, fear of overproduction, combined with resistance to Northern interference, led this planter to oppose Chinese labor.

The same “old South Carolina planter” thought that white workers used the theory of miasmas to avoid work by having other races work for them. Most nineteenth-century scientists and medical professionals believed that poisonous gasses, or miasmas, abounded in the hot and humid plantations of the South, which led to various diseases, such as malaria. Furthermore, it was commonly believed that certain races were more suited to work in these areas than others, the white race being considered the most prone to these miasmas. Solomon Samson Satchwell, a leading figure in nineteenth-century American medicine, was known for his work in preventing malaria. Like most medical professionals of the nineteenth century, he held to the miasmatic theory. Satchwell delivered a report to a labor convention held in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1868, in which he advocated for the Southern immigration of various groups of foreign laborers from Switzerland, Germany, and Great Britain, but also from China. The Chinese worker, he claimed, would be best suited to certain work in the South where their “remarkable powers of endurance and adaptability to the malaria of our rice fields and swamps, render them desirable at this time.”⁴⁴ The “old South Carolina planter” thought this miasma argument was nothing more than white men in the South trying to avoid honest work, and

⁴⁴ *Wilmington Journal*, November 28, 1868.

that they could easily provide the labor the South needed if they stopped seeking easy professions such as that of a shopkeeper or preacher. He asked, “Do we want Chinese coolies?” “No sir,” he answered. “Cannot we live without the Negro?” he asked. “Shame on the man who says not. Send the poor white men of the country here...and I will guarantee each one of them a clear profit”⁴⁵ Rather than seeking to shift planter dependence from one group to another, this planter wanted to free white planters from any of the other races and instead employ poor white men on the plantations. While a few planters may have argued that the miasmas were mythical, most in the nineteenth-century held to their existence, and this no doubt helped to maintain or reinforce the belief in a non-white plantation work-force.

Though the *Appeal* remained generally in favor of Chinese labor in the decade after the Civil War, there were times when it questioned how feasible the plan was. One report from the *Appeal* in 1867 claimed that coolies would require too much “attention and super-intendance.” It stated, “The coolie fauna can do a great deal of work, so can the ant, but neither will do ours.” The *Appeal* argued that it was the role of the United States, its duty even, to “plant roses where the thistle grew—to make gardens of wildernesses, and spread Utopias over the ruins of fallen countries.”⁴⁶ However, the editors questioned the usefulness of the coolie in completing the “multitudinous small duties of our life and farming.” Although large scale importation of coolie labor might be beneficial to the

⁴⁵ “Correspondence of Southern Enterprise,” *Southern Enterprise*, August 4, 1869.

⁴⁶ “Labor,” *MDA*, July 16, 1867.

larger plantations, the *Appeal* questioned whether the Chinese laborer was the most efficient means to other ends:

In the wholesale planting referred to as promising profit from the coolie, success looks essentially in the greatest aggregate of small effects, regardless (more especially in the case of the cheap coolie) of the numbers required to produce it, while in the nature and diversity of our pursuits, success necessarily balances between greatest efficiency and fewest numbers.⁴⁷

Much like the *Appeal*, Arthur Chaler remained hopeful, if not a little ambivalent, about the prospect of Chinese labor in the South. In 1867, Arthur Chaler, a planter from Louisiana, reported that his coolie laborers were working out well on his plantation. He stated that they were “good laborers and sober men.” But Chaler also noted that coolie labor was only possible if the contract was strictly followed by the employer, especially in regards to the provision of rations and payment.⁴⁸ Chaler realized that there would be no return to the system of slavery in which the master held absolute control and responsibility for the care of his workers. For Chaler and other planters, the contract was the modern answer to the question of control in a free labor market. Another report from the New Orleans *Crescent* claimed that coolies imported from Cuba were “never idle” and were “the most frugal and ingenious people in the world.” The *Appeal* featured the *Crescent*’s report, which found that planters in the Red River region near Natchitoches were satisfied with their coolie laborers who possessed both “industry” and

⁴⁷ “Labor,” *MDA*, July 16, 1867.

⁴⁸ “General Business,” *MDA*, February 21, 1867.

“tractability.”⁴⁹ In 1867, positive reports from planters served to bolster the *Appeal*’s faith in Chinese labor.

The *Appeal*’s Memphis editors looked beyond the Mississippi Valley for confirmation of the viability of Chinese coolie labor. They reported on “experiments in Cuba” which proved to them that coolie labor was “six times more remunerative than slave labor on that Island.”⁵⁰ In the nineteenth-century, it was rational that progress could be quantified in such a way that Chinese workers, operating under a more modern system of contract labor, could be measured as six times more profitable. The editors of the *Appeal*, like many disfranchised Southerners, looked to the Caribbean for an answer to their post-emancipation labor problems. After all, many Caribbean islands had already experienced emancipation in one form or another, and some like Cuba, were experiencing a violent transition from slavery to something else, just as the United States was. Southern labor managers and reformers were well aware of these emancipatory labor transitions. As Guterl states, “Southerners thus viewed the American Mediterranean with a mixture of fear and excitement.”⁵¹ From the relatively calm emancipations in the British West Indies, to the revolutionary and frightening liberation of Haiti by its former slave population, southerners were aware of the fact that they were not alone in their transitional labor problem. In the 1860s, Cuba was likewise experiencing violent upheavals in its slave labor system as continual slave revolts were suppressed by planters

⁴⁹ “Weekly Review,” *MDA*, April 3, 1867.

⁵⁰ “Coolie Labor,” *MDA*, May 25, 1869.

⁵¹ Guterl, *American Mediterranean*, 33.

and military force. Cuban planters also used supplementary coolie labor to maintain control as well, and the *Appeal* reported on the success of this labor. One Southern planter family did more than just observe and report on experiments with Chinese labor in Cuba.

Eliza Ripley McHatton grew up in a wealthy family in the South during the antebellum years of slavery. Along with her husband, she operated a plantation in Louisiana until the Civil War broke out in 1861. After war had been declared, McHatton and her husband fled to Cuba, where they hoped to replicate their success as planters in a land not all that dissimilar to their own. In Cuba, McHatton and her husband purchased a sugar plantation called Desengaño. Ironically, McHatton encountered many of the same labor shortages in Cuba as post-Civil War planters in the American South. In order to keep the plantation in operation, McHatton and her husband decided to employ Chinese contract workers, alongside slave labor. McHatton described the Chinese workers as having a “grotesque appearance, beardless, and with long pig-tails, loose blouses and baggy breeches.” To McHatton, the entirely male work force all “looked like women.” McHatton compared them to Native Americans, saying they were “stolid, quiet, and undemonstrative as Indians.”⁵² This comparison to the more familiar Native American people of the United States was likely due to the assertion by white Americans that Native men and women did not occupy proper gender roles and societal functions. For example, Native men did not till the land and “take dominion over it,” and thus white Americans felt justified in owning it. In most cases, Freedmen shared this devotion to

⁵² Eliza McHatton, *From Flag to Flag: A Woman's Experiences and Adventures in the South during the War, in Mexico, and in Cuba*. (New York: D. Appleton, 1889), 166, 170.

land ownership and farming along with white Americans. Thus in the white American view, black men were more qualified as “men” than Native American men. The extent of Chinese masculinity was a matter of some debate as McHatton was not the only one to reference a supposedly ambiguous gender among Chinese men.⁵³

McHatton and her husband recognized that the workers were in no shape to begin working right away, and so they provided what they considered ample time to become rested and acclimated to their surroundings. However, the new workers did not settle in easily. McHatton could not understand why the Chinese workers seemed discontent. She complained that they were becoming quite a burden on herself and her husband.⁵⁴

Not long after the Chinese workers were hired on the plantation, they rebelled and attacked McHatton and her family. McHatton described the attackers’ bodies as “swarthy.” She described their attacks as “savage impetuosity,” and when they shouted she imagined they were “yelling like demons.” Some newspapers used similar words and phrases to describe coolie attacks and uprisings. *Harper’s Weekly* reported extensively on one mutiny in 1864, describing the coolie attackers as “wretches,” “miscreants,” and “fiends,” and their shouts as “demoniac shrieks.”⁵⁵ Anti-slavery journalists and abolitionist ministers labeled the coolie trade a sin and just as much an evil as the slave trade. Theodore Parker, a northern minister concerned with the sins of his nation’s citizens, argued in the 1850s that the coolie trade was a smear on Christian civilization

⁵³ For more on perceptions of masculinity and Chinese immigrants, see Albert J. Lee and Valerie Matsumoto, “*A Legacy of Deviance: Historical Constructions of Chinese Immigrant Masculinity*” (UCLA: UCLA Center for the Study of Women, 2010). <http://escholarship.org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/uc/item/9ss5w4gg>

⁵⁴ McHatton, *Flag to Flag*, 171.

⁵⁵ Edgar Holden, “A Chapter on the Coolie Trade,” *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, June 1864.

and it was an evil for both the captor and the captive. Coolies were not the only ones who behaved barbarously, argued these anti-slavery groups, but also the coolie traders. Within this inhuman system, they argued, both became “wretches” and “fiends.”⁵⁶ When McHatton used the descriptions she did in the late 1860s, it was not to condemn the coolie traders, though perhaps she could have, just as American slave owners had condemned slave traders in order to exonerate themselves.⁵⁷ Instead, McHatton’s descriptions created an image of Chinese people as savages when they arrived. Her later descriptions indicated that they had become civilized after their stay at Desengaño.

Eventually the local authorities arrived and enacted punishment on the rebels who had attacked McHatton and her family. This punishment included cutting off the Chinese workers’ pigtails.⁵⁸ McHatton recorded that the Chinese “wilted” at this punishment. Even more important than the punishment, however, the local authorities asked to hear the complaints of the Chinese workers through an interpreter. After hearing these complaints, the authorities had the interpreter reread their contracts to them and then punishment was enacted. This was not slavery in the sense that the master had complete

⁵⁶ Theodore Parker, *A Revival of Religion Which We Need: A Sermon* (Boston: W.L Kent, 1858), 11.

⁵⁷ Just as slave traders sometimes received the brunt of anti-slavery attacks, rather than the slave owners, coolie traders were often singled out by abolitionist and anti-slavery publications.

⁵⁸ Chinese pigtails, or queues, were a required hairstyle for Han men under Manchurian rule in China. One could be arrested or killed for not wearing one’s hair in this style. Thus this punishment may have led many Chinese men to stay in the United States instead of returning as planned. For more on this, see Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011). According to McHatton, Chinese hair was sold as a drug in Cuba. It was said to be “shades darker than the señoritas hair.” Martha, one of the slaves owned by McHatton and her husband, gathered up the shorn hair and, as McHatton believed, made a pillow of it, or sold it to the local wealthy women in the area. McHatton, *Flag to Flag*, 172-75.

control over the worker. The contract was now the master, and the contract, argued its proponents, was a fair and just tool of a free labor society.

After the attackers were disciplined and put back to work, McHatton described the Chinese workers with admiration, remarking on their “intelligence,” as well as their “cleanliness, efficiency, and systematic methods.”⁵⁹ After undergoing the necessary crucible of punishment and contract enforcement, McHatton hereafter described Chinese workers as more capable than most of the Africans who were enslaved. After one lengthy description of the Chinese, she remarked that, “The Negroes, direct descendants of imported Africans, were more or less stupid...like dumb-driven cattle.”⁶⁰ McHatton, like many planters, must have held doubts about slavery, but still wanted to maintain the plantations and the wealth they provided. During McHatton’s experience in Cuba, she determined that coolies under contract could be a useful way to do just that.

Though most of the Chinese workers were referred to simply as coolies by McHatton, she pointed out that some of them became attached to their employers and prospered because of the “loving-kindness” their employers showed to them. She recounted that several even stayed on past their contracts, or contacted McHatton to tell of how they had prospered after returning home or seeking work elsewhere. According to

⁵⁹ McHatton, *Flag to Flag*, 175-76, 183.

⁶⁰ McHatton, *Flag to Flag*, 180, 295. McHatton does not describe her three personal house slaves, Ellie, Martha, and Zell in this manner. In fact, these three are more often referred to as friends rather than slaves. Perhaps for this older generation of planters, race was not yet an unchangeable and absolute factor for an individual, whether black or Chinese. An individual’s identity was not yet seen as inescapably determined by that individual’s race. For more on this nineteenth-century concept, see Angela Pulley Hudson, *Real Native Genius: How an Ex-Slave and a White Mormon Became Famous Indians* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

McHatton, this success was due to their time at Desengaño.⁶¹ Thus McHatton demonstrated an understanding that an individual could move beyond the status of coolie, most easily with the help of those who were in a position to “civilize” them (i.e. white planters). Through the use of contract labor, McHatton proved in her mind that some planters could have the best of both worlds: reliable and efficient labor AND an uplifting system of labor for the worker. While slavery died with the Civil War in the United States, coolieism lived on for a short time in the minds of many planters who sought to reconcile these two ideals in the form of Chinese labor. Looking to the American Mediterranean and to California, one group of Southern planters, supported by the *Memphis Appeal*, were determined in 1869 to bring a successful form of Chinese labor to the South, not as coolies, but as free contract laborers.

The Memphis Labor Convention

On July 13 of 1869, a large group of influential Southerners, labor managers, and business leaders gathered for a three-day convention in Memphis, Tennessee. Labor conventions were a common occurrence throughout Southern cities, especially after the war; however, the purpose of this particular convention was to discuss whether Chinese labor might be the solution to the problems that faced the post-slavery South. The *Appeal* noted that other states had already taken steps to import Chinese labor, specifically in

⁶¹ McHatton, *Flag to Flag*, 178-80.

Arkansas.⁶² The *Appeal* boldly claimed on the first day of the convention, “We suggest that the most important assemblage is to convene to-day that our city has ever seen.” The paper continued to campaign for the convention and its goals throughout the year of 1869. “We earnestly hope that every citizen having at heart the welfare of city, State, and section will meet to give and receive counsel,” pleaded the *Appeal*, even calling for the women of Memphis to attend, adding, “We trust that the ladies will not fail to grace the occasion with their presence. We are all interested.”⁶³

A few weeks before the convention began, several “public-spirited and influential” citizens of Memphis assembled at the city’s Chamber of Commerce to plan for the forthcoming meeting. These organizers resolved to “encourage the emigration of Chinese laborers, in large numbers, direct from China to supply the great demand now existing in the South for steady and reliable labor.”⁶⁴ One notable speaker at this meeting was Butler Anderson, whose testimony was used by the *Appeal* to create support for the convention. Anderson was a resident of the Pacific Coast and employed Chinese workers in his mining operations. He noted that they worked “steadily, conscientiously, and faithfully, without ever seeming to tire.” The *Appeal* emphasized his description of Chinese labor as productive, but also conscientious. Anderson furthermore stated that Chinese workers were “easily taught, readily accepting lessons from any who took the

⁶² “John Chinaman,” *MDA*, July 1, 1869. Ironically, the *Appeal* claimed that the convention would be “The first move towards turning the tide of Chinese Immigration hitherward” In reality, it would prove to more of a last ditch effort as the tide began to quickly turn against them.

⁶³ “The Convention To-Day,” *MDA*, July 13, 1869.

⁶⁴ “John Chinaman,” *MDA*, July 1, 1869.

pains to teach them.”⁶⁵ This emphasis on the ability to teach was no doubt meant to encourage those Southern labor managers who wanted a worker that could be improved and uplifted. But the *Appeal* also emphasized Anderson’s claim that they were temporary contract workers, which the editors used to counter fears that the Chinese population would overwhelm the South.

Anderson described the Chinese contract system as follows: “They all leave China with the expectation of returning thither; they never emigrate, never leave there to settle, and they have no disposition to colonize or purchase homesteads.”⁶⁶ This does not describe the ideal free laborer as understood and promoted by Northern Republicans, whether it be the emancipated black worker in the South, or the white settler in the West. The worker being promoted by the *Appeal* to Southern planters was a temporary contract worker who could be improved and uplifted by the United States, but not as a permanent citizen. The long nineteenth century has been called the “great age of global mobility.” The late nineteenth century in particular witnessed the most intensive period of migration with millions of workers relocating, voluntarily or otherwise, to destinations across the globe.⁶⁷ Sometimes the migration was permanent and other times only temporary, but for capitalists in industries like cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar, these workers were vital. This was possible due to the improvements in transportation like steam ships and railroads, but also it was due to the growth of free labor capitalism and its support by

⁶⁵ “John Chinaman,” *MDA*, July 1, 1869.

⁶⁶ “John Chinaman,” *MDA*, July 1, 1869.

⁶⁷ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 23.

liberal empires. Unlike the British in India who sought to directly exert their ideals through colonization, Southern planters in favor of Chinese labor aimed to exert their ideals through a migrant labor force. Unlike black emancipated workers, who involved themselves in politics and became what was perceived as a tool of Northern Republicans, Chinese migrant workers were viewed by Southern labor reformers and managers as a means of improving the South and the people of China without the unwanted influence of the North.

A business owner from Alabama wrote to the *Appeal* just before the convention began saying that that he would be “willing to take anybody...to be emancipated from the iron rule of *Scipii Africani*,” whether they be “Chinese, Tartar, Hindostanese [sic], Mongol, Bengalese” or any other race that could help the planter elite regain control of the South. He admits in his letter that he had originally been opposed to the importation schemes of the *Appeal* out of “mistaken charity” for the freedmen, but that now a “change had come over” him. This business owner, like many planters throughout the South, made a claim that he was “enslaved” to the will of the freedmen and their Northern Republican allies. Many attempts at gaining Chinese labor, or labor from other places around the globe, were spurred by a desire to regain control over the freedmen. After employing several black workers at his hotel, the Alabama business owner argued that they were impossible to control and that they had the employer “completely in their power.” The hotel owner went on to say, “You go to bed in fear and trembling, not knowing whether you will have breakfast, and dreading that you may have to cook your own dinner. So pray, Mr. APPEAL, send us a regiment of Chinese, as we are prepared to

receive them, rats and all.”⁶⁸ The *Appeal*'s inclusion of this letter in its discussion of the Chinese labor convention no doubt invited the attention of planters and business owners who sought to be “emancipated” from “*Scipii Africani*.”

A number of former Confederates appeared at the Memphis Convention, including Nathan Bedford Forrest, an outspoken proponent of Chinese immigration; Isham Harris, former governor of Tennessee and chairman of the convention; and Gideon S. Pillow, one of the principal figures in organizing the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company, which formed as a result of the convention. There were many other influential delegates to the convention from all over the South, about five hundred total.⁶⁹ The delegates met at the Greenlaw Opera House, and for the first day occupied themselves with introductory business, the appointment of committees, and general organization. It was reported that Cornelius Koopmanschap, a labor contractor who had experienced success importing Chinese workers to work on the Central Pacific Railroad, would be arriving the following day, and so the group adjourned until the following morning. However, the *Appeal* did not refrain from commenting more about the overall business of the convention. The editors stated rather defensively, “this convention is eminently one of *business*. It is not here to discuss the good or bad policy of Chinese immigration.” In other words, the question of whether Chinese immigration was a good idea or not had already been settled and it was now up to the delegates of the convention to decide the

⁶⁸ “Letter from Valhermosa Springs,” *MDA*, July 13, 1869. The portrayal of Chinese immigrants eating rats was common during this time and the name “rat eater” became synonymous with Chinese immigrants.

⁶⁹ Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 67-72.

“best and cheapest means of securing Chinese laborers.” Of course, the question had not been settled, as later opposition would prove, but for now the *Appeal*'s editors sought to discourage any dissent toward the planters and labor managers at the convention who they regarded as worthy of respect and trust. After listing several of the eminent members of the convention, the editors of the *Appeal* asked, “Is it to be supposed that such men have gone daft?... Are we no longer to have confidence in or be guided by the wisdom of the country?”⁷⁰

After reconvening for the second day of the convention, the members laid out plans to form a joint stock organization that would “bring into the country as many immigrant laborers as possible, in the shortest amount of time.”⁷¹ The committee to form the company was led by Pillow, a former slaveowner and Confederate general. He proposed that once the company was organized it would send agents to procure Chinese laborers in San Francisco where they could be attained by planters in the five states bordering the Mississippi River at thirty-three per cent less than what was possible with individual efforts alone. This stock company was organized with shares at \$100 each with a required initial investment of \$100,000 dollars. The members all agreed that they would meet again after the initial investment was met.⁷²

⁷⁰ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 14, 1869.

⁷¹ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

⁷² “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869. There seems to be no evidence that financial backing of the company was ever successful. Lennie Cribbs questions whether the Chinese Labor Convention's venture would have been successful had the timing been different. He says that by 1869 the anti-Chinese mood was too strong in the nation. While the convention's delegates might have succeeded in bringing in a few more Chinese workers, it is unlikely that a few years earlier would have made a significant difference. See Lennie Austin Cribbs, “The Memphis Chinese Labor Convention, 1869,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 37, no. 74 (1983).

Pillow guaranteed the delegates of the convention that he was “moved by no hostility” toward the freedmen of the South. He went on to say that he could not understand how this movement had anything to do with “that sentiment.” Instead it was simply a question of having the necessary amount of labor to develop the Southern landscape. “At present we produce but half a crop...and to do so we employ about two-thirds of the available Negro labor,” argued Pillow. “Having been a planter, he spoke from experience in making these statements,” said the editors of the *Appeal*, who went on to ask what these statements revealed: “What do they reveal? Plainly that just one half of the soil is in cultivation that was so before the war and that because the labor was not adequate to the demands.” The editors of the *Appeal* expanded on Pillow’s statements, saying, “The negroes have taken to other vocations also, and have left the corn and cotton fields. They have usurped the place of the white man...and have supplanted the Irish, Dutch and Germans. Our cities are full of them.” Pillow concluded his remarks on the necessities of labor by declaring, “More labor has become a necessity with us, and involves the very existence of our country; without it Memphis will dry up, our commerce will dry up, and the earth, our great mother, will cease to yield her wealth.”⁷³

In an article accompanying coverage of the convention, titled “The Effects of Population,” the *Appeal* made a revealing claim about the ultimate goals of the convention and of Chinese labor importation in general. The article began by quoting several figures that demonstrated how the North had been able to prosper at an increased rate due to the massive immigration of Europeans since the founding of the nation. The

⁷³ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

Appeal bemoaned this unfair advantage by saying, “Their [the North’s] power and position is due not to any natural advantages of soil and climate they possess, but simply to the great migration of people to their shore from Europe.” The article then went on to cite many statistics that proved how the soil and climate of the South was superior to the North and the mid-West, and that it was only lack of population that held it back from being superior to the North, and indeed to anywhere in the world. The *Appeal* contended that “The whole valley of the Mississippi, when once cleared and drained, will be found as admirably adapted to wheat growing as the valley of the Nile.”⁷⁴ In order to develop the wilderness of the Mississippi Valley, just like the Nile Delta, the *Appeal* argued that more labor was needed. “The question now for us to decide,” argued the *Appeal*, “is whether we would like to be the equal or the superior of that great country [the North].” Since the North had an abundance of labor to produce “articles for which there is little demand,” the *Appeal* encouraged the South to do as the North did. The paper declared that it had already made its stance clear that European immigration was “impracticable,” and that Chinese labor could be gained with “ease and certainty.” China was the most “wealthy and prosperous country on the globe when we consider her population,” said the *Appeal*.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ This reference was more than hyperbolic rhetoric. As Beckert demonstrates, and as nineteenth-century Memphian labor reformers probably recognized, Egypt, like the South and other cotton producing sites throughout the globe, was at the forefront of industrialization. Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xvi-xvii.

⁷⁵ “The Effects of Population,” *MDA*, July 13, 1869.

The editors of the *Appeal* further explained their lofty imperial ambitions:

Now if the opportunity were offered to the people of the South to go to China and control her commerce, superintend the construction, equipment and operation of the thousands of miles of railways necessary to so numerous a people and so large an area...in other words; to rule, govern, control, and be profited by the wealth and labor of that people, there is not a question but that we would go and take possession. That, however, is not possible, but the next thing to it is. We may move as much of the Chinese population here as we wish; we may make this great country of ours what she ought and will be—the seat of Empire on this continent. We trust that the convention to assemble to-day will make some practical and decided move in the premises before it adjourns.⁷⁶

For these labor reformers, the convention in Memphis was the beginning of a great American liberal empire, with the South at its head. But this empire did not have to directly control a foreign territory itself through colonization, but rather a segment of the emerging global labor force.

After Pillow's report on the formation of the company and the investment required, the chair of the transportation committee, H.D. Bulkley, delivered his report. Bulkley was a railroad executive and reported the prices to make contracts for Chinese laborers to be shipped to Memphis from the west coast, and then prices from Memphis to the rest of the South, whether by ship, by railroad, or by other means. The laborers would reach Memphis by rail in "lots of 100-500, \$55 each" or "Above 500, \$50." After reaching Memphis, prices were set at one cent per mile for rail transport into the eastern states. Prices for river transport ranged from \$1.00 to \$2.50 "per head." Bulkley also provided the probable costs for transport from Hong Kong to Atlantic ports as between "\$100 and \$120 in *gold*," plus other expenses "over and above the cost of transportation."

⁷⁶ "The Effects of Population," *MDA*, July 13, 1869.

⁷⁷ Just as these planters looked for the most efficient way to transport their laborers, either by rail, by steamship, or by sailing ship, they also looked for the most efficient type of person, the one who was capable of developing the land and being developed at the same time. The designations used to describe these laborers is not much different than one might use to describe livestock, machinery, plows, tools, and other implements of labor that may or may not be suited to certain areas.

The *Southern Cultivator*, a reform-minded periodical intent on informing the Southern planter of the latest agricultural advancements, weighed in on the Chinese question in 1866. The *Cultivator* reported, “Not even the smallest spot of ground can be found there, that is not used for agricultural or horticultural purposes. Landscape gardening is the only branch of art in which the Chinese have been the masters of Europeans.” The article described the ways in which Chinese agriculturists cultivated the soil with great efficiency, not with the use of machinery or advanced methods, but with an abundance of hard-working labor. “The Chinese make beasts of burden of themselves,” noted the *Cultivator*, “labor is so cheap they have no use for machinery.” The *Cultivator* then noted their level of efficiency, saying, “The Chinese display unwearied industry, and no small degree of skill.” The periodical added, “It is a mistake, however, to suppose that they are adepts in what may be called the science of agriculture. Their implements are generally primitive” ⁷⁸ The *Cultivator* demonstrated to Southern planters that Chinese laborers were hard-working, industrious, and even skillful, but were

⁷⁷ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

⁷⁸ “Coolies (Chinese Laborers),” *Southern Cultivator* (November 1, 1866): 252-53.

not fully developed in their current condition. The question for later proponents of Chinese labor was: could these undeveloped Chinese workers be uplifted and improved by their work in the South?

To prove that Chinese laborers fit the requirements of efficiency, Forrest submitted a letter to the convention written to him by Walter Gibson, a resident of the Hawaiian Islands (then called the Sandwich Islands), who claimed to have extensive knowledge regarding Chinese laborers. The first important claim made by Gibson, which the *Appeal* and the convention members seemed to already agree with, was that one must not bring in coolies. Gibson argued that the consequences of the failure to be vigilant in this regard were “disappointment and mischief,” as demonstrated by the conditions found in Peru, Cuba, and other places. Gibson stated, “It is an easy matter to order through a mercantile house in San Francisco or Hong Kong a cargo of coolies; but when they arrive they may bitterly disappoint you. It needs an experienced personal selection to insure the obtaining of young healthy and satisfactory Chinese laborers.”⁷⁹

The *Rural Carolinian*, an agricultural magazine devoted to informing the South’s planters, divided the Chinese population into two broad types: the “Mongolian” who could be found in Northern China and the “Malay” who could be found in Southern China and in the port cities. An article featured in the *Rural Carolinian* argued that the success of Southern importation depended on the type of Chinese worker being imported. Those from the North “most approach the Caucasian race,” argued the article, and if they were chosen and treated well according to their contracts, they would make excellent

⁷⁹ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

temporary workers and would not involve themselves in politics or citizenship. But to import workers from the various Chinese seaports like Swatow (modern Shantou), argued the *Rural Carolinian*, would be like “letting loose a horde of murderous Malays on the [Southern] community.”⁸⁰

Gibson remarked that he was “making a practical test of [his] experience in the Sandwich Islands” by employing different “races and tribes of the Chinese Empire” in various tasks including: the cultivation of cotton and rice, the raising of livestock, and the work of carpentry, cooking, and domestic service. “There are striking differences between races like Hakas and Punkis, as between English and Irish,” contended Gibson. He went on to argue that, “Some take readily to the plow and hoe. Some have great aptitude to manage stock. Then you have shop keeping and artisan races.”⁸¹

The second day of the convention dragged on and several delegates became restless waiting to hear from Koopmanschap. Several remarks were given, and one dissenting delegate opposed to Chinese immigration spoke up, despite overwhelming condemnation from his fellow delegates. Eventually, the delegates called for Tye Kim Orr to address them. Orr was a Chinese Christian missionary to British Guiana who had traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean and South America.⁸² In his address to the convention Orr agreed with the sentiment of Southern planters regarding the labor of the freedmen. He noted that in the West Indies, “The negroes, after emancipation,

⁸⁰ “The Coolie and Coolie Labor,” *Rural Carolinian* 1, no. 3 (December 1869): 130.

⁸¹ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

⁸² Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 68.

degenerated and would not work. To remedy that, they imported Chinese.” Like Gibson, Orr emphasized that there were different types of Chinese workers. He warned the planters in attendance not to take Chinese labor “indiscriminately,” or else they would end up with the “offscourings” of the race. Instead Orr encouraged his planter audience to seek those from the rural areas of China, “where the people are “agriculturalist.”⁸³

Koopmanschap finally arrived during Orr’s speech and was quickly ushered to the platform. After initial greetings and apologies for arriving late, he appealed to the planters gathered by describing the Chinese as an “orderly, quiet race.” He then began to discuss prices paid Chinese laborers in California and on the Central Pacific Railroad compared to prices paid in Peru and Cuba which were much lower. Koopmanschap thought that Southerners could get them at somewhere between these rates. However, he expressed concerns about the faithfulness of the workers when faced with a competitive labor market among the planters. The *Appeal* reported that Koopmanschap “did not think that they could be relied upon to carry out contracts with planters if other planters offered them better wages.”⁸⁴ This reveals a contradiction between contract labor and free labor that others were quick to point out.

The editors of the *Southern Cultivator* argued that the labor contract in any form, whether dealing with a coolie or with a sharecropper, was harmful to both the employer and to the employee. Instead, the *Southern Cultivator* argued that planters should adopt

⁸³ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

⁸⁴ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

the “only true principle of labor contracts,” which they believed was wage labor.⁸⁵ The virtue of free labor capitalist productivity was that it would improve the employee and the employer; both would be united by their desire to increase production, which would result in overall prosperity. For advocates of this system, the contract was an archaic and harmful device. Senator William Stewart of Nevada agreed with this condemnation of the contract when he proposed a bill in 1870 that would outlaw the types of contracts proposed by Koopmanschap. Stewart, a Northern Republican, was driven by the desire to promote free labor. He argued that these contracts held Chinese workers in a state of “servile” labor, which was “by no means free.”⁸⁶ But Stewart was also driven by the anti-Chinese sentiment sweeping the West coast. No doubt aware that most Chinese workers could not afford to make the passage to the United States without some form of contract, he held up the contract as a sign of their inherently degraded status as an unfree laborer, i.e. a coolie. For Stewart, as for many other Republicans on the West Coast, denying Chinese laborers was the same as promoting free labor. But for the *Appeal* and the planters at the Convention, denying Chinese contract labor was the same as denying the South its restoration and committing it into the hands of the freedmen and the “black republicans.”

The third and final day of the convention commenced with reports by the committees responsible for conducting further interviews of Koopmanschap and Orr. They repeated the advice of Orr and Koopmanschap that planters should be highly

⁸⁵ Contract Labor,” Greenville *Enterprise*, February 1, 1871.

⁸⁶ “Washington,” Charleston *Daily News*, June 7, 1870.

selective in who they entered into contract with. It must be those workers in China who were from the rural districts, not the port cities. Further discussion of the price for contracts and transportation were provided, though Koopmanschap refused to guarantee exact figures for these costs. The committee reported with cold calculation that Chinese laborers would each need “2 pounds of rice, ½ pound of meat, ¼ pound of salt fish, a small quantity of tea and vegetables per day—no bread needed.” As if comparing the specifications of a locomotive or a factory spindle, Chinese workers were compared to black workers, the latter demanding what were seen as extravagant meals.⁸⁷

At this point, Colonel Martin of Kentucky, the committee’s chairman, offered some inspiring words of encouragement concerning the venture being undertaken:

But just when we are in this quandary, God in his wisdom, has shown us a solution of the problem, and opened up the way to an immense population—a high and a celestial people, who are to take the place of our slaves—not as slaves, however, but as freemen. Look at it! Just at the time we need it, the great railway across the continent is finished and puts us in direct communication with San Francisco. It is in direct communication with China—a country teeming with the best labor in the world.⁸⁸

For Martin, the completion of the transcontinental railroad was a sign of Providence, a sign that God had connected the South with the teeming masses of China in order to provide a remedy to the disastrous effects of the war. Martin made it clear, like the *Appeal*’s editors, that this was not a replication of slavery. He wanted “freemen,” but just not the freedmen that were already in the South. Referring to the freedmen, Martin and the others claimed they had “understood him as a slave” and now they “understood

⁸⁷ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

⁸⁸ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

him as a freedman.” Lacking the paternalistic care of slavery provided by his former owners, Martin argued that the freedman “has been the worst sufferer by this condition of affairs, and although the war gave him freedom, he got the worst of it.” After all, in the minds of most white Southerners, the freedom gained by formerly enslaved people was merely a freedom to work, and Northern intervention was hindering that. If the Chinese laborer could exercise this type of freedom better, reasoned the convention’s delegates, then so be it.⁸⁹

As the convention continued, Pillow presented a more detailed plan for forming the company he had initially suggested. He named it the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company with a proposed capital of one million dollars that must be raised. He urged that all planters and capitalists interested in the prosperity of the Mississippi Valley, especially those in New Orleans, to take stock with him in the company. He proposed that the company be organized on August 15 of that year, provided that the sum of \$100,000 had been reached. Pillow also declared, “It shall be the duty of the company to see that, in the contracts with planters, the rights of these laborers are *properly protected*.”⁹⁰ In this regard, the planters operating this company held similar objectives to the Northern Republicans operating the Freedmen’s Bureau. Both intended to protect the rights of the laborer, and both sought the signing of labor contracts to ensure the South’s plantation produced to fullest capacity. However, they disagreed about what type of laborer was best suited to the work required. Though race played a significant part in

⁸⁹ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

⁹⁰ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

these perceived differences, there were other issues at play as well. The Chinese laborer was seen as more efficient in his work. He could be educated, not in politics or religion, but to work better. He was industrious and frugal and perhaps most importantly, he was uninfected by the politicization of the Northern Republicans.

After three days of discussion and debate, the convention's delegates were hopeful that a company would soon be formed and that within a few years the South would be restored. The convention ended with closing remarks from J.W. Clapp, a former slave owner, congressman, and treasury agent for the Confederacy. Clapp summed up the proceedings of the convention's three days and then looked to the future:

When the supply of this labor becomes a business, competition will of course, spring up, and the expense of procuring it will be reduced to a minimum, which must fall far below the expenses incident of our present labor system, whilst its great advantage over that system, and the impetus it will impart to all of our industrial interests, will, it is confidently believed, very soon silence all objections, and remove all the prejudices now existing in the minds of our people.⁹¹

The *Appeal* continued its sponsorship of the plan to form the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company in the following months. In August, the paper featured reports from Pillow, who remarked with fondness on the growth of Memphis since 1821, of which he said was mostly due to cotton. In order to continue this growth, Pillow believed it necessary to bring in "reliable and skilled labor as it was proposed to introduce from China." The general claimed that he had "personally, patiently, faithfully, and energetically" tried to use the labor of freedpeople and was "compelled to confess it was a failure." As Pillow saw it, "We must have cotton to live, and we must have the labor to

⁹¹ "Chinese Labor Convention," *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

produce it.” As he and his fellow planters at the convention had deemed the labor of freedpeople “a failure,” Pillow and many others believed the prosperity of Memphis and the rest of the South, would decline unless a form of “new, cheap, and intelligent labor was introduced.”⁹²

The *Appeal* and its planter allies were initially concerned with returning black laborers to work on plantations. Though this was no doubt still a desirable outcome of Chinese immigration, the Memphis Chinese Labor Convention demonstrated a shift in overall objectives. For those gathered at the Memphis Chinese Labor Convention, free Chinese labor was the answer, not coolie labor. The *Appeal* rather succinctly stated in June of 1869, only a few weeks before the Memphis Convention, “The Chinese, who passed down on the Thompson Dean, were not Coolies, but laborers. The term coolie implies involuntary servitude.”⁹³ Though this distinction was never entirely clear in the nineteenth century, as Chapter I demonstrates, by 1869 the term was typically used by opponents of Chinese labor. The coolie was not part of the modern free market system. The coolie was not reliable and efficient, but essentially a degraded slave, whose labor would be damaging to both the employer and the worker. The Chinese laborer under contract in the South was a different matter.

After the success of the convention, the *Appeal* was so certain of its mission to bring in free Chinese laborers that it was perplexed when opponents of Chinese labor used the 1862 “anti-coolie law” to protest the actions taken by the Memphis Labor

⁹² “Chinese Immigration,” *MDA*, August 4, 1869.

⁹³ “Local Paragraphs,” *MDA*, June 29, 1869.

Convention and its distinguished guest, Koopmanschap. “What does all this amount to when nobody proposes to violate the law or import any but voluntary laborers?” asked the editors of the *Appeal*. According to them, neither the Memphis Convention, nor Koopmanschap, planned to import coolies.⁹⁴ Koopmanschap himself denied any connection with coolie labor, pointing not only to the free will of those he made contracts with, but to their relatively high pay compared to coolies. He argued that coolies only received about four dollars a month, while the voluntary Chinese laborers he dealt with received ten to fifteen dollars a month.⁹⁵ As a nineteenth-century proponent of free labor, Koopmanschap believed the free Chinese laborer had the mobility and free will to extract the highest possible pay from the global market by way of making contract through him or his fellow labor immigration agents. The fact that some workers were payed significantly more than others was proof enough that they were free, not coolies.

Anderson described the Chinese that worked for him with tremendous admiration. But his admiration was directed at the Chinese laborer, not the coolie. “They are the same race of people,” he claimed, “but altogether a different kind. The one is free, the other... a slave.” Anderson went on to describe the condition of a coolie in his home country as essentially that of slavery. He contrasted this to the condition of the laborer in the United States who “makes his own contract, and acts for himself on all matters relating to his services.”⁹⁶ For Anderson and Koopmanschap, the contract was obvious proof of the

⁹⁴ “State News,” *MDA*, July 31, 1869.

⁹⁵ “Koopmanschap,” *MDA*, September 28, 1869.

⁹⁶ “About John Chinaman: The Difference between the Chinese and the Coolies,” *Charleston Daily News*, August 7, 1869.

freedom of the laborer and it set the United States apart from other countries where the Chinese worker was a slave.

Despite the ardent claims made by the *Appeal* and its planter allies that Chinese labor in the South would remain voluntary in nature, some did not believe it. Choy Chew and Sing Man believed that Chinese workers who traveled to the South to work would become oppressed in a system akin to slavery. “What assurance of protection could we have if the whites oppressed us?” they asked. Chew and Man were also not convinced by the contract system that many labor managers pointed to as proof of voluntary labor. “I do not like the contract system anyway,” Chew said, “Chinamen, like other men, will work better and do themselves more credit and give better satisfaction as entirely free laborers than under contracts where they would soon learn they did not get full wages.”⁹⁷ Despite the fact that Chinese laborers faced incredible amounts of resistance and violence in the West, Chew and Man believed that Chinese workers would face even worse conditions in the South. “In the West,” Chew said, “the Chinamen would have the protection of good and equal laws, and the people have not the ideas which prevail in a country where there has been slavery.”⁹⁸ Chew reasoned that a society just emerging from slavery would want to return to some form of that slavery, and that the labor contract in the hands of this society was likely part of that attempt. Conversely, for the *Appeal*, the labor contract represented a sign of free labor; two equal parties entering into an agreement that would benefit them both. For planters at the Memphis Labor

⁹⁷ “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration,” *MDA*, October 24, 1869.

⁹⁸ “A Chinaman’s Views of Emigration,” *MDA*, October 24, 1869.

Convention, the contract was not flaunted as a means to return to slavery, but a means to escape the clutches of Northern Republicans by taking hold of the emerging global labor market. In this way, they envisioned a labor force that could develop the Southern landscape efficiently, and improve itself in the process.

CHAPTER II

The question of supplying labor to the South is one of vital importance, in which all classes are concerned.... I believe that this can only be secured by the introduction of a respectable class of laborers from Europe; for although temporary benefit might be derived from importation of the Chinese and Japanese, it would result, I fear, in eventual injury to the country and her institutions. We do not only want reliable laborers, but good citizens, whose interests and feelings would be in unison with our own.¹

—Robert E. Lee (1870).

In 1870, *De Bow's Review*, one of the most widely read periodicals in the South during the mid-nineteenth century, published a letter from former Confederate general Lee to the Virginia Immigration Society. Lee emphasized that the South needed not only “reliable laborers, but good citizens.” He pointed to the shortsighted nature of plans like those proposed at the Memphis Labor convention the previous year, saying they would only provide a “temporary benefit.” Instead of Chinese laborers, Lee proposed European immigrant families should be introduced to the South, where they would be “better satisfied and give greater satisfaction.”² Lee agreed with the Memphis *Daily Appeal* and other labor reformers that more labor was needed in the South, but he wanted more than reliable workers, he also wanted “good citizens” with families who possessed a fondness for the “country and her institutions.” Lee did not want single Chinese men as contract

¹ “Gen. Lee on Chinese Immigration,” *De Bow's Review* 8, no. 5 (May-June, 1870): 498-99. Commercial Periodicals from the Southern U.S., 1811-1877, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2017).

² “Gen. Lee on Chinese Immigration,” *De Bow's Review* 8, no. 5 (May-June, 1870): 498-99. Commercial Periodicals from the Southern U.S., 1811-1877, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2017).

laborers, no matter how reliable and efficient the *Appeal* and other supporters argued they were. For Lee, and many other commentators, there was more at stake than just the quality of work or the price required to maintain the worker. It was also necessary that the land, the worker, and everyone involved in the labor relationship be improved. As a wealthy antebellum slaveholder, Lee likely had thought, as most planters did, that slavery was the most effective way of improving and developing black workers. In fact, most slaveholders believed, or at least tried to convince themselves, that slavery was a “positive good” for all parties involved. Without this system in place, and with the influence of Northern Reconstruction, most planters found black labor to be ineffective.

As the 1870s progressed, Northern influence over the South waned and Southern labor managers began to “redeem” the South from Northern Republican influence. Southern labor managers were able to regain power, in large part, because Northern Republicans abandoned the freedmen. By the late 1870s, most Republicans believed that the freedmen no longer fit the model of the ideal free laborer, whose primary purpose was to restore the South from its post-war ruin. As Heather Cox Richardson argues, black workers began challenging this Northern Republican image when they demanded their own land, social services, and civil rights from the federal government beyond what only the most radical of Republicans in congress deemed appropriate. They regarded the demands of black workers as a request for “special privileges,” something that was a threat to the “American way” of individualism. At that point they were counted among special interest groups like communists or populists.³ Opponents of Chinese labor formed

³ Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), xiv-xv. Whereas the liberal Republicans of the mid-nineteenth century believed that the freedmen of the South could be the ideal model

similar arguments about Chinese workers, and believed they represented a threat to American society. It was not racism alone that drove the abandonment of the freedmen or the rejection of Chinese immigrants in the 1870s and 1880s. Eligibility for American citizenship and for the American working class, in the minds of most nineteenth-century leaders depended on many things that intersected and overlapped with race, but were never completely bound by it.

After the Memphis Labor Convention took place in the summer of 1869, the Memphis *Daily Appeal* continued to campaign for the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company and Pillow, the company's founder. Pillow needed to raise the necessary funds and receive approval from the state authorities to import labor from China. The *Appeal* refuted many arguments against Chinese labor as its editors continued to support Pillow's company, as well as other Chinese labor schemes. During the 1870s, the *Appeal* and labor managers in favor of Southern Chinese labor struggled to keep the movement alive as national anti-Chinese sentiment from the West and from Washington D.C. swept the nation.⁴ The South had been the proving ground in terms of progress for many decades as

of the free laborer, by 1900 the freedman was replaced by the often fictionalized image of the white western cowboy. Ironically most cowboys were, and are, depicted as white, when in reality the vast majority were black, Mexican, or Native American. For more on this liberal Republican shift from the Southern black worker to the Western white cowboy, see Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴ Several national laws were passed in the 1870s that reflected the national anti-Chinese sentiment. In 1870, the wording of the Naturalization Act of 1790 was adjusted to allow Africans, and those of African descent, to become citizens of the United States, whereas the original wording had limited naturalization to "white" immigrants. The debates surrounding this change reveal that Chinese people were specifically excluded from naturalization. Moon-Ho Jung argues that the way the Naturalization Act of 1870 was passed preserved the understanding of all Chinese laborers as coolies, which excluded Chinese laborers from naturalization and created a divide between Europeans, who could be seen as immigrants, and Chinese men who were seen as coolies. Therefore the Act preserved the image of the United States as a "nation of immigrants" while simultaneously denying certain people citizenship. Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 144-45.

the federal government fought over the effects of slavery and emancipation on the progress of the nation. But the federal government in the 1870s began to focus on the West as it returned control of the South and its labor situation to the Southern states.⁵ In the process, Southern labor managers regained a large measure of control over the freedmen as planters and black workers reached “compromises” in the form of sharecropping and tenant farming, as opposed to planter dominated contract labor. The South’s labor managers no longer deemed Chinese labor necessary for resisting Northern Reconstruction efforts as they had in the 1860s. Many other post-emancipation societies used Chinese labor extensively while transitioning from slave labor to free labor. It would not have been a stretch for the Southern United States to use Chinese labor in the same way. However, the particular circumstances of emancipation and Reconstruction in the United States did not provide the necessary conditions for the widespread use of Chinese labor in the South. Despite a fervent dedication to their goal of importing Chinese labor, the editors of the *Appeal*, and other supporters of Chinese labor in the South, faced three key impediments: a lack of support and investment beyond the local level, a resistance from state and national lawmakers, and a resistance from labor managers in China and from Chinese laborers themselves. The lack of support for Chinese labor, and the resistance to it from white Southern leaders, centered on three primary issues: The Chinese as “heathen,” the suitability of Chinese men as citizen workers, and the fear of increased racial conflict in the South.

⁵ Despite Republican claims that the West was a bastion of free labor, Foner notes that during the late nineteenth century it was transforming into a plantation society with Chinese and Mexican indentured servants working on massive fields owned by an elite few. This was a troubling situation for these “Free Soilers” and it contributed to the anti-Chinese sentiment in the West and in the Republican controlled federal government. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 463.

The Heathen Charge

The opposition to Chinese labor in the South grew throughout the 1870s despite the attempts of its defenders at the *Appeal*. The arguments on both sides had already taken their basic form as early as the Memphis Labor Convention in 1869. During the convention and immediately after, the *Appeal*'s editors faced accusations from opponents who claimed the *Appeal* and its planter allies were initiating a "coolie trade." As Chapter II demonstrates, these accusations were denied and proof of free labor was indicated by the existence of a contract. However, opponents leveled an equally threatening indictment toward the plan for Chinese labor when they argued that America's Christian society would be overrun by "pagan" or "heathen" immigrants.

The *Appeal* strived to overcome the image of the Chinese worker as a heathen, not by denying that this perceived heathenism existed, but by arguing that American Christianity and its institutions would overcome any religious or social threat that the Chinese worker posed. In a preliminary meeting before the Memphis Labor Convention, Anderson denied the heathen charge. He admitted the Chinese he had employed on the West Coast were "idolaters," but noted that they were educated people, quick to learn, and wise with money.⁶ Since the Chinese workers were "educated people" and "quick to learn," Anderson reasoned they could be improved. Much like the "coolie" could be improved in the right conditions, so could an "idolater." A few weeks after the convention, the *Appeal* featured the testimony of Koopmanschap, the esteemed labor

⁶ "John Chinaman," *MDA*, July 1, 1869.

immigration agent and guest of the Memphis convention. His interview was conducted by a reporter for the New York *Herald*. The *Herald* asked Koopmanschap “Is there nothing to fear from the social and religious views of these Chinamen?” Koopmanschap responded, “That is a point made by a great many. People think that there will be a deluge of idolatry in our land; that the floodgates of heathenism will be opened when the yellow man steps on our shores. This is all *fol-de-rol*. Ours is a superior race: our God is the true God... We have nothing to fear from the incursions of heathen, especially when they come as servants.”⁷ During the convention’s proceedings days before, Orr had taken this reasoning even further when he argued that not only would they not be a threat to American religion, Southern planters should bring them into the country to evangelize them. Orr, as a Chinese minister and missionary of Christianity urged his listeners to consider, “What is this the 19th century for if not to bring ‘The Word’ to the people who have it not? Do not spurn these people from you. You may be the means of evangelizing them....The Chinese are a docile, patient, and susceptible people who will follow and love those who try to teach and benefit them. Love begets love.”⁸ Orr combined the language of paternalism with the context of a global free labor market. No doubt he was aware that his audience at the convention was composed of planters familiar with antebellum slavery, as well as labor managers seeking to prosper the South in the modern age of capitalism. Neither Koopmanschap, Anderson, nor Orr denied that the Chinese

⁷“About the Celestials,” *MDA*, July 26, 1869.

⁸ “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 15, 1869.

were heathen or worshippers of idols, but they believed that they could be positively developed and uplifted in the South even in this condition.⁹

The *Appeal* responded directly to an opponent who wrote to the paper in the year following the convention. The anonymous author of this letter argued against Chinese labor saying, “The Chinese would doubtless be more useful as laborers than Negroes; but it is to be feared that if brought to our country, they may, in a few years, be a source of much trouble to us, as the Negroes have been. With the Negroes here, and the Chinese here, our country would, in a few years, be overrun with idol worshipping heathen.” The author of the letter proposed to “forget the Chinese, get rid of the “Negro” workers, and encourage the immigration of white workers to the South. The *Appeal*’s editors responded by saying they were still not fully convinced by the many objections they had heard against Chinese labor. They admitted that European immigrants to the South would be preferable. The question was not so much what was best, but what was feasible. The editors responded to the letter, saying, “We shall take the best labor if we can get it, and if not the next best.”¹⁰

The next month, the *Appeal* responded to a speech given by the Reverend Paul Bagby on Chinese immigration. Bagby had worked as a missionary to several areas of Asia, including China, and the Mississippi legislature requested that he deliver a “lecture in the Hall of the house on the subject of the immigration of the Chinese.” Bagby feared the heathenism of the Chinese would be a threat to the nation. The *Appeal* commended

⁹ Other speakers at the convention discussed the “heathen charge.” John Martin in particular delivered another lengthy defense of the Chinese, denying the threat of heathenism. See “Chinese Labor Convention,” *MDA*, July 16, 1869.

¹⁰ “Untitled,” *MDA*, January 16, 1870.

him for “examining the question carefully,” but took issue with his conclusions as well as his methods saying,

With all respect to the speaker, we think that he has committed an error quite too common with clerical gentlemen, and similar to that of the antagonists of Galileo, when, as to the motion of the earth, he had reasons to give them which they took no pains to discover, and were unwilling to hear.¹¹

In the minds of the *Appeal*'s editors, the plan to import Chinese labor was a modern indication of progress and its detractors were nothing more than backward thinking priests. According to the *Appeal*, Bagby would rather have the South be a “howling wilderness” than to have it “howling with the worship of the devil.” In reviewing the manuscript of Bagby’s speech, the *Appeal* was dismissive of his fears, saying, “When our wilderness is filled with population, prosperity, and plenty, we need not fear the whims of barbarians.”¹²

The editors of the *Appeal* were not implying that Chinese workers would continue to practice their “idolatry,” but were rather arguing that their readers should place their faith in the strength of Christianity and its global evangelism. We have confidence in the capacity of the Christian religion to overcome idol worship all over the world,” argued the paper, “If Christianity can go into heathen lands and overcome idolatry there, it ought at least to be safe at home, on its own throne, and in its own glorious dominion.” The paper elaborated further, saying, “To fear the introduction of the Chinese on this account

¹¹ “Untitled,” *MDA*, February 5, 1870.

¹² The manuscript of Bagby’s speech is not reprinted for the reader. However, Bagby also reportedly feared that “idolatry by law” would be initiated in the United States because the constitution did not include the “name of God.” The *Appeal* responded to this saying, “Atheism is not set up by allowing freedom to our people to worship God, or to omit it as they will, and idolatry is no more so by allowing the same liberty.” “Untitled,” *MDA*, February 5, 1870.

is to distrust and undervalue the Christian system.” If it [Christianity] is not capable of taking care of itself” proposed the *Appeal*, “it is incapable of performing its mission in the conversion of the world.” The *Appeal* found no contradiction between the goals of Christian missionaries and the goals of Southern labor managers. “Practically, this is a question of dollars and cents, of business, of demand for labor, and how its use may promote our interests and build up our country,” argued the *Appeal*, “Religiously, if there is any question at all, we should say it was a question whether civilization and religion could be most advantageously prosecuted and promoted at home or abroad.”¹³ The editors of the *Appeal* perceived no threat from any “idolatry” or “heathenism” brought by Chinese laborers. In fact, they found that both “civilization and religion” could be spread through immigration and the global labor market.

Contract Labor vs. Autonomous Labor

In 1871, the Charleston *Daily News* featured a letter from the Spofford Brothers Company of New York, who offered to begin a “legitimate” immigration of Chinese workers through a company in Charleston, South Carolina. Deterring accusations of illegal activity, such as those leveled at Koopmanschap, the Spofford Brothers Company stressed that it wanted no part in the “atrocious coolie trade.” Instead the company proposed immigration of Chinese laborers in a “legitimate, comfortable way, the same as the better class of German and Irish emigrants come.” To further emphasize the

¹³ For more on Southern views of Christian missionary work before and after the Civil War, see Erskine Clarke, *By the Rivers of Water: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

legitimacy of its proposed form of immigration, the company asked why the “Chinaman could not be brought with his family and allowed to work for wages the same as the European, or, if he preferred, to buy his own few acres of land and cultivate it for his own account.”¹⁴ This plan was far different than the one made at the Memphis Labor convention two years earlier by Southern planters, which suggested thousands of single men as contract workers be brought to the South. This Northern labor immigration company deemed the most legitimate form of free labor as that composed of a man with a family who would be offered a piece of land of his own to cultivate and one that would be paid wages. The Spofford Brother Company went on to say, “They [the Chinese] are a frugal and industrious race; when decently treated very quiet and orderly, and that they would be a great addition to the laboring population of any country.” The Company also warned Southern planters and labor managers, “Your people, however, must so treat them after their arrival, and their treatment on the passage must be such as to be an effectual disproof of the charge that will be brought that there is an attempt to inaugurate another reign of slavery under the name of Chinese immigration.”¹⁵

Just as the *Appeal* looked to Cuba and the American Mediterranean as proof of the effectiveness of Chinese labor, the Spofford Brothers Company looked to these places as evidence that Chinese labor could be a continuation of slavery in the form of coolie labor. The company argued, “For I do assure you that the treatment of the poor coolie on the guano islands of the Pacific and on some of the Cuba sugar estates is as much worse

¹⁴ “The Heathen Chinee,” *Charleston Daily News*, May 20, 1871.

¹⁵ “The Heathen Chinee,” *Charleston Daily News*, May 20, 1871.

than your old system of slavery as can be imagined.”¹⁶ The Spofford Brothers Company argued that if Chinese migrant labor was initiated in the South in the same form as European labor (i.e. family-oriented, autonomous, wage labor) then this would prove to the rest of the nation that Southerners did not want to institute slavery in another form.¹⁷

The Spofford Brothers Company of New York and the *Appeal* held two different views regarding what form free labor must take. Foner has shown that autonomy was perhaps the most important goal of the freedmen after emancipation. The contract agreements proposed by Southern planters typically denied freedmen that autonomy by making them dependent on the planter for subsistence. Most freedmen refused to sign any contract that did not allow them to cultivate their own land in addition to their work on the plantation. Planters preferred yearly contracts which offered more control over the extraction of labor, especially during crucial times of planting and harvest.¹⁸ By the 1870s, many planters and freedmen arrived at a mutual “compromise” of sorts in the form of sharecropping, which provided some measure of autonomy on the part of the worker and some measure of control on the part of the planter, though both of these elements were contested by both parties. When the Spofford Brothers Company proposed that Chinese families be allowed to purchase land, and therefore have some measure of autonomy in the labor relationship, they were speaking to this conflict between the emancipated workers and their former owners. This Northern company argued that

¹⁶ “The Heathen Chinee,” *Charleston Daily News*, May 20, 1871.

¹⁷ Of course this does not take into account the possibility of wage slavery, not does it account for the horrendous conditions faced by many Northern factory workers who had all three (family, land, and wages).

¹⁸ Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press), 86-93.

Chinese workers under contract would lack autonomy and thus become like slaves, whereas the *Appeal* argued that the contract was a modern tool that could be used to restore the South and civilize a “heathen” worker.

While Northern and Southern visions disagreed about the autonomy of a worker and the payment of wages, vis a vis, contract labor, they could agree that the presence of a family indicated proper manhood, though for different reasons. In a late nineteenth-century Northern worldview, the wife and/or mother in a household was the moral guide and teacher for the family. Women were seen as inherently more pure than men and thus responsible for improving society by way of their children and their husbands. The Chinese laborer, working in a group of single men without the uplifting influence of a wife, was viewed by the adherents of this belief as inherently prone to corruption and depravity. The Southern view of masculinity dictated that a man be not only master of himself, but also of his household, and his land. Though women served as little more than objects to be used in the formation of this masculinity, they were necessary in order to establish this manhood.¹⁹ Therefore, the dominant view of society, North and South, was that a single male Chinese worker without a family of his own was prone to immorality and/or a state of servitude. This image was compounded by the view of Chinese women as prostitutes.

¹⁹ The preservation of this Southern masculinity often took the form of racial violence as the myth of the “black rapist” became prevalent throughout Reconstruction and remained an element of Southern life for many generations. For more on Southern masculinity, see *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); and *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

In 1875, congress passed the Page Law which was intended to prevent the immigration of Chinese women, labeled as prostitutes, and Chinese men, labeled as coolies. While the first “coolie law” of 1862 was birthed out of an anti-slavery desire to end all vestiges of a foreign and destructive system of labor, the Page Law of 1875 was the first immigration law birthed out of the desire to improve the labor of the United States and the larger society as a whole. It was the first legislative answer to the “Chinese question.” The Page Law was named after Republican California congressman, Horace Page, who sought to end what he saw as the two-fold danger of Chinese immigration: Chinese men as coolies and Chinese women as prostitutes. In effect, the page law served to increase the disproportionate number of Chinese men to Chinese women in the United States and thus the view of Chinese laborers as single men was self-fulfilled.²⁰ These

²⁰ The Page Law posed stiff fines and jail time for those found employing Chinese and other “oriental” laborers against their will and also sought to restrict immigrants who were convicts in their home countries. While these two provisions remained largely ineffective and male Chinese immigration continued to increase, the provision which restricted the immigration of Chinese prostitutes was enforced more stridently. Due to the attitudes of immigration officials, the Page Law effectively restricted the immigration of most female Chinese migrants between 1875 and 1882. Essentially any female Chinese migrant who was not the wife of an influential merchant or diplomat was assumed to be a prostitute. George Peffer demonstrates how previous historians, beginning with Mary Coolidge, have discounted the Page Law as an explanation for the low numbers of Chinese women during the early decades of Chinese immigration. They have instead pointed to other factors such as the sojourner explanation and internal affairs taking place within China. These historians have also concluded, based on unreliable testimony, that there was an increase in the prostitution trade at the time and that most Chinese women being excluded by the Page Law were in fact prostitutes. Peffer argues that these claims are based on the same prejudices as those upon which the Page Law was founded and that it was more likely that a great number of these women were wives of Chinese laborers already in the United States, who, being subjected to humiliating and arbitrary interrogations by consul officials in China, were prevented from joining their husbands. George Anthony Peffer, "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875-1882," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (1986): 28-31, 42-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500484> For more on the legal formation of the Page Law, see Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 176. For more on the effects of the Page Law on immigration and gender ratios, see Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian American through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 25-26, 44-48.

events, and the anti-Chinese sentiment surrounding them, did not go unheeded in the South and were published in Southern newspapers.

In the following year after Congress passed the Page Law, the Port Royal *Standard and Commercial* of Beaufort, South Carolina informed planters of the findings of a congressional committee in San Francisco. The *Appeal* also featured frequent reports from California noting that “Californians have had considerable experience with Chinese labor, and may, therefore, be supposed to speak understandingly.”²¹ This “Chinese Congressional Committee” had been tasked with determining the nature of Chinese immigrants that were coming to California. The committee interviewed Frederick Low, the former Republican governor of California and foreign minister to China, and T.H. King, a ship captain familiar with “China waters.” The committee found that the Chinese workers coming to California were “indeed coolies” and that coolieism was “substantial slavery.” Furthermore, it found that Chinese women coming to the state were “nearly all prostitutes.” Governor Low reported to the committee that Chinese labor “has had a bad effect on our boys, crowding them out of employment, and it tends to degrade white labor.”²² Thus Californian officials reported that American labor was being degraded in two ways, through Chinese “coolieism” and through Chinese prostitution. With the passage of the Page Law, the image of the Chinese worker in the United States as a “heathen” man, without a family, who was prone to immorality and despotic influences, grew in the minds of the nation’s leaders, as well as in the minds of Southerner labor

²¹ “The News,” *MDA*, August 4, 1869.

²² “The Chinese Committee’s Work,” *Port Royal Standard and Commercial* (South Carolina), December 14, 1876.

reformers and managers who were considering Chinese labor for the South. As both Lee and the Spofford Brothers Company of New York indicated in their respective letters, the South would prosper more from the immigration of “families,” not solitary Chinese men working under contract.²³ This unintentional alliance of thought between a Southern planter and a Northern immigration company indicates the dominant resistance toward Chinese immigration that the *Appeal* and its allies faced in the 1870s.

Fears of Racial and Class Conflict

A few weeks after the Memphis Labor Convention, Hermann Bokam, a labor commissioner from Tennessee, visited Cincinnati in the interest of acquiring European laborers for the South. A *Cincinnati Times* article described his visit and was reprinted for Southern readers in Richmond, Virginia. Bokam emphasized to his Northern hosts that he was opposed to the “movement toward China for laborers.” He believed that these “millions of coolies” would take the place of the recently emancipated slaves and prohibit the formation of a Southern middle class. A middle class, argued Bokam, could “carry forward progressive ideas and insure social and political stability.” The presence of an aristocratic slaveowning class at the top and a mass of poor whites and slaves at the bottom had led to the war, argued Bokam, as well as the “great debt that now oppresses the nation.” Bokam feared that Chinese labor would result in a similar situation. Instead of Chinese “coolies,” Bokam proposed German and Irish immigrants, who would help to establish the Southern middle class and who would oppose any attempts to “virtually re-

²³ “Gen. Lee on Chinese Immigration,” *De Bow’s Review* 8, no. 5 (May-June, 1870), 498-99. Commercial Periodicals from the Southern U.S., 1811-1877, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2017).

establish slavery.”²⁴ Bokam, like Lee, believed that European immigrants were more ideal for the South. These Europeans, they believed, were more capable of promoting Southern “progressive ideas” as well as “social and political stability.” Chinese laborers, conversely, were prone to despotism, becoming tools of the aristocracy as slaves had once been.

Labor managers like Bokam were not the only Southerners worried about a transition from a slave aristocracy to a coolie aristocracy. Many of the non-landholding whites of the South believed the Chinese might supplant them or create an unfair competition with them. Moreover, fears of a return to the evils of African slavery, with a “coolie-holding, instead of a slaveholding, aristocracy” were held by some yeoman farmers.²⁵ Jung has demonstrated that immigration labor movements in the South opposed the planters and their efforts to import Chinese labor.²⁶ In an interview with the *New York Herald*, Koopmanschap, responded to these allegations from the “poorer and more uneducated classes” in the South. Koopmanschap said that these classes assumed he was “initiating a movement hostile to their interests.” Koopmanschap denied this, and responded with confidence that the introduction of Chinese laborers would not harm anyone in the South.²⁷

The *Appeal* responded to fears that their immigration schemes would harm the lower classes of the South by comparing the Chinese worker to other modern tools of

²⁴ “Coolie Labor at the South,” *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, Virginia), July 28, 1869.

²⁵ “Letter from Eastern Mississippi,” *MDA*, August 7, 1869.

²⁶ Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 163-77.

²⁷ “About the Celestials,” *MDA*, July 26, 1869.

progress which had helped to develop and improve the South including the cotton gin, the railway, and the steamer. “John Chinaman will find his place,” claimed the author, “like a locomotive, and the State will be enriched, and the poor of America will be elevated and find their condition improved.”²⁸ The *Appeal* reasoned that, not only would the Chinese laborer be harmless for the South’s lower classes, he would also uplift the poor white worker. The *Appeal* reasoned that the Chinese worker was akin to any modernizing technological advancement, which was slow to receive acceptance from the working class.

An incident in the North proved that the working class was not accepting of Chinese migrant labor. In North Adams, Massachusetts in 1870, the employer of a shoe factory replaced a group of striking employees with Chinese laborers. Opinions about this event were wide-ranging. An article from the *New York Tribune* was featured in the *Memphis Appeal* in support of the Chinese laborers. The article claimed that resisting the hiring of a cheaper form of labor by restricting Chinese labor would be just as barbarous as destroying new technology such as the Arkwright’s Spinning Jenny or the street cleaner. “Men have a right to work for as low wages as they choose; employers have a right to hire them; and we shall only involve ourselves in endless trouble by denying either,” claimed the article.²⁹ On the one hand, this can be seen as basic free market ideology. On the other hand, Roediger and Esch might argue that the use of Chinese laborers to replace striking white workers was an example of race management, as the

²⁸ “Letter from Eastern Mississippi,” *MDA*, August 7, 1869.

²⁹ “What shall we do with John?” *MDA*, July 2, 1870.

factory employers played races against each other.³⁰ The white workers in the factory believed the problem was the influx of Chinese “coolies” and the Chinese laborer might see the white laborer as the problem. In the minds of nineteenth-century labor reformers and managers, this improved efficiency, just as much as the use of a spinning loom.

The Southern response to the North Adams incident was mixed, and triggered commentary from journalist advocates of labor in the South. Some indicated how successful the Chinese “coolies” had been in improving the efficiency of the factory and in saving the employer money.³¹ The *Memphis Appeal* used the North Adams incident to continue its support of Chinese labor. The *Appeal* bolstered their argument that Chinese workers were no threat to society by referencing a report which described the Chinese workers as “quite Americanized” and which claimed they had “won the respect and sympathy of the residents of North Adams.”³² Others used the North Adams incident to dispel the now rampant objections to the Chinese based on their religious threat as “heathens.” One article from the *New Orleans Republican* noted, “It may relieve the pious minds of those who fancy that Chinese immigration will make idolaters of us all to learn that the Chinese shoemakers at North Adams all go regularly to church on the Lord’s Day, and that the leader of the company is a zealous Methodist.” Agreeing with the *Appeal*’s estimation regarding the power of American Christianity, the *Republican* reasoned, “On the whole, it seems that we are quite as likely to make Christians of them

³⁰ Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 14-16.

³¹ “Chinese Labor,” *Opelousas Journal*, November 26, 1870; *New Orleans Republican*, August 31, 1870.

³² “The Chinese at North Adams,” *MDA*, February 20, 1871.

as they are to turn us into heathens.”³³ The North Adams incident provoked many of the same responses for and against Chinese labor and revealed differing views about what free labor meant.

Chinese Resistance and the End of the Movement

Immediately following the Memphis Labor Convention, Captain George Washington Gift left for China to arrange for the immigration of Chinese laborers in the interest of the Arkansas Labor Immigration Company. Gift was born in Tennessee, and was trained as a navy captain. He lived several years in California, but returned to serve the Confederacy. Gift was an agriculturist and civil engineer, and had been a strong proponent of Chinese labor for the South since the Civil War ended in 1865, contributing to southern agricultural journals and newspapers. The *Appeal* credited Gift with being the “father of the present movement,” and found him to be the ideal promoter of Chinese labor saying, “If there is a man who can succeed in bringing the affair to a reasonable conclusion, it is George W. Gift.” Though Gift had been present at the regional labor convention in Memphis, and was resident of Tennessee at the time, his travels to China were in the service of the locally based immigration company in Arkansas which was eventually successful in bringing a small amount of laborers from China to work the

³³ New Orleans *Republican*, August 5, 1870. David R. Locke, one of the most widely read American humorists of the nineteenth century, commented on the Chinese question in general, and the North Adams incident in particular, in the form of his alter ego, Petroleum V. Nasby. Locke’s character was ignorant, uncouth, and overtly racist. By using this character to embody what he found to be the worse elements of his society, Locke mocked those in North Adams who opposed the immigration of Chinese migrants. In particular, he targeted the Irish, who he claimed were in the same circumstance as Chinese migrants when they first arrived in the United States. New Orleans *Republican*, July 26, 1870. For more on Locke see John Grinspin, “The Steven Colbert of the Civil War,” *New York Times*, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/the-stephen-colbert-of-the-civil-war-2/?_r=0;

state's plantations. The *Appeal* followed the travels of Gift and the importation of laborers by the Arkansas Labor Immigration Company, hoping for a success that would set a precedent for the rest of the Mississippi Valley and the South. In fact, the *Appeal* considered the Arkansas Labor Immigration Company a trial run for the regional Mississippi Valley Immigration Company organized by Pillow and the entire plan for Chinese labor in the South. The *Appeal* declared, "The great question of Chinese immigration is soon to be practically tested." Upon the success of the Arkansas Company much depends," The *Appeal* also argued, "[if] general satisfaction is given, then will the ocean be bridged between us and China, for hundreds of thousands more immigrants will find employment." Gift left for China on July 22, 1869 and promised to correspond with the *Appeal* while he was there.³⁴

While Gift was involved with the Arkansas company, Tennessee's legislators gathered in October of 1869 for the Thirty-sixth General Assembly. During the proceedings, they denied the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company the authorization to import Chinese labor into the United States.³⁵ Joseph M. Baker of Hancock County was a dissenting voice in the assembly. He delivered what he termed a "minority report" in which he countered the dominant view that Chinese laborers were a threat to the

³⁴ Capt. Gift and his Mission," *MDA*, July 20, 1869; "Untitled," *MDA*, July 23, 1869.

³⁵ William Hardy's in-depth analysis of this congressional gathering shows that most of the legislators were young and relatively new to politics. Hardy argues that "the thirty-sixth general assembly was, for the most part, composed of a younger generation, shaped not so much by the social, economic, and political conditions of antebellum America as by the tumultuous years of the Civil War and Reconstruction that followed." It may be possible that this younger generation was more opposed to Chinese immigration than the older generation of disfranchised planters that funded the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company and supported its goals of establishing a Chinese labor force of thousands. See William Edward Hardy, "Fare well to all Radicals': Redeeming Tennessee, 1869-1870 " (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2013): 182. http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/2432

political and religious landscape of the South. Baker acknowledged the majority argument, saying, “It is urged that if the fifteenth amendment shall be adopted, the Chinese and other barbarous races will flock to our shores, and control our elections.” Baker argued that the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment was a foregone conclusion, but Chinese workers were no threat. “Let the Chinese come;” Baker insisted, “Let them cultivate our soil, and develop our mines. Their gods need not be our God. Let our posterity teach them to cast away their stocks and stones, and worship the true and living God.” It was not only faith in the strength of American religion that animated Baker’s speech, but also the strength of America’s republican ideals. “Let them see and learn the great principles of republican liberty, “urged Baker,” and let them return, if they choose, and propagate these grand principles and this Divine religion throughout the Celestial Empire.”³⁶ Baker echoed the defenses made by the *Memphis Appeal*, another “minority report” from the opposite end of the state. Both Baker and the *Appeal* argued that Chinese labor was a modern tool that could help the South transition from slavery to free labor and at the same time, carry a message of civilization in the form of religion and “republican liberty.” However, Baker’s speech did not persuade the Tennessee legislature to support the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company or its importation efforts. After this defeat, the *Appeal* looked to Arkansas and Gift for vindication of Chinese labor in the South.

Gift wrote to the *Appeal* in March of 1870 to report on his findings in China, noting that his letter would be arriving at about the same time the first ship carrying

³⁶ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 36th General Assembly, 1869-1870, chap. XIV, 45, 188-189, 228. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433010019614>

Chinese laborers rounded the Cape of Good Hope. He warned the editors and readers of the *Appeal* of two things: First, that the plan to import Chinese labor would take time and careful planning, and second, that the Chinese “must *know* from parties in their own sphere of society that that they will be properly treated and cared for before they will venture on emigration.” Gift also cautioned his readers that “The Chinaman is shrewd as well as industrious and laborious, and he must have practical guarantees where he goes.” Gift emphasized to the planters of the South that they must treat their Chinese employees well and carry out their contractual obligations. Gift reminded his readers that prospective Chinese migrants were quite aware of the fact that “Chinamen are taken from Macao to Peru and Havana and *sold* in the market”³⁷ For Gift, and for many of the planters he was informing, the contract was a way to restrain the forces of the labor market and prevent people from being “sold” in such inhuman ways as the Macao-Peru exchange. However, residents of China were aware of the infamous “coolie trade,” and hesitant to participate in migrant labor without proper assurances.³⁸ Planters in the United States who were in favor of Chinese labor argued that those coming to the South would not encounter this mistreatment, but rather that the South could be an uplifting and civilizing influence on the Chinese laborer.

³⁷ “The Chinese,” *MDA*, March 28, 1870.

³⁸ In 1874, 2,841 Chinese workers in Cuba testified to their mistreatment to a committee commissioned by the Chinese government to ascertain the validity of the accusations of coolieism. Lisa Yun describes this as an act of “resistance” and “mass protest” on the part of the Chinese laborers in Cuba. This could be viewed as similar to the testimonies of black workers to the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction, which historians have for some time considered acts of resistance. However, unlike the Federal government of the United States who eventually abandoned the freedmen to the South, the Chinese government heeded the report of these Chinese workers and prohibited any further “coolie trade” from China to Cuba. Chinese workers who refused to go to Cuba were not likely to go to the American South where there had also been slavery. Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1, 36.

The Chinese laborers hired by Gift arrived at New Orleans in June of 1870. After a few days, the *Appeal* reported that the workers were being transported to Arkansas, saying, “The Bismarck left New Orleans Friday, with 175 of George Gift’s Coolies, destined for the Arkansas river.” The report followed this with another statement, “She also has 3,131 bars of railroad iron.”³⁹ Railroads were seen by many as one of the best means to restore the South, and several Southerners made a fortune for themselves and others establishing railroads. The *Appeal* described the arrival of “coolies” in much the same way as the arrival of railroad iron. Both were seen as tools of a modern capitalist age, but both needed to be developed into the most efficient form. It may at first seem contradictory that the *Appeal* would use the term “coolie” to describe these Chinese laborers, considering many previous attempts by the paper to argue that southerners did not participate in anything but free labor importation. But just as the railroad iron could not yet be called a railroad in its present condition; coolies were likewise considered to be in an unformed and underdeveloped condition, not yet a free laborer, but not a permanent slave either. By coming to the United States, working under contract, and learning from the religious and republican ideals of the United States (as best exemplified in the South), the *Appeal* and its planter allies believed that coolies could be developed and formed into an efficient and industrious laborer. This laborer could then restore and uplift the South, just as the railroad could. However, as Lucy Cohen has demonstrated, Gift and others involved in the actual procurement of Chinese labor after the Memphis Labor Convention realized that their success would require the support and confidence of Chinese business

³⁹ “Miscellaneous,” *MDA*, June 7, 1870.

leaders, labor agents, headmen, interpreters, as well as the confidence of the workers themselves. Cohen argues, “They would be the final judges of the conditions of work and the systems of social relations in the South.”⁴⁰

Though larger state and regional efforts to establish immigration from China failed, some local companies did establish low levels of immigration and hire Chinese migrant workers on plantations. By the mid-1870s, many planters who hired these workers found that they were not as “docile” as they had hoped. An 1873 report from the *American Citizen*, a Mississippi newspaper, claimed, “Chinese labor in Louisiana has not proved successful. Most of the coolies, it is said, soon become worthless and dangerous. In several instances they attempted to murder overseers.” This report also stated that “The only planter who got along with them was one who treated them roughly and made them afraid of him.”⁴¹ Proponents of Chinese immigration did not suggest violence as the ideal method of extracting labor. Rather they intended it to be a combination of the modern contract and America’s uplifting ideals. Other reports produced by Southern journalists detailed the failures of Chinese labor in the South. Jung demonstrates that planters had to pay increasingly higher wages to ensure that Chinese laborers stayed for the duration of their contracts and uprisings and premature terminations of contracts were frequent.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 80.

⁴¹ “Chinese Labor in Louisiana,” *The American Citizen*, December 18, 1873.

⁴² Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 199-201. It is impossible to say for sure how successful Chinese labor may have been for Southern planters had the nation’s lawmakers not passed immigration laws. But it may have been that Chinese workers would have refused to “compromise” with planters in the form of sharecropping or tenant labor, as black workers did. After all, many Chinese migrants had different goals and views regarding labor and citizenship than African Americans. One must be careful not to assume that it was the desire of all Chinese migrant workers to integrate as American citizens in the way that most freedmen did. For more on this, see Elliot Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 8-9.

By the end of the 1870s, the *Memphis Appeal* no longer supported Chinese labor. The paper's editors featured a report from San Francisco in which the Chinese were compared to an infestation of rodents and to a creeping vine that would soon exhaust and destroy the "tree of American liberty." Fearing the possible ramifications of giving these coolies citizenship, the report claimed that their votes would be "farmed out" by their Chinese masters to certain political parties. "If the ignorance, the superstition, the paganism, the barely civilized despotism...of China is to have sway in this country by way of the ballot box" the report reasoned, it would result in a "hurricane of destruction" of which the war over the introduction of African laborers as slaves would be but a "gale" in comparison. By 1879, the *Memphis Appeal*, which had been one of the most supportive of Chinese labor importation to the South, agreed that the introduction of Chinese laborers could result in another internal war. This time, the editors reasoned, the war would not be a war between sections, but a war between races.⁴³

The petitions of journalist reformers like the *Memphis Appeal* and the strivings of labor managers like Pillow and Gift were not enough to overcome the charges of "heathenism, coolieism, and despotism" made by ministers, planters, and other journalists, as well as the lack of support at the state and regional level in the South. As local experiments with Chinese labor in the 1870s failed and Chinese workers refused to work under contract, the Southern movement for Chinese labor dissolved years before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Efforts to bring about modern progress for the world would have to take place another way.

⁴³ "Untitled," *MDA* January 8, 1879.

EPILOGUE

In 1888, Keating, editor of the Memphis *Daily Appeal*, wrote a multi-volume history of Memphis and Shelby County, including what he deemed to be of “sufficient importance to have changed the drift or current of the larger events as they shaped themselves.” In his coverage of Reconstruction, Keating devoted one sentence to the Chinese labor convention that took place in Memphis in 1869. He did not mention the attempted formation of the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company or the other local efforts to import Chinese labor that his paper supported. Much like modern histories of the South today, the push for Chinese labor is left out. Perhaps this is justifiable. After all, the movement did not pan out the way its supporters wanted. Many thousands of Chinese laborers were not imported into the South and perhaps the immigration schemes of the *Appeal* and its planter allies did not change the “drift or current of the larger events.” However, there are similar discussions and debates that took place in the 1860s and 1870s, which Keating does discuss at length, such as plans to colonize Mexico or Brazil and the plan to create an American Empire with President Grant as emperor.¹

Most would consider such things unlikely, if not impossible, and so these possibilities are rarely discussed or studied. Yet modern discussions concerning Reconstruction do not shy away from the possibility of racial equality in the South during Reconstruction. Revisionist historians have lamented that more was not done by white and black leaders to bring about opportunity for formerly enslaved people during these

¹ John M. Keating, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County Tennessee* (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1888), 5, 599, 602-04.

years. Recent scholarship demonstrates that equality, in the twenty-first century sense of the word, was highly unlikely if not completely impossible during the 1860s and 1870s in the United States.² It would not be unreasonable to argue that Chinese labor importation for the South in the 1870s was much nearer the realm of possibility than racial equality.

Keating, like historians after him, used Reconstruction to address issues relevant in his own time. Keating referenced what he saw as the degraded actions of the formerly enslaved in Memphis, particularly black men. In several cases, he explicitly noted the abuse of white women. However, he placed the blame for any such actions on the interference of Northern "extreme radicals." He did not blame black men for their actions, but those in the North who he believed, sought to politicize and "minister to the vanity of the Negro." Keating explained that Reconstruction ended in Tennessee in 1876, after which he described the behavior of black men in much more amicable terms. For example, during the 1878 outbreak of yellow fever in Memphis, Keating described the chaos and general lawlessness of the city's population, both white and black. But in response to claims that black male nurses raped their white patients, he defended these men saying, "No charge ever made was so baseless and wanton, so cruel, so unjust. This class of the population, whatever they may have been to each other...were deferential to the white race."³ For Keating, the accusations of black rape (which were prevalent in the

² Brooks Simpson discusses the limits of Reconstruction and demonstrates how historians have questioned the distance the federal government was able to go in stopping white supremacy and aiding the freedmen, while also simultaneously attempting to foster sectional reconciliation. More importantly, how willing was the North to abandon white supremacy themselves? Though Simpson and most historians for that matter are uncomfortable with the idea of inevitability, it would be safe to say that Reconstruction, as twenty-first century observers would like it to be, was impossible. Brooks D. Simpson, "Mission Impossible: Reconstruction Policy Reconsidered," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 1 (March 2016): 85-102.

³ Keating, *History of Memphis*, 568-69, 636-37, 658-59.

South after the 1880s for many decades) were baseless for a population that had been returned to the control of white Southerners. By the time Keating's history of Memphis was published, the "Chinese Question" was no longer a question. Other labor "arrangements" had been made and there were other questions that troubled Keating.

Reconstruction remains one of the most pliable time periods for scholars and activists. The period is often referenced as a unique moment when the course of history was laid open to the opportunity for positive transformation, and then quickly stifled by a resurgence of white supremacy. Not only does this simplistic line of thinking betray a sense of naivety, but also an overemphasis on American exceptionalism. Reconstruction in the United States was one of many similar occurrences throughout the globe as societies shifted, often violently, in the wake of emancipation. This is not to say that reactions to emancipation were all the same; Chinese labor was one possible reaction among many. But to understand this time period, and those surrounding it, observers should recognize it, not as a failed American experiment with freedom, but as a part of a much larger global reaction to free labor.

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