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An Inquiry into the Plight of Chinese Laborers' Work in Peru during the Mid-to-Late 19th Century

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Abstract: In the mid-19th century, as the Opium War forced open China's doors, the Qing government was compelled to abandon its policy of seclusion. A large number of Chinese people began to go abroad to make a living. Besides Southeast Asia and North America, Peru, which was facing a shortage of labor in plantations and mines at that time, also deceived and coerced Chinese laborers to go to the country through the "coolie trade". Similar to the situation of Chinese laborers in the United States, those in Peru also faced the problems of intense labor and low legal status. This paper takes Chinese laborers in Peru during the mid-to-late 19th century as the research subject, explores the plight of their labor and its causes, and discusses a glimpse into the living conditions of early Chinese immigrants in Latin America by examining the history of hardships endured by these laborers in Peru at that time.

Keywords: Latin America; Sino-Peruvian relations; Peru; Chinese laborers

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1. Background and motivations for Chinese laborers' journey to Peru

1.1. Peru's demand for labor

Peru gained independence from Spain in 1821. Similar to other Latin American countries, it was mired in prolonged civil wars and political power struggles after independence, with its economic development disrupted for a long time. It was not until the 1840s, when Ramón Castilla took office as President of Peru, that the country's political situation stabilized.

Peru's economic development relied heavily on coastal plantations, its abundant copper mines, and guano resources. However, both plantations and mines required a large number of laborers. By 1836, however, Peru had a population of only 1.374 million [1]. For a country with an area of over 500,000 square kilometers, this was extremely sparsely populated. Moreover, a large proportion of this million-strong population were Indigenous peoples of South America. Rather than enduring intensive manual labor on plantations or in mines, these Indigenous peoples preferred to live in the Andes Mountains and engage in a semi-farming and semi-pastoral lifestyle [2]. This further widened Peru's labor shortage.

Therefore, Peru was in urgent need of importing a large number of laborers from abroad to meet the demands of its domestic economic development.

1.2. Motivations for Chinese people to go to Peru

After the Opium War of 1840, China was forced to open its borders and lost its tariff autonomy; the large-scale invasion of

Western capitalism gradually dismantled China's traditional self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy, intensified land annexation, and the massive influx of foreign goods also led to the collapse of a large number of local handicrafts, leaving these bankrupt farmers and handicraftsmen unable to sustain themselves, so they had to attempt to go abroad to seek a living.

The invasion of Western powers further exacerbated class contradictions, so in the mid-19th century, various peasant uprisings broke out with the Taiping Rebellion at their core, and the prolonged wars caused by these uprisings further worsened the hardships of people's lives; after the failure of the Taiping Rebellion, a large number of insurgents also fled abroad to escape the pursuit and persecution of the Qing government. These Chinese people, who were forced to go abroad to seek a living for various reasons, became an important source of labor that Western invaders sold to Southeast Asia, the Americas, Oceania and other regions through abduction, plunder and other means [3]. Although the Qing government still banned overseas labor after the Opium War, it could not stop this trend.

1.3. Forms of Chinese laborers' migration to Peru for work

The main form of Chinese laborers' migration to Peru for work during this period was the "contract labor system". Essentially, contract labor meant that colonizers used deceptive, kidnapping, and coercive means to force Chinese laborers to sign indenture contracts; most Chinese laborers, either under coercion or due to lack of access to information, were forced to sign contracts with a term of 8 to 10 years, and then forcibly transported to Peru to engage in slave-like labor. Colonizers, through their agents in the southeastern coastal areas of China, would lure Chinese laborers with the bait of "high wages", and an even more direct method was to collude with local forces to kidnap them.

Many Chinese laborers, due to poverty and war, were deceived by these people. This practice of luring Chinese laborers into signing labor contracts was locally known as "selling piglets" (a derogatory term for this human trafficking practice). As the British Hong Kong Government soon passed a decree to ban the coolie trade in Hong Kong, and the Qing government also explicitly prohibited Chinese people from emigrating abroad, however, the Portuguese Macau Government adopted a permissive attitude towards the coolie trade; thus, naturally, Macau, across the Pearl River Estuary, became the main export port for colonizers to plunder contract Chinese laborers at that time [2].

2. The labors plight of Chinese laborers in Peru

2.1. The long voyage

Among all destinations of the coolie trade for Chinese laborers, Peru was one of the farthest. As the antipode of Southeast Asia, literally the exact opposite side of the Earth, Chinese laborers had to cross the entire Pacific Ocean to reach Peru from Macau, a voyage of nearly 18,000 kilometers that could take up to four months.

Beyond the transoceanic distance, the truly deadly aspect was the harsh living conditions in the ship's holds. All the equipment used to suppress and abuse slaves on slave ships during the Age of Exploration were also fully available on the ships transporting Chinese laborers [3].

The living quarters for Chinese laborers were also extremely harsh. Although there were regulations for transport ships at that time, requiring regular sanitation checks, cabin cleaning, and maintenance of hygiene; in reality, due to the absence of supervisors, most of these regulations became a dead letter. Chinese laborers were actually confined in airtight lower decks, and the so-called "cabin cleaning" was impossible to implement. Such dreadful living conditions easily led to the outbreak of epidemic diseases, resulting in a sharp rise in mortality rates, some laborers even died of oxygen deprivation and suffocation [2].

Not only were the living conditions terrible, but the food and drinking water provided to the laborers were also appalling. Portuguese regulations stipulated minimum rations of food and water for each laborer based on the length of the voyage. However, just like the hygiene rules, these food ration regulations were practically not enforced. To cut costs, ship captains provided far less than the minimum standard of food and insufficient water. Moreover, the laborers often had

to cook for themselves, and at that time, people lacked proper hygiene awareness, thus adding another source of epidemic diseases on top of the harsh living conditions.

The lack of adequate food meant there was also no access to fresh vegetables. In addition to epidemic diseases, Chinese laborers thus suffered from scurvy [2]. Any complaints or resistance would result in physical abuse, including floggings and branding with hot irons [3]. These appalling conditions led to extremely high mortality rates: in most years, nearly half of the coolies departing from Macau died en route, with Peruvian-bound ships having the highest numbers and fatality rates. The infamous Dolores Ugarte and Don Juan recorded mortality exceeding 90% [4]. For those who survived these hellish voyages, even greater suffering awaited them in Peru.

2.2. Coolies on plantations

With Britain abolishing the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in 1833, the abolitionist movement gained momentum worldwide, and Peru was no exception. In 1856, President Ramón Castilla announced the abolition of slavery in Peru. While slavery was abolished, the plantation-dominated agricultural economy remained unchanged; plantations still needed a large supply of low-cost labor to sustain operations, and indentured Chinese laborers became the key workforce replacing enslaved people.

Among the indentured Chinese laborers who arrived in Peru, the vast majority were sent to work on plantations. For accommodation, they usually lived in crude shacks or small walled huts. As most of Peru consists of temperate deserts with low rainfall and mild climates, some of these dwellings didn't even have roofs. To cut costs, employers had no intention of improving the laborers' housing or providing daily necessities. Just like the holds of the ships that had transported them to Peru, the laborers' quarters lacked sanitation facilities, resulting in equally appalling hygiene conditions. Their personal space was extremely limited, barely enough to store a few personal items. To prevent escapes at night, the laborers were usually locked in their quarters and forbidden from going out [5].

In terms of food, the Chinese laborers' provisions were poor. They typically had rice as their staple food, with occasional small portions of meat and fish; however, more often than not, their side dishes only consisted of sweet potatoes and corn. The quality of the food was also subpar the rice was often rotten, barely fit for pigs. Due to food shortages, many laborers had to buy additional items like lard and tea from plantation stores to supplement their diet, which meant their meager wages were often spent entirely on these extra provisions [2].

The laborers' working hours were extremely long. They were usually routed out of bed before dawn to start work and didn't stops until 8 or 9 pm, with barely any breaks in between. Even a slight delay in getting up, gathering for work, or a moment of slackness on the job would result in physical punishment, including flogging. Abuse of Chinese laborers was common on plantations, most of which had prisons on-site. Laborers were often forced to work in shackles and chains. Under such circumstances, countless laborers attempted to escape, but plantation owners would summarily execute those who were caught. Escapees were chased by ferocious dogs; if captured, they were shot dead, and in some even more brutal cases, burned alive or thrown into water dungeons to rot [3].

Plantations employed not only Chinese laborers but also indentured laborers of other ethnicities, including Black and Indigenous people. However, Chinese laborers occupied the lowest status among all these indentured laborers. These indentured laborers of other ethnicities, despite being exploited themselves, did not sympathize with Chinese laborers; instead, they regarded Chinese laborers as people of lower status than themselves. As a result, they even helped plantation owners oppress Chinese laborers, often more brutally. Employers were also happy to see these indentured laborers fight among themselves, Chinese laborers' dwellings were segregated from those of other ethnicities, and employers also used Black and Indigenous laborers as a backup force to suppress Chinese laborers [6].

Harsh living conditions, inadequate food, and slave-like labor intensity led to an extremely low survival rate among Chinese laborers. Most of them died before the expiration of their contracts. Even if they completed their contract terms, employers still refused to release them as stipulated in the contracts and demanded that they work indefinitely. To these greedy employers, contracts were nothing but scraps of paper. Escaping would lead to death by torture, while continuing to

work offered no hope. Ultimately, many desperate Chinese laborers chose to end their lives by suicide [6].

2.3. Coolies in guano mines

If the plight of Chinese laborers on plantations was already tragic, then the issues of working conditions and labor intensity for those digging guano on the Chincha Islands were even more severe. Before the invention of the Haber process (ammonia synthesis from air) by the German chemist Fritz Haber, most of the world's fertilizer was derived from guano mining. The various islands off Peru's coast were the main sources of guano at that time, so guano exports became Peru's largest source of foreign income. However, guano mining was the harshest form of work among all types of labor in Peru, neither indentured laborers from other countries nor local people were willing to dig guano. Contracts also generally included provisions prohibiting the assignment of coolies to guano mining, but such provisions were only introduced in the late 1860s. Since locals and other foreign laborers refused to take on the work, the majority of coolies working in guano fields in the mid-19th century were Chinese laborers [3].

On the Chincha Islands, guano piled up like mountains, emitting a suffocating stench. The air was filled with large amounts of powder and toxic ammonia gas, inhaling this air caused severe damage to the lungs and bronchi. Prolonged skin contact with guano also irritated the skin and led to ulcers. Just like on plantations, Chinese laborers on the guano islands had no access to adequate food or water. The lack of sufficient water for basic hygiene and daily needs further accelerated the spread of diseases and physical harm.

If the relatively mild climate along Peru's coast spared plantation laborers from extreme heat and cold, Chinese laborers in guano fields did not even have this meager comfort. The islands were scorched by the blazing sun, with extremely high temperatures and oppressive humidity, yet little rainfall. Laborers had to work in such sweltering heat every day [6].

Despite the harsh natural environment, their daily workload was no lighter than that on plantations. Chinese laborers were required to dig 4 to 5 tons of guano per day; failure to meet this quota would result in punishments such as flogging and being put in shackles [3]. They usually started working before dawn and continued until dark. With no breakfast provided, they had to endure several hours of intense labor in the morning, leading to a working day as long as over ten hours.

While Chinese laborers on plantations still had the option to escape, those digging guano had nowhere to run, trapped on isolated islands. Burdened with immense mental stress, many chose to end their lives because they could no longer endure such inhumane treatment. Every day, two or three people would hang themselves; many others opted to drown themselves in the sea or bury themselves alive. Instead of improving working conditions when faced with the high number of suicides, employers tried to stop these acts. They even posted guards specifically along the coast to prevent Chinese laborers from drowning themselves in the sea [3].

3. Chinese laborers' resistance and their subsequent developments

3.1. Chinese laborers' resistance

Faced with extremely brutal exploitation and inhumane treatment, Chinese laborers never ceased their resistance. Passive resistance was the most common form, including sabotaging tools, slowing down work, and fleeing. Direct forms of resistance were uprisings, such as the 1870 Uprising in the Pativilca Region, the 1871 Uprising at the Lima Maranga Plantation, the 1875 Huacho Chinese Laborers' Uprising, and the 1876 Trujillo Uprising [2]. Under the brutal oppression of plantation owners, these Chinese laborers took up arms to resist and gained control of multiple local plantations. Although most of these uprisings were suppressed, they still greatly shocked the colonial rulers.

3.2. Subsequent developments of the Chinese indentured labor system

From the 1870s onward, amid pressure from international public opinion and the continuous resistance of Chinese laborers,

the Peruvian government, under pressure, gradually abolished the "Chinese indentured labor" system. Finally, in 1874, Macau decided to ban the Chinese coolie trade. In the same year, the Peruvian government signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between China and Peru with the Qing government, agreeing to guarantee the rights of Chinese laborers and investigate and improve the treatment of Chinese laborers in Peru [2].

4. Conclusion

In summary, the treatment of Chinese laborers in Peru in the mid-19th century was a reflection of colonial exploitation and the tragedy of overseas Chinese from a weak nation. Deceived or abducted, these laborers endured immense suffering during their trans-Pacific voyage. Upon arriving in Peru, they were sold like commodities to guano mines and plantations, where they worked from dawn till midnight and suffered all forms of mental and physical abuse. The vast majority of them perished in this harsh environment. The blood and tears of these Chinese laborers proved that the dignity of individuals is closely linked to the lack of national sovereignty. Their ordeal was a microcosm of modern China's humiliating history.

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