

Politics of Life and Labor: French Colonialism in China and Chinese Coolie Labor During the Construction of the Yunnan–Indochina Railway, 1898–1910

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Abstract

The Yunnan–Indochina railway, built by France across the China–Vietnam border between 1898–1910, never realized the expansionist dreams of French colonialists in Indochina and therefore has been studied as a failure of French imperialism. Taking a labor perspective, this article examines the labor conflicts along the Yunnan railway against the backdrop of the emergence of a global labor market where different colonial powers competed for cheap Chinese labor after the emancipation of black slaves. At the time of the railway’s construction, access to cheap labor was so central to colonial competition that the metropolitan, colonial, and business agents of the French empire found themselves in a dire conflict over labor shortages in Yunnan. To the extent that France failed to restrain the railway company agents from abusing the labor force, other European colonial powers used worker misery to dispute French claims to conducting a “civilizing mission.” At the same time, both Qing imperial officials and Chinese nationalists advanced their arguments for national sovereignty in the name of protecting their national subjects, i.e., the railway workers. As a result, French recruiters had to reconsider the terms of Chinese coolie employment, increase wages, improve worker contracts, and invest in welfare systems. In sum, worker resistance during the construction of the Yunnan railway not only delayed the railway’s completion and diminished French colonial prestige in the region but also empowered the workers, giving them leverage to increase the value of their labor in a market extending beyond Chinese national borders.

On April 10, 1898, as compensation for German colonial acquisitions in north China, the Qing central government agreed to sign a treaty with France that granted the Indochinese government the right to build a railway from Haiphong, Vietnam, to Kunming, China, the capital of the southwestern border province of Yunnan.¹ With a convention approved in the French Parliament on June 20, 1901, the *Compagnie Française des Chemins de Fer de L’Indochine et du Yunnan*, a private company, was founded and given the concession to build the Haiphong–Yunnan line and the right to operate it for seventy-five years. After the long and contentious

work of route selection, actual construction began in 1903, only to result in an international scandal when thousands of Chinese and Vietnamese workers, along with numerous European employees, lost their lives due to the malarial climate. The railway company's ruthless labor management, worker resistance to Italian contractors' recklessness, and growing nationalist activism in the region further exacerbated the crisis. While locals familiar with the region's malarial conditions resisted working for the railway, coolies brought from other Chinese provinces immediately deserted the worksites. Qing officials also obstructed French recruitment efforts because the workers were mistreated. Even after contracting an adequate number of laborers, Chinese coolies continued to vanish when work conditions were unbearable, steal from their employers when they were not paid, and murder the company's foreign staff when tensions arose. Although spontaneous worker reactions were not manifestations of a class struggle in the conventional sense, they exemplified how workers protected their lives and labor from their employers long before class was articulated as a category of political activism in peripheral China.²

This article examines the construction process of the Yunnan–Indochina railway as a case in which Chinese workers empowered themselves in the context of rising colonial competition for cheap labor and the emergence of a global coolie trade. Commonly known as “indentured labor,” the coolie trade was a labor regime in which workers were tied to an employer for a fixed term under a contractual agreement that enforced penal sanctions if workers violated the contract's terms.³ Analyzing American debates about the binding nature of labor contracts and travel hardships suffered by Chinese coolies in the nineteenth century, Moon-Ho Jung demonstrated how coolie labor was seen as a continuation of slavery.⁴ Likewise, David Northrup found many similarities between indentured labor and slavery in terms of recruitment, workload, daily life, health care, resistance, crime, and punishment.⁵ Although the domestic coolie trade into Yunnan was similar to what scholars found in overseas labor migrations, the fact that the railway construction fell within the borders of the Qing imperial realm, where these workers were recognized as subjects of a sovereign state, gave the workers the advantages of official protection, a shared culture, and a familiar geography. These provided them leverage to breach contracts through absenteeism and mass desertion or by confronting their employers with revolts, theft, and homicide, acts that were for the most part infeasible for their overseas counterparts, who usually chose suicide as the only escape from their dreadful work conditions.⁶

In discussing worker struggles in Yunnan within the context of the global coolie trade, this article intends to shift the scholarship on modern Chinese labor activism from the binary of class-consciousness versus culture and toward changes in global labor markets. The first generation of labor historians of China, looking for typical forms of class activism such as strikes, boycotts, and unionization, mostly focused on urban regions on the eastern coasts. They underestimated pre-1919 worker activism, arguing that it did not have a unique agenda of its own, particularly before the emergence of communism as a viable political ideology and movement politics.⁷ In a pioneering work on the Chinese labor movement, the historian Jean Chesneaux argued that by 1919, the Chinese working class “had not yet taken action on its own behalf, but had merely provided support for movements directed by other social classes.”⁸

Similarly, S. A. Smith also argued that during the anti-American boycott of 1905, participating workers did not act “as members of a class” but “as guild members in unison with their employers.”⁹ While both authors convincingly argued that the working class rose to prominence in national politics in 1919, on the shoulders of the nationalist and antidynastic struggles of the preceding years, they designated class-consciousness as a prerequisite for class struggle. They also gave credit to labor struggles only when they were affiliated with larger social movements, for example, nationalism.¹⁰

This article suggests a reconsideration of the relationship between pre-1919 labor struggles and antidynastic nationalist movements, particularly those in peripheral China. The Yunnan railway case, especially during the failed antidynastic Hekou rebellion in 1908, indicates that railway workers did not lend their support to the nationalist movement as naturally as did workers in urban centers. Before they identified with the nationalist movement, these nonurban workers, starting with their journey from their hometowns to the worksites in Yunnan, formed a collective identity based on wage-earning, shared misery, and the urge to survive. During their journey to the railway, they caused trouble and fought with local officials for their advance payments, even claiming an invincible authority for being the “servants of the great French country.”¹¹ In this sense, the example of the Yunnan railway workers, while demonstrating how anticolonial nationalism impaired colonialists’ ability to find cheap labor, makes a case against the argument that worker identity in pre-1919 China was subsumed under an innate nationalism.

On the other hand, unlike orthodox labor histories that prioritized the unitary nature of nationalism and interpreted regionalism as a divisive force preventing collective action, Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig, inspired by E. P. Thompson’s new labor history, focused on culture to highlight regional identities as a unifying factor. They argued that provincial backgrounds enhanced worker solidarity in a pre-class setting where workers mobilized through hometown networks rather than under political ideologies.¹² This article also understands workers’ local ties as a facilitator of labor activism. However, it mainly explains Chinese workers’ empowerment with reference to the emergence of a global labor market and its increasing demand for Chinese labor in a post-emancipation world.¹³ Labor shortages and worker resistance along the Yunnan railway brought to light conflicts between the metropolitan, colonial, and business agents of the French empire. To the extent that the French failed to keep the labor force alive and at work and the railway company agents under control, other European colonial powers used worker misery to dispute French claims to be on a civilizing mission, thus weakening the French position in the global competition for cheap labor. At the same time, both Qing imperial officials and Chinese nationalists advanced their arguments for national sovereignty in the name of protecting their national subjects, i.e., the railway workers. As a result, the French government and recruiting agents had to reconsider the terms of Chinese coolie recruitment, increase wages, improve worker contracts, and invest in welfare systems. In other words, worker resistance during the construction of the Yunnan railway not only delayed the railway’s completion and diminished French colonial prestige in the region but also empowered the workers, giving them leverage to increase the value of their labor in a market whose conditions were determined beyond Chinese national borders.

French Colonial Policy, Paul Doumer, and the Yunnan–Indochina Railway

From its inception as a colonial infrastructure project, the Yunnan railway has remained a controversial issue in French politics and scholarship. Especially after the railway's retrocession to China in 1945, and the end of French colonial rule in Indochina, French (and Western) historiography has adopted a monolithically critical tone by seeing the railway as a failed project of French imperialism.¹⁴ In the first historical study of the railway, Michel Bruguière argued that more than economic reasons, it was imperial competition between France and Britain that pushed the railway onto the French colonial agenda.¹⁵ According to Bruguière, it would have achieved its economic and political ends only if the French colonial government had annexed Yunnan.¹⁶

The basis for Bruguière's argument was the controversial governorship of Paul Doumer (1857–1932), the former minister of finance, who was known for his expansionist ambitions. When he was appointed to be the Governor-General of Indochina in 1897, metropolitan politicians had long been debating the costs and benefits of colonial investments in an effort to redefine the needs of *fin-de-siècle* France.¹⁷ Doumer approached French colonization in Indochina from a comprehensive perspective, seeing it not only as a project to exploit local markets but also as an opportunity to spread French influence into the Far East through commercial and cultural works across colonial borders.¹⁸ This strategy would benefit metropolitan industries and demonstrate the merits of expansion to opponents of the imperial project.

Upon arrival in his new post, Doumer immediately established state monopolies in salt, alcohol, and opium in order to secure the colony's financial autonomy.¹⁹ By turning indirect taxes into the state's primary source of revenue, he planned to provide funds for the proliferation of public works that would serve both economic and political ends. These works, railways in particular, would unify the colony, strengthen the colonial economy, and revive metropolitan industries by utilizing French manufactures in construction.²⁰ As part of this broader scheme, the Yunnan railway would become an artery to enlarge the French colony's social, economic, and political reach.

Doumer's foreign policy was an extension of his vigorous economic planning. Unlike many metropolitan bureaucrats and politicians who gravitated to a more cautious and constrained attitude in international relations, he saw prompt and early action as the only way to avoid international debacles like Fashoda.²¹ After his appointment as the head of the colony, Doumer sent at least six missions to Yunnan, mostly headed by military men.²² If these missions' disgraceful manners were stark examples of French impudence toward local populations, Doumer's own visit in mid-1899, utterly ignorant of Chinese protocol, was a display of his expansionist mindset. After his departure, local miners, disturbed by survey teams from the Anglo-French Mining Syndicate, attacked foreigners and attempted to burn the customs office in Mengzi. In July, a crowd in Kunming besieged the pagoda leased to the French railway commission because the commission disrupted religious and commercial activities. Responding to calls from paralyzed French officials and staff in Yunnan, Doumer was preparing his troops to march into Yunnan before the French Foreign Ministry put an end to his plans. Seizing Yunnan would violate the Anglo-French Convention of January 15, 1896, which, signed to resolve the

territorial conflicts between Britain and France in Southeast Asia, required that any privileges in the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan be shared between the two powers.

Considering local reactions in China, as well as the financial and diplomatic risks posed by Indochina expansionism, the project was organized as a private business enterprise supported by a French diplomatic mission in Yunnan.²³ However, having two separate entities manage railway construction caused further problems. From the railway's route to the handling of local unrest, everything became a matter of contestation between French officials and company agents, including a significant number of Italian contractors along with French managers and engineers. Being subject to no jurisdiction in Yunnan, the Italians easily turned toward abusing their workers and other foreigners, putting French colonial prestige under scrutiny in the eyes of Chinese officials and the general public. In French Indochina, dignity and prestige were racially defined keywords that served to maintain the legal distance between the colonial subjects and French citizens.²⁴ In this articulation of the colonial situation, the domination over locals was only secondary to exercising sovereignty over the French population in the colony or maintaining its self-control, a principle frequently violated by both the uncontrollable Italians and by profit-seeking French entrepreneurs in Yunnan.

Ultimately, the main issue that damaged relations between the company and French officials was the devastating labor shortage. In addition to the difficult task of finding workers in sparsely populated Yunnan, many of the recruits either died from malaria or fled worksites due to harsh working conditions. French officials and company agents approached the question differently: the former held the company responsible for the mistreatment of the workers, and the latter blamed Chinese officials' reluctance to help with recruitment. Whereas the former approached coolie recruitment and work management within the larger framework of French prestige and competitive power in the colonial world order, the latter, focusing squarely on their profits, saw in the coolie a disposable commodity.

For example, August François (1857–1935), the French consul in Kunming, reported that the Italian contractors employed brutal methods with the workers. As a result, “the number of coolies leaving the work surpassed the newcomers, the worksites were deserted, and the contractors, leading an idle workforce, were about to abandon their contracts.”²⁵ In addition, the sanitary conditions at worksites were unbearable. Almost 40 percent of the workforce was sick, more than twenty-five European employees died, and the mortality rate was significantly higher among the Chinese workers. Under these circumstances, local officials refused to help in recruitment, which risked provoking public resentment and social turmoil. As a solution, François suggested better planning for worker accommodations, meals, hygiene, and wages.

Like François, the Mengzi Consul Raphaël Réau (1872–1928) stated that the frequent worksite conflicts arose due to the “dubious morality” of the railway employees, including the Italians, the French, and individuals of unknown nationalities.²⁶ These employees were behaving in brutal and ignorant ways, “as if they were trying to revive the old customs of American Far West,” and “as if the life of a poor coolie is not worth a pipe of tobacco.”²⁷ He observed that most of the Italian contractors and

French engineers held a sense of superiority over the Chinese, forgetting that they were China's guests, and that the success of the railway project was dependent on the strength of relations with Chinese authorities. Frequent crimes were reasonable, he suggested, because betrayed or mistreated workers "did not hesitate to recover their shares from the property of their employers, either in cash or in kind."²⁸

Not all French diplomats shared Consul Réau's solicitous attitude toward the workers. On the contrary, many of them discussed deserting or defiant workers in racial terms similar to French colonial agents elsewhere.²⁹ For example, the Hekou Consul C. A. J. Sainson (1868–1954) observed that the population in southern Yunnan was sparse and "the people were miserable, addicted to opium, weak, lazy, and unintelligent."³⁰ Contractor Waligorski, having failed to recruit workers in Yunnan, was able to find eleven hundred coolies in neighboring Guangxi, and arrived at the worksite with only one-third that number. According to French diplomats and Italian contractors, it was typical that people refused to work in southern China because hard work did not fit their culture, lifestyle, or even genetics. To attract such an "idle population," the management had to offer seventy-five cents per day as opposed to fifty cents, which was deemed too expensive at the beginning of the project. Sainson believed that with increased labor costs, the railway would not produce the expected profits unless subsidized by the French government.

The racialization of the labor question by French diplomats and the company implied a distinction in the French imagination between a Chinese coolie and a worker, which also prevented the French from acknowledging the coolie resistance as a proper form of labor struggle. The French plan to build this labor-intensive railway was based in the first place on the assumption that China was a labor-exporting country with an abundant supply of cheap and submissive toilers. Facing reality in Yunnan, French officials and company employees took Chinese reluctance to work for the railway as the basis for their view that the Chinese were not even good workers, let alone members of a legitimate working-class resistance. For the French, the ways that workers confronted their employers were not expected acts of worker struggle, but mere crimes. In a letter about Chinese workers who remained after the completion of the railway, the French consul in Kunming described them as a group of men "belonging to a bellicose and bandit-friendly race" with the potential to form gangs along the railway, potentially destroying railway platforms and attacking passengers.³¹ For this reason, they pressured the Chinese government to remove the original railway treaty stipulation that banned worker recruitment from abroad (Vietnam). They planned to recruit their "loyal" and more controllable colonial subjects whom they had already employed as railway guards in superior positions to the Chinese coolies in order to keep wages under control.³²

Even though both Chinese and Vietnamese coolies were similarly dismissible for the French, the Vietnamese received different consideration beyond their economic value. When the Transindochinois was planned and built, the French envisioned local railway workers as diffusers of modernity. Without denying the use of forced labor, David W. Del Testa argued that French colonial social engineering in Indochina created "a labor aristocracy of [indigenous] railroad workers" through "technical education, medical benefits, and relatively higher pay" and gained their loyalty until the 1930s.³³ It is thus understandable that in the particular context of

Yunnan, where French colonial prestige was at stake, French Vietnamese subjects were marked in sharp contrast to the Chinese who were found “unintelligent and parasitic” by the French.³⁴ On one occasion, when local Chinese officials expressed concern about potential troubles if nonlocal Chinese workers remained in Yunnan after completing the railway, Henri Leduc (1863–1919), the consul in Kunming, defined their anxiety as “exaggerated pessimism.” He assured the foreign minister that the workers recruited from the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Guangdong, and Zhili were being sent to the Namti (Nanxi) Valley, “where the work will not be complete in less than four years and where the disease will decimate most of the workforce.”³⁵ That is to say, while the Vietnamese were economically more viable and had a symbolic value as embodiments and carriers of the French civilizing mission, Chinese coolies had no value beyond their labor power during and after the period of construction. This was the extent to which French officials were blind to the dysfunctional nature of their coolie employment strategy.

Maurice Casenave (1860–1935), a French inspector who visited China’s southwestern borders in mid-1904 as the First Embassy Secretary on Mission, expressed a different perspective, reporting that the maltreatment of the contract labor force was a structural issue in the French empire.³⁶ According to Casenave, many of the Chinese workers employed in Indochina were treated improperly and paid irregularly. Some companies closed their businesses due to bankruptcy without paying their workers, who could not return to their homes. The same was true for other French overseas colonial projects. Compared to the British and Dutch colonies, where strict and efficient legislation protected Chinese workers, the French did not have specific legislation regarding coolie emigration.³⁷ As a result, while emigrants to other colonies were willing to bring their families to the new country at their own expense, workers in French colonies advised their fellows to avoid the French. Observing the Yunnan railway, Casenave suggested that many of the workers employed in the Namti Valley perished due to the unhealthy climate and lack of the most basic medical facilities. Company agents ignored their responsibility by closing their eyes to contractors and foremen’s brutality for fear of any cost increase being rejected by the company headquarters.³⁸

Contrary to what the company claimed, Casenave believed that local officials in Guangdong and Guangxi were aware of the Yunnan railway’s importance. Hence, it was not the mandarins who impeded recruitment, but the inappropriate attitudes of company agents and their auxiliaries. Finally, Casenave suggested passing new legislation to govern Asian labor migration to French colonial projects based on examples that attracted immigrants.³⁹ In his words, “the Chinese coolie is a commodity which is, like all other commodities, subject to the general laws of supply and demand.”⁴⁰ That is, the only solution to the problem of labor shortages was to follow the rules of the Chinese labor market, which, due to the high demand from various colonial powers, was highly competitive.⁴¹ An institutional reform aimed at recuperating the terms of recruitment would give the French leverage in the competition for labor.

A year later, the French consul in Canton (now the city of Guangzhou in Guangdong province), Gaston Kahn (1864–1928) criticized the company and its recruiters for trying to make a profit from recruitment instead of focusing on the

outcome of the work. They neither made distinctions in the physical quality or professional skills of the recruits. This negligence was a loss for the employers as they had to “feed these useless mouths” who could not adjust to Yunnan’s circumstances.⁴² Included in the same correspondence, the consul had another note from Casenave, who now argued that it was mainly the recruitment agents who, needing to fulfill their quotas, boarded unfit workers for work in Yunnan.⁴³ He observed that workers in English and Dutch colonies, were subject to strict regulations from the moment of their recruitment and these regulations, leaving nothing to the discretion of employers, covered their travel and accommodations. On the other hand, the French did not take into consideration the needs and desires of indigenous workers. They mistakenly thought that a high salary would be enough to satisfy the workers. Under these circumstances, France had no chance to prevail over its rivals in the search for coolie labor.

Both Casenave and Kahn were ahead of their compatriots in understanding the recruitment issue within the context of the broader global coolie trade and the transition to free labor. While coolie labor was still seen as a commodity, coolies had the freedom to choose which contract to sign, except in cases where recruitment agents tricked them.⁴⁴ In other words, the supply of “coolie-commodities” in the newly emerged labor market depended on the circumstances offered by hiring agents in a competitive setting. Using this global competition to their advantage, Chinese workers could increase the price of their labor power. In addition, the coolies’ productive capacity was embedded in their physical being, namely in their bodies. Once they died or disappeared, the “coolie-commodity” consumption cycle came to an end and created a crisis, as their supply was not endless. Thus, it was necessary to develop the means and mechanisms to maintain and reproduce coolie labor by keeping them healthy and working.

During the same years, France made changes in the labor law and introduced the first state welfare provisions in the mainland.⁴⁵ The new question was whether to implement these changes in the French colonies, where the effort to turn the colonies into economically independent units required further reductions in labor costs. To the dismay of colonial investors, pressure from Britain and from the anticolonial movement in France, supported by missionaries who denounced atrocities in the African colonies, forced the minister of colonies to improve contractual terms and give colonial government agencies more power to intervene in recruitment processes.⁴⁶ In China, Casanave and Kahn suggested similar solutions, whereas the railway company, even amid a dire labor shortage, was committed to a free functioning labor market.⁴⁷ When Chinese authorities suggested recruiting local workers on a trial basis in 1905, the company engineer de Traz told the Kunming consul that he could not “admit that the authorities impose upon [the company] a mode of labor organization not compatible with the requirements of the work and the wage rates for the chiefs, which must be determined only by the laws of supply and demand.”⁴⁸ Similarly, during the rice crisis in 1906, company director Guibert confronted French consular agents, who blamed the contractors for not storing enough rice and causing starvation on worksites by emphasizing that labor contracts did not compel the company to provide food for the labor force. In response to the warnings that the famine would further impede recruitment, he arrogantly wrote that:

Based on our long-term study of the question, we believe that the country [China] has given us the men it could and wanted to give. Assuredly there are more than ten thousand pairs of arms in the country, but we cannot expect, nor even wish that all available arms were employed in our work. It would mean a famine in the country, disrupt the economy, and be disastrous for all.⁴⁹

Guibert, concerned only with the railway in Yunnan, implied that they did not need to make the circumstances attractive for workers in China. Most probably, he knew at the time that their agents were conducting clandestine recruitment in the Canton area to circumvent the intervention of Chinese officials.⁵⁰ The same year, the French consul in Fuzhou reported the posting of some placards by a group of Chinese who opposed recruitment for the Yunnan railway. The placards said: "We recruit workers in Fuzhou—secretly and without the authorization of the Chinese government—to whom we promise work in Yunnan, but we ship them in reality to Laocai, where they are mistreated and where they die from hard work and unhealthy circumstances."⁵¹ As soon as the protest appeared, the consul asked the local authorities to tear down the placards and punish "the perpetrators." At the same time, he wrote a letter to the consul in Mengzi asking him to warn the company that if they wanted to continue recruiting in Fuzhou they needed to change their treatment of the workers. Like Canton, Fuzhou was a port city that sent Chinese workers to overseas projects. A French company owned by Francis Vetch (1862–1944) carried out recruitment for Yunnan along with recruitment for French mining operations in Boleo, Mexico. More than the completion of the Yunnan railway, the consul was concerned about the overall image of French companies in China. A negative public image caused by the Yunnan incidents would be highly detrimental to French companies' interests, which made significant profits from the coolie trade to the Panama Canal during the Chinese anti-American boycott. The consul stated that the company's attempts to extend the contracts and retain workers for more extended periods would be a bad advertisement for future recruitment.⁵²

The Yunnan Railway and French Colonial Prestige in the Public Eye

The labor question in Yunnan, inflamed by the unruly Italians and remiss company managers, tarnished the image of France and impelled Chinese officials to take action to protect their subjects. In 1905, Cen Chunxuan (1861–1933), the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, responded to the "inhumane" working conditions on the Yunnan railway by banning recruitment in the Canton area and recalling Cantonese workers who had already started to work on the railway.⁵³ Hearing this decision, the French minister in Beijing, Georges Dubail (1845–1932), lobbied the mandarins in the central government to prevent Cen from proceeding with his radical move against the French company. Dubail complained in his report to the Foreign Ministry that contractors recruited "workers with no guarantees and preliminary medical examinations," which resulted in filling worksites with "coolies who did not meet the requirements of age, strength, and health, necessary to resist the climate and diseases waiting in Yunnan."⁵⁴ The company's bad reputation was such that it was impossible in certain districts to recruit any more men even with the help of mandarins.

Three months later the French minister of colonies was still complaining about the company's laxity in implementing worker contracts. In particular, Chinese recruitment firms, hired in various provinces, did not execute the contracts at all. Many workers disappeared during their trip to the railway because recruiters did not provide them with the necessary instructions and roadmaps. As if the missing workers were not enough, the company asked officials to repay advances made to the families of the lost. Another issue that caused resentment was the handling of the dead. It was commonly reported in Canton that deceased workers were not appropriately buried. They were either randomly rolled in coffins or buried in very shallow graves. As the minister wrote to the company director, the disrespect shown to workers by the contractors and the company's negligence were the reasons for revolts at worksites, the murder of foreigners, and recruitment failures.⁵⁵

When news of Viceroy Cen's ban spread both inside and outside China, in May 1905, the Indochina governor asked for an investigation into the circumstances at the construction sites. However, according to Leduc, the consul in Kunming, the company was not eager for an investigation because they believed it would be impossible to change Viceroy Cen's mind. Since the promulgation of the recruitment ban, mortality among Tianjin workers in the Namti area had increased due to a beriberi epidemic caused by malnourishment and improper shelter against the continual rains. The situation was so severe that some people in Hanoi had started to take steps to transfer the work to the Indochina Department of Public Works. Leduc was worried that the transfer might cause further troubles by resuscitating the expansionist plans of former governor Doumer, who had been recalled to France in 1902.⁵⁶ Getting involved in a colonial fight in Chinese territory would disrupt France's balance-seeking foreign policy. While the vice-consul in Hekou believed that the coolies in Hekou were in great misery and needed help, he was worried news of an epidemic would soon spread to the neighboring Tonkin provinces that provided the workforce for the Laocai–Yenbay (Vietnam) section of the Indochinese railway.⁵⁷

The harsh working conditions on the railway led to similar antirecruitment decisions in other provinces as well. As part of the recruitment campaign organized for 1905–1906, de Traz traveled to Hong Kong, Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, and Ningbo, where they located many workers but needed official authorization from the Qing central government. Despite their personal and French consular efforts, they could not get proper authorization for recruitment in Ningbo, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. The head of the Chinese Foreign Relations Office, Prince Qing (1838–1917), simply wrote that no worker was willing to work for the company due to the distance between Ningbo and Yunnan.⁵⁸ Qing officials knew that treaty sanctions required them to help with recruitment, but they maneuvered circumstances to utilize their sovereign powers and empower the workers in indirect ways. Viceroy Cen's patriotism notwithstanding, the fact that he only lifted the ban after eight million francs was deposited by the Indochina government into a bank in Canton as security for worker payments also suggests that Chinese officials saw worker salaries as a valuable source of cash flow into the economy.⁵⁹

After the mass mortality and desertion of the northern workers in 1905, the Yunnan railway came to international attention when foreign nationals from other colonial countries seized the opportunity to debate French colonial practices in

China within a humanitarian discourse. In this inter-imperialist dialogue, the Yunnan railway workers were featured merely as “poor coolies” or victims of a cruel work process, without any recognition of their resistance in the form of mass desertion, open revolt, theft, and murder.

In one article, a German author poetically described the misery of northern workers who escaped from the construction sites by walking from Yunnan to Beijing, an approximate distance of 7,000 li.⁶⁰ They had left their homes and families to earn a decent living but returned home ragged, hungry, and sick. He quoted from a widely circulating worker story: Having been deceived by a Chinese recruitment agent, upon their arrival in Yunnan the workers were asked to start working immediately in a mountainous area without inhabitants. They even built their huts with the grass and wood they scavenged from the woods. On the first day, they received some rice, salt, and vegetables, but the supply of these staples, along with firewood, soon disappeared. Even though they initially were given a small amount of cash, the payment was not all at once, and it too was soon cut. They worked until it was completely dark and ate some cooked rice at the workplace if they were lucky enough to find fuel. Otherwise, they had to swallow their rice raw. The site where they worked was a dark and narrow gorge where the humid wind created an unhealthy vapor. When they dug a tunnel, many died because of gas leaks from underground caves. Only the ones who refused to enter survived. The author claimed that the supervisors, company employees, and interpreters caused the death of thousands by forcing the workers into the tunnels with revolvers. The circumstances were so dire that even the Europeans did not escape death.

The author believed that helping these honorable men from the impoverished countryside could prove that not all foreigners were as cruel and rapacious as the contractors on the Yunnan railway. The author observed that the workers, despite their silence, had learned a clear lesson “against the pioneers of civilization, against the representatives of a superior nation who had been called to trample on a miserable people.”⁶¹ He indicated that after the incidents, the Chinese synonym for the French became “wicked.” Finally, the author stated, “when the time came for China to stop bending under brutal force, misfortune would fall onto the individuals, companies, and nations without faith” and “China would be able to decide to which nation she would trust her confidence.”⁶²

While the piece reflected the inter-imperialist rivalry over Chinese land, resources, and labor, it is noteworthy that the author rationalized the German colonial presence in northern China through their so-called civilized treatment of the local populations, as opposed to the inhumane French railway project. In questioning the bona fides of the French civilizing mission, the author’s only prospect for China was reliance on a more powerful and faithful nation, the choice of a good imperialist over a bad one, because it was thought that the Chinese were incapable of developing any semblance of political maturity and independence, at least in their current situation.

Similar discussions of Chinese victimhood and Western humanitarianism could also be found in the Anglophone press. A year after the German article, D. W. Crofts, an American missionary stationed in Guizhou, wrote to the editor of the *North China Daily News* about “the plainly murderous exploitation of laborers by the syndicate engaged in constructing a railway in Yunnan.”⁶³ Crofts claimed

the workers, having experienced the deadly working conditions under armed threat, deserted the worksites at their peril and arrived and “kneeled” at the doors of Crofts’ missionary group “more dead than alive.” He wrote:

It is an old saying that corporations have no souls. But even corporations do yield to the pressure of moral demands on the part of society. Surely the Christlike pity which came to the rescue of the Chinese hereon (*sic*) and made the export of aigrettes contraband ought not to overlook the case of these poor unfortunate, victimized men.⁶⁴

As expected from a religious figure, Crofts formulated the issue as a matter of morality, especially for the foreign (Christian) population that had the power to exert pressure on the relevant parties. His moral appeal found a response from a Francophile located in Shanghai. For the writer of the response, “of course the railway has got to be built, and lives have to be risked, European as well as the native, and the French contractors for the work have to get labour somehow, by hook or by crook,” but the problem was “the callousness to human suffering as well as the neglect of their [the company’s] own best interests.”⁶⁵ Based on the account of his friend who had just returned from a trip in Yunnan, this author stated that,

A Chinaman was less regarded than a horse or a mule; these latter, of which numbers are employed by the superintendents along the line, are well housed and well fed, well groomed and well cared for: the poor willing coolie is dumped down to shift for himself in a strange wildland as best he may.⁶⁶

The author claimed that a murderous economy prevented the precaution of building worker huts at higher altitudes to avoid the malarial air, which peaked at night-time at the bottom of the Namti Valley, and instead left the workers to perish just like the migrant Jamaicans who worked on the Panama Canal. Feeling pity, the author had “shamefully” sent ten taels to the editor and asked him to forward the money to their Guizhou correspondent in order to provide “a thousand meals for the starving wayfarers.”⁶⁷

In the way that it depicted railway construction as a necessity and a right to improve commercial and industrial interests in a competitive world while condemning the irrational entrepreneurs for not understanding the dynamics of the Chinese labor market, this letter was an example of colonial morality, which denied the agency of local populations. The question of morality came to prominence in French public debates after abuses by French colonial agents were brought to light by the Committee for the Protection and Defense of Indigenous People, founded in 1881.⁶⁸ French humanitarianism in this period was more concerned with justifying French expansionism vis-à-vis the other colonial powers, such as a campaign for liberating the enslaved people from their “uncivilized” rulers, rather than problematizing the unequal relationship between French authorities and their colonial subjects.⁶⁹ In any sense, French work practices in Yunnan contradicted the basic principles of nineteenth-century French humanitarianism. Within the limits of a racialized conversation, Chinese workers, despite their active resistance to unfair recruitment and

workplace abuses, unsurprisingly only appeared as victims of irrational and hence immoral business practices rather than as labor activists.

Chinese Nationalists and Yunnan Railway Workers

Worker suffering in Yunnan attracted the attention of antidynastic Chinese (Han) nationalists, who blamed the impotence of the ruling Qing (ethnically Manchu) government for the agony of the country under imperialist assault. Nonetheless, their views on foreign railway investment in China centered on national-level economic considerations and had a dualistic quality: on the one hand, nationalist intellectuals defended the nationalization of the railway lines to gain absolute control over the national economy; on the other hand, they found foreign investments beneficial, especially given China's lack of native capital to improve its industrial infrastructure. Railways were a vital means to enrich the country through domestic and international trade. Whether built by foreign or native capital, their service to the national economy remained the same. Indeed, nationalists believed that foreigners were more efficient in building railways.⁷⁰ Since wages and rents paid by foreigners would increase national revenue, what China needed, they argued, was not a total rejection of foreign investment but a strong government that protected its national interests against foreigners.

Despite their positive approach to railway construction, Yunnanese nationalists were worried that France and Britain were plotting the actual occupation of Yunnan under the pretext of railway construction. At the same time, they contended that in the nineteenth century, colonialism had evolved from simple territorial expansion to more nuanced ways of exploiting local resources. They saw constant foreign immigration into the province, especially after the beginning of railway construction, as the initial stage of colonial intrusion.⁷¹ Once the railway was complete, colonialists in Vietnam could move into Yunnan as the province possessed a better climate and air quality. Others noticed that the Europeans who came for railway construction had already started to buy land either for personal use or to open mines, hospitals, and schools. Taking the lack of local investment and military forces into account, the invasion of foreign capital and people would gradually lead to full colonization.

In analyzing Yunnan's particular circumstances, Yunnanese nationalists were deciphering the changing face of colonialism years before Lenin systematically analyzed imperialism as the financial stage of capitalism, and Third World activists began to use the terms "neo-colonialism" and "semi-colonialism" to describe distinct forms of colonial domination.⁷² A writer for the nationalist *Yunnan Journal*, for instance, reminded those who believed that the railway would bring convenient transportation and improve the provincial economy that the policy of destroying countries (*mieguo zhengce*) had gone through a dramatic transformation in the nineteenth century: In its new form, it did not require territorial occupation, the massacre of people, banishing rulers or destroying businesses. On the contrary, it worked through "not absorbing land (*tudi*) but exploiting its essence (*jinghua*); not slaughtering people (*renmin*) but destroying their kind (*zhongzu*); not banishing officials (*guanshi*) but using them for corruption; not destroying businesses (*zhiye*) but seizing their sovereign powers (*quanli*)."⁷³ Hence, even if the French made extensive investments in the province,

nationalists saw them as part of a plan to extinguish the people, households, and country of China.

For Yunnanese nationalists, labor conflicts along the railway gained meaning within this anticolonial framework. For the *Yunnan Journal's* first issue, they dispatched a special agent to inspect the working conditions on railway construction sites. The inspector reported from the Hekou border that the French compelled every Vietnamese above eighteen years of age to work on the railway.⁷⁴ Those who refused were either brought in as detainees or killed by gunfire. He personally witnessed the execution of two Vietnamese and the amputation of two others. He observed that Chinese workers were mostly regular recruits who did not suffer as much as their Vietnamese fellows. According to this report, only laborers from Yunnan's Chuxiong County received similar treatment as the Vietnamese because, in this area, villagers were obliged to pay enormous fines if they refused to comply with government-issued work orders. Laborers who accepted work paid the officials for their travel expenses, and many perished on their way back home due to hunger, disease, cold, and the other hardships of travel. The reporter himself found the corpses, one near a dike and another under a big tree, of two people who had died a few days earlier and were covered with flies and mosquitoes. Overwhelmed with sorrow, the reporter bought two coffins and hired a local man to bury them. In the end, he could not help but get choked up and kowtow before their bodies.

Many of the authors who narrated the working conditions along the railway employed a similarly emotional tone and emphasized the misery of the Vietnamese workers who had no power to resist their colonial patrons, unlike the Chinese who were, to some degree, protected by the Qing state's weak but still extant sovereign rule. Nonetheless, they failed to acknowledge workers' defiant acts as a proper form of political struggle. Rather than focusing on the workers' urgent problems, they wanted to keep their audience alert to the possibility that Yunnan could soon become another Vietnam. The reporter also mobilized the suffering of Chinese workers for his antigovernment propaganda: instead of protecting its subjects against an abusive enterprise, the Qing government was helping the colonialists to exploit the labor of its people in the most inhumane ways.

Another purpose for this type of sensationalist plea was to turn the railway workers' shared misery into the building blocks of a unified anticolonial struggle in China and Vietnam. On the pages of the same *Yunnan Journal*, the renowned Vietnamese nationalist Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940) informed readers that in September 1906, the French and Chinese authorities agreed on several restrictions on Vietnamese railway workers after frequent complaints about their unruly behaviors. As explained by Phan, according to this agreement only the Vietnamese who had identification cards and guarantees from the French embassy were allowed to come to Yunnan. Once they crossed the border, they were supposed to immediately go to their work-sites, stay in worker dorms, and have no contact with the Chinese population. Interaction with the local Chinese was subject to severe punishment.⁷⁵ Phan took these regulations as evidence of the French ambition to colonize Yunnan. Against French efforts to isolate the Vietnamese from the Chinese, he proposed uniting these two peoples into a common struggle against the French. Phan believed that if the Yunnanese rose against the railway, the Vietnamese would join them. In

Phan's words, "while the Vietnamese grip the French throat, the Yunnanese hit their back; while the Yunnanese restrain the French arms, the Vietnamese hold their shoulders. [By so doing,] the Yunnanese will maintain, and the Vietnamese will recover, their independence."⁷⁶

The Hekou Rebellion, April–May 1908

Around this time, events in Yunnan indicated that Phan's calls for a unified anticolonial struggle fell on deaf ears. Unlike Phan, who believed in the necessity of maintaining monarchical rule in Vietnam until the French were ousted, Chinese nationalists, including the revolutionary leader Sun Yatsen (1866–1925), considered foreign support key to overthrowing the Qing dynasty.⁷⁷ Expelled from Japan in 1907, Sun Yatsen moved to Vietnam to revive his earlier contacts with French officials in order to gain their support for a planned insurrection in southern China.⁷⁸ Although on the request of the Qing government the Indochina government also expelled him in March 1908, Sun sent his comrade Huang Xing (1874–1916) to Guangxi to mobilize secret societies in the area and orchestrate an uprising in Yunnan. On April 29, 1908, Sun's field commanders Huang Mingtang (1866–1938), Wang Heshun (1869–1934), and Guan Renfu (1873–1958) crossed the Yunnan–Tonkin border and seized the border city of Hekou with the help of sympathetic Qing forces. Killing a border garrison commander, who refused to cooperate, and cutting telegraph lines, the rebels closed communication channels to the provincial center and moved northward to seize the city of Mengzi.

On May 1, the rebel leader Huang Mingtang issued a proclamation to the international community that guaranteed foreigners' life and property, recognized the concessions given to foreign powers by treaties, and denounced any foreign efforts in support of the Qing government.⁷⁹ He also sent a letter to the French railway company informing them that their trains could freely cross the border unless they were carrying Qing imperial troops and weapons.⁸⁰ In the meantime, the Chinese community in Vietnam was engaged in fundraising and propaganda in support of the rebellion, negotiating loans from French banks to purchase French arms.⁸¹ However, Huang Xing, who had returned to Hanoi to bring in arms and money, was arrested en route by French border police.⁸² Sun Yatsen's efforts to provide help from Singapore were also in vain. On May 26, Chinese imperial troops dispatched by Viceroy Xiliang (1853–1917) suppressed the rebellion. Six hundred revolutionaries fled to Tonkin and were deported to Singapore and to French colonial territories elsewhere.

Because the rebellion started in Hekou, the first station of the Yunnan railway in China, while Chinese reformists and nationalists were campaigning to reclaim the Yunnan railway from the French, Chinese nationalist historiography has depicted the rebellion as a reaction to the French and their railway.⁸³ Other scholars, leaning on a more anti-Qing position, have cast the cooperation between the Qing and Indochina governments to suppress the rebellion as a betrayal by the ruling dynasty.⁸⁴ Indeed, by 1908, the railway had already begun partial operations in southern Yunnan and was essential for communication between revolutionaries across the China–Vietnam border. As another link in the cycle of antidynastic uprisings, the

rebellion targeted the ruling dynasty and its control over the southern provinces more than it attacked the French or their railway. It was even claimed that Mengzi Consul Raphaël Réau provided arms from Indochina to support the uprising.⁸⁵ Hence, in addition to Huang's foreign-friendly proclamation and letter to the company, the discrete contacts between Chinese nationalists and French citizens prove that the revolutionaries did not see the French as their main enemy.

Based on French archival records, it is evident that French officials in Yunnan, like Consul Réau, were quite sympathetic to Chinese revolutionaries as long as they did not inspire Vietnamese nationalists with a vision of shared revolution or attract the attention of Qing imperial troops that caused unrest among the local and foreign populations. According to the railway company's complaints, the soldiers took horses used in railroad construction and randomly blocked cargoes of rice designated for railroad workers and cement for urgent works. An inspector assigned to the Namti area by the Mengzi consul noted that some military posts were composed entirely of former railway workers. The company lost approximately one thousand workers in the Mengzi area and some were runaways afraid of forced conscription. The inspector learned that the local government paid a small monthly stipend to these ex-coolies in addition to a daily supply of rice.⁸⁶ The soldiers mostly used workers to transport their arms, baggage, food, and injured. On one occasion, soldiers were seen forcing three Vietnamese workers to push a lorry in the telegraphic service, and on another, a worker was beheaded for not cooking rice properly. It was also reported that soldiers forcefully moved some Vietnamese workers from their huts and harassed them with swords and clubs.

In addition to the Vietnamese, Chinese workers from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces received cruel treatment by Chinese officers. Because these two provinces were considered hotbeds of antidynastic activity, all railroad workers from these provinces were suspected to be potential rebels. Soldiers threatened that all workers from these provinces would be exterminated after the rebellion.⁸⁷ As a result, a quarter of the workers in the second section of the railway ran away by early May. We do not know if they joined the uprising, but contractors claimed that their foremen chose to leave because they felt threatened by the arrival of imperial troops.

Despite their initial neutrality, French officials in Yunnan had to cooperate with the local administration to avoid open conflict with the Qing government. Because Chinese intelligence officers claimed that many of the coolies were members of the rebel group, the consul asked company personnel to help the police search for rebels. Based on their inspection, the company sent sixty workers identified as former rebels to Tonkin.⁸⁸ On similar grounds, they sent another group of two thousand Chinese and Vietnamese workers to Hanoi under the supervision of their foremen and gendarme forces.⁸⁹

Despite the Qing government's insistence that many railway workers were affiliated with the antidynastic rebellion, French and British consular records indicate that worker participation in the rebellion was not significant. Even after the defection of Qing soldiers, the number of rebel forces was around five thousand at maximum. The leaders of the rebellion reported that three hundred rebels were overseas Chinese living in Vietnam who had participated in an earlier uprising in the area and another two hundred revolutionaries had impersonated as coolies.⁹⁰ The quick suppression of

the rebellion and the skillful maneuvering of Viceroy Xiliang also support a low-participation argument. During the nationalist campaign to recover the railways from foreigners, Xiliang had gained the support of the patriotic gentry and educated youth. Similarly, by firmly resisting Anglo-French demands to exploit Yunnan's mines, the viceroy had gained the Gejiu miners' sympathy. Neither miners nor the intellectuals working for railway rights in different parts of the province joined the rebels in Hekou. They likely found the viceroy's efforts to combat the foreign railroad and the opium trade more appealing to their nationalist sentiments than the antidy-nastic call of the Alliance leadership, who based their armed struggle on an uncon-cealed association with the French, the "wicked" employees of the railroad workers. On the other hand, their anticolonial propaganda reinforced resentment against for-eign enterprises and their labor recruitment efforts.

Another example of the discord between the nationalists and railroad workers was an article published in the nationalist *Yunnan Journal* that criticized the workers for sacrificing their precious lives and bodies (*zui baoshan zhi shengming xuzhi*) for money, which ignored the fact that work refusal and mass desertion were the most common forms of worker resistance on the railway.⁹¹ The same reporter, knowing that the railway was crucial for the development of the national economy, and that local resources were not enough to complete it, suggested nothing other than waiting for the completion of the railway and educating the people of the region to improve their national consciousness. Hence, the nationalists' concern over working conditions remained at most a rhetorical strategy, appealing to an antiforeign, antigovernment sentiment through victimization rather than pro-worker solidarity.

Despite the systematic denial of worker agency in labor conflicts, the railway work-ers continued to resist and fight their employers on a daily basis. Criminal cases between the workers and foreign personnel were so common that in addition to hos-pitals and medical clinics the French had to create special police forces, a consular tribunal, and prisons along the worksites. Another strategy the company pursued was to prioritize the recruitment of nonlocals. In a report, the engineer de Traz wrote that the locals, familiar with the area, would resist working for the railway even with government enforcement.⁹² In January 1905, for instance, the company reached an agreement with local officials to recruit one thousand local workers from Lufeng Village in Chuxiang County, an area where the Yi ethnicity mostly lived.⁹³ The first group would comprise three hundred men under the supervision of a chief recommended by local authorities who would remain in charge until the work was complete.⁹⁴ As agreed, the group arrived at the end of February under the supervision of a chief named Ma, but it only consisted of 170 men. For the first three days, the coolies refused to work, and on the fourth, many had already van-ished. The ones who remained, headed by Chief Su, used their construction tools to threaten the company employees who asked them to work. They even tore down the wooden bridges and laid an ambush on the service track to prevent work from pro-ceeding. Following these incidents, two more groups arrived under the supervision of two Chinese colonels, but instead of six hundred, they could bring only 260 men. According to company agents, these men did not work hard and revolted at their chiefs' first signal.⁹⁵ The troubles caused by local workers suggest that the authorities forced these men to work for the railway. Eventually, the contractor in charge of the

unit, with the Kunming consul's help, convinced the authorities to pursue recruitment in Sichuan. They knew that men from other provinces came to the company without any knowledge of Yunnan's circumstances, which forced many to stay, usually until they died. As in the overseas coolie trade, it was thought to be easier to control workers who lacked local ties than those with strong local, communal networks.

Conclusion

On March 31, 1910, the Yunnan–Indochina railway started operation with a daylong ceremony where French and Chinese officials delivered celebratory speeches that left the following facts unspoken: by the time of its completion, the railway had cost France more than 165 million francs, exceeding the provisioned budget by 74 percent. The number of people sacrificed for construction numbered around twelve thousand.⁹⁶ Toward the end of construction, French consuls in Yunnan, expecting no significant profit from railway operations, favored selling it to China to cover at least some of its expenses.⁹⁷ Despite all the “French sacrifices,” Italian contractors were the ones who took advantage of a French project whereas French engineers and investors left with much lesser savings. Moreover, Italians were making new business connections in Yunnan due to the sympathy they gained from local officials at the expense of the French. The “Italian threat” in Yunnan was so profound that Asti, an Italian sparkling white wine, had replaced French champagne on the festive tables of Chinese officials and notables.⁹⁸ The support given to the Chinese revolutionaries by the Indochina residents had left France “the most detested power in China after Japan.”⁹⁹ It was clear that on all fronts, political, economic, and cultural, the railway was a failure of French colonialism.

Like French colonialists, Chinese nationalists, though successful in reorienting antiforeign activism into anticolonialism in Yunnan and decreasing the competitive power of France in the global competition for Chinese labor with their anticolonial propaganda, failed to create a coalition of local forces, which could have included resentful officials, ethnic groups, peasants, miners, and railway workers for a popular uprising against the ruling dynasty or a campaign to take over the railway from the French. Their developmentalist discourse and limited articulation of politics as the development of national consciousness fell short of harnessing the political potential of labor conflicts at the worksites of a colonial railway project.

On the other hand, Chinese workers discerned the value of their labor in the competitive circumstances of an emerging global labor market. They further empowered themselves by using the advantage of working in their own sovereign territory to confront their foreign employers by repudiating the fatal work practices of an imperialist infrastructure project, either through mass desertion or fighting back. As the labor question in Yunnan turned into a nation-wide scandal and workers from other provinces carried their experience into Yunnan and from Yunnan back to their own hometowns, the Chinese coolie, a peculiar and cultural object of French imagination, rendered itself the embodiment of labor as a universal category in Chinese politics.¹⁰⁰ Even if it meant the subjection of labor to capital and its commoditization, in a context where the categories of imperial, nationalist, colonial, and socialist politics were still fluid, contentious, and contested, the railway workers were able to turn their lives

and labor into sites of struggle, and hence into a particular form of labor politics, regardless of how other political actors repurposed the workers' plight. In this regard, Yunnan railway workers' struggles, considered in relation to the global coolie trade and labor markets, were another step in the emergence of a worker identity in urban and peripheral China.¹⁰¹

Notes

1. The Yunnan–Indochina railway covered a distance of 859 km from Kunming to Haiphong. The Chinese section of the railway (465 km) ascended from 76 m in Hekou, the beginning station of the China section, to 2,030 m in Kunming through mountains and across rivers via 158 tunnels, 22 iron bridges, and 108 stone bridges. Yifang Cheng, “Dang’an jilu xia de dian yue tielu [the Yunnan–Vietnam Railway in Archival Records],” *Yunnan Dang’an* 10 (2017): 40.
2. Rather than studying coolie labor in relation to slavery, Evelyn Hu-Dehart argued that it was the first step to free labor for many overseas Chinese. E. Hu-Dehart, “From Slavery to Freedom: Chinese Coolies on the Sugar Plantations of Nineteenth-Century Cuba,” *Labour History* 113 (2017): 31–51.
3. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), xi.
4. Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies, and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD, 2006).
5. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (Cambridge, 1995).
6. Lucy M. Cohen, “The Chinese of the Panama Railroad: Preliminary Notes on the Migrants of 1854 Who ‘Failed,’” *Ethnohistory* 18 (1971): 309–320; Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia, 2008).
7. Marianne Bastid-Bruguère, “Currents of Social Change,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank (Cambridge, 1980), 574–575.
8. Jean Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919–1927* (Stanford, CA, 1968), 131.
9. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Nationalism and Labor in Shanghai, 1895–1927* (Durham, NC, 2002), 48.
10. Revising the orthodox position with a case from noncoastal China, Joshua Howard argues that it was through struggle that Chinese workers turned themselves into a class. J. Howard, *Workers At War: Labor in China’s Arsenals, 1937–1953* (Stanford, CA, 2004).
11. Letter of P. Badie, the apostolic missionary, to P. Oster, December 11, 1904, *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques, Chine*, NS 501.
12. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964); Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949* (Stanford, CA, 1986); Emily Honig, *Sisters, and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford, CA, 1986).
13. Oliver Tappe, “Coolie Chains: Global Commodities, Colonialism and the Question of Labour,” *Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin* 147 (2016): 205–208.
14. Jean-François Rousseau, “An Imperial Railway Failure: The Indochina–Yunnan Railway, 1898–1941,” *Journal of Transport History* 35 (2014): 1–17. Until the late 1990s, Chinese historiography depicted the railway as a Trojan horse for French colonialism and studied the period’s local uprisings as manifestations of Chinese nationalism against French and British colonialists. Since the 2000s, a revisionist scholarship has emphasized the railway’s contribution to the socio-economic development of the peripheral province. It has tied it into China’s recent drive for regional integration through a China-led revival of the ancient Silk Roads. Chaozhu Miao, “Fa diguozhuyi yu dian yue tielu [French Imperialism and the Yunnan–Vietnam Railway],” *Honghe Xueyuan Xuebao* 2 (1986): 28–39; Yuzhi Wang, Qiang Peng, and Dewei Fan, *Dian yue tielu yu dian dongnan shaoshu minzu dique shehui bianqian yanjiu* [the Yunnan–Vietnam Railway and Social Change in the Ethnic Regions of Southeast Yunnan] (Kunming, 2012).
15. Michel Bruguère, “Le chemin de fer du Yunnan. Paul Doumer et la politique de l’intervention française en Chine, 1898–1902,” *Revue D’Histoire Diplomatique* I–III (1963).
16. Robert Lee discusses how France subsequently prioritized economic interests over politics in their rivalry with Britain in China. Robert Lee, *France and the Exploitation of China, 1885–1901* (Hong Kong, 1989). Later histories of the railway have focused more on the encounters between French colonial agents and Indigenous populations, drawing on newfound evidence from the personal archives of French

diplomats and company employees. Vatthana Polsana, "Technology and Empire: A Colonial Narrative of the Construction of the Tonkin–Yunnan Railway," *Critical Asian Studies* 47 (2015): 537–557; Bernard, Locard, and Marbotte, *Le chemin de fer du Yunnan: une aventure française en Chine: d'après les correspondances et les photographes de Albert Marie et Georges-Auguste Marbotte* (Bordeaux, 2016).

17. Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 78–80.

18. Paul Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine, 1897–1901* (Hanoi, 1902), 3–4.

19. Gerard Sages, *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina* (Honolulu, 2017), 51. Diana Kim adds that creating the common budget in Indochina also derived from an effort to give confidence to external investors. Diana Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition Across Southeast Asia* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), 158–160. For the importance of Yunnan opium for the Indochinese economy, see Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l'opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine: l'élaboration de la régie générale de l'opium, 1860 à 1914* (Paris, 1992).

20. Phan T.H. Trang, "Paul Doumer: Aux origines d'un grand projet, le chemin de fer Transindochinois," *Histoire, Économie, et Société* 30 (2011): 115–140. The Yunnan railway project's proponents expected "more than 100 million francs worth of industrial orders from France." The report prepared by the Colonial Commission in charge of examining the bill for the approval of the convention for the construction of the Haiphong–Yunnan-sen Railway, presented by Deputy Maurice Ordinaire, June 24, 1901, NS 496.

21. In the Fashoda Incident, France had to withdraw from its Fashoda expedition in Egypt, which started against Britain in 1898. In the end, France left control of Egypt to Britain in return for dominance over Morocco. Following the incident, French anxiety over British colonial rivalry was commonly called the "Fashoda syndrome."

22. Lee, *France and the Exploitation of China*, 190–203. Doumer was planning to use potential disturbances by the Muslim and Miao minorities as a pretext to annex the province. Nicole Tixier, "La Chine dans la stratégie impériale: le rôle du Quai d'Orsay et de ses agents," in *L'esprit économique impérial (1830–1970): Groupes de pression et réseaux du patronat colonial en France et dans l'empire* (Paris, 2008), 79.

23. For example, in a letter to the governor-general, Mengzi Consul Dejean de la Batie complained about the alarming activities of Colonel Pennequin in Yunnan. Based on his interactions with the mandarins, the consul concluded that after all the military missions sent from Indochina, China would consent to the railway only if a private company built it. Dejean de la Batie to Doumer, December 10, 1897, NS 494.

24. Emmanuelle Saada, "The Empire of Law: Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the 'Colonial Situation,'" *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20 (2002): 98–120.

25. François to Delcassé, November 20, 1903, NS 499.

26. Réau, "Note sur le chemin de fer du Yunnan," December 1905, NS 503.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. Julia Martínez, "'Unwanted Scraps' or 'An Alert, Resolute, Resentful People'? Chinese Railroad Workers in French Congo," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 91 (2017): 79–98.

30. Sainson's report dated November 30, 1903, NS 500.

31. Flayelle to the company, April 22, 1910, NS 510.

32. Oliver Tappe discusses the role of debt in forcing the Vietnamese into indentured labor. Oliver Tappe, "Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia," in *Bonded Labor: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)*, ed. Damir-Geilsdorf, Ulrike Lindler (Bielefeld, 2016), 103–131.

33. David W. Del Testa, "Workers, Culture, and the Railroads in French Colonial Indochina, 1905–1936," *French Colonial History* 2 (2002): 181–198.

34. Consul Leduc was conveying the opinion of the company, November 28, 1904, NS 501.

35. Leduc to Delcassé, November 28, 1904, NS 501.

36. Casenave to Delcassé, June 4, 1904, NS 501.

37. The British government was the first to sign an official treaty with the Qing government for coolie emigration and continued to revise the terms of the coolie recruitment as needed. Of course, the existence of rules and regulations did not mean that Chinese workers received better treatment in British and other plantations. Mae M. Ngai, "Trouble on the Rand: The Chinese Question in South Africa and the

Apogee of White Settlerism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 91 (2017): 59–78. For a comparison of French and British practices of coolie employment, see A. Stanziani, “Local Bondage in Global Economies: Servants, Wage Earners, and Indentured Migrants in Nineteenth-Century France, Great Britain, and the Mascarene Islands,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47 (2013): 1218–1251.

38. Casenave, June 4, 1904, NS 501.

39. Implementing a universal contract labor law was still incomplete and on French colonists’ agenda as late as 1929. Martínez, “Unwanted Scraps,” 86–87.

40. Casenave to Delcassé, June 4, 1904, NS 501.

41. Ulrike Lindner, “Indentured Labour in Sub-Saharan Africa (1870–1918): Circulation of Concepts between Imperial Powers,” in *Bonded Labor*, 59–82.

42. Gaston Kahn to Dubail, May 4, 1905, NS 502.

43. Note by Casenave, May 8, 1905, NS 502.

44. For a discussion of “coolie as commodity” and how the British worked to create a free labor market in China, see Adam Mckeown, “The Social Life of Chinese Labor,” in *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. E. Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang (Durham, NC, 2011), 62–83.

45. Alessandro Stanziani, “The Abolition of Slavery and the ‘New Labor Contract’ in French Equatorial Africa, 1890–1914,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Bondage and Human Rights in Africa and Asia*, ed. G. Campbell and A. Stanziani (New York, 2019), 236.

46. *Ibid.*, 239–240.

47. The idea of a free labor market was not the same everywhere. For instance, in the Straits Settlements, the British saw government intervention against the monopoly of Chinese brokers essential for the maintenance of a free labor market. Mckeown, “The Social Life of Chinese Labor,” 75–79.

48. Leduc to Delcassé, December 5, 1904, NS 501.

49. Leduc to the Foreign Ministry, August 20, 1906, NS 505.

50. Kahn to Destabeau, March 12, 1906, NS 504.

51. Flayelle to the Mengzi consul, March 10, 1906, NS 504.

52. Flayelle to the Foreign Ministry, March 18, 1906; Flayelle to the Mengzi consul, March 10, 1906, NS 504.

53. Confidential telegram of Yunnan Viceroy to the Customs Daotai, August 2, 1905, NS 502.

54. Dubail to Delcassé, May 31, 1905, NS 502.

55. Clémentel to the company, December 18, 1905, NS 689.

56. Leduc to Delcassé, June 15, 1905, NS 502.

57. Dupont to Leduc, May 25, 1905, NS 502.

58. Prince Qing to Dubail, September 15, 1905, NS 502.

59. The Proclamation of Viceroy Cen Chunxuan, December 1, 1905, NS 504; the Minister of Colonies to the Foreign Ministry, May 2, 1906, NS 504.

60. The piece titled “Striking Injustices” was published in *Der Ostasiatische Lloyd* in 1905. I use the partial French translation attached to the official correspondence between Dubail and Rouvier dated October 20, 1905, NS 503. “Li” was a Chinese unit of length, approximately half a kilometer.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. D. W. Crofts, “A Grave Scandal,” in *North China Daily News*, June 20, 1906.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Francophile, “A Grave Scandal.”

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. Emmanuelle Sibeud, “Une libre pensée impériale? Le Comité de protection et de défense des indigènes (ca.1892–1914), *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 27 (2009): 57–74.

69. J. P. Daughton, “The ‘Pacha Affair’ Reconsidered: Violence and Colonial Rule in Interwar French Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of Modern History* 91 (2019): 493–524; Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, “Alsace-Lorraine and Africa: French Discussions of French and German Politics, Culture, and Colonialism in the Deliberations of the Union for Truth, 1905–1913,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 40 (2014): 9–28.

70. Shao Xia, “Lun guomin baocun guotu zhi fa [on the Methods of People’s Protection of the Country Land],” in *Yunnan Zazhi Xuanji* [Selections from Yunnan Journal, YZX hereafter] (Kunming, 2013), 71–72.
71. Sheng Xue, “Faren yu Yunnan [the French and Yunnan],” in YZX, 361.
72. V. Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was first published in 1916, and Kwame Nkrumah’s *Neo-Colonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism* was first published in 1965. In a recent study of Chinese railroad workers employed at the Transcontinental Railroad, Manu Karuka has defined this process through which indigenous lands were appropriated in the United States as “railroad colonialism.” Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland, CA, 2019).
73. Xia Yi, “Wei dian yue tielu zaocheng jinggao quan dian [a Warning to Yunnan on the Completion of the Yunnan–Vietnam Railway],” in YZX, 515.
74. Sheng Zhe, “You dian shu lue [a Tour in Yunnan],” in YZX, 344.
75. After endless complaints about the crimes committed against foreigners, Governor-General Beau visited Yunnan in mid-1906 to personally investigate the circumstances. The governor concluded that the complaints were exaggerated, and the French gendarme forces were doing their job properly in Mengzi and Hekou. The only problem was the Annamites brought from Tonkin, whom he described as the “dregs of Tonkin cities.” This piece must be written after the visit. Beau to the Minister of Colonies, May 28, 1906, NS 505.
76. Cited in Shiraishi Masaya, “Phan Boi Chau in Japan,” in *Phan Boi Chau and the Dong-Du Movement*, ed. Vinh Sinh (New Haven, CT, 1988), 67.
77. Boi Chau Phan, *Overtaken Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan-Bôi-Châu* (Honolulu, 1999), 109, 126.
78. For Sun Yatsen’s contacts with French officials, Kim J. Munholland, “The French Connection That Failed: France and Sun Yat-sen, 1900–1908,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 32 (1972): 77–95.
79. Roger V. Des Forges, *Hsi-Liang, and the Chinese National Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 1973), 123.
80. The National Archives of the UK, FO 228/2639, 24.
81. Dewei Fan, “Yunnan huaqiao yu wu shen yunnan hekou qi yi (Overseas Chinese in Vietnam and the 1908 Hekou Uprising in Yunnan),” *Overseas Chinese History Studies* (2011): 23–31.
82. Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Sun Yat-Sen and the French, 1900–1908* (Berkeley, CA, 1979), 82.
83. Chunfu Sun, “466 gongli dian yue tielu shang de qi wan tiao xingming [70,000 lives on the 466 km Yunnan–Vietnam Railway],” *Wenshi Tiandi* (2011), 14–18. For the railway rights recovery movement, Mary Backus Rankin, “Nationalistic Contestation and Mobilization Politics: Practice and Rhetoric of Railway-Rights Recovery at the End of the Qing,” *Modern China* 28 (2002): 315–361.
84. Yuanhui Chen, “1908 nian hekou qi yi yu zhong-fa jiaoshe (the Hekou Uprising in 1908 and the Negotiation between China and France),” *Journal of Yunnan Nationalities University* 28 (2011): 105–110.
85. Nicole Bensacq-Tixier, “La France en Chine en 1912–1913,” *Outre-mers* 99: 376–377 (2012): 261.
86. Réau to Bapst, May 20, 1908, NS 507.
87. Ibid.
88. The report submitted by Mengzi consul, July 1908, NS 240.
89. The Indochina governor to the Ministry of Colonies, June 6, 1908, NS 240.
90. Dewei Fan quotes from Hu Hanmin’s report to Sun Yatsen, “Yunnan huaqiao yu wu shen yunnan hekou qi yi,” 24.
91. Shi Fu, “Dian yue pangbian ji tiedao zhi shikuang [The Yunnan–Vietnam Border and the Situation of the Railway],” November 1907, in YZX, 460–77.
92. Company to the Minister of Colonies, November 17, 1905, NS 503.
93. Yunnan Railway Office’s memorial to the Yun-Gui Viceroy for recruiting three thousand workers, Xingcheng Zhuang et al., *Dian yue tielu shiliao huibian* [Historical Documents on the Yunnan–Vietnam Railway] (Kunming, 2014), 20.
94. Leduc to Delcassé, February 2, 1905, NS 501.
95. Genty to Delcassé, February 22, 1906, NS 689.
96. Documents Parlementaires, Séance March 9, 1909, NS 510. Chinese sources give the number eighteen thousand. Yunnan sheng zong gong hui, *Yunnan gongren yundong shi 1872–2000* [The history of the Yunnan Workers’ Movement, 1872–2000] (Kunming, 2003), 12.
97. Note sur la question de la rétrocession du chemin de fer du Yunnan à la Chine, August 7, 1907, NS 506.

98. Bourgeois to the Foreign Ministry, February 10, 1909, NS 508.
99. The French minister in Beijing to Pichon, February 22, 1909, NS 694.
100. Frederick Cooper, "The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Postwar French Africa," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 412.
101. Yunnan sheng zong gong hui gognren yundong shi yanjiu zubian, *Yunnan gongren yundong shi ziliao huibian, 1886–1949* [*The Documents on the History of the Yunnan Labor Movement, 1886–1949*] (Kunming, 1989).