

Coolie Encodings: representations of the coolie/emigrant figure in early 20th century Chinese fiction

Elizabeth Evans Weber

PhD student in Asian Languages and Cultures
University of California, Los Angeles

The history of the early waves of contracted Chinese laborers to the Americas is, as we know, fraught with stories of abuse, of cruelty, of negligence; sometimes of surrender and capitulation in the face of these challenges, sometimes of perseverance and hard-won victories. These stories have their base in various levels of reports and testimonies, whether from people external to the coolie trade, those complicit with it, or those victimized by it. At the time, these testimonies seem to have been collected largely to offer insight into particular events—for example, a voyage with a particularly high mortality rate, or a mutiny. However, these testimonies are often terse, and sometimes are given in response to direct questions. As such, I have decided to supplement my understanding of recorded testimonies by examining works of fiction regarding Chinese emigrants of the late 19th century. In this paper, I will analyze at least two (possibly more) short stories about Chinese emigrants to the Americas, written in the Sinitic script: *Bitter Society* (苦社会), Anonymous, 1905; and *Golden World* (黄金世界) by Biheguan Zhuren (碧荷馆主人: “Master of the Jade Lotus Inn”), 1907. I have chosen fiction because fiction rounds out its personages in a way that most official testimonies do not—offering personal background, tracing interpersonal relationships, giving voice to internal monologues, personal thoughts, etc. While there is no indication that the authors of these pieces experienced the horrors of emigration firsthand (and thus may not be 100% reliable sources), they have not only attempted to humanize the victims of the coolie trade by telling the story on an individual level; they have also gone beyond the level of event-based testimony to demonstrate how a single emigrant might be mistreated in each of the various phases of emigration. The reason I have chosen fiction written in China in the Sinitic script rather than in other languages is because I believe there are several interesting questions to be asked about these pieces: what purpose did it serve for authors to write and publish these stories years after contracted emigration from Hong Kong and Macau had already been terminated? Why were mainland intellectuals still invoking the figure of this particular kind of emigrant? What did he mean to them? And did his invocation in the narrative form have more to do with China’s relationship with its emigrants, or its relationship with the Americas at that time? It is possible that the revival of the figure of the contracted laborer was meant purely to as a reminder of the cruelties perpetrated on American soil; however, it seems to me to be a deeper issue than this, and resolving these questions will be the primary focus of this paper.