ABSTRACT

Chinese coolies, used in this paper to mean labourers generally, constituted a major sector of the overseas Chinese society. They had made important contributions to the economic growth of the Southeast Asian countries, particularly Singapore. Yet little is known about them either as individuals or as a collective group. This paper is designed to fill the gap.

The AE consists of seven chapters. Chapter I describes the purpose and scope of this study.

Chapter II of this study seeks to identify the basic factors that induced Chinese immigrant labourers to leave their homeland and come to Southeast Asia. Economic reasons are considered to be the main motivating force, while other social and political factors accelerated the movement.

Chapters III and IV look into the recruiting system and the coolie traffic in Singapore. Many of these immigrant labourers did not come here on their own but were recruited by the coolie-brokers under the 'credit-ticket' system. Because of the receptive attitude and non-intervention policy of the Straits government adopted towards Chinese labour immigration, abuses like kidnapping and maltreatment of coolies occurred. However, this study attempts to show that the working conditions in Singapore were much better than those in other settlements owing to the nature of its economy. It also attempts to show that since the second half of the 19th century, Singapore had become a transit centre for coolie emigration.
The following two chapters compare the attitudes of both the Chinese and the Straits governments towards the movement of Chinese labourers. During the first half of the century, the Chinese government discouraged emigration of all sorts and perceived all emigrants rather negatively, while the Straits government adopted a laissez-faire policy. The last quarter of the century saw a changing attitude on both sides. The setting up of the Chinese consulate and the Chinese Protectorate marked the beginning of supervision and regulation of the Chinese immigration movement in general and the coolie trade in particular.

Although the Chinese consulate showed a certain degree of sympathy towards the coolie immigrants, its main concern was soon shifted towards the merchant class, as it was these rich businessmen who donated a great sum of money to the Chinese government. The man whose policies directly affected the plight of Chinese coolies was W.A. Pickering, his name was then translated by the Chinese to refer to the office of Chinese Protectorate as Pi-Ki-Ling 碧麒麟. He and his successors to the office worked hard to remedy the problems that had been in existence in the Chinese communities for a long time. Thanks to them, by the end of the 19th century, the major evils connected with the recruitment and transportation of Chinese labourers had been successfully removed.

In conclusion, at the turn of this century, Singapore had become a relatively stable and peaceful society. Much of the success of the Singapore economy during the last century can thus be seen as an contribution from the Chinese coolie immigrants.