

## "Opium and Social Control: Coolies on the Plantations of Peru and Cuba."

The place of opium in the history of the Chinese diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean has received scant attention. This paper is a preliminary attempt to look into this history, based on fragmentary evidence available. From 1847 to 1874, as many as 225,000 Chinese indentured or contract laborers (coolies), almost all men, were sent to Cuba, still a Spanish colony, and newly independent Peru. Both the human trade itself, as well as work and life on the plantations, closely resembled slavery; indeed, the coolies in Cuba worked alongside African slaves. Opium was part of the coolie trade from its inception, distributed in the holding pens in south China ports, on the long, arduous voyages across the Pacific or Atlantic, as well as on the plantations. Cuban and Peruvian planters permitted, even encouraged, the sale, barter and consumption of opium by their coolies, in effect creating a mechanism of social control by alternately distributing and withholding this very addictive substance to desperate men. But this cynical use of opium might also have backfired on them, as sustained and massive ingestion lowered productivity, caused premature death (often by suicide), and resulted in high absenteeism.