

Article [EN]

Were Qing Ports Mere Gateways or Agents of Globalization? Silver, Coolies, and the Sino-Latin America Connection

¿Fueron los puertos Qing meras puertas de entrada o agentes de la globalización? La plata, los culíes y la conexión Sino-América Latina

Zhicang Huang^a

^aInstituto de Estudios Regionales e Internacionales, Universidad Sun Yat-sen, Zhuhai, China

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the role of Qing dynasty port cities in early globalization by examining two Sino-Latin American linkages: the influx of Spanish American silver in the late 17th and 18th centuries, and the export of Chinese indentured labourers ("coolies") in the mid-19th century. Rather than serving merely as passive gateways for trade and migration, the ports of Xiamen and Kulangsu actively shaped these transoceanic exchanges. Through a comparative analysis with other coastal hubs such as Guangzhou and Macao, the study shows how these cities forged a maritime network that extended China's reach into Latin America. Southern China's coastal entrepôts integrated overseas silver into local economies and later joined the lucrative yet troubling business of sending Chinese labourers to Cuba and Peru. Although constrained by imperial policies and unequal treaties, officials, merchants, and intermediaries in Fujian negotiated and adapted with a degree of agency to these global transformations. These findings provide an alternative view on the role of Qing ports in globalization, drawing attention to the local actors and conditions that influenced Sino-Latin American exchanges.

Palabras claves: China, Latin America, silver, coolie trade, globalisation

RESUMEN

Este artículo reconsidera el papel de las ciudades portuarias Qing en la primera globalización mediante dos vínculos transpacíficos clave: la llegada de plata hispanoamericana entre finales del siglo XVII y XVIII, y la exportación de trabajadores chinos ("culíes") a América Latina a mediados del XIX. Lejos de servir como simples puntos de entrada pasivos, los puertos de Xiamen y Kulangsu moldearon activamente estos intercambios. Un análisis comparado con Guangzhou y Macao revela cómo dichas ciudades articularon una red marítima que extendió el alcance chino hacia América Latina. Los puertos del sur integraron la plata en sus economías locales y luego participaron en el lucrativo, aunque controvertido, envío de mano de obra a Cuba y Perú. Pese a las restricciones de las políticas imperiales y tratados desiguales, funcionarios, comerciantes e intermediarios fujianeses negociaron y se adaptaron con cierta agencia a estas transformaciones. El estudio ofrece una visión alternativa del papel de los puertos Qing en la globalización, subrayando la importancia de los actores locales y de las condiciones internas en los intercambios sino-latinoamericanos.

Keywords: China; América Latina; la plata; comercio de culíes; globalización

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Autores: Zhicang Huang, investigadora posdoctoral de la Universidad Sun Yat-sen, ORCID: 0000-0003-2905-083X

Correspondencia: Zhicang Huang, zhicang.huang@outlook.com; **Editor:** Qinfeng Zhang

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1. Introduction

Port cities have long been central to narratives of early globalisation, serving as hubs where local and global forces intersected. In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), China's reopening to maritime trade after 1684 transformed its coastal ports into dynamic entrepôts, linking the empire with wider global networks. Historians have often characterised Chinese ports of this era as *gateways*, namely entry and exit points for goods, people, and ideas flowing between China and the world. This gateway perspective emphasises how foreign merchants and later Western imperial powers penetrated China's economy and society through treaty ports. However, an emerging body of studies suggests that these ports were not merely passive conduits but agents that actively shaped global interactions. In this view, ports like Xiamen were "laboratories of globalisation" where new patterns of trade, migration, and cultural exchange were tested and refined at the local level, often in ways unanticipated by imperial authorities. The question of whether Qing ports were mere gateways or genuine protagonists in globalising trends is more than semantic. It speaks to the debate about agency: Did Chinese actors in port cities simply accommodate or endure foreign influences, or did they harness and direct global currents for their own purposes? Recent research on global economic history has revised earlier Eurocentric narratives, showing that Chinese demand for silver had a determinative influence on world trade in the 16th–18th centuries (Von Glahn, 2020), and that Chinese immigrants in the 19th century significantly shaped labour markets from California to Havana (Roopnarine, 2018). These findings invite a closer look at the Chinese coastal nodes that facilitated such exchanges. Were they merely points of transit, or did they become creative centres behind economic and social change?

This article addresses this question by examining two critical linkages between Qing China and Latin America: the influx of Spanish American silver and the export of Chinese coolies. These two phenomena were separated by centuries. The peak of the silver trade occurred in the late Ming and early Qing period, whereas the coolie trade surged in the mid-19th century. Yet both hinged on the activities of port cities. Silver from the mines of Potosí and Mexico flowed into Qing China largely through seaborne routes, entering via ports such as Xiamen and Guangzhou, which became the lifeblood of the Qing monetary system (Von Glahn, 2020). Almost two hundred years later, thousands of Chinese labourers were shipped out from these same ports to work in Peru and Cuba, as well as in the Caribbean, a human transoceanic movement that again placed Xiamen and its environs at the heart of a global network. By focusing on Xiamen, one of Fujian province's most vibrant trading hubs, and the adjacent isle of Kulangsu, a foreign settlement off Xiamen's harbour, we can observe how a Chinese port community engaged with these global currents over time. The next section explores the silver connection between Spanish America and China, detailing how Latin American silver coins, especially the Spanish peso or "Spanish dollar", became a staple of Qing coastal commerce and local economies, and shows that Fujian's ports not only absorbed silver as a medium of exchange but also redefined its circulation through Chinese commercial practices and institutions (Ollé, 2002). The subsequent section turns to the coolie trade, investigating how tens of thousands of Chinese were recruited or coerced in southeastern China to meet labour shortages in Latin America after the abolition of slavery there. This section pays special attention to the mechanics of recruitment in port cities, the role of Chinese and foreign brokers, and the use of Kulangsu as a detention and transit site for emigrants. This section draws on both contemporary accounts and recent knowledge that illuminate the entwined interests of Western merchants, the Spanish colonial state, and Chinese local elites in this traffic (Ginés-Blasi, 2022). The final section offers a critical perspective, arguing that Qing ports like Xiamen were not simply channels for global forces but also interactive nodes that negotiated, transformed, and sometimes subverted those forces. By examining the China–Latin America connection through the lens of these port cities, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of early globalisation, one that recognises the agency of Chinese participants and the two-way nature of global exchange. This study contributes to a growing literature that re-evaluates East Asia–Latin America connections and the multiplicity of globalisations from the early modern to modern eras.

2. Silver, port cities, and the early globalisation of trade

From the 16th century onward, silver was the sinews of global trade, and no connection was more pivotal than that between Spanish America and China, a route even termed a “Silk–Silver Road” in recent historiography (Jin, 2022). After the Spanish conquest of the New World, massive quantities of silver from mines in Peru and Mexico entered global circulation. China, during the late Ming and then Qing dynasties, emerged as the world’s largest sink for this silver, due to a convergence of economic policies and market demands. By the 1570s, the Ming state had effectively transitioned to a silver tax system, the “Single Whip” reform, which heightened domestic demand for the silver metal. At the same time, Chinese exports of silk, porcelain, and tea were in great demand in Europe and the Americas, creating a trade imbalance that foreign merchants could only equalise with silver. Recent quantitative work by Wan Ming demonstrates that between 1571 and 1620 alone, no less than 80 million pesos reached China’s southeast, with Fujian accounting for almost one-third of declared inflows (Wan, 2022). As a result, a continuous stream of Spanish American pesos, also known as the *real de a ocho* or “piece of eight”, made its way across the Pacific via Manila, as well as across the Indian Ocean via European and Asian traders, into the pockets of Chinese merchants and officials. Indeed, silver remained China’s primary import further into the 19th century (Von Glahn, 2020). The port cities of South China were the entry gates for this specie, with Guangzhou (Canton) and Xiamen (Amoy) being especially prominent among them, during the last century of the Ming dynasty. Much of the silver arrived through the Manila Galleon route (from Acapulco to Manila), then on to Fujian and Guangdong via Chinese junks or Portuguese carracks. The rise of Xiamen illustrates how a Chinese port could become an active broker in these flows. Located on the Fujian coast, Xiamen had been a significant harbour since the Song dynasty, but it was in the late 17th century, after the Qing dynasty lifted the long-standing maritime bans, that Xiamen, along with Macao, Guangzhou, and a few others, became a legal passage for oceanic trade (Chen, 1991). In 1684, the Kangxi Emperor terminated the *haijin*, or sea ban, policy and established customs offices in select ports, Xiamen included, to supervise and tax maritime commerce. This reform inaugurated a new era: Fujian’s coastal economy rapidly reorganised around overseas trade, and Xiamen emerged as a central node in a maritime trading network on the China coast. The city’s merchants built far-flung connections linking the South China Sea, the Philippine Archipelago, and beyond, so that Spanish pesos and goods from Southeast Asia were able to routinely pass through Xiamen’s markets.

Luzon vessels maintained close contact with Xiamen during the 18th century. The Luzon *jiabanchuan*, built on the Dutch model yet generally smaller, arrived with foreign merchandise and substantial silver in exchange for local products. Their high profitability stimulated Fujian’s economy and drew official attention; keen to secure revenue, provincial authorities placed no barriers on their entry. Chinese sources record the following *jiabanchuan* transactions at Xiamen:

1781 Sixty Luzon merchants each landed more than 140,000 silver coins; their cargoes included edible bird’s-nest and Indian sappanwood (*sumu* 苏木). They purchased cloth, porcelain, cinnamon, and worked stone blocks (*shitiao* 石条).

1782 About seventy foreign traders arrived in February. They traded white paper, blue-and-white stone tools, cut stone, tiles, and square bricks for sappanwood, areca-nut (*binlang* 檳榔), and ebony.

1783 In September roughly fifty merchants brought sappanwood, areca-nut, sea cucumbers, and other goods. They bought textiles, porcelain, umbrellas, cinnamon, paper, ink, dressed stone, millstones, and medicinal ingredients.

1786 A convoy reached Xiamen in September but conducted no business: after being battered by a storm, the merchants repaired their vessel and departed without unloading.

1807 Another storm-driven visit occurred in May; Chinese sources do not specify the goods involved.

1809 Around sixty businessmen arrived with 140,000 silver coins. Their cargoes included sea cucumbers, areca-nut, cowhide, bird’s-nest, and rice. They purchased cloth, flax yarn, local tea, rock sugar, umbrellas, and medicinal supplies.

Foreign imports in the 19th century increasingly centred on opium. Continuous arrivals were recorded in 1823, 1824, 1827, 1828, 1829, and 1830; besides Southeast Asian and Dutch craft, a growing number of British and other European vessels also called at Xiamen (Xiamen Chorography Compilation Committee, 1996). Until 1775, silver arriving from the Americas was able to satisfy almost the entire Qing dynasty's demand for coin, a watershed moment that shows how fully China had been drawn into the new global economy (Lin, 2011). In an 1833 memorial to the Daoguang Emperor, the censor Huang Juezi thus observed:

"Ever since foreign silver entered China, our people have been delighted to use it, for each piece carries an established value that makes it convenient in daily exchange. Because the coins are worth almost as much as sycee yet of slightly lower fineness, profiteers, lured by gain, imitate foreign dies and melt ingots to strike 'foreign money' ..." (Huang, 1833, quoted in Zhou, 2020).

The first consignments of imported specie comprised coins minted in the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru as well as large silver ingots. Once inside China, the silver was commonly melted down and cast into standard-weight ingots that were then stamped with the name and location of the mint to ensure uniformity. Long before the intensive exploitation of American mines and the mass coinages of the 17th century, European-minted silver (*fanyin* 番银, "foreign silver") had already reached China, though its intermittent production gave it varied forms (Peng, 2007). By the late 18th century, most of the silver coins in circulation originated from the Mexican mint and shared the same milled-edge design. These pieces were known locally as "Buddha silver" (*foyin* 佛银), the bust-type peso, because they bore the effigy of the Spanish monarch (Peng, 2007). After 1832, the republican Mexican peso began reaching China's coastal provinces and quickly gained popularity alongside sycee.



Figure 1. Spanish Reales Circulated in Southern Fujian

Source: Photograph from the private numismatic collection of Mr. Lin Nanzhong, Fujian.

Spanish reales, above all the piece of eight, or *benyang* (本洋) in Chinese, became the most widely accepted foreign money in southern Fujian (Zhou, 2020) (Figure 1). The Zhangzhou Museum preserves examples of cobs, pillar dollars and bust dollars, each renamed by local Chinese when they entered circulation (Zhou, 2020). Contemporary documents refer to the Spanish peso variously as "flower-rimmed money" (*huabian qian* 花边钱) and "cross money" (*shizi qia* 十字钱); the latter, irregular in shape, corresponds to the earliest cob issues, of which five denominations have been recorded in southern Fujian (Chen, 2015)

(Figure 2). More than a thousand private contracts from the 17th–19th centuries preserved in the *Collection of Contracts Held in Xiamen* regularly state payments such as “received this day 440 yuan in foreign flower-rim silver” or “pledge [this paddy field] for 58 yuan in ‘double-candlestick’ silver.” By the early 19th century, foreign coins, especially the piece of eight, had effectively become the monetary standard of Fujian, displacing even traditional sycee ingots (Zhou, 2020).



Figure 2. “Cross Money” (*shizi qian*) with Countermarks from Chinese Financial Institutions (*Qianzhuang*) Guaranteeing its Value and Authenticity

Source: Photograph from the private numismatic collection of Mr. Lin Nanzhong, Fujian.

The influx of silver was not merely a passive gain; it actively stimulated China's economy, especially in the coastal provinces. With reliable currency in hand, Fujian and Guangdong merchants could efficiently buy local products for export and settle transactions in the intra-Asian trade. They also re-minted or chopped the coins to certify purity, integrating them into Chinese monetary practices. Some Chinese businessmen became specialists in currency exchange and arbitrage, profiting from the different silver standards and currency systems across Asia (Ollé, 2002). In Xiamen, merchant guilds and money-changers mediated between foreign coinage and local needs, ensuring that silver flowed to where it was most needed for commerce or taxes. As one Spanish observer remarked in the 18th century, “the Chinese have found in silver the key to unlock all trade”, serving as a testament to how Chinese ports actively leveraged the silver trade to China's advantage (Ollé, 2002).

Yet the agency role of Qing ports in the silver economy also had a dark side, as seen in the generated informal economies and corruption. The problem of corruption in Xiamen Customs has been examined by Chin-keong Ng, Chen Xiyu and other scholars, with the documentary sources cited in Ng's work serving as representative references. As Ng notes, a 1764 memorial by Huang Shijian, the Fujian naval commander, records that every merchant vessel calling at Xiamen was charged an “extra fee” ranging from only a few taels to as much as 1,500 taels of *huabianyin* (Spanish reales). The illicit revenue (*guiyin* 规银) thus amassed exceeded 100,000 yuan each year. The take was apportioned as follows: 10,000 yuan to the Governor-General (*zongdu* 总督); 8,000 to the Provincial Governor (*xunfu* 巡抚); 6,000 to the Fuzhou General; 10,000 plus an extra 7,000 to the Xingquan Circuit Intendant (*yongdao* 兴泉永道); 33,000 plus an extra 6,000 to the Maritime Sub-prefect; 17,000 to the Customs Administration; 2,000 to the Quanzhou Prefect; 3,600 to the Tong'an Magistrate; 1,000 to the Nan'an Magistrate; and 21,500 to the Naval Commander. Of the naval share, the commander himself retained 9,500 yuan. It should be stressed that these figures represent only those contributions deemed “legally” acceptable—i.e., they were reported to the emperor (Ng, 2014). Hence, the extent to which the customs system could function efficiently and remain consistent with Emperor Kangxi's goal of encouraging trade and enriching society ultimately depended on the integrity of the customs officials.

The arrival of Spanish American silver through the Manila Galleon system created a monetary artery that linked New Spain, Manila, and coastal China. With coins as the medium, commercial exchange flourished and the Qing monetary system gradually grew dependent on foreign bullion. In this setting, Zhangzhou and Xiamen, two ports that had already been vital entrepôts under the Ming, became decisive gateways for the import of foreign coin into the empire. Surviving hoards, museum collections, and archaeological finds in southern Fujian still contain pillar dollars, bust pesos, and later republican Mexican pesos, tangible evidence of the depth of this connection. The institutional structure of Qing finance encouraged this dependence. Tax obligations were assessed in silver, but the empire possessed no large domestic silver mines. Consequently, the Qing state, and by extension private commerce, came to rely on the steady production of the Mexican and Peruvian mines. For much of the 18th century that reliance appeared sustainable, because Manila-bound galleons delivered a predictable stream of pesos that merchants redirected to Fujian markets, where they purchased silk textiles, porcelain, tea, and medicinal ingredients (Flynn & Giráldez, 1995). Contracts preserved in Xiamen show ordinary land and rice pledges valued in yuan, meaning pesos, confirming that foreign coin had become a reference unit of account throughout the region.

3. The coolie trade: labour, migration, and the Sino–Latin America connection

By the mid-19th century, the nexus of China–Latin America relations shifted from bullion to people. The abolition or decline of African slave trading in the Americas, especially in the Spanish Empire's remaining colonies of Cuba and Peru, created a voracious demand for alternative sources of cheap labour. This demand was met by the so-called coolie trade: the shipment of indentured labourers from Asia, primarily China and India, to plantations and worksites in colonial or post-colonial societies. Between the late 1840s and the early 1870s, an estimated quarter of a million Chinese men were transported to Latin America and the Caribbean under indenture contracts, with Cuba receiving about 125,000 and Peru about 95,000 of these workers (Roopnarine, 2018). Smaller contingents went to European colonies in the Caribbean such as British Guiana and Trinidad (Gao, 2021). This mass migration was involuntary or coerced in most cases, involving deceptive recruitment and even kidnapping, and conditions for the coolies were often so brutal that many observers related the coolie trade to a new form of slave trade (Hu-Dehart, 1993). Indeed, conditions triggered repeated mutinies aboard some coolie ships, although such rebellions were usually met with lethal force by the crews. Central to this human trafficking were the Chinese ports where labourers were gathered and dispatched. Xiamen was one such port, second only to the Guangdong ports, as a point of embarkation for Chinese coolies bound for the Americas (Look Lai, 1993).

The involvement of Xiamen in the coolie trade can be traced to the 1840s, immediately after the First Opium War when Xiamen was forced to open as one of the five treaty ports under the Treaty of Nanjing. Western merchants and officials quickly recognised that southeastern China's impoverished communities could be tapped for labour supply. Early coolie traffickers in Xiamen were often foreign adventurers or traders who had previous experience in the region's junk trade. They worked in concert with Chinese brokers, known colloquially as "pig dealers" because the human cargo was crudely referred as pigs. These brokers, often based in coastal market towns and villages, approached impoverished families with a mix of inducements and coercion—false promises of wealth abroad or outright abduction—to gather able-bodied young men (Meagher, 2008). The men were then transported to port depots to await shipment. In Xiamen, as in other ports, barracoons or holding pens were established to detain coolies before embarkation. A contemporary report describes how, prior to loading, "the coolies were herded together in guarded depots so that they would not attempt to escape after having signed their contracts" (Brown, 2020). Some of these depots in the Xiamen area were on Kulangsu, the islet where many foreign offices and warehouses were located. British officials in 1852 had already taken note of these deceptive and violent recruitment practices in Xiamen, warning of the abuses in dispatches back home (Bowring, 1852).

Kulangsu's role in the coolie trade was a byproduct of Xiamen's unique geopolitical situation. After Xiamen became a treaty port, foreign consulates and trading firms set up their bases of operation, initially on Xiamen Island itself. However, over time, Kulangsu—situated just across a narrow channel—grew into

the preferred enclave for foreigners, due to its pleasant environment and separation from the main city. Between the 1860s and 1870s, several consulates and merchant houses had facilities on Kulangsu. This semi-colonial enclave, though under Chinese sovereignty, was effectively managed by the foreign community under various agreements. It was here, in the shadow of consular authority, that much of the organisation of coolie shipments took place. Spanish diplomatic correspondence from the 1860s reveals that the Spanish consul in Xiamen was deeply involved in labour recruitment efforts to supply Cuba (Ginés-Blasi, 2022). In fact, Spanish officials at times coordinated with local Chinese agents to secure batches of workers and arranged transport, even chartering ships from other foreign countries when necessary. The use of the Philippines as an intermediate route was also explored: Chinese labourers could be sent first to Manila and then trans-shipped to Havana, thereby exploiting Spain's imperial network to evade British restrictions on coolie trafficking.

One illustrative incident of Kulangsu's involvement is the case of an American ship, *Agnes*, reported in 1852. The ship, flying the U.S. flag, arrived at Xiamen to collect indentured Chinese for Peru (Irick, 1982). According to local archives, the would-be emigrants were confined in a facility on Kulangsu under guard by Chinese intermediaries employed by the foreign contractor. While the *Agnes* case ended contentiously with allegations of abuse reaching the ears of Qing officials, it demonstrated how deeply enmeshed Kulangsu had become in this international labour trade (Yen, 1985). Qing authorities in Fujian were aware of these activities but found them difficult to suppress. Technically, the coolie trade violated a long-standing imperial prohibition against the overseas traffic of Chinese subjects, a prohibition rooted in concerns dating back to the Ming era when 'selling people' abroad was illegal. However, enforcement was weak in the treaty ports, especially when foreign consuls provided protection to the traffickers. Moreover, local Qing officials often turned a blind eye, either out of corruption, as bribes from brokers were common, or pragmatic recognition that the emigrants were often willing to risk the journey. Thus, the coolie trade at Xiamen operated in a grey zone of semi-legality and collusion between Chinese and foreign participants.

The human dimensions of this trade were harrowing. Contemporary investigations describe coolie ships that reached Callao with the men "heavily ironed, holding up their chains with one hand to keep them from galling their ankles, while they carried their spades with the other" (Steere, 1874). Mortality on some voyages ranged from 20 % to 30 %, according to statistics cited in the British House of Commons debate on 23 May 1873 (Hansard, 1873). Atrocities aboard vessels such as the *Guangdong* in 1870 and the *Dolores Ugarte* in 1871 featured prominently in consular dispatches and legal proceedings that circulated internationally (Stewart, 1951; Hansard, 1872). On some occasions, indentured Chinese revolted at sea, although these insurrections were ultimately quelled by deadly force. These scandals, together with petitions from merchants in Xiamen and Guangzhou, provoked riots against recruiters and prompted the Qing court to act. The Zongli Yamen instructed its envoys to denounce the traffic, and Minister Guo Songtao in London branded it a "shameful outrage on humanity" in a memorandum of 1873 (Irick, 1982). Under sustained Chinese and foreign pressure, recruitment for Cuba ceased when the last eight-year contracts expired in 1874 (Meagher, 2008). Peru adopted comparable restrictions in 1876 and signed a bilateral treaty with China in 1877 that formally terminated the trade (Irick, 1982).

An often-overlooked dimension of the coolie era was the trafficking of Chinese women. Although the coolie trade is generally portrayed as a migration of male labour, Chinese women were also involuntarily sent overseas in this period, typically for the sex trade. In Xiamen, a "regular traffic of women" was observed by the 1830s, linked in part to the local custom of selling young girls and even to widespread female infanticide stemming from the low valuation of daughters in certain communities (Gützlauff, 1833, p.142). It is unsurprising, then, that years later the coolie trade incorporated the purchase and export of Chinese women. Exploiting the growing demand for a female presence among overseas Chinese, profiteers began sourcing women and girls from the Pearl River Delta and Fujian. In 1852, one agent was documented as having bought numerous teenage girls in the Guangzhou region to send abroad, and simultaneously an increase in missing young women from local villages was noted by officials. As researcher Wu Fengbin explains, many women from impoverished backgrounds were deceived regarding the true purpose of their journey. They were unaware that signing documents at the port effectively bound them to brothels in

distant colonies; instead, they were manipulated through promises of marriage or domestic employment, only to end up ensnared in sexual exploitation networks to repay their travel debts (Wu, 1988, p. 40).

Within the jargon of the time, the trafficked Chinese women were disparagingly called *zhuhua*, literally “pig flowers.” This term, *zhu* (“pig”) combined with a colloquial word *hua* (“flower”) often used euphemistically for women, suggested a view of these victims as vile commodities (Kani, 1985). Initially, Western colonisers rationalised the emigration of Chinese women by arguing it would provide wives for the male migrants and thus improve the moral conditions of Chinese communities abroad. In practice, however, many of the women were forced into prostitution in foreign lands, adding another tragic layer to the coolie trade’s history. The scant historical testimonies indicate that wherever significant numbers of Chinese male labourers went, parallel establishments of Asian women in sexual servitude emerged. For these women, the migration experience often proved even more harrowing than that of their male counterparts, as it entailed gendered violence and exploitation on top of the general abuses suffered by all coolies.

Xiamen and Kulangsu were directly touched by this closure. In 1874, a Qing official commission and a visiting Cuban delegation jointly inspected the conditions of Chinese emigrants in Xiamen. They used facilities on Kulangsu to house and process some liberated or returning coolies. One result of these investigations was the recognition that many contracts had been obtained through illicit means. The Spanish authorities agreed to repatriate those coolies who were fraudulently procured or who had survived their 8-year indentures. Over the next decade, small numbers of Chinese labourers trickled back to Xiamen and other ports, often in destitute condition. The local community on Kulangsu formed a charity, aided by overseas Chinese guilds, to help these returnees with temporary shelter and food (Ong, 2021). Such episodes further demonstrate how port cities dealt with the consequences of global forces: not only did they dispatch emigrants, but they also had to reintegrate those who returned.

Throughout the coolie trade period, one finds Chinese coastal society adapting to and profiting from this new global commerce in people. Chinese junk owners rented their vessels to ferry recruits from interior to port; translators and brokers earned commissions from foreign shippers; even local landlords benefited by renting out the very barracks that held the emigrants (Chen, 1991). At the same time, the social fabric was strained: villages in Fujian and Guangdong suffered the loss, often permanent, of a portion of their young male population, and prevalent anger sometimes flared against the “pig sellers” for their role in kidnappings. The Qing legal system in Fujian occasionally prosecuted particularly egregious cases when victimised families lodged complaints, but convictions were rare. More often, the trade was tacitly allowed to continue as part of the treaty port economy. This illustrates the ambiguous sovereignty of places like Kulangsu, which was nominally Qing territory but effectively under foreign dominance where Chinese law had limited reach.

For this article’s purpose, the key point is how the outward flow of labour fed back into the port economy and urban identity of Xiamen, turning the city into a migrant gateway whose streets filled with recruitment depots, ticket brokers, and foreign consulates vying for contracts. What is pertinent is how this transpacific movement looped back into the Chinese ports. Xiamen, as one of the *zuobarou* (organising centres for emigrant ships), gained a cosmopolitan reputation. The foreign community on Kulangsu grew in prestige, partly financed by the lucrative emigrant trade and related businesses like provisioning the ships. By the late 19th century, Xiamen’s identity was in part that of a migrant gateway: a place from which many departed but few returned. The term *qiaoxiang*, meaning ‘hometown of emigrants’, began to be used for areas with many overseas Chinese; southern Fujian, including villages near Xiamen, became one such region overseas. Remittances from Chinese coolies (for those who managed to send money back) started trickling in, introducing another kind of global monetary flow to coastal China, this time from Latin America to China. The amounts were initially small compared to the grand scale of the silver trade, but they were meaningful at the community level, helping families to purchase land or pay off debts (Gao, 2021).

In evaluating the coolie trade’s effect on Qing ports, one finds a mix of coercion and opportunity that again underscores the agency of these ports in globalisation. On one level, Xiamen and Kulangsu were simply the stages where foreign powers enacted a new “slave trade in all but name.” But on another level,

local Chinese players made choices that influenced how the trade unfolded, as whom to sell, what routes to use, how to invest the proceeds. The port city milieu, with its mix of Chinese and foreigners, created a unique microcosm of international relations. For example, when disputes arose, such as a coolie riot on a ship in Xiamen's harbour, or allegations that a consulate was unlawfully detaining Chinese, the resolution often involved negotiation between the provincial officials and foreign consuls on Kulangsu. In those negotiations, Xiamen's officials sometimes extracted concessions, such as better treatment for emigrants or compensation for bereaved families, showing that even under unequal treaties, Qing authorities could exert moral pressure by invoking humanitarian norms or the Qing state's residual sovereignty (Yen, 1985). These interactions presaged the more famous "coolie questions" that China would raise on the international stage in the 1879–1880 treaty negotiations with Peru and Spain, where China insisted on the formal abolition of the trade and provisions for repatriation (Mah, 2016).

By the 1880s, the era of the coolie trade had effectively ended, but the movement of people through Xiamen did not cease. In fact, Chinese migration from Fujian and Guangdong continued, now increasingly directed toward Southeast Asia (Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies) and the United States (via Hong Kong). Xiamen remained an important embarkation port for these destinations, though often overshadowed by Guangzhou and later Hong Kong. The infrastructure and networks developed during the coolie era were then repurposed; for instance, some of the same brokerage firms shifted to handling free emigrant passage to Singapore, and Kulangsu continued to host agencies that facilitated contract labour to other British and French colonies in Asia. Thus, the port's global role evolved rather than disappeared. It became a migration hub in the age of mass emigration that characterised the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This continuity reinforces the idea that Qing (and post-Qing) ports were enduring agents in global exchange, adapting from demands of one era, namely silver for an emerging global economy, to those of another, namely labour for colonial economies.

The history of the coolie trade in Xiamen and Kulangsu demonstrates that these ports were not passive conduits but active theatres of global interchange. They facilitated an unprecedented flow of human labour to the New World, and in doing so, they themselves were transformed. Socially, the experience left an imprint of cosmopolitanism and tragedy in local memory, encompassing stories of those who left never to return, of fortunes made and lives lost abroad. Economically, it tied the fortunes of Fujian's coast to the plantations of Cuba and the guano fields of Peru, though this connection was largely invisible. Politically, it forced Chinese authorities to grapple with the challenges of protecting their subjects under the constraints of imperialist treaties. All these facets highlight that Qing port cities possessed a significant degree of agency: they were adapters, intermediaries, and negotiators in the 19th-century global labour system.

4. Conclusion

The case studies of silver and coolies reveal that Chinese port cities under the Qing were far more than passive entryways for global currents. They were interactive nodes where global and local forces met and co-created new realities. In the late 16th to 18th centuries, ports such as Xiamen actively absorbed the influx of Spanish American silver, embedding it in Chinese commercial practices and fiscal networks. Fujian's traders and officials did not simply let silver wash through their hands; they manipulated its flow, profited from its presence, and coped creatively with its fluctuations. In the mid-19th century, the very same port city took on a new global role in funnelling human labour to distant continents. Nonetheless, Xiamen and Kulangsu were not just victims of external forces; local brokers, merchants, and even officials colluded and collaborated in the coolie trade, effectively globalising their own activities. In both instances, we observe a pattern: Qing ports acted as mediators of globalisation, filtering and transforming external influences through a Chinese coastal lens. This is not to deny the asymmetries of power at play. Certainly, Qing port cities operated under constraints, whether the tribute system and Qing regulations in the silver era, or the unequal treaties and foreign gunboats during the coolie era. Foreign actors often held the initiative in setting terms of trade or demanding access. Nevertheless, the concept of Chinese ports as laboratories of globalisation is borne out by the way these cities experimented with and adapted to global trends. They were sites of innovation: in currency usage, in business models, in forms of labour brokerage, and even in

cross-cultural institutions. Kulangsu, for example, by the late 19th century had become an international settlement with its own municipal council after 1903, where Chinese and eleven foreign nationalities cooperated in governing a tiny island, a direct legacy of decades of multinational interaction in that port. Such developments emphasise that port communities came up with new social and governance forms in response to global engagement.

Crucially, the agency of Qing ports also had feedback effects on the global system itself. Chinese demand for silver influenced mining outputs and trade policies in the Spanish Empire, and Chinese participation in the coolie trade influenced labour policies and anti-slavery movements in the West, for instance, the outrage over the coolie trade contributed to international pressure to enforce anti-slave-trade measures and eventually to the abolition of the coolie trade by the 1870s. The flow was not one-way; it was interactive. Port cities were the interface where this interaction was most intense. A telling example is the way Xiamen's experiences fed into Chinese foreign policy: the abuses witnessed in Xiamen and other ports gave Qing reformers like Li Hongzhang ammunition to push for greater state control over migration and trade, ultimately leading to the first Chinese-run steamship companies and early attempts at emigration agreements in the 1870s and 1880s. In that sense, the ports incubated new ideas about sovereignty and modernisation truly functioning as "laboratories" for how China could engage with the outside world on more equal terms.

Another layer to consider is cultural and intellectual exchange. Although the focus here has been on economic and social history, it is worth mentioning that port cities were contact zones where languages, religions, and ideas mixed. Xiamen had Protestant missionaries, Catholic priests, overseas Chinese returnees, and European diplomats all in one urban milieu. This too is part of globalisation's fabric. The presence of a Latin American connection, though less studied, left subtle marks, for instance, Spanish words entering local vocabulary: the Spanish dollar was known colloquially as *bolivar yin* in some parts of Guangdong, referencing "Bolívar" coins from post-independence Latin America. There were even accounts of Chinese-Cuban mestizo children being brought back to Fujian by their fathers in the late 19th century, a tiny footnote in diaspora history. These human stories serve as a reminder that globalisation is not just about economics but about human lives knitting continents together in unexpected ways.

Qing ports like Xiamen were neither mere gateways nor absolute masters, but they exhibited a significant degree of agency within the structural limits they faced. The narrative of silver and coolies shows them leveraging opportunities, whether by capitalising on a currency influx or by participating, willingly or under duress, in a transoceanic labour market. They mitigated challenges, such as finding local solutions to silver scarcity or negotiating the terms of emigrant handling. And they certainly left an imprint on both Chinese and global history: the wealth that flowed in helped sustain the Qing economy for centuries, and the labour that flowed out helped build the economies of Cuba and Peru, linking the fates of Qing China and Latin America inextricably during the era of high imperialism. For Latin America, the China connection via these ports is an important but sometimes overlooked aspect of 19th-century history, complementing the better-known narratives of European and African influence. The Chinese coolies contributed to the "second slavery" in plantations and to the multicultural makeup of societies like Cuba, while Chinese silver consumption in earlier times indirectly bolstered the Spanish colonial treasury that funded projects in the Americas. Viewing Qing ports as active participants rather than mere gateways enriches the understanding of globalisation's early waves. It recognises Chinese contributions and responses to global economic integration and reminds us that globalisation in the 16th-19th centuries was a multi-centred process. The China-Latin America connection forged through silver and coolies is a compelling example of how regional histories intersected across oceans. Ports like Xiamen and the community on Kulangsu stood at the crossroads of these intersections. They were portals, to be sure, but also actors that helped shape the currents passing through them.

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