CHAPTER 11
The Amoy Riots of 1852:
Coolie Emigration and
Sino-British Relations

Introduction

Large-scale shipments of Chinese coolies to foreign lands under contract began soon after the opening of five ports (Guangzhou, Amoy, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai) to foreign trade under the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. The first shipment was sent from Amoy to Île de Bourbon (Reunion Island) aboard a French vessel in 1845. Thereafter Amoy supplied the largest portion of contract emigrants until this flourishing human trade shifted to other locations in the early 1850s.

Despite the illegality of such an activity under Chinese law, the export of Chinese laborers from Amoy was openly operated with the connivance of local Chinese and British consular officials until the outbreak of riots against the abuses of the trade in 1852. The coolie trade in Amoy declined drastically after this incident. Until then, Chinese emigration from Amoy had generally been conducted by local British agencies. Up to August 1852, 73 per cent of the emigrants were shipped on board British vessels, and the rest on ships flying Spanish, French, American and Peruvian colours.¹

The public outburst of fury in 1852 has been touched upon in a number of Chinese and English writings. In 1957 Tien Ju-Kang wrote about the Amoy riots, seeing this event as another example of an injustice imposed on Qing China by the western imperialists. He was critical of both Westerners and the corrupt and incompetent Chinese officials. Consequently he viewed the riots as a righteous and heroic response by the Amoy people to exploitation and repression. On the other hand, in his

¹ Note prepared by Dr Charles Winchester, in FO 663/9, Enclosure 3 in no. 127, 26.8.1852.
work Yen Ch'ing-hwang reconfirmed the conventional image of Chinese officials as being timid and self-preservation. The organizational aspect of the Chinese coolie trade and the abuses in general were described by Wang Singwu in his book published in 1978.

Drawing its sources mainly from the British Foreign Office documents, including the seldom-used Amoy consular records that also contain correspondence in Chinese, the purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct the event from the local and treaty-port perspectives and re-examine the stereotyped images of the Chinese and British officials in their handling of the matter.

Emigration and Abuses

Dr Charles Winchester, First Assistant to the British Consulate in Amoy, provided an 1852 eyewitness account of the emigration from this locality during this specific period. He states that the Chinese emigration from this port was conducted under both native and foreign contract systems. In his estimate, the annual exodus from Fujian province involved some 50,000 able-bodied men. The vast majority of them left under arrangements they had made themselves, that were either voluntary or by contract. In both cases, the emigrants would work overseas under prosperous Chinese who had established themselves in the Malay Archipelago. The native system had been in existence long before foreign engagement in the export of Chinese laborers and had facilitated the commencement of emigration under foreign contracts. Until August 1852, the total number of emigrants who had left under foreign contracts was estimated to be 6,255. They were shipped to Havana, Demerara, Isle


3. See fn. 1.
de Bourbon (Réunion), Australia, the Sandwich Islands, Batanhas in the Philippines, California and Peru.

Both push and pull factors affected the emigration. The first and foremost reason was that the average wages of all labor in the city and the surrounding countryside were very low. They amounted to less than one hundred copper cash per day, or less than two Spanish dollars per month for an able-bodied man. The wages of a skilled artisan or agricultural laborer might be double this amount. If food were provided, the wages would be reduced by five-eighths. Furthermore, even at these low rates, jobs were not always available. In the rural sector, as the landholdings were fragmented, they were usually taken care of by the owner or his family members. Under such difficult circumstances, many job-seekers fell easy prey to native “crimps” (coolie-brokers) employed by foreign agents. The attraction was that a foreign contract guaranteed them a fixed income. For example, a Cuba contract offered three dollars per month, in addition to the provision of food. The wages under a Sydney contract were two-and-a-half dollars with rations. Moreover, the prospective emigrants cherished the dream of getting rich in foreign lands. One illustration was given by Dr John Bowring, the Acting Superintendent of British Trade in China, when pointing to the representations of the boundless wealth of the Golden Mountain (California) that, “have almost fanaticized the people”.

Overseas demands for coolies gave a number of crimps employment. It was a general practice for a European merchant who was engaged in coolie export to employ one or two of them. These crimps controlled their subordinate agents, who in turn acted as touts and sent out their own scouts to go around the towns and villages in the neighborhood to induce the poor and the idle. The reputation of the Chinese coolie-brokers was very low. The local community accused them of engaging in the trade of “selling men” to English merchants. They practised all sorts of techniques in their recruitment tactics and were paid 50 copper cash daily for each man mustered. They also demanded a usurious interest for the money they lent. Their remuneration on each coolie ultimately shipped was one dollar.

The shipment of Chinese coolies was mainly in the hands of British businessmen, whose main concern was profit; consequently they did their best to keep the cost of transportation low. The inevitable upshot was that the welfare of the emigrants on board was neglected and the mortality rate as the result of disease was high. Conditions could worsen as the result of the cruel and despotic conduct of a ship’s commander.

4. FO 228/153, no.2, Bowring to Malmesbury, 17.5.1852.
This explains the rather frequent mutinies among the Chinese passengers during their voyages. One such notorious case was the *Robert Bowne* incident. This American ship left Amoy for San Francisco on 20 March 1852, loaded with 410 Chinese emigrants. After ten days at sea, the Chinese mutinied and killed the captain, two officers and four seamen. They then took possession of the ship. The surviving crewmen later regained control of the vessel and sailed her back to Amoy. A great number of coolies who escaped from the *Robert Bowne* and other vessels brought back news of the ill-treatment and cruelties to which they had been subjected. This stirred up great resentment in the community toward the emigration agents.\(^5\)

Despite their awareness of the illegality of organized emigration, the staff of the British Consulate in Amoy connived in the involvement of their subjects in such activities either because they felt powerless to do anything about it or were unwilling to interfere. For instance, when James Tait, an English merchant and the principal shipper of coolies, applied to the Consulate for a license to export coolies, Officiating-Consul John Backhouse replied that he had no orders from Her Majesty’s Government to issue such a document and therefore, he did not intend to have anything to do with the transaction.\(^6\) Backhouse’s response was based on a dispatch from John Bowring in which he said, "I have had no instructions [from the Foreign Office] either to assist or in any way to interfere with these vast Plans of Emigration."\(^7\)

Nevertheless, the abuses of the foreign contract system and the cupidity of the shippers of coolies had drawn the attention of the British Foreign Office. A dispatch to John Bowring from the Earl of Malmesbury, the Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, dated July 21, 1852, stated that, "Her Majesty’s Government are not ignorant of great irregularities having been committed in the transport of coolies from China in British ships."\(^8\) This letter made special mention of two notorious cases involving the British vessels, the *Lady Montague* and the *Susannah*. In 1850, the mortality rate on the *Lady Montague* reached a shocking 66.66 per cent.\(^9\) However, the Foreign Office decided that the existing state of the British

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6. FO 228/153, no.4, Bowring to Malmesbury, 16.7.1852; also no. 9, Bowring to Malmesbury, 1.10.1852.
8. FO 663/9, no.36, Bowring to Sullivan, 3.8.1852.
law “unfortunately precludes any effectual interference with transactions of this kind.”\textsuperscript{11} The British government did consider framing some kind of enactment to cover such cases, and it expressed the wish that, “the British authorities in China should pay close attention to the proceedings of British ships engaged in transporting coolies, and should adopt all legal means in their power to check abuses”.\textsuperscript{12} In response, Bowring pessimistically foresaw great difficulty in introducing such legislative enactments. As no aid or co-operation could be relied on from the Chinese authorities and as the embarkation ports were spread along the coast, where there was no consular representative, he was afraid little could be effected to check the frauds and irregularities. Furthermore, the British authorities had no control over other foreign ships.\textsuperscript{13}

John Bowring expressed his anxiety in his dispatches to John Backhouse dated October 22 and November 22. It had come to his notice that Amoy was full of vessels that had arrived from different parts of the world and were loading emigrants destined for the Spanish and British West Indian colonies. Several ships had also arrived from Australia in search of agricultural laborers. This was an indication of the rise of Amoy as one principal source of the supply of Chinese coolies. He was alarmed by the many abuses that existed in the way in which coolies, particularly young men, had been seduced away from their families. Coercion could also certainly not be ruled out and great desertions had taken place after coolies had been hired.\textsuperscript{14} Some of the outrage caused by the recruitment system could be attributed to the insensitivity of the British agents. They were so notorious and paid such little respect to the local authorities that they erected their barracoons (rough barracks) right alongside the Amoy Customs House. Bowring personally witnessed the arrangements for the shipment of coolies in Amoy. He reported that there were “hundreds of them gathered together in barracoons, stripped naked, and stamped or painted with the letter C (California), P (Peru), or S (Sandwich Islands), on their breasts, according to the destination for which they were intended”.\textsuperscript{15} All this insolence was offense to the local community. The abuses, in Bowring’s words, “are not far from placing the coolie emigration in the category of another Slave Trade”.\textsuperscript{16} However, he

\textsuperscript{11} FO 228/153, no. 3, Malmesbury to Bowring, 21.7.1852.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} FO 228/153, no. 8, Bowring to Malmesbury, 25.9.1852.
\textsuperscript{14} FO 663/9, Bowring to Backhouse, 22.10.1852 and 22.11.1852; also FO 663/58, no. 59, Backhouse to Bowring, 20.11.1852.
\textsuperscript{15} FO 228/153, no. 2, Bowring to Malmesbury, 17.5.1852; and no. 5, 3.8.1852.
\textsuperscript{16} FO 228/153, no. 13, Bowring to Malmesbury, 24.12.1852.
lamented, “the authority possessed or exercised by the Consuls had been wholly inoperative to check such abuses”.

Outbreak of Riots and the Anglo-Chinese Contentions

The irregularities and abuses that were connected with coolie emigration eventually resulted in the outbreak of a riot in Amoy on November 21, 1852. Perhaps because of the chaotic and confusing situation, it took almost a week for the man on the spot, Acting-Consul John Backhouse, to send his first report to John Bowring. Even when he did, this official did not seem to have grasped the severity of the actual occurrence at the time of his writing. He described the disturbance and disorder as “an atrocious outrage” committed by an armed party of Chinese soldiers. He claimed that, on that evening when a clerk, E.J. Mackay, in the house of Tait and Co., was passing by the street in front of a police court, he had been attacked with stones flung by a group of soldiers. Some of the missiles struck him on the head. They allowed him to leave only after giving him a blow to the head with the sharp edge of a spear, that inflicted a wound about two inches in length. Soon afterward, the chief mate of the English ship the Australia, Richard Vallancey, happened to be passing by the same place in the company of a friend. They too were attacked by the soldiers. The friend managed to escape, but Vallancey received cuts over each temple, one spear was thrust in the upper part of his left arm and he had five or six wounds in his thigh, one in the abdomen and some other places, besides sustaining a severe injury from the blows inflicted to his head by sticks or stones. In a nutshell, he was seriously wounded. The next day, news of the disturbance had spread all over town. All the shops were closed. Just at the same time, the town was flooded with vagabonds from the neighborhood, who, teaming up with the local bad characters, were soon determined to plunder the Hongs of the foreign community, not to mention robbing their own countrymen whenever and wherever they could. Backhouse requested Commander J.S. Ellman of HMS steam-sloop the Salamander to bring the ship into the harbor as close to the Hongs as possible to protect the lives and property of British subjects. Furthermore, a request was made for a party of 15 to 20 men to be sent ashore to act as guards. In the forenoon of the 24th, the atmosphere was so threatening that, upon Backhouse’s request, a very strong party

18. For the report, see FO 663/58, no. 60, Backhouse to Bowring, 27.11.1852.
19. FO 663/55, no. 34, Backhouse to Ellman, 22.11.1852.
of men landed from the steamer.\textsuperscript{20} By this time, the crowd was rapidly increasing and the landing party was pelted with stones by the mob. After a while, Lieutenant Smith, who was in command of the marines and seamen, gave orders to fire. Four in the crowd were killed and five wounded. Backhouse said that the local authorities fully approved of what had been done by the British and considered that it would be highly imprudent for the marines to be withdrawn from the Hongs. He also said the Chinese authorities made no attempt to deny the culpability of their soldiers.

These cast no more than a cursory glance at John Backhouse’s early perception of the incident as written in the dispatch of November 27. However, Backhouse added further information in a private letter accompanying the dispatch and stated that he believed “the riots were attributable to an attempt made by [Francis Darby] Syme ... to rescue a coolie broker from the hands of the Chinese authorities”\textsuperscript{21}

Two days after the first riot, John Backhouse officially lodged with Daotai (Circuit Intendant) Zhao Lin, the most senior Chinese civil official in Amoy, a formal complaint about the assaults and a demand for the latter’s immediate action. On the same day, he again communicated with this official, citing Article I of the Peace Treaty that stated that British subjects should enjoy full security and protection for their persons and property in China. Now there was unrest in the locality and the authorities were unable to suppress the mob. He had no choice but to request the landing of the British marines from the steamer to provide protection.\textsuperscript{22}

However, Daotai Chao had a different story to tell. According to his own source of information, three Englishmen had been walking in the street that evening. One of them, under the influence of liquor, had been quarrelling with some soldiers and the crowd outside a police court about some Chinese coolies “whom the English had purchased”. He had also commenced bullying them and a scuffle ensued. To substantiate his analysis of the outbreak, the Daotai cited a joint petition presented to him by the gentry, elders and businessmen immediately after the outbreak of disturbance. The petitioners blamed the abusive system of emigration for the outrage and said peace could only be secured for the community when the root cause had been removed. As long as the villainy was

\textsuperscript{20} FO 663/55, no. 36, Backhouse to Ellman, 24.11.1852. Lieutenant Smith landed with an armed party of officers, 8 marines and 37 seamen to protect the house of Syme, Muir & Co. and English merchants. See FO 228/153, Appendix F in Enclosure 8 of no. 14, Smith to Commander Ellman, 25.11.1852.

\textsuperscript{21} FO 228/153, no. 14, Bowring to Malmesbury, 27.12.1852.

\textsuperscript{22} FO 663/57A, nos. 20 and 21, Backhouse to Chao, 23.11.1852.
tolerated, awful disasters would be the result. They went on to allude in particular to the vile impositions that were practised daily on the people by a class of reprobates, who, under false pretences and delusive offers, had succeeded in enticing them from their homes and sold them to the English. The petitioners mentioned a recent case. It had happened a day or two earlier when one of the ketou (brokers in these transactions) called Lin Huan had violently kidnapped an unfortunate man and taken him to sell to the English. Lin Huan was a notorious figure in the local community. He paraded the streets accompanied by bands of armed ruffians who were kidnappers by profession. Murder and plunder had been the order of the day. The people were enraged by this atrocious way of behaving. They seized this infamous broker and sent him to the Marine Magistrate (haifang tongzhi) as a prisoner to be tried and punished. The petitioners regretted that their authorities had not yet imposed a punishment on him. They were convinced that the mandarins had an undoubted right to judge Chinese offenses and punish crimes committed by their own people. Unless the authorities condemned the offender to severe punishment, the streets of Amoy, the resort of business and trade, would be made unsafe and the interests of the community would be seriously affected. Upon receipt of the petition, the Daotai immediately sent orders to the Marine Magistrate to cooperate with the military and seize the offenders.

On the basis of this information, Daotai Chao accused John Backhouse of having distorted the picture. He said Backhouse was vague on several key points and demanded the latter’s explanation. He asked, “What induced that Englishman to go out on a dark night and in a drunken fit to assault the soldiers and others, what was the subject of their quarrel, who was wounded, and by whom and where?” He requested Backhouse to obtain these various particulars as accurately as possible to enable him to proceed with the investigation of the case and deal with it accordingly. Finally, he observed that:

... a party of troops was landed from the steamer. As this is the first time on record that this has occurred at Amoy, I shall make no comment upon it at present until I have reported the subject officially to Their Excellencies the Governor-General and Governor of the province, who will bring it officially to the notice of the plenipotentiary of your honourable country.23

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23. FO 663/51, Zhao to Backhouse, 24.11.1852. The translation of this Chinese dispatch can be found in FO 663/5, Zhao to Backhouse, 24.11.1852.
While Zhao was engaging in the debate with John Backhouse, he received a report from Acting Marine Magistrate Wang telling him of the violent clashes between local people and Englishmen on the 24th. Wang said three Chinese were shot dead by the English and two others were wounded in the affray. He requested his superior to write officially to the British Consul for a joint inquest on the bodies. He also claimed that, having been informed of the clash, he proceeded in person to the spot and succeeded in quelling the row and dispersing the mob.24

On the 27th, John Backhouse wrote to the Chinese officials to convey the fears of the British merchants about the safety of their Hongs and he charged the local authorities with the responsibility for the protection of their property. The Marine Magistrate and the colonel in charge of the local garrison immediately consented to place about six or eight men under petty officers at each of the outlying Hongs. These measures apparently did not please the Daotai who, in a dispatch sent two days later, was highly critical of the improper wording of the Acting Consul’s letter. He reprimanded the latter for shifting the entire responsibility on to the Chinese authorities. He thought that the local authorities and their people should collaborate with the British officers and their merchants to render each other assistance for the preservation of peace and the maintenance of good will between the two parties.25

Daotai Zhao’s tough stance on the issue did not show any signs of softening when he again communicated with John Backhouse on December 2. Coming straight to the point, he directed the Consul’s attention to the abuses practised by the English Hong merchants in their recruitment of coolies through the crimps. “These proceedings”, he said, “have given rise to considerable general discontent, and are undoubtedly the origin of the affray in which life has been lost.” He warned the Consul that the minds of the people were far from being pacified, and that he should not be deceived by the apparent tranquility. As the English merchants had not stopped the fateful commerce, there was no telling when a similar affray, such as the last, might break out again. On the part of the Chinese authorities, the Marine Magistrate had issued orders to seize all the crimps and punish them with a degree of severity. This would “effectually dig out the soil at its root”. He simultaneously requested the

24. FO 663/51, Zhao to Backhouse, 25.11.1852. The English translation is in FO 663/5, Zhao to Backhouse, 25.11.1852.
25. FO 663/55, no. 39, Backhouse to the British merchants, 27.11.1852; FO 663/57A, no. 24, Backhouse to Zhao, 27.11.1852; FO 663/56, no. 19, Zhao to Backhouse, 29.11.1852; and the translation of Zhao’s reply in FO 663/5, Chao to Backhouse, 29.11.1852.
Consul to issue strict injunctions to these Hong merchants and others, prohibiting them from entering into arrangements with any agents or contractors for the kidnapping or hiring of coolies.26

In reply, John Backhouse proposed discussions on the drafting of preventive regulations be held between the two parties; but he asserted that this step could be taken only after the Chinese authorities had complied with his request to conduct an investigation into the disturbance and punish the instigators of the riots.27 To this Daotai Zhao responded on December 10, saying that a joint inquest had been conducted on the bodies of the four deceased and the wounds sustained by Vallancey and a Chinese. Steps were also being taken for the apprehension and punishment of the guilty parties who wounded Vallancey. On the other hand, he demanded orders be issued by the Consul to bring those Englishmen, who had unjustifiably fired upon the people, to justice. Referring to the coolie traffic, the Daotai said there was a positive law against the emigration of Chinese. Should any natives be found guilty of infringing this law, the authorities would subject them to the extreme penalty of the law. There was no need to formulate new regulations.28

In Hong Kong, John Bowring had received the report from John Backhouse as well as other information from unofficial quarters. He sensed the gravity of the affair and knew that the exportation of Chinese laborers and the felonious actions of the agents had adversely affected what he considered the amicable relations between the British and Chinese subjects. He thought it desirable to send the Secretary and Registrar in the Superintendency of Trade, Frederick Harvey, to investigate the causes of the outbreak and the manner in which coolie emigration had been carried out in Amoy. The latter sailed on board HMS steam-sloop Hermes, commanded by Captain E. Gardiner Fishbourne, and arrived in Amoy on December 12. While in Amoy, Harvey visited the Acting Marine Magistrate twice, the second time accompanied by Captain Fishbourne. The mandarin expressed his indignation about the coolie emigration in general and coolie-brokers in particular. As a man-of-war had been sent, he thought the present occasion propitious for putting an end to the illegal traffic in Chinese coolies that was being carried out by British merchants. On the Chinese side, they had been actively and severely prosecuting the nefarious brokers.

26. FO 663/56, no. 20, Zhao to Backhouse, 2.12.1852.
27. FO 663/57A, no. 28, Backhouse to Zhao, 3.12.1852.
28. FO 663/56, no. 21, Zhao to Backhouse, 10.12.1852.
Turning to the marines who had fired on the people, the Marine Magistrate demanded their punishment by the British authorities. When he was told that the mob had gathered at the gate of the English Hong for plunder and that the English soldiers were justified in protecting British life and property, the Magistrate denied that people went there to plunder. Their hatred was directed toward the coolie-broker who had done so much harm and had ensconced himself inside the Hong. Pertinently, these people were unarmed. Others were at a great distance from the crowd; some on their boats, others on their balconies, and in particular a babe still in arms, had been innocently involved. He said it was the intention of the Chinese authorities to punish the men who speared and wounded the English mate; but he required from the British government the trial and punishment of the individuals who had killed the Chinese subjects.

During the interview Captain Fishbourne, RN expressed to the Marine Magistrate the British government’s desire to right certain abuses that had crept into the system of emigration and its wish for the cooperation of the Chinese authorities in effecting their purpose. The mandarin said he would proceed against all the coolie-brokers with unmitigated rigor, but he bitterly complained about those wicked coolie-brokers who were protected by the English Hongs. He then strongly protested against the interference of the English merchants, naming Francis Darby Syme and James Tait, who on every occasion an arrest was made, either sent in their cards with messages for the release of such brokers or came themselves to effect their release. This, he said, had lowered the mandarins’ position and dignity in the eyes of their own people. Harvey later commented in his report on this practice adopted by the English merchants, saying he considered such a custom an “unauthorised and irregular mode of proceeding unheard of at any other port”. He trusted means would be found to put a stop to it as soon as possible.

To the proposal about whether a petty officer might be appointed by the Chinese authorities to inspect each emigrant ship as it left, for the purpose of satisfying himself that no coolies were being carried out of the country against their will, the Magistrate smiled at the idea and said, certainly not. He stated that there was a general prohibition in the code of the laws against the emigration of Chinese subjects. To regulate would be to recognize the propriety of emigration and be contrary to Chinese laws. He counter-proposed that the English merchants should be prevented from encouraging more to emigrate. In his reply, Fishbourne said what they could do would be to prevent English subjects from sending Chinese subjects out of their country against their will. If they were to do
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this effectively, they must be informed of any such circumstances by the Chinese authorities.²⁹

The Queen versus Syme: British Judicial Inquiry

When John Bowring sent Harvey to investigate the affair, he also instructed Acting Consul John Backhouse to hold a formal judicial investigation into what had occurred.³⁰ After Harvey’s arrival in Amoy, a Consular Court of Inquiry was held from December 13 to 17. It was presided over by Backhouse, Harvey and Commander Fishbourne. During the sessions, the whole of the small British mercantile community was summoned to testify in court. Other witnesses included English and American missionaries and several Chinese. The procedure was recorded in the minutes of evidence at the Court of Inquiry that shed interesting light on several obscure aspects of the riots.³¹

The causes of the riots were closely examined by the court. In his testimony, Francis Darby Syme’s assistant, William Cornabe, admitted that the excitement was not the usual manner in which Europeans were treated at Amoy and that there must have been something wrong with the way the Chinese broker conducted his business. Rev. William Chalmers Burns, an English missionary, believed that they had broken out because of the disturbance in the public mind aroused by the exportation of coolies. There was a general impression in the Chinese community that the coolies were being carried away against their will. To substantiate his observation, the reverend gentleman cited a government proclamation that had appeared several months earlier. It had been issued by Acting Marine Magistrate Wang, stating that coolie-brokers were deceiving and selling poor people. In doing so they had committed a serious breach of law. The proclamation declared that strict orders had been given to the police for the apprehension and severe punishment of these guilty persons.³²

In his testimony Reverend Burns mentioned two placards that appeared on November 23. One was written in the name of the scholars and merchants. It made a general reference to the “buying and selling of

²⁹. For the interviews, see FO 228/153, Enclosures 9 and 10 in no. 14. See also FO 228/149, Enclosure 1 in no. 3, Fishbourne to Captain Massie, 15.12.1852.
³⁰. Ibid.; and Enclosure 3 in above, Bowring to Harvey. See also FO 663/9, no. 61, Bowring to Backhouse, 9.12.1852.
³¹. For the Minutes, see FO 228/153, Enclosure 8 in no. 14.
³². Wang’s proclamation is in FO 228/903, p. 149 with a translation in FO 228/153, Enclosure 12 in no. 14.
men’ that had been carried on in this port for a number of years. It went on to complain that of late several scores of native people had joined together for the purpose of obtaining persons to be exported and that they had several hundred in their employ who were going in all directions, using every pretext by which they might get hold of persons to suit their purpose. The placard then strongly warned the people against being imposed upon by such persons. The other placard, written in the name of the 18 wards of the town, was of a more violent character. It reacted strongly to what it called the human trade and specifically targeted the Hongs of Syme, Muir & Co. and Tait & Co. These placards were posted up throughout the town and had apparently caused a huge stir among the people.\textsuperscript{33}

Answering charges of forced detention, Francis Darby Syme denied them and argued that the coolies in the sheds were most decidedly free agents and at liberty to go in and out at pleasure. However, several other witnesses testified to the contrary. Reverend Burns mentioned a specific case about a fortnight before the disturbance arose, in which his Chinese servant begged him to do what he could to have a young man released. His servant told him that he had gone to the shed in front of Syme’s Hong, in the company of the young man’s relatives from his village who wished to have him released. These relatives claimed that the young man had been deceived and was confined against his will. When summoned to testify before the court, the servant described the shed as being “a very bad place”. The men had nothing but the damp ground, with mats spread upon it, to lie down on. They were all found wearing trousers, but otherwise naked. He was positive that the coolies so kept were not at liberty to leave, or in his words, “they could go in, but they could not come out”. A similar case was raised by another English missionary, Dr J.H. Young, during his testimony. It was about how his Chinese teacher was asked by a female relative from the countryside to help in seeking the release of her nephew from the coolie ship.

During the inquiry, six coolies from Syme’s emigrant depot were brought to testify and they all said they had been promised work in Amoy, but on arriving at Syme’s Hongs, they were pushed into the coolie sheds and not allowed to leave. Seven other witnesses from Tait & Co.’s coolie depot also testified to the same effect. Other witnesses recollected occasions of personal violence being committed by Syme, who seemed to be fond of carrying a stick and using it to strike at the coolies in the sheds.

\textsuperscript{33} For the two placards, see FO 228/903, pp. 146–7, the English translations of which are in FO 228/153, Appendices A and B of Enclosure 8 in no. 14.
A couple of eyewitnesses said they had seen the coolies bleeding from the mouth after being beaten by Syme.

As the court hearing proceeded, some missing links of the affair on November 21 also fell into place. It became clear that, in the evening of the 21st, Francis Darby Syme, accompanied by Cornabe as his interpreter, made a visit to a police court with the intention of ascertaining whether one of the men belonging to his Hong was being detained. If so, they had planned to liberate him. After the mandarin told them the detainee was not their broker, they subsequently left, but were told by someone that this official had deceived them. Syme and Cornabe went back for the second time. It was during this second visit that, upon recognizing Syme, people made the assault upon him and his clerk, Cornabe. The broker they were looking for was Lin Huan. Lin had entrapped a man in Amoy and was seized by the people, who turned him in to the police court. Both Syme and Cornabe, as did Lin, managed to escape the scene amid the confusion and under cover of twilight. Lin took refuge in Syme’s Hong.34

Now the anger of the people was aroused and exercised upon Mackay, a clerk with Tait & Co., who arrived at the place shortly after. In his deposition, Lin Huan said the Hongs of both Syme and Tait came to claim him. Mackay explained his presence differently in his testimony. He said he visited the place wanting to find out what had happened and that he could have been mistaken for Syme by the mob. After Mackay’s departure, Vallancey and his companion, Arthur Malthew, both from the coolie ship the Australia, appeared on the scene. In their testimonies they did not explain why they went there and what caused their involvement in the fight.

Francis Darby Syme’s coming to the rescue of Lin Huan had greatly antagonized the local people. The placard issued on the 23rd in the name of the whole community was the outcome of their anger. In it they expressed their determination not to transact business with the Hongs of Syme, Muir & Co. and Tait & Co. They threatened that, if people among themselves should happen to trade with these Hongs, their houses would be pulled down, their goods plundered and their lives taken. Trade would be resumed only after the escaped coolie-broker had been surrendered to their authorities for punishment.

It seems that after the outbreak of the 21st, the mandarin of the police court was disciplined for the incident. This action caused more

34. FO 228/153, Enclosure 8 in no. 14, the minutes of Syme’s and Cornabe’s testimonies; for Lin Huan’s deposition made to the Chinese police court, see FO 228/903, p. 148b. The translation of this Chinese document was presented to the Consular Court of Inquiry. See FO 663/9, Enclosure 15 in no. 177 of 1852.
disaffection among the people and led to the closing of their shops from the 22nd until the dispersion of the mob. The act was taken to exonerate this mandarin from blame for the circumstances that occurred between him and Francis Darby Syme. These people, said to be between three and six thousand, petitioned the Daotai requesting that this official should not be demoted. They were resolved to keep their shops closed until the official had been restored to his former position, and until the coolie-broker had been given up to the authorities.

During the examination, the Court of Inquiry also shed light on the obscure elements in the second outbreak on the 24th and the mob’s motivation. That morning, about 1,500 men, mainly Amoy people, assembled in front of the foreign Hongs. Consequent on the shootings by the British marines and sailors, as later estimated by Harvey, seven or eight were killed and between 12 and 16 wounded. Besides the casualties among the rioters, four others who had nothing to do with the rabble were accidentally killed by stray bullets, among them a babe at her mother’s breast.\(^35\)

One witness, the acting-mate of HM’s steam-sloop the *Salamander*, William Hugh Nurse, told the Court that the mob had plundered the outhouses in front of Syme’s Hong. When he was asked to describe what these outhouses contained, he said there were household utensils for the use of the coolies. Then the Court reminded him of the fact that these outhouses were only the coolie sheds. Nurse agreed that no direct attempt was made to break open the dwelling-houses and godowns in order to plunder them.

Commenting on the intention of the mob, the British merchant Robert Jackson considered their object to be twofold: vengeance for the outrage committed by the foreigners; and plunder. But, on being questioned by the Court, he agreed that the mob did not at all appear near other Hongs, such as those owned by Captain McMurdo and Captain Helm. Other witnesses also admitted that the reason for the original gathering of the mob was to obtain delivery of the coolie-broker, certainly not for plunder. The crowd’s feelings seemed to have been centered on Syme’s Hong only; therefore, general plunder could not have been their objective.\(^36\)

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35. FO 228/153, Enclosure 7 in no. 14, Harvey to Bowring, 22.12.1852.
36. Jackson was also involved in the exportation of coolies, but he had not become a target of attack. According to his explanation, he used only fair means to procure his coolies. He took only those who were perfectly willing to emigrate. However, a Chinese called Lin San, who was brought from Jackson’s coolie depot in the town by Harvey and Commander Fishbourne, stated to the Court his unwillingness to emigrate. He said he did not ask to be let go because he saw others being beaten when they asked to leave.
The question of motivation was also addressed to Francis Darby Syme. He was asked to explain why his house had become the target of the attack. Syme said it was for plunder. He was then questioned how he would reconcile his claim with the message brought to him by an American missionary, Rev. John V.N. Talmage, that, if the coolie-broker was given up to the authorities and no future decoying of men by brokers were to be practised, the people would be satisfied and the affair would come to an end. On this occasion, Talmage was deputed by a group of respectable Amoy residents to call on Syme about the matter. In his response, Syme did not fully agree with the Court’s view that the placards, the situation and the exasperation of the people against the coolie-broker were sufficient to identify the riots with the recent coolie emigration. He insisted that the crowd who gathered in front of his Hong were there merely for plunder. He could not account for the fact that only his Hong and that of Tait & Co. were named in the hostile placard.

After the inquiry had ended and sufficient evidence collected, John Backhouse held a Consular Court on December 18 to try Francis Darby Syme and his clerk for offences committed on November 21. Syme continued to be defiant at the trial and did not plead guilty. Nevertheless, the Court found that, in contravention to the Treaty existing between Britain and China, Syme had visited a police court on the subject of a coolie-broker, with a view to obtaining his release, and that he had been therefore guilty of a breach of the Treaty. He was fined 200 dollars. Cornabe was also charged with the same offenses that caused a riot, in which two British subjects were assaulted. He pleaded guilty. He was fined the smaller sum of 20 dollars because he had acted upon the instructions of his employer. A summons had likewise been served on Connolly, a partner in the firm of Tait & Co. He was to have been tried for “misprision” in allowing coolies to be confined against their will on board the emigrant depot ship; but, as the coolies who would have been the witnesses in this case had made their escape from the consular jail, the Court could only give him a warning as to his future actions to do with the shipment of coolies.37

37. FO 228/153, Enclosure 7 in no. 14, Harvey to Bowring, 22.12.1852; and Enclosures 5 and 6 in no.14, minutes of Consular Court at Amoy, 18.12.1852.
Vallancey versus the Chinese Authorities: Claims and Chinese Counter-claims

Vallancey’s case was brought up during Captain Fishbourne’s interview with Marine Magistrate Wang in December 1852. The former told the Chinese official that, by the custom of England, this English victim claimed an indemnity of 5,000 dollars. Wang said it was not the practice in China to pay money as compensation for wounds inflicted, but that by law the case should be thoroughly investigated and the offenders punished. He also reminded his British visitor of the cases in which innocent Chinese had been shot or wounded, even though these persons were at some distance away from the crowd. He said their relatives had not yet claimed compensation for the tragedies.38 Harvey later conveyed to John Bowring that it would be very difficult to obtain the compensation for Vallancey.39

By late December, John Bowring had received four petitions from Amoy, two from the brothers, one from the widow and the fourth from the mother of persons shot, calling on his intervention on behalf of innocent persons who lost their lives when the marines opened fire. Bowring asked John Backhouse for a formal report and suggested the fines levied on Syme and Cornabe be distributed among the families of the victims. So far, Backhouse had not reported Vallancey’s claim to Bowring and was, therefore, asked by the latter to send his advice.40 Bowring reported to Malmesbury on Vallancey’s claim and the Chinese petitions on December 27. In the latter case, he stated that under Chinese law such claims were rigidly enforced against Chinese who were the cause of the accidental death of others.41

John Backhouse replied in mid-February 1853. He said he had informed the petitioners that Her Majesty’s Government could in no way be held responsible. He was far from convinced of the innocence of those who had fallen victim. The marines only fired when it became absolutely necessary to protect their own lives as well as the property that they were stationed there to guard. If the victims had joined in the disturbance, their own temerity and that alone was to blame. Even if they had been spectators of an affray in which armed parties were opposed to each other, they should have been sensible to the danger that they

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38. For the minutes of the two interviews, see FO 228/153, Enclosures 9 and 10 in no. 14. See also FO 228/149, Enclosure 1 in no. 3, Fishbourne to Captain Massie, 15.12.1852.
40. For the petitions, see FO 228/903, pp. 149–50. The English translations are in FO 228/153, Enclosures 5–8 in no. 17.
The Acting Consul believed his decision was supported by the laws of his own country under similar circumstances. In the matter of the distribution of the amount of the fines among the relatives of the victims, he requested the cooperation of the Chinese authorities, but had not yet received any reply. Regarding Vallancey’s claim, Backhouse considered it to be exorbitant. He would be willing to support a more reasonable demand.\footnote{FO 228/153, Enclosure in no. 22, Backhouse to Bowring, 16.2.1853.}

The final decision on the case was not made immediately pending instructions from London and also because of the unstable local condition that in the latter part of the year led to an uprising and the six-month occupation of Amoy by a body of local rebels. In the dispatch of February 20, 1854 the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, inquired of John Bowring about developments in the case. In his dispatch of April 13, 1854, the latter directed the Consul in Amoy, D.B. Robertson, to investigate the facts of the case thoroughly, ascertain whether the injuries had been inflicted by Chinese soldiers, and how far Vallancey had exercised the necessary prudence in the situation. Having satisfied himself on these particulars, he might suggest the payment of a sum not exceeding 1,000 dollars as compensation. The Consul was empowered to threaten recovery of the sum by levying on the customs dues controlled by the Consulate.

In his reply, Consul Robertson cast some doubts on the claim. To determine who was responsible for the damage incurred, he found it necessary to examine the attendant circumstances. He said Vallancey had unfortunately ventured into the streets of the town at a moment at which there was great excitement among the people, arising from a general belief that British merchants had been engaged in kidnapping Chinese coolies to fill their ships. The visit was also made within an hour or so of a similar attack made on the persons of certain British merchants. Moreover, earlier in the same evening, Francis Darby Syme had rescued his coolie-broker from the hands of the Chinese authorities and had hence been indisputably involved in a fight. The situation made it dangerous for foreigners to go into the streets.

Having examined the records, Robertson found every witness cognisant of and admitting to their knowledge of the state of public excitement that existed at the time of and previous to the attack made on Vallancey, but in the voluminous documents he had not come across any inquiries being directed to the claimant asking whether he had been aware of it. His own statement led to the supposition that he landed and entered the town in complete ignorance of the troubled state of
Robertson found this statement rather improbable, taking into consideration the excitement that existed and that Vallancey was an officer on board one of the coolie ships, “which were shipping the cause of the dissatisfaction viz. the coolies”. If a person persisted in placing himself in danger, it must be upon his own responsibility, as neither Her Majesty’s Government nor the Chinese could guarantee security to life or property unless the person himself did all in his power to avoid or prevent danger to either.

Moreover, Vallancey appeared to found his claim on the assumptions that the injuries had been inflicted by Chinese soldiers. According to Robertson, “this may or may not have been the case”. Knowing the facility with which a Chinese mob could arm itself, the members might have been mistaken for military men by a stranger, but Robertson inclined to the belief that they were not so. Certainly, in the records, there was no evidence provided by any witness except by the claimant and his companion to prove or establish that fact. Even their own depositions did not throw much light on the subject.

Consul Robertson also thought that the timing of lodging the claim might not be appropriate. Since the local uprising in the past months, the Amoy authorities had been suffering a shortage of funds. On account of the stagnation of trade, no native customs duties had been received and the mandarins were greatly distressed. He feared that pressing the claim under such circumstances would be considered unfriendly by the mandarins. This would be very injurious to British permanent interests. Finally, he said, of the mandarins holding office at the time of the attack on Vallancey, only one was still in Amoy. He was the Hackwan (Customs Superintendent), whose duties were unconnected with the military or civil administration of the place.43

John Bowring concurred with Robertson’s observations and gave the latter directions not to put forward Vallancey’s claim for the present. The Foreign Secretary later also approved of Bowring’s suspension of the demand. Nevertheless, Clarendon asserted that the claim should not be abandoned, and it might perhaps be advisable to lodge it, but not to press it on the Chinese authorities.44 Consequently, at the end of the year, the case was brought up again with the Daotai by the British Consular authorities in Amoy for the purpose of “carrying out the spirit of the Earl of Clarendon’s directions”.45

43. FO 663/58, no. 29, Robertson to Bowring, 8.5.1854.
44. FO 228/164, no. 35, Bowring to Clarendon, 18.5.1854; and FO 228/ 169, no. 103, Clarendon to Bowring, 5.8.1854.
45. FO 663/58, no. 89, Parkes to Bowring, 30.12.1854.
British Self-appraisals

After his on-the-spot investigation, Harvey was able to piece together the picture and gave his appraisal of the affair. He began by responding to the causes of the riots. His report confirmed that the outbreak was attributable to Francis Darby Syme’s “unauthorized and irregular proceedings” and that some of the English merchants at Amoy were greatly to blame for the reckless manner in which coolies had been obtained. These merchants employed men of the lowest possible character to supply emigrants. Abuses, fraud, deception and, in some instances, kidnapping were the natural consequences of the premium paid for every man obtained. Harvey was also critical of what he thought “a disgusting and obnoxious shed”, or rather “barracoon”, in front of Syme’s Hong, built for the reception of coolies, or “what Mr. Syme calls ‘Applicants for Emigration’”. He saw this as a disgrace to the name and character of Britain in Amoy and impressed on John Bowring that he should apply every legal means to ensure its removal.

Another appraisal, that was even more sympathetic toward the Chinese, came from Captain Fishbourne. He said that, for some few months, the public mind had been festering under the accumulated wrongs perpetrated by savage Chinese brokers, with whom their employers were associated in the people’s thinking. The illegal interference of Francis Darby Syme to stay the course of justice undertaken by the authorities eventually sparked off a revolt at the instance of an indignant and outraged people. The people felt defeated in their legal remedy by the rescue of the broker. When they found out that the broker had hidden himself on Symes’ premises, they determined to take the law into their own hands.

Fishbourne also revealed that various meetings had been held by respectable citizens, at which attacking the English Hongs, the ships and other extreme measures were proposed. Significantly, such proposals were all rejected, as people were well aware that their triumph would only be short-lived, as steamers would be up from Hong Kong to avenge any attack upon persons or property. Eventually, they expressed their detestation of the prevailing coolie system by selecting the coolie shed as their target of attack. They partially demolished it and liberated its inmates.

In the Commander’s view, Francis Darby Syme “ought to be tried for misprision, if he were not prosecuted under the 2nd Clause of 6 & 7 Victoria, Cap. 98, of the Slave Act”. He found the moral perception of so many in the coolie trade to be so much impaired they were unable to see

46. FO 228/153, Enclosure 7 in no. 14, Harvey to Bowring, 22.12.1852.
they were violating the law as well as the commonest moralities. It was a forlorn hope to try to enlighten these coolie merchants. He personally saw a man escaping from Syme’s shed and being “chased by a set of barbarous harpies who seized him by the tail, arms, and legs, as if he had been a wild animal”. Fishbourne was especially critical of Syme’s defiant bearing in the Consular Court, saying that the latter showed no remorse at the thought of the deaths that had occurred. The captain continued, “if he (Syme) did not eventually embroil the two countries, he would eventually destroy all friendly relations between our people and the Chinese at Amoy”.47

Now, John Bowring was ready to make his first report on the affair of the Amoy riots to the Foreign Office. Bowring observed in his dispatch of December 27 that, “the public peace was seriously compromised, large amounts of property placed in jeopardy, and the amicable relations between the subjects of Great Britain and China likely to be interrupted by the misdoings of the instruments and agents engaged in the collection and exportation of Chinese labourers”. With reference to the barracoon in front of the foreign Hongs, he completely concurred with Harvey’s opinion that it must be demolished. He had desired a “private intimation to be given to Mr. Syme that he had better quietly remove this cause of offence, and I hope that this may be effectual”.48

On December 29, John Bowring stated his view to John Backhouse, saying that their merchants had been in the habit of disregarding and suspending the Consul’s authority, and had established direct intercourse with the mandarins independently of the Consulate. He saw this as one of the primary sources of mischief and one of the abuses that had taken place. Therefore, he instructed the Acting Consul to call the attention of the British community to the provisions of Article XIII of the General Regulations of Trade that stated:

(w)henever a British subject has reason to complain of a Chinese, he must first proceed to the Consulate and state his grievance...
If an English merchant has occasion to address the Chinese authorities, he shall send such address through the Consul, who will see that the language is becoming...

He required John Backhouse to enforce this regulation strictly by punishing any infraction. As to assaults, sometimes of a brutal character, being committed on Chinese subjects by British subjects, Bowring told Backhouse that:

47. FO 228/149, Enclosure 1 in no. 3, Fishbourne to Captain Massie, 21.12.1852.
The Amoy Riots of 1852

if, on the one hand, we call upon the Chinese authorities to punish their people for their offences against British persons and property, it is equally our duty to see that no outrages committed upon the subjects of China go unpunished.

The latter was then reminded of the power of summary jurisdiction, whereby the consular authorities had the means of enforcing the obligations of Treaties in this particular, and causing the law to be respected.49

It was also on this occasion that John Bowring commented on a protest note sent to the Chinese authorities by John Backhouse. On the morning of November 24, Backhouse found out that the broker, Lin Huan, was hiding in Syme’s Hong. He demanded Syme deliver the broker to him. On his way to the Consulate, Lin was intercepted and taken away by officials sent by the Marine Magistrate. Backhouse communicated a strong protest to Daotai Zhao against what he considered to be an act of great insult to the British government.50 Bowring, however, reminded the Acting Consul of the existing guidelines about the right of the British to abstract Chinese subjects from their own authorities and the authority of their own tribunals. He said it had been decided before by the Crown lawyers that they had no right to interfere in the legal authority that the Chinese government exercised over its subjects.51

In January 1853, John Backhouse reported to John Bowring from Amoy that, “affairs at this port have entirely resumed their former peaceful aspect, and that the foreign residents can, as heretofore, move amongst the native population without danger of molestation or insult”. He attributed the restoration of peace partly to “the inoffensive disposition of the inhabitants, who were aroused to a display of anger and indignation at the hardships to which they were undoubtedly submitted”. On account of the abuses of the coolie system, “even the most peaceful and forbearing will be excited to resistance and the endeavor to right their own wrongs”.52

The calmness of the situation was also attributed by John Backhouse to the disappearance of the main cause of excitement. From the outbreak of riots to the end of the year, only three vessels left Amoy with coolies. Other ships had proceeded to Nan’ao, another opium station, in the Shantou (Swatow) region, to pick up this cargo. By early January 1853, scarcely a single coolie was obtainable at Amoy. The local authorities had

49. FO 663/9, Bowring to Backhouse, 29.12.1852.
50. FO 663/57A, no. 23, Backhouse to Zhao, 25.11.1852.
51. FO 663/9, Bowring to Backhouse, 29.12.1852.
52. FO 683/10, no. 5, Backhouse to Bowring, 11.1.1853.
taken action to deter the brokers. The latter were forced to discontinue their malpractices under pain of severe punishment. However, voluntary emigrants to Singapore and Sydney still embarked from this port.

**The Limits of Local Diplomacy**

In analyzing the Amoy affair, the imperialism-versus-patriotism approach does not do much more than scratch the surface. Nevertheless, the image of the Chinese officials as being timid and incompetent in their conduct of local diplomacy is shown to be more a distortion than the whole truth. The event has to be seen both in its local context and in a broader perspective to convey a fuller picture.

The coolie emigration was conducted as a private enterprise that involved both Chinese and English parties. These agents were acting on their own initiative without permission from or the sponsorship of their respective authorities. The English merchants treated the emigrants as human cargo and conducted the business with unbridled entrepreneurship. Profit maximization, not ethics, governed their business policy and management.

Although Chinese law prohibited the outright emigration of its subjects to foreign countries, there was a practical limit to the arbitrary authority of the local government. In the first place, the officials did not have authority to negotiate for amendments to be made to the existing laws or treaties; on the contrary, they were bound and were required to abide by both. Nevertheless, when they encountered their British counterparts, they were able to stand on their dignity and argued firmly against the latter to insist upon the upholding of Chinese rights under the Treaty. Viewed from this angle, these officials performed their function reasonably and fairly. Moreover, as Winchester observes, in years of scarcity the population pressure occasioned great anxiety among the local authorities and often led to their disgrace; any disturbances that arose from famine were almost certainly attributed to their neglect or mismanagement. The mandarins were very well aware that emigration relieved the pressure of the surplus population on the supplies of food and hence took the opportunity to deport wild and lawless vagabonds to foreign lands; not to speak of the pecuniary interest that some Chinese officials always contrived to find in the continuance of a forbidden practice.\(^5\) The local authorities were also realistic enough to understand their limited capacity to stop such trade. Their duty and concern was the

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\(^5\) See fn. 1, note prepared by Winchester.
maintenance of law and order. They did intervene when crimes connected with the system persisted and then made arrests of the subordinate Chinese crimps and agents.

Realizing the practical constraints with which they were confronted, both the officials and the Amoy community acted with restraint and had no wish to let anti-foreignism influence their actions and excite further disturbances. A case in point was the occasion on November 25 when Acting Marine Magistrate Wang issued a proclamation “to reassure the native population, to calm all foreign merchants, and rigorously to prohibit ill-disposed persons from seeking occasion to foment disturbances”. He informed the general public that the broker, Lin Huan, had now been delivered up to justice and punished, hence all animosities were at an end and trade would proceed as before. Wang issued another proclamation two days later, prohibiting the unauthorized publication of placards, with a view of putting an end to “the circulation of fabricated tales, and the inflaming of men’s minds thereby”, so that “natives and foreigners reside together in Amoy in mutual peace and harmony”.54 As to the Amoy community, despite their great fury, the citizens made an effort to impose self-restraint on themselves and declared in their proclamation issued on November 23 that they did not want any dispute with the whole foreign community. Even the mob during the riots had its justified grievances and accordingly found its target in the persons who were thought to have connections with the abusive system.

On the British side, the consular authorities were fully aware of the illegality of the emigration being carried out. As John Bowring himself had pointed out to them, they as the Treaty enforcer in the port enjoyed the power of summary jurisdiction and had the means of enforcing the obligations set out in the Treaties and causing the law to be respected. Nevertheless, they did not have jurisdiction over other foreign vessels in the ports. Even the control of their own subjects often entangled them in diplomatic complications. For example, James Tait had “all the advantages and influence which his being Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese Consul gives him”.55 Consequently, the British officials could not take arbitrary initiatives to ease the appalling abuses of the coolie exportation and even thought it inadvisable to do anything about it without instructions from their superiors. Not surprisingly, they chose to connive in the ongoing situation, although they felt strongly about the evils being perpetrated.

54. Wang’s two proclamations are in FO 220/903, pp. 146–7. The English translations of these documents are provided in FO 228/153, Enclosures 13 and 14 in no.14.
55. FO 228/153, no. 5, Bowring to Malmesbury, 3.8.1852.
The British authorities in Hong Kong were also faced with the dilemma occasioned between suppressing and condoning the abuses of the coolie system. Their initial reaction had been sluggish until the outbreak of the riots that they could no longer ignore.

The moral sentiments and tenets held by the British officials on the China coast in this incident were genuine and admirable, but they eventually had to give way to considerations of broader British interests. While the British authorities in Hong Kong and Amoy were carrying out a post-mortem on the Amoy affair and indulging in an earnest self-examination, John Bowring was required to ponder upon the policy implications of a dispatch, dated October 20, from the Earl of Malmesbury on the subject of promoting the immigration of Chinese laborers to British Guiana and Trinidad or other West Indian colonies. At this juncture, the Colonial and Foreign Offices decided to appoint a government emigration officer to superintend the procedure and ensure the best selection of laborers.

To justify their engagement in the exportation of coolies, the British government argued that a very extensive emigration had been taking place from China for some time and that the Chinese government had not taken steps to enforce the law or to intervene in the emigration that was actually taking place. The British government had not forgotten its principles that no official agent should organize a system in opposition to the laws of the land within the territory of a friendly state but, in the question of emigration from China, the British government justified an exception to the general rule by arguing that the Chinese prohibition law was dormant, or at the very least a tacit consent was given to its violation. Under such circumstances, the British government viewed it to be its duty to place the emigration system on a healthy footing and the Chinese authorities could not consider themselves justified in raising objections to a measure that was to the advantage of the Chinese emigrants and to prevent the recurrence of the lamentable conditions on board emigrant vessels.

Still, even at this point in time, the British government hoped to avoid a head-on clash with its Chinese counterpart, not to speak of the undesirability of having the coolie issue as the source of conflict. Therefore, it imposed the guideline that, should the Chinese government resolve to adopt a new course and enforce its then inoperative law against emigration from the ports to which the British had access by Treaty, the British Consuls at such ports were bound to act in strict conformity with the Treaty and not in any way aid or abet the shipment of Chinese subjects destined for British colonies. In such a case, the operations of the agent must be restricted to the British territory of Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the
Foreign Office was quick to add if Chinese subjects should, of their own free will, risk the penalty and embark, without the aid of the Consul or of the agent, for any place within the British dominions, the Consul was not bound either to prevent, or even to be ostensibly cognizant of such acts for it was the duty of the Chinese government to enforce its own laws. This situation had certainly created a difficult dilemma for John Bowring to do with the shipment of coolies from ports and places, principally the opium stations, in which, under Article IV of the Supplementary Treaty, the British were prohibited from trading. He saw the Treaties as part and parcel of the law of England. Therefore, it became a matter how far they might be authorized to allow or sanction the violation of their own engagements.

However, there was not the slightest doubt that, whatever the rhetorical or moral and legalistic concerns were, when the different considerations clashed, morals and legality gave way to national interests. At this point, inconsistencies, double standards and hypocrisy crept into the actions of the British authorities. The British government and its officials stationed in China always stood firm throughout on the question of protecting their subjects and interests. They were never slow to show force and use threats to achieve their purposes. Hence their actions were no longer guided merely by morals and legality. Understandably, in the eyes of the Chinese officials and the citizens in Amoy, this was clear evidence that the British authorities were interested only in protecting their “crooked” coolie traders and the abusive system and showed no respect for the Chinese laws.

56. For the British policy directives as explained above, see FO 228/139, no. 67, Malmesbury to Bowring, 20.10.1852. For Bowring's responses, sec FO 228/153, no. 12, Bowring to Malmesbury, 20.12.1852 and Enclosure in the above, circular to Her Majesty's Consuls in China, 16.12.1852.