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Chinese Migrant Labor and Cocoa Cultivation in Colonial Samoa and Vanuatu: A Historical Analysis of Plantation Economies

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Abstract: This article presents a historical analysis of the pivotal role played by Chinese migrant labor in the development of cocoa cultivation within the colonial plantation economies of Samoa and Vanuatu during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing upon a range of primary and secondary sources, this study examines the motivations behind the introduction of Chinese indentured workers, the conditions under which they labored, and their significant, yet often overlooked, contributions to the expansion of the global cocoa commodity chain. The research contextualizes these specific Pacific instances within the broader historical phenomena of commodity frontiers, the evolution of coerced labor systems post-slavery, and the global movement of Asian migrant workers. By delineating the recruitment practices, daily lives, and socio-economic impacts of Chinese laborers in these distinct colonial settings, this article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between imperial ambitions, global market demands, and the human cost of tropical agricultural expansion in the Pacific.

Keywords: Chinese migrant labor, cocoa cultivation, plantation economies, colonial Samoa, colonial Vanuatu, labor migration, Pacific colonial history, indentured labor, agricultural history, imperial economics.

Introduction: The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a dramatic expansion of global commodity frontiers, profoundly transforming rural landscapes and labor systems across the world [1, 2]. As industrializing nations sought raw materials and new markets, tropical agriculture became a cornerstone of imperial economies, driving the establishment of vast plantations for crops such as sugar, coffee, and cocoa [2]. This expansion frequently relied on various forms of coerced labor, evolving from chattel slavery to new systems of indentured servitude and other unfree labor arrangements, particularly after the formal abolition of slavery [5, 6, 7]. The Pacific Islands, with their fertile lands and strategic locations, became integral to this global economic reordering, drawing in diverse populations of migrant workers to fuel their emerging plantation sectors [16, 17].

Among the commodities that experienced significant global growth during this period was cocoa. Driven by increasing demand for chocolate in European and North American markets, cocoa cultivation expanded rapidly from its traditional Latin American strongholds into new colonial territories in Africa and the Pacific [4, 21, 22]. This shift often necessitated the establishment of large-scale plantations, which, in turn, created an insatiable demand for a reliable and exploitable labor force [3, 22].

Within this broader historical context, the recruitment and deployment of Chinese migrant labor emerged as a significant, albeit controversial, solution to the labor shortages faced by colonial enterprises worldwide [7, 8]. Often referred to as the "coolie trade," this system

involved the movement of millions of Chinese workers under various contractual arrangements to plantations, mines, and infrastructure projects across the Americas, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific [8, 9, 10, 12, 14]. The nature of this labor—whether it constituted "free labor" or a form of "neo-slavery"—has been a subject of extensive historical debate [12].

This article focuses specifically on the experiences of Chinese migrant laborers in the cocoa plantations of colonial Samoa and Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides). While the broader history of indentured labor in the Pacific is well-documented [17], the particular contributions and conditions of Chinese workers in the cocoa sectors of these two distinct island groups warrant closer examination. Samoa, under German colonial administration, and Vanuatu, under the Anglo-French Condominium, offer contrasting yet complementary case studies of how imperial powers utilized Chinese labor to cultivate a globally significant commodity.

The primary objective of this study is to:

1. Trace the historical development of cocoa cultivation in colonial Samoa and Vanuatu.
2. Analyze the reasons for the recruitment of Chinese migrant labor to these plantations.
3. Detail the recruitment processes, living conditions, and working experiences of Chinese laborers.
4. Assess the impact of Chinese labor on the growth and profitability of the cocoa industry in these Pacific territories.
5. Contextualize these specific cases within the broader global history of commodity frontiers and coerced labor.

By shedding light on this often-marginalized aspect of Pacific colonial history, this article seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex human geographies and economic transformations wrought by global capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Pacific Plantation Economies and Migrant Labor

To understand the specific dynamics of Chinese labor in cocoa cultivation in Samoa and Vanuatu, it is essential to situate these cases within the broader historical scholarship on global commodity frontiers, labor systems, and the expansion of the cocoa industry.

2.1 Global Commodity Frontiers and Labor Systems

The concept of "commodity frontiers" describes the geographical and social expansion of commodity production into new territories, often accompanied by profound transformations of local ecologies and labor relations [1, 2]. This process, a hallmark of global capitalism, necessitated the mobilization of vast labor forces, particularly in tropical regions where European capital sought to exploit land and resources for export-oriented agriculture [1, 2].

Following the abolition of chattel slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and subsequently in other colonial powers, new forms of labor coercion emerged to sustain the burgeoning plantation economies [5, 6]. Historians have extensively documented the transition from chattel slavery to various systems of "unfree labor," including indentured servitude, sharecropping, and forced labor, which often maintained exploitative conditions reminiscent of slavery [6, 12, 13]. Sidney Mintz's seminal work on sugar, for instance, highlights how the global demand for commodities like sugar historically drove the development of coercive labor regimes [2]. Similarly, Kris Manjapra emphasizes the "global travel of agricultural racial capitalism," where plantation models, built on racialized labor exploitation, were replicated across continents [1].

The demand for labor on these expanding commodity frontiers led to massive intercontinental migrations. Indian indentured laborers, known as "coolies," were transported to the Caribbean, Fiji, and other parts of the British Empire [13]. Simultaneously, Chinese laborers were recruited to work in diverse locations, from the sugar fields of Cuba and Trinidad to the gold mines of California and Australia, and various plantations across Southeast Asia and the Pacific [8, 10, 12]. The "Coolie Question" became a significant international and domestic political issue, revolving around the contractual nature of this labor, the conditions of recruitment and passage, and the often brutal realities of their lives on plantations [7, 8, 9, 14]. Lisa Yun's work on Chinese indentured laborers in Cuba, and Mae Ngai's analysis of the "Chinese Question" in global politics, underscore the complex legal, economic, and social dimensions of this global labor phenomenon [8].

2.2 Cocoa as a Colonial Commodity

Cocoa, derived from the Theobroma cacao tree, has a long history as a prized commodity, but its global significance as a mass-produced item surged in the late 19th century with advancements in chocolate manufacturing and rising consumer demand in Europe and North America [4, 21]. William Gervase Clarence-Smith's comprehensive histories of cocoa and chocolate detail this expansion [4, 22].

Initially, cocoa cultivation was often the domain of smallholders, particularly in West Africa [3, 22].

However, as demand intensified, colonial powers sought to establish large-scale plantations to ensure consistent supply and exert greater control over production [22]. This shift from smallholder-dominated production to a plantation model, particularly in new colonial territories, created a significant demand for labor that indigenous populations could not always meet or were unwilling to provide under colonial terms [22, 24, 25]. Core Ross highlights this "plantation paradigm" in the global cocoa boom [22]. Early attempts to cultivate cocoa in places like Brazil also relied on various forms of coerced labor, including slavery [4]. The expansion into the Pacific, therefore, was part of this broader global trend of establishing new cocoa frontiers [34].

2.3 Chinese Indentured Labor in the Pacific

While Chinese migrant labor was a global phenomenon, its presence in the Pacific Islands, particularly in the context of plantation agriculture, has received specific scholarly attention. However, comprehensive studies focusing exclusively on Chinese labor in cocoa cultivation in Samoa and Vanuatu remain less prominent compared to broader analyses of other migrant groups or other commodities within the region [16, 17].

The Australian colonies, for instance, were early participants in the broader Pacific labor trade, including the debate over Chinese laborers [14, 15]. Historians like Miriam Meyerhoff and Ben Featuna'i Liua'ana have documented the presence of Tonkinese (Vietnamese) migrant labor in Vanuatu and Chinese fortunes in Samoa, respectively, providing crucial foundational work [16]. These studies often touch upon the challenges faced by these laborers, including issues of repatriation and integration into colonial societies [16].

The literature thus establishes a clear need to integrate the specific experiences of Chinese laborers in Samoan and Vanuatuan cocoa plantations into the larger narratives of global commodity chains and colonial labor systems. This study aims to bridge this gap by providing a focused historical analysis of this particular intersection of labor, commodity, and empire in the Pacific.

METHODOLOGY

Historical Research and Archival Analysis

This study employs a qualitative, historical research design to investigate the role of Chinese migrant labor in cocoa cultivation in colonial Samoa and Vanuatu. The methodology is primarily based on the systematic collection, critical evaluation, and interpretation of both primary and secondary historical sources. The aim is to reconstruct the historical context, conditions, and impacts of this specific labor migration and its contribution to the colonial plantation economies of the Pacific.

3.1 Research Design

The research design is fundamentally interpretive and analytical, seeking to provide a nuanced understanding of a complex historical phenomenon. It is not designed to test hypotheses quantitatively but rather to explore, describe, and explain the historical processes and experiences. The comparative element between Samoa and Vanuatu allows for the identification of both common patterns and unique characteristics shaped by different colonial administrations and local conditions.

3.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from a variety of historical sources, categorized as follows:

1. Archival Sources:

o German Colonial Archives: Extensive use was made of documents from the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, Germany, which houses records pertaining to German colonial administration in Samoa. These include official reports on cocoa cultivation, labor regulations, correspondence concerning Chinese laborers, and economic statistics [30, 37, 45]. These records provide crucial insights into colonial policies, labor management strategies, and official perspectives on the challenges and successes of the cocoa industry.

o United Nations Archives: Relevant documents from the United Nations Archives in Geneva were consulted, particularly those related to trade statistics and colonial reports for territories like New Guinea, which offer comparative data and broader regional context for cocoa exports and labor [36, 38].

o Other Colonial Records: Where available, records pertaining to the Anglo-French Condominium in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) were examined to understand labor policies and economic activities in that territory [35].

2. Colonial Reports and Publications:

o Official Reports: Technical papers and annual reports published by colonial administrations and agricultural departments provided detailed information on cocoa cultivation techniques, production volumes, economic value, and labor conditions [26, 35]. Examples include Urquhart's technical paper on cocoa growing in Western Samoa [26].

o Contemporary Newspapers and Periodicals: Historical newspapers from Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific (e.g., Daily Telegraph, New Zealand

Herald, Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser, Samoa Weekly Herald, Morning Bulletin, Mercury, Telegraph) were invaluable for capturing contemporary public discourse, advertisements for labor, reports on plantation activities, and local events related to labor and trade [14, 27, 28, 33, 36, 37, 42, 43, 49, 50, 57, 58, 59, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70]. These sources often provide anecdotal evidence and local perspectives that official reports might omit.

o Travelogues and Memoirs: Accounts by colonial officials, planters, and visitors (e.g., H.J. Moors's With Stevenson in Samoa, Richard Deeken's Manuia Samoa!) offered personal observations on plantation life, labor conditions, and the social environment [29, 44, 49, 74].

3. Secondary Sources:

o Scholarly Monographs and Journal Articles: Extensive use was made of existing academic literature on global commodity chains [1], colonial labor history [6, 7, 8, 13], Pacific history [16, 17, 18, 19, 39, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75], and the history of cocoa [4, 21, 22]. These sources provided essential historical context, theoretical frameworks, and interpretations of primary data. Key works include those by Holger Droessler on Samoan colonialism [17, 18, 39, 41], Ben Featuna'i Liua'ana on Chinese in Samoa [16], and Dorothy Shineberg on labor in New Caledonia and Vanuatu [59, 61].

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were subjected to thematic content analysis and historical contextualization. This involved:

- Close Reading: Meticulous reading of primary sources to identify key themes, patterns, and specific details related to Chinese labor, cocoa cultivation, and colonial administration.
- Cross-Referencing: Verifying information across multiple sources to establish reliability and identify discrepancies. For instance, comparing official reports with newspaper accounts to gain a more complete picture.
- Contextualization: Placing specific events and conditions within broader historical narratives of colonialism, global capitalism, and labor migration. This involved understanding the economic pressures, political ideologies, and social hierarchies that shaped the experiences of Chinese laborers.
- Comparative Approach: Systematically comparing the findings from Samoa and Vanuatu to highlight similarities and differences in labor recruitment, conditions, and outcomes, and to explore how distinct colonial regimes influenced these processes.
- Critical Interpretation: Analyzing sources with an awareness of potential biases inherent in colonial records (e.g., official reports often downplaying harsh conditions) and interpreting them in light of subaltern perspectives where possible.

By employing this rigorous methodology, the study aims to provide a well-substantiated and nuanced historical account of Chinese migrant labor's role in the cocoa plantation economies of colonial Samoa and Vanuatu.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chinese Labor and Cocoa Plantations in Samoa and Vanuatu

The analysis of historical sources reveals distinct yet interconnected narratives regarding the establishment of cocoa plantations and the reliance on Chinese migrant labor in colonial Samoa and Vanuatu. Both territories, driven by global demand for tropical commodities, sought to expand their agricultural output, leading to complex labor dynamics under their respective colonial administrations.

4.1 The Rise of Cocoa in Colonial Samoa

Samoa, particularly under German colonial rule (1900-1914), became a significant site for cocoa cultivation in the Pacific [26, 39]. German colonial ambitions in the Pacific were driven by economic interests, including the desire to secure raw materials for the burgeoning German industries [52]. While copra (dried coconut meat) was traditionally the primary export, cocoa emerged as a highly profitable alternative due to its increasing global demand and higher value [26, 31, 32]. By 1951, cocoa beans from Samoa were significantly more valuable per ton than copra, highlighting its economic importance [32].

Early attempts at cocoa cultivation in Samoa date back to the late 19th century, with figures like H.J. Moors, a prominent American trader in Apia, noting the potential for cocoa in the Samoan climate [29, 44, 45]. The German administration actively promoted cocoa planting, recognizing its lucrative potential [27, 28, 30]. Plantations were established by both large German firms, such as the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft der Südsee Inseln zu Hamburg (DHPG), and smaller European planters [52, 67]. The climate and soil of Samoa proved highly suitable for Theobroma cacao, leading to optimistic projections for the industry [43, 57].

However, a persistent challenge for these expanding plantations was securing a consistent and compliant labor force. Indigenous Samoans, with their strong communal land tenure systems and subsistence economies, generally resisted working for wages on

colonial plantations [51, 53, 71]. Their participation was often sporadic or limited, as they preferred to work their own lands or engage in traditional activities [39, 42]. This labor shortage became a critical impediment to the full realization of Samoa's agricultural potential [52]. Early attempts to import labor from other Pacific islands, such as the Gilbertese (from Kiribati), also proved problematic due to high mortality rates and resistance [55]. This context set the stage for the introduction of Chinese indentured labor.

4.2 Chinese Labor Recruitment and Conditions in Samoa

The decision to import Chinese laborers into German Samoa was a direct response to the chronic labor shortages on cocoa and copra plantations [52, 73, 74]. Governor Wilhelm Solf, the German governor of Samoa from 1900 to 1914, initially resisted the idea, fearing social disruption, but eventually conceded to the planters' demands [74, 75]. The first contingent of Chinese laborers arrived in Samoa in 1903, marking a significant shift in the colony's labor demographics [73].

The recruitment process for Chinese laborers, often referred to as the "coolie trade," was fraught with controversy and exploitation globally [7, 8, 9]. While officially presented as voluntary contractual agreements (indenture), the reality often bordered on coercion or "neo-slavery," characterized by debt bondage, deceptive recruitment practices, and harsh conditions [12]. Chinese laborers for Samoa were typically recruited from southern China, particularly from areas affected by poverty and instability, through a network of brokers and agents [8, 10].

Upon arrival in Samoa, Chinese laborers were assigned to plantations, where they worked primarily in cocoa cultivation, as well as copra production and general plantation maintenance. Their contracts typically stipulated a fixed term of service (e.g., three to five years) in exchange for passage, wages, food, and accommodation [16, 52]. However, the reality of their living and working conditions was often grim.

- Wages and Debt: Wages were low, and laborers often found themselves in a cycle of debt due to advances and deductions for supplies [12].
- Housing and Food: Accommodation was basic, often overcrowded barracks, and food rations were sometimes inadequate, leading to malnutrition and disease [16].
- Workload: The work was arduous, involving clearing land, planting cocoa seedlings, weeding, harvesting pods, and processing beans [43, 64]. Cocoa cultivation, particularly the delicate process of fermentation and drying, required careful and consistent labor [20].
- Discipline and Control: Planters and overseers maintained strict discipline, often resorting to corporal punishment and other forms of coercion [19, 53, 54]. The colonial legal system offered little protection to the laborers [19].
- Social Isolation: The Chinese laborers were overwhelmingly male, leading to severe gender imbalances and social isolation, with limited opportunities for family life or integration into Samoan society [16].
- Resistance: Despite the harsh conditions, laborers often found ways to resist, including desertion, work slowdowns, and occasional uprisings [53, 54]. Robert Louis Stevenson, who lived in Samoa, documented the social tensions and conflicts of the period, including those related to labor [54].

The number of Chinese laborers in Samoa fluctuated but was substantial. By 1913, there were 2,184 Chinese laborers in German Samoa [73]. Their presence was crucial for the expansion of cocoa production, which saw significant growth during the German period [30, 31]. The Chinese laborers were instrumental in transforming vast tracts of land into productive cocoa estates, contributing directly to Samoa's economic output. However, their contribution came at a significant human cost, reflecting the exploitative nature of colonial agricultural capitalism [1, 18]. The majority of Chinese laborers were eventually repatriated after their contracts expired, with the last repatriation ship leaving in 1948 [16].

4.3 Cocoa Expansion and Labor in Colonial Vanuatu

Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, presented a different colonial context, being governed by an Anglo-French Condominium from 1906, a unique dual administration that often led to jurisdictional complexities and inefficiencies [35, 59]. Despite this, agricultural development, including cocoa, was pursued. Cocoa cultivation in the New Hebrides was noted as early as the late 19th century, with reports of its potential [33, 34]. French settlers, in particular, were active in establishing plantations [35].

Similar to Samoa, labor was a persistent challenge in Vanuatu. The Condominium initially relied on various sources of labor, including local Melanesians and other Pacific Islanders, as well as indentured laborers from Tonkin (French Indochina, modern-day Vietnam) [16, 59, 60]. The Australian-Pacific indentured labor trade, which involved the recruitment of Islanders to work in Queensland and Fiji, also influenced labor dynamics in Vanuatu [60].

While Chinese laborers were a significant presence in

other parts of the Pacific and Southeast Asia, their direct role in the cocoa plantations of Vanuatu appears to have been less prominent compared to Samoa or the Tonkinese laborers [16, 59]. The French, with their colonial ties to Indochina, prioritized the recruitment of Tonkinese workers for their plantations in the New Hebrides [16]. However, the broader context of labor migration and the "Coolie Question" was certainly relevant to the region [8, 14]. The conditions faced by Tonkinese laborers in Vanuatu were also harsh, marked by high mortality rates and exploitation, reflecting the broader patterns of coerced labor in colonial plantation systems [16, 59].

Cocoa production in Vanuatu, while not reaching the same scale as in Samoa during the German era, steadily grew, contributing to the islands' export economy [35, 36]. The demand from chocolate manufacturers, including British firms like Cadbury, influenced the growth of cocoa cultivation in the broader Pacific region, including Vanuatu [36]. The challenges of labor, land, and colonial administration continued to shape the development of the cocoa industry in the New Hebrides.

4.4 Comparative Analysis and Broader Implications

Comparing the experiences of Chinese laborers in Samoa and the broader labor dynamics in Vanuatu reveals both commonalities and distinctions within the framework of global commodity frontiers and colonial agricultural capitalism.

Similarities:

- Labor Scarcity: Both colonial administrations faced chronic labor shortages due to the unwillingness of indigenous populations to engage in plantation wage labor under exploitative conditions [51, 53].
- Reliance on Migrant Labor: Both territories resorted to importing migrant labor to sustain their plantation economies, reflecting a global pattern of labor mobilization for tropical agriculture [7, 13, 16].
- Harsh Conditions: Regardless of the origin of the indentured laborers (Chinese, Gilbertese, Tonkinese), the conditions on colonial plantations were generally characterized by low wages, poor living standards, strict discipline, and limited rights [16, 19, 55, 59].
- Economic Motivation: The expansion of cocoa cultivation in both regions was primarily driven by the increasing global demand for chocolate and the high profitability of the commodity [4, 21, 22, 32].

Differences:

- Colonial Administration: German Samoa's centralized and often authoritarian administration facilitated the large-scale importation and control of Chinese labor [52, 74]. In contrast, Vanuatu's Anglo-French Condominium led to a more fragmented and often less efficient labor policy, with French planters favoring Tonkinese labor due to existing colonial ties [35, 16].
- Scale of Chinese Labor: Chinese labor played a more direct and numerically significant role in the cocoa industry of German Samoa compared to Vanuatu, where other migrant groups were more prominent in the early 20th century [16, 73].
- Focus of Production: While both cultivated cocoa, Samoa's cocoa industry under German rule became particularly renowned for its quality and quantity, becoming a major export alongside copra [30, 31, 32].

The experiences in Samoa and Vanuatu underscore how the global demand for commodities like cocoa fueled a complex and often brutal system of labor migration. The "Coolie Question" in Samoa, and similar debates surrounding Tonkinese labor in Vanuatu, highlight the racialized nature of agricultural capitalism, where non-European laborers were often seen as disposable and subjected to conditions reminiscent of slavery [1, 6, 12]. The economic benefits of this system flowed primarily to colonial powers and European planters, while the human cost was borne by the migrant laborers and, indirectly, by the indigenous populations whose lands and resources were exploited [18]. The long-term impact of these labor systems includes the shaping of demographic patterns, social structures, and economic dependencies in these Pacific island nations.

CONCLUSION

This historical analysis has illuminated the critical, yet often under-recognized, role of Chinese migrant labor in the development of cocoa cultivation within the colonial plantation economies of Samoa and Vanuatu. Driven by the escalating global demand for chocolate and the persistent labor shortages in the Pacific, colonial administrations and European planters systematically recruited and exploited Chinese indentured workers to transform these islands into productive commodity frontiers.

In German Samoa, Chinese laborers became the backbone of a burgeoning cocoa industry, contributing significantly to the colony's economic output. Their recruitment, often under coercive conditions, and their arduous lives on plantations epitomized the broader global patterns of coerced labor that emerged in the wake of chattel slavery. Despite the harsh realities of low wages, poor living conditions, and strict discipline, these laborers were instrumental in establishing and maintaining the cocoa estates that generated

substantial profits for colonial enterprises.

While Chinese labor was less numerically dominant in colonial Vanuatu, the challenges of labor supply and the reliance on other migrant groups, such as the Tonkinese, reflected similar underlying dynamics of colonial exploitation driven by global commodity demands. The distinct administrative structures of German Samoa and the Anglo-French Condominium in Vanuatu influenced the specific modalities of labor recruitment and control, yet the fundamental objective of securing cheap and pliable labor for tropical agriculture remained consistent.

The experiences of Chinese migrant laborers in the Pacific cocoa industry serve as a poignant reminder of the human cost of global capitalism's expansion. Their stories are integral to understanding the complex interplay between imperial ambitions, the transformation of global countrysides, and the enduring legacies of racialized labor systems. These historical processes not only shaped the economic fortunes of colonial powers but also profoundly impacted the social, demographic, and environmental landscapes of Samoa and Vanuatu.

Future research could delve deeper into the micro-histories of specific plantations, providing more granular details about the daily lives and forms of resistance among Chinese laborers. Comparative studies with other Asian migrant groups across different Pacific commodities could further illuminate regional variations in labor systems. Additionally, exploring the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts of these labor migrations on both the migrant communities and the host indigenous populations would offer valuable insights into the enduring legacies of colonialism in the Pacific.

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