

Examining Chinese Diaspora from a Transcultural Perspective: The Case of Chinese Migration to Latin America in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This paper retraces the history of early Chinese migration to Latin America and examines its relations to the global evolution of human rights and humanitarianism in the nineteenth century. As the abolitionist movement succeeded in Europe and the Americas, African slaves were no longer legal or commercially viable for business owners in Latin America. In the cases of Cuba and Peru, the result was an increasing demand for Chinese coolies in plantations, railway construction, guano mines, and other labor-intensive industries. Nevertheless, the coolies received similar maltreatments at the hands of their masters as African slaves previously did; their unfortunate stories eventually caused an international outcry in the printed media. Based on archival materials and newspapers published in Chinese, English, and Spanish, this paper argues that the plight suffered by the Chinese coolies was instrumental in developing some global standards of labor rights. This event also witnessed a critical convergence of the ideas of humanitarianism between China and the West during the nineteenth century.