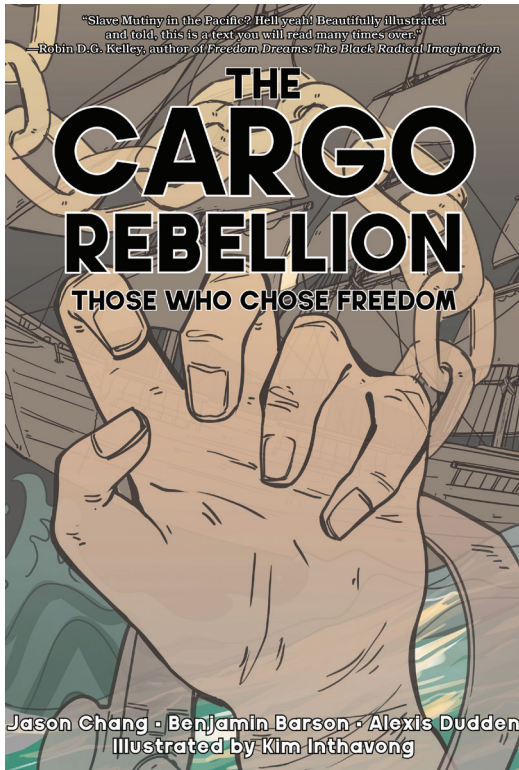




THE CARGO REBELLION: THOSE WHO CHOSE FREEDOM

By Jason Chang, Benjamin Barson, Alexis Dudden, and Kim Inthavong (illustrator). Oakland: PM Press, 2023

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The Cargo Rebellion: Those Who Chose Freedom is the story of mutiny by indentured laborers on board the American ship *Robert Bowne* in 1852. Through this event, the book examines Asian immigration to the Americas as indentured laborers following the 1833 end of African enslavement in the English Caribbean and South America. Employing a unique format of graphic novel followed by three scholarly articles, *The Cargo Rebellion* recalibrates accepted histories of Asians in the Western Hemisphere from California to Latin America and the Caribbean with respect to time of arrival, type of immigration, narratives of personal agency, and relationship to the racialized society of the West.

A slim volume, *The Cargo Rebellion*, like PM Press's other publications *The Day the Klan Came to Town* and *Maroon: Origins and Destinies*, hews closely to the publisher's credo as an "independent, radical publisher of books and media to educate, entertain and inspire." As an illustrated work, *The Cargo Rebellion* draws readers into its pages via an entertaining medium that resonates across generations. Read further, and the depth of primary source information and rigorous scholarship that form the underpinnings of this book become immediately clear.

The brilliance of *The Cargo Rebellion* is its artful, multilevelled access points to a complex and undertold aspect of Asian and Asian American history. Opening with the simple yet loaded truth that in the 19th century American capitalism—and the global economy of which it was an integral part—depended on the “disposable” human labor of the enslaved to such an extent that, with the end of slavery, new victims for the forced labor economy were desperately sought. This new workforce was found among indentured laborers from Asia and South Asia who putatively signed work contracts of their own free will—a questionable concept given the stranglehold and coercion that came with British imperialism in these regions. Many of the ships’ captains and contract agents plying the cargo of indentured laborers whom they called “coolies”—a derisive term that retains its sting even today—were nothing more than rebranded slavers who used retrofitted slave ships and the same brutal methods to “break” their indentured cargo as they had used with enslaved Africans less than a decade before.

Just as on slave ships throughout the tenure of the Atlantic trade, mutiny was not uncommon on the so-called “coolie” ships. *The Cargo Rebellion* provides a list of mutineers on ships from 1850 to 1872 in its opening pages. But the book is focused on the specific mutiny on the *Robert Bowne*. Its passengers believed it was bound for California but it was likely headed for the guano mines in Chincha, Peru, where ammonia produced by bird dung harvested for fertilizer killed two-thirds of the indentured laborers sent there. Learning their fate, and enervated by their inhumane treatment on board ship, the Chinese men aboard the *Robert Bowne* revolted and killed the ship’s captain. What followed would become the basis for an unusual international incident revolving around the recapture of survivors, survivors at large on the island near which the ship foundered, and the American desire to hush up what amounted to a new and illegal type of human trade.

The graphic novel portion of *The Cargo Rebellion* does an excellent job at distilling the many complex details of the Bowne Rebellion in an easily digestible format. Three scholarly pieces at the end of the book—by Alexis Dudden, Jason Chang, and Benjamin Barson, respectively—examine the details of the mutiny and legal arguments for and against the mutineers; a guide as to how Asian immigration to the Americas must be retaught considering indenture; and the impact of Chinese musical culture in formerly enslaved communities of 19th-century Louisiana. Using the story of indentured servitude, *The Cargo Rebellion* draws parallels to human trafficking that has continued through history to the present day. Rich citations offer opportunities for further exploration for scholars of maritime history, enslavement, and indenture, as well as for those who study liberation movements. *The Cargo Rebellion* is suitable for use in secondary school classrooms as part of a more holistic examination of the Asian presence in the western hemisphere.