In this study, the author examines the movement of labour to the Transvaal gold mines, primarily from the Kuangtung province in south China and from Shantung and Chihli in the north. In 31 shipments between 1904 and 1906, 63,000 labourers were acquired, although many more were recruited before final acceptance and embarkation. The scale of the operation and the organization and rationale behind it are richly dealt with in this dense and scrupulously researched study. The work is significant for its pioneering and comprehensive documentation of the rigorous process by which the labour markets in China were tapped for capitalist enterprise in South Africa. It is also interesting for the author’s treatment of the subject. For, despite the evident richness of the phenomenon investigated as source for social commentary, this is not a work of social history. As Richardson notes: “The almost consistent reiteration of batches, schedules, ratios and prices is unfortunately the language of commoditised labour... The more overtly human... elements have deliberately been minimized to understand the wider process”. What emerges is a history of the state as active mediator in the accumulation process, by which a largely peasant population (prompted by professional recruiters, at times monopolistically organized) are temporarily separated from their parcellized holdings through rural poverty, debt bondage and temporary closure of the labour market (in the north), and where intermediaries in the recruiting process are unscrupulous, by extortion and fraud. The process helps to place the mine-owners’ intervention in the Chinese labour markets in the context of the cost constraints which affected their industry.

The postwar crisis of 1901-4, which manifested itself in a shortage of unskilled labour, inflated production costs and escalating wage rates, is seen as the motivating factor behind the “Chinese experiment”. Simultaneously this crisis threatened the industry’s (migrant) labour system and increased the production costs of gold, a commodity whose price was fixed by international agreement. Since technological and geological constraints restricted economies of scale in mining at the time, and the static price of gold precluded the transferring of costs to the consumer, the extension of the migrant system to the mainland of China was a crucial exercise to sustain profitability. Richardson’s discussion of this response is convincing and notable for its single-mindedness in retaining the Chinese venture at the centre of his study. The historical debate over the genesis of the war, the debates preceding the search for Chinese labour, and the incorporation by the employers of white miners in preferential wage and work practices—all these are swept aside without damage to the central argument in order to illuminate the mineowners’ calculated thrust into China.

Richardson’s grasp of the complex issues in the Transvaal and in China, his emphasis on the crucial factors of cost control and state action, and his painstaking documentation, make the work of singular historiographical importance. The text is occasionally repetitious and the reading slow, but the result is wholly rewarding.

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