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Despite international protests against bonded labor, the flow of indentured laborers during the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries was extensive compared to the earlier centuries. The focus of this article is on the particularity of the “Chinese coolies experiment” in South Africa’s gold mining industry which commenced in 1904. This 20th-century episode of indentured labor is notable for several reasons, and it serves as a springboard for the discussion of some fundamental issues in capitalist development, labor and identity formation. This article emphasizes the last, examining how a “Chinese” identity was formed through the development of the gold fields and, in turn, how this formation reinforced a nascent white labor aristocracy. It discusses two dimensions of this labor “experiment” in South Africa: (1) the heady debate on the decision to look to China for cheap labor and (2) desertion by the indentured Chinese laborers from various mining compounds in the Witwatersrand.

In 1903, one year following Britain’s annexation of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony (or Free State), and one year preceding the actual importation of indentured laborers from China (also referred to as “Chinese coolies” and “Chinamen”), the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association commissioned an investigation to ascertain the prospects of recruiting “Asiatic” labor for mining work in the Transvaal (Sacks 1967: 34; Skinner 1903; Worsfold 1913: 300–301). Mr. H. Ross Skinner was appointed to proceed to California, British Columbia,
the Malay Peninsula and China (especially Hong Kong, Canton, Swatow, Amoy, Foochow, Shanghai, Chefoo, Tientsing, and Tongshan), places where indentured Chinese laborers were deployed at different historical times. Skinner's report mentions that he also visited Japan and Korea, which were contingent places for labor recruitment. He was charged with the investigation of how best to deploy indentured Chinese laborers once they arrived at the mines, where to recruit those laborers, and whether laborers from China would endure gold mining work (Skinner 1903: 1). These inquiries reveal that (1) the deployment of Chinese indentured laborers was not a new global phenomenon in 1903; (2) South African mine owners and the Association representing them were in tune with the broader world and borrowed strategies from beyond; and (3) identity was part and parcel of labor recruitment strategies for the gold mining industry.

This article addresses identity as an essential factor in recruitment strategies for the South African gold mining industry since indentured Chinese labor was both a racialized and gendered form of labor, as well as a process of identity formation. I discuss two particular dimensions of this Chinese labor “experiment” (as the introduction of Chinese laborers was referred to in colonial documents of the day) in South Africa: (1) the heady debate on the proposal to look to China for cheap labor and (2) the desertion (or absenteeism) by the indentured Chinese laborers from various mining compounds in the Witwatersrand. Based on my analysis of these two dimensions, I shall elucidate the specific character of anti-Chinese sentiment, which contributed to the shaping of Chinese identity in the context of South Africa. I further suggest that the construction of Chinese identity also influenced the definitions of who is “African,” “White,” “Coloured,” and “Asiatic” in South African society at the time.

Bridging History and Race Discourse

Among the scholars of race and race theory on which this study is based, Howard Winant’s proposed “racial formation framework” is most appealing because of the breadth and scope it implies (Omi and Winant 1986; Winant 2000). He tells us, “[a]t its most basic level, race can be defined as a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (Winant 2000: 172, italics added). The “race” concept, Winant explains, “appeals to biologically based human characteristics (phenotypes)” (Winant 2000: 172), but the selection of particular human features for purposes of constructing differences is both a social and historical process. This, thus, suggests that race constitutes the various dimensions of social organizations. While some scholars, such as Cedric Robinson, assert that the genealogy of race can be traced from the early development of “Europe” (Robinson 1983), Winant shows that race — “black” race in his case study — can be located in (African) slavery,
colonialism and imperialism, which are parts of the development, organization and expansion of the European world capitalist system. That is, race and racial identity are part and parcel of material processes whichever criteria are used to demarcate human differences. From such a framework, one must consider, then, how the invention of “the Chinese” or “Chinaman” in the South Africa context proceeded apace with an acute world market demand for cheap exploitable labor in the early 20th century, which has received little attention by scholars of South African history and those who analyze the Chinese phenomenon in that country.

In South Africa, the short period of time in which the indentured Chinese laborers worked in the gold mines and the small population size of the Chinese have been used as reasons to ignore their relevance and to explain their invisibility in local racial politics. By overlooking the Chinese, scholars of South African society, polity, and economy have failed to explore alternative explanations for the changing patterns in South African racial dynamics that do not subordinate race to class, and to surpass a black-white paradigm of race relations (e.g. Cell 1982; Davenport 1988; Fredrickson 1981; Hamilton 2001; Johnstone 1976; Keppel-Jones 1952; Marx 1998; Simons 1969; Van den Berghe 1970). According to Deborah Posel, Jon Hyslop and Noor Nieftagodien, on the other hand, in 20th-century South Africa, the country’s social order would have to have an influence on Chinese identity and, in turn, an analysis of Chinese identity would have to reflect South Africa’s racialization process (Posel, Hyslop, and Nieftagodien 2001). They write:

During the course of the 20th century, the South African social order became one of the most thoroughly racialised in the world. By the time apartheid reached its zenith in the 1960s, every facet of life in the country was saturated with the effects of racial thinking and practice (Posel, Hyslop, and Nieftagodien 2001: i).

From this perspective, it is difficult to understand why socio-historical studies have avoided highlighting the racialization of the Chinese mine laborers, while a lingering silence on the subject has persisted in the theoretical literature that addresses race in South Africa.

Studies that have been published about the Indian community (e.g. Ginwala 1985; Freund 1994; Josh 1942; Kuper 1960; Mukherji 1959; Pachai 1971), the Coloured population (e.g. Adhikari 2005; Goldin 1987; James 1996; Lewis 1987; Pickel 1987), and the Chinese who have settled (or “free” Chinese) in South Africa (e.g. Smedley 1980; Human 1984; Yap and Man 1996) are essential to remind us that besides Zulus and Boers (or Afrikaners), other groups populated South Africa. With regard to the literature about the Chinese, the available studies ostensibly seek to integrate them into South Africa’s national narrative. A close reading of this literature, however, shows that conceptions of
the Chinese do not contribute to an adequate understanding of race in South Africa. This in part has to do with the scholars’ understanding of the role of indentured Chinese laborers in South Africa’s racial division of labor in general and Chinese identity formation in particular. Claims of “Chineseness,” such as in language, religion, and Confucius values, have elevated the role of culture, making it instrumental in overcoming obstacles in hostile conditions. However, such an emphasis on culture treats it as a rigidly defined object with one long temporality, rather than, as Peter Harries puts it, “as a range (or repertoire) of resources that may be assembled and asserted or repressed in different situations” (Harries 1996: xix). In inserting a temporal-spatial dimension to culture, in Harries’ view, “identity is situational and fluid rather than the organic product of a bounded community” (Harries 1996: xix). Thus, by substituting culture for biology as the medium of human difference, scholars studying the Chinese in South Africa have characterized “Chinese” as a (non-changing and homogenous) cultural group and an identity that can be extricated from racial dialogues, thus downplaying the tensions and conflicts in South Africa’s racial dynamics that contributed to shaping Chinese identity.

Alternatively, the literature that focuses on or addresses indentured Chinese labor in South African gold mining (comprised of few published texts and more unpublished theses) offer a break from the binary black-white model of studies about labor, as well as gold mining work (e.g. Callinicos 1980: 64–70, 73–74; Reeves 1954; Richardson 1976, 1977, 1982; Sacks 1967: 28–104; Van Onselen 1982). Peter Richardson’s often-cited study, and subsequent theses influenced by his study, explain the political economy of indentured Chinese laborers and describe the Chinese role in the development of the gold fields. With few exceptions, production is at the center of the analysis and issues of race are treated casually in favor of class. Moreover, the importation of Chinese labor is treated as a logical response to a general economic crisis that followed the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), and by submerging Chinese labor to requirements of capital, such studies undermine the humanity of the laborers, and the relevance of race in the social relations of gold mining. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to explain how the “Chinese Labour Question” — whether the importation of indentured Chinese labor would reinstate slavery and whether its introduction was necessary for building up the mining industry — was essential to shaping anti-Chinese sentiment, constructing “Chinese” identity, and bolstering a white (or more specifically, British) South Africa (Worsfold 1913: 273).

**Changing South Africa**

South Africa’s turn to recruiting indentured Chinese labor was not unaffected by a global re-divisioning of labor between *metropoles* and colonies, as well as
a change in East-West relationships associated with a weakening state in China (Benedict 1996; Chu 2005; Frank 1998; Grasso, Corrin, and Kort 2004; Gray 1990; Jenks 1994; Kim 2004; Kuhn 1970; Lee 1989; Lee 2003; Perry 1980; Pomeranz 2000; Scalapino 1985). Among other factors, two key events in the 19th century set the pace for the transformation in the early 20th century: the collapse of the old order of colonial trade that paved the way for freer trade (Cain and Hopkins 1993; Hobsbawm 1968), and the emancipation of African slaves that prompted a worldwide labor problem. Efforts to resolve a global “labor shortage” in an expanded world market economy were marked by a range of plausible solutions (Cooper, Holt, and Scott 2000), such as the imposition of anti-vagrancy laws, re-organization of existing slave systems (Tomich 1990), and a return to indentured labor (Guterl 2003). Laborers from China were recruited for the last as early as the 1830s, beginning in Mauritius and later the British West Indies. By the latter half of the 19th century, the occupation of China by different European powers, internal rebellions, and the loss of parts of northeastern China to Japan following the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), signaled the demise of the Qing dynasty in East Asia and contributed to the continually changing European perceptions of China and the Chinese. For example, Karl Marx’s use of the terms “Oriental despotism” and “Asiatic mode of production” to describe the political and economic structures in Asia in general and China in particular exemplifies this shift from seeing China as an advanced, wealthy empire to an authoritarian and stagnant entity. The latter coincided with conceptions of the Chinese as the “mysterious other,” thus, unknowable to and feared by Europeans. The notion of “yellow peril” that was used widely in the late 19th and early 20th centuries exemplified this European view of the Chinese.

By the early 20th century, the formation of a British colonial government in the Orange River Colony (or Free State) and Transvaal, in addition to the already established settlements in the Cape Colony (1806) and Natal (1824), dramatically altered the course of South Africa’s historical development; all of South Africa was incorporated into the British Empire and, just as importantly, the world market economy dominated by Britain. The demand for cheap and unskilled labor received much attention during this era of British occupation. The slave trade had already been abolished in 1807 as a result of the British occupation of the Cape in 1806 and slaves were emancipated by an Act of British Parliament in 1834 (Keppel-Jones 1952: 19, 42, 45). This meant that cheap, unskilled labor for agriculture and various developing industries such as mining and railway construction had to be secured by alternative means. In the first half of the 19th century, the Boers, faced with the change in status of the slaves, trekked north of the Cape taking African slaves along with them into areas not yet under British colonial rule. During the second half of the 19th century, unskilled labor for sugarcane growing in Natal, diamond extraction in
Kimberley, and gold mining in the Transvaal was provided by local low-waged African and/or Coloured laborers, as well as laborers recruited from Portuguese East Africa, India, and China. Of the industries that were being developed in South Africa at the time, gold mining was at the forefront of the British colonial administrators’ postwar reconstruction strategy.

The discovery of diamond in the 1860s and especially gold in the 1880s attracted foreign capital and further lured migrants from Europe, who eventually settled in South Africa. This “mineral revolution” contributed to the growth of (1) a white industrial working class, made up of farmers whose lands had been usurped for commercial agriculture or Europeans who sought opportunities in the new colonies; and (2) an increased demand for a cheap labor force constituted by Africans who had been forced onto reserves or who had been recruited from Portuguese East Africa (e.g. Mozambique). The depression period that followed each economic boom saw the emergence of poor white unskilled laborers (Davies 1979), whose position in the division of labor was improved with the importation of indentured Chinese laborers. As for the African labor supply, it became evermore problematic, especially in the gold mines, where mine owners proceeded to lower the wages of African laborers following the Anglo-Boer War (Callinicos 1980: 63). Appalling mining conditions and the aversion of Africans to labor are other reasons that have been cited as to why African laborers were unavailable during the critical period of postwar reconstruction. According to Bernard Sacks and others, it was believed that “[t]he presence of the Chinese as a competitor would spur the native to establish the worth of his hire” (Sacks 1967: 41). That is, the Chinese laborers would help “rehabilitate” Africans, impelling them back to (mining) work.

The indentured Chinese laborers were mostly agricultural workers (or peasants), but some were ex-convicts, artisans, and scholars (or the educated). They were mostly men, recruited primarily from northern China. These Chinese laborers arrived in Durban on British-owned ships and following registration and the issuance of passports, were transported by train to the heart of the Transvaal, or the Witwatersrand mines (Sacks 1967: 65). They had to ride in third class coaches designated for Africans, which seems to indicate the non-existence of a prior racial classification for the Chinese. Once on the Rand, the Chinese entered a racialized work force that had further crystallized from the debate brought about by the proposal for their importation to South Africa, which involved questions of English morality for tolerating the institutionalization of Chinese slavery and the perceived needs for South Africa’s development. That is, as a result of this heady debate, Chinese laborers could only be permitted entry to South Africa under conditions specified in the Transvaal Labour Importation Ordinance. Accordingly, the “Chinese coolies” were compelled by law, which was outlined in this Ordinance, to work underground as unskilled
laborers alongside African miners, as skilled labor was reserved for the whites (Callinicos 1980: 74; Worsfold 1913: 360–66). Thus, while providing relief for the perceived economic crisis, this labor arrangement along with the promise of repatriation upon completion of contract, assured the general white public that there would not be competition for skilled work. Under such circumstances, the Chinese laborers were finally allowed to be introduced to South Africa’s gold mines (Sacks 1967: 58).

**Debating Recruitment**

The debate over the importation of Chinese labor, which subsequently influenced the conditions of entry and terms of contract for the duration of their employment in South Africa, not only divided the whites, but also exposed the particular character of anti-Chinese racism in Britain and South Africa. Speeches by Sir George Farrar, who was the President of the Chamber of Mines, and Mr. W. Mather, who was Secretary of the Miners’ Union, and the subsequent discussion at a meeting held on the East Rand Proprietary Mines (E.R.P.M.) at Driefontein on 31 March 1903 marked the beginning of “active agitation for and against the introduction of Chinese laborers, which was carried on in the Transvaal from the date of the Bloemfontein Conference (10th to 23rd March 1903) until the approval of the principle of Asiatic imported labour by the Transvaal Legislative Council (30th December 1903)” (Farrar 1903; Worsfold 1913: 302–304). This meeting between Sir George and European miners of the E.R.P.M. is also a revelation of the nature of the debate. Two dominant views were presented during this meeting: (1) the view of the colonial administration and mining authorities that reflected the resolutions on the Customs, Railway, and Labor questions concluded at the Bloemfontein Conference, which was largely in favor of importing foreign Asiatic labor; and (2) the concerns of skilled white mine laborers, who were opposed to the importation of cheap foreign and, especially, Chinese labor.

Although he represented the mining authorities and supported the Conference’s resolution to import Asiatic labor, Farrar depicted himself as an ally of the skilled laborers at this meeting, and appealed to his white audience’s common sense by substantiating his report on the labor question with statistical data regarding “the native question” (Farrar 1903: 5). He reviewed the figures of the overall “native” population, the stamps that were being worked and those already erected, the number of actual “native” laborers working in the gold and coal mines, and that of “native” laborers employed in the towns and suburbs of Johannesburg to highlight the asymmetry between the “native” population size and the actual number of “native” laborers required for the gold mines, demonstrating a “native labor shortage.” According to Farrar, this shortage could not be ameliorated
through the coercion of native laborers because it was not what civilized countries did, or through radical changes in legislation “which would disturb the minds of the natives [and] might possibly incite them against the white man” (Farrar 1903: 5). Furthermore, this labor shortage, Farrar explained, could not be redressed by recruiting African labor from the continent because countries north and south of the Zambezi also required their own labor forces for their industrial developments at the time (Farrar 1903: 9–10). Instead, he presented an economic argument as to why Asiatic labor was a necessary alternative if the mines were to resume production and continue being productive, as well as profitable.

It is significant that Farrar mentioned local and external “native” labor supplies for the mines and, later in his speech, he told his audience that “skilled whites” at high wages and “unskilled coloured labor” at low wages had built up the gold fields. Farrar’s comments not only reveal the racial distinction between skilled and unskilled laborers and the difference in wages between the two types of work, but also intimate that there was no clear distinction drawn between “native” and “coloured.” And perhaps differentiation was unnecessary here, as both categories seemed to be constitutive of laborers that were cheap, unskilled, and non-white. Other sources show that these two categories were extended to, or used to refer to, the indentured Chinese laborers after they had arrived in South Africa.

While “native” and “coloured” were used interchangeably (and generated much distress among Cape Coloureds who at different times fell under one or the other category16), the term “white” seemed just as ambivalent. Proposals to recruit cheap labor from all parts of Europe prompted one speaker to assert that “cheap Europeans who[m] you cannot expel” were unwanted, especially because they could move from being unskilled to skilled laborers and subsequently displace those who were already in skilled positions (Farrar 1903: 22). From this remark, the division among the whites appears to have been along a class line. But the majority of those attending this meeting were English, which suggests that the opposition to “cheap Europeans” could readily be one directed at Europeans who were considered not whites or “undesirable” whites such as the Hungarians and Italians, according to Sacks (1967: 53), or the “Peruvians,” who, according to Charles van Onselen, were Jews of Lithuanian and Russian origins (2007: 150).17 This population, van Onselen explains, were “hawkers, traders or assistants in eating-houses and liquor stores [which] placed them in close proximity to African miners and, in the white haze of colonial prejudice, their Russian and Polish identities had become elided” (van Onselen 2007: 151). It is possible, then, that at this time, besides being divided by class, the whites were also racially divided. This may suggest that the whites in South Africa were not yet a unified group, and any hint of similarity, or close association, between “cheap European” and “native” or “coloured labor” would threaten the
superiority of the whites in an African territory where they were the minority, especially in the case of the English vis-à-vis the Boers.

Sir George Farrar also referred to “Asiatic labor” and only once during his speech alluded to the people of China, but his opponents put particular faces to this broad category. As a result of earlier importation and settlement of Indians in Natal, “Asiatic” generally applied to Indians (although at times they too were referred to as “native,” negating the fact that they were British subjects and had rights associated with being such). However, at different points of the ensuing discussion, “Chinese,” “yellow man,” or “Chinaman” were synonymous with “Asiatic.” And yet, at another time, when confronted by Farrar if the opposition meant Chinaman, Japanese, or Indian when they referred to “Asiatic labor,” both Indian and Chinese were presented as the “yellow man” (Farrar 1903: 23). Here van Onselen’s notion of eliding identities is appropriate. The speakers’ inconsistency not only reflects the ease with which the terms of identification could be applied to different groups of people, but also highlights the porous nature of the category “Asiatic.”

Despite the above-mentioned ambiguity, or a tendency to treat different population groups as one general homogenous race, each speaker had his own ideas about who the Chinese were in relation to the Indians. Chinese and Indians were similarly described as a permeating disease or “commercial parasite” threatening to overrun white society (Farrar 1903: 20). However, there was also acknowledgment of difference, specifically that “the Indian, who because of his adoption cannot be indentured and repatriated” and that the Chinese was not a British subject (Farrar 1903: 22). While the comparison with Indians concomitantly reveals the varied articulation of British imperialism and the significance of being a British subject in the treatment of non-white laborers, views regarding the Chinese also echoed racial perceptions held by the British of Africans they had previously encountered through colonization (Comaroff 1992). At the E.R.P.M. meeting, other views of the Chinese indeed emerged through juxtaposition with Africans. An instance of this can be seen from Mather’s effort to differentiate the Chinese laborers from the African in his speech. He asserted that “[t]he Chinese was a different subject to the Kaffir. The Kaffir was honest, truthful, and reliable” (Farrar 1903: 17). He then continued to explain the basis of this differentiation:

He was reliable … because he had never sought to usurp the white man’s work. The moment the yellow man was brought into competition with themselves so soon would they break through any stipulation that might have been imposed, and seek to oust the whites from their positions (Farrar 1903: 17).

This remark resonates with popular belief, supported by Skinner’s investigation in California and British Columbia, and understanding of the Chinese problem in
Australia, that the Chinese could not be contained and would inevitably compete for other types of employment traditionally performed by the whites — that is, they were the “yellow peril.” Furthermore, this passage reveals the condescending nature of Mather’s interpretation of the “Kaffir,” who, for him, were either too docile or intellectually inferior to compete with the white man.

Bolstering Mather’s view, Mr. Outhwaite from the White Labour League also addressed the difference between Chinese and Africans: “It must be remembered Chinese were not Kaffirs. The Chinese had a high intellectual development, and were capable of imitating the white man in every possible pursuit; they would indeed be ‘skilled’ men, for they must remember the skill of the Chinaman as a labourer” (Farrar 1903: 20). The Chinese were represented here as people whose minds were developed, who had the potential to learn and compete, and work; they were closer to the white man in terms of skills and intellect. This contrasts with contemporary perceptions of the Africans, who were believed to be and often presented as polygamous, unintelligent and lazy (Atkins 1993). As Keletso Atkins points out, the myth of the “lazy kaffir” first circulated among frustrated colonists who were unable to secure the labor needed to bring returns on their investments (Atkins 1993), while the image they had of the working Chinese shows their concern for returns on investments on the one hand, and their anxiety on the other.

This meeting on the East Rand reflects the type of racial thinking among white men from the elite and the working classes during the early 20th century. Moreover, the various comparisons of the Chinese demonstrated above seems to undercut conventional assumptions about Chinese identity and the role of the Chinese in the making of South Africa’s racial labor hierarchy. While the gold mining industry was built on the social relations between Europeans and Africans accepted by the whites and their perceptions of races, it also further developed and extended the racial hierarchy through the deployment of indentured Chinese laborers. Multiple racial classifications and laborers of diverse origin — albeit predominantly male — were poured into a heady mix of identities, spaces, and places, making racialization and the identity formation process extremely dynamic. An investigation of this dynamism would thus present an opportunity for new understandings about not just South African history on the whole, but also Chinese identity.

**Deserting the Compounds**

At another level, racialization and the process of identity formation of the Chinese laborers were not confined to the mining industry or the boundaries of the compounds. In the midst of the public meetings and proliferation of newspaper
articles, which circulated stereotypes that signaled and informed attitudes toward
the Chinese, the first shipment of indentured Chinese laborers arrived in June
1904. The presence of the Chinese in the Witwatersrand only strengthened
existing sentiments about the Chinese, especially as desertions from the mining
compounds did occur among the indentured Chinese laborers, putting them in
view of the white public. The responses to such incidents not only drew attention
to the general white public’s skepticism of the colonial government’s ability to
control the mobility of the imported Chinese, but also further demonstrated the
relevance of race in this particular labor experiment. A letter from a “Lover of
Order” to the Editor of the Transvaal Leader, dated 8 November 1904, was an
exposition of such skepticism and negative perceptions of the Chinese.

The letter was inspired by incidences of “the newly-imported Chinese [being]
in the habit of parading or lounging through Bezuidenhout Valley, sometimes
in small and sometimes in large gangs” (Transvaal Leader 1904). These unruly
“gangs” of Chinese, “Lover” wrote, entered through gates or climbed fences to
get onto private grounds, thus, violating the privacy of the whites and their
private property. This letter further conveyed the sentiment that the white
public regarded these Chinese laborers as a nuisance to be chased away, people
“jabbering” in strange tongues, and “scantily and indecently dressed” to the
point of being naked. This letter alleged that the uncouth appearance of the
“Chinamen” frightened both women and children. Simply put, the Chinese
were unintelligible wandering menaces, but also a probable threat to white
womanhood (and, indirectly, white manhood). “Lover” concluded by expressing
a wish to know if the public was expected to continue tolerating such nuisance;
and, subsequently, deploying the white fear of a Chinese invasion, asked: “If
the few Chinaman [Chinamen] who have arrived cause such a nuisance, what
will it be like when large numbers are here” (Transvaal Leader 1904)?

A rejoinder to “Lover’s” letter is unavailable, but a collection of correspondence
between the Secretary of the Foreign Labour Department (F.L.D.) and the
Secretary of the Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency (C.M.L.I.A.)
indicates that the authorities were compelled to address the issue of Chinese
absenteeism from the mining compounds. The measures that were initiated to
identify, apprehend, and keep an accurate account of Chinese laborers who had
absconded from the various mining compounds also suggest alternative racial
ideas about the Chinese. For example, the Secretary of the F.L.D.’s interpretation
of the instances of Chinese desertion presented a benign paternalistic view of
the indentured Chinese laborers. He wrote:

… the culprits have originally had no intention whatever to desert; but have merely strolled
about in ignorance of the boundaries of the mine property…. Once they have passed this
boundary and find that nobody stops them, they evidently stroll about, lose their way,
and are eventually arrested for desertion (Letter 11/11/1904).18
Here, the F.L.D. Secretary raised the possibility that “the culprits” might not have been aware of the boundaries of the mine property, and presented them as child-like, testing boundaries, having no sense of direction, and being curious of their surrounding. Moreover, their desertions were accidental and unorganized. In contrast to the menacing mass presented in “Lover’s” letter, the Chinese deserters were constructed as harmless wanderers. To prevent further wanderings, the F.L.D. Secretary proposed that the Chinese be instructed about the boundaries of the compounds, and that signposts written in Chinese were adequate because even those who could not read could have the content conveyed to them by other Chinese laborers who were literate.

Within a year, a letter from the Secretary of the F.L.D. to the Chief Secretary for Permits revealed that Chinese deserters were linked to crimes, which ranged from housebreaking to housebreaking with intent to harm, assault, and rape. Under such circumstances, the F.L.D. Secretary responded in a different tone, stating that a system was needed to promptly ascertain the number of Chinese deserters at large on any particular day (Letter 09/11/1905). This would require legislative changes, but also more surveillance, to which the Governor of the Transvaal replied: “275 South African Constabulary have been specially stationed around the Witwatersrand in addition to the ordinary posts” (Telegram 09/18/1905). In addition to taking this measure to restrict the deserter’s mobility and to further assuage the white population’s fear, the Governor of the Transvaal granted those living in or near the Witwatersrand District the right to possess firearms of any kind except magazine rifles; and if they could not afford to do so, he assured them that the government would apply to the Resident Magistrate to permit Martini-Henri rifles to be lent to them (Telegram 09/18/1905). While demonstrating the power of the government to contain deserters and protect whites, he also noted that “[d]uring the last three weeks the South African Constabulary have caught 243 wandering Chinese generally famished and only too glad to be brought in” (Telegram 09/18/1905). The Governor of the Transvaal thus evoked the earlier image of the Chinese as harmless wanderers presented in the F.L.D. Secretary’s correspondence, only this time, helpless and grateful to be rescued, thereby emasculating the Chinese deserters. This, combined with the measures implemented to tighten control over the Chinese, inadvertently addresses “Lover’s” concern about the “Chinamen’s” threat to white women and children.

While desertions can be seen as a form of resistance to the authorities or the terror of working conditions, here, colonial writings on the subject suggest that multiple or diverse interpretations of this act by members of the white public or persons in authority provide an insight into identity construction and representation. The letters mentioned in this section indicate that racialism not only influenced the organization of labor (i.e. relations of production), but
also reinforced and spread social perceptions as regards the Chinese. If Posel, Hyslop, and Nieftagodien are correct in their analysis that the time of apartheid represented the apex of racial thinking and practice in South Africa, then the active process of racializing every dimension of life in this country may be said to have commenced with the Chinese labor question at the beginning of the 20th century when the British Empire completely occupied South Africa.

**Concluding Remarks**

One perceived solution to South Africa’s economic crisis in the three years following the Anglo-Boer War was to rebuild and expand the gold mining industry. However, confronted by a shortage of unskilled labor resulting from the competition from railway construction, agricultural development and the unavailability of African labor both locally and regionally, the gold mining industry resorted to importing indentured Chinese laborers. This article has discussed the distinct ways in which mine owners, government authorities, white skilled laborers, and the general white public responded to the changes in South Africa’s economic and social order in the early years of the 20th century. The influx of Chinese laborers following the first group of arrivals in June 1904 would seem to signal that the proposal to import unskilled laborers from China was eventually accepted by the white public in South Africa and the government in Britain; however, subsequent events suggest otherwise. The Chinese labor question culminated in a victory in 1906 for the Liberal Party in Britain (Worsfold 1913: 273; Wrench 1958: 259) which won by campaigning on this contentious question. Party members supported the anti-importation, or anti-Chinese, position, making themselves allies of labor unionists who were also opponents of importation. Furthermore, the repatriation and ending of indentured labor for “John Chinaman” by 1910 demonstrates that the presence of the Chinese was deemed undesirable.

Given this background, the question of the indentured Chinese laborers would appear to be a significant one, and yet it has been systematically overlooked in South African history and among race theorists. While many factors may account for this, the race dimension of South African life and of the indentured Chinese laborers stands out. The black-and-white construction and conception of race is inevitable given the magnitude of the “native question” for the whites (both Boers and Englishmen), who make up a much smaller portion of the population. However, as I have tried to demonstrate in this article, such racial paradigm has failed to capture the nuances of South African history, and more importantly, of race identity formations at a critical turning point in the country’s historical development. The focus on the African mine laborers and their relations with South Africa’s capitalist development, although essential, has obscured the complex,
multiple, and qualitatively different relations and processes constituting South Africa's racial labor hierarchy and society. Race, or racialized, identities are not abstractions; they are formed through relations between peoples (albeit oftentimes facilitated by the state alone or in collaboration with capitalists). As the above discussion has shown, the racial categories, “native,” “coloured,” “Asiatic,” and “white,” were still being worked out at the beginning of the 20th century; and one can map the fluidity of these racial categories through discourse on the Chinese labor question.

As such, further research is necessary and questions need to be asked about the role of the indentured Chinese laborers, such as: (1) Why have the Chinese not been written into the racial discourse? (2) How do scholars begin to construct “the Chinese” as an identity that was formed through processes of capitalist expansion and racial formation? (3) What would such construction reveal? These questions suggest that Chinese identity is not pre-determined, but constructed through time and space, and reflective of global and local conditions. Under such circumstances, there can be multiple Chinese identities, rather than one singular, or universal, identity that all persons with roots in China are expected to share; thus pointing to the need for the notion of a common Chinese identity to be interrogated. Nonetheless, as Chinese identity is subjected to historical and theoretical analysis, the history of the whites and other non-whites in South Africa, and the British Empire, will also need to be reconsidered owing to their inter-related histories.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Dr. M. Dores Cruz for her patient reading and re-reading of this paper when it was being prepared for the ISSCO conference in December 2006.
2 These terms were used interchangeably to refer to this group of laborers.
3 For the complete Report of Mr. H. Ross Skinner to the Witwatersrand Labour Association, see National Archives Repository, Pretoria (NAR), Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Foreign Labour Department (FLD) 131/20 Emigration Matters in China, General Policy, 22 Sept. 1903.
4 These names of places in China follow the spelling used at the time, especially in Ross’s Report.
5 Here, Dr. Karen L. Harris’s work has touched upon the racialization of South African Chinese, who have been referred to as “settled” or “free” Chinese, mostly merchants, rather than indentured laborers (Harris 1999 and 2002).
7 On the issue of “humanity of laborers,” Richardson does allude to its absence in economic studies about Chinese labor in his conclusion, and Harris highlights one aspect of it
in order to “give voice to both the Chinese labourers’ experience and reaction” in the “homosexual debate” (Harris 2004: 115–17). Another possible approach to this issue is to reconstruct the colonial authorities’, the mine owners’, and the white public’s conceptions and constructions of “the Chinese,” which were expressions of racist thinking deliberately aimed at dehumanizing the Chinese laborers (Gordon 1995).

This gap in the literature has been addressed in more recent studies which have shifted the focus to the social dimension of indentured labor, by examining the violent conditions of gold mining work (Kynoch 2005) or passage on board ships (MacDonald 2005).

8 This can be inferred from different statements and letters: FLD 37/4/4 Letter to the General Manager, C/M Labour Importation Agency, Ltd., Johannesburg, 31 May 1905, reveals that one person was a tailor. FLD 198/45/5 Statement by Kao Pu-yuan, Government Passport Number 52210. Condemned to Death for the Crime of Murder, 28 Apr. 1909, alludes to the fact that Kao Pu-yuan was a shoemaker by trade, which was a skill he could not have acquired in the Transvaal.

9 According to Elaine Katz, an “industrial colour bar” was instituted during the 1890s, resulting from white artisans’ insecurity as they competed for work against “informally-trained, long-serviced Africans, Indians, and coloureds” in the Witwatersrand gold mining industry (Katz 1999).

10 For a copy of the Ordinance, see NAR, TAD, TKP 94 Rules and Regulations (Asiatic), The Transvaal. An Ordinance Entitled the Labour Importation Ordinance, 1904, Together with the Proclamations, Regulations and Instructions Issued Thereunder.


12 A reading of Mohamed Adhikari’s explanation of the origins of the Coloured community gives a sense of this, as the “acculturated colonial blacks” attempted to acquire privileges for themselves within the white-dominated social hierarchy (Adhikari 2006: 2–3).

13 This is similar to the situation of the Irish in the context of the United States (Ignatiev 1995).

14 FLD 104/15/I Correspondence of the Secretary of Foreign Labour Department to the Secretary Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency, 11 Nov. 1904.

15 FLD 104/15/II Correspondence of the Secretary of Foreign Labour Department to the Chief Secretary for Permits, 11 Sept. 1905.

16 FLD 104/15/II Copy of Telegram of the Governor Transvaal to Secretary of State, 18 Sept. 1905.

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