‘Your Petitioners are in Mortal Terror’: The Violent World of Chinese Mineworkers in South Africa, 1904–1910*

GARY KYNOCHE
(Dalhousie University)

Sixty-three thousand Chinese indentured labourers helped resuscitate South Africa’s ailing gold mining industry in the aftermath of the South African War of 1899–1902. This short-lived experiment – the first men arrived in 1904 and by 1910 all surviving labourers had been repatriated to China – has attracted the attention of various historians who have focused on the labour shortage that led to the employment of Chinese workers and the political consequences of importation for both Britain and South Africa. However, very little is known about the lives of the Chinese men who actually worked in the Witwatersrand gold mines. Much like African migrant labourers, Chinese mineworkers had to contend with oppressive labour practices, restrictive living conditions and various manifestations of violence. Africans and Chinese were routinely assaulted by white supervisors, and labour protests were often brutally suppressed by state police and mine security forces; but much of the violence took place within the labouring populations themselves. While African miners were ‘notorious’ for engaging in group confrontations known as ‘faction fights’, murder and suicide were the predominant forms of violence in the Chinese compounds. Powerful syndicates, directed by the Chinese police force, controlled gambling operations on all the mines that employed Chinese labourers. These syndicates mercilessly pursued debt defaulters, many of who were murdered or committed suicide to escape persecution. Vendettas were common and the violence spilled over into the surrounding countryside when deserters from the mines raided nearby farms and shops. Scholars have noted the ways in which management practices, economic fluctuations and changing political conditions generated violence on the South African gold mines. This article argues that migrant cultures also shaped the nature of mine violence.

Introduction

Between 1904 and 1907 more than 63,000 Chinese men were imported into South Africa to work as indentured labourers on the Witwatersrand gold mines. By 1910, with the exception of a handful of deserters who were unaccounted for, and those who had died, all had been repatriated to China. When Peter Richardson examined the Chinese labour experiment from an international political economy perspective, ‘the more overtly human or individual elements’ of this venture were deliberately ‘minimised in an attempt to understand the wider

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1 The Witwatersrand (also Rand or Reef) refers to the belt of gold mines and urban settlements running some 100 km from east to west with Johannesburg at its centre.
process’. Yet he was hopeful that such ‘omissions’ would ‘spur future investigations’. This article now addresses the human elements of this story by exploring the violence within the Chinese labour force and, to a lesser extent, the conflict between Chinese workers and the white population surrounding the mine areas.

The South African mining industry has been plagued by violence since its inception. Labour protests, ‘faction fights’ between groups of African workers, underground assaults by supervisors, and criminal gangs operating on the mines have all contributed to this climate of violence. Time and again official reports noted the violent nature of ‘non-white’ mineworkers, and measures were taken to contain the perceived dangers such masses of men presented to the Witwatersrand’s white communities. However, very little was done to address the violence that took place within the compounds, a situation analogous to the differential policing of white suburbs and black townships. As long as township crime did not spill over into white neighbourhoods or challenge the structures of government control, it was largely ignored by government officials. Chinese (and African) mineworkers killed each other in substantial numbers but, providing white employees were not attacked and the mines remained operational, mine management and successive governments considered this violence a by-product of doing business.

Despite much common ground, the particular circumstances under which African migrants and indentured Chinese labourers lived and worked in South Africa produced specific patterns of violence. Collective violence amongst African workers typically took place along ethnic lines and was often related to job security as different groups competed for favoured positions on the mines. Mine management promoted these rivalries by grouping the various ‘tribes’ in separate hostels. As Dunbar Moodie has noted, ‘The policy of ethnically segregated housing along with homefriend networks provided the social structural basis for faction fights.’ These conflicts were ‘important as assertions and confirmations of “ethnic” solidarities among mine workers.’ There were no comparable divisions within the Chinese

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3 Although a minimum of seventeen Chinese labourers were shot and killed while reportedly breaking into white farmhouses and stores, Chinese workers in South Africa were never the targets of pogroms as were their compatriots in the United States. See R. Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1988). Chinese mineworkers in South Africa were protected by the Labour Importation Ordinance, which restricted them to unskilled labour on the gold mines. Imported labourers were barred from skilled occupations, forbidden to hold trading licences of any kind and denied the right to lease or own property. These restrictions, combined with their physical isolation on the mine compounds, may account for the lack of mob violence directed against indentured workers in South Africa.


5 Central Archives Depot (CAD), Pretoria [All archival materials referenced in this article are housed in the CAD], GOV 209, CON 33/05, Memorandum regarding the steps which ought to be taken in order to place the working of the Foreign Labour Department on a proper footing. Superintendent Jamieson, 7 August 1905; 1914 Buckle Commission report (Native Grievances Inquiry), NGI, para. 474, cited in Moodie, *Going for Gold*, p. 76.

6 Moodie, *Going for Gold*, pp. 182, 190.
labour force. These men spoke a common language and occupational hierarchies were not based on ethnicity. I can find no record of pitched battles between rival groups of Chinese mineworkers; rather, collective violence was directed against Chinese police; state police brought in to ‘restore order’; and, very rarely, against African workers.

In part, the rarity of this last phenomenon was because, while a few mines employed Chinese exclusively, most used Chinese workers underground and hired Africans for the more poorly paid surface positions. Thus, interaction between Chinese and Africans in the workplace was minimal. I uncovered only three references to fighting along these lines, all in 1905. The first originated outside of the compound and was thought to have begun as a dispute over a dog or a woman. The second erupted when African mine police were used to quell a protest initiated by Chinese mineworkers. This action apparently ignited a more general conflict between African and Chinese workers. In this instance, the mine manager and compound manager were censured for taking ‘injudicious action in making use of the kaffir police against the Chinese’. The final conflict took place between Chinese and African bathers at a dam on mine property and was said to have been ‘caused by the kaffirs pulling the queues of the Chinese’.8

As opposed to the group solidarity of African ‘faction fights’, among the Chinese violence tended to be personal and precise, with suicide, murder and vendettas featuring prominently. Gambling conflicts were at the heart of much of this violence and powerful syndicates, directed or at least sanctioned by the Chinese police force, operated on all the mines that employed Chinese labourers. These police and their confederates harassed and even murdered debt defaulters, who had little hope of gaining justice through appeals to white officials. Mine management and the Foreign Labour Department (FLD) were aware of the tension between the Chinese police and the Chinese labour force, as well as police involvement in gambling and extortion rackets, but limited their intervention to punishing a handful of police whose offences were too blatant to ignore. A wholesale campaign against corrupt police would have undermined the structures of control on the mines. Tied to their workplace by three-year contracts, and with virtually no access to legal protection, Chinese mineworkers found it difficult to escape persecution without resort to violence – including suicide. For their part, Chinese police operated lucrative schemes with a minimum of interference from mine management. In these conditions, violence became a normative method of resolving conflicts and, in some cases, of acquiring the means to discharge gambling debts.

Unfortunately, a handful of petitions and the testimony of witnesses at official inquiries are all that survive of the labourers’ voices. Appeals to mine and government officials indicate some of the concerns of, and strategies employed by, Chinese mineworkers, but fear of censure almost certainly outweighed candour and many subjects such as gambling syndicates, secret societies, sexual practices and opium use were rarely remarked on. Thus, we are forced to rely on representations made by white officials – who interpreted, paraphrased and distorted Chinese actions and concerns – to reconstruct the Chinese mineworkers’ world. Despite these deficiencies, the reports of FLD inspectors, mine officials, police and government authorities, together with the Chinese voices preserved in petitions, provide glimpses of compound life and indicate that

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7 One police report mentions that an arranged confrontation instigated by a gambling dispute between Chinese workers from different mines was pre-empted by confining the would-be combatants to their respective compounds. FLD 54, 6179, Chief Detective Inspector, CID, to the Secretary, FLD, 18 September 1906.
8 See GOV 165, GEN 279/05, Riots and Disturbances amongst Chinese Labourers. Report by the Superintendent of the Foreign Labour Department, 20 April 1905; GOV 872, p/s 37/12/0, Acting Superintendent FLD to Lieutenant-Governor, Pretoria, 8 May 1905; FLD 19, AG 10/05, Disturbance at the Van Ryn Gold Mines & Estate Limited, 14 May 1905.
indentured labourers constructed hierarchies and networks within the compounds that were virtually impenetrable to white authorities. This ignorance, coupled with government and management indifference to aspects of labourers' lives not directly related to mine production, allowed gambling syndicates to thrive and ensured that the Chinese labour force routinely employed violence to settle disputes within the compounds.

The Chinese Labour Experiment

Importation of Chinese labour was a response to what was seen as a short-term labour crisis following the South African War. Chinese were brought in to boost production and keep the mines operational until a sufficiently cheap supply of African labour could be secured. The British and Chinese governments negotiated the Anglo–Chinese Labour Convention that was signed in London in May 1904. Chinese workers were bound by the Labour Importation Ordinance (hereafter Ordinance) that regulated the introduction of ‘unskilled Non-European Labourers’ into the Transvaal. The vast majority of these men were peasants or rural wage-labourers from the northern provinces of Chihli (now Hebei) and Shantung (Shandong). These areas had been severely affected by floods and drought in the late nineteenth century and had also suffered chronic political instability resulting from the Boxer Rebellion and its suppression. South African recruiters were the direct beneficiaries of these calamitous misfortunes.

By 1905, 35 mines employed Chinese men who lived in compounds and worked an average of ten hours daily, six days a week, with Sundays and various holidays off. For the six working days, the men were confined to the mine premises. Labourers could request permits to visit town or friends at other mining compounds but Chinese mineworkers were forbidden by law to leave the Witwatersrand magisterial district. Refusal to work, desertion, changing employers, the failure to produce a mine passport while off mine premises and several other acts were defined as criminal offences under the Ordinance – to which amendments were added over time. The great majority of Chinese labourers worked underground. Of the just over 50,000 indentured workers employed on the Rand in 1906, less than 2,000 worked on the surface as sweepers and cleaners (578), police (532), cooks (404) and in various other capacities.

The supervision of Chinese labourers at each mine was overseen by a small contingent of Europeans. The mine manager directed the mining operation, but the European compound manager, known as the controller, dealt with the labourers on a daily basis. For example, the controller, who was supposed to have a degree of proficiency in Chinese dialects, was responsible for issuing passes to labourers who wished to leave mine property. White foremen accompanied teams of Chinese workers underground and served as supervisors. Given the small number of Europeans on each mine, order within the compounds was maintained by indentured Chinese mine police, many of whom had served in the British forces.

9 FLD and mine officials speculated that labour unrest and violence were fomented by a shadowy group of ‘undesirables’ and ‘bad characters’ consisting of ‘ex-boxers and members of secret societies’, but were rarely able to substantiate these claims. During one raid, ‘various documents and insignia were discovered which proved beyond a doubt that a Secret Society was being organised ... as a branch of the “Ko Lo Hui” a wellknown Society in North China’. GOV 165, GEN 270/05, Riots and disturbances amongst Chinese labourers, Report by the Superintendent, FLD, Period November 23 1904 to March 25 1905.


11 FLD 24, 2706, Walter Bagot, General Manager, Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency (CMLIA) to the Superintendent, FLD, 8 March 1906.
Army at Weihaiwei (a British-leased territory in northern China). Some of the hostility between police and indentured labourers may have derived from previous antagonisms in their home areas. As Richardson notes, ‘the most successful recruiting grounds for South Africa were exactly those areas which had experienced the greatest intensity of Boxer activity’. It is likely that at least some of the men who later worked on the mines in South Africa were associated with the Boxers and might well have harboured resentment towards Chinese mine police who were enlisted in the British Army during the Rebellion. This was certainly the opinion of FLD Superintendent Jamieson who observed that, ‘As the coolies were drawn almost exclusively from the area over which the Boxer rising of 1900 spread itself, it may also be taken for granted that no considerable proportion of them were participants.’

Approximately one policeman was employed for every hundred labourers and the police began their duties on board ship amongst the Chinese recruits on route to South Africa.

The FLD, which was created specifically to oversee the Chinese labour force, operated independently from the Chamber of Mines, and Chinese labourers were told to take any concerns, including disputes with mine officials, to FLD inspectors. A team of inspectors was employed to ensure that housing, food and sanitary conditions were up to standard and to record the grievances of Chinese mineworkers. Despite occasional friction, the FLD and the Chamber of Mines co-operated to maintain control over the Chinese workforce. The local courts were ill equipped to deal with thousands of cases involving Chinese labourers and, in 1905, the FLD also assumed a judicial function. Inspectors were accorded the powers of resident magistrates and acted as judge and jury for labourers charged with offences under the Ordinance. From October 1905 to January 1906, FLD inspectors tried 2,771 Chinese miners, of whom 2,632 were convicted. Chinese workers probably found it difficult to regard the very organisation that dispensed judgement and punishment on behalf of mine management as an advocate for their interests.

Corruption and Control: Sex, Drugs and Gambling
Mortality figures compiled by the Chamber of Mines, while incomplete and imprecise, provide an impression of the violence to which Chinese mineworkers were subjected. Between October 1904 and August 1908, excluding July 1906 for which the figures are missing, the Chamber recorded 145 murders, 124 suicides, 28 state executions, 17 killed during the commission of ‘outrages’ – crimes committed off mine premises against non-Chinese – and 268 deaths directly related to opium use.

The opium deaths are ambiguous. Some of the recorded suicides were attributed to opium overdoses, while ‘opium habit’ and ‘opium poisoning’ were listed separately from suicides. Although it seems to have been rampant, opium use did not arouse much official interest.

12 EC 86, 82/06, Lord Selborne to the Colonial Office, 29 January 1905. FLD 20, AG52/05, FLD Superintendent Jamieson to the High Commissioner, Johannesburg, 19 August 1905.
13 Richardson, ‘Cooies, Peasants and Proletarians’, p. 177.
14 FLD 20, AG52/05, FLD Superintendent Jamieson to the High Commissioner, Johannesburg, 19 August 1905.
15 Some mining officials complained that the FLD’s role in disciplining workers struck ‘at the root of all control by the mine management, which should have full authority over the interior arrangements on the mines’. GOV 990, PS 37/17/06, Confidential Report of mine managers appointed by the Transvaal Chamber of Mines to consider means to be adopted for securing the better control of coolies on mines (hereafter Report of Mine Managers), 28 May 1906.
16 EC 86, 82/06, Lord Selborne to the Colonial Office, 29 January 1906.
17 FLD 101, 13/53, Returns for District Medical Officer of Health, Witwatersrand. Until May 1907, deaths were listed under specific headings, categorised as ‘natural causes’ and ‘other’. These figures indicate the monthly death toll from mining accidents, murder, dysentery, tuberculosis and so on. Beginning in June 1907, individual deaths were recorded with each man’s name, the mine on which he worked and the cause of death all listed. The final compilation of murders, suicides, executions, those killed during ‘outrages’ and opium deaths is based on my own calculations.
Labourers procured opium from the small Chinese community in Johannesburg centred round Ferreira’s township. Given the extent of addiction in China, mine authorities accepted that some labourers would be unable to fulfil their duties without access to opium. Chinese mineworkers could purchase opium legally but only after obtaining a permit from a mine medical officer, which then had to be authorised by an FLD inspector. However, it was reported, ‘in no single instance’ had ‘an application for a permit been made to an Inspector of Foreign Labour by an indentured labourer’. Instead, opium was smuggled into the compounds and distributed by entrepreneurs, many of who were mine police. It is possible, despite the lack of documentary evidence, that heavy opium use resulting in debt was an additional cause of desertion, murder and suicide, as was the case in other Chinese migrant communities.\(^\text{18}\)

During this same period, dozens of deaths were recorded as ‘found dead’, ‘inquest pending’, ‘hit by a train’, or listed as ‘fractured skull’ or ‘penetrating wound’, without distinguishing between accidents, suicides or homicides. In addition to these fatalities, an unknown, but certainly greater, number of Chinese were injured in assaults by fellow workers, the Chinese police and white supervisors, as well as during riots.\(^\text{19}\) Much of this violence seems to have been gambling-related.

Gambling and loan-sharking attracted the attention of mine and FLD officials because it was believed they promoted desertion.\(^\text{20}\)

Money-lending at 50% per month interest is a constant cause of desertion amongst Chinese coolies… These coolies walk along the line to Johannesburg, with the intention of being arrested… so as to escape from their persecutors dunning them for capital and interest… Borrowing follows gambling – the police are the worst offenders.\(^\text{21}\)

The FLD implored labourers to desist from gambling. ‘There is nothing which has caused more sorrow to some of you than the excessive gambling carried out on some mines. The evil have fleeced the innocent and guileless and if they remained here for a hundred years the latter could never hope to discharge their obligations.’\(^\text{22}\) In October 1906, FLD Superintendent Jamieson warned labourers of an amendment to the Ordinance that outlawed gambling.

Of the many evil practices in which you indulge, and of which I have to complain, there is none greater than gambling. It is at the root of all crime, and is the source of untold misery… I have on a previous occasion endeavoured to dissuade you from this vice, unfortunately in vain. I now, therefore, make known to you that Government have decided rigorously to suppress gambling. Any labourer who engages in any game of chance whatsoever will be punished.\(^\text{23}\)


\(^\text{19}\) Although riots were usually sparked by protests against unfair labour practices, they also provided a cover for settling scores within the compound population.


\(^\text{21}\) FLD 217, 57/4, M. Wilkinson to the Secretary FLD, 30 October 1906.

\(^\text{22}\) FLD 22, AG 161/05, Notification addressed to all Chinese working on the Transvaal Gold Mines, 7 November 1905.

\(^\text{23}\) FLD 217, 57/4, Notification addressed to all Chinese Labourers on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 6 October 1906.
A year later an FLD Inspector attributed 90 per cent of debt to gambling and maintained that it was ‘one of the most fruitful sources of crime on the Reef’. He concluded that ‘there is no use in winking at the fact that it DOES occur, and will occur, whatever preventative measures are taken’.24

By all accounts, the Chinese police were instrumental in the criminal networks that operated in the compounds. ‘Indunas’ and other African intermediaries often held positions of influence on the mines but more whites had some knowledge of African languages than could speak Chinese dialects and many Africans had a basic command of English or Afrikaans. In addition, ‘Fanakalo’, a simplified language developed to enable white supervisors to instruct African workers, provided whites on the mines with at least a limited ability to directly communicate with Africans. Governor Selborne judged that ‘The white miners and the Kaffirs understand quite sufficient of each other’s language to comprehend each other’s meaning.’ By contrast, ‘The interpretorial staff employed by the Gold Mining Companies on some of the mines where the Chinamen work is inadequate: indeed, on some of the mines of the Robinson Group I am informed that there is not a single European who can speak the Chinese language.’25 A deserter from Glen Deep Mine

made a statement to the effect that the reason he left his mine was because the Compound Manager could not speak Chinese and that they were therefore managed by the head Police Boys. These latter forced them to gamble with them. If the Police Boys lost they did not pay. If the coolies lost they had to pay up and if they could not do so they were charged with refusing to work or were beaten by the Police Boys.26

FLD Superintendent Jamieson conceded that ‘At some mines none of the white overseers can speak Chinese … with the result that … far too much power has, in certain cases, been vested in irresponsible Chinese Compound Police’.27 Chinese police were quick to exploit their advantage and Jamieson clearly lacked a plan to rectify this situation. ‘On almost every mine the Controller works through his Chinese police … Assuming that the Controller speaks no Chinese, can anyone suggest to me how … the misdeeds of the police would be brought to light?’28

Desperate labourers in conflict with the Chinese police and gambling syndicates had few options. The Attorney-General observed that ‘every effort is made by [FLD] Inspectors to get coolies to bring forward cases [against the police], but for the most part ineffectually’.29 Mineworkers’ fear of retribution, coupled with the likelihood that many FLD officials were not perceived as benefactors, limited the number of formal complaints. Governor Selborne unwittingly outlined the dilemma faced by workers who fell foul of the Chinese police:

It must ever be borne in mind that the Chinese coolies are but children of a larger growth, and that the organisation of a compound corresponds in a striking manner with that of the English public school, the compound police occupying a position analogous to that of prefects or monitors. So long as discipline is maintained and authority not abused, the headmaster is content to leave the settlement of their internal differences to the boys themselves.30

24 FLD 168, 34/00, H. Crocker, Travelling Inspector to Superintendent, FLD, 16 November 1907.
25 GOV 209, CON 33/05 Governor Selborne to Colonial Office, 7 August 1905.
26 FLD 54, 6/68, Captain H. F. Trew, District Commandant, Pretoria District to the Chief Staff Officer, S.A.C. Johannesburg, 16 November 1905.
27 GOV 209, CON 33/05. Memorandum regarding the steps that ought to be taken in order to place the working of the Foreign Labour department on a proper footing, 7 August 1905.
29 FLD 22, AG 115/03, Suggested notes for compiling a reply to the Secretary of State’s telegram No. 2 of January 16, 1906.
30 EC 86, 82/06, Governor Selborne to Colonial Office, London, 29 January 1905.
Official reaction to sexual practices within the Chinese compounds further escalated tensions between mineworkers and the Chinese police. Mine authorities responded to the 1906 Bucknill Report, which claimed that ‘unnatural vice’ was widespread amongst the Chinese labour force, by repatriating suspected ‘catamites’. Governor Selborne insisted ‘no stone be left unturned to expel from the Rand the small minority of coolies who are given to the practice referred to’ and, in 1906 alone, 131 suspects were deported. European controllers relied on Chinese police to identify alleged offenders and some labourers responded by naming police as perpetrators of forced sex. Mineworkers from New Heriot Mine claimed

the Police have illicit and unnatural intercourse with the youths of this mine. The Chief of Police has two catamites, one is called ‘Hsiao Liu’ and the other ‘Hsiao Teng-k’o’. Policeman Ts’ai has one catamite boy, who is called Hsiao San. Beside the above boys, the Police have other youths in the Compound. If a boy refuses to entertain the illicit suggestions of the Police, he is beaten unmercifully ... Your petitioners are in mortal terror of the Police mentioned above and earnestly beg that your Excellency will repatriate the Police, as a measure of stopping their commission of further malpractice on the Labourers of this Mine.

Controllers and FLD inspectors were inundated with conflicting charges and had no way of determining the veracity of, and motivations behind, the various accusations.

A Coolie labourer No. 56510 of New Modderfontein G.M. Co. stated to me yesterday that his repatriation had been applied for and sanctioned on the ground that he was a reputed catamite: he indignantly repudiated the charge and stated that his being singled out was due to the fact of his having refused to entertain propositions of an improper nature made to him by policeman no. 27571. I confronted him with 27571 who denied the accusation, and there was no means of arriving at any conclusion as to the truth or otherwise of 56510’s statement ... The incident has rendered me uneasy lest this practice of, as it were, divining catamites may lead to serious injustice in individual cases and open a whole perspective of accusations and counter-accusations prompted by jealousy, revenge and fear.

It is impossible to know if the Chinese police were disproportionately involved in coercive sex or if labourers capitalised on official sentiment regarding homosexuality in an attempt to strike back at the police.

Accusing Gov. Passport No. 7439, Yu Tien Yung, of the Glen Deep Limited – Policeman – of the commission of unnatural offence on youths in the Compound, who, if they refuse to entertain his illicit desire, are beaten unmercifully until the point of death. The youths of the Compound have no means of escaping from him. This man, Yu, trades in opium, and superintends gambling generally. Labourers are afraid to report the matter, for fear of the after consequences, as Yu is a terrible man. Anonymous petitioner begs that an inquiry be instituted in this matter.

However, most complainants withheld their identities and, with no witnesses and no proof of wrongdoing, it is unlikely that the FLD or compound managers took action against police whom they relied upon to enforce discipline in the compounds.

With such poor prospects of getting their grievances addressed through official channels, mineworkers resorted to vigilantism. Disputes at Van Ryn Estate during the latter half of

31 FLD 236, 73/12, Governor Selborne to Colonial Office, London, 17 December 1906.
32 Ibid.
33 FLD 236, 73/32, The petition of Nos. 690, 841, 693, 923, 832, 933 and 850 of the New Heriot G.M. Co., on behalf of the labourers of that Mine, to H.E. the Superintendent, FLD, 9 April 1907.
34 FLD 236, 73/12, Inspector Myers to Secretary, FLD, 10 December 1906.
35 FLD 240, 76/6, Undated, Anonymous Petition. For other accounts of police involvement in coercive sex, see LD 1000, AG 398/05, Superintendent FLD to Attorney-General, Pretoria, 24 January 1905.
36 African miners sometimes fought with overbearing African ‘boss boys’ and expressed resentment against African mine police, but these relationships were not characterised by the same animosity and violence as on the Chinese compounds. See Breckenridge, ‘The Allure of Violence’.
1904 resulted in at least four fatalities. Fighting began in August and escalated in September when

a serious riot took place in which one of the Chinese police had his leg broken and others were hurt. Several of the labourers were imprisoned for this fight and one of them was heard to say that he would have his revenge when he came out. A few days after the release from prison of these men the two Chinese policemen who took the most active part in getting the rioters imprisoned were murdered in their room. A fracas then took place in the Compound, one labourer being killed and another mortally injured. These two are alleged to have been killed by the police to avenge the deaths of their comrades.37

In January 1905, the Simmer & Jack Mine experienced a violent conflict that ‘took the form of an organised attack on the quarters of the Chinese Police’.38

Later that year a Chinese policeman arrested a labourer at Rose Deep Mine for throwing rice on the ground. The mineworker’s colleagues demonstrated their solidarity by smashing windows in the compound and Superintendent Jamieson arrived the next morning to investigate:

The coolies agreed to leave the dealing of the case in my hands on condition that the Chinese police were dismissed. I told them that they had no voice in the selection of the police, but that I would personally go into the matter of their suitability later on. They then agreed to go down to work at 1 o’clock if the coolie who had been arrested was liberated. This I promised and ordered him to be set at liberty.

At this point the handcuffed labourer was released into the compound. A key was procured but the labourers would not allow Jamieson or any other white man to unlock the handcuffs. They insisted that the policeman who had made the arrest must do it.

I then walked across the Compound with the Police Sergeant in order to bring him to the coolie who was handcuffed for the purpose of having the handcuffs unlocked by him. Whilst on the way he was set upon and beaten by several coolies who were armed with crow bars, bits of iron, sticks and weapons of all sorts… He eventually fell between my legs and unfortunately his head projected beyond my feet and several coolies in the mob hit him again very badly in the head.

The attack stopped when Transvaal police entered the compound and threatened to fire on the labourers. The Sergeant was not expected to survive the assault attributed by Jamieson to ‘the feeling existing amongst the coolies against the Chinese Police’.39

A 1907 attack on the Chinese police quarters at the French Rand Mine was directly related to gambling.

Chinese Coolies raided the rooms of the Chinese Police, assaulted the occupants and robbed them of about £324 … The assailants were armed with hammers, hatchets, pick hafts etc, and their attack was so severe that some of the Police Boys were rendered unconscious … The reason ascribed for the outrage is that the Police Boys were in the habit of running a gambling den, and that their patrons among the labourers were very much indebted to them. The Police pressed for payment of debts, and the Coolies being unable to meet their demands, and being constantly worried and oppressed resolved to end it by raiding the room.40

37 GOV 159, GEN 894/04, Governor Milner to Lyttelton, Colonial Office, enclosures from FLD, 12 December 1904.
38 GOV 165, GEN 279/05, Riots and disturbances amongst Chinese labourers, Report by the Superintendent, FLD, Period November 23, 1904 to March 25, 1905.
40 LD 1543, Acting Commissioner, Transvaal Town Police to Secretary of the Law Department, Pretoria, 28 December 1907.
The FLD made a token attempt to establish boxes on each mine in which labourers could anonymously lodge their grievances. However, Chinese police took action to prevent abuses coming to light. A frustrated FLD inspector reported that ‘On the night of Sept. 17 [1905], a Coolie was struck by a policeman because the latter saw that he lodged a petition in the box. This box was also broken open and petitions destroyed in the same night… On my informing the General Manager of this fact, he said that there was no proof against the policemen [sic].’ Numerous reports mentioned Chinese police tampering with complaint boxes and the FLD experiment seems to have had little practical effect.

A Special Committee formed to discuss the problems of controlling Chinese mineworkers (consisting of the Superintendent of the FLD, the General Manager of the Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency, representatives from the South African Constabulary, a magistrate and the Chinese Consul-General) reported that the Chinese police were ‘not only unreliable, but resort[ed] to all sorts of malpractices, such as trading in opium, fostering gambling, extortion, administration of illegal corporal punishment … and illicit trading’. Compound Managers were even less charitable:

1. The Coolie as we know him here on the Rand is not morally or physically capable of acting as a Policeman.
2. He is utterly unreliable and his word cannot be taken on any subject whatsoever.
3. The Police extort all sorts of fines and commissions from the Coolies in a secret manner which is only discovered when a riot takes place on account of it.
4. There is no doubt that they receive bribes from opium smokers and gamblers in order that opium smoking and gambling can go on without being brought to the notice of the management.

Despite these pronouncements, no attempt was made to overhaul the force, and Chinese police, much like Selborne’s prefects, were free to pursue their own agendas as long as they assisted management in keeping the mines operational.

Murder and Suicide

The official records contain little on murder and suicide within the Chinese community on the mines. The authorities were convinced that gambling contributed to violence amongst Chinese workers but, as far as I can ascertain, their suspicions were not confirmed by any official inquiries or investigations. The mineworkers executed by the state were almost without exception found guilty of murder committed during ‘outrages’ or convicted for murders that occurred during riots on the mines. The vast majority of murders of Chinese labourers went unsolved and no effort was made to determine why so many men committed suicide. Thus, we are left with fragments of evidence suggesting a link between violent deaths and gambling. The Special Committee report contains one of the few references establishing a connection between gambling and violence within the compounds:

Gambling is carried on to an enormous extent on the mines… Evidence has been given, which we believe to be true, that the Chinese mine police employed at and within the compounds not

41 FLD 22, AG 115/05, Lord Selborne to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18 December 1905.
42 FLD 179, 36/31, Superintendent FLD to Secretary, Chamber of Mines, 30 July 1906.
43 Special Committee, p. 8.
44 FLD 179, 36/30, Edward Way, General Manager, Kleinfontein Mine to the Secretary, Kleinfontein Group Central Administration, 23 October 1905.
45 FLD 50, 6/1, Governor, Johannesburg to Secretary of State, London, 2 July 1906.
only lend their countenance to, but in a large measure participate in the profits resulting from this evil practice. The coolie who cannot pay his debts has collective pressure brought to bear upon him and is oppressed in the compound to such an extent that life becomes unbearable to him. When in this position three alternatives present themselves to him as a means of escape: 1) To put an end to his existence; 2) to desert for the purpose of robbing to get the wherewithal to liquidate his indebtedness; 3) to commit offences and go to prison... Cases have been brought to our notice where the labourer who sought to evade his obligations in this manner has been murdered.46

Although the Special Committee declared that 90 per cent of desertions were attributable to gambling debts, their solution was to introduce a new permit system to make it more difficult for labourers to abscond from mine premises.47 These measures may have increased the murder and suicide rate as indebted labourers had less opportunity to escape their persecutors.

A homicide committed in South Africa but prosecuted in China supports the theory that gambling debts often led to violence. When his cousin was murdered underground, Hong Feng-Lin was determined to bring the killers to justice. Hong claimed to know the identity of the two men responsible for the murder and informed an FLD inspector of his suspicions. When no action was taken, he purchased his discharge and returned to China where he reported the incident to the authorities. The alleged murderers were arrested when their ship arrived at Chinwangtao and, after being questioned and possibly tortured by the local police, both admitted their guilt. Wang Chao-Ming gave the following statement:

The deceased, Hon Fen-Hsiang, and I, had been gambling and I lost to him the sum of £60. When the deceased went down the shaft to work, I followed him and then struggled with him and tied his hands. Chang San then took a jumper [metal drill] and pierced him with it leaving him then – dead.48

This case is suggestive of how gambling vendettas may have played out in the compounds. Shortly before his murder, ‘Chief Police Boy’ Hon Fen-Hsiang had been discharged from his position and sent underground as a labourer. No longer protected as an agent of the mine authorities, and separated from his police colleagues, Hon became vulnerable to retribution.

Given the social isolation and deprivation they experienced, it is hardly surprising that some Chinese miners resorted to suicide. Chinese labourers on South African gold mines were effectively a captive workforce.49 They were indentured for a three-year period and no man was permitted to break his contract unless he had the means to reimburse his employer for the cost of transporting him to South Africa and returning him to China. Mine owners were determined to extract the maximum return from what was an initially costly investment and the Chinese, unlike African labourers, could not seek work in other sectors or abandon their contracts. The British government’s determination to get the mines producing at

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46 Special Committee, pp. 14–15. For the connection between gambling debts and murder, see also FLD 168, 34/00, H. Crocker, Travelling Inspector to Superintendent, FLD, 16 November 1907.
47 FLD 168, 34/00, Report by Major McAndrew, Inspector, FLD, April 1907.
49 Africans working on the diamond fields in Kimberley were housed in closed compounds and subjected to intense surveillance, but these men were free to return home following the completion of contracts that were measured in months instead of years. See W. Worger, South Africa’s City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 288–9. Moreover, as noted by P. Harries, Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1860–1910 (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1994), p. 68, the diamond fields ‘had to attract men from competing areas of employment... and, to do this, management and labor had to negotiate conditions that were acceptable to both parties’. In this competitive environment, mine owners learned to limit the worst abuses and offer sufficient wages to induce experienced black miners to re-contract. With their workers bound by three-year indentures, employers of Chinese labour had no such concerns.
maximum output to help rebuild the colony in the wake of the South African War made it sympathetic to the mine owners’ overall approach to the Chinese labour force. This convergence of circumstances led to a particularly oppressive labour regimen on the gold mines, one that could not be exactly replicated with African miners who were not under the same constraints.

African workers also had more of a social support network in the surrounding black communities, including greater access to women and recreational opportunities in township shebeens. Most African miners visited their families in their home areas at least once a year, if not more often, and some maintained families on the Rand. By contrast, Chinese miners had few opportunities for a social life outside of the mines. Some made weekend visits to the small Chinese quarter in Johannesburg, reportedly to purchase opium, but as a racially isolated, single-sex community largely confined to the compounds, their sense of alienation must surely have been greater than that of African migrants on the Rand.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of the Chinese labour force had likely been misled as to the type of work for which they had been contracted or simply had not understood what working on a gold mine entailed. Some disgruntled Chinese miners chose to go to jail rather than fulfil their contracts once they got a taste of working underground. Indeed, the General Manager of North Randfontein complained that “The hard labour they are subjected to in gaol is much easier than the ordinary work in the Mine, and it would greatly help us in general control of them if their life in gaol was made irksome to them instead of luxurious.”

Chinese labourers deserted in large numbers, but ultimately had nowhere to go and were rounded up, jailed and eventually returned to their mines. Desperate to get home, some Chinese even resorted to self-mutilation.

I beg to draw your attention to the frequency of the way in which the Chinese are mutilating themselves [by cutting off the fingertips of the left hand]. Within a very short time we have had five cases, the last being done today. This seems a serious loss to the Company and is only done with the hope of being repatriated. In view of the above fact it is quite time that something should be done to prevent this by meting [sic] out some severe punishment.

It does seem, however, that gambling debts were also a factor in the suicides that occurred every month. Less than a year after the first Chinese labourers arrived, Jamieson reported that gangs of professional gamblers have established themselves in the compounds, and are there living lives of luxurious ease at the expense of their less sophisticated country-men. One poor wretch took refuge here the other day from creditors towards whom he had incurred gambling debts to the extent of £200, and he informed me that life was no longer worth living seeing that he could never hope to clear himself.

Mineworkers clearly feared for their lives when they accumulated large debts and numerous reports stated that indebted workers deliberately committed offences for which they would be

50 Available records indicate that the heterosexual options for Chinese mineworkers were quite limited. Although they were said to ‘pay their attentions to the loose women of the nearest location’, it was illegal for Chinese men to have sex with white prostitutes. One unfortunate who was convicted of ‘unlawful carnal connection’ was sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment with hard labour and ten strokes. The same report notes that some 200 to 300 Chinese mineworkers were lined up at a makeshift brothel to avail themselves of the services of one white and one coloured prostitute. FLD 15, 147/56, Superintendent FLD to the Acting Lieut.-Governor, Pretoria, 7 January, 1905; GOV 1076, PS 37/17/07, Report of the Attorney-General’s Office, Pretoria, 2 May 1907.
51 GOV 1076, PS 37/9/07, A.W. Baker to the Attorney General, 31 January 1907.
53 FLD 19, AG 34/05, General Manager, North Randfontein, G.M. Co. Ltd. to Superintendent, FLD, 22 August 1905.
55 FLD 20, AGS2/05, Superintendent FLD to High Commissioner, Johannesburg, 19 August 1905.
imprisoned to avoid harassment.\(^{56}\) Gambling debts and suicide have been linked in other Chinese overseas communities. Chinese labourers in Malaya in the last two decades of the nineteenth century were said to have been prolific gamblers.

Many Chinese coolie immigrants were led... to believe that there was quick money to be made overseas, and that, with a few years' hard work, they could return to China with a lot of money. Although their unrealistic expectations were soon shattered after their arrival overseas, they still possessed a desire for quick money, and gambling seemed to be the way to obtain it as well as providing some diversion from a hard new life.

Just like mineworkers in South Africa, 'many of those who failed to pay off their gambling debts ended up in tragedy: they either committed suicide or sold their wives and children to pay off their debts'.\(^{57}\)

**Outrages**

Gambling was also thought to be behind many of the break-ins that so alarmed white farmers and shopkeepers. In a 1907 report, an FLD inspector informed Superintendent Jamieson that

> It must surely be a matter of common knowledge to Controllers that an unpaid creditor will often force his debtor into robbery... under the threat that if he remains in debt any longer an early opportunity will be taken of doing him to death. The unfortunate debtor is thus practically forced into outrage and crime.\(^{58}\)

Some Chinese mineworkers formed gangs in order to commit robberies:

> On the night of the 8th inst. these Chinese met at a gambling hall on the New Modderfontein Mine. The leading spirit of the gang known as ‘Big Dog’ who is really No. 7073, Lee Shun from the Glen Deep Mine, called the others aside and told them they were to go plundering, because his gambling debts were so big that he could not go back to his mine. He then served out to them 4 pick handles and three knives.\(^{59}\)

However, other labourers stole simply to survive when they deserted to escape the difficulties associated with life on the mines or threatening creditors. A magistrate who investigated farm raids outlined their plight:

> When arrested they are as a rule found destitute of everything except the clothes they stand in. During the time the mealie and other crops were on the land the deserters have always been able to forage for themselves without molesting anybody. Now that there are no crops on the lands these men have in order to live to rob the farm houses and kaffir kraals.\(^{60}\)

The fear of Chinese deserters seems out of proportion to the actual threat. Only four white deaths (along with those of several Indians and Africans) were attributed to Chinese

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56 FLD 202, file 45/56, FLD Inspector Fairfax to FLD Superintendent, 28 February 1907; FLD Chief Inspector Purdon to FLD Superintendent, 1 March 1907.


58 FLD 168, 34/00, Travelling Inspector Crocker to FLD Superintendent Jamieson, 16 November 1907.

59 FLD 54, 6/68, Captain H.F. Trew, District Commandant Pretoria District to the Chief Staff Officer, S.A.C. Johannesburg, 16 November 1905.

60 LD 1121, AG 3795/05, Report by Resident Magistrate, Pretoria to the Secretary of the Law Department, 20 August 1905.
'outrages', while the vast majority of incidents were simple burglaries. The murder of a white farmer in August 1905, for which four Chinese labourers were convicted and sentenced to death, led the government to supply shotguns and Martini-Henry rifles to rural white households throughout the Witwatersrand District, who were said to be suffering 'a feeling akin to terrorism'. A hostile, heavily-armed farming population making no distinction between starving vagabonds and organised criminal gangs, rendered desertion extremely dangerous. White sentiment is captured in a letter written by a woman whose husband shot a Chinese miner allegedly trying to break into their house: 'He is the first to kill a Chinaman stone dead and has been congratulated by everyone.' Although whites killed several Chinese miners in questionable circumstances, I have found no evidence of criminal charges being laid.

Beginning in mid-1905, mounted police patrols, sometimes accompanied by armed farmers and African police, made regular sweeps of the outlying areas to round up deserters, while 60 additional police posts staffed by 275 South African Constabulary officers were established to cordon off the areas through which potential deserters could travel. Jamieson assured the Attorney-General that the FLD was co-operating closely with local police.

To-morrow night I contemplate instituting a large drive on the West Rand where some 40/50 deserters have been making themselves particularly obnoxious. You will remember my mentioning to you the fact that a large disused shaft near the Princess Mine was utilized by the coolies as a harbour of refuge… When I receive information that they are there in considerable numbers, I will have arrangements made to 'bag' the whole lot.

The Commissioner of Police confirmed this collaboration: 'The Police in co-operation with the Foreign Labour Department have arranged in all cases where Chinese offenders have escaped punishment in consequence of want of identification that the suspects should be repatriated.'

Mine and FLD officials did not always observe legal niceties when dealing with Chinese suspects. Jamieson reported that he was on the track of a gang of housebreakers, who hire men to work for them by day, while they are recovering from the toils of the night. One could never hope to secure a conviction against them in court and yet they cannot be allowed to remain at large. I propose to deal with them after methods of my own, until power to repatriate them under the Ordinance can be obtained.

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61 GOV 990, PS 37/17/06, Return of Outrages Committed by Chinese Labourers in the Transvaal Town Police Area; Return of Outrages Committed by Chinese Labourers in the districts of the Transvaal outside the Town Police Area, 1 June 1905–28 February 1906. Africans and Indians may have been fatally victimised after the end date of this report, but the murder of whites is unlikely to have gone unrecorded. There were 107 outrages listed for the Transvaal Town Police Area, ranging from an incident where 'A Coolie snatched a sovereign from a Native' to a white proprietor who was killed when his store was dynamited. Outside the Transvaal Town Police Area, the severity of the 29 outrages extended from the theft of pumpkins to the murder of a white farmer.

62 LTG 166, Governor, Transvaal to Secretary of State, 18 September 1905; FLD 23, AG 168/05, Secretary to the Law Department to the Secretary to the Treasury, 22 January 1906.

63 LD 1121, AG 3795/05, Report by Resident Magistrate, Pretoria to the Secretary of the Law Department, 20 August 1905.

64 FLD 24, 26/06, Private letter written to Charles Moss by his sister Fanny, January 1906.

65 LD 1564, AG 259/08, Commissioner of Police, Johannesburg to Secretary to the Law Department, Pretoria, 25 January 1908.

66 LTG 166, Governor, Transvaal to Secretary of State, 18 September 1905; FLD 25, AG 147/81, Commissioner of Police, Johannesburg to Secretary to the Law Department, Pretoria, 13 March 1906.

67 FLD 24, 27/06, FLD Superintendent Jamieson to Attorney General, Pretoria, 16 February 1906.

68 FLD 23, AG147/81, Commissioner of Police to Secretary to the Law Department, 13 March 1906.

69 LD 855, AG4401/04, FLD Superintendent Jamieson to Secretary of the Law Department, Pretoria, 5 September 1905.
Following the capture of several labourers suspected of various offences, Jamieson appealed to the Attorney-General: ‘I sincerely hope that the Crown Prosecutor will be instructed not to omit even the slightest detail that may be laid before him, with a view to securing conviction, and that they will be all duly hanged, as there can be no doubt of their guilt.’ The Secretary of the Law Department felt compelled to warn the President of the Chamber of Mines against coercing confessions from Chinese labourers. Citing a case in which four labourers had been sentenced to death, he noted that the ‘Attorney General had such reasonable doubts as to whether the confessions were voluntary... that [he] had to advise that the sentence... be commuted into imprisonment for life. I am to point out that the ends of justice may be wholly defeated... if confessions are obtained from Chinese labourers by threats or intimidation’.

The authorities were determined to impress upon Chinese workers the dire consequences that awaited offenders. When four Chinese miners were scheduled for execution, Jamieson insisted that

at least one representative from each of the mines on which they were employed – the New Kleinfontein and the Simmer & Jack – attend the execution. It would be all very well publicly to announce that capital punishment had been inflicted; the statement would probably not be believed. Whereas ocular demonstration and the subsequent spreading of the news throughout the compounds concerned would have a most beneficial effect.

In mid-1906, the FLD posted a notification in all compounds listing labourers who had been sentenced to death and shot dead during the commission of crimes, along with those who had received lengthy prison terms. It concluded with a cautionary note:

When your contracts have expired you can all joyfully return home, whereas they will have to languish for life or tens of years in an alien gaol, separated by thousands of miles of sea and many intervening mountains from parents and children, whom they will possibly never see more again. I would wish you all to take warning of the fate of these men, and to remember that this is a country of law and order, and that all offenders will be most rigorously punished... You must know that already restrictive measures are being put in force. The good have to put up with the curtailment of liberty because of the actions of the bad, and your ‘face’ has been greatly prejudiced. In consequence of the lawless acts committed, the inhabitants in the neighbourhood of the mines, speak of you with detestation and classify you as wildbeasts [sic].

The violence inflicted upon deserters by white farmers, police and mine officials greatly outweighed the crimes committed by a few Chinese labourers. Mineworkers who fled the compounds for a respite from oppressive working conditions and persecution were faced with a white population that viewed them as dangerous vermin:

...hiding in dongas by day, slinking across the farms by night, dodging South African constabulary patrols, chivied [sic] by Boer farmers, chased by kaffirs, stealing fowls, robbing lonely homesteads, barefooted, half-starved, desperate, with an Asiatic contempt of life in their blood, and Chinese cruelty and callousness in their hearts. No one can understand them, they understand no one.

70 FLD 52, 6/77, FLD Superintendent Jamieson to Attorney-General, Pretoria, 14 December 1905.
71 FLD 25, AG 57/06, Secretary to the Law Department to the President, Chamber of Mines, 6 March 1906.
72 FLD 22, AG 158/05, Superintendent FLD to Attorney-General, Pretoria, 26 October 1905. To be fair, Jamieson also thought that the presence of Chinese labourers at the execution ‘might afford the poor creatures some small measure of consolation to quit this life with a knowledge that there was present at least one friendly or familiar face to which they could bid a tacit farewell, instead of being dispatched amid a crowd of unsympathetic strangers’.
73 GOV 990, PS 37/17/06, Notification Addressed to all Chinese Indentured Labourers on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 25 June 1906.
Conclusion

For the duration of their three-year contracts, Chinese labourers were housed in a single-sex, prison-like environment, in which corrupt Chinese mine police wielded an inordinate amount of authority. Gambling and extortion schemes flourished and mineworkers who fell behind in their payments risked being murdered. This climate of insecurity invited both pre-emptive action and retaliation, and ignited a cycle of violence on the mines that sometimes spread to neighbouring areas as indebted mineworkers committed robberies. Mine and government authorities reacted forcefully when whites were victimised or productivity was threatened by desertion and strikes, but did little to address violence within the compounds. Instead, they exacerbated the situation through their support of the Chinese police. The combination of a captive labouring population, an entrenched culture of gambling, a venal and oppressive Chinese police force and an official administration that failed to protect workers’ interests produced an epidemic of violence for the duration of the Chinese presence on the goldfields.

Gary Kynoch
Department of History, Dalhousie University, 6135 University Avenue, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, B3H 4P9. E-mail: gkynoch@dal.ca