Private and Confidential:
The Chinese Mine Labourers and ‘Unnatural Crime’

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A study of subaltern classes is hindered by the fact that as a subordinate group of unfree or indentured people, completely lacking in power, their voices are not readily recorded and are therefore not heard (M. Carter and K. Sivaramakrishnan).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, 63 659 Chinese were imported to work as unskilled labourers on the Witwatersrand gold fields. The impact these Chinese workers had on both South African and British political history is generally acknowledged and has been widely researched.

One aspect of the political furor surrounding the anti-Chinese lobby was the abhorrence at the homosexual activity – labelled ‘unnatural crime’ – which was held to be prevalent among the Chinese on the mines. Once it became a political scandal, it was believed to have sealed the fate of Chinese labour in the Transvaal. But, despite this political significance and the fact that the allegations and reports of homosexuality among the Chinese on the mines are relatively well documented,1 in contrast to African labour,2 the subject remains historiographically underexplored. The purpose of this article is not only to focus on its historical significance on the centenary of the importation of Chinese indentured labour, but also to consider the reaction to Chinese homosexuality as yet another prejudice of the European orientalists’ construction of the ‘other’. At the same time, it attempts to delve into the world of this subaltern class to try and give voice to both the Chinese labourers’ experience and reaction, adding another dimension to the ‘homosexual debate’.

1. Transvaal Archives Depot (hereafter TAD), Foreign Labour Department (hereafter FLD), 236 no 73/ - 73/32, Unnatural crime; Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), Colonial Office (hereafter CO), 537/540 no. 38767/06, Secret: Chinese coolies.
Historiographical Neglect

After numerous efforts to resolve the labour shortage facing the gold industry in the immediate post South African War period, the Chamber of Mines decided in favour of the importation of indentured Chinese. This facet of early South African gold-mining history has received specialised and detailed historiographical attention from as far back as the 1920s. There are a number of reasons which explain the popularity of the subject, particularly as the topic of local and overseas master’s and doctoral studies. First, the amount of research material is vast and varied, and therefore a fairly wide range of sources is generally accessible. Secondly, the topic comprises a very manageable unit of study; the Chinese were recruited, exploited and repatriated within less than a decade between 1904 and 1910. Thirdly, the Chinese experiment had ramifications in numerous fields: British imperial policy; British elections; South African politics; the local labour market; international migrant labour systems; and the economic development of the gold industry.4

However, until recently, the Chinese labourers’ experience of the indentured system on the Rand has not received much historical attention. As historian Peter Richardson pointed out, ‘the more overtly human and individual elements’ have been overlooked.5 As a subaltern class the details of their experiences are virtually invisible. In addition to their lower status, they did not have easy recourse to record keeping or access to written sources, and it is mainly for this reason that they remain neglected in the historical narrative. To obtain information about the individual indenture experience, the researcher is heavily dependent on ‘surrogate sources’,6 such as the reports of officials, including commissions of inquiry and court cases, as well as accounts by contemporary observers. In each case, as


Marina Carter, author of *Voices of Indenture*, argues, the ‘transcribers ... would have been distanced from the migrant’s situation’. Added to this is the political bias of the author, as well as the prevalence of an ‘orientalist’ approach to all things Chinese. These sources inevitably say more about the writer than the subject. The indentured labourer is therefore doubly obscured, first by a lack of direct testimony, and secondly by pejorative ‘orientalist’ perceptions.

One facet of the indentured experience which, despite available source material and its political ramifications, has also generally been ignored is homosexual activity among the Chinese. Of the major works on the subject of Chinese indentured labour, P.C. Campbell refers to it in a paragraph, I. Meyer briefly considers its political presence, J.A. Reeves touches on it in a page, and Richardson merely alludes to it. Besides these brief references, there is one superficial article written in 1974 which focuses on Transvaal Chinese homosexuality as a political and ‘moral scandal’. The author, J. Lehmann, is the son of a British member of parliament who was in government at the time of the investigation into homosexuality on the mines. He provides a brief account of the episode in the context of British parliamentary politics, drawing on the diary entries and campaign notes of his father, and alludes to its role in the termination of the indenture system.

More recently, Ronald Hyam has briefly discussed the prevalence of homosexuality among Chinese labourers. But he merely makes the point that contrary to contemporary allegations, the Chinese were not responsible for introducing sodomy to the African miners, as was suggested, ‘since it was already practised by them’. This view is reiterated by Marc Epprecht, who focuses specifically on the 1907 Commission of Enquiry into homosexual activity among the ‘black African’ mine labourers on the Witwatersrand. He devotes a few paragraphs to the Chinese ‘scandal’ and concludes that after the investigation into its prevalence the furore against the Chinese abated. The topic therefore remains relatively under-explored both in terms of its historical significance as well as of the indentured Chinese themselves.

Constructing the ‘Other’

From the outset of their campaign to obtain the support of the Transvaal government, the local white population, the British Colonial Office and the Chinese authorities, in order to enact the indentured labour importation legislation, there was widespread outcry against the idea. Regardless of the particular stance on the scheme – be it the mine-owners’ pro-Chinese campaign or the anti-Chinese reaction – elements of ‘orientalism’ were evident as perceptions of the Chinese as an ‘inferior other’ predominated. Even the anti-Chinese lobby, which emanated from opposing positions of ‘racism’ and ‘humanitarianism’, was clouded by attitudes that were blatantly anti-Sinitic and ‘orientalist’. These attitudes persisted and intensified throughout the duration of the scheme culminating in politicians in both Britain and the Transvaal making political capital from the debate in 1906 and 1907 respectively.13

One of the main concerns of the anti-Chinese protagonists was the economic competition the ‘easterner’ would pose to the white worker.14 The stereotype of being far more energetic was construed as a potential national danger, while perceptions of what was termed ‘Celestial vices’15 captured the imagination. It was therefore argued that apart from bringing financial ruin, their presence would mean ‘moral ruin’.16 The latter aspect permeated much of the rhetoric as the Chinese workers were denounced as ‘morally pestiferous’ and it was averred that ‘nameless vices [would] be introduced among the sober, steady pure minded population of Johannesburg’.17 It was argued that ‘anyone who has close acquaintances with Chinese coolies … will testify that … where they live in celibate communities, the peculiarly degrading devices which, unquestionably, they often carry with them, make them a population highly undesirable as immigrants’.18 Moreover, the fact that the proposed importation ordinance did not make allowances for the importation of a proportionate number of women, or the wives of the indentured men, resulted in allegations that ‘in practice the rule would be “unmarried men preferred”; and one can imagine the moral and other evils that

16. TAD, Secretary of Native Affairs (hereafter SNA), 198/03, Secretary East Rand Vigilance Association, Letter to Mr Chamberlain re native labour, 16 Jan. 1903.
must follow from the herding of tens of thousands of these men in filthy compounds for three long years at a stretch’.19

This predisposed fixation with moral ruin was to culminate in the ‘scandal’ which the Transvaal government, mining magnates and British parliament tried so desperately to contain. The widespread opposition also led to importation legislation with a dual purpose – lenient conditions to quell cries of ‘slavery’ and ‘inhumanity’ on the one hand, and stringent measures to assuage fears of ‘labour intrusion’ and ‘moral decay’ on the other. The net result was that 17 of the 35 sections of the Labour Importation Ordinance were purely restrictive.20 The labourers were to be employed only on the Witwatersrand as unskilled miners, and they were not to be employed in 55 occupations, except in unskilled positions.21 They were to be issued with a passport, reside on the premises where they were employed, and could not leave without a permit which would be granted for periods of less than 48 hours. All labourers had to enter into a contract of service not exceeding three years, after which they were to be returned to their country of origin. They could not own landed property or engage in trade. Other offences, such as desertion, refusal to work, absenteeism or employment other than that stipulated, was punishable by imprisonment or a fine.22

A Foreign Labour Department (FLD) was established with a Superintendent of Labour to manage the scheme. The ordinance regulated the administrative officers and provided for inspectors who were to monitor the implementation of conditions, general treatment and complaints of the labourers.23 It also prescribed specific conditions for the system of recruitment, the passage to South Africa, compound and ablution facilities and medical attention, as well as dietary requirements.24 Many of these stipulations had been included at the request of the Chinese authorities, including a prohibition on corporal punishment by the employer.25 The participation of the Chinese government in the contract regulations revealed an attempt to combat the exploitation of Chinese labour which had taken place globally over the previous four decades. This was achieved within an increasingly hostile international environment, since by the end of the nineteenth century countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia had

21. Ibid., section 1, p. 75; section 9, a, p. 79; schedule 1, p. 93.
22. Ibid., section 15, p. 81; section 18, p. 82; section 19, pp. 82-3; section 9, p. 79; section 14, p. 81; section 25, p. 86; section 26, p. 86.
all implemented Chinese exclusion acts. Despite this, the Labour Importation Ordinance was still described as the ‘most unpopular of all the unpopular measures’, as it satisfied neither the pro- nor anti-lobbyists.

Once the Chinese arrived on the Rand, the resistance to the scheme did not subside. The objections ranged from the outcry against the inhumane conditions they had to endure to the abhorrence at the outrages and murders they had committed. Moreover, mine management, white miners and Chinese police abused the Chinese labourers flagrantly, which often resulted in disturbances, riots and fatal confrontations. The labourers were invariably subjected to corporal punishment, while management was known to extend its power to include the ‘humiliation of the beam and the cruelty of Asiatic torture’. In ‘orientalist’ fashion, the authorities attributed these confrontations to the ‘moral weakness of the Chinese as a racial type’, as well as the ‘inherent Chinese vice’ whose ‘sleeping passions could be unpleasantly aroused’.

The Subaltern Context

In his study of African migrant miners, Patrick Harries makes the point that ‘the picture of life on the [Witwatersrand gold] mines has depended on the description of whites who attempted to speak for them’. The Transvaal Chinese miners were in a similar situation as they were mainly illiterate, and therefore their ‘voices’ and experiences were also only indirectly heard. Any recorded communication was either written by a second party or recorded by an interpreter. Since ‘orientalism’

26. Richardson, Chinese Mine Labour, 35.
31. TAD, SNA 90 na 138/03, correspondence: Chinese labour report.
was such an intrinsic part of European reflection, texts and reports were prejudiced, and are therefore of limited value as sources of information on the nature and context of the indentured experience. Moreover, research of the subaltern class is seriously hampered by the paucity of material on the experiences of individuals.33 Through a painstaking process of sifting the voluminous material, including government records, mine management reports, journalist accounts, political propaganda and the sparse – and hitherto unused – information emanating from the indentured labourers themselves,34 a vague reconstruction of the social milieu of the Transvaal indentured Chinese does, however, emerge.

Richardson managed to ‘piece together’ an astoundingly clear picture of where the Chinese indentured labourers came from and what their backgrounds were.35 This context is crucial for an understanding of the labourers’ ability to cope with and endure the oppressive system they were introduced to and their reaction to the allegations of ‘unnatural vice’. Thirty-two of the 34 shipments of recruits, that is 62 006 or 97.3 per cent of the total, who went to the Transvaal were from the northern Chinese territories.36 The two provinces which predominated, Chihli and Shantung, were mainly rural in character and the overwhelming majority of emigrants came from the lowest stratum of this economy. They included poor peasants, rural wage labourers, migrant urban labourers and the destitute.37 Richardson contends that the high rate of ‘medical rejects during the preliminary selection period’ attests to a background of ‘considerable distress’.38 Poverty was endemic in these regions as inhabitants were subjected to floods, droughts and severe famines.39 In 1900, this critical situation had contributed to the Boxer rebellion, followed by years of oppression. These conditions in the northern provinces were compounded by the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 and the closure of Manchuria. Traditionally, this region had provided employment for

33. Carter, Voices from Indenture, 10.
34. Most of this material is in the TAD, Foreign Labour Department (FLD). The few ‘letters home’ were found in FLD 188-189, na 40/- 40/52: Transmission of labourers’ letters. These letters are a rare find because policy stated that letters that did not reach their destination were returned to the sender or destroyed. See also petitions in FLD 240-241, na 76/- 76/32: Complaints of Chinese labourers.
37. Richardson, ‘Coolies, Peasants and Proletarians’, 77-9; Campbell, Chinese Coolie Emigration, 189.
thousands of seasonal Chinese agricultural labourers, but, as a result of war, they faced starvation and were therefore amenable to recruitment. That poverty was a key factor in the lives of the Chinese labourers is substantiated by the eagerness of the Chinese authorities for large-scale emigration and the interest they showed in the effective implementation of the allotment system.

The concern about remittances was naturally also common among the labourers and their families, as is clear from the numerous enquiries about money which did not reach its destination. The threat of destitution which was rife in China at this time is corroborated by Western observers. For example, missionary T.W. Pearce wrote ‘the word “poverty” takes on a new meaning when used of the Chinese …It is not easy to imagine a lower standard of human existence than is met with in the mud villages of the worst districts.’ Richardson believes that the connection between the ‘poverty’, ‘chronic ecological instability’ and ‘rebellion’, as the causes of Chinese migration, have not been sufficiently emphasised. However, given the miserable state of affairs, it is quite obvious why thousands of Chinese chose indentured work in the Transvaal mines, renewed their contracts, and induced others to follow them.

In considering the social conditions of the Chinese on the Transvaal mines, it has to be conceded that in the face of the high cost of recruitment and accommodation as well as political opposition and scrutiny, it was to the material interests of the Rand magnates that the coolies should be well treated, comfortably housed and fed, and secure of justice. Were the Chinese to find themselves downtrodden and unhappy, they would neither renew their contracts nor advise their friends to come and join them.
The Chinese did arrive in adequate numbers and there is evidence indicating that brother followed brother creating ‘chain migration’ — despite the short duration of the experiment (1904-1910). This suggests that the conditions and treatment on the Rand, however appalling, did not eclipse the benefits of the relatively high remuneration. Coming from a desperately poverty-stricken background, the Chinese generally endured the harsh treatment of the contracted period for the sake of the much-needed money.

Numerous contemporary Europeans believed, however, that because the Chinese were confined to the compounds, debarred from social amenities and their movements circumscribed, they had been denied ‘basic civil rights’. While not disputing this judgement, there is evidence which offers a glimpse of a world that was created by the Chinese labourer beyond the hours spent toiling underground or apart from the monotony of compound life. Similar to African migrants on the mines, the Chinese were not what Harries has termed ‘unrelenting victims’, and he argues that critics who assigned the ‘cultural expression of the black workers in the cities to the realm of the abnormal or degenerate’, obscured whole areas of life in the compounds. He claims that ‘beneath the surface, behind closed doors, and hidden within the intimacy of the workers’ daily life lies another picture’. This world was also referred to by missionary and anthropologist, Henri Junod, who wrote that ‘in the middle of this general ugliness the blacks succeeded in creating a good deal that [was] picturesque’.

Not unlike their African migrant counterparts, the Chinese indentured labourers also attempted to recreate the world they were accustomed to by invoking customs, traditions and other social practices during their leisure hours. From various Chinese petitions and official reports it is evident that leisure time included celebrations of Chinese festivals, while on Sundays and other holidays, on the provision of a pass, the Chinese would ‘stroll in the woods’, ‘buy fruit’, visit ‘Cantonese eating-house[s]’, ‘brothels’, ‘gambling dens’ and other compounds, while some took cab rides in the surrounding region. There were also
accounts of the Chinese having picnics, performing in bands and sacrificing food to the gods of heaven.54 Another popular and traditional pastime was performing in or watching Chinese theatre.55

These sanguine descriptions of the Chinese on the Rand – be they of Chinese or European origin – do indicate that some of the Chinese were able to ‘create a world of their own’, albeit a form of ‘cultural resilience and adaptation’56 within an alien and controlled environment. These experiences do not, however, refute the existence of dissatisfaction and exploitation.

Apart from the strictures of compound life, another aspect which was perceived of as having contributed to the abnormality of the Transvaal Chinese indentured experience and which elicited reaction, was the lack of family life. Labour historians, such as Dunbar Moodie and Harries, have focused on the implications of African labourers who became ‘increasingly divorced...from their womenfolk’ as they ‘worked longer and more frequent periods on the mines’.57 Chinese labourers were faced with a similar, but more extended separation often exceeding three years. As was the case with Africans, there is evidence to suggest that some of the Chinese also adopted various ways of coping with this ‘all-male environment’.58

During the debates around the compilation of the Labour Importation Ordinance, it was strongly contested that ‘in the interests of morality it was physically necessary that [the Chinese] should be accompanied by [their wives]’.59 The mine magnates reluctantly conceded to this demand against their better economic judgement. Although the contract regulations made allowances for the introduction of the labourers’ wives under the same conditions as their own,60 there was no prescribed proportional percentage for importation, as was the case in many other indenture systems.61 During the entire experiment a total of about

56. Carter, Voices of Indenture, 100.
58. Harries, Work, Culture and Identity, 207.
60. Ordinances of the Transvaal, Labour Importation Ordinance, no. 17, 1904, section 33.
half a dozen Chinese wives, and a few dozen children, arrived on the Rand. Although this was the smallest figure recorded for colonies receiving both free and indentured Chinese, it was very much in line with the general trend. For example, between 1860 and 1880, 53,242 Chinese men and only 30 Chinese women arrived in Australia, and 5017 men and only 16 women went to New Zealand.

The reason for this imbalance in the sex ratio is ascribed to the fact that the Chinese did not usually take their wives away from their homes and ancestral villages. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was ‘so strong a sentiment in China against any respectable woman leaving home even with her husband that very few went to America or Australia. The few who went to California were for the most part large-footed women of ... disreputable character.’ The reference to the size of the feet points to another aspect of the lifestyle of Chinese women -- footbinding. This practice had ‘darkened the lives of most Chinese women for several centuries’ and had impaired their capacity for labour, as well as their ability to walk. The peasant classes imitated the upper classes and continued to practise it long after the Qing dynasty had denounced it. It was particularly prevalent in the rural areas of the north Chinese provinces. This severe physical impediment must have played a significant role in the reluctance of women to go abroad. But as sinologist John Fairbank points out, research on this topic is virtually non-existent. It is the least studied aspect of Chinese society and both its ‘social and psychic repercussions ... call for historical reappraisal’.

Throughout the indenture period there were reports of Chinese labourers frequenting brothels, while in a few cases some were ‘known to have intercourse with [African] girls’. The latter often led to violent friction between the Chinese

63. According to S.W. Greif, The Overseas Chinese in New Zealand (Singapore, 1974), 26 in 1896 there were 3700 Chinese men and only 14 women in New Zealand; B. Sacks, South Africa: An Imperial Dilemma (New Mexico, 1967), 66-7.
68. Fairbank, China, 173-5.
69. Ibid., 173, 176.
70. PRO, CO 291/100 no. 23988/06, Chinese coolies, executions and trials, week to 17 June 1906; TAD, FLD 236 no 73-., unnatural crime, A. Ross: report on unnatural vice, 24 Aug. 1906.
and African men,71 but did not result in any legal action. On the other hand, Chinese who had ‘carnal connections’ with white female prostitutes, were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to jail with hard labour.72 One such case was the arrest of two European men together with a European and Coloured woman for contravening the Immorality Ordinance of 1903.73 They allegedly had a brothel at 8 Fox Street in Johannesburg and when it was raided by the police they found between two and three hundred Chinese Coolies were waiting in the back yard of the house and were being admitted two at a time by [John Jock] Jacobs and [William John] Matthews to the room occupied by the female accused. When the police entered this room they found the two Chinese accused there, Lu Te Sheng (no. 38,581), fully dressed, sitting on a sofa, and Wee Chang Juen (no. 19,969) with his clothes undone, having just completed or being just about to have connection with the accused Martha Muller.74

While Lu Te Sheng and the hundreds of Chinese waiting in the backyard were not prosecuted, Wee Chang Juen was convicted under the Immorality Ordinance ‘as a native, [defined] as a person manifestly belonging to any of the native or coloured races of Africa, Asia, America or St. Helena’ for attempting to have ‘unlawful carnal connection with a white women in circumstances not amounting to rape’.75 He was sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment with hard labour and ten strokes. The two European men were sentenced to two-and-a-half years’ imprisonment, Emma Grovernor to twelve months and Muller to six, all with hard labour.76

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72. TAD, LD 1436 AG 1594/07, Despatch from Secretary of State on the subject of alleged prosecution of certain persons in Johannesburg for keeping a brothel frequented by Chinese coolies, Attorney General report, May 1907; GOV, 1076 PS 37/15/07, Chinese prosecution for keeping a brothel frequented by Chinese coolies, report of the Attorney General’s office, May 1907.

73. Transvaal Ordinance 46 of 1903.

74. TAD, LD 1436 AG 1594/07, despatch from Secretary of State on the subject of alleged prosecution of certain persons in Johannesburg for keeping a brothel frequented by Chinese coolies, Attorney General report, May 1907; PRO, CO 291/117 no. 18568/07, Chinese coolies, prosecution of certain persons for keeping brothel, 6 May 1907.

75. TAD, GOV 1076 PS 37/15/07, Chinese prosecution for keeping a brothel frequented by Chinese coolies, report of the Attorney General’s office, May 1907; Selborne to Elgin, 17 July 1907.

76. TAD, Law Department (hereafter LD), 1436 AG 1594/07, despatch from Secretary of State on the subject of alleged prosecution of certain persons in Johannesburg for keeping a brothel frequented by Chinese coolies, Attorney General report, May 1907; PRO, CO 291/117 no. 18568/07, Chinese coolies, prosecution of certain persons for keeping brothel, 6 May 1907.
Instances such as these gave rise to fears that the Chinese might sexually assault and rape European women. This was indicative of another perception associated with ‘orientalism’, in which the ‘other’ was perceived to have ‘unbridled sexual lusts’. However, on request of the British House of Commons, the allegations were investigated and proven completely unfounded.  

Although nothing is known of the few Chinese women who arrived on the Transvaal mines, a great deal of public commotion ensued as a result of the general absence of them. The lobbyists against the Chinese labour scheme had speculated negatively about the consequences of a scarcity of Chinese women, claiming that it would result in ‘moral and other evils’. It was also argued that ‘the herding together of some 45 000 men not of a high type, deprived as they are of the opportunity of any intercourse with their womankind, indeed with any women at all [would] lead to the rise of an unmentionable state of things’.  

Ironically, it was this factor which later contributed to what the anti-lobbyists wanted. It was believed by many that the absence of Chinese women had resulted in heightened homosexual activity – labelled ‘unnatural vice’ and ‘unnatural crime’ – and once it became a political scandal, had ultimately ‘sealed the fate of Chinese labour’.

‘Unnatural Crime’

As a political issue, the outrage over homosexuality among the Chinese labourers was historically significant. It should, however, be considered as yet another prejudice of the European ‘orientalists’ construction of the ‘other’. Moreover, it was a reaction heightened by the puritanical ethic of late-Victorian and early-Edwardian England. In the 1890s, the homophobia of British society had reached its zenith and by the start of the twentieth century, ‘the homosexual act ... became treachery against the state in the minds of many people’. The suggestions of homosexual and other ‘unnatural activity’ among the Chinese prior to their arrival...
on the Rand created fertile ground for exaggerated estimates of its prevalence, and accounted for the disproportionate political reaction to it.84

At the time of the investigation into the matter, it was portrayed by many not so much as a result of the depraved compound system and the absence of female partners, but as yet another negative trait of Chinese society. Much of the contemporary rhetoric emanated from a puritanical obsession to project a particular image on the Chinese.85 On the other hand, many shared the view of the Prime Minister of the Liberal ministry, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who pronounced in 1906 that ‘such dangers were certain to arise where the ordinary social conditions were so commonly inverted’.86

This was a view upheld by numerous historians of indentured and other bonded labour, who, maintained that compounds and mining capital themselves were generally responsible for the development of this ‘undesirable form of sexual expression’.87 As will be shown later, this view has subsequently been questioned and refuted by scholars of homosexuality.88

Prior to the reports of ‘unnatural vice’ by the Reverend Alexander Frances and Leopold Luyt89 which led to the appointment of a commission of investigation in 1906, there was evidence to suggest that mine management had been aware of homosexuality among the Chinese, but chose to ignore or conceal it.90 Knowledge of the ‘crime of sodomy’ was widespread in the mine compounds even prior to the introduction of the Chinese.91 It was practised by the African labourers on mines, and was believed to be most common among those from Portuguese East Africa. In their studies of migrant labour, both Moodie and Harries focus on this aspect, as does Epprecht in his work on the 1907 commission.92 They interpret migrant

85. Spencer, Homosexuality, 253-4.
86. Campbell, Chinese Coolie Emigration, 211.
88. See below, as well as Zackie Achmat’s discussion of the work by Charles van Onselen, Dunbar Moodie and Patrick Harries in ‘Apostles of Civilized Vice’, 97-106, and Epprecht, ‘Unnatural Vice’.
89. TAD, FLD 236 no 73/-, unnatural crime, Lord Selborne to R. Solomon, 2 Aug. 1906; Governor Selborne to the Earl of Elgin, 1 Oct. 1906; PRO, CO 291/114 no. 24548/06, Chinese coolies’ conditions in compounds, 5 July 1906.
90. TAD, FLD 236 no 73, unnatural crime, R. Solomon to Superintendent of Labour, 27 Feb. 1906. For sources emanating from the Chinese, see, for example, TAD, FLD 240 no 76/6, complaints by Chinese, Wit Deep, anonymous petition, n.d., and excerpt from a letter received by the Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department, from W.P. Thomas, Interpreter, 1 Apr. 1907.
91. TAD, FLD 236 no 73/-, unnatural crime, Lord Selborne to R. Solomon, 2 Aug. 1906; TAD, FLD 236 no 73/-, unnatural crime, memorandum on the prevalence of unnatural crime amongst Chinese indentured labourers on the Witwatersrand, 11 Aug. 1906; Epprecht dates the first appearance to 1892: Epprecht, ‘Unnatural Vice’, 128.
homosexuality as ‘functional to rural society’. Harries explains that ‘mine managers turned a blind eye to bukhontxana [mine marriages]’ and argues that ‘in reality, mine managers had to put up with, if not encourage bukhontxana, if they wished to reproduce the labour force at their disposal’. Sex between men was known by contemporaries as ‘hlobonga’ but was, as one inspector put it in 1902, ‘a point with which [he thought] inadvisable for [them] to interfere. It is a common practise among natives and would be impossible in [his] opinion for an inspector to cope with.’ A similarly dismissive sentiment was expressed about the Chinese – ‘it does exist to a certain extent, as indeed it does in almost every race, including Englishmen in England’ – but such views did not reflect the attitudes of the majority of ‘puritanical Europeans’.

According to Frances and Luyt, homosexual intimacy was widespread among the Chinese in the compounds. They stated that the ‘sleeping accommodation of the coolies was calculated to produce this result, as they lie side by side, separated only at intervals of three or four by a curtain.’ They also contended that ‘the practice of sodomy took place in the seclusion of the compounds, as well as the open veld, and that their allegations were supported by the prevalence of syphilis in the rectum among Chinese in hospital’. They alleged that the Chinese were ‘teaching these practices to the natives, and, presumably, communicating the ... diseases to them’. After thorough investigation, most of what these two men had claimed was eventually discounted, but the furore persisted.

The outcry which resulted in the British House of Commons taking action was not only concerned with the existence of sexual acts such as ‘sodomy’, the practise of ‘professional male prostitution’, or the outbreak of ‘venereal disease’, but also with the belief that the Transvaal European population had been aware of it, and had condoned it. FLD Superintendent, J.W. Jamieson, requested the Governor of the Transvaal, Lord Selborne, to inform the British government that ‘the greatest indignation prevails amongst his inspectors that insinuations should have been made that they could have been so far forgetful of their birth and traditions as in any way to connive at any suppression of fact relating to this...
subject'.102 The highly confidential investigation, led by Commissioner of Patents, J.A.S. Bucknill, concluded that the main allegations were true, but had been exaggerated.103 On Bucknill's recommendation, steps were taken to identify suspected 'catamites'104 and repatriate them as 'undesirables'.105 Within weeks of the investigation, applications were made for the repatriation of 131 'coolies' as 'undesirable characters'.106 That the procedure ran the risk of committing injustices was readily acknowledged by contemporaries, and is illustrated by the following case:

A certain coolie was suspected, on information laid by the Mine Police, of being a catamite ... On learning of what had taken place the coolie in question indignantly repudiated the charge, and stated that his being singled out was due to fact of his having refused proposals of an improper nature made to him by a certain other individual on his mine ... The latter denied the accusation flatly, and there was consequently no means of arriving at the whole truth beyond having the individual originally accused examined by the medical officer ... The result of the medical examination was to prove that this individual was innocent of the crime alleged.107

Aware of the danger of false accusation, as well as possible legal action for damages against defamation of character, the Transvaal government declared that it was prepared to risk the consequences of the system suggested by Bucknill, in order that 'no stone may be left unturned to expel from the Rand the small minority of coolies who [were] given to the practices referred to.108

Another precaution which had been taken earlier against homosexual activity was the prohibition of Chinese theatre. It was believed to be one of the main sources of male prostitution, as the 'actor on the Chinese stage and catamite' were regarded as synonymous.109 The initial rationale for the abandonment of theatre
was related to the jealousy which arose among the actors’ paramours which had often resulted in murders or suicides.110

Regarding the accusation that the Chinese were teaching homosexuality to African labourers, it was concluded that ‘the Chinese would not stoop to intercourse with blacks, for whom they affect the greatest contempt’.111 If this were the case, it reflected a racial hierarchy that was shared with, if not propagated by, the Europeans. This is evident in a European report on the matter which claimed that the ‘South African natives have little or nothing left to learn in the direction of vice ... [and they did] not believe that our “black brother” is likely to deteriorate to any further extent either morally or physically merely on account of meeting the Chinese’.112

Scholars of homosexuality in South Africa, such as Zackie Achmat, have argued that homosexuality among Africans on the mines was not ‘alien to indigenous cultures’, but rather that the compound presented ‘a new space of desire’.113 In the Chinese case there was the context beyond the constraints of the capitalists’ compounds which likewise sets the whole question of homosexuality in a broader perspective. As in other societies, homosexual practices were integral to Chinese culture. Dating back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.), Chinese history recorded male homosexuality as an accepted part of society.114 Numerous emperors were known for their homosexual relations, one of whom gave the phrase ‘cut sleeve’ to the Chinese language to denote homosexual passion. Apparently, the Emperor cut off the sleeve of his own garment in order not to disturb his lover, who was sleeping on it.115 In the sixteenth century, Western travellers remarked on the pervasiveness of boy prostitutes and male prostitution116 and seventeenth-century Chinese literature and drama highlighted it.117 It was believed that although same-sex relations were traditionally accepted within

111. Ibid.
112. TAD, FLD 236 file 73/-, unnatural crime, Acting Mayor Roodepoort-Maraisburg to Private Secretary High Commissioner, 13 Aug. 1906.
117. Ng, ‘Homosexuality and the State’
Chinese and other Eastern societies, the advent of Western missionaries and modernisers from the mid-seventeenth century began to stigmatise them.118

As far as the Rand Chinese labourers were concerned, it was reported that ‘the inhabitants of northern China undoubtedly practise[d] pederasty’.119 It was explained that

owing to the extreme cold of the Northern winter, the universal sleeping place is a raised brick platform, heated by a system of flues, and every individual divests himself of all clothing, prior to retiring to rest. As the men lie huddled together, under cotton quilts, it would be strange were unnatural passions not inflamed, and in military camps and other aggregations of men in China connection per annum [sic] is extremely common.120

In a confidential report to the Earl of Elgin, Governor Selborne made a similar observation. As a result of his private inquiry, he ascertained that the ‘vice [was] practised to a certain extent here as it is in China’, concluding that this was ‘no doubt due to the different standard of morality which prevails among Western nations from that which prevails among certain Eastern races, of which the Northern Chinese are one’.121

In the light of this typically ‘orientalist’ view, it is important to note that there is another dimension to the homosexuality debate which none of the scholars focusing on homosexuality among African miners addresses, and that is the indignation shown by some Chinese labourers accused of homosexual practices. In the aftermath of the initial investigations, numbers of Chinese labourers indicated that they ‘bitterly resent[ed] the indiscriminate charges levelled at them [and some of them made] earnest remonstrances ... to their employers in respect of the aspersions unjustly cast upon their characters’.122 Prior to and independent of the Bucknill report,123 some Chinese had petitioned the Superintendent of the FLD to make enquiries and take action against fellow Chinese labourers and Chinese police, who were prone to what the Chinese called ‘illicit desire’, or who had ‘adopted sons’, whom they also referred to as ‘catamites’.124

118. Miller, Out of the Past, xxiv; Spencer, Homosexuality, 249-50.
120. TAD, FLD 236 no 73/-, unnatural crime, memorandum on the prevalence of unnatural crime amongst labourers on the Witwatersrand, 11 Aug. 1906.
121. TAD, FLD 236 no 73/-, unnatural crime: confidential, Lord Selborne to the Earl of Elgin, 1 Oct. 1906.
122. PRO, CO 291/106 no. 662/06, Chinese coolies, prevalence of vice amongst, 17 Dec. 1906.
123. Ibid.; PRO, CO 291/110 no. 40886/06, Chinese coolies: alleged prevalence of unnatural vice, 5 Nov. 1906.
124. TAD, FLD 240 no 76/6, complaints by Chinese: Wit Deep, anonymous petition; excerpt from a letter received by the Superintendent, Foreign Labour Department, from W.P. Thomas, Interpreter, 1 Apr. 1907.
Conclusion

Regardless of the extent of its prevalence, the homosexual activity of some of the Chinese labourers was used as yet another weapon in the political onslaught against the indentured scheme, as the opponents of Chinese labour portrayed this as a moral threat to society. ‘Unnatural crime’ was effectively used in the election campaigns of the Liberal Party in Britain in 1906 and by the Het Volk party in the Transvaal in 1907.\textsuperscript{125} The immediate pressure to repatriate the Chinese might, as Epprecht indicates, have been ‘temporarily abated’,\textsuperscript{126} but it remained an issue in popular consciousness as well as in political circles. Within the context of this highly prejudiced, ‘orientalist’ and anti-Sinitic environment, the fate of the Chinese experiment was eventually sealed, further recruitment was prohibited, and the renewal of contracts disallowed. Repatriation began in mid 1907 and by the end of the decade Chinese indentured labourers had been returned to China.\textsuperscript{127} This was not unlike the experience of Bishop Edward Twells who lived in the Orange Free State in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{128} In his case too, society used homosexuality to suit itself. As historian Nicholas Southey aptly puts it: ‘sodomy was used by political opponents in an attempt to rid the region of foreign influence’.\textsuperscript{129}

Besides focusing on the historical significance of this issue in the context of European orientalist prejudice, this article shows how the Chinese indentured experience on the Witwatersrand gold fields mirrors some findings on the prevalence of homosexuality among African mine labourers. It also adds another dimension to this debate by revealing that not all Chinese labourers were party to homosexual activities, some expressing indignation at such accusations. This also needs to be reflected upon in more detail in terms of African mine labour.

\textsuperscript{126} Epprecht, ‘Unnatural Vice’, 126.
\textsuperscript{127} Richardson, \textit{Chinese Mine Labour}, 182-3.
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Ibid.}, 67.