

# The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics, 1849-1910

Mae M. Ngai

Columbia University

Around the turn of the last century, some half-dozen countries enacted laws that prohibited Chinese immigration.<sup>1</sup> These countries constituted an arc that ranged from the Americas across the Pacific to Australasia; and then across the Indian Ocean to South Africa. The American political scientist Aristide Zolberg called it the Great Wall against China.<sup>2</sup> The conventional explanation for Chinese exclusion is that Euro-American workers in the receiving countries feared competition from cheap Chinese labor. And indeed, this perception was widespread. But there was something special, something more, about the Chinese Question that emerged in the late nineteenth century: it carried an unmistakable whiff of racism, and it appeared to be a global problem. But how Chinese immigration became a global race problem has not been adequately explained.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an expanded version of a keynote address the author delivered on June 7, 2021, at the conference "Mobilities, exclusion, and migrants' agency in the Pacific realm in a transregional and diachronic perspective," held at the German Historical Institute's Pacific Office in Berkeley. This expanded version is based on the author's chapter in *Global History of Gold Rushes*, edited by Stephen Tuffnell and Benjamin Mountford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 109-136. It is published here with the kind permission of the University of California Press.

<sup>2</sup> Aristide Zolberg, "The Great Wall against China," in Jan

Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, eds., *Migration, Migration History,*

*History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern, 2005 [1997]).

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 69 (Fall 2021 / Spring 2022): 95-122

© Mae M. Ngai | ISSN 1048-9134

CC BY-SA 4.0

Illustrations included in this article are not covered by this license.

3 Total world production of gold from 2000 BCE (Egypt) through the mid-nineteenth century has been estimated at 10,000 metric tons. Gold production from the 1848 rush in California through the opening of the goldfields in Yukon Territory in 1891 totaled 13,540 metric tons (435.32 million ounces). "Gold Production through History," <http://www.goldfeverprospecting.com/goprthhi.html>; David Zurbuchen, "World's Cumulative Gold and Silver Production," Jan 14, 2006, <http://www.gold-eagle.com/article/worlds-cumulative-gold-and-silver-production>

At one level, we might note the obvious – that global ideas emerge in a global environment. And to be sure, the period between 1875 and the First World War was one of unprecedented global integration – achieved through the increased circulation of people, capital, trade and ideas. But, we might pause and ask, why do some ideas become global, and not others? How do ideas acquire global force?

There were, of course, general stereotypes about China that had circulated in the West since the early nineteenth century, Orientalist constructions about the “stagnation” and “despotism” of the East that served to define the “progress” and “vigor” of the West, were perhaps most famously expressed by Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, published in 1805. But in the late nineteenth century, these ideas were too general, too vague to have political force on the ground. In important ways, the local was the generative site of politics, to paraphrase Tip O’Neill’s famous dictum. But politics also travel, as it were, and borrow from and copy the ideas and policies of others. There is a dynamic interplay between local and global politics. My research is directed toward understanding that relationship.

The origins of the Chinese Question may be found in the gold rushes of the nineteenth century and the broader context of the globalization of trade, credit, labor and the rise of Anglo-American power. The gold rushes both expanded the world and brought it closer together.<sup>3</sup> The sudden increase in world gold production in the late nineteenth century resulted from Anglo-American settler colonialism and capitalist development. Sustained exploration and extraction required capital investment, deep-mining technology, mass labor migration and long-distance transportation.

The gold rushes also launched into motion hundreds of thousands of people from the British Isles, Continental Europe, the Americas, Australasia and China. The goldfields were fluid, inter-

national contact-zones on the peripheries of the world's core societies; they marked the advent of settler colonialism and the "congealing" of the frontier.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the gold rushes were the first occasions of large-scale contact between Euro-Americans and Chinese. In California and the Australian colony of Victoria, Chinese comprised upwards of 25 percent of the mining population in the 1850s and 60s, but until fairly recently they were marginal actors in most gold rush histories. Euro-American gold seekers became idealized by their descendants for their democratic and entrepreneurial spirit and have been considered foundational in national histories. Without exception, these polities excluded the Chinese.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014), p. 370.

But, the global Chinese Question did not emerge fully formed, like Athena from Zeus's head. In my research, I have been struck by differences in the Chinese Question on the ground, especially during the gold rush period. The Chinese Question shifted and evolved as it moved across and shaped the Pacific world, and over time acquired the status and force of a global idea, which idea was intricately connected to the rise of Anglo-American hegemony.

## I. California

We start in California, where the discovery of gold on the north fork of the American River in January of 1848 drew prospectors from the eastern and southern United States; from Hawaii, Mexico and Chile; from Great Britain, Europe and Australia; and from China. In the early, fevered days of the rush, white Americans found nativism a convenient weapon of competition; "it's all for 'us' and not for you," a crude expression of American Manifest Destiny. By 1850 they had already successfully driven from the goldfields Mexicans, South Americans and many Europeans. British colonists from Australia received a particularly cool welcome in California, though on the whole Americans were recep-

**5** Malcolm Rohrbough, *Days of Gold* (Berkeley, 1997); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp* (New York, 2000); Stacey Smith, *Freedom's Frontier* (Chapel Hill, 2014).

**6** See for example, Mining Records of Calaveras County, 1854-1857, California State Library. In this district, 44 percent of Chinese claims comprised partnerships of 2-3 men.

**7** For example, see *Eighth Annual Report of the California State Mineralogist* (1888), enumerating Chinese river claims along the Klamath River in Siskiyou County. According to the report, there were some 1,000 Chinese mining in the county, and that they owned and worked some of the richest river claims in the county, with an estimated income of at least \$365,000 a year. Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California, 1850-1880: An Economic Study* (Madison, WI, 1963), 25, 30-1.

**8** Sue Fawn Chung, *In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West* (Urbana, IL, 2011), 17-8.

tive to British and German gold seekers, whom they regarded as their ethnic kin. Anti-foreign sentiment then focused on Chinese, who were now arriving in large numbers. Notably, the Chinese appeared on the scene just as placer mining (sifting for gold in the gravel of riverbeds) was beginning to give out, so anti-foreign feeling now mixed with the bitterness of dashed hopes.<sup>5</sup>

By 1852 the argument against Chinese took on a special cast, with white Americans accusing them of being indentured workers, or coolies, imagined as slaves or semi-slaves. In fact, Chinese miners worked in a variety of ways, the least common of which was under contract. They worked mostly as independent prospectors and in small cooperative groups, as well as for wages for white-owned companies. Many of these formations were common to miners generally, regardless of ethnicity. Like American partners, Chinese partners were often close relatives or from the same hometown, indicating kinship as the medium of trust.<sup>6</sup> Chinese also worked for small companies, in which the principal investor was a local merchant, who bought or leased the claim and furnished the equipment.<sup>7</sup> Most Chinese companies operated on a share basis, in which the merchant-investor typically took a portion of the output and the miners shared the rest. The merchants also supplied the miners' provisions.<sup>8</sup> Chinese also worked in small cooperatives, especially in river-placer mining. These usually comprised as few as five men (and rarely more than ten), working smaller claims with low-tech equipment like rockers and sluice boxes. Cooperatives also worked on shares, but with equal shares for both profits and expenses, and they typically had no boss or headman.<sup>9</sup>

**9** *Eleventh Census of the United States* (1890), "Report on Mineral Industries in

the United States: Gold and Silver," p. 109. In Calaveras County, 38 percent of

the claims belonged to 4-10 men. Mining Records of Calaveras County, 1854-57.



Chinese miners also worked for white employers in return for wages. In the southern mines Chinese worked “shoulder to shoulder” with Cornish miners in John Frémont’s mines at Mariposa. The U.S. mining commissioner, Rossiter Raymond, reported “whole shifts of brawny pig tail wearers” working in deep mines in Mariposa, Merced and Tuolumne counties from the late 1850s, for as long as ten to fifteen years. By 1870, Chinese miners earned from \$39 to \$50 a month, nearly the rate of white miners. Chinese also worked as unskilled laborers in the quartz mills, feeding the giant stamping machines that crushed the tons of rock dug up from the earth to release the gold from the veins within.<sup>10</sup> A more extensive practice was the hiring of Chinese by hydraulic mining companies, who used giant high-pressure water hoses to blast away the sides of mountain ridges to mine auriferous gravel from the ancient riverbeds; and by water companies, who delivered water to the former from mountain lakes and reservoirs. Chinese worked on wages both in construction and in the mining operations.<sup>11</sup>

If Chinese were not actually indentured, the larger fiction that they were a “coolie race” overwhelmed any inconvenience

**Figure 1.** Head of Auburn Ravine, 1852. Attributed to Joseph B. Starkweather. California State Library.

<sup>10</sup> Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California*, 34-37; Allan Nevins, *Frémont, the West’s Greatest Adventurer* (New York, 1928), vol. II, 525; Rossiter Raymond, *Statistics of Mines and Mining* (Washington, 1870), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California*, 36-8.

**12** “Coolie” is a pidgin word that was used in European colonial port cities in Asia. It probably derived from the Tamil word “kuli” for wages and generally referred to lowly workers, like porters and domestics. By the mid-nineteenth century it came to refer more narrowly to Indian and Chinese indentured workers who were sent to European plantation colonies (Mauritius, the Caribbean, Natal, etc.) and became a pejorative term associated with degraded unfree labor.

**13** Arthur Quinn, *The Rivals: William Gwin, David Broderick and the Birth of California* (New York, 1994); William Henry Ellison, *A Self-Governing Dominion: California 1849-1860* (Berkeley, 1950), 308-11; Scott McArthur, *The Enemy that Never Came: The Civil War in the Pacific Northwest* (Caldwell, Idaho, 2012), 17. For more on Gwin’s expansionist vision, see Rachel St. John, “The Unpredictable America of William Gwin: Expansion, Succession, and Unstable Borders in Nineteenth Century North America,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, 1 (March 2016): 56-84.

of fact.<sup>12</sup> Anti-coolieism imagined Chinese as innately servile, without individual personality or will, regardless of their actual condition. It was a racial shorthand that drew on two comparisons. First, it recalled the so-called “coolie trade” of indentured Asian labor to the former-slave plantation colonies. Second, and much closer to home, it associated Chinese labor with African slavery in the American South. That second association positioned Chinese immediately as a racial threat to free labor.

The coolie trope was actually not invented on the goldfields but in Sacramento, as a weapon in the first chapter of California state politics. As early as 1850, some Californians were promoting grandiose visions of developing a new empire along the Pacific slope, one that potentially stretched from Alaska to Chile. One aggressive booster was U.S. Senator William Gwin, a pro-slavery Democrat. Gwin believed enslaved African Americans and imported native Hawaiians would provide the labor needed to develop California.<sup>13</sup>

Others saw Chinese labor as a potentially unlimited labor supply and one more readily accessible (before the building of the transcontinental railroad) than labor from east of the Rockies. Some drew inspiration from the practice of importing indentured Chinese and Indian labor to the British plantation colonies of the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery. In January 1852 two California legislators, George Tingley and Archibald Peachy, introduced bills into the state senate and assembly respectively, to enable the recruitment of foreign workers under contract into the state, primarily for agricultural development. The contracts would be, in principle, voluntary; but they set terms of five years to ten years, which exceeded anything in the Caribbean or elsewhere, and a minimum wage of \$50 a year, a pathetically low amount. Workers who broke their contracts could be punished with imprisonment and fines, penal sanctions that recalled the master-servant laws that had been dead letter among white

Americans since the 1820s.<sup>14</sup> Initially the coolie bills received support from both Whigs and Democrats, and the assembly passed the Peachy bill. But opposition to the Tingley bill gathered force from Free Soilers, and Tingley was outmaneuvered in the senate, which defeated the bill, 16 to 2. Without a senate bill, the Peachy bill died in the assembly.<sup>15</sup>

Opponents of the coolie bills were not necessarily against Chinese immigrants in general. The *Daily Alta California* supported free immigration and thought the principle applied to all, regardless of origin. The California goldfields were open and free to all comers. But the *Alta* opposed the coolie bill as bringing a system of servitude to California. It warned that recent experience with the “labor contract system in the English Colonies” (such as Jamaica, Guyana and Mauritius) showed that the work “in which these menials engage, though voluntary, is hard and sometimes cruel.” It reminded readers that: “Already this physical bondage is classed by the press of the country as slavery, of the most iniquitous species.”<sup>16</sup>

The distinction made by the *Alta* between free and indentured Chinese emigrants quickly blurred. Governor Bigler himself was largely to blame for the obfuscation. Although the coolie bills were dead, the governor could not help but give the issue another kick.<sup>17</sup> On April 23, 1852, Bigler issued a “special message” to the legislature, his last address before the close of the session. The sole subject of the message was the Chinese Question. Bigler raised alarm over the “present wholesale importation to this country of immigrants from the Asiatic quarter of the globe,” in particular that “class of Asiatics known as ‘Coolies.’” He cited over 20,000 Chinese currently leaving China for California and warned there would soon be 100,000 in the state. He declared that nearly all were being hired by “Chinese masters” to mine for gold at pitiable wages, with their families in China held hostage for the faithful performance of their contracts. The Chinese, Bigler alleged, dug up gold and removed it from the country; they had no interest in becoming citizens, caring not to “avail themselves of the blessings of free government”; and they

<sup>14</sup> “Labor Contract Law,” *Daily Alta California*, March 21, 1852. On Tingley, see Oscar T. Shuck, ed. *History of the Bench and Bar of California* (Los Angeles, 1901 [2007]), 590. See also Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle Over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 99-100.

<sup>15</sup> “Legislative Intelligence,” *Daily Alta California*, April 24, 1852. On Senate opposition see Minority Report of the Select Committee on Senate Bill No. 63, for “An Act to Enforce Contracts and Obligations to Perform Work and Labor,” March 20, 1852, in *Journal of Third Session California Legislature* (1852): 669.

<sup>16</sup> “Chinese Immigration,” April 26, 1852, *Daily Alta California*; “The Cooley Trade,” *Daily Alta California*, May 4, 1852.

<sup>17</sup> “Legislative Intelligence,” *Daily Alta California*, April 24, 1852.



THE CHINESE QUESTION.—(See Page 147.)  
 COULIE.—"HARD ON, GENTLEMEN! AMERICA BEARS FAIR PLAY FOR ALL MEN."

© 2001 HARPWEEK®

Figure 2. Thomas Nast, "The Chinese Question," *Harpers Weekly* February 18, 1871. © 2001 Harp-Week®

18 "Governor's Special Message," April 23, 1852, *Journal of Third Session California Legislature* (1852): 373.

were a menace to public safety. Bigler called upon the legislature to impose heavy taxes on the Chinese to "check the present system of indiscriminate and unlimited Asiatic immigration," and to pass a law barring Chinese contract labor from California mines.<sup>18</sup>

The coolie bills were dead and Chinese in California were not contracted or indentured labor, but Bigler saw political potential in the Chinese Question. He had won his first election in 1851 by a mere thousand votes. In 1853 he would be running for re-election and he needed to excite the mining districts to his side. The Forty-Niners were restive, as the placers were rapidly giving out and a diligent miner could now make only \$5 a day. Many were already working on wages for others, earning about the same. By

tarring all Chinese miners as “coolies,” Bigler found a racial trope that compared Chinese to black slaves, the antithesis of free labor, and thereby cast them as a threat to white miners’ independence. Bigler’s message was dutifully published in full in the *Alta*; the governor also had it printed on “small sheets of paper and sent everywhere through the mines.”<sup>19</sup> As he had intended, Bigler roused the white mining population. Miners gathered in local assemblies and passed resolutions banning Chinese from mining in their districts. At a meeting held in Columbia, Tuolumne County, in May, miners echoed Bigler’s charges. They railed against those who would “flood the state with degraded Asiatics, and fasten, without sanction of law, the system of peonage on our social organization,” and voted to exclude Chinese from mining in their district. Other meetings offered no reasons but simply bade the Chinese to leave, or to “vamoose the ranche.” Sometimes they used violence to push Chinese off their claims. Bigler would win his re-election. He would be the first American politician to ride the Chinese Question to elected office.<sup>20</sup>

The use of Chinese gang labor, first seen in the construction of mining infrastructures and later in building the transcontinental railroad, further confirmed white Americans’ beliefs that Chinese were held in bondage. In fact, ethnic gang labor can be traced to the contracting of Irish workers to dig canals in northern states, from the building of the Erie Canal from the late 1810s through the 1840s. In the antebellum north, contemporaries considered Irish navvies to be rough and intemperate – but they did not accuse them of being “slaves,” which they obviously were not. But after the Civil War, contracted labor assumed an ambiguous place in American political culture, which had drawn a bright line between servitude and slavery, on the one hand, and free labor on the other. As free labor came increasingly to mean waged work and not independent farming or artisanship, drawing a line against contracted ethnic labor was a way for native white workers to address their own sense of precarity. The association of ethnic and racial others with unfreedom enabled this construction, which otherwise was not so clear cut.

<sup>19</sup> Chun Aching and Tong Achick, “To his Excellency, Gov. Bigler, from the Chinamen,” May 16, 1852, in “An Analysis of the Chinese Question. Consisting of a Special Message of the Governor and, in reply thereto, Two Letters of the Chinamen and a Memorial of the Citizens of San Francisco,” (San Francisco, 1852).

<sup>20</sup> “Governor’s Special Message,” *Daily Alta California*, April 25, 1852; “Meeting at Columbia,” *Daily Alta California*, May 15, 1852; “Anti-Chinese Meeting at Foster’s Bar,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, May 3, 1852; “Sacramento News” (on miners meeting in Centreville, El Dorado), *Daily Alta California*, May 15, 1852. See also Ping Chiu, *Chinese Labor in California*, 13, 15; Rodman Paul, “Origin of the Chinese Issue in California,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 25 (Sept. 1938): 190.

**21** Sundry claims in Register of Mining Claims, Sandhurst Division, vol. 2, VPRS 6946/P0/1-11, Public Records Office of Victoria (hereafter PROV), North Melbourne, Victoria; Register of Mining Claims, Daylesford, vol. 1 (1865-68), VPRS 3719/P0/1, PROV, Ballarat, Victoria.

**22** William Young, "Report on the Conditions of the Chinese Population in Victoria," March 2, 1868, pp. 40, 42-3, reprinted in Ian McLaren, *The Chinese in Victoria: Official Reports and Documents* (Ascot Vale, 1985). On small share companies see also, Barry McGowan, "The Economics and Organization of Chinese mining in Colonial Australia," *Australian Economic History Review* 45 (July 2005): 121, 123. A puddling machine was a wooden tub with a rotating blade that one turned by hand to break up gold-bearing clay. The remainder of the Chinese mining population in Bendigo worked as individual "fossickers," rewashing old claims and tailing.

**23** Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-61* (Melbourne, 1963), 321.

Indeed, race obfuscated the ambiguities in concepts such as free labor, voluntary migration and, especially, the contract. As freedom of contract became the watchword of free labor under laissez faire capitalism, the contract remained associated with indenture and servility for Chinese. Anti-coolieism remained foundational in the 1870s and 1880s as the urban workingmen's movement and state party politics drove the Chinese question to national exclusion legislation in 1882.

## II. Victoria

In the British colony of Victoria in Australia, conditions were similar to those in the American West – an international rush following the discovery of placer deposits in 1851, then a shift to capitalized quartz mining. As in California, Chinese miners in Victoria engaged in independent prospecting; small companies and egalitarian cooperatives; waged work for European-owned companies; and organized themselves into the same kinds of hometown associations and brotherhood societies. Victorian gold district registers of mining claims show Chinese individuals and small partnerships of two or three men with small claims.<sup>21</sup> According to a census of the Chinese population in the Victoria gold districts conducted in 1868 by the Reverend William Young, more than half of the 2,200 Chinese miners in Bendigo worked in small companies ranging in size from six to over ten men. Three hundred worked in companies with puddling machines and 800-900 in small companies washing tailings, which were likely cooperatives.<sup>22</sup> Small groups also worked together to achieve economies of scale. According to historian Geoffrey Serle's seminal history of the Victorian rushes, the "most typical form" of work for Chinese was "paddocking," in which "gangs of one hundred or more [would] lift and wash the soil of gullies from end to end, working either cooperatively or as companies of employees."<sup>23</sup>

In the Victoria claims registers, individually owned claims with substantial acreage or equipment indicate small



companies.<sup>24</sup> Chinese companies favored sluicing, which required moderate investment and drew from Chinese agricultural experience with water engineering. In December 1878 the *Bendigo Advertiser* reported Chinese sluicing companies working in three shifts, around the clock, using three million gallons of water a week.<sup>25</sup> Egalitarian cooperatives similar to those found in California, are numerous in the Victorian mining registers.<sup>26</sup> Testimony given before a coroner's inquest held after two Chinese gold miners died in a fight shows the working of a cooperative located at Portuguese Flat near the town of Creswick. It comprised eight "mates," including at least two who were cousins. They held equal shares in the claim, each worth £3 to £4. One member, Ah Yung, kept the group's gold and books, and paid out weekly earnings to the members, about thirty shillings. The men lived in separate tents but ate breakfast together and divided among them chores, such as cooking and collecting firewood.<sup>27</sup>

**27** Testimonies of Ah Su and Ah Ter, Inquest held upon the body of Ah Yung at Creswick, VPRS 24/P0/124, PROV, North Melbourne. Ang Hui, a

member of the group, killed Ah Yung after a quarrel over the weekly payout. Ang Hui later killed himself, using the same knife. According to Lovejoy,

thirty shillings a week was the average Chinese earnings through the 1860s and 1870s. "Fortune Seekers of Dai Gum San," 159.

**Figure 3.** Chinese travelers on a Cobb & Co coach near Castlemaine, c. 1865-1871, Creswick Museum.

**24** For example, August 25, 1865, Register of Mining Claims, Daylesford, vol. 1, 1865-1868, VPRS 3719/P0/1, PROV, Ballarat; April 8 and June 22, 1863, at Spring Gully, Register of Mining Claims, Sandhurst, vol. 1 (1862-65), VPRS 6946/P0/1-11, PROV, North Melbourne.

**25** Quoted in Valerie Lovejoy, "Fortune Seekers of Dai Gum San: First Generation Chinese on the Bendigo Goldfield, 1854-1882" (Ph.D. thesis, La Trobe University, 2009), 157-8.

**26** For example, no. 155, Ah Toy, Ah Quio, Ah Sing, Ah Wah, sluicing claim, two acres, Deep Creek Feb. 13, 1868, Register of Mining Claims, Daylesford, vol. 1.

**28** E-Tu Sun Zen, "Mining Labor in the Ch'ing Period," in A. Feuerwerker, R. Murphy and M. Wright, eds., *Approaches to Modern Chinese History* (Berkeley, 1967). According to Sun Zen, Qing-era mining merchant-investors allotted as much as 40 per cent of the profits to their workers. See also David Valentine, "Chinese Placer Mining in the United States: An Example from American Canyon, Nevada," in S.L. Cassel, ed., *The Chinese in America: A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium* (Walnut Creek, 2002), 37-53; Alister Bowen, "The Merchants: Chinese Social Organization in Colonial Australia," *Australian Historical Studies* 42, 1 (2011): 25-44.

**29** Robert Gardella, "Contracting Business Partnerships in Late Qing and Early Republican China," in Madeline Zelin, Jonathan Ocko and Robert Gardella, eds., *Contract and Property in Early Modern China* (Stanford, 2004), 329.

**30** Mary Somers Heidues, *Goldiggers, Farmers and Traders in the Chinese Districts of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY, 2003); Mary Somers Heidues, "Chinese Organizations in West Borneo and

Both companies and cooperatives were similar to mining organizations found in China and Southeast Asia. In southern China, placer techniques were used to mine tin and iron-sand deposits, and also drew from agricultural water-irrigation practices. Mine operators sometimes hired local farmers during the slack season, but there were also small companies of full-time miners, often comprised of landless and socially marginal types, who worked for shares under a manager-investor. These companies had minimal internal hierarchy and generous share division, reflecting the difficulty in holding labor.<sup>28</sup> The practice of share division also drew more generally from a tradition of partnership arrangements – a feature of late-Qing business organization.<sup>29</sup> The cooperatives in California and Victoria bear a canny resemblance to the famous Chinese "kongsi" (*gongsi*) of the West Kalimantan (West Borneo) gold mines of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These began as small, egalitarian share partnerships, as evidenced by their names, e.g. *shiwufen* (fifteen shares), *xinbafen* (new eight shares). As mining developed, some of these cooperatives joined together into federations; a few became extremely powerful and acted as though they were sovereign states. Not surprisingly, the larger they became, the less egalitarian they were, with newly recruited credit-ticket workers at the entry level and share partners at the top. The power of the West Kalimantan kongsi derived from the position of the Chinese as a force between the native population and Dutch colonizers.<sup>30</sup> Those conditions, of course, did not exist in the

Bangka: Kogsi and Hui," in David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidues, eds., *Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Early Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (Armonk, NY, 1993), 34-88; James

C. Jackson, "Chinese in the West Borneo Goldfields: A Study in Cultural Geography," *Occasional Papers in Geography* No. 15 (Hull, 1970). Chinese mining kongsi were also prevalent in tin mining on the Malaysian peninsula.

Anthony Reid, "The Chinese on the Mining Frontier in Southeast Asia," in Eric Tagliacozzo and Wenchin Cheng, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (Durham, 2011), 29.

United States or Australia, so Chinese cooperatives in New World goldfields remained primitive.

Importantly, all of these formations – mining companies in southern China, cooperatives in Borneo and their counterparts in California and Australia – were associated with sworn-brotherhood societies. In southern China, these brotherhoods practiced elaborate and secret ritual oaths, ceremonies and exercises that cemented their solidarity. They could be both protective and predatory, engaged in mutual aid for their members and thievery among the general population. In late-seventeenth-century southern China, the *Tiandihui* (heaven and earth society) and *Hongmen* (vast family), the largest societies, assumed an anti-Qing political orientation. During the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, many activists fled China to Southeast Asia and beyond.<sup>31</sup> In the 1850s exiles formed a group called the *Zhigongdang* (in Cantonese *Chee Kong Tong*, Active Justice Society) throughout the Chinese diaspora. From the early 1850s the *Zhigongdang* had branches in California and throughout the nineteenth century was especially prevalent in the mining districts. In Australia, the *Zhigongdang* was known as *Yixing* (in Cantonese *Yee Hing*). It became the most powerful Chinese association in Victoria, and its members would gain respectability in white society by explaining themselves as Chinese “freemasons.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Chinese in Victoria in the late 1860s and 1870s also found employment with quartz-mining companies. Young’s 1868 census reported some seven hundred Chinese working for whites on wages in the Ovens district. Smaller numbers were employed at European claims in Ballarat.<sup>33</sup> Although some Chinese worked underground, it was more common for them to work inside the mills, feeding and running the stamping machines.<sup>34</sup>

**31** David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford, 1996); Dian H. Murray in collaboration with Qin Baoqi, *The Origins of the Tiandihui* (Stanford, 1994); Ownby and Huedes, *Secret Societies Reconsidered*.

**32** Sue Fawn Chung, “Between Two Worlds: The Zhigongtang and Chinese Funerary Rituals,” in Cassell, *The Chinese in America*, 217-38; Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change* (Chicago, 2001), 111-2. On Australia and *Yee Hing* see Cai Shaoqing, “From Mutual Aid to Public Interest: Chinese Secret Societies in Australia,” in Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor, eds., *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia, 1860-1940. Special edition of Otherland*. 9 (Dec. 2004): 133-52; John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, 69-76; Kok Hu Jin, *Hung Men Handbook* (Bendigo, 2002).

**33** Young, “Report on the Conditions of the Chinese Population in Victoria,” 33-43.

**34** These include mining for Chinese-owned quartz companies, which

were several, if not large; and European companies, such as the Reform

Mining Co. near Ballarat, which leased its number-one shaft to Chi-

nese on tribute. Lovejoy, “Fortune Seekers of Dai Gum Sam,” 160.

**35** Barry McGowan, "Economics and Organization of Chinese Mining," 121; Rohrbough, *Days of Gold*, 125.

**36** Serle, *Golden Age*, 73. See also Ronald Limbaugh, "Making Old Tools Work Better: Pragmatic Adaptation and Innovation in Gold Rush Technology," in J. Rawls and R. Orsi, eds., *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold-Rush California* (Berkeley, 1999), 24-51.

If it surprises us to find independent prospecting, share companies, egalitarian cooperatives, and waged labor among Chinese miners in California and Victoria, that surprise perhaps indexes our resistance to seeing Chinese labor in a flexible and diverse manner, or to see similarities with the economic organization of Euro-Americans.<sup>35</sup> Miners of all nationalities drew from their respective cultural backgrounds and learned from each other to devise methods of work that suited the demands of alluvial-gold mining. Working in small groups enabled miners to work more efficiently, to take turns at the more arduous tasks and to share costs and rewards; hence Serle's observation that "in its early years the [Victorian gold] industry was almost exclusively worked by thousands of tiny cooperative groups."<sup>36</sup> But if cooperation was common among all national and ethnic groups and, indeed, celebrated by whites as the quintessence of fraternity among free men, it was the Chinese not the Europeans whose cooperative practices endured. Chinese cooperatives, built upon solidarities of native-place and kinship, might be considered a kind of refuge from, even resistance to, capitalist-wage relations. Europeans and Americans did not have analogous cultural resources to sustain independent mining. Thus, when the quartz companies came to dominate the scene, Euro-Americans traded their autonomy for the relative security of a job or quit mining altogether.

The variety of Chinese mining practices also highlights the problem of thinking about labor in apposite categories of "free" and "unfree." The point is not to simply move Chinese miners from one column to the other. At a certain level, of course, Chinese miners were not "unfree" – they were not held as chattels, unremunerated for their labor, or prohibited from quitting or moving, the normative conditions of bound labor. Miners who worked solo, with partners, and in egalitarian cooperatives had considerable if not complete autonomy, though it must be noted that the economic rewards of independent mining grew increasingly meager as the placers

diminished. Working for proportional shares and for wages, whether on skilled underground work or in construction gangs, involved elements of both of coercion and volition.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the corporatist social forms observable among Chinese miners – native-place associations and sworn-brotherhood societies – should also not be considered in terms of Orientalist binaries. They are better understood as early modern social formations that facilitated overseas trade and migration, and which operated along vectors of both solidarity and control.<sup>38</sup>

Racism toward the Chinese on the Australian goldfields was more inchoate than in California. There was racial tension and conflict, and a few anti-Chinese riots, some of which may have been instigated by Americans. But white miners aimed their ire chiefly at the colonial government, which required an expensive miner's license and policed the goldfields to enforce compliance. Although many Europeans disdained the Chinese, they did not allege that the Chinese were indentured or enslaved. The legacy of unfreedom in the Australian colonies was not racialized African slavery but convict transportation of the English and Irish poor. More important in their perceptions of Chinese were fears generated by their location at the fringes of the British Empire. The Melbourne *Argus* explained, "Geographically, we are nearer the pent-up millions of China than any other large tract of country occupied by the white man. ...We are still but a handful of men and women and children."<sup>39</sup> Australians obsessed over their fragile hold on the continent and their vulnerability in a larger contest in Asia between two empires, British and Chinese.

In Victoria anti-Chinese agitation clashed with official colonial policy of equal protection. This principle, enshrined in

<sup>37</sup> Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labor: Anomaly or Necessity?* (London, 1987); Thomas Brass and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Free and Unfree Labor: The Debate Continues* (Bern, 1997); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Era of Slave Emancipation* (New York, 1998); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*; Carolyn Brown and Marcel van der Linden, "Shifting Boundaries between Free and Unfree Labor: Introduction," *International Labor and Working Class History* 78 (Fall 2010): 4-88.

<sup>38</sup> On origins of *huiguan* in late sixteenth-century cities see Him Mark Lai, *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Walnut Creek, 2004), 41; S. F. Chung, *In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West* (Urbana, IL, 2014), 19. Kwee Hui Kian credits these associations for Chinese economic success throughout Southeast Asia. They provided a mechanism for pooling capital and labor and channeling "market information, credit facilities, and other forms of assistance." Kwee Hui Kian, "Chinese Economic

Dominance in Southeast Asia: A Long Duree Perspective,"

*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55 (Jan. 2013): 8.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, January 6, 1879, p. 4.

**40** Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne, 1982); Mae Ngai, "Chinese Miners, Headmen and Protectors on the Victorian Goldfields, 1853-1864," *Australian Historical Studies* 42, 1 (2011):10-24.

**41** Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, 65-6; Memorials, interviews and accounting of compensation paid to Chinese storekeepers [Buckland], VPRS 1189/P0/502/A57-5519, PROV, North Melbourne.

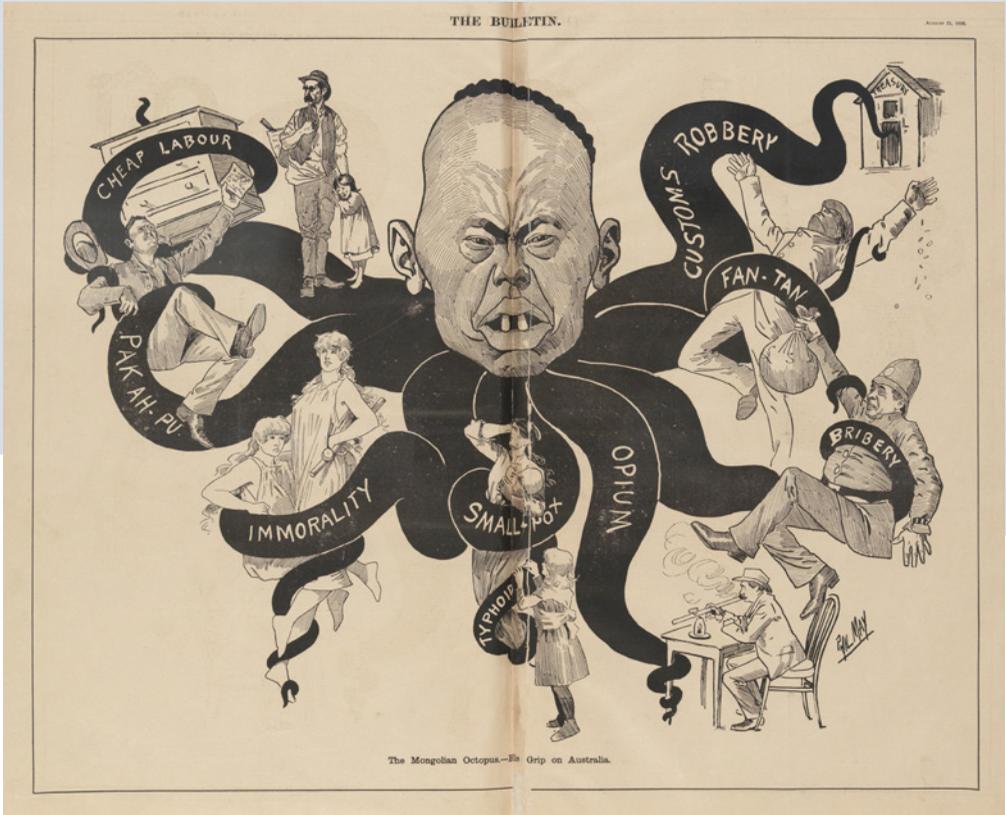
**42** Editorial, *Melbourne Argus*, Jan 6. 1879, p. 4

**43** "Sticking to the Chinese! The Capitalists' Conference Decides to Put White Labour Down—if Possible," *Queensland Worker*, March 21, 1891; see also Warwick Anderson, "Coolie Therapeutics," *International Labor and Working Class History* 91 (Spring 2017).

precepts of Enlightenment liberalism, was a conceit belied by Britain's vast empire acquired through violence and dispossession. In general, the authorities at Melbourne conceded to and protected European interests.<sup>40</sup> But the colonial government did oppose individual and group violence against Chinese. Police were more likely to arrest and prosecute Europeans who committed crimes against Chinese in Victoria than in California; and the colonial government compensated Chinese for losses suffered during a riot in the Buckland River Valley in 1857.<sup>41</sup>

The coolie trope did not enter Australian politics until the late 1870s and 1880s, and it came not from the goldfields of Victoria or New South Wales, but from the so-called "Top End," where controversy grew over the use of Asian and Pacific Islander contract labor in Queensland and the Northern Territory. White Australians, at least for a time, conceded the use of colored labor in the tropical far north, where, as one observer put it, white men fell "victim to malaria and fever ... under the fierce sun and amid the marshes."<sup>42</sup> The climate theory of race, though it was influential at the time, was spurious, of course, since enslaved and indentured workers also suffered from tropical diseases, not to mention arduous plantation labor. In any event, the problem in Australia was that the tropical areas were not separate islands, like Jamaica or Mauritius, but contiguous to the temperate zones, which Europeans had staked out for themselves. By the late 1870s and 1880s whites in Australia were becoming increasingly alarmed at the growth and mobility of the Chinese population in the far north. The *Queensland Worker* targeted pastoralists – that colony's most powerful capitalists – for their "determination to make Queensland and Australia as much like Fiji and Hindustan as possible."<sup>43</sup>

The Chinese Question was a core element of an emergent Australian nationalism, which viewed racial homogeneity and free labor as conditions for democracy. It was a new ideological formation, at once democratic, masculinist and racialist.



Anti-Chinese leagues sprung up in big cities like Melbourne and Sydney, even though the Chinese urban population was tiny and economic competition was negligible. In 1878 the seamen's union struck the Australian Steam Navigation Company to protest its use of Chinese sailors on its vessels, a reminder of the racial stakes in the Pacific world.<sup>44</sup> References in the Australian press to the California exclusion movement were frequent and explicit. Many made direct comparisons between the ruinous effects of Chinese immigration on California and Australia.<sup>45</sup>

By the 1880s and 1890s most of the Australian colonies had enacted some restrictions on Chinese immigration. Still, British imperial policy prohibited categorical exclusion. Historian Benjamin Mountford has argued that the Chinese Question in Australia was really two questions involving different interests, a colonial or local question about immigration and an imperial question about British commerce and diplomacy with China. In the 1880s and 1890s these two questions

**Figure 4.** Phil May, "The Mongolian Octopus – His Grip on Australia," *The Bulletin*, August 21, 1886. State Library New South Wales.

<sup>44</sup> Marilyn Lake, "Challenging the 'Slave Driving Employers': Understanding Australia's 1896 Minimum Wage through a World-History Approach," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, 1 (2014): 87-102.

<sup>45</sup> For example, "The Labor Movement in California," *Argus*, February 5, 1878; "The Chinese in California," *Queenslander* (Brisbane), December 14, 1878.

**46** Benjamin Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia* (Oxford, 2016).

**47** Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, 74; Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line*, 137-65.

**48** Mae Ngai, "Trouble on the Rand: The Chinese Question in South Africa and the Apogee of White Settlerism," *International Labor and Working Class History* 91 (Spring 2017). See also Tu T. Huyhn, "'We are not a Docile People': Chinese Resistance and Exclusion in the Reimagining of Whiteness in South Africa," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 8 (2012): 137-168; Rachel Bright, *Chinese Labour in South Africa: Race, Violence and Global Spectacle* (London, 2005); Peter Richardson, "Coolies and Randlords: The North Randfontein "strike" of 1905," 2, 2 *Journal of South African Studies* (1976): 151-177.

became increasingly at odds, straining both Anglo-Australian and Sino-British relations.<sup>46</sup> It was only with federation and self-governance in 1901 that White Australia came fully into its own. The new parliament quickly passed legislation that excluded Asian immigration, as well as laws to deport Pacific Islanders and exclude aboriginal peoples from the franchise.<sup>47</sup>

### III. Transvaal

Just a few years after Australian federation, across the Indian Ocean, Chinese miners began arriving in the Transvaal colony of South Africa, which had been recently annexed to the British Empire. This novel experiment was aimed at reviving the gold mines of the Witwatersrand ("the Rand," then, as now, the largest gold producing region in the world) and addressing a shortage in native African labor in the wake of the South African War. Between 1904 and 1910, the Transvaal Chamber of Mines imported over 60,000 Chinese for work on the Rand. The scheme was a ticking political time bomb in the postwar context, as South Africa's racial politics were still in flux. The basis for reconciliation between whites, British and Afrikaners remained unresolved, as did the future of policy in regard to native Africans.

Unlike Chinese miners in North America and Australia, the Chinese mine laborers went to the Rand under contracts that set their wages and hours; forbade them from working in any other occupation or industry and from owning or leasing property; and required them to return to China at the conclusion of the contract. But if Chinese mining laborers were indentured, they were not docile. They rioted, went on strike, and passively resisted, by simply refusing to drill more than the daily minimum number of inches required of them. Desertion was common, especially for a day or two, but also for weeks and even months at a time. Within six months the program faced a crisis of labor discipline and social control.<sup>48</sup> Between 1904 and 1907, nearly 25,000 Chinese laborers, more than one-third of the total number of Chinese to work on the



**Figure 5.** Roll call of Chinese laborers at the Simmer and Jack Mine, Transvaal, ca. 1899. Photo courtesy of Hilton Teper.

Rand, were convicted of various offenses, including refusing to work, rioting, staging work actions, deserting the compounds, as well as assault, manslaughter and murder.<sup>49</sup>

The importation of Chinese labor for the Rand soon developed into a major political issue in South Africa and across the British Empire. There were sensational accounts in the Transvaal about Chinese mine deserters roaming the countryside and attacking Afrikaner farmsteads and, in Great Britain, about floggings meted out to those who refused to drill the minimum number of inches and other conditions alleged to be “akin to slavery.” In 1906 the Superintendent of the Transvaal Foreign Labor Department, James Jamieson, despaired that supervising Chinese mine laborers was a “hopeless” endeavor, an assessment that signaled the impossibility of satisfying mine production goals and local demands for public safety without the labor system looking like slavery.<sup>50</sup> The crisis assumed the incendiary symbolic force of the Chinese Question, building upon a half-century of European experience with Chinese emigration to New World settlements. Not coincidentally, the white, English-speaking, skilled miners and artisans in the Transvaal included many Australian and Cornish workers who traversed the Anglo-American goldfields. The President of the Witwatersrand Trade and Labor Council, Peter Whiteside, was originally from Ballarat, Australia. Tom Matthews, who founded the Miners Association on the Rand, was a Cornish miner who came to South Africa by way of Montana, where he had been a miner and a Socialist state legislator.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) (1905) Cd. 2401; BPP (1905) Cd. 2563; BPP (1907) Cd. 3338/app. 2; BPP (1907) Cd. 3528.

<sup>50</sup> Jamieson to Solomon, March 6, 1906, Foreign Labor Department, Vol. 24, AG 32/06, Transvaal Archive Depot, National Archives of South Africa (Pretoria).

<sup>51</sup> Ngai, “Trouble on the Rand.”

**52** Charles Van Onselen, "The Main Reef Road into the Working Class," in *New Babylon New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (Johannesburg, 2001), 309-26.

**53** On South Africans' reliance on the state, see Ivan Evans, *Cultures of Violence* (Manchester, 2009).

The Chinese Question on the Rand emerged as a key issue in two major political elections in 1906, the general elections in Britain and the elections for responsible government or home rule in the Transvaal. Both elections spelled the speedy demise of the Chinese labor program and set broader political trajectories into motion. In the Transvaal, the Chinese Question brought to the fore long-simmering controversies over the mine labor shortage and the economic security of South African whites, whose relationship to the mining industry had been problematic since the discovery of gold in the 1880s. To be sure, gold had opened a range of economic opportunities on the Witwatersrand, but only a minority materially benefited to any significant degree.<sup>52</sup> The postwar reconstruction policies of Lord Alfred Milner, the first governor of Transvaal and Orange River Colony and high commissioner of Southern Africa, had done little to improve the economic situation of white Afrikaners, especially those of limited education and without training for a trade. The general view that the state was responsible for ensuring that all whites benefited from white supremacy substantively, not just symbolically, informed Afrikaners' approach to economic policy in general and the Chinese question in particular.<sup>53</sup>

The so-called Randlords, the capitalists who controlled the mining industries in Witwatersrand, believed that using white labor in unskilled jobs was simply too costly for mining to be profitable but, lest this appear too self-interested, they emphasized that the further development of mining would increase the absolute number of skilled positions for whites on the mines and, moreover, that increased prosperity of the colony would generate more jobs for whites in the towns. The argument had carried the day in 1903, when the proposal for using indentured Chinese on the mines was first debated. But even as the industry again prospered, white unemployment remained a serious problem. By 1905-06, Afrikaners had lost what little patience they had had with the promise that Chinese labor would increase white employment. They became more firmly

committed to the belief that the state served the greed of the mining magnates at the expense of the white population.<sup>54</sup>

In this view they were joined by the South African trade union movement, which was dominated by British workmen. The trade unions had their own grievances against the Randlords. Employment of skilled whites on the mines fluctuated with the general business cycle as well as seasonal variations in the native labor supply. Skilled workers also resented efforts by the mining companies, led by their engineers, to wrest from them control over the point of production and to increase productivity. Like artisans and craftsmen everywhere, they mightily resisted these incursions against their autonomy.<sup>55</sup>

In the event, the Chinese Question served to unify Afrikaner politics, which after the South African war comprised diverse and conflicting perspectives. The Afrikaner *Het Volk* party, formed in 1904 by the former Boer commandos Jan Smuts and Louis Botha, rode the Chinese Question to power in the 1907 elections for home rule. That would set the course that would lead the colonies to federate as the Union of South Africa in 1910, under the banner of radical white supremacy and racial segregation. South Africa joined Canada, Australia and New Zealand as self-governing Dominions of the British Empire, all based on white-settler rule, native dispossession and Asiatic exclusion.

In Britain, the Chinese Question helped the Liberal Party overturn twenty years of nearly unbroken Conservative rule in 1906.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, it galvanized the British trade union movement and helped it to secure increased representation in parliament. The core of the Liberal-Labour opposition to Chinese labor in South Africa was the view that the Chinese had been brought to South Africa under conditions “akin to slavery.” In their view, it represented a stain on the honorable tradition of British abolitionism, a tradition held dearly by both radicals and religious nonconformists in the Liberal Party. They found in the Chinese Question a blunt instrument

<sup>54</sup> Selborne to Lyttelton, November 11, 1905, enclosure with resolutions from public meeting held Potchefstroom, Oct 4, 1905, BPP (1906) Cd. 2819/06.

<sup>55</sup> John Higginson, “Privileging the Machines: American Engineers, Indentured Chinese and White Workers in South Africa’s Deep-level Gold Mines, 1902-1907,” *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 1-34.

<sup>56</sup> See also AK Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Hamden, CT, 1973).

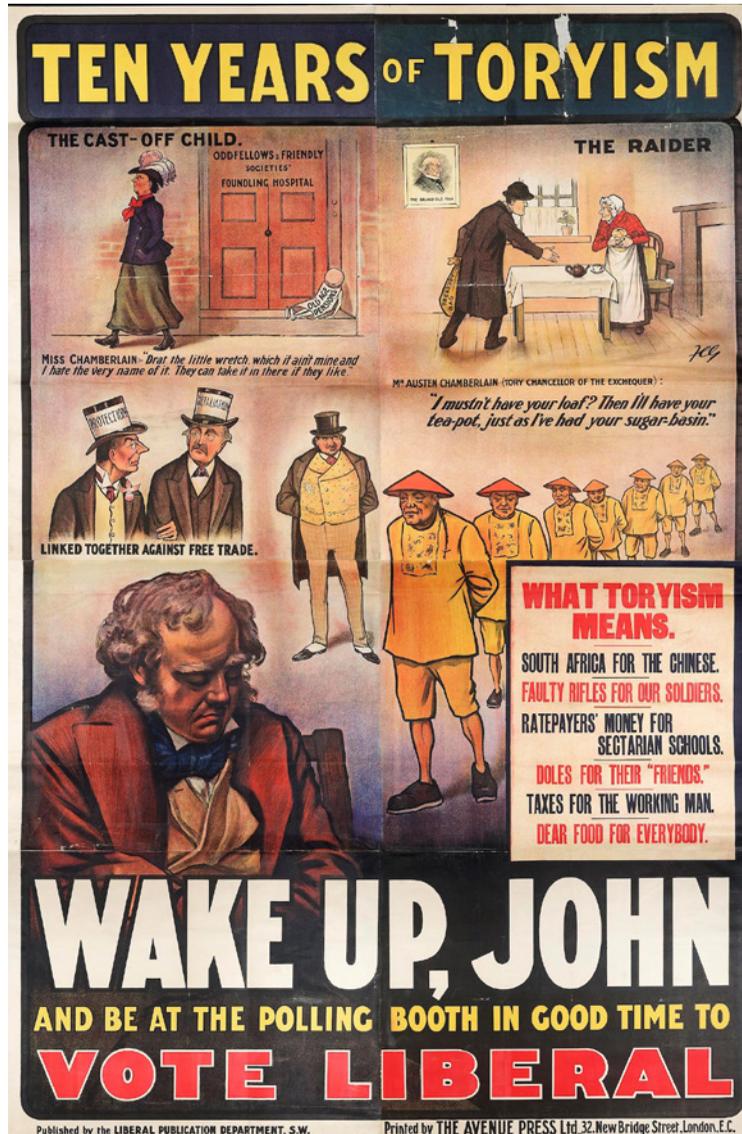


Figure 6. "Ten Years of Toryism," Liberal Party election campaign poster, 1906. Library of the London School of Economics and Science.

57 Central Federation of Trade Unions, "White Labour or Yellow Slaves? Analysis of Division," March 9, 1904, Center for Research Library, dds-22478.

to attack the Conservative government by linking the moral tradition of abolitionism to the recent sacrifices made by British soldiers (50,000 casualties) and taxpayers (£250 million spent) in the war against the tyrannical Boer republics. The trade unions readily adopted the antislavery refrain. As early as March 1904, the British Trade Union Congress denounced the importation of Chinese labor to the Transvaal as a violation of the principles of Trade Unionism and of the "previous splendid record of our race" in "freeing the civilized world from slavery."<sup>57</sup>

Criticism of the program reached a crescendo of outrage in the fall of 1905, after revelations emerged of floggings of Chinese laborers on the one hand, and of Chinese desertions and crimes committed against white farmers, on the other.<sup>58</sup> The Liberal Party connected the two developments in a single indictment of a disastrous policy: “We brought the Chinamen into the mines and we cannot prevent them from being at once the victims and authors of lawlessness.”<sup>59</sup> To be sure, a precise definition of slavery eluded the Liberal and Labour election campaigns; their writings and speeches were studied with phrases like “general tenour,” “feeling of slavery,” “conditions akin to slavery,” and “partaking of slavery.” When pressed to define “slavery,” the Radical Liberal MP John Burns resorted to citing the United States experience as evidence of the impossibility of free Chinese immigration, which brought the concept of Chinese comprising a “coolie race” full circle.<sup>60</sup>

Conservatives attacked the Liberals for hypocrisy and for using the Chinese Question for partisan purposes. They fought back with a deluge of newspaper reports and pamphlets of their own, with photographs of clean quarters in the compounds, while also invoking the protections of the contract. They warned that the withdrawal of Chinese labor would ruin the colony’s future prosperity.<sup>61</sup> Their charges of Liberal hypocrisy and partisan opportunism were not far off the mark. Liberals may have opposed “slavery” but they did not oppose racism; they did not support Asian free labor, free immigration or equal rights in the settler colonies. Liberals’ moral opposition to “Chinese slavery” in the Transvaal conceded to the argument made by the trade unions – that British working men were, by their own rights of empire, entitled to populate, work, and prosper in the settler colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Moreover, they were convinced that they could exercise that right only if Asians were altogether excluded.

The politics of white imperial laborism had been in the making since the 1880s and 1890s in Canada and Australia; both

<sup>58</sup> The most incendiary was the article by Frank Boland, “The Price of Gold,” published in the *Morning Leader*, September 6, 1905. See also *John Chinaman on the Rand* (London, 1905).

<sup>59</sup> “The Government and Chinese Labour,” *Speaker: The Liberal Review*, June 16, 1906: 240

<sup>60</sup> J. Burns, “Slavery in South Africa,” *Independent Review*, May 19, 1904.

<sup>61</sup> For example see, “South Africa and Party Politics,” *Saturday Review*, February 24, 1906, 224; “Chinese Labour. Five Reasons for Supporting the Government on Chinese Labour,” *Imperial South Africa Association Pamphlets no. 60* (1904), Center for Research Libraries.

**62** On Canadian exclusion of Chinese and Indians, see Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections* (Berkeley, 2012); Lisa Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era* (Oxford, 2010); on Australia, see Ann Curthoys, "Men of all Nations, Except Chinamen"; Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line*.

**63** Marilyn Lake, "Challenging the 'Slave-Driving Employers'"; J. Hyslop, "The Imperial Working Class Makes Itself 'White': White Labourism in Britain, Australia and South Africa Before the First World War," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12, 4 (Dec. 1999): 398-421.

**64** Charles A. Pearson, *National Life and Character: A Forecast* (London, 1893). See also Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line*, esp. chapter 3; Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law and the Chinese Puzzle* (Basingstoke, 2012), 20.

**65** M.A. Stobart, "The Asiatic invasion of the Transvaal," *Fortnightly Review* (1907).

**66** Hyslop, "The Imperial Working Class Makes itself 'White'." Hyslop writes that white laborism traveled along three vectors: Australian trade unionists, Cornish miners, and the union of mining engineers.

borrowed heavily from the rhetoric of the Workingmen's Party of California to make the case against Chinese "coolieism."<sup>62</sup> In Australia trade unionism established an ideological and material structure of labor rights based on high wages and Asiatic exclusion. To many white South Africans, Australia offered a model "militantly egalitarian polity, backed by an interventionist state."<sup>63</sup>

The conflict between white laborism and capital was, at one level, over the distribution of resources and power within the context of the white settler state. At another level, racial nationalism expressed the view that racial entitlement unified national identity and purpose across class lines. Charles Henry Pearson, the Oxford historian and later Victorian colonial administrator, did much to distill and disseminate this notion through his influential *National Life and Character* (1893). Pearson warned that the "temperate zones" were the last and only hope for the white race, under population pressure from Africans and Asians. If not excluded by force of law, the argument went, Asiatics would inundate and overwhelm the white settler colonies with cheap labor and commerce. Set in a global context, Australia was the central battleground between two races, the European and Chinese, for domination.<sup>64</sup> Pearson's analysis was rehearsed tout court in Britain during the election season. For example, M.A. Stobart wrote that at stake was the "existence of [Transvaal] as a Colony of Great Britain or as a dumping ground for Asia."<sup>65</sup>

Another "vector" of white laborism operated through the Cornish diaspora, a far-flung network of skilled workers who circulated throughout the mining regions of the empire, from California and the North American West to Australia and New Zealand, to southern Africa and often returning to Cornwall.<sup>66</sup> Adding to these loops, white South Africans also traveled around the settler colonies and back to the metropole. Frederick H.P. Creswell, a former mine manager who argued that gold could be profitably mined with unskilled white labor, stumped in England during the election season, speaking at

trade union rallies, Liberal Party meetings, and received wide coverage in the press.<sup>67</sup> The secretary of the White League, F.R. MacDonald, also an Australian emigrant, toured Australia, New Zealand and Britain in 1906.<sup>68</sup>

The seemingly fortuitous timing of the Chinese Question's arrival in the metropole was no accident. Labor in the colonies had not been an election issue in the past, but in 1904-06 the Liberals astutely sensed its importance – if they hoped to align with the labor movement against the Unionist government. Around the turn of the twentieth century, with the United States and Germany overtaking Great Britain in industrial output, the British trade unions grew more interested in emigration as a hedge against economic insecurity. They were receptive to the arguments made by the Australian and South African unions, and they became alarmed when stories circulated back to England about British emigrants living in abject poverty on the streets of Johannesburg, their unemployment supposedly the result of Chinese labor.<sup>69</sup> Emigration was not as central to the British labor movement's vision as were demands for government social welfare (which many laissez-faire Liberals opposed). But racial protectionism in the colonies was another kind of statist reform, a government guarantee that the peripheries of the empire would be reserved for white settlement. In fact, emigration between 1903 and 1913 rose to unprecedented levels, with 3,150,000 people leaving England for the Dominions.<sup>70</sup>

In the colonies, white labor gave popular support to elite political interests, which in a sense were rather parochial insofar as they sought power over their particular node of the Empire. The Chinese Question gave them common cause and a global stage. For Great Britain, white-settler autonomy was the price of developing Australia and South Africa inside the Empire and not, like the United States, outside of it – as Lord Selborne, Joseph Chamberlain's undersecretary for the colonies and later the British high commissioner for Southern Africa, summarized. The Dominions got to have their cake and

<sup>67</sup> "Liberals and Chinese Labour," *The Times*, February 28 1906: 10; F.H.P. Creswell, "Unskilled White Labour In the Transvaal," *The Times*, March 27, 1906, 8; *Daily Telegraph*, February 8, 1906, 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, September 28, 1906.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see "Yellow v. White Labour. Protest from Johannesburg," *Western Daily Press*, January 2, 1906, Farrar Album.

<sup>70</sup> <http://english-emigrationtocanada.blogspot.com/> (accessed March 17, 2016).

71 Lawrence Neame, *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies* (New York, 1907), 7.

72 Neame, *Asiatic Danger*, 4.

eat it, too. They would be self-governing, but they would still receive the Empire's protection from the proximate threats of the yellow peril and black Africa.

## Conclusion

At this point, one may detect a certain completion in the circumnavigation of the Chinese Question, its contours forged in crucibles of nation building on the frontiers of empire. From diverse local conditions emerged a common global discourse, which cast all Chinese as a "coolie race" and as "slaves" regardless of their actual status or condition. The South African polemicist Lawrence Neame cogently summarized its thesis in 1907. Neame wrote that Asiatics were a danger to the colonies because they would always "under-live and under-sell" the European, dragging down their wages and beating them at commerce, to boot. He perpetuated the coolie fiction that Asians were naturally servile and lacked normal human desires for economic sufficiency and improvement; and he ignored, of course, the historical and political reasons for China and India's impoverishment.<sup>71</sup> But Neame also adopted a more alarmist tone than had been heard previously. Like the Randlords who had not anticipated unruly Chinese coolies on the mines, Neame nervously noted "an awakening of Asia, a movement which involves a keener resentment than obtained in the old days... There is a vague yet growing sense of commercial power. The idea is gaining ground that a weak spot has been found in the armour of Europe." In the shadow of the Russo-Japanese War, Neame perceived a contest between the surplus populations of Europe and Asia over control of the temperate zones of the global south. Without strict barriers to Asiatic immigration, he feared that Europeans would lose this contest, lose by the numbers, lose by the cheapness of servile Asian labor, and, in something of a contradiction, by the cleverness of Indian and Chinese at business.<sup>72</sup>

We should not forget the role of the United States in the coming of the global Chinese Question. Not only was the coolie

trope born in the American West. For white-settler colonials in Australia and South Africa, the United States after the Civil War was, broadly speaking, an object lesson in the folly of racial equality – witness the consequences of unchecked Chinese immigration and postwar reconstruction. But then white America came to its senses and offered solutions in racial management – Chinese exclusion and Jim Crow segregation—that inspired like-minded policies in White Australia and segregated South Africa. If the first bricks of the Great Wall against China were laid by the United States, that wall grew and promoted the development of the American West, Australia and South Africa as so-called White Men’s Countries.

The Chinese Question as a theory of racial danger and exclusion as state policy emerged as constitutive elements of nationalist politics across the Anglo-American world. It was already abloom in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, in racialized notions of continental expansion and the meanings of free labor. In the British settler colonies, the coolie trope emerged later, as a central element of Australian nationalist ambition and the fashioning of the British Dominion.

Chinese exclusion laws were also as part of a dynamic interplay between Anglo-American expansion and Chinese containment. Imperialism’s footprint in China was set down with opium, gunboat diplomacy, unequal treaties and war indemnities, yes — and also from the exclusion laws. The wall protected and advantaged American and British territorial and economic expansion, which depended on control over land, resources, markets, labor and, not least, gold, the foundation of credit.

These policies served to contain China’s position within the global economy: Free immigration invariably begets commercial and cultural exchange. An open door, yes, but one that swings only one-way – that was the strategy of the West. Henceforth, Chinese labor emigration and settlement would remain regionally concentrated, in Southeast Asia and Manchuria, areas that were also entangled with European and

Japanese colonialism. Of course, it could not last forever. After World War II, decolonization loosened the regimes of exclusion; and the end of the Cold War hastened a new era of global economic integration. A different world informs the Chinese Question in our own time. Today's anxieties about China's economic power as a new "yellow peril" are generated by contemporary issues of global economy and politics. But they also draw from a deeper history of ideas and forces that powered their circulation and their rise to the status of the global, dynamics that had their origin in the gold rushes of the Anglo-American world in the nineteenth century.

**Mae Ngai** is Lung Family Professor of Asian American Studies and a professor of history at Columbia University. She is author of the award-winning *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004) and *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (New York, 2021), which received the Bancroft Prize in 2022.