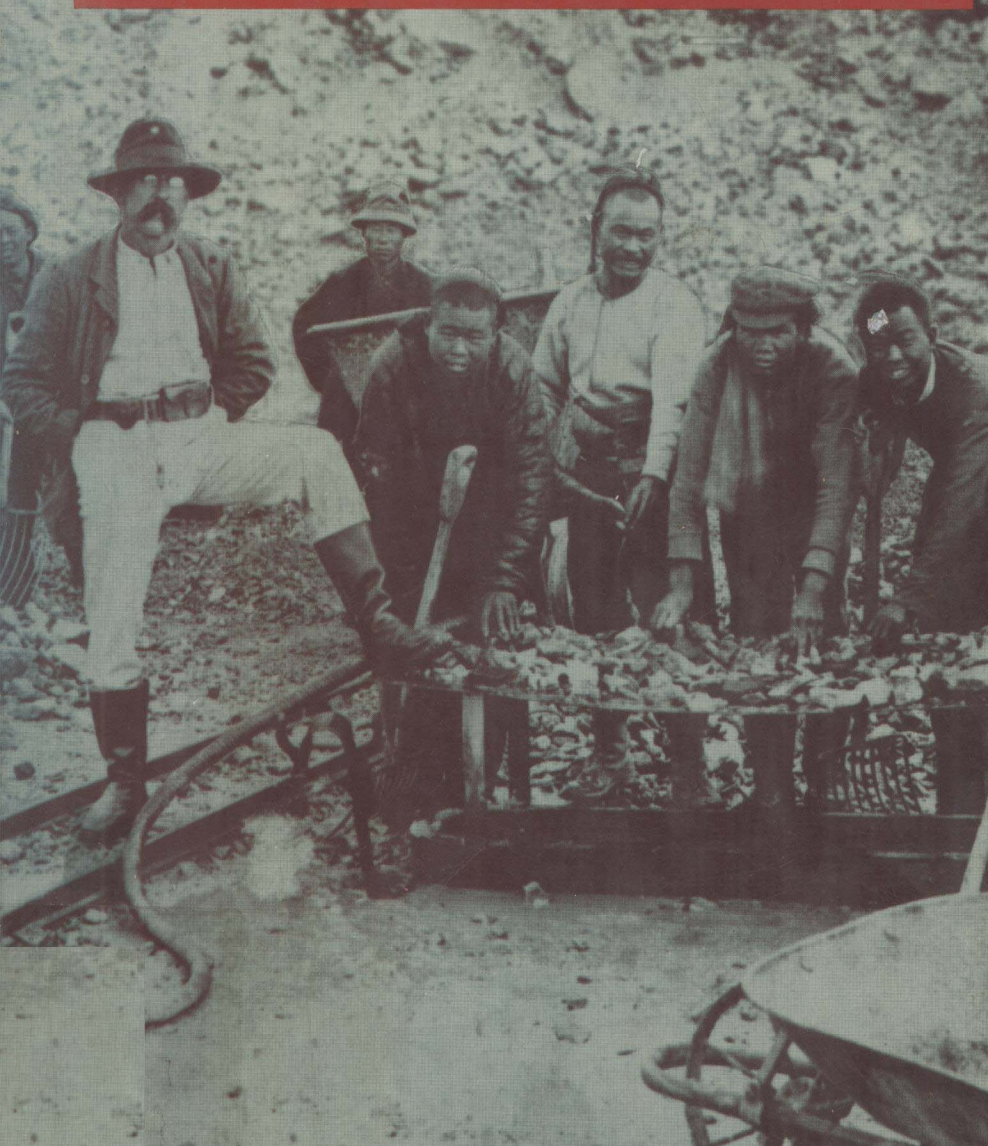


PETER RICHARDSON
CHINESE MINE LABOUR
IN THE TRANSVAAL



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First published 1982 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 27222 6

Printed in Hong Kong

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Preface

Very many people have helped me in writing this book during the past few years. Professor W. G. Beasley and Dr Shula Marks have been a constant source of guidance and encouragement, both during the book's formative stage as a University of London PhD thesis and subsequently. During my time at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Drs K. N. Chauduri, C. Curwen and W. Atwell gave me assistance with various aspects of this work, as did Paul Clifford and Gary Tiedemann. Whilst at the Polytechnic of Central London, Gillian Burke, Barbara Roweth and Pat Ryan all gave me valuable advice and information which helped with the creation of this book. One of my largest debts of gratitude must go to a group of friends who in England and South Africa have always shown me great kindness and often provided me with the inspiration to continue with the task at hand. Adrian Graves, Charles Van Onselen, Stanley Trapido, Ian Phimister, Jean Jacques Van-Helten, Charles Perrings and Tim Couzens have all helped me in so many ways that it is difficult for me to thank them adequately.

The research for this book has been very generously supported by many institutions and authorities. The Social Science Research Council, the Central Research Fund of the University of London, and the Scholarships Committee of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, all made grants to me at various times which made the project possible. Recently, the British Academy's Small Grants Research Fund in the Humanities has made a material contribution to the completion of this book by making a very generous grant available to me for the purchase of microfilm.

I should also like to thank the staff of the archives and libraries that I have used in the course of this work. Mrs Maryna Fraser of Barlow-Rand was particularly helpful, and without her co-operation the completion of the present text would not have been possible. Mrs Anna Cunningham of the University of the Witwatersrand Archives was also very helpful at different times. The Chamber of Mines of South Africa very generously made their private records on Chinese labour available to me, and without them this book would be much the poorer. The staff of the British Library,

London, the School of Oriental and African Studies Library, the Royal Commonwealth Society Library, London, and the Public Record Office, Kew, always showed willingness to help me wherever they could. The same must also be said of the staff of the Transvaal Archives Depot, Pretoria, the Johannesburg and Cape Town Public Libraries, the Killie Campbell Library, Durban, and Library of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Finally, I should like to reserve a special word of thanks to Dr Keith Griffin, now President of Magdalen College, Oxford, whose recommendation made the publication of this book possible, and to Helen Moroney who typed the manuscript.

Oxford
March 1981

P. R.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations appear in the text:

CMLIA	Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency
CSAR	Central South African Railways
dwts/ton	pennyweights per ton (one pennyweight = one-twentieth of a troy ounce)
ERPM	East Rand Proprietary Mines Ltd
FLD	Foreign Labour Department
SAR	South African Republic
TEA	Transvaal Emigration Agent
TLC	Transvaal Labour Commission
WNLA	Witwatersrand Native Labour Association

Note on Chinese Names

As a general rule the Wade–Giles system of Romanisation is used in the text to facilitate cross-reference to other sources. There are, however, two exceptions to this:

- (i) In place names where the more common usage follows the form of the Chinese postal system; thus Tientsin is used not T'ien-chin for the city of that name, but T'ien-chin *fu* is used to denote the prefecture in which the city is situated.
- (ii) Proper names when used in quotations follow the usage of the writer, not the more accurate rendering, and are followed by the word (*sic*) to denote the variation; thus Liu Yü-lin is used in the text to denote the Chinese Consul-General in Johannesburg, but Lew Yuk-lin (*sic*) in quotations.

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Introduction

This book is a detailed case study of a series of events in the international political economy of the early twentieth century. Although it has a clearly defined geographical focus in southern Africa and China, its approach is thematic in nature. It is essentially concerned with three major developments in the spread of international capitalism: the circulation of capital and labour power, and the mining and production of gold, the money commodity. In the period 1890–1914, gold served as a measure of value, a standard of prices and a world currency, by means of which a world-wide circulation of goods, capital and labour was achieved.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, metalliferous mining had proved a magnet for capital investment, particularly from Britain. In the 1820s and 30s, the copper mines of Chile and Venezuela, and the silver mines of Bolivia and Mexico attracted large amounts of speculative finance.¹ Later, base and precious metal mines in the USA and Australia attracted substantial amounts of British money.² In the last decades of the century, it was the turn of tin in Malaysia and gold in South Africa to draw in foreign investment.³ However, the consistency of international, particularly British, investment in mining ventures in all continents of the world throughout much of the nineteenth century, hid changes of a quantitative nature in the role of capital export in the world economy after 1870. As is commonly acknowledged, the scale of overseas lending by Britain increased very dramatically in the last three decades of the century, to play a decisive role in Britain's overall balance of trade. In the course of this development, the real significance and course of which is still much disputed, investment in mining continued to play an important role in circulating funds on a global scale.⁴ Naturally, as the scope of the international economy expanded and ever-increasing numbers of countries were drawn into the orbit of the metropolitan capital, the relative importance of mining investment declined. It has been estimated, for example, that only 12 per cent of the new British portfolio investment of £4082 million made available between 1865 and 1914, was in extractive industries.⁵ However, in certain areas international investment in mining was particularly marked. Nowhere was this more true than in southern Africa,

where the diamond and gold mines secured large amounts of British, French and German capital. By 1914, South Africa and Rhodesia had absorbed £318 million out of a total British investment in Africa, in all sectors, of £441 million. In this area, mining accounted for over 35 per cent of total British investment in 1910, whilst a further 28 per cent was invested in Colonial Government stock, largely to finance transport facilities to service the mines, and a further 3 per cent went directly to the railway companies.⁶

Not surprisingly, such a scale of investment in extractive metallurgy had a noticeable effect upon the pace of economic activity, of which the growth of urbanisation and immigration were some of the major indices.⁷ In the wake of the Californian gold discoveries, the population of the state rose from 14,000 to a quarter of a million between 1849 and 1852, with San Francisco supporting a population of 35,000. A significant feature of this influx was the large number of Chinese immigrants. Between 1849 and 1876, their numbers grew from 76,000 to 111,000.⁸ A similar correlation between expanding gold mining and Chinese immigration was found in the Australian colonies of Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland between 1854 and 1877.⁹ In South Africa too a connection between investment in gold mining, urbanisation and immigration was also evident from 1886 onwards. Johannesburg grew with remarkable speed from a mining camp to a city with a European population of 25,000 within three years of the Witwatersrand being declared a public digging.¹⁰ Between 1895 and 1898 a total of 86,000 United Kingdom citizens arrived at South African ports, making the subcontinent the second most popular port of emigration from Britain and Ireland after the USA in this period.¹¹ Although the conditions under which the Chinese labourers emigrated to the Transvaal between 1904 and 1907 were much more restrictive than those governing the movement of their countrymen into the gold producing districts of North America and Australia, or of European immigrants into southern Africa, the very diversity of conditions of movement and its continuing connection with international movements of capital, suggests strongly that all were part of the uneven development associated with the global expansion of capitalism at this period. As Philip Corrigan has made clear: 'It may well be that the major form of labour's contribution to the making and remaking of capitalism as a world market system is large scale circulation. We shall never grasp "the facts", if we fail to appreciate labour theoretically as it is itself treated (in practice, in accounts, in State policies) as a commodity which is circulated.'¹²

Much of the tone of this book originates from this commoditised and internationally circulated character of labour power under capitalism, a

feature which became pronounced during the period of imperialist expansion.¹³

The end result of this movement of capital and labour power was the production of goods for exchange. It has been estimated that the world-wide movement of these commodities between 1870 and 1914 was larger in relation to total production than at any time before or since. Also the world came very near to possessing a single monetary system.¹⁴ The basis of this expanding network of finance and trade was the gold standard, whose structure owed much to the historic domination of nineteenth-century world trade by British industrial capitalism.¹⁵

The gold standard, as it functioned during the high noon of its operation between 1870 and 1914, had certain distinctive features, which affected the development of the world economy very closely. In the first instance gold in the form of coins was permitted to circulate within the domestic economies of gold standard countries, and was interchangeable with notes at central banks. These banks used gold reserves to maintain and safeguard convertability. Second, sterling was, as a means of international payment, virtually interchangeable with gold, the currency being used as the normal medium of settlement. Bullion was only used to balance items in trading accounts. This gave to the Bank of England not only the role of regulator of the British monetary system, but also that of arbitrator of the international gold standard and payments systems. This interchangeability of sterling and gold owed a great deal to the intrinsic strength of the currency, itself a reflection of the strength of the overall balance of United Kingdom trade in the period under review. Third, the great expansion of world trade at this time more than offset the inherently deflationary tendencies of a system which worked on fixed or narrowly fluctuating exchange rates between gold and national currencies. In response to this expansion of finance and trade, a genuinely international banking system developed through which the process was regulated.¹⁶

The fact that the pre-1914 gold standard was both a coinage and international exchange standard, at least in the major industrial nations of western Europe and North America, meant that the impact of demand for gold for financial purposes was large. Especially after the adoption of the gold standard by Germany in 1871, and until the mid-1890s, the demand for gold exceeded the supply, despite the increased output of gold from the Australian and Californian deposits.¹⁷ The result was a major increase in the value of gold, and a dramatic fall in the value of silver.¹⁸ However, variable value was not the only consequence of this monetary system for the world's gold miners. It also imposed a fixed monetary price for the metal as a consequence of the fixed exchange rate and it also guaranteed

demand, as banks were required to accept as payment all gold presented for settlement.¹⁹ All these factors played an important role in the economic situation in the Transvaal after the war of 1899–1902.

The changing value of gold and silver and the fluctuations in the level of prices during the last three decades of the nineteenth century were indicative of major changes in the structure of the international economy. These had their roots in the emergence of rival industrial and manufacturing nations, particularly Germany and USA, which posed a serious threat to Britain's hegemonic trading position. Similarly, the opening up of new areas of primary commodity production, made possible by the revolution in transport initiated by the railway and the steamship, had a depressant effect upon commodity prices.²⁰ These pressures manifested themselves in diverse ways. In the heartland of industrial capitalism, the demand for protection mounted consistently. Germany in 1879, France in 1881 and the USA in 1890 actually erected tariff barriers.²¹ In the Far and Near East, these pressures took the form of demands for government aid in securing concessionary investment and trading areas.²² In Africa such demands were repeated, creating a highly charged competitive atmosphere, and greater tolerance of state regulation of economic activities by business interests. These developments undoubtedly played a key role in the transformation of political relationships between Europe and Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, although the precise relationship between economic instability and the extension of colonial empires in Africa was by no means simple or direct.²³

In southern Africa much of this instability was manifested through the progressive extension of the mining frontier from the late 1860s onwards. The rise in the value of gold, particularly after 1873, encouraged a wave of prospecting activity and immigration which culminated in the Witwatersrand discoveries of 1886. The openly expansionist aims of the major mining houses stretched this turbulence beyond the confines of the Transvaal as far north as Nyasaland, until restrained by government intervention. This process was part of an almost continent-wide business or unofficial partition of Africa which proceeded from mid-century onwards. It had a strong impact upon the better known political partition of the 1880s and 1890s.²⁴ Thus speculative mineral activity and its related demand for labour became associated with British plans for confederation in southern Africa, both in the 1870s and again at the turn of the century. The climax of the latter was the ten years which began with the war of 1899–1902. This was followed by the occupation of the two Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal) in 1900 and their annexation to Britain as Crown Colonies under the terms of

the Treaty of Vereeniging of 1902. The decade ended with the restoration of self-governing status to the Transvaal in 1907 and the Orange River Colony in 1908, and the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910.²⁵

The war of 1899–1902 also ensured that the political and economic settlement of South Africa would be a major issue in British domestic politics. The massive victory of Salisbury's Conservative and Unionist government in the 'Khaki election' of 1900, the split in the Liberal Party over the war, and the subsequent direct responsibility of the Colonial Secretary for the administration of the newly won territories in Africa, kept southern Africa in the forefront of parliamentary debate for close on ten years. In this mêlée of political interests, the issue of Chinese labour in the Transvaal was to play a major part. Indeed, it might be claimed that the question of 'Chinese slavery' did as much as any other single issue to erode the electoral fortunes of the seemingly impregnable Tory party, and united the Liberals. It also played a significant role in cementing the Lib–Lab pact, which contributed so much to the emergence of the Labour Party as a political force in these years.²⁶

The task of fully explaining the impact of South African questions upon Edwardian politics has still to be done, but certain key elements in relation to the question of Chinese labour stand out. In the first place the issues cut across class lines and cemented many of the otherwise disparate and antagonistic elements within the Liberal Party. This can best be seen in the response of the so-called 'Nonconformist Conscience'. Dissenting religious opinion was outraged by the conditions under which the Chinese were forced to live and work.²⁷ That allegations about widespread homosexuality amongst Chinese labourers on the Rand became the focus of a major Parliamentary row bore witness both to the flavour of British politics and the force of this tradition within the Liberal Party. The strength of non-conformist and humanitarian opposition to Chinese labour clearly owed something also to other aspects of contemporary South African politics, most particularly the conduct of the British Army during the guerrilla stages of the war.²⁸

In other respects, the prominence of class as a basis for British opposition to Chinese labour was much clearer. The early years of the twentieth century were a period of relatively high unemployment, with between 3½ and 6 per cent of registered trade unionists out of work between 1902 and 1908.²⁹ The prospect of Chinese labourers taking jobs in the Transvaal mines which could be done by British workmen led to widespread opposition from organised labour. A meeting in Hyde Park on 26 March 1904, called by the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union