

# Rand Capitalists and Chinese Resistance

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## Introduction

From the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century thousands of Chinese were indentured or employed as labourers on plantations, railway lines, road works and mines across the five continents. This expansive traffic from both the northern and southern provinces of China was the result of factors which went far beyond the sheer size and availability of this labour resource. In contrast to the European, Indian and African unskilled labourers, the Chinese were recruited not only because they were 'industrious' and 'cheap'<sup>1</sup>, but because they were preferred since they were regarded as more docile, submissive and obedient.<sup>2</sup> These traits featured prominently in almost all pro-Chinese labour lobbies world-wide, and the Witwatersrand (Rand) capitalist campaign to obtain Chinese labourers for the gold mines at the turn of this century was no exception.<sup>3</sup> The indentured Chinese who came to the Rand were, however, to prove recalcitrant, and were not unlike their European skilled and African unskilled counterparts, who, as revisionist historiography of early South African industrialization has shown,<sup>4</sup> were not passive recipients of the Randlord's exploitation. On the contrary, Chinese resistance appears to have been more prevalent and more publicised than that of European and African employees, as a result of the very active contemporary anti-Chinese agitation, and the accompanying detailed press and official reports.<sup>5</sup> Outrages committed beyond the limits of the Rand mining compound elicited the greatest public response and attention. The acts of Chinese resistance within the compounds were more the concern of the Foreign Labour Department, Colonial Secretary and House of Commons, and have subsequently only been analyzed in unpublished theses and a single article.<sup>6</sup> However, the Chinese resistance was significant in that it augmented both the scope and nature of the labour activity on the Rand gold mines at the turn of this century.

The main reason for the introduction of the Chinese indentured labourers was that after the South African War (1899-1902) the once thriving Rand economy was devastated. The gold mines had virtually come to a standstill, and drastic measures were required to restart mining production. The condition in which the Transvaal found itself was by no means conducive to the development necessary, and together with a post-war decrease in the purchasing power of gold, the rising cost of skilled labour and the dramatic decline in the supply of unskilled African labour, a decision was taken by the mining capitalists to import Chinese workers.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese were to add yet another dimension to the multicultural nature of the Rand

mining labour society.<sup>8</sup> Besides the various African communities that had been recruited for the mines, there were miners from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and United States of America as well as smaller numbers from virtually every country in Europe.<sup>9</sup> With the introduction of the Chinese, the Rand mining society encompassed members from every continent in the world.

Throughout the campaign for the introduction of Chinese labour, right up to the termination of the Chinese indentured system in 1910,<sup>10</sup> most of the Rand mining capitalists retained a belief in the 'hard working, law abiding aliens'. Yet, despite the repressive controls imposed by a multitude of restrictions, these indentured men resisted the exploitation of the capitalist system by all the means at their disposal.

## Restrictive regulations

The Chinese indentured, unskilled labourer was the third element introduced into the gold mining labour field after 1900. Recruited and repatriated within a half dozen years, they were held to have 'helped to save an industry and even perhaps a country'.<sup>11</sup> While African or 'black' labour was regarded as the cornerstone of the gold industry,<sup>12</sup> Chinese or 'yellow' labour was the scaffold<sup>13</sup> - a temporary expedient to reconstruct the gold industry. Like the African labourer, the Chinese was 'non-white' and ultra-cheap,<sup>14</sup> and was therefore also seen as exploitable and subject to restrictive regulations. The marked difference in their origin and nature, and the unique condition of their indentured circumstances, was reflected in the way they resisted and reacted to the economic system.

The upshot caused by the intended importation of the Chinese labour force were as divergent as the sources from whence it came. Reactions emanated from every component of Rand society: British humanitarians, Boer leaders, skilled white labourers, Progressive and Liberal party politicians and Australian and American trade unionists.<sup>15</sup> This response combined with the Anglo-Chinese agreement of 1904 which stipulated among other things 'proper supervision and protection of such immigrants',<sup>16</sup> made for importation regulations with reasonable conditions, on the one hand, to quell cries of slavery, but restrictive measures to annul fears of labour intrusion on the other.<sup>17</sup> As soon as the British imperial government accepted the Labour Importation Ordinance (No. 17 of 1904), the Foreign Labour Department was established in the Transvaal in March 1904 for the sole purpose of carrying out the stipulated provisions.<sup>18</sup>



*Chinese indentured labourers on the Rand Mines*

The Labour Importation Ordinance regulated the appointment of administrative officers and provided for inspectors who were to keep a watch on general treatment, conditions and complaints of the Chinese indentured immigrants. All labourers had to enter into a service contract not exceeding three years, after which they were to be returned to their country of origin, unless the contract was renewed for a further two years.<sup>19</sup> They were to be employed only on the Witwatersrand and as unskilled labour, meaning 'labour as is usually performed in mines ... by persons belonging to the aboriginal races or tribes of Africa south of the Equator'.<sup>20</sup> These and other stipulations were introduced to keep the Chinese a temporary and controlled component of Rand mining society.

The Chinese workers were to be issued with a passport, had to reside on the premises of the Rand mine on which they were employed, and could not leave without a permit which would only be granted for periods of less than forty-eight hours. They could not own landed property or trade in any

way, and were not to be employed in fifty-five stipulated occupations. Refusal to take up service on arrival resulted in the labourer being repatriated. Other offenses, such as desertion, refusal to work, absenteeism or employment other than that stipulated, was punishable by imprisonment or a fine. The time spent away from work and the period in imprisonment were to be reckoned as additional to the term of service, and thus the labourers' periods of contract were prolonged.<sup>21</sup> A regular check was also kept on the workforce by holding compulsory weekly roll-calls on all mines in which Chinese labourers were employed.<sup>22</sup>

The Ordinance was described as the 'most unpopular of all the unpopular measures'.<sup>23</sup> The white skilled miners declared that it was not a sufficient safeguard against Chinese encroachment and competition,<sup>24</sup> while opposition at the other extreme denounced the stringent regulations as a 'Charter of Slavery'.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these 'outside' pressures to which the magnates necessarily conceded to attain their Chinese goal,<sup>26</sup> there were certain 'inside' considerations which also played a role in the formulation of the Chinese

regulations. Chinese labour had been decided upon as 'the cheapest of all labour'<sup>27</sup> in preference to the African unskilled labour force, which was not forthcoming, and unskilled whites who were apparently an unviable economic proposition.<sup>28</sup> Proposals to the Chamber of Mines to introduce batches of Italians, Finns, Russians and Serbs had all been rejected<sup>29</sup> as white unskilled labour also held the threat of unrest and combination in the form of trade unions, whereby they could 'hold the government of the country in the hollow of their hands',<sup>30</sup> as well as disrupt production. Moreover, the enormous capital outlay incurred in the importation of the Chinese had to be balanced by the absolute utilisation of their labour power.<sup>31</sup>

involved continual training of the newly recruited batches.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the restrictive measures placed on the movement, work and living conditions of the Chinese served to strengthen the magnates' control of their employees.<sup>35</sup> Although reports had described the Chinese as 'docile, law abiding and industrious people',<sup>36</sup> the mine-owners fear of 'anything approaching combination among the workers'<sup>37</sup> led to the suggestion that in 'order to minimise the danger ... of Chinese forming societies ... gangs should consist of Chinese from different districts'.<sup>38</sup> The mine magnates had also taken the precaution of persuading the government to ban all forms of protest, including 'peaceful meetings'.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese were in effect



*Role-call of Chinese labourers on the Rand*

The Chamber of Mines regulated the terms so that the Chinese indentured labourer was exclusively at the disposal of the mining industry,<sup>32</sup> thus excluding any form of competition from other industries, transgression being illegal and subject to a fine or imprisonment.<sup>33</sup> The minimum three-year contract was far more advantageous than the African average eight-month period, which

'forbidden by law to raise themselves, or to bargain with their masters'<sup>40</sup>, since all forms of protest were legally prohibited.<sup>41</sup>

The general conditions of Chinese accommodation, medical attention and diet were comparatively better than those of the African labourers employed on the gold mines. Enormous sums were spent on 'making the Chinaman

comfortable'.<sup>42</sup> New compounds were erected on selected Rand mines, provided with ablution facilities costing an average of £7 10/- per head in construction.<sup>43</sup> Food comprised the traditional staple diet of rice, with a ration of meat or dried fish, vegetables and tea.<sup>44</sup> Certain contemporaries regarded their treatment as luxurious and 'a life which unskilled workers in any part of the world may well envy'.<sup>45</sup> Generally, the Chinese never complained on this score, but then again they did not complain since they were apparently 'unaccustomed to the procedure',<sup>46</sup> and in many cases where grievances were believed to exist 'the aggrieved person himself [preferred] to maintain silence'.<sup>47</sup> These 'attractive' conditions were imperative as far as management was concerned, not only to counter British 'slavery cries', but also in the interest of encouraging the Chinese to come to the Rand.<sup>48</sup>

### Treatment

The actual treatment of the Chinese, however, left much to be desired. The management and white miners abused the Chinese flagrantly,<sup>49</sup> and although the humanitarians were alleged to overexaggerate the mishandling, 'the allegations', wrote C.P. Trevelyan, British MP., '... could not be believed off-hand. But neither could they be denied off-hand by companies against which allegations had been made'.<sup>50</sup> Corporal punishment was regularly inflicted upon the Chinese, while management extended its power to include the 'humiliation of the beam and the cruelty of Asiatic torture'.<sup>51</sup> Incidents such as the one recorded by Tom Burt, where a 'Compound Manager got two police boys, one to hold [the Chinese victim] by the head and the other, by the legs on the ground, [while] the Compound Manager flogged him', were not uncommon on the Rand.<sup>52</sup> The fact that many similar occurrences were suppressed is evident in the study made by David Ticktin concerning the conduct of a manager's, intimidation and ruin of a miner, Thomas Ratcliffe, who had the 'audacity' to sign an affidavit and report a case to the Attorney-General in which an assistant compound-manager of the New Cason Mine had inflicted 'twenty-five strokes with a sjambok on a Chinese miner, Toan Shing San Lino'.<sup>53</sup>

Harsh treatment and the many other confrontations between management and employees were generally dismissed as being the result of 'linguistic incomprehension'<sup>54</sup> or ironically attributed to the inherent Chinese vice whose 'sleeping passions' could be 'unpleasantly aroused', maintaining that 'firmness and equity [were] essential in handling them'.<sup>55</sup> The enormous number of disputes which took place on the Rand mines and the diversity of causes and characteristics, refute entirely such simplistic judgements.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, they tend to reflect on the extremity of capitalist exploitation of its workforce in its lust for bigger profits.

'John Chinaman' was in many ways comparable to the migrant African worker, who was also brought into a country where the idea of 'civilization' and manner of living were entirely at variance with that which existed in his

country or district of origin.<sup>57</sup> The 'untutored Oriental peasant'<sup>58</sup> was unaccustomed to the intensity and rigour of gold mines.<sup>59</sup> A Chinese interpreter, Gim Ah Chun, asserted that they were brought to the Rand 'under the most cruel and false pretences',<sup>60</sup> and claimed that the Chinese had been deceived by direct misrepresentation, and withholding of the truth. For example, they had not been aware that they were to work underground, nor had they been informed of the small purchasing power of money on the Rand.<sup>61</sup> This deception did not differ much from the methods used to lure African labour to the Rand, nor was there much discrepancy between the general objections and grievances of the two unskilled forces each subjected to an exploitative system by restrictive measures of varying degrees. Thus, conceiving of industrial conflict as a 'continuum'<sup>62</sup> ranging from premeditated action to blatant absence, as Eddie Webster does in his analysis of labour on the Witwatersrand, the Chinese labourers were also to resist the employer, as did their fellow African workers<sup>63</sup>, by various measures viable in their particular circumstances.

### Protest action

Forms of protest available to the Chinese were even more limited than the options open to the indigenous Africans. The Chinese were completely isolated from their homes, bound to the Rand gold fields by a three-year contract which could only be terminated by tendering a sum sufficient to defray the expenses necessary for repatriation.<sup>64</sup> Self-financed repatriation was naturally impossible in view of the cost required and the remuneration received, and so together with the restrictive nature of the contract, the Chinese were virtually immobile.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, despite these measures and circumstances, the Chinese, unskilled, indentured labourers still managed to show their disapproval by withdrawing their labour in many ways. Against considerable odds, the most common form of resistance was desertion, i.e. withdrawing completely from the labour market. During the first year alone, some 21 205 illegal absentees were reported, out of a total population of about 50 000 ( $\pm 42.4\%$ )<sup>66</sup>, the first reported incident having taken place within less than a month of the Chinese arrival on the Rand.<sup>67</sup> The overriding reason for desertion was probably related to the avoidance of the arduous form of work and tedious captivity to which the labourers were subjected;<sup>68</sup> after all, they could not desert to another form of work or employer, nor to their homes - although a tale is told of a mine labourer who supplied maps at 10/- to fellow labourers, which showed the road from the Reef to Tibet in great detail, and which they could reach in less than a couple of weeks.<sup>69</sup> Desertion was so rife that a committee was appointed to investigate the conditions controlling the Chinese and the means to improve them.<sup>70</sup>

The investigating committee concluded that 'gambling and the pecuniary loss which it entails was accountable for nine-tenths of the desertions', maintaining that 'the payment of debt ... was a matter of honour with a Chinaman'.<sup>71</sup> But the high percentage attributed to gambling appears

somewhat exaggerated as do the other reported immediate causes: the opium habit and 'bad character' of the Chinese.<sup>72</sup> This committee appeared to be blatantly intent on proving the opinion that 'absentees or deserters ... [had] not absconded themselves or deserted from any cause connected with their employment or treatment on the mines'.<sup>73</sup>

The other form of Chinese protest which proved to be a real source of strength was their 'determined combination' or 'solidarity with fellow workers'.<sup>74</sup> This was the very strategy which the mine-owners feared, even though it was by no means associated with sophisticated trade unionism of the industrial world. It was a united show of force that demanded stern counteraction.

The Chinese, unlike the Africans,<sup>75</sup> were a large, fairly homogenous group, and although differences existed between the Chinese from different districts, batches which enlisted for the Rand were usually recruited together, the majority being Northerners with a sprinkling of Cantonese recruits.<sup>76</sup> This uniformity of origin and dialect, together with the long period of 'confinement' on a specific mine, their relative isolation as a group both physically and socially, and the customary power of headmen,<sup>77</sup> made their united front all the more effective and powerful. Any action taken as a result of dissatisfaction, no matter how trivial the cause, was usually well supported by fellow workers of that mine, whether it entailed a refusal to work, an attack on compound police, a fight against African workers, the shirking of work, or the stoning and destruction of compound property. These outbursts were usually confined to one specific mine and thus facilitated immediate suppression by police, making all incidents of short duration, mostly resulting in arrests and imprisonment.

The Foreign Labour Department's records of 'Riots and Disturbances' by Chinese labourers are by no means comprehensive, and are in many cases, vague. Lists were limited to incidents which 'necessitated the calling in of Police assistance',<sup>78</sup> while reports were kept to an absolute minimum, many outbursts being brushed aside by the remark 'very trivial' or 'unimportant'.<sup>79</sup> During the initial years of the experiment, the records were comparatively more regular, but tended to play down the extent and

seriousness of the upheavals, in view of the political contentiousness of the system.<sup>80</sup> As the termination of the indentured system became more apparent, however, so the reports became less frequent.

Contemporary officials claimed that all incidents were triggered by misunderstanding and the ignorance and nervousness of the Chinese on finding themselves in a strange country.<sup>81</sup> But, as in the case of desertion, this was probably an attempt to neutralise any accusations that the Chinese were discontented or misused on the mines. One must also bear in mind in this context that the 'misunderstanding' excuse works two ways, and that a lack of comprehension of the Chinese on the part of the mine managers and judicial authorities was also prevalent. There

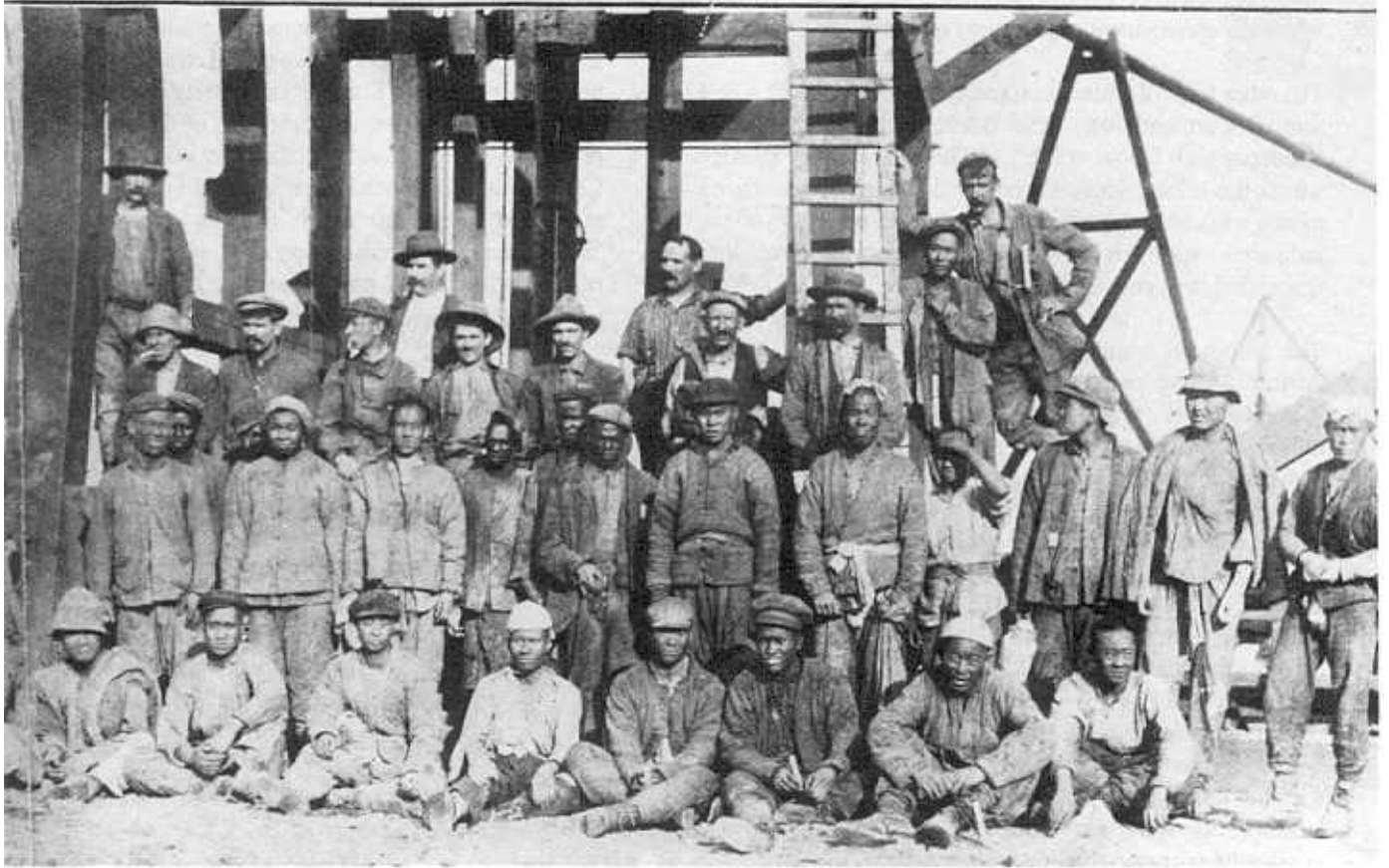


*Chinese Policemen*

was a shortage of interpreters and those available were 'far from perfect',<sup>82</sup> many of them having been hired from South China from where management had initially anticipated the miners would be recruited.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, an analysis of some of the detailed 'Disturbances and Riots' proves the 'misunderstanding' allegation to be inadequate, the directness of action indicating no misconception as to what their grievances were.<sup>84</sup>

#### **Riots and disturbances**

In the first half year of Chinese employment on the Rand, for example, the population numbered no more than 50 000, and some sixteen disturbances requiring additional police intervention were reported. Four of these were described as



*White miners and Chinese labourers - 1906*

'trivial',<sup>85</sup> another four were ascribed to friction between the African labourers and Chinese,<sup>86</sup> while a further three were attributed to Chinese attacks on Chinese police. Chinese police had for the most part distanced themselves from their fellow countrymen, owing to the disciplinary duties required and by their superior attitude on account of their association with or service in the British army.<sup>87</sup>

The three clashes that involved attacks on the Chinese police took place on the Van Ryn Mine in August, September and November 1904 and were sequels of each other. The first incident was of a limited nature, merely arising from underlying tensions between the police and the labourers. The next outburst was of a more serious nature: a Chinese policeman was attacked and a number of labourers seriously injured. The labourers imprisoned for this outburst served a two-month sentence, but on their release in November, they took revenge on the policemen who were responsible for their imprisonment and so precipitated the third uprising, which resulted in the death of two Chinese labourers.<sup>88</sup>

The other five incidents referred to above also reveal grievances among the Chinese, as they reacted to particular

pretexts by absence from work. On 22 July 1904, the night shift at the East Rand Proprietary Mine refused to go on duty as two Chinese had been killed earlier in an explosion. Mine officials' attempts to induce them to go to work were met with stone throwing, whereupon police were called, and a number of Chinese were arrested and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment.<sup>89</sup> Two incidents occurred regarding the payment of wages on 29 August and 11 October at the North Randfontein Gold Mine and Glen Deep Mine respectively. In the latter case, the Chinese refused to go to work, having not understood deductions on account of advancements and allotments. Fighting broke out as the compound police attempted to force them underground, but was soon controlled, culminating in various arrests.<sup>90</sup> The former upheaval was of a similar kind, resulting in the prosecution of fifty headmen.<sup>91</sup>

'Maltreatment' and 'bullying' of Chinese by white miners in the absence of the white overseer on 17 October 1904 at Geduld Mine resulted in thirty-three men refusing to work. On the arrival of the police, rioting took place and several Chinese were arrested and charged with 'public violence and intent to do grievous bodily harm' - ironically the reason for the protest in the first place. The sentences ranged from two

Table 1

CHINESE MINE LABOURERS' RIOTS, DISTURBANCES AND 'STRIKES'		
DATE	MINE	ISSUE
<b>1904</b>		
July	East Rand Proprietary Mines	Two Chinese killed
August	Van Ryn Gold Mine	Police friction
August	North Randfontein Gold Mine	Wage
September	Glen Deep	'Trivial'
September	New Kleinfontein Mine	African friction
September	Van Ryn Gold Mine	Police friction
September	North Randfontein Gold Mine	African friction
October	Glen Deep	Wage
October	Geduld Proprietary Mine	Ill-treatment
October	Aurora West United	'Trivial'
October	French Rand Gold Mine	'Trivial'
November	Van Ryn Gold Mine	Police friction
November	New Kleinfontein	Food
November	French Rand Gold Mine	Faction fight
November	New Kleinfontein Mine	African friction
December	Witwatersrand Gold Mine	African friction
<b>1905</b>		
January	Simmer and Jack Mine	Police friction
March	Princess Estate Mine	'Trivial'
April	North Randfontein Gold Mine	Wage
April	Durban Roodepoort Gold Mine	'Trivial'
April	Jumpers Deep Mine	Leave
April	French Rand Gold Mine	Ill-treatment
April	Princess Estate Mine	Wage
May	Rose Deep	Ill-treatment
May	Angelo Gold Mine	African friction
June	New Croesus Gold Mine	Wage
June	Consolidated Langlaagte	White friction
June	Rose Deep	Police friction
June	Angelo Gold Mine	African friction
October	Jumpers Deep Mine	White friction
<b>1906</b>		
June	Nourse Mine	Saturday work

to four months' imprisonment with hard labour and whipping, amounting to twenty strokes.<sup>92</sup> Another incident occurred on New Kleinfontein Mine on 19 November 1904 and was a show of direct action against what the Chinese thought was an attempt to deny them their food, a make-shift dinner having been supplied, since the cooking apparatus had broken down. Some employees attacked the kitchen and chased the chief policemen out of the compound.<sup>93</sup> These incidents, and those that followed in the next half dozen years, were a reflection of the determination of the mine workers to express their grievances and resist the excesses of the managements' exploitative treatment, and disprove stereotype of Chinese submission, docility and obedience.

promoted contact and communication within the group prior to arrival on the mines.<sup>99</sup> Added to this was the strengthening effect of a common enemy, a fracas having broken out at the embarkation depot between another batch of recruits and the North Randfontein complement.<sup>100</sup> The Chinese employees represented 97.6% of the total unskilled labour force on the North Randfontein Mine, and thus had to bear the full weight of restarting production.<sup>101</sup>

After seven months of challenging work, including one show of force about wages, the North Randfontein Chinese drew up a petition regarding their wages. In terms of clause 6 of their contract of service they believed they should receive a minimum of fifty shillings after six months, and

### "Strikes" and violence

Other Chinese incidents which occurred later on the Rand, and are worthy of note, are a serious 'strike' at North Randfontein Gold Mining Company on 1 April 1905<sup>94</sup>, an occurrence at the Jumpers Deep Mine on 24 October 1905, and the Nourse Mine episode of 16 June 1906. The North Randfontein Gold Mine's dispute concerned the classic labour quarrel of 'wage' rates and management production policy,<sup>95</sup> and was described by the Commissioner of Police, E.M. Showers, as the 'most serious disturbance ever had' and one in which the 'Chinese stood their ground well'.<sup>96</sup> As Richardson points out, this was more than just a show of physical solidarity in combat, but also in the tactical manner in which they approached the situation.<sup>97</sup> They carefully avoided contravention of the law or breach of contract, while still managing to maintain the upperhand in the bargaining power balance, as well as affecting production on the mine.

The Chinese engaged on the North Randfontein Gold Mine were all Northerners recruited from the province of Chihili, with the majority coming from the city of Tientsin.<sup>98</sup> This homogeneous origin contributed to the marked cohesion of the 1 988 recruits who were employed on the mine. Furthermore, a two-week delay at the depot of embarkation

tually stopped by dispersing the protesters. The 'strike' continued the following day and a small police force on foot patrolled to maintain order.<sup>126</sup> At 15h00 the men resumed work, the Foreign Labour Department Superintendent issuing a notification that:

it [was] not for [them] to decide as to who is right or who is wrong, that is a matter reserved for those in authority over [them]... but [he would] not tolerate that they wantonly suspend work of their own accord.<sup>127</sup>

Another incident arose on the Nourse Mine on 16 June 1906. The management called upon 450 Chinese labourers to go on shift on a Saturday afternoon. On proceeding to the shaft at the stipulated time, a member of the gang raised the cry: 'Why should we work on a Saturday afternoon, let us go back and refuse!'<sup>128</sup> The entire group acceded, and beat up the Chinese police escorts as stone throwing and rioting ensued.<sup>129</sup> The controller's house and the compound hospital were badly damaged, and on attempting to close the compound gate on the returning mob, the white gate-guard was assaulted, before he fired at and injured some of the malcontents. The compound police succeeded in quelling the disturbance and the Chinese returned to work.<sup>130</sup> This unprecedented show of combination highlights once again the strength of the mass co-operation among the Chinese workforce even if at a moment's notice.

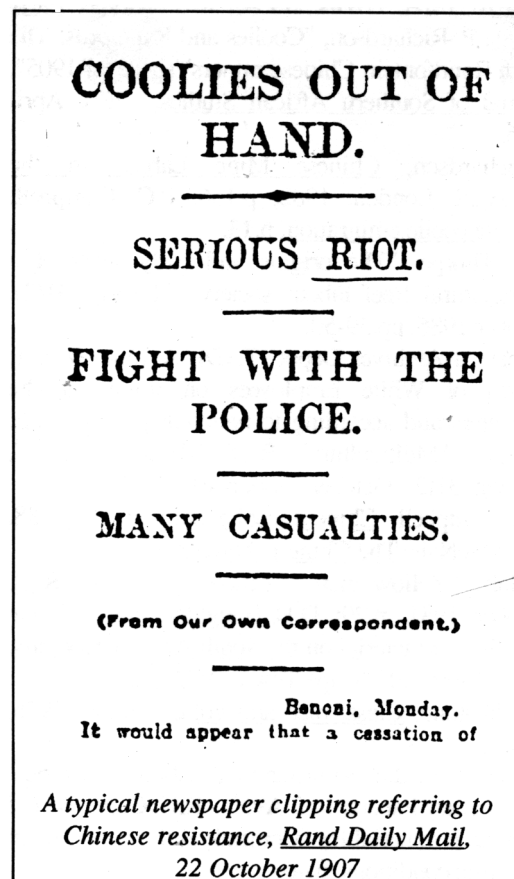
#### Conclusion

The Chinese indentured labourers resisted their treatment and revealed their grievances in ways often similar to their African and European counterparts on the Rand gold mines. Resistance in the form of desertion, loafing, retaliation, work-to-rule, and general refusals to work, all had an impact on mining output and compound control. In most cases their action erupted into physical combat and rioting, as they were forced to resist compound police and reinforcements of local police. In 1905, the General Manager of the Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency, assessed the situation aptly when he commented that:

the coolies [had] defied the white man's authority on the mine, even when backed by armed force, and they have dictated terms which include the removal of the white controllers, they will argue that they only have to riot and create disturbances to get whatever they want.<sup>131</sup>

This account of Chinese resistance on the Rand gold mines throws some light on the manner in which the 'peasant from the Chinese plains'<sup>132</sup> was not prepared to submit passively to the exploitative Rand capitalists' power. The Chinese reactions not only disproved the concept of them being 'docile, submissive and obedient', but also added another

dimension to the working class actions on the Rand gold mines at the turn of the twentieth century.



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