

# CHINESE INDENTURED MINE WORKERS ON THE RAND

## 1904 TO 1910



## Background

As the Boer War loomed in 1899, there was a mass **exodus** of labour from the mines on the Witwatersrand, both white and black. Almost **all** the 120 000 black migrant workers were repatriated to their villages and the mines on the Rand were **shut** down for the duration of the hostilities

At the **end** of the war in 1902, both the mine owners and the new British Administration in the Transvaal were **desperate** to get the mines back in production as quick as possible

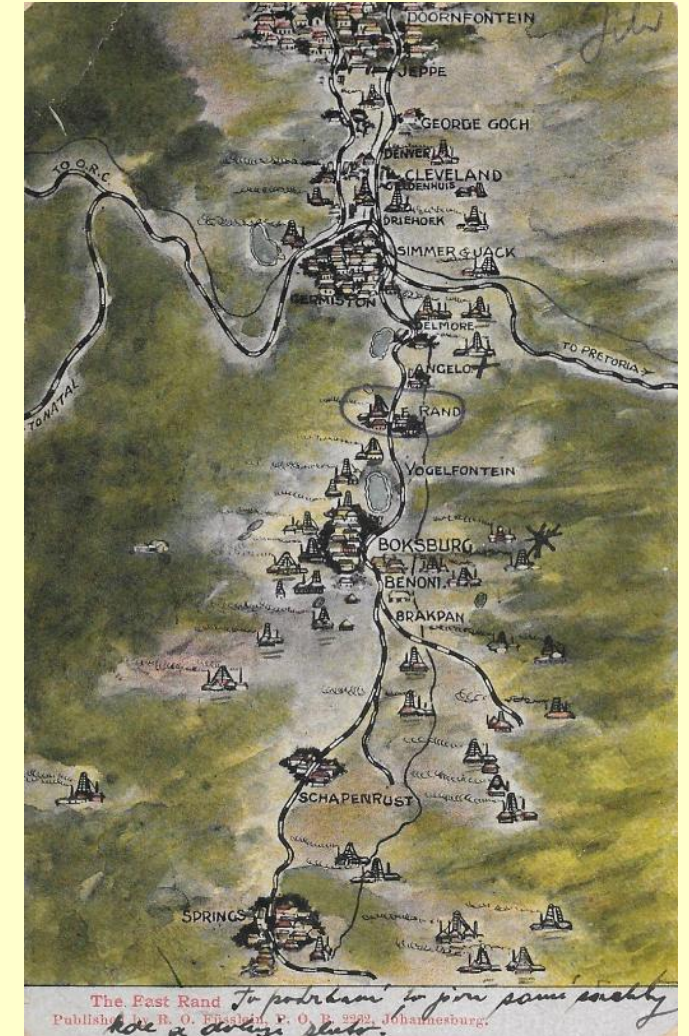
Everybody was awaiting and expecting a boom - mines were trying to **catch** up on production. **Reality** was that Johannesburg was filled with unemployment and most mines remained closed

Black workers were understandably reluctant to return to their old jobs and a shortage of **unskilled** workers emerged

Numerous futile **attempts** were made to lure unskilled workers to the Rand Mining companies were loud in their complaints about the **shortage** of labour

It was in this context that the mine houses seek to be allowed to **recruit** indentured **Chinese** workers to meet their labour needs.

Towards 1906 some 63 000 Chinese were employed on the mines with **remarkable** effect on the industry



Johannesburg to Springs showing mines where the Indentured workers were placed. Sent from East Rand PO to Austria on 8 January 1912.

R.O. Füsslein, Johannesburg - DB in green, number 185519

# Arrival

An agreement was reached between China and Britain in May 1904 for importation of indentured labourers as unskilled workers to the Witwatersrand

Recruitment could commence under the following conditions: (a) Three-year indenture with application for additional 2 years  
(b) Confined to unskilled labour in the Witwatersrand mines (c) Compulsory repatriation

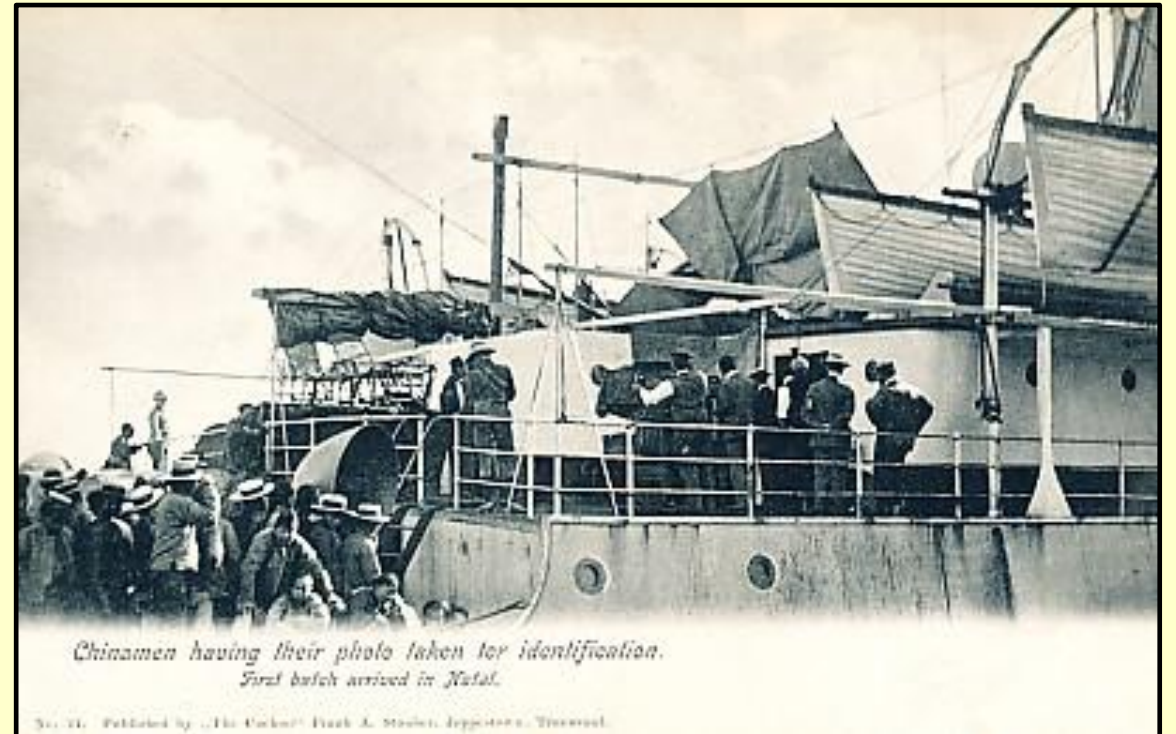
After passing medical screening, they were fingerprinted and issued with a unique number (engraved on a metal disc), a passport, some clothes and a salary advance of £2 to £10

In June 1904, the pioneer workers arrived in Durban on board the Steamer Tweeddale



Arrival of the first Chinese Indentured workers in Durban. The people discussing the arrival experienced the indentured Indian workers project on the Sugar plantations in Natal.

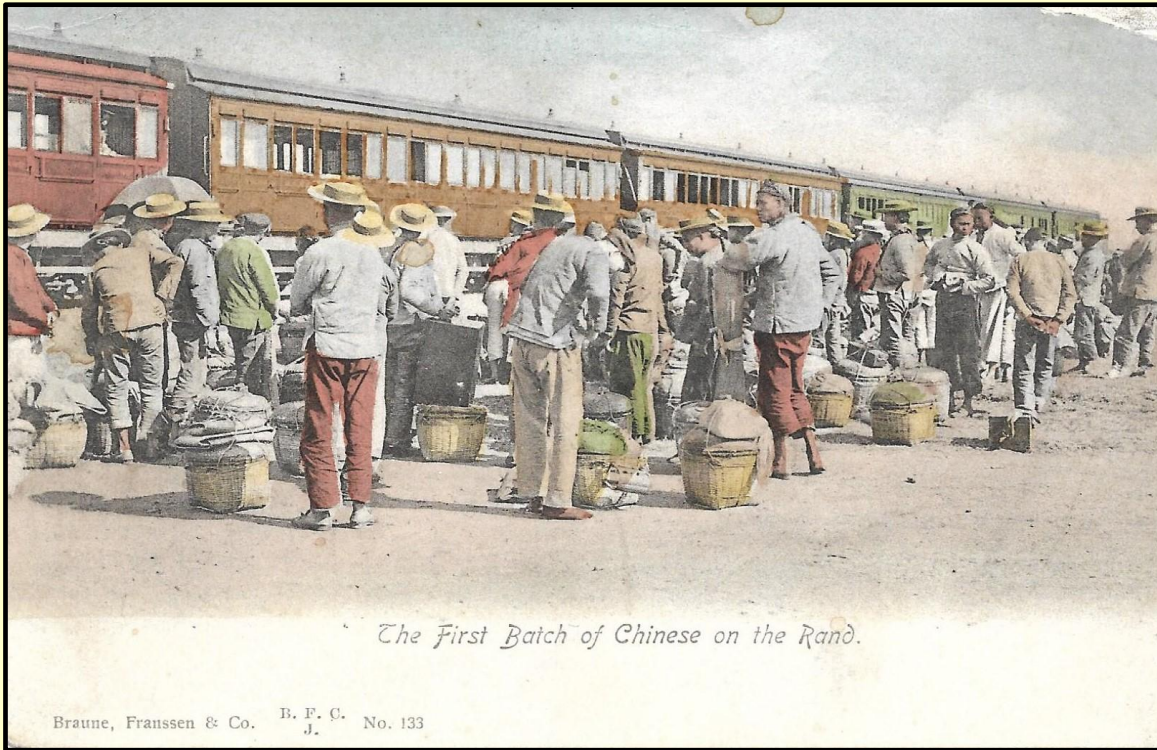
*Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban with UB in black*



No. 11. Published by The Overseas Press & Stationery, Johannesburg, Transvaal

# Witwatersrand

From Durban they were transported by train to the Witwatersrand where they were placed with 62 different mines. From Springs on the East Rand to Randfontein on the West Rand, each mine providing its own on-site compound accommodation

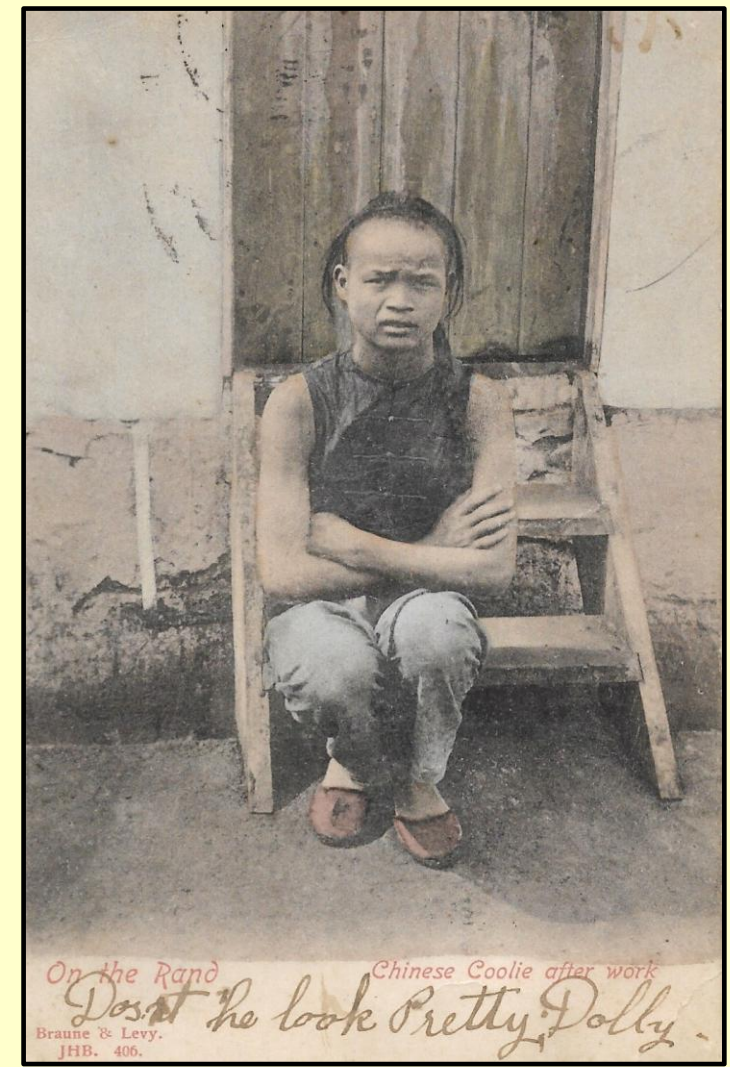


*The First Batch of Chinese on the Rand.*

Braune, Franssen & Co. B. F. C. J. No. 133

Arrival of the first indentured workers on the Rand by train. The Chinese indentured labour experiment attracted wide attention of the local population  
*Braune, Franssen & Co (B.F.C.J.) no 133 Levy. DB in red-brown*

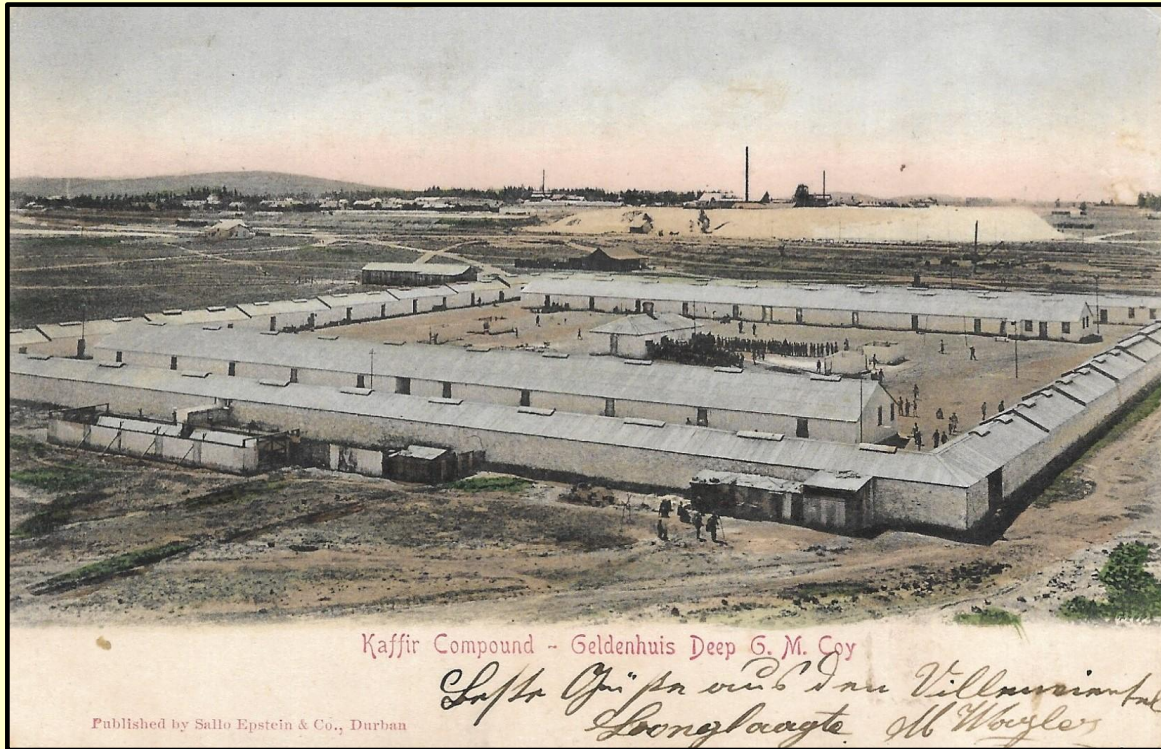
Postcard representing "John Chinaman", a distinctive persona of China, portraying the "typical yet dignified looking" Chinese labourer.  
*DB in brown, Braune & Levy with number JHB 406*



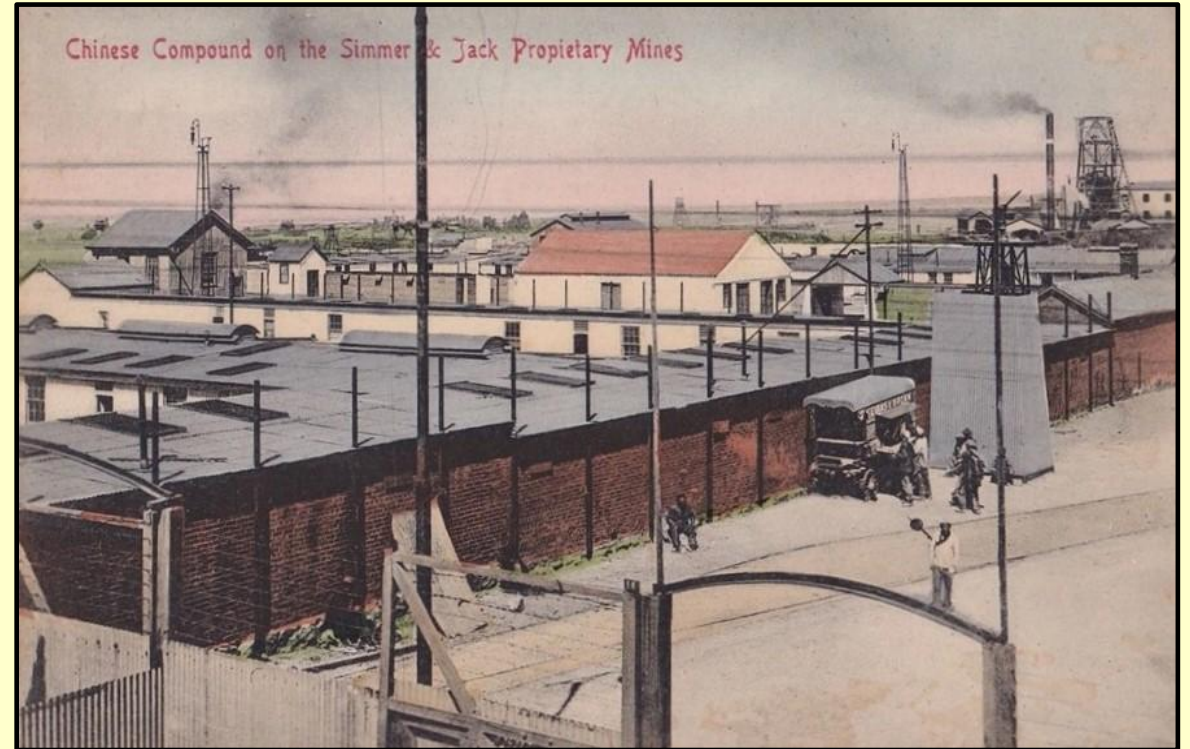
*On the Rand Chinese Coolie after work*  
*Doesn't he look Pretty, Dolly.*  
Braune & Levy.  
JHB. 406.

# Living conditions

Accommodating migrant workers in compounds is an aspect of early South African mining to enforce control and restrictions on migrant labour



A typical mine compound at the Geldenhuis Deep Gold Mine.  
*Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban. UB in grey*



The Chinese compound at Simmer and Jack GM  
*Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban, number 2113. UB in green*

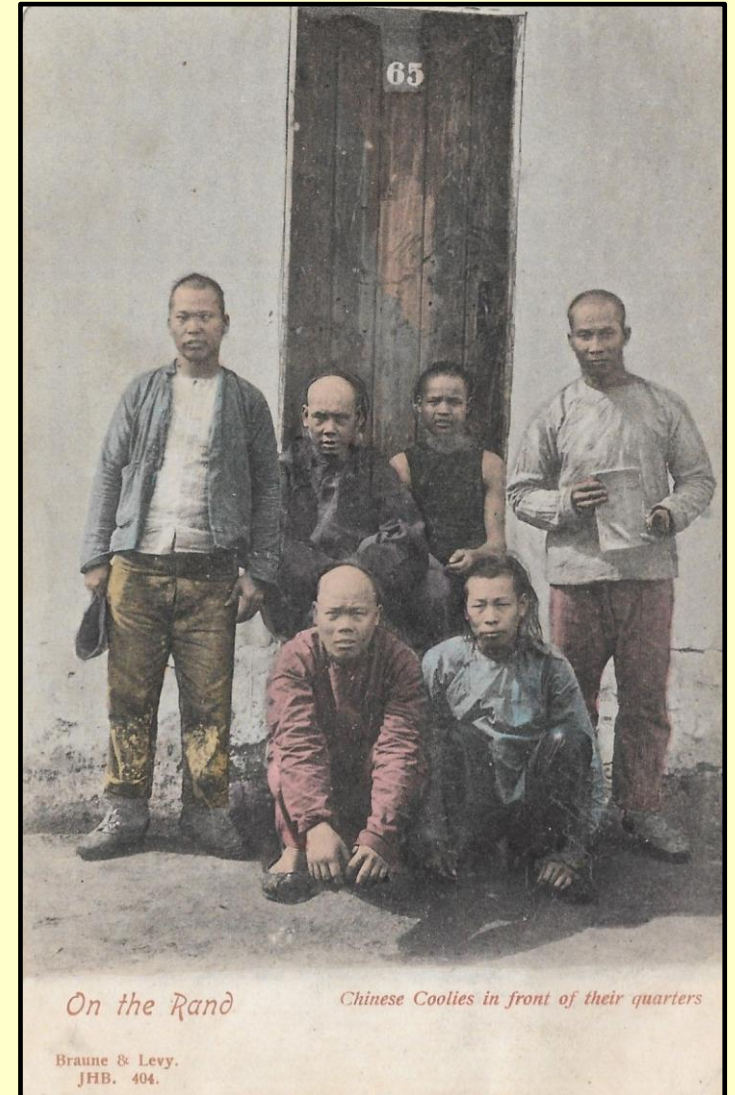
## The compounds

Movements of the Chinese were restricted to the premises of the mining company employing them and they could only leave with a permit. Even with a permit, they were not allowed to Leave the Witwatersrand magisterial district



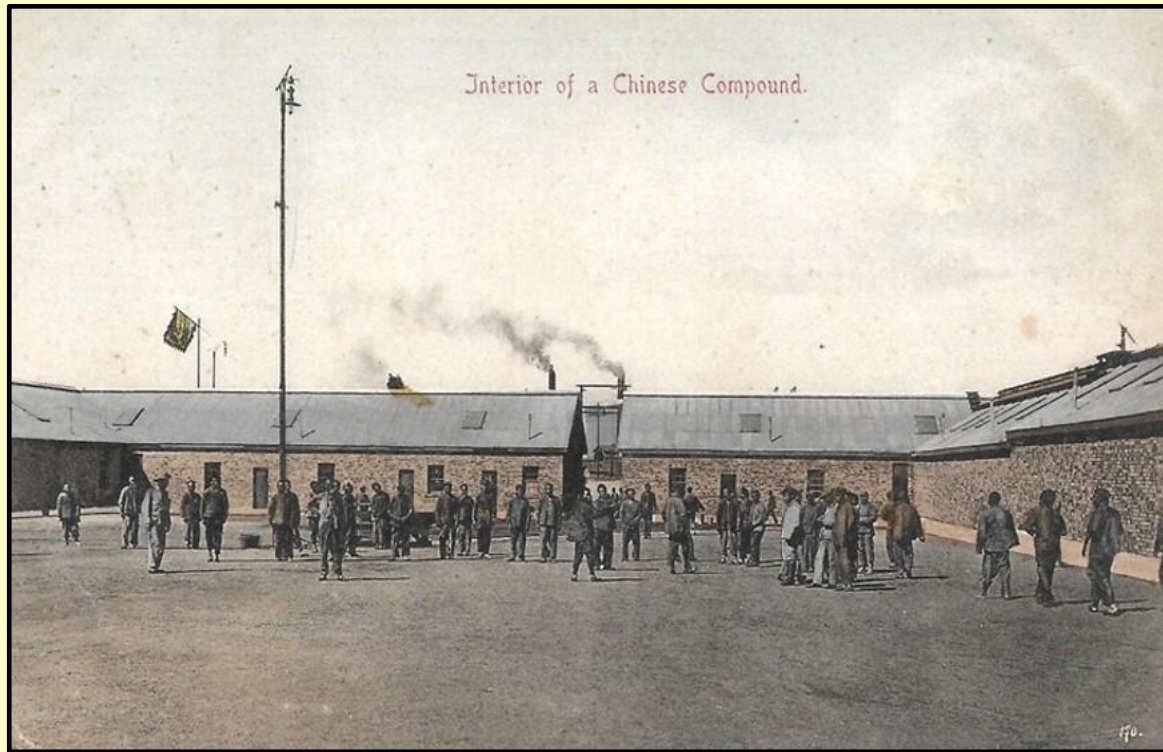
Chinese workers posing and photographed inside a compound with Caption "Chinese Mine Boys" in right margin  
DB in green, Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban, number 1775, "Phototyped in Prague"

Chinese workers posing in front of their quarters  
DB in brown, Braune & Levy with number JHB 406  
Part of a series of 26 numbered 40 through 426,  
DB in red

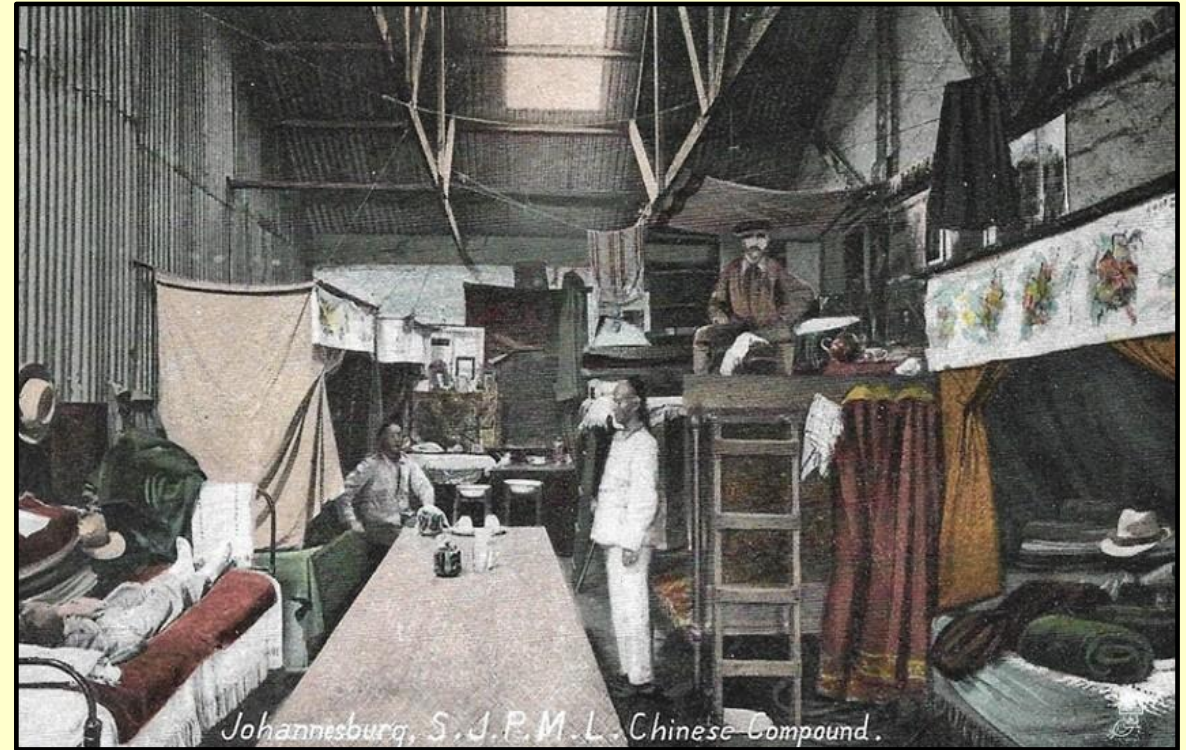


## Facilities

Living conditions in the compounds were atrocious. It provided considerably basic accommodation with four to six men occupying a small confined space



Chinese at the enclosure of a compound  
*Sallo Epstein & Company, Johannesburg, number 2065. DB in green*



Chinese workers in the Simmer and Jack compound where they sat, eat, slept,  
and stored their personal possessions  
*Raphael Tuck & Sons "Chromette" postcard number 4922. Art Publishers to  
Their Majesties the King & Queen. Used, DB in red-brown (Johannesburg  
Series No 1)*

## Facilities

Facilities were mostly overcrowded with an entire block sharing elementary ablution and communal bathroom facilities



A Bath House in a Chinese compound  
*DB in green, Sallo Epstein & Company, Johannesburg" with serial 2067 (at the back) as part of a series of 5 numbered 2065 through 2069 - "Phototyped in Prague"*



Chinese Bathhouse with the scene of exposed Chinese men in what depicts a situation of powerlessness  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 1320 as part of a series of 6 numbered 1318 through 1323, DB in red*

# Facilities

Compound housing was a practice described by some as "the most controlled form of labour short of slavery" and indicative of the cruelty thereof



Staff of a Chinese cookhouse, fully dressed as chefs who prepare traditional food

Braune & Levy, Johannesburg number 420 in a series of 26 numbered 402 through 426, DB in red



Chinese staff busy cooking traditional Chinese food, intimating the psychological consideration given to their culture

Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 1319. DB in red, "Phototyped in Prague" One in a series of 6 numbered 1318 through 1323

# Health Care

The compounds also made provision for medical treatment of Chinese workers. In the early days of the system, many Chinese were treated for low levels of Vitamin B (Beri-Beri) that claimed almost as many lives as accidents



Interior of a Ward in the Chinese Hospital on a Gold Mine near Johannesburg.

Inside of a ward of a Chinese Hospital facility  
*Published by Braune & Levy, Johannesburg, DB in red.*



Braune & Levy, Johannesburg. No. 417.

On the Rand

Chinese Hospital

Chinese men convalescing in a Chinese compound hospital on the Rand.  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 417. DB in red. One in a series of 26 numbered 401 through 426*

## The reality

For mine owners, the most beneficial aspect of the compound system was the tight control over workers that resulted in more productivity.

Workers could not easily stay away from work with over 90% going to work every day



White, Black and Yellow in front of a Mine Office. The half nakedness of the "Black" makes use of the photographic style of the time, enforced on colonized African subjects and segregates between the races with the "Black" and "Yellow" stand or squat, whilst the "White" sits respectfully in the center  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 1324. DB in red*



Chinese labourers on the way to work posing in an unseemly posture (in the absence of a white Supervisor)  
*Although the logo of Paul Schaefer & Co with number 1329 is present on the address side, the publisher's name appears as the CNA Ltd, Johannesburg. DB in green. The CNA published a limited number of Postcards*

# Working Environment

To overcome the language barrier and to assist mine management and compound managers with communication, interpreters, writers, office boys and policemen were appointed. The police began their duties on the ships en route to South Africa



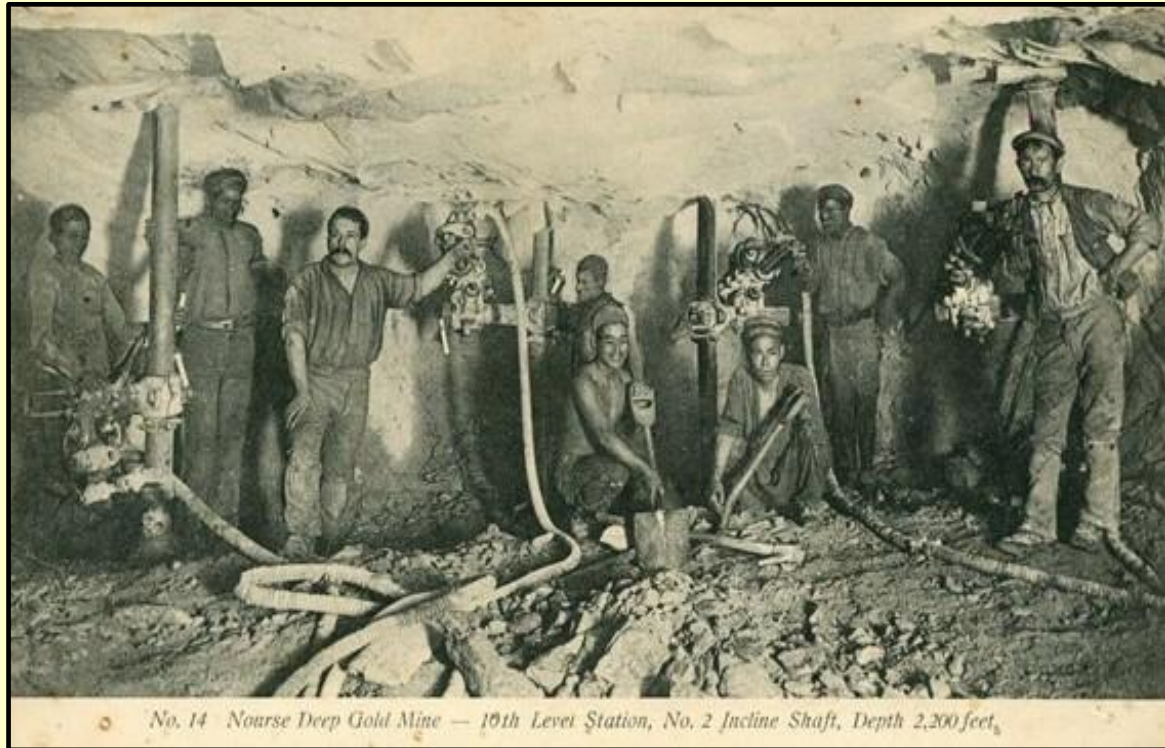
Chinese Mine Police demonstrating at a 'feast day'  
 Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth. DB in brown  
 Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour separately in Lithography



One Chinese policeman was appointed for every hundred Chinese workers  
 Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 421 and DB in brown. One in a  
 series of 26 numbered 401 through 426

## Working Environment

Towards 1905 nearly 50 000 Chinese were employed on the mines with remarkable effect on the industry. Gold production has risen from 18.8% of the world's output in 1903 to 26.7% in 1905



Monochrome print of underground Chinese workers with two white supervisors at the Nourse mine  
*Number 14 from a set of 30 mining Postcards without publisher's imprint, DB in black*



Monochrome print captioned top centre in red "At underground work - ON THE RAND" (difficult to read) with white supervisor and black colleagues.  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 1533, DB in red*

## Working Environment

The presence of these workers on the Rand also created employment for an extra 5 000 white men and the floating of at least 300 mining companies on the Stock Exchange



Monochrome print of underground Chinese workers with white supervisors and black colleagues at the Nourse mine  
Number 27 from a set of 30 mining Postcards without publisher's imprint, DB in black



Chinese workers at work  
'SAPSCO', PO Box 5792, Johannesburg. RPPC, DB in black

## Leisure times

The Foreign Labour Department (FLD) was created specifically to oversee the Chinese laborers and their main function was to ensure that living and working conditions for the Chinese were satisfactory



Playing a game in a compound courtyard with white supervisor present. The Chinese workers posing for the photo give a picture of normal and serene life in a compound

*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 410 and DB in red. One in a series of 26 numbered 401 through 426*

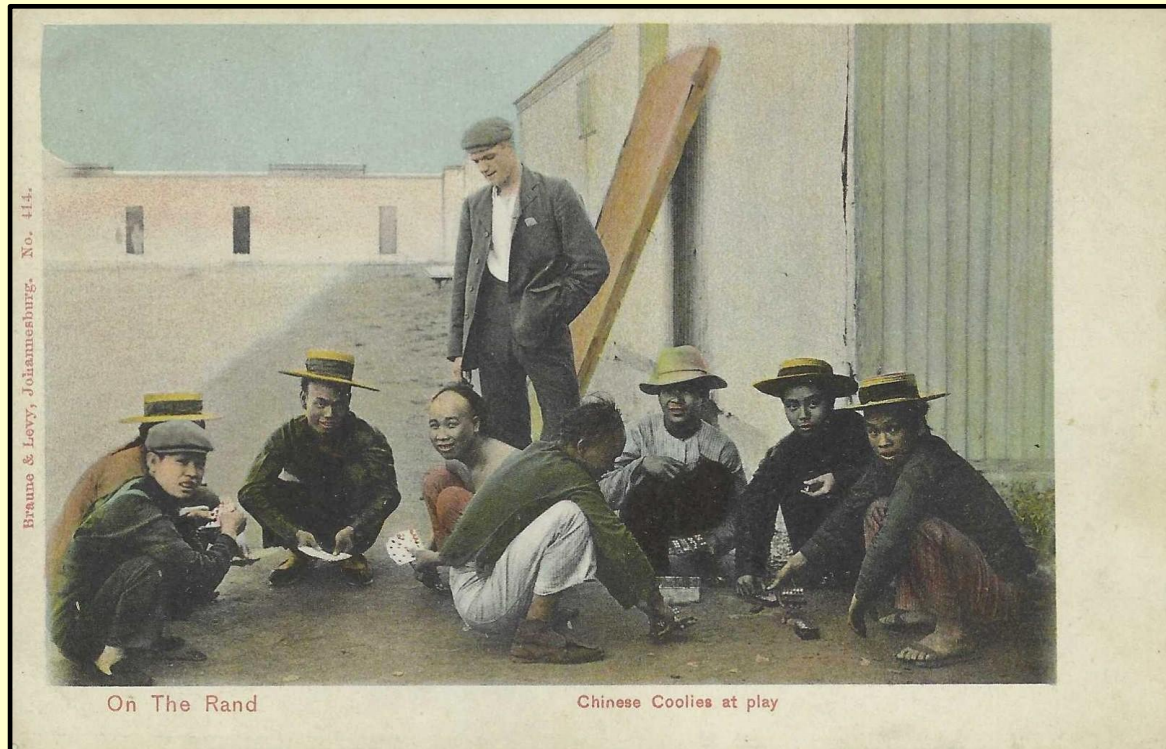


Playing a card game in a compound courtyard

*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 408 and DB in red. One in a series of 26 numbered 401 through 426*

## Leisure

Card games was very popular under the Chinese workers. Apart from these and to relieve boredom, they carved miniatures, gambled, play fah-fee and on occasions savagely fight each other. Assaults and murder were the prevalent forms of violence in the Chinese compounds and drug trafficking in opium and gambling were rife



Chinese at play inside a Chinese Compound  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 414 and DB in red-brown. One in a series of 26 numbered 401 through 426*



Chinese at play behind a mine dump  
*Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban. UB in black*

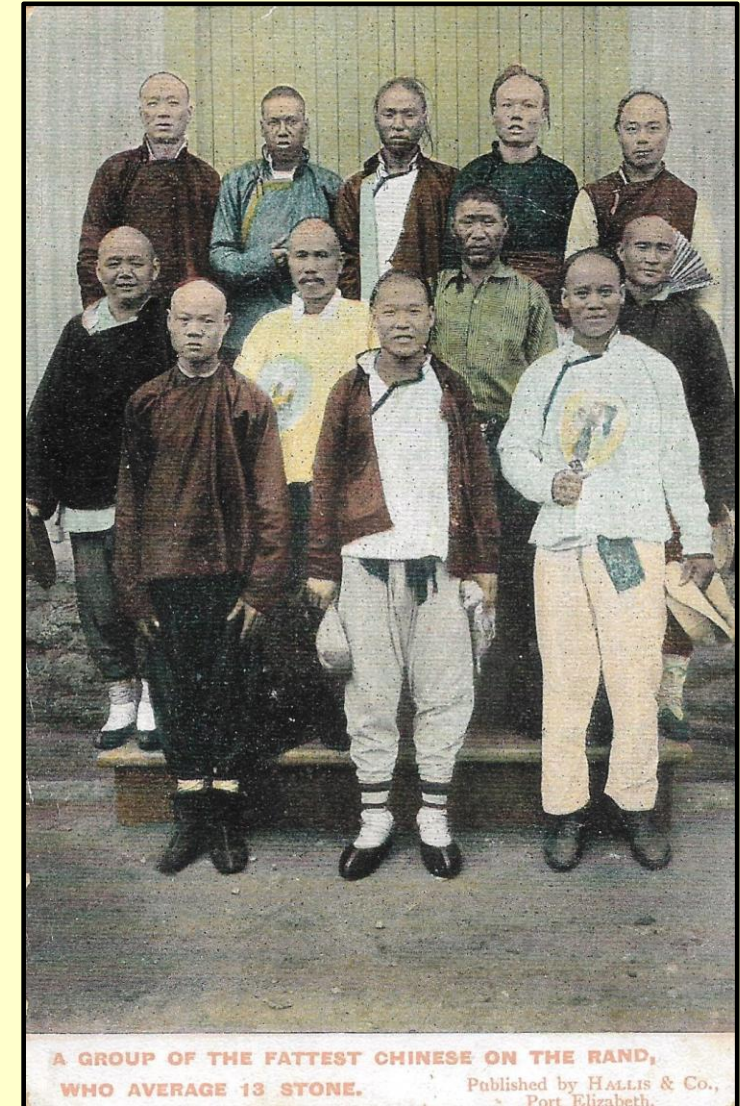
## Life and Times

Despite their circumstances, there are reliable sources originating from the labourers themselves, describing some of their activities, revealing positive attitudes



Chinese haircut - apart from their pigtailed hair fashion being strange to the local population, they could not go anywhere else for this service  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 419 as part of a series of 26 cards numbered 401 through 426, DB in red*

Message of a normative view of the indentured labour experiment depicting the fattest Chinese on the Rand.  
*DB in brown, Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth*  
*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour printed separately in Lithography*



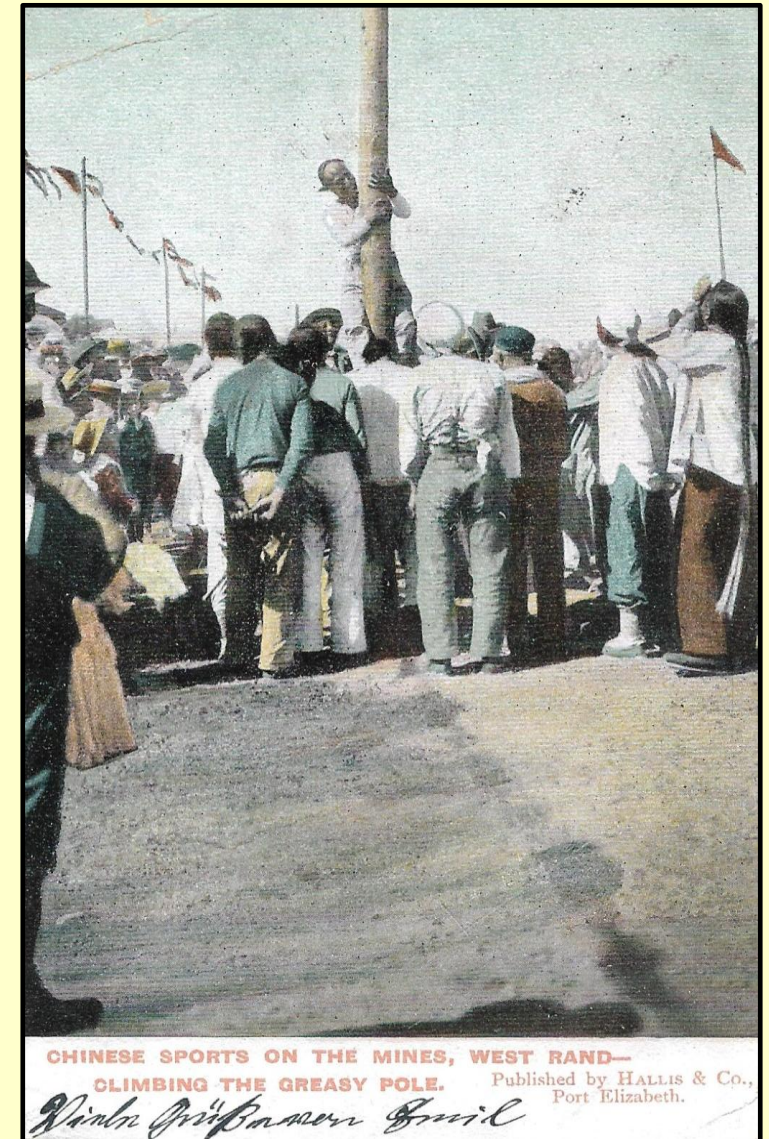
# Recreation

In their pastime, the Chinese workers attempted to recreate the world they were accustomed to by invoking traditions and other social positions for recreation



Musical Chinese  
Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 136. DB in red

Internal competition on the  
West Rand to climb the  
greasy pole  
DB in brown, Hallis & Co,  
Port Elizabeth  
Picture side is printed with  
letterpress and colour  
printed separately in  
Lithography



## Recreation

According to their contracts, the Chinese were not to work on certain Chinese festivals

Early on, during the Chinese New Year, a group of workers met to consider the best way to spend the new year holidays. It was decided to have a feast. Subscription was started to purchase eatables and decorations for feasts



To ease compound life, members of a specific village, or those who spoke similar dialects, would gather to socialize within the controlled environment

*Published by Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth. DB in brown*

*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour printed separately in Lithography*



Festival activities during a feast on the Rand

*Published by Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth. DB in brown*

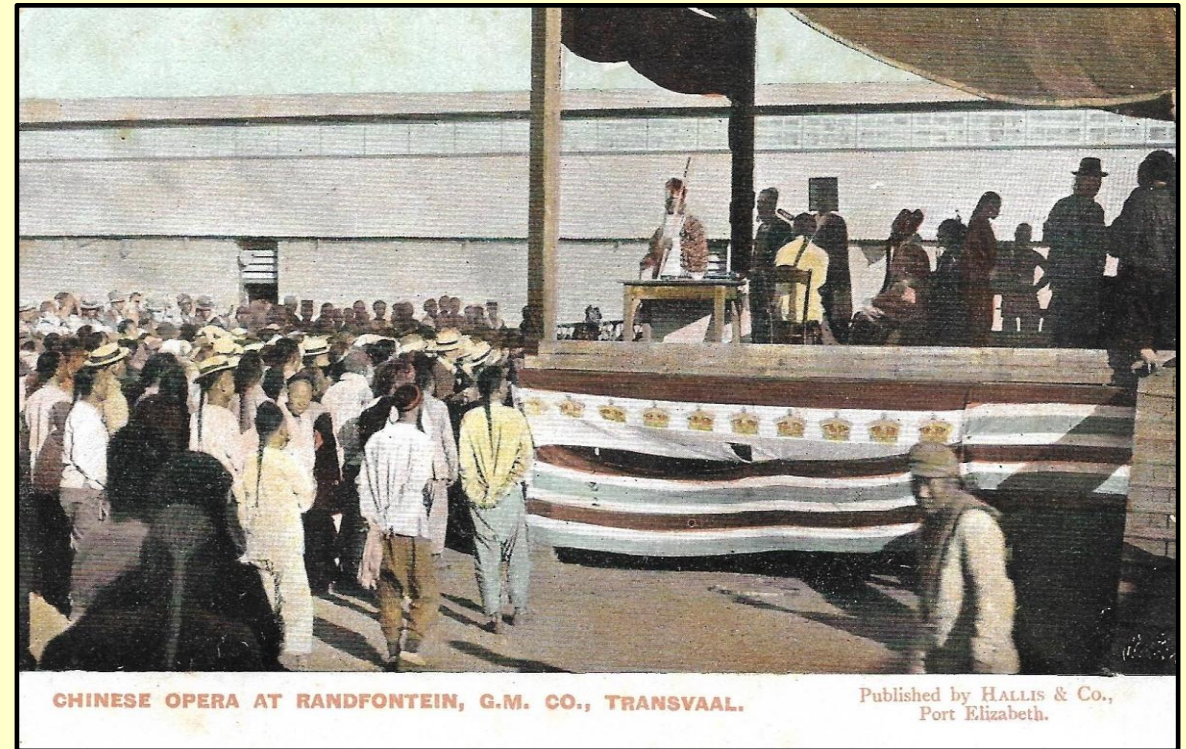
*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour separately in Lithography*

# Recreation

Their love of drama was illustrated when £250 was handed to the Mine Manager at Glen Deep mine to be sent to China for the purchase of scenery, costumes and stage properties for opera and theatrical performances



Performers in traditional Chinese opera outfit  
*Published by Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth. DB in brown*  
*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour separately in Lithography*



Stage for Chinese performances at Randfontein Gold Mine  
*DB in brown and published by Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth*  
*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour separately in Lithography*

## Recreation

In January 1906, a three-day Chinese New Year celebration at the Randfontein Mine were an extremely colourful event that the Rand has not seen before. It comprised of Chinese opera performances, processions and carnivals



Performers at Randfontein clad in traditional Chinese opera outfit  
*Braune & Levy, Johannesburg with number 1231, DB in brown*



Performers at Randfontein clad in traditional Chinese opera outfit  
*Published by Hallis & Co, Port Elizabeth. DB in brown*  
*Picture side is printed with letterpress and colour separately in Lithography*

# Repatriation

In 1906 Britain restored internal self-government to the Transvaal and Johannesburg was dragged once again into the politics in Britain with the 1906 elections

In their election campaign the Liberal Party accused the Conservative Party, the Transvaal Administration and mine management of employing slave labour. They were successful and swept the Conservatives out of office – now that the Liberals were in, the Chinese had to go

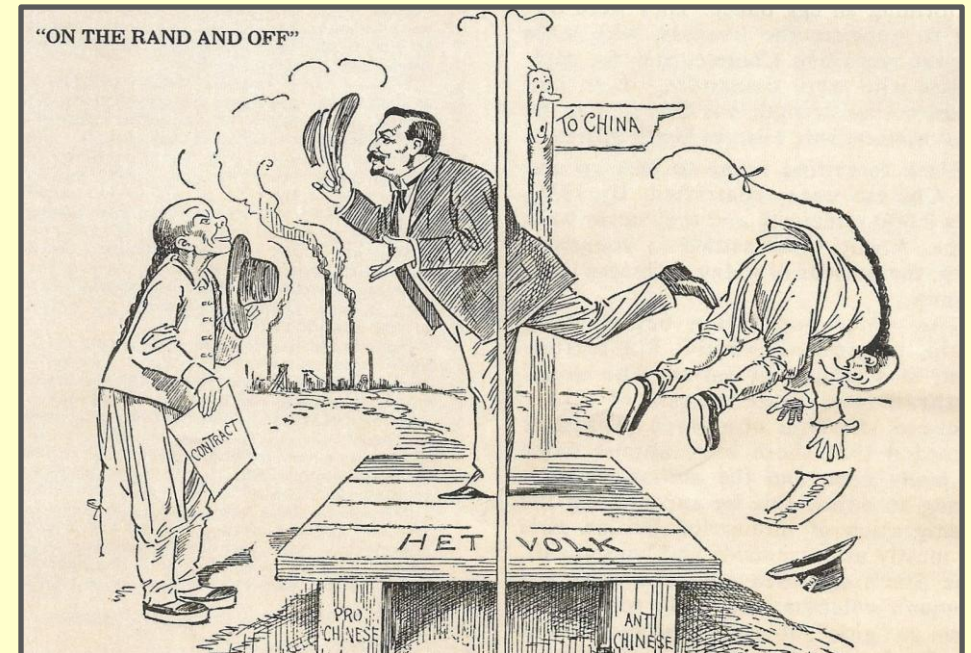


Meeting of Protest against repatriation of Chinese in Boksburg (1906), notated 9 May 1906 at the back. The two banners to the left read "We want to be Governed here not 6 000 miles away" and "Is this what we spilled our Blood for"  
*Published by Braune & Levy, Johannesburg, serial number 1643. DB in red*

In South Africa, the Het Volk party also used the complexity of Chinese labour as a platform for their election campaign in 1907

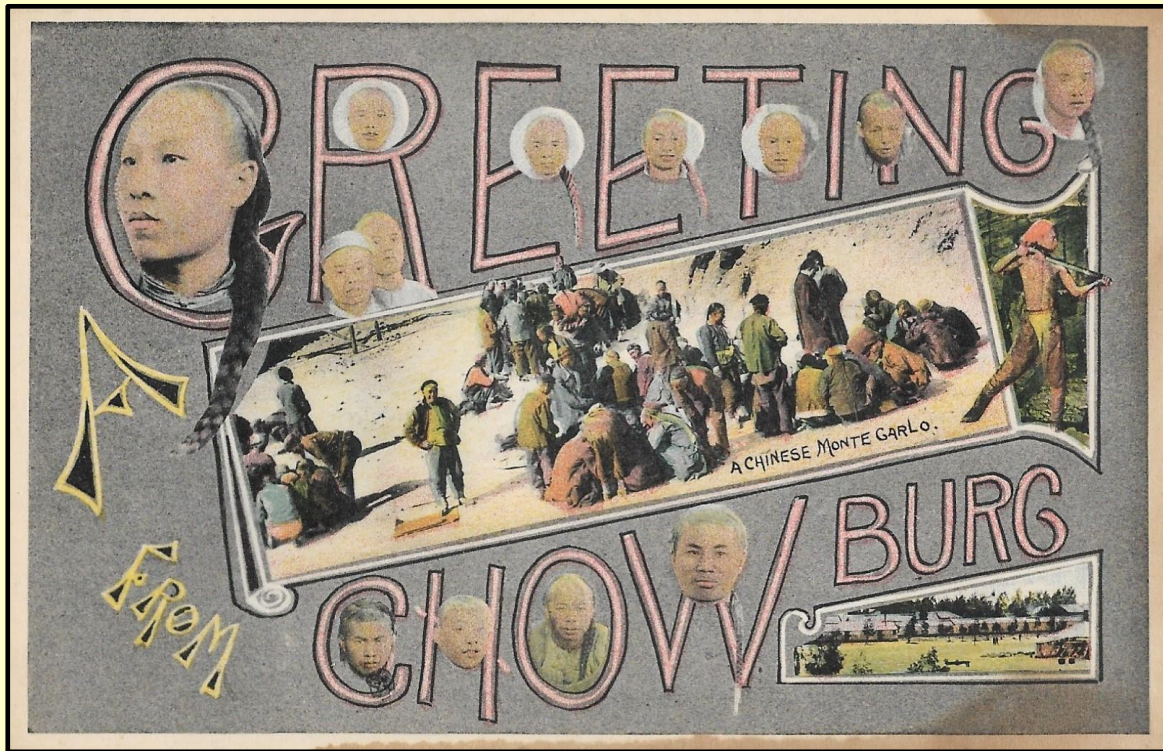
They won the election and stopped all further Chinese recruitment. It was the **beginning** of the end for Chinese mine labour in South Africa

By 1910 all the workers were repatriated

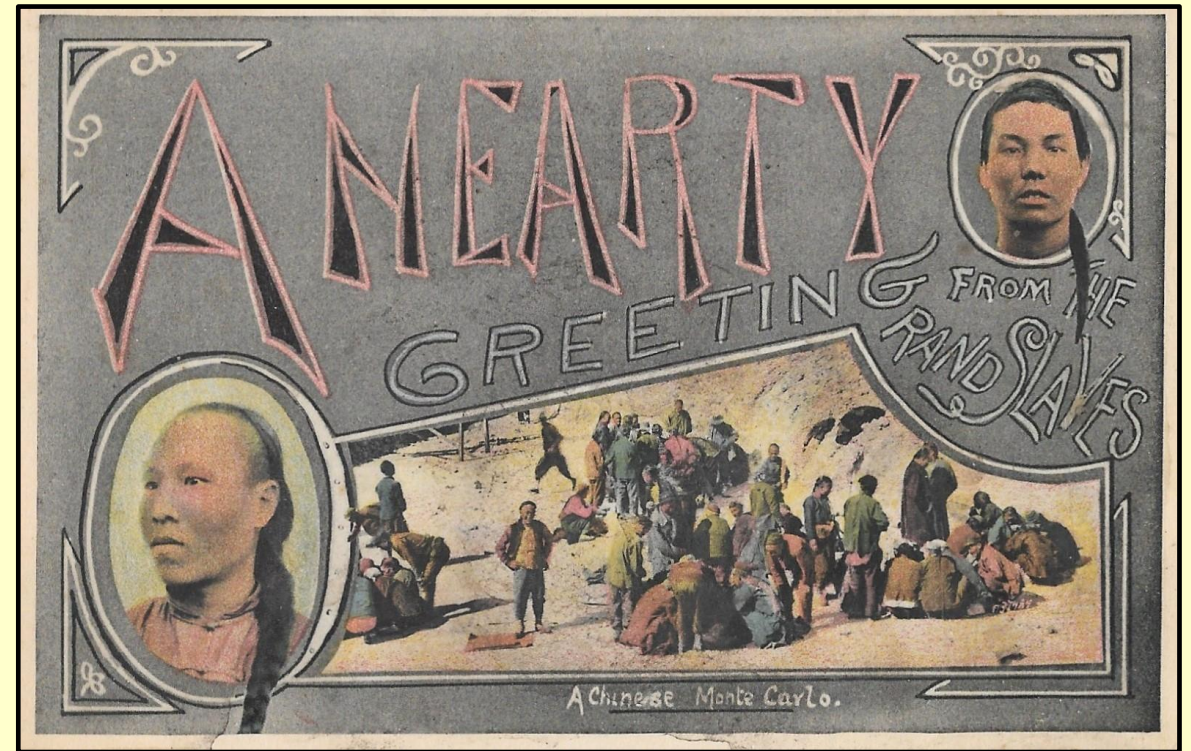


## Greetings Postcards

In c. 1908, Sallo Epstein broke away from the traditional production and published a series of three Greetings Postcards which can be construed as either caricature or sarcastic. The artwork and greetings were somewhat unsophisticated and featured hand-drawn lettering with Chinese faces and scenes roughly cut out from earlier postcards

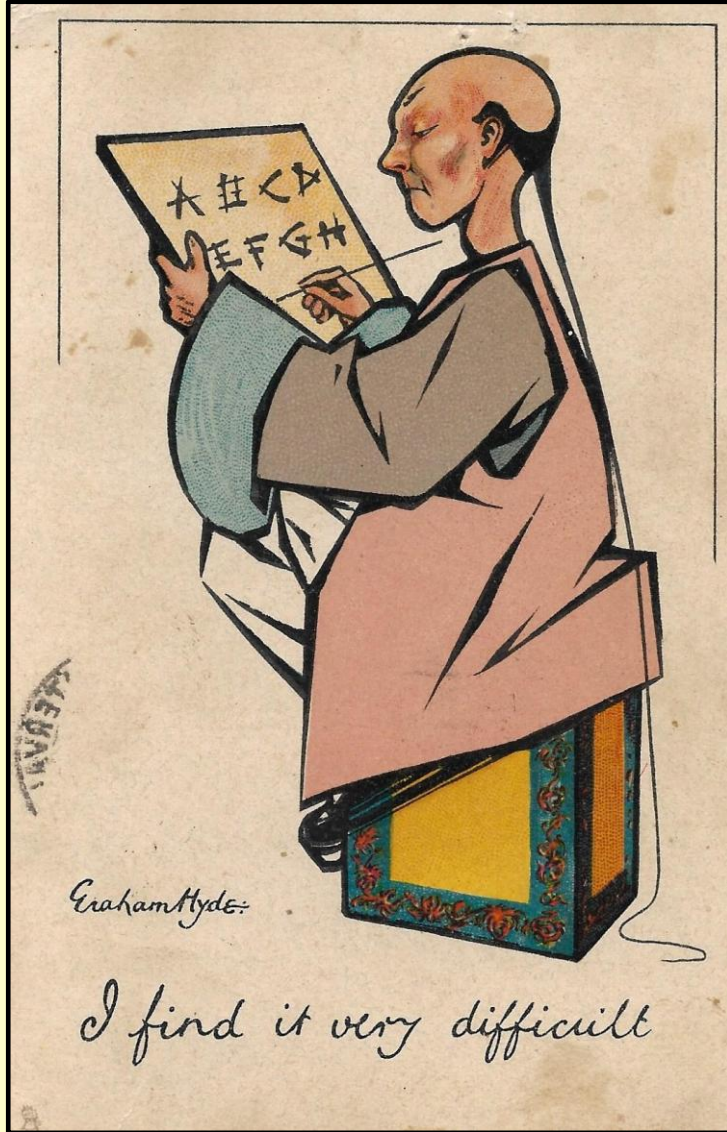


Chinese at play during a work brake  
Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban, number 2492. UB in green



Chinese at play during a work brake  
Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban, number 2493. UB in green

## Write Away Postcards



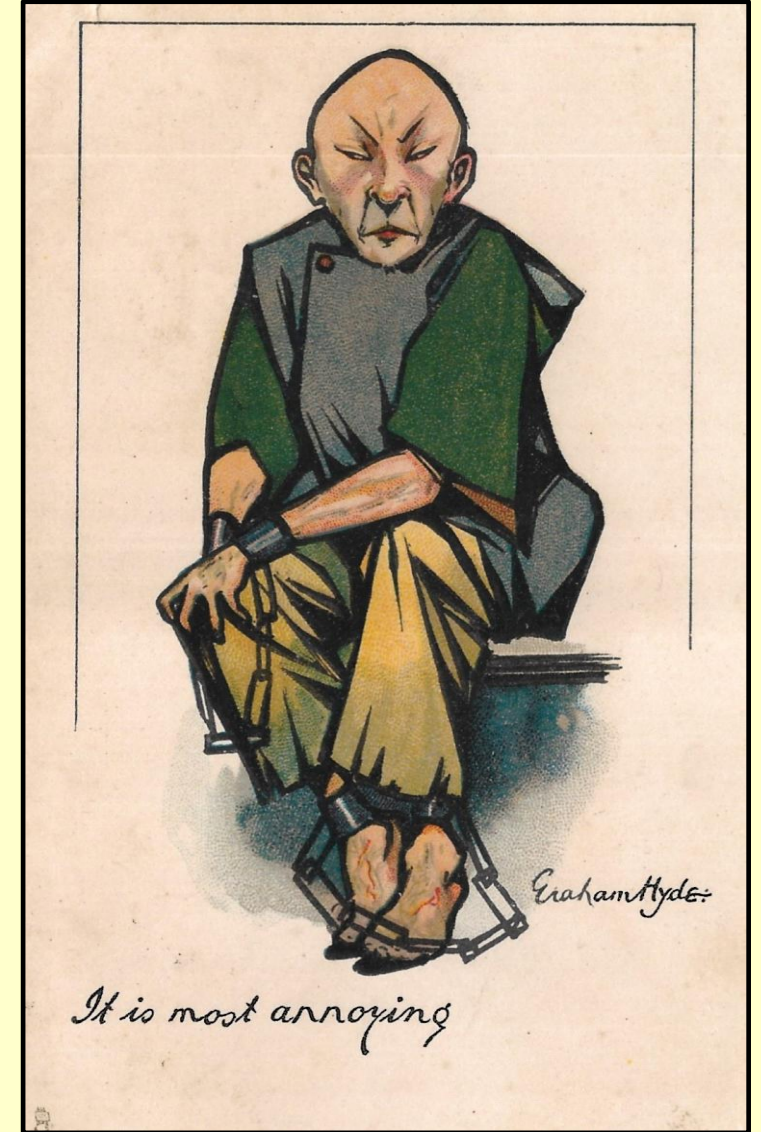
Raphael Tuck & Sons Write Away series 1374,  
Chromographed in Saxony

These cards comprised an image, typically humorous, accompanied by a few related words that began a sentence **expected to be finished by the sender**

While these words were certainly not captions, they often had a subtle connection to the image

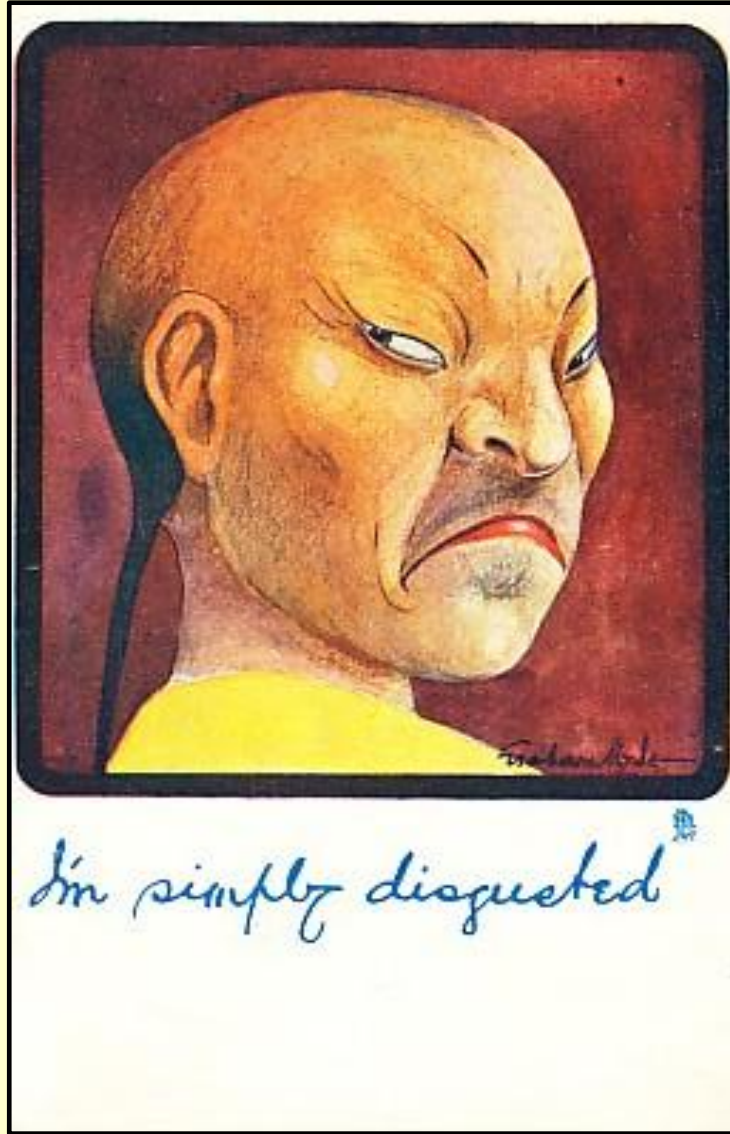
Normally postcard artists, skilled in the craft of cartooning, effectively employed national stereotypes to convey their messages

This is not the case with Write Away cards



Raphael Tuck & Sons Write Away series 1375,  
Chromographed in Saxony

## Difference



Raphael Tuck & Sons Write Away series 1374,  
Chromographed in Saxony

Write Away cards are easily identifiable featuring wording based on emotions and illustrations depicting the appropriate facial expressions, such as a smiling face for pleasure, a yawn for fatigue, an unpleasant face for disgust etc.

The facial expressions are adding to the comic nature of the cards

The choice of Chinese characters for these illustrations is notable, but they could have represented any nationality. However, it could have been influenced by the general interest in oriental culture, fashion, art, and literature in Europe at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Raphael Tuck & Sons Write Away series 1375,  
Chromographed in Saxony

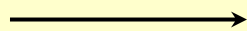
## Correspondence

Despite the alleged level of illiteracy of the Chinese labourers, letters are registered as having been transmitted to and from China to the labourers on the mines

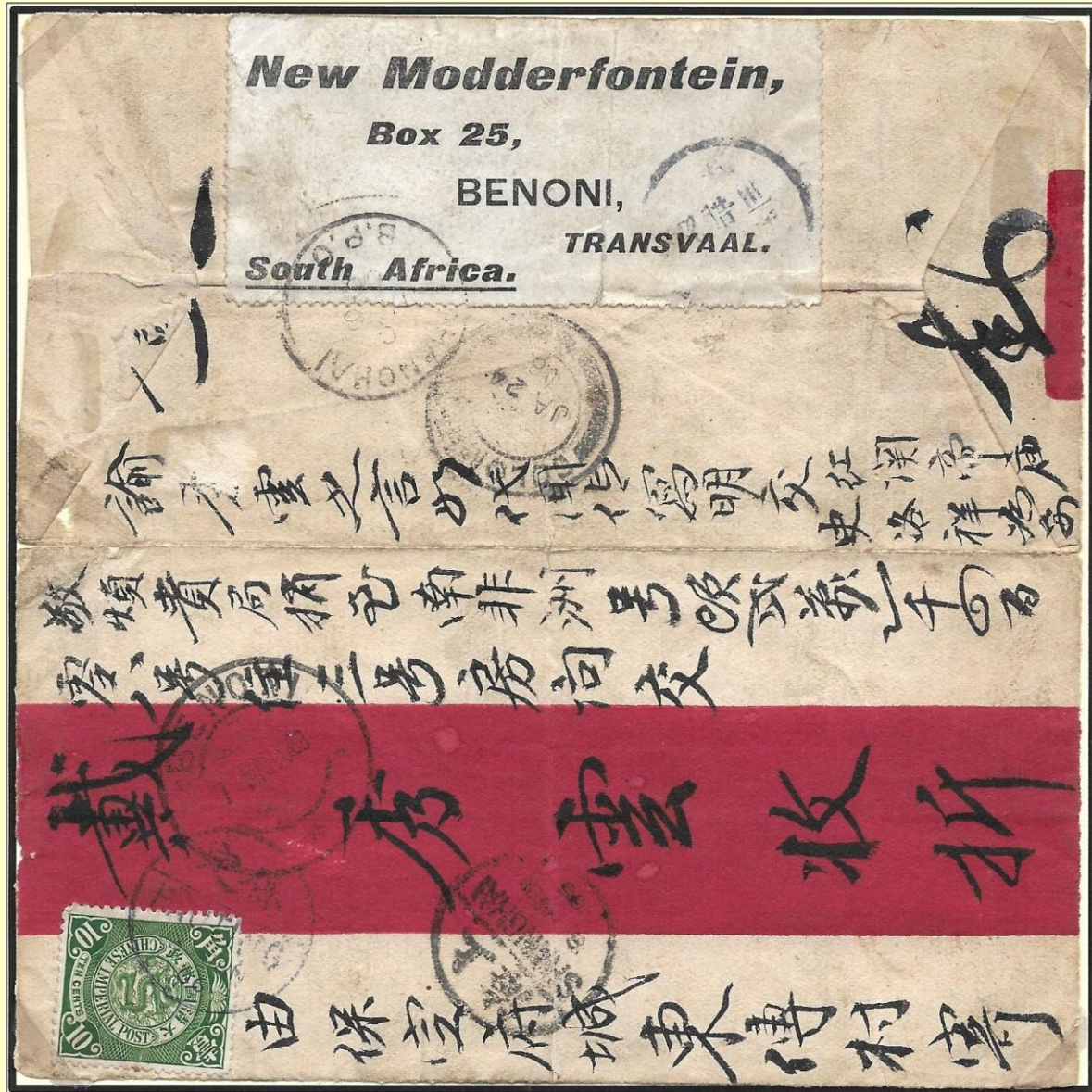
*Opened out cover, correctly franked with a 10c green Chinese Imperial Post stamp with indistinct datestamp and bears no other transit or arrival markings*

*As it was sent per **closed mails** between China and South Africa, it is assumed that it received the "South Africa" and "Johannesburg" cachets as part of the address from the Transvaal Chamber of Mines Labour Importation Agency in China before it was despatched*

*After arriving in South Africa, it was stamped with a red boxed cachet for "Transvaal Passport Number" 22453 and marked "Van Rijn" in blue, indicating the receiver worked at the Van Rijn Gold Mine in Benoni*



## Correspondence



In the absence of comprehensive and accurate archival records on the amount of correspondence, eleven covers are known to exist

*Opened-out cover from Paoting, China to New Modderfontein Gold Mine, Benoni*

*The letter was posted on 3 January 1906 and postage paid with a single 10c green Chinese Imperial Post stamp*

*It received a Shanghai bilingual handstamp on 8 January and on the same day a Shanghai British Post Office date stamp*

*It was re-sorted at Colombo on 24 January 1906 and arrived in Benoni on 7 March 1906 where it received a Benoni handstamp*

*A pre-printed label for the New Modderfontein Mine was used to overcome the problem of providing an appropriate address*

