

In the Pink of Health or the Yellow of Condition? Chinese Workers, Colonial Medicine and the Journey to South Africa, 1904-1907

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Abstract

This article develops recent trans-national perspectives by considering Chinese indentured labor to South Africa (1904-1907), with a spatial focus on the port of Durban and the adjacent Indian Ocean. I examine the relationship of Chinese workers with medicine as a particular form of colonial authority. Far from being part of the notoriously unregulated exchanges of “coolie-labor” characterized by high mortality rates, the South African case is unusual in its extensive state and capital regulation in the *healthy* transport of workers. I consider the mediating role played by colonial doctors on board the vessels in managing the steamships as “floating compounds” closely allied to the imperatives of discipline-discipline. This article thus details quasi-medical efforts at control and management of miners in the shift to industrial capitalism, and assesses where these measures failed or encountered forms of resistance from the Chinese.