

**From Demand for “Asiatic” Labor to Importation of Indentured Chinese Labor: Race Identity in the Recruitment of Unskilled Labor for South Africa’s Gold Mining Industry, 1903-1910**

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**Abstract**

Despite international protests against bonded labor, the flow of indentured laborers during the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries was extensive compared to the earlier centuries. The focus of this article is on the particularity of the “Chinese Coolie experiment” in South Africa’s gold mining industry which commenced in 1904. This 20th-century episode of indentured labor is notable for several reasons, and it serves as a springboard for discussing some fundamental issues in capitalist development, labor and identity formation. This article emphasizes the last, examining how a “Chinese” identity was formed through the development of the gold fields and, in turn, how this formation reinforced a nascent white labor aristocracy. It discusses two dimensions of this labor “experiment” in South Africa: (1) the heady debate on the decision to look to China for cheap labor and (2) desertion by the indentured Chinese laborers from various mining compounds in the Witwatersrand.