

Chinese Gold Miners and the “Chinese Question” in Nineteenth-Century
California and Victoria

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the largest gold deposits yet known in the world were discovered in the American west, Australasia, South Africa, and western Canada. From 1848 to 1891 a series of gold rushes—quick, short-term bonanzas (or failures) for individual miners—swept those regions, drawing hundreds of thousands of gold seekers from around the world. In fewer than fifty years, miners and mining companies extracted from the earth some 435 million ounces of gold—more than the total that had been mined in the previous three thousand years. The sudden increase in world gold production in the late nineteenth century was produced by Anglo-American settler colonialism and capitalist development. Since ancient times gold has been valued for its beauty and purity. Indigenous populations on the settler-colonial frontiers were long aware of alluvial gold deposits in their midst, but they did not value gold as a money commodity. Thus, gold rushes furthered the dispossession of native peoples and transformed the Pacific worlds where gold was discovered, as well as the global economy. Sustained exploration and extraction required capital investment, deep-mining technology, mass labor migration, and long-distance transportation. Such

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activity accelerated the economic development of the gold-mining regions and strengthened the international financial power of Great Britain and the United States as creditor and investor nations.¹

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The prospect of gold attracted men from the British Isles and continental Europe, the Americas, and the Asia-Pacific region. These typically small-scale miners extracted gold from “placer deposits” found mainly at or near the earth’s surface in the sand and gravel of streams. Sooner or later such deposits were depleted, and placer mining gave way to quartz mining, which obtained gold from veins or ore bodies underground. Gold extraction became a business, with stockholders, managers, engineers, and waged labor. Thus, for many independent gold seekers, the rush was a short-term experience, and they went home in the end—with or without gold. Not a few others were serial rushers, described by one historian as “a variety of the *genus* Pacific Man whose habitat is no particular country but the goldfields.” Still other miners, along with the merchants, artisans, and saloonkeepers who followed in their wake, settled and became known in their respective national histories as pioneer citizens, lauded for their driving democratic and entrepreneurial spirit.²

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Chinese gold miners were upward of 25 percent of the mining populations in California and Victoria, Australia, in the 1850s and 1860s, but they remain marginal figures in most historical accounts of the gold rushes and gold mining.

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When they do appear they are noted as objects of Euro-American racism and xenophobia but not as historical subjects in their own right. Recent interest in the politics surrounding the Chinese (or “coolie”) question has focused on discourse or policy, with little empirical investigation into the conditions and experience of Chinese labor, especially during the early years of the mining industry. Thus, we know a lot more about what whites thought about Chinese labor than about Chinese labor itself. Disparity in the scholarship has not only made understanding of the gold rushes incomplete but has also clouded thinking about the politics of inclusion and exclusion that characterized the gold-rush era in the United States and Australia. Notably, mainstream U.S. historical literature remains committed to the view that Chinese labor in the American West was unfree. This view was not prominent in early and mid-twentieth-century scholarship, but was introduced in 1964 with the publication of Gunther Barth’s *Bitter Strength*. Barth argued that the widespread use of credit tickets, by which many Chinese migrants financed their passage to America, was a system of debt bondage, organized and enforced by Chinese native-place associations (*huiquan*). His analysis relied on highly selective quotations from newspaper commentary and from testimony from California senatorial and U.S. congressional hearings on Chinese immigration—much of it prejudicial or based on hearsay. He ignored testimony from witnesses who doubted or denied claims of coerced labor and debt peonage, and he dismissed testimony

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from missionaries, who he thought were naïve, and from Chinese witnesses, because he believed they were self-interested. Although historians of Asian America concur that Chinese emigration to the United States was voluntary, U.S. economic and labor scholars since the 1970s have cited Barth, entrenching the view of unfree Chinese labor in the literature. In a sense, the historiography remains hindered by an Orientalist blind spot: enduring stereotypes of Chinese as slavish and despotic lend credence to depictions of Chinese as indentured, bound by debt peonage, or otherwise enslaved by “custom,” even when the evidence for such claims is problematic or thin.³

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The Australian historiography of gold mining by Chinese is not similarly burdened by such bias, although it too suffers from a disjuncture between the particularist focus of Chinese Australian studies and the discursive analysis of White Australian politics. The coolie trope was not commonly deployed on the Victorian goldfields, and it entered Australian politics only in the 1880s. Scholars have tended to project that influence backward, contributing to a hazy picture of race relations during the gold-rush era.⁴

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This essay examines Chinese labor systems and anti-Chinese politics in California and the Australian colony of Victoria from the 1850s to the 1880s. It offers a fresh examination of the “Chinese question” by making two interventions. First, the study is comparative and transnational, enabling a view beyond what, in a

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single-nation study, may seem normative. California and Victoria are well suited for comparative study: they were the locations of two of the three largest gold strikes of the nineteenth century, occurring just a few years apart (1848 and 1851, respectively); both strikes attracted miners from around the world, including from China; and governments in both locations passed restrictive immigration laws against Chinese.

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More generally, both California and Victoria share characteristics of settler colonialism: the desire to build replicates of Euro-American societies out of “wilderness”; conquest and removal of native peoples; rapid economic growth fueled by gold and other precious-metal extraction; and the formation of local democratic polities based on racial exclusion. There are also important differences: Victoria was a formal colony of the British Empire and the United States, while behaving in many ways like an empire, was a sovereign republic. Victoria also had a stronger presence of state authority during the gold-rush era. Finally, to a remarkable degree, Europeans, Americans, and Chinese traveled back and forth across the Pacific Ocean, giving rise to cross currents of exchange and influence.⁵

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Second, I argue that the Chinese question must be tackled empirically as well as discursively. This essay draws on research in government and company records and other contemporary accounts to flesh out the nature of Chinese mining organization. The data are scattered and incomplete—more so in California than in

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Victoria, where colonial authorities kept better records; but we can learn a great deal about the varieties of mine labor from what is available. Newspaper articles, legislative records, and other contemporary writings by both Euro-Americans and Chinese bear out the trajectories of racial politics. Out of a rich mix of local experiences and transnational dynamics I identify patterns of similarity and difference, and the contingencies that produced them. These contingencies are at the heart of my analysis, for they —more than anything else— explain historical variation and change. Such analysis may yet rescue Chinese labor from Orientalist historiography.

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The First Miners

The first Chinese miners in California appear to have been a group of about sixty contracted workers who arrived in Tuolumne County in the summer of 1849. They had been hired by British investors in Shanghai under a contract that included an advance of \$125 as passage money, which was to be paid back from monthly wage deductions. They set up diggings at Camp Salvado on Wood's Creek; although, accompanied by Chinese headmen, they were supervised on site by Mexicans from Sonora. In the first year or two of the rush, the use of contract labor was not unusual; Californios, Sonorans, and Chileans also engaged in the practice. Some whites from the American South brought African American slaves to the

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goldfields; others hired (or impressed) Miwok Indians and native Hawaiians for placer mining. At the American River mining site where gold was first discovered, James Marshall hired Miwok Indians for wages. Others used methods similar to the mission system, a form of servitude in which labor was exchanged for subsistence. Indians also panned for gold themselves and used it for barter. In a short time, however, whites would push Indians out of the mining areas.⁶

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Ethnic relations in the goldfields were not all conflictual; Europeans and Americans learned gold-washing techniques from Mexicans and Chileans, for example. In the fevered atmosphere of the rush, however, nativism proved a useful weapon of competition. White Americans used violence or the threat of violence to drive foreigners from profitable claims. As part of this general pattern, whites drove the Chinese company from their diggings at Salvado. The Chinese retreated over the mountain to Washington Camp (later renamed Chinese Camp). This is the first known incident of anti-Chinese violence on the California goldfields, but it also appears to have been an unusual occurrence. In 1849 and 1850 there were few Chinese in California; nativist enmity focused upon the more numerous, more experienced, and hence more competitive Sonorans and Chileans. Americans did not justify their action against the Chinese at Salvado on the grounds that they were contracted workers. In general, nativism did not focus on unfree labor; white Americans simply claimed a national entitlement to California's riches.⁷

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A group of Chinese miners in Yuba County observed by the Scots traveler John Borthwick in 1850 were probably contracted workers, judging by the size of the workforce, the construction of a large wing dam, and the presence of supervisors. Large-scale operations were short-lived, however. Violent expulsions from successful claims meant losses for investors. Evidence also suggests that contracts were not enforceable. An English ship captain wrote in 1849, “Fifteen coolies I brought [to San Francisco] from China, and who were under a bond for two years with the party who engaged them, were no sooner ashore than they resisted their contract, and each turned his separate way.” Importing Chinese contract labor for gold mining had quickly proved unprofitable and by the early 1850s was discontinued.⁸

The 1850 census lists only approximately five hundred Chinese miners in California, out of fifty eight thousand miners in the state. As news of gold traveled back to Hong Kong, however, Chinese began their own “rush” to California. In 1851 some 2,700 Chinese arrived at San Francisco; by the end of 1852 there were twenty thousand Chinese in the state. Unlike the first miners, they came on their own account, with funds furnished by relatives or on credit tickets arranged by emigration agents.⁹

The gold rush in Victoria opened in 1851. The following year Chinese began traveling to the Victoria goldfields, both from California—possibly to escape

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growing racial hostility there—and directly from China, encouraged by publicity circulated from shipping companies and emigration agents. Between 1851 and 1852 a few thousand Chinese made their way to Australia; in 1855 another 11,500 arrived in Victoria, leading the Chinese to dub that location “new gold mountain” (*xinjinshan*) and San Francisco as “old gold mountain” (*jiujinshan*). These arrivals appear to have come primarily by credit tickets, but some may have come as indentured servants. Even so, desertion was reportedly a problem, as it had been in California.¹⁰

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Gold seekers who headed for California and Victoria hailed from southern China. Most of them came from Guangdong Province, especially the *siyi* (“four counties” region) in the southwestern part of the province, and sailed from Hong Kong. Victoria also attracted men from Fujian Province through the port city of Xiamen (known by Westerners as Amoy). A majority of the miners were sharecroppers, hired hands, and small landholders—that is, they were rural working people of modest means. They were not the most destitute laborers, the poor souls who were vulnerable to abduction by crimps (kidnappers who used trickery, intimidation, or violence) recruiting for plantations in Peru and Cuba. As many scholars have pointed out, it was not necessary to kidnap anyone to go to the gold mountains.¹¹

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Chinese work and ownership patterns

Independent mining

If the use of contract labor in gold mining was short-lived, what were the forms of labor organization among Chinese miners? In both California and Victoria alluvial gold mining was generally practiced by individuals working solo or with partners.

The Chinese also fit this pattern. Partners were often close relatives or from the same village or clan lineage, indicating kinship as the medium of trust.

Notwithstanding trust, Chinese miners sometimes formalized their partnerships by jointly registering their claims. A rare surviving register of mining claims along the north fork of the Calaveras River in Calaveras County, California, includes sixty-one claims of Chinese miners from 1854 to 1857. Of these, parties of two or three accounted for twenty-seven claims (44 percent). In Tuolumne County, Chinese placer-mining partners working small claims fared about as well as (or as poorly as) whites independently working similar claims — earning about \$75 per man per month on claims valued at \$500 to \$600.¹²

Victorian gold-district registers of mining claims show Chinese individuals and partnerships of two or three men with small claims. For example, Ah Ping and Low Ying registered their creek claim of one hundred yards of Bendigo Creek, “commencing 50 yds from White Hills cemetery,” in 1868. An 1859 map of the Golden Point section of Forest Creek in the Castlemaine District of Victoria shows

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individual mining claims along the creek. Here, as on many other Victorian goldfields, Chinese and Europeans worked in close proximity. The map shows claims of miners named Molloy, Lo Cheung, Murphy, Ah Cheung, A'Kut, and Burns. arrayed cheek by jowl with others in the gully.¹³

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Chinese companies and cooperatives

American mining-census reports reference Chinese mining companies with names such as the John China Placer Mining Company and the Hong Kong China Wing Dam Company. They are described as either owned or leased, with ten to twenty workers, and with a listing of their equipment (including sluice boxes and races, wing dams, and water wheels). We may assume that a group of more than a dozen men working with larger equipment on larger claims, are with companies in which the principal investor is a local merchant who bought or leased the claim and furnished the equipment. As a rule, the merchant and the miners came from the same district in China and spoke the same dialect. Most Chinese companies did not pay wages but operated on a share basis, which was a way to spread and share risk.

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The merchant-investor typically took a portion of the output, and the miners

divided the rest. Merchants also supplied the miners' provisions.¹⁴

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American mining-census enumerators also remarked on the prevalence of small Chinese cooperatives in river placer mining. These usually comprised as few as five men, and usually no more than ten, working smaller claims with low-tech prospecting equipment such as rockers and sluice boxes. Cooperatives also worked via shares, but unlike the proportional shares of the merchant-investor companies, cooperatives organized on the principle of equal shares for both profits and expenses. The register of mining claims in Calaveras County, California, from the 1850s shows twenty-three claims (nearly 38 percent) belonging to as few as four men but as many as ten. As late as the 1880s, seven partners were mining together near Fournier's farm in Sierra County. The group had no boss; one member, Ah Fock, described himself as "merely the treasurer, the man who took charge of the [gold] dust as it come out. I don't claim any charge of the working there." He kept the group's accounts, paid out "dividends," and gave members gold dust or coins to buy provisions in town for the group.¹⁵

The same arrangements existed in the Australian colonies. According to Rev. William Young's unofficial 1868 census of the Chinese population in the Victoria gold districts, more than half of the 2,200 Chinese miners in Bendigo worked in small companies ranging in size from six men to over ten. Three hundred men worked in companies with puddling machines (used to break up gold-bearing clay) and around nine hundred worked in small companies—likely

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cooperatives—washing tailings (reworking old claims for leftover gold). Half of the four thousand Chinese in the Ovens District and 660 out of 765 Chinese miners at Daylesford “formed themselves into small companies” —language that suggested cooperative arrangements. Small groups also worked together to achieve economies of scale. According to Geoffrey Serle, the “most typical form” of work for Chinese was “paddocking,” in which “gangs of one hundred or more lift and wash the soil of gullies from end to end, working either cooperatively or as companies of employees.”¹⁶

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In the Victoria claims registers, individually owned claims with substantial acreage or equipment indicate small companies, such as Ah Ling’s sluicing claim of three acres at Old Race Course Spring, near Daylesford. Chinese companies favored sluicing, which required moderate investment and drew from Chinese agricultural experience with water engineering. The *Bendigo Advertiser* reported in December 1878 that Chinese sluicing companies were working in three shifts, around the clock, using three million gallons of water per week.¹⁷

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Egalitarian cooperatives, evidenced in small claims with four to eight holders of equal shares, are numerous in the Victorian mining registers. Testimony given before a coroner's inquest held after two Chinese gold miners died in a fight shows the work of a cooperative similar to Ah Fock's group in California. The Victoria cooperative, located at Portuguese Flat near the town of Creswick, comprised eight "mates," including at least two cousins. The miners lived in separate tents but ate breakfast together and divided chores such as cooking and collecting firewood. They held equal shares in the claim, each worth £3 to £4. One member, Ah Yung, kept the group's gold and books, and paid out weekly earnings of about 30 shillings to the members.¹⁸

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Both companies and cooperatives were similar to mining organizations found in China and Southeast Asia. In southern China, placer techniques were used to mine tin and iron-sand deposits, as were practices from agricultural irrigation. Mine operators sometimes hired local farmers during the slack season, but there were also small companies of full-time miners, often comprising landless and socially marginal types, who worked for shares under a manager-investor. These companies had minimal internal hierarchy and generous share division, reflecting the difficulty in holding labor. The practice of share division also drew on a tradition of partnership arrangements from late Qing-era business organization.¹⁹

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The cooperatives in California and Victoria bear a canny resemblance to the famous Chinese “kongsi” (*gongsi*, or company) of the West Kalimantan (West Borneo) gold mines of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These began as small, egalitarian share partnerships, as their names—*shiwufen* (fifteen shares), *xinbafen* (new eight shares)—suggested. As the mining industry developed, some of these cooperatives joined to create federations; a few became extremely powerful and acted as though they were sovereign states. Not surprisingly, the larger they became, the less egalitarian they were, with newly recruited credit-ticket workers at the entry level of the cooperative and share partners at the top. The power of the West Kalimantan kongsi emanated from the Chinese as a force between the native population and Dutch colonizers. Those conditions, of course, did not exist in the United States or Australia, so Chinese cooperatives remained primitive.²⁰

All of these formations—mining companies in southern China, cooperatives in Borneo, and their counterparts in California and Australia—were associated with sworn-brotherhood societies. In southern China, these brotherhoods were fictive-kin organizations comprising socially marginal males, with elaborate and secret ritual oaths, ceremonies, and exercises that cemented their solidarity. They could be protective and predatory, engaged in mutual aid for their members and in thievery among the general population. In late seventeenth-century southern China,

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the societies of Tiandihui (heaven and earth) and Hongmen (vast family), assumed an anti-Manchu political orientation. During the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), many activists fled China to Southeast Asia and beyond. In the 1850s exiles formed a group called the Zhigongtang (Active Justice Society) throughout the Chinese diaspora. From the early 1850s the Zhigongtang had branches in California, and throughout the nineteenth century the society was especially active in the mining districts. In Australia, the Zhigongtang was known as Yixing. It became the most powerful Chinese association in Victoria, and members would gain respectability in white society by explaining themselves as Chinese freemasons.²¹

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