

Listening to the unremembered – Chinese indentureship in South Africa

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Notwithstanding the deep history of the South African-born Chinese community, discourses of 'othering' and 'exclusion' continue to be developed around them. The unremembering of Chinese indentureship to the South African Chamber of Mines in the early 20th century, in the so-called 'Chinese Experiment', is a case in point. Over 64 000 Chinese workers were subjected to extreme forms of exploitation, which included exposure to known deadly working conditions, police violence, and the legalised access to narcotics. While international historiography of Chinese indentureship as a system of exploitation is extensive, the post-indentureship fates of Chinese labourers is largely unknown and uncertain. For those indentured in South Africa, even less is known since all were repatriated, excepting a small number of escapees, at the end of the scheme in 1910. The only South African indentured-Chinese labourers for whom we have certain knowledge are the group skeletons held by the Raymond A. Dart Collection of Human Skeletons at the University of the Witwatersrand. By reflecting on the continued possession and use of those skeletons for scientific research, this paper will pose broader questions regarding our professional practice. Are we unremembering the migrant workers of the 2022 Qatar Football World Cup? Do mandatory medical measures involve a degree of unremembering? Do our national healthcare systems unremember workers? It will be suggested that only a change of paradigm to a worker-centric, serviced-based model of occupational health and safety, where worker agency is enhanced, will ensure that we, the professionals, listen and remember.



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