

CHAPTER 3

TYPES OF EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES PAID IN CHINESE GRAVEL PUMP MINES

On May 1964, there were 637 gravel pump mines employing a total of 18,547 workers. There are 2 main types of workers employed in Chinese gravel pump mines, namely:-

- 1) Dependent workers who are either monthly paid or daily paid. These workers are mostly housed and fed by the miners themselves.
- 2) Independent workers, who are usually piece rated. These are not housed and fed by the miners.

There may be another unique type of workers which are not found in dredges and are employed under a contract system commonly referred to as a 'Pok Chow' system among mining circles.¹ They may be classified as independent workers. All these independent workers whether they are paid at time rate or piece rate or are employed under the 'Pok Chow' system are not housed and fed by the miners.

a) Types of Dependent Workers in Gravel Pump Mines and How They Are Paid.

- i) Monthly Paid Dependent Workers.
Among the monthly paid workers in the mine, there is firstly, the kepala who is the most important person on the mine besides the miner. He is usually quite elderly and has a lot of experience in mining operations. He has control and the respect of all the dependent mine workers. His main duty is to see that all workers are given a fair amount of work and that their work is properly done. He can be likened to a supervisor of the mine workers and the miner usually relies absolutely on him. Instructions on the work of the mine from the miner are handed to him

¹The word 'Pok' means 'gamble' in Chinese, and the word, 'Chow' means 'tribute'. Thus 'Pok Chow' taken literally means gambling tribute.

and it is his responsibility to see that the instructions are carried out by the workers. In the absence of the miner on the mine, he would assume the miner's responsibility and would have to answer for any incidence or untoward happenings which might occur on the mine. Thus in a way he also assumes the duty of a resident manager though he is not given the corresponding pay. He is paid about \$223.00 per month.

The kepala usually has an assistant kepala to work with him. This assistant kepala might be the 'Kuen Pan' (shift leader or the 'Pong Shau²'). He assists the kepala in controlling the over all labour on the mine. He gets an average of about \$157.00 per month. The Kuen Pan, who may also be the assistant kepala, takes charge of only one of the gangs or shifts of mine workers. His monthly salary depends on the number of shifts he has worked in a month. When called upon to assume the responsibilities of an assistant kepala, he gets an extra monthly allowance. On some mines, a pong shau may take the place of the kuen pan. The pong shau is like an odd-job worker. He has a knowledge of most types of work in a mine and he receives an average rate of \$120.00 per month. He could be the future kepala of the mine when he has worked for a long time in the mine and has accumulated enough experience. The kuen pan and the pong shau may be classified as semi-skilled workers. They have their own specific job to do and they could only assume the role of an assistant kepala only when the kepala or the miner requires them.

Few miners employ book-keepers or accountants on their mines as most of these work is done by their clerical staff in the town office. The miners would only employ book-keepers and accountants if they own many mines and employ a labour force large enough to justify their services. An example of such miners are Choong Sum and Foong Seong of Perak. However, these book-keepers

²The word 'pong shau' means helping hand in Chinese.

and accountants are kept among the clerical staff in the town office. The miners usually employ a mine-clerk for each mine to work as secretary, treasurer, paymaster, storekeeper and general supervisor on the administrative side of the mine. Though he has this wide range of responsibilities, his pay is not high and it usually amounts to about \$163.00 per month. The job of the mine-clerk is usually taken over by the miner himself if he owns only 1 or 2 mines.

Every Chinese gravel pump mine must have a cook since Chinese miners invariably supply free food to their regular workers. Usually a male cook is employed because he has to sleep with the other mine workers in the kongsi³ house also. The wage he receives per month depends on the size of the workers he has to serve. In an average sized mine, he gets about \$100.00 per month. In large mines where there are large numbers of mine workers, the cook has assistants who are usually the wives or daughters of some of the mine workers to do the menial work like cleaning raw food and dishes. Sometimes the cook takes the responsibilities of the 'hang kong'.⁴ If he does so, he is paid extra. Sometimes he may even be contracted to purchase the supplies for other mines which happen to be located nearby. His income then, becomes quite substantial, depending on the number of mines which he could be contracted to provide supplies.

Mines also employ chargemen to look after the electrical instalation on the mines. They are paid according to their

³A 'kongsi' house is a large house usually made of wood and zinc belonging to the miner and where mine workers live. This house is situated on the mine itself.

⁴The person in charge of the purchases of food and other miscellaneous articles for the mine.

qualifications. A chargeman holding a first class certificate gets about \$180.00 per month, while the one without a certificate gets about \$80.00.

Mines also employ a watchman who is usually a Sikh. He gets about \$97.00 per month. He lives and sleeps separately, and has no intercourse with the other mine workers.

ii) Daily Paid Dependent Mine Workers. Among the dependent mining workers, the daily paid form the largest class. It is estimated that about 70% of the dependent workers are daily paid. All daily paid dependent mining workers are either classified as semi-skilled or unskilled.

In some mines, the pong shau is daily paid. He, as mentioned before, is the general all round assistant, adaptable to all jobs with no specified task. A mine may have 2 or 3 pong shaus and they are classified as semi-skilled workers. Usually a newly employed pong shau is daily paid. But as he becomes accustomed to the activities and operations of the mines, the miner might place him on his monthly paid staff. A daily paid pong shau receives an average of \$2.00 per day.

The 'chap kung'⁵ and the 'kongsi kung'⁶ are also daily paid workers. These types of workers get about \$1.80 to \$2.00 per day. The 'chap kung' is usually considered as the more skilful worker though both these types of workers are classified as unskilled. Because he has a more specified job to perform, such as tending the monitor,⁷ he gets a slightly higher rate than the 'kongsi kung'. Usually he gets an

⁵Chap in Chinese means 'assorted' and kung means 'work' thus, chap kung means assorted work.

⁶As the term denotes the 'kongsi kung' does all the miscellaneous and unimportant jobs around the kongsi such as hoeing, carrying earth and stones, planks, loading, etc. This type of worker gets about \$2.00 to \$2.50 per day.

⁷A pump which shoots out a strong jet of water to break down the tin bearing soil.

average of about \$2.00 to \$2.50 per day. Among the chap kung workers, there are persons besides tending the monitor, also taking charge of the waste-chute, palong or sump.⁸ Tending a monitor or the sump, requires practically no skill and effort on the part of the worker, except maybe, his attention. Thus a chap kung appointed to these jobs usually gets less than the chap kung who is in charge of the waste chute or palong because such work demands the experience and skill of the worker in the quick separation of large rocks from the karang¹⁰ that come up to the palong.

These two categories of unskilled labour are most numerous on tin mines and usually account¹¹ for 2/3 to 3/4 of the total labour force employed. Their earnings include payments for special or emergency work done outside normal hours. High job rates are paid to them when they are called to perform work, such as strengthening the bunds during a heavy storm at night. All these workers are housed and fed by the miner. If women are employed, they fall in the kongsi kung category. Today, an estimated 10% of the kongsi kungs are women. They may be paid as high or even higher than their male counterparts, but they do not receive free food or lodging from the miner.

Although these unskilled labourers receive a daily rate of so much in a day, their income could also be time rated. Say, a chap kung or kongsi kung is paid \$2.00 per day of 8 hours work. That means he is paid about \$0.25 per hour of work done. Eight hours are the normal length of time in a day for most mine workers. However, he can take time off to attend a wedding or funeral. He may spend

⁸ A chute where large rocks are slid away.

⁹ The spot where the ore and mud are sucked into the pump up to the palong.

¹⁰ 'Karang' is tin-bearing soil.

¹¹ Siew Nim Chee, Chinese Labour in Tin Mines.

the whole day or half a day away from the mine, in which case, he is paid according to the hours of work he has done on the mine. For example, he might have worked for 2 hours in the morning and then spend the rest of the day away from the mine. He is then paid \$0.50 provided he has informed the kepala before he leaves. It could be noticed in many mines, an unskilled worker is not rigidly bound to their employers. However, if he takes too many days off from work too often, he may suddenly be dismissed by the miner on the recommendation of the kepala, or he might receive nothing or a smaller 'ang pow'¹² at the end of the year.

The average wage rates, hours and days worked and earnings for gravel pump workers are found in Table 3.2.

iii) Others. Although most dulang washers¹³ are really independent workers, in recent years many miners employ them to recover tin in the tailings. If so employed, they may be paid a daily rate or at a piece rate. If they are daily paid, then they are classified under the category of unskilled woman among the kongsi kung. If they are piece rated, they would be paid according to the amount of tin they have recovered. The amount they receive for each kati (a kati is about 16 ounces) of tin varies from mine to mine. These dulang washers do not receive food and lodging from the miner and they are usually the wives and daughters of the mine workers.

2) Independent Workers. Independent workers on the Chinese gravel pump mines are usually either paid at time rate or piece rate.

a) Piece Rated Independent Workers.

i) Ore Dressers. Among the independent workers who are paid at piece rates, there are the

¹² A red packet of varying sum of money given to all dependent mine workers as a bonus. The amount given to each worker depends on his status in the mine and the profits the miner has made during the year.

¹³ The pan or dulang as it is called in Malaya, is a large shallow dish, usually made of wood, and very light. By a swirling movement of the dulang, the lighter particles of sand and gravel are carried away, leaving behind the heavier tin ore. By skilful use of this method, the tin that escaped concentration on the mines and are washed away with the tailings are to a large extent saved. Thus, persons who use this method to recover tin are called 'Dulang Washers'.

TABLE 3.2

CHINESE GRAVEL PUMP MINES
AVERAGE WAGE RATES, HOURS AND DAYS WORKED AND EARNINGS.¹

Occupation	Employed Direct (D) Or Through Contractor (C)	Average Rate of Pay		Average Hours Worked in a Day	Average Days Worked in a Month	Average Monthly Earnings (\$)
		Daily Rate (\$)	Monthly Rate (\$)			
Kepala	D	-	223.00	-	-	223.00
Assistant Kepala	D	-	157.00	-	-	156.00
Clerk	D	-	163.00	-	-	163.00
Cook	D	-	103.00	-	-	101.00
Watchman	D	-	97.00	-	-	97.00
<u>Unskilled Labour:-</u>						
Pong Shau	D	2.00	-	8	27	121.00
Chap and Kongsu Kung	D	1.80	-	8	27	101.00
Female Chinese	D	1.85	-	8	27	82.00
<u>Engine Drivers:-</u>						
1st class cert.	D	-	159.00	8	29	159.00
1st class cert.	C	-	169.00	8	29	170.00
2nd. class cert.	D	-	113.00	8	29	113.00
2nd. class cert.	C	-	112.00	8	29	113.00
Without cert.	D	-	88.00	8	28	89.00
Without cert.	C	-	76.00	8	28	77.00
<u>Chargemen:-</u>						
With cert.	D	-	180.00	8	28	180.00
With cert.	C	-	169.00	7½	28	169.00
Without Cert.	D	-	77.00	8	29	77.00
Without cert.	C	-	83.00	7	25	83.00
Excavator and Bulldozer-Driver	D	6.20	148.00	8	27	133.00

Source:- Annual Report of Labour Department, Malaya.

Notes: ¹ As on July, 1963.

ore-dressers.¹⁴ They are paid according to the number of piculs of ore they have dressed for the miner. Usually they are employed by an ore-dressing contractor who usually does not do the cleaning himself, and pays them at a slightly lower rate than the rate offered by the miner to him. These ore-dressers may work in groups of about 3 persons and sometimes instead of being employed by an ore dressing contractor, they make their own contract with the miner to dress the ore. However, ore dressers prefer to be employed under a contractor because ore-dressing may take only 2 or 3 days to finish and a mine only cleans its palong once a week or 10 days. This means that the ore-dressers may work only when the mine cleans its palong. Thus ore dressers might only work in a mine for about 6 to 10 days each month. If they are employed by an ore-dressing, they could be assured of work throughout the month, because their contractor who is usually well known in the mining area is able to procure jobs for them in various mines successively, since different mines have their palong cleanings at different days of the month. If the ore-dressers make their own contract with the miner, they might be able to earn more in a mine by not sharing the money with a contractor, but they would be too tied down in ore-dressing in the mine to be able to look for work in other mines. If they are employed by a contractor, they get about \$100.00 to \$200.00 per month, depending on the speed with which he can dress the ore. The contractor is able to make more because he usually controls a number of workers whom he contracts to various mines, getting a cut on every picul of ore dressed by his workers. Depending on his efficiency in getting contracts and the number of workers under him, he often gets more than \$500.00 in a month. These ore-dressers are classified as semi-skilled workers and since they are 'casual' workers to the miner, they are not housed and fed by him.

¹⁴Those who are engaged in washing and cleaning the tin ore.

ii) Construction Workers. Another type of independent workers who are paid at a piece rate are the construction labourers. They are usually called by the miner to put up a building or effect repairs to the existing structures at an agreed sum of money. The amount would depend on the nature and the number of the construction and the time the miner wants the constructions to be completed. Depending on his agreement with the construction workers, he may or may not supply the necessary materials. He gives the specifications and agrees on a certain lump sum for the completion of the task at a specified date. This sum is then shared among the construction workers. They usually appoint a leader among themselves to supervise their work. In times of very high tin price (example, during the Korean War Boom), the miner is very anxious to have his constructions erected as quickly as possible. He would then pay extra over the agreed amount to the workers to persuade them to finish the job in less time. These construction workers are classified as semi-skilled and they receive no food and lodging from the miner.

Some miners who own several mines may employ these construction workers and give them a rate which depends on the hours and days they have worked on their mines. Usually they receive about \$3.00 to \$7.00 per kung of 8 hours depending on their degree of skill.

iii) Engine Drivers. Another type of independent workers are the engine-drivers. These are usually employed by an engine-contractor who would send them to various mines. Although there has been a gradual trend on Chinese gravel pump mines in the Post-war period to pay their engine drivers and their apprentices a monthly salary, the majority still employ these technical staff through an engine-contractor. The engine-contractor agrees to supply the necessary personnel to man the machinery efficiently for a certain lump sum every month; a sum which

may vary from a few hundreds to \$3,000 per month, depending chiefly on the number of engines, their horse-power, and hence, the number of men required to tend them and on the degree of skill and experience such men must possess to be efficient. Other considerations will be the measure of security of the engines, the mine's nearness to, or remoteness from towns, the shifts required, and whether the mine is to be worked 24 hours daily or less, since the contracted personnel do not get any extra allowance for repairs. These engine-drivers are paid by their contractor according to their skill and the number of shifts they work on the mine. An engine-driver holding a first class certificate of the machinery department, and working 8 hours a day gets about \$170.00 per month while the one with a second class certificate and working 8 hours a day gets about \$113.00. Their apprentices who have no certificate get an average of about \$77.00.

If these engine-drivers are dependent workers in the mine, they are paid slightly less because they receive free food and lodging while those who are employed by a contractor and are not fed and housed, are paid more. The engine-contractor has a number of engine-drivers and apprentices under his control and he contracts them to work in various mines in different districts, getting a cut on every contract. He is the general supervisor, dropping in occasionally to check on the work of his engine-drivers and to settle any complaints. He is called upon by the miner if anything goes wrong with the engines to help in the repairs, reconditioning, overhauling, etc.

3) Others. There is an unique type of independent labourers working under a system commonly known among Chinese gravel pump mines as 'Pok Chow'. Under this system the miners delegate authority to kepalas who in turn, engaged the required number of employees, pay wages and keep accounts, etc., and thus save for themselves all this work and day to day supervision. The workers employed on this system are sometimes

known as 'self-employed contractors' and they could be termed as 'entrepreneurs' in the economic sense because they assume risks. Occasionally, they employ a few unskilled labourers on daily rates. These workers have a contract of service with their respective kepalas who are, in fact, employers and are therefore, responsible for paying wages, contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund and Workmen's Compensation in case of accidents.

Under 'Pok Chow', the workers or a contractor employing labourers on a share basis, work the mine themselves and receive a percentage of the proceeds of the sale of the tin concentrate produced. Many miners allow this system to be worked in their mines because they may be too tied up with the initial capital outlay when starting operations on a mine. Thus it is usual for them to let 2 or 3 acres of their land to be worked out by the 'pok chow' system. The share of the money the miners get from this working, would help to lighten their financial burden. Owners of small or marginal mines may also let their mines to be worked under 'pok chow' because they do not wish to assume the responsibility of mining operations or to take the risks involved. These risks may be in the form of low production or low prices.

The miner who lets out his mine to be worked under this system agree to pay a certain price which is much below the prevailing price for every picul of ore produced. In some cases, there is an upward sliding scale of prices for increasing output, but usually the price per picul is reduced as the output of ore increases. Thus every extra picul produced meant an increase in the money to be shared out among the workers. This is the incentive for them to work harder. Where the output may be too small, the miner may guarantee each worker a minimum amount of wages per month. Since the workers are assuming the risks of the miner, the workers may work for nothing when there are low tin contents on the mine or bad weather arises to stop production. Thus definite wage or earnings of a worker for actual work done is not assured, because of the element of risk that is associated with the enterprise. However, if their enterprise might prove successful, every worker may earn as much as \$500.00 per month or more. Mining under this system is small scale and usually there are less than 20 workers doing the mining operations. The labourers and their contractor or kepala

agree on a certain rate for every kung which varies according to the types of work of each worker. Then when the output had been sold to the miner at the agreed price per picul, the first claim on the money from the sales, would be for payment of wages according to the kungs worked by each worker. If food had to be paid for, this is deducted from the remainder. Of the rest, which constitutes profits or bonus, a certain percentage would go to the contractor or kepala for his management, and the rest would be shared out according to the number of kungs put in by each worker. The miner's profits are derived from the differential between the price he pays for the ore and the price at which he sells it.

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