The decision to import Chinese into South Africa was not merely an imperial matter, of course, but fed into national discourses in Britain and China. A belief that the mines and government colluded to secure Chinese labour has been widely reiterated since by historians. Richardson has claimed that ‘[n]o clearer evidence of this co-operation between State and industry can be found than in the history of the most important single piece of legislation in the whole experiment, the Labour Importation Ordinance’. However, this is based on the assumption that the primary players were the Transvaal government and Chamber of Mines. Analysis of the establishment of an administrative framework for the importation of the Chinese reveals that this is far too simplistic. While there was a general desire within the Transvaal administration and the Chamber to cooperate to make the scheme a success, since improving the profitability of the mines was important to both, there were too many competing interests for them to work in harmony. The Chamber of Mines itself represented nine mining companies and over 140 mines in 1903 (see Tables 4.1–4.4). Furthermore, the Transvaal administration, the British Parliament, the CO, the FO, and different branches of the Chinese government were all involved in shaping and administering the terms of indenture and all under the watchful eyes of the public. Conflict was inevitable and collusion problematic.

In Britain, the ‘Chinese slavery’ controversy remains one of the most important examples of empire taking centre stage in popular politics, and received more newspaper coverage than the Congo ‘slavery’ scandal at the same time. In the run-up to the 1906 British election, the use of Chinese labour on the gold mines of the Transvaal helped unite different labour and liberal factions, obsessed both with promoting the
rights of ‘white labour’ and with preserving Britain’s humanitarian reputation. It went to the heart of liberal notions of why the British Empire existed and challenged British identity as a humanitarian nation in the wake of the South African War. Consequently, the legal framework of the scheme became an important medium through which empire and British national identity could be debated.

The legal framework was also important because it was the first time the Chinese government was directly involved in drawing up the terms of Chinese indentured labour. The result was a contract which enshrined working and living rights which far surpassed the norm in South Africa, Britain, or China. In China, the imperial government tried to use this as a means of reasserting their strength and appeasing the growing nationalist support within their diaspora. In practice, it revealed the deeply ineffective and fractious nature of Qing rule at this time. Terms were agreed in London, but implementation in China and South Africa was fraught with difficulties. Instead of demonstrating Qing strength, the scheme merely demonstrated regional power struggles, the growing support for Sun Yat-Sen in the diaspora and foreign economic imperialism in China. Furthermore, while negotiations focused on housing, wages, recruiting, remittances, health checks, corporal punishment, government oversight, and who paid for what, they failed to take into account simple things like language barriers or how to actually enforce all of the terms agreed upon.

**Chinese ‘Slavery’ and British ‘Honour’**

The primary focus of negotiators in the Transvaal had been to mitigate comparisons with the large Indian ‘coolie’ scheme in Natal and to prevent the Chinese from competing with whites in skilled work, agriculture, or trading. In Britain, the view was different, despite the mine propaganda efforts. Since indentured labour schemes began to be used after the abolition of slavery, there were widespread allegations that this was simply a new form of slavery. From the 1840s, the government frequently held commissions and published parliamentary papers on the investigations into the various Indian indenture schemes around the world, endeavouring to ensure good treatment. If widespread abuses were found, shipments could be stopped almost immediately. By the 1870s ‘protectors’ were normally appointed by colonial governments to oversee the fair treatment of indentured labourers. Nor was it just British officials who sought to improve conditions. Increasingly, Chinese and Japanese governments and the India Office monitored the treatment of