Mae Ngai’s Bancroft Prize-winning The Chinese Question examines how the Chinese diaspora in the United States and the British settler colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa gave rise to a global struggle over the Chinese Question summarized as follows: “were Chinese a racial threat to white, Anglo-American countries, and should Chinese be barred from them?”(4), and how these self-styled “white men’s countries” ultimately answered this question by passing laws excluding Chinese from immigration and citizenship around the turn of the twentieth century.

Ngai locates the roots of the Chinese Question in the nineteenth-century gold rushes, which engendered the first mass contacts between Chinese and Euro-Americans, and charts how distinctive local race theories developed into a single global race theory about the threat of Chinese immigration.

The book focuses on the politics of the Chinese Question and social history of Chinese miners in the three largest nineteenth-century gold-producing regions (California, Australia, and South Africa) while advancing understanding of related developments in world history.

These include Anglo-America’s rise and China’s decline propelled by the Western-dominated capitalist world system, imperialism, mass labor migration, Chinese exclusion, settler colonialism, and the transition of the global monetary system from bimetallism to the gold standard.

Ngai sheds light on the links between race and money by centering the Chinese diaspora and anti-Chinese racism in the story of the gold rushes and building on economic and monetary studies as well as political and social histories of the gold rushes.