



A day scene at a typical tin mine.

Image courtesy from www.ipohworld.org

### A Working Day

The silence of deep sleep would be shattered by the deafening sound of the cook banging pots together to announce breakfast. It would still be dark, for work started at first light and continued until dusk. Breakfast would be the staple diet of rice, a few vegetables, when available, and the occasional meat, if the local people had brought any to the kongsi for sale. Then it would be time to don the coolie hat, collect a cangkul and walk out to the mine, just a few yards away.

Soon the new miners would find out what hard work really meant. Dig with the cangkul, fill up wooden buckets, carry them to the tin shed, empty them and return

to the cangkul. As the mine got deeper the climb out became steeper until a "horses ladder" cut from a tree trunk would be necessary. And there would always be an overseer present to ensure there were no slackers. The day would wear on slowly with the sun beating down upon the hapless coolies.

At noon there would be a brief respite, a bowl of rice and a pot of tea

before returning to the backbreaking toil.

By dusk the coolies would scarcely be able to drag their weary bodies out of the mine and back to the kongsi, where they would barely have the strength to wash up and don their clean singlet. Many would not bother.

Then was time for the dinner prepared for them and then to take refuge under the mosquito nets, for another dreamless sleep of the exhausted. Such was the lot of the simple mining coolie, who after working off his debt to the Towkay would earn a few miserable cents a day – paid not in cash, but with company tokens of values 1, 2, 5 and 10 cents each. These could be exchanged for clothing and tobacco at the mine or, on festive days like Chinese New Year or the 9 Gods' festival, for more exotic pleasures of toddy, gambling, girls or opium in Paloh, the nearest town, The practice worked well for it was the mining Towkays that owned these pleasure palaces!

# The Great Migration

Part 2 by Ian Anderson



A set of Chinese bone gambling tokens used by the coolies as their entertainment.

Image courtesy from www.ipohworld.org

## Communal Living

Communal living in any circumstance requires the ability to live in close confines with people you do not particularly care for, but nonetheless to adopt an attitude towards them which will help to create harmony in the group. This requires a level of patience and understanding which is often not readily available in many of us, particularly those who are not well educated. Thus it was in the mining kongsi.

Imagine our new miners, a group of rough, uneducated, total strangers suddenly thrown together in the circumstances previously considered. There would be no entertainment apart from gambling away hard-earned cents by the light of the flickering kerosene lamp. No women, no alcohol – just black tobacco to smoke and the same bunch of dirty, tired miners that you would see day in day out from the moment you were woken until falling into the sleep of the near dead.

Food would be almost the same every day and on some days, if the Orang Asli had not been round, every meal would be just plain, stale rice for they would be many miles away from the nearest store. No doubt the cook would be one of the first to be blamed! Then there would be arguments and fights over the most inconsequential events like taking up too much space at the table or



Coolies having a meal together.

keeping others awake by snoring, coughing or even screaming from the pain of dreams or the lack of opium.

Of course in such difficult times, despite being all Hakka people, gangs would be formed and sides taken in support of the adversaries. Then an all-out war could develop unless the overseer or mine manager was of sufficient stature to step in and stop the battle before the cleavers, knives and parangs were brought into play. A wounded miner would be no good for work the next day.

Communal living is never fun for very long but in the mines there was no choice.