Moving the Edge: The South Africans Who Are Chinese

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To journey to South Africa is to enter a place of tremendous complexity, contradiction, hope, and anxiety. It is a place of incredible change where so much has remained the same. The many layers and interactions of society, culture, and politics (among other aspects) require years, perhaps a lifetime, of investigation. This essay describes the beginnings of a study, conducted over a period three weeks, of one of the smallest ethnic groups in South Africa, the "local" Chinese.[1]

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the University of Colorado–Boulder was the first to draw my attention to the South African Chinese. In response to my inquiry about Asian communities in Africa, she noted that Chinese are everywhere albeit in small numbers. Her comment led me to assume that I would find the descendants of the 19th century coolie trade that brought Chinese and Asian Indians to South America and the Caribbean. Perusal of tourist guidebooks revealed that Indians are present in significant numbers in Durban as a result of the presence of sugar plantations in the area but there was no mention of other Asian communities.

With Prof. Hu-DeHart's assistance, I was able to make contact with members of the Chinese community in South Africa who consented to interviews and shared their knowledge of its past. They estimate that there are currently 43,000 Chinese in South Africa of whom 8,000 are local; 15,000 emigrated from Taiwan; and 20,000 arrived from the People's Republic of China.[2] In the last official census, taken in 1991, the population of South Africa was 38.5 million.[3] Thus, the Chinese represent approximately 0.1% of the population.

However, this tiny group has played a significant role in South African history. I hope to demonstrate that their challenges to the government policies shaped South African society in ways that are analogous to the manner in which Asian Americans have influenced the structure of American institutions and society.[4]

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Most South African-born Chinese are concentrated in Port Elizabeth and the area around Johannesburg. There are, however, small groups scattered throughout the country, primarily in port cities.[5] During my visit, I was able to meet and interview several second generation Chinese from Cape Town and one community leader from Johannesburg.

I found the Cape Town local Chinese community (estimated to consist of 400 members) to be remarkably vibrant and cohesive in spite of its small size. Recently, their Community Center (the site of the former Chinese School) attracted the attention of the University of Cape Town which reportedly paid over R2,000,000 (approximately $333,000) for the property.[6] The new community center is used for cultural activities. Its basketball court is used by a different segment of the community every night. Apparently, cultural events at the Center are so well attended by the larger Cape Town community that they pay for its upkeep.[7]

However, given their small numbers, it was not surprising to learn that Chinese South Africans believe that they are an invisible minority. They conjectured that the poor treatment Chinese were given in the past was due in part to this lack of visibility. As a part of an effort to improve their position in South African society, they commissioned a journalist, Melanie Yap, to write their history. In 1985, the Chinese Association of South Africa collected funds to support her for three years while she and Diane Man wrote their story. Yap raised an additional six years of salary and completed *Colour, Confusion and Concession: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* just prior to the first democratic elections in 1994.[8]

Yap and Man uncovered a rich history of many interactions between China and Africa dating back to the 7th century. Maps showing Africa, produced by Chinese explorers, were published as early as 1320, 150 years before Diaz rounded the Cape. In addition, porcelains dating back the Sung dynasty (960–1279) have been unearthed in the

Transvaal, and San sand paintings show people wearing Chinese style hats.

According to Yap and Man, the first Chinese to live in South Africa were brought by Jan van Riebeeck, the founder of Cape Town, in 1660. Van Riebeeck needed laborers because he was unable to persuade the local inhabitants to work for him. The Dutch East India Company sent convicts and exiles, including people from India, China, Indonesia, Ceylon, and from what is now Java, to be van Riebeeck's slaves. After serving their terms, some convicts stayed on in the Cape as "free" blacks. Free blacks had many of the same privileges as whites but rarely owned property and, after 1790, were required to carry a special pass to leave town. The fate of the free Chinese amongst them is unknown but they are presumed to be the ancestors of the coloured population of the Cape.[9]

Beginning in the early 19th century, Chinese laborers and artisans began to immigrate to South Africa in small numbers. Their arrival coincided with the mass importation of Indian laborers bound for the sugar plantations of Natal.[10]

The arrival of the Chinese was controversial. They are given credit for helping build the infrastructure of the country, including the port of Durban. Nevertheless, there were many objections to their presence which closely resemble comments documented in accounts from 19th century California. As in the United States, there were calls for immigration restrictions even when the numbers of Chinese were minuscule. They were described as being barbarous and uncivilized, immoral and heathen on one hand, and being enterprising and useful in spreading the tax burden on the other.[11]

Immigration from China to South Africa began in earnest in the 1870s, just after the largest wave of migration from China to the United States and Hawaii. Although there are many parallels between the experiences of the two groups of immigrants, there are also several events that are unique to the South African case.

The vast majority of immigrants to South Africa came from Guangdong province, the home of the ancestors of most American-born Cantonese Chinese. However, many of those who moved to South Africa were Moiyean, a group of internal refugees thought to have originated in northern China. Many came by way of Mauritius, settled in the port communities of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, and Durban,[12] and were employed as grocers, artisans, laborers, and launderers.[13]

Although there were only a few Chinese in British controlled areas (215 in the Eastern Cape in 1891,[14] 329 in Cape Town in 1904,[15] and 77 males in Natal in 1893[16]), by 1897 they were subject to special legislation limiting their legal rights. In the Cape Colony, only immigrants who could read and write a European language were allowed entry.[17] In Natal, a test was given in English. In addition, the Dealers Licensing Act 18 gave local Natal officials broad discretionary authority in the granting of Asiatic traders licenses. It goes without saying that Chinese were not allowed to become citizens of these colonies.[18]

In the Boer republics, the legal rights of Chinese (and other Asians) were also severely limited. For 95 years, beginning in 1891, Asians were prohibited from living in the Orange Free State.[19] In the Transvaal from 1885, Chinese were subject to trade restrictions, were made ineligible for citizenship (and thus ownership of property), had to carry a special pass, and eventually were restricted to certain residential areas and jobs. Interestingly, there were no self-employed Chinese miners in the gold rush of the 1870s and 1880s because local authorities conspired to give diggers licenses only to whites.[20]

However, the discovery of gold at Witwatersrand in the Transvaal in 1886 created a situation that affects South African Chinese to this day. More than 60,000 Chinese laborers were employed as indentured servants to work the mines from 1904–1910 at a time when only 2,300 "free" Chinese lived in the Transvaal, Cape, and Natal colonies and the white population of the Transvaal was less than 50,000. These laborers had to be recruited from northern China because the South African Chinese took out ads in their hometowns warning their kinsmen of the dangers of mining. Only three laborers are known to have escaped the mandatory repatriation and remained in South Africa.[21]

The presence of such a large number of transient, foreign Chinese provoked legislation that negatively affected the resident Chinese community. As a direct result of the importation of Chinese contract laborers, Natal passed the Transient Immigrants Act in 1904, requiring Chinese laborers from other colonies to stay in designated housing. Consequently, Chinese residents of Natal were obliged to carry domicile certificates bearing their fingerprints.[22] In the same year, the Cape Colony passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, also requiring those already in residence to bear a Certificate of Exemption, which included distinguishing physical marks and fingerprints. This certificate had to be renewed every year.[23]

Nevertheless, in the short time they were employed to work the mines, the Chinese contract laborers extracted over 45 million fine ounces of gold worth over 174 million pounds. These temporary workers helped put gold mining on a solid footing in South Africa. Their presence attracted the attention of the Chinese government, which established the Consulate-General in Johannesburg and initiated a link to the South African Chinese community that endures to this day.[24]

The legacy of the contract laborers also includes the establishment of the precedent for segregating employment by color. By law, Chinese contract laborers were not allowed to perform fifty-five specific skilled jobs including bricklaying, plumbing, wiring, and driving machinery. This prohibition was later extended to all black workers and became a salient feature of apartheid.[25]

The resident Chinese and Indian communities suffered serious difficulties from white paranoid beliefs that Asians were about to flood the labor market in South Africa. In 1905, one year after the arrival of the contract laborers, all Asians in the Transvaal were required to register with the government. Just one year later, an Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance was proposed in the Transvaal, which required Asians to re-register, be fingerprinted, and carry the registration certificates. Under leadership of the Transvaal Chinese Association and the British Indian Association, including honorary secretary, lawyer Mohandas Gandhi, the Chinese and Indian communities worked together (with the assistance of the government in China) to protest the proposed ordinance. They began their protest using Gandhi's suggested strategy of passive resistance. In the end, they had to settle for a compromise in which the mandatory registration was made voluntary if everyone agreed to register and provide either a signature or thumbprints. (Only nine Chinese could sign their names.)[26]

In subsequent years, especially during the apartheid era, the legal rights of the Chinese continued to become more limited. However, in some cases, the small size of the community worked in its favor. Even though Asians were classified as coloured, the Chinese often successfully argued that separation from other communities, especially white communities, was unworkable. For example, it was not feasible in smaller cities to build separate facilities such as hospitals for only a handful of Chinese so they were allowed to use the Whites Only facilities. In all the major cities except Port Elizabeth, the Chinese were able to avoid being concentrated in Chinese-only residential/employment areas by pointing out that it was not economically feasible for a com-

munity to consist entirely of general store owners. In other instances, their small numbers made it possible for them to be ignored by the government.[27]

Interestingly, during the apartheid era, Japanese were made honorary whites. Because most people could not distinguish between a Japanese and a Chinese, it was possible for Chinese to "pass" as Japanese and thereby gain access to services reserved for whites.[28]

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The fluid status of the Chinese in the past has had a detrimental effect on the ability of the Chinese community to lay claim to the affirmative action efforts of the current ANC government.[29] While they were denied the franchise in the past, their economic status was and continues to be relatively high, even when compared to whites. In Johannesburg, the popular stereotype of Chinese is that they are rich[30] and the local Chinese in Cape Town report that a relatively high percentage of second generation Chinese South Africans are college educated professionals.[31] In my conversations with them, they repeatedly emphasized that they are not descended from the contract laborers who worked the gold mines but are instead the offspring of resourceful shopkeepers.[32]

However, the limitations placed on Chinese have led to a severe brain drain to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. Les Hoy, a member of the Executive Committee of the Western Cape Chinese Association, estimated that 40% of the Cape Town Chinese have emigrated.[33] Indeed, every one of the dozen Cape Town Chinese I met has at least one sibling or child living outside of South Africa. In every case, the emigrant is a highly trained professional. Two of the women I met are on waiting lists to emigrate. These women also cited the violent nature of contemporary South African society as a reason to consider emigration.[34]

The population decline of the local Chinese community has been compensated for by a large influx of new immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China (as mentioned above.) In Cape Town, the established community has welcomed the new immigrants. Two immigrants from Hong Kong, for example, serve on the Executive Committee of the local Chinese association.[35] However, in Johannesburg, a new suburban Chinatown has sprung up miles away from the original one.[36] Evidently, there is little interaction between the old and new communities.

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The experiences and contributions of South African Chinese are reminiscent of those of Chinese Americans. In the process of negotiating a repressive dominant society, they found their niche first as small shopkeepers, then as highly skilled professionals. Their resistance to injustice prompted the white power structure to respond.

In his book *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian Americans in History and Culture*, historian Gary Okihiro argues that the activism of Asians on the fringes of society in the United States has provoked the center to reevaluate and redefine itself. He writes:

> What I would like to suggest is that the deeper significance of Asians, and indeed of all minorities, in America rests in their opposition to the dominant paradigm, their fight against "the power," their efforts to transform, and not simply reform, American society and its structures. Specifically, I am thinking about the challenges posed by Asians to the central tenet of American democracy — equality under the law — but I also have in mind how Asians helped to redefine the meaning of the American identity, to expand it beyond the narrower idea of only white and black, and to move it beyond the confines of the American state and the prescribed behaviors of loyalty and patriotism.[37]

In many ways, South African Chinese have played a similar role. By continually resisting oppression, they helped define the limits of apartheid and perhaps signaled its demise. ◉

Notes

1. Melanie Yap, interview, Pretoria, South Africa, January 5, 2000. Ms. Yap is a member of the Executive Board of the Chinese Association of South Africa. The term *local Chinese* refers to people of Chinese descent who were born in South Africa.

2. Ibid. and Les Hoy, interview, Cape Town, South Africa, January 20, 2000. Mr. Hoy is a member of the Executive Committee of the Western Cape Chinese Association.

3. Melanie Yap and Diane Leong Man, *Colour, Confusion and Concession: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 426.

4. I am drawing on the analysis presented by Gary Okihiro in his book *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

5. Op. Cit., xix.

6. H.L. Lee-Pan, interview, Cape Town, South Africa, January 20, 2000. Mr. Lee-Pan is a retired general store and restaurant owner.

7. Pricilla Lee-Pan, interview, Cape Town, South Africa, January 19, 2000. Ms. Lee-Pan is the Chair of the Executive Committee of the Western Cape Chinese Association.

8. Yap and Man.

9. Ibid., 6–7.

10. Ibid., 20.

11. Ibid., 21.

12. Ibid., 32–36. Also, interviews with H.L. Lee-Pan and with Lilly Keeson, Cape Town, January 20, 2000. Ms. Keeson is a member of the Executive Committee of the Western Cape Chinese Association.

13. Ibid., 42, 57.

14. Ibid., 45.

15. Ibid., 61.

16. Ibid., 44.

17. Ibid., 62.

18. Ibid., 43.

19. Ibid., 73.

20. Ibid., 75–6.

21. Ibid., 72, 134–35. However, according to Yap and Hoy, the stereotype of the Chinese miners remains in the minds of most South Africans as the origin of the local Chinese.

22. Ibid., 44–5.

23. Ibid., 62.

24. Ibid., 134–5.

25. Ibid., 108.

26. Ibid., 152.

27. Ibid., 317–370.

28. Ibid., 375 and Les Hoy interview.

29. Kathy Sundstrom and Jeanne Van Der Merve, "South African Chinese 'not black enough,'" *Saturday Argus*, Cape Town (22–23 January 2000): 10.

30. Yap interview.

31. Hoy, Keeson and P. Lee-Pan.

32. P. Lee-Pan.

33. Hoy.

34. Cindy ?, interview, Cape Town, January 20, 2000.

35. Jack ?, interview, Cape Town, January 20, 2000.

36. Yap interview.

37. Okihiro, 155.