



Revue européenne des migrations internationales

vol. 25 - n°1 | 2009

Nouvelles migrations chinoises en Afrique et en Amérique latine

Recent Chinese Migrants in small Towns of Post-apartheid South Africa

Les nouveaux migrants chinois dans les petites villes de l'Afrique du sud post-apartheid

Los nuevos migrantes chinos en las pequeñas ciudades de Sudáfrica post-apartheid

Yoon Jung Park et Anna Ying Chen



Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/remi/4878>

DOI : 10.4000/remi.4878

ISSN : 1777-5418

Éditeur

Université de Poitiers

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 juin 2009

Pagination : 25-44

ISBN : 978-2-911627-51-4

ISSN : 0765-0752

Référence électronique

Yoon Jung Park et Anna Ying Chen, « Recent Chinese Migrants in small Towns of Post-apartheid South Africa », *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* [En ligne], vol. 25 - n°1 | 2009, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2012, consulté le 23 novembre 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/remi/4878> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.4878>

Recent Chinese Migrants in small Towns of Post-apartheid South Africa

Yoon Jung PARK* and Anna Ying CHEN**

In the context of growing media and scholarly attention on China's increased political and economic interests in Africa it is timely to start attempting to understand the Chinese migrants who come with Chinese aid, trade, business and development activities to the continent. It is equally relevant that we start in South Africa for a number of reasons: South Africa is home to the only sizeable resident multi-generational Chinese population on the African continent; it has also become home to the largest numbers of newer Chinese migrants. For significant historical reasons, which we will expand upon later in the paper, we chose to begin our research on these new Chinese migrants in the Free State province, one of the nine provinces of post-apartheid South Africa¹.

This paper is based on field research in the Free State's smaller towns. It forms part of a larger research project on Chinese migration to southern Africa which is linked to two related research projects; one of these focuses on African perceptions of the Chinese, and the other examines the political mobilization of increasing anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment.

This article is, at this early stage, primarily descriptive. However, the intention of the larger research project within which it is situated is to understand new Chinese migration and settlement patterns, key challenges for these communities, and how

* Senior Researcher Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg
yoon@tiscali.co.za

** Research Fellow Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg
annachen@telkomsa.net

1 Previous versions of this paper were presented as "Intersections of race, class and power: Chinese in post-apartheid Free State" at XIV SASA Congress, Stellenbosch University, 7-10 July 2008 and again at the University of Johannesburg Sociology & Anthropology Seminar series on 23 July 2008.

decisions about 'home' are made in relation to broader discourses of social networks, social capital, and identity in a globalized setting. This is an ethnographic description of a nascent community, but one which is couched in a larger framework of questions dealing with migration, race, class and power in South Africa.

WAVES OF CHINESE MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA

The earliest Chinese to South Africa included convicts and company slaves of the Dutch East India Company who controlled the Cape in the mid- to late 17th century, a small number of contract laborers and artisans who came to South Africa in the early and mid-1800s, and over 63,000 contract miners imported to (and later exported from) South Africa between 1904-1910. While these histories are significant in terms of understanding the context into which free Chinese migrants entered South Africa, their numbers were small and most were eventually repatriated to China or gradually mixed into South Africa's mixed race population.²

The ancestors of the local Chinese or SABCs (South African-born Chinese) began arriving in South Africa in small but significant numbers from the late 1870s. Today this element of the Chinese in South Africa numbers approximately 10,000.³ Originating in two areas of Guangdong province in south China, they arrived in South Africa as independent, free immigrants intending to make their fortunes and return to China. However, due to political events in both China and South Africa, a small community of these free immigrants eventually settled in the country.

From their first arrival in the late-1800s and for nearly a century discrimination and racist legislation kept their numbers low, restricted further immigration, and placed controls on the existing Chinese community.⁴ While the numbers were tiny, both in real and relative terms, the reaction was unduly harsh: Chinese throughout the various colonies and states of early South Africa met with fear and hatred based primarily on race. Until the apartheid years, their numbers grew slowly but steadily. Barriers to Chinese immigration in North America were lowered during and after World War II, but in South Africa, after an initial increase between 1949 and 1953 comprised mostly of new brides brought from China, the door to South Africa was virtually shut by the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act (number 43 of 1953).

Then, after a gap of almost three decades and due to increasingly close ties between the apartheid government in South Africa and the Republic of China/Taiwan, small numbers of Taiwanese industrialists were enticed to make investments in remote areas of South Africa, part of a larger plan to staunch the flow of black Africans from the 'homelands' into urban areas. A small but steady influx of Taiwanese industrialists into South Africa from the late 1970s formed the first wave of new Chinese

2 For more detail on these early histories see Yap and Man 1996, Park 2006 and 2008 and Harris 1998a and 1998b.

3 This figure is based on June 2008 press release of the Chinese Association of South Africa.

4 Yap and Man 1996:62, 76-84; Smedley 1980b:20-21; Tung 1947, Harris 1998a, 1998b.

immigration to South Africa. Generous South African government incentives (including relocation costs, subsidized wages for seven years and subsidized rent for ten years, cheap transport of goods to urban areas, and housing loans) and favorable exchange rates encouraged the immigration of investors and their families from Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁵

By 1988, an estimated 2,500 immigrants from Taiwan had arrived. By 1989, these industrialists were reported to have established nearly 150 factories, mostly in remote parts of the country in or near the former 'homelands'; by 1992, according to the Association of Chinese Industrialists, hundreds of these factories had created over 40,000 jobs and invested capital of approximately one billion Rand.⁶ At first these early Taiwanese experienced some difficulties with housing and schooling for their children as they settled in conservative towns surrounding the former homelands in remote areas of the country. These Taiwanese immigrants initially were accommodated by permit-based exemptions to existing apartheid laws. Eventually, however, South Africa's long-standing prohibition of non-white immigration was waived in order to accommodate them; the Free State province went a step further, overturning laws that had previously prohibited Chinese and Indian residence, to permit these new Chinese investors to live and settle in their towns.

In the 1990s, a second wave of immigration started. On the heels of the industrialists, many other immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong entered South Africa. They came in as entrepreneurs opening import/export firms, restaurants, other small businesses, and as students. While the industrialists, some senior managers, and their families were based primarily in or near the former homelands in rural parts of the country these newer arrivals settled in South Africa's larger cities. By the end of 1994, there were approximately 300 such businesses and hundreds of Chinese students in South Africa.⁷

It should be noted, however, that this was not a permanent uni-directional migration. As with many transnational migrations, some of these new migrants were opportunistic capitalists; they took advantage of incentive schemes and moved on when conditions for business worsened.⁸ Still, for about a decade the number of Taiwanese migrants grew steadily. Then, in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, many of these Taiwanese took leave of South Africa, their departure hastened by the termination of their subsidies, South Africa's official recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC), difficulties with South Africa's labor regulations, and stiff competition from the entry of cheap imports brought in directly from China. Crime and security as well as

5 Hart explains that at the same time, large numbers of small-scale industrialists in Taiwan came under enormous pressure to leave the country due to rising wages, escalating exchange rates, and high rents. Ironically, these conditions, she says, were created by the stunning pace of their industrial investment and export drive (Hart 2002:2).

6 Yap and Man 1996:421, Hart 2002:2-3.

7 Yap and Man 1996:423.

8 See Park 2005, chapter 7 for discussion.

concerns about political and economic stability were also major concerns in during this period, when the interest rate increased and the South African Rand depreciated to a record low of R13:US\$1. From a high of approximately 30,000 in the mid-1990s, there are currently approximately 6,000 Taiwanese in South Africa.⁹

The third wave of immigration, which overlaps with the second and continues today, is immigration primarily from the People's Republic of China. Starting in the late 1980s and picking up pace in the period leading up to South Africa's recognition of the PRC in January 1998, huge numbers of both legal and illegal immigrants have entered South Africa from mainland China, dwarfing the existing South African-born Chinese community and the Taiwanese. These numbers have increased even more dramatically in the past five to seven years. In terms of this third wave of immigration, mostly from mainland China, we identify three distinct periods and three different types of migrations: the first from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s; a second from the mid- to late 1990s; and a third – larger and ongoing – wave which began in the early 2000s.

The earliest of these new Chinese immigrants from mainland China arrived in South Africa in the late 1980s, although some reports claim that the first of these arrived in South Africa as early as 1986. Our research indicates that most of these earliest immigrants from the PRC arrived along two primary routes: the first group arrived via Lesotho and the second via Hungary¹⁰ through the Ivory Coast. The majority of this group came to South Africa with little and started up small businesses; however, many arrived with previous migrant experiences from other countries. Most of those who came via Lesotho initially began as employees for Taiwanese businesses. By the late 1990s, many of these earliest immigrants from mainland China became quite successful, mostly as importers/wholesalers of Chinese products and as factory owners. However, like many of the early Taiwanese industrialists, we estimate that as many as half of these earliest Chinese immigrants later left South Africa due to security and other family concerns; some returned to China¹¹ while others re-migrated to the US, Canada, Australia, and other developed Western countries.

The second inflow of mainland Chinese into South Africa took place in the mid- to late 1990s, in the period immediately following the first democratic elections and as South Africa ended its relationship with Taiwan and established a diplomatic

9 These numbers were originally based on an 'off the record' comment by a former staff member of the Taipei Liaison Office; however, the figure seems to be regularly quoted by the Chinese language press in South Africa.

10 At the time, because Hungary was also a communist nation, Chinese did not need visas to enter. Upon discovering that there were limited business opportunities there, they moved on to look for other opportunities. Africa was one of the obvious choices, again due to the porous borders of many African nations.

11 While many of these earliest Chinese immigrants left South Africa, quite a few of them maintain business linkages to the country. Some have left their South African business interests in the hands of newer Chinese immigrants. Others have set up related businesses, such as factories, in China.

relationship with the People's Republic of China. It is worth noting that during this period, just before the diplomatic relationship was formally established, the South Africa Research Center of the Chinese Research Institute of International Affairs in Pretoria was responsible for the political relations between the two nations and Great Wall (Pty) Ltd in Johannesburg represented the then Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MofTEC) which is now the Ministry of Commerce (MofCom), and managed the economic and commercial affairs between South Africa and China.

These early Chinese businesses, some of them state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and others private, typically sent at least two Chinese to staff their operations; the larger businesses, during their peak periods, had between five to ten Chinese nationals in their employ. At the end of their two- to three-year contract periods, some of these Chinese employees – from across China – decided to stay on in South Africa. Those who chose to remain were largely well-educated professionals, many with international work experience and some capital. This subgroup of Chinese migrants has since established extensive business networks in southern Africa and in China. Many have expanded beyond their initial trading businesses into other industrial fields, including mining, manufacturing, and property development.

Others in the second cohort hail from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, two of the most affluent regions in China which benefited from the Chinese open door economic policy. With a dense population providing skilled labor at low costs and other coastal benefits, these regions are also known for their manufacturing capacity in all kinds of products including textile, shoes, bags, and many other light industrial products. They are the manufacturing base for both China and the world. Entrepreneurs from these regions identified the business opportunities in Africa and saw South Africa as their entry point to other neighboring African countries. They came with both capital and other business resources. Most of these immigrants are linked by close social networks to factories in China. With these resources and other competitive advantages, their first business choice is import, wholesale, and distribution. Some of the mainland Chinese of this second cohort have also moved on to other countries in southern Africa, again, usually as wholesalers/distributors of Chinese imports.¹²

The last and ongoing wave of Chinese immigrants began arriving in South Africa in the new millennium. They are made up mostly of small traders and peasants¹³ primarily from Fujian province. Many entered the country illegally via neighboring

12 See Dobler 2005 on Chinese wholesale merchants engaged in cross-border trade in Oshikango, Namibia.

13 In the early 1980s part of economic reforms in China allowed families to occupy and farm a piece of land; however the land is still owned by the government. Each village has rights to some portion of land; this land is then divided equally amongst the families that live in the village. The individual families farm the land and then sell some portion of their produce back to the government, after taking a small share for themselves. These are not farmers in the commercial sense; rather the Chinese 'peasants' are similar to sharecroppers, with the Chinese state as the landowners.

countries; due to their limited English, limited education, limited start-up capital, and less extensive business networks, they tend to operate in the lower rungs of the retail sector, operating small shops in the remote towns all over South Africa. Most of the people interviewed in the small Free State towns belong to this last group of mainland Chinese immigrants.

Unfortunately, there are no accurate statistics regarding the total population of Chinese in South Africa. As mentioned, there are currently fewer than 10,000 Chinese South Africans (South African-born or local Chinese) and approximately 6,000 Taiwanese in the country, but in terms of the overall numbers, these are more difficult to ascertain. The Chinese embassy reports that while they do not have any official figures, they estimate that there are about 200,000 Chinese in South Africa. In news broadcasting by CCTV (the main Chinese broadcaster) and other news agencies, the figure rises to 300,000; one of the authors of this paper has used the figures 300,000 – 350,000;¹⁴ and Sautman estimates between 250,000 and 350,000.¹⁵ Due to large numbers of “illegal” migrants, poor record-keeping on the part of South Africa’s Home Affairs officials, as well as continued movements across borders, it is impossible to come to any exact accounting of the total number of people of Chinese descent in South Africa; suffice it to say that at present South Africa has at least five to ten times more Chinese within its borders than any other African nation.

CHINESE IN THE FREE STATE

Of all the early colonies of South Africa, the Orange Free State was the most exclusionary: from as early as 1854 OFS law prohibited the settlement of “Asiatics”¹⁶. Indians and Chinese were prevented from owning property or becoming citizens; these were “rights” reserved for whites only. In 1891 another OFS law further prohibited any “Asiatic” from living within the province and transiting “Asiatics” were permitted within the borders for only 72 hours (at the time). During the apartheid years, these laws were retained on the books: Chinese and Indians were prohibited from settling – or even staying overnight – in the Free State until the mid-1980s.

Why did the laws change at that time? As mentioned earlier, in the late 1970s and into the 1980s the apartheid government strengthened its ties to Taiwan. There were exchanges of ministers and a significant increase in trade. The South African government provided tremendous incentives to Taiwanese investors and industrialists to build labor-intensive factories, mostly in the textile industry, in and near former homeland areas, primarily as a strategy to prevent further black Africans from migrating to the major urban areas. The Free State provincial government and local municipal governments, too, made efforts to attract investments and played host to

¹⁴ Park 2005.

¹⁵ Sautman 2006, see also Mohan with Kale 2007.

¹⁶ This term, used to refer to all people from Asia, but typically referring to Indians and Chinese, is uniquely South African and can be found in many apartheid-era pieces of legislation.

several such factories. In order to accommodate their new investors/guests, the Free State finally overturned the 1891 law in 1986 and Chinese were permitted, for the first time in its history, to settle and live in the province. Bloemfontein, the capital city of the province, at one point in the 1990s, was home to the highest concentration of Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa; however, by January 2007, fewer than 1000 were left.¹⁷

We chose to explore the Free State's Chinese population in part because of these unique aspects of recent history. We had heard reports indicating that there were Chinese shops in almost every small town across the Free State. We wanted to see if this was true and to then understand why and how Chinese had settled in these Afrikaner heartlands, reputed for their political and racial conservatism. Chinese officials estimate that between 5,000 and 6,000 people of Chinese descent now reside in the province, down from a high of approximately 10,000. Most of those who left were Taiwanese businessmen and their families. The newcomers, as mentioned, are predominantly from Fujian province of mainland China.

RESEARCH METHODS: THE ROAD TRIP

Our field research road trip took us across the Free State from north to south, west and back up toward Johannesburg. We mapped out a route specifically designed to follow secondary roads to access small towns to locate, observe and document "China shops" in the province. "China shops" is a term widely used in the region, sometimes rather indiscriminately. It can refer to both the merchandise sold in a shop as well as to the owners of the shop. For example, we also ran across textile shops selling Chinese-made clothing that were owned by black South Africans. However, we use the term "China shop" here to describe textile shops selling a wide assortment of Chinese-made products (usually including clothing, shoes and other 'leather' products, toys and baby items, small electronics & household appliances, and blankets) and that are owned and operated by new Chinese immigrants. Where Chinese are involved in other businesses, we specify whether these are grocery stores, general dealers, restaurants, or other such businesses.

The "road trip" as a research method proved to be extremely flexible and adaptable; it afforded the research team immediate opportunities for comparison and contextualization and highlighted areas for further investigation.

GENERAL FINDINGS

Chinese in Free State towns

The following table lists the Free State towns we visited, the general population statistics, and the numbers of Chinese shops and individuals in each.

¹⁷ Van der Watt 2007:3.

Table 1 : Chinese in Free State ‘dorpies

Town	General Population¹⁸	Number of Chinese shops	Types of Chinese shops	Number of Chinese individuals
Welkom (inc. Thabong township)	192,966 ¹⁹ (+400,000 in greater municipality) ²⁰	+ 20	various	+/- 200
Theunissen	1,669	6		15-20
Brandfort	1,513	3	2 grocery shops 1 “China shop”	15
Trompsburg	929	2	1 grocery shop 1 “China shop”	3
Phillipolis	1,166 ²¹	1	1 “China shop”	4
Springfontein	1,754	1	1 grocery shop	3-4
Smithfield	501 ²²	2	1 general dealers 1 “China shop”	7 (1 Taiwanese family, 1 mainland Chinese family)
Hobhouse	2,591 ²³	1	1 shop - groceries and textiles	2
Ladybrand	4,211	15-20	various	50 Taiwanese families, 30-40 mainland Chinese
Ficksburg	8,309	10	various	+/- 20
Clarens	4,085 ²⁴	None found		None found
Bethlehem	11,819	+ 10	1 restaurant/take-away + 10 grocery and “China shops”	20-30
Steynsrus	1,192	1	“China shop”	2-4
Kroonstad	23,994	+ 10	various	20-30

18 Unless otherwise specified, figures are from Census 2001, generated by Space-Time Research www.str.com.au

19 From the Matjhabeng – IDP 2001 Spatial Analysis downloaded from [www.matjhabeng.co.za/pdf-documents/Municipality/annexureA/socio-economic analysis.pdf](http://www.matjhabeng.co.za/pdf-documents/Municipality/annexureA/socio-economic%20analysis.pdf)

20 Downloaded from www.matjhabeng.co.za/towns.htm

21 One of our informants, however, reported the following figures: 600 whites in town, 100 whites in surrounding area, 4500 blacks in Poding-tse rolo township + 1500 Coloureds & Griquas.

22 One of our informants reported +/- 300 in town.

23 One of our interviewees reported 4,000 – 5,000 in the local townships.

24 One of our informants reported approximately 500-550 in town; +/- 4,000 in adjacent townships of Kgubetswana, Pameng, & Kanana.

Based on the 2001 Census data, the total Indian or Asian population of these 14 towns was 1,302. We estimate that these numbers have more than doubled in the past seven years. Our preliminary research indicates that there are close to 500 new Chinese immigrants and at least 50 Taiwanese families based in these 14 towns. In addition to these numbers, there were at least two to three times as many new Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants based in these towns or, more typically, in the adjacent townships. The numbers did not increase as dramatically overall as might have been expected due to the ongoing out-migration of Taiwanese business owners and their extended families.

It appears to be true, then, that there is at least one “China shop” or Chinese-owned grocery shop in every small town in the province. All the towns we visited, from the smallest to the largest had at least one and as many as a dozen Chinese businesses. The largest concentrations of Chinese were located in Welkom and Ladybrand followed by Kroonstad, Bethlehem, and Ficksburg. Interestingly, Theunissen, with a population of only 1,669 boasted six Chinese-owned businesses.

The vast majority of these was owned and operated by a single Chinese family, sometimes with one or two hired hands from the extended family or the same village, and, in the case of the larger shops, at least two or more black South African staff. A smaller number of Taiwanese businesses also still operate in the Free State, the largest concentrations based in and around Ladybrand, near the border of Lesotho; Bloemfontein and the two large adjacent black townships, Botshabelo and Thaba N’chu; and around Phutatitjaba at the border between the Free State and Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces. Taiwanese-owned businesses were generally better-established, larger, and covered a wider range of sectors/industries.

With the exception of a few of our interviewees, most of the Chinese shop owners and Chinese employees were originally from the Fuqing region of Fujian province. Most are in their twenties or early thirties and have been in South Africa for three to five years. One of the couples interviewed, also originally from Fujian province, has been in South Africa for twenty years. They had originally settled in Johannesburg but relocated their business to Bethlehem to escape the worsening crime of the big city. Two of our interviewees were originally from Taiwan and both had been in South Africa for a longer period, eight years and fifteen years, respectively. Finally, one of the women reported that she was originally from Shanghai and has been in South Africa for over fifteen years.

Most of those interviewed reported that they had only completed their mandatory nine years of schooling in South Africa. Most had been rural peasants and had few skills. There were, however, a few exceptions. One of the two Taiwanese men was a university graduate and formerly a trader in the stock market based in Taipei; he came to South Africa with education, skills, and capital as well as family connections to fairly large business interests in both Lesotho and South Africa. Monica, the older woman from Shanghai, also arrived in South Africa with both education and big city experience.

Migration and settlement

Numerous scholars of overseas Chinese have documented the long-held tradition of emigration from two coastal regions of mainland China, Canton (Guangdong) and Fujian. It would appear that these millennia-old traditions of looking seaward and venturing out continue to exist in those Chinese coastal provinces as demonstrated by our interviewees. Most of our interviewees came from small towns or villages in Fujian. Some were employed in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs before leaving China; a few owned their own small businesses there. Few had little more than the standard minimum education before they arrived here. Paths to South Africa were varied; some arrived directly, while others came via Lesotho. Some had applied for asylum seeker status, while others applied directly for work permits. Almost all arrived here because relatives and friends from their villages and towns had already settled in South Africa.

According to Mr Weng, more than fifty percent of the people in his village in Fujian migrate to South Africa. Others immigrate to Japan, the US and Greece. He reported that South Africa was not his first choice as a migration destination; he would have preferred to go to Cyprus, but he was unable to locate a job there. He was invited by a cousin to South Africa; his cousin, who owns a business here, told him that it was easy to make money in South Africa and there were plentiful business opportunities. Mr Weng entered South Africa as an 'asylum seeker'.²⁵ He received his work permit in 2003; this must be renewed every two years. His visa application was filed through a Chinese immigration agency. All of his brothers and sisters are in South Africa.

Mr Chen came to South Africa in 2002 via Lesotho. South Africa was his first choice of migration because his friends and family in South Africa told him that it is easy to run a small business here. He knew that emigrating to UK or Japan would require more skills and more capital than he had. He also came in as an asylum seeker and has successfully converted to a work permit. He, too, is from Fuqing, Fujian province. He had finished junior high school in China. Before coming to South Africa, he had a small brick factory in Jiangxi province, China. The business was barely profitable; upon hearing that relatives and friends had better lives in South Africa, he decided to come.

All of the shop owners interviewed reported that they have friends and/or family members living either in neighboring towns or elsewhere in South Africa. The families and friends form a small and closed community offering support to one other, sharing the community news and celebrating the Chinese festivals. The extended family and village networks are the primary vehicle of communication and continued

25 This is an illegal status according to the Chinese authorities and is not recognized by the Chinese government. The Chinese government does not admit that this is a political crisis in China, therefore, Chinese immigrants do not have legitimate reasons seeking asylum in a foreign country. According to one of our interviewees, however, the 'one-child policy' is often used as the reason for asylum seeker applications.

immigration. These networks also assist with business: often shops are passed on from one relative to another. They also tend to purchase stock together, lowering costs through quantity discounts, and adding to safety on the long road trips to Johannesburg.

For example, Mr P Chen has uncles and sisters running shops in other towns in the Free State; he has an extensive network of family and friends in the Free State and extending into Kwa-zulu Natal. He took over the shop from his uncle, who owns several shops all under the same name "Lin's Clothing". When we mentioned that we had seen another "Lin's Clothing" in Ladybrand, he confirmed that this belonged to his uncle.

Most of our interviewees had lived in at least one other South African town or city before settling in their small town in the Free State. Often the young men apprenticed with an uncle or other older male relative or fellow villager at a shop prior to purchasing their own similar business. Often, these older relatives move on to larger businesses in bigger towns or they leave the country for other business opportunities in the region. For example, Gordon Wu, upon arriving in South Africa, originally moved to Wepener, looked around and eventually settled in Ladybrand, several dozen kilometers away. He started a smaller business down the road, renting the premises; then moved to a second premises; and eventually bought the building where Gordon's Supermarket now sits. Hobhouse's one "China shop" is currently owned and operated by Mr Yan, 27, and his young wife, 22. Mr Yan purchased the shop from a cousin 4-5 years ago. He reported that this cousin at one stage owned three shops; he then sold all of his shops and immigrated to Angola.

Because of stiff competition from other "China shops" and larger retail shops, some of our interviewees have moved on to other types of businesses. Mr Weng opened up a grocery store and butchery; the Huangs opened a Chinese restaurant and take-away; Mr Lin runs a pub; and Gordon Wu owns a grocery/hardware store as well as properties.

One of the indications of the "temporary sojourner" mentality of many of these newest Chinese immigrants lies in their decision about where to raise and educate their children. Many of the new Chinese immigrants send their young children home to China to be cared for by extended family. Childcare is time consuming and difficult for these new immigrants who run retail businesses that are often open every day of the week for at least 10-12 hours a day. Additionally, many of these new immigrants want to ensure that their children learn Chinese. Until such time as they decide to settle permanently in South Africa, they typically send their children "home" to China. For example, Mr and Mrs Chen who own and manage two "China shops" in Ficksburg, sent their older boy, now 3 years old, to China because they were too busy to look after the boy. Their South African-born daughter is now 11 months old, and they have plans to send her home so that both their children can attend schools in China. He said should their situation in South Africa improve, he will then bring the kids to South Africa for high school; but until such time, he will ensure that they learn proper Chinese.

However, those who have been in South Africa for a longer period, including the two Taiwanese families and two of the Chinese families, find themselves in very different circumstances; they are most settled. Both Thabo in Smithfield and Gordon in Ladybrand have their children in local schools. Thabo's children, both born in South Africa, are boarding during the week at a school in Aliwal North and come home only at weekends. Gordon's boys, the youngest of them also born in South Africa, are all enrolled at an exclusive English-medium private boys' school in Bloemfontein and also return home on weekends when they are not busy with school activities. Mr and Mrs Huang, the restaurant owners in Bethlehem, also reported that their children were at local schools. Both of their children were born in South Africa and have grown up here. The older son is 18 and the younger one is 11; they consider themselves South African. Monica's son finished primary school in China prior to moving to South Africa, but she was also very clear: he considers himself a South African.

Key Issues and Challenges

One of the key issues for these new immigrants was their lack of English language skills. This created communication difficulties, strained labor relations, and exacerbated their social isolation. One of the biggest challenges for these new Chinese immigrants, particularly those with little or no education, is communicating with locals. Although they all expressed an interest in learning English and/or other local languages, particularly to assist in running their businesses, they have limited resources and little time for formal language learning. Most had managed to learn their numbers and other simple words ("come", "go", "pass", "clean", "wash") but clearly these were insufficient for in-depth communication with either their staff or their customers. Moreover, when such single word commands are used with locals, they are often viewed as rude or ill-mannered. Both language and cultural differences make it more challenging to integrate with local people. Most of them communicate with the local customers using local staff as interpreters; it is, however, questionable how much is being accurately communicated and translated through these single word commands, body language, and facial expressions.

The social isolation, boredom and loneliness were palpable, particularly amongst the youngest and newest immigrants and those in the smaller towns. For Mr and Mrs Yan, in Hobhouse, life is very boring as they do not speak English and cannot communicate with the local people. After the shop is closed, their social time is limited to watching rented Chinese videos. They are lonely. Their lack of English skills also jeopardizes their healthcare; he complained that their worst time was when his wife was sick and had to go to a hospital in Bloemfontein; not only was it extremely expensive, but more crucially, they had difficulties communicating with the doctors; ultimately they had to engage the services of a Taiwanese interpreter.

Miss Shi in Smithfield said that she had no local friends because she does not speak any English. She reported that sometimes, the neighbor's (Taiwanese South African) children come to keep her company, play with her baby, and teach her some simple English. However, most of the time, she is too busy to learn. She says that her only friend is her landlord and his wife, the Taiwanese shop owners next door.

Meimei said, in general, the locals in Phillipolis are not very friendly, so she does not go out at all. She said that when she did venture out to the street, the local black children pointed and laughed at her. She works every day of the week as she does not know what else she can do; she has no friends and there is no entertainment. She sometimes watches Chinese DVDs. On weekends or on Chinese festivals, she and her mother go to the cousin's family to celebrate. She had only been to Johannesburg once for stock purchase. She reported that she is homesick and misses her brother, her grannies and her school.

Compounding their language issues and the social/cultural barriers to social integration, most of these new Chinese immigrants arrived in South Africa with debt. They borrowed money to cover the costs of airfare and to start their meager businesses. Often it takes two to three years to repay these debts before they can start seeing any profits. Usually any money earned is ploughed back into more stock for their businesses. In the meantime, they live frugally, often in a back room of their shop, and they work long hours, often 6.5 to 7 days a week. On top of these hardships, many of the interviewees complained of competition from other "China shops" and from local retail chains. They also mentioned that they are constantly dealing with the impression that Chinese goods are "cheap"; very few of the "China shops" could boast any white customers and even many of the black South Africans shopped elsewhere if/when they could afford to. Most of these new immigrants are also running retail businesses for the first time, without any previous experience or business training.

In addition to competition from other "China shops" run by Chinese, several of the interviewees mentioned competition from other immigrant communities. We also noticed this in most of the small towns we visited: for every "China shop" on the main road of a Free State town we saw or heard of at least two or three similar shops and grocery stores run by Bangladeshi or Pakistani immigrants. In Phillipolis, Meimei reported that the "Indian"²⁶ shop owner was particularly unfriendly to her. She reported that the "Indian" shopkeeper once "hired" some local blacks to buy electrical appliances from her shop, break them, and then demand refunds from her. She said that they were threatening to chase her and her mother from the town; they only left after local police were brought in.

Almost all of the interviewees expressed concerns about corrupt South African government officials from Home Affairs, the Revenue Service (SARS), and the Labor Department, as well as the local police. Chinese across the country are often targeted for extortion attempts by corrupt officials because of their difficulty with English, their general ignorance about national and local laws, and stereotypes or rumors about their

26 In fact, almost everyone we spoke to referred to the Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants as 'Indian'. It was only after speaking to a few of them that we realized that almost all of them were, in fact, also new immigrants to South Africa. Research into these other Asian immigrant communities indicates that there are at least 60,000-70,000 Pakistanis and a further 30,000-40,000 Bangladeshis in South Africa (Park in CoRMSA Report 2008: 69). Further research indicates that there are even larger numbers of new immigrants from India. These communities should not be confused with the Indian South Africans.

illegal status in South Africa and about large quantities of cash stored in their shops and their homes. They reported that if they had information about relevant laws and regulations, they would certainly abide by these; however, often, new immigrants (not only the Chinese) remain ignorant of such laws.

The biggest challenge regarding life in South Africa, however, is crime. Crime in the small towns of the Free State is not as big a concern as it is in Johannesburg and other larger cities, but most of the interviewees remain concerned. Anecdotal reports indicate that most Chinese immigrants have fallen victim, at least once or twice, to break-ins and armed robberies. During the course of our interviews, every single person mentioned at least one such incident. The fact that all of these new immigrants were engaged in some sort of small retail business and dealt in some quantities of cash, makes them soft targets for South Africa's criminal element.

Community support mechanisms/communication channels

The community organizations are becoming more and more important in the lives of the new immigrants. These Chinese organizations assist in a variety of ways. During the recent wave of xenophobic attacks which started in the Alexandra township of Johannesburg (April 2008), the Chinese organizations sent out news of the riots, and advised their members to close up their shops and refrain from any unnecessary travel. They also assist by organizing cultural events, particularly around Chinese festivals and by educating shop owners with basic knowledge in South African tax and labor laws. Besides the outdated community newspapers that most of them buy every fortnight when buying stock in Johannesburg, those that joined these community organizations reported that they were very helpful, particularly if the individuals were experiencing difficulties.

The Chinese government, through their embassy and consular offices, provide visa and passport services as well as advice to the Chinese nationals. In cases of crimes against Chinese nationals, however, it was clear from an interview with one of the consular officials that they often feel powerless to provide more assistance to their fellow countrymen. They are limited to reporting these incidents to the proper South African officials.

A Future in South Africa?

When asked if life is better in South Africa, many answered that they enjoyed a better life in China. They remain in South Africa for a variety of reasons. As mentioned earlier, most have borrowed money in order to come here; they cannot return unless they can pay off their debts. However, several reported that life in South Africa is not easy and business is getting worse; over time, their dream of paying off their debts and making a profit, becomes more and more distant. Some reported that they planned to go home in two to three years as they do not see hope in their business. These immigrants reported that they can barely afford their own living, let alone pay off their debts or send remittances back to China.

Others have earned their “first bucket of gold” and would prefer to reinvest their profit for the chance at an even bigger return. These individuals have moved away from the traditional “China shop” selling textiles, shoes and electrical appliances to other potentially more profitable businesses like the liquor stores, general dealers, and butcheries. Amongst these new immigrants, some indicated that they like South Africa. Given the opportunity to make a living, and barring an increase in crime, they would like to stay in South Africa. Most, however, were unwilling to make any final long-term decisions, preferring to wait and work for another two or three (or more?) years before deciding their future plans.

It was clear from our small sample of the Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants that a few issues made all the difference between success and happiness or failure and loneliness. First of all, the length of time in South Africa made a huge difference. Those who had been here longer were both more settled and more professionally successful. In terms of business success, choosing to do something slightly different from your typical “China shop” seemed to bring increased profits. The ability to communicate made a tremendous difference to both business success and social life; the lack of English and local language skills proved to be one of the biggest barriers to “settling” into their adopted towns. Finally, those with extended support networks were much better off than those who were isolated.

CONCLUSION

Are these new Chinese immigrants any different from other immigrants to South Africa or to those who land in other countries? We would argue that in some ways, the new Chinese immigrants are similar to the Indians in Kenya, the Lebanese in West Africa, and the Asian Americans in the US. They have clearly come to occupy a unique gap in local economies, similar to the groups that were studied for the “middleman minority” research in the US.²⁷ They have followed similar migration patterns and paths as these other groups who run immigrant shops in poorer areas of cities and towns. They are also positioned, in both race and class terms, between white and black. In similar ways, the Free State’s “China shops” cater to a lower income, predominantly black/African market and generally not to the white middle class. To some extent, they are better off than black township residents, but still not as well-off as white residents of the towns.

Similarly, we are already witnessing some movement out of the “China shops” and into other businesses. These businesses or similar businesses will likely be taken over by another newcomer immigrant group, or perhaps by local black South Africans. In this limited way, Chinese businesses have the potential to build local capacity and contribute to local economic development, helping locals to establish linkages to Chinese wholesalers and possibly even directly to China. Both directly and indirectly,

27 See Bonacich, E. 1973. “A Theory of Middleman Minorities” in *American Sociological Review* 38 (October).

these “China shops” affect local economies, not only by providing access to low-cost products, but also by encouraging local business development. We observed, in Ficksburg, for example, several textile shops selling Chinese products which were owned and run by black South Africans. Still other South Africans are bypassing the Johannesburg Chinese distribution centers altogether and going directly to China to source merchandise for their local businesses, as witnessed on flights to and from China by both authors.

As we mentioned earlier, those amongst the new Chinese immigrants who are most likely to succeed are those with greater social capital (English language skills, better education, previous overseas experiences/exposure), stronger social networks (Chinese business linkages to distributors/wholesalers), and greater access to credit. How they arrived here – legally or illegally, with or without higher education, with or without capital – make all the difference in terms of levels of success and happiness.

Barriers to settlement continue to be, primarily, crime and corruption. Many of the Chinese, despite being slightly better off than most of their black South African customers, complained of feeling powerless in the face of these two social ills. Even one of the Chinese consul-generals reported feeling powerless to do anything to help Chinese nationals deal with the increasingly violent crime, the relentless extortion, and the specific targeting of Chinese. To a large extent, however, these, too, are problems that confront other immigrants to other places.

There are, however, also some significant differences between the new Chinese migrations to South Africa and African migrations to South Africa as well as previous migrations of other groups to other destinations. The two most significant differences have to do with China’s rising global power and China’s dominance in manufacturing. Within the context of China’s global ascendance both economically and politically; China’s increased investments, aid, and trade in Africa; and strengthening China-South Africa relations, Chinese immigrants to South Africa, whether legal or illegal, are clearly still better off than migrants from other African nations to South Africa. The recent wave of xenophobic violence is a testament to this; while two or three Chinese businesses were affected in the Cape Town area, the primary targets of the violence were Zimbabweans, Somalis, and other black Africans. While the Chinese consul-general complains of his powerlessness in the face of crime and corruption against Chinese nationals, at least he is granted audience with the South African officials. This, we would argue, has to do with China’s importance nationally, regionally, and globally. In other words, in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways, bilateral political and economic ties between the two countries, as well as China’s global image, have an impact on migrant lives; in the case of new Chinese migrants, China’s increasingly important role in Africa certainly helps.

The Chinese immigrants are also advantaged insofar as they have social and ethnic ties to Chinese wholesalers and sometimes even to Chinese factories, both in the region and in China, giving them economic advantages over locals and other migrant traders. China’s continued dominance in the manufacture of textiles, small electronics

and household appliances and other such products thus also affects new Chinese immigrants' business success.

However, South Africa's current political crisis within the governing African National Congress and the ongoing socio-economic challenges, particularly with regard to the current global financial crisis and problems with service delivery to the poorest sectors of South African society create conditions that are generally unfavorable to newcomers; apart from crime and corruption as discussed in this paper, the general climate is currently unstable and inhospitable for migrants. Media portrayals of China (as a neo-colonizer), of the Chinese (as unfair, corrupt, low class), and of Chinese products (as cheap, substandard) also impact on the perceptions and treatment of these newest Chinese migrants, typically in very negative ways. While we might be able to draw on some similarities between these new Chinese migrations to South Africa and other migrations, all attempts to understand these particular communities must, therefore, be carried out within the current local and national political, social, and economic context.

References

- BONACICH Edna (1973) "A Theory of Middleman Minorities" in *American Sociological Review* 38 (October).
- CENTRAL STATISTICS (1998) "Living in the Free State. Selected findings of the 1995 October household survey." Pretoria: Central Statistics.
- CHINESE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA (2008) "High Court rules in favour of Chinese South Africans" (June).
- CONSORTIUM FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA (2008) "Protecting Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in South Africa. A CoRMSA Report" Johannesburg: CoRMSA.
- DOBLER Gregor (2005) "South-South business relations in practice: Chinese merchants in Oshikango, Namibia" unpublished paper.
- HARRIS Karen Leigh (1998a) "The Chinese 'South Africans': An Interstitial Community" in L. Wang and G. Wang (eds). *The Chinese Diaspora. Selected Essays. Volume II* Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- HARRIS Karen Leigh (1998b) "The Chinese in South Africa: A historical study of a cultural minority." unpublished paper.
- HART Gillian (2002) *Disabling Globalization. Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press.
- MOHAN Giles with Dinar KALE (2007) "The invisible hand of South-South globalisation: Chinese migrants in Africa. A Report for the Rockefeller Foundation."
- PARK Yoon Jung (2005) "Shifting Chinese South African Identities in Post-apartheid South Africa" unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- PARK Yoon Jung (2006) "Sojourners to Settlers: Early Constructions of Chinese Identity in South Africa, 1879-1949" in *African Studies*, vol 65, No 2 (December).
- PARK Yoon Jung (2008) *A Matter of Honour. Being Chinese in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media (Pty).
- PARK Yoon Jung and CHEN Anna Ying (2008) "Intersections of race, class and power: Chinese in post-apartheid Free State", unpublished paper presented at XIV SASA Congress, Stellenbosch University, 7-10 July 2008.

- SAUTMAN Barry (2006) "Friends and Interests: China's Distinctive Links with Africa" Center on China's Transnational Relations, Working paper no. 12, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Available at <http://www.cctr.ust.hk/articles/pdf/WorkingPaper12.pdf>
- SMEDLEY Linda N. (1980) "A sociological analysis of some aspects of the life of South Africa's Chinese community." Unpublished D. Litt et Phil thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- TUNG M. (1947) *Legal status of Chinese in the Union of South Africa*. Johannesburg, Chiao Sheng Pao.
- VAN DER WATT Victor - SME (2007) "'Made in South Africa': A social history of the Chinese in Bloemfontein, Free State Province, South Africa, ca. 1980-2005." Unpublished Honours thesis for University of Stellenbosch.
- WANG Gungwu (2000) *The Chinese Overseas. From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- YAP Melanie and MAN Dianne Leong (1996) *Colour, Confusion and Concessions. The history of the Chinese in South Africa*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Additional web sources

Census 2001, generated by Space-Time Research www.str.com.au
[www.matjhabeng.co.za/pdf-documents/Municipality/annexureA/socio-economic analysis.pdf](http://www.matjhabeng.co.za/pdf-documents/Municipality/annexureA/socio-economic%20analysis.pdf)
www.matjhabeng.co.za/towns.htm

Les nouveaux migrants chinois dans les petites villes de l'Afrique du sud post-apartheid

Yoon Jung PARK et Anna Ying CHEN

L'Afrique du sud accueille la plus importante population chinoise du continent africain, estimée entre 250 000 et 300 000 personnes. Les différentes vagues migratoires chinoise ont créé des communautés chinoises diverses, pluri-générationnelles et plurilingues. Cet article analyse ces vagues migratoires et s'intéresse plus particulièrement aux nouveaux migrants chinois pour la plupart originaires des zones rurales du Fujian et principalement établis dans les petites villes rurales sud-africaines. Puis les auteurs analysent ces nouveaux migrants en termes de race, classe et pouvoir et examinent ce qui les rapprochent et les différencient des autres communautés migrantes.

Recent Chinese Migrants in small Towns of Post-apartheid South Africa

Yoon Jung PARK and Anna Ying CHEN

South Africa is host to the largest population of Chinese on the African continent, with estimates ranging from 250,000 – 350,000. Various waves of migration from China to South Africa have resulted in the creation of diverse, multi-generational, and multi-lingual communities of Chinese. The article explores these waves of migration and then focuses on the newest Chinese migrants, mostly from rural parts of Fujian province, many of whom are settling in small, rural towns across the country. The authors conclude with an attempt to position these newest Chinese migrants in terms of race, class, and power and examine the similarities and differences between them and other migrant communities elsewhere.

Los nuevos migrantes chinos en las pequeñas ciudades de Sudáfrica post-apartheid

Yoon Jung PARK y Anna Ying CHEN

Sudáfrica acoge población china la más importante del continente africano, que se estima entre 250 000 y 300 000 personas. Las diferentes olas de migración chinas han creado varias comunidades chinas, multi-generacionales y plurilingües. Este artículo analiza estas olas de migración y se interesa particularmente por los nuevos migrantes chinos oriundos, en su mayoría, de zonas rurales de Fujian y que se encuentran principalmente en pequeñas ciudades rurales sudafricanas. Después, los autores analizan estos nuevos migrantes en términos de raza, clase, poder y examinan lo que le acerca o le diferencia de las otras comunidades inmigradas.

**种族隔离制度废除后生活在南非小镇中的华人新移民
内容摘要**

Yoon Jung PARK and Anna Ying CHEN

据估计南非现有 25 万—30 万华人移民，是目前非洲大陆上中国移民人数最多的国家。几次大规模的华人移民浪潮造就了今天南非社会中多语言、多年龄层，多差异的华人群体。本文探讨这几次华人移民潮，并集中研究华人新移民。他们中很多来自中国福建农村，现在分散居住生活在南非的农村小镇中。作者希望通过本研究从种族、阶级和权力的角度探讨华不同人移民群体以及与其它种族移民群体的异同。