

## THE CHINESE IN SOUTH AFRICA: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF A CULTURAL MINORITY

Karen L Harris

(Department of History and Cultural History, University of Pretoria)

### Introduction

South African historiography has for the most part been primarily preoccupied with explaining the past in terms of ethnic dimensions.<sup>1</sup> More particularly, race - in its black-white paradigm - has been profoundly formative in historical studies of our society.<sup>2</sup> Until fairly recently, the "persistent disinterest in thinking about race and race relations in terms other than black and white" led to various cultural minorities being under represented in the historical record and incorrectly reflected in popular culture.<sup>3</sup> This article briefly considers the lacuna in historiography; outlines some of the research related problems in dealing with a cultural minority; and focuses on the early history of the Chinese community as an example of how such a study adds a different perspective to the larger parameters of South Africa's racially stratified past.

### Historiographical neglect

The historical silences to which numerous cultural minorities, such as the ethnic Chinese, have been subjected is by no means unique to South Africa. American, Canadian and Australian histories have revealed similar patterns. Although both free and indentured Chinese have been integral to the histories of all these countries since shortly after the inception of colonial intervention, they have consistently been perceived of as "temporary and transient figure[s]".<sup>4</sup> They were therefore either absent or relegated to the periphery of the respective national histories.

According to historian Rodger Daniels, the "Asian element in [American] history has been more significant than its place in textbooks and general histories would suggest".<sup>5</sup>

This was confirmed by a 1996 survey done at Cornell University on United States

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<sup>1</sup> W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds), *Segregation and apartheid in twentieth century South Africa* (New York and London, 1995), p. 4; S. Marks and S. Trapido (eds), *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa* (London and New York, 1987), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the origins of the racial order* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1995), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> G.Y. Okihiro, "Teaching Asian American history", *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, 10, 4 (Summer 1996), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> A.B. Chan, "'Orientalism' and image making: The sojourner in Canadian history", *The Canadian Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 9, 3, 1981, pp. 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> R. Daniels, *Asian Americans: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*, (Seattle, 1988), p. xv.

history text books, which reported that "Asians are largely absent from those texts".<sup>6</sup> Commenting on historical scholarship on the Chinese in the United States, historian Kevin Scott Wong argued that it paid more attention to the "excluders" than the "excluded", since it focussed mainly on the anti-Chinese movement.<sup>7</sup> This perception was reiterated by historian Jennifer Cushman in her assessment of the history of the Chinese in Australia. She claimed that Australian scholars were "evidently still struggling to escape from a historiographical discourse limited by their colonial past" and a "preoccupation with explaining the formation of the White Australian policy".<sup>8</sup> The Chinese were therefore mainly portrayed in the politicized context of the "yellow peril", and were only relevant as part of the debate about the "alien problem".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it has been argued that the Chinese were generally included "for what was done to them" rather than "for what they had accomplished".<sup>10</sup> In these histories the Chinese were mainly viewed as "objects, and the researchers [were] primarily concerned to examine European reaction".<sup>11</sup>

While this "negative history" revealed more about the Western host societies' racist attitudes than it did about the Chinese communities, it also propagated stereotypes which became embedded in popular consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Chinese minorities were persistently portrayed as the "other" and numerous stereotypical images were constructed to buttress this notion. Included in these enduring perceptions were the Chinese as a "sojourner" or "perpetual foreigner" who was "unassimilable", "alien" and "inscrutable".<sup>13</sup> It has been argued that part of the reason for "this lack of understanding of the Chinese people stemmed from the Chinese clannishness, as well as the discriminatory practices of the members of the host society".<sup>14</sup> Whatever the

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<sup>6</sup> Okhiro, "Teaching Asian American history", p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> K.S. Wong, "The transformation of culture; Three Chinese views of America", *American Quarterly*, 48, 2 (June 1996), p. 201.

<sup>8</sup> J. Cushman, "A 'colonial casualty': The Chinese community in Australian historiography", *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 7, 3 (April 1984), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> D. Day, "Aliens in a hostile land: A re-appraisal of Australian history", *Journal of Australian History*, 33 (1958), p. 18; S. Chan, "The writing of Asian American history", *Organization of American Historians: Magazine of History*, 10, 4 (Summer 1996), pp. 9, 12.

<sup>10</sup> R. Daniels, "Westerners from the East: Oriental immigrants reappraised", *Pacific Historical Review*, 35 (November 1966), p. 375.

<sup>11</sup> A. Markus, "Chinese in Australian history", *Meanjin*, 42, 1, (March 1983), p. 88; Daniels, "Westerners from the East", p. 375.

<sup>12</sup> G. Wang, "The status of overseas Chinese studies", Luodi-Shenggen Conference, University of Berkeley (November 1992), pp. 5, 7.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of these see K.L. Harris, "A history of the Chinese in South Africa to 1912" (D. Litt et Phil thesis, University of South Africa, 1998), chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> T. Tan, *Your Chinese roots: The overseas Chinese story* (Singapore, 1986), p. 31.

rationale, this blanket labelling was unjust as it denied the Chinese any individuality, making them both faceless and nameless accessories to the various national histories.

Compounding the construction of Chinese minorities as the "other" within Western society, were the perceptions which formed part of the Occidental mind since the expansion of Europe. In terms of the study of "overseas Chinese",<sup>15</sup> the notion of "Chineseness" was forged by host societies on the basis of a perceived homogeneity in physical identity, cultural unity and relations with the ancestral land - China.<sup>16</sup> The latter attribute also gives substance to what American historian John Higham designated "nativism", defined as an "intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. non-American) connections".<sup>17</sup> Related to these notions is Edward Said's "Orientalism" which essentially argues that Western accounts of Near Orient civilizations (Arab and Islam) are distorted as a result of ethnocentric attitudes and a kind of "intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture".<sup>18</sup> Australian historian Colin Mackerras believes the main points of Said's "Orientalism" are "equally applicable to the study of China" and concurs that Western scholarship reveals a "general inability to examine Asian countries [and people] in their own terms".<sup>19</sup>

Within this hostile climate it can be assumed that one of the reasons why the Chinese communities overseas did not write their own histories, was that they were reluctant to draw attention to themselves for fear of possible victimization within their adopted countries. This situation was intensified by the introduction of discriminatory immigration legislation in many of the Western countries on the one hand, and the often controversial politics on the Chinese mainland on the other.

The historiographical position of the Chinese in South Africa has been equally neglected. Not until the 1990s was the history of the Chinese community an issue mentioned, let alone dealt with, in any of the national histories or historiographical publications. Like many other colonial destinations this had as much to do with historiographical trends, as the numerically small size of the community. But while they are, and have always been, one of the smallest cultural minorities, at times the Chinese presence had ramifications quite disproportionate to their numbers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Refers to communities of Chinese descent who have settled permanently or temporarily in countries outside of China.

<sup>16</sup> P.A. Kuhn, "The ancestral land: Thinking about the history of Chinese overseas", The Morrison lecture, Australian National University (1997), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> J. Higham as quoted by Daniels, *Asian Americans*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), pp. 19, 26-27.

<sup>19</sup> C. Mackerras, *Western images of China* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> At present the Chinese comprise about 0.04% of the total South African population, numbering between 25 000 and 30 000. In the United States of America the Chinese and Japanese comprise about 3% of the population.

As was the case in many other countries, the first accounts of the Chinese in South Africa were written by authors who were not trained historians. Because the Chinese occupied what has been called a "strange position in a strange society", a "no man's land between White and Black", they became the subject of sociological study.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that some of these studies were sanctioned and published by the government's Human Sciences Research Council at a time when official diplomatic ties were being established between South Africa and the Republic of China (ROC).<sup>22</sup>

In line with the developments in overseas Chinese studies, the first historians who paid specific attention to the history of the Chinese in South Africa were from abroad. In 1978 Huguette Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo of Mauritius included a chapter on the South African Chinese in her doctoral thesis on the Chinese diaspora in the western Indian ocean.<sup>23</sup>

In 1979 American historian James Armstrong began research on an ongoing project on the Chinese at the Cape during the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) period.<sup>24</sup> In 1990 Chinese author Lynn Pan produced an epic tale of the "Chinese diaspora" which included brief references to the South African Chinese.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately neither of the two earlier works found their way onto South African library shelves, let alone making an impact on the content of general South African texts or popular consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

Besides the author's own work, the first locally published compendium to focus exclusively on the history of the Chinese in South Africa was written by two third-generation South African Chinese, Melanie Yap and Diane Leong Man.<sup>27</sup> This informative and well received 1996 publication was the painstaking product of the "South African Chinese History Project" launched in 1982.<sup>28</sup> As a "comprehensive record" of "minority group experiences which otherwise might have been lost" and as the Chinese "community's story",<sup>29</sup> the authors must be commended for their industry

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<sup>21</sup> F. Collins, "Perspective: Its status quo for Wong Fung Ho", *Personality* (8 October 1970), p. 67; L. Human, *The Chinese people of South Africa: Freewheeling on the fringes* (Pretoria, 1984), p. vii.

<sup>22</sup> For further details see Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 32-37.

<sup>23</sup> H. Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo, "Diaspora Chinoise dans l'océan Indien Occidental" (Thèse de Doctorat d'Université, University of Aix Provence, 1978). Later translated and published as *Chinese diaspora in western Indian ocean* (Mauritius, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> J. Armstrong, "The Chinese at the Cape during the Dutch East India Company period, 1652-1795" more recently presented at the "Slave Route Project Conference" in Cape Town in October 1997.

<sup>25</sup> L. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The story of the overseas Chinese* (London, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> For a review of these texts see Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 37-40, 82-90.

<sup>27</sup> M. Yap and D. Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions: The history of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Yap and Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions*, p. xiv.

<sup>29</sup> Yap and Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions*, pp. xv-xvii.

in piecing together the puzzle of the South African Chinese past.<sup>30</sup> However, its greatest shortcoming is that it is, as the authors themselves proclaim, "a somewhat introspective account of the Chinese in South Africa" which does not take cognisance of the wider South African historical spectrum.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note, that in response to criticism that the project should have begun earlier, the authors point out that in former decades the community wished to maintain a "low profile" so as to avoid negative consequences in a racially repressive society.<sup>32</sup> By the late 1980s, however, the political mood began to improve and the research for and publication of the book was timely.

There is, however, one facet of the history of the Chinese in South Africa that has consistently received detailed historiographical attention from as far back as the 1920s. This concerns the indentured Chinese labourers imported to work on the Witwatersrand gold mines at the turn of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the exclusive focus on this episode resulted in the popular perception that all Chinese in South Africa were descendants of the indentured labouring class.<sup>33</sup> The popularity of this topic can be ascribed to the wealth of research materials available, the manageable time frame of the study and the numerous and diverse ramifications it had on both the local and overseas economic and political fronts.<sup>34</sup> The most important historiographical monograph on the subject appeared in 1982: *Chinese mine labour in the Transvaal* by Peter Richardson.<sup>35</sup> While essentially focussing on the crises which necessitated importation, the recruitment, embarkation and employment systems, Richardson also places the subject within the context of the workings of the international indentured labour system.

Yet, despite this book's encompassing qualities and the abundance of research on the topic over the past five decades, there are still aspects which remain unexplored. In his book's conclusion, Richardson points out that "the more overtly human and individual elements" of the subject have been minimised, and "hopes these omissions will spur future investigation".<sup>36</sup> Other neglected issues include the impact the indentured labourers had on the free or "unindentured" Chinese community, other Asian

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion of this book see review article by K.L. Harris, "The South African Chinese: A community record of a neglected minority", *South African Historical Journal*, 36 (May 1997), pp. 316-25 and Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 41-45.

<sup>31</sup> Yap and Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions*, p. xv.

<sup>32</sup> Yap and Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions*, p. xvii.

<sup>33</sup> L. Callinicos, *A people's history of South Africa: Gold and workers* (Cape Town, 1980), p. 69 alludes to this popular misconception.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion of the theses, papers, articles and other publications see Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 45-53.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Richardson, *Chinese mine labour in the Transvaal* (Hong Kong, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> Richardson, *Chinese mine labour*, p. 189.

communities, working class peoples and race relations, as well as a comparative component within the colonial context.

Fortunately, the historical neglect of the overseas Chinese communities, both in South Africa and elsewhere, has and is gradually being redressed. However, as identifiable communities which have been in existence in virtually every country in the world for up to five centuries and totalling about 30 to 40 million, they remain relative latecomers to modern academic discourse.<sup>37</sup> Only after the Second World War, as a result of China's alliance with the West, and the abolition of much of the host countries' immigration and discriminatory legislation against the Chinese, have they emerged as a subject worthy of study. Moreover, the development of ethnographic and minority studies as accredited disciplines facilitated the development of scholarship on the overseas Chinese.<sup>38</sup> Despite the progress made in the field, it is still very much in its infancy in the 1990s. It is however believed to be a discipline that has considerable future potential both as a key part of Sinology and as an independent field of ethnic and minority studies.<sup>39</sup>

### Research obstacles

The most common and formidable obstacles experienced by historians and other scholars studying cultural minorities, is the scarcity and scattered nature of research material. This has proven to be one of the contributing factors to the historiographical neglect of overseas Chinese communities the world over, as well as determinant as far as research approaches and topics are concerned.<sup>40</sup> This dearth also partly explains the chequered history of overseas Chinese studies.

For the history of the Chinese overseas, particularly during the early phases, historians are largely dependent on the observations and reports of European colonists and officials. In many cases the authors were hostile towards the Chinese, or at best wrote from an "orientalist" perspective, thus rendering the material inherently limited.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the twentieth century, sources written by either Chinese or indigenous inhabitants were very rare and those that existed added very little to what the foreign reports said. During this period only a small section of the Chinese population received a formal education, and therefore written sources emanated from an elite minority. Moreover,

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<sup>37</sup> G. Wang, "Greater China and the Chinese overseas", *The China Quarterly* (December 1993), p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> The "International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas" was founded in the United States of America in 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Wang, "Overseas Chinese studies", pp. 17-8.

<sup>40</sup> Wong, "Transformation of culture", p. 203; Daniels, "Westerners from the East", p. 375.

<sup>41</sup> S. Wang, *The organization of Chinese emigration, 1848-1888* (San Francisco, 1978), p. 26; Wang, *China and the Chinese overseas*, p. 18; Markus, "Chinese in Australian history", p. 89.

the early Chinese settlers kept few records partly because in a hostile environment they tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible, and so very few documents survived.<sup>42</sup>

Compounding the source situation was the disregard the Chinese Empire held for its compatriots overseas. There was a general prohibition of emigration during most dynasties up to the second half of the nineteenth century, and any Chinese citizen who went away was declared an outlaw to be punished by death. Consequently, the Chinese emperors were not interested in the Chinese abroad and even accounts of official Chinese voyages contained little, if any, reference to the Chinese settlements they encountered.<sup>43</sup> The overseas Chinese were deemed "unworthy of separate mention as an extension or a part of Chinese history" - a disposition which by no means favoured historical record.<sup>44</sup>

In the twentieth century, overseas Chinese sources became slightly more profuse as "more people were literate and more was written down".<sup>45</sup> There was a general proliferation in Chinese language newspapers and records, while European documentation also increased as the various state infrastructures evolved and more local media developed. But again, it was select sections of the Chinese community that featured in these accounts. Only the articulate members of the elite wrote or were worthy of being written about, while European records mainly included references to the misdemeanours of criminals and other transgressors. The vast middle class, including the ordinary Chinatown resident, small entrepreneur and labourer, rarely featured and therefore remained anonymous.<sup>46</sup> The large corpus of official census figures, statistics and anti-Chinese legislation did very little to alleviate the research material problem. Inconsistent data collection methods, the incompleteness and bias of reports and the practice that Chinese were often included in the category of "others" rendered these sources fairly unreliable.<sup>47</sup>

From the turn of twentieth century, a partial interest in the overseas Chinese gradually developed in China itself. With the increase in legal emigration, China could no longer ignore her subjects abroad. Representatives and scholars were appointed to compile official reports, but these focussed mainly on relations with China, economic successes

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<sup>42</sup> B.L. Sung, "Archival records of Chinese immigrants", Luodi-Shenggen Conference, University of Berkeley (November 1992), p. 2; Wong, "Transformation of culture", p. 203; Wang, *China and the Chinese overseas*, p. 87.

<sup>43</sup> C. Yen, *Coolies and mandarins: China's protection of overseas Chinese during the Late Ch'ing period, 1851-1911* (Singapore, 1985), p. xv; S. Wang, "The attitude of the Ch'ing court toward Chinese emigration", *Chinese Culture*, 9, 4 (1968), p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> Wang, "Overseas Chinese studies", p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Wang, *China and the Chinese overseas*, p. 189.

<sup>46</sup> Wang, *China and the Chinese overseas*, p. 189; Wong, "Transformation of culture", p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> M. Ip, *Home away from home: Life stories of Chinese women in New Zealand* (Auckland, 1990), p. 9.

and political activities.<sup>48</sup> After 1949, with the emergence of the "two Chinas" the political dimension of much of the writing intensified and became coloured with elements of suspicion and bias, thereby reducing its source value.<sup>49</sup>

Some researchers of the more recent period of overseas Chinese history are fortunate in having access to elder members of the community for oral evidence. This has led to the emergence of a whole genre of "story telling" and "direct testimonies" which are virtually autobiographical.<sup>50</sup> Almost without exception, these publications have been authored by members of a particular Chinese community. The reason given for this is that the "Chinese are suspicious of any probing into their personal affairs" and therefore a person of Chinese descent is in a "better position than an outsider to penetrate the feelings, attitudes and thoughts of the group".<sup>51</sup> Despite the drawback for non-Chinese writers, the oral-testimony publications form another source for historians, as do the recent discoveries in the field of archaeology.<sup>52</sup>

In South Africa, similar problems with sources are encountered, although on a more magnified and complex scale. The minuscule size of the Chinese community, as well as the various political dispensations in South Africa, mainly account for this paucity. As was the case with other Western colonies, the earliest references to the Chinese were in sources written by Europeans. These included travel accounts, legal records, official correspondence, registers and court proceedings. Virtually no documents were authored by Chinese, and the single memorandums and testaments that did, emanated from a handful of relatively affluent members of the tiny community, thus leaving the remainder anonymous.<sup>53</sup>

It was only towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries that officials - and therefore the historical record - took indirect cognisance of the Chinese presence. The escalation of Indians within the interior of the country led to the introduction of restrictive legislation. The Chinese were subsumed under the category of "Asiatic" along with the Indians, and although the rationale was intensely negative,

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<sup>48</sup> Wang, *Chinese emigration*, pp. 26, 32; C.Y. Yang, "Overseas Chinese in China's policy", *The China Quarterly* (June 1990), pp. 281-282.

<sup>49</sup> Yang, "Overseas Chinese in China's policy", p. 281; Wang, "Overseas Chinese studies", p. 7

<sup>50</sup> M. Ip, *Dragons on the long white cloud: The making of Chinese New Zealanders* (Birkenhead, 1996); Chan, "The writing of Asian American history", pp. 13-4.

<sup>51</sup> N.B. Fong, *The Chinese in New Zealand: A study in assimilation* (Hong Kong, 1959), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> P. Wegars (ed.), *Hidden heritage: Historical archaeology of the overseas Chinese* (New York, 1993), p. xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> For details on documents at the Cape see Armstrong, "The Chinese at the Cape" and A. Malan, "East meets West: Free-black Freeburgher households in early 18th century Cape Town", Society of Historical Archaeologists Conference, Washington D.C., January 1995, pp. 3-5.



it did mean that the Chinese were sometimes documented.<sup>54</sup> However, although this escalation of source material gave some voice to the hitherto unrecorded Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century, it later often compounded the research problem: Chinese and Indians were merged as "Asians" in terms of legal designation and European attitude, and therefore became indistinct.

Throughout most of the remainder of the twentieth century the South African Chinese have generally preferred to maintain a low profile within an increasingly racially divided and repressive society.<sup>55</sup> This was comparable to their compatriots in other countries who at times also preferred not to draw attention to themselves for fear of discrimination. For the most part, the documentary record is therefore very fragmentary and the Chinese lead what Armstrong has called "archivally unrecorded lives".<sup>56</sup>

In stark contrast to the records on the free Chinese community, the importation of the 63 695 indentured Chinese labourers for the Witwatersrand gold mines after 1904 led to a plethora of documentation. Owing to its highly politicized and contentious profile, detailed information was generated by a wide range of protagonists.<sup>57</sup> Despite this abundance of source material the researcher still encounters difficulties for the elucidation of certain aspects of the experiment. As Richardson argues, the overwhelming proportion of the extant material presents "one-sided interpretations of events" and "little or no evidence survives of the impressions which the Chinese formed".<sup>58</sup> The tumult caused by the indentured Chinese labourers did however have ramifications that went beyond the confines of the mine compounds, Transvaal borders and British politics. It resulted in the free Chinese community becoming more conspicuous within South African colonial society and regulations were introduced to monitor and ultimately prohibit their continued immigration.<sup>59</sup> This delirium led to numerous exaggerated accounts and reams of official data, but at least it generated source material on the Chinese that could be interpreted and verified.

Once the indentured Chinese were repatriated in 1910 and the Union government had enacted stringent immigration laws in 1913, the furore which had resulted in

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<sup>54</sup> See K.L. Harris, "Gandhi, the Chinese and passive resistance", in J.M. Brown and M. Prozesky (eds), *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg, 1996), pp. 72-73; Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Anon., "Chinese community: No politics please", *Financial Mail*, 18, 2, July 1981, p. 163; M. Yap, "Portrait of South Africa's Chinese", *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 February 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Armstrong, "Chinese at the Cape", p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 27-29.

<sup>58</sup> P. Richardson, "Coolies and Randlords: The North Randfontein Chinese miners' 'strike' of 1905", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2, 2 (April 1976), p. 151.

<sup>59</sup> For example, the introduction of Act 37 of 1904, "The Chinese Exclusion Act", and the concomitant administrative documentation.

contemporary literature and official records on the Chinese, subsided.<sup>60</sup> Their numbers declined and they became untraceable in the historical record as a separate "ethnic group", being categorized as "mixed" or "other" with the "coloured" or "non-white" groups of the evolving segregated state.<sup>61</sup> The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and South Africa's initial allegiance to the ROC in the mid-twentieth century placed further constraints on the community. Caught between the "two Chinas" they were forced into an invidious position which resulted in an increased self-imposed invisibility. Moreover, during the apartheid struggle and process of democratization, the Chinese chose to remain inconspicuous to avoid possible detrimental political ramifications. In contrast to the trend among overseas Chinese elsewhere during the twentieth century, the South African Chinese virtually disappeared in terms of the public record.

As Cushman so aptly puts it, this research "lacuna must inevitably fetter the historian".<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, he or she is forced to complete meticulous and painstaking searches to distil small returns, while relying heavily on surrogate sources produced by often hostile and prejudiced outsiders, in order to reconstruct an image of the cultural minority's past.

### **The South African Chinese**

Contrary to the impression created in South African historiography, the place of the Chinese in this country's past is not confined to the half dozen years on the gold mines at the turn of the twentieth century. Since Dutch administration at the Cape in the mid-seventeenth century through to the present, the Chinese have formed an integral part of multi-cultural South African society. This is not to imply that the role of the Chinese mine labourers was not of particular importance, indeed, it remains a pivotal episode in South Africa's past. But contrary to general belief, its importance is not confined to the economic developments on the Witwatersrand gold fields and the political ramifications in Britain. Rather, it will be shown how the importation of the labourers acted as a catalyst which thrust the relatively inconspicuous free Chinese community resident in the Cape and Transvaal into contemporary political consciousness. In effect, the arrival of their indentured compatriots disrupted the lives and position of the free Chinese community and their descendants irrevocably. These particular developments form episodes of South Africa's colonial past which are largely forgotten, and are in turn indices of how the Chinese were later brought under the yoke of segregation, which anticipated the oppression of apartheid after 1948.

The insertion of the Chinese into an account of the South African past is not, however, merely an exercise in "correcting the record" or developing a more inclusive multi-cultural historical account. An analysis of their involvement in aspects of the South

<sup>60</sup> *Statutes of the Union*, Act 22 of 1913, Immigrants' regulation.

<sup>61</sup> Central Statistics Service (CSS), Pretoria: Census records 1891-1991.

<sup>62</sup> Cushman, "A 'colonial casualty'", p. 105.

African past also adds another perspective to the understanding of race and race relations.

During the first two centuries after the arrival of the Europeans in South Africa, the number of Chinese present at the Cape was relatively insignificant, including only free, slave, contracted and exiled Chinese individuals.<sup>63</sup> This was despite the fact that under both the Dutch and British dispensations, the respective authorities made futile appeals to introduce Chinese to develop the Cape settlement. Despite the minuscule number of Chinese present, there were however already traces of anti-Sinicism, as members of the white settler population periodically objected to the Chinese presence, and in particular, their economic competitiveness.<sup>64</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the large-scale international emigration of Chinese, the number of Chinese in South Africa gradually increased as they were attracted to the developing mineral fields in the interior. They arrived not to mine - this being prohibited by law - but rather to establish various small trade and service businesses.<sup>65</sup> However, the presence of the Indian indentured labourers imported to the Natal sugar plantations from 1860, increased white racism towards "Asiatics" as a whole and led to the introduction of legislation to curb and control them. By the end of the nineteenth century both Boer republics in the interior had introduced laws proscribing admission, trading and residential rights of the "Asiatics" - a term which was defined so as to include the comparatively small number of Chinese.<sup>66</sup>

Not only were the resident Chinese negatively affected by the Natal Indian labourers, but so too were their compatriots who came as part of the Chinese indentured labour scheme. On white insistence it was decided that the Chinese labourers would not enter the Transvaal on the same conditions as Indians had entered Natal.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, besides the severely restrictive regulations imposed on the Chinese labourers by the Transvaal Ordinance, it also stipulated that, unlike the Indians, the Chinese could not become ex-indentured.<sup>68</sup> The proposed introduction of the Chinese indentured labourers resulted in the small free Chinese communities in the Cape and Transvaal

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<sup>63</sup> Armstrong, "Chinese at the Cape".

<sup>64</sup> K.L. Harris, "Chinese merchants on the Rand, c.1850-1910", *South African Historical Journal*, 33 (November 1995), pp. 155-8; Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 75-99.

<sup>65</sup> K.L. Harris, "The Chinese in South Africa: A preliminary overview to 1910", *Kleio*, 26 (1994), pp. 12-20; Harris, "Gandhi, the Chinese and passive resistance", p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> *Statute Laws of the Transvaal, 1839-10/1910*, Law 3 of 1885; *Wetboek van den Oranjevrijstaat 1891*, Hoofdstuk xxxiii. The latter legislation remained on the statute books for just over nine decades.

<sup>67</sup> For further details see Harris, "Gandhi, the Chinese and passive resistance", pp. 72-73; Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", pp. 107-118.

<sup>68</sup> *Ordinances of the Transvaal*, No. 17 of 1904, Labour Importation Ordinance.

becoming more conspicuous, and they therefore became victims of specifically discriminatory policy.

The political and economic ramifications of the Chinese indentured labour system are widely researched and well-known. However, a study of the more "human dimension" of this labour scheme provides some insight into the social world labourers created within the confines of the Witwatersrand mining compounds. Against the dismal background of their poverty stricken motherland and the stringent treatment of the mine authorities, the Chinese reveal a certain resilience.<sup>69</sup> Their popular culture, recreation, crime and sexuality add colourful nuances to the drab world of labour. They collaborated and resisted so as to endure, but at the same time heightened the prejudice and anti-Sinicism which lingered on long after the first decade of the twentieth century when they had been repatriated to China.

As a result of the Chinese labour scheme in the Transvaal, the free Chinese residents in the British dominated Cape Colony were thrust into the limelight as political fodder for the 1903-1904 elections and as a result became the victims of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904.<sup>70</sup> The latter legislation terminated the future immigration of other Chinese to the Cape, while at the same time dramatically impeded the life style of those Chinese who remained.<sup>71</sup> In terms of South African history, the 1904 Exclusion Act is virtually ignored, partly because it does not accord with the black-white dichotomy of traditional historical analysis. In terms of Cape colonial history, its restrictive and discriminatory nature also reveals a not-so-liberal and racist underside of Cape colonial liberal politics. These developments had extremely detrimental effects on the future growth of the Chinese community, not only at the Cape, but also in the Union and later Republic of South Africa. The 1904 legislation remained on the statute books until 1933, and served to enhance inherent Western "orientalism" making the long term position of the Chinese in apartheid South African society untenable.<sup>72</sup>

The impact of the Chinese indentured scheme on the position of the free Chinese in the Transvaal Colony was equally detrimental. However, unlike the Cape, where the Chinese were controlled by specific legislation, the Chinese in the Transvaal were targeted together with other Asians - a categorization which both the Chinese and Indians resented. The harsher legislation and greater discrimination which resulted after the South African War under British rule, led to the uncharacteristic involvement of the free Transvaal Chinese community in political activity. This episode in South African history is almost exclusively associated with the passive resistance movement of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian community, known as "satyagraha". It is not

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<sup>69</sup> For further details see K.L. Harris, "Rand capitalists and Chinese resistance", *Contree*, 35 (1994).

<sup>70</sup> *Statutes of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*, Act 37 of 1904, The Chinese Exclusion Act.

<sup>71</sup> For a detailed discussion see Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", chapter 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Statutes of the Union*, Act 19 of 1933, Immigration (Amendment).

sufficiently known that the Transvaal Chinese participated in the movement, not merely as accomplices, but also independently and on their own terms.<sup>73</sup> Although they supported Gandhi's opposition, they took their own initiatives, had their own leaders and organized separate deputations and meetings.

This political activity of the South African Chinese was unprecedented, and remained a singular phenomenon which was never repeated in the history of the community. Their actions however placed them at the centre of an internationally acclaimed political event. In addition, their participation in the first phases of "satyagraha" was meaningful in terms of Gandhian historiography. In this context, they provided a different perspective to his relations with non-Indian communities and therefore repudiated the conventional revisionist view of Gandhi as "politically exclusive". Finally, this episode also represented a momentary deviation from the "non-political" stereotype of overseas Chinese communities throughout the world.

The experiences of the South African Chinese at the beginning of the twentieth century, in both the Cape and Transvaal presaged the political rigours which they would confront in the remainder of the century under the segregationist and apartheid governments.<sup>74</sup>

The foundation for the future position of the Chinese community in South Africa had been laid. On the one hand they had become numerically insignificant and therefore politically less important, while on the other, there remained a lingering legacy of "orientalism" in white South African collective memory. Throughout the subsequent phases of constitutional and political change, as South Africa altered in status from a Union to Republic and then to a new democratic dispensation, these factors resulted in the Chinese finding themselves in a more and more invidious position. In a system predicated upon race and colour, in which they were neither white nor black, they were left in an interstitial and ambiguous position. While their small numbers still render them relatively insignificant, it remains to be seen if the Chinese communities will persist in maintaining their uniquely ambiguous position within South African society. In fact it has been argued that the change from white to black rule has "left the Chinese in the same no-man's land they have always occupied in this country".<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> For a detailed discussion of this see Harris, "Gandhi, the Chinese and passive resistance"; Harris, "Chinese in South Africa to 1912", chapter 6.

<sup>74</sup> For a detailed discussion of this see K.L. Harris, "The Chinese 'South Africans': An interstitial community" in L. Wang and G. Wang (eds), *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays*, (Singapore, 1998); K.L. Harris, "Accepting the group, but not the area: The South African Chinese and the Group Areas Act". Paper presented at Sixteenth Biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society (Pretoria, 1997); K.L. Harris, "Closeted culture: The Chinese in South Africa". Paper presented at Third Conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (Manila, 1998).

<sup>75</sup> *Cape Argus*, 10 February 1997.

**Conclusion**

A focus on the Chinese as a cultural minority within the larger parameters of South African history brings a new perspective to an understanding of that past. In other words, as a case study, the Chinese add a third dimension to the persistent paradigm of purely black-white binarism. Anti-Sinicism, and Chinese cultural exclusivity emerge as a subtle racism which is not accommodated in a conventional two dimensional analysis. In the context of American history, historian Gary Okihiro points out that "the Asian racial subject is indispensable to both an understanding of race and an intervention into the politics of race".<sup>76</sup> In the South African context, the Chinese or other cultural minorities present another reflection on the development of race relations as well as how the various political structures have relentlessly tried to control people on the basis of race. It is hoped that the newer and more textured accounts of the experiences of cultural minorities, such as the Chinese, will have an impact on the master narratives of general histories - and one might add, popular consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Okihiro, "Teaching Asian American History", pp. 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> Okihiro, "Teaching Asian American history", p. 3.