

The Chinese Diaspora in South Africa: The Gray Area

by Ann Williams

The study of the Chinese diaspora's experience in South Africa helps to focus on a specific dimension of diasporic studies, contributing to the field as a whole and increasing the academic reach of diaspora research. This topic elucidates the state's manipulation of race for political means, investigates the machinations of systemic white supremacy, and uses Freud's narcissism of minor differences as a lens to explore the effect of such racist policies upon a diaspora's lived experience.

Links between the African continent and the People's Republic of China have recently been generating much press coverage—the Belt and Road Initiative continues to unnerve Western powers, and China's interest in Africa has been subject to much international political and academic debate. The two places, however, share a very long history of interaction, one that can be traced as far back as 202 BC, or the year 545, depending on the nationality of scholars that are reporting (Snow 1988). Trade, investment, and other forms of fiscal interaction have always been of importance, but so too has a more anthropomorphic interaction—that of human migration. Over the years and due to many diverse push and pull factors, Chinese people have formed a sizable community in Africa, one that is the largest in the southern tip of the continent. South Africa specifically hosts the largest percentage of Chinese people in Africa, as well as the largest number of new migrants, and thus becomes a site of a worthwhile investigation into questions of diaspora (Park and Chen 2009). The Chinese diaspora in South Africa has often fluctuated in size, interacting with the political machinations of host land and homeland in a place shaped by race-based apartheid legislation. The experience of Chinese South Africans during apartheid, particularly their status as more “white adjacent” than other ethnic groups in the country sparked curiosity. Were Chinese people constructed as a “model minority” by the state or by efforts of their community? How did that affect the Chinese diaspora's integration into society and relationship with other Black South Africans? Finally, what was

the role of the state in constructing this diaspora through immigration policies with clear political aims? Using Butler's emphasis on international forces as formative agents contributing to the creation and maintenance of diaspora, as well as Manning's attention to the two-way connections between a homeland and a diaspora created a refined diasporic framework for study to elucidate these questions considering the Chinese diaspora (Butler 2001; Manning 2009). Through analysis of the Coolie movement, South African immigration policies, apartheid racial reclassification issues, and diplomatic relations with China, it became clear that the South African colonial government's regulation of race and anti-Black motives before and during apartheid informed and exacerbated the narcissism of minor difference between Chinese people in South Africa and the Black community in the state's effort to retain white supremacy.

Diasporic Migration Waves and Groupings

The movement of people is critical to interactions between China and Africa as a whole, as an estimated one to two million people from China live across the African continent; however, this number is highly speculative and unreliable due to difficulties in ascertaining dependable data because of porous borders and corruption of some African government agencies (Park 2012). Well over half of these Chinese migrants end up in southern Africa, and thus South Africa is the only country in the African continent with a significant population of Chinese and Taiwanese South Africans. The number

of Chinese people in the country has fluctuated throughout history and is also difficult to concretely ascertain, but according to Yoon Park's (2012) research, the number is probably between 350,000 to 500,000. Park (2012) identifies three distinct groups of Chinese in South Africa—the Chinese South Africans, the Taiwanese, and new Mainland Chinese immigrants—which can further be divided into two waves based on time of entry, pre- or post-2000. Of course, these labels and groups are highly porous and are not to be misconstrued as homogeneous by any means. Migration patterns varied highly depending on personal push and pull factors as well; however, most Taiwanese and Chinese members of the pre-2000 group are South African citizens and permanent residents, whereas post-2000 migrants typically intend to return to China (Park 2012).

Historical Background

It is critical to understand and contextualize the extensive history of Sino-African relations generally, as well as South African interactions specifically to properly problematize the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. According to Philip Snow, the first instance of evidence of trade between Africa and China differs depending on whom you ask. Chinese scholars tend to assert that the Han dynasty traded with the kingdoms of Kush and Axum in 202 BC to AD 220. To African scholars, however, the "Indian Voyager" Kosmas provides more concrete proof of trade, as according to his *Universal Christian Topography*, traders from Adulis (modern Eritrea) and Tzinista (China) met in Ceylon to trade silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood, and other products (Snow 1988). Arguably the most fundamental ancient interaction between China and Africa, however, came with the ships of Zheng He, who made seven voyages to various locations in the Indian Ocean, such as Champa, Java, Sumatra, Malacca, Ceylon, India, and finally Africa. Africa was the destination of Zheng He's fifth great voyage in 1417-19 which explored a stretch of the African coastline, including Mogadishu, Brava, Zhubu, and possibly other more southern locations. What exactly occurred during this interaction is contested, but whether trade or formal submission to the Ming throne, what was most important about this visit was its stark difference from European powers—Zheng He did not storm cities or seize land but returned to his original home (Snow 1988).

Throughout this period of trade and exploration and brief encounters and interactions, Europeans were beginning to take interest in Africa. Almost one hundred years after Zheng He's fleets first set sail, Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama landed on the Natal coast, but it was the Dutch who founded a colony there in 1652 under the tutelage of Jan van Riebeeck of the Dutch East India Company. The first migration of Chinese people to South Africa came about as convict laborers through the Dutch East India company; van Riebeeck himself had made many requests for Chinese labor because in his experiences with them in other colonies they had always struck him as hard workers (Snow 1988). These laborers were brought to the Cape of Good Hope in the mid- to late-17th century but are not ancestors of the current Chinese South Africans, as they were eventually repatriated or gradually became a part of the area's mixed-race population (Park 2012).

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud writes that amplified antagonism between similar groups with minor differences occurs when groups are close together (Freud 2014). The next influx of Chinese people to South Africa shows how Europeans manipulated this phenomenon to their benefit. Miners, 64,000 of which were imported to South Africa under Britain's colonial rule between 1904 and 1910, were the next large group to arrive in the country (Park 2012). At this time, African mine labor was disappearing due to protest and dispersal after the war, and mines were on the verge of collapse due to lack of work. Important European officials decided Chinese miners to be the answer to keep this vital industry afloat, who were thought to set an example for the "lazy" African workers. The *Daily Telegraph* reported at the time that "the importation of Chinese is the condition of keeping South Africa a white man's country" (Snow 1988, 47). The incoming "coolies," a term used to refer to Chinese miners, were considered superior enough to Africans because they had a country of their own, but were not allowed enough freedom to challenge the white Europeans in South Africa and were subjected to extreme segregation whilst working and living in the country. In response, Chinese laborers engaged in various forms of protest, including raiding Boer farms, killing livestock, and destroying railways (Snow 1988). The white powers also feared the most

foreboding alliance possible, that of the Chinese mine workers and the Native Black residents, but used Freud's narcissism of minor differences to their advantage, by keeping the two groups separate and paying them different wages. Additionally, in some cases, the Chinese mine workers attacked both white and Black South Africans due to the views of their own cultural superiority. The legacy of the Chinese laborers and mine workers is important to their future experience as a diasporic community in South Africa, as the government's use of them as a buffer between white and Black South African residents was the onset of a pattern that continued during apartheid. The protests of Chinese laborers, as well, can be seen as the start of a long trend of activism and advocacy for their community. The miners were all returned to South Africa, the last leaving in February 1910. Chinese South Africans today, then, do not trace their ancestry to these groups, but to independent migrants that began to trickle into South Africa in the early 1870s from Guangdong Province (Park 2012).

Overview of Immigration Restrictions

Free and independent immigration to South Africa, however, has never been simple for Chinese people. Chinese independent migration to South Africa began roughly in the late 1800s but was complicated by multiple xenophobic anti-Chinese restriction policies. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1902 and the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1904 limited the number of independent Chinese immigrants allowed to enter the country, which was ironic considering Chinese mine workers were brought to South Africa that same year in 1904. The Orange Free State was even more exclusionary, as this law prohibited the settlement of Asiatics there as early as 1854. Indians and Chinese were prevented from owning property, being citizens, or even staying longer than 72 hours within The Orange Free State even if merely passing through (Park and Chen 2009). These laws targeted Asiatics both specifically by name and by more inconspicuous means, such as requiring prospective immigrants to be able to read and write a European language, which was required by the Immigration Restriction Act (Yap and Man 1996). The Chinese Exclusion Act wholly excluded Chinese people from immigrating to the Cape Colony and forced Chinese people living

there to always carry a special license that had to be renewed each year (Yap and Man 1996). Stipulations within this law and other legislation that denied citizenship and prohibited land ownership for the Chinese relegated the groups to be treated at the very least a non-citizen, but often like a criminal. These immigration legislations were supported by the public as well, or at least the white public, and were not merely policies of state design. Chinese people were not welcomed by local populations at this time, exemplified by one *Graaff Reinet Advertiser* article printed in 1903 which stated, "John Chinaman is in every way unfitted to be a fellow citizen in this country...[as he is] working out the European trader and introducing habits and customs which it is to our interest to keep out of the country" (Yap and Man 1996, 62). These conditions undoubtedly influenced the Chinese community in South Africa to form a close community and strong Chinese identity, as they were not treated as citizens of South Africa until democratization. Still, throughout these often inhospitable conditions, Chinese people continued to immigrate to South Africa for economic reasons and build a life and a home in the country.

While the immediate aftermath of WWII provided some relief to immigration restriction, the border was tightly closed yet again at the onset of apartheid and the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act of 1953. Chinese people who found themselves in South Africa at this time were essentially trapped, as the Communist Party takeover in 1949 and harsh emigration legislation in the homeland prevented Chinese people from returning (Park 2012). The Central Chinese Association, a group mobilized to protect the Chinese community's interests in the face of apartheid, initially decried the stringency of this act by appealing to the South African government's blatant belief in racial purity—"hitherto the Chinese people in South Africa is a homogenous community of pure stock. Very few mixed marriages have been contracted by our people. Under the stress of the above restriction however where the choice of a mate is confined in a small community, mixed marriages of an undesirable kind are more likely to occur" (Yap and Man 1996, 349). Whether or not this was a tactical method or appealing to a racist and white supremacist apartheid government or the actual belief of the Chinese community, it represents an instance of exacerbating perceived differences

between Chinese people and other minority ethnic groups to attain special privileges. By painting the Chinese community as “homogenous” and of “pure stock,” the Central Chinese Association maintains its unique exceptionality as a race and creates divisions between itself and other “Coloured” or “Black” communities that Chinese were living amongst in South Africa. This is likely a response to the state’s emphasis on segregation that exists for almost all Chinese migration to the country, as well as state tactics to use Chinese people for the state’s anti-Black aims, like the Coolies in the early 1900s. Interestingly, the South African state completely reversed its restrictive immigration policies in the 1980s for a specific group of Chinese immigrants—Taiwanese investors—which will be discussed later.

Apartheid and Beyond

As seen in the aforementioned immigration legislation, racial segregation and racist governmental policies of apartheid were not new to the country and had existed in South Africa years before the National Party came to power in 1948. However, with the onset of the National Party’s leadership came a unique form of institutionalization and expansion of the legal sanction of such segregation dubbed apartheid, or sometimes “separate development.” With the onset of apartheid came a racial reclassification system that exposed the erroneous belief “that racial classifications are clear-cut, natural, and inevitable attributes of South African Society” because of the lengths in which the government had to regulate who constitutes which race (Erasmus and Park 2008, 103). With the extreme oppression of all non-white peoples of South Africa also came a clamoring for equal rights expressed by all victims of discrimination to achieve equality. In the Chinese case, their political activism often won them the status of “white adjacent,” a phenomenon that begs exploration.

The so-called “cornerstone” of the apartheid system was the Population Registration Act 30 of 1950, which established three racial categories of division within South African society—European, Coloured, and Native. The terminology used changed over time, as did the categories, two of which expanded to account for more ethnic groups. Europeans came to be known as “White,” “Natives” were understood to encompass Bantu, African,

or Black racial identities, and “Coloureds” were further divided into smaller categories with the Proclamation 46 in 1959—Indians, Chinese, Malays, Griquas, and people of mixed race (Yap and Man 1996, 316; Erasmus and Park 2008, 100). In the late 1940s, as the National Party came into power, the Chinese community in South Africa included around 4,340 people, around 0.04 percent of the total population. The 1951 census recorded a total countrywide population of 12.6 million, with 8.5 million Africans, 2.6 million Whites, 1.1 million Coloureds, and 366,000 Asiatics (Yap and Man 1996). Before 1950, Chinese people were racially classified as “Asiatic,” but then became absorbed into the “Coloured” category. However, the 1951 census data still lumps Chinese into the Asiatic category, showing the incongruities involved in labeling race. The Population Registration Act further defined a Chinese person as “any person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of a race or tribe whose national home is in China” (Yap and Man 1996, 317). What constitutes “general acceptance,” however, is not clear in this definition. Thus, racial labels were arbitrary and ever-changing before and during apartheid in South Africa according to the government’s deemed necessity of groupings.

Chinese people were subjected to many other forms of legislation and policies that restricted their freedom of movement in society, including the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act 43, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 55, the Immorality Amendment Acts of 1951 and 1957, and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (Erasmus and Park 2008). The consequences of these policies were split into the classifications of “grand” apartheid and “petty” apartheid, arbitrary distinctions in terms of lived experience, but accepted distinctions in terms of governmental administration. The Group Areas Act of 1951, a “grand” form of apartheid, was one of the most problematic policies for Chinese South Africans’ livelihoods. Essentially, the government demarcated areas in which each race would live and operate in society, such as where one could use a sports facility, get a job, or do business. Those of the “wrong race” who were occupying a space allocated for a different racial group were forced to relocate (Yap and Man 1996, 326). This act, along with all the other apartheid legislation, required the government to decide and regulate how race was

identified, expressed, and defined, and exactly who fits into which category. As Chinese people fit within the in-between place—the “Coloureds,” or, not quite White and not quite Black—the group was able to manipulate their racial classification in ways that would benefit their community. Being Black during apartheid, however, would not help them in any way due to extremely harsh treatment of Black people during this time. Chinese people were trapped in a situation in which having more political autonomy and human rights was synonymous with the white experience.

For the South African government, attempting to categorize and identify an idea that is currently understood to be completely socially derived was a challenge, as seen by the case of one David Song, a man who achieved reclassification as “white” based on letters of acceptance from white friends, although he personally admitted he “looks like a Chinese” (Erasmus and Park 2008, 201). Two months later, in May 1962, the government amended their legislation to ensure that applicants for racial reclassification not only had to be *accepted* as white but had to *look* the part as well. A total of 183 people were classified both into and out of the Chinese group between 1974 and 1990—a number that clearly shows the potential for racial mobility but a very small number of successful cases (Yap and Man 1996). The phenomenon of racial reclassification was not widespread. In other instances, Chinese people seemed to exist in the gray area between White and Coloured, as they were offered to be included on the white voters’ rolls multiple times, and on an individual basis, many Chinese were allowed to reside in white areas under the Group Areas Act. It must be understood that Chinese people did not unanimously agree on the political action to take regarding how “white adjacent” they wanted to become. For example, in 1988 after another offer to extend the vote to the Chinese community, whether to accept or reject the offer was the topic of discussion for the Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA), formerly Central Chinese Association. Some Chinese South Africans wanted the vote, as that was the culmination of what the group had been striving for in terms of political rights, but others argued to reject “because the racial basis of the constitution amounted to ‘approval’ of apartheid” (Yap and Man 1996, 416). Importantly, CASA members stressed the

distinction between “full rights” and “White rights,” as they did not want to merely assume the position of whites in society. In the end, they voted to refuse the offer yet again. The South African government manipulated white supremacy in that whiteness became the normative requirement for citizenship; to gain any form of political rights required white adjacency. Non-whites were not granted citizenship rights, regardless of whether they had immigrated or had been there before the Europeans. The Chinese diaspora, then, existed in a difficult dichotomy between advocating for a better life for their own people, while refusing to accept the racial label that came with that privilege. The government had institutionalized white supremacy to such a degree that citizenship rights were equated with whiteness.

Chinese South Africans did not refuse, however, the special privileges granted to them on an individual basis to reside in white areas. The Chinese community in South Africa was very small compared to other groups, and because of their history of migration as independent migrators, had lived and worked with many different racial groups in many different places. Chinese South Africans largely believed that the Group Areas Act would be detrimental to their very livelihood and existence in South Africa, and community leaders and CASA appealed to authorities for an exemption to the Group Areas Act through individualized permits, which were considered and granted based on merit. In 1971, the authorities even allowed Chinese people to purchase property in white areas if the whites who resided there already did not object. As little by little, Chinese people gained more exemptions or offers for white privileges, media publicity focused on how they could be “the first disqualified group to gain all White privileges” (Yap and Man 1996, 367). Throughout apartheid, however, the Chinese community suffered “petty” instances of the policy such as being banned from sports matches and being refused service at restaurants and hotels. Non-whites, in this case, could be considered similar in terms of experience, as all were inferior compared to whites, and oppressed to various degrees by the white minority which held power. According to Freud’s narcissism of small differences, then, the minor distinctions between these similar groups could easily lead to antagonism. The small differences that Chinese people had, such as a small population

and the assistance of good diplomatic relationships between the Republic of China and South Africa, enabled them to achieve white adjacency in some respects, which caused antagonism between them and other ethnic groups, particularly the Black community, which came to a head in 2008 after apartheid had ended.

On June 18, 2008, CASA won a court challenge against the South African government, winning recognition that Chinese South Africans fall within the definition of “black people” contained in two pieces of redress legislation that attempted to address the inequalities of apartheid and compensate for groups that suffered discrimination. The term “black people” is a direct word from the legislation itself that acted as a blanket term for all those that suffered discrimination under apartheid; realistically, this would include all non-white people under such a definition. CASA had engaged with the government for eight years, attempting to seek clarity on the ambiguity of “black people” and whether they qualified under the legislation. Their case generated much backlash in the media from the Black community of South Africa, with some referring to this ruling as “surprising, irrational, shallow, opportunistic, and inexplicable,” and the Labour Minister himself announcing, “What I know is that coloureds don’t speak Chinese” (Erasmus and Park 2008, 99). White supremacy’s narcissism of small differences is at work here—the discussion of which non-white group was discriminated against more, and which group was victimized the most. While it is incredibly important to recognize the diversity of experience under apartheid, and also to recognize the proportional privilege Chinese people received, it seemed that the state’s regulation of race was yet again driving a wedge between the Chinese and Black communities. The Chinese fit into an interesting juxtaposition of apartheid society in which they weren’t white enough to receive full rights, but weren’t oppressed enough to receive redress from the discrimination they did face.

State Involvement and Foreign Policy

Investigating South African immigration policies further elucidates not only the role of the state in constructing and dismantling diaspora but how the state manipulated the narcissism of minor differences between Chinese immigrants and Black natives to

uphold white supremacy. Although they seemed to achieve a form of white adjacency that white South Africans sometimes accepted, were Chinese people ever really wanted in the country? It seemed that for much of South Africa and China’s history, the government made it next to impossible for Chinese people to legally immigrate. However, the case of Taiwanese investors in the 1980s problematizes this pattern and builds on an older historical context of the Chinese mine workers being brought to Africa for economic benefit. In the late 1970s, the South African government began offering incentives for Taiwanese investors and their families to relocate from the Republic of China, including subsidized wages, costs of relocation, subsidized rent, housing loans, and other non-governmental-based incentives such as favorable exchange rates and cheap transport of goods to urban areas (Park 2012). Their arrival was designed to slow Black urbanization, according to Yoon Park, as the investors were encouraged to settle in the “homelands,” rural regions of high Black populations (Park 2012; Yap and Man 1996, 420). Around 1989, at the peak of Taiwanese immigration, there were close to 30,000 Taiwanese in South Africa, 300 new factories, an invested capital value of USD \$300 million or one billion Rand, and 40,000 new jobs (Yap and Man 1996, 421).

On paper and from a financial perspective, the Taiwanese investor influx to South Africa during this time was highly beneficial for its local residents, but the incentives had a more sinister anti-Black motive. Another reason for this immigration was diplomatic, as the Republic of China and South Africa had developed very close relations at this time. It was clear that the political machinations and diplomatic connections of states had a profound effect on diaspora, but it is important to consider the two-way connections between a homeland and a diaspora, and vice versa, as Manning proposes in “Diaspora: Struggles and Connections” (2009). Additionally, international theorists Shain and Barth (2003) assert that “Diasporas can be active actors, influencing the foreign policies of their host lands. Diasporas, especially those in liberal-democratic societies, often organize as interest groups to influence the foreign policy of their host land vis a vis their homeland” (453). While the interactions between Africa and China are often seen in economic terms (e.g., trade values and investment capital), it is important to

consider the anthropomorphic power of diasporic groups as a determinant in foreign policy. The South African government's anti-Blackness and the complicated relationship of diasporic Chinese to their homelands influenced South Africa's diplomatic relationship with China and vice versa.

For example, in 1960 the Republic of China voted in favor of a United Nations resolution to condemn apartheid in South Africa as a threat to world peace, and Chinese South Africans found themselves as spokespeople for the ROC whilst still needing to declare loyalty to South Africa. The Central Chinese Association declared loyalty to South Africa as a response to protect themselves against ill feelings of Afrikaners who were disappointed with the ROC's actions, inadvertently defending apartheid. The Central Chinese Association also signed a statement with other overseas organizations published in the *New York Times* to oppose the admission of the People's Republic of China into the UN in 1967 (Yap and Man 1996, 375). White supremacy worked to intimidate the Chinese community into defending apartheid to show loyalty to South Africa and put Chinese people in a complicated relationship regarding their host land and homeland. Significantly, the anti-apartheid stance of PRC and Mao's relationship to Pan-Africanism was a catalyst for South Africa's break with Taiwan (Yap and Man 1996). Forces within and beyond the Chinese diaspora's control influenced these foreign policy decisions, but it is important to conceptualize the diaspora as an active entity with a bilateral impact on South African politics, one that was also influenced by anti-Blackness.

Conclusion

The study of the Chinese diaspora's experience in South Africa helps to focus on a specific dimension of diasporic studies, contributing to the field as a whole. While considering the power of international forces such as foreign policy or diplomatic relations and their effect on the diaspora is important, the diaspora's power in counter influencing the same international forces is equally worth studying, as hopefully shown within this paper. The Chinese experience in South Africa has been adaptive, showing the agency of a small minority diasporic community in a state with racial stratification and extreme discriminatory practices. The trend of anti-

Blackness remained consistent throughout most of the South African state's relationship with Chinese people, manipulating their race and reputation to serve their anti-Black aims through the narcissism of minor differences. Even after the end of apartheid and democratization of South Africa, the Chinese community still faced a gray area between being white enough or Black enough to feel integrated within the community.

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