Chinese presence throughout the African continent has increased tremendously in the last decade, resulting in both high hopes and many serious concerns. The Chinese state news agency Xinhua reported that in 2005 trade volume with Africa totalled nearly $40billion – a forty-fold increase from 1990 – and direct investment in Africa reached $1.18billion (Mail & Guardian June 16–22 2006; AFP June 18 2006). In South Africa, trade between South Africa and China totalled $5.7billion (Mail & Guardian 20 January 2005). For the most part, these large-scale investments have resulted only in temporary populations of Chinese in various African cities. However, there has been small-scale immigration of Chinese, particularly into South Africa, since the earliest days of white settlement in the mid-seventeenth century. Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese population of South Africa has increased from approximately 20,000 to between 200,000 and 300,000 today.¹

Given the recent increased presence of and interest in Chinese in Africa, the long-standing presence of a tiny Chinese community in South Africa, and the dramatic increase in South Africa’s Chinese population, the dearth of academic work on related topics is particularly noteworthy.² The majority of scholarly work on Chinese in South Africa has focused specifically on the Chinese indentured mineworkers (Richardson 1982; Levy 1982; and Reeves 1954).³ In other books covering overseas Chinese around the globe, the Chinese in South Africa merit only a few lines to, perhaps, a chapter or two (Campbell 1923; Pan 1990; Pineo 1985). L. Smedley (later writing as Human) authored or co-authored a number of works focusing on the increased acceptance of Chinese by white South Africans. Funded by the Human Sciences Research Council in the late 1970s and 1980s, these works are now both theoretically dated and politically marred by their apartheid biases. M. Yap and D. Man in 1996 published a rich and detailed community history, which goes a long way to explain this misunderstood and often invisible community. Finally, K.L. Harris is, perhaps, the only
academic who has focused on the Chinese South African community in the past two decades, doing a great deal to place, or replace, the Chinese in the historiography of South Africa.

This article seeks to carry on in the new tradition established by Harris and Yap and Man. It utilises historical material from them and others in combination with original research to draw attention to the earliest phases of Chinese identity formation in South Africa. The article will cover a broad band of time, from 1879, when the ancestors of today’s ‘local’ Chinese population arrived in South Africa as free immigrants, through the late 1940s, when the fates of two national political parties rendered even more drastic changes in the lives of this tiny Chinese community. The article is based on a doctoral research project that conducted and analysed approximately 150 questionnaires and over 70 in-depth interviews. While even the oldest interviewees were too young to recall the earliest years covered in this article, many were able to pass on stories heard from their parents and grandparents; others had recollections of their childhoods, the back-and-forth movements between China and South Africa, and the lessons taught by their seniors. All of these had an impact on the formation of their identities in South Africa.

The main social actors in the construction of Chinese South African identities have been the state – both Chinese and South African – and the small Chinese community. South African state imaginaries; racism and orientalism (Harris 2004); the pull of China, as the ‘motherland’; and the Chinese South African community’s self image and sense of cultural superiority combined to shape early constructions of Chinese identity in South Africa.

The influence of the South African state on identity construction is emphasized here due to the state’s reliance on racial policies, in particular race-based labour and immigration, developed during the capitalist class formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Marx (1998), Omi and Winant (1994), and Morsy (1996) and others have written extensively about the role of the state in “making race” (Marx 1998), turning race into a salient societal issue. State policies of ‘wedging’ the Chinese in-between white and black labourers, particularly during the short-lived ‘Transvaal Experiment’ – the importation of Chinese indentured mineworkers – to the periodic ‘lumping’ of Chinese with Indian as “Asiatics” for the purposes of restrictive legislation, and policies of wholly excluding Chinese from South Africa through immigration legislation had a tremendous impact on social and political identity formation of all its residents. Through these acts and in various other ways the South African state circumscribed the identity choices available to early immigrant Chinese.

China, both real and mythical, also greatly influenced the early construction of Chinese identities in South Africa. Through state policies on overseas Chinese and through its agents – the Consul-General and the representatives of the Kuomintang (KMT) – particularly at times of war and conflict, China maintained
tremendous influence on overseas Chinese in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Overseas Chinese, including those in South Africa, imagined that they belonged to a once great mythical China. Deeply held beliefs in the great China myth contributed to the Chinese state’s success in maintaining a psychological and emotional hold over the Chinese diaspora (see Wu 1994:149; Tu 1994:preface; Pan 1994:12). This sense of belonging and superiority, combined with fervent desires that China regain its former vaulted position on the world stage, were key elements of early Chinese identities in South Africa. Chinese citizens, particularly those overseas, viewed themselves (and were viewed by the Chinese state) as ‘representatives’ of this great Chinese state and heritage. Particular ‘Chinese’ traits of lawfulness, respectability, and industriousness, with roots firmly embedded in this view of China, remain important to Chinese South Africans even today. Other less virtuous features of early Chinese lives in South Africa – gambling, opium dens, violent brawls, and visits to prostitutes – were ignored, excised from these identity constructions for the sake of propriety; these less savoury elements of ‘Chineseness’ provided unfortunate evidence contrary to the notion of the great civilisation from whence they came.

While both South Africa and China occupied key roles in shaping early Chinese identities, the Chinese immigrants were also social actors in these early identity construction projects. Early Chinese immigrants actively engaged with the South African state and the powerful myths propagated by the Chinese state to shape and direct the construction of their identities.

Chinese immigration to South Africa can be divided into three phases. During the first period, from 1652–1870s, Chinese were imported in tiny numbers as slaves, convicts, and indentured labour to South Africa. The second period, from the late 1870s until the 1940s, small numbers of Chinese sojourners arrived as free immigrants, chasing rumours of gold and great wealth; these eventually became settlers, the ancestors of today’s ‘local’ Chinese population. During this second period, from 1904 to 1910, the so-called ‘Transvaal Experiment’ introduced close to 64,000 Chinese indentured labourers to the Transvaal to work on the goldmines; almost all of these indentured labourers were sent back to China at the end of their contract periods (Harris 1995 and 2004; Richardson 1982; Levy 1982; Campbell 1923; and Yap and Man 1996). In the third period, from the late 1970s to the present, ‘new’ Chinese immigrants began to arrive from Taiwan and later from mainland China following the relaxation of anti-Asian immigration laws; increasingly friendly relations between the apartheid government and the government of the Republic of China; and after 1994, the transfer of diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People’s Republic of China. This article will focus on the second phase of Chinese immigration to South Africa, specifically on the ancestors of the South African-born Chinese South Africans – the small groups of sojourners who gradually became settlers.
Early Chinese to South Africa
Convicts, slaves, artisans and indentured labourers

A very brief description of these early Chinese in South Africa is required in order to clarify some common misperceptions and provide the historical context for the Chinese immigrants who arrived from the 1870s. These earliest Chinese included the convicts and company slaves of the Dutch East India Company who controlled the Cape in the mid- to late seventeenth century and a small number of contract labourers and artisans who were introduced to South Africa in the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. These early Chinese migrants to the shores of South Africa are important to this article insofar as their reception in this country had a far reaching impact on later Chinese arrivals. These brief histories draw a more comprehensive picture of the political, social, and economic environment into which the later Chinese sojourners arrived and the way in which the early South African states of the Cape, the Transvaal, the Free State, and Natal, and later the Union of South Africa, imagined and constructed South Africa as mainly white, to the long-term detriment of all other ‘race’ groups. These official and unofficial imaginaries of the white states and its settlers had a tremendous impact on identity construction projects of other ‘race’ groups.

The first documented arrivals of Chinese into South Africa occurred from the mid-seventeenth century, when small handfuls of Chinese men, mostly from Java, Batavia, and southern China, entered the Cape’s newly established refreshment station as convicts or company slaves of the Dutch East India Company. These convicts and company slaves continued to arrive in small numbers through the late eighteenth century, never numbering more than about one hundred at a time (Armstrong 1986:2; Harris 1995:157; Yap and Man 1996:12). Some returned to their home countries in South East Asia or China after their period of servitude. Some eventually became “Free Blacks” and settled in the Cape, engaged in baking, petty trading, shop keeping, and ships’ provisioning (Pineo 1985; Yap and Man 1996; Boësken 1977); they also worked as market gardeners, money-lenders, restaurateurs, fishermen, and candle makers (Harris 1995:157).

The slow increase and spread of the white population beyond the Cape and into the hinterland created the need for additional labour, and prompted periodic and contentious proposals for the importation of Chinese labour. Between 1810 and 1882, the British-controlled colonies of the Cape and Natal experimented with small-scale importation of Chinese labour; these projects and proposals for larger-scale importation of Chinese for public works and farming invariably met with bitter opposition and the expression of race-based fears (Yap and Man 1996:12). During this period free Chinese were treated with contempt; however, they were also begrudgingly admired for their abilities in both production and marketing of goods and feared as a formidable and unwelcome source of economic competition (Harris 1995:157). In their infancy, these colonies were envisioned as
white settlements, with a subservient working class made up of native and Malay slaves. The prospect of introducing large numbers of Chinese, particularly if they had entrepreneurial abilities, fell in the face of white settlers’ need to be numerically and economically dominant. In October 1882 the Colonial Secretary of the Cape voiced the potential Chinese threat to European hegemony. Responding to a farmer’s petition to import Chinese labourers, he wrote:

I feel bound to say that the Government would regard the introduction of Chinese in any number as a step fatal to the future of this colony, destroying as it would any hope of creating a European population other than capitalists and landowners. (Yap and Man 1996:17)

In South Africa, particularly after the discovery of gold in 1886, despite opposition, white industrialists stepped up efforts to import cheap Chinese labour. As small numbers arrived in Durban, Port Elizabeth, or Algoa Bay, bitter public opposition met each arrival, influenced, in no small part, by the experience of the earlier importation of Indian indentured labour into Natal. This anti-Chinese hostility eventually shaped racist legislation that restricted and later prohibited the immigration of any Asians into South Africa (Klaaren 2004a and 2004b; Yap and Man 1996:14–24).

The early experiences of Chinese convicts and company slaves illustrate the South African authorities’ social imperative of creating a state sculpted by racial domination. The need for cheap labour forced reluctant whites to accept the importation of small numbers of Chinese to South Africa. However, alternate labour supplies and continued opposition ensured that the numbers of Chinese in South Africa remained quite small. Chinese men who remained in South Africa between the mid-seventeenth and the late nineteenth century were numerically too insignificant and too scattered to maintain any distinctly Chinese communities. Those who did not return to China in all likelihood married and blended into the growing mixed-race community. These early controversies concerning the importation of small numbers of Chinese labourers pale in comparison to the furore surrounding the major project undertaken to import Chinese contract labourers to work in the goldmines of the Transvaal less than two decades later.

The ‘Transvaal Experiment’: Chinese contract miners

The controversial importation of Chinese contract miners between 1904 and 1910 has attracted a tremendous amount of scholarly interest and attention (Harris 1995 and 2004; Yap and Man 1996:99-117; Richardson 1982; Levy 1982:222–229; Campbell 1923; Reeves 1954)\(^{13}\), in part because of the importance of mining to the development of the South African economy.\(^{14}\) The period in which Chinese mineworkers arrived in South Africa has been intensely studied and analysed as the foundation period during which the ‘ruling class’ was formed (see Bozzoli 1981), ideologies consolidated, and the modern South African state shaped. Harris also notes that the ‘Transvaal Experiment’ had ramifications on British
imperial policy and elections, South African politics, the local labour market, international migrant labour systems, and the economic development of the gold industry (2004:116).

The relevance of the Chinese mineworker episode for this article lies in the sentiments that shaped and later ended the ‘experiment’ and the anti-Chinese legislation that followed. White South Africa’s experience with the importation of Indian labour in the 1860s had a tremendous impact on shaping the Chinese proposal. Furthermore, anti-Chinese and, more broadly, anti-Asian sentiment, which determined the manner in which Chinese mine labour was brought into South Africa also led to the introduction of further restrictive legislation affecting free Chinese immigrants.

Indian indentured workers introduced to Natal to work the sugarcane plantations during the 1860s were contractually granted their freedom and a number of rights, including the right to settle permanently with a small land grant, after ten years of servitude (Harris 1995:160; 1996:72; 1998b:277). Many of these freed labourers had started farms and businesses, in direct competition with white farmers and shopkeepers. The gradual increase of an Indian trading community in the Transvaal resulted in legislation to attempt to curb and control it (Harris 1995:160). The Chinese, because they shared a common geographic origin with Indians were also included in the legislation.\(^1^\) The Indian indentured labour system also “determined the legislation which accompanied the introduction of the Chinese indentured mineworkers to the Witwatersrand” (Harris 1995:161). In 1903, the Chairman of the Anglo-French Group, Sir George Farrar, argued that the labour shortage in Africa necessitated looking elsewhere for workers but he cautioned against bringing in Chinese under the same terms as indentured Indian labour. He said: “I have seen the evil of the Indians holding land and trading in competition with white people and on no account whatever would I be party to any legislation that permitted this” (Yap and Man 1996:106).

Despite widespread outcries, mine owners eventually won the complicity of the local administration, the imperial government, and certain segments of the white community of the Transvaal to bring in Chinese indentured labourers, with the understanding that they were to be a very restricted and temporary resource and could never become un-indentured. Chinese workers were to be explicitly excluded from any skilled mining operations and returned to China at the end of their contract periods (Levy 1982:223-224; also see Harris 1995 and Richardson 1982).\(^2^\) These conditions were much more restrictive than those that had governed the movement of Chinese into other gold production districts in North America and Australia half a century earlier, where Chinese moved more freely, without the rigid constraints of contracts between governments (Richardson 1982:166). Between 1904 and 1907, 63,695 Chinese were imported to South Africa to work in the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. Of those who survived (nearly one in twenty lost their lives on the mines, due to work conditions,
disease, suicide or murder – Yap and Man 1996:103), nearly all were returned to China at the end of their contract periods as far as can be ascertained (Yap and Man 1996:117-118; Campbell 1923:216; Richardson 1982).

The presence of large numbers of Chinese contract miners in South Africa, with their foreign looks and long plaited pigtails, exacerbated existing anti-Chinese racism, which continued to affect free Chinese immigrants for decades (Harris 1995:162). Yap and Man argue that:

Sweeping generalisations on Chinese morality, attitudes and habits were made in countless press reports and long-standing fears of the economic threat posed by Chinese traders periodically surfaced. Such unwelcome publicity doubtless did little to aid local Chinese in their fight against anti-Asiatic legislation. (1996:135)

Fears that vast numbers of miners might be freed led directly to restrictive immigration legislation in the Cape, Natal, and later in the Union of South Africa. Additional legislation not only barred Chinese mineworkers from skilled mining operations, but also prevented them from acquiring licenses to deal in liquor, mining, trading, hawking, building, and fixed property^17 (Levy 1982:224; Harris 1995:162). These laws had a tremendous impact on the free Chinese in South Africa in that they: “certainly retarded the growth and development of the Chinese community…” (Yap and Man 1996:135).

The history of the earliest Chinese in South Africa indicates that precedents for the unequal treatment of Chinese in South Africa occurred very early on, in part, as a response to early imaginaries of South Africa by its white settlers and its white governments as a white-dominated country. Undoubtedly divisions existed amongst South African whites with different political and economic interests, but as Yudelman points out, “perhaps the only thing they agreed upon was the necessity to maintain the subordinate position of Blacks” (1984:34). In fact, various segments of the white population agreed upon the need to entrench the subordinate position of blacks, Chinese, Indians, and all other ‘non-whites’. The ‘Transvaal Experiment’ resulted in both the first colour bar legislation as well as the reduction of black wages, further entrenching their subordinate position once the Chinese were repatriated (Richardson 1982; Levy 1982). As Yudelman argues, both the Anglophiles and the British imperialists played a crucial role in laying down both the administrative and the ideological foundations for modern institutionalised race discrimination (Yudelman 1984:14). This discrimination affected the lives and identities of the small population of free Chinese immigrants, or sojourners, the ancestors of today’s still-small South African-born Chinese South African community.

The Sojourners

Today’s ‘local’ Chinese, as they refer to themselves, are neither descendents of the very earliest handful of Chinese convicts, slaves, and artisans, nor of indentured mineworkers. Furthermore, they seek to distinguish themselves from the new
Chinese immigrants who started arriving in South Africa in late 1970s from Taiwan and later from Hong Kong and mainland China, during the third phase of Chinese immigration to South Africa. The ‘local’ Chinese form a distinct group, descendants of independent immigrants who arrived in South Africa from 1870 onwards. They originated in two areas of China, approximately 400 kilometres apart in Guangdong (Kwangtung) province, and arrived in South Africa as independent, free immigrants intending to make their fortunes and return to China. The remainder of this article will focus on their origins, their hostile reception in South Africa, their resistance to discrimination, the constant pull of China throughout their first six to seven decades in South Africa, and the impact of these various factors on the construction of a unique Chinese South African identity.

**From China to South Africa**

From the mid-nineteenth century, a four-way collusion of events led to a dramatic rise in Chinese emigration, particularly from south China: Western imperialism had reached its zenith and required labour to exploit virgin lands in the Americas and Australasia; slave labour was no longer available; gold was discovered; and, simultaneously, China, experienced natural disasters on top of local and international political crises. South China, in particular, was affected by a combination of political, economic, and natural forces including: the Opium Wars and the civil upheaval that followed, drought and famine, the loss of Canton’s trading monopoly resulting in hundreds of thousands of job-losses, and the Taiping Rebellion of 1850–1864 during which more than twenty million died (Pan 1994; Wang 2000; Zia 2000). These internal crises led the Chinese government to comply with the labour demands of the ‘new world’ by providing manpower to the developing colonies (Pineo 1985:1; Wang 2000:60–61). Some labourers left China under state-sponsored contracts with other nations as ‘coolie’ or indentured labourers; many others left China independently.

As incentives to leave south China mounted, the outside world beckoned with discoveries of gold and rumours of great wealth. These discoveries of gold enticed Chinese to go further a field, beyond South East Asia. California was the first ‘Gold Mountain’, or *Gam Saan* in Cantonese. Later discoveries of gold occurred in British Colombia, Melbourne, Otago, and from the 1880s, on the Transvaal. Although their paths were varied, all were initially lured by gold to South Africa (Harris 1995:159): most of these early Chinese immigrants ventured out as sojourners, with hopes of acquiring riches and returning to China as wealthy men. Others arrived in South Africa by accident, confused by varying stories about gold discoveries around the globe. Many of the older interviewees recalled the arrival stories of their parents and grandparents. All of those whose ancestors arrived around the turn of the century mentioned gold:

> Chinese people came to South Africa because they heard about a mountain full of gold. That is why my grandfather came out – to look for gold. He took a boat, 28
days to Hong Kong, past Singapore, past India, down the coast to Mombasa, to Durban . . . You can’t imagine. And they couldn’t even speak a word [of English], eh? They were real pioneers. (John, 61)

There were several accounts of ancestors who thought they were headed to the Gold Rush in California. For example, James K, 67, recollected that:

Dad came over in the early 1900s, probably in his 20s. The gold rush in California and the Transvaal caused confusion. [There was] no gold in the streets, so they ended up working as labourers . . . Dad was asked to ‘watch’ a shop while this man went back to China, and he never returned.

Much of the confusion had to do with the Cantonese names for the various places where gold was discovered. Accone, in his autobiographical book, All Under Heaven, penned an imagined conversation between his great grandfather and an innkeeper near Canton, in which the innkeeper spells out the dangers of giving only the name “gold mountain” as the destination.

Aha . . . but you know that sometimes people land in the wrong country, when they take passage and say only ‘Kum Saan’. For there is also a gold mountain in Australia, in a place they call Melbourne. I have heard it from a Hakka miner that he set off for this Namfeechoh (Africa) but was put on shore in Mei-Kwok, America – ha, ha. Said to me it was not enough to say Kum Saan – you must say New Gold Mountain, Soen Kum Saan. Then you must watch which way the ship sails from Hong Kong. If it turns south-east, you are going to Australia; west, you are heading for Africa. So, sir, watch out for the correct way. (Accone 2004:33)

As in other countries, the gradual growth of the Chinese community occurred by a process of chain migration – Chinese migrants, related by common dialect and place of origin, tended to concentrate in the same areas in the receiving countries (see Wang 2000). The immigration pattern of the Chinese immigrants was similar to that followed by many other immigrants to the New World: boys and young men came out first; women arrived later – as wives of the men who had come out earlier. The migration patterns described by interviewees were all quite similar:

My grandfather came over and grandmother stayed in China. They had two daughters and one son, my father. The eldest daughter stayed in China. My father came to South Africa and later travelled back to China (to find a wife) . . . Grandfather bought the shop for dad. He hoped to make some money and go back to the village and settle down. That’s what every Chinese thought. (Frank, 62)

My grandfather and great uncle came from China at the turn of the century and started a little shop. He went back to China to find a wife and start a family. Both my mother and father were born in China. Father came out in 1922, when he was thirteen years old. Mother immigrated in 1928 as a young girl. (John, 61)

These descriptions highlight a pattern of regular movement between China and South Africa, and explain why, with ancestors who had arrived before, during, and just after the turn of the century, so many of the interviewees were technically only second-generation Chinese South African. Often, families already settled in
South Africa would send one or two children back to China for a Chinese education. Young men who could afford to pay for their passage returned to China for wives. Once suitably settled in South Africa married men went back to China to fetch wives and children. In addition, there was movement between South Africa and other New World destinations; a few of the Chinese immigrants arrived in South Africa from California or Australia (Yap and Man 1996:73). Some early immigrants came to South Africa and later returned permanently to China. It was not merely a permanent uni-directional movement out of China into South Africa. Furthermore, these movements, repeated for at least two generations, were frequently interrupted by major political events in China, affecting border closures and the safety of those travelling:

Grandfather had immigrated to South Africa in the mid-1920s. He had a shop in Mafikeng, made money, returned to Canton in 1936 or 37. Then, when the Japanese invaded [later in 1937], grandfather brought the children back to South Africa. Dad was nine years old. (James, 42)

Ethnically these Chinese were Cantonese and Moiyeanese (or Hakka); the two groups spoke different dialects and practised different customs. These two groups, while viewed by outsiders as ‘Chinese’ imported their strained relations to South Africa. Animosities, fuelled by ethnic differences, resulted in concentrations of Cantonese and Moiyeanese in different parts of South Africa: Cantonese were more numerous in the Transvaal, while the Moiyeanese predominated in coastal towns. The ethnic differences between the two groups lasted well into the 1940s with intermarriage between the two groups rare and discouraged for decades (Yap and Man 1996:35). These ethnic differences, while not very significant today, influenced early identity construction: the ethnic cleavage reduced their ability to work more effectively together to combat discrimination and resulted in a general lack of integration with other groups in South Africa.

Interview and survey data, on first glance, appeared to support the notion that the earliest immigrants generally had little or no education, corroborating preliminary theories about the illiterate, peasant background of Chinese immigrants. For example, Rick, 60, reported that both his Chinese-born parents were illiterate. William, 57, reported that his father only had four years of education when he arrived in South Africa. Mark, 54, spoke proudly of his eighty-five-year-old mother-in-law who, without knowing a word of English, managed to run a shop with the aid of a pointer stick. He also spoke about his own mother who still cannot read or write English or Chinese, but had the spirit to travel to South Africa on her own.

There were, however, some exceptions amongst the interviewees, indicating that these Chinese immigrants were probably neither the poorest nor the most illiterate of South China. A few of the interviewees reported that their parents or grandparents were literate in Chinese. For example, Donna, 60, reported that several members of her family were educated:
Uncle and grandfather could write and read in Chinese... and we found out that my uncle used to write letters for everybody. My husband’s father also used to do that, as well. Both dads were of the few who were educated.

As Donna mentioned, those few who could read and write provided valuable services to the rest of the community by reading and writing letters to family and friends in China and communicating information from the Chinese newspapers that found their way to Africa. Some educated immigrants, like Accone’s great grandfather, Langshi, immigrated to South Africa on the invitation of the Chinese who had already settled in the Witwatersrand, to serve the existing community with his skills as a traditional healer. Descriptions and photographs of the earliest Chinese clubs in South Africa also indicate some level of education amongst the new immigrants. In addition to gambling and other forms of recreation, almost all these clubs had libraries and sitting rooms, subscriptions to Chinese newspapers, and collections of Chinese books for members to read. It was via these papers, journals, and books that these early Chinese in South Africa kept abreast of news from China. It is also clear, from the neatly suited gentlemen in early photographs that these men had some means and wished to be seen as ‘civilised’ and ‘respectable’.

Immigration restrictions, including the Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act of 1902 and the Cape Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904, meant that any Chinese who wanted entry into the colonies (and later, the Union) had to prove that he had been resident in South Africa prior to the law’s passing or show proficiency in a European language. It is therefore reasonable to assume that while the immigrants who arrived prior to the turn of the century were mostly illiterate, after the imposition of restrictions, only the literate were permitted entry as first-time immigrants. Small numbers of Chinese immigrants found ways of skirting these laws. One method was for unmarried bachelors or other childless men to sponsor young men – nephews or unrelated young men from their village – by providing falsified documentation that these young men were their sons. This practice came to be referred to as “paper sons”. Both Alfred’s father and uncle were “paper sons”, adopted from China to come and help in the family business:

My paternal grandfather was in Mauritius for a while. [He eventually] ended up in Durban in the early 1900s. He set up shop and then went back to China to find a wife and moved back to South Africa. His first wife died and he had only daughters with his second wife, so both my dad and uncle were ‘adopted’ from China, became ‘paper sons’ and were brought to South Africa.

The literature on other overseas Chinese communities corroborates my revised assertion that the Chinese who immigrated to South Africa were not, in fact, the poorest of the poor in China. They were connected to the news of the ‘New World’; they maintained communications with those who had earlier ventured forth; and they had passage to South Africa. Loewen’s study of Chinese in the Mississippi supports the notion that emigrant families of south China were neither the poorest nor part of landed gentry. He writes that they were mostly
peasant or artisan families, who, because of their emigrant connections and their remittances, were better off than the mass of rural Chinese (Loewen 1988:28). Most arrived with some capital, sometimes enough to start a small grocery. More often, a relative or friend already established sponsored the newcomer. Most of these early immigrants made their living as minor shopkeepers, traders, or general dealers (Harris 2004:159) and occasionally by farming. A few ran native eating-houses, butcheries, fahfee games, or started dressmaking / tailoring businesses.

The majority of these early Chinese immigrants continued to struggle financially. However, almost without fail, interviewees reported that they sent money back to their immediate and extended families in China; remittances played a large role in supporting the economies of the sending regions in south China. Ties to China during the first few decades of their arrival were strong, strengthened by the backward and forward movement between the two countries and the continued arrivals, albeit in small numbers, of new immigrants. The first generation of Chinese in South Africa remained, in effect, sojourners – physically overseas, but with their hearts still in China (see Wu 1994; Tu 1994; Pan 1994; and Wang 2000). They were Chinese people in a foreign land. A few of the interviewees reported that their ancestors had arrived in South Africa illegally, with falsified documents or as stowaways. Their precarious status in South Africa as unwanted and sometimes illegal immigrants, combined with their undeniable differences from other South African groups, their difficulties with the local languages, and the discrimination they faced on a daily basis had great impact on identity construction. There was a constant tension between their desires to remain unobtrusive and their high visibility due to their physical difference from other South Africans. The hostile reception in South Africa greatly affected the strength of their Chinese identity for at least two generations.

A hostile reception

The gradual settlement of Chinese in the Cape, Natal, and the ZAR (later Transvaal) met with fear and hostility (Yap and Man 1996:42; Harris 1995:159). From their first arrival in the mid-1800s and for nearly a century racist legislation kept the numbers of Chinese low, restricted further immigration, and placed controls on the existing Chinese community (Yap and Man 1996:62, 76–84; Smedley 1980:20–21; also Tung 1947 and Harris 1995). Early Chinese immigrants to other Western countries including the United States and Australia received similarly harsh treatment well into the mid-twentieth century (see, for example, Takaki 1993; Zia 2000; Lowe 1996; and Ryan 1995). Table 1 shows the early Chinese population of South Africa, excluding the Chinese indentured mineworkers, by region. While the numbers were tiny, both in real and relative terms, the reaction was unduly harsh and entirely disproportionate: Chinese throughout the various colonies and states of early South Africa met with fear
and hatred based primarily on race and the perceived economic threat they posed to whites (Harris 2004:158).

There were, however, regional differences in the treatment accorded to Chinese. For example, Chinese in the South African Republic (ZAR) were denied digging licenses by laws enacted in response to concerns about the “rather extensive immigration of Chinese in Australia and California” (Yap and Man 1996:73–74). The Johannesburg business community led the anti-‘Asiatic’ sentiment, which resulted in other racist legislation, including laws denying citizenship, prohibiting land ownership, restricting trade, and requiring passes. The specific target of most of the legislation was the Indian community, whose higher numbers and trading activities posed a threat to white economic dominance, but the Chinese were subject to the same race-based discriminatory legislation (Harris 1998a:279; see also Harris 1995).

Generally, the Chinese in the Cape enjoyed more rights than Chinese in the ZAR. For example, property ownership was permitted and if they were property owners, they could register to vote in parliamentary and municipal elections. Nevertheless, the Chinese were often targets of abuse, antagonism, and racial slurs (Yap and Man 1996:50). Furthermore, the Cape Colony was the first to specifically target Chinese with immigration restrictions. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1902 effectively barred most “Asiatics” by demanding that prospective immigrants pass a literacy test in a European language. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904 went a step further specifically prohibiting Chinese from entering and residing in the Cape Colony, denying citizenship, and requiring fingerprint identification. The passage of this law related to fears that the Transvaal’s indentured Chinese miners would flood into the Cape (Harris 1998a, Yap and Man 1996). Despite Chinese protests, the South African government kept the act in place virtually halting any new Chinese immigration to the Cape for nearly three decades.

Table 1. Early Chinese populations, excluding Chinese mineworkers, by region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1904</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natal Province</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>245 (inc. 31 in Mafikeng)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Cape</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>806*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town and surrounds</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Province</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>1,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transvaal Province</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>2,556</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These numbers swelled between 1891 and 1904 with the addition of labourers and artisans from Mauritius.

**All figures are based on census data extracted from Yap and Man (1996:46–87).
In Natal, alarm at the growth of the Indian population, resulted in legal steps against all “Asiatics”, including Chinese. In 1897, laws were passed to restrict immigration and trading; later, in 1904, another law placed restrictions on transit. The immigration legislation required that all new immigrants pass a European language test, as in the Cape. Between 1900 and 1904, 752 Chinese were refused entry and only 54 were admitted, either because they passed the education test or because they could prove that they had previously resided in South Africa (Yap and Man 1996:44). Other laws required domicile certificates to re-enter the colony, confinement of all contract labourers in compounds while in Natal, and fingerprinting. Despite restrictions on trade and immigration, Chinese in Natal were permitted to own land and fixed property from 1896.

The immigration of Chinese into the new world brought them into contact with pre-existing constructions of race and identity, with specifically anti-Chinese and orientalist views (Harris 2004), and with states that sought to embed racial domination in law; such state policies are historically imbedded and “make race” (Marx 1998:2). We see similar processes of racial construction occurring in both the US (see Takaki 1993 and Lowe 1996) and Australia (see Ryan 1995) where Chinese immigration was also restricted by law. In the US, alien land laws of 1913, 1920, and 1923 prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land and other property making them into “aliens ineligible to citizenship” (Lowe 1996:13). Lowe argues that the period from 1850 up through the Second World War was a period of legal exclusions, political disenfranchisement, labour exploitation, and internment for Asian-origin groups in the US (Lowe 1996:9–14). Both Lowe and Takaki explain that racial constructions of America formed the basis of the treatment of Chinese. Takaki, for example, argues that white businessmen were able to “degrade the Chinese into a subservient labouring caste” because of the “dominant ideology that defined America as a racially homogenous society and Americans as white” (Takaki 1993:204).

In South Africa, similar racial dynamics and specific anti-Asian and anti-Chinese legislation of the first half of the twentieth century reinforced earlier racist legislation and reflected the ideologies of the white governments (including the British); however, there was no master plan to keep South Africa white. Indeed, racial policies were negotiated, contested, and re-negotiated between various parties. The construction of race was a work in progress and despite the existence of overarching racial ideologies, there were times when factors other than race became more salient. National economic imperatives, for example, could divert the state from these ideologies, while haphazard implementation frequently followed newly established state policies. State views and treatment of particular race groups were mercurial, fluctuating over time. The differences in the treatment accorded to Chinese and Japanese in South Africa, for example, offer a dramatic example of the inconsistencies of state policies, in this case, due to economic interest. The Japanese were exempted from ‘non-white’ status and granted special privileges. As early as 1928, the formal incorporation of the ‘improved’
status of Japanese was written into law with the Liquor Act, which exempted Japanese from the definition of “Asiatic”, thereby allowing them possession of alcohol and admission into public bars. Stemming, in large part, from trade relations with Japan in the early part of the twentieth century, the Japanese gained rights as “honorary whites”. The Chinese protested against such differentiation, arguing that, “on the international front, Chinese were placed on the same footing as Japanese” (Yap and Man 1996:247); at the core of their protests was the very honour of the ‘great China’ of their own imaginaries.

Despite these inconsistencies, the general trend throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries was towards a construction of ‘Chinese’ or ‘Asians’ as a racially distinct group, warranting distinctive treatment by law. A multiplicity of petty and substantive laws inflicted discrimination on this tiny group of people and influenced social identity construction. For the Chinese community, protesting racist treatment became a way of reclaiming honour lost, fighting the shame of their official second-class status, and attempting to make life easier for themselves and their children. The manner in which they protested and their very arguments for better treatment indicate a particular construction of their social identity.

**Chinese organisations and resistance**

Indeed, it would appear that the Chinese protested most pieces of racist legislation and incidents of discrimination (Harris 1995 and 1996; Yap and Man 1996). In each instance, Chinese individuals and groups, through community organisations or with the assistance of the Chinese Consul-General protested and petitioned against their poor treatment. In the process, they took decisive steps toward the construction of a fresh identity in their newly adopted country – an identity as industrious, law-abiding, civilised, and respectable people, separate from all other groups. Quiet diplomacy, petitions, and letters were typical of the way in which the Chinese community fought against what they deemed unfair and unjust treatment in South Africa. The only exception to the quiet diplomacy practised was their once-off participation with the Indians in the passive resistance campaigns led by Mahatma Gandhi.

As early as the 1880s, the Chinese community sent letters and petitions to government officials, asking to be allowed to remain in the country; stating that they merely wished to work and trade legitimately (Yap and Man 1996:50); petitioning that they not be placed in locations with other Asians (Harris 1996:74); and generally requesting that the government ease restrictions on their community. One group, in 1898, argued that the Chinese were “an order-loving nation, always ready to obey the laws of the land that they reside in and also faithfully paying all taxes and never getting involved in politics ...” (Yap and Man 1996:82). In response to the Cape’s Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904, again the Chinese protested. Regional Chinese associations wrote letters and appealed directly to the
Cape Colony government, raised money to send delegates to London to petition the Chinese Minister, and sent appeals through the Imperial Chinese Consulate-General (Harris 1996:78–79).

Chinese organisations led much of the community’s activism. These organisations provided support systems for settlers; some were purely social in nature and offered a variety of recreational facilities. Several of the clubs also organised burials or offered a monthly venue for the draw of the ‘fee’ or hui money-lending scheme. However, several of these community organisations directed their attention and efforts to the restrictions imposed on the Chinese and concentrated on improving their position in South Africa. The Transvaal Chinese Association (TCA) formed the core of political activity in the Transvaal during the early part of the 1900s. Members of the TCA actively participated in the passive resistance campaigns with the Indian resisters during “the five years between 1906 and 1911 (which) marked the most turbulent times in the history of the community” (Yap and Man 1996:137; see also Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000; Harris 1995 and 1996; Huttenback 1971). Led by Mahatma Gandhi during his sojourn in South Africa, the ‘free’ Transvaal Chinese together with the local Indian community committed themselves to opposing the new ‘fingerprint’ Asiatic registration law of the Transvaal.41

Why did they participate in the passive resistance movement? Yap and Man suggest the mineworkers’ experiences of physical abuse and ill treatment at the hands of the white managers and supervisors, particularly in the first year following their arrival, influenced the free Chinese who wanted to ensure that they were treated differently (Yap and Man 1996:144). Whites, who did not distinguish between the free traders and the indentured mineworkers, indiscriminately attacked the free Chinese. Chinese also faced the wrath of the Het Volk Party who wanted to send all Chinese, indentured and free, back to China. Yap and Man posit this rapid deterioration in circumstances as the stimulus for the Chinese joining the protests. Harris argues that the implications of this ordinance were far more restrictive than any previous legislation; furthermore, Gandhi viewed it as “the thin edge of a wedge” — a “first piece of discriminatory legislation from which, if it were allowed to go unchallenged, more would flow” (Harris 1996:77). There was also the issue of their pride, dignity, and social standing. Fingerprinting, in particular, would bring disgrace to oneself and to China and was tantamount to treatment as “criminals” (Harris 1996:77); fighting, in this instance, would be the virtuous path (Yap and Man 1996:44). While the Indians used their status as British subjects in their appeals, the Chinese called for fair treatment based on the international treaty obligations between two foreign powers. The Chinese objections to the law, initially made via the Imperial Chinese Consul-General for South Africa, were that the registration law would inflict “a degrading stigma on the subjects of a civilised nation” (Yap and Man 1996:139); they argued that the subjects of the Chinese Empire, an ancient
Sojourners or settlers

The first two generations of Chinese in South Africa, while seemingly committed to remaining in South Africa, did not immediately develop a deeply local identity. While the length of residence in South Africa and gradual demographic changes would indicate increasingly closer ties to South Africa, three key events in China – unification, the rise of the Chinese nationalists (Kuomintang or the KMT), and the Sino-Japanese War – kept the sojourners emotionally tied to their ‘homeland’. The Chinese in South Africa were committed to staying in South Africa, sometimes even petitioning for citizenship; however, their identities remained deeply connected to China, even while recognising that there was no returning to their motherland.
Traditional sojourning “was a state of mind, a residual affirmation of the sojourners ultimate identification with China” (Wang 2000:54). However, sojourning depends on regular contact with the home country or at least frequent access to objects from home: “it cannot survive if the sojourners see no prospect of returning home” (Wang 2000:51). Regular movement to and from China, so frequent amongst earlier immigrants, became increasingly problematic both due to South African restrictions as well as the wars and political strife in China itself. Demographics also played a role. As the numbers of Chinese women in South Africa increased, so, too, the numbers of Chinese born in South Africa. As single men began to establish families in South Africa, travel to China decreased and the sojourner community began its transformation into a settler community. Table 2 shows the Chinese population of South Africa during the census years of 1921, 1936 and 1946 by birthplace and by sex.

By the 1936 census, the numbers of Chinese born in South Africa already numbered over 1,000 and the number of Chinese women in South Africa also topped 1,000. Between 1936 and 1946, as the number of Chinese women increased, the number of Chinese born in South Africa almost doubled. By the 1946 census, the numbers of Chinese born in South Africa outnumbered those born in China.

Older Chinese remained engaged in affairs of China. They followed events through newspapers and letters from home and remained attached to their motherland. Accone’s grandfather, Ah Kwok/Ah Leong lived most of his life in South Africa, having arrived at the age of fourteen. He never returned to China, however, the fact that they never returned was:

... a matter of circumstance. Once his children were born, the possibility of a return receded. And then came the grandchildren ... (but) he never viewed himself as South African. China was his home. Not here. (Accone 2004)

Once there were children and grandchildren in South Africa, reasons for returning to China became less and less important. Gradually, these sojourners became settlers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Chinese in South Africa, by Birthplace and Sex</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Born in China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Born in South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Yap and Man 1996: 209
Source: South Africa. Office of Census and Statistics.
Simultaneously, through their community organisations and through the Chinese Consul-General, they fought for their rights in South Africa. Early petitions demanding better treatment were made as Chinese nationals; they argued on the basis of their membership in the ancient and grand Chinese civilization and as subjects of the Chinese Emperor, which had numerous treaties with the British, as well as most-favoured nation status (Harris 1996:75). Increasingly, the Chinese were fighting to remain, live, and work in South Africa. I would also argue that, gradually, their long-time residence in South Africa and their behaviour as good citizens became the primary linchpins in their demands for rights and better treatment in South Africa.

Early petitions for citizenship did in fact occur. As early as 1884, again in 1886, and throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, dozens of Chinese made petitions for both citizenship and rights as citizens of South Africa (Yap and Man 1996:43); these men had decided to settle in South Africa. The participation in the passive resistance campaign and the activities of the numerous Chinese organisations provide further evidence of Chinese willingness to fight for their rights in South Africa and their determination to remain. The Transvaal Chinese Association (TCA) in a memorandum to the Feetham Commission investigating legal and illegal occupation of land as it pertained to the 1932 Asiatic Land Tenure Act wrote:

> We claim to be law-abiding and we take pride in being self-supported . . . Though we have referred to ourselves herein as citizens of the Chinese Republic it is the desire of most, if not all, of us to settle here and regard this our home; and even though we may never be granted full rights of citizenship in so far as franchise . . . we must . . . work for the good of the country as a whole, and the greater our rights in the country, the greater our interest, and consequently the greater our endeavour for the good of the land of our adoption. We desire, as citizens of a friendly nation, to be treated with justice and humanity by a friendly, civilised nation (in Yap and Man 1996:187; italics added).

The memorandum clearly states that while they argued as citizens of a friendly nation, they wanted to settle in South Africa, they considered South Africa home, and they wanted to work for the good of the country. The leadership of the TCA appealed to the friendly and civilised leaders of South Africa to treat the Chinese fairly and give them greater rights for the good of South Africa, the land of their adoption.

The sojourner mentality often discussed in overseas Chinese literature was, in the case of South Africa, a relatively short-lived phenomenon. Certainly, some of the earlier and older Chinese immigrants continued to hold on to dreams that they would one day return with their accumulated wealth to China. Dan, 53, spoke of his paternal grandfather:

> He came out when he was about twenty-three, very young, very adventurous . . . he thought this was the land of milk and honey . . . he thought this was the place he
would make his riches and go back to China. The idea was to go back to China eventually.

Practically speaking, however, the riches they sought in South Africa were elusive and there was seldom enough money to return to China in the manner of which they dreamed. Restrictive immigration legislation made travel to and fro increasingly difficult. Moreover, as the community evolved from one of single men to one of two-parent families with children, so, too, the Chinese were gradually transforming from a community of sojourners into settlers. However, Asian politics interfered with the general direction of shifting identification from China to South Africa, with a series of events forcing the focus to return repeatedly to China.

In 1911 – a year after the Cape Colony, Natal, the Transvaal, and the Orange Free State joined to form the Union of South Africa – revolutionary groups led by Dr Sun Yat-Sen overthrew the Ch’ing dynasty and founded the Republic of China. This event caused great excitement and led to a rise in Chinese nationalism amongst Chinese overseas, including those in South Africa. A number of the interviewees recalled conversations with their elders about the Chinese revolution and later, the war with Japan:

Especially the older generation – my dad’s or my grandpa’s time. In those years, things were linked to the Chinese revolution. You know, the local Chinese were supporting the revolution as well. Also the anti-Japanese war; they contributed a lot. (Paul, 66)

The establishment of branches of the KMT from 1920 in most of South Africa’s larger cities further heightened identification with Chinese nationalism while inhibiting the development of South African identity. The members of the Chinese clubs also had membership in their local branches of the KMT. An opening speech at one of the KMT branches, called for the Chinese in South Africa to offer their patriotism to China, urging:

... unswerving support to President Sun Yat Sen in his attempt to reunite China into a single, world power. Delegates were called upon to swear allegiance to the republic and to offer for the cause their lives and property. (in Yap and Man 1996:245)

The KMT branches ensured that the politics of China remained very much a part of the everyday lives of these early settlers.

Again in the early 1930s, at a time when a generation of Chinese in South Africa had begun to identify with South Africa, the Sino-Japanese War began. Even more than the unification of China two decades earlier or the on-going activities of the KMT, the attack on China by Japan fired a latent nationalism and patriotism toward China. Interviewees’ comments supported these conclusions about the renewed patriotism to China. Yap and Man corroborate: “Living as they had for years on the edge of South African society, the Chinese responded with alacrity to the opportunity to ‘belong’ in some way to a struggle in far-off China” (Yap and Man 1996:256). Wang concurs that the height of Chinese nationalism was
reached both in and outside China during the Sino-Japanese War and Second World War (Wang 2000:73). Wang reports that in South East Asia the Japanese occupation in most of the region between 1941 and 1945 was, in many ways, responsible for the “resinisation” of many local-born Chinese because it highlighted the commonality of Chinese, regardless of whether they were China or local-born (Wang 2000:85).

The combination of racial discrimination in South Africa and a war in China resulted in renewed patriotism toward China; loyalties and identification, rather than cementing to South Africa, were redirected to China. Treated, at best, as second-class citizens in South Africa, they knew that they were not welcome; because of the war, they could not return to China; however, they could retain their identity as Chinese. In the face of racism and discrimination, a number of authors have observed that ethnic minorities tend to “cling to the culture of his own ethnic group” (Paul C.P. Sui in Loewen 1988:30; see also Marx 1998:194). Unable to return to China, denied full citizenship in South Africa, they retained a strong sense of Chinese identity while remaining committed to life in South Africa.

Conclusion: The Beginnings of A Constructed Chinese South African Identity

This overview of the early immigration from China to South Africa supports a number of conclusions about identity and identity construction. First- and second-generation Chinese South Africans began to construct their identities within the limits set by the South African state, with the constant ‘tug’ from China. Their small numbers in South Africa and a combination of fear and pride, also influenced identity construction.

There was ample evidence of race discrimination in South Africa. Successive ruling parties imagined South Africa as a white state and were determined to maintain European and later, white South African hegemony. Notwithstanding the importance of tensions between the two dominant groups of white settlers – the English and the Boer – their overriding preoccupation was subordinating the black African population. The earliest governments established who was to be included and excluded in the colonies in the formulation of their citizenship and immigration laws. Potential Chinese immigrants faced restrictions on entering the colonies of South Africa, first because of white fears after the experience of Indian indentured labourers and later due to fears of Chinese indentured labour. Various immigration restrictions limited the pace of growth of the community and the overall size of the Chinese community. By the 1940s, although over 40 per cent of the almost 3,000 Chinese were born in South Africa, they had no political rights and were restricted in trade, education, public transportation, property rights, and freedom of movement by various laws.

Chinese protests and petitions against discriminatory treatment are indicative of some degree of education and empowerment. Their efforts to fight against
mistreatment and the arguments put forward by the Chinese constitute their early attempts at constructing a new Chinese identity in South Africa. Notions of honour and shame, mentioned numerous times in interviews, prove useful to understanding the construction of Chinese in South Africa. In terms of socio-economic class, we concluded above that while most immigrants from China were probably illiterate and poor, they were not from the poorest segments of Guangdong (Kwangtung) society, in contrast to the Chinese mineworkers from the north who were destitute and desperate (Harris 2004). Rather, they were people with some means and with contacts abroad. In China, they may have been people with some socioeconomic standing. In coming to South Africa, they had economic aspirations. However, their reception in South Africa was harsh. The earliest Chinese immigrants had intentions of ‘striking it rich’ by working in the gold mines, but they were not permitted to hold gold digging licenses. In moving to South Africa, they had lost whatever position they might have had in China. They could not return to China as poor men without admitting failure and losing their honour. Their only recourse was to continue to work hard and educate their children to secure future success in a foreign land. The virtues of hard work and value of education remain linchpins of Chinese South African identity today. Their arguments for better treatment in South Africa consistently emphasized their solid, law-abiding, hard-working character and their membership in a civilized, friendly nation; all the while, they remained emotionally, culturally and politically tied to China.

In terms of political identity and strategy, the lessons learned in the aftermath of the Chinese participation in the passive resistance campaign have also had long-lasting effects. Interviewees described their community as quiet, passive and apolitical. They explained that they learned their passivity from their parents. Joseph, 56, attributed Chinese political attitudes to parents’ lack of education, early immigrants’ questionable legal status in South Africa, and fear:

If you look back, like my parents were uneducated. I think the important thing for them at that point was to survive … The other thing also is the situation of the Chinese coming to South Africa. I think it was very tough for them to come to South Africa … a lot of them were not supposed to be here – they were most probably illegal. So, the best was to sit back and hope for the best. This would account for the passivity.

However, contrary to these self-assessments, the leadership of the Chinese South African community was, as shown above, both vocal and political. Strategies however, changed from collective action with other ethnic groups to quiet diplomacy on their own. Albert, 73, defended the Chinese strategies of diplomacy and negotiations:

You must realize that our forefathers, who were pioneers, were unsophisticated immigrants. They did not know the English language nor the local vernacular and therefore were unable to communicate effectively with the local population. Their numbers were small and (they were) scattered throughout the larger cities of South Africa.
Due to a number of factors such as language, absence of leadership, lack of communication, etc. they never entered the political arena. Furthermore, they feared the might of the powerful white government, which often made use of the draconian laws available to them on the statute books... Early attempts to join the Asian community (Indians) in acts of civil disobedience following the visit of Mahatma Gandhi ended in extended jail terms of a number of Chinese South Africans. This unfortunately resulted in bitter hardship for their families. Consequently, the Chinese, rightly or wrongly, decided to use diplomacy and negotiations in order to extract concessions from the white government. (email dated 24 February 2001)

As Albert argued, the leaders of the Chinese South African community engaged in continuous battles to regain honour lost as second-class citizens of South Africa, fighting for rights, privileges, concessions, and generally better treatment for Chinese in South Africa.

While discrimination and exclusion succeeded in slowing the early formation of attachments to South Africa, key political events in China from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1911 founding of the Chinese Republic, the unification under the Nationalists in 1928, the 1931 Sino-Japanese War, followed by the Second World War glued overseas Chinese emotionally to China. For those in South Africa, these tumultuous turns in Chinese history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries periodically opened and closed doors to their sojourns. At the same time, they re-ignited Chinese nationalism at times when they might have become more South Africa-identified. Chinese political movements, such as the KMT, the offices of the Consul-General, and Chinese state policies regarding overseas Chinese also played roles in encouraging the continued loyalties of overseas Chinese, urging them to remain filial.

Their belief that China was great and that Chinese people, wherever they were, had to maintain this greatness passed from the first ‘free’ Chinese immigrants to South Africa to their descendents. Many scholars of overseas Chinese write about the continuing power of the myth of the “sons of the yellow emperor” (see, for example, Louie 2004; Dirlik in Hu de-Hart 1999; Wang 2000; Tu 1994). This myth of a ‘great China’ and a great Chinese people continues to hold great sway over current generations of Chinese South Africans. Alfred, 48, stated:

(The) older generations of Chinese (those who came over) carried themselves in a way that said, ‘we are better than anyone else’ – act like it all the time. You know, ‘the chosen people’ syndrome. Even as a child, I would constantly remind myself that China was the most populous country, had the longest surviving civilization, the greatest man-made artefact... etc., etc., ad nauseam.

These perceptions motivated them to think of themselves as ‘more civilized’ than the rest. The Chinese in South Africa felt they had to counter the shame of their treatment as second-class citizens and the decline of China by regaining some honour through their individual accomplishments. In the early days, they fought for rights and better treatment of Chinese as foreign nationals and members of the ‘great China’. Later, they continued to fight for rights as South Africans.
Their belief in the myth of a ‘great China’ and their deeply held belief in Chinese superiority and the need to regain lost honour motivated Chinese to behave ‘properly’ and to strive to improve their position in South Africa.

When South Africa entered World War Two with China acknowledged as an ally, the white leaders of South Africa’s wider war efforts invited Chinese in South Africa to participate. China’s position during the war and the activities of the local Chinese focused greater attention on the Chinese position in South Africa. From 1942 onwards, numerous media articles penned by liberal whites focused on the ‘unjust’ discriminatory measures imposed on the Chinese. They argued that since China was an ally, the Chinese residents of South Africa should receive better treatment. They also pointed out that by the 1940s over 40 per cent of the Chinese were born in South Africa (Yap and Man 1996: 273–274). At the end of the Second World War, Chinese in South Africa were optimistic that the post-war period would bring more freedoms and greater equality to their small community. Certainly, the Chinese in North America, whose histories up to this point had much in common with the history of Chinese in South Africa, benefited from post-war changes and liberalisation. The Chinese of South Africa, having worked side-by-side with white South Africans on the war effort, with China as a staunch ally, assumed that the few privileges that they had begun to receive during the early 1940s would continue.

Instead, by the end of the 1940s, drastic changes embedded in the fates of two very different nationalist parties literally trapped these Chinese in an increasingly unfriendly South Africa. In 1948 the South African National Party won power in the national elections. The following year, the Chinese Nationalists were forced to flee main land China for Formosa Island, defeated by the Chinese Communists. As China’s doors effectively closed, Chinese South Africans found themselves ‘stuck’ in South Africa, facing the extension and entrenchment of racial restrictions.

Notes
1. This large discrepancy in the numbers exists for a number of reasons: Chinese in South Africa, being such a small minority, are often counted as white; the Chinese Association of South Africa’s attempts to collect survey data have been a dismal failure; embassies and consular offices of both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China maintain that they do not have accurate or current data on all their citizens here, claiming that their main purpose is to process visas for South Africans who want to go to there and to assist those Chinese citizens who voluntarily register with them; finally, it has been virtually impossible to get up-to-date statistics from the Department of Home Affairs. The estimates presented in this article are based on Gastrow 2001 and further conversations with him in 2005; the large discrepancy is due to the huge population of illegal Chinese migrants, estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000. The legal population includes 10,000 to 12,000 ‘local’ Chinese South Africans, 10,000 to 12,000 Taiwanese, and approximately 80,000 Chinese from the PRC, as reported in Park 2005.
3. Harris also points out that the Chinese mine labourers have been the subject of numerous Master’s and Doctoral theses (2004:116).

4. Park 2005 focuses on the impact of the Communist victory in China and the gradual implementation of the National Party’s apartheid system on the identities of Chinese South Africans.

5. By state, I use Yudelman’s (1984) definition, encompassing all the state institutions – the executive, legislative, civil service, judiciary, police, and army – that make and enforce public policy both symbolically and actually. The state “is a complex of mechanisms of domination and control, with the exclusive legal monopoly on the use of force and a territorial base” (Yudelman 1984:17).

6. See Bozzoli 1981 and Johnstone 1976 for outlines of the various approaches to nature of the relationship between ‘race’ and ‘capital’.

7. “Asiatics” was broad term used in South Africa to refer to anyone with their geographic origins in Asia; most commonly it referred to Indians and Chinese.

8. The Kuomintang (or Guomindang) is the Nationalist Party of China; hereafter it will be referred to as KMT.

9. Most of the literature on Chinese in South Africa focuses on the contract miners. The common misconception is that these miners were the forefathers of the South African-born Chinese communities. Therefore, it is necessary to correct these misconceptions and explore the differences between the various groups of Chinese who entered South Africa from its earliest days.

10. Some have speculated that Chinese sailors visited the east and west coasts of South Africa before the year 1300 and mixed with the local Khoikhoi; this is offered as an explanation for the Mongolian characteristics of the Khoikhoi and the conical oriental hats worn by the Basotho in Southern Africa (Yap and Man 1996:1–5).

11. The Dutch had, by 1641, succeeded in reducing Portuguese influence in South East Asia. Their “mastery over the Indian Ocean proceeded from East to West” (Pineo 1985); they settled and colonised Ceylon in 1636, Mauritius in 1638, and the Cape by 1652. Chinese and Malaysian slaves, convicts, and indentured servants were transported along these same routes. For a more detailed account of European hegemony in the South China seas to the Indian Ocean, see Pineo 1985, chapter one.

12. “Free Blacks” was the term used to refer to slaves who had been liberated or manumitted. They were a mixed group, including peoples from India, Ceylon, Indonesia, Brazil, Madagascar, as well as the East and West coasts of Africa and China (Boe¨seken 1977).

13. Harris also notes that the popularity of the subject, particularly as the topic of local and overseas Master’s and Doctoral studies is because there is a vast and varied amount of research material that is generally accessible and the topic is a manageable unit of study. In addition to the sources mentioned in the text, Harris also notes the following: Meyer 1946 (M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand); Weeks 1968 (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University); de Villiers 1968 (M.A. thesis, University of Pretoria); Brown 1972 (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Carolina); Sung 1974, and Gordon 1987 (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ulster) (Harris 2004:116).

14. Heribert Adam contends that this was “a decisive turning point in South African history” (Adam 1971: 25).

15. Anti-Asian legislation and the Chinese community’s responses will be discussed later in this article.


17. These were the provisions of the TLIO.

18. The Chinese in Mississippi also arrived from Canton in South China, the region that for centuries sent millions of traders and emigrants out into the world (Loewen 1988; Pan 1994). Studies have indicated that the young men of this region are influenced by a pre-departure
socialisation (Robert Park in Loewen 1988) that emphasises their emigration as a customary means of adding to the family’s fortunes and success (in Loewen 1988:27).

19. In particular, with the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, China was forced to open up five ports to Western powers and allow Western labour brokers access to their surplus populations.

20. Harris notes that the Chinese government, in the early twentieth century, made attempts to combat the exploitation of Chinese labour, which had been taking place globally for four decades, in their negotiations over contract regulations for the indentured mine labourers in the Transvaal (2004:119).

21. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese from south China had immigrated to South East Asia via Hong Kong; they went to British Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia as independent artisans, merchants, and contract labourers.


23. Reports exist of miners from California and Australia arriving in the Transvaal (Yap and Man 1996:73). Further accounts depict people who mistakenly believed they were headed to the Gold Rush in California but landed in South Africa. Much of the confusion resulted from the Cantonese names for these places: California, the Transvaal, and Australia were all referred to in Cantonese as “gold mountain”.

24. Christine Ho writes that the lack of cultural homogeneity in Trinidad and Guyana led to fragmentation and factionalisation between the Cantonese and the Hakka; this combined with other factors – population size, distribution of the population, rates of intermarriage – led to a higher degree of creolisation in those communities than in the Chinese communities of Jamaica where there was ethnic solidarity amongst the Hakka and greater retention of elements of cultural distinctiveness (Ho 1989:3–25).

25. One must also take into consideration that in those days very few had the ability to read and write in Chinese. A formal education in China was a privilege set aside for a select few who either showed the capacity for learning or had the connections to gain access to higher learning.


27. Adopting Christianity was one means of laying claims to South African residence. From the inception of the Chinese Mission School in 1918, Chinese parents seemed to be aware of the larger significance of becoming Christian: “Community elders took the view that Christianity was one means by which Chinese could strengthen their claims to remaining in South Africa . . . Proof of identification and particularly residence was of importance in terms of the 1904 Chinese Exclusion Act, which regulated the movement of Chinese into and out of the Cape Province” (Yap and Man 1996:284). Having baptismal papers was a way of securing their place in South Africa and quite a few Chinese chose to give up their Buddhist beliefs, at least on paper, in return for further evidence of their South African residence.

28. The practice was also widespread in the US and other countries with strict immigration regulations.

29. It was also common practice to take out loans to cover passage; even in these instances, there would have to be trusted contacts with resources and some collateral or other assurance that the loans would be repaid within a reasonable time.


31. Fahfee is a form of gambling; it is illegal in South Africa. It is an informal game of chance involving bets placed on a series of numbers, between one and thirty-six, much like a lottery. Brought to South Africa by early Chinese immigrants, it continues to be run mostly by Chinese South African families, although recent conversations indicate that new Chinese immigrants seem to be taking over as Chinese South Africans move into the professional classes. (For more detail see Krige 2004.)
32. The Orange Free State did not permit settlement of “Asiatics” until 1986. From 1854, the law forbade “Asiatics” from owning property or becoming citizens; these were rights reserved for whites only. In 1891, a law further prohibited any “Asiatic” from living within the province; transiting “Asiatics” were permitted within its borders for only seventy-two hours.

33. One of these laws required registration with the district magistrate within eight days of arrival in the province and a fee of £25. Indians, as British subjects, protested. After protracted correspondence between the ZAR and the British governments, the 1887 laws were amended to allow “Asiatics” to buy fixed property in streets or locations set aside for them; in addition, the registration fee was lowered to £3.

34. Huttenback reports that Indians, too, were generally treated more liberally in the Cape than in the Transvaal (1971).

35. In 1905, 1907 and 1913 at least twelve Chinese were registered to vote in the Port Elizabeth electoral division (Yap and Man 1996:60).

36. By 1891 the population of Natal was as follows: 470,000 blacks; 45,000 whites; 46,000 Indians; 77 Chinese. The Indian population exploded with the importation of indentured labour followed by the immigration of the Indian trading classes and had already surpassed the population of whites in Natal causing great alarm. For more on Indian indentured labour to Natal see Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000.

37. Posel (1997, second edition) makes a similar argument about apartheid’s racial policies.

38. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Japanese faced the same restrictions as all “Asiatics” as far as immigration, freedom of movement, and property rights. However, between 1910 and 1920, Japan had become the second largest export market for South African goods, just after the UK. By 1933, Japan also became one of six major suppliers of goods to the Union of South Africa. For these reasons, the Japanese requested and received special treatment.

39. In 1903, with the impending arrival of indentured Chinese labour into South Africa, a Chinese Consulate-General was established in Johannesburg. Originally assigned to protect the contracted labourers, the Chinese Emperor extended these protections to include all Chinese in South Africa. Consequently, appeals and petitions were often channelled via the local consul to China and also to the official Chinese representatives in Britain. (Harris 1996:75).

40. Harris notes that the Indian community, too, used these tactics (1996).

41. Harris points out that the infamous ‘Black Act’ spurred “simultaneous resistance by these two relatively exclusive communities for the first time”... arguing that initially, they acted separately, as two separate groups, and always maintained slightly different priorities, arguments, and agendas (1996:77–89).

42. Both Harris and Huttenback site Gandhi’s irritation about Chinese persistence on the matter of fingerprinting; the Indians, despite initial objection, had gradually come to see it as unimportant (Harris 1996:85; Huttenback 1971:184).

43. Early census figures indicate that there were few Chinese women in South Africa during the early days of Chinese immigration to the country. Loewen’s study of Chinese in Mississippi indicates that there, too, the numbers of women remained low for the first several decades of immigration. He argues that both Chinese families and US immigration laws made it difficult for Chinese women to go overseas. The “hostage value of the wife and children” kept each sojourner bound to his financial obligations and eventual return to the homeland. This pattern retarded assimilation (Loewen 1988:29; see also Takaki 1993 and Zia 2000).

44. I use ‘citizens’ here in the broadest sense and not in a legal sense.

45. This also happened elsewhere in the world, wherever there was a sizeable Chinese community (Pan 1994; Wang 2000; Wang and Wang 1998a and 1998b).

46. Klaaren 2004b argues that laws controlling immigration and mobility were based on two tenets: they were unequal and based on legal residence.
References


