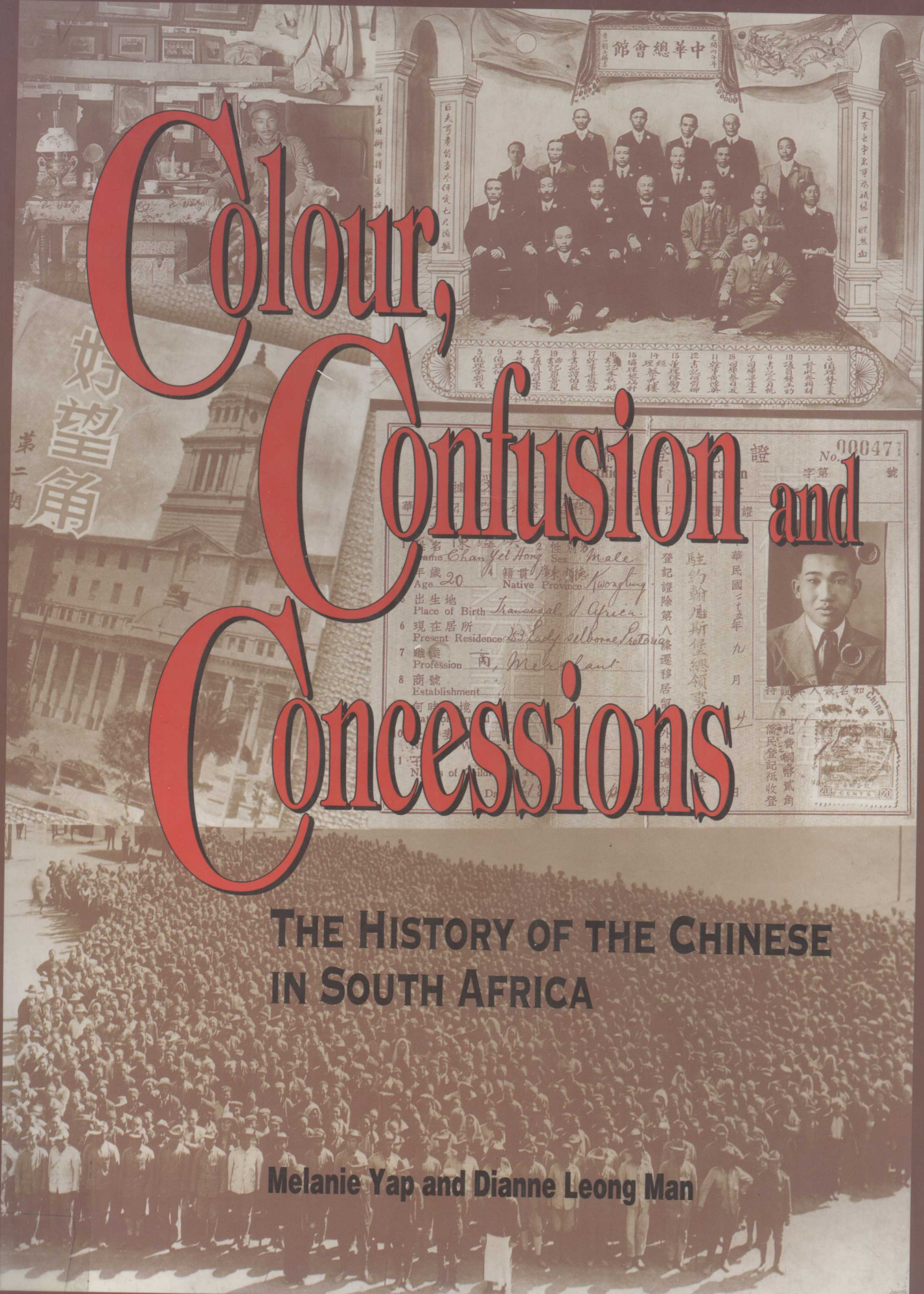


# Colour, Confusion and Concessions

THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE  
IN SOUTH AFRICA

Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man



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# Colour, Confusion and Concessions

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THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Acknowledgments

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**T**his book belongs to the Chinese people of South Africa and all who contributed to its creation. The Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) and the Transvaal Chinese Association have remained steadfast in their hope that this work would eventually be completed, and we appreciate their trust. Thanks must go too to the Eastern Province Chinese Association and the other member associations of CASA who assisted us — Kimberley Chinese Association, Pretoria Chinese Association, Western Province Chinese Association and East London Chinese Association.

There are several individuals who deserve special mention. Lynette Man played a significant role in the project's research, specializing in the legal aspects of the community's history and assisting in the analysis of legislation. Stanley May sacrificed much time in translating essential documents from Chinese into English and providing us with the necessary background for their interpretation. Paul Vink, Rodney Man and Eric Yenson have been our mainstays, unstinting with their expertise and advice and unfailingly generous with their assistance. Professor Peter Li of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, read the manuscript and offered invaluable criticism and advice. Professor Charles van Onselen of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, read an early draft of the first chapters and provided us with much appreciated guidance on historical perspectives.

We are most grateful to Hong Kong University Press for their patience, professionalism and precision. Our research was made possible by many institutions, organizations and individuals, and to each of these, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude. A full list of those to whom we are indebted appears from p. 437 to 442.

## *Introduction*

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South Africa's Chinese constitute one of the smallest and most identifiable minority groups in arguably the most race-conscious country in the world. In this divided society, they have lived in limbo, neither dark enough to be Black nor light enough to be White. Their story is one of adaptation, of trying to fit into a society which had no place for them and of striving to find some niche in today's post-apartheid South Africa. The present community numbers around 20 000 people, or 0.04% of South Africa's population, and is made up of those who can trace their forefathers' arrival in the country back for three to five generations, as well as new immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.

For more than 300 years Chinese have been part of the fascinating mix of people who make up the inhabitants of the southern tip of Africa. Too minuscule in number to warrant any serious historical attention, they were unknown and largely forgotten in the wider South African context. The intention behind this work is to fill a gap in available histories by producing the first comprehensive record of the Chinese in South Africa from the earliest times to the present. A key objective is to correct the widely held misconception that the present-day Chinese are descendants of the labourers contracted to work on the Reef gold mines at the turn of the century.

This is not a history of South Africa, but a somewhat introspective account of the Chinese people of South Africa. Many themes raised in this book are well-documented in other works, for example, indentured mine labour, passive resistance, apartheid and the application of discriminatory laws such as Group Areas. The difference here is that attention is directed largely at the Chinese and those historical developments which shaped the community. We have put the Chinese on centre stage and this has of necessity shifted the focus away from other major players in South Africa's history. While this

approach may open us to charges of having 'the tail wag the dog', we believe it is important to record minority group experiences which would otherwise be lost. Attempts have nonetheless been made to place this story within a broader South African, Chinese and international context.

Mention should be made of the way in which this work has been written. Each chapter begins with a brief outline which provides a framework for its contents. The main text serves as the detailed record of the community's history, documenting all major developments from the 1660s to the 1990s. The short story 'insets' are asides which would interrupt the flow of the main text, but nonetheless offer interesting insights into or more information on the people and subjects discussed. Of equal importance is the inclusion of photographs to bring the history of the community to life. The level of detail on regional developments may seem superfluous or even repetitious to some readers, but is necessary to serve as a record of the activities of communities in each area.

As for terminology, most Chinese regard the word 'Chinaman' as a slur. Its use in this work is unavoidable because of the extent of its occurrence in early documents. It and other derogatory racial terms have been used only in context in direct quotations. Without becoming embroiled in the political connotations of race terminology, we have chosen to use the term 'non-White' as a more practical and accurate description for people of colour than 'Black' which was once used as a generic term for all people who were not White. 'Black' refers to the indigenous African people, 'Coloured' to those of mixed racial descent and 'Indian' to those originating from the Indian sub-continent. Chinese names are rendered in the forms most familiar locally. We have used the Wade-Giles system of romanization with its Hanyu Pinyin equivalent in parentheses.

This work is developed thematically and follows a largely chronological sequence. Time periods overlap in several chapters to allow for a thorough discussion of each theme. Beginning with references to earliest Chinese contact with Africa, this account outlines the arrival of Chinese in the Cape from 1660 and events in China which precipitated the migration of thousands to foreign shores in the 19th century. It reflects the settlement of independent traders in most centres of South Africa prior to the mass importation of over 60 000 Chinese labourers to work the gold mines of the Witwatersrand in 1904. Chinese participation in Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance campaign as well as the social and political development of the community in the early part of the 20th century are discussed. Attention is paid to the Chinese position in relation to the Japanese, the response to the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 and the emphasis on education to secure the future of the community. The impact of apartheid on the Chinese is examined with particular reference to Group Areas, Immigration and Separate Amenities laws. The work concludes with the dismantling of apartheid, the country's historic all-race elections in 1994 and the challenges confronting Chinese in the new South Africa.

The map of South Africa has since been redrawn to incorporate the former Black 'homelands' and to create nine provinces. We however refer only to the original four provinces or colonies which existed in the time period covered in this work – namely,

Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal. South Africa's nine new provinces are Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Free State, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Northern Province and North West Province.

Documenting this history has been a community project, funded and supported by organizations countrywide as well as individuals who also provided information and photographs. The work was launched as the South African Chinese History Project by the Transvaal Chinese Association and from 1988 was conducted under the auspices of the community's national representative body, the Chinese Association of South Africa.

Not being historians, we embarked on this project somewhat naively, without any realization of the extent and scope of such an undertaking. Ignorant of the fact that Chinese settlement in South Africa could be traced back to the 17th century, we were also unaware of the problems of trying to find information on a virtually invisible minority. We learned as we worked, conducting more than 200 personal interviews, visiting most centres where Chinese lived to gain insights into local conditions and scouring cemeteries for evidence of early settlement. Much time was spent in state archives, libraries and museums to trace records on Chinese and to read newspapers dating from the 1860s. Two slide presentations were produced to publicize the project, to raise funds and to elicit further information from the community and historical groups.

Research proved more difficult than initially anticipated. The Chinese 'disappeared' in official records such as censuses and statistics where their small numbers led to their being incorporated into larger groups such as 'Asiatic' or 'Coloured'. Information searches were complicated by the ambitious time scale covered, variant spellings for Chinese, including Chinees, Chinezen, Sjinees and Sjinezen and the need to understand Dutch, Afrikaans, English, French and Chinese. Much assistance had to be sought particularly for the translation of Chinese language documents. South Africa's distance from Britain, Taiwan and China limited access to potentially useful archival resources. It is regrettable that most Chinese regional associations as well as the Chinese Consulate-General which was based in Johannesburg for 90 years, apparently kept few records of their activities. Notable exceptions were the Eastern Province Chinese Association and the Uitenhage Chinese Association which generously offered the history project free access to their files.

Writing the community's story has been like putting together a complicated jigsaw puzzle. Many pieces of information were collected and only after each had been verified and analyzed could we see what kind of picture was emerging. A few pieces may be missing or incomplete and lack of knowledge may have led us to err in some assessments. For this, we ask your indulgence. We have also had to deal with issues which aroused controversy within the community. Varying and sometimes conflicting accounts were given to us in interviews, but we have tried to reflect all sides in dealing with subjects such as the Chinese group area in Port Elizabeth or the role and contribution of particular individuals in the community. Some community members expressed vehement opposition to our making any mention of gambling activities such as fah-fee. We have tried to walk the middle road, including all the information we considered necessary to produce a fair and balanced account.

Many community members said this project started too late, and should have



included elders who had died over the past 20 or 30 years. While the perspectives of these, the first generation of settlers, would have been invaluable, we also realized that research could probably only have been conducted earlier with grave handicaps. Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, the community was pervaded by a sense of fear and the need to maintain a low-profile. Within a repressive political system, they were wary of the possibility of a backlash and any who asked questions were regarded with suspicion. Only by the late 1980s were circumstances right for this project. Being part of the closely-knit Chinese community enabled us to gain access to a wide cross-section of people, most of whom spoke frankly of their experiences and gave freely of their time.

In the 1990s we were fortunate to be invited to participate in three international conferences on Overseas Chinese. Contact with Chinese scholars made us realize that the experiences of the Chinese in South Africa should not be seen in isolation but had a place in the wider context of contemporary Chinese studies. Awareness of issues such as migratory patterns and ethnic identity prompted us to examine more closely their relevance locally. The South African Chinese pattern of migration could in many respects be regarded as a microcosm of Chinese migration worldwide and we hope this work will provide material of use to those interested in comparative Chinese studies.

We regret that this book has taken so many years to complete and that many of the people we interviewed have not lived to see in print the anecdotes they recounted. But the passage of time has also proved to be a boon ... history was being made while the project was in progress. Political changes in South Africa make it logical for this work to conclude in 1994 with the democratic, all-race elections which marked the end of an era for the Chinese and all South Africa. Bringing the book up to date has however left little leeway for the safety of hindsight which historians recommend, and it is for this reason that the final chapter is not an analysis but simply a record of current developments.

Nearing the end of nine years' work makes us realize how inadequate the words 'thank you' are to express our debt to the countless people who have shown their support in so many ways. There were those who shared their stories with us, the generous donors who made the research possible and all those who sought out old documents and photographs. There were those who gave unstintingly of their time to translate interviews and documents and families around the country who were warmly hospitable. Colleagues and acquaintances offered valuable snippets of advice and information, volunteers gamely accompanied us on many a foray through the veld in search of neglected graves while libraries, archives and museums countrywide gave us access to their records. Finally, of course, there are those very special people, our families and friends, without whose support, encouragement and belief in us, this work could not have been completed. Thank you.

Melanie Yap  
Dianne Leong Man  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
October 1996

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## Sources of Illustrations

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Most of the illustrations in this book have been donated by individuals to form part of the South African Chinese History Project's collection. Page numbers and sources for the other photographs are as follows:

Abbreviations:		TLWE	<i>Transvaal Leader Weekly Edition</i>
		TWI	<i>Transvaal Weekly Illustrated</i>
2, 4	courtesy of Dr Oscar Norwich		117/8 Johannesburg Public Library
11	Cape Archives Depot, No M164 and No. E3417		120 Simmer & Jack Mine
23	Natal Archives Depot, No. C993		121 <i>The Star Weekly Edition</i> , 16 February 1907
38	TLWE, 3 August 1907		123 TLWE, 1 December 1906
46/7	McGregor Museum, Kimberley		130 TLWE, 19 May 1906
91	TLWE, 10 December 1906		132 Krugersdorp Municipality
92	Liberation Museum, Beijing, courtesy of Jonathan B. Thompson		133 TLWE, 6 July 1907
94	Natal Archives Depot, No. C51		148 TWI, 28 November 1908
107	TLWE, 19 May 1906		154 TWI, 22 August 1908
110	TLWE, 20 May 1905		161 TWI, 15 February 1908
113	Local History Museum, Durban. No. Q/81/8/9 and Q/81/6/5		165 TWI, 8 February 1908
114	Simmer & Jack Mine		175 TLWE, 20 May 1905
115	Johannesburg Public Library		311 Baileys African Photo Archives
116	University of the Witwatersrand Library		358 (centre photograph) University of the Witwatersrand Library
			364 <i>Daily Dispatch</i> , 9 April 1970

# 1

## *Convicts and Coolies* 1660 – 1880

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What kind of contact existed between China and Africa? Why did Chinese first come to South Africa? Beginning with earliest references to Chinese contacts with Africa, this chapter outlines the arrival of Chinese in the Cape as exiles and convicts during the 17th century and then as indentured labourers during the 19th century. Their presence was noticed from the outset, making them a ready target for racist rhetoric in those territories which were to become the British colonies of the Cape and Natal. Always the smallest of minorities, the Chinese were an adjunct to the multi-hued society being forged on the southern tip of Africa.

### EARLY CONTACT

Chinese links with the continent of Africa can be traced back for nearly 2000 years. During the Han dynasty (208 BC to 220 AD) Chinese travellers recounted tales of ancient Egypt, opening the Silk Road to carry Chinese silk to the west and take home glass and coloured glazes from north Africa.<sup>1</sup> This cultural and commercial interchange appears to have continued in the centuries which followed, with tales of strange gifts such as a live rhinoceros, magicians, jugglers and large birds' eggs being sent to the Chinese court from remote corners of Africa.<sup>2</sup>

During the T'ang dynasty (618 to 907), Chinese records reflected knowledge of Berbera (also called Bobali) on the Somali coast, and Malindi in Kenya. They described a country producing ivory, rhinoceros horn and ambergris, whose people drank the

blood of cattle mixed with milk and who hunted with poisoned arrows.<sup>3</sup> The earliest record of a Chinese setting foot on African soil dates back to around the year 750 AD. Captured in battle with the Arabs near Samarkand, Du Huan, an officer, disappeared for 12 years. On his return to China, he wrote of his experiences among Black people in a country called Molin, probably the border of today's Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

Arab vessels plied a busy trade route to China's southern ports and slaves from Zanzibar and Madagascar were sent to China. It was only during the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644) that Chinese ships actually sailed to Africa.<sup>5</sup> Early maps offer concrete evidence that the Arabs and Chinese knew more about the southern part of Africa than most historians have recognized. In 1320, more than 150 years before the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias told Europe that South Africa existed, Chinese cartographer Chu Ssu-pen (Zhu Siben) compiled a map revealing the triangular shape of the southern African sub-continent. Ch'uan Chin's map, 82 years later, fills in more detail, showing inland waters and possibly the Orange River flowing westward. Between 1405 and 1433,

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Ming dynasty cartographer Ch'uan Chin produced this map of the world in 1402, showing the continent of Africa on the extreme left.

