

# **‘MADE IN SOUTH AFRICA’: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN BLOEMFONTEIN, FREE STATE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA, CA. 1980-2005**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Minority histories are increasingly emphasised in a world in which intense globalisation has had the paradoxical effect of variously entrenching and obliterating concepts of ethnic communities and cultures. They are histories of adaptation and of maintaining cultural, ethnic and national identities in an environment that both challenges and reinforces these sociological and historical markers. Minority histories are also frequently seen as previously neglected in relation to the histories of “large civilizations”, a concept which has lost its salience in all but the popular imagination.

In South Africa one such neglected minority group is the Chinese. For most of South Africa’s history the Chinese population remained a very small, quiet minority. Nevertheless, their interstitial status in a race-obsessed South African society meant that incidents surrounding them often threw some of the most glaring contradictions of segregation and apartheid into relief. It also exposes how post-apartheid society is all but exempt from racial preoccupation.

What makes the Free State an interesting case is that, of all the provinces, it has been the most racially exclusive, with Indians, Chinese and Arabs not allowed to settle in the area for almost a hundred years. Even today it is still considered by the general South African public to be a conservative, rather homogeneous province. Yet it was Bloemfontein, the Free State’s capital, that at one point in the early 1990s had the country’s highest concentration of Taiwanese industrialists. Now, fewer than a thousand remain.

Academic literature on Overseas Chinese in South Africa is scarce, with the notable exception of the work of Karin Harris, who published numerous works on the topic, and of academics such as Yoon Park. Very little has been written on the Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa, in particular the Free State. Information on the Taiwanese community in Bloemfontein was mostly gleaned from newspaper and internet articles, and interviews conducted with members of the community and several South African officials who have interacted with them.

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## 2. 'ENOUGH LEGAL CONTRADICTIONS TO CONFUSE CONFUCIUS',<sup>2</sup> THE STATUS OF CHINESE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The first inhabitants of Chinese descent who entered South Africa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were accorded the status of Free Blacks.<sup>3</sup> In different guises, this interstitial status was to accompany people of Chinese descent in South Africa through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Anti-Indianism in the southern-most colonies of Africa became anti-Asianism early on, though some laws targeted the Chinese specifically. Since the 1870s regulations to control the urbanising Indian group applied, almost by default, to the miniscule Chinese population.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese were commonly perceived to be a threat to white small businessmen, and legal obstacles in the form of permits and restrictions were regularly put in their way. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the political entities that would become the Union of South Africa restricted Chinese immigration, property rights and freedom of movement. Most severe was the Orange Free State, where anyone of "Asian" descent was forbidden to enter the colony in terms of Section XXXIII of 1891. Restrictive legislation also increased in the ZAR after 63 695 indentured labourers were brought to the Witwatersrand mines in 1904. They had all been sent back by 1910. Although almost none of them stayed, their presence had life-altering repercussions for the Chinese community in South Africa, as the laws remained on the books.<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese question was also one of the most puzzling pieces on the chessboard of apartheid legislators, despite – or perhaps because of – their seemingly insignificant numbers. Some of the most glaring inconsistencies of the Group Areas Act were highlighted where the Chinese community was involved and the Chinese became the first "non-white" group to be exempted from the Act in 1984, a few years after the arrival of the first Taiwanese industrialists.<sup>6</sup> One could even argue that these legal anomalies continued until today with the exclusion of South African Chinese from affirmative action laws.

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2 *The Argus*, 2 May 1962. Quoted in M Yap and D Leong Man, *Colour, confusion and concessions: The history of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong, 1995), p. 380. This refers to the controversy in the early 1960s, when Japanese earned the mocking title of "honorary whites" after they had been declared white in terms of most apartheid laws on the grounds that they were almost always only temporarily in South Africa.

3 Free Blacks designates a diverse group of freed slaves or freed convicts of colour in the Cape VOC period. For more on their status consult R Elphick, and H Giliomee (eds), *The shaping of South African society, 1652-1840* (Cape Town, 1989). For more on the general history of the Chinese in South Africa consult Yap and Leong Man, *op cit*. For more on their legal status throughout history, refer to KL Harris, "Accepting the group but not the area": The South African Chinese and the Group Areas Act" in *South African Historical Journal* (40), May 1999 and KL Harris, "'Whiteness", "blackness", "neitherness" – the South African Chinese 1885-1991: a case study of identity politics", *Historia* 47 (1), May 2002.

4 Harris, pp. 181-182.

5 Yap and Leong Man, pp. xv-xviii.

6 Harris, "'Whiteness", "blackness", "neitherness" – the South African Chinese 1885-1991: a case study of identity politics', p. 107.

### 3. THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CHINESE IN THE FREE STATE 1983-1992

#### 3.1 Forbidden territory: Free State and racial legislation

The 1980s heralded the decade during which South Africa became increasingly isolated, economically, politically and culturally. With apartheid crumbling, PW Botha's cabinet looked towards one of the other major isolated states in the international arena, the Republic of China or Taiwan. Not only were the ties economically motivated,<sup>7</sup> but the two countries also sought to give each other legitimacy in this way.<sup>8</sup> The history of the Taiwanese in Bloemfontein, a city known for its conservatism in a conservative province, reflects the history of a race-dictated society as it transpired amongst some of the most conservative groups. It also shows that "conservative" is not always such a clear-cut label as it might seem.

The South African government, which needed to make the homeland system work in an economically viable and justifiable way, came up with business propositions for entrepreneurial Taiwanese businessmen. Generous incentives were offered for them to set up factories in the border industry areas: Bophuthatswana, Ciskei, Transkei, Venda, Lebowa, Gazankulu, Qwa Qwa and KwaZulu.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1980 the then prime minister of Taiwan, Sun Yun-Suan, paid an official visit to South Africa, with Prime Minister PW Botha reciprocating a few months later. The same year talks between the Taiwanese and interested parties in Bloemfontein started.<sup>10</sup> Thaba Nchu and Onverwacht (later called Botshabelo), two black townships located approximately 50 km outside Bloemfontein, as well as Bloemfontein itself, were in dire need of new industries. As Bloemfontein was known for its political and social conservatism, the talks were initially kept under wraps.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, perceptions in the Free State about the Chinese were racist in nature. A column published in 1881 in *The Friend*, an influential Free State newspaper of the time, amidst rumours that 250 Chinese labourers would arrive at the Cape, makes it clear that at least one part of the population in the Free State was virulently against the bringing of Chinese labourers to the southern part of Africa: "The lower

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7 Wilhelm, 'The Chinese Communities in South Africa'. 2109 14 State of the Nation 05~27102005095946AM.pdf, p.356. [www.hsrcpress.ac.za](http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za) (9 December 2006) and *Beeld*, 18 November 1980, p. 1.

8 Wilhelm, p. 356.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 357.

10 *Die Vaderland*, 5 July 1983, p. 5.

11 *Ibid.*

class of Chinese are filthy, dirty, terrible thieves, and I know many instances of their treachery. They are nearly all opium smokers, and great gamblers. A Chinaman will gamble away his wife, his wife's relations, and then try his hand at his own relatives... Hanging has no effect on a Chinaman, as they used not to wait but as soon as the noose was round their necks they would jump off the platform with a ghastly 'Hi Ya!'... As to flogging, you might as well threaten a Hottentot with a 'souple'. ... There is a dark tale that the Chinese are fond of babies; this, however, I am not going to assert..."<sup>12</sup>

Though there were also economic and political reasons for promulgating Section XXXIII of the *Orange Free State Law Book* in 1891, a decade after the quoted column had been published, the vituperative tone of the column is a testimony to the atmosphere the Act was born in. The Act was promulgated by the Orange Free State Republic "Volksraad", and was carried over to the Union and later the Republic of South Africa. In short, the "wet tot tegengaan van die instrooming van Aziatische kleurlingen tot verwijdering van blanke misdadigers van elders in deze staat komende"<sup>13</sup> stated that: "Geen Arabier, Chinees, Koelie of andere Aziatische Kleurling zal sich met ter woon in dezen Staat (die Oranje-Vrystaat) kunnen vestigen, of alhier voor langer dan twee maanden kunnen vertoeven, zonder vooraf verlot van den Staatspresident te hebben verkregen."<sup>14</sup>

Though the wording of the Act is unambiguous in putting "Chinamen" in the same category as Indians ("koelies"), the Act was naturally not mentioned at all during PW Botha's visit to Taiwan, neither in his speeches nor in that of the Taiwanese prime minister, or even in the press.<sup>15</sup> What was mentioned, however, is that a better position for the Chinese group in South Africa in general was being negotiated.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, some of the Bloemfontein City Council's members realised that, if the Act were to be investigated, it would probably be discovered to be invalid in this case.<sup>17</sup> "Chinamen" aside, the undercurrent was rather that, if ethnic Chinese were allowed to enter the Free State, so would Indians. Having Indians in the Free State was a much more threatening idea than having Chinese there, and was passionately opposed in parliament on grounds of the fact that they had no part in "die erfgrond van die Afrikaner", whilst the numerically insignificant numbers of

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12 *The Friend in the Free State*, 8 December 1881, p. 8.

13 *Raad van Afgevaardigdes Debatte (HANSARDS)*, Vol. 2, 25 January-9 April 1885, col. 1-2188 (436).

14 *Beeld*, 6 April 1885, p. 11.

15 PW Botha Collection (SA Media, UFS): POV 11/1/3 and POV 11/1/4 and POV 4/2/90, 680-682.

16 Yap and Leong Man, p. 17.

17 Interview with Norman Doubell, previous mayor of Bloemfontein, ca. 1988-1990. Bloemfontein, 11 July 2006.

Chinese in South Africa and the “ancient civilization” of the Chinese were barely mentioned in parliamentary debates about the Act.<sup>18</sup>

The concern was nonetheless raised in the newspapers. Initially, it was said that the coming of Taiwanese businessmen would not affect this law. In reaction to reports that the law would be reconsidered because the Bloemfontein City Council gave a group of Chinese businessmen permission to build factories in the city, the administrator of the Free State, Louis Botha, said that this did not infringe on the principle of the law.<sup>19</sup> One of the ways the council attempted to justify its decision was by stating that the Taiwanese would work on the basis of a permit system in the townships of Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu.<sup>20</sup> According to the chairman of the Bloemfontein Management Committee and later mayor, Norman Doubell, managerial staff could live on property in Bloemfontein ‘with certain permits from government’.<sup>21</sup>

When a widely-read weekly community paper, *Ons Stad*, did a survey amongst Bloemfontein inhabitants about the desirability of Taiwanese businessmen, the assumption about the “conservatism” of the city was contradicted. The survey concluded that an overwhelming 90% of the (white) inhabitants had no objection to Taiwanese coming to live in the city; 7% thought it may cause some problems, and 3% were strongly against it. Most of those against the plan never had any kind of contact with Chinese, and those who were in favour of the plan emphasised the civilized nature of the Chinese.<sup>22</sup> Many of those in favour also have had contact with Chinese, lending weight to the argument that ignorance fuels racism. It is also perhaps indicative of the fact that Bloemfontein citizens essentially had fewer scruples about taking in immigrants from the Far East than other South African citizens of Indian descent.

The same newspaper that published the racist invective against the Chinese in 1881, referred to above, expressed its support for the Taiwanese in a leading article a hundred years later. Though it did not necessarily speak for all citizens at the time, the result is ironic: “Bloemfontein is badly in need of a more cosmopolitan flavour. It is a delightful city which has been badly maligned in the past by unimaginative people. The draft guide plan, Chinese families, a more tolerant attitude towards Indians and a concerted public relations exercise could put Bloemfontein firmly on the map...”<sup>23</sup>

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18 *Hansards*, Vol. 2, col. 4535-4586.

19 *Die Volksblad*, 24 July 1983, p. 2.

20 *The Friend*, 24 July 1983, p.1.

21 *Daily Dispatch*, 24 June 1983, p. 2.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *The Friend*, 27 June 1983, p. 8.

By the time most Taiwanese had settled in Bloemfontein, the Group Areas Act was no longer applicable to them. Act XXXIII of the *Orange Free State Law Book* in 1891, however, was repealed only in June 1986.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 The way to Bloemfontein

The Taiwanese who settled in Bloemfontein came mainly from two groups – those who moved to Bloemfontein via Lesotho, and industrialists who were recruited by the Bloemfontein City Council in conjunction with the national government. A third group consists of those who brought family members and friends over. A few narratives of individuals still living in Bloemfontein will be recounted briefly to illustrate this.

#### 3.2.1 Lesotho

Jolene Chang and her family came to Bloemfontein from Lesotho. They were part of a group of Taiwanese who were sent to southern Africa mainly to run an agricultural development programme in Lesotho.<sup>25</sup> Lesotho had official diplomatic ties with Taiwan until 1983, after which they severed them in order to establish diplomatic ties with China. This affected the Chang family, who came to Bloemfontein to earn an income by setting up businesses.

Another group with links to Lesotho who came to Bloemfontein were industrialists who set up mainly textile and clothing factories, as well as retail businesses. After Lesotho had come under military rule in 1986, ties were again taken up with Taiwan, amidst rumours of bribery and corruption.<sup>26</sup> This led to a growth in the above-mentioned Taiwanese-owned industries. In May 1991 the death of a Mosotho woman in a foreign-owned shop sparked xenophobic riots, stemming from sentiments against foreigners that had been simmering for a while. The shopkeepers and industrialists were blamed for exploitation and joblessness in the economically struggling Lesotho. The riots were violent and there were a number of fatalities. Most Taiwanese families fled to Ladybrand, a Free State border town, where a refugee camp was set up in co-operation with the Ladybrand municipality. About 70 families emigrated to Ladybrand afterwards,<sup>27</sup> and some more moved on to Bloemfontein, other South African cities and other continents.

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24 *Staatskoerant*, No. 10277, 13 June 1986, p. 10.

25 Interviews with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux, previous mayor and town clerk, respectively, ca. 1980-1994, Bloemfontein, 11 July 2006, Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald, ladies from the Taiwanese community, Bloemfontein, 11 July 2006.

26 R Tangri, 'Foreign business and political unrest in Lesotho', *African Affairs* 92(367), April 1993, p. 227.

27 *Tzu Chi Quarterly*, Summer 1998. <http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/98summer/qs98-15.htm> (Accessed 5 January 2007).

### 3.2.2 “Made in South Africa”? Initiatives and concessions

Van Chen, one of the first and most successful Taiwanese industrialists in Bloemfontein, fondly recalls the day he decided to establish himself in the city. He was one of the Taiwanese who came to South Africa after a developing company based in South Africa had approached Taiwanese businessmen around 1987. After a tour of the former border industry area around Ga-Rankuwa, where the apartheid government wanted the industrialists to set up factories to invigorate flagging economies, Van Chen spent the night in Bloemfontein before departing for Taiwan. The next day, he says, he saw children going to school with sporting gear against the backdrop of Naval Hill, a nature reserve inside the city. He immediately approved of the lifestyle in Bloemfontein and, making use of government concessions, relocated to the city. He set up industries in the Botshabelo area and invested heavily in the development of Ooseinde,<sup>28</sup> an industrial area outside Bloemfontein, where he is still based. His children, he says proudly ‘are made in South Africa’ and became accomplished students of two of Bloemfontein’s most prestigious schools, Eunice Girls High School and Grey College.<sup>29</sup>

Van Chen was also actively involved in the City Council’s tour to Taiwan in 1990, acting as tour guide and translator.<sup>30</sup> The tour, as well as the sister city agreement made with Hsinchu in Taiwan, was the result of a process that had started in 1985. Danie Hough, chairperson of the South African tourism office at the time, came to Bloemfontein to open the newly built Orchid House. He told the City Council that the South African government had allocated money towards setting up ties between South African and Taiwanese cities in order to establish mutually supportive economic and cultural relationships. As a result, the first Taiwanese delegate to visit the city was the mayoral couple of Taipei, MA Cheng Fang and his wife. Cheng Fang then organised for the first industrialists to come to Bloemfontein. From the beginning it was made clear by government officials that the preferable outcome would be a sister city agreement between a Taiwanese city and Bloemfontein. At the time, though, the Bloemfontein council was careful to underplay the government’s role in the agreement. The City Council followed up on the initial visit from Taipei and began an aggressive marketing campaign to lure investors and industrialists to Bloemfontein and the “black cities” of Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo.

It was decided that Bloemfontein should take up an agreement with Hsinchu, a city with a position in Taiwan that was comparable to that of Bloemfontein. In April 1989, during the visit of a delegation from Hsinchu, the agreement was officially

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28 *Die Volksblad*, 30 January 1990.

29 Confirmed with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux.

30 Interviews with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux, Norman Doubell and Van Chen, prominent businessman, owner of Sheet Plastic, Bloemfontein, 12 July 2006.

signed with all the required pomp and ceremony in Bloemfontein. This visit was returned in October 1990, with an itinerary largely drawn up by Van Chen, who acted, at his own cost, as guide, translator and enthusiastic promoter.<sup>31</sup> The City Council could only advertise to a limited extent in the papers, and both parties agree that many industrialists came after having heard from their fellow countrymen.<sup>32</sup>

There are also second-generation industrialists, even though many South African Chinese children followed different career paths, mostly in other countries. One such second-generation industrialist is Jason Lai, a devout Buddhist, who took over from his father when the latter decided to devote his life to his religion.<sup>33</sup> He is chairman of a company registered in both South Africa and Taiwan called Hung Hsi, which focuses on property development in Bloemfontein. Several attempts were made by the Taiwanese to move into residential and industrial property development, most noticeably in the Bloemindustria area between Bloemfontein and Botshabelo, where there have been various attempts at residential development since 1992.<sup>34</sup> A number of ambitious and well-intended projects have already been planned, but with mixed success.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. CHINESE URBAN INTEGRATION IN THE FREE STATE FROM 1985

##### 4.1 Community and residential settlement

When they first arrived in the Free State and in Bloemfontein in particular, the Taiwanese had some difficulty in renting or buying property. Some agents refused to lease property to “Chinamen” and other Taiwanese experienced initial problems with neighbours.<sup>36</sup> Despite promises by the Bloemfontein City Council, some Taiwanese still had ‘problems with acquiring permits for people who had to stay there for a long time’,<sup>37</sup> especially whilst apartheid legislation was still in place. At first the industrialists from Taiwan were subject to the Group Areas Act. Visas were required of citizens of Taiwan who sought temporary residence for industrial and commercial investment. They were granted temporary residence permits, but were not classified

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31 *Die Volksblad*, 30 May 1989, p. 15; 18 April 1989, p. 8; 15 April 1989; 14 February 1986, p. 2; Interviews with Voet du Plessis, Flip le Roux, Norman Doubell and Van Chen.

32 Interviews with Voet du Plessis, Flip le Roux and Van Chen.

33 *Ons Stad*, 4 December 2003, p. 20. Interview with Jason Lai, prominent businessman and Clark Wan Feng, chairman of the Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce, Bloemfontein, 10 July 2006.

34 *Ons Stad*, 11 December 2003, p. 2.

35 Though some visible development has taken place at Bloemindustria, residential developments such as “Mandela View” have yet to acquire the status of luxurious yet affordable upper-middle-class areas, as was the intention. Visit to sites, 10 December 2006.

36 Yap and Leong Man, p. 419; interviews with Van Chen, Jason Lai and Clark Wan-Feng.

37 *Beeld*, 4 June 1985, p. 11.



in terms of the Population Registration Act. Although they were subject to the Group Areas Act until 1984, they were free to apply to any school for the admission of their children.<sup>38</sup> In the beginning the myriad of forms and regulations were available only in English. This complicated the procedure further for immigrants, until the Taiwanese community themselves had the documents translated.<sup>39</sup>

Various attempts were made by property developers to build “Chinatowns” for the new wave of immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The potential investors in these developments came from South Africa as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong. The intention with these “Chinatowns” was to centralise investment, but because the Group Areas Act was still fresh in the collective memory of South African Chinese, the Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) voiced its opposition to the idea of “Chinatowns” for the immigrants from Taiwan, saying that they “cannot tolerate any exclusive grouping, whether this be voluntary or enforced [sic]”.<sup>40</sup>

One such attempt at an exclusive grouping, was a planned creation of a R170 million Chinatown located just outside Bayswater, one of Bloemfontein’s northern suburbs, in 1991. The project on the approximately 34 ha site would have included 125 luxury homes, a Chinese-style hotel, a shopping centre and a park.<sup>41</sup> Though the City Council was in principle not against the development, the planned area lay next to an existing shopping centre and would therefore have had to be rezoned.<sup>42</sup> The project soon failed. Although the Taiwanese did suggest some reasons for the failure of the project, there is no clarity about *how* and *why* it failed. According to Taiwanese businessmen, the population size of Bloemfontein did not justify such an investment. Furthermore, the increase in crime and violence was a source of great concern to prospective investors.<sup>43</sup> The R170 million destined for the Chinatown development was then said to have gone towards a property development in Pentagonpark.<sup>44</sup> After this venture had failed as well, the people of Bloemfontein became sceptical about Taiwanese investments.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of locating to a Chinatown, the Taiwanese community in Bloemfontein “live all over”, according to those Taiwanese interviewed.<sup>46</sup> When asked to name the

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38 Yap and Leong Man, p. 418.

39 “Chinese nyweraars hou van Bloemfontein”, *Finansies & Tegniek*, 26 Julie 1991, p. 138.

40 Yap and Leong Man, p. 423.

41 *Business Day*, 14 February 1991, p. 3.

42 *Ons Stad*, 13 March 1991, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

43 *Ibid.*, 13 April 1992, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

44 *Ibid.*, 14 March 1991, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

45 *Ibid.*, 5 September 1991, n.p (SA Media clipping file).

46 Interviews with Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald, Yu-Chiong “Frankie” Feng, restaurant owner and musician, Bloemfontein, 10 July 2006, Van Chen, Leong Lee, minister, Dutch Reformed Church Hugenoot Congregation, and his wife, Rachel, Bloemfontein, 11 July 2006.

suburbs where they live, it seems that they prefer the northern, more affluent suburbs such as Bayswater, Pentagonpark, Heuwelsig, Waverly and Dan Pienaar. After a spate of crime in 2004 and 2005 in especially Heuwelsig, interviewees claimed that some Taiwanese who did not flee the country moved to less “rich-looking” suburbs.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4.2 Taking care of the children: Schools and education

One of the major hindrances facing the Taiwanese who wanted to settle in Bloemfontein was that the English schools had a lack of accommodation.<sup>48</sup> Though Bloemfontein has some highly regarded schools that also teach in English, almost all of them are single-sex and difficult to enrol in as a result of their popularity and prestige status. The co-education English schools in the proximity of the suburbs most Taiwanese settled in, Brebner High and Christian Brother’s College (CBC), also had limited accommodation available.<sup>49</sup>

Initially, most Taiwanese children went to Brebner High School, nowadays probably Bloemfontein’s most multicultural school. The school had already started taking in children of representatives of the Transkei homeland during the 1980s at the request of the then South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pik Botha. Later the government was pressured to allow the enrolment of other “Transkei citizens”.<sup>50</sup> Being a tightly-knit community that takes great pride in their cultural and national heritage, the Taiwanese and their embassy went to great lengths to cultivate a sense of culture and tradition in their children. Initially the Taiwanese embassy sponsored two teachers, and the Taiwanese children were put in separate classes until their English was proficient enough for mainstream tuition. Later, new Taiwanese children were paired off with children who had been in the school for some time and who translated classes for them.

In addition to Chinese as a second language, lessons in Chinese history and culture were also given in the afternoons. These classes are still attended by Taiwanese pupils from other schools. They wrote British GSCE-level exams in Mandarin. The classes have now been taken over by local teachers of Taiwanese descent.<sup>51</sup> According to Karen Huang, then chairperson of the Chinese Association of Bloemfontein and coordinator of the afternoon Chinese schooling at Brebner,

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47 Interviews with Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang, Shu-Hui Groenewald and Yu-Chiong “Frankie” Feng.

48 There was a negative precedent for Taiwanese schoolchildren in the Free State.. In 1983 a Taiwanese mother who had to flee Lesotho after that country had severed ties with Taiwan wanted to enrol her daughter, 11-year-old Bibi Koo, in a Harrismith school, but she was denied entrance because “she did not have the necessary permits”. Yap and Leong Man, p. 419.

49 *Ons Stad*, 7 May 1992, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

50 Interview with Andrew Taylor, principal of Brebner High and chair of Bayswater Police Forum, Bloemfontein, 4 January 2007.

51 Interview with Andrew Taylor.

the goal is that “all Chinese children, most of whom were born in South Africa, must learn everything about the Chinese language, culture, and history”.<sup>52</sup> In 1997 another Taiwanese teacher, paid by the Taiwanese government, was brought to Brebner. In 1999 Brebner had 95 pupils of Taiwanese descent. Nowadays only very few industrialists’ children still attend Brebner and they are now dispersed amongst all the Bloemfontein schools with English as the medium of instruction, especially as the children started to become proficient in English.<sup>53</sup>

The Chinese pupils adapted well in the Bloemfontein schools, excelling at academic work and extramural activities such as chess and karate.<sup>54</sup> In 1991 the first Head Pupil “of colour” chosen in a previously white school was Paul Shih, who came to Bloemfontein from Taiwan with his older brother.<sup>55</sup> Taiwanese were regularly among the top matric candidates in the city.<sup>56</sup>

Though there were some social tensions at times, Joseph Lai, a Grey College-educated attorney, said that he had friends from several cultures, including Afrikaans people.<sup>57</sup> According to Brebner’s principal, Andrew Taylor, the picture at Brebner High looked somewhat different. He said that even the few Taiwanese remaining in the school are much less inclined to integrate than the other minorities who attend the school today, including Koreans, Phillipinos and Pakistanis. They also prefer to have their own sports teams.<sup>58</sup> According to Taylor, their reluctance to integrate can perhaps be found in their nationalist culture, but one must keep differences in school cultures in mind. Unlike Brebner High, Grey College, for example, is a school with a coherent group identity attached to a school.

According to Chen Mido-Yu, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald, their children were sometimes singled out at school as “Chinese”, but then they emphasised that they were in fact South African.<sup>59</sup> Many of those who grew up in South Africa and Bloemfontein can readily speak their parents’ mother tongue, but have some difficulty in writing it.<sup>60</sup> Many also use their good English skills to acquire an education and they emigrate to countries such as Canada and the USA.<sup>61</sup>

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52 *Die Volksblad*, 15 January 2000, p. 4.

53 *Ibid.*, 4 July 2002, p. 3.

54 Interviews with Voet du Plessis, Flip Le Roux and Van Chen; “Chinese nyweraars hou van Bloemfontein”, *Finansies & Tegniek*, 26 July 1991, p. 138.

55 *Die Volksblad*, 14 November 1991, p. 6.

56 Interview with Andrew Taylor.

57 Interview with Joseph Lai, South African educated attorney, Bloemfontein, 11 July 2006.

58 Interview with Andrew Taylor.

59 Interviews with Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald.

60 Interviews with Joseph Lai, Jason Lai and Yu “Clark” Wan-Feng.

61 Interviews with Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald.

Early on, when more mainland Chinese moved in, Taylor said, there were visible tension between the Taiwanese and the new immigrants from mainland China, also on the school grounds. In general, however, the two communities are working together surprisingly well in Bloemfontein. Between the Taiwanese and the black children the same kind of tension exists as between the black students and most other minorities at Brebner High. One possible explanation is resentment amongst the black community, who blame foreigners for job losses and crime. Many of the new immigrants are setting up small businesses and shops in the black townships and surroundings. The new immigrants have a different, more effective type of business acumen generally to the detriment of local black-owned shops. The xenophobia then filters through to the children and the school ground, where the children who can afford to do so tend to “flash their money”,<sup>62</sup> assuming an air of superiority.

### 4.3 A school or a parking lot? The Heuwelsig school issue

In April 1992 plans were made public for building a new school in Heuwelsig, an affluent Bloemfontein suburb. At the time between 15 to 20 Taiwanese families lived in the area<sup>63</sup> and Bloemfontein had about 3 000 Taiwanese inhabitants and the highest concentration of Taiwanese industrialists in the country.<sup>64</sup> The allotted land, already zoned for schooling purposes, was next to a Dutch Reformed Church and used as an informal parking lot. The school building, which would have catered for Chinese schooling in the afternoons but would function as a fully-fledged English South African school in the morning, would have been paid for by Taiwanese investors.<sup>65</sup> The developer, Van Cheng, had already allocated the money from overseas investors.<sup>66</sup> There was also a rumour that a small Buddhist temple would be added to the school’s premises.<sup>67</sup>

The project was met with vehement opposition from some people in the local Afrikaner community. The tension created by the idea of a Chinese school next to a Dutch Reformed Church, a church that formed an integral part of Afrikaner identity politics, revealed the underlying racial tensions between the Heuwelsig Afrikaans community and their Taiwanese counterparts. In the leading article of *Die Afrikaner*, the mouthpiece of the right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP), the Bloemfontein City Council was accused of choosing “good relations” with the Taiwanese above the church, and that this left Bloemfontein’s inhabitants ‘with doubts about the

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62 Interview with Andrew Taylor.

63 *Ons Stad*, 7 May 1992, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

64 Interviews with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux.

65 *Ons Stad*, 7 May 1992, n.p. and 21 May 1992.n.p. (SA Media clipping files).

66 H van der Merwe, “Chinese wil Bloemfontein los oor bou van skool”, probably *Ons Stad*, 5 August 1992, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

67 *Ons Stad*, 31 July 1992, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

“Christian” City Council’. Furthermore, they argued, that the ‘Chinese chose Bloemfontein as their ‘culture city’ and they apparently want to create some sort of Chinese Mecca out of it. The damage this will do to Bloemfontein’s Afrikaans character is incalculable, because soon Bloemfontein will get the nickname “China City”.<sup>68</sup> Some members of the Afrikaans community complained that it ‘would damage the image of the neighbourhood’ and that it would lead to a decrease in property value.<sup>69</sup> At a City Council meeting to decide the fate of the project, one council member, Prof. Fief van der Merwe, asked why the Taiwanese were allowed to buy property in Heuwelsig in the first place, saying that “they look us in the eyes, and want their own schools”. The “inappropriateness” of a Buddhist temple next to a Christian church was also cited as problematic and intrusive.<sup>70</sup>

Other City Council members were appalled at what was likened to “racist AWB-like speeches”. “We tried to get the Chinese here. Now we handle them like lepers”, said one councillor, Dr Louis Wessels.<sup>71</sup> Eight councillors voted against the project and seven in favour of it.<sup>72</sup> The Taiwanese community was upset about the decision. They had already invested a great deal in Bloemfontein and were usually on good terms with the City Council. They also contributed to community upliftment in the area.<sup>73</sup> They threatened to take their business elsewhere, to Durban or Pretoria where they would get free land for the building of a school.<sup>74</sup>

The controversy around the school can perhaps be best understood not as an issue with the Chinese *per se*; after all, as the *Ons Stad* survey had already suggested, 90% of Bloemfonteiners approved of their arrival, but it rather played out against the wider background of rapidly deteriorating Afrikaner political power by 1992. It also played on a fear of loss of identity, as is evident from the above extracts about the city’s supposed “Afrikaans character”. Moreover, previous talks about major Chinese investments in Bloemfontein were not always successful, with numerous projects such as the Chinatown and the property developments at Pentagonpark that fell through. Then again, many investments did in fact come to fruition, and many factories had indeed been erected. According to Flip le Roux, who served as Bloemfontein town clerk during the 1980s, the apprehension of the Afrikaans community was not the reason that the school did not materialise.<sup>75</sup> One cannot

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68 *Die Afrikaner*, 3 June 1992, p. 5.

69 *Ons Stad*, 18 June 1992, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

70 *Ibid.*, 31 July 1992, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

73 Interviews with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux.

74 H van der Merwe, “Chinese wil Bloemfontein los oor bou van skool”, Probably *Ons Stad*, 5 August 1992, n.p. (SA Media clipping file).

75 Interviews with Voet du Plessis and Flip le Roux.

really speculate whether or not the (much needed) school would have been erected had there not been opposition from the Afrikaans community. However, the incident highlighted the fact that there was a reason behind Bloemfontein's reputation as a conservative city and cooled down the relationship between some Chinese and Afrikaans inhabitants.

#### 4.4 The role of the Christian Church in the Bloemfontein Chinese community

Whereas one Dutch Reformed Church congregation drove the Taiwanese away in 1992, another embraced the community. It was especially the efforts of individual leaders in the community that played a decisive role in this regard. The Dutch Reformed Church in the Free State, like elsewhere in South Africa, played an important role in politics on a broad level – that of state, identity and culture. Statistically, it had the most members. It also had a strong emphasis on missionary work.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the Dutch Reformed Church was bound to become involved with the new migrants. Their involvement, as well as that of other religious groups, served as a revealing trajectory of Chinese settlement in Bloemfontein and the Free State.

Soon after the Chinese had arrived organisations were established to Christianise them, or to provide the Christian Chinese with a church community. The first discernable one was called the 'Aksie Christus vir die Chinese' (Action Christ for the Chinese) (ACC). Found in 1991 under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church, they called on the people of Bloemfontein to note that 'they need not go to the East to do missionary work, because the East is now here'.<sup>77</sup> The Action group also intended to help the new immigrants with settling in, organising activities such as the teaching of Afrikaans and English, and providing cooking lessons. Although, according to the Chinese interviewed, most Taiwanese in Bloemfontein were Buddhists,<sup>78</sup> some were either Christian or converted to Christianity in the Free State.

In 1993 missionary work started amongst Chinese in Bloemfontein and environs. Because language was a problem, Chinese missionaries were called to South Africa. In 1997 Calvin Lee was sent to Tshwane (Pretoria) and then to Bloemfontein.<sup>79</sup> Lee was a first generation immigrant from a Buddhist family and was converted to Christianity in 1979. He was an erstwhile aeronautical engineer and had worked under the auspices of the Hugenoot Dutch Reformed Church congregation. The congregation draws most of its members from Bayswater and Helicon Heights, two areas favoured by Chinese immigrants from Taiwan. The Chinese congregation grew

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76 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners – biography of a people* (Cape Town, 2002), p. 122.

77 *Die Volksblad*, 5 September 1991, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

78 *Ibid.*, 1992, n.p. (SA MEDIA clipping file).

79 *Ibid.*, 4 July 2002, p. 3.

and later Lee's mission field included Maseru, Ladybrand and surroundings.<sup>80</sup> In 1998 he was the first person of Chinese descent to be ordained as a Dutch Reformed Church minister.<sup>81</sup> This opened the way for the first Indian Dutch Reformed minister in South Africa to be ordained in the Free State in 2000<sup>82</sup> – despite the legacy of Article XXXIII of the *Orange Free State Law Book* of 1891. After Lee had left for the United States in 2005, he was succeeded by the Rev. Leong Lee. Currently, the Chinese regional congregation of the Hugenoot Dutch Reformed Church has about 100 communicant members and more adherents.<sup>83</sup> There are also a few South Koreans and mainland Chinese involved with the church. In 2005 four additional missionaries came to the church with the assistance of China Evangelistic Missions (CEM). The Hugenoot congregation now fulfils the role of “mother church” to smaller congregations set up all over South Africa.<sup>84</sup> They are also regularly invited to come and speak at Afrikaans congregations. Another Christian church, the Christian Revival Church (CRC), also attracted some members from the Chinese community and is active in upliftment work amongst the recent immigrants from the People's Republic.<sup>85</sup>

The involvement of the community, especially of the Dutch Reformed Church, shows a measure of cultural assimilation on the side of the Taiwanese, as well as a good networking opportunity. The latter motivation is also given for the involvement of newly arrived mainland Chinese, such as the Fujin people, a working-class people from the People's Republic of China, who mainly entered South Africa illegally via Lesotho.<sup>86</sup> The involvement of the church also opens up a particular cultural channel of communication that a part of the Bloemfontein community uses in order to engage with groups other than those whom they perceive as their own.

There is also a small Buddhist temple just outside of Bloemfontein, built in the early 1990s. Many Buddhists also regularly attend the Nan Hua temple in Gauteng, close to Bronkhorstspuit.<sup>87</sup>

#### 4.5 Putting out forest fires: Community involvement

The Taiwanese community in Bloemfontein took a lively interest in the local community through cultural activities and community development in both

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80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*, 17 February 1998.

82 Private conversation with Dr Nobin Shunmuggan, first minister of Indian descent in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, Bloemfontein, 2005.

83 *Volksblad*, 17 February 2005, p. 4.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Interviews with Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald.

86 Conversation with the Rev. Charles James, Dutch Reformed Church Hugenoot 1996-2006, Bloemfontein, 15 December 2006. Interviews with Leong Lee and Rachel Lee.

87 Interviews with Jason Lai, Yu “Clark” Wan-Feng, Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang, Shu-Hui Groenewald, Joseph Lai, Leong Lee and Rachel Lee.



Bloemfontein and the Free State at large. According to some researchers, many of these associations and organisations have the overarching function of creating networking opportunities. It is part of what is termed the “business-card” culture.<sup>88</sup> This would pertain more specifically to the Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce or Free State Chinese Association. However, these are not all exclusive organisations.

Interaction between the Taiwanese and the South African population of Bloemfontein is frequently negotiated by means of organisations. On the one level there is, for instance, the Tzu Chi foundation, involved in community and upliftment projects. In their own words, Tzu Chi members are “like small birds trying to put out a forest fire with the water in their beaks”.<sup>89</sup> Understandably, many of the projects in which the Taiwanese are involved also pertain to their own needs – such as their involvement with the Bayswater Police Forum<sup>90</sup> and their attempts to support private security companies.<sup>91</sup> On a more informal social level, the most remarkable initiative must be the Free State Chinese Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra was founded in 2004 after a chance meeting between Yo-Chiong “Frankie” Feng, a Hong Kong musician turned restaurateur, and Johan Cromhout, a well-known Bloemfontein musician and teacher. The orchestra consists of both Taiwanese and local students. The music, arranged by Frankie himself, is a blend of classical Western and classical Chinese music, using instruments from both traditions. The orchestra has been relatively successful and has also received invitations from other cities.<sup>92</sup>

## 5. MOVING ON: THE CHINESE IN PRESENT-DAY SOUTH AFRICA

At its peak in the early 1990s, the Taiwanese population in South Africa was estimated to have numbered between 30 000 and 40 000. Most re-migrated and those remained are estimated to number between 12 000 and 14 000.<sup>93</sup> The dwindling number of Taiwanese and the increasing number of mainland Chinese are closely linked to changing South African and global politics.

### 5.1 The diplomatic relationship between South Africa and the “two Chinas”

In December 1996 South Africa rather suddenly announced that they were taking up diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China, which also meant severing ties

88 Wilhelm, p.359.

89 *Tzu Chi Quarterly*, winter 1999. <http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/99winter/qw13.htm> (Accessed 11 December 2006).

90 *Die Volksblad*, 31 May 1997, p. 4. Interviews with Lai Jason, Wan-Feng and Yu “Clark”.

91 Interviews with Leong Lee and Rachel Lee.

92 *Volksblad*, 26 April 2006. [www.volksblad.co.za](http://www.volksblad.co.za) (Accessed 8 December 2006). Interviews with Lizabe Lamprechts, member of the Free State Chinese Orchestra, Bloemfontein, 6 July 2006 and Yu-Chiong “Frankie” Feng.

93 2005 estimate. Wilhelm, p. 352.



with the Republic of China or Taiwan.<sup>94</sup> Due to the animosity between the two Chinas, this was anything but an insignificant decision and had far-reaching consequences for the Chinese community in South Africa. Though informally there are still links between South Africa and Taiwan, “switching sides” impacted on migration regulations and opened the doors for an influx of immigrants and manufactured goods from mainland China, and the export of raw materials and agricultural products to China. In Bloemfontein the focus shifted from Hschichu to Nanjing. A controversially expensive visit to Nanjing by a delegation from Bloemfontein in July 1998<sup>95</sup> was returned in March 2000 by a delegation from Nanjing.<sup>96</sup> Officials at the current Bloemfontein City Council were unsure about whether or not a sister-city agreement or something similar exists between Bloemfontein and Nanjing.<sup>97</sup>

The Taiwanese community was taken aback at the decision and felt betrayed. Prof. Wenyen Chang, then chairperson of the Free State Association for Taiwanese, asked whether “it is not strange and questionable that South Africa, an exemplary democracy, would take up ties with an oppressive regime at the expense of ties with a free and democratic country?”<sup>98</sup> Though most Taiwanese interviewed are still disappointed with the government’s decision, most of them say they understand the political, economic and emotional reasoning behind the decision. It did, however, complicate immigration and work permits for citizens from Taiwan. One interviewee also said that the absence of a formal diplomatic relationship, along with other factors such as labour laws and crime, discouraged further investment from Taiwan.<sup>99</sup>

## 5.2 Labour laws and unions

Another reason why many Taiwanese left, pertaining more specifically to their economic livelihood, concerns labour. From the outset, despite government incentives, major stumbling blocks to effectively erecting factories were language difficulties and an unskilled labour force. These problems were exacerbated in post-1994 South Africa, with the strengthening of labour unions and the implementation of strict labour laws, such as the 1995 Labour Relations Act.

On the one hand, South Africans were not used to the sweatshop conditions under which many had to work in Taiwanese factories. Cases of severe underpayment

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94 *Die Volksblad*, 2 December 1996, p. 5.

95 *Ibid.*, 26 June 1998, p. 8.

96 *Ibid.*, 28 January 2000, p. 4.

97 George Masuabi, Demographics Officer, Motheo District Municipality, Bloemfontein, 4 July 2006. Several colleagues of Mr Masuabi did not know either when asked during informal conversations.

98 *Die Volksblad*, 2 December 1996, p. 5.

99 Interview with Van Chen.

and appalling working conditions in Botshabelo factories were reported.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, Taiwanese factory owners said that minimum wages “reduce already low productivity and compel the companies to cut their workforces by half”.<sup>101</sup> It would also increase the already high staff turnover. In addition, factory owners were inexperienced in handling labour unions, which play a pivotal role in the South African economy and politics.

Most Taiwanese factory-owners pursued one of two options. The first was to relocate the factories to the neighbouring countries, Lesotho and Swaziland, where labour was cheaper. A second option was to move their factories to mainland China, since the borders had opened, as labour there was cheap and controllable.<sup>102</sup> The latter movement has ironically forced local Taiwanese factory owners, labour unions and government to work together, as those factories that moved to mainland China undercut the prices of locally made products, forcing severe job losses.<sup>103</sup> Though most interviewees mentioned labour as a push-factor, some denied that it had played a role.

Though most factories closed down, according to 2003 data released by the Taipei Liaison Office, there are 37 left in Botshabelo, 14 at Thaba Nchu and 11 at Bloemfontein.<sup>104</sup> It must be kept in mind, though, that the numbers dwindled sharply in 2004 and 2005, according to many of those interviewed. According to Frankie Feng, before 2004 his customer base was 50% Taiwanese and 50% local. Currently (2006) only 5% of his customers are of Chinese descent.<sup>105</sup>

### 5.3 Crime: Victims and perpetrators

As for many other South African inhabitants who could afford emigration, the escalation in crime after the 1994 elections is the reason cited most often for the decision to move to other countries. Crimes committed against Chinese and Taiwanese in South Africa are widely reported locally and also in China. The most frequent explanation of why a big proportion of Taiwanese are victims of robberies is that they have in the past tended to lead a visibly luxurious lifestyle, and are thought to have large sums of money in their homes.<sup>106</sup> Many Bloemfontein Taiwanese realised this and started to tone down their lifestyle.<sup>107</sup>

100 *The Daily News*, 18 August 1997, p. 5; *Star*, 9 March 2004.

101 *The Star*, 22 August 1997, p. 5.

102 Interviews with Joseph Lai and Andrew Taylor.

103 *SABC News Report*, *Afrikaans News Bulletin*, 2 January 2007.

104 “Taiwanese investment in South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho: A case study by Ambassador Du Ling”, 12 June. 2003. <http://www.roc-taiwan.org.za/press/20030612/2003061201.html>.

105 Interview with Yu-Chiong “Frankie” Feng.

106 *China Daily*, 7 February 2006. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-02/07/content\\_4147254.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-02/07/content_4147254.htm) (Accessed 9 December 2006).

107 Interviews with Yu-Chiong “Frankie” Feng, Leong Lee, Rachel Lee, Mido-Yu Chen, Jolene Chang and Shu-Hui Groenewald.

The Chinese are, however, not only victims of crime, but have also been linked to various cases of organised crime. Several triads are known to operate in South Africa, including societies operating from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Moving into South Africa in the early 1980s,<sup>108</sup> they operated from all the major city centres, including Bloemfontein.<sup>109</sup>

Traditionally, triads are known for the smuggling of endangered species such as shark (for their fins) and abalone. In Bloemfontein at least one major case of abalone smuggling has been exposed.<sup>110</sup> Although abalone smuggling still forms an important part of their activities, it is no longer their core business, which now consists of ‘various forms of fraud, drug trafficking, firearm smuggling, extortion, money laundering, prostitution, illegal gambling, the smuggling of illegal immigrants, tax evasion, and the large-scale importing of counterfeit goods’.<sup>111</sup> There is, however, no evidence of a direct link between the triad societies and the Taiwanese industrialists still living in South Africa. The nature of these societies is such that it is nearly impossible to obtain precise factual information on them.

The publicity and popular myths<sup>112</sup> spun around the triads have an impact on the daily lives of Chinese. Most South Africans do not distinguish between the different Chinese groups, often using the expression “Chinese” for all peoples from the Far East, including diverse countries such as South Korea and Japan. Many law-abiding Chinese bear the brunt of the perception that Chinese cannot be trusted and everything cheap comes from China. Chinese who have been in South Africa for several generations have been approached by police to present their passports, for instance, or have been victims of racial slurs.<sup>113</sup>

#### **5.4 Land of opportunity no more? Affirmative action and the re-racialisation of South Africa**

The interstitial position of Chinese in South Africa was not alleviated after the demise of apartheid; it was merely embedded in another matrix. Though it probably affects the South African Chinese on a deeper psycho-social level, a few Taiwanese brought

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108 P Gastrow, “Triad societies and Chinese organised crime in South Africa.” *Institute for Security Studies*. Occasional Paper 48, 2001. <http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Papers/48/48.html> (Accessed 26 December 2006).

109 *Weekly Mail*, 26 June 1992, p. 12.

110 *Volksblad*, 24 January 2002, p. 1.

111 P Gastrow, “Triad societies and Chinese organised crime in South Africa.”

112 See, for example, *Weekly Mail*, 26 June 1992, p. 12: ‘Members are required to swear 36 oaths which bind them for life – betrayal means death – and to undergo an initiation ceremony in which they drink blood, memorise certain texts and learn identifying handshakes and signs’.

113 Wilhelm, p. 352

up the same subject: they were “non-white” and now are deemed not to have been “previously disadvantaged”.<sup>114</sup> They are not mentioned in the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Act 53 of 2003 and other relevant Employment Equity Acts. The Broad Based BEE Act defines “black” as a ‘generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians’.<sup>115</sup> In current official parlance used, for example, in census documents, Chinese fall under the broad and vague categories of “Indian or Asian” or just “Asian”.<sup>116</sup> In effect, they occupy the same anomalous position as before in a re-racialised South African society.

A study by Cliffe Dekker Inc. on the status of South Africans of Chinese ancestry for an empowerment company found Chinese people should be deemed “Historically Disadvantaged South Africans” as they were subjected to discriminatory legislation in the previous dispensation.<sup>117</sup> Yet, the reality is that many Chinese youths, like their white and urban black counterparts, feel that they will not have job opportunities in South Africa and move to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.<sup>118</sup> Conversely, the migration of Chinese youths is also part of the increasingly migratory and global job market, especially for young educated people. As Joseph Lai, a young Taiwanese attorney in Bloemfontein remarked, quite a few of his white South African friends are currently teaching English in Taiwan.<sup>119</sup>

### 5.5 The interrelationship between Chinese groups in post-apartheid South Africa

Though the South African Chinese and the Taiwanese do not share the same mother tongue, they do share the same middle-class values and lifestyle. Amongst them an underlying hostility prevails towards the newcomers from mainland China, who are perceived as “uncivilized and lower class”.<sup>120</sup> The same sentiment, though diluted, was also expressed by a number of Bloemfontein Chinese. Almost all of those interviewed pointed out that most mainland Chinese enter South Africa illegally and that there are cultural and class differences between the two groups. Officials of the current Bloemfontein City Council, who seemed not to know the Taiwanese

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114 *Ibid.* D Accone, *All under heaven - the story of a Chinese family in South Africa* (Cape Town, 2004); *Daily Mail and Guardian*, 5 October 2000.

115 Cliffe Dekker Incorporated. *The status of South Africans of Chinese descent - prepared for Empowerdex (Propriety) Limited*. [www.cliffedekker.com](http://www.cliffedekker.com) (Accessed 5 July 2006), p. 5.

116 Statistics South Africa Census Documents 2001; “South Africa’s population”, *South Africa. info* (Official South Africa website) [www.southafrica.info/ess\\_info/sa\\_glance/demographics/population.htm](http://www.southafrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/demographics/population.htm) (Accessed 9 July 2006).

117 Cliffe Dekker Incorporated, *The status of South Africans of Chinese descent*, p. 9.

118 *Daily News*, 12 December 2006, p. 15; Y Park, *Shifting Chinese South African identities in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa* (2005).

119 Interview with Joseph Lai.

120 Wilhelm, p. 355.

community too well, also made the distinction.<sup>121</sup> Most Taiwanese, however, also mentioned that the mainland Chinese are exceptionally hard-working people who live frugally.

However, between the South African Chinese and Taiwanese, there is still a measure of a sense of “us” and “them”, especially following reports about labour and environmental practices.<sup>122</sup> There are also international politics to consider, as the Taiwanese strait is still a divide between the two Chinas. That the sense of division filtered through to South Africa is clear when one considers that in 2004 a China-backed All Africa Association for the Peaceful Reunification of China was inaugurated in Johannesburg.<sup>123</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

There are many historical ironies to be found in the history of the Taiwanese in Bloemfontein. The prevailing one, however, must be that they came to South Africa in general and Bloemfontein specifically to prop up the border industries which were apartheid South Africa’s last draw – franchise for all, but in “independent” homelands. Taiwan also conveniently suited the “total onslaught” rhetoric of the time. The pressure they faced from the international community, but especially from the People’s Republic of China, resonated with ideological fears of the apartheid state. Yet, if anything, the Taiwanese’s arrival in Bloemfontein provided even more impetus to the inevitable demise of apartheid. The impracticality and moral ambiguities of social engineering became even more apparent. In some instances the coming of the Taiwanese, and their integration as a minority community into Bloemfontein society, paved the way for other minority groups to settle in the city. Their history also shows the fragile and ambivalent relationship between cultures and races in big arenas such as economy and politics, but also in smaller localities such as the school ground or the church.

There are several minority cultures in South Africa with histories that must still be recounted, also in Bloemfontein. Some of these cultural groups have been here a while, like the Portuguese or Greeks. Others are starting to move in, such as an increasing number of Pakistanis and, of course, mainland Chinese. Looking at the history of these minority cultures, especially in cities and towns where their presence would seem unexpected, can provide valuable insight into how policies made in offices in the metropolises affect or disaffect real communities. The social histories

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121 Interview with George Masuabi.

122 Yap and Leong Man, p. 426.

123 “‘Johannesburg Declaration’ calls on overseas Chinese worldwide to promote peaceful reunification”, 16 June 2004 <http://www.china-embassy.ch/eng/ztnr/twttw/t138794.htm> (Accessed 16 December 2006).

of minorities also reflect on questions of identity and citizenship: how communities strive to uphold “their culture” and “their language” and on how they integrate into a country such as South Africa that both celebrates and curses its “diversity”. Towns in the Free State that will prove fertile ground for such analysis include Bethlehem, with its new large mosque and Bollywood video stores, or Ladybrand, a little town on the border with Lesotho with a surprising number of nationalities as its inhabitants. As long as one keeps in mind that no “group” or city is as homogeneous as it might appear at first glance.