

Perceptions of Chinese in Southern Africa: Constructions of the “Other” and the Role of Memory

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Abstract: Increasing numbers of Chinese migrants have arrived in southern Africa over the past two decades. Perceptions of and reactions to the Chinese, however, vary from country to country and within countries. This article, based on several years of field and survey research, examines perceptions of Chinese in South Africa and Lesotho. The author argues that in addition to the global context, national political and economic realities, history, and memory shape local perceptions of China and the Chinese people who now reside in these spaces. States and other political actors play a key role in constructions of foreigners. Competition, whether real or perceived, is also important in shaping negative attitudes toward migrants. However, personal interactions and memories can serve as mitigating factors, even in the face of negative news of China or Chinese activities.

Résumé: Un nombre croissant d’immigrants chinois sont arrivés en Afrique du sud au cours des vingt dernières années. Les réactions et perceptions varient d’un pays à l’autre et même d’une partie d’un pays à l’autre. En s’appuyant sur plusieurs années de recherche sur le terrain et à travers des sondages, cet article examine les perceptions des Chinois en Afrique du Sud et au Lesotho. L’auteur soutient qu’en plus du contexte global, des réalités économiques et politiques, l’Histoire et le souvenir du passé

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influencent les perceptions locales de la Chine et des Chinois qui résident maintenant dans ces contrées. Les états et autres acteurs politiques jouent un rôle clé dans la manière dont les étrangers sont perçus. La compétition, réelle ou perçue, est aussi un facteur important affectant les attitudes négatives contre les immigrants. Cependant, les interactions personnelles et les liens ainsi créés peuvent servir de facteurs atténuants, même au su de nouvelles négatives concernant la Chine ou les activités chinoises.

Introduction

Many media reports about China–Africa relations would have readers believe that Africans do not like the Chinese. China is often portrayed as a neocolonial power, hungry for African land and resources, its people descending on the continent in hordes to take advantage of poor, hapless Africans, all part of a plan hatched in Beijing by “China, Inc.” to take over Africa. The realities, of course, are far more complex, involving a range of Chinese actors in almost all of Africa’s fifty-four nations, each with its own distinct political and social history and involving multiple actors often with clashing views and interests. While much of the media and scholarly attention has tended to focus the spotlight on aid, trade, investment, and the politics of China–Africa ties, recently attention has turned to Chinese migrants, African responses to Chinese traders, and crimes involving Chinese.¹

This article examines African perceptions of Chinese people in Lesotho and South Africa, two of six southern African countries that have been the sites of my research over the past six years.² In this article I analyze these two countries as distinct cases, each with its own contested history, actors, and dynamics. Based on this research, Chinese in South Africa seem to fare much better than those in Lesotho. I will argue that views of China and Chinese people are (1) influenced by both global and official/state-level discourses on China (Sautman & Yan 2009) as well as constructions of the “other” (Nyamnjoh 2010); that they are (2) affected by national and local social, economic, and political contexts; but that (3) these perceptions are also mediated by social history, personal experiences, and memory.

The bodies of scholarly work that help us unpack and understand these migration flows and the complex responses of Africans to the Chinese migrants include works on the China–Africa connections, migration, African migration, and Chinese diasporas; however, each of these bodies of literature presents limitations. The scholarly work on China–Africa linkages has tended to focus primarily on the macropolitical and economic dynamics of the engagements rather than on grassroots dynamics. Much of the migration literature focuses on South–North and East–West trajectories from underdeveloped or less developed countries to more developed ones. African migration studies have focused almost entirely on movements between the former colony and the colonizing country or on flows of

refugees and asylum seekers within the continent (see Landau & Vigneswaran 2007; Lavie & Swedenberg 1996). The literature on overseas Chinese migration has focused on flows from China to the Americas and Australia or older movements of Chinese into Southeast Asia (see Wang & Wang 1998; Wang 2000; Pan 1990; Tan et al. 2007). Work on more recent Chinese flows has focused on high-flying transnational Chinese migrants—“astronaut” families and “parachute” children—as in the work of Aihwa Ong (1999). The migration of Chinese to Africa, particularly the vast numbers of Fujianese and other independent migrants, does not fit easily into any of these earlier East–West or transnational frameworks (see Huynh et al. 2010) because of the newer South–South trajectories and class positions of these newest migrants.

There is, however, a growing body of work that examines Chinese migration flows and new communities in different African countries; most of these works are based on extensive field research and draw out the specificities and nuances of each case while simultaneously challenging existing frameworks of migration as well as binary constructions of race relations in postindependence Africa (black/white, European/African, colonized/colonizer). More recently scholars have also begun to examine African perceptions of China and the growing numbers of Chinese on the continent.³ Sautman and Yan (2010) and Rebol (2009) summarize the earlier random sample surveys carried out by Afrobarometer, BBC, Pew, and Gallup. This article aims to contribute to this growing corpus of work with two site-specific cases and through greater focus on African attitudes about Chinese people rather than on China or China–Africa linkages. This article is also situated in terms of race relations in postindependent and postapartheid southern Africa. Xenophobia has been a growing problem in South Africa since the end of apartheid. In particular, it draws on Nyamnjoh’s (2010) notions that increasingly bounded ideas of race, place, and culture lead to exclusionary claims to culture, belonging, and identity.

The article is based largely on ethnographic interviews carried out in Lesotho and South Africa between 2008 and 2010, with a focus on Maseru and Johannesburg. Key informants in both countries included government officials, representatives of opposition political parties, activists, the media, unions, and the textile industry. In addition, I also distributed approximately 650 questionnaires (450 in South Africa, 200 in Lesotho) implemented by local field researchers. I used targeted sampling to obtain a range of views across gender, age, class, educational levels, and ethnic groups in different parts of Johannesburg and Lesotho to get a broad sense of African views of the Chinese people in their midst.⁴

National Contexts: Party Politics and the Economy

No doubt China’s global rise and Western responses to China as a potential global competitor set the stage for African national and local engagements and responses to China. Beyond the global level, however, national and

local contexts are critical to understanding how perceptions of and responses to Chinese migrants are shaped. In many ways the responses of Basotho and South Africans could not be more different.

Lesotho is one of the smallest countries in Africa, with just over 30,000 square kilometers of land. It is completely landlocked and mountainous with very little arable land. The nation is tiny, poor, and underdeveloped, with over 40 percent living below the poverty line and unemployment as high as 45 percent (CIA Factbook 2012). The population is small and shrinking, down from 2.3 million in the 2004 census to approximately 1.9 million due to the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS as well as ongoing outmigration into South Africa. There is a long history of Basotho men leaving the country to work in South Africa's mines; more recently Basotho women have been crossing the border for domestic work in South Africa. The complex and historic ties to South Africa, the general lack of development and consequent poverty, a history of outmigration, and a fractious political situation with multiple parties set the stage for both its engagement with foreign nations and its highly ambiguous treatment of its Chinese migrants.

In contrast, South Africa, with a population of approximately 50 million, is Africa's largest economy; however the country has deep levels of inequality, high unemployment, and an official jobless rate of over 25 percent (CIA Factbook 2012). In terms of migration status, it is both a receiving and a sending country. In the context of South Africa's continued high levels of unemployment, frustration about the lack of service delivery promised by the ANC, and continued signs of fracture within the leadership of the ruling party, the political opposition in South Africa and even disgruntled government partners have periodically targeted China as a convenient scapegoat.

While several of the political parties, including the ANC, have a history of ties with China, the Democratic Alliance (DA) has no such history and periodically displays an anti-China position, particularly in regard to China's human rights abuses (interview with Kenneth Mubu, June 10, 2010). The South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the ANC's two partners in the tripartite alliance that governs the country, have demonstrated conflicting views about China, with the SACP reaching out to the Chinese communists while COSATU lambasts the government's close ties with China. The labor unions have led periodic boycotts against Chinese products and calls for quotas on China-made goods; however, COSATU has never led a broad or lasting anti-China charge in South Africa. Given the complex ties linking COSATU with the ANC government, the nation's growing dependence on economic ties to China, and the in-fighting within the ruling party about China, this situation is not likely to change in the near term.

Both South Africa and Lesotho have growing populations of Chinese people, but the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the first Chinese in the two countries, the current dynamics, and the local responses are strikingly divergent, as the next sections will discuss.

Chinese in Lesotho

Lesotho has been one of the most fickle African countries with regard to its official relations with “China,” having switched recognition between the Republic of China (ROC)/Taiwan and the mainland People’s Republic of China (PRC) multiple times since gaining independence in 1966. The first ethnic Chinese migrants to Lesotho arrived in late 1960s from Taiwan as participants in a Taiwanese state agricultural project. A small number of the Taiwanese agricultural workers decided to stay at the conclusion of their government contracts. More Taiwanese immigrants arrived in the 1970s and 1980s; many of these Taiwanese were engaged in the textile and garment manufacturing industry, likely part of the flows of Taiwanese capital and people moving to South Africa during that period (see Hart 2002; Park 2010). According to Jennifer Chen, the owner of one of the garment factories, there are approximately four hundred to five hundred Taiwanese in the country (interview, June 5, 2009). The Taiwanese textile industry is the second largest employer in the country (after the government) and the largest employer in the manufacturing sector, even as more and more factories have closed in recent years. Interviews with the Lesotho Textile Exporters Association and labor unions indicated that from a high of approximately 57,000 jobs in 2002–3, the number of jobs in the industry dropped to approximately 35,000–38,000 in early 2010 (interviews with Jennifer Chen, June 5, 2009, and Daniel Maraisane, June 3, 2009). Numerous complaints about working conditions were lodged through the 1990s and into the early 2000s; however, since the 2005 launch of a special Inter-Ministerial Task Team (IMTT), key issues have been addressed despite some continued complaints of low wages (African Economic Outlook 2012).

The earliest migrants from mainland China arrived simultaneously with the Taiwanese, as managers and supervisors for the textile factories; however, it was not until the mid-2000s that Chinese from the PRC began to arrive in any significant numbers. According to preliminary interviews, the majority of these more recent immigrants appear to be from Fujian province; a Brenthurst Foundation report corroborates these findings (McNamee et al. 2012:16,35). The majority work as traders in Lesotho, running “China shops” selling clothing and inexpensive household items or groceries. They tend to be much less educated than the earlier Taiwanese migrants, and they have spread out across the country as far as the tiny mountainous outposts in the interior. In 2009 and 2010, most Basotho interviewees estimated the Chinese population as ranging from five thousand to ten thousand; the Brenthurst report cites a source that claims that Chinese make up about 1 percent of the overall population in Lesotho, or twenty thousand (McNamee et al. 2012:33). Whether the actual figures are closer to five thousand or twenty thousand, in the context of such a small and shrinking local population and the current economic conditions, the impact of the Chinese presence and mounting tensions surrounding the growing Chinese population are palpable. In Lesotho, the Taiwanese and

the Chinese migrants are the only significant “other,” they are highly visible, and it would appear that they are increasingly seen as the “despised other.”

Chinese in South Africa

South Africa is the only country on the African continent with a significant “indigenous” or ethnic Chinese community with roots going back to the discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa in the late 1870s and 1880s.⁵ This historically rooted community currently comprises about ten thousand to twelve thousand people and is scattered throughout South Africa’s provinces, based mostly in the larger cities and towns. South Africa is also home to a community of approximately six thousand Taiwanese South Africans, a significant decrease from nearly thirty thousand in the early 1990s; this community, too, is unique in Africa. The Taiwanese community established itself in South Africa during the latter half of the apartheid era, as a result of a South African state-sponsored incentive scheme to attract Taiwanese investment in manufacturing to the black South African “homelands.” Taiwanese South Africans—largely middle class, educated, and professional—are now concentrated in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and the Free State, one of the provinces of intensive apartheid-era industrial investment.

The third and largest group of Chinese in South Africa comprises newer migrants from mainland China; statistics for this last group are the most elusive, but there seems to be a general consensus that between 350,000 and a half million migrants from PRC have arrived since the early 1990s. These “new” Chinese migrants are, by far, the most diverse; they come from many different regions of China, are scattered throughout South Africa in both rural and urban areas, and are engaged in a wide range of economic activities. While Chinese migrants in small towns and rural areas tend to operate small “China shops” as in Lesotho and many other African countries, it was clear from previous research in the Free State that they are not displacing any South Africans but rather filling gaps that have been vacated by others. These shops had been operated by earlier immigrant groups, including those from Greece, Cyprus, and Portugal. Johannesburg, in contrast, has very few Chinese operating retail shops except in the two Chinatowns; rather, they have moved up the economic ladder into wholesale trade.⁶

While the number of recent Chinese immigrants in South Africa is by far the highest on the continent, such statistics must also be put into context. South Africa has relatively high rates of emigration; according to the OECD database, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand have the largest number of South African immigrants. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has also received large numbers of both documented and undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers from other countries both within and outside of Africa, including Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, Somalia, Bangladesh,

and Pakistan (Landau & Kabwe Segatti 2009:9). The total foreign population (including documented and undocumented) based on the Forced Migration Study Program's extrapolations from census data is likely to be between 1.6 and 2 million; the vast majority seems to be concentrated in and around Johannesburg and Cape Town. Zimbabweans currently make up the largest group of international migrants in the country; including both recent arrivals and long-term residents, there are between 1 million and 1.5 million Zimbabweans currently in South Africa (Polzer 2010:3).

Unfortunately, as the foreign population of South Africa has grown, so too has xenophobia (see Polzer 2010; Misago et al. 2009; HRW 2009). In recent years South Africa's African foreigners have been the targets of increasing xenophobic violence. A preliminary study of Asian migrants (Park & Rugunanan 2009) suggests that the historical presence of Chinese and Indian South African communities and a lack of competition were key factors in the absence of xenophobic violence against these newer Asian migrant communities. In his attempt to explain why xenophobia in South Africa is targeted specifically at black African foreigners, Nyamnjoh explains: "The hierarchy of humanity inherited from apartheid South Africa is replayed, with white South Africans at the helm as superior, black South Africans in the middle as superior inferiors, and *Makwerekwere* as the inferior scum of humanity."⁷ Nyamnjoh adds that "Coloureds and Indians are not part of the picture in any big way." Furthermore, white foreigners are also excluded from the xenophobia. He states: "The articulate and accomplished white migrants are presumed to bring opportunities; the stuttering and depleting *Makwerekwere* compound the insecurities and uncertainties in South African lives" (2010:66).

In most instances of xenophobic violence, the Chinese and South Asian migrants have been spared. It would appear that the Chinese migrants, like the ethnic Chinese South Africans who came before them, fall somewhere in between black and white (see Park 2011, and forthcoming); furthermore, as with the Coloureds and Indians discussed by Nyamnjoh, they seem to fall outside of the constructions of insider-outsider. While interviews with members of the Chinese, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrant communities indicate that they feel quite vulnerable to criminals and corrupt officials, particularly for extortion and theft (Park & Rugunanan 2009), this sense of insecurity is likely a result of their overrepresentation in the retail sector and some level of "racial profiling." Evidently, whereas Chinese in Lesotho have been targeted as an "abhorred other," Chinese in South Africa have a long history as a significant part of the social fabric of the nation.

Perceptions of Chinese—The Survey

Both qualitative and quantitative research conducted over a multiyear period indicate that responses to and perceptions of Chinese in South Africa and Lesotho vary considerably, both within and between countries. A preliminary analysis of the two questionnaires targeting general populations

indicates that Basotho are much more critical about China and the Chinese migrants in their country than are South Africans. For example, 33.7 percent of the Basotho indicated that the impact of China's rising power in Africa is potentially harmful versus 14 percent of South Africans; when they were asked an inverted version of the question, 64.2 percent of the South Africans thought that China was potentially beneficial for Africa, while only 49.8 percent of the Basotho responded positively. Nearly 50 percent of the Basotho "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with media portrayals of China as a neocolonial power whereas only 25.5 percent of South Africans agreed with this portrayal.

With regard to the impact of Chinese migration on their respective countries, only 16.5 percent of Basotho indicated that increased Chinese migration would benefit their county, whereas 51.5 percent of South Africans thought Chinese migration was potentially beneficial. Nearly 40 percent of South Africans thought Chinese businesses in their country were helpful to local economic development; in contrast less than 12 percent of the Basotho felt that Chinese businesses would help local economic development, while close to 50 percent responded that Chinese businesses were either not helpful or actually harmed the interests of local people.

When asked to describe Chinese migrants, many of the respondents seemed to agree that Chinese were hardworking (40.5 percent in South Africa's general population and 30.5 percent in Lesotho); quite a few also found Chinese to be disciplined, although much more so in South Africa than in Lesotho (21.6 percent versus 5.3 percent). Perhaps most interesting, however, is that 31.2 percent of the Basotho found the Chinese to be unfriendly, and another 17.5 percent thought that they were racist; in contrast, only 4.6 percent of the South Africans found the Chinese to be unfriendly, and only 4.6 percent thought that they were racist. While there is considerable difference in attitudes toward and perceptions of the Chinese *within* both countries, generally, the Basotho seem to harbor more and stronger negative feelings than the South Africans. In both South Africa and Lesotho, particular sectors stood out as the loci of tension in regard to the Chinese migrants, as the next sections will detail.

Areas of Engagement and Tension—Lesotho

Interviews and a review of local media reports from 2007 to 2010 indicate that Chinese–Basotho tensions in Lesotho revolve primarily around two industries: the textile and garment industry, and retail trade of small commodities. Since the establishment of textile and garment factories, Basotho workers have accused Taiwanese factory owners of a range of abuses including employing child labor, sexist and ageist hiring policies, cruel and abusive labor practices, failure to observe national holidays, and environmental degradation. While the most severe problems within the textile and garment industry seem to have been addressed through the work of the taskforce (IMTT) mentioned earlier, general perceptions of

the “bad Taiwanese employer” linger. It should be noted, too, that most Basotho do not distinguish between more established Taiwanese Chinese individuals and more recent migrants from mainland China.⁸

Many Basotho continue to be angry about the near omnipresence of Chinese in their country. Most Chinese in Lesotho run small “China shops”; smaller numbers operate grocery stores as well as a variety of other small businesses including hardware stores, petrol stations, wholesalers, restaurants, butcheries, and sewing and tailoring shops.⁹ Multiple Chinese businesses can be found not only in Maseru, but also in Teyateyaneng, Leribe, Maputsoe, and Butha-Buthe and the small outposts along the main road to Katse Dam. According to one interviewee, “You cannot move 5 kilometers without seeing a Chinese shop. All of Kingsway and Eloff [two of the main roads in the central business district of Maseru] is now [made up of] Chinese shops. They’ve displaced Basotho shops. Outside of town, as well, eight out of ten businesses are run by Chinese” (interview with Mamolete Mohapi, June 4, 2009).

Technically, all of the smaller businesses are illegal because national legislation reserves ownership of small businesses for Basotho citizens. Trading licenses are supposed to be granted to citizens only; however, Chinese, with the “cooperation” of Basotho officials, landlords, and former business owners, regularly bypass these laws by renting shops from locals, purchasing trading licenses, and even purchasing national identity documents. National policies are designed to attract foreign investment and create jobs. These Chinese retailers are clearly not investors as such, and yet they seem to benefit—often unknowingly—from a generally pro-China government position.

In contrast to the situation in South Africa, where Chinese businesses seem to be filling marketplace gaps, Chinese businesses in Lesotho are putting locals out of business at their own game. As one interviewee complained, “They are not going into big business, but competing with apples, oranges, sweets, and fat cakes [fried dough balls]!” (interview with Tohland Rantsoeleba, June 3, 2009). According to interviews conducted in Lesotho, dozens of local Basotho businesses closed down between 2005 and 2010. The Chinese shops offer many of the same goods at lower prices. Chinese business practices include purchasing from other Chinese (perhaps, but not always, at a discount), making bulk purchases in groups (operating like cooperatives), and focusing on bulk sales and rapid turnover rather than high profit margins. Within a few short years, since they first entered the retail market scene in the 1990s but more rapidly since 2005–6, these Chinese businesses seem to have displaced most Basotho small local businesses. Despite the prevalence and popularity of “China shops” among ordinary people, Basotho consumers also complained incessantly about the poor quality of Chinese goods and services. When my research team inquired about why Basotho continue to buy from Chinese shops given the numerous complaints about cheap, fake products, one of the interviewees explained,

Chinese shops are always cheaper. Given the current economic problems, most Basotho prefer to shop at the Chinese shops versus the larger South African retailers shops, even if they offer better quality. . . . People complain about shoes from Chinese shops. They are low quality. Feet ache. But they [continue to] buy them because they are cheaper. (Interview with Mohlalefi Moteane, June 4, 2009)

In addition to the areas of tension related to Chinese business practices, there were some general complaints about the Chinese in Lesotho: they isolate themselves and refuse to engage with locals; there are serious communication issues because most of the Chinese newcomers do not speak English or Sotho; and they engage in corrupt relations with local officials. Finally, there were also a couple of unsubstantiated rumors (also widely circulated throughout the continent) that the Chinese migrants have unfair advantages over locals such as easy access to loans, and that they do not bank locally but take all their profits out of the country.¹⁰

Complaints about the Chinese are common features of Basotho radio stations and newspapers. Interviews with Moafrika FM and People's Choice FM (June 3, 2009) revealed that Basotho across the country have anti-Chinese views, often voiced through call-in shows. While station managers claim that they are not specifically anti-Chinese, they reported that listeners commonly aired frustrations and complaints against the Chinese through their calls, regardless of the topic of the show. The station managers also noted that the Chinese do not advertise on the station, nor do they call in to defend themselves or air their views. This absence, they argued, results in rumors and exaggerations becoming "truth"—through constant repetition and a lack of refutation.

My research team also found evidence of contradictions. Many respondents acknowledged the benefits of more affordable consumer products, appreciated the long hours and work ethic of the Chinese owners, and recognized the collusion of Basotho government officials and property owners. The impact of these factors, however, decreases significantly when weighed against the poor quality of products, the poor service from the shops, the competition, the communication problems, the wide culture gap, and occasional political mobilization.

Areas of Engagement and Tension—South Africa

While the South African state and the elite seem to be enjoying a love affair with their Chinese counterparts (Mofokeng 2011), my research indicates that views of the South African public on China and the many ethnic Chinese in the country are quite diverse. The Chinese are rarely in the limelight in South Africa, and certainly not in the same way as they are in Lesotho. South Africa is a much larger country, with a much larger population and economy. It also receives large numbers of migrants, many from within Africa, who bear the brunt of public scrutiny and periodic

violence. The main sources of tension in South Africa vis-à-vis the Chinese are the import of cheap and substandard Chinese goods, their negative impact on the local clothing and textile manufacturing sector, and ongoing labor problems in the Taiwanese- and Chinese-owned clothing and textile factories. In addition, prodemocracy interests in the country are often critical of China.¹¹

China has been the focus of some criticism by the official opposition in the country as well as others who advocate for liberal democracy, particularly in response to China's general record and positions on human rights, democracy, and governance. The opposition uses these issues to indirectly criticize the ANC government and their increasingly strong political and economic ties to China; some have gone so far as to argue that China has increasing clout over South African government decisions (see Mofokeng 2011; Kornegay 2009; AP 2012). Many prominent South Africans, including Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, voiced their concerns when the South African government refused to grant visas (on two separate occasions) to the Dalai Lama. The former Archbishop and many others lambasted the ANC government for kowtowing to the Chinese (IOL 2009; SAPA 2011).

Opposition parties, political commentators and even various members of the ANC have also expressed general concerns about Chinese engagement in South Africa and the continent, particularly as they relate to resource extraction, labor, and the environment. Even former President Thabo Mbeki, who was generally in favor of strengthening ties with China, and representatives of labor unions have expressed concerns about China's growing appetite for Africa's raw materials, the import of manufactured Chinese goods, and the growing potential of developing a "colonial" trade relationship (BBC 2006).¹²

South Africans also periodically express concerns about Chinese involvement in a range of illicit and illegal activities, including bribery, fraud, and corruption; smuggling of banned or protected species or animal parts (including rhino horn, ivory, shark fin, and abalone); drug and firearms smuggling; human trafficking and prostitution; and illegal immigration. Concerns about Chinese and Taiwanese labor practices have also, periodically, received public and official government attention.¹³

From their inception, many Taiwanese-owned factories in South Africa experienced labor problems. In the 1990s ownership of some of these factories switched hands from Taiwanese to Chinese as the apartheid-era subsidies expired, but the labor problems remained (see Yap & Man 1996; Hu & Wei 2011). As recently as 2011, there were reports of government raids at Chinese- and Taiwanese-owned factories in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal; factories were accused of "safety hazards, illegal workers, inadequate and unhygienic toilet facilities, failure to register for or pay contributions to the unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation funds in some factories, as well as non-compliance with the 70 percent wage requirement" (Payne 2011a).

These ongoing tensions around labor, crime, and China's human rights record have undoubtedly had an impact on perceptions of ethnic Chinese in the country. Generally, however, it would appear that negative South African perceptions of the Chinese population in the country are not as widespread or as vehement as they are in Lesotho. China and/or Chinese people periodically appear on the national radar, and different groups or sectors respond based on their respective interests; typically, negative sentiments are focused on certain issues or events such as the reports of labor abuses or the Dalai Lama incidents; occasionally, these issues galvanize public concern and mobilize political demonstrations of resistance, which then fade away and disappear from the news.

While there has been rapid and substantial migration (both documented and undocumented) of Chinese to South Africa, these newer migrants appear to be spread out across the country so that their presence is noted but remains relatively small and diffused vis-à-vis local populations and other flows of migration. They appear to be concentrated in small retail shops in most small towns across South Africa and in Johannesburg's large wholesale and product distribution centers.¹⁴ In the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal some Chinese migrants from both the ROC and the PRC are also engaged in manufacturing. While the exact number of jobs created by these small and medium-sized Chinese businesses is still unclear, preliminary extrapolations suggest that they may reach upward of several thousand. So, as opposed to stealing the livelihoods of others (as is the perception of Chinese in Lesotho), the Chinese in South Africa tend to create economic opportunities, albeit on a relatively small scale. In Nyamnjoh's (2010) framework, the Chinese can be classed, together with white migrants, among those who bring opportunities rather than competing for scarce resources. Furthermore, the broad range of Chinese migrants, from professionals to entrepreneurs and investors, and the diverse sectors and levels of engagement, appear to further diffuse South African perceptions of the Chinese.

In general, then, South Africans tend to have more balanced and nuanced views of Chinese than their Basotho counterparts. One interviewee, a well-known activist in South Africa, noted that "most black South Africans do not hate the Chinese. The Chinese are accepted. They are the 'other' but not the hostile 'other'" (interview with Trevor Ngwane, October 30, 2009). Ethnic Chinese in South Africa, whether local or migrant, are not consistently reviled in public discourse, media portrayals, or conversations as they are in Lesotho. As revealed in the periodic outbursts of xenophobic violence, South Africans seem to reserve their most visceral hatred for other black African migrants. Beyond Nyamnjoh's characterization of "articulate and accomplished" white foreigners and "stuttering and depleting" black foreigners—which, in some ways parallels my own arguments about the divergent ways that Chinese have inserted themselves into local economies of Lesotho and South Africa (Park 2010)—I would argue that in South Africa a combination of mistaken identity (i.e., the conflation of new migrants

with ethnic Chinese South Africans) and both individual and collective memory work in favor of migrants from China and South Asia. There is a familiarity with these two broad groups, who have also, historically, lived near, worked with, and served black and Coloured communities as shopkeepers. These histories and memories simply do not exist in Lesotho.

The Role of Memory, Historical Consciousness, and Personal Ties—Lesotho

Lesotho is one of several African countries with a history of antifoigner violence, but it is probably among the few that specifically targeted Chinese as early as the 1990s. Early in the decade (interviewees mentioned, variously, 1990, 1991, and 1993) a shoplifting incident in an Indian-owned shop and the death of a local Mosotho woman who had been beaten by the shop security guard resulted in rioting.¹⁵ Locals looted, set fire to, and attacked both Indian and Chinese shops in the area, and the incident triggered resentments against both groups of foreigners in Maseru.

Riots erupted in Maseru again in 1998 and quickly spread to other parts of the country. This subsequent wave of riots was more political in nature and concerned the recently held elections, but again foreign shops were targeted, including those owned by Indians, Chinese, and South Africans. As indicated earlier, laws in Lesotho “reserve” small businesses for citizens; foreign owners of small businesses, therefore, seem to have suffered public consequences of these failures of policy implementation. In this particular instance, many foreign-owned shops were looted and burned to the ground.

As a result of this last episode of violence, many of the foreigners moved out of Maseru across the border into South Africa. While many of them, including some of the Taiwanese textile factory owners, eventually returned to reestablish their businesses, they retained their South African residences in Ladybrand, Ficksburg, and other border towns (interview with Jennifer Chen, June 5, 2009). In November 2007 there was further rioting in Maseru; the impetus on this occasion was a municipal campaign to relocate Basotho informal street traders to a designated marketplace away from the city center. The street traders vented their anger against the Chinese shops that had been pressuring Basotho shops and traders over the years.

Lesotho is, historically, a migrant-sending country; its government and its people have limited experience with immigrants. The Chinese, around only since the late 1960s, have become increasingly visible as they broadened their business interests from factories to retail shops, moving from the capital into the hinterlands of the country. While there have been complaints about the labor practices of the Taiwanese-owned factories, as one of the country’s largest employers in a country with high unemployment, there were tremendous incentives on all sides to address these problems. Current complaints about Chinese traders are much more widespread and seemingly intractable. There are no long histories of close ties at national, community, or personal levels to mitigate current tensions. At the same time, opposition

parties have political motivations to exacerbate and mobilize anti-Chinese tensions as a way to criticize the incumbent party. While these behaviors serve to expose ongoing corruption, they also make the already visible Chinese migrants more vulnerable.

The Role of Memory, Historical Consciousness, and Personal Ties—South Africa

South Africa has a historic presence of Chinese in townships and cities going back for many decades, and this long history and familiarity seem to serve as mitigating factors when negative news of China or Chinese arises. Most black South Africans grew up with Chinese martial arts films, *fahfee*, and Chinese shopkeepers (see Park 2009; Ho 2012).¹⁶ The Chinese South African community has existed in South Africa since the late nineteenth century. During the apartheid era, with their official designation as “non-white,” many Chinese made their living as shopkeepers in or near black or Coloured townships. Many of these Chinese also quietly ran illegal *fahfee* games as a profitable side business. One senior member of the South African Communist Party spoke fondly about his memories of growing up in Kimberley and of one family, in particular:

The Changfoot family was open to non-racialism. They bore the hardships of apartheid as non-Afrikaans, non-white, but also being non-racial they used to give store credit (to their black customers). Most of their customers and their social relations were with blacks. These Chinese *fahfee* dealers and Chinese shopkeepers serve as key personal catalysts to my (positive) memory of the Chinese. (Interview with Chris Matlako, July 27, 2010)

Several black South Africans mentioned their first recollections of Chinese as involving Bruce Lee and other martial arts experts in the movies (interviews with Trevor Ngwane, October 30, 2009, and Chris Matlako, July 27, 2010; personal communication with Comfort Phokela, August 29, 2009). These movie characters were admirable and tough, and often fought the bad white man—not an insignificant detail during the struggle era. Personal encounters with Chinese shopkeepers or *fahfee* men were typically equally pleasant.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was increasing confusion about the place and position of Chinese South Africans. They were the first to integrate white schools, white hospitals, and white residential areas; many white South Africans attended school with one or two Chinese South Africans. However, most of the Chinese shops remained in or near the townships. Chinese South Africans officially retained their “non-white” status until 1994, even as they benefited from increasing concessions and privileges as “honorary whites.” As increasing numbers of Taiwanese and mainland Chinese arrived in South Africa, most South Africans conflated these new arrivals with the Chinese South Africans. Most South Africans remain confused

about the role and position of ethnic Chinese in South Africa, as evidenced in the uproar surrounding an affirmative action case filed by the Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) (see Erasmus & Park 2008; Park 2011) and battles over whether or not Chinese South Africans should receive affirmative action benefits as “formerly disadvantaged” (and therefore “black” in terms of the legislation) or whether they continued to be mistakenly identified as “honorary white.” These battles revealed the extent of confusion over their “place” within the South African cosmology of racial, ethnic, and national identities.

The Chinese are clearly seen as “other” and “foreign”—a reality that is hurtful to the thousands of Chinese South Africans whose parents and grandparents were born in South Africa and suffered through apartheid—but they are also *not* constructed by the state or other political groups as a “despicable other.” Memories of Kung Fu masters (à la Bruce Lee), *fahfee* men, and kind and generous shopkeepers appear to play a mediating role in shaping perceptions about Chinese in South Africa in ways that do not exist in Lesotho. The role of memory and social history in mitigating contemporary contexts of potential conflict are undeniable.

Conclusion

In Lesotho, a country of outmigration with only a brief history of Chinese migration, the sudden presence of significant numbers of Chinese has been socially and economically destabilizing. The country is burdened by extremely high levels of poverty and unemployment. It has a fraught political system with over a dozen parties that have a history of dividing and realigning themselves into different configurations. There are also high levels of corruption in various government departments as well as a lack of implementation and enforcement of laws and regulations. Desirous of retaining the few remaining Taiwanese textile factories and further enlisting the assistance of China (as well as other potential foreign friends), the state—perhaps inadvertently—has sent out a message to its citizens to keep their hands off the Chinese.

The highly visible and proportionately large and growing numbers of Chinese migrants, many of them poorly educated, without English or Sotho language skills, are clearly outcompeting the locals in small business, sometimes by illicit means. That there are no other significant “others” in Lesotho makes the Chinese vulnerable. The state-sanctioned shielding only serves to perpetuate more corruption and fuels already tense relations between Basotho and the Chinese migrants. Political mobilization of anti-Chinese sentiment without mitigating historical factors creates a volatile situation for Chinese migrants.

In South Africa the situation is quite different. While the numbers of Chinese people in South Africa are among the highest on the continent, they continue to represent the smallest minority group within the overall population, and their growing numbers remain eclipsed by the number of

African migrants. They are also geographically and professionally diffused. Fewer political parties and clearer lines between them have enabled each party to develop its own position with regard to China. The state ruling party and its alliance partners hold conflicting views about China and Chinese people in South Africa.

Chinese are generally seen as a friendly and familiar “other” because of their long historical presence in the country. During the colonial, segregation, and apartheid periods in South Africa, the Chinese occupied a middle ground or in-between space: they were considered not quite white but also not black. By the end of apartheid, most Chinese South Africans were educated and working as professionals or entrepreneurs; as such, they can be seen together with whites as “articulate and accomplished” (Nyamnjoh 2010:66), or as expressed by many of my respondents, “hard working and clever.” According to Nyamnjoh’s framework, the Chinese have never been grouped with South African blacks during apartheid or with foreign blacks in the present as the “inferior scum of humanity” (Nyamnjoh 2010:66). Perhaps most importantly, they are not seen as competitors. The long-standing presence of Chinese in South Africa—as *fahfee* men and shopkeepers—seems to play a mitigating role even in the face of reports of labor abuses in textile and garment factories or the damaging role of cheap Chinese imports—or *fong kong*—on South African manufacturing.

Beyond the differences that emerge between Lesotho and South Africa, my research suggests there are further differences within countries that cannot be easily divided between white and black or elite and general public. Sautman and Yan’s study (2009) finds that there is no general divide between African elite and popular views on China–Africa links; Esteban (2010) argues that generally those who stand to benefit from ties with Chinese are more positive about their presence, while those who compete against Chinese migrants will be more negative; and other studies (e.g., Gadzala & Hanusch 2010) have found that those who feel strongly about democracy and human rights are more likely to be critical of China. This article has examined the role of particular national contexts, political constructions of the Chinese migrants, and the potentially mitigating role of memory, which also contribute to shaping perceptions of Chinese held by Africans in Lesotho and in South Africa. Accurate portraits of Chinese migrants in different African countries as well as sketches of African perceptions of Chinese thus require fieldwork and wide-ranging qualitative work to uncover the complexities and a long view that considers the different historical, political, and social contexts.

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- Daniel Maraisane, LECAWU (Lesotho Clothing & Allied Workers Union), Maseru, June 3, 2009.
- Chris (Che) Matlako, Secretary of International Affairs, South African Communist Party, Johannesburg, July 27, 2010.
- Mamolete Mohapi, Institute for Extra Mural Studies, Maseru, June 4, 2009.
- Mohlalefi Moteane, Wool and mohair trader (and veterinarian), Maseru, June 4, 2009.
- Kenneth Mubu, MP and Shadow Minister, International Relations and Cooperation, Democratic Alliance, Johannesburg, June 10, 2010.
- Trevor Ngwane, South African activist, founder of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and Anti-Privatisation Forum, Johannesburg, October 30, 2009.
- Comfort Phokela, M.A. student, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, August 29, 2009.
- Tohland Rantsoeleba, member of Theko Mmoho (an association of Basotho small business people/traders), Maseru, June 3, 2009.
- Sebonomoea Ramainoane and Maklienchere Ramainoane, Moafrika FM, Maseru, June 3, 2009.
- Etienne Vlok, Research Director, South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, telephone interview, July 6, 2010.

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Notes

1. On negative perceptions of the Chinese in Africa, crimes involving Chinese, or fears about Chinese cupidity and machinations in regard to Africa, see Timberg (2006); Dixon (2006); Michel (2008); Laing (2006); Lelyveld (2006); Pheko (2007); Polgreen (2006); Malone (2008); Nduru (2006); Beech (2009); Fishman (2005); Lohr (2005); IRIN (2012); Mabinda (2012); Ngozo (2012); IOL (2012); AP (2012); Mullen and Zhang (2012). On aid, trade, and the politics of China–Africa ties, see Alden et al. (2008); Bräutigam (2009); Broadman (2009); Rotberg (2008); Taylor (2009).

2. To simplify, I have utilized the first-person “I” throughout when referencing my field research, but in many cases it should correctly have been “we.” The research from which this article draws involved collaborative efforts with two teams: Anna Chen and Tu Huynh, and Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong. In some instances I also relied on local field researchers.
3. On Chinese migration flows and new communities in different African countries, see Haugen and Carling (2005); Carling and Haugen (2008); Dobler (2009); Sautman and Yan (2010); Esteban (2010); Harris (2010); Bourdarias (2010); Kernan (2010); Huynh et al. (2010); Park and Chen (2009, 2010); Park (2010a). On African perceptions of China and the growing numbers of Chinese on the continent, see Sautman and Yan (2009); Gadzala and Hanusch (2010); Kohut (2007); Sylvanus (2007); Rebol (2010); and Esteban (2010).
4. I use the term “African” here to refer to citizens of both countries. In South Africa, respondents included black, Coloured, Indian, and white South Africans; in Lesotho, all the respondents were black Basotho. Apart from the growing Chinese population, there is no real racial/ethnic diversity in Lesotho; I learned that there were a few Indian families around Buthe Buthe, but most assumed that the handful of whites in the country were South African or European. (Foreigners can obtain national identity documents and passports relatively easily; however, it is unclear whether Home Affairs has a process by which one can “become” a Basotho.) The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in Maseru; however, because the country is small, the field researcher was also able to travel around the country.

The seed for this project was planted by Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, who requested my assistance in implementing a questionnaire for their “African Perspectives on China–Africa Links” project. Their research project concentrated on university communities. I was given permission to add a few of my own questions pertaining to views about Chinese people and implemented their original questionnaire on the University of Johannesburg’s main campus. I then received funding to implement a modified version of this questionnaire, focusing on perceptions of Chinese people and their businesses.

The general make-up of respondents was about equal with regard to sex, with slightly fewer female respondents than male in both countries (54.2% in South Africa and 52.5% in Lesotho). It is worth noting, however, that the respondent pool in Lesotho was considerably younger than that of South Africa, likely the result of targeted research in a school and a university campus in Maseru. For example, while only 20.3 percent of the respondents were below twenty-five in South Africa, 40.6 percent of those in Lesotho fell into this category; 40.6 percent of the South African respondents were between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four whereas only 11 percent of Basotho respondents were in this age group. Finally, it should be noted that there were very few older (over 55) respondents in either country.

5. Mauritius and Madagascar also have significant Chinese communities that predate the independence period.
6. See Park (2010); Park and Chen (2009, 2010); Huynh et al. (2009); Harrison et al. (2012); Patel (2012).
7. *Makwerekwere* is a term that was coined during this period to refer to undesirable black African foreigners.
8. Research in 2010 also revealed that there were several Korean immigrant businesses in and around Maseru. While one of the interviewees was able to

- differentiate among the three Asian immigrant groups (Taiwanese, mainland Chinese, and Korean), he also pointed out that most Basotho do not and cannot differentiate among the groups, heightening the sense of a monolithic rise of “Chinese” entrepreneurs (interview with Teboho Kobeli, March 2010).
9. I was also informed that a couple of these businesses were actually owned and operated by Koreans. Two of the car dealerships and a few other larger businesses are owned by Taiwanese.
 10. As I observed in person, similar complaints were regularly lodged against Korean immigrant shop owners in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s.
 11. See Mofokeng (2011); SAPA (2011); Kornegay (2009); IOL (2009); Gadzala and Hanusch (2010).
 12. This was also expressed in an interview with Etienne Vlok (July 6, 2010).
 13. See Zvomuya (2006); Schoofs (2007); Busch (2010); (Payne 2011a, 2011b); Karrim (2011); Marian (2011).
 14. In the late 1990s there were some tensions between local and Chinese street traders in downtown Johannesburg. New Chinese migrants had set up trading stands on corners throughout downtown without realizing that various locations had already been allocated to members of a traders association. After some initial troubles, the Chinese seemed to realize that they could still engage in the business of selling China-made clothing and other products, but they could avoid direct competition and perhaps make greater profits if they moved off the streets and into wholesale centers. There are now over a dozen large wholesale/distribution centers across Johannesburg, each with dozens of shops/stalls selling a wide range of products to customers from across South Africa as well as neighboring countries.
 15. A number of my interviewees related the same incident to me, although none could recall the exact year of the incident or clarify if this was an Indian South African or an Indian Basotho shop owner.
 16. *Fahfee* (also sometimes spelled *Fafi*, sometimes called “Mo-China”) is an illegal game of chance involving placing small bets on numbers usually selected on the basis of the interpretation of dreams. According to one source (Geldenhuys 2009), it has been in existence since 1911. It is commonly operated by Chinese South Africans, with players (who select a number and place bets) and the runners (who collect the bets).