Colour, Confusion and Concessions

The History of the Chinese in South Africa

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Convicts and Coolies 1660 – 1880

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

EARLY CONTACT

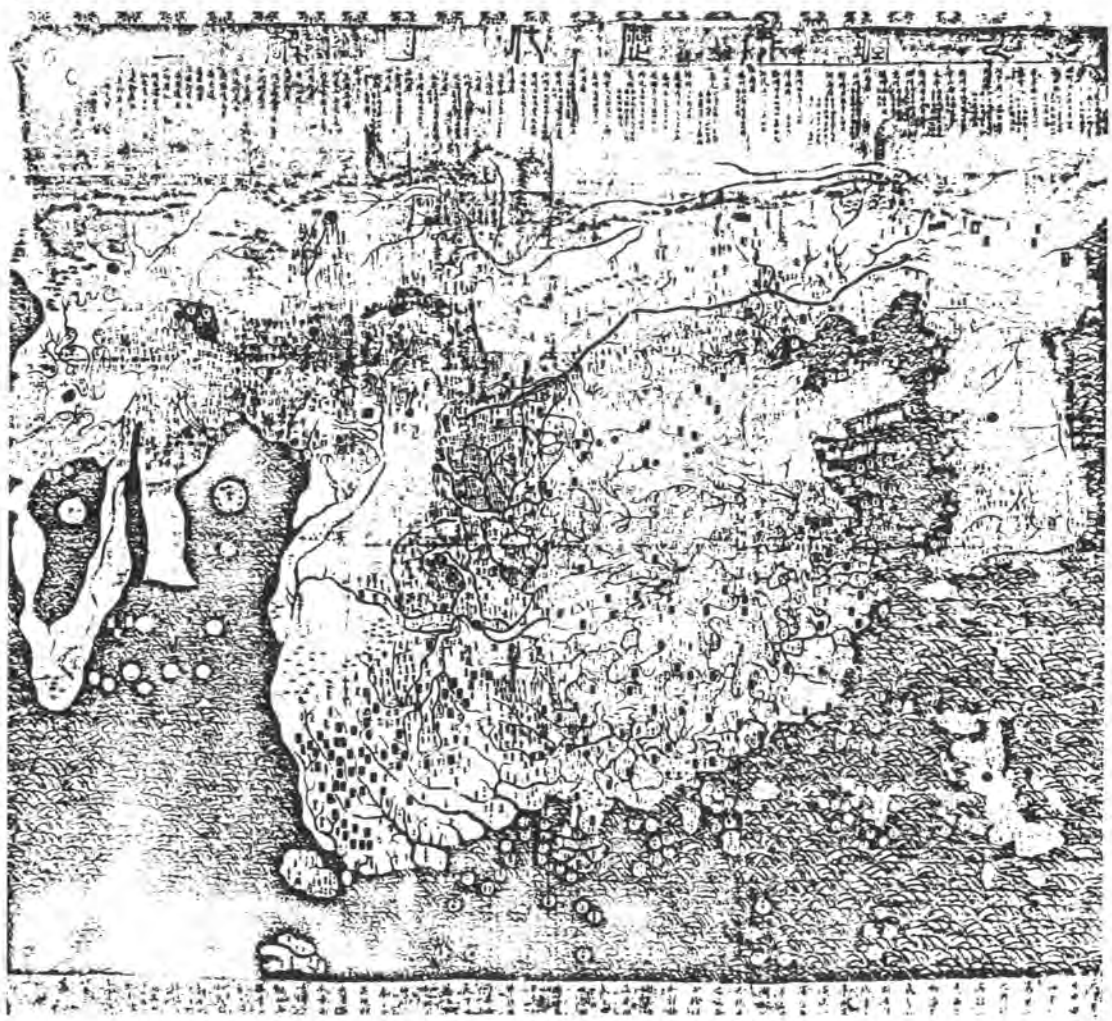
Chinese links with the continent of Africa can be traced back for nearly 2000 years. During the Han dynasty (208 BC to 220 AD) Chinese travellers recounted tales of ancient Egypt, opening the Silk Road to carry Chinese silk to the west and take home glass and coloured glazes from north Africa.[1] This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

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

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

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

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



the most famous explorer of the Ming Dynasty, Cheng Ho (Zheng He), undertook seven expeditions in the Indian Ocean, the nautical chart of his voyages reflecting the extent of Chinese knowledge of this region.[6]

Noted Sinologist, J.L. Duyvendak asserted it was a *giraffe* which first prompted the Chinese to sail to Africa in 1417, on an expedition to Malindi on Kenya's coast. He said in the Somali language, a giraffe was called a 'girin' which to the Chinese would sound much like 'ki-lin' — a mythical animal which could be equated to the unicorn. Legend had it that the appearance of the 'ki-lin' was evidence of Heaven's favour and augured well for an emperor's rule. So when ambassadors from Malindi visited the Chinese court in 1415 taking with them a gift of a giraffe, they were warmly welcomed and honoured by a Chinese escort, which accompanied them all the way home to the east African coast.

The appearance of a giraffe in China was immortalized in poetry and painting, and lavishly described in such verses of praise:

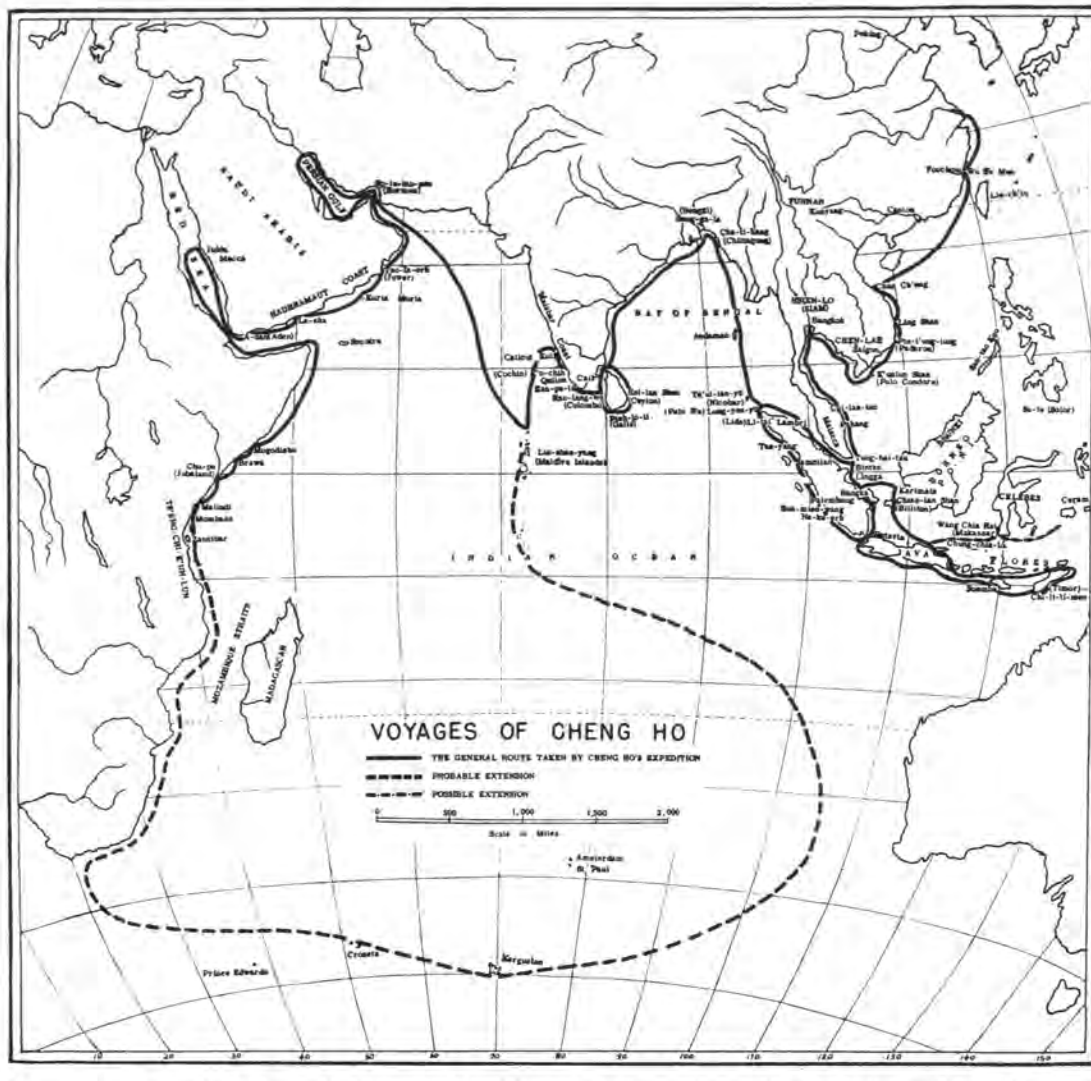
> Truly was produced a K'i-lin whose shape was high 15 feet,
>
> With the body of a deer and the tail of an ox, and a fleshy boneless horn,
>
> With luminous spots like a red cloud or a purple mist,
>
> Its hoofs do not tread on (living) beings and in its wanderings it carefully selects its ground,
>
> It walks in stately fashion and in its every motion it observes a rhythm,
>
> Gentle is this animal that in all antiquity has been seen but once ...[7]

Small wonder that Africa was an area of much interest to early Chinese explorers!

Limiting the focus of this work to southern Africa however, fragments of information point to Chinese contact with the sub-continent over the past 1000 years. Chinese porcelain dating from the Sung dynasty (960 – 1279) has been found in Zimbabwe,[8] and inhabitants of Ndarangwa in Zimbabwe's Honde Gorge have, for generations, used the Chinese character for the surname 'Tien' [田] as a decorative motif on walls and clay pots.[9]

Even in South Africa, porcelain dating from the Sung dynasty is said to have been found at an excavation at Mapungubwe, in the northern Transvaal.[10] While finds of pottery do not necessarily point to direct human contact, evidence suggests the Chinese, or some Mongolian people, visited South Africa before Black tribes moved south in the 16th century. Bushman paintings once assumed to be foreigners wearing peaked Chinese and peg-topped Mongolian hats have been found at Magdala, near Barkly East in the north eastern Cape province, and along the Kei and White Kei Rivers near East London. In the 1920s, Brother Otto, a Trappist monk at the Marianhill monastery in Natal, made painstaking sketches of Bushmen paintings in rock shelters, at least two of which were possibly inspired by some oriental people. Renowned anthropologist Raymond Dart said these finds were highly significant in demonstrating 'an extremely ancient cultural impact upon the aboriginal Bushman'.[11]

He also speculated that the peaked straw hats, characteristic of Lesotho headgear, originated from contact with the Orient when the Basotho people lived further north,



This nautical chart of the route traversed by Ming dynasty explorer, Admiral Cheng Ho, reflects the possible extent of Chinese knowledge of the Indian Ocean area.

or were adopted from the 'Bust-Hottentot' communities of the eastern Cape. Of these nomadic tribes, he wrote:

> So Chinese did these Kei River people appear to early Dutch settlers that they called them Snese Hottentoten: Chinese Hottentots.[12]

Chroniclers of the early Cape described inhabitants in the vicinity of the Great and Little Fish Rivers, near East London, as 'a tribe of Hottentots of somewhat lighter colour, yellower than the others, called on that account Chinese Hottentots',[13] and a people 'with curling hair, ... called Little Chinese.'[14]

Perhaps it was simply these names which gave rise to flights of fancy on the origins of the Khoikhoi (also called Hottentots) and speculation that they were descendants of Chinese sailors who visited the African coast. While it is highly improbable that any such Chinese temporarily settled in Africa before European colonization, the theories,

nevertheless, make for interesting if somewhat 'popular' reading.[15] In brief, the story goes that before the year 1300 navigators from south China, called Manzi, were frequent visitors to the east and west coasts of South Africa. Remaining ashore for five to six months for the south-west winds to aid the voyages of their junks, they mixed closely with the local people ... a possible explanation for the Mongolian characteristics of the Hottentots.[16] Surmising that Port Nolloth was 'the home of the true yellow Hottentots, the Snese, or Chinese Hottentots of the old Cape Dutch', one writer points to the tonal similarity between the Hottentot and Chinese languages, adding that 'any number of Chinese ships must have been wrecked on the Namaqualand coast from 945 to at least 1295'.[17]

In this vein, the Bahurutsi tribe of Bechuanas (Tswanas) has been linked to similar origins. Said to trace their history back to the middle of the 13th century when the Chinese abandoned their trips to the southern African coast, they too wore peak-topped, oriental hats. 'These Chinese-Bantus were referred to as the abandoned people, Awatwa, a name later given to the Bushmen.'[18]

CHINESE CONVICTS ARRIVE IN THE CAPE : 1660 – 1795

European expansion towards the East necessitated navigation around southern Africa and from the end of the 15th century, Portuguese ships bypassed the Cape. Although English, French and Dutch East India companies all considered establishing a base in Table Bay for their ships, only the Dutch did so in 1652. Not intended to be a colony or settlement, the Cape of Good Hope was founded as a refreshment station with a hospital, granary and garden to supply fresh provisions for Dutch ships traversing the busy sea route between the Netherlands and Asia.[19] It served as an outstation for the vast trading empire controlled by the Dutch East India Company (VOC)[20] from Batavia (Djakarta) in Java, Indonesia.

The Cape, populated by Khoikhoi herdsmen and San (Bushman) hunters, held the promise of rich agricultural potential in fertile soil, fresh water and a temperate climate. Difficulties however in developing intensive cultivation prompted the first Cape commander, Jan van Riebeeck, to suggest that agriculture be handed over to freeburghers (free citizens) who would perhaps labour more diligently on their own land than as Company employees. Settlement of freeburghers was encouraged by grants of land and these former VOC employees formed the nucleus of the permanent White population which would increase slowly in the following years.[21]

Sufficient labour to develop the Cape's resources was cause for much concern from the outset of the establishment of the refreshment station. The indigenous Khoikhoi people were reluctant to become labourers and Van Riebeeck persistently pleaded for the services of slaves. On several occasions he also asked the Company to send him a few Chinese to introduce agricultural and fishing skills.[22] The Chinese in Java, however, did not regard the Cape as a worthwhile risk and the India Council informed Van Riebeeck: 'We have not been able to persuade any Chinese to leave their country for such a distant land and with such uncertain prospects.'[23] Just a few years later, in 1656,

the Council said it was trying to find some 'industrious Chinese' to promote agriculture but again confessed defeat ... 'We would have liked to send you some Chinese volunteers for agricultural purposes but all were unwilling and could not be persuaded to go.'[24]

Slavery played an important part in the Dutch East India Company's activities in the Indies and its introduction in the Cape set the pattern for relations between racial groups which would be marked by the dominance of Whites over Blacks. The following description of the legal status of slaves as defined in Roman law sums up the position of those consigned to the Cape:

> ... slaves have not any of those rights and privileges which distinguish the state of the free in civil society; they cannot marry, they do not possess the right of disposing of their children, even if they be minors, they cannot possess any money or goods in property ... they cannot make a will, and they are therefore considered in the civil law as not existing.[25]

From 1658 the Company imported slaves and used the Cape as a penal settlement for its unwanted criminals, political exiles and other undesirables from the East Indies.[26]

So, ironically, the first Chinese to arrive in the Cape were not the farmers with knowledge of rice and sugar planting, the fishermen, carpenters, masons and craftsmen that both Van Riebeeck and his successors sought. Instead, they were a few among the thousands of convicts, banished from Batavia, either for debts owed the Company or for offences and crimes largely unspecified in the Cape records.[27]

The exiles were Indian, Singhalese, Javanese, Chinese and other Indonesians. And since most Chinese in Batavia at the time were from Fukien (Fujian), it is likely the Chinese who came to the Cape were Fukienese. The first Chinese convict to arrive appears to have been a man named 'Wancho', sent on the *Arnhem* in 1660.[28] Four years later, Ytcho Wancho was caught attacking a slave woman in the Cape with a knife. After unsuccessfully trying to hang himself, he was sentenced to a flogging and then banished to serve out his term on Robben Island which lies seven kilometres off Cape Town's coast.[29]

Although never numbering more than 50 to 100 at any one time, some Chinese left traces of their existence in legal documents, wills and petitions. In an extensively researched work on the Chinese at the Cape during the Dutch occupation from 1652 to 1795, historian James Armstrong sketched a vivid picture of the lives of these exiles. As convicts they were, in everything but name, Company slaves. The numbers who died were high ... and red tape, strung out from distant Batavia, added to their hardships. In one case, a convict sentenced to serve 10 years at the Cape was found 22 years later still there![30] The Chinese convicts were employed as basketmakers, fishermen and masons.

In Batavia, the Dutch feared economic competition from Chinese settlers and imposed restrictions on their trade and movement. This led in 1740 to a massive uprising which saw the massacre of thousands of Chinese and the deportation of many back to China, or to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Cape.[31] When the Chinese convicts in the Cape had completed their terms or when they were pardoned, they either returned to Batavia or chose to remain in the Cape as 'free' Blacks, the status accorded to former slaves who had won their liberation. 'Free Blacks', during the Company period, was a

term which included Chinese and generally referred to all free people wholly or partially of African or Asian descent. It did not however seem to be applied to the indigenous Khoisan people.[32] As a description it was a misnomer since the majority of free Blacks were from Asia — India, Ceylon, Indonesia and China.[33]

In 1722 the Chinese with other free Blacks were formed into a type of citizens' defence force in the Table Valley — their task being to deal with emergencies such as fire or ships being stranded in Table Bay.[34] In very rare instances did free Blacks own fixed property, although the more affluent among them did own slaves. From 1752, freed men were given all the privileges and rights of burghers (citizens) but they were certainly never regarded as the equals of Whites. In the 1790s, free Blacks had to carry passes if they wished to leave town, a requirement not made of free-born citizens.[35]

Some Prosperous 'Free' Chinese

A difficulty in researching individual Chinese in the Cape's early days is the variety of spellings given to a single name, for example the names Onka, Onko, Onkonko, Oquanko, Loquanko and Hoquanko all refer to the same person. While most of the individuals' names do not appear to be 'Chinese', it is likely they were simply transcribed to match a sound more familiar to the Dutch, and some Chinese probably adopted Dutch names.

One of these was perhaps the first free Chinese in the Cape, Abraham de Vyf, also known as 'Tuko de Chinees'. He was accepted into the Reformed Church and baptized in 1702, 'an unprecedented event at the Cape'. The Church Council also noted that another two Chinese were receiving religious instruction. Abraham de Vyf accumulated some property and intended to return to Batavia, but died in 1713, leaving his widow, Maria Jacobs Eenre and three children, Daniel, Christina and Beatrix de Vyf.

A rather prosperous Chinese was Horloko, a goldsmith and interpreter. His will in 1724 named three sons and a daughter, living in Quintangh province in China — probably the southern province of Kwangtung (Guangdong). Another successful individual was Oquanko who lived in the Cape for at least 10 years and who, in 1726, owned one female and five male slaves. He was a baker, and it seems likely that a 1727 edict forbidding the sale of baked goods in the streets of Cape Town, was specifically directed against him. That year the licensed bakers complained of unfair competition from Chinese bakers sending their 'boys' into the streets.[36]

Some of the Chinese exiles deported from Batavia were exempted from serving hard labour during their terms of banishment, and instead, paid a 'special tax'.[37] Virtually all Chinese within the ranks of the free Blacks were former convicts. Their numbers were few ... there were only two in 1725, rising to 16 in 1750 and then declining to three in 1774.[38] Nevertheless the Dutch settlers saw them as 'unwelcome competitors' in activities such as baking, petty trading, shopkeeping and ships' provisioning, and also accused them of receiving stolen goods, thus encouraging theft.[39]

One major chronicler of the Cape at the time, Otto Friedrich Mentzel, claimed they did not deal with thieves among the slaves, but received goods from sailors smuggling items from the ships. Of the Chinese traders he said:

> ... it is dangerous to generalize and condemn them all as rogues. Some of them will show more consideration to those who owe them money than Europeans do. I have met people to whom Asiatic dealers had given various commodities such as tea, chinaware and Eastern fabrics on long credit, even until their return from Holland. On the whole these Chinese live a humble, quiet and orderly life at the Cape.[40]

From the 1740s, it appears the handful of free Chinese (probably no more than 12 men) ran restaurants, sold vegetables, and were active as traders, chandlers and craftsmen. Describing their activities, Mentzel wrote:

> Some of these Chinese are expert fishermen as well as good cooks. Fried or pickled fish with boiled rice is well-favoured by soldiers, sailors and slaves. When the fierce North-Westers blow, crayfish, crabs, seaspiders and 'granelen' are cast ashore. They are jealously collected by these Orientals, cooked and sold ... These Asiatics likewise keep small eating houses where tea and coffee is always to be had; they specialise in the making of kerri-kerri. One need not be squeamish in patronising their cookshops since they keep the places scrupulously clean and do not touch the food with their fingers. When they themselves feed they cut the meat, fish, etc., into small slices and put the food in their mouths with chopsticks of white wood or ivory. They manipulate these sticks with such skill that no crumb escapes their attention.[41]

Another of Mentzel's observations covered Chinese handiwork:

> The Chinese are the only candlemakers at the Cape, for though the homemade farm candle is serviceable, it cannot be compared in appearance with the handiwork of the Chinamen. Though made of mutton fat they are as white and well-shaped as wax candles.[42]

Other chroniclers too referred fleetingly to the few Chinese they encountered in the Cape. One remarked on seeing a tame tyger-wolf (spotted hyena) which had been reared from birth by a Chinese,[43] and another described his landing at the Cape in 1772, in these words:

> We were hardly come to an anchor, before a crowd of black slaves and Chinese came in their small boats to sell and barter, for clothes and other goods, fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit, all of which our crew were eager to procure.[44]

Among the Chinese in the Cape, several are known to have signed official documents in Chinese characters. Although this was not proof that they were literate in Chinese, sufficient numbers must have been able to read for the Company to post important edicts in Chinese as well as in Malay, Javanese and Dutch.[45] Several Dutch statutes relating specifically to Chinese forbade them to wear 'European clothing' and imposed a high customs duty on the export of Chinese corpses. Furthermore, the estate of a Chinese who died without leaving a will was divided equally between a widow and sons, with daughters only being entitled to half of their mother's share.[46]

Petitions lodged in the Cape Archives offer some insights into the concerns and

the hardships encountered by the convict and 'free' Chinese. In 1733 two men asked to be relieved of hard labour, stating that they had been in the Cape for 20 years and were growing too old to work. It appears the authorities only then discovered that although the men had been banished to the Cape for life, no mention had been made of their being condemned to hard labour![47] Ten years later 38 Chinese appealed for permission to return to Batavia, several having served their punishment in chains and others wishing to be pardoned.[48] In a rather plaintive series of petitions from 1724, a Chinese named Pang Sisay appealed repeatedly for pardon. Aged 65 years, he said he had been sentenced to hard labour but was continually sick and unable to work. The records only reflected that he had been banished for 'some offence', but the man's pleas appear to have gone unheeded.[49] Many Chinese requested permission to manumit their slaves or to be allowed to return to Batavia.

In contrast to the trickle of Chinese into the colony, there is at least one instance of a Chinese being banished from the Cape to Batavia shortly after the British took control of the Cape in 1806. He was Simon Arnold, 37, who was tried for theft and exiled to Batavia in 1807.[50] As single men, the handful of free Chinese practised polygamy and obtained wives by purchasing female slaves.[51] Of all owners applying to free their slaves, four percent were Chinese. Many of these stated they wished to marry their freed slaves.[52] That several Chinese had children by slave women is clear from various petitions in which they applied for the manumission of their children. In 1737 Limkoksaaij asked for the freedom of his 18-year-old daughter, Cornelia, whose mother was Sophia of Angie, a Company slave, and in 1765 Liminionko requested the manumission of his slave Dina, and the two children he had procreated by her.[53]

Few as the Chinese were in the Cape's early days, they warranted a separate burial ground, near the gallows.[54] Quite where this was is difficult to say since varying descriptions have been given on its position. It has been said to lie north west of Cape Town, perhaps on the site now occupied by Gallows Hill Road,[55] but another observer has placed it south of the city.[56] The only description of a Chinese burial was recorded by Thunberg in the late 1700s:

> In their burying ground at a short distance from the city, small ratans are stuck up, fastened together with cotton thread, so as to form an arch or a vaulted roof over the tomb.[57]

The numbers of free Chinese declined through the latter part of the 18th century. Since only two Chinese women are known to have come to the Cape (neither of whom had children), any offspring of the 17th and 18th century Chinese would have become part of the Cape's emerging Coloured population.[58] The term 'Coloured' is generally used in South Africa to denote persons of mixed racial descent.

BRITISH SEEK CHINESE LABOUR

From the time of the Dutch occupation, the boundaries of White settlement in the Cape had been steadily pushed eastwards and northwards. Hunting and trading expeditions regularly set out in search of ivory and cattle, 'trekboers' (nomadic farmers)

sought out grazing lands in outlying country areas and pioneers dispersed into the hinterland. White settlers first encountered Blacks along the eastern Cape frontier. Xhosa moving westward across the Fish River in search of hunting and grazing land for their cattle crossed paths with colonists moving eastward over the Gamtoos River, and there the struggle for land gave rise to bitter conflicts.

Control of the Cape changed hands three times between 1795 and 1806, passing from the declining Dutch East India Company to the British, then back to the Batavian Republic in the Netherlands and the colony was eventually formally placed under British rule. Immigrants had arrived from France, Germany and other parts of central Europe to swell the White population to 26 568 in 1806.[59] British rule introduced new influences challenging the cultural uniformity of a society which was largely Dutch-speaking and under the sway of the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church. English replaced Dutch as the official language, religious toleration was extended, many trade restrictions were removed and measures abolishing slavery were introduced.[60]

The persistent shortage of cheap labour in the colony continued to motivate periodic calls for the importation of Chinese workers. And it was not long before artisans were smuggled out of China to work as contract labourers for the Cape colonial government. As early as 1804, a Cape official, John Barrow, had proposed the settlement of 10 000 Chinese farmers in the Cape, Stellenbosch and Drakenstein districts. He suggested the grant of free land to enable the industrious Chinese not only to supply local markets but to produce sufficient surplus for export. This importation 'would prove a more valuable gold mine to the colony, than those which are supposed to exist'.[61]

Nothing came of the suggestion, although in later years the view was expressed that Chinese would be most useful as 'artificers, mechanics, and domestic servants' in Cape Town and smaller towns.[62] In 1810, a Chinese cabinet maker named Iyou appealed to the Governor of the Cape for permission to remain in the colony until his health improved. A traveller aboard the *Fort William* bound for India, he expressed the wish to settle in the Cape.[63]

Nearly 50 Chinese artisans arrived in the Cape in the following years. In 1814, Capt. T.T. Harington, brought 23 Chinese craftsmen to erect his new home and establish the gardens at Seaforth, in Simonstown, Cape. They included 3 carpenters, 3 masons, 2 stonecutters and 15 farmers.[64] Faced with this example, the Governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset, may have been influenced in his decision to request 25 Chinese artificers to serve the Cape's Colonial Government. In April 1815, Harington transported these artisans from Canton to Cape Town aboard the *Scaleby Castle*.

Referring to the Chinese government's prohibition on the emigration of any Chinese, Harington offered no guarantee that the labourers were able or qualified. They had been brought aboard secretly, just before the ship's departure and their capabilities were taken on 'general assurance only'.

> The 25 consisted of a Foreman and 12 ordinary masons, a Foreman and 10 ordinary carpenters and one 'carpenter and painter'.

Their three-year contract stated they would serve His Majesty's Government at the Cape of Good Hope 'in our several capacities, faithfully, honestly and industriously, at

the wages of Eight Spanish Dollars per month with wholesome food and suitable lodging; and we also acknowledge to have received from Captain Thomas Talbot Harington three months advance of wages previous to our leaving China.'[65]

It appears four of these men were sent to work on the Drostdy at George, but returned to Cape Town after a few months, dissatisfied with their working conditions. One was subsequently employed at Knysna, and 10 others were still working in 1822. Some of these workmen built the belfry and wooden campanile of the English chapel in the Naval Yard at Simonstown.[66]

A number of Chinese indentured labourers from St Helena were also sent to the Cape after Britain took control of the small Atlantic Ocean island in 1834. The Cape Archives contain various petitions relating to the plight of these labourers. Many appealed to be sent home to China, or to be returned to St Helena. Some stated they were too old to continue working while others asked for an increase in their maintenance allowance. It is difficult to judge how many Chinese from St Helena were in the Cape but an amount of £252/16/6 was spent on their maintenance between 1 January 1847 and 30 June 1848.

EARLY CHINESE CEMETERY IN THE CAPE

Reference has already been made to a cemetery set aside for those Chinese who were sent to the Cape from Batavia. This was most probably the site referred to, on 26 March 1829, when William Assaw petitioned the Governor of the Cape for a suitable burial ground for his countrymen. He complained about the deteriorating condition of the existing cemetery saying he

> ... was shocked to see the entire of the graves totally defaced and most of them hidden from view, a heap of rubbish covering the entire of the grave ground. The Malaye's (sic) grave ground, at the height of Wall Street, is close to that of the Chinese ...

He questioned whether the ground had been purchased by the Malay community, and if so, asked the governor to allow another portion of land for Chinese interment. An official note attached to this petition states that the site concerned

> appears to have been appropriated many years ago by the Chinese as a place of Interment but neglected of late years in consequence of the comparative small numbers of that nation who continue to reside in this Colony — on which account also the said piece of ground has been encroached upon by the Malayes to enlarge their adjoining burial ground.[67]

Within a matter of months, Assaw's request was granted and a piece of land was ceded 'in full and free property to the Chinese of this Town, for the sole and express purpose of a Burial place, the undermentioned piece of ground, situated on the side of the Lions Rump, Cape Town'. The government surveyor's map of the cemetery shows a site on the lower slopes of Signal Hill, bordered by Dawes Street, just off Longmarket Street. It covers an area of 6817 square feet and is described as belonging to the 'Chinese people of Cape Town'. Dated 26 November 1830, the map values the property at £1000.[68]

The Chinese of St Helena

The tiny island of St Helena, 3000 km north west of Cape Town, in the south Atlantic Ocean, is perhaps best known as the place of exile of self-proclaimed French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte. Discovered by Portuguese sailor, Juan de Nova Castella, in 1502, it was used as a refreshment station by Portuguese ships traversing the sea route between Europe and Asia. St Helena was first colonized by the British, then the Dutch, and in 1673 ceded to the United English East India Company.

In May 1810, the Company imported fifty Chinese labourers from Canton (Guangzhou) to work in St Helena. They soon proved their value to the island and another 150 were requisitioned.

> "They were divided into two tribes according to their place of origin and were accompanied by priests and interpreters. Rules for the employment and control of the Chinese were laid down, and as late as 1828 these are to be found in the island bye-laws, showing that the scheme continued to be useful to the Colony.
>
> It seems that the number of Chinese stabilized at about 400 for some time. China Lane and masonry bearing Chinese characters remain today to remind St Helenians of the industrious and skilled workmen who contributed so much during some of the most eventful years of the island's history."[69]

One of the labourers returned home 'with a tidy sum of money' to import silk worms from China. But although a silk-worm farm was started in 1828, it failed to become a profitable industry.[70] Most of the labourers were employed in farming, and some worked as mechanics. Their contracts were for three years, later extended to five years, and although some chose to return to China, they were soon replaced by Chinese sailors off passing ships.[71]

Writing on the role of these labourers, the island governor, Major General Alexander Beatson, said,

> "In respect of the Chinese, they are a good deal employed in agriculture; that is, in fencing the lands, in paring and burning, in driving carts, in planting and gathering potatoes, and many other offices; and some are already become expert ploughmen ...
>
> The Company pay the labourers a shilling a day, and finds them in rations; and by this mode, their military services may be at command, and very useful in aiding the corps of artillery, in dragging of cannon, and carriage of ammunition; in short, in employments similar to those of the artillery Lascars in India. As they are all placed under the direction of European overseers, it cannot be doubted that much more labour is obtained from them than if they were left to themselves."[72]

In 1818 it appears fights broke out between the two Chinese groups on the island — those from Canton and others from Macao. Two Chinese were shot in the incident.[73]

When St Helena became a Crown Colony in 1834, the British government faced the problem of repatriating the Chinese. Many were sent to Cape Town where they were given an allowance by the government.

Of the Chinese who remained on St Helena, the former Commissioner of Crown Property, John Charles Mellis, wrote in 1875: '... it is regretted that such industrious men have quite disappeared. A year or two ago the last remaining Chinaman died at a good old age ... the only records of their time exist in the Chinese cemetery, at a spot called New Ground, and an extremely picturesque little Jos house at Black Square; but both of these are fast falling into decay.'[74]

Chinese buried there probably included Atim, a middle aged man who died in the old Somerset Hospital on 5 May 1836[75] and the poor soul, known only as 'a Chinaman' called Attick or Artick. A sparse death notice in the Cape records reveals that he died in a pauper asylum at the age of 64 on 3 November 1846, leaving no children and no belongings.[76]

Ten years after being granted the land, community leaders erected walls around the cemetery and advised the Chinese of Cape Town to apply to be buried there. They published the following notice in the *Cape of Good Hope Gazette* on 1 May 1840:

> ***Notice to the Chinese***
>
> William Assier, Assam, and Achin, headmen of the Chinese people resident in this Colony, having, by permission of His Excellency the Governor, had appropriated to them a plot of ground as a Burial place for the people of that nation, and having built, by subscription amongst themselves, enclosure walls, &c. around the same, hereby give notice, that all natives of China, and their wives lawfully married, or children by said marriages, may claim for themselves or deceased relatives the right of burial therein free, upon application to either of the headmen above named.[77]

For as long as the present-day Chinese community can remember, at the twice-yearly festivals of tomb-sweeping and honouring the dead in April and August, visits have been paid to this graveyard. Because no tombstones remain, flowers are left at the gateway.[78] Chinese were not only buried in the cemetery at Signal Hill. There is a record of one Chinese who was interred in the Anglican graveyard of St George's, on a site fronting Somerset Road. He was J.J. Arshut, of Barrack Street, who died in 1853. His tombstone, carrying an inscription in both English and Chinese characters, survives at Cape Town's Maitland cemetery.[79]

CHINESE LABOUR: OPPOSED AT THE OUTSET

Between 1849 and 1882, the British-controlled colonies of the Cape and Natal experimented on a small scale with the importation of Chinese labour. Groups of Chinese were indentured both by independent farmers and agents as well as by government departments. The often bitter public opposition to the arrival of Chinese shaped legislative measures, in later years, to restrict and eventually prohibit Asiatic immigration into South Africa.

On 12 January 1849, the *Norfolk*, en route from China, docked in Port Elizabeth's Algoa Bay with a cargo of tea and a few Chinese artisans 'who will enter the service of Mr J.O. Smith, in their several callings of cooks, gardeners, carpenters etc.'

Recording the arrival of the Chinese, the local newspaper added:

> We understand that Mr Smith likewise expects a batch of men from Orkney in Scotland. When these have arrived, their union with the Chinamen will afford a

The First Chinese Community Leader

Probably the first Chinese 'community' leader in the Cape was a man known as William Assaw, Assue or Assier. These names crop up in various records between 1829 and 1840; the first name William is consistent in all the references; and the similarity in the surnames is too coincidental to ignore. Perhaps the various spellings arose as different individuals wrote down the name according to its sound.

Nevertheless, this man emerges as an articulate individual who spoke up on behalf of the Chinese in the Cape, appealing first for a Chinese cemetery and later requesting assistance for Chinese labourers from St Helena. William Assaw may well have been illiterate in English, for one of his petitions was signed with a cross, yet he certainly knew whom to engage to prepare his petitions to officials.

Addressing the Cape Governor in a letter dated 26 March 1829, William Assaw, said he was 'a native of China' who intended shortly to leave the colony. He however expressed his concern about obtaining some land for burying his countrymen, 'as it will be of infinite pleasure to Petitioner in case his request is granted before his departure'.[80] Evidently Cape officials regarded him as a spokesman for the community since the cover sheet of the title deed to the Chinese burial ground refers to 'William Assaw as representing the Chinese Population of Cape Town'.[81]

Despite stating that he intended leaving, it is possible he simply visited China then returned to the Cape. By April 1838, one William Assue appeared to be caring for a number of Chinese labourers who had been transferred from St Helena to the Cape. On behalf of 10 of these 'aged and worn out' strangers, he petitioned the Cape governor for their sixpence a day allowance to be increased to a shilling. A police report attached to this petition, of 17 April 1838, states:

> "Among these Pensioners there are some not too old to do something for themselves. I have no doubt they do contrive to earn a little, and which, the Chinese being so remarkable in their patriotic feelings, they share with those who from extreme age are really incapacitated from working. It strikes me that to allow these people a Shilling a day as applied for, independent of free lodgings which the Government also provides, would be setting a premium on idleness, and that meat being so dear the Pensioners might very well eat fish thrice a week so long as the present scarcity may continue and the allowance would then be found ample for their support."[82]

Undeterred by this refusal, Assue submitted another petition just two weeks later in which he cited 'the great rise in the articles ...[the former labourers]... consume, even fish and rice', and his conviction that food would not 'soon be cheaper'. His persistence paid off and he was granted 9d a day for the labourers' maintenance.[83]

His name surfaces yet again two years later, this time as 'William Assier'. A notice published in the *Cape of Good Hope Gazette* on 1 May 1840 cites him as one of the 'headmen' of the Chinese resident in the colony. In this notice, he and others said they had collectively raised funds to enclose the Chinese burial ground and would consider applications from all Chinese for burial there. Bearing in mind that it was a William Assaw who first asked for a Chinese cemetery, it is highly likely he is the same person.

> kind of literal representation of the 'ends of the earth being brought together'. And no human agency has contributed more towards this consummation than the enterprizing commercial spirit.[84]

Over the next 30 years the large-scale importation of Chinese labour for public works and local farming was a recurring theme of discussion in the colony. A shipload of Chinese, bound for Cuba, passed by the Cape in 1853 prompting officials to discuss the subject. The authorities however dismissed the issue as not 'expedient now to embark in an endeavour to introduce this class of Emigrants into the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope.'[85]

Despite the worldwide clamour for cheap labour, some Chinese did not willingly leave their homes for foreign lands. When a Spanish ship, the *Rosa del Turia*, carrying Chinese coolies from Macao to Havannah stopped at Algoa Bay for provisions in 1872, a Cape newspaper reported there were 317 'coolies' on board — 48 had died from sickness on the voyage and 22 had jumped overboard and drowned.[86]

Again addressing the subject of the cheap labour shortage on Cape farms, the newspaper argued that 'Chinamen are manifestly unsuited to the requirements of our pastoral and agricultural employers'.[87] In 1874, the Cape Parliament toyed with the idea of introducing no more than 400 Chinese labourers to assist the Public Works department in building railways. The high cost per head, treaty arrangements and safeguards required by the Imperial Chinese government, however, kept the issue in the realm of discussion only.

In a succinct summary of prevailing attitudes relating to the question of labour supply, John X. Merriman, Commissioner of the Ministerial Department of Crown Lands and Public Works, wrote in a memorandum:

> ... in the Cape the Government is called on to 'Survey mankind from China to Peru,' in the hope of creating and maintaining a class of cheap labourers, who will thankfully accept the position of helots, and not be troubled with the inconvenient ambition of bettering their condition.[88]

In the following years, the 'shall we, shan't we' approach to importing Chinese labour continued. Influential editorial writers argued that the Cape government should look more closely at aiding immigration from Europe since they would find it difficult to control the importation of Asiatics. In February 1876, the following observation appeared in a Cape Town newspaper:

> Chinamen are industrious, saving, sober, peaceful people; and they succeed in making a livelihood, and even in acquiring what is to them wealth, where an Englishman would starve. But on the other hand, they rarely or never take root in the country where they settle; they leave their women behind them, and they invariably endeavour to carry out their own laws and social system — by secret means, if necessary — in the place where they have temporarily taken up their abode.[89]

For local farmers, the long-term implications were academic. They faced an immediate, and pressing labour shortage, which some hoped could be alleviated by Chinese. Replying to a petition from an Albany farmer, in October 1882, to import Chinese labourers, with the same concessions granted to White immigrants, the Colonial Secretary wrote:

> I feel bound to say that the Government would regard the introduction of Chinese in any number as a step fatal to the future of this colony, destroying as it would any hope of creating an European population other than capitalists and landowners and with these views, it would be idle for me to hold out any hopes of assistance in the introduction of what I believe might prove a serious danger to the community.[90]

Yet private enterprise had already embarked on introducing this 'danger' into the Cape. On 10 November 1881, a group of Chinese labourers from Foochow (Fuzhou) aboard the British barque, *Ambassador*, arrived in Port Elizabeth.[91] The group consisted of 20 men, two of whom had died on the passage from China.[92] Rumours had run rife that the new arrivals would number 250, and scathing remarks condemning Chinese were widely circulated.

Unbridled racism marked a lengthy article which appeared in *The Friend of the Free State*, a newspaper published in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, and written by columnist 'Devoir'.

> Two hundred and fifty John Chinamen have been safely landed in the Colony, with a cargo of jingalls, Chinese fireworks, and other furious abominations; chopsticks, fat dogs, edible birds nests, and an assortment of buttons and peacock's feathers for those who may be raised to the distinction of mandarin by the present Secretary for Native Affairs ...
>
> The lower 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 on his own relatives ...
>
> Hanging has no effect on a Chinaman ... Decapitation is the only punishment they fear. ... When all the dogs in Cape Town are polished off, a supply will be sent from China. There is a dark tale that the Chinese are very fond of babies; this, however, I am not going to assert ... [93]

That the 250 'Chinamen' used as the basis for this racist diatribe numbered only 18 did not deter Kimberley's *Diamond Fields Advertiser* from reprinting the column, in full, under the heading, 'That Heathen Chinee Again'.[94] The Cape Argus, however, dismissed 'Devoir' as being motivated by feelings of resentment, concluding with a tongue-in-cheek invitation:

> We also make no assertions as to babies; but if John will come and make a series of square meals of every cur in Cape Town he will earn our eternal gratitude.[95]

The *Graaff Reinet Advertiser* described the Chinese as 'human rubbish' and 'moral plagues', making dark predictions on the future of the colony if Chinese were allowed to gain a foothold.[96] In Natal, an appeal was made for the adoption of a protective immigration policy to 'shut our gates against the Chinese coolie'.[97]

Injecting a measure of balance to these views, the *Cape Argus* questioned whether 'the landing of any inoffensive man on these shores should be prevented on account of his race'.

> We are not concerned to paint in any glowing colours the Chinese character; although we have on many occasions spoken of the miserable hypocrisy of objecting to the Chinaman as a colonist on the self-contradictory grounds that he gambles

> away his gains, and that he saves all he can; or that he only wishes to return to his own land, and that he will take possession of the land to which he comes. ... the Chinaman is certainly not the immigrant we would wish to see here if we could otherwise supply the place which he would fill; but if he comes, it will be because there is a practical need for his services. Petty plodding industries and small gains, such as attract the Chinese, will never bring the European settler to South Africa ... In any Chinese Immigration which may find its way to our shores, not less than in the European Immigration which we hope will go on, we shall learn in the long run that things will find their own level, despite all our fluster.[98]

The newspaper added that even opponents of Chinese immigration 'would not drive off, because of objections to his race or colour, a Chinaman who had paid his own passage here, and who was willing to do work which the white man was glad to pay for, but which the black man would not do. Whatever vices the Chinaman may be guilty of, laziness is not one of them.'

In the face of the furore, another group of Chinese disembarked from the *Notting Hill*, in December 1881 and were transported from Port Elizabeth to Cradock. And 10 Chinese were recorded as passengers for Port Elizabeth when the *Berwickshire* docked in the same month.[99]

CHINESE LABOURERS IN CRADOCK

In the course of 1882 more Chinese labourers arrived in the Eastern Cape, their sojourn remarkable mainly for the attention it attracted. The saga of the ill-fated passengers aboard the *S.S. Bylgia* aptly illustrated some of the hazards and hardships which accompanied such a venture. Fewer than 80% of the 152 labourers who set sail from Hong Kong for Algoa Bay survived the sea voyage of more than three months, and virtually all aboard ship were ill when the vessel was forced to dock in quarantine at Port Natal.

According to official medical reports, 1 died by accident and 26 of trichinosis, caused by the poor quality of provisions and water on board ship. Of the 126 who landed, half were suffering from diarrhoea, pain in their joints, fever and colic and a further seven later died in a typhoid state. Most of the survivors made a rapid recovery once they were treated to 'fresh air, fresh vegetables and meat, large in quantity and good in quality'. The Inspector for Emigrants in Hong Kong said he had had every reason to believe the men should reach their destination alive since they were nearly all skilled artisans and superior in physique to the majority of Chinese who left the port.[100]

By September 1882 the labourers were ready to take up their contracts, one of which was extending the railway line between the Eastern Cape towns of Cradock and Colesberg. Seventy men were sent aboard the *S.S. Dunkeld* to Port Elizabeth where their arrival was greeted with 'some excitement' by local residents. Speculating that some of the Chinese had been suffering from scurvy, a local newspaper noted: 'Those we saw looked fine healthy men, most of them young men. They were sent off to Cradock by rail, and, we believe, will be employed in the construction of the Cradock Extension line.'[101] Another Eastern Cape newspaper however pointed out that whatever disease had plagued the labourers, '... it is something very, very bad', and speculated on the moral evils and opium dens which the Chinese would introduce.[102]

For the labourers themselves, the controversy surrounding their importation was only beginning. Shortly after their arrival in Cradock, they refused to work, claiming that they were not being paid the wages stipulated in their contracts. Their employer, G.R. Davies, airing his grievances in the press, wrote that they had been influenced by 'three Chinese residing at Cradock, formerly gaol birds'. After stopping their food supplies and thrashing one of the ringleaders, work on the railway resumed.[103]

Describing the incident as 'A Bad Spec', the *Graaff Reinet Herald* commented:

> ... It was understood that the men with the pigtails were to be employed on the Cradock-Colesberg railway line, but as we are informed, a hitch has occurred which bids fair to assume considerable proportions ... Some of the pigtails proved to be equal to the occasion, and denied that they had ever signed or entered into any agreement at all ...[Davies], knowing that he is being cheated and that the agreement, if forthcoming, would be found all fair and square, would like to see his rebellious charges compelled to go to work ... Possibly when the copy of that agreement ... arrives from Hongkong, it will be found that Johnny Chinaman will still find some legal excuse for evading its provisions.[104]

An East London resident, however, saw the incident differently. Arguing against agents such as Davies and 'flooding the Colony with cheap labour', he wrote:

> ... This agent for the benighted Chinee carts his precious, and let us hope his unprofitable cargo to Cradock, hurries them before the Resident Magistrate to sign an agreement — some of their countrymen, however, are there before them and probably keenly remembering the suffering caused by the tender mercies of a previous coolie agent, tenders them, as in duty bound, some good practical and wholesome advice, for this they are branded as 'gaol birds.' Can it be possible that strangers in this colony can legally be coerced into signing agreements, can be sentenced to starvation, and to be beaten by others than magistrates and judges — life and property in that case are no longer safe. Our friend, G.R. Davies, however, is not easily abashed by small difficulties; he proceeds as per confession to put on the thumbscrews, in the shape of starvation. Even this does not subdue them all, for one at least receives a 'reprimand' with a stick — it is not stated to what part of the body applied, but probably the soles of the feet — thus compelling him to go on his knees before the chief man ...
>
> The cry hitherto has been that the Chinese are required in this country to compete with the native. How false that is can now plainly be seen by the arrival of these 70 Chinese artizans, evidently to cheapen the cost of European labour.[105]

A month after the initial group of 70 Chinese were despatched to work in Cradock, the remaining 43 of their countrymen arrived in Port Elizabeth. With no place to go and none assuming responsibility for their presence, they were the object of much curiosity as they waited to hear their fate outside the magistrate's court in the city.

> A benevolent Malay by name Ismail, a basket maker, gave them food and secured a night's lodging for them ... On the stoep of the Court House they presented a pitiable sight.[106]

Despite their plight, the new arrivals soon displayed a natural curiosity about their surroundings. The following account described their antics.

> Yesterday the band of Celestials were to be observed taking 'stock' of the town, the

> famous Donkin-street occupying a deal of their attention, while some took a lively interest in the working of a smithy in Main-street, and to his credit be it remarked, an unusually foolish looking Chinaman passed the greater part of the day in the congenial companionship of the 'cabbies', who appeared to highly relish his society and his pantomimic enquiries into the mysteries of their profession. Should the weather get a little cooler, it is highly probable that the Hill will be visited by our illustrious strangers — at present they shy at anything approaching exertion, and enjoy themselves in such shade as the streets afford.[107]

How long these workers enjoyed their enforced idleness is not known, but more than likely the agent who recruited them soon claimed his charges and put their services to use in the Eastern Cape. In addition to working on the railway line, Chinese labourers also built the 3000 to 4000 yards of stone wall enclosing the Cradock race course. Their work was described as 'neatly and well done.'[108]

CHINESE CONTRACT LABOUR IN NATAL

In south-eastern Africa, adjoining the Cape, the Colony of Natal was also under British rule and populated largely by Zulus as well as White settlers, many of whom had emigrated from England and Scotland in the 1850s. Although Blacks performed manual work for most Whites, coastal planters establishing sugar and cotton industries were unable to attract sufficient labourers.[109] They urged the importation of either Indian or Chinese labourers ... and in 1858, 'the manager of the Umzinto Sugar Company brought from Java a few Chinese and Malay labourers used to the cultivation of sugar-cane.'[110]

But it was the mass importation of Indian labourers from 1860 which added a forceful new element to Natal's population structure. More than 6000 indentured labourers, over two-thirds male, were imported from Madras, and a few from Calcutta. For the time being, the sugar cane plantations had the labour they needed,

> but neither the planters nor the Colony in general seem to have faced the sociological implications of the new venture nor indeed to have shown the most elementary human compassion and understanding towards the immigrants who were mainly regarded as 'hands' and no more.[111]

Indian immigration stopped temporarily in 1866, but by the 1870s, the colonists once again sought supplies of labour. Chinese were suggested as potential candidates, although enquiries on their suitability proved discouraging. Commenting on the subject, the Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong, in a letter to the Colonial Secretary of Natal, stated:

> ... it seems right that you should be made to understand, in the first instance, that a Chinaman does not, in the proper sense of the word, *emigrate*, but simply goes to a foreign country with a view of making money and of returning to his home.[112]

He added that a Chinese would want more money than the 10 to 15 shillings a month apparently offered to farm labourers, 'and he would expect to earn it without too much laborious physical work, and without denying himself reasonable indulgence

in what he considers the luxuries of life.' Furthermore, he said, should the Chinese find the Colony suitable, their friends and their friends' friends would follow in the same way as the Californian emigration commenced.

The Immigration Agent for Natal, H. Firth, pointed out that Indians would 'be content to work for nearly four times less the amount of wages'.[113] He said he could recruit Chinese labourers at £11 monthly, foremen at £25, blacksmiths, carpenters and brickmakers at £20, masons and wellsinkers at £16 and bricklayers at £15. Since these were 'relatively excessive' wages, he said he expected the Colony would prefer to recruit 400 Indian labourers.

Elderly community members have long maintained that Chinese helped build the Durban harbour, and these claims have since been substantiated by archival documents and newspaper clippings.[114] From 1875, the Natal colonial government imported Chinese artisans and labourers on a small scale for the colony's roadmaking, harbour and other public works projects. On 16 August 1875, 75 Chinese and 34 French Creoles arrived from Mauritius to work for the Colonial Engineer's Department.[115] It is interesting to note the way in which their arrival was recorded in the 'Shipping' column of the local newspaper:

> The *Rio* arrived yesterday from Mauritius with 3 passengers, 75 Chinese, & 34 French coolies, and a general cargo.[116]

The contingent included 'a great many craftsmen such as carpenters, masons etc. ... and after being taken to the civil engineer in whose department they are intended to serve, [they] were marched to the coolie barracks where preparations were made to receive them'.[117] By January 1876 there were 53 Chinese males resident in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal, about 80 km inland from Durban.[118] Chinese carpenters and masons were also sent to the outlying area of Estcourt and to work on the Tugela Bridge at Colenso.

Later that year, in August 1876, one of the labourers, Simcaw or Akou, aged 47, died intestate in the Durban Hospital. Scanty records state he was from 'Fookhoug', China, and his worldly possessions amounted to a mere £1-7-5, of which £1-5-0 was used for a coffin.[119]

CONTROVERSY RAGES OVER CHINESE HARBOUR WORKERS

No sooner had Chinese workers arrived to work at the harbour in late 1875 when 33 mechanics and workmen at the Durban Harbour petitioned the Colonial Secretary expressing their fears that these Chinese would 'throw some of us out of work'.[120] Vocal opposition to their importation was expressed at a crowded public meeting in Durban's Council Chambers as the 'artizans, mechanics and labourers of Durban' argued that the future of British workmen in the colony was at stake.

Among the many 'reasons' cited for the wish to keep the Chinese out were — they were barbarous and uncivilized, they were adepts in thieving, they were immoral, and they lived on rice and fowls borrowed or stolen from their neighbours.[121] Several speakers stated the settlement of Whites would be adversely affected and the meeting unanimously

The Case of Ah Hing

Official records throw little light on the everyday lives and concerns of the Chinese who arrived in Natal to work as contract labourers, either on the sugar cane fields or on public works projects. One exception is an early petition, dated 28 June 1878, involving the case of 72-year-old Ah Hing.

One might well ask how a man of such an age could be working as a labourer, since the first large batch of Chinese workers only arrived in Natal three years earlier, in August 1875. Perhaps he was one of the group of Chinese imported nearly two decades previously to work on the Umzinto Sugar Company's cane fields, in 1858. In a petition to the Natal Governor, thirteen Chinese who described themselves as traders and labourers in the colony, pleaded for the release from jail of aged Ah Hing, who had been convicted of 'maliciously wounding cattle'.

They stated he had worked on a sugar and coffee plantation in Victoria County but 'that his mind had given way long before said offence was charged against him, and that he is now from old age and infirmity in a semi state of mental derangement and physically in very feeble health'. Adding that he could not live very long 'and it is amongst the Chinese considered the very greatest of calamities to die out of their own country', the petitioners asked for permission to send him back to China at their own expense.

Asked to comment on this appeal, the superintendent of the Durban jail said Ah Hing was in fact nearly 80 years old and had been unfit for hard labour since his admission. He added that he had 'given no trouble' in prison.

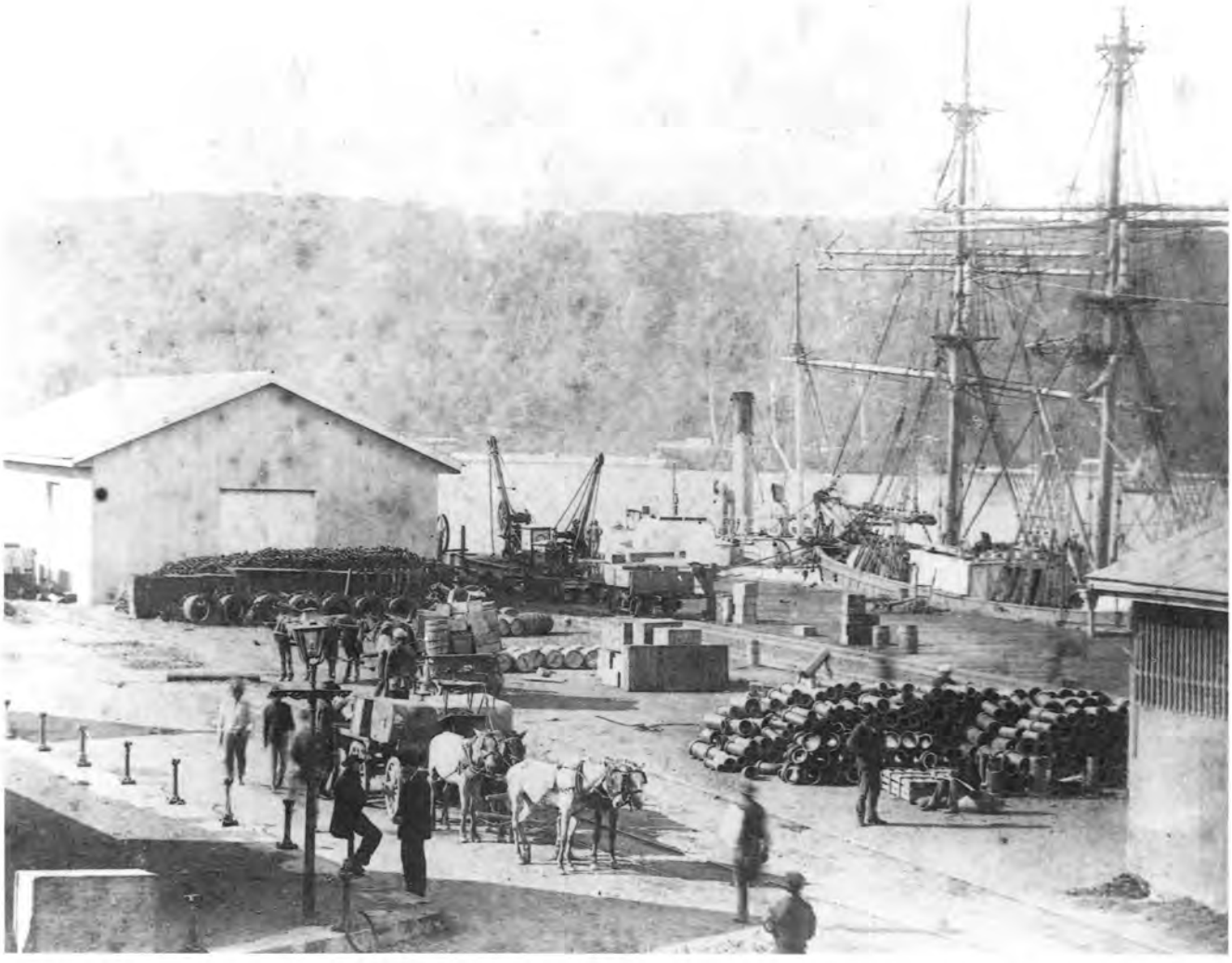
The judge in the case said although the evidence was 'altogether circumstantial', both he and the jury had had no doubt as to the prisoner's guilt. No evidence had been given on Ah Hing's state of mind, nor had he smoked or chewed opium. He concluded: 'Prisoner attempted to cut his throat immediately after suspicion was cast upon him.' Replying to the petitioners, the Governor turned down their request for remission of Ah Hing's sentence and said he saw no grounds for interfering with the court's sentence.[122]

adopted a petition calling on the government to stop further importation of Chinese labourers.

In defence of the Chinese, another speaker, a Mr Escombe, pointed out any increase in immigration would benefit all in the colony, distributing taxation more equitably and promoting the construction of public works. Describing the Chinese as an enterprising people, he said 'the injustice done to them would remain a stigma upon the land to which we belonged'. While he did not favour their passage being paid for them, he stated that:

> There was very much in the character of these people to favour their introduction, and it was only right to give them fair play - and wrong to prejudge them before they had been tried (shouts of 'We know them well enough; we don't want to try them').[123]

As a result of this stormy meeting, one D.P. Carnegie published an impassioned 15-page tract to spell out his opposition to the Chinese and to answer those who had



The Wharf in Durban, 1879. Chinese artisans were among the labourers employed on Durban's harbour works from 1875.

defended them. He warned that Western civilization was endangered by this 'influx of heathenism' and it was absurd to contend that Chinese were the oldest nation in the world, renowned for strides in civilization, science and education. He dismissed as 'sheer nonsense' the view that the British mechanic could hold his own against the Chinese.[124]

A local newspaper, the *Natal Mercury*, expressed its support for halting further Chinese importation. In a lengthy editorial it argued that those who had defended the 'irrepressible "Chinee" ' represented employers whose interests were opposed to those of the workers.[125]

The Chinese themselves did not, however, face this barrage of abuse silently. To ensure that his views gained some exposure, one Chinese merchant paid for special advertisements to be printed in the *Natal Mercury* just a few days later. The advertisements, in the form of a letter replying to accusations against the Chinese, stated the recently imported Chinese labourers had been 'wholly and emphatically

deceived'. Instead of receiving the wages they expected, they had 'to work for little or nothing to enable them to pay back their passage money'. The merchant said the labourers would gladly return to Mauritius, 'the sooner the better, instead of allowing the people of Natal to harmonise and harbour such arbitrary feelings, and run down a nation without justifiable cause or reason.'[126]

Less than a month after this outcry, 28 European mechanics at Durban's Harbour Works were discharged from service, while the Chinese remained. Reporting the incident, the *Natal Mercury* said:

> Not a little consternation was caused yesterday at the Point, when it was observed that the 'blue ensign' had been affixed reversed on a pole, as a signal — so it was taken to be — of distress...
>
> The Chinese are retained, and the mechanics being thus suddenly thrown out of employ think they have just cause for complaint.[127]

Notwithstanding all the protest, another group of five Chinese arrived from Mauritius aboard the schooner *Alice* in October 1875,[128] and work progressed at the harbour. The only incident involving Chinese in the following months was an accident on the Breakwater at the Point when a Chinese worker was hit by a truck.[129] In the next year, 1876, the newspaper remarked favourably on the increase in Natal's population, adding that a good many settlers had originated from Mauritius.

> More than a hundred Chinamen have come from thence, and although their advent caused a species of small panic amongst the artisans here, the demand for workmen is such that the fact does not appear to have disturbed the conditions of the labour market.[130]

It is not known whether these Chinese artisans and labourers remained in Natal or returned to Mauritius. At least 10 were still employed by the colonial government in 1886, but by 1887, only two were reported to be living in the barracks of the Point, the quarters adjoining Durban's harbour.[131]

Over the following years discussion on the importation of Chinese labourers went as far as a proposal to appoint Chinese consular representatives in the Cape Colony. In 1891 Cape authorities asked the British government whether such a proposal would 'convey tacit approval of introduction of Chinese as settlers'. The reply was reassuringly direct:

> Her Majesty's Government are of opinion that the appointment of a Chinese Consul for the Cape Colony, if made, would not commit the Colonial Government directly or indirectly to adopt any policy with regard to Chinese immigration which would not have been adopted if there were no Chinese Consul.

It was pointed out that the Chinese government was not likely to appoint consuls in places where there were not a considerable number of Chinese subjects.[132]

More independent immigrants — among whom were the forefathers of the South African-born Chinese — arrived in the country from the 1870s onwards. They left southern China, as did thousands of their compatriots, to seek new opportunities in foreign lands. The reasons for their exodus lay in China and the impact of western penetration into the 'Middle Kingdom'.

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