

**“Not a Chinaman’s Chance”:  
Chinese labour in South Africa and the  
United States of America**

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From the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese labour formed an integral part of the mass migration of people in the international era of industrial capitalism. In particular, developing colonial economies throughout the world, which were specifically dependent on mining, plantation and later railway developments, precipitated these movements. Being stereotyped as hard-working, diligent and reliable, the Chinese labour force was as much welcomed, as it was objected to. The anti-Chinese campaigns that resonated across the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans reveal remarkable similarities in terms of anti-Sinicism and extreme Orientalism. While it has been argued that most of the work on indentured labour has examined the subject in terms of a “single overseas location”<sup>1</sup> and intimated that more comparative historical work is required<sup>2</sup>, this article will juxtapose the situation in two key areas of the Western colonial world: the United States of America (hereafter US) and South Africa (hereafter SA). It will compare and contrast the place and position of these labourers, as well as the visual representations of the “other”. This, it will be argued, eventually culminated in some of the first overtly racist legislation introduced during the genesis of white hegemony on these two continents, and had ramifications that went well beyond the dissolution of the respective exclusion acts.

**Historiography**

For the most part of the mid-twentieth century, much of the work written on the Chinese overseas was criticized for the attention it paid to the

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1. D. Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834 to 1922* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), pp ix-x.
2. G. Wang, “The Status of Overseas Chinese Studies”, in L. Wang and G. Wang (eds), *The Chinese Diaspora Selected Essays I* (Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1998), p 1; R. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore A History of Asian Americans* (Penguin Books, New York, 1990), p 7; M. Guterl and C. Skwiot, “Atlantic and Pacific Crossings”, *Radical History Review*, December 2004.

Chinese “as objects”.<sup>3</sup> American, Canadian, Australian, South East Asian and other scholars all accused the existing research of only being concerned with examining “European reaction”<sup>4</sup> to the Chinese, and contended that it paid more attention to the “excluders” than it did to the “excluded”.<sup>5</sup> They ascribed this so-called “negative history” to the “preoccupation with explaining” the colonial past,<sup>6</sup> a history which it has been argued, revealed more about Western societies’ racist attitudes than it did about the Chinese communities.<sup>7</sup>

This writing in turn resulted in a stereotyping which denied the Chinese any individuality, making them both faceless and nameless accessories to the various host societies and consequently the respective national histories. These stereotypical images – albeit the blanket portrayal as the excessively dexterous and astute worker, cunningly shrewd villain, unassimilable feeble sojourner or lecherous seductive contaminator – buttressed notions of the Chinese as the “other”. There appeared thus to be very little distinction between the historical studies and the contemporary records these studies were based on. This fed into notions of exoticism and what Edward Said later termed “Orientalism” – a phenomenon which was so much part of the growing Western imperialism of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Said defines Orientalism “as the body of occidental *representations* [my emphasis] of the oriental world which both constitute the Orient as Other to the Occident and appropriates the domain of the Orient by speaking for it”. Orientalism is a discourse, Said argues, which “manages and produces information about an invented other, which locates and justifies the power of the knowledgeable European self”.<sup>9</sup> This interpretation has been transferred to a US context by Neil Gotanda who claims “The American Orientalist constructs the Orient and Orientals as the external and foreign Other who

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3. A. Markus, “Chinese in Australian History”, *Meanjin*, 42, 1, March 1983, p 88.
  4. Markus, “Chinese in Australian History”, p 88.
  5. K.S. Wong, “The Transformation of Culture: Three Chinese Views of America”, *Australian Quarterly*, 48, 2, June 1996, p 201.
  6. R. Daniels, *Asian American Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1988), p xiii; J.W. Cushman, “A ‘colonial casualty’: the Chinese Community in Australian Historiography”, *Asian Studies Association of Australian Review*, 7, April 1984, pp 100-101; Markus, “Chinese in Australian History”, p 8.
  7. Wang, “The Status of Overseas Chinese Studies”, p 5.
  8. C. Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989), pp 44-45.
  9. L. Lowe, *Critical Terrains French and British Orientalism* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992), p 3.

define America and Americanness”, concluding that “American national identity is ... invested with the Otherness of the Orient”.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the increased interest in ethnic minorities, overseas Chinese studies has developed as an intellectually independent discipline over the past few decades, with the result that much of the above critique has been addressed and the field has taken on numerous new directions.<sup>11</sup> This development has produced more nuanced and textured accounts, as well as a wide array of genres across disciplines that have given a voice and a place to the Chinese in their various overseas destinations.<sup>12</sup> This is obviously a development that is as dynamic as it is diverse, and one which is gradually having an impact on the master historical narratives as well as popular consciousness worldwide.

However, as indicated above, the focus of this article is indeed upon the formerly criticized concern with European reaction to, and more particularly, depiction of the Chinese immigrant and labourer at the onset of the mineral and industrial development in the US and SA. While historians on either side of the Atlantic Ocean have, to a greater or lesser degree, dealt with the topic of Chinese labour both in isolation and comparatively,<sup>13</sup> this article juxtapositions the two situations in the US and SA, tracing them to the culmination in the respective Chinese Exclusion Acts and the dire consequences thereafter.

The two destinations are as different as they are similar. While the number of Chinese immigrants in the US and SA remained equally miniscule up to the mid-nineteenth century, there was a relatively dramatic, but divergent increase thereafter. This coincided with both the discovery of minerals in the two regions, as well as the general global upsurge in Chinese emigration. By the turn of the twentieth century, the geographically larger US mainland recorded Chinese immigrant figures escalating to more than 100 000, while the SA figures remained below 5 000. Chinese Exclusion Acts were introduced in 1882 in the US, while

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10. N. Gotanda, “Exclusion and Inclusion: Immigration and American Orientalism”, in E. Hu-DeHart (ed), *Across the Pacific Asian Americans and Globalisation* (Temple University Press, New York, 1999), p 132.
  11. For an overview of the history of overseas Chinese studies, see: Wang, “Status of Overseas Chinese Studies”, pp 1-13.
  12. For a recent discussion of one dimension of the development in the literature, see: G. Wang, “Within and Without: Chinese Writers Overseas”, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 1, 1, May 2005, pp 1-15.
  13. M. Guterl and C. Skwiot, “Atlantic and Pacific Crossings”. Herein they call for the combination of comparisons within a global context.

its SA counterpart followed in 1904, coinciding with the introduction of the indentured labourers to the SA gold-mines. The Chinese then remained excluded on both continents until pragmatic considerations by the US and SA governments altered their positions in 1943 and 1933 respectively. Thereafter, often existing on the fringes, the Chinese appeared to have been sidelined as the momentum of the US civil rights movement and the later SA freedom struggle got underway. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, they held a precarious position, one it will be argued that was grounded in their initial encounters and representation.

Despite the extreme demographic disparities, unsynchronised periodization and other variants which exist between the two countries, the main consideration of this article will be on the similar pattern that emerged in the treatment and perception of the Chinese. It will focus on the way the Chinese were viewed and portrayed by contemporaries within their societies – focusing specifically on the visual representation – which it will be argued had immeasurable impacts on the position and status of the respective Chinese communities for generations thereafter. It is believed that it was indeed this imprint of a particular representation in popular consciousness – precisely what Said was pointing to – that not only contributed to the introduction of the first exclusively racist legislation in the US and SA, but also to its retention and continued enforcement for numerous decades thereafter. Even once the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed, these perceptions were perpetuated and persisted. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it has been argued that “media stereotypes have changed little from those of bygone days”,<sup>14</sup> with the “myth of the ‘yellow peril’” being “unfailingly recycled” and “representation [being] systematically reproduced during critical times”.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in certain domains, whether the complete assimilation of the Asian American or South African Chinese into the proverbial “melting pot” (or “tossed salad”) and “rainbow nation” has been achieved, still remains a mute question.<sup>16</sup>

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14. H. Ling, *Surviving on Golden Mountain* (State University of New York Press, New York, 1998), p 5.
  15. S. Tam, “Representations of ‘the Chinese’ and ‘Ethnicity’ in British Racial Discourse”, in E. Sinn (ed), *The Last Half Century of Chinese Overseas* (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1998), p 82.
  16. For reference to this situation, see for example the introduction in E. Hu-DeHart (ed), *Across the Pacific Asian Americans and Globalisation*, pp 1-23; Anonymous, “Neither Fish nor Fowl!” *Transvaal Chinese Association Newsletter*, March 2001, p 1.

### The first Chinese arrivals

Very small numbers of Chinese immigrants arrived in the Cape Colony (South Africa) from the late seventeenth century and in the US from the late eighteenth century. They were generally individual males who came ashore from passing ships or might have migrated intentionally. They were mostly occupied as merchants and small-scale traders, with a lesser number of labourers and servants. The US records both students and circus performers as among their early arrivals, while at the Cape there were also convicts or ex-convicts who had been banished by the Dutch East India Company in Batavia. The latter were of generally little consequence as they left once their sentences expired.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the relatively insignificant size and position of the first Chinese in the early years of the two colonial settings, murmurings of anti-Sinitic feelings were already prevalent. An array of evidence indicates that some of the first Chinese arrivals at the Cape were indeed reasonably wealthy, so much so that the European settlers protested to the authorities about their “unfair competition” in the market-place. As a result, already in 1727 regulations (*plakkaaten*) were introduced in the Cape which prohibited the Chinese from participating in the sale of certain products.<sup>18</sup> In the US there was also evidence of local anti-Chinese sentiment, particularly when it came to competition in the job market. It is important to note that during this initial period, the number of Chinese in neither the US nor SA ever exceeded more than about 50. This was a result of China’s policies prohibiting emigration, as well as the apparent high rate of return to the East.<sup>19</sup>

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17. H.M. Lai, “The United States”, in L. Pan (ed), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, London, 1998), pp 261-262; K.L. Harris, “South Africa”, in L. Pan (ed), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, pp 360-361.
  18. *Kaapse Plakkaatboek II (1707-1753)* (Cape Times, Cape Town, 1948), pp 121, 172; *Kaapse Plakkaatboek III (1774-1786)* (Cape Times, Cape Town, 1949), p 22.
  19. J. Armstrong, “The Chinese at the Cape in the DEIC Period, 1652-1795”. Unpublished paper presented at Slave Route Project Conference, Cape Town, October 1997, p 32; R. Elphick and R. Shell, “Intergroup Relations”, in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1989), p 217; Lai, “The United States”, p 261.

### Gold and Chinese immigration

It was only after the mid-nineteenth century, when the two colonial economies entered new phases of development, that the number of overseas Chinese – both free and indentured – going to these destinations escalated dramatically. The situation was triggered by the discovery of gold on both continents (respectively in 1849 and 1886), expedited by the termination of the slave-labour system (respectively in 1863 and 1834), and accelerated by the dire socio-economic circumstances in China.<sup>20</sup> In addition, various treaty arrangements facilitated the process, such as the Chinese Passenger Act (1855); the Convention of Peking (1860), which authorized foreign emigration; and the Burlingame Treaty (1868), whereby the Chinese were free to immigrate and establish American citizenship.<sup>21</sup> In 1904, the Anglo-Chinese Labour Convention and the Transvaal Labour Importation Ordinance facilitated the introduction of indentured labour to the SA gold-mines.<sup>22</sup>

The resident or existing small Chinese communities within the two destinations, as well as their free compatriots who emigrated later, were to be affected detrimentally by the sudden arrival of this comparatively overwhelmingly large number of Chinese, particularly of the labouring classes. In the US, after 1849, some 25 000 Chinese went to the Californian gold-mines or “Golden Mountain” alone, eventually representing the largest of the foreign minorities and almost one-third of the population in some of the mining counties.<sup>23</sup> The number of free Chinese who came to SA after the mineral discoveries of diamonds (1867) and then gold (1886), was miniscule in comparison to the US. They totalled an estimated 2 000 in both the Cape and Transvaal, but then after 1904, 63 695 indentured labourers were recruited by the European

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20. T. Chen, *Chinese migrations with special reference to labour conditions* (Che'ng-wen Publishing Company, Taipei, 1967), pp 5-11.
  21. P.C. Campbell *Chinese coolie immigration to countries within the British Empire* (Negro Universities Press, New York, 1969), pp 114-115; D. Mišćević and P. Kwong, *Chinese Americans the Immigrant Experience* (Baker and Taylor, Southport, 2000), p 3; J.K. Martin and others, *America and its People* (Scott, Glenview - Illinois, 1989), p 556.
  22. K.L. Harris, “A History of the Chinese in South Africa to 1912.” PhD thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1998, pp 133-135.
  23. W. Bean and J.J. Rawls, *California an Interpretive History* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1988), p 127; J.R. Conlin, *The American Past A Survey of American History* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1987), p 515; B. Borland (ed), *America Past and Present* (Harper Collins College, New York, 1995), p 524.

mining magnates to work the gold-mines in the Transvaal on a stringently regulated contract basis.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of the labouring classes that came to the US were from south-eastern China, they were generally poverty-stricken and arrived under the credit-ticket or brokerage system. Chinese brokers or touts paid the passage of the emigrant, but had a lien on his services until the debt was paid with interest. The lien could be either on family or property in China and could be sold to a ship's captain or employer.<sup>25</sup> In California their labour was often sold to transcontinental railroad companies or Chinese mining companies through Chinese sub-contractors, resulting in excessive exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Besides the credit-ticket Chinese, there were also those who came and worked independently in the US in mining, agriculture and secondary service industries, while many were prepared to operate the more menial daily chores of cooking, gardening and laundering, which the European settlers were generally less prepared to take up.<sup>27</sup>

The comparatively small number of free Chinese that arrived in SA as independent immigrants were also primarily from the south-eastern regions in China. They were generally self-employed merchants, but also established small-scale service businesses in the vicinity of the mines. The 63 695 Chinese indentured labourers contracted to work on the gold-mines from 1904, were from the northern provinces and were specifically recruited to augment the unskilled labour force. After the South African War (1899-1902), black labour supply, which formed the indispensable base of the mining industry, had not been forthcoming. A fervent and ultimately successful campaign was launched by mine management and the local British authorities to obtain approval for the importation of Chinese labour.<sup>28</sup> In order to allay the fears of the opponents, seventeen

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24. The key text on this subject is P. Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal* (Macmillan, New Jersey, 1982).
  25. Campbell, *Chinese coolie emigration to countries within the British Empire*, pp 94-95; T. Chen, *Chinese migrations with special references to labour conditions* (P.S. King and Sons, Washington, 1923), pp 14-16.
  26. Bean and Rawls, *California*, p 126; J.A. Henretta and others, *America's history* (Worth, New York, 1993), p 53.
  27. L. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* (Arrow - A Division of the Random House Group, London, 1991), p 90; Martin, *America and its People*, p 556.
  28. For a discussion of this, see: D.J.N. Denoon, "The Transvaal Labour Crisis, 1901-1906", *Journal of African History*, 17, 3, 1967, pp 481-494; A.H. Jeeves, "The Control of Migratory Labour on South African Gold Mines in the Era of Kruger and Milner", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2, 1, October 1975, pp 3-29.

of the thirty-five sections of the Labour Importation Ordinance which regulated their employment, were purely restrictive. The labourers were to be employed only on the Witwatersrand as unskilled miners, and were not to be employed in fifty-five specified occupations, except in unskilled positions. They could not own landed property, nor engage in any form of trade. They were to reside on the premises where they were employed and could only leave with a permit which would be granted for periods of less than 48 hours. All labourers had to enter a contract of service not exceeding three years, with the right to renewal for a similar period, after which they were to be returned to their country of origin. A separate Foreign Labour Department was established to organise and regulate the system from the initial recruitment, to employment and final repatriation.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that more Chinese labourers were imported into SA in the first decade of the twentieth century, than slaves imported to the Cape for a period of one and three-quarter centuries.

It has been argued that because the Chinese were regarded as the cheapest form of labour after the abolition of slavery, and because in many cases they replaced black slaves or black labourers in the US and SA, their poor treatment was owed in part to that fact.<sup>30</sup> It was however also the very nature of the various systems under which the Chinese came to the respective destinations that placed the immigrants in a position where they were subject to extreme abuse. Under the credit-ticket system in the US, many of the Chinese labourers suffered exploitation and oppression from fellow Chinese and Europeans in superior positions. Not only were they worked hard and paid extremely low wages, but the exorbitant commissions which were charged resulted in the workers being kept in a state of “debt bondage”, which was often enforced by a Chinese creditor-employer network.<sup>31</sup> At the end of a term of service, the labourers were sometimes forced to continue their servitude for “alleged debt, crimes and other fictitious charges”.<sup>32</sup> Although the indentured contract system introduced in SA regulated conditions and treatment, the Chinese were still subjected to flagrant abuses by both fellow mine-workers and management.<sup>33</sup>

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29. *Ordinances of the Transvaal*, “Labour Importation Ordinance”, No 17 of 1904; Harris, “A History of the Chinese in South Africa to 1912”, pp 137-142.
30. K. Saunders (ed), *Indentured labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (Croom Helm, London, 1984), pp iv-v; Miščevič and Kwong, *Chinese Americans*, p 83.
31. Bean and Rawls, *California*, p 126.
32. M.F. Farley, “The Chinese Coolie Trade, 1845-1875”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 3, 1968, p 259.
33. See: Harris, “A History of the Chinese in South Africa to 1912”, pp 137-142.



### Anti-Chinese sentiment

Beyond the negative circumstances of the various employment and recruitment systems in the US and SA, however, was the far greater and ultimately detrimental environment of anti-Chinese sentiment. This was a sentiment which knew no boundaries in terms of its location, rallying power and emotive force and in this instance – in terms of the US and SA – it goes to show how universal the anti-Chinese feeling was in the imperial world, despite the tangible differences in situation and time. Imperial networks and intercontinental links<sup>34</sup> prejudiced and reinforced the perception of the Chinese as an “inferior other”. At the same time, a more commonly held view was of the Chinese as an external foreign minority, that became the scapegoat for all socio-economic evils,<sup>35</sup> and in both the US and SA, was the rationale for the introduction of the first two racially discriminating exclusion acts.

The reason for this anti-Chinese sentiment has never been easy to explain. Although numerous studies have been done, particularly by Asian American scholars, there is no consensus as to its cause, other than that it is a deep-rooted and complex matter.<sup>36</sup> In her book on Chinese American women, Huping Ling presents a brief summary of four primary explanations on the subject: economic, racist, cultural and isolationist.<sup>37</sup> The most popular, and the one to which many historians subscribe, is that which contends anti-Chinese sentiment was (and is) primarily economically founded. The Chinese were seen as unfair competitors in the market place – not only were they prepared to work for lower wages than most, but also maintained a lower standard of living.<sup>38</sup> Another cause of the animosity toward the Chinese within the economic context, was their ability to succeed and even excel in the various lucrative sectors.

In SA, this was apparent from as early as the 1700s when, as already mentioned, the Dutch settlers petitioned the administration about

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34. J. Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist J.T. Bain, a Scottish Rebel in Colonial South Africa* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2004), p 7.
  35. N.A. Graebner and others, *A history of the American People* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1975), p 515.
  36. A. Gyory, *Closing the Gate Race, Politics and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1998), pp 6-16; Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27; Henretta, *America's History*, p 533.
  37. Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27.
  38. Henretta, *America's History*, p 533.

the “unfair competition of the Chinese”.<sup>39</sup> Almost a century and a half later, the Europeans on the SA gold-mines again petitioned the authorities about Chinese merchants who caused “great injury to white traders”.<sup>40</sup> In the build-up to the proposed introduction of Chinese labour, their alleged assiduousness was caricatured as follows:

...their narrow, tireless industry, pushed beyond a virtue to the level of a defect, coupled with their excessively low standard of living, render them competitors in the labour market specially unwelcome to European peoples who endeavour to maintain the level of comfort ... essential to happiness under conditions of civilization.<sup>41</sup>

This exaggerated concern about and objection to the Chinese work ethic in both SA and the US is clearly evident in an article published in a British periodical just prior to the arrival of the Chinese indentured labourers in SA:

The natural condition of the white man appears to be a state of rest. Not so the chinaman [sic]; his natural state is one of ceaseless activity; it requires no effort on his part to commence work, and when once started he goes on like a steam machine ... [they] would go on forever if they were not stopped ... The American working man pointed out the error of their ways and did all they could to civilise the poor heathen, and to impress upon him the principles and practices of the white workers, but all to no purpose; the misguided heathen still worked on like a machine.<sup>42</sup>

In the US white workers became particularly incensed by the Chinese profitably working mining claims that had been abandoned by them.<sup>43</sup> One US writer who believed that economic considerations were the most important in causing anti-immigrant feeling, E.C. Sandmeyer, claimed it was “particularly because Chinese labourers became unwitting pawns in labour-management disputes during the series of economic recessions”.<sup>44</sup> In support of this, others have argued that as the US depression of the 1870s and 1880s grew worse, the competition for

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39. See K.L. Harris, “Chinese merchants on the Rand, c. 1850-1910”, *South African Historical Journal*, 33, 1995, pp 155-168.

40. *Indian Opinion*, 23 July 1907; Harris, “Chinese merchants on the Rand, c. 1850-1910”, p 163.

41. H. Samuel, “The Chinese Labour Question”, *The Contemporary Review*, 85, April 1904, p 459.

42. H.S. Maxim, “The Chinese and the South African Labour Question”, *Fortnightly Review*, March 1903, p 507.

43. Borland, *America Past and Present*, p 524.

44. Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27.

unskilled jobs increased and thus the Chinese came under increasingly bitter attacks at the hands of fellow European settlers. Violent riots against the Chinese broke out in the subsequent two decades in places such as Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver and San Francisco.<sup>45</sup>

Another view was that the anti-Chinese sentiment went deeper than merely economic considerations and that it was founded on blatant racism. As mentioned above, the Chinese were sometimes perceived as substitutions or replacements for black slaves and black labour, and hence, as R. Takaki argues, the “status of racial inferiority assigned to the Chinese had been prefigured in the black and Indian past”.<sup>46</sup> As the “inferior other”, they were relegated to the lower echelons of society and, like blacks, were viewed as “threats to white racial superiority”.<sup>47</sup> Taking this further, S.C. Miller argued that “the hostilities toward Chinese were part of the general xenophobia of white Protestant Americans” and that “Chinese immigration would threaten Aryan dominance in America”. This “sinophobia” was fuelled by such claims as “Mongolian blood was debased” and “the Chinese mind was politically retarded”, making their importation both “retrograde and dangerous”.<sup>48</sup>

According to cultural anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu, the anti-Chinese sentiment was a result of a “classical case of cultural misunderstanding”. In other words, the “majority of white Americans [or settlers] were ignorant of Chinese culture and their ignorance produced prejudice”.<sup>49</sup> The perception of the Chinese as “alien” and “different” permeated much of the rhetoric. It was held that the “Chinese who, though abnormally civilised in some ways, are yet painfully uncivilised according to our ideas in many others”.<sup>50</sup> Anti-Chinese feelings were based on “essentially irrational fears” of a people who “worshipped strange gods, ate strange foods, and were thought to suffer from strange diseases”.<sup>51</sup>

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45. Graebner, *A history of the American People*, p 515; Borland, *America Past and Present*, p 524; Martin, *America and its People*, p 556; Henretta, *America's History*, p 533; Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist*, p 10.
  46. R. Takaki, *A Different Mirror A History of Multi-cultural America* (Little, Brown & Company, New York, 1993), p 204.
  47. Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p 205.
  48. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p 92; Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27; A.W., “Yellow Slavery and White!”, *Westminster Review*, 161, 5 May 1904, p 487.
  49. Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27.
  50. I. Dobbie, “Chinese Labour”, *MacMillan's Magazine*, August 1906, p 799.
  51. Bean and Rawls, *California*, p 177.

Taking the cultural dimension further, it is also believed that the Chinese remained isolated from whites as a result of “a language barrier, different customs, syncretistic religion and other traditions”. The fact is that the Chinese tried to place a “comfortable distance between themselves and the unfriendliness in the looks and acts of their [white] co-workers and neighbours”, but unfortunately, this “voluntary separation stamped them with a badge of inferiority”.<sup>52</sup>

It must also be noted that even those who supported the importation of and benefited financially from the arrival of Chinese, also held “Orientalist” views. Employers such as the US railroad and agricultural developers and the SA mining magnates viewed the Chinese in terms of their incredible work acumen. In fact, imperial powers generally believed that “no race in the world would do them better service than the Chinese”.<sup>53</sup> They were described as “machine-like”, “hard working and industrious”.<sup>54</sup> Thus even in the pro-Chinese camp, the rhetoric was riddled with an awareness of the “other”. The attitude of the Westerner or Occident towards the credit-ticket (US) and indentured (SA) Chinese labourer, led to a heightened and more negative awareness of the free Chinese community throughout the two countries which had – and still has – far-reaching consequences for their future positions. In addition, as author Lynn Pan has argued about the US, but which is equally applicable to SA and elsewhere, “middle-class Chinese immigrants were up against the fact that because the first Chinese to enter America had been labourers, in the ordering of (foreign) minorities, ethnic Chinese had been assigned a low place in American minds”.<sup>55</sup>

This sinophobia or anti-Chinese sentiment was a complex and deeply rooted emotion, which echoed across colonial destinations often even prior to the actual arrival or presence of Chinese immigrants. These abstract emotions and attitudes were made tangible not only in the attacks and violation of Chinese persons and property, but more damningly, in the introduction of the exclusion legislation.<sup>56</sup> This legislation not only obstructed the settlement of the contemporary Chinese and their families, but marred the future of generations to come. As Eric Foner claims,

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52. Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 27.

53. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p 26.

54. D. Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 1999), pp 36-37; A.E. Munro, *The Transvaal Chinese Labour Problem* (H.J. Drane, London, 1906), p 85.

55. Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p 277.

56. A. Gyory is of the opinion that politicians were at the heart of these developments.

“Exclusion profoundly shaped the experiences of Chinese-Americans”, and one might add Chinese South Africans, “long stigmatizing them as incapable of assimilation and justifying their isolation from mainstream society”.<sup>57</sup> According to Andrew Gyory, the exclusion legislation “legitimized racism as national policy”, maintaining that “its lingering impact of anti-Asian bigotry remains to this day”.<sup>58</sup>

### Chinese Exclusion

The introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in the US in 1882 and SA in 1904 marked the first time in the history of the respective European settlements “that race had been used to exclude an entire group of people”.<sup>59</sup> In the evolving legislative infrastructures of the early settler societies, white dominance was ever present and the various governments had instituted legislation which protected or elevated the rights of those who were white and discriminated against those who were not. In 1790, for example, a federal law in the US restricted “citizenship” to whites,<sup>60</sup> while in SA, the 1858 constitution of the newly founded South African Republic declared that there would be no equality between the white inhabitants and coloured people.<sup>61</sup> As regards the gold-bearing regions, which were central to the future economies and a key draw-card for immigrants, the South African Republic Gold Law of 1898 stipulated that no “coloured person”, meaning “any African, Asiatic, Native or coloured American person, Coolie or Chinamen” would be allowed to be a “license-holder or be in any way connected with the workings of the diggings, unless they were employed as workmen in the service of whites”.<sup>62</sup> In the US, access to mining was not obstructed along colour lines, but in the 1850s a “Foreign Miners’ Tax” was levied, requiring the payment of a monthly licensing fee. Although initially directed against all foreigners, it was soon apparently enforced almost exclusively against the Chinese and eventually contributed five million dollars to state revenue.<sup>63</sup>

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57. E. Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (W.W. Norton, New York, 2005), p 659.

58. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p 16.

59. Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, p 657.

60. Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, pp 195, 207.

61. *Grondwet van die Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*, 1858, Artikel 9.

62. *Laws of the Transvaal up to 1899*, Number 15 of 1898, Sections 130-131.

63. Graebner, *A History of the American People*, p 515; Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p 195; Bean and Rawls, *California*, p 127.

Over time both regions witnessed the introduction of immigration legislation to keep out certain elements which the authorities and white society regarded as “undesirable”. The US “Page Law of 1875” was introduced to bar prostitutes – although written in general terms the act was apparently executed with Chinese women in mind.<sup>64</sup> A similar pattern was followed in the Cape Colony with the introduction of the “Immigration Act of 1902”. Following on the example of the other three SA states in which restrictive immigration legislation had been passed – including the “Natal formula” with its notorious European language test – various restrictions were accordingly set in place to restrict and remove “prohibited immigrants”.<sup>65</sup> In both the US and SA, immigration legislation prior to the Chinese Exclusion Acts did not single out any specific nation or cultural group, despite the pressures of increasing “anti-alienism”, which coincided with escalating immigration and weakening economic circumstances.

In the preamble to the US Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed by the forty-seventh Congress on 6 May 1882, it was stated that the “coming of Chinese laborers” to the US “endangers the good order of certain localities within the territories”.<sup>66</sup> To rectify this, Congress made it unlawful for Chinese labourers to enter the US for the next ten years and denied naturalized citizenship to the Chinese already there. Chinese immigrants presently in the US, had to register and secure a passport if they intended to leave and return. An amendment redefined “Chinese laborers” as both skilled and unskilled workers, as well as miners. Because it proved too difficult to enforce, the prohibition was broadened in 1888 to include “all persons of the Chinese race”, although exemptions were provided for Chinese officials, teachers, students, tourists and merchants. To inhibit further immigration, the Scott Act of 1888 declared all return certificates “void and of no effect”, which resulted in the prevention of some 20 000 Chinese in possession of such return certificates from re-entering the US. The Chinese Exclusion Act was renewed ten years later in 1892, and extended indefinitely in 1902 and 1904.<sup>67</sup> Only in 1943, some 61 years later, did the US Congress repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, allowing a quota for Chinese immigration of

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64. G.A. Peffer and S. Chan as quoted by Ling, *Surviving on the Golden Mountain*, p 28.  
 65. *Statutes of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*, Act Number 47 of 1902, The Immigration Act.  
 66. H.S. Commager, *Documents of American History I* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1973), p 560.  
 67. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, pp 223, 314, footnote 9; Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, p 207; Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, p 657.

105 Chinese per year and gradually extending the right of naturalized citizenship. The catalyst for this development was none other than the pragmatic considerations around China's participation in the Second World War.<sup>68</sup>

While conceding that economics and racism provide "valid insights" into the origins of the US Chinese Exclusion Act, Andrew Gyory claims that the "single most important force" behind it, was national politicians "who seized, transformed, and manipulated the issue of Chinese immigration in the quest for votes". He maintains that the Chinese became "pawns in a political system characterized by legislative stalemate and ... razor-thin margins". Moreover the Chinese were used by politicians as a detractor to deflect from the real national problems.<sup>69</sup> Although he considers the merits of the two theories that historians have used to explain the origin of the Chinese Exclusion Act – the long-standing Californian thesis initially advanced by M.R. Coolidge in 1909 and then the more recent nationalist racist thesis<sup>70</sup>, he concludes that it was politicians that supplied the agency for Chinese exclusion, and "not Californian workers and national racist imagery".<sup>71</sup> He contends that the Chinese Exclusion Act is a "classic example of top-down politics" and offers a "unique window for viewing the political system of the Gilded Age". He shows that Chinese exclusion was seen as a "safe, non-ideological solution to the [American] nation's industrial crisis" and "anti-Chinese racism provided a convenient alternative in the hunt for scapegoats amid a sputtering economy."<sup>72</sup>

The South African Chinese Exclusion equivalent was introduced by the Cape Colonial Government as Act 37 of 1904. While the Transvaal Government and mining magnates to the north were seeking sanction for the importation of Chinese indentured labour from the British Colonial Office, Cape politicians were gearing up for one of the first party-political contested elections. In line with Gyory's US interpretation, the politicians at the Cape seized upon this as an issue to attract popular support and lobbied to prevent the entry of Chinese into the Cape. Here it must be noted that at the time of this political campaign, there were scarcely 2 000 Chinese resident in the Cape Colony. Moreover, the indentured Chinese who were to be imported into

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68. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, p 387; Ling, *Surviving on Golden Mountain*, p 2.

69. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p 15.

70. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, pp 6-16.

71. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p 15, backcover.

72. Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, pp 15-16.

the Transvaal on three year contracts, had not yet arrived. Unlike the American legislation, which excluded mainly Chinese labourers, the Cape act went all out and dealt with “all classes” of Chinese. It was therefore made applicable from the outset to the “whole of the Chinese race”. The only exceptions were those persons who could be exempted because they were British subjects or were resident or present in the colony at the time of the passing of the act and could therefore be admitted by permit.<sup>73</sup> The act remained on the statute books until 1933, where again, pragmatic trade considerations with China led to its repeal.<sup>74</sup>

Like its American counterpart, and in line with Gyory’s view, the Cape Chinese Exclusion Act was a classic example of how politicians seized upon an issue purely for political gain. On more than one occasion the Chinese in SA were to become an emotive tool in the party political electioneering campaigns across the length of the Atlantic. Besides the US, the Chinese indentured labourers and their resident countrymen were a major political issue on three counts in the first decade of the twentieth century. First, in the Cape elections of 1902, which culminated in the introduction of the Cape Exclusion Act; second, the British elections of 1906, when the Liberal government defeated the Conservatives and then had to follow through on promises to repatriate the indentured Chinese on the SA mines; and third, in the 1907 local Transvaal responsible government elections, when the Het Volk and Labour parties successfully joined forces also to terminate the Chinese indenture system on the gold-mines. Moreover, these episodes showed how widespread consternation could be created completely disproportionate to the importance of the issue at hand, with extremely dire long-term consequences.

Using the Chinese – be it the free or indentured compatriots – as a party-political issue, was however not an unprecedented or unique tactic limited to the surrounding shores of the Atlantic. Politicians in other Western colonial countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, had also effectively used the “Chinese” as a plank to conjure up support in their respective political platforms.<sup>75</sup> Although the politicians might

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73. *Statutes of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, 1902-1906*, Act 37 of 904, The Chinese Exclusion Act.

74. *Statutes of the Union of South Africa*, Act 19 of 1933, Immigration Amendment Act.

75. A. Markus, *Fear and hatred purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901* (Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979), p 2; C.Y. Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia* (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975), pp 24-25; C. Price, “‘White’ Restrictions on ‘Coloured Immigration’”, *Race*, 7, 3, 1966, p 233.



have orchestrated or got mileage out of the Chinese as an election issue as Gyory claims, and were even in effect responsible for the resultant legislation, it was the long-lasting impact of these overtures, that entrenched a legacy of attitudes onto the various host societies' collective memory and popular consciousness. It is to this representation that I now briefly turn.

### Representation

While the end product of the political agitation against the Chinese was discriminatory legislation and restrictions on their respective positions, the by-product was the lasting image that the rhetoric and visual representation left to posterity. In both the US and SA, as elsewhere, the graphic rhetoric and visual images created and endorsed an exaggerated negative image of anything Chinese. While politicians might have drafted, enacted, amended and even repealed discriminatory and exclusionary legislation, the images that the dailies and weeklies produced, were indelible. This in effect underscored the phrase "Not a Chinaman's chance" – meaning to have no chance at all – as no matter where the Chinese were or what they did, the "unfavorable image"<sup>76</sup> was perpetuated.

In this section a brief comparison of the image of the Chinese as represented in cartoons in the US and SA will reflect a mirror image of the extreme prejudice against the Chinese in the respective "run-ups" to the introduction of the two exclusion acts. The cartoon, once described as "the truest history of our times",<sup>77</sup> was a popular vehicle of social comment and played a pivotal role in depicting the Orientalists' view of the Chinese. In the half-dozen samplings that follow, the American images date from the 1860s and 1870s and include material from *The Wasp*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harpers' Weekly* which chronicled life in American society, while the South African depictions are from the early 1900s and are taken mainly from the SA weekly newspaper of social comment, *The Owl*.

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76. S.C. Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant the American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (University of California Press, Berkeley 1969), p ii.

77. Quoted in D.J. Kotze, "Die spotprente van D.C. Boonzaaier in *Die Burger*, 1915-1924: politieke kommunikasie deur spotprente vanuit 'n historiese perspektief." MA thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 1988, p i.

**Cartoon 1A:**

From the increased onset of Chinese immigration to the USA from the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly as a result of the discovery of gold, there was a concerted effort to oust the Chinese from every form of employment. In an advertisement of George Dee, promoting a new washing product, an Uncle Sam figure is seen to be cleaning out the Chinese.<sup>78</sup>

**Cartoon 1B:**

The proposed introduction of Chinese labour for the South African gold-mines half-a-century later, resulted in similar animosity. Here a Boer figure is depicted sweeping the Chinese away. Both representations bear strong connotations of the Chinese as being unclean and disposable.<sup>79</sup>

**Cartoon 2A:**

“What shall we do with John Chinaman?” An African-American contemplates hurling the Chinese labourer over the precipice.<sup>80</sup>

**Cartoon 2B:**

The South African equivalent of the same situation depicts the African “settling the Chinese problem”.<sup>81</sup>

**Cartoon 3A:**

The Chinese were despised for both their alleged “vices and “virtues”. Their apparent adeptness was perceived as a threat to the US white labour force and a reason for unemployment and poverty. The dexterity of the multi-handed Chinese in this cartoon is portrayed as taking all the work.<sup>82</sup>

**Cartoon 3B:**

The white unemployment card was used extensively in South Africa as a powerful electioneering tool. Here Chinese labour is seen as the force which keeps the white miner out.<sup>83</sup>

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78. George Dee advert, 1870s.

79. *The Owl*, 17 November 1905.

80. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 25 September 1869.

81. Watercolour on postcard, no date.

82. L. Pann (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas* (Archipelago Press, Singapore, 1998), p 264.

83. *The Owl*, 24 July 1903.

USA



CARTOON 1 A

SOUTH AFRICA



CARTOON 1 B



CARTOON 2 A



CARTOON 2 B



CARTOON 3 A



CARTOON 3 B

## **Conclusion**

The socio-political and economic anti-Chinese sentiments prevalent in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century and the concomitant exclusion acts had an undoubtedly negative impact on the Chinese communities at large. The English language expression, “Not a Chinaman’s chance”, reflects accurately on and bears testimony to the futile situation in which the Chinese found themselves in the colonies stretching from the west of the Atlantic to the east of the Pacific. In this article, this point is made distinctly apparent, as despite the differences in size, location, circumstance, periodization and history, the Chinese in both the US and SA underwent similar experiences. While the US and SA have, at very different paces and at very different times, moved into supposedly more democratic and equitable dispensations, there still remains an intermittent prevalence of unease about the Chinese presence within the nation state. Thus it can be concluded that the anti-Chinese mindset, entrenched in both the English language and negative visual representation of the Chinese, gave rise to a legacy that was to have ramifications which lasted well beyond the abolition of the exclusion legislation that was precipitated by these anti-Sinitic sentiments.

## **Abstract**

Chinese labour formed an integral part of the mass migration of people in the international era of industrial capitalism. The developing economies of colonial mining, plantation and railway developments, precipitated these movements. The Chinese labour force, which was stereotyped as hard-working, diligent and reliable, was as much welcomed as it was later objected to. As a subaltern class of contracted or indentured people, they were completely lacking in power, their voices were not readily recorded and were therefore not heard. The anti-Chinese campaigns which resonated across the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans reveal remarkable similarities in terms of anti-Sinicism and Orientalism. This article attempts to juxtapose these situations by comparing and contrasting the place and position of these labourers in terms of the attitudes and actions of the colonial employer, as well as the visual representations of the “other”. This eventually culminated in some of the first overtly racist legislation introduced during the genesis of white hegemony in the various colonial destinations, namely the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

## Opsomming

### *“Not a Chinaman’s Chance”:*

#### **Sjinese arbeid in Suid-Afrika en die Verenigde State van Amerika**

Sjinese arbeid het ’n integrale deel van die grootskaalse migrasie van mense tydens die internasionale era van industriële kapitalisme uitgemaak. Die ontwikkelende ekonomieë van koloniale mynbou, plantasie- en spoorwegontwikkeling, het hierdie verhuising aangevuur. Die Sjinese arbeidsmag, wat gestereotipeer is as hardwerkend, ywerig en betroubaar, is net soseer verwelkom, as wat dit later afgekeur is. As ’n ondergeskikte klas bestaande uit gekontrakteerde of ingeboekte mense, het hulle oor geen mag beskik nie. Hulle stemme is nie gereedelik aangeteken nie en is daarom ook nie gehoor nie. Die anti-Sjinese veldtogte wat oor die Atlantiese en Stille Oseaane weerklink het, vertoon merkwaardige ooreenkomste wat anti-Sinisisme en -Oriëntalisme betref. Hierdie artikel poog om dié gevalle naas mekaar te stel deur die plek en posisie van hierdie arbeiders in terme van die houding en optrede van hulle koloniale werkgewers, asook die visuele uitbeelding van hulle as “die ander”, met mekaar te vergelyk en te kontrasteer. Dit het uiteindelik gelei tot van die eerste openlik rassistiese wetgewing wat tydens die ontstaansjare van wit hegemonie in die onderskeie koloniale gebiede aanvaar is, naamlik die “Chinese Exclusion Acts”.

#### **Key words**

Anti-Chinese; Chinese Exclusion Act; Chinese labour; comparative history; orientalism; South Africa; United States of America.

#### **Sleutelwoorde**

Anti-Sjinees; “Chinese Exclusion Acts”; Oriëntalisme, Sjinese arbeid; Suid-Afrika; Verenigde State van Amerika; vergelykende geskiedenis.