

## *The Reimagined Migrant Portrait – Exploring the Lives of Chinese and Taiwanese Minorities Living in South Africa*

Tzu Ting Hsu, University of Cape Town, South Africa

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

This multimedia project explores the lives of Chinese and Taiwanese migrants living in South Africa and how language, culture, community and marginalisation have come to shape their identities and to visually represent them in a way that is not prevalent in mainstream media. It uses two visual mediums – photography and video interviews – to understand these migrants' experiences, how they perceive themselves and how they think society perceives them. Data analysis consisted of a process of coding the video interviews and structural analysis of the visuals. Rising worldwide migration has simultaneously increased the spread of diasporic communities. China's positionality as an economic powerhouse and the influx of East Asian migrants to South Africa in recent years has shone a light on this minority population group. However, much of what is known about them tends to be through forms of mass media which perpetuates stereotypical representations. This paper draws on various literature including acculturation, diasporic communities, representation, languaging and xenophobia to explore the lives of East Asian migrants living in South Africa and search for more empowered forms of representation.

Keywords: Migration, East Asian, Diasporic Communities, Identity, Language, Documentary Photography

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

The number of international migrants has rapidly increased particularly in recent years and by 2017, there was an estimate of around 258 million migrants worldwide – up from 173 million in 2000 (United Nations, 2017). To date, South Africa has the largest number of international migrants in Africa and recent decades have seen an increase in the population of East Asian migrants. The Chinese population in particular has seen an increase. About 250 000 – 350 000 Chinese people now live in South Africa, however there is no official figure of the estimate of Chinese in South Africa due to factors such as corruption and poor record-keeping at Home Affairs and an increase in illegal migrants (Park, 2009). On a smaller scale, other East Asian immigrant populations in South Africa include Taiwanese, South Korean, Hong Kong and Japanese. The recent influx of Chinese migrants to South Africa is in tandem with China's rapid rise and increasingly dominant position in the world, and its established relations with various countries.

South Africa is the only country in Africa that is home to three distinct communities of Chinese; the local Chinese, the Taiwanese and Hong Kong industrialists and the new wave of migrants from PRC (Park & Rugunan, 2010). There are also smaller groups of other East Asian ethnicities living in South Africa. From the 1970s, South Africa established relations with Taiwan which led to the influx of Taiwanese industrialists. Small numbers of Taiwanese industrialists started arriving in South Africa, motivated by incentives offered by the South African government such as covering costs for relocation, subsidising wages and rent among others. At its height, there were approximately between 30 000 and 40 000 Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa (Wilhelm, 2006). Many of the immigrants started up small businesses across South Africa, oftentimes in small towns. Huynh et al., (2010) points out that the immigration of the Taiwanese to South Africa was not a “permanent uni-directional migration” and that many migrants were largely taking advantage of the incentive scheme and indeed by the early 1990s, the Taiwanese population had started decreasing – with many returning to Taiwan or relocating to other Western countries due to concerns such as family and security. This was further perpetuated by South Africa's official recognition of China in 1996 and cutting ties with Taiwan. Today, there are about 6 000 Taiwanese immigrants left in South Africa and the number continues to decrease, whereas there is a steady rise in Chinese immigrants settling in the country.

It is against this backdrop that this multimedia project explores the lives of Chinese and Taiwanese migrants living in South Africa and how language, community, marginalisation/xenophobia have come to shape their identities and to represent them visually in a way that is not prevalent in mainstream media. The goal is to promote a deeper understanding of these ethnic groups located within the larger landscape of the country, provide a more representative lens into their lives and reflect upon their positionalities in South Africa. Thus, it will use two visual mediums – photography and video interviews – to explore how these migrants perceive themselves and how they think society perceives them.

## **Literature Review**

### **Diasporic communities**

Although migration from the East to the West can be traced back to the 19th century, the bulk of this international migration has occurred in recent decades. Several international studies have researched the movement and of East Asian migrants to Western countries. In a study

carried out amongst Taiwanese and Hong Kong migrants in Australia, it was found that these first generation young migrants were provided with an international Western education as a means of enhancing their social standing (Chiang and Yang, 2008). Although they experienced many challenges such as language, relationships, familial bonds and adjusting to school and workplaces, they would tend to accept the traditional ways of their culture of origin (Chiang & Yang, 2008). Furthermore, the authors point out that many of them identify as “Taiwanese” and the minority perceive themselves as “possessing a hyphenated identity” and less “Australian”. Another study looked at the lives of Taiwanese migrants in Vancouver, Canada which attracted migrants due to family ties and the thriving Taiwanese and Chinese community (Chu, 2002). Similarly in this study, “better quality of life and educational prospects for children” were often stated as motivation for many Taiwanese migrants when compared to their home country which they perceived was “limited” and “declining” (Chu, 2002). These studies illustrate that enticing economic opportunities, attractive environments and prestige are some of the core reasons for the migration and that the level of acculturation into the host environment is dependent on a multitude of factors such as age, generational status, culture, social, language abilities, household and personal perspectives.

### **Xenophobia and racism**

South Africa has an ethnically and culturally diverse population, although certain minority groups tend to be continuously treated as foreigners. Furthermore, xenophobic acts of violence have often been targeted towards the general immigrant population in South Africa. Whilst black African migrants living in South Africa are more likely to be targeted in these attacks, various groups of Asian immigrants remain visible and vulnerable to violent xenophobic attacks (Park & Rugunanan, 2010). Moreover, Gordon (2016) points out that causes for xenophobia particularly in South Africa have often been linked to the economic conditions, labour market competition and political subjectivities. Furthermore, tensions continue to exist not only between the East Asian and local South African populations but also amongst themselves: the local Chinese, Taiwanese and the new wave of Chinese migrants. Park (2009) also talks about the different levels of “Chineseness” among Chinese immigrants and Chinese locals, which brings about questions of self and identity.

### **Representation**

Despite increasing worldwide migration – which suggests societies becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse – representations of minority groups remains problematic. In societies where there are imbalances in power relations, dominant groups use ideology as a means to legitimise power over other groups and one way is through mass media (Paek & Shah, 2003). Stereotypes can be explained as a “set of representational practices that are key mechanisms by which one group’s generalised and widely accepted beliefs about the personal attributes of members of another group are constructed” (Paek & Shah, 2003: 228). It essentially reduces people to having certain characteristics which are seemingly “fixed”. Negative perceptions of East Asians migrants in South Africa can be linked back to the late 1800s and early 1900s when Chinese workers were perceived as a threat by local workers as illustrated in early cartoons, postcards etc. (Harrison et al., 2017). Furthermore, national news coverage of East Asian migrants in South Africa tend to focus on highlighting their economic activities in the country; the importance of learning Mandarin; the dominance of China; the growing presence of Chinese migrants and their involvement in illegal trade such as rhino poaching, abalone poaching and the donkey skin trade. This has not come without backlash as the Chinese community has become progressively aware of xenophobic and racist comments and have

issued public statements to denounce these acts (News24, 2017). Both international and local representations of East Asians in the media tend to be stereotypically driven. Regardless of whether they are “positive” or “negative” stereotypes, ultimately these portrayals have consequences which feed into maintaining the status quo and attitudes towards East Asian migrants.

## **Methodology**

This study used qualitative methods to address the research objectives. It included the participation from 15 people: eight Taiwanese migrants and second-generation migrants; one Chinese migrant and one second generation Chinese migrant and lastly, five local Chinese people. In this paper, the term migrant refers to someone who relocates to another country from their home country and second-generation migrant is someone who was born and raised or spent most of their childhood and adult years in the host country. The participants were based in four cities – Cape Town, Newcastle, Johannesburg and Pretoria – and between the ages of 21 and 69. Due to potential difficulties in accessing migrants, research participants were recruited through a snowball approach. I made initial contact with friends and family who are ethnically Taiwanese and Chinese and residing in South Africa. Snowball sampling is based on the assumption that there is an established “link” between initial participants and others in the same population group which allows for referrals to be made (Berg, 1988). My prior association and access to the Taiwanese community helped facilitate finding Taiwanese participants in Newcastle. The search for local Chinese contacts was found through friends and secondary sources such as blogs, Facebook pages, Instagram as well as inquiring at certain workplaces (restaurants, shops etc). New Chinese migrants were the hardest to make contact with and make up the smallest percentage of my project.

Content analysis of the interviews will be used in this study to explore relevant themes that occur frequently. The content that will be analysed will come from the full interview transcript, not just the final edited version. The photographic portraits and video interview will also be analysed and how its meaning is communicated to the audience. Interviews were conducted either at the participant’s home or place of work, depending on what was convenient for both participant and researcher. The interviews took on a semi-structured format and I asked established questions but allowed for flexibility in follow-up questions to explore a topic further (Brennen, 2013). The interviews were carried out in either English or Mandarin, depending on what language the participant was most comfortable with. The participants responded in their language of choice, either English, Mandarin or Taiwanese Hokkien. The use of multiple languages allowed me to develop a closer rapport with my participant and for them to speak freely, without limitations. Consent forms were provided for the video interviews and photographs. Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed, translated, coded and analysed.

## **Results**

### **Identity and community**

The rise of cross-border migrations mean that migrants are required to adapt in some way to their new host society and thus often expected to coincide different identities. Identities are essentially social constructions, and are about “questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we become, how we have been represented and how

that bears on how we represent ourselves” (Hall, 1996: 4). Most of the younger second generation participants identified with being South African and East Asian simultaneously, referring to themselves as South African Taiwanese or South African Chinese. This suggests that they’ve embraced both identities and therefore created a category of identification for themselves. Younger participants have acculturated at a faster rate than their migrant parents due to being in contact with various cultures, diverse environments, people and languages from a young age. Out of all the generation groups interviewed, this group showed the most adaptability between the “two identities”, being able to shift between being South African and Taiwanese or Chinese. This suggests a smoother transition into a western society compared to their parents – most of whom are first generation migrants. The process of acculturation can take years and is likely to include different forms of “mutual accommodation”, which ultimately results in “longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups” (Berry, 2006, p. 699). The older second generation migrants who only arrived in South Africa in their teens experienced slightly more conflicted feelings towards their identity.

The first generation migrant group have the shortest exposure period in their host country and the least developed local language skills. They are more likely to visit Taiwan and China regularly due to family and friendship ties in the country and this has also largely influenced the second generation group who have continued this ritual and most return to their country of origin at least once a year. Local Chinese readily identified with being South African but also acknowledged their Chinese heritage. They’ve essentially assimilated into the South African society, often participating in local customs and have well established bonds with other South Africans due to being in the country for decades.

Ultimately, most of the participants (regardless of generation status) struggled to pinpoint their identity and have conflicted feelings – often feeling “foreign” when visiting their country of origin and also being perceived as foreigners in their host country. At times, there may be a sense of a loss of home or foundation and thus attempting creating a home within a new space. Most participants continue to maintain ties with other East Asians living in South Africa. Many consider themselves to be part of a local Asian community which is often perceived to be tight-knit as a support group although the downside includes the tendency for gossip. The Taiwanese community is seemingly slightly larger than the local Chinese community, however both tend to hold various functions throughout the year, especially in celebration of traditional events. It is evident all the participants have come into contact with Asian communities at some point due to parental and peer influences. Their decision to maintain this contact depends on a host of factors such as personal values and preferences, social circles and family. The presence of tight knit diasporic communities illustrates the need for kinship – connected through shared cultures, languages, identity, religion and challenges encountered in a western society.

## **Language**

One of the biggest challenges that migrants encounter in their host country is communication. Language is integral to the acculturation of migrants into the new society and their experiences and perceptions are predominantly moulded by various forms of languaging. Language significantly impacts business, formation of social circles and family relations and the establishment of self. The first and second generation participants grew up being exposed to more than one language: Mandarin and other dialects of Chinese and Taiwanese and later English in addition to other national languages of South Africa. Many first generation

participants initially experience prominent language barriers which largely influence a successful integration into their new community. It also results in the tendency for migrants to mostly associate with other migrants due to language familiarity, which enhances the widening chasm of decreasing contact with local languages. Thus, these communication barriers can persist for many years even after initial relocation and is dependent on the migrant's adaptability and willingness to acquire knowledge of local languages. Additionally, research shows that multilingual speakers tend to use English for "utilitarian purposes with a pragmatic attitude and they won't develop a cultural affinity with the language or attempt to represent their identities through English" (Canagarajah, 2007: 199). This is demonstrative amongst older migrants who learned English after relocating to South Africa and second generation migrants that arrived in South Africa in their teens or later years. They tend to reserve the use of English and other local languages for business and administration.

Second generation participants are exposed to a variety of languages such as English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa etc. through formal education in addition to their home languages Mandarin and Taiwanese Hokkien. The steady language exposure from a young age increases their fluency levels and many also attend Chinese school on a daily or weekly basis. Many second generation participants tend to mix languages in their communication with parents and with their East Asian peers. In contrast, the local Chinese participants primarily spoke English growing up. They tend to know at least one other local language that was taught at school, or learned from their peers or helpers at home. Some of the participants indicated that despite their parents having knowledge of Mandarin and other dialects, they generally did not communicate with their children in these languages and would default to English. There also seems to be a sense of shame or embarrassment amongst some participants for not being able to speak Mandarin or other dialects. Edwards (2013) argues that subtractive bilingualism occurs in a setting in which one language is more dominant; where one is on the ascendant and the other is declining. The use of Mandarin in the local Chinese community has clearly declined over the years in favour of local languages which they perceive as more practical within the given environment. Furthermore, when visiting countries in East Asia, some participants are faced with feeling like outsiders or foreigners amongst people who look like them, particularly due to language barriers.

### **Marginalisation, stereotypes and xenophobia**

Migrants are often faced with issues such as discrimination, stereotyping, racism and xenophobia when residing in another country. Berry (2006) argues that migrants tend to be viewed less favourably since they are typically dissimilar to the local population. Therefore, those who "seek to assimilate and who undergo greater behavioural shifts (towards receiving society norms) may experience less discrimination (Berry, 2006, p. 622). Due to the diverse range of interviewees, their experiences varied. First generation and older second generation participants experienced discrimination due to their limited English abilities and certain cultural practices. There is also a prevalent fear of being targeted by criminals especially amongst those involved in the manufacturing industry. There seems to be a general consensus amongst migrants that locals perceive them to be wealthy. These migrants tend to be particularly cautious in their business dealings and many have experienced robberies at work or know of other migrants who have been targeted. Many migrants also reside at their place of work such as at the factories, but due to previous experiences of crime, some have mentioned that they have relocated to residential areas to return to after work for safety reasons. Park & Rugunanan (2010) point out that although Africans continue to bear the brunt of most of the xenophobic violence in South Africa, various groups of Asian migrants

are becoming increasingly vulnerable to crime and harassment due to certain perceptions associated with them.

The second generation participants spoke about being predominantly discriminated against at school due to factors such as a lack of English abilities, cultural aspects including the food they brought to school and their ethnic appearance. A few still experience discriminatory attitudes in their adult lives however it has become less frequent. The acculturation theory proposes that the decline in incidents may be the outcome of increased acculturation over time and by the time they reach adulthood, the participants may be adapted into society. The local Chinese are the most integrated in South Africa. However, many report that they have also received some level of discrimination such as stereotyping and racist attitudes.

Regardless of generation status, the participants tend to feel that there has not been overt discrimination towards East Asians in South Africa apart from a few instances mentioned. However, many continue to feel like an outsider or foreigner to some extent even after years of living in the country, largely due to their appearance. Ultimately, many of the issues experienced by the participants stem from language barriers, cultural differences, appearance and the negative perceptions targeted towards the population group at large as a result of isolated incidences.

### **Constructed visual representation**

In approaching other East Asians, the image making and interviews became a form of dialogue, therapy, knowledge sharing, support, empowerment and a sense of kinship. The photographs are constructed, the subject posed, aware and usually looking directly into the lens as the photo is taken. There is some resemblance between these portraits and the portraits of African photographers such as Seydou Keita (Malian portrait photographer) and Yoruba photography. Both Seydou Keita and Yoruba photography seemingly strive to counter the colonialist gaze, by the subject reinventing themselves and reclaiming their identities through carefully constructed poses in the portraits. The subjects tend to be well-dressed and sit facing the camera with a dignified expression and looking at and through the camera (Sprague, 1978). My participants' attire consisted of their everyday wear and some took extra effort to be well-presented for the photograph. Details of the clothing, environment make up the sociological aspect. I opted to take the portrait in landscape which offers a glimpse into the environment in which the participants are in. A classroom; a master bedroom; a restaurant kitchen; a salon; a factory or a martial arts storeroom – these settings added context and were crucial to the individual's identity. The psychological aspect is contained in the facial expressions and gestures. It was a collaborative effort; we would share ideas as to where the photograph can be taken and a few participants would ask for assistance on posing, particularly if they felt awkward or unsure of what to do with their body. Furthermore, the photos were generally taken at either eye level to the participant or from a slightly lower position. This method was to represent them in a dignified manner, exuding presence and power.

Although placement and location were relatively straightforward, the photographs do offer hidden narratives, juxtapositions and questions that the viewer may feel compelled to inquire. Who are these people? What are their stories? Where do they come from? What are they doing here? One of the main goals of this project is to highlight a small participant group taken from a minority population group in South Africa and answer some of these questions. Still photographs are essential in order to provide the initial impression. However, I needed a

deeper level of engagement which I felt was missing in the representation of East Asians in mainstream media, and particularly in South Africa. The interviews were integral for this process. An ongoing and prevalent issue in documentary filmmaking is the attempt to elicit truth in the presence of a camera. Naturally, people feel defensive and may put on a level of performance in front of the camera. For many of my participants, it was their first time on camera. Some felt anxious because they were hearing the questions for the first time. Nonetheless, they answered the questions thoroughly and started warming up and answering more naturally due to the extended length of the interviews. A few participants mentioned that the interview was therapeutic, one said it helped him do some soul-searching and a few were curious as to what other participants said.

## Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding into the transformed lives of Taiwanese and Chinese migrants in South Africa and their positionality in society. The results show that first generation participants tend to be involved in entrepreneurial activities in manufacturing, restaurants, small businesses and other types of sales whereas subsequent generations are prone to be well-educated and enter white collar jobs after university. Only a few return to assist their family's businesses. Regardless of their generation status, the primary reason for relocating to South Africa was in search of improved economic opportunities and living conditions. Second generation migrants have also acculturated at a faster rate than their migrant parents and readily identified with being both South African and Taiwanese or Chinese. First generation migrants often first identified with their country of origin which they considered their primary home and the local Chinese strongly aligned with being South African, but acknowledging their Chinese heritage. Although many participants continue to feel foreign in South Africa, they experience a similar feeling of being perceived as an outsider when they visit their country of origin due to factors such as language barriers, cultural and social norms. Arguably, a significant factor which affects the participants' experience and level of integration in a different country is language abilities. This is particularly evident amongst the first generation migrants in South Africa whose struggles are predominantly a result of limited English and cultural clashes. Furthermore, a preference for a particular language is highly dependent on environment and social circles and the diminishing use of Mandarin and Taiwanese Hokkien can be seen amongst the second generation and onwards. Amongst the local Chinese, very few can speak the Mandarin and other dialects, with most having a preference for English. The majority of the participants have been discriminated against from a young age due to language, appearance and culture but experienced it less as adults. Those involved in the manufacturing industry tend to perceive themselves as "easy targets" and more susceptible to crime. Although the local Chinese are more acculturated than the other participants, they also mentioned episodes of discrimination which suggests that East Asians are continued to be perceived as "other" despite efforts of integrating into society. Finally, carefully constructed photographs portray a personal and dignified representation of the participant as they reclaim the space they are in. It is a disruption of the prevalent narrative of East Asian migrants in a western country, offering a more explorative perspective into their lives. The curation of quotes, photographs and videos on a website provides an efficient and interactive space for viewers to engage, learn and share.

This visual project focused predominantly on the lives and stories of fifteen first and second generation Taiwanese and Chinese migrants and local Chinese. Future studies and the continuation of this project can incorporate more participants, particularly new Chinese

migrants. Furthermore, this study only includes a certain demographic of East Asian migrants and limited to ones that hail from Johannesburg, Newcastle and Cape Town. Future research can incorporate a wider range of participants living in various towns and cities across South Africa and even in other African countries. It can also potentially expand to include other East Asian ethnicities such as Japanese, South Korean, etc. and include other exhibition formats such as a feature length documentary, a photo story and an online web-series.

## References

- Berg, S. (1988). Snowball sampling, in Kotz, S. and Johnson, N. L. (Eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Statistical Sciences*, 8.
- Berry, J.W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 29(6), 697-712.
- Brennen, B. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. Routledge.
- Canagarajah, S. (2007). Lingua franca English, multilingual communities, and language acquisition. *The modern language journal*, 91(s1), 923-939.
- Chiang, L.H.N. and Yang, C.H.S. (2008). Learning to be Australian: Adaptation and identity formation of young Taiwanese-Chinese immigrants in Melbourne, Australia. *Pacific Affairs*, 81(2), 241-258.
- Chu, J.J. (2002). Finding a Niche: Taiwanese Immigrants in Vancouver. *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 209-234.
- Edwards, J. (2013). Bilingualism and multilingualism: Some central concepts. *The handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism*, 5-25.
- Gordon, S. (2015). Xenophobia across the class divide: South African attitudes towards foreigners 2003–2012. *Journal of contemporary African studies*, 33(4), 494-509.
- Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. eds. (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity: SAGE Publications*. Sage.
- Harrison, P., Yang, Y. and Moyo, K. (2017). Visual representations in South Africa of China and the Chinese people. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 29(1), 25-45.
- Huynh, T.T., Park, Y.J. and Chen, A.Y. (2010). Faces of China: new Chinese migrants in South Africa, 1980s to present. *African and Asian Studies*, 9(3), 286-306.
- Paek, H.J. & Shah, H. (2003). Racial ideology, model minorities, and the "not-so-silent partner:" Stereotyping of Asian Americans in US magazine advertising. *Howard Journal of Communication*, 14(4), 225-243.
- Park, Y.J. (2009). Recent Chinese migrations to South Africa: New intersections of race, class and ethnicity. *Representation, expression and identity: Interdisciplinary insights on multiculturalism, conflict and belonging*, 153-168.
- Park, Y.J. and Rugunanan, P. (2010). Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa.
- Raborife, M. (2017). Chinese association lays charges over xenophobic Facebook comments. *News24*, 7 February 2017. (Online). Available at: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/chinese-association-lays-charges-over-xenophobic-facebook-comments-20170207> (accessed 12 December 2018)

Sprague, S.E. (1978). Yoruba Photography. *Photography's Other Histories*.

United Nations (2017). *International Migration Report*. 1 – 31.

Wilhelm, J. (2006). The Chinese communities in South Africa. In: S. Buhlungu, J. Daniel, R. Southall, and J. Lutchman (eds.) *State of the Nation: South Africa 2005–2006*. Cape Town: HSRC Press: 350–368.

**Contact email:** [imtinahsu@gmail.com](mailto:imtinahsu@gmail.com)