

# Meeting points:

## the roles of Chinese associations in Pretoria, South Africa



The growing Chinese presence in Africa and South Africa is most often described in economic and political terms. Exploring the social aspects of Chinese migration and activities within receiving countries provides insight into the challenges and strategies of this largely heterogeneous group. *Elmé Vivier, Dr Ke Yu, Marie Wentzel* and *Dr Greg Houston* report on findings from a pilot study examining the roles of Chinese associations, in particular, in mediating social interactions and the sense of belonging among Chinese immigrants living in Pretoria.

**F**orming associations is a common way through which diasporas establish communities in order to preserve identity and culture, support the arrival of new immigrants, and promote social and economic opportunities.

The Chinese in South Africa are no exception. South Africa hosts the earliest settlement and largest population of Chinese on the African continent (approximately 350 000 to 500 000), and the first Chinese associations were established as early as 1906.

In a 2010 publication, Huynh, Park and Anna Ying Chen estimated that there might have been more than 120 different Chinese associations throughout South Africa and Lesotho. These included associations of the earliest immigrants that have been maintained by their descendants, as well as various associations established by and for the Taiwanese community, and groups formed by the most recent (post-2000) immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The latter organisations are often based on village or province of origin, such as the Fujian association, which boasts a membership of nearly 70 000 across southern Africa.

### Three Chinese communities in South Africa

The Chinese in South Africa comprise three broad groups based primarily on place of origin and period of migration. These include Chinese whose ancestors arrived in the late 1870s and now comprise third or fourth generation South African-born Chinese; Taiwanese who began immigrating in the late 1970s and 1980s under the apartheid government's industrial development policy; and the newer migrants that

have been arriving since the mid-1990s, and especially after 2000, mainly from the PRC. This latter group consists of middle managers, professionals and small traders.

One of the major obstacles of interaction among these three groups is language. The oldest group speaks Cantonese, English and Afrikaans, but not Mandarin. Many of the Taiwanese speak Mandarin and English and the new migrants speak Mandarin and some speak minimal English.

### Chinese associations in greater Pretoria

Pretoria has a well-established yet scattered Chinese community that has not received much attention in the prevailing literature. This pilot study focused on select religious, educational, political and cultural associations and the social roles they played in the lives of the Chinese living in the Pretoria region. The study comprised the South African component of a collaborative project between the HSRC and the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS).

In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from, and members of, various local Chinese associations, as well as with unaffiliated Chinese individuals such as traders, university students and lecturers.

The associations in Pretoria vary according to origin, function and membership, and thus reflect the diversity of Chinese communities and interests, and the roles of associations therein. However, many of the institutions' histories, activities and memberships also overlap, suggesting that identities and interests do not necessarily allow for straightforward categorisation. Throughout the Pretoria region, the majority of respondents among the oldest generation of

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Chinese and among the Taiwanese indicated some form of participation in the activities of associations. These ranged from being board members or employees to volunteering for functions, attending annual events or festivals, organising fundraisers and being members of sports clubs. This was to be expected, as these two groups were relatively well-established within South African society.

The new immigrants, on the other hand, appeared to rely much more on informal social networks, sometimes temporarily tapped into the established community networks for specific purposes. For instance, new migrants sometimes approached established associations in order to get advice and assistance on issues such as how to purchase a house or how to register a business. These engagements rarely resulted in the formation of long-term friendships, however, and seemed to reinforce the space between the old and new immigrants rather than bridge their differences.

Of course there are numerous differences even within the three groups, and especially at the individual level. Individual strategies of adjustment and social engagement in Pretoria illustrate the many kinds of perceived benefits and primary motivations of participating in Chinese or local associations.

### **The benefits of participation**

Participation in associations is motivated by a range of apparent benefits, including new social and economic networks, employment opportunities, religious fulfilment, education, Chinese/English language learning, preservation of culture and identity, belonging to a community, etc.

The benefits that motivate participation often do not coincide with the primary functions of the associations, thus many associations serve multiple purposes for the Chinese communities. This is also true of local South African institutions. For instance, new immigrants from the PRC predominantly make use of local English churches and schools in order to improve their English-speaking skills.

Use of such local institutions (especially religious and educational) suggests that modes of engagement and adjustment are not necessarily motivated by a sense of Chinese identity and community belonging, but rather by pragmatic concerns. Many of the Chinese institutions organise annual cultural events and functions, for example, yet the benefit of attendance at such events appears to be about social and business networking opportunities rather than preservation of culture and identity. These events also provide a platform for engagement between organisations, as well as between members of the different Chinese communities.

### **Generational gaps and notions of Chineseness**

Strong generational differences appear among the South African-born Chinese, who express a strong Chinese identity and sense of Chinese culture, while the younger generation purports to be entirely South African. These differences may

in large part be attributed to the impact of apartheid, which forced the local Chinese at the time to create their own spaces for social and other activities. Many members of the younger generation, however, often do not attend the local Chinese school, do not speak Mandarin (some instead speak Afrikaans), and describe their social activities as typically normal South African pastimes.

Interestingly, many of the older Chinese, including the SABCs and Taiwanese, believe that they have a much stronger sense of what it means to be Chinese than the recent immigrants from the PRC. New immigrants are thus criticised for what is perceived to be their ruthless commitment to and conduct of business. Such sentiments appear to be common among older or more established members of Chinese migrant communities in general.

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### **Conclusions and further research**

Although associations are integral in fostering communities and shared practices, the activities of the Chinese communities in Pretoria are evidence of how people make use of associations for their particular needs, and the multiple distinct ways in which people find their own places of community and modes of interaction. Indeed, the modes of adjustment and engagement employed by the Chinese living in Pretoria generally seem to utilise informal social networks for those purposes rather than formal associations.

Key observations in related thematic areas indicate that further research is necessary to explore these issues more deeply. These issues include the migration history of Chinese immigrants, family linkages facilitating migration and migration patterns, the immigrants' integration in South Africa, the main challenges faced in South Africa by Chinese immigrants, perceptions of South Africa, future migration plans and links with China. ■

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