

CHINESE TRADERS IN SOWETO

By Ray Mahlaka

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RAY MAHLAKA holds an Honours degree in journalism and media studies from the University of Witwatersrand, and obtained a double major in journalism and communications & media studies from Monash University South Africa. As part of the 2013 Wits honours class' final in-depth project on the Chinese community in Johannesburg, Ray documented the journey of the Chinese community in Soweto by finding old settlers and new arrivals to recount their experiences in South Africa. He currently works as a financial journalist at Moneyweb. In May 2015 Ray received the Property Feature Journalist of the Year award at the 47th annual South African Property Owners Association International Convention in Durban.



Soweto's rich history, particularly during the struggle against apartheid, is well documented since the first settlements in 1904. However, the story of the Chinese community – which has existed in the township since its beginnings – is yet to be explored.

Dianne Leong Man, co-author of the book *Colour, Confusion and Concessions*, says there have been many Chinese people in Soweto since the township was founded. Klipspruit is where Soweto was born, with the emergence of township clusters housing black communities. Black people continued to move to the township both voluntarily and forcibly during apartheid. At the same time, Chinese people found a home in nearby Kliptown.

“Kliptown had a huge Chinese community and had a Chinese school run by nuns. That's how big it was. A lot of them had shops in Moroka and a lot of them used to play 'fafi' [a game of chance] in Pimville and places like that. So there was a lot of interaction between the Chinese in Soweto.”

Displaced Chinese move into Soweto

Chinese people also lived in Sophiatown and Newclare

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and when those suburbs were declared white areas in 1950, the Chinese community was forced to move and left displaced.

During the wave of violence against the repressive apartheid system during the 1970s, Gerard Li, a South African-born Chinese man, was working for his father in Soweto. He saw people being shot and necklaced in front of him. Li later started a business delivering meat for supermarkets in the township during the 1980s.

“It was hard for me to do deliveries in Soweto. I had to be involved in a lot of community projects to be protected. Not all black people took well to Chinese people in Soweto. Some hated us, especially local businesses hated me.” Li says he was resented as an interloper in the

township's business world, which was run by black men.

Because of the Group Areas Act of 1950, which assigned racial groups to different residential areas, Chinese people could not trade in white areas and the government did not know where to locate them. "Apartheid was hectic ... You could either live in a black, Indian or coloured area. You weren't allowed to live in a white area or have a business there."

Li says some Chinese people, mostly South African-born, could find a 'gap' in Soweto and moved to the township.

After moving to Soweto, they created a community of shopkeepers in Moroka and Kliptown. "They couldn't be put into a little group area by themselves and trade among themselves," says Dianne Leong Man. "That was the biggest problem for the Chinese, losing their livelihood."

It was an adapt-and-survive approach for the Chinese community, Li explains: "When you don't have a choice, you are forced to do things. When you don't have a choice, you do whatever to survive."

Li now has a butchery and supermarket, a business that has been at the heart of Moroka for nearly 20 years. Li recounts the criminal violence he witnessed during his years in Soweto: "I've seen people in my store back in the 1990s being put in a car boot and they were gone. I knew they would beat the shit out of him. I think as a Chinese guy, if you operated in Soweto back in the 1990s, you had to be super tough. Now it's alright. I've been here so long, it's like I'm a black man."

The reason Chinese shop owners chose Soweto as a location for trade was because of the township's large, dense population, says Man. "They [Chinese people] could go into the fringes of Kliptown and Moroka, just on the edge of Soweto. It would be a place among the black communities where they would go and buy in local stores and not go to the big supermarket."

New and old Chinese residents

Soweto is a tale of two worlds for the Chinese. The community in the township is made up of Chinese people who have lived in Soweto for decades and Chinese foreign nationals who have only recently set up shop.

One of the recent arrivals is Leon Feng. The only thing Feng knew about South Africa while living in China was the boom in gold and diamonds. Seven years later, the 31-year-old has struck gold in his own right – as a trader of Chinese herbs and medicine. He has three medicine shops, one in Dobsonville, one in Protea Glen and the



Leon Feng arrived in South Africa in 2006, and owns Chinese medicine shops in Dobsonville, Protea Glen and Protea Gardens in Soweto.

other in Protea Gardens, all in Soweto. He chose Soweto as the location for his business because of the many black people who form part of his clientele.

"So many people stay here. That's why I opened a shop. I also came to Soweto to help people. Our medicine can help people. There are few Chinese medicine traders, that's why we do business."

Feng says doing business outside of Soweto would be difficult because "white guys don't trust our stuff, they prefer to go to the pharmacy".

Locals walk through his doors and tell Feng their personal problems. Some customers communicate their problems in Setswana or isiZulu, of which Feng understands a smattering. He then gives a diagnosis and a remedy for the ailment. His shop provides tea, tablets and incense as remedies for a plethora of medical problems, from fertility complaints to matters of the bedroom.

"My products work," he says emphatically. "If it doesn't work they never come to buy or they buy once and leave or they talk bad things to other people. They like my medicine."

Feng is not the only Chinese foreign national in the shopping centre. However, the other shop owners are not as proficient in English, opting to speak African languages.

Feng says when Chinese people arrive in Soweto they learn a local language before they learn English because "if you can speak Zulu, it's better than English". Feng has learnt the basics of local languages. He speaks a little isiZulu and Setswana, peppering his conversation with "Unjani, Ngiyaphila gogo and madala [I am fine granny and grandpa]".

Speaking local languages allows Feng to know locals

better, he says. “South Africa is very good. The locals treat me very good, so kindly. I like these people.”

Born to Chinese parents, who themselves were born in South Africa, Graham Sing is a 42-year-old second generation South African who owns a butchery in Soweto.

Sing’s uncle, who now lives in Australia, opened the butchery before 1994, at a time when the livelihood of many Chinese people depended on small businesses in townships. “They could only open small shops or butcheries and that’s what he did at the time. It was during the apartheid era, he couldn’t really do anything. Butcheries and supermarkets, that’s what the Sings could do at the time. Only later, when the laws were relaxed, then Chinese people could branch out to do other things.”

Some Pimville locals have grown up with the butchery and Sing’s business is part of the community. Sing says his experiences in Soweto have been good, much like the experiences of his uncle before him. “People are friendly, you do get a bit of racism, harmless banter, but not so much. People will say ‘Oh you are a Chinese in a black area’. Once they get to know you, they leave you alone.”

Hot spots

Despite Sing’s integration into the community, he is wary of crime. The butchery has been broken into, though Sing himself has never been attacked. In some parts of Soweto, foreign nationals have been victims of violence and locals have looted their shops.

A researcher of the Chinese diaspora in Johannesburg, Khangelani Moyo, is not aware of Chinese immigrants moving into Soweto in any numbers. He says xenophobic attacks on Somalis and Bangladeshis are well known, but such attacks on the Chinese community are not common. “They are not in direct contact with poor people in townships and informal settlements as they are mainly in China malls.”

South Africa continues to see an influx of Chinese immigrants who establish their enterprises, and Moyo says, “when such a time comes when the Chinese are directly in contact with locals, then maybe you will have issues of attacks on the Chinese”.

While the Chinese approached in Soweto have not experienced such attacks, Sing’s butchery almost had a violent end once. “Someone was telling me that there was a riot here, when my uncle was here. They were burning shops and the older generation of people said, ‘Don’t burn this shop, leave the Chinese alone,’ and they moved on.

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If you are good with the locals and if something happens, they will look after you some day.”

Sing says many Chinese are not scared to go into ‘hot spots’ riddled with crime and violence in Soweto. “They know the market there and they were brought up with black people. My parents used to tell me that they played with black people. They were classified as black. They couldn’t go on the bus, they couldn’t walk on the street. That’s why they are comfortable with black people.”

Dianne Leong Man says the Sing family’s experience is not unusual: “They [Chinese people] co-existed for so



Graham Sing, a South African-born Chinese man is a butcher in Pimville, Soweto. He has been in Soweto as a trader for nearly 20 years.

many years in Newclare, Martindale and Sophiatown. It was a way that they could live in South Africa.”

New arrivals

Sing's only concern is crime, which could force him to emigrate. He says it was also the main reason why so many of the second generation of Chinese South Africans have emigrated. But the crime does not deter new Chinese people from coming to Soweto to seek better opportunities.

“The reason why immigrants come here is for business and to make money. That's why they are building all the malls and shops...so they can make a killing.”

His uncle sold the butchery to Sing and his friends. But the business has taken a turn for the worse. Sing says, before 1994, the butchery had a lot of customers and locals supported his uncle's business. But now, with the emergence of supermarkets and malls in Soweto, there is more competition. Sing will soon sell the butchery to a Chinese buyer and has started a new business with a lucrative new market – a shop selling the heads, feet and other offal of livestock.

“I'm doing it more for the black imports, the Malawians, Nigerians and Somalis, they are more into the head of cows and sheep. With the locals, they never used to eat those. I'm branching into that side now.”

New Chinese migrants arrive in Soweto with minimal English language competence and limited knowledge of the commercial market. “You find that some Chinese people will work in the shops as apprentices, then with time they move on to establish their own businesses,” says Moyo.

One such apprentice is Ron Yang, manager of a Protea Glen supermarket, owned by a local Indian businessman. A qualified medical practitioner in China, Yang hopes to open his own medicine shop in Soweto.

Yang says he loves Soweto because it is welcoming of Chinese people. He can understand South African languages, mainly Setswana and isiZulu, which he learnt by speaking to locals. Yang also says Soweto and its people treat Chinese people well. “Chinese people are too much in Soweto, you get Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese – in Soweto all are welcome.”

“People in Soweto treat me well. Bad experiences towards Chinese people are scarce. They greet me saying ‘Chinese, China’ and I say ‘hello’ to them.”