

Orient and Ocean: The Chinese Community in Seychelles

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The Creole population in Seychelles comprises a rich mix of ethnicities, emanating from Europe, Africa and Asia. First came the French, who colonized the previously uninhabited archipelago until, in turn, Britain assumed that proprietorial role. Neither colonial power was able to attract its own people to toil on the plantations that yielded the main source of income for the islands, and so both resorted to forcibly bringing labour from Madagascar and the African mainland. Like so many tropical islands, the early history of Seychelles is, therefore, marked by a regime of slavery. When that practice was abolished (in Britain and then France) in the first half of the nineteenth century, the plantation owners filled any gaps in their labour needs through the recruitment of indentured workers from India. As largely impoverished wage labourers, conditions amongst both the freed slaves and indentured migrants were little better than previously experienced by the majority of the people. Gradually, and in much smaller numbers, these four ethnic groups – French, British, African and Indian – were joined by migrants who came originally from China. The Chinese community in Seychelles has never amounted to more than one percent of the country's population but its influence has been greater than mere numbers suggest. It is this ethnic group that is the subject of the research described in this report.

The idea for the project followed discussions at the University of Seychelles, between the Confucius Institute and two research institutes, one in Creole Language and Culture and the other in Peace and Diplomacy. No matter that the Chinese community is the smallest of the minorities in the country, there were important questions that deserved attention. What was it, in the first place, that attracted migrants from their distant homeland? How have they fared in the ensuing period? In spite of the recent completion of a new pagoda, is the community in a sound position? In framing the research, we were also interested in the possible impact of changing geopolitical relations in the region. China's emergence as a major power and its growing presence across the Indian Ocean has given rise to strategic concerns amongst other nations. We ask whether this will give rise to changes in how the local community is viewed?

Why Seychelles?

To answer the first question, on what it is that attracted Chinese migrants to these shores, there is no single answer. Entry into the country started late – the first recorded settler of Chinese ancestry was not until 1863 and it was to be another two decades before a group of twenty-three disembarked at the port of Victoria. They had not arrived direct from China but by way of Mauritius, lured by opportunities in and around the prospering sugar-cane plantations. A sizeable community remained there but some thought that it was time to encourage new communities elsewhere in the region. In that way, the existing business network in Mauritius could be extended to the benefit of them all. For information on this part of the project we relied heavily on secondary sources, not least of all the seminal research undertaken by Huguette Li-Tio-Fane Pineo, published in English in 1985 under the title of *Chinese Diaspora in Western Indian Ocean*.

Migrants continued to arrive in Seychelles in relatively small numbers during the first half of the twentieth century, in some cases breaking their journey in the port of Victoria, *en route* to Madagascar or mainland Africa, and choosing to remain in Seychelles. There was a hiatus following the establishment in 1949 of the People’s Republic of China, when emigration was banned. With the death of Mao Tse Tung in 1976 and the subsequent period of ‘reform and opening up’, the borders were reopened. This time, new migrants were motivated, less by a need to escape poverty (although at first that was still a factor) and more by the lure of the new business opportunities created by China’s rapid economic growth. When, in the 1990s, Africa was prioritized for increased trade and development, Seychelles assumed a new importance on the regional map; because of its location, it could assist in the logistics of shipping across the western reaches of the Indian Ocean and it was itself a member of various African organizations.

How has the community fared?

The second question was to ask whether Seychelles proved to be a good destination for migrants who came to improve their lives? A key part of our research for this section was to interview members of the community. Apart from the two principal researchers, we are indebted to teaching staff and volunteers from the Confucius Institute who conducted some of these interviews.

One always has to tread carefully when relying on interview returns. It is essential that the sample of interviews is representative of the community in question. And one also has to be prepared to cross-check findings to ensure that information has not been forgotten by respondents or, perhaps, exaggerated. In the event, the team identified a mix of individuals

and families who had been resident in Seychelles for at least one generation, and another cohort who arrived more recently. Twenty-five interviews were conducted from these groups, fifteen of which were with longstanding members of the community and the other ten with relative newcomers.

Of the established group, it was discovered that most came originally from the coastal province of Guangdong, in China's south-east. They made their way, sometimes by river to one of the many ports where shipping left for overseas voyages. In spite of their shared provenance, there was a rift between the Cantonese and the Hakkas, two groups divided by their respective languages and cultural histories. Such was the division in the early days that, when they arrived in Seychelles, the Cantonese settled in central Victoria, close to the main market and pagoda, while the Hakkas distanced themselves in the area of Mont Fleuri. Apart from their shared Chinese ancestry, both groups arrived with little more than the clothes they wore. Gradually, though, their situation improved, the result of hard work and ingenuity. Small shops were opened and niche opportunities found in various crafts.

Most of the early migrants were single men and, although some returned to China to find a wife, others married local women, usually of African or French origins. In that way, they integrated effectively into Seychellois society, invariably learning Creole and no longer using their Chinese language. While it was still a colony, the British would not allow a dedicated Chinese school and so the younger generations had no option but to mix with children of other ethnicities. For all the changes, though, the family was the bedrock of the community, often extending to distant relations.

In contrast to these pioneers, mainly since the 1990s, Seychelles has attracted a new generation of enterprising migrants from mainland China, focused sharply on growing business opportunities. As with the earlier episodes of immigration, most of the newcomers were single men, but in this case with little intention of remaining as permanent residents. They started construction projects and opened hardware and other stores to serve a rising demand for local building projects; they engaged in imports and exports, and brought with them valuable links to shipping companies in Asia; and some could soon see gains to be made in property transactions. Culturally, they showed little interest in adapting to local life and spoke to each other in Mandarin. There were profits to be made but at some time the expectation was to return to their homeland. Time will show whether they change their minds and decide to stay.

As well as interviews with these two groups, attention was also paid to individuals from the Chinese community who have contributed in a major way to the development of Seychelles. For such a small number in the community, the record of achievement is impressive. Individuals with Chinese ancestry include no less than the founding president of the nation,

together with government ministers, business leaders and eminent professionals in various fields, not to mention international practitioners in the arts. Some have passed away and, in those cases, we relied on written records of their achievements as well as interviews with people who knew them. Where possible, we met personally with the individuals. One thing they have in common is that, although they regard themselves first and foremost as Seychellois, they all share obvious pride in their Chinese ancestry. They invariably make visits to the original homeland of their families, the highlight of which would be a detour to the village where their parents had once lived. Such encounters are warmly recalled.

It should be mentioned that we were not able to gain access to the national archives at the time of our research, but we were fortunate to see copies of detailed notes on Chinese migrants compiled by the eminent Seychelles historian, Julien Durup. At some time, the archives will be restored and the early records of the Chinese community can be revisited.

Will the community survive?

The conclusion of our own project coincided with the completion of the new pagoda, on the site of the earlier one in the centre of Victoria. Because of a combination of technical and financial difficulties, the building took eight years before it could finally open its doors. And even then, as a result of coronavirus restrictions, a high-profile event to mark the landmark occasion was not possible. Yet it was a big day for the Chinese community. Or was it?

It may seem churlish to question what is undoubtedly an outstanding achievement in itself. Pagodas represent an ubiquitous symbol of Asian (not solely Chinese) culture, and the community would be incomplete without its own venue. Once again, because of the small numbers in the community, the cost and effort to see it to completion fell on the shoulders of relatively few individuals. But they were determined to succeed and, with support from the Chinese Embassy, the new pagoda now stands proud in the busy heartland of Victoria. So why should we allow any doubt to creep into our conclusion?

The fact is that we are only reflecting a certain uneasiness amongst some of the leaders of the community itself. Is there still a place, they ask, for the kind of activity such a place offered in the past? When the community was newly settled and in need of mutual support, the old pagoda offered an essential resource. It was not simply about religion but also social care. This is where marriages could be celebrated and funerals attended, it was where the community would gather on festive occasions, but it was also where individuals could come on a daily basis. They could meet informally and take tea while chatting, young boys would find a quiet corner to do their homework or simply read a book, and familiar smells of indigenous cooking would waft through the building. Life, however, is no longer like this, not

only within the Chinese community but across society. People have more living space of their own and individuals are in less need of mutual support. Through intermarriage and mixed schools, children are not confined to social groups defined by their elders. The lives of young people are not any longer limited to the streets where they were born; they are now global citizens.

None of this is to suggest that there is no place for the new pagoda and everyone involved in the project is aware that it cannot simply replicate the previous one. Thus, it already has a different mission: to serve as a modern cultural centre for the community and to demonstrate Chinese traditions to other ethnic groups. It will be judged on its ability to do this, rather than be compared with the past. We believe we are right to ask questions, if only to encourage thoughts about the need to adapt to new circumstances. The community has proved to be adaptable in the past and will surely be so again.

Geopolitics and the community

Finally, we ask whether changing geopolitical relations in the region will have an impact on the local Chinese community in Seychelles? Our premise is that international rivalries need not be replicated locally. In the interests of peace, this is an important distinction.

At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, for instance, reference by the then President, Donald Trump, to the ‘Chinese virus’ undoubtedly enflamed public opinion, not only in the United States but around the world. In the words of a headline in *The New York Times*, ‘As coronavirus spreads, so does anti-Chinese sentiment’. In a similar vein, China’s naval and merchant shipping presence in the Indian Ocean, and its infrastructure investments in some of the surrounding countries, make their own sensational headlines in the Western media. Is this a matter of concern for the Chinese community in Seychelles?

Fortunately, there is no history locally of organized opposition to Chinese settlement. It has helped that numbers of immigrants have never been large and entry to the country has been through individuals or in small groups. More important is the fact that, as a result of intermarriage and a reputation for being hard-working and loyal, the Chinese minority is accepted as part of the distinctive Creole mix of ethnicities. Time and again, we heard the statement that ‘we are Seychellois with Chinese ancestry’. In this way, a balance is preserved and antipathy avoided. The nation’s Constitution, which includes the following pledge, is thereby upheld:

We, the people of Seychelles...AWARE and PROUD that as descendants of different races we have learnt to live together as one Nation under God and can serve as an example for a harmonious multi-racial society.

Outcome

It was our intention at the start of the project to produce an online report of our findings. Instead, we have been persuaded to publish the outcome as a small book that will be of interest locally as well as for tourists who visit the pagoda. This be available soon as *Orient and Ocean: The Chinese Community in Seychelles* (Blue Gecko Books).