

The Good, the Bad, and the Asian:
Ethnoracial Politics of Honorary Whiteness in Twentieth-Century South Africa

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The aim of this project was to investigate how Asian minorities were racially constructed in South Africa, and how they experienced racial segregation, reconsidering the ‘honorary white’ status purportedly afforded to Japanese residents by the South African government during the apartheid period.

In academic research on race and racism, greater importance has been attached to a transnational framework since the 2000s. Several studies shed light on the global migration of Asians from the mid nineteenth to early twentieth century. They emphasised how the idea of whiteness and legal strategies to restrict Asian immigration were exchanged and mutually formative among the five white men's countries: the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The controversy around who to accept as citizens also became the basic blueprint for defining national identity, with the same being true for South Africa. However, the in-between positions of Asian groups have scarcely been scrutinised, such as the ambivalence of their practices aimed at improving their status, which sometimes oppressed Africans who were more deeply deprived. This study presents honorary whiteness in South Africa as a racial category co-produced and co-constituted with other groups, and advances understanding of the interrelated logics of racialised inclusion and exclusion.

In pursuit of the study's goal, the author collected archival materials, parliamentary records, and newspaper articles in South Africa and Japan. A total of 23 suitable and willing informants were identified and interviewed in South Africa and Japan from 2005 to 2020. They comprised 15 Japanese and 9 Chinese South Africans who had lived there during the apartheid period. The Japanese community in South Africa primarily consisted of expatriates and their families dispatched from private institutions or governmental agencies. Community members almost completely turned over every few years, except in a few cases. All interviews were conducted in Japanese. Chinese informants in this study were second- or third-generation individuals who were born in South Africa from the 1930s to 1970s, and currently living in Johannesburg, Pretoria, or Cape Town. All interviews were conducted in English, and snowball sampling was employed. Because of the sampling method used as well as limited number of interviews conducted, the results of this study may not be considered representative.

The introduction elaborates on protest movements against statues of Gandhi which have been witnessed in various parts of the world, leading to a growing interest in the history of Asian communities and their intermediate positions in the racial hierarchy of South Africa.

Chapter one, “Related Literature and Method”, examines related works in order to investigate the in-betweenness of the Asian minorities in South Africa in sociological studies of race and ethnic relations. The research method adopted in this project is also presented.

Chapter two, “The Arrival of Asian Immigrants and Immigration Control”, gives a brief historical background to Asian immigration to South Africa. The literacy tests introduced in Natal to regulate immigration from India served to control both the quality and quantity of applicants for landing, but they also served to both add order to and conversely complicate race-related boundaries. When the Immigration Regulation Act was enacted in 1913, the Japanese were included in "prohibited immigrants", designated by the Minister of the Interior as all Asians.

Chapter three, “Honour and Exclusion”, focuses on the early encounters between South Africans and Japanese and the creation of the Gentlemen's Agreement between the two respective countries in 1930. The aforementioned agreement

regarding the favoured treatment of Japanese nationals resulted from the global wave of Asian immigration and regime of white supremacy.

Chapter four, “Racial Segregation and their Lives in the ‘Bubble’”, paints a portrait of the Japanese community under apartheid based on interview material. Under the strict racial segregation regime of the apartheid era, foreigners who resided in South Africa for a limited period of time for diplomatic or business purposes were permitted to live in "white" areas. The Japanese community at that time, consisting of corporate expatriates and their accompanying families, was established within these areas. They formed "expatriate bubbles" in local society and lived self-enclosed within them. They did not have the opportunity to deepen their relationships with Africans, and even disassociated themselves from their ambiguous position under the racial segregation regime. This distance from and ephemeral stance toward the host society can also be seen in the ennui, indifference, and coldness that Zimmel describes as characteristic of mental life in the metropolis.

Chapter five, “‘Honorary Whites’ as a Racial Concept”, advances understanding of the interrelated logics of racialised inclusion and exclusion in South Africa, reconsidering honorary whiteness purportedly afforded to Japanese residents by the South African government during the apartheid period. Given that the apartheid government never classified the Japanese as ‘honorary whites’, honorary whiteness turned out to have been framed not just from ‘above’ but also from ‘below’, being primarily born from their comparison with Chinese residents. At the same time, the position of the Chinese was also entwined with that of the Japanese. By being indistinguishable from the Japanese and adopting a policy of not being in apparent conflict with the white community despite their opposition to racial policies, they gradually expanded into white areas.

The conclusion provides an analysis and concluding discussions of the findings. This study presents honorary whiteness in South Africa as a racial category co-constituted with other groups from the mid nineteenth to early twentieth century. Given that the members of the Chicago School focused more on the relations between subjects than on the subjects themselves, and situational dependence, which laid the foundations for the study of ethnicity and race relations, observation through a relational lens enables us to identify the origins of urban sociology and ethnic and racial studies. There were two major limitations of this study that should be addressed in future research. The small size and non-probability sampling limited the ability to generalise the findings as representative of the experiences and perspectives of others. Second, little is known about the relationship of the Japanese and Chinese with other groups such as Africans, Coloureds, and Indians. The findings of the study would have been more informed by conducting further interviews with the groups.

While primarily aiming to bridge the knowledge gap surrounding the race-based treatment of Asians in South Africa, this study describes more than just the past. It looks at broader implications of studies on Africa-Asia relations, which have attracted the worldwide attention of academic research over the last decade.

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