

## **CHAPTER TWO FROM SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN TO ‘HONORARY WHITE’: CHANGING STATE VIEWS OF CHINESE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Social identity remains a historically specific social construct, inextricable from prevailing power relations. (Soheir Morsy 1996:193)

### **Introduction**

From the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the ascension of the National Party to power in South Africa in 1948, segregation laws had ensured that Chinese in the country, defined together with Indians as ‘Asiatics’, were never treated as equal citizens. Racist ideologies and varied political and economic interests combined to shape a series of laws that made life for ‘Asiatics’ extremely challenging, albeit not nearly as difficult as for Africans. As shown in the previous chapter, while many of the laws were written with the growing numbers of Indians in mind, the small Chinese community was also subjected to restrictions in terms of adult male immigration,<sup>1</sup> the purchase of property, free trade, and residence. Just prior to and during World War Two, Chinese were singled out as allies fighting with South Africans and were granted a number of social privileges in terms of access to white public transport and cinemas. Their hopes that this special treatment would expand and their status improve in South Africa were dashed by the end of the decade.

Two pivotal historical moments marked a turning point in the lives of Chinese in South Africa. Between the victory of the National Party in the 1948 national elections in South Africa and the defeat in 1949 of the Chinese Nationalists (the Kuomintang or KMT) in China the Chinese in South Africa were faced with few options. Instead of an extension of special treatment for the Chinese, the 1940s ended with the construction and implementation of apartheid in South Africa and increasingly restrictive legislation for all ‘non-whites’; simultaneously, political changes in China brought an end to any notion of a return ‘home’ from their sojourn. Instead, the tiny Chinese community was

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<sup>1</sup> The Cape’s Chinese Exclusion Act (No. 3 of 1904) banned adult male immigration and limited female immigration. The Union’s Immigration Regulation Act, No. 22 of 1913 also prohibited adult male immigration.

forced to confront the reality that South Africa, with its expanded system of racial inequalities, would have to become 'home'. The first part of this chapter will focus on the Chinese under apartheid: how did the various laws affect this small community?

In the earlier years of apartheid the Chinese were subjected to the same restrictive racist legislation as all other 'non-whites', but later years brought some relief for the small community in the form of concessions. By the 1970s, Chinese were generally exempted, by permit, from many of apartheid's laws and placed, unofficially, in the bizarre category of 'honorary white'. How and why did the Chinese, initially perceived as foreigners and treated as second-class citizens, come to occupy this in-between space? This chapter will suggest several interrelated answers: (a) the costs and difficulties of implementing apartheid for such a small community; (b) increasingly close diplomatic and trade relations between the South African state and Japan and Taiwan; (c) social perceptions of Chinese as 'civilised', respectable, law-abiding, and generally non-threatening;<sup>2</sup> and (d) the quiet political actions of the Chinese community leaders and the Chinese Consul-General for further concessions and privileges. The remainder of the chapter will focus on these areas.

The acceptance of Chinese as 'honorary whites' took place over the first three to four decades of apartheid due to a gradual and partial merging of state and community constructions of Chinese identity. The growing need for Asian trading partners increased the negotiating power of Japan and Taiwan with South Africa; these bi-lateral trade relations, in turn, boosted the status of local Chinese. Other socio-political actors, including opposition political parties, white South African society, the media offered contesting views of the Chinese minority ensuring the process of constructing new Chinese South African identities was by no means straightforward. Over time however, these various constructions of 'Chinese South African' became increasingly similar and

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<sup>2</sup> The primary concern with regards to the Chinese community was communist infiltration. South African government fears of communism had a powerful and negative impact on the local Chinese community. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

by the 1970s, Chinese were generally accepted, albeit unofficially, as ‘honorary whites’ and viewed, increasingly as ‘white’.

That their ‘honorary whiteness’ resulted in increased concessions and privileges suited the Chinese South African community; in fact, following the precedents set by their ancestors, community leaders continued to fight for greater concessions throughout the apartheid years. Their political aims and strategies were influenced by those established earlier. Concessions reinforced the community’s existing self-image, the foundations of which had been laid by their fathers and grandfathers, as respectable, civilised, hardworking, and apolitical; they felt that concessions were well deserved. They saw themselves, however, as ‘Chinese’ and not ‘white’. Ultimately a merging of these various ‘constructions’ of Chinese South Africans (see Barth 1969, Nagel 1986 and 1994, Cornell and Hartmann 1998) – as increasingly ‘white’ by outsiders, and as ‘Chinese’ in their own eyes – failed because of the community’s unwillingness to give up their Chineseness. While taking advantage of all the privileges and concessions offered them, they refused to become identified as ‘white’. This chapter will explore various facets of these competing and shifting constructions of Chinese South African social identity through the apartheid years. As in the previous chapter, the literature on the state’s impact on race and constructing national and ethnic identities will provide the theoretical and comparative framework for understanding these interactions and shifts.

### **Chinese under apartheid legislation**

While South Africa was segregated along race lines well before 1948, apartheid “entrenched differentiation, incorporated racially repressive mechanisms and generally took the practice of segregation to new levels of sophistication” (Yap and Man 1996:315). Laws prohibited social mingling, enforced racial segregation, entrenched whites in a position of superiority, and denied people of colour rights and privileges. The Population Registration Act (1950), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), and other legislation encompassing educational and occupational rights affected the Chinese community; however, it was the Group Areas Act (1950) that provided the impetus for coordinated

and consistent community action. This section will focus on the difficulties of categorising the Chinese, and then examine, in greater detail, the Group Areas Act, its impact and the responses of the Chinese community to it. Finally, I will take a preliminary look at the concessions granted to the Chinese community, for, as onerous as these laws were, the Chinese never really suffered the full brunt of apartheid laws, as did black South Africans.

### *Classification of the Chinese*

The Population Registration Act, number 30 of 1950, was one of the two cornerstones of apartheid legislation. It divided everyone into ‘European’ (white) and ‘non-European’. The ‘non-European’ were further divided into ‘native’ (also later referred to as ‘Bantu’, ‘African’, and ‘black’), Indian, and ‘coloured’ (which included almost everyone else who was not white or black, and encompassed people of mixed blood, Griquas, Malays, and Chinese). A Chinese person was later defined as: “any person who in fact is or is generally accepted to be a member of a race or tribe whose national home is in China” (Yap and Man 1996:315; Posel 2001:51). The law used the criterion of appearance *or* general acceptance for belonging to a specific group and provided for a population register and the issuing of identification cards.

Most people could be readily classified<sup>3</sup>, but numerous ‘borderline’ cases required investigation by race re-classification boards. The first instance of classification ‘problems’ with regard to the Chinese came in March 1962, when a Chinese man, David Song, successfully applied for reclassification on the grounds that he associated with whites and was ‘generally accepted’ as white<sup>4</sup> (Yap and Man 1996:318). Before the legislation could be amended a number of other Chinese successfully obtained reclassification as ‘white’ in order to retain their businesses in white areas. This

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<sup>3</sup> Posel argues that apartheid’s racial reasoning – the idea that South African society comprises four distinct races, including ‘whites’, ‘coloureds’, ‘Indians’, and ‘Africans’ – has become a “facet of popular ‘common sense’ (Posel 2001:51).

<sup>4</sup> David Song’s reclassification ultimately made his life more difficult as he was the only member of his family who was reclassified as white. According to the Group Areas Act, white and non-white could not live in the same house in the same area. While public officials often turned a blind eye to Chinese living in white areas, because his case received so much publicity, officials singled out his family and forced them to move out of the white area where they had resided for many years (Yap and Man 1996:319).

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loophole within the law was plugged by an amendment to the Act in May 1962, which stated that: “applicants had to be white in appearance *as well as* accepted as such” (Yap and Man 1996:318); racial boundaries were reasserted and hardened before more ‘non-whites’ could make claims of social acceptance and cross over. However, the successful reclassification of David Song and the handful of other Chinese suggests that as early as 1962 Chinese in some communities around South Africa had already achieved a high degree of social acceptance amongst whites.

Between 1974 and 1990, 183 people were reclassified into or out of the Chinese group. Chinese were reclassified as ‘white’, ‘Cape Coloured’, ‘Malay’, and ‘Indian’ and people from these groups were reclassified as ‘Chinese’ (Yap and Man 1996:318).

Classification of parents was the prime factor in determining the ‘race’ of children; however, the incidence of the ‘dreaded miscegenation’ (Posel 2001:52) gave rise to classification problems. Several of my interviewees also mentioned that white women who married Chinese men were forced to give up their ‘white’ classification to be reclassified as ‘Chinese’. In 1991 the Population Regulation Act and its amendments were repealed. Until that time South Africa’s tiny Chinese minority community had amongst them white, blonde, blue-eyed ‘Chinese’ women.

With the exception of this handful of white women who married into the ‘Chinese’ category, generally Chinese were readily identifiable; however, their small numbers and inconsistencies in the law made it difficult for apartheid officials to accommodate them within existing apartheid structures. For example, under the Electoral Act (1951 and 1957), Chinese were considered ‘non-white’ and therefore had no vote.<sup>5</sup> According to the Department of Community Development Chinese were classified as ‘Asian’. According to the Group Areas Act Chinese were classified under the general heading of ‘coloured’. Proclamation 73 of 1951 classified the Chinese as a separate group (Yap and Man 1996, Harris 1998, Human 1984). Because of all these variations in the categorisation of Chinese, their small numbers, and the high degree of social acceptance

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<sup>5</sup> The few male property owners who had had municipal and provincial votes in the Cape lost this with the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (no. 49 of 1953).

of Chinese amongst whites, bureaucrats were often at a loss as to where to place the handful of Chinese they encountered.

Interviewees attested to the confusion in the day-to-day implementation of apartheid laws with regard to Chinese people. Most public facilities were designated for ‘white’ and ‘non-white’. However, in a system within which “race was to be the critical and overriding faultline” (Posel 2001:52), Chinese often spoke of being ‘in-between’, ‘sitting on the fence’, and being lost in the vast spaces between black and white. Some of the most poignant examples of the confusion at the level of implementation came from interviewees speaking of their experiences as children, shunted from one entrance, marked ‘European’ to the other, marked ‘non-European’ and back again. Mark, 54, relayed the following story:

I remember I must have been ten years old when my late dad asked me to go down to the post office down the road to buy stamps. When I went to the coloured side, because (in those days) it was ‘white’ and ‘non-white’, the chap shouts at me and says to go the other side... so I stood outside (and was told the same thing) ... and the first person that came by, I asked them to buy a stamp for me.

It was not only the bureaucrats who were confused about the Chinese position. As Chinese gained more concessions, whites, blacks, and coloureds – all – began to assume that Chinese were ‘white’, or at least ‘honorary white’ and the faultline of race began, increasingly, to show fissures. General social perceptions led to assumptions about the Chinese community’s societal position, which, in legal terms, had not changed. The Groups Areas Act provided ample evidence of the unenviable middle ground occupied by the Chinese.

### ***Group Areas Act***

Of all of the apartheid era laws the one that had greatest impact on the Chinese was the Group Areas Act (number 41 of 1950, revised in number 36 of 1966), the second cornerstone of apartheid, because it threatened their livelihoods. Designed to force each separate ‘race’ group to live *and* work within their own designated group area, for the small population of Chinese traders who had always lived and made their living among

other race groups, the Act was a portent of disaster. The proclamation of a Chinese ‘group area’ would mean that everyone would have to move into the demarcated ‘Chinese’ area thereby losing his or her customer base amongst blacks, ‘coloureds’ and poor whites. Non-proclamation of an area, on the other hand, would mean they would be legally displaced with no official place to live or work.

The racial segregation of the pre-1948 period had already demarcated separate areas for blacks and placed restrictions on ‘Asiatics’ and ‘coloureds’; the Group Areas Act increased the scope of these laws. The initial legislation imposed racial criteria for residence and trade; later amendments encompassed admission to and use of hotels, halls, and sports facilities and effected conditions of employment by requiring that companies provide separate canteen and toilet facilities for employees of different race groups. As a result of this latter requirement, one of the first Chinese to be hired for factory work had special facilities built for him. Donna, 60, spoke about the amenities constructed exclusively for her husband and the few other Chinese in the factory:

When he started working in the Phillips Carbon Black Co., the Chinese people had a reputation as workers and so they looked for Chinese people to work. But when they brought the first group of Chinese to work there, they still had separate showers...and they had a separate canteen... There were three Chinese chaps working, so they built a small canteen the size of an officer’s room for them.

While Donna’s husband benefited from the law, most employers used this particular legal requirement to exclude Chinese and other ‘non-whites’ from jobs.

The ramifications of the Group Areas Act on their lives and their livelihoods motivated a level of activism not seen in the Chinese community since their participation in the passive resistance campaigns with the Indians in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese around the country, under the loose coordination of the Central Chinese Association of South Africa sent letters, memoranda, and submissions to anyone with influence; they also appeared in front of Land Tenure Boards and later Group Areas Boards. They argued that (a) the size of the community did not warrant their own separate area and (b) that they could not survive by trading amongst themselves if all

confined to one area. They requested to be allowed to trade under a system of permits, to have Group Areas proclaimed for them only for residence, and that the granting of property rights be reviewed to ensure some security of tenure to traders (Yap and Man 1996:328). The Chinese adopted, as in previous times<sup>6</sup>, a non-confrontational approach. They negotiated for differential treatment on the basis of their small numbers, their general acceptance within (white) society, their record as a quiet, law-abiding community, and their (high) standard of living (Yap and Man 1996:328). Their very arguments for differential treatment reinforced their preferred image of themselves – their constructed identity.

The Chinese in various parts of the country were affected differently by the legislation as bureaucrats began implementing the Act; some communities were moved, while others remained relatively untouched. The Chinese in East London, being a tiny and well-accepted community in a small town, were permitted to stay where they were; however, approximately eighty Chinese in Vereeniging's Top location, near Johannesburg, lost their businesses when they were forced out with the relocation of the black population to Sharpeville in the late 1950s, and nearly a thousand Chinese in Sophiatown and Martindale were dislocated in the 'slum clearance' of 1956. In the Johannesburg area, after proposals, opposition, and negotiations between Chinese and government officials of the Group Areas Board, an 'understanding' was finally achieved in December 1960: the Chinese would be allowed, on a permit basis, to move into parts of Johannesburg, in and around the city centre; however, tenure was insecure and dependent on the acquiescence of the immediate neighbours.

The possibilities of developing designated Chinese group areas were discussed by government officials and town planners for every major town and city that had any significant Chinese population; however, only four were proclaimed and only one was developed. Table 2.1 below provides a brief summary of the Chinese Group Areas.

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<sup>6</sup> With the exception of their participation in the passive resistance campaigns, all other political interventions have been diplomatic.

<b>City (Chinese population in 1951)</b>	<b>Date proposed / area</b>	<b>Date proclaimed</b>	<b>Developed</b>	<b>Date abandoned or deproclaimed</b>
Pretoria (600)	1960 / north of Laudium	Feb. 1961	n/a	1967
Johannesburg (2500)	1953 / Ferreirastown 1967 / Willowdene 1970 / Chinatown	n/a n/a n/a	n/a n/a n/a	n/a n/a n/a
Cape Town (300)	1955 / Fraserdale 1960 / Heatherly Estate or Landsdowne	n/a n/a n/a	n/a n/a n/a	n/a n/a n/a
Kimberley (146)	1959 / SW of Mint Village	July 1959	n/a	1973
East London (265)	1953 / off Kimberley Road behind Indian area	n/a	n/a	n/a
Uitenhage (130)	1967 / Baines Road & Lower Caledon Street	October 1967	n/a	1979
Port Elizabeth (1400)	1952 / Korsten 1956 / Cape Road in Kabega 1976 / undetermined	n/a May 1961 n/a	n/a Kabega Park n/a	n/a 1984 n/a
Durban (160)	mid 1960s / Norse Street on the outskirts of Overport	n/a	n/a	n/a

Compiled from Yap and Man 1996:330-347

In most instances the Chinese either protested or simply failed to move to the designated areas. Most projects were ultimately shelved; the Chinese were too small a community and there were many other, more pressing priorities for Group Areas Boards. The only Chinese group area that was both proclaimed and developed was in Port Elizabeth (PE). There, the events led to the development of Kabega Park were, according to Yap and Man:

Shrouded in controversy, suspicion, and accusation. Not only have fingers been pointed at community leaders for ‘accepting’ the group area and potentially jeopardising the Chinese position in other cities, but insinuations have also been made that individuals exploited the situation for financial gain. (Yap and Man 1996:339)

The leaders who agreed to the controversial development of Kabega Park, however, managed to secure a significant concession from authorities: they were granted the right to separate business rights from residential rights. Large numbers of PE families, displaced by urban redevelopment, had no option but to move to Kabega. Others chose

instead to leave: large numbers of Chinese from PE emigrated from South Africa throughout the 1960s.

Between 1955 and 1975, their in-between position in terms of the Group Areas Act turned most Chinese South Africans into ‘displaced persons’. Prohibited from owning property, Chinese had to rent homes and business premises, making them dependent on the goodwill of landlords and neighbours. Theirs was a precarious position, constantly exposed to exploitation, eviction, and prosecution. Gradually, a growing social acceptance of Chinese within white society started to affect the implementation of the Group Areas Act as regarded the small community. For example, from 1971, the Department of Community Development began to issue permits allowing Chinese to purchase property in white areas, with the proviso that none of their immediate neighbours protested. However, these privileges carried great costs. The older interviewees reported that amongst their most humiliating apartheid experiences was the process of getting the required signatures of immediate neighbours in order to take residence in designated ‘white’ areas; for years this required that they go door-to-door to obtain signatures. For many of these older Chinese, some now holding tertiary degrees and professional jobs, it was degrading to have to ask their white neighbours, often lowly, uneducated bureaucrats, for such permission.

By the late 1970s, permits for the Chinese had become a formality. By 1983, after a special commission investigated the Groups Areas and other legislation with respect to the Chinese, it was recommended that the Chinese “in respect of ownership and occupation of land be granted the same rights as members of the white group but with the same disqualifications on marriage or cohabitation with a member of another population group” (Yap and Man 1996:348). In May 1985 an amendment enabled Chinese to acquire, hold, or occupy property in white areas without permits, making *de jure* what was already *de facto* (Yap and Man 1996:348). Harris speculates that concessions to the Chinese in terms of the Group Areas Act stemmed from (a) the impracticality of the regulations as regards to their tiny community, (b) warming

relations between South Africa and Taiwan, and (c) fears that the creation of a Chinese group area could be exploited by Chinese communists (Harris 1998:285).

Concessions made day-to-day life easier for Chinese but many older Chinese remained bitter about the earlier humiliations they suffered. Furthermore, these were still only concessions and permits. The Chinese never had any legal rights during apartheid and this lack of security continued to affect their sense of themselves, particularly as South Africans. Until the repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1991, the exceptions, concessions, and privileges granted to the Chinese in this incremental and haphazard fashion served to further entrench their separateness from other 'non-whites'. Simultaneously, the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act (number 43 of 1953), the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950 and 1957) re-affirmed their legal status as 'non-white'.

### ***Other apartheid legislation***

Barriers to Chinese immigration in North America were lowered during and after World War Two, but in South Africa, after an initial increase between 1949 and 1953, comprised mostly of new brides brought from China, the door to South Africa was virtually shut by the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act (number 43 of 1953) until the late 1970s when Taiwanese industrialists were permitted entry in increasing numbers.<sup>7</sup> State laws regulating immigration affected both the size and the nature of the Chinese community. As intended, these laws ensured that the size of the community remained small. However, they also limited infusions of Chinese culture, typically made by new immigrants, which ultimately affected Chinese culture and ethnicity in South Africa. Furthermore, the knowledge that they were part of a 'barred' community, amongst other factors, affected the full integration of Chinese into white South Africa.

Under the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1951 and 1957), the Chinese remained officially 'non-white' throughout the

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<sup>7</sup> The immigration of Taiwanese and mainland Chinese into South Africa from the late 1970s and their impact on the local Chinese community will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

apartheid years and there were no exceptions made in cases of mixed-race dating and marriages.<sup>8</sup> Legislation applying to education and occupation also restricted opportunities for the Chinese.<sup>9</sup> The inconsistencies between the various pieces of legislation, the result of conflicts between the official ideology of economic, political, and social separation between the ‘races’, on the one hand, and growing social acceptance of Chinese by whites, on the other, were confusing to both the apartheid bureaucrats charged with implementation and to the Chinese people. A study of white attitudes toward the Chinese in 1975 and 1978, funded by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) revealed similar inconsistencies, which the authors refer to as “between the formal/official attitudes and the informal/popular attitudes” (Smedley 1980:31-47).

With the implementation of the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (number 49 of 1953) a uniform bar was imposed on all public premises and vehicles, extending segregation to parks, libraries, beaches, and civic halls. It introduced separate entrances, queues, counters, and toilets. Only representatives of foreign governments were exempted. While Chinese were officially ‘non-white’, applying the Separate Amenities Act proved to be particularly problematic because, in addition to the issues mentioned earlier, there was a great deal of confusion with the Japanese who had legally been classified as ‘honorary whites’ (Yap and Man 1996:358). This next section will focus on the impact of South Africa’s relations with Japan, Taiwan, and mainland China on the local Chinese population.

### **The impact of foreign relations with Asia**

South Africa’s foreign relations with Japan and China<sup>10</sup> have had, at various points throughout the apartheid years, both direct and indirect effects on the Chinese South

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<sup>8</sup> The impact of these two pieces of legislation will be discussed in greater detail in the Chapter Four.

<sup>9</sup> These, too, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>10</sup> Here ‘China’ refers to China before 1949 and both the People’s Republic of China (PRC or mainland China) and the Republic of China (ROC/Taiwan) in the post-1949 period.

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African community.<sup>11</sup> The impact of South Africa's foreign relations on the local Chinese was by no means consistent; rather, it was often confused and contradictory, and changed over time. The Japanese and Chinese communities in South Africa posed challenges to the apartheid government, in part due to their small size and 'racial' difference from all other race groups within apartheid's classification system. However, it was the growing importance of trade relations with Asian countries that shifted power relations on an international level and ultimately necessitated special accommodation within racial ideologies; economic necessity gradually influenced a policy of exemptions, concessions, and privileges for the local Chinese, which contradicted the very spirit of apartheid.

### *Japan*

Historically, South Africa's relationship with Japan has had tremendous impact on the Chinese South Africans. Due to treaty obligations between Great Britain and Japan and a high volume of trade between South Africa and Japan, the handful of Japanese people<sup>12</sup> in South Africa were given special treatment for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the pre-apartheid era, from 1910, just after the Union of South Africa was formed, to 1930, when the Gentlemen's Agreement between South Africa and Japan was signed,<sup>13</sup> Japanese people in South Africa were granted special privileges, exempted from legislation as applied to the 'Asiatic' group, and generally treated better than Chinese in the country. On numerous occasions throughout this period, China's Consul-General requested that Chinese, especially those who had been in South Africa for a long time, be granted similar privileges. The Consul-General was denied on all these occasions.

During apartheid, the disparity between the treatment of the Chinese and that of the Japanese in South Africa again caught the public's attention in 1961. In the post-World

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<sup>11</sup> The chronology in Appendix Two gives some indication of the relationship between broader political events and policies and their impact on the changing view of the local Chinese community by the South African government.

<sup>12</sup> In 1921 there were only 54 Japanese in South Africa (Yap and Man 1996:248).

<sup>13</sup> The Gentlemen's Agreement stated that all Japanese tourists, students and merchants recommended by the Consul would be allowed to enter the country for one year, with renewable permits.

War Two period, Japan's need for industrial raw materials led to a substantial strengthening of trade links between South Africa and Japan. Between 1955 and 1961 Japan doubled its exports to South Africa becoming its fourth largest trading partner. South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961 and a significant decrease in trade with countries such as Britain and Canada opened up trade opportunities for other countries. In 1961 Japanese imported £25.6 million in raw materials from South Africa and spent another £17.9 million in exports.<sup>14</sup> The maintenance of this valuable trading relationship is presumed to be the main reason for the South African government's relaxation of apartheid laws with regard to Japanese; under apartheid laws, specifically the Group Areas Act, the Japanese were officially exempted as 'honorary whites' (Yap and Man 1996:376). The government further justified the special consideration given to the Japanese in South Africa by pointing out that they were very few<sup>15</sup> and they were temporary residents, not immigrants.

As they had done previously, both the Chinese Consul-General and Chinese South African community leaders responded to what they viewed as an insult in South Africa's selective 'upliftment' of the Japanese. From the early 1960s through the early 1970s opposition party politicians and the press also questioned why Japanese were granted special privileges. Granting 'honorary white' status to the Japanese only in terms of one law proved extremely problematic for the government ethically as well as practically. In the face of contradictions and inconsistencies, the government continued to defend a rigid 'white'-'non-white' divide. And despite the difficulties experienced by most people in differentiating between Chinese and Japanese, official policies were not changed to accommodate the Chinese.

The Chinese South Africans were well aware of the different official positions regarding Japanese and Chinese; however, they made use of the fact that few could distinguish

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<sup>14</sup> In 1985 Japan was South Africa's biggest trading partner. Under increasing international pressure, Japan started imposing trade sanctions in the late 1980s, only to resume normal trade relations with South Africa in the 1990s (Yap and Man 1996:376-79).

<sup>15</sup> In 1961 there were only about fifty Japanese in South Africa. By 1974 the number of Japanese temporarily resident in South Africa was approximately six hundred (Yap and Man 1996:376).

between the two groups to their benefit. Michael, 66, explained how the local Chinese took advantage of Japanese ‘rights’ and white amenities:

The Japanese were trading with South Africa, buying a lot from South Africa. You know, when you are trading money, you can buy anything. So, the Japanese were termed ‘honorary whites’; so the Chinese and Japanese look alike; so you know, if you walk into the cinema and they say, ‘no Chinese allowed’ you would say, ‘I am not Chinese. I am Japanese.’ And they would let you in. So, I think the attitude was, if they look Chinese or Japanese, just let them in...after the Japanese were doing business with South Africa and Taiwan came in, so they had more reason to give us amenities because of the trade links.

As a practical matter, it was almost impossible for the bureaucrats, hotel managers, restauranteurs, and others to distinguish between the two Asian groups; as a result, there was a gradual acceptance of Chinese into white areas. These state exceptions and exemptions, however, carried high political costs for the National Party. The differences between official policies regarding Japanese and Chinese became the focus of many liberal and opposition jibes against apartheid, especially in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Republic of China/Taiwan***

South Africa and China officially established diplomatic relations in 1905, a year after the Transvaal gold mines had begun to import indentured Chinese labourers.<sup>17</sup> From the rise of the Chinese Nationalists (KMT) in the 1920s and throughout the conflict with the Communists, South Africa had continued to support the KMT. In 1949, after the Communist Party gained control of the mainland, the Chinese Consul-General in Johannesburg continued to represent the Chinese Nationalist government of the Republic of China (ROC), exiled to Taiwan.

Between 1960 and 1962, the Chinese South African community were put in the awkward position of having to answer to the government of South Africa for the actions of the ROC/Taiwan. The ROC/Taiwan still held a permanent seat on the United

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<sup>16</sup> These will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

<sup>17</sup> The only gap in Chinese consular representation in South Africa occurred from 1911 and 1920, when the acting Consul-General, Liu Ngai, was recalled to China. During this period, the American consulate in Johannesburg handled matters relating to Chinese interests in South Africa. (Yap and Man 1996:417)

Nations Security Council in the 1960s, and had typically been a political ally to South Africa. However, in the aftermath of the Sharpeville riots of March 1960, they voted for sanctions against South Africa. The Chinese South African community became concerned about possible repercussions on the local Chinese as a result of the Taiwanese sanctions vote. Their fears were based on the common misperception that the local South African-born Chinese were foreigners. These misperceptions were also based on Chinese Consul-General's 'representation' of the local Chinese in their efforts to attain greater privileges.<sup>18</sup> Chinese South African community leaders wrote to or met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the ROC/Taiwan, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, President Chiang Kai Shek, and the Chinese delegation at the United Nations to express their concerns. Community leaders emphasised that most of its community members were born in South Africa and regarded South Africa as their country (Yap and Man 1996:372-373). While they were willing to be 'mistaken' as Japanese in order to access white areas and privileges, the local Chinese were quick to draw the distinction between themselves and the Taiwanese government when they felt that they might suffer from repercussions as a result of any confusion.

In the mid-1970s, despite the earlier UN sanctions vote, relations between ROC/Taiwan and South Africa warmed significantly as the two nations, both increasingly isolated from the international community, increased bilateral trade, exchanged visits of Cabinet ministers, and in 1976, raised their diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level. The impact of these warming relations was seen in increased immigration to South Africa from Taiwan and later from the PRC/mainland China<sup>19</sup> and also in the improved treatment of Chinese South Africans by the South African government. According to historian Karen Harris, by 1979 South African exports to ROC exceeded R180 million, and ROC ranked as South Africa's fifth largest trading partner. In 1980, the two countries concluded a 400 million Rand uranium deal. By the mid-1980s, new legislation repealed "certain laws regulating the admission of Asians into certain parts

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<sup>18</sup> The influence of the ROC/Taiwan on the Chinese South African community diminished significantly from the mid-1970s. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> A more detailed discussion of the new Chinese immigrants to South Africa and their impact on Chinese South Africans will follow in Chapter Seven.

of the Republic” (Harris 1998:280): Chinese were permitted to establish residence in the Free State, from whence they had been banned since 1891.

Chinese South Africans were well aware of the improving relations between Taiwan and South Africa and the potential positive impact on their community. For example, Steve, aged 61, reported that during the 1960s and 70s the good relations between the Nationalists in Taiwan and the apartheid government “elevated our positions and (we got) better promotions.” As with the Japanese situation, the Chinese South Africans made the best of the changing national climate brought on by improved relations between Taiwan and South Africa. At the risk of jeopardising their relations with blacks, Indians, and ‘coloureds’,<sup>20</sup> they took advantage of the increased opportunities presented by their changing status in South Africa. Accepting concessions and privileges, was also, one might argue, a firm refusal to completely acquiesce to their second-class citizenship; they believed that they had every right to superior, privileged treatment.

### ***‘Red China’, communism, and illegal immigration***

The fear of communism brought about one important anomaly in the general trend towards greater acceptance of Chinese. As mentioned earlier, throughout the conflict between the KMT and the Communists in China, the Chinese Consul-General in South Africa continued to represent the Chinese Nationalists. After the Communist Party declared victory in mainland China and declared the People’s Republic of China, South Africa continued to have official ties to the ROC/Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> The South African government was very vocal in its opposition to communism. Any immigration, legal or illegal, from mainland China after 1949 was assumed to be communist; the Immigration Regulation Amendment Act ensured that any new immigration from China was virtually halted.

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<sup>20</sup> The older generation of Chinese South African shopkeepers depended for their livelihood on their Black and Coloured customers. However, with each passing decade, fewer and fewer Chinese remained in the shops as larger numbers completed tertiary degrees and became professionals.

<sup>21</sup> This only changed in 1996 when South Africa, under an ANC government officially recognised the People’s Republic of China.

Fears of infiltration by communists and other ‘criminals’ from ‘Red China’ were brought to the fore in the mid-1960s. After the assassination of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd by an illegal immigrant from Eastern Europe, nearly four hundred Chinese were questioned in connection with smuggling illegal Chinese into the country. In urgent negotiations between the police, Chinese associations, and the Consul-General, there was a call for voluntary surrender of all illegal Chinese immigrants with the promise that they would not be detained and would be granted ‘emergency’ residence documents while awaiting trial. This call for voluntary surrender included people with false birth certificates, identification cards, and residence papers and those with no residence papers; in other words, it included large numbers of Chinese who had entered South Africa prior to 1949 under false documentation. This government ‘sweep’ caused tremendous fear throughout the community and rumours spread across the country that police were prepared to raid every Chinese home. Justifying their fears, in 1967 police began searching homes in Johannesburg’s Kliptown area and went shop to shop in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage, and Grahamstown.<sup>22</sup>

The statewide hunt for ‘Red Chinese’ and insecurities about their in-between status, particularly under the Group Areas Act, reinforced Chinese fears and wariness about the South African state. These fears led to immobility, passivity, and a generally non-confrontational attitude. Chinese attributed their fears to their cultural values, the heritage of their parents and grandparents, their small numbers, and their inability to have any social or political impact. There were both family and community pressures to stay out of trouble. Generally, these social control mechanisms prevented the majority of Chinese South Africans from actively engaging in politics.

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<sup>22</sup> Chairman of the Central Chinese Association of South Africa and the Consul-General worked to clear all allegations of communist affiliations, arguing that the four hundred “were refugees from the tyranny of communism who had desperately tried to reach the security of a country like South Africa” (Yap and Man 1996:373). Ultimately, through the work of the Consul-General, who offered to stand security for the accused, approximately 380 people were able to legalise their residence and eventually become citizens.

Nevertheless, some Chinese organisations continued to make their voices heard. In a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* of 21 November 1967, it was alleged that 17 million overseas Chinese, represented by 285 Chinese organisations worldwide, opposed the admission of 'Red China' into the UN and deplored the lawlessness and wanton destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Signatories included four Chinese South African organisations. The participation of the Chinese South Africans was likely prompted by the need to show the South African government that they, too, were staunchly anti-communist (Yap and Man 1996:373).

Because of on-going contact with relatives 'left behind' in China, many local Chinese were well aware of the hardships of life in communist China and had already developed, independently, their own negative views on communism. Furthermore, most Chinese in South Africa had been Nationalists prior to 1949; with the continued relations between the local community and the KMT and the Nationalist-led Consul-General in South Africa, they maintained these loyalties. The 'hunt' for illegal immigrants and 'Red Chinese' of the 1960s reinforced their anti-communist views.

The state's shifting and, often, contradictory positions on Chinese in South Africa reinforces one of Posel's principal arguments in *The Making of Apartheid* (1991, 1997): that apartheid was *not* a single, monolithic, 'grand plan'. The very essence and spirit of apartheid was challenged and ultimately compromised by the greater economic benefits of continued trade relations with the Japanese, which necessitated the exemption of Japanese from certain aspects of apartheid legislation. To further complicate matters, various departments of the South African state were often divided as to how to deal with the Chinese. Lawmakers often had different views from the state bureaucrats charged with implementation. Implementation of apartheid regulations, further compromised by the fact that few state officials could tell the difference between a local Chinese and a visiting Japanese, varied from department to department and province to province.

Anderson's study "Imagined Communities" (1983) focuses on the official boundaries which define and enforce who is imagined as part of a nation and who is not.

Citizenship is the key institutional mechanism for establishing the boundaries between those included and those excluded. In South Africa, apartheid legislation made the boundaries 'thicker' (Cornell and Hartmann 1998), excluding all those who were not 'white'. This study shows, however, that these boundaries were neither impenetrable nor permanent. The legal racial order, officially excluding Chinese, was challenged by competing national economic interests, which forced a reconsideration of where to place the small, resident Chinese community and the even smaller, non-resident Japanese community. The small size of the Chinese community, their esteemed reputation as a 'civilised race', and their general acceptability in white society confused the apartheid bureaucrats charged with implementing the racial order. As a result, throughout most of the almost forty years of apartheid, the position of Chinese remained ambiguous and fluid. This next section will focus on the increasing ambiguity of apartheid laws as applied to the small South African-born Chinese community in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Changing views of the Chinese, official and unofficial**

The Chinese South African community and their identities were deeply affected by legislation and their general treatment by the state; however, as mentioned above, state views of Chinese were not always consistent, and the gap between the official legal status of Chinese and their actual treatment under the laws widened considerably during the 1960s. Increasingly, the way general South African society viewed the Chinese had a greater impact on the government's ability (or inability) to exclude them. In addition, the Chinese community themselves, with their own strong sense of identity, were unwilling to adjust their views to those of the state. This next section outlines the contestation surrounding the construction of Chinese identity during the 1970s and 1980s. It will focus on the South African state in crisis, and, in particular, on state efforts to co-opt the 'coloured', 'Indian', and 'Chinese' communities. The roles of the other social actors – white society, the media, and the official (white) political opposition, and the local Chinese community – will be considered for the parts they played in influencing the state's contested and changing views of the Chinese.

Sociologist Linda Human, reporting on two HSRC studies conducted in 1975 and 1978, found that most white people in South Africa were quite accepting of Chinese, whom they viewed as socially and culturally close to ‘white’ (Smedley 1980:31-47). The media and white opposition parties played a large role in bringing attention to the awkward in-between position of the Chinese; both made use of particular incidents to highlight the inconsistencies of apartheid throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the media articles also pointed to the civilisation and heritage of the Chinese. In 1970 the Chinese were splashed across the newspapers countrywide for the controversy surrounding several incidents of Chinese exclusion: several young people were barred from sports competitions, Chinese schoolboys were prohibited from an aptitude test, a university student withdrew from the finals of a Rag Queen contest, and eight Chinese toddlers were threatened with expulsion from a white crèche<sup>23</sup> (Yap and Man 1996:363-364). Opposition politicians and media used these incidents to point to the hypocrisies of apartheid. For example, one newspaper stated:

It seems paradoxical that one of South Africa’s smallest ethnic minorities – the Chinese community of 8000 – is dealing some of the heaviest blows to the crumbling wall of applied apartheid. Soul-searching in Nationalist intellectual circles has, possibly, been more evident over the Chinese questions than with any other problem of racial segregation. (*Daily News*, 30 June 1970, “The Chinese – a re-appraisal”)

Chinese community organisations, engaged in negotiating concessions from the apartheid government also influenced changing government views. Aaron, 62, reported heated debates over both aims and strategies: Should they use bribery? Should they approach government officials directly? Did they want to be reclassified as ‘white’ or did they simply want the same privileges as the whites? He said that ultimately the Chinese South Africans simply wanted a higher standard of living, as did all ‘non-white’ groups in South Africa at the time:

Another very important thing was, some opinion was that we should ask for white rights. We resisted that. We felt that we just wanted privileges to be granted us. We did not want to be ‘white’. And one of the reasons for not wanting to be ‘white’ was that being classified as ‘white’, there were many Chinese families who had properties in the coloured areas and the black areas

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<sup>23</sup> Day-care centre for toddlers.

and they would be jeopardised then...at no time were we prepared to accept white rights, but to be treated with equality...

Chinese also agreed to adopt a low profile, diplomatic, and direct approach with government officials, community leaders, and other decision-makers to bring about improvements in their position.

It was generally held that whatever had been achieved by the Chinese had been through their being 'inconspicuous' and this remained their best course of action. Regional Chinese associations took up problems that arose in their areas and in many cases succeeded in securing sympathetic consideration from the authorities ... The community fostered good relationships with other racial groups, donating money to charities and worthwhile causes and building up a reputation as a quiet, law-abiding and hard-working section of South African society. (Yap and Man 1996:382)

Many of the interviewees, particularly the community leaders, corroborated Yap and Man's comments about strategies. Aaron, 62, spoke of the efforts made by the Chinese community in Kimberley to get their children into white schools. He said that they made overtures to the white community by holding Chinese dinner/dances and donating proceeds to white organisations:

Because of the apartheid laws, we were trying to improve our lot by hoping to get our Chinese in white schools. And one of the things we did was to launch a Chinese dinner/dance. And this Chinese dinner/dance was levelled at the white community and any proceeds from these...the profits, we used to donate to white organisations...and not long after, we started getting our children going to the Catholic school...slowly then, we started going to white schools. But this was only a privilege; it wasn't a right...in that time, we had all sorts of battles.

Andrew, 26, explained that the Pretoria Chinese Association used negotiations and social events to help gain concessions. While attempting to ensure that they did not jeopardise their relations with blacks and 'coloureds', they based their arguments for special consideration on differentiating and distinguishing themselves from other 'non-white' communities. A central part of their argument was that the Chinese should not be put in the same category as 'blacks' and 'coloureds'; the Chinese, they believed, had a heritage, civilisation, and living standard that were far superior. He stated:

How we did it in Pretoria was not by force but by negotiations. What we did was sat and said we have to get these people to know us socially. So we got the

officials, sat down and talked to them – it was a long process. There were rules, but when you met them, they were not that harsh. And explaining to them and bring across to understand them – the rules are these, but maybe the law had all the black and ‘coloured’ people in mind when they were made, so how can you compare our standard of education, living, and civilisation to theirs?

The similarities between the Chinese in South Africa and the Mississippi Chinese in the US are striking on many counts. The Mississippi Chinese exhibited similar patterns of migration from the same areas of southern China, their small community made up a similarly tiny proportion of the local population, they worked primarily as shopkeepers, and they were positioned between a black majority and a smaller white population that held all the power and wealth in the region. Furthermore, they used similar political and social strategies and successfully managed to reclassify themselves from ‘black’ to ‘white’ (Loewen 1971, 1988 and also Cornell and Hartman 1998). Loewen states that their success was based on: (a) convincing whites that they believed in racial integrity and made a positive virtue of racial distinctiveness; (b) adjusting their lifestyle and image to be more acceptable to whites; (c) constructing parallel institutions – churches, missions, mission schools, dances, social clubs; (d) developing a reputation for academic excellence, and as a quiet and trouble-free community; and (e) differentiating themselves from blacks (Loewen 1988:79, 81, 119-129). Loewen states:

The Chinese style of operation, through influence rather than through power, with persuasion behind the scenes rather than open confrontation with Whites, has perhaps been a key to their progress. (Loewen 1988:92)

The Chinese South Africans successfully used similar strategies, including diplomatic overtures to white community leaders and government decision-makers; these actions combined with increasing political opposition and media attacks made it impossible for the state to hold the ideological line. Furthermore, by the early 1970s it was clear that the apartheid state was in trouble, facing a severe economic recession as well as political pressures. In 1970, under siege in both press and Parliament, the Minister of Community Development, Blaar Coetzee, announced a blanket exemption for Chinese to mix freely with whites at sports and social gatherings. His justification was that the Chinese were, in his view, a separate racial group with a separate identity, but they were

too small a group to be given separate facilities. They would be allowed, therefore, to ‘attach themselves’ to one or another group and if there were no complaints, the government would not take exception. By December 1979, many restrictions on the multiracial use of facilities (including libraries, private hospitals, theatres and halls, conferences, private clubs, exhibitions and fetes, drive-in cinemas, circuses, cafes and restaurants) were relaxed with ‘blanket exemption permits’ in terms of the Groups Areas Act (Yap and Man 1996:366-367). Making concessions for such a small and distinct community cost the state little, initially; however, one might argue that these continued government ‘sacrifices’ of racial ideology for political or economic expediency ultimately corroded the edifice of apartheid.

In every sector of life, while there were still many restrictions and no legal ‘rights’, the Chinese South Africans benefited from a number of concessions, turns of blind eyes, and privileges. The Chinese were quite aware of their heightened standing relative to other ‘non-whites’. They were very practical about accepting concessions, arguing that they simply wanted a higher standard of living. As mentioned earlier, this elevated treatment ‘fit’ with their image and constructed identity; they saw themselves as separate, worthy, and superior to all other South Africans. Michael, 66, explained that the Chinese were simply being practical; a pragmatic approach would result in better health care for the Chinese whereas standing on principle against apartheid would not:

So, when you came to the later stages of apartheid, we could go into white hospitals, we could go to white cinemas. We had access to a lot of amenities, which ‘non-whites’ didn’t. Actually, legally, if they were to throw the book at us, there were a lot of things we weren’t entitled to, but, you know, being Chinese, they turned a blind eye...So, I think a lot of blacks, Indians, and coloureds are still – the ones who can remember – are still jealous of the fact that we had more privileges than they did...But you can understand the Chinese position. We had this situation we could take advantage of. Who is going to say for a principle, “We are not going to take advantage of it?” You want to go to a white hospital because the facilities were so much better there.

However, this stance had its limits. The Chinese community’s acceptance of concessions and privileges stopped short of accepting legal changes in the classification of Chinese. While it was one thing to quietly accept concessions for access to white

schools, white residential areas, and white hospitals, it was quite another to officially and legally align themselves with the white apartheid government and accept reclassification as 'white'. Their position became quite clear around the franchise and official representation on the President's Council.

With respect to the franchise, from mid-1970s, public attention increasingly focused on the status of the Chinese.<sup>24</sup> United Party politicians proposed that Chinese be included into the white group arguing that they should not be denied the franchise. In early 1978, a Member of Parliament tabled a motion calling on government to give Chinese South Africans "the same legal status as white South Africans" and full voting rights on a common roll with whites. The motion was withdrawn when the Chinese objected, pointing out that they did not want to be classified as 'white'. In the Catholic Chinese newsletter, *Inter Nos*, Father Ignatius Ou stated:

As Christians, it should certainly not be our objective to seek to be elevated merely to lord over any less fortunate groups than ourselves, but rather to seek to achieve equal status whilst at the same time retaining our identities as Chinese and always fostering our rich Chinese culture of which we should be justifiably proud ... our aim should not be to protect an ideal of separate development and discrimination but to strive for the fundamental equality of all South African citizens (as quoted in Yap and Man 1996:367-368).

Father Ou's statement indicates, yet again, that the Chinese were quite aware of their preferential treatment under apartheid; however, for both cultural and ethical reasons, the Chinese did not want to be reclassified as 'white'.

In 1979 the Schlebusch Commission of Inquiry was appointed to inquire into the introduction of a new constitution and parliamentary system. One of the key recommendations was the appointment of a President's Council, an advisory body made up of sixty white, 'coloured', Indian, and Chinese representatives, leaders of their

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<sup>24</sup> The handful of Chinese male property owners in the Cape who had had franchise rights in the Cape prior to 1956, lost these rights with the passage of the Separate Representation of Voters Amendment Act (no. 30 of 1956). Under this legislation, all Coloured and Indian (and Chinese) men were removed from the common voters roll and given indirect representation in Parliament. In 1968, separate councils were established for the Coloureds and Indians; the Chinese position was not given any consideration at the time.

communities and experts in their respective fields. According to Yap and Man, the specific mention of the Chinese came as a surprise to the community; they had never been involved in any government structures. They concluded that Chinese inclusion was likely the result of warming relations between South Africa and the ROC/Taiwan during the 1970s and a state visit to South Africa in March 1980 by the ROC/Taiwan's premier, Sun Yun-Suan (Yap and Man 1996:410). Opposition parties opposed the creation of the President's Council stating that it gave a place to the tiny Chinese community of 10,000 members while excluding 'blacks' (70% of the population) and was a creation of the white, apartheid government reporting to an exclusively white Parliament (Yap and Man 1996:410).

Melvin, 72, a community leader at the time, reported that the Chinese community via regional Chinese associations ultimately decided not to participate; however, one Chinese South African, with the backing of the Chinese Consul-General, disregarded the community decision.<sup>25</sup> Melvin reported:

When they wanted to nominate somebody for the President's Council, I wasn't completely in favour of it because it excluded blacks. In principle, I didn't agree with the President's Council because, to me, it appeared that the government was trying to get the rest of the population of colour on their side in order to balance the power with the blacks.

James, 67, also spoke briefly of the Nationalist Party government's attempts to co-opt the Chinese community "as their ship was sinking." He, too, was speaking of the invitation by government to the Chinese community to participate in the President's Council.<sup>26</sup> He said, "To the Chinese community's credit to remain apolitical, it did so quite well."

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<sup>25</sup> The greater community ensured that the parties involved in this betrayal paid a heavy price. Kenneth Winchui was formally ousted from the Pretoria Chinese Association, publicly 'disowned' in the media, and socially excluded. The Consul-General also paid dearly: they were never again consulted or used as the representative of the local Chinese community. In fact, this episode led to the formation of the Chinese Association of South Africa (or CASA), a national representative Chinese South African organization.

<sup>26</sup> The Chinese South African community debated the implications of participation in the President's Council and after a series of meetings representatives from Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg, and Pretoria opposed Chinese representation on the Council. To everyone's surprise, two weeks after this decision was reached, the newspapers reported that Kenneth Winchui of Pretoria, who had been present at the

In 1984, when South Africa's newly adopted constitution provided for a tricameral parliamentary system for whites, 'coloureds', and Indians, the Chinese position again became the subject of media attention and political debate. In terms of South Africa's 'homeland' government policy, blacks were technically citizens of various homelands and had the right to vote for legislatures in these areas. 'Coloureds' and Indians were to become part of this new tricameral system. The Chinese, then, were the only racial group without any form of franchise. Opposition politicians and members of the press used the situation to press for full rights for the Chinese. F.W. de Klerk pointed out that the community's small size and their national dispersal necessitated a special approach (Yap and Man 1996:415). The Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA), through its contact with the Ministry of Constitutional Development and Planning, reiterated the community's wish to be consulted before any decision was taken on its political future (Yap and Man 1996:415).

For the next four years, South Africa came under extreme pressure internally and externally: widespread protests greeted the introduction of the new constitution, a state of emergency was declared as political violence escalated with school boycotts and worker strikes, the European Community imposed economic sanctions in 1985, and the United States passed its Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986. In October 1988 the government scheduled the country's first nationwide municipal elections, involving voters of all races; they were however voting on separate rolls for separate institutions. Again, the 'voteless' Chinese attracted attention. The possible extension of political rights to the Chinese was the subject of community meetings throughout the country as CASA member associations sought to establish a consensus. "Community members pointed out that a distinction had to be drawn between *full rights* and *white rights*, saying that the community wanted *full rights*, but not as '*whites*.'" (Yap and Man 1996:416). Intertwined with the issue of the vote was the concern that Chinese men

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meeting, had accepted the nomination to serve as the first Chinese on the President's Council. In press statements it was announced that Kenneth Winchui was expelled from the Pretoria Chinese Association and that he did not command the support of the community.

**Chapter Two**  
**From Second-Class Citizens to 'Honorary White':**  
**Changing State Views of Chinese in South Africa**  
**Chinese South African Identities**

would become subject to compulsory military conscription, as were all 'whites'. The final consensus was that the community wished "that consideration of its position be delayed until a constitutional solution acceptable to all South Africans was found" (Yap and Man 1996:416).

The Chinese South African community was apparently offered the franchise again in 1992. According to Joel, CASA turned down this offer as well.

Wisely, they said no. The reason they gave was that South Africa had much more pressing problems than giving us the franchise. We were prepared to fall into place once the new government was in place – that's the stance we took, quite wisely.

Because of apartheid's separation and stratification of the races and the small size of the Chinese South African community, the only way to give Chinese rights, beyond the haphazard system of exemptions and permits that had been in place, was to redefine them as 'white'. The impact of improved relations between the South African and ROC/Taiwan states, earlier trade relations between South Africa and Japan, and the law-abiding, 'civilised', respectable image that the Chinese promoted had had a positive impact on the way white South Africa – the state, the media, the opposition, and white society, in general – viewed the Chinese in South Africa. Cornell and Hartmann, in their introductory discussion about the differences between race and ethnicity, explain that racial designation typically implies inferiority – that some races are inherently physically or biologically inferior, less intelligent, and have lesser moral worth (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:28). Chinese, during this period, became 'worthy' enough to be included on the white electoral rolls. However, the state's attempts to re-define and re-imagine Chinese South Africans as 'white' failed largely because the Chinese South Africans were unwilling to give up their ethnic identity as Chinese. They wanted white rights but they did not want to become 'white'.

CASA's responses to each attempt to redefine the Chinese as 'white' indicate a great deal of political foresight: they viewed the state's attempts with scepticism and in light of the mounting internal and international pressure on the government to transform.

Their acceptance of privileges and concessions and their rejection of being redefined as 'white' must be seen, on the one hand, as a reflection of their ambiguity about and distrust in the South African state. Theirs was an ambiguous position, and they realised that most concessions were based on the discretion of white people who wielded power over them. At the same time, they saw that the acceptance of 'white rights' might damage their future in South Africa. They were already compromised, having accepted numerous concessions. As it became clear that the white apartheid government was facing a serious and mounting crisis, they refused to accept reclassification as 'white' and be 'caught out' yet again. Their position was one of practicality and caution. Chinese South African identity, in many ways, has been shaped more directly by apartheid definitions and restrictions than by the concessions received by the community. Privileges and concessions, while allowing them better lives and increased opportunities, served to reinforce the tenuousness of their position and resulted in their 'return' to their ethnic origins. On the other hand, this precarious balance between their acceptance of 'white' privileges and concessions and their refusal to become legally reclassified as 'white' must also be seen in light of their tenacious grip on their ethnic identity. They were and chose to remain 'Chinese'. They viewed themselves as unique and superior because of their imagined links to a mythical great 5000-year-old civilization. The next chapter will focus on the connection between the Chinese South Africans and the Chinese state as well as their sense of belonging to a great mythical China.

### **Conclusion: ambiguities of life 'in-between'**

This chapter has discussed the impact of the state as a principal actor in the shifting constructions of Chinese identity. The state's role was particularly important in defining the parameters within which the Chinese could manoeuvre. However, the state was only one of several influences on constructing Chinese South African identity. Furthermore, the state was inconsistent in terms of its definitions and classifications of Chinese, as well as in the application of laws and concessions. Overriding racial ideologies of the apartheid state, in a number of instances, were sacrificed for greater economic benefits or because of political pressures. The examples mentioned within

this chapter bear out Posel's argument that apartheid was not based on a grand master plan, but was developed piecemeal, in response to various external pressures as well as internal debates (Posel 1991, 1997).

The state set aside privileges for the Chinese for a number of reasons. By the 1970s, the apartheid state was in economic and political trouble and it was becoming clear that costs of administering the complex network of apartheid laws and institutions were increasing (Thompson 1990:221); trying to accommodate the tiny Chinese community was costly and increasingly irrelevant in the larger scheme of priorities and concerns. National economic interests dictated that Japanese and Chinese be treated better than other 'non-whites'. There was also the practical consideration that most people could not distinguish between Japanese and Chinese, and the Japanese has already been granted official 'honorary white' status. The tiny Chinese population were not seen to pose any serious threats to continued white supremacy; furthermore, they had been quite successful in their campaigns to convince whites of their 'civilisation' and respectability. The Chinese South Africans were educated, law-abiding, hard-working members of society. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the white opposition and liberal media brought to bear increasing social and political pressures. As a result, during the last years of apartheid the state attempted, several times, to legally redefine the Chinese as 'white' in order to address some of the contradictions of the permit-based exemption system. These attempts failed because the Chinese community, while happy to receive concessions, refused to become 'white'.

The Chinese South African strategies throughout the apartheid years, to quietly accept concessions and distance themselves from the larger political struggle against apartheid, is mirrored in the actions of the Chinese in Mississippi, who actively campaigned to be re-classified from 'black' to 'white'. Similarly, the Egyptians in the US experienced shifting identities and, at crucial times, distanced themselves from Black Americans. Morsy's essay on the classification of Egyptians in the US focuses on the historical contingency and the social construction of their societal identity. He examines, specifically, US racial categorisation and foreign policy as these affected Egyptians'

decisions to, at times, stress their national identity or religious affiliations over identification as Africans or Arabs, or with Black Americans (Morsy 1996:178). Whereas Egyptian students in the 1960s once identified with ‘blacks’ during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, Morsy explains that: “New immigrants who want to succeed in racially stratified U.S. society may well try to distance themselves from socially debased categories” and opportunistically detach themselves from African and Arab identity (Morsy 1996:189). The Mississippi Chinese, the Egyptians in the US, and the Chinese South Africans – all tiny minority communities – made practical and strategic choices based on their circumstances, often severely delimited by states’ racial policies.

Members of the Chinese community were actors in the construction of their identities. Their self-definition as ‘apolitical’ notwithstanding, this chapter provided ample evidence of the almost constant activities of the various regional and national Chinese associations and individuals ‘fighting’ for increased rights or privileges and better treatment for their community. That they were not visibly active in the larger struggle against apartheid should not necessarily lead to conclusions that they were supportive of the white government. The rationale for accepting concessions and their arguments that other communities, given the same opportunities, would have done likewise are corroborated by the examples of the Mississippi Chinese and the Egyptians in the US. These were survival mechanisms. That they stopped short of accepting legal reclassification as ‘white’ indicates not only that the Chinese were grounded in a broader ethical framework, but also that their leaders had a great deal of political savvy.

Their sojourner and settler ancestors argued for rights on the basis that they were members of an equal, friendly nation. A later generation argued that they were upstanding, law-abiding, long-standing residents of South Africa. While the Egyptians of Morsy’s study had the options of three circles of associations – the Arab, the African, and the Muslim (Morsy 1996:182) – overseas Chinese, including those here in South Africa, had China. The power of their belief in a mythical great China and their membership in this lofty, superior heritage and the related construction of the Chinese

South African identity helped them survive the racial discrimination of both the segregation and apartheid eras in South Africa with their heads held high. Whites could relate to, respect, and even admire this tenacity to hold on to their cultural and ethnic heritage. Their Chineseness motivated them to aspire to better, higher social position and to overcome the shame and humiliation of being treated, officially, as lesser. At the very core of many of their arguments for differential treatment was the argument that they were members of a 5000-year-old superior civilisation. The next section will examine, in greater detail, the linkages between the Chinese South Africans and China, both real and imagined.