INTRODUCTION

During the course of this research project, many have asked why a Korean American was doing research on Chinese people in South Africa. I selected this topic for a number of reasons. As a 1.5 generation (Park 1999) Korean American, I had both personal and intellectual interest in how the Chinese identified themselves. In the US, since the civil rights movement, Asians in America have claimed their rights as citizens and become a part of the nation (see Tajima 1996; Takaji 1996; and Takaki 1996, Lowe 1996, Zia 2000). Asian American identities and allegiances are not without contest. In fact, Asian Americans are still often viewed as foreigners (Lowe 1996, Takaki 1996, Kibria 1999, Tuan 1999, Nishi 1999, Louie 2004). The recent scholarly and media attention on transnational Chinese has led to a backlash against Americans of Chinese descent as the conservatives question Chinese-American loyalties (see Hu-deHart 1999, Wong 1999, Ong 1999, and Dirlik 1999). However, on a personal level, I have seldom felt any great conflicts between my ethnic heritage as a Korean, my national identity as an American, and my cultural identity as a blend of the two. I am comfortable with my concentric circles of identity (Smith 1986, Morsy 1996). Born in Seoul, my family immigrated to Los Angeles in 1969. I married a black American, am the mother of a bi-racial child, and speak Spanish better than Korean. These overlapping circles of identity intersect to create my complex, blended, multiple, and layered identity. This sense of ‘hybrid’ identity (Hall 1992a and 1992b) is not uncommon for someone from southern California, which Tajima (1996) refers to as an Asian American ‘homeland’ and comfort zone, or indeed any of the other major metropolitan areas of the US (see also Cornell and Hartmann 1998:50). My residence in Africa over the past decade, in Johannesburg, and for three years, in Nairobi, adds further international layers to my identity, but I remain, in my self-definition, a Korean American.

The situation in South Africa, at the outset of this research project, appeared to be starkly different. Having arrived in Johannesburg in early 1995, not a full year after the first democratic elections, I encountered several multi-generational Chinese South Africans who had never been to China, did not speak any Chinese, and yet insisted on that they were ‘Chinese’, with no reference whatsoever to South Africa, the land of their birth and their ostensible citizenship. The lack of a strong South African identity
seemed understandable in the context of South Africa’s recently-ended apartheid history. Nevertheless, I was perplexed at the lack of any evidence of pride in the peaceful transition or the general euphoria that I witnessed, all around me, at the time. Could it be that because they did not participate in the struggle they felt no ownership of the ‘new South Africa’? How did their experiences during apartheid colour their identities and sense of ‘home’. How could I understand and explain Chinese identity in South Africa, in sociological terms? Through a more comprehensive, in-depth examination of this small, minority immigrant community – one with which I had much in common – I hoped to shed some light on how and why Chinese South Africans identified themselves as they did, as ‘Chinese’. In doing so, I hoped to increase my own understanding of the diversity of the new South Africa, as this had become my home, temporarily. On another level, research on the Chinese in South Africa, a community that had received little scholarly attention in the past, meant I might be able to contribute something new and interesting to the existing body of work on overseas Chinese and identity construction.

Research questions and secondary aims

In my initial conceptualisation of this dissertation project, my primary research question was: “Where is home for Chinese South Africans?” Having come to the early conclusion that social identities are constructed and that Chinese South Africans had multiple identities, the research question underwent some changes. The set of research questions addressed herein include the following:

- How do Chinese South Africans identify themselves?
- How were their identities constructed?
- Who were the principal social actors engaged in the construction of their identities?
- What factors influenced the particular formations of their ethnic and national identities? and
- How did apartheid, in particular, influence Chinese South African identities?

Identities shift and change over time. Identities are forged in specific historic periods so it was important to both periodise the findings and examine them contextually. It
proved immensely helpful to compare and contrast the experiences and identities of South African-born Chinese to ‘overseas’ Chinese elsewhere. It became apparent early in the course of this research that several social actors and specific issues played critical roles in the construction of Chinese South African identities. Amongst the most prominent actors were the South African state/s before, during, and after apartheid and the Chinese states, in their various changing forms. In a narrow sense, states define borders, controlling immigration and the treatment of these immigrants (Marx 1998, Wong 1999). More broadly, they affect the boundaries of citizenship and identity, belonging versus exclusion, the rise and fall of nationalism, and ultimately, allegiance (Smith 1986 and 1991, Marx 1998, Lowe 1996, Takaki 1993 and 1996, Omi and Winant 1994). States exerted (and continue to exert) a primary role in shaping environments within which identities formed, they, too, were actors in the process of identity construction. State projects of cultural and national citizenship were contested from within, by opposition parties, and by the subjects themselves (Lowe 2004, Posel 1991 and 2001, Marx 1998). On another less tangible but important level, the way in which governments visualised who would belong (and who would not belong) as South Africa was being formed – the imaginaries of the South African state (Marx 1998, Lowe 1996, Takaki 1996) – and myths of a ‘great China’ (G.Wang 1991and 2000, L. Wang and G. Wang 1998a and 1998b, Tu 1994, Tan 1986) were also significant in shaping identities. Consequently, the role of the various states became a key focus of the thesis.

Identity formation of a miniscule minority community within a racially diverse and racially divided South Africa was fraught with challenges. I wanted to discover how the Chinese constructed their identities (Barth 1969, Nagel 1994, Louie 2004). Did they work collaboratively with any other non-white ethnic groups in their struggle for better treatment (Gomes da Cunha 1998, Grueso, Rosero and Escobar 1998, Brah 1992)? How did they co-exist with the majority blacks and the whites in power? And what happened to their Chinese culture over the generations in South Africa? Had their Chineseness become merely symbolic (Gans 1979, Waters 1990)? Shifting views and definitions of the Chinese during the apartheid years – from foreigner, ‘Asiatic’, and second-class citizen to ‘honorary white’ – complicated the constructions of identity for the Chinese South Africans. The arrival of new Chinese immigrants after a prior ban on
Chinese immigration and the implementation of post-apartheid legislation added further complexities to apartheid-era constructions of Chinese South African identities. Finally, South Africa’s delayed entry into the ‘global era’ introduced yet another set of challenges to existing Chinese South African identities. These issues are explored in the thesis.

The secondary aim of this research was to add to the understanding of identity formation and identity issues of ethnic minorities in South Africa in light of comparative work on similar communities elsewhere. What factors impact on the strengthening or weakening of ethnic versus national identity? How long does it take to ‘become’ a South African – South African, not in the sense of legal citizenship, but in terms of identity, allegiance and loyalty? Has globalisation challenged the state's control over the permeability of borders and citizenship reducing its power to define and delimit the identities of its people? This study of the Chinese South African community will not only answer these questions about the South African case, but should, I believe, shed light on constructions of identities in other nations and amongst other ethnic groups.

**Literature review**

The presence of Chinese in South Africa from the time of Dutch settlement at the Cape in the 17th century has generally been ignored in scholarly works. The tiny size of the Chinese community and its limited impact on the political, economic, and social life of South Africa can partly explain its absence. Harris (1997) notes that this neglect is compounded by an essentially white-dominated South African historiography.

Prior to the 1990s, few works included the Chinese (Campbell PC 1923, Reeves JA 1954, Levy N 1982, Richardson P 1982, Armstrong JC 1986, Pineo 1985, Pan 1990). The majority of these focused specifically on the importation of 63,695 indentured Chinese labourers to work in the gold mines of the Transvaal between 1904-1911. These histories focus on various features of the ‘Transvaal Experiment’ including: international mining capital and the Transvaal’s economy; the complex post Anglo-Boer War crisis that necessitated the introduction of Chinese labour; the nature of the...
importation, employment, and repatriation policies; and the impact of the controversy surrounding the Chinese labourers on British and South African party politics. However, none of these studies focuses on the “more overtly human or individual elements” (Richardson 1982:189) of the Chinese labour experiment. These indentured Chinese miners were often thought to be the ancestors of the present-day Chinese South Africans. Callinicos (1981) in a brief chapter on the conditions of the Chinese mineworkers dispels this myth (in Harris 1997:320).

Of the works cited above, two (Pan 1990 and Pineo 1985) are general studies of overseas Chinese and include chapters on the Chinese in South Africa. Pineo’s work focuses on the Chinese diaspora in the Indian Ocean and identifies Mauritius as a platform for the immigration and emigration of overseas Chinese in the region for many decades. Chinese from China and South East Asia travelled to Port Louis; from there, many migrated to other destinations in Africa, including Mozambique and South Africa. With the exception of Richardson’s work, all those cited focus on the Chinese only briefly, usually in a single chapter, providing a cursory historical glimpse of the early Chinese in South Africa. In the scholarly material this gap remained unfilled for many decades.

During World War Two, media coverage, particularly in the liberal press, pleaded the case of the Chinese in South Africa. They argued for better treatment of South African Chinese, who were allies in the war (Freidgut AJ 1943, Moore AS 1942). This type of media coverage served as a precursor to the overwhelming national attention received by the Chinese community in the 1970s (see The Star, Sunday Times, and Rand Daily Mail). In 1970 alone, there were over sixty articles, letters to the editor, editorials and cartoons1 in the English language press depicting the controversy over the treatment of Chinese in South Africa.

The vast majority of these articles lamented the continued exclusion of Chinese from white crèches, schools, sporting events, and other amenities. Most of these articles mention the small size of the community – at the time, around 8,000-strong. The white

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1 Examples of some of these can be seen in Chapter Two.
press lauded the Chinese community as unobtrusive, of high calibre, well-disciplined, gentle, law-abiding, hard-working, intelligent, Christian, responsible, sensitive, refined, and cultured; in short, they were viewed as model citizens. They all spoke admiringly of the Chinese community’s ancient and rich civilisation. They argued that there were simply no political or economic reasons for the continuing discrimination against the Chinese; they posed absolutely no threat to white South Africa. Furthermore, the impossibility of distinguishing between the Japanese who were officially classed as ‘honorary whites’ and the Chinese who were legally ‘non-white’ was viewed as ludicrous and cited as yet another reason to include the Chinese as ‘whites’. The efforts to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese and exclude Chinese were described in one newspaper as “petty apartheid gone mad” (*Rand Daily Mail*, 7 July 1970).

The controversy over the tiny Chinese population continued to surface throughout the 1970s, due, in part, to the growing social acceptance of Chinese by whites in South Africa. Tony Stirling wrote, however, that, “Many ardent Nationalists would view open acceptance of Chinese in the White community as a crack in the granite wall of apartheid” (*Sunday Times*, 20 April 1975). In fact, it would appear that the Chinese, however inadvertently, were slowly chipping away at the logic of apartheid through their very acceptance amongst whites.

Another ‘fan’ and advocate of the Chinese people in South Africa, Father Michael Tuohy spent over 36 years in dedicated service to the Chinese community in South Africa. His dedication to this tiny community continued even beyond death. Upon his passing, per his request, Father Tuohy was buried in the Chinese cemetery in Newclare. He wrote an unpublished manuscript entitled “The Chinese Apostolate” (1987) which is filed in the Catholic History Bureau at the University of the Witwatersrand. A personal account of his interaction with the Chinese communities of Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg, the manuscript contains interesting information not found elsewhere. However, the work suffers from an essentialist and primordial view of the Chinese. For example, he writes:

> After nearly 30 years’ association with the Chinese people in Johannesburg, I am still fascinated by them. Four thousand years of culture and civilisation have seeped down into their characters and personalities. There is a certain
refinement, a certain sensitivity, a courtesy and thoughtfulness which I have not found in other national or ethnic groups. In short, they are a superior people (Tuohy 1987:20).

The 1960s and 1970s, the first two decades with significant numbers of Chinese university graduates, witnessed a rise in writings by Chinese South Africans about Chinese South Africans. Unfortunately, most of these were either unpublished student theses or articles in Chinese community newsletters, limiting their readerships to the scholarly community and the Chinese in South Africa. Two of the theses (A Song 1989 and GL King 1974) focused specifically on Chinese religious practices and beliefs. Many of the others (T Gin 1963, E Wing King 1964) focused on the ‘loss’ of Chinese culture or the problematic position of and discrimination against Chinese in South Africa (RF Ford 1972, L Changfoot 1982, M Kim Sing 1964, 1965). In the writings on culture, religious practices, and beliefs there is, again, a clear tendency toward essentialism. Chinese culture is viewed as something tangible and unchanging; Chinese South Africans, through these essentialist lenses, have ‘lost’ their Chineseness over time, becoming Christianised and westernised.

In the late 1970s, the state subsidised a sociological research project conducted under the auspices of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on the “attitudes of the white population group towards the Chinese minority group” (L Smedley and DC Groenwald 1976). The investigation, according to Harris, was prompted by the “growing cordiality between the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC) and South Africa due to the establishment of trade relations in a climate of international sanctions against both countries” (Harris 1997:320). This study focuses on the discrepancies between the official/formal attitudes and the unofficial/informal attitudes as well as the ambiguities within the official/formal attitudes. Smedley and Groenwald conclude that Chinese are generally socially accepted by white society; however, laws still treat the community as ‘non-white’.

Linda Human (nee Smedley), in her various works following this study (Smedley 1978a, 1978b, 1980a, 1980b and Human 1984) draws on the HSRC research as well as further research she conducted for her PhD thesis on the Chinese. Most of her works
are largely descriptive, focusing on a brief history of the Chinese community, their status under apartheid laws, and the Chinese community of the period. She writes about their culture (acculturated to white) and values (still traditional); education (amongst the highest in the country), occupation (gradually moving from shopkeepers to professionals), and income; family life; housing (90% live amongst whites); associations and social contacts (increasingly with whites); and religion (Christian). While informative, her studies are dated and her conclusions are flawed, reflective of some of the sociological trends of the time. Discourses of assimilation and acculturation, marginality, and anomie dominate. For example, she concludes that the discrepancies between the official/formal attitudes and the informal/popular attitudes have created a marginal Chinese subculture. She claims that while the Chinese are increasingly socially and culturally assimilated and acculturated with white South Africans, they desire to maintain their own ethnic identity. She also writes that relations with other ‘non-white’ ethnic groups are strained, exacerbated by Chinese failure to unite with other groups in co-operative political action. As a result, she argues the Chinese South Africans exhibit sociological marginality and psychological anomie.

Melanie Yap in her “Portrait of South Africa’s Chinese” (Rand Daily Mail, February 1977) responds to the original HSRC study and makes perhaps the first ever attempt to educate South Africans about her Chinese South African community and their occupation of the interstitial spaces between white and black. She points out, like Smedley and Groenwald, that while Chinese have a high degree of assimilation and social acceptance amongst whites, they are still officially ‘non-white’. She states that over 90% of Chinese, excluding those in Port Elizabeth\(^2\), live in white areas and 60% of high school graduates go on for tertiary education; however, Chinese doctors earn 70% of what their white counterparts earn and they cannot hold managerial positions. As a result, many professional Chinese emigrate. Writing for a newspaper article, Yap is, by necessity and definition, brief and somewhat superficial. She also falls into the essentialist camp, arguing that Chineseness has been diluted as Chinese South Africans became westernised. She states that the Chinese community, however, has managed to

\(^2\) The majority of Chinese residents of Port Elizabeth live in Kabega Park, the only declared and established Chinese group area in South Africa. See Chapters Two and Four for more detail about group areas and residential assimilation with whites.
maintain their ‘traditional’ Chinese values. She emphasises their interstitional position in South Africa:

Chinese have always shunned publicity and steered clear of political involvement because of their precarious existence in the no-man’s land between White and Black … insecurity and existence on privilege, rather than by right, remains the way of life for Chinese South Africans (Yap 1977).

Lily Changfoot’s autobiography, one of the few published works by a Chinese South African, picks up on this in-betweeness of the Chinese South Africans. She writes: “As a South African Chinese, I was sandwiched between Black and White” (Changfoot 1982:87). She highlights the tensions between the Chinese and the Indians, who occupied the same middle spaces as traders and general dealers to the poor whites, ‘coloureds’, and blacks, in addition to the ambivalence of blacks toward the Chinese. She, too, argues that the Chinese have been left out of South African history.

In the 1990s, a few scholars and lay scholars attempted to fill the gaps of South African historiography and include the Chinese. Harris (1995, 1998a, 1998b) and Yap and Man (1996) have attempted to avoid the two divergent but prevailing criticisms of earlier works on overseas Chinese historiography. These involved, on the one hand, treating Chinese as mere subjects of greater forces, and, on the other hand, sinocentricity (Harris 1997). They focused, instead, on establishing the characteristics of the Chinese themselves.

Karen Harris, a historian currently based at the University of Pretoria, has attempted to (re)place Chinese within South African historiography. She has focused on specific episodes of local Chinese history, such as their participation in Gandhi’s passive resistance campaign in the early part of the 20th century (Harris 1996) or on the Chinese merchants on the Rand between 1850-1910 (Harris 1995). Harris carried out comparative studies (Harris and Pieke 1997 and Harris and Ryan 1997), and generally concentrated on the Chinese communities “interstitial” position within South Africa (Harris 1998a and Harris 1998b).

Melanie Yap, a journalist by training, and Dianne Leong Man, a university librarian, published Colour, Confusion, and Concessions in 1996. The book was the result of
fourteen years of archival and community research carried out under the auspices of the South African Chinese History Project started by the Transvaal Chinese Association (TCA). The book was “intended to reflect the ironies, the determination, the hardships as well as the laughter in the stories of the people who make up the Chinese community of South Africa” (TCA newsletter, no. 71, 26 September 1991). It is an epic and comprehensive record of the Chinese in South Africa, filled with details of regional developments and lists of individual contributions of community members. The book is, as stated by the authors, “not a history of South Africa, but a somewhat introspective account of the Chinese in South Africa” (Yap and Man 1996:xv). The book has been criticised for being overly concerned with a detailed record; making little attempt to trace the historiography that preceded the publication of the book; failing to locate the story within broader South African, Chinese and international contexts; making some historical errors; and generally failing to present a more nuanced and critical picture (Harris 1997). Nevertheless, the authors accomplished an impressive feat of chronicling a community’s history. In their epilogue, “In Retrospect”, they write,

The change from White minority rule to Black majority rule has left the Chinese in the same no-man’s land they have always occupied between the different racial groups. Although they have been given the franchise, the outstanding question remains whether or not the Chinese, so long perceived as ‘foreigners’ in the land of their birth, will finally be accepted as equal citizens (Yap and Man 1996:435).

The works of Linda Human, Karen Harris, and Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man have been invaluable to this research project. However, as mentioned earlier, Human’s writings are now dated and utilise sociological theories now generally discredited. Harris and Yap and Man have written histories and succeeded in finally (re)placing Chinese within South African historiography. However, there is little analysis about identity and identity formation in any of their works; they are, after all, histories and not sociological analyses. As community historians, Yap and Man, as the critics have said, do tend toward the middle road and often avoid some of the more controversial elements of their history in favour of appeasing the community. While they are to be admired for the tremendous feat they undertook, particularly in attempting to locate Chinese who often disappeared in official documentation, they are not, nor do they ever

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1 To be further discussed in the following theory section.
profess to being, scholars. Theirs is a community history and as such, they fail to make more nuanced, objective, and critical assessments of the story they weave. They also fall into the essentialist trap when discussing Chinese culture. Human, Harris, and Yap and Man nevertheless provide the only extant and invaluable secondary materials on Chinese South Africans; their collective works formed the historical basis for my research. My goal, herein, is not to repeat their work but to examine, in detail, questions about Chinese South African place, position, and identities within the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. There will be some inevitable overlap in some of the periods and events covered by these authors. Yap and Man end their book with a question about Chinese South African belonging; I attempt to answer their question and examine, more broadly, how Chinese South African identities have been shaped by apartheid, by China, and through the agency of the Chinese themselves.

Chapter content
Chapter One is based primarily on the secondary materials and examines the history of the Chinese in South Africa up to the apartheid era. In the first section, I focus on the pre-1870s Chinese convicts, slaves, artisans, and indentured labourers, paying particular attention to the indentured mineworkers on the ‘Transvaal Experiment’. The second section focuses on the ancestors of today’s South African-born Chinese South Africans. This chapter seeks to prove that even from the earliest periods of Chinese immigration to South Africa, the Chinese were engaged in efforts to shape very particular images of themselves, often in response to the treatment they received from the South African government and early white settlers. These early efforts to mould a specific Chinese identity in South Africa form the foundations for later efforts to construct Chinese South African identities. The historical outline contained in Chapter One also identifies the principal social actors and some of the key factors relevant to Chinese South African identity construction.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the role of the state on shaping identities. In Chapter Two I focus on the impact of the South African state, particularly in terms of its foreign and trade relations, on the shifting views and treatment of Chinese in the country. The Chinese were affected by apartheid restrictions as ‘non-whites’; however, over time, the
Chinese community gradually received concessions and privileges and came to be perceived, unofficially, as ‘honorary white’. This chapter traces the shifts in the perceptions and treatment of Chinese by the state and white society and examines the roles of the media, the political opposition, and the Chinese community in contesting the shifting identities of Chinese South Africans during the apartheid era.

Chapter Three shifts the focus onto China – both the Chinese state and the myth of a ‘great China’ – and their roles in influencing Chinese South African identities. As indicated earlier, the first Chinese South Africans I encountered identified themselves as ‘Chinese’. This chapter explores the how and why of Chinese South Africans’ sustained links, both real and imaginary, to their distant Chinese homeland. It examines Chinese South Africans’ continued contacts with China via links to family and village as well as other travel to the region. The chapter looks at official Chinese state policies and attitudes toward overseas Chinese in general and focuses on the issues of nationalism and anti-communism in South Africa. It explores the confused relationship between the Chinese Consul-General in South Africa and the Chinese South African community. Finally, the chapter explores the importance of ‘felt’ connections to an increasingly imagined, mythical China on identity formation.

Chapters Four and Five explore some of the ‘results’ of shifting Chinese South African identities and introduces the reader to three identity cohorts of Chinese South Africans. Chapter Four links their growing acceptance in white society and their unofficial ‘honorary whiteness’ to their economic upward mobility. By the mid-1970s, many Chinese South Africans were sending their children to white schools followed by a university education. They had moved into white residential areas, made an occupational shift from shopkeeper to professional, and were increasingly socialising with whites. This chapter outlines these shifts in detail and makes the argument that despite their ‘whitening’ the Chinese South Africans are both unable and unwilling to completely become identified as ‘white’.

In Chapter Five, I examine the culture and ethnicity of the Chinese South Africans. In their essentialist view, they claim that they are ‘losing’ their Chinese culture. As
evidence, they report that they no longer speak any Chinese language and they are now all Christians. I find, alternatively, that they have selectively retained aspects of Chinese culture – certain traditions and values – that have, over time, taken on different purposes and meanings to them, as a community.

In Chapters Six and Seven we move forward, into the post-apartheid era in South Africa. This era has brought forth new challenges to Chinese South African identities in the form of new Chinese immigration to the country and official Chinese exclusion from affirmative action policies. Chapter Six addresses the issues of exclusion, democratisation, and globalisation and the impact of these on Chinese South African identities. Chapter Seven examines the new Chinese immigrants and the special challenges they present to the South African-born Chinese community and identities. Herein, I suggest that the new Chinese immigrants might form additional identity cohorts of Chinese South Africans. Chapter Seven also reports on the findings of the research on Chinese South African emigrants – those who have left South African and adopted new homes elsewhere. This last chapter finally seeks to ‘place’ these Chinese South African emigrants and the new Chinese immigrants to South African within the larger body of recent research on overseas Chinese.