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Shifting Chinese South African identities in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THREE STRANDS OF IDENTITY

Introduction

This research project is concerned primarily with social identity in its broader sense, and more specifically with racial, ethnic, and national forms of identities of the South African-born Chinese South Africans during the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. The theories used in this study are intended to provide the tools with which to explore the intersections and possible tensions between these three strands of identity. The key theoretical assumption on which this study is based is that identities are socially constructed and are contested between and amongst individuals, groups, and states (Barth 1969; Nagel 1986,1994, 1998; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Waters 1990; Nash 1989; Smith 1986; Louie 2004). I also assume that identities change over time and across contexts (Waters 1990, Tuan 1999). Given these assumptions the study will focus on the ways in which identities are constructed; locate the principal social actors engaged in identity construction; identify the primary issues or factors affecting the construction; and name the primary building materials.

This theoretical framework will begin by providing some key definitions, laying out our understanding of ethnicity, race, and nation as they apply to identity. The second section will take up a brief explanation of some of the pre-constructionist approaches utilised by social scientists, including: the still-influential assimilationist school, primordialism, and circumstantialism. I will illustrate some of the problems with these theories and examine aspects or alternative ways of interpreting these theories that might prove useful in understanding ethnic, racial, and national identity. The main body of the chapter will examine the constructionist approach to questions of ethnicity, race, and nationalism, with special reference to diasporic Chinese communities. Discussions of the Chinese South African community must acknowledge that all three aspects of identity are relevant, diverging and coalescing under changing historical conditions.

I will look specifically at the key actors in social identity construction and the key construction materials. Our analysis must take into account, for example, the fact that the state plays a prominent role in establishing the context within which identities are constructed; it is itself, a participant in identity construction (Omi and Winant 1994,

Marx 1998, Louie 2004). The role of myth is one of the principal components of identity construction, especially as regards overseas Chinese identities (Tu 1991/94, Wu 1991/94, Louie 2004, L. Wang 1998, G. Wang 2000, Ong 1999) and will also be examined herein.

The final section will attempt a brief summary of some of the literature on globalisation and transnationalism as they affect identities. Globalisation presents challenges to states' exclusive powers over defining borders and citizenship; consequently, states' abilities to command national loyalties also face challenges. In relation to these challenges, globalisation affects the construction of increasingly complex, hybridised, blended, syncretic, multiple, and constantly shifting identities. This section will also explore some of the current (and contested) ways in which the scholarly community views and categorises overseas Chinese in such globalised settings.

Definitions of 'race', ethnicity, and national identity

Before attempting to explore ethnic, racial, and national identity construction, we need to clarify some definitions. 'Race' and ethnicity are often seen as interchangeable; however, they refer to distinct but sometimes overlapping phenomena. Ethnicity and nationalism are also often confused; again, while they sometimes overlap, they are not the same. This section will attempt to outline the areas of overlap and distinction in these three concepts that form the critical core of this thesis.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity, in sociological terms, refers to a particular way of defining others and ourselves. Weber was the only one of the classical sociological theorists who tackled the definition of ethnicity directly. He stated that ethnic groups are "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (Weber 1986:389 in Cornell and Hartmann 1998:16). While the notion of common descent, real or assumed, was central to Weber's definition of ethnicity, Cornell and Hartmann point out that in the last several decades many social theorists began to move away from the notion of kinship. These social theorists equated

ethnicity with shared culture; an ethnic group became identified as a group of persons distinguished by language, religion, or other patterns of behaviour and belief (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:17). For example, a recent edition of a widely used textbook in the United States defines an ethnic group as "a group of people who are generally recognized based on social or cultural characteristics" (Farley 1995:6 in Cornell and Hartmann 1998:17). Such a definition reveals many ambiguities: any number of social groups shares social or cultural characteristics. In addition, these latter definitions fail to address that fact that while distinctive cultural practices have declined over time, the sense of ethnic distinctiveness – or identity – has not.

For the purposes of this study, I have adopted a definition of ethnicity in the Weberian tradition. An ethnic group is defined as a self-conscious group within larger society that "has real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Schermerhorn 1978:12 in Cornell and Hartmann 1998:19). Again, claims of kinship, common history, or even culture *need not be founded in fact*; often these elements have more symbolic power than practical effect on group behaviour. Assigned identity – the way outsiders see us – can be a powerful force in shaping our own self-concepts.

Race

While most contemporary scholars dismiss the notion of race as a biological category that can be applied to separate groups, race continues to wield enormous power as a social category. Omi and Winant point out that even as social theorists have rejected the biological basis of race most of them have adopted one of three flawed paradigms based on ethnicity, class, and nation to understand race and race relations; these are flawed in that they neglect race *per se* (Omi and Winant 1994:11). Omi and Winant claim that two contradictory and opposing temptations lie within the existing paradigms. On the one hand the temptation is to think of race as an essence – something fixed, concrete, and objective; on the other hand is the temptation to imagine race as a mere illusion, a pure ideological construct (Omi and Winant 1994:54).

For the purposes of this study, I have adopted Omi and Winant's definition of race as:

> A concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies… the concept of race invokes biologically bases human characteristics (so-called phenotypes) … the selection of these particular human features for the purposes of *racial signification* is always and necessarily a social and historical process (Omi and Winant 1994:55; italics added).

In other words, racial categories are not natural but are "created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994:55) by human action. They are social products based on physical characteristics to which particular meanings are attached; these change over time, linked to historical processes and the evolution of hegemony.

Cornell and Hartman make some further distinctions, which I find useful for this theoretical framework. They point out that race typically has its origins in assignment, in the classifications that outsiders make, whereas ethnicity more frequently originates in the assertions of group members. Secondly, the designation of race is, in and of itself, an assertion of the power to define the 'other'; race and power have historically been tightly intertwined. Finally, racial designation typically implies inferiority (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:27-29). Historically, 'white' has been seen as normative, while all the groups of 'other' are assigned and judged against this 'neutral' and generally unexamined norm (Frankenberg 1993).

In South Africa, perhaps more than in any other country in the world, race has been the most powerful and persistent boundary; what Posel calls the "critical and overriding faultline" (Posel 2001:52). Leading architects of apartheid adopted a bioculturally mixed (Gilroy 2000 as cited in Posel 2001) definition of race wherein 'race' had both cultural and biological markers. Posel argues that:

> It was this hybrid conceptualisation of race that lay at the core of apartheid's racial project, and which enabled a practice of racial differentiation far more insidious and tenacious in its grip on everyday life than might otherwise have been the case (Posel 2001:53).

She refers here to the dangers of 'race' becoming a matter of 'common sense':

> Closely linked to this confidence in the authority of everyday experience as the site of racial judgement was the idea that racial differences were typically obvious and uncontroversial (Posel 2001:56).

Her observations are particularly useful to this study. While both race and ethnicity are commonly held to be 'natural', common-sensical categories, in fact, both are elastic, politically and historically contingent, social constructions.

Nationalism

Nationalism is commonly based on ethnic ties, but it is distinct from ethnicity. Anthony Smith criticises the view that 'nation' is a purely modern phenomena (Hall 1992b), giving historical evidence of the existence, in the ancient world, of parallels to the idea of national identity and character (Smith 1986:11-12). He also criticises the primordial view that nations and ethnic communities are 'natural' units of history and integral elements of human existence based on primordial ties of language, religion, race, ethnicity, and territory. National identity in the standard, western model, he suggests, involves some sense of political community, some common institutions, a single code of rights and duties for its members (or citizenship), territory, and a common culture and civic ideology (Smith 1991:9-11). He contrasts this with the non-western 'ethnic' model of nation, which emphasises a community of birth and native culture which views nation as a "fictive 'super-family'" (Smith 1991:12). Combining the common elements of these two definitions, he states that a nation is:

> A named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members (Smith 1991:14).

This latter definition is adopted herein. As with ethnicity, typically nationalist claims of groups are based on "assertions of peoplehood and common cultural heritage and on an appeal to the past, to blood ties, and to shared understandings and practices that set them apart from other groups" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:36). Again, these can be real or assumed. Connor argues convincingly that the power of nations comes not from any objective criteria, but from the *felt ties* that members have to one another:

> The essence of the nation is a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all non-members in a most vital way… what people perceive in the group's separate origin and evolution is an important ingredient of national psychology" (Connor 1993 in Hughey 1998:44).

In other words "the sense of kinship that infuses the nation", the 'felt' history is what gives nation its tremendous power (Conner 1998:44). Understanding the subjective power of nationalism and national identity will prove most valuable to examining the lasting power of Chineseness within the multi-generational Chinese South African community.

Perhaps most importantly, national identities, like race and ethnicity, are also social and political constructions: "national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and relation to representation" (Hall 1992b:292). National cultures and identities are constructed, 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). Anderson argues that nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism are all cultural artefacts (Anderson 1983:4).

Having clarified some of the key conceptual definitions of race, ethnicity, and national identity to be utilised below, we will now move on to discuss some of the pre-constructionist approaches to identity.

Pre-Constructionist Approaches

Assimilationist school

The question of whether Americans would ever lose their ethnic identities in the American 'melting pot' is, indirectly, one of the academic debates of interest and relevance to this thesis. The answers to this question have been divided between the 'assimilationist' and the 'pluralist' perspectives on ethnicity (Waters 1990, Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Assimilationists argued that for later generations of Americans, further removed in time from the original immigrants, ties to the ethnic group became increasingly less important and structural reasons for maintaining ethnic group solidarity declined leading to eventual assimilation into the majority group.[1] They based their theory on the assumption that ethnicity was based in social institutions. Gordon (1964), for example, argued that the ethnic group could not survive structural assimilation because once the social world of primary relationships – neighbourhood,

[1] The original 'melting pot or assimilationist theorists came from the Chicago School and were led by Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess. See also the works of Milton Gordon, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Andrew Greeley.

friendships, marriage – became ethnically heterogeneous, assimilation would proceed and ethnic groups would disappear (in Waters 1990:4-5). Pluralists, on the other hand, argued that ethnic assimilation was not inevitable and that various groups could and did maintain distinct ethnic communities and identification even into the third and fourth generations.

These debates were based, primarily, on studies of 'white ethnics' in the United States – immigrants who arrived from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Herbert Gans (1979) however, while most third generation white ethnics had indeed achieved structural assimilation by the 1970s and ethnic ties continued to wane, there was still a high degree of ethnic identification. He argued that ethnicity had become mostly *symbolic*. He interpreted *symbolic ethnicity* as a form of voluntary and individualistic identification, which did not conflict with other ways of life and was thus comfortably adopted by well-assimilated groups. Ethnicity became expressive – a leisure-time activity that involved the use of symbols. Waters (1990) corroborated Gans' work on symbolic ethnicity with her in-depth interviews with third and fourth generation 'white ethnics' in the late 1980s. These debates proved useful insofar as they addressed social processes experienced by 'white ethnics'; however, they proved problematic in their application to immigrant groups with clearly defined physical characteristics.

Because of structural and racial divisions in most societies, symbolic ethnicity is not an option for 'racialised' ethnics (Portes and Rumbaut 1996), such as the Chinese in South Africa. In cases such as these, where an element of 'racial' marking accompanies ethnic identity, processes of 'straight-line assimilation' of the melting pot theorists and symbolic ethnicity are not viable options. Portes and Rumbaut identify an alternative process; in their case studies of Haitian, Cuban, Vietnamese, Sikh, and Mexican communities in various locations across the United States they identify patterns of *selective acculturation* and *segmented assimilation.* They use the concept of straight-line assimilation to highlight the opposite in their case studies. 'Selective acculturation' refers to a process wherein subjects selectively adopt certain aspects of their 'host' culture, while keeping others of their 'homeland' culture, based on their community's

resources. 'Segmented assimilation' refers to the differential levels of assimilation achieved by groups within a given community and between different ethnic communities.

'Straight-line assimilation' or what Lowe identifies as 'vertical, generational models' (Lowe 1991) are problematic because they ignore societal power dynamics and structural inequalities, usually based on race, that assign and ascribe 'thick' identities (Cornell and Hartmann 1998) to 'racialised' ethnics. In addition, these models assume a relationship between authenticity and assimilation, with the left 'homeland' as the place of origin. Vertical, generational models assume that the further one is removed from the homeland, the more assimilated one will become to the new host country; the flip side of this argument assumes that authenticity is lost as one becomes increasingly assimilated (Lowe 1991).

Theories such as Portes and Rumbaut's selective acculturation and segmented assimilation are better suited to explaining how Chinese South Africans have purposefully selected elements of their 'home' culture and elements of their adopted land to construct new identities (Portes and Rumbaut 1996:243-245). These theories point to the problematic nature of applying earlier assimilationist theories to racialised ethnics. They acknowledge the dynamics and structural nature of race and power as they affect ethnic and racial identities, and they recognise human agency in the construction of identity.

Primordialism and essentialism

Primordialism can be seen as an attempt to deal with the main flaw in assimilation theories – the deep and enduring aspects of ethnic identity. Primordial theories of ethnicity emphasised the primordial ties associated with physical affinity, a common language, common religion, and other cultural and historical commonalities; these 'primordial' bonds were thought to be more emotional rather than rational. Ethnicity, according to the primordialists, was thought to be an extension of pre-modern social bonds, such as kin or tribal ties, based on commonalities in physical and cultural characteristics associated with the place of origin. Ethnicity, then, was characterised by cultural distinctions involving such issues as language, dress, food, holidays, customs,

values, and beliefs. (Min 2002: 6). These notions of primordialism are still quite common in non-academic circles.

Popular ideas about Chinese culture tend to have a related, essentialist component. Chinese culture is often seen as static, measurable, and commodified; cultures as seen as being more or less 'authentic'. Some people are thought to have 'more' Chinese culture, while others (having 'lost' it) have 'less'. Lowe suggests that if we treat traditional cultural knowledge as a marker of cultural authenticity, we oversimplify and essentialise the notion of culture (Lowe 1991). In Louie's study of Chinese identity in China and the US, such habits of thought were commonplace; she found that both mainstream US society and her Chinese American subjects often questioned the 'authenticity' of their hybrid Chinese American culture. The problem, she explains, lies in the "vertical, generational models" of ethnicity, mentioned above. In the case of Chinese American culture: "…when compared to authentic Chinese culture, becomes something that is impure, diluted, and devolved … some are accused of being *jook sing* (hollow bamboo); others are viewed as bananas (yellow on the outside, white on the inside)" (Louie 2004:106).

While social scientists study ethnicity from social, situational, or rational points of view (Waters 1990:17) Waters argues that peoples' *beliefs* that racial or ethnic categories are biological, fixed attributes influence ethnic identity. She explains, furthermore, that the belief that ethnicity is biologically based acts as a constraint on the ethnic choices. In the United States, for example, she notes that whites enjoy a greater freedom in choices whereas those defined in 'racial' terms as 'non-whites' have much less choice because the identities of 'non-whites' are socially constrained or ascribed (Waters 1990:158-160).

Lavie and Swedenburg focus on racialised and socially constrained subjects, shifting the focus of analysis to margins, borders, and diasporas as sites of both dislocation and creative resistance. Their attempts to re-focus and de-centre the analysis, force a reconsideration of the meaning of 'essence'. They argue that as hybrid products from the margins work to "subversively appropriate and creolise master codes, decentering,

destabilising, and carnivalising dominant forms through 'strategic inflections' and 'reaccentuation'" (Mercer 1988: 57 in Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:9), even essence can become a social construction. In other words, essentialism can be (and has been) appropriated from the centre and utilised, in strategic ways, for the margin's recovery and healing (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:11-13). Brah cautions that any notion of ultimate essence that transcends historical and cultural boundaries is problematic. She, too, notes that 'dominated' groups often appeal to bonds of common cultural experience in order to mobilise their constituency; however, "by doing so, they may assert a seemingly essentialist difference" (Brah 1992:144). While some theorists are in favour of this "strategic essentialism" (Spivak and Fuss in Brah 1992), she argues that we must remain vigilant of the circumstances under which we affirm a particular collective experience so that it does not become an essentialist assertion of difference (Brah 1992:144).

Essentialism and primordialism, as theoretical concepts, are not particularly useful in helping us to understanding communities such as the Chinese in South Africa as they tend to operate on a 'deficit' model of culture raising issues of authenticity, as mentioned above. However, we see a great deal of both essentialism and primordialism in this study, not so much as a conceptual framework for analysis but as a social fact insofar as the Chinese South Africans tend to adopt essentialist explanations of their own positions. The research subjects hold essentialist and primordial understandings of Chinese culture; furthermore, their identities have been ascribed by the state based on essentialist assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, however, subjects' beliefs about their cultural, ethnic, and national identities wield tremendous emotional power. Primordialism remains important to this study insofar as the subjects' imbue their constructed identities with symbolic value. Furthermore, as indicated by Lavie and Swedenberg, Chinese South Africans, as a racialised, marginalised group have periodically appropriated and utilised essentialist notions in the constructions of their own Chinese South African identities.

Circumstantialism

Primordialists responded to the apparent failure of the assimilation model by emphasising the deeply rooted, enduring aspects of ethnic attachments and affiliations. However another, much larger group of social scientists focused on the practical uses of ethnicity to account for the persistence of ethnic and racial identities; these uses were derived from the circumstances and contexts in which ethnic and racial groups found themselves (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:56).

Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* challenged the idea of ethnic groups as primarily cultural groups and suggested that while shared culture continued to be important in some cases, members of ethnic groups were also linked by ties of interest (Glazer and Moynihan 1963, A.Cohen 1969,1974). The salience of ethnic identities changes with changing circumstances that alter their utility; any identity is potentially a resource or a handicap (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:57). This utilitarian logic is apparent in both individual and group behaviour. For example, ethnic ties can be used as the basis of collective political mobilisation or of claims to certain resources. According to the circumstantialists then, individuals and groups emphasise their own ethnic or racial identities when such identities are in some way advantageous to them; however, both identity and action are mediated, if not determined, by the circumstances and contexts in which individuals and groups find themselves. This last point is important because it suggests that ethnic and racial identities are not fixed and unchanging but rather fluid and contingent, responding to the needs of the situation or the moment.

Competition and conflict are at the core of most circumstantialist accounts. Amongst these are theories of ethnic or immigrant enclaves (Portes and Manning 1986) and middlemen minorities (Bonacich 1973) These theorists explain the resilience of ethnic communities as the result of specific economic positions and the absence of a smooth path of assimilation. Ethnic or racial boundaries are reinforced by limited economic opportunities faced by certain groups. Another group of theorists focus on competition between ethnic groups as the key to ethnicity. The contributors to the Olzak and Nagel's *Competitive Ethnic Relations* (1986) view competition theory as the

explanation of the persistence and resurgence of ethnicity. Competition theory, they argue, accounts for the tenacity of ethnic boundaries, the rise of spontaneous organised ethnic movements, and the demobilisation of ethnicity as a result of declining levels of competition. Ethnic loyalty is seen as a function of the degree to which one's ethnic affiliation provides a member with necessary and important resources (Stinchcombe 1986:97), and ethnic conflict is explained as competition between ethnic groups over limited resources and entitlements (James 1986:147).

One aspect of competition theory focuses on the strategic utilisation of ethnicity. For example, much has been written about the strategic political construction of identities in the US, particularly around pan-Asian American and Latino identities in the US (See Tajima 1996:263-264 and Padilla 1986:153-177). According to Padilla, Latino identity is a social product based on conscious and strategic use of a collective group identity based on an assessment of goals and options to obtain those goals – an "ethnic principle of organization" (Padilla 1996:167). Manifestations of Latino identity are operative within specific situational contexts; particular contexts determine whether an individual is Puerto Rican or Latino, depending on which is most appropriate or salient at a point in time. Studies of other countries and cultures reveal similar political constructions of ethnic identity. Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar focus their attentions on the black community of Colombia (Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar 1998:196-219) while da Cunha focuses on black community organising in Brazil (da Cunha 1998:220-251). In Britain, debates have focused on the contested definitions of 'black', which includes the African-Caribbean communities and sometimes, also, South Asian communities (Brah 1992:126-145).

Cornell and Hartmann provide a useful summary of the most important insights of circumstantialism provided by the competition- and conflict-oriented approaches to intergroup relations. Firstly, they show how intergroup conflict and competition often promote ethnic and racial boundaries, upsetting the assimiliationst process. They also emphasise the importance of power in ethnic and racial processes; for example, they point out that some groups have the power to make boundaries effective bases of social

stratification and collective action. Finally, they typically introduce a class dimension into the analysis of ethnicity (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:63-64).

As an explanatory tool for the case of the Chinese South Africans these theories fall short for a number of reasons. The circumstantialists cannot explain forms of ethnicity that are not based strictly on utilitarian interests and they have difficulty dealing with ethnicity and race in and of themselves (Omi and Winant 1994). The resilience of ethnicity is attributed "to something outside of the realm of the ethnic" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:65). In the extreme form, some of these scholars see ethnicity as a mere "myth", denying its significance and redefining it in explicit class or caste terms (Steinberg 1981). I would therefore agree with Cornell and Hartmann's critique of the circumstantialists in that: "Focusing solely on the circumstantial components of ethnicity ignores the personally felt power of many ethnic identities and the socialising process that often produces ethnicities" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:67). Nonetheless, competition theory proves useful in explaining certain aspects of the Chinese South African story, including their strategic use of their distinct ethnic identity to gain concessions from the South African government and the post-apartheid re-racialisation stemming from the implementation of affirmative action policies.

We are left, then with a need for a more complex understanding of ethnicity than the assimilationists, primordialists, or circumstantialists can offer. The assimilations school assumes that over generations and across time, all 'new ' ethnic groups will eventually merge, culturally and ethnically, into the dominant (white) group, and that ethnicity will eventually fade away. Primordialists see ethnicity as relatively fixed and unchanging, neglecting the social and historical conditions that generate, maintain, and transform ethnic and racial identities. On the other hand, circumstantialists see ethnicity as fluid and contingent and therefore ultimately ephemeral, ignoring the 'felt' power of many ethnic identities. Each provides valuable insights but fall short of an explanatory tool that recognises that ethnicity is both contingent on circumstance and therefore fluid, but also often experienced as primordial and therefore fixed. The constructionist approach, which will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter, provides such a tool.

Constructionist Approach

While identity may seem natural or given to the individual, to social scientists it is a social construction. Rather than assuming meanings or identities as historically fixed or culturally given, a constructivist theoretical approach analyses the heterogeneity and instability of meanings and identities; in other words, social conditions and social change drive identity shifts. Ethnicity, race, nation, and even difference, for the purposes of this study, are all seen as social constructions. Barth was one of the earliest social theorists to point out that both self-ascription and ascription by others were critical factors in the making of ethnic groups and identities. Ethnic identity is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations (Barth 1969, Nagel 1998:240). This thesis adopts this approach and assumes that groups are actively engaged in the construction and reconstruction of identities. Identities are created elaborated, and re-created in the interaction between circumstances and actions. These interactions are ongoing. Ethnic, racial, and national identities change over time as historical conditions change. Interactions between circumstances and groups form the core of these processes. As such, socially constructed models of ethnicity stress the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organisation, and action (Nagel 1998:237).

Ethnic identity involves the establishment of boundaries – determining who is a member and who is not – and designates which ethnic categories are available for individual identification at a particular time and place (Nagel 1998:239). Constructionists generally agree that ethnic identity, both its content and its boundaries, are historical products and subject to change or redefinition (Barth 1969, Nash 1989, Nagel 1994). Nagel argues that debates over the placement of ethnic boundaries and social worth of ethnic groups are central mechanisms in ethnic construction (Nagel 1998:239). Along these lines, I will show that Chinese South African identities have been fluid historical products, constructed through often-contested processes of defining both boundaries and content of ethnic identity. These have shifted both across time and during the individual life cycles of the subjects.

Just as debates around ethnic identity have grappled with questions of essentialism and constructionism, a similar set of questions have occupied those concerned with race. Theories about racial identity, particularly the aspects of historical contingency, will prove particularly important in explaining the identity shifts experienced by Chinese South African subjects. The importance of race, racism, and the invocation of racial categories throughout South Africa's history cannot be overstated. Recall Posel's quote about race being the "critical and overriding faultline" (Posel 2001:52) defining South African society. Chinese South African identity was always a racial identity as well as an ethnic one. However, as circumstances changed, Chinese South Africans 'progressed' from being viewed as 'non-white' to becoming commonly accepted as 'honorary white' during the course of apartheid. A number of factors, both external and internal, such as South Africa's political and economic relations with Asian countries influenced these shifts in the perceptions of Chinese resulting in South African state efforts to officially change the racial designation of Chinese from 'non-white' to 'white'. These will be discussed later in this thesis.

There are numerous other cases of the historical economic, political, and social contingencies of racial identity. For example, Morsy's essay (1996) on the classification of Egyptians in the United States examines US racial categorisation and foreign policy as these effected Egyptians identification with their national or religious affiliation over identification with African or Arab. At various points in history, based on the relationship between the US and Egypt, the US and the greater Arab world, and US race politics, Egyptians were variously classified as 'white' or 'black'. At the same time, the way in which Egyptians in America identified themselves also underwent shifts. The key point for the purposes of this study is that as with ethnicity, race is constructed.

Nation, too, is a social construct, despite our common sense notions about it. Ernest Gellner, discussing the problem of nationalism points out the difficulties in seeing nation as a construction. He writes:

> The idea of a man without a nation seems to impose a strain on the modern imagination. A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears. All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is not true. But that it should have

> come to seem so very obviously true is indeed an aspect, perhaps the very core, of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such (Gellner 1983:6 in Hall 1992b:291)

Most of the key theorists who write on nation, nationalism, and national identity acknowledge their constructedness. Anthony Smith points out that nations are not "a given of social existence, a primordial, natural units of human association" (Smith 1986:3). Benedict Anderson defines nation as "an imagined political community" (Anderson 1991:6). The social construction of nation is taken as given in this thesis.

Most constructionists agree that people have multiple identities that combine aspects of the racial, ethnic, and national. These identities are contextual, situational, positional, and conjunctural. The distribution of identification and of loyalty between categories depends strongly on time and space (Wiberg 1996:2). Worsley, in agreement, states:

> As social identities these forms of differentiation are relative and situational, not absolute. They take on different meanings in different contexts, depending on who uses them and for what purpose" (in Morsy 1996:176).

Surtee's research on Indian South African teachers, showed evidence of different fragments of identity – as Indian, as South African, and, for some, as 'black'[2] – surfacing from different social and personal experiences of her respondents. Her subjects had no fixed, essential, permanent identity; instead they assumed different identities at different times (Surtee 1998:2-7; also see Shrage 1996, Harris 1998, and Morsy 1996). Frankenberg and Mani also write about relational and situated identity. Highlighting the writings of US women of colour, they write that the displacement of women of colour speaking from "within and against" the women's liberation and anti-racist movements imply a multiplicity of positions. They observed multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identities in their study (Frankenberg and Mani 1996:288-290).

[2] In South Africa, particularly in the period following the black consciousness movement, 'black' became accepted and commonly used as a political identity that included not only black Africans but also members of both Indian and 'coloured' communities who were actively engaged in the struggle against apartheid.

A number of social scientists have observed the importance of an 'American' national identity as one of the component identities of their subjects. For example, Waters describes the 'white ethnics' in her research as having concentric circles of more or less inclusive identities with American on the outside ring, and internal rings made up of Irish, Polish, German, among others. In most cases, two or three identities, national, ethnic, and cultural, are complementary: you can be American but also of German descent. However, she said there was a great deal of variation in the weight that people assigned to component parts of their identity and American was a primary identity (Waters 1990:54). Portes and Rumbaut also note that while there is a *persistent ethnicity* amongst the East and South Asian second generation Americans in their research, ethnic identity is couched within a framework of loyalty to the United States and an overarching American identity (Portes and Rumbaut 1996:55-56). Studies of migrants and other displaced subjects also note their multiple identities. Lavie and Swedenburg, for example, write of the "doubled relationship" or dual loyalties that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places in terms of:

> their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with 'back home'. Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular cultural space but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:14).

To summarise thus far, the constructionist approach that I adopt in this thesis assumes that ethnic, racial, and national identities are constructed in an ongoing process of interaction between circumstances and action. As such, identities are fluid and dynamic; however, identities are also historically embedded and inextricably linked to the power dynamics at work within a given context. Individuals have multiple, sometimes overlapping identities and circumstances affect the salience of one or another identity at any given time and place. For migrants, exiles, refugees, and other displaced subjects, there are added layers of identity as most such subjects occupy two or more cultural spaces. We now move on to the key actors involved in the construction of identities.

Social Actors in identity construction

Barth (1969) was the first social scientist to articulate the notion of ethnicity as mutable. He argued that ethnicity was the product of social ascriptions – a labelling process engaged in by oneself and others. Ethnic identity is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes as well as individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations (in Nagel 1994). According to this perspective, one's ethnic identity is a composite of one's view of oneself and the views held by others of one's ethnic identity. As such, ethnicity can change according to variations in situations and audiences. Nagel explains that the chosen ethnic identity is determined by the individual's perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different social contexts, and its utility in different settings (Nagel 1998:241). This section will further examine the human element of identity construction and then take a closer look at the role of the state.

Human agency

Ethnicity and race are not simply labels forced upon people. Cornell and Hartmann argue that people "accept, resist, choose, specify, invent, redefine, reject, actively defend" identities (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:77). Other authors agree. For example, Takaki writes of the varied subjects in *A Different Mirror* that:

> The people in our study have been actors in history, not merely victims of discrimination and exploitation. They are entitled to be viewed as subjects – men and women with minds, wills, and voices. In the telling and retelling of their stories, they create communities of memory (Takaki 1993:14)

Min, similarly, explains that while societal expectations and barriers have an impact on identity construction, minority groups, as social actors, have agency. They do not passively accept ethnic labels given by members of the dominant group but try to negotiate ethnic and racial identities in social interactions with others, thus "resisting negative categorizations and presenting an identity they consider positive or advantageous to them in a particular situation" (Min 2002:11).

While influenced by circumstantial factors, subjects also use the raw materials of history, cultural practice, pre-existing identities, and even their ascribed or assigned identities to design their own distinctive notions of who they are. They do this through

the establishment of organisations, promoting research into ethnic history and culture, re-telling official histories in new ways, re-establishing defunct cultural practices or inventing new ones (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:79); ethnic and racial groups play a creative role in shaping their own identities.

Individual human agency and group processes are most evident in the construction of culture. In the constructionist view, culture is not simply an historical legacy. Rather, we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the "shelves of the past and present" (Nagel 1998:251). Cultures change: they are borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted. However, these strategic uses of identity do not occur in isolation. Nagel argues this point saying:

> The notion that ethnicity is simply a personal choice runs the risk of emphasizing agency at the expense of structure. In fact, ethnic identity is both optional and mandatory, as individual choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at a particular time and place (Nagel 1998:242)

The individual can choose from among a set of ethnic identities; however, these are limited to socially and politically defined ethnic categories with varying degrees of stigma or advantage attached to each. In some cases, the array of available ethnicities can be quite restricted and constraining. In the case of the US, for example, 'white ethnics' have many choices (Waters 1990), while black Americans have but one option because of the overriding power of race as the key factor defining social identity and status.

This theoretical framework assumes the importance of human agency in the construction of identities; however, the subject's participation in identity construction is not always a conscious, active effort. For example, in resisting a negative societal categorisation, a subject may 'retreat' to a more comfortable ancestral identity, real or assumed; in doing so, the subject may not realise that s/he is constructing an alternative identity that combines elements of their 'homeland' identity and their newer 'host' identity. Just as most subjects view cultures through an essential and primordial lens, so, too, most subjects are unaware of the constructedness of their identities nor of their own roles in defining these identities. I will give evidence in this thesis that Chinese South Africans engaged in the construction of their own identities, sometimes in

conscious, active efforts at image-making and, at other times, in subconscious or unconscious efforts of preserving their dignity, utilising the raw materials and symbolic power of their Chinese heritage.

Apart of the role of the subject, the other party with a profound interest in identity is, of course, the state. This next section elaborates on the state's role in both establishing the ethnic and racial categories and overall structure within which identities are constructed *and* as a social actor, engaged in furthering its own agenda by identifying groups in particular ways.

The role of the state

Anthony Marx makes the bold statement that "states make race". He argues that race has continued to serve as a criterion of stratification, deeply embedded in economic relations, political institutions and ideology. These distinctions are socially constructed and the state, he argues, plays a major role in constructing and enforcing institutional boundaries of race (Marx 1998:4). The way in which a state is 'imagined' (Anderson 1983) has everything to do with official boundaries, which determine who is included and who is excluded. Citizenship is key institutional mechanism for establishing these boundaries. "States bind the nation they claim to represent by institutionalising identities of racial inclusion and exclusion" (Anderson 1983:5). Nagel, too, points out that official ethnic categories and meaning are generally political and that the state is the dominant institution in society with political policies regulating ethnicity by shaping ethnic boundaries and influencing patterns of ethnic identification. She explains that states influence ethnic identification through immigration policies, ethnically linked resource policies, and political access (Nagel 1998: 243-247).

Anderson explains, however, that, "institutionalised exclusion may further consolidate the subordinated identity and encourage self-interested mobilization and protest" (Anderson 1983:6). A number of other authors have observed the same phenomenon: that ethnic minorities in the face of racism and discrimination tend to "cling to the culture of his own ethnic group" (Paul C.P. Sui in Loewen 1988:30).

Louie, in her study of Chinese identities in the US and China, notes that constructions of identities are mediated state projects of cultural citizenship (Louie 2004:8). She argues that while citizens in both countries are invested in defining Chinese identities, states play a large role in establishing the parameters. For example, because Chinese Americans are excluded for cultural citizenship in the US, they continue, both voluntarily and involuntarily to be associated with China. She writes:

> Racialized and territorialized conceptions of Chineseness form the primary building blocks for state productions of cultural citizenship that define the boundaries of the nation through inclusion and exclusion. Thus, the Chinese origins of Chinese Americans, and the symbolic markers of foreignness and cultural difference that accompany them, result in the sense of displacement that motivates Chinese Americans to seek their roots in China. And similar essentialised conceptions of the racial and cultural origins of Chinese Americans form the basis of their inclusion in Chinese government nation-building projects (Louie 2004:23).

In other words, American-born Chinese Americans are defined within US society through their Chineseness and cast as perpetual foreigners "in a society where achieving true 'American' status is attached to racial and class background in addition to legal citizenship" (Louie 2004:24). Other American scholars have made similar arguments about the impact of racist policies on perpetuating the view of Asian Americans as foreigners (Takaki 1996, Lowe 1996). One can make similar observations of the South African-born Chinese South Africans. This study of identity focuses on the apartheid and post-apartheid years, during which the state apparatus of race-making was most powerful. The state institutionalised race and racial difference. The South African states' role in the construction of racial identity has been a dominant one, but it has also been inconsistent, contested from within and objected to by political opposition forces. Social identities are consolidated in the interstices of these interactions and contestations between state, subjects, and other social actors. This thesis will give evidence of the various roles played and positions adopted by the South African state in the construction of Chinese South African identities.

The discourse on states' abilities to bind together ethnically diverse people is also potentially useful for examining, in particular, the post-apartheid period. The challenges of nation building facing the South African state after its long history of

exclusion can, perhaps, be understood by reference to some of the theories described below. Smith says that many new states are anxious to counter the fragility and artificiality of state borders by integrating their culturally disparate populations. He also finds that the very attempts to integrate such divided peoples may exacerbate ethnic antagonisms and highlight ethnic solidarities (Smith 1981:10). Competition theorists also argue, quite convincingly, that state attempts at homogenisation often serve to reinforce ethnic cleavages. Nagel, for example, argues that most state and nation-building projects failed to manufacture national identities out of local linguistic, cultural, or religious affiliations. Instead, she posits that the opposite has occurred: ethnic identity and organisation appear to be strengthening in the face of economic and political development (Nagel 1986:94).

The majority of the scholars in the field seem to be of the opinion that most nation-states' attempts to unify their people have been unsuccessful (Hall, 1992b, Wiberg 1996, Smith 1981, Nagel 1986). The only states that are successful in these nation-building efforts, according to Wiberg (1996), are the ones that can establish a 'super-identity' – the creation of a 'trans-ethnic' identity or a 'super-identity' through a 'citizen-state'. Within a citizen-state, identification and solidarity with the state is greater than with the ethnic group (to the extent that they collide), and also greater than with class or any other category. He cites the United States and some West European countries (Finland and France) as examples of the successful creation of a super-identity via the citizen-state (Wiberg 1996). Theorists mentioned earlier, including Waters (1990) and Portes and Rumbaut (1996) also write of 'American' identity as the outer ring of concentric identities and as the overarching identity within which other identities were couched.

States shape ethnic, racial, and national identities by constructing and enforcing boundaries. They do this through immigration and citizenship policies and the distribution of resources. However states are also actors in identity construction projects, with their own historically embedded imaginaries of their citizenry and their own agendas. They interact not only with subjects but also with other social actors such as opposition political parties, the media, and other social groups in contested processes

of defining their people. In these contested spaces, identities are shaped and given meaning. As Nagel states:

> As a result of processes of negotiation and designation, ethnic boundaries wax and wane. Individual ethnic identification is strongly limited and influenced by external forces that shape the options, feasibility, and attractiveness of various ethnicities (Nagel 1998:249)

The power of states over identity construction is brought home in the case of Chinese migrants. The historical authority of the Chinese state over the identities of Chinese people – not only those within China but also those tens of millions who have resided outside of China for generations – is unique. The Chinese state has been an unusually powerful force in shaping identities of both its resident citizens and the millions of Chinese overseas.

The Chinese state

Wang Gungwu suggests that Chinese migrants overseas are not like all other migrants but that they possess certain unique features. Part of the difference, he argues, lies in the "greater difficulty they seem to have in assimilating in countries where they settle" (G. Wang 2000:39). Lucien Pye suggests this may be because the Chinese are not simply citizens of another state, but part of an ancient civilisation. He observed; "China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations," but rather "a civilization pretending to be a state… The fact that the Chinese state was founded on one of the world's great civilizations has given inordinate strength and duration to its political culture" (Pye 1985:58 in Tu 1994:17).

In perhaps the most effective and long-lasting case of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), most great outside influences on China and Chinese culture – Buddhism, and military and political domination of the Central Country by the Jurchens, the Khitans, the Mongols, and the Manchus (all distinctly non-Han) – all underwent a process of sinification. Buddhism became distinctly Chinese and the Jin, Liao, Yuan, and Qing, all 'foreign' leaders, were turned into legitimate Chinese dynasties (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983:4). The power of 'Chineseness' – what Tu refers to as "the Middle Kingdom syndrome" or "Central Country complex" – has also resulted in a lasting notion of superiority (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Tu 1994).

The Chinese state's power over identity has been felt not only by resident citizens but also by the tens of millions of Chinese living outside of Chinese. Until relatively recently[3], the Chinese state sought to contain all overseas Chinese in the fold of the 'motherland'. Ling-chi Wang writes that from the end of the 19th century, successive Chinese governments have used the notion of roots and 'luoye guigen'[4], or Chinese as sojourners (L. Wang 1994:187), to claim full jurisdiction over all overseas Chinese, regardless of where they happened to reside or whether they had become citizens of their adopted lands. "Chinese communities overseas were essentially treated as colonies of the Chinese government, subject to extraterritorial rule" (L. Wang 1994:200).[5] Tu Wei-ming agrees with Pye's observations and notes the impact on overseas Chinese:

> China as a civilization-state features prominently in the Chinese diaspora … the ubiquitous presence of the Chinese state – its awe-inspiring size, its long history, and the numerical weight of its population – continues to loom large in the psychocultural constructs of diaspora Chinese (Tu 1994:18).

In South Africa, the Chinese states (both the Republic of China/Taiwan and the People's Republic of China) directly and indirectly, through the offices of the Chinese Consul General in South Africa and clubs of the Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang or KMT), continued to influence the identities and loyalties of Chinese South Africans and other overseas Chinese.

Having discussed the 'who' of identity construction, this theoretical framework will now focus on the 'how'.

[3] From 1909 until 1954, China had a policy of *jus sanguinis*, making a Chinese citizen of anyone born of a Chinese mother or a Chinese father; governments used this law to maintain the allegiance of overseas Chinese (Pan 1994:206). In 1954, the People's Republic of China repudiated the law but continued to offer China as a place of refuge to expellees and voluntary repatriates. The Chinese nationalists (or the KMT) inherited the *jus sanguinis* law and continued to apply it in Taiwan well after 1949 (Pan 1994:206, 211).

[4] Chinese abroad defined as "fallen leaves that must eventually, inevitably, return to their roots in Chinese soil" (L.Wang 1994:187)

[5] In 1957 The Chinese Communist government officially renounced its policy of dual citizenship and replaced it with one that emphasised free choice of citizenship, integration into the adopted country, and repatriation, if necessary; however the Chinese government in Taiwan continues to hold to the old policy to this date (L.Wang in Tu 1994:200).

Identity construction: materials and resources

Culture

If, as we have suggested, identities are constructed, and if they are malleable and changeable, *how* does this occur? In the case of ethnic identity, Nagel asserts that culture and history are the substance of ethnicity and the basic materials used to construct ethnic meaning. Nagel uses the image of a 'shopping cart'[6] as a metaphor for the way in which ethnic boundaries work and how they come to contain a various contents. Ethnic 'boundary construction' determines the shape of the shopping cart – its size, the number of wheels, the composition; in other words, boundaries function to determine such factors as identity options, membership composition, size, and form of ethnic organisation. Ethnic culture, she suggests, comprises the elements we 'put into' the cart including such cultural items as: art, music, dress, religion, norms, beliefs, symbols, myths, and customs. Individuals and groups construct culture by picking and choosing items to put into the cart from the "shelves of past and present" (Nagel 1998:251).

Cultural construction techniques include revivals and restorations of historical cultural projects and institutions, revisions of current culture and innovation, and the creation of new cultural forms. Nagel explains that these are ongoing group tasks in which new and renovated cultural symbols, activities, and materials are continually being added to and removed from existing cultural repertoires (Nagel 1998:252). For the purposes of this analysis, Nagel's construction of culture is similar to Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) 'invention of tradition' and Cohen's (1985) 'symbolic construction of community' insofar as the past is a resource used by groups, sometimes quite imaginatively, in the collective quest for meaning and community (Nagel 1998:253). Smith refers to ethnic and national groups' "deep nostalgia for the past" that result in efforts to uncover or, if necessary, invent, an earlier, ethnic "golden age." (Smith 1986:174). Nagel also asserts that the fictive aspects (or inventions) of any given ethnicity in no way detract from the reality of said nationalism. She states: "For newly forming ethnic and national groups, the construction of community solidarity and shared

[6] Nagel's 'shopping cart' modernises Barth's original imagery of a 'vessel' to describe ethnic boundaries and content (Barth 1969:14-15).

meanings out of real or putative common history and ancestry involves both cultural constructions and reconstructions.

In Louie's study of Chinese identities in China and the US (2004) her subjects, young multi-generational Chinese Americans, were often cast as foreigners and outsiders by other Americans; simultaneously, in this present era of multiculturalism, these same Chinese Americans were expected to "have and display their Chinese 'culture'." (Louie 2004:25). In response, she posits that her Chinese American subjects engaged in a process of re-ethnicisation whereby they selectively adopted parts of their Chinese heritage and selectively incorporated these elements into their lives. These elements were then assigned meanings. Her subjects, and many other Chinese Americans, she argues:

> Consciously research and adopt practices, material culture, and beliefs that signify 'Chineseness' or 'Chinese Americanness' to them. Or they may mark as ethnic certain values, traits, and customs that they view as being part of their family's core (Louie 2004:108)

In the case of her subjects, re-ethnicisation often involved learning more about Chinese history and culture or Chinese/Asian American history. In addition to flexibly adopting Chinese customs and practices that were meaningful and familiar to them, they also modified these practices for a Chinese American context and discarded some traditions that were irrelevant to them. For example, many of her Chinese American subjects de-emphasised the tradition of (male) generational naming at marriage but reinforced the importance of genealogy, recasting the tradition in light of their reclamation of their family histories and changing its form by including both men and women (Louie 2004:118). In this way, they were able to take ownership of their Chineseness in new ways (Louie 2004:117).

Other social scientists have also made similar observations about their subjects selectively incorporating elements into their cultures. Min, for example, places a much heavier emphasis on the culture of the parents' home country, but also acknowledges that: "members of the second generation selectively pick and choose some elements of ethnic culture and reject others, while revising many cultural elements" (Min 2002:7). Waters, too, states that:

> One constructs an ethnic identity using knowledge about ancestors in one's background … This information is *selectively* used in the social construction of ethnic identity within the prevailing historical, structural, and personal constraints (Waters 1990:19)

This discussion about cultural construction will prove invaluable in understanding the way Chinese South Africans selectively retained, adapted, and incorporated certain elements of their Chinese values and traditions, such as their unique practice of *C'hing Ming*[7], and assigning these continued practices with new meanings as they constructed their new identities.

Myth, memory, imaginaries, and 'home'

Added to these processes of selection and reinterpretation are those of mythologisation. This is particularly powerful in cases of Chinese migrants where myths of the past often become a vital aspect of identity construction. Nagel (1998), Smith (1986), and others have referred to the 'past' as a resource for cultural construction projects. We shall show that for the Chinese in South Africa the past, both real and imagined, played a large role in constructions of Chinese South African identity. These aspects of identity construction are well illustrated in the work of Connors who focuses attention on nationalist leaders, clearly showing the power and impact of so-called blood bonds in mobilising nations. Connors' answer to the question, "What is a nation?" is that it is "a group of people who feel that they are ancestrally related. It is the largest group that can command a person's loyalty because of felt kinship ties; it is from this perspective, the fully extended family." However, this belief in unique descent does not, in most cases, accord with factual history, but rather, reflects a mythologised past:

> It is not chronological or factual history that is the key to the nation, but sentient or felt history. All that is irreducibly required for the existence of a nation is that the members share an intuitive conviction of the group's separate origin and evolution (Connor 1998:50).

Connor explains further that:

> The non-rational core of the nation has been reached or triggered through national symbols, nationalist poetry, music, and the use of familial metaphors – motherland, fatherland, ancestral land, land of our fathers, this sacred soil, land

[7] A day of honouring deceased ancestors; this concept and the way in which it is practised in South Africa will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

> where our fathers died, the native land, the cradle of the nation, and most commonly the home/homeland of our people (Connor 1998:52).

Thus, just as nationalist leaders can invoke the power of 'blood bonds' and kinship, subjects, too, can utilise myths, memories, and imagined homelands, both consciously and unconsciously, as they construct new identities. The Chinese South Africans have clearly done this, as we shall see, as have numerous others. Luis H. Francia writing about the notion of 'home' in Asian American literature, for example, writes about the role of memory in notions of identity and home amongst Filipino Americans. Significantly for us, he suggests that a sentimental identification with parents' or grandparents' homeland arises as a response to the continuing reluctance of larger American society to fully accept Asian Americans. He writes:

> Memory, of course, is a tricky process – it too can be *imagined, implanted*. Fed partly by their parents' or grandparents' quasi-romantic views of the Philippines, partly by the continuing emphasis on "roots," and partly out of a deep and abiding dissatisfaction with finding their place in the American sun, many Filipino Americans tend to look upon those shores with utopian longing, making a complex, colonized, wounded culture bear the weight of desire. A *mythified* "Philippines" becomes the counterpart to a *demythified* "America" … The imagined home/homeland offers possibilities of escape from the politics of dominance and subservience (Francia 1999:212-213) (italics added).

In the introduction of his collection of essays and criticism, *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie describes a photograph of his family home, dated 1946, that hangs on the wall of the room where he works. He says that the photograph insists that he invert the idea of the past as a foreign country: it says that "the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 1991:9). He argues, in his eloquent way, that all exiles, emigrants, and expatriates are "haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back" but that to do so, one must acknowledge the physical alienation from the "lost home". This inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that which was lost, "that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 1991:10).

Sons of the Yellow Emperor

These mythical constructions take on a particular form where Chinese is the 'homeland' concerned. Tu Wei-ming states that traditional notions of Chineseness assert that there exists a common ancestry, homeland, mother tongue, and a basic value orientation. These are experienced or imagined as 'primordial ties' and they are so vested with personal feelings that they can engender great psychic energy and can never present themselves as "simply unambiguous conditions of human life" (Tu 1994:vi.). Legend has it that all Chinese have a traceable, biological line to the Yellow Emperor. According to Tu: "this ethnic identification, mythologized in the idea of the 'dragons' seed' evokes strong sentiments of originating from the same progenitor" (Tu 1994:v). And while he argues that the "China that evokes historical consciousness, cultural continuity, and social harmony, not to mention centeredness and rootedness, already seems a distant echo" (Tu 1994:vii – pointing to China's turbulent modern history) the myth of the 'great China' continues to have tremendous power. The question of Chineseness first emerged in 551BC and started with the notion of a cultural core area – the centre of China – in the north near the Yellow River. This presumed core area was instrumental in forming a distinctive Chinese identity. Chineseness came to mean culture plus civilisation; all else was imagined as barbarian. Cultured and civilised Chinese, myth goes, claim a common ancestry; the symbol of the "children of the Yellow Emperor" is constantly re-enacted in Chinese literature and evokes feelings of ethnic pride. The idea of being Chinese, geopolitically and culturally defined, is further reinforced by a powerful historical consciousness informed by "one of the most voluminous verifiable documentary records in human history" (Tu 1994:3).

David Yen-ho Wu writes that recent studies have shown that the existence of a superior Chinese culture is, at best, a myth; however, most Chinese people are unaware of the constructedness of their culture:

> The Chinese people and the Chinese culture have been constantly amalgamating, restructuring, reinventing, and reinterpreting themselves; the seemingly static Chinese culture has been in a continuous process of assigning important new meanings about being Chinese … However, the Chinese people have not been conscious of using such a cultural construction (Wu 1994:151).

The impact of these myths of an ancient and civilised China even on the tiny, far-flung community of Chinese in South Africa over a century after they left China is no less than remarkable. The myth of China as much as the real China has loomed large in Chinese South African constructions of identity, particularly insofar as their sense of belonging as 'sons (and daughters) of the Yellow Emperor' served as a healing balm in the face of their official exclusion from South Africa. Notions of a great China and Chinese superiority helped these overseas Chinese survive apartheid with their heads held high.

However, powerful ethnic and cultural nationalisms that flow from these myths have had unintended consequences. Evelyn Hu-deHart, in her explorations of Asian American identities in the age of globalisation, raises the question of whether or not claims of 'ethnic nationalism' are compatible with cultural and political citizenship (Hu-deHart 1999). Similarly, Arif Dirlik criticises the effects of the new discourse on Chinese diaspora because it tends to reify Chineseness. He argues:

> Because the very phenomenon of diaspora has produced a multiplicity of Chinese cultures, the affirmation of "Chineseness" can be sustained only by recourse to a common origin, or descent, that persists in spite of widely different historical trajectories. This results in the – often divisive – elevation of ethnicity and race over all the other factors that have gone into shaping Chinese populations and their cultures … widely different Chinese populations have, in recent years, been endowed with supposedly identical cultural characteristics that further erase their differences" (Dirlik 1999:44-45).

Dirlik suggests that overemphasising the Asianness of Asian Americans renders them unambiguously 'foreign' and it distances them from other ethnic groups in the US (Dirlik 1999:55). While 'foreignness' may be more acceptable (and may even be marketable) in a multicultural polity, it has not always been so and may not continue to be advantageous. This type of glorification and reification of an ethnic identity also threatens the power of the umbrella national identities, or 'super-identities' (Wiberg 1996) to unify disparate groups of people in many countries. This certainly appears to be the case in South Africa where Chinese South Africans have often been viewed by other South Africans as foreigners. These problems have recently been compounded with the continued arrivals of legal and illegal Chinese immigrants into South Africa since the late 1970s, of which more will follow.

Impact of Globalisation

Challenges to the state: borders and citizenship

Slater posits the question: "In a globalised world, where there is a widening sensibility of the need to reach beyond national boundaries" does national identity or citizenship have any meaning? (Slater 1998:380). While some authors like Joel Kotkin (1992) argue the diminishing importance of the nation-state as ethnic 'tribes' increase their global economic powers, many others (Nash 1989; Hall 1992a and 1992b; Smith 1981; Gellner 1983) argue that the nation-state and national identity remain important. Wong is amongst these latter scholars; he believes that "with respect to citizenship and human migration, the nation-state continues to be the privileged site, albeit with somewhat diminished authority" (Wong 1999:1). Palumbo-Lui, writing about diasporic subjects, agrees:

> While cognizant of the fact that no state can absolutely dictate or predetermine the "identity" of diasporic subjects, one should not downplay the complex process of identity formation, that, in one way or another, involves state apparatuses. Simply put, there is no diaspora without borders and no borders without states. The imperatives of states (even under transnational conditions) contest and constrain the psychic identifications that make up diasporic identity and the identity of diasporas (Palumbo-Lui 1999:343).

States' abilities to maintain borders, define citizenship, and control access to resources imbue them continued power over the identities of people within their borders. Nash argues that: "the nation-state, over the last five centuries, has emerged as the most potent, maximal, perduring (sic.) form of social and political organisation" (Nash 1989:1). Smith argues that the relationship between ethnic communities and nation is much more than an academic issue, pointing out that large numbers of people are willing to sacrifice their lives for recognition of their national identities and restoration of their 'historic' lands, and that new (culturally diverse) states are anxious to establish their national credentials (Smith 1986:1-2).

While states continue to wield great power over identity construction projects, globalisation and transnationalism present serious challenges to states' powers over borders and citizenship. Several scholars have focused on these aspects of late 20th and early 21st centuries of globalisation. For example, Wong states:

> With economic and cultural globalisation the relationship between nation-states and citizenship must be re-examined as deterritorialization of social identity increases and individuals develop social ties and membership to multiple communities" (Wong 1999:7).

This deterritorialisation of social identity, he argues, challenges the nation-states' claims to an exclusive citizenship, which acts as a defining focus of allegiance and fidelity. He contrasts this with the increasing realities of overlapping, permeable, and multiple forms of identity (Cohen 1997 in Wong 1999). People in many communities subject to massive forces of global cultural changes and population movements engage in what has been called 'multi-locationality' which cross-sects social, cultural, and territorial boundaries (Wong 1999:7). Normally citizenship is conceptualised as a legally recognised status incorporating rights and duties and as social membership incorporating ideas of participation and identity (Delanty 1997 in Wong 1999:8). The 'transmigrants' of recent decades can be distinguished from earlier generations of migrants in that they are able to maintain social, economic, and even political life and identities across borders. The present global era facilitates their abilities to carry out financial transactions, business, travel, and communications with greater ease and speed enabling them to maintain pluralized lives. These 'transmigrants' are de facto citizens of more than one nation-state.

An increasing number of authors (Baubock 1994, Delanty 1997, Jacobson 1997, Kymlicka 1995) suggest that the concept of citizenship today must take into account the weakening link between citizenship as a 'singular loyalty' to territory (Jacobson 1997:125 in Wong 1999) to reflect the realities of contemporary transnational and diasporic communities. For the purposes of this study, we acknowledge globalisation's diminishing impact of on states' exclusive power over defining citizenship and identities; these seem to be more contested today than ever before. However, we remain convinced that states are and will remain one of the principal actors in identity construction, even in the face of growing transnationalism. Overseas Chinese communities have dominated many of these discussions of transnationalism and transmigrants; the relevance of these studies on the Chinese South Africans will be explored below.

The pluralizing impact of globalisation

Identities in the post-modern, global, transnational age are multiple, co-existing, and multidimensional (Wiberg 1996); in such a globalised world, people have concentric identities (Smith 1986, Morsy 1996). Furthermore, in a global age, the notions of 'home' and identity, especially for those of migrant communities, must become multiply-sited:

> Because of displacement and dispossession, and because siting ideas of home within a specific locale no longer proves satisfactory, the need for alternative sites arises … such re-siting makes home moveable … but not transient, mutable but not amorphous, complex but rarely confusing. By exploring issues of language, history, and memory – usually in the service of (re)constructing an identity – the monolithic "I" acquires deepening; it learns to adapt, to straddle, and to leap about agilely (Francia 1999:205-206).

Globalisation has the effect of contesting and dislocating the centred and 'closed' identities of national culture (Hall 1992b). It also has a pluralizing impact on identities, producing, what Hall identifies as a variety of possibilities and new positions of identity. Globalisation, goes the argument, has made identities more positional, more political, more plural, more diverse, and less fixed, less unified. However, according to Hall, these general processes have resulted in two contradictory tendencies: some gravitate towards 'tradition' while others toward 'translation' (Hall 1992b:309). On the one hand, there are powerful attempts to reconstruct 'purified' identities, to restore coherence, and tradition in the face of hybridity and diversity; Hall gives the examples of the resurgence of nationalisms in Eastern Europe and the rise of fundamentalism (Hall 1992b:311). The tendency toward 'translation', on the other hand – more relevant for the Chinese South African subjects – accepts that identity is subject to plays of history, politics, representation and difference; identity formations cut across and intersect national frontiers, and are composed of people whom have been 'dispersed' forever from their homelands. Hall states:

> Such people retain strong links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bear upon them traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages, and histories by which they were shaped. The difference is that they are not and will never be unified in the old sense because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories

> and cultures, belonging at one and the same time to several 'homes' (and to no one particular 'home'). (Hall 1992b:310)

Post-modern people, he argues, are products of new diasporas created by post-colonial migrations (Hall 1992b). They 'inhabit' at least two (cultural) identities and speak two cultural languages; and they must translate and negotiate between them. Rushdie writing about England's Indian writers, states: "we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools … (it is) ambiguous and shifting ground" (Rushdie 1991:15). Rushdie hearkens to the etymological roots of the word 'translation' which stems from the Latin for 'bearing across' as he writes: "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained" (Rushdie 1991:17).

In contrast to Hall and other writers who address globalisation and post-modernism, some theorists have argued that many subjects, particularly those from migrant, refugee, slave, and other such displaced communities have long possessed multiple identities – these are not simply post-modern phenomena (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, Ong 1999). Each of these has been tied to a specific historical period and circumstances. Lavie and Swedenburg, for example, criticise the "post-modernist celebration of fragmentation in which identity becomes an infinite interplay of possibilities and flavors of the month" for ignoring power relations and failing "to comprehend that position and temporalities of the margins were not only multiple and constantly shifting, but also historically anchored to specific locations" (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:1-5). Globalisation has, perhaps, had an impact only insofar as it has increased the speed at which these multiple identity transformations have taken place. As the descendents of migrants who arrived in South Africa three or four generations ago, Chinese South Africans have long possessed multiple, co-existing identities. How do they 'fit' into recent theories about Chinese transnationals? This last section will address this question.

Overseas Chinese: 'luodi-shenngen', diasporic, and transnational identities

The literature encompasses a growing body of work on overseas Chinese that focuses on the transnational character of Chinese migrants. This focus on a new kind of 'overseas Chinese' has emerged in response to the rapidly growing movements of ethnic Chinese from South East Asian 'tiger' economies, including Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as the current rise of China as a growing world power. These are not the poorer peasants of the earlier eras of migration from China, but members of the wealthier classes for whom global movement is a career choice rather than an economic necessity. Aiwah Ong writes about ethnic Chinese overseas who number anywhere from 25 million to 36 million[8], approximately 85% of whom are based in South East Asia (L. Wang 1998); however, she claims that their concerns about identity and home are not new. Ong suggests, rather, that: "for over a century, overseas Chinese have been the forerunners of today's multiply displaced subjects, who are always on the move both mentally and physically" because while they have been economically successful in the postcolonial states, they continue to be seen by their host nations as politically alien or alienable (Ong 1999:2).

Ong views these earlier Chinese migrants as the predecessors to today's transnational Chinese. Ong's view of political borders in this global age is illustrative of this new body of work on transnationals. Ong suggests that by focusing on "transnational practices and imaginings of the nomadic subject and the social conditions that enable flexibility" (Ong 1999:3) we can obtain a different picture of how nation-states interact with capitalism in late modernity. Ong proposes the term "flexible citizenship" to refer to "the cultural logics of capital accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (Ong 1999:6). She illustrates the celebration of flexibility and mobility with examples of transnational Chinese who most benefit from their participation in global capitalism: the 'astronaut' who shuttles across borders on business, the multiple passport holder, and the 'parachute kids' who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific commute (Ong 1999:19). Hu-deHart explains that

[8] Tu Wei-Ming (1991/1994) puts the number of overseas Chinese at 36 million; while Wang has qualified his number as ethnic Chinese, Tu has not; perhaps this difference can partially account for the large difference.

'astronauts' are so described in reference to the inordinate amount of time and energy these migrants spend in 'orbit' vaulting across the Pacific to monitor their transpacific investments (S C Wong 1995 and Ong 1993 in Hu-deHart 1999:9).

This 'new' Chinese diaspora exhibit a hyper mobility through transnational networks (Chan 1994:320 in Wong 1999). Skeldon (1995:72 in Wong 1999) observes that Chinese transmigrants operate in transnational social networks, which will allow them to 'flow' from one part of the system to another, depending on conditions of economic boom or recession and political liberalization or repression within any part of that system. Terms such as 'new extended family', 'diasporic families', and 'trans-Pacific networks' are now used to discuss this flow along points in a network (Wong 1999:5).

While these various insights are useful for describing a particular segment of overseas Chinese, the tendency to characterise all recent Chinese migrations as such must be checked. In fact, most of the Chinese currently entering South Africa as well as most of the Chinese South Africans leaving South Africa do not fit into these definitions of transnational migrants. The Chinese moving in and out of South Africa do not exhibit the flexibility, the capital, or the cosmopolitanism as described in the literature. They cannot and do not freely flow from one part of the transnational network to another. Neither do they seem to claim any 'brotherhood' with other overseas Chinese, functioning as a 'global tribe' (Kotkin 1992) in a search for success in a new global economy. In fact, the interactions between groups of Chinese in South Africa indicate increasing cleavages rather than cooperation based on any perceived commonalities, as I will show later in this thesis. Rather, these subjects might be better described as *luodi-shenngen*, a term used in another segment of the overseas Chinese literature.

Ling-chi Wang offers a different paradigm or approach to viewing overseas Chinese based on the notion of *luodi-shenggen* – "growing roots where they land" or "planting of permanent roots." In contrast to the theorists of the transnational school, Wang suggests that most overseas Chinese today do not see themselves as sojourners, orphans, or patriotic Chinese nationalists. They are, rather, 'luodi-shenngen'. This approach, he writes:

> Views the Chinese minority to be an integral part of each country's citizenry, to be treated with equality and justice. This approach also posits the racial and cultural heritage of the Chinese and treats the overseas Chinese as a cultural asset in the building of more enlightened societies in our integrated global economy and shrinking world, whose diversity is brought ever close home by expanding international trade, rapid flow of information, capital and labor across national boundaries and jet-age travel (L. Wang 1998:xi).

Wang's view is critical of the transnational school for the same reasons that Hu-deHart (1999) and Dirlik criticise the rise of ethnic nationalism, especially among Chinese: they tend to place China at the centre of analysis, the reify Chineseness, and they potentially jeopardise all ethnic Chinese to being forever labelled as 'foreigner'. A conclusion that takes into consideration the variety of Chinese migrants, both from China and of Chinese descent from other parts of the globe, should rather be mindful of the socio-political-economic contingencies of each case, which, based on the preceding theoretical framework, would result in a myriad of 'translated' Chinese identities.

Conclusion

This introduction has attempted to outline the key analytical concepts that will have relevance for this study. It began with the definitions of race, ethnicity, and nation, as they apply to identity. Then we outlined some of the pre-constructionist schools of theories about ethnicity including assimilationism, primordialism, and circumstantialism, showing how they generally fall short of providing sufficiently broad and complex understandings of ethnic and racial identity for the purposes of the analysis herein; nevertheless, each of these provides some insights that will provide useful. The main body of this theoretical framework focused on the constructionist approach to identity – the approach adopted for this study – to explain how identities are formed, who constructs them and the key issues or factors affecting these processes. We pointed out that constructed identities are fluid and shifting, but also embedded in historical periods. We have also claimed that most people, but particularly migrants have multiple identities, circumstances and contexts determining which identities will be more or less salient at any given time. Human agency and the other principal actor, the state, interact in moulding identities. We made special reference to the powerful role of the Chinese state and myths about China in creating identities of Chinese both inside and outside of China. Finally, we briefly examined the impact of globalisation on

identities, particularly in terms of its influence on states' powers to define citizenships and control borders. The bedrock of concepts outlined in this theoretical framework will provide valuable insights for understanding and analysing the constructions of Chinese South African identities during the apartheid and post-apartheid periods in South Africa.