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

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**CHAPTER THREE**
**CONNECTEDNESS TO THE SYMBOLIC CENTER:**
**THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA, REAL AND MYTHICAL, ON CHINESE SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITIES**

> Mainland China holds great power as the symbolic center to which Chinese identities both in China and outside China are metaphorically attached.
> L. Wang 1995 in Louie 2004:20

## Introduction

Between 1945 and 1949 the civil war in China between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communists raged, commanding the attention of all overseas Chinese, including the small community in South Africa. The eventual retreat of Chiang Kai-Shek's troops to Formosa (Taiwan) and the declaration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Communists marked the 'closing off' of China for them and for overseas Chinese worldwide. China became inaccessible: wives could no longer be 'imported', children could not be sent 'home' for Chinese education, and sojourners could not 'return' to their beloved homeland. China, however, remained a powerful influence on their identities. This chapter seeks to explore the various ways in which China, both real and imagined, has influenced the construction of Chinese South African identities. Where the last chapter focused attention on the South African state, this chapter turns to the Chinese state and its continuing, albeit gradually decreasing, influence on Chinese South Africans. In addition, this chapter will also attempt to elucidate the impact of mythical Chin – the China that exists in the hearts, memories, and imaginaries of overseas Chinese. This China, in some ways, has had a greater sway on Chinese South Africans than the various states of China in its impact on Chinese identities.

Both Chinese and South African states wielded tremendous influence on the construction of Chinese South African identities. The Chinese states, particularly the Nationalists exiled to Taiwan, continued to view overseas Chinese as Chinese citizens and lay claim over them while the emerging South African apartheid state, even while granting them concessions, still viewed them, officially, as 'non-white' and often treated them as foreigners. Whether through inclusion or exclusion, Chinese identities were mediated by these state projects of cultural identity (Louie 2004:8). The inclusion of overseas Chinese in Taiwan's imaginary translated locally into the presence of Chinese

Nationalist (KMT) officials and the Chinese Consul-General, who were on hand to provide support to the local Chinese community and ensure that they were kept 'in the fold' of greater China. Exclusion in South Africa, despite the concessions they received, disposed the Chinese to continue to look to China as 'home' and cling to an increasingly distant and mythologized China. Chinese South Africans, throughout the apartheid years, retained both sentimental connections to an imagined homeland, as well as real physical, social, and political ties to China. On a practical level, extended families, visits to ancestral villages, travel, remittances, and Chinese politics kept Chinese in South Africa tied to China.

This study indicates that Chinese identities have changed over different life stages and in response to particular experiences (Waters 1990, Thai 1999). These multiple formations of Chineseness were evident as identities shifted across time and distance from China, each generation's experiences of China and South Africa informed by the particular social and political events of their era (Louie 2004). Identities have also proven to be situational and relative, as travels to China or confrontations with Chinese outside of South Africa showed Chinese South Africans different ways of being Chinese (Louie 2004, Lowe 1991). Chinese South African experiences will be compared to those of other overseas Chinese in South East Asia and America to indicate both similarities and differences in formations of Chineseness. As in Chapter One, literature on state constructions of social and racial identity will inform the discussions that follow.

Chinese South Africans through multiple generations have sustained imaginaries of an ancient, distant, powerful, Chinese homeland. Their links to this mythical China provided the local community with a strong ethnic identity, one that provided a sense of belonging in the face of rejection by the South African state. Even after the effective closure of China to overseas Chinese, China, both the state and the myth, continued to influence the identities of millions of Chinese outside of China including the small population of Chinese in South Africa. How has China continued to wield such power over Chinese identities two, three, and four generations after these people left China? This chapter will examine family ties and travels to China, the influence of the two

Chinese states on Chinese South African identity, the role of the Chinese Consul-General, and the connection to an imagined 'great China' in an attempt to answer the question.

**Family ties and travels 'home' to China**

The connection between the older Chinese South Africans and China remained very real, in part, because of continued family ties. However, as we will show, over time and with each passing generation, these ties became more and more distant. The youngest of the interviewees' ties to China, both real and mythical, were much weaker than those of the older interviewees. Similarly, of those who travelled to China, the older Chinese South Africans often felt they were 'returning home', while most of the younger Chinese South Africans felt that, while welcomed, they were foreigners in China. As pointed out by Andrea Louie, a third generation Chinese American, for each generation – hers, her father's, and her grandfather's – 'returning' to China carried very different significance and each 'return' experience was shaped by the particularities of the social and political events of the time (Louie 2004:6). In South Africa, the ability (or inability) to make such a 'return' was affected by restrictive immigration and travel laws, staunch anti-communist views of the state, and China's changing political climate. These factors also influenced the 'return' experiences of those able to make such journeys.

Most second-generation Chinese South Africans, with ties leading directly to China across just one generation – that of their parents – managed to maintain contact with relatives in their 'homeland'. As mentioned in the previous chapter, travel to and from China was restricted before apartheid but these restrictions did not stem the tides of travel between the two countries. Earlier generations of Chinese in South Africa went home to find brides, get married, and have children. Many were also sent 'home' to study so that they might become 'proper Chinese' (Louie 2004, Pan 1994). Prior to the 1952 Immigration Restriction Act in South Africa and the Communist takeover in China, several of the older members of this group were also sent to China to study. A few spoke of siblings who stayed in China. For example, Paul, 66, spoke of his family's arrival to South Africa and their continued connection to China.

> Grandfather was a pioneer: he came out to South Africa in 1898, and then went back and forth between China and South Africa several times. Father and a few uncles and aunts were born in South Africa. Mother was born in China. Mom and dad met and married in China. They had eight boys and four girls; three of the eldest boys, myself included, were sent to study in China. I came back to South Africa in 1950. My elder brothers stayed in China until 1968 when they applied for exit from China to Hong Kong…the family managed to maintain contact with them.[1]

Later, during the apartheid years, despite South African restrictions, a number of interviewees managed to travel to ancestral villages in China after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. Over one-third of the oldest group of interviewees reported that they had been to China to visit family villages. Most of these found their way to the villages of their fathers or grandfathers, where, without exception, they were well received by family members there.

Within this second-generation Chinese community, even amongst those who had no interest in a 'return' to China, many continued to refer to China as 'home'. Luis H. Francia, writing about images of 'home' in Asian American literature, states that 'home' does not refer to the nation-state nor the government, but to the "cherished ideal". He argues that in the case of diasporic communities that can never truly return 'home'; instead, the imagined 'home' becomes the primordial, archetypal locus of innocence (Francia 1999:192). Similarly, Salman Rushdie, in Imaginary Homelands writes of exiles, emigrants, and expatriates who are "haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back." He warns, however, that:

> …our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that 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).

It was clear that amongst the older Chinese South Africans, they, too, longed for an imagined China of their pasts, a China created in their memories by their longings for a 'return' to a safe, warm, 'home' embrace. Joseph, 56, for example, stated, "I've been to China in 1990. I've been home. I've met my people there…I've been home." Barbara,

[1] Paul is technically third generation on his father's side and second generation on his mother's side.

64, reported that she had been to China twice to fulfil a wish of her deceased father who had always wanted to take his children 'home'. She said:

> I always wanted to go because my father always said he would take us *home*. And when I got to China, I stood before my father's picture and said, "Daddy, you didn't bring me here, but I got here anyway." I went to my father's village, to his house. He had continued to send money, so we were received with open arms. I couldn't speak Chinese but my brother could translate for me. I met my aunt and other relatives.

Barbara also confirms that many Chinese South Africans continued to send money to China to support families who remained there. These remittances of overseas Chinese to families in China played a vital role in many villages throughout southern China and were one of the key factors in changes to Chinese policies regarding overseas Chinese. These will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

About two-thirds of these older interviewees never travelled to China. Melvin was one of these. High costs of travel combined with political and legal restrictions were cited as the main factors. Melvin reported that he and many others did not go to China during apartheid because of fear of the staunchly anti-communist South African government. He stated:

> In those days, we were a bit scared to go to China because this country was anti-communist. So, we didn't dare think of going to China because…I thought the Chinese authorities…they won't stamp your passport that you've been to China…but anyhow, we didn't want to take the risk because if we get back and they say you've been to communist China, they might say, "Oh, there's another communist!"

While older Chinese South Africans were intimidated by the apartheid government's stance on communism, younger people, who had not experienced the raids for illegal communists from 'Red China' of the early 1960s, were less affected by such fears. Time was also on their side, for by the 1980s the Cultural Revolution had ended and many of the South African restrictions on travel were lifted clearing the paths to China once again. Finally, as greater numbers of Chinese South Africans became professionals and joined the middle class, especially amongst these younger Chinese South Africans, they had increased access to information and greater financial means to enable them to travel overseas.

Just over half of the middle-aged Chinese South Africans had been to China and quite a few of them indicated that they still had family there. However, within the second generation, these younger Chinese South Africans exhibited a much more distant connection to China. Most of those who visited China or Taiwan spoke of feeling welcomed, but that they felt like tourists. While they were excited about seeing other Chinese, they also reported feeling alien; they were visiting China as foreigners. Rather than reinforcing their ethnic attachment to China their 'return' to China had the opposite effect: they saw themselves as quite 'westernised'; as compared to the Chinese in China, they did not feel 'very Chinese'.

Two Chinese American scholars write on the issues of cultural authenticity raised by these middle aged, second-generation Chinese South Africans. Louie states that ideas about degrees of authenticity as Chinese, which link ethnicity to both territory and knowledge of 'traditional' Chinese culture, have become the basis through which diasporic Chinese define themselves in relation to one another (Louie 2004:21). Lowe explains further that these vertical, generational models of Chineseness in the US, derived from assimilationist theories of ethnicity, are problematic because of the relationship they construct between authenticity and assimilation: with China as the place of origin, the further one is removed from China, the more assimilated to US culture one will be and therefore less authentically Chinese (Lowe 1991 in Louie 2004:105).

Chinese South Africans, similar to the Chinese Americans of Louie's study, have expressed a tendency to objectify Chinese culture:

> Culture is … broken down into discrete practices, customs, and traditions …these elements carry symbolic weight as features and traits that can be measures to indicate the authenticity of a culture. Within this context, Chineseness becomes a measurable and commodified from of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) (Louie 2004:106).

Accordingly, some people have more Chinese culture and others have less. These middle-aged Chinese South Africans expressed a range of emotional reactions to their encounters with Chinese in Taiwan and China, many of them expressing similar notions

of cultural authenticity or, in their case, inadequacies vis-à-vis their own notions of Chinese culture. One reaction was to simply distance oneself from the 'Chinese' and see oneself as 'foreign' and 'Western'. Abel, 37, loved his experience travelling in Taiwan, but said that he felt like a foreigner; he reported that he felt very 'Western' in contrast to everything in Taiwan.

> I don't think we realise how Westernised we are becoming…your whole outlook is very different to…in Taiwan. I loved Taiwan. It is so Asian and it is also very foreign to you…however, the fact is, at the end of the day, because of the fact that you are speaking English, you are a foreigner.

Others, like Jane, were able to find a sense of pride in the heritage she shared with other Chinese. Jane, 39, went to China in 1980 just after she had started her first year of work after graduating from university. Based purely on race, on physical appearance, she said that she felt that she had finally found a place where she fit in; however, she also realised that she was not Chinese in the same way as all those people around her. Despite these differences, she left feeling proud of her heritage. In her view, the sense that she was Chinese in a different way from those she met did not diminish her sense of pride in being Chinese:

> It was like "wow!" You're like part of the crowd. You don't stick out like a sore thumb. You know what I mean? Because you all look the same. So you felt like you belonged, but yet you knew that you didn't belong. You know what I mean? You weren't from China. You were part of a tourist group. But I guess I felt proud…all these palaces and…they are magnificent…and the Great Wall.

Mary M, 44, has also come to feel pride in her Chinese heritage. However, her 'arrival' at this place of comfort with her cultural heritage has occurred gradually, slowly shifting over the last five years during which we have remained in contact. In 1999, she reported feeling "not very Chinese" and detached from her culture. Her marriage to a foreign-born Chinese has forced her to confront, on a daily basis, the differences between herself and her China-born husband. Over the years, she has travelled to China numerous times. During our primary interview she said that on her trips to China, she always felt like a tourist: "Whenever I go to China, I am the foreigner…They do make me feel like the odd one out…I would never go and live in China." However, in a later e-mail communication, after yet another trip to China, Mary M seems to have re-

thought some of her earlier statements about her Chineseness and come to accept her identity as an 'SABC' – South African-born Chinese. She wrote:

> I have always regarded myself as a South African-born Chinese and not Chinese. However, after travelling through six provinces and listening to the guide explain some history, I am quite proud to be Chinese yet ashamed of myself for not wanting to be Chinese before. I still regard myself as SABC – South African-born Chinese, but proud that I have Chinese roots.

Mary M's Chineseness has changed and developed over time. With annual trips to China and daily interaction with her first generation Chinese husband she appears to have become more comfortable with her Chinese heritage and with her identity as a Chinese South African[2].

I find Thai's use of the term "marginal man"[3] to describe the subjects of her research – young second generation Vietnamese Americans in their childhood and adolescent years before they began to form a strong ethnic identity (Thai 1999:53-54) – useful for understanding the reactions of some of my interviewees. Erin and Tammy, described below, are two middle-aged interviewees who exemplify such marginality. Tammy's response to her trip to China (and her return to South Africa) can be described as a 'marginal' experience insofar as she felt that she did not quite fit in in either place:

> When I went back to China, when I got there I was so excited to see people of my same race…(but) once there I was viewed as an outsider and mocked because of my accent…In China, everyone was calling us 'halvsies' – as in "you're not Chinese, you're not whatever" … After getting excited that I was going there and I was meeting all these Chinese people…then you come back here and you're not white, you're not anything (age 44).

Erin, 41, was also unable to form any connection with the Chinese that she met on her travels. When she saw herself next to a Chinese person from China, she did not feel Chinese. These encounters with 'real' Chinese people confirmed to her that she was, undoubtedly South African. In her travels to China, Erin's notions of Chineseness shifted, especially with regard to language, such that they no longer included her. But

[2] See Thai 1999 and Waters 1990 for discussions about shifting ethnic identities over various life stages.
[3] "Marginal man" was conceptualised by Park 1924 and later formalised by Stonequist 1961. I use the term as explained by Thai 1999.

she also indicates that her sense of herself as Chinese shifts depending on the context and her audience. She said:

> The only time I don't feel Chinese is when someone speaks to me in Chinese and you know you don't speak Chinese…I may follow suit in traditions, but I don't speak the language, but then you know you are not really Chinese…If I meet anyone from Hong Kong or Taiwan and they speak to me in Chinese and I can't speak, I say, 'Sorry. I am South African.'

A large part of Andrea Louie's recent book, *Chineseness across Borders. Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States* (2004), examines the experiences of a number of Chinese American participants in a program called In Search of Roots,[4] which took the young adults to their ancestral homes. The experiences of my middle-aged interviewees are not entirely dissimilar from the experiences of these Chinese Americans: identities were re-created and re-negotiated and they shifted over time. The balance between Chinese and South African, East and West, often shifted for many of these middle-aged Chinese South Africans as they questioned their Chineseness and reasserted their Western-ness or their South African-ness, or re-discovered pride in their Chinese heritage. For Jane, Mary M, and a number of the others, seeing, first-hand, some of China's achievements resulted in a re-awakening of pride in their imagined connection to that great and ancient heritage.

However, those who attempted to measure their Chineseness against those with 'more' Chineseness felt excluded and inadequate. In fact, most Chinese South Africans adhered to the popular (and primordialist) conceptions of culture and ethnicity – that people 'have' or 'possess' cultures and that these were natural or innate. Concomitantly, their views on Chinese culture were generally static; Chineseness was a specific set of cultural practices, traditions, customs, and language, which are either present or absent. Thus, in their view, Chinese South Africans were seen to have, over time, 'lost their culture'. These 'losses' were made more evident and more salient in their travels to China as they confronted 'real' Chinese. The dilemma of Chinese South Africans is that they have been assigned their 'non-white' second-class Chinese identity within the South African legal order, but they have constructed their identity in South

[4] The In Search of Roots program is run by organizations in Guangzhou and in San Francisco and provides opportunities for young adults of Cantonese descent to visit their ancestral homes in China.

Africa around their Chineseness; now, however, in contrast to the Chinese in China (or Taiwan or Singapore), they feel inadequately and inauthentically Chinese.

For the youngest of my interviewees, aged between 21 and 34, whose connection to China and their Chineseness was most tenuous and distant, their lack of 'authentic' Chineseness was not particularly important. While some have travelled to China, most speak little to no Chinese and they no longer practice Chinese customs. China only existed in the imagined or mythical realm. There was some shame attached to their lack of stronger connection to China and Chinese culture especially when compared to the new Chinese immigrants; however, apart from a few who were taking Chinese language courses at the time of the interviews, most had done nothing to address this shame. With minimal contact with their extended family members in China and very little interest in the politics of China, there was very little association with China.

A substantial number of these younger interviewees reportedly travelled to China and/or Taiwan; however, only a few of them felt welcomed and at home. Patricia, 29, was the only one who reported that when she went to China, she felt integrated, welcome, accepted. There was a language barrier, but she said that she might even be able to live there because of the level of acceptance and warmth she experienced. Most of the others, however, felt uncomfortable, like outsiders or foreigners. For example, Laura, 25, reported that she went to Hong Kong and then China when she was 13. In the Chinese family village she said that she struggled with the way they did things, the lack of amenities, and the language. She said that the experience made her realise how Westernised she was.

For now, however, China, for these young people, continues to be viewed from a distance, through a foreign lens. There was no evidence of loyalties to China or Taiwan and little knowledge about Chinese history or current political conflicts. Most, raised in homes of Chinese nationalists, were critical of communism, but beyond this, there was very little interest in China. No doubt, they, too, will experience shifts in their feelings about China and their Chineseness as they go through different phases of their lives; however, it is unlikely that they will ever develop the same high levels of connectedness

as their parents and grandparents. As with Andrea Louie's subjects, their Chineseness will be selectively crafted from elements of an increasingly mythical China and combined with their unique South African experiences in the 21st century.[5] Their ties to China are looser, more distant, and less intense.

Louie's study also looks at the United States and the PRC "state projects of cultural citizenship" and the role they play in shaping Chinese identities. The role of the South African state was the focus of the last chapter. In the following two sections of this chapter, I will examine the role of the Chinese state in shaping Chinese South African identities.

**The influence of Chinese states on Chinese South African identity**

> 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-Liu 1999:343).

The Chinese states, both in the PRC and the ROC, as well as general Chinese politics have wielded considerable influence on Chinese South African lives and identities, particularly with the oldest group of interviewees. This Chinese influence was exaggerated by perceptions on the part of both the Chinese and South African states of South African-born Chinese *as Chinese*: the South Africa state often viewed the tiny minority community as foreigners and Chinese states continued to lay claim over them as Chinese nationals. In addition, many of the older Chinese South Africans maintained political ties to and interest in China. In fact, quite a few of the older Chinese South Africans remained, until relatively recently, card-carrying members of the Chinese Nationalist Party. This section of the chapter will cover two key aspects of China

[5] Louie comments that her own experience of 'return' to China was quite different from those of her father and grandfather's experiences and that each of these were "shaped by the particularities of the social and political events of the time" (Louie 2004:6). For many of the youngest Chinese South African interviewees, trips to China took place in the post-1994 era and carried a different weight or significance. In post-apartheid South Africa, they no longer had to look to China as a potential home because the new South African government, at least in spirit, embraced them as full-fledged citizens.

politics in terms of their impact on Chinese South African identities: Chinese policies toward overseas Chinese and the impact of Chinese Nationalist versus Communist politics. The first section will look more broadly and historically at changing Chinese state policies toward overseas Chinese, while the second section will focus on the situation in South Africa.

***Official Chinese policies toward overseas Chinese***

Wang Gungwu provides a detailed historical account of official Chinese policies toward overseas Chinese in his account of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (G. Wang 2000). For the purposes of this thesis I will provide only a very brief summary of relevant shifts in these policies. Wang describes movements of Chinese out of China into South East Asia in small numbers since the 10th century, and in larger numbers since the late 16th century. These numbers grew into floods beyond Southeast Asia in the 19th century. He writes that the Chinese state variously labelled these men[6] as vagabonds, fugitives, and outlaws or later, as sojourners, guests, visitors, and temporary residents (G. Wang 2000:43). From the 1370s until 1893 imperial law virtually forbade Chinese from leaving the country. Returnees could be punished as criminals (G. Wang 2000:43). The Manchu Qing court finally changed the official overseas Chinese policies at the end of the 19th century: living abroad was no longer seen as a crime and those Chinese who were successful abroad could become assets to the empire.

Why the change in policy? The challenges of facing an aggressive West finally forced the Chinese state to open its ports and reassess its policies toward their sojourners. Through treaties with Western powers, Mandarins became aware of how much attention Europeans gave to protecting their own citizens overseas. Wang writes that in preparing for imperial representation abroad, including consular offices, the Mandarins recommended that the Chinese abroad "should be given a respectable place in the Chinese scheme of things" (G. Wang 2000:46). Traditional sojourning had long been a condition of the China trade, but its recognition as something beneficial, "as another kind of loyalty to things Chinese," was a belated development. He states:

[6] As mentioned in previous chapters, early emigration from China was made up almost entirely of men. There were practical, legal, and cultural reasons for keeping women at home, in their villages, and in China.

> What crystallized the recognition of the phenomenon was the challenge to national consciousness, the call for a new patriotism to help an enfeebled China to defend itself against an aggressive West (G. Wang 2000:54).

The growing realisation that sojourners had been forsaken for too long, that foreign powers had exploited their talents to enrich their countries, and that many were already lost to 'barbarian' ways led to a call for the sojourners to be "suitably endorsed" and their energies channelled to serve China (G. Wang 2000:65-66). Galvanised by the discovery that there were sojourners who were skilled in dealing with native and European governments and whose overseas experience might be called upon to play a role in China's affairs, both the Qing government and the reformist and revolutionary groups (who wanted to overthrow the Manchu) wooed the sojourners, especially for their financial support. The term *huaqiao* was coined to describe the Chinese sojourners who, according to the orthodox Confucian perspective, would be good filial sons who loved their homes, always planned to return, and never stopped being Chinese (G. Wang 2000:44).

The fall of the Qing and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 brought in a new era for sojourners. Wang writes,

> Calling them *huaqiao* … involved a normative exercise that affirmed a national consciousness, a faith in the rejuvenation of China, and a name to be worn as a badge of pride. Sojourning became a national duty, with the republican government responsible for the sojourners' preservation and protection (G. Wang 2000:70).

From the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Department emerged. Its work was expanded beyond fundraising and diplomatic protection to education and identity retention. When the Kuomintang (KMT) came to power in 1928, the commitment to promote overseas Chinese welfare became even stronger. This was accomplished not only through consular offices but also through locally recruited KMT members.[7]

[7] Wang writes that Chinese government efforts had differing results with the two major groups of *huaqiao*, those in Southeast Asia and those in migrant states of the Americas and Australasia. In the latter migrant states, government policies had less impact because they coincided with a period when sojourners were ageing, reduced in numbers, and no fresh immigration permitted. In Southeast Asia, increasing wealth brought more sojourners; however, colonial governments were increasingly alarmed by the rising

Lynn Pan argues that remittances were the primary reason for policy shifts on overseas Chinese. Remittances from overseas Chinese supported parents, wives, and children left in China; remittances also built houses, ancestral halls, graves, schools, and bridges. According to Pan, between 1929-1941 overseas Chinese remittances averaged between US$80-100 million per year. By the early to mid-1950s, over 8.5 million wives left behind in China were dependent on money sent home by emigrants (Pan 1994:205). These remittances became a sort of foreign aid for China. The matter of how to keep the funds flowing into China was a primary concern for successive Chinese governments. The Manchu answer "Chinese, wherever born and wherever resident, were Chinese subjects", based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* was used by later governments to maintain the allegiance of overseas Chinese (Pan 1994:206).

Ling-chi Wang corroborates Pan's view that the *huaqiao* were viewed "first and foremost as an economic asset" (L. Wang 1994:186). They were a source of remittances and a key link to international trade. They would also, later, be viewed as the leading force in China's modernisation. L. Wang argues that for these reasons, China's primary concern with regard to overseas Chinese has been their loyalty:

> Cultivating and ensuring the loyalty of overseas Chinese to the homeland – both cultural and political – has thus been a primary task of successive governments since the late 19th century (L. Wang 1994:186).

Interventionist policies of the Republic of China (1912-1949) led to continuous calls for patriotism and financial support that were taken to every overseas Chinese community (G. Wang 2000:79). However, not all sojourners, especially local-born, cared to respond politically to Chinese nationalism. Wang Gungwu writes, "While proud of being Chinese, these small groups were not necessarily attracted to the new Chinese national identity" (G. Wang 2000:79). Chinese government and party officials did not take into account the different conditions under which various sojourner communities lived. He argues that some of their tactics were damaging for Chinese overseas who

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Chinese nationalism. Sojourner nationalism also raised fears in emerging indigenous nationalist leaders. In addition, there were also tensions between various groups of Chinese themselves, between those who had learned Chinese and looked Chinese and those who were mixed and/or educated in local or colonial languages (G. Wang 2000:72-73).

were seen as potentially disloyal subjects in the countries in which they lived (G. Wang 2000:80).[8]

Chinese nationalism and patriotism reached its climax in the 1940s when the effort to support the anti-Japanese war in China was at its height; however, the patriotic model became a double-edged sword when China became communist. After 1949, especially in anti-communist states, every Chinese was suspected of being a Communist or a sympathiser whose loyalty could never be trusted. The problems for the sojourners were compounded by the fact that China continued its appeals to patriotic *huaqiao* to return to help build socialism. Wang Gungwu writes that in Southeast Asia the majority, especially amongst the local-born, did not share such intense patriotism and stayed put (G. Wang 2000:83).

In 1954 China (PRC) repudiated the principle of *jus sanguinis,* but continued to offer China as a place of refuge to expellees and voluntary repatriates. On the other side of the Straits, the KMT inherited the *jus sanguinis* law and continued to apply it in Taiwan after 1949. The KMT also worked hard for the allegiance of the overseas Chinese. Pan writes:

> To rally the millions of expatriate Chinese to its flag was to enlarge its fief; to relax its grip upon them was perhaps to allow them to drift into the arms of the Communists… it vied with the Communists for the hearts and minds of the expatriate Chinese, turning every Chinatown into an arena of Nationalist-Communist rivalry…to win them over to Chinese culture was, it was hoped, to win them over to Taiwan, for it was the boast of the Nationalists that they rather than the Marxist iconoclasts of the Chinese mainland, were the orthodox guardians of Chinese cultural tradition (Pan 1994:222).

To this end, Taiwan sent money for clubs and newspapers; they sent teachers and teaching materials; they promoted the Chinese language and Chinese education in immigrant communities. These Chinese schools were "what kept the overseas Chinese communities Chinese, generation after generation" (Pan 1994:206). In addition, the

[8] This issue will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

schools engendered and nurtured the expatriates' political loyalties to China (Taiwan) and the KMT.[9]

Competition between the Communists and the Nationalists for the "hearts and minds of the *huaqiao*" in the post 1949 period was about support for the political legitimacy of the government of Taiwan or conformity with the revolutionary nationalism on the mainland (G. Wang 2000:86). In South Africa, the Chinese Nationalists based in ROC/Taiwan became the official 'China' recognised by the apartheid government; the Chinese Consul-General officially represented the Chinese Nationalists. In addition, as mentioned in previous chapters, the KMT had started numerous clubs in South African cities; these had local members as their agents, as will be shown in the section below.

***Chinese nationalism and anti-communism in South Africa***

Branches of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), were established from 1920 onwards in Johannesburg, Kimberley, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth (Yap and Man 1996:244). At the launch of the Port Elizabeth branch, the delegates from all parts of South Africa toasted the "reawakening of Chinese nationalism and patriotism" (Yap and Man 1996:245).[10] While the leadership of these organisations would have been a generation older than my oldest interviewees, there remain several card-holding members of the KMT amongst the older Chinese South Africans.[11]

As discussed earlier, the second Sino-Japanese war united the South African Chinese in a new spirit of patriotism toward China. This was a key event for the parents of the oldest interviewees – the one that consolidated the importance of their identification as Chinese. It also shaped the views of these interviewees: that they grew up in homes that flew the flag of the Chinese republic – where China was referred to as 'home' – had long-lasting impact on their sense of identity and home.

[9] The impact of such policies in South Africa will be shown in the following section of this chapter.
[10] Wu, in Tu's *The Living Tree*, writes about the ability of the KMT to forge and maintain a Chinese nationalist identity amongst overseas Chinese even in the tiny Chinese community living on remote islands of Papua New Guinea (Wu 1994:153).
[11] None of the interviewees mentioned that they, personally, had membership in the KMT, although several spoke about their parents' membership.

Several factors – the long-term struggle between the KMT and the Communists in China, the aftermath of the 1949 Communist Party victory, and the South African government's views and policies on communism – together produced many staunchly anti-communist Chinese South Africans.[12] For many of the older Chinese, growing up during these struggles translated into a loyalty for the exiled Nationalist government of the Republic of China/Taiwan. John, 61, for example, said that most local Chinese hated communism and maintained their support of the ROC government because of the suffering of the Chinese people, including relatives, under the Communists. However, he also spoke of the 'brainwashing' of his parents' generation by the exiled Nationalist government. He stated:

> The fact is, I think that most local Chinese hate communism for what they did to our people in China. In some ways, I think some of our parents were brainwashed by the Nationalists also. But besides that, the letters we get from China tell us what was going on there, like the famine they had in 1966…a lot of them are still very loyal to the ROC…but then, there is a lot of old guards (sic) who are very staunch Nationalists. They say they will never bow to the communism, the way they treated the old people in China. I don't know if you know, but in China, they were very, very brutal…Nationalist China was the only legitimate government and most of us were Nationalists.

Interestingly, over one-quarter of the survey respondents reported feeling some level of patriotism to China, with about 5% reporting that they are very patriotic to China and another 21% stating that they are somewhat patriotic to China. As with the interviews, there was a strong link between age and feelings for China. Almost 86% of those who professed that they were very patriotic to China were 60 or older. Patriotism to China was also correlated with generation, with second-generation respondents much more patriotic than third- or fourth-generation respondents. In a related cross tabulation, those with less education reported that they were more patriotic to China: 67% of those with below standard 6 education reported that they were very patriotic and another 33% of those in this age group said that they were somewhat patriotic.

[12] After the communist victory in mainland China, many countries that were host to Chinese immigrants experienced fears that the 'Yellow Peril' was also the 'Red Peril'. During the Cold War, Chinese and Communist, race and ideology, anti-sinicism and anti-communism were viewed as one and the same. These fears led to the persecution and expulsion of many Chinese throughout South East Asia (Malaya 1950-52, Burma 1967, Cambodia 1975, Vietnam late 1970s, and Indonesia 1960) and India in 1962. Many were killed in violent anti-Chinese attacks; many more were repatriated to China. In the US, the Chinese in an effort to prove themselves loyal Americans styled themselves as Nationalist/Taiwan supporters (Pan 1994:215-220).

The agents of the so-called 'brainwashing' mentioned by John above would have been the official representatives of the Nationalist government of the ROC/Taiwan in South Africa, the Chinese Consul-General. This next section discusses the relationship between the Consul-General and the Chinese South African community, focusing, in particular, on the impact of that relationship on the loyalties and identities of the local Chinese.

**The Chinese Consul-General in South Africa**

The history of the Chinese South African community's interaction with the Chinese Consul-General serves as good indicator of the community's shifting loyalties and identities. Prior to 1950, most Chinese in South Africa, regardless of the actual land of their birth, had counted themselves as Chinese. With the simultaneous 'closing off' of China and the implementation of apartheid in South Africa, Chinese began to question their identity and their loyalties. During these years, China, through the Chinese Consul-General,[13] maintained a powerful grip on the hearts and minds of the Chinese South Africans, particularly with the oldest Chinese South Africans and the generations that preceded them. Gradually, however, younger people born in South Africa began to question the legitimacy of 'representation' by the officials of a foreign government, and indigenous Chinese South African organisations began to operate independently of the Chinese Consul-General. This section will cover the principal activities of the Chinese Consul-General and this gradual shift from Consul-General to local community organisations as the 'voice' of the Chinese South African community.

***Education, cultural retention, and political support***

The primary role of the Consul-General's offices vis-à-vis the local Chinese community in South Africa was to support Chinese culture and language. The Consul-General of the ROC, through the years, provided financial and in-kind support (of Chinese

[13] Given the anti-communist leanings of both the South African government and the resident Chinese community, the 'government' representing China in South Africa was the Nationalist government in exile on Formosa, later Taiwan. The Republic of China (ROC) continued to be the official Chinese representative in South Africa until 1996 when South Africa switched their diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China on the mainland.

teachers, books, and other educational materials) to several of the Chinese schools around the country[14], for sports activities, including the annual Easter Tournament (an annual sports gathering of Chinese South African communities from around the country and Chinese communities from neighbouring countries), and for cultural activities, festivals, and dance lessons, amongst others.

Joel, in his early 60s, explained that the Consul-General had a long-standing involvement with the Chinese school in Pretoria pre-dating apartheid. During the years of prohibition and restrictive residential rights, the Consulate-General, permitted to purchase land and alcohol, was often asked to assist the local Chinese community. Joel explained further:

> The (Chinese) school (in Pretoria) started in 1934.[15] At that time, we weren't allowed to buy property. We weren't even allowed to buy drinks. That's how strict the laws were. And whenever you have a Chinese wedding, you must have drinks, so, we'd invite the Consulate at the time, because the Consulate was allowed to buy drinks. So, the Consulate was invited to all Chinese weddings. And the old property (for the Chinese school) was bought under the Consulate name – the Consulate-General from the ROC at the time – that was the only representative in South Africa up until 1994 (sic) when the ANC government recognised (the PRC).

The ROC government had been, according to interviews, providing financial support to the local community for Chinese community cultural and educational activities. Some of the older Chinese South Africans believed that without this support the Chinese culture would have died. Barbara S, 64, claims, "Our Chinese culture would've died out 25 years ago without Taiwan and the Taiwanese people."[16]

In addition to the legitimate educational and cultural matters, the Consul-General interceded with the South African government on behalf of the local Chinese South African community for increased privileges for the local community. As described in Chapter One, from the earliest days of their presence in South Africa in the early 20th

[14] Chinese schools in South Africa will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
[15] The Chinese community started the Chinese school in Pretoria initially to teach English to adults.
[16] Quite a few of the overseas Chinese scholars write of the influence of Chinese schools, especially in Southeast Asia, in teaching a China-oriented identity. See, for example Pan 1994, G. Wang 2000, and Wu 1994.

century, they helped to lobby on behalf of the local community for rights, privileges, and concessions, and for better treatment of the local Chinese. As one of South Africa's major trading partners, Taiwanese officials had access to national and provincial government offices. Questions of identity and legitimacy as their community 'representative' aside, local Chinese made practical and strategic decisions to utilise the Consul-General to gain entry to South African government offices. Several of the interviewees mentioned various issues or times when they went to the Consul-General to request that he speak on behalf of the local community. Michael T, 66, explained:

> The ROC, in those days, we would only deal with culturally and educationally. But there were times when we had to appeal to one of the ambassadors…he would have helped us in a lot of political matters…you know, getting us permits to allow (local) Chinese to do apprenticeships with whites at technikon – that type of thing, because at that time they held a lot of leverage in this country because of trade relations. Therefore, they were able to persuade the (South African) government to do a lot of things.

Both Joel and Andrew K, 63, corroborated Michael's statement. They spoke of the fact that the Chinese diplomats had entrée to South African government officials whereas they did not. Joel said,

> If you look at it from a South African point of view, the Chinese…the diplomatic corps had inroads into the (South African) government officials where the community couldn't (sic.). So, the community would ask them for help as far as representation and to speak for us.

Andrew reported that most of the Chinese officials were very supportive. He said that the local community requested their intervention when they deemed it necessary.

> The Chinese – we did not refer to them as Taiwanese at the time – they have been very supportive … However, yes, where we could we had pushed them to help us because they had government recognition. After all, they were country representatives and they could see certain government officials, whereas we could not. They could open many doors. In many cases, they were actively supporting the local community."

The Chinese state, through the offices of the Consul-General also had their own rationale for assisting the local Chinese in South Africa; the consequence of financial, cultural, and political support was Chinese South African indebtedness and loyalty. Initially, these feelings of gratitude spilled over onto Taiwan, manifesting in patriotism and bleeding into their sense of identity. For at least the first few decades of apartheid

the ROC was quite successful in 'purchasing' the allegiance of many of the Chinese South Africans, as was their intention (Pan 1994, G. Wang 2000). As younger Chinese South Africans, born and educated in a South Africa, began to take leadership positions in local Chinese organisations, they began to question the role of the Consul-General.

***Chinese South Africa's legitimate representative?***

After earlier failed attempts to form a united Chinese organisation, the Chinese managed to re-group in 1950 to establish the Central Chinese Association of South Africa (hereafter referred to as Central). The primary catalyst for the formation of a unified national Chinese organization was the introduction of the Group Areas Act. The preamble of their constitution stated, "The Association owes no allegiance to any organisation; neither will it accept any direction from any body in- or outside the Union of South Africa. It is subservient to none, nor does it subscribe to any political ideology" (as quoted in Yap and Man 1996:323). However, for the first decade of its existence the Consul-General played a key role in the Chinese South African community's national body. The Consul-General called together the various community representatives to form the central body, assisted in making representations to government, and acted as arbiter for the many different interest groups.

In the mid-1960s some members of Central began to question the role of diplomatic personnel in the association's decision-making. Differences of opinion and approach between the older and younger members of Central centred on the key issue of whether the Chinese owed their primary loyalty to China or to South Africa, together with coordination difficulties, general lack of unity, and personality differences led to the demise of Central in 1967 (Yap and Man 1996:324-325). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, young people debated their place, position, and role in South Africa. Even more than the older second-generation Chinese South Africans, theirs was a life of in-between-ness. Concerns about their identity were discussed and debated throughout this period:

> Virtually all the publications produced by the Chinese throughout the 1960s and 1970s debated their role and place in South African society. Obviously differentiated by race, but settled for two or more generations, younger people in particular questioned how 'Chinese' they still were and where they belonged.

> Loathe to describe themselves as South Africans since they were neither accepted nor treated as citizens, they nonetheless questioned the sense of owing 'loyalty' to a far-off homeland, either mainland China or Taiwan. (Yap and Man 1996:404-405).

While the older generation still often referred to the Consul-General of the Republic of China in exile on Taiwan as their representative, these younger people (now middle-aged) were more concerned about their own role and future in South Africa and questioned the role of the Consul-General, pointing out that their representations on behalf of the South African Chinese community perpetuated the view of them as foreigners. Debates and discussions also covered the loss of Chinese language and culture, their increasing westernisation via education in white schools, and the fact that South Africa, and not Taiwan or mainland China, was home.

Throughout this period, the Consul-General remained involved in a number of negotiations on behalf of the Chinese South Africans regarding rights, privileges, and permits primarily because the South African government, too, used the Consul-General for official purposes. For example, in order to travel between provinces by train, it was necessary to get a "letter of reference from the Consul-General (that) testifies to a community member's social standing as was required at least until the mid-1970s before Chinese could purchase train tickets." (Yap and Man 1996:361)

Assistance from the Consul-General was also sought by older community members in order to help get Chinese South Africans into the trades. Dan, 53, recalled asking the ROC officials for assistance:

> On the issue of allowing Chinese South Africans to become tradesmen, the local EPCA[17] went to the ROC representatives who went to the South African government. It was effective because, at the time of sanctions, Taiwan was one of the only countries with official relations with South Africa and this worked to the advantage of the local South African Chinese.

There were times, however, when the political intervention of the ROC government officials was seen as meddlesome. This increasingly became the case as more Chinese

[17] The Eastern Province Chinese Association, which is still the official name of the Chinese association of Port Elizabeth and surrounds.

South Africans began to question the role of the Consul-General in their community. Part of the problem, of course, was that both the South African and the Chinese governments viewed the Consul-General as the legitimate representative of the Chinese South African community.

Conflicts between the Chinese officials and the Chinese South African community, which had started to arise in the 1960s, were further fuelled by the nomination of a Chinese community member to the President's Council in the late 1970s[18] despite the Chinese community's decision not to participate. Melvin, 72, a long-time community leader in Kimberley, spoke at length about this incident. In his view, the then ambassador of the ROC nominated an individual to the President's Council despite protests from the local Chinese community because he wanted someone within government whom he could manipulate. Melvin and others saw this as a betrayal by both the ambassador and the nominated individual. At issue was the question: who was the legitimate 'voice' of the Chinese South African community? While many older Chinese South Africans still had loyalties to the Consul-General and the ROC for earlier moral and financial community support, younger Chinese were starting to challenge the involvement of the Chinese government officials in their local affairs.

The controversies over the nomination of one of their members to the President's Council and the involvement of the Consul-General in those negotiations with the South African government against the wishes of the majority of the Chinese South African community served as the proverbial 'last straw' in the mounting tensions between the Consul-General and the younger Chinese South Africans. Questions around loyalties and identities, brewing within the community for almost two decades, finally exploded around this issue. After nearly a hundred years in South Africa, some Chinese finally began to feel more South African than Chinese. Education and professionalisation increased self-confidence; they felt, minimally, that they were capable of representing their own interests to the South African government.

[18] The President's Council was one of the recommendations of the 1979 Schlebusch Commission of Inquiry. In brief, it was to serve as an advisory body to the President, and include White, Coloured, and Indian. Both the exclusion of Blacks in both bodies and the inclusion of a Chinese representative on the President's Council drew much criticism from opposition parties.

The perceived crisis of how to respond to the President's Council provided the impetus to renew communication between the various regional associations and spurred the formation of the Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) in 1981. CASA had as its aims: the attainment of full rights for the Chinese, the preservation of the Chinese cultural identity, safeguarding and promoting the interests of the Chinese, assisting the community in overcoming difficulties, fostering harmony and goodwill among Chinese and promoting good relations with all other communities (Yap and Man 1996:412). The formation of CASA marked the official end of representation of Chinese South African interests by the diplomats of the ROC/Taiwan. Both the Ambassador of the ROC/ Taiwan and the new CASA chairman acknowledged that (a) diplomats must serve their own country and (b) it was time for the Chinese South Africans to stand on their own feet, look after their own interests, and play out their role as citizens of South Africa (Yap and Man 1996:413).

***Offers of physical protection***

The one exception to the gradually diminishing role of the Consul-General occurred toward the very end of apartheid, in the upheavals and violence of the early 1990s. Taiwan's claims over all overseas Chinese apparently extended to offers of protection when there was violence or the threat of violence against Chinese South Africans. Several of the Chinese South Africans spoke of offers of protection and Taiwan's claims of sovereignty over all Chinese. Barbara S, 64, recollected offers of assistance from the ROC officials:

> With the elections in 1994…there were all these people (who) expected something to happen…and the Taiwanese government was quite prepared to come to the rescue of the South African Chinese people. They were quite willing to rescue them and take them, if need be, out of South Africa.

Dan, 53, recalled both Taiwan's influence with the South African government as well as offers of 'rescue' should the local Chinese community feel physically threatened:

> The Taiwan government still has quite an influence…on the government here…but if we were to have something of a very serious nature we were told (that) we could approach the Chinese government in Cape Town … Was it (the) last year the riots occurred? The Consul-General's men came down and gave us an assurance that in the event of us being…harassed by the people, whoever it

> was trying to overthrow the government, or any danger, that there were the fishing boats outside the territorial waters of South Africa…that if it would so happen that something serious was going to happen to our Chinese community, that he would get us on those boats…all we had to do was to keep in contact with Cape Town…that was the assurance given to us and we didn't doubt that.

Melvin, 72, spoke generally about his views about the Chinese state's views of overseas Chinese. His understanding was that the Chinese government still considers all overseas Chinese as people of China. He viewed it as a natural consequence, then, that the Consul General's office or ambassador would intervene in foreign countries and engage with foreign governments to protect 'her people' in the face of threats. Using the Indonesia case as an example, he stated:

> If any harm comes to their citizens, like what happened in Indonesia, then the Chinese government… would feel obliged to say that these are my citizens, we want protection, we don't want this wanton killing, and … I was quoting the case of Indonesia, where a lot of Chinese properties were burnt and looted and Chinese were killed and so on, you know? They didn't ask China for protection, but China feels that "*these are my people and they are being harmed"*…(if) it is racial unrest…(if) there was anti-Chinese sentiment, if there was violence against the Chinese, Chinese being killed, Chinese properties being destroyed…then…the Chinese government would step in and say that he would like to see the South African government take steps to see that the Chinese people are not harmed. That is reasonable…because China still regards Chinese, or Taiwan, or both, *they still regard Chinese in foreign countries as their people*. (Italics added.)

He also indicated that he understood the struggle between the ROC and the PRC, in terms of their attempts to win over the loyalties of overseas Chinese.

> ROC always wanted the support of all the overseas Chinese … even though Chinese people were born in foreign countries, Taiwan still wants to try to command as much loyalty from Chinese in foreign countries.

Offers of protection did a great deal to further entrench the loyalties of the Chinese South Africans to China during the apartheid era, particularly when they were feeling excluded from South Africa. While the Sino-Japanese War served to consolidate patriotism toward China and Chinese identity for an earlier generation, apartheid in South Africa, in the reverse manner, did the same for many of the older Chinese South Africans. Despite the concessions they received as a community, the consolidation of discrimination under apartheid made South African-born Chinese feel like foreigners in

the land of their birth. South Africa's nationalism excluded them. Officially, South Africa addressed the members of the Chinese community in South Africa through the offices of the Chinese Consul-General regardless of the fact that many were now second- and third-generation South Africans. Simultaneously, China, through the offices of the Consul-General, embraced and claimed them. They offered protection, sanctuary, and an ethnic home. Neither the Chinese South Africans nor the governments of South African or Taiwan seemed to see any conflict in treating Chinese born in South Africa as Chinese nationals.

***Ambiguous loyalties and identities***

While the Consul-General bowed to the wishes of the Chinese South African community and allowed CASA to take the lead in representing the community to the South African government, they maintained their role, albeit more quietly, as a "protector" of the community. As mentioned above, these promises of protection and sanctuary, held out at times of greatest insecurity and instability, did much to persuade many Chinese South Africans to retain at least some loyalty to China. The promises of rescue and safe haven in times of turmoil were, however, a more powerful tool for the older Chinese South Africans than for any of the younger generations of Chinese South Africans, who could not envision China as 'home'.

Paul C, in his mid-40s, spoke about the loyalties of the older generation toward China:

> Even today, there are people staying in Cape Town who are still members of the KMT – and they have never been to Taiwan. So their identity of being Chinese stems from the fact that they had a certain amount of recognition from the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAC) in both Taiwan and now mainland China. So, where they weren't recognised in their own country, South Africa, they were still recognised in the country of their birth. So the ties were very much with China from the older community. And in that sense, they were Chinese. They got the recognition from the OCAC and from the Chinese governments … It was very important to my father's generation and I'd like to think that it's very important to my generation.

The oldest of my interviewees, their parents, and their grandparents were those most affected by their interaction with these Chinese officials in South Africa. From the late 1920s, it was the Nationalists who represented China in South Africa. In the case of

South Africa's small Chinese population, the KMT's strategies seem to have worked until very recently:[19] political loyalties lay solidly with the Nationalists in Taiwan; the Consul-General's offices were credited with helping the Chinese South Africans retain their culture and their language; and many of the older interviewees continue to call China 'home'.

This older group of Chinese South Africans still has a great deal of ambiguity with regard to the official Chinese diplomatic corps in South Africa. There was an almost constant confusion with regard to the use of possessive pronouns when referring to the Consul-General or the ambassador of China, whether ROC or PRC, to South Africa. Many of these oldest interviewees still regard the representative of ROC or PRC as 'our' representative. For example, Melvin, 72, says that the local community regards the Consul-General as 'their' Consul-General; initially, it would appear, this is due to their common racial and ethnic identity as Chinese, but later he says that this is for reasons of sentimental attachment.

> No. We did regard him as our Consul-General … when we had any dealings with the Consul-General, we did so as Chinese. Not Chinese citizens, but (as) Chinese. Because we're not Chinese citizens; we're born here; we're South African… Although we are South African by birth, we are still Chinese…There is a sentimental attachment. It's not a legal attachment. It's more of a sentimental attachment… You know, it's just a questions of…we say "our" because it's from our motherland, from our country, and we're identifying the officials here because they come from our country.

Middle-aged Chinese South Africans, the generation in the leadership of CASA, may have continued to use the offices of the Consul-General throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, but they did so strategically; the Chinese diplomatic corps was an instrument utilised to gain access to South African government channels which, otherwise, were closed to them. The youngest interviewees, in stark contrast, had virtually no contact at all with the Consul-General. Apart from those who took advantage of ROC-sponsored

[19] In 1996 South Africa switched diplomatic ties from the ROC to the PRC. In addition, because of the strengthening of economic and political relations between South Africa and both Chinese countries, South Africa has seen unprecedented immigration from both these countries as well as from Hong Kong. These new Chinese immigrants have enlarged and diversified the community of Chinese in South Africa. The challenges that these new Chinese immigrants present to the Chinese South Africans will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

tours to China and Taiwan, their relationship to China, its governments, and its representatives in South Africa remain distant.

However, despite the declining influence of the Consul-General in the day-to-day lives of the Chinese South African community, the emotional power and pull of the 'motherland' remain strong, especially in the face of exclusion and discrimination in the land of their birth. The following section of this chapter focuses on the impact of an increasingly mythologized China on the Chinese South Africans.

**China as 'home': connection to a mythical China**

> China's glorious past still exerts power over the imagination of most first generation Chinese wherever they many be, but how strongly and for how long? For how many generations can that last? Chinese humiliations and failures since the mid-19th century can arouse strong nationalist feelings, but the mystique of Chineseness has survived only among those who received a fair amount of Chinese education when young and seems to fade among those born overseas and educated in non-Chinese schools (G. Wang 1998:10).

This chapter, responding to Wang's questions above, attests to the strength and long-lasting power of the myth of the 'great China' in South Africa. Contrary to Wang's suggestion that 'China's glorious past' will cease to exert great power after the first generation of Chinese, in South Africa it continues to exert its power over third- and even fourth-generation Chinese South Africans, despite their lack of a 'proper' Chinese education in China. While previous sections have focused on familial ties in and travel to China, as well as the continued political and cultural links to the Chinese state via the Consul-General, this section focuses on Chinese South Africans' emotional and psychological connection to China.

The China of the hearts and minds of the Chinese South Africans has taken on mythical proportions, especially in terms of their sense of belonging to an imagined 'great China'. This is, perhaps, the most important aspect of their China connection with regard to their identity and their sense of their Chineseness. This myth of a former 'great China', which exists in most overseas Chinese communities, seems to ignore the last one and a half centuries of Chinese history of Western imperialism – the collapse of

the Manchu dynasty, warlord struggles, Japanese aggression, the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists, the mis-guided principles of the PRC, and the two China struggle. Instead, the mythologized China evokes a historical consciousness, cultural continuity, social harmony, and a sense of rootedness and centeredness (Tu 1994:vii). Other overseas scholars, too, have observed this imagined China's "power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance" (Shwarz in Hall 1992b:106), but note that this ability is not consistent.

This last section will show that this mythical China continues to hold sway over Chinese South African identities, albeit with decreasing power over time and generation. I propose that there are two key reasons, which, combined, explain the lasting power of 'China's glorious past' in South Africa; they are (a) apartheid, specifically the apartheid state's treatment of Chinese South Africans as foreigners or second-class citizen and (b) the continued claims of the Chinese state over the Chinese South Africans. These two factors explain the lasting strength of their imagined kinship ties to an imagined 'great China'.

Numerous scholars have written about the importance of ethnic identification, kinship ties, and the psychological bond that joins a people. Walker Connor, for example, writes:

> 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 … it is not what *is* but what people *perceive as is* which influences attitudes and behavior. A subconscious belief in the group's separate origin and evolution is an important ingredient of national psychology (Connor 1998:44).

It is not so much a real history of separate origins, but the *belief* in these separate origins that provides the power of ethnic identification and national spirit. While many social scientists dismiss primordialism and essentialism, it is impossible to ignore the emotional attachment and psychological power of that which is felt. When it comes to nationalisms and ethnic identity, the stirrings of kinship ties, obligations, and loyalties, real or imagined, continue to exert tremendous power. This is the stuff over which wars are fought. Histories of separate origins can be found across the globe, but none has

proven to be as powerful or as long lasting as the myth surrounding the 'Yellow Emperor' (Pan 1994, G. Wang 2000, Hu-deHart 1999, Louie 2004, Tu 1994, L. Wang 1994, Wu 1994).

Numerous China scholars have written about the particular nature of Chinese ethnic bonds. Part of the strength of Chinese nationalisms, throughout the years of changing dynasties and political leaders is the length of Chinese recorded history. China, it has been stated, is not merely a state, but a civilisation – a civilisation that many ordinary Chinese still believe to be superior:

> To ordinary Chinese, the traditional view of being at the centre of existence has always been an important aspect of being Chinese. This anthropocentric view is based on a deep-rooted sense of belonging to a unified civilization that can boast several thousand years of uninterrupted history. (Wu 1994:149)

China's myth of descent from the 'Yellow Emperor' continues to wield power over millions of Chinese, both in and outside of China. As Tu Wei-ming writes, one of the features of being Chinese is the myth of origin:

> Surely a salient feature of being Chinese is to belong to a biological line traceable, as the legend goes, to the Yellow Emperor. This ethnic identification, mythologized in the idea of the 'dragon's seed,' evokes strong sentiments of originating from the same progenitor. (Tu 1994: preface)

He continues to say that recent studies have shown that the existence of a superior Chinese culture is, at best, a myth. He writes, "In truth, the Chinese people and Chinese culture have been constantly amalgamating, restructuring, reinventing, and reinterpreting themselves. *However, the Chinese people have not been conscious of using such a cultural construction*" (Tu 1994:151, italics added). The truth of myths of origin is not as important as the belief that they are true or the sentiments that they evoke.

For those who were far from 'home' or the 'motherland' these beliefs carried great weight, particularly if the circumstances of their adopted or temporary homes are difficult. Lynn Pan writes that for overseas Chinese, this sense of shared origin provided comfort: "A consciousness of shared origin no doubt compensated for the feeling of being lost in a new country …" (Pan 1994:12). Luis Francia's essay on the

notion of 'home' in Asian American literature reveals that the view of Asia is ambivalent, but filled with longing "for all that the adopted home is not" (Francia 1999:205). He writes:

> That far-off place becomes a way of dealing with displacement, assuming a curative, revitalizing role … the country left behind … acts as a solid counterweight to the feelings akin to weightlessness (Francia 1999:20).

China as a place of one's roots and one's heritage certainly held a great deal of importance with many of the older Chinese South Africans. John, Michael, Andrew, and Melvin, all spoke of their pride as Chinese, a pride that was instilled in them by their parents. Their Chineseness, when they spoke about it in these terms, took on almost mythical elements. China was referred to as 'home' or 'motherland' and China was always imagined as powerful, advanced, and superior.

The aspects of longing for some far-off land, as a possible alternative re-siteing of 'home' when their South African home did not want them, were quite evident in the following statements made by some of my older interviewees. John K, 61, stated that he would consider retiring to China if things got really bad in South Africa. He also believed, exaggeratedly, that over two-thirds of the Chinese South Africans would do the same. He said,

> I know for a fact where my roots are. I know who I am…I am Chinese. I know my ancestors are all from China… After I have been back to China (sic), I realise that our roots are in China. Frankly, if things get worse here, I wouldn't even mind retiring there… I think I would even say 60-70-% take the same view I am taking now.

Andrew K, 63, also reported that he would move to China if the situation in South Africa deteriorated. He gave a number of reasons: he said that it might be because he is 'feeling' his Chineseness and because he would feel comfortable being amongst people who looked like him. He also mentioned his pride in China's recent transformation and achievements. He stated:

> My view is that if things don't work out over here and I am forced to move, my destination would be China…now maybe I am being a little bit materialistic and *maybe because the Chinese in me is coming out*, (but) there is where the future lies. There is great transformation going on and (mean)while you are feeling more at home because you are among your people. Secondly, it seems to me to

> be the only growing colony in the world. So, from that point, that is where I would go… And I am looking forward to a united China and a very strong China that would make me proud to be Chinese.

Andrew K's comments reveal the way in which most Chinese South African's viewed their Chineseness – as something primordial and elemental. In addition, there were also cultural and political elements of Chineseness that were passed on from parents. For example, Mary M, 44, said that both of her parents were born in South Africa and sent to China as children; they went to school there for four or five years and then returned to South Africa when they were about twelve or thirteen years old, just before the war broke out. She said that her father constantly spoke of 'going home' to China.

> My father, although he was born in South Africa, he still says he feels he would like to go home to China…My father has been a patriot – PRC. He can recite Chinese poetry and literature, and he is very interested in anything to do with China. He is obsessed with it…he (says that he) would like to retire there.

John K, Andrew, and Mary M's parents reveal highly emotional and exaggerated levels of connection to an imagined China, a China of their memories, and a China of an imagined great future. This China of their dreams and longings says as much, in some ways, of their feelings of uncertainty about their real home in South Africa as about their feelings about China. In the latter half of the 1990s, the changes taking place, especially for older people, raised old fears about their tentative position in South Africa. Melvin, 72, was quite clear about his South African identity; however, he also spoke about his pride in China as a world power and China as his 'motherland'. He stated that in his heart, he felt very Chinese. His sentimental attachment was linked to China's suffering under other nations and, more recently, pride in its recent emergence as a major power. He also compared the Chinese to the Jews in terms of the strong ethnic identification.

> But, at heart, *I feel very Chinese*…There are several factors. In the first place, China was always dominated by foreign powers and that made me feel very, very strong about the injustices meted out to the Chinese people by their own country. That was one factor. And today, of course, China has emerged as a strong power – a power that must be counted in world affairs today – and that gives me a certain amount of pride: that from an oppressed country, China has emerged as one of the major powers today. I feel…I think a lot of Chinese feel that way, too. I can't speak for them, but I think a lot of Chinese probably feel that same feeling or sentiment about the *motherland*…It's the same like the

> Jews: the Jews have been persecuted…And that is why the Jews have such a strong identity with each other. They're Jewish first, South African second…

Amongst the older interviewees there was a very strong sentimental attachment to China as well as feelings of pride in and loyalty to China. Aaron, 62, in speaking of a trip to China, said, however, that his pride in China did not mean that he was any less South African.

> It was one of pride, in that we were amongst our own kind. And that didn't mean I was any less South African. I think it's to deal with countrymen's achievements. You have a loyalty to your ancestry. Does that make sense? … I think a country's strength does…if China were an underachieving, lazy in the eyes of the world, a poor country, then I wouldn't feel that kind of pride…And then, of course, the historical achievements of the Chinese people, the culture. I think this is something to do with our Chinese attitude toward others. We tend to feel a superiority when we…our heritage…that the Chinese were living in silk garments when the rest of the work was in animal skins, you know? …And now that China is a world power, makes us all proud.

Not surprisingly, ethnic pride was clearly strongest amongst the oldest interviewees and weakest amongst the youngest, third- and fourth-generation Chinese South Africans.[20] The survey showed a clear correlation between age and ethnic and national identity with the older Chinese South Africans feeling more strongly about their Chineseness. For example, 60% of those 70 or older saw themselves mainly as Chinese, and almost 40% of those 60-69 felt similarly. In contrast, close to 88% of those between 18-49 viewed themselves as mainly South African.

The most powerful myths are those which "influence what people think and do; which are internalized in their ways of thinking, and which they pass on consciously or subconsciously to their children and kin …" (Samuel and Thompson 1990:14-15). The notion of the superiority of the Chinese people and pride in their Chinese roots and history was ingrained into the next generation, the middle-aged Chinese South Africans, from the time they were children. Their parents, their Chinese teachers, and other elders

[20] There was some evidence, however, that there may be a current 'trend' amongst the youngest of this group 'rediscovering' their culture; this will be discussed in Chapter Five. With the influx of new immigrants there is certainly more Chinese presence in the major cities of South Africa together with greater opportunities for Chinese language lessons, more diverse food offerings, and greater opportunities to be with other Chinese people.

taught them that they should be proud of their Chineseness. Margaret, 52, said that these notions of superiority often extended into separatism and racism:

> I think the Chinese, by nature, are racist. I don't believe it is only the South African Chinese that are racist. Because ever since we were young, I think we were really a proud race…I remember when I was young, my parents saying over and over again, "You are Chinese!" and "The whites are barbarians!" And they said it in Chinese…I think it came from China. It came with my parents and my parent's friends…and my grandparents. Because to them, there was no other race but the Chinese. I mean, we were brought up that way. "You are Chinese!" I believe this racism comes from their parents and the belief that Chinese are the superior race.

These Chinese notions of racial superiority and encouragement of separatism fit quite well with the principles and policies of apartheid with one important exception: the Chinese were not treated as a superior people, but rather as second-class citizens. It was South Africa's treatment of the Chinese that encouraged the younger, newer generations of Chinese South Africans to maintain their attachments to China. As with the Asian Americans of Francia's essay,

> Sentimental identification with parents' or grandparents' homeland arises out of a continuing reluctance of larger society here to see Asian Pacific Americans as they are – citizens of color – and as they would be: full-fledged participants in a pluralistic American enterprise. 'Homeland' here becomes a refuge, a state of parity, a myth of their own hearts. (Francia 1999:213)

The myth of a great China continued to hold some power over the middle-aged Chinese South Africans, but was being challenged more and more with the younger Chinese South Africans. Mary M explained that her teachers at the Chinese school tried to ingrain in her a sense of pride in her Chinese history, heritage, and identity but that her later life experiences caused her to question much of this.

> The Chinese teachers…they used to say that you are Chinese. You've got five thousand years of history behind you. We are Chinese and we are number one…You know how it gets drummed into you? … It was drummed into my head as a child that we are Chinese first before South African. Our Chinese teacher from Taiwan used to tell us to be proud of our Chinese history, culture, etc., but I'm not sure how many really believed them as we felt more South African than Chinese…And my husband is doing the same to my children.

The youngest of my interviewees still had pride in their Chinese heritage, but it was primarily based on what their parents, grandparents, and Chinese teachers had told

them. They had little first-hand experience of China. This imagined China was countered by their experiences in South Africa, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s with greater privileges and concessions, fewer restrictions on their daily lives. Still, while their imagined China was less powerful, it was not entirely forgotten.

**Conclusion: The lasting power of China on Chinese South African identities**

The myth of a 'great China' lasted in South Africa at least one to two generations beyond that described by Wang Gungwu because of the particular circumstances of the South African Chinese. While they were born in South Africa, it was a South Africa that treated them initially as foreigners or second-class citizens. Feeling rejected by and excluded from South Africa, China became a refuge and a place of belonging. The Chinese state, on her part, embraced the South African Chinese and claimed them as her own. The distant state of their ancestors encouraged identification with China in real and practical ways, by offering support and protection at times when Chinese South Africans felt most vulnerable. This support validated their beliefs that they were 'sons of the Yellow Emperor' with a rich and ancient heritage in a mythical 'great China'; in the face of exclusion, this China could be imagined as 'home'. The construction of their Chinese South African identity, and in particular the unique, 'superior' Chinese aspects of their identity were both a form of protest and a matter of survival. The intentions were to set themselves apart from other South Africans, to remind themselves of their heritage, and to become socially acceptable to those in power.

Racial discrimination affected the daily lives of the Chinese, particularly of the older members of the community. It limited their opportunities, it influenced their sense of self, and it hindered their sense of possibility and imagination. South Africa denied them full citizenship although they were born in South Africa. They were excluded from the nation and granted only second-class citizenship. As discrimination against the Chinese community eased, as they were granted greater concessions and privileges, the need for an imagined alternate 'home' decreased resulting in the shifting identity over time. The decreasing levels of discrimination and the increasing levels of acceptance by white society diminished the need to re-site 'home' away from South Africa. Younger Chinese South Africans reported feeling 'less Chinese'; as they

succeeded in becoming more acceptable to white society, the less they needed their imagined China. But for several generations, their Chineseness – the sense of belonging to the great, imagined nation of China – was a peg upon which to hang their identity. China, both political and cultural, the real and the imagined, provided the Chinese South Africans with an identity 'refuge' and fulfilled their need to belong.