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

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CHAPTER FIVE
OUR OWN LITTLE BOX:
CHINESE SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

> When we were in school, when we were growing up, we were 'Chinese'. We weren't 'white'. South Africans would call us 'white', 'coloured', 'Asian', 'black' … So we used to make up our own little box for 'Chinese'. We never marked 'white'. We always made our own little box; we formed our own category. We used to get very indignant. Erin, 41

Introduction

In the late 1970s through the 1980s the Chinese South African community rejected a number of proposals and offers by white opposition parties and the National Party government of South Africa to give the Chinese white rights and include them on the white electoral rolls. They rejected these offers because they did not desire to be redefined as 'white'.[1] They wished, rather, to maintain their ethnic identity as Chinese *and* have full rights. Their desire to have 'their own box' – to be acknowledged as South African-born Chinese South Africans – was key in their decisions to forego rights and continue to live with the insecurity of life based on permits and exemptions. This chapter is about the boundaries and contents of that box[2] – that which is contained within the boundaries (Barth 1969) of their ethnic and cultural identity – and the shifting nature of the boundaries themselves.

Interviews indicated differences between the cultural identities of the Chinese South Africans of different generations, ages, and localities. Most agreed, for example, that generally older Chinese were 'more Chinese' and younger ones 'less Chinese'; new immigrants were viewed as 'real' Chinese whereas they – the local Chinese – were 'less real' or inauthentic (Louie 2004, Wu 1994, Dirlik 1999). Many social scientists criticise

[1] In the late 1970s and 1980s when these proposals were made, the leaders of the Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) had enough political savvy to realise that the apartheid government was in crisis. The decision to reject the white government's offers was made in part by weighing up the potential political costs to the Chinese community should there be a change in government. The community leaders also took a moral position on rights for all South Africans. These two reasons, as well as their desires to maintain their distinct and separate Chinese identity were the main issues of the debates that preceded the CASA decision.

[2] Barth (1969) used the imagery of a 'vessel'. Nagel (1994) used 'shopping cart'. Both wrote about the boundaries and content of ethnicity. I've chosen to use the 'box', as several of the interviewees spoke passionately about creating their own category. 'Box' in this instance is both literal and metaphorical.

these essentialist views of culture; however, popular, essentialist conceptions of culture – that people 'have' or 'possess' culture, and that it is natural, innate, and something inborn – have had a tremendous impact on the way Chinese South Africans viewed their own cultural and ethnic identity. As early as the 1940s, second-generation *shopkeepers*, particularly those from the smaller towns, adopted many western cultural practices, spoke mostly English to one another, and lost their Chinese language abilities. They expressed shame and sadness about their 'lost' or 'diluted' Chineseness. The youngest cohort took these notions a step further, referring to themselves and their peers as *bananas*: yellow on the outside, white on the inside.[3]

At the same time, Chinese South Africans were unwilling to give up their identities as Chinese. They maintained a high degree of pride in their heritage and culture while admitting that they had 'lost' so much of it. Their feelings of shame and their attempts to learn Chinese (to be discussed below) are further indications of this pride. The strength of their ethnic attachment (Min and Park 1999) is somewhat surprising. In the Asian American literature, ethnic attachment and ethnic identity of second- and third-generation Asian Americans is typically more distant. Min Zhou, on Asian American children writes:

> Immigrant children and children of immigrant parentage lack meaningful connections to their 'old' world. They are thus unlikely to consider a foreign country as a place to return to or as a point of reference. They are instead prone to evaluate themselves or to be evaluated by others by the standards of their new country (Zhou 1999:1-2).

Zhou's statement holds some truth for Chinese South Africans, and this study showed evidence of the continuing shift from China toward South Africa as a point of reference; however, Chineseness remains a vital part of Chinese South African identity.

This chapter examines the Chinese South African 'box' of ethnic identity. Here, I unpack some of the contents of their box: language, traditions and festivals, beliefs, and values. The chapter shows that both the boundaries and the contents of the box have shifted over time, adapted by the Chinese South Africans to their changing

[3] Louie's (2004) multi-generational Chinese American subjects as well as the Mississippi Chinese studied by Loewen (1971) are also referred to as *bananas*.

environments. It also shows that there are continuing individual and community shifts, occurring within an individual life span as a consequence of further demographic changes in South Africa. While the Delta Chinese have all but become white (Loewen 1971, 1988) and the Chinese of Trinidad completely creolised (Ho 1989), why and how have the Chinese in South Africa held on to their ethnic roots? Part of the answer was provided in Chapters Two and Three where it was argued that the strength of their ethnicity was a response to South African and Chinese state projects to define national and cultural identity. This chapter will develop the discussion further. I intend to provide evidence of a culture not 'diminished' and 'diluted', as the Chinese South Africans might have it, but transformed into a unique 'Chinese South African' configuration of cultural and ethnic identities.

Language

> As the central component of ethnicity, language has the strongest effect on integrating members into a particular ethnic group. Yet language is also the first element of the immigrant culture to disappear (Min 2002:6).

Pan (1994) [4] and Louie (2004) have written that immigrant generations of Chinese in North America and South East Asia often believed that without a Chinese education (in China) one could never be truly Chinese. Many of the first Chinese immigrants to South Africa did, in fact, send their children to China to be educated. The principal goal of a Chinese education was to instil Chinese language and culture. Language is typically one of the first items to be put into the 'box' of culture. If one were to measure Chinese South Africans' cultural authenticity based solely on language ability they would fall short. Most Chinese South Africans speak fluent English, and many others, Afrikaans. Some have learned a third (usually European) language. However, relatively few can boast of fluency in any Chinese language.[5]

[4] While Pan has received some popularity for her interesting and easy-to-read books on overseas Chinese, she has been much criticized by this comment and for her work, in general, in more scholarly communities, particularly in the US.

[5] The two main Chinese spoken languages in South Africa are Cantonese and Hakka or Moiyeanese. These two language groups are completely different and completely unintelligible one from the other.

This study has shown clear differences in language ability between the different age groups. Overall, the survey respondents' abilities to speak, read, or write in Chinese was limited despite a number of older respondents reporting that they could speak Cantonese or Moiyeanese fluently. There was a correlation between age and generation, with almost 90% of those who reportedly spoke Chinese fluently being second generation Chinese South Africans. Only 4% of third generation respondents reported language fluency and only about 25% spoke 'somewhat', as compared to 30% of second-generation respondents who reported fluency and 42% who spoke 'somewhat'. Of those who reported that they spoke no Chinese, 83% were third generation. Another 80% of the third generation respondents read no Chinese and almost 75% write no Chinese. The survey also indicated an inverse relationship between education and Chinese language skills. Respondents with less education had greater Chinese language skills than those with higher educational levels. The youngest respondents were the only exception. It is likely that these youngest respondents are taking advantage of the increased language class offerings brought on by the influx of new Chinese immigrants to South Africa.[6]

There were indications, as in other parts of this study, of differences between interview and survey data. In this case, the interviewees showed less Chinese language ability than the survey respondents. Higher levels of education at white schools explain these differences as the interview population had higher levels of 'white' education than the survey respondents.

Most of the *shopkeepers* reported speaking some Chinese as children. Currently they speak very little. In fact, none of the *shopkeepers* reported fluency in any Chinese language and three claimed no Chinese language ability at all. Most understood some Chinese and spoke a little 'kitchen' or 'village' Chinese[7] but had since lost most of their Chinese language skills. The *fence-sitters* were divided almost equally in thirds amongst those who reported 'some' Chinese ability, those who said that they spoke 'a

[6] This influx of new Chinese immigrants and their impact on the local Chinese community will be discussed in Chapter Seven.
[7] These are terms the interviewees used, referring to the 'informal' Chinese learned in the home rather than one formally learned in school.

little' Chinese, and those who had no Chinese language skills at all. Amongst the *bananas* only one of the fifteen reported speaking Cantonese at home, and he stated that he was not fluent. Of the few who claimed to speak Chinese fluently or pretty well, all were second generation.[8]

The few who retained Chinese language abilities were typically older and had been sent as children to China or Hong Kong to study. Those who can still speak Chinese grew up in homes where one or both parents insisted they speak Chinese or where they had to interpret for parents or grandparents who spoke no English. Abel, one of the younger second generation Chinese South Africans not only had immigrant parents, but also took Chinese lessons, and had further language reinforcement through contact with Chinese sailors and fishing crews in Cape Town's harbour.

Many interviewees reported speaking Chinese while their parents or grandparents were alive; however, the death of the older generations resulted in the loss of impetus and opportunity to practice Chinese language skills. Even Cyril (70), one of the only interviewees born in China, ceased speaking Chinese once his mother passed away. He also reported that because Kimberley had no Chinese school, none of his second-generation peers learned Chinese formally.

Schooling in South Africa required most children to learn both English and Afrikaans. Trying to learn a third language at home in addition to two school-required languages proved to be difficult for some. Rick reported that he spoke Chinese while growing up but has since forgotten much of it.

> We learned Chinese, but you also had to have English and Afrikaans. Chinese was an extra subject … As a youngster, I had to learn Chinese calligraphy… trying to learn English, Afrikaans, and Chinese – that became difficult. We were glad when we didn't have to learn Chinese to do our matric … My home language was really Chinese until I was about 17. Until 17, Chinese was still my home language. That was when I went overseas. When I came back, no Chinese was spoken (in the home).

[8] Note that while they might speak Chinese, most of them also report that they cannot read or write well.

Attending white schools, leaving home, and the death of the Chinese-speaking parent or grandparent were the most frequently given reasons for loss of Chinese language skills. Interviews also indicate that as early as the 1930s, when the eldest of this group was growing up, some Chinese parents chose to (and had the ability to) communicate with their children in English. Melvin's parents spoke to their children in English. Very few Chinese in Kimberley, like Melvin, retained any Chinese language skills.[9] Finally, quite a few of the couples explained that because they married between the two main groups of Chinese in the country, Cantonese and Moiyeanese (Hakka), English became the common language; this was the case with Richard and his wife.

For many of the older Chinese South Africans, home language changed during the course of their lives. As children they spoke 'kitchen' Chinese at home. As they began going to white or 'coloured' schools, left home, or married into another dialect group, their primary language switched to English. There were also regional differences. If they lived in predominantly Afrikaans-speaking areas or had to do business in Afrikaans, then Afrikaans became the primary spoken language. As Melvin reported, most Kimberley Chinese spoke English comfortably. Most of those who grew up in or around Pretoria or the Cape spoke more Afrikaans. In contrast, very few of the interviewees from the Johannesburg area spoke Afrikaans unless it was required of them in their work environments.

The loss of the Chinese language is associated with shame and embarrassment. It serves as further evidence of the gradual 'loss' of the Chinese South Africans' Chineseness. Alice, in her mid-40s, claimed the younger generation has been raised to be 'more white' and less Chinese. She pointed out that other ethnic South African

[9] Several of the Kimberley residents as well as current Johannesburg residents who grew up in Kimberley often spoke of the uniqueness of the Chinese community there. They were quite small and very close-knit. They are, by their reports, quite well educated and prosperous. For example, Melvin stated, "The Chinese in Kimberley were quite unique. My father's contemporaries were all very well spoken in English…the Chinese businesses were situated in different parts of the city…so they had more exposure to people who were fairly prominent in this town…And the result is, my father used to, always, apart from business, he used to have a lot of social conversation and that is why my father and his contemporaries were quite well versed in English." In addition to switching to English earlier than Chinese in other cities, they were, generally, more integrated in Kimberley life, both with the white and Coloured communities. They were quite 'westernised' and yet proudly Chinese. (as reported by Melvin in various e-mail communications in July and August 2004).

communities have retained their languages while the Chinese have forgotten theirs. She argued, quite emotionally:

> The younger generations here is more and more your South African side, more white side (sic) – they are brought up less Chinese. They even bring up their kids and they can't even speak the language. I say to them, "don't you think it is a bit disgusting – your kids can't even speak the language?" They look at me and say, "Well, what can we do? We don't even speak very well." I say, "Well, send them to a course at school or send them to a part-time learning centre where they can learn the language properly. Let them associate with the older generation so the older generation can speak to them and teach them the language." … The Greeks speak their own language. The Italians, the Spanish and Portuguese speak their own language as well.

Embarrassment about the loss of Chinese language became more pronounced with new immigration from Taiwan, China and other Chinese-sending countries. The late 1970s and early 1980s put second- and third-generation Chinese South Africans in direct contact with first language Chinese speakers. These new Chinese immigrants not only spoke Chinese but also expected the local Chinese to do the same. Similar expectations arose when Chinese South Africans travelled to China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. In contrast to these 'Chinese' Chinese or their 'very Chinese' parents or grandparents, interviewees saw themselves as 'not very Chinese'. Bradley, in his mid-20s, said that the new immigrants make him feel "less Chinese, because they think you don't belong."

As reflected in this new 'mirror', Chinese South Africans were made aware of their own inadequacies in terms of language and, by extension, their Chineseness. Carolyn, 26, stated:

> I am disappointed in myself that I don't speak Chinese. Despite my not having been brought up with it, I could have made every effort to learn. But because in the work environment, there hasn't been a need…it's only when we're at the Chinese functions, where you go and you meet other Chinese that you feel this inadequateness (sic) of not being able to … and they're so shocked when they hear, "No, I'm actually Chinese South African and I don't speak Mandarin."

Veronica, also 26, shared similar feelings:

> I'd love to speak Chinese better. I mean, it's bad. You're Chinese and you're supposed to speak Chinese…when people ask you, "do you know how to speak Chinese?" and you say "no" it's bad.

Quite a few of the *shopkeepers* expressed shame at their inability to speak better Chinese and guilt at their inability to pass the language on to their children. These feelings were linked to their beliefs that 'true Chinese' should speak the language. Rick, 60, explained how the older people made you feel ashamed:

> In the older generation there was a shame with those who can't speak Chinese…if you can't speak your language, they'll make you feel like it is not right, you should be ashamed of yourself if you can't speak your own language.

A number of Chinese South Africans were addressing their shame by attempting to learn Mandarin, taking advantage of the now numerous Mandarin classes on offer[10]. William, 57, and Albert, 73, reported studying Mandarin, with varying degrees of success. William mentioned that several of the Chinese South African women in his community "are all learning to read and write". Mark, 54, also spoke about the revival of Chinese language lessons in his community. In his view, the surge of Chinese language learning was an attempt by Chinese South Africans to reassert their ethnic pride and reclaim their Chineseness. He said,

> I think it is very much a case of being proud of one's identity and trying to uphold the identity, as such. We have lost so much and trying to get that back, you are really chasing against time at the moment… About my identity, I am very proud to be Chinese. Very, very proud.

Many other interviewees spoke, in similar terms, of 'loss' and 'dilution', about other aspects of their Chinese culture. The next section looks at the cultural practices of Chinese South Africans and their understanding of the shifts that have occurred.

Chinese culture

If the continued practice of Chinese traditions and the observance of various festivals is another way of 'measuring' Chineseness, Chinese culture in South Africa might, indeed, be viewed as 'diluted'. Most of the interviewees said that they were not 'very Chinese'. Many stated that they no longer participated in Chinese community activities or observed the various Chinese festivals. Interviewees spoke at length about the fact that they were 'losing their culture' or that the culture was being 'watered down'. Joseph,

[10] Again, this is due to the influx of new immigrants from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There are now numerous Chinese language courses offered around the country, quite often because the new immigrants want to ensure that their young children can retain their language abilities.

56, went further, concluding that the Chinese culture had already been lost and that even Chinese values were in jeopardy:

> We lost the culture of the Chinese, I think…the Chinese culture has actually dwindled. It doesn't have to mean mixed blood. Like I said, I've lost quite a bit of the Chinese culture. I think the circumstances and the situation…there are certain values that I think has to be passed down…the thing is, we're losing our values and we've become Westernised.

Many of those who still practiced Chinese ways credited their parents for their 'old-fashioned' or traditional upbringing. Several said that their mothers were very old-fashioned or that their fathers put extra emphasis on things Chinese. Melissa, 62, explained that her mother-in-law came to South Africa when she was older and brought with her many Chinese customs. Her own mother also came from China and put credence in numerous Chinese beliefs and practices, some of which Melissa continues.

> My husband does more than I do because (both) his parents came from China. Actually, his father came first and his wife didn't come for a long time – over twenty years. So, when she came here, she was much older. So, she brought quite a lot of the customs. But even with me, my mother came here, and there were certain things that we always had to do. Like in New Year, they put out lettuce and all that to start a fresh green year – my mother used to do this for Chinese New Year and New Year – it doesn't do any harm – like cucumber and lettuce in a bowl. It's a very common custom, because my aunt used to do that, too. She was superstitious.

About half of the *fence-sitters* claimed to still observe some Chinese traditions. Abel, 37, is the son of a former Chinese school principal. He claimed that because his parents were 'very Chinese', he learned more about Chinese culture than most of his peers.

A few of the *shopkeepers* mentioned regional differences in the continued practice of Chinese festivals, traditions. These cultural differences are based in part, on ethnic differences between the Cantonese, who are mostly in the Johannesburg and Pretoria areas and the Hakka who are based, primarily, in the coastal communities. Nearly all the interviewees who mentioned regional differences claimed that the Cantonese of the Transvaal were more traditional.[11] Johannesburg's larger Chinese community had a

[11] The Hakka have long been seen as outsiders in China. Their periodic migrations started over 3000 years ago. Along the way it is likely that they lost traditions and started new ones. They see themselves and are seen by the Cantonese as untraditional. As a result of their periodic migrations within China

critical mass large enough to maintain several Chinese associations and social clubs, various Chinese restaurants, and over the years, two Chinese schools. They were also able to support, en masse, festivals and other traditions. Similarly, Christine Ho, in her comparative study of Chinese communities in the Caribbean, noted that the larger Chinese population in Jamaica "enhanced the potential for reproducing traditional institutions" (Ho 1989:22). By contrast, in smaller towns with smaller Chinese populations, once the first generation Chinese passed away, there were few forces or institutions to encourage or direct the continued practice of Chinese customs. As previously mentioned, the smaller size of the Chinese community in minor towns had the effect of speeding the pace of acculturation to white South African society.

Young Chinese South Africans of all generations were exposed to Chinese customs and festivals at home. Those who attended Chinese schools received additional Chinese cultural education through Chinese teachers and school-centred activities. Funded primarily by contributions from the Taiwanese government, Chinese books and Chinese teachers were imported to ensure the younger generation had some knowledge of lion and dragon dances, moon festivals, and other celebrations. Andrew A (26) from Port Elizabeth reported: "When South Africa recognised the ROC, there were lots of dignitaries and functions at the Chinese school (in PE)…and that kind of encouragement stimulated Chinese culture." Similarly, Carolyn (26) also from Port Elizabeth reported: "My influence was being at the Chinese High School. That's where I got exposed to things like…Chinese New Year, Double Ten, celebrations and that. My family never imposed anything on me…(I had) no exposure to language or customs at home."

According to the *shopkeepers*, their Chinese culture was already 'diminishing' or 'being diluted' when they were growing up. At the root of this 'dilution' of culture, they argued, was the small size of their community within a larger 'foreign' and 'western' culture, the lack of movement to and from China (as was practiced by their parents), and the prohibitions against further immigration from China, which prevented continued

followed by large-scale migration out of China, it is likely that they have adopted different customs and practices, and learned to put great value in being flexible and adaptable. While a thorough investigation into the Hakka history was not within the scope of this research project, it is reasonable to conclude that fluidity and adaptability have become part of Hakka culture.

'infusions' of culture.[12] Some also argued that the increasing concessions to the Chinese South Africans by white South Africa encouraged assimilation into white South Africa. Several of these older Chinese South Africans even credited apartheid for keeping the community together; many of them, in fact, viewed their acceptance into white schools and white society as beginning of the end of Chinese culture. They reported that, even as early as the 1940s, as they started entering white schools, they were becoming westernised. Barbara spoke about the impact of apartheid on the retention of Chinese culture. She said,

> I think you might be shocked but I think that in some ways apartheid has done one small good thing for us Chinese. You might be amazed, but I think that in some ways apartheid brought us together. If they didn't have the group areas, I don't think the Chinese would've ever come together like this. We would never celebrate things together because we would be apart and there would be nobody to coordinate all these things, the get-togethers. Twenty-five years ago when the Chinese teacher came from Taiwan, he started and this is how he got people involved and the community together – at the school – organising, coordinating Chinese festivals, functions and all. This is why the Chinese stick together.

Some also pointed out that while their parents taught them various 'Chinese' values – to keep quiet, obey laws, work hard – most of their immigrant parents were too busy worrying about the economic survival of family and had little time to pass on culture. They also recognised the passage of time and the increased distance from their immigrant roots and Chinese 'homeland' as factors in the continued 'dilution' of their culture.

The remainder of the chapter will focus predominantly on one specific tradition: *Ch'ing Ming*. Lamenting the 'loss' of their culture, interviewees nonetheless, spoke of observing the practice of 'tomb-sweeping days'. Well over half of the interviewees in all three cohorts spoke about this tradition. The extended family (or clan) gathers at the cemeteries where ancestors are buried to pay their respects. The rituals involved have traditionally been associated with ancestor worship. Filial piety is the basis for ancestor worship; Tan called it "filiality beyond the grave" (Tan 1996:28). Traditionally,

[12] Lynn Pan states that in most countries there was a constant "replenishing of Chinese settlements with fresh tides of immigration" which kept communities looking and feeling Chinese (Pan 1994:107). The interviewees argue that the lack of this constant replenishing is one of the principle reasons for the 'dilution' of Chinese culture in South Africa.

ancestors are worshipped and representations are made to them for supernatural guidance and help. *Ch'ing Ming*, which takes place during the third lunar month[13], is when ancestral and clan graveyards are visited for a 'cookout reunion' with the dead (Tan 1996:29). Food, flowers, and incense are supposed to be placed on the graves of deceased family members. These practices are typically followed by a family meal. Identified variously by the Chinese South Africans as *Ch'ing Ming*[14] and *Hang Seng*, *Sui Yi* and *Hong Ching*, or the Flower festival, these 'tomb-sweeping' traditions are amongst the few that are still carried out with surprising regularity by Chinese South African communities throughout South Africa.[15]

However, even amongst the *shopkeepers* this tradition and others are practiced without much comprehension of the origins, meanings, or traditional cultural significance. In South Africa, they are often observed without the traditional food offerings, money-burning, or incense. With each successive cohort they are practiced with less frequency and intensity. Interviews indicated both generational and age differences in the practice of *Ch'ing Ming*, the understanding of tradition, and general interest in Chinese culture.

Against the backdrop of this broad lack of understanding of the origins, meaning, purpose of *Ch'ing Ming*, these rituals have taken on new meanings. The primary functions now involve (a) opportunities to reconnect with extended family and clan members and (b) a symbolic way of proclaiming their ethnic identity. Frank, 62, commented that Chinese South Africans, even of his generation, did not really understand the meanings behind many of the Chinese festivals:

> We sort of improvise and improve. And we find out what is the Chinese way or method, or the Western interpretation is totally wrong. And likewise, the Chinese interpretation is also wrong – because the Chinese don't understand what it really means. And it's passed on from the generations…you just carry on with it. Like the *Ch'ing Ming* is actually to bring the family together and to

[13] As I understand it, the clan leaders determine the exact date in a given year, for the observance of *Ch'ing Ming.* Interestingly, in South Africa, it appears to take place twice a year as opposed to the traditional one time, perhaps to take into account the reversed seasons in this hemisphere.
[14] This is the name by which it is popularly known and observed by other Chinese communities around the globe.
[15] According to the interviewees the Hong Kongese or the Taiwanese no long observe *Ch'ing Ming*. It is viewed as old-fashioned. However, a quick scan on the internet indicates immigrant communities in the US, Canada, and parts of South East Asia still maintain the practice.

> respect or to honour the dead; in other words, it's more like a memorial…it isn't ancestor worship…If anything, the Chinese have failed to understand even their own culture… Somehow, we think we know everything about Chinese…(but) we don't know our own culture.

Frank has translated and re-worked the definition and meaning of *Ch'ing Ming* in a way that allows him to continue to observe the traditions – necessary to maintain his Chineseness – but so that they do not conflict with his modern, western, Christian beliefs and way of life.

Some older interviewees made the connections between *Ch'ing Ming* and the practice of ancestor worship but then went to great lengths to explain that they no longer *believed* in ancestral intercession; rather, they carried on the traditions as a way of paying respects to their deceased, like Frank above. By changing a few elements of the physical practice of *Ch'ing Ming* they have transformed it into something socially acceptable in South Africa. Pauline, 60, reported her family continues to hold family gatherings; however, these days they do it without the incense, without other traditional accoutrement, and without the traditional bowing at the tombstones. All practices that might be misconstrued as ancestor worship, viewed as at odds with their Christian beliefs, have been eliminated from their practice of *Ch'ing* Ming. Thus, a Chinese cultural tradition has been transformed into a simple gathering of extended family and a symbol of Chineseness.

Jane (39) and Lily (mid 40s) carry on observing *Ch'ing Ming* and some of the other traditions, but as with many of the other *fence-sitters* they do not understand the traditional meanings or purpose of these practices, and in Jane's case she does not even know when they take place.[16] Instead, she counts on one of her sisters to remind her of these important dates. She stated: "I observe taking flowers to the cemetery two times a year…don't remember when, but we do it." Lily from Johannesburg still participates, but says that she doesn't really understand all the reasons for the various observances:

> And we observe Chinese festivals only as a family. I think it is twice a year – we get together as a family and take flowers to the graveyard. I don't think we

[16] In contrast to most western holidays the observation of Chinese festival days still take place according to the Chinese or Lunar calendar, therefore, every year the actual dates on the western calendar must be recalculated for that given year.

> are very traditional…we do get together as a family and have a meal together…I must say, I don't follow a lot of Chinese customs. Even when I was, younger, when we went to funerals…it's funny with all the customs and traditions they can't give you a logical answer about why they are doing it. They have just accepted it. Just because.

For them, as for Pauline, the continued observation of these traditions provides opportunities to get together with family and maintain contact with the extended family. Increasingly, they also do it to appease their parents.

Mike (36) tries to maintain some commitment to the Chinese community, but he does not really believe in the traditions. He claimed that most members of the Chinese community do not know what the festivals and celebrations are for; for the younger generation of Chinese South Africans they are merely opportunities to see friends. It is interesting, however, that although Mike rejects the ancestor worship elements of these traditions, he appears saddened at the condition of the Chinese cemeteries caused by the very lack of interest amongst those in his generation. He said:

> I do have commitment to the Chinese community, but with all these functions – we go there, we having singing and dancing – I don't believe in it. I don't…some of them are fine…Chinese New Year…but the way I see it, Chinese all over have stuck to tradition. They take out the incense, they go to the graveyard and honour the dead and all these things – I don't know. I don't believe in all those things like honouring the dead with incense and all that…the elder generation took better care of the graveyards. Right now, they are overgrown. Nobody takes care of them. But we are trying to take better care of them now. We had Double Ten the other day – *Hang Ching* – they mean nothing to me. I mean, you go there for a festival. You get together…in the Chinese community now, I could say even 80% of them don't even know what it is for. I would say they just turn up, suppose it is as the Chinese Club, people eat, drink, and go home. So, you meet your friends at something like that. For the younger generation, it is like that.

This youngest group of Chinese South Africans lost their language, and according to many interviewees, were becoming 'white' – referring specifically to shifts in culture. They were forthright about their ignorance of Chinese culture and language. Laura (25) commented, "We're bananas. I'm the ultimate banana, but at least I can use chopsticks…(the) Chinese (of my generation)…don't really understand the culture… No one explained the reasons for functions or traditions."

Jane (21) was almost patronising about her grandmother's practices and did not to understand or celebrate any of them herself:

> My grandmother lights incense, sort of to commemorate my grandfather's mother's birth and death, which I found sort of touching…(however) as for things like the moon festival and double ten and things like that, I actually have no idea what they mean. We don't really celebrate it. For me, personally, the Christian holiday mean a lot to me – Easter, Christmas, the various feasts. But Chinese festivals, no…I'm afraid I don't know any obvious Chinese beliefs or things like that.

There were, as with language, many indications that during the life course of each interviewee, the practice of Chinese traditions changes. The *bananas,* when they still lived with their parents, observed various Chinese traditions and festivals but, today, as adults, few continue to do so. Peter M, 26, reported that:

> My mom always gave us red packets and (on) birthdays we would get red packets, but the other Chinese holidays or festivals, we don't really celebrate…We used to do that (go visit ancestors in the cemetery), but that stopped probably two-three years ago, maybe even longer. We used to take flowers to the cemetery and give fruit and incense and that kind of thing.

Those who continued to observe Chinese traditions transformed and adapted their practice of *Ch'ing Ming* and others. Interviewees exhibited a selective incorporation of certain traditions to the exclusion of others. A great deal of blending, improvisation, and adaptation of both foodways and traditions occurred. They did this while complaining they had 'lost' so much culture. Nonetheless they maintained, quite adamantly, that they were still Chinese.

A few of the *shopkeepers* expressed concerns that their culture had been watered down, adapted, improvised, or changed but claimed that they were Chinese nonetheless. For example, Rick, 60, said that although he was a Christian (and not a Buddhist) and despite the fact that he ate his Chinese food with a spoon and fork, he was still Chinese. Several of the *shopkeepers* mentioned Chinese food as evidence of their Chineseness. James K, 67, for example, said that while he had lost his language skills, he still preferred his Chinese food. Sherine, 63, argued that her children were still Chinese, if for no other reasons than that their values and their food preferences were still Chinese: "The children still have the Chinese culture. They are not western all together… We

still maintain the Chinese values and culture, and I cook mainly Chinese food with all the spices."

Many Chinese traditions have been transformed to fit the new circumstances and values of their lives in South Africa. Dan, 53, explained how some practices were diluted and adapted to fit within a Christian belief system. *Ch'ing Ming*, as mentioned above, is traditionally associated with ancestor worship; however, Dan claimed that only the oldest members of the community still 'believe' in the ancestors. In current practice, the elimination of the incense, the burning of paper houses or paper money, and food offerings signal the transformation of *Ch'ing Ming* into a family/community outing, and something more acceptable to the majority of Chinese South Africans who are now Christian. Dan explained how he purposefully transformed and re-packaged the practice of *Ch'ing Ming* in Port Elizabeth in order to attract young Chinese South Africans:

> I visit the cemeteries with the Moiyean Association once a year… Now this is where I perhaps diluted certain things. I wanted the younger Chinese people to respect the Chinese culture, but the younger Chinese people are very Christian now. So *Ch'ing Ming* is actually worshipping the dead, you see? So I said to them now…you also take flowers in remembrance of people past…we really would like you to come along with us because it's a form of getting the Chinese community together. (I said,) "You, as a Christian, and I, myself, as a Christian, we will go and put flowers on various graves in respect, in remembrance of those people past." So that is how I managed to get more Chinese people to come with us. Funny enough, the older people still firmly believe. Some of them burn incense…besides taking the flowers only…

Some interviewees selected a few of the Chinese traditions and holidays to continue observing, discarding the remainder for a variety of personal reasons. Some, for religious reasons, decided to discontinue some of the practices. Bradley, in his mid-20s, said that simple boredom and his Christianity led him to 'drop' some Chinese practices:

> I am really selective. There are some parts of my culture I would like to hold on to; there are other parts that I would like to drop. A lot of the stuff is very tedious. The procedures and processions you have to go through. It actually becomes quite painful after a while because it is quite monotonous. Especially when it comes to burials. It is very morbid and as we aren't Buddhist, we are Christian, so there is a conflict of interest when you come to the two…so there are parts of the Chinese culture I would like to get rid of.

Other interviewees chose to revive traditions at specific stages of their lives. Weddings, for example, were occasions when quite a few interviewees chose to be traditional. Having children was also a point at which some Chinese South Africans, particularly women, chose to learn more about their culture in order to pass it on to their children. Others chose to carry on observing some of the Chinese traditions for the sake of their parents. Tracy, 31, spoke of how some Chinese practices had faded away, while others had remained important to her and her family. Her wedding and certain birthdays were special occasions when, because of her parents, she chose to observe in a traditional Chinese way. She said:

> When we got married, all these rituals and rites and things like that – a lot comes to the fore when you get married. Like the menu – either six or nine course. And we went for a Chinese wedding. And you couldn't have tofu because you only have it at funerals. You can have beef; you only have it at funerals. That type of thing. Crackers to ward off spirits. And red packets. And that's when a lot of it comes into play. And then we had to…our first child and the second child – the one-year-old party…All the ones – 61, 21, 31 – all the ones are important birthdays. So, in some ways, we keep those things. And in some ways, it was important for us to. We didn't mind. We could've had what we wanted, but because we both had two living parents, we also wanted to please them, so we did some of it.

After two, three, and four generations in South Africa, they had lost their understandings of certain practices. The question, therefore, is why, when some of the traditions conflict with their Christian beliefs, did the Chinese continue to observe *Ch'ing Ming* and other Chinese traditions – practices considered to be old-fashioned by the newly arrived Hong Kong and Taiwan Chinese? Aaron and Joel offered up their own explanations:

> Both our parents left our home country and you have to survive in an alien environment. And you have to *protect your identity* in this alien environment and in the wider community…because we lost our language and we only cling to certain traditions around the sweeping of the tombs and…those are the things we still keep. But when my friend from Hong Kong came to visit, I said we're having a party for the sweeping of the tomb, and she looked at me and said, "We don't even practice that in Hong Kong anymore." And that is the only thing that we had to carry on…She was amazed that we carried on with sweeping the tombs…and that is the only thing we cling to for our identity here.

Joel, also in his early 60s, had similar insights:

> You'll find that the local Chinese tend to be more traditional, possibly, than the younger generation from Hong Kong or Taiwan. A lot of the things we practice, the Hong Kong people tell us that, "this is old-fashioned" and "we don't do that anymore." But because we don't have it, we tend to hang on to every little bit we can. And with the Hong Kong people, because they have it already, it doesn't really mean anything to them…I think, because Chinese, to us, is something that we're trying to hold on to, so maybe we tend to be a bit more intense about that type of thing as opposed to the Hong Kong people or the Taiwanese.

What Joel refers to – the 'something' that the Chinese South Africans do not have, but the new immigrants do – is a sense of confidence in their Chineseness, a strong connection to their Chinese roots.

Lynn Pan writes of the role of ancestor rituals and clan associations in overseas Chinese communities. As both Joel and Aaron explained, these rituals have helped these communities maintain the connections to distant China. Her assertions about immigrant communities in South East Asia remain true for the *shopkeepers* in South Africa. She writes:

> It assuaged the members' nostalgia for the old country, helped to perpetuate descent lines, satisfied the need for a sense of closeness to one's origins and prolonged one's memories of home. In a community always in danger of being diluted by forces in the outside world, the clan association served as an oasis of Chineseness (Pan 1994:113).

However, on closer examination, it becomes evident that far from 'disappearing' their Chineseness has been made flexible, fluid, and changing (Hall 1990; Louie 2004). The Chineseness of the Chinese South Africans has been and continues to be transformed and adapted to their lives in South Africa. Furthermore, their selective incorporation of specific traditions, practices, or values takes on new meanings and in this process they re-define their Chinese ethnic identity. The revival of Chinese language lessons is an indication that they are attempting to re-ethnicise (Louie 2004) themselves: by learning Chinese, show their pride in their Chinese heritage and reassert their Chinese identity in the face of the current challenges made by the new Chinese immigrants. The continued practice of *Ch'ing Ming* and other Chinese traditions and the new ways in which they are practiced ensure that they can assert their Chinese identity without contradicting

their Christianity or offending those in their current social milieu. Similar processes have taken place with regard to their beliefs and values, discussed in this next section.

Beliefs and values

Religion

Almost all of the interviewees reported that they were Christian, either Anglican or Catholic. Reasons for their conversion to Christianity were given in the previous chapter. Some are churchgoers and others are not, but very few made any mention of Buddhism or any other 'Eastern' religions or philosophies. Several of the *shopkeepers* explained their continued observance of *Ch'ing Ming* in respect of their Christian beliefs; they saw no conflict between the two and in the elimination of incense was indication enough that their observance of *Ch'ing Ming* was a matter of paying respect to the deceased, not to be mistaken for ancestor worship. Barbara S, 64, stated firmly that while she is a Christian, she still respects the teachings of Buddha and continues to observe *Ch'ing Ming*.

> We are Christians but a lot of the Chinese things we do believe in (sic) and that doesn't make me un-Christian. And some of the things that our parents did, like when we went to China and then we had to go and light the crackers and the incense and bow in front of my father's picture and things like that…And even when I go to the cemetery, I still bow at my father's grave…I think it is important to respect the teachings of Buddha and everyone has to respect other people's religions.

Andrew was the only one of interviewees who mentioned that he was involved in any 'Chinese' religious practices. He explained that he had recently become involved with *Do*, which he explained as a form of religion from Taiwan. He said,

> *Do*, in Chinese, means reason. It is different from other religions. They have holy houses, an elder or minister, they accept other religions, and they are there to show you the reason, the truth, they way. They have enlightenment lessons, which explain the Bible.

But most interviewees expressed limited awareness and no conscious practice of Chinese religions or belief systems. They are all, at least nominally, Christians. Donna's mother-in-law still had 'the Buddha incense' but there were very few of 'the older ones' who still observed Buddhism. Donna explained that missionaries had worked amongst the early Chinese in South Africa in order to convert them. She

reported that a fellow Port Elizabeth resident, an elderly woman, was "one of the first to be actually baptised and confirmed. Although she did not read, she used to go to church regularly and always carried the Bible with her."

For the few interviewees who mentioned religion, it was Christianity that played a significant role in their lives, shaping their values, affecting their social circles, and influencing vocations. Several of these practicing Christians converted from their Anglican or Catholic faiths to more evangelical and charismatic denominations, referred to by interviewees in Port Elizabeth as the 'happy clappies'. These few spoke of deep commitments to their faith and its influence in their lives; one even went so far as to contemplate missionary work.

A few, especially amongst the youngest interviewees, were so convinced of the righteousness of their Christian beliefs that they ridiculed the traditional beliefs and superstitions encountered on trips to China. Carolyn, 26, had a condescending attitude about the Chinese beliefs she encountered on a trip to China:

> When I went to China, I was exposed to a lot of Buddhism and paganism…but I realized that people know no better. And the superstition and that…and you think these people are idiots, but then you realise that they don't know any other way. They're not exposed to anything else.

Traditional Chinese beliefs and religions have been transformed such that they are no longer religious but cultural practices, markers of their Chinese ethnic identity. Chinese values, too, have been selectively incorporated and re-worked to fit into their South African lives.

Confucian values

Chinese South African value systems are clearly based on a Confucian model; however, not a single interviewee mentioned Confucianism by name. They viewed their values as 'Chinese'. Similar to Chinese language or culture, the primary transmitters of values were families and education, for those who attended, the Chinese schools. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned values were the importance of family and filial piety, often

translated simply as 'respect for elders'.[17] Closely related to these were their views on gender and education. Interviewees discussed the role of fear, complacency, and subservience to authority in their lives. These character traits, they argued, stemmed from the high value placed on respect for authority, tolerance and patience, and keeping the peace. There was also considerable discussion of the racism of the Chinese community and the importance of power and prestige, which were viewed negatively. Most interviewees showed a tendency to view their values as 'natural' and almost primordial. Following a brief discussion of some of these values, I will argue that Chinese South African values – the ones that remain – while based on Confucianism, are not primordial or essential aspects of Chineseness, but rather, they have been selected and adapted to fit into a construction of their identity – an identity that would serve the Chinese community during the apartheid era.

Most interviewees were taught their values at home; however, the Chinese schools, particularly the one in Pretoria, played an important role in perpetuating Chinese values, particularly regarding 'respect for elders'. Mary H, 23, explained both her parents and the Chinese school were vital to teaching her respect and self-discipline:

> I would say all those people that went to the Chinese school … when we were in primary school, if somebody walks into the classroom (who was) older than you, everybody stops what they are doing, you stand up and you greet the person. You are not allowed to talk back to anybody and it is sort of like if you seem rebellious, that's a bad thing…I think my parents brought us up very well…They gave us a good balance of letting go and guiding us at the same time. They weren't really strict. They were strict on behaviour in the sense that you can't behave like that because it is wrong…you cannot cry in public, you cannot look unhappy public…everything has to be totally under control. I think the Chinese school had a big impact on me in the way of discipline.

The family (which can be extended to clan and community) continues to play a central role in Chinese South African life.[18] Paul D, 66, claimed that family life and family cohesion was the backbone of the Chinese community. The family helped individuals

[17] Not one of the interviewees made any connection between filial piety and *Ch'ing Ming* or ancestor worship.

[18] According to Tan the "family is the center of human existence, from which all life radiates" (Tan 1996:25). He writes that at the core of Confucian ideology are concentric circles of duty starting with the family and spreading out to the extended clan, the village or the community, the state, and finally the society of man (Tan 1996:20).

to adapt to changing situations. He believed that Chinese reliance on family and their general adaptability were virtues that have helped the Chinese survive all the challenges thrown up by the apartheid system in South Africa:

> I think the situation is that Chinese will learn to adapt provided that they are given the opportunity to adapt to the circumstances…that they can be successful…They can isolate themselves…the world can go on around them and they will exist no matter what happens, in the sense that their family life supports them for all their needs…If you cut them off from their families and their surroundings, I think you can destroy the Chinese. The very backbone of the Chinese lifestyle (is family). Give them their families and you can do what you like to the country. Simplistic, but that's how I see the Chinese. That's how we live.

William, Pauline, Melvin and Joel mentioned that filial piety – respect for their elders, and in particular, respect for parents – was 'drummed into' them as children. One of the younger interviewees, Bradley, spoke of the same type of 'home schooling'. He was taught to be obedient, to keep quiet, and to always be respectful. He also spoke about these values and behaviours in primordial terms, as 'just the way things are' and 'second nature'.

> She said some things that we were allowed to do and that was it. Basically this is one of the things about the Chinese homes: when the parents said something, you obey. That was it. You don't ask why. You don't question anything. You just do it…It's just the things that you do and the way of doing things…it is just the way that you do it. Things which are second nature…(such as when) there are guests in the house: you sit and watch what's going on, listen to the conversation, speak when spoken to or else you do your own thing, but out of the way. Don't make a noise. Don't be a nuisance and that was basically it. You go out anywhere where there are adults present, speak when spoken to, (be) seen and not heard. As I got older, my parents let me…join in a mature conversation, as long as I have something worthwhile to put in. If I have nothing to say, I keep quite or speak when spoken to. Speak in turn. Never be rude or disrespectful.

Gender norms are an integral part of Confucian system of values[19] and many of the *shopkeepers*, in particular, were still fairly traditional when it came to gender.[20] In most cases, women made the comments about gender values. Sherine (63) worked at least ten hours a day in the family grocery store. She also continued to manage the running

[19] Women are bound to obey their fathers, their husbands, and later in life, their sons.
[20] While the Chinese certainly have no exclusive hold on traditional gender norms, several of them spoke of these norms as Chinese, so they have been included in this discussion.

of the house and had remained the sole cook. While she complained about the additional household responsibilities and called it a 'Chinese thing' she also seemed to relish her control over the home domain:

> I do the cooking, morning, noon, and night. I do it all…I don't know if he can cook because he never does anything…I think I spoilt him rotten. Most of the time, I think he should give me a hand, but he never does. He still got (sic.) that Chinese thing in him – that women must do everything.

Education, as explained in the previous chapter, was viewed as the key to moving up the socio-economic ladder and securing a future for themselves. Many parents made it a priority and encouraged their children to complete their secondary and tertiary education, often at great cost to the family coffers. Certainly by the second generation, it was assumed that all of their children would attend university. Richard explained,

> The parents must see that the children apply themselves. It is all to do with the parents. If you don't see to your children's education, if you don't encourage them, that child, of course, won't succeed and they will take longer. But you find families that encourage their children to study. That's what I did with my children – encouraged them. And they themselves must see what is their future.

However, in the first half of the twentieth century, education was not seen as an option for most women. Melissa, a trained biochemist, spoke of the challenges of girls getting educated in her day. She explained that her father, despite his gendered views, 'allowed' her to go to university. She said:

> But you can see that for girls to go to university in those days, the family had to be quite liberal… My father definitely thought boys were better…when my brother had his third daughter…(my dad) he was so disappointed…all my brothers had girls first…(my father is) very traditional in that respect, but he still let me go to university. He didn't say I couldn't go. But if I hadn't done medicine, maybe he wouldn't have let me. He felt that you had to get a practical degree – like a doctor or so – so you can be your own boss, you know?

Barbara, too, was educated, at a teachers' college. She set out to fight gender stereotypes and encouraged others to do likewise.[21]

> I was secretary for the Chinese Education Committee for eighteen years and I was the first woman on that committee… And then I called all the young women and said you have to join in. And I said that it was time to assert ourselves. I

[21] There was no sociological explanation for Barbara's 'feminism'; her views can probably be explained as a combination of her family upbringing and the force of her personality.

> told the girls, now you have to vote to end this and since then there have been three females on the committee. We also penetrated the EPCA (Eastern Province Chinese Association). Therefore, I was one of those women who was on the forefront of women's rights.

In traditional Confucian society, boys have the primary responsibility of caring for elderly parents and for the tombs of deceased ancestors. Girls, in contrast, once married, are meant to transfer their primary familial obligations to the husband's family. Higher education for girls, therefore, was generally seen as a wasted expense. These traditional views on gender appear to have changed as the necessity for higher education – as a survival tool during apartheid – took precedence.

Respect for elders and respect for authority featured prominently in Chinese South African value systems. Tan (1986) also notes the parallels between submission to elders in the family and loyalty to the state and its leaders. Paul D, 66, explained that respect for authority, combined with fear of repression during the apartheid years, resulted in the sort of subservience and passivity common in descriptions of Chinese South Africans. The Chinese position in their early years in South Africa resulted in, he argued, an inferiority complex. He wavered about whether these traits were somehow inherent in all Chinese or whether they were a response to their second-class position in South Africa. The subservience and their adaptability were traits that endowed Chinese South Africans with an ability to carry on with their lives. He said:

> The older Chinese definitely had an inferiority complex to the whites. Inferior. Very subservient. That's the Chinese culture, I suppose. Respect for people in high levels of authority. That respect…when one goes by the law that actually classifies you as second class citizens…and the Chinese are not known to go against the flow, so to speak…Chinese have always lived under whatever government was in power, whether they were occupied or whether is was their own government…The Chinese carried on with their lives…It's something that's an inherent Chinese trait or culture – to be subservient and to give respect to those who've assumed power.

Sherman felt that, in some ways, apartheid reinforced cultural norms. The small size and easily identifiable racial differences of the Chinese within the context of apartheid quite possibly exaggerated (or transformed) some Chinese values dealing with self-discipline, communalism, and respect for authority figures. The Confucian principle of

joint responsibility, writes Tan, meant that, "punishment for serious crimes could visit members of the entire clan. Inversely, an honour attained by one person, …glorified all members of the clan" (Tan 1986:28). Sherman's comment reflects the impact of apartheid on this principle of joint responsibility. He said, "You and everything you do reflects on your whole community…in some ways apartheid reinforced cultural norms: you must be your brother's keeper, you understand, so you have to watch everyone."

While elements of their value systems might have their origin in Chinese culture, some were given greater weight because of the circumstances of the Chinese South Africans, particularly during the apartheid years. Some of the key elements of the constructed Chinese South African identity – tolerance, obedience, patience, humility, keeping quiet, and the lack of confrontation – were reinforced by apartheid-era fears. The immigrant generation and all subsequent generations of Chinese South Africans 'drilled' these values in their children. The immigrants, as described in the background chapter, for the most part, had little education, lacked local language skills, and were fearful of attracting the attention of any government, particularly if they were in South Africa as illegal immigrants. They saw these values as crucial to their very survival in South Africa. Meg (63) explained, "The Chinese in South Africa during apartheid were humble, giving in, didn't want to cause problems, took punishment in silence. During the apartheid years you didn't dare to have a big mouth." Barbara S (64) also contended that the lack of education in the immigrant generation was at the root of these particular values or behaviours: "You know, our trouble with our Chinese people – they are too inhibited, probably because of the lack of education, so they need self-esteem boosting."

The *fence-sitters* were also taught to keep their heads down, stay focused, and remain quiet. The fact that many of the *fence-sitters* were the first of their families to attend white schools and universities certainly had something to do with the constant exhortations to be on good behaviour. Veronica, 41, for example, reported,

> My father used to tell us to be on our best behaviour because it was a privilege to be in those (private) schools: "you must always be clean and neat and tidy and you must shut up. You mustn't say anything because you are there to study." Because of that, you will find that a lot of Chinese cannot speak out for that reason (sic) – they are not used to it.

That Veronica and others in her situation were often the only Chinese students in all-white schools meant that they were already easily identifiable. They were taught, therefore, to behave so as not to draw any further, unnecessary attention to themselves.

While they might claim to be *bananas* and argue that they know little about Chinese culture or its superstitions, the youngest cohort have retained many of these same traditional values, especially those having to do with respect for elders, self-discipline, perseverance, and humility. Laura (25) said, for example: "…being Chinese, you grow up having to respect. If someone says something nasty to you, you don't react. You bear it. Don't start a fight."

A few interviewees also mentioned the importance of prestige, position, and wealth. Frank M (62) was most vociferous on his views of these 'negative' 'Chinese' traits. He claimed he did not have many Chinese friends *because* they tended to place too high a value on money and position.

> Prestige – Chinese like that kind of thing. That's why they become doctors… The Chinese (also) like to talk about money and wealth. I'm not interested in those things at all…peerage, the wanting of titles – they want to belong to high level associations and they want to be chairman of so-and-so…merely hold the position so that the community know they are somebody…some even buy their position. When I say buy, I mean they donate money to keep their positions.

Melissa (62) mentioned Chinese South African girls held similar values: "A few of the Chinese girls they said they won't marry men unless they have a Dr. in front of their names." She also spoke of the reaction from fellow Chinese South Africans when they heard that her daughter wanted to become a schoolteacher. "When my daughter said she wanted to be a teacher, lots of Chinese said, 'how can you let her? She'll be poor!' I said, 'Well, someone has to teach your children." She, too, found these values – materialism, self-importance – to be negative.

While these interviewees viewed the high value placed on wealth, position, and prestige negatively, these values can be interpreted as necessary to their long-standing goals of gaining social acceptance and respectability within apartheid South Africa. Legally classed as second-class citizens together with blacks, 'coloureds', and Indians, they had

to be better than whites in order to earn their acceptance: they had to make more money, be better educated, and have better jobs. In the case of the women of this generation, they could achieve this higher status by marrying into it. Placing high value on money, material possessions, and positions of high rank within local associations can also be seen as compensatory. Having such things compensated the Chinese for their lack of position and power within South Africa. They helped to make-up for their second-class citizenship.

For many Chinese South Africans racism was a feature of value systems, in part the result of a Chinese superiority complex and in part learned or reinforced by apartheid. Quite a few of the *shopkeepers* mentioned the racism of Chinese as related to the general notion of Chinese superiority – a superiority taught and constantly reinforced by their parents and other elders. There was a strong sense that this Chinese superiority was somehow primordial – an essential component of Chineseness that all Chinese are simply born with. Some of this may be explained as a way of (over)compensating for the loss of status, position, and power in moving to a foreign land, making up for the loss of face, regaining pride. Much of it can also be attributed to the strength of the myth of a 'great China' discussed in Chapter Three. Additionally, it is an indication of the acceptance of the establishment-defined racial hierarchy, with whites on top and blacks on the bottom. Racism provided a way for Chinese South Africans to deal with the conflict between their own deeply imbedded sense of Chinese superiority in the face of their treatment as second-class citizens in South Africa.

To better understand some of the complex effects of apartheid on racism and identity, it may be useful to examine Lily. Lily (mid-40s) is a mixed-race Chinese; her father was Chinese, her mother, 'coloured'. She, more than most other interviewees, was particularly adamant about her Chineseness. Because of the generally poor treatment of mixed-race Chinese by the Chinese community, she seemed to feel that she had to be 'more Chinese' in order to be accepted or recognised as Chinese. She continues to follow various Chinese superstitions and she even argued that these values, superstitions, and practices are inbred, almost genetic … a 'natural' part of being Chinese:

> You are born with it. I think it is something that is in you. You never want to feel inferior. You never want to owe…It's just the things that you do, the way of doing things. It has always been that way for as long as you can remember. You can't remember anyone saying, "you have to do this or that." It is just the way that you do it. Things which are second nature, whereas others might look at you and say, "what are you doing?"

While making every attempt to be 'very Chinese', she was also fervent in her feelings about other race groups; she associates only with other Chinese and feels that they are, in every way, superior. When one of her daughters married a white South African, her husband (who shares her negative feelings about other race groups) ended all contact with her and enjoined Lily to do likewise. It was only after the arrival of her first grandchild that Lily finally chose to adapt to the situation and re-analyse some of her strong beliefs and sentiments.

The selection and retention of certain values, which are identified as Chinese, can be seen as part of the process of constructing and maintaining a Chinese South African identity. The values retained were those that helped the Chinese South Africans survive the discrimination and racism of apartheid and the insecurity of the awkward position they held from the 1960s onward as they received more and more concessions but remained legally 'non-white'. The Chinese South Africans, from their earliest days in South Africa, viewed themselves as hard-working, law-abiding, family-oriented, quiet, apolitical, respectful and respectable. High value was placed on these particular features of their Chinese culture and these were passed on to later generations as 'Chinese'. This construction and maintenance of this particular Chinese South African identity was influenced both by the segregationist and apartheid contexts *and* served to help them survive the oppression and ambiguities of those periods.

A number of these interviewees also spoke of adapting their Chinese values to fit into their own lives. For example, Mary H, 23, stated that the 'respect for elders' that she was taught as a child must now be earned:

> I still respect my elders but I have kind of thrown off (the) "everyone who is older than me must be respected no matter what kind of person they are." I have a healthy respect for those who are my superiors. 'Healthy' meaning I will be polite to them and I will respect them until they give me reason not to…Somebody just doesn't earn that because they have more years than you

> do…Ethnic loyalty, as well. I would say if a Chinese person was in trouble, I would help him, but more increasingly, if anyone else was in trouble, I would help them.

Alan, in his mid-40s, made a very similar comment. He also said that he had the 'old Chinese values', perhaps to distinguish these from some of the values they observe amongst the new Chinese immigrants. He said, "I still hold Chinese values like honesty and parental reverence; however, they think they deserve respect, I think they must earn it... I have old Chinese values, of the original Chinese South Africans: honesty and commitment…"

Conclusion:

'Chinese South African' – new, unique, and different forms of Chineseness

Chinese culture in South Africa – traditions, foodways, and even values – has been adapted and transformed. On the surface, it might appear that the Chineseness of the Chinese South Africans has diminished over the years, that they are becoming 'more white' as the one older interviewee stated. The alternative analysis offered here is their Chineseness has evolved into something new, unique, and different. It has been adapted and transformed through the various influences of family, school, friends, religion, as well as the South African social climate and broader global factors. Their Chineseness has not disappeared; it has been translated into something else. It has become a culture that works for them and fits with their lives.

In the Mississippi Delta, the Chinese became totally identified with 'white'. The young people had no knowledge of Chinese culture and very little Chinese language abilities. They had little knowledge about China, their own family histories, or the history of Chinese in the United States and no curiosity about any of these things. Furthermore, they had no interest in Chinese functions and they exhibited a great deal of ambivalence about Chinese culture. Loewen concluded,

> If I am correct, then virtually all aspects of Chinese culture in the Delta are gradually giving way under pressure from American forms. A few individual traits … may persevere, but their continuance will be more of a "memory" of a culture than a true element of it (Loewen 1988:163).

Are the Chinese in South Africa any different? I would argue that they are, primarily in that, despite the many striking similarities with the Delta Chinese, the Chinese in South Africa were determined to retain their Chinese ethnic identity albeit in new, redefined forms. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the Chinese were offered white status during the crisis period of apartheid. Why did they refuse? One of the reasons is that their Chinese ethnic identity became a source of pride and a form of protection against the belittling, dehumanising, embarrassing effects of second-class citizenship in South Africa. Even with all the concessions and privileges of the 1960s and 1970s, theirs were lives on the edge – never quite legal, always at the mercy of the white bureaucrat, neighbour, supervisor. Their Chineseness, their pride in their heritage, their belief in the Chinese myth of superiority provided them with the wherewithal to not only survive these uncertainties but to become, as a community, successful.

Paul (in his mid-40s) served as a community leader. He explained the Chinese South Africans' insistence of their Chineseness as a defence against their treatment as second-class citizens during apartheid, as a way of distinguishing themselves from both 'white' South Africans and from other 'non-white' South Africans.

> The Chinese were too proud to accept that they were second-class citizens, which they were classified as being. And the way to set themselves apart, I believe, was to identify themselves as 'Chinese' and not just 'non-white'…The identity of Chinese is the position of our strength…Chinese have always been very proud of their achievements academically…and I think because you weren't recognised in South Africa as South Africans but as second-class citizens…so our parents did a good job teaching us to identify with other Chinese. It's very strong within the community. The fact is, the need to look after your own is instilled within us… So when one asks the question, "Why do you identify yourself as Chinese?" I think it's because of that background.

Certainly there were many forces pressing the Chinese to acculturate. Apartheid prevented new immigration from China and thereby cut off the major source of potential culture 'inputs' – new immigrants. The only exception to this was the allowance of the periodic 'importation' of Chinese teachers from Taiwan by the Chinese Consul-General. Apartheid also provided the key challenge to Chinese South Africans by treating them as second-class citizens. The challenge to become equal to, if not better than whites, was met through the attainment of higher education and professional

status. In the process Chinese became, by necessity, more westernised. They had to become fluent in English, they had to fit in, and they had to 'play the same game' as white South Africans.

The concessions and privileges received by Chinese beginning gradually in the 1940s and picking up by the early 1970s further entrenched this process of westernisation and (white) South Africanisation, at least in terms of their social customs and many cultural practices. However, apartheid, in some ways, also served to reinforce ethnic identity. Apartheid emphasised racial difference, by discouraging racial mingling, and by encouraging the formation of separate Chinese organisations and clubs. The influence of China via the Chinese Consul General and the long-term effects of the myth of the 'great China' cannot be underestimated. The main factor, however, was their second-class citizenship in South Africa. Had they earlier been accepted as full citizens and given rights rather than privileges, it is quite likely that they might have been more like the Mississippi Chinese. As it transpired in South Africa, however, despite all the concessions and privileges and the high levels of social acceptance amongst white South Africans, they remained, throughout the apartheid era, legally 'non-white'. Their lesser status was the principal motivating factor in the retention of a strong Chinese ethnic identity.

Smedley argues that the discrepancies and ambiguities of the apartheid era created a marginalised Chinese subculture. She speaks of psychological anomie (Smedley 1980:296). Chinese South Africans tended to see Chinese culture as something ageless and static; with this essentialist view they concluded that they have 'lost' their Chinese culture. An alternative view is offered here. Firstly, Chinese culture is *not* inherently stable and unchanging. Cultural boundaries and the content within these boundaries shift over time, sometimes gradually and sometimes more dramatically. Secondly, the Chineseness of Chinese South Africans has not been 'irrevocably lost'; rather, it has been changed and adapted, blended with their South Africanness, practiced for a new set of purposes, and valued for different reasons. Finally, rather than view the Chinese as hapless victims of forces beyond their control, this study shows that Chinese South Africans have played an active role in the cultural shifts, which, to a large extent are the

by-product of their own strategies to become more acceptable, more respectable, and more middle class. They were social actors engaged in the construction and maintenance of a Chinese South African identity that would help them to survive in apartheid-era South Africa.

Contrary to the traditional assimilationist view, the Chinese South Africans have exhibited a *persistent ethnicity* couched within a framework of larger South African identity (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). They exhibited *selective acculturation*: certain practices were chosen and retained. These were then adjusted and translated to fit within their Christian beliefs and their South African context. The identities of Chinese South Africans have also been shown to be flexible, situated, and under negotiation (Hall 1990). They are contextual and situational, as when examined vis-à-vis other Chinese. Their ethnic identities are both fluid and dynamic. There have been changes over time, between generations and at particular points in the life cycle (Waters 1990:16, Espiritu 2002). These changes have taken place within specific historical contexts, in dialogue with and in opposition to both the racist ideologies and practices *and* the concessions and privileges set aside for the Chinese during apartheid-era South Africa.

Chinese South Africans are recognisably Chinese and yet uniquely South African. As Espiritu writes of her second-generation Filipino Americans, they are, "qualitatively different from those immigrant homelands and well as from traditional American identities" (Espiritu 2002:38). Their Chineseness is an ethnic identity, but one that is distinct from those of other Chinese around the globe or entering South Africa. Their unique Chinese 'box' does not contain Chinese language fluency or a conscious connection to Chinese religions or philosophies, but it is a form of Chineseness nonetheless. Their Chineseness has been translated from their heritage as 'sons of the Yellow Emperor', is signalled by their unique observance of *Ch'ing Ming* and other cultural practices, and is deeply embedded in the construction of their 'own little box' of 'Chinese South African'.