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**Echoes of Family: Chinese-Australian Belonging(s)  
in Perth, Western Australia**

By

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at the

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## **Declaration**

Except where otherwise indicated  
this thesis is my own work.

Lau Sin Wen

July 2001

*To*

*Mum & Dad*

# *Acknowledgements*

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# *Contents*

|                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| 1. Introduction          | 1  |
| 2. Remembering Place     | 21 |
| 3. Bodily Offerings      | 37 |
| 4. Constructing Memories | 54 |
| 5. Echoes of Family      | 74 |
| 6. Conclusion            | 93 |

*Bibliography* 97

## *Echoes of Family*

# 1

This is a study about belonging(s), entangled ones that transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. It is about the processes through which a diasporic community – the Chinese in Perth, Western Australia (W.A.) – struggle to become a part of their adopted land. It is also about the ways in which the Perth Chinese have actively engaged their quest for Chinese-Australian belonging(s) by (re-)interpreting, posturing and positioning their Chinese-ness. Belonging(s) is an issue that underlines recent discussions on cultural hybridisation, race and Australian national identity within 'Asian-Australian' communities, a category the Chinese in Perth (and the Chinese in Australia, for that matter) are seen to be a part of. I hope to contribute to these discussions, particularly in illuminating the negotiations that take place within the community in their struggle to find an acceptable cultural location of belonging(s), both for wider Australian society and themselves. In focussing on the internal processes through which the community seeks to resolve its quest for belonging(s), I hope to provide a bottom-up approach to the study of a particular Asian-Australian community.

The Chinese first arrived in Perth in 1829, the very year it was founded as a remote outpost of the British Empire. These early pioneers came as indentured labourers, working as domestic servants and cooks in Perth, or on the farms in York,

Albany and Bunbury<sup>1</sup>. In these early days, the desire to become a part of Australia was probably non-existent as many of these early Chinese carried with them a 'sojourner mentality' (Wang 1991) and hoped to eventually return to their ancestral homes in China. They saw their presence in Australia as temporary as they were in the island continent for the economic opportunities it offered. Most of them had no intention of staying in a foreign country forever. It was not until 1910 that a shift in this attitude occurred. In this year, the Chinese in W.A. pooled their resources and built what became the Chung Wah Association (CWA, 中华会馆). The establishment of CWA has been read as the community's political response to the oppressive climate of discrimination and inequality of the time (Cai 1998). More important, was the indication of a shift in mindset from sojourner to settler. The establishment of CWA signalled a growing awareness amongst the Chinese that they too, had a right to the land, a land they had contributed to and helped build with their labour. This marked a willingness and more crucially, a commitment amongst the Chinese to regard W.A. as a place they were a part of and belonged to.

This inscribed monument of Chinese yearnings to become a part of Australia continues to operate as the oldest and largest Chinese association in W.A. today<sup>2</sup>. It represents a greatly expanded and increasingly diverse community. According to the 1996 Census of Population and Housing, the Chinese formed 2.1% or 26, 141 of the population in Perth (information obtained from [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au))<sup>3</sup>. The majority of them entered Australia after the liberalisation of immigration regulations in the 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> As several excellent studies have been done on the historical predicament of the W.A. Chinese in this period (for example see Cai 1999 & 1998; Ryan 1995; Atkinson 1995 etc), I will not linger over a description of the socio-political situation of the time.

<sup>2</sup> In 1989, CWA expanded its influence into the Southwest of W.A. and formed Southwest CWA.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on the number of respondents who claimed to speak a 'Chinese language' during the 1996 Census. The Chinese population in Perth may be larger than the figure presented.

They came from diverse countries, ranging from those with a Chinese majority such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC); as well as from countries where the Chinese are a minority such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Burma (*Chung Wah Association 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine (1910 – 1995)* [CWAAM] 1995: 18 – 19). There were also migrants from other Australian cities of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (*ibid.*). Despite the complexity of their composition, the Chinese in Perth today acknowledge that they have decided to settle in Australia and see themselves as Australians. They recognise and accept that their primary belonging is to Australia. For those born in Australia, Australia is their country, the only home they have ever known and belonged to. CWA continues to echo the yearnings of this diverse community to become accepted as a part of Australia, for this desire to belong continues to be thwarted, subordinated and rejected by wider (White) Australian society.

## *A Thorny Issue*

As recently as May 2001, Australia's infamous populist politician, Pauline Hanson, announced her decision to adopt an anti-Asian platform in her 2001 Federal election campaign. Her platform featured 'attacks on boat people, multiculturalism and policies which allegedly favour Asian-Australians at the expense of others' (*Sydney Morning Herald* [SMH], 26 May 2001), an anti-Asian stance she had previously used effectively. The Hanson phenomenon has been variously explained (for example, see Markus 2001; Ang 2000a; Lo *et. al* 2000 etc) and it is not my intent to rehash the arguments already put forth by others. What I would like to highlight instead is the underlying message about belonging(s) for Asian migrants in Australia. Hanson's

popularity implies the persistent rejection of Asians as acceptable categories of people who can be imagined as constituting a part of Australian national identity and therefore, 'Australians', by pockets of (White) Australian society.

Persistent outbursts of racism suggest that the issue of belonging(s) for an Asian migrant community like the Chinese remains a volatile issue in Australia. The Chinese in Perth have, in recent years, been plagued by sporadic outbursts of racist ideals. Throughout the 1980s, the Australian National Movement (ANM) masterminded a racist crusade that included a widespread racist poster campaign (*West Australian* [*WA*] 8 May 1989; *WA* 6 May 1989; *WA* 5 May 1989 etc) and the bombings of several Chinese restaurants (*WA* 26 May 1989; *WA* 10 January 1989). In 1988, a Chinese taxi-driver was bludgeoned to death by an (White) Australian youth (*WA* 9 August 1988). The bungled sentencing of the case raised suggestions of an unfair verdict within the Chinese community (*WA* 18 May 1989). In 1996, the racist platform adopted by Pauline Hanson and her One Nation party and the support she garnered rekindled the community's fears of being targets of racism (*WA* 10 October 1996).

This persistent refusal to include non-white migrants in the Australian community is contrary to the State-imposed policy of multiculturalism, the framework that has defined Australian belonging(s) for nearly three decades. Officially implemented in 1973, Australian multiculturalism is an attempt to reconstruct a new definition of the Australian national identity as one that consists of many different cultures (Stratton & Ang 1998). It marks the shift away from a racialised imagining of the national community - an ideology that had defined Australia's founding principles and dictated government policies since 1901 - to an inclusive imagining that seeks to embrace the varied cultures that now dot Australian landscape. Under this framework, ethnic minority cultures are celebrated as enriching Australian national culture.

Minorities like the Chinese are allowed to belong and be accepted as part of Australian society. Chinese-ness, or the conscious production/displays of Chinese culture and traditions, is recognised as part of national culture because it enriches and validates Australian multiculturalism.

Recent studies on Asian-Australian identities have argued that multiculturalism has done more to conceal and perpetuate the structures of inequality and discrimination that continue to dictate minority status in Australian society (for example, see Lo *et. al* 2000; Ang 2000a; Ang 2000b; Stratton & Ang 1998), a consequence attributed to the Government's failure to disarticulate racial ideas from national ideology (Ang 2000a). Specific studies on Chinese-Australian communities have argued that under multiculturalism, Chinese ethnicity is 'a racialised marker of difference', a signifier that perpetuates the notion of Chinese-ness as outside-other of Australian-ness and conceals the hegemony of Whiteness (Chan 2000). Chinese communities are also seen as occupying subordinate positions where multicultural displays of Chinese culture and traditions are really selective processes of incorporation defined by the dominant values of mainstream Australian society (Wang 2000). What these studies have indicated is that for the Chinese, belonging to Australia hinges on an entangled awareness of being a part of a wider diasporic community and of being Australian. They also indicate that Chinese-Australian belonging(s) continues to be a racialised issue concealed by the liberal inclusive policy of multiculturalism. Caught in their subordinate position and struggling to become an accepted part of Australia, the Chinese are 'forced' to put up quaint and caricatured representations of Chinese-ness that appeal to the (White) majority. In other words, the Chinese can be accepted as a part of and belong to Australia, but *only* on the (unequal) terms dictated by the (White) majority.

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Though these studies have been particularly useful in illuminating the hidden power structures embedded in Australian society, they have assumed that the Chinese community and Chinese-ness are static entities to be moulded by the State. In focussing on the State, these studies have ignored the ongoing dynamics and negotiations that take place within the Chinese community as the community grapples with their desire to belong to Australia within a State defined framework and the yearning to retain some measure of Chinese-ness. In this thesis, I would like to suggest that, in addition to the influence of the State, a study of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) has to take into consideration the community's diasporic imaginings and the indeterminacy of Chinese-ness, cultural factors that mediate the Chinese experience in Australia. The Chinese community is a living and conscious group of people capable of making rational decisions in their quest to become a part of Australia. The centrality of personal coherence was underlined by Rutherford (1990) when he discussed the issue of belonging in relation to a place known as 'home'. He argued that belonging to a certain place is enabled only when personal integrity and recognition of this centralised notion of self is achieved (1990: 24). As will be shown, this centralised notion of self is very much tied to the notion of preserving a perceived cultural 'self' within the Chinese community in Perth. The right and ability to define and use their perceived cultural core in relation to the exterior framework applied by the State enables the Chinese to nurture a sense of personal coherence and intelligibility, particularly in the face of the contradictions that permeate Chinese-Australian belonging(s) in Australia. Stripped of this ability to self-define, belonging(s) becomes unreal. It is by fulfilling this perceived cultural core and constructing new memories and strategies of survival that sentiments of attachment to Australia are nurtured and made real.

The importance of culture in the shaping of belonging(s) for a diasporic community was highlighted by Clifford (1994) in his landmark essay on diasporas. According to Clifford, diasporic communities exist in 'contrapuntal modernity', a lived tension between the present and the past, of entanglement and separation, of living here and now while remembering and desiring another place and time. It is a consciousness that is constituted by the painful and traumatic experiences of displacement, discrimination and exclusion, as well as the awareness of being a part of a world historical/cultural/political force. To Clifford, this is a consciousness that 'makes the best of a bad situation' (1994: 312), one where experiences of loss, marginality and exile coexist with creative skills and strategies of survival. Mediating this counterpoint is the immense creative power of diasporic cultures (1994: 311). We are further reminded of the centrality of diasporic cultures in enabling dispersed communities to cope with their experiences by Boyarin & Boyarin (1993) who, in a study of the generation and grounding of Jewish-ness in spite of twenty centuries of exile, argued that diasporic cultures and identity allow for a complex continuation of diasporic cultural creativity and identity while simultaneously allowing diasporic peoples to participate fully in the common cultural life of their surroundings:

'Diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from "mixing" but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing. Cultures, as well as identities, are constantly being remade...' (1993: 721)

Presentations of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) as constrained and dictated by the State therefore fail to take into account, the creative power of Chinese diasporic identity to 'mix' in order to survive and assume that Chinese-ness is a docile cultural entity to be moulded by the State. The indeterminacy and fluidity of Chinese-ness is a well-studied phenomenon (for example, see Tu 1994; Ang 1993 etc). It is an identity

that is increasingly mediated by a complex of social and political factors (Tu 1994: vi; Wang 1994; Wu 1994) and exhibits little homogeneity within and between countries and regions (Wang 1994b; Wang 1994). The very nebulousness of Chinese-ness in overseas Chinese societies suggests that it is malleable to interpretation from both the Australian State and the community. What occurs is a constant shifting of ground such that both the views of the State, as well as the interests of the community are met. The dynamics of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is then a constant negotiation between the State and the community, a continual shifting of ground as to what constitutes Chinese-ness, and therefore, belonging(s), in the Australian context. I will argue in this thesis that Chinese-ness is a living construct appropriated and (re-)interpreted by both the State and the Chinese community in the search for belonging(s) in Australia. It is the ground on which Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is enabled for the community.

## *Belonging(s) as Lived Experience*

Belonging, however, is a difficult word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) tells us that it can refer to context ('circumstances connected with a person or thing'), kinship/identification with a group of people ('persons related in any way') or being a part of something ('connected with, forming a part, appendage, or accessory of another'). It can even refer to inanimate material items such as 'possessions, goods, effects' (*OED*, Volume I, 1933: 791). What is suggested is a subjective association, identification with a particular context, group of people or object such that the individual feels that he/she is part of something and that that something is a part of them. At the same time, it is an identification that has to be recognised by others.

Discussions on diasporic belonging(s) have tended to conceptualise belonging(s) as a tension between the homeland left behind and the new adopted land. Malkki argued forcefully that belonging(s) amongst displaced peoples tends to be seen as irrevocably tied to a particular tract of land (1992). It is from identification with this land that displaced communities draw their identities and are identified as such by others. When ruptured by de-territorialisation, this sense of identity dissolves into chaos and confusion (*ibid.*). The Chinese, however, present a challenging case for they never lost their homeland (Tu 1994: 16). In fact, many early Chinese migrants left China for economic reasons (Wang 1991). There is therefore, no cathartic yearning for a lost homeland. What the Chinese diaspora shares appears to be a belief in a common ancestry and shared cultural background, a cultural core symbolised by the divine land, China. Overseas Chinese identity is therefore closely tied to identification with a perceived cultural tradition symbolised by a land loosely referred to as China.

Clifford (1994) pushed Malkki's argument further when he suggested that diasporic belonging(s) are entangled ones existing in tension with the norms of the nation-state. He stressed that the issue 'is not a process of absolute othering, but rather of entangled tension' (1994: 307) for diasporic attachments, by their very nature, subvert the narratives of common time and territory traversed by the nation-state. The suggestion then is that in spite of all their efforts to become a part of their new adopted nation, diasporic communities never truly belong to the nation-state they adopt. Their allegiances are always intertwined with attachments to another nation, region, continent, or world-historical force. Again, the Chinese case presents new difficulties. Many of the Chinese migrants who settled in Perth are re-migrants. They migrated to Australia as Malaysians, Singaporeans, Taiwanese, Vietnamese or Cambodians, third or fourth generation descendants of Chinese migrants. Shaped by the socio-political context from

which they came, these re-migrants carry with them different understandings of what it means to be Chinese. Chinese diasporic belonging(s) in Perth is therefore an amalgamation of the diverse and varied understandings of Chinese-ness transplanted by these re-migrants.

How then do the Chinese resolve this myriad of Chinese-ness against their yearning to become a part of Australia? Lovell (1998) suggested that belonging is a sentiment induced and shaped by the trials of living in a certain place. It is an emotional response to the place displaced peoples find themselves living in. For diasporic communities, belonging is a feeling that can be (re-)constructed through (re-)imagining and remembering a distant past or land left behind (Lovell 1998; Connerton 1989). It is through remembering that collective identity is re-affirmed and strengthened. Outward manifestations of this (re-)imagining and remembering further strengthen this collective identity as others recognise its distinctiveness.

At this point, I would like to bring the argument further by drawing attention to the shifting paradigms of belonging(s) in Australia. It became evident in the course of my fieldwork that, in Australia, the paradigms of belonging(s) for the Chinese have shifted over time and is dictated by the definitions of the prevailing climate. These paradigms of belonging(s) have shifted from blatant hostile rejection, to tolerated presence, and today, official acceptance lined with submerged discrimination. This suggests that belonging(s) is neither static nor unchanging. A study of belonging(s) needs to take into consideration that belonging(s) is a process of becoming.

In this, I turned to Turner's concept of 'experience'. In *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Turner argued that experience is a 'lived through' process. Each 'erlebnis' or distinctive experience has a perceptual core where pleasure or pain can be felt more intensely than in routine everyday behaviour. When this core is disturbed, dormant

images of past experiences and the feelings bound up with them are fully awakened with 'unusual clarity of outline, strength of sense, and energy of projection' (Dilthey, cited by Turner 1982: 14). Meaning is generated when these interconnections between past and present are made. 'It is in bringing past and present into "musical relation" that the process of discovering and establishing "meaning" consists' (*ibid.*). An experience is, however, incomplete until it is expressed, that is communicated in terms intelligible to others, linguistic or otherwise. Cultural institutions and symbolic modes are therefore 'expressions' for they are 'the crystallised secretions of once living human experience, individual and collective' (Turner 1982: 17). It is when an expression is performed that culture is re-experienced, re-lived, re-created, re-constructed, and re-fashioned (Turner & Bruner 1986: 11). To Turner, culture is 'the ensemble of such expressions', constituted by the experience of individuals made available to society and accessible to the sympathetic penetration of other minds (1982). Experience then is a subjective process that engages 'feelings and expectations' (Turner & Bruner 1986: 4) and a complex dialectic between past and present. It is the process through which the present is made sense of and the future made possible:

'...experience is both "living through" and "thinking back". It is also "willing or wishing forward", i.e., establishing goals and models for future experience in which, hopefully, the errors and perils of past experience will be avoided or eliminated...' (Turner 1982: 18)

The problem with Turner's concept, however, is that it emphasises the subjective, a realm extremely difficult to research (Brownell 1995: 14). In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu provides a framework through which this subject-object dichotomy can be analysed. He argues that the values and orientations embedded within the prevailing structures of our time are internalised through what he described as the 'practice' of everyday life. To him, 'practice' refers to the process through which

the external becomes internal and the internal becomes external (cited in Brownell 1995: 12). The internalisation of the values and orientations embedded within prevailing structures strengthens and re-affirms the existing status quo. The daily repetition of practice produces '*habitus*', a dogmatic state that re-affirms a particular reality, a 'system of predispositions, a habitual way of being' (Brownell 1995: 11). Through habituation, the values and orientations of prevailing structures become externalised. It is through the daily practice of Chinese-ness that Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is experienced. It is the everyday experience of what it means to be Chinese in Australia that contributes to the community's understanding of Chinese-ness and their place in Australian society, as well as Australian society's understanding and acceptance of the community.

Belonging(s) then is a lived cultural experience, an ongoing and dynamic subjective process that engages the rational decision-making powers of the Chinese community. As a lived experience, belonging(s) underscores the dynamism inherent in the way belonging(s) is defined in Australia and allows consideration of how the Chinese contribute and influence the official interpretation of belonging(s), particularly the manner in which Chinese-ness is conceptualised. As conscious and rational thinking beings, the Chinese are themselves able to mould and negotiate their Chinese-ness, albeit within the framework imposed by the State. It involves remembering and (re-)imagining a distant past, as well as the daily and contemporary concerns of living in Australia.

## *Definitional & Methodological Considerations*

My attempts to understand the processes through which belonging(s) is enabled for the Chinese community in Perth treaded into a minefield of methodological and definitional problems. I have, thus far, been referring to the group of people I studied as the 'Chinese community'. Both terms, 'Chinese' and 'community' are problematic.

The term 'Chinese' (*huaren*, 华人) is a complex and multi-layered one. It refers not to a concept of identity, but to the perception of Chinese-ness, 'of being Chinese and of becoming un-Chinese' (Wang 1991: 198). To be 'Chinese' is to be intricately tied to issues of a common ancestry traceable to the mythical Yellow Emperor, or to the homeland that has variously been identified as the Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*, 中国), or as the Divine Land (*Shen Zhou*, 神州). It is to be tied to the mother tongue, whether it is Mandarin or the multitude of dialects associated with the term. It is also intertwined with a basic value orientation that encapsulates values such as loyalty and filial piety (Tu 1994a: v). It is by no means static (Tu 1994b; Wang 1991). Perceptions of being Chinese have changed over time and are still undergoing changes. There can, therefore, be many Chinese identities that people associate with simultaneously (Wang 1991). These identities are, as Wang pointed out, 'difficult to define and, despite many efforts to refine them, are often dependent on nothing more than self-identification' (Wang 1991: 198). In this, I will limit the use of the term to the cultural sense. It will refer to the people who perceive themselves as the 'Children of the Yellow Emperor' (*yanhuang zisun*, 炎黄子孙). They see themselves as sharing a common ancestry and

a cultural core<sup>4</sup>. These people or their ancestors would have lived in the territorial entity called *Zhongguo* at some time. In other words, they share a perceived common cultural tradition that can be traced to having originated from this territorial entity.

'Community', on the other hand, is one of the most complex and elusive terms in social research (Yeoh & Kong 1995: 18). It has been variously defined by geographical area, a common set of relations and forms of social interaction. Though it is today generally accepted to include locality, a sense of belonging and a system of social relations, it continues to defy attempts to define it<sup>5</sup>. My use of the term is further complicated by the diversity of the Chinese living in the Perth area. In this, I would like to draw from Anderson's understanding of a 'community', that is, 'communities' are groups of people linked by the style in which they are imagined (1991: 6). The 'Chinese community' will therefore refer to the group of people who imagine themselves as sharing a common ancestry and perceived cultural tradition living within the Perth area. They are a 'Chinese community' because of their imagined Chinese cultural/ancestral bonds.

This definition of the 'Chinese community' does not, however, eradicate the fact that the Chinese living in the Perth area consists of an incredibly diverse range of people. They not only come from a wide range of countries and carry with them different understandings of Chinese-ness; they also arrived in Australia at different periods. There are also the Chinese-Australians who have lived in Australia for several generations. The diversity and complexity of the Chinese community in Perth implies as well, a myriad of subjective experiences of belonging(s). In grappling with this

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<sup>4</sup> The belief in a central cultural core from which Chinese culture emanated is a mythical one. Archaeological findings have revealed that China had several equally developed cultural centres rather than one single, central core even in the Neolithic periods (Tu 1994).

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Dr David Moore for providing me with this summary of the various definitions of the term currently used in the literature.

methodological difficulty, I adopted what has been referred to as the concept of 'place', a geographical entity invested with a myriad of meanings (Yeoh & Kong 1995: 13; Agnew & Duncan 1989). At one level, 'place' is the concrete setting for human lives, activity and movement. On another, it is a socially constructed entity invested with human meaning (Yeoh & Kong 1995: 13). 'Place' is lived by and formed through the actions of people. It is the product of a cultural process (Hirsch 1995: 21), one that is timeless and includes 'places' of past experiences (that is, memory), and those that exists in the imagination, or in simulations and iconographies (Hirsch 1995: 22; Yeoh & Kong 1995: 13). By focussing on a Chinese 'place', the diversity and complexity of the Chinese community can be overcome and Chinese-ness studied as a perceived common cultural core. The concept of place also enables the collapse of subjective experiences of belonging(s) into a common experience. As a socio-cultural construct, a 'place' is an 'expression' of culture. Individual participants of a Chinese 'place' inevitably carry with them different meanings and experiences of belonging(s). However, it is their common participation in the place that ensures that their experience of participation constitutes a 'typical' experience:

'When an experience can be designated as typical, then the doings of the individual and community become shared, not only with regard to what actually happens under those circumstances, but also how one feels about the happenings....the doings and the feelings reinforce each other...this system of typicality of event and sentiment provides us with a linkage between past and future, for the very recognition of typicality rests on others having gone through that experience (or something like it) before...' (Abrahams 1986: 60).

It is the typicality of an experience that enables discrete individual actions and meanings to be shared and seen as collective (Bruner 1986; Abrahams 1986).

## *Cultural Monuments of Belonging(s)*

It was with these methodological considerations in mind that I decided to focus on Chinese associations in the course of my fieldwork. Chinese associations are important sites of belonging(s) in overseas Chinese societies. They are sites that reinforce Chinese identity in overseas Chinese societies (Wickberg 1988a) and are regarded as integral in easing migrants into their adopted society (Cushman & Wang 1988: 301). They evoke a wide range of belonging(s) – of being a part of the Chinese diaspora, the Chinese community, the adopted society, or probably a combination of all these different strands of belonging(s). Associations are also important methodological tools through which light can be shed on both the internal dynamics of the Chinese and the society of which they have become a part (Freedman 1959, cited in Fallers 1967: 10). These organisations are, after all, adaptations to the wider social environment in which immigrant communities developed (*ibid.*) and are responsible for addressing whatever social/cultural deficiencies not addressed in the arrangements of social life in the new environment (Freedman 1967: 41).

The ethnographic data analysed in this thesis will therefore focus on the activities and responses gathered from members of two Chinese associations operating in W.A. today – CWA and the Chinese Community Centre (CCC, 西澳华人公会). The associations were selected on account of their prominence in the Chinese community in Perth. Officially established in 1910<sup>6</sup>, CWA has been significant in shaping Chinese belonging(s) in W.A.. As the largest politically neutral association operating in the area today, CWA continues to be influential. It boasts a large number

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<sup>6</sup> CWA was recorded in its Minute Books as being formed in April 1909. However, 1910 was adopted as its official founding year as it was then that CWA's Constitution was officially registered in the Supreme Court of W.A. and construction of the Chinese Hall along James Street where CWA is housed today began (Cai 1998).

of well-educated professionals and wealthy members of the community within its ranks. The CCC, on the other hand, was set up in the 1970s by a group of restaurateurs dissatisfied with the way things were run in CWA. Today, the CCC is largely managed by restaurateurs, some of whom were part of the renegade group that broke away from CWA, and its members are mostly from the blue collar working class. The CCC also has close Taiwanese ties, particularly with the Kuomintang (KMT, 国民党). While I was in the field, this Taiwanese connection was evident from the efforts made by the CCC to organise activities and dinners held in celebration of the 106<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the KMT and the 89<sup>th</sup> National Day of the Republic of China. The KMT funds certain activities organised by the CCC, as well as the textbooks used in the weekend language school run by the Association. It is also important to bear in mind that though these two associations are prominent in the Perth Chinese scene, not all Chinese residing in the area belong to these associations. It is very likely that some of them are not even involved in activities organised by any association. All issues related to these two associations will be analysed from the theoretical perspective of belonging(s) as experience. These include the processes through which the associations and its members (re-)construct their collective cultural memories about their cultural tradition and their attempts to carve a Chinese space for themselves in the Australian landscape.

At first glance, these two associations appear to be engaged in promoting Chinese culture and in the process, reinforcing/(re-)affirming Chinese identity. In fact, this activity is considered so central to their existence that associations cite it as their *raison d'etre*. I was repeatedly assured by the leaders of both associations that their (re-)constructions of Chinese culture were 'very traditional' ('chuan tong', '传统') and that I had come to 'the right place' if I was trying to understand the (re-)construction of

Chinese traditions and practices in Australia. The situation, however, is more complex on closer inspection. The emphasis on Chinese culture and tradition implies a determination to retain some measure of their Chinese identity and suggests a reluctance to lose their cultural/historical heritage. This deliberate (re-)construction of Chinese-ness can and has been read as a process of recovery for new migrants (Ommundsen 2000) or re-sinification for those who have lost their cultural roots (Wickberg 1988a). Yet, these (re-)constructions of Chinese belonging(s) are not mechanically retrieved from a remembered past; they are blended and hybridised with Australian belonging, shaped by the local experience of State-imposed Australian multiculturalism and permeated with contemporary concerns. Complicating this already complex situation is the fact that many of the Chinese migrants to W.A. are themselves re-migrants. The (re-)constructions of Chinese-ness in W.A. then are really a collage of diverse understandings of Chinese cultural traditions and practices, mediated by the Australian State and shaped by local and contemporary concerns. Diverse Chinese belonging(s) are therefore, intertwined with Australian ones in these associations.

As cultural monuments that straddle both Australian and Chinese worlds, Chinese associations evoke a wide range of belonging(s) - to community, diaspora and nation. It is by participating in and breathing life into the associations that the Chinese in W.A. have managed to make sense of and negotiate their experience of living in Australia. By examining how these diverse strands of belonging(s) become entangled and exist in tension within Chinese associations, this study is a bottom-up approach to the problem of belonging(s) in a diasporic group residing in Australia.

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## *Two Main Themes*

In my attempts to understand how the Chinese in W.A. conceptualised Chinese-ness and used it in their quest for acceptance and belonging(s), I spent four months in Perth observing, asking questions, listening and talking to members of the two Chinese associations. The result is an account of survival that draws from rich historical/cultural roots. The data collected on the Chinese in Perth will be examined under two main themes. The first involves the processes of (re-)production and (re-)construction of Chinese-ness by the community; the second, attempts made to cope with and survive the trauma of rejection and discrimination involved in living in Australia.

The importance of the first theme lies in the centrality of producing Chinese-ness as a marker of identity in Australia. Under the multicultural framework in which Australia operates, Chinese-ness is associated with the community and the community is seen as responsible for preserving and displaying it. It is through the production of Chinese-ness that Australian multiculturalism is validated and made real. The importance of the first theme also stems from the observation that many members of the Chinese community exhibit a very real yearning to retain some measure of Chinese-ness in their adopted country. This desire for cultural preservation is extended not just to themselves but their descendants as well, for it is through the fulfilment of their 'cultural selves' that the Chinese are able to nurture a sense of belonging(s) in Australia.

While the first theme focuses on rememberings of a past cultural tradition, the second arose out of the need to understand how the Chinese community made sense of their lives in Australia, particularly when the experience is one that continues to be mediated by the submerged threat of discrimination and rejection. It is by confronting

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their Australian lives as a united group that the Chinese in W.A. carved out a Chinese space for themselves and cultivated belonging(s) to Australia.

Chinese associations then form the liminal site on which Chinese-ness is manipulated, (re-)interpreted and (re-)produced to induce Chinese-Australian belonging(s) by its members. The cultural activities carried out on these sites mirror the community's entangled desires of wanting to satisfy a deep-seated yearning to retain some measure of their Chinese identity and desiring to be accepted as 'Australian'. The conscious production of Chinese culture, together with the united stance taken over the negotiations and struggle with wider Australian society, echo the community's desire to be accepted and to belong as 'Australians'. The story that has emerged is an account of a strong people trying to rebuild their lives and nurture new bonds of belonging(s) by (re-)constructing what Breckenridge and Appadurai (1989, cited in Malkki 1992: 39) described as 'a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment'.

# 2

I missed the entrance to Chung Wah Association (CWA) - the oldest Chinese association in Western Australia (W.A.) - the first time I looked for it. Retracing my steps down James Street in Northbridge, Perth, I realised why. The green painted doors of the Association were sandwiched between the glass panes of a spaghetti place and looked more like the entrance to the restaurant than the main entry to the Association. 'Absolutely incongruous!' a friend was to remark to me later. 'Considering the number of Chinese restaurants operating along the street, one would have thought that the business renting the premises below a Chinese association would have been a Chinese restaurant!'

Peering into the gloomy interior, I saw a grand wooden staircase that led to a small platform decorated with an antiquated mirror - a gift from the elderly members of the Association according to the inscription - before making its way to the next level. The staircase creaked under my weight and it sounded louder than it probably was in the silence that enveloped the stairwell. I listened intently for any sign of life at the top of the staircase, but there was none.

A large airy hall met me at the top of the stairs. Dominating the Hall was a huge set of four characters moulded in plaster. Inscribed on it were the characters '*Qun Xian*

Australian soil in their struggle to become accepted as part of the land. It is by growing roots, and Australian ones at that, that the Chinese can form bonds of attachment to the land and be accepted.

The process through which diasporas cultivate belonging(s) to their adopted homeland is, however, a complex one for 'homecomings' [and hence a sense of belonging(s)] are, by definition, the negation of diasporas' (Clifford 1994: 307). It involves being engaged as a node within the transnational networks of the Chinese diaspora and the construction of multiple attachments that draw both from memories of the past, and the experiences of living in their adopted land. The process is also a difficult one in which the community struggles to accommodate, as well as to resist, the norms and practices of its host country, in its seemingly contradictory search for belonging(s) and preserving their culture.

'Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres (1987), forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference...Thus, the term "diaspora" is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement...' (Clifford 1994: 308)

In this arduous and perplexing search for acceptance and cultural preservation, the Chinese in Australia found an answer in the construction of Chinese associations. As responses to their predicament, associations are structures that *ground* the community to Australian soil and hold together, what in reality is a diverse community, into a public sphere grounded in a common culture and yearning to be accepted. Associations create a sense of communal solidarity from which strength can be drawn to stand against rejection and hostility. In the multicultural framework in which Australia now operates, associations have become sites of authenticity, repositories of Chinese cultural knowledge, and more importantly, legitimate expressions of Chinese ethnicity,

heralding Chinese right to a part of Australia. Associations are also, in this framework, ethnic nodes through which the Australian Government is able to disseminate knowledge of Chinese culture and legitimise Australia's position as a multicultural country.

How then did associations emerge and survive as a viable response to the plight of the Chinese community in Australia? In what way(s) are associations expressions of Chinese-ness? What roles do they play in the opposing drives to preserve Chinese culture whilst entrenching the Chinese community into the Australian landscape? What sort of belonging(s) would a site like a Chinese association cultivate? In response to these questions, I argue that Chinese associations are cultural markers through which the Chinese in W.A. negotiate the vagaries of migration. More importantly, they are contested sites of belonging(s) through which the boundaries of Chinese cultural identity and Australian national identity are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated in the community's search for acceptance and cultural preservation.

## *A Grand Old Patriarch*

It became evident in the course of my fieldwork that there was an ongoing process of deification amongst the associations in Perth, the most pronounced observed in CWA. This process of 'deification' was not one that attempted to see associations in a religious light or as gods or guardian angels. Rather, it was a process that tried to personify and construct the associations as respected community leaders whose positions are legitimised and drawn from a certain understanding of Chinese cultural tradition, a set of knowledge often presented by the leadership of the associations as a deep and all-powerful cultural resource capable of absorbing any challenge of change

posed to the community. In deifying CWA, the association was made out to embody certain cultural values that would perpetuate cultural norms and ideas, and ideally hold the community together.

Prior to the celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CWA, then CWA President stated:

'...the Chung Wah Association will be eighty years old. In line with Chinese tradition, to attain the age of eighty is to acquire wisdom and esteem. I believe that the Chung Wah Association will reach that happy stage...' (*Chung Wah Newsletter* [*CWNL*], November/December 1989: 2 - 3)

It was clear from this short passage that CWA is personified as an old person whose age accorded it respect and reverence. Like an esteemed elderly person celebrating his/her birthday, CWA's achievements were discussed in celebration of its anniversary. By implication, it meant that respect and veneration of the Association from the community was in order since CWA is an establishment that has survived the onslaught of time and is capable of leading the community. Its age and achievements were then validations for CWA assuming the role of community leader<sup>1</sup>, echoing its worthiness in leading the community as it navigated the vagaries of cultivating belonging(s) to Australia. In situating CWA as an old person in Chinese cultural tradition, this passage also alluded to the resilience and success of Chinese culture, as embodied by the organisation, in surviving against the odds and more importantly, flourishing in a foreign land. The personification of CWA as a wise and elderly leader is a constant theme that runs through the articles published in CWA's official newsletters - *CWNL* and *Chung Wah News* (*CWN*)<sup>2</sup>. Like a person, it is described as having a 'voice', a respected one heeded

<sup>1</sup> There appeared to be a certain degree of tension amongst Chinese associations over CWA's claim to leadership. The Chinese Community Centre, for example, was adamant that their contributions were as significant as CWA's, and should therefore, be seen as equal to CWA. In the course of my fieldwork, there were also suggestions that there is keen competition between associations to assume the leading role.

<sup>2</sup> *CWN* replaced *CWNL* as the Association's official newsletter in January 1990.

not just within the community but by wider society as well, particularly the Australian Government (for example, see *CWN* May/June 1990; *CWNL* April 1989; *CWNL* September 1985; etc).

This process of deification is boosted by the use of familial images about the Association. In an article that thanked Dr Eric Tan for his leadership of CWA, it was stated:

'He [Eric Tan] is deeply grateful to his family and the extended family of the Chung Wah Association...' (*CWN* March/April 1991: 8)

In suggesting that the members of CWA formed a family, the writer dipped into the Chinese cultural resource that emphasises family values and kinship. After all, it is only through knowing one's position within their kinship structure that a Chinese individual is sure of his identity in relation to others and in society. In this, the personification of CWA as a wise and venerable member of the community gains further meaning as its position is defined like that of the patriarch of a Chinese family. Like the patriarch, CWA, through exercising its wisdom and accumulated knowledge, will take care of its children and descendants, ensuring the continuity of Chinese cultural tradition. This image is an intensely powerful one. It draws from a deeply embedded cultural notion to give meaning to and legitimise the position of the Association as leader of the community. In articulating deeply embedded cultural ideas, the Association also ensures the perpetuation of these ideas within the community. More importantly, it is through the perpetuation of cultural ideas that the diverse Chinese community residing in W.A. today is able to respond to the calling of the Association and stand together. The continued existence of the Association, as the embodiment of Chinese cultural values in the Australian landscape, gives the community a sense of their 'cultural selves'.

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Two main positions have been taken over the understanding of cultural identity<sup>3</sup>.

In the first, cultural identity is conceptualised as a single collective sense of 'self'. This suggests that the identity of a group of people stems from sharing a common history and ancestry. This essential self, informed by history and ancestry, is primordial, stable and unchanging. It is the one-ness that encompasses all other superficial differences. It is the *essence* of an individual's identity, the re-discovery of which will secure the individual for eternity. This conceptualisation of cultural identity remains, as noted by Hall, an immensely powerful one in the representation of marginalized people (1990: 223). In the second position, identity is conceptualised as contingent and provisional. Instead of an essential inherited 'self', this position emphasises the processual quality of cultural identity. It is in constant transformation and is subject to the influence of history, culture and power. It is not something waiting to be re-discovered, but a name that we give to the various ways in which we are located by and see ourselves as within the narratives of the past (Hall 1990: 225). The point I would like to make here is that there is a very real desire amongst members of Chinese associations, particularly the older members, to retain what they perceive to be their 'true selves'. They believe that there is a Chinese core in each and every one of them, something that can and should be (re-)discovered. They also seem to think that this essential core needs to be constantly maintained and (re-)affirmed through the practice of Chinese customs and beliefs, without which, their sense of being Chinese would be lost. It is precisely because of this belief that there is a 'Chinese' core that associations position themselves as sites of Chinese-ness, sites where this essential identity can be (re-)discovered and maintained. They come to be seen as sites where a Chinese sense of belonging(s) can be cultivated.

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Dr Jacqueline Lo for drawing my attention to the ongoing debate in identity politics.

The success of CWA's leadership in deifying the Association as an elderly leader of the community stemmed primarily from the deep historical roots that CWA has grown in the W.A. landscape. CWA was founded in 1910 by a group of Chinese market gardeners as a political institution fighting against the hostile environment in which the Chinese were living (Cai 1998). At this time, anti-Chinese sentiments were raging throughout W.A. and discriminatory laws were continually passed to regulate the



The Chinese Hall along James Street. It is currently the main premises where members of the Chung Wah Association gather and activities are held.

economic activities of the Chinese and hence, threatened their very survival (Cai 1999; Cai 1998; Atkinson 1995; Ryan 1995). Tired of being ostracised and feeling like 'scattered sand', the Chinese hoped to unite with a 'willing and capable leader' against the bullying of the 'people from the West' ('xiren', '西人'), that is, the (White) Australian (*CWA's 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine* [CWAAM] 1995: 10). It was believed that with united strength, the community could 'even move mountains' (*ibid.*). The call

for unity went beyond county and sectional divisions. Membership of CWA was extended to *all* persons of Chinese descent. The commitment made by the founding leaders to unity and democracy ensured that CWA never took on sectional characteristics or became a 'village joss house' (Cai 1998: 501).

The history of CWA is significant not only because it was the first Chinese association in the whole of Australia to unite the Chinese community regardless of sectional and county divisions<sup>4</sup>, but also because it was the first Chinese organisation to claim a physical space for the community within the Australian landscape. The Hall that stands along James Street in Perth today was built in 1910 entirely on donations collected from Chinese shops, gardens and factories in the Perth metropolitan areas (*West Australian* [WA] 15 October 1910: 3). The location on James Street, then considered 'not a nice locality, having Chinamen and larrikins' (Stannage 1979: 244), meant that the Hall was conveniently located opposite a big produce market where the Chinese delivered their goods and in the informal Chinatown of Perth. It became 'a home for their own people and for visiting fellow countrymen...' (WA 15 October 1910: 3). For the community, the Hall was more than just a home. It was a place where they could eat, drink, be merry, and essentially be themselves in a hostile environment. The huge plastered plaque dominating the Hall bears testimony to this yearning to be easy in their skin when they were on Australian soil. The characters, '*Qun Xian Bi Ji*', appeared to have been taken from the 'Preface' to a volume of poems collected under the title, *The Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion* (兰亭集). The poems were inspired during a wild party amongst literary figures during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Wang Xizhi (王羲之), a famous calligrapher and literary figure of the time authored the 'Preface' and wrote of

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<sup>4</sup> The move was so momentous that an official notice from the Chinese Consulate in Melbourne urged the Chinese in each State to set up a unified association. News of the establishment of CWA was also reported in Sydney and served as encouragement to the Chinese in other States (Cai 1998: 503).

the gathering as 'Many a good man came, the young and old alike' ('群贤毕至，少长咸集')<sup>5</sup>. The words, '*Qun Xian Bi Ji*', allude to the good time Wang had with the gathering of his worthy friends at the Orchid Pavilion. In displaying the characters prominently in the Hall, the community echoed their desire to have a place where virtuous and worthy members of the community could gather together and essentially be themselves.

The transformation of the Perth landscape with the construction of the Hall was an important step in the process through which the Chinese community sought to be accepted by wider society. It was a visible physical reminder to the wider population of the Chinese presence in their midst. It was testimony of the community's strength to unite in fighting for the betterment of their rights and positions. It was a concrete commitment made by the Chinese to wider Australian society to become part of the landscape. This was clearly written in the European façade of the Hall. It was also a reminder to themselves of the cultural landscape they left behind. Without the construction and re-visioning of such remembered landscapes, the Chinese in W.A. would not have been so successful in creating a sense of community for themselves.

## *Visions of a Past Landscape*

The remembering of past landscapes is a crucial one in the process of (re-) creating a sense of community amongst migrants living in a hostile environment. Leonard (1997) made this point in her study of Indian and Japanese immigrants in rural California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She argued that it is by maintaining a continuous

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Dr Colin Jeffcott for pointing me to the line from which the idiom came from, its context and the translation I have used here. This translation originally appeared in Stephen Owen's *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (1996).

link with a sense of one's own society that the space and otherness of the host society is overcome. This link with the past is possible through what Leonard described as a 're-visioning' of the landscape, a conceptual imposition of a cultural past onto the land that the migrants have found themselves in. It is through re-visioning that a sense of community can be constructed in a barren land, that comfort and security become possible in the face of hostility. In this light, the decision to build a Chinese association as a response to the hostile environment was a means through which the Chinese sought to re-vision the Australian landscape such that it became more habitable for the community.

Though illuminating, I would argue that Leonard's study is lacking in that it failed to explain the processes through which a particular past or vision was selected for appropriation by the migrants. The choice of remembering could not have been random but rather, needed to serve a specific purpose that would satisfy the needs of the migrant community. In the case of the Chinese in W.A., the question remains then why associations were, as a structure, seen by the early migrants as capable of resolving the racial tensions of their presence in Australian society and transplanted in W.A.. It was clearly the resilience of the choice they made that associations stand as respected and meaningful Chinese terrains of belonging(s) in W.A. society today.

The Chinese reference term for associations, *Hui Guan* (会馆), is illuminating in this regard. The prefix, *Hui*, or to 'meet', modifies the root character, *Guan*, or a 'hall', and gives the combined meaning of the association as a place where people could meet. In feudal China, it was a meeting place for traders who were away from home. In immigrant societies, Chinese associations played very much the same role. They were meeting places where immigrants were able to meet people from the same cultural background (Freedman 1967). After its establishment, CWA played precisely this role.

It provided the premises at which Chinese market gardeners and their families could gather and engage in social activities. The James Street Hall became the venue for many social and fund-raising activities (*CWAAM* 1995: 16). In fact, it remains the case today.

Traditionally, associations were more than just meeting places. In feudal China, they provided accommodation for travelling traders and were a popular choice amongst the traders in the late Imperial period when there was an increasing volume of merchants travelling across China (Chen 1996: 219). Over time, associations also took on regional and county characteristics, and membership extended to men who originated from the same place. The fact that these men came from the same native place reinforced sentiments of mutual aid and it was not uncommon to make arrangements to assist a fellow kinsman or townsman. Rituals reaffirming the individual's identity and strengthening the bonds that one had with one's native place of origin were also commonly held in associations (Chen 1996; Wang, Ouyang & Li 1994). In overseas Chinese societies then, associations were important for providing practical assistance (Freedman 1967) as well as offering the opportunity for immigrants to reaffirm their ties with the homeland and, more importantly, with their lineage. Without these attempts to reinforce their identity, they would have thought of themselves as lost and without a sense of 'self' (Chukou 1983; Freedman 1967). As the early founders of CWA were adamant that the association remained neutral and not be influenced by regional and county divisions (Cai 1998: 501), the association provided the location, not for a reaffirmation of identity within a lineage structure, but an articulation and strengthening of Chinese identity, an identity based on the sense of discrimination the community faced from wider society and from the fact that members of the community, at that time, came from China. Today, this strengthening of Chinese-ness has shifted to a (re-)

assertion and for some, a reclamation of the Chinese identity. This role is particularly important in a multicultural framework in which associations become sites where Chinese ethnicity is articulated and through which multiculturalism is perpetuated<sup>6</sup>. It is through this process of (re-)definition and legitimisation that the Chinese community justifies its adoption of Australian identity, as well as acceptance from wider society and Chinese-Australian belonging(s) enabled.

Inherent in traditional forms of associations found in feudal China was the ability to organise the group the association represented. Through organisation, associations were able to defend and protect the interests of the group and, in turn, regulate the relations of the group with wider society (Chen 1996). In overseas Chinese societies, this characteristic was integral in regulating relations between the Chinese and other groups, particularly the ruling authorities. Based on his observations of the Chinese immigrant community in 19<sup>th</sup> century Singapore, Freedman (1967) argued that associations were crucial in regulating the relations between the Chinese and the colonial authorities. For the Chinese in W.A., this was a prime motivation behind the decision to set up CWA. The community realised that they needed to organise themselves and stand united if they were to succeed in protecting their interests in a climate of ostracism and prejudice (Cai 1998; Atkinson 1995). The association provided the ideal communal structure through which they could achieve this aim. It should also be noted that the establishment of CWA was possible in 1910 because of the congregation of the Chinese community in Perth and its metropolitan areas. Prior to the settlement of the Chinese in the urban areas, small pockets of the community lived in remote areas of the State, making communication extremely difficult, if not impossible.

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<sup>6</sup> I will delve further into this process of (re-)affirming Chinese cultural identity within the Australian multicultural framework in Chapter 3.

Associations like CWA emerge as an 'envelope of space-time' (Massey 1995: 188, cited in Fortier 1999: 47), conflating both time and space such that past cultural meanings are brought into the present to ensure cultural continuity and to enhance and legitimise meaning in the rubric of the present. As sites of Chinese historicity, these associations mark a communal project of recovery, of (re-)constructing and (re-)discovering Chinese ethnic identity in a hostile landscape. Through time, they served as a grounding for the displaced community, reinforcing their Chinese sense of 'self' as well as providing them with a means to entrench themselves into the land. Indeed, CWA is remembered by the Perth Chinese today as a survivor, one that has stood the test of time despite hanging voraciously on to its Chinese identity in a viciously hostile environment. It is remembered as the meeting place, not just for its members, but also for the possible co-existence of Chinese cultural identity and a sense of being a part of Australia.

### *Chinese-Australian Terrains of Belonging(s)*

Though the founding fathers of CWA expressed their interest in being accepted as part of the Australian landscape (Cai 1998), it was not until the mid-1980s that Chinese associations in W.A. emerged as Chinese-Australian terrains of belonging(s). This is not to say that there was a break in the desire of the community to become accepted but that there was a gradual and subtle shift of positioning, from seeing themselves as purely sites of Chinese-ness seeking acceptance to internalising Chinese-Australian belonging(s).

This shift in the conceptualisation of their position was evident in the newsletters circulated by the associations. In the 1980s, there was no clear direction as to how the

associations could manoeuvre between gaining acceptance and retaining their culture. What was clear was the desire to retain their culture while becoming a part of Australia. The struggle for acceptance was labelled as 'assimilation' and 'a two-fold process of response', one in which the community extended its goodwill to wider society via public relations efforts to promote better understanding between the community and Australian society (*CWNL* June 1984: 2). In this positioning, the community was seen as separate and different from wider society. It was a monolithic entity with a unique culture capable of absorbing and dealing with the norms and values of Australian society. The reasoning was that there was something inherent in the teachings of Chinese culture and history that enabled the Chinese to become accepted by wider society without losing their Chinese-ness. The community saw itself as an independent entity that was trying to reach out to wider society via public relations efforts. Associations then were mediums through which bridges could be built between two separate entities, the Chinese community and wider Australian society.

In 1986, a new position was clearly articulated. In his first address to the members of CWA, then CWA President emphasised that the Association was first and foremost, an Australian organisation. It existed for 'the benefit of *all* Australian Chinese, irrespective of their background' (*CWNL* June 1986: 7, emphasis added). It was only by adopting an 'Australian posture' (*ibid.*) that participation in the mainstream activities of the Australian society could be facilitated. Only then could the community preserve its cultural tradition for it is through this tradition that the community could offer itself to all Australians (*ibid.*). In recognising Chinese associations as Australian organisations, the address placed the Chinese as a group within the Australian society. They were not different, as in separate, but different, as in part of the diversity in Australian society. In positing Chinese cultural tradition as something that the community could offer to

Australia, what had previously been a point of contention in the process of the Chinese becoming accepted as part of Australian society became something of value that Australian society could absorb and claim for itself. The preservation of Chinese culture then became something 'Australian' to do rather than inhibiting the integration of the Chinese into Australian society. This shift towards perceiving the Chinese community as embedded within Australian society transformed Chinese associations from 'Chinese' sites to 'Chinese-Australian' terrains. It was by recognising that Chinese associations exist as nodes within the multicultural Australian landscape that the Chinese could truly belong to the land down under while retaining their cultural identity.

The subtle shift in positions suggests that associations are heavily contested sites, places where the tensions of being Chinese in a foreign land manifest themselves. They are simultaneously locations of Chinese-ness and Australian sites of belonging(s). It is by careful positioning that associations are able to tread the consistently shifting line between Chinese-ness and being Australian. In treading this in-between space that associations, and by extension the community, are able to exist within the Australian national time/space, or as Clifford (1994) put it, to live inside but with a difference.

# 3

Putting their heels together, the girls started bending their knees with their arms reaching downwards as they slowly moved their bodies closer to the floor. It was a lazy spring afternoon and sunlight filtered into the James Street Hall through the high windows as the girls worked on their stretching exercises. The delicious smell of cooking spaghetti sauce from the Italian restaurant downstairs wafted into the Hall and excited the gastronomic juices of the girls as they flexed their muscles and positioned their bodies according to the exercises. The strains of a piano recording blasted from a small radio sitting on the table at one end of the Hall.

'One! Two! Three! Pay attention to the expression in your eyes! They must follow your arms! Again! And, one!...'

The girls rolled their eyes and made funny faces at Miss Chen's command. A couple of them struggled to keep their balance. Others grimaced as the muscles in their legs contracted to execute the gradual downward movement and strained to keep the elegant postures.

'All right! Back arches! And, one!'

Perfectly in time with the music, Miss Chen hoisted her petite body onto the tips of her toes, stretched out her right leg behind her, slowly moved her left arm forward

and proceeded to bend backwards. Arched, her left arm formed an elegant curve with her outstretched thigh. Her eyes focussed on some unseen point beyond the tips of her fingers. Watching her, it is difficult to believe that she is near forty-five.

'Oh my god! I hate this one. I can never balance on my toes and I can feel the fat on my back bunching up into clumps! Yucks!'

The girls dissolved into laughter at Wai Min's rather loud whispered confession. Most of them were making half-hearted attempts at the exercises.

'You pay attention?!? C'mon! Taa-dum!'

The girls turned back to the exercises as Miss Chen started to walk round the table checking their poses. She stopped behind Wai Min.

'You so lazy!!! C'mon! You can do it!!! Try!!'

At this, Miss Chen put one hand on Wai Min's thigh using it as a pivot while her other hand held on to Wai Min's foot as she lifted the leg higher. Propelled by the motion, Wai Min automatically arched her back. Her face was a mask of pain and her breathing became laboured. Her eyes darted around at the rest of us as she strained to arch her back even further.

'Yes! Like that! You have to feel it! Some more!!!'

'AaaahhhhOOouuuccchhh! I can't! It's too painful!'

'Try!'

The exercises continued.



A bodily connection underscores the powerful metaphors of the naturalised relationship between people and the land. The movement of people involves essentially, the movement of bodies from one land to another. Movement ruptures the

bond between bodies and the land, creating the 'loss of bodily connection to their homeland', a 'loss of moral bearings' (Malkki 1992: 32). The adoption of a new land requires then, processes through which the link between the body and the adopted land is (re-)established. It is by (re-)connecting the body to the land that the body and 'self' becomes (re-)orientated. The movement of bodies from one culture into another implies also a need to (re-)shape and (re-)mark displaced bodies such that they become acceptable to the host population. It is by (re-)marking Chinese bodies that the Chinese can be seen by both the State and wider Australian society as moral and a non-threat to the stability of the place they want to call home.

This process of (re-)marking is a painful one for displaced peoples. They are pulled between two opposing forces, of wanting to preserve a remembered past and desiring the internalisation of an alien identity, an identity crucial to their finding solace in their adopted land. The (re-)marking of Chinese bodies presents a particularly difficult case. The Chinese, regardless of whether they are recent migrants or have lived in Australia for several generations, look different from the ordinary Australian. Recent migrants are also distinguished from the way they speak and sound. Members of the community in Perth are aware of these physical differences. They accept that they are not completely acceptable as Australians in the first generation, but hope that their children and grandchildren will eventually be accepted as they sound Australian:

'...Australians are funny in this aspect. They seem to relate to you better if you sound like them...There is no way a first generation migrant like myself can acquire the Australian accent...but things are different with my children. They grew up here...they sound Australian...so with time I am sure the Australians will find it easier to accept the Chinese...'

This difficulty in accepting the Chinese stems in large part from historical conceptions of what an Australian looks like. In the early twentieth century, Australian identity emphasised the Anglo-Saxon roots of the society and national identity was

firmly based on physical and racial characteristics, tampered by a moral, social and psychological identity (Stratton & Ang 1998: 148). This Anglo-Saxon understanding of Australian identity was gradually expanded to include European migrants who flocked to the island continent in the post-war years (*ibid.*). Regardless of this definitional expansion, the Australian national type was still firmly grounded in racial categories. Non-white communities like the Chinese were ostracised and rejected. The implementation of multiculturalism almost three decades ago has done little to eradicate these deeply ingrained racial ideals that continue to circulate in pockets of contemporary Australian society (Ang 2000a). As such, the Chinese continue to be seen as unacceptable, or at best marginally, Australian.

This marginal position is one of uncertainty, tension and anxiety. In seeking to mediate the uncertainty of their position, the Chinese constructed Chinese associations to ground them in Australian soil. It is, however, through the enactment of rituals that the community has (re-)territorialized the Australian landscape and (re-)established the link between Chinese bodies and Australian soil, thereby claiming a part of Australia for themselves. Rituals have a transformative ability (Turner 1986). They mediate periods of uncertainty and anxiety and restore a sense of order in society (Spencer 1988). The enactment of rituals separates specified individuals from everyday life, places them 'in a limbo', at a place they were never in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returns them (Turner 1986: 25). Bodies, through rituals, are changed and transformed such that they become incorporated into a new social order. Through this incorporation, a new social order resolved of previous anxieties and conflict emerges. Rituals, then, form an important part in the processes through which the Chinese cultivate Chinese-Australian belonging(s) in Australia. The enactment of rituals transforms their Chinese bodies into Chinese-Australian ones. In performing rituals on Australian soil, the

Chinese (re-)connect with the land and become incorporated as acceptable parts of the Australian landscape.

The rituals through which the Chinese community mediated their positions of uncertainty are the conscious and repeated productions of Chinese culture. In Australian society, the performance of ethnic cultures forms the basis of Australian multiculturalism. Broadly understood, multiculturalism is the co-existence of a plurality of cultures within a nation (Stratton & Ang 1998: 135). It seeks to bring about national unity through a rhetoric of embracing diversity. In Australian multiculturalism, national unity is sought through cultural diversity. The Government actively funds and provides facilities for the preservation of ethnic cultural heritage for the discourse of multiculturalism encourages, and even compels, ethnic groups like the Chinese to preserve their cultural heritage (*ibid.*). The performance and display of Chinese culture is therefore an important one in the Australian multicultural framework. It justifies the presence of the Chinese in Australia and transforms them into Chinese-Australians, categories acceptable to wider Australian society as (marginally) Australian. By staging these performances, the Chinese articulate their support for the State and their commitment to being Australian. In this chapter, I will discuss the ritualised processes through which (re-)ethnicised Chinese-Australian bodies are transformed and (re-)marked as Chinese ones. Focussing on Chinese cultural dance, I will argue that it is by offering distinctively Chinese bodies to wider Australian society and the State that belonging(s) to Australia is made possible for a people who look (and for some of them, sound) different.

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## *Why Chinese Cultural Dance?*

As Chinese-Australian sites of belonging(s), associations offer a plethora of cultural activities. Activities that produce Chinese-ness range from the popular Chinese cultural dance group and lion dance troupe, to martial arts, Chinese calligraphy and painting classes. Given the variety of activities that produce Chinese-ness in these privileged sites of Chinese-Australian belonging(s), why did I decide to focus on the performance of Chinese cultural dance? My decision was based on a number of considerations.

Dance is a form of ritual (Spencer 1988). 'It may be seen as a [ritualised] dialogue that maintained the vitality of community existence, while preserving it from the Hobbesian chaos' (Spencer 1988: 31). Dance is a heightened activity through which Chinese-Australian belonging(s) are aesthetically presented, expressed and actualised. At the same time, it articulates and reinforces social solidarity. It is also an activity that requires a visible (re-)marking of the body, in this case young female ones. Chinese cultural dance is therefore a ritualised space of cultural production through which the dynamics of belonging(s) between the community and the State are negotiated and expressed. It is therefore a ritual of belonging(s). A study of Chinese cultural dance would reveal the compromises and positioning of Chinese-ness within the Australian multicultural framework undertaken by the community such that Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is induced.

My decision to focus on Chinese cultural dance was also influenced by the observation that the Chinese associations in Perth had two primary vehicles through which they displayed Chinese-ness to wider Australian society: the lion-dance troupe and the Chinese cultural dance group. These two groups were very popular as they

were well-known in Perth. They were frequently invited for performances, both by members of the Chinese community and by non-Chinese-Australians. According to one of my respondents in the Chung Wah Association (CWA) cultural dance group, the girls averaged one performance a month. During the busiest period around Chinese New Year, it was common to have two performances in one day. In addition to being popular mediums through which the associations presented Chinese culture to wider Australian society, the dance group and the lion dance troupe brought in money for the associations. They were usually paid for the performances and most of the money was channelled back into the groups to finance costumes, props and lessons. As one of the main mediums through which the Chinese associations presented Chinese-ness, the cultural dance group was a logical focus for my fieldwork.

I was also constrained by the fact that I was a lone researcher in the field working within an extremely tight schedule. After observing several dance practises and lion dance practice sessions, I decided that it would probably be easier for me to be accepted as a member of the dance group. I made this decision on the basis of gender. The dance group consisted of a group of lively and chattering young girls, aged between fourteen to twenty. There were, however, two exceptions who were in their thirties. On the other hand, the lion dance troupe was made up almost entirely of boys. As a young female, I felt that it would be easier for me to gain access to the dance group. Being more of an indoor type of person, the sheer physicality of the lion dance practices, of having to prance atop metal poles and having to bear the deafening clangs of the cymbals and drums, also daunted me. I was, of course, to be proven wrong in this as my muscles protested every week against the stretching exercises I did with the dance group, exercises that had seemed relatively easy when observed from a distance!

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## *Uneasy Rituals of Belonging(s)*

The performance of Chinese cultural dance in the Perth landscape is an uneasy one. Though the actual performances of the dance form were unmistakably Chinese in appearance, my experience with the Chinese cultural dance group suggested that this Chinese appearance was very much the product of debate, careful consideration and manipulation of different aspects of the dance. To my respondents in the dance group, the Chinese-ness of the dance form is made up of several discrete items like dance movements, costumes, music and props. The dance is 'Chinese' because of all these different items. It is a combination of all these things, or what my respondents described as 'the entire package' that makes the performance 'Chinese'. This view of the dance as a 'package' made it possible for the girls to justify their manipulation of different aspects of the dance. They either adhered to what they referred to as 'tradition' or removed things from the package and introduced new, contemporary influences to the dance form.

The group's emphasis on 'tradition' was an overpowering one. It was *the* concern of the group that they performed distinctively Chinese dances. My respondents appeared to think of things with Chinese appearances as 'tradition'. A new design for the group's costume was rejected by the older members of the group because they did not consider it 'traditional' enough. They also expressed concern that it would be difficult for them to explain the adoption of the design to the Executive Committee if the matter was raised. The design consisted of a simple piece of cloth wrapped around the body and tied at the back and in the neck with ribbons, leaving the back bare. Coincidentally, this design was very fashionable with teenage girls in Perth at that time and it was possible to buy a similarly designed outfit in any shop dealing in teenage

fashion. Despite its trendiness, the design was similar to the undergarment, the *dudou* (肚兜), worn by women in ancient China, a fact emphasised by the dance instructress who had proposed the design. The rejection of this design suggested that my respondents were concerned with ensuring what they understood and what their audience recognised as Chinese-ness in their performances. They adhered to what they perceived as 'traditional' aspects of the performance because they wanted to present a visibly recognisable Chinese dance. The use of the proposed design would have reduced the Chinese-ness of their appearance because it was a design that was regarded as fashionable and trendy by the Australian public. In this, they were not seeking to preserve 'tradition' or traditional practices, but to present heightened representations of what they understood as Chinese-ness.

Though conscious attempts were made to ensure that their 'package' remained distinctively Chinese, there were instances when the group introduced contemporary influences into their performance. The use of the music by the group 'Middle Kingdom' is one such instance. My respondents found that the 'foreign audience' visibly responded to the performance when they used contemporary music:

'[Music by the group is] really a blend of traditional and modern sounds. We found that it is more acceptable to the Australian ear and the audience responds to it...well, they clap along and you can see them swaying to the music...'

The willingness to tinker with certain aspects of their performance such that an affinity is established with the audience suggested that the performance of Chinese cultural dance, though sanctioned by the Australian Government, remained an uneasy cultural space. It was one marked by conscious and deliberate attempts to remain distinctively Chinese while making compromises in order to reach out to their audience.

As rituals of belonging(s), the emphasis on Chinese-ness can be interpreted on several levels. It is an expression of communal remembering, of a distant cultural tradition. Chinese-ness is (re-)lived in Australia through this deliberate infusion of the dance form with Chinese-ness. The performance opens up a space where a remembered cultural past is folded into the present. In converging the past and the present, the repeated public performances of the dance form actualised and made real the essentialised perceived cultural core of every member of the community, (re-)living their Chinese-ness in dance. It is also a ritual that calls into mind the transnational links of the community. In her study on the preservation of Italian-ness in the Italian community of London, Fortier (1999) argued that the annual procession in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was a 'diasporic moment', one in which the Italians in London shared with the Italians of Montreal, New York, Toronto and parts of Italy as they celebrated their devotion to Mary. It was the enactment and repeated annual re-enactments of the ritualised procession that the Italians (re-)mapped their Italian-ness onto alien London soil. Likewise, the performance of Chinese cultural dance is 'a diasporic moment' for it enables the (re-)mapping of Chinese-ness in Australia. The performance of Chinese cultural dance in the Australian landscape is therefore a ritualised remembering of Chinese culture and a (re-)affirmation of Chinese belonging(s).

Under the multicultural framework, the performance of Chinese-ness is also very much an affirmation of Australian-ness. The performance of Chinese cultural dance is therefore, also a ritual of Australian belonging. It is through the conscious display of Chinese-ness that Australian multiculturalism is lived, experienced and made real for Australian society. It is by producing their Chinese-ness in heightened public displays that the Chinese experience Australian belonging. And yet, this display of

Chinese-ness is not entirely popular with the Australian public. Chinese-ness has to be modified in order to become popular and hence, acceptable to wider Australian society. This suggests that there is a gap between the official sanction of multiculturalism that sought to embrace different cultures and the willingness of ordinary Australians to accept diverse cultures in their entirety. As a ritual of belonging(s), the performance of Chinese cultural dance therefore remains an uneasy one in the Australian landscape.

### *(Re-)Marking Chinese-Australian Bodies*

Caught within these uneasy rituals of belonging(s) were the young female bodies of the dancers. Fortier (1999) argued that children and the young, particularly the ritualised marking of their bodies, formed an integral part in the processes through which migrant communities preserved their ethnicity. She argued that the children of migrant communities represented the passing of generations and were:

'...the living embodiment of continuity and change, mediating memories of the past with present living conditions, bringing the past into the present and charged with the responsibility of keeping some form of ethnic identity alive in the future. Called upon as bearers of an "original" identity and culture, and an "adopted" one, they embody both continuity and change...that decant into each other and combine in the formation of a distinct émigré identity...' (1999: 55)

The youthful bodies of the dancers are therefore sites on which boundaries between Chinese-ness and Australian-ness are blurred and fused into a distinctive Chinese-Australian identity. It is the marking and control of these youthful bodies that the preservation of Chinese-ness into the future, as well as the future of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) are glimpsed and made possible. How are they (re-)marked such that they become Chinese bodies? How do these Chinese bodies become accepted as Chinese-Australian ones? How have these (re-)markings given rise to the uneasy rituals of

belonging(s) outlined above? More importantly, what do they suggest about the way in which the Chinese associations, and by extension the community, positioned Chinese-ness to induce Chinese-Australian belonging(s)?

Of essential importance in this consideration of bodies was the fact that all fourteen of the girls who formed the main core of the cultural dance group were either born or grew up in Australia. All of them speak with an Australian accent and consider no other place home besides Australia. They are therefore living embodiments of Chinese-Australian-ness, typical examples of who Chinese-Australians are and will be. It is, as I will show, the deliberate manipulation and (re-)marking of these typified Chinese-Australian bodies into distinctively Chinese ones that associations are able to generate Chinese-Australian belonging(s) for the community and induce acceptance of Chinese faces in wider Australian society. It is by (re-)marking Chinese-Australian bodies as Chinese ones that Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is enabled.

Bodies can be trained into emulating a certain worldview. The way a body moves, or 'body culture' (Brownell 1995), is the product of training the body such that it embodies the values and norms of the existing structure. This process of training the body may either be unconscious or deliberate. The 'body culture' of my respondents was unconsciously shaped by the Australian-ness of the environment in which they live and grew up in. They therefore speak with distinctively Australian accents and dress along Australian fashion trends in daily life. The Australian-ness in these bodies needed to be subdued, (re-)shaped and (re-)marked as Chinese ones before they can perform as legitimate dancers of Chinese cultural dance and be seen as the legitimate successors of their cultural heritage. It is by (re-)learning Chinese-ness that these Chinese-Australian bodies can be incorporated under Australian multiculturalism and accepted by both the State and wider Australian public as forming a unique part of Australia. This (re-)

shaping is carried out through the weekly practice sessions where the girls learnt the appropriate dance movements and gestures of the Chinese dance form. The practice sessions deliberately and, I have to add very painfully, contorted the Chinese-Australian bodies of these girls into poses that the body was unfamiliar with and unused to. This process of (re-)marking the Chinese-Australian bodies as Chinese ones is so important that the group engages the services of an instructress who formally trained in Chinese classical dance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) before she migrated to Perth. The fact that this instructress had formal training in Chinese cultural dance was something my respondents in the group emphasised. They generally felt that they had learnt more about Chinese cultural dance from her than from any other instructor they have had. It is through this bodily learning of uniquely Chinese dance movements and gestures that the Chinese-Australian bodies of these girls are trained into Chinese ones.

This process of bodily learning was supplemented by a visual marking of these Chinese-Australian bodies through the use of ethnic costumes. The use of ethnic costumes to preserve some measure of ethnic cultural identity is a well-researched phenomenon (for example, see Eicher 1995). 'Ethnic dress helps to position the individual in time and place relationships' (Eicher 1995: 4). The adornment of the body with ethnic costumes transports the past into the present. It freezes the past in time and allows the individual and the community in question to establish a link between their selves in the present with a meaningful past heritage. The details that distinguish an ethnic dress are usually minute, but it is the preservation and regulation of these minute details that preserve the heritage of the dress (Eicher 1995). It was therefore of paramount importance that the girls retained the minute yet distinctive Chinese features of their dance costumes. It is these features that (re-)establish the link between their bodies and a cultural past. The loss of these features would render their bodies un-

Chinese, a category unacceptable both in their claim as legitimate successors of Chinese cultural heritage and the actualisation of their Australian identity. It is worth noting that the group's perception of what constituted a Chinese dance costume was closely influenced by what the Australian audience understood and saw as Chinese costumes, a conception that essentially consisted of quaint and picturesque designs of Chinese collars and trimmings. The adoption of designs that broke out of this caricatured mould, particularly one that was trendy and deemed fashionable by wider Australian society, would have obliterated the Chinese-ness of their performances, made the dances by the girls visually un-Chinese and erased the transformative process of becoming Chinese-Australians within the State-imposed multicultural landscape.

The deliberate (re-)marking of Chinese-Australian bodies such that they are (re-)moulded into Chinese ones has to be understood within the context of Australian multiculturalism. The cultural emphasis of the policy links the ethnic individual to a particular culture. His/her identity is seen by the State and wider society as grounded in this ethnicity. Hence, even though Australian multiculturalism aims to incorporate alien bodies and transform them into Australian ones, this transformation is very much rooted in (re-)affirming ethnicity. The Chinese-Australian bodies of the dancers therefore are *not* seen or accepted by the State as Australian even though they are shaped and marked by Australian influences. It is only when they take on Chinese markings that what are essentially, Chinese-Australian bodies, become accepted as such by both the State and wider public. On the other hand, the uneasiness of the dance performances stems from what has been described as a very real gap between official policy and public opinion over the incorporation of traditionally unacceptable categories of people as Australian (Ang 2000a). This gap creates a chasm that the community tries to bridge by modifying certain aspects of Chinese-ness. Through modifications, the community hopes to reach

out and establish a link with wider Australian public. In the performance of Chinese cultural dance, these modifications took the form of wanting to please the 'foreign audience' the group performed to. It was by pleasing the audience that a connection between two disparate and diverse groups of people was forged. It is through the establishment of such links that acceptance is made plausible.

Much has been written on the State's control of ethnic bodies and the 'selective incorporation' (Wang 2000: 119) of minority groups like the Chinese into Australian society. This argument of disempowerment and subordination of ethnic groups to the State blinkers out the control and the space, minimal though they may be, in which minority groups in Australia are able to manoeuvre and preserve their cultural heritage and traditions. The concern expressed by the older girls over the possibility of the Executive Committee accepting the new design suggests that associations *do* exercise control over the bodies of the dancers and how Chinese-ness is displayed. The consideration that there is a very real yearning within the community to retain and freely articulate their perceived cultural selves implied that this control exercised by the Committee is not purely an expression of State control or subordination. Rather, it is an indication of how the associations, and by extension the community, position Chinese-ness and work within the imposed State framework to induce Chinese-Australian belonging(s). In order to understand the dynamics of this positioning, it is important to return to the theme of contribution I outlined in Chapter 2.

## *Bodily Offerings of Contribution*

First articulated in 1986, this theme of contribution took on an increasingly important role in determining the manner in which Chinese associations in Perth

positioned themselves. In 1990, then President of CWA articulated the internalisation of this theme of contribution in the way CWA approached their efforts to entrench the community in Australian soil:

'...The Australian society is demographically a multicultural one. That is why it is vibrant, colourful and exciting. In order to keep it that way, it is important that different groups which make up this Australian society should seek ways and means of contributing to it...That certainly is the principal attitude and approach of our Association...' (*Chung Wah News* [*CWN*], January 1990: 2)

It is important to note the link made between contribution and multiculturalism in this short passage. The contributions made by the community enabled the vibrancy, colour and diversity of Australian society. It was therefore, the Australian thing to do to contribute their Chinese cultural heritage. In taking this position, the associations accorded legitimacy to the State and its policy of multiculturalism. It is by working within this State imposed framework that the community can 'call Australia Home' and indicate to 'fellow Australians that Chinese-Australians are as much part owners of this nation as any other Australian and that we are making this land, and this land only, our home' (*CWN*, January/February 1997: 14).

On the other hand, it is by appropriating the State-imposed multicultural framework that associations have managed to address the community's yearnings to preserve their cultural selves. In this, Chinese culture is positioned as a contribution to Australian society. By positioning Chinese culture as contribution, the space to freely express and articulate Chinese-ness is freed for the community. The freeing up of this cultural space enables Chinese-ness to be remembered, expressed, lived and made real. Australian multiculturalism therefore, opens up a space in which minority groups can remember and (re-)live their cultural heritage, as well as realise their Australian belonging. This is not to suggest that the community is blind to the fact that despite their efforts, they continue to be discriminated against and rejected by pockets of

Australian society, a situation I will delve into in the next chapter. It is sufficient at this point to note that it is by playing within the multicultural field demarcated by the State that the Chinese associations hope to cultivate Chinese-Australian belonging(s) for the community.

In this light, the performances of Chinese cultural dance are contributions, ritualised offerings that the associations, and by extension the community, make to the State. As a ritualised expression of Chinese culture, the display and production of Chinese cultural dance, and the subsequent devouring of the dance form by the State and wider Australian society, validates and legitimises Australian multiculturalism and reinforces the multicultural definition of Australian national identity. The deliberately (re-)ethnicised bodies of the dancers are ritualised offerings through which the community offers its contribution and symbolically submits itself to the State. It is by offering Chinese bodies through the ritualised dialogue of dance that the vitality of Chinese communal existence is preserved and Chinese-Australian belonging(s) realised. It is through these bodily offerings of contribution that the connection between Chinese bodies and Australian soil is made and actualised, enabling the community to make the claim, 'We call Australia home'.

# 4

'What racism?'

Cheung 'Ser's'<sup>1</sup> response surprised me. We were seated in the small cramped room that was used as a classroom cum storeroom, located at the back of the James Street Hall. Propped against the wall at the back of the room was the lifeless body of a *Wu Long* (dragon dance costume, 舞 龙), covered with a fine sheen of dust. Watercolour paintings of Chinese landscapes lined the walls. The rest of the room was taken up by rows of tightly packed tables and chairs, and a white board littered with scribbles. I tried to shift my position in my chair and ended up knocking my knees against the table as my eyes darted from a painting of the Three Gorges to Cheung Ser's wrinkle-lined face.

'Are you suggesting that racial discrimination does not exist in Perth today? What about that recent attack on the house of a Singapore businessman?'

'That was an isolated incident,' shrugged Cheung Ser as he peered at me through his thick plastic lenses. 'I have not personally encountered any form of racism in all the time I have been in Australia. There may be a couple of die-hard racists, but you have

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<sup>1</sup> It took me a while to realise that 'Ser' (articulated with an emphasis on the 'e') was actually a suffix that marked respect. Its meaning is akin to the English word, 'Sir'. Hence, 'Cheung Ser' was actually 'Cheung Sir'.

to realise that the Chinese themselves have to take some responsibility for the racial attacks'.

'Huh? What do you mean?'

'Well, the Chinese are seen to be overly rich and they insist on showing off their wealth. How would you feel if your new neighbour, who is of another race, moves in with several luxurious cars, starts renovating his house and digs up his garden so that he can replant what was previously already a beautiful garden? Worse, he ignores you when both of you are within sight of one another in the garden or in the driveway. Do you see what I mean?!? How can we insist on being accepted when we don't even have the basic courtesy to consider our neighbour's feelings?'



Diasporic (re-)connections with their adopted land are not just about remembering and carefully positioning a cultural past within an acceptable State-sanctioned framework. It is an 'entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford 1994: 311). It is also about dealing with and living in the present, of resolving the problems and difficulties of living in another land, of constructing another home. In what remains of this thesis, I would like to focus on how Chinese-ness is used by the associations to mitigate the everyday problems of living in Australia.

Memories, particularly memories about their new home, appear to play an important part in this process of cultivating Chinese-Australian belonging(s). Memories give not just a sense of community, but also enable the community to feel that they are part of the land. They are, after all, recollections of the past and, very often, it is

accepted that the memories one can recall of being in a certain place and time, particularly if the memories stretch far back in history, legitimise the conditions of the present (Jing 1996). More importantly, memories, particularly those of struggle and trauma, provide the terrain for the consolidation of a selfhood intricately linked to the experience of living in an adopted land. It is by having fought for and having bled for a place that migrants feel an affinity and a right to the adopted land. It justifies their presence and strengthens their ties to the land. This is why I think that the Chinese Hall run by the Chung Wah Association (CWA) is concrete testimony to the long-standing presence of the Chinese community in W.A.. It is a culturally inscribed monument to the efforts made by the community to survive in the face of blatant hostility in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the submerged threat of racism today. In reminding the community of their history in the land and the sweat and toil that had gone into cultivating the land by their predecessors, the Hall and the memories it stood for legitimised and justified the community's presence in Australia today, as well as their right to belong and be accepted as part of the landscape.

I would like to pause here and draw the analytical distinction between the cultural (re-)imaginings discussed in the earlier chapters and the memories of actually living in Australia. The memories concentrated on in this chapter are those grounded in the experience of living in Australia. They are borne out of having to struggle and negotiate for acceptance. It was through the formation of these memories that the Chinese have been able to think of themselves as Australians, albeit within their unique cultural tradition. Though I am discussing these memories and cultural (re-)imaginings as distinct categories, they are not. Rather, it is the tussle and constant negotiations between these categories that encouraged the cultivation of a sense of belonging(s) and which had given rise to a Chinese-Australian identity for, as Malkki pointed out,

identity is 'rhizomorphic' and is 'always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorisation by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera. It is a creolised aggregate composed through bricolage...' (Malkki 1992: 37).

It is the aim of this chapter to discuss the construction of collective memories grounded in the experience of living in Australia. In particular, I would like to focus on the construction of memories related to encounters of racism, a phenomenon that has had a long historical presence in the Chinese experience in Australia and which continues to intermittently plague the community today. I will argue that the collective memories that emerged out of the community's attempts to negotiate racism entrenched feelings of belonging(s) to the land.

### *Submerged Threat: Why Discuss Racism?*

Before I begin my discussion, I would like to explain why I have decided to focus on the construction of collective memories around racism, particularly at a time when the multicultural policies of Australia are thriving and when researchers themselves are looking beyond the racist discourse to the internal dynamics of the Chinese community<sup>2</sup>. While I fully agree that there is immense scope for research into the everyday life and culture of the Chinese community, I would like to emphasise here that racism, or the fear of being the target of anti-Chinese prejudice, remains a key experience for many Chinese living in Australia. It is a destabilising force that has a direct impact on the way the Chinese cultivates their bonds of attachment to Australia.

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<sup>2</sup> The call for research beyond racism in migrant communities, particularly Chinese communities in the Western world, was highlighted to me in a private communication with Dr Manying Ip.

It is therefore not possible to ignore the influence of racism on the community in this study. A word of moderation appears appropriate at this point for Australia is no longer the overtly racist country it was in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though racial ideas continue to be held and are propounded by certain sections of the population, the majority of Australians no longer endorse racist ideals (Markus 2001).

Racism, albeit intermittently, continues to feature in the everyday lives of the Chinese living in Australia. Two types of racism confront the community today: the acts of violence and hatred widely regarded as traditional expressions of race ideology; and a new form of racism that disguises the superiority and bigotry characterising traditional forms of racial expressions in a moderate, rational tone (Markus 2001: 9-10). The former hurt the Chinese in Western Australia (W.A.) when the Australian Nationalist Movement (ANM) carried out their racial campaign throughout the late 1980s (for example, see *Western Australian* [*WA*] 26 May 1989; *WA* 8 May 1989; *WA* 22 Aug 1988 etc). They also had to grapple with the senseless bludgeoning of a Chinese taxi driver by an eighteen year-old youth who admitted during trial, 'I don't like Chinese to start with, and then when he hit me I started belting him' (*WA* 9 August 1988: 15). Though there were no reports of violent racist incidents against the community in the 1990s, it is worth noting that the bungalow of a Chinese businessman from Singapore was vandalised and his possessions set on fire late last year. Though investigations were still being conducted by the time I left Perth, reports that the walls of the bungalow were covered with racist messages such as 'Go home, wog' suggested that there was a racial undertone to the incident. While it is not possible to conclude that the destruction was racially motivated, it is still significant that the vandals chose to take on a racial tone in their graffiti. It suggested that sentiments fuelling racial hatred continue to boil under the veneer of peace and racial tolerance. For the community, the

latent potential of becoming targets of racist attacks injects fear and destabilises their sense of belonging(s) in W.A., making their stay in Perth an insecure and difficult one.

The latter form of racial expression manifested itself in 1984 with the discussions on immigration by Geoffrey Blainey (Markus 2001: 59-60)<sup>3</sup>. This moderate tone claiming to defend common sense propositions gathered force and culminated in the birth of 'One Nation' and the electoral victory of Pauline Hanson in 1996<sup>4</sup>. It continues to make waves in mainstream Australian politics with the political comeback of Hanson in the forthcoming 2001 elections. Unlike the acts of violence and hatred that were traditionally perceived to be expressions of racist ideals, this form of racism is more insidious as it is coldly rational and adapted to the climate of multiculturalism (Hage 1998: 209). It enables its proponents to manoeuvre within the framework of tolerance and racial harmony promoted by the State. By claiming that they are not racists, but concerned with the real, day-to-day problems of the average (White) Australian, proponents of this line of thought have managed to attract substantial followings. Though these forms of racial expression do not seek to directly impose violence on the Chinese, they nevertheless, stir up latent racial sentiments in Australian society. In the aftermath of Hanson's maiden speech for example, Chinese children were called 'Chings' and abused in playgrounds in Perth (*WA*, 5 November 1996: 5). Not unlike the acts of racially motivated violence and hatred, this form of racism also

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<sup>3</sup> Briefly, Blainey charged that the immigration policies of the time favoured Asians and cautioned against 'some kind of slow Asian takeover of Australia' (cited by Markus 2001: 63).

<sup>4</sup> The emergence of this moderate tone of racism in mainstream Australian politics is a complicated issue that unfortunately, cannot be dealt with in detail here. It is, however, worth noting that its emergence had been attributed to the confluence of several factors: the mobilisation of the New Right; the construction of meanings based on the ideal of 'one nation' in mainstream Australian politics; the role of John Howard in the positioning of the Liberal Party; the values, politics and influence of the far right in Australia; the birth of Pauline Hanson's One Nation; and the traditions of populist politics, particularly in Queensland (Markus 2001).

instils a sense of insecurity about their present as well as their future within the Chinese community.

Regardless of the forms that they have taken, racist incidents and comments have a common effect on the community. By questioning the legitimacy of their existence and, at times, imposing the threat of violence on their physical safety, encounters with racism destabilise the sense of self that the individual has. It raises questions of how one can grow up doing things Australian and thinking of oneself as Australian and yet be periodically rejected by pockets of society. It leads one to wonder how it would be possible to become accepted as Australian despite looking and, for some, sounding different. Racism therefore injects not just a sense of uncertainty to the daily lives of the Chinese, but also displaces whatever feelings of security the individual is able to build up. It clearly runs counter to feelings of belonging(s) and is therefore, central to our discussion on how the Chinese community has been able to build up feelings of attachment to Australia.

It is my contention in this chapter that as a collective experience, racism enables the tightening of bonds within the community and encourages the formation of a sense of belonging(s) to a land that continues to reject them. In studying victims of natural disasters, Erikson argued that traumatic experiences formed communities:

'...it is the *community* that offers a cushion for pain, the *community* that offers a context for intimacy, the *community* that serves as the repository for binding traditions...traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to one another...the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship...' (1995: 188 – 190)

Though not every member of the Chinese community in Perth has been a target of racism, the expressions of racial thought target the community as a whole. It is therefore the consciousness that they might be targets, rather than being actual victims

that characterise the experience of racism within the community today. This shared consciousness serves as a source of communality and is, I would argue, integral in drawing the community together and reinforcing the bonds they already share through their ethnicity. It is by focussing on an issue like racism that has the potential to threaten their very existence that members of the diverse community have been able to bridge their differences and come together. It is only by closing ranks and tightening the bonds they already share that the community is able to offer comfort, intimacy and protection to both the experience and consciousness of the racial threat. The most logical fallout from this tightening of bonds would be the reinforcement of cultural identity. It creates for the individual an identity, a sense of being a part of a community within a hostile climate. It is by consolidating this identity that the individual is able to feel safe and find strength to negotiate the hostility in wider society and carve a niche in the hostile landscape.

## *Memories of Progress*

In trying to understand how racial experience influenced the nurturing of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) amongst the Chinese in Perth, I turned to newspaper reports and newsletters circulated by the associations to reconstruct a partial history of the racial incidents throughout the 1980s and 1990s as a guide in my search. The tenor expressed in newspaper headlines such as 'We are Living in Fear: Asians' (*WA* 10 October 1996: 1), 'Racism Theory on Bombing' (*WA* 26 May 1989: 8), 'Violence Fear in Poster War' (*WA* 8 May 1989: 8) was clearly one of violence and horror. Coupled with calls for calm and restraint (*Chung Wah Newsletter* [*CWNL*], August/September 1987: 2) and the articulation of concern and fear of being targeted in racial campaigns and the

raising hysteria of anti-Asian sentiments in the 1980s (*CWNL*, August/September 1988: 17), I concluded at that time that the memories the community had about these events and the impact it had on their sense of being a part of Australia would be one of fear, horror and insecurity. Armed with this, I set out to flesh out my outline of recent racial history through a series of interviews. The ostensible memories I found in the field were totally unlike what I had expected.

There was a curious sense of progress amongst my respondents when I brought up the issue. Many of them saw these events as incidents in the past and that they had moved beyond the horror of the experience. One of the most common comments my respondents gave me after detailing their perceptions of the racist acts carried out by the ANM in the 1980s, for example, had been 'Oh! Things have been getting better and we are past all that now'. Many attributed the improvement in racial affairs as the consequence of the multicultural policies promoted by the Australian Government. In addition to claiming that they had moved beyond the incidents, some of my respondents also attempted to trivialise the horror precipitated by the activities of the ANM. One of my respondents recalled the ANM as 'an extremely small organisation that did not cause extensive damage'. This comment was contrary to the reports I read on the ANM's racist campaign in the 1980s. Under the leadership of Peter Joseph Van Tongeren, the ANM was responsible for plastering racist posters throughout Perth and inciting racial hatred in W.A.. The clean up of racist posters alone cost tax payers more than A\$130,000 between May 1987 and June 1988 (*WA* 6 May 1989: 9). Between 1988 and 1989, the ANM was also suspected of being involved in the bombing of several Chinese restaurants (*WA* 26 May 1989). It was not until the arrest and sentencing of Van Tongeren and several ANM members in August 1989 that the racial campaign spearheaded by the ANM came to an end (*WA* 27 May 1989a; *Daily News* 5 April

1989). The trivialisation and the seemingly nonchalant comments of my respondents on the ANM implied insignificance in terms of the impact of the ANM campaign on their lives and the implication that things are much better in the present than they were in the past. In this, they demonstrated a clear sense of progression, moving from the violent racial encounters of the 1980s to the less violent and therefore more stable present.

This placidity seemed almost unreal when one considered the aberrations revealed in the interviews. Most of my respondents were able to recall with vividness and clarity the racial activities carried out by the ANM. For example, the respondent who claimed that the ANM was an 'extremely small organisation' that had not caused much damage was also able to provide details of the bombings engineered by the group, right down to the location and names of the Chinese restaurants that were bombed. The ability to recall minute details of the incidents suggested that my respondents had paid close attention to the happenings and had been more than concerned with the events. They clearly, had not thought of these racial incidents as insignificant as suggested in their comments.

Furthermore, there was also a feeling of resignation when my respondents discussed their perceptions of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party. Though the Hanson phenomenon is comparatively more recent in their memories than the racial attacks carried out by the ANM, comments such as 'they [referring to white Australians in general] are always doing things like that' and admissions of thinking 'Oh no, here we go again' when Hanson and her party first emerged on the political scene suggest that my respondents were conscious that racism continues to underline the fabric of Australian society and that the present is really not much better than the past.

This ostensible insouciance in the memories I found in the field suggested an attempt by my respondents to conceal the difficulty of their position as Chinese-

Australians. By remembering things as having improved and far right groups as being insignificant in their existence in Australia, the memories of my respondents operated as a defence mechanism against the painful reality of trying to settle into a new country and the psychological trauma of being constantly rejected. Most importantly, it concealed the powerless position the community found itself in when dealing with repeated racial prejudice for the continued eruption of racial incidents indicated not just the persistent prevalence of racist ideas underlining Australian society but also implied that things, despite its efforts, have not necessarily improved for the community when it came to gaining acceptance. By imagining linear progress, the community saw its position as becoming stronger. It was by trivialising racial incidents into insignificance that it has been able to continue its struggle for acceptance and belonging(s).

## *Constructing Memories*

How then were the memories of progress discussed above constructed? In what way(s) did these memories encourage Chinese-Australian belonging(s) in the face of hostility? I will argue in what remains of this chapter that the memories emerged out of the successful containment of fears and retaliation in the immediate aftermath of racist incidents. It was by bridging the gap between the immediate situation and an overall rhetoric of evolutionary progress, a strategy that materialised from maintaining the balance between negotiating within a certain framework and a yearning to be accepted, that the memories of progress flourished.

It was by turning to the newsletters circulated by the associations to their members that I realised that the sense of progress exhibited by my respondents was grounded in a rhetoric of evolutionary progress promulgated by the associations. The

sense of progression was articulated strongly in the call 'to realise that we, as a minority group, must not regress in our assimilation process...' ('President's Message' in *CWNL* June 1984: 2). This call was made in the period during which the anti-Asian migration debate, sparked by the comments made by Geoffrey Blainey, was raging through Australia in 1984. The use of the word 'regress' indicated the community's perception of its settlement in Australia as a forward moving process in which the Chinese could not afford to fall behind. This forward-looking process where one had to work hard for acceptance was constantly emphasised and repeated in the newsletters circulated by associations. It was noted in the August/September 1986 issue of *CWNL* that 'through concerted efforts over a number of years, substantial improvements have been made and all of us can sense a change for the better' (1986: 2). The feeling of progress and of moving towards a future where the community is accepted as part of Australia was clearly stated in this observation. A year later, the process of acceptance was referred to as an 'evolution' (*CWNL* August/September 1987: 2), giving the reader the sense that time is moving forward and conditions improving. More importantly, by observing an improvement in the conditions in which the Chinese lived, the associations perpetuated the belief that they were in a continuum where their efforts propelled them towards acceptance. It was the repeated articulation of such ideas that hammered the perception of progress into the minds of the community.

In the construction of this rhetoric, the history of the Chinese in W.A. played an integral part. Leaders of the associations turned to historical evidence to justify their observation that things have improved, particularly through the hard work and contributions made by the community. In the August/September 1986 issue of the *CWNL*, the historical environment of the Chinese pioneers in W.A. was used as a comparison to the improved conditions of the Chinese in the present:

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'...For our predecessors, it was an environment of hardships and unfair treatment. The condition, until recently, were [sic] far from rosy...' (*CWNL* August/September 1986: 2)

By contrasting the differences and stating that the present environment was much improved from the conditions of the past, the observation of progress was legitimised and therefore accepted as reality by the community. This is not to say that conditions have not improved for the Chinese at all or that the rhetoric promoted by the associations concealed reality. On the contrary, the environment in which the Chinese live in today has improved vastly from that of their predecessors. What I am trying to highlight here is that history plays an integral role in the construction of memories:

'Memory is the internalisation of history. History is the institution for the social regulation of memory. Those who control the means of regulating collective memory direct the course of future history...' (Ci Jiwei, cited in Jing 1996: 169)

In this instance, history provided the legitimisation that the associations needed to justify their rhetoric of progress. It served as a comparison of how things had improved, thereby reinforcing the perception that the process of gaining acceptance had been moving along and was one of linear progression.

Complementing this idea of progress were calls for the community to contribute to Australian society as 'good citizens'. In July 1986, for example, *CWNL* responded to the economic downslide by urging members to support Australian industries:

'We are now living in Australia and to demonstrate our pride in being Australians, we must support local industries and products, even little things like "Beaut Bonds" underwear...it all helps in the long run, so keep the Aussie dollar here and help the economy back on its feet' (*CWNL* July 1986: 1).

Like the reiteration of progress, these calls for contribution to Australian society were emphasised and continually repeated. Underlying this call for contribution is the understanding that acceptance is a two way process in which the community has to

work hard to assume their Australian identity. The community has to prove itself to be Australian in order to be accepted as Australian.

The effect of circulating this rhetoric of evolutionary progress and putting out calls for contributions to the Australian society is to embed a forward looking mindset grounded in the realities of living in Australia within the consciousness of the community. Hope for a better future is held out in this framework for reality is perceived to develop in linear evolution towards a better environment. By encapsulating unpleasant racist incidents in a linear progression of time, it became possible to look back and think 'we are past all that now'. Dealing with eruptions of racism then becomes bearable as the fear and anxiety generated is seen to be part and parcel of this evolutionary process. This hope is, as highlighted above, tampered with the recognition that things will improve only through concerted effort and hard work of the community. While branding the notion that the community has to contribute to the land in order to belong to it into the consciousness of the community, this linear conceptualisation of reality encourages as well, a feeling of achievement, for the successful management of racist expressions indicates the attainment of development and progress in the process of acceptance. To admit de-evolutionisation therefore would be to negate the contributions and efforts made by the community and plunge back into a dark past marked by inequality and discrimination.

This overall rhetoric of evolution needed, however, the successful containment of the spill out in the immediate aftermath of racist incidents in order for it to appear to be a close representation of reality and therefore acceptable to the community. The ways in which the associations dealt with the contiguous situation therefore had a direct impact on the formation of memories of progress. A study of the available documentation on the reactions of the associations during and between racial

expressions revealed that these organisations adopted several techniques through which they attempted to contain the fallout.

The most pressing concern was the allaying of communal fears, the quelling of the community's anger and the diminishing of the threat of retaliation. At this point, I would like to quote, at length, sections of a passage written by Dr Eric Tan, then CWA President, when he addressed the issue of the ANM:

'The campaign by the Australian Nationalist Movement in inciting racial hatred against Blacks and Asians became much more prominent recently as a result of the media feasting on what it perceives to be a "good story". This has the undesirable side-effect of causing considerable concern in our community, particularly amongst the old and the young...These traumatic emotional response are inevitable and we have to learn to cope with them in the best ways possible...

...Their [ANM's] perverted ideology of racial supremacy in the guise of nationalism was expressed with much greater force and effectiveness half a century ago in Northern Europe and was found wanting. That lesson was learnt at the cost of millions of lives. I do not think that it would be forgotten in a hurry, nor repeated easily. Therefore, because of the good commonsense and fair-mindedness of the Australian people, I do not believe that the extremist philosophy as advocated by the ANM will take hold in this country and I do not think that we should be unduly alarmed by their exaggerated claims of support in this community...' (*CWNL* May/June 1987: 2-3)

What Dr Tan had tried to do with this passage was to allay the fears reverberating through the community. By attributing the high profile of the ANM to the sensationalist reporting of an irresponsible media, Dr Tan suggested that the damage reportedly caused by the ANM was not the actual representation of reality. In referring to the community's reaction as a 'side-effect' of irresponsible reporting, Dr Tan insinuated that there was no real reason for the community to be concerned about the ANM campaign. He reinforced this point when he pointed out that the support enjoyed by the ANM was largely 'exaggerated'. Dr Tan also used several techniques to reassure the community. Firstly, he stated that it was normal and understandable that the community felt frightened and anxious about the development of racial affairs in the face of the violent hostility. He juxtaposed this normality with the 'perverted' racial

ideology of the ANM. By doing so, he effectively signalled to the community that the ANM was really a group of individuals promoting an abnormal perspective. In view of this abnormality, it was therefore necessary for the community to exercise calm and restraint, particularly since European history had proved that it was unacceptable and impossible for such extremist philosophies to be implemented. Lastly, he alluded to the 'fair-mindedness' and 'good commonsense' of the wider Australian population and suggested that wider society would not permit the implementation of far right ideas in Australia.

This internal allaying of communal fears was complemented by efforts to highlight the steps taken by wider society against extremist groups and to externalise the concerns of the community. The anti-racism response from then Minister for Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs on the racist poster campaign carried out by the ANM was brought to the attention of the community in the May/June 1987 issue of *CWNL* (*CWNL* May/June 1987: 11). Then CWA President, Dr Eric Tan, used the opportunity to urge the community to rally behind the Minister and support his anti-racism message. CWA also responded to the move by the congregation at the Church of Christ in Wembley to clean up the 'Asians Out' posters by sending a letter of thanks to the Church. Both the letter and the *WA* report on the move by the congregation were published in the August/September 1987 issue of *CWNL* (1987: 17-18).

In addition to highlighting the response of wider society, associations used the media to articulate and externalise the concerns of the community. In the months following the outbreak of the Hanson phenomenon, for example, CWA articulated the community's concern via the media (for example, see *WA* 5 November 1996; *WA* 22 October 1996; *WA* 10 October 1996). While largely confined to giving anecdotal evidence of what the community was experiencing in these difficult periods, these

responses were crucial in bringing the plight of the community to the attention of the public. Efforts were also made to communicate the anxieties of the community to relevant government agencies. CWA, for example, submitted a petition to Prime Minister John Howard urging the denunciation of racist speeches that threatened the peace and harmony of Australia ('Letter to the Prime Minister John Howard, MP' in Chung Wah Newsletter [CWN] January/February 1997: 7).

Associations also played the integral role of narrowing the channels of communication between the community and government agencies. In July 1989, CWA organised a meeting between Chinese restaurateurs and the W.A. Police to facilitate the exchange of views on the spate of bombing of Chinese restaurants (CWNL August/September 1989: 22). The meeting enabled an exchange of information, something that had previously been missing because of the reluctance of the restaurateurs to approach the Police for fear of retaliation from far right groups.

The associations have also adopted more visible and confrontational techniques in expressing the concerns of the community with regards to racial issues. The Chinese Community Centre (CCC), for example, organised a protest march against Hanson and the One Nation Party in May 1997 (Aozhou Xinwen [澳洲新闻] 1 May 1997). Such antagonistic and visible approaches were, in the short term, useful in providing instant gratification to the community's anger and in reassuring the community of their position in society. My brief sojourn in Perth did, however, suggest that different associations had different ways of dealing with the issue. CWA adopted what was referred to as a 'constructive approach' (CWNL August/September 1987: 2) that took a long-term view of the situation of the Chinese in Perth. Its aim was to bring about 'a rightful place in the Australian society' for the community through non-antagonistic means. This placid stance had, however, been perceived by many to be a sign of weakness and had brought

criticism to CWA (*CWNL* May/June 1989: 2). This differed drastically from the more antagonistic stand taken by associations like the CCC. A large reason for this difference could have been due to the different managements in the various associations.

Whatever the steps taken to contain the spill out from racism, the short-term aims of the associations had been to calm the community, appease communal anger and discourage retaliation from within the community. Through the techniques discussed above, further inflammation of the issue was averted and contained. The successful prevention of communal anger and fears from deteriorating into further violence and chaos was essential in the formation of memories of progress. As there had been little actual bloody or violent consequences to these intermittent eruptions of racism, the memories the community held about these incidents were therefore not as intense as they could be if blood had been shed and chaos unleashed. With time and the constant hammering of the belief that the Chinese community, together with wider Australian society, were moving linearly towards a race-free future, the horror, fears and anxieties experienced by the community during these difficult periods become muted and transformed into collective memories of progress.

## *Riding the Same Boat*

Associations, unlike totalitarian regimes or communist party-states that shrewdly manipulate social memories for power and political ends (Jing 1996: 169), are not calculated manipulators of collective memories. Rather, the memories of progress expressed by their members were precipitated by their perception of their position within the multicultural framework.

Associations in Perth perceive themselves to be responsible for encouraging and ensuring an environment in which the community can thrive and prosper. Associations are seen to be:

'the principle organisation concerned with conservation of the human environment of the Chinese community. This human environment dictates whether those in it lead happy peaceful and fulfilling lives or conversely an existence of misery, frustration, degradation and injustices...the human environment is never static and requires constant conservation and improvement...' (*CWNL* August/September 1986:2-3)

As the organisations responsible for ensuring the conservation of the environment, it was then the responsibility of the associations to manage and deal with the intermittent eruptions of racism. In the simplest sense, this would mean standing up and fighting for the rights of the community in the face of racial insults, violence and hatred. The role played by associations in this process of conservation is, however, tampered by the framework of multiculturalism imposed by the State. Associations recognised that the sense of belonging(s) encouraged by Australian multiculturalism is the nurturing of 'loyalties to community *and* country' (*CWNL* December 1981:4, italics added for emphasis). By manoeuvring within the multicultural framework, associations promote a 'positive "ownership" image' that indicates to fellow Australians, the community's commitment to Australia (*CWN* January/February 1997: 14). More importantly, it was through the acknowledgement and the practice of being embedded within the multicultural framework that associations have managed to encourage its members to cultivate Chinese-Australian belonging(s) and to convince Australian society of their commitment to their adopted land. Not surprisingly, the fact that the community is embedded within the Australian multicultural framework is a theme that is repeatedly emphasised by the associations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Whatever

conservation of the human environment the associations encouraged would therefore have to fall within this framework if feelings of attachment are to thrive.

The willingness to accept and work within this framework is perhaps, best summarised in the comment 'We are all in the same boat so let us pull in the same direction' (*CWNL* June 1984: 20). The decision to migrate and settle in a new land left migrants and their descendants with little choice but to try to survive in their chosen land.

# 5

'Hurry up, ah! They're starting!' Madam Huey's clipped Hokkien tones reached us before her kindly wrinkled face appeared in the doorway. 'Are you people ready or not?'

'Coming! Coming!' The four of us hurriedly scooped out what remained of the soup from the pot, picked up the remaining dishes and moved briskly into the main Hall where lunch was just beginning.

Overhead, the fans turned lazily. The blinds that sifted out most of the noonday sun waved slightly in the light breeze. The shadows cast by the moving blinds fell on the plastered plaque on the wall, illuminating in moving strips of light the four large characters, '*Qun Xian Bi Ji*'. Two rows of tables were neatly arranged down the length of the Hall ending just beneath the plastered plaque. Seated around was a group of elderly people. In front of each of them was a bowl of rice, a pair of chopsticks and a spoon. On each table was a cluster of four dishes – Chinese cabbage soup, stir-fried mixed vegetables with tofu, steamed chicken and sweet and sour pork – all sprinkled with finely chopped spring onions and garnished with coriander. The Hall was filled with the delicious smell of food.

Not far from me, a plump old lady fished a small container from her handbag.

'Ahhh!!! Just what we need! Sambal belacan!'

'Come, don't be shy! Pass it around! I made it yesterday!'

'Eh, this is good stuff! You cannot buy belacan chilli like this in Perth!'

I helped myself to some of the pungent paste when the container came round. The smell of home tantalised my nostrils. The distinctive sweet and mildly sour taste of the paste suggested that the lady was originally from Southeast Asia. By this time, the sounds of people supping up their rice and soup had filled the cavernous Hall. A lively babel of Chinese dialects had broken out amongst small groups as the elderly downed their food.



The uprooting of peoples strips away supporting networks of kinship and friendship, thrusting the individual and his/her family into an unfamiliar environment, one devoid of the comfortable structures of support. Migrants have to (re-)learn and (re-)familiarise themselves with the land, a task extremely difficult to achieve without the supporting structures of kinship and friendship to fall back on. The (re-)construction of kinship and friendship ties, similar to the ones left behind, can help cultivate a sense of belonging(s). It is the (re-)entrenchment and subsequent proliferation and flowering of these ties in Australian soil that the psychologically harrowing experience of moving into another culture and land can be mitigated.

As cultural markers of Chinese-Australian belonging(s), associations assist in the (re-)construction of these intangible yet essential ties. They are therefore more than just concrete manifestations of Chinese-ness where Chinese culture and its traditions are (re-)lived, (re-)enacted and preserved. A large part of the activities organised by

associations deal with the existential problems of the migrants, encouraging familiarisation with Australia and plant the seeds of becoming a part of the land in both newly arrived migrants and members of the community who have lived in Australia for some time. The importance accorded to the provision of assistance to migrants is underlined by the spatial arrangement of the James Street Hall. The Hall houses the two main offices of Chung Wah Association (CWA): the cultural office and the welfare office. Like the pair of stone lions that traditionally guarded the entrance to a Chinese home, they are located on either side of the main staircase leading up from James Street into the Hall. They each have their own areas of jurisdiction and the office bearers of these two sections respect the boundaries that lie between them. The allocation of separate offices to the welfare and cultural sections implied the equal importance accorded to these two offices. Together, they formed the backbone of the bulk of activities organised by the Association.



A sample of the information brochures available at the associations.

In this chapter, I will focus on the processes through which the associations provided assistance to their members and to individuals of the community. Through this, I hope to illustrate how the Chinese associations assisted migrants in (re-)mapping the unfamiliar Australian landscape into a familiar one. In what follows, I present three migrant experiences drawn from my observations of the daily activities at the two associations I worked with: the solitary experiences of the elderly; the concerns of members of the community who have lived in Australia for some time; and the uncertainty of newly arrived migrants. These experiences are meant to be read as a collage rather than in an organised sequence. Each experience articulates a different perspective of the Chinese migration experience and attempts to capture the many layers in which Chinese-ness is imagined and used by both the community and the associations to negotiate the practical concerns of belonging(s). I will argue that what holds them together is the desire to (re-)familiarise themselves, to make themselves comfortable in a new territory. This yearning is assisted by falling back on a deliberately crafted image of an extended Chinese family, a persistently recurring metaphor appropriated from Chinese cultural tradition.

### *Experience One: Autumn Years*

She stood alone on the side of the street, a small solitary figure leaning on her metal walking cane in the midst of the daily morning bustle along James Street. Her small heart-shaped face was turned to the oncoming traffic, looking for an opportunity, a gap between the moving cars that would allow her to cross the two narrow lanes that stood between her and the Association. It took a while before she found an opening and gathered up enough courage to shuffle onto the road, all the time holding on to her thick glasses and peering down the road for any oncoming cars. A car approaching from the opposite direction slowed to a stop before she turned her head to check the traffic in the other direction. She raised her hand in appreciation. Behind the stopped car, a van had screeched to a halt. The driver was honking impatiently, eager to get the traffic moving again.

When she reached the other side of the road, she turned around, pursed her thin lips and gave the driver of the van a glare as he drove past, or at least, as close to a glare her cataract misted eyes could give. Shaking her head, she muttered, 'Bloody impatient fool!' and continued her slow shuffling towards the Association.

Life, for many of the elderly members of the Chinese associations in Perth, is marked by solitude and loneliness. Many of these 'seniors' lived alone, away from children who lived in other states or overseas. They relied on themselves to survive in anonymity in the bustling city of Perth. A fortunate few still enjoyed the company of their spouses, making this lonely existence somewhat more bearable:

'...you know, I am so old and I live alone. If I don't do these things myself, who is going to help me? If I don't come out of the house, what do I have? Just four walls...If I come out, at least I know that I'm still alive...'

These feelings of solitude plagued even those who lived with their children. Handicapped by their age and language limitations, many of them relied on their children to bring them out. Often, they realised that their children were too busy with their work to be able to do so frequently. Others have found it difficult to accept and live the Westernised lifestyle their children have adopted.

The elderly at the associations cited their limited ability to use English and the cultural differences between the (White) Australian and themselves as the main causes for their limited social life. The language barrier prevented them from functioning effectively in society. Even going to the doctor was a problem and many recognised it as potentially hazardous as they could not properly tell their doctor what was ailing them. Many have also found that their limited knowledge of the language curtailed and widened the gap between them and their children or grandchildren:

'[My children] understand some Mandarin though they cannot speak it...conversation becomes difficult when I try to go beyond asking what they had for lunch or dinner...'

Perceived cultural differences with the (White) Australian also limited the social circles the elderly could move in. All of the elderly members I worked with felt that they were different from the (White) Australian and though they claimed that 'it was all right to be friends', particularly since they were already living in Australia, they found it difficult to get along with a (White) Australian. Even the few who admitted to having (White) Australian friends underlined the cultural differences.

The associations provided a place where these lonely old people could meet others in the same predicament and more importantly, people who came from the same culture and spoke the same language. Virtually all weekday activities organised by the associations involved the participation of the elderly. These activities ranged from English lessons, social dancing, knitting and cooking classes, to occasional excursions outside the Perth area and weekly visits to the North Perth Multicultural Day Care Centre<sup>1</sup>. More importantly, these activities provided an opportunity for these lonely elderly members of the community to socialise with people they could connect with:

'...learning English is just an excuse...how much can I remember at this age? I come to class everyday because I get to meet people of my age and cultural background...it's a good way to pass my time, particularly since they are all "fun" to be with...I feel like a child when I'm with them...'

In providing a 'meeting place' for these elderly members, associations addressed a practical need within the community. Tapping into their members' identifications with Chinese-ness, the associations opened up a channel through which the elderly could widen their social networks and (re-)build the social ties they had lost when they moved to Australia. In this, associations gave comfort and assuaged the painful process of uprooting and (re-)rooting for the old.

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<sup>1</sup> These weekly visits to the Day Care Centre are an initiative taken under the Commonwealth Government's Home and Community Care Program.

More important to note was the underlying cultural approach taken by the associations towards the provision of assistance to the elderly. The elderly were respected and perceived as authentic embodiments of Chinese culture. Unlike the young Chinese-Australian bodies that needed to be deliberately (re-)marked as 'Chinese' in order to be publicly recognised as embodiments of Chinese-ness, a naturalised cultural link constructed by the associations linked the bodies of the old to Chinese traditions:

'...We must...do more for our members. Our priority has to go to our elderly – as is traditional in Chinese society and as such, we should try to complete our Autumn Centre...' (*Chung Wah News* [CWN] May/June 1990: 2)

In this passage, a link was established between the care of the elderly and Chinese culture. The implication was that the desirable values of taking care of the old were embedded in Chinese culture. In establishing this link, the elderly were accorded venerated status within the culture. This venerated status was further boosted by statements like 'the Association respects their [senior members] wisdom and experience' (*Chung Wah Association 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Magazine* [CWAAM] 1995: 59). This image of the patriarch of the community deferring to the wisdom and experience of the elderly reinforced this venerated status. While this emphasis on the need to respect and care for the old represented yet another attempt to inculcate Chinese virtues of filial piety and respect for one's elders by the Association, it was, as we shall see later, part of a bigger construction of a familial metaphor, a cultural appropriation that takes centre stage in the processes in which associations cultivated belonging(s). At this point, it is sufficient to say that the venerated status accorded to the elderly enabled the perception that, by virtue of their age, they were naturalised embodiments of Chinese-ness. The reinforcement of this idea perpetuated the circulation of deeply embedded cultural ideas within the community.

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## *Experience Two: Watering Withering Roots*

There is a sense of urgency amongst the Chinese migrants in Perth to retain, or more accurately slow down the erosion of, their cultural heritage. The concern is that their descendants will lose their Chinese identity once the culture becomes hazy with time and intermarriage with other ethnic groups:

'...I completely freaked out when my daughter came home from school and told me that she is Australian and not Chinese...I decided there and then that my children needed to learn about their culture...I had to make them understand that there is no way they can change their black hair and black eyes into blond hair and blue eyes!'

Associations have responded to this urgency by organising a variety of activities that encourage interest in the culture and by creating an environment steeped in Chinese traditions and values. In particular, I would like to highlight the importance accorded to the learning of Mandarin. Language is an important medium through which intergenerational continuity in the transmission of cultural practices and values is achieved (Ozolins 1993, cited in Luke & Luke 2000: 45). It plays an integral role in the processes through which migrant groups (re-)establish a sense of community and solidarity (Luke & Luke 2000). Chinese schools are one of the most popular ways through which Chinese parents in Perth attempt to instil some sense of Chinese-ness into their children and through this, preserve some measure of Chinese identity. Though the headmaster of one such school estimated that over 40% of the students found learning the language 'a pain', parents continue to encourage their children to attend these schools and the weekend Chinese schools run by both CWA and the Chinese Community Centre (CCC) boast of full classes.

Underlying this push to learn the language is the assumption that there is a 'Chinese' core that defines their identity as 'Chinese' within every member of the

community<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the understanding of what constituted this 'Chinese' core differed from individual to individual and was strongly influenced by the socio-politico context in which the individual came from. Scholarly research into this area has also confirmed the range and fluidity of Chinese identities available (for example, see Tu 1994). Regardless of the nebulous quality of this essential identity, it is the notion of a shared 'Chinese' core that drives the community's determination to cultivate a similar essence in their children by immersing and familiarising their young in Chinese cultural practices and learning the language. Through this process, young bodies of the community internalise varying degrees of Chinese-ness and are therefore able to preserve some measure of Chinese ethnicity. The language and culture forms also an essential link in the Chinese diasporic imagination, a link, no matter how tenuous, that bridges the gaps between different groups of Chinese and holds the diverse diaspora together in the absence of a common geographical location. This ability to transcend physical location and imagine a tenuous cultural commonality enable the Chinese in overseas communities to identify with one another and feel a sense of being Chinese. It is being familiar with the culture and being able to use the language (and at times, its various forms of dialects) that the overseas Chinese, regardless of where they live, are able to think and see themselves as Chinese. The preservation of this idea is possible not just because the Chinese have a voluminous historical/cultural record, but also because it is deemed possible to inculcate their young with Chinese-ness, despite the fact their children are growing up in non-Chinese environments.

This mission to keep themselves within acceptable definitions of Chinese-ness and to preserve Chinese culture, particularly in a non-Chinese environment, is a powerful one in overseas Chinese societies (Wu 1994: 151), an idea mediated by the

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<sup>2</sup> I discussed this general perception of an essentialised Chinese core amongst the members of the associations in Chapter 2.

experience of living in a non-Chinese environment that impinges directly on their lives (Wang 1994b). As we have seen, the community's yearning to remain Chinese is clearly mediated by the State-imposed framework of multiculturalism. It is, however, important to realise also that this State-imposed mediation is itself tampered by pragmatic assessments of reality and a stoic acceptance of the gradual erosion of Chinese-ness within the community. In the midst of their yearnings to retain their cultural selves and the calls to preserve their cultural heritage, many parents recognise the growing economic importance of Mandarin. Knowledge of the language was regarded by some of my respondents as a tool through which their children could make a living with in the future:

'...with Mandarin and a strong English background, he will have a better life than me...he will be attractive to the big bosses who are constantly on the lookout for applicants who are fluent in Mandarin...'

There is also a stoic acceptance that the erosion of Chinese identity in their descendants is an inevitable consequence of living in a predominantly non-Chinese society. Underlying this acceptance appeared to be the fact that many Chinese migrants saw themselves as part of Australian society and that there had to be a balance between maintaining their cultural identity and being Australian:

'...I can exert some influence on my sons, but my influence cannot reach my grandchildren or their children...so really, being Chinese in Australia is just that. We're firstly Australians then Chinese...'

In this light, the urgency expressed by the Chinese migrants in Perth represents an attempt to slow down the erosion of the cultural heritage in their young. I am not suggesting here that cultural (re-)imaginings of a Chinese cultural tradition will eventually disappear from the Australian landscape but that the community realises and accepts that their decision to migrate to Australia entailed making compromises of their

culture, possibly even giving up hoping for cultural continuity in their descendants. As long as new Chinese migrants continue to enter Australia from predominantly Chinese countries like the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan and Singapore, and as long as a framework that thrives on the expression of cultural diversity continues to be imposed on Australian society, the yearning to remember and express their cultural tradition, a search to satisfy their cultural selves, and pressure to manifest Chinese-ness will continue to circulate in Perth society.

### *Experience Three: Taking Care of New Roots*

They stood hesitantly at the top of the staircase, looking lost and unsure of themselves. They were obviously new as nobody greeted them even though a group of elderly members were milling around the Hall waiting for their daily English lessons to start. Nobody approached them as nobody knew who they – a plump lady in her fifties with a riot of permed curls and her teenage son dressed casually in a T-shirt worn out of shape from too many washes and a pair of dark green jeans – were and wanted.

It took them a while to realise that two offices flanked the staircase. Entering one of them, they stated their decision to register as members of the Association. They had just arrived from Foshan. A friend of the mother's had told them about the Association and she thought that it would be a good idea to register with the organisation, particularly since she was not proficient in the English language and had no idea who to approach to find out more about working rights for her son who was in Australia as a student. Besides, she saw it as the 'traditional' role of a Chinese association to help out Chinese migrants. 'This is something every Chinese knows.' It was the case in the past and remains so in the present, regardless of which overseas Chinese community the Chinese migrant was in.

Associations regard new migrants, particularly those with a limited command of English, as an especially vulnerable group (*CWAAM* 1995: 59). Efforts are made to address the problems of these migrants. Informal ties are built with leading figures of local government agencies, ties recognised by an association leader as integral to facilitating assistance to the community, particularly on practical day-to-day issues:

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'...[It is crucial to] make the necessary connections...[particularly since] we have come to someone else's place [Australia]...besides, it would be much easier to ask for help if one knew the right person to approach...'

Where necessary, associations have tapped into these informal communication channels and assisted migrants in resolving their problems and voicing their concerns. In a particular case I learnt in the course of my fieldwork, an association leader approached the relevant authorities on behalf of the individual to expedite his application for a certificate of good behaviour. These informal channels have also been integral in providing a platform through which Chinese community leaders have been able to bring up the concerns of the community. Sensitive issues, such as racism in the Australian civil service, have been effectively resolved this way. A community leader noted that it was also more efficient to exploit these channels in voicing sensitive issues because they contained the immediate problem and prevented the spread of tensions and rumours until the relevant authorities could effectively deal with the problem. In seeking out these channels, a good relationship was maintained with the relevant authorities as it gave them space and time to deal with the issues.

The associations also ran daily English lessons for migrants. Though these classes were shared with the elderly, they nevertheless commanded a total attendance of about 50-60 non-English speaking migrants. It is through participation in the activities organised by the associations that these new migrants meet people, make friends and 'develop good rapport with the Association without realising it...[and] start to feel comfortable in seeking our advice for personal problems' (*CWAAM* 1995: 59).

In assisting these new migrants, the associations play their traditional role of assisting the individual away from home. The assistance they provide is practical. They offer opportunities for the migrant to widen their social circle, build new networks and dispense practical advice such as the legal rights of migrants as residents of

Australia. Through this, the associations enable Chinese familiarity with the landscape. They reach out to the relevant authorities and learn and understand how Australian agencies operate. They also identify what migrants need to settle into an unfamiliar landscape and try to equip them with the relevant information and skills. Through this knowledge, they are able to (re-)map Australian society and transfer this knowledge to the migrant when help is sought. Caught within this provision of assistance, of 'helping out', is the manifestation of Chinese-ness. In fulfilling their traditional role of providing assistance, the associations in Perth preserved a historical tradition, one that 'every Chinese knows'. The historical/cultural knowledge of the functions of Chinese associations enables new migrants to home in on Chinese associations when they need help and assistance in an unfamiliar land. In drawing from this cultural knowledge, help can be found in an unfamiliar land and burdens shared and resolved.

## *Echoes of Family*

In trying to understand the processes through which the associations have provided assistance to the community, as well as the manner in which associations have sought to cultivate a sense of Chinese-Australian belonging(s) within a cultural framework, it is impossible not to return to the familial image I discussed briefly in Chapter 2. I suggested then that Chinese associations appropriated the familial metaphor to boost and culturally legitimise their position as the patriarch of the community. I also suggested that in adopting this metaphor, the associations emphasised family values and underlined the importance of Chinese kinship. Through the articulation of these ideas, the associations ensured the perpetuation of deeply

embedded Chinese cultural ideas, satisfying the community's deep-seated yearning to retain their cultural selves.

The data I discussed in this chapter and throughout this thesis has underlined the pervasiveness of this metaphor in Perth Chinese associational life. Associations both rely on it to reinforce their leadership position in Chinese society in Perth and to structure their associations. For a start, the respect and venerated position consciously accorded to the elderly echoed Chinese cultural emphasis on filial piety and respect for the old, values enshrined by the culture as integral to ensuring the stable continuation of a traditional Chinese family (Freedman 1979: 242). This emphasis on perceived Chinese familial values was clearly manifested, developed and institutionalised in a well-established mature association like CWA. CWA housed a 'Council of Elders', a group made up of 'responsible members who have served the Association in a significant capacity in the past, and as such represent a wealth of experience and talent' (*CWAAM* 1995: 38). The Council performed an advisory and, more importantly, supervisory role. It reserved the right to refer to the Executive Committee any matters for clarification. It was also able to make appropriate recommendations or refer to any extraordinary general meeting for discussion, any decision of the Executive Committee. The Council therefore functioned as a check on the decisions made by the Executive Committee. It very much performed the role of a respected elderly member of a Chinese family whose opinions were sought and respected because of his age and experience. The 'Council of Elders' was therefore a body of patriarchs whose age, experience and wisdom helped shape the direction in which the Association developed. The Executive Committee, on the other hand, represented the mature child of the family, the son who was grown and capable of making certain decisions, under the tutelage of his elders, of course. It was made up of migrants who have lived in Perth for

several years and who were aware of the workings of Australian society. New migrants represented the younger and less mature sibling. They required assistance and deferred to their elders as they (re-)familiarised themselves with the land. The Executive Committee, through guidance from the senior members of the Association, provided this assistance. The young represented the new generations in a Chinese family. As many of them are growing up in Australia, they had to be taught Chinese values and culture such that they become (re-)ethnicised and (re-)marked as Chinese. Only then will the culture be preserved into the future and the community accepted as part of Australia.

This is, however, a *loose* representation of a traditional extended Chinese family. The gender bias towards the male child, so evident in traditional Chinese familial structures (Freedman 1979), does not appear to apply to the Chinese family constructed by the Association. The Executive Committee consists of both male and female members. Likewise the Council of Elders. Though there does not appear to be a preference for males in the primary decision-making body of the Association, it is worth noting that no female has served as CWA President. This suggests that the familial structure appropriated by the Association simulated certain aspects of the traditional Chinese family model, while modifying others. I will discuss further in this chapter plausible reasons for the modifications. The point I would like to emphasise here is the creation of a simulated Chinese familial structure by the associations, simulations that echoed the traditional extended families that once marked Chinese cultural landscape.

The simulation of familial ties underlines the attempts made by the associations to (re-)create a sense of family within the community. In doing so, they underlined the insecurity and loss of a sense of belonging(s) within the community - the feelings of comfort, of being easy in one's skin in a certain place, of knowing who one is -

sentiments that were lost and displaced by the decision to migrate and the struggle to grow roots in alien soil. The decision to appropriate the familial structure was not an accidental one. The similarities between the ideal of a traditional extended Chinese family and the structure of the Chinese associations – particularly a mature one like CWA – leave little doubt that the simulations of the traditional familial model is a deliberate effort constructed over time.

It is a moot point to emphasise the importance of the family in providing warmth, security and a sense of belonging(s) to the individual, or even suggest that the Chinese family is unique in this respect. What I would like to do here is to underline the importance accorded to the Chinese family *within* the Chinese social framework. Through this, I hope to illuminate the overarching cultural framework used by the associations in their quest to cultivate Chinese-Australian belonging(s).

Research into Chinese society has made several claims to the centrality of the Chinese family in Chinese kinship structure, a structure on which traditional Chinese society is based on (for example, Hsiao 1960, cited in Freedman 1979: 240). Freedman (1979) made the pristine distinction between the family and Chinese kinship structure. He argued that the importance of the Chinese family lies in its intimacy in defining an individual's kinship ties. It is the private setting in which the ties that define an individual's rights and duties outside the family is expressed, constantly (re-)affirmed, and learnt, particularly through the enactment of kinship rituals like marriage and mourning rites:

'Family...its realm is that of domestic life, a realm of co-residence and the constant involvement in affairs of the hearth, children, and marriage. Kinship is something different. Outside his family a Chinese was bound by rights and duties to people related to him through ties of descent and marriage...' (1979: 241)

As the ground on which kinship ties are defined, articulated and learnt, the Chinese family is integral to the stability of traditional Chinese society. It is the 'first unit of social control' (Freedman 1979: 244). This structural importance, noted Freedman, is encapsulated in culture and expressed through ingrained cultural norms such as an emphasis on filial piety and respect, qualities that ensured the stability of the family and wider Chinese society (*ibid.*). In Chinese society, then, the family is the central, most fundamental, building block on which the kinship structures that make up traditional Chinese society rested. In belonging to a family, an individual gains an identity, a sense of 'self', for the ties defined within the family accords the individual the privilege to be a part of a lineage. Without the family, the individual could not exist within Chinese society as he would not have an identity.

The forces of modernisation and change, the fact that many members of the Chinese community in Western Australia (W.A.) have lived for several generations outside China and the radical political changes that have swept through China, the symbolic cultural core, in the past few decades, suggest that this deeply ingrained ideal of the Chinese family has been watered down and has changed over time. It is very likely that the Chinese in Perth no longer feel such an intense affinity with the familial structure or rely as much on the family to define kinship ties such that they are socially seen to be secure in their identity, the way their ancestors were. As noted above, many elderly people lived alone. Several young members of the associations moved away from their parents when they left school. Many of these Perth Chinese that I met, however, did say that the Chinese were different from the (White) Australian because they were 'much more family oriented', and placed a premium on intergenerational bonds. This suggests to me that there have been gradual changes in the structure of a Chinese family in Australia and that the maintenance of a Chinese familial structure

may not be as important as it once was to the Perth Chinese. These, however, are changes that continue to be underlined by a persistent circulation of a belief in the immutability of the familial structure within the Chinese community in Perth. If the familial structure is no longer so central to the lives of the Chinese in Perth today, why then do Chinese associations continue to persist in presenting this familial image? What does this imply about the way Chinese-ness is used by the associations and the community to induce a sense of belonging(s) in multicultural Australia?

This use of the cultural metaphor marked a remembering of a cultural past, of an attempt to satisfy the perceived cultural core believed to be embedded in each and every member of the community. The importance accorded by the culture to the family made it sensible for the associations, eager to play the role of the patriarch and remain relevant to the community, to appropriate it. In doing so, they reinforced their position as the leader of the community. More importantly, it also cemented their position as Chinese-Australian sites of belonging(s). The presentation of a traditional familial image to the community (re-)creates a sense of the home left behind, of the family lost through movement to another land, of the ties that secured and bound the individual such that he/she is an accepted part of a group of people. It addresses the desire within the community to be accepted as part of Australia, to see Australia as home, a yearning that has yet to completely bear fruit. As *the* Chinese family in the Australian landscape, the associations provide refuge and assistance to Chinese migrants, as well as leadership in mediating and negotiating the processes of becoming accepted as part of Australia. As patriarch, associations led the community, (re-)interpreting and (re-)positioning Chinese culture such that it fits into the State-imposed multicultural framework on which Australian society operates. As patriarch, it exercised its authority and led its children – the community – into actualising their desire to become Chinese-Australians.

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In being 'home' in a hostile landscape, associations assuaged the community's painful realisation of their liminal position, of being caught in between two worlds, one that they had decided to leave and the other they hoped to enter. It is by dipping into their cultural past and (re-)imposing cultural images that the associations found a means through which they could address the painful loss of home and the delayed acceptance sought by the community. As a second home, a home constructed out of a familiar cultural framework, associations cushion the loss of security and warmth while cultivating Chinese-Australian belonging(s).

# 6

Chinese-Australian belonging(s) is clearly an ambivalent issue. It is a fragile belonging(s) that continues to be torn between the Chinese community's desire to retain and preserve their unique cultural heritage, and hence their perceived sense of cultural 'self'; and the yearning to be accepted as part of Australian society, a yearning yet to be completely fulfilled, a desire that has failed to materialise in spite of conscious and tireless efforts made by the community, a desire that continues to be sporadically thwarted by hostile, and at times violent, outbursts of racial rejection. It is a belonging(s) entangled with simultaneously wanting to be 'Chinese' and to become 'Australian'.

Chinese-ness sits inevitably at the nexus of these two contradictory desires as the cultural identity that the community seeks to retain and preserve into the future. Chinese-ness is also an aspect of the cultural diversity that legitimises and makes real Australian multiculturalism. More importantly, in legitimising Australian multiculturalism, Chinese-ness is the key that would give the community access to becoming accepted as Australians. It is important to realise that Australian multiculturalism is more than an attempt to include and make sense of the diverse cultures that have come to characterise Australian landscape since the liberalisation of

immigration regulations. It is fundamentally an attempt to re-define Australian-ness, of what it means to be Australian (Stratton & Ang 1998). In imposing multiculturalism, the Australian State cleared a national space in which traditionally unacceptable migrant communities like the Chinese can be imagined as Australian, a space that theoretically gives the Chinese community equal status as Australians in society. Its ultimate aim is to induce national cohesion and unity by managing cultural diversity. Australian multiculturalism is therefore a project of national belonging, a State-imposed ideology that seeks to re-define Australian-ness away from historically racialised categories of what it means to be Australian. As the overarching framework on which Australian society functions, it is impossible for the Chinese community to ignore it, particularly since they have taken the decision to settle in Australia and be accepted as Australians. They therefore play and live their Chinese-ness within the framework prescribed by the State, an existence that does not preclude the understanding that they continue to occupy subordinate and disempowered positions in Australian society.

As Chinese-Australian sites of belonging(s) operating within this racialised project of national unity, Chinese associations have – despite the apparent lack of an overall plan – sought to mould Chinese-Australian belonging(s) by building up deeply held cultural ideas about family. In recalling Chinese cultural understandings of what it meant to be a part of a 'family', Chinese associations enabled the construction of ethnic boundaries that hemmed in ethnicity and enclosed it within the fold of an all-powerful and all-encompassing Chinese-ness. It marked the remembering and (re-)imagining of Chinese culture and its traditions as an internal matter, one confined to the familial hearth, to the community. This circulation of Chinese-ness and Chinese values has enabled the (re-)affirmation of the perceived sense of cultural 'self' within the community.

At the same time, it also enabled communal cohesion in an incredibly diverse community by describing the community as 'family'. The call for unity is not something new to the Chinese community in Perth. It was expressed by the founding fathers of Chung Wah Association (CWA) who ensured that CWA remained free of sectional and regional divisions. In adopting the familial image, the Chinese associations in Western Australia underlined the importance of standing together even further. This was particularly the case in the community's construction of memories of progress, a phenomenon I discussed in Chapter 4. In tightening the bonds they already shared as a community and standing together, the Chinese community in Perth was able to contain the fallout from racial attacks, look forward and persist in their drive to become accepted as part of Australia. In likening the bonds that bind the community today to those that bind family members or kinsmen in traditional Chinese families, the associations therefore underlined the determination of the community to stand together - as a traditional Chinese family - against the odds.

The familial image is also an expandable cultural metaphor that allowed the Chinese associations to take control of the younger generations of Chinese in Australia. Control of the younger generations is of utmost importance to the preservation of cultural identity in migrant communities (Fortier 1999). By inscribing the young with Chinese-ness, the community transferred the responsibility of keeping the cultural identity alive to a new generation. As I argued in Chapter 3, this is a process that is mediated by Australian multiculturalism in the Australian landscape. Through deliberately (re-)ethnicising young Chinese-Australian bodies, the community is able to demonstrate its support for Australian multiculturalism. In this process, the distant and vaguely remembered Chinese cultural identity of young Chinese-Australians is also (re-)affirmed and strengthened.

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My account of the Chinese in Perth is not one of a people entirely subordinated by the wider structures of inequality and discrimination. Rather, it is of a people caught between two worlds, a difficult position from which they used their culture to (re-) imagine themselves and gain access into the land they decided to adopt. In echoing the traditional Chinese family, Chinese associations are sites of collective (re-)imaginings where elements of a remembered cultural past are (re-)interpreted, (re-)imagined and (re-)positioned to mould a body of communal belonging(s). They are sites where Chinese-ness is regarded as a cultural resource from which the community can turn to and dip into for inspiration in their quest to preserve their cultural heritage and become accepted as Australians. They are places where a remembered past converges with the present to induce a sense of being a part of Australia. It is by remembering and staying united that the community has been able to ride the waves of Australian multiculturalism and live inside with a difference.

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