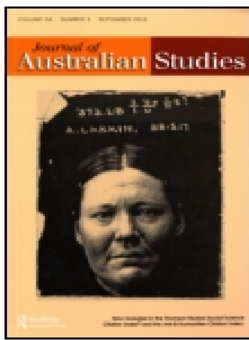

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Living with 'Difference': Growing up 'Chinese' in White Australia

Carole Tan

While the historical presence of Chinese in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been documented, more narratives are beginning to emerge about the struggles of Chinese migrants and their descendants to establish their lives in Australia during the years of the white Australia policy, a task made more difficult by institutionalised racism and social exclusion.[1] This paper seeks to contribute to this growing body of research by exploring the childhood experiences of multi-generational Chinese-Australians who grew up during the years of the white Australia policy.[2] In particular, this paper examines the diverse ways in which 'difference' was inscribed in the lives of multi-generational Chinese-Australians on account of their 'Chineseness'.

The narratives presented in this paper do not claim to be representative of the experiences of all multi-generational Chinese-Australians due to differences in location, class, generation, birth cohort, gender and sexuality.[3] Nonetheless, they do highlight the multifarious ways in which 'difference' became inscribed in the lives of individual Chinese-Australians during childhood in and through social encounters that occurred at the interface of mundane, everyday life and the wider (white) Australian community in which Chinese-Australians and their families lived. These narratives show, for instance, that it was through social encounters that took place at school and in the local community that Chinese-Australians first realised that being of Chinese descent positioned them as 'different' and 'other' within white Australian society.

The differential process within which this 'othering' occurred can be seen to derive from the process of racialisation that Chinese-Australians were subjected to on account of their Chineseness and the various societal meanings with which Chineseness (and/or 'Asianness') were imbued.[4] These included Orientalist images and stereotypes of the 'Chinese race' as inherently and immutably 'inferior' to the 'white, British race' that white Australians claimed as their heritage, as well as 'peculiar', 'dirty', 'morally depraved', 'prone to disease', and 'unassimilable' to the Australian way of life.[5] Thus, Chinese were seen as undesirable and a threat to the national project of maintaining the racial and cultural homogeneity of white Australia.[6] Incommensurate differences that cast 'Chineseness' and 'Australianness' as mutually exclusive thus led to all Chinese being cast as perpetually foreign and outside the Australian nation,[7] regardless of rights of birth and citizenship, generational longevity, and Chinese-Australians' own sense of identity and belonging as 'Australian'. Strangely, Orientalist notions of foreign-ness also led to Chinese concomitantly and ambivalently being positioned as mysterious, exotic and desirable within popular Australian discourse. This was largely a gendered process whereby Chinese males were constituted along negative lines as undesirable, weak and emasculated types, while Chinese females were constituted as exotic and alluring.[8] In both cases,

however, Chinese-Australians and their families became subject to the curiosity (and ignorance) of white Australians due to their position as 'Absolute Other' within white Australian society.[9]

Encountering 'Difference' at School

Narratives show that many Chinese-Australians became conscious of their 'Chineseness' only as they became aware of their subjective positioning within hegemonic white Australian society as different and 'other'. This was generally a process that occurred in and through social encounters that took place outside of the home.[10] For many, it was in the classroom and the school playground that difference was first realised, due to the practices and actions of white Australian teachers and peers. These generally mirrored the various societal meanings with which 'Chineseness' was imbued within white Australian society, including notions that Chinese were inherently 'inferior', 'dirty' and 'disease-ridden', and distinctly 'unAustralian'. These notions influenced the ways in which Chinese-Australian children were treated by teachers and often resulted in being singled out, ridiculed, bullied and harassed by white Australian peers. While the children of other migrant groups, such as Greeks and Italians, experienced similar problems due to being seen as culturally 'different', this problem was experienced more intensely by Chinese-Australians due to their hypervisibility within white Australian society through the ineradicable markers of 'Chineseness' carried in the body, which marked Chinese-Australians out as a target for racism.[11]

In *Sadness*,[12] a slide-show production authored by the renowned photographer William Yang, in which he recounts parts of his life-story, Yang describes what it was like to grow up Chinese in North Queensland in the 1940s. Yang recalls a significant moment in his life when, at the age of six, he was confronted with his 'Chineseness' for the first time:

> One day when I was about six years old, one of the kids at school called at me 'Ching Chong Chinaman, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha.' I had no idea what he meant although I knew from his expression that he was being horrible. I went home to my mother and I said to her, 'Mum, I'm not Chinese, am I?' My mother looked at me very sternly and said, 'Yes, you are.' Her tone was hard and I knew in that moment that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother, who was four years older than me, and much more experienced in the world. He said, 'And you'd better get used to it.'[13]

Here Yang represents the discovery of his Chineseness as the cruel discovery of a 'terrible curse' he would have to carry for the rest of his life, something that was forced on him whether he liked it or not and which, consequently, he had to learn to deal with.

In the bio-documentary *Reunion*,[14] filmmaker Lisa Wang reveals a similar awakening to her 'Chineseness' when she was very young. Wang, who grew up in Melbourne in the 1950s, describes her experience of difference as centred around the fact that she looked (rather than felt) different to white Australian children and visibly did not fit the white Australian 'norm'. This led to Wang being subjected to name-calling and face-pulling, while at the same time her 'difference' meant she was treated like a kind of 'side-show'.[15] Thus Wang recalls being expected to

'entertain' her peers through the outward performance of her Chineseness, demonstrating her strangeness and peculiarity, for instance, by speaking Chinese. Feeling under pressure, and wanting to be accepted, this is what Wang sought to do. However, due to the fact that the only Chinese words Wang knew were 'food, instructions and swear words', her 'performance' was merely a pretence of speaking fluent Chinese when in reality all she did was string together 'a smorgasbord of food in Cantonese'. These encounters resulted, Wang recalls, in experiencing Chineseness as something negative, made worse by the fact that she 'didn't even feel Chinese'. Consequently, Wang describes her memories of childhood as filled with 'feelings of not belonging, confusion and sadness' that mirror those of William Yang. Consequently, Wang comments, it took a long time for her to feel a sense of pride in being Chinese-Australian because when she was a child 'there was no celebration'.

Similar experiences are recorded by a number of Chinese-Australians who talk about their childhood and what it meant to grow up Chinese in white Australia. For many, the inscription of difference and 'otherness' at school on account of being Chinese resulted in 'Chineseness' being seen as a stigma and a distinct handicap. Name-calling, teasing and bullying encountered at school are recalled by many as hurtful experiences that remain etched within their memories of childhood, impacting in diverse ways upon their sense of self. George Wah Day, for instance, who grew up in North Queensland in the 1930s, was one of only a few Chinese students at the local primary school he attended. George comments:

> I used to dread coming out of school in the afternoon because usually you'd get a few kids that'd gang up on me, a half a dozen or so would gang up and start calling me a 'Ching Chong Chinaman'. They'll come up and jostle you and pull your shirt, take your hat off you and stamp on it. And virtually, you know, I'm already involved in a fight. [Interviewer: So this is because you were one child and were different?] Yes, that's right ... So I felt very hurtful about it, very resentful ...[16]

Charles See Kee, who attended Nudgee College in Brisbane during the 1920s, describes a similar experience and comments:

> I was the only Chinese there and they couldn't quite understand me being Chinese. They were always wanting to pick fights with me because they wanted to see whether I knew jiujitsu and things like that. And being Chinese, I was so small. I was one of the smallest there ...[17]

In addition to demonstrating how Chinese-Australians were frequently picked on simply for being 'different', Charles' account of being bullied illustrates some of the stereotypes Chinese-Australians encountered due to being Chinese. In Charles' case, this involved the popular stereotype that Chinese boys were good at martial arts. Thus he represented a subject of interest and intrigue to white Australian male peers who wanted to test Charles' ability in this regard — especially since he was physically much smaller than they were.

The relationship between being of small physical stature and being bullied and harassed is reflected in a number of narratives, especially those of Chinese-Australian males who, as they grew and matured, continued to fail to physically match up to popular notions of the 'ideal Australian male' type.[18] For this reason, several Chinese-Australians felt that being 'Chinese' was not as difficult for

females as it was for males, due to the treatment of Chinese females frequently being tempered by popular (Orientalist) notions of Chinese females as exotic and alluring. One respondent, for instance, recalls frequently being referred to by white Australians when she was young as a 'lovely and cute China doll'. Accordingly, she felt that being a Chinese girl carried certain advantages not available to Chinese boys due to being seen as unusual, attractive and 'special' while being Chinese just made boys more 'vulnerable'.[19] This illustrates the differential processes of racialisation within white Australian society and the various entanglements between 'race' and gender.[20]

However, these processes were further complicated by the racialisation of 'looks'[21] whereby Chinese-Australians became implicated in/by relations between Australia and Asia, and the fates of other Asian peoples both within Australia and abroad.[22] For example, several Chinese-Australians recall that during and following the second world war, Chinese-Australians were frequently misrecognised as Japanese, resulting in their becoming the target of anti-Japanese antipathy and hostility.[23] Furthermore, this was not purely an adult phenomenon, as even at school Chinese-Australian children could be targeted and harassed by white Australian peers on account of being ostensibly 'Japanese'.

While 'difference' was inscribed in the lives of Chinese-Australians in and through encounters taking place in the school playground, it was also inscribed in other areas of school life through educational practices and the actions of teachers in the classroom. Educational practices generally reflected assimilationist policies put into practice during the years of the white Australia policy, which placed a great deal of pressure on the children of non-Anglo-Celtic migrants to shed 'Old World traits' and become as 'Australian' (read: white) as possible. This involved a process whereby the children of migrants were expected to become proficient in English, speak with an Australian accent, and adopt white Australian behavioural norms, customs and practices.[24]

In practical terms, this meant speaking only English within the classroom — any other language was 'taboo' and became a punishable offence. Several Chinese-Australians who spoke little or no English when they started school recall being punished, for instance, for speaking Chinese or for failing to understand the teacher's instructions in English. This frequently resulted in the partial or complete loss of Chinese language ability.[25] Angela Chan, who grew up in Sydney in the 1950s, describes the emphasis placed on English in the classroom where speaking Chinese represented a distinct 'stigma':

> It [speaking Chinese] was just basically totally unacceptable. Teachers made it quite clear that 'You are in Australia and you must speak English, and that is your responsibility — and you don't need to know anything else about life, except to learn English'.[26]

This narrative reflects the difficulties young Chinese-Australians faced in an environment where being Chinese was a distinct disadvantage. This involved not only the need to become proficient in English in order to be successful in Australian life but also the struggle to overcome popular images and stereotypes of Chinese as inherently inferior to white Australians. This meant that as much as Chinese-Australians were pressured to learn English fluently, this was often seen as beyond their intellectual capacity. Angela recalls, for instance, the difficulties

she encountered convincing her teachers that she should be allowed to learn French as a second language. This reflected the popular notion that Chinese people had enough difficulties learning English, let alone another European language. It was only when Angela proved her academic ability by gaining first place in her grade that teachers finally relented and allowed her to take the subjects of her choice. Similar experiences are recounted by other Chinese-Australians who also recall the constant pressure to 'prove' themselves in order to gain the acceptance and respect of teachers as well as their white Australian peers.

The attitudes and actions of teachers also inscribed 'difference' in the lives of Chinese-Australians in the classroom in other ways. Roslyn,[27] who grew up in Sydney in the 1950s, recounts that one of the ways she experienced 'difference' on account of being 'Chinese' occurred through the process of selecting children to play specific roles in the class play. Invariably, Roslyn says, while her white Australian friends would be chosen to play fairies and angels, she herself was chosen to play the part of the 'tar-baby' or 'some little animal'. Roslyn desperately wanted to play the part of a fairy, however, and one day complained to the teacher about the injustice of never being picked for this role. In response, the teacher created a new part in the play especially for Roslyn — she could be the 'dawn fairy'. However, as Roslyn points out, this was a role where she continued to be differentiated from her white classmates as the 'dawn fairy' herself was visibly distinguishable from the other fairies by both her costume and the nature of the role she played. Roslyn sees this as a reflection of the deeply embedded perception that she was 'different' to everyone else. Recounting this incident, Roslyn ascribes the teacher's choice of white Australian classmates as fairies and angels to the fact that they had blonde hair and blue eyes, and the notion that such features meant that they visibly 'fit' these roles, while conversely her own role as 'tar baby' or 'small animal' enabled the teacher to camouflage the fact that Roslyn was 'dark'.[28] Despite finally earning the right to play a 'dawn fairy', the fact that she continued to be marginalised in the play through being positioned as 'different' to the others re-inscribed her sense of difference and 'otherness' on account of being 'Chinese'.

Narratives show that Chinese-Australians developed a range of strategies during childhood that enabled them to deal with the various kinds of 'racisms'[29] to which they were subjected in the classroom and playground. These frequently involved the acquisition of what several Chinese-Australians refer to as a 'passport' to gaining the acceptance and respect of white Australian teachers and peers. Such passports included learning to stand up for oneself with one's fists, succeeding (and 'getting even') on the sports field, and proving one was 'as good as if not better than' one's white Australian peers by achieving academic success. Despite the development of such strategies, encounters with racism, whether deliberate and overt or unintentional and 'benign',[30] invoked a keen sense of vulnerability amongst many Chinese-Australians as children due to their precarious position as 'undesirable' and 'Absolute Other' within white Australian society. This, in turn, left an indelible mark on their sense of self and belonging, disrupting their sense of being completely 'Australian' and inscribing 'Chineseness' within their lives, whether they felt 'Chinese' or not.

Encountering 'Difference' in the Community

The inscription of 'difference' in the lives of Chinese-Australians was reinforced by encounters that occurred at the interface between the private sphere of the home and the wider white Australian community. As Janis Wilton shows in 'Chinese Voices, Australian Lives',[31] negative societal attitudes towards Chinese within the wider community had real and material implications for Chinese-Australians and their families, who largely depended on the white community for social and economic survival.[32] However, local attitudes were frequently tempered by a degree of familiarity, as well as the knowledge that Chinese-Australians and their families contributed to the development and sustainability of the local community.[33] Social relations between white Australians and Chinese-Australians and their families were not necessarily overtly racist — discrimination was often much more subtle and 'benign'.[34] Nonetheless, Chinese-Australians continued to be constituted as foreign, and positioned as different and 'other' within white Australian society. Accordingly, in order to gain the acceptance and respect of white Australians in the wider Australian community at large, Chinese-Australians and their families were forced to become as 'Australian' (read: white) as possible by obliterating all visible aspects of their 'Chineseness'. This very process served to inscribe a keen sense of difference on the lives of Chinese-Australians and their families, which is reflected in the various ways Chinese-Australians remember their family lives. Joyce Cheong Chin, who grew up in the small regional town of Pine Creek in the Northern Territory in the 1940s, describes the impact of this on her own family:

> Because we were virtually the only [Chinese] in the town, and because my parents were in business, we weren't encouraged to retain any of our culture. For example, we didn't use chopsticks at all. We ate partly Chinese food, but a lot of other Western foods. We did not speak the language, unfortunately. My parents considered it was rather bad manners to speak a foreign language in front of people who couldn't understand what you were saying. And they had to be careful, for the goodwill of the business, that they couldn't be accused of talking about their customers behind their backs, or in front of them in a foreign language. And we didn't observe a lot of the Chinese festivities, or anything like that. We were very much encouraged to try and be — well, like the white people ...[35]

In an effort to further make themselves acceptable to the local white community, Joyce's parents also held church services in their home and encouraged their children to attend Sunday school. While here Joyce speaks of the pressure to conform to the Australian way of life experienced by her family, her narrative illustrates that this meant the obliteration or erasure of 'difference' by changing eating habits, speaking only English, giving up Chinese traditions and practices (such as festivals), and converting to Christianity. The need to do this served to inscribe a keen sense of 'difference' on Joyce's life. This was not due to Joyce's feeling 'different' in and of herself — for Joyce says that during childhood she felt more 'Australian' than 'Chinese' — but, rather, reflected the inscription of difference by others on her and her family due to visible, racialised markers of Chineseness carried in the body. Thus, despite the cultural assimilation of Chinese-Australians and their families to the Australian way of life, the hypervisibility and ineradicability of racialised bodily markers resulted in their continuing to be

positioned as foreign, and therefore different and 'Other' in accordance with the various societal meanings with which 'Chineseness' continued to be imbued.

Consequently, Chinese-Australians were continually forced to combat the images and stereotypes circulating within popular Australian discourse that ambivalently positioned Chinese as foreign and strange, yet also mysterious and exotic. One of the stereotypes a number of Chinese-Australians recall as being prominent in their lives was that of Chinese being 'dirty' and 'prone to disease'.[36] Mabel Lee, who grew up in Sydney in the 1940s, recalls her father's almost obsessive concern with being 'puritanically clean, Victorian clean' due to his fear of being seen as 'dirty'.[37] These concerns are similarly reflected in the narratives of other respondents, many of whom recall having to dress up in their Sunday best every time they were seen in public, for similar reasons. Norma King Koi, who grew up in Brisbane in the 1960s, describes the impact this had on her own family:

> My parents were brought up to be 'white Australians' practising the customs and etiquette of well-mannered white children so that they would not appear inferior in any way. They had to prove that they were as good as if not better than 'white Australians'.[38]

> Everyone tried to be 'white' and follow Australian customs ... The children always had to be clean, tidy and neat and make sure there were no holes in their clothes or socks so that no one would call them 'dirty Chinese'.[39]

Other respondents recall being deeply embarrassed by their parents or other family members drawing attention to their 'difference' in public. Several respondents recall feeling embarrassed when their mothers wore the traditional Chinese cheongsam to meetings with teachers or on visits to town. One respondent describes regular family trips to Rookwood cemetery, where he felt extremely embarrassed at having to bow down before his grandparents' gravesite in public, albeit this was a means of showing respect:

> I used to find that a matter of extraordinary embarrassment. I would always look around to see whether there was anyone in eyesight, and if there were, I would watch very carefully to make sure they were turned away before I did it. I don't know why it embarrassed me so much, but it certainly did.[40]

These narratives show that from a young age Chinese-Australians came to realise that 'difference' was not positively valued within the white Australian community and needed either to be obliterated or hidden away from the public eye.

Sometimes this was difficult, particularly for those with migrant parents who struggled with English and were keen to preserve Chineseness within the next generation. Some respondents recount how embarrassed they felt when white Australian friends dropped by when their parents were speaking Chinese. Others recalled embarrassment when friends commented about the 'strange' food they ate or the 'unusual cooking smells' that pervaded their homes. Roslyn recalls that when her white Australian friends visited, they frequently manifested reactions of both fascination and horror regarding the food they and the family were served. Here, food represented the key signifier of difference:

> We never realised that they [white Australian friends] thought we were different until one of my friends went home and said, 'You know those ... children, they fight over the fish eyes!' ... She was really horrified. So they obviously saw us as being

> different ... But then she used to say 'Oh you have much more interesting food than we do ... Our food is so boring and your food is so exciting and different'.[41]

As Roslyn's narrative shows, it was the discovery that white Australian friends saw Roslyn and her family as 'different' that remains etched within Roslyn's mind. To Roslyn's friend, this difference was at once 'interesting', 'exciting' and 'alluring', yet 'strange' and 'horrifying'. Here, Chinese food represents a trope whereby food became a key signifier of difference that marked respondents out as deviating from the white Australian 'norm'. It also reflected the ambivalent attitudes of white Australians towards Chinese-Australians and their families where their very 'foreignness' was seen as exotic and novel. Roslyn's narrative, as well as those of other Chinese-Australians, reveals that it was on account of the fascination white Australians showed for Chinese food that the sharing of meals became an important strategy used by Chinese-Australians as a means of building relationships across cultural borders. Chinese food thus represented one aspect of difference that was generally positively (rather than negatively) valued within white Australian society and was seen as something special and interesting that Chinese-Australians had to offer. Nonetheless, this was another aspect of 'Chineseness' through which difference became inscribed in the lives of individual Chinese-Australians.

Conclusion

It was largely through social encounters taking place at the interface of everyday life and the wider (white) Australian community that Chinese-Australians gained a keen sense of difference on account of their 'Chineseness'. The attitudes and practices of white Australians towards Chinese-Australians and their families, while not always deliberately or overtly racist, disrupted individual Chinese-Australians' sense of self and belonging. Their identities as 'Australians' were contested, a process which served to inscribe 'Chineseness' in their lives whether they saw themselves as Chinese or not. While Greek- and Italian Australians growing up within white Australia shared similar experiences of exclusion and 'othering' on account of cultural difference, the fact that Chinese-Australians were so visibly and ineradicably marked by 'race' (on account of phenotype and 'looks') augmented and perpetuated the kinds of problems encountered by individual Chinese-Australians. This reflects the fact that, unlike cultural differences, which are apt to gradually dissipate across generations, 'racial' markers carried in the body continue to be passed from one generation to the next.[42] Furthermore, the valorisation of 'looks' within white Australian society as the key determinant of being a 'real' Australian[43] has meant the elision of rights of birth and citizenship, generational longevity and cultural identities of Chinese-Australians, and forms a continuing challenge to their assertion of 'Australianness'. Accordingly, no matter how 'Australian' Chinese-Australians may feel or see themselves to be, they continue to be positioned within white Australian society as 'perpetually foreign'. While Chinese-Australians have adopted various strategies that enable them to re-position themselves within society and re-assert their identities as 'Australian' now that they are older, nonetheless the inscription of difference within childhood on account of 'Chineseness' remains etched within their memories as a distinct formative experience.