Chineseness at the Crossroads: Negotiations of Chineseness and the Politics of Liminality in Diasporic Chinese Women’s Lives in Australia

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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(Agnes May Lin Meerwald)
Abstract

Chineseness at the crossroads examines how Chineseness is negotiated by diasporic Chinese women in Australia. I question the essentialist notions of Chineseness by deploying Homi Bhabha's theory of liminality. This concept of being neither here nor there helped me examine the women's ambiguous experiences of acceptance and rejection, within and across marginal and dominant Australian circles. My position disrupts the binaric frames that divide the old from the new, and the eastern from the western practices for cultural appropriation. It recognises instead the past and the present in the creation of new but familiar versions of Chineseness.

I argue that essentialist norms are communicated through cultural semantics to inform how Chineseness is rehearsed. I assert that liminality exposes the power structures that inform these cultural semantics by disrupting the naturalised norms. I posit that the diasporic women's awareness of these interdependent processes enables them to question their practices and ideologies.

I used an autoethnographic technique to collapse the divide between the researcher and the researched. It created a liminal space between the researcher and the researched. This subverted norms of the researcher as the archaeologist of knowledge by enabling the other women's narratives to tell their stories alongside mine. This methodological frame also serves as a prism to examine the intersections of gender, sexuality, family, relationships, language, education, class, age, and religion with Chineseness in the lives of the 39 Malaysian and Singaporean women interviewed.

My results indicate that Chineseness is precarious and indeterminate, and specific to the particular moments of articulation at the crossroads of geopolitical and socioeconomic factors. The versions of Chineseness rehearsed are complexly influenced by the various cultural semantics that impact on the women's negotiations of who they are as diasporic Chinese women in Australia. I conclude with a discussion of how these results challenge current curriculum and pedagogical practices in English classrooms. I argue that a re-examination of these practices will contribute to a more inclusive Australia.
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Soli deo gloria!
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S/he sailed across the seas and oceans towards a land with promises, a land white and pristine, without blemish, or so they thought. Their first step confirmed to them this promise of purity and perfection.

Over yonder, unknown Black dotted the coastline, spoiling the whiteness, spoiling the dream.¹ In time, the white sand was stained with red, with colour.²

Over time, yellow, others and other whites coloured this coast.³ (Agnes Meerwald, unpublished)

¹ *Spoiling* used to note the perspective of the early settlers, rather than as a comment on the effect of the Aboriginals on Australia.
² The passive voice is used here to eliminate blame on either side.
³ *Coloured* is used to emphasise the notion that all ethnics are coloured though they may look white on the surface.
Preface

It was 1990. I was standing on the footbridge overlooking Nanjing Lu, Shanghai's busiest road, happily snapping away on my camera. Below me and on the bridge, all these Chinese were as a glacier snailing its way down the road.

"I can only get you alien tickets," said my friend who was studying there on a foreign exchange.

I felt indignant. Not only did his remark mean that I had to purchase rail tickets at a hefty foreigner's price, but he was also stating my "otherness" in such a matter-of-fact manner that it irked me.

It was a trip in a lifetime. Before I was born, the Malaysian Government had prohibited any Chinese from visiting China but now the policies had changed. So here I was, finally, in my Motherland and yet I found that my Mother did not know me, nor did I know any of her other children. They looked at me with their foreign eyes and saw me as their "other."  

Surely there on Nanjing Lu I could have found someone who recognised me, but I did not. Each time I opened my mouth, strange garbled Chinese came out. All my practice from conversational tapes had been in vain as the Shanghaiese spoke their own dialect, which made it doubly hard for me to understand the locals. Though I found the university students more patient and able to recognise my attempt to mimic the Beijing accent from my tapes, I was still an "other" to them.

"You're a banana," said my friend at the English Corner of the Shanghai local university. I didn't comprehend the metaphor initially. "Yellow on the outside and white inside," he explained.

I bought myself a pair of local boots, jumper and leather jacket after that. They did not make me any more Chinese.

As my girlfriend and I travelled on, we found it near impossible to merge in with the locals. The few times when we did manage to get local tickets into some tourist attraction, we celebrated. In our naivety we felt accepted. In retrospect, I don't think it was mere acceptance that I was after as we were welcomed everywhere we went. In fact we were treated like royalty.

When we got to Yang Shuo, a tiny little township outside Guilin, we were keen to find foreigners whom we could talk with sensibly, after a drought of meaningful conversation. That was our most memorable town. Though we were still aliens to the locals, it seemed I had accepted my otherness.

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4 This is unlike American novelist, Amy Tan, in her account in Joy Luck Club, and William Yang, Chinese-Australian photographer, who both felt that stepping on Chinese soil made them feel powerfully Chinese. Yang (1994) states: "It had to do with feeling you were standing on the soil of your ancestors and feeling that the blood of China ran through your veins" (p. 95). For me, the ambivalence stung. Luke and Luke (1998) also write about the term other with its implications of being "a non-person, located in a non-place, and locked into a state of non-being" (p. 733). I note this problematic but use this to signify the feeling of alienation and marginalisation that is not captured in alternative terms like subaltern, diasporic, or hybrid. My use of other has a meaning that is also interchangeable with diasporic women or migrants. Frankenberg states that although the other is sometimes seen as being better -- more interesting, natural, or spiritual -- this is still a binaric construction of the self and its other. See also Ang (1996, p. 44).

5 Banana is a term frequently used to describe a westernised Chinese: "Yellow on the outside, white on the inside" (Yang 1994, p. 92). Ang (1998c), from a politicised perspective, sees this as a term of abuse, as it promotes the notion of a doubleness that loses a part of the self in its travel towards an other side.

6 Alien is the term given to foreigners in China.
These days, I peer through a window as I recollect memories of China, watching each scene flash by, as they grow more and more foreign to me. And as the windowpanes grow dustier, the Chinese faces grow more and more alien to me and I to them. But I feel as if I am the one behind the window while they are out there roaming and rushing about their lives. I envy their certainty of knowing who they are. As for me, I will always remain an other in some foreign land, with never a home that is truly mine.\(^7\) (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

My trip to China, amongst other experiences, ushered me onto this research, which weaves my personal journey with the pilgrimages of other women, to reframe the window on what Chineseness means for diasporic Chinese women in Australia.\(^8\) And so I began by picking up the pen to compose an Oriental legend, with dragons and moons and ephemeral beauties, but my page remained unblotted with character or plot. I realised the images I was trying to create were not ones I had been familiar with from my childhood, yet they were. There was just this deep gulf between the page and my desire to conquer the gap with words and notions I didn’t have but should have had.\(^9\) The harder I tried the more defamiliarised (Lee 1991) I became, it seems, with what was or is Chinese. All versions of Chineseness eluded me. I later found my page filled with images of Orientals who were not quite Oriental, yet are, and the calligrapher’s pen replaced with other tools. Thus, some of you reading these pages will ask with me, “What is Chineseness anyway?”\(^10\) Why tell the Chinese story this way and who told it?\(^11\) Why did s/he use the paintbrush?”\(^12\) Others may find these stories alien or even uncomfortable for they confront our various legends by sometimes erasing the dragons and moons and ephemeral beauties. In their place, these pages paint the lives of other creatures that reinvent legends with familiar yet different characters and plots, and so I embarked on this journey to discover more about these Chinese who have migrated to other lands, including Australia.

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\(^7\) Ang expressed a similar sense of ambivalence and alienation in her trip to China. My reading of Ang’s work gives me a sense of déjà vu, as it echoes so much of my own experiences despite the different trajectories we have travelled. See Ang (1993, pp. 1-3).

\(^8\) I use diaspora in Wang’s sense of “Chinese overseas,” rather than huaqiao or “overseas Chinese,” which means the sojourner from China. I echo his concern with the connotation of a diaspora that is monolithic to state my position of a perspective of the Chinese diaspora that is heterogenous. See Wang (1999, pp. 2, 17).

\(^9\) Lee Kuan Yew, educated in a stepmother tongue, felt the same alienation and said: “My world of textbooks and teachers were totally unrelated to the world I lived in. We were ... not formally tutored in our own Asian cultures, but not belonging to British culture either, [were] lost between two cultures” (Lee, K. Y. 2000, p. 169).

\(^10\) This addresses the meanings of Chineseness I interrogate in this thesis.

\(^11\) I seek to expose the power structures and forces that control the way that Chineseness as a narrative is constructed.

\(^12\) I interrogate the methodological norms and posit that the same story can be told in alternative ways.
I found that some of these Chinese elsewhere, like me, have a patchy memory of Chineseness. I speak a hotch-potch of dialects and these pages reflect that. Fragments of what I remember are captured sometimes in Hokkien, my so-called mother tongue; sometimes in Cantonese, the dialect I learnt to buy lollies with at my hometown school in Ipoh; and rarely in Mandarin, the one dialect I romanticised and was schooled in but only grasped conversationally when travelling in China. The first word I learnt to consciously spell was *satu*, a Malay word for “one,” but I was already reading in English. My favourite foreign language was Jawi, a Persian script I was better at than I was in Chinese. My understanding of the giving and receiving of *ang pows* or “red packets with money” during the Chinese New Year celebrations was limited to my own rationalisation for the custom. Other cultural practices were even more vague and had to be learnt through books or from my parents’ and friends’ hazy memories.

I am, as Chow (1991) describes, one of “those ethnic peoples whose entry into culture is, precisely because of the history of Western imperialism, already ‘Westernized’” (p. xi), but I add, already a bit of everything. Born Chinese, I once believed that I grew up white, through the books my mother read to me, through the media I was glued to, the music I played on the piano, the songs I sang and danced to, and the exotic Western people whom I marvelled and copied. I now realise that my ethnic awareness then, as Wang, G. (1991) says, was too simple, too superficial. Gaining yet another layer of awareness, I was able to dislodge myself from the dualistic understanding of ethnicity and realised that that was a period of denial of my Chineseness due to the privilege ascribed to all things Western in Malaysia, and the racism experienced when I migrated to Australia. Further, I am more than just a westernised Chinese, for my past has always been rainbowed. I craved for English meals at the colonial clubs and on days when I felt Chinese, I used chopsticks to eat rice or noodles. If I wished to play at being Indian, I used my hands to shovel the food into my mouth, as I watched the Tamil and Hindi movies that our servant watched. On a *normal* day, I ate with a fork and a spoon. My dreams were filled with Chinese ghosts that floated on air and Malay *hantu* that turned into wooden

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13 Krishnaswamy (1995) posits that an awareness of the diversity within the diasporic strata, according to gender, class, history of immigration, gives political potency to the postcolonial discourse. See Krishnaswamy (1995, pp. 129-30). Denial, apart from self-hatred and assimilation, is a strategy that some migrants adopt when positioned as a foreigner in the adopted land. However, Ang (1998d) posits that this strategy is not empowering, nor productive. See Ang (1998d, p. 155).

14 Though conscious of this from a postcolonial perspective now, I am still prone to a Eurocentric preference, as is detected in my autoethnographic narrative based on my trip to England (see p. 10). I find it impossible to be divorced from the *Englishness* acquired over the years, though proud of my Chinese heritage now, after being confronted with the “inescapability of my own Chineseness” (Ang 1993, p. 8).
figurines. At the same time, elves and imps crept out at night in my garden from amongst the toadstools. I learnt English and Chinese chess and mastered neither, falling forever into that liminal space of always being checked. But this was still at a simplistic level.

When I embarked on this doctoral journey, my ethnic awareness became more acute as I became immersed in postcolonial theories of ethnic subjectification. But a postcolonialist in the essentialist sense I am not, for I am not the product of imperialist indoctrination alone, nor am I hostile towards my ex-colonisers. Ee, a Malaysian writer, distances himself from the notion of an imperial hegemony that sought to only oppress and silence the colonised. Like Ee, I feel that I am multiply constructed by other discourses such as my Western-educated family, Christian religion, feminist leanings, middle-class background, tertiary education, heterosexual orientation, marriage to a white Australian, the media, all of which I have learnt to select and sieve as my contexts changed. We see below Ee’s negotiation of English values embedded in the curriculum he was educated in:

Even if this socialisation to English values were nowadays viewed as an indoctrination of a kind, … I have never thought that we had in any sense been got at. Perhaps, the English curriculum was not lacking in humor, and we could sense intuitively what it was worthwhile learning and what were merely manners and mannerisms that would sit ill on our little shoulders. We might have been less critical in our innocence but our parents were aware of what was happening, and they did not object. … And inasmuch as we are not robots but humans, with the capacity to accept or to reject – even a slave can revolt – growing up entails a conscious or unconscious learning to sieve and select. … It did not require much intelligence or effort to extract the essence of the lessons, not swallow them wholesale, and in due course, to make the vital shift from context to context, retaining whatever we could live with, rejecting the irrelevant. (in Shen 2001, pp. 110-11)

As an agent with the will to make choices within the boundaries of class, gender, geography, age, and so on, I have been active in constructing a path for myself either rationally or nonrationally. Thus, I do not apologise for my Western education and enculturation for it has given me many experiences that I may not have gained otherwise, and a wider selection of

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15 Hantu is a ghost in Bahasa Malaysia.
16 Here, I use postcolonial in the historical or temporal sense.
17 In other places, I refer to the white Australian male as Aussie. These terms are used interchangeably. Aussie is also used to refer to members of the white Australian community in general. However, it is not the intention of this thesis to create a homogenous Aussie. Its reference is more for ease of discourse.
18 See the section “The themes” in Chapter 1 “Introduction,” p. 21, on the differences between the rational, nonrational, and irrational.
choices as a result of these experiences. My encounters with my colonisers in Malaysia and in Australia have never been violently hostile, although admittedly, I have experienced both overt and covert racism. Nor do I apologise for my Oriental roots for to do so would make me guilty of internalised racism or racist attitudes towards my own ethnic group, as if I am able to pretend that Chineseness does not exist! Nor am I a born-again Chinese, a “sleeper Chinese who begins to embrace Chineseness after experiencing some sort of ethnic awakening.”¹⁹ For I stand in that in-between arena of power and disempowerment, and choose not to take sides when possible.²⁰ Bhabha (1994a) claims that this state of liminality, or state of being in-between camps, alienates us from our political expectations by making us aware that our political inclinations are not inherent nor natural but constructed.

For how can I ever be on any one side permanently when I have already been and am a part of multiple sides? Am I Chinese or Malaysian or Australian or Chinese-Australian or Malaysian-Chinese or some other hyphenation? At every side I am both potentially accepted and rejected. I see my dislocation and relocation through migration as net gain (Mukherjee, in Krishnaswamy 1995). This is a critical point of my thesis, for how can I erase my past, my history, when it is already a part of me, and how can I deny my present which continues to inform how I fashion my current version of Chineseness?²¹ Thus, as a mottled Chinese I stand in that indeterminate space that enables me to interrogate the norms that continue to inflict immense force on my negotiations of Chineseness. Being a mottled Chinese, I refer to myself and my participants simply as Chinese, rather than the more specific Asian-Australian or Chinese-Australian, or Australian-Chinese, or Australian-born Chinese or any other hyphenations such as Malaysian-Chinese or Singaporean-Chinese. As the array of hyphenations indicate, any of the above would be insufficient or inappropriate to properly label my participants. Even within the Malaysian group alone, there are many sub-groups, differentiated according to their dialect groups, percentage Chinese blood,²² birthplace, or time of migration. Further, Malaysian-Chinese or Singaporean-Chinese are merely transitional labels since these terms of reference should technically only be used for the first-generation migrants, whose children would no longer be from just Malaysia or Singapore. However, I do add diasporic Chinese to our name.

¹⁹ Born-again Chinese is a term I first heard in my conversations with Henry Chan, an esteemed Chinese scholar at his home in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales. Yang (1994) describes the born-again Chinese as one who takes up traditional values and practices in his search for his Chinese roots.

²⁰ On this notion of not belonging to either centre, see also Lee (1991).

²¹ For elaboration on this aspect, see p. 23, in the section “Genderised girl,” and p. 85, in the section “An imaginary space,” both in Chapter 2 “Framing the fictions.”

²² Even though this is an essentialist notion, many still claim this as a measure of Chineseness.
as this more aptly captures our social reality of having a past and a present that contributes to our futures. It also embodies the sociopolitical and racial tensions experienced in the Australian location.

Here it is also useful to refer to Lo, J. (2000), who speaks of the political currency that the term *Asian-Australian* serves to uncover Australia’s history of miscegenation for recognition in reconfiguring its national identity. The hyphenation also destabilises the idea of a fixed Asian category to establish the idea of subjectification as a fluid process. This ties in with Ang’s (1994a) call for a move beyond the particular compartments that Australian multiculturalism has produced for the diverse population. Although the term *Asian-Australian* effects that position of liminality – of being Asian and Australian – that opposes cultural difference from being reduced to cultural diversity, for the political purposes of this present discussion, I use the term *Chinese*. First, for ease of discourse, and without the intention of homogenising the group, I use *Chinese* as an umbrella term to cover all the permutations of hyphenations used in our complicated self-identification. Secondly, the use of *Chinese* refers to clearer borders, compared to the ambivalence in *Asian-Australian*; the spatial area of Asia itself remains arbitrarily indistinct. Thus, as a strategic move, I use *Chinese* in this thesis, as the very borders set up by the term at once causes us to question: “But what is Chinese? Are you Chinese? How are you Chinese? Why are you Chinese?” This term also has more international currency as a semantic shortcut across the ambivalences of *Asian,* although I must add that the Chineseness examined here is full of localised specificities, only some of which are transferable globally. I suspect that despite the label we choose for self-identification, at the end of the day, we are still perceived as being generically Chinese, as Ang (1993) states in citing Chow, self-ethnicisation confirms one’s minority status, and paradoxically acts as an alibi for “prescribed ‘otherness’” (p. 9). Thus, in this thesis, *Chinese* refers to diasporic Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore, where my female participants and I are from.

By focusing on women, I doubly interrogate Chineseness as I question what it means to be *Chinese* and *woman*. Gendering exposes the powers underpinning the construction of Chineseness and leads us to question if Chineseness is constructed according to patriarchal

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24 See Ang (1994a, pp. 77-78).
norms, for example. Further, it questions images of the diasporic women that may be influenced by socioeconomic class factors, education, language, religious beliefs, and so on.

I use whatever tools there are available to investigate the issues, akin to the Rubik’s cube in the hands of a deft problem-solver. Like Chow R. (1998), I was once asked by a Chinese scholar whom I respect why I use Western theories or non-Chinese scholars to interrogate Chineseness.26 I cite Chow’s response to a similar concern expressed to her, that the study of Chinese texts should employ Chinese methodologies:

How to strive for authentic originariness, when the history of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is inundated with disruptive contacts with the West? Where could authentic origins possibly come from? In other words, what is “Chinese”? ... What is missing from the preoccupation with tradition and authentic originariness as such is the experience of modern Chinese people who have had to live their lives with the knowledge that it is precisely the notion of a still-intact tradition to which they cannot cling – the experience precisely of being impure, “Westernized” Chinese and the bearing of that experience on their ways of “seeing” China. ... Thus, as is often felt though never directly stated, Chinese from the mainland are more “authentic” than those who are from, say, Taiwan, or Hong Kong, because the latter have been “Westernized.” A preference for the purity of the original ethnic specimen perhaps? But if so, one would have to ... ask why sinologists should “study” China at all, since studying already implies “othering” and “alienating” it; and to that effect, how even the most sinocentric of sinologists could possibly justify writing about China in a language other than classical Chinese. ... China historians may criticize the conservatism of this dictum for retarding China’s progress into the modern world, but aren’t those who opt for a “sinocentric” approach to China repeating this conservatism themselves? (Chow 1991, pp. 28-29, Chow’s italics)

What Chow has raised echoes my sentiments, for in accusing certain Chinese of being inauthentic, which period of Chineseness are they referring to? If it is a historical image of Chineseness that is meant, then surely it is obvious that these ancient Chinese have moved on as they adapted to the changes faced. Fixing Chineseness historically is the product of the intersection of allochronism, which is “the casting of the other in another time” (Chow 1991, p. 30), and cultural relativism, which is what Chow calls the territorialisation of other cultures according to their central values and vital characteristics. This act produces a dead culture to which contemporary Chineseness is expected to conform. The critical mind visiting China or meeting a Chinese person should ask: “Where is the Chinese person?” for s/he no longer exists,

26 Chow states that this hostility towards Western discourses is now marginalised beyond significance.
if the fixed and dead image is what they are looking for. Further, if it is the geographic base that is used to fix one’s ethnic identity, another traditional basis for unity and collective identity (Shen 2001), then what is Chinese when the mainland northern Chinese already look more Russian than Chinese, and the southern Chinese less Chinese than the northern Chinese? The north-western and south-western Chinese are so intermingled with the border and minority groups that it is hard to know which is more dominant. For those outside mainland China, these striations become even more complex and though the diasporic Chinese are accused of being westernised, they are already more than just westernised. They are caught in that in-between space of the “sinologist’s ‘gaze’ and the ‘images’ of China that are sewn on the screen of international culture” (Chow 1991, p. 29), and are at once objects and subjects of any study of Chineseness.

So to answer the initial question of why I use Western theories in my interrogation of Chineseness, I answer that I use Western and Chinese and any other theory applicable to my inquiry, paying heed to the contexts within which these theories are formed, but without bias as to the ethnic origin of the theorist. This is not to refute Ang’s (1993) claim that diasporic issues are different for different diasporas or that each diasporic context has its own multiple issues either, but that Chinese tools should be used with other relevant tools to gain a fuller understanding of the Chinese diaspora.27 Therefore, I interrogate the practices of these diasporic Chinese from a loosely postcolonial perspective that is strategically eclectic. I weave into this feminist approaches and gather relevant material from other fields, such as cultural studies, where necessary, without essentialising a theory to an ethnic group, for Chinese issues are also often others’ issues and vice versa.28 Essentially, there are often similarities, and “all of our discourses … are ‘politically uninnocent.’ They occur within a shifting and dynamic social context in which the existence of multiple sets of power relations are inevitable” (Apple, in Lather 1991, p. vii).

I thus strive to disrupt the dynamics that influence the cultural semantics or “grand narratives” that inform the Chinese ghosts from the past and the present,29 and question how these

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27 Ang (1993) states that the Chinese diaspora is unique in the strength that the mythical homeland has on the diasporic Chinese, and that this is due to the prominence placed on China in the Western imagination. Thus, China is perceived as great because that is how the West sees it. This then deprives the diasporic Chinese of autonomy in determining their own cultural identity. See Ang (1993, p. 11).

28 Often, the issues raised on Chineseness can be translated to the Indian or Italian diaspora as well as other migrant groups facing the tension between the old and the new cultures.

influence how I perform and perceive Chineseness. Ang (1993) states that our Chinese subjectification is "often externally instigated" (p. 11) to perform a position of subordination to the Western other.\textsuperscript{30} One way the West performs its patterns of domination and hegemony based on the elusive realities of the "Westernised ethnic subject" (Chow 1991, p. xvi) is in the assertion of a banana identity.\textsuperscript{31} I add that the East likewise subjugates by compelling all who have Chinese connections to conform to the institution of Chineseness, by often disregarding or rejecting the obvious influences of the West.

I seek to act as a feminist cultural worker who removes the barriers that prevent us from speaking for ourselves (Apple, in Lather 1991), and to make concrete the elusive, through the voices of the women who have shared their stories, and my stories – injected wherever relevant\textsuperscript{32} – to make sense of our present identities for future ethnic subject negotiations. This is an important goal for the diasporic Chinese women in Australia, as for Shen (2001) states, "the self-perceptions of one’s own generation in the homeland [and elsewhere] can impinge on diaspora consciousness" (p. 96), that is, the individual experience is often translated to the communal level. Because of this translation, there is hope for the construction of a new story for the diasporic Chinese women as the old traditions are disrupted. This communal perception hopefully then impacts on the other's perception of the diasporic Chinese in contemporary Australia.\textsuperscript{33} I disrupt without fixing any form of Chineseness to templates, or of diasporic women to imagined communities in the monolithic sense, for it is possible that I may be alone in writing legends with gargoyles and phoenixes, all with the same brush strokes. For often, I find that I stand in that indeterminate space of having romanticised not just China but also England, although home has always been somewhere else, perhaps Malaysia, perhaps Australia, perhaps somewhere I haven’t even ventured to yet. Our stories display our varied trajectories and specific histories. And here, a timely trip to England again made me question who I am as a Chinese woman in this whitewashed world:

\begin{quote}
It was 2000. It was my first time visiting England. People in Malaysia often spoke of England with pride and used it as a tool for raising their social status. There were those who had been to England and those who hadn’t. England was full of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} See footnote 27 on the prominence of China in the Western imagination on p. 9.
\textsuperscript{31} This is an identity I had once naively assumed (yellow on the outside, white on the inside). For further explication of the banana, see the section "Uncomplicated," in Chapter 2 "Framing the fictions," p. 71.
\textsuperscript{32} At one stage, this perhaps upset the thesis genre but it is possibly acceptable practice today with conventions everywhere slowly loosening up.
\textsuperscript{33} For example, in Shen’s analysis of Tam Sie’s memoirs, Tam Sie’s self-image provides a “counter-balance to Australian stereotypes about Chinese people" (Shen 2001, p. 50).
fantastic imaginings and expectations, and I thought it was significant for me to make the pilgrimage to fulfill my childhood dream.  

I arrived to find it quaint as I had imagined, full of thatched historic houses and herbal scented drives in Sussex. It was more than I had anticipated, and I soaked in the red poppy fields and ancient pebbled paths leading to the pubs. The people treated me with blasé indifference. I was just another camera-clicking tourist.

Everywhere I went I found myself strangely familiar with its historic and literary sites. My aunt first took me to the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. I soon realized her reason.

While outside, its Moorish architecture betrayed its internally rich Oriental design that was interlaced with an Englishness. “So Chinese!” I kept whispering to my aunt as we followed the tour guide. “So Indian!” She smiled at me. In the souvenir shop, I marveled at the resemblance that the English and Chinese china shared.

As I travelled on north, my idea of England slowly became tainted with the reality of a realm that had lost its glitter. The streets and sites were gilded for the year 2000 but the gold was tarnished. The tourist towns were merely preserved places to maintain its link to a fading fiction.

Everywhere I went people understood my accent and I theirs. It felt like I had gone “home,” but there remained this gulf between us. I recognized them, their histories, their stories, but they knew me not, and they remained complacent in their ignorance.

I took hundreds of photos of my England; all postcard shots sitting in my album, transfixed in time. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

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34 My parents had often encouraged me to travel there, and I had often cast aside the idea as the impossible dream to attain due to travel costs, and just the subconscious idea of somehow not wanting to spoil the fantasy. When my supervisor suggested that I should aim to go to the United Kingdom for a conference, I finally took up the challenge.

35 Krishnaswamy (1995) states that for some the migrant transition is like “going home because it brings one closer to a world that one had imagined all along” (p. 132). I felt that sense till I examined the specific local aspects more closely and realized that what I thought was home was a mere imagination of England.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The quest

This thesis, *Chineseness at the crossroads*, interrogates what it means to be a Chinese woman living in Australia. It involves an analysis of interview data from 39 women with Chinese backgrounds who migrated to Australia. I examine the narratives shared by these diasporic women, placing them alongside my autoethnographic narratives. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the gap in empirical research on negotiations of Chineseness by diasporic women in Australia. This investigation is informed by a politics of liminality (Bhabha 1994a), of being neither here nor there but in-between, that provides an alternative to essentialist representations of Chineseness. I argue against a static understanding of Chineseness and assert that Chineseness is complex and intricately negotiated according to the various cultural semantics governing how one practises and negotiates Chineseness.

The more general question of Chineseness has been raised for some time, both within China and amongst the diasporic Chinese (Graubard 1991). Tu (1991) states that it first emerged in the “axial age’ half a millennium prior to the birth of Confucius in 551 B. C.” (p. 2). The question is not surprising due to China’s ancient history and due to the fact that the geographical boundary of China itself hosts one of the world’s most populous regions. In the final quarter of the last millennium, over 30 million Chinese lived diasporically outside their country of origin, as a result of migration or being born into a migrant community (Brown and Foot 1994a). This entry into an other space ushered many to consider who they were as Chinese people as they interacted with others who were similar yet different in a multitude of ways. Bhabha (1992b) states the histories of displacement through spatial movements, which is accompanied by globalised media territories today, makes culture translatable and complicates “the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture” (p. 438).

*My friend said to me, “You’re Australian.”*

*Having been quite comfortable with being an in-between person in the past, I was suddenly confronted with a new pigeonhole. I felt unusually unsettled by his statement and found myself asking, “Why am I Australian?”

“You are, aren’t you? I mean, you’re not typically Chinese, are you?”

“You mean, I’m unconventional in my cooking?”*
He couldn’t quite explain how I was Australian but the point of the exchange made me uncomfortable. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

While I was living in Malaysia, being Chinese was not an enigma for me, as I was in a time and place where Chineseness according to the categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, geographical space, or cultural practice was unproblematic. This was due to a cultural unselfconsciousness as I was young and constantly surrounded by a large number of Chinese, and I was in the privileged position of not having to question who I was as a Chinese person. Dialogue with others, as in the autoethnographic narrative above, and the differential Chinese group size between Malaysia and Australia, both within a multicultural context, caused me to begin to feel uneasy about my ethnic subjectification, and I began to develop a “(troubled) relationship to ‘Chineseness’” (Ang 1993, p. 4). This predicament, as Ang (1996) points out, is due in part to the multicultural discourses in Australia that include people like me by virtue of my otherness. Though my status in Australia has changed from that experienced by Chinese women in the pre-multicultural days, my position in Australia remains precarious and ambivalent.

The age of postmodernity has also taught us to unpick the naturalised and taken-for-granted bulwarks of tradition that form the cultural semantics or “fictions” and grand narratives related to cultural meanings that narrate our lives. It has challenged us to enter the trenches that have protected the unthreatened forces of power. It is not unusual then that the ancient concept of Chineseness should face interrogation. The idea of Chineseness has stood the test of time, its mythical fortress, the “‘Great China’ syndrome” (Shen 2001, p. 101) threatened only by communism and defended repeatedly by both Orientals and Occidentals, if I may use Said’s

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36 This is similar for the mainland Chinese for whom Chineseness remains unproblematic and unproblematised due to the hegemony of the Chinese ethnicity and cultural practices. There is no need to negotiate your ethnicity for “You are Chinese and that’s it!” See Ang (1998d, pp. 157-58).

37 Australia subscribes to a multiculturalism that produces a particularisation of Chineseness that essentialises and marginalises. According to Ang, such a multicultural policy reinforces racism by “pinning people down to their ethnic identity, by marking them as ethnic” (Ang 1994a, p. 77). On the other hand, Ang (1998d) also argues for multiculturalism elsewhere by commending it for its open-endedness which encourages a negotiation of ethnic subjectification in multiple ways, without limiting the expression with closure. See Ang (1998d, p. 163).

38 Ang (1996), in citing Flax, argues that the ambivalence is the result of conflicting and intense desires or ideas that we cannot have nor abandon simultaneously. This ambivalence is an appropriate response as it shows that the complex and contradictory have not been reduced or simplified or suppressed. See Ang (1996, p. 44).

39 See “Cultural semantics,” a term I have coined, can be used as a singular or plural noun. I elaborate on this in the next section, “The themes,” p. 18.
terminology. The Orientals preserve Chineseness as its stronghold and the Occidentals do so as its reflected, weaker other. But what is this Chineseness? What did communism chip away?

This thesis challenges the essentialist notions of Chineseness and states that where once the meaning of Chineseness was simply defined (Wu 1991), today the meanings are complex and nebulous as the diasporic people with Chinese backgrounds cross the boundaries that used to contain its meaning. As the borders they cross blur and blend, the Chinese diasporic subjectivity is increasingly challenged. Meanings of Chineseness today are shifting and varied, just as the use of gen or “roots” to denote Chineseness changed to become associated with a wider geographical boundary, as the Chinese people moved away from their birth village and then overseas (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991). Later, the political entity entered the idea of roots, to ensure the loyalty of the Chinese in diaspora. Bearing the multiple readings of roots in mind, it is necessary to note the changing meanings of Chineseness effected as they may affect the expressions of Chineseness practised. Wang, L. L.-c. (1991) states that “there is no single Chinese identity in the United States or in the world of Chinese diaspora” (p. 205), although it is common to observe the Chinese as a group of people who seem to inhabit a similar or unique cultural world (Graubard 1991). They seem untouched by the differential influences of history and geography. Wu (1991) states that many diasporic subjects still share commonalities of being Chinese although there is an increasing distance from the geographical location of China. In an essentialist sense, he states that as long as the people with Chinese backgrounds can claim a male Chinese ancestor, the ancestor’s birthplace in China, or practise some form of Chinese culture, they remain Chinese. Being Chinese thus has a whole array of meanings ranging from having an ancestor with a Chinese background, having the right skin colour, knowing about the culture, practising aspects of the culture, or in other instances, being wealthy and having social status, as in the Chinese in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s (Wu 1991). These meanings are arbitrarily assigned but naturalised.

40 Shen (2001) argues that the communist regime reinforced the myth of China as a superior civilisation, despite citing the regime as the destroyer of much traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps the regime preserved what was strategically useful for its own propaganda and destroyed that which was threatening.

41 Dirlik (1996) argues that the people of the Orient are co-agents with the Occidentals in the construction of the Orient. Ang (1998a) adds that the West is as guilty as the Orient of the assumptions and attitudes of cultural essentialism. See Ang (1998a, p. 235). Ang, in her critique of Tu’s work, exposes the motivation behind the Cultural China Project which aims to strengthen the very category of Chineseness itself, despite recognising the fluidity of its meaning. The category of Chineseness is magnified for global significance, taking it outside the geopolitical borders of China, which paradoxically unfixes the category itself. See Ang (1998a, pp. 231-32).
In the Chinese language alone, multiple words such as zhongguoren, zhonghua minzu, huaren, huaqiao, tangren, hanren (Wu 1991) are used to reflect the complexity of the concept of Chineseness. Zhongguoren, Wu explains, has the connotation of nationalism, and literally it means “people from China.” Zhonghua minzu, on the other hand, refers to the Chinese as a people in a nationalistic sense too but with the connotation of warning against the annihilation of Westernisation. It also refers more specifically to the Republic of China or Taiwan. Both represent the sense of nationalism in terms of cultural and historical fulfilment, with the hanren identified as “the race of China” (p. 162, italics added), the uncorrupted race unlike the China mainland minorities. To further depict the intricacies of meanings attached to Chineseness, let me continue to explain: huaren is used by the intellectual overseas Chinese to refer to themselves as foreign citizens of Chinese origin, while huaqiao is used by the mainland Chinese to refer to the overseas Chinese (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991). Tangren, on the other hand, is the vernacular used by the overseas Chinese to refer to themselves as Chinese from China. Wang (1999) further problematise these terminologies by asserting a difference between the overseas Chinese and the Chinese overseas, the latter being Chinese who were not necessarily born in China. In Australia, the term ABC is often used to describe the Australian-born Chinese. These are usually Australian citizens unlike the PR migrants of Chinese descent who remain as permanent residents in Australia, choosing not to become naturalised.

None of the terms above can adequately describe the heterogenous composition of the people with Chinese backgrounds. The Chinese, like the hybrid subject, experiences “a difference that has no name and too many names already” (Trinh 1991, p. 14). As Trinh puts it, “the singular naming of a person, a nation, a race, has undergone a reversal of values. … Naming it today often means declaring solidarity among the hyphenated people of Diaspora” (p. 14). The solidarity alluded to above is imaginary. The hyphenated peoples are lost in their search to belong. They are pushed from one place to the other and the other pushes them back (Anzaldúa 1987a). They belong to neither side. There is no solidarity. Moreover, it is impossible to name critically that which is transitional, not fixed. As soon as it is named, it is unnamed, as the name no longer applies. Trinh (1991) states:

Naming critically is to dive headlong into the abyss of un-naming. The task of inquiring into all the divisions of a culture remains exacting, for the moments when things take on a proper name can only be positional, hence transitional. (p. 2)

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42 These terms are often used interchangeably by many theorists.
The name can only at best be temporal. The name is only *accurate or true* at the point of naming. Besides, each person has a different set of circumstances, further complicating the way that Chineseness is practised by the different people of Chinese ancestry. Wu (1991) cites that within China itself, Chineseness continues to amalgamate different practices, while the people continue to restructure, reinvent, and reinterpret themselves. New meanings of Chineseness continue to be assigned, though this often goes undocumented by scholars within China, according to Wu. Thus, meanings of Chineseness are constantly changing and Chineseness is dynamic and ever transforming (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991), just as any other form of existence is dynamic. According to Lee (1991), the Chinese intellectuals, writers, and artists, following the disillusionment of the Cultural Revolution, sought to redefine and reinvent themselves: “How to find a meaning of being Chinese other than what the Party has defined for them?” (p. 208).

I have hence ascertained that Chineseness is a fluid process which is not fixed by a set of parameters (Bottomley 1997). This constant flux is due to the “race relations in the host country, public policy toward the Chinese, the state of the host country’s diplomatic relations with China, and China’s policies toward overseas Chinese” (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991, p. 205). Apart from the above factors, one’s class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other referents of subjectivity, or social processes, actively engage with time and place to fashion one’s subjectivity (Bhabha 1994a). Bhabha (1992b) adds that the representational meanings produced by each of these referents or processes are socially specific, having value systems within locations that are contextually particularised. A woman of Chinese descent living in a middle-class suburb may negotiate practices of Chineseness in ways that are quite different to another who lives in a working-class suburb. The same person may translate expressions of Chineseness in rather contradictory ways as her location of culture shifts. Subjectivity thus becomes unset by parameters because of the shifting status of the subject’s stations. The hybrid subject is acknowledged when these contributors or referents are recognised as intersecting and interweaving freely, away from the bondages of fixed essentialism, within a liminal space – not constrained by geographical, social, economic, religious or political boundaries – that accepts the subject’s context as constantly changing. Such flux within the liminal space means that “the natural(ized), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of culture’s particularity, cannot be readily referenced” (Bhabha 1992b, p. 438). Bhabha’s (1994a) liminal space is hence critical to our understanding of a Chineseness that is constantly
changing – translating, negotiating, in a state of flux – more particularly as a result of the diasporic phenomenon.

Thus, at the crossroads of Chineseness, I stand, as my history and my present interact to raise more specific questions that pertain to my ethnic subjectification as a diasporic Chinese woman in Australia. In my quest, I also searched for diasporic others like me, who form this "imagined and imaginary unity" (Ang 1996), to make sense of who I am. However, oftentimes I found that these others in books, and the plethora of academic rhetoric on ethnic subjectification, were either about distinct groups of mainland Chinese or Chinese-Americans, or that we were all dumped into a homogenous clump. More markedly, many of the differences between the others and other others were often dimmed, or similarities indiscriminately highlighted. Thus, more often than not, the diasporic Chinese woman is portrayed as a privileged, literate, educated, middle-class voicepiece for all others, and our contextual historicities and geopolitical specificities are neglected. The various strands of feminism enable us to critique the universalised by exposing the differences among women's experiences and the heterogeneity within Chineseness.

My aim in this thesis, therefore, is to interrogate notions of Chineseness as negotiated by women with Chinese backgrounds living in the diasporic location of contemporary Australia, by focussing on the processes of subjectification within a specific setting, to interrupt the assumptions of naturalised boundaries around ethnicities. Instead, I posit Chineseness as having a precariousness and indeterminacy (Ang 1993), and assume a position that discerns the contradictory, incommensurable, and complex interweavings in how cultural translations are negotiated and fashioned (Bhabha 1994a). More specifically, I ask how gendered Chineseness is influenced by the cultural semantics that are fixed by essentialising or naturalising discourses of identification, and if the politics of liminality enables a different theorisation of ethnic subjectivities. Within this frame, I consider the intersections of Chineseness with notions of gender, sexuality, language, education, class, religion, and other relevant factors, to provide an empirical study of contemporary Chineseness as negotiated by women in the in-between spaces

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43 I adopt Ang's (1996) position of using the diasporic Chinese label as a construction for problematisation, as with the Chinese label for my participants, rather than as a representation of a homogenous collective subject.
44 See also comment on others like me in footnote 51, on p. 21.
45 I elaborate on the notion of liminality in Chapter 2 "Framing the fictions."
of multicultural Australia. In so doing, I contribute to Luke and Carrington’s (2000) clamour for the third space diaspora to receive analytical attention to dispel the notion of a homogenous diasporic community. I also heed Ang’s (1998d) quest to examine the negotiations of Chineseness in the in-between liminal spaces within specific and different contexts. Most significantly, I develop Bhabha’s (1994a) third space project, often criticised for being disembodied and “lacking critical possibilities or a radical potential” (Law 1997, p. 111), by contributing to the gap in the empirical knowledge on diasporic Chinese women’s issues in Australia.

The themes
Moving more specifically into the question of what Chineseness means for the Chinese woman is the examination of how the fictions of Chineseness, and others, impact on negotiations of Chineseness in practical terms. I posit that these fictions are the cultural semantics or "essentializing master narratives" (Meerwald 2001, p. 388) that complicate the negotiations that some diasporic women experience daily. I borrow from Weedon’s (1997) idea of common sense and how this influences Chinese female subjectivity to elaborate on my notion of cultural semantics. Like common sense, cultural semantics consist of various social meanings and ways of reading the world that reinforce these meanings. These meanings, which serve the interests of particular groups, become fixed and accepted as truth, disguising their contradictions and changeability according to contexts. The power of cultural semantics, like common sense, comes from “its claim to be natural, obvious and therefore true” (Weedon 1997, p. 74). In short, cultural semantics are similar to Foucault’s discourse in that they are “ways of constituting knowledge” (Weedon 1997, p. 105).

The impact of cultural semantics on our subjectivity is profound because they form a part of the wide web of power relations and institutions. In aligning with Hall, Luke and Carrington (2000) argue that:

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45 I state multicultural Australia here to highlight the assumed racial tolerance masked by Australia’s pluralist policies towards multiculturalism, which paradoxically perpetuates racism. For a useful and interesting discussion on this, see Ang (1996).

46 Shen’s (2001) analysis of Chinese-Australian autobiographies found that there were no contributions from women in the late nineteenth century. There was also nothing written by men and women in the period from 1939 to 1959. Of late, although women like Ien Ang, Beth Yahp, and Christine Ramsay have written autobiographically about their experiences in Australia, empirical analysis is still lacking. See Shen (2001, pp. 48, 67, 111-26).

47 For more on Weedon’s (1997) work on subjectivity and common sense, see her text on pp. 72-77.
Identity formation “occurs at that point of suture between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourse, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’”. … Becoming the other occurs within processes of location- and culture-specific racializing practices, which are (re)produced by racially marked subjects as much as they are (re)produced by socially dominant discourses and practices. (p. 7)

I borrow from Chow’s (1991) discussion of Mulvey’s essay on film theory, *The last emperor*, to explicate the idea of how these cultural semantics or “socially dominant discourses and practices” impact on diasporic Chinese women’s subjectification. Chow says that cinema does not produce pure images but that it constructs a pre-given gaze from which we perceive the images produced. This gaze, however, is invisible as it hides the filmic signifiers, but it “directs our paths of identification and nonidentification [as it] negotiates, mediates, and manipulates [and] builds on the ‘gazes’ that are visibly available on the screen” (p. 18). There is a “‘givenness’ of subjectivity … that has always already begun” (p. 19). Therefore, if we relate this to my present discussion, what the spectator sees when s/he gazes at the Chinese woman is not what is necessarily there but that which has already been built into the image through the cultural semantics that inform that gaze. In short, there are other stories outside the image that produce an intertextual reading for that image.⁴⁹

Let me further elaborate by borrowing from Shen’s (2001) reference to the “theory of model emulation in traditional Chinese philosophy” to explain the impact of cultural semantics on women’s negotiations of Chineseness. Shen’s analysis of pioneer Chinese-Australian autobiographer, Taam Sze Pui, finds that Taam portrayed himself according to the model Confucian citizen. Shen says: “Such representation suggests how profoundly Confucianism penetrated people’s lives … that cultural patterns had already been inscribed in the individual before he came to Australia, and that these patterns persisted over a long period overseas” (p. 64). If indeed such inscriptions exist in the psyche of the other and its other, then the images of the Chinese woman and the normalising processes that form them need to be unpacked as they contribute to the cultural semantics that inform our beliefs and practices.

⁴⁹ See Chow’s (1991) discussion of de Lauretis’ work on the unity of the image and the story from the perspective of the female spectator in *Alice doesn’t: Feminism, semiotics, cinema* (pp. 19–21). She makes a useful observation here on how the gaze is presumably male. This assumption is significant in my own analysis of the diasporic woman, which has subconsciously given weight to the male view by the act of including their perspective on women in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 127.
I also question if these cultural semantics have fixed meanings or if they shift according to the women’s contexts and posit that their meanings are socially and historically produced. Chow (1991) argues that fictional texts are not just mechanical reproductions of reality, but that they are a form of action themselves. She questions: “Are these popular stories then simply writings that ‘imitate’ or ‘continue’ traditional patterns of oppression against women in Chinese culture?” (p. 52). I add that cultural semantics are the actions and ideas that make up real life texts that influence us, just as fictional texts do. As Lowe (1996) argues: “The U. S. national culture – the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity – powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget” (p. 2). In unpacking what contributes to the construction of the diasporic Chinese woman, we can then begin to understand beliefs and practices that we hold and engage in.

It is also necessary to examine the reproduction of the conditions of the production of the cultural semantics that interact with different forces to determine and shape us (Althusser, in Chow 1991). For example, parochial attitudes are hard to get rid of if you have strong family influences that ensure that tradition is continued. Migration may weaken these ties if the family unit is fractured. Government policies and class may also serve to extend the grasp of prevalent cultural semantics. The reason for the close family structure in Singapore may not necessarily be due to filial piety but socioeconomic class, for example. The government structure is such that it forces singles to live at home till they are married, as housing is too expensive for the single (Hing 1998). If one did move out, the group that one moves into would most likely have a similar class background and values, so the outlook on life would remain very similar. Class impacts on one’s ethnicity because one’s shifting financial and social capital can impact on the practices and attitudes maintained or challenged, as we can see in what Alex, a participant, states:

*If you move out with a group of friends, you’re always inserted in a social group in some way, whether it’s your family or your friends. You cannot branch out on your own. It’s very expensive to do that. You cannot be really very independent in your head and actions because you’re always with people who will constrain you in some way. (Alex: 3391-3397)*

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50 Although Chow is writing about traditional texts from China here, I translate this to the diasporic context by arguing that the plethora of texts we are exposed to position and construct us according to our different contexts.
As a result of reinforced attitudes and behavioural patterns, the cultural semantics that encourage the construction of and conformity to stereotypes are often class related. A particular class will have a particular associated image, which is perpetuated and reinforced by that class group. Slote (1998) states that “if all of one’s fellows live with identical values, regard life with attitudes that reflect only a prevailing norm, and speak with the same voice, it is exceedingly difficult for most to act, think, and feel otherwise” (p. 40). Thus, the national culture, the family unit, governmental policies, and class are some of the factors that contribute to the cultural semantics that influence who we are, which suggests an interdependent relationship between what is practised and the cultural semantics contributing to the practices.

The cultural semantics we subscribe to, or are imposed on us, often influence the way we interpret Chineseness, although this may not necessarily be something that we are consciously aware of. Hsu (1998) adds that the nonrational, as opposed to the rational and irrational, influences us powerfully in all our negotiations. She adds that every society manipulates its cultural heritage by selecting, rearranging or warping it (p. 57). Thus, on one hand, some aspects of this narrative of the Chinese woman may transcend time and place, and these fixed and reductionist meanings may still prevail in the contemporary comprehension of what constitutes a Chinese female. On the other hand, other aspects have been introduced to existing cultural semantics, according to the historical and geographical changes in the Chinese woman’s life. These narratives, ancient or contemporary, essentialise how a particular version of the Chinese woman is then performed and we either consciously adhere to them or subconsciously absorb them into our practices. Munro (in Shen 2001) states that “there is something special in the degree to which Chinese believe that people of all ages learn by imitation and in the ways in which they apply that belief” (p. 64).

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51 The cultural semantics operating in Australia are often popularly considered to be similar to those constructed for Asian Americans, although our circumstances differ, and because of this difference, conformity to the American cultural semantics is performed with added difficulty by Chinese women here and elsewhere. The literature of the American aunties of Chineseness, such as Amy Tan, Maxine Hong-Kingston, and Adeline Yen Mah may have a great influence on Chinese-Australian practices and literature. Personally, when starved of an explanation for the experiences here in Australia when I first migrated, I turned to America for answers as the Chinese-Americans were ahead of us in forging an identity that was relevant to their context. Texts from China also became popular in the 1990s and in this new millennium, they are increasingly more commonplace in our bookstores. However, I felt myself grow more and more alien towards these other experiences as I realised how I didn’t fully relate to their experiences despite being a Chinese woman myself. My history and my present location here mean that my experiences vary from those of the Chinese woman in the USA or China, or even Malaysia and Singapore, despite the similarities shared. We are thus similar yet different, depending on the individual and the circumstances.
Therefore, though it seems that the diasporic woman’s experiences are peculiar to the individual in a sense, due to the internalised cultural semantics that inform her own practices, there are commonalities in what is shared with other women of colour and women everywhere else. This is due to the external cultural semantics that coerce conformity, first for women as a collective group, and then for Chinese women. This is perhaps what causes what I call the supermarket-spy phenomenon where one migrant spots another and begins to stare, in seeking some sort of recognition:

I was struggling with one of those impossible trolleys when I noticed that I had gained the attention of another Chinese lady down the shopping aisle. As I looked up from the trolley, she looked away. I knew she had been staring at me. I decided to head for the next aisle, pretending to be absorbed in my shopping list, and looked up suddenly to find her looking my way again.

“Another one of those Asian migrants,” I muttered to myself.

I was getting the cold meats when our eyes met again. This time I pretended to look at something else near her, as she walked towards me. Through the corner of my eyes I saw her mouth curl up as she examined me. When she finally passed my trolley, she had a quick look at what I had collected in my trolley. I felt tempted to call out to her but decided against it.

It is weird being in the zoo sometimes. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

It appears that migrants may spy on other migrants they meet. There seems to be a certain curiosity, a certain assessment of each other, as if to check if one was assimilating into the new country well, or if one had become too westernised. Sometimes the silliness of spying on one another ends up in conversation, where one party asks the other where they are from. As Alex says: “There’s also that thing about recognition of someone from the same place. There’s a pleasure there” (Alex: 3462-3464). Alex’s comment shows that there is sameness and difference. Thus, the experiences of the diasporic woman fall somewhere in between the crevices of difference and sameness, when compared to the experiences of her other sisters, including her Australian sisters. We are similar yet different. Some women struggle with the

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On uniformity with other Chinese women, it is not unreasonable to attribute it to the influence of Confucianism on the Chinese mindset. As an ideology, it discouraged individuality and hence creativity of practices. It promoted an “inconceivability of alternate possibilities [and] permitted extremely limited variation” (Slote 1998, p. 40). Nevertheless, on the uniformity of experiences with other women everywhere else of different colours, although Kristeva (1981a), in writing about mainland China’s women, says that it is impossible to “equate their problems with ours” (p. 240), the experiences of the diasporic woman are already part of the other half of the sky that Kristeva wrote about in 1974. We share similar issues in regards to many areas of our lives due to globalisation, mobility, education, and so on. And yet, the experiences of diasporic women are different and in the case of diasporic Chinese women, there is the critical issue of our biological markings that make us more visible as women. The distinction between them and us is blurred in the diasporic woman’s experiences.
same issues as their thorn in life. For others, some issues such as ethnic identity are more
germane in some contexts, surfacing only occasionally, as we can see in another participant’s
comment: “While not denying being a Chinese woman, it is not usually on my consciousness”
(Sonia: 104-106). Velvet adds, from a non-heterosexual perspective:

_The pretentious academic response would be that I’ve had to cross triple
boundaries! – being Asian in a predominantly white society, being a woman in a
patriarchal society, and being a lesbian in a heteronormative society. However,
when you experience things, it all feels like the same big hurdle, but I’m happy with
who I am, so it doesn’t feel quite so arduous. (Velvet: 473-477)_

Velvet speaks of the triple jeopardy that Trinh (1989) refers to. However, she finds that
heteronormative forces are just like any other social norm that she has to negotiate as a Chinese
woman in Australia. Here, I note that the perspective of other non-heterosexual women would
add another layer to my interrogation of Chineseness. However, only one participant represents
this category. As such, my research presents the views of mainly heterosexual Chinese women
in Australia.

**Genderised girl**

This section problematises the binds of binarism between East and West, Chinese and
unChinese, as they intersect with the cultural semantics to complicate the negotiations of
Chineseness. It does so by examining the issue of gender and ethnicity in relation to the
diasporic woman’s location in Australia. The binaric logic reduces the complex
interrelationships between gender and ethnicity, amongst others, into discrete categories for
analysis, a postulation highlighted by this section’s title, “Genderised girl.” Binarism in itself is
no doubt a structure that is useful when deployed strategcally, but it becomes problematic
when it shrinks irreducible issues into dichotomous divides. Perhaps if the world were black
and white, it would be possible to think in just boy and girl, or East and West, or woman and
Chinese woman, categories, but Trinh (1989) states that the diasporic woman’s subjectivity is a
complicated negotiation. Social forces do not act in discrete and monolithic forms but terrorise
us in complex ways:

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53 On the triple jeopardy, see p. 24.
54 It is apt to add that while I may critique binarisms, I also deploy the binaric frames in my discussion and
analysis of the various issues in this thesis, where appropriate, to get a point across. For example, I find it
particularly useful to apply a binaric structure in how I analyse and write up my data. As with all things, the
beneficial aspects should never be thrown out with the negative elements.
Many women of colour feel obliged [to choose] between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never have/are one without the other. The idea of two illusory separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning [to pit] anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another … to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms. (Trinh 1989, p. 104)

For the diasporic Chinese woman, there is no choice between colour and womanhood, for “from the beginning, race and gender have been intertwined” (Cheung, in Wong and Ana 1999). The Confucian hierarchical and patriarchal society has attempted to simplify gender and age roles into naturalised “patterns of the social landscape” (Tu 1998b, p. 123). Any good Chinese woman would then feel intimidated should she interrogate these norms. Kristeva (1981b) argues that woman itself is hard enough to define since she is a social construct, not a natural construct: “In ‘woman’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies” (p. 137). Thus, if woman is undefinable, how much more complicated are the experiences of the diasporic woman with all her striations, and even more so when age, for example, is taken into consideration. Trinh refers to this complex web as “triple jeopardy” for:

Whenever a woman of color takes up the feminist fight, she immediately qualifies for three possible “betrayals”: … man (the “man-hater”), or her community (“people of color should stay together to fight racism”), or woman herself (“you should fight first on the women’s side”). (Trinh 1989, p. 104)

Further enmeshed in this entanglement are education, family, religious background, location, relocation, and a myriad of other factors that we engage with in this materialist world. Added to these permutations that need to be negotiated daily are the written and unwritten laws that regulate her attitudes and practices, and others’ perceptions of her.

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55 Speaking in the 1970s, Kristeva’s (1981b) version of woman still tends to be essentialist despite her claim that woman can never be defined. She states that women are more serious about social constraints, are less likely to move towards anarchism, and are more ethical, attributing these as innate qualities to the female gender. Her interviewer comments: “The women’s struggle cannot be divorced from revolutionary struggle, class struggle, or anti-imperialism. The issues that are crucial in our practice involve the notion of the subject, its fragmentation, the inscription of heterogeneity, difference — These are issues that feminism skirts, by postulating that women are ‘separate complete individuals’ with their ‘own identity,’ or by demanding such things as ‘names for women,’ … We run the risk of creating within feminism an enclosed ideology parallel to the ideology of the dominant class” (p. 140). The interview is conducted by “psychoanalysis and politics,” a group of women concerned with the woman question in France (see Marks and de Courtivron 1980, p. x).
My title for this section also refers to girl, as opposed to woman, to depict the vulnerable position of the female gender. The diasporic Chinese woman in Australia is triply vulnerable because she has to "battle both racism and [italics added] patriarchy from the start [as well as her] troubled positioning ... between Asian patriarchy ... and western colonialism" (Wong and Ana 1999). There is a constant triple hurdle jumped.

The dualistic delineation of complex issues is visible in other areas of the diasporic woman's life. This binaric view is problematic as the complicated is forcibly reduced into simplistic realms, and choices made become viewed through the prism of an essentialised and ethnicised gender or genderised ethnicity. In simplistic terms, one's identification could be read in terms of whether one is Chinese or not Chinese. Her sexuality may be negotiated according to ethnicised options – Chinese or Western. Educational choices may be made according to a Western or Chinese curriculum and medium of instruction, according to her ethnic identification, rather than a blend of both. So, a diasporic woman who performs differently from the Chineseness that the cultural semantics prescribes is classified as unChinese. More pointedly, one is forced to make choices that either accept or reject one's ethnic origins, since the options are viewed in binaric terms. But the diasporic setting complicates such ethnic subjectification.56

Discourse | language

I have used Chineseness in apparently monolithic terms but there are many forms of Chineseness practised, just as there is no homogenous West. Here, I use the different forms of Confucianism, often used to represent Chinese thought, to briefly illustrate the heterogeneity prevalent in Chineseness. We have the bourgeois Confucianism, as opposed to the high Confucianism that the Mandarin scholars in ancient China would have been familiar with (Tu 1998b). Tu adds, within high Confucianism, there are intersections of the more authoritarian versus the more benevolent forms. It is useful to refer to the difference between the authoritarian Three Bonds and the benevolent Five Relationships (Tu 1998b), an obvious dichotomy which Tu says is a simple-minded delineation of Confucianism. He adds: "the psychocultural dynamics of the Confucian family lies ... in the complex interaction of the two" (p. 133). Those who profess to keep the Confucian ideology are also known to:

56 I elaborate on the diasporic setting on p. 26.
Accept the concrete living human being differentiated by hierarchy, age, and gender as an irreducible reality. ... Even though this does not mean that the Confucians uncritically accept the existing power relationships, they are, as Max Weber has pointed out, prone to "adjustment to" rather than "transformation of" the world. (Tu 1998b, p. 130)

In other words, they adjust to the power relationships that stand to oppress and are not prone towards resistance or revolution. They negotiate this by respecting authority although they may be critical of the existing power relationships (Tu 1998b). Of course, due to the geographical and historical journeys that the diasporic Chinese women have made, a myriad of other factors now impact on their practices here in Australia, to further diversify Chinesseness.

Thus, at the crossroads of discourses, the paradigm shift may have transpired within the academy, to move us from fixed ideas of Chinesseness to notions that are in a state of flux. Outside the regime that ultimately educates us on how to think and what to think, however, old stories still influence our ideas of ethnic subjectification. Within the essentialist framework, that at a crude level reduces a person's identity according to gender, race, and sexuality (Ang 1994a), I interrogate questions of diasporic women's Chinesseness, deploying the politics of liminality that I elaborate on in the next chapter. Thus, to assist the transition, in this thesis I deploy ideas and discourses from the old world intermingled with the new till the old reductionist language and concepts are revolutionised. In many ways, "we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace" (Jameson 1984, p. 80). As such, the struggle also involves the use of appropriate language to articulate that which is still imaginable to us in a limited way. But, as will become clearer as these pages unfold, the new always has a trace of the old, to make sense of the present, to make our transition into the future smoother.

The diasporic setting

Holding an array of meanings for the different sociopolitical contexts it represents, when used in its original sense, diaspora refers to the eviction of ancient Jews to exiled lands and their subsequent scattering (Chang, Kee, and Chang 1997; Clifford 1997). This notion is thus translated to the scattering of Chinese people all over the world from mainland China. Within this sense, only a smaller section of society may traverse this diasporic space. However, its characteristic as a liminal or "in-between space" of home and not home is not alien to many
others who move in and out of temporal spaces at one time or another—people from different diasporas, people facing career changes, juggling different roles and responsibilities in their daily interactions, those who are questioning their sexuality, or those moving between different socioeconomic classes. As a postgraduate who tutored, I straddled this space too as I was sometimes a student and sometimes a staff member, both roles requiring different negotiations due to their different contexts. Thus, the diasporic space is similar to the liminal space in that it is an in-between space of being neither here nor there, as the inhabitants of this space are neither at home nor not at home as migrant dwellers. It is a space where dualistic economies of meaning and power are disrupted to enable ethnic negotiations which do not necessarily fit into current stereotypical modes of subjectification.

The idea of diaspora that I focus on more particularly is the contemporary space dwelt by immigrants and members of the ethnic communities (Docker and Fischer 2000). Echoing its attribute raised above, this transient space is interesting, due to the symbolic tensions that it represents for the diasporic Chinese woman living in Australia. The diasporic space, embodied by the Chinese community within Australia, serves as a useful backdrop for my theorisation of ethnic subjectification. Ang (1998a) cautions against the notion of an alternative homogenising centre based on cultural identification. Bearing this in mind, the centre staging of the peripheral diaspora as the shaper of future versions of Chineseness (Tu 1991) concurrently breaks the mirror of a monolithic Chineseness through the differences performed by the diasporic

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57 By liminality, I mean the practices that are found in the in-between spaces of the essentialised cultural semantics that inform the Chinese woman’s negotiations. I explore the idea of liminality in Chapter 2 “Framing the fictions,” see p. 43.

58 Gupta and Ferguson (1992) state that even people within their homeland are dislocated due to changes experienced over time. They cite that “‘Englishness’ … in contemporary, internationalized England is just as complicated and nearly as deterritorialized a notion as Palestinian-ness or Armenian-ness, since ‘England’ (‘the real English’) refers less to a bounded place than to an imagined state of being or moral location” (p. 10).

59 Because of its familiarity in different situations, the knowledge gained from the study of this space may be transferred to other spaces or may be useful to those who live in this mobile age. The strategies and skills of living in a transient and diasporic space will increasingly be something we all need to acquire. Some of these socioeconomic and political skills are outlined in (Brown and Foot 1994b).

60 Law (1997) speaks of the bar as the third space for resistance against dominant representations and stereotypes, such as the prostitute as victim and the male customers as victimiser.
This diasporic domain is productive in disrupting fixedness and unity, as sameness and difference are magnified to challenge the idea of a homogenous nation-state that shares a common geographical space and history (Tölölyan, in Ang 1998c). Such a diasporic dilemma blurs the boundaries that were once clearly distinct through the binarically forced divisions that left those who did not clearly belong to either faction in limbo (Ang 1998c). Docker and Fischer (2000) say:

Diasporic communities can experience racist hostilities, disdain and contempt from a majority society. … They are colonisers in relation to the colonised and they can be perceived by the colonised as another set of invaders, not brothers and sisters on the margins, not the fellow oppressed and dispossessed. Yet they can also be perceived by the colonised and indigenous as fellow subjects of racism, creating commonalities, the attraction of outsiders to fellow outsiders, the stranger (the indigenous made a stranger in her or his own land) to the stranger from elsewhere. The politics of diaspora are indeed intricate and tortured. (p. 15)

The diasporic space is one where culture confronts culture. This space, a result of the cultural complexities of the postcolonised world of immigration, and shifting geopolitical, sociocultural boundaries and borders, is where difference and similarities are foregrounded to produce a certain questioning of identities. "Who am I? Who are you?" are common questions in such a space of flux. According to Bhabha (1992b), the problematics of representation are highlighted in the liminal locations of cultural values, produced as a consequence of the "encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within 'colonial' textuality" (p. 439) – the hybrid fabric that results from the interacting cultures, for the members of the diasporic communities no longer have a clear sense of belonging, as Docker and Fischer argue above.

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61 Tu (1991) adds that the diasporic peripheral Chinese are the ones to reconstruct Chineseness, as the centre remains helplessly disabled by the hegemonic West, though the question remains in regards to how this may be done without reproducing a Western Chineseness. Ang’s (1998a) caution of this new centre is critical and she highlights the metaphor of the living tree used in Tu’s Cultural China project, to show that it represents the dependence of this periphery on the centre – the homeland – to which all parts of the living tree finally returns. The centrist notion in this project collapses the differences that are within the diaspora in a depoliticising way, in the goal of hegemonising Cultural China. See Ang (1998a, pp. 232-33). I posit here that the use of the website as a metaphor, instead of the living tree, may be more appropriate to move away from the organic and centering notion of Chineseness. Websites are all interlinked, yet it is virtually impossible to find the original website. However, this alternative metaphor would require much more development.

62 It is critical that though the similarities are noted, that difference is not decontextualised and flattened out, "as if 'we' were all, in fundamentally similar ways, always already travellers in the same postmodern universe, the only difference residing in the different itineraries we undertake." Ang (1998c) warns that such a depoliticised notion of difference will result in a "complacent in difference toward real differences" and urges that attention to the conditions that produce both difference and sameness need to be noted.

63 Goldberg (2000) states that heterogeneity, intermixing and cultural interfacing have always been prevalent though at a slower pace perhaps. However, we have been distanced from this fact due to the homogenous racialisation of modern states. See Goldberg (2000, pp. 73-74).
Though national identity and citizenship are exposed for their artificuality or arbitrary constructedness, the diasporic space continues to represent a middle ground for the Chinese in Australia as they are neither indigenous nor the initial dominant settler community. They may thus feel that they are twice removed from any real claim to the land. Ang (2001a) argues that migrants – especially those of cultural backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic – have a different position than Aborigines in relation to the national history because they do not have the moral capital that the latter have by virtue of their status as the indigenous people of the land. The Chinese are thus at once accepted and rejected by the majority and minority society, at once a familiar face yet a stranger within the same space. The diasporic Chinese woman is further liminalised as she faces both empowerment with access to more equality in the Western system, and continued subjugation within the Chinese patriarchal system that she may be in.

The friend or foe element in the diasporic space is significant as it influences the migrant’s negotiations of self within it. For those who desire to cross over out of the alien space, aggressive steps may be taken to belong. The attitudes and values of the dominant society may be adopted to ensure membership in the inner circle. Shen’s (2001) analysis of pioneer Taam Sze Pui’ autobiography *My life and work* indicates that Taam perhaps embraced the early Chinese perception of native people as yeren or “savages”, and the settler view towards the environmental hardships in Australia, to consciously or unconsciously position himself as an equal to the white settlers. This desire for a shared response to Australia is an assertion of Taam’s sense of belonging. Diasporic Chinese women may likewise identify themselves as Australian, at the expense of denying their Chineseness, for the benefits associated with this identification, as I alluded to. This influence is notable as it may cause some women to be blindly accepting of the predominant attitudes and values in society. Instead, a critical response is needed if one is to be a responsible and proactive citizen who is capable of challenging negative pervasive norms.

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64 Ang (1993) states that this artificuality is noted in the conflicting ways that some nations choose to forge their collective memories of similar histories. Citing Rushdie, she adds that this contradictoriness forces those displaced culturally to accept that [cultural] truth is provisional. See Ang (1993, p. 8).

65 In Shen’s analysis of Tam Si, another pioneer, she finds his portrayal of his fellow men in his memoir influenced by the white perception of the Chinese. An uncritical absorption of prevailing attitudes hence risks mistreating one’s own ethnic group. See Shen (2001, p. 61).
The diasporic space that the Chinese women traverse in Australia is also unique for it is a political space that is both covertly and overtly hostile towards them. 66 Australia’s historically racist attitudes towards Chinese people in its settler years saw few women accepted as migrants. 67 Traces of the White Australia Policy continue to haunt the present Chinese settlement in Australia (Choi, in Shen 2001), 68 despite the period of apparent multicultural bliss prior to the nervous state stirred by Pauline Hanson’s One Nation policies in 1996. 69 It is alleged that Hanson engineered her policies on the economic fears of right-wing conservatives by identifying racial scapegoats as simple explanations for the changes in Australia’s economic, social, and political climate. 70 Such policies of racial separation remind the current Chinese communities of Australia’s more overtly racist past and this threatens their future sociopolitical stability. 71 Many Chinese migrants committed to Australia are deterred from taking up full Australian citizenship, as their idea of home is not secure. It seems, with a change to the Liberal Government, 72 they could be tipped over as an unwelcomed foreigner all over again, just as the early Chinese settlers were. For such people, the diasporic space is sustained by very “real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’” (Ang 1998c).

Firm governmental policies in the area of immigration, citizenship, and social relations are required to assure future citizens of Australia that this country is committed to them regardless of colour or creed. 72 In East Africa, Asians left, or were expelled, because the nation-state was “incapable or unwilling to invest in a new inclusive national identity and consensus” (Brown and Foot 1994a, p. 10). Despite Hanson’s resignation from the One Nation party in January

66 Although it can be argued that other ethnic groups have experienced discrimination over the history of Australia’s settlement and development as a nation, the Chinese have not been able to rid themselves of the Yellow Peril syndrome, as evidenced in the Pauline Hanson period outlined. Other white immigrant groups have been able to become more invisible over the years.
67 This was also due to China’s policy on female emigration. See Shen (2001, p. 48).
69 A useful site which includes Hanson’s controversial maiden speech can be found at http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aar/sarah2.htm.
70 Lo, J. (2000) echoes this scapegoating by Hanson and also Geoffrey Blainey in the 1980s, pp. 159-60. See also Ang (2000, p. 118).
71 Australia’s foundation was premised upon a white Australia that is homogenous racially and culturally, and it is this desire for homogeneity that “implied the exclusion of racial/cultural others” (Ang 2000, p. 119). Where difference is presently acknowledged, it is within the frame of a homogenous disparity, in that all are viewed as being equal, robbed of their specific interaction with class, gender, ethnicity, age, education, and other individual trajectories.
72 The Liberal Party in Australia is rightwing and conservative towards race issues while the Labour Party is generally perceived to be more leftwing and pro-multiculturalism.
73 Gupta and Ferguson (1992) add that anthropology needs to rethink its concept of the native, and that popular thinking about the foreigner and alien also need to be interrogated.
2002, political commentators believe that its spectre will continue to haunt Australia for as long as socioeconomic uncertainties remain in Australia (Manning 2002). With a government that does not openly endorse inclusive policies sincerely, Australia is hence concurrently both home and not home for many Chinese migrants. This sense of precariousness is especially true for the first generation migrants who hold to the "myth of return" after leaving their home country for a year, according to Brown and Foot (1994a). Despite the investment of their lives in Australia, I question if such investments are adequate to secure their commitment to Australia if the government does not sufficiently acknowledge and value their contribution to the country. As many had left their initial countries due to political, economic, social, and other discontentment, it should not be surprising if another move is made, especially in this mobile era. The diasporic space, with its complicated array of allegiances and sense of belonging, is thus pertinent to the setting for this thesis' investigations as it brings to the fore the inadequacy of the binaric logic. Within the diasporic space, practices are necessarily negotiated to de-naturalise the norms of fixed Chineseness, due to the ambivalence experienced by the diasporic women in such a context, highlighting the diasporic space as a liminal space.

The liminal realm
The liminal nature of the diasporic space thus enables the deployment of the concept of liminality, an idea that figures as a space of in-betweenness. Liminality is the location for the negotiation of diasporic subjectivities that allows us to observe the strategies of subjectification exercised. It challenges the normalising practices of Chineseness and informs ethnic subjectification by providing a discourse for the identification of the emerging subject in the ambivalent interstitial moments, and in-between spaces of postcolonial border crossings. The liminal space is thus defined as the interstitial space where fixed identification boundaries and

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74 While the economic instability is often a significant reason for xenophobia, it is paradoxically the same reason why former Prime Minister Paul Keating called for Australia to be a "multicultural nation in Asia" (Ang 2000, p. 120).
75 Perhaps not so much with the older first generation migrants, due to the trauma of migration or cost of adjustment at an older age, but their children who came with them, also first-generation migrants, may opt to re-migrate, as indicated in my data, for various reasons: education, cultural experience, linguistic development of their children. See p. 205.
76 The examination of how the diasporic community has impacted the dominant Australian society, and vice versa, should make a useful contribution to multicultural policies in Australia. Hinmells and Daniels (in Brown and Foot 1994a) note how the migrant community, among Parsis and Indians in North America, contributed to favourable opportunities, improving female educational and employment levels within the dominant host country. Ansari (in Brown and Foot 1994a) states that immigration policies encouraging a positive relationship between migrants and hosts is crucial and cites the Pakistani state as having failed in the management of social tensions, redistribution of social resources, and creation of a new Pakistani identity to "subsume loyalties of ethnic origin" (Brown and Foot 1994a, p. 10).
binarisms are blurred, to negotiate ethnic subjectivities which are “neither the One … nor the Other … but something else besides” (Bhabha 1994a, p. 28).

I add to this that in the “something else besides” traces of the old and the new are sometimes distinct due to the mind’s constant search for the familiar and the tendency to fix. The liminal space witnesses the “cross-fertilization of cultures” (Lye 1998) that does more than foreclose the essentialist margins of ethnicities. I also execute it in the sense of Trinh’s (1991) “detrimentalized” (p. 3) subjects, as it captures the crossing boundaries of practices and values within and across cultural groups. In crossing, the gaps are exposed and the power structures that mask ethnic subjectification become recognisable. This idea of liminality is more than the fusion of clashing categories popularly promoted in hybrid assertions. It is a discourse that acknowledges the practices and values of the in-between spaces within ethnicities as well as across ethnicities, stressing the heterogeneity within framed ethnic groups. It captures the fluidity and flux in ethnicities within gendered margins, as echoed in Trinh’s description of the woman’s location:

In the realm of dualities … [the diasporic Chinese woman] finds no place she can simply dwell in or transgress. Crisscrossing more than one occupied territory at a time, she remains perforce inappropriate/d – both inside and outside her own social positionings. … A trajectory across variable praxes of difference, her (un)location is necessarily the shifting and contextual interval between arrested boundaries. (Trinh 1991, p. 4)

While it is useful to engage in dualistic realms as depicted in Trinh’s location of the woman, the liminal space includes multiple ethnic realms as experienced in the global world. The multiplicity of subjectivities confronted in this age results in a criss-crossing of ethnicities to produce an ethnic ambivalence that needs to be negotiated. The liminal space unbinds Chineseness from fixed borders and helps us as women with Chinese backgrounds to comprehend how “[we are] the moon and [we are] not” (Trinh 1991, p. 4). 79

Liminality creates a space to explore the hybridising and essentialising practices that emerge within the processes of subjectification. Though the essentialist ideology is acknowledged as

77 Lo, J. (2000) expounds on the problematics associated with the mere collapse of ethnic boundaries, which she calls a form of happy hybrity that is robbed of its politics and specific histories.
76 See Goldberg (2000, p. 82).
78 For an explanation on the symbolic use of the moon, see “State of flux,” in Chapter 2, p. 85.
problematic within academe, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) question if it is possible to “do away with all claims to authenticity, to all forms of essentialism, strategic or otherwise” (p. 18). Furthermore, Landry and MacLean (1996) argue that “you cannot not be an essentialist to some degree” (p. 7). In other words, it is perhaps true that we cannot fully escape the regimes of essentialist thinking due to the history of its prevalence in our practices.

If it is true that essentialism still informs our thinking, that “the nightmare of the ideologies and categories of racism continue to repeat upon the living” (Young 1995, p. 28), one of the primary aims of this thesis is to examine how this is deployed or if it is used strategically by Chinese women in fashioning their subjectivities. I explore how essentialism impacts on our understanding of contemporary Chineseness in our ever-changing contexts, borrowing from Young’s (1995) question: “How does that affect our own contemporary revisions of that imagined past?” (p. 28) Further, I question how strategic essentialism may reformulate the interrelationship between power and resistance.

I thus deploy discourses of liminality to articulate the ambivalence experienced by the diasporic Chinese women in the in-between spaces, by exposing the essentialist discourses that govern such practices. I focus specifically on the proximate factors impacting on the fashioning of diasporic women’s versions of Chineseness. The ambivalent, multiple, and blurring boundaries in the postcolonised world have shifted the question of subjectivity, from a focus on selfhood to one concerning the historical and geographical location of the person (Appiah and Gates 1995). In negotiating their ethnic subjectivities, each new formation or translation encounters shifting boundaries of their own enunciative sites (Bhabha 1994a). Theorising Chineseness thus needs to account for the specific sites by considering the diasporic woman’s context for each lived moment.

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81 Fuss (1989) states that essentialism can be used in various discourses as a strategic deployment.
82 Abu-Lughod (in Law 1997) inverts Foucault’s dictum: “Where there is power, there is resistance,” by asserting: “Where there is resistance, there is power” (p. 112). As a college resident while collecting data interstate, I was second-rated as a resident due to my short-term stay. By knowing my rights as a resident, regardless of temporariness, I resisted this position. This state of refusal led to a process of negotiation that ultimately revoked the position of power that the administrator had over me.
Mapping the method

The goal of knowledge for knowledge's sake represents only one possible goal for research. (Ellis 1997, p. 135)

In my interrogation of Chineseness, I set the prerequisite for a methodological approach that reflects the theoretical position of this thesis. In this innovative move, I enter these pages as the narrative journeys of the Chinese women are unravelled, by deploying autoethnography as both a "method and a text" (Reed-Danahay 1997, p. 9). As a text, I employ the autobiographical narrative to cover both snippets of my life and the narratives of other diasporic Chinese women in Australia. Their stories enlighten my own experiences to expose the power regimes operating in my life that I otherwise may not realise, and my stories are a prism to understand theirs. I thus do not stand in a neutral position. My stories foreground factors found in the data and vice versa. There is a complex interplay of perspectives as these experiences are analysed, an operation very much like the pipe symbol deployed in my methodological chapter.\footnote{For an explanation of the pipe symbol, see footnote 178, p. 91.} As both our narratives are from the first person perspective, I appropriate them autobiographically for my theorisation of Chineseness. The examination of this thesis requires a display of the mastery of its generic conventions. To be accepted as a full member of this tribe, as Ellis (1997) calls it, I have to earn the licence to defy its conventions. To do so, I adopt a mask by applying the conventions of thesis or scholarly writing. This serves as a double-edged sword in that it camouflages its subversive act,\footnote{Ang (1998d) argues that autobiographical writing is not necessarily subversive as it can be narcissistic when used in the wrong context and for the wrong purpose (see p. 159). However, I note its value as a challenge against dominant research norms.} endorsed by my methodological position within the autoethnographic paradigm. In writing from between the interstices, I hope to "sing an old song in a new key" (Ellis 1997, p. 136).

I also employ autoethnography to collapse the notion of the researcher and researched so that they are no longer distinct groups. The postmodern turn problematises the binaric divide between the researcher and researched on two counts. One, it interrogates how modernity situates identity as singular and fixed, and not multiple and fluid. Two, it questions how modernity positions the researcher as the creator of knowledge and the researched as the source of knowledge. I sought a method that enables me to "get within the machinery" (Probyn 1996, p. 7), as well as out of it, in my interrogation of Chineseness. Liminality enables movement that
disrupts the hegemonic construction of researcher and researched.\textsuperscript{85} Thus, this thesis challenges the traditional modernist thesis genre in its mode of data presentation and thesis writing, as a commitment to its liminal theory.\textsuperscript{96} Autoethnography authorises the presentation of data in the form of autobiographical narratives.\textsuperscript{87}

By entering these pages autoethnographically, I resist the reproduction of dominant discourses in scholarly writing which necessitate three things. First, academic writing has in the past demanded an objective voice. Goldberg (2000), in citing Bakhtin, states that “authoritarian language … depends upon the singularity and static fixity of meaning, the insistence of the given and the ordered, the silencing of voice(s) at odds with the authorial power” (p. 81).\textsuperscript{88} The use of the omniscient narrator in most academic discourses, for example, “camouflages the ‘I’ [and] speaks for [or on behalf of] silenced and marginalised voices” (Ellis 1997, p. 116, Ellis’ underline), instead of allowing those voices to be heard. As a transgressive move to mask the authoritarian voice, I subscribe to the use of the autoethnographic narrative. Hall (1992) is useful here: “Autobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I’ve got to speak autobiographically” (p. 277). Speaking in this mode makes indeterminate the authoritative voice and thus infringes upon the separation of the researched and the researcher (Jackson, in Ellis 1997). Although it may advocate a plurality of voices, Ellis (1997) states that the conventional discipline:

\begin{quote}
Celebrates the usual and the typical while ignoring the possible and exceptional; ignores the emotional and sensuous for the cognitive and visual; privileges theory, concepts, and taxonomies over stories, examples, and cases (Bochner 1994); generalizations and explanations over details and understanding; the simple and predictable over the complex and ambiguous; telling with authority over coping with our vulnerabilities; and arguments that produce general truth over stories that show lifelikeness (Bruner 1986). (p. 116)
\end{quote}

I seek to empower the other women by privileging their stories. I achieve this by weaving my voice in with theirs, in a step to remove the notion of hierarchy between the researcher and researched voices. In letting their voices speak, I pursue tales that are lifelike, complex,

\textsuperscript{85} Law (1997) states that the third space breaks the dichotomy between the victimiser and victim which fixes their identities and subject positions to disable the negotiation of alternative identities, and to disempower the victim from resisting the power relations at the intersection of class, race, and gender. See Law (1997, p. 107).
\textsuperscript{86} A conventional introduction to the thesis would not usually include data from participants, for example.
\textsuperscript{87} Autobiographical narratives here include both the researcher’s as well as the participants’. Since both are from the first person perspective, they are referred to as autobiographical narratives or narrative texts. See Chapter 3 “Researcher | Researched” for elaboration.
\textsuperscript{88} See also the notion of anti-transdisciplinarity in footnote 89, on p. 36.
ambiguous, and vulnerable. Written abstractly, the details in our lives will be lost or
camouflaged (Ellis 1997). The narrative allows us to use our own metaphors to get our
messages across (Ellis 1997). Autoethnographic writing from the heart blurs this boundary, by
positioning the narratives in a liminal position of both being on the fringes as well as being an
authority.

Writing strategically against the grain interrogates the language of theoretical critique. I echo
Bhabha (1994a): “Is the language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally
privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-
knowledge equation?” (pp. 20-21). He indicts it as colluding with the Western hegemonic
power bloc. Thus, instead of hiding behind the veil of apparent scientific objectivity, I weave
my autobiographical narratives into the voices of the other Chinese women’s stories. I make the
invisible I become radically visible and make the other voices speak with mine, and in so
doing, I engage in bold border crossing (Anzaldúa 1987a) by breaching the boundaries of
conventional academic writing, and affirm that “every representation of truth involves
elements of fiction. … The more one tries to clarify the line dividing [between fact and fiction],
the deeper one gets entangled in the artifice of boundaries” (Trinh 1992, p. 145).

Although transdisciplinarity is a threat to the academic privileged (Goldberg 2000), the
transgression of the traditional thesis genre is pertinent as it interrogates the norms of what
constitutes acceptable research. Middleton (1995) states:

While modernist buildings conceal their skeletal structures and the various conduits
for water, electricity and gas, post-modernist buildings often expose, and make
design features of, such evidence of their own constructedness. Post-modernist
writing is similar in the sense that it does not hide its author behind the conventions
of disembodied objectivity or linearity. (p. 88)

The use of autobiographical voices, though still controversial in more positivistic circles, reminds
the reader of the constructedness of the text as its mark “indicates a disruption in genre, an

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89 Ellis (1997) questions the usefulness of the rigid boundaries that separate the different disciplines. I write
this thesis at a university that encourages the crossing of disciplines and this is one of the features that attract
students to this campus: the ability to minor in Psychology while completing a Business degree, or to
complete joint degrees. Goldberg (2000) further comments that academic disciplines are to intellectual pursuit
what geographical borders are to nation states. He states that there is not only fear that the discipline might
transform but also that it might be made redundant (see p. 81). There is thus vested interest to protect the
purity of academic disciplines.
eruption or interruption of self-representation in genres in which it has not been previously legitimatized" (Gilmore 1994, p. 7). Pilling (1981) describes it as being "much more lawless and various" (p. 1) and this lawlessness jars against modernist norms of what is acceptable research data presentation. This controversy has a dual function. First, it unsettles the notion of the genre as an over-arching framework governing the ordering of details in the text, and then it leads the reader to the corresponding idea of the constructedness of culture, according to the prevalent cultural semantics before its subsequent interrogation.

Secondly, convention seeks for generalisations or patterns across the narratives, instead of allowing the individual stories to be told. Focusing on a single case breaches traditional research, according to Geertz (cited in Ellis 1997). I comply with the request for generalisations where relevant, as in the use of statistical information, to earn my licence as part of my professional socialisation. I argue, at the same time, that the narrative’s validity lies not so much in its generalisability across other narratives but more so in its ability to speak to other readers about their own experiences (Ellis 1997). If it speaks to them, the text is generalisable, according to Ellis (1999). Our lives are thus particular and yet generalisable (Ellis 1999). I stress that although threads of similarity and difference may be present in the narratives, I do not seek to produce a monolithic Chinese story. I argue that these narratives capture “conjunctural moments” (see Probyn 1993, p. 99) that are singular and context-bound, driven by geographical, historical, and political factors governing the women’s lives. The experiences paint lives that show that even in hybridity there is heterogeneity. Trinh (1991, p. 15) states it well by saying: “In undoing established models and codes, plurality adds up to no total,” in the sense that there is no fixedness to these narratives, just representations of individual stories in a particular setting. Thus, the exposure of the similarities and differences in the Western Australian woman’s narrative compared to a Sydney-sider’s, or that between a 30-year-old’s issues and those of a 71-year-old, challenges us to examine the mechanisms that create these similarities and differences.

Thirdly, academic tradition requires that other people’s experiences be collected, and not the researcher’s own stories. It argues that autoethnography gives voice only to the powered elite and silences other voices that do not have access to this discourse. Ellis (1997) argues vehemently against this by asking: “Do you think that people find their stories among the statistical analysis of large databases about social minutiae?” (p. 134). She adds that academics
who tell their stories may encourage the disempowered to speak their silences, and lead to a discovery of the researcher’s own silenced parts.\textsuperscript{90} The autobiographical narrative serves to illuminate theory as lived in my life. Ang (1994b) argues “the narrating of life as lived [rescues] notions of ‘experience’ and ‘emotion’ for cultural theorizing … to critique the formalist, postmodernist tendency to overgeneralize the global currency of so-called nomadic, fragmented and deterritorialized subjectivity” (p. 4). The autobiographical narrative is able to capture “a tension between self and others, of generating a reflection on the fluctuating place of the subject within its community” (Molloy 1991, p. 9). Further, Shen (1998) states that Chinese-Australians treat the autobiography as a “process of cultural retrieval, of reconciliation with a lost identity, and of a relocation of the self” (p. 4) that thus makes it a useful site for identity negotiation.

I assert that the researchers’ life stories legitimise the experiences of the silenced, and vice versa, and this encourages the closet to be opened. In so doing, it interrogates the forces that “create the condition for silencing” (Tierney 1993, p. 4). Further, I know that I “cannot speak of them without speaking of [myself], of history without involving [my] story” (Trinh 1991, p. 76). I see this as a hybrid threading of my life into my writing about others. It contains my autobiography and personal history in a descriptive and interpretive paradigm (Denzin 1989b), as I use my life as a prism to interrogate issues of Chineseness in a diasporic context.\textsuperscript{91}

The use of the autobiography in this thesis, thus, reflects effectively its theoretical framework. First, as Hymes has suggested, it goes beyond the mere collection and analysis of texts as it observes and analyses performance, which is the \textit{third moment}, where the process of performance and text live (cited in Gubrium and Holstein 1998). This third moment, for the purposes of this thesis, is the interplay between the narratives and the cultural semantics informing them. The focus on this third moment moves the analysis away from the internal structure and meanings of a text to how it is assembled socially (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Secondly, it encourages entry into the liminal spaces to break down borders, to create imaginings that are beyond the beyond. Lionnet (1989) states that:

\begin{quote}
The weaving of different strands of raw materials and threads of various colours into one piece of fabric ... would emancipate the writer from any ... one literary
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{90} The researcher after all is the theorist so why would one ignore the deeper recesses of the theorist, if not only because of what is deemed as the objective norm.
\textsuperscript{91} See the prismatic use of my life in footnote 182, on p. 93.
style or form, freeing her to enlarge, redefine, or explode the canons of our discursive practices. (p. 213)

In line with Lionnet’s hybrid notions reflected above, this thesis is thus committed to “structure … texts in ways which encourage readers to experiment with unorthodox, multiple and idiosyncratic readings” (Middleton 1995, p. 88). In so doing, naturalised reading practices are challenged and new readings are encouraged as the narratives reveal multiple processes encountered by each lived experience. Further, autoethnographic writing from the heart adopts a discourse that is accessible to a larger audience through the simplicity of the narrative voices.

I thus cross the border of the researcher/researched subject. I am the research driver and sometimes I am a passenger in these liminal journeys which take me in and out of other women’s lives. Our lives interweave. Our lives take on divergent, similar paths. I question why we fashion Chineseness in such similar yet different ways, and focus on the “strategies of selfhood” (Bhabha 1994a) engaged with in constructing our subjectivities. Thus, in the researcher–researched roles performed, shadows of liminality are perceived as I function sometimes as the researcher, sometimes as the researched, and sometimes as both. These dual or in-between or multiple roles reflect the theoretical framework deployed by this thesis in the methodological approach as well as the thesis production itself. There is an interweaving of resistant and conventional strategies as the thesis is knitted into a hybrid text that demonstrates theory in action and, by so doing, exposes the essentialised conventionalised aspects of the constructedness of the thesis genre.92

To summarise, this thesis investigates the practices of Chineseness by diasporic women within Australia. It applies the concept of liminality in its aim to interrogate notions of what it means to be Chinese and woman, and how this will inform the English classroom. And finally, this thesis deploys the postmodern, postcolonial paradigm towards the genre of the thesis itself, ordering the very tools of postcolonialism in its research method and actual thesis production to negotiate a research narrative that is, as Bhabha (1992a) states, new but familiar.93 But as Bhabha (1994a) has argued:

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92 This should then probe us to question who or which discipline the thesis genre privileges.
93 I deploy postcolonial here in the sense of resistance against the tools of white hegemony and conventional academic writing.
A critical discourse does not yield a new political object, or aim, or knowledge, which is simply a mimetic reflection of an a priori political or theoretical commitment. … The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave ... but to the extent which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity ... where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political [or theoretical] expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics and [theorising]. The challenge lies in conceiving of the time of political action and understanding as opening up a space that can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without [italics added] rushing to produce a unity of the social antagonism or contradiction [or convention]. This is a sign that history is happening – within the pages of theory, within the systems and structures we construct to figure the passage of the historical. (1994a, p. 25, Bhabha’s italics)

To explicate Bhabha, I argue that in challenging what Chineseness means for diasporic women in Australia, the variations of Chineseness exposed, and the contradictoriness and complexities of practices produced, will enable us to consider a new politics. This new politics should include a recognition of liminal heterogeneity that frees us to be “neither one nor the other,” without pushing us towards the embracement of a Eurocentric set of dominant values and practices, against the Chinese cultural past, and vice versa.

The overview

Having introduced this thesis’ interwoven conceptual and methodological framework for the negotiations of Chineseness by diasporic women in Australia, let me now sketch the ensuing pages.

Chapter 2 “Framing the fictions” elaborates on the frames for subsequent data analysis. In the first section “The Chinese review,” I survey the work of key scholars on Chineseness, with a special focus on the diasporic Chinese in Australia. In section two, “Being Chinese,” I outline the essentialist ideas of Chineseness according to fictions of geography, culture, and biology. In the third section “Beyond Chineseness,” I pit these fictions against the liminal lens to argue that Chineseness deviates between essentialist notions of how it should be rehearsed. In the fourth section “Being Chinese | woman,” I consider how the liminal framework applies to feminist issues for the diasporic Chinese woman in Australia.

Chapter 3 “Researcher | researched” elaborates on the methodological framework as a postmodern and postcolonial package for cultural theorising. I present autoethnography as an
appropriate apparatus for the purposes of this research. I consider the modernist objections such as research validity, reliability, and generalisability. In the latter sections of the chapter, I consider the nuts and bolts of the method, such as the participants' particulars and analytical considerations.

Chapter 4 "Good girls vs bad babes" examines the complex web of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity and argues that the negotiations of these are meted according to the cultural semantics of the binaric good or bad Chinese woman. This chapter also forms the template for other chapters as it illustrates more specifically the intricate interplay between binarism and the various other cultural semantics that inform who we are as Chinese women in Australia.

Chapter 5 "Darling daughter | martyr mother" first looks at the ethnicisation of the cultural semantics of filial piety. I examine the impact of filial piety on the role of the daughter in its intersections with socioeconomic class, religion, and geographic location. I also consider the impact of the Confucian model of motherhood on the women’s negotiations of motherhood. Finally, I note the different emphases given to the language and culture of interracial families and the reasons for the mothers’ desire for Chinese language acquisition and cultural continuity.

Chapter 6 "Perfect partner" draws on the discussion of chapters 4 and 5, and focuses on the issue of partner preference. I interrogate the cultural semantics that operate to inform the diasporic woman’s preferences and examine how these intersect with her ethnic subjectification. I posit that the women’s liminal position as neither fully Chinese nor Western complicates their partner preferences.

Chapter 7 "Language and liminality" looks at the liminal position that women are placed into due to their language proficiency. I posit that language is used as a marker of ethnicity, and examine how and why proficiency in the Chinese and English languages impacts on the diasporic women’s ethnic subjectification. I also interrogate how language functions as a segregatory device within and across ethnic lines. I finally consider the strategies negotiated by the diasporic woman in her Australian location to gain acceptance into the various groups she interacts with.
Chapter 8 “Educated elite” deals with that great Confucian value of education. I interrogate the impact of education on the diasporic woman by intersecting its impact with other factors, and posit that socioeconomic class may be a significant factor. I trace the diasporic women’s educational histories, and discuss the different opportunities created by the various language mediums and educational locations. I problematise the ethnicisation of education, and its implications for ethnic subjectification and pedagogical perspectives. I also discuss the benefits and costs of educational goals, before challenging the cultural semantic of education as the diasporic woman’s emancipator. I argue for more fluid feminist frames before finally exploring the politics of an education that counts.

The final chapter “Challenging Chineseness” remaps the different issues raised in this thesis and rallies us to consider the implications of essentialist and liminalist cultural semantics on the diasporic woman’s negotiations of Chineseness in Australia. It also focuses on the educational implications for the findings of this thesis. I suggest curricula changes for the English curriculum and challenge the prevalent pedagogical practices in classrooms.
Chapter 2

Framing the fictions

Chineseness, increasingly “rich with contradiction and changeability” (Wang 1999, p. 10), has long intrigued scholars. In this chapter, I first highlight the key scholars and their work on Chineseness, paying particular focus to the diasporic Chinese in Australia, in the section “The Chinese Review.” I then explore the theoretical sites relevant to the negotiations of Chinese ethnic subjectification to form the frame for my data analysis. In the second section, “Being Chinese,” I consider how Chineseness has been theorised according to the different categories of essentialist Chineseness: geography, culture, and biology, and their problematics for negotiations of contemporary Chineseness among diasporic Chinese women. In the third section, “Beyond Chineseness,” I argue that the liminal space is a useful paradigm for the shift in how contemporary Chineseness is fashioned. Liminality is examined here as a counter fiction to the essentialist cultural semantics that fix our ideas of Chineseness. The different categories in sections two and three are interrelated, and this betrays the constructedness of these fictions. In the fourth section, I consider how the liminal framework informs the feminist critique on negotiations of Chineseness among the diasporic women. But first, I survey the prolific research on diasporic Chineseness before explaining my research position.

The Chinese review

Wang (1999), a leading Chinese historian, recently traced the plethora of research on the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. The body of research between the late 19th century to the 1950s consists of three main areas. The first strand of research included the Chinese and Japanese scholars who unified the overseas Chinese by identifying them as huaqiao or “sojourners.” This led to the establishment of study centres focusing on the huaqiao. Secondly, from the early to mid-20th century, the diasporic Chinese were studied in different regions of Southeast Asia for political reasons, as the Chinese were seen as having beneficial and threatening possibilities to the colonial regimes. Comprehensive work on Southeast Asia and anthropological studies were produced as a result of this. The third area emerged as

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94 Because the issues arising out of my data traverse many different areas, I appropriate the literature relevant to those particular issues as they arise, rather than to tackle them all in this chapter, which thus functions more as a conceptual chapter for the thesis.

95 For a list of other related scholars who kickstarted this field of study, see Wang (1999, pp. 2-3).

96 Wang (1999) cites Purcell, Freeman, Tian, Elliott, and Topley as key scholars here, see p. 3.
communist China’s restrictions towards research saw sociologists and anthropologists turn to overseas Chinese in their study of China, focusing on the Southeast Asian region. The second and third research areas established Hong Kong and Taiwan as the alternative Chinese societies for study under the London-Cornell project, and produced a new generation of scholars that included Chinese Southeast Asians. Of significance to the question of Chinese subjectivity was the Southeast Asian political climate of the 1950s, which forced many to question what nationalism meant to them outside China. The Japanese occupation inadvertently identified the Chinese living overseas as Chinese regardless of their loyalty to China or their adopted country of residence. Ironically, the Chinese overseas were often dogged by questions of ethnic authenticity and cultural inferiority due to their ability to adapt to the culture of their adopted country.

In the 1960-70s, the research focus in Southeast Asia shifted to China, although Australian scholars sustained their interest in Southeast Asia, due to the political proximity of Indonesia and Malaysia, and the high percentage of students of Chinese descent from the region. With Japan emerging as an economic power in the late 1960s, the studies began to focus on the Chinese people’s commercial activities. The 1980s aimed to network with the new breed of sojourners from China in their new respective countries, with the purpose of establishing a trade diaspora for economic links. This interest was also sparked by the new associations, societies, and cultural organisations to strengthen the diasporic Chinese social and cultural links.

More recently, Pan’s (1998) *The encyclopedia of the Chinese overseas*, an ambitious project, offers a comprehensive, panoramic and comparative overview of the Chinese diaspora globally. Though well intentioned, this text provides a rather homogenous view of the different diasporic groups, as is characteristic of texts of such an extensive nature. Chaliand and Rageau’s (1995) *The Penguin atlas of diasporas* includes a small section on the Chinese diaspora with maps, but again this is a surface sweep of this vast and complex group of people. Tu’s (1994) *The living tree: The changing meaning of being Chinese today* is a collection of works by various authors, with different approaches. It argues that Chineseness is fluid although, as a collection, it

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97 See Wang (1999, p. 3).
98 For a list of such scholars, see Wang (1999, p. 4).
99 For a list of scholars, see Wang (1999, p. 10).
100 A new generation of social scientists were produced as a result of this focus. See Wang (1999, p. 11).
appears reluctant to admit that Chineseness is not essentially unique as a culture, especially in the different diasporic contexts encountered.

Closer to home, Australian research on intermarriages includes a study on the relationships between the Chinese and Australians (Penny and Khoo 1996), oral history projects focusing on the Chinese in Australia (Giese 1994; 1995; 1997), and a section on the contemporary Chinese-Australians in Pan’s encyclopedia by Inglis (1998). The first tends to treat the Chinese-Australians in homogenous terms, while the second had an essentialist tendency in the rationale of the interview questions. The third provides a historical, demographic, and cultural summary on the Chinese in Australia. Martin’s (1999) study of the Malaysians in Australia also provides a useful profile on the Malaysian-Chinese. Others also working on the place of Chinese sojourners and settlers in Australia and New Zealand include Fitzgerald’s (1997) history of the Chinese in Sydney and other studies of the Chinese in Australia, which focus on the construction of a sense of belonging and identity that is not tied to citizenship.

In a collection of papers that covers a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the Chinese in this region (Ryan 1995), the variety of the Chinese experience is emphasised. The Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora in Canberra, established in 1989, has also set the pace for much research on the Chinese diaspora from a multidisciplinary perspective. Giese’s (1999) survey of the literature at the National Library of Australia finds that the Chinese immigrants have written on their negotiations of mundane daily activities. They have also translated government pamphlets and described student, work, and married life. The collection further includes newsletters, yearbooks, and other publications celebrating the Chinese-

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104 The National Library’s Post-War Chinese Australians Project, begun in 1992, includes over 85 interviews with Chinese settlers and immigrants from Southeast Asia. The Chinese Australian Oral History Partnership aims to extend this work. There is also The Australia-China Oral History Project, a joint initiative by the Australia-China Council, the Australian Museum, and the National Library, which records interviews with Chinese-Australians for the years up to 1949. Since then other interviews by various people have also been conducted with different prominent Chinese-Australians. However, only a relatively few Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese were included in these interviews.
105 Other demographic work includes Coughlan and McNamara’s (1997) work on six Southeast Asian countries, which analyses a diversity of cultural, demographic, economic, and social data from the 1996 Australian Census data.
107 For a list of the scholars involved and their research interests, see Ryan (1995).
108 For information on this Centre, its research profile, list of publications, and researchers, see http://rspas.anu.edu.au/cscsd/home.html.
Australian contribution to Australia, and accounts of the Chinese experience in the mining and regional areas, with an interest in the White Australia Policy, racism against the Chinese, and China affairs, reported.

In the 1980s, there was an influx of students from Southeast Asia to Australia due to the export of education to that region. This sparked off new research amongst educational psychologists. The educational research on the Chinese in Australia, however, tends to focus on the student population and I feel that local Chinese students are attributed similar characteristics based on findings pertaining to the overseas students. Further, this is problematic when the research tends to be based on either a deficit view, which assumes that students of Chinese descent have particular learning difficulties due to language deficiencies, or an essentialist view that focuses on the Asian student’s learning style. Lately, researchers are beginning to challenge the deficit and stereotypical assumptions about Chinese student’s learning styles and posit instead that there is much more variance within the groups than initially realised.\(^{109}\)

Global racial issues after World War 2, such as the contempt felt towards the Semitic Holocaust, the Black-White civil rights movement in the United States, and the growing human rights movement in the West, saw a move from assimilationist to multicultural policies in North America and Australasia (Wang 1999).\(^{110}\) These events impacted on questions of identity amongst the diasporic Chinese worldwide. This produced extensive debate on questions of belonging and issues of hybrid identities. In North America, scholars like Chow C. (1998), Chow R. (1993; 1997; 1998), Lowe (1996), and Ma (1998) are among some of the many who have contributed significantly to this body of research. They address the more complex negotiations of Chineseness in the daily lives of diasporic subjects living in North America, and pay particular attention to the women from feminist perspectives. Parker’s (1995) work outlines the existing research on young Chinese people in Britain, and argues against the essentialist logic for a more fluid position on ethnic subjectivity.

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\(^{109}\) A useful paper outlining these issues is Volet and Renshaw (1996).

\(^{110}\) Jakubowicz (2002) states that assimilation in Australia was the official policy for “making minorities the same as majorities [to] become like whites” (p. 12). It lasted until the 1960s when Australia signed the International Convention to Eradicate All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, was the Australian Government’s replacement policy for assimilation in the 1970s. It is premised on the belief that different cultural beliefs should be respected and that the migrant population should not need to abandon their previous values to be good Australian citizens or residents.
In Australia, the complicated position of the diasporic Chinese has produced prolific research on the issue of ethnic subjectification. Ang (2001b), a leading Chinese-Australian cultural thinker, in her collection of essays, addresses the vexed question of Chineseness in the Australian context, and pushes the politics of identity to its limit. Shen (2001), another Chinese-Australian scholar, in her analysis of Chinese-Australian autobiographies covering the period from the 1860s to the 1990s, shows the varied paths taken by these Chinese immigrants to Australia. It includes the complexities involved in the Chinese migrant’s identity in Australia, in response to the White Australia Policy, and the subsequent multicultural policies that replaced it in the 1970s. Current research on the Chinese diaspora in Australia include work by Xiao (1999) on the cross-cultural comparisons of cultural negotiations of the diasporic Chinese between other ethnic groups with mainstream Australian society, and between the mainland diasporic Chinese and non-mainland Chinese, in the 1990s. Also of significance is the contribution of the many other cultural theorists who have debated the subject of hybridised identification within the framework of cultural studies, which have led to my present research on the negotiations of Chineseness amongst the diasporic Chinese women in Australia.\(^{111}\)

From the literature surveyed, and from my own experiences, I was keen to produce knowledge based on the daily negotiations of ethnic subjectivity by the diasporic Chinese women living in contemporary Australia, as my contribution to this present body of research. Empirical research on contemporary Chinese women in Australia has hardly begun and my research contributes significantly to the current theorising in cultural studies on the subject of liminalised lives in the diasporic context. In the next sections, I develop a conceptual framework for the analysis of my data that simultaneously reflects the methodology employed for my data collection.\(^{112}\) I draw together the various threads of cultural theories by different scholars, focusing first on the essentialist views that continue to grip Chineseness, and then proposing a liminal framework for cultural appropriation in this current context, before I draw conclusions on how this specifically impacts on diasporic Chinese women’s experiences.

**Being Chinese**

Gilman (1998) asks: “What is ethnicity?” (p. 19). I add to this: “What is being Chinese?” and “What is being Chinese and woman?” Often these are answered according to a fixed,

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\(^{111}\) Two useful texts that include a wide range of such theorists are Ang, Chalmers, Law, and Thomas (2000) and Gilbert, Khoo, and Lo (2000).

\(^{112}\) Apple (in Lather 1991, p. x), in citing Jaggar, states that theory, method, and praxis should be integrated into research that aims to transform women’s subordinate positions within the dominant institutions.
reductionist, and essentialist view of Chineseness, which believes in a pre-given essence that
must be shared by all in the same ethnic group (Benton and Pieke 1998). I highlight three
fictions based on the categories of geography, culture, and biology that are often subscribed to
when one tries to imagine what being Chinese means and argue that the issues confronting the
diasporic Chinese woman are often different to those of some other migrants in Australia due to
their visible appearance and gender. I also contemplate within the postcolonial poststructuralist
feminist framework how the different fictions of geography, culture, and biology influence a
woman's negotiations of Chineseness in Australia.

A geographical fiction

Taking from Gupta and Ferguson's (1992) idea of spatial fiction, the geographical fiction
consists of the ethnological and national naturalisms that link people to place in a "solid,
commonsensical, and agreed-upon" (p. 12) fashion. However, these associations are actually
"contested, uncertain, and in flux" (p. 12). The traditional sino-centric or anthropocentric view
of Chineseness focuses on essentialising Chineseness to one specific geographical area (Wang,
L. L.-c. 1991), with the Chinese people at the centre of existence and all other peoples cast into
the periphery (Wu 1991). Wang, L. L.-c. (1991) uses the concept of gen or "roots" to elaborate
on this static belief of Chineseness and explains that the ancient understanding of roots ascribed
to one's ancestral home and birth place, or the geographical space of China (among some of the
huaqiao or "overseas Chinese"), is used as the reference point for subjectification.\footnote{\textsuperscript{13}}

The present modernist and arbitrary delineation of geographical spaces into distinct political
nation states has thus created a fiction that naturalises cultural identity to space (Gupta and
Ferguson 1992). This fiction is both a unifying and dividing force in a multicultural setting like
Australia. It unifies those from the same nations but divides those from different nations,
especially if the source nation has different interests, values, and histories (Schurmann 1998).
Whilst nationality remains problematic as a source of subjectification, it plays a significant role
in international relations and is something that cannot be ignored (Schurmann 1998). Within this
geographical fiction, different views emerge for the diasporic women's subjectification.

\footnote{13}{The French are accepted as people living in France, practising the French culture, and America is where
the Americans live. These distinctions are contemporarily reinforced by immigration policies to keep the
disempowered and unsuitable immigrants -- according to say class, religion, skills, ethnicity -- away. See

\footnote{14}{The Palestinian struggle is an extreme case of this subscription to land for self-determination (Gupta and
Ferguson 1992, pp. 12-13).}
Within this geographical or spatial centre, two interpretive frameworks have been used since the second postwar period to understand the history and life of diasporic Chinese and those living specifically in the United States (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991). Although these do not deal specifically with women’s issues, I find them useful in exploring negotiations of Chineseness by diasporic women in Australia. For the purposes of this discussion, I treat them as fixed frames although in reality there is much flux between them. Wang sees these two frameworks as different and opposing because they have different views of China, varying sets of strategies for survival, destinies, and readings of diasporic Chinese subjectivity; yet, they are both planted in the word root. This suggests that both operate in the essentialist discourse as they fix the Chinese migrant’s subjectivity according to a geographical locale, appointing China or the adoptive country as the reference centre.\(^{115}\) This binarically centrist model therefore makes references to a geographical location in the construction of subjectivity according to the two frameworks: yeluо guigen and luodi shenggen.

**Yeluо guigen**

In the yeluо guigen framework, the Chinese migrant refers to the home country as the geographical centre “from which one is removed but to which one imagines one actually belongs” (Ang 1998c). I deploy Wang, L. L.-c.’s (1991) root symbol in the designation of one’s birth country, motherland, or ancestral land to explain this reference. According to Wang, yeluо guigen (literally “leaves fall, return root”), paints the Chinese as “fallen leaves that must eventually, even inevitably return to their roots in the soil of China” (p. 183, Wang’s italics), or sojourners who will return to China to retire and die there. Their subject reference would be China, or in other contexts, the subject’s home country. We can see this in Figure 1 below:

![Figure 1. Geographical yeluо guigen centre](image)

\(^{115}\) In the case of my participants and me, Malaysia or Singapore may be the geographical points of reference, instead of China.
The Chinese subject in the host country makes references to the country of origin, deliberately illustrated in Figure 1 above as a larger circle, to signify the importance of this home country to the migrant subject, for his/her representational meaning or subjectivity.

As discussed earlier, the life of a Chinese migrant who perceives him/herself as a sojourner, lives in the foreign land as true foreigners since their country of origin prevails as their home. The strategies they apply in negotiating their subjectivity on foreign soil are influenced by the geographical location they refer to. They remain resistant to the "assimilationist technologies" (Bhabha 1997b) present in the host country’s immigration or social policies. Their whole existence and subjectivity is structured by this sojourner mentality, tied to the geographical country of origin (Wang, L. L.-c. 1991). As Shen (2001) says: "Deep in their psyche, there existed a specific place in China [or Malaysia/Singapore] which they called home. ... upon which many overseas Chinese have structured their existence and identity" (p. 60).

Ang (1998c) cites three reasons for this attachment to the homeland. First, the "legendary commitment to one's ancestral home and devotion to the family [and] the important value of filial piety ... foregrounded as key characteristics of traditional Chinese culture" contributes to the clan mentality. The importance placed on filial piety as a supreme virtue helps to explain the importance of the geographical space to some Chinese (Jordan 1998). The diasporic Chinese woman who holds to this fiction will find it hard to negotiate practices of filial piety in Australia, as she becomes exposed to feminist values that question such practices. She may practise it regardless of the Australian socioeconomic conditions as compared to those in Malaysia or Singapore, conforming to the powered forces that regulated her behaviour in her previous homeland. Thus, the ancestral home remains significant in the performance of obedience to one’s ancestors. Secondly, relate this to the racial ostracism experienced in the new land, and we have another expression of this geographical attachment, which Ang (1998c) explains, in citing Safran, is a defence strategy to tolerate the injustices experienced. The diasporic woman who faces racism or discrimination in Australia due to her language deficiency or racial markings, for example, romanticizes her home as one where no such pain is experienced. This myth is thus a conceptual utopia, which is never intended to prepare the Chinese migrant for an actual return to the homeland. Thirdly, the dichotomous construction of the East and West strengthens China’s emotional pull on its diaspora. China’s ethnocentrism, which places it in the centre of civilisation, as earlier mentioned, and the West’s tendency to
invest all Chinese affairs with “more than ‘normal’ significance” due to its fascination with China, exacerbates this geographical tie. Thus, the diasporic woman who holds to a glorious China will find it hard to attach herself to an inferior white Australia.

I find it useful here to refer to Lee’s (1991) analysis of overseas Chinese literature in the USA to illustrate the problematics of such an attitude. Lee (1991) notes that the authors and their characters were obsessed with China, although the stories are written outside China. Lee (1991) feels that huaqiao writers are too obsessed with China as the homeland and as such are deprived of the benefits of their peripheral position overseas. Lee sees value in being able to shift intellectually and psychologically from the geographical centre. I believe he is suggesting that such a shift would allow the huaqiao artists sufficient distance from the centre of obsession to re-create, rather than to reproduce, new texts. Presently, Lee (1991) sees that cultural practices and ideologies imported from the homeland are only “narrow facsimiles” (p. 218) or reproductions. They signify a “peculiar vanity to retain his[her] past – a desperate wish not to be forgotten by the homeland” (p. 218). As such the obsession is a stranglehold on their creativity.

To further illustrate the fiction of geography, Wu’s study on the Bai people in China shows that one’s ethnic subjectification is arbitrarily related to the geographical region. The Bai people were described by a Chinese sociologist as “not quite a minority, but not quite Chinese either” (T’ao, in Wu 1991, p. 168). Living in close proximity to other groups in the Yunnan trading and now tourist zone since ancient times had so influenced their cultural practices that they were indistinguishable from the hanren or “pure” Chinese. Wu records that the Bai label was only known to the Bai people when the government compiled an official list of nationalities in 1958. Before then they were known by a number of other labels, depending on where they resided. According to Wu, in the 1940s the Bai were offended when they were referred to by their minority status. They preferred the ethnic Chinese label, along with the privileges of those who enjoyed the Chinese status. In 1985, Wu found that the Bai felt that they were a distinct group from the Chinese though they could not provide evidence for the cultural differences alluded to, apart from language differences. Wu concluded that the official policy of renaming them was

116 Taam Sze Pui’s autobiographical text of his settler years in Australia is similarly comprised of mainly Chinese people (Shen 2001).
117 See Taiwanese novelist, Pai Hsien-yung’s, Wandering Chinese, voluntary self-exiles who are lost in limbo because of the need to be tied to a geographical locale in Lee (1991).
the cause of this change in their self-perception.\textsuperscript{118} There is also evidence that the government policy of giving financial and other assistance to develop the minority groups culturally has also aided in this change in ethnic subjectification. I have included the Bai study to illustrate that the assertion of an identity according to a geographical area is a fiction that is manipulated for economic and political gain. The diasporic Chinese woman in Australia may likewise strategically identify herself as Chinese or Australian, according to prevalent socioeconomic policies, if not for the need to fix their subjectivity to a geographic space under the essentialist grip.

The geographical fiction does not adequately address the postcolonial issue either. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) ask: “To which places do the hybrid cultures of postcoloniality belong?” (p. 7). For example, though born in Malaysia where I spent half my life before migrating to Australia, I grew up with a sense of fascination for China till I visited it in 1990. I then found that my idea of China was an invention that was fixed to an era that no longer exists.\textsuperscript{119} My reference to China was a Malaysian reading of China, and what China means to Malaysians with Chinese backgrounds. My migration to Australia has made me twice removed from China, as my reading is now influenced by Australian images and perceptions of China. Any future relationship with China will also be informed by Australia’s foreign policy with China.\textsuperscript{120} My experience in China is similar to Pan’s description of the overseas Chinese:

> Each time they visit it, they ask themselves, ‘Why are we here? Why do we keep going back?’ … And yet had China meant nothing to them, any other place thereafter would have meant less, and they would carry no pole themselves, and they would not even guess what they had missed. When they leave it after their visit they feel that they have left something of themselves behind, yet they also realise that they could never live there.” (in Ang 1998c)

The maintenance of the geographical fiction for a diasporic woman like me is thus much more complicated as our relationship with China forms a “troublesome double bind” (Ang 1998c). I assert that identification according to the \textit{routes} one has travelled, rather than the \textit{root} of one’s origin (Ang 1998d, p. 155), would be much more appropriate.

\textsuperscript{118} For more cases, see Wu (1991, pp. 171-76).
\textsuperscript{119} Ang (1998c) speaks of China’s “power to compel tribal feeling” within the diasporic community. Many have a pride/shame relationship with China and both responses to China equally exhibit China’s power over that subject.
\textsuperscript{120} Gupta and Ferguson (1992) cite the case of Palestine to highlight that our construction of the homeland changes with the political shifts that occur (see p. 12).
Luodi shenggen

In the second framework, the Chinese migrant subject refers to the host country as the geographical centre. This reference uses Wang, L. L.-c.’s (1991) *luodi shenggen* (literally “fall soil, take root”) symbol, which sketches the migrant subjects as “seeds sown in foreign soil, taking root wherever they have emigrated” (p. 183), as settlers who will contribute to the chosen country as permanent residents or citizens. In this framework, the people may conform to the stereotypic image of the dominant group in their chosen country of migration in fashioning their subjectivity. This too is centrist in that it refers to the adoptive country as its representational point, as we can see in Figure 2 below:

![Figure 2. Geographical luodi shenggen centre](image)

This centre also influences the destiny of the people involved. Instead of referring to their homeland in the processes of subjectification, they may reject their homeland. According to Wang, L. L.-c. (1991), they turn instead to their host country, conforming to the values and behaviours there. It is perceived that they initially stand on the outer fringes of the host country till they move closer to what they believe to be the core of the host country, referencing the host country for images of what they believe to be the real Australian. Wang adds that to gain acceptance:

> Some went as far as to Anglicize their Chinese family names, suppress their Chinese speaking ability and their accents, dissociate themselves from their relatives and Chinese friends, move out of Chinatowns if possible, and take advantage of modern cosmetology – some by dying their hair or even by undergoing plastic surgery to alter their eyelids, nose, and lips. (p. 197)

Within this second framework, the Chinese migrant usually abandons the past in the reconstruction of his/her present subjectivity. They take up citizenship and engage actively in the new nation that they now belong to (Schurmann 1998). The result is perhaps a subject who
is essentially australianised to the mythical Australian stereotype. This too is problematic due to
the heterogeneity prevalent in multicultural Australia, for who is the true blue Aussie? Is it the
Australian who lives in the outback or one who commutes to work in urban Australia? It
silences the space that an urban Chinese woman would dwell in since the stereotypical Aussie
only pertains to the males or rural/pioneer women. Further, there is the question of xenophobia
that could erupt. Whilst multicultural policies promote the luodi shenggen commitment
amongst the Chinese diaspora (Schurmann 1998), the threat of Australia’s possible return to
right-wing racial politics hinders many from this ideal. This second framework is particularly
pertinent to my research setting as many of the diasporic Chinese women struggle to abandon
the past in their attempt to fit into Australia, according to the dominant Australian norms at the
expense of their past culture.¹²¹

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In applying the frameworks of yeluoguigen and luodi shenggen away from Chinese
ethnocentrism to other geographical contexts, I find both frameworks problematic in translating
the meanings of Chineseness in our current shifting contexts, particularly if we have crossed the
border to another home permanently (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). It fails to embrace those who
retain a part of their otherness while adopting aspects of the new other, or those who shift in
their subjectification according to the different contexts encountered. Both frameworks are
essentialist in their perspective and limit the people’s perceptions of their subjectivities in
narrow ways. Further, they enforce a psychological restriction on the choices made towards the
meaning of home. It suggests that one has to choose either the old home or the new home, but
not both.¹²² Nevertheless, the homeland remains powerful as a unifying symbol in the diasporic
context despite the different connections to it (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This reinforces my
argument that the liminal framework is critical to negotiations of diasporic women’s
Chineseness in Australia.

¹²¹ I pick up this point again in the section “A hybrid culture,” in “Beyond Chineseness,” see p. 70.
¹²² Gupta and Ferguson (1992) further find issue with what they call the “isomorphism of space, place and
culture” (p. 7), as it does not include those who dwell the borderland of national boundaries nor those who
cross borders as a way of living – farmers who spend half the year in Mexico and the other half in the United
States.
A cultural fiction

The cultural fiction is the myth that “discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 7) exist as neat sets of traditions that need to be practised for cultural continuity. The cultural fiction asserts that there is a central set of practices that real Chinese people rehearse within naturalised geographical and biological boundaries as a link to their Chinese cultural heritage (Wu 1991). This cultural fiction relies on “a central zone of symbols, values, and beliefs which govern a society” (Shils in Lee 1991, p. 222), as the reference point for cultural practice. Thus, a real Chinese should respect the elders, by exercising filial piety in their lifetime and after their death, or value education and exhibit keen business acumen. According to Lee, Shils’ explanation for this central system lies in the human need for:

Something which transcends and transfigures their concrete individual existence. They have a need to be in contact with symbols of an order which is larger in its dimensions than their own bodies and more central in the ultimate structure of reality than is their routine everyday life. (in Lee 1991, p. 222-23)

Havel (in Lee 1991) critiques this need for an outer force by stating that it “enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious modus vivendi, both from the world and from themselves” (p. 223). What I find more problematic is that the practices ensuing from this cultural fiction blind the performers from questioning what they do. The practices become normalised as a given Chinese entity. For the diasporic woman, she may remain fixed to her role as daughter, mother, and wife in a manner that continues to serve the patriarchal system, unaware of the feminist politics that she can ascribe to to redefine who she is. Further, it fixes the meaning of Chineseness by narrowing the choices available and stereotypes those who subscribe to it. Wu (1991) extends this by stating:

Many Chinese who have acculturated to the indigenous population are still labeled as Chinese and subject to suspicion, discrimination, or exclusion in sociopolitical participation. In part, this suspicion is not unreasonable given that the identity for the overseas Chinese has been inseparable from a China-oriented nationalist sentiment for most of the twentieth century. (p. 177)

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123 Wu (1991) questions how this is applied to those who no longer practise the customs and language in the China homeland.

124 On feminism and politics, see Weedon (1997).
Thus, the Chinese are collectivised due to their practices and may be viewed with political suspicion according to communist types, or as a commercial threat due to assumed special tiger economic prowess. As Trinh (1991) states: "The function of any ideology in power is to represent the world positively unified" (p. 2). The diasporic Chinese women are hence seen in homogenous terms. Those who veer from the norm are rejected as westernised or unChinese.

To counter this model of interpreting Chineseness, it is not sufficient to merely "challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society [but there is a need] to conceive of how a politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it" (Trinh 1991, p. 2). Theory on its own is not adequate:

To disrupt existing systems of dominant values and to challenge the very foundation of a social and cultural order is not merely to destroy a few prejudices or to reverse power relations within the terms of an economy of the same. Rather, it is to see through the revolving door of all rationalizations and to meet head on the truth that struggles between fictions. Art is a form of production. Aware that oppression can be located both in the story told and in the telling of the story, an art critical of social reality neither relies on mere consensus nor does it ask permission from ideology. Thus, the issue facing liberation movements is not that of liquidating art in its not-quite-correct, ungovernable dimension, but that of confronting the limits of centralized conscious knowledge, hence of demystifying while politicizing the artistic experience. (Trinh 1991, p. 6)

The process of demystification involves conscious awareness of the influences on the practices engaged in, a de-naturalisation of all that we do and how we think. We ask: "Why do we do the things we do? Why do we think the way we think?" As Trinh has echoed Bhabha (1994a) above, the truth and its power come from the interstices in in-between spaces or "the truth that struggles between fictions." To merely reverse the powerhold by rejecting the cultural practice will not sufficiently remove the centre. Doing so would only deny one set of practices in preference for the other. The external or political/ideological cultural fiction is a powerhold on ethnic subjects all over the world. As Lye (1998) puts it, the totalising and essentialising cultural fiction is a nostalgia that serves to give a sense of unity to the colonising or, in Australia's context, the dominant culture while mystifying the culture of the colonised other. There is a need to disable its grip by demystifying the other's culture. The truth can be found in the spaces in between these narratives as they expose the power structures that produce them. There is thus a critical need to seek transformation in the truth by "transforming both the social

125 For a brief on the diasporic Chinese involvement in the tiger economies, see Schurmann (1998).
relations of knowledge production and the type of knowledge produced" (Weedon 1997, p. 7). We can do so through the heterogeneous narratives shared by these diasporic women to show instances when/how essentialised cultural practices are subscribed to and why.

The cultural fiction denies the truth that geopolitical and socioeconomic forces inform every practice, and that a practice should not be essentialised as an inherent quality of Chineseness. In communist China, for example, the consensus or Maoist ideology is used to control the masses. The practices of the communist Chinese, being constrained by communism, are different to those of the democratic Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore, and in Australia. In Malaysia and Singapore, the imported version of Confucianism is ascribed to by the Chinese migrants, perhaps as a link to their ancestral land, in such a way so as to naturalise it as a Chinese practice (Tu 1998a). In this instance, it is possible to posit then that the cultural fiction enables the adherence to the geographical fiction. In Australia, we are fortunate not to experience the control of a totalitarian government. However, the powers of control still lie with a central force of governmental policies that affect the lives of the dominant as well as marginal or peripheral groups. The White Australia Policy before the mid-1970s determined how Chineseness was practised in Australia, while other policies such as the Equal Opportunity Act, multicultural and immigration policies, as well as economic and other non-race related processes, presently influence how Chineseness is fashioned. Thus, while the Equal Opportunity Act gives the diasporic woman more access to freedoms than she may have had in Malaysia or Singapore, societal and governmental attitudes towards race continue to confine her practices to a state of ambivalence.

Further, practices evolve or change with the environmental forces within a particular geographical region. Speaking at the Australia Day address in Sydney, Flannery (2002) interrogates the present idea of multiculturalism as the co-existence of multiple cultures, each preserving its own set of practices and imagining a home that is somewhere else. Such a view, in his opinion, is not only impossible but also divisive and silly since it encourages a sense of identification around a meat pie. He states that no culture can exist unmodified in a new environment" (p. 11). Yang (1994) adds: "You can’t transpose one culture into another and

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126 It also influenced the attitudes of the dominant society and other peripheral groups, and this in turn impacted on the Chinese population. Ang (2000) also argues that although this policy was abandoned, it was without the consent or popular conviction of the nation, but by a calculated governmental move. Many Australians still have the childish mentality of feeling as if a toy had been ripped from their grasp, and are reeling from the loss of their "symbolic ownership" (p. 125) of Australia.
expect it to grow the same way. ... Where you transpose you get a hybrid bloom which is neither one or the other” (p. 95). For the diasporic Chinese woman, the triple jeopardy she faces due to her race and gender gives her no choice but to make strengths out of her differences to survive (Lorde, in Trinh 1989).

**A biological fiction**

A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of shared past, and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group’s identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance [italics added]. (Bulmer 1986, p. 54)

I define the biological fiction, as Fuss (1989, p. 92) calls it, according to the last point in the above traditional sociological definition of ethnicity, which embodies the salient or physical features of the members to represent them as a collectivity (Gilman 1998). This view of ethnicity is problematic, as members who look the same need not hold to all the elements – religion, language, territory, or even nationality – within the collectivity. Ang (1998c) argues that Chineseness “cannot presume the erasure of internal differences and particularities, as well as disjunctures, as the basis of unity and collective identity.” Trinh (1989) echoes a common complaint among women of colour:

Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on being among the few women chosen for a “Special Third World Women’s Issue” or on being the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone’s private zoo. (p. 82)

The diasporic Chinese woman likewise is treated homogenously, as if being Chinese makes her an expert in all things Chinese.

The biological perspective highlights the prevailing debate on race as a signifying criterion for ethnic subjectivity to indicate difference. Fuss (1989) asks if the criteria for race include morphological, anatomical, or genetic characteristics and cites this anecdote by Washington to illustrate the point that sometimes it is difficult to ascertain “where the black begins and the white ends” (Washington, in Fuss 1989, p. 73):
There was a man who was well known in his community as a Negro, but who was so white that even an expert would have hard work to classify him as a black man. This man was riding in the part of the train set aside for the coloured passengers. When the train conductor reached him, he showed at once that he was perplexed. If the man was a Negro, the conductor did not want to send him into the white people’s coach; at the same time, if he was a white man, the conductor did not want to insult him by asking him if he was a Negro. The official looked him over carefully, examining his hair, eyes, nose, and hands, but still seemed puzzled. Finally, to solve the difficulty, he stooped over and peeped at the man’s feet. When I saw the conductor examining the feet of the man in question, I said to myself, “That will settle it”; and so it did. (Washington, in Fuss 1989, p. 73)

Despite the arbitrariness of the racial signifier indicated above, Dikotter (1994) states that race narratives are still essentialist and “root culture in nature, to equate social groups with biological units, to primordialize the imagined or real congenital endowments of people.” Dikotter states that Su’s recent definition of the Chinese according to a yellow skin pigmentation, represents Chineseness as being “primarily a matter of biological descent, physical appearance and congenital inheritance.” In this essentialist definition, people with Chinese backgrounds are described in a reductionist sense as in a “belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss 1989, p. xi).

Despite living in a postmodern period where meanings of Chineseness are acknowledged as ever changing (Tu 1991; Wang, L. L.-c. 1991), Young (1995) accuses us of still being gripped by essentialism in our regimes of thinking as re-enacted in our language and concepts used. He says that the use of the epithet full-blooded by any commentator, for example, repeats the essentialist distinction between those who are of a pure race and those who are not, referenced according to the most salient physical aspects of the person. Barthes (1957) indict us by stating that the “disease of thinking in essences is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man” (p. 75). We still look to repetition as the essence of truth – ten Chinese exercising the same values must mean all Chinese, irrespective of context, hold to those same principles. I posit, however, that Chineseness cannot be so simply essentialised for each lived experience is “startlingly different and more complex [and the experiences cannot be] contained simply or singly” (Bhabha 1994a, p. 27), according to one’s biological make-up.

Thus, first, from the perspective of those who have Chinese backgrounds, the biological fiction contributes to the myth of a superior pure Han culture and race. This persists today despite the
fact that the differences between two Han groups – the Cantonese and the Shanghaiese – can be greater than the differences between a Han and a minority Chinese (Wu 1991), or between a person of Chinese descent and an Italian. This myth then translates to the cultural fiction that being Chinese is practised in a particular manner. Those in the peripheral space, in between the non-Chinese and the Han groups, “embraced an unspoken but powerful mission: to keep themselves within the acceptable definition of Chineseness and to engage other members within the Chinese community in the preservation of Chinese civilization despite their non-Chinese environment” (Wu 1991, p. 162). I believe that many huaqiao, in their feelings of estrangement and need to claim a Han identity in their host country, engage in practices of Chineseness which have been preserved in time and place as an attempt to be associated with the superior Chinese race. The biological fiction is also translated to the geographical space where the overseas Chinese develops an emotional tie to this mythical homeland (Lee 1991). The huaqiao hence still practises and maintains an unadulterated version of Chinese culture (Wu 1991), or think they do, despite being removed from the geographical region of mainland China, just because biologically they present as Chinese.

Wu (1991) highlights the biological as the key marker of belonging to the naturalised and fictional Chinese race. Ang (1998a) adds that this gives the diasporic Chinese a “magical solution to the sense of dislocation and rootlessness [experienced]” (p. 239). Even if one did not feel very Chinese, the cultural semantics informing Chineseness are automatically subscribed to to explain how one should feel, behave, and think as a Chinese. Without this imaginary connectedness to China through this biological fiction, Chineseness would be “a culturally empty identity” (Ang 1998a, p. 240). This link-up is problematic as it erases all the specifics of the local zone, in the focus on that other zone, China, and as Chow (in Ang 1998a) adds, this is a surrender of interactional agency within that local zone.

Hence, second, from the perspective of the other who holds to the biological fiction, this myth is what is used to impose Chineseness on someone who may not even rehearse the traditions and languages of Chineseness. The question of race is still problematic no matter how we practise Chineseness, as this is at the forefront of all interactions. The biological fiction is thus probably the most sinister of the fictions discussed and it has been the source of prejudice and many racially motivated crimes both against the individual and collective members. I cite here acts of violence, such as Hitler’s rampage through Europe, the genocide of Aboriginals in
Australia, racist immigration policies towards the Chinese and other races in most of Australia’s political history, the treatment of Black slaves in the American South, among just a few. Luke and Carrington (2000) state that biological race or the distinct phenotypical physical visibilities “remains at the core of racisms, identity and racializing practices” (p. 6).

One of the most enduring representations of the Chinese overseas in the host countries is that of aliens and sojourners, according to Wang, L. L.-c. (1991). They are often portrayed as “parasites, arrogantly holding on to their peculiar culture, reserved mannerisms, and frugal living habits, incessantly siphoning off the host countries’ national assets and resources” (p. 193). Wang adds that the Chinese sojourner image in Australia and USA is reinforced by perceptions of the Chinese as heathens who are non-assimilable. While this image is often associated with the early Chinese men who came to Australia, the diasporic woman also suffers the consequences of imposed representations. Ang (1996) speaks of the stereotypical submissive and exotic oriental woman, an image that suggests that the diasporic woman is accepted only within those boundaries of submission. Hence, if she smiles submissively, she enchants and pleases the Westerners who then accept her. Outside this frame, she is rejected. These images of the Chinese male and female are static, oversimplified, and ahistorical, and are anchored by the biological representation of the person, again proving those who use or think in those terms guilty of effecting essentialist expressions.

More recently, due to the economic success of the Chinese in diaspora, the image takes on the more positive slant of industrious entrepreneur. This stereotype paints the Chinese as being able to turn anything into gold. Though the embodiment of diligence and thrift carries a more positive connotation of the Chinese, this image is still static and explains cultural practices according to biological make-up rather than business acumen. Perhaps economic researchers keen to explain this phenomenon according to Confucian influences have overlooked the historical interrelatedness of cultures. A Chinese-American graduate from Columbia University argued that the patriarchal family business structures in Chinese operations are not unique to the Chinese people, and asserts, “There is nothing ethnic about it” (KPMG 1999). American families such as the Rockefellers, and I can safely add, the Kennedys and Jewish families have similar structures (Li, in KPMG 1999). The romanticised explanation according to the biological is due to ignorance and is an inaccurate understanding of the phenomenon, it is further argued, since the Confucian world frowned on merchants who preferred profit to learning (KPMG
1999). Finally, although this economic image is more positive, it silences the Chinese woman and gives her no room to exert her talents, her skills, and her presence, in the business world.

What I have outlined above is the biological fiction of ethnicity which outlines subjectivity as essentially having inherent, "fixed, and identity-determining essences, typically of a biological character" (Haslam 1998, p. 1). People are seen as having an inner sameness, continuity, and certainty (Bottomley 1997), with an innate subjectivity which progresses along a continuum. Within this discourse, this inherent character remains static, fixed in time and place, despite changes to one's context – geographically, historically, socially, and politically. Whichever the stereotype of Chinese-ness produced – positive or negative – all need to be razed. Otherwise race will continue to function as a marker that determines status, access to opportunities and material resources (Luke and Carrington 2000). Luke and Carrington (2000) add that race markers are significant in perceptions, interactions, construction and negotiation of identities, and the reshaping of relationships in interracial relationships. The notion of a static Chinese-ness is clearly problematic when applied to the community and can be captured in Yang's (1994) dilemma:

It is my fate to be born with a Chinese face and to live among Westerners, to share their identity yet to look different. I have absorbed the Australian culture as a natural process because I have been born into it, yet somehow I feel alien from it. (p. 90)

I can safely quote Dikotter's (1994) "imagined biological group" in reference to the essentialised Chinese-ness that exist as an imaginary to haunt people like Yang, who are made to feel othered because they do not fit. For Yang "being Chinese was a terrible curse" (p. 91) that he had to get used to.

In citing Su's work, Dikotter (1994) states that though the Chinese culture is a product of that imaginary group, it is "secondary and can be changed, reformed or even eradicated [in that] one can be a Confucian scholar or socialist cadre, Hunanese peasant or Hong Kong entrepreneur [but] one will always be 'Chinese' by virtue of one's blood." This constructionist definition of culture states that while a person from a Chinese background has an intrinsic, authentic, and true form of Chinese-ness which is fixed biologically, the practice produced is not fixed but is

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127 They state this within the context of interracial coupling and families but I extend it to other social interactions.
contextually bound. This contrastoriness exposes the problematics within essentialism that confirm that essentialist notions of Chineseness are inadequate as a discourse for subjectification. Bhabha (1994a) cites Green who asks: "What is a community anyway? What is a black community? What is a [Chinese] community?" (p. 3). In a similar way, we can question if there is such a thing as Chineseness and arrive at the same conclusion as Green who continues to say that she has "trouble thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories" (in Bhabha 1994a, p. 3).

To maintain such a traditionalist and fixed view of the subject, Bhabha (1994a) argues, merely restages the past in a reinventive way, and in so doing, it is only able to bestow upon the diasporic Chinese woman a partial subjectification. It homogenises, "de-particularizes" (Fuss 1989, p. 92) and asexualises the ethnic subject. This biological fiction fuels debate in a less productive way than if we were to examine the ideological and political forces of ethnic subjectification. How is Chineseness fashioned or negotiated by the various diasporic Chinese women? What contributes to these practices of Chineseness? Such interrogations are more constructive, as Bhabha (1997a) has highlighted, for the biological is only one of the many determinants of ethnic subjectivity, along with language, religion, nationality, geography, and other social factors (Fuss 1989). Fuss warns, however, against the simplistic replacement of race with the more politically correct term ethnicity.\(^{128}\) That is not the intention of this thesis for to do so would be to "e-race" (1989, p. 93) a vast body of knowledge which remains critical to this interrogation of Chineseness since the biological perspective appears to retain its grip on how Chineseness is fashioned. Whilst it is important to note the other factors that contribute to tensions that may arise in the negotiations of Chineseness, it is critical that we are reminded of the real prejudices that are based on race alone.\(^{129}\)

**Summation: Liminalised lives**

Essentialist readings of Chineseness mask and silence the gender-, class-, age-, education-, and language-specific and incommensurable factors within the heterogenous diasporic community (Lowe 1996). Essentialist boundaries create a binaric technology of thinking, which I fear,\(^\).........

\(^{128}\) Ang (2000) addresses the issue of race versus ethnicity, and argues that the abandonment of race in official discourse does not destroy the ravages of racism (p. 116). Whilst it may seem that I use race and ethnicity interchangeably, I acknowledge that they are not analogous. However, it is not the intention of this thesis to discuss the problematics of these terms. A useful discussion on this can be found in Anthias (1992).

\(^{129}\) Shen's (2001) analysis of Tam Siew's memoirs reveals that he was keen to resist identifying race as a marker of Australianness, and attributes the cause of tensions experienced between the white and Chinese colonisers to class factors (see pp. 54-56).
encourages us to re-enact the very thing we fight against: our oppressors’ orders, for it forces us
to choose according to the hegemonic nation states, and into self-exile if we choose against the
dominant order. As Trinh (1989) argues: “How can one re-create without re-circulating
domination?” (p. 15). One self could eventually dominate the other. Trinh (1991), in quoting
Lorde, states that “one is bound again and again to recognize ‘that piece of the oppressor which
is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’
relationship’” (p. 8). Essentialism traps us as diasporic Chinese women into oppressive forms of
being that disregard the freedoms that can be considered within our new Australian location.
She remains stuck in fixed forms of practices in her role as daughter, mother, or wife/partner,
unaware that poststructuralist feminism offers fluid forms of womanhood. Bottomley (1997)
argues that it is not possible to maintain the essentialist technology of thinking in a society that
is marked by rapid change and loss of certainties. In fact, as Lee (1991) notes, the cultural
discourse of the younger Chinese scholars raises “new and profound questions about what it
means to be a Chinese even inside China” (p. 211, Lee’s italics).

Today, diasporic discourses and challenges to the modernist certainties have exposed the
Eurocentrism within modernity’s presumed universalism, creating more freedom for
expressions of identification, according to Young (1995), who questioned whether:

The old essentializing categories of cultural identity, or of race, were really so
essentialized, or have been retrospectively constructed as more fixed than they
were. … They are in fact contradictory, disruptive and already deconstructed.
Hybridity here is a key term in that wherever it emerges it suggests the
impossibility of essentialism. (p. 27)

It seems a paradigm shift, which has already begun, is necessary to counter that ethnicity is not
a fixed quality but a process that is constantly renegotiated. There is thus a need for a
hypothetical space that suitably enables a discourse of Chineseness that gives diasporic women
in Australia an alternative “cultural capital” (Chow, R. 1998) to fashion themselves.

Beyond Chineseness

In this section, I present a counter discourse to the essentialist views of ethnic subjectification,
by theorising an imaginary identity through the avowal of the liminal spaces for the diasporic
women’s negotiations of Chineseness. The liminal space is based on the concept of hybridity,
which has two notions. I borrow Lo, J.’s (2000) term happy hybridity to discuss the first form,
which is often mythologised as emancipatory (Ang 1998b). It is politically impotent and views culture as interchangeable and syncretic (Krishnaswamy 1995), when certain differences are often incommensurable. The second notion is based on Bhabha’s (1994a) idea of an indeterminate or ambivalent space through which the essentialist categories and power structures that assign these ethnic boundaries can be interrogated. This notion is a politicised hybridity as it provides crevices, in the interstices, to subvert the dominant powers. Through the interstices of the one and its other, oppressive norms or cultural semantics are examined, interrogated, and explored to reinvent an other mode of ethnic subjectification. The liminal space deployed in this thesis is based on this second non-organic, critically reflexive interaction of difference and similarity across fixed fictions. I use the term liminality to differentiate it from happy hybridity.

I refer to liminality as a fiction because liminality after all is an idea and as an idea, it is pertinent to our present diasporic circumstances and should not be attributed with universal qualities that represent a monolithic response to all future problematics for the diasporic woman’s ethnic subjectification. Lo, M. W. W (2000) describes it as a fiction of identity that exists for the act of representation, as difference is juggled for political advantage. As our contexts change, this fiction too may pass but for now, it is a suitable fiction to interrogate the processes of ethnic subjectification by the heterogenous diasporic Chinese women in Australia, as it echoes the fluidity within the postcolonial poststructuralist feminist framework. Further, liminality assumes the existence of at least two fixed entities and this

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130 Fuss (1989) borrows the atomic metaphor from physics to describe the postmodern subject as a “highly charged electronic field with multiple identity particles bouncing off each other, combining and recombining, caught in an interminable process of movement and reconfiguration” (p. 103). This is a useful analogy for the hybrid subject in the liminal space to question how harmony is possible if there are seemingly opposing selves.

131 Lucas (1997) states that what prevents social serality from fusion is social antagonism. Young (in Lucas 1997) defines social serality as “a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of others.” It is this conflictual condition which prevents unification, a precedence of a universal ideology. Trinh (1991) states that the hegemonic ideology serves to represent the world as a unified body. Although unity may seem to be a strength for the society, Lucas (1997) argues this equates all ethnic groups in a way that subjugates, silencing gender, class, and so on, as no alternative ideology can be presented to serve all the needs of the different groups.

132 Lo, M. W. W. (2000), in examining de Man’s attack on the fiction of autobiography, relates to hybridity and questions if it is ever possible to describe or represent hybridity without defacing or distorting it (see pp. 69-71).

133 The label diasporic Chinese women may appear to homogenise the group, but it is the very heterogeneity within this group that causes me to deploy the liminal space as a notion to grapple with the difference and concurrent sameness that exist within this group. Admittedly, the very naming of a group draws boundaries around it but it is necessary to add that although some modernist ideas are problematic, not all aspects need be discarded so as to render communication impossible. Further, our discourses will always have a trace of the old as the new emerges.
premise is a fiction in itself, as the entities may merely exist as constructs that are negotiated within the realist frames. However, according to Bhabha, liminality is critical to such negotiations in how it is:

Not able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather [it] ... is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives. (in Law 1997, p. 110)

Liminality is thus merely a child of actual and imagined reactions against modernist frames that incarcerate people to fixed spaces, according to geography, culture, and biology. In fact, though a fiction, the liminal location is less fictional than the arbitrary real sites delineated by these modernist fictions for identification. Ang (1998d) says: “Even though you can say that fixed entities are fictional, fictions have real effects. I don’t care that entities are fictional, because fictional reality is a reality nonetheless” (p. 162).

In the following discussion, I present liminality as an alternative fiction within the postcolonial poststructuralist feminist framework for understanding diasporic Chinese women’s experiences in Australia. It is hoped that knowledge about this other space for ethnic subjectification will help us to realise that our experiences are influenced by factors that are socially engineered and changeable, and that we are not naturally inferior nor our conditions naturally inequitable (Weedon 1997). Further, liminality echoes the postcolonial poststructuralist feminist framework to raise our awareness of the precariousness and contradictoriness of our subjectivity as Chinese women. This awareness then gives us the political impetus to identify the fixed cultural semantics that may presently govern our experiences, and to therefore form ways of challenging these regimes. Thus, in the next sections, I counter the essentialist frames of geography, culture, and race from the perspective of liminality.

**A hyperspace**

While the geographical fiction limits our identification according to distinct cultures, societies, and nation states that are fixed by arbitrary geographical boundaries, the liminal space is deployed as a hyperspace (Jameson 1984) to challenge that fiction. Jameson states:

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134 Ang (1998d) cites Thomas who states this presumption of fixed entities (see p. 161).

135 Ang (1998d) adds that although race as a concept has lost its scientific currency, culturally it still has potent energy (1998d, see pp. 161-62).
Our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture therefore ... stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions. (p. 80)

He argues that although the built space has mutated, the human subjects living in the postmodern space have not, and this disables the subject from having the capacity to grapple with concepts that are produced in the hyperspace.

I posit that this hyperspace is both a fictional and real space. To counter the assumption that this hyperspace is totally absolved from its historical and geopolitical context, I marry it to Pratt’s (1999) idea of the contact zone, as one where differences are confronted, clashed, and contracted within differential power relations. Massey (in Ang 1998b) adds that this is a space of “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (p. 24), to forefront the local and global intersections encountered. This counters the utopic borderland that Ang (1998b) cautions against. Let me elaborate on the aspects of this hyperspace, which I deploy as a space for imaginary and real trajectories, in the next three sections where I consider it as a multiple, imaginary, and marked space.

The multiple space
I deploy Bhabha’s (1994b) notion of the third space to address liminality as an arena that destroys the “mirror of representation” as it mobilises the dualistic first and second spaces and reveals culture as an on-going “expanding code” (p. 37).136 Hence, I redeploy the liminal space in the sense of a hyperspace (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) or virtual space that does not belong anywhere,137 to counter the assumption that women in the diasporic setting straddle two fixed places – the past homeland and the present adopted land. Here, space is “reterritorialized” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 9, Gupta and Ferguson’s italics) to reconfigure the concept of space.138 Liminality is that “interconnected space that always already existed” (Gupta and

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136 Said (1978) speaks of the construction of the Oriental as a reflection of the Occidental. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that this assumes that cultural groups are constructs with distinct unproblematic delineations, assuming the East can be clearly defined from the West (see pp. 13-14). While this anthropological idea uses one society to critique the other, it runs the risk of ignoring differences within each group, similarities across groups, and naturalises the binaric divide between the groups studied. Further, it marginalises the group that the anthropologist does not belong to, as the other group. Communication is then viewed as being “across cultures” and “between societies” instead of a shared connectedness.

137 See the section “The marked space,” this chapter, as a qualification of this idea, p. 69.

138 Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that space is unproblematically divided into countries and cultures are seen as occupying these “naturally’ discontinuous spaces” (p. 6), appended to the nation-states as the country’s natural and distinctive culture.
Ferguson 1992, p. 8), where people juggle multiple histories, positions, and politics, as they are “at least differently territorialized” (p. 9). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) add that the isomorphism of culture and space hides the hierarchical interconnectedness that exists between spaces. The diasporic intermingling increasingly exposes the power structures that impose an identity on an arbitrarily demarcated space. Liminality is thus a space that is at the crossroads of multiple spaces.

I also borrow Foucault’s idea of heterotopia which “juxtaposes in one real place several different [imaginary] spaces, ‘several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ or foreign to one another” (in Probyn 1996, p. 11). In so doing, the idea of a united us against the other other and the divide between them are problematised and interrogated, since the divide between us and our other is blurred. In this hyperspace, difference is accentuated and as the divide blurs, the fluidity in the diasporic Chinese woman’s repertoire of femininity, sexuality, expressions of equality, and so on becomes accented, and she is freed from the incarcerating fixed forms.

The imaginary space

Here, I draw on Probyn’s (1993) call on the imagination for a stretching of the diasporic Chinese woman’s articulations of the self. For purposes of geopolitical administration, liminality remains as an imaginary space. Bhabha (1997b) describes it as an “imagined” geopolitical space,” created as different cultures occupy once exclusive territories (Anzaldúa 1987a, preface). This imaginary space motivates us “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities [or essentialism] and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 1994a, p. 1). This is because the diasporic condition places people of different cultures in this imaginary interstitionality to suspend the geographical fiction and other political inclinations. As an example, multicultural attempts to unite separate ethnic groups may bring two different parties together to dialogue differences and similarities. In this liminal imaginary space, the dialogue occurs within

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139 It matters not whether the us is the diasporic Chinese group or the mainstream non-diasporic Australian society, and vice versa. The idea is to break down these unnatural separations.
140 Anthropology and immigration laws, for example, continue to limit the appropriation of liminality in practice. See also footnote 113, on p. 48.
141 I find the multicultural form in Australia problematic as it still assumes that discrete cultural groups are natural. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) say that such multiculturalism is “both a feeble acknowledgment of the fact that cultures have lost their moorings in definite places and an attempt to subsume this plurality of cultures within the framework of a national identity” (p. 7). People groups, in other words, are still unproblematically linked to a specific place of origin.
oneself,\textsuperscript{142} as one exists as a member of different people groups, usually separated by various factors such as the geographical and political borders. As such, political objectivity may be more likely than dialogue between black and white, or the dominant and its marginal, which are usually confrontational. An interior dialogue enables a different politics that is possibly beyond initial imaginings, as the willingness to cross over has already taken place.

Thus, because ethnic subjectification is rooted in ideas and not nation states (Ang 1998c),\textsuperscript{143} in the diasporic woman's search for identity, the past and present can be familiar yet strange, and this need not lead to identity confusion.\textsuperscript{144} Lee (1991) states that this search "points to the presence of an 'Other,' not only another persona but an alternative realm that seems to convey a deeper meaning. ... Both realms clearly exist in the present" (p. 209). Liminality enables us to accept the presence of the other within us as a path towards a constant dialogue that promotes a deeper understanding of our negotiations of who we are. Because we do not need to choose to fix our identity to a static template, we are free to fashion our self according to the contexts we face, and the presence of another realm or multiple realms need not eventuate in an identity crisis. In dealing with the present and the future, the historical intersects with the geographical present, resulting in a presencing that is no longer one or the other. The migrants have become "undecidably mixed with otherness" (Young 1995, p. 1), and dwell in a space where their cultural practices continue to be negotiated, transformed, and rearticulated (Bhabha 1994a).

The marked space

While I have used the concept of the hyperspace to dislocate identity from space, it is also necessary to reinstate the significance of space in our lives. There is after all that marked reality of space impacting on our negotiations of Chineseness. Peters (in Gupta and Ferguson 1992) argues that our experiences "remain highly localized"" (p. 11), and I add globalised, as our ethnic subjectification is "always-already a crossroads, an intersection of global/local linkage" (Ang 1998b, p. 25), which we need to negotiate. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) further state that to

\textsuperscript{142} This is a form of intentional hybridity that I outline later (see p. 77) which Lo, J. (2000) argues "works by internal dialogue, and ... self-reflexive doubleness [to effect] an ironic double-consciousness which destabilises orthodox world-views" (p. 161, Lo's italics).

\textsuperscript{143} Krishnaswamy (1995) argues, however, that this may focus too much on the mental or psychological processes at the expense of the sociological or political forces, especially class and gender, so it "de-materializes the migrant into an abstract idea" (p. 132).

\textsuperscript{144} See Lee's (1991) use of The Homecoming by Han Shaogong (p. 209). She asserts that searching for one's roots in the past world leads to a sense of defamiliarisation that has an unrooting effect since that old world is merely the "unfamiliar Other world they imagine to have existed" (p. 211). Searching for our Chinese roots is hence a futile expedition that leads to confusion, disappointment, and estrangement. On the notion of the return visit syndrome, see also p. 82, this chapter.
imagine communities as merely literal entities is naïve. There are still the forces within the hierarchical interconnectedness that collide with our daily experiences, and Peters reminds us of the powerful role place plays in the “‘near view’ of lived experience” (p. 11). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) also warn against the total liberation of collective political causes from place as the “‘nowhere’ [utopia will inevitably turn] out to be a specifically English ‘somewhere’” (p. 13), due to the Western hegemony. They stress the importance of place politics for the operation of collective causes, for we “still depend for our everyday reproduction on the here-and-nowness of (a) ‘home’, however defined” (Ang 1998b, p. 26).

Thus, while the geographical fiction relates people to places in reductionist ways, location is still significant. With Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992) suggestion that the borderland notion — “the interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of hybridized subjects” (p. 18) — is perhaps the more natural conceptualisation of space for the postmodern diasporic woman, there is a need to further dislocate it from any trace of the type of borderland that is between two fixed locales.¹⁴⁵ Liminality reterritorialises this space by marking the multiplicity within any postmodern post. Our site for subjectification in Australia is so complexly striated by ambivalence and contradictions, so marked by complicated local histories and contextualised knowledges that basic binarisms form inadequate reinventions (Lo, J. 2000). Therefore, it is critical to examine how Australia as a space marks the lives of diasporic Chinese women. This will enable an execution of feminist theory to address women’s experience by examining how the sociopolitical forces structure these experiences. Weedon (1997) explains that awareness of these interrelationships, and I add within the marked space, recognises a multiplicity of subjectivities and offers “both a perspective and a choice, and [opens] up the possibility of political change” (p. 9).

A hybrid culture?
While the cultural fiction imposes a set of practices according to specific geographical spaces, liminality enables practices to emerge outside those parameters and, as a discourse, explains the emerging practices within the diasporic community that “do not ‘belong’ to a particular ‘people’ or to a definite place” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 19). This disruption exposes cultural production as a minefield of interrelated or interconnected practices and places that are determined by the hierarchical forces that network these elements together (Gupta and Ferguson

¹⁴⁵ See also Anzaldúa (1987a).
1992). Liminality asserts that cultural production is not fixed to geography or biology, and that we can produce practices that are outside the essentialist notions of what Chineseness means. This aspect of cultural hybridity is often theorised as the alternative to essentialist notions of cultural practices, but I posit here that the idea of hybridity itself needs to be interrogated for it is often uncritically celebrated.

Happy hybridity (Lo, J. 2000) describes the “fusion of disparate elements” (p. 152) to produce a melded unbounded alternative culture, either through the rational or conscious strategic selection of options available from these dissimilar cultures or from an unconscious and politically indifferent stance. This happy or organic hybridity aims to settle the irreconcilable differences evident in diasporic subjectification by collapsing difference into a conflict-free, politically indifferent, stable, unquestioning, and unconscious potion that hides and preserves inequitable hierarchies. In fact, “difference is reabsorbed into the status quo” (p. 167).

Hybridity, in this sense, is a naturalised and historical state that is inevitable due to the evolution of different cultures coming together. I posit that this form of hybridity is effective in the dialectic domain as a manufacturer of new ideas, but these ideas may not be realistic due to the tensions that undoubtedly arise as differences collide. For example, it ignores gender or class differences. I thus problematise happy hybridity and its assumptions of an uncomplicated and uniform view of culture in the next two sections, before I posit liminality as the form of intentional hybridity that addresses the impossibility of committing to the contradictory and incommensurable aspects of colliding cultures.

Uncomplicated

Happy hybridity presents a simplistic view of diasporic women’s experiences. The hybrid state is presumed to be unique to the diasporic subject and the hybrid is seen in “polarised and

\[146\] The intrusion of the mass media across geographical borders challenges the notion of pure cultural groups and exposes the interconnectedness in our increasingly globalised culture. However, this does not preclude those who choose to deliberately practise a fixed form of culture as an act of preserving what they feel is an otherwise lost culture. In some ways, the melding of cultures or the loss of certain practices is inevitable. This I do not find as problematic as the imposition of a dominant culture on a group that then marginalises those who are not able to or choose not to submit to this hegemonic culture. On the mass media, see Gupta and Ferguson (1992, pp. 18-19).

\[147\] Lo, J. differentiates between this notion of hybridity and its more politicised aspect, which she calls intentional hybridity. I use the term liminality to echo intentional hybridity.

\[148\] Lo, J.’s (2000) critique of this happy hybridity stems from Bakhtin’s notion of organic hybridity that is politically mute and which resides in the unconscious realm of the hybrid subject.
essentialised dichotomies” (p. 54), as if the hybrid can be split into neat categorical parts.\textsuperscript{149} 

*Banana-ism*, for example, suggests a progressive trajectory towards the dominant culture. We see this in Yamada who describes herself as:

An Asian American woman thriving under the smug illusion that I was not the stereotypic image of the Asian woman because I had a career teaching English in a community college. ... It was so much my expected role that it ultimately rendered me invisible ... contrary to what I thought, I had actually been contributing to my own stereotyping. ... When the Asian American woman is lulled into believing that people perceive her as being different from other Asian women (the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along with Asian woman), she is kept comfortably content with the state of things. (in Trinh 1989, p. 87)

Like Yamada, most of the self-confessed bananas are actually subjects who see themselves as having attained entry into the dominant culture through a whitewash process that has erased traces of their Chineseness.\textsuperscript{150} In positing this hybrid position then, the diasporic Chinese woman is in fact reiterating the very power structures that oppress and subjugate. It is violence inflicted upon the self through the slow but certain erasure of the marginal self towards the dominant culture. The production of a “non-western westerner” is regarded as the passport into the West (Papastergiadis, in Chan, D. 2000) as a form of empowerment. Hybridity here then consolidates the dominant hierarchical forces such as hegemonic multiculturalism in an apolitical fashion (Lo, J. 2000),\textsuperscript{151} with the middle-class Chinese woman content in her own privileged white circumstances. However, the diasporic woman cannot sit apolitically in comfort for she stands in that indeterminate space of blooming only within the established rules of subservience, submission, and conformity. Once she becomes too outspoken or breaks the boundaries assigned, she becomes a sign of the Yellow Peril once again. Thus, in that precarious state, she risks sitting with the white feminists, who assume white male attitudes towards women’s issues, in their treatment of ethnic women’s issues, and especially of those who are further separated by socioeconomic class, education, and language proficiency. Thus, I

\textsuperscript{149} Lo, M. W. W. (2000), in her examination of Brian Castro’s *Drift*, questions if such neatness is possible in reality or if it is only possible on paper. The impossibility of such neatness is due in part to the tension that exists between the imagined conflicting parts. Further, Castro argues through the character Seamus, who is a racial hybrid, in *Birds of passage*, how it is impossible to isolate the memories and experiences into neat Chinese and Anglo sections. Further, those who are descendants of interethnic rape would find it traumatic to identify with the violating part of their hybrid make-up. I must add that Castro’s depiction of hybridity assumes that these parts are always conscious to the hybrid. In reality these parts perhaps only surface as they are highlighted in particular situations. Nevertheless, Lo writes: “Any conception of hybridity as an orderly experience, split neatly ... is mocked as a simplification” (p. 73).

\textsuperscript{150} This access is usually limited by socioeconomic class and education.

\textsuperscript{151} Hegemonic multiculturalism celebrates diversity according to ethnic lines to counter the threat of political instability from changing demographics (see Lo, J. 2000, p. 159).
assert that banana-ism as a form of hybridity is a form of colonial assimilation towards the hegemonic “non-ethnic centre” (Lo, J. 2000, p. 157). It privileges the middle-class, educated, and literate diasporic Chinese woman and alienates her from others who do not have these assets. She assumes equality with the Western world but fails to realise that gender and race at once already separate her.

I borrow from Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992) idea of articulation to further interrogate the notion of a hybridity that travels towards the dominant norms. Their use of the articulation model in the context of colonial capitalism shows that the interaction of precapitalist states with global capitalism results in the transformation of both local and global or larger spatial arenas. This model suggests that there is not a predetermined route for the transformation that occurs, although the local arena may change more dramatically. Both fixities are equally upset and displaced, with a possible reconstruction of the diasporic setting as a result of this interaction (Hanru 1994). Here, there may be the temptation to opt for the melting pot model, which happy hybridity deems inevitable over time since all cultures are hybridised to some extent (Chan, D. 2000). However, I posit instead the deployment of the liminal space.

It is also useful here to use Fuss’ (1989) work on Derridean translation to argue that the process of translation transforms both the original as well as the translated text: “Once a text has been translated, the ‘original’ is no longer the same; it, too, has been changed by the operation of translation” (p. 82). This phenomenon is effected by the new meanings that the translation imposes on the original text and repeats Derrida’s idea of how translation modifies both the original as well as the translating language. Derrida calls this process the “translation contract” between the two texts (in Fuss 1989, p. 83). Thus, in the liminal negotiations of Chineseness, both the original Chinese and the translated Chinese women are transformed. What emerges is a newness that is beyond the beyond.

It is beneficial here to further borrow Fuss’ (1989) use of Gates’ concept of retranslation to show how liminality employs the Chinese migrant’s dual or multiple life text. A woman of Chinese descent in Australia thus occupies the liminal space of at least her home country’s

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152 I add to Lo, J.’s (2000) use of non-ethnic here by qualifying that white Australians form an ethnic group as well.
153 Chan, D. (2000, p. 56) adds the notion that all cultures are hybrid does not necessarily lead to theoretical and political nihilism but what is more critical is the acknowledgment that the processes of hybridity are different for each person. See p. 77, this chapter, and Chan, D. (2000, p. 56).
tradition as well as that of Australia's. She now negotiates between the original and Australian texts to produce a new text that is a translation of the two. The new text has at least a double heritage. It is at least two-toned. Its visual tones could be yellow and white, and even her English dialect may now become tinged with traces of Chineseness and Australianness.\(^{154}\)

Building on Fuss' (1989) extension of Gates' translation which she calls bi-translation, I want to further state that the translation of Chineseness by the hyphenated Chinese in this context could be described as “translating in at least two directions at once … and negotiating between at least two ‘ordinary’ texts in need of mutual translation” (p. 83). This bi-translation process fashions Chineseness in a way where “the line between the ‘original’ and ‘translation’ is never [and no longer] clear” (p. 83). The emerging Chineseness has moved beyond the beyond, for:

the moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. … [She] resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure. … She refuses to reduce herself to an Other. … She is not an outsider like the foreign outsider. … Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that Undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. … She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (Trinh 1991, p. 74)

In translating, retranslating, and bi-translating, the negotiated diasporic Chinese woman stands in a different position and applies different strategies for survival. She knows that she now locates herself as similar and yet different to the other in ways which are far more complex and unsettling than fixed notions of her subjectivity could ever cope with. In asserting “I am like you,” she confronts the dominant by stating that she is not that different. This has a mood of defiance as it assumes that she should have access to the same privileges as the dominant other. This assumption is problematic or naïve. The Australian multicultural celebration of diversity constructs a narrative of difference that overrides hints of sameness between the majority and minority segments of society. It is precisely segments that are celebrated. This discourse of multiculturalism places the dominant and marginal groups in ambivalent positions — though the marginal should be fully authorised, this admission is still dependent on the mainstream acceptance. For in reality, sameness has always existed but these are ignored to highlight

\(^{154}\) The use of Chinese and Australian may sound essentialist here though that is not the intention. These are used simply to illustrate the point.
differences. Thus, “ambivalence pervades the micropolitics of everyday life in multicultural society” (Ang 1996, p. 41), and people remain ambivalent in how they deal with difference.

Here, Anzaldúa’s (1987a) description of the liminal borderland as a “place of contradictions” (preface) is apt. The contradictory notions found in the liminal borderland are very much echoed in the autoethnographic narrative in my preface, which portrays my sense of contradiction as I recognise both the rejection and acceptance experienced in China. “Not foreigner, yet foreign. At times rejected by [my] own community, other times needfully retrieved” (Trinh 1991, p. 18). Happy hybridity does not adequately acknowledge the complicated contradictions that exist for the diasporic woman whose ethnicity cannot be simply explained as just being more Chinese or Australian or a blend of both. Their perception of self interacts with others’ perception of them as well. Lo, J. (2000) states: “The blurring of the boundaries between the subject and object of the gaze results in an altered power dynamic characterised by negotiation rather than essentialism, opening up possibilities for new kinds of subjectivities which are partial and provisional” (p. 166). Further, some are locked in without the benefit of bridges to cross over due to their socioeconomic class, education, and language positionings.

**Uniformity**

The notion of a happy hybridity also promotes a homogenous view of the diasporic experience in what Chan D. (2000) terms the “doctrine of conflations and equivalency” (p. 53). It collapses the multivalent stories of the women’s migration – voluntary migration, migration that results from colonisation and political refugeeship – into one unitary diasporic experience and inadvertently masks the factors such as class, education, gender, and age that impact on the processes of hybridisation differently. It forgets that “everyone enters into the condition of hybridity differently” (Chan, D. 2000, p. 56). In short, it is “renewed homogeneity” (Goldberg 2000, p. 82), and often the narrative is one of unitary diasporic Chinese women who are

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155 Speaking from the perspective of refugees, Anzaldúa’s (1987a) borderland refers to the geographical space between Mexico and USA. However, it is also symbolically applied to the notion of the hybrid identity that is produced as a result of this to-and-fro movement across the geographical border. There is, however, a tendency in Anzaldúa’s work to collapse difference in a homogenising fashion. She sees the borderlands as a space where the inequities of class can be ignored through the energy that comes out of the celebration of this hybrid state, which welcomes difference indiscriminately (see pp. 79-80).

156 See p. 2 of the preface.

157 According to Goldberg (2000), the homogenisation of culture corresponds with the logic of administration and governmentality, as a form of control over nation states and its constituents. Hybridity is thus what McClintock (in Goldberg 2000, pp. 81-82) calls a *scandal* since it is about transformation, reformation and not conformity.
illiterate and unemployable, or privileged, based on the middle-class Chinese women who are literate. The homogenised hybridity obscures the negative diasporic experiences encountered by the refugees, working-class, and other migrants, although for the privileged, the migrant experience may become more bearable with time, due to access to class status provided through education and employment.

The struggle of the diasporic Chinese women without access to power shows that admission into the dominant society is difficult or even impossible. It reveals that the new home is a much more uncomfortable territory, and that in this home, they swim constantly in an alien element. "But every place she went/ they pushed her to the other side/ and that other side pushed her to the other side/ of the other side of the other side/ Kept in the shadows of other" (Anzaldúa 1987b, p. 3). There is difficulty in truly accessing the other culture, as the entry is not equal to all. For various reasons, many diasporic women of the liminal land “can’t go home. She’s sold her house, her furniture, and borrowed from friends” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 12). And so she dwells in a site that is both home and not home. Being on both sides of the fence, she could still not secure a sense of belonging on either side, as this is both home and a war zone as her various worlds collide to create a “shock culture” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 11). Her liminal land is gendered, classed, and determined by other social factors like education, language proficiency, and so on.

For me, the clash is often less violent as I sit in the more comfortable space of being the “'westernized', highly educated professional whose English is almost fluent, a presentable and articulate ‘Asian’ whose presence is arguably of economic and social benefit to the nation” (Ang 1996, p. 47, Ang’s italics). This contradictoriness creates both exhilaration and discomfort, according to Anzaldúa (1987a), as the struggle is against the familiar tablets of tradition (Bhabha 1994b). Many women like me, for fear of being abandoned in this new home, conform to the dominant cultural practices observed and “push the unacceptable parts into the shadows” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 20), by adapting quickly to the Australian dominant norms. However, as Anzaldúa explains, this only leads to another fear: that of being found out.

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158 Ang (1998b) argues here that though people with Eurocentric privileges – the right social, racial, and economic credentials – have an easier time crossing physical borders, they are more myopic to the invisible racial and cultural borders (see p. 16).
159 Ang (1996) adds that the Asian woman symbolises the submissive exotic oriental woman whose smile is the cursed sign of her self-approved state of subjugation (see p. 48).
160 Perhaps this is Yang’s (1994) mother’s felt strategy for survival in not teaching him the Chinese language and customs (see p. 91).
Bearing our different positions in mind, this imaginary space allows some of us with the cultural capital to find a home in an other country. For in this liminal space, I can be sometimes this and sometimes that, sometimes accepted, other times rejected. Despite all the contradictions experienced, I know that in this liminal space, I do not ever have to choose between one or the other, or fear being found out for I can choose not to conform. I can be at home in a state of incommensurability. I don’t have to reconcile my differences within and without. It is within this flux that I gain stability. There is no end or final hybrid culture. The subject sometimes practises traditional customs, sometimes a fusion, sometimes a something else that is familiar yet different. But I add again, this freedom to dwell in liminality is often only restricted to the elite, to the privileged few with the cultural currency to dabble with it.

Liminality thus recognises the contradictions and contestations that need to be negotiated by forcing us to consider the materialist politics that intersect with the diasporic subjectification. Chan D. (2000), in citing Lowe, explains that this politics considers ethnic subjectification and cultural practice as a product of “uneven and unsynthetic power relations” (p. 55) but adds that the differential entry into the liminal state is more critical as a politics of intervention. He argues that while not all have the privilege of toying with the rhetoric of hybridity, we must also be careful to avoid the politics of victimology. Thus, it is in this interstitial space that liminality functions as a conscious or intentional form of hybridity that strategically manipulates the multi-consciousness arising from the collision of difference to form a prism for political intervention.\(^{161}\) It is a form of “positive indeterminacy” (Ang 1998c, p. 33) for the diasporic Chinese woman. Liminality ushers us to question instead the processes marked by gender, class, sexuality, education, age, and religion, rather than the essences, of cultural identity. And the focus on the processes exposes the forces that enable or limit our expressions of who we are and how culture is strewn with contradictoriness and contrariness in a diasporic setting.

**Uncommitted**

While happy hybridity ushers the diasporic Chinese woman towards a denial of her past practices, liminality breaks this binaric bind, based on an ethnicised culture. It destroys the need to cease practising the traditional aspects of the old culture in the adoption of new practices.

\(^{161}\) Spivak (1987) speaks of *strategic essentialism* to consciously manipulate the essentialist categories of race by the *othered* as an expression of political empowerment. She sees this as a *constitutive paradox* since “the essentializing moment … is irreducible” (p. 205).
Confusion or guilt need not eventuate, as the old and new are equally embraced. A Singaporean-Chinese participant, Alex, has dabbled with the idea of liminality at the academic level and expresses how she operationalises it imaginatively in relation to cooking and Chineseness. Although she still chooses from fixed categories of what she considers to be Chinese or Western food, and assumes the idea of a pure custom that can be lost, Alex is able to see that she has the option to selectively reconfigure what Chineseness means to her. She has entered the liminal space of subjectification by learning to maintain a fluid position despite the static delineation of culture in multicultural Singapore. She is able to recognise both sets of cultural practices without assimilating towards the Australian dominant culture, if it exists. In stepping outside the traditional boundaries, Alex and others may begin to question why they practise what they do as they reinvent new recipes. Further, the blurring of her practices unsettles traditional notions of what Chineseness means and Chineseness begins to be seen as “a category whose meanings are not fixed and pregiven, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (Ang 1993, p. 5).

In the next example, I demonstrate how the diasporic context may cause us to interrogate the taken-for-granted customs and ideas that are transferred through the generations. Clara, in her late 20s, engaged in a heterosexual relationship, negotiates the concept of the submissive Chinese wife, an idea she was indoctrinated in since childhood:

I clash with my mum quite a lot. She always told me, “You have to be a good wife.” She instilled in me that the role of a woman is being a good wife to your husband and taking care of the house. She asks me, “Do you iron for [your husband] or do you cook for him?” I think this is because she is a housewife and so all her life is really concentrated on that. It moulded me to feel quite incorrectly about my worth as a good wife or a good home-maker in terms of the state of my house or how well I cook. I disagree in that women have to work now and they have to maintain a home. You just can’t do everything perfectly and even if you can’t maintain your house well or you can’t cook meals for your husband every time, it doesn’t mean that you are a bad wife or a bad woman. (Clara: 696-715)

Although Clara realises that her worth as a wife or woman is not tied to her skills as a house manager, it is something she is working through. She still feels guilty if her house is messy but is able to dissociate the wife’s role from her ethnicity and gender. She is also able to isolate the impact of employment on this role. According to Anzaldúa (1987a), our culture informs our beliefs and we absorb the version of reality created by the powered patriarchs unquestioningly,
as in the case of Clara’s mother, who pushes the norms of a dutiful wife onto her daughter. Femininity is also traditionally tied to the role of wife, a notion that needs to be interrogated. There is the hidden assumption that it excludes the silenced unmarried women. Further, the woman is valued according to how the home is managed. Anzaldúa adds that in her culture there used to be only three options for a woman: becoming a nun, a prostitute, or a mother. She adds that a fourth option had since been found: self-autonomy through education and career. Clara has discovered her fourth option in the sense that she is conscious that her circumstances, as a working woman, are different to her mother’s. This, however, does not reconcile their different values and still leads to her angst over her new option as it challenges her notions of what filial piety means.\(^{162}\)

Although Clara is still anxious about the new ideas she has adopted, due to the circulation of the broader culture of feminist discourses to which she has access, she is able to realise and negotiate an alternative model of what it means to be a good Chinese wife. However, Lowe (1996) warns that the traditional tablets of Chineseness are “worked out as much ‘horizontally’ among communities as [they are] transmitted ‘vertically’ in unchanging forms from one generation to the next” (p. 64). In short, there is pressure communally as well as generationally to conform to expected norms. I posit that the courage to imagine new possibilities in the liminal space leads to processes that produce unconsummated versions of Chineseness that are specific to the performance context, rather than a regurgitation of past practices according to traditional templates.

In the interstitial spaces inhabited, the diasporic Chinese woman is reinscribed as she makes “her own culture with [her] own lumber, [her] own bricks and mortar and [her] own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 22). And as she builds, new versions of Chineseness are produced with new striations of the binaric past and present, outside and inside, excluded and included (Bhabha 1994b). She has the “freedom to carve and chisel [her] own face” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 22) and to disentangle herself from the problematic link between ethnic subjectification and location (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). She now stands no longer on one side of any border war, not committed to either side yet a part of both. The privileging of the tensions in this space highlights liminality’s potential to counter the biological fiction that continues to alienate the diasporic Chinese woman within her setting.

\(^{162}\) I follow up these notions of what makes a good woman in chapters 4-8.
A homosapien

In response to the essentialist biological fiction, liminality attempts to create an imaginary ethnicity that is in a state of flux, to unfix who we are from the colour coded notions that violate our rights as diasporic women. Idealistically, this enables us to confront who we are as people first, as we become unhinged from the geographical space of origin. It sets our biological marker as an indication of the twice-removed, instead of direct, historical heritage we share with the geopolitical space of China. While it is true that these geographical and historical links contribute to the practices accumulated, liminality at once racialises and de-racialises cultural production, for “the body is marked ... by race and gender” (Lo, J. 2000, p. 160). This physical marking problematises the fiction of liminality. Despite this, liminality encourages us to imagine that we are also on-going products of the present sociocultural, political, environmental, and other forces. I examine the notion of ethnic subjectification as a work-in-progress against the reality of race as the “symbolic marker of the unabsorbable cultural difference” (Ang and Stratton, in Lo, J. 2000, p. 160) in the Australian imagined community, and argue that liminality is potent due to its state of flux.

Work-in-progress

Although the liminal space is an open arena for negotiations of Chineseness, it is often believed that migrants do arrive at a point where their assimilation is complete, although the migration journey is a process.\(^{163}\) As evidenced by the born-again Chinese syndrome (Yang 1994),\(^{164}\) one who is fully integrated into the Australian society may still return to one’s roots in search of that essentialist Chinese self.\(^{165}\) However, I refer to Trinh’s (1991) notion of the work-in-progress to illustrate how the diasporic woman is not totalised in her negotiations of Chineseness, just as the life narrative is an open text, “an act of ceaseless renewal” (Elbaz, in Denzin 1989a, p. 19). Although Trinh (1991) acknowledges the goals desired in the linear move towards a tangible and concrete social end, against the juxtaposed anxieties associated with a work-in-progress that has no notable limit, she explains:

\(^{163}\) Shen (2001) refers to Gittin’s assimilation process as slow, but complete, at least twice in her analysis of the autobiography A stranger no more. She also refers to a point in which Gittin’s assimilation is complete (see p. 78).

\(^{164}\) On the born-again Chinese, see also p. 6, in the preface of this thesis.

\(^{165}\) This is something that I experienced myself and it culminated in a backpacking trip to China. I felt I had to see the real China by taking the off-beaten track, rather than merely visiting the touristy icons. See this thesis’ preface.
The to- and fro- movement between advancement and regression necessarily leads to a situation where every step taken is at once the first (a step back) and the last step (a step forward) – the only step, in a precise circumstance, at a precise moment of (one’s history). In this context, a work-in-progress, for example, is not a work whose step precedes other steps in a trajectory that leads to the final work. It is not a work awaiting a better, more perfect stage of realization. Inevitably, a work is always a form of tangible closure. But closures need not close off; they can be doors opening onto other closures and functioning as ongoing passages to an elsewhere (-within-here). (1991, p. 15)

When do we arrive? Do we ever arrive? Each step is taken in flux, and with each new step negotiated, there does not follow a necessary forward movement towards a finality. Instead the subject remains in constant flux as an on-going work-in-progress. Not arriving does not necessarily have to be a state of unproductive unrest or limbo, a position often problematised and viewed negatively but I borrow from Trinh (1991) to explain otherwise:

Every work materialized can be said to be a work-in-progress. The notion of a finished work, versus that of an uncompleted work requiring finishing, loses its pertinence. … These widely adopted and imposed forms of closure. … create neither a space of serenity nor of fecundity for the mind and body to rest and grow; rather, they naturalize the zone of conformity. (p. 16)

I deploy the above to posit that the subject as a work-in-progress has no need to arrive. In fact, arriving would mean conforming, according to Trinh, and that would mean accepting the cultural semantics that influence one’s negotiations of Chineseness. I borrow from Probyn’s (1993) idea of the naturalised sexed self to probe the naturalised Chinese self by questioning the essential or taken-for-granted norms of Chineseness. “I am Chinese. I am born Chinese. How can I not be Chinese?” is often the response from women interviewed. Being born as someone who looks Chinese gives them no other option but to be Chinese. They arrive as Chinese the moment they are born and can see no other alternative way of narrativising Chineseness. They feel that they have to practise certain customs associated with the grand narrative of a Chineseness that is tied to a political, geographical, or racial space.

Not having to arrive opens up the woman’s Chinese self to rearticulate a different position. It creates a space to work through new practices of Chineseness once unimaginable, as it encourages one to “cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 3). In so doing, the reduction of Chineseness to space or race is exposed, and Chineseness is realised as an evolving ensemble of techniques and practices instead. This then
leads to two possible deductions. One, if the practices differ from the traditional templates of Chinese culture, these differences destabilise essentialist notions of Chineseness. Two, if normalised practices of Chineseness are reproduced then liminality breeds the interrogation of the forces that produce them, to conceive a reworked Chineseness.

The processual negotiations of Chineseness involve understanding who we are as Chinese women living in Australia, whilst "keeping intact [our] shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (Anzaldúa 1987a, preface). The interweaving of the new with the old is the key to making visible the invisible in us. In a sense, the invisible in us is hidden by our Chinese face, which reduces perceptions of us to stereotypes. The to- and fro-movements enable "a way of balancing, of mitigating duality [or multiplicity]" (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 19) to more effectively engage in strategies appropriate to our context. We work through the "best way to cross" (Anzaldúa 1987a, p. 11) to maximise our diasporic positioning. However, the next step taken is not necessarily a step forward or backward. No totalised hybrid is produced. I borrow from Probyn's (1993) use of Barthes' phrase on the self to state that Chineseness "is experienced only in an activity of production ... it cannot stop ... its constitutive movement is that of cutting across" (p. 3). This on-going process focuses the migrant's experience on the "where you're at" (Gilroy, in Ang 1998c).

Unfortunately, as Ang (1998c) points out, where the diasporic woman is at is often complicated by notions of where she is from due to the biological fiction that continues to mark our identity to place. She argues that the question "Where are you from?" positions the migrant as an other, and exposes and reproduces "the hegemony of nationality as [the] key marker of cultural origin and belonging," or that our presence in Australia is unnatural because of our appearance (Ang 1996).\footnote{Ang (1996) further expresses the ambivalence surrounding the question "Where are you from?" which carries the tension between the curiosity about otherness which implicates the other as an other, and indifference that would be equally insulting. This she explains is a "true moment of 'communication breakdown'" (p. 43).} Previously, such a condition was negotiated through the geographical fiction or the "myth of the homeland" (Ang 1998c) to which one must return.\footnote{As discussed in the section "Yeluo guigen," this chapter, p. 49.} The fixedness of identity in this strategy leaves the migrant in limbo when s/he finds that the homeland is one where there is no return when "migration is one-way travel" (Shen 2001, p. 89), and as Shen points out, the homeland exists merely in the imagination. She adds: "When the changed reality of the motherland contradicts their imagination, or the reality in their imagination, a sense of
disappointment, frustration, even alienation occurs, and their dream of permanent return is destroyed" (p. 89). Nevertheless, although essentialist Chineseness is disrupted and even destroyed, it continues to effect power culturally over the ethnic subjectification of its diasporic community. Hall (in Ang 1998a) states: “The fact that race is not a valid scientific category does not undermine its symbolic and social effectuality” (p. 227).

It is thus necessary to consider the reality of race that haunts so many. Even though the horizontal difference of race has shifted discursively, through the scientific invalidation of race as separate species (Goldberg 2000), race still matters on the hierarchical plain. Luke and Carrington (2000) argue that “race’ matters a great deal to racially marked others in predominantly white Anglo-European societies such as Australia” (p. 5), as non-whites are still regarded as inferior people. I borrow from Lo, M. W. W’s (2000) critique of Castro’s reference to the rape of two Aboriginal women by white men and the subsequent rape of the descendant, Emma. Lo questions the futility of Emma’s “part-white” hybrid assertion, and states: “Could brandishing her ‘whiteness’ have stopped the men?” (p. 73) In short, our self-identification does not preclude us from the experience of overt and subtle forms of violence. Despite how we identify ourselves, we are still constrained by how we are perceived by others within and outside our own ethnic communities and by sociocultural policies and attitudes within the community that impact on the diasporic community (Chang 1998). Further, as Luke and Carrington (2000) found, that though the term race has been replaced with other terms in the Australian census and scholarly literature, race still matters. Colour is coded no matter what it is called.

Here, we see the enigmatic power of liminality, where it works both to erase race by obliterating the boundaries of race, and to highlight race. From this ironic slant, Lo, M. W. W. (2000) states:

This destabilisation of physical identity does not ... necessarily enable an ‘escape’ from ‘categorisation’; [rather] the instability of phenotype paradoxically highlights

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168 Usually return visits break the spell of the romanticised homeland and remind the migrant that the old home is no longer that which they have transfixed in their memory, and that old friends too have moved on. In a sense, those who travel to and fro become increasingly deterritorialised and are perhaps able to question these fictions more consciously. See also footnote 144, on p. 69.

169 Chang (1998) suggests aspects such as the stigma of association with a particular group or governmental policies like affirmative aid or action programmes or apartheid policies. The stigma of Australia’s past Immigration Restriction Act 1901, aka the White Australia Policy, abolished in the mid-1970s, would have similar implications for ethnic identification amongst even the contemporary diasporic community.
the impact of phenotype categories upon the experience of cultural identity, revealing both the interdependence of physical and cultural identity as well as the impossibility of escaping categorisation. (p. 72)

There is a paradoxical interdependence between categorical thinking and hybridity for “the ambiguity of hybridity is sustained by the existence of categories [without which] the vacillation that produces ambiguity is impossible” (Lo, M. W. W. 2000, p. 74). Goldberg (2000) states that in its “desperate drive away from race ... it at once predicates itself on racial distinction” (Goldberg 2000, p. 72). Thus, in attempting to eliminate categories, categories are illuminated. It is within this paradox that it exerts political power for we cannot cover colour or escape from the undeniable possibility of being rejected by both sectors of the community. Some react to this by renouncing their Chineseness, only to discover that being acculturated is equally unsatisfying. In fact, their “permanent racial visibility” (Ang 1998c) makes full integration or assimilation into the dominant society impossible. Denial or full integration as a strategy is limiting as it assumes a binaric boundary for ethnic subjectification and narrows the expression of the self to the two options: Chinese or Australian. However, “Chineseness is not a static essence” (Ang 1998c), but is in a state in flux, and as such liminality gives it political momentum.

State of flux

I have established that who we are as ethnic subjects exists as an agonistic ambivalence. Anzaldúa (1987a) refers to the blurring of the ocean as it touches the earth to illustrate the sense of ambivalence and flux as differences are negotiated. I add to this by asking you to look at the moon as the sun begins to shine at the break of dawn. Which is dominant at dawn? Which is dominant at dusk? In that in-between time at dawn and dusk, the two share an ambivalent moment. This ethnic ambivalence is in an on-going state of flux as new understandings of Chineseness continue to be negotiated to challenge static and pure ideas of Chineseness. Instead, Chineseness is seen to exist as a version of Chineseness and the Chinese person ascribed a “partial ‘identity,’ which must be constantly (re)invented and (re)negotiated” (Ang

170 Goldberg (2000) further comments on the apparent paradox of hybridity that at once attempts to quell xenophobia as well as to exacerbate it (see pp. 80-81).
171 I use these terms integration and assimilation interchangeably here because I see both as ushering migrants towards the dominant society. Although lauded by some as being more inclusive, Jakubowicz (2002) states that integration is a “grudging acceptance of difference but underpinned by a desire to eradicate difference. ... It is a way of playing lip-service to diversity while continuing a path towards assimilation” (p. 12). Ang (1998c) states that those who realise the impossibility of attaining the full status of Dutchness or Westernisation return to their roots in the Chinese culture.
172 If we must still use ethnicity as a measure of identification.
1998c). Let me illustrate through this exchange with Carol, a Malaysian in her late 20s, who has boarded in Australia since her high school days:

> It was late and the interview had just finished. My participant was keen to turn the questions on me.
> “So, on a scale of one to ten, how Chinese are you?” she asked cheekily.
> I turned the question back on her and said, “Well, where would you place me?”
> She described me as being less Chinese than she was. According to the superficial traditional notions of Chineseness, I had thought that she was more Chinese. Her accent was still Malaysian and she had stated that she preferred a Chinese partner. She still lived submissively under her parents’ roof despite her age and had a passion for Chinese food. But as we journeyed on, I began to see that like my own life, hers had drifted in and out of versions of Chineseness, according to time and place.
> She said that I was less Chinese than she was. I found myself wanting to disagree yet I didn’t. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Both of us in the exchange above have been on every notch of the Chinese scale from one to ten, depending on where we were, who we were with, what we were doing and a myriad of factors. It was impossible for me to quantify whether I was more Chinese or Australian.

Neither did I want to, for doing so either way would mean erasing a part of my history. There is a seamlessness between my Chineseness and Australianness or otherness that leaves neither aspects dominant nor marginal. To further illustrate the point, Trinh’s (1991) sketch of the different cycles of the moon is useful: “With each phase a shift has occurred, a new form is attained, several motions interweave within a movement. Crescent, quarter, gibbous, full: an old form continues to mutate [to invite] a different entry into areas of social dissent and transformation” (p. 1). This captures how new forms are always attained as we interact with our social environment and how change is a politically feminist move. As Trinh says, there are different forms of the moon – crescent, quarter, gibbous, full – but all are still the moon, regardless of its transitory name chosen for politicised reasons, though the boundaries between one and the other are blurred. There are new translations of Chineseness, but all are still versions of Chineseness. Trinh’s moon is:

> The principle of transformation and the site of possibility for diversely repressed realities. With the moon, the Imaginary She is at once centered and de-centered.
> Access to proper names as moments of transition (the “moon” is a name) requires that “the imagination also [be] a political weapon” (Escobar). (1991, pp. 7-8)

173 Although this assumes that there are static versions of Chineseness on the scale, I assume this fixedness for the sake of argument. For a similar scenario on degrees of Chineseness, see Lowe (1996).
The moon is both the principle of transformation and the site of possibility because of its ambivalence. In the liminal space, there is possibility for challenge and change as the imaginary becomes, as Escobar states above, the weapon of politics. I am the sun and the moon at dawn and at dusk, two or more worlds in agonistic ambivalence. Where the binaric notions enforced a choice between the two, and “seriously complicated the sense of identity of Chinese people” (Shen 2001, p. 86) worldwide, in the liminal space I assert the avowal of both the Chinese and the Australian in me as they radically striate each other in constant negotiations. The imaginary quells our need to belong by offering us multiple options concurrently without necessarily focusing on our ethnicity. In this liminal space, it can be argued that subjectivity can be “doubled, tripled, multiplied across time (generations) and space (cultures) [so that] differences keep on blooming within despite the rejections from without” (Trinh 1991, p. 14). It produces a range of subjectivities that slide up and down any scale that attempts to measure or quantify. In this space, we are challenged to imagine new narratives that are beyond binaric binds and other purist performances, according to the essentialist biological fiction.

**Being Chinese | woman**

Elsewhere I state that the postcolonial poststructuralist feminist perspective frames this investigation. Here, I seek to problematise my troubled relationship with this framework before I outline its research significance. First, I hold an ambivalent position towards normalised white feminism in my refusal to be labelled as a particular type of feminist. 174 I have also come to realise that despite the shared experiences with other white women, our differences that are due to globalised modern capitalist structures remain incommensurable and cannot be adequately explained by existing white feminist theories. 175 For example, while Madonna’s sexual politics are celebrated by white feminists as a way of subverting male dominance, hooks argues that this is only liberating from a white perspective. From a black perspective, it is more critical that respectability is gained due to the image of the black female as a “sexually ‘fallen’ force” (in Ang 2001b, p. 184). Further, assertiveness and the confrontational approach are seen as the generalised white feminist ways to counter rape and sexual harassment, while passivity and submission are discredited. Ang commends how Aoi, a Thai prostitute in a documentary film, uses ambiguity to tackle her white male predator and states: “She did not say ‘no’ in any

174 Although Ang (2001b) describes herself as a “(marginally) committed feminist” (p. 177), I would differ in the sense that I am fully committed to the feminist issues that Chinese women experience in their daily negotiations.

175 Ang (2001b) outlines the white hegemonic hierarchies in these problematics very clearly.
straightforward manner, but that doesn’t mean she simply surrendered to patriarchal power” (p. 182). Thus, my own ambiguities towards issues of sexuality can be explained by this differential negotiation by diasporic women, according to the various cultural semantics governing their versions of sexual empowerment in the different contexts encountered.

While I agree with de Lauretis in how “the experience of racism changes the experience of gender, so that a white woman would be no closer than a Black man to comprehending a Black woman’s experience” (in Ang 2001b, p. 184), I also hold an ambivalent position towards other Third World or postcolonial women. I cannot stand with them and say that I am oppressed as they are in their various locations. My geohistorical location has given me a voice and benefits that they may not possess. I partly share in the “non-metropolitan, postcolonial whiteness” (Ang 2001b, p. 189) that Ang calls an Australian whiteness that is “dubiously postcolonial” (p. 189), yet I am not quite party to the power and privileges that come with being born an Australian. I am thus like these other Third World women, yet not quite.

Therefore, I stand in that liminal space of being a critical feminist and deploy the term *postcolonial poststructuralist feminism* to analyse the issues faced by diasporic Chinese women that are negotiated in a fluid manner. In this deployment of feminism, it is hoped that the complex and contradictory powers influencing the choices diasporic Chinese women make will become exposed. Thus, despite my troublesome disposition towards feminism, I assert that it is still necessary to apply a feminist critique to diasporic women’s experiences in Australia, to examine how liminality is exercised in incommensurable and conflictual diasporic encounters. Poststructuralist feminism intersects with the liminal framework as it argues that the assumption of one particular form of subjectivity (past or present) is at the expense of other competing subjectivities (Weedon 1997). Although liminality similarly enables identities to be produced as a way of re-departing (Trinh 1991), as a work-in-progress, without erasing the past, this does not answer how and why certain cultural semantics of Chineseness continue to imprison diasporic women’s negotiations of Chineseness. Thus, there is a need for a feminist critique.

A feminist critique allows me to investigate the power structures that cause some Chinese women to reproduce restrictive narratives despite their relocation to Australia. It also examines how they can be led to question the taken for granted norms thought unchangeable. How can
they be encouraged to disturb their own thinking patterns, and to challenge the familiar and clichéd, so that they are able to create new narratives for Chineseness strategically. As such, I saw fit to interrogate liminality as a gendered space to expose Chineseness as a socially-constructed gendered discourse that serves to preserve both the Occidental and Oriental male privileges. I thus consider how the realities of class, age, education, language proficiency, and other factors, impact on our diasporic subjectification in my data analysis. I assert that we begin to question what we practise when our identity becomes unfixed or denaturalised from the various fictions. Where these practices are rehearsed without the awareness of the cultural semantics in operation, the power structures controlling them will continue to violate how we fashion our self. As Weedon (1997) argues, a discourse or cultural semantics only has political impetus if we commit to reproducing or transforming the social practices and powers that underlie them. She adds that we are never innocent when faced with our multiple subjectivities, but we may not realise that we have a choice and fail to critique the interests represented by the various cultural semantics that govern how we practise being woman, daughter, mother, or wife/partner.

Weidon (1997) argues that we can expose the power of the cultural semantics, and the ways it coerces us to consent to its power, so that we can resist its power. An awareness of these cultural semantics and value systems that we subscribe to gives us, as diasporic Chinese women, agency to make better value judgments about our practices. Lo, M. W. W. (2000) states that “without … hybridity, the comfortable inhabitants of relatively unproblematic (hybrid) identities would have less awareness of the many conditions that make our fictions of representation possible” (p. 74). This thesis therefore addresses the power of liminality for a gendered ethnic subjectification that questions the normalised Chineseness. Addressing the how questions is significant in terms of drawing out the implications of this thesis for addressing issues of Chineseness and ethnic subjectification in the educational context.

176 In her review of Anna Yen’s monodrama Chinese take away, Lo, J. (2000) observes the use of hybridity to highlight the processes of theatrical representation as political tools into the instances of asymmetries and power discrepancies in race, gender, and class in the Asian-Australian diasporic context (see p. 163).
Interlude

I did begin [my autobiography] but the resolve melted away and disappeared in a week and I threw my beginning away. Since then, about every three or four years I have made other beginnings and thrown them away – Mark Twain, a letter, 1904.

It was 1993, a volatile year. Within 23 days at the end of that year, my future mother-in-law died from cancer, I submitted my Honours thesis, was proposed to, and completed all my exams, while facing rowdy students at work. My fiancé and I were subsequently married and I was further estranged from my father for doing so. I remember around then being challenged to write an autobiography. I remember how I winced at the thought of recounting all the complicated episodes in my life and said, “I only write fictional short stories, in the third person.”

When I embarked on this research journey to discover aspects of myself as a Chinese woman living in Australia, I knew I needed a method that went beyond statistical analyses and controlled environments. My life had become too complex for the neat procedures I had been trained in. In a sense, my journey began in a liminal period in research methodology and this is indicative of an imminent paradigm shift that has not been fully realised yet. “Postpositivism [had just] cleared methodology of prescribed rules and boundaries” (Lather 1991, p. 52). I saw this as a promising sign as I wanted a praxis-oriented research methodology to effect change.\(^{177}\) I found the autoethnographic inquiry most appropriate despite its gut-wrenching and self-confrontational qualities.

I began to experiment with different styles of writing to present the stories collected. Each time I theorised, however, I would slip into the omniscient voice. I sounded immensely convoluted, intensely boring, and incredibly weak in my politics. My masks worked so well that they silenced the voices and dulled the vivacity of these stories.

After wandering in the desert of indecision, I decided to begin again, on a fresh page, to write from the heart events and stories lived and shared with other women of a similar yet different

\(^{177}\) Lather argues that “we who do empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics must discover ways to connect our research methodology to our theoretical concerns and political commitments. At its simplest, this is a call for critical inquirers to practice in their empirical endeavors what they preach in their theoretical formulations.” See Lather (1991, p. 172).
backgrounds. Although I have still not written an autobiography, I found a way of piecing together epiphanic snippets of my life which have been instrumental in what I am researching today. Here, then, are my reasons for sharing this collection of stories autoethnographically.
Chapter 3

Researcher | researched

Interpretation is an art that cannot be formalised. ... Writers are writing to make sense of their own lives. Others write to make sense of “another’s” life. In the end it is a matter of storytelling and the stories we tell each other. ... And so the stories we tell one another will change and the criteria for reading stories will also change. And this is how it should be. The good stories are always told by those who have learned well the stories of the past, but who are unable to tell them any longer because those stories no longer speak to them, or to us. (Denzin 1994, pp. 512-13)

An emancipatory social research calls for empowering approaches to research where both researcher and researched become, in the words of feminist singer-poet, Cris Williamson, “the changer and the changed.” (Lather 1991, p. 56)

My title “Researcher | Researched” deliberately highlights the fluidity that frames my methodology. I am a bricoleur-researcher who picks up relevant bits and pieces from everywhere to build the research nest. This nest is imperfect but it is a home from which to tell my stories. Nestled precariously on the branches of poststructuralist interpretive practices, such nests will keep the art of story-telling unformalised.

In this chapter, I outline the autoethnographic method I use to interrogate the practices of Chineseness by diasporic women in Australia. In the first section, I describe the different aspects of autoethnographic research and how I deploy them for the purposes of this research. I then explain why I have adopted autoethnography as my research method. The second section details autoethnography as a method text and the theories related to narrativising. In the third section, I discuss my concerns about this form of research, before proceeding to profile my participants and analytical approaches.

178 The vertical bar |, in the title, is an ASCII character in programming language. In English and the computer languages C, C+ and Java, it means “or.” This symbol is also called a pipe and is used to represent a pipe between two processes in a shell command line, or to feed information from one program to another. In the example, grep foo log | more, the pipe character feeds the output of grep into the input of more without requiring a named temporary file, and without waiting for the first process to finish. In this chapter, I use the symbol to denote the two groups of participants in this thesis, and to highlight that sometimes the researcher is the researched, and vice versa, a concept I elaborate on in this chapter.
Autoethnographic aspects

The sweep of viewpoints on autoethnography shows that its form is a hybrid scientific genre with many lineages. Autoethnography has journeyed through the paths of ethnography and life history (Reed-Danahay 1997). As a term, it has been used for over two decades in the literary, anthropological, and sociological fields. One of its earliest references was made by Heider, who used the term to mean auto for "autochthonous," since it was the "account of 'what people do,' and 'auto' for automatic, since it is the simplest routine-eliciting technique imaginable" (in Reed-Danahay 1997, p. 4). From my survey of its use as a research method, the focus is either on ethnography or autobiography. While the ethnographic focus of autoethnography is a study of one's own cultural group, the autobiographical angle is the study of self within a cultural group.180

From these two practices of autoethnography, the divide between the researcher and the researched is evident. Reed-Danahay (1997), for example, refers to autoethnography as being either the "ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (p. 2). It is also a self-narrative of the socially contextualised self. Both these ideas view the researcher and researched as two distinct groups. In another example, Pratt (1992) defines autoethnography as a text that adopts the coloniser's dominant modes in representing the marginalised colonised self. Despite the mobility created in the colonised-coloniser exchange, there is still a them-and-us notion. I find the binaric divide between the researcher and researched in the forms of autoethnography above problematic for two reasons, both of which relate to the postmodern turn in the late twentieth century.181

First, the researcher and researched divide situates identity as singular and fixed. The postmodern displacement of cultures and the shifting axes of power change this conception of the self and society. This crisis of representation views identities as no longer singular and fixed, but as multiple and fluid. The notion of the multiple self challenges the conventional ethnographic study, which works within the realist and objective observer paradigm, and the traditional autobiography, with its monovocal reflection of the self (Reed-Danahay 1997).

179 See Dorst (1989); Hayano (1979); Pratt (1992; 1994); Strathern (1987); Van Maanen (1988).
180 See Brandes (1982); Deck (1990); Denzin (1989a); Ellis (1995); Lejeune (1989); Reed-Danahay (1997).
181 Hayano cites three reasons for the advent of autoethnography: one, due to economic and political changes, which reduced and urbanised the tribal groups; two, due to an increasing number of minority anthropologists educated and trained for fieldwork amongst their own people, by choice, social restriction, or necessity, due to the growing interest in the fields on marginalised ethnic groups; and three, due to a reduction in research funding that encouraged students to conduct backyard anthropology instead. See Hayano (1979).
Secondly, the researcher and researched divide situates the researcher as the creator of knowledge and the researched as the source of knowledge. Postmodernity decentres the researcher's role as the archaeologist of existing knowledge. Instead, researchers create data alongside their participants (Tierney 1997). Together the researcher and researched create knowledge, and the boundary between us becomes blurred. The need for an alternative autoethnographic form is apparent from the two considerations above.

I use a postmodern form of autoethnography, which collapses the ethnographic and autobiographical focuses of the more traditional autoethnographic form, to resolve the binary divide. Postmodern autoethnography enables me to research my participants, our communities, and myself in an interactive process that is not dichotomous. I research myself as I research others concurrently. Sometimes I am the researcher, sometimes the researched, and sometimes I am both. This perspective knits the researcher and the researched together. In deploying autoethnography in this manner, I create more ambivalence in the researcher | researched domains. I blur the distinction between the researcher and the researched by weaving myself into the participants' text autobiographically (see Crapanzano, in Denzin 1989a). I speak as one voice amongst the other participants' voices. I see this as a hybrid threading of my life into my writing about others. It contains my autobiography and personal history in a descriptive and interpretive paradigm (Denzin 1989b), as I use my life as a prism to interrogate issues of Chineseness in the lives of other women in a diasporic context, and vice versa. I have various reasons for this deployment of autoethnography.182

One reason I embrace the autoethnographic perspective is to appropriate its multivocality as a time control mechanism. In invoking Ellis' (1995; 1997; 1999) multiple selved autoethnography, I embrace a range of voices to speak on the different issues that I face in the various roles in my life – as daughter or wife, for example. Instead of aiming to create reality, I engage the multiple voices to insert parts of my life into the participants' stories, in a non-linear fashion. Time then is manipulated. Ellis (1997) cites Denzin who says that life is "lived through the subject's eye, and that eye, like a camera's, is always reflexive, nonlinear, subjective, filled

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183 While this prismatic use of my life may seem to counter my argument against cultural connectedness (see footnote 136 on p. 67), the very use of this technique exposes the difference and sameness within the diasporic community, as well as the interdependent relationship of this group with all other peoples in Australia. It highlights the interconnectedness of gender, class, education, religion, age, politics, and so on. It aims to evidence the indistinct separation of people groups instead of setting myself up as a token diasporic Chinese woman. To contrast my intent here against other anthropologists who use life history, and the role that other factors play in cultural production, see Gupta and Ferguson (1992, pp. 14-16).
with flashbacks, after-images, dream sequences, faces merging into one another, masks dropping, and new masks being put on” (p. 125). This control over time allows me to jump from episode to episode in my life, as my stories are injected into the participants’. Further, the participants’ stories, too, are not related in a chronological manner as in a life story but according to themes and issues that arise. The ensuing multivocal text in turn exposes the power structures that underpin the stories unfolded. This is effected as the range of voices shows both the similarities and differences experienced in the issue isolated.

Another reason for the autoethnographic embracement is to empower alternative voices to speak from the liminal position of marginality and authority. It is a liminal position firstly because of the author’s cultural position of subjugation and simultaneous privileged position of authority, due to factors such as class and education that give the author access to the dominant discourses that are then displaced by this very doctrine of liminality. In so doing, this displacement deterritorialises the master language (Deleuze and Guattari, in Knaller 1999) and legitimises the voices of the other. Secondly, the liminal position is deployed by inserting myself to reposition my stories alongside the participants’ stories. It would be naïve for me to state that this attempt to centre my position as researcher achieves equality between my voice and my participants’ voices. It does not. I do not stand on neutral ground nor is the hierarchical order totally displaced. Instead it is a strategic move to give an impression of equality, of having one voice with my participants. My aim is to legitimise my participants’ voices.

Legitimisation is a critical act as the creation of a narrative is a powered transaction because narratives circulate and form history for a culture. This history in turn gives the culture authority and legitimisation. As Rich states: “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (in Knaller 1999). Just as autoethnography empowers the self by acknowledging that the individual’s story is as valid as the third person narrative, narrativisation empowers the marginalised voices and questions why these voices have been silenced or marginalised.

My voice also serves to constantly expose the texts’ constructedness. Its multivocal narrative and intrusion of various voices within the texts, for example, invite the reader in to inspect the texts as constructs. My voice, my narratives, have political appeals and serve to foreground
features in the participants’ narratives. I do not pretend to adopt an objective position in how I manoeuvre my narratives alongside my participants’.

This autoethnographic position also suitably reflects my personal odyssey and those of Chinese women living in Australia, as shared yet heterogenous pilgrimages. I do not argue for the production of a universal history, or worse, an alternative cultural semantics to represent the Chinese women in Australia, nor do I seek to record the fate of a people or a group. Rather, I wish to construct a text that is “a remembrance that does not form a we-identity” (Kneller 1999). It is a remembrance significant for the one time, one place. Narrativising sets in fluid tablets experiences that are at once unique to the individual context, yet similar across the different cultural spaces that exist in our society. It legitimises and problematises the stories that the participants in my research and elsewhere have to tell by examining the regimes at work in these narratives. Just as it is important to recognise the singularity of the voices, other stories too in their proliferation need to be told to cull the idea of a universal or monolithic Chinese culture. I thus provide a collection of individual stories that are specific and yet have widespread implications without being universally representative (Hones 1998).

Another reason for my autoethnographic appropriation is the blurring of the border between the self and its social context. Ellis (1997) borrows from Clandinin and Connelly’s idea of the fluid movements of autoethnography, back and forth, inward and outward, and backward and forward. In what she calls evocative autoethnography, Ellis (1999) connects the outward gaze of ethnography, that is, the worlds outside our own, to mark the social coordinates of the self, with the inward gaze of autobiography, to expose the self that is vulnerable to the power structures impacting on it. This outward-inward conjunct is a vantage point for cultural interpretation, as the actions, feelings, thoughts, and language in the narrative expose the powered forces.

Finally, autoethnography remoulds Pratt’s (1992) transculturation idea by using the liminal space to open up the traffic between the dominant and marginal discourses. Pratt states that the marginalised merge and appropriate their own idioms with the dominant discourses to produce negotiated forms of self-representation. Autoethnography enables me to thread theory into narrative and to manipulate the narratives to illuminate theory. The different discourses and modes of understanding navigate the data into a construction that is open to non-academic
readers. In other words, I want to write a K-Mart text, as Lather (1997) would call it, that has unrestricted readership. Ellis (1997) states that its accessibility to readers outside the academy signifies the potential of the autoethnographic method for further use and experimentation.

In the next section, I focus on autoethnography as a method text. First, I establish why the narrative is pertinent as a method text and how I operationalise it, before I outline the two main narrative theories relevant to my discussion. I also discuss two reading theories that form the backdrop to how I present my data autoethnographically. These narrative theories, as I later argue, impact on how the concerns related to the narrative are negotiated.

**The method text**

Hybridity is a powerfully transgressive property and it has an ability to destabilise genres ... and it is that destabilisation which makes writing interesting as deliberate miscegenation. (Castro 1995, p. 32)

I deploy autoethnography as both a “method and a text” (Reed-Danahay 1997, p. 9). As a text, I employ the autobiographical narrative to cover both snippets of my life as well as other women’s narratives. As both are from the first person perspective, I appropriate them as autobiographies.

The pervasive nature of the narrative should not be surprising since we are products of narratives. We are imbued with narratives; nested in narratives. We make meanings of people and events through narratives at both the individual and social levels (Conle 2000). Narratives, in the sense of cultural semantics, define us. We construct our narratives from these cultural semantics to make meaning of our lives, and Bruner (in Conle 2000) states our self-identification and agency are influenced by these narratives.

Because our lives are so infused with narratives, it is appropriate to analyse the relationship between the narrative texts produced and the influence of cultural semantics on them. I want to highlight that “even where the autobiography covers only a small part of a life or a particular crisis, its object is understanding and its medium is narrative” (Egan 1988, p. 99). Thus, the narrative is merely a tool to gain insight into the relationships between the cultural semantics of Chineseness and the versions of Chineseness performed in the narratives. I depart from the
traditional autobiographical form in that these autobiographies are neither linear nor depictions of whole lives. In my narrative stance, I loosely adopt the eyewitness posture (Deck 1990), as required.

Having established how I deploy autoethnography as a method text, I turn my focus to the relevant theories on the narrative. I highlight two main theories of the narrative text pertinent to the purposes of this thesis. The first theory looks at the conventional or modernist idea of the narrative and the second outlines postmodern perspectives on the narrative. In the next section, I also outline two reading theories that are pertinent to how I operationalise my autoethnographic narratives. These theoretical positions are critical to how I negotiate limitations raised against the narrative as a suitable scientific research tool.

**Theorising narrative texts**

Since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we should feel free to substitute explicit interests for implicit ones. (Reinharz, in Lather 1991, p. 50)

Just as there is no neutral education (Freire, 1973), there is no neutral research (Hall, 1975; Weskott, 1977; Reason and Rowan, 1981). (Lather 1991, p. 50)

**Coherent construction**

The conventional narrative text is coherent in the Aristotelian (1954) sense of having a beginning, middle, and end. Richardson (1997) states that the narrative text is crafted through a selection of details, tone, images, and metaphors configured with the usual elements of conflict, crisis, and resolution. These are then structured into a created story that is located within the larger context of genre. According to this first narrative theory, this constructed text is coherent.

Further, this traditional view of the narrative holds that the text is rational. The narrative is not just a chronicle without interpretation. It is a meaning-making machine. Just *facts* presented in an unrelated string are not narrative. Richardson (1997) explains that this view maintains that things must hold together to make sense. The scattered elements in a life are gathered and reassembled to form a comprehensive sketch (Gusdorf, in Deck 1990). It reorders the past retrospectively to make meaning of the present. The narrative thus does not only involve a coherent sequence of events within a temporal setting, but it also involves valuation that gives meaning. The emphasis given to certain events belies the meanings and values attached to the
choices made in the selection process. I argue that experiences are privileged or highlighted by the author according to the cultural semantics underpinning the selection process. In other words, events and experiences are rationalised according to existing systems of meanings.

We therefore make meaning of our lives from a coherent and rational arsenal of narratives which we deploy intertextually. Cultural identity, for example, may be practised by referencing these cultural semantics. I find issue with this narrative theory. Let me quote from Sturrock (1977) to explain how this coherent and rational view of the narrative is problematic:

> For chronology ... is seldom understood simply as a succession of events; it is read as an intelligent concatenation of events, and temporal sequences are effortlessly raised into causal ones. We are reassured by believing that what follows after also follows from, a reassurance we are fully entitled to in reading a fictional narrative, whose sequence has been dictated by its author; we are hardly entitled to it reading a chronological life story, which is largely a sequence of contingencies. A life story so organized is the counterfeit integration of a random life into a convenient fiction. (pp. 54-55)

I want to highlight Sturrock’s point on the cause and effect approach to the narrative. The critical issue, I argue, is that this coherent cause and effect narrative idea is only possible in the construction of a fictional text. This, however, has been transferred to the recording of a life as in an autobiography. This attempt to give coherence to a life makes the autobiography convenient fiction indeed and has no other purpose than fiction. I argue that a life lived is not coherent and events lived are not always explainable in a cause and effect manner.\(^\text{183}\)

Further, under this view, narratives tend to be reproduced unquestioningly. To achieve coherence, variance is usually explained away or made invisible so that life is presented as free from contradictions. Thus, the normalising practices contained within this view remain unquestioned as the narrative text flows without hiccup. More sinisterly, I argue that this view veils the reproduction of practices that require revision. Such a theory encourages the practice of culture in a normalising fashion. When the gaps become evident in the narratives, most force the inconsistencies to fit into existing moulds. As earlier stated, these existing moulds are the cultural semantics that are referenced for cultural identification. Confusion arises with the need

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\(^{183}\) Sturrock states that the discontinuity that chronology brings to the narrative text is purposeless since readers bring continuity to the text in the reading act. For example, the diary is written with daily unlinked entries. However, readers do not read the entries as unlinked texts. Instead they bring an unbroken reading to the text. See Sturrock (1977).
to fix identity to these moulds, when identity should be left in flux, as a narrative that requires on-going revision. Instead, this view binds people to fixed narratives.

There is another related dire consequence in that some cultural semantics portray negative images that trap people, according to gender, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, in pre-existing frameworks that silence their positive aspects. Even positive images can entrap as they lead to misunderstandings due to assumptions made about these people and their practices. In both instances, there is a need for new narratives, especially resistant narratives, and resistant readings of these cultural semantics for the stereotypes to be broken. Alternative or resistant discourses are needed to free those who are marginalised and stereotyped by pre-existing cultural semantics. Such discourses can also lead to fresh cultural practices.

**Contradictory construction**

An alternative to this first narrative view is clearly necessary and I adopt Ricoeur’s (1981; 1984-1988; 1991) idea of the narrative as a creative process that is dynamic. The recreation of experiences, or the act of narrativising, produces narratives that are always new. I add to this the notion of the text as “fragmentary, inconclusive, digressive, and interpenetrated with other texts” (Wallis, in Kneller 1999). I argue that this view mirrors social realities where conflicts remain unresolved, where lives are lived as on-going processes (Poirier and Ayres 1997).

Moreover, I use this view to interpret and present the stories shared in a non-sequential frame and with discontinuities. Narratives are thus not constructed as coherent texts in the chronological and rational sense in this view. I argue that this is because our lives are on-going projects that are still being made sense of. Further, in piecing together the fragments from my life and the interviews conducted, without necessarily seeking coherence, new meanings are more likely to emerge. This alternative narrative theory presents a peeping-hole position from which to examine new meanings. I borrow from Pensky (in Lather 1997) to describe the project as thus: “The task is to bring fragments (all we have) into a critical constellation so precise that truth will allow itself to appear, however fleetingly, in the mosaic representation itself” (p. 239).184

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184 Postmodernity problematises truth, multiplying truth to versions of truth instead of a set truth. I assert that for a truth to be deemed *established truth*, it needs to transcend time and place. Otherwise, one truth here and now may not be truth there and then, as the context changes.
Contradictions, instead of rationalised accounts, are rife in the alternative narrative theory. Although other narratives are still referred to intertextually, events may not be interpreted to fit the existing network of narratives. They may challenge them instead. The past is understood as incomplete, tentative, and revisable, according to present circumstances and how the future is projected (Bochner, Ellis and Tillman-Healy, in Ellis 1997). Alternative versions of the past and reinvented selves may emerge as well (Ellis 1997). The inconsistencies that may be recognised here “signal points of confusion, uncertainty, or conflicting emotions in the narrator” (Poirier and Ayres 1997, p. 552). Gaps are allowed to exist in the narrative and these question the relevance or sufficiency of the existing framework for meaning-making.

I argue that this alternative narrative theory presents an incoherent and irrational culture that is riddled with contradictions. This suggests the “possibility of altered perspectives and positions” (Knaller 1999) and the courage to not know all the answers. This is critical to my focus in this thesis as it makes room for new or alternative narratives, in the act of resisting normalised cultural semantics of Chineseness. Gaps and inconsistencies that arise, when the cultural semantics fail to account for the changing contexts, lead to new narratives and subsequently new cultural practices. Chineseness and other cultural projects are thus seen as on-going projects in that they are never finished. The story keeps going as we weave new events into our existing stories. Often the new events may lead us to have new understandings, instead of being interpreted to fit existing stories which disables the story-teller from telling the tale in a different way. These resistant narratives keep narratives open-ended as they encourage multiple readings.

I find it useful here to venture briefly into the role of the reader in the narrativising act. Two reading theories need to be mentioned here. The traditional approach is to expect one correct reading from a text. We read a text to find its real meaning. The opposing view to this is a reading theory that suggests that multiple readings can be produced according to the reader’s context.\(^\text{185}\) Thus different readers may read a text and gather different meanings. This has research implications as it opens up the issue of validity as the data is presented in the form of narratives. The traditional reading theory requires data to be presented as accurately as possible so that the reader will not misread the data. The second reading theory suggests that multiple readings are produced so that accuracy per se is not a test of validity.

\(^{185}\) Other factors such as the textual context or genre of the text positions the readers in particular ways in the readings produced too.
Rather than to further debate the various notions of the narrative,¹⁸⁶ I attend to the liminal spaces that emerge, as a result of this tension, as a tool for interrogating the concept of Chineseness. The gap created by the ambivalence surrounding the narrative’s nature as complete and rational, or fragmentary and inconclusive, unsettles the master narrative as whole, having continuity and unquestioned authority. This opens the door to the production of alternative or resistant texts that are beyond the normalised narrative conventions, or texts that are not “accomplices of a framework already in power” (Knaller 1999).

While in this vein, I want to raise a concern regarding resistant texts. Richardson (1997) argues that some resistance narratives may “reinscribe rather than circumvent” (p. 78) because they give indirect focus to the dominant voice, if they are merely written as responses to the dominant discourses. Doing so would keep the diasporic women’s voices on the margins. Richardson (1997) highlights my concern as thus:

In resistance narratives ... (there is a need to determine) how the stories we tell do and do not reinscribe tyrannies, large and small – do and do not improve the material, symbolic, and aesthetic conditions of our lives. (p. 77)

Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that the postmodern reconstruction of the self and its society produces texts that are not simply natives’ offerings against existing dominant discourses. These texts are not produced by natives in the anthropological sense, but by members who dwell in the interstices of the dominant and marginal camps. I argue that the reinvented postmodern diasporic self juggles duality and multiplicity, and in so doing, offers resistant texts that are empowered as alternative forms of meanings and power in dominant discourses.¹⁸⁷ The traffic between the insider and outsider becomes an on-going process that is open and constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

**Scientific stories**

A science capable of grasping the continual interplay of agency, structure and context requires a “becoming space” (Derrida, 1981: 27) where we can think and

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¹⁸⁶ For further elaborations here, see Knaller (1999)
¹⁸⁷ The preposition in is used instead of to as the resistant texts are written within the dominant discourses, rather than as a response to them, as that would place the texts further on the periphery. This act of writing within the centre resists further marginalisation.
act with one another into the future in ways that both mark and loosen limits. (Lather 1991, p. 101)

In this third section of the chapter, I posit that the narrative is an authorised science. I borrow from Lather’s (1997) notion of double science, that is, a science that is situated in the interstices of science and not science, to describe the scientific narrative. To the positivist, writing and telling stories is just not scientific research. My use of the narrative, within autoethnography, is a result of my search for a tool that could adequately embrace the stories that I sought to tell and to hear. The narrative’s position as a liminal scientific tool, however, raises questions as to whether it is a legitimate scientific recording device. I detail here the concerns pertaining to the use of the narrative text in this research in more general terms before detailing my concerns and how I resolve these limitations.

The critical position towards the narrative is due to the division of all writing into the literary or the scientific since the seventeenth century (Richardson 1997). Revolutionary work with any real importance or truth content was once recognised only in scientific writing (Milne 1997). In a survey of life stories in various fields from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, Kohli and Bertaux (in Reed-Danahay 1997) found that the trend was towards scientism, rather than native autobiography in anthropology.

Despite the objections raised against the narrative as a scientific device, I argue that its usage indicates its growing popularity as a research tool. Its use is increasingly widespread in the sciences, especially in nursing. In education, it has been used to capture the temporal nature and the contextual details of the data (Fenstermacher 1994). The narrative has also been used at school sites (Jackson 1968; Smith and Geoffrey 1968). I trace the narrative’s prevalence in research today to:

> The gradual erosion of the positivist model of man [sic] ... and the struggle to replace it with a model that more adequately reflects what we humans take to be the nature of ourselves as thinking, feeling, and sometimes rational creatures. (Phillips, cited in Hones 1998)

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188 See Aström, Norberg, Hallberg, and Jansson (1993); Cooper (2000); Fagermoen (1997); Gilmer (2000a; b); Ingvar, Ohlén, and Bergbom (2000); Lovgren, Engstrom, and Norberg (1996); Öhrling and Hallberg (2000); Rittman, Rivera, and Godown (1997); Roth and Nelson (1997); Yam (2000).
What many fail to realise is that narratives have always been a part of science. In looking at the construction of the narrative text, I find it useful to compare it to the construction of the conventional *factual* research report. Like the narrative text, the thesis is a constructed text,\(^{189}\) crafted by the researcher who includes information that is relevant to the purposes of the study in the literature review, for example, to argue the case. Data are selected for emphasis in the discussion section and certain results receive lengthier debate than others. The research paper’s format, thus:

Reveals its own narratively driven subtext. ... theory (literature review) is the past or the (researcher’s) cause for the present study (hypothesis being tested), which will lead to the future – findings and implications (for the researcher, researched, and science). (Richardson 1997, p. 77)

Clearly, even academic papers are constructs. I add that the construction of texts does not deem them less valid or more valid. It simply highlights the different ways in which research can be presented (see also Polkinghorne, Donald E. 1997).

Due to the literary techniques employed in the writing act, the narrative has also been critiqued as a “unique act of imagination” (Cox and Frye, in Renza 1977, p. 2), which has little scientific validity. Despite this, suffice it to say that other *scientific* texts engage in the use of literary techniques, even in the recording of *scientific* data.\(^{190}\) In reporting on the life of an organism, for example, its lifespan may be structured narratively as having a beginning, middle, and end. Renza (1977) argues that the presence of fictional techniques is not enough to accuse the genre of inadequate scientific validity. Instead he reasons that the autobiographer, unlike some other scientists, “self-consciously borrows from the methodological procedures of imaginative fiction” (p. 2). He adds that the verbal strategies are used to transcend the limitations that exist in the attempt to record the past from the present.

As a tool, Middleton (1995) argues, narratives are also useful to convey often complex ideas in non-specialist language. Often, academic discourse is unable to capture the complexity of the lives lived. For example, Ellis (1997) felt that the social science prose and use of the omniscient voice were too authoritative and detached to deal with sensitive issues such as death and loss.

\(^{189}\) To further expose the thesis as a constructed text, this chapter draws attention to its constructedness via the use of alliteration in its title and sub-headings.

\(^{190}\) In science, language is assumed to be transparent, having no meaning or value attached. See Richardson (1997).
Further, the discourse could not capture the complexity of the lives of local people adequately. Rather than to deny the narrative's closeness to fiction, I take advantage of the privilege presented by this genre in a way that liberates my discourse.

Here I also want to deal with the issues generally raised in qualitative research. These are questions of validity, reliability, and generalisability by first echoing Tierney and Lincoln (1997) that these concerns now have been reinscribed with postmodern meanings. First, postmodern validity (Ellis 1999; Lather 1986), for example, is not just simply about questions of truth, or how an interpretation can be legitimated, but what might be wrong with the validation and how the research improves the lives of the communities. Secondly, reliability is not coherence between the past, present, and future but it involves the procedure of checking our reading of the participants’ stories against theirs. Postmodern reliability opens the door for a reconciled reading to be produced if differences occur (Ellis 1999; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Finally, generalisability does not just invoke a universal appeal or a shared experience between reader and research material. Postmodern generalisability takes advantage of the particularity of our experiences by asking if the research provides the reader with a vicarious experience of unfamiliar territories (Ellis 1999). Rather than to excuse or gloss over these issues with a postmodern veneer, let me further elaborate on how I negotiate each of these concerns – validity, reliability and generalisability – according to the particularities of this research. I posit that these concerns are linked to how the narrative is theorised.

*Autobiographical authenticity*

But one does not have to view autobiography as either truth or fiction, but more as self-confrontation, and hence, as at its very best, filtered self-awareness, and at its very worst, unrefined mystification. (Horowitz 1977, p. 176)

Despite the resuscitation of the autobiography as a critical reservoir of experiential data, a culture of doubt still surrounds its use, and this relates to questions of truth or the autobiography’s validity. This doubt is premised on the notion that knowledge is value-free and untainted by sociopolitical, historical, and geographical factors. Postmodern validity is not so

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Note: It is interesting to note that the undefinable qualities of the autobiography mirror the concept of liminality in this thesis. The autobiographical text crosses many generic boundaries. See Broderick (1987). In some ways, it is a hybrid text as it belongs neither to fact nor fiction. It is fact employing fiction and fiction employing fact in the telling of a story. Renza refers to it as “a unique phenomenon, definable neither as fiction nor non-fiction – not even a mixture of the two” (p. 5). See Renza (1977). This again echoes the theoretical framework of this thesis.
concerned with legitimising truth but seeks more to interrogate the validation itself and how research as praxis enriches the participants' lives as well as the lives of members of the wider community. Lather (1991) speaks of research as having *catalytic validity* in the sense that it catalyses action as a result of participation in the research. Rather than to maintain the stance of researcher neutrality, there is collaboration between researcher and researched to produce self-enlightenment and action. She explains that the catalytic power in a theory comes from the increased specificity at the contextual level which exposes how the larger issues are inextricably interwoven with life's particularities. This is why probing into the details of a life at the basic level of daily practices is especially pertinent to this research. Further, Ang (1993) adds that the autobiography is a platform for public consumption, where the "displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance [to stage] a useful identity" (p. 3).

Despite the postmodern reconfiguration of validity, I argue that further theorising around validity is needed for it to effect an improvement on the readers' lives.\(^{192}\) We need an understanding of the construction of truth so that the processes that entrap are exposed. The invisible made visible results in emancipatory knowledge. Thus, I begin my reasoning from a positivist angle in stating that the text's validity is destabilised by the gaps that exist between the textual and non-textual *I*.

These gaps are due first to the coherence that is given to chaos in the construction process of the narrative text, as I highlighted in the second section of this chapter. Frye (in Renza, 1977) states that in the narrative's construction, the autobiographer, faced with an overwhelming amount of data, is pressured by discourse to structure the data according to a narrative design. Milne (1997) suggests this structuring is a selective process that omits certain *insignificant* data, to make the text coherent, and reading less laboriously tedious and interminable. Data may also be distorted to conform to present cultural semantics. This construction process produces a textual *I* that may be different to the non-textual *I*.

Clearly, it is not the non-textual identity that is *properly* and *truly* captured on paper, but the textual identity. Renza acknowledges that written words "essentially signal a higher signifier,

\(^{192}\) For the research text to really have an impact on people, we need to write in ways that reach the wider community. We need to write in ways that simplify complex ideas into non-specialist language, and this is where the narrative comes in. See Middleton (1995). Writing in a discourse that is accessible to the lay person should be the aim of the postmodern researcher. This supports Lather's promotion of K-Mart texts. See Lather (1997).
the *logos* of human consciousness, which in turn signifies what cannot become signified, the eternal *Logos*" (1977, p. 8). He further asserts that words from Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, are only "imitations, copies, or more precisely, intentional acts whose object, his consciousness of self as such, reduces them to exterior signs concealing (dialectically determined) silent or invisible confessions" (p. 8). It is useful to add, that the identity represented in an autobiographical text is not the whole person signified but only a portion; the portion that is relevant to the study. As the autobiographer, I will not pretend to ignore the discontinuity between the I on paper and my non-textual I, or that my writing is only a "sketchy, arbitrary rendering of [my] life" (Renza 1977, p. 11). Bruner (in Deck 1990) argues:

> The critical distinction here is between reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated). In a life history the distinction is between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expressions). Only a naïve positivist would believe that expressions are equivalent to reality and we recognize in everyday life the gap between experience and its symbolic manifestation in expression. (p. 244)

I can also blame the alienation of the non-textual I from the textual I on the memory maze of data that a researcher has to tap into. Discontinuities exist for the writer, who returns to the text to find that the text has been written by another, though this other is self. Bruner explains the temporality of the I in the text by stating:

> Every telling is an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory, in that we highlight some causes and discount others; that is, every telling is interpretive. The concept of an experience, then, has an explicit temporal dimension in that we go through or live through an experience which then becomes self-referential in the telling. (in Deck 1990, p. 245)

It is true that it is impossible to compare two memories separated by time and place (Proust 1971), as memory does not function in a linear manner (Ellis 1999), but I add that the autobiography is an elucidation of the present, not the past (Renza 1977). We understand our past from our present position and gain insight as we disentangle the now from the then (Ellis 1999). In speaking on the past, Augustine states:

> What is brought out from the memory is not the events themselves (these are already past) but words conceived from the images of those events ... My boyhood, for instance, which no longer exists, exists in time past, which no longer exists. But
when I recollect the image of my boyhood and tell others about it ... I am looking at his image in time present. (1963)

Thus, when I write about the past, there is a lapse between what I remember and the actual words I use to recall the memory. I can assert that the autobiographer seeks to resurrect the past into the present, through what Deck (1990) calls the art of “skillful fashioning” (p. 245),\(^{193}\) and in so doing gives the past newness.

I posit that the resurrection of the \(I\) from the past positions the autobiographer as being ceaselessly renewed. This is unlike the fictional text which is framed within its own setting, and actions which are played by “still” characters trapped within time and space (Renza 1977). Olney (1972) asserts that the autobiography is a definition of the writing self at a moment in a place. The context in my life at the point of recall, for example, shapes the meaning attached to the event as compared to the same event recalled at another time. The autobiographer's ideological assertions are framed by “his [sic] cultural-historical [semantics] (and not timeless) milieu” (Renza 1977, p. 5). Further, the limitation on what can be known and admitted to self (Ellis 1997) produces a boundless \(I\) that is constantly reinvented according to new knowledges and admissions. Thus, autobiographical narratives are produced as on-going processes (Gubrium and Holstein 1994).\(^{194}\)

In this ceaseless renewal, the \(I\) constructed in the text takes on multiple identities. This happens on two levels. The first level sees the multiplicity of \(I\)'s in terms of the “‘I’ who speaks as researcher, teacher, man or woman, commentator, research participant, narrative critic, and theory builder” (Clandinin and Connelly, in Hones 1998). As the researcher, I take on these different \(I\)'s or personae to play these different roles. At the second level, Barthes sees the \(I\) as “always new, even if it is repeated” (p. 163, in Reed-Danahay 1997). He sees the recounted \(I\) and the one recounting the \(I\) as being separate identities.

Here, I find it helpful to adopt Gunn's (1982) concept of the displayed self which builds a bridge between the dual self in autobiographies. I argue that this displayed self is positioned in

\(^{193}\) Deck elaborates that the autobiography is a fiction in the sense of “something made or fashioned, based on the word’s Latin root *fingere*. In the course of systematically interpreting experience (highlighting some causes and discounting others), autobiographers and ethnographers produce constructed truths that astute readers accept as partial representations of what actually happened in a life or what was actually out there in front of the ethnographer." See Deck (1990, p. 245).

\(^{194}\) See an example of this on p. 121.
the gaps between the textual and non-textual identities, or between what is narrativised and practised. The self may peep at us through the interstices of the textual and non-textual selves. I do not argue for consistency in the displayed self, between the textual self and its non-textual other. Instead, as outlined before, I focus on the ambivalences and contradictions (Ellis 1997) perceived in the displayed self in the liminal gaps produced to interrogate why they exist.

 Needless to say, this argument demands qualification "for when an epistemology assumes that writing can no longer refer to 'the author's historical identity,' then 'the long migration of autobiography from fact to fiction is complete'" (Spengemann 1980, p. 213). In short, the textual self must not be so far removed from the non-textual self that the text becomes pure fiction.

Therefore, I argue that rather than to verify the autobiographical narrative for its accuracy or truth value, advantage should be taken of the gap that exists between the textual and non-textual I's. In doing so, I adopt the narrative text as a symbol (Gusdorf, in Deck 1990) of the self that is ceaselessly renewed, since each narrativisation act is a record of the self for that particular moment and context. Bochner, Ellis and Tillman-Healy (in Ellis 1997) argue that it is not the precision of events narrated that should be focused on but rather, what narratives do, the consequences, and the resulting uses for these narratives. The renewing I in stories lived and relived leads to growth, change, and resistance to the cultural semantics that framed previous recollections. Denzin (1989a) makes this aspect clear:

The point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or reality. Rather, what must be established is how [italics added] individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies. The sources of this coherence, the narratives that [made] them and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered. (p. 62)

What is critical to attend to then is the cultural semantics framing the decisions made in the narrativising act. Rather than to focus on the unity of the I's, I assert that it is more useful for the reader to note the contextual factors that determine how meanings change, how new readings are produced according to these changes, and the ever changing cultural semantics framing our understanding of the world.

We are re-writing our narratives all the time. Our identities are written and re-written day by day according to our new experiences. Unfortunately, our narratives are bound by the politics of story-telling – there is a need to consider the larger cultural semantics which bind or limit
narratives, when constructing or reading the micro-narratives. “Narrative is the primary code through which humans organise their experience into temporally meaningful episodes ... the narrative mode is contextually embedded and looks for particular connections between particular events” (Richardson 1997, p. 109). As such, there is a need to realise that our identities are re-written according to the narratives of the time.

The realisation of the sociopolitical, geographical, and historical factors informing our version of Chineseness leads us back to Lather’s (1991) notion of catalytic validity where the research process “re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (p. 68). Before theory performs as a catalyst for action, however, it needs to be communicated in simple and ordinary language. Then as we are enlightened, I hope that, along with members within and outside the Chinese community, we are challenged in our thinking and actions about Chineseness. Our self-reflective processes catalyse a deeper understanding of our particular contexts, and the emancipatory outcome, I believe, is more valuable to the Australian society than the establishment of the accuracy of a story in this research.

The fact/value dichotomy simply drives values underground. Facts are never theory-independent (Hesse, 1980: 172); they are as much social constructions as are theories and values. (Lather 1991, p. 51)

Reconciled readings

For persons, as autonomous beings, have a moral right to participate in decisions that claim to generate knowledge about them. Such a right ... protects them ... from being managed and manipulated. ... The moral principle of respect for person is most fully honored when power is shared not only in the application ... but also in the generation of knowledge. ... Doing research on persons involves an important educational commitment: to provide conditions under which subjects can enhance their capacity for self-determination in acquiring knowledge about the human condition. (Heron, in Lather 1991, pp. 55-56)

The old parameters for reliability concentrated on coherence along a time continuum in the stories shared. Postmodern reliability focuses more on gaining a reconciled reading of the data. This is practised in the exchange of data interpretations to produce a negotiated researcher | researched reading (Ellis 1999). Thus, one common way to gain postmodern research reliability is to decentre the researcher as the demystifier of life’s experiences and guru interpreter, by acknowledging the researcher as facilitator for change and the researched as an active agent in
the generation of knowledge. This process reduces the likelihood of conceptual
overdeterminism or the impositional researcher to researched hierarchy. Lather (1991) explains
that conceptual overdeterminism occurs when theory conditions experience, which in turn
reinforces theory, because of nondialectical theorising. She explains that theory in this instance
acts as a “container into which the data must be poured” (p. 62). Data that only illuminates
theory is guilty of a priori reading. To avoid this, and reified hierarchies between researcher and
researched, I need to be open to imperfections in my theory and to counter-interpretations
through my participants’ voices. Further, for me to understand the participants’ world views
and the cultural semantics impacting their understanding of life, I need to engage with them in
this meaning production. Both parties learn from each other in this process. Thus, dialogue
needs to occur between researcher and researched, according to this postmodern notion of
reliability.

However, I argue that in some cases, instead of aiming for a reconciled reading between our
interpretations, gaps should be expected to exist between the readings to encourage multiple
readings. Leaving interpretations unreconciled may not account for participant false
consciousness as it is just the participant’s understanding of their particular situation.\textsuperscript{195} It also
does not account for the situation where the participant may unsay their words (Tripp, in Lather
1991). The gaps, nevertheless, discourage the potential for participant initiation into existing
cultural semantics. The gaps or contradictions expose existing frameworks for meaning making
as inadequate, and this then leads to new realisations and understandings. It creates an active
engagement with present theories as well as the production of new ideas. As Ashton-Warner
suggests, readers need “spaces to develop theories which tap their own native imagery” (in

To seek reconciliation between our readings is to commit the crime of data doctoring, even if
the doctoring is by the researched. The risky act of leaving the readings potentially
contradictory to each other opens up the possibility of further theorising. Reciprocity is still
exercised except that it is the power between researcher | researched that is negotiated but not
necessarily the meaning of the stories. In a sense, I need to be comfortable with non-closure in
the analysis of the data and to not seek a final reading:

\textsuperscript{195} False consciousness, according to Lather, is the “denial of how our common sense ways of looking at the
world are permeated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment” (p. 59). These norms are unquestioned
because they provide a false sense of security in the direction and meaning they provide to a life, according to
For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, speaking to and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life. It must, moreover, be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. (Lather 1991, p. 55)

So how did I build reciprocal reliability into my research method? First, I factored a reflective section into the data gathering process to provide access to alternative modes of thinking to participants who may not have this exposure any other way. I did this through a short story *Beyond limbo* by Kitty Vivekananda, which introduces some participants to the idea of liminality. I also used follow-up questions to elicit reflection. However, Fay states that the process that leads to emancipatory and empowering enlightenment is not that simple:

> Coming to a radical new self-conception is hardly ever a process that occurs simply by reading some theoretical work; rather, it requires an environment of trust, openness, and support in which one's own perceptions and feelings can be made properly conscious to oneself, in which one can think through one's experiences in terms of a radically new vocabulary which expresses a fundamentally different conceptualization of the world, in which one can see the particular and concrete ways that one unwittingly collaborates in producing one's own misery, and in which one can gain emotional strength to accept and act on one's new insights. (in Lather 1991, p. 60)

Secondly, I returned some of the participants' stories to them and sought their interpretation of their own stories. This is intended to move my participants from the point of simply sharing their stories to a point where they are able to theorise from what they have shared about their own lives (Kushner and Norris, in Lather 1991). From here, I hoped that they realise the politicised personal self for future negotiations of the self. However, due to time limitation in a doctoral research like this, this was carried out with only willing participants. Further, few participants were willing to commit further time despite the personal gain promised, due to their own busy schedules.

Thirdly, to counter the time factor in the second point above, I opened up a space for further discussion in the form of an electronic mail list. This extends the two-way discussion between researcher and researched into a forum. The ensuing discussion provides an avenue for the participants to ask me questions, construct and validate their own theories, test the practicality
of these theoretical conceptualisations, and answer other questions raised, while more gaps in our understanding of Chineseness may be exposed. I hope that this forum, which will extend beyond the duration of this research, will enable the participants to develop skills for critical analysis and political action. The forum for collaborative theorising does not seek to produce a neat theoretical framework. Instead it seeks to lay side by side the different stories and voices and readings, leaving gaps open should a reconciled reading not be negotiated. Lather (1991) argues that the imperfect answers in these gaps serve as entry points for the critique of ideology.

**Shared stories**

Traditional views on generalisability argue for the production of a universal set of data that can be applied to all contexts. Postmodern generalisability focuses more on the particularities in every set of data produced. The specific situations in every story shared draw us to conclude that some data cannot be transferred across generally to every context. If the experience cannot be transferred across to another’s world, what is its value, you may ask? I hold the postmodern reinscription of using the specific story shared to give readers a vicarious experience of that which they may otherwise not know about.

The virtual realities of particular and shared experiences serve to inform multicultural Australia. These stories are not just for diasporic Chinese women but also for men and other ethnic groups who can glean from these for their own particular negotiations. This is because all of us dwell in a liminal space at one point or another, and some have always and will always dwell in this space. Liminality is not unique to the diasporic community in Australia since “transversal connections between individuals are an everyday activity” (Probyn 1996, p. 6). Probyn adds that plagued by the need to belong and the politics of polarisation that go beyond the skin in so many of life’s arena, we are already always placed on the outside. Thus, the liminal experience is tasted by all in one form or another. Although the specifics are not generalisable to another specific context, the vicarious experience presented gives us insight into our own particular practices and serve to enlighten us.

Without going to the extreme of universalising experiences or of contradicting myself, there is also another sense in which the specific sharing educates us. In many ways, our stories are sited

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196 The initial interviews and surveys conducted were not dialogic so as not to impose my views on the participants at too early a stage. Subsequent discussions were more interactive.
in an in-between space of singularity and generality. No experience can ever be fully separated from other experiences. In other words, no experience is absolutely singularised or absolutely generalised. There will always be that iota of sharedness, like “invisible chains” (Yang, in Lo, J. 2000, p. 164), when the events of one specific context are translated to another specific context. Probyn (1996) cites Deleuze in arguing that these moments are interconnected: “Singularities, in their connection with the whole, are subject to other singularities. They are affected by these other singularities; in their interaction with them, they are transformed both into structures and into other singularities” (p. 69). I borrow from Probyn to argue that the element of interstitiaility in our experiences comes from the specific and singular being situated ambiguously within and alongside a narrative that is generalised. It is this interstitiaility that gives us that transposed wisdom as we taste it vicariously. *Wisdom* acquires another level of meaning here because of the selective transference required in recognising that it is our common contexts that give a sharedness to the experiences, but that the experience is not a representative experience.

As images which intertwine alongside each other, they hit me, they move me. (Probyn 1996, p. 90)

**Nullifying narrative negatives**

Despite the concerns raised above, I believe that there is a narrative turn in the postcolonial and postmodern worlds. I assert that the use of autoethnography and the autobiographical narrative will become a postmodern staple in research. This is because for research to be a social act, autoethnography presents researchers with a method that collects data in a more natural setting, compared to the controlled environments that disturb the natural and impair that which is collected (Kohli 1981). As such, the narrative acts as an appropriate tool for capturing and analysing human experiences (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Polkinghorne 1995; Sumson 1999). It also acts to bridge the gap between researcher and researched, as the researcher’s own narratives become the object of analysis in the autoethnographic approach.

The autobiography, being self-representational and culturally situated, is increasingly transdisciplinary as a critical practice (Gilmore 1994). I am thus not surprised that it has been ferried into the ethnographic field as a method of enquiry. Postmodernism, according to Gilmore, has broadened the scope of the autobiography significantly arguing that the postmodern autobiography is a “site of identity production” (p. 4). As such, despite its
limitations, I believe that it serves this thesis well in capturing the stories shared by my participants and myself within the politics of autoethnography.

As far as I’m concerned, my text is flawed not when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own. I keep my tale as wide open as I can. (Mairs 1994, p. 74)

The participants’ profiles

The Chinese have been migrating to Australia from before the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which began an era of official restrictive immigration policies to keep Australia racially pure and white. The Act, aimed to restrict non-European migrants or coloured races from Australia, devised a dictation test as a discriminatory tool against those who were not proficient in European languages (Shen 2001). The Act also kept Chinese women off the Australian shores. Further, China’s own imperial policy and family tradition prevented the women from following their husbands (Shen 2001). The few women who did arrive held a subordinate position to the Chinese men. Unlike the pioneer Chinese women, the women who participated in my research migrated over the period of 1968-1995. They thus experienced a very different Australia comparatively. Many were already enjoying a more equal position with men due to feminist movements worldwide, and many were educated with qualifications for employment, unlike their pioneer counterparts.

Despite the political movements to dismantle the White Australia Policy, the attitudes lingered amongst the Australian people and were harder to eradicate. Arriving from different countries and at different periods in Australia’s history, the Chinese have responded to their new home in a host of different ways. Some have responded proactively to racial vilification, others not so successfully. Some have embraced Australian ways while others have kept to traditional customs. Brown and Foot (1994a) state that each migrant negotiates what is valued in the initial culture as s/he relates to the new culture:

Asians abroad must decide whether to keep all or part of their culture, belief systems, worship patterns and traditions of domestic interaction: They have to

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197 The restrictions placed on immigration were policed by the Immigration Restriction Act, or the White Australia Policy, which was held in effect from 1901 till it was thrown out in 1973. Prohibited from immigration to Australia were the insane, diseased persons, prostitutes, criminals, and manual workers. See http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/08abolition.htm.

198 The Dictation Test was abolished in 1958 but it severely restricted Chinese numbers and migration to Australia. See Shen (2001).
respond to the pressures and opportunities of the society and culture in which they find themselves, particularly as their children are educated in the host society’s educational systems. … What seems clear is that most Asians who migrate continue to value their inherited and imported culture and its manifestations very greatly and take pains to ensure its survival and inheritance by the younger generation, though there is considerable willingness to accept selectively from other traditions and practices. (Brown and Foot 1994a, p. 8)

These processes are familiar to the migrant who experiences the need to constantly negotiate between one set of values and another, not necessarily between initial and new cultures only, but from an array of value systems bombarding us.

In this thesis, I explore the negotiations of Chineseness by the Chinese women living in Australia at the turn of this millennium, focusing particularly on the diasporic Chinese women from only Malaysia and Singapore, for four reasons. First, demographically, Singapore is a majority Chinese society while Malaysia is a large minority Chinese society. Wickberg (1994) states that migrant size and concentration contribute significantly to how they adjust to their new location. Secondly, this supposed homogeneous group gives evidence to the heterogeneity that is prevalent in any Chinese community. The Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore are also twice-removed from China, an aspect that is significant to their negotiations of Chineseness. Thirdly and more personally, I spent most of my formative years in these two countries prior to my family’s migration to Australia. Thus, the experiences of the women from these countries would be possibly most similar to mine. Fourthly, I include the stories of other diasporic Chinese women living in Australia, to more fully problematise many of the issues I have personally confronted. In an address to the New South Wales History Council in Sydney, just two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attack on New York, Ang cites historian Davison as saying: “Active and ethical citizenship depends… upon the imaginative capacity to look at the world through the eyes of others” (in Ang 2001a). Ang extends this by calling for a focus on the intertwining histories of our diverse heritage to unite the divisive ethnic cells within Australia today, and to link us to the outer world. Thus, in learning about these other women’s experiences, I learn about my own, and in so doing, I hope to present readers with a bridge into this other culture, to provide insight into our interlocking histories so as to encourage unity within diversity. This thesis is therefore as much a personal journey as it is an interrogation into

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109 By diasporic here, I mean those who have voluntarily migrated to Australia to settle here permanently, a characteristic common amongst this group of Australian migrants. Unlike exiles or refugees, who are classified as involuntary, I include those who migrated with their family at a young age in this category.
the constructions of Chineseness, by examining its negotiations in the lives of other diasporic Chinese women living in Australia, with implications for an inclusive Australian identity politics.

As mentioned, the women interviewed are from Malaysia and Singapore, countries in which Chineseness has already been once removed from China’s version of Chineseness. In some ways, what this means is that the Chineseness practised in those countries is a version that is possibly either already cemented in time to an era of Chineseness practised in China, perhaps according to the forefathers’ migration period, or translated according to influences from the native communities within those countries. Ang’s insight is helpful here:

Truth is always partial. What we get represented as “our” history is never simple fact; it is always steeped in selective memory and interpretation, driven by ideology and by an all too common desire to put a positive spin on one’s own past. The same course of events can be historicised in very different, even contrasting ways. We never look back to the past without a particular lens; fact and interpretation are always inevitably merged. This also means, of course, that what we choose to commemorate as “our heritage” is never innocent, never neutral or objective.

International migration made me acutely and viscerally aware of the inescapability of subjective perspective, and it has made me permanently suspicious of nationalist histories which present a self-absorbed, totally self-glorifying or self-serving picture of the nation’s past. (Ang 2001a)

Thus, from what is remembered, the transplanted Chineseness was practised as it also became translated when it melded with other cultural practices in those countries. Upon the women’s migration to Australia, the various versions of Chineseness that developed probably became further transplanted and translated. Thus, although the Chinese from China brought with them the familial and interpersonal relationship norms associated with Confucianism, those from Malaysia and Singapore brought such norms which were twice-removed from the original homeland. The norms that Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese migrants brought with them:

Stress the importance of personal networks and reciprocal assistance as the basis of action rather than more general and abstract principles or institutions. Education is

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200 In a very general sense, these countries also share a similar history with Australia, due to the British colonial experience, with Malaysia, Singapore and Australia all having had a non-aggressive colonial history. I use transplanted here to indicate a fixed form of culture that is often brought with the migrants due to their desire to preserve what is perceived as the better qualities from the initial culture. I also use translated, instead of diluted, because the latter suggests that there is an original Chineseness that can be lost. Translated, on the other hand, connotes a change which takes the context into account.
prized for both its personally transforming qualities and its capacity for enhancing familial social status. (Wickberg 1994, p. 22)

Norms also came from literature and models of middle-class urban life in China. Hard work and long-term family strategies for getting ahead are included. However, being in a different location as a minority, and having an increasing sense of alienation from the Chineseness that is imposed as the performative Chineseness, begins to impact on one’s ethnic subjectification and sense of belonging. As Ang states:

For migrants, … “history” is always a complicated thing, and their relationship to it even more so! … because for migrants any national(ist) history – both that of “homeland” and of “host country” – becomes relativised, stripped from its persuasive absoluteness (Ang 2001a, Ang’s italics).

Despite this apparent dislocation from the monolithic Chineseness that is often presented to the world, traditional Chinese cultural practices remain alive in Australia, although these are foreign to iconoclastic China (Shen 2001). These pages reveal that many diasporic Chinese women are consciously and unconsciously “infused with a strong dose of Confucian familism [and that their practices are still] intimately intertwined with Confucian ethics” (Tu 1998b, p. 135). This is contrary to what I had contemplated as I first embarked on this research journey. I was adamant that one such as I, a banana or “westernised Chinese woman,” indoctrinated with Western ideologies, values, practices, and dreams since my parents’ generation, would not have been influenced by Confucianism. Having also personally embraced Christianity as a teenager, I thought that I was immune from Confucianism. However, as I journeyed on, I discovered that despite all that, Confucian thought has influenced me, too.202 It should come as no surprise since Confucianism was the predominant philosophy in government, elite education, and moral discourse for centuries before Western philosophy influenced East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century (Tu 1998a). In fact, it has been said that:

Confucian values and norms have never ceased to be defining characteristics of the Chinese way of life. Many Chinese have professed to be Taoist, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian, but seldom have they abandoned their Confucian roots. From the time that Confucianism was generally accepted by the Chinese populace (second century B. C.), it has become an integral part of Chinese society as a whole and of what it means to be Chinese. (Tu 1998a, pp. 7-8)

202 For a historical outline of Confucianism, see Tu (1998a).
This socioeconomic-political system that influences different strata of the Chinese society – from the individual, up to the family, the school, community, to the state and kingdom – has survived through the centuries due to its chameleon characteristics, and continues to impact on our thought processes even today. In the form of the cultural semantics that operate to inform our behaviour and attitudes, Confucianism blends with other philosophical values adopted. Oftentimes the dominant cultural semantics at work is not even recognisable or identifiable. We do not question it. This is similar to what Confucian scholar, Hsun Tzu, stresses as the evil human nature that counts on the rational mind for morality (Tu 1998a). As Tu states: “We become moral by voluntarily harnessing our desires and passions to act in accordance with societal norms. This is alien to our nature but perceived by our mind as necessary for both survival and well-being” (p. 17). This survival instinct then ushers us to perform uncritically the expected norms and to conform unthinkingly, and so continue to nourish the oppressive societal structures. Therefore, while it is the rational that we call on to perform our moral obligations, it is the nonrational that influences and even controls how we perform the moral and other negotiations of Chineseness. It is thus necessary to interrogate the social forces that impact on our practices in the liminal spaces of rationality and nonrationality.

Other aspects of the participants’ profile consist of their Australian residential locations and age. The participants come from across four Australian states (Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria) and the Australian Capital Territory. They were contacted through my personal and professional networks, through the Internet as well as from a field trip to Canberra and Sydney. Like Shen (2001) I found that it was easier to make contact with participants in smaller cities. I was surprised to find that many were not keen to speak about themselves. These usually responded by saying that they were confused about their ethnicity, or that they were not Chinese enough, and could not therefore contribute soundly to the research. Others refused participation with a curt “Not interested.” Some were too busy to commit time to face-to-face and survey interviews. In response to this lack of willing participants, I extended the age from 20 to 30 to include an age range of 15 to 71 years. Parental consent was sought for the under-aged participants and parental presence was also requested during the interviews.

The personal narratives are gathered from 39 participants over a period of 15 months. The interviews are in the form of face-to-face interviews (13 participants), surveys that are followed up by internet interviews (22 participants), and interview transcripts (4 participants) from the
National Library of Australia, based on interviews conducted by Diana Giese for the “Post-war Chinese Australians oral history project.” The face-to-face interviews are semi-structured and focus on similar questions raised in the survey, which covered open topics on education, employment, family, migration, ethnicity, partner, children, leisure activities, language, and beliefs and values, to elicit as much background from the participant’s life as possible. These are conducted over one to four, each approximately two-hour long interview sessions. The survey interviews are based on a set of fixed questions, which are then followed up by further semi-structured questions. The interview transcripts based on Giese’s work are selected on the basis of the participant’s initial country and the interviews’ relevance to this research. As the classical controlled environment is not within the methodological framework of this thesis, the data collection used various methods with the aim to elicit initial responses for follow-up questions. Further, as all participants, bar one, are heterosexual, the data are handled according to a heteronormative perspective except where relevant.  

I completed the survey questions and included myself as one of the participants but my identity, apart from the autoethnographic narratives, remains anonymous in amongst all the other participants to remove the hierarchical structure between researcher and researched. It also allows me to include data involving family members without necessarily divulging their identity. The autoethnographic narratives are based on my experiences. The material is gathered from diaries, letters, and journals kept as well as my recollections from memory.

**Autoethnographic analysis**

In this section, I outline the processes involved in how the narrative is used to present the data collected for this research. As previously stated, the narrative text in this thesis refers to autoethnographic narratives, written by and spoken by the researcher, and personal narratives, by the participants. As the personal narratives are also self-stories by the participants, they have been referred to as autobiographical texts in the previous sections. However, for ease of differentiating between the two sources of data, in this section, the terms “autoethnography” and “personal narratives” are used to refer to their respective sources.

The mode of analysis used to examine the narratives within the autoethnographic paradigm is narrative inquiry (Conle 2000; Hones 1998; Poirier and Ayres 1997). This enlightens the

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203 Details on the individual participants are provided in Appendix 1, on p. 348.
relationship between self and society in order to understand both. Sarris (cited in Hones 1998) says:

In understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final and transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both.

The autoethnographic texts are written by using Ellis’ (1999) systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall. These processes enable me to understand my past experiences by attending to physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions (Ellis 1999), to capture the details as close to the experience as possible. Revisiting the scenes produce other details that may have been forgotten (Ellis 1999). Further, the “introspective homework” (Ellis 1997, p. 131) allows me to engage with the dialogues and disputes within myself. Following the introspection, I move out to capture the recollected memories from a cultural position, writing it up as autoethnographical narratives, using the devices of dialogue, internal monologue, flashbacks, setting, and plot as required. These narratives are woven into the thesis fabric according to themes. This in-and-out movement of the camera produces effective autoethnographic work (Ellis 1999).

The autoethnographic narratives are presented as stories without analysis or with analysis. First, the use of autoethnographic narratives without analysis encourages multiple and idiosyncratic readings (Middleton 1995), although it must be noted that no text is objective in the scientific sense, as may be implied by the fiction of multiplicity. My agenda as a researcher should be evident in this apparent openness in leaving certain texts unanalysed. The open text, thus, enables the reader to move in and out of the story of the text and their own story, comparing experiences as they read (Ellis 1997). In the act of reading, similarities and differences emerge and if the text is well written, the “threshold’ crossed would lead them into their own homes” (Mairs, in Ellis 1997, p. 131). This is what Ellis (1997) refers to as a penetration of the head and heart, and this leads to readings that hopefully challenge normalised reading practices.

Ellis (1995) also argues that apart from traditional analysis, analysis is evident through the narrative itself and its use of dialogue. This is due to autoethnography’s overt analytic purpose and frame (Ellis 1999). The selection of details and the way the narrative is positioned alongside the other participants’ narratives are all part of the process of more covert analysis. Citing
Lopate, Ellis (1997) states that "the 'plot' of [her] story, its drama and suspense, consisted of inviting readers to move with [her] through [her] defences toward deeper levels of examination" (p. 131). The autoethnographic narrative invites the reader to "relive the tale with [me], not interpret or analyze it" (Van Maanen 1988, p. 103). Frank (in Ellis 1999) states that reliving a story enables the reader to resonate with the story, to reflect on it, and to become a part of the story. This process is powerful and evocative.

Secondly, some autoethnographic narratives allow me as the researcher to analyse or make explicit my own norms and normative assumptions. The conceptual framework of liminality is used as a prism to analyse the data. I consider the stories shared by contemplating the instances of liminality and/or essentialist notions of how Chineseness is practised and rehearsed by the diasporic Chinese women living in Australia. Furthermore, Hutchins and Vaught (1997) state that such autobiographical work allows one to detect changes in one's views and form a good basis for self-surveillance. These changes may be due to my interaction with the other women's stories (Ellis 1999). The following event below, for example, was written first in 1999 and then again in 2001, as autoethnographic narratives. The revision indicates a change in my theoretical position on Chineseness:

1999 Version

My friend said to me just the other day, "You're Australian."
Having been quite comfortable with being an in-between person in the past, I was suddenly confronted with a new pigeonhole. I felt unusually unsettled by his statement and found myself asking, "Why am I Australian?"
"You are, aren't you? I mean you're not typically Chinese, are you?"
"You mean I'm unconventional in my cooking?"
He couldn't quite explain how I was Australian but the point of the exchange made me uncomfortable.

2001 Version

"You're Australian," my friend said to me one day. I smiled and then thought, "I'm not!" and surprised myself. In the past I would have welcomed such a comment but I didn't that time and wondered why.
"You don't cook Chinese, do you?" he added. "No, I don't but yes, I do," I said and noted the annoyance in my voice.
As I pondered on it, I realised why the exchange irked me.204

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204 I have used the 1999 version in the introduction to this thesis despite the change in my position, to expose the binarism that was evident in my initial position.
The above example gives me an opportunity not to silence the competing voices from within me (Ellis 1997). Rather than to produce one version with one voice, it allows the multiple voices to speak to me. The contradictory and ambiguous thoughts and feelings caught in the interstices expose the social conventions and commitments that may have narrowed my vision of the world (Ellis 1997). This revelation challenges the power structures framing the various voices, and enables me to track my own cultural theorising. In the latter version, it has become clear to me that the discussion unsettled me because it was forcing me to commit to one side of the fence, something I was not prepared to do. The simplistic banana-ism I had adhered to previously became suddenly more complicated in this conversation and I became more aware of the complexities in my ethnic subjectification. I realised my different practices are not essentialised but are rehearsed according to the relevant contexts.

It is also interesting how I had changed the construction of the dialogue in terms of details captured. This further exposes the constructedness of the text. Where appropriate, the dialogue and other descriptive language used in my autoethnographical narratives include non-standard Australian English or other languages to convey the nuances found in other dialects and languages, to portray the events and characters as vividly as possible. Ellis (1997) argues that sometimes a line of dialogue captures the moment more effectively than any description or analytical discourse.

The participants’ personal narratives, on the other hand, are analysed conventionally according to emerging themes to evidence the academic rigour required for a thesis. The transcripts of the interviews are coded using the qualitative software called Non-numerical Unstructured Data: Indexing searching and theorizing (NUDist). Searches are performed on the coded data for patterns to emerge. As outlined in previous chapters, these personal narratives are also analysed to examine their relationship with the cultural semantics informing their construction. Despite the conventional analysis, the personal narratives are presented non-conventionally where appropriate. For example, autoethnographic texts may form as interludes to these. This is to achieve the effect of always reminding the reader of the constructedness of the thesis genre, with the purpose of subverting the convention as previously discussed.

The data chapters in this thesis, therefore, perform the liminal concept framing it. First, the inclusion of myself as a researcher in the data collection process and analysis blurs the
boundary between researcher and researched. Secondly, the data is written up in a discourse that slips between the academic and narrative voices. It exposes the researcher’s presence, rather than camouflaging it (Ellis 1997). Thirdly, the form of the chapters, in short, is hybrid. The form evolves with the needs of the data so that these are presented in the most effective way. Thus, in some chapters, a conventional approach is taken. In others, the researcher may noticeably intrude the pages by integrating autoethnographic events into the participant’s story. Each chapter may be altogether unique (Ellis 1999), but not discrete as they are interlinked through cross-references. This is due to the nature of life being a complex web that cannot be discretely sectioned into neat categories. Every part of life is always a little of this and a little of that, and one part affects the other accordingly. Finally, the liminality reflected in the form of the data chapters is also the prism that is used to analyse the data themselves.
Chapter 4

Good girls vs bad babes

This chapter interrogates the intricate interrelationship of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in the diasporic women’s negotiations of Chineseness in Australia. I examine this against the dichotomous cultural semantics of the constructed good and bad Chinese woman. I argue that those who embrace the cultural semantics of the traditional good woman are perceived to be Chinese, while those who assert modern practices of femininity and sexuality are viewed as unChinese by members of the Australian and Chinese communities. In short, differences in the women’s practices are linked to questions of being Chinese or unChinese. In short, the differences in expressions of femininity and sexuality are ethnicised. I assert that such binaric constructions of diasporic Chinese women’s options for negotiations of gender and sexuality “mark and help police supposedly fixed, natural divisions between the powerful and the disempowered” (Pile, in Law 1997, p. 109). I argue that these need to be disrupted through the deployment of the liminal space so that we do not collude with the power structures that control our negotiations of who we are as diasporic Chinese women living in Australia.

Ho zha boh

According to Weedon (1997), dominant discourses on female sexuality are often based on notions of a woman’s place being in the home. Further, good women are supposedly “sexually passive and virginally modest in their self-presentation” (p. 36). The Chinese female subjectivity likewise has often been constructed according to dominant images of the good Chinese woman, or ho zha boh, and its reverse, the bad woman, or heow zha boh. The things that one should do, or avoid, to be good are encapsulated in the following extract taken from an international Chinese community forum board set up in the USA:

As a girl, you should learn to do house work. Sweep the floor … do cooking for your parents. … If you have a job, it is very important for you to get along well with your colleagues.

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**Ho zha boh** is the Chinese Hokkien dialect for the female gender. Its more specific meaning derives from the speaker’s relationship to the person referred to. Thus, when used by a father, it means "good daughter." When used by a husband, it means "good wife." Its other meaning of "good woman" depends on the speaker’s position and context.

**The Chinese Community Forum (CCF) was initially set up for post-Tiananmen Chinese students in the USA, and still draws most of its volunteers and readership from there. However, in its ten-year history, there has been a marginally transnational editorship comprising of volunteers from the UK, Australia, Hong Kong, and sometimes from China.**
Be kind and have self-respect and do not speak and behave skittishly in front of men. If possible, do not stay alone with one man, in case those meddlesome women make irresponsible remarks behind your back. Wear suitable clothes and do not dress casually on formal occasions. Before you go out ... do not make up too heavily.

As a married woman, you are distracted by a lot of chores, but you still should not leave your job. Once you give up your job, you cannot be independent and equal to your husband in terms of your economic status. If you have a child, you should find time to take care of your child and educate him or her.

And be sure not to neglect your husband. Try to comfort and help him whenever he fails in his career or meets any difficulty. Do not always complain about some trivial matters when your husband comes back after a day of hard work. (Laura 2001)

Prescribed roles for the Chinese woman in the above extract are conveyed in a normalising fashion. The opening sentence assigns domestic duties to the female on the home front, and a submissive or amiable attitude in the work environment. Economic independence can be gained through one’s profession, according to the extract above, but this does not free one from domestic responsibilities as a daughter, wife, and mother. The daughter’s role is to exhibit filial qualities by caring for her parents. The role of the wife is in submission to the husband whose needs are above hers because he is positioned as the bread winner. Equality with one’s spouse is only possible through one’s independent economic status. There are also certain codes of conduct that control the woman’s behaviour with men, suggesting preservation or appearance of chastity as a top priority. These normalised constructions of femininity and sexuality form images of the ho zha boh or virtuous woman, which serve masculine privileges.

A feminist critique reveals that these images are often attributed to and adopted by the Chinese woman in an essentialising discourse that needs to be problematised so that the category woman becomes a tool to “unsettle the very notion of ‘tradition’ itself” (Chow 1991, p. 52). As Chow (1991) argues, in citing Scott, a feminist historian, problematising the discourse exposes the power relationships that exist to subjugate women. However, as it currently stands, Chow adds, the question of woman is normalised or neglected due to greater goals such as reform or revolution in issues such as “freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centers for

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207 Whilst these norms are attributed to the Chinese woman, I note that these are not limited to women of Chinese descent. It is useful to refer to Aveling for a comparison of these issues with Australian women of other ethnic backgrounds. See Aveling (1995).

208 This is interesting in itself because another version of traditionalism may be that the woman relies on her husband to provide for her needs.

209 On the virtuous woman, see p. 129.
children, equality on the job, etc.” (Kristeva 1981b, p. 137). Though issues necessary for discussion and attention, I would say that this preoccupation and subsequent neglect of woman itself, further secures the position of the dominant forces, which are outside woman. Thus, it becomes a survival matter to unearth the cultural semantics that operate to disempower and marginalise women.

Tied in with the constructed prescription for woman is the notion of perceptions. Said (1978) signalled this in Orientalism through his critique of the East and West as a mirror of the binaric other. This “system of dualistic reasoning” (Trinh 1989) still operates to violate our minds today because of the choices that are enforced upon us through its logic.

Who’s that girl?

The power of binaric logic in how we discern a complicated world is evident in my personal predicament in early negotiations of Chineseness. Trained to think in dualistic terms, complex interrelationships were reduced to make invisible the power structures that were operating to disempower me. A simple aspect of empowerment is the knowledge of who one is. Disempowerment can thus come in the form of being assigned or adopting the position of an other within one’s community or an other community. It can also come in the form of a perpetual navel-gazing entanglement where one is continually asking if one is Chinese or not Chinese. Such a focus blinds us to the real question that needs to be addressed: “Who is ‘seeing’ whom, and how?” (Chow 1991, p. 3) The answer to this helps to establish the power relationships between the seer and the seen. However, the seer and seen do not stand in fixed positions, as we are fooled into believing. Due to our dually impaired perception of the world, we are trained to accept stable relationships of power that are in fixed binaric hierarchies. The relationship between the seen and the seer is a reciprocal and interdependent relationship. The oppressed or subjugated can move to repossession, given the right conditions. The dominant can choose to surrender the hegemonic status, though this is less likely. Acknowledging power as slippery sites creates a pipe relationship. This piped power allows the forces to flow in both ways. Sometimes the other becomes the seer, and sometimes the seen becomes the other. Who sees whom, or the focus, are always changing. To establish the pipe relationship, however, requires a risk – on the subjugated other’s part especially – in moving across the established boundaries, of questioning the naturalised, of seeing that the crossover is already constructed.

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210 See footnote 178 for explanation of the pipe symbol, in Chapter 3 “Researcher | Researched,” p. 91.
The awareness of the unstable position of seer and seen is liberating as we resist the cultural semantics that locate us in subdued sites. Previously trained to think of power as flowing in one direction, one of the questions that plagued me as a teenager was how we, as Chinese women, were perceived by our male counterparts. My earlier encounters with members of the opposite sex had made me consider the unwritten codes of conduct that I was obviously unfamiliar with, due to the possible gaps in my socialisation process as a result of my relocation to Australia. In that old paradigm, I felt compelled to conform to the operative cultural semantics instead of challenging them as voyeuristic images constructed to perpetuate the male hegemony.

While collecting the data for this research, I hypothesised that diasporic women are perceived by some diasporic men in binarc terms – traditional/modern, Chinese/westernised, or virtuous/wild. To test this hypothesis, I sent an e-mail out to my Chinese male contacts in Australia with this question: "Tell me what you think of the different women with Chinese background whom you know in Australia. What are they like? How do you perceive them?" The men who responded categorised the diasporic women according to cultural practice, age, and geographical sites. This forms a useful base for my interrogation of Chineseness, as it informs against ethnocentric, sinocentric, and other "culturally coded perspectives" (Chow 1991, p. 4) that violate the diasporic woman's ethnic subjectification. The ensuing discussion also displays the impossibility of dissecting the question of gender from ethnicity and other related factors when we investigate issues related to diasporic Chinese women. Further, while the ensuing discussion on the women may appear to be ahistorical constructions of essentialist categories of the women, this is deliberate to facilitate my subsequent deconstruction of these types. Thus, while my participants’ perceptions may be entrenched, my presentation of these images is to expose them as problematic categories.

**Typical traditionalist**

I labelled the first group of women identified by the male respondents as *traditionalists*, for ease of discourse. The men generally viewed this group as belonging to the older generation, of holding strong family values, and expressing filial piety toward their parents. According to them, that although the traditional Chinese woman is steeped in cultural values, she is possibly insular and conservative. In regards to her morals, she is "too overly protected by her parents" (Steve: 26 May 2000). She is not the type who would "go out too late at night" (Ken: 29 May 2000).
While the traditionalists are virtuous, they are not necessarily better mothers as they tend to offload their role as mothers to maids, according to the men. She is dependent on her partner and is not very independent in her thinking. Unable to reason for herself, she is uncritically submissive to her partner. Her lack of independence is not very appealing as she is found to be lacking in her own ideas or opinions.\textsuperscript{213} The qualities of the traditionalists are regarded as a consequence of living in the Asian region, a cultural semantics that naturalises ethnicity to geographical space (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Meerwald 2001). I would add that the males’ description of the traditionalist is possibly influenced by their view of their mothers,\textsuperscript{214} an assumption that is more evident in the images offered by the women I interviewed. The men’s categorisation of the women does not consider issues of class, education, religion, or other factors, but are very simplistic.

Anita, who considers herself to be a modern woman, describes the traditional girl in relation to what she has observed in her mother’s extended family:

\begin{quote}
The life of traditional Chinese women, like my mum’s sisters, revolves around cooking, cleaning at home and their husband, and not really pursuing anything else other than home. Women should be a certain way and should not be outgoing; they should not wear short skirts; they should not be going out late at night because it’s not the right thing for women to do. That’s very much my mum’s family’s thinking. (Anita: 2492-2499)
\end{quote}

This is very similar to the image of the traditional girl painted at the beginning of this chapter.\textsuperscript{215} Clara, likewise, relates to images of her mother as she draws on the domestic duties in her description of the traditional woman. It is interesting to note that like Anita, Clara dissociates herself from this identification:

\begin{quote}
For my mum, she is a housewife and she is quite Chinese in her view of herself as a woman and a wife to my dad. So she will do everything for my dad and she thinks she is responsible for his basic needs. (Clara: 776-779)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{212} Luke and Carrington found that white Australian men’s preference for a Chinese wife was based on this image of the feminine, meek, and gentle Chinese woman, as opposed to the forward, aggressive, independent, loud, boisterous “Aussie Sheila” who was preoccupied with gaining equal rights. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 10).

\textsuperscript{213} It is useful to turn to my discussion of Xiao Mang, from Jiang Zidan’s novel, \textit{For whom the smoke rises}, on the male hegemony in operation here. See “Entrapment” in this chapter, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{214} See discussion of the role the mother plays in the life of some Chinese males, in the section “Modern Miss,” in this chapter, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{215} See p. 124.
Anita and Clara appear to reject the traditional role for Chinese women in their description of such women as an other. Kelly adds to this by signalling domesticity as the gauge to traditionalism: "I am not sacrificial as compared to the traditional Chinese mother or woman, and am not very domesticated. I am very unconventional in my approach to housework, cooking, and general housekeeping" (Kelly: 1445-1448). In rejecting the traditional gender role, it appears that women like Kelly would practice a different version of domesticity. Some, it would be reasonable to deduce due to the binaric bind, may even reject domesticity altogether to further dissociate themselves from being labelled as traditionalists.\(^{216}\) To understand this rejection, it may be appropriate to consider the extreme end of domesticity, which is the issue of sacrificial obedience to spouse and children, as seen in Esther’s description of her mother:

> My mother is a one hundred per cent woman. She is really, really like a China woman. She does everything and she helps the husband and the family, the children to grow up, and she can stand everything – what her husband does to her. All the time she would just keep quiet and not do anything at all, just keep quiet and help the family. Very good woman.

> She worked and had ten babies. She never studied. At five she just knew that she was already this guy’s wife. “I have to do what I can. I’m already [his] wife. I can’t do [what I want] at all. Just listen to what they say.”\(^{217}\) She helped with homework, housework, cooking, and they had a lot of chicken, some pigs – she had to feed them, do the washing and all the housework, and she had to do them well.

> At 17 years she married my father, and in the second year, she became pregnant, and nearly every year, pregnant and pregnant, kept having babies. After the baby is one month, she had to go out and work, from 8 o’clock to 5 o’clock. When she got home, she had to cook and look after the baby at night. All the China women were like that – from China. They were the really, really China woman type. (Esther: 179-184; 198-216)

Esther’s mother is depicted as the fully domesticated mother who sacrifices her own needs for the family. The notion of sacrifice in the woman’s role as wife and mother is part of the Confucian regime to reinforce the power structure within the family, and possibly to romanticise the link of the virtuous woman to the geographical site of China.\(^{218}\) However, many Chinese women do not realise that the “hierarchical social structure was also designed to reward the passive acceptance of the status quo by subordinates” (Slote 1998, p. 39). So silently, many women conform to the image of the ho zha boh or “virtuous woman” by living a

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\(^{216}\) They are not necessarily rejecting their ethnicity but are keen to distance themselves from tradition.

\(^{217}\) They refers to the in-laws.

\(^{218}\) See also the notion of martyrdom in this sacrificial role and the emotional blackmail that is unleashed on the children in (Slote and De Vos 1998, pp. 40-45).
sacrificial life, as doing so identifies her as the ideal good woman.\footnote{Chow refers to the \textit{ho zha boh} as \textit{lie nü}, or “notable women,” a term used in the Song era with homonyms that mean “stridently moral” or “pious.” Both homonymic terms were used in latter dynastic reigns in China (Davis 2001) to establish a moral model for the Chinese woman. See Chow (1991).} We see how Dorothy chooses to describe herself as a traditional woman: \textit{“We are good cooks and are friendly and helpful. We keep our high standard of morality and we don’t swear a lot. I don’t swear at all”} (Dorothy: 741-743). Dorothy prides herself in identifying as a \textit{ho zha boh} due to the assumptions of chastity associated with that cultural semantics. For some diasporic women, these markers of virtue are rejected, due to the oppressive practices such cultural semantics impose as depicted in Esther’s mother’s attempt to be virtuous, and alternative practices are sought in their negotiations of what it means to be a good Chinese woman. There also appears to be a scale of Chineseness that exists on a continuum from the \textit{very} Chinese to the \textit{not so} Chinese woman.\footnote{This scale suggests the idea of a progressive trajectory towards an essentialised \textbf{better or purer} Chinese. See my discussion on p. 58.}

It is pertinent to question what the virtuous woman represents to understand why women like Dorothy or Esther’s mother would conform to such an oppressive cultural semantics, and I borrow from Hing’s (1998) sense of morality to interrogate the norms at work here:

\begin{quote}
Morality is … obedience to the law and the recipe for a trouble-free life of conformity. It is assumed that people need to be frightened and forced to be moral; that they prefer being forced to a life spent in the agony of interminable uncertainty; that to make them moral one needs first to write the laws and then to instil discipline in conformity with the spirit and the letter of these laws. (Hing 1998)
\end{quote}

Being virtuous promises a peaceful life. This promise enables one to conform to the written and unwritten moral codes in society \textit{freely}, as we can see in how proudly Dorothy identifies herself as a \textit{ho zha boh}. She is keen to establish her conformity to the \textit{lie nü} without any prompting. There is the imagined set of rules she has constructed for herself from those “inscribed for [her] by significant authority figures such as teachers, political leaders, and parents” (Hing 1998). She monitors her own conformity to these rules through the presence of an imagined law enforcer, which could take the form of what Althusser lists as the church, the school, the family, the law, the political system, the trade union, the media, the arts, and sporting activities (in Chow 1991). Thus, the cultural semantics of the virtuous woman represent an idea of an ideal woman that
every other Chinese woman should model. Dorothy’s conformity to this norm is presumed to be voluntary, possibly due to her fear of reprisal by an imagined community police.\textsuperscript{221}

The existence of the virtuous woman cultural semantics thus represents an invisible force that needs to be exposed. Although there are similarities in these ideas of what the virtuous woman is, there are also differences in its emphasis for each woman. While Anita emphasises domesticity and chastity in her idea of the traditional woman, Clara focuses on domesticity in reference to the marital relationship. Kelly weaves in the issue of sacrifice in the roles as wife and mother, and Dorothy concentrates on doing the right thing morally. The silenced aspect of these descriptions questions who the hegemonic ideals of the virtuous woman are for. If there is unpoliced fear in Dorothy’s rush to conform, then it is pertinent to ask who benefits from conformity to the \textit{ho zha boh}. The women described may feel that they gain in terms of fulfilment in meeting the needs of those they serve in their selfless fashion, but to measure one’s self-worth in these terms is to be as guilty of valuing self in salary terms. In fact, there are gains indeed “minimal though they might have been ... primarily in terms of a sense of intrapsychic security through the assurance that one’s destiny was determined elsewhere by an all-knowing and benign authority” (Slote 1998, p. 39). To yield to the cultural semantics unquestioningly due to the insecurity and guilt felt for not complying then is to nurture the male hegemony common in many Confucian societies. Those who are alerted to this invisible hegemonic force respond by rejecting the traditional \textit{ho zha boh}. However, to respond by simply asserting that one is not traditional but modern is to fall prey to the binaric reasoning that many succumb to. Let me attend to what has been described as the normalised traditional girl’s alter ego, the modern Miss, before I elaborate further on this point.

\textit{Modern Miss}

The second group of diasporic women was labelled by the male respondents as \textit{feminists} or Australianised Chinese,\textsuperscript{222} and these modern women are seen to have femme fatal powers. She plays her man “\textit{like a fiddle}” (Kim, 25 May 2000). She is highly independent and seeks equal opportunities with men. She is “\textit{not as obedient and submissive as Chinese women in other Asian countries possibly due to [her] level of education}” (Steve: 26 May 2000), which gives

\textsuperscript{221} Although a small sample, I also considered the impact that class, age, mother tongue, educational background, and partner’s ethnic background may have on the responses to the \textit{ho zha boh} cultural semantics, and found that no generalisable pattern emerged. It seems the cultural semantics permeate the lives of these women to impact them differently.

\textsuperscript{222} It is interesting to compare this construction with the typical Australian woman. See footnote 212 on p. 128.
her an ability to reason. She is seen to have a more easy-going perspective on life than her Asian counterparts. She may stay out till the early hours of the morning and may not be too concerned about how her parents may feel (Ken: 29 May 2000). As a result, she is often portrayed as being promiscuous: "wilder types of girls, the real party animal, boozing types" (Ken: 1 Jun 2000). The Chinese male finds her interesting yet risky: "I get confused about how to treat her. If you're too nice, you end up getting squeezed" (Kim: 25 May 2000). Despite her less virtuous qualities, she may be a better mother due to the Australian culture, as she has more time to spend caring for her children herself. She is not as filial as the traditionalists and may "see her parents as a burden due to the different cultural influences" (Steve: 26 May 2000).

Informed by the traditionalist image of the virtuous woman, the modern Miss is often regarded in lower esteem. Her relocation to Australia is perceived by the Chinese community to somehow magically transform her into this wild whore, an aspect of the ethnicised geographical fiction (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Meerwald 2001) raised earlier that is also intermingled with perceptions of the Australian white society’s moral standards. Further, the Oedipal relationship between the male and his mother, and the Confucian complex that marries the mother to the son more than to her own husband, means that "most males, particularly in the past, were not able to replace the mother with a contemporary woman of equivalent significance" (Slote 1998, p. 42). The modern Miss is thus someone that the Chinese male may not take seriously as a potential partner for life.

The power of the cultural semantics at work is displayed in how the female participants in this research echo the male respondents' binaric categories for women and their description of the modern girl. Georgie describes herself as thus:

_I don’t have bound feet (laugh). I’m fairly independent and I am quite liberal in my outlook, so maybe that’s modern. I try not to have stereotyped ideas, and I try to be more flexible in outlook in terms of what’s acceptable. That’s pretty modern in terms of being open._ (Georgie: 857-866)

There is a departure from traditional practices such as foot-binding, in Georgie’s idea of the modern woman, as well as a tolerance of ideas instead of being conservative. Kristeva views foot-binding as a conscious sign that marks the permanent struggle between man and woman.

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223 See the section “Chinese girls don’t sleep around,” in this chapter, p. 158.
224 See the section “Conspiracy theory” in Chapter 6 “Perfect partner,” p. 213.
(see Chow 1991), because it is an act of violence that is displayed conspicuously on the female body, unlike the act of male castration. Georgie’s declaration can be read as an identification with independence and freedom from this struggle. From the perspective of the Chinese community, being open-minded is also viewed as being unChinese or less Chinese: “They never see me as a one hundred per cent Chinese woman because I’m open-minded” (Esther: 561-563). The idea of deviating from the traditional norms is also seen in Deana’s description of the modern woman:

Modern as in a modern society (laugh). Not traditional as in the home – I would call my mum traditional, not modern. Modern in the sense that I’ve got a career, a job; I go out at night socialising which a lot of the traditional Chinese women wouldn’t; I’ve got my own car; I’ve got my own bank account. I’m more reliant on myself than I am on people around me. A traditional Chinese woman would be more reliant on her family. She wouldn’t have much assets to herself. So I call myself modern in that aspect. (Deana: 1506-1518)

The modern woman, according to Deana, is one who is independent and not tied to the homefront. Modernity is associated more with the bad woman image in some ways as she is more sociable, unperturbed by nocturnal engagements.

Patty also sees modernity in terms of rebelling against the norm: “She completely kicked the traces and decided to do her own thing” (Patty: 155-157). It is the rewriting of norms that the community police judges as rebellion, and often such women are viewed negatively for that reason. For some women, the oppression felt from having to conform to the traditional ho zha boh is so stifling that they ignore the consequences of being perceived as different or even bad:

For me, I am not a real China woman. I am already half-half (laugh). Just like Aussie half. I like freedom. I won’t let people control me. I just do anything I want. Just open. ... When I was young, I was already like that because this is my character. Because my mum is traditional, I hate it, because I don’t like this kind of woman. I can never become this kind of woman in my life because so poor and the husband smacks her for anything, and she still keeps quiet. It made me decide in my mind to never do that forever. (Esther: 216-231)

Esther witnessed the abuse of her own mother by her drunken, gambling father and vowed to never submit to the cultural semantics that demand unquestioning sacrifice on the part of the
woman. Although she initially tied ethnicity and practice to a geographic site,\textsuperscript{225} Esther here asserts that her modernity is an innate quality that is not bound by location. This challenges the notion of marrying ethnicity to geography.

We also see an apparent rejection of the traditional girl as lived out in Kelly’s mother’s life. Kelly describes her mother as a modern woman in terms of her attitude towards children and grandchildren:

\textit{She would prefer us not to have many children. She has reduced her two children preference to one. This is so unlike so many potential Chinese grandmothers. Most would be putting pressure on their children to have kids but mum states otherwise. (Kelly: 881-887)}

Instead of looking forward to being a grandmother, it appears that Kelly’s mother commits her retirement years to the pursuit of education and other personal interests that she was unable to attain in her youth:

\textit{Mum also has a passion for learning and is the scholar in our family. At the age of 60 she graduated, a dream that she had since childhood. I admire her for this pursuit and for accomplishing her dream. Since then she has not given up her pursuit of knowledge but spends more time learning the Bible. She is also taking up music lessons, another dream she had as a girl that never eventuated fully. (Kelly: 905-913)}

A traditionalist would accuse such pursuits as being selfish, as the good Chinese mother should be sacrificial and not self-indulging. Those who put value on being recognised as a \textit{ho zha boh} will ensure that their own interests and values are subordinated to those of her family’s. Kelly’s mother’s individualistic self-pursuit also ethicises her as a Westerner. Ironically, Kelly’s mother is simply performing the Confucian attitude towards education: one should “learn without flagging” (Tu 1998a, p. 11), as education is a “ceaseless endeavour to accumulate knowledge, skills, insight, and wisdom” (Tu 1998a, p. 17). However, the tension here is due to the other Confucian value of filial piety, which calls for an embodiment of the family that moves one beyond self-centredness (Tu 1998a). For the Chinese woman, education is a luxury that needs to be negotiated against both her roles as mother and wife. Thus, Kelly’s mother was

\textsuperscript{225} Esther linked the virtuous woman to the location of China. See p. 129.
ostracised by her in-laws for being perceived as having adopted Western ideals. Other diasporic women are also seen as westernised for not fitting the traditional Chinese female mould:

A contradiction: I have very radical sides to my personality, with also strongly conservative values. I want to belong, but know it's not something that I will easily find. In sum: as a Chinese woman, I am very modern and westernised, but also very conservative. I think most of my friends don't see the difference. Some of my closest friends often tell me that they forget that [I'm] Asian until they're reminded. They see me as courteous, a bit conservative. (Judith: 238-241; 243-245)

Perhaps Judith’s conservative moments remind her friends that she is after all a Chinese woman, despite the other radical and westernised practices that she performs, as conservatism is related to Chineseness in their opinion. Judith’s negotiation falls more in the liminal spaces between traditionalism and modernity.

Carol also views herself as being less Chinese as a result of how she ethnicises the traditional role of the wife and mother to Chineseness:

An Australian woman will look after the family but it is different for a Chinese mother who would slave and slave and slave to keep the house clean; cook really good meals that takes five hours to prepare and not do anything with her husband. An Australian woman is not like that for the most part. They usually have a life of their own. They believe in simplicity (laughter) As long as you get fed, don’t complain. So I think in that respect it is probably different (laughter). I would describe myself as probably not very Chinese. (Carol: 1775-1787)

The modern woman is seen as westernised due to the binaric logic that ethnicises one’s values as Chinese or Western. Thus, if one chooses not to practise traditionally Chinese customs, one is viewed as being westernised. We also see in Georgie’s description of herself:

I would describe myself as a fairly modern and independent Chinese woman, who attempts to bridge the divide between the East and West in the best way possible. Among my Australian friends, I am viewed as a Chinese woman who is fairly accepting of cultural differences and who has acquired an understanding of Western norms and practices. Among my Chinese/Asian friends, I am viewed as being fairly westernised in my attitudes and practices. (Georgie: 318-325)

Depending on the group Georgie is in, she is perceived to be Chinese or westernised. In actual fact, Chineseness is more fluid than these set categories. The arbitrary delineation of Chinese
women into traditional or modern categories, or into Chinese or Western categories, is artificial as we can see in Deana’s description of herself:

*I am a new age Chinese woman. I adopt Chinese beliefs and customs that are appropriate to the current period. A modern, independent Chinese woman. Others see me as fairly Chinese, one that still clings to the traditional side of the Chinese culture.* (Gerry: 123-127; 168-170)

Although still informed by a binaric logic, Deana sees herself as performing customs and beliefs that are relevant to the contexts that she is in. She is beginning to build her own culture with her own lumber, bricks, mortar, and feminist architecture (Anzaldúa 1987a). It seems the binaric norms of acceptable behaviour sometimes become more fixed in Australia as migrants struggle to maintain the hegemonic status quo. The reality disrupts essentialising behaviour to ethnicity, and shows that diasporic women perform practices that are contingent upon the circumstances that they are found in. This would explain the confusion that the male respondent, Kim, felt towards the ambivalent performatives of the modern woman that do not conform to his expected norms.  

Tension erupts as the *modern Miss* practises her version of Chineseness because underlying these images of what constitutes a modern Chinese woman is a powerful cultural semantics that reads something like this: “Because I am Chinese, I should be filial; I should be grateful to my parents for bringing me to Australia; I should marry a Chinese man; I should study hard to pursue one of the top four careers; I should stay chaste.” This cultural semantics is problematic when it also intersects with the binaric logic that divides the non-West into the traditional or modern, as the modern is then associated with a sense of loss (see Chow 1991). This sense of loss, when intersected with notions of the virtuous woman, is attached with negative meanings. Thus, in not conforming to the cultural semantics of the good Chinese woman, the tendency is for some diasporic Chinese women to see themselves as bad girls, a category often associated with notions of Westernisation. So in the lived realities of *not fitting* the dominant cultural semantics of the *ho zha boh*, we question who we are as Chinese women. This creates angst for many diasporic women who are assigned by themselves or others the position of *bad woman.*

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226 See Kim’s response on p. 132.
The equation of counter narratives produced in our relocated sites of subjectification to
morality is gravely problematic and inflicts violence on the diasporic woman. This binaric
reading of the available choices for subjectivity creates confusion and the vexing need to
identify with one or the other: "I am a mixed-up Chinese woman. In fact until recently I didn’t
see myself as a Chinese woman because of the way that I think, act, and speak. I was a neutral" (Kelly: 1416-1418). It also reduces the enigma of what is Chinese and what is not according to
how our practices are perceived by others: "Most people make the same old Orientalist
assumptions when they first meet me. The ones who know me find me an ‘unusual’ example of a
Chinese woman" (Julia: 239-243). Julia is viewed as unusual because she does not quite fit into
any of the categories of East or West or modern or traditional according to the existing binaric
cultural semantics. Bev similarly finds her friend confusing because she expects the friend to be
either westernised/liberal or Asianised/conservative, but not both:

She confused me because on the one hand, she was very West-, non-Asian, very
democratic in her outlook on life, the things she was doing with her life. At the same
time, like if I’m buying a photo album, she would say, "Don’t buy black. It’s no
good. Buy the red.” There was that very ingrained Asian-Chinese thing coming out
of her, but at the same time she was this liberal Western, liberal Asian woman.
(Bev: 2690-2697)

Bev is not able to accept that there can be a bit of both, and more, in her friend. To her, one
should either practice Chinese or Australian values, and not a mesh of both. To rebel against
the tablets of tradition by assuming a modern perspective reduces one’s subjectification. In
reality one is always blending traditional and modern practices, or if we want to subscribe to
the ethnic divides, Eastern and Western practices. However, I question, what constitutes
Eastern and Western, as they are arbitrary delineations of practices.

Liminality is thus a useful platform from which to critically examine these ideas of who we are
and why we practise our forms of Chineseness. This framework provides the space to imagine
and practise roles that need not necessarily fit the current cultural semantics. A position of
liminality highlights the inadequacy of the fixed and binaric cultural models used to explain
experiences. At the same time, liminality is necessary to erase the anxiety felt by women of
Chinese descent as to what it means to be a Chinese woman. I discuss this notion of fluidity in
the next section.
Fluid female

Although traditionalism and modernity are not false illusions of the Chinese woman, the artificial division of the diasporic woman into these binaric categories is exposed when the male respondents are challenged to consider more fluid forms of genderised ethnicity. Thus, while the two female groups may be described as chalk and cheese (Kim, 25 May 2000), the males conceded that there are also crossovers. They admitted that some feminists may take on family values and some traditionalists may have a more laid back approach to life. However, this more fluid position was only gained when I asked: "Is it possible for the women with Chinese backgrounds to be anything else apart from the two groups you have identified so far?" Ken, who categorised women according to the age divide, responded by saying:

Anything's possible in this world, ain't it? Seriously, if you get down to fine details of manner of speaking, maturity levels, etc, I suppose there could be hundreds of categories or age groups. But broadly speaking, the two cover most people in my experience, anyway. One, those treating me as an equal, and thinking and talking in similar "young people" fashion, and two, those who clearly see the generation gap and think, talk, and behave accordingly. (Ken: 10 June 2000)

While accepting that the static notions he earlier raised are not necessarily fixed, it appears that Ken is less comfortable with the fluid ideas of gender and sexuality. Kim, who is more at ease with the slippery notions, unpicks one of the factors contributing to such essentialist thinking:

What I've described is just a simple "rationalisation" of types. There are many variations-on-a-theme, e.g. Miss Post Femme Feminist may well have a seductive, flirtatious variation – the "heow-chah-boh" (colloquial Hokkien) subgroup – and I use the term very "loosely" (pardon the pun!). And Miss Tradition could have a confused, "rebewith-a-cause" variation, fuelled by internal conflict, and a hamlet-esque "to-be-or-not-to-be" manic depressant temperament of schizophrenic proportions! Despite the external facade, if there is kindness and a good sense of right or wrong that comes from within, then I say, what's the fuss all about? The trouble is seeing past the stereotypes! (Kim: 2 June 2000)

Kim is aware of the power of stereotypes and yet is beaten by its power. His immediate answer was to consider the images that he had been exposed to through the various cultural semantics available. Only upon subsequent questioning was he able to refer to the range of subjectivities within the binaric groups that he had identified. The responses from the males reiterate the

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227 To support this assertion that all binarisms have elements of truth, no matter how injurious to women, I borrow from de Lauretis' argument that new terms of reference cannot be constructed by eliminating and denying the existence of a givenness in any particular cultural reading. See Chow (1991).
power of essentialist thinking (Landry and MacLean 1996). Both men and women fall prey to
the binaric logic about complex and entwined issues that govern our lives, and this power is
similarly recognised by Judith who says:

*Although I act and think Western, I often attract idiots in bars, or places that are
“appearance-only” by nature. It reminds me how powerful the world of
appearances are, and how much discrimination and of the “glass ceiling” Chinese
women have to endure before going forward. (Judith: 386-390)*

Triggered often by surface representations, essentialist thinking binds people to the various
cultural semantics. While many are beginning to think in more fluid forms of Chineseness,
often it is still within a binaric frame, that is, flux is viewed in terms of movement between two
worlds, an indication that the paradigm shift is only in its early stages:

*I see myself as a Chinese woman who still maintains her cultural values whilst
accommodating the local way of life and its values as well. I choose to accept the
positive aspects of local ethics and values and I pay no attention to the negative aspects of the Australian way of life. Therefore, I maintain the best of both worlds
without becoming biased to one particular cultural base. (Susie: 229-236)*

Sherry similarly views herself according to the divide between what is Chinese and what is
westernised: “I look and eat Chinese and I have some Chinese values but I am very
‘westernised’” (Sherry: 88-89). Laura also faces this dilemma of having a dual identity: “Asians
think I’m a sell-out and Anglos think I don’t fit in. I’m a woman with feet in two cultures. Have
had to create a worldview of self and others that allows for this duality: a worldview unique to me” (Laura: 461-465). Hannah says: “I’m still very Chinese in certain ways but I’m also
adaptable to Western ways. 50-50 maybe. Don’t know (laugh). I’m not that Chinese or that
westernised. I still have my Chinese values” (Hannah: 898-901). Hannah’s description of
herself, despite still being in the binaric bind, is more realistic in the sense that Chinese migrant
women never completely change, to be more westernised or whatever other label given to their
new set of practices. Further, as diasporic women, our old practices are never retained in the
pure form, due to our relocation to Australia. Also, even if we had remained in our original
home, other global factors would impact on our lives. Thus, we are influenced by a myriad of
different worlds from out television sets, music we listen to, travel, books we read, the
backgrounds of our different teachers, and in this era of cyber communications, friends we
make on the Internet, in our on-going processes of Chineseness. Our practices are fluid and we
adapt them according to the contexts that we are in, for “tradition and modernity are not ‘opposed’ … nor are they in ‘conflict’” (Fabian, in Chow 1991, p. 31). Moving away from binaric notions of ethnic subjectification to view our diasporic identity as being in a state of flux enables us to construct an identity that may encourage us to shift our obsession with questions of ethnicity – are we Chinese or not Chinese – a preoccupation that is “a fetishizing imagining of a ‘China’ that never is” (Chow 1991, p. 27), to the oppressive powers that continue to plague us as women of Chinese backgrounds.

For those of us living in Australia, perhaps we are ushered into the liminal space of being neither nor or both of the histories we live. Perhaps the diasporic women’s relocation to Australia, being one of many factors, allows her the post from which to confront the reproduction of cultural semantics that resist change. Standing in this new vista may enable her to construct a new reality for herself that weaves strands of the new into the past, the past into the new, to strengthen the fabric of the Chinese diasporic experience. Our experiences thus indicate to us that there is fluidity in how we negotiate our practices of Chineseness. The construction of a new cultural semantics that allows for a more transient form of Chineseness enables diasporic women to identify more readily with Chineseness without feeling bound by an ancient template nor the need to completely resist it. For the rejection of either tradition or contemporaneity, or the adoption of one without the other, is unjust as it reduces the array of practices that can be strategically negotiated. For sometimes the old is performed as the only strategic mode of survival in an oppressive situation.228

In the next section of the thesis, I want to focus on the Chinese woman’s femininity and sexuality, in relation to the impact of the various cultural semantics on this aspect of her life. It is important to reiterate that it is not my purpose in the data analysis to produce a universal reading of diasporic women’s lives in Australia. Neither do I wish to write a blueprint for essentialising migrant women’s experiences. Instead, I draw similarities and differences to show the particular ways that Chineseness is practised. In so doing, there is a strategic interweaving of other women’s stories alongside mine to highlight particular readings of the issues discussed. Other experiences that defy the traditional expression of Chineseness are equally authorised. Together our stories create knowledge and a history about the different ways we play out our roles as Chinese women in Australia. This is an emancipatory exercise as

it functions to approve and affirm a heterogenous expression of Chineseness to mediate the confusion and guilt that arises out of the politics of binaric identification.

**Femme fatale**

*The stereotypical Chinese is someone who has quite traditional ideas of sexuality, of remaining untouched before marriage. (Alex: 2962-2963)*

Asian women are coveted and fetishized ... embodying a sexy blend of enigma, suffering and compliance. She is the epitome of femininity. (Ayres 2000)

Sexuality and femininity are fluid processes, just as ethnicity is not static or fixed. However, femininity and the sexual behaviour of Chinese women are often measured against a template of exoticism versus strict traditional taboos, stereotypes, and social restraints. In many ways, the issues in Chinese femininity and sexuality are universally shared by our non-Chinese sisters. The woman as “seductive leader-astray” is a notion that has been widespread in many cultures and historical periods (“Special Article: A World Fit for Women” 1999). However, due to the stereotypical constructs of the Oriental woman, and the social, historical and political contexts in Australia and elsewhere, some of these issues are also unique to the individual Chinese woman living in Australia. The female thespian, for example, is “over-determined by codes of race, sex and gender which fix the Asian woman as the passive, receptive and sexualised object of the colonising gaze” (Lo, J. 2000, p. 162). Further, pop culture’s stereotypical notions of subservience or the mail-order bride or sarong party girl influencing our daily interactions are frequently encountered in our negotiations of Chineseness.

As a child, I quickly picked up that there were some girls who were known as heow, or of “low moral conduct.” The *heow zha boh*, as opposed to the *ho zha boh*, often parades around in *cheong-sams* with high slits or hangs off the arm of some middle-aged businessman. Often they end up as someone’s mistress or engage in polygamous relationships. There was the other

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229 Lo, J. adds that the writer, actor, and director seek to subvert and transcend this over-determination, which links the Chinese woman to the Orientalism cultural semantics.

230 Both the mail order brides and sarong party girls have negative connotations for the diasporic migrant woman. The first term refers more to Filipino women Australian men meet while travelling in the Philippines. Sarong party girls are often used to describe local girls in Singapore who marry white men. They are perceived to be promiscuous. Both these terms do not necessarily refer to Chinese women but in the Australian context, these terms have been translated to include diasporic Chinese women as well. See also the section “Sarong party girls and mail order brides,” in Chapter 6 “Perfect partner,” p. 240.

231 *Heow* is the Hokkien for the adjectives “immoral” or “promiscuous.”
group – chaste, well groomed, and refined – and of course it was every father’s hope that his
daughter would end up in this second group.

Entrapment

When I came to Australia, my boundaries of what constituted a good and bad Chinese woman
became blurred. The neat categories I had grown up with became problematic as I began to
realise the vast array of behaviours and attitudes unrepresented by the familiar pigeon-holes.
My interaction with and observation of overseas or local Asian and Australian males made me
further question my femininity and sexuality:

It was one of the many Friday nights spent at the campus meeting for overseas
students. I was 18 or 20 at most. I was no longer the extremely shy girl that I used
to be when I first left Malaysia. At school I had slowly learnt to speak to the guys
and now, I suddenly found myself freely mixing with members of the opposite sex.

I was talking to Jenson, a particularly soft-spoken and handsome young man
who was on the conservative side. As I bubbled on excitedly about one thing after
another, I suddenly found him armouring himself against me. First, he folded his
arms and then he took a step back.

I remember how aghast I was. I asked myself as I drove home that night, “Was I
being too forward? What did I do to make him take a step back like that? Was I
being too friendly?”

A year or so later, I was going out with a native student from Malaysia. He
would tell me how appalled he was with my mannerisms when I talked to people.
“You use your hands too much! Don’t giggle! Don’t swing around!” We used to
end up fighting because I couldn’t see how I was being “loose.” He never said it
but it was there. He insinuated it in his tone. Once he even stood behind the person
I was talking to, arms folded or standing akimbo, shaking his head as a reminder to
me to stop flirting with the male companion.

Was I really flirting?

A friend of mine is an extrovert. An Australian guy she was unofficially dating
accused her of misleading him. Like me, she was caught between the different
cultural codes of conduct. She was too friendly on both sides of the fence. (Agnes,
autoethnographic narrative)

It is probable that the men in our lives above associate us with the mythical image of diasporic
Chinese women who are supposedly westernised and promiscuous. Our friendliness is thus
interpreted according to this cultural semantics. As one Malaysian friend said to me, not only

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232 I read elsewhere that men who have attractive partners are “more likely to engage in mate-guarding
behaviors, like ... making them feel guilty about talking to other men.” See Goode (1999). This is due to the
commodification of attractiveness which causes men to interpret such social cues as a smile or friendliness as
an invitation to sex – thus the jealously guarded woman.
was I from overseas, but I was also a city girl and this made me doubly wild in his family’s opinion. Bev relates the story of her friend who was at a nightclub in Singapore when this local man approached her and said: “‘What do you do?’ She said, ‘I’m studying in Australia.’ He immediately tried to pick her up because he thought if she is studying in Australia, she would be easy” (Bev: 3861-3865).

The simple reduction above creates a dilemma as “the Asian-Australian female does not easily fit into existing Australian stereotypes, [sic] in fact she is a relatively new social phenomenon” (Lee, F. 2000, p. 7). Diluted by the influences of her Australian context, the diasporic Chinese woman can become lost as she is neither the fetishised delicate or exotic maiden nor is she the Caucasian female with the necessary long legs, blonde hair, and well-endowed glands (Lee, F. 2000). “Young Asian males did not give her a passing glance because to them she was Aussie, and Caucasian males showed little interest because she was not the stereotypical Asian maiden nor the bronzed Aussie” (Lee, F. 2000, p. 7). Judith, an articulate student, states how this stereotypical image of the Asian fetish is disconcerting as it gives her confusing signals about what are appropriate sexual codes of conduct so as to not fall prey to the male with such expectations.233 “What I got was a lot of paranoia over who and what I should be attracted to” (Judith: 513-514). To further complicate this, the diasporic woman may find that she is neither the chaste nor promiscuous type, neither the exotic nor familiar siren, but a liminal blend of the images that entrap her. Lo, J. (2000), in citing Brecht within the theatrical context, states that the gap between what the woman is and the cultural semantics that represent her, needs to be foregrounded to expose the discursive conditions of representation.

Just as masculinist politics define ethnicity (Bottomley 1997), the cultural codes of sexuality and femininity imposed on and engaged in above are usually constructed according to a male hegemony (Bian 1997). Bian (1997) highlights this phenomenon well through her review of Jiang Zidan’s novel, For whom the smoke rises:

The heroine Xiao Mang begins as a faithful woman who is respected by men, but she is abandoned by her lover for being too dull. She turns her back on her former personality, but in consequence finds herself exploited and disdained by men. Xiao Mang’s distressed life symbolizes the two contradictory alternatives designed for women by men [italics added]. Neither makes a good choice.

233 It may be useful here to refer to Chow’s elaboration on fetishism, its origin, and translated meaning. See Chow (1991, p. 26).
Xiao Mang has no room to move. She only has two choices. If she remains chaste, as expected, she is unattractive. If she veers from this, she is then ostracised after first being abused. Both choices are to the men’s advantage. The chaste makes for a good wife. The seductress makes a good lover. She needs room to make a third choice or multiple choices.

Apart from the personal benefits gained, the laws regulating female practices of femininity and sexuality serve a patriarchal communal interest. As Bottomley (1997) puts it, the “cultural preoccupations with virginity and other forms of sexual purity [are] regarded as essential to the maintenance of collective purities” and these acts continue to violate women both physically and psychologically. Let us not be mistaken here in assuming that these codes are only exacted by males. The community as a whole collaborates to maintain the status quo. “My maternal grandmother taught me a lot of Chinese etiquette, particularly how to behave like a virtuous lady and modesty” (Faith: 95-97). Thus, women, too, police other women to ensure the deification of the ho zha boh and the chastisement of the heow zha boh. Sometimes the community can be stricter on the woman than her own family: “The way the clan was – gossipy, paranoid about girls getting in with the ‘wrong crowd,’ and very hypocritical about what sons could do and daughters could not – didn’t always tally with the way my parents were” (Julia: 618-621).

Such set statutes on sexuality and femininity do not only pose a predicament to the diasporic woman but they also complicate how such statutes should be regulated and practised by the males themselves. Alex, in speaking about her brother who has spent many years studying in Australia and the United Kingdom, describes his confusion as thus:

In terms of his attitudes towards girls, the way he treated me, he was a bit confused but I could see that he actually does like independent, spirited sort of women, not the traditional sort of Chinese girl that I was expected to be. The ones that he’s had longer term relationships with have always tended to be quite opinionated, quite independent, and career-driven sort of women. I don’t think he likes women who’re gonna hang on him dependently. (Alex: 2057-2062; 2068-2070)

He has bipolar attitudes towards women. He has conservative ideas about how his sister should be protected but in his own relationships, he finds it acceptable to flirt (Alex: 1961-1965). The liminality towards sexuality and femininity makes him confused. Perhaps this is because he
holds certain values that he practises but feels, at the same time, that he is compelled to impose a different set of values on his sister: "His friends had a more old fashioned idea of what he should do as a big brother than he did and it was them, his friends that taught him he should keep an eye on me" (Alex: 2033-2035). Her brother’s confusion comes from trying to reconcile what he practised himself and what others expected of him.\textsuperscript{234}

In the next sections, I further investigate the dominant images of Chinese sexuality and femininity imposed on and engaged in by the diasporic Chinese women and examine how these intersect with liminality. I focus on the written and unwritten laws regulating Chinese female behaviour (Chow 1991). I attend in particular to ethnicisation of sexuality and femininity and the impact of this on the negotiations of Chineseness.

**Too sexy for our skin**

I am particularly interested in the way the women’s femininity and sexuality are linked to their ethnicity. The traditional women, for example, are often referred to as the very Chinese type or the ho zha boh. Those who do not fit the typical traditional images are often labelled as Australianised or westernised women, as having adopted Western or Australian ways (Ken: 29 May 2000). However, the binaric divide ignores the multiplicity of possibilities within the two extreme ends of the spectrum.

Wong and Ana (1999) emphasise the interconnectedness of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity by referring to other Asian American cultural critics’ adjectival phrases such as “impossible to separate,” “complex interrelationships,” “tightly plaited,” and “fused.” Wong states how “ethnicity is, in some sense, always already gendered, and gender always already ethnicized” (in Wong and Ana 1999, p. 126). Lowe adds that “sexuality is racialized” (in Wong and Ana 1999, p. 126). We see this in how Faith attributes the differing sexual values among women to ethnic difference:

> My husband criticises the inhibition and low morality of Western women. He praises the virtues of Chinese women. They are more committed to their marriage and are more capable of fidelity than their Western sisters. Such remarks often remind me to live up to the virtues of a Chinese woman. (Faith: 240-246)

\textsuperscript{234} This is reflected in his own life, according to Alex, who says: “He’s caught in-between all these traditional expectations of a Chinese boy: grow up, be a good provider, sow your wild oats in your youth, but settle down with a family. And he’s not like that. I don’t know if he will ever be the sort of guy that would have a family and settle down with one woman” (Alex: 2042-2047).
Such ethnicised sexuality and femininity are often commodified and exploited by those within and outside the diasporic community in various forms. “Non-westerners also gaze, are voyeurs and spectators” (Chow 1995, p. 13). For example, the media (Eastern and Western) exploit the China doll image wherever possible (Lee, S. 2000). Judith, a tall and attractive young student, sometimes appropriates the romanticised Oriental woman in how she dresses:

*I often like to wear Chinese dresses and clothes (e. g. cheong-sams) I do like to
dress in beautiful Chinese clothing, to take advantage of the “exoticism” often
associated with being Chinese, but I know that this is not common practice. (Judith:
425-426; 431-433)*

This appropriation of the China doll plays on Lowe’s (in Wong and Ana 1999) racialised sexuality which is employed by different parties to “fantasize itself and the world” (Chow 1995, p. 13). It also highlights the complex hegemony in the relationship between the China doll and its other. While Said argues: “The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ … but also because it could be [italics added] – that is, submitted to being – made Oriental [italics added]” (1978, pp. 5-6), presumably by the Occident. It can be counter-argued that the Orient is an exploiter of this construction too. The Chinese play the role of both subject and agent (Chow 1995). This highlights the ambivalent position of diasporic Chinese women, for they are both orientalised and self-orientalised, commodified and self-commodified.

Although it can be conceded that the commodification of ethnicity can serve some causes, it is highly problematic. Woods’ (2000) analysis of the use of the exotic female symbol to advertise Hungry Jacks’ satay burger, exposes the abuse of the racialised exoticism. She writes, tongue-in-cheek:

 Isn’t satay an Indonesian or Malay cuisine? So why was the image of the Chinese woman chosen? ... Maybe it was because satay is readily available in most parts of Southeast Asia and the Chinese lady was used as a generic representation of the

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235 There are also those who exploit their ethnicity especially when it is trendy to be Chinese. For Yang, a Chinese-Australian photographer and performer, he admits that he has “made a career out of being Chinese.” See Yang (1994, p. 95).

236 Weedon states that dress is “a site of conscious sexual-political struggle.” See Weedon (1997, p. 83).

237 She also states that although there is an attempt to portray a variety of Asian women, the infrequent representation of the Asian woman in the media, except in stereotypical settings, gives a false sense of her existence in Australia. Let me add, it is not difficult to conclude from the Australian media’s display of race and cuisine the simplistic level at which our Australian multiculturalism is practised.
region. Perhaps one Asian woman could be used to portray all Asian women in general. After all, aren't the characteristics common to all — docile, feminine, submissive, shy and most of all "exotic"? (p. 19)

This complex webbing of gender and sexuality to ethnicity also complicates the processes of ethnic subjectification for those who do not fit the present cultural semantics of the positive and negative stereotypes presented. Only the attractive, demure and subservient, among other features of the China doll image, can benefit from the sexier realm that Chinese women are placed into, simply for being Asian (Lee, F. 2000), for example. This realm of seduction is not usually open to the plain, stout, large-boned, or loud diasporic woman. Ayres (2000) writes that power and status are accorded depending on one's sexual attractiveness:

"Physically attractive people have a social advantage over people who are considered "unattractive." So if you're young and good-looking, you're at the top of the social hierarchy. You're fascinating and charming by default, even before you open your mouth. ... But anyone who is older, shorter, fatter, taller, disabled, or otherwise out of the dominant paradigm of what is considered attractive, struggles to be visible."

Visibility for the Chinese woman who is outside the sexy domain becomes an issue. Nor is the China doll image open to those who do not wish to conform to the connotations associated with the Asian maiden. For such women, ethnic identification becomes a complicated negotiation.

We see this interconnectedness further problematised in the following stories, chosen on the basis of their level and type of education, socioeconomic class, employment status, marital status, religious faith, age, sexual preference, profession, and language proficiency. I also hope to capture through these shared stories the range of practices negotiated by my participants and I in regards to our femininity and sexuality.

**Ain't no Chinese any more**

*On femininity: The assertive China doll*

The feminine cultural semantics that paints the Chinese woman as small framed, submissive, and pleasant is often imposed on the diasporic woman, who may first, struggle to compete against the petite size of her Malaysian or Singaporean girlfriends, and secondly, find it offensive to be soft-spoken or agreeable. It must be admitted that these miniature Chinese women do exist, perhaps due to the diet and commuting lifestyle, in Singapore especially.
However, as Said cautions: “One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths” (Said 1978, p. 6). They possibly exist as a self-disciplined attempt to conform to the constructed image of what an Asian woman should look like. This then further anchors the petite China doll as the sign for what constitutes an attractive woman, adorning it with more “redoubtable durability” (Said 1978, p. 6).

On an added point, though the China doll is perceived to be submissive, she could actually be the controlling force in a relationship. She may just do it more quietly or subtly. Rosa highlights this through how she negotiates the China doll syndrome with her husband:

*He makes it very clear that it is not because I am Chinese that he has married me. We often make jokes between ourselves about “Asian brides” because they are meant to be docile and obedient. Our relationship is quite the other way round. I am a strong, decisive person, and my husband recognises that. He is happy to have a wife who works and through her work achieves some sense of identity as well. He has said explicitly that he cannot marry a woman who relies on him for her identity.*

(Rosa: 291-303)

However, when one is constantly fed with rhetoric that equates being Chinese to a more feminine cultural semantics, it is not unusual for confusion to arise about one’s sense of what a woman is if one is not able to conform to that image. Alex, a highly educated young woman, considers that her femininity, or lack of according to the fixed cultural semantics, erases the Chinese-ness in her. As a size 12, she would dwarf her Singaporean sisters. She considers this to be a factor, along with her accent, that differentiates her from the local Singaporean girls:

*On my return to Singapore in the last few trips, I was asked in shops, “Ah, where are you from?” It could be that I’ve an accent that I’m not conscious of. Also, physically I’m taller than a lot of Chinese girls in Singapore. It does get really confusing – interesting in some ways like in New Zealand, I feel Australian and then in Singapore ...* (Alex: 3428-3443)

238 Elsewhere, Alex states: “I tend to refer to Chinese culture as one monolithic thing but it’s quite obvious that our interpretation of it is different and it differs with gender, with age, and with time, and what particular time you lived in Singapore or other places. It also differs in terms of social class. Some people who weren’t born into an upper middle-class Chinese family with a Chinese business may have a totally different view of Chinese-ness than I do. So it’s just giving some sort of context that is a little bit more lived and grounded than what you receive through television” (Alex: 2400-2409). Despite her realisation that Chinese-ness is a smorgasbord of practices, rather than a single dish, it is useful to note here the power of essentialist thinking on Alex.
Although Alex is conscious of other pointers that announce her difference, such as her accent, what I am more concerned about is how Alex’s physical appearance makes her question her cultural identity. At a simplistic level, this is the measure that the local Singaporeans and others use to gauge her Singaporeanness. Dorothy, an older working-class migrant from a Chinese language background, for example, considers dress mode as a marker of how Chinese or westernised or modern she is. To her, the traditional Chinese woman is more Chinese than she is in the way they dress:

_They are very simple. Overall maybe the hairdo, the make-up and how they dress is very simple. Plain, very plain. Not much make-up and all the clothing is very plain. To me it’s tasteless. They have very straight hair or bob – there’s very little change in their look._ (Dorothy: 843-852)

This appears to be the level at which ethnicity is negotiated amongst some members of the diasporic community. Despite being able to laugh at the absurdness of the influence of such simplistic thinking, Alex has obviously considered this at a deeper level. When asked how she dealt with her confusion, she said:

_I’m beginning to develop a strategy of actually enjoying it. I’ve been toying with the idea of confusing people because some people deliberately muddy the waters and so I’ve been toying with that idea._ (laugh)

_My strategy with new people has always been: “I’m from Singapore but I’ve been here for 10 or 11 years” and sometimes they pick up the Singapore bit and sometimes they pick up the 10 or 11 years. Some people, I’ve noticed, have been quite sensitive, and immediately see from the inclusion of how long I’ve been here that I’m not really interested in talking about Singapore.

So that’s actually worked quite well. I’ve to think about other ways. The longer I am here, the more inclined I am to say I’m an Australian._ (Alex: 3446-3457)

Despite having developed the above strategies, there is still a sense of rejection of or alienation from her Singaporeanness. Her Singaporean identity or background is something she would rather not discuss and she identifies more readily as an Australian. It is her nationality that is in question, not her Chineseness, but there is a sense that she is possibly equating her nationality here with her ethnicity. Though this is not stated bluntly, it is implied in the following:

_In terms of the way they treat women, that’s partly to do with certain Chinese cultures. The earlier generation, like my grandmother’s generation, looks at one of their grand-daughters and exclaims, “Oh, she’s too tall to marry Chinese (laugh) men” or you are valued in accordance to how good you would be as a wife._ “Oh,
she can cook! But my goodness, isn’t she tall!” (laugh) I felt it more in terms of the way they treated women, and the way that the guys would talk to and about a girl. (Alex: 1672-1683)

In the above, again there is the ethnicisation of Chinese femininity. A Chinese woman who does not fit the petite physique is not marketable despite other skills that she may have. The constructed feminine woman is a Chinese male preference and this link associates the notion of feminine identification to ethnicity.

Apart from not fitting the Asian size, Alex is vocal. Her extended family’s attitude towards her personality is: “She’s too fierce to be a good wife” or “She’s too noisy. She should be more submissive” (Alex: 1687-1688). This probably further alienated Alex from her ethnicity. When asked if being assertive made her more Australian, she says:

Ooh, sometimes I think I am! I have to say that that’s a characteristic of being Australian – a female characteristic here. That’s another stereotype but it’s a nice positive stereotype, that Australian women are supposed to be more assertive. (Alex: 3340-3342)

She aligns being assertive with being Australian although she is quick to correct herself by relating it to a gender rather than race issue. She admits that it is not just an enculturation process but age as well that has helped to develop her assertiveness. However, this vocal quality contributes to her feeling rejected:

I felt silenced because in many ways a lot of what I knew about things came from books that were not Singaporean. And I felt silenced in that if I were to speak, I would be regarded as an oddball and I was. I did not accept a lot of things that were supposed to be given. I did not accept that as a woman I was supposed to be pretty, and slim, and pleasant. (Alex: 3345-3350)

She sees that her behaviour as a woman and the values that she holds from her formal and informal education make her unSingaporean and unChinese. When she was younger, her explanation for her seeming oddity was to identify with her English roots. Despite not growing up in England, she felt she was different because the United Kingdom was her birthplace. Later she attributed her difference to books read, her parents’ education overseas, her parents’ heterogeneous cultures, and the fact that they started the family in England, which could have given them English values that they subsequently transferred to Singapore.
More recently, Alex’s attributions have been challenged by the Singaporeans who, despite their travel and mobility, remain very Singaporean, while some others enter a state of flux. This enabled her to unroot the fiction that naturalises ethnicity to a specific geographical location (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992), as mobility lands one in multiple locations, and the experiences gained somehow complicate and expose the purist attitudes towards cultural identification.

Lucy Liu in power suits

Anita, a single young professional who has practically grown up in Australia, negotiates her assertiveness and femininity without fixing her ethnicity to a geographical location. Instead, she considers the impact of other forces within the different geographical borders. Often verging on the essentialist paradigm, she says: “I am very outspoken and that’s a lot more of a Western characteristic than a Malaysian trait. The mentality is so different and I don’t think I like to live there” (Anita: 2366-2367; 2376-2377). However, being opinionated is not explained in terms of her ethnicity or the geographical fiction. She credits her outspokenness to her Australian education: “In school we were encouraged to say what we thought; we were encouraged to think for ourselves but over there the schools encourage you to learn some things in the books and education is shaped that way over there” (Anita: 2385-2388).

Anita feels that her location in Australia gives her opportunities that her Malaysian sisters do not have access to:

I don’t think they would have roles like women have here, such as they won’t be in a position where they could have a lot of control. I don’t feel I am limited in what I can do, not at work. A lot of men I work with treat me as a peer, not as someone below them. In a lot of places in Malaysia, that doesn’t happen. My aunty is actually doing very well. She sees herself as quite an accomplished person. She thinks highly of herself because she’s a major director of a really big advertising company and there are not many women there in such a position. (Anita: 2415-2432)

I queried her on her freedom outside the work circle to see if there were any restrictions there. She says: “I don’t feel limited or restricted in any way and I don’t feel things are expected of me. I feel that I can do what I like to do without great difficulty” (Anita: 2443-2445). I pursued

339 For use of Lucy Liu, see Woods (2000, p. 19).
this to determine if her different circles influenced her differently and asked her to describe her social groups:

In my church circle, I don’t think I’m treated differently from the guys apart from the fact that we get tea first which is good (laugh), but I don’t feel that they expect us to follow after them or do things for them. We have lunch every Sunday at Kenneth’s [her boyfriend] house after church. Kenneth cleans up. He washes the dishes. He never asks me to do it but if I do it, it is because I’m helping him. And the other girls, we usually sit at the table ’cause we’re guests and the guys just prepare the food so we’re not expected to do the woman thing. If it was at my place I would do a lot more because I’m the host and not because I’m female. We have suppers and things like that in our house and the guys help out. (Anita: 2449-2465)

While Anita is able to enjoy equality with her male counterparts in Australia, she asserts that the Malaysian males are chauvinistic, expecting the females to cook and clean after them. This perception is gained from her observation of relatives and friends, and she admits that it is not a very fair generalisation. In her church circle, Anita feels that she is an equal with the men. Perhaps her interactions there have given her skills for maintaining that same equality at her workplace. On independence, she states:

Independence is practice and you get better at being independent the more you practice it. I know I like doing my own thing; cooking for myself; cleaning my own house and being on my own so I know I’ll be better the more I go out and try to do that. (Anita: 3554-3558)

Apart from practice, Anita feels that certain other factors contribute to her freedom and independence. She names social acceptance as an agent of change for the Chinese woman who desires to assert herself. She feels that her age is another that gives her the desire to claim her independence. Although there are still traces of the prevailing cultural semantics of the subservient Chinese woman in her generalisations of Malaysian females, Anita appears to have learnt to write a different story for herself in Australia. She has unpicked the seams that bind others to a womanhood that is unnatural. She is in a realm that focuses on the issues surrounding what she wants to attain and works at these instead of simply attributing closed doors to gender or ethnicity. In other words, she does not simply whine, “It must be ‘cause I’m Chinese” but examines the issues that are hurdles to her freedom.
Half-half and the China woman

Esther, a mother of three children who runs her own business from home, was working for someone else in the same industry before coming to Australia. Educated firstly in the Chinese stream and later in English, Esther describes her mother as the very China woman type while she labels herself as a half-half.240 Esther ties her independence and self-assertiveness to her being unChinese. Her narratives seem to emphasise her unChineseness. There is a sense of resistance against conforming to the subservient China woman role:

My husband really likes a 100% woman but I'm not, very sorry about that but nothing can be done about that. Chinese women always keep quiet, stay at home, and never argue with the husband, listen to what the husband says. But I'm a different kind. I'm the one who likes to be in charge. (Esther: 625-635)241

Although Esther is unfamiliar with the rhetoric of male hegemony at the academic level, she sees it in practice and rebels against it. She asserts her half-half-ness and produces her version of a counter-narrative to what her husband desires. He, on the other hand, has been assigned the very China man image – one who beats his wife up and shows no respect for her freedom or desires. Thus, these two cultural semantics – that of the China woman and the China man as personified by her parents – seem to direct the course of her life. Despite professing to being a hybrid, she is in practice glued to the other end of the spectrum in refusing to reflect the virtuous woman in her negotiations of her femininity. She is unable to understand the true emancipation available through the appropriation of the liminal space which would enable her to practise a more fluid form of feminist independence.

On sexuality: No sex in the city

Since the Han dynasty, chastity has been placed on the pedestal as the vital signature for a woman’s reputation. In fact, Chinese people in general are perceived to be pure and sexless. In Chow's (1991) analysis of literary characters, Chinese women are found to sacrifice their personal desires and lives “in the names of chastity and morality” (p. 52). Such is the significance of chastity and morality to the Chinese community. Within the Australian diasporic community, my deployment of Chow's (1995) primitive passions argues that morality is raised as a fantasy to preserve the original culture lost in the diasporic process. Chow (1995) states that during moments of cultural crisis, as in migration because it threatens the

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240 See her narratives on pp. 129 and 133.
241 See also her comment on p. 243.
predominant signs of traditional culture, the \textit{primitive} is accented. As these signs are weakened, fantasies of an origin are democratically reconstructed to replace them. She adds that the primitive emerges as a way of thinking about the unthinkable – that which was lost or, I add, threatened and weakened.\footnote{For further elaborations on Chow’s use of \textit{primitive passions}, see Chow (1995, pp. 22-23).} We see the appropriation of this concept in how communal control on chastity appears to be tighter in the relocated setting. Chinese women have to be chaste and a female who stays out late at night is considered unchaste even if she does not engage in sexual activity.

\textit{It was my first party in Australia. It was only two weeks after I had arrived in Perth and so it was very cool to be invited to a “show.” At sixteen, all Aussie males looked attractive to me as they were a reflection of the pin-up boys I used to have on my Malaysian bedroom wall. My girlfriend had organised for her brother, Mick, to pick me up. Wow! I thought when he came to the door. So did my parents. They quickly established a curfew of 9 pm for me after checking that boy out with a series of questions. He wasn’t even my date for the evening and I felt sorry for him.}

\textit{When I got to the party, I found bodies already slumped on the carpet in my friend’s family room, knocked out by the first round of alcohol consumed. Mick had quickly disappeared as soon as his driving duty was done. I was expecting a video show and wondered what the movie was. I soon realised that there wasn’t going to be a video for the night.}

\textit{I felt utterly uncomfortable. The only safe people around were these twins who were the epitome of nerdiness as they thumped to the music in uncoordinated moves. Another guy caged his arms around me as he pinned me to the wall, reeked in alcohol. My Irish girlfriend spat, “Leave ‘r alown!”}

\textit{Nervous, I went into my friend’s bedroom to sit out the night. Soon the cops came as neighbours complained about bodies rolling in their garden on makeshift mattresses. Bottles smashed. Screaming, interrupted by giggling in the laundry from this lone female in the midst of excited males.}

\textit{When it was about nine, I had to look for Mick. He was necking with his girlfriend. I tapped him on the shoulder and reminded him that the Chinese police would be on to him if he didn’t get me home soon.}

\textit{That was my first show in Australia. Six months later friends asked me if I was going to the show. I was quick to say no. They meant the Perth Royal Show. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)}

My discomfort with my surroundings that night highlights the effect of the chaste cultural semantics on me. Naïve as I was, I was not ignorant of what the unwritten codes are for chaste behaviour. Drinking is deemed unchaste, and so are sexual encounters of any sort with strange or known men. Finally, it is the obligation of every \textit{good} Chinese girl to be home by the appointed time. It is a Cinderella factor. To be found guilty of breaking the moral code is to be
imprisoned by the stigma associated with the *heow zha boh*. My parents’ curfew ensured that there would be no hint of any hanky-panky on my part.

Others’ social activities are similarly controlled by their family members. Deana shares a similar experience with me: “Most Chinese are more conservative. If we went out, our parents wouldn’t let us stay to past ten o’clock. I used to get picked up at ten o’clock. Parties used to start at ten o’clock!” (Deana: 428-434) Alex adds: “At sixteen my aunt was caned for staying out late. Late wasn’t much, wasn’t like twelve o’clock or anything like that” (Alex: 550-555). It is the duty of the family to preserve the chastity of the women on all fronts. This was another reason why parents would often discourage or object to daughters who wish to move out of home as single women, as was Deana’s case: “My parents made it clear from young that I was not to leave home till I got married” (Deana: 92-93). Her parents relented when she turned 30 and decided to invest in a joint property with her sister. As she was not moving out on her own, it was seen as acceptable behaviour. Her chastity would not be questioned. However, in Judith’s case, her departure from home was not well accepted: “I still feel compelled to play the ‘good girl’ role, but can’t do it properly any more, having left home, and challenged my father’s patriarchal authority” (Judith: 149-151). Judith feels that she burnt the bridge to the good girl image when she moved out of home. The difference could be the timing of the move out of home. In 2001, the Howard Government’s first homebuyer’s scheme assisted Carol in her desire to move out into her own place. Her parents agreed that it was a good decision to invest in her own property.

Two other consequences arise as a result of the construction of the chaste community. I discuss these in terms of the patriarchal hegemony that it maintains and the Westernisation of sexuality, which echoes the idea of a knitted gender, ethnicity, and sexuality triangle (see Wong and Ana 1999).245

_Hegemonic sexual bodyguards_

Often it is the male member (father, brother, husband, boyfriend) who is responsible for rescuing the damsel in distress and protecting her from potential sexual danger (Weedon 1997), as we can see in Alex’s brother’s rise to the call:

245 Although outside the parameters of this research, it would be interesting to investigate how other ethnic groups would negotiate these issues. Perhaps some Americans would view these issues similarly while others would find them peculiar. It may be argued that some Italian families may hold identical values but I add that others may not. Thus, I assert that variousness and contradictoriness exist in other ethnic groups as well.
Sometimes he takes on a very responsible big brother role like when we were here in Perth. A friend of his reminded him, “Hey, you know, you should take care of your sister!” and suddenly he started taking care of me (laugh). I know that he seems to take his big brother role very seriously at times.

I had a boyfriend when I was an undergrad and we would be sitting out in the garden, and my brother would start doing push-ups (big laugh) and then he would walk past and give a glare. Yes, very protective. In a lot of ways, he’s funny in the same way my dad was. (Alex: 1986-2004).

Her brother and father are concerned about the potential risks to her chastity. “I felt that here was the chance for me to be on my own and my big brother was there, and he suddenly became protective and big-brotherish towards me at this time of my life” (Alex: 2028-2031). Where her brother was careless or ignorant of his duty, other members of the community reminded him of it. There was thus pressure to conform to the expectations of the community if he were to be regarded as a good brother to his sister.

In the earlier generations, the women were also protected by the family so that their chastity as unmarried singles was never questioned. Alex’s mum, for example, was always chaperoned by her brothers: “She grew up in a society where she would go out with her brothers and her sisters, and her brothers would filter the men. Any guy that wanted to ask her to dance had to ask her brother” (Alex: 2151-2153). The brothers performed the role of the sexual bodyguard and shielded the sisters from any potentially immoral men.

I ask why this role was so important to the community, and especially the men. What was the motive apart from protecting the interests of their daughters or sisters? Holding on to my use of Chow’s notion of primitive passions for cultural preservation, I argue that the significance of this task is possibly due to the maintenance of the family name, to ensure that they are vigilant in ensuring the endurance of purity in the Chinese culture. This then nurtures the chaste and apparent no sex in the city cultural semantics. More importantly, however, it promotes the oppression of women by the patriarchal system of sexual policing. That aside, Chinese women should not complain since women in a myriad of societies used to be murdered if they tarnished the family honour (“Special Article: A World Fit for Women” 1999).

I argue that chastity is constructed to preserve male hegemony due to the hypocrisy in how it is exercised. Whilst the rules regulating Chinese women’s morality are strict, Alex highlights how
her father has two sets of expectations on moral conduct: one for her brother and the other for her:

_He’s got that double standard. He’s actually very proud of my brother and my brother’s conquests but he doesn’t have the same attitude towards women. I haven’t given him trouble until I came here so maybe he’s also inexperienced in that regard but he has that double standard about how women should behave and how boys, men should behave._ (Alex: 1727-1731)

Alex’s behaviour – living in a de facto relationship – is read in terms of trouble for the family. Her brother’s sexual conquests, on the other hand, are deemed as trophies that possibly reflect her father’s own masculinity. Her brother, like her father, exhibits double standards towards sexuality according to the gender line. “_It was one rule for him, and another rule for me ‘cause he’d been with a lot of women_” (Alex: 2024-2025). This is echoed in the Islamic culture: “_For men: a wife (up to four, for Muslims), mistresses, slaves and prostitutes. For women: virginity till marriage, chastity after_” (“_Special Article: A World Fit for Women_” 1999). Alex was very resentful of the restrictions placed on her for this reason:244

_The values presented to us in school [Singapore] were leaning towards the patriarchy. I felt it was not fair. Either both men and women were to follow the same rules or the rules were to be relaxed for both. But all I saw was a heavy leaning against women: “Oh, women weren’t supposed to do this, women weren’t supposed to do that!” I didn’t like the whole double standard thing where boys could play around and girls couldn’t._ (Alex: 2901-2907)

There is fluidity in how these moral rules are executed despite their seeming fixedness and this emphasises the disparity between the expectations placed on men and women. Such practices are not exclusive to the Chinese community as de Pisan writes from the 1400 period: “_Men will accuse [women] of ‘so many vices in everything’, while readily using ‘all kinds of tricks to catch you, just as one lays traps for wild animals’_” (in “_Special Article: A World Fit for Women_” 1999). An English writer in 1700 chides: “_If a woman falls into your snares … so cruel and unjust are you, it is impossible she should ever retrieve her character; but you can find an hundred excuses for the crimes of your own sex-slips_” (in “_Special Article: A World Fit for Women_” 1999). Such was the hypocrisy and such is the same in Alex’s experience.245

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244 It is useful to note too that the naturalisation of the sexual codes is according to a heterosexual norm. I question if the same attitude will prevail should the son’s conquests be amongst members of his own sex.  
245 For more details on the double standards between genders, see “_Special Article: A World Fit for Women_” (1999).
In asking Alex if she was ever caned like her aunt was for partying till late into the night, she said:

_No, no! I think my dad wanted me to go out a lot but I didn’t (laugh)! To go out and maybe occasionally to come home late. I would come home at twelve and they didn’t seem to mind. It was very rare cos I was always a bookworm. He would have preferred me to ‘cause he always felt if I had experimented a bit more and gone out a bit more there [Singapore] then I wouldn’t be stuck in Australia because my freedom was experienced here [Australia], not there. So that’s his rationale._ (Alex: 1693-1701)

Her father’s rules are possibly modified for a number of reasons. First, Alex had hit her late 20s and was still single. Her de facto relationship was possibly unrecognised or her partner deemed unsuitable. Thus, her father may have moderated his control of her conduct with the hope that she would meet someone in Singapore. Her mother’s preference for her to live in Singapore is another possible reason for this relaxation. When I asked her why there was this discrepancy in how they dealt with her in the different locations, she says: “My mother’s logic was, ‘Oh because a girl can get pregnant anytime and be left with a baby and a boy can’t’” (Alex: 1764-1767). This is possibly one explanation, though not a justification, for gendering sexuality.

In discussing this contradictory approach to how they monitored her social and perhaps sexual activity, she says: “He would encourage me to go out but I think they both didn’t like me getting hooked on one guy” (Alex: 2005). Her father and brother’s encouragement for her to play the field contradicts their protective nature over her when she was dating in Australia. This suggests it is her partner that they may be opposed to rather than dating itself. What is it about her partner that they possibly objected to? This question leads me to my second point, which is on the Westernisation of sexuality.

Chinese girls don’t sleep around
I refer to my appropriation of Chow’s (1995) primitive passions again in this section. In the preservation of the original culture, a sense of ethnic pride is created around the question of sexuality. “As a Chinese woman you must do the right thing and don’t change your partner all the time. Because the Aussies change their partners very easily. As a Chinese woman, it is better not to be like that” (Esther: 490-493). In maintaining the chaste Chinese morality, the Chinese deem themselves superior to the immoral and nymphomaniac Westerner, as we can see
in what Patty says: "We thought that the Australian girls were quite wild. We really were sort of flabbergasted – how they would ask us to open the window or the door past twelve o’clock and to creep in" (Patty: 692-696). Other deviations from the acceptable norms are seen as unChinese, as we can see in the reception of Velvet’s non-heterosexual preference: “When I ‘came out’ to my parents as a lesbian (I was 23), they coped with this fairly well, although they see it as something quite foreign to their culture, immediate circle of Chinese friends, and relatives” (Velvet: 107-113). There is almost an unstated understanding that Chinese people are all heterosexuals, and the assumption that non-heterosexuality must be a Western influence: “I’m sure many people don’t even think that Asian lesbians exist!” (Velvet: 425-426). Despite the different factors that have made people question the essentialisation of sexuality, openness about sexuality is still seen in Singapore, for example, as a Western influence:

\[I am aware that in Singapore they’ve been talking about Westernisation and exposure to foreign values and how we need to protect it. It needs to be closely examined whether or not Chinese culture was truly as sanitised as it’s presented. (Alex: 2876-2882)\]

The influence of the West is still seen as negative. “Sometimes they still have different expectations of Asian girls as opposed to Australian girls. The Asian girls are supposed to be good and well behaved. Therefore anything passed that is supposed to be wild” (Bev: 3842-3848). Parents work hard to protect their daughters from such influences but relax their strictness when they realise that not all Australians are the same:

\[My sister could sleep over at friends’. I never had. I couldn’t, wasn’t allowed to sleep over. In a way by the time Janice started going to school and mixing with older friends, mum and dad had softened up. For me, it was like breaking new grounds. (Deana: 440-448)\]

People who have adopted the attitudes of premarital sex or extramarital sex are seen as having adopted Western values. This could be due to the sexual revolution in the 60s and 70s which was clearly identified with the West. This is a reason why Chinese women who behave immorally are perceived as having a westernised sexuality. Other forms of behaviour deemed as of Western influence include what Carol calls acceptable public behaviour:

\[246\] Velvet admits that her sexuality impacts on her the most but does not relate it to her ethnic subjectification (Velvet: 297).
When with my brother-in-law and sister started going out together, it was very 'Oh they are all over each other.' That was a big no. But coming along a little bit, I can accept holding hands, a bit of kissing. (Carol: 698-707)

While Carol outlines acceptable behaviour according to a Christian norm, Alex questions if sexual promiscuity was not already prevalent in the Chinese community, just hidden. Despite this, the stereotype of Westerners as immoral and Singaporeans as moral is still predominant and these same sexual codes have been exported to the Chinese community in Australia.

**Chinese Confusion**

There used to be no opportunity for the diasporic woman to behave differently to the original moral code. They were expected to be transfixed in their behaviour despite the changing morality in China itself, and other countries of origin such as Malaysia and Singapore. There was no tolerance towards those who deviated from the *ho zha boh*. In short, there was no sex in the city if you fear reprisal from the Chinese community. The stereotype of the chaste Chinese girl silences the fact that not all Chinese women are chaste. Even today, this stereotype causes those who engage in premarital sex to feel like outcasts. The cultural semantics of the *ho zha boh* also contributes to the confusion that some women then have about who they are in terms of their ethnicity. They begin to feel that they must no longer be Chinese if they behave so differently or if they are rejected by the Chinese community for their chosen lifestyle.

Despite the changing codes on sexuality globally, and Alex’s own recently realised fluid position, the power of communal rhetoric retains a stronghold on her perception of who she is as a Chinese woman living in Australia. I asked her if she felt that her sexuality was a westernised sexuality and she says:

> In all honesty I have to say that perhaps it is because certainly we were presented with this point of view that Chinese sexuality is such and such. You’re not supposed to do this, not supposed to do that, before you’re married. So I’ve broken the rules that I was brought up with. Right now I’m living without being married to him, it’s a long term relationship and my point of view is fine, but certainly with the values I was brought up with, it doesn’t fit. I would say that those values were presented as Asian, Chinese. (Alex: 2887-2895)

Alex felt like an alien due to how her sexuality was perceived in Singapore. Her views were very different to the local Singaporeans. "Then I thought, 'Oh, I don’t fit in here. Maybe
somewhere else” (Alex: 3356-3357). In Australia, she continues to break the unwritten laws by living in a de facto relationship. The ethnicisation of the sexual values as Asian or Chinese values makes her feel like an other, especially back in Singapore where the cultural semantics is more dominant. In Australia, there seems to be more room for the parents to relax their attitudes: “I am sure they would prefer me to be married instead of ‘living in sin,’ but they have never said anything or even asked me when I am getting married!” (Shelly: 182-185).

Deana speaks about her sister, Macy, who is estranged from the family for reasons that stem from their childhood days due to the differential ways in which the parents relate to her and their other sister, as compared to Macy. She says: “She always resented that, and that’s partly why she’s gone off to where she has been, and she’s just rejected the Chinese ways, and just gone and taken on a practically new lifestyle for herself” (Deana: 477-482). Macy’s rejection of the family’s values is seen as a rejection of Chineseness. Her chosen lifestyle is measured according to ethnic values. I asked Deana how she would describe Macy in terms of her Chinese identity and she says: “I don’t see it there at all. She’s hardly at home now. She doesn’t even sleep at home. She’s usually at her boyfriend’s place. It’s like she’s rejected the whole lot of us. We’ve lost her” (Deana: 502-506; 512-513; 532). Deana reasons that Macy’s inability to find love within the immediate family has driven her to find it elsewhere and in so doing has adopted a westernised lifestyle:

*The Western influence gave her the opportunity to go that direction because of the freedom it has, because everybody else did it. So there’s a certain freedom that this culture gives. It has opened a door for her.* (Deana: 597-601)

I asked Deana if Macy would have made the same choices if she were still in Singapore, where they are from, and she says:

*I don’t think Macy would have had the opportunity to pick up European influence, or Western influence. I don’t know how Singapore has changed but my perception of Singapore is that it’s always frowned upon you staying over at your boyfriend’s house at night. In Singapore she would have been pressured because there’s the stigma that would have been attached to it. Because we are not in that Chinese environment, we don’t have to. So she doesn’t.* (Deana: 541-561)

It seems that not only is there a locational influence in her choices, but communal pressure as well. “It’s the pressure you have from a Chinese group. It’s expected of you. I don’t know if
she would have been better off. She would have been pressured to stay in that group, within a
certain governing body" (Deana: 584-590). This would depend on the group that she socialises in, as Alex has highlighted earlier on.\(^{247}\) Perhaps if she were still mingling with the Chinese community in Australia, she would have felt the same social constraints. Her departure from her Chinese family and association with her Australian boyfriend’s family means that she is no longer confronted by expectations from the Chinese community. Deana states: “She just
couldn’t be bothered about it really” (Deana: 560-561). Though Macy’s attitude may sound flippant, her decision to dissociate herself from her family and hence the Chinese community at large could have come at a personal and emotional cost.\(^{248}\) With this decision to practise an alternative lifestyle, she ceased to be considered Chinese. This is revealed in Deana’s response when asked if she still viewed Macy as a Chinese woman. Her response also indicates the complicated array of Chineseness perceived:

*She is still a Chinese woman. Physically she is. She will always have something of Singapore with her, something that as we were growing up, as opposed to being totally Chinese, no. She’s more westernised. There is a group of Chinese who have become very westernised and within that group, there is a degree of difference there. Then there’s the very, very Chinese, which is in Singapore and Asian countries, and then there’s us lot who come here, who’ve studied here, who’ve lived here. We come in all different degrees. She would be more the Chinese who’s very westernised. If you asked her whether she was Chinese, she would say yes because colour-wise, she is Chinese. But if you asked her about the Chinese ways, ideas about how the Chinese are, she wouldn’t have all that because that’s not the way she is now. She embraces the Western ways a lot more easily.* (Deana: 620-647)

**Censorious community?**

In this section, I consider the impact of the community on negotiations of sexuality and ethnicity. The binaric construction of sexuality and how this reflects what is *good* and *bad* is problematised.

*My face was stinging. I threw my books into boxes blindly. My neighbour and boyfriend were there to help. Soon my shelves were empty. My clothes were marched out, still on their hangers. I was shaking and smarting.

I can remember my father punishing me only twice ever before as a child, once a smack on the bottom and the other a slap on the face. Apart from those two occasions, my father had always doted on me, his pet, so say my brothers.*

\(^{247}\) On the social group influence, see p. 20.

\(^{248}\) See the section on “Filial piety,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 161, for an idea of the emotional enormity of such a move by Macy and me. Personally, no matter how individualistic I may think I am, my natal family issues still permeate my life in ways that are deep in a nonrational way.
I was past my mid-20s then and had longed to move out into my own place. I decided not to despite advice received, due to the stigma associated with Chinese girls who move out of home before marriage. But as I stayed on, the pressure mounted.

A friend, who had left home in similar circumstances a few years before, had offered me her place should I ever need to move out. I called her. It was okay. I felt I landed myself on her. After a brief period there, I moved.

I kept moving. With each move, I encountered different cultures – Chinese, Dutch, Indian, and Australian – different classes – trades people, professionals, and students. Each move took me further away from my Chinese roots. I felt the stares and the whispers behind my back. “Stigma” was shouted at me every time I saw a Chinese face. “You’re not Chinese!” these strangers accused. “She’s one of those loose Aussiefied girls,” I felt them gossip. “We don’t want our family associating with her.”

That was nearly ten years ago. Now married, some days I still hear those voices haunting me. Can’t shake off that stigma cicatrised into my life forever. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

When I heard Macy’s story, I commiserated with her. She was accused of being immoral, of being unChinese. Chinese girls just don’t sleep around. Chinese girls don’t move out of home till they are married. I too felt that I ceased to be Chinese that day I left home. It is sad that my departure was under such traumatic circumstances. Although it was not for sexual reasons, that emotional decision tagged me as loose, immoral, promiscuous, westernised, Australianised and unChinese. I was a bad, bad girl and was subsequently disowned by my father. I felt ostracised by the Chinese community he socialised in too. No one asked me why I had moved out. That was not the point. The point was that I had disobeyed and disregarded the Chinese codes for female behaviour. My censure was in the form of “a gaze that can only be felt but not clearly seen” (Chow 1995, p. 17).

Though reconciled with my father many years later, I have not ceased to feel that I am no longer Chinese in their eyes. More recent interactions with my parents’ friends produced surprised remarks if they hear of me doing things considered Chinese. “Wah, so good of you to visit your parents so regularly, ah,” they would exclaim. Thus, the punishment for me was never blatant. “Rather than punish the body, such subjection specializes in reforming the heart and the mind” (Chow 1995, p. 17) and in my case it was through the subtle, but clearly decipherable, display of institutionalised morality.

I need to add that what I have recollected is based on my perception of how I was viewed. I underscore the power of the operative cultural semantics that made me feel so self-conscious, to
the point of turning my back on the Chinese community where possible. Chow’s (1995) work on technologised visuality is useful here to interpret this experience. I include here an excerpt from the preface to Lu Xun’s autobiography that she cites to contextualise this for the purposes of the analysis above:249

One day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a public demonstration, while the Chinese beside him had come to appreciate this spectacular event. (Chow 1995, p. 4, Chow’s italics)

The film so disturbed Lu Xun, that he converted from pursuing his medical studies to writing. He felt that changing the spirit of the people was more effective than doctoring their physical health as the latter would not reduce them to being used as “materials or onlookers of such meaningless public exposures” (1995. p. 4, Chow’s italics). Chow argues that the point of the horror for Lu Xun is not just the execution itself nor the passivity and powerlessness of the onlookers, but the power and ambiguities of the visual encounter itself. Visuality, Chow argues, enables a re-reading of the episode above by considering the web of relationships among the various spectators. This web includes those who appreciated the spectacle, Lu Xun as he watched the event and the other spectators on film, Lu Xun as he watched himself and others watching him in his role as writer. Through this web, we see that the spectators in watching the execution have become a spectacle and a film themselves. This image of the “passive collective mesmerized in spectatorship” is what produces the effect of shock on Lu Xun.

Let me then relate this to the autoethnographic narrative above where I observe others observing me and supposedly accusing me of not being a virtuous daughter. Acknowledging a self-consciousness tied to the spectator position, the horror for me in that experience is the recognition of the cultural semantics at work in the minds of the Chinese who were supposedly critical of my behaviour, and the paralysis of not being able to change their thought processes. I can argue that this is possibly the root of the pain felt by Macy too but how do we know that for a fact? To answer this, I borrow from Chow’s work on Lu Xun’s conversion again. She questions:

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249 Lu Xun is a famous modern Chinese writer.
How do we know that the looks on their faces mean that they are apathetic? ... Visual images ... do not have possibilities of interiorization and abstraction that are typical of the written word. ... Lu Xun's explanation is already a retroactive attempt to verbalize and narrativize a mute visual event. ... If the visual encounter causes a major change in Lu Xun ... how [did it cause] the change[?] ... Because the visual image itself is silent, how do we go about explaining the changes it causes in us? ... It is impossible to know for sure. ... [There is a] need for interpretation, the need to make up for the lack/silence in the visual image with an act of nonvisual filling. (p. 7, Chow's italics)

Here, she confirms that it is impossible to know that the members of the Chinese community whom I met were actually censorious. In fact, they could have been equivocal in their stance or apathetic, which indeed would have been the case with strangers. However, the cultural semantics persuaded a reading of the circumstances as recorded in the narrative. Thus, there is truly a need for a re-interpretation of the event above to secure an end to the violence of the operative cultural semantics there.

It needs to be noted too that it is not a matter of simply choosing to adopt an alternative cultural semantics so that a different reading of the experience is produced. As Said argues: “None of this Orient is merely imaginative. ... It would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality” (1978, pp. 2, 5). It is because the cultural semantics that are imposed on and engaged in by members of the diaspora are true and real, that such perceptions as registered in my autoethnographic narrative and in the accounts above continue to exist.

In relation to the above problematic, it is also necessary to further discuss the position of observer or spectator by citing Crary's definition: “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations” (in Chow 1995, p. 204). He adds that the observer’s problem is:

The field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification. (in Chow 1995, p. 204)

If the observer is constrained by the powers within the field, then an awareness of the reality of this power at least ushers us to produce an alternative cultural semantics. Here, I suggest a
deployment of the alternative liminal space to counter the real, to encourage the common sense understanding that not all members of the Chinese community respond in a similar manner to issues of sexuality. Further, it would help us to be unfixed from the grip of the binaric cultural semantics that control what is a good or bad woman.

Commanding conformity

We return to Alex's story on her sexuality in this section. Living in a de facto relationship has been the source of much angst for her and her partner, especially in her relationship with her parents, who all things being equal are more liberated than other parents. On her marital status, she says: "I've been told by my uncle here, 'If you're my daughter, I wouldn't stand for this kind of thing' – coming here on my own, having a de facto relationship" (Alex: 1713-1717). Her father is similarly adverse to her chosen lifestyle: "He's very uncomfortable about it. He's quite traditional, old fashioned, in terms of women, sexuality and men" (Alex: 1722-1727). Her father does not seem able to handle the opposing stance she has taken on sexuality and this has caused friction in their relationship:

_Ever since I came here [Australia], and started seeing boys, more and more there have been closed subjects. I was his little girl so (laugh) for his little girl suddenly to go off overseas and then come home with a guy, was quite hard for him to take. In that transition from his little girl to a woman, I don't think he ever made it actually. He finds it difficult to address me that way, to talk to me that way. (Alex: 1789-1790; 1807-1812)_

The friction between Alex and her father could be reasoned as his discomfort with her maturing sexuality and his difficulty in negotiating this change adequately. I could say that her father is unable to deal with the idea that his daughter is a sexual being and is only able to view her as his chaste and unsexed little girl. I could add a male hegemonic layer and say that apart from dealing with his daughter's transition into womanhood, the father has to confront his own boundaries of what is appropriate behaviour for his daughter sexually. While it may be argued that it is a cultural clash, according to the vertical-generational model problematised by Lowe (1996), which simplifies this complex situation, it is Alex's deviation from his set ideas of what is moral that causes problems in this particular relationship. The father's hegemonic cultural
semantic is challenged and this may be the root of the tension. This further confirms the construction of sexuality and femininity as a tool for the preservation of male dominance.

**Liminalised sexuality**

Although the rhetoric on Chinese sexuality remains rather fixed, changes are already occurring in Malaysia, for example. Judith explains how the shifting values affect her:

*The main issue is realising how Western Malaysian-Chinese people in Malaysia are. In Australia, it’s so conservative because my parents’ generation are clinging on to an idealised 1960s and 70s vision of struggle, and attempt to maintain cultural identity and uniformity. In Kuala Lumpur, the young Chinese women were very broad-minded: drank alcohol, dated many males, very sociable and hospitable, admired Western education, but also had a strong sense of family. There was less guilt in KL than I feel that I carry in Australia. (Judith: 228-236)*

Apart from Malaysia, social factors in Singapore are also beginning to challenge the idea of an ethnicised morality. To a certain extent, Alex is able to de-ethnicise sexuality due to the transforming Singaporean culture. The rising standard of living in Singapore result in increasingly expensive real estate. Young couples find it harder to afford their own homes. Thus the extended family may have become lax towards sexual standards in order to accommodate their adult children's practices. These changes are reflected in the following:

*Their parents would let their children's boyfriend or girlfriend, mainly girlfriend because girls are still a little bit more precious, stay overnight. So Singapore does have pre-marital sex, from what I hear. (laugh) And some people have told me that people are living together there now, which is kind of bizarre for me because for a long time that was a big taboo. (Alex: 2857-2862)*

These changes enable Alex to disentangle her sexuality from her ethnicity and to “redefine the whole idea of Chineseness” (Alex: 2938). Where she initially felt that her sexual practices made her less Chinese, she later states:

*I'm glad to see that Singapore has changed and that people are more open about sexuality now. Like I said, I don't know whether it is because my circumstances have changed. I'm noticing that people of my generation have adapted to this and it's not considered non-Chinese any more but there are still pockets. I know that friends over here, who are Chinese and who have moved around predominantly*

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250 See Chapter 6 “Perfect partner” for other possible factors contributing to the tension between a father and his daughter.
Chinese communities, are still exposed to a lot of the attitudes that are part of my past. (Alex: 2940-2945)

As morality standards in Australia are often transported from the migrant’s culture of origin, the changing perspective will gradually infiltrate and substitute current cultural semantics on sexuality. This may then challenge current ideas and possibly lead to a more fluid position on sexuality. In the interim, socioeconomic class, for example, continues to impact on people’s notions and practices of sexuality. On this issue, Alex says of her relocation to Australia: “I’ve got friends now that don’t fit into the school that I came from so they aren’t from predominantly Christian or middle-class backgrounds” (Alex: 2872-2874). What this intimates is that while class is contributing to cultural change in Singapore, it is also at once at work to concretise prevalent ideas within a social class although this is not as pronounced in Australia.\(^{231}\) Bearing these issues in mind, one is then encouraged to further question the other gendered forces that continue to construct norms for diasporic Chinese women’s expressions sexuality and femininity.

Whilst I argue for a more fluid position on sexuality, my point is to deconstruct these fixed ideas with the purpose to remove the pitfalls of sexualised ethnicity. I do not wish to encourage another static version of sexualised ethnicity at the other end of the spectrum. I do want to create a liminal space for diasporic women who differ in their practices of sexuality to be able to continue to assert their Chineseness and not to feel or be estranged from the Chinese community for so doing. It is hoped that a different Chineseness is reconfigured for the future.

\(^{231}\) Generally, being in a particular class inserts one into a social realm that reinforces the values of that group, making it harder for those within it to shift in their ideals and ideas of sexual issues. See also Alex’s comment on this on p. 20.
Chapter 5

Darling daughter | martyr mother

As [women], we are encouraged to accommodate ourselves to families at the expense of our own feelings and the quality of our lives. (Weedon 1997, p. 38)

In this chapter I focus on the role of the Chinese woman as daughter, in terms of her attitudes towards filial piety, and how these expectations may influence her perception of motherhood. I question how filial piety operates to influence the way that these roles are performed, focusing particularly on how the cultural semantics of filial piety assume certain attitudes and practices as norms, to expose the invisible forces that operate to inform the diasporic Chinese women’s role as daughters and mothers. I assert that the women negotiate these roles as ethnicised and gendered subjects in “historically-specific practices” (Fraser, in Aveling 1995, p. 110) within the family institution. This position thus impacts on how they assume their roles as daughters and mothers as Chinese women. I also consider what impact the liminal space may have on the daughter’s practices of filial piety, in her role as the surrogate son, and her subsequent negotiations of motherhood.

As part of this interrogation, it is useful to refer to Lowe’s (1996) argument against how the Asian American culture is often interpreted along vertical lines between the first and subsequent generations of migrants. I add that such a claim does not consider the context for generational conflict. In the case where multiple generations may still live together under one roof, such a vertical interpretation may still be valid, and especially if a common budget is shared by the different family cells (Yim 1998). A vertical cultural model has the tendency to be reductionist as it obscures the finer “particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians” (Lowe 1996, p. 63). The vertical model highlights an interpretation of experience according to the cultural semantics of generational conflict or filial piety, which explains the experience according to ethnic lines and invisibilises all other factors. “Ahh, Chinese parents,” one complains. Instead of critically examining the social, economic, political, geographical or historical forces at work, experience becomes understood in generalised terms according to one’s ethnicity and gendered configurations for these practices.

252 The pipe symbol in this chapter is used to indicate the possible link between the experiences of the daughter and her subsequent perception of motherhood, as discussed in the section “Matriarchal might,” p. 193.
are silenced. As filial piety is fundamental to the Confucian doctrine for Chineseness (Tu 1998a), it is impossible to ignore the influence of this practice in the lives of the diasporic women in Australia, no matter how unChineseness they may claim to be.

Filial piety

Licentiousness tops all evils; /Filial piety is the first of all good deeds. (Hsu 1998, p. 69)

A brief excursion into the background of filial piety serves as a good backdrop for this chapter. The word *filial* has its roots in the Latin for “son” or “daughter.” The Webster’s Dictionary (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* 1987) defines it as “of or pertaining to a son or daughter; becoming to a child in relation to his parents.” It is the positioning of the adult child to a subordinate role in relation to one’s parents. Its assumed origins in Confucianism, which began during the Han Dynasty (206-220 B. C.) (Holzman 1998), exposes its essentialism as a Chinese practice. It is not a practice confined to the Chinese or the Asians, as Clara believes: “Filial piety in Chinese culture is different from that in Western culture if there is a concept like that in Western culture” (Clara: 1419-1421). There is evidence of its practice in other cultures as suggested by the etymology of the word itself. The Greeks practise it as a “‘human flourishing’ for both parent and child” (Tu 1998a, p. 13).\(^{253}\)

In Confucianism, filial piety or *xiao* is the virtue of devotion to one’s parents, and forms the root of the five great Confucian virtues (Baures a): benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and fidelity (Legge 1899). Central to these values is the cementing of self to family that Slote and De Vos (1998) describes as thus:

One may reject the family, a rare but not unheard-of-occurrence, but one never loses the sense of family as the basic unit of which the personal self is but a part. It is a matter of soup versus a slice of pie. In the West, we tend to regard ourselves as one part of a whole, that is, a slice that is related to the other but who maintains his/her individuality; in the East, on a deeply buried unconscious level, one is part of a vast barley or lentil soup in which the ingredients swirl around each other and in which one’s identity and sense of self is inextricably established only within the context of the whole. Autonomy, as defined in the West and as a personal, culturally supported goal, is essentially inconceivable for most East Asian societies.

\(^{253}\) Although some cultures may not refer to this practice as filial piety, the concept is similar. For related studies, see Baldassar and Baldock (2000), Baldock (1999), and Baldock (2000).
The inevitable result is that the family assumes a crucial, life-determining significance. The individual is not an “I”, rather he/she is an inextricable part of an encompassing “we.” (pp. 43-44)

The family is thus expected to be the life of the members of that family unit, an expectation that causes much tension either interrelationally or internally for many. Another central value is the maxim that filial piety, or the submission of self to one’s parents or elders, removes self-centredness for the good of humanity. Following this tradition, filial piety is performed by exhibiting complete obedience to the parents during their lifetime. The practice shifts to ancestor worship after the parents’ death (Baures a), demonstrated in such rituals as tomb-sweeping. This devotion to one’s parents is the end goal of filial piety. It forms the basis for the wider Chinese social system of communal relations and is still practised to preserve the family unit, which serves as the foundation for the traditional Chinese social system (Chen 1973). Children who were raised under this system which revered the parents often suffered emotional scars, as we can see in Rosa’s description of her family: “They’re very stern in their Chineseness and keep closely to all the rituals, such as the distance between parents and children; I’ve never felt that my father feels at ease and can be himself in front of his parents” (Rosa: 112-120). The fathers were especially restrained in their role but as grandfathers, they were able to relax and be more affectionate. This, according to Slote (1998), is “testimony to the emotional price they [the grandfathers] paid for the restraints imposed upon them in the past when they were fathers” (p. 41).

The Han Dynasty saw the confucianisation of Chinese politics and educational curriculum (Tu 1998a). Filial piety is also practised in other religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism regards filial piety in much the same way as Confucianism. I include an extract relevant to my discussion on the role of the daughter. The following speaks of daughters who are unfilial after marriage, despite all the good that their parents have invested in them. These daughters are deemed unfilial because their devotion is given to their husband and their husband’s family upon marriage, placing their parents as a lower priority:

It may be the case that daughters were quite filial to their parents before their own marriages, but they may become progressively rebellious after they marry. This

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254 See the section in “Chinese confuson,” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 161, for an example of how the family tensions are traumatic for Macy and myself.

255 As none of the participants volunteered information on their negotiations of filial piety with their Buddhist faith, I decided not to venture further into this area in this thesis. However, for details on this, as well as how filial piety is translated to other contexts in other countries, it is useful to refer to (Slote and De Vos 1998).
situation may be so extreme that if their parents show even the slightest signs of displeasure, the daughters become hateful and vengeful toward them. Yet they bear their husband’s scolding and beatings with sweet tempers, even though their spouses are outsiders with other surnames and family ties. … These daughters hold their parents at a distance. … They do not long for them and simply cut off all communication with them. When the parents continue to hear no word from their daughters, they feel incessant anxiety. … Their every thought is of seeing their children. … The virtue of one’s parents’ kindness is boundless and limitless. If one has made the mistake of being unfilial, how difficult it is to repay that kindness! (BuddhaNet)256

As we can see, similar to Confucian teaching on filial piety, Buddhism teaches that a daughter’s life should be lived in obedience to her parents, who are portrayed as perfect gods to be revered. Her gender constructs her as having less filial potential because she marries out, as compared to a son. For this reason, many Chinese families value sons over daughters.

In some countries, like China, Singapore, Japan, and Korea, filial piety is further translated by the governments for economic (“World Faces Aging Population” 1998) and political (Snyder 2000) purposes. At the core of it is an ideological system that indoctrinates children to provide care for their aged parents. This care need not necessarily be based on love but a sense of duty and the adult child’s own pride, due to the practice of filial piety as a measure of one’s worth as a child. Its end goal of establishing self, as is outlined in the Confucius texts (Legge 1899), shows the underlying selfish nature of the practice though it is couched in selflessness. For example, a child submits to the moral obligations stipulated, as it will not only bring shame to the family but to self as well.257 Thus, the worship of one’s parents is comparable to the worship of the Western God (Holzman 1998), and an unfilial child, viewed as a criminal in the Han era, was subjected to the death penalty (Bauers b). Adherence to the practice sometimes cost the child his/her life (Holzman 1998). A mother who gives birth to an unfilial child is regarded as better off dead than to live to see such a child grow up. Thus, to be perceived as unfilial was such a shame that many would ensure that they never brought such dishonour upon themselves or their parents. This is practised in terms of care for the aged in practical and financial terms. Although such a staunch ideological foundation is manipulated by certain governments to counter an otherwise exorbitant social security system, this practice also provides stability in a rather sophisticated social system.

256 This extract is taken from a file from a non-sectarian Buddhist Internet site set up to disseminate Buddhism.
257 On the collective effect of filial duty, see p. 190.
Christian Chinese, on the other hand, negotiate filial piety differently,\(^{258}\) seeking perhaps a different version of the practice as taught in the Bible:

> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth. And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6: 1-4, *Holy Bible: New King James Version* 1994).

The emphasis is on a reciprocal relationship of mutual respect, rather than complete obedience to the parents from a subordinate position, as in the Confucian tradition. Furthermore, Christianity also teaches that one is to leave the natal family to cleave to the new marital family: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2: 24, *Holy Bible: New King James Version* 1994). Though one does not neglect one’s parents, the newly wed couple now have their own established boundaries. This teaching applies to both genders in the Christian faith.

Regardless of religious background or adherence, Confucian values have been transmitted into the cultural semantics that govern how Chineseness is negotiated, at both the political and private levels.\(^{259}\) Its impact permeates the various cultural semantics on Chineseness at the different levels of consciousness. It is a normalised aspect of Chineseness that is often unquestioned due to the negative implications of being unfilial. Thus, although Confucianism is not necessarily adhered to at the conscious level of practices of Chineseness, I agree with Slote (1998) that as an ideology that influences the cultural semantics of Chineseness, it remains “extremely influential” (p. 38).

The issue of filial piety is, therefore, one that confronts many Chinese women regardless of age or location. We see how this is negotiated and adapted into the lives of the diasporic women in their roles as daughters. I assert that filial piety operates to influence the choices made by these

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\(^{258}\) See discussion on Clara, p. 183.

\(^{259}\) Similar to Slote, I have chosen to confine my discussion of filial piety to Confucianism despite other religious influences. I intersect this ancient philosophy with other religions that are pertinent to the lives of the participants interviewed, such as Christianity. Slote believes that Confucianism has had a far greater impact on the individual at the psychological level than Taoism or Buddhism. I believe this to be true the more I delve into the issues and the way I have come to analyse much of what I consider to be important aspects of Chineseness. See Slote (1998).
women and the expectations placed on them by their family, in their role as daughters. For some, the liminal space enables them to make decisions outside the boundaries of filial piety and gender. Others remain fixed in their understanding and practice of Chineseness according to past cultural semantics. The power of this cultural semantics, amongst others, in its influence on my analytical perspective, made it hard sometimes to step outside its grip into the liminal space, to observe the data from an alternative position that is not informed by the narrative of filial piety.

Filial piety and Chineseness

Marker of Chineseness

In this section, I consider how filial piety impacts on ethnic subjectification. The practice of filial piety is often seen as a marker of Chineseness or unChineseness but I posit that it can be negotiated fluidly. Hannah, for example, states that respect for elders is one aspect of being Chinese: “I find all that is important: calling people and appreciating, respecting the older people. In those principles, I’m very, very Chinese still” (Hannah: 1265-1267). Deana says: “I am Chinese because I still observe filial piety toward my parents. I respect them. I value the family unit” (Deana: 226-227). Vanessa describes her Chineseness as:

I am Chinese by race, by heritage, by ancestry. I am Chinese by some of the customs/traditions I observe (e.g. Chinese New Year, respect towards my elders, even if they don’t necessarily deserve it). ... I am Chinese in the memories I have of living with an extended family and by being aware of the saying that blood is thicker than water. (Vanessa: 777-786)

Thus, while being filial is linked to being Chinese, independence from the family unit is seen as being westernised since Chineseness is seen as being in a familial web and Westernisation as being autonomous.\(^{260}\) We see this in how Dorothy perceives Australian families:

The Australians are not close with their family. Sometimes they are really close. When the children are young, they are really close and demonstrative to their children. But when they grow old, they all become so independent. They leave home at the age of seventeen and they don’t take care of the old, elderly parents. These are the things I don’t like. (Dorothy: 1196-1203)

Dorothy’s view of filial piety is that of closeness to and dependence on the family regardless of age, something she feels the Australians do not practise or value. She ethnicises this practice to being Chinese, and regards those who do not practise care for the elderly parents as being westernised:

*The Westerners are usually not so good with their morality in terms of their respect for the parents. The Chinese are renown for taking care of their old parents but the new generation want to be westernised. They put their parents in nursing homes. Chinese people should keep to our kind of Chinese tradition to look after their old parents.* (Dorothy: 581-592)

Dorothy feels that the Chinese are inherently filial. She regards the practice of placing parents in nursing homes as unfilial instead of seeing that as adapting to improved health facilities for the aged. It is seen instead as an escape from responsibilities. Clara also views the white Australians as having weak family ties and implies this as an innate quality in Australians: “*A lot of the foreign ones [migrants from Europe] are very close to their family. They have quite strong family values compared to the Aussie ones who are more individualistic*” (Clara: 1287-1289). Who are the Aussies is an issue Clara does not problematise. There is a common view that Australian children are less devoted to their parents as they leave home at a young age or are kicked out of home early: “*The Aussie way is very open. They can do whatever they want. They don’t listen to their family so they leave home young*” (Esther: 294-296). Some of the white Australians’ attitudes about aged care and financial support to ageing parents are perceived to confirm this stereotype:

*My non-Chinese partner and I have talked about issues like the care of our parents when they are older (I don’t know what my parents expect. I certainly don’t want to “look after” them, or give money to them). He thinks it is a bizarre idea and that parents should be supporting their kids, and not the other way around!* (Shelly: 380-386)

**Turning unChinese**

In this section I consider the impact of location on practices of filial piety and negotiations of Chineseness. Clara’s parents are perceived to consider her as being less Chinese due to her location in Australia and the different way she approaches practices of filial piety:

*Probably not as Chinese as what they would want me to be in terms of being very, very respectful to more elderly people and in terms of filial piety when they are old.*
What I think they expect of me must be what they do with their parents. I’ll say that they are very, very filial to their parents so they probably think that we’re quite westernised, having lived here. I find that quite difficult sometimes. What they expect of me as their child, as their daughter, is quite a lot. But in Chinese families they are usually very, very close, and even in older generations where couples would live with their parents, so they probably think that I am not as Chinese as I should be. (Clara: 1392-1405)

The irony in Clara’s parents’ attitude is that they do not live with their own parents themselves and yet expect Clara to practise what some may feel is an archaic form of filial devotion that existed before contemporary nursing homes for the aged existed. “What I think they expect of me” conveys that this may only be how Clara perceives her parents’ expectations.261

Many parents fear that their children will become westernised due to their relocation to Australia and monitor their children’s assimilation of values and attitudes very strictly. Debra feels that her daughter is Australianised due to her rebellious streak and assertion of independence:

My daughter pretends that she’s all Australian. What can I do? I would say to her, no matter how, you are Chinese and cannot really act like the Australian people. She said, “When I turn eighteen, I am moving out.” So, if she wants to do it, I have no choice. She has to learn to do everything herself. (Debra: 1069-1073)

As in Debra’s case above, many parents view the possible adoption of Western values as a betrayal of Chinese ways. Acceptance of their children as still being Chinese and yet having different practices to what they themselves held to in their home country, due to easier access to housing, would enable them to interact in that liminal space, as Debra’s attitude later reveals: “She can still be Chinese but she’s acting the way Australian people act” (Debra: 1081-1082). Debra feels this is because the Australian law gives 18-year-olds adult rights. Likewise, a realisation that Australians are independent yet caring towards their family unbinds us from the binaric perspective on filial piety and ethnicity, as we can see in Heather’s description of the Australian family: “Whether it’s true or not, I have a perception that Australians are willing to help out wherever they can. That’s something I appreciate” (Heather: 542-546).

The parents’ fear that their children will become unfilial in Australia is due to perceptions of filial piety as an essentially Chinese trait. Shelly says of her non-Chinese partner: “He has a

261 See p. 189 for effect of filial piety on the Chinese psyche.
very European/Western attitude and doesn’t like having too much to do with family (his or mine), whereas my family sees a lot more of each other” (Shelly: 389-392). Shelly herself feels that filial piety is obligation to the family but that it would place restrictions on her life. Parents therefore fear that association with Australians would cause their children to adopt similar values, and guard them jealously against such influences and associations.

The impact of the Australian location on filial piety is also viewed in terms of age of migration:

_“I asked my mother how I am unChinese and she said that it is because I don’t have a preference for Chinese ways, unlike my brothers. She states that perhaps it is because my brothers were younger when they came over to Australia and so were more respectful and obedient to what my parents said to them. She said that I was rebellious, preferring to go my own way and was more easily influenced by the environment and people around me because I came at an impressionable age. (Kelly: 1917-1931).”_

Kelly’s independence is seen as rebellion, which is assumed to be a result of the Australian influence on her life. She is thus viewed as being unChinese.

Migrant children who step outside the norms of filial piety are perceived to have less respect for elders in the community. We see how this impacts on perceptions of one’s ethnic subjectification as well:

_Whenever we met, I always felt like a child again. The men would set up the tables while we warmed the food in the kitchen.

“Ahh, very good of you to support your father,” they often said, nodding in approval.

“Where are your children?” I would ask, only to recoil on remembering that I didn’t have the licence to interrogate them.

The project had a rocky start and I sensed there was going to be disunity as the men had very different goals for it. They insisted on my support but I soon realised that it was my presence they sought, not my contribution of opinions. My questions often went unwelcomed.

“Insolent child! Didn’t your parents teach you how to be quiet?” I often felt them chide. It was in a no win situation, I felt, for I was a young woman. “Stay in the kitchen and do the chores while we meet, child!”

The issues they faced were clear to me but it was not my place to even suggest that there was imminent trouble in their midst. Soon the big bang came and they all went their separate ways. (Agnes: autoethnographic narrative)_

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262 This could be one reason why parents object to their daughter’s marriage to non-Chinese men. See “Economic,” in Chapter 6 “Perfect partner,” p. 235.
In the eyes of those men above, I was disrespectful due to my gender, age, and ethnicity. The fact that I am married to a white Australian also marks me as disrespectful and thus unChinese. We also see this in Patty’s description of her husband, which helps to explain the mentality of the old patriarchs:

_He doesn’t have the respect that we have. Anglo-Australians never have that respect for older people. He would argue with them. Even now he will argue with my mother or my uncle. I’d say: “But this is not right” – and request him to look at the situation in a more courteous way. But John would argue in a very strong, hard, frank way. But he’s German and Australian, and he believes in being frank and he believes in people knowing his position on any issue. He doesn’t see why it should be cloaked in any way._ (Patty: 1023-1037)

Patty’s husband’s frankness is viewed in terms of his ethnicity. In many ways, I am guilty of Frank’s response to a situation where I feel strongly about something. I see it as hypocritical to agree with the other party just for the sake of giving them face._263

_Fluid filial piety_

The practice of filial piety should not be seen in essentialising terms. Clara, who initially stated that being Chinese contributed to her filial practices later concluded: _“Being Chinese doesn’t make one filial but it will make you more than you need to be”_ (Clara: 613-614). She realises its essentialising effect on her thought processes and readily accepts that Chinese people can adopt Western practices. However, she views it as a very difficult process for Australians to adopt Chinese customs: _“I never thought of Western people taking on Chinese values”_ (Clara: 1511-1512), because she feels that the Western culture is so much more attractive, as compared to the Chinese. Towards the latter part of the interview, Clara is able to consider the possibility of dissociating the practice of filial piety from being Chinese. However, at the subconscious level, she still associates the practice with being Chinese. When she finally came to this conclusion herself at a subsequent interview, it is still an uncertain departure from the essentialist views of Chineseness and the practice of filial piety. Due to its essentialist powers, it can be concluded that filial piety still has a complex hold on many, and this is evidence of the power of the Confucian ideology on the mindset of many contemporary diasporic Chinese.

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263 In some contexts, giving them face may be a necessary negotiation in that one chooses to not oppose the other’s views publicly. Thus, sometimes it is wiser to save their face out of respect for them although I may not agree with them on the issue.
**Surrogate son**

In this section, I examine the role of the daughter in her negotiation of filial piety when there is no son in the family. The Chinese family, though relocated to Australia, sometimes still maintains a structural system that assigns particular roles, status, and behaviour to different members of the family. Traditionally, the eldest son plays the most significant role in carrying out the filial obligations of the family (Yim 1998). The family’s ultimate purpose for the daughter is to marry her off, to begin her life as wife and mother as a member of another family (Slote 1998) where her filial duties are practised. The birth of a daughter was thus no cause for celebration due to the parents’ need to *market* the daughter as a viable commodity, and hence the preference for sons (Hilditch 1995). Furthermore, the daughter could not continue the family line. This genealogical function sets the biggest difference between Chinese sons and daughters in some families. Deana says of the status of sons:

*I've always felt there is a big difference because they carry the family name (laugh). I've asked my mum that. Because they're the prize – they are the bloodline for the next generation. (Deana: 1221-1227)*

Deana, single with a good income from a professional career, is able to laugh at this discrimination because she is the eldest in a family of three girls. There is thus no apparent differential treatment received, in terms of gender, amongst her siblings. The position of the son is evidently an honourable one as reflected in the following extract:

*Betina Aptheker, the daughter of Herbert Aptheker the ideological inspector general of the American Communist Party, became a leading student agitator when she went to Berkeley in the 1960s. She writes here, proudly: “Of the Jewish daughter it has been written, ‘To inherit a father’s dream makes you the eldest son. To further his ambitions makes you heir to the throne.’” (Schwartz 1999)*

With the role of the son, and especially the eldest son, in mind, daughters in a Chinese family with absent sons are often viewed to be in a unique position of liminality. This is because their gender role becomes blurred as they straddle the duties of son and daughter according to their class, academic ability, family background, and so on. I specifically examine this phenomenon of surrogate sonship in the next section. The women’s stories indicate the status of the daughter is negotiated differently according to socioeconomic class, religion, and geographical location.
Filial piety and socioeconomic class

Here, I discuss how the daughter’s financial status influences the parents’ expectations of her filial duties, and how this impacts on her life. Socioeconomic class plays a critical role in the daughter’s status within some families. To gain Bettina’s position of “heir to the throne,” as stated in the previous section, it was necessary for Deana to champion the role of missing son. Deana’s story reveals that the worth of a daughter is perhaps different according to the family’s socioeconomic class, and this is often influenced by other factors such as education and employment:

I asked, “Why didn’t you keep trying for a male?” because we are from a family of three girls. Because dad studied in Australia, he already started to be westernised and he was happy with what God gave him. And I thought that’s a very different view because a lot of people tried till they got a boy. And a lot of dad’s friends said, “Why didn’t you keep trying?” but dad said that he was happy with the three, and he’s always been happy. I mean, we have good jobs. We’ve made something of our lives. And I don’t think we’ve ever disappointed him so he was vindicated in that sense that, “Yeah, sure, I don’t have sons, but I’ve got terribly good daughters that look after me, and who have high professions,” so he was fine. (Deana: 1229-1247)

Although Deana attributes her father’s contentment with daughters to his Australian education and Christian faith, be the only influences. It is evident that Deana’s father has compensated for his lack of sons by consoling himself with the blessing of dutiful daughters who have good jobs and high professions, factors that are socioeconomically related. Deana’s high profession promises financial security and this vindicates her father from not having sons, as she is able to care for him in his old age. The continuation of the family line appears to be secondary to his retiring well. Deana explains: “If it mattered, he would have kept trying for a boy” (Deana: 1250).

Alex’s story questions the influence of Western education on gender bias: “My grandfather sent off my aunties and my father to universities all around the world. My father’s side wasn’t poor but he was Chinese educated” (Alex: 515-519). Here, the attitude towards the daughters in his family, a rarity (Alex: 557), is influenced by the economic factor, rather than the grandfather’s Chinese education. I wonder if the grandfather would have been gender-biased if he had not had the financial means to educate all of his children.
Perhaps Deana’s father’s Christian faith is the ruling factor in his attitude towards daughters in a world that values males, but I question if this and his Australian education would have sufficiently pacified the loss of male heirs, if the daughters were not capable of looking after him. Westernisation and religiosity, in other words, may have less of an impact in changing Chinese attitudes and practices, as compared to the economic factor. The good daughter here is equated with good jobs or high professions, and the ability to secure a financially sound position for one’s parents. This is thus Deana’s story: to be a good daughter is to perform the duty of looking after her parents financially through the security of a professional career, amongst other things. Perhaps if she had been able to step outside this essentialising discourse, she would have been able to see that it was possible for her to be a good daughter by providing for her parents in other ways. She felt that there was no room for her to pursue her own inferior career dreams and instead had to push herself hard to gain a higher profession. 

I experienced a similar yet different situation in my life in regards to not meeting my parents’ expectations in my initial academic goals:

> I had read the letter carefully. My friends were commiserating but I was celebrating. I had just been told to take a year off from the enrolled course of study.
> I had flippantly applied for a place in the course my parents had suggested, never expecting to gain entry into it. Unfortunately, I did well in my TAE and gained entry into my first option and thus found myself totally lost in a world that I simply could not relate to. It promised a good career and stable income. My parents had meant well but it wasn’t the path for me.
> The only time I did well was when I had to write an essay. I got a distinction.
> The rest was gobbledegook. I persevered by hitting the coffee breaks with different groups of friends.
> On the day of the exam, I remember hitting blanks after blanks. I hadn’t studied.
> I had socialised my year away.
> When the letter came, I knew that it was my licence to move on. I did. What a bad daughter. How totally selfish! (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Like Deana would have felt had she not qualified in the professions her parents expected her to, I felt that I had failed my parents by not pursuing their preferred double Computer Science and Commerce degrees successfully. When I later completed a degree in Journalism and Creative Writing, only to find that I didn’t want to work as a journalist, I felt that I should

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264 On Deana’s parents’ preference of her career, see p. 322.
265 See the professions that are held in higher esteem in “Course choosiness,” in Chapter 8 “Educated elite,” p. 309.
have listened to my parents. I sometimes still feel that I am not half as good a daughter as I could have been, as I do not have the salary range that my brothers have to splash on my parents. Deep down I know that my parents wish only for me to be happy and comfortable in life but on bad days, I find it hard to tear myself away from the grasp of this cultural semantics. At other times, I know that my expression of love to my parents is not fixed to prescribed ways. It is not tied to a fixed salary bracket. It is creative and practised out of my own volition. There is a space where I can be different. However, there was a time when this instilled resentment in me towards my parents, especially in the social context where their friends would praise my parents for my brothers’ medical and engineering professions. My status then as a teacher was often silenced.

The position of surrogate sonship has made Deana feel resentful but not necessarily towards her parents. Perhaps the cultural semantics of filial piety does not give her room to feel resentful towards her parents as emotional responses to situations were usually censored according to an expected norm (Slote and De Vos 1998). Further, obedience to the family is likened to the military where resentment, though felt, is never conveyed to others, for the sake of order (Slote 1998). Deana thus describes herself as the obedient daughter who always listens to her parents. She explains that her filial expressions are out of gratitude for their sacrifices in bringing her to Australia. However, this gratitude has been complicated by the pressure placed on her to perform according to their expectations:

*I’ve resented being the eldest in the family. I would have liked to be in Janice’s position as the youngest because Janice had a lot more in terms of freedom, in terms of less pressure on her to have to succeed; in terms of having less to support the family. I had to do a lot of that. She can help out now, which is wonderful. And I’m okay. I’ve gone through it. I’ve helped out and I’m fine about it.* (Deana: 1083-1099)

Deana’s attitude towards the pressure imposed on her can be explained in terms of the internalisation of the parents’ high expectations, as discussed above, as well as the consequence

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266 Yang in his autobiographical article also speaks of his departure from a “safe career” when he chose to become a playwright, only to find that his parents were “right in some ways” when he could not survive financially. See Yang (1994, p. 92).

267 This resentment within the family is possibly one reason why Macy, Deana’s sister, drifted away from the family. Macy is perceived by her parents as being unable to contribute to the family financially due to her chosen non-medical career (see p. 183). Slote states that the suppressed intrafamilial dissonance is often negotiated via an estrangement from the family (see “Chinese confusion” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 309). See Slote (1998).
of the "suppression of hostile feelings" toward parents" (Yim 1998, p. 165, Yim’s italics). It is not just the act of showing resentment towards one’s parents that is forbidden as "even thoughts of such hostility are morally condemnable and therefore suppressed. ... They cannot admit openly, perhaps not even to themselves, that they would like to be rid of their parents; but the desire must inevitably arise" (Yim 1998, p. 166). In fact, the "conscious awareness of hostile impulses was also stringently prohibited" (Slote 1998, p. 47). Perhaps it is this restriction of true expression that results in her explaining her feelings in terms of her position as eldest daughter. Slote (1998) states that "essentially we are dealing with subconscious processes, rarely available to conscious awareness and then only under unusual provocation" (pp. 46-47).

Despite Yim’s claim that these kind of expectations affect sons and daughters differently, in families with no sons, it would seem that the duties that would otherwise befall the eldest son, are similarly expected of the eldest daughter, as is befitting of her financial status. Fortunately for Deana, this often onerous task, which only becomes more complicated as the parents age and are in need of other forms of care, is shared by her sister who earns a much higher income. ²⁶⁸ Thus, whilst Deana and Janice are pressured by her parents to provide for them financially, through the need to study hard to gain qualifications for a professional career, her other sister, Macy, is not expected to support the family financially as her salary is not as high. A child’s income bracket is often taken into consideration in the parents’ filial expectations, as we can also see in Shelly’s family: "I don’t currently give them money. In fact I have never done so because my income has always been low – they don’t act like they expect us to anyway" (Shelly: 386-389). This is possibly why importance is placed on the child’s education and future employment. Having never been as academic as the other daughters, Macy’s occupation is not considered to be as prestigious as her sisters’. She has also been estranged from her family for other reasons, which were previously discussed.²⁶⁹ Both Deana and Janice, however, take on the role of surrogate sons, by providing the parents with the financial support that a son otherwise would.

Filial piety and Christianity

The practice of filial piety is negotiated through a complicated web as it intersects with other factors that the woman holds as important. In this section, I examine how the expectations of the parents are considered alongside the women’s Christian faith. I posit that despite the

²⁶⁸ For other consequences of this obligation, see “The love life,” in Chapter 8 “Educated elite,” p. 319.
²⁶⁹ For "Chinese confusion," in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 161.
confession of a Christian faith, which forbids ancestor worship, some are still very much influenced by the Confucian socialisation processes from their childhood and community. Thus, in some cases, one’s filial duties are exercised as discrete entities from one’s Christian faith. Slote (1998) states that the child-rearing patterns were so identical in Confucian families that “children heard only an echo of themselves in each other and in the parents of their peers” (p. 40). Such a restrictive upbringing would give little variation to how one negotiates one’s relationship with the parents. Thus, within such a uniform society, filial duty is practised despite its costly process (Yim 1998). However, there is also evidence in Clara and Indi’s stories that their Christian faith enables a more fluid negotiation of their filial obligations.

Clara, like Deana, also comes from a family of daughters. Her duties are different to Deana’s due to her parents’ wealth. Instead of having to work to support her parents monetarily, she is expected to manage her father’s financial matters. As the youngest of four girls, she was left with the bulk of the responsibility. She feels torn between having to do what her parents require of her and expressing her filial duty in love: “I am not saying that the Chinese don’t do it because we don’t love our parents, but a large part of it is also the expectations of the parents” (Clara: 1444-1446). Although “filial piety does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority but recognition of and reverence [towards them] for our source of life” (Tu 1998a, p. 13), Clara feels that it is a chain around her relationship with her parents. Instead of being able to show her love towards them freely, the expectations reduce all she does for them to duty.

*In Chinese culture you are really expected to support your parents and to take care of them when they are old. You are very much still a part of them even when you have grown up and are married. In Western culture it can be very individualistic. When they are married, they are quite separate and the parents don’t impose any expectation on them to take care of them when they are old or to even take care of their affairs all the way through. They would be like, “Oh you’re married and these are my affairs. I will take care of it myself. It doesn’t mean that if you are my son or my daughter, you have to do it.”

*In Chinese culture, like in my family, my dad would expect it from me because it is like, “I have done everything for you and this is just a little bit that you can do for me so you shouldn’t complain, and you know you should do it. You are not filial and you are a bad daughter.* (Clara: 1423-1437)

Here, being a good daughter means managing the parents’ finances. It is an obligatory duty of the daughter to take on this responsibility no matter what her own personal affairs may be like,
in return for what the parents have sacrificed for her. Not meeting these expectations types her as a *bad daughter*.

Clara’s negotiation of her parents’ expectations is complicated by her Christian faith, which she acknowledges as the source of and solution to her conflict. “*I couldn’t identify myself wholly with the Chinese filial piety that my parents passed down to me*” (Clara: 605-606). Her parents taught her a Chinese or Confucian form of filial piety whilst she wants to practise a Christian form. Her faith teaches her: “*Once you are married you should leave your parents and then you set up your own home. I don’t know whether that is a Christian thing or a Western culture thing*” (Clara: 511-513). Hence her frustration when her status as a married woman, with added responsibilities, is ignored by her parents who still treat her like a minor with *chores* assigned to her, regardless of how she feels about it:

*If he can manage it on his own, then he should do it instead of troubling me. I see it as trouble because I am already so busy and I have my own household. I just can’t manage so many things. So I feel that if he can, he should learn to do it because I am married. Not that I can’t help him any more but if possible he should try to do it himself.* (Clara: 493-498)

Clara explains that while her faith gives her the freedom to be a separate entity to her parents, it concurrently encourages her to be filial. “*If I am not a Christian, I probably won’t be that filial. I would disagree then. As a Christian, I will still help him, but if I disagree with it, I would just say, ‘No, I can’t do it’*” (Clara: 563-568). She adds that her filial piety is dominated by her Christian faith and concludes that if her father asked her to do something that was contrary to her beliefs, she would not do it.

Clara’s attempts to negotiate her faith with her filial duty is, however, still wrought with encumbrances, and these mediations are often associated with guilt.

*Not wanting to do things for him made me feel very guilty. Even though I felt that it was very reasonable, I couldn’t explain that I felt that I had to do it because he is my dad and that he has done all these things for me. It just made me feel very guilty, and that is still quite a grey area.* (Clara: 549-554)

Clara is uncomfortable with the grey area of what she wants, compared to what her father wants, despite stating: “I just live at a comfortable stage of what I think I should be and what I
think Christianity expects of me as a filial daughter” (Clara: 607-609). There is still the underlying tension in how she speaks because she feels she has to choose between pleasing her father and what she wants, rather than to juggle different responses according to the various requests made according to her Christian beliefs. Clara’s only solution to the problem is to submit because of her desire to honour her father as a Christian, and out of gratitude for all that he has provided for her. The ability to apply her Christian faith to the liminal spaces she faces would help her to dwell in the grey area more comfortably. Thus, in some circumstances, she may be called to submit to her father’s request while in others, she may need to stand firm on her individuality as a married woman with her own responsibilities towards her husband. However, Clara is not able to negotiate the liminal space to her satisfaction yet and still feels guilty when her feelings are opposed to her parents’ expectations. Her options remain fixed by binaric binds that the Confucius cultural semantics require of her as a daughter.

While Clara struggles to mediate her filial practices with her Christian faith, Indi negotiates this web by detangling the mesh between her faith and the practice from her ethnicity. Indi, single and pursuing a doctorate degree, migrated with her parents and sister nearly fourteen years ago. She describes her relationship with her parents as being one that is totally relaxed and laid back, as compared to other Asian parental relations (Indi: 66-68), despite living under one roof with them and the grandparents as well:

*We live in a three-generational home. Family is of utmost importance, surrounded by aunts and uncles who live down the street or in the next suburb. However, everyone who looks at the way my sister and I have been brought up, our relationship with our parents, will see us as very non-Chinese.* (Indi: 110-114)

Indi claims that the family’s values are more Christian-based than Chinese-based although they value the family unit highly. The family appears to negotiate the practices of filial duty well by relating these to a Christian base rather than expectations of an ethnicised filial piety. There is a freedom and independence that enables the daughters to express their filial love without restraint or resentment. Although there is the possibility of attributing this practice to being westernised, the blend of the filial practice of looking after the aged and respecting each other’s individuality proves a successful translation of an otherwise essentialist and restrictive view of filial piety. Thus, though they live together spatially, they are independent in how they are free to express themselves openly: “I have a very open relationship with my parents. There is more 'equality' with my mum than with dad” (Indi: 66-69). The equality Indi refers to is indicative of
a generational family structure that does not seem to follow the strict Confucian tradition, a translation that is effected by her Christian values. Indi describes their practices as a "total paradox" (Indi: 110). She adds: "As a kid, the line between Chinese values and Christian values tended to blur. Now they are not an issue" (Indi: 176-177). Perhaps years of practice at negotiating their practices from their Christian perspective has enabled them to develop a fluid response to filial piety.

**Filial piety and geographic locations**

The diasporic woman’s relocation to Australia influences the negotiations of filial piety differently. Geographic location also intersects with other factors to determine the expected filial duties and may ease the responsibilities expected by the parents. In the following, Carol comments hypothetically on the cross-section of geographic location with filial practices and her ethnic subjectification:

*I wouldn’t mind being either [Chinese/Australian] as long as I lived in Australia. As an Australian living in Australia the difference would be a lot less than if I was a Chinese living in Australia. The biggest difference would be family. I would prefer to be Australian. There are certain things I don’t like about being Chinese such as parental restrictions. Apart from that, I have no objections to being what I am. I don’t think I would mind being an Australian but it is not like I really, really, really want to change. (Carol: 2418-2442)*

Carol has a preference towards being Australian due to the degree of freedom that Australian women are perceived to experience, as compared to Chinese women with filial obligations. However, she admits that the restrictions on her life are not severe. It can be extrapolated from this that her position would be more extreme if she were still living in Malaysia, where she is from. Perhaps Australia provides the parents with a space to negotiate their own ethnic subjectification differently and thus they are able to be more accepting of difference. “While my parents had certain expectations, they have ended up respecting my choices; they have ‘let go of me’ in all of the above – leaving home, career, partner” (Sonia: 54-56).

Bev, a postgraduate student, is the only daughter to her middle-class Baha’i parents who are now divorced. Despite also being the only child, Bev is not expected to fulfil the filial responsibilities normally anticipated. One could argue that it is a distance factor since both her parents do not live in Australia nor do they visit regularly, but Bev’s upbringing also enables
her to carry out her role as a daughter differently. When her parents first divorced, Bev was very upset. "My father has very bad eyesight, and I thought that it was my mum's duty to take care of him" (Bev: 1184-1185). She did not place herself in her mother's role nor was she expected to. Her parents were also very open to her making her own choices. "From a very young age they assumed I was going to be something. ... They had their expectations that I would be whatever I wanted to be" (Bev: 1261, 12654-1265). There was not the same pressure from her parents for her to perform well academically either (Bev: 1419-1422), except that they did encourage her to pursue her Masters degree rather than a graduate diploma, which was deemed to have less value. She sought this with the assurance that she was free to accept or reject their advice. "My father's tendency is to be proud of me no matter what I do" (Bev: 1300-1301). Her parents trusted her and wanted her to be independent, rather than dependent on them or vice versa. She views this practice as atypical rather than the norm.

They placed a huge amount of trust in me in the sense that I was allowed to go on holidays; I was allowed to do things – on holidays they would give me the responsibility of navigating even though they knew I was going the wrong direction. They just wanted me to learn to be independent. I suppose they gave me opportunities to be trusted, and so I feel that now is just an extension of that. (Bev: 1495-1501)

Despite the freedom given to her by her parents, she still feels the need to care for her parents in their old age, especially her father, and this obligation may come from a duty-consciousness that is "a response to a debt that one can never repay and an awareness that the willingness to assume responsibility for paying that debt is morally exhilarating" (Tu 1998b, p. 128). Further, Tu adds that the father's authority is "neither external nor contractual" (p. 132) but that it stems from the child's awareness of indebtedness and a willingness to voluntarily engage in filial duties. Thus, Bev may be prompted to care for her father's welfare, despite being given the freedom to do otherwise.\textsuperscript{270} This is a concern that is complicated by her location in Australia and her father's increasingly poor health.

\textit{For us [Bev and her non-Chinese husband], if mum and dad are ill or need constant attention, then what would we do? We raised this with my father who basically said, "Oh, you have your own life now. Don't worry. When the time comes, we'll see what happens." We have discussed him coming over. (Bev: 2611-2613)}

\textsuperscript{270} This sense of duty or \textit{duty-consciousness} is said to feature in the Confucian literature on ritual. See Tu (1998a, p. 20).
Thus, Bev’s location both excuses her from performing filial duties towards her parents as a single child, as well as complicates her desire to care for them in their old age. From the above, it is also possible for me to argue that despite being in Australia, the cultural semantics of filial piety may still influence the way she thinks, even if this narrative is not consciously acknowledged. Yim (1998) explains that filial piety is a moral obligation that is not just externally imposed by the parents and society but that it is internalised and “accepted as right and proper [to the point that] adult offspring feel a sense of guilt whenever they cannot fulfill their moral responsibilities” (p. 165). Thus, despite having been raised by her parents to be independent, Bev’s attitude indicates that the influence of Confucianism is still extremely powerful (Slote 1998). It is possible that the cultural semantics of filial piety is so entrenched in the Chinese psyche that one lives under its normalising fashion regardless of the freedom to choose otherwise.

Sometimes geographical distance may not be great, but it still impacts on how filial piety is expressed. For example, the sense of guilt Bev felt is also experienced by Julia who says: “I feel guilty about not seeing enough of my parents, not doing enough for my parents” (Julia: 116-118). This is similarly shared in the relationship that my friend and I have with our parents:

She had been away from home for many years, visiting only when the funds and time were available. Her pain was in not knowing how her mum felt about her as a daughter. “What kind of daughter am I?” she mused. I asked myself the same question.

I try to “go home” every Saturday night. It was good at first, lots of talking. Then we’d arrive to find mum and dad having a party, everybody round the karaoke set. We interacted with their friends.

Now I am resolved to visit when all are not busy. I try not to make it a religion. It’s hard. Each time I call to say, “We’re not coming for dinner this week,” I feel the regret all over again.

Muddled up in that is the knowledge that mum and dad will not always be there. I know, too, that I want to see them because I miss them, and not because I have to. I think they know that now. They’re learning to let me reinvent what it means to be a good daughter. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

The conditions placed on the relationship are not necessarily verbalised by our parents but, due to the cultural semantics of filial piety, it is taken for granted that our parents would react in a particular manner if we did not behave dutifully. We also know what is supposedly right and proper. This is problematic because our parents may not even feel that we are unfilial in the
first place, as in the above musings, which reveal that the guilt is based on how we feel rather than what has been expressed to us. Often it is the perceived disapproval that is felt. Sometimes this perception is based on what our parents’ peers may convey through the use of their children’s filial acts as a measure of their own status in the Chinese community. In other words, the more filial the child, the more well regarded the parent. This is because in the Confucian cultural semantics, the good that a child does has a collective effect just as shame is ascribed to the whole family, sometimes to “succeeding generations, cursing the children with a blemished heritage” (Slote 1998, p. 44). We see this in Laura’s mother’s response to her decision to leave home before marriage:

When I left home before my marriage, it broke tradition with family upbringing. No cousins or other members ever did this unless they went to work or study overseas. The automatic assumption is that you live at home till marriage. Mother initially disapproved – “What will family say? What will people think? How will this reflect on the family?” (Laura: 127-134)²⁷¹

The dutiful daughter brings good tidings to the family just as immorality brings a collective loss of face, with the parents bearing the consequences of the child’s bad behaviour as a sign of their failure to raise them diligently (Slote 1998). There is thus the pressure from the child to conform to expectations, and pressure on the parents to ensure that their children are dutiful. Thus, the cultural semantics operate to unload guilt on our conscience to the extent that we then function under its normalising influences.

My Christian faith opens up a liminal space for me to negotiate my filial duties to my parents in a way that may not fit the traditional cultural semantics of filial piety. Here, the geographical distance is one of separation at marriage. Influenced by my Christian belief that my relationship with my parents has now become secondary to my marriage, I attempt to overcome this emotional baggage and guilt by realising that my parents are a separate entity to me.²⁷² Instead of comparing myself to what other Chinese women may do, I still struggle to acknowledge that I am free to do as I desire. I question my motives to ensure that I am not performing to meet others’ expectations. This assists to ensure that my relationship with my parents is not based on

²⁷¹ Laura explains that her departure would have been earlier if she had had the financial resources to do so. This suggests that perhaps many women in Confucian societies would probably prefer to move out too if given the financial means to do so. She attributes her attitude to her age, Western influences, and peers (Laura: 149).

²⁷² I wonder if this parental severance at marriage is not what is alluded to as being individualistic and Western, due to an ethnicisation of Christianity. See p. 298.
obligations but love. Our families are now separate units despite the strong ties that evidently still unite us, but in love. I find that this legitimises our relationship and gives me integrity in how I relate to them. As I assert this other way of being filial, my parents negotiate the codes of the new cultural semantics with me. Our relocation to Australia also gives my parents room to negotiate a different response to filial piety, as compared to those who live in societies steeped in its practice.

The Australian location has also created opportunities that release daughters from the otherwise imposed role of surrogate son. Anita has a brother, Peter, and a sister, Leila. Both women have professional careers while Peter has a labouring job. According to Anita, it was initially hard for her father to accept that Peter, his only son and eldest child who would thus have the chief filial role, was not academically gifted like he was (Anita: 2040-2070). If we assume that parents transfer the son’s responsibilities to the daughters when the son is unable to meet all their filial expectations due to financial constraints, then one may question why Anita and her sister are not pressured to adopt the surrogate position. First, Anita’s father appears to have negotiated his daughter’s filial duties by ensuring that they are financially independent:

_He expects my mum to run after him and do things for him but he says my sister and I are different. He wants us to be educated, like highly educated. He wants us to really pursue our careers. I don’t know why that is. My dad never really differentiated how we’re female or male. He wanted us to get our degree to go out to work and to be successful in work. (Anita: 3500-3505)_

Second, it is possible to surmise that the opportunities provided in the Australian workforce for people like Peter through vocational avenues has meant that he is able to secure a good-paying job despite his non-academic background. This and the parents’ middle-class background have enabled Peter to invest well from his income and their added assistance, thus securing his financial independence. In Malaysia, where they are from, this would not have been possible, and Peter would have had to depend on his parents to provide him with the comforts that the family is used to, due to manual workers receiving extremely low pay. Thus, in Australia, Anita’s father has been able to change his attitude towards Peter’s inability to gain higher educational qualifications, without necessarily transferring the son’s responsibilities over to his daughters. Anita therefore exercises her filial duties without the additional pressure that comes with surrogate sonship.
Despite the positive attributes of being relocated to Australia, it is unfortunate that in some instances, the diasporic woman is unable to escape from the obligations of filial piety. Gerry’s parents, whom she considers to be extreme, “believe children should always listen to parents no matter what” (Gerry: 347-348). Gerry struggles with this, especially within the context of having to live with her parents after marriage. She feels strongly that this practice is wrong and has chosen to resist their expectations despite the emotional blackmail she experiences. Gerry has a brother who returned to live in Malaysia. Her parents put pressure on her to live with them in Australia even though Gerry is married. They wanted her and her husband to live with them because that is their perceived Chinese way of practising filial piety. “My parents are quite extreme in their practices. Children should always live with and take care of their parents” (Gerry: 347-349). Gerry’s brother insists on this practice even though she is now married. When asked if he lives with them, she replied, “No, he is in Malaysia. They are here” (Gerry: 357). The brother has pushed his responsibility and insistence on the practice of filial piety on to his sister who wishes otherwise.

I believe that people are entitled to live in their own homes once they are grown up. On the other hand, being told over and over again that Chinese children who leave home to set up their own homes are bad, made me feel bad. I wanted my own home but I was made to feel guilty about wanting it. (Gerry: 396-403)

The unstated resentment is felt towards her brother and her parents, although she obliques them by living with them. She performs the role of surrogate son as assigned. As a professional with a doctorate degree, Gerry is still ensnared by the cultural semantics of filial piety and needs to feel more comfortable in the space that she has started to visualise – a space that enables her to set up her own home without her parents. However, despite being in Australia, the cultural semantics associated with the practices of filial piety maintains a stranglehold on her negotiations at this stage in her life.

The stories of these daughters from families with absent sons tell how the practice of filial piety differs according to the women’s economic status, birth position among the sisters, educational and professional qualifications, stages in their Christian faith, and location in Australia. Age and marital status, however, do not seem to disqualify the women from their filial responsibilities. The cultural semantics of filial piety retains its stronghold on many of the women above, including myself. I was surprised to hear the impact of this practice on these women’s lives and the struggle that they had with it in their relationship with their parents. For
those of us who have begun to step into the liminal space of practising an alternative narrative, there remains an uneasy tension between what we know is possible and what we have been exposed to since our childhood. In the next section, I deal with the psychological implications of filial piety on the negotiations of motherhood in the lives of the women interviewed.

**Matriarchal might**

In this section, I examine the effects of filial piety on the negotiations of motherhood in the lives of the diasporic women interviewed. It is useful to refer to the role of the mother in the Confucian family for the purposes of this discussion. The Confucian mother held a key role in the running of the household and the care of the children (Slote 1998). Although they are often loving and sacrificial in their role, mothers more often favour sons over daughters. Thus, although many women consider themselves to be *modern women* now, traces of the consequence of Confucian motherhood may still be evident in their negotiations of motherhood. One of the issues that surprised me from the data collected is some women’s preferences not to have children. The other issue that I observed is that, although many women continued to practise what they were familiar with or had experienced personally, there were those who desired a freer relationship with their own children. I posit that this is the binaric opposite way to how they may have been raised under the influences of Confucianism or what they observed in other families. Slote’s (1998) description of the strategy of martyrdom employed by many Confucian mothers helps to provide insight into the psyche of those who may have been at the brunt of less positive mother-daughter relationships:

> The central issue was suffering, because without pain it would have had no impact. The children were made to feel guilty for their misdeeds – which usually consisted of not doing what their mothers wanted them to do, and inasmuch as the mothers were the primary transmitters of the Confucian code, the restraints upon independence were many. The primary ingredient was power and dominance; the effect was to reduce the child (and husband and whoever else was on the receiving end) to impotence – helpless, frustrated, furious, and floundering. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a castrating maneuver that leaves the child drained and exhausted, and very hesitant to take the mother on again. Thus, its effect was cumulative. … If the situation was serious enough, the mothers wove a web of accusations and hurt feelings that could escalate until the children were distraught. The mother carved out a position in which she was aggrieved and, ostensibly, completely innocent. Some transgression, either in fact or fantasy, was chosen and magnified to the point where the original issue was often obliterated. (pp. 42-43)

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273 See the notion of sacrifice in “Typical traditionalist,” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 127.

Although the reasons are never stated, I wonder if it is possible to relate the above emotional abuse by some mothers to why some women would prefer not to have children themselves, as a reaction against their own experiences. Slote (1998) observed in his research that negative feelings towards one’s parents were never acknowledged and the two participants in his research who did, did so by hedging and qualifying the feelings “almost to extinction” (p. 47). This suppression of feelings is more firmly exercised in regards to the mother, and is often displaced on to the spouse or children, according to Slote.

The abuse of the position of honour and respect is well documented indeed (Slote and De Vos 1998). Although the intention of Confucian hierarchical order is for harmony and social stability (Tu 1998b), parental power is sometimes abused at the cost of the child’s happiness. Gerry, for example, states how older members of the family could exploit their position: “The bad parts about being Chinese are the disunity among them, and the abuse of power by people in the position to do so (e. g. older)” (Gerry: 304-310). Gerry elaborates on the negative aspects of filial piety by saying: “My parents think being Chinese means being respectful and subservient to elders, never questioning but accepting the decision of an elder. They would agree with it; they think that parents are always right” (Gerry: 368-370).

Another aspect of Confucianism that affected many children is the often cold and distant relationship between parent and child. This is often related to other factors as well such as employment and socioeconomic class:

_I don’t remember her singing lullabies. We missed out on a lot of cuddling. We had what we call amahs who looked after us and mum was away politicking. She should have given more time to her children. As children, we all have our needs and I would have liked my mother and my father to be home a lot more._ (Patty: 171-176; 185-187; 195-197).

I want to interrogate a possible link between the participants’ relationship with their mothers and their own role as mothers, whether they have children or not, as I consider their choices to have absent or autonomous children.
Absent children

As earlier stated, 12.8 per cent of the participants choose not to have children. Heather, for example, states: “I don’t have children and don’t plan to have any but that’s unrelated to my Chinese identity” (Heather: 399-400). She chooses not to elaborate further. Katie similarly simply states: “No children by choice” (Katie: 170) and Shelly: “We don’t have children and don’t want to have them” (Shelly: 406). Vicky adds: “I don’t plan to have children. I don’t see it as an issue” (Vicky: 140).

Julia gives some reasons: “Don’t intend to have children. Reasons have nothing to do with Chineseness or ethnicity. More to do with priorities and ideas of where society is headed, humans in the greater scale of things” (Julia: 281-284). Despite the reasons listed, there is not enough evidence from any of the above to support my hypothesis that perhaps this choice is related to the women’s experiences with their own mothers. Julia’s good relationship with her parents also disputes the hypothesis (Julia: 83-100). Further, despite a bad relationship with her mother and step-mother, Judith still chooses to have children.

Although substantiation is lacking, I note the above as the silence surrounding such a huge decision is significant and intriguing. As choices towards having children are personal, it was not possible for me to probe further, nor were the participants comfortable or willing to reveal more, apart from Julia. It is possible that many feel unable to give the kind of care and love that a child needs, and thus choose not to have any. We see a sense of this in Patty’s decision to have children later in life, after experiencing a childhood of absent parents: “That’s why I started very late, because children need more nurturing, need more attention” (Patty: 250-252). It is also possible to suggest that the feminist discourses tied to the role of the mother available to these women communicate to them that who they are as women is not validated by having children and being mothers. Or perhaps they are just happy to deploy the feminist freedom to have a choice to do as they please, according to their individual circumstances, as a break from the gendered norms for motherhood.

Autonomous children

Many women choose to raise their children as autonomous individuals, against the Confucian upbringing which tends to produce children who are dependent on their parents, especially the mother, who in turn is very attached to her children, especially the sons (Slote 1998). Confucian mothers also tend to be authoritarian towards the children:
As my parents could be fairly strict, even authoritarian, at times, I figured that the less they know about me and my actions, the fewer restrictions they can impose. My father has a propensity for paranoia and can be over-protective, which was extremely frustrating for me and my siblings. My father has mellowed a lot in the past few years – we’re not exactly little children any more! – but can still be too protective at times. (Vanessa: 292-305)

As an adult, Patty felt that she was treated like a child who had to gain her parents’ permission in regards to her decision to migrate to Australia: “Twenty-five, but when you’re not married, you’re not grown up. You’re still under the authority of your parents” (Patty: 958-960). 275 Over-protective parents can result in children withdrawing from them, as we see in Vanessa’s coping mechanism. 276 Being over-protective has other negative consequences as well: “Chinese, Malaysians and Asians in general are a lot more protective of their children so they make decisions, rather than to train them to think for themselves” (Anita: 2548-2550). Thinking on behalf of the children would in turn encourage them to be more dependent on the parents. Although many mothers realise that they are smothering their children, they often cannot help themselves, as we can see in Hannah’s treatment of her adult sons:

As a mother, I still want to mother my children though they are so big because they are at home. John told me the other night, “Mum, I’m 27 years old. You’re still asking me whether I’ve eaten my fruit!” (laugh) Western people won’t say that to their children, ah? They don’t but I’m still so Chinese in that sense. I still look after them. (Hannah: 948-954)

It is interesting to note Hannah’s ethnicisation of her mothering style. Others correct themselves when they realise they are repeating the mistakes of their own parents: “We also put fences on what we see as protection. But, of course, when we recognise it we quickly remove it. It seems to be a maternal or paternal instinct to want to protect your child” (Patty: 963-971).

In reaction against their stifling childhood, many women desire to raise their children in a freer manner: “I tend to treat my children as friends – not authoritarian relationship” (Sophie: 37-38). Others may have responded thus due to their observations of the strict Confucian upbringing in other families. Anita explains:

275 I have had friends who have openly sought marriage as a way of getting away from their parents’ suffocating clutches.
276 See also how my parents were overly strict about my social curfew in the section “On sexuality: No sex in the city,” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 153.
Children in Malaysia are not heard and not told as much and not given as much responsibility as the children here. When we came to Australia, we weren't told so we followed because we were children. If I had children and we were going away somewhere, I would tell them and explain to them where we're going; why we're going and what it's going to be like; what might be hard like for them to make new friends. I would do that because I'm influenced a lot by the culture here because I grew up here. I want my husband and me to be shown respect by our children. I want them to know that they have to live by our rules but I want them to be equal in the sense that we are all as important as each other and I don't want my kids to ever be frightened of me or be intimidated by me so this is very much a Western concept. (Anita: 2534-2540; 2562-2567)

Clara, like Anita, was not given an option about migrating to Australia: “I was just told that we were coming to Australia. I wasn’t really given a choice or anything. I was a bit disappointed that no-one told me earlier or no one considered my opinion” (Clara: 1128-1130; 1132-1136). Vanessa adds: “I don’t recall ever being involved with the decision-making process. All I knew was that we were moving to Australia. I’m not sure I understood the full implications of such a move until much later” (Vanessa: 415-419). Indi, and many others, was also told little of what the move entailed: “I came as a child with my parents. I thought I was going to Austria – imagine my horror when we arrived in an Aussie summer as opposed to snow capped mountains!!” (Indi: 116-118). My own experience involved a trip for my brothers to Australia, where they were shown what their new home was going to be like. I was not included in the trip. 277

The women’s location in Australia enables them to see a different way of relating to their future children than they had observed previously. Further, in many instances, the woman’s role in her conjugal relationship, which places her in a more equal position to her husband, compared to the Confucian husband-wife role, 278 may in turn open her mind to a freer relationship with her children, thus striking a more balanced role.

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277 I recently asked my mother why and she said that it was because I had exams to sit and that I was also over the age for discounted travel.
278 Tu states that gender roles are defined in a hierarchical fashion in Confucian marriages. This places the woman’s role as wife in a secondary position to her children. Due to fear of nepotism through a conjugal relationship that is too intimate, many seek to focus on the children instead of their marital relationship. See Tu (1998b).
Opportunity knocker

Anita sees her role as a provider of opportunities: "I want to give them every opportunity for their education" (Anita: 3219-3230). Anita refers to this as an Asian value. Deana, possibly as a reaction against the pressure from her parents to gain certain qualifications for a career in the medical field, says: "They'll never be pressured to do medicine, dentistry. They should be encouraged to do what they love because I value that" (Deana: 1587-1595).

In response to the lack of freedom from her relationship with her parents,279 Gerry likewise regards her role as the provider of opportunities for her children whom she believes have a right to exercise their individuality and freedom. She also feels that what she gives to her children is not conditional: "I don't think that my children owe me anything. They're gifts from God and it's my responsibility to provide them with the best skills, knowledge, so that they can grow up to be complete, independent, happy, and confident individuals" (Gerry: 349-352). Bev similarly feels that her role is to support her children in their choices in life, while providing guidance:

Regardless of what their interests are academically, they'd still work towards some form of happiness in their lives. If they're interested in cricket, and they have the skill and talent to be a cricketer, as a parent I would still want them to have something to fall back on because sports won't last you forever. So maybe sport physiotherapy. I would like them to be able to not go through a phase in their life where they're worried about not being able to get a job, being depressed. If they wanted to be something quite outrageously different, like an artist or actor, then it will be a real challenge to be loving and supportive while at the same time say, "You have to eat, dear." (Laugh) Do you know how difficult this can be? (Bev: 2592-2607)

Western methods?

These responses to child-rearing are certainly different to the restrictive manner that many Chinese women may have been raised in but these alternative approaches are often viewed as a result of Westernisation, as we saw in what Anita says in her ideas of raising children.280 Debra feels that her lack of control over the children makes her unChinese: "I am not typically Chinese. 'Oh, you have to do this and have to be like that'" (Debra: 1010-1011). It is, however, more appropriately viewed as a rejection of Confucius values, for one remains Chinese regardless of the method of child-rearing. We also see examples of this ethnicisation of methods in Hannah's views:

279 On the women's move to Australia, see p. 192.
280 In reference to Anita's ideas, see p. 197.
I’m not dogmatic. Chinese – what the mother says goes or what the father says goes. I always sit down and talk to the children and discuss. “Okay, why did you say that? Why did you say this?” In that sense it is very westernised, isn’t it? Chinese people don’t do that. What your father says goes. They don’t argue but when we are westernised, if we object, we tell them why and if they object to our objection, they tell us why. (Hannah: 903-909)

Hannah feels that proper communication with her children is a Western practice. Perhaps this is because in some Chinese families, little communication takes place between parents and their children, as we saw in how little information children were given about such a big move as migrating to Australia.281 We also see this in Dorothy’s response to how her parents felt about her foreign qualification at a time when such opportunities were still rare: “I don’t really know how he felt about it now. They never said anything” (Dorothy: 251). Fifi, likewise, experienced a distant relationship with her parents: “Very Chinese – we’re to be seen and not heard, speak only when one’s spoken to, especially with dad” (Fifi: 42-44).

The detachment of restrictions placed on children from Confucian practices, instead of ethnicity, should encourage more Chinese parents to adopt different methods of raising their children. It is perhaps not wrong to conclude that many reject these alternative methods for fear of losing their Chineseness, especially in the diasporic context where their cultural roots are already threatened. Perhaps these alternative approaches may suggest a further inversion of the filial piety ethic that many Chinese parents still adhere to. This ethic holds the family as the central reference point which means that the alliances made outside that kinship are usually weak (Hsu 1998). By giving the children such an independent role, their allegiance may no longer be to the family but to the outside circle. Thus, we see angst as in Hannah’s dilemma towards her sons’ ethnic subjectification: “It worries me– one wasn’t Chinese and now, this one is too Chinese, and now this one is not Chinese. But people always say, ‘Leave them-lah. You come here. Let them be what they want. They change.’ It’s true” (Hannah: 1147-1150). The ability to perceive autonomous children as Chinese children without the Westernisation tag, and without the fear of undutiful children, will produce healthier relationships between parent and child, and as we can also see in Anita’s desire to communicate more effectively with her future children:

281 See p. 197.
I like to have an environment where we can talk to each other and I won't want my children to think I was more important than them because I was older than them. I want them to have respect for me being a parent but I want them to feel comfortable to come to me with anything, with their problems and be able to talk to me and tell me things. (Anita: 3193-3198)

Mother's tongue and culture

In this section, I consider the emphasis given to the mother's language and culture in interracial or interethnic relationships. Where the children's upbringing is concerned, there appears to be little emphasis on the non-Chinese partner's culture: "White cultures are all very similar anyway (laugh). We don't seem to problematise it so much. Maybe can visit it some time" (Alex: 3645-3646). Anita similarly stresses the need for her children to learn the Chinese culture, but she does not include her partner's Anglo-Indian culture for consideration. Bev, whose husband is Australian, explains why she has not considered her husband's culture in this manner: "Living in Australia will expose them to the Australian part of their identity" (Bev: 2643-2644). There is an assumption that Australian culture is homogenous, or that other white cultures are likewise lacking in heterogeneity. The diasporic woman's attitude towards Chineseness in relation to language and culture, however, is given much thought and consideration.

Language learning

It appears mothers attempt to hold their children on to Chineseness through language learning: 282 "I want my children to be able to speak Chinese too so off to Chinese school they would go" (Anita: 3278). Kathy adds: "Want them to learn Mandarin – this influenced our choice of high school" (Kathy: 113). Some parents emphasise Chinese language learning at the expense of the English language: "It's not because he doesn't like me to speak English with my children. It's just that he's scared that when the kids grow up, they can't speak Mandarin any more" (Debra: 661-663). Perhaps this is due to essentialising the Chinese language to Chineseness. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding father, felt that he was deculturalised due to English education and chose to educate his children in Chinese schools. 283 We see this in how Alex views language as being the key link to her ethnicity in: 284

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282 My data elsewhere shows that the amount of time children spend at language schools at and outside school does not correlate with success in language acquisition (Carol: 968-983). Other factors such as motivation, usage, and relevance would need to be considered too.

283 His strategy was to have his wife speak to the children in English while he spoke to them in Mandarin, so that they would be bilingual. See Lee K. Y. (2000, p. 169).

284 See also the sections "Language and ethnicity" and "Ethnicity and the Chinese language," in Chapter 7 "Language and liminality," pp. 250 and 252.
I do wish that the language was there and I do wish I could pass it to my kids. If I were to have children, I would try and make Chinese language learning part of the household thing. It would be less natural and more forced but I think that’s better than nothing. (Alex: 2305-2306; 3673-3675)

To Alex, the teaching of the Chinese language is linked to her Chineseness, although she does not speak Chinese herself. Kathy also feels this link strongly: “My parents instilled in me a fierce pride in being Chinese and I never want my children to lose that part of me or themselves” (Kathy: 207-209). The inability to speak the Chinese language herself is also a problem encountered by Carol who regrets that her lack may contribute to her children’s loss of cultural knowledge:

I would have to go to Chinese school because in one year they would know more than me. I have the luxury of having parents who know more Chinese than me and therefore whatever I don’t know, they tell me whereas if my kids were to ask me, I would have no idea and so that part of them would be lost mega, mega quickly. (Carol: 2199-2205)

Rosa, like Carol, also shares that not speaking the language herself is a barrier to her children’s Chinese language acquisition: “I haven’t tried teaching them Mandarin or Hokkien because it is too difficult; they never hear me use it” (Rosa: 323-325). Apart from the minimal knowledge of the language, dialect differences provide an added complication. Despite speaking little Chinese herself, Carol feels strongly that her children should learn some Chinese, in the appropriate dialect, and adds that should her children not end up speaking some Chinese:

I would feel a little bit ashamed of myself that I had not done my job in bringing them up to know at least a little bit of Chinese. There’s a whole part of my life that my kids won’t understand. When I say “la-la-la” they have no idea what I mean. (Carol: 2208-2211; 2221-2222)

285 It seems that learning the relevant dialect, rather than Mandarin, the Chinese lingua franca, serves an important aspect of language learning as well: “I would encourage them to explore their Chinese heritage, encourage them to speak Cantonese” (Iris: 125-126). This could be due to the link that the dialect has to other members of the family since many of the diasporic women themselves do not speak the mother tongue proficiently: “I spoke to Hugh in Hokkien from the time he was born because my father is Hokkien, out of respect for him as he is still alive. I should have spoken to him in Cantonese as it is more generally used, and he can understand Hokkien but he will not speak it. Doesn’t matter – at least he understands” (Pearl: 1378-1384). Susie’s desire for her son to speak Mandarin is for a similar reason: “I would like my son to be aware of his Chinese background and to be able to communicate effectively in Mandarin to other members of my family” (Susie: 287-289). Other deterrents to language continuation are the parents’ busyness, teasing at school, and the influence of the English-speaking dominant community that may discourage the children from speaking a foreign language: “It’s harder for them because they are not in an environment where the languages are spoken” (Pearl: 1416-1418).
The shame felt by Carol is probably related to the link between the Chinese language and ethnicity. The need to emphasise the children’s Chinese background is seen in Clara’s comment: “I would tell them that they are Chinese and say if they ever tell me that they are not Chinese or they are Australian, I would discourage that and I would tell them they are Chinese” (Clara: 1719-1722). This would perhaps help the children to accept their ethnicity, in some parents’ opinion: “Chinese should learn the Chinese language. Other people might think you are Chinese, but if you don’t know how to speak Chinese and how to write, sometimes you feel ashamed. It’s part of the parent’s job” (Debra: 272-280). Debra suggests that despite how westernised a child may feel living in Australia, they will always be perceived as Chinese so having the language skills is a necessary part of that ethnic subjectification in her view. Despite the effort made by many parents in helping their children to attain Chinese as a mother tongue or second language, access to educational and employment opportunities in the dominant society through the English language erodes the need for Chinese language acquisition (Wickberg 1994). Wickberg adds that in the Philippines many parents, when faced with full educational and future employment opportunities for their children in English and limited study time in a given day, are forced to make the “cruel educational choice” (p. 31) and forfeit the child’s Chinese education for English. Many Chinese parents in Australia would likewise make such sacrifices.

Bev considers language learning to be an important activity but she does not relate it to her ethnicity alone. She feels that learning the Chinese language while the children are young gives them grounding for future study of the language: “Once they’re old enough, it would be good for them to start taking Mandarin lessons not just because I’m Asian but also it’s good for them to have a second language” (Bev: 2634-2638). Esther maximises the opportunity she has while the children are young to teach them as much of the language as she can:

The important thing is that I want them to know, to learn Chinese words. They have to know how to speak, how to write. That is the rule. They have to know. But if they want to forget, or if they don’t want to learn, I can’t do anything anyway. Since they are still young, I can force them a bit to learn. When they grow up and forget everything, there is nothing I can do any more. (Esther: 638-644)

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286 See the section “Ethnicity and the Chinese language,” in Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 252.
287 Wickberg states that in Canada before World War II, the Chinese had to acquire Chinese language and cultural skills for employment within Chinatown as opportunities outside this community were few. After the war, as access to employment opportunities outside Chinatown was more easily gained, the motivation to study an extra language waned as the skills were no longer necessary nor relevant. See Wickberg (1994).
Perhaps Esther does not want her children to regret not learning Chinese, as Patty’s children have:

_They completely didn’t see why one should learn some other language. They are Australians and all their friends speak English. “Why, mum, do you want to make us learn this other language, which is so difficult? We’ve got a lot of other problems as well.” Now they regret it, because they realise that they live in an Asian region and in their jobs, they would have been able to travel more around the area and with greater ease, had they had Mandarin or Cantonese. But there you are, we always regret many things that our mums push us to do when we were young._ (Patty: 218-232)

As the Chinese language becomes increasingly important for trade with East Asian countries and careers in the diplomatic arena, the trend towards Chinese language acquisition has emerged again. In North America, for example, the ethnic awareness movement in the 1960s and Asian trade saw an increase in Chinese language learning in both the Chinese and non-Chinese communities (Wickberg 1994). Thus, people like Pearl persist with teaching her children Chinese due to the future benefits gained: “I want to teach my children Chinese so they can trade better, so they are not left behind but at the same time, they must never lose what their background is” (Pearl: 1708-1710). There is a strong connection between language learning and cultural learning: “We try to develop their awareness by celebrating Chinese New Year and giving ‘ang pows,’ and teaching them Mandarin and Hokkien” (Lydia: 155-156). We see in the next section how this connection is interrelated to other factors as well.

**Cultural learning**

In many instances, the mother’s role is perceived as being strongly linked to the continuation of the Chinese culture: “If you keep telling them all the time, they won’t forget, same as my mum. She told me when she was young, all the Chinese traditions, all the time. Until now I won’t forget” (Esther: 652-658). Judith states:

_I will make sure my children take languages classes, take them to Asia often, cook Chinese meals often, and continually remind them of their heritage – be they “mixed” or not. I will discourage silence, and encourage them to think of their heritage as both rich and diverse._ (Judith: 297-301)
Sophie taught her children the Chinese culture more formally: “I introduced them to literature, philosophy, religions” (Sophie: 113). Vanessa will give them their Chinese link through their Chinese name (Vanessa: 578). Hannah adds: “I always give them lectures. Don’t forget you’re Chinese. We don’t do this sort of thing. I talk to them. Try to arrest it sometimes” (Hannah: 1153-1155). Faith similarly believes that it is her responsibility to guide her children in the Chinese customs:

_I teach them about the Chinese culture and tell them stories to reinforce their knowledge about being Chinese, particularly in human relationship such as respecting the elders and all people, and getting along with all kinds of people. I didn’t tell them what to do but more in guiding them along that direction._ (Faith: 260-266)

Pearl feels that it is the responsibility of a Chinese mother in particular, so that the children will not naturally westernise, due to the influences of the dominant culture:

_We as parents, especially with a Chinese background, have a responsibility to make sure that our children are exposed to the food, to the culture, to the traditions, and even just usual things that we were brought up with in terms of respect for the elders, manners and greetings. It is very, very important because it is very easy to be Western. The children can choose that when they grow up._ (Pearl: 1356-1368)

Bev feels that cultural learning also gives the children a sense of identity: “Kitty’s daughter does Indian dancing, and through that she learns a lot about Indian culture. Maybe some kind of activity, whether it’s a lion dance troupe or dance classes to give them a sense of their identity” (Bev: 2639-2642). Deana feels that cultural learning gives her future children a sense of rootedness: “I’d want my kids to know the stories because it allows you to see where you’re from. It gives you a history. People who don’t have history are like they’re lost, hanging. They’ve no where to look back to” (Deana: 1533-1539). This reinforces this thesis’ position of an ethnic subjectification that values both the past and present. Alex also holds cultural learning highly in terms of how it affects her children’s future choices:

_That tie to a past is important even though some of them are archaic. It gives you a sense of where you come from. I do want them to be raised in a certain way, with certain values that I’m used to, not necessarily the same as the ones my parents raised me with but some of the ones I grew up with. I want them to have a choice, which they won’t have if I don’t retain something for them. It must be a fear of losing myself, seeing traces of myself in my kids. I want an acknowledgment that_
In introducing her children to her culture, Alex holds that family ties are critical to the success of the process. "Grandparents are very important. A lot of things get passed down through that kind of relationship. I don’t think that the immediate family can offer everything" (Alex: 3696-3704). This may prevent her from conveying a limited form of culture, as in the celebration of festivities, to her children. However, this wish is complicated by her location in Australia and her parents’ location in Singapore, which restrict any contact that her future children may have to annual visits. She considered the option of re-migrating or educating them in Singapore as a way to counter this locational problem: "I would love them to be steeped in it for a period of time" (Alex: 3712-3713). This would be ironic since her parents sent her to Australia for education. Clara, like Alex, feels that the grandparents will play an important role in providing the Chinese cultural influence to her children: "It is really good that my parents are here and I am sure that we will have many family gatherings so that should instil some Chineseness in them" (Clara: 1706-1708). Velvet similarly sees the important role that her parents will play towards the enculturation of her children: "I will try to teach my children everything that I know about my ethnic background, and ask my parents to do the same" (Velvet: 264-266). It appears that grandparents play a reinforcing role in teaching the children about the Chinese culture.

Despite the changes evident in cultures, many Chinese women still view the Chinese culture from a limited multicultural perspective. Although Pearl realises the temporal nature of culture, she still desires to share what she experienced with her children. Perhaps this is one reason why many migrants tend to cement culture to the particular version that they remember:

_We try to take them to markets when we’re over there and just say: “Look, these are some of the experiences that we went through as a child.” Of course the wet markets are also changing in the cities. They’re not as big and as vibrant as they used to be._ (Pearl: 206-215)

Pearl’s children view their Chineseness in terms of costumes worn: "When my daughter feels like being very Chinese, she goes and pops on one of her Chinese costumes I have brought back for her” (Pearl: 1918-1922).288 Although Deana emphasises the need to understand the stories

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288 See my reference to the use of chopsticks as a child when I felt like being Chinese, p. 4.
behind the festivals celebrated, she still equates them to an essentialist expression of Chineseness: "I was aghast when these other two friends of mine said that they don't celebrate anything that's Chinese in terms of festivals. But I'm thinking, 'But you're Chinese! Why don't you celebrate anything like that?" (Deana: 1527-1533) Having learnt what the festivals mean from books, Deana is unable to see the fixedness that comes with these versions of Chineseness (Deana: 1575-1579), and how they are related more to religious practices and superstitious beliefs than to ethnicity.

To avoid essentialising Chineseness, and to prevent full assimilation into the Australian dominant culture, requires knowing about the past and present cultures. However, Alex believes that introducing her children to her past culture will cause them conflict:

> When you have to deal with different cultures, the past/present traditions, you find yourself having to decide where you stand. So tension in that you don't have a clear identity, you don't have a clear goal. Things are not straight-forward in the sense that you have to negotiate all these different values and decide which one. It's quite confusing sometimes, even for me. It's not as clear cut to me as adopting Australian attitudes and assimilating. To me, part of myself is the thing I was brought up as in Singapore and I don't want to ditch it. So in terms of tensions for the children, they won't be so easily assimilated in that they won't be totally Aussie so it won't be easy for them. I still don't think that kind of heritage is totally accepted in Australia and they probably would have an easier time if they were given only one culture, and they didn't have that tie. (Alex: 2324-2338; 2352-2355)

Alex feels that her children's identity negotiation will be more difficult because their ethnic background, values, and direction will become more blurred. Georgie similarly observes that there would be conflict: "There would be some issues of identity and that sense of finding out where they are. If the cultures are very positive, in that they have the best of both worlds, then they grow up quite secure" (Georgie: 916-920). However, she feels that not having positive options to choose from usually results in rejecting the minority culture. Having options made available to the children, on the other hand, provides opportunities that the children would otherwise not have:

> I would do more to promote it. I'll give them Chinese names and I would like my children to be bilingual because having an open door into the language gives you a better appreciation for it. That should be an option that's available for them whenever they choose to decide which cultural route they want to take. (Georgie: 962-969)
The race issue is also one that Anita raises: “I would explain to them that they do not have to be like everyone else and that colour doesn’t make people more or less important than others” (Anita: 3288-3295). Gerry adds: “We have never discussed about being Chinese with my daughter until the Pauline Hanson circus. We didn’t do it because it was not a big deal” (Gerry: 159-168). The race issue is also expressed by Judith’s father: “Whether or not they’ll be ‘pure-blooded’ is an issue for my parents. Not for me. I’m not fussed with those types of considerations” (Judith: 292-294). This indicates a two-way racist attitude, in that just as the Australians may be racist towards the children, so too the Chinese grandparents. Carol is more optimistic about the race issue and states: “The Australian society is changing so much now that it is becoming much, much more multicultural. It is not so much of an oddity to be different particularly by the time I do have kids” (Carol: 2182-2184). She adds that the race factor would become more of an issue if she were to have a partner who would enforce a strict Chinese heritage on her children because that “emphasises their difference because they just don’t do everything quite like everybody else” (Carol: 2194-2195).

Despite the possible tensions, Alex feels that teaching her children the Chinese culture is a positive path towards the children’s ethnic negotiation later on:

> It will always be part of them so they might as well learn to deal with it in a healthy way and one healthy way is so that they know something about it. If they don’t know anything about it, how are they going to deal with it healthily? How are they going to acknowledge it? (Alex: 2367-2371)

Emily similarly feels: “Just respect your background. You can’t escape it so you might as well deal with it” (Emily: 405-406). Vanessa stresses the importance of not imposing the culture on her children: “If they choose to be interested in their Chinese heritage/ancestry, I will encourage them in this, but it must be their own choice” (Vanessa: 583-586). Vanessa’s approach suggests a severing of the culture from the biological fiction.

The liminal space would enable the women to imagine child-rearing and cultural learning in ways that they themselves have not experienced with practices that they value from their own background. If one is free to mix and match, that confusion can be developed into a strategic

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289 On Pauline Hanson, see p. 30.
display of multicultural learning. Carol feels that if she were to have children, she would then be exposed to how Chinese she is due to their schooling (Carol: 2173) but states that she would teach them the method she learnt in her childhood, as opposed to the methods she has observed used here (Carol: 2174-2181). Anita describes her child-rearing approach as a mix of what she knows with what her partner brings into the equation:

It would be a blend of everything we know and pick out all the best bits. Chinese culture, I want them to show due respect for people that are older than them. I want them to come out, greet guests at home and speak to them as well. (Anita: 3200-3207)

The new way that Anita and Kenneth develop will give glimpses of the old, blended in with the new from each other’s cultures. Selecting the best from the different cultures that we are exposed to in our child-rearing practices enables the development of strategies that are beneficial to the general community: “We believe that in the Chinese culture, children are subject to more discipline. Our children are more socially aware of others’ needs than Chinese children we know, and a lot more socially aware than Australian children we know” (Rosa: 308-318). Susie likewise has blended her previous experiences with what she has observed in Australia:

I am probably a little less Chinese than they are as I am a Christian, and I have spent more time in an English-speaking environment whilst settled here in WA. However, I have not let go of the morals and values that were taught but I am a little more flexible in my expectations of my son and of those around me. I am also careful to avoid enforcing every aspect of Chinese culture onto my son at the expense of other lessons that he may learn. Similarly, I will not suppress any aspect of his Chinese origins but I will expect him to function wisely between the two cultural groups by using his discretion carefully. (Susie: 98-104; 252-253; 301-306)

Susie considers the new environment that her son is in and chooses to emphasise that which is relevant to his contexts. She also encourages him not to enforce his values onto others in a dogmatic manner (Susie: 295). Selecting to emphasise the positives in each culture may begin to avoid the binaric approach that many parents still have towards their children’s cultural upbringing:

I don’t want to bring up kids and assimilate them to the extent that they are ashamed of their identity and their background knowledge. Neither do I want them
to be brought up so that they think that they are more at home overseas, back in their so-called roots. (Alex: 2754-2758)

Another aspect of culture that Alex views as critical to her future children’s cultural learning is the idea of culture as a living culture:

I’ll also give them a sense of how things may have changed and to get them away from certain interpretations of a fixed culture. By teaching them a culture, I don’t mean just the traditional stuff, but also that it’s something alive, something that develops. Quite often in popular culture, the image you get of ethnic is very stereotypical, fixed, even in some aspects of SBS, not all. You get a different dishes approach to different cultures. You get this one culture and this one kind of dish. (Alex: 2376-2390)²⁹⁰

Hannah’s need to adapt to a more fluid form of Chineseness in Australia helps her move into the liminal space, and out of the fixed formula for Chineseness:

Everything we do is ruled by being Chinese. Can’t help it because we are brought up that way. We have a form of diluted Chineseness. We are comfortable either way because we know both cultures. My values are not always the best. In talking with the children, we begin to question our own values. We choose the best from both worlds. Parents must adapt too so parents don’t put pressure on children to perform their static version of Chineseness so they feel they’re in limbo. (Hannah: 1452-1458)

Liminality is useful as confusion arises when one has to stand with one side and not both, instead of making the most of the situation and switching sides accordingly. People should be free to straddle comfortably between the two, or to juggle multiple cultures. Although presently seen as a schizophrenic weakness, as you cannot decide where you belong, liminality eventually gives strength as one finds security in the past and present.

Chapter 6

Perfect partner

Mixed marriages in Australia are increasing, as the population overall becomes more culturally diverse (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000).

The previous chapters’ discussion of the cultural semantics of gender and sexuality, the role of the daughter in the Chinese family and motherhood, informs my present interrogation of interethnic relationships premised on perceptions and the problematic homogenisation of interethnic coupling. I consider how these with images of the Chinese and white Australian men, and diasporic women’s self-perception in interracial relationships, intersect with their negotiations of Chineseness in their partner choice.

Images of Chinese men, past and present, are emasculated constructions that have impacted on the way they are perceived. Such is the influence of these cultural semantics that American writers from the 1960s to 1980s were focused on overcoming these distortions (Wong and Ana 1999). Together with the norms of what constitutes an attractive male, these men are labelled as typical China men and are deemed as inferior products to their Western counterparts. But “what is wrong … with being considered passive, sexless, nerdy, evil, a Fu Manchu or a computer technician ‘if that is really what one is?’” (Chin, in Wong and Ana 1999). The problem is, even if one fits the masculine build, one may still not be authorised as fully attractive. For example, ageing actors Jackie Chan or Chow Yun Fat look distinguished and even attractive to many but, in my view, their inability to acquire the Western accent leaves them classified as China men. Thus, they fall short of comeliness as soon as they open their mouths. Their inability to roll the R bars them from full membership in the glamour world of Eurocentric masculinity.291

More importantly, the norms that operate to determine attractiveness are gender-distortions that impact on one’s partner choice. At worse, these norms construct a cultural semantics on Chinese men that inflicts violence on the diasporic community. It is a violence that silences the Chinese man’s sexuality, robbing him of his right to articulate his own fashion or style by imposing an other’s language on him:

291 To counter my perception, both Jackie Chan and Chow Yun Fat have been cited as the personification of wu manhood (masculinity gained through military accomplishment) in a study on Chinese masculinity. See Louie (2002).
A man, in any culture, speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man but a ventriloquist’s dummy at worst and at best a parrot. ... The tyranny of language [italics added] has been used by white culture to suppress Chinese-American and Japanese-American culture and exclude the Asian-American sensibility from operating in the mainstream of American consciousness. (Chin and Chan, in Wong and Ana 1999)

I use language here to mean the gendered, feminised, and sexualised norms that marginalise the Chinese man as asexually unattractive. Set aside as a China man, he may be deemed as inferior and cast aside from full participation in the Australian mainstream. This has serious ramification. The diasporic woman’s commitment to a Western male may confirm the power of this cultural semantics although partner choice, according to some women, is not consciously made according to colour: “I wouldn’t say I consciously choose a partner. Pretty much they fall my way” (Alex: 3571-3572).

When the preference for a non-Chinese partner is made at the conscious level, it can be marked as internalised racism, as the choice is made according to a racial stereotype. At the unconsciousness level, it is an issue that begs discussion. Ayres (2000), a Chinese male gay, feels that his attraction to white men empowers them with the tyranny of his longing. I invert this by stating that the diasporic woman’s preference or desire for the white male may likewise empower the white male. However, although this needs to be further examined, the preference for the white male likewise empowers the diasporic woman as the conscious choice frees her from the constraints of the Confucian patriarchal system, personified in the Chinese male, while the Western male personifies freedom. The choices made by the women are based on Occidental perceptions of the western and Chinese men (Said 1978). It is also an act that can be perceived to disempower the Chinese male as they are silenced but spoken for by the various media of stereotypical representations of the Oriental male. For some, the preference either way is controlled by unconscious forces:

I find it easier getting along with the Australian males and I have no idea why. In my mid-20s I began to question why I wasn’t attracted to Chinese men. It wasn’t that I had a preference for Western men either. It was just that I was hardly attracted to Chinese men. Finding myself mixing so comfortably with Western

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292 See definition of internalised racism on p. 6.
293 On how the Western male personifies freedom and equality, see the section “Equality”, this chapter, p. 245.
males as friends with no strings attached, made me question my identity. I wanted to know why I was so different to my other girlfriends, some of whom would only date Chinese men. (Kelly: 1292-1294; 2352-2356; 2370-2374)

When prompted to reflect on this partiality, many are exposed to the reasons for their choices and how these may have been influenced by stereotypical representations of both Chinese and Western men. Let me explicate the power of such stereotypes on our psyche. Ayres (2000) asserts that sexual preferences are shaped by two global factors: “The idiosyncrasies of our personal histories – the first boy or girl we fiddled with in the back shed [and] the social signifiers of the ‘desirable body’ – movie stars, supermodels.” My own experiences seem to support his idea:

Donny Osmond, Shaun Cassidy, John Travolta and Rick Springfield all used to gaze at me from their shiny posters. My early teenage wall was covered with pin-up boys from America. I wasn’t very fussy about who went up as long as it was male and "ang mor" or European. No Chinese guy ever made it to my hit list, not even Bruce Lee, and definitely not one of those kungfu guys in dresses and pig tails.

Coming to Australia was a white haven for me. Aussie guys everywhere. They all looked the same to me in those days. I couldn’t tell an Italian from a Swiss guy. They were all cute, all hunks, all tall, dark and handsome, all heart-throbs in the early days. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

I was not the only victim of the Western male idol, as many Chinese women shared this preference:

I was into Mills and Boons then so my ideal partner would have been several years older than me, really rough and domineering, authoritative, tall dark and handsome. Sweep me off my feet. Of course, a Westerner because all the guys in Mills and Boons were Westerners. (Carol: 279-289)

Growing up on a diet of Western literature, from Austen to cheap Mills and Boons, my romantic fantasies consisted of shaven or bearded heroes with hairy chests, deep set eyes, and height. Due to this imperial colonisation of my mind, it was subconsciously hard for me to visualise short, hairless, and slanty-eyed Chinese males as attractive. Of course, I must have only met the southern Chinese variety whose ancestors migrated to Malaysia and Singapore. The northern Chinese were of a different breed but by the time I met them in China, I had become so immersed with Australian ways that mere attractiveness was insufficient to warrant the surrender of my heart to them. Ayres (2000) echoes my predicament: “Being brought up in
an Anglo-centric culture, I’ve internalised Anglo-centric notions of what is considered desirable and undesirable.”

The specific cause of the preference cannot be simplistically determined as the forces influencing the diasporic psyche are values absorbed over a long period. Thus, it is not my intention to determine the specific why but more to interrogate the perceived reasons for interracial preferences and how these impact on our negotiations of Chineseness. Let me set the stage to problematise the cultural semantics that operate to influence Chinese women’s partner preferences. I want to interrogate this notion by first examining it as a conspiracy theory.

**Conspiracy theory**

*So as woman, Chinese or otherwise, I am independent, strong-willed, and headstrong, too headstrong for many Chinese men and the more conservative Western males. I tend to be rather gregarious and that doesn’t go down too well with Chinese men either. Speaking my mind has put me in the stink with older Chinese males, especially those who feel that I am not respectful when I am just speaking my mind. They prefer me to kowtow to them and to agree with whatever they say even if I don’t agree. Sometimes because I prefer to say it as it is, some find me too blunt. I am not sacrificial as compared to the traditional Chinese mother or woman, and am not very domesticated. I am very unconventional in my approach to housework, cooking, and general housekeeping. (Kelly: 1434-1448)*

It takes two to tango, they say. Thus, in this section I turn the camera on diasporic Chinese males for a moment and consider their possible perception of diasporic Chinese women before refocussing on the women. This diversion is important as it gives us a glimpse into the men’s perceptions, which I assert in turn influence the women’s perceptions of themselves. For the purposes of this brief diversion, I assume the position that Chinese men prefer Chinese partners.

In a way, westernised Chinese women are an enigma to the Chinese male, who may prefer not to be ensnared by her wiles. Wong (1991) describes the American-born Chinese woman as “a rare commodity whose Westernized ways and air of sexual freedom both tantalize the immigrant men and provoke in them intense cultural anxieties.” These anxieties are possibly due to the threat posed by westernised Chinese women because of their symbolic association

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294 See the section “Modern Miss,” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 131.
with the Western world of oppression. We see this association in a collection of folk rhymes, published in the 1910s by the men in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where the white women, the objects of their passion, appear by proxy in the form of the second-generation American-Chinese women. I can draw from this equation a further relationship between westernised Chinese women and the “patriarchal labor abuses and racism of dominant white America.” In short, if second-generation American-Chinese women are stand-ins for white women then it is possible to equate diasporic women with Westernisation and its oppressive powers. As victims of this oppressive power, the Chinese men would steer away from its symbols: westernised women.

At another level, the westernised women are possibly less attractive to the Chinese men because of the men’s preference to marry someone who befits the role of the perfect mother, wife and lover. They see that these roles culminate in the “culturally pure’ Asian woman” (Wong 1991) who lives to serve her husband and children. The westernised woman, on the other hand, represents “American [or Australian] ideals of ‘freedom,’ ‘Western culture’ and ‘civilisation’” (Wong 1991). An independent woman would live for her own selfish goals, and not be sacrificial towards her children and husband. Their independence in a relationship would add to the lack of recognition the Chinese men already feel in the Western patriarchal system.

On Asian American manhood, Kim (in Wong 1991) states:

When “Asian patriarchy was pushed aside or subsumed by an American patriarchy that did not, because of racism, extend its promise to Asian American men,” the men responded by “attempting to reassert male authority over the cultural domain and over women.”

Thus, to overcome the oppression faced in his adopted land, the Chinese man exerts his authority over women, possibly through his choice of a subservient Chinese woman.

Unfortunately for him, as many discover, the docile Chinese wife is mainly a myth.

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295 See also discussion on the relationship between mother and son in the section “Modern Miss” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 132.

296 On this myth, see how Chinese women may be perceived to be docile or submissive in the section “Being Chinese | woman” in Chapter 2 “Framing the fictions,” p. 86. In a related area, Law (1997) also argues against the assumptions that bar women are powerless by stating that they are capable of negotiating alternative, transient, ambivalent, flexible, and multiple positions of power and resistance. Law asserts that they do so by resisting the “power of the voyeuristic gaze through disruption rather than covert opposition” (p. 111). See also Law (1997, p. 108).
Initially people had certain expectations of Asian girls, especially Asian girls going out with white Australian males. They think you are quiet and very submissive until they find out what you are like. They think of the Filipino mail order brides who try to escape from this horrible life, and they think that they are very yes-yes. Then they find out you have your own mind. (Bev: 2913-2918)

Such submissive women are usually perceived to be so but underneath the exterior front, they are actually the controlling force in the relationship. They just do it more quietly. (Kelly: 1946-1950)

Nevertheless, this still affirms the argument that diasporic “sexuality [is] tested by [the] experience of race and racism” (Leong, in Wong 1991) since the oppressive powers of racism draw the Chinese man to cling more fervently to his ethnic group for security.

Let’s consider too the white woman’s appeal to the Chinese man as “fetishized objects for the construction of a heteronormative Asian American masculine subject” (Wong and Ana 1999). A relationship between a Chinese man and white woman transforms the asexual Chinese man into an eroticised Statue of Liberty. If this is true, then the argument that westernised Chinese women are rebuffed due to their association with the Western world is apparently moot. This draws out the problematic and ambiguous position that many diasporic women hold. They are neither white nor fully Chinese. Standing in the in-between space of ethnic indecision, they can often neither cook an authentic laksa nor a roast properly. In that indeterminate position, they are doubly scorned.

The conspiracy theory, as I argue, is that westernised Chinese women, on sensing this apparent fear or rejection from the Chinese men, consciously or subconsciously, become subsequently attracted to other available non-Chinese men who find them irresistibly attractive. As I have earlier discussed, these Chinese women, not necessarily westernised in the eyes of the non-Chinese men, are portrayed as exotic and sexy commodities. They are in turn attracted to and are attractive to the Western men who already enjoy the security of the more dominant powers of mainstream society, as compared to the Oriental ogre who still struggles with power access. Further, the values held by these supposedly westernised Chinese women encourages them to seek out similar values, as we can extrapolate from the following:

297 See Chapter 4 “Good girls vs badbabes.”
My parents have warned us against Asian men – we are too Western and too independent to make it in a traditional Asian home. As my mum put it, “I am not going to deal with a Chinese mother-in-law who thinks that I am a bad mother because you are all shrews!” (Indi: 85-88)

Another possible reason for the high rate of interracial attraction is due to the number of potential partners. There may only be a few good men to choose from out of the diasporic population. If these few good men are fussy about westernised Chinese women, and have a preference for traditional Chinese women, then there are fewer men to choose from. Hence the need to look elsewhere and the apparent high incidence of interracial romances:

Perhaps it is because of living in Perth where Chinese men were rarer than in Malaysia, and mixing in the overseas student community meant that many left after their studies. My later involvement in the local Australian community meant that I had even less interaction with Chinese men. The few whom I did come into contact with usually repulsed me as I was never certain if it was my permanent resident status that appealed to them or me. (Kelly: 2357-2366)

The fear that some diasporic women have when encountering Chinese men who are not residents of Australia is similar to their fear of Australian males who may only be attracted to Chinese women for their exotic value: “I have to be careful about what dates to go on. Some males only like ‘Asian girls’ and the submissive stereotype” (Judith: 385-386). Again, diasporic women stand in that middle ground of liminality, caught between multiple worlds of potential negative male intentions.

Although my sample is not representative of all Chinese women in Australia, it is interesting to note that 50 per cent of the participants are in an interracial relationship and only 25 per cent have a Chinese partner. Of the other 25 per cent, who did not have a partner at the time of the interview, all of them except for one have no ethnic preference where their future partner is concerned, suggesting that there is no pressure from their family to commit to Chinese males.

The apparent pattern indicating that migrant Chinese women prefer non-Chinese males is supported by marriage registrations between 1996 and 1998, which indicate that mixed-

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298 In some cases, there was initial pressure to marry Chinese men but parents compromised their preferences as their daughters aged. See also p. 234.
marriages are on the rise in Australia.\textsuperscript{299} However, Chinese women do not always prefer non-Chinese males. Moreover, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics imply that perception and homogenisation play a significant role in affirming the cultural semantics that diasporic women prefer non-Chinese men, as I outlined in the conspiracy theory. The fact that intercultural couples are visibly recognised further attests to this cultural semantics. However, if 75 per cent of my participants are already in or would not mind a relationship with non-Chinese partners, let me further problematise this by considering its implications for negotiations of Chineseness in Australia.\textsuperscript{300}

**The Chinese man: Censored version**

Warning: Chinese males may find this section offensive!

\begin{quote}
"You’ve got to be kidding! There is no way that I will ever go out with him!" I said with a shudder.

"He likes you! He follows you everywhere!" Sally teased.

I should have been flattered, I suppose, but he was such a China man. I would have had to be desperate to go out with him.

After much teasing, I avoided him. I didn’t handle it very maturely but the idea that a China man was interested in me was quite a scary thought at eighteen. I could have been black marked as a China woman, and left a spinster! (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)
\end{quote}

So who is this China man? Chinese males are often essentialised as in Alex’s idea of the traditional man:

\textit{My brother was brought up as a traditional Chinese male in a traditional Chinese family. He’s quite conservative in terms of marriage. He’s traditional in a lot of ways like who should visit whom on Chinese New Year, who should call whom. Young people should call elders, not vice versa. (Alex: 1599-1614)}

\textsuperscript{299} For limitations on the statistics available such as the exclusion of de facto relationships and the inability to tell from the birthplace the ethnic origin of the person, see http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/0820D37F8ACA348FCA256A7100188A57?Open&Highlight=0, ethnic_marriage. Interracialism in Australia is emerging as a socio-demographic phenomenon, according to Luke and Carrington, who cite that there were one in six intermarriages in 1996, with 75% of the second-generation migrants out-marrying. It is also predicted by Price that 40% of all Australian marriages will be interracial. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 8).

\textsuperscript{300} For a detailed examination of intermarriages in Australia, see Penny and Khoo (1996).
Although Alex states that the context in Singapore has changed, she still views Singaporean males as narrow-minded and incompatible to her. In short, the diasporic women consider many of the Chinese men to be unattractive due to their conservatism:

*I just didn’t see the sort of people I would be attracted to where I grew up. Maybe if I had stayed longer, maybe I would have. And as my idea of Singapore, and Singapore itself, changes, I’m sure there are guys there that are open-minded and have the qualities that would attract me.* (Alex: 3582-3586)

*My parents would prefer me to marry a Chinese. I don’t agree with them on that because there are certain traits in a male Chinese that annoy me which I don’t see in an Australian male.* (Deana: 97-100)

Carols’ views are particularly fascinating as she describes the Chinese boys she knew from childhood in asexual terms:

*Of my childhood friends the boys were very feminine.* (Laughter). *I didn’t view them as girls. I didn’t view them as boys. Like I wouldn’t lump them with the boys. But you wouldn’t call them girls. They just weren’t boys.* (Laughter) *I cannot see them as my ideal partner because they weren’t boys. Well, if they are not boys, how can they be men?* (Carol: 234-243; 266-272)

Let me now further examine possible reasons why so many diasporic Chinese women in Australia find the Chinese male repulsive, or are hostile to the Chinese male, or are resistant to marrying the Chinese male.

*Spoilt*

*Dad stood at my front door as I struggled with the laundry basket. Instead of offering to help me, he stood frozen in fear of being touched by the dirty linen. I was suddenly rushed back to Malaysia, as I was reminded of his cultural training there. This is a woman’s job. Men don’t handle dirty laundry.*

*“Don’t let the boys do it! You do it!” Mum scolded me as a child. Just recently she said that no Chinese man would covet Tom Jones, who has women throwing him their underwear at his concerts.*

*“So unfair!” I grumbled underneath my breath. “I have to do everything! So unfair!”*  

*My brothers chuckled cheekily, glad to have been let off the hook yet again. “Nerr, nerr, nerr, nerr! You are a girl! Nerr, nerr!” they chimed before running off to play.*
Still mattering and defiant, I folded their underwear begrudgingly. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Some Chinese males are subjected to a certain level of pampering from a young age. They are set aside from menial housework and especially anything that is related to female hygiene.

Girls will look after the boys, which I don’t agree with. But I do. I say I don’t agree with it but obviously have absorbed some of it because I do run around after my brother and father. Just pick up after them, just do a lot of things for them. With my brother, I don’t know whether it is because he is the youngest or whether he is a boy. When my parents go away it is very much we girls look after him. We do the cleaning. He doesn’t really unless we push him. (Carol: 778-790)

As a result, there is a generation of Chinese men who are so spoilt, predominantly by their mothers, that they are rendered useless in the home. Many Chinese boys are thus viewed negatively because they tend to be tied to the mother’s apron strings.

Samuel couldn’t do a thing. He couldn’t even wash a car! I had to teach him how to wash a car! All he did was study. He liked to read and I’ve met Chinese guys like that. That’s all they want to do: just read and study. Even in Singapore, dad never used to wash his car. He used to hire people to wash the car.

They can’t cook. Samuel can’t cook. His mum waits on him. That was the other thing I couldn’t stand. Because of the culture, Chinese mums tend to wait on their sons and so they marry girls that likewise would do the same. And I watched and I thought, “Am I supposed to wait on you and carry your food to your desk when you’ve got work there?” Say if he took work home, and he couldn’t get to the dinner table, was I supposed to pile all this food and put it on his table so that he could eat whenever he wanted to?

Western guys – I don’t think they would expect it, because their mums don’t pamper them. Their mums make them take out the garbage. Chinese guys don’t do that! It’s like they are on a pedestal. (Deana: 1196-1219)

The diasporic context means that Chinese women do not have the privilege of maids to do the housework. The need to share household responsibilities becomes a problem because many of the first-generation Chinese men have not been trained to assist. Instead they have been trained to avoid such matters altogether. However, I must add that this is simply a matter of perceptions. Luke and Carrington (2000) found that white Australian women “repeatedly

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301 Tu states that the Confucian value of woman being the sole homemaker is being challenged today and shared duties are now seen as a necessity and virtue. See Tu (1998b, p. 127).
praised their [Southeast Asian] men for their willingness to cook and help with kitchen and housework, which ‘you wouldn’t find with an Australian man’” (pp. 10-11).

Alex adds that it is not just a gender issue but that socioeconomic class exacerbates this pampering: “Not all of them are well off but they’re known to be quite privileged, and from the start I had the attitude that these upper middle-class boys are kind of spoilt” (Alex: 158-161). The wealthier families are able to afford maids who would do everything around the house. Otherwise, they would have mothers who can afford to choose to stay home to ensure that nothing distracts their sons from their purpose in life: a good education for a successful career.302

This image of Chinese men as domestically helpless is contrasted against those who are independent and capable of managing both internal and external affairs. Here, socioeconomic class plays another role. Alex’s description of her brother enables us to glimpse what women like her view as attractive:

_He had studied overseas for so long. He was very worldly by the time he came back and very independent just in the way he conducted things. In Singapore they weren’t thrown out into the world to do a lot of things for themselves. I don’t think much of boys who’ve been softened. He could cook for himself. Because he had been overseas he wasn’t as pampered. He travelled all through Europe. It was a good thing he had the opportunity. (Alex: 1925-1948)_

The male who is worldly, well travelled, and independent is seen as westernised and attractive. Local boys do not stand a chance against the westernised males who are able to look after themselves, and not be pampered. Again, socioeconomic class is a factor for consideration as it provides the opportunity for such alternative experiences. Those who cannot afford to travel or to study abroad, may not experience such independence and the cultural capital to “buy’ a certain amount of masculinity with affluence and American cultural fluency” (Wong and Ana 1999). Women seeking such alternative practices sometimes ethnicise these attributes and look to non-Chinese guys:

_What I like about the Western guys is that they can do things. They cook for themselves; they go grocery shopping. They fix things around the house, which a_

302 This would then enable them to carry out their filial duties properly.
Chinese guy can’t do! My dad – the shelves after a couple of years, they drop!
(laugh) Western guys tend to be really handy with things! Just a lot more balanced.
(Deana: 1186-1194)

I was amused when Deana shared this with me as I was reminded of the doors at home that
were not properly hinged, and of the security lights that remain unwired so visitors trip over the
tree roots on their way in to the garden. Being married to an Australian male has not brought
me a handyman either.303

Sexist
The family is often “an oppressive unit that perpetuates normative gender roles and sexuality”
(Wong and Ana 1999) in the Chinese household. The males are traditionally the dominant ones
in the Confucian family. Although the woman may have equality in home affairs,304 they are
generally inferior in status and value, and do not necessarily enjoy an emotional or sexual
relationship with their husbands. In fact, many marriages in the Confucian families were often
“distant, formal, and frequently hostile [with] both parties withdrawn, unfulfilled, and
despairing of ever finding the emotional sustenance that every human requires” (Slote and De
Vos 1998, p. 42).305 The authoritarian role that the Confucian husband has over the wife is
viewed as having no redeeming feature (Tu 1998b).306 The father or husband as governing
master of the home is what makes a man a man. The woman who performs her domestic role
unquestioningly is a good wife and mother.307 We see this observed in the following:

Very traditional family. Any daughters-in-law had to wait until the men had
finished eating before they could start. (Alex: 548-550).

The males are quite dominating and the women do whatever their husbands tell
them so that’s how I see Malaysian society. (Anita: 2437-2439)

My mum’s sisters do everything for their husbands. They cook; they clean; they
wash up. My dad’s brothers expect to be served by their wives. My mum’s younger

303 My husband feels that his time is better spent earning money for a professional to do the job well. Despite
his experience with his father on home renovations, most of the work was apparently supervised and he feels
he does not have the expertise to do the job on his own after all.
304 See the section “Matriarchal might,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 193.
305 Although I refer here to the Confucian family, I add that such dysfunctional relationships are unfortunately
also common in many other cultures.
306 This relationship is contractual and hence irrevocable unlike the father-child relationship. See “Filial piety
and geographic locations” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 187.
307 Compare this with her role as mother, which has more power and freedom to do and decide on that which
is pertinent to the household and children, in the section “Matriarchal might,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter |
Martyr mother,” p. 193.
A Chinese guy expects a Chinese girl to hang off his arm, to be submissive. When they say something, the girl is supposed to say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I agree.” They expect that when they get married and they come home, that dinner’s going to be on the table for them. They don’t have to lay a finger, because I see it in my dad and mum. My dad would sit down and look around for his dinner. Mum would serve him because she’s brought up that way. (Deana: 1166-1178)

These gender roles are often maintained by the community who guard against those who stray from the expected norm: “In some cultures it’s much more acceptable and it seems to be the norm. You can’t really depart from that without people looking at you and saying things about you” (Anita: 2970-2972). Although the sexist Chinese male role may be nurtured in some Chinese communities, in mainstream Australian society, such attitudes are considered patriarchal and chauvinistic. Women who serve such males are labelled as door mats. Deana complains: “This is not the sort of guy I want. I just couldn’t handle a guy that wouldn’t contribute” (1178-1180).

According to Wong and Ana (1999), the patriarchal role is used to “maintain [the males’] dominant positions and enforce normative behaviour.” This is practised in other social settings as well: “There was one particular guy in the class that was a typical sexist. He had a girlfriend that he would make buy him lunch. She’ll come over to his table with a tray and his food” (Alex: 222-226). In their power play, they present themselves as tyrants who have no respect for women. Alex feels that the China men are “very sexist and their attitudes towards women are quite undeveloped. They do not quite know how to treat women in a respectful manner” (Alex: 163-166). This sexist behaviour is exercised to boost the male position on the home front and elsewhere.

As a Chinese woman, I don’t feel like a rat. The Chinese way is that the man will catch the rat, and the rat is the woman, and the cat is the man. The man always stands on the lady. I don’t like that way and also how the women give in all the time. (Esther: 595-598)

The gender roles construct versions of masculinity and femininity that many diasporic women question and rebel against. This explains the preference that many diasporic Chinese women have for non-Chinese males, while Chinese men were viewed to be “narrow minded in what
they wanted, no compromise [with a] male ego” (Luke and Carrington 2000, p. 10). Anita believes that gender roles should be equal and that one should be free to act as they desire, rather than out of expectations. Of her partner, she says:

He doesn’t expect me to run around to serve him, which is good because I won’t want to do that. I’m not saying it is bad because it is good for women to want to serve their husbands but not out of expectation. I won’t mind cooking and cleaning and doing everything around the house but I would never want that to be expected of me. So I don’t want to do it because someone wants me to. I do it because I want to do it. (Anita: 2954-2956; 2973-2979)

It is interesting to note that men who do not fit the typical sexist China man norm are seen as westernised, as are those who are not spoilt and pampered:

Dad helps out now because he’s now a bit more Western. He helps out with the cooking and the groceries. Before, when dad was in Singapore, he wouldn’t. “It’s just not my job. It’s a Chinese woman’s job.” (Deana: 1180-1186)

There is also the gendered ethnicisation of male behaviour that results in certain expectations by women. We see this in Anita’s adoration for her friend’s father, a first-generation migrant who has spent many years in Australia.

Chrissy’s dad has always been a major role model for me and I always say to Chrissy, “I want someone like your dad” and I tell her to look for someone like him because her dad is really a great husband. He was very, very giving to his wife and always looked after her when she was sick. He was very kind and very gentle and that’s a very important trait to me. (Anita: 3113-3120)

When challenged about the fact that Chrissy’s father’s ethnicity is Chinese, Anita says: “Oh! No! He’s educated in Australia (laugh)” (Anita: 3122). She adds that she is not more attracted to Chinese men despite what she has observed in him. She explains:

I saw him as an exception because he came here when he was really young. He was educated here and lived here almost all his life so he didn’t have the same way of thinking as my father – I guess I could have found a westernised Chinese man. (Anita: 3126-3129)

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308 This issue of gender equality is picked up again later. See the section “Equality,” in this chapter, p. 245.
The exception to the rule applies to Chinese men who stray from the sexist stereotype. I find this form of negotiation problematic for those who do not quite fit in either category:

*My husband is not that Chinese in the sense that what he says goes. Initially what he says goes but after some cajoling, he will see my way. He cooks and he helps around the house so he’s not really typically Chinese either.* (Hannah: 1213-1220)

These exceptions do not challenge the stereotype. Instead the men who practise alternative forms of Chineseness, and there are many who do, are seen as different, as not quite Chinese. The indictment on Chinese males then remains. It would be more politically correct to promote these *alternative men* as images of a more fluid form of Chinese maleness.

**Sexually unfaithful**

Despite what fathers do to protect their daughters from immoral Western men, some of the diasporic women interviewed feel that it is the Chinese male who is not trustworthy as a sexual partner. Perhaps this is because many men in Confucian societies subject themselves to the idea that their emotional and sexual fulfilment is found outside marriage. They thus turn to other men for company, or prostitutes, and extramarital relationships for sex (Slote 1998). In a post-interview chat with Bev, we discussed how the Chinese men’s apparent inclination towards infidelity impacts on our perception of them:

*Agnes: Growing up in Malaysia put me off a lot of Malaysian guys because of the extramarital —*

*Bev: Yes! It’s such a big thing, isn’t it? It’s almost seen as being normal. You accept it.*

*Agnes: And it’s a status thing. You have xyz mistresses floating around everywhere, and your wife just has to live with it. I thought that was awful.*

*Bev: And that’s another Chinese characteristic from the olden Chinese concubine days. It was emperors with the most concubines who were considered the most wealthy.* (Agnes, in conversation with Bev: 4150-4166)

Bev draws the link between contemporary practices of polygamy to the ancient custom of collecting concubines. In both eras, having a mistress or second/third wife signals a particular socioeconomic status within the community, as only those who can afford to have more than

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309 See the more detailed discussion of this in the section “Hegemonic sexual bodyguards” in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 155.

one woman do so. It is a sign of wealth and virility. “If you can handle it, you can have more
wives. If you can’t, you just have one wife. It depends. Some only need one in their life. They
don’t want to argue so much. (laugh) They just need one” (Esther: 280-283). According to
Esther, it is also a sign of manhood in that one is capable of controlling more than one woman.
Polygamy or infidelity is often encouraged and maintained within the family and societal
structures:

He’s actually very proud of my brother and my brother’s conquests. Right from
eyearly days when women used to call my brother, he was very proud and he showed
it by joking or laughing, “Oh, that naughty boy.” (Alex: 1727-1742)

Males are expected to play the field. It is so common in Malaysia and Singapore, and even in
Australia, that some accept it as a gendered norm that cannot be revoked or helped, as we can
see in Clara’s mother’s attitude:

When we were still in Singapore, if my Dad had a mistress, or if he had a fling, she
would say things like, “Oh, that is just men.” She would probably accept it and say,
“They are like that sometimes and you just have to accept it.” She was probably
thinking about it because so many Indonesian businessmen have mistresses when
they go overseas. I thought that was quite a traditional role for a woman. I don’t
know whether that is Chinese or not but I would say it is quite Chinese. (Clara:
786-795)

This male thing then ethnicises male sexuality by equating Chinese men with the potential to be
unfaithful to their partners. Infidelity is assumed to be something that cannot be helped as to be
a Chinese man is to be unfaithful at some point. What many fail to realise is that the practice,
already influenced by Confucianism as earlier mentioned, is also compounded by the 1970s’
sexual revolution which influenced many Malaysian and Singaporean people.

While some accept infidelity as an ethnicised and gendered norm, that is, it is a habit or custom
that is natural to Chinese men, others negotiate this practice differently. When asked if she
would be able to accept it if her husband decided to have another wife, Clara says:

Of course not. No, I wouldn’t but it is very hard to say unless you are in that
situation. Not that my Mum won’t bring it up as well but I would find that very hard
to accept and so would she, but I don’t agree with her reasoning: “Oh, you know
men!” It is almost like they have a right. They can do that sort of thing but probably
women can’t. I wouldn’t agree with the idea that men are entitled to it. Men do do it
and it is not acceptable, but it is common. I don't think that anyone should be allowed to, full stop. Because it is a Christian thing to avoid extramarital affairs and it is wrong to engage in them. (Clara: 797-811)

While Clara applies her Christian faith to the practice and views that it is morally wrong to condone it, Esther negotiates it differently. She says: “No, I can’t accept that men can have so many wives. They can have lovers but not multiple wives. They can have lovers but not go ahead and sleep together all the time” (Esther: 284-289). She is able to deal with her husband having lovers as long as he still spends time with her. She applies a hierarchical structure to the status of wife and lover, and uses that to settle the issue of infidelity. Perhaps this is due to the attitude shared by Clara’s mother that Chinese men will err anyway, so as long as he does not overstep the boundary by marrying again, Esther is accepting of his extramarital affairs.

Although some girls find the playboy or flirt attractive due to the confidence they exude, Alex’s brother, whom she describes as an incredible flirt, has influenced her differently: “My brother’s definitely put me off playboys. I’ve got friends who love that kind of guy. They know they’re arseholes. They know they’re real rotten guys but they still are attracted to them” (Alex: 2076-2082). Speaking from an atheistic position despite her early Christian education, Alex opts for the one-woman man. It must be reiterated, as with other fluid notions of Chineseness, that the image of the Chinese man as a womaniser varies from person to person and from context to context. Often a contradictory stereotype is deployed as it suits the situation: “These traditional expectations of a Chinese boy: grow up, be a good provider, sow his wild oats in his youth, but have a family and settle down with one woman” (Alex: 2043-2047). Perhaps this is one reason why so many ignore the apparent Chinese male potential for infidelity since it may go away once he is married to the right girl.

Silent

As earlier suggested, when some Chinese men speak, they risk being discredited linguistically because of their inability to roll the R. When they are silent, they are also viewed negatively. Here, focusing more on the father and brother as the Chinese male icons, although it is often realised that it is a gender stereotype that is in operation, many women still see the male’s apparent lack of communicative ability as an ethnicised trait:
In a lot of ways, he’s got the same way of not talking about personal things. That was how Chinese boys were raised. It’s not just Chinese boys. It’s a Western thing as well but he pretty much holds in a lot of things. (Alex: 2047-2052)

Boys are expected to repress and not express their emotions but this is attributed firstly to his being Chinese and secondly to his being male. He is seen as a typical Chinese male firstly and then as a male type who is not good at deep communication. She later describes both her brother and her father in like manner:

They have difficulty ... dealing with intimate conversations about matters close to the heart. They would rather pretend it’s not happening or they’d rather leave it unsaid, rather than deal with it directly. (Alex: 2089-2092)

The non-communicative male is seen as the typical Chinese man who keeps everything within stoically. This may be cowardly as they are not willing to confront a situation and would rather ignore its existence. The Chinese male, to Alex, is non-confrontational but unhealthily so as the conflict remains unresolved. It is useful here to refer to the Confucian tradition that discourages any display of affection by the father figure towards the “little ones, especially the girls” (Slote 1998, p. 41). The father is groomed to be a remote and feared figure in the family, and this practice is instilled through the generations (Slote 1998). Hence the explanation for the brother’s behaviour as well.

Patty describes the silent treatment in terms of an inability to express their true opinion, which could be explained as a face thing:311

I’m brought up to have a taste for boys who would speak out against things that they don’t like, who speak their mind, and here was I faced with Asian boys who were the pets of their mothers, and who were terribly spoilt and who would want to order you around – and do this, that, and the other - and then, on the other hand, be terribly courteous and polite and never say what they really meant. (Patty: 914-924)

The Chinese males in Patty’s experience are viewed as cowardly bullies who are not able to express their true intentions. In other words, they are poor communicators. Alex essentialises the male thing to ethnicity though she does qualify it as being a family-specific trait. Here she

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311 The fear of losing face is a discouragement to speak one’s mind so as not to be proven wrong.
admits that incommunicability is a male and Chinese characteristic that is also evident in other cultures as a patriarchal attribute.

_ I do put it down to this male thing. It’s male and Chinese but it’s also not culturally specific. It’s something you see in other cultures as well but the Chinese culture does have that emphasis. Maybe it’s the Chinese culture as I’ve experienced it. Men aren’t brought up to be touchy, “feely” (laugh). I’m very aware that some of my generalisations are very family-specific. (Alex: 2093-2103)_

The diasporic women negotiate the problem of male silence differently. Judith grew up in a male-only family as her natal mother left her father when she was very young. Raised with brothers who could not express themselves was something that caused her much grief till she was in her mid-20s and able to consider things from alternative positions. As a child, she interpreted their silence as being unloving. Slote (1998) states that in general the Confucian Chinese father is trained to establish fear by distancing himself emotionally from his children. He, in turn, trains his sons to be likewise. The price paid for this practice by the Confucian fathers is hefty, according to Slote. I would add that the emotional pain caused to their daughters is similarly scarring. Judith responded by not expressing her needs in return: “Often, I don’t demand what I want, and feel I should just be a ‘good girl’ and not say anything – let the older male do the decision-making and assert his authority” (Judith: 158-161). This is something that Judith is still working through. She has found a non-Chinese partner who “talks a lot – he has an over-active mind, and is [her] best friend” (Judith: 269-270).

Anita’s father is also non-communicative and would rather keep himself occupied in some form of activity than to talk. She interacts with him in the language that he speaks:

_ My dad’s not much of a talker so we wouldn’t sit down and converse about things. He’ll ask me little things and he’ll be like, “Aw, that’s good.” He’s much more an activity type person. We’ll sit there and watch TV together, and he’ll do things for me and I’ll do things with him, so that’s very much our relationship. (Anita: 1297-1303; 1320-1323)_

Although ideally she would prefer her father to talk more about anything (Anita: 1312), Anita has learnt to accept his silence. She sees it as a need on her part to adapt to his personality and as a result deals with his lack of communication positively without essentialising it to ethnicity. Both Anita and Judith have found a third or alternative space to negotiate their need to relate
despite the silent male members in their families. Perhaps others negotiate this by looking for partners who do not fit this figure of silence and look for males who promise an attentive ear.³¹²

**Partner problems**

Interracial couples face many conflicting values and issues in their relationships. These issues include personal adjustments to their partner, conflict situations within the natal family, and community pressures expressed.

**Merely male**

Cross-cultural couples do not necessarily hit it off. Often problems encountered are gendered and ethnicised: “All the mates made me feel alien, not only in the sense of being Chinese but also in the sense of being female” (Alex: 3555-3557). Despite feeling marginalised on both those counts, Alex’s male friends explained their incompatibility according to her ethnic background without consciously regarding her gender. In the multicultural context, gender sometimes becomes absorbed as a secondary difference to ethnicity. This is possibly because ethnicity is the most obvious difference, second to gender.³¹³ In a context where all are of the same ethnic background, on the other hand, the most obvious difference would be gender.

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_This boyfriend said, “Oh I think so and so was glad that we split up because he didn’t think that I should have been dating someone from a different culture anyway.” At the time I’d suspected it but I wasn’t sure. Then I started thinking, “What’s wrong with me?” He said, “Oh so and so won’t mind seeing you but he’s not sure how his racist friends would take it,” which really made me feel really strange. (Alex: 3308-3312; 3323-3325)_

Mateship is flagged as the reason that made Alex feel doubly alienated, first as a woman and then as a Chinese woman. Her cry, “What’s wrong with me?” (Alex: 3312) captures the sense of marginalisation, which perhaps made her think that there was something wrong with her ethnicity, especially when it was confirmed to her that it was her ethnic background that they did not approve of. Further analysis of the situation masked by the mateship factor reveals social skills, amongst other factors, as more pertinent influences in their inability to relate:

_I had a boyfriend who had friends that did not know how to start a conversation with me at all so I would try, but being shy myself it was quite hard. So those times I_

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³¹² See Alex’s comment comparing her partner to her father and brother, p. 244.
³¹³ See Luke and Carrington’s comment on race as a marker in interracial relationships, p. 233.
really felt alien. It’s like we would sit together and my boyfriend would leave the room and we could not start a conversation. (Alex: 3124-3134)

Alex later acquired more culture knowledge to assist in social interactions although she still encounters difficulties when the topic veers towards sports:

Now I have cultural knowledge to deal with it. I know what could possibly be a source of conversation. I have some awareness of the current affairs here and I’m a little bit more assertive nowadays. Then I was also quite young, and some of this has to do with age. (Alex: 3300-3336)

She cites cultural knowledge as a handy tool for conversation. She also attributes her inability to mix with her partner’s friends to her age. As she grew older, she gained more confidence and self-assertiveness: “I forced them to acknowledge my presence. I would make sure I inserted myself into the conversation” (Alex: 3144-3148). It needs to be noted too that the Australian males did not have strategies to help her integrate either. They were portrayed as non-communicative and matey, but they were presumably just as socially raw and lacking in cultural capital.

Parent preferences versus child’s choices
In the Chinese culture, the family plays a critical part in the issue of marriage. Sometimes consideration of the family goes to extremes where the woman may sacrifice her own desires just to please her parents: “I went back to try to look for someone of Asian, Singaporean, Chinese origin to satisfy my parents. I tried very hard, actually, but just couldn’t find anybody” (Patty: 871-875). Patty was willing to end her relationship with her white boyfriend if she could meet someone else of Chinese descent, just to accommodate her parents’ wishes. As with other cultural groups, the parents play a vital part in a couple’s wedding plans, and their approval is highly sought, as we can see in the following:

For Baha’i weddings, you need your parents’ consent for you to marry and mainly because your parents know you best. And I’ve had parents who did not approve of their wedding so they had to wait but in the end, once the family accepted it and gave them the permission, it made for such a happier occasion. (Bev: 4230-4415)

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314 See the section on “Filial piety and Chineseness” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 174, for possible reasons for certain parents’ hostility towards mixed marriages.
315 Luke and Carrington echo this and add that family members would register their protest against the relationship by not attending the wedding. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 15).
I'm trying to get married. My father is the one person I haven’t convinced yet so we’re all waiting for his approval before that goes ahead. (Alex: 1621-1624).

The obvious importance that parents and family play in weddings is compounded when there are differences between the couple and their families. These family feuds are often complex and emotionally entangling, and are usually intensified when the couple indicate their marriage intentions, according to Luke and Carrington (2000). “It was a tremendous battle because there is filial piety. We believed they always did things for our good, so we would try very, very hard to comply. But things of the heart are harder to overcome” (Patty: 839-844). Patty and her partner resolved the situation by eloping: “My father didn’t want to know me. We just lived our life in Australia and they, theirs” (Patty: 982; 1002). The estrangement ended when her father became very ill. Her partner met her father for the first time then, and they were reconciled. Luke and Carrington (2000) state that permanent loss of the natal family and years of no contact was a fact of some intermarriages. I shared a similar heart-breaking experience of parental conflict with Bev:

My dad was very opposed to Darren. He had this idea of Darren as a pretty wild Australian male. For many years the clash between my dad and Darren wasn’t resolved, to the point that my dad didn’t come to our wedding. That’s a very unChinese thing. It was very, very hard although we did get married.

It was a very confusing time as well. We’d been going out for about two and a half years, and his mum was very sick with cancer. On the day I handed in my Honours thesis, Darren proposed. We wanted to get married quickly. His mum had really deteriorated and we wanted her at our wedding but it didn’t happen. She passed away.

My dad didn’t understand and there were many complications.

Even walking down the aisle I had refused to have anyone else take my father’s part in the wedding. It was him or no one else. So I walked down the aisle by myself and I remember seeing my brother. For a moment, I thought it was my dad and I just stopped short and I thought, “Did he come?” Then I realised it was my brother and I was disappointed.

There was that stigma. Do you know what I mean? I know it wasn’t a Chinese thing to do but in the end, in marriage I have to leave my family anyway to cleave to my husband. It would have been really hard for me to leave my family had everything been fine.

I had accepted that I would never see my dad again. We’d tried for so many years that I had given up. When I had accepted that the reconciliation may never happen, out of the blue I got a call from my mum who said that we were invited up for lunch.

“We?” Darren and I had been invited up for lunch. I had thought that if we were ever reconciled, in the next thirty years, it would have been me first, with a
whole list of conditions attached, but no, we were both invited up for lunch! I was really sceptical.

We got there and I thought, “That sounds like dad’s footsteps but he seems too keen to come to the door,” ‘cause we’d been there before, and he had refused to see us. And he opened the door and I think we just hugged and he said, “Welcome home.”’ (Agnes, in conversation with Bev: 4230-4412)

Often when a Chinese woman decides to disobey her parents and persist with her own choices, she is ostracised from the Chinese community as well.316 When Patty eloped, she found herself cut off from her extended family as well: “My brother did communicate not the seniors – only our level” (Patty: 1002-1006). Her parents’ peer group severed their ties with her regardless of how they felt themselves. In fact, as she later discovered when reunited with her father, many had admired her for her courage. However, there was the unspoken understanding in that network, supporting each other against the actions of their children. I realised how strong this Chinese network was when my father’s brother and friends, who had tried very hard to bring about reconciliation prior to the wedding, excused themselves from our wedding. When we resumed our relationship with my father, we experienced a similar reception to that which Patty and her husband encountered: “Later on we went back to Singapore, those who didn’t mind or admire that action would be very, very friendly to John and often to me” (Patty: 1014-1018).

Despite all that, we should count ourselves fortunate when compared to that which Rosa had to face in her relationship with a Eurasian man: “There was no help from any side, even siblings, favourite aunts, and uncles felt this was something wrong” (Rosa: 147-149). Perhaps such communal strongholds can be explained as follows: “The processes of demonizing young females and targeting them as significant objects for control constitute part of a countermovement to return society to the traditions and values of its venerable ancestors” (Hing 1998). Perhaps the patriarchal powers, as earlier discussed,317 are maintained by demonising these women who choose to engage in mixed marriages.

Oftentimes too the conflict with one’s parents is resolved by living in a de facto relationship. This provides the couple with a symbolic liminality where they enjoy the benefits of being together without the pain of parental negotiations required for marriage. Such couples are


317 See “Conspiracy theory,” this chapter, p. 213.
sometimes twice-wronged in the eyes of their parents since they disobey both the demand to kowtow to the parents' partner preference as well as the norms of marriage.\footnote{318}

As Lowe (1991) states, the vertical model would reduce these differences with one’s parents to generational and racial reasons but this over-simplifies the scenario, although the parents’ preference for their daughters to marry Chinese men indicates that there are racist elements involved. While conceding the reality of racial reasons, often the conflict is not just confined to racial differences. Perceptions play a vital role in these situations. Let me consider the more invisible forces influencing these perceptions, after discussing the common problem of race.

\textbf{Ethnic chauvinism}\footnote{319}

Racism is a two-way street. While complaining of discrimination against themselves, a woman’s parents were known to concurrently object to her dating a white Australian male (Shen 2001). Luke and Carrington’s (2000) research found that race was the main marker of difference in the interracial couples’ difference which “[triggered] an array of overt and subtle racisms from community, friends and family” (p. 7).\footnote{320} Chinese people are sometimes the most racist and maintain that certain traits are intrinsic to the Chinese race.\footnote{321} For example, affluence is often essentialised as an inherently Chinese quality, as promoted by the Asian tiger economies. Some Chinese then manage their lives so as to gain a certain socioeconomic class as befitting their race. Perhaps to retain this natural propensity to acquire wealth, marriage between Chinese couples is encouraged. This, some believe, helps to maintain or raise their social standing.

\begin{quote}
People are very aware that a lot of their affluence comes from being Asian so there’s a lot of pride there. They want to retain that. And they have very negative views of Western society as promiscuous, kicking out their kids, and crime. (Alex: 3397-3404)
\end{quote}

\footnote{318} See Alex’s and Heather’s situations, pp. 231, 236, 236 and 239. 
\footnote{319} Ang states that Chinese chauvinism is a defensive mechanism against being rejected in the Australian community. Through it, one hopes to regain the greatness of China which they feel was never recognised, especially by the West. See Ang (1998b, p. 156). 
\footnote{320} Ang, citing Luke, states that overt racism is not the main form faced but more the intangible in the form of subtle exclusion from conversations, avoidances, and stares received. See Ang (1996, p. 42). 
\footnote{321} Luke and Carrington state that the issue of race is significant to the couple due to the cultural semantics governing the communities’ perception of the other partner, which in turn impacts on how each partner reshapes his/her own identity. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 7).
While they have positive views about their own background, they have negative views of Australians. Patty shares her parents’ aversion towards her fiancé despite his medical profession and class status: “Dreadful, dreadful. I was going to marry a horrendous white Australian” (Patty: 798-800). To ensure preservation of their good values, they would not accommodate Western male partners for their daughters. Sometimes the racial bias is not restricted to Western males but to other ethnic groups as well: “If I really want to go out with a Korean, my dad would have really objected to it. Instead of advising you, he would have said, ‘No, you shouldn’t. You cannot go out with him’” (Clara: 944-948). Clara’s father would oppose such a relationship on the basis of the difficulties met due to the differences between the cultures. Sometimes the objection has no other real basis apart from skin-colour: “My father always warned me that he’d disown me if I married someone who wasn’t Chinese. My dad doesn’t like the look of ‘half-Chinese’ children. They’re inferior, and not really Chinese, that is, not pure-blooded” (Judith: 276-280).322 Deana’s parents also used to prefer her to marry a Chinese man:

It’s just keeping it in the race. Both mum and dad are pure Teu Chew.323 I remember when I was young, the guy had to be Teu Chew! They just like the idea of keeping it all the same colour. Like my uncle would say, “Red ants and black ants should not mix.” Red ants should never marry black ants; they should always marry a red ant, and keep going so that you can rear babies. It’s all colour. I don’t think they think that Australians are beneath them. In a way maybe they’re a bit superior. But they feel the blood of the Chinese should not be contaminated by a Westerner.

Given [that] most of us are pretty old, they’re pretty open to whomever we marry. It’s better than nothing. And they can see that, as the years go by, we’re more westernised so a Chinese guy would not work out. I talked to my colleagues and they said, “That’s probably why your engagement with Samuel didn’t work because he’s just too Chinese for you.”

He’s Cantonese. My mum did not like it because he was Cantonese. That’s how prejudiced it is even within the Chinese. It’s like he’s Cantonese; he’s beneath us. The Teu Chew is meant to be quite high up there. My parents just want to keep it all Teu Chew.

But my colleagues said, “You’re not Chinese, fully Chinese” because they’ve met fully Chinese people. “You’ve got so many Australian ways” and they’ve met Samuel and they thought, “Gee, he’s very different.” (laugh) (Deana: 1100-1163)

Deana’s parents have a hierarchy of Chineseness that they used to impose on their daughters’ partner choices. It was not sufficient for the daughters to marry a Chinese man. He had to come

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322 Luke and Carrington’s research found that parents echoed the fear of mixed-race grandchildren and also expressed concern over the loss of cultural heritage and practices. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 17).

323 This is a dialect group just as the Cantonese or Hokkien people are of different dialect groups.
from the same dialect group as well. Thus, despite Samuel's class credentials, he was not accepted as a suitor. Carol's father, likewise, considered the Chinese as the superior race:

*Initially it would be "Better be Chinese or else," much more my mother than my father. Because my father has a very high opinion of Chinese and low opinions of other people, and I suppose he is proud to be Chinese. He always says, "I'm Chinese!" He is proud of the traits that are associated with Chinese people, such as discipline, hard work, able to study, careful with money, good cooks, know how to appreciate their food, know how to put together a good meal.

In some respects, people like me, who are in-betweens, who are half Chinese, half non, the bananas, yellow on the outside and white on the inside, are not as superior because we have absorbed, this sounds so condescending, we have absorbed Western culture so we have relaxed our standards a little more. It sounds dreadful. We have relaxed in that we have absorbed Western ways of thinking. I have. I mean, I am much more Western than my parents. (Carol: 659-700)*

In both instances above, Deana and Carol's parents compromise their standards as their daughters age. Perhaps this is also in response to conceding that their daughters have been translated into a different version of Chineseness than the one that they were used to. The participants themselves feel that they are no longer the pure Chinese but have changed according to the contexts. Deana feels that she has become westernised while Carol feels that she is now a *banana*, a hybrid of Chineseness and Australianness.

**Economic**

Although the issue of race is often raised as the sole factor in parent-daughter-partner disputes, as can be assumed from Patty's case, intersections with socioeconomic class play a significant role in the conflict. Probyn (2001) argues that "cultural analysis has become too preoccupied with gender and sexualities at the expense of the real cause of difference – class" (p. 26). Likewise, the attribution of such a complex clash of cultures cannot be reduced to race or ethnicity alone, as we can see in Anita's comment: "A lot of Chinese parents want Chinese kids to marry Chinese. They want them to marry someone with exactly the same background or better or someone rich, someone with good education. It's always the same sort of credentials" (Anita: 1535-1538). Probyn (2001) borrows from Bourdieu's idea of habitus, which is the embodiment of class that "becomes an intimate part of us that orients how we act in the world" (p. 26). Evolving from this idea, I add that socioeconomic class sometimes veils all other considerations when parents object to their daughter's love interest.

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324 See p. 231.
Socioeconomic status is something that is pertinent to many Chinese parents’ deliberations on their daughter’s choice of partner. Often, the daughter’s status is determined by her husband’s socioeconomic status (Tu 1998b). Although it must not be denied that the parents do have selfless intentions, tied to this materialist emphasis may be the notion of the daughter’s filial duty to them in their retirement and old age, especially if there is no son in the family. The parents’ fate, especially the mother’s, is eventually determined by her children’s economic and political conditions (Tu 1998b). Further, their interference in the daughter’s choice of partner may be connected to their desire for her to maintain current cultural capital and social status, which are acquired through our backgrounds and education (Probyn 2001). Alternatively, marriage could be her opportunity to abandon the economy class for the business class, if I may use Probyn’s air travel metaphor here. Thus, with socioeconomic class as the driving force, other expectations are presented to mask it.

With my parents it hasn’t been a matter of race in itself. It’s been a host of things that they have to get used to – my de facto relationship. And, the other is that he’s Western but that’s just one additional factor that they had to deal with. His educational level in that he isn’t my educational equal. He’s not a graduate. (Alex: 2425-2435)

The Chinese often emphasise the importance of education. Having the same educational background is seen by the Chinese as a compatibility factor in a relationship. Tied to education is the question of career success and financial stability. If the woman is of a lower educational background, the husband is expected to better this so as to improve her status, hence the adage that a Chinese woman should never be too intelligent. “You wouldn’t want to be too clever if you were going to be married” (Interview with Wainwright, in Oram 1999, p. 101). Thus, “choosing a partner of the same educational background or career is another” (Alex: 4355-4356) way that class “viscerally enters into bodies” (Probyn 2001, p. 26) to impact on one’s negotiations of Chineseness.

In partner-parent conflicts, often the real source of the clash becomes evident when class is considered. Alex, whose father had been silently opposed to her relationship, contemplates ethnicity, sexual mores, and class as possible reasons for the disapproval: “All the traditional

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325 See the section “Filial piety and socioeconomic class,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | martyr mother,” p. 180.
attitudes of a Chinese father about, 'Oh you must be able to support my daughter'; we have to meet all these conditions" (Alex: 1621-1624). Carol highlights the penetrating impact of class: "In terms of educational status, financial security would still be of very big importance. But I don't know if that would be necessarily Chinese" (Carol: 662-665). Her comment aptly captures the fact that class permeates every ethnic embodiment and is not restricted to Chineseness. "He is not filthy rich or anything like that. That would be ideal (big laugh). That is being Chinese! (big laugh) No! It's being female now! No, it's being human" (Alex: 3545-3550). Everybody experiences class consciousness and aspirations. Perhaps the surface ethnic difference encountered enables interracial couples to cross other barriers, such as class and educational background.

How class is experienced is where it may differ. For the Chinese family, there may be emphasis on the person’s career: "The whole Chinese thing rests its head because they would prefer an accountant, engineer, lawyer or doctor but no, he isn't" (Alex: 3589-3597). Although aiming for the top four professions is often viewed as being typically Chinese, it is more an inclination of the middle-class and of those aspiring to move up the social ladder. Nevertheless, this shows that in some instances, socioeconomic class performs as a greater source of family conflict than ethnic differences.

Sexual
I have discussed how the family protects the daughters from potential suitors. 326 It is possible that family conflict in regard to interracial relationships is due to the racist view that holds white Australian men as being more promiscuous than Asian boys. 327 Male sexuality is thus divided according to the ethnic line with white men being equated with virility, promiscuity, and disrespect for women. Although there is a strong preference for the Australian male with 75 per cent of the women interviewed, the Aussie bloke stereotype is not perfect. Images include immorality and mateship, similar indictments to those heaped on the Chinese males.

My father didn't want to know me and he said I had made a terrible choice, because mostly white Australians are beer swillers, womanisers, and are very permissive. He said James would find another woman soon, and I would have to come back home. They were sure. (Patty: 982-988)

326 See the section "Hegemonic sexual bodyguards," in Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 155.
327 I use boys deliberately to suggest a sense of imagined purity and innocence, or emasculation, attached to Asian men.
Images of the beer-swilling, beach-loving, sporty, laidback Australian male womaniser (Anita: 3723-3725) anchor many Chinese parents’ beliefs that their daughter’s marriage to or de facto relationship with the Aussie bloke would not last. Although Anita realises that the Australian males “are a lot more than that” (Anita: 3732), such images prevail. “Australians were less moral and single mums” (Alex: 2719-2721). “So they think all Australian males are wild and only after their daughter for certain things” (Bev: 4234-4236).

While it is a widely accepted fact that many Chinese men drink and womanise too, many families still oppose their daughter’s marriage to Australian males. This could be due to the assumptions that mixed couples will encounter many cultural differences, which again leads to fears that such marriages or partnerships will not last. However, sometimes there is more sameness between interracial couples than meets the eye. Often race becomes an issue due to its physical presentation, which masks the sameness shared by the couples.

My dad kept quoting to me that two out of three mixed-marriages fail. The statistic is reduced if you are a Christian and if you pray together, have similar values, so it is for other couples who have similar values who are not Christians, but my dad couldn’t understand that.

Darren and I have more in common than my brothers and I, and we grew up reading the same types of books. There is the globalisation thing and the media. You can come from the same home town and still not have enough in common. The values need to be similar. (Agnes, in conversation with Bev: 4193-4229)

Often culturally mixed couples are attracted to each other due to some common values and interests which are outside the cultures such as religion or beliefs. These common elements are more important to Georgie than racial compatibility: “My ideal partner is definitely a born-again Christian, someone who is really committed to God. For me, race is not an issue at all. My Christian faith is” (Georgie: 879-882). People, like Georgie, believe a common faith will eventuate in common values and relational compatibility.

It is possible that tied to this aversion towards mixed marriages is the intersection between the notion of white male promiscuity and the stigma of divorce:

Like the whole hang up about being a divorced woman – a friend of mine married an Australian. That didn’t work so she’s divorced. Now in my circle, that’s not a problem but in the circle she moves in, which is predominantly Chinese, she had to
deal with a lot of insensitive comments by well-intended people that sort of highlighted the fact that she was divorced and disadvantaged in some way. (Alex: 2947-2952)

No matter how attractive or successful a woman may be, she would be viewed as disadvantaged or even a failure if she was a divorcee. A happy marriage is esteemed by women themselves, over the single life and career success: “A career, however successful, would be unsatisfactory, compared with a happy marriage and family life, with children” (Howard, research participant, in Oram 1999, p. 101). The social welfare system in Malaysia and Singapore is not as generous as the Australian towards single mothers and this would have some bearing on the financial well-being of divorcees.

Westerners are also perceived to be less committed to their partners. In speaking about white women, Esther says: “The Aussies, they change their partners very easily” (Esther: 491-492). To add to the angst, a Chinese woman who rebels against her parents’ wishes would be at fault, and the relationship break-up would be blamed on her partner’s ethnicity: “I am sure if we ever broke up, their very first words would be: ‘You should never have gotten involved with an Australian’” (Heather: 175-179). It is assumed that her relationship would have worked out if she had had a Chinese partner, as advised by her parents. Although there is no sanction against divorce, and Confucius himself was three-times divorced or separated (Tu 1998b), Chinese partners are perceived to be more likely to stay married, regardless of how they feel, for the sake of the children.328

There is more freedom here than in Malaysia. In Malaysia they still decide not to divorce. Here, if the husband and wife feel that they are not happy and have lost their feelings, they will divorce straightaway. So in Malaysia, they always think about their children, so they don’t go ahead with the divorce. After the divorce it is hard to educate the children; it is hard to tell them what is the right thing. The children will always think that they have only one side of the story. (Esther: 306-314)

Thus, the Chinese man’s perceived commitment to marriage and avoidance of divorce, even if it is just for the sake of the children, compared to the Australian male, provides more potential

328 The percentage of Chinese getting divorced in mainland China has risen by more than 50 per cent in the decade between 1990 and 2000. There is breakdown in the divorce taboo, and children are seen to benefit from divorce than being scarred by parents’ marital unhappiness. See O’Donnell (2002).
stability in many parents’ opinions. Hannah speaks here about her uncle’s unhappy marriage and filial obligations, and how this was negotiated:

*After marrying her, he fell in love with somebody very beautiful. My grandmother said, “You cannot” so he had to break it off. He almost had an affair because at that time you could not have a second wife. So my grandmother said to him, “Don’t you dare do that! No, you must give me face. I’ll commit suicide.” So he had to give up the girl.* (Hannah: 459-465)

Despite his unhappiness, Hannah’s uncle remained committed to his marriage due to his filial duties. Ironically, this idea of working at a relationship or staying committed is something that is viewed by Rosa as not particular to the Chinese, but she merits them for their persistence:

*Through my growing up years, my parents never really had a good relationship. However, they worked hard at the relationship. Neither were willing to give up on it, and they stayed together because of their three children. Now, in their old age, they’ve become inseparable. I need to make the point, though, that I have never thought that working at a relationship is something peculiarly Chinese. I have always thought that I was lucky to have parents who were committed to their relationship and worked through their ups and downs.* (Rosa: 153-170)

**Sarong party girls and mail order brides**

An ethnically-mixed relationship is viewed negatively by different sections of the community:³³⁰ “My partner has a Eurasian friend who used to get heaps for dating a white girl here” (Alex: 2357-2359). In speaking to Dorothy who is single and Chinese-educated, she says: “This is not my cup of tea (laugh). I just find it hard to see myself married to an Australian. I’m sorry, you are married to an Australian” (Dorothy: 916-928). Such communal disapproval is further compounded by the China doll syndrome:³³¹

*In general society, there is this awful new stereotype – the Asian girl fetish – the cheap, cute Asian girl who is an easy alternative to the Australian woman. Easy to get, or at least, easier to dominate, and more submissive than an Australian. It’s more than just about what you feel, attraction, or emotion for a particular person, but a lot also has to do with the outside world, and how people see you and the relationship.* (Judith: 512-516)

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³²⁹ It is interesting to note that the trend of polygamous marriages was not popular in Hannah’s uncle’s days. ³³⁰ Luke and Carrington state that many are targeted by strangers, and even friends and acquaintances, for their partner choice. See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 19). ³³¹ See Chapter 4 “Good girls vs bad babes,” p. 124.
White women are supposedly seen as unfaithful, immoral, and unchaste while Chinese women are chaste, but through association with a white male, the Chinese woman is assigned the China doll image. In Australia, Chinese women married to white males are often aligned with the mail-order bride stereotype. In other places, such as Singapore, these women are known as sarong-party girls.

People married to foreigners are termed all sorts of things such as “sarong party girls” – Asian girls who throw themselves at white men – although that perception is now changing to being more accepting that they are not necessarily tall, skinny, and sexy women who have thrown themselves at these men. (Bev: 2943-2953)

Often although such images are not necessarily translated to the Australian context, these images strongly influence the diasporic woman’s perception of herself:

I remember once when I was standing with my husband and two other white males, and this Asian lady walked past and glared at me. I felt she was being judgmental without knowing the situation. What did she think I was? Was she thinking that I was a “sarong party girl” trying to pick up an Australian man? The circumstances were that the rest of the girls were in the toilet, and I just happened to be there with the guys. (Bev: 2972-2983)

It is interesting that although nothing was stated, Bev’s first response was to feel associated with the sarong party girl stereotype. The lady could have glared at her for standing in her way. Needless to say, such glares are usually assumed to represent communal displeasure towards mixed marriages. This is due to the implied rejection of one’s ethnicity when one engages in an interracial relationship. It is “seen as your trying to become different, or that you are shunning your own type although some people still have that ‘Chinese is not good enough for you accusation’” (Bev: 2987-2989). You are considered as traitors. In an e-mail, referring to interracial marriages, I was told: “She has like you ‘married out’” (Chan, H. 2000). Luke and Carrington (2000) noted that those accused of treachery often reconstituted their friendship circles to include other interracial couples.

Women in such relationships are accused of being westernised: “Living in an Australian society and married to an Australian man, my observance of traditional practices has shrunk

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333 Luke and Carrington found that couples were challenged by their friends for “betraying their culture.” See Luke and Carrington (2000, p. 18).
dramatically. My mother thinks I have assimilated into the local culture more than is ideal” (Katie: 51-53). In other instances, such relationships are censured for breaking other sexual and class norms. When asked if the Chinese community in Australia accepts her, Alex says: “Not totally because certain choices have been defined as not Chinese, like choosing to live with my partner instead of marrying him. Not choosing a partner of the same educational background or career” (Alex: 4350-4356). To cope with such judgmental instances, Bev comments on the perception that strangers or acquaintances have:

I know I am not accepted and I wasn’t actively looking for a white Australian male partner, but the perception [of the sarong party girl] is a reality to some people. That wasn’t the case, in my case. Whatever they think, they don’t know me. It is only a fleeting moment anyway. They don’t even know who I am. (Bev: 3003-3006)

Luke and Carrington’s (2000) comment on mixed relationships sums up the confusion felt by the above women:

That “connectedness”, that sense of shared group cultural identity can be ambivalent and/or absent. … S/he as a cultural/racial outsider; s/he as the white person who crossed the color line; and both … transgressing layers of cultural taboos and stereotypes. (p. 8)

These are prevalent in both the dominant and marginal communities. They add that this sense of being on neither side, of rejection, could be one reason why interracial partners resent being mistaken as Filipino brides, or in this context, sarong party girls, and choose instead to reinvent themselves according to their partner’s culture. Regardless of the adoptive self-representation, the sense of ambivalence remains.

**What women want**

We have discussed the imperfections perceived in the China man and have conceded that interracial relationships are not free from problems. It is pertinent to ask then why some women would still consider Australian males as the more perfect partner. What do these diasporic women see in them? What do these women want?
SNAGS

Cuppa cha?
I was typing away feverishly and Darren’s improving culinary skills were wafting into my study.
"Famished!" I thought, but tea wasn’t ready yet.
"Wanna cuppa?" Darren pops in quickly. "Tea will be another ten minutes still."
I gladly accept the cuppa to tide me over and then I continue with my work.
(Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

A partnership relationship is sought by many diasporic women who feel suffocated by the domineering Chinese male. We see this in Esther’s frustration over her attempt to be independent: “Chinese men don’t always give freedom to their wives after marriage. This is another thing I can’t accept. I don’t like” (Esther: 633-635). Many Confucian men are known to be “frequently abusive and demeaning towards their wives, diminishing the women’s spirit and the vitality and spontaneity of the relationship” (Slote 1998, p. 42). Although the emotional tie to their mother is eventually transferred to the wife, this feeling is not allowed to be acknowledged. Instead it is suppressed (Slote 1998). Esther contrasts this with her observation of Australian couples:

They just treat husband and wife as good friends. They won’t say that because you are the wife, you must do the wife things. I’m the husband, I must do my husband things. They combine and they help each other. They share each other. In everything they share; they share love. I like that way. (Esther: 819-823)

We also see this partnership desire in Bev’s perception of the Chinese male’s attitude towards highly educated women: “Had he been a typical Singaporean, he would have said, ‘Think about it very seriously. Why don’t you get a public job instead of doing this PhD?’” (Bev: 2585-2587); and in my own disgust with those who command servitude from their partners: “What I hate is the Chinese guy who sits at the dinner table and expects to be served, and will not lift a finger to help the wife” (Agnes, in conversation with Bev: 4137-4140).

Some of the women desire a partnership with their mate in typically gendered household obligations. The new feminism urges us to see that that which is traditionally the female role should not be imposed on us. It should be something we engage in by choice and not as an
activity forced upon us. Australian males are often seen as being more willing to serve, unlike Chinese males who expect to be served most of the time. The roles are relevant to the context rather than the gender of the person, as we see in Bev’s arrangement with her Australian husband:

William does the washing up. Whoever cooks doesn’t have to wash up, unless you have a really good excuse. The fact is we share household duties, and if I’m busy, he’s quite happy to go off and do the shopping himself. There might be Singapore guys who do that. (Bev: 2567-2587)

Some diasporic women want sensitive, new age guys who are willing to risk time in the kitchen. Yet, at the same time, they want them to have good old-fashioned chivalry. Moreover, these qualities are often ethnicised and perceived as qualities that only Western or westernised men have, while Chinese men are assumed to be incapable of such niceties: “Some people can’t stand Asian guys and their attitudes towards women in particular. A lot of them feel that they are very conservative, very condescending” (Bev: 2567-2570). This attitude towards Chinese men could be due to the influences of a Eurocentric education and the mass media, forms of Anglo-centric enculturation. We see this in Anita’s comment on the ideal man:

It’s very, very important to me to have guys treat women well and to be gentlemanly. Maybe it is superficial but I like guys to wait for females, to open doors; I like guys to be behind females. I don’t like them to be rushing ahead and pushing past them ‘cause that’s very rude.

It’s not how I’ve been brought up, but that’s my own thinking. Maybe it’s from books I’ve read, maybe it’s from movies, and also from nice guys like role models I’ve seen. (Anita: 3099-3112)

Anita has acquired all these ideas about what she wants in a man through an imperialism of the mind, similar to what I earlier stated. Thus, the Western male is seen as gallant, sensitive, communicative, non-patriarchal, and an equal who is willing to make cuppas, compared to his Chinese counterpart.

My [non-Chinese] partner is very soft spoken. He would make me a cup of tea if I needed it. He would talk to me and listen, whereas I don’t think my father and brother are like that. I always wanted someone that’s protective but not in an arrogant, patronising fashion. (Alex: 2082-2086; 3552-3553)

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334 See Anita’s narrative on how the males at her church treat her as an equal, p. 152.
335 As discussed earlier in this chapter. See p. 212.
336 See p. 212.
While the Western male is willing to make that cuppa, the Chinese male continues to be perceived by some as sitting at the table, demanding to be served.

Equality

Many women also desire a partnership with their mate in the decision-making process. It has been argued: “If God had meant Eve to be Adam’s equal, he’d have made her from our first father’s head, not a rib, would He not? (To which Peter Lombard, a 12th-century theologian, replied that He didn’t make her from Adam’s foot, as a slave, either)” (“Special Article: A World Fit for Women” 1999). Clara, Anita, and I desire a negotiated partnership with our mates, but we each still concede that ultimately there needs to be one who leads in the relationship. Perhaps this is due to the reformed Presbyterian background that we have in common that teaches equality of genders but complementarity in the roles carried out.337

I see it more as a relationship, a partnership, where you work things out. There are some things you give in to your husband in the end ’cause ultimately I still believe that he has to make the final decision, when we both can’t agree on something, but there is room for negotiation. (Agnes, in conversation with Bev: 4143-4148)

My reasoning is that if we both continue to fight for the right to make that decision, then there will be a stalemate. Having expressed my opinion when faced with a decision, I am then happy to relegate that final decision to my husband who bears the ultimate responsibility in weighing up what we have discussed. My responsibility is in voicing my opinion and bouncing his ideas against mine so that he can consider a different perspective on the issue. However, as my husband often says, he is not the one who makes all the decisions, especially if they are matters that I have more expertise in. The leadership is often ambivalent. Despite this reality, I am still informed by the stereotypical perception of the Christian cultural semantics that states I am secondary to man and should not partake in the decision-making process. This construction of the role of man and woman requires a secular re-reading that challenges the patriarchal narrative that would have influenced the early Christian and secular worlds alike.

337 Personally, I believe that Eve was created as Adam’s equal and “helper comparable to him.” See Genesis 2. 18, 20 in (Holy Bible: New King James Version 1994). The word helper in the English language has negative or deficient connotations in that it implies inferiority, though the word itself is not meant to carry this connotation (in Psalm 46:1 – God Himself is described as our help in troubled times). The original text is supposed to translate as help meet. This means that the companion meets Adam at his every need. This shows the status of the companion more clearly. Evidently for someone to meet another in their hour of need, this person is complementary in every respect, else it would not be possible to meet the other in their every need. This is contrary to modern worldviews that still subjugate women’s position.
While my husband and I sometimes negotiate the roles according to level of expertise, Clara’s idea of partnership is gendered: “It is more like a role thing, male versus female, so for example he would have more decision-making power. We will discuss it, but I would say the final decision will still be his” (Clara: 1684-1687). Clara’s roles are gendered. She feels that the decision-making task is a man’s job due to his gender.

Anita envisions equality in her family, including the roles that her future children take, differently again:

*Australian in the sense that I want our family to feel that we are all equal with each other. Sure it’s important that I want my husband to be head of the house as there’s to be some order in the house.* (Anita: 3210-3213)

Instead of viewing the role that the husband takes as usurping her position of equality, Anita views it as necessary for the sake of order.

Patty sums up the partnership paradox as thus: “Although you like to dominate your partner often, you respect that he can’t be dominated” (Patty: 929-931). Rosa’s story may shed light on what non-Chinese men who share their leadership think of women like us:

*We often make jokes between ourselves about “Asian brides,” because they are meant to be docile and obedient. Our relationship is quite the other way round. I am a strong, decisive person, and my husband recognises that. He is happy to have a wife who works and through her work achieves some sense of identity. He has said explicitly that he cannot marry a woman who relies on him for her identity.* (Rosa: 294-303)

Related to the question of equality is the issue of power access. Interracial relationships are perceived by some to give power to the woman who is twice removed from equality – racially and gender-wise. “The possibility of relationships and ultimately marriage between Asian [women] and white [men] suggests a cultural bridging of Eastern (‘Oriental’) and Western … nationalities” (Wong 1991). In a sense this bridge can be seen as a gateway into being perceived as westernised and thus having the capacity to participate in the dominant society. In an autobiographical novel, *East Goes West*, immigrant Han believes that his relationship with a white woman integrates him into the Western culture (Kim, in Wong 1991). This then gives him
the cultural capital to perform in mainstream society. Let me quickly elaborate on this by turning to a very mundane ritual at the supermarket:

_I've had checkout chicks, after ringing up the items, look to my partner for payment. I find that very offensive. I don't know if it's a gender or race thing. It could be both. It could be to do with my being Chinese, non-white, mail-order bride, or not being the income-earner, and wallet-holder of the relationship._ (Alex: 4486-4493)

Alex is uncertain if the assumptions made by the cashier are totally gendered as she feels that they could be racially motivated. The stereotype of the illiterate Chinese may have influenced the cashier to feel that it is easier to deal with Alex's white partner. For those who do not fit this stereotype, such an assumption is insulting, but for those who do, the English-speaking white partner would enable the non-English-speaking woman access to an otherwise difficult transaction. Her partner becomes the gateway to a society that she otherwise may not get to experience. In other words, she gains a certain degree of pseudo-acceptance as her partner deals with the white world on her behalf.

**Promising partnerships**

A few conclusions can be made from the discussions in this chapter. Alex suggests that perhaps the bridge to understanding between different ethnic groups can be made through the socialisation processes that cross-cultural couples experience:

_My housemate's brother said: "I used to think Asians were this and that, and I didn't like them but ever since I knew you, I can see that they are people just like us." I felt at that time it's a little bit insulting but I now see it as a positive thing. He was on the way, in his own fashion, to a little bit more understanding of Asian people._ (Alex: 3094-3102)

"Prejudice and racism is ... entirely a matter of experience. ... a matter of having a positive experience with other cultures" (Li, in Blazic 2000). Despite the lingering White Australia sentiments experienced by many of the Chinese women interviewed, there is a promise in cross-cultural couples' ability to bridge differences and show to others their racial tolerance.

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338 See the section “Stigma of illiteracy,” in Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 278.
The women who shared their ideas about an ideal partner have an image of what they desire in a man. These are usually based on the stereotypical notions of the Chinese male. Rather than a universal Chinese male stereotype, I found that these images vary from woman to woman. It is often the case that one is quite happy to recall the stereotypical images of the haunting China man, till one is confronted personally with a question like: “What about your brothers? Are they China men?” When I was asked that, I could not answer the question and found myself thinking about other men who were Chinese whom I thought were closer to my ideal man: “It’s terrible but we all do it (laugh). We can be conscious of the fact that we’re not just this and this and this. So a stereotype is a stereotype and it’s not really a person” (Anita: 3739-3742).

Despite this acknowledgment, we remain entangled in the web of powerful cultural semantics that grip us. As many reading these pages would affirm, there are many Chinese males who practise what has been ascribed to Australian males. Perhaps to overcome the ethnicisation of the practices associated with what women want, we may need deconstructed and reconstructed China men to replace current stereotypes. Attractive, young Chinese men, are perhaps more commodifiable. An example is second-generation Asian-Australian Jason Li, our publicly elected Constitutional Convention delegate during the Republic debates in 1999.\(^{339}\) Also featured on the ABC’s *Australian Story* in 2000,\(^ {340}\) Li has completed a Law degree and worked as a Judge’s Associate at the UN Balkans War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague before studying in New York for his Masters degree. Many tip him as the new political face representing Australian youth. He says: “It is critical to Australia’s development that we find a very sure sense of who we are as a people – an Australia which will see racial stereotypes smashed down ... that’s the Australia which I am very optimistic about” (Li, in Blazic 2000).

Young men like him are articulate and are able to slip into the dominant culture invisibly, and yet count visibly. Described as having traditional Aussie larrikin qualities, a taste for footy, a drink, and a chat, Li has also been instilled with the Chinese culture. However, invisibility is not the ultimate aim. A reinvented China man, like Li, adept at shifting modes of identification, will enable a subjectification that recognises the past as well as the present. Such negotiations of Chineseness challenge current standards of what constitutes an attractive man. Ultimately,

\(^{339}\) Li’s transcript on the republic issue is available at [http://www.abc.net.au/amp/s63536.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/amp/s63536.htm) and his lecture at The Hawke Centre is available at [http://www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au/speeches/jasonli.htm](http://www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au/speeches/jasonli.htm).

\(^{340}\) See transcript at [http://www.abc.net.au/austory/transcripts/s111240.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/austory/transcripts/s111240.htm).
we all affirm that it is what's inside that counts, but until then a book remains judged by its cover.
Chapter 7

Language and liminality

My country and my people/ I never understood./ I grew up in China’s mighty shadow,/ with my gentle, brown skinned neighbours;/ but I kept diaries in English. …/ My country and my people/ are neither here nor there, nor/ in the comfort of my preferences./ if I could even choose. (Lee, in Koh 1998)

I’m trying too hard to speak without mistake, sounding totally like polite, proper BBC English … when I’m dispatched to write about Ebonics! Ebonic-bubonic plague, I thought … why I should write and spoil more my English. (Bhabha 1997c)

In this chapter, I highlight the significant role language plays in the diasporic woman’s sense of belonging in different contexts faced. I examine the notion of language as coincident with ethnicity and how this impacts on negotiations of Chineseness in Australia. More specifically, I investigate the intersections of their attitudes towards and strategies in manipulating the English and Chinese languages, and how the liminal politics informs such negotiations.

Language and ethnicity

Language is often held to be coincident with ethnicity, although it has been argued that our identity should not be based on our language preference (Chan 1998). Ang (1998a) writes about her exchange with a mainland Chinese taxi driver in Sydney who said to her when he learnt that she could not speak Chinese: “It will be easy for you to learn. After all, you have Chinese blood” (p. 240). She shuddered at the thought of such a naïve link between language and ethnicity, “as if [her] imputed racial identity would automatically and naturally give [her] access to some enormous reservoir of cultural capital!” (p. 240). Cheng and Kuo (2000) state that “language often occupies a crucial position in the social construction process of ethnicity.” This is due to the connective role played by language in relation to kinship ties both within their country of origin as well as diasporically. Since the colonial period in Malaysia and Singapore, language has been perceived as “inseparable from ethnic and cultural identity” (Koh 1998, p.

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341 The notion of the link between ethnicity with language skills and retention is not my focus in this chapter. For studies in this area, see Giles, Taylor, Lambert, and Albert (1976); Rumbaut (1994); Taylor, Bassili, and About (1973).
152). In Australia, ethnicity is defined according to language for census purposes (Jupp 1996). Thus, it is not difficult to understand why the ability to speak Chinese is associated with being Chinese, while the inability to speak Chinese is often seen as being westernised, as we can see in Carol’s description of her siblings: “Susie and Robert are much more westernised. Robert in particular. He doesn’t speak Chinese” (Carol: 929-931). Other assumptions that language parallels ethnic make-up, from both the Chinese women’s and non-Chinese perspectives, are explicit in the following examples:

_I remember once walking up George Street in Sydney, deep in discussion with a Vietnamese friend, when a man snarled at us, “Speak English!” when we already were. We turned around and told him so. I’m sure we both found it quite astounding that someone could make that kind of comment purely on the colour of our skin or the features of our faces._

_The incident makes me wonder about the sheer bigotry and ignorance of others; I don’t see any reason to feel ashamed of my racial or ethnic background, or about my ability to speak more than one language: most speak only what they can; those who can speak several languages, speak what they will._ (Vanessa: 669-683)

_I never actually realised that I looked different, because I spoke perfect English. I have, overall, had very few accounts of racism based on my looks because, I suspect, my English has always been flawless (that is perfect grammar, and without an accent). This does not mean that I did not suspect prejudice against me. On the odd occasion when I experience a biting racist remark or exceptional display of rudeness, I was surprised at them, because I often forgot that I looked different, and was Chinese._ (Judith: 18-19)

_When my Australian friends speak Mandarin, it makes me feel that I need to learn the language to justify my Chineseness._ (Lydia: 187-189).

_Normally, when you meet somebody, you think, “What are they like?” When you meet Caucasians, you tend not to think, “Are they English? Are they Australian? Are they Scottish?” But when you meet a Chinese, even I think it and I am not Caucasian, first you identify that person as a Chinese. With that comes the perception that they must be this way. They must be that way. Just the way they talk to you because initially when I went to school, there were people who assumed I couldn’t speak English because I was Chinese._ (Carol: 79-89)

_Waiters/sales assistants assume that you don’t speak good English. When you sound like an Aussie, they look shocked._ (Indi: 25-26)

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Chineseness, considered in terms of its relationship to language, is based on stereotypical assumptions that are triggered by the ethnic appearance of the women. Ang (1998c) states that the assumption that a Chinese person should be able to speak Chinese "puts the overseas Chinese in a no-win situation: she is either 'too Chinese' or 'not Chinese enough,'" and renders the idea of diaspora as a disempowering hindrance to ethnic subjectification. Ho argues that the Germans, Italians, and other European migrants to the USA and Australia are not expected to speak their native language, "yet overseas Chinese are always expected to know Chinese or else they are despised not only by their fellow Chinese but also by non-Chinese!" (in Ang 1993, p. 12) Cheng and Kuo (2000) find that the relationship between language and ethnicity is in fact weak, and that many other factors contribute to ethnic identification and these are negotiated as part of the web that we tangle with. Despite this possibility, the cultural semantics that view language as coincident with ethnicity impacts strongly on practices of Chineseness. In the next two sections, I consider the negotiations of the Chinese and English languages and how these impact on diasporic women's ethnic subjectification.

**Ethnicity and the Chinese language**

In this section, I examine the impact of the cultural semantics that Chinese language is coincident to ethnicity on the diasporic woman's identification. Due to the assumed link between language and ethnicity (Cheng and Kuo 2000; Koh 1998), and race being the marker of ethnicity (Luke and Carrington 2000), Dorothy, a Chinese-educated migrant, feels that the inability to speak in Chinese causes confusion in ethnic identification:

*I'm very proud of my language. I'm glad that I can speak Chinese. A lot of Chinese cannot speak Chinese. I feel so sorry for them, especially the youngsters nowadays. They will have more problems when they grow up to identify themselves as Chinese because they can't speak Chinese and yet they look Chinese. (Dorothy: 981-987).*

The confusion is seen in Carol's rationalisation on her ethnicity: "*I am not very Chinese in that I don't know the language, the culture very well. I don't know the customs*" (Carol: 1876-1878). Due to her language and cultural deficiency, Carol feels that she is less of a Chinese. In other

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344 Those who do not speak Chinese are also viewed as *fake Chinese* as this inability to converse in one's own language is a sign of assumed loss of authenticity. See Ang (1993, pp. 9-10).
345 Ang adds that this is simply a Western attempt to keep Western culture white. Thus, an English-speaking Chinese is seen as *unnatural*.
words, how can one be authentically Chinese if one does not speak or write Chinese? "When visiting Asia, my accent is laughed at, sneered at – ‘You think you are so smart?!’; ‘How can you call yourself Chinese? You can’t even speak the language!’" (Indi: 133-137). Such an accusation is due to an essentialisation of language to ethnicity and cultural identity (Koh 1998).

Dorothy adds that the ability to speak in one’s mother tongue is a mark of authenticity that gains the respect of the white Australians. She feels that lack of proficiency in her own language would make her feel inadequate: “I’ll feel sorry for myself if I’m a Chinese but am not able to speak Chinese” (Dorothy: 1002-1003). This is echoed by Carol who says:

_Sometimes I feel that as a Chinese I should be more knowledgeable, know more about my own culture, my own language._

_If you are a bio-chemist, they expect you to know about bio-chemistry. If you are a Chinese, people expect you to know something about Chineseness. And every time they see a Chinese person, they ask, “What does that mean?” They will turn to the only Chinese they know and expect you to have the answer to everything Chinese and then of course I don’t._

_Sometimes they know more than I do because they have read about it. And that is where you feel you are just a Chinese on the face. (Carol: 1952-1954; 1958-1967)_

Being ignorant of her language and culture makes Carol feel like an imposter Chinese. All Chinese are expected to be experts on the Chinese language (Shelly: 499). Although language is often a pointer to ethnicity, it should not be so since a non-Chinese can be just as fluent in the Chinese language. Such a person may face similar issues in a reversed manner. A non-Chinese speaking Chinese can be as exotic as the Chinese _ocker_.

Georgie, a single woman who migrated to Australia on her own, also draws the link between language and Chineseness by attributing her weak Chinese language proficiency to a sense of alienation:

_My Chinese identity would be stronger if my Chinese language skills had been better. This would have enabled me to read and discover more about Chinese culture in its original form rather than the translated versions often done by some Caucasian authors. (Georgie: 360-364)_

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An _ocker_ is the assumed true blue Aussie who speaks with a particular drawl and uncultivated demeanour. It is usually a male stereotype.
Georgie feels that her Chineseness is a translated Chineseness, just as the texts she reads about the culture are translations. This verballises her feelings of inauthenticity. To negotiate this sense of loss, Georgie employs a rather simplistic strategy that reflects an essentialist view of Chineseness, and the apparent complicity between language and ethnicity. In the following quote, she speaks of her isolation while she was working in rural Australia:

*Often when I feel that my Chinese identity is in “danger” of being eroded away, especially when I lived in the country towns of Australia, I would often try to think in Chinese and sing Chinese songs. By playing/singing these Chinese songs, it was a reminder to myself of my Chinese identity.* (Georgie: 375-378)

Our rational mind tells us that merely singing in Chinese does not contribute significantly to our ethnicity, just as singing in French does not make us French. However, this underscores the powerful relationship between language and ethnicity. Carol, likewise, clung to the Chinese language when studying in Australia as a young teenager away from her family. To Carol, being able to speak in her mother tongue brought her closer to home while away:

*Once I arrived in Australia, I very much wanted to speak Chinese. When I got to Australia, I suddenly realised there are so many words you cannot use because you are now language restricted. There are people who don’t understand you. My sister made a point to tell me to try not to speak too much in Chinese to each other when we are out in public. People will think that is rude, because they don’t understand us and think we’re talking about them. All of a sudden I felt this big part of me stripped away because I couldn’t exercise it. Even with the one person whom I could speak to in Chinese, I wasn’t allowed to by her, unless we were alone. Now my Chinese is so terrible but that was one thing that I realised, that I really missed speaking in Chinese when I couldn’t, when I didn’t have that ultimate freedom to do it whenever I wanted to.* (Carol: 1354-1372; 1376-1382)

It seems the diasporic woman who is proficient in English, and not Chinese, is placed in that liminal space of feeling lost in both camps.

*Ethnicity and the English language*

The sentiment that considers language as being coincident with ethnicity abounds in one’s relationship with the English language as well. Just as it is *inauthentic* to be Chinese if one is not fluent or literate in Chinese, a Chinese writer would find it very hard to articulate an *authentic identity* in English since English is not meant to be his/her mother tongue (Koh 1998). A renown Chinese writer, who publishes in English, tells of her insecurities during her
I used to have my English essays read by her. I never wrote one creative line at university and yet I was writing poetry in English, in Malaysia, when I was 12. I was writing stories. I used to have good marks for English in Malaysia and yet in Australia, I went into a freezer because I felt so inadequate with my English, due to my accent. And I didn’t make a distinction then between accent, and good or bad English. (Tina: 922-924; 935-945)

Tina later realised that her strengths were in creative writing, not analytical work which stifled her. Instead of identifying her strengths and weaknesses in the different aspects of the English language, the cultural semantics that essentialises language to ethnicity blinded her.

The consideration of language as coincident with ethnicity questions the Chinese woman’s right to be an expert in the English language. We see this complaint in the stories of these women. They are all highly qualified and educated in the English medium. Julia, who has published widely in English, says: “In my current job in administration and policy, lots of people are still being impressed or wary about the fact that I have a PhD in English” (Julia: 70-74). Katie, who was unemployed at the point of the interview, says: “They were surprised at my level of proficiency in English as it de-emphasises my Chinese identity” (Katie: 14; 185).

Shelly, a student with a degree in the Arts, says: “When I won the prize for English at the end of the year, the main racist in my year said [that] it must be a ‘fluke!’ So I made sure I won that prize again the next year” (Shelly: 63-69). These stories echo Kelly’s predicament with her ability in the English language and how this impacts on her ethnic identity:

When people speak to me as if I don’t comprehend English, I feel my colour. When people say, “Your English is so good” or “You write so well,” I wonder if it is because I am just better than the average Asian or Chinese, or if I am really good. (Kelly: 2125-2134)

Regardless of the diasporic woman’s proficiency in English, her racial appearance marks her as inauthentic and places her in an ambivalent position. We see this in Clara’s attitude towards English: “Trying to speak properly in English is one way of trying not to be Chinese because people expect the Chinese not to speak as well as Western people” (Clara: 2035-2038).
The Malaysian and Singaporean linguistic history

To better understand how an ethnicised language identification translates to the diasporic context, it is useful to refer to Koh’s (1998) work on the development of English literature by the elite Malayan Chinese during the post-war period. Koh highlights that prior to the drive for a national consciousness as part of the Malayan struggle for independence from the British, the Chinese, who still had strong links with China, wrote in Chinese as an expression of their Chinese identity and concerns. During the post-war nationalism period, the writers with Chinese backgrounds who emerged subscribed to the English language as the tool to forge a national identity. Although the majority of the writers were Chinese, it was hoped that English would unite the different ethnic groups under a national identity, as the English language was not tied to the main ethnic groups in Malaya. The consequences of this strategic move by the government had far-reaching effects. The English-educated Chinese diluted their allegiance to China to promote the English literary movement. They felt that they had to “cease to perceive or merely articulate themselves as separate ethnic entities [and] adopt a self-transcendent national identity shared with members of the other races resident [there]” (Koh 1998, p. 154). In that same decision, they thus alienated themselves from the Chinese who remained loyal to China. The Chinese-educated Chinese then began to regard the English-educated Chinese as not quite Chinese. This led to a great division between the Chinese-educated Chinese and the English-educated Chinese which remains a problem today (Koh 1998), even within the diasporic context in Australia.

The early distinction between the Chinese-educated Chinese and the English-educated Chinese sent the English-Chinese into exile within their own homeland. An earlier group of English-educated Chinese were already at a “cultural and linguistic crossroads” (Koh 1998), as there was no language that they could identify with ethnically at an emotional level. They were

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347 Prior to 1965, Malaysia and Singapore formed Malaya. Singapore subsequently seceded from Malaysia.
349 According to Wong and Ee, many of these Chinese were first-wave immigrants from China who had had to cut off all ties with China as emigration from China was punishable by death then. These Chinese, called Peranakans, or Babas and Nonyas, intermarried with the Malay, spoke bazaar Malay and adopted local Malay customs. Many saw the King of England as their sovereign and adopted the King’s English where possible. See Wong and Ee (1971). See also Chapter 8 “Educated elite” for further details on the history of Malaya, and the educational and political implications on Chinese identification.
350 For insight into the links that early Chinese immigrants had with China, see Kuo (1998, pp. 232-34).
removed from all options available to them except for English but that was ironically the language of the colonists:

The English-educated were both a privileged and a compromised class. With English being the language of colonial rule and the English-educated trained to be in its service, some members of this class began to realize that their English education and its ultimate purpose made them complicit with the repressive power, set them apart, and alienated them from the masses. (Koh 1998, p. 159)

Having broken their ties with China, the English-educated Chinese had little in common with the British apart from the language. Thus, twice-removed from their Chinese roots, this created a sense that they were “neither ‘purely’ Chinese culturally nor European in heritage” (Koh 1998, p. 158).

Further, post-independence politics and national language policies in Malaysia alienated the whole Chinese segment of the population there.\(^{351}\) As only those of Malay ethnic origin were recognised as \textit{bumiputras} or “sons of the soil,” the Chinese were thrust into a liminal space.\(^{352}\) Thus the English-educated Chinese felt dispossessed firstly from their Chinese culture, and then \textit{doubly dispossessed} due to the minority status (Lim, in Koh 1998). The Chinese-educated Chinese were also marginalised by this race politics. Finally, the race riots in Malaysia on 13 May, 1969 confirmed the Chinese as secondary citizens to the ethnic Malay. Such was the pain of dispossession that one writer, Ee, wrote in his poem, \textit{Exile}: “He finally chose/ the only way out/ for the sake of all/ he held most dear,/ left one quiet evening,/ ash-grey,/ incognito,/ dirt on tarmac” (in Koh 1998, p. 164). Despite being a seventh-generation Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia,\(^{353}\) Ee felt he was nothing more than “dirt on tarmac” and was compelled to leave his homeland for Australia. Ee’s peer, Wong, expressed how as an internal exile, he was “a prisoner of the past and an outsider in the present” (in Koh 1998, p. 165). Other younger generation writers, like Lim, sought the liminal space for self-preservation. Having little Chinese language, and regarded as a \textit{ghost} due to the Peranakan influence on her ethnicity, Lim adopted an international identity and an international perspective to her writing (Koh 1998), and embraced liminality as a strategy out of an otherwise negative limbo.

\(^{351}\) On the instatement of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, see the section “The educational immigrants” in Chapter 8 “Educated elite,” p. 306.

\(^{352}\) See footnote 415 on p. 307. Further, the Malays were the majority ethnic group, who gained political control of the country in 1957, giving themselves special economic and educational privileges as well. See Lillard and Willis (1994).

\(^{353}\) On the Peranakans, see footnote 349 on p. 256.
The politics in Singapore, after the 1965 secession from Malaysia, took a slightly different path, with English remaining as the tool that bridged the different ethnic groups (Koh 1998).\textsuperscript{354} Further, English was seen as “the only acceptable neutral language … that would make [Singapore] relevant to the world” (Lee, K. Y. 2000, p. 173). The Singaporean majority thus adopted English as their own language. The Singaporean writers engaged with the English language and bred a uniquely Singaporean English that is neither Chinese nor Western. The Singaporean-Chinese should have felt secure about their ethnic identity and sense of belonging due to the stabilising effect of the English language, as compared to the confusion that arose from the Malaysian national language policies. However, progress and commercialism ate away at the Singaporean culture, history, and Chinese roots, leaving the Chinese ambivalent towards the past as they made way for the new. The Chinese dialects were replaced by Mandarin to identify with the national language of China and Taiwan, presumably to strengthen the Singaporean-Chinese identity. Instead, torn from their native dialect and due to the country’s desire for progress and prosperity, the Singaporean-Chinese too felt remote from their initial Chineseness.

This history has ramifications for the Australian diasporic context. The language policies in Malaysia and Singapore inadvertently reinforced the ethnicisation of language. It encouraged an ethnic identity that is marked by one’s language capacity. Thus, some of the Chinese who migrated to Australia, and especially the English-educated Chinese, felt that they became further diluted in their Chineseness as their linguistic capabilities changed in Australia. What they failed to realise is that in many ways they had arrived as already translated Chinese. We see this concern with the translated Chineseness in Kathy’s comment on the impact of the English language on her life:

\begin{quote}
For me, being a modern Chinese woman, with modern, Western-educated, fluent English-speaking parents, it was almost inevitable that I would end up quite unChinese, in terms of celebrating Chinese festivals, sending my children to Chinese school, having no Chinese friends. Also when I came to Australia there were very few Chinese people to interact with, so almost inevitably, I mixed with Caucasian Australians.

Yet in spite of all this, my parents instilled in me a fierce pride in being Chinese and I never want my children to lose that part of me or themselves. As the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{354} For a personal perspective on the development of Singapore’s language policies from Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs, see Lee K. Y. (2000, pp. 169-73).
generations progress though, it's sad to think our cultural heritage will be diluted and it'll be almost impossible, in generations to come, to know what being Chinese means any more.

People who know me well say that they don't even notice that I'm Chinese any more. I certainly speak English very fluently and people are always surprised to meet me when they've only spoken to me over the phone. (Kathy: 197-213; 217-221)

Kathy, who migrated in the 1960s, has lived in Australia for over 30 years. An idea of Chineseness that is fluid, and not based on some fixed idea of what a Chinese person should sound or speak like, would enable her to understand that one's Chineseness does not become diluted when there is change. Instead, a fluid concept accepts that change is inevitable and that the practices of Chineseness adapt to changes and become translated. This is unfortunately not how Chineseness is viewed. Thus, diasporic Chinese women continue to experience the effects of an ethnicised language.

Having now established a brief historical background to the impact of English on the Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore, I turn to address the policies in Australia that impact on the way that language is used or perceived.

The Australian multicultural and linguistic policies

Australia's declaration as a multicultural country in 1973 plays a significant role on its language policies and usage although traces of the other immigration policies, including the racist Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, are still prevalent even today. These policies, along with those in Malaysia and Singapore, influence the linguistic negotiations of Chineseness. As a result, it is useful to examine the participants' context according to their arrival in Australia (see Table 1).

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Table 1: Participants' arrival according to Australia's immigrant settlement policies after 1947

Most of the women interviewed arrived during the multicultural period. Two participants had earlier studied in Australia, one during the assimilation period and the other, during the period of integration policies.\(^{355}\) The assimilation period encouraged migrants to speak English

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\(^{355}\) I have entered them twice in the table to indicate their exposure to previous immigration policies. The four participants from Giese's interviews have not been included.
publicly and in the privacy of their own homes so that they could “become like Australians” (Jupp 1996, p. 5). This would then mean that second-generation migrants would naturally speak English. The determined push towards English language acquisition was relaxed during the integration period as migrants resisted such impositions. More tolerance was shown towards migrants with NESB backgrounds.\footnote{On NESB, see footnote 342 on p. 251.} The multicultural period denounced the practices of White Australia and recognised the different languages and cultures that migrants brought with them.\footnote{For a more detailed description of the history to Australia’s multicultural policies, see Jupp (1996).}

It is not my purpose to draw definitive links between the immigration periods and the women’s language development but this history is useful as a context to factors influencing the negotiations of Chineseness in contemporary Australia. It is usually a host of different issues that impact on how one performs one’s version of Chineseness, as I will examine in the following sections. Again, I reiterate that it is not the why that I focus on but the how in response to the possible reasons for a particular performative.

**A certain Whiteness: Power and status**

*To speak or not to speak*

Fridays were “Speak English and Malay” days. The school canteen was noisy as usual. I ate with my friends in the first section where most of us in the top class hung out. I was on duty that day.

“Okay, see you in class,” I said as I slurped up the last bit of soup, before going off to do my rounds.

As I walked away towards the lower end of the canteen, I felt the tension rise. This was where most rebels sat. They would almost deliberately speak in Chinese loud enough so I couldn’t pretend not to hear them.

“Oh no! It was Mei Fun again!” I thought to myself. She had received two black marks from me already. I whipped out my prefect book and quickly scribbled her name down, and next to it, “Speaking in Chinese.”

Mei Fun knew that she had accumulated too many black marks for this offence alone. It was time for her to face her punishment.

The toilets were dark, wet and smelly. Most people would avoid them unless they couldn’t hold on any longer. As she brushed the toilet floor, I felt her defiant attitude and it stung. I was torn between her world and mine. My world was so English. Mei Fun’s world was everything Chinese. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)
Language is symbolic of ethnic status (Cheng and Kuo 2000). English was the language of power and authority in Malaya during the colonial period, and even after independence. The Chinese language, on the other hand, was viewed as an inferior language for reasons outlined in my earlier section. My narrative above highlights the difference in status associated with the English and Chinese languages in Malaysia. This cultural semantic promotes the English language as an empowering tool, giving authority to me, for example, to punish those who did not accept its importance in education. The illiterate in English were deemed as inferior, and I associated them with the working-class and of having a lower academic ability. Today, as I reflect on the practice then, I realise how unfair it was that students were not encouraged to speak in their own tongue. Those who chose to were made to feel marginalised by those who wielded power. The hierarchical order in the languages is translated to the Australian context and this causes some segregation in the community here.\footnote{358}

English is also the language of “social and economic advancement for the ambitious [and it] generated high hopes” for the English-educated. Any Chinese woman with access to an English education would consider herself a “daughter of a better age” (Lee, in Koh 1998, p. 162). An English medium education was seen as a privileged education: “You must be so grateful that you had the luck to be English-educated” (Laura: 95-97). English was a privileged language as it was the passport to further education and out of a low socioeconomic class through a professional career: “International recognition was given to tertiary degrees undertaken in English-speaking Commonwealth countries. Degrees from countries such as Australia, USA, UK are viewed favourably by employers in both Commonwealth and Asian countries” (Susie: 32-36).\footnote{359} Noting this privilege, parents chose schools for their children according to the language emphasis and medium.\footnote{360} Kelly raises this in how she perceives the choices made by her grandmother and mother:

\begin{quote}
Her mother had earlier placed her in an English school for the opportunities that she would gain through an English education compared to the Chinese. Mum emphasised the need for an English education and always encouraged me to read and to write. I would say that I was given many opportunities despite the fact that I am a girl. (Kelly: 845-849; 865-869)
\end{quote}

\footnote{358} I will elaborate on this further in the next section “Segregatory device” in this chapter, p. 263.
\footnote{359} It was also the language identified as the gateway to business and diplomacy, of science and technology (Lee, K. Y. 2000).
\footnote{360} Ironically, parents in Australia sometimes choose schools according to the availability of Mandarin classes.
In fact, Kelly’s gender made it more critical for her to attain an English education.\textsuperscript{361}

The power association between language and colonialism in Malaysia and Singapore suggested the Orientalist attitude that viewed Westernisation as superior due to the benefits for employment and socioeconomic status, and English was seen as the language of Westernisation.\textsuperscript{362} In the Singaporean context, the boys at a religious-based school are perceived as westernised due to their literacy in English. This is then associated with a colonial status:

\textit{Very English oriented. In fact, they have a problem with speaking Chinese. These boys always have problems with Chinese in their schools. Their level of Chinese is poor. They fail. Their level of passing is poor in comparison to other institutions. It's pretty much English as first language kind of school in Singapore. (Alex: 88-90; 93-95)}

Despite the boys’ failure to gain literacy in Chinese, this is not a barrier to the school’s prestige nor the students’ reputation. Instead, failure in Chinese is a positive trait because it is identification with Westernisation and colonialism. One’s status is reversely improved. This is a sort of inverted or reversed racism, where one considers one’s own culture as inferior due to its inability to provide educational advancement and other subsequent social benefits. This is what Fanon calls the \textit{perverted logic} of colonialism for it is not “satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. ... It turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 1993, p. 37). The perverted logic is evidenced in the delegation of the Chinese language to the inferior position.\textsuperscript{363}

In coming to Australia, the sociopolitical factors here reinforced English as a power tool and bridge to equal opportunities. One is seen as westernised, and therefore superior. Speech patterns are used as a measure of one’s status. One’s accent, for example, is often used as a marker of one’s Westernisation: “\textit{The people in Singapore, friends and relations, all think I’ve}

\textsuperscript{361} On differences between English and Chinese education for girls, see the whole section “The educational escape,” in Chapter 8 “Educated elite,” from p. 289.
\textsuperscript{362} See Said (1978).
\textsuperscript{363} Instead of viewing language acquisition in this dichotomous manner, it is more advantageous to push for the acquisition of both Chinese and English, and to view bilingualism, or even multilingualism, as superior to monolingualism, which was viewed as a setback and the loss of one’s cultural identity if it was just English (Lee, K. Y. 2000). For the political benefits of multilingualism, see Lee K. Y. (2000, p. 173).
become ‘Australianised.’ I do not speak English with a Singaporean accent any more, but neither do I have an Australian accent’ (Rosa: 211-225). Thus, to access power, one needs to speak the right type of English: “My family never really spoke Singlish. As far as they were concerned you speak proper English, you write proper English. It was probably a class status thing” (Bev: 3659; 3662-3663; 3669-3670). In Australia, such sentiments were confirmed with English being the dominant language and with the lingering White Australia attitudes. There was, thus, not only an ethnicisation of language, but also an association of this link with power. These formed a triangular relationship, with Westernisation through language as a path towards that power.

Thus, in this cultural semantics, the English language is associated with a certain social status and educational background. Speaking English is viewed as empowering. Many who subscribe to this set of cultural semantics would forsake their mother tongue to pursue the English language. On the whole, those who speak standard Australian English are seen to stand in “good stead” (Julia: 38). As Australia asserts a more pluralistic form of multiculturalism, one that encourages ethnic pride, more Chinese may return to the Chinese language. As it is, there are many who choose to maintain their Chinese language skills despite the apparent advantages that the English language offers in Australia.365

Segregatory device
The focus in this section is on the function of language as a divisive mechanism in the Chinese community. The Chinese community in Australia is perceived to reject or accept members on the basis of the language skills exhibited by those members. Chinese language proficiency is used as a measure of one’s degree of Chineseness by members within and outside the Chinese community. The way language drew the line between my friends and me as illustrated in the autoethnographic narrative To speak or not to speak is an issue prevalent in the Australian Chinese community too.366 I will discuss this according to how those who only speak Chinese are perceived by both Chinese and non-Chinese members of the community, and then those who speak English as their dominant language, and consider how both groups negotiate their ethnicity according to their language use.

364 Singlish is a hybrid language consisting of English and other Singaporean local additives. It is similar in nature to the indigenised Malayan English.
365 See footnote 363, on p. 262.
366 To speak or not to speak is on p. 260.
The really, really Chinese Chinese

In Anita’s story, we see how those who only speak Chinese as the preferred language are perceived by members of the English-speaking diasporic community:

There was one group that was the really, really Chinese group (big laugh). They went out clubbing a lot. A lot of them have really nice cars. Some of them were older because they’d come from overseas, and they had to stay back a year so a lot of them drove.

So that was a really Chinese group. They listen to Chinese music. (laugh) They had Chinese characters on their cars, and they had lots of parties together and some of them smoked. (Anita: 356-367)

It is a common response to laugh at the Chineseness described above. Many diasporic Chinese who speak English as their first language find it amusing when they meet Chinese people who fulfil the epitome of the stereotypical Chinese as portrayed in the media and elsewhere. I asked Anita what it was that made her describe this group from her school days as the really, really Chinese group and her response is:

Everything about them like some of them spoke Chinese at school, and they didn’t really fit in with the rest of the people at school. They didn’t care. They only spoke English whenever they needed to, but to people that could speak Chinese, they would speak Chinese so they were quite separate from the rest of the school. And they befriended mainly Asian people. (Anita: 373-378; 545)

Despite being Chinese herself, Anita did not consider herself a part of that really, really Chinese group. Instead she saw herself as belonging to a normal group that spoke English to integrate into the other student groups. She described the behaviour of the really, really Chinese group as odd and adopted the Australianised attitude towards foreign-sounding migrants: “They might have been saying things that they didn’t want people to hear. I don’t know” (Anita: 581-582). 367 This statement accents the difference between them, as Anita’s proficiency in Chinese was that poor that she could not understand what they were saying. Further, it emphasises the really, really Chinese group’s apparent insensitivity to members outside their circle as they presumably refused to integrate through their language choice. Debra’s narrative here helps to explain why their behaviour was deemed as anti-social:

367 This adoption of mainstream attitudes is similar to the minority partner in an interracial relationship embracing the partner’s dominant attitudes and practices. See Luke and Carrington (2000).
Maybe the Aussies don’t like us to speak our dialect. If we speak Mandarin, it’s very insulting like we are talking bad about them. I suppose when we are together, we have to pretend that we are not Chinese. We are still Chinese but it’s just that it’s very rude if we speak our own language. We respect them so we don’t speak our own dialect or language. (Debra: 930-936; 945-947; 962-963)

Anita’s attitude towards those who speak Chinese within the dominant society is accommodating. However, Debra explains how the language choice of Chinese is divisive because of its perceived rudeness and disinterest in the Australian society. Though they have the apparent tools to cross the language border, they choose not to. A possible reason for their language preference may be that their language skills are not strong enough for them to cross the border confidently.

Some other factors contributing to the choices made above may include the size of the group, temporality in Australia, socioeconomic class (which increases their mobility and links to their initial culture), and how speaking Chinese is perceived. First, the really, really Chinese students Anita refers to have enough members of similar values and cultural practices to mingle exclusively. They do not have a need to move outside this circle or comfort zone. Because of this, they continue to speak Chinese and to form a sub-culture within the school.

It is possible that they see their time here as temporary. The likelihood that they would return to their home country to work is high since their parents are probably there. They have no reason to integrate. They are seen as rejecting the Australian community who would in turn reject them for their attitude. However, to give them the benefit of doubt, they may have felt rejected by the mainstream society upon their arrival because of their inability to speak English fluently. As a result, their strategy may have been to assert their ethnicity. They may thus view the Chinese language as an empowering tool in establishing their ethnic pride, as a way of rebelling against the mainstream students. They accept Anita because of her physical appearance and possibly her personality, because she is friendly and willing to socialise with them despite their exclusive social practices. Anita may have also used her minimalist Chinese skills to mingle with this group.

Hannah’s experience may shed light on why some recently migrated women may find it hard or refuse to integrate into the Australian community. Hannah was educated in English and spoke English as her first language. Despite this, she says:
It was very strange because the Australian accent is so strong. I couldn't catch what they were saying. When we first came, I stayed in a hostel so there were a lot of Australians and some Asians, thank goodness (laugh). The Asians would sit on one side. We all just click, you know, because we're all Asians.

Every time I sat down and listened to the Australians, I didn't know what they were talking about, because their accents were so strong. Their English was so different from the English we knew. My English was Irish English, French English, that sort of English and the Australian English was so different — it was so strange.

They use slang like, "That old chook!" They call their mother "old chook." I say, "Oh, so rude! They call their mother that!" We never ever say that! "My mother is an old chook!" (laugh)

Those were the first few words — "old chook" — I was so shocked but to them, it's nothing. It's just "my mother" but to me, "Goodness! How can they say that about their mother! No respect."

So it was cultural shock and their sense of humour. They're being sarcastic or what? You think they're serious, saying such things, and you don't see the funny side of it, and I didn't think that it was funny, and I didn't know that they were teasing me. That sort of thing. Oh, it was terrible (laugh). (Hannah: 529-553)

The Australian use of English is unique and the unusual expressions are often a cause for misunderstanding, even if no antagonism is meant. The shock that follows may lead many to dissociate themselves from the Australian community due to an apparent clash in cultural values and mores. Hannah applied the more positive response by being determined to integrate so she forced herself to keep mixing with the white Australians. "Please slow down! What do you mean by that? And they will explain to me" (Hannah: 571-572). She was fortunate in that her Australian friends were willing to accommodate her.

The not really Chinese Chinese

Bev, a migrant who speaks with a slight Singaporean accent, describes those who speak English with a broad Australian accent as thus:

They have people within their in-group who have very, very Aussie accents. Sometimes they tend to choose friends who look and sound a certain way. They dress very smartly, yuppyish, and they don't sound foreign.

I remember that I felt it was an exclusive group because they weren't very comfortable with foreigners — Asians — but then I realised that there were Asians in the groups. Then I also realised that they were Asians with very broad Australian accents so maybe they were not seen as being different and therefore not excluded.

Sometimes I do feel excluded by these groups. I think they are being polite but I also think they are being patronising, because they talk to you very nicely but they have no intention of being more than just acquaintances. That suits me fine. I think
they are snobs. It makes me feel pissed off because it seems their value judgments are very shallow.

It makes me think about my ethnicity but more so it makes me think about the differences between long-term Australians who have been in Australia before they were ten, and Asians who still sound fairly different. That is the distinction that they tend to make. So, what is a foreigner, and what is an Australian to them, is how long you have been here and how you sound. (Bev: 3589-3611)

Bev’s perception of the English-speaking Chinese is criss-crossed with issues of socioeconomic class, status, and length of stay in Australia. They are perceived to be elitist, with a superior attitude and ability to slip into the mainstream society invisibly, as her initial inability to identify them as Asian indicates. The critical point is in how language divides the Chinese community here. Some members of the Chinese community feel rejected by a Chinese person who does not speak Chinese, or worse, if s/he speaks with a broad Australian accent. Dorothy, when asked what she thought of the Chinese who speak with an accent, describes them as thus: ‘A lot of them are not as proud of their Chinese descent. They just want to be like the English – Chinese are always Chinese. Even though you speak in the English accent, you are still Chinese” (Dorothy: 551-561).

This perceived preference to be something other than Chinese, divides the Chinese community causing some to feel rejected. Barbara’s view of those who do not speak Chinese helps to explain why some Chinese may reject other Chinese on the basis of their poor Chinese language proficiency:

They behaved in ways that showed they wanted to erase that side of them (the Chinese side) because they wanted too much to be Australian, to behave in that way, to adopt the culture; they would refuse to speak Cantonese or any Chinese dialect. (Barbara: 192-194)

When asked to consider the possibility that the Chinese were non-Chinese speakers, Barbara accused them of choosing not to learn the language despite the language schools set up for such purposes. She holds these views because the operating cultural semantics tells her that a Chinese person has to speak Chinese, and if they do not, it is because they have chosen not to. The act of choosing not to is understood as a rejection of their Chinese ethnicity itself, not just the language, and thus a rejection of Chinese people, including herself. Barbara would in turn reject such non-Chinese-speaking members of the community. This rejection may be blatant or subtle. According to Barbara, Chinese people who do not speak Chinese, but who subscribe to
the same cultural semantics, ought to take up language lessons to identify with members of the Chinese-speaking community, and to gain acceptance. The interesting observation for me during this interview is how Barbara spoke with a really affected accent that may be an attempt to erase her own Chinese heritage.

The English-speaking members of the Chinese community in turn feel rejected by those who speak Chinese. We see how language is a divisive societal factor in Laura’s perception of how she is viewed by Chinese-speaking Chinese:

_The inability to speak Chinese is a disadvantage, in so far as other Chinese people don’t see or accept me as a fellow Chinaman [sic]. People from other races in Asia – Indians, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan – accept me better than the Chinese people who see me as a sell-out because I fit in so well in the mainstream. They seem to have more problems with my being Asian and Western all in one, than I do._ (Laura: 344-350)

Laura is made to feel like an imposter, an inauthentic Chinese. She raises the problem of not belonging to either camp in Australia. She is expected to choose between groups and is accepted or rejected with language proficiency as one of the determining factors:

_In school, it was hard to have a Chinese-Australian identity. It often made me feel that it was an either/or choice or worse, people made decisions and definitions of who you were, for you.

White kids who were friends treated me like them but saw me as different to those other Chinese kids whom they felt “did not try to blend in,” and who tried hard to stay off as a separate culture with language, attitudes, and even where they sat and ate.

In contrast, Chinese kids would not accept me as truly Chinese as I did not speak the language, did not show anti-white attitudes (reverse racism), and would not give up good friendships with white kids._ (Laura: 22-34)

Laura is a typical example of the English-speaking Chinese who feels twice-removed from her Chinese ethnicity due to the language she has acquired.

_The Australian connection: Interactions with the non-Chinese_

This next section deals with the Chinese women’s interaction with non-Chinese Australians. The white Australian perspective towards those who do not speak _proper English_ seems to
vary. Debra, a single mother who was educated in Chinese, and who now still speaks in *broken* English says:

> I can talk to people quite comfortably. And though I didn’t speak English well at that time, I tried my best and people could understand me. Some of them encouraged me. The place where I lived did not have a lot of Asians. My neighbours were all Australians. They were very helpful. (Debra: 465-468)

Her experience appears to vary according to the different contexts she is in and who she is with. Those who know her are accepting of her difference. Hannah’s experience reiterates Debra’s comfort zone with her friends and unease with acquaintances:

> When I first came, I felt that it was harder to break in because you were from a different background. The way you talk is different. We retain our own accent. Negatively, I always feel that it takes time for them to get to know me first before they can accept me. Whereas if I am among Chinese, we are so natural and so easy. We can speak how we like. But with the Aussies, I feel that you have to be more guarded. When I know them better, I can say “aiyoh lah” and they can also copy me. After working many years with them, I started influencing them instead. But at the beginning, I always found that I had to prove myself to them first. (Hannah: 181-191)

Hannah highlights the time needed to build on a relationship of trust, before she feels she is accepted for her linguistic peculiarities. The discomfort is not felt, however, when Hannah is in the company of other Chinese: “*Maybe, it’s their attitude towards me then. Among Chinese, once you meet somebody, I find that I am at ease and can be what I am*” (Hannah: 194-196). Similarly, the white Australian strangers Debra meets are not as open to her difficulties with the English language as her compatriots:

> I have been treated differently once. There was a guy in a shop who thought I couldn’t speak English. I was looking at the bread. He pretended to ask me and he didn’t say hello or anything like that. I kept quiet. (Debra: 830-834)

It would be appropriate to deploy the notion of the negative stereotype of the Chinese who does not speak fluent English to postulate the cultural semantics that was possibly governing this stranger’s attitude towards Debra. “He pretended to ask me” may suggest that the man was suspicious that Debra may be a shoplifter, a typical association with the criminal Asian stereotype. It is interesting that Debra chose to keep silent although she is able to speak
English. Perhaps she was offended by the way he was treating her and the assumptions he was making about her, and decided to play the role. Debra’s response should have been to speak, instead of keeping silent, although silence can be a powerful tool of resistance. Perhaps this was her intention but speaking up would have destroyed the stranger’s preconceived ideas about her as a Chinese woman in Australia.

Debra’s general apprehension could also be similar to Hannah’s in that she may have felt uneasy speaking her broken English in the stranger’s company:

Among the Chinese, I feel that literally they are a part of me. Whereas with the Aussies, I find that we don’t speak the same lingo. I can’t say my old slang with them. But I can laugh. It’s not that bad but when I first came, I felt that. But not any more. I’ve been here for so long, I don’t feel that any more. (Hannah: 198-202)

Here, given time, the misgivings are forgotten and Hannah is able to interact more comfortably with the non-Chinese. Both parties begin to be more accepting of each other as they get to know each other.

On the whole, in the Australian context, proficiency in English is seen as a bridge into the dominant society. Tina shares: “I had no problems because I spoke English. That helped no end. Whereas a lot of kids that came in a little bit later than myself, or with me, did have problems because they could not communicate so easily” (Tina: 52-576). This ability to enter the Australian community through the English language may mean, in some cases, the cutting of links with the Chinese community. Just as Tina perceived rejection by certain members of the Chinese community for speaking English, those who do not speak English would feel rejected by the non-Chinese Australians. Further, she may not be expected to speak English, as we can see: “‘You speak good English for a Chinese person.’ ‘It surprises me how quickly you’ve picked English up’” (Laura: 269-271). Patty describes her mother’s response to such reactions:

“You speak such good English.” When they say that to my mother, she would tell them, “I taught English and I can probably speak English better than you do. You need to go back to school.” She would tell them that, and they can’t wait to get out of the lift. (Patty: 1179-1186)
In either case, the Chinese woman may feel that she belongs to neither side of the fence, and she has no place to call home since she is no longer able to return to her birthplace.

**Ventriloquism and Chameleonism: Shifting one’s sense of belonging**

I borrow from Bhabha’s (1997c) *act of ventriloquism* to capture how many members of the Chinese diaspora negotiate the type of English they speak, according to the contexts they are in. Many retain a certain degree of the Malaysian or Singaporean English dialects, or an *other* accent: “The cultural cringe is so endemic, it’s a shame. I find the Australian drawl a bit over the top. I don’t do it” (Vicky: 209-211). Others have become rather adept at switching between these and standard Australian English in a chameleon-like manner to gain acceptance into their shifting contexts.

*So Aussie-lah*

“*Wah! So fast Joseph sounds so Aussie, ah? How can?*” Yin, a Malaysian friend of mine who had been studying here in Australia for a number of years, commented.

“You know-lah. Must sound like that if you want to work, right? Otherwise cannot understand him, right?”

“Snobby-lah. So snobby. One minute Singaporean, and then suddenly can speak like that one. So scary-lah!”

The phone rang and I went to get it.

“Hi, yes, speaking. Oh yes, I am still interested in it. When can we meet together?” I paused as the person at the other end of the line gave me the details. “Okay, I’ll meet you say at ten on Thursday. I’d love to discuss this further with you. Okay, see you.”

“Who’s that?” Yin asked.

“Remember the job, right? Want to see me, to talk about it more-lah. Thursday morning!” I said excitedly.

“Wow! So good. Okay, I go now. See you, ah?”

“Ya, okay.” (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

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368 Bhabha describes this as the “act of switching between ‘proper English’ and ‘black English.’” See Bhabha (1997c). I also attend here to varieties of English spoken, rather than English versus Chinese, because of the fluidity involved in being able to blend into the community through the use of English. The Chinese language, on the other hand, twice removes the speaker from the mainstream. I also add that the ability to switch from one language to another is something that many diasporic women do naturally. They switch from their mother tongue, if it is not English, or some dialect as their attempt to keep ties with their Chineseness, to English in their everyday interactions at home. With my parents and brothers, I have been noted to switch into the Malaysian-English dialect without even thinking about it.

369 Although Bhabha calls it *ventriloquism*, I feel that *chameleonism* captures the sense more adequately. I retain the reference to ventriloquism to maintain the link with Bhabha’s idea.

370 This autoethnographic narrative uses a Malaysian-Singaporean English dialect, elsewhere referred to as EngMalChin. See Koh (1998). This indigenised English was created as part of the move towards nationalism as it was a language that was neither Western nor Chinese, but a blend of both.
Ventriloquism gives me fluidity in how I rehearse my language usage. My ability to switch from one form of spoken English to the other, as is depicted in the narrative above, gains my acceptance within the Australian-Asian community. Those who choose not to speak in the English dialects within the community are often viewed as traitors, as in Joseph’s case. This is similar to the attitude that the Malaysian Chinese-educated writers had towards the English-educated Chinese, as outlined earlier (Koh 1998). In speaking differently, people like Joseph are seen alongside the English-educated writers, as not quite Chinese, or worse, those who are agents in erasing their Chineseness. Carol recalls a similar attitude towards her sisters when they first returned to Malaysia after schooling in Australia:

After being there for one year, they came back, especially Candy, speaking like an Australian and saying “ta” all the time which was so affected, and I thought to myself, “That is so revolting. I swear I would not get an Australian accent!” I refused to get an Australian accent. (laughter)

And when I first arrived, a lot of people told me, “That is very good. You do not have an accent at all or not even a Chinese one,” and I was so proud of that fact because, in some ways, I didn’t want to stand out as having a Chinese accent, but I just didn’t want to have an Australian one. (Carol: 1400-1408)

Carol highlights the need to belong and how spoken language is used to negotiate this sense of group membership. In refusing to speak like an Australian in Malaysia, she maintains her Malaysian membership by conforming to the majority speech patterns. She manoeuvres her position in Australia by not sounding Chinese. Thus, chameleonism enables her to belong to both parties.

As in my autoethnography, the colloquial Malaysian or Singaporean English is maintained to instil a sense of group membership among members of the diasporic community. Deana speaks of the comfort she enjoys with people who speak and sound like she does:

We supported each other. It was all Chinese. Sonia was the only person who was of another ethnic make-up in our group but the rest of us were all Chinese. We used to get teased. But we knew that in our own group, we were just accepted. We didn’t have to speak well. We could just go into our little Mandarin or our little dialects, and everybody would understand each other. We would be accepted.

If we did it in front of other people, it was different. People would sort of look at you as a little strange. I remember one particular guy, Shaun. He would be forever correcting my English! And it used to annoy the hell out of me. It still does! (laugh) Simple words like “Wednesday.” In Singapore we used to call it “Wen-nes-day.”
He would say, “It’s not ‘Wen-nes-day.’ It’s ‘Wensday!’” Oh, it used to get up our nose!

But I don’t get that with my Chinese friends because all of us speak like that!
(laugh) So it was comfortable. You didn’t have to try. You weren’t on show.
(Deana: 388-416)

Deana’s struggle to understand the Australian accent later urged her to pick up the Australian slang. Her friends within the diasporic group, who had been in Australia for a longer period, and who had already been accepted, assisted her. They had now become ventriloquists or chameleons. They had begun speaking in somebody else’s voice when the occasion required it. She is now adept at speaking in both communities with ease. She juggles her language to fit into her different worlds. We see this negotiation in Bhabha’s work on ebonics:

We all have our individual way of speaking. It doesn’t hurt anybody most of the time. You can do what you want on [sic] your personal time, but when you’re getting paid to do something, you want to speak properly. ... The slang comes in when you talk with your friends. (Bhabha 1997c)

The diasporic Chinese speak in dialects or standard Australian English according to the context that they are in:

Say at home, speaking to my husband or with friends, especially with Chinese friends, you tend to mix English and Chinese, or you just have your own colloquial English. If you speak in just pure English, sometimes it is hard to really convey the real message. (Clara: 210-214)

This swap between the Malaysian dialect and standard Australian English is something often practised among the diasporic Chinese to give its members a sense of belonging. As Bhabha states:

Keith’s ventriloquism, the act of switching between “proper” English and “black English,” redraws the public/private distinction through the medium of language, making both audible and visible the ways in which minorities are positioned as, at once, insiders and outsiders within the society of their belonging. ... This much more communal “privacy” – lived out, ironically, in public – is a way of establishing a kind of cultural intimacy, even indigeneity. (Bhabha 1997c)

The critical point about this sense of belonging, as highlighted by the act of ventriloquism, is that the diasporic Chinese chooses to belong to multiple groups, according to their various
contexts. As depicted in the autoethnographic narrative, *So Aussie-lah*, the switch allows the speaker to belong to both the Chinese and Australian communities. And as Bhabha asserts above, the diasporic women can be described as insiders and outsiders concurrently. The skill of switching enables them to belong to the selected group at their own discretion.

Thus, within the non-Chinese community, the diasporic Chinese may *put on* an Australian accent to signal a sense of belonging to the dominant group. In so doing, they employ the same strategy as the immigrant Chinese in Malaya, who asserted their Malayan identity as a claim to indigeneity and loyalty to Malaya as their adopted home (Koh 1998). However, the difference with the diasporic Chinese would be that they have not broken their ties with their other *homes*. They are chameleons who adapt accordingly, to belong everywhere.

In a sense there is no place for them to call home (Anzaldúa 1987a), yet everywhere is home to them, as we can see in Carol’s struggle to maintain her original accent on her trips back to Malaysia while she was studying in Australia. Concerned with “*how much of [her] Chineseness [she had] lost*” (Carol: 1503), she negotiates this *loss* by finding people like her, who have a similar dilemma.\(^{371}\)

> *The majority of them were transplanted people like me. We all had friends who were Australians but just generally we wanted to have some friends like us, in the same situation.*

> *Because I was afraid that I would appear as too different or that they would perceive me as different, I tried very hard not to be Australian or to let any Australianness creep into my dealings with them. So I tried not to speak with an Australian accent or use Australian lingo but then you realise how much has permeated into your everyday life in speech, just the way you do things, like “going to the loo” and putting “but” at the end of every sentence.*

> *I was a little bit disappointed because when I was in Australia for the two years, I was conscious that I was different and I was conscious that I didn’t really fit in completely although I was getting there. When I went home, I thought, “Okay, now I can relax and be back in the bosom of my family and with my friends.”* 

> *But when I went back with these expectations that things were just going to click for me and realised I was different to them, it was like, “Oh, I don’t fit in either*.

\(^{371}\) There are other groups not represented in the narrative, such as the Chinese-Australians (born in Australia), who may not be able to switch depending on how much contact they have with the diasporic community. The diasporic Chinese who can switch speak to the Chinese-Australians in standard Australian English. There are also Chinese-Australians, born and bred in Australia, who sound very unAustralian perhaps due to the infrequency of interaction with mainstream Australia and to their strong language links with their parents. Interestingly, I have also met Australians who mingle so regularly with Asians that they have picked up the Asian accent and speech peculiarities. These Australians likewise use the *lahs* and *aiyokhs*, typical Malaysian or Singaporean expressions copied, to gain acceptance into these Asian circles.
place. I am neither here nor there. Oh no. There is no one who is really quite like you except people who are in the same situation. People who have gone overseas and then come back."

And to this day it feels a little bit like that when I go back. I know that I only half fit in. (Carol: 1409-1412; 1593-1613)

Quite often, as Carol’s story tells us, despite the ability to switch, one does not belong any where any more. There is a sense that one has become only a partial member at every base, forever. It is acceptance of this ambivalence that enables one to move into the liminal space without feeling lost. In so doing, one becomes more expert at ventriloquism. Vanessa, in switching effectively, is able to move fluidly among the different groups she encounters in Australia:

_I always had the feeling that the “Asians” liked me because I was Asian myself, and that the white/Anglo Australian pupils liked me because I wasn’t a very Asian Asian, by which I mean that I didn’t spend my days speaking Cantonese or hanging out in an Asian group._ (Vanessa: 84-92)

Alex uses her ability to switch to emphasise the commonalities she shares with other members in the community. While not erasing her ethnicity, Alex uses language, accent, phrases, and attitudes to establish that which is common among them (Alex: 4380-4384). Thus, when in Rome, do as the Romans do, and speak as the Romans speak: "Sometimes especially when you are overseas, you say, ‘Ah, how are you-lah?’" (Alex: 4439-4441), and in Australia, you say, “G’day!”

I’m not one of them

In this section, I deal with issues that deter the diasporic women from speaking non-standard Australian English. I examine possible reasons that encourage us to _speak like an Aussie_. These include factors associated with language and ascribed marginality, the stigma of illiteracy, and barriers to their educational and employment goals.

Ascribed marginality

Certain members may opt not to speak in their Malaysian or Singaporean dialect to avoid the negative stereotype that portrays non-English speaking Chinese as coming from the working-class, academic failures, and having criminal tendencies (Bhabha 1997c). In short, they do not want to be perceived as marginal, even if the marginality consists of positive images. These
English dialects would be similar to Black talk, for example, which is identified as the minority’s speech act and this identification gives a sense of peripherality (Bhabha 1997c). We see this in Julia’s comment:

_ I talk to them as soon as possible so that they can hear how I sound (and, yes, I think it’s stupid that people judge on accents but I find myself trying to reassure others that I do not have an accent). I try not to let people get away with generalisations though this is often socially difficult to do. I don’t particularly put on an Australian accent – I just know that I have a particularly strong one so if I talk to anyone, it becomes quite obvious._ (Julia: 376-383; 593-594)

Thus, while a Chinese in Malaysia or Singapore may have once found it unthinkable to acknowledge that his/her mother tongue is English (Koh 1998), as doing so would deny his/her Chineseness, in Australia the opposite is true, especially for those who are English-educated, so that they are ascribed membership in the dominant society. Deana, for example, sees speech as a marker of difference:

_ When I arrived in Perth, my eyes were opened. Different people with different cultures. I noticed I was different. I talked, thought, acted differently from those around me at school. I was teased about how I spoke, and so I was determined to speak better but I was also proud. I did not want to lose who I was. As much as I wanted to be “Australian” so I would not be teased, I was proud to be Chinese. Once I dropped the “lah” in my speech, my funny pronunciation, and picked up the Aussie slang, I was okay._ (Deana: 14-21; 33-34)

As Deana struggles to improve her English while retaining aspects of her Chineseness, Alex attempts to resist being defined as an other (Alex: 3466-3467) by stating a different country of origin when asked “Where are you from?” However, she states: “_But I know that my accent will betray it_” (Alex: 3476). Alex struts the fine line between speaking her own tongue, with her own accent, and her own idiosyncratic habits, against the expected Australianised English. This forms “part of a wider public ambivalence through which strategies of inclusion and exclusion, opportunity and discrimination, are set in motion” (Bhabha 1997c).

_ Stigma of illiteracy_

The use of the English dialects and the non-standard Australian accent positions diasporic women in an ambivalent position and risks them being stereotyped as those who are illiterate. The sense of being perceived as illiterate forms part of Faith’s struggle in Australia. Having migrated to Australia as an older woman with three teenage children, Faith who is now in her
60s says: “At first I felt like an alien, not welcomed here. I felt worse than a third class citizen because I was treated like an illiterate. Australians then thought every Asian was uneducated” (Faith: 187-191). In her brief responses to the questions asked, she repeatedly raised the issue of the stigma of illiteracy. She states that it is not an issue she would face in Malaysia and it is possible that this affects her self-esteem. She says:

Before I came to Australia, I was quite comfortable as a Chinese. I was never ashamed and never regretted I am a Chinese. But since coming to Australia, I realise that to be a Chinese, particularly a middle-aged Chinese woman, faces a lot of disadvantages living in Australia. First, the Australian always thinks that I’m illiterate. They seem to think that I’m rather dull and dumb. I feel offended that they think I came from a very poor and illiterate background. (Faith: 313-320; 346-348)

For Faith, not being able to speak English with an Australianised accent was to be identified as not having the necessary skills and competence for the workforce. This appears to have affected her more severely than otherwise due to her highly educated status, previously successful career in Malaysia, and period of unemployment in Australia. Further, Faith’s description of herself may help us to understand why she was so incensed by the classification:

I don’t think I fit the Chinese stereotype because I was born in Malaysia, a cosmopolitan country. Besides I was educated in an English school where the medium of instruction is English. The first language I could read and write was English. I am a Chinese by birth and upbringing by Chinese educated parents. I’m not a perfect Chinese because I had been influenced by Western culture from my education. (Faith: 334-342)

Perhaps the insinuation of being illiterate would not have offended her had she been truly uneducated and ignorant. The stigma would have been further reinforced by her inability to gain substantial work in her area of expertise. More importantly, it is the cultural semantics of the superiority of a Western education and the English language highlighted in Faith’s words (cosmopolitan, English school, first language … English, Western culture) that apportions such power to the stigma of illiteracy.

Like Faith, Carol’s mother, who is also in her 60s, faces similar insecurities due to her language deficiency: “She gets intimidated very easily. She feels inferior often because she is not as highly educated as everybody else in the family and she feels that her English is not good enough” (Carol: 740-742). Susie, who is in her 50s, also stresses the importance of “speaking
competent English to prove that I am not ignorant or badly dressed” (Susie: 379-380). To understand the impact of this stigma on Susie, Faith and Carol’s mother, it is useful to cross over to Hannah’s story about her aunt. Hannah, in her 50s, also migrated as an adult:

My aunity was illiterate. At that time, they looked down on people who are not educated. She was the daughter of a very rich rice merchant. She didn’t want to do housework so because of that, nobody liked her. She was also not educated. So they always spoke English in front of her. I can still remember that. She was never accepted by the family, by everyone. She couldn’t read and write at all. She never had any say. Even I tell her what to do (laugh). It was like that. She didn’t have any say. She had no status, poor thing. (Hannah: 420-421; 451; 455-458; 501-503; 523-525)

Hannah’s aunt’s life reveals the importance of being perceived as literate and educated in the Chinese culture where education is prized. Despite the aunt’s socioeconomic class, she was never accorded any status or position in her household. Even Hannah, as a young child, had a higher rank than the aunt who was bullied and ridiculed instead. Due to her language lack, Hannah’s aunt was disempowered.

This stigma of illiteracy is not just something experienced by older Chinese women who migrate to Australia. Clara, in her late 20s, also feels marginalised by her language skills.

I felt I had to struggle more to prove myself, that I am just as good or I can speak just as well or that I have learnt English before and it is my first language so I am not like an English-as-second-language kind of person. Just to prove that my English is just as good. I suppose if I said that I didn’t know English then I would feel more inferior. (Clara: 171-183; 192-193)

Clara feels that English is a power tool in Australia because it is an English-speaking country. “So if you know English and if you know it just as well as they do, that means you can function just as well” (Clara: 198-199). When asked if she has done anything to improve her English, she says that she is happy with it just the way it is, except for her self-perception and confidence because of the assumptions made about her language proficiency based on her ethnic make-up.

Shelly negotiates the assumption that all migrants are not proficient in English in this manner:
People are STILL sometimes very tentative around me and speak very slowly (or loudly which is worse) when initially talking with me. I then “put them at ease” by speaking idiomatic Australian English with an Australian(ish) accent. Then they say, “Oh! You were born here!” (I have given up trying to correct them). (Shelly: 118-124)

The severity of the stigma is best summed up in Anita’s attitude towards being perceived as illiterate in the English language. During the interviews, Anita had little to complain about Australia except for this one aspect which she found offensive:

When people ask me where I’m from and if I say Malaysia, and if they ask me, “Do they speak English over there?” I find that offensive, quite insulting because Malaysians speak English very fluently, and in a very capable sort of way. (Anita: 3917-3922)

Carol, when faced with people who assumed that she could not speak English due to her ethnic make-up says: “Oh gee. What stupid people. (Laughter) A bit offended, I think” (Carol: 91). Both Anita and Carol here have inverted the stigma by imputing the ignorance to those who make such ethnicised assumptions about language.

Goal barriers
The stereotype of the illiterate Chinese, heavily exploited in Australia during the White Australia Dictation Test regime, is something that could pose problems in the educational environment. In Singapore and in Australia, non-standard English is perceived by certain Chinese women as a barrier to one’s educational pursuit. “It could be damaging in this sense that if you use a lot of Singlish, and assume that that’s correct English, then educationally life is harder for you” (Bev: 3670-3672). Students were also perceived by Deana to be dismissed from particular university courses due to poor proficiency in English:

In my second year, I had two friends leave. One was Vietnamese and one was Chinese. They just got kicked out. Simple as that. Why? Because one couldn’t speak very good English and the other one wasn’t a very confident young lady. I thought, “None of the Europeans get thrown out as much as us Asians.” We had to struggle so hard, so, so hard. (Deana: 909-921)

Whether those students were actually kicked out for the reasons perceived by Deana is hard to gauge, but the significance is in how she rationalised it. She saw the cultural semantics of an ethnicised language in operation. This was the incentive for her to work hard so as not to get
expelled from the course. It is also interesting to note that poor language skills are seen to be on par with being awkward or lacking in confidence.

Low English proficiency is also considered to be a barrier in attaining work (Bhabha 1997c), which is possibly another reason why members of the diasporic community are keen to shed their accents. Barbara, who had tasted the bile of unemployment, made this comment:

*If you do not speak like an Australian or have that accent or speak like one of them, then you may not get the job. You may not get the promotion because they want someone who is an Australian, can speak like one, and behave socially as one. Naturally they would pick someone of that calibre.* (Barbara: 543-547)

It is interesting that the offer of a job, its security, and promotional prospects are reduced to one’s accent and English proficiency. Bhabha’s thoughts on the vernacular are useful to understand this phenomenon:

*It is the ambivalent and antagonistic ways in which the vernacular comes to be socially valued within the ideological structure of mainstream culture that constitutes a major class – and race – contradiction. … “[It is] understood yet not understood. …Colourfully comprehensible … yet deemed so utterly incapable of effective communication when it comes to finding a job.”* (Bhabha 1997c)

Perhaps it is the lingering effects of the Dictation Test days that produce such conclusions from members of the diasporic community. At the rational level, most people would admit that qualifications and experience would have a higher priority than accent, although language proficiency could become a critical factor depending on the nature of the job. In short, the assumption is that if there were two people short-listed for the position, one reason to be disqualified is one’s language skills, in Barbara’s opinion.

In Kelly’s story, it could have cost her her job as an English teacher if she had not been aware of the cultural semantics at work:

*Some of my students in detention complained to their mums that they didn’t complete their homework because they couldn’t understand me. At the meeting with the mums, it became evident to me that I was falling prey to the illiterate Chinese stereotype. I asked the two mums after chatting for a while, “Can you understand me now?” The realisation that came upon them confirmed to me that they too had*
For the mothers, the realisation that their sons had been lying to cover up their own laziness probably came when they recognised that they could understand Kelly, who only had a slight non-Australian accent. The crucial point was when Kelly confronted them with the question: “Can you understand me now?” (Kelly: 637) Perhaps what is more sinister is the arrogance felt by the students that a Chinese woman was teaching them their mother tongue. Sherry, for example, had a student snap at her for correcting her written work: “Once, when I corrected an Aussie student’s grammar and spelling in her essay, she was quite resentful and sarcastically asked whether I thought I was her English teacher” (Sherry: 208-212). It is possible that if Sherry were Caucasian that the student would not have felt the resentment.

From another perspective, the mothers probably accepted their sons’ excuses as true since it was uncommon for a Chinese to have the linguistic competence to teach English, let alone sound intelligible. Had Kelly not acquired a somewhat neutral accent,372 she would have been “about to leave for ‘foreign’ where, as a migrant belonging to a minority culture, her own ideeolc will, no doubt, be open to all kinds of symbolic readings and status responses” (Bhabha 1997c).

**Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the ethnicisation of language and how this poses problems to the diasporic Chinese in their negotiations of who they are as Chinese women living in Australia. Critical to the de-ethnicisation of the language process is the awareness that both Chinese and non-Chinese members of the community need to develop about language and ethnicity. The mythical qualities that assume that language is coincident with ethnicity need to be exposed. Cheng and Kuo (2000), for example, find that second-generation Chinese-Americans who speak Chinese as a family need not necessarily have a clear ethnic identity formation. Their ethnic identity is found to be in a state of flux instead.

Strategies for coping with such pervasive attitudes that essentialise Chineseness will assist in our negotiations of Chineseness. Anita’s struggle was enlightened through the reading of a

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372 Her accent is not described as fully Australianised or ockerised. It has often been described as neutral and this would reflect her liminal identity – not quite Australian nor Malaysian, something neutral.
short story, *Beyond limbo* by Kitty Vivekananda, that I presented to her at the end of our interviews. She says:

I’ve come up with the idea that I can be both at the same time. Reading the story helped a lot. I could see the person’s confusion. I’ve experienced the same thing where I have walked into a Chinese restaurant to have dim sum and they’ll speak to me in Cantonese. I don’t really understand it. I feel frustrated that I can’t speak it but I feel irritated by them, that they don’t have that tolerance. They just expect that, because I look a certain way, I should really speak Chinese too. (Anita: 4106-4110; 4126-4128)\(^{373}\)

Anita’s strategy for coping with this is neither to meet their expectations nor to feel compelled to do so. If she is in the company of others who can speak the appropriate dialect, she leaves the task to them. Rather than to feel guilty, she says: “It’s not my fault that I can’t. I can speak Hokkien but I can’t speak Cantonese” (Anita: 4134-4136). She settles with not being fluent in all Chinese dialects and isolates proficiency in Chinese from her ethnicity.

Alex, like Anita, also gained from the short story and says that it helped her to accept that she cannot “completely belong unproblematically” (Alex: 4584)) to a particular place due to her physical representation and speech. She says: “I feel most at home with people who have shared this experience of ambivalence, and know what it is like to be negatively stereotyped from appearance and speech” (Alex: 4586-4588). Bev and Deana were also able to commiserate with the character’s frustration with being judged linguistically according to her ethnic appearance. Deana states:

> People judge us by our looks our colour and automatically presumed we would be or act a certain way. It does not allow for variation or differences. So what if I cannot speak my own dialect or can’t use a chopstick well. It’s no one else’s business but mine. I am a person and should be treated with no prejudices.  
> (Deanna: 1818-1822)

Georgie similarly found her ethnic negotiations tricky in rural Australia where there were fewer Chinese. She says:

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\(^{373}\) I recently experienced a similar snub by a restaurant proprietor in Chinatown for not being able to read the Chinese menu, and for not having the vocabulary to order in fluent Cantonese. In sensing his arrogance, I completely abandoned speaking in broken Cantonese and used English, just to defy his arrogance. I felt he should have been more accommodating since this was Australia, not Hong Kong! Further, he would have gladly explained the menu had I been a white Australian.
As a Chinese living in Australia, one can suffer from "reverse racism" too especially if you can't speak Chinese when you have a Chinese face. The Chinese community, I have found, exerts its own subtle pressure and expectations of what being a Chinese is upon you. It was a difficult balance to achieve in some ways - an integration of both cultures in that particular country town. (Georgie: 1173-1176; 1182-1183)

The use of the short story text with Anita, Alex, Bev, Deanna, and Georgie was a surprisingly effective tool. Such literature legitimised the diasporic women's experiences. It also benefits members of the non-diasporic community and brings understanding, laying to rest myths. It acts to disempowers essentialist notions of ethnicity and language.

Further, it is critical that members of the Chinese community do not assume or expect all Chinese to speak Chinese in that monolithic manner. Some Chinese may speak a minority dialect and not the more common dialects like Cantonese, Mandarin, or Hokkien. Some Chinese may not speak any of the Chinese dialects at all. This need not necessarily be a result of their own decision but their parents' and for a host of other reasons that may not have been within their control or choice.

Finally, it is important that the educational system addresses notions of an ethnicised language so that incidents such as the following can be avoided in future:

Every so often for a few weeks I would be sent off to an ESL class with two other girls from my class. It was assumed that I didn't speak much English either. I was always rather bemused by my presence in that class, and the ESL teacher must have been, too, because she eventually told me that I didn't have to come back. (Susie: 142-151)

When I was enrolled, the principal took me and my parents to see my teacher and Amy was brought out, as well, being the only other Chinese person in the class. Amy was to help me settle into the school, and I spent a couple of weeks hanging around her and her friends. It was very kind and all, but they didn't speak much English and I didn't speak much Cantonese; I eventually came to spend most of my time with the other Australian/English-speaking pupils. (Susie: 155-167)
Chapter 8

Educated elite

Confucius, the first private teacher in China, devoted his life to education as a political tool for social transformation and improvement (Tu 1998a). His emphasis on education has no doubt been well entrenched in the Chinese value system, and hence in this chapter, I focus on the implications of education in the lives of the diasporic women in Australia. I posit that class intersects with education to impact on the Chinese woman’s life significantly but explore other critical striations. I set up this chapter’s interrogation through this scenario in Rita’s life:

Even standing, there was tension that held her body rigid. She looked small, vulnerable and out of place. Her clothes were wrong. Her hair was black, tinged with yellow. She was too young to be a student’s mother, too dressed-up to be a canteen worker. What was she doing here, standing stock-still at the university gate?

She would have liked to ask directions from some of the students whom she passed, but didn’t dare. In the end it was a porter (“Someone my own kind,” she thought ruefully) who pointed her up the stairs towards the landing she wanted.

As she climbed, students passed her, calling to each other in confident voices. They seemed to her unexpectedly classless and conformist. She’d been expecting posh accents and a sort of ABC-announcer poise. She tried to listen to what they were saying. At first, nothing seemed to make sense; it was like the radio when the needle sweeps past foreign stations.

She stopped outside a battered door, bending to peer at the name on it: Dr Bryant. She swallowed nervously, then knocked. A muffled voice called.

The noise had woken a still-fuddled Frank. The door burst open. A young woman he’d never seen before charged into the room. Frank stared at her in some confusion. She looked and sounded like a superior immigrant learning to speak Australian English. What was she doing in his study? “Now,” he said, “you are … What is your name?”

Understanding at last, she gave a brisk nod. “First name, ah?”

“Well, that would at least constitute some sort of start, wouldn’t it?”

Slanty-eyed, she gave him a look of suspicion. But secretly she felt the stirrings of an excited glee. At last he’d sounded like a real professor: this was what she’d expected to hear. She said, “Rita.”

“Do you know Yeats? The poet.”

She shook her head. A dangerous abyss threatened to separate the cultures. Quickly he went on, “Well, there’s a Yeats’ poem called The Wild Swans at Coole.”

“Oh, you means, ah, Wild Swans by Jung Chang?” she asked, peering at him as her glasses slid down her bridge. (adapted from Chepstow 1983, pp. 6-8, 12)
The scenario above, an adapted extract from *Educating Rita*, suggests a portrayal of Rita with a deliberately stereotypical Chinese background, with the purpose to imply a sameness and seamlessness between cultures in the initial reading of the text. However, Rita stands out as her differences become obvious to us. The original character felt set apart due to her class and age. The adapted Rita, assuming a working-class background too, is multiply-removed from the context she braves herself to enter due to her ethnicity, age, dress sense, and accent. All the other students, on the other hand, had seemed so normal to her, so “unexpectedly classless and conformist” (Chepstow 1983, p. 7). To escape her marginality, the adapted Rita seeks education, just as the original Rita sought it to depart from her working-class life. In so doing, both characters begin to inhabit a realm of “nebulous class differences” (Probyn 2001, p. 26), as their education places them into positions that may contradict other realms that their life’s experiences may find them in. The liminality that women experience as a result of the education and class web informs the way I assess how “aspirations are curtailed or extended by cultural and economic capital” (Probyn 2001, p. 26). As Probyn (2001) has argued, we are too rapt in the abstractions of class, and need ethnographies of how classness is lost and acquired in the schizophrenic class experiences encountered.

One cannot speak of notions of class without including education, and of education without considering classness. In the Versace court battle to clear the family from alleged criminal links in Frank Monte’s memoirs about the Versaces, Donatella, the sister of the late fashion mogul, Gianni Versace, was accused of making an obscene hand gesture at Monte. Despite her fame and wealth, Donatella ascribed to education as her mark of classness and culture: “I am a very well-educated lady and I wouldn’t do that to anybody – I see your finger, can you put it down” (Videnieks 2001, p. 3). Class and education are matted, and I investigate this interrelationship by focusing on how education influences the diasporic Chinese woman’s entry into another class of her own, a class that has the additional striations of ethnicity and gender.

It is appropriate here to comment on the significance of education to the Chinese community. Historically, education has always been valued by the Chinese. Aristocratic families in China used to hire tutors to educate their sons before Confucius established the art of teaching as a vocation (Tu 1998a). Learning, according to Confucius, was for the sake of the self as the path to self-realisation, and was to be exercised in the political arena. Confucius felt that his claim to fame was his love of learning, which “broadened his knowledge, deepened his self-awareness
and also defined who he was” (Tu 1998a, pp. 11-12). Much emphasis was thus placed on education for self-development, and for the good of society and the political realm. The cultured person from the educational socialisation process, according to Tu (1998a), was thus one who had succeeded in subliming his/her own interests for the public’s.

It is no wonder why education retains its significance in the Chinese diasporic community today. It would be difficult to discard something that is so well entrenched in the psyche of a people, especially when it is something recognised for its positive impact on society. Confucian disciple, Mencius, attempted to separate scholar-officials from agriculture, industry, and commerce, and education from socioeconomic class influences so that the actualised person is not “corrupted by wealth, subdued by power, or affected by poverty” (Tu 1998a, p. 15). Despite this, a complex interweaving of these factors continue to exist today. The booming economy in Malaya during the British rule, for example, played a significant role in contributing to the advances in and opportunities for education. It can be said that a country’s educational history shows that the economy impacts significantly on its educational structure (Wong and Gwee 1972).

The cultural semantics that promote education as women’s emancipator is thus examined in this chapter by dealing with the significance of education, the life trajectories it offers, and how these intersect with socioeconomic class. Probyn has argued that class is the “real cause of difference” in culture (2001, p. 26). By culture, I presume she refers to the dominant culture. I thus examine if this is true for the diasporic culture, and consider the impact of socioeconomic class on the Chinese woman’s educational journey by questioning if other factors too interact with class to influence the woman’s educational outcome.

The getting of wisdom and class

In the following sections, I consider both the past and present educational experiences that have impacted on the lives of the diasporic Chinese women. For those who have been educated in both systems, it is important to trace in montage sequences how some diasporic women’s lives

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375 Malaya is the pre-independent name for Malaysia and Singapore.
376 The economic boom meant that the focus of education was on preparing the students for employment whilst the previous vernacular education was based on classical education for the Chinese and religious education for the Malays.
377 For a useful historical outline of the political, racial, and religious background to Malaysia and Singapore, see Wong and Ee (1971).
are criss-crossed by their previous education in Malaysia or Singapore, and Australia. Others have been educated in only one system. Let me add, too, that although many of the following sections seem to be segmented, many of the issues raised intersect each other as the historical, political (such as the New Economic Policy in Malaysia that saw an influx of Chinese families emigrating overseas for educational purposes), geographical location (education in Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia), religious ethos, values, ethnicity, gender, language medium (Chinese and English), and other factors intersect in confounded ways in one’s journey towards wisdom and class.

The educational eclipse
In the beginning, there was no formal education in Malaysia and Singapore. Strictly speaking, there were limited educational opportunities, and many Chinese women in the older generations were not given the privilege of an education. Alex, who was born in the late 1960s, says: “My grandfather sent his daughters off to university, which was very rare for men to do in those times” (Alex: 555-557). We also see this in Hannah’s story of her aunt. The earliest Chinese schools recorded were in Malacca in 1815, set up by missionaries (Wong and Ee 1971) and in Singapore in 1829, which were Cantonese and Hokkien dialect schools (Wong and Gwee 1972). The cultural semantics governing the attitude towards the education of women was similar to that in medieval England: “Even when schools spread, they were not for girls. ... Education was rare: why waste it on girls?” (“Special Article: A World Fit for Women” 1999). Most parents did not invest in educating their daughters since the girl marries out to benefit the husband’s family. Marriage was the traditional route to financial security and social status, if one was fortunate enough: “My parents ran a strictly Chinese household where the male siblings were expected to work and work hard, whereas my sisters and I were expected to be familiar with home duties in preparation for marriage” (Susie: 67-71). Economic independence, sexual expression, and motherhood could only be achieved with respectability and femininity within marriage, just as it was in the latter period between the world wars in England and Wales (Oram 1999).

My mother was a very difficult person because she was a woman who wanted to do men’s activities. She always wanted to go into tertiary education. My grandfather did not consent to it because it would be, of course, a waste on a woman. Why would she want to study? She should marry his best friend’s son, who was in the

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378 On the New Economic Policy, see footnote 412 on p. 306.
379 Also see Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 278.
380 Note the possible translation of values to the Malayan colony by the British.
same car profession, and also a millionaire, and then you get the business and social connections. But, no, that was not for her, she wanted to go and be a teacher. (Patty: 85-98)

Patty’s mother fought to get her teacher training, which she did gain due to her family’s affluent position. However, for the majority, the only options were marriage or domestic labour, and the family’s socioeconomic status often impacted the women’s future variously (Tu 1998b): 381

My uncle is English-educated. My aunty is not at all. Can’t read and write at all. Never went to school. Rich man’s daughter, you don’t have to go to school at that time. You just stay at home and be looked after. And they just marry you to somebody rich or somebody who can earn money. (Hannah: 499-506)

Hannah, who was born in the 1940s, speaks of her aunt, whose option was marriage due to her family’s wealthy position. Through marriage, a woman could find financial security and status. However, her arranged marriage can be seen as her being sold as chattel, presumably in exchange for the Chinese guanxi or business connections. This practice is not uncommon in other cultures. In the 1500s the “English gentry of the day readily affianced their under-age daughters [as] part of a property merger” (“Special Article: A World Fit for Women” 1999). The commodification of women continued in England till the 1900s but this practice is common even among our contemporary social elite except that the arrangements may be more subtle or even agreeable to parties involved due to maintaining their status quo. For some, marriage brings bliss. However, due to Hannah’s aunt’s illiterate background, her marriage did not bring the fulfilment that it promised: 382

It wasn’t a love marriage. It was an arranged marriage. He had never seen her before but she was the daughter of a very rich rice merchant. They had a big palace in Malacca at that time. My aunty came from that sort of background but no education. My grandparents were not rich people so when this merchant heard about my uncle and offered their daughter, my grandparents dared not refuse. People so rich, you know, how can you say no. So they dared not refuse, but my uncle never loved my aunty. (Hannah: 426-440)

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381 Most women were involved in working in subsistence agriculture, childcare, and home duties in the precolonial days. See Noor (1999).
382 See also the section “Stigma of illiteracy” in Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 278.
Despite her family's wealth, once married she became her husband's property. Unfortunately for her, education was more highly valued than wealth at that time (Hannah: 420-421). Unwelcomed by her in-laws, she was thus reduced to a servant's status and further ostracised when she failed to meet the family's expectations in the chores assigned:

*Very sad for my aunty because she wasn't popular. My grandmother worked very hard - reared pigs, grew vegetables at that time and my aunty never helped. Didn't want to help and then when it was her turn to cook, she would go home. Because she didn't like to do all these things, she'd go home. Very selfish so because of that, nobody liked her. She was also not educated. (Hannah: 446-456)*

The aunt's lack of education placed her in a very precarious position where she was forced to straddle between her previous upper-class pampering and her new *servant* status. Her inability to fit into the new role was understood as lack of interest and selfishness. It is uncertain if the aunt's failure to participate in the family household activities was due to her elitist snobbery or genuine inability to carry out the domestic duties. Regardless, the aunt's marriage entered her into a class limbo and much marital unhappiness.\(^3^8\) Despite that, Hannah's aunt was regarded as being more privileged than those from a poor socioeconomic background. Women in poverty did not have the hope that marriage offered Hannah's aunt as, apart from exceptions, they would have had only men of similar socioeconomic status to choose from, and hence a life of labour and domesticity.

*The educational escape*

Education later provided an alternative to marriage and a means of escape if the marriage was an unhappy one. Hence, some migrant women were encouraged to set high goals in their educational and professional pursuits, instead of marriage. "*My grandparents always encouraged me to get a good education so that I would be independent and would not have to depend in particular on a husband in case the marriage went bad*" (Iris: 63-65). Financial independence was nurtured so that these women did not have to be dependent on their husbands for their security. We thus see a shift from the traditional pressure from parents for their daughters to marry and to marry well, to education, if a good profession can be secured through

\(^{38}\) See the section "Sexual," in Chapter 6 "Perfect Partners," p. 53.
their education. If marriage was still an option, then education raised the women’s social status to hitch better educated husbands.\textsuperscript{384}

In the next sections, I outline the types of education available to women in Malaya. Education for most Chinese women in the period from 1786 to 1941 came through the vernacular or Chinese schools set up by different Chinese associations, and English or mission schools set up by the British government in urban areas, where most immigrant groups congregated (Wong and Gwee 1972).\textsuperscript{385}

\textbf{Chinese education}

The availability of Chinese education in Malaya gave women the opportunity to be educated. However, Chinese education, as it was then and into the post-war years, was seen as having limited benefits, as they imparted a classical education that was deemed irrelevant to the Malayan context (Wong and Gwee 1972).\textsuperscript{386} Many books were imported from China along with the teachers, and the curriculum focused on strengthening ties with China as the motherland (Wong and Ee 1971). Starting her primary education in the post-war years, Faith says: \textit{“We would only be housewives if we continued to study in the Chinese school. Graduates from Chinese schools had very little opportunity for a professional career unless they went overseas”} (Faith: 514-516).

A Chinese education was perceived as inferior to an English education due firstly, to the poorer quality of instruction, as most teachers were not necessarily professionally qualified,\textsuperscript{387} and secondly, to the limited opportunities that a Chinese education offered.\textsuperscript{388} Those who attended the Chinese schools had to go overseas to enter university. However, often many could not

\textsuperscript{384} Many girls enrolled at Scotland’s St Andrew’s University on Prince William’s decision to study there, with the hope of becoming the future queen of England. Also see \url{http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/scotland/newsid_960000/960987.stm}.

\textsuperscript{385} Some Chinese girls may have attended Malay vernacular schools depending on where they lived. Rural Chinese were known to attend such schools as they provided free education. However, these schools emphasised the Quran and the Islam religion. See Wong and Gwee (1972).

\textsuperscript{386} The classical education was based on the Confucian classics that formed the core curriculum in the schools in China, as established since Confucianism became recognised as the official imperial ideology and state cult. See Tu (1998a). These schools in Malaya were initially unmindred by the British Government but following the Chinese Revolution of 1911, they came under the government’s jurisdiction which meant that the quality of the teaching improved. The Chinese vernacular schools then also began to follow China’s post-revolution educational system. See Wong and Gwee (1972).

\textsuperscript{387} Suitable teachers were lacking in the Chinese vernacular schools, and most had to be recruited from China. They thus did not have a local relevance. See Wong and Gwee (1972).

\textsuperscript{388} So severe was the disadvantage of Chinese education that many Nanyang graduates did not disclose their Nanyang degrees when applying for work, and produced instead their school certificates (Lee, K. Y. 2000).
afford this and the number of Chinese universities was also limited. According to Wong and Gwee (1972), the foundational college for a university, Raffles College, opened in 1929, was in the English medium, as were subsequent universities.³⁸⁹ Nanyang University established in the Chinese medium only came into effect in 1956 (Lee, K. Y. 2000). Further, plans to study in China became complicated and impossible with communist rule. Thus, a girl who was English-educated had more educational and career scope than one who studied in the Chinese medium:³⁹⁰ "My mum took the advice of her friend that girls should study in English schools for a better career future, and sent me and my two younger sisters to a Methodist girls’ school" (Faith: 13-16).

**English education**

English education in Malaya came with the British in the pre-war years (Wong and Gwee 1972), and this provided English medium instruction to the different ethnic groups, usually in the urban areas where the British commercial interests and needs were. The British supported schools financially and also by ensuring that the poorer classes had access to education (Wong and Ee 1971). Although the British also financed elementary education in the vernacular languages in the rural areas, British education is generally associated with the English medium schools.³⁹¹ An English education was perceived to be more valuable than the Chinese and despite difficulties in transiting to the English medium, many parents would encourage their children to persist:

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I started studying in a Chinese school for six years and then had to change to an English school. We have one year’s remove class, to prepare us for the transition, but it was still a bit hard at the beginning so I was not very keen. Really wanted to drop out but then my mother kept on scolding me, just had to persevere. They themselves are uneducated so they know that education is so important for the future. I suppose there are more prospects for the future if you know English. This is the best thing I have done otherwise I wouldn’t be able to speak English if I stayed on in the Chinese school. (Dorothy: 15-38)
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³⁸⁹ Following independence, the Malay medium was introduced to instil national pride among the citizens. ³⁹⁰ Even male students benefited more from an English education as there were no job opportunities for the Chinese educated, who were viewed as having blighted careers. Their futures depended on their command of the language of the latest textbooks and these were usually in English. See Lee K. Y. (2000, pp. 174-77). ³⁹¹ The British encouraged parallel systems of schooling as a means of financing the education for the country: rural Malay schools were government-run; Chinese and Tamil schools were operated by associations within their respective communities; and English medium schools for the urban population were also maintained by the government. The fee structure varied. Malay schools were free so some rural Chinese students would attend Malay schools for that reason. Chinese and Indian schools demanded a low fee while English schools had higher fees. See Wong and Ee (1971).
In the early years, two significant English schools included the Penang Free School and the Singapore Free School, both with fee structures based on means-testing to enable the poorer students access to education. These schools included English and vernacular sections as well as a girls’ department. This suggests that perhaps vernacular schools did not promote the education of girls sufficiently. Other English schools were also set up by missionary and charitable societies to provide general and moral education based on Christian tenets to all races and creeds (Wong and Gwee 1972). Following the war period, the drive was to promote English medium schools for national unity towards independence from British rule, while still maintaining the study of the language and literature of the various ethnic groups (Wong and Gwee 1972).  

Due to the Chinese people’s interest in business and trade, they tended to live in urban Malaya where the English schools were and as English was the language of trade, these schools became their best option for schooling (Wong and Ee 1971).

In the post-war years, and especially in the 1950s, rising political awareness and the push for independence from the British saw a move towards a national school system. In Malaysia, schools aimed for bilingualism (English and Malay) and Chinese students were encouraged to be trilingual. English medium schools were initially seen as the unifying means for the different ethnic groups, and vernacular schools were encouraged to become integrated into the national system. In Singapore, although national unity was sought through the English medium schools, due to the higher Chinese population, the Chinese medium schools continued to exist with government support as long as they met the national objectives. Thus, increasing importance was placed on English as the medium of instruction and there was also a reduction in fees to attract students to these schools so as to achieve national unity.

The education system developed and left behind by the British was well-respected for its quality (Kurlantzick 2001). The British system enabled many to go overseas to further their education and extended the Chinese women’s profession into teaching and nursing either through scholarships or self-funding, both locally and overseas: “I went to England for my nursing training and I didn’t have to spend any money from my father” (Dorothy: 300-301). An overseas qualification was highly valued by women: “It was very hard to get a job at that time in Malaysia and that was the only way to get some professional career – to go overseas to

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393 For further details, see Wong and Ee (1971, pp. 52-66).

394 See also Faith’s scholarship in footnote 399 on p. 295.
study” (Dorothy: 315-317). Dorothy’s qualifications in nursing later enabled her to migrate to Australia on her own accord, without straining the financial resources of her working-class parents. For these reasons, British education was perceived to advance the cause of women significantly.

Interestingly, although education became more accessible in the 1950s in Malaysia (Lillard and Willis 1994), the British are given the credit for the educational escape. Many forget the drive to educate girls and lowered fees came into effect with the independence movement, and through the developing independent government.\(^{395}\) Perhaps the attribution of educational progress to the British is due to the acceleration of female entry into schools which began in 1930 (Lillard and Willis 1994). Perhaps it is due to the latter ethnic bias in the Malaysian tertiary education system. Whichever, while under British rule, for the English-educated there was no gender discrimination on daughters wishing to pursue their education, even at tertiary level, if they had the financial backing from family or scholarships offered: “My grandfather sent off my aunties and my father, and all these people, off to universities all around the world” (Alex: 514-516).

However, in many cases, even presently, this is still something that women have to fight for:

> I was the only one who studied after I finished Chinese school in year 6. After that I continued to ask for high school but my mum didn’t allow me to go to high school. Everyday I would cry. A month later I got into high school because my eldest sister said that if my mum didn’t allow me to study, I would leave home. My eldest sister persuaded my mum to let me study at high school so I received my English education at high school.

> After school, I had to help my mum to do the business till after 11 o’clock then I could start my homework till 1 or 2 o’clock. Then I could sleep in the morning before I had to wake up at 5 o’clock to open the shop for the next day. It was a very hard life for me to be educated at high school. (Esther: 242-261)

Due to the increased opportunities for education and cheaper or free tuition in the post-war years,\(^ {396}\) in some ways Esther’s fight was not for an English education as much as it was a battle for basic education due to the need for her to assist in the family business. Esther, 39, who came from a family of nine had to strive hard to get into high school where she gained her English education. She had been schooled in the Chinese medium prior to that. She was the

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\(^{395}\) There was a 16.3% increase in women in employment from 1957 when Malaysia became an independent country, and this is attributed to the educational opportunities created by the independent government for women. See Lillard and Willis (1994) and Noor (1999).

\(^{396}\) The move towards independence from the British saw a rise in the importance of education as the means to unite the different ethnic groups and to develop a national consciousness.
only one of the girls in her family to get an education beyond primary school. Evidently, her family’s working-class status was a factor. Hing (1998) states that “young, working-class females face more disadvantages in their attempts to build new roles for themselves.” Sometimes it is because their family and financial commitments form a barrier to their educational goals. According to the Becker-Tomes theory, in the perfect capital market, educational investment is “independent of … parental wealth, or the number of and gender composition of the sibset” (Lillard and Willis 1994). Living in a realistic world where capital is limited, it is then unsurprising that the “child whose father is a farmer [is] less likely to enter school or continue to a higher level, especially if the child is a girl” (Lillard and Willis 1994).³⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Esther is one of the few working-class women who saw the multiplicity of opportunities open to her through education and, more specifically, an English-based education. Despite the difficulties in attaining her educational goal, she had “made her own decision about what she wants to be … far different from the gendered rigid division of labour that their mothers and grandmothers encountered” (Hing 1998), and fought hard to gain access into that other world.³⁹⁸ Although Hing (1998) speaks of the present booming Singaporean economy as the key to opportunities for the modern Singaporean woman, the open doors are multiplied when the woman is educated. Uneducated girls were often expected to depend on their husband for their livelihood, or if they gained employment, it would be limited in career options. Teaching, nursing, and secretarial work were generally the highest forms of career a woman could aim for before the 1960s (Faith: 499-500). Although Esther did not have tertiary education, she was able to attain financial independence through her own small business when she relocated to Australia.

Tertiary education
Tertiary education further extended a woman’s career goals in Malaya. There was a need for tertiary qualification as the economy continued to grow, which meant that tertiary-qualified personnel became increasingly necessary. For those who were affluent, this became the expected norm: “It doesn’t surprise me that someone would go off and do a PhD, but I have

³⁹⁷ I recently noted that many young Singaporeans from working-class families, have chosen to gain a local diploma to enable them to start working. Through their local employment, they save up for a graduate degree overseas, which when obtained gives them a promotion and higher salaries.

³⁹⁸ It needs to be noted though that sometimes determination alone is not enough to ensure access to education. It is possible that Esther’s older sisters assisted financially to give her the opportunity that they did not gain but this is a postulation.
found people in the workplace to whom further education is anathema” (Julia: 78-80). For Faith, who completed her high school in the 1950s, coming from a family of six brothers and four girls meant that the opportunity to go overseas to further her education was severely constrained due to her family’s financial status:

_I wanted to be more than just a school teacher. I was planning to go to uni but my dad wasn’t keen to send me to uni because I was a girl. It would be wasted investment to give a girl tertiary education because she married out. She would benefit her husband more than her parents. Due to this, many a time I wished I was not a Chinese girl. I wished I was a boy as I would not have missed out on a uni education. (Faith: 39-48)_

Hampered by limited financial resources and so many sons to educate, Faith’s father’s option was to encourage Faith to apply for a scholarship offered by the government then to train teachers in the United Kingdom.³⁹⁹ Her English education enabled her to win such a scholarship. On her subsequent migration to Australia, Faith was able to pursue her dream of gaining a degree. She graduated from her first degree at the age of 60 and contemplated a Masters programme thereafter.⁴⁰⁰

Colonial education

Thus, it was colonialism that presented the Chinese woman with access to literacy and formal education (Wong and Ana 1999). Colonial education, with its ethos based on ethnocentrism, English medium instruction, and Christianity, intersected with gender to revolutionise what was traditionally denied to women. Its impact on the ethnic subjectification of those educated within its system is significant. For myself, I grew up white without realising how I arrived as a white Chinese. My cultural location within the dominant Australian society and education perhaps

³⁹⁹ "The scholarship was awarded by the Government of the Federation of Malaya to overcome the shortage of adequately trained teachers for the upper primary and lower secondary schools. We did not have the facilities for teachers’ training colleges back in the 50s. Arrangements were struck with the British Government to have our teachers trained in Kirkby starting in the year 1951 and then a couple of years later also in Brinsford Lodge, mainly for secondary school teaching. Each batch consisted of 150 students. We were paid M$600 for warm clothing (as we were due to arrive in UK right in winter). We were also paid a monthly allowance of 10 English pounds with food, accommodation and other facilities absolutely free. My husband’s batch was 1959/60 and mine 1960/61 (being the last batch to be trained there). Thereafter the College was closed. The College is known as Malayan Teachers’ Training College, Kirkby, Liverpool, UK. The scholarship award was on merit basis and is simply called the Malayan Government Teachers Training Scholarship” (Faith: 517-520). Many other scholarships were also offered to ensure that students were equipped for a profession. See Wong and Gwee (1972).

⁴⁰⁰ Ironically, her English qualifications were not recognised by the Australian Education Department. She remained unemployed despite her long teaching experience in Malaysia. See also p. 276 on the effects of unemployment on Faith.
enables me to view my ethnicity from a marginal yet dominant position, which perhaps provides a different critique on my subjectivity.401

Colonial education opened the door for many Chinese women in Malaya as there was a future that came with colonial education.402 It provided employment and its scope for further education was wider. For those who were affluent, the opportunities were virtually limitless: “It was very common amongst my peers, even in the ‘50s, when I was a teenager to further our studies. That was the phrase: for further studies” (Tina: 152-156). And with further studies, the window of opportunities became wider, and the threat of an unhappy family life or domesticity could be averted through the woman’s financial independence and mobility:

I saw learning, education, as a way out of town, as a way out of being a woman attached to a husband. I didn’t have those words then but certainly that was the picture. I had seen my mother being economically dependent. The consciousness conveyed by my mother was, you never become an economic dependant on anyone. So education was a way out of that role. (Tina: 205-219)

The way out of town for Faith was gained by crossing some hurdles, first by her parents. It was a financial commitment for them to enrol their daughters in an English school, as compared to the cheaper Chinese night school provided before national schools came into effect.403 The only advantage for the poor in the English schools was that fees were means-tested:

My parents had to pay tuition fees to the Methodist school whereas it was free to study in the evening Chinese school. Not sure about the day Chinese school. It was more difficult to get into the English school ‘cause one needs a recommendation, interview, and reading test apart from the higher fees. Most Chinese-speaking parents felt shy, particularly my mum, to enrol their children to English school due to the language problem. In my case, it was a tenant who being an old girl of the Methodist school and also a Christian, accompanied my mum and my two sisters to the school. Miss Olsen, an American missionary, gave me a Standard Two reader to read. I was able to read the whole book ‘cause my favourite subject at the night school was English. Miss Olsen accepted the three of us into the school. (Faith: 490-504)

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401 See “Ethnicised education” in this chapter for further elaboration on the impact of colonial education on the diasporic women interviewed, p. 298.
402 Of course the door was opened to the Malay and Indian women as well.
403 See Wong and Ee (1971, pp. 67-88) The British authorities required the mission schools to charge a nominal fee as the criteria for government grants allocation before 1941. After the war, however, Singapore reduced the fees charged at English schools to draw students away from the Chinese schools, in the hope of building nationalism through a common language medium for the different ethnic groups. See Wong and Gwec (1972).
Faith was fortunate that her neighbour was able to assist with the application process. Her reading ability also enabled her sisters, who may not have been as competent, to enrol. Of the opportunity given to her, Faith says:

*Going to the Methodist school had certainly changed my whole life. I was never interested in studies in the night school. The teachers there neglected me, thinking I knew my work as I was a teacher’s child and also because I could speak Mandarin better than my classmates.* (Faith: 509-513)

Although the independent Malaysian and Singaporean governments played a significant role in further improving on the education system the British began, the cultural semantics encouraging a sense of indebtedness to the British continues to remain strong. Many British schools currently set up in Southeast Asian countries, for example, play on their past reputation and charge extortionate tuition fees to maintain their supposed prestige despite the poor quality of instruction today, compared to cousin schools in the United Kingdom (Kurlantzick 2001). Colonial education, which comes with its tuition in English as well as a set of ethnocentric values and belief systems, is commodified for the continued extension of off-shore imperialism.

It is useful here to refer to Said’s work on the Orient to understand how this commodification is performed and why colonial education is so valued. Said (1978) argues that the Orient was constructed for the West “essentially [as] an idea … with [a] corresponding reality” (p. 5), to pit the West against the Orient as its master. In valuing colonial education, the ex-colonies inadvertently continue to sustain the Occident’s construction of self as superior and thus normalise the West’s position in “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978, p. 3). This relationship of subjugation and dominance endured long after the departure of the British from Malaysia and Singapore. From the postcolonial perspective, it can be argued that despite the positive changes that colonial education brought, English or colonial education established the British as the master, and the colonised as the subjugated.404

*“Singapore in that time, and even during the time I was growing up, even though it was postcolonialist, was very much English, and Europeans were up there in status”* (Alex: 357-359). Despite being a generation removed from colonial rule, Alex still feels the remnant sentiments that the older generation had for a British kingdom that was unrivalled by any other

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404 See discussion on rote-learning in the section on “Ethnicised education,” this chapter, for an extension on this argument, p. 300.
since the late 1800s (Wong and Ee 1971), till the Malaysian independence in 1957. Having a colonial or English education was thus seen as contributing to a privileged position in society, as one was virtually equated to a Westerner and thus an empire-builder, with access to professional employment and a higher socioeconomic status. This is significant in contributing to many of the issues already raised in this thesis. Let me further discuss the ideas of an ethnicised education in the next section.

The ethnicised education

In Malaysia and Singapore

Education is seen as one of the benefits of Westernisation (Wong and Ana 1999), and Westernisation a consequence of colonial education. Due to the English schools being mission schools, there was also the tendency to see Christianity as Westernisation and vice versa. Thus, this network of factors traverses each other to impact on the Chinese woman’s self-perception and value system. We can see the effects of this web in Hannah’s description of her father: “He associated a lot with the missionary schools, the Methodist Girls’ School because he mixed with all these people, he was more westernised than anybody at that time” (Hannah: 301-306). Women educated in these schools were often exposed to Christianity, either Catholicism or Protestantism, and their education was perceived as ethnicised and Christianised. The effect of the ethnicisation associated with such mission schools has far wider implications on the ethnic identification of these women and the perceptions that others have of them than anticipated then. “Although very Chinese in my up-bringing and culture, my English education has played a large role in my mental outlook. Others would probably see me as a very westernised Chinese woman” (Fifi: 115-118). Fifi’s education ethnicised her and she was perceived and perceived herself to be westernised. Such women were also noted as belonging to a different class.

Women who had received an English education likewise encourage their children and especially daughters along the same path, having tasted the benefits of such a privilege themselves.\(^\text{405}\)

\[\text{In bringing me up, mum has always espoused Western values to me. I felt that the Western world was the real world and never questioned it as an alternative to the eastern world that I was born into. I couldn’t see then that I was being raised white}\]

\(^{405}\) Lillard and Willis indicate that the mother’s education has a significant effect on the daughter’s education, as compared to the son’s, due to the quality of time she is able to spend with her children. The impact of the father’s educational background, on the other hand, relates more to the economic resources and location of the family. See Lillard and Willis (1994).
despite my coloured surroundings. Mum emphasised the need for an English education and always encouraged me to read and to write. I would say that I was given many opportunities despite the fact that I am a girl. Perhaps it is because she felt that she didn’t have those opportunities herself and wanted me to have them, to be accomplished, well-educated so that I would never be bullied by my in-laws. She had a terrible time with her in-laws. (Kelly: 859-873)

Kelly’s mother was able to fend for herself despite the difficulties with her in-laws due to her own education and career, which subsequently opened the door for migration to Australia. Thus, the opportunity given to one generation may elevate their socioeconomic class to then impact on the subsequent generation/s.

In many ways, the Chinese women who are English-educated are a transplanted people. They are both envied and resented by those who are not thus educated nor equally privileged:

_Mum was very different for her time. She did not adhere strictly to customs and that is what made her an outcast in my father’s family. They saw her as the Christian and never really welcomed her into the family. She was supposed to have her Western ways, which they envied and loathed at the same time._ (Kelly: 852-858)

Again, there is the intersection between a Western education, Christianity, and ethnicity. Perhaps the rejection of Kelly’s mother by the others in the community in the 1960s-70s is better understood as being similar to those who are rejected for having a Western accent, or a different religion. Christianity would mean that the ancestors would not be worshipped, thus impacting on the family’s filial duties. Often the different values acquired set the English-educated woman apart from the rest of the community and family:

_Other Chinese would think I am quite westernised. Learning something new at this late age, doing something not for scholastic reasons, just for fun. Things that don’t make you money and things that you usually have to spend lots of money on doesn’t seem to make sense to them._ (Carol: 1994-1999)

Carol is the product of the Australian education system from the 1980s-90s that has given her a different attitude towards learning, compared to her parents. Despite the differences created through the different education systems, many seek the path of an English education due to the better opportunities promised:

406 See the section “The not really Chinese Chinese,” in Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 266.
407 See the section “Filial piety and Christianity,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 183.
My parents’ tenant advised my mum to send her daughters to an English school because of better career opportunities. A girl with Form Three could easily become a clerk, secretary, or nurse. For a teacher it requires a Form Five qualification. (Faith: 497-500)\textsuperscript{488}

The opportunities that came with an English education were tied to the needs of the British government in Malaya. The training of efficient clerks, for example, was considered one of the most important functions of English schools as they served the commercial interest of the British government (Wong and Gwee 1972). As the economy flourished, so did the different types of occupations required.

In Australia

The ethnicisation of education in Australia, on the other hand, is reversed. Certain learning styles, for example, are perceived as essentially Chinese (Marton, Dall’Alba, and Kun 1996). Rote-learning and precision in answering questions, as opposed to the more discursive manner that the Australian school system uses, are perceived as the Asian way of learning, and more importantly, as being Chinese:

_{The education system made me realise I was very Chinese in the way I think, in the way I learn. Because the classes in Australia are conducted to encourage you more to think and give your views and opinions, which is very different from the way that most Chinese learn and study. I am turning more towards trying to reason but I am still very unconfident because I still need that assurance of: “Is what I am saying correct?” or “Is that the majority opinion?” so in that sense I suppose I am still Chinese in my way of thinking. (Carol: 16-34)}

Carol has absorbed an Australian perception of rote-learning as a Chinese or Asian way of learning and essentialises her own learning style as being Chinese. She ethnicises rote-learning as a Chinese way of thinking: “I feel that because I am Chinese and I’m brought up to think a certain way, I still operate on the assumption that there’s a right answer, there is a wrong answer. I am not as adventurous in the way I think” (Carol: 411-414). When asked if it was just being Chinese or being Carol, she says: “It is a bit of both because that was how we were educated” (Carol: 419-422). She compares her way of learning with the Australian way and says:

\textsuperscript{488} Form Three is equivalent to the Lower School Certificate, while Form Five is comparable to the Leaving Certificate, although this was not sufficient for one who desired tertiary education.
They just seemed to be so much more confident, so much more together. They have opinions and they are not afraid to say so. In class I was amazed when the teacher would say something and all these hands would come up saying that they want to have a discussion about it. I thought, “This would never happen at home. And, even if it did, I wouldn’t be one of those people with my hand up.” I would try to avoid the teacher’s eye as often as possible thinking, “If I don’t see her, she won’t call me.”

And if they got it wrong, oh well, they got it wrong. Whereas for me it would be such a humiliating and miserable experience. I would never answer a question unless I was completely 100 per cent sure that I was correct. (Carol: 1445-1459)

When I further challenged her essentialist ideas by asking whether her way of thinking was similar to the Malays since they went through the same education system, she says after a long pause:

It is true of people who come from countries like Malaysia and Singapore, but I would say that the Chinese who live predominantly in a Western culture, for example, the States, especially first generation Chinese, would think the same way. So it is not necessarily the Malaysian education system. (Carol: 444-449)

Rote-learning and precision are so well entrenched as a Chinese way of learning and thinking that, to Carol, it transcends geographical space. She sees them as hereditary skills and relates this to her parents’ expectations of good grades, which she equates to getting correct answers (Carol: 455-467). The influence of rote-learning on Chinese identification is thus possibly significant. Here rote-learning is applied to language learning:

I wish Chinese and Chinese culture was taught more. I don’t think that Chinese was taught very well. My perspective for Singapore education is very negative because at that time I don’t think, they taught in a way that encouraged you to grow intellectually. Things may have changed now but at that time, it was very much learn by rote so Chinese for someone that didn’t have a background in Chinese speaking and writing – you had to memorise the writing. (laugh) This stroke and that stroke. My memory isn’t very good. (Alex: 364-372)

According to Carol and Alex, the Malaysian and Singaporean teaching and learning styles, which focuses on mastery of content, contributed to the development of an uncritical mindset

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409 It is possible that perhaps rote-learning was the strategy developed by Confucian scholars. This would then explain the phenomenon, if true, of Chinese all over the world having the same learning style. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore this further, but personally, I feel that this is a myth. See also rote-learning as a British tool, p. 300.
that encouraged the maintenance of those same styles. It produced a mind that was content with getting accuracy in facts regurgitated rather than a questioning mind:

*There were times when I thought, “It is more important to know whether an answer is right or wrong than to just guess at it and give all these airy fairy reasons why.” So in some ways I felt superior. When I knew the answer, I thought obviously that is what is important.* (Carol: 58-65)

The regime of uncritical thinking is maintained since one is not trained to be creative in formulating ideas and opinions, according to Carol. This then leads to insecurity and subsequent conformity to the dominant discourse: *"I am less confident in speculating and I am less confident to put forward my own opinion unless I am sure that it is the majority opinion”* (Carol: 414-416). Thus, Western education, based on the Australian system, is assumed to be a way of critical thinking that is generally not promoted or encouraged in Malaysia and Singapore.

The perception of an Asian education is that students there are encouraged to rote-learn material in the Ausubel sense of memorising the content verbatim without meaningful transformation of the material (in Biggs 1996), which is then regurgitated in formal examinations. Instead of focusing on pedagogic differences, often these different approaches to learning are seen as Chinese or Western. The fact that rote-learning is a British tool would surprise many Chinese students who associate it as a *Chinese style of learning:*

*Hong Kong’s rote-learning system, modeled on Britain’s, rewards memorization. Students prepped to regurgitate facts are often presumed to lack the thinking patterns to apply this knowledge to real-world problems. It’s a classroom world of drilling and testing, not reading and analysis. (“Reading, Writing, and Rote-Learning ... Drive Students to Western Schools” 2000)*

The British may have intended to use mindless repetition as a colonisation of the mind, to keep the colonised uncritical and unable to think, and thus unable to fend for themselves. If that was the intention of the British, then the governments that followed did likewise to keep the citizens compliant and controlled: *"The policies of the Lee Kuan Yew government had worked effectively in preventing people from asking questions”* (Rosa: 31-32). Rote-learning appears to

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419 Chang and Hung’s (1999) research on the development of critical thinking within the Singaporean tertiary culture is a useful paper to counter this perception of the Singaporean past educational system.
exclude the mind from a careful examination of issues so that there is continued conformity and obedience. Furthermore, according to this perception of the Chinese student, learning becomes a means to better marks and does not become a lifelong experience that is enjoyable (Warwick 1997). However, these suppositions are not adequately substantiated and stand weak when I further interrogate the ethnicisation of education.

In problematising the view that the Western educational system is the superior alternative, as perceived by some, it is useful to juxtapose Carol’s attitude that the Australian education system is sometimes too airy fairy, without any real reflective depth, as stated above, with the paradox of the Chinese learner (Watkins and Biggs 1996). Marton, Dall’Alba, and Kun (1996) question the nature of rote-learning in regard to Chinese students: “How is it possible that Asian students demonstrate such high achievement?” (1996, p. 70) Clearly this question arises because educational pedagogy has dangerously become viewed as ethnicised methods that are mutually exclusive. Marton, Dall’Alba, and Kun (1996) further emphasise that the denigrated rote-learning system is more complex than realised. Their research resolves the paradox as it indicates that rote-learning comes in two intertwining forms: mere mechanical regurgitation in a parroting form (surface) and memorisation with understanding (deep). In realising the different purposes for rote-learning, one is alerted to the fact that we can become blind to the potential pedagogical benefits due to an ethnicisation of education. By de-essentialising the way of learning from ethnicity, we can critique the pedagogical implications more clearly to develop a system of learning that deploys learning tools strategically; sometimes this method, sometimes the other, sometimes a modified blend of both to reach that same educational goal. As Biggs (1996) states:

This is not even a cross-cultural argument; ... learning should be seen in context. Thus, a subject in an experiment who chooses to use repetition ... is not using a surface approach to learning ... but is making a strategic choice appropriate to the laboratory context. ... A student who chooses a repetitive strategy to learn examination material after understanding it ... is likewise not using a surface approach but making a strategic choice. (p. 54)

Indeed the way we are educated should not be a cross-cultural issue, especially if it distracts the focus from the deeper matters in question, such as the value-laden ethos that comes with education. From the Malaysian and Singaporean perspective, an education in the English medium is seen as a westernised education. From the Australian perspective, a learning style
that is based on rote-learning is viewed as a Chinese or Asian way of learning. Either
perception essentialises a system of education to ethnicity and consequently impacts on the
ethnic subjectification of the learner at the risk of not critiquing the educational system itself.
Instead the students may venture into an area of study that fits the cultural semantics. Thus, we
have Asian students clamouring to enter Medicine, not necessarily for the love of patient care
but because it is the thing to do. Of such mindless conformity, Chow (1991) says:

The stereotypical Asian student who is a genius in the “hard sciences” but who
cannot express himself verbally in interesting ways is symptomatic of this division
between “West” and “East” in terms of the former’s hegemony in verbal, literary,
and fantastic productions and the latter’s often unwitting collaboration with that
hegemony through an overinvestment in non-verbal, lucrative disciplines. (p. xiii)

The skills required for the hard sciences may have been adopted by the Asian student because
these fields of study generally lead to higher incomes.411

The educational emigrants

It was the first time I was going to see her in twenty years. We used to play together
as kids and we used to fight but Nancy was my closest cousin as I didn’t have a
sister.

I put on my Sunday’s best and did up my hair, checking in the mirror every time
I stopped at the lights. At various stages, she had looked very glamorous in the
photos sent to us. When I got there, I found that Nancy looked the way she did when
I left, just older.

I tried to express how much it meant for me to see her again, and how I really
wanted to recapture our childhood together. But there lay a huge gulf between us.
For a long time I couldn’t understand it. And then I realised how it would have felt
for her to see me. I stood happily married, successful, well-travelled. Nancy was
single, successful in her own way but not highly educated nor as cosmopolitan in
her outlook. I didn’t mind. She did.

My sister and I were separated not just by land and sea, but this privilege that
had been bestowed on me because my parents had made the move all those years
ago.

That final goodbye, our eyes met. “You don’t understand,” I tried to say.
“Neither do you,” her eyes told me. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

The Chinese woman’s relocation to Australia has opened further doors to give her a very
privileged position in many ways, compared to the Malaysian or Singaporean woman:

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411 See how this is rationally or nonrationally set as a goal due to the cultural semantics of filial obligations, p.
180.
Very few Chinese women have the opportunities that are presented to Chinese women here in Australia. In Australia, a Chinese girl may enter university, qualify, and commence a career without undue pressure for marriage. Therefore, I am careful in speaking to my siblings regarding my experiences here as I do not wish to make them feel underprivileged. (Susie: 108-115)

The Australian location for many women means that access to higher education is not restricted according to the family’s financial resources: “I don’t think my parents could have afforded a tertiary education for me if we had stayed in Malaysia so I might not be as well educated as I am now!” (Shelly: 317-319). In Australia, parents do not have to discriminate according to gender. Many parents are able to instil the importance of education upon their daughters freely: “The main way my father influenced my identity as a Chinese woman is the belief in the importance of education” (Carol: 601). In Australia, this emphasis on education, and especially further education, is not simply verbalised but acted upon because the opportunities are more accessible.

In Australia, Anita had the opportunity to taste two distinctly different fields of learning: “I did Physiotherapy and Commerce, which were such different disciplines. That contributed a lot to me. I don’t regret the fact that I have done two different things because I’ve had that added experience” (Anita: 953-956). This may not have been an option in Malaysia and Singapore, unless her family was particularly affluent. Anita’s friend, followed the opposite course, having completed everything apart from the last semester of her Commerce degree before proceeding on to Physiotherapy:

She’d gone to Physio because she hated Commerce. She was a lot older. When she came to the end of it, she hated it and she didn’t want to do it so she left. She’s from a really, really wealthy family, so she didn’t study for quite a while and she’d actually gone to work for her parents for quite a long time, and then she wanted to do Physio. (Anita: 796-808)

Despite Anita’s relatively different socioeconomic class, as compared to her friend’s, both women were able to switch courses in Australia, after much time and money had been invested in the initial course of study. Further, age is not a deterrent to education and one has the option of discovering one’s interest area by experiencing the study course itself. In Australia, there is
also the option of returning to study after working for a period, and there is the flexibility of working and studying at the same time.

For those who may not have been academically inclined, Australia provided them with opportunity: "I wouldn’t have had the education that I now have, nor the freedom to pursue the interests that I have as freely. I have never been terribly ambitious. Living in Malaysia would have made me even less so" (Kelly: 1400-1406). Despite her initial lack of interest in education, being in Australia enabled Kelly to later pursue a doctorate degree. Australia is an educational goldmine and as such, many came to Australia "to study" (Sherry: 63).

Many Chinese families, being focused on education, migrated to Australia for the opportunities that come with an English medium education, as experienced before the New Economic Policy (NEP) established Bahasa Malaysia as the universal medium of instruction in Malaysian schools. Many also migrate for a more meritocratic educational system. In 1970, Malaysia established a quota system for entrance into tertiary education according to ethnic lines (Lillard and Willis 1994).\footnote{\textsuperscript{412} These quota systems were later part of the New Economic Policy (NEP), adopted in 1970 as a result of the race riots in Malaysia in 1969. It included the establishment of Malay medium schools and the erection of "barriers to government jobs and enforcement of employment quotas in private firms, and [the] enforced participation of Malays in business ownership." See Lillard and Willis (1994). Hannah did not value this change: "Everything was Malay, Malay, Malay first and all the privileges for the Malay. Next time my children, if they can’t study, will they have a chance to go to university? Because the Malays get a certain percentage of the places there first. In the company, you had to employ a certain percentage of Malays and the only people you can employ from them are drivers and clerks, and they are all hopeless. If you send the driver out to buy a ticket for a show, he’ll take a day. Always it is my father’s sick or mother’s sick or my son’s sick. They are always sick" (Hannah: 816-825).} Those of Malay origin were thus given first priority in gaining university places.\footnote{\textsuperscript{413} The special position that the Malays hold in education is something that goes back to the British ethos to look after the indigenous population as a priority. See Wong and Ee (1971). For as long as their interests were looked after, the Malays did not cause the British any trouble politically. See also Wong and Gwee (1972). The policies favoring Malays were further pursued when the Malay-dominated government took over in 1957. See Lillard and Willis (1994).}

_We came for the sake of my children’s education. I was dissatisfied with the unequal educational opportunities the Chinese had to face in Malaysia. Scholarships for tertiary education were only given to Malays. Good courses such as Medicine, Engineering, Law were offered to Malays. The Chinese have to go overseas to study for good courses. This means only the rich could afford to send their children overseas. We were not rich then. Our children were close in their ages. We could not afford to send all of them overseas at the same time. The only solution was to emigrate to a Western country._ (Faith: 140-152)
Although some argue that there is little evidence for racial differences in educational attainment as a result of the introduction of the NEP, many Malaysian families move to Australia due to the discriminatory educational practices in Malaysia, which have employment ramifications (see Lillard and Willis 1994). The equal opportunities Australia promised were also very attractive.

*In Malaysia, there are racial quotas to get into university. A certain percentage of places is given to people of different ethnic groups. So because of that you already are conscious that there is a bias depending on what race you are from, and often the proportions are not in line with the proportion of applications. So as a Chinese you may comprise the larger proportion applying to go to university but by the percentage of places allocated, you may be one of the smaller groups. So in that respect, the government is discriminating against you.* (Carol: 199-209)

Both Shelley and Anita were attracted by the meritocratic and free tertiary education that Australia provided before the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989:414

*As a Chinese, I would have to contend with the Malaysian government’s quota policy for bumiputras”* (Shelly: 321-323).415

*So we can have free education without being limited because in Malaysia it works on quota: how many Malays; how many Chinese; how many Indians and of course the quota for Malays is much larger. It doesn’t provide equal opportunity for all people.* (Anita: 2139-2151)

Anita felt that she had a chance to compete for a place at an Australian university if she studied hard enough. Rosa, on the other hand, was attracted to the wider scope offered by the Australian universities despite the educational opportunities in Singapore:

*I completed my primary, secondary, and undergraduate education in Singapore. I also completed a Master of Arts degree, before I decided to come to Australia to pursue a PhD.* (Rosa: 5-8)

Rosa decided to further her academic path in Australia. She felt that she “had to do it somewhere other than Singapore. In the continuation of higher degrees, it is considered (particularly if one is pursuing a research career) tunnel vision to get all of one’s degrees from

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414 For further information on this scheme, see http://www.hecs.gov.au/
415 Bumiputras are the tribal natives and Malay citizens in Malaysia.
one university” (Rosa: 480-483). Susie’s reasoning adds another perspective to why many prefer the tertiary education provided in Australia: “A degree in an English-speaking Commonwealth country would be internationally recognised, as opposed to a tertiary degree gained in Asia which may not be recognised by certain people” (Susie: 150-154). There is still a perception that Western qualifications are more prestigious and hence the preservation of the Western hegemony. Although she did not complete her primary schooling in Australia, Carol also prefers the ethos of the Australian education system:

I would have liked to be educated here, just the opportunities that the kids have to try out different things. Back in Malaysia, and this is also a big part of being Chinese, even from year one, kindergarten, your grades are very important. Whereas here, people are more concerned that their kids are able to make friends, have a good social life, and participate in sport. (Carol: 295-305)

The Australian educational options are available to Chinese women on a meritocratic basis.416 Because of the future that the Australian education system promises, many aim for a life here although much is sacrificed in the migration process:

Hubby and I discussed the issue of giving up everything to emigrate to Australia. My only child and son had wanted to continue his studies here. My husband felt we should to enable him to continue his tertiary education. (Fifi: 77-83)

Education also impacts on choosing Australia as the migration destination. Some come over as a result of their education here. Through her time in Australia as a student, Bev met an Australian man who became her husband. She says of her reason for migration: “I married an Australian after I finished my MA” (Bev: 667). Some choose Australia due to the friends made while studying here on a student visa: “Just that I had friends in Melbourne then” (Dorothy: 455). Others return for the lifestyle they had been exposed to as students: “I had already spent six years here as an overseas student. I was used to life here” (Vicky: 76-77). Thus, the Australian education impacts on the lives of migrants in significant ways. In turn, Australia too becomes striated by the people it attracts.

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416 Meritocracy is presently severely tested across the population with the introduction of escalating fees and an elitist mentality towards education, among a range of other factors limiting women’s chances academically.
Course choosiness

Another consequence of the Australian education experience is the availability of career options through the varied selection of courses. Women and parents were able to be selective about what was deemed as suitable courses of study to undertake. Courses were ranked according to their earning potential and their perceived career status in society, often according to their previous culture’s standards. There are the top four careers like Accountancy, Engineering, Medicine, and Law (Alex: 2970) or in another permutation: Medicine, Law, Dentistry, or Pharmacy. “It was only the four options. Nothing else” (Deana: 746-747), all chosen for their prestige and high salaries. “Like a good Asian daughter, I decided to do Medicine to please my parents” (Patty: 742). The hierarchical nature of the courses varied from family to family.

Although many conform to the cultural semantics of what is an acceptable profession to aim for,\(^\text{417}\) those who fall outside the highly regarded professions and courses, often felt marginalised. Alex speaks of the limiting nature of such cultural semantics, especially in the Singaporean context:

\[\text{There was an immediate cutting off of options. There were these things that you should do to become successful. Media production was perceived to be a bit weird but at least you got a fixed salary from it. It just felt a bit stifling for that reason.} \]
\[(\text{Alex: 1314-1319})\]

These attitudes are transferred across to Australia, usually by the parents who have sacrificed much to migrate to Australia. Deana, and her sister Janice, chose the medical fields as advised by their parents.\(^\text{418}\) However, many Chinese women are able to break out of these restrictive social expectations in Australia. Alex chose against this grain, preferring to do what she is really interested in instead. Her upper middle-class background and her parents’ dissimilar educational qualifications and career options could be reasons why she has opted for a different path to the top four professions. However, her relocation to Australia is probably a significant factor in allowing her room to be different to the norm: “You do get that materialism here and you do get social stratification here but I felt it more in Singapore” (Alex: 1327-1329). In Singapore, her upper middle-class background inserted her into a social circle that pressured

\(^{417}\) Often there is pressure from the parents to attain good grades to get into the prestigious courses so that they can get good jobs. See “Filial piety and socioeconomic class,” in Chapter 5 “Darling daughter | Martyr mother,” p. 180.

\(^{418}\) See the socioeconomic class implications and effect on Deana’s life, p. 322.
her to conform or to feel on the outer. The liminality experienced probably caused Alex to question her career motives more consciously. Australia’s seemingly less class-conscious society allows more freedom:

If you migrate on your own, you don’t have that experience of having grown up and positioned in a certain way within that society and having to deal with that all the time. Singaporeans frequently ask me, “Where do I live? Where did my parents come from?” You hardly get that kind of question here. They were just trying to position me. People are probably more subtle about it here. In Australia I could forget about class, not have to deal with it as part of my interaction with people all the time. (Alex: 1337-1355; 1367-1369)

The influence of the family made Alex feel a loss of individuality in her identity. She felt she had no accomplishments of her own. The family network, which was important in gaining employment in Singapore, made her feel that her achievements boiled down to who she knows rather than what she knows. She had a good social status because of her family but felt this restricted and typed her:

Just immediately I was positioned as coming from an upper middle-class background and the way people treated me was like that. It made me feel all my achievements I owed to my family, my parents. Of course it partly did but it got to the point that it felt that every subsequent thing I did was the result of that. (Alex: 1357-1358; 1372-1375)

The cultural semantics of what is a sought-after educational course and subsequent profession may not restrict some diasporic women from pursuing their real interest but it may place them in a negative space of imagined failure. Carol’s father was not pleased with her initial choice of Optometry:

My father wasn’t happy with the choice of Optometry. He was even less happy when I switched to Science. He wanted me to do Medicine. He didn’t have a high opinion of the role of optometrists in society. It wasn’t a good status partly because for that occupation in Malaysia, you didn’t need to go to university to have an optometrist shop. You are a dispensary, so there were optometrists everywhere. (Carl: 828-836)

Although course-switching was not as convenient in Malaysia, unless one had the financial means to do so, Carol’s subsequent pursuit of General Science was received with equal or less
enthusiasm: “Because of the low cut-off rates for Science – people who score really badly in the exam do Science” (Carol: 836-838).

Anita similarly changed from her initial course in Physiotherapy to another course, which was deemed to lead to a more suitable career:

*My parents were putting heaps of pressure on me because my Dad thought Physiotherapy wasn’t a professional course. I could hear them saying that it was terrible, that I have to slog, that it wasn’t worth it, that no one thought anything of it. So I guess it was really hard, not because I wanted to do what they wanted me to do in the sense that I didn’t care about what I wanted to do. I think it’s the pressure. The fact that it was a very difficult course and I thought that if I really wanted to do it, I could get through that course but at that stage I wasn’t sure ‘cause I’d done work experience, which I didn’t like. Also, I didn’t have that kind of emotional support from my parents. They gave me money for my books but they weren’t happy ‘cause they were really clear about it. Physios in Asia are known to massage and that’s all they do. They don’t really have that much technology like we have here and I guess physio is a way of thinking. Physios are looked down upon in Asian countries. Masseurs (laugh) is what my parents think of them. (Anita: 606-618; 622-624; 645; 659)*

Due to her frustrations with how Physiotherapy was viewed by her parents, and the lack of emotional support from them, Anita dropped the course mid-way and pursued something outside that field:

*I don’t regret my job because it is a good one as well and I know that it is a practical job. It’s a job that I can travel with and it is good in a sense that I don’t have to use any physical force. My parents are happy with it because I can work till whatever age if I needed to. But I regret the fact that I didn’t give Physio a fair go. (Anita: 671-677)*

Anita experiences what I call *imagined failure* due to having conflicting goals and interests to her parents. She negotiates this by doing what she feels is the right thing to do, but at the same time, is not able to deny the influential power that her parents’ attitudes have had on her decisions. On a further note on imagined failure, those who fail academically may experience this sense of failure to a greater extent, especially if the cultural semantics governing the family is one that believes that the Chinese are intelligent and diligent enough to make up for any intellectual lack. Anita describes this phenomenon in regards to her brother: “He’s always known he wasn’t as academic as my sister and that’s affected him. And so he’s never been a
very confident person. My Dad is very much a very academic person so that's mattered to him a lot. Education is very important to him and he didn't cope as well with my brother's lower academic ability because of his background” (Anita: 2060-2062; 2067-2070). Anita’s brother sensed the disappointment in his father acutely but in recent years they have been able to rebuild their relationship. Perhaps this is due to his ability to invest well despite his vocational employment, which has quelled his father’s anxiety over his future.419

Changing Chineseness

A major consequence of diasporic women’s education in Australia is what it bears on their ethnic identification:

I was here in Australia, working at a university department which stressed equality and equity issues strongly. Hence, it was not only the fact that I was a woman not of Anglo-Celtic descent, but also one who was studying a philosophy that would have been quite foreign to many of the academics working in my department. In that context, I flourished because much encouragement was given to me and my project, and I was on the receiving end of many affirmative action policies. It made me, for the first time in my life, consciously proud to be Chinese and keen to take advantage of opportunities. (Rosa: 74-88)

When we compare the above statement with Faith’s shame of being a Chinese woman,420 we get another sense of what it is like to be a Chinese woman in Australia for some. For many, the issue of liminality is extended or confronted in Australia due to their educational experience. Their identities as Chinese women come under scrutiny as it is no longer clear where they stand. Their initial simplistic view of what Chineseness means is also challenged:

There was a new girl in my year and she was about as different from me as you could possibly imagine. She was one of those who would try to sneak out and meet up with boys and she had ended up being expelled. I thought, “Okay, I guess not all Chinese are the same.”

I remember when I saw her, my first thought was that I suddenly realised I am now a minority. Everywhere I looked there was brown hair, blonde hair. Nobody had black eyes and black hair and then she came along and I thought, “Oh good. I have a friend.” I realised that she was very different from me and, in fact, not my idea of someone I wanted to befriend. Then it became much more looking outside of a Chinese face for a friend. (Carol: 1326-1341)

419 More on Anita’s brother’s financial stability on p. 191.
420 See the section “Stigma of illiteracy,” in Chapter 7 “Language and liminality,” p. 277.
Apart from ethnic identification, values are also challenged as the new environment impacts on the old values. Anita shares this conflict in terms of her relationship with her parents:

*My parents always think it's really important to have a good job, to be financially stable. I think they are important too but I've lots of different types of friends. I've some that are really impulsive and not into career as much and my parents' friends are all people at their sort of level, like usually Chinese, middle-class, working, quite good financial status.* (Anita: 1392-1400)

Alex expresses a similar sentiment with the class uniformity that she faced when she was in Singapore, and enjoyed the variety of people she met when she studied here in Australia – there were students of different ages, maturity levels, previous occupations, and different countries of origin (Alex: 666-671).

Alex also experienced a different type of liminality on her first day at university, due in part to the way that students are classified in the orientation programmes conducted at universities:

*I was neither an overseas student nor an Australian student. I came in as a new permanent resident and migrant so I didn't have orientation with the international students. International students went off on an orientation camp together so they got to know each other before they started classes. And of course the Australian students either had friends from school or they went for orientation. I didn't really go for long orientation 'cause I actually migrated with my family.* (Alex: 656-664)

Alex was caught in that awkward space of not quite belonging anywhere. By physical appearance, it was assumed that she was an overseas student so local Australian organisations perhaps did not approach her with orientation programmes for local students. Further, as she had recently migrated then, she would not have really fitted in with the local Australian students. Neither would she have fitted in with the overseas students as they had a

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421 See p. 309.
temporariness to their time in Australia compared to Alex. In short, she didn’t fit into any of the categories available. She was caught somewhere in between the different groups.⁴²²

Due to the stereotypes constructed for the Chinese or Asian student, many Chinese women experience an uneasiness about their ethnicity. Some internalise the stereotypical images, on one hand, while feeling uncomfortable with their ethnic identification, on the other:

In terms of studying, I was quite proud to be Chinese because generally people have a very high opinion of Chinese students. They have high expectations of them. So in a way, a little bit of pride comes in with the fact that you can study in a particular way that you are good at – subjects which score well too like Maths and Sciences. On a more social aspect, I wish I were less Chinese. (Carol: 68-74)

Her discomfort with her ethnic identity in the social setting may be compromised by the sense of ethnic pride in the academic realm. This sense of not quite belonging is also felt by Anita who describes her subjectivity according to the different contexts that determine her ethnic identification:

The ideas that my parents have are predominantly probably Chinese because of the way that they were brought up. So when I’m with them, the things that we do probably reflect the Chinese culture. When we have friends over, we have to come out to say hello. That my parents see as a form of respect. And I think that’s a Chinese thing as well.

When I was with a different group of people, like my OCF friends, I felt very Australian compared to them.⁴²³ I think they saw me as being really different from them because they had a lot of Malaysian or Singaporean influences so I felt very Australian. A lot of them would say, “We’re going to do this and this because it would please our parents.” For me, I want to please my parents but I also want to do what I think is right and what is best for me. So I felt very different from them in that sense. (Anita: 3953-3976)

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⁴²² Alex would have probably fitted into the overseas’ students’ orientation programme at that point as she had just arrived. However, longer-term migrants would have experienced even more ambivalence due to their minority status in local orientation programmes. I question why these programmes do not aim to integrate local and overseas’ students more. As an undergraduate I volunteered to lead the orientation camps for overseas’ students, run by the Australian Development Assistance Bureau. My role, along with other permanent residents, was to assist the overseas’ students in their transition to the Australian culture. Of course, all overseas’ students were lumped together as Asian, regardless of the country they were from. Hence, we were expected to orientate the Vietnamese, Indonesians, Malaysians, and so on, in a homogenous manner. Although this may seem to contradict my earlier statement of integrating local and overseas’ students, it is the assumption of ethnic homogeneity that seems to contravene the purpose of segregating the local from the overseas’ students that I am unpicking here.

⁴²³ On OCF, see footnote 424, on p. 318.
The diasporic women’s values are often found to be in conflict with those who have been educated somewhere else. This puts them in a position where they are constantly negotiating their values and strategies according to the people they are mixing with.

*I realised how much of my Chineseness I lost. (laughter) I thought I hadn’t changed too much. It was two years before I went back and I realised that I spoke differently, I thought differently, I read differently. I became more Australian in all the ways that I described. A little bit more confident. A lot more vocal. Maybe I was a little bit condescending in my viewpoint in that now I am going back from big city to small town. It is like, “Don’t you guys have ‘this’?”* (Carol: 1503-1513)

Her educational experiences set her apart from those whom she once belonged to. And yet, she wasn’t fully an Australian although she felt she had become more Australian. Caught in that in-between world of being neither here nor there, she now finds herself to be: *“A little bit out of it sometimes. Just not quite within the inner circle. Just on the fringe”* (Carol: 101-102). Thus, her perception of self and the other’s perception of her, and her location within the communities, shift accordingly as a result of her dislocation and relocation.

**Educational empowerment**

*It was my first time back to my cherished home town, Ipoh, and my husband’s first visit. I had slipped back into it so comfortably that it seemed I had always been there. I thought I would have found it too provincial and the people too simple. Yet, it was the simplicity that I envied. Such a leisurely pace for everything.*

*We had to go to Kong Hing, my favourite eating haunt as a child. As we entered, I found that the concrete floor was still grimy and the ceiling fans still whirled quietly to ease the steamy coffee shop. The satay man was still alive. No one else does chicken satay on skinny sticks like he does. Just that slight taste of char on the marinated chicken. And they still keep topping up the plate so unwary tourists will think that it is all for the same price.*

*I checked and yes, the “sar hor fun” noodle stall still stood in the same corner. The proprietor seemed younger though.*

*As we ate, I was the one doing the staring around the shop. I wondered if each woman I saw there was an ex-school mate. I had lost touch with so many of them. So I looked and I stared, hoping. If I could meet up with just one of them, we would have such a ball again.*

*Just as we had finished the first course of hawkers’ delights, this young woman came along with her tray of cookies. We all had a sample. Delicious. She went round the rest of the coffee shop taking orders before taking off.*

*I then realised that I would not find any of my friends there. I wasn’t one of the crowd either. I sat in a very privileged position, whether I acknowledged it or not, and so did my childhood friends. Many had left town, I was told. Many overseas.*
Our schooling had taken most of us away, away from this little sleepy town that had run out of tin ore. That cookie girl probably sold all the cookies made for that week. She was happy as she left the shop. When that satay man dies, his son will probably take over. In Perth, even the children of our favourite takeaway food hall dare to dream lives that are far different from their parents' hard labour, through diligence at school for a professional career thereafter.

As we left Kong Hing, I nearly slipped. The floor was still grimy. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

In many ways education has provided me with a life experience that I otherwise would not have. However, having outlined the different Chinese women’s educational journeys in the previous sections, I question, as I did in this chapter’s introduction, how education empowers since socioeconomic class still plays a significant role in diasporic women’s educational pursuits. I stipulate that with every gain comes a cost. In the next sections, I examine the consequences of educational gains on the diasporic women’s negotiations in their personal relationships.

**Expensive education**

The cost of education is often viewed in monetary terms, and according to the Becker-Tomes theory, educational investments are made according to “the marginal rate of return [being] equal to the rate of interest” (Lillard and Willis 1994). Many families, however, risk more than just the economic returns in their decision to invest in their children’s educational future. Carol shares her chequered childhood:

> I would have liked to have developed friends from a young age and maintained them so I have that continual contact, but I left after the second year of high school. I went back in the last year of high school and it was just really nice to see what good friends they had become. When I left the co-ed school, there were anti-boys sentiments but at the end, it was how you can become good friends with guys and girls. Whereas I came and I went into an all girls school and that was the part I missed. But I wouldn’t have liked to have stayed at school there. (Carol: 178-187)

At the base level, the dislocation of the child, as shared above by Carol, impacts on their socialisation process. Gaps appear in all sorts of ways that do not seem to have an immediately apparent consequence. In Carol’s case, it influenced her interactions with the opposite sex and broken ties with childhood friends. In the next two sections, I want to address two other factors,
amongst the myriad other consequences of education, that have impacted on my participants’ lives.

The family life

Another flight. Another emotional jolt. Back at the dorm, I found myself in that in-between time of day and night again, stabbing me with loneliness. My little chubby hands peeled the mossie net from its ring above my bed, slowly unwrinking it. I had been away, back home on holidays with my family. Only two weeks.

We were driving home from school when Mum first asked how I felt about going away to boarding school. Images of midnight feasts from Enid Blyton’s Malory Towers gripped me with excitement. I discovered in my first term at “Malory Towers” that no food was allowed in the rooms.

The return flight had been uncomfortable. This time I returned with tiny glasses on my little nose, and the stewardess accompanied me through the airport so I didn’t get lost.

My little rabbits had died while I was studying here the term before. No one had told me. They didn’t want me upset. Each phone call about happy things always made me sob, what more bad news.

“Bring her home! She’s too young!” Dad had growled.

“She wants to be a writer. Her English will improve in Singapore,” Mum had reasoned.

Over the months, my English and Maths steadily improved as my brothers learnt to play different games at home, without me. I had seemed so grown up playing with them this time too. No more screaming up the stairs to get away from them. I just wanted to play with them all the time.

My hands were soon damp as I tucked the mossie net under my mattress. I had forgotten to turn the lights on. Loneliness crept in with the dimming dusk light. The little rivulets now streamed down my cheeks uncontrollably. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Many families make huge sacrifices in the pursuit of educational opportunities. Sent off at a young age, many remained permanently separated from their families and initial cultural ties. I do not regret my parents’ decisions in regards to my education and the scars I bear are minor compared to what some others may have experienced. Often both parents and children embark on this journey innocent of the cost that comes with it, till the pain is etched deep within:

I was very excited about going and I had no thought of missing my family until we said goodbye at the airport, and then it suddenly hit me and I bawled my eyes out. I just couldn’t stop crying all the way to Singapore. As you fly further and further away you feel that you are not going to go back. I had come across without my parents due to cost basically. I grew up reading Enid Blyton, Malory Towers, St Clair, all those stories about how wonderful life was going to be in boarding
school. How you had midnight feasts, how you had all these sports. It was nothing like that. I had a lot of preconceived ideas. (Carol: 1207-1216; 1279-1285)

Carol’s education at boarding school since her early teens affects the way she now relates to her parents, despite her father’s insistence on their doing many things together as a family now, as adults:

_I don’t know whether my parents are less approachable because the time when I was growing up, a lot of changes happened in my life that were for me to share with other people as my parents were not there. So I don’t think I ever got into that sharey/sharey, asking your parents for their opinion kind of stage. In many ways my mother takes care of me from a physical point of view because I don’t look to her for emotional support._ (Carol: 753-764)

Carol has learnt to relate to her parents in a physical way and vice versa. They don’t share the emotional bonds that her younger sister does with her mother in particular. Carol’s emotional distance from her parents is also felt with her youngest sister, Sally:

_Sally has always been a little bit more distant because I left when she was ten. I was away for eight years while she was growing up. When she was ten, she was a pest and when I came back she already had a boyfriend so I was no longer first priority. She already had somebody to be close to so we never became that close after that._ (Carol: 898-905)

Carol learnt to fill the gaps that her family left by finding a proxy family through her sisters, who were also studying in the same city, and the Overseas Christian Fellowship.\(^{424}\)

_ I really looked forward to weekends when I could leave and be with my sister and speak Chinese and eat rice. That was when I met OCFers. to be with Chinese people. To be with people who didn’t swear. To be with Christian people and to eat rice. (laughter) I was very homesick. I didn’t really have close friends in my first year. I felt really intimidated by a lot of the Australians. I dwelt too much on the fact that there was nobody like me._ (Carol: 1428-1443; 1461-1462)\(^{425}\)

Many parents have had to negotiate the separation that is involved in educating their children. In speaking of her mother, Tina says: _“She had ambivalence about me going away because she_

\(^{424}\) The Overseas Christian Fellowship (OCF) is an organisation set up to cater for the needs of overseas Christian students in Australia.

\(^{425}\) For the reason behind why she felt the Australians were intimidating, see p. 301 in the section “Ethnicised education,” this chapter.
wanted her children always to be around. But she never ever had any problems in terms of wanting higher education for her children" (Tina: 222-226). Family dispersal is often the result of the educational pursuit for many families.

My grandparents grew up and brought up children in a time of British rule in Malaysia. On mother's side, all three children were sent to Aussie universities. All three families never returned to Malaysia. On father's side, he was sent as a Colombo Plan scholar (a scholarship) and he sponsored two later siblings as international students studying in Australia. My extended family live throughout the world. My maternal grandfather's siblings mostly in America and England. (Laura: 180-188)

Family separation is one reason why many families, regardless of financial status, have opted to migrate instead of simply sending their children off to study overseas. Migration was the result of my parents’ negotiation for a good education while attempting to keep the family together.

The love life

Being too well educated is a deterrent to marriage. Perhaps those who choose this path have at one point or another decided to commit to education rather than marriage, as the opposing view considers “if there is any value in studying to advance herself if ‘one day, [she] will get married and have children’” (Hing 1998). It is possible that marriage and motherhood are already of a second priority for some. More than 30 per cent of the participants in this study, all of whom are highly educated professionals, are single and without a partner, and nearly ten percent are in de facto relationships. While singlehood is not recognised in Australia as a social problem, in Singapore since the 1980s, there has been perceived concern shown towards the increasing number of problematic graduate women who fail to get married (Lyons-Lee 1998). The concern in Singapore centres on the correlation between an increase in aged dependants and the reduction in the workforce due to lowered birthrates (Lyons-Lee 1998). There are several possible factors that contribute towards singlehood or later marriages amongst the educated diasporic women in Australia.

The number of years committed to study deters the woman from pursuing a relationship, or simply delays marriage plans and motherhood. Many reach the liminal boundary of what is considered an acceptable marriageable age, without a partner, simply due to the “necessity of

\footnote{Even amongst the married women, marriage and motherhood may take a second place to education and career pursuits.}
study" (Oram 1999, p. 100). “More highly educated women marry later, the survivor functions clearly indicate that most women are married by age thirty-five” (Brien and Lillard 1994). The qualification gained at the end also secures them financially and allows them to “recognize and avoid the dependency of marriage. Unlike most women, they were not obliged to marry in order to achieve a reasonable standard of living” (Oram 1999, p. 98), which meant that they did not have to sacrifice their educational investment for marriage. Fulfilment could still be reached through a satisfying career and network of friends. The strong sense of identification with one’s career also means that the woman can be independent, compared to others who had chosen marriage as their option to social status.  

The discipline of study leads to an independence that negotiates a life that is free from domesticity:

> It seems more pleasing to me to be facing a day where I shall be away from home earning my own living than ... attending to the breakfasts of a husband and family ... to cook dinners with love in them. (Oram 1999, p. 102)

Although such tensions between work and domestic duties are negotiated differently by women with partners, some diasporic women prefer to tango on their own if no suitable partner is found. Dorothy, who has a comfortable job despite her working-class status, says: “I quite enjoy my single life. My mother doesn’t push me to get married. She has seen a lot of unhappy marriages before among my cousins. I haven’t met the right person” (Dorothy: 871-879; 890; 894). Rather than to risk an unhappy marriage by marrying the wrong person, Dorothy’s job enables her to maintain a comfortable single life that includes travel and a home in a middle-class suburb in Australia. Her domesticity is by choice.

Being highly educated also enters many diasporic women into a space of being considered too smart for some men. Singaporean male graduates, for example, were found to prefer women with lower educational qualifications. Even those with equal qualifications are deemed unsuitable partners (Lyons-Lee 1998). The Chinese warn against being too intelligent for the girl’s own good, as we see in Tina’s comment:

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My mother had this idea that clever girls don’t get husbands. She saw it as a strategy. In other words, you must be clever but you must also be even cleverer not to show that you are clever, if you are a woman. (Tina: 230-236)

Similar to the negative image that many teachers received in the United Kingdom in the war years, highly educated women are “unattractive, unmarriageable spinsters [who are] seen as clever and therefore unfeminine” (Oram 1999, p. 101). A participant in Oram’s study stated: “You wouldn’t want to be too clever if you were going to be married” (p. 101). In short, “women had to be younger, shorter and less intellectually competent than their husbands” (Oram 1999, p. 101), although there could be those who “[shy] away from a husband with less educated ways” (Lee, in Lyons-Lee 1998). Whichever the reason, this is a phenomenon that is exacerbated in the Australian context where there are fewer Chinese men to choose from anyway, if that was one’s preference.429

Some diasporic women hold the view that marriage and motherhood are secondary to education and career ambitions anyway. Georgie appears to believe this in what she says:

My mother thinks you should get married and have kids, and there’s no other reality. Although she does agree that education is important but you shouldn’t overlearn as well. Having come to Australia, I probably absorbed quite a lot of Western values. Returning back to Singapore, that was the hardest bit with my Mum. I had to cope with her expectations as well, which are completely different to mine and my beliefs had changed. We probably agreed to just have our differences. (Georgie: 695-710)

Georgie’s mother stresses the need for marriage and children, while Georgie feels that perhaps motherhood is not all there is to life. They negotiate their difference by agreeing to float in that middle ground where their other values intersect. Her parents accept job security as an alternative to the security that a husband would otherwise provide. However, security for women in careers may be taking another turn again, as Georgie’s parents discover: “My sister had to go through a contract job, when she first started, and that shook my parents up as they always thought a job was permanent. Then their ideas about the workplace changed” (Georgie: 718-721). With the changing perspectives on job security globally, life’s identification in work and dependence on it for security may need to be reassessed.

429 See the section “Conspiracy theory,” in Chapter 6 “Perfect partners,” p. 216.
The increasing number of de facto relationships and single mothers in Australia challenges the dominant cultural semantics that women should marry and engage in the "fundamental feminine roles – motherhood and homemaking" (Oram 1999, pp. 96-97). Away from the stigma of singlehood or spinsterhood, which includes images of women who lead stunted, narrow and frustrated lives (Oram 1999), the diasporic women are able to carve a space for themselves that is not perceived as necessarily disadvantaged. Thus, some diasporic women equate singlehood with career ambition, and elevate the social position of singlehood over motherhood, by suggesting that true femininity need not come from marriage. The dominant ideas of what brings happiness to women are challenged by the opportunities created through education.

Their location in Australia also means that many have come with parents who have sacrificed much to enable them to have an Australian education and life. Oram argues from the English and Wales context that “the financial sacrifice made by many families to support their daughters through teacher training may have enhanced the woman teacher’s sense of responsibility towards parents and siblings and caused them to renounce or defer marriage” (1999, p. 102). Many poorer parents may also feel that their investment performs the role of a loan which is to be later repaid when the child begins to work (Lillard and Willis 1994). The diasporic woman in the surrogate son’s position may similarly feel this pressure or filial responsibility especially if the family continues to struggle financially.

*Mum and Dad would always remind me that we didn’t have the money, and that I had to study hard, and I had to get a good job. I had to get an independent job, not just a desk job. And Dad always stressed, “You had to be independent and you have to earn money on your own.” There was no other field that I could even go into. I loved another course and I wanted to do it but I knew the money wasn’t good so it wasn’t an option.* (Deana: 741-755)

Women like Deana pay the price for their education. Marriage would have to financially equate their present salaries to meet the economic support provided to their parents. Greenhalgh (in Lillard and Willis 1994) argues that parents educate their daughters in the hope that they will repay the family before marriage. In the case of surrogate sonship, that duty may continue after marriage. Here, socioeconomic class impacts on the diasporic woman’s life significantly.

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Educational enlightenment

Even though my “personal” history is written with many forms of otherness, such otherness, when combined with the background of my education, is not that of the victim but of a special kind of social power, which enables me to speak and write by wielding the tools of my enemies. (Chow 1993, p. 22)

The Australian educational pedagogy focuses on enabling the diasporic woman to think for herself, so as to wield the tools that enable her to negotiate her ethnicity in this uneasy territory of past blatant racism and present precarious political positions on race issues. This is an aspect of the Australian education system that is valued by many of the participants in this research:

_In school we were encouraged to say what we thought; were encouraged to think for ourselves. To be taught to learn and to think for yourself [is] far better than to teach someone to learn from the book. (Anita: 2385-2387; 2397-2399)_

For Anita, learning to think for herself means being able to see that a lot of the issues she faces as a Chinese woman in Australia are not necessarily just due to her ethnicity. She has learnt to look at the other factors that influence the issues she has to deal with. Thus, during the interviews, she would often relate to aspects such as gender, class, or religious factors, rather than ethnicity alone in her analysis of her own life:

_Back in Malaysia they seem to be content with what they have and what they don’t have. It was still the era where girls don’t really pursue much education. You are very limited in the kind of roles that you have and children, whether male or female, shouldn’t like arts and languages because they don’t lead to good jobs. I started to think there are a lot more options open to you. My thought processes worked differently. The Malaysians were very accepting of a lot of things, of their situation, of authority. It is a case of, “That’s the way it has always been and that’s the way it always will be.” Things aren’t always like this and things can be done differently and then you realise an alternative is possible. I was just frustrated because it seemed that people didn’t grasp that or didn’t see that. (Carol: 1517-1535; 1546-1549)_

For Carol, despite feeling that she is still lacking in her own opinions, her education in Australia has enabled her to question – gender issues, authority, among others – something her childhood friends were not able to when she last met them.
It would be narrow to say that it is only the Australian education that has opened the minds of diasporic women. For many, one of the consequences of colonialism that continues to impact on their experiences is the liberal feminist ideas advocated by the mission schools, especially those educated in the Methodist girls' schools.\textsuperscript{432} Of its influence, Georgie says: "Being a long-established all girls' school in Singapore, it highlighted that females could achieve as much as males" (Georgie: 50-52). Kelly adds:

\begin{quote}
The Methodist Girls' School promoted what I could term a Christian feminist motto, where girls were encouraged to aim for the best and the highest. The school motto is "Our utmost for the highest." We were always encouraged to strive for better things and our gender was never an issue. If you like something, you go for it and you do your best in it. (Kelly: 388-396).
\end{quote}

The girls were also encouraged to be physically competitive, according to Rosa: “There was certainly an emphasis on being a strong, independent woman. Being an all-girls’ school, it taught us that we could do everything – even excel physically, as well as in the disciplines traditionally reserved for men” (Rosa: 16-22). Kelly remembers the different competition events set up to encourage this:

\begin{quote}
It was very competitive in that we had all sorts of competitions from Speech Days to Concerts to sporting events. We were known to be good in many things and the challenge was against other girls' schools as well as the boys. We had to learn how to juggle school work with all these other interests right from young. (Kelly: 396-404)
\end{quote}

Thus, the women’s past and present educational opportunities allow them to aim for goals that they otherwise would not have considered. Their minds have become exposed to an alternative way of thinking that enables these objectives to be met. However, I return to my initial challenge and ask if it is the educational opportunity alone that has enabled this change in the diasporic woman’s life, or if other factors continue to have significant influence.

\textsuperscript{432} This counteracts the stereotypical notion of Christianity as the subjugator of women's rights and equality. One of the other aspects the mission schools encouraged was diversity: "The people were a lot more diverse. They came from a lot more different backgrounds. There were students who spoke English at home. There were lots of Malay students, there were lots of Indian students, and there were just people who were very different to me” (Bev: 266-279). There was also class diversity: “There were students who were on scholarships. So I did have contact, not only with the affluent students, but also with students that had to work quite hard after school in their father's shop” (Patty: 573-579).
So much is waged on education because of the cultural semantics that informs us that education is the real cause of difference for diasporic women. Perhaps this is because change in Malaysia and Singapore is still attributed to the British, due to the more blatant race policies that followed their departure. At the end of *Educating Rita*, Rita is challenged by what she has accomplished. She says to Frank: "I'm educated now. I've got what you have. ... I've got a room full of books. I know what clothes to wear, what wines to buy, what plays to see. I know what papers and what books to read" to which Frank responds: "Have you come all this way for so very, very little?" (Chepstow 1983, p. 115).

The education we gain and what we do with it thereafter may depend on our class position and social institutions that continue to convey that the woman's main function in life is as wife and mother. Despite this, it is possible to argue that it is what we do with our education that matters. Otherwise our education would have simply produced an educated elite who is guilty of being "another brick in the wall." In short, a futile project. Our education should:

Empower the oppressed to come to understand and change their own oppressive realities. ... For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, speaking to and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life. It must, moreover, be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. (Lather 1991, pp. 53, 55)

For those in the privileged position, where socioeconomic class and education enable them to pursue goals beyond the measured academic successes, like Alex's mother below, emancipatory enlightenment may come in the form of assisting other women who may not have the opportunity to help themselves. The educated diasporic woman may thus be seen to be in an advantaged position because of the access to power to change things. Alex, who is greatly inspired by her mother, describes her as thus:

> Her friends and she were all women lawyers who were the most educated and therefore the ones who were more in touch with the points of law surrounding women's rights. They were also the ones who dealt with divorce law, and they knew that there were certain laws that weren't all that good for women. So they were the ones that tried to make these things change. (Alex: 2165-2172)

433 For Pink Floyd's lyrics on "The wall," see http://www.pinkfloyd.net/lyrics/the_wall.html#3.
In *Educating Rita*, the protagonist is again confronted by Frank, who asks her: “What are you going to do?” (Chepstow 1983, pp. 135-36). As I sit here in a room of my own, surrounded by walls lined with books, I am equally challenged:

> The spring day is calling. The wind-chime is tinkling. I pick up my fishing rod and head off towards the river. It is another day. Another day for living. Another day for the life ahead with family and friends and all that matters.

> In the background, Pink Floyd plays “All in all it was just a brick in the wall. All in all it was all just bricks in the wall. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

During the Cultural Revolution in China, many took to fishing. Jung Chang records this activity in her father’s life and writes:

> Throughout history Chinese scholars and mandarins had traditionally taken up fishing when they were disillusioned with what the emperor was doing. Fishing suggested a retreat to nature, an escape from the politics of the day. It was a kind of symbol for disenchantedment and noncooperation. (1993, p. 313)

It is no coincidence that I end this chapter on the day of the Federal Elections by going fishing. However, I use this fishing symbol in this autoethnographic narrative to depict the tension involved in politicising the knowledge accumulated through this research and what that means in practice. To stay fishing is to have achieved “so very, very little.” To fish as an interim activity to the next political move is a sign of an accomplished educational goal.
Chapter 9

Challenging Chineseness

Reflections

In this thesis, *Chineseness at the crossroads*, I deployed the politics of liminality, as elaborated by Bhabha (1994a), to interrogate essentialist notions of Chineseness by examining the narratives of diasporic Chinese women living in contemporary Australia. I addressed the need for research to investigate the much theorised liminal third space to produce an empirical analysis of its impact on negotiations of Chineseness among these diasporic women. I posited that Chineseness is much more various and complex than the fixed categories assumed by essentialist discourses. The Chineseness negotiated is also complicated by the cultural semantics that are subscribed to or imposed on us, often according to what our imagined version of Chineseness is. We cannot neatly reduce our ethnicity to dichotomous *Chinese* and *Western* sections. It is much more complex. Further, this research has demonstrated that liminality helps to reconcile the incommensurability of ethnic subjectification within the diasporic context by opening up the space for acceptance of multiple subjectivities in flux. These dichotomous subjectivities emerge because of the biological markings on our bodies but the cultural practices and geographical rootings are more fluid. Instead of choosing between the past and present practices, for example, liminality acknowledges the avowal of both, or sometimes either, strategically dependent on the context that one is in. Thus, this research has emphasised that our ethnic subjectification lies somewhere between our biological and geographical origins, and our current, cultural identities — we are Chinese but how we live as Chinese women may be very different according to our individual changing contexts.

As much as this was a story about other women, this thesis was also very much my personal journey to understand my negotiations of Chineseness as a first-generation migrant in Australia. As such, I deployed autoethnography as my methodological tool to politicise our stories and to upset the traditional notions of the researcher | researched. I placed my narratives alongside the other women's stories to amplify the voices of marginalised and silenced women in the spirit of postcolonial feminist research. These narratives were also manipulated to undo positivist notions of the omnipotent researcher who mines the participants for data. I argued that both the researcher and researched stand on par to create knowledge together. Thus, I weaved the stories
captured by interviews and surveys together with my experiences of Chineseness to give a glimpse into the heterogenous range of diasporic Chinese women’s practices and beliefs.

**Results revisited**

My research indicated that Chineseness crosses complex, contradictory, and complicated trajectories in the lives of the diasporic women interviewed. Through the participants’ narratives and my autoethnographic narratives, we saw the difficulties of various cultural semantics, imposed and self-imposed, on such negotiations. My research depicts how the politics of liminality informs the negotiations of Chineseness in the contemporary Australian diasporic context. However, I theorise that liminality in Chineseness is at the crossroads,\textsuperscript{434} for many still resisted accepting Chineseness as a fluid form of cultural production, preferring to fix it to essentialist notions in their negotiations of gender, sexuality, family obligations, partner preferences, language use, and educational choices, within binaric frames of *Chinese* versus *not Chinese*. From the data collected, it was found that liminality is only deployed to a minimal extent. Overall, this thesis has illuminated how fictions of geography, culture, and biology intersect with the politics of liminality to inform our understanding of diasporic Chinese women’s lives in the Australian context. I highlight the main issues raised and address these in terms of relocation, rituals, and race, although these categories are interlinked.\textsuperscript{435}

**Relocation**

The geographical fiction was negotiated in different ways by the women due to their relocation to Australia. First, there was a distinct delineation between some women’s initial home and Australia, where Malaysia and Singapore were spoken of as an *other* country with *other* practices. Their perceptions of these places were often inaccurate or were often set in concrete. As such, the women with this binaric view of the past and present rejected the values and practices of their *other* home. Alternatively, although taking *root* in Australia, some still seemed to be very much influenced by the culture in their *original* home, even if they had lived most of their life in Australia, an indication that the past continued to impact on their ethnic subjectification.

\textsuperscript{434} Rather than to signal a point that forks into two roads, I use *crossroads* to mean a bend in the paradigm of Chineseness, or that we are nearly turning the bend.

\textsuperscript{435} For the purposes of alliteration in the use of these sub-headings, *relocation* refers to geographical fictions, *rituals* to cultural fictions, and *race* to biological fictions. Thus, *race* is used interchangeably with *ethnicity.*
Secondly, this relocation enabled some to be dislocated from the myth of fixing their identification to one geographical space. Being twice-removed from the geographical space of China may have contributed to these women’s ability to reattach and to consider Australia as their home, as in the luodi shenggen framework.\(^{436}\) Others spoke of their homes in seamless ways – one moment they are talking about Malaysia or Singapore and the next they are in Australia. This shifts continuously, suggesting that these arbitrary geographical boundaries artificially segment their lives. I asserted that liminality created room for these women to rehearse a culture that recognises the past and the present practices, modifying these according to their Australian location. This gave them the tools to fight against the politics of assimilation that continues to be the discourse at all Australian political levels, couched in multicultural discourses to sound politically-correct.\(^{437}\) Ang (2001a) argues that “the still recurrent demand that they sever their pasts and leave their old histories behind once they’re here. ... is a demand as ungenerous as it is unrealistic.” I suggest that we need to recognise that this new location impacts on our present, and that we are not merely hybridising towards some dominant other or into some homogenous form that collapses all difference and similarities. Instead, if we can begin to acknowledge that we fluctuate in the interstitial spaces of liminality, even if it is initially just between two cultural locations, then we will begin to imagine that our present is complexly interrelated to our past. It is then that we will continue to interrogate past and present politics that construct the cultural semantics that we ascribe to rationally and/or nonrationally.

The constant reference to place as the women narrated their lives indicated that the politics of space continues to impact on them because identification is a process that:

Occurs in situ, in relation to a symbolically and physically constructed “home”, “place”. ... Identity is thus place bound both conceptually and geographically to specific localized contexts of domination and resistance, and has “no being outside the asymmetrical contact with dominant categories.” (Luke and Luke 1998, pp. 732-33)

In stating her place, her home, the diasporic woman is also telling her story of her journey to and settlement in Australia.

\(^{436}\) On luodi shenggen, see p. 53.

\(^{437}\) Even as recently as March, 2002, Bellingham, the mayor of Warwick, a country town outside Brisbane, in commenting on the monocultural make-up of Warwick, states of migrants: “If they make the effort to assimilate, you’ll find the Australian rural community would be very tolerant and very appreciative” (Scott 2002, p. 1).
Ritual

The women’s rituals were rehearsed differently either in rejecting tradition or in keeping with the cultural fiction of what is Chinese. The rejection or acceptance of traditional roles ascribed to the Chinese women was seen as a rejection or acceptance of their Chineseness. First, certain practices were maintained by the diasporic women as a way of exhibiting their Chineseness. Filial piety, for instance, continues to be rehearsed as those who deviated from traditional expressions of parental devotion were deemed as unChinese. There was little fluidity in how this was rehearsed which confirmed how filial piety was still “extremely influential” (Slote 1998, p. 38).438

Gender and sexuality were also negotiated according to the dichotomous cultural semantics of what constitutes a good or bad woman, with the good woman associated with being Chinese and the bad as unChinese or westernised. This binary bind blinded the diasporic women from the forces that constructed what is good or bad, since the women’s focus was on the choices that needed to be made instead. I argued here that the politics of liminality enabled a position that stated a concurrent choice between traditionalism and modernism, and the strategic deployment of either according to the different contexts. I further asserted that liminality also enabled a focus on factors that constructed the ideal Chinese femininity and thus assisted in de-ethnicising gender and sexuality.

In the area of cultural and linguistic considerations, most mothers who were married to non-Chinese partners gave greater emphasis to their own ethnic background, often silencing their partner’s culture. The mothers also believed that language learning was critical to their child’s ethnic identification due to the biological fiction that marked them as other no matter how westernised they became. Others felt that having a second language was an added benefit for their children’s future in a globalised world, giving them options and future strategic manipulation of their different backgrounds. This approach to language learning may help to overcome an otherwise essentialist reason for acquiring Chinese as a second language.

Secondly, some women rejected the traditional Chinese culture. In the women’s role as mothers, for example, many reacted against the effects of the supposed Confucian mothering

438 On the influence of filial piety, see also p. 173.
style by asserting a very different role or by not having children, and liminality was minimally deployed. Many families accepted or rejected one’s past practices, instead of accepting and appropriating both. Such an essentialist idea of culture matches Huntington’s (1993) clash of civilisations theory, which in effect is a cultural clash theory. Thus, many families were disrupted, and this disruption was blamed on the children’s adoption of values and perspectives different to their parents’. These differences were ethnicised and the children were seen as westernised.

In examining the women’s response to the rituals or cultural practices in Australia, I conclude that those who had access to liminal theories or ideas were still found to be in a bind due to the strength of the cultural semantics governing Chineseness. I found that Berger’s words rang true: “[There is a] sway of Confucian-derived values in the lives of ordinary people, many whom have never read a Confucian classic and have little education, Confucian or other” (in Tu 1998b, p. 134). This is partly due to the translation of Confucianism over the years through folklore and folk religious practices. Thus, Confucianism is so absorbed into the Chinese psyche that many of the Chinese women often did not know why they practised or held certain customs and values. This urged me to consider as true that “most Chinese can be said to some extent to be Confucian” (Kuo 1998, p. 232). Other contemporary discourses such as feminist ideals and religion also impacted on us. The mental laziness and ignorance that still underpins our ideas of ethnic identification enable me to theorise that perhaps, on the surface, essentialist thinking simplifies life as one looks to existing cultural semantics to inform and explain one’s ethnic performances. However, the reality is that “Chinese culture is indeed not different from other cultures [in that] culture is either negotiated or assumed, challenged or revered, rejected or carefully guarded against alien contamination” (Pieke 1997). Ang (1998a) says we can say no to Chineseness for:

Not only does the moment of pure Chineseness never strike; there are also moments-occurring regularly ... in which the attribution of Chineseness does not make sense in the first place. The liberating productivity of the diasporic perspective lies “[in unlearning] that submission to ... ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate

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439 The silence in choosing not to have children was significant although this was not fully investigated within the boundaries of this research.

440 I am not proposing a collapsing of difference into a homogenous cultural hybridisation here but am urging for a practice that acknowledges the past practices as much as the present, while considering the new locational factors such as the sociopolitical and economic, and how these impact on governmental policies that in turn intrude into the daily negotiations of Chineseness within Australia.

441 Huntington’s theory has been criticised for its simplistic analysis of culture.
I counter argue that one can also say yes to Chineseness for the fixed traditions, even if modified, will not suddenly disappear with our present theorisation on liminality. However, we need to raise the awareness of traditions that are fixed according to a time and place for a particular political or economic purpose, so that traditions are not regurgitated unthinking. Ang (1998d) states that “fixed entities might not be there in reality, rather they are posited as constructs and lived as such” (p. 161). Where the subject is able to adopt a transcultural notion of liminality for self-reflexivity and political critique, much insight can be gained about the cultural semantics that oppress or control their processes of subjectification. For it is in the interstitial gaps of these evident parts that the ethnic subject gains insight into who they are and gain political power to do something about the inequities exposed. In our reinventions, there may arise claims of re-delineated ethnicity due to our need to define. If so, it is critical to continue to examine the politics of what we include and exclude in these new versions of Chineseness.

**Race**

Many of the Chinese women’s lives are still very much influenced by the biological fiction that marks them as different in Australia, no matter how alien her practices may become. Luke and Luke (1998), in citing Omi and Winant, argue that “race’ continues to be a core and defining cultural category that structures and shapes everyday motivation and common sense, social practices and perceptions” (1998p. 732), so that they can never abandon identifying themselves or being identified by others as Chinese. Thus, despite practices of sexuality that contravene acceptable expectations within the Chinese community, colour remains a marker of the diasporic woman’s identity among white Australians although she may perceive herself as unChinese.

The cultural semantics that non-Chinese men are more attractive influenced some diasporic women in their partner choice. Although her location in Australia was significant in her desire to be an equal to her mate, the common perception was that Chinese males were not able to

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442 This self-reflexivity is facilitated by migration and other cross-cultural encounters.
443 Luke and Luke (1998) highlight the plight of second-, third-, or fourth-generation migrants who continue to be targets of racism although their cultural and linguistic practices no longer appear like those of the first-generation migrants (see pp. 731-32).
offer this. Chinese men who did not conform to this stereotypical image were seen as westernised exceptions, instead of Chinese men who practised alternative forms of Chineseness. What is emphasised is the men’s ethnicity rather than practices. Chinese men were also perceived to be less faithful in marriage. Infidelity was ethnicised as a Chinese trait and some responded to this cultural semantics by choosing non-Chinese partners, only to discover that interracial relationships have their own problems too. However, the problems were often explained in terms of racial conflict first (Luke and Carrington 2000), although the real reasons were not necessarily racial. The irony was that white Australian men were perceived to be more promiscuous by some Chinese families.

Racist attitudes were often influenced by the diasporic woman’s language proficiency or preference. To negotiate the liminality created by their language choices, some diasporic women adopted the act of ventriloquism to gain acceptance into their various social groups, adapting their speech styles accordingly. This act enabled them to emphasise sameness, rather than differences in their cross-cultural interactions. I posit here that the Australian and Chinese communities need to be made aware of the varieties of Chinese dialects, and how not all Chinese people speak all the different dialects. Further, some Chinese may not speak any of the dialects at all. To not endorse the ethnicisation of language, the ability to speak or not speak a language should cease to be used as a measure of one’s Chineseness.

The biological fiction was also extended to the educational context where educational pedagogy catered to the students according to their phenotypical presentation. Some women felt that there were certain behaviours expected of a Chinese student, regardless of their differing abilities in the English language. I argued that de-ethnicisation of pedagogical tools will enable the best tools to be deployed to suit the particular learning or teaching contexts. The appropriation of tools according to the student’s ethnicity limits the student’s learning potential and severely handicaps the educator’s teaching approach.

The problematics raised by the biological fiction, and our inability to activate a politicised liminality, are perhaps because our modern mind metes mutually exclusive ideals. It precludes the possibility that some seemingly mutually exclusive facts are in fact not mutually exclusive, but that they dwell in that indeterminate space of being both and not both. There is still the prevailing hegemonic assumption that Australian and Asian cultural identities are “mutually
exclusive, antagonistic categories: the two cancel each other out; they are a contradiction in terms. One cannot ... be Asian and Australian at the same time” (Ang 2000, p. 126). Hence, Ang adds, Asian immigration to Australia remains severely moderated to avoid the possible dilution of the Australian white race and culture. The Chinese and Australian remain distinct in the Australian psyche according to the differences in skin colour. No doubt there is an ever more critical need for new narratives to transform the way we think by deconstructing the original desire for “one nation” (Ang 2000, p. 128) based on a common history and collective memory.

I add that such a notion needs to be distanced from the pluralistic idea of a multicultural Australia that presently informs our governmental policies. Although economically driven to include Asians in the current political context, the Australian multicultural project risks particularising the Chinese, and other ethnic groups, in essentialist terms, which then marginalises them (Ang 1994a). Such a policy continues to mark the Chinese, and other ethnic groups, according to race and promotes a superficial idea of harmony amongst the Australian people. However, Ang (1994a) argues that it is impossible to be anti-essentialist either. Instead, a position of liminality enables multiculturalism to be a site of struggle to affirm and undo Chineseness, and other ethnic identities, presently reduced to essentialist norms. For this reason, the term Asian-Australian, as raised in this thesis’ preface, serves as a political tool to destabilise present race discourses. It injects the Asian into the Australian national imagination, to say that we are different but we are also “like you” (Trinh 1991, p. 74).

Recapping the researcher | researched

The interweaving of the researcher | researched informed this research uniquely. It can be argued that being so closely involved with the data and participants positioned me prejudicially to view the stories from a subjective perspective. However, I reiterate that all research is already somewhat biased and argue instead that the data produced in this research would not have surfaced in quite the same way if not for the insertion of self into the other women’s narratives, and vice versa. As my life was used as a prism to understand my participants’

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444 Luke and Luke (1998) state that although race has been replaced by discourses of ethnicity in the Australian demographic discourses, it acts to simply “mark whites as unracial and all ‘others’ as visibly different” (p. 731).
445 For the full quote, see p. 74.
446 On the validity of research, see the section “Autobiographical authenticity” in Chapter 3 “Researcher | researched,” p. 104.
narratives, so too were their stories used to help me understand my journey.\textsuperscript{447} Thus, my experiences have also been shaped by these other women’s stories. I found that my comprehension of self as a Chinese woman changed as I progressed in my research, travelling from a naïve \textit{happy hybridity} model of ethnic subjectification to one where the striations of the past and present became much more indeterminate and complex, to arrive at a more fluid understanding of my own version of Chineseness. I found early on that I could no longer identify myself as a \textit{banana}.\textsuperscript{448} I slowly became more accepting of the Chinese heritage that I had denied in my identification as a \textit{banana}.

I realised too that my position is very privileged and that not all diasporic Chinese women have the same access to the discourses that now inform who I am as a Chinese woman living in Australia. This, I feel, is a huge limitation in this study as many of the women I interviewed did not grow in their understanding in quite the same way that I did. Despite setting up a forum on the Internet for my participants to further their discussion of their ethnic subjectification, few have actively engaged in the discussions. Others did not have access to this forum. Yet others could not comprehend the complexity of a liminal space that breaks down the simplistic dichotomies that they presently understand. However, because of the few who did come to integrate their past with their present, and from what I have personally gained from this research, I have been challenged to politicise this knowledge through the educational context. I also found that although the use of the short story \textit{Beyond limbo}, by Kitty Vivekananda, was sometimes useful to introduce the concept of liminality to my participants, many only gained a \textit{happy hybridity} understanding of being Chinese in Australia, identifying themselves as \textit{bananas} or \textit{half-and-halves}, both in dualistic terms. However, this response was gained without any intervention from me, so as not to bias their reaction to the story. Use of such texts in the classroom context, as previously discussed, should generate better understanding of the liminal concepts and encourage strategies for ethnic subjectification.

Perhaps in future studies, the focus could be on fewer women in the form of longitudinal studies. It would be interesting to see how women negotiate their ideas of Chineseness over a longer period of time. The knowledge gained in recording the different strategies used with the women’s awareness of the liminal framework will benefit many. I feel it is also necessary to further investigate factors that lead to essentialising and hybridising tendencies in the women’s

\textsuperscript{447} Richardson (1992) also speaks about how her participants’ stories have affected her (see p. 134).

\textsuperscript{448} I also found that my whiteness \textit{inside} was not so white.
lives. I echo just a few raised by Luke and Carrington (2000): interracial relationships, non-heterosexual preferences, detachment from family and/or culture, critical events, abnormal families, exposure to cultural difference, and experiences of racism. Studies in these areas will encourage us to further interrogate ethnic subjectification and to raise the awareness of the cultural semantics that we subscribe to for cultural appropriation. It is hoped that we also realise that there is much that is shared amongst us but there is also much that is different in how we practise our Chineseness or other subjectivities. For me, this journey has been an enlightening experience to give me a fluid position from which to be Chinese. Perhaps another study could observe how Chineseness is negotiated by diasporic Chinese men living in Australia, and diasporic Chinese who speak mainly Chinese, a group I was not able to interview due to my own language lack. I am sure the issues raised from these other groups will also contribute significantly to our understanding of the Chinese diaspora in Australia.

**Ramifications**

*When I hear our government and politicians spout misguided views and statistics about Asian invasion and negative stereotypes of Asians, I am ashamed to be Australian. It is time that we see that Australian is a nationality with a variety of races. I like how Americans think because they are a nationality first, race second. It gives them a mutual bond, goal, and identity. (Laura: 484-491)*

My analysis of the personal and autoethnographic narratives show that Chineseness is negotiated complexly by the diasporic women, according to the various cultural semantics that influence these negotiations. As Laura suggests above, what politicians and the media espouse influences our ethnic subjectification, and this along with other cultural semantics and sociopolitical and economic factors, as previously discussed, in turn impact on how we are perceived by others. My research also indicates the value of liminality in these negotiations. Where choices in relation to our gender and sexual practices, family relations, partner, and education have affected our perception of self as Chinese or unChinese, liminality enables a break from binaric options. It proffers instead a position where our past and present practices can be accepted without rejecting who we are as Chinese women living in Australia. An understanding of the complex and complicated processes that inform ethnic subjectification may encourage a perception of Chineseness and other ethnicities that is unfixed from present stereotypic portrayals of ethnic groups. From my examination of the practices of Chineseness in the diasporic context, I also found that the various cultural semantics of geography, culture,
and biology continue to impact deeply on the psyche of both the diasporic and mainstream communities. However, I posit that our ethnic identity, which is based on the biological markings on our bodies, can be untied from our cultural and geographical identities.

I thus address these findings by asserting that it is essential to consider this research's implications at a level that seeks to deconstruct our present thinking about ethnic subjectification in the educational context. The school, and particularly the subject English, are productive sites for undertaking this kind of work. Given the focus on challenging the dominant culture's representation of self in the Year 12 English syllabus in Western Australia, I argue that it is necessary and critical to interrogate representations of ethnicities that gravitate towards notions of essentialism in the classroom context. I assert that instances of negotiations at the liminal crossroads have an unsettling quality that raises our awareness of the "construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (Bhabha 1992b, p. 438). If such an awareness of culture can be raised within the classroom context, a disruptive reading of ethnicity can be produced. As students question what it means to be Chinese, Anglo-Australian, Italian, German, or Greek, seeds can be sown towards upsetting them from their seats of essentialist complacency. I also posit that a single event or educational session will not invoke a change that is lasting or transforming, and suggest that our educational institutions appropriate the liminal framework into their curriculum and pedagogy, so that we are infused with this alternative concept to inform thinking.

Curricula changes

Essentialist readings of ethnicity in the English classroom can be disrupted by engaging the use of texts to encourage the students to contest current readings of ethnicities, to nurture an environment that embraces liminality as an alternative reading. The implications of the changing Chineseness within texts should be investigated for two reasons, and I draw from Lionnet (1995) to support this proposal. First, Lionnet argues that literary texts may represent "the subjective experience of muted groups" (pp. 187-88). People of Chinese descent are certainly a marginalised group in our current English syllabus in Western Australia. This in itself is problematic since one of the general aims of the Year 12 syllabus is to "learn about, share in, and develop a critical awareness of the language and cultures of Australia" (Curriculum Council 1998, p. 51). Further to this, the rationale for the syllabus in developing the

460 See Fay's comment on p. 111. See also Anita's response to a short story used with some of my participants (p. 281). Although Anita gained from this activity, many others found little value in it.
student’s sense of self must surely be compromised if texts silence particular ethnic group’s experiences. Presently, although moves have been made to insert texts by authors of other cultural backgrounds into the syllabus, the emphasis is still on the Western canon, and representations of Chineseness are minimal.

Recently there was much debate about the inclusion of film texts such as *Star Wars* and Natasha Stott Despoja’s first parliamentary speech into the NSW HSC English syllabus. The debate focused on the political agenda underpinning such inclusions. Bond (2002) sums up the argument as such:

> It seems to assume that teaching the Western canon is not political, has no political or other agenda, and is a purely objective intellectual exercise. ... They are [in fact] filled to the brim with cultural norms and expectations and social propaganda. Much as I love the “Great Books” I can see that to impose them on students and to expect those students also to uphold them as “great” is in itself arrogant. A great number of English students do not share our love [italics added] of the canon, no matter how much time you spend studying them and their merits as great works of literature. (Bond 2002)

I have included this discussion to question the political agenda in the current English syllabus. Are we holding on to the canon to prolong the White Australia attitude of the Australian forefathers? Although the English module of the Graduate Certificate for Western Australian teachers now incorporates Asian writers in a variety of genres, the inclusion of other texts in the English curriculum is still so limited that they are perceived as marginal texts by marginal groups. This is significant in the working out of our future as a multicultural Australia, for texts from marginalised groups need to be given equal value to the Western canon so that multicultural education can be promoted as mainstream education for all at a national level, rather than education for the minority or marginalised, or education that is an elective unit amongst all the core units one undertakes. Ang (2001a) argues:

> The problem is that the history of what is generally called “multicultural Australia” is still treated as just a mere add-on to the “real” Australia: it is not recognised as an integral part of Australian heritage, and above all it is not seen as having a

450 Despoja is the Australian Democrats leader.
451 *Love* is italicised to emphasise how one may not enjoy a text as much since one cannot relate to it if one’s experiences are silenced or not positively affirmed in the text. When these needs are addressed, then student interest is gained, which then leads to enjoyment that comes from being challenged by the text, and so on, as stated in the Year 12 English syllabus (Curriculum Council 2002-2003, pp. 52-53).
452 This is part of the Access Asia Schools project. See “Partnerships” (2002).
transformative impact on how we conceive of Australian history – the way Aboriginality has.

Although my present discussion pertains to the English syllabus, a multicultural perspective needs to be inserted into the curriculum at every level and in every subject so that it is not just an “add-on.” It should be based on the rationale of “productive diversity” (Jupp 1996, p. 15), which assumes that migrants have a significant contribution to make to the country, as opposed to the deficit model, which assumes that Asian migrants, in particular, are a threat to the stability of this country. Approaching education from the productive diversity perspective benefits all Australians by encouraging a development of interest in the skills, languages, or cultures of different migrant groups, which will further enrich our arts and trading advantage in multiple world regions.

Secondly, Lionnet argues that “the ambiguities and indeterminacies inherent in the literary texts prevent the articulation of rigid or universalizing theoretical conclusions” (p. 186). Thus, I explore the possibilities opened up by using texts that challenge normalised portrayals to investigate the politics of representations of women with Chinese backgrounds, paying particular attention to how subjects engage with texts that disrupt the essentialist readings of ethnic subjectivities, and how this may then challenge their own negotiations of who they are. We see how educational moves to do so validated Vanessa’s experiences:

_The pivotal event I experienced in Year 12 was studying the three-unit English option, New Voices, for the HSC. Dealing with postcolonial writing, the texts we studied (Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife, J.M. Coetzee’s Life and Times of Michael K, Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion), made me aware that I was not alone in the alienation I had so often felt, and that the feeling of being somewhere between two very different worlds was not a condition unique to my small being._

_More significantly, perhaps, was the fact that it was text, literature. To find that writers beyond the “canon” could be studied for writing with literary merit about things I had experienced first hand made my personal experiences, in a way, legitimate, real. Issues that had always been pushed away into the background and/or ignored were actually being discussed and analysed as a part of somewhat esoteric literature. (Vanessa: 106-118; 124-131)_

Taken further, such reading practices also inform the other members of the student population about alternative ethnic subjectivities. As one of the process objectives of the Year 12 English syllabus is to understand how the construction of the text encourages particular responses in its readers to confirm or change their attitudes as they read, it is critical that reading practices are
interrogated for the power relations that produce them. In so doing, stereotypical portrayals of
Chineseness and other ethnic peoples are challenged. Furthermore, it is also essential to
highlight that one who is not typically Chinese is not necessarily unChinese. Instead the politics
of liminality should be taught to encourage a reading that accepts Chineseness outside the
normalised frames of Chineseness.

The texts could also be read intertextually to understand how other texts shape their readings.
For example, students could be asked to give responses to a contemporary text portraying
Chinese characters in Australia. For ease of discussion, I suggest Beyond limbo by
Vivekananda (1992). The students’ readings of Vivekananda’s character could be
interrogated by considering other texts such as A golden shanty by Dyson (1963), which
portrays the early Chinese gold miners in Australia, and the way such portrayals may
contribute to how they shape their present readings. It is useful here to also investigate the
historical setting of the two stories and how government policies such as multiculturalism and
the Immigration Restriction Act may have influenced the construction and readings of these
texts. The economic tensions could also be highlighted as the cause of the conflict between the
Western and Chinese characters in A golden shanty. It would also be useful to produce a
gendered reading of the texts, and to alert them to how Chinese women were silenced in the
earlier Dyson text. Students could also be asked to refer to other texts that they have informally
read, as well as their own contexts (gender, class, sexuality, religion), to understand how these
collectively may have influenced their expectations, attitudes, and values in the present reading.
Educational awareness will give birth to the beginning of a hybrid discourse that encourages a
reading of ethnicity from the interstitial spaces that recognises the inequitable socioeconomic
layers that create difference. Such readers will develop critical capacities to realise that texts,
including non-fiction and non-print texts, are constructed with a political agenda in mind, and
that information and language are selectively appropriated to foster the prevalent attitudes
within a particular historical and geographical setting. Such an invasive reading of texts helps
us to dare to imagine a new Australia so that the Yellow Peril may cease to act as the cultural
semantics that explains economic instability in Australia.

453 A very useful text, currently in the Year 12 English syllabus as a reference text, is From the margins by
Wayne Martino (1997). It positions the texts from different cultural groups without privileging any particular
group. It also has a relevant activity for the text Beyond limbo by Kitty Vivekananda (pp. 74-80).
454 For a copy of the text, see Appendix 3.
455 For a copy of the text, see Appendix 4.
456 The historical and cultural contexts impacting on the construction of a text is one of the general principles
for comprehension in the English Year 12 syllabus (Curriculum Council 2002-2003, p. 52).
The politics of liminality, as applied to the use of texts, also influences the students’ composition. In reading a wider variety of texts that include a greater range of experiences, students will be encouraged to pen their own experiences. I borrow here from Lorde (1990) who cites Momaday: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. … The greater tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (p. 8). If all we read is from the Western canon, then all we reproduce will be copies of the Western canon. We need to imagine stories that include our own experiences, and this will encourage creativity that produces stories that are freer from clichés.

Just as students produce gendered readings by drawing on what they already know about gender (Martino and Cook 1998), they likewise produce readings of ethnicity based on existing knowledge about gendered ethnic stereotypes. An awareness of the cultural semantics governing how their experiences are formed will enable the students to further interrogate the powered forces that shape how they perceive themselves, and to develop their own political positions, from which to exercise who they are as subjects in contemporary Australia. In reading and writing about their own experiences, all Australians will find a legitimate place as proactive citizens of this country. In understanding their own political stance on the issues discussed, the students will in turn learn to appropriate the tools required to address a variety of audiences in their writing.

**Pedagogical practices**

The implications of a complex and complicated notion of ethnic subjectification are also critical considerations for pedagogical practices within the educational context. Teachers should be educated to reflect on their assumptions of culture and how these have impacted on them in different educational contexts. It is worth noting that discrimination in the classroom is often subtle and engaged by those who are ignorant of such practices (Hatton 1998b). Garcia (1984) states that discrimination is not a deliberate or conscious practice nor is it “blatant racism or sexism, nor is it based on malice” (p. 104). For example, in selecting texts that come only from the Western canon in their teaching programme, teachers often unconsciously discriminate against their students by not including the narratives of other ethnic groups. The students’ awareness of the experiences of other groups whom they encounter in their day-to-day activities is then hampered.

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457 See “Purpose and Audience” under the Composing section (Curriculum Council 2002-2003, p. 57).
Discrimination by teachers also manifests itself in practices such as lowered academic expectations, differential discipline measures, sex-role, and ethnic group stereotyping (Garcia 1984). In the following narrative, I highlight the assumptions that teachers at a Perth high school in Western Australia held towards the students of different ethnic backgrounds. This incident took place in 1998 between a cooperating teacher on the school’s staff and me, while I was supervising student-teachers on their teaching practical.

“That was a lovely class!” I said, as I breezed in towards the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher seemed pleased with the comment but then proceeded to contextualise the class for my benefit.

“You have your Asian gang in there, you know, kids who have been breaking and entering – activities outside the school. There is one Aboriginal boy and a bully in there as well.”

“In my student’s next class?” I asked, puzzled by her description, if she had meant the class I had just observed.

“I live in this area,” I thought to myself, “but I haven’t seen these Asian gangs terrorising the neighbourhood. Do they come out after hours? Are they members of triads? Who runs these triads? Their parents? Why haven’t they approached me for support since I am Asian too?”

The teacher continued to paint the rest of the delinquents and I found myself feeling more and more indignant that such discriminatory attitudes could be espoused so easily.

On other observations of the class, I met the “problem kids” again. Once more, the behavioural patterns that the cooperating teacher had warned me about did not manifest themselves. I dismissed the teacher’s attitude as an isolated incident. On subsequent visits to that school and other local schools, I was appalled that such positions prevail amongst both experienced and new staff members, either consciously or otherwise. I was concerned that these would be perpetuated as student-teachers adopt their mentors’ views. (Agnes, autoethnographic narrative)

Lortie (1975) argues that student-teachers learn through an “apprenticeship-of-observation” (p. 65), embracing influences intuitively or imitatively, often without reflection. Hatton (1998b) adds these adoptive attitudes may not change with teacher education. She argues that “teachers often engage in mimicry of existing practices rather than involving themselves in reflective consideration of what might be more appropriate” (p. 7). Tertiary institutions that produce these teachers also perpetuate these practices as we saw in how they replicate orientation programmes that cater to the needs of students according to ethnic stereotypes.\(^{488}\)

\(^{488}\) See Alex’s predicament on p. 313.
In the description of the class above, the cooperating teacher was essentially categorising the students according to existing stereotypical ethnic roles. It is almost amusing, if not for the severe consequences of such discrimination, that middle-class Asian students are often assumed to be diligent and capable students while working-class Asians are ascribed gangster qualities. A deficit view is adopted towards such gangsters. The liminal space challenges these notions by highlighting the need to acknowledge that some students do not fit either of these categories. Some students can be said to exist in an ethnic liminal limbo. For example, a middle-class Asian student, assumed by the teacher to have the capacity to gain any dux award, may have learning difficulties which are ignored or unidentified due to the stereotype s/he is forced to fit into. On the flip side, the working-class Asian with academic potential may not be given that opportunity through lowered expectations from the teachers. Dent and Hatton (1998) illustrate the significance of thinking beyond the beyond through the liminal space by noting that Vietnamese students in an Australian primary school were given positive treatment despite belonging to the lower socioeconomic strata. Though now economically poor, their parents were once middle-class professionals in Vietnam who retained middle-class attitudes and values towards education when they came to Australia. The teachers considered these students' historical background and recognised them as having the potential for academic success.

Hatton (1998a) states that “teachers ... need to critically examine cultures and cultural responses, including their own, to assess which of their cultural practices and responses are flawed, even oppressive” (p. 6). Dent and Hatton (1998) assert that it is crucial to be reflective of one's educational strategies in monitoring the intended and unintended effects of these. Attention to the specific nature of their individual students should be given so that diversity and social inequalities can be factored into their classroom. They suggest that to better understand the cultural diversity in the classroom, student-teachers should engage in ethnographic activities to immerse themselves in different cultural sites. This would be ideal if it could be carried out. In practice, I feel, few would have the opportunity to be so immersed in a variety of cultures as to move from merely knowing about a culture to the position of knowing a culture experientially. Teacher-training time would need to be significantly extended for this immersion to be effective.

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459 Biggs (1996) outlines the paradox of the Chinese learner who is presumed to use superficial learning strategies such as rote-learning, yet outperform Western students who supposedly use deeper level strategies. The clear binaric delineation of learning strategies according to ethnic background is problematic.

460 On ethnic stereotypes and socioeconomic class, see Dent and Hatton (1998).

461 While class and gender intersect with ethnicity to impact on our subjectivity, we must caution against essentialising attitudes and behaviours according to these factors as well.
The liminal space enables one to regard cultural differences and similarities without necessarily going through this ethnographic process by encouraging educators to consider that some students do not fall neatly into one mould or another. While it must be acknowledged that, in certain cases, knowing about a cultural group would arm one with a set of strategies for dealing with students who behave in non-conformist ways, it must still be argued that the strategies employed need to be specifically tailored to the needs of the specific student for that specific context. For sometimes a student may fit one pigeon-hole, at other times another, and at other times neither, none or both simultaneously. Adopting such a framework would enable us to comprehend how “[they are] the moon and [they are] not” (Trinh 1991, p. 4).

Reverie

I started off by asking “What is Chineseness?” and thought that it is something that I can choose to assert or not assert as a Chinese woman in Australia. However, I have found that Chineseness is an inescapable identity that is marked by the biological signs on my body although I do not necessarily practise the rituals that so many ascribe to in affirming their Chineseness. Thus, often in writing this thesis, I found myself turning Chinese. As the pages filled with words and as I poured over more and more texts and data, I found myself learning more about this ancient culture that I have been born into, yet had little familiarity with till now. There is this awareness tune by Fenton that pops into my head each time I think about my Chineseness and it goes: “I’m turning Japanese/ I think I’m turning Japanese/ I really think so/ Turning Japanese/ I think I’m turning Japanese/ I really think so.” For me, singing it is evidence of the unnatural link between culture and ethnicity, and the range of cultural semantics ascribed to and prescribed. Being born Chinese did not automatically make me Chinese. I have had to learn how to become Chinese. I don’t think I have arrived, nor will I ever arrive. It will be an on-going process of negotiation as I weave in new knowledges of Chineseness with other knowledges of Australianness or Europeanness or whatever-elseness, into my practices.

For what is Chineseness after all? It is not a fixed entity nor should it be fixed. Its fixed version is more Confucianism, not Chineseness, and this naturalised link has caused much confusion to many Chinese who do not seem to appreciate nor practise the Confucian maxims. For those

463 For the full lyrics, see [http://hem.passagen.se/paren/lyrics.htm#Turning%20Japanese](http://hem.passagen.se/paren/lyrics.htm#Turning%20Japanese).
who hold on to these traditions, either consciously or as an absorbed act, do so as a desperate attempt to define themselves as Chinese. It is because Chineseness is nebulous that there have been such attempts to fix it. If we as Chinese people can acknowledge that the Chineseness we long for or seek to glorify is dead, we will then be able to move out of that essentialist space into another where we can then negotiate other forms of Chineseness freely and without guilt, accepting both past and present practices and values. Awareness of the liminal space will hence enable us to develop a cultural identity that is not just assimilated to the dominant culture, nor fixed to some static notion of Chineseness, but one that is living and changeable.

I borrow from Ang to sum up the tensions within Chineseness: “If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent” (Ang 1993, p. 14). I find this statement problematic as consensual power is determined by the specific context that one is in. Although Ang later adds: “When I say I am Chinese it is a choice, but it is not a completely free choice” (Ang 1998d, p. 155), that freedom to give consent to Chineseness may not be present at all in certain contexts. I quote Ang here to elaborate:

Traffic through a crossroads is never free flowing and uncontrolled: there are traffic lights, road signs and rules that all road users must obey, for example, those approaching the crossroads from a minor road are supposed to give way to those passing through from the main road. Consequently, borderlands (which are spaces where the condition of crossroads traffic is normalized) are generally heavily policed and patrolled, and it depends on your identity card, your credentials, what you own, or simply the way you look [italics added]. … These interstitial spaces are pervaded by power structures of their own. … It matters who you are in borderland encounters, just as it matters which borders … are being crossed. (Ang 1998b, p. 16, Ang’s italics)

Although certain factors, such as economic class, academic and employment credentials, gender, and so on, may enable us to go against the traffic in certain contexts, or to reinvent the cultural semantics that govern Chineseness, sometimes these factors are powerless as one is reduced to the biological markings that render one unmistakably Chinese. It is likely that Chineseness is attributed to one who looks Chinese, regardless of the identification choice made.

Where consent can be given, it is in terms of how we may choose to practise our versions of Chineseness. This is where we find ourselves at the crossroads, and I iterate crossroads that are
junctions of multiple trajectories. Here, we decide which versions of cultural practices and
values we want to subscribe to as we adapt our practices to our current changing contexts.
Here, too, we need to acknowledge as Chinese women that difference will multiply and that our
versions of Chineseness should not be imposed on other Chinese. As we learn to accept
difference within Chineseness, then the non-Chinese may also recognise these differences.
Perhaps we can also view our subjectification, through the lens of the avant-garde Chinese art
movement, as a reaction to our context, formulating and reformulating as this context changes,
rather than attempting to constitute purist forms. Particularly interesting is Yang’s art which
employs traditional ink and wash painting calligraphy, instead of obliterating all traditional
forms, to subvert the tradition’s own paradigms and values.\textsuperscript{463} There is a sense in which this
strategy echoes my argument that the new finds its variation from the old. There is always
something familiar about the new, where the old is never fully erased. As Bhabha (1994a)
asserts:

> The “beyond” is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past. [It is a]
> moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of
difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and
exclusion. (p. 1)

I then question if such differences will cause confusion since nobody knows how the other may
act or respond to situations any more. I borrow again from Ang (1998b) who questions how we
can communicate meaningfully in the context of the differences met at the crossroads, which
should not be ignored to keep the trajectories visible and the heterogeneity alive, when
meaningful dialogue paradoxically comes with shared commonalities that we understand. To
effect understanding, the appropriate rhetorical strategies need to be employed, according to
Ang. I thus return to my application of liminality as the cultural semantics framing ethnic
subjectification as the discourse in the English classroom, to teach us how to rethink sameness
and difference. Thus, in our reappropriation of present cultural semantics, we need to realise
that the existing cultural semantics are not naturally fixed fictions. We can thus critically
construct new narratives from these cultural semantics to reduce the inequities experienced at
the crossroads without further paralysing Chineseness, and other ethnicities, to impotent and
subjugated sites.

\textsuperscript{463} For more detail on Yang’s art, see Hanru (1994, p. 36).
Ang (1998b) calls for an increase in the discursive crossroads traffic. I transfer this to the crossroads encounters at the micro level of everyday experiences, to avoid producing bourgeoisie theory that is decontextualised and with little regard for the pragmatics in the particular and concrete contexts. Students who begin to exercise their political positions within the school setting may one day enact governmental policies necessary to provide the infrastructure for this traffic, which we cannot escape, for meaningful meetings can only be experienced in this spatial tension, through the gaps of recognition. Although this research has enabled me to appropriate the road rules according to the contexts faced within the politics of liminality, to arrive at a point where I am comfortable with my versions of Chineseness, it does not assume the absence of tensions that continue to make this journey complicated, complex, and sometimes even confusing. However, it matters that tensions are no longer perceived as a deficit, nor a negative state of limbo. Instead the tensions arising from the gaps exposed are positive signs of an awareness of the power relations that impact on the cultural semantics that govern the diasporic Chinese woman’s subjectivity. While this research is not conclusive, it opens up the road for further exploration on how ethnic subjectification is perceived. It is no longer just black or white but both, and “we need to substitute an ‘and’ for the ‘either/or’ logic [which can only breed] polarised destructive conflict” (Bretherton 1998, p. 9). May we then learn to further appropriate these road rules for ethnic subjectification in contemporary Australia.

And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice. (Trinh 1991, p. 21)
## Appendices

### Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Migration year</th>
<th>First language</th>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Partner’s ethnic background</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>Widow</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Scottish/German/ English</td>
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<tr>
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* Mandy, Patty, Pearl and Tina are participants from interviews conducted by Diana Giese. Permission has been sought to use their interview transcripts. However, no personal details are available.

** Also came as a student in 1961.
Appendix 2

A. Face-to-face interview questions

Education

Overseas
1. When you think about your schooling overseas, what stands out significantly in terms of how it made you view your identity as a Chinese woman in Australia?
   • Who were your friend/s or best friend/s at school? Tell me about them. Were they different to your friends here? Did they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds?
   • Which teachers can you remember and why? What impact did the teacher/s have on you in terms of how you viewed yourself as a Chinese?
   • Did anyone treat you differently because of the way you look? How?
2. Would you have preferred an education in Australia?

Australia
1. When you think about your schooling here, what stands out significantly in terms of how it made you view your identity as a Chinese woman in Australia? (My first day made me feel different)
   • Who were your friend/s or best friend/s at school? Tell me about them. Did they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds?
   • Which teachers can you remember and why? What impact did the teacher/s have on you in terms of how you viewed yourself as a Chinese?
   • Did anyone treat you differently because of the way you look? How?
2. Would you have preferred an education overseas?

Tertiary
1. What were the significant people or moments that shaped your identity - friends, lecturers, subjects?
2. Did you enjoy your course?

Employment
1. In your work, do any issues arise for you as a Chinese woman living or working in Australia?

Family

Parents
1. Tell me what your relationship with your father/mother is/was like.
2. What is your father/mother like in terms of their practices of Chineseness? Are you similar/different to them in any way in terms of your practices of Chineseness?
3. Are there issues arising out of your relationship with your parents which influence your identity as a Chinese? (living at home, leaving home, career, partner, etc)

Siblings
1. Tell me what your relationship with your sibling is/was like.
2. What are your siblings like in terms of their practices of Chineseness? Are you similar or different to them in any way in your practices of Chineseness?
3. Are there any issues arising out of your relationship with your siblings that influence your identity as a Chinese woman living in Australia?

Family Issues
1. Does your family have particular views about Chineseness? (Are there any particular occasions celebrated at home as a result of these views?)
2. Are there members outside your immediate family (friends, grandparents, relatives) who have influenced you in any way in terms of your identity as a Chinese woman?
3. If you were to sum up your family’s ethnic background and cultural practices, how would you describe them? Is this how they perceive themselves?

Migration
1. Tell me about your migration experience.
2. Did you want to come to Australia?
   • If yes, why?
   • If not, did you have any strategies for settling into Australia?
3. Have you ever been back to your home country?
If yes:
• What was it like?
• Did you feel at home/different to the people there?
• Did it change your perspective on your home country or Australia in any way?
If not:
• Why not?
• Do you still have much contact with anyone there? Why/not?

4. How do you feel about living in Australia now? Do you think you have changed? How?
5. Would you leave Australia? Where would you go? Why?
6. Are there issues which have arisen for you as a Chinese woman in Australia which you didn’t face in your home country? (school racism; English teacher - ethnicity an issue)

Self
1. How would you see yourself as a Chinese woman?
2. How do you think others see you as a Chinese woman?
3. In terms of your ethnic background, have you ever been described in a way that you have found offensive?
4. Do you use your Chinese name? Why/not? Has this always been the case?

Partner
1. Tell me about your partner.
2. Is your partner’s ethnic background an issue for you? Why/not?
3. Does your partner influence you in terms of how you view yourself as a Chinese woman living in Australia?

Children
1. If you do/don’t have children, are there issues related to your children in terms of their Chineseness?
2. Do you do anything to develop/silence their awareness of their ethnic background? What do you do?

Leisure Activities
1. Do any of your interests make you question your ethnicity in any way?
2. Do your choice of friends make you think about your ethnicity in any way?

Languages
1. How do you think your language capacity impacts you in terms of your ethnic identity?

Beliefs and Values
1. What do you think is the main thing that governs the way you live/ think?
2. Do your beliefs raise issues for you as a Chinese woman living in Australia?
3. What strategies do you have to cope with these issues?

Ethnic Awareness
Stereotypes
1. Are you aware of ethnic stereotypes?
   • What do you think is the stereotypical Chinese?
   • Do you think you fit this stereotype? How/not?
   • How are you Chinese or not Chinese then?
   • Have you been stereotyped in any way? How do you feel when people stereotype you according to existing stereotypes of the Chinese?
   • How do you feel about being stereotyped according to the way you look physically? Do you do anything to avoid/encourage this stereotyping?

Rejection/Acceptance
2. Where are you from? How do you feel when someone asks you that question?
3. Can you think of incidents, here and in your home country, that have made you aware of your ethnic background? How does that make you feel about being a Chinese woman?
4. Do you think you have ever been treated differently on the basis of your appearance? How does that make you feel?
5. Have you ever been rejected by any ethnic group? How? How did you respond to the rejection? (What did you do/how did you feel?)
6. Do you feel rejected by any ethnic group? Why do you think you feel this way? How does it make you feel? What do you do to cope with this rejection? Do you wish to be accepted/rejected by any particular group? Do you do anything to be accepted/rejected by a group?

Ethnic Binaries
7. How do you practise your Chineseness? Are there things you do to be/not Chinese?
8. Are there aspects of being Australian that appeal to you? Are there things you do to be/not Australian?

Hybridity
9. Do you find your ethnic background confusing at times? When are they confusing? How do you deal with this confusion?
   - If you had to choose between being Chinese or being Australian, which would you choose? Why?
   - How are you Chinese or Australia?
   - Do you choose to be in one group sometimes and the other at other times? Do you think this is a conscious choice?
   - Do you think you can be Chinese and Australian at the same time, or can you only be Chinese or only Australian?
   - Do you think it is good or offensive to be flexible in your ethnic group choice?
   - Is it possible for you to be Chinese at times, not Chinese at other times, both Chinese and Australian and neither Chinese nor Australian yet at other times? Is there benefit in this at all?
   - What do you think it means to be Chinese then? How is one Chinese? Do you think you are born Chinese or do you learn to be Chinese?

10. Where would you place yourself in this diagram? (1 is for old culture, 2 for new culture)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefer 1 over 2</th>
<th>Don't like either</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefer 2 over 1</td>
<td>Embrace both</td>
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</table>

11. Would you place yourself anywhere else apart from these four boxes? (outside or inside the boxes)
B. Internet survey questions

Please answer these questions in the order that they appear. Thank you for your participation.

Education
Consider the following questions first for your schooling overseas, then for your schooling in Australia, unless one is irrelevant.
1. When you think about your schooling, what stands out significantly in terms of how it influenced your identity as a Chinese woman? (you may want to focus here on significant friends - did they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds? Influence of teachers and significant events.)
2. Did anyone treat you differently (positive and negative) because of the way you look? How?
3. Would you have preferred an education in Australia/overseas? Why/not?

Tertiary
1. What were the significant people or moments that shaped your identity - friends, lecturers, subjects?
2. Did you enjoy your course? Why/not?

Employment
1. In your work, do any issues arise for you as a Chinese woman living or working in Australia?

Family
Parents
1. What is/was your relationship with your father/mother like?
2. What is your father/mother like in terms of their practices of Chineseness? Are you similar/different to them in any way in terms of your practices of Chineseness?
3. Are there issues arising out of your relationship with your parents which influence your identity as a Chinese? (eg living at home, leaving home, career, partner, etc)

Siblings
1. Tell me what your relationship with your sibling is/was like.
2. What are your siblings like in terms of their practices of Chineseness? Are you similar or different to them in any way in terms of your practices of Chineseness?
3. Are there any issues arising out of your relationship with your siblings that influence your identity as a Chinese woman living in Australia?

Family issues
1. Are there members outside your immediate family (friends, grandparents, relatives) who have influenced you in any way in terms of your identity as a Chinese woman?
2. If you were to sum up your family’s ethnic background and cultural practices, how would you describe them? Is this how they perceive themselves?

Migration
1. Tell me about your migration experience.
2. Did you want to come to Australia?
   • If yes, why?
   • If not, did you have any strategies for settling into Australia?
3. Have you ever been back to your home country?
   If yes: What was it like?
   Did you feel at home/different to the people there?
   Did it change your perspective on your home country or Australia in any way?
   If not: Why not?
   Do you still have much contact with anyone there? Why/not?
4. How do you feel about living in Australia now? Do you think you have changed? How? Why/not?
5. Would you leave Australia? If so, where would you go? Why?
6. Are there issues which have arisen for you as a Chinese woman in Australia which you didn’t/wouldn’t face in your home country?
7. What is your position on your citizenship? Why have/haven’t you given up your initial citizenship?

Self
1. How would you describe yourself as a Chinese woman? How do you think others see you as a Chinese woman?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with “1” being very Chinese and “10” being not very Chinese), where would you place yourself? Where do you think your friends/family would place you?
3. In terms of your ethnic background, have you ever been described in a way that you have found offensive?
4. Do you use your Chinese name? Why/not? Has this always been the case?

Partner
1. Tell me about your partner. If you don’t have a partner, what is your ideal partner?
2. Is your partner’s ethnic background an issue for you? Why/not?
3. Does your partner influence you in terms of how you view yourself as a Chinese woman living in Australia?

Children
1. If you do/don’t have children, are there issues related to your children in terms of their Chineseness?
2. Do/will you do anything to develop/silence their awareness of their ethnic background? What do/will you do?

Leisure activities
1. Do any of your interests strengthen or make you question your Chinese identity in any way?
2. Do your choice of friends make you think about your Chinese identity in any way?

Languages
1. How do you think your language capacity impacts on you in terms of your Chinese identity?

Beliefs and values
1. What do you think is the main thing that governs the way you live/ think?
2. Do your beliefs raise issues for you as a Chinese woman living in Australia?
3. What strategies do you have to cope with these issues?

Ethnic awareness
1. Are you aware of ethnic stereotypes? What do you think is the stereotypical Chinese?
   - Do you think you fit this stereotype? How/not?
   - How are you Chinese or not Chinese?
   - Have you been stereotyped in any way? How do you feel when people stereotype you according to existing stereotypes of the Chinese?
   - Do you do anything to avoid/encourage this stereotyping?
2. “Where are you from?” How do you feel when someone asks you that question?
3. Can you think of incidents, here and in your home country, that have made you aware of your ethnic background? How does that make you feel about being a Chinese woman?
4. Do you think you have ever been treated differently on the basis of your appearance? How does that make you feel?
5. Have you ever been rejected by any ethnic group? How? How did you respond to the rejection? (what did you do/feel?)
6. Do you feel rejected by any ethnic group? Why do you think you feel this way? How does it make you feel? What do you do to cope with this rejection? Do you wish to be accepted/rejected by any particular group? Do you do anything to be accepted/rejected by a group?
7. How do you practise your Chineseness? Are there things you do to be/not Chinese?
8. Are there aspects of being Australian that do/not appeal to you? Are there things you do to be/not Australian?
9. Do you find your ethnic background confusing at times? When are they confusing? How do you deal with this confusion?
   - If you had to choose between being Chinese or being Australian, which would you choose? Why?
   - How are you Chinese or Australian?
   - Do you choose to be in one group sometimes and the other at other times? Do you think this is a conscious choice?
   - Do you think you can be Chinese and Australian at the same time, or can you only be Chinese or only Australian?
   - Do you think it is good or offensive to be flexible in your ethnic group choice?
- Is it possible for you to be Chinese at times, not Chinese at other times, both Chinese and Australian or neither Chinese nor Australian yet at other times? Is there benefit in this at all?
- What do you think it means to be Chinese then? How is one Chinese? Do you think you are born Chinese or do you learn to be Chinese?

10. Where would you place yourself in this diagram? (1 is for old culture, 2 for new culture)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefer 1 over 2</th>
<th>Don't like either</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefer 2 over 1</td>
<td>Embrace both</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Would you place yourself anywhere else apart from these four boxes? (outside or inside the boxes)

*Thank you for participating in this research. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.*
Appendix 3

*Beyond Limbo by K. Vivekananda*

The nuns in the Catholic school I attended in Canberra told us about limbo. It made a vivid impression on my primary school mind. Unbaptised babies and good non-Catholics went to limbo when they died. They were neither bad enough to go to hell and be permanently separated from God, nor good enough to be with God in heaven. Limbo was a pleasant, painless alternative, neither good nor bad, but there was no prospect of ever leaving this place.

I decided that I was destined to go to limbo. That is what happens to people who do not belong and cannot be categorised.

*First impressions can be deceiving. My face is Chinese. This evokes curiosity and questions.*

"Where do you come from?" asks the stranger.

I wonder how to respond to such a simple question. Does she mean, where do I live or where was I born? I answer, "I was born in Malaysia."

That seems to satisfy her and she continues, "But you don’t have an accent. Your English is very good."

I think sarcastically to myself that her English is very good too. But I smile and reply, "Thank you. I’ve lived in Australia since I was seven."

These questions reflect Australia in the 1960s. My family arrived in Australia prior to cheap Jetset tours to Asia, when the White Australia Policy was still in operation. Australians at that time saw Asians as grouped into brown and yellow people. There was little appreciation of the subtle cultural, ethnic and language variations that exist amongst the different Asian countries.

At school I hated to be called Japanese by the other children. When I told them that I came from Malaysia, it did not mean anything to them. It was all ching-chong to them.

Australians then despised Japanese goods as cheap and nasty. The Chinese were feared as "teeming hordes" ready to invade Australia. Australia’s foreign policy aimed to protect Malaysia and South Vietnam from the communists. The Indians who lived in poverty and overpopulation were pitied.

Curry meant throwing Keen’s Curry Powder onto sausages and Chinese food consisted of chop suey and sweet and sour pork.

*First impressions can be confusing. My name is Indian. The questions are changing.*

"Vivekananda? That’s an unusual name. Where does it come from?" asks the stranger.

"The name comes from India," I reply.

The more adventurous or sophisticated questioner pursues further inquiries. "But you don’t look Indian! Do you have Chinese ancestry or are you married to an Indian?"

The bare facts of my genealogy are given. "My husband’s name is Smyth. Vivekananda is my maiden name. I was born into a Chinese-Malaysian family and I was adopted into an Indian-Malaysian family."

*More recently, the impact of multiculturalism and overseas travel is beginning to show.*

The questions tend to be more like: "Is your name Thai, Sri Lankan, Indian or Filipino?"

A librarian once said to me, "Oh, I’ve been waiting for you to come in, so I could ask you about your name. Are you related to the Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda?"

"No, I don’t think so. It’s quite a common name," and I add an exaggeration. "Like Smith."

As an adolescent growing up, my name caused me great embarrassment and I hated anything that was Asian. How I wished to be Mary Smith. I grew up in the sterilised environment of Canberra, when the population was white, predominantly of British and Irish stock, with a sprinkling of European migrants. One of my most vivid memories from my childhood was the difference in physical appearance between myself and those around me.

When I walked in the streets, I was very conscious of other people’s stares. Perhaps it was the unusual sight of my mother dressed in a sari or the novelty of an Indian woman with a Chinese child which made us conspicuous.

The effects of this self-conscious childhood lingered into my adult life. When I began to give lectures in the course of my work, I experienced an overwhelming sense of anxiety, almost reaching phobic
level. I endured this for some time, until I remembered the experience of people staring at me in my childhood. When I stood in front of an audience, and was confronted with a sea of "staring" faces, I imagined the hostility and condescension I had experienced then.

**Appearances can be misleading. I am confronted with disbelief.**

> My (Anglo) Australian friend and I are in a Chinese restaurant.
> The waitress looks at me to take the order and predictably she speaks in Chinese. I return a slightly blank look and open my mouth to order in English. The waitress frowns and I imagine she is thinking that I am a traitor to my race, forgetting my native tongue. To make the situation even more embarrassing she asks "Chopsticks?"
> My Australian friend replies, "Yes." and I reply, "Fork and spoon."
> On one occasion the waitress openly admonishes me: "Your mother should have taught you to speak Chinese."
> I don’t answer but I feel uncomfortable and annoyed. Perhaps I should tell her how this is impossible. But why should I have to explain myself to other people?

Another time, when I was visiting Hong Kong on my own, the waitress was outright hostile. She shouted at me (in English), "Why can’t you speak in Chinese? You are only pretending that you cannot."

In Hong Kong I rapidly learn to use chopsticks before I starve from shame.

I read in the newspaper about a pig that was raised by a dog. The pig thought it was a dog. It would bark and fetch sticks. The dog thought of the pig as its own. I imagine that it was all the other pigs and dogs who found this situation bizarre.

I once had a Chinese name. The only tangible evidence of it is on my birth certificate. On it is written the name Lim Seok Ngin. I don’t even know how to pronounce it. It reminds me that I might have been a different person.

The month I had my twenty-first birthday, I was holidaying in Malaysia. During this time I visited my biological family. My adoptive and biological families were good friends and in the days when my adoption took place, adoptions were arranged openly.

I distinctly saw myself as I might have been. It was peculiar to contemplate that I might have had a different identity. Had I not been adopted I would have spoken a different language, belonged to a different religion, lived in a different country, and had a different career.

**Appearances can be puzzling.**

> When my mother and I were travelling through Singapore and India, the taxi drivers, customs officers and shopkeepers would ask my mother in Tamil, "Is she your daughter-in-law?"
> "No, she is my daughter! I adopted her when she was a baby. She was just five days old when we took her. She’s been raised in our family. She’s grown up in Australia and done all her schooling there," my mother would say.
> "Can she understand Tamil?" they would ask.
> I would hear myself discussed as though I were a retarded child, who did not understand the language. I would reply in English, "Yes, I can."

When I was in India, I stood on the very southern tip, that triangular point on the map, where the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea meet. Hundreds of people gather there to view the sunsets and sunrises. It is possible to see the sunset and moonrise simultaneously on the same horizon.

It is also a vastly symbolic place. Mahatma Ghandi’s cremated ashes were sprinkled in the sea here. There is a memorial to Ghandi which combines Hindu, Moslem and Christian architectural styles. Another famous Indian, Swami Vivekananda meditated on a small rocky island just offshore. He brought Indian spiritual traditions to the West. Both these men were able to move beyond racial, cultural and religious boundaries.

At dawn, while it was dark and silent, still figures stood on the shore to wait for the sun to rise. I felt as though I was standing at the edge of the earth. This place was strangely tranquil and quiet, unlike the usual noise, pushing and overcrowding in India. There, I came to the realisation that perhaps it is possible to be at peace with my various cultural traditions.
Eight years after my visit to India, I was at another beach. This time I was sitting in a Chinese restaurant on Coogee beach, Sydney. At the table was my sister from my biological family who was visiting Australia, as well as my husband and my mother. My sister was chatting to the waitress in Chinese and I felt absolved from the expectation of ordering in Chinese. I could have just as easily been in her place but some strange quirk of fate had changed that.

It was a meeting of diverse cultures: my sister from her Chinese-Malaysian culture, my husband from his mainly Celtic background, and my mother from her Indian-Malaysian origins. It has taken a long time for me to feel connected to these various cultural traditions, but I accept these as my genetic and cultural heritages.

I always wanted to be a Smith. It is strange that when I was actually given the opportunity to change my name to Smyth, I did not take it up. Perhaps, I am happy after all that I am not Mary Smith.
Appendix 4

*A golden shanty by Edward Dyson*

About ten years ago, not a day’s tramp from Ballarat, set well back from a dusty track that started nowhere in particular and had no destination worth mentioning, stood the “Shamrock” Hotel. It was a low, rambling, disjointed structure, and bore strong evidence of having been designed by an amateur artist in a moment of vinous frenzy. It reached out in several well-defined angles, and had a lean-to building stuck on here and there; numerous outhouses were dropped down about it promiscuously; its walls were propped up in places with logs, and its moss-covered shingle roof, bowed down with the weight of years, and a great accumulation of stones, hoop-iron, jam-tins, broken glassware, and dried ‘possum [sic] skins, bulged threateningly, on the verge of utter collapse. The “Shamrock” was built of sun-dried bricks, of an unhealthy, bilious tint. It’s [sic] dirty, shattered windows were plugged in places with old hats and discarded female apparel, and draped with green blinds, many of which had broken their moorings, and hung despondently by one corner. Groups of unguainly fowls coursed the succulent grasshopper before the bar door; a moody, distempered goat rubbed her ribs against a shattered trough roughly hewn from the butt of a tree, and a matronly old sow of sparse proportions wallowed complacently in the dust of the road, surrounded by her squealing brood.

A battered sign hung out over the door of the “Shamrock,” informing people that Michael Doyle was licensed to sell fermented andspirituous liquors, and that good accommodation could be afforded to both man and beast at the lowest current rates. But that sign was most unreliable; the man who applied to be accommodated with anything beyond ardent beverages – liquors so fiery that they “bit all the way down” – evoked the astonishment of the proprietor. Bed and board were quite out of the province of the “Shamrock.” There was, in fact, only one couch professedly at the disposal of the weary wayfarer, and this, according to the statement of the few persons who had ever ventured to try it, seemed stuffed with old boots and stubble; it was located immediately beneath a hen-roost, which was the resting-place of a maternal fowl, addicted on occasion to nursing her chickens upon the tired sleeper’s chest. The “turnover” at the “Shamrock” was not at all extensive, for, saving an occasional agricultural labourer who came from “beyant” – which was the versatile host’s way of designating any part within a radius of five miles – to revel in an occasional “spree,” the trade was confined to the passing “cockatoo” farmer, who invariably arrived on a bony, drooping pad, took a drink, and shuffled away amid clouds of dust.

The only other dwellings within sight of the “Shamrock” were a cluster of frail, ramshackle huts, compiled of slabs, scraps of matting, zinc, and gunny-bag. These were the habitations of a colony of squalid, gibbering Chinese fossickers, who herded together like hogs in a crowded pen, as if they had been restricted to that spot on pain of death, or its equivalent, a washing.

About a quarter of a mile behind the “Shamrock” ran, or rather crawled, the sluggish waters of the Yellow Creek. Once upon a time, when the “Shamrock” was first built, the creek was a beautiful limpid rivulet, running between verdant banks; but an enterprising prospector wandering that way, and liking the indications, put down a shaft, and bottomed on “the wash” at twenty feet, getting half an ounce to the dish. A rush set in, and within twelve months the banks of the creek, for a distance of two miles, were denuded of their timber, torn up, and covered with unsightly heaps. The creek had been diverted from its natural course half a dozen times, and hundreds of diggers, like busy ants, delved into the earth and covered its surface with red, white, and yellow tips. Then the miners left almost as suddenly as they had come; the “Shamrock,” which had resounded with wild revelry, became as silent as a morgue, and desolation brooded on the face of the country. When Mr Michael Doyle, whose greatest ambition in life had been to become lord of a “pub,” invested in that lucrative country property, saplings were growing between the deserted holes of the diggings, and agriculture had superseded the mining industry in those parts.

Landlord Doyle was of Irish extraction; his stock was so old that everybody had forgotten where and when it originated, but Mickey was not proud – he assumed no unnecessary style, and his personal appearance would not have led you to infer that there had been a king in his family, and that his paternal progenitor had killed a land-lord “wanst.” Mickey was s a small, scraggy man, with a mop of grizzled hair and a little, red, humorous face, ever bristling with auburn stubble. His trousers were the most striking things about him; they were built on the premises, and always contained enough stuff to make him a full suit and a winter overcoat. Mrs Doyle manufactured those pants after plans and specifications of her own designing, and was mighty proud when Michael would yank them up into his armpits, and
amble round, peering about discontentedly over the waistband. "They wus th’ great savin’ in weskits,” she said.

Of late years it had taken all Mr Doyle’s ingenuity to make ends meet. The tribe of dirty, unkempt urchins who swarmed about the place “took a power of feedin’,” and Mrs D. herself was “th’ big ater.” “Ye do be atin’ twenty-four hours a day,” her lord was wont to remark, “and thin yez must get up av noights for more. Whin ye’re not atin’ ye’r muchin’ a schnack, bad cess t’ye.”

In order to provide the provender for his unreasonably hungry family, Mickey had been compelled to supplement his takings as a Boniface by acting alternately as fossicker, charcoal-burner, and “wood-jamber”; but it came “terrible hard” on the little man, who waxed thinner and thinner, and sank deeper into his trousers every year. Then, to augment his troubles, came that pestiferous heathen, the teetotal Chinee. One hot summer’s day he arrived in numbers, like a plague, armed with picks, shovels, dishes, cradles, and tubs, and with a clatter of tools and a babble of grotesque gibberish, camped by the creek and refused to go away again. The awesome solitude of the abandoned diggings was ruthlessly broken. The deserted field, with its white mounds and decaying windlass-stands fallen aslant, which had lain like a long-forgotten cemetery buried in primeval forest, was now desecrated by the hand of the Mongol, and the sound of his weird, Oriental oaths. The Chows swarmed over the spot, tearing open old sores, shovelling old tips, sluicing old tailings, digging, cradling, puddling, ferreting into every nook and cranny.

Mr Doyle observed the foreign invasion with mingled feelings of righteous anger and pained solicitude. He had found fossicking by the creek very handy to fall back upon when the wood-jamming trade was not brisk; but now that industry was ruined by Chinese competition, and Michael could only find relief in deep and earnest profanity.

With the pagan influx began the mysterious disappearance of small valuables from the premises of Michael Doyle. [sic] licensed victualler. Sedate, fluffy old hens, hitherto noted for their strict propriety and regular hours, would leave the place at dead of night, and return from their nocturnal rambles never more; stay-at-home sucking-pigs, which had erstwhile absolutely refused to be driven from the door, corrupted by the new evil, absented themselves suddenly from the precincts of the “Shamrock,” taking with them cooking utensils and various other articles of small value, and ever afterwards their fate became a matter for speculation. At last a favourite young porter went, whereupon its lord and master, resolved to prosecute inquiries, bounced into the Mongolian camp, and, without any unnecessary preamble, opened the debate.

“Look here, now,” he observed, shaking his fist at the group, and bristling fiercely, “which av ye dhrity haythen furriners cum up to me house lasht noight and shtole me pig Nancy? Which av ye is it, so’t I kin bate him, ye thavin’ haythen?”

The placid Orientals surveyed Mr Doyle coolly, and innocently smiling, said, “No savvee”; then bandied jests at his expense in their native tongue, and laughed the little man to scorn. Incensed by the evident ridicule of the “haythen furriners,” and goaded on by the smothered squeal of a hidden pig, Michael “went for” the nearest Asiatic, and proceeded to “put a head on him as big as a tank,” amid a storm of kicks and digs from the other Chows. Presently the battle began to go against the Irish cause; but Mrs Mickey, making a timely appearance, warded off the surplus Chinamen by chipping at their skulls with an axe-handle. The riot was soon quelled, and the two Doyles departed triumphantly, bearing away a corpulent young pig, and leaving several broken, discouraged Chinamen to be doctored at the common expense.

After this gladsome little episode the Chinamen held off for a few weeks. Then they suddenly changed their tactics, and proceeded to cultivate the friendship of Michael Doyle and his able-bodied wife. They liberally patronised the “Shamrock,” and beguiled the licensee with soft but cheerful conversation; they flattered Mrs Doyle in seductive pidgin-English, and endeavoured to ensnare the children’s young affections with preserved ginger. Michael regarded these advances with misgiving; he suspected the Mongolians’ intentions were not honourable, but he was not a man to spoil trade — to drop the substance for the shadow.

This state of affairs had continued for some time before the landlord of the “Shamrock” noticed that his new customers made a point of carrying off a brick every time they visited his caravanserai. When leaving, the bland heathen would cast his discriminating eye around the place, seize upon one of the sun-dried bricks with which the ground was littered, and steal away with a nonchalant air — as though it had just occurred to him that the brick would be a handy thing to keep by him.
The matter puzzled Mr. Doyle sorely; he ruminated over it, but he could only arrive at the conclusion that it was not advisable to lose custom for the sake of a few bricks; so the Chinese continued to walk off with his building material. When asked what they intended to do with the bricks, they assumed an expression of the most deplorably hopeless idiocy, and suddenly lost their acquaintance with the "Inglishman" tongue. If bricks were mentioned they became as devoid of sense as wombats, although they seemed extremely intelligent on most other points. Mickey noticed that there was no building in progress at their camp, also that there were no bricks to be seen about the domiciles of the pagans, and he tried to figure out the mystery on a slate, but, on account of his lamentable ignorance of mathematics, failed to reach the unknown quantity and elucidate the enigma. He watched the invaders march off with all the loose bricks that were scattered around, and never once complained; but when they began to abstract one end of his licensed premises, he felt himself called upon, as a husband and father, to arise and enter a protest, which he did, pointing out to the Yellow Agony, in graphic and forcible language, the gross wickedness of robbing a struggling man of his house and home, and promising faithfully to "bate" the next hop-eared Child of the Sun whom he "cot shiftin' a'er a brick."

"Ye dogs! Wud yez shate me hotel, so't whin me family go insoide they'll be out in the rain?" he queried, looking hurt and indignant.

The Chinamen said, "No savee." Yet, after this warning, doubtless out of consideration for the feelings of Mr. Doyle, they went to great pains and displayed much ingenuity in abstracting bricks without his cognisance. But Mickey was active; he watched them closely, and whenever he caught a Chow in the act, a brief and one-sided conflict raged, and a dismantled Chinaman crawled home with much difficulty.

This violent conduct on the part of the landlord served in time to entirely alienate the Mongolian custom from the "Shamrock," and once more Mickey and the Chows spoke not when they met. Once more, too, promising young pullets, and other portable valuables, began to go astray, and still the hole in the wall grew till the after-part of the "Shamrock" looked as if it had suffered recent bombardment. The Chinamen came while Michael slept, and filched his hotel inch by inch. They lost their natural rest, and ran the gauntlet of Mr. Doyle's stick and his curse — for the sake of a few bricks. At all hours of the night they crept through the gloom, and warily stole a bat or two, getting away unnoticed perhaps, or, mayhap, only disturbing the slumbers of Mrs. Doyle, who was a very light sleeper for a woman of her size. In the latter case the lady would awaken her lord by holding his nose — a very effective plan of her own — and, filled to overflowing with the rage which comes of a midnight awakening, Mickey would turn out of doors in his shirt to cope with the marauders, and course them over the paddocks. If he caught a heathen he laid himself out for five minutes' energetic entertainment, which fully repaid him for lost rest and missing hens, and left a Chinaman too heart-sick and sore to steal anything for at least a week. But the Chinaman's friends would come as usual, and the pillage went on.

Michael Doyle puzzled himself to prostration over this insatiable and unreasonable hunger for bricks; such an infatuation on the part of men for cold and unresponsive clay had never before come within the pale of his experience. Times out of mind he threatened to "have the law on the yalla blaggards"; but the law was a long way off, and the Celestial housebreakers continued to elope with scraps of the "Shamrock," taking the proprietor's assaults humble and as a matter of course.

"Why do ye be shteealing me house?" fiercely queried Mr. Doyle of a submissive Chow, whom he had taken one night in the act of ambling off with a brick in either hand.

"Me no steal 'em, no feah — odder feller, him steal 'em," replied the quaking pagan.

Mickey was dumb-stricken for the moment by this awful prevarication; but that did not impair the velocity of his kick — this to his great subsequent regret, for the Chinaman had stowed a third brick away in his pants for convenience of transit, and the landlord struck that brick; then he sat down and repeated aloud all the profanity he knew.

The Chinaman escaped, and had presence of mind enough to retain his burden of clay.

Month after month the work of devastation went on. Mr. Doyle fixed ingenious mechanical contrivances about his house, and turned out at early dawn to see how many Chinamen he had "nailed" — only to find his spring-traps stolen and his hotel yawning more desperately than ever. Then Michael could but lift up his voice and swear — nothing else afforded him any relief.

At last he hit upon a brilliant idea. He commissioned a "cocky" who was journeying into Ballarat to buy him a dog — the largest, fiercest, ugliest, hungriest animal the town afforded; and next day a powerful, ill-tempered canine, almost as big as a pony, and quite as ugly as any nightmare, was duly installed as guardian and night-watch at the "Shamrock." Right well the good dog performed his duty.
On the following morning he had trophies to show in the shape of a boot, a scrap of blue dungaree trousers, half a pig-tail, a yellow ear, and a large part of a partially-shaved scalp; and just then the nocturnal visits ceased. The Chows spent a week skirmishing around, endeavouring to call the dog off, but he was neither to be begged, borrowed, nor stolen; he was too old-fashioned to eat poisoned meat, and he prevented the smallest approach to familiarity on the part of a Chinaman by snapping off the most serviceable portions of his vestments, and always fetching a scrap of heathen along with them.

This, in time, sorely discouraged the patient Children of the Sun, who drew off to hold congress and give the matter weighty consideration. After deliberating for some days, the yellow settlement appointed a deputation to wait upon Mr Doyle. Mickey saw them coming, and armed himself with a log and unchained his dog. Mrs Doyle ranged up alongside, brandishing her axe-handle, but by humble gestures and a deferential bearing the Celestial deputation signified a truce. So Michael held his dog down, and rested on his arms to await developments. The Chinamen advanced, smiling blandly; they gave Mr and Mrs Doyle fraternal greeting, and squirmed with that wheedling obsequiousness peculiar to "John" when he has something to gain by it. A pock-marked leper placed himself in the van as spokesman.

"Niccey day, Missa Doyle," said the moon-faced gentleman, sweetly. Then, with a sudden expression of great interest, and nodding towards Mrs Doyle, "How you sissetah?"

"Foidn out! Fwhat yer wantin’?" replied the host of the "Shamrock," gruffly; "t’shtale more bricks, ye crawlin’ blaggards?"

"No, no. Me not steal ‘em blick – odder feller; he hide ‘em; build big house byem-by."

"Ye loi, ye screw-faced nayger! I seed ye do it, and if yez don’t cut and run I’ll lave the dog loose to feed on yer dirty carcasses."

The dog tried to reach for his favourite hold, Mickey brandished his log, and Mrs Doyle took a fresh grip of her weapon. This demonstration gave the Chows a cold shiver, and brought them promptly down to business.

"We buy ‘em hotel: what for you sell ‘em – eh?"

"Fwhat! yez buy me hotel? D’ye mane it? Purchis th’ primisis and yez can sh tale ivery brick at yers last. But ye’re joakin. Whoop! Look ye here! I’ll have th’ lot av yez aten up in two minits if yez play yer Choinase thricks on Michael Doyle."

The Chinamen eagerly protested that they were in earnest, and Mickey gave them a judicial hearing. For two years he had been in want of a customer for the "Shamrock," and he now hailed the offer of his visitors with secret delight. After haggling for an hour, during which time the ignorant His Yup of the contorted countenance displayed his usual business tact, a bargain was struck. The yellow men agreed to give fifty pounds cash for the "Shamrock" and all buildings appertaining thereto, and the following Monday was the day fixed for Michael to journey into Ballarat with a couple of representative heathens to sign the transfer papers and receive the cash.

The deputation departed smiling, and when it gave the news of its triumph to the other denizens of the camp there was a perfect babel of congratulations in the quaint dialogue of the Mongol. The Chinamen proceeded to make a night of it in their own outlandish way, indulging freely in the seductive opium, and holding high carouse over an extemporised fantan table, proceedings which made it evident that they thought they were getting to windward of Michael Doyle, licensed victualler.

Michael, too, was rejoicing with exceeding great joy, and facilitating himself on being the shrewdest little man who ever left the "ould sod." He had not hoped to get more than a twenty-pound note for the dilapidated old humpy, erected on Crown land, and unlikely to stand the wear and tear of another year. As for the business, it had fallen to zero, and would not have kept a Chinaman in soap. So Mr Doyle plumed himself on his bargain, and expanded till he nearly filled his capacious garments. Still, he was harassed to know what could possibly have attached the Chinese so strongly to the "Shamrock." They had taken samples from every part of the establishment, and fully satisfied themselves as to the quality of the bricks, and now they wanted to buy. It was most peculiar. Michael “had never seen anything so quare before, savin’ wanst whin his grandfather was a boy.”

After the agreement arrived at between the publican and the Chinese, one or two of the latter hung about the hotel nearly all the time, in sentinel fashion. The dog was kept on the chain, and lay in the sun in a state of moody melancholy, narrowly scrutinising the Mongolians. He was a strongly anti-Chinese dog, and had been educated to regard the almond-eyed invader with mistrust and hate; it was repugnant to his principles to lie low when the heathen was around, and he evinced his resentment by growling ceaselessly.
Sunday dawned. It was a magnificent morning; but the rattle of the Chinamen’s cradles and toms sounded from the creek as usual. Three or four suave and civil Asiatics, however, still lingered round the “Shamrock,” and kept an eye on it in the interests of all, for the purchase of the hotel was to be a joint-stock affair. These “Johns” seemed to imagine they had already taken lawful possession; they sat in the bar most of the time, drinking little, but always affable and genial. Michael suffered them to stay, for he feared that any fractiousness on his part might upset the agreement, and that was a consummation to be avoided above all things. They told him, with many tender smiles and much gesticulation, that they intended to live in the house when it became theirs; but Mr Doyle was not interested – his fifty pounds was all he thought of.

Michael was in high spirits that morning; he beamed complacently on all and sundry, appointed the day as a time of family rejoicing, and in the excess of his emotion actually slew for dinner a prime young sucking-pig, an extravagant luxury indulged in by the Doylees only on state occasions. On this particular Sunday the younger members of the Doyle household gathered round the festive board and waited impatiently for the lifting of the lid of the camp-oven. There were nine children in all, ranging in years from fourteen downwards – “foine, shrappin’ childer, wid th’ clear brain,” said the prejudiced Michael. The round, juicy sucker was at last placed upon the table. Mrs Doyle stood prepared to administer her department – serving the vegetables to her hungry brood — and, armed with a formidable knife and fork, Michael, enveloped in savoury steam, hovered over the pig.

But there was one function yet to be performed – a function which came as regularly as Sunday’s dinner itself. Never, for years, had the housefather failed to touch up a certain prodigious knife on one particular hard yellow brick in the wall by the door, preparatory to carving the Sunday’s meat. Mickey examined the edge of his weapon critically, and found it unsatisfactory. The knife was nearly ground through to the back-bone; another “touch-up” and it must surely collapse, but, in view of his changed circumstances, Mr Doyle felt that he might take the risk. The brick, too, was worn an inch deep. A few sharp strokes from Mickey’s vigorous right arm were all that was required; but, alas! The knife snapped, whereupon Mr Doyle swore at the brick, as if holding it immediately responsible for the mishap, and stabbed at it fiercely with the broken carver.

“Howsly Moses! Fwhat’s that?”

The brick fell to pieces, and there, embedded in the wall, gleaming in the sunbeam, was a nugget of yellow gold. With feverish haste Mickey tore the brick from its bedding, and smashed the gold-bearing fragment on the hearth. The nugget was a little beauty, smooth, round, and four ounces to a grain.

The sucking-pig froze and stiffened in its fat, the “taters” and the cabbage stood neglected on the dishes. The truth had dawned upon Michael, and, whilst the sound of a spirited debate in musical Chinese echoed from the bar, his family were gathered around him, open-mouthed, and Mickey was industriously, but quietly, pounding the sun-dried brick in a digger’s mortar. Two bricks, one from either end of the “Shamrock,” were pulverised, and Michael panned off the dirt in a tub of water which stood in the kitchen. Result: seven grains of waterworn gold. Until now Michael had worked dully, in a fit of nervous excitement; now he started up, bristling like a hedgehog.

“Let loose th’ dog, Mary Melinda Doyle!” he howled, and, uttering a mighty whoop, he bounded into the bar to dust those Chinamen off his premises.

“Gerrout!” he screamed – “Gerrout av me primisis, ye thavin’ crawlers!” And he frolicked with the astounded Mongolians like a tornado in full blast, thumping at a shaven occupant whenever one showed out of the struggling crowd. The Chinamen left; they found the dog waiting for them outside, and he encouraged them to greater haste. Like startled fawns the heathens fled, and Mr Doyle followed them howling:

“Buy the ‘Shamrock,’ wud yez! Robbers! Thaves! Fitch back th’ soide o’ me house, or O’ll have th’ law onto yez all.”

The damaged escapees communicated the intelligence of their overthrow to their brethren on the creek, and the news carried consternation and deep, dark woe to the pagans, who clustered together and ruefully discussed the situation.

My Doyle was wildly jubilant. His joy was only tinted with a spice of bitterness, the result of knowing that the “haythens” had got away with a few hundred of his precious bricks. He tried to figure out the amount of gold his hotel must contain, but again his ignorance of arithmetic tripped him up, and already in imagination Michael Doyle, licensed victualler, was a millionaire and a J. P.

The “Shamrock” was really a treasure-house. The dirt of which the bricks were composed had been taken from the banks of the Yellow Creek, years before the outbreak of the rush, by an eccentric German
who had settled on that sylvan spot. The German died, and his grotesque structure passed into other hands. Time went on, and then came the rush. The banks of the creek were found to be charged with gold for miles, but never for a moment did it occur to anybody that the clumsy old building by the track, now converted into an hotel, was composed of the same rich dirt; never till years after, when by accident one of the Mongolian fossickers discovered grains of gold in a few bals he had taken to use as hobbs. The intelligence was conveyed to his fellows; they got more bricks and more gold – hence the robbery of Mr Doyle's building materials and the anxiety of the Mongolian to buy the "Shamrock."

Before nightfall Michael summoned half a dozen men from "beyant," to help him in protecting his hotel from a possible Chinese invasion. Other bricks were crushed and yielded splendid prospects. The "Shamrock's" small stock of liquor was drunk, and everybody became hilarious. On the Sunday night, under the cover of darkness, the Chows made a sudden sally on the "Shamrock," hoping to get away with plunder. They were violently received, however: they got no bricks, and returned to their camp broken and disconsolate.

Next day the work of demolition was begun. Drays were backed up against the "Shamrock," and load by load the precious bricks were carted away to a neighbouring battery. The Chinamen slouched about, watching greedily, but their now half-hearted attempts at interference met with painful reprisal. Mr Doyle sent his family and furniture to Ballarat, and in a week there was not a vestige left to mark the spot where once the "Shamrock" flourished. Every scrap of its walls went through the mill, and the sum of one thousand nine hundred and eighty-three pounds sterling was cleared out of the ruins of the hostelry. Mr Doyle is now a man of some standing in Victoria, and as a highly respected J. P. has often been pleased to inform a Chinaman that it was "five pound or a month."
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