HONORARY WHITENESS: 
THE MAKING OF A MODEL MINORITY

The Socio-Legal Construction of Race &
East Asians as Global Outsiders in the Landscape of a
Post-Apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the largely unexamined nuances of racial identities and attitudes of East Asians (Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese) in a post-Apartheid South Africa that is still predominantly viewed as divided between white and black. While race is a defining facet of South African society, racial awareness has largely excluded East Asians, irrespective of Africa’s historic and now rapidly increasing trade and diplomatic relations with East Asia. The ambiguous position of East Asians in South African society somewhat parallels the conception of Asians as a “model minority” in the United States. East Asians in South Africa have been classified as “honorary whites” for trade and diplomatic purposes, as unequivocally Chinese, as Coloured (a sub-category of non-white, typically referring to mixed races), as Indian (a term that has become synonymous with Asian), and today, as Black, for Black Economic Empowerment (affirmative action) purposes. A close study of the history of the racial status of East Asians in South Africa not only reaffirms the theory of race as a social construct, but also demonstrates one manifestation of a global history of Yellow Peril. This study utilizes historical analysis and in-depth interviews to propose that the fluid and often arbitrary socio-legal construction of class and race in South Africa, contributes to the perpetuation of the ambiguous racial status of East Asians, and the perception and self-identification of East Asians as “global outsiders.”
INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, a living history of racial discrimination and subordination of ethnic minorities is omnipresent and percolates throughout the “rainbow nation” in systematic, and consequently, insidious ways. The Apartheid-era townships that serve as remnants of the Group Areas Act and racist urban planning policies remain nearly as segregated today as they were purposively designed during Apartheid. More than half of South Africa’s population still resides in the sprawling, colorful, informal settlements and shacks that often lack basic infrastructural services such as sewage, electricity, roads, and potable water. The presence of these townships, juxtaposed besides gated, wealthy, and predominantly white communities, dismantles the political imagination of a colorblind, post-Apartheid “rainbow nation.”

It was in one of these very townships that I first encountered the puzzling dilemma of race in South Africa. Little children ran along the dirt roads between the concrete houses in the wealthier areas of the black township and grasped our hands; skipping, and running, they followed us with admirable persistence as we circled the neighborhood. A foreign spectacle of mostly white, American students, we stood out plainly, clear outsiders to the lives within the multicolor patch-worked homes set against the backdrop of Cape Town’s magnificent mountains.

“You China!” It was evident that Lemange, my host brother, and the other children in Zwelethemba, identified me first and foremost as “China.” I tried to explain that I was ethnically Korean, and also American like the other students, but the distinction was lost on them. American was white and I was not. “China, China China!” followed me everywhere I went. In the Bo-Kaap, a multicultural, Cape Malay

neighborhood located on the Western Cape, I got the palatable impression that my coloured host family perceived my ethnicity and race as “China,” in the same way the children and my black host family had perceived of me in Zwelethemba. “We had another student just like you!” exclaimed my host mother. Smiling and pulling her eyes apart with her hands, she said, “He was you know, Chinese, he was from Vietnam, China, too!” It stuck me again in that moment that this unconsciousness of the diversity behind those deemed “China” had an ironic similarity to the nescience driving portrayals of Africa as a singular country.

I realized that as long as I was in South Africa, as in many other countries, I would be categorized as a product of China, an alien, even while member to a group of equally American outsiders. I was in South Africa to study public health, but researching access to basic infrastructural amenities brought up unanticipated questions of identity. I interviewed mothers about their water usage, their access to electricity, and the violence within their communities; I visited HIV clinics and tuberculosis hospitals, learned about the investments of multinational companies post-1994, and listened to young women share their hopes and dreams of one day living in their own homes. But while I gleaned insights valuable to my public health research, these insights did not provide answers to the questions of racial identity that kept floating through my mind.

In South Africa, I realized that the conception of “Asian”—specifically East Asian—and my role as a minority was as confusing as, if not more so than it was in the United States. The official racial classifications set during Apartheid that on the whole still exist today, are Black, White, Coloured, and Indian. I wondered where East Asians fit into this racial schema. Eight months later, I would return to South Africa
continuing to search for answers to this question. I would search for answers that could contextualize the East Asian identity within a post-apartheid South African society and shed light on the construction of race beyond the dichotomy of white and black, even beyond South Africa’s borders.

**Research Question**

This exploratory study utilizes in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generation South African East Asians in Johannesburg and Pretoria to answer three principal questions: (1) How does the socio-legal construct of race in South Africa influence and perpetuate the ambiguity of the racial status of East Asians? (2) How does the intersection of class and race demonstrate the theory of race as a social construct and the parallels between the characterization of East Asians in South Africa and East Asians in the United States? (3) Where do East Asians fit in the racial landscape of a post-Apartheid South African society? In order to answer these questions, this study investigates important themes of race as a social construct, the linkages between race and class, and the often forgotten history of Yellow Peril and global racial discrimination against East Asians.

The nuances of the myriad racial identities of South African East Asians (Chinese, Taiwanese, South Korean, and Japanese) has been a topic largely unexamined in a post-Apartheid South Africa that is still predominantly viewed as divided between white and black. While race is a defining facet of South African society, racial awareness has largely excluded East Asians. The historic trade and diplomatic relations between South Africa and East Asian countries have complicated,
instead of consolidating a place for East Asians in South Africa’s understanding of race.

Throughout South Africa’s history, East Asians have been socially and legally classified as Chinese, as “honorary whites,” as Coloured (a sub-category of non-white, typically referring to mixed races), and as Indian (a term that has become synonymous with Asian). Today, South African Chinese born before 1994 are officially Black, for Black Economic Empowerment (affirmative action) purposes, but are often considered “white.” A close study of the history of the racial status of East Asians in South Africa not only demonstrates one palpable illustration of the social construction of race, but also showcases a long history of contradictory treatment towards East Asians; simultaneously non-white, alien, white, and a “model minority,” East Asians continue to hold many divergent identities. This study proposes that the fluid and arbitrary socio-legal construction of class and race in South Africa contributes to the perpetuation of the ambiguous racial status of South African East Asians, and the perception and self-identification of East Asians as “global outsiders.”

This proposition will be made in five parts: First, I will discuss South Africa’s conception of race in relation to the historical context of the apartheid regime and the implementation of race legislation. Second, I will conduct a literature review of existing research pertaining to the topics of this study, notably the theory of race as a social construct, the distinction between race and ethnicity, and the racial classification of East Asians in South Africa. Third, I will describe the study design, setting, methodology, and data collection methods and sources. Fourth, I will make salient the themes of race as a social construct and using primary and secondary research on the racial status of South African East Asians as a case study in demonstrating the notion
of East Asians as global outsiders. Lastly, I will discuss the results and conclusions of this study.

HISTORICAL PREFACE

Four Categories: The Rise of Apartheid & the Legal Designation of Race

Black. White. Coloured. Indian. These were the four official racial classifications created by the Nationalist apartheid regime that are still used widely today. The rise to power of the National Party (Herenigde Nasionale Party, HNP) after World War II in South Africa’s 1948 general elections marked the beginning of the
systematic legalization of racial discrimination intended to sustain and perpetuate white dominance over South African society. This system of “Apartheid,” an Afrikaans word meaning “separateness,” or literally, “apart-hood,” sought not only to segregate white and non-white populations, but also to actively limit the opportunities of the African and non-white majority in order to entrench the political, economic, and social privileges of the white minority. In order to understand the complex racial landscape of present-day South Africa, it is critical understand the history of apartheid, and how its implementation has shaped the racial organization of a post-apartheid society.

The Rise of the Apartheid

Many researchers, scholars, and politicians have fiercely debated the origins of apartheid. Some argue that apartheid was merely an intensified extension of South Africa’s long trajectory of racial discrimination that began in colonial times under the Dutch Empire; others argue that economic aspirations, competition, and the promise of great profits laid the groundwork for the Nationalist succession and defeat of Jan Smuts and the United Party. While it is indubitable that it was an amalgam of historical, sociocultural, and economic factors operating in tandem that set the stage for Apartheid, it is also clear that the actuating catalyst of this era was World War II. The precipitous economic and political change borne from wartime industrialization and urban migration heightened racial conflict between the white minority and the non-white majority, threatening white control of society, and culminating in the HNP’s institution of the Apartheid regime.

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Between 1940 and 1946, wartime manufacturing burgeoned and factories rapidly expanded to accommodate wartime supplies, pulling a great number of both African and white workers into South Africa’s cities. Increasing opportunities in cities led to a boom in urbanization and labor expansion, challenging the country’s segregationist policies both in cities and in the workplace. For the first time, Africans began to outnumber whites in urban centers, exacerbating swelling racial tensions and creating issues with the enforcement of laws limiting African entry into municipalities and rules restricting their residence to designated townships.

With over 200,000 white males fighting in the war, employers increasingly turned to women and Africans to fill the skilled industry jobs traditionally held by white men. The number of African industry workers grew by by nearly 70 percent during the war, and by the end of the war, Africans composed over half of the industrial workforce outside of mining—a breakthrough in South African history. The changing workforce demographics during the war, and a realization of the increasing bargaining power of the African labor force prodded a change in African political attitudes and a reorganization of the African National Congress (ANC) by the new president Alfred Xuma. Xuma advocated for a shift away from the ANC’s backing of incremental constitutional change, and towards a policy of non-cooperation with a government apathetic to the African struggle.

In 1943, the ANC drafted the document, “Africans’ Claims in South Africa,” placing the aspirations of the African people within the principles of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Atlantic Charter. Termed “The Atlantic Charter from the African’s Point of View,” this document functioned as a bill of rights, calling for full citizenship rights including the “abolition of political discrimination based on race,”
“the right of every child to free and compulsory education,” “equal pay for equal work,” and “the right to equal justice in the court of law.”

In the document’s preface, Xuma writes:

Already according to press reports there seems to be differences of opinion as to the applicability of the ‘Atlantic Charter’ as between the President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister of Great Britain. It would appear that President F.D. Roosevelt wanted the Atlantic Charter to apply to the whole world while the Prime Minister Mr. Winston Churchill, understood it to be intended for the white people of the occupied countries in Europe. In South Africa, Africans have no freedom of movement, no freedom of choice of employment, no right of choice of residence and no right of freedom to purchase land or fixed property from anyone and anywhere. Under the guise of segregation, they are subjected to serious educational, political and economic disabilities and discrimination which are the chief causes of their apparent slow progress.

In that same year, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu proposed the creation of the ANC Youth League, a branch of the ANC that actively protested against government segregation and discrimination. Despite the efforts of Mandela, Sisulu, Xuma, and the ANC, Smuts rejected the ANC’s demands, replying that he was “not prepared to discuss proposals that are wildly impracticable.”5 Government indifference led to formation of African trade unions, and 300 strikes flared up between 1939 and 1945. Violent police suppression of protesters led to the loss of many African workers’ lives, but the protests from African unions, political parties, and squatters continued to increase, demonstrating the great strength and potential for Africans to challenge the present system. Naturally, this sparked fear in the ruling white minority.

The white electorate demanded action from the government to deal with the


effects of black urbanization and protest. Consequently, in 1948, the ruling United Party (UP) issued the Fagan Report and the opposing National Party (HNP) issued the Sauer Report. These reports both made clear that African labor was critical for South Africa’s economic development but differed critically in their proposals to control increasing African urban migration and unrest. The UP’s Fagan Report promoted a continuation of pre-war policies, noting that while complete segregation was “totally impracticable,” Africans should not have any political rights.

The HNP took a more radical stance. The HNP advocated for a removal of Africans from the cities into the countryside, or their “homelands,” where they could continue to live in tribal societies. A significant portion of HNP argued for total segregation, which would remove all Africans from the economy in order to protect the jobs and “dignity” of the white worker. The commercial wing of the party, recognizing that African labor was necessary for the economy, proposed a “practical apartheid,” under which Africans could enter cities with government supervision. Under this plan, Africans would never constitute an enfranchised population in cities and would only be able to move through the country with government consent, fulfilling white labor needs while protecting whites from African resistance. However, even under this “practical” apartheid, the “eventual ideal and goal” was total segregation.

**The Legal Designation of Race**

Sparking rising nationalist sentiments, the HNP, renamed the National Party (NP) in 1948, portrayed itself as the only party that could prevent integration of races,
“which would in the long run amount to national suicide on the part of the whites.”

The NP issued a pamphlet in late 1947 ahead of the May 1948 general election outlining an initial plan for apartheid, stating:

It is a policy which sets itself the task of preserving and safeguarding the racial identity of the White population of the country; of likewise preserving and safeguarding the identity of the indigenous peoples as separate racial groups, with opportunities to develop into self-governing national units.”

But “safeguarding the racial identity of the White population” required complete separation of all non-white racial groups not only from whites, but also from one another. It was in this pamphlet that the NP first outlined its plan to create a legislative basis for racial classification. In sections titled, “The position of the Coloured,” “Bantu Policy,” and “Attitude to the Indians,” the NP detailed a strict racial hierarchy setting whites at the top, coloureds somewhere in the middle, and blacks and Indians at the bottom. The manifesto described its initial plans for enforcement of this hierarchy by banning intermarriage between races. The 1947 manifesto reads:

The party holds that a positive application of apartheid between the white and non-white racial groups and the application of the policy of separation also in the case of the non-White racial groups is the only sound basis on which the identity and the survival of each race can be assured and by means of which each race can be stimulated to develop in accordance with its own character.

Here, it is important to note the absence of any mention of the Chinese population in this document. Because the Chinese constituted such a tiny minority, they were lumped in with “coloured” and sometimes as “Asiatic.” The Chinese had stood beside Mahatma Gandhi as he led Indian protesters in the fight against the

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7 Race Relations Policy of the National Party. (1947)
Immigration Law Amendment Bill and the Franchise Amendment Bill; they had joined in the campaign of passive resistance protesting the 1906 Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act, known as the “The Black Act,” which affected Indians and Chinese alike. But “Asian” remained a category reserved largely for Indians, and the Chinese minority was further marginalized.8 Noting the absence of a racial designation for the Chinese in this document is important, because it is indicative of a phenomenon before, during, and after apartheid, in which the Chinese do not have a definitive place in society, but rather occupy many racial categories at once. Moreover, because racial categorization permeated every aspect of a South African’s life, the lack of a definitive racial category for the Chinese is indicative of the perception that the Chinese were truly outsiders. In the section “Attitudes towards Indians,” the NP states:

The Party regards the Indians as a foreign element which cannot be assimilated in the South African set-up. Not being native to this country, they cannot expect more preferential treatment than an immigrant community… We accordingly have in mind the repatriation of as many Indians as possible… This matter is of such urgency that South Africa should be prepared for a substantial sacrifice in order to finance such an undertaking… No Indian immigrants are henceforth to be admitted to the country.9

This document showcases a perspective of the Indian population as fundamentally foreign, non-South African, and alien. But as damaging and discriminatory the Apartheid plan was for the Indian population, that the Indians were at the very least regarded as a group for concern indicates basic recognition of the group by the government. In contrast, the initial disregard, then discrimination against the Chinese population is demonstrative of an attitude that the Chinese were true aliens who would never approach acceptance by South African society. Despite their

9 Race Relations Policy of the National Party. (1947)
sporadic and arbitrary classification as “Asian,” and growing acceptance as “white,”— the Chinese would continue to be treated as outsiders, their long history in South Africa forgotten and ignored. It was by this legal recognition of the four racial categories of White, Black, Coloured, and Indian, that the NP set the precedent of categorizing Chinese, and other East Asians deemed Chinese, wherever most suitable to contemporary societal standards and the government’s political and economic agenda.

The Implementation of Apartheid Legislation

To truly understand race in the South African context, it is critical to understand that Apartheid was not simply a regime of racial segregation—it was an explicit system of racial subordination designed to instill and uphold white supremacy at all costs. Whereas the Jim Crow laws of the United States enacted in 1890 and upheld by the 1896 ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson attempted to justify racist segregation policies with the dubious legal doctrine of “separate but equal,” the Apartheid regime was built with the unequivocal mission to divide and suppress the non-white population in the belief that white people were inherently superior and meant to rule all inferior races. Understanding that it was white supremacy, and neither the purported guise of “white self-preservation” nor the simple desire for racial separation, that served as the driving force behind Apartheid is crucial to dismantling the racist regime and understanding how the logistically improbable and economically destructive scheme of apartheid was supported and implemented.

White Supremacy
Jan Smuts, who served as prime minister until 1948, bolstered the work of the prime ministers before him in building and legitimizing the foundations of a white supremacist state that would eventually come to embrace apartheid as rule of law. Smuts was able to successfully reinforce and expand such as state in the midst of a growing tide of global human and civil rights reform, by veiling a fundamentally anti-democratic state in the mantle of international democracy. A key advocate for the League of Nations, Smuts parlayed favor with the global community, allowing him to further entrench state ideals of white supremacy; he took control of the Territory of South West Africa, successfully convincing the international community that consultation with the territory’s African inhabitants was unnecessary.

In 1946, Smuts participated in the drafting of the United Nations Charter, speaking about human rights, liberty, and fraternity, and ironically produced the Charter’s perambulatory words, “We, the Peoples of the World.” However, upon returning to South Africa, Smuts was approached by nationalists about his part in producing the preamble, and asked, “Where do we stand in relation with the non-white races? Do you include them in those words?” Smut responded, “You know well, that I did not include them in those words. They are not our equal and they will never be our equal.”

In South Africa, Smuts pushed for a full doctrine of white supremacy that placed even prisoners of war over native Africans, if they were white. Mokgatle, an activist and critic of Smuts’ so-called “liberal” government, wrote in his autobiography:

Large numbers of Italians were captured in East Africa, and as prisoners of war they

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used to walk the streets of Pretoria and other cities and towns of the country with more
dignity, respect and pride than we non-Europeans. They entered hotels, restaurants,
cafes, cinemas, and enjoyed outdoor life in the parks, all denied to us. Africans who
served them were ordered to call them ‘master’. Because of Smuts’ doctrine of white
superiority, the master-race concept, they lived in South Africa far better than we did.
They wore their army uniforms and spoke no English or Afrikaans, but South Africa
was a paradise for them.\footnote{Mokgatle, N. (1971)}

Smuts, a key architect of South Africa’s white supremacist state, certainly did
not champion the human rights contained in the Atlantic Charter he read and signed on
behalf of the nation, but by the National Party’s standards, Smuts’ proposed policies
were much too liberal and did not do enough to protect the interests of the white
minority. The NP’s 1947 Manifesto was extreme and impractical, even solely on an
economic basis, but against the UP’s “liberal” call to regulate the inevitable integration
in South Africa, the NP presented a simple and favorable alternative. Though the UP
overwhelmingly won the majority of the popular vote, because the NP won a majority
of the seats contested, the victory went to the NP. The NP’s new government named
D.F. Malan prime minister, the nationalist leader who had once questioned Smuts’
contribution to the United Nations Charter, and vowed under all circumstances to
protect “the white character of our cities.”

Smuts continued to argue that total segregation was an idealistic and
economically infeasible dream, and by 1950, Malan stated, “total territorial
segregation was impracticable under present circumstances in South Africa.” But the
adoption of cosmetic adjustments to make apartheid policies more economically
feasible did not change the original intentions of the policies. Trevor Huddleston, a
critic of apartheid, wrote:

It is not \textit{apartheid} which has provided the Nationalist government with the immense
and growing dominance over all the European groups and parties in this country. It is not the thirst for such a negative state of affairs such as ‘separation’ in, itself that has so stirred enthusiasm and multiplied votes. It is something much deeper and much more appealing. In a word, it is ‘white supremacy, now and always’… It is not white self-preservation that is considered a sufficient motive force today; it is white supremacy, that and nothing less.  

Following the 1948 election, the NP majority grew and began cementing its apartheid regime, while the UP continued to lose votes to the NP. Because the UP did not challenge the NP by questioning the immorality of apartheid, but rather questioned the economic practicality of the regime, the UP failed to move the white minority of voters who increasingly feared rebellion of the African majority.

**Race as Law**

Under the Nationalist government’s efforts to legislate white supremacy and solder apartheid into the national identity of South Africa, race came to permeate every aspect of South African life. The rule of law was used to legitimize a legal framework of discrimination based on race, and the NP’s race legislation caused a decided shift from South Africa being a state fostering white supremacist ideals, to a state explicitly motivated and governed by white supremacy. These laws did not only separate whites from non-whites, but they also gave legal authorization to the socially dominant principle that whites should be favored above all other races because they were inherently superior. There was not even the ugly façade of the principle of “separate but equal” as in Plessy v. Ferguson—basic rights of citizenship were denied to non-whites, and the state had incontrovertible power to suppress any opposition to

its racist regime.

One of the first implementation strategies the NP delineated in its 1947 manifesto was a ban on inter-marriage. Unsurprisingly, Act 55 of 1949, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, became the first official piece of apartheid legislation passed by the NP. This act prohibited marriage between whites or “any person who is in appearance obviously a European,” and non-Europeans. The first clause of the act reads as follows:

As from the date of commencement of this Act a marriage between a European and a non-European may not be solemnized, and any such marriage solemnized in contravention of the provisions of this section shall be void and of no effect.

Act 55 of 1949 was buttressed by and operated in tandem with the Immorality Acts of 1927, 1950, and 1957, and Act no 30 of 1950, the Population Registration Act. The Immorality Act of 1927 and 1950 prohibited sex between European and non-European people. The Immorality Act of 1957 replaced both the 1927 and 1950 acts, adding amendments to prohibit any “immoral or indecent acts” between whites and non-whites, increasing punishment to up to seven years of prison for both partners.

It was the Population Registration Act however, that acted as the centerpiece of apartheid policy. Initially, the Act defined three groups: (1) European, (2) Native, and (3) Coloured. As detailed in the 1947 manifesto, the NP refused to recognize Indians as true residents of South Africa, but in 1959, included them under the category “Asian”. The many amendments added to the Population Registration Act dealt heavily with “appearance” as an indicator of race as a measure to identify light-skinned non-whites passing as whites, and prevent any assimilation of races.

Critical to the Population Registration Act was the issuing of identity cards that
allowed authorities to identify the race of any South African, and accordingly, his or her legal rights. Legal racial identification via the Population Registration Act was necessary to implement the Group Areas Act of 1950, which encompassed three acts working in junction to force physical separation between races by creating different residential areas for different races. The law forced non-whites to reside in the least developed areas and restricted ownership and occupation of land to statutory groups. To enforce this, a pass law called the Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act was enacted in 1952, requiring non-whites to carry “reference books,” (in essence, passports) not only to enter white areas of South Africa, but at all times. Non-whites could be criminalized for being unable to produce a pass to the police.

These laws were borne from a combined belief in the inherent superiority of whites and the insecurity about the ability of the white minority to maintain its power. The Group Areas Act separated whites and non-whites in an effort to maintain racial purity, but more pragmatically, it functioned to counter the growing threat of riots by non-whites as they migrated from rural areas into big cities. The Native Labour Act of 1953 made illegal any strike action by blacks. While the 1953 act did not prohibit trade unions, the government did not legally recognize them. In his explanation of the government’s decision to reject the recommendation for the recognition of African trade unions, South African Minister for Labour Ben Schoeman said:

I think hon. Members must realize that if we give that incentive to Natives to organize —and we must bear in mind that they are primitive and illiterate Natives who have not the faintest conception of the responsibilities of trade unionism, that they are people who cannot even read the constitution of a trade union, who know nothing about negotiation or the industrial set-up of South Africa—if we give them that incentive to organize and they should become well-organized… they can use their trade unions as
a political weapon and they can create chaos in South Africa at any given time.\textsuperscript{13}

The irony of the Minister’s argument lies in the fact that the government actively sought to prevent Africans from receiving an education that would lead them to aspire to skilled positions equal to or above whites. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 established a Black Education Department in the Department of Native Affairs, which instituted racially segregated schools with differential curriculums. The Minister of Native Affairs, and future Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, made it clear that the policy of the Bantu Education system was to ensure that black and non-white workers were moved to the unskilled labor market, befit only to serve their own race, or to work under whites. Verwoerd, who drafted the Bantu Education Act, stated: “There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour… What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?”\textsuperscript{14}

Of course, it was Verwoerd, and other crafters of the apartheid government who made certain though deliberate efforts that there was no place for non-whites in the higher echelons of society. It was not because blacks and other non-whites were innately unable to assume skilled positions—if this was the case, laws such as the Bantu Education Act would have been unnecessary. It was this type of circular reasoning, in which the premise of white supremacy justified the conclusion of white supremacy that drove much of the rationale for the apartheid laws.

\textbf{LITERATURE REVIEW}


Race as a Social Construct

The concept of race has been a topic of contentious debate and inquiry for over a century; some deny the very concept and existence of race, while others defend the concept of race, either as biologically grounded or socially constructed. In the historic debate over the foundation and reality of race, three predominant lines of thinking have emerged: race is biologically real, socially real, or not real at all. While the ambiguities surrounding the delineation of racial boundaries have led to the discarding of racial naturalism and an acceptance that “discrete or essentialist races are socially constructed, not biologically real,” a great deal of scientific and philosophical debate on race remains. Some scholars defending the racial population naturalism school of thought continue to deliberate the genetic significance of non-discrete and non-essentialist shared biological groupings and phenotypes, while others in the racial skepticism and eliminativism camp argue that because race is not a biological determinant, race simply does not exist and any concept of it should be

While there is certainly value in questioning the theory of race as a biosocial, and epigenetic construct, as there is value in considering a future where the concept of race no longer exists, these racial ontologies are not generalizable to a global understanding of race, and in their simplicity, create irresolvable conceptual mismatches. Biosocial theories of race do not explain how an individual may be biologically identical in two locales, yet white in one place and black in another; they do not question deeply enough how racial transmission can be biological, though race is not biologically real. Conversely, in evoking the flawed logic that “because racial naturalism is false, races of any type do not exist,” racial skeptics and eliminativists falsely equate biology as a necessary condition for reality, failing to consider that social constructs are just as real as biological ones. To put it in terms of a simple analogy, we know that both gold and jewelry are real, though gold is an unchangeable natural element and jewelry is a socially constructed category subject to different interpretations. Nevertheless, the concept of jewelry remains just as real as gold in a society so long as the term has meaningful reference. While these theories add valuable discourse to the debate on race, it is undeniable that race is not biologically determined, but socially constructed. It is undeniable that our history has been deeply shaped by manufactured hierarchies of race and power that continue to influence our most basic understandings of identity today.

The theory of racial constructivism accepts the nonexistence of biological race,

26 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
but argues that because the formation of race has been “contingent upon human
culture and human decisions,” race still meaningfully frames our understanding of
cultural and ethnic groups. Race constructivists share the belief that the conservation
of race is necessary for race-based social movements or policies such as affirmative
action to counterbalance socially constructed, but very real, race-based differences in
resources, opportunities, and outcomes. Three different ontologies exist within race
conservatism: thin constructivism, interactive kind constructivism, and institutional
constructivism.

Thin constructivists such as Charles Mills (1998) and Robert Gooding-
Williams (1998) reject racial naturalism, but view race as based upon “superficial
properties that are prototypically linked with race,” such as skin, hair, and eye color,
and the “criteria ordinary people use to ascribe racial membership,” such as “ancestry,
self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience and self-
identification.” Interactive kind constructivists such as Adrian Piper (1996) argue
that it is not merely the observable characteristics that create our understanding of
race, but rather the common experiences that arise from being ascribed to a certain
racial category. Piper writes:

What joins me to other blacks, then and other blacks to [one] another, is not a set of
shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share. Rather, it is the
shared experience of being visually or cognitively identified as black by a white racist

29 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
30 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
University Press.
33 Gooding-Williams, Robert. 1998. “Race, Multiculturalism And Democracy.” Constellations
34 Mallon, Ron. 2006. “‘Race’: Normative, Not Metaphysical Or Semantic*.”
Lastly, institutional constructivists such as Michael Root (2000) and Paul Taylor (2000) regard race as a culturally specific and embedded institution, and therefore non-generalizable across different societies or time periods.\(^{36,37}\) In his explanation of racial categories as “both made up and real,” Root notes that a person with sickle-cell disease may be perceived as black in the U.S., but as white in Brazil; accordingly, prevalence of sickle-cell disease amongst blacks differ by place, as does race. Root writes:

Race does not travel. Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today. Socrates had no race in ancient Athens, though he would be a white man in Minnesota. Where R is a race, a person is R at a site only if R is used there to divide people. Because the ancient Greeks did not divide people by race, there were no races in Athens then and, of course, no differences between people in morbidity or mortality based on race there.\(^{38}\)

Root concludes: “the biomedical or social generalizations into which racial categories enter are local.”\(^{39}\)

South African society is one of many examples that corroborates the theory of racial constructivism and makes particularly salient Root’s argument that race is real in a society as long as that society is race-conscious. While race is not biologically real, the normative social categorization of race makes race real all the same. In other words, race has not been borne from the laws of nature; race is invented, and therefore


specific to the place and time in which it is created and perpetuated. But this does not mean that all constructs are metaphysically the same. Root writes, “Some invented categories are more real and have more of a role in the social sciences than others, even if none enter into laws of nature.” In other words, society’s categories are no less real than those of nature, but they are different in that they create their own causal order based upon changing norms and laws. Society exists “not merely by what happens to be,” but rather “by the statements of what ought to be.”

South Africa’s apartheid-era race laws demonstrate the extent to which race is invented, and made more and less real by social norms and regulations. While discriminatory legislation had been enacted under former British and Afrikaner governments pre-apartheid, apartheid served to make race more real by systematically formalizing race into law. The white minority ruling South African society depended on the ideals of white supremacy to maintain their power, and so manufactured society in their vision of “what ought to be,” not “what happens to be.” By binding racist norms into law, the Nationalist party validated the construct of race as a determinant of all aspects of life, metaphysically making race more real. As Root says, “In the U.S. during the Jim Crow era, the laws of racial separation acted like cement in the southern States; they kept the blacks together and the blacks and whites apart; the races were never so real as when enforced by the law.”

To create the racial structure that would organize the apartheid regime, the Nationalist government passed the Population Registration Act in 1950, requiring all residents of South Africa to be classified and registered as one of three groups:

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European, Native, or Coloured. Indians were added later as a separate classification. But this classification was messy and arbitrary because the apartheid government’s construction of race continued to evolve over time. Both the composition and names of the racial groups continued to change. European was changed to white, and Native was changed to Bantu, then African, then black. “Coloured” was defined as “a person who is not a white person or a Bantu,” and included people of mostly mixed races, Griquas, and Malays, and more loosely, Indians, and Chinese. The qualifications one had to fulfill to be member to one of these groups were incredibly nebulous, and included criteria such as demeanour, habits, and deportment. Later the four official racial categories became white, black, Indian, and coloured.

The original 1950 Act states in clause 1 that a white person is defined as “a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person.” In 1967 the Act was amended to include more specific criteria by which the government could distinguish a “white” person. Sub-clause 2 of Act No. 64, the 1967 Population Registration Amendment Act, reads as follows:

(2) Notwithstanding anything contained in subsection (1) or any other law, but subject to the provisions of section 5 (5)—

(a) in deciding whether any person is in appearance obviously a white person or not a white person within the meaning of the definition of “white person” in

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subsection (1), his habits, education and speech and deportment and
demeanour in general shall be taken into account;

(b) it shall, in the absence of proof that any person is generally accepted as a white
person or a Bantu, be assumed that he is generally accepted as a coloured
person except where such a person is in appearance obviously a member of an
aboriginal race or tribe of Africa;

(c) a person shall be deemed not to be generally accepted as a white person, unless
he is so accepted in the area in which or at any place where he—

(i) is ordinarily resident;

(ii) is employed or carries on business;

(iii) mixes socially or takes part in other activities with other
members of the public,

and in his association with the members of his family and any other
persons with whom he lives;

(d) in considering whether or not any person is a white person, he shall be deemed
also to admit freely and voluntarily and on the ground of facts that he is by
descent a Bantu or a coloured person if—

(i) in any proceedings before a board or for the purposes of his
classification before a court of law, he admits or has admitted under
oath that he is not by descent a white person; or

(ii) in any form or return referred to in section 3 or 9 or in any application
for an identity card completed and signed by him there appears a
statement to the effect that as far as his race is concerned, he is not a
white person; or

(iii) he for the purposes of his classification admits or has admitted
that either of his natural parents is or was not generally accepted as a
white person;

(e) the fact that any person was generally accepted as a white person or a coloured
person or a Bantu on the date on which a form or return referred to in section 3
or 9 was completed by or in respect of him, shall be at all times be conclusive
proof that he is so accepted.47

What did it mean to be white in South Africa’s apartheid regime? It is clear that

neither metaphysical theories of racial population naturalism nor racial skepticism, and
certainly not racial naturalism explain South Africa’s understanding of race. According
to the racial population naturalist, it is possible to demarcate races based upon
prevalence of genetic traits in certain populations, and according to racial skeptics,
race is neither real nor relevant, either naturally or conceptually. But it is plain that
race in South Africa is both immensely real and relevant, as it is plain that criteria such
as education, socioeconomic status, residence, habits, and employment are not
genetically determined.\textsuperscript{48,49} It is erroneous to attribute genes to the result of
environmental or epigenetic effects. The apartheid criteria of educational attainment
and employment of different races cannot be attributed to some inherent causal
authority. It is not because of a natural inability to learn or attain mastery in a
profession that different races did not meet the government’s criteria for whiteness;
rather, it was because the white minority government actively suppressed the ability of
non-white individuals to ever become white, feeding their circular justification for
white supremacy.

The Act’s vague determination of the criteria for a “white person”
demonstrates that “Whiteness” is not evaluated in the literal sense of observable
characteristics of appearance such as a person’s hair, skin color, or facial features.
Rather, whiteness, and race in general, is normative; it is specific to the values and
meanings societies attach to the construct. While it was evident that the Nationalist
government based its evaluations of racial classification on non-essentialist attributes
such as general acceptance by a racial community or the types of friends and
acquaintances one had, in its attempt to provide ostensibly more legitimate grounds

\textsuperscript{48} Parliament of South Africa. 1962. \textit{Act No. 30 Of 1950}
upon which to legally create, separate, and discriminate against racial groups, the
government devised overly simplistic and arbitrary means to test for race.

One’s racial group was often unclear because race is not essentialist, but
because the South African government purported it to be, the government developed
tests to assist authorities in fulfilling the mandates of the Population Registration Act.
One of the most popular tests, the “pencil test,” demonstrates the extent to which race
was subjective and manmade. Authorities determined a person’s racial classification
by sticking a pen or pencil in the hair of a person whose racial status was uncertain. If
the pencil fell to the floor, the person would “pass” the test and be determined “white.”
If the pencil remained in a person’s hair, the person was classified as coloured. In
another version of the pencil test, blacks who wished to be reclassified as coloured (as
coloureds were allowed more rights than blacks), were told to place a pencil in their
hair and shake their head. If the pencil fell out, they “passed” and were reclassified as
coloured.\(^{50}\)

It is clear that race is socially constructed, but still real; race is real not because
of some biological element, but because our social consciousness of race makes the
construct important and manifest in our lives. Social constructs are as real as natural
elements, though their causal power, unlike the causal power of natural elements, is
derived from “what ought to be” rather than “what happens to be.”\(^{51}\) While there is
merit in contemplating a world absent of race, at present, it is impossible to deny that
race does exist, and that race-based differences in opportunities and outcomes too
exist. Acknowledging the reality and influence of race is critical to counterbalancing
these constructed differences. Finally, race exists temporally and regionally—because

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race operates as a social institution, it is particular to the society in which it has been invented.

Race and Ethnicity

In understanding race as a social construct, it is necessary to make a distinction between race and ethnicity, related concepts that are often incorrectly conflated. Whereas society invents and externally imposes race onto individuals, individuals have much more choice in their ethnic identification. Stephen Cornell and Douglass Hartmann (1998) define race as, “a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent… Determining which characteristics constitute the race…is a choice human beings make. Neither markers nor categories are predetermined by biological factors.”

In contrast, ethnicity is described as “a named social category of people based on perceptions of shared social experience or ancestry” such as “cultural attachments, past linguistic heritage, religious affiliations, claimed kinship, or some physical traits.”

Race is connected to ethnicity in that racial identities can be comprised of many ethnic identities. Thereby, individuals who are racially designated as Asian may hold a diverse collection of ethnic identities based on national, sub-national, trans-national, cultural, linguistic, or geographic markers (e.g., Korean, Malaysian, Indian-American). Cornell and Hartmann argue that “racial identity is typically

57 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
externally imposed by outsiders, and as a result are hierarchical, with particular races being superior or inferior to others.

History is fraught with examples of racial imposition and invention. Michael James explains: “…whites created the negro race to homogenize the multiple ethnic groups they conquered in Africa or brought as slaves to America…European explorers “discovered” and then conquered peoples with radically different phenotypical traits.” Conversely, individuals have much more agency over choosing and expressing their ethnic identity than they do over their racial identity. Because physical differences between ethnic groups are usually less evident, and individuals can choose to reveal their religious affiliations or express their cultural practices, ethnicity grants much more influence to the individual rather than to an external force.

Unlike ethnicity, because race is often associated with immediately visible physical traits and falsely “perceived as inherent, something individuals are born with,” race becomes inextricable from power. James states, “…race typically involves power relations, from the basic power to define the race of others to the more expansive power to deprive certain racial groups of social, economic, or political benefits…” Apartheid South Africa provides a clear example: in order to assert their economic and social authority in society, the white minority Nationalist party implemented a regime of racial segregation, stripping away civil rights, and suppressing the ability of the non-white population to gain equal standing in society.

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59 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
60 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
61 James, Michael. 2008. “Race.”
Race and Ethnicity of East Asians in South Africa

There is no group that better exemplifies South Africa’s social construction of race than East Asians. In South Africa, East Asians remain one of the country’s smallest minority groups; the most recently available data show approximately 350,000 Chinese and Taiwanese (2009), 1,238 Japanese (2006), and 4,450 Koreans (2014) residing in South Africa, though today those numbers are likely higher and exact counts are difficult to ascertain. Though for over three centuries, East Asians, and in particular, the Chinese, have contributed to the diverse racial and ethnic makeup of South African society, because of their small population size, they have often been unknown, ignored, and largely forgotten within the larger historical context of South Africa.

While there are researchers who have filled substantial gaps in knowledge of Chinese in South Africa, notably, Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man (1996) with their book, *Colour, Confusion, and Concessions: the History of the Chinese in South Africa*, Yoon Jung Park (2008, 2009, 2010), and Anna Ying Chen (2009,

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there has been less research on other East Asians in South Africa, whose histories are equally as confusing as, if not more so than, the history of the Chinese in South Africa. This lack of knowledge comes in part because within the East Asian community in South Africa, the Korean and Japanese communities constitute even smaller minorities, and their history in South Africa is shorter than that of the Chinese community. Furthermore, the dominance of China in the present global political economy contributes to the societal understanding of all East Asians in South Africa, including Japanese and Koreans, as “Chinese.”

While all East Asian groups have been subject to South Africa’s arbitrarily defined race laws and the consequent societal marginalization and inconsistent racial classification, it is useful to look at the history of Chinese in South Africa, in large part because the experience of the Chinese has deep connections to the experiences of other East Asian groups. The South African Institute of Race Relations describes well the historical marginalization and arbitrary classification of the Chinese in their 1996 comments on the future of the Chinese in a post-apartheid South Africa:

No group is treated so inconsistently under South Africa’s race legislation. Under the Immorality Act they are Non-White. The Group Areas Act says they are Coloured, subsection Chinese… They are frequently mistaken for Japanese in public and have generally used White buses, hotels, cinemas and restaurants. But in Pretoria, only the consul-general’s staff may use White buses… Their future appears insecure and unstable. Because of past and present misery under South African laws, and what seems like more to come in the future, many Chinese are emigrating. Like many Coloured people who are leaving the country, they seem to favour Canada. Through humiliation and statutory discrimination South Africa is frustrating and alienating what should be a prized community.70

70 Yap, Melanie and Dianne Leong. Man. 1996.
Park (2008) describes the confusion amongst Chinese South Africans who were subject to the apartheid laws, and the notion of living “in between,” and “sitting on the fence” between white and non-white. One individual, speaking of his childhood experience, recounted the following:

I remember I must have been ten years old when my late dad asked me to go down to the post office down the road to buy stamps. When I went to the coloured side, because [in those days] it was “white” and “non-white,” the chap shouts at me and says to go to the other side [when I went to the other side, I was told the same thing] […] so I stood outside […] and the first person that came by, I asked them to buy a stamp for me.71

This confusing experience of sitting on an ever tenuous line between privilege and disadvantage arose in part from the Nationalist government’s designation of certain Asian ethnic groups as “honorary whites” while keeping the racial status of Chinese unchanged. Under apartheid law, the Group Areas Act of 1950 threatened the livelihoods of the Chinese traders whose work depended on being able to trade among other race groups. While racial segregation pre-apartheid had already separated areas specifically for blacks, and placed restrictions on Asians and coloured, the Group Areas Act created a markedly negative change in that it required all Chinese to “proclaim” a group area and move into a Chinese territory. Non-proclamation of an area would legally displace the Chinese, and provide them no official place to work or live.

The harsh consequences of the Group Areas Act inspired an unprecedented level of activism in the Chinese community. Sending letters, memoranda, and submissions to land tenure boards, group areas boards, and local and federal

government officials, the Chinese requested to be allowed to trade under a system of permits, or have some sort of property rights for traders. In other words, the Chinese requested concessions—and they received them. Park notes:

The Chinese adopted, as in previous times, a nonconfrontational approach. They negotiated for differential treatment on the basis of their small numbers; their general acceptance within white society; their record as a quiet, law-abiding community; and their high standard of living. Their very arguments for differential treatment reinforced their preferred image of themselves—their constructed identity as respectable, civilized, and middle class.  

Though the racial status of the Chinese had not legally changed, and under the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act (1951 and 1957), the Chinese remained officially non-white with no exceptions, some areas began allowing Chinese special privileges to purchase property in white areas, but at great costs. Park recalls:

Older interviewees said that among their most humiliating apartheid experiences was the process of getting the required approval of immediate neighbors in order to take up residence in designated white areas; for years this meant going door-to-door to obtain signatures. For many of the older Chinese, some now holding tertiary degrees and professional jobs, it was degrading to have to ask their white neighbors, often lowly, uneducated bureaucrats, for such permission.

The rise of concessions gained amongst the Chinese accompanied the growing importance of South Africa’s foreign relations with East Asian countries, further changing the societal perception of the Chinese as well as that of other East Asian minorities. Pre-apartheid, South Africa had been obliged to grant special dispensation for Japanese in South Africa due to treaties between Great Britain and Japan. Though the Immigration Act of 1913 banned Japanese and all other Asians as “prohibited

immigrants,” in 1930, the then Minister of the Interior D.F. Malan persuaded the government to exclude the Japanese from the “prohibited immigrants” category using the logic that Japan was a necessary long-term ally to South Africa:

[A]re we not urgently in need of a counter-balance against Communism in the Far East, in the Pacific Ocean: is it not in our interest? Of course. Because we want to make Japan our friend, because we want Japan's sympathy with the Western powers, as has now been proven to be the case, it is to our advantage to make peace with Japan so that this way we can combat the powerful Communist influence in the Far East.74

Throughout his political career, Malan consistently worked to foster good relations with the Japanese. He insisted that Japanese be excluded from the decision of a Select Committee on the Liquor Bill prohibiting Asians from drinking in the Union, stating, “we can never stop the Japanese from having a drink in this country” as they are “our friends.” As Prime Minister, Malan continued to strengthen trade between the two countries. In contrast, the repeated requests of China’s consul-general during this time for Chinese to be granted similar privileges were denied.76

Post World War II, existing trade relations between Japan and South Africa greatly expanded due to Japan's need for industrial raw materials, and by 1966, Japan had doubled its exports to South Africa, becoming its fourth-largest trading partner.77 It was during this time that the Japanese were re-classified as “honorary whites” by the South African government in a move to facilitate trade agreements between the two countries. Faced with the possibility of a $250 million industrial contract with Japan, Prime Minister Verwoerd nudged Pretoria’s Group Areas Board to announce that all Japanese would “be considered white, at least for purposes of residence.” The

76 Osada, Masako. 2002.
77 Park, Yoon Jung. 2008.
Japanese were officially exempted from the Group Areas Act, and public arenas such as municipal swimming pools were opened to Japanese guests.\textsuperscript{78,79,80}

South Africa’s small Chinese community of 7,000 voiced their feelings of injustice concerning the subjective nature of this classification. Their complaints again corroborate the extent to which race is socially constructed in South African society. One Chinese businessman argued, “If anything, we are whiter in appearance than our Japanese friends.” Another demanded, “Does this mean that the Japanese, now that they are ‘white,’ cannot associate with us without running afoul of the Immorality Act?”\textsuperscript{81} The Chinese raised an obvious point—it was impossible for the government to fully enforce the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953, which imposed segregation on all public premises and vehicles, because, as the city council’s Health and Amenities Committee admitted, “It would be extremely difficult for our gatekeepers to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese.”\textsuperscript{82} Thereby, it would also be extremely difficult to distinguish between persons who were “honorary white” and “non-white.”\textsuperscript{83}

Soon, Koreans too gained “honorary white” status, when South Africa and the Republic of Korea negotiated diplomatic relations in 1961, and Koreans were removed from the “prohibited immigrants” category. In the late 1970s, Taiwanese obtained “honorary white” status following the establishment of diplomatic and trade ties between apartheid South Africa and Taiwan (Republic of China), nations facing increasing isolation from the international community. As a result, there was a massive

\textsuperscript{78} Yap, Melanie and Dianne Leong. Man. 1996.  
\textsuperscript{79} T.I.M.E. 1962.  
\textsuperscript{80} Park, Yoon Jung. 2008.  
\textsuperscript{81} T.I.M.E. 1962.  
\textsuperscript{82} T.I.M.E. 1962.  
\textsuperscript{83} Park, Yoon Jung. 2008.
increase in immigration to South Africa from Taiwan, which also resulted in improved treatment of the Chinese. While it was not until 1984 that South African Chinese prevailed in their efforts to be treated equally as Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese—as “honorary whites” under the Group Areas Act—it was long before then that South African society had begun to assume that Chinese were “white” or at least “honorary white” and began to treat them as such.

While the official apartheid state legislation designated Chinese as “non-whites,” societal views of the Chinese varied widely. Park reports, “[Two] Human Science Research Council studies conducted in 1975 and 1978 found that most white people in South Africa were quite accepting of Chinese, whom they viewed as socially and culturally close to white.” Media articles noted the ancient civilization and roots of the Chinese. The inability of society to distinguish between Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese, began to cement societal understanding of East Asians as “white,” and thereby Chinese too became “white,” at least in societal terms.

However, during this period of social and legal concessions, the Chinese continued to be targeted and excluded from many aspects of society; young Chinese South Africans were banned from sporting competitions, educational opportunities, and day care providers. Until 1984, Chinese were still considered “prohibited immigrants.” The legal designation of Chinese as “non-white” and the attendant injustices sometimes had spillover effects on the Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese “honorary whites” because society was unable to distinguish between the groups based on appearance. The ambiguity surrounding the racial classification of East Asians, their homogenization by society, and the ambivalence of state and societal attitudes

84 Park, Yoon Jung. 2008.
85 Yap, Melanie and Dianne Leong. Man. 1996
have deeply impacted the identities of East Asians in South Africa.

Post-apartheid, members of East Asian communities in South Africa continue to face confusion in defining their racial identity. Today, Chinese South Africans are officially classified as “Black,” or more specifically, “Coloured,” a subcategory of Black, under a 2008 Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) ruling meant to redress the inequalities of apartheid by providing previously disadvantaged groups economic privileges. Yet individuals labeled “Chinese,” widely used to refer to anyone appearing of East Asian descent, are often perceived as “white,” and often are socioeconomically better off than other previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa. Consequently, there was extensive backlash following the court order against the ruling. Erasmus & Park (2008) recount the media outrage that ensued:

Some black business and professional organizations have referred to the ruling as ‘surprising, irrational, shallow, opportunistic and inexplicable. The Labour Minister, who ironically was one of the respondents who did not oppose CASA’s application, made baffling statements such as: ‘What I know is that coloureds don’t speak Chinese…. I suppose if I stand up now and say I want to be classified as pink, so maybe a court will agree that you are pink even if you are not pink.’

What lies behind the outrage is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Chinese community’s grievances. The Chinese Association of South Africa (CASA) pursued this ruling not only for the practical restitutions for apartheid, but also as a way to shine light upon the often forgotten and ignored history of prejudices wrought upon the Chinese in South Africa, pre to post apartheid. The eventual social perception of Chinese as sometimes “white,” may have conferred protective advantages for some from the worst type of injustices, but for many, it did not. The selective treatment of

East Asians as “honorary whites,” and “model minorities,” is sinister. These thinly veiled terms are used as a gaslighting technique, erasing a history of unjust offenses, and rewriting a narrative more favorable to oppressors. Paul Farmer, in *An Anthropology of Structural Violence*, writes, “Erasing history is perhaps the most common explanatory sleight-of-hand relied upon by the architects of structural violence. Erasure or distortion of history is part of the process of desocialization necessary for the emergence of hegemonic accounts of what happened and why.”

Material reparations for those wronged have a practical purpose, but symbolically, reparations make tangible an acknowledgement of a history of past wrongs, and admissions of real pain, suffering and hardship created hands of the payer. As the chairperson of CASA explained, “The [Chinese] community’s struggle has not been about economic opportunism, but about [the] lack of recognition and clearing up of misconceptions of the historical injustices the South African Chinese faced.”

Part of the outrage also stems from confusion about the eligibility criteria. The 2008 court order classifies Chinese under the definition of “black people,” but is only applicable to Chinese South Africans, or other Taiwanese or Chinese immigrants who became citizens of South Africa before 1994. Park estimates that there are most likely fewer than 20,000 total Chinese who would fall under BEE status. However, as is the general understanding of the East Asian racial identity in South Africa, the BEE designation is also unclear for the many South Africans who do not distinguish between Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, much less, Chinese South African, Taiwanese South African, and new Chinese migrants. Post-apartheid South African society still

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very much functions according to apartheid-era socio-legal constructions of race. The apartheid categories of white, black, coloured, and Indian continue to define the so-called “rainbow nation,” and East Asians continue to fall simultaneously into all and none of the categories provided. East Asians in South Africa continue to grapple with conflicting identities that lie within the spectrum of whiteness and blackness, of privilege and disadvantage.

A Model Minority

This phenomenon exists on a global level, though perhaps less saliently than it does in South Africa. Outside of Asia, Chinese, and more broadly, East Asians, often sit on a tenuous line between privilege and disadvantage conferred upon them due to socially constructed hierarchies of race. In the United States, East Asians are commonly believed to be a “model minority,” though this term has been largely contested and criticized.\(^{89,90,91}\) The term “model minority,” coined in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson, was used to bolster the narrative that Asian Americans, due to their cultural values and hard work, had successfully been able to overcome the discrimination they had faced in the United States and achieve success. However, this narrative falsely characterizes “Asian American” as a homogenous group and masks and excuses real discrimination Asian Americans continue to face. In the 1960s, many members of the Asian American community embraced the narrative of the model minority, largely because it came as a welcome respite after a long period of Yellow

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Peril, and discriminatory laws such as the Japanese Internment Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act.

While national statistics then and now suggest that Asian Americans have achieved more success than have other minorities in the United States, disaggregating the data tells a different story. Asian Americans, as a broad racial group, do vastly out-earn all other racial groups, have more wealth than black and Hispanic minorities, and have the highest education attainment levels of all racial groups in the United States. But beneath this surface glory is a history of oppression, silenced voices, and the neglected needs of a racially diverse group. Many intellectuals and researchers have challenged the model minority myth from its conceptions, but many others have bought into it, focusing attention upon reasons for Asian American success. The divide within the Asian American community is indicative of ambivalence about the community’s shared identity, subgroup ethnic and national identities, and the perception of the community by American society.

The concept of a “model minority” in the United States has striking similarities to apartheid South Africa’s construction of “honorary whiteness.” The labeling of Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and then Chinese South Africans as “honorary whites,” was founded upon an understanding that East Asians were not really “white,” with all the socio-cultural and legal meanings of “whiteness,” but superficially, came very close to it. For the Chinese in particular, the label was a façade that disguised the bitter injustices of apartheid—a label that dramatically changed the social and legal perceptions of an entire community. The drastic shift in the racial understanding of the Chinese and of East Asians generally corroborates Root’s argument that the invention


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of race is bounded by temporality and locale. East Asian skin did not change from “black” to “white” due to their hard work and cultural values; rather, societal ideas of race and class were imposed upon the group as one collective, changing the racial identities of East Asians over time.

East Asian struggle for identity in South Africa mirrors the East Asian struggle for identity in the United States. As in the United States, inconsistent perceptions of East Asians are related to South Africa’s racial immigration policies, as well as different self-perceptions during different times. Guofang Li and Lihshing Wang (2008) and Frank Wu (2002) explain this ambivalence well:

Overlooking the American history, mainstream American society’s perceptions of Asian Americans seemed to have swung back and forth on the pendulum, indicating a conflicted “love and hate” relationship. From the 19th century up until early parts of the 20th century, Asian Americans, especially the Chinese, the “Chinaman,” were seen as the “yellow peril” who took up many of America’s working class/laborers’ jobs and brought all manners of ills to the country. Their children were once put in separate schools from both the blacks and the whites. During this time, “yellow” was a distinct race, neither blackened nor whitened. After the mainstream media crowned Asian Americans as the model minority in the 1960s, the Asian race was beginning to be whitened as “Anglo-Asian.” While Asian Americans were thrown into a whirlwind of benevolence from the mainstream and were about to enjoy a moment of relief, Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two White men in Detroit in 1982. After him, many incidents of violence against Asian Americans occurred. These incidents served as painful reminders of the status quo of Asian Americans in the dominant racial hierarchy.

The perception of East Asians in the United States as no longer “a yellow peril” but instead a “model minority” was officiated by the media that continuously praised Asian Americans as a “super minority” “outwhiting the Whites.” In South Africa, it

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97 Li, Guofang and Lihshing Wang. 2008
was not the media, but the rule of law that officiated East Asians as South Africa’s “honorary whites,” its own model minority. Due to South Africa’s socio-legal construction of race, the racial identity of East Asians is even more ambiguous than it is in the United States. This research seeks to shed light on personal understandings of racial identity amongst East Asians in a post-apartheid South Africa.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

This exploratory study draws on 54 in-depth, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with South Africans of East Asian (Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean) descent. 45 participants were recruited (18 Chinese, 6 Taiwanese, 6 Japanese, and 15 Korean). Interviews were conducted in July and August 2015 in Johannesburg and Pretoria, with focus on participants’ lived experience of race before, during, and after Apartheid. Data on local business investment and migration patterns was also gathered from Taiwanese and Japanese embassies in Pretoria.

Johannesburg and Pretoria were chosen as study sites for this analysis for three main reasons: cultural and historical relevance, sample population density, and proximity. As the city with the highest density of Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Korean residents in South Africa, Johannesburg continues to function as a central economic and cultural hub where much of the history surrounding East Asians in South Africa originated. The oldest Chinese association in South Africa, the only Japanese International School, and many Korean churches are located in Johannesburg, making the city an opportune site for this research. As the nation’s capital, Pretoria was similarly vital to understanding the history of East Asian race
relations in South Africa, and its proximity to Johannesburg made gathering data and recruiting participants from the capital feasible.

A snowball sampling method was used to construct a diverse sample in terms of ethnic origin (Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean), age, and socioeconomic background. Initial contacts for Chinese in Johannesburg and Pretoria were derived from correspondence with Dr. Yoon Jung Park, a leading researcher in China-Africa studies, and Dr. Garth Sheldon, a professor at the University of Witwatersrand. From these contacts, I received information on contacting other potential participants, and locations from which I might find success in recruiting contacts and participants. Most of the study’s Chinese and Taiwanese participants were recruited from initial contacts; most Korean participants were recruited at a central Korean church in Johannesburg and most Japanese participants were referred by the Japanese embassy in Pretoria.

Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours, and some participants were interviewed two or more times. All participants were either provided a written consent form or delivered an oral consent script. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent for transcription purposes. Names are coded within this analysis to protect the confidentiality of participants.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

Five major themes emerged from the interviews and secondary research conducted: (1) the inextricability of race and class, (2) cross-generational attempts to reconcile conflicting ethnic, racial, and national identities, (3) similarities in reasons
for migrating to South Africa, (4) parallels between “honorary whiteness” and the concept of the “model minority,” and (5) feelings of being an “outsider” in South African society.

Race and Class: Two Sides of the Same Coin

“It’s not about race anymore—class is the only thing that matters now.” This was an argument I heard repeatedly from young men and women during my time conducting public health research in Cape Town as well as from participants in this study. Interviewees shrugged off questions about race versus class saying, “Race doesn’t matter,” “Did you know the richest man in South Africa is black?” and “As long as I’m rich, people will respect me.” I soon realized the problem with asking whether race or class was more important in South African society lay in the fact that race and class represented two different ways of thinking about the same construct. Because class is a significant determinant of South Africa’s social conception of race, race and class become two sides of the same coin, often mistaken for disparate entities. While the connection between race and class is hardly a phenomenon unique to South African society, in the South African post-apartheid context, this inextricability becomes remarkably salient.

Sub-clause 2 of the Population Registration Act of 1950, as described in the literature review, details the criteria individuals had to meet to qualify as a “white person.” These qualifications were based on socioeconomic standing—one’s education, employment, and residence were all factors that determined whether one was white or black. When we consider the long history of East Asians in South Africa being racially classified as “white” and “honorary white,” it is clear that this
designation was based upon external perceptions of societal wealth and social standing. The Chinese, who were considered “black” until the end of apartheid, constituted an anomaly amongst all other East Asian groups in South Africa; Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese all obtained the government’s “honorary white” status before the Chinese.

While there are certainly many factors that go into explaining this phenomenon, a key point to note is that the Chinese, unlike Koreans, Japanese, and the Taiwanese, had been imported into South Africa in the early 20th century to work as miners. In 1903, South Africa had conducted an investigation on the labor potential of those in East Asia, considering the importation of Korean, Japanese, or Chinese laborers, but ultimately decided on Chinese workers.98 Had Koreans or the Japanese been chosen as South Africa’s initial laborers from the East, it is not unlikely that the Chinese could have swapped roles with Japanese or Koreans during the 1960s, assuming “honorary white” status, and sparking the outrage of other East Asian groups.

Nevertheless, because the Chinese made their livelihoods as traders, even during apartheid, the Chinese were better off financially than were most other minority groups in South Africa. This, in combination with the designation of all other East Asian groups as “honorary whites,” led in part to rising concessions for the Chinese and the perception of their “whiteness.” Because class was so pivotal to apartheid’s race laws, class and employment opportunities became one of the causes of the outrage towards the 2008 Pretoria High Court order designating South African Chinese and Taiwanese born before 1994 as “black.” K.P., a 4th generation Chinese South African explained:

98 Yap, Melanie and Dianne Leong. Man. 1996
There were tensions with the black community when we won the court case because at that time, what was it 2007, 2008, there was a lot of Chinese investments coming into Africa. So these people were saying, ‘Gosh, these guys are going to come in and take all of our jobs and take all of our contracts’ because contracts are awarded based on how many points you get on BEE.

Another participant, L.O., a second generation Taiwanese South African, said:

I think there was the idea that, you know, Chinese hadn’t really suffered under apartheid—and I think to some degree it’s true—we as Taiwanese didn’t suffer as much as blacks. It’s also because… you see all these people looking for jobs? South Africans think the Chinese are rich—Chinese investments are the big thing now. So there was some anger.

While there are very some wide socioeconomic gaps amongst Chinese immigrants in South Africa, and during apartheid, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese South Africans all at some point were denied economic privileges to varying degrees, today, East Asians, and Asians as a whole, earn significantly more than the black or coloured populations in South Africa.

Figure 1 depicts average annual household income according to South Africa’s 2011

99 Yap, Melanie and Dianne Leong. Man. 1996
census data. White households earned six times the average annual income of black households, and three times the average annual income of coloured households. Asian households (including Indian households) earned more than four times the average annual income of black households. But what this graph does not depict is the massive growth in economic disparities between the racial groups over time.¹⁰⁰

Figure 2 shows that while the black population has continued to increase as a percentage of the total population every decade since 1960, the economic outcomes amongst blacks have not risen in proportion to those of other racial groups. Post 1994, the incomes of every racial group rose sharply, except the income of black individuals. It is clear that the implementation of BEE has not had much success in its mission to

create economic growth amongst those most “previously disadvantaged.”

This data belies the popular belief that class matters more than race in a post-

apartheid South Africa. While class is certainly important, its importance is magnified by the presence of race. Because apartheid sought to systematically limit the opportunities of blacks and non-whites to achieve educational or financial success, it is fair to say that apartheid in large part shaped the socioeconomic disadvantages of the black population today. In other words, it is because the apartheid government constructed race to be understood in terms of indiscrete and non-essentialist attributes such as appearance, general “demeanour,” and importantly, class, that class is so important in discussions of race, and race in discussions of class. When asked, “Do you think it is more important to be black or white, or is it more important to be rich or poor?” L.O. responded,

I think in any capitalistic society, your socioeconomic status would be more important than your skin color. Statistics say that the wealthiest person in South Africa is a black person. And if that is true that goes quite contrary to whether it is more important to be black or white, Indian, coloured, Chinese, or Korean… I think in this country, people tend to believe it’s more important to be rich… in this “new” South Africa where most opportunities are given to the so-called previously disadvantaged, your BEEs.

Unfortunately, it is clear that BEE has not yet had the intended effect of bringing those previously disadvantaged into the economic mainstream. Figure 3 and Figure 4 depict a dot map representation of race and household income in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Simply looking at the map demonstrates the extent to which these two major cities remain segregated by wealth and income. In Figure 3, the green areas, representing areas with a high density of blacks, are also areas with South Africa’s biggest and oldest townships, living remnants of the apartheid era. Unsurprisingly, Figure 4, a dot map of household income in Johannesburg and Pretoria, creates an almost perfect overlay on Figure 3. Areas with the lowest household incomes match almost perfectly with areas with the highest density of
blacks; areas with the highest incomes match almost perfect with areas with the highest density of whites.

Figure 1: Dot Map: Racial Distribution of Johannesburg and Pretoria (Census 2011)

Figure 2: Dot Map: Income Distribution of Johannesburg and Pretoria (Census 2011)

Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese

In my initial data collection, I found that most East Asians resided in wealthy, white areas, with the exception of the Chinese. While many older generations of local Chinese South Africans and newer Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese migrants lived in

one of two of Johannesburg’s Chinatowns, others lived in wealthier, whiter areas. Many Koreans lived in gated communities in the north of Johannesburg, and the small Japanese community lived either in Pretoria, near the embassy, or in Emmarentia, in Randburg. Though reasons for migration to South Africa varied for each group, typically reasons were related to business endeavors.

Amongst the Chinese, business dominated as the reason for immigrating to South Africa. Johannesburg is home to numerous “China malls,” shopping centers run entirely by Chinese. These malls range from wholesalers to retailers, and sell anything from upscale goods to discount products. These malls, and other Chinese-run developments in Johannesburg are predominantly from Mainland China. It should be noted here that there are three major groups of Chinese in South Africa: The “local” Chinese South Africans, the Taiwanese, and the new Mainland Chinese migrants. Of the Chinese and Taiwanese South Africans interviewed, all spoke English fluently, and some spoke Afrikaans. Levels of Chinese fluency and literacy varied, but most had at the very least a basic proficiency in Chinese. Newer migrants I met had varying levels of English fluency, but most did not speak English well. Because all interviews were conducted in English or Korean, new migrants were not interviewed.

Amongst Koreans, the reasons for migrating were rooted in religion, though business endeavors and economic advancement were also themes in answers given. The Korean community is centered about Korean churches in Johannesburg; half of the Koreans interviewed said that either they or their parents had come to South Africa as Christian missionaries. All Koreans interviewed were religious (or at least had grown up with religion) and many drove down from Pretoria to Johannesburg every Sunday for a full day (9am-6pm) of church services, bible studies, and general
socializing with the Korean community. Amongst individuals who did not state religion as their primary purpose for migration, a common theme emerged: participants expressed a desire to “start over,” “be free,” and “escape the pressure” of the competitive educational system and job market in South Korea.

Japanese interviewed were predominantly contract workers, temporary residents of South Africa, sent over by large companies such as Toyota. Interviewees noted that the tiny community of local Japanese South Africans was shrinking. Ryan Keet, an official at the Japanese Embassy in Pretoria confirmed that most Japanese residents in South Africa were temporary, and provided contact information for the South Africa Nippon Club, through which I recruited interview participants. One of the older interviewees who had lived in South Africa for 38 years, said she frequently returned to Japan to see her family.

**Conflicting Identities**

Interviewees ranged from 19 to 63 years of age, but across age groups, and generations, a theme of conflicting racial, national, and ethnic identities emerged. In response to questions such as, “Do you feel more South African or more Chinese?” and “Where do you fit in South Africa’s understanding of race?” participants provided a wide range of answers from “I’m 99% South African, 1% Asian,” to “By blood, I’m Chinese, and no matter where I go, I’ll be Chinese.” But all participants expressed uncertainty about societal perceptions of their race, regardless of their personal identifications. E.L., the 22 year old 1st generation Taiwanese South African who had said, “I’m 99% South African, 1% Asian” elaborated:

Like, all my friends, all my friends are white you know? Race isn’t important. I’m
definitely South African. I feel South African, I do South African things—me and my brothers, we go to the gym and chill—and I don’t feel Asian—like I’m Taiwanese, but I don’t do “Asian” things like play video games or things like that… I mean, people will always look at me and think ‘Hey, he’s Chinese,’ but besides that, I’m 99% South African.

E.L.’s words suggests that on some level, he believes that being South African is mutually exclusive to being Chinese. Despite claiming, “race isn’t important,” E.L. acknowledges that because society perceives of him as Chinese, he can never be 100% South African. Furthermore, in stating, “all my friends are white,” E.L. identifies “white” as a criterion for being truly South African. E.L.’s words indicate that a desire to be accepted by South African society, a society with which he culturally identifies, but because of his race, cannot fully be seen as South African, in his understanding of the meaning of “South African.”

My interview with K.P., 47, a 2nd generation Taiwanese South African will be highlighted here because his sentiments are illustrative of those in many other interviews. Asked the question, “Do you feel South African?” K.P. responded:

It was always hard to feel that you are South African in the sense that I was neither black nor white. So to put it more correctly, let’s say it was difficult to have a sense of belonging, to say that I’m South African because I was one of the ethnic groups here. So from that perspective, it was difficult to find a sense of belonging. But as the years went by you eventually grow to become a South African because of course, your education, the way that you lived.

When asked if he had ever felt, “white,” K.P, who had grown up in a predominantly white neighborhood during apartheid, laughed and said, “Every day I look in the mirror, and no I don’t feel that I’m white. I’ve never felt that I was white.” Unlike E.L., K.P. had grown up during apartheid, and had experienced the daily confusion of living between line demarcating white and black. When asked about the “honorary white” classification he and his family were given as Taiwanese, K.P. said:
It’s said that Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese were classified as “honorary whites,” but I don’t know what honorary white means. It’s a contradictory term—and the reason I say that is that on any of the official documents we had to fill in in those days, we had to fill in which race we were, and there was certainly not a column in which I could tick “honorary white.” It said, white, black, and I think that’s it. It was either European or black and there weren’t any other choices. Maybe later coloured or Indian, but I think then everybody was classified as black. So you know, there was not a place where you could say to yourself or to anybody or you know that you’re “honorary white.”

After some thought, K.P. continued:

In real life, I must say we were afforded privileges of white people, not by virtue of “we asked for it,” but I think—if I could give an example—if I went to a garage, a petrol station, and I wanted to use the bathroom, the petrol attendant would naturally direct me to the whites toilet. In those days, I couldn’t understand why—why couldn’t I use the blacks toilet, why couldn’t I go to the one that was closer, why did I have to walk all the way there. I couldn’t understand.

The privileges afforded to East Asians as “honorary whites” contributes to the confusion in racial identity. K.P., certainly does not feel white—having lived through apartheid, he said, “I would feel more black than white.” But because society simultaneously deems him more white than black, and also, perhaps not truly South African, K.P. expressed a sense of uncertainty about societal perceptions of his race. He pointed out that while he, as Taiwanese, superficially had the privileges of whites, others like him, who were ethnically Chinese, did not. When asked about the 2008 ruling reclassifying Chinese South Africans as “black people,” K.P. said:

It’s only fair for those South African born Chinese to be recognized as having suffered under the apartheid regime. It was never about the economic status. You know, having the preference now of being able to benefit financially in terms of government projects. It was never about that for the Chinese people. It was always about recognition.

East Asians as Global Outsiders
While interviewees varied in their feelings of racial self-identity, all participants expressed a shared sense of “not belonging” in South Africa. H.B., 25, a 2nd generation Korean said:

“I’m South African, yeah of course, but I’m more Korean just because the way I look and the way people treat me. Like here in South Africa, the Korean community is close-knit—we speak Korean, eat Korean food. I guess in society, people would just see us as Chinese. I think people here don’t really know about Korea, and sometimes, even after living here all these years, I still get asked, “How long are you staying in South Africa?”

A.L., 33, a 2nd generation Korean said:

“I’m Korean. I don’t know where that fits in. I’m Asian but not here because here in South Africa, Asian just means Indian. I’m not black, or white, or coloured, so I guess I’m other.

M.Y., 63, a 1st generation Japanese said:

“I’m proud to be Japanese. But I think many people believe I am Chinese, but I get used to it.

P.K., 27, a 1st generation Korean said:

“I don’t know what I would check off as my race. People would see me as Chinese and Chinese are seen as you know, foreign investors coming to invest in South Africa, so they probably think I’m not from here.

The sentiments among the Koreans about not truly fitting in because they are seen as “Chinese” and therefore, “foreign,” are echoed in the answers Chinese interviewees gave. E.P., 3rd generation Chinese South African spoke of neither fully fitting into South African or Chinese society.

I would say I feel more comfortable here in South Africa, but it's almost like going to some friend's house and you've been there all the time and that sort of thing. You feel comfortable because you grew up there, and you've known your friend all your life, but it's never your real home whereby you can go into your home and you can feel so comfortable and say, "this is my home." because there's just
something... because if you're staying at your friend's house no matter how long, there's just something, not like home. And where is really really home? So you go to China, and everybody looks the same and you're like ok, everyone's the same there but they think differently. So I can speak the same, that's fine, but I don't really belong there either. I would say I'm South African, but I'm never really treated as the child of the parent at the friend's house—I'm just a friend.

Chapter 6: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to answer 3 principal questions: (1) How does the socio-legal construct of race in South Africa influence and perpetuate the ambiguity of the racial status of East Asians? (2) How does the intersection of class and race demonstrate the theory of race as a social construct and the parallels between the characterization of East Asians in South Africa and East Asians in the United States? (3) Where do East Asians fit in the racial landscape of a post-Apartheid South African society? From this study, we can identify key themes of race and class, conflicting identities, honorary whiteness, and feelings of being an “outsider” in South African society.

First, it is clear that the fluidity of South Africa’s socio-legal construct of race overwhelmingly makes it difficult for East Asians in South Africa to “feel truly South African.” Old and young generations claim more often that they feel “caught between two cultures.” Second, race and class are inextricably linked. Racial structures are composed of class structures, and the apartheid system of racial classification still remains entrenched today. Third, the notion of the “model minority” parallels the notion of “honorary whiteness.” There are important parallels with conceptions of East Asians in South African society, and those of East Asians in the United States. The parallels of the conception of East Asians as a “model minority” in the United States, and the relatively high socioeconomic status of East Asians in South Africa also feeds
into the characterization of East Asians in South Africa as a “model minority,” which bears striking resemblance to the bygone term “honorary white.” The deviation of East Asians from the conflated stratification of minority/subordinate racial status and low socioeconomic class not only creates a reality in which East Asians are in some ways treated preferentially compared to other subordinate or minority identities, but also a reality in which racism against East Asians, in the past and the present, is often dismissed, excused, and sometimes, altogether forgotten. Lastly, the experience of East Asians in South Africa, corroborate the theory of racial constructivism, making extraordinarily clear that race is a social invention, specific to time and place.

Where do East Asians fit in a post-apartheid South African society? It is clear that many East Asian South Africans feel a strong sense of ethnic identity; participants quickly and confidently said they were Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese. But it is also clear that many East Asians feel they are not truly seen as “South African” by society, but rather, as Chinese, and foreign. Hence, even those who have lived in South Africa all their lives express uncertainty about societal perceptions of their racial status and social standing. When participants were asked where they believed East Asians fit into South Africa’s racial hierarchy at present, some placed East Asians as below whites, but above other races. However, other participants (particularly those who had lived through apartheid), placed Chinese at the same level as black and coloured. As are East Asians in the United States, East Asians in South Africa are falsely seen as a homogenous group, and outsiders to South African society. In a post-apartheid South Africa, East Asians continue to live between a spectrum of whiteness and blackness.
Chapter 7: DISCUSSION

This examination of East Asians in South African society presents a compelling case study illustrating the theory of race as a social construct. In doing so, this study also demonstrates that the notion of “honorary whiteness” as legalized by the apartheid government, exists for East Asians beyond the boundaries of South Africa. The treatment of East Asians in South Africa has striking similarities to the treatment of East Asians as a “model minority” in the United States. These indeterminate and often contradictory racial categories imposed upon the Chinese in apartheid South Africa still have reaching effects today.

While this study examined attitudes and perceptions of race of East Asians in South Africa, future research incorporating attitudes and perceptions of East Asians from non-East Asians would be valuable to understanding where East Asians fit into a post-apartheid South Africa. This study was exploratory and broad in scope, touching upon many relevant and important themes. Future research could look at narrower aspects of the question, “Where do East Asians fit in the landscape of a post-Apartheid South Africa?” Most research on East Asians in South Africa focus on the Chinese, but research on the present Korean and Japanese populations is lacking. In-depth study of the racial attitudes of the Korean or Japanese populations would be a valuable addition to the literature.


(http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans-graphics/).


