“Don’t be such a snowflake,” my sister says.

I’m fuming; I can’t even half-sneer at the casualness of her response that I’m being too precious, too fragile, that I think I’m going to melt. It’s a hundred miles from the indignation I want to stew in and the reason I phoned her in the first place.

I had clicked on two emails and found I had been invited to a function literally because I’m a “Person of Colour.” The first email with the invite arrived in my inbox cordially enough, “requesting the pleasure of my company” and all of that. It was the preceding mail I clicked on second that revealed the thread that had me gobsmacked and then fuming. Either by mistake or sheer absence of nous instead of oblivion this email was forwarded to me. Here in the to and fro messages between colleagues was a thread asking for “people of colour” to be put on the invite list—“Including Chinese and Japanese,” the man’s email had continued. His
colleagues wrote back to him, offering up, quite cheerfully, my name and that of one other person: a black female politician.

“It’s the way the world works and if you want to stay on the invite list and you want to go to the event then you have to get off your high horse and suck it up,” my sister says, deliberately matter of fact, deliberately annoying.

Her lunch is burning, she says (still deliberately matter of fact, still deliberately annoying) and it’s more important than my indignation. She hangs up before I can dive deep into what I have to say about blinkers, privilege and whitesplaining and half a dozen other bitter labels stuck in my throat.

*S * *

**Sink or Swim Fahfee Man**

“Suck it up, don’t rock the boat ... just eat your lunch”—it still how Chinese South Africans and many Chinese living in South Africa navigate life and their expected place in society. We’re expected to get over it, because we always have. It’s a hangover maybe from surviving by invisibility as a minority group regarded as second-class citizens in apartheid South Africa like all non-whites, but still having more concessions and benefits than other race groups relegated to a lower rung on the racial stepladder in a Nationalist Party-run country.

In the apartheid days my parents would have always had to slot into someone else’s framing of the world so they didn’t draw too much attention to themselves. They’d nod and smile knowing that it made life simpler and they could get on with their agenda mostly of saving some money to raise me and my three siblings to have the aspiration of an education—and importantly, a university education, which really was the first prize for my parents. They knew it would be the key out of the grudge work and grind, which was the reality for my *fahfee* man father. *Fahfee* is a distinctly South African illegal gambling game in which betters place bets on numbers between 1 and 36. It is characterised by choosing “lucky” numbers from dream symbology and patterns of life and is associated predominately with Chinese operators and black betters, especially during the apartheid era.
While dad headed out six and half days a week for a boss who had several “banks” or groupings of regular betters dotted throughout Johannesburg, my mom kept house and raised four children. As a migrant from China, someone who arrived in South Africa as a “paper son”—having had to use someone else’s identity fraudulently to dodge authorities—this was what livelihood looked like for my father.

In the townships and locations, the so-called *kasis*, the *fahfee* man made the calculated gamble of pitting recorded betting patterns up against luck and chance and the whimsy of dreams and superstition. It’s how betters and bankers chose their numbers, even now, in the hope of winning a few rands. *Fahfee* operates in the shadows, with the stigma of illegality and stays deliberately invisible and unknown. Under apartheid it was staying under the radar of white authorities and white people in general.

*Fahfee* loomed large in my family, it made my identity one that was curated, hidden and tweaked, depending on who it was presented for. And *fahfee* was never gambling in my family, it was work and it was how my dad put rice on the table. My parents were hardworking and committed even to this drudgery. They knew to survive meant staying the course, also about making nice with giving gifts of bowties and brandy. It kept police and polite white polite enough to look the other way. They knew if they didn’t suck it up they would be told to “go back to China.” It was infuriating, insulting of course, but just convenient and advantageous enough to silence whatever protestation they may have had.

*Fahfee* became and still is synonymous of a generation of working-class Chinese men like my father. To outsiders he was only ever one of these two things: the fahfee man or the Chinaman.

We all weigh up trade-offs and choose a side on the scale that gives us more personal benefits. We also know sacrifice, as we do self-preservation. It’s not unlike the choking truth of the Cantonese idiom that translates loosely about eating something lovely but knowing it hits your gut not via the usual channels, but via the bumpy discomfort of going down your spine—sometimes there are bitter pills to swallow.

* * *
Skin in the Game

Skin colour doesn’t change, it’s a visual marker, it’s the part of your identity you can’t escape—your skin colour marks you and speaks for you even before you say a single word. Skin colour doesn’t change—identity though does.

The shaping of the identity of the Chinese in South Africa is of course no different to any other group of people inventing and reinventing themselves.

There’s no easy way to untangle the stories of the different Chinese communities living in South Africa today. We are too conveniently lumped together as “the Chinese community.” There’s little wish to understand that the Chinese, like any other group or community, can’t possibly be a homogenous monolith. That being proud of your Chinese ethnicity and heritage is not an automatic match-up to being supportive of China’s politics, policies or even cultural practices of other Chinese. Of course there are complexities, individual identities, loyalties and leanings and an evolving dynamics that’s true of any community.

Identity is never fixed, not for anyone. We hold on to some things tighter and discard others as their usefulness and relevance keep shifting.

Identity is confused, complex, contradictory but also perfectly rational and perfectly ordered. It’s individual as well as collective—always it’s personal. Understanding identity is understanding that we are the things that pull us apart, the things we would rather leave unmentioned; it’s the things that unite us and the things we foreground for compliments and affirmation.

For the Chinese living in South Africa identity takes it shapes from shifting personal experiences, changing intergenerational dynamics, the whims of global politics, the tilt of global economic power in China’s favour and the full range of evolving perspectives of China’s presence in Africa.

Identity is also shaped these days by social media’s echo chamber and where we find the convenience and comfort of confirmation bias. Racial injury, real or perceived, is a reason for righteous outrage and to mobilise, even if it’s via a hashtag. Social media allows people to signal allegiance and to stand proud in defence of “Chineseness”—and increasingly and disturbingly that’s become enmeshed to mean China’s politics too. It’s
hopelessly narrow and quite absurd to assume that the Chinese communities in South Africa are a single entity with wholesale allegiance to a superpower that draws misgivings, distrusts and suspicion.

Going against the grain of “the glorious China” narrative comes with perils. You can see it with the signalling of allegiance on a Whatsapp group or on a Facebook page; it’s a statement also a lure to note who’s mute on what issue. It allows a quick identification of who deserves cheering on, acceptance and recognition. It also defines insider, allies and mere onlooker.

The sense of ourselves these days can also find a boost from the most tenuous links and in the seemingly most odd places. It’s the like of the movie Parasite’s success at the Oscars in 2019 and the mainstream success of Crazy Rich Asians (2018). Neither film is Chinese, but ‘Asian’ has become another label to be co-opted in the broader skin tone umbrella. The impact of the cross-over success of the feel-good, formulaic rom-com directed by Jon M Chu wasn’t the movie per se, it was the message of Asians telling their stories in a way they wanted it told, played by characters who at least look like them and was led by directors and crew that had Asian connections, even if by surname alone.

Writing an opinion piece in the New York Times, columnist Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018) put it down as: “We live in an economy of narrative scarcity, in which we feel deprived and must fight to tell our own stories and fight against the stories that distort or erase us.”

Closer to home South Africans grasp onto the success of someone like Dr Patrick Soon-Shiong lauding him on Facebook posts and shares. Soon-Shiong may have left South Africa decades ago, has little to do with the country these days, but he is still claimed. He remains the South African-born surgeon and one-time top Wits University graduate who has gone on to become a US biotech billionaire and the very high-profile owner of the LA Lakers and the LA Times.

Negative stereotypes too hold potency as rallying points that feed off outrage. Take the Covid-19 pandemic, the annual horrors of the Yulin’s dog eating festival and, in our backyards in South Africa, the abuse and inhumane treatment of donkeys raised and slaughtered for their skins for the Chinese traditional medicine market—they all flame racist vitriol and small-minded intolerance against the Chinese.

The angrier people are about being bullied, about being targeted, the easier it is to blindside them to heed the call to “stand together” to “stand proud” and to “show the world that China is strong and resilient to
the Western influencers’ lies.” Stoking righteous anger and the urge to retaliate makes paper enemies real-life ogres.

The “defend China and Chinese and at all costs” programme however, trips itself up when it’s a kneejerk reaction. It crosses the line from rightly calling out China and Chinese-bashing, racism, bigotry and intolerance and becomes a retreat to laagers to throw stones back or to play mindless cheerleading or to parrot the default “West against China” narrative.

Identity can sway in this narrow band of ethnic pride and a belief of exceptionalism on one hand, and on the other, stay miserably weighed down by massive chips on shoulders and an inferiority complex that masquerades as bravado.

But sectionalism makes us smaller, it makes the world devastatingly polarised and all of us a little more insular and blinkered. When we fail to step out from the circle of petty sniping and outrage it adds to the portrayal of the Chinese once again lumped together—as thin-skinned, paranoid and myopic.

It makes the identity question spin wildly and more pertinently as a question of what it means to be Chinese in the South Africa today. Or asked differently: what chameleon do you want to be today? … Maybe skin colour does change after all.

* * *

**I Am Ah Kee’s Daughter**

This thing happens sometimes when I’m in the supermarket. I do this now even as an adult as I’ve done since I went shopping with my mom as a kid back in the 1980s.

I see a Chinese uncle or aunty in the supermarket aisle—they look familiar but I’m not sure, I think that they know my parents. Being not sure is not good enough to dodge a gaze and to pretend like you’re looking for low fat yoghurt not the Greek variety that’s directly in front of you.

So I greet, a standard greeting in Cantonese, respectful and warm. The old uncle or aunty looks at me and says hello, haltingly maybe, a little uncertain themselves. Then they say almost instantly in that quite brash, unapologetic way some Cantonese uncles and aunties have—“Whose daughter are you?” they ask.
And I tell them “I am Ah Kee’s daughter and my mother is Ah Yee.” They pause. They use the seconds to locate them on the map in their heads of where all the Chinese South Africans they know fit in. They find my parents, then they find me.

Now they smile and nod and tell me to send greetings to my mother. I say I will, thank you very much.

We’re bound by these first threads of our identity. They’re laid down when our world is not yet ours. Our parents, our grandparents, our siblings and our networks of extended family community set up our codes of norms and customs, of duty and of expectations we must strive for. Greeting aunties at the veggie aisle is demonstrating that you have good manners, that your parents brought you up right and that you care that they “don’t lose face.”

Growing up in Joburg’s eastern suburbs, my Chinese community is small and the Chinese school I attend is insular, tiny and contains a snug world view. There is a lot to wonder about but not as much to question. It’s only growing up and growing into new ways of seeing and being that the picture starts to look less cosy, less easy to contain and less easy to agree with without more critical interrogation. The tangled bits means my personal identity has me wondering still. It also means that till I find different answers I’ll probably carry on stopping to greet the old Chinese uncles and aunties in the supermarket.

* * *

WHERE DID THE “MADE IN TAIWAN” STICKERS GO?

Just about everything had a “Made in Taiwan” sticker when I was growing up—a small gold oval sticker affixed to the base of plastic ornaments and behind photo frames and on the packaging of cutesy erasers I loved as a teen.

Then the stickers disappeared one day and it seemed like no one noticed. Of course it wasn’t just the stickers that made their exit, it was Taiwan exiting the politics frame in a changed South Africa. The seismic shifts of democracy in 1994 were beginning to rumble into place; the ruling ANC party would align with the People’s Republic of China. Trade and diplomatic ties would be with the PRC and the island standing
its ground against the mainland would be muscled back into orphan territory.

The diplomatic shake-up in 1998 was one of the key signallers that the story of China in South Africa was set to enlarge, like its footprint. It would also change how the Chinese South Africans would be perceived. In that time Chinese South Africans sought to separate themselves from the newcomers, desperate to make the distinction of being “South African Born Chinese” the so-called SABCs. Somehow this acronym, they believed, marked them as better, as more “refined” as removed and above the caricature of the hock-and-spit Chinese hawkers who seemed to have arrived overnight en masse. Making a distinction also associated Chinese South Africans with a merit of long lineages linked to generations on the southern tip of the African continent.

By the late 1990s hawkers had populated Joburg’s streets then spread to the Joburg East suburb of Cyrildene where a second Chinatown in Joburg was mushrooming. Before long the ubiquity of sub-divided warrens in hulking warehouses would become the boom of China malls dotted across the industrial landscapes of the city.

The nascent presence of Chinese migrants turned to bulging and swelling, so much so that in the next few years the newcomers would outpace the SABCs in numbers and would come to be called “a wave” of migration. But in this window period Chinese migrants were easily labelled as chance-takers, small-fry, law-benders and the people bringing down the “good name” of the Chinese. More specifically, it made the invisible Chinese community squirm under a spotlight they worked so hard to dodge. These “interlopers” in their numbers were tearing at a neatly sewn up presentation of the Chinese as unobtrusive, hardworking, law-abiding and compliant—the “good” stereotypes of being Chinese that are easy to own up to.

It happened often enough those days that someone would seek me out at a function or gathering and tell me something like “you should write something about this, so people don’t think that we’re not like them.” There may have been a headline about a Chinese syndicate involved in an abalone or rhino horn bust. These people collaring me might have been somewhat angry about the poaching crisis but more outraged to be identified as “them” as “these people” and completely blind to their own xenophobic tendencies.
Fast forward to the present day and the one-time newcomers are after two decades not just a wave, but a force and a force that shapes the question of China in Africa with convincing dominance.

Those “hock-and spit” hawkers who started off selling every imported thing of cheap ubiquity from a single shipping container, or who shared floor space with six or seven other migrants in highrises in Hillbrow have become wealthy and materially successful. They’re tied to property development empires mostly of China malls; they own restaurants that have become successful chains or have made the simple iteration of import and export businesses become the sum of many valuable parts. They’re also the people who leverage political expediency unapologetically, spinning it as due loyalty to ruling parties both in South Africa and in China—“building those bridges of friendship and cultural exchange” but knowing that towing the party line builds favour. In contrast the Chinese South Africans have been markedly absent from politics. It’s likely linked to a history of a people who, like all non-whites, were disenfranchised before democracy in 1994 and many who were not just second-class citizens but considered outsiders too.

Now SABC seems like a less-wise moniker to foreground. Now, saying that you “stand with China” earns slaps on backs, heart emojis and a new kind of political agency and connection. Polishing up on Mandarin over English or even Cantonese is essential to creep closer in proximity to this new power. Demonstrating this closeness is a new identity marker too for the Chinese in South Africa today.

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**Sorry I Don’t Speak Mandarin**

My Cantonese is shaky, I also speak a kind of village-Cantonese, I’m told. I used to apologise and I used to be embarrassed a little that my Cantonese sounded so country bumpkin. But I’ve grown to love that my accent is way off from posh because it marks me as someone descended from people who came from a village, the simple places that my parents and grandparents called home at some time in their lives and therefore also holds bits of my origin story.

I also know I can say this living in a world which I navigate in English and that I may not feel the same if advancing in this world came down to
my Cantonese accent and how this might mark social standing, level of education and class.

I also don’t speak Mandarin.

“You don’t speak Mandarin, why?” the man at the crowded Dragon City mall in Joburg’s industrial western townships barks in English at me. It’s the summer of 2019. He is impatient and dismissive about the journalism project I’m working on about crime and the Chinese traders who have stepped up their formalisation of Chinese policing forums. He doesn’t fob me off immediately largely because I’m a distraction from the monotony of selling the shoes and clothes jammed into his fluorescent-lit trading space in a corner shop in the giant mall.

First I apologise with the few sentences of Mandarin I am able to mutter that really are “Sorry, I don’t speak Mandarin”. We stumble along with a bit more English and I try Cantonese and he shakes his head some more, with equal disdain for the home language I grew up with.

He shows me a few things on his phone about police forum meetings and WeChat group exchanges about their activities but he’s not keen to reveal too much, it’s clear. I don’t get much from him and in minutes I’m ready to leave. “You must speak Mandarin,” he shouts as parting shot. I can’t help but shout back “You must speak Cantonese.” All the time we’re saying this to each other in English and the irony is not lost on me.

Something shifted for me in that exchange though. This was 2019, the man didn’t need to be accommodating or polite about my inability to speak Mandarin. In fact he was going to point out that it was a failing in his eyes and it would exclude me from knowing about the activities of the policing forums. Even as fear and paranoia that Chinese nationals were singled out as crime targets was spiking he didn’t need me to know about it, he didn’t need me—even a Chinese South African—to report on it or even to be interested in it.

It struck me later that in the last few years his community had reached critical numbers to support its own structures, connections and economic and political muscle. It’s allowed them to keep things within a closed inner sanctum. If there was an agenda to assimilate 15 or 20 years ago it was a distant memory now.

Thing is, I too was not going to apologise that Cantonese and English are two of the languages that I communicate in as a Chinese South African. I didn’t have to be particularly polite to him as a one-time newcomer and neither of us considered the exchange particularly rude.
I was born in South Africa, not in the mighty Middle Kingdom; so sorry, not sorry—I don’t speak Mandarin.

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**WE’VE BEEN HERE BEFORE, WE’LL BE HERE AGAIN**

Joburg has the distinction of having two Chinatowns. The one at the western end of Commissioner Street is the one I call “the Chinatown of my childhood.” It’s tiny and contained in the two or so blocks in this part of town. Its history dates back to the late 1880s when Johannesburg became a gold mining town with Chinese relegated to this corner as the fortune hunters and labourers on the wrong side of white also trying their luck under the shadow of the “golden mountain”—what Joburg is called in Cantonese.

Some Saturday mornings when my dad got a late start to his fāhfee shifts we kids would join in on trips to Chinatown.

My dad would get on with adult things that needed doing and we’d tag along. Sometimes he would be in Chinatown to leave a donation in lieu of flowers for someone’s funeral at the Chinese provisions store Sui Hing Hong. Maybe he’d also have to buy a stack of printed fāhfee betting sheets or some of the cheap round purses fāhfee men sold on to their betters in which they placed their betting slips and the money for their bets. Sometimes it was to catch up on gossip or community news. There would also be groceries to buy and we’d pick up bunches of spinach and spring onions wrapped in newspaper, jars of mini-blocks of fermented tofu in a stinky brine or imported long-grain rice in coarse brown hessian sacks.

There would also be treats. My dad was absent so much from our home just working and working that he spoilt us when he could. There would be pillowy steamed bao with char siu, the sticky roasted pork chunks, or baos filled with black lotus paste, smooth and sweet, or the crispy deep-fried stuffed green peppers with a centre of pounded fish, oozing an oil slick onto the brown paper bags they were packed in all the way home.

Chinatown was a space of community, customs and connection and therefore also of identity. Here we could find the foods that never appeared on the shelves at the local supermarkets but made it onto our kitchen dining table. The dishes may have been cooked up weirdness for
some people, but for Chinese families like mine were the deliciousness of home and culinary heritage.

These days Chinatown along Commissioner Street shrinks in size and significance all the time. People have moved out, emigrated even and the next generations have fulfilled the promise of professional life that those of my parents’ generation worked so hard for us to have.

Every day this Chinatown slips further into memory, blurring into the past it allows another natural evolution of community to emerge. Now it’s Cyrildene Chinatown that keeps up a simple hum of everyday life, as it has done from the mid to late 1990s. It’s more recent arrivals from China who call the suburb home now. Life here spills onto the streets with produce and trade and in the small restaurants bowls of noodles and broth are served up for locals’ lunches as much as they are for visitors looking for the “authentic” Chinese food experience. Sometimes there are noisy, smoky celebrations in restaurant rooms where lazy Susans spin dishes marking off reasons to gather, to eat and to raise a glass. They’re celebrations made possible as the passage of time cycles round and as another year clocked up living South Africa turns acquaintances into friends with whom to share milestones.

In-between lunch and supper trade TVs may blare from the restaurants with Chinese soapies or news from “back home.” A mah-jong game or two is played and sometimes there are children doing homework in English.

It’s children that have become most notable over the last few years in Chinatown. Babies and little ones are distinct features as they’re bounced in their mothers’ arms or seen crossing the road clutching a grown-up’s hand. They are a new generation of Chinese growing up as South Africans. They represent a maturing community that has set down roots. Those newcomers from 25-odd years ago are now people who have families, extended families, babies and growing children many presumably born South Africans.

I see myself in those little ones sometimes, as a daughter of migrants myself. They will grow to straddle worlds. Maybe they will be torn between the imaginings of home and motherland that is their parents’ reality still. But they will have to find their way in a country that is diverse and grappling with its questions of race, contested histories and the tension points of inclusion and exclusion. They will also grow up in a democracy, imperfect and tense, but triumphant in rushing to debate and even to disagree. It’s also a country that doesn’t baulk from
taboos like not from speaking about Tibet, Taiwan, the Hong Kong
democracy protests or the human rights abuses of the Uighurs in China.

Maybe these children will remember to Facetime with their grannies
in China, speaking in Mandarin for a while till their Chinese becomes
increasingly broken, till they remember only how to say their names in
Chinese or the words for their favourite Chinese dishes.

They will find bullies too with the weary old racist taunts. Some of
their friends will think that “100-year-old” eggs gross or that an altar in
a home honouring ancestors is spooky or bizarre. Maybe like me they’ll
go to school in South Africa to be taught Geography and History in
English, not Mandarin. And when they stand to attention at school it will
be a national anthem of this land, and they’ll know every word.

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**Of Snowflakes and Melting Points**

Being Chinese in South Africa is an evolving picture—, exactly as you’d
expect. There’s a struggle for a new visibility now for Chinese South
Africans today. It’s a visibility that comes through expressing distinct
narratives that are about individual stories even as they are impacted
on by collective histories unfolding and all the forces and pressures of
a world constantly in flux.

Knowing who we are is the truth we seek, or the truth we try to
outrun. It makes getting closer to the identity question a journey, also
a negotiation.

And yes, I RSVPed cordially and went along to my “person of colour”
event. I went not feeling like I had to suck it up or with the intention to
sulk. I attended open to the possibility of enjoying myself and enjoying
my hosts’ good graces that were indeed on display. I drank their wine,
loved the canapés and engaged. I didn’t say a thing about the invitation
that landed in my inbox as an insult. I didn’t make a fuss or take to social
media to leave angry screen grabs as bait for Facebook or Twitter to gorge
upon.

Maybe I was too scared to speak out or too polite for the drama—but
I also know that you have to choose your battles. And the truth is it’s not
the first time it’s happened and it won’t be the last. My skin colour will
always speak for me even before I say a word. That doesn’t change but I
know skin colour is not my whole identity either. Just as I know I’m not
a snowflake—I’m too much a “person of colour” to melt so easily.
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