

# **State, Myth, and Agency in the Construction of Chinese South African Identities, 1948-1994**

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## **Abstract**

Based on the author's PhD research, this article focuses on the fluid and contested nature of the identities – racial, ethnic, and national – of people of Chinese descent in South Africa in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. The research focused on the approximately 12,000-strong community of second-, third-, and fourth-generation South African-born Chinese South Africans. It uncovered that Chinese South Africans played an active role in identity construction using Chinese history, myths and culture, albeit within the constraints established by apartheid. During the latter part of apartheid, movement up the socio-economic ladder and gradual social acceptance by white South Africa propelled them into nebulous, interstitial spaces; officially they remained “non-white” but increasingly they were viewed as “honorary whites.” During the late 1970s and 1980s, the South African state attempted to redefine Chinese as “white” but these attempts failed because Chinese South Africans were unwilling to sacrifice their unique ethnic identity, which helped them to survive the more dehumanizing aspects of life under apartheid.