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#### **Publication Date**

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**LIVING IN LIMINALITY: CHINESE MIGRANCY IN GHANA**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

**Conal Guan-Yow Ho**

September 2012

The Dissertation of Conal Guan-Yow Ho  
is approved:

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Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Under the Radar: The Chinese, an “Invisible Group”	I
2. Sojourners or Settlers?	8
3. Spatial Orientations: Accra	15
4. Spatial Orientations: Tema	23
5. Historical Orientations: Geography in Accra–Tema Region	29
A. Pre-Colonial Accra Plains	29
B. Accra in the Colonial Era	33
C. Accra in the Post-Independence/National Era	39
D. Accra’s Social Landscape Today	45
6. Historical Orientations: Fluidity and Sedimenting of Ethnicity	52
A. Ethnicity in Gold Coast History	53
B. Strangers and Ethnicity in Ghana	58
C. The Barely Visible Chinese	64
7. Vignettes of Chinese in Ghana	75
Scene 1	76
Scene 2	79
Scene 3	82
8. Outline of Chapters	86
<b>CHAPTER 2. LEAVING: HISTORICAL CAUSES AND PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS</b>	<b>88</b>
1. Historical Causes and Personal Motivations: Theoretical Considerations	90
2. Leaving for Africa: Historical and Cultural Perspectives	102
A. Overview of Chinese Emigration Patterns	102

B. Chinese Activity and Emigration in Africa, Pre-Seventeenth Century	105
C. Chinese Emigration to Southern Africa, 1650s to 1990s	107
D. Chinese Activity in Africa during the Cold War, 1940s to 1980s	113
E. Chinese Activity in Africa, Late Twentieth Century Onwards	119
F. Chinese Emigration to Ghana	126
<b>3. Leaving for Africa: Personal Motivations</b>	<b>133</b>
A. Narratives of Economics: Global Trends and Growing Markets	136
Jim Tse, Entrepreneur: Reshaping World Circumstances through Business Practices	137
James: Coming (I)	150
B. Concurrent Narratives	155
James: Then Going, and Coming (II)	157
Anna: Leaving Home Twice, Lessons in Self-presentation	173
Other Concurrent Narratives	179
<b>CHAPTER 3. BEING IN LIMBO: STRUCTURAL CAUSES &amp; INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>1. Structural Causes of Mobility and Immobility</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>2. Experiences of Liminality</b>	<b>199</b>
A. Joe: Arriving in 1969, Returning in 1994	199
B. Fracturing and Congealing Social Relations, 1	214
C. Of Bread and Cakes: Social Prominence and Outcasts	226
I. Relationship by Proxy: Connecting Social Outcasts	227
II. Tsao Ying-fung and Tsao Mei-yee: From Social Prominence to Outcasts	232
III. Jenny	236
D. Fracturing and Congealing Social Relations, 2: Gossip and Suspicion	240
<b>CHAPTER 4. INHABITING AND WORKING WITH THE LIMBO LIFESTYLE</b>	<b>253</b>
<b>1. Theories of Displacement in Modern Society</b>	<b>254</b>
<b>2. Suspicion, Gossip, and Betrayal</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>3. Case Study on Suspicion, Gossip, and Betrayal</b>	<b>281</b>
<b>4. Living Here, then Imagining Other Worlds</b>	<b>299</b>
A. Setting Her Children on the Right Path	302
B. Career Woman?	308
<b>5. Embracing Limbo, Securing the Future</b>	<b>322</b>

<b>EPILOGUE</b>	<b>328</b>
<b>APPENDIX. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES</b>	<b>337</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>345</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1.1 MAP OF ACCRA (I)	16
FIGURE 1.2 MAP OF ACCRA (II)	17
FIGURE 1.3 MAP OF TEMA	25

## **Abstract**

### **Living in Liminality: Chinese Migrancy in Ghana**

**Conal Guan-Yow Ho**

Is the sense of community necessarily something that immigrants yearn? Do migrants necessarily want to settle down or maintain connections to their former homes, or are there other ways of living? This dissertation is an ethnographic account of the Chinese in Ghana that looks closely at their lives to understand the nature of community and stability. For various historical and personal reasons, the Chinese in Ghana are an “invisible population” without a sense of residential and cultural community. Despite many Chinese having lived in Ghana for decades, the desire to settle down is not strong, and at the same time, they do not necessarily want to go elsewhere.

Based upon two years of ethnographic fieldwork primarily in the cities of Accra and Tema, I explore how the Chinese in Ghana live and engage with their liminal status in unexpected ways. I argue that in order to see these kinds of experiences and to understand them, it is necessary to take a person-centred ethnographic approach rather than relying primarily on structural and historical analysis. I argue that assuming the Chinese in Ghana is a community would obfuscate how their social relations fracture and congeal to produce not community, but malleable social networks which at various times individuals remove themselves from in order to maintain some kind of invisibility and



privacy. Paying attention to people's concurrent narratives (multiple narratives that exist simultaneously but may not be revealed at the same time) demonstrate how individuals are contradictory in their understanding of their worlds and their methods of negotiating their lives. The overarching theme in this dissertation is that while many Chinese in Ghana either find their situation less than desirable or sometimes tenable for the time being, many do not want to leave immediately or return to their former homes. Instead, they find a way to live in liminality and they sometimes find this a desirable trait. This study demonstrates the dangers of assuming the Chinese in Africa are fairly homogenous, or that typical migrant narratives of home and community necessarily apply to them.

*In remembrance of my mother Winnie Chu-Ping Wong, and  
for my father Cecil SeeHoo Ho*

為了紀念我逝去的母親黃珠萍，  
並獻給我在世的父親何思豪

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the generosity and kindness of many Chinese and Ghanaian people in Accra, Tema, Takoradi, and Kumasi. My chief debt is to them. They welcomed my curiosity, offered me food and friendship, and accepted me into their lives. For reasons of confidentiality, most are identified herein by pseudonym.

For opening up their home, sharing their lives and connecting me with so many new friends, especially during the early stages of fieldwork, I am grateful to George and Anna Yeung, Betty Chan and her family, and Amy Tong and her family. For friendship and encouragement throughout my fieldwork, and especially helping me to navigate Chinese social and business networks, I am grateful to Grace Lam and her family, Law Man-Kwong, Mandy, Aaron and Sandra Pok, Jenny and Simon Tam, Tien Feng-Yee and her family, Tsao Mei-Yee and Tsao Ying-Fung, and the Zervoudakis family. Their stories and perspectives gave me a new window into the world of living in liminality. For friendship and assistance in Accra and Tema, I thank Albert Kung, Amy Tong, Andrew Wan, Mr. Fong, Huajie, Im Chung-Kit, James Wang, Jeffrey Choy, Jim Tse, Lai Dong-wai, Melaney Guo, Mrs. Xiong, Winnie Shek, Wesley Yeung, and Mrs. Zhuang.

For helping me to navigate Ghanaian society and understand the challenges they personally face, I thank Daniel Ahenawah, Susan and Sylvan Amegashie, Richard Anku, Eqwe Assingbon, Jack Baiden, Esther Baidoo, Stephen

Boadu, George, Gifty, Gladys and John, Gug, Mason, Mensah “Driver”, Mensah “Plumber”, Issac Marfo, Randie Sowah, and Shum Pak-Wo. Winfred “Uncle” Addoquaye was always ready to talk about “vexing issues” at the social and personal level; he offered great insight into human psychology and how he lived in liminality. Justice Ahensah offered friendship and assistance in Accra and Kumasi, and gave me a window into his world as a young teacher in a mining town, while struggling to get into university himself. For friendship and for inviting me to do a different kind of fieldwork for a brief period interviewing trotto drivers and mates, I thank Rohit Lakhani, a primary school friend whom I reconnected with during fieldwork.

For institutional affiliation and assistance with Ghanaian bureaucracy, I thank Patrick Awuha and Dr. Nana Araba Apt of Ashesi University, and Dr. Irene Odotei of the University of Ghana. I also thank my research assistant Ebenezer Ayesu. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation provided research funds for this research. The anthropology department at the University of California, Santa Cruz provided pre-dissertation travel supplementary grants that helped to shape this project in its early stage.

I am deeply grateful to my advisor Daniel Linger who provided much needed intellectual camaraderie and encouragement while I was in the field and throughout the dissertation process. His kindness, patience, rigour, and mentorship helped me work against the grain and helped to shape this project. He is a great model of how to listen carefully and deeply to people. Thanks also go

to the members of my committee, Carolyn Martin Shaw and Lok Siu, for providing valuable suggestions, and pushing me further than I could have gone. All have been more than generous with their thoughts and time. Other professors who provided support at different phases of my graduate school career include Mark Anderson, Donald Brenneis, Jackie N. Brown, Elisabeth Cameron, Nancy Chen, Wendy Martyna, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Donald Moore, Maxwell Owusu, Lisa Rofel, and Judy Yung.

I owe much to friends and colleagues who read drafts of my dissertation, offered emotional, intellectual and spiritual support, including Rose Asera, Eunice Blavascunas, Jeremy Brown, Kim Cameron-Dominguez, Shelly Chan, Janny Chang, Sarah Chee, Angelina Chin, Nellie Chu, Fred Deakin, Riet Delsing, Karen deVries, Queenie Ho, Roshanak Kheshti, Pam Kido, Eben Kirksey, Alejandra Kramer, David Krieger, Ann Lauten, Dave Machledt, Bahiyyih Maroon, Hiroyuki Matsubara, Harrienne Mills, Aaron Montoya, Debbie Neal, Allyson Ramage, Dave Raymond, Lee Ritscher, Nikki Shechtman, Katie Simonton, Jeff Smith, Nancy Smith, Noah Tamarkin, Yen-ling Tsai, Xiaoping Sun, Jill Wolfson, Roberta Valdez, and Ron Wyzga. For their friendship, humour, faith, teases, and sharing of grief and joy, I thank Angelina Chin, Janny Chang, David Krieger, Nicole Shechtman, Xiaoping Sun, and Ron Wyzga. While I was in the field, Jeremy Brown offered an invaluable base in the United States.

In my early years in Santa Cruz, members of the Santa Cruz Track Club provided a much needed outlet for fun, competition, and physical recreation. In my last few years in Santa Cruz, Everyday Dharma Zen Center provided a

nurturing spiritual space for looking inwards, expanding outwards, and centring. I especially want to thank deeply my guiding teacher Carolyn Atkinson and my wonderful sangha-mates including Mark Adams, Mary Molseed, Alan Richards, and Merritt Tucker. Other Buddhist sanghas that have been crucial in giving me support include Living Compassion, Insight Meditation Center, Spirit Rock, and the Chapel Hill Zen Center. To all of you, I deeply bow. Gassho. Deep thanks also go to my numerous friends at Brain Tumour Caregivers for helping me through a most difficult situation and offering such wisdom on living, dying and death.

Without the endless care, emotional and financial support, forbearance, humour, music, and love, provided by my husband Brad Croushorn, this project could not have been completed. I admire how he understands, laughs at my antics, and plays along, and how he intuitively knows when I need the space to grieve and when I need to be heard.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Cecil Ho, and to my late mother, Winnie Wong. They have been supportive of all my intellectual pursuits, even when they were not sure what to make of it. My father has been tremendously supportive in critiquing numerous formative ideas for this dissertation. In the midst of writing this dissertation towards the end of 2009, my mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. After surgery, radiation, and months of chemotherapy, she was stable for a short while. In September 2010, I received the dreaded phone call and was asked to return to Canada to be by my mother's side. Although she had severe mental and communication deficiencies by then, the first thing she asked me when she woke

up in the ICU was if my advisor had given me permission to drop my dissertation and come back. My dissertation and completion of the PhD was always on her mind. In the ensuing 3½ months, my father and I took care of my mother at home as she quickly faded away. She passed away on the evening of 16 January 2011. I regret that I could not complete the dissertation in her time.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*To what extent are we willing to be present in conditions of limbo? Or, do we wrap our sense of identity only around the clear precise demarcation of beginning and ending of productivity and accomplishment?*

Shaila Catherine

#### 1. UNDER THE RADAR: THE CHINESE, AN “INVISIBLE GROUP”

A few months after I arrived in Accra I contacted Dr. Agyeman<sup>1</sup> to seek an institutional affiliation. She is a prominent scholar in sociology and history who has conducted research both locally and in Europe. Close to retirement age, she is now an administrator for a local university. Dr. Agyeman was wearing an outfit cut from one piece of contemporary Ghanaian wax print. In local tailoring circles such an outfit is known as “three-pieces”: a wrap skirt, top set (like a blouse but usually without buttons), and a head tie. I introduced my project by saying that I was interested in studying national and cultural belonging among the Chinese in Ghana. Like many dissertation projects, the topic I eventually wrote about turned out to be somewhat different than I had imagined. Dr. Agyeman remarked that she occasionally enjoyed a few meals at local Chinese restaurants. Then she asked, “Is there a Chinese community in Ghana? Are there that many Chinese here?”

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<sup>1</sup> All names are fictitious unless otherwise indicated.



I was taken aback. She did not know about the prominence of local Chinese-run factories that make wax prints popular in modern-day Ghana. I explained that Chinese had been in Ghana much longer than the recent proliferation of Chinese restaurants in Accra might suggest. Chinese textile factories that produced wax prints played a prominent role in the manufacturing sector of the country from the 1960s to at least the 1990s. Though the prominence of these factories has steadily declined in the 2000s, they played a significant economic and cultural role in Ghana's early years of industrialisation. In their heyday, Chinese factories like Ghana Textile Manufacturing Company (GTMC) were reputed to manufacture the best locally produced wax prints. Dr. Agyeman then remembered something about the history of Chinese factories, but it was a distant memory and she did not know that there were more than a few Chinese entrepreneurs. For most Ghanaians, as for Dr. Agyeman, the Chinese as a group are not visible though they do register their presence individually. Except for those employed by Chinese, Ghanaians would be most likely to notice the Chinese presence in Chinese restaurants, which are staffed in the front by locals, but managed behind the scenes by Chinese. Ghanaians cannot be faulted for not knowing that there are more Chinese in the country. Even the Chinese I befriended recognised that through their gossip networks, there is a much larger number of Chinese in Ghana than it would seem. By their estimates for 2004 to 2006, there were a couple thousand Chinese in Ghana, though some estimates are as high as 6,000 (Sautman and Yan 2007:89). Much of the Chinese population live and work in the Accra–Tema metropolis.

How is it that a sizeable group of Chinese continue largely to remain invisible to Ghanaians and the Ghana government? This dissertation begins by looking at the causes of this phenomenon. Though the presence of Chinese in Ghana parallels the modern economic and social development of Ghana's largest metropolitan area (Accra-Tema), they are not part of the national consciousness. In answering this puzzle, it becomes necessary to broaden our perspective and look at how Chinese relate to each other and how they relate to their experiences of migrancy. I argue that the Chinese in Ghana do not have a sense of localised community and so do not operate as an ethnic group socially or economically. Despite that, the Chinese do not have deep social relationships with other non-Chinese. I argue that they inhabit liminality, a way of living which contributes to their being invisible in Ghana. There are four major themes in the dissertation and they are enumerated as follows:

I. *Chinese and Community*. Since the formation of anthropology and sociology as academic disciplines, both have been concerned with displacement and the changing nature of society caused by rapidly modernising societies. In the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, the concern is similar, but on a larger scale: how the hypermobility of globalisation uproots people. There are various takes on how the sense of community is formed. Some argue that it is externally enforced (for example, through legislation), others argue that community and belonging are natural states, while others argue that belonging is desired by individuals. It is often argued that without a sense of belonging, individuals become lost. Community and belonging provides individuals mooring. As the

world becomes increasingly fragmented, it is argued that we are pushed to the edge and the need to belong increases.

I argue that the Chinese should not be considered a residential community or a community of any kind. At best, they are a network of fluctuating social connections. The ethnicity or nationality of migrants is sometimes assumed to be a marker through which migrant communities form. While this may be true in some cases, it should not be assumed that ethnicity necessarily bonds migrant communities. More fundamentally, it should not be assumed that migrants desire communities. In the case of Chinese in Ghana, assuming that they necessarily form a group because of their ethnicity foils our ability to notice and investigate other types of migrant experiences, particularly the relationship Chinese in Ghana have with their place, and more importantly, the role that liminality plays in their experiences. The notion of community as one that provides us with stability, direction, and a sense of belonging does not work for the Chinese in Ghana. The intricate play and tension of suspicion and desire to socially connect for economic and other personal reasons is very much how the Chinese in Ghana produce and live their social connections with each other. Not once during my fieldwork in Ghana were there conversations or hints from the Chinese about where and how they belong. There were other pressing issues, particularly about living in a liminal state.

2. *Person-centred ethnography.* Though I do not dismiss structural and historical perspectives, to understand why the Chinese are in Ghana and their experiences there, I argue that it is best to take a person-centred ethnographic

approach. Structural and historical perspectives reveal the nature and development of broad general patterns. For instance, I argue in a later part of this chapter that a structural and historical perspective to group formation in this region provide some understanding of how the Chinese have been able to dovetail into pre-existing ethnic fluidity and thus, are able to remain invisible. However, this perspective only offers a partial understanding of their invisibility. A person-centred approach can show how the Chinese experiences of their social networks (their concerns and its reproduction) contribute to their invisibility. A person-centred approach can illuminate the Chinese experiences of liminality and how Chinese situate themselves in their social networks. A structural and historical perspective would be unable to provide tools to understand the conundrum of how living in liminality works.

3. *Concurrent narratives and fracturing and congealing of social relations.*

These are two concepts developed respectively in chapters 2 and 3. They illuminate the experiences of the Chinese living in Ghana, and the nature of Chinese social networks. I define concurrent narratives as the simultaneous existence of multiple narratives that a person holds about a topic, but which she or he does not (and often cannot) express at the same time. Additionally, different narratives may be expressed at different times. Concurrent narratives show why it is important to use a person-centred ethnographic approach when understanding Chinese experiences in Ghana. How individuals experience or understand a phenomenon, is multi-faceted; it may be contradictory, confusing, and even mysterious to themselves. A person-centred approach highlights how individuals

are actors in their own worlds while still under the contexts (and constraints) of larger socio-cultural flows. But, in highlighting how individuals are actors (how they make sense of their worlds) it is also important to see that their own behaviours and experiences can remain mysterious and contradictory to themselves.

Fracturing and congealing of social relations describe the nature of social network among Chinese in Ghana and are key to my argument on why the Chinese should not be regarded as a community. The Chinese in Ghana are suspicious of each other's motives for various economic, personal, and structural/historical reasons. Yet at the same time, they do form social alliances with each other, in part to alleviate boredom, find a certain amount of meaning in their everyday work lives, and for economic gains. These social alliances do not seem to be solid, even among those who hold an oral agreement to keep those bonds. Instead, their social ties fracture and congeal as new and old relationships are formed and re-formed (or sometimes permanently broken). This nature of their social ties is also a large part of their experience of liminality.

4. *Living in Liminality*. It is commonly assumed by anthropologists that migrants live in close proximity to each other and develop a sense of community. Their shared history and struggles, it seems, would draw them together to create stability and to maintain their culture. Migrants are also portrayed as either eager to settle down in their new home, or to maintain strong connections with their former home and eager to return eventually. An overarching theme in this dissertation is that these patterns are not so clearly delineated for the Chinese in

Ghana. Instead, it would be more accurate to portray them as living in liminality. Many Chinese in Ghana find their current living and working situation tenable, and even sometimes desirable for the time being. Others find the situation less than desirable but are able to find ways to work within the conditions. Most do not have longings for their former homes, and almost none has a desire to be rooted and find belonging in Ghana. Yet it is not always clear to themselves where their future lies. Some Chinese informants remind me that they find Ghana desirable, but only given their current stage in life. A conclusion I draw is that migrants can live in liminality (and some find the potential that liminality offers a desirable trait). We should not assume they either want to hold on to former homes or that they want to settle down where they are.

The rest of this chapter has three aims. First, to relate the ethnography to a wider body of Chinese diaspora literature. Second, to give a geographic orientation to the Accra–Tema metropolis and to locate the Chinese in this presentation. Third, to examine the history of ethnicity in this region with an emphasis on how social group formation and the construction of ethnic identities changes under different historical circumstances. During the pre-colonial and colonial period in Ghana, various ethnic groups merged together sometimes, or in other cases one group subsumed the other. In the twentieth-century as Ghana debates what it means to be Ghanaian, the issue of ethnicity has been one of periodic absences and resurgences. Sometimes the differences between ethnic groups are seen as important to creating a pluralistic Ghana, while at other times there are calls for putting perceived differences aside and building a united

Ghanaian identity. I argue that the fluid nature of ethnicity and geographic growth of the area presents us with a partial understanding of why the Chinese tend to be invisible.

I did fieldwork from 2004 to 2005, focusing primarily in Accra, the capital, and the neighbouring industrial town, Tema, where the majority of Chinese live. Both are major cities of the administrative region called Greater Accra. Within this region are five districts, or assemblies. Accra belongs to the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, and Tema belongs to the Tema Municipal Assembly. The assemblies share a common boundary. The city of Accra is 16 miles (25 km) west of Tema, connected by Kwame Nkrumah Motorway in the north and the older coastal access road in the south.

## **2. SOJOURNERS OR SETTLERS?**

What is the relationship of Chinese in the diaspora to their place of settlement and original home? This question has occupied studies of Chinese in the diaspora that typically portray Chinese migrants as sojourners—migrants whose desire to return to their native home in China, (e.g., Barth 1964; Lee 1960; Wong 1982)—or as settlers in their adopted homelands (e.g., Park 2009; Skinner 1957). Earlier studies tended to portray Chinese migrants as sojourners (Wang 1998). Cultural ideologies and state policies promoted China as the centre of the world. For one, Confucian ideology has long interpreted leaving home the same as abandoning one's filial duties, such as taking care of one's parents, tending to

the graves of forefathers, and making regular ritual offerings to ancestors (Levathes 1994; Snow 1988). For another, the Chinese state has a long history of viewing itself as the centre of the world with its emperor as the intermediary between Heaven and all people, including those outside of China's borders (Pan 1994, 1998). This "Middle Kingdom syndrome" or "Central Country complex" (Tu 1991), promoted China as superior and civilised while non-Chinese polities as barbaric. In the Ming dynasty (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century) until the late Qing dynasty (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), Chinese who lived abroad were viewed as traitors, and were prosecuted if caught back in China. While it is difficult to gauge the effects these restrictive policies have had on cultural perceptions that Chinese have about China as home, it is likely that it bears some weight (for example, Zhuang 1999). Scholars such as Wang (1991:22–40) and McKeown (1999:307) have argued that this complex is frequently ingrained into the tradition of Chinese language scholarship which emphasises the enduring patriotic love and connection Chinese in the diaspora have for China.

This concept of sojourning was common within China, and likely played a role in the imaginations of Chinese in the diaspora. Anthropologist G. William Skinner (1977:266) notes, "The simple fact is that aside from the peasantry large numbers of men in traditional China pursued their occupational calling away from home; they were sojourners, and the local systems and central places where they sojourned were typically more urban than the native places where they still maintained their residences". The sojourner's mobility strategy to link to his or her home community was important because it was "precisely because those who



left could be counted on to return that a man with aspirations to get ahead could expect support from members of his local [community] beyond the limits of family and lineage” (Skinner 1976:335). Yow (2007:86) noted that after the Qing court abandoned its policy of treating overseas Chinese as traitors, it made efforts to enlist financial support from them and began to transform the home villages of these Chinese immigrants into so-called *qiaoxiang* (sojourner’s village)<sup>2</sup>, which have extensive transnational relationships with so-called *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourners). An example of this is Hsu’s (2000) study of Taishanese (Chinese from the district of Toishan) in the United States from 1882 to 1943 in which she argues that Taishanese local identity has long been tied with Taishanese who live in the US. Taishanese left behind depended on overseas Taishanese for their livelihood. Some members of the community even went so far as to totally depend on the overseas Taishan remittances and did not find their own ways of livelihood.

In North America, the concept of sojourning had been largely applied to the early Chinese diasporic experience, although not without controversy. The term was first applied by sociologist Siu (1952) and subsequently used by other scholars. For example, Barth (1964) argues that anti-Chinese hostility was due to Chinese mentality of sojourning. It was more common, though, for scholars to explain sojourning as a mechanism for adapting to native and host country conditions. Hsu (2000) argues that poor economic conditions in China along with the opportunity to become wealthy during the Gold Rush in California

---

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the concept, see Pan (1998:27–30). For a more extensive critique of the term and some of its problems in contemporary political usage, see Yow (2007).

motivated Chinese men to move to California: “[they] continued to chase the rainbow on both sides of the Pacific, believing that a pot of gold was waiting in America at one end and family and a life of leisure at the other” (54). She argues that the mentality of sojourning became more solidified after the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which proved to Taishanese that the US could not be their home. Chan (1980) argues in a similar vein that Canada’s institutional racism determined the pattern of Chinese immigration and not the Chinese mentality of sojourning. This mentality of sojourning was used to explain the structure of Chinatowns with their associations that helped to facilitate largely bachelors into settling in and sending remittances back home (Lee 1960; Lyman 1976; Wong 1982). By the 1960s, the sojourning mentality was largely defunct and permanent settlement was the pattern (Yang 1999).

Wang (1996 [2001]) has long argued that the sojourning experience was common in older and contemporary forms of Chinese immigration in Southeast Asia, though he does distinguish this as separate from the large-scale and temporary migration of Chinese coolies that occurred between 1870–1930. Sojourners were regarded as Chinese nationals by both Chinese authorities and the colonial governments of Southeast Asia until after World War II, except in Thailand and the Philippines (Skinner 1996 [2001]) where integration has been ongoing for centuries. When Chinese coolies began arriving in the Philippines in the 1860s, the new influx of Chinese encouraged older established Chinese to adopt native identities while dropping their Chinese one (Mackie 1996 [2001]:xiv). This contrasts with Malaysia and Indonesia where Chinese migrants

have become long-term settlers who coexist separately from the larger indigenous population. Chinese coolies to Southeast Asia during the 1860s to 1930 may be classified as sojourners. In the colonial era, the question of Chinese integration was not at the forefront of concerns in indigenous societies. However, by the 1950s as Southeast Asian countries became independent, Chinese were called upon to demonstrate their loyalty to their country of settlement (Skinner 1996 [2001]; Wang 1996 [2001]). Freedman notes that by the 1960s, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, had become more integrated into their country, though many still regard China as “an ancestral land, however remote it may be in distance measured by generations, knowledge, or political sympathy” (1979:20–21). The question of Chinese integration in Southeast Asia had been debated, particularly in Indonesia between advocates of assimilation and proponents of integration. The former were middle-class Chinese professionals and the latter were primarily poorer Chinese to whom full assimilation was more difficult to attain (Coppel 1983).

In more recent times, scholars have moved away from debates over assimilation versus sojourning (for example, Tu 1994; Wang and Wang 1998a, 1998b). They argue that assimilation does violence to migrants because it tries to eliminate racial identity and cultural heritage (Wang 1998). Using a concept they call *luodi-shenggen* (“settling in, growing roots”), they argue that Chinese migrants are integral to the countries they settle in in social and political terms, and can maintain their own racial identity and cultural heritage. With increased interest among scholars in globalisation, scholars write in broader ways how the Chinese

diaspora relate to place or places. Siu (2005) studies the sense of belonging among Chinese in Panama looking at the connection they have to Panama, their relationship to China and Taiwan, and to the larger Chinese diasporic community in Latin America. She proposes the concept of diasporic citizenship which is the idea of subject formation through the interaction of multiple geopolitical spaces. Thus, being Chinese in the diaspora is always a state of becoming. In a similar trajectory, Leung (2003) examines various notions of home and sense of belonging among the Chinese in Germany. She concludes that home is not bounded or fixed in geography, but rather “more often placed at different geographic scales and multiple locations” influenced by their personal experiences, social identities, and socio-political contexts (253). Like Siu, she argues that diasporic identities are always transforming and being transformed.

Portrayals of Chinese as sojourners or settlers seem to have a tinge of anxiety over national and cultural loyalty. Perhaps this anxiety comes from an assumption that being rooted, and thus in place, is inherent in human nature. I discuss this in Chapter 4 and argue that assuming being rooted or having a desire to be rooted can blind us from seeing the more murky ground that Chinese migrants in Ghana have to negotiate. In this vein, my work is more in alignment with works such as Siu (2005) and Hsu (2000) that consider how Chinese identities in the diaspora continue to be formed through their changing relationship to various geopolitical realms. In my ethnography, I am less concerned about identities and more focused on *how* the Chinese experience and

live in liminality. As migration continues to increase, scholars have to seriously consider how migrants can lead lives that are not rooted in place but imbued with uncertainty. Chan (1986) cautions that for historians, “it is impossible to say if the Chinese were solely [sojourners or immigrants] because to do so requires an accurate knowledge of their motives” (xx). Person-centred ethnography of the variety I pursue here can provide at least some insight into those motives.

Anxiety over national and cultural loyalty as demonstrated in the scholarship does have its legitimacy. A recent study in Namibia (Dobler 2008) shows rising anti-Chinese sentiments due to economic competition from Chinese shopkeepers, while the opposite is true in Cape Verde (Carling and Haugen 2008) and Senegal (Gaye 2008). However, the Chinese presence does not always evoke discernible positive or negative sentiments. As this ethnography shows, though the Chinese have been present for decades in Ghana, they are largely invisible as a group to the local population. How is this possible? This ethnography suggests that doing ethnographic research on Chinese groups in Africa is important because such detailed study may challenge some assumptions journalists and scholars have about Chinese in Africa. For example, my ethnography reveals that Chinese in Ghana are not as coherent as stories about Chinese in Africa make them seem. In her study of the Chinese in Zanzibar, Hsu (2007) discovers that there are at least three distinct groups and they rarely have contact with each other. Both Hsu’s and my study begin to show that when considering the question about Chinese in Africa, sometimes the group “Chinese” cannot be assumed and it is important to understand more closely the dynamics of this “group” in order

to understand their relationships to the place they have temporarily or permanently settled in. The next two sections provide geographic orientations to the two cities where most Chinese live—Accra and Tema.

### **3. SPATIAL ORIENTATIONS: ACCRA**

Geographers studying the development and economics of the Accra consider it more fruitful to consider Tema and Accra as one unit because of their close economic ties (Grant and Yankson 2003). In 1965, the fishing village of Tema was developed into a deep-water port and industrial town that facilitated economic growth and foreign trade for Accra. Since then, the two towns have had a symbiotic relationship. Accra is primarily the financial and market powerhouse while Tema has the oil refinery and manufacturing base. Known as the Greater Accra region, this is the most industrialised and economically most productive region of the country.

Prior to Tema's development as a deep-water port, freight destined for Accra had to moor offshore because Accra's coast was too shallow for large ships. Cargo would be offloaded to surf boats, which could complete the final leg of the journey to Accra. The alternate method for the large ships was to dock in Takoradi, a city 140 miles (225km) west of Accra from which the goods would be transported by land to Accra. Since the 1960s, these two localities have become increasingly interdependent. Population in both cities has expanded beyond their

original borders. What used to be uninhabited open space of mostly grassland between the two cities now is overflowing with residents from both sides<sup>3</sup>.

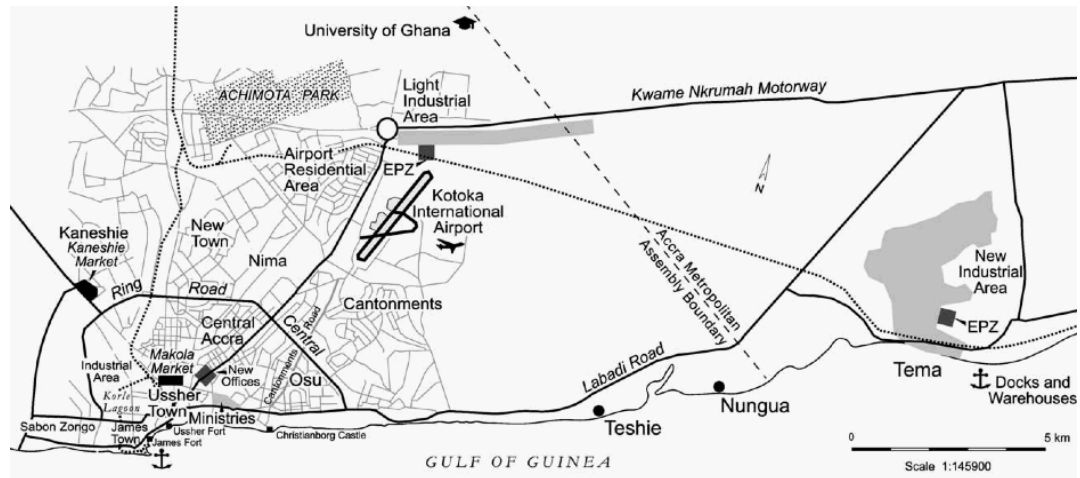


Figure 1.1 Map of Accra (I) (Source: Grant and Yankson 2003:66)

<sup>3</sup> Though economists and geographers tend to understand these two cities as one, these two localities hold some level of difference for the Chinese. Many Chinese consider Tema a peaceful and quiet place to live. Its slower pace is praised for providing respite but also criticised for its dullness when leisure activity is desired. Accra is considerably larger and for many Chinese closer to the idea of a modern city, with a plethora of western goods in its supermarkets and places for middle-class recreation and leisure including movie theatres, swimming pools, and trendier restaurants. It is not atypical for Chinese residents of Tema to travel to Accra for shopping and eating out. For the purposes of describing the spatial orientation of these two cities, I do make the distinction because the cities have historically developed differently, and, though currently symbiotic, they are still distinct.

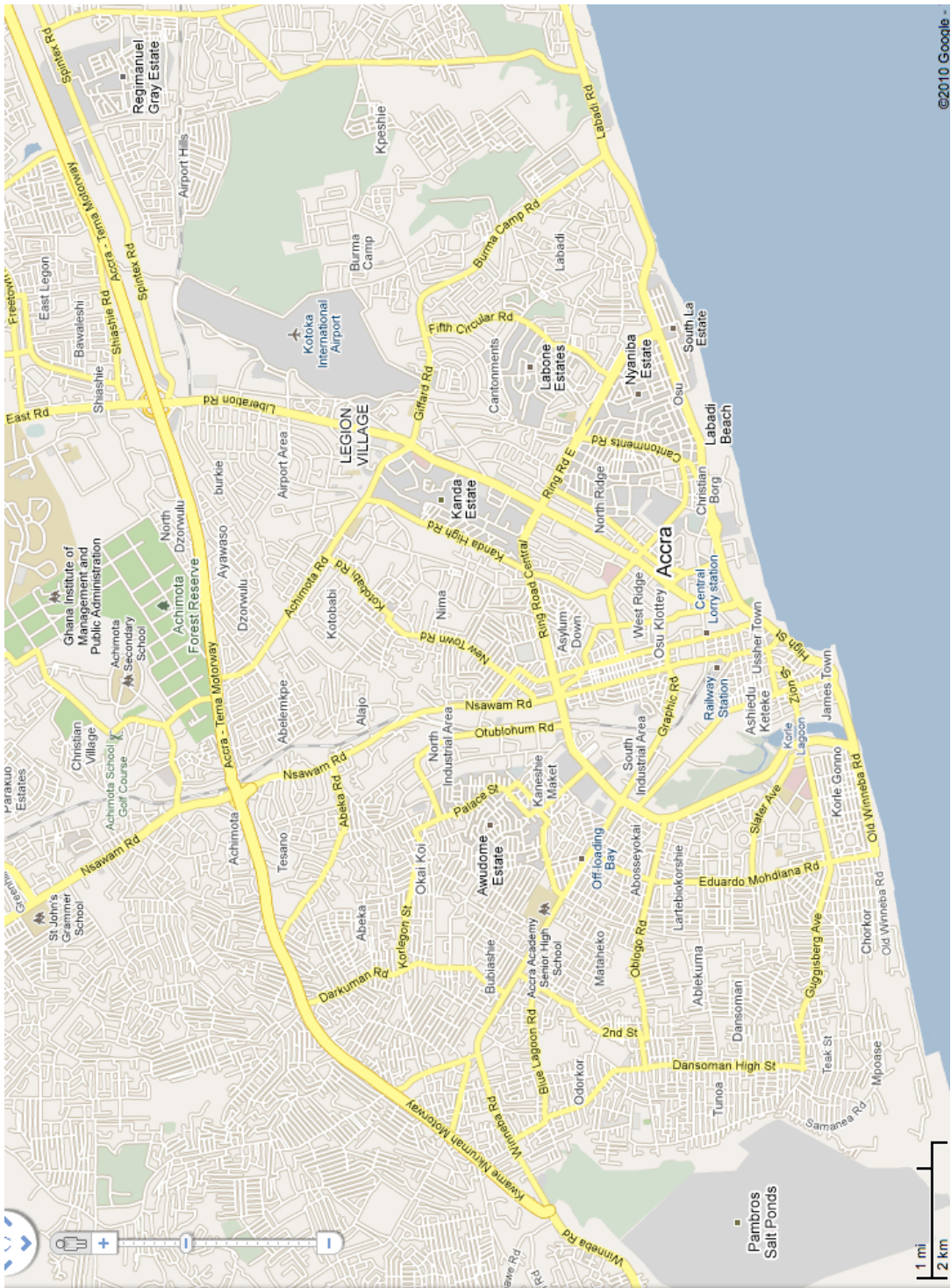


Figure 1.2 Map of Accra (II) (Source: Google 2010a)



Accra is bounded by the Gulf of Guinea in the south, the suburb of Legon in the north, Pambros Salt Ponds in the west, and Tema in the east. The built-up area of Accra, about 15.5 miles (25km) east to west and 8 miles (12km) north to south, was populated by about 1.7 million people in 2000, a considerable increase from a population of 388,000 in 1960 when the first modern Ghanaian census was taken. Whereas old city Accra was developed around Accra Harbour, the port is now largely abandoned by shipping companies and most industries but is still used by local fishermen. However, the area around the port remains the economic and financial centre of Accra.

The city began developing between the area of Cape St. Paul and Christiansborg Castle. Three neighbourhoods in this area form the Central Business District (CBD) and Ministries. Major roads running from east to west are laid out in uneven concentric circles that ripple outwards from the CBD. Ring Road is the major east-west artery that forms a semicircle in the middle of Accra dividing it into northern and southern halves. Towards the top of the northern half is the Kwame Nkrumah Motorway that also forms a rough semicircle around Accra's periphery. Major roads that run north to south radiate outwards in a ray-like pattern beginning at Accra's core, the CBD.

South of Ring Road are a few major areas of concentration of businesses and residential areas. Ussher Town is the traditional CBD that was the site of the Old European town in the colonial era. This area has a heavy concentration of corporate activities including the second highest concentration of Ghanaian-

controlled companies in Accra along with a number of long-established foreign companies (Grant and Nijman 2002:330). Most of these domestic companies are in the finance and producer services (Grant and Nijman 2002:331). The landscape here is a mixture of modern high-rise and colonial buildings with corrugated roofs and open arcades. Adjacent to Ussher Town is a dense concentration of government ministries with two architectural sites of national significance—Black Star Square and Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park. Small trading companies in Accra date back to the colonial era and are located in this area and the western parts of Accra. Import-export firms have been based in this old Native Town since the colonial times when petty traders offered local and international goods for sale. Europeans were typically not interested in these activities as they provided little profit. Today, various ethnic groups continue to have import-export trading firms, including Lebanese, Syrians, Indians, and Chinese. Chinese firms in this area are primarily in the wholesale import business of Chinese household goods, although many also operate out of their homes scattered throughout Accra.

North of this area is Adabraka, Tudu, and Asylum Down. The biggest economic draw in this area is Makola Market, Accra's largest market. It is a mixture of paved and unpaved sidewalks and back alleys through which the market spills, creating permanent congestion. This is one of the main open-air markets where Chinese restaurant owners come for their ingredients. A mixture of Ga and other ethnic groups including Hausa-speaking migrants has populated Adabraka. The name of the neighbourhood comes from the Arabic *albarka* meaning "blessing." This area was settled by Hausa and northerners who kept

beef cattle. During the bubonic plague of 1907, the colonial government developed this residential area. Tudu (Hausa for “hill”, and formerly known as Railway Hill in the colonial era) is another neighbourhood that was developed south of Adabraka. Today both areas are a mixture of commercial and residential areas. They are also considered “stranger”<sup>4</sup> settlements (Zongo) with a mixture of various ethnic groups including Ga, other Ghanaians, and non-Ghanaians. The business district here has the highest density of domestic companies, most of which are small (Grant and Nijman 2002:330).

The western boundary of Accra is around Pambros Salt Ponds. Between this boundary and Korle Lagoon are neighbourhoods developed in 1907 after the bubonic plague, and in 1939 in order to relieve congestion in Central Accra. Most neighbourhoods drew their population from the Ga-dominated areas of Central Accra, with the exception of Sabon Zongo (Hausa for “new camp”), which became a strangers’ section. Today the neighbourhoods are largely a mix of ethnic groups including Akan and Ewe. Many Chinese tend to view the areas west of Korle Lagoon as undesirable, since they are closer to neighbourhoods populated by immigrant workers and tend to be in the busier areas of Accra.

Further eastwards to Osu is one of Accra’s newest business districts. Unlike the mix of colonial buildings and high-rises in old Accra, Osu’s business district is primarily comprised of low-rise buildings running in a narrow strip along Cantonments Road. The largest concentration of foreign companies is

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<sup>4</sup> “Strangers” refers to “groups which for various reasons have moved out of their homelands and had established relatively long-term residence in the territories of other groups” (Skinner 1968). See Section 4, Part D of this chapter for further discussion.

found in this area, including those in the finance and producer services such as communication, real estate, advertising, and consulting (331). There are also many businesses here in the retail, service, and hospitality industries. Seeking middle-class leisure activities, many Chinese spend their disposable income here at the casino, sit-down restaurants and fast-food joints that cater to Accra's middle class.

Crossing the southern portion of Ring Road, we move into the northern half of Accra. At the northwestern edges of the city is Kaneshie (Ga for "under the lamp"), in reference to its beginnings as a night market. In order to control increasing commercial congestion, the government re-built the market in the 1970s, confining it to a large multi-storey building. This location also serves as a major transit centre. Located nearby is Accra Industrial Area where most of Accra's factories are located. This area includes several Chinese factories, including carton box and textile manufacturing companies.

Neighbourhoods eastwards of Kaneshie and north of Ring Road originally started as villages of Fulani and Hausa cattle herders, but are now fairly mixed ethnically, especially with other northern migrants. These villages began sprawling in the 1940s and 1950s when World War II soldiers returned home and became incorporated into the city in 1953.

In the eastern end of the northern half of Accra is Labone, Cantonments, and Airport Residential Area. All these are largely affluent residential areas, though there are a few run-down parts along with the mixed-used buildings for both residential and business purposes typical of Accra's development. The developed land here is subdivided into small individual residential plots.

Cantonments is distinctive in that rings of circular roads mark off its land. Just to the north is Airport Residential Area. It is distinctive from the other affluent residential areas in that more of its homes are recently developed. Parts of Airport Residential Area have been developed into gated communities such as Regimanuel Gray Estates. Homes in these gated communities look like a scene out of an American suburb, with their uniform plots, tract housing, and manicured lawns.

Accra's landscape reveals its historical and contemporary development. The older portions of town have old colonial buildings along with some modern high rises. Domestic companies primarily in finance and producer services dominate the economy of this area. The vast majority of these companies are small operations that target both businesses and consumers. The newer and typically more affluent parts of town are concentrated further away from the traditional CBD with increasing density from Osu and further north into Airport Residential Area, spilling into the suburbs of Accra. Land is cheaper in the central and northwestern parts of Accra and more expensive in Osu and eastwards towards the suburbs such as Airport Residential Area. Domestic companies are more price-sensitive to land value and thus tend to be concentrated in the central and older parts of Accra while foreign companies, which tend to be wealthier, are concentrated in the outskirts of the city. However, because Chinese trading businesses are typically small, many are located in the older parts of Accra towards the coast and the CBD. Other Chinese trading businesses are located in homes which double as warehouses. Chinese-owned restaurants also dot the

Accra landscape with no clear geographic clustering. Their locations depend on the patrons they attract. Chinese restaurants aimed at less wealthy patrons, especially those marketing themselves as fast food, tend to be located in poorer or busier sections of Accra which tend to be older and towards central Accra. Restaurants that cater to wealthier patrons, including Chinese, tend to be in the eastern and northeastern side of Accra, which are largely inhabited by better-off locals and foreigners.

With the exception of the Ga who cluster primarily along the old centre of town on the coast (Weeks, et al. 2006:536), ethnic groups are not residentially segregated, but rather dispersed throughout the city. Instead of being clustered by ethnicity, Accra's neighbourhoods are more clearly divided by socioeconomic class. The central areas are inhabited primarily by the working class while areas in the north and east tend to be wealthier. Chinese tend to be dispersed throughout the city in more upscale neighbourhoods, and usually away from areas that are largely working class.

#### **4. SPATIAL ORIENTATIONS: TEMA**

Tema township, about 25km east of Accra, had a population of about 500,000 in 2000 (GSS 2002; Brand 1972b:285). Its development was fuelled by Accra's economic growth. Tema was the original site of a small fishing village named Torman. By 1950, Gold Coast's only deep-water port in Takoradi was straining to handle the increasing international trade. Furthermore, a deep-water

port was needed to serve the eastern part of the country. In 1951, the site of Torman was chosen to develop the colony's second deep-water port because it was close to the Volta and Accra rivers. In 1952, the city was founded. The government acquired 64 square miles of land north of the harbour and entrusted it to Tema Development Corporation (TDC), which was in charge of constructing roads, buildings, and other services for this planned industrial-residential city. This part of town is divided into 20 districts called Communities. In 1962, Tema Harbour was opened, and today it handles 70% of the country's shipments and also handles those of landlocked countries like Burkina Faso (Programme Solidarité Eau 2002). Each of the 20 Communities was supposed to have its own central location for a market and main services, but that vision was not carried through. TDC was unable to construct enough affordable housing and services to manage the influx of migrants to Tema, resulting in the formation of a slum area called Ashaiman (population 150,321) where many factory workers and day labourers of Tema live (GSS 2002). In the late 1960s and 1970s, Tema's development brought its first influx of Chinese attracted by the potential for industrial development. Larger industries included textiles and metal works.

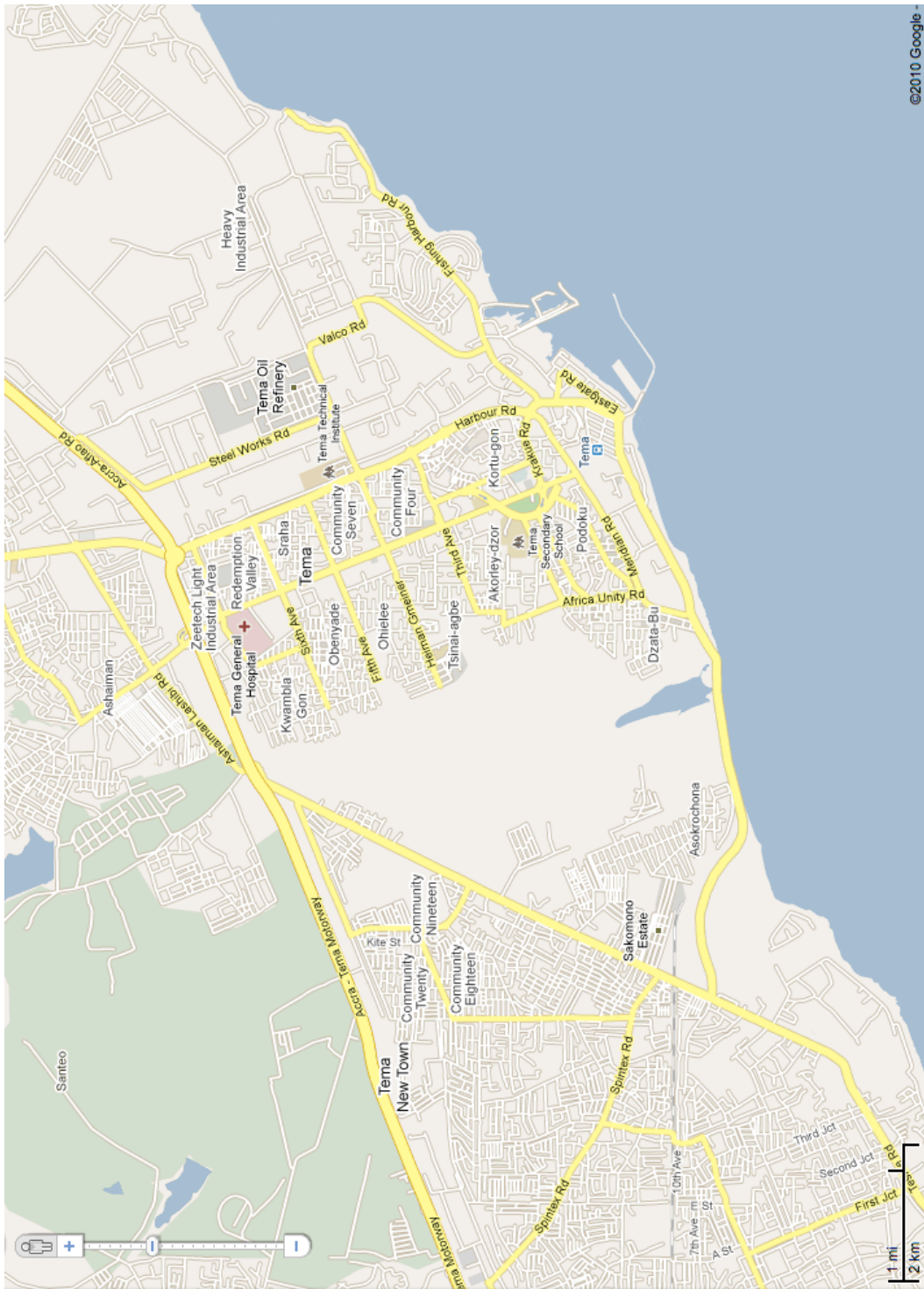


Figure 1.3 Map of Tema (Source: Google 2010b)



Tema today is a mix of planned Communities in neatly defined residential blocks located in the old central area of town, along with haphazard sprawling Communities towards the western outskirts of town approaching Accra. This image of order and chaos displays the local government's desire and inability to manage the influx of migrants and growing industries and businesses since the 1960s. Like Accra, Tema is bordered in the north by the Kwame Nkrumah Motorway and in the south by the Gulf of Guinea. Originally, Tema was separated in the east from Accra by the fishing village of Sakumono. Today, Sakumono has essentially been swallowed up as Tema has expanded its borders in the northeast now abutting Accra. Along the southeastern end of Tema, the area is still separated from Accra by the suburbs of Teshie and Nungua.

A north-south oriented road bifurcates Tema into roughly two halves. Since winds in Tema predominantly blow eastwards, the industrial section was built in the eastern part so that pollutants from the factories would blow away from the residential areas, which are built in the western half. The eastern half includes the country's oil refinery, an aluminium plant previously owned by the American company, Kaiser Aluminum, and numerous manufacturing plants. In the southern part of this eastern half is Tema Fishing Harbour.

The western half consists of the numbered residential Communities. Community 1 at the southern edge of Tema adjacent to Tema Harbour is the transportation hub and market centre of town. Community 1 through Community 10 were planned in neat blocks along the two major arteries of Hospital Road and

Harbour Road and are thus well connected to each other. When Chinese factories were first established, it was typical to house Chinese employees in rented flats or buildings in close proximity to one another in these Communities. This geographic clustering no longer exists, largely due to the dwindling number of Chinese staff. Today, the homes of the Chinese in Tema are scattered throughout the planned Communities of 1 to 10. There are a few Chinese-owned businesses in this area, mostly restaurants and a few wholesalers of household products.

Community 11 to 20 are separated from the rest of Tema by a vast undeveloped plain and the Sakumono Lagoon. The planning of these communities has been haphazard and chaotic, and because they are relatively far from the centre and industrial areas of town, most Chinese tend not to live in this area. There are only two ways to travel from these communities to the rest of Tema. The most popular route is to take the illegally unpaved road that feeds onto the Motorway in the northern border of Tema. The alternative and more circuitous route is to travel along the old beach road in the southern border. In other words, there are no established roads in the middle of Tema connecting its different parts.

The Motorway that runs along the northern border of Tema also reveals the haphazard history and geography of Tema. When constructed in 1964, Motorway was intended as an expressway toll road linking Tema and Accra, both of which at that time were significantly smaller. Over the decades, satellite communities and industrial areas have sprung up along Motorway with uncertainty whether those communities belonged to Tema or Accra since that

area seemed beyond the jurisdiction of Accra Metropolitan Assembly and Tema Metropolitan Assembly. Originally, all industries of Tema were located east of Harbour Road. Since Tema township has now expanded westwards beyond Sakumono Lagoon, it has swallowed up these residential and industrial satellite communities. Along this portion of Motorway are multinational giants like Coca-Cola, Unilever, and Johnson Wax. There are also a few Chinese-owned industries here, including one that used to produce corn puffs and iced lollies in plastic tubes that were ubiquitous on the streets of Accra and Tema. Despite the growth of these residential and industrial areas, Motorway has only two legal exits and entrances between Accra and Tema. The satellite areas do not have legal entry and exit points to this toll highway. Nevertheless, factories and residences have created their own unapproved and unpaved feeder roads onto Motorway.<sup>5</sup>

Despite being developed as a planned city, the rise of informal settlements and squatter areas is evidence that Tema's rapid urban growth has gone beyond what its authorities have planned for. This is similarly true for Accra. These informal settlements are both used as residential areas and sites of economic production and have been described by some local scholars as "physical manifestations of the failed attempt at industrial transition which is best described as de-industrialization under globalization and 'free trade' "(Songsore 2010:35).

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of the history and shortfall of the Kwame Nkrumah Motorway, see Akordo (2007) and Boakye (2009).

In both Tema and Accra, the Chinese do not live in residential clusters. They tend to live in wealthier parts of town and away from the economic centre where many of the working class both live and work. However, it is not uncommon for some Chinese businesses, such as fast food joints and household wholesale stores, to be located in these poorer areas, depending on the socioeconomic level of targeted clientele. In both Accra and Tema, their landscape of unplanned growth of informal settlements and areas of production is evidence that authorities have not been able to control the region's population. This seems to be a factor that allows the Chinese to live in their environment largely undetected as a group, being able to blend into the social geography of both towns and escaping state "legibility" (Scott 1998) and national consciousness.

## **5. HISTORICAL ORIENTATIONS: GEOGRAPHY IN ACCRA–TEMA REGION**

### **A. Pre-Colonial Accra Plains**

The Accra plains where the Accra-Tema metropolis is located are considered by the national government and the Ga people to be entirely Ga stool land<sup>6</sup> because the Ga are considered autochthonous to this area. In Accra, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Stools are typically wooden seats that commoners, diplomats and royalty use and thus are associated with all kinds of political and non-political statuses. For political purposes, a stool is equivalent to a throne and represents the seat of political and religious authority. In the case of royalty, stools are enshrined with the soul of a people, including its ancestors and the unborn. Through this enshrinement, the occupier of the stool is able to exercise the people's spiritual and political power. For detailed discussion on stools in Ghana and particularly of the Ashanti people, see Patton (1979).

Stool land is communal land held by a whole tribe often acquired through conquest and occupation. The "chief" of the tribe is given authority over management of these lands. Stool land

popularly accepted that though Ga language is indigenous to the area, it is being overshadowed by various Akan dialects that are replacing Ga as the language for economic and social interaction among different ethnolinguistic groups (Kropp Dakubu 1997:48). This, however, belies the social fluidity of the Ga people and history of the area. For instance, while the Ga use the Ga language for everyday purposes, their court ceremonies incorporate the Akan language, which was instituted during Akan supremacy of the area from about 1660 to the end of the nineteenth century (113). The music of the drums and horns of the Ga and their songs are based on Akan texts and not usually Ga. Words used in the songs during the Kple festival are in the Kpeshie language, which comes from northern Ghana (Kropp Dakubu 1997; Field 1940). These are all indicators of the complexities of group formation and incorporation in the Accra plains.

It has been accepted by anthropologists that the Kpeshie people were considered the original inhabitants of the Accra plains, but they too had migrated from northern Ghana down the Volta River creating farm settlements on the plains. According to colonial anthropologist M. J. Field, the Kpeshie and Lɛ people did not settle in Tema until around the 1750s. Although it is unclear how the original settlements were arranged, the Kpeshie and Lɛ tribes banded together militarily when slave-raiders from the eastern side of the Accra plains began

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is inalienable but its land usage can be granted to outsiders. This has historically been the case and my understanding is this is still the case. This tradition of land rights and authority has been a contentious issue in Ghana and has been cited as a hindrance to national economic development. See for example, Shelford (1911).

advancing towards Tema. From discrete tribal settlements, Tema was formed into a town of two halves, Ashaiman and Awudung.

Ga oral traditions date their history back to the fourteenth century with migration stories to Ghana beginning in the sixteenth century from the east near current-day Benin and Nigeria. The Ga migrated to Ghana in three family groups. It is alleged that upon arriving in the coastal plains they did not clash against the Kpeshie, but rather lived among them forming their own farm settlements. Initially, neither the Kpeshie nor the Ga organised themselves into military units or towns, and neither group had centralised governments. Their groups were organised into extended family units and, instead of being headed by a chief, each extended family was headed by a priest. Over time, the three original Ga parties split into various subsections and some went to live on Ayawasu hill<sup>7</sup>. Later, an Akan party from the kingdom of Denkyira came to the seaside as servants of the Dutch because this party had lost its land during warfare. Overtime, this Akan group became part of the Ga group that lived on Ayawasu hill through intermarriage.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the coastal Ga kingdom was invaded by the Akwamu people who wanted to capture them as slaves and trade them with Europeans for gunpowder. Due to the expanding slave-raids on Ayawaso, the centre of the Ga Kingdom, the Okakwei group sought refuge from the hillside and moved back to the coastal areas where present-day Accra is located. This resulted in the gradual resettlement of the Ga to the western side of the Korle

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<sup>7</sup> Also known as Okakwei.

Lagoon, the boundary that demarcates the western side of Accra. In addition to returning to the coast, Ga and Kpeshie reorganised themselves into military units to fend off the Akwamu.<sup>8</sup> While the population of Ga increased, the Kpeshie continued to decline. Eventually, Kpeshie people handed the power they had over their land to the Ga, and Kpeshie became fully incorporated into Ga groups (Field 1940; Kropp Dakubu 1997).<sup>9</sup> Internal divisions among the Ga lead to their defeat in 1681, resulting in almost 150 years of overrule by the Akan.<sup>10</sup> By 1681, the Akwamu had destroyed the centre of Ga kingdom (Briggs 2004; Osei-Tutu 2000; Yaw 1989).

Soon after the Ga returned to the coastal areas, European merchants began trading with the coastal Ga. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Europeans wanted to strengthen their trading positions and so asked locals permission to build forts. These forts afforded the Ga protection from slave-raiding and also provided them a profitable trade with Europeans, including cloth which became an important part of Ghanaian culture (Littrell 1977; see, Steiner 1985). Ga provided Europeans with slaves, gold dust, and palm oil in return for guns and gun flints (Acquah 1958).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Termed asafo

<sup>9</sup> Remnants of Kpeshie society within Ga culture can be heard in the songs of the Kple religious festivals where the Kpeshie dialect is used

<sup>10</sup> The Akan people include the Asante and Akwamu. Akan at their height in the early eighteenth century stretched for more than 250 miles along the coast from Whydah (Ouidah, Benin) in the east to beyond Winneba, Ghana in the West.

<sup>11</sup> The Dutch founded Fort Crèvecoeur (now Ussher Fort, so named when it was handed over to the British in 1868), and less than half-a-mile west, the British founded James Fort in 1673. Christiansborg Castle was built by the Swedes in 1657 in the Osu settlement of Accra about two miles east of Ussher Fort, but was quickly captured by the Danes (Dantzig 1980). There are currently two forts and one castle in Accra. Fort Crèvecoeur was founded by the Dutch in 1649, destroyed by earthquake in 1863, handed over to the English in 1868. Now known as Ussher Fort

Growth of the site of modern-day Accra began around the 1690s, with an estimated population of 3,000 to 20,000 in 1811 and then a slow decline until 1911. From 1940s onwards, Accra began rapid population growth. Modern-day Accra encompasses the former seven quarters.<sup>12</sup> These original Ga settlements were clusters of farms separated by vast uninhabited lands that then formed a confederation up until the 1840s to ward off the slave-raiding practices of the Akan (Field 1940; Manoukian [1950] 1964).<sup>13</sup> Although identified as Ga, these settlements included non-Ga. For instance, the Otublohu quarter consisted of mostly Akwamu people (an Akan speaking group) who were later joined by the Denkyera (also another Akan-speaking group) who had come to Accra as servants of the Dutch. The Alata quarter consisted of mostly workers from Lagos, Nigeria who were brought by the English to build James Fort.

## **B. Accra in the Colonial Era**

Despite this history of fluid migration and mixing and sedimentation of ethnicities, modern-day Accra today is popularly seen as a Ga city and the Greater Accra administrative region, which encompasses the city of Accra and Tema, is

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it is currently a prison. James Fort was founded near Ussher Fort in 1673 and is also currently a prison. There are debates about the origins of Christiansborg Castle located in Osu settlement. According to Acquah (1958: 16) Christiansborg was founded by the Swedes in 1657, and four years later captured by the Danes. Christiansborg was later in Portuguese hands from 1681 to 1683 and was known as Fort S. Francisco Xavier. It was then handed over to the Akwamu in 1693 and subsequently sold to the British in 1850. Since 1876, it has been the seat of government and is known by its original name of Christiansborg Castle Dantzig (1980).

<sup>12</sup> At one point, though it is not clear when, the original three settlements were split into seven quarters.

<sup>13</sup> There are disputes as to whether there were four or seven settlements though it seems that at some point the four settlements split into seven. The names of the seven settlements were Asere, Abola, Akunmadzei, Gbese, Sempi, Alata, Otublohu.



considered Ga stool land. Yet there are only a few neighbourhoods or settlements where the Ga are the primary residents. This includes the old coastal settlements of Osu, James Town, Ussher Town, and Labadi. Outside of these settlements, the Ga people and language are a minority (Kropp Dakubu 1997:43; Manoukian [1950] 1964).

When Accra's Europeans forts were built, they were used as holding places for slaves and other trade goods. In the nineteenth century, these forts became administration centres and housing for government officials, troops, and police. European merchants who were formerly living in the forts moved into town. The Ga continued to act as middlemen between Europeans and native groups of the interior and have been described as "zealously guarding their monopoly of buying from foreigners" (Acquah 1958:17).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A description written in 1873 by Henry Stanley gives a good visual image of what Accra looked like at this time:

The scene ashore was that of a straight beach backed by a mud terrace, which stretched to the right and left and rear of Accra for many miles, singularly open and clear as seen from shipboard. Accra itself straggled for nearly a mile on the edge of a terrace overlooking the beach, with many pretentious houses, whitewashed, attracting attention from their prominence above the clay-brown huts among them. Almost to the extreme left was the Commandment's house, aloof and exclusive, its wide veranda denoted luxurious coolness... Away to the extreme right was another large house with wide verandas and abundant grounds about it. This was the Basel Mission House, occupied by a singular community of religious Swiss and Germans who have banded together for the very sensible purpose of teaching the natives and making money by them by honest trade in palm oil and gold dust. In the very centre of the town was the port and lighthouse of Accra [referring to what is now James Town.] Between these houses the body of the town of native and European buildings jammed itself...

The huts of the natives have been established everywhere, without regard to order or any symmetrical arrangement. The consequence is that the streets are uniformly narrow, crooked, and oppressive from the filthy habits of the natives. The principal merchant of the town is Mr. Croker, the agent of the great mercantile house of F. & A. Swanzy who found the legitimate West African trade (Stanley 1874:77-79 cited in Acquah 27).

Throughout this period, the British government headquartered in Cape Coast tried numerous times to exert its influence on all of Accra even though they held only half of it. British authorities worked through traditional authorities to get locals of the coastal areas to maintain a standard of public sanitation, especially when Europeans moved outside of the forts to live in town and regarded the local environment as unsanitary (Acquah 1958:21). As the presence of European officials grew, the influence and power of traditional authorities over the local population waned. Attempts by the British to improve town sanitation took a new form as they noticed that local authorities did not exercise much power. The difficulties the British faced stemmed from two primary issues: first that they did not want direct and complete responsibility to provide for town amenities, and secondly, local inhabitants were often not willing to pay for the improvements and services (22). The British authorities set up a local council that included traditional authorities and prominent men of various districts along the coast so that they could “[teach] people to govern themselves...by controlling and modifying their own Government (Governor's despatch to the Secretary of State, 14th July 1862 cited in Acquah 1958: 23). The idea was for the council to register all dwellings and collect tax. This idea was unfavourable to locals, and by 1859 traditional authorities incited locals to rebel against the government.

By 1877, the colonial government moved from Cape Coast to Accra citing the reason that Accra was a healthier place. This marked the beginning of a period of serious and continual effort by the colonial government to administer the town. The power and influence local authorities had over their population

declined significantly in this period as European officials dealt directly with the population. Unlike previous styles of administration, which were half-hearted attempts to govern the western part of the Gold Coast, the colonial government made a concerted effort to establish a town council for the purposes of forming a municipal government, collecting revenue, and executing health and sanitary measures. The government's primary concern was "the good health and prosperity of the European population" and priority was given to urban improvements which benefited the administration and European traders (Hess 2000:40). As in previous years, there were numerous objections by locals especially dealing with the old problem of revenue collection, but by 14 February 1898 the Accra Municipal Council was formed.

Accra's growth as the colony's capital was the result of a mutual interaction between the activities of the British administration and the local commercial activities. Even though Accra is not rich in natural resources, its status as the capital meant that it grew in importance in relation to the rest of the colony. Improvements were made to communications and town amenities. Roads were extended northwards after the acquiring of the Ashanti and Northern territories and also extended along the coast to connect nearby towns. We begin to see a new growing class of wealthy African merchants whose power surpassed that of the traditional authorities. British commercial houses such as Yates Brothers and F. & A. Swanzy were established in a newly created Central Business District along High Street. Basel Missionary and other European missionaries were also located here. Accra was becoming the central juncture between trade networks of the

interior and the British metropole, shifting the locus from the western shores of Cape Coast and Elmina to the eastern shore of Accra.

In ensuring the health of European expatriates and maintaining “an orderly European character,” the city over time evolved distinctly segregated areas dividing local natives from Europeans (Grant and Nijman 2002:7). The coastal areas were developed for three distinct purposes. The eastern side, formerly known as Danish Accra now called Victoriaborg, became the administrative centre. Further west towards Cape St. Paul where James Town and Ussher Town are located was developed into docks and warehouses. Because the shore along Accra was too shallow, steamships had to anchor offshore relying on surfboats to shuttle people and goods to the docks. In the vicinity between the docks and administrative area was the European commercial district.

Previously Europeans had rented homes from natives, but later they developed this area into a mixture of commercial and residential areas. Commercial space occupied the ground floor of buildings while the floors above were for residential use. Activities in the commercial space included banking, trading, goods distribution, and transportation. When families began joining husbands, Europeans decided that it was unsanitary to have families living in these mixed commercial-residential areas. Both the government and European population decided to channel money to develop the outskirts into European suburbs and recreational areas that included a golf course and polo grounds. The area north of the European commercial district and west of the European recreational grounds was developed for natives. Native Town was separated by

open green space and was developed as a mix of commercial and residential area with activities such as small-scale industry, traditional markets and bazaars, and crafts. The pattern of the landscape then was segregation of foreign and native commercial and residential activities.

By the early twentieth century, this pattern of segregation began to erode as international trade increased. British funds to further develop the city decreased during the First World War through to the Depression era. The British officially abandoned racial segregation after the Devonshire White Paper was published in 1923 stating:

It is now the view of the competent medical authorities that, as a sanitation measure, segregation of Europeans and Asiatics is not absolutely essential for the preservation of the health of the community . . . to the effect such separation by legislative enactment except on the strongest sanitary grounds would not, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government, be justifiable. (Brand 1972: 44 cited in Hess 2000:39)

Migration to squatter settlements in James Town and Ussher Town also increased during the Depression years with little funding to aid squatters to move to the Native Town. After the Second World War, an influx of European merchants and administrators led to the emergence of an expatriate middle class resulting in an expansion of the government and commercial sectors. Natives from other areas of the country also increased immigration to Accra. Migration of expatriates and natives to Accra led to the erosion of previously established geographic racial boundaries because neither sector could contain its population. Rapid growth in the city of Accra began in the 1940s, due mostly to migration.

Between 1948 and 1960, migration into the Accra-Tema area accounted for two-fifths of its growth, the population rising from 136,000 to 492,000 (Berkoh 1974:4), then reaching 1 million in 1989 and almost 2 million by 2000 (GSS 2002). As independence drew near, the racially segregating borders within Accra were no longer as easily discernible due to the elimination of the segregation policy. In conjunction with a growing middle class of the native population, the policy of discouraging native businesses was terminated, leading to rapid growth of domestic companies. The migration histories of European and native groups into the city of Accra, combined with the changing policies of the British government on segregation, led to Accra's geography today as an odd assortment of spaces that blend administrative, commercial, and residential activities.

### **C. Accra in the Post-Independence/National Era**

Several factors brought about Ghana's independence: growing resistance among local chiefs and peoples towards British policies, native merchants who financed political organisations to protect their commercial interests, and pressure by Western-educated natives who demanded independence. In the years immediately following independence in 1957, president Kwame Nkrumah was quick to rid the city of its colonial regulations and to de-Europeanise Accra. The Central Business District took on a national character as it began to be populated by the native government, state-controlled enterprises, the central bank,

domestically controlled companies, and locally owned small-scale enterprises. This national presence, however, competed with the continual presence of European multinational companies.<sup>15</sup> The continual presence of foreign firms in Accra was partly a legacy of colonialism but also a continuation of trade patterns in pre-colonial West Africa that involved native Africans and foreigners.<sup>16</sup>

Nkrumah attempted to construct community by re-imagining the city through its architecture. Central to his plan was to create a unified national culture and identity that would subsume the heterogeneities of natives and foreigners (Hess 2000). Hess argued that this “facade of homogeneity” was most present in Nkrumah’s advance of architectural modernity through a modified version of International Style promoted by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier. Hess describes this style as “emphasis upon volume...preference for surface regularity as opposed to ‘axial symmetry,’ and the avoidance of ornament (45).” The National Museum located just northwards of the Central Business District, the Accra Technical Institute (now the Accra Polytechnic), new office buildings in the Central Business District, the former US Embassy, State House, Ghana Bank, Ambassador Hotel, and Kingsway Department Store all employed this architecture style. The National Museum, in

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<sup>15</sup> These companies included: the United Africa Company Ltd. (a merger of two British trading companies in West Africa in the early 1900s), Unilever (an Anglo-Dutch company), Nestlé (a Swiss company), and PZ Cussons (an Anglo-Greek multinational company that started as a trading post in Sierra Leone).

<sup>16</sup> Even though the presence of foreign firms decreased in the 1980s, their continual presence foreshadowed the re-encroaching presence of foreigners in the neo-liberal era of the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, despite the practices of Ghanaian authorities to impose certain hegemonic characters on the city and its residents, the trend of social fluidity, which has long been part of West Africa’s history, continues.

particular, was a powerful metaphor for the unification of the country's heterogeneous cultural elements under one nation. Its prefabricated aluminium-dome roof covered the museum's entire collection, which included models of colonial and indigenous architecture.

Nkrumah's plans for urban growth in Accra and its suburbs also revealed his philosophy of national unification. The British administration had focused on the reorganisation of the Central Business District and development of the coastal area of the city from James Town to Christiansborg Castle for recreational purposes. The British were primarily concerned with "order and preeminence" of that region of the city along with installing "public squares, foundations, ornamental pools and statues". Due to their concern with the overpopulation of Accra's central and commercial congestion, they devised plans to redirect roads and to impose a "tightly organized grid" to create order (Hess 2000). Nkrumah had other priorities. His plan for the coastal development of Accra was not for recreational usage but for public demonstration of national unity. This idea was realised by building Black Star Square. Situated halfway between Christiansborg Castle (the seat of government) and James Town, the square consists of a large assembly and parade ground bordered by four open-air seating structures. Along the southern coastal border of the ground is an enormous arch for the Presidential seating stand. Opposite the square is the Independence Arch with a bronze plaque bearing the inscription,

Ghana's Independence. A.D. 1957. Let this monument hold sacred in your memory, the liberty and freedom of Ghana. The liberation and freedom, which by our struggle and sacrifice, the people of



Ghana have this day regained. May this independence be preserved and held sacred for all time.<sup>17</sup>

Nkrumah left the surrounding areas undeveloped in order to add visual weight to the square's significance. However, he wanted to demolish the neighbouring slums in James Town and Ussher Town and relocate their population. This was met with strong opposition from Ga leaders who traditionally had political clout over this area.

Outside of the Central Business District, Nkrumah followed similar ideas of the colonial administration to create spacious living quarters, extending this philosophy into Native Towns and new suburbs such as Kokolemle, Adabraka, New Town, and Nima. With growing economic and political pressures on Nkrumah's administration, these ideals for spacious residential living quickly became side-lined, and the previous patterns of overcrowding and defiance of land use ordinances returned with a fuller presence.

Ghanaians had increasing dissatisfaction with Nkrumah as the mid-1960s approached. On 24 February 1966, he was overthrown while in Vietnam on a state visit. There were many reasons for this, especially the poor economy of the country. Moving the country's economy towards an industrial model, Nkrumah had led Ghana from being one of the richest African countries to one of the poorest. With the overthrow of Nkrumah on 24 February 1966 by the Armed Forces in cooperation with the police, many of Nkrumah's monuments and

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<sup>17</sup> For a further reading of the Nkrumahist connotations of this architecture, see Hess (2000) who makes the argument that the Presidential stand in the square is an architectural imposing of Nkrumah as figurehead Ghana and his values, while the independence written on the Independence Arch contrasts with this.

architectural achievements—the Accra Community Centre and the Black Star Square—fell into disuse because Nkrumah’s regime was considered evil and dictatorial (Hess 2000:54). The toppling of his bronze monument was a gesture of the people’s disillusion with Nkrumah and his policies. Within seventeen hours of Nkrumah’s overthrow, the National Liberal Council made it illegal to display his statue.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, Nkrumah’s image has been re-interpreted in the positive light of pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism, while his image as dictator has faded into the background. His statue, with both arms amputated, has been re-erected in the grounds of the Ghana National Museum, though, oddly, next to a refreshment stand. A number of large projects in the Central Business District were built in his honour, including the Accra International Conference Centre. In 1992, president Jerry John Rawlings dedicated a memorial complex for Nkrumah on the site of the British polo grounds near the Black Star Square. The vast memorial complex includes a well-maintained garden with a statue of Nkrumah with his arms out and body leaning forward. There is also a museum dedicated to the history of Nkrumah and his ideals; however, it is mostly empty except for

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<sup>18</sup> The national newspaper, *Daily Graphic*, published an article the day after the coup justifying this action:

The concentration of power in the hands of one man has led to the abuse of individual rights and liberty. Power has been exercised by the former President capriciously... The economic situation of the country is in such a chaotic condition that unless something is done about it now the whole economic system will collapse. In fact the country is on the brink of national bankruptcy. In 1957...the country had massive overseas reserves... All have been used and the country has virtually no free reserves now (cited in Ziorklui 1988: 66).

some aging postcards, fading photographs, and his mausoleum. Hess describes the park in this way:

The mournful hush that falls over the interior of Nkrumah's mausoleum and the triumphant forward motion of the Nkrumah monument [outside] would appear curiously juxtaposed. This juxtaposition may in fact be viewed as a metaphor for the supercession of specific histories and cultures in architectural space—and as a metaphor for the advancement of an imagined and triumphal notion of the “nation”. (56)

This juxtaposition could also be given additional meaning. From outside the low wall that surrounds the grounds of the memorial park one gets the impression of order, advancement, and achievement. Once inside the park one notices its sparseness, which is further heightened when you enter the barren museum. This uneasiness between the government's desire for order and impression of achievement and local reality also exists in the larger scope of the city's history and geography. Throughout the history of the formation of Accra—from coastal settlements to colonial capital to the capital of Africa's first independent country—there has been a cycle of administrative imposition of order and so-called advancement. This has led to an uneasy relationship between governments trying to create a particular kind of order in Accra and local inhabitants and migrants working around that instilling of order. Periodically, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) performs what it calls “exercises” to rid the city of beggars, slum areas, traffic congestion, and peddlers all of which are in evidence outside the grounds of Nkrumah Memorial Park. These exercises occur several times a year and seem to appear on a whim but they only last for a couple of weeks before the AMA turns its attention to other pressing issues.

#### **D. Accra's Social Landscape Today<sup>19</sup>**

The city of Accra now encompasses the original Ga coastal settlements and areas around and areas 12km inland. The original Ga settlements that were distinctly separated by large tracts of land now run into each other with no clear demarcated boundary between them, although some locals, especially older Gas, know where these boundaries are. Any Ga who claims to be from Accra can trace his or her lineage back to one of the original geographically and politically distinct divisions that made up old Accra. However, as noted by Roger Sanjek in his study of ethnicity in the Adabraka section of Accra, an area of town that is highly multi-ethnic, people are not usually aware of the original seven geographically and politically distinct divisions that made up old Accra (Sanjek 1977).

The practice of distinguishing local and non-local communities, commonly referred to as “zongos” or “stranger settlements,” has a long history in the West African region stretching back to pre-colonial times. “Strangers” refers to those people who move away from their homelands to settle in a foreign place. Instead of conceptualising them as immigrants who eventually settle down, strangers are understood not to come from the local community but are integral to the community. Strangers are primarily merchants and traders who operate in local or foreign trade. Historically, local leaders encouraged stranger communities because they connected areas economically throughout the West African region.

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<sup>19</sup> Some of the sources for this section come from Kropp Dakubu (1997) and Manoukian ([1950] 1964).

Strangers also augmented the wealth of local leaders through tributes and gifts. They also had the advantage of being translators and interpreters for visitors and other African rulers who come to the local community, effectively serving as emissaries. The colonial era changed the relationship between strangers and locals because strangers came into local communities under the aegis of European administrators, turning to Europeans for arbitration rather than local authorities. Though the politics of “strangers” have changed in contemporary Ghana, the term continues to be used and holds local significance. In Accra, stranger settlements denote communities of non-local African traders and African Muslims, especially those who have a historical connection to the area in pre-colonial times.<sup>20</sup> Non-African foreign groups such as Europeans and Asians are not usually conceptualised as strangers in the same way but exist in a separate category. Strangers often have more intricate knowledge and dealings with local traditional authorities, whereas most Europeans and Asians work closer with recognised municipal and national governments, often bypassing local traditional authorities.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the continued existence of this concept of strangers, Accra should not be thought of as having various ethnic ghettos because all these neighbourhoods have a large mixture of ethnic groups, including the former European residential areas and affluent areas. Even areas that were once developed to relieve congestion in Central Accra and that originally drew their

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<sup>20</sup> Southern Ghana is dominated by Christians whereas northern Ghana is Muslim oriented.

<sup>21</sup> For more detailed discussion, see: Fortes (1975), Pellow (1991), Schildkrout (1978), Shack and Skinner (1979), Skinner (1968).

populations from the Ga ethnic group, such as Korle Gonno and Mamprobi, are now largely mixed; in some, northern (and thus Muslim) migrants dominate. Kropp Dakubu, a sociolinguist who studied the Ga language community in Accra, writes, “there seems to be almost no continuity between nineteenth-century migrants and the present communities, which represent voluntary movements of individuals on a much larger scale than before in response to superior prospects for gainful employment offered by the metropolis” (69). Even in affluent neighbourhoods there are scattered pockets of low-income residential areas inhabited by those who are employed by wealthy households. These low-income groups include domestic workers, chauffeurs, security guards, and watchmen. These residents either live in a back part of wealthy household compounds or in hastily developed areas of makeshift shacks in the shadows of the wealthy.

There are more than 88 ethnic identities in the city of Accra, but at the everyday and traditional political level Accra is still claimed to be a Ga town (Sanjek 1977:604). For instance, in May before the rainy season, the *Homowo* festival begins and is celebrated by the Ga of the Greater Accra Region.<sup>22</sup> The festival celebrates a bumper harvest and commemorates when the group was faced with long periods of drought and hunger. The festival begins with the sowing of millet by traditional priests. Thirty-days later, the Ga Mantse and Paramount Chief of the Ga-Dangbe Traditional Area decrees a ban on drumming and noise-making so that the gods of the land can get some peace and quiet to do

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<sup>22</sup> *Homo* means “hunger”, and *wo* means “sleep”; combined, the word is often translated as “hooting at hunger.”

their job. National newspapers give notice of this ban and duly ask for its respect.<sup>23</sup>

More significant is the issue of land ownership, which marks Accra as Ga land. In southern Ghana, land ownership is tied to sacred objects called stools, which are symbolic of a people's lineage. For the Ga, extended families own these stools. Gold Coast native laws stipulated "a person of a different tribal origin is regarded as a stranger," and so strangers could not truly be in ownership of stool land. The Ga policy however was often very generous, often letting other Africans "be given the opportunity of obtaining land by gift or grant upon payment of prestation (Pogucki 1954 cited in Pellow 2001:62)." Pellow documents how the Ga granted Muslim Hausa from Northern Nigeria an area in Accra allowing them to build the "first stranger enclave in Accra consciously created by [a] single ethnic group" (:63). And, Kropp Dakubu (1997) documents how the people who settled Madina, a township ten miles northeast of Accra, were treated similarly.

Despite this idea of Accra as a traditional Ga town, Accra was also given the status of the gateway to the country in 2003 when the Ministry of Tourism and Modernization of The Capital City was formed by the Kuffour administration.<sup>24</sup> The mission of the ministry is to "ensure the development and promotion of domestic and international tourism on sustainable basis in order to derive optimum socio-economic growth and positive environmental impact for

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<sup>23</sup> Ironically, it seems that contention about celebrations of *Homowo* often come from within the Ga communities that dispute over who is the proper Ga *mantse* (the Ga leader).

<sup>24</sup> In 2006, the name of the ministry changed to Ministry of Tourism and Diasporan Relations. The idea of first linking the capital to tourism and then later diasporan relations is the idea that tourism would attract foreign investments.

the benefit of deprived communities in particular *and the country at large* (emphasis added, MINO 2007).” Two of its aims are, “To facilitate the development and Modernisation of the Capital City in order to attract tourists and investment” and “[t]o promote domestic tourism in order to foster cultural cohesion and national integration as well as the re-distribution of income.” Accra exists under a tension between conceptualisations of an area that is traditional Ga land with traditional Ga customs that inhabitants of the city are supposed to obey, and the national government’s conceptualisation as the nation’s capital and a regional metropolis that serves as a gateway to the rest of the country and indeed West Africa.

Since the 1800s, Accra has been a place where administrators’ plan for the area conflicts with how locals live and develop the land. Prior to 1983, land development for many of these areas mostly originated from transactions in the traditional land system, which are held by specific families and peoples. Some 87% of residential areas were developed from transactions in the traditional land system. One of the consequences is the impediment to residential development. Residential development in Accra sometimes occurred through the local government, which saw its role as producer of housing, but it was primarily through individual builders that this happened. Scholars have also argued that prior to 1983, the government legislature discouraged private developers (Grant 2005:661-662).<sup>25</sup> Due to the lack of centralised planning and fragmented

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<sup>25</sup> For further reading on land development in Accra, see Tipple and Willis (1992); Quarcoopome (1992); Kasanga et al. (2001); Konadu-Agyemang (2001a); and Otoo et al. (2006).



development, building a house could take over a decade while individual builders negotiated through the complex process of land acquisition, finance, and construction, often outside of planning regulations. This resulted in the development of residential units in unserviced areas and in plots that were not uniform in size and not up to building standards (Konadu-Agyemang 2001a).

Liberalisation policies to divest government enterprises and privatise the market began in 1983. These changes directly affected housing development policies in the early 1990s when the World Bank advised the government to adopt the role of managers of the housing sector rather than producers of housing. Government introduced private market initiatives for land development. With the aid of the World Bank, the Home Finance Corporation was established in 1991 to create a mortgage program. With the restructuring of foreign direct investment, large private developers began to take over the housing sector. By the mid-1990s, this resulted in the rapid development of areas north of the motorway and east of the airport. Gated communities have been developed in a new suburb north of the motorway called East Legon and in the area northeast of the airport along Spintex Road (Grant 2005).

As I argue, human settlement in Accra has resulted from historical tension between governing officials and the local and migrant populations. Governing officials had plans to segregate Accra's population beginning with

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<sup>26</sup> In his study of cognitive maps of ethnicity in Adabraka, Sanjek argues that the cognitive domain of ethnic identities is implicitly organised by the three major language groups—Ga-Adangbe (the indigenous language of Accra), Ewe, and Akan—of which there are many sub-groups within each major group ((Sanjek 1977)).

European settlement along its coast. Plans to segregate the lands of Accra were not entirely successful but did have effects. Even though Accra is a highly multiethnic and polygot city, ethnic enclaves are not what divides the land.<sup>26</sup>

In Accra, categories seem to flow into one another, spilling into each other's imagined boundaries. Various Ghanaian and West African ethnic groups are spread throughout the city. There are a few distinct areas where certain ethnic groups tend to dominate even though that has been changing for decades now. The 2000 census finds the Akan group accounting for 38.6% of the population, followed by Ga-Adangbe at 26.1%. The Ewe are the third most populous group and the fourth are the Mole-Dagbani. Geographically, residential areas of various ethnic groups are spread widely throughout the city, although the Ga are clustered primarily in the old Ga towns (James Town, Ussher Town) and generally along the coastline, while Akan are inland to the west. Non-Akan and non-Ga groups are inland towards the east. Weeks and Hill note that Accra's population is geographically fairly heterogeneous. In their statistical analysis of residential patterns, they show that only 19% of Accra's population "would have to move within Accra in order to eliminate residential segregation (2006:536)." By using the term "residential segregation," they are not suggesting deliberate discrimination, which they argued against, but rather indicate the separation of groups from one another. In addition, commercial and residential areas also spill

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<sup>26</sup> In his study of cognitive maps of ethnicity in Adabraka, Sanjek argues that the cognitive domain of ethnic identities is implicitly organised by the three major language groups—Ga-Adangbe (the indigenous language of Accra), Ewe, and Akan—of which there are many sub-groups within each major group ((Sanjek 1977)).

into one another. The fronts of houses are often used as retail spaces, salons, and other enterprises, while the backs are used for residential purposes. This includes my host parents' home/restaurant.

Accra is a polyethnic place, and most people are polyglots. In his study of cognitive mapping of ethnicity in Adabraka, Sanjek mapped out one woman's language use, finding that during different times of the day she may use five different languages depending on whom she is interacting with (Sanjek 1977:606).

## **6. HISTORICAL ORIENTATIONS: FLUIDITY AND SEDIMENTING OF ETHNICITY**

In the previous section, I showed the history of the geographic development of the Accra-Tema region from precolonial times to present-day Ghana. An underlying current has been the fluidity of the formation of social grouping and identity. By this, I mean that social group formation changes shape and solidifies under various circumstances and then later reconfigure in entirely different ways. Fluidity in the social and cultural landscape of West Africa is a defining feature of this African sub-region, and this section brings forward this theme. First, I present an overview of how tribe and ethnicity have been written in colonial Gold Coast history. Then, I examine the relationships between strangers and autochthonous groups in Ghana. Finally, I conclude by showing how the implications of the history of ethnicity in Ghana bear on the Chinese, especially providing possibilities to render them invisible.

## A. Ethnicity in Gold Coast History

The movement of West Africans, their shifting alliances with different communities and societies, and the fluid nature of personhood made it difficult for colonial administrators to understand their socio-political organisation. Margaret Joyce Field, a social anthropologist for the Gold Coast colonial administration in 1940, pointed out that the “circumscribed communities” as imagined by anthropologists were nowhere to be found in the Gold Coast. She described European imagination of their own and other’s societies as “component particles busily colliding with one another and interchanging energy in the give-and-take of social activities.” Instead she observed a more diffused imagery of Gold Coast communities as “eddies in a fluid, for ever breaking up and reforming into new whirls round new centres and new central ideas [and] European influence has taken a part in stirring the waters” (Field 1940:71). Field’s imagery is a striking departure from that of her contemporaries of African anthropology including Radcliffe-Brown and Forde (1950), who argue that social structures generally bring societies into equilibrium, and those structures maintain that stability.

Field’s point, though fitting, does not go far enough. The image of eddies—the circular movement of water—describes the motion and changing nature of social organisation and social identity but does not describe the periodic sedimentation of social categories such as ethnicities, tribes and communities.

During periods of warfare and conflict between social groups, social categories can temporarily solidify and then change again. Such processes of periodic flows, sedimentation, and break-up are part of the nature of group-ness in West Africa.<sup>27</sup> Another take on this view, championed by Southall (1970), is that interlocking, overlapping, multiple, and alternative collective identities are more appropriate in studying Africa than the colonial mission of fixing people to a bounded group.<sup>28</sup> The implication here is that under different circumstances people would choose to identify with one group and not another, but in other circumstances would choose to identify with exactly the group they rejected in a different context. Numerous cases have been documented among Africans in the towns of Northern Rhodesia (Mitchell 1956), among the Tallensi of northeastern Ghana who call themselves Frafra when away from home (Hill 1970), and migrant miners from the Northern Territories who identify themselves as “northerners” rather than smaller groups such as the Dagarti or Lobi when in town (Lentz 2000). Furthermore, the literature on strangers demonstrates the importance that permeable ethnic boundaries and shifting identities play in the West African region. Under certain social and historical circumstances, groups may not entirely become local but neither are they conceived of as “the other”. These strangers to

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<sup>27</sup> Leach’s introduction in his study of the Kachin of Burma specifically makes the case against the Radcliffe-Brown school idea that societies tend to be in equilibrium. He argues for the idea of “unstable equilibrium,” by which he means that societies are constantly in flux. He makes the convincing argument that the language of theory and abstraction, which is necessarily fixating and idealising in its portrayal, has led anthropologists to view societies as stable. His study of the Kachin demonstrate how native mental models of kinship in practice have contradictions. This results in certain groups fluctuating from one ethnic identity and back, such as aristocratic Kachins who identify as Shan at one time and at other times not (1993 [1954]).

<sup>28</sup> Southall notes that some earlier anthropologists (e.g., Clark Wissler) recognised that outsiders often assigned tribal names but they seemed to have ignored their own findings and continued with using tribes as a basic unit of analysis.

local areas historically lived in separate areas of their adopted settlement and played roles that mediated exchanges between foreigners passing through and locals. Their liminality plays a key in the local and wider region.

Scholars of Ghana have argued that although the history of Ghana could not be understood without using the concept of ethnicity, it has not been a central organising principle (cf. Lentz and Nugent 2000b). Indeed, ethnic politics have not taken centre stage in Ghanaian national politics although there have been periodic episodes of ethnic tension, such as the 1994 conflict in the Northern Region and occasional accusations of ethnic favouritism of the NDC (National Democratic Congress) sometimes seen as a pro-Ewe party and NPP (National Patriotic Party) sometimes seen as heavily influenced by concerns of the Ashanti.

Studies of Ghana did not emphasise ethnicity or its invention by colonial administrators unlike scholarship from eastern and southern Africa (cf. Ranger 1983), which scholars of Ghana have argued cannot be used to understand the Ghanaian experience. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship of Ghana can be divided into two approaches: one dealt with the various societies of the Gold Coast and the Ashanti, and a second dealt with the peripheries and the Northern Territories protectorate.

The literature on the Gold Coast and the Ashanti does not portray the colony as a field of distinctive tribes. Native intellectuals such as J. E. Casely-Hayford, J. C. De Graft Johnson, and J. B. Danquah were interested in writing the histories of various polities. The category “tribe” was mostly absent from these writings. When it was used, it was meant as a substitute to mean “group of

people” rather than denoting a culturally coherent group with a shared lineage and a political head. While native intellectuals writing as spokesmen for their peoples noted their particular characteristics, they also noted that the groups had strong commonalities, especially among the Akan polities (Jenkins 1990; Sarabah 1968). However, they also acknowledged that there were deep group rivalries between Akan polities, and so there was no unified sense of Akan community. These groups had a common culture and language, but each had particular local patterns, different political alliances, and multiple layers of social and political identification. To make the field more complicated, not every people belonging to a group (i.e., belonging to the same stool) had a common culture and language, such as the Akuapem (Gilbert 1997) and Buem (Nugent 2000). For example, in the case of Akuapem, located in the hills just north of Accra, the Akan who settled there later incorporated with the Guan and adopted a Guan identity. In certain cases, towns in the area such as Abiriw have seen a movement between Guan and Akan identity (Gilbert 1997). We have, then, situations where culturally and linguistically similar peoples do not necessarily belong in the same ethnic group, and also cases where peoples of different culture, language, and histories belong to the same stool and have the same ethnic identity. These complications render the concept of “tribes” dubious.

The second set of literature in Ghana’s history deals with the Northern Territories and its stateless societies and contrasts with the literature of the southern and coastal areas. Here, the concept of “tribe” is pervasive. Colonial administrators and intellectuals saw “tribe” as an effective tool to organise people

not associated with chiefdoms. This was a result of using interpreters from northern Muslim states who constructed the ethnic map according to the perspective of northern Muslim states such as the administrative centre and city state of Wa. In opposition to Muslim states, which were regarded as well-structured, politically powerful, and stable centres, tribes were viewed as wildly disorganised associations in which the groups would often reform and create different groupings. Tribes were seen as revolving around these stable political centres such as Wa and Ashanti Kingdom. Colonial policy fashioned these stateless societies into tribes that were assumed to be governed by chiefs according to their customary law. Although colonial authorities recognised that tribes did not play a political role at the local level, they assumed that the order of tribes used to exist and that tribes was a necessary step towards building a civilised nation (Lentz 2000). This demonstrates the limits of the theory of colonial invention of “tribes” for Africa, suggesting that colonial administrators did not invent “tribes” out of thin air. Instead, natives had a role in shaping the conceptual framework of social groupings that colonial administrators understood about their colonies and territories: “[colonial administrators] borrowed from Africa conceptions of political spaces as much as they reshaped it” (Lentz and Nugent 2000a:6).



## **B. Strangers and Ethnicity in Ghana**

Semi-permanent to permanent stranger settlements among the indigenes, called Zongos, have long been a part of West Africa, adding another layer of complexity to ethnicity in the region. In pre-colonial Accra, it was common for foreign settlers to become incorporated into Ga political and kinship organisations (Parker 2000). Strangers in West African indigenous communities often played important roles, especially as traders, such as the Hausa who would take cattle from the Fulani to sell, and as spreaders of Islam linking various societies across interior and coastal West Africa (Cohen 1969). For Europeans, strangers were often more familiar with a wide array of foreign areas and so often acted as interpreters of various societies.

The changing relation between the autochthonous Ga of Accra and strangers highlights how European administrators affected boundaries of ethnicity. When the Ga arrived in Accra, the Kpeshie people were already living there. Due to the growing number of Ga, along with the diminishing Kpeshie population and also slave raids from Akan kingdoms towards the coast, the Kpeshie eventually were incorporated into Ga society. Historically, until the colonial period, military service became a principle way of incorporating free and unfree migrants (slaves) into Ga society, one of the first stages of acquiring citizenship in Ga society (Parker 2000:48). In demonstration of the Ga notion of community, to fight as a warrior for one's town was an act of becoming part of the Ga community. In particular, slaves had a chance to remove themselves from

control of their owners by engaging in various battles to protect their town (62). Others, such as Muslim settlers, would live in separate areas called *zongo* and not become Ga but maintain patronage with the *mantsemei* (leading officeholder) and other traditional Ga leaders who mediated their terms of settlement.

In the late-nineteenth century when the British moved the capital of Gold Coast colony to Accra, it brought the political and economic centre of the colony into the centre of an indigenous political state. Growth of urban areas attracted migrants creating new issues of identity for both stranger and autochthonous groups. Some city migrants had weakening ties to their own native tribes and came to be nominal members of a tribe that they did not identify with back home. In other cases, migrants identified with larger tribes in the city but had a different rural identity. New kinds of identities were forged within groups as class division took place, especially when members became part of the growing class of wealthy African merchants. As the British political system dominated the Ga political system, new strangers came under the aegis of the British. As the migrant population grew beyond the areas of the traditional Ga towns and came increasingly under the aegis of European officials, Ga officials lost even more of their ability to mediate the terms of stranger settlements. When disputes occurred, strangers often had arbitration under their own courts or by-passed the Native Courts resorting instead to the District Commissioner.

The economic relationship between strangers and local groups in the colonial era also began to shift. Previously, as primarily traders and merchants (or as slaves) serving the locals, many new strangers engaged in new economic

activities such as working for European firms or working in non-traditional areas such as cultivating crops for export. Thus, many became competitors to local traders, merchants, and businessmen. In certain areas of the economy, such as diamond mining, Nigerians came to dominate Ghanaians (Skinner 1968). Citing Stapleton and Busia, who document a rise in foreigners identifying with locals, Skinner concludes that,

The post-conquest stranger populations were larger, more self-sufficient, and, because they did not have to relate to the local Africans, they remained relatively self-centred. This parochialism was encouraged by the relative ease with which the more recent strangers were able to travel to, and communicate with, their ancestral homelands... they became more concerned with events there than with those in their host countries. (Skinner 1968:311)

The rise of Gold Coast nationalism after World War II and finally decolonisation brought into existence a new political state entity and new social identity, which jeopardised the relationship between strangers and natives. For a while during campaigns for decolonisation, natives and strangers were both in support of self-governance away from British. For example, strangers such as Mossi, Yoruba, Nigerians, and Songhay supported the release of Nkrumah from prison and advocated for his induction into the Convention People's Party (CPP). However, with the removal of British colonial rule, the keystone that mediated the position of strangers with the natives, a vacuum was created. Though Nationalists enjoyed the support of strangers, it became unclear where their loyalties lay when it came time to build public support for electoral offices. It was uncertain whether strangers were citizens and whether they could vote. For instance, leaders of some stranger communities mobilised their people to support national groups that

supported traditional leaders instead of the C.P.P., which called for detribalisation, nationalism, and Pan-Africanism. When the C.P.P. came into power, they retaliated by deporting various peoples, including those of mixed ethnicity, rationalising that their presence and partisan politics activities “was not conducive to public good” (Skinner 1968:313). It was not always clear for national parties and the government how to distinguish non-Ghanaians. Skinner writes that Ghanaians often labelled Mossi and other related but distinct groups as “Moshi”. Hausa and Fulani of Northern Nigeria were often lumped together with southern Nigerians such as Igbo and Yoruba.

Systematic expulsion of foreigners occurred from the 1950s to the 1980s. In 1954 and 1961, Ghana deported Nigerians and Voltaics, respectively, reasoning that “their presence was not conducive to the public good” (Skinner 1968:313). After the 1954 deportations, the government established laws on immigration, residency, employment, and deportation of foreigners beginning with the provisions of the Aliens Act of 1963, and amended in 1965. However, these laws regulating foreigners in the country were not enforced. It was in fact recommended by the Advisory Committee on Population that in the interest of African unity, it would not be conducive to prevent immigration of other Africans into the country. After the coup in 1966, the act became the Alien Compliance Order of 1969, giving all foreigners two weeks to obtain residence permits or to leave (Addo 1974). In part, due to the declining economy, the government decided to restrict the areas of the economy that foreigners could work in. In addition, it

also restricted the outflow of remittances further because the government believed this prevented immigrants from building loyalty to Ghana.

The issue of ethnicity in twentieth century Ghana has been one of episodic absences, resurfacing of social friction framed as ethnic tensions, and denials of the importance of ethnicity. Generally at the public level, the discourse of ethnicity has been uneven. Immediately after independence in 1957, there were demands framed in ethnic terms in the Ashanti region, Trans-Volta Togoland, and in the Northern Territories (cf. Amenumey 1989; Allman 1993; Ladouceur 1979) followed by the absence of politicised ethnicity for a long period until the founding of the Second Republic in 1969 during which the issue of tribalism resurfaced. By the end of the 1970s, the issue of tribalism, sparked by different groups vying for political power, had quieted down. The revolution of 1982, led by Jerry John Rawlings, marked another episode when ethnicity was subordinated by the language of economic class, pitting old elites as the enemies of the “people”, an ambiguous definition that shifts multiple times in the course of the history of Ghanaian politics in the 1980s (Nugent 1995). Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the pendulum seems to have begun to swing back, and now the question of tribalism and ethnicity is again part of political discourse. With the founding of the NDC (New Democratic Congress) and NPP (New Patriotic Party), popular discourse has characterised the NDC as an Ewe-led party that also favours the tribes of the north, while the NPP is seen as an Ashanti-led party favouring Ashanti and Akan kinsmen.

There is a distinct political structure in place to separate chieftaincy/tribal and national politics. The Fifth Republican Constitution of 1992 limits the role the national government can play in matters regarding customary politics and chieftaincy disputes and places responsibility in the hands of traditional authorities and the House of Chiefs. However, demarcation of tribal lands is unclear. If the boundaries of traditional areas were to be followed according to customary patterns of political allegiance, many chiefdoms would become multi-cultural, or many areas would have no chiefs. Furthermore, if native states are to be determined ethnically, cultural outsiders then have to make demands for having chiefs when historically they may not have had such political structures. Part of this uncertainty arises from the colonial legacy of linking tribes to native states, thus defining “native states” in ethnic terms, which necessarily cuts through historically-formed political allegiances. The 1994 ethnic conflict in Akuapem, a kingdom north of Accra that is formed from a historical alliance of Guan-speaking and Akan-speaking peoples, demonstrates this problem. On one level the conflict was about tension between one major Akan group against three lesser-power Guan groups and another smaller Akan group. Historically it is more complicated because the Guan groups were formed by people of various Akan groups who fled their previous homelands and adopted a Guan identity in order to get away from raids and harassment. When they allied with the Akuapem kingdom and eventually part of it, they maintained their adopted Guan identity. A few groups within this kingdom had once gone through a process of Guanification and adopted Akan identity since the 1970s. The 1994 conflict then

was about more than ethnic tension but also about the disputed histories of the groups and the relationships between the various towns that have gone through a combination of Guanification and Akanification processes (Gilbert 1997).

### **C. The Barely Visible Chinese**

My conversation with Dr. Agyeman, the university professor who expressed surprise that there were a sizable number of Chinese in Ghana, made it clearer for me that though the historical and social presence of the Chinese parallels the economic, social and geographic development of the Accra-Tema metropolitan area, it is not part of the national consciousness. Chinese have lived in Ghana since independence in 1957 but there are stories of earlier arrivals on the shores of Takoradi. Dr. Agyeman recognised that there were Chinese individuals in Ghana—usually affiliated with Chinese restaurants—but did not recognise, the larger population of Chinese involved in other sectors of the economy, especially in the textile industries, which Chinese were deeply involved in from the 1960s to the late 1980s. In essence, the Chinese are largely invisible in Ghana.

How can one explain this disappearance? There are historical, structural reasons for this beginning with the history of Ghana's construction as a political entity. In the Gold Coast era, colonial administration linked "tribes" to "native states" leading to a legacy of the Gold Coast as a federation of "native states". This federation has resulted in the imagination of modern-day Ghana as an

amalgamation of “traditional” groups and native authorities, though at various times there were calls for transcending tribal group identity to a broader-level focus of allegiance to the nation. The push for a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state that moves beyond provincial allegiance has not been stable. At various junctures, national politics have been politicised as tribal favouritism that went alongside national discourses for the erasure of ethnic group identity and differences. At the same time, there are also national arguments for recognising local, language, and religious differences, which is believed to bring national unity by levelling hierarchies between groups (cf. Bemile 2000). The point here is that these debates have focused attention on how to work with the various autochthonous groups while attention on foreigners has been largely but not entirely absent.

In both popular and national discourse, the recognition of Chinese in Ghana is rare. In a survey of a national newspaper, *Daily Graphic*, from the 1960s to the current times, there were almost no articles about the Chinese presence in Ghana. The few articles that mentioned the Chinese presence were on Chinese construction projects and Chinese government donations to various rural villages and community-based groups. There were no reports regarding the actual Chinese community in Ghana except for a handful of articles about individual wealthy Chinese and factories donating to various causes. This would seem odd especially given the alien expulsions of the 1950s and 1960s and the potential scare in the 1980s. How was it that the Chinese escaped these political issues? To



answer this, I examine Barth's concept of ethnicity, one that has shifted our understanding of ethnicity.

Barth argued for a revision to the concept of ethnicity in the 1970s. He noted that what makes an ethnic group distinct is not its cultural and social elements that define the group but rather the boundary where the social processes of exclusion occur. Ethnic groups are developed in opposition to other groups, and it is this opposition that makes a group. It is through this process of self-ascription and ascription by others that groups come into formation. Barth's theory on the construction of ethnic groups paid attention to the interactional processes between "self and other," but missing from his theory was the question of whose perspective. In the case of the Chinese, the process of social exclusion is not equal on both sides. What constitutes a group depends on which side of the boundary one is located. For Ghanaians, the Chinese presence in Ghana is marked primarily by the presence of individual business owners and not the understanding of Chinese as a group. Chinese as a group do not exist from the Ghanaian perspective. For most Chinese, it is clear that they do not want to be a significant part of Ghanaian society. For them, making a living is often raised as the reason for their presence in Ghana, but their reasons for not wanting to be permanently based in Ghana are often complicated and contradictory. From the perspective of Ghanaians, there isn't a need to socially imagine the Chinese as a group because the Chinese have not yet, at the time of this fieldwork, presented a significant threat or particular rewards with respect to socio-cultural and political activities that matter for Ghanaians.

This is clearly distinctive from the history of expulsion of aliens (primarily West African foreigners) in Ghana's modern history. Even though Chinese have an increasing presence in Ghana, they are not seen as a significant threat though there is potential for change as the local media begin reporting on unrest over Chinese competition in certain economic realms.<sup>29</sup> For one, the history of Chinese in Ghana compared to other African strangers is short. Not having been part of the pre-colonial and colonial history of Ghana, Chinese never had relations with local or national authorities. When the Chinese arrived in the postcolonial era, Ghana was politically moving away from western influence (associated with political and economic imperialism) and an economic policy of rapid industrialisation. The Chinese had mostly come to build and operate manufacturing industries and secondarily to engage in trade primarily settling in the areas of Accra and Tema. Their settlement was welcomed by the national government that desired not only to reach outwards for African unity but towards the east for a coalition of unaligned states. As such, Chinese were able to circumvent much of local tribal politics in arbitrating their terms of settlement.

Even though Ghanaians for the most part do not see a need to actively exclude Chinese, thus rendering them invisible as a group, processes of social exclusion were deemed necessary by the Chinese. For Chinese, the Ghanaian lifestyle is in opposition to what Chinese imagine for themselves, both in terms of

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<sup>29</sup> There are signs that this maybe changing. In 2007, local newspapers reported local fishermen accusing Chinese fishermen of destroying their export industry by using technologically more advanced boats that could fish at greater depths, capturing more export-quality fish and leaving the less undesirable fishes to local fishermen ((cf. Aklorbortu 2008; TGC 2007b; TGT 2008b; 2008a)).

culture and modernity. Thus, they consider Ghanaians as part of one group but have much less need to distinguish the various indigenous and African groups within Ghana. Often in even cruder ways, any sub-Saharan African, whether Ghanaian or not, is lumped into a group and demarcated as “black Africans.” Barth’s theory of ethnicity then needs a revision to include perspective because depending on one’s perspective, a group may or may not exist, and also a group may or may not exist under different political reasons.

With a new twist on Barth’s theory of ethnicity, we can begin to notice that the alien expulsion activities focused on African foreigners, as this was a way for Ghana to exert its national consciousness and regional might in a region of newly formed states. This was also a new twist on the historical relations between local groups and African strangers, a history that the Chinese were not a part of. As I laid out earlier, West Africa has a long history of long-distance migration and stranger settlements within the region. When colonial administrators took over control, these historical relationships began to change. Whereas strangers once negotiated with native authorities on various economic and political matters, they could now bypass these authorities and seek arbitration from the colonial administration. This set the stage for resentment among autochthonous groups, one that carried forward into the era of the republic. With scarcity of foreign exchange and a poor economy at various times in Ghana’s modern history, African foreigners were scapegoated as exemplified in the statement by the Ministerial Secretary for the Interior who said, “We cannot afford to feed other mouths when ours are not fed. We cannot cater for the interest of those who do

not help us to pay our debts” (Peil 1971:209-210). However, these sentiments are not constant and have only surfaced a few times in the nation’s modern history.

There are other possible reasons for the invisibility of Chinese as a group from the Ghanaian perspective. As has been previously described, ethnicity as a concept in Gold Coast was primarily the linkage of “tribes” to “native states”. This ideology led to the solidification of certain groups, the disappearance of some groups, and the creation of others. One trend in older scholarship described societies within the Gold Coast colony and their relationship to the Ashanti, one of the larger Akan-speaking groups.<sup>30</sup> Narratives of tribal societies often revolved around the relationship societies and colonial administration had to the Ashanti. Most of these were about economic cooperation, political tensions among each other, or being at war. It is perhaps through this ideological move of understanding societies in the Gold Coast that less significant groups became subsumed under the narratives of larger groups such as the Ashanti. Furthermore, non-native groups that were not deemed significant to the country, either positively or negatively, were erased from public discourse.

Contemporary imagination of Ghana as one nation is somewhat inconsistent although not volatile. Seething underneath a national discourse of unity is a parallel discourse of cultural and social heterogeneity. As noted in a popular history textbook, Ghana is imagined to be a nation-state made up of a diverse mix of indigenous ethnic groups that previously were organised into

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<sup>30</sup> The word “Akan” refers to a language group and also denotes the ethnic group. Within the language of Akan are various dialects. The Akan, specifically the Baulé, are also in Côte d’Ivoire. For histories of Ghana, see (Buah 1998)

independent states and kingdoms but “through a series of ‘friendship’ and forced annexation, the independent states were merged as one territory under the British imperial rule” (Buah 1998:1).

The continual process of creating a socially homogeneous notion of “the nation” was intentional during Kwame Nkrumah’s presidency until his exile in 1966. His decision to use a modified International Style architecture was to reconfigure the Accra landscape from the plans of the British colonial administration and create a constructed environment that would unify its heterogeneity. The British colonial administration had continual plans to segregate the population of Accra, dividing it between natives and Europeans for the purposes of securing the health and prosperity of European expatriates (cf. Hess 2000). Nkrumah’s physical presentation as leader of Ghana to various villages through the use of various traditional rituals such as durbars, clothing, and festivals was a move to unite the country under a form of socialism called Nkrumaism in which Nkrumah’s party, the Convention Peoples Party (CPP), became the defender of Ghana and Ghanaians against imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. He engineered a plan for the rapid industrialisation of the economy and modernisation of Ghana’s armed forces despite protests for focusing on developing an agrarian economy.<sup>31</sup> Nkrumah became invested with the qualities of *Osagyefo*, meaning redeemer, saviour, lawgiver, and war leader, or more literally “paramount chief of Ghana” (Vandi 1979:71).

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<sup>31</sup> Nkrumah’s economic plans put the country into spiralling debt and in 1966 he was overthrown. For the next twenty years, Ghana went through multiple regime changes and economic collapse and chaos.

Nkrumah's architectural and ideological moves to unify Ghana were not a complete success, though not a total failure. On 24 February 1966, he was overthrown by the Ghanaian Armed Forces and was subsequently denounced publicly by demonstrators; later, his statue was toppled and beheaded. Less than 24 hours later, the National Liberation Council enacted legislation pronouncing the display of Nkrumah's effigy an offence.<sup>32</sup> The following years, there were restrictions on the erection of architectural monuments.

Since Nkrumah's death in 1972, there have been various moves to recapture and renew memories of Nkrumah and his ideologies of nationalism before his overthrow. In 1972 when Nkrumah died in exile, Colonel Acheampong, Chairman of the ruling National Redemption Council, ordered the return of Nkrumah's body and gave him a state funeral. In 1992, President Jerry John Rawlings dedicated the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park in the former British colonial polo grounds, addressing the themes of nationalism and self-determination (Hess 2000:54).

Despite continual attempts to create a sense of Ghanaian nationalism, Ghanaian national politics has been unable to subsume the country's social and cultural heterogeneity. The 1994 Constitution of the Fourth Republic of Ghana

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<sup>32</sup> The bronze statue of Nkrumah was commissioned by Italian artist, Nicola Cataudella and erected in 1956 outside the Parliament House in Accra. Inscribed below the statue on the pedestal are three phrases attributed to Nkrumah: "We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquility," "Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto it," and "To me the liberation of Ghana will be meaningless unless it is linked with the total liberation of Africa." The second phrase is in imitation of the biblical phrase in Matthew 6:3, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." The statue, now amputated and headless, was re-erected in 1977 and today stands in the garden of the National Museum.

instituted a National House of Chiefs and instituted a Regional House of Chiefs for each administrative region. House of Chiefs or traditional councils for each region elect five paramount chiefs to represent the region in the National House of Chiefs. Part of the duty of the National House of Chiefs is to handle traditional customs and laws (Ghana 1992). Thus, the constitution recognises the diversity of social groups in Ghana, and their various customary laws.

In numerous attempts to produce a Ghanaian society and to figure out who a Ghanaian is, numerous movements towards nationalism, and numerous coups and regime changes have occurred. Early Ghanaian nationalism was articulated by marginalised western-educated elites who found upward mobility in the Gold Coast restrictive. The first articulation of nationalism was for African nationalism and African unity. The fight for decolonisation moved nationalism from a pursuit of the elites to the civic bases. Nkrumah and his fellows from the Convention People's Party (CPP) offered a vision of "ethnocultural regeneration and civic pride" (Brown 2000), thus involving a wider base of educated and semi-educated who moved against traditional authorities. Over a short period of time from the 1960s to the 1980s, various regimes (including that of Nkrumah) portrayed the country as having internal and external enemies that were undermining the development of the new Ghanaian nation. The external enemies were identified as global capitalism—Western governments—while the internal enemies were identified as tribalism, which threatened to disrupt national unity. To solve the problem of foreign exploitation (imperialism), Nkrumah identified

state enterprises as the alternative, although many Ghanaian radicals eventually pointed out the maladies of the state apparatus.

Thus, in the numerous coups and regime changes that occurred from the late 1960s to the 1980s, none primarily targeted foreigners. Most overthrows and subsequent reformation in the country resulted from claims of the new regime that there was internal corruption, and foreigners were often *not* the main targets of scapegoating. On 4 June 1979, Rawlings took over in a coup and overthrew General Fred Akuffo and instated Dr. Hilla Limann but then overthrew Limann on 31 December 1981 and installed the Provincial National Defence Council headed by Rawlings. Paul Nugent has called the revolution of the 1980s an ambiguous revolution because it was not clear whom the revolution was for and whom it was against (Nugent 1995). While the PNDC sought to define the limits of foreign involvement “by harnessing the creative energies of the population at large,” it also was uncertain who the revolution was against (53). Nugent argues that early campaigns were against the corrupted acts of *kalabule*, a term referring broadly to profiteering either by manipulating the state or through other official controls (27). Rawlings, the instigator for this revolution, identified all previous regimes as *kalabule*. And then, sometimes it was seen that “big men” such as businessmen, professionals, and chiefs who were the old orthodoxies were the corrupted ones. Indeed, the defence of workers became entwined with pronouncements of anti-imperialist sentiments. An American aluminium company (Volta Aluminium Corporation) became one of the first companies that symbolised foreign exploitation. Other companies such as the Dutch-owned



Ghana Textile Printing and the Chinese-operated Juapong Textile Limited were also targeted. However, in the larger picture, the adversaries were not really these foreign companies but an ambiguous shifting internal population. Anyone who was suspected of making illegal accumulation was a potential target. Not only “big men” were targeted but market women, farmers, and trading communities. These were communities that often in PNDC discourse were supposed to be the groups they were helping because they were unfairly being discriminated against and bearing the brunt of the economic collapse. Essentially, the revolution became ambiguous because those whom it claimed to be saving were often also the ones being targeted. On the whole, foreigners were not the targets.

In David Brown’s (2000) analysis, ethnic rivalries are not undermining Ghana’s national unity, a common perception of African nationalism. Rather the threat comes from regional rivalries that sometimes are articulated in ethnic terms or, as in the case of the revolution in the 1980s, in terms of class and elites. Brown argues that, due to the history and culture of patron-client relationships, the view among locals is that often to succeed one must have someone from one’s region in national politics to gain access to state power and patronage (115). Brown argues the 1982 revolution was not depicted as a class revolution but rather a revolution to cultivate loyalty to Ghana (121).

Ghana’s modern history is about various attempts to create a Ghanaian society and to create a loyal following in which its people were loyal to the nation before tribes and regions. In many cases, foreigners have not played a major role in the construction of Ghanaian nationalism and society. Historical fluidity of

group formation and the movement of peoples in the West African region play a role in enabling the possibility for the invisibility of the Chinese. Furthermore, Chinese, although numerous by the 1970s (about a couple hundred increasing to an estimated thousand by the 2000s), do not operate as an ethnic group either economically or socially. In later chapters, I show how among Chinese there are tensions between recognising each other as part of a group and personal disidentification from the group. Social and historical conditions were then set for the Chinese to remain under the radar of other Ghanaians and the government.

## **7. VIGNETTES OF CHINESE IN GHANA**

Like many other ethnic groups in Accra, the Chinese of Accra and Tema do not live in ethnic enclaves. Furthermore, they do not typically live in close proximity to each other although there was a period when they did. Between the 1960s and 1980s, there was a tendency for Chinese employees of each factory to live next to each other or in close proximity to each other. This is no longer as true, especially given the downsizing of the number of Chinese employees in Chinese-owned factories resulting in a larger number of factory staff being picked from the local or West African population. Scattered throughout the city, the wealthier Chinese tend to live in places like Airport Residential Area, Cantonments, Labone, and East Ridge. More recent Chinese migrants, who tend to come from mainland China and are often in the trading business, live in less

wealthy areas that are closer to the core of Accra such as Kaneshie, Asylum Down, and on the outer ring of the city in areas such as Abofu and Abelenkpe.

Geographic separation from each other plays a significant role in the spatial sense that Chinese have of their individual conceptions of place and their feelings of group-ness in Ghana. Not living in close proximity to each other seems to be a marker that each of them is on his or her own transitory pathways, yet at the same time, there is a kind of reliance on each other as recognisably ethnic Chinese. Several scenes of my informant's experiences of living in Accra illustrate these points.

#### **Scene 1**

Xiaolü came to Ghana from China several years ago to work as a wholesale trader of Chinese household goods. A mutual friend whom I was visiting introduced us. Wanting to find out more about how he came to Ghana, I was invited to his home in Kaneshie area of Accra.

Located in the northwest corner of Accra, Kaneshie is a mixed commercial, industrial, and residential area. It is home to the second largest market in Accra. It is also a short 2.5-mile drive to Makola Market, Accra's largest market located in the traditional Central Business District. Because of the convenience to two large markets, Xiaolü chose to live in Kaneshie. It was easy for him to transport goods to his retailers and for his retailers to drop by for their business transactions. Kaneshie also is the site of a long distance bus depot for buses travelling to major

cities in western Ghana. It also has an industrial area with factories that produce a wide range of items including plastic housewares, mattresses, and fruit juices. Possibly due to the large human and business traffic, Kaneshie is known for its petty crimes, especially in the area where Kaneshie Market is located (cf. Ablekpe 2009). The juxtaposition of goods for sale and garbage for disposal can be surprising and overwhelming. In the two-storey Kaneshie Market, market women sit behind their colourful rows of tomatoes, green peppers, and other foodstuffs. Nearby, along the gutters that line the roadways are sometimes knee-high accumulations of indiscriminately disposed of garbage, sludge, and even human faeces. These garbage piles have been known to cause major flooding during the rainy season (cf. GNA 2009a; Ofori-Parku 2009). Poor planning and the lack of adequate resources also contribute to the perennial flooding. Some buildings are built in waterways, sometimes with legal permits. The city does not have adequate garbage disposal and collection systems to manage the large amount of human traffic in the area.

A majority of residential homes are one- or two-bedroom detached family homes, and others are large rooming houses that provide single occupancy for up to some 20 households. In his survey of housing conditions in Accra, Konadu-Agyemang argues that housing types and neighbourhoods in Accra “depict a system of social stratification based on wealth and status” (2001b:32). This seems true in Kaneshie as its mix of single family to multi-family homes does correspond to its mixed-income nature.

Xiaolü's home is a two-family occupancy building that sits along a major thoroughfare to central Accra, providing him with easy access to the two major markets. The tall whitewashed concrete walls of the home muffle the sound of the busy traffic right outside. The space inside his home does not feel lived in. It is starkly bare of household items beyond the essentials, and at the same time because Xiaolü uses most of the empty space as a warehouse, it is full of unopened and opened boxes. From the far corner of what was once a living room and is now a makeshift warehouse, he pulled an office chair to his lonely dining table and offered it to me. He excused himself upstairs to grab a folding chair for himself. He apologised for not having extra chairs downstairs. He said he didn't have many visitors. "The Chinese are not trustworthy here, you know. So I just do my own thing. It's very rare to have a trustworthy friend like Mr. Pok." Aaron Pok is a mutual friend who introduced us when I was visiting him in his Tema factory. Xiaolü makes frequent trips to exchange currencies with Gwong-jing, who lives almost an hour away. It seemed that Xiaolü hadn't found the kind of trusted business relationship he needed in Accra.

Xiaolü's humble home does not betray his complicated background. He explained that he comes from a politically influential family in China, and has family members who are officials in the Communist Party. Although he would not divulge much information about the connection and his past history, he told me that he really wants to be an "intellectual" and has been writing his thesis on the Communist Party, but due to certain circumstances that he did not want to explain, he came to Ghana and is now importing Chinese goods for wholesale. He

said he does business by himself. Thinking that he might be able to give me a general sense of the history and lives of Chinese traders in Ghana, I asked him more questions. “I don’t really know. You see, we mostly keep to ourselves,” he replied.

I was struck by Xiaolü’s depiction. His remarks were not unique to his experience of living in Ghana. They starkly portrayed the sense of distance that I recalled other Chinese evoked when they talked about community and social relations with other Chinese. Furthermore, Xiaolü like many other Chinese did not form friendships with other Ghanaians. Often the absence of these relationships with Ghanaians is due to a mix of socio-economic differences, racial attitudes, and cultural differences that are not seen as necessary or meaningful to surmount.

## **Scene 2**

Several miles east of Kaneshie in the residential area of Osu is the Phoenix Chinese Restaurant, owned by Simon Tam and his wife Jenny. They are several blocks away from Cantonments Road, more popularly known as Oxford Street, a nod to London’s mile-and-a-half long Oxford Street, which is allegedly Europe’s busiest and most dense shopping street with over 300 stores. Although this Ghanaian Oxford Street is not as busy, dense, or high-end as the English one, it is jammed with local street sellers and major retail businesses such as the popular mobile phone company Spacefon Areeba, Sony, and Koala, one of Accra’s best

supermarkets frequented by expatriates and middle-class Ghanaians. Located off the main street, Phoenix caters to lower-end clientele and specifically not to Chinese. One has to wind one's way through the back of Osu to get to Phoenix, a location that has been detrimental to its business. There is also a Ghanaian chopbar on the other side of the street.<sup>33</sup>

Phoenix occupies a large compound that has been paved over with cement. Two buildings and one covered patio create a U-shape occupying the perimeter of the compound. In the middle is the large car park. The restaurant offers indoor and outdoor seating but most of the time, except during lunch hours, there is hardly more than a handful of patrons. The décor inside the restaurant is Spartan with Formica tabletops and plastic chairs. A television, hung from the wall, is always turned on to mask the silence in the restaurant. A bakery display case, formerly used to show Chinese baked goods, is now used as a refrigerator for drinks. Simon and Jenny had hoped to market Chinese baked goods to the locals but it never caught on.

Jenny told me, "Ghanaians are not receptive to these kinds of bread. They don't know what it is. We even gave them free samples and while they said they liked the bread they never came back to buy it. We were making fresh bread everyday and having to throw most of them out the next day because who wants to by stale bread when you can get fresh ones? Oh pity us!"

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<sup>33</sup> "Chop" is local parlance for eating. A "chopbar" usually refers to a small establishment that sells local food along the roadside. These are often partially or fully-enclosed wooden structures with an area for food preparation.

Their home is in a block attached to and perpendicular to the restaurant building. To get through the doorway, one has to either climb up two steps or straddle over them. Jenny told me that they didn't realise the compound slopes towards their home and so during the rainy season, rainwater pools up and then runs towards their house, flooding the home. The stair unit was later added after they were flooded a couple of times. It was built to function as a low wall channelling rainwater away from the doorway to the back of the building. This kind of patchwork practice seemed common for living in Ghana. Part of the lifestyle is to parry unexpected blows as they come rather than investigate beforehand to determine how to prevent them.

Jenny seemed eager for someone to lend her an ear. As soon as we settled down for conversation she began airing some grievances. Jenny feels that her relatives who convinced her to come to Ghana tricked her. Her relatives already owned a very successful Chinese restaurant in another part of Osu. The idea, she told me, was for both of them to operate this business and have it specifically cater to a lower-end clientele. "They told me there was business to be made here, so I came. Look at our business. Look at the state of our house. If I knew it was going to be like this, do you think I would have come here?"

Throughout my stay in Ghana, Jenny and her relatives were sometimes on talking terms and sometimes had major fallouts for months. She said she tried to keep her distance from her relatives, although it was hard to see how she did that when she often found solace confiding in the uncle who had a major role in bringing her to Ghana. She did keep herself distant from most other Chinese,



saying that the gossip that they spread about her difficulties and family problems in Ghana was too much for her.

### **Scene 3**

In North Ridge, east of Osu, is a large gated compound occupied by two multi-level buildings surrounded by a vast green space with a rusted-out children's swing. The two buildings are elevated on tall cement stilts, creating divided parking spaces for each apartment. There are also rooms on the ground floor assigned to the six apartments above. These rooms were designed as servant quarters. The three storeys above are divided into six apartments, three on each side of the building. The Chinese sometimes jokingly refers to this compound as "Chinatown" because all of the main occupants are Chinese. Built by the owner of Freedom Textile, these buildings used to be occupied by the factory's Chinese employees. In the 1980s, when there were many more Chinese families in Ghana, Chinese parents asked the Chinese embassy to offer Mandarin classes to their children. The living and dining room of an apartment in this complex was used as a classroom, and a teacher from the embassy along with textbooks were made available. About thirty Chinese children from primary to secondary school age sat in this converted classroom one day a week studying Mandarin. I was among this group of schoolchildren. Later, in the 1980s, as Freedom Textile continued downsizing its Chinese staff, the factory owner rented out the apartments to other Chinese. Today, none of the renters in this complex work for Freedom Textile.

Two of my friends, Tien Feng-yee and Grace Lam, lived in two apartments in these buildings. Their homes were on the same floor of the same building. Their main doors faced out onto the central stairwell. They kept the doors open to facilitate movement between their homes. They felt safe enough to do this because not only was the compound walled in but also because it was staffed by a Ghanaian watchman whose job most of the day, it seemed, was to listen to the familiar honks of cars owned by the Chinese tenants and to swing open and shut the metal gates accordingly. The first time I visited this compound, a tenant of the building did not accompany me. Nevertheless, when the watchman saw that I was Chinese, he quickly opened the gate and waved me on. Southern Ghanaians call all fair-skinned people *obruni* and most *obruni*, especially the ones from Europe and Asia, can easily gain privilege.<sup>34</sup> It was unlikely that the watchman would swing open the gate for me the first time if I were a Ghanaian.

The walled compound and the free access Chinese are given in this compound give the false sense that there is a sense of community here. Chinese who live here do not all freely associate with each other. I know several other occupants in this compound, but they often keep to themselves. As they put it, they have different “circles” and theirs do not usually commingle with some of those within the compound. Some tenants are long-time residents; others are there for the short term, temporarily staying until they find alternate homes. Some are entrepreneurs in various businesses, from inexpensive Chinese

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<sup>34</sup> The term is also used to refer to African-Americans and other non-African foreigners who, even though they may not have fair-skin, are marked as foreign to Africa.

household imports to second-hand computer equipment to employees of major Chinese factories. Though there isn't a sense of community, there is some truth to the moniker Chinatown. That everyone here is Chinese provides some sense, whether idealised or not, of security and potential group loyalty.

Two cases demonstrate this. Several years ago, Xiaolü made his first home in Ghana in one of these apartments. His family has political connections to the owner of Freedom Textile, which enabled him easy access to stable ground in a foreign country. A short while later, he found a more suitable home and moved out. Although my conversations with Xiaolü did not broach why he left "Chinatown", he was strongly against socialising with the Chinese, whom he felt untrustworthy and under-educated. He said he preferred to keep to his own business. He has few friends, but the handful he has seem deeply loyal to each other.

In another case, the proprietor of a Chinese fast food restaurant in Osu had for several years been living with her boyfriend in a home in Kanda in the middle of other Ghanaian households. After closing, she often drove home alone. She had no reason to fear for her safety. Several months before I left Ghana, she was robbed at knife-point in her home. She was almost certain who did it. She suspected it was one of her waiters, whom she had recently sacked. Though the armed robber who broke into her house had his face covered, she said she recognised his stature and speech. She quickly moved into Chinatown explaining that she felt safer among other Chinese who would at least help her when she needed.

There is a curious sense of tension when comparing these two cases when thinking about community and individuals. In Xiaolü's case, his connections to the Chinese community enabled a smoother transition into Ghana. Yet he found no desire or reason to believe in Chinese group loyalty and soon left the compound to establish his own business elsewhere. In the case of the Chinese proprietor, she did not have a strong sense of group loyalty when she first came to Ghana but felt that she could tap into some notion of loyalty and safety among the Chinese. Ironically, there are many cases of Chinese being disloyal to each other from false accusations, especially around business agreements, money laundering, and seeking the secrets of each other's trade.

These three scenes, far from being unique, exhibit common themes in the experiences of the social lives of Chinese in Ghana. They all show varying degrees of uneasiness in forming social bonds with other Chinese, as people at times push away from some Chinese while at the same time they pull closer to others. Furthermore, the precarious relationships among the Chinese do not translate to the formation of stronger social bonds with local Ghanaians. There is in fact largely an absence of social relationships with non-Chinese. The fluidity of ethnicity as a category and the history of group formation in the history of the region play a role in enabling Chinese to remain hidden as a group in the eyes of the government and in the minds of local Ghanaians. At the same time, the Chinese also remain actively hidden from each other a large part of the time, but not always. Living in such precarious states of abeyance draws up the question of

what the sense of home and belonging is among these Chinese, many of whom expect to live many years in Ghana. To respond to this question, I first turn to the question of why the Chinese in Ghana would leave their previous places of residence to migrate to Ghana and live such lives.

## **8. OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

The rest of the dissertation is organised in the following manner. Chapter 2 discusses the phenomenon of Chinese leaving Asia for Ghana from two different perspectives. One perspective examines the Chinese migrants in Ghana as a group and lays out the historical factors that contributed to the migration. The other takes a close-up view of Chinese as individuals to look at individual motivations and conflicts that impelled them to migrate to Ghana. A key theoretical discussion in this chapter is that historical patterns of a group should not be applied in a straightforward manner to understand individual experiences. While historical patterns help us gain theoretical legibility of a group's movement, examining the experiences of individuals reveals a much more complicated reality filled with conflicts and actions that do not necessarily reconcile with each other. In this chapter, I also make the case for putting the individual back into the picture of anthropology in order to listen in to the subtleties and conflicts as individuals work with the circumstances they face. Chapter 3 takes these two perspectives to examine the condition of being in limbo. It looks at the structural

causes of mobility and immobility, then examines specific individual experiences, focusing closely on how social relations fracture and congeal in this state of liminality. Chapter 4 examines how Chinese navigate and inhabit liminality, a condition that is increasingly identified with the globalisation. Rather than assuming that people need community and belonging, I find that it is possible to live in liminality without a nostalgic desire for the past or a yearning for something more stable in the present or the future.

## Chapter 2

### Leaving: Historical Causes and Personal Motivations

*[T]he general in any man's conversation must always be converted into the particular and personal if you want to understand him.*

Aldous Huxley (1964)

About five months into fieldwork, I began to experience some episodes of malaise and lacklustre spirit. Usually these experiences took the form of dread, sadness, and some loneliness instigated by a sense of disconnect and isolation from other Chinese. I went into the field thinking I would find a Chinese community only to find that the spirit of communality practically did not exist. I had idealised the sense of community and had been struck with a much more complicated reality. But my sense of disconnect and isolation wasn't only mine. Other Chinese expressed the same about the "community". These experiences of isolation were most profound at night when the scarce sight and sound of human activity in the Labone area where I lived conjured up the same dreaded feelings I had as a primary schoolboy in Ghana in the 1980s. Most streets in Tema where I grew up were not lit, and the enveloping darkness along with the absence of human activity and traffic foregrounded my own internal disturbances. As a young boy, I often wondered what meaning living in Ghana had. My parents often talked about how to leave Ghana. They could not envision themselves in Ghana for the long duration. They were dissatisfied with the lack of economic potential and an insecure livelihood. In fact, we had left once, only to return two years later when we were unable to "make it" in the United States. These

concerns about an extended stay and about leaving Ghana were not uncommon topics among the Chinese.

A decade after I left Ghana, I returned for fieldwork. Everything felt new. Major roads were being constructed and repaired. The experience of being a consumer in the Accra-Tema region was sharply different from 10 years ago. Previously there was widespread scarcity in the heavily regulated market. Today because of the Economic Recovery Programme, which began in 1983, the private sector has grown with many state enterprises partially or fully divested.<sup>1</sup> A large number of retail stores have sprung up offering a wide range of goods including premium products from Europe and the United States. However these are often sold at American and European prices, which most Ghanaians cannot afford. Many Ghanaians I talked to said the economic liberalisation programme has brought more private businesses into the country but at a level they cannot compete at due to their smaller economic resources. They also pointed out the growing income disparity between the lower class (which most Ghanaians occupy) and middle to upper classes.<sup>2</sup> Konadu-Agyemang (2000) argues that the achievements of the Structural Adjustment Program in Ghana have been unevenly distributed:

The people in the rural areas as well as the poorest of the poor in the urban areas seem to have suffered significantly due to their inability to compete in the market. While Ghana's economy may

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Ghana's economy up to the mid-1990s, see Berry (1995)

<sup>2</sup> In a briefing paper published by Afrobarometer, a research project started between various African research groups and the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University, the author states that while the experience of poverty in Ghana has declined, there is "growing income inequality between rural and urban areas and across Ghana's administrative regions" and many Ghanaians are saying "that the costs of reforming the economy are too high" (CDD-Ghana 2008)



perhaps be experiencing the best of times at the macro level (compared to the 1970s), the benefits have not trickled down to all parts of the country, and to all socio-economic groups. Living conditions have become harsh for the poor, especially the residents of the rural areas and savanna belt whose access to education, health, and other services has been severely curtailed under the Structural Adjustment Programs. Fifteen years of SAPs have not been able to alleviate rural poverty and the long existing socioeconomic and spatial disparities in Ghana ... (481)

While the Chinese I talked to are largely not in the lower socioeconomic group and can afford a higher standard of living than most Ghanaians, they also had doubts about how long their prosperity in Ghana would last. My sense of isolation and malaise was not only mine. It was a theme that I had not been attuned to in the early stages of fieldwork. Five months later, I realised that the themes of social isolation, disconnect, and distrust among the Chinese still emerged in frequent remarks and conversations among the Chinese. At the same time, there were desires for social and economic connections. Settling down in the field helped me to notice these recurring idiomatic themes of uneasiness and uncertainty about living in Ghana. Given these concerns, why did the Chinese leave their former homes and migrate to Ghana? How did they make sense of continuing to live in such uncertainty?

## **1. HISTORICAL CAUSES AND PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are two contrasting yet complementary perspectives on this question: one that takes the perspective of historical and cultural causes and another that takes the viewpoint of personal motivations. Historical and cultural

perspectives would involve looking at the social, economic, political, and temporal circumstances that encouraged, or perhaps even some would argue, coerced this kind of movement. They provide generalisations for a group of people in understanding, what seems from afar, a singular mass. For migrants such as the Chinese, they would help to explain patterns of a group, with the provision that firstly the Chinese can be considered a group and secondly that a generalised perspective does apply to the movement of individuals.

This mode of inquiry, dominant and almost *de rigueur* in the social sciences, has been traced by various scholars back to Durkheim's notion of "social fact" produced at the end of the nineteenth century, furthered by the interpretive move developed by Geertz in the 1970s, and bolstered by the rise of French theory in the United States, particularly of Foucault in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, various theoretical influences led to the separation of the social and psychological as a way to argue the primacy of the society in the formation of an individual's behaviour. There are variations of this theme. Durkheim ([1897] 2002) argued that certain social phenomena, particularly an individual's relationship to society and higher authority, dictated a society's "collective inclination" towards suicide. In the middle of the twentieth century, Geertz (1973) argued that culture is made up of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people behave and act. French poststructuralists, such as Foucault (Foucault [1972] 2002), forged a link between larger structural

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of why the approaches of generalisation and impersonalisation are ubiquitous in academic and everyday discourse, see Rapport (1997b). For a discussion of this historical trend, see: Cohen (1994); Linger (2005); Rapport (1997a); Rapport and Overing (2000).

systems and individual human practices, giving focus to the question of subject positions and how they are constructed through history and social structures. As attention is focused on subject positions, the individual is bracketed away from theory, and discourse practices describe how individuals become subjects to structures of power. In many of these variations, individuals are understood to speak from and respond to conventional discursive forms that are already in place set up by society and language.

Historical, cultural, and discursive interpretive approaches have similar effects in their levels of conceiving the world. Taking a macro-level examination, they abstract and reveal patterns in the socio-cultural milieu, making legible realities that could otherwise be bewildering to manage. They allow for broad comparisons. They provide us with patterns that can speak about and explain the realities of a group of people.<sup>4</sup> To use Evans-Pritchard's words, this type of abstraction makes society "sociologically intelligible". What historical, cultural, and discursive interpretive approaches do is to translate the ethnographic experience (the observed behaviour, social interactions, and participations) into concepts and ideas about culture, subject positions, society, and so forth. These constitute a pattern allowing us to make sense and make *legible* social realities.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this type of abstraction, which was also its greatest challenge to the popularity of functionalism in anthropology, was that it

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<sup>4</sup> Linger (2003), posing the question "Do Japanese Brazilians exist?", directs us to question what the implications are in placing particular individuals in a specific group. Boundary drawing is an "inherently ideological act". While Linger is specifically talking about a set of people often seen as a diaspora (which implies that they form an ethnic group with a particular historical trajectory and a particular collective mental state), his argument can be extended to any act of grouping sets of people.

enabled us to take into account social change (see, Bloch 1977). In particular, the historical approach brings a sense of cause and effect over the *longue durée* of societal activity.

But there are vexing problems with historical and cultural perspectives. At their extreme, they paint an overarching generalised picture of a group that has difficulty being reconciled to any individual. At the same time one can easily make the slippage and transfer group patterns onto individuals, assimilating individual behaviour to the activities of a group or, worse, projecting onto individuals stereotypes of the group. For instance, a primary characteristic of national and international geopolitical narratives of China in Africa is that the narratives are about everyone and no one in particular. The very generalised nature of these explanations is partly applicable and partly not applicable to individuals, or even sometimes not applicable at all. Desjarlais's (1997) opening to his ethnography on the homeless in a Boston shelter makes the latter point. Examining news articles on how the homeless are portrayed, he notices that they "*thrive on images of death, transgression, and grotesque bodies*" (1997:2; emphasis added). Rather than examining the person as an individual, the person becomes the figure to animate ideas and traits conceived about certain groups:

the homeless are usually characters writ large, serving as figureheads of despondency, vagrancy, insobriety, madness, or moral failure. The plot often comes first: the scene in *Au Bon Pain* requires a 'homeless man, bleeding heavily from the nose'; a wintry survey requires 'an old woman, her hair whipped about wildly about her head.' Such figures are at once allegorical (expressing the idea that homeless bodies transgress social order...) and fully embodied (a bloody nose, wildly whipped hair). The traits run true to type: the bag lady, the shopping-cart woman, the runaway youth,

the homeless vet...are rarely individuated, even if they are endowed with two or three physical details. (1997:4)<sup>5</sup>

In his book on the identity of Japanese Brazilians in Toyota City, Japan, Linger (2001b) makes the point that wide-sweeping generalisations about global transnational phenomena are too generic and, over time, like early twentieth century theories about cities and metropolis, likely to be regarded as unsophisticated and quaint. He writes, “Toyota [City] is not a global anyplace, and Brazilian lives there are not generic transnational phenomena” (9). There is a gap. On the one hand we have overarching theories and portraits of the twenty-first century human condition, the kind of view from “on high” that gives the scholar the illusion that that they are grasping how individuals are actually being manipulated by their conditions and how individuals deal with their situations. And yet when we pay close attention to how people make sense of their situations and how they navigate their worlds, this “on high” view of social conditions falls into the backdrop and may even disappear entirely because it is unable to provide us with a nuanced understanding for why individuals feel, act, respond, and experience in their particular ways. In an earlier work, Michael Jackson’s (1986) experimental narrative about the Kuranko, which he calls an “ethnographic novel”, he clearly states the problems he has faced in the process of abstraction:

Wearied by years of academic writing in which the lives and

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<sup>5</sup> My field experiences speak to this. Colleagues in the discipline most often expressed interest in the Chinese as figures of migrancy and asked questions about their social lives assuming that they lived in ethnic enclaves much like how most Chinese immigrants to the United States have been portrayed for much of the twentieth century. More recently because of the rising academic and public interest in China’s activities in Africa, I noticed scholars who work on Chinese in Africa often find (or assume) the connection Chinese in their African locale have to China is the most interesting question to ask. And, they presume that is also what I study.

identities of actual Koranko people had disappeared under a welter of interpretative ideas about totemism, witchcraft, sacrifice, divination, initiation, and narrative, he had at last given himself a task that might be totally authentic—to enter freely and imaginatively into the lives of those whose names were by now as familiar to him as the names of his own forebears, to write from within their consciousness of history, to bridge with metaphor the gap between aspects of his own experience and theirs. For it was his hope that anthropology might move away from a yearning for essences, causes and determinate meanings to an open-ended quest for connections and juxtapositions—striking common chords, finding common ground, disclosing common historical horizons without the pretence of arriving at any necessary truth.

He leafed through his notes again. How was he to bring to life these figures, whose very existence was so often reduced to a name, a single detail, an event, or a mere linking role in a chain that stretched back . . . ? (3–4)<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, the macro-level abstraction that cultural, historical, and discursive methods creates, to use James Scott's term, "legibility" (1998). Scott examines how states manage their subjects and environment and notes that legibility is a central problem of statecraft. He argues that the premodern state was ineffective ("partially blind") because it had no way to standardise, simplify, codify, and make abstract its subjects, their identities, landholding, yields, and so forth. Without a metric to measure and map out its terrain to create a "synoptic view", state interventions were "crude and self-defeating". Legibility made highly complex and localised forms of knowledge become standardised into a convenient form that could be categorised, recorded, and compared with data from other locales. Scott explains,

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of

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<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein Linger writes that, "too much theory tends to automate persons and animate abstractions. It turns people into the fodder of History or specimens of Science", and instead he wants "to recover a sense of each person's singularity and irreducibility" (2001b:10).

vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. Combined with similar observations, an overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation. (1998:11)

This comes at the expense of local knowledge. While state projects create legibility at one level, they render illegible practices, context, and details under which local knowledge arises.

The kind of abstraction that a solely historical, cultural, and discursive perspective creates makes legible (or some have argued, makes into a spectre) certain knowledges and practices at the macro-level but renders illegible some of the details, differences, and circumstances at the individual level. It also creates a kind of legibility of the past through reading historical artifacts and documents for cultural reconstruction purposes. As previously noted, this kind of legibility is a type of translation from ethnographic experience to abstractions to socio-cultural and economic patterns. As all translations go, some things go untranslated or are not translatable in the framework used. While the masking inherent in legibility is not flawed when it is judiciously used, it is a *particular perspective* on reality and does not encompass it.

In an ironic way, though anthropologists have been arguing for the primacy of local knowledge and to heed local needs and local actors, certain methodologies currently championed render them invisible. This has perhaps been one of the greatest charges from anthropologists taking a psychological and

phenomenological approach to anthropological research. What happens to the individual? Where is his or her agency? The title of Linger's article, "The Problem of Missing Persons" (2001a) is very telling. He argues that there is a tendency "to elide considerations of biography, consciousness, and personal agency from analyses of meaning." This is the erasure he calls "the problem of missing persons." The criticism from Rapport is even more condemning. He calls these the processes of impersonalisation.

[Durkheimian social science and social anthropology] reifies—ontologically dumps—its epistemological constructs: 'collective conscience', 'collective representations', 'social facts', 'the cult of the individual'. It routinises and generalises the formal creations of its individual exponents: 'joking relations', 'lineage theory', 'dynamic equilibrium'; so that in order to find means of self-expression free from institutionalisation, individual social scientists must engineer paradigm shifts: from Functionalism to Structural-Functionalism, to Structuralism, to Neo-Marxism, to Symbolism. It claims that the Gods it has created, as well as their goods, forces and powers ('Society', 'Culture', 'Kinship', 'Ritual and Religion', 'Political and Economic Relations', 'Language') are outwith its control, leading autonomous lives of their own determination, orientation and evolution. It claims to gain access to objective sociological data . . . which are beyond the personal ken of individual participants in a socio-cultural milieu because of their lack of learning or impartiality or self-reflexivity or freedom of thought. Finally, it denies the personal complexity of its own involvement in the lives of others, of the interface between research and its researchers' own lives, of its knowledge practices *per se* [emphasis original]....[I]t is almost as if, for much of its history, actual people have been incidental to the Durkheimian project — irrelevant if not departicularised: generalised into one impersonal (defining, limiting) category or another. What emerges are "synthetic fictions", "fictive matrices of uniformity"... (1997a:23-24)

It would seem from the historical and cultural perspective, that agency exists not in a person but rather at the external cultural and historical level. To be sure,



history and society do provide the circumstances that individuals live in but they do not determine individual responses to those conditions.

Some scholars have been trumpeting to put the individual back into the picture of anthropology (for example: Cohen 1994; Desjarlais 1997, 2003; Linger 1994, 2005; Rapport 1997a). Examining closely the personal motivations and responses to particular circumstances is the other perspective I take in examining why Chinese left their previous homes to come to Ghana. Historical and cultural narratives can give a false sense of completeness and neatness, but lived experiences and even the narratives that people tell of their lives are convoluted, contradictory, and often mysterious. Looking more closely at the individual level enables us to take into consideration the conundrums and idiosyncrasies involved in both the experience of leaving and the experience of living. It is often revealed that individuals chose certain paths without fully understanding why they did so, and sometimes they did not consider other options as possible pathways.

Are the cultural/historical and discursive approaches at odds with the approach that looks closely at individual motivations? Are these two irreconcilable? Rapport (1997a) and Joan Scott (1991) would seem to affirm that it is so. Rapport, on the side of rewriting individuals back into the analysis giving them agency and consciousness, argues that the social sciences should study the “impulse” to impersonalise the world, how cultural and historical abstractions have the effect of reifying themselves, how they unfold in society and culture. He strongly argues that we must not take these abstractions as actual human reality. There is no such thing as “collective knowing”: “culture and societies, institutions

and associations cannot know; only individuals have the minds and memories to know” (Rapport 1997a:25). He argues that while the human world is one of individuals interacting with each other, ultimately knowledge of the world is individual. In short, lives are lived and known absolutely rather than relatively.

Joan Scott (1991) has an entirely different take on this. Individuals, subjectivities, and experiences need to be seen for their historical and discursive constructions. If we take any of these as self-evident, we end up ignoring the constructed nature of experience and subjectivities. In other words, subjectivities, identities, and experiences are all historical discursive constructs. If we ignore the construction of these aspects, we end up using the “evidence of experience” to reproduce the existing ideological system. In her view, using “experience” and “subjectivities” as ways to understand an individual, leads to the reification of the subject and essentialises identities. Scott writes,

we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience but subjects who are constituted through experience. (1991:779)

Treating the emergence of new identity as a discursive event is to refuse a separation between “experience” and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse.... Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. (1991:792-793)

Scott charges that notions of the interiority and experience are themselves culturally constituted through external, publicly shared systems of signs. To this accusation, Rapport has a reply:

Against this final ploy, this last play, there is no response. For this is

the point where argument, as Rorty might have put it, dissolves into the tautology of metaphysics. Which is why I prefer at this point to stay mute, end this brief envoi and hope the above narrational exposition of anxious interiority speaks for me [referring to his chapter about his experiences of not being trapped into a capitalist marketing discourse]. (Rapport 1997a:163)

Are we at an impasse? Scott's understanding of the individual and experience seems illogical to me on several levels. For one, it's recursive. If we are not to take the individual's experiences and narration seriously at some level, then how does Scott make her argument if we only approach it at the level of deconstruction? In other words, I assume that Scott would like us to find her argument persuasive, that she knows what she is talking about and that she is to be believed. But under what aegis does she make her points if she herself is only to be seen as a spectre of historical construction? There is no ground to stand on. And if she does claim such a ground for herself, then it would seem she must allow the privilege of a ground for other individuals. Relatedly, if experiences, individuals, and subjectivities are all historically and culturally constructed through public symbols, especially through language, then how do we get out of the trap of not being part of the ideological system through which these constructions are created and reproduced? Her argument appears to foil her own desire to get out of a repressive ideological system.

Linger suggests that a version of what Scott and Rapport proclaim can be held together. He proposes that we need to hold the two perspectives, what he calls a "double vision" (2001b) or "double lens" (2005), in mind at the same time.

The two perspectives are termed “public worlds” and “personal worlds”. He explains:

Public worlds are environments to which people are exposed, into which they are thrust, or which they build together, and from which people learn, over the course of their lives, to assemble ever-changing universes of thought and feeling. Public worlds confront people with propositions, choices, dilemmas, imperatives, challenges, and opportunities. They present conditions that compel, permit, or evoke responses....

Public worlds, though they are unavoidable and often ensnare people, do not inevitably eclipse them or dictate the course of human affairs. People act within public worlds, but they also operate according to their own lights, sometimes transforming those worlds and even themselves....

Personal and public worlds are systems, but not closed systems. (2005:12–13)

These two spheres are linked systems. Linger writes that the phenomenon of identity-making in transnationalism is “universal, but variably actualized,” for at the level of the “personal world” (what I similarly term “personal motivations”) people engage their lives in specific individual ways. We need to understand that lives are never lived in a generalised way, that we don’t experience our lives in general patterns. Rather, each life is understood and experienced as its own<sup>7</sup>. In the words of Rapport, “the ultimate knowledge of the world is individual *per se*, the possession of individual bodies and brains” (1997a:25). Linger suggests that we can only understand human worlds by examining the interaction between these two spheres.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Nigel Rapport who writes, “[C]onsciousness is limited by the forms and practices by which it can express itself and hope to communicate itself at any one time, but individual consciousness is none the less responsible for animating those forms and practices with its own individual ‘energy’—its agency, intentionality and meaningfulness” (1997a:5).

From a slightly different perspective, I would also emphasise that these two worlds are not necessarily incongruent with each other. In public worlds, one might be able to “read” (interpret) trends, and patterns might emerge. En masse, a group of people might seem to migrate due to particular causes. But when we focus the lens closer in to personal worlds, how we see a person responds and how they understand their interactions with the public world may not have much relation to what the larger public patterns look like from afar. From afar the social patterns that emerge can be the causes for migration but not necessarily the reasons for an individual’s migration. For this chapter, exploring the public worlds and personal worlds of Chinese migration to Ghana would be fruitful and at the same time serves as a cautionary reminder that what emerges as larger patterns should not then be seen as directly corresponding to individuals’ motivations. The levels of analysis are not the same.

## **2. LEAVING FOR AFRICA: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

### **A. Overview of Chinese Emigration Patterns**

The history of Chinese in Africa from historical and cultural perspectives has been sporadic in nature. It is one of multiple encounters, disappearances, and re-encounters. This pattern primarily has to do with the Chinese state’s relationship to international emigration. China’s history is one of periodic outward expansion and isolation depending on the emperor and on the domestic economic and political situation. Confucian advisors to the emperor typically

viewed foreign travel as interfering with family obligations and viewed trade as mean and debasing. This distrust of travel and merchants had varying ramifications towards China's expansion and isolationist policies. Furthermore, continual political tension between eunuchs and Confucian advisors, both of whom advised the emperor on different affairs, influenced the emperor's decision about foreign trade and travel (Levathes 1994).

International migration prior to the nineteenth century was largely based on tribute missions to China, and also on trading of Chinese manufactured goods to the tropics and tropical goods to China. Unofficial trades occurred between, on the one hand, Chinese merchants and Chinese officials, and on the other, foreign officials and foreign merchants. State response to emigration has been historically ambivalent. Sometimes migrants have been allowed to go overseas but their return is discouraged, while other times the state has favoured emigration and encouraged emigrant remittances. At other times it has entirely closed off international migration, considering it a capital crime to leave the empire.

For example, during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), considered one of the Golden Ages of the Chinese Empire, maritime trade was well-developed and thriving. In the 1100s, trade routes were further extended to Southeast Asia. However, in the early Ming period (beginning 1368), private trade and trade outside of the tribute system was banned, which made it difficult for merchants to move to and from China. In the later years, the Ming imperial state relaxed its policies on private local maritime commerce but prohibited overseas residence. Under the rule of Mongols (1279–1368) trade was expanded northwards into

Russia and westwards to Persia. During the early part of the Qing dynasty from 1644 to the early 1700s, emigration overseas was considered a capital crime and trade with foreigners was restricted only to the port of Guangzhou. These trade and emigration restrictions since the 1400s drove Chinese seasonal traders to seek settlement in cities along established trade routes such as Nagasaki and Manila. In 1727, the Qing government revoked private trade abroad, and in 1754, the Qing government declared that emigrants could safely return to China. From 1949 through to the Cold War and into the late 1970s, China isolated itself from the West and from Chinese migrant communities. Migration to and from China was strictly prohibited, illegal border crossing was considered a crime, and overseas connections were treated as espionage and treason. Those who were caught were subjected to camp labour or jail (Zhou 2005).<sup>8</sup>

These general patterns also affect Chinese trade and emigration to Africa and in part explain the sporadic appearances of Chinese activity in Africa. At the same time, even during times when China was more outward looking and friendly, its own political and economic interests towards Africa waxed and waned. Finally, scholarly interest towards Chinese and China in Africa has been similarly sporadic. Prior to the 1950s, few scholars were interested in Chinese in Africa. When China began intensive development projects and aid to Africa in the 1950s to the 1970s, it gained some scholarly interest. When China's activity in

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<sup>8</sup> This historical overview of Chinese emigration largely comes from Zhou (2005). She provides a broad literature review of Chinese emigration and international trade over time, but glaringly omits Chinese emigration to Europe, which in modern times has been significant in number and about which there is existing research. She also entirely omits Chinese emigration to Africa, though this is less of an offense since the literature of historical Chinese emigration to Africa is sparse.

Africa receded in the 1970s, scholarly interest in the subject lost momentum and disappeared until the mid-2000s when China re-kindled interest in Africa. Today, China has become a major economic power, which in part explains why the scholarly and media interest has been re-kindled.

To this effect, I have divided the rest of this section into five sub-sections. I continue with a narrative about historical reasons for Chinese contact with Africa prior to the seventeenth century, which were largely trade related and involved no significant long-term emigration to the continent. The next sub-section picks up the emigration narrative from the 1700s to the 1900s when a significant number of Chinese migrated to southern Africa. Next, I write about the 1950s when China's foreign aid and development projects in Africa made significant headway only to largely disappear by the 1970s. The fourth sub-section gives an overview of how scholars have discussed and debated the "reoccurrence" of Chinese activity in Africa in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I finally wrap up this section with an overview of the historical reasons for Chinese in Ghana since emigration in the 1960s.

## **B. Chinese Activity and Emigration in Africa, Pre-Seventeenth Century**

Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) historical sources suggest that Chinese came into contact with Africa for trade as early as the first century CE when they entered the Huang-tchi kingdom, which historians believe corresponds to modern-day Eritrea and Ethiopia (Smidth 2001). Chinese historical sources from



the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907) suggest the possibility that Chinese merchants were following established trade routes in India and areas by the Red Sea in the seventh century. The earliest record of a Chinese in Africa is Du Huan's travel report, *Jingxingji (Record of My Travels)*. Du Huan was an officer in a military campaign to expand China into Central Asia in 751 when he, along with 20,000 other Chinese soldiers, was captured by Arabs and brought into Iraq (Snow 1988; Smidth 2001). Most of the captured Chinese became gold and silversmiths, painters, weavers, and paper fabricants. Du Huan recorded that he went to Molinguo, which Smidth deduces to be a country in the dry desert lowland in the Sudan and Eritrea. In 762 CE, Du Huan entered the port of Guangzhou, China.

The next recorded history of Chinese encounters in Africa describes the voyages of Admiral Zheng He in the early 1400s, beginning with the reign of Zhu Di in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). This marked the beginning of a new period of outward expansion. Emperor Zhu Di ascended to the throne by defeating Zhu Yuwen, his nephew, who was given the right of succession by Zhu Yuanzhang, Zhu Di's father. In defiance of his father's policies, Zhu Di gave more power to the eunuchs who had helped him gain sovereignty while decreasing the influence of Confucian advisors. On the advice of eunuchs who encouraged foreign trade, Zhu Di began building an imperial fleet. He wanted to capture Zhu Yuwen who was thought to be in exile abroad and disguised as a Buddhist monk. It was during the fifth voyage in 1418 that Zheng He first arrived in Africa. He was returning ambassadors from Aden on the Arabian peninsula to their homes in Mogadishu and Brawa in present-day Somalia, and Malindi in Kenya (Levathes

1994:151). Zheng He brought back with him some ambassadors from Mogadishu who stayed in China for two years, leaving in 1421. The sixth and last voyage to Africa Zheng He made, from 1421 to 1422, took on the manner of exploration more than trade. Levathes describes Africa as being viewed by the Chinese explorers as “the land of the rare and precious things, mysterious and unfathomable” (1994:151). After 1433, Chinese exploration ended and thus began a period of contraction. Zhu Di had died about a decade earlier and foreign trade began to dwindle. Zhu Qizhan, his successor, eventually halted construction of ocean shipyards, focusing more on the construction of river barges and domestic affairs. There were various reasons for this including the balance of power between eunuchs and Confucian advisors shifting toward Confucian advisors who limited the power of eunuchs by eliminating seafaring and overseas trade, which was their domain. Inflation made foreign trade difficult to maintain, and furthermore the Mongol invasion of northern China shifted China’s attention away from its southern coast to the northern inland (173–178).

### **C. Chinese Emigration to Southern Africa, 1650s to 1990s**

Chinese emigration to Africa during most of this period was principally related to forced labor, then later indentured and contract labour to aid the West’s colonial expansion into Africa. Most of the activity occurred in southern Africa from the southern coast of Kenya to the Cape of South Africa. Historical

narratives in the later periods focus on the settlement of Chinese in South Africa, a separate group from the forced and indentured labourers of the earlier period.<sup>9</sup>

Most histories of this period recount the Portuguese discovery of the sea trade route from Europe to India by navigating the coastline of Africa in the fifteenth century. During this period of exploration, Portugal was attempting to gain direct access to trading centres, bypassing the middlemen. In 1415, when they captured the Muslim coastal city of Ceuta in Morocco, they learnt of the trans-Saharan trade route that brought gold into Europe. Eager to bypass Muslim traders, the Portuguese, under the patronage of Henry the Navigator, began exploration of the African coast, establishing trading and naval bases while claiming for Portugal the parcels of land they discovered. By 1460 they had arrived in Sierra Leone in West Africa and by the early 1500 to mid-1500s had taken Mombasa on the Kenyan coast, establishing their own trade centres. The Dutch, French, and British followed suit in the next few centuries (Reynolds 2005).

Portugal needed manpower to work their colonies and began shuffling people from their various African colonies. Portuguese exploration took them to China and eventually they set up a trading post in Macau that gained colonial status in 1573. Unlike other Europeans who concentrated their trading development in Africa, Portugal focused on Asia, setting up Macau to be their centre of trade and religion. For the most part then, they shipped African subjects

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<sup>9</sup> See Snow (1988:45) for map movement of Chinese labourers and traders to Africa in the colonial period.

to Macau, though they did ship a smaller number of Chinese to their African trading posts (Snow 1988:40).

It was mainly the Dutch and the French who brought in a larger number of forced Chinese labourers, mostly in southern Africa. Snow recounts that the Chinese were brought in largely to replace local African workers who were uncooperative or did not have the skills to perform certain work, such as planting rice and sugar, carpentry, masonry, and pottery. For example, in the eighteenth century, France attempted to develop the islands of Mauritius and Bourbon by bringing in African slaves from Madagascar, Mozambique, and the Guinea Coast of West Africa. The slaves however were uncooperative, refusing to work and making their escapes and for this reason the Chinese were brought in.

In the seventeenth century, the Qing government had a restrictive policy towards the emigration of their subjects, so how was it possible that Chinese labourers were brought to southern Africa? It had to do with the combination of the growing influence of European trade power and the large number of impoverished Chinese. By the seventeenth century, Europeans had established various trading posts in Southeast Asia. Thousands of impoverished Chinese from southern Chinese provinces illegally left the empire looking for work at these European trading posts. Some ran afoul of local authorities and so some of them became conscripted labourers to Africa.

The history of Chinese in South Africa often begins with this narrative of conscripted labourers. In the mid-seventeenth century, convicts and company slaves of the Dutch East India Company from Java, Batavia, and southern China

were brought in to South Africa to established refreshment stations. Over the next century, Chinese continued to arrive in South Africa in small numbers, most eventually returning to Asia and a few settling down in the Cape under the status of “free blacks,” working in petty trading and shopkeeping. As the Dutch settled into the area and beyond, labour demands grew and they increased the import of Chinese labourers (Park 2009). In 1800s as the Qing government became increasingly weak, they were increasingly forced to allow legal Chinese emigration and also permit the establishment of trading posts in Chinese territory. By the 1840s, contract labourers could now be lured from China legally.

After the 1860s, free Chinese immigrants began arriving in South Africa, but their presence was rarely documented and mostly not noticed until the end of the nineteenth century, when formerly indentured Indians began to move to Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, one of the two Boer republics, from Natal. This was a period when white settlers debated whether the continued import of Chinese labourers was a detriment to white colonist society. Although some industrialists were able to defy public opposition and imported Chinese artisans and labourers, hostility grew and eventually led to the enactment of racist immigration laws that prohibited the flow of Asian immigrants.

In 1904 more than 60,000 indentured Chinese labourers were imported to work in the gold mines of Witwatersrand. Labour disputes between Chinese labourers and white South Africans lead to another spike in conspicuity. Regulations were imposed to monitor the Chinese and eventually end their immigration, repatriating many of them by 1910 (Park 2009). By this period,

there were two major groups of Chinese in South Africa, indentured labourers and free traders. Between 1910 and 1948, restrictive laws determined what forms of livelihood the Chinese were permitted to engage in. Accone and Harris describe the Chinese situation during the second-half of the twentieth century: “not only prohibited from adding to their numbers, but they were literally left in-between. In a system predicated upon race and colour, in which they were neither ‘white’ nor ‘black’, they were marginalized” (2007:194)

Between 1948 to late 1980s, two main political and legal changes happened. In 1948, apartheid was implemented, codifying segregation. The idea behind apartheid was to classify the population into white, black, and coloured groups to facilitate separate development. The Group Areas Act was instituted, creating separate residential areas for different racial groups. Though the Chinese were not vocally against apartheid, they were against the Group Areas Act since they depended on trading for their livelihood and needed access to different population groups. From 1970s onwards, there were official attempts to change the status and position of South African Chinese. The Republic of China (Taiwan) and South Africa were considered rogue states in the international community. This pressure brought them closer together economically, which led to the South African government being obligated to reconsider the Chinese position in South Africa. Eventually, the Group Areas Act was abolished for the Chinese and they became the “first ‘non-white’ group to breach the racial divide of the apartheid system” (198).

Today's South African Chinese, a population estimated between 100,000 and 300,000 (Wilhelm 2006), are a mixed group with different histories, described as "three distinct Chinas" (Accone and Harris 2007). Those identified as "local" Chinese (or who call themselves South African-born Chinese) are not descended from the early Chinese migrants who were indentured labourers and convicts. Descended from free immigrants from the 1870s and later, this group is largely comprised of third- and fourth-generation Chinese who have diversified from small businesses into professions. Another group of Chinese in South Africa today are those who arrived after 1970, first from Taiwan, then Hong Kong. The third and most recent group comes from mainland China (Park 2009).

In light of such hostile environments in the past several hundred years, why did the Chinese continue to come to South Africa? With the approach and limitations of large historical perspectives, Accone and Harris argue that the answer "partly" lies in "perceived opportunities", such as gold mining, and widespread poverty in China. The possibilities of a more comfortable material life motivated Chinese emigration. Historians often note that these motivations explain the larger international Chinese emigration pattern that began in the nineteenth century (cf. Pan 1994). Are economic considerations enough to move individuals? Are there other narratives or perhaps alternative ways of looking at this question?

#### **D. Chinese Activity in Africa during the Cold War, 1940s to 1980s**

Historiography of China in Africa during this period focuses on inter-state politics with a dearth of literature on the emigration of Chinese peoples during this period. From the late 1940s to the early 1980s, China had significant contact and projects in Africa. Two political trends came into alignment to forge this new contact. First, China's Communist Revolution ended in 1949 with the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party, giving birth to the People's Republic of China. Secondly, in the 1960s to the late 1970s, most African colonies were decolonising. These newly independent African countries were eager to form South-South connections. African countries and China were attempting to achieve recognition on the world stage (Achberger 2010; Larkin 1973).

The Bandung Conference in April 1955 was the People's Republic's first major contact with African liberation movements. The conference reflected dissatisfaction among Asian and African nations with the West's reluctance to consult them regarding Cold War tensions and especially about colonialism in Africa and Southeast Asia and relations between the West and China. Political Scientist Bruce Larkin (1973) notes that though in 1955 China did not view its relations with African states as important as her affairs with other Asian countries and the U.S., the Bandung Conference demonstrated that Afro-Asia was a viable political concept. In part due to China's eagerness to remove itself from the tutelage of the Soviet Union, it began allying with African states. By 1957, the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization was formed, increasing China's role



in Africa by establishing diplomatic missions development aid to African countries. A concern that began to arise in the West was of the accusations that China was taking advantage of Africa's resources. Though there is a dearth of African scholarly views about China in Africa during this period, one major exception is Nigerian scholar and diplomat Alaba Ogunsanwo, who in 1974 concludes that "from the African standpoint, relations with China helped to construct a progressive aura of respectability and independence" (1974:266).

China's involvement in this period involved primarily development aid and projects. The Suez Canal crisis of 1957 and Algerian War from 1954 to 1962 were two dramatic African events that China became involved with through declaration of military support and financial backing. Similarly, forming alliances with newly formed and forming African governments was China's way to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that it was being underestimated. China had also begun its social and economic plan called the Great Leap Forward. Under the political slogan "let politics take command", the intention was to move China from a largely peasant agrarian economy to a communist society through industrialisation and mechanised farming. Such radical political ideologies aligned well with the radical national liberation movements and ideologies of decolonisation in Africa.

Speaking to a Rangoon audience on 16 April 1960, Zhou Enlai emphasised the two themes central to China's view of Africa: 1) the triumph of people over technology and machines—a comparison between the might of Afro-Asian people and its lack of advanced technology over the more advanced technology of the West—and, 2) the common suffering of China and Africa from imperialism

(Larkin 1973:51).<sup>10</sup> China's interests in Africa were largely a mix of state-driven pragmatic interests and revolutionary ideology (cf. Ogunsanwo 1974; Larkin 1973).

In sum, China's development aid to Africa had several primary functions. Chinese aid, like all aid from foreign countries, is largely a matter of security and international politics. Chinese used aid to accomplish strategic goals such as supporting the corrupt dictator of Zaire, Mobutu, primarily because he was in strong opposition to the Soviet-backed regime of neighbouring Angola. Chinese aid thus was used to offset the influence of the USSR and Western countries. Foreign aid was also provided to discourage diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and to support various national liberation movements in Africa. Thirdly, aid was used to support economic development and political unity among various "Third World" countries. Finally, the economic reason for foreign aid is to develop markets to export goods manufactured in China. During the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, Chinese foreign aid emphasised the dangers of imperialism, including foreign aid from Western countries (Bräutigam 1998).

One of the most successful and largest Chinese development projects is the TAZARA railway project initiated in 1969. A railway line was built from Zambia to the harbour of Dar es Salaam to transport copper from Zambia's copper belt, bypassing white-settler ruled Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia had originally turned to Western donors (including the IMF and World Bank) for support but

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<sup>10</sup> Larkin (1973) citing *Survey of China Mainland Press*, No. 2242 p. 26 and p. 37, 16 April 1960.

they were turned down, owing to claims that the project was not economically viable. China seized on this opportunity. State discourses of Chinese revolutionary ideals and African nationalist ones began to be aligned (Monson 2009).

In 1969, 1,000 Chinese railway technicians were brought in to work on the six-year-long project. Over the next five years, another 30,000 to 50,000 Chinese workers were brought in. The Chinese chosen for this project were mainly selected for their technical expertise. There were two categories of Chinese railway workers: a group of engineering experts and a larger group of technicians (Monson 2009:41). It is uncertain what the experiences of the Chinese workers were since scholarly analysis of this project focuses on the way Tanzanians responded and also on state propaganda and official rhetoric. Using the language of brotherhood and friendship, China emphasised that it was the only world power truly in solidarity with African countries working to combat colonialism and superpower domination. Chairman Mao at this time envisioned the world not in two spheres (i.e East vs. West) but in three worlds: the United States, the USSR, and China. He viewed the U.S. and USSR as similar in that they were both expansionist and imperialist. China's development principles were articulated as "anti-hegemonic". These were laid out according to the eight principles during Zhou Enlai's 1963–1964 visit to Africa. He made the point that Chinese involvement in Africa was not colonial but was primarily to help African nations build self-reliance and remove the ties of dependency to imperial forces. Practical examples of this included Chinese and African workers working and living side-by-side doing similar tasks. Chinese official rhetoric encouraged both sides to be

in solidarity with each other. Tanzanian state rhetoric was similar to official Chinese state rhetoric with the additional emphasis of nation building. However, historians suggest that relationships between Chinese and African workers were “hierarchical and highly regulated” (Monson 2009:7).

What scholars know about Chinese workers during the TAZARA project is primarily related to state and political rhetoric. For example, Monson writes that Chinese experts who worked with African workers “would impart not only technical skills but also the values of simplicity, self-discipline, hard work, and brotherly solidarity” (37). Hard work was a theme that was continually repeated by the Chinese such as the 1965 survey team. The idea behind this was to educate Africans that being hardworking would assist them in being self-reliant. The theme of brotherly solidarity was also emphasised to suggest that cooperation was a sure route to nation building.

We are left wondering why Chinese workers were interested in leaving China, even if temporarily. Monson suspects that since the years of the TAZARA railway project intersected with the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China itself was still underdeveloped and life in China was difficult. Living conditions in Tanzania and Zambia were described by some workers as being better than in China. There were also financial incentives, for workers earned an additional 40 yuan per month (41). Still, it is hard to imagine the deeper motivations and psychological experiences of Chinese workers, especially since Monson’s account primarily analyses state discourse and places it before the backdrop of geopolitics. Through this lens, Chinese become primarily actors for

the state, carrying out the visions of the Chinese state of emphasising hard work, especially working longer hours than the Tanzanian legislature had set out.<sup>11</sup>

Though the TAZARA railway project is one of China's largest in Africa, most development projects were small and often focused on rural agricultural development. In West Africa, these have taken the form of rice cultivation and irrigation projects in what Bräutigam (1994, 1998) has termed exporting the "Green Revolution". Her work compares three major rice irrigation and cultivation projects in Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Liberia that occurred between 1971 and 1977. In all three cases, the rice projects were originally started by Taiwan but then abandoned after the three African countries severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognised China. The projects began with the same goals and blueprint and none was well-maintained after the development teams left. The Gambia was the only country where Chinese aid continued to influence local agriculture five years after the projects ended. Bräutigam concludes that China attempted to use their own rural solutions, which assumed strong state institutional control, and applied them to these West Africa states that politically were weak. Moreover, China did not pay attention to how local land systems worked, and to how gender divisions manifested in rural agriculture. West African governments "remolded [Chinese blueprint designs] to suit their own political needs for patronage, for votes, or for more centralized control" (197).

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<sup>11</sup> Monson's book on the TAZARA railway is primarily that from state and individual African perspectives and her sources are archival records and life narratives of African workers on the railway. A few glimpses of living and working situations of Chinese are in her third chapter, "Building the People's Railway". It is not my intention to fault her for her methods, but only to point out the limitations of history, and that the best one can do in the absence of live narratives are general speculations on motives.

Largely, China imposed their own ideas of rural development based on their experiences of their own land development during the Maoist and post-Maoist era. Scholarly works on China in Africa during this period take a decidedly geopolitical, institutional, and internal state affairs perspective.

### **E. Chinese Activity in Africa, Late Twentieth Century Onwards**

By the mid-1980s, China's interest in Africa had decreased as African states took a dive for the worse and China embarked on a new modernisation project, *Gaige Kaifang* ("Reform and Open"). This modernisation project required foreign investment and technological assistance that China sought from Europe, the United States, and Japan (see, Taylor 1998). By no means did China's presence in Africa disappear. In 1996, before the resumption of media and academic fervour over China in Africa, *The Economist* reported that western governments were losing interest in Africa, but it continued to be a battleground for China and Taiwan to "[compete] frenetically for recognition by governments, much as western powers used to compete for treaties with African kings and chiefs" (The Economist 1996). The story reports that China made a \$10 million joint venture deal with Zaire to process cobalt and copper waste, and another \$250 million deal to overhaul Nigeria's railroads. Its trade with South Africa amounted to \$1.3 billion in 1994. Despite the vigorous Chinese economic activity, the article ends on the low note that European investors, "worn—with a few exceptions—by years of dashed hopes, are sceptical" of China becoming an

economic success in Africa. Some scholars even argued that Africa no longer mattered to China (Segal 1992).

Jump ahead about a decade and the attitudes and attention to China have changed. By the mid-2000s, China's involvement in Africa had increased dramatically from what was deemed "limited influence" (Eisenman and Kurlantzick 2006) to a dramatic \$55 billion in 2006 (Asche 2008; and see, for example, Alden 2005). What *The Economist* had sceptically predicted for the Chinese has now been replaced by a new set of strong criticisms cautioning that China is promoting "rogue governance" (Naím 2007), that this is a turning of a new phase of economic imperialism, even a "revisit of colonialism" (Manji and Marks 2007) and imperialistic tendencies (Eisenman and Kurlantzick 2006; Lyman 2005). A few scholars argue that China's activities have not yet proven to be neo-colonial or imperialistic, though that does not mean they are unproblematic (Asche 2008; Lee 2009; Sautman and Yan 2007). China's "return" to Africa even seems to have caught some Africans by surprise (Gaye 2008). Others have argued that these criticisms are uncritical narratives derived from the West's imaginaries of Africa and China (Mawdsley 2007; Mohan and Power 2008). What happened?

In a speech made in 1985, Deng Xiaoping formed China's post-Mao foreign policy by suggesting that China's primary objective was economic development and modernisation (Mohan and Power 2008). This was a major shift, sparking new economic and commercial engagements. As part of this Reform and Open policy, China began to encourage an outflow of Chinese

migrants, making it easier for business people and workers to go abroad (Thunø 2001). Some scholars (Alden, et al. 2008; Taylor 1998) have also argued that the democratic uprisings in Tiananmen Square in 1989 were a further catalyst in the deepening relations between China and Africa. In the face of diplomatic isolation from the West, China furthered its political alliances with Africa. At the same time, a number of African leaders who did not welcome the West's support for democracy approved of China's handling of the uprisings. In 1999, the Chinese government created a new strategy called *Zouchūqū Zhànliè*, ("Go Out Policy"), which encouraged its state enterprises to go abroad in search of raw materials and investment opportunities in order to create externally driven economic growth (Zhou 2006). In this new period, China's relations with Africa can be characterised as "driven by economic diplomacy rather than the ambitious ideology of the past" as was the case from the 1950s to the 1970s (Alden, et al. 2008:6).

From the African perspective, by the late 1990s and 2000s, the continent had been experiencing a long period of economic decline associated with the Washington Consensus policies of privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation. China's economic growth at this point led it to seek more long-term energy resources, and thus it re-shifted focus to Africa. Its bids for primary resources, compared to bids by Western countries, were competitive because they are accompanied with investment and infrastructure loans. China's investments are often in "neglected infrastructure projects and hardly viable industries," and loans are made at zero or close to zero interest that sometimes can be repaid in natural



resources or cancelled entirely (Sautman and Yan 2007). Analysts have characterised this as a “Chinese model” in which investment and trade play a prominent role in economic growth and foreign relations. This model of “mutual benefit” is one where African states receive development aid and assistance while China receives energy resources or is given access to new markets for Chinese exports (Alden 2005, 2007).

Without a doubt, commercial and political ties between Africa and China have increased in the past decade (Asche 2008). For instance, the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation was held in Beijing in 2000 and subsequently every three years after that. Asche characterises China’s “Africa mode” as being unique in that it builds on different areas that also complement each other. These areas are namely trade, investment, aid, and immigration (Asche 2008; see also, van Dijk 2009). Chinese investment is primarily driven by its desire for resources such as oil, mineral, and metals (Broadman 2007; Hurst 2006), and timber but also in areas such as textiles, construction, agriculture, retail trade, etc. (Asche 2008; Mohan and Power 2008). Countries rich in natural resources (Angola, Sudan, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, South Africa) claim 50 to 80% of China’s foreign direct investment (FDI). Most of these FDI are resource oriented (Alden, et al. 2008). Smaller Chinese businesses, though, are making inroads into non-resource rich countries, such as Sierra Leone, with virginal markets and less government control (Centre for Chinese Studies 2006, 2007). Other places include Namibia, where Chinese traders are situated along the Namibia-Angola border to facilitate “safe trade” to Angolans (Grobler 2006), and Cameroon where

Chinese are selling local street foods, such as beignets (Mbori 2005). This is an important change because although most investments issue directly from the Chinese central government, many do come from provincial and local-levels of Chinese government and also private entrepreneurs. According to Alden et al. (2008), state-backed businesses do not seem to be well integrated to the African business community in contrast to smaller private investors. China is now Africa's third largest trade partner and there are more than 700 Chinese companies (most of them state-run enterprises) in 49 African countries (Mawdsley 2007). In Ghana, the Chinese government has sponsored privately managed activities including construction of the National Theatre in Accra, the Afeji irrigation project, the Dangme East District Hospital, three rural schools, police and military barracks, an office block for the Ministry of Defence, and a powerplant in Tema.

It is uncertain how many Chinese migrants there are in Africa since its diplomatic missions no longer control immigration (cf. Asche and Schüller 2008).<sup>12</sup> Xinhua News Agency (cited in French and Polgreen 2007a) estimated in 2007 that there were 750,000 Chinese migrants working or living for extended periods in Africa. Another estimate is that there are over one million Chinese migrants (Asche and Schüller 2008). Mung (2008) estimates that there are

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<sup>12</sup> When I inquired at the Chinese Embassy in Ghana about the size of the local Chinese population, they admitted that they do not keep figures and that many who entered did so illegally. Instead, they referred me to local Chinese business people whom they said would have a better sense. Chinese in Ghana commonly think that the local Chinese Embassy is not interested in the local affairs of its nationals, except when they are needed to present a unified front for political purposes, what some local Chinese have termed "acting like monkeys [i.e., pets]" for the Chinese government. Local Chinese often contrast China's lack of concern for its nationals with their impression of the American government who are always ready to help their citizens abroad.

between 270,000 and 520,000 of which 70,000 to 80,000 are contract migrants. Hale, citing a Reuters report, quotes an Angolan minister that “4 million Chinese could move to the country during the next few years” (2006:26). The number seems exaggerated but does suggest there is some friction between Chinese and local Africans in certain locales. For instance, Africa-wide conferences organised by trade unions have highlighted employment challenges brought on by Chinese companies, and Zambian and Tanzanian workers employed by Chinese companies have gone on strike (Lee 2009). Senegalese scholar Adama Gaye (2008) notes that the Chinese of Dakar — whom he calls “conquistadors” — have gained “popular legitimacy” but insinuates that they “give no chance to their local competitors” even though there have been protests including those by a national trade union. Furthermore, the Chinese presence in Senegal is being supported by much of the local population. In Ghana, reactions towards Chinese are for the most part positive, although there is growing worry by local Ghanaians (and even long-established Chinese) about their businesses being overrun by new Chinese imports and enterprises.<sup>13</sup>

Currently there are, broadly speaking, three categories of Chinese migratory groups in Africa. Labour migrants make up the largest group and usually are associated with large infrastructure projects, mostly in the oil production and energy resource sector. There is an official estimate of 80,000 labour migrants (Mung 2008) in an estimated 800 state-influenced enterprises

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<sup>13</sup> For negative responses to the Chinese presence in Ghana, see, Frempong (2010); TGT (2008b); Kokutse (2008a, 2008b). For positive responses, see, Asomaning (2008); GNA (2005a, 2008).

(Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009). According to some scholars, much of this increase in number is due to the rush for oil production (Kitissou 2007). The second group consists of entrepreneurs in small businesses such as trade, light manufacturing, and restaurants (for example, Dobler 2008; Haugen and Carling 2005). In some geographic areas and in certain industries, these entrepreneurs are welcomed (for example, Kokutse 2010; Mukumu and Mwiti 2010), but there has also been some tensions with trade unions and local entrepreneurs due, in part, to what has been considered “unfair competition” (Frempong 2010; Gaye 2008; Amankwah 2005). The Chinese are seen to flood the local market with “imitation” or cheaply manufactured products that local industries cannot compete with. Part of the ability of these traders to out-compete African businesses is their use of flexible networks (Bräutigam 2003). The last group consists of undocumented migrants. Some are workers for local industries, while others use African states as a gateway to North American and Europe (for example, GNA 2009d; Mung 2008).

Though much has recently been published about China and Africa relations, the emphasis has been on the geopolitical relationship between China and Africa with most of the emphasis on the Chinese perspective through the use of statistics and government-collected trade data and analysis (for example, Broadman 2007; Lee 2009; Mawdsley 2007; Mohan and Power 2008; Mohan 2008). There is a lack of empirical research, especially on individual actors and

their local networks.<sup>14</sup> There is also a tendency to use a specific country or local phenomena in order to generalise at the continent-wide level.

#### **F. Chinese Emigration to Ghana**

Though much of the research of China and Chinese in Africa has focused on the role that China's political and economic interests played, these interests have been uneven in their significance to Chinese emigration to Ghana (Ho 2008a:50–51). Because the history of Chinese in Ghana is poorly documented, especially because the community remains fluid and rarely noticed by the Ghanaian government and the Ghanaian public, the history I recount here is primarily through oral history and life histories of long-time residents. In particular, residents pointed me to the direction of long-time Chinese factory managers and workers whose residency in Ghana started in the 1960s.

Stories circulating among local Chinese about the earliest Chinese reach back about a decade prior to Ghana's independence from British rule in 1957. The primary pattern up until the 1980s is the story of Hong Kong Chinese manufacturing industries established by industrialists or by their proxies. After these factories were established, the industrialists typically left Ghana behind while their proxies stayed behind and additional Chinese workers were brought

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<sup>14</sup> A few notable exceptions include Bräutigam's (2003) study of how Chinese entrepreneurs were catalysts for manufacturing growth in Mauritius and eastern Nigeria; Lee's (2009) study of Chinese investment in Zambia with a focus on Chinese capitalist pursuit of flexible labour regime; Liu's (2010) study of the interaction between Chinese and Ghanaian sellers in Accra; Hsu's study of traders in Zanzibar (2007) and Chinese medicine in Tanzania (2008), and my own study (2008a) of community among Chinese in Ghana.

over to continue to develop the factories. These stories locate the Chinese first in Takoradi when it was the only city with a deep-sea harbour expediting the import of raw materials from abroad. The story of Chinese settlement begins to shift eastwards to the Accra-Tema region in the 1960s when Tema's harbour and industrial area were developed. The industrial centre moved from the twin cities of Sekondi-Takoradi eastwards 125 miles to the Accra-Tema region

The story goes that Hong Kongers arrived (by ship, presumably) in Sekondi-Takoradi, settling down to establish a tobacco venture (Ho 2008b). It is said that what attracted the venture was that Ghana's tobacco farms showed promising signs of growth. Less than a decade later, the venture collapsed and the Hong Kongers returned home. Local Chinese are uncertain why the venture failed but suspect that because tobacco smoking in Ghana was unpopular, it was difficult to develop the virgin market. Though smoking in Ghana is unpopular relative to other African countries, this seems to be an unlikely reason because the tobacco processing industry was established in 1954 with great support from Nkrumah's government leading to two decades of growth, petering out in the 1980s until its collapse in 2006 (Owusu-Dabo, et al. 2009). The tobacco venture did not bring more than several Chinese to Ghana, none of whom stayed for long.

A few years after the tobacco factory was established, a household enamelware factory was founded in the same region. Several Hong Kongers were brought over to manage the factories though most factory workers were local Ghanaians. The factory continues production today though it has changed ownership a couple of times and according to the managing director, the goal is to

continue the trend of decreasing Chinese staff. First, the Hong Kong Chinese staff were replaced by Chinese from PRC since they were less expensive to hire. Eventually, the goal is to replace most of these Chinese staff with local staff to further cut down labour cost. When I visited the factory in 2004–2005, there were about eight Chinese staff. Beginning in the 1960s, several Chinese textile factories were established, most in the Accra-Tema region with one in Akosombo. These factories brought with them groups of Hong Kong Chinese workers and their families. As was typical of the trend, Chinese workers brought their families with them.

What factors influenced Chinese entrepreneurs to establish businesses in Ghana?<sup>15</sup> One of the narrators of this early history, Albert Kung, a major shareholder and founder of a successful metal rod factory in Ghana, provided an answer. Originally from Shanghai, China, he migrated to Hong Kong and then subsequently to Ghana in the 1970s where he helped to found a steel-rod-making factory. Mr. Kung recounted a version of the early history of Chinese emigrants highlighting the importance of several converging trends. Though most of my fieldwork was conducted in Cantonese, Mr. Kung chose to speak in English, perhaps as a signal that he was a well-educated and well-informed person.

The first Chinese in Ghana who discovered Ghana were seafarers who sailed around southern Africa and then across the Gulf of Guinea in the 1950s. They landed somewhere west of [Tema] around Takoradi, but I don't think they stayed for long. They found the place amicable. Ghana is a beautiful place — good weather and the natives are very tame. You know, Ghanaians are very friendly and not racist. No tribal wars. No ethnic conflicts. Not like Togo or

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<sup>15</sup> A version of this is published in my article, Ho (2008a).

Ivory Coast. And they are very tame, easy to work with, and welcomed foreigners. We had the knowledge for factories and they had the labour. These Chinese reported back home and news was heard how favourable Ghana was for business, so the Chinese came. Ghana was just becoming independent and there was business opportunity. The government was looking for foreign investment, but I don't think they were that keen on aid from Europeans. Development here was also easier for the Chinese from Hong Kong because of the British connection — and business was in English.

Mr. Kung explained that Ghana's political and economic approach to its colonial legacy and desire to rise as an industrial nation created the possibility for Chinese entrepreneurs to establish industries in Ghana.

Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, who played a major role in leading Ghana to independence in 1957, saw himself as champion of Africans' right to self-determination and liberation. Nkrumah was not just satisfied with an independent Ghana but envisioned that the whole of Africa would follow suit. He believed that the ultimate goal was not national unity but political unity across the African continent – the creation of a suprabate (Nkrumah [1957] 1971:290). Nkrumah was aware that Ghana held the unique position of being the first sub-Saharan colony to gain independence and that it played a leading role in pan-African politics in its first nine years of independence. He was conscious of forming foreign policies that “shielded Ghana from ideological conflicts” between the West and the Eastern bloc (Armah 2004). Furthermore, to move Ghana's economy away from dependence on colonial trade and on foreign capital and goods, Nkrumah launched an industrialisation campaign. In 1960, the manufacturing sector claimed 10% of GDP, and by 1970 it was 14% (Berry 1995).



State programs and protectionism over the manufacturing sector created economic possibility and enticed Chinese entrepreneurs to develop their industries.

Another converging trend was China's foreign policy post civil war. As explained above, China's foreign policy was to ally with other developing countries. Chinese Communist Party's control over China was consolidated in 1954, and in 1955 at the Bandung Conference, China had their first major contact with African liberation movements (Larkin 1973). Just as Nkrumah was conscious of not aligning with either the Western or Eastern bloc, China desired to remove itself from the influence of the Soviet Union and to ally with African states. At the same time, China was attempting to get more countries to recognise its dominion over Taiwan. On July 5, 1960, formal diplomatic relations were formed between China and Ghana (EPRCRG 2003). Though early Chinese emigrants to Ghana were not from the People's Republic of China, these diplomatic relations nevertheless set an amenable environment for emigration. It was likely that, to the local population, the internal political differences between Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan did not matter.

The third convergence is the desire of Chinese industrialists to escape from communist influence. Sociologist Wong Siu-Lun (1988) writes about Shanghai industrialists who began emigrating to Hong Kong in the mid-1940s and who eventually helped to develop Hong Kong's vibrant industrial economy, particularly around the cotton textile industry. With the intensification of civil war

in China after World War II in the 1940s, Hong Kong became a refuge for Shanghai industrialists to re-establish their factories.

For some of these industrialists, there was a second subsequent move out of Hong Kong to Southeast Asia and to Africa to escape economic competition in Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong's market for textiles was small, new export markets had to be opened, especially after the United Kingdom and the United States imposed quotas on Hong Kong's textile products. Some of these markets for textiles included Nigeria and Ghana. However, these second migratory moves for the entrepreneurs were temporary. Once the factories were established, managers and workers from Hong Kong were sent to take over the day-to-day operation of the companies, allowing these industrialists the freedom to move away from Ghana. Notably, less wealthy industrialists who did not have factories outside of Ghana continued to manage company operations while wealthier industrialists who also had a larger global reach did not.

In the 1980s, as the manufacturing sector performed weakly (Berry 1995), many Chinese factories let go of their Hong Kong Chinese employees. Some returned to Hong Kong while others decided to immigrate to different Western countries, notably the UK, USA, and Canada. A few who stayed behind typically went into the Chinese restaurant business. The Chinese restaurant business had been in existence prior to the 1980s but was small in number. The 1980s saw a spike in Chinese restaurants, most of which were opened as a result of factory unemployment.

Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Open program set in motion subsequent emigration of mainland Chinese. A small and sporadic trickle of migrants from China began in the 1980s but the trend was not immediately noticeable. Factory owners responded to this trend in part by replacing their Hong Konger employees with employees from China who were cheaper to hire, and, as local Chinese told me, these employees came with fewer demands since their socio-economic conditions in China did not afford the quality of life that Hong Konger employees have.

In the 1990s, Mandarin Chinese speakers became a noticeable portion of the local Chinese population. Many came to sell inexpensive Chinese manufactured goods. An increasingly large number of Chinese in Ghana are these Chinese traders. Some of them have opened up Chinese restaurants, to the displeasure of many existing Chinese restaurateurs who claim this "makes the rice bowl smaller for everyone." Long-time local Chinese residents have remarked to me that in the past they could walk the streets of Accra and Tema and any Chinese they saw on the streets would be someone they recognise or know. This, however, is no longer the case, and this often gives them the impression that there are hordes of new Chinese in town. By my rough estimates in speaking to other Chinese, there are roughly 2,000 Chinese in Ghana, although other estimates have gone as high as 6,000 (Sautman and Yan 2007:89). It is worth noting that the Chinese embassy also is unable to keep records on the local Chinese population. The embassy's reply to me was that many do not register with the embassy, and many are illegally staying in Ghana.

### 3. LEAVING FOR AFRICA: PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS

In order to understand why Chinese emigrants came to Ghana and why, for most of them, Ghana is not home, a closer perspective on individual lives is necessary. On the surface, it may seem that individuals are responding to historical trends and contemporary issues in a similar fashion. This is what most current China-Africa studies suggest when characterising how Chinese (en masse) are living in Africa. Historian Joan Scott writes, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience [history]” (1991:779). To her, the subject is made through historical and cultural discourse. Individuals are undoubtedly affected by larger historical trends and contemporary phenomena, but how they make sense of these trends and respond to them is different. If we are to believe that individuals consciously animate their own experiences and make meaning out of them, then individuals are not just pawns for larger historical and cultural trends. Scholars who write against this grain certainly believe in their own consciousness and agency and expect their readers to do so. Anthropologists should grant this to their informants, and some, such as Rapport (1997a), have argued for such a position.

Closer encounter with individuals would reveal that in many instances motivations that led them to emigrate are not always self-evident. This muddiness can take the form of an urge or a gut feeling that the decision to leave their country was the right choice. If we only examine the larger historical narratives of why Chinese emigration to Ghana occurred, we find individuals telling similar

stories, especially ones about socio-economic reasons. But as the anthropologist builds a closer relationship to the informants, less common narratives arise. I call the existence of these two kinds of stories *concurrent narratives*. They exist at the same time but do not necessarily appear together. Some of these concurrent narratives are readily available. These are narratives that often corroborate larger historical and cultural trends because these trends are publicly accepted and are stereotypical of what is globally, regionally, or culturally accepted as migrant experiences.

Both in academic and everyday discourse, migration has been portrayed as the quintessential experience of our age with global market forces working to uproot people, contributing to an increasing global homogeneity (for example, Hannerz 1987). Typical public narratives of migration among the Chinese are in alignment with such discourses. Jobs are no longer easily accessible at home, and opportunities for making a living exist abroad. Making a living is difficult, and we have to go where the jobs are. These somewhat stereotypical and publicly accessible narratives result from the collusion of various desires. These narratives can act as a way for individuals to confirm their status in the group. Among the Chinese, the idea of being able to go where jobs exist is considered a sacrifice necessary to keep a family healthy. It is an honourable move. Moreover, this narrative is a way to portray the migrant experience as an inevitable and unquestionable (i.e., natural) way of contemporary life and so allows the individual to hide from discussing more complex and difficult circumstances. Scholars also may play a role in reinforcing the public visibility of these

narratives. In our desire for theoretical legibility of our field experiences and local informants, these public narratives easily work with already existing academic themes of late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century migration experiences such as globalisation, labour market forces, and the “unbounded citizen”. Much scholarly work on migration is about flows and intersections of geo-political and socio-economic forces. The migrant’s public narratives of migration work with our theoretical understanding of global migration.

Other narratives that co-exist but do not necessarily co-appear with these publicly available ones tend to be private narratives that emerge in certain relationships and interactional contexts. Migrants sometimes deflect these private narratives as a way to prevent further inquiry into potentially charged, complex, and convoluted issues. Individual experiences are complex and behaviours and actions often conflict from one moment to the next. Neither the informant nor the scholar has a conceptual shell to wrap these stories in a tidy fashion. As the anthropologist builds the relationship with informants, these muddy and contradictory private narratives may reveal some of the processes of meaning-making. I understand these incomplete, contradictory, and muddy narratives to be part of the individual’s process of coming to terms with their circumstances, with the choices they made with clear intention, and with the actions they took without intending to have done so.

These public and private narratives are not always in competition with each other. The idea of concurrent narratives is that not only are these narratives happening at the same time but that private narratives make use of public

narratives. Rapport makes the argument that stereotypical (public) narratives are used by individuals to “locate themselves in this migrating world, so an imaging of order and collectivity in terms of social stereotypes is a means of positing a wished-for-definitional stability while simultaneously being able to come to terms with the continuity of possibly radical personal change” (1995:271). Public narratives allow informants to have some understanding of their individual experiences, anchored by what is publicly acceptable and thus having weight as public truth. But while these public narratives serve as structures for interpretation of individual experiences, they do not encompass the entirety of how an individual understands their experiences, nor do they speak for the individual. In Rapport’s words, “It is individuals who continue to speak and mean, not their stereotypical discourse” (271). To rely only on larger historical reasons to understand Chinese emigration leads us to simply understand the publicly acceptable and neatly bounded stories, but does not help us understand the process of coming to terms with the individual experience of migrancy.

#### **A. Narratives of Economics: Global Trends and Growing Markets**

It is common for Chinese, like other emigrants, to say that improving their own socioeconomic status is the primary, obvious reason for moving. Finer variations of this theme exist. Unattached young men also express that leaving gave them the opportunity to explore the world. In other scenarios, this sense of improving or sustaining one’s socioeconomic status is not as closely linked with a

personal sense of growth but rather more closely associated with the desire to reform and reshape the world that one encounters.

### **Jim Tse, Entrepreneur: Reshaping World Circumstances through Business Practices**

What the Chinese nicknamed Chinatown in Accra is a large walled-in compound comprised of two white-washed four-storey buildings with a total of twelve apartments in the residential neighbourhood of North Kanda. The two buildings face Ring Road, the major thoroughfare that runs in a semi-circular fashion along Accra's east-west axis, cutting through major residential and commercial districts. The compound is nicknamed Chinatown because the apartments are occupied only by Chinese, making it one of the few places in town with a relatively high density of Chinese who are living in the same quarters but are not employed by the same company. The compound was built for the Chinese staff of Freedom Textile, which its staff fully occupied in its heyday. Today, without a sizeable Chinese staff, Freedom Textile has rented out the apartments to other Chinese, most of whom are later migrants arriving in Ghana in the 1990s and 2000s. Migrants who arrived earlier in Ghana occupy a couple of the apartments.

Jim Tse, a recent Chinese migrant to Ghana, occupies one of these apartments. His house is spartan. The sitting room has two sofas and a Formica dining table, all pushed against the walls making the centre of the room spacious but empty feeling. The austere nature of his apartment is not unusual for Jim's



lifestyle. Almost half of the year, he lives in the U.S. as he buys and ships used computer parts to his computer repair company in Ghana.

Jim was a medical doctor trained in Shanghai, China, and later went to the UK for his doctorate. When he immigrated to the United States, he went into the informational technology sector. As a result of the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, the IT sector became unprofitable. He was faced with the question of where to find new markets for his products. He debated whether he should go to Asia or China or Africa, which he considered a virgin market.

When he came to Ghana in 2000 for initial market research, the experience reminded him of how China was in the 1970s. The market and profits one could make did not correspond with each other. He characterised this as a “funny market” in which the relationship between the market and profit were “irrelevant”. He explained,

The average profit margin for selling computers is 20%. It is impossible to make an 80% profit, and no one is willing to make a 5% profit. This is what the mature market looks like. In Africa, this isn't the case. Here, you can sell something for 100 times the cost price. Correspondingly, if you have a good product, one that sells particularly well in China and the U.S., [it is possible that] no one here might buy it. The market here is completely irrelevant!<sup>16</sup>

Jim explained that the Ghanaian market does not correspond to what goes on in the global market and that its “profits do not correspond to stabilised profit margins.” Markets typically have a “natural margin,” which Jim explained means that there are relatively narrow profit margins. Profit margins in the U.S. average

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<sup>16</sup> Jim's native language is Mandarin Chinese, but we conversed in English. He is fairly fluent in English, but his grammar and expressions may sometimes be confusing to read in the written form. For the sake of clarity, I have made some edits though I try to do them judiciously so as to be faithful to his voice and manner of speaking.

20% to 30%, while those in China are around 40% to 50%. If you wanted to gain 200% profits on a computer, it would be impossible. Jim describes the market in Ghana as “very different” and “confusing”. The usual western understanding of market logics and business practices do not seem to apply.

We originally did market research and followed the American way and hired a market survey company. When I looked at the market survey report, I scratched my head and said what kind of report is this? So I came over to take a look. Initially, I couldn't make sense of this place. So, I pretended to be a customer and went from company to company to look at what kinds of computers were sold. I found out that it's a very good market. For example, in the US, you can sell a particular computer for \$600 but here you can sell it for \$1,600! You'll be surprised. Somebody will buy it! But companies are confused by this profit margin because if they follow this route they will eventually fail. You ask them why the business isn't doing so well, and they will tell you competition for selling computers is very high now. Some said we were selling our computers for \$1,200 but somebody else is selling it for \$1,600. The computer competition here is very narrow. It's like the mining companies. With surface mining, you can make some profit but not much and it will eventually end. But underneath the surface is where most of the profit is. Ghana's market is in this segment—underneath the surface.

Jim discovered that the market for selling highly profitable computers is small and quickly exhausted by the flood of businesses that capitalise on this discovery. Digging deeper, he found that there is a bigger market for computers in Ghana but only for very inexpensive computers in the \$200 range. “When they are looking at a computer they don't define what computer they want. They just want a computer to do some word-processing, home-office work, and some educational programs.” Jim explains that importing cheap (used) computers to the Ghanaian market is only the first step. You need to “train” the market and “develop” it in contrast to mature markets like in the U.S. where consumers are

more concerned about having a wide range of choice than simply the availability of a type of product. He explains,

You're actually trying to train the Ghanaian market. The market starts with a low-end used computer, which is what locals can afford. When he feels a need to upgrade for education, for business or other purposes he will come to you. We're developing and broadening this market. Initially, this market doesn't exist. The second target, because this is a virgin market, is to have reliable tech support to lead people to believe you are dependable and offer them good service. That's user support. I train staff to be familiar with all machines so they can repair them. We use that to fill in a gap that doesn't exist in Ghana, the technical support gap. When the market knows how to handle technical support, computer spare parts, along with selling computers, then the market is getting matured. We call it self-sustainable economic product. We've made it full circle.

From the framing of the larger historical and social perspective, one might find it easy to explain Jim's movement as part of the unfolding neoliberal trend of flexible accumulation where private parties are interested in maximising their personal profits and as such, are part of the mobile elites of the world. Per Harvey's (1989) explanation of capitalistic logic in the period of postmodernity—similarly named “late capitalism” or “neoliberalism”—he argues that economic change occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the conflict of interest between capital and labour was exposed as post-war economic recoveries of Western Europe and Japan led to the saturation of their internal markets. As a result, Western Europe and Japan sought external markets. To do this, corporations had to gain flexibility and move away from the rigidities of domestic Fordist economies that depend on the social contract between corporations, labour unions, and the State. This flexible regime of accumulation means

corporations becoming mobile, gaining flexibility in their workforce and production, with the aim of lowering production costs.

Ong (1999) extends Harvey's examination of this condition of flexible accumulation in her study of the mobility of Hong Kong Chinese elites, and she comes up with the term "flexible citizenship". She argues that for elite transnational migrants, citizenship is no longer about integrating themselves and gaining recognition in their adopted country but rather about several things that she labels under the term "flexible". Flexible citizenship is "the cultural logics of capital accumulation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6). Mobility is key to capital accumulation, so elites need to be ready to move to take advantage of emergent opportunities and thus cannot be tied down to any place. Related to this is the idea of multiple citizenship, which enables these elites' mobility. Furthermore is the idea of acquiring not only capital but symbolic capital, such as language ability, education, behaviours, and so forth. Citizenship for these elites then has lost the original affective weight (e.g., sense of belonging, civic responsibility) that the term used to carry (see, Kymlicka and Norman 1994).

This historical and cultural perspective of late capitalism is a partial picture of transnational elites. When taken too far, it blinds scholars from seeing other things that are idiosyncratic to certain individuals. If we only used this perspective to understand Jim's trans-Atlantic travels between the U.S. and Ghana, we would not see that beyond flexible citizenship and flexible accumulation are Jim's desires to reshape circumstances that he faces in late capitalism. It was not self-evident

that Jim could gain capital in Ghana's economy, and yet he tried. Scholars and journalists have noted that Western entrepreneurs are abandoning African economics because of the risks involved, but Chinese entrepreneurs are not. These economies are characterised by a "high level of market imperfections" such as "institutional voids", which Acquah, et al. have defined as "the absence of market-supporting institutions, specialized intermediaries, contract-enforcing mechanisms, and efficient transportation and communications networks" (2008:99). A result of "institutional voids", there is an increase in business transaction cost and business risk along with less efficient market institutions. In spite of these risks and inefficiencies, it bears to note that the conditions for *seeing possibilities* in the economy hinge upon an individual's attempts to make it work, in spite of what Jim refers to as an "irrelevant" (illogical) and "confusing" market that does not follow economy theories taught in the West.

My conversation with Jim showed that his departure from the U.S. and decision to work in Ghana were both a result of external circumstances and his own desire to reshape those circumstances. Leaving the U.S. market did not seem to be a difficult decision for him, but where to go to next was uncertain. Ghana's virgin market was risky, and, from the failure of other computer businesses there, it did not seem to be a promising market especially since it seemed to have a logic of its own. Applying regular business practices to this new market failed, as other businesses had demonstrated. Undeterred, he sought to dig deeper to understand the market. He explains how he realised there was another market for computers in Ghana, but not the lucrative high-profit margin one that quickly dried up. He

explained how he went to different companies that he thought would have a use for computers. When Jim offered to sell them a \$1,000 computer, the companies told him that they could only afford to buy low-end computers close to the \$200 level.

And that's how you begin to find out this other market for computers. You might want to sell \$1,000 computers but people only want to buy \$100 or \$200 level computers. That's what's underneath this high profit margin. It's what's below the surface—surface mining. How many people actually want to buy low-end computers? I say let's leave the computer sector and go to the automobile industry. Tell me how many people own cars in Ghana? At least ten percent. If people can buy vehicles, they must have the financial potential to buy computers if they wanted. And the second question is how to determine people's buying power, which is how much money they really have to buy computers. The conclusion I found is that people can afford \$200 for the computer. Can you make a \$200 computer and make money? If you can answer this question right now, you do it.

Jim discovered other things about the market that made it possible to sell a \$200 computer. The kind of computers that these companies and private individuals wanted would cost about \$500 in the US, but Jim found a way to make this work. Clients were generally not concerned with the latest model of computers and would accept computers that could perform a few basic functions like getting on to the Internet, word processing, and a few other basic home-office functions. Jim found the solution by importing used computers.

I'm not trying to dump trash in this country. Actually, I'm trying to train this market. This market begins with low-end computers and when the client feels necessary to upgrade, they will buy more expensive and perhaps new computers. And whom would they buy it from? From me! We're developing and broadening and growing this market. You're not going to deliver products to the market that wants new computers because this market doesn't exist.

The market that doesn't exist is the market for higher-end and more powerful computers. In the past four years, Jim has been developing the market towards more expensive computers. He holds annual technology fairs for school students and adults in the Accra region introducing them to computers and work that they could do. One of these is the Children's Festival for visually impaired students held annually in August. Local teachers are hired and trained to use the computers who then go on to teach these students. In addition, his company has expanded to include repair and upgrade services so that over time clients can extend the life of their computers until the entire model needs to be replaced.

In four years his operation has expanded from its headquarters in Accra to new branches in Kumasi and Takoradi. The rapid spread to create new markets was potentially risky given the nascent nature of the computer market. Foreign managers often run the everyday operations of foreign owned companies in Ghana. As confirmed by local Chinese entrepreneurs I spoke to, this is particularly true for Chinese businesses where Chinese are employed to keep an eye on local employees.<sup>17</sup> This is due partly to distrust of locals and partly to the lack of skilled workers and management in the local workforce. Jim's company is unusual in that, except for himself, local Ghanaians run the company. Even more unusual from this perspective is that Jim is typically out of the country six months of the year leaving his staff to manage the business.

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<sup>17</sup> As far as I know, there are no in-depth studies of labour organisation and management of foreign companies in Ghana. Basic data such as the number of foreign companies in Ghana, the social components of the workforce these companies and company activities have not been collected. Major studies of these types of companies describe similar difficulties ((cf. Acquah, et al. 2008; Grant 2001; 2002).)

Jim characterises his company as a mix of various cultural elements drawn from his experiences growing up in China, being educated in the U.K. as a doctor, and most recently having lived in the U.S.:

Chinese companies here normally have at least a Chinese or a white person sitting in the office taking care of business, or supervising the whole company. In my company, I may not be here for six months. I'm not involved in any daily decision. I don't care about what they are doing.

This company is unique and many have asked why I'm the only Chinese person working in the company. First, this is not a Chinese company. It's an American company. Just because I'm Chinese you think it's a Chinese company? Second, the foundation of this company is Ghanaian with US management style and regulations. This is not something practised by Chinese companies.

Describing his company's foundation as Ghanaian, he means that his company is much of the time managed by Ghanaians. Generally, managers and supervisors of Chinese-owned companies are Chinese because they do not trust Ghanaians to have the skill and reliability to smoothly run a company. When Jim described his company as using US management style and regulations, he is contrasting that to what he characterises as typical Chinese companies that are run with unclear and unwritten regulations, and that are mostly dependent on favours and social connections. Jim explained that combining different cultural elements from his various experiences—growing up in China, going to medical school in the U.K., and setting up business in the U.S.—has helped him to figure out how to sort out some of the “unusual” and “confusing” situations and practices in Ghana. Using what he called “time philosophy”—perhaps more



accurately described as cultural philosophy—he demonstrated that it is one key reason why there are business conflicts and misunderstandings in Africa:

When you look at time philosophy you can understand why there are so many cultural and business conflicts. Americans are frustrated with Chinese, and Chinese are frustrated with Africans. Chinese philosophy is more like *Taiji* (a form of Chinese martial arts), more organic. Americans are more precise [to the point]. When a Chinese says we think it's good, we'd like to think about it, he actually means he is not interested, but an American takes this to mean he's interested. When an American is not interested, he will say I don't think I'm interested but I really think it's good. When a Chinese says I'm interested, it usually means let's put business to a halt. Looking at Confucian philosophy, we are taught to respect each other; we don't want to say no I don't like it. We don't want to say no. But when you deal with Europeans and Americans, they use their instant feelings. If it feels good, they do it. When you talk to Africans, sometimes their mind is blank. They have no idea what you might be talking about but they'll say 'Oh okay, it's good. I think we can do it.' But when you see how they carry out the task, you can see they didn't understand. Neither of these philosophies are better than the other. But you can use these situations to determine what business attitude you will hold. You can determine how you will adjust yourself....You cannot use certain kinds of attitude to push people's businesses here.

Jim talked about how this influenced his approach to his business. He made the point that when Chinese do business, they do not generally have a business plan: "They act according to circumstances. It's a very flexible strategy. There is no certain way." He characterises the American method as "not flexible," carrying forth a business plan from day one and seeing it through to maturity: "Usually Americans do pilot projects, testing and so forth. For Chinese, they do it right away. No pilot project." Jim had difficulty understanding and characterising African business methods, but he knew it was messy and somewhat illogical to him. For example, local business procedures and government regulations seemed

to discourage businesses. Jim says his local employees do not always fully understand the logic of his business methods and have in the past tried to work differently. But he says he has a “simple regulation” in his business: “Do it my way!”

Although I have not been able to ascertain firsthand whether what Jim described as his business methods is what he practices, it is revealing to hear him describe how he tries to balance giving power to his staff and training them to carry out business in his way. Two examples demonstrate this. First is the way he tries to work with productivity issues in the company. Staff are paid twice a month. The first part of the month they are paid a salary that is higher than what employees of other IT companies are given. The latter part of the month is when they get 2 to 3% commission from sales. He explained that productivity is a constant problem in Ghanaian businesses, and he found a method that created motivation for productivity.

Ghanaians always give you excuses. They say, sir it's the first month of the year, we've just finished New Year's, so no one has any money to buy computers. I say okay. The second month they say, February is the shortest month of the year, so sales are less than normal. I say okay. Then March comes along and they say we've just started picking up business again. Then April, they say, we have Easter holiday so people don't have much money. You can say every month they have very good excuses for why business is slow. But when you build in a commission system in the middle of the month, they only have to explain to themselves why they aren't being more productive. They know this, and they have families to feed, so they are more likely to be productive especially when they know the next pay cheque depends on their productivity.

The second example Jim pointed out was the impact that funerals had on worker productivity. Funerals play a major social and economic role in Ghanaian

life forming an intricate link between living, death, and money.<sup>18</sup> Among the Akan, funeral rites are the intersection of social, political, and religious ideologies (Arhin 1994:309). They are often public events used as a stage by families to demonstrate their prestige, wealth, and respect in the community (for example, de Witte 2003). In certain cases, villages would compete for the glory of claiming the body of a deceased (Gilbert 1988). Many ethnic groups in Ghana believe that one's ancestral spirits are the guardians of the resources of the living, and that therefore the living also need to take care of the dead (Arhin 1994:309). Since the 1950s, expenses and the size of funerals have steadily increased along with the number of days that are devoted to celebrating and mourning the dead. Arhin argues that this is due to the expanding size of villages, the growing connections between villages and wealthier urban areas, and the influence of religious beliefs, namely Christianity. This has resulted in “the installation of money at the centre of social relations...so that funeral rites become opportunities for money-making” (Arhin 1994:313). In the past several decades, there have been local and national debates about the effects of funeral expenditures and time spent on celebrating and mourning the dead. Some argue that the expenditures, though large, are not damaging because funeral participants contribute to paying for the expenses of the funeral—such as the music, food, dancing, and concert parties (for example, Cole 1997)—and also funerals support industries that grow up around these social events (for example, Arhin 1994; Mensah 2007). Others, such as traditional

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<sup>18</sup> There is a website and newspaper dedicated just to announcing funerals in Ghana ((see, *Funerals in Ghana*)).

leaders and councils (for example, GNA 2009b), and the national parliament and presidents (for example, GNA 2009c; TGT 2009) have argued that the time and money spent on funerals result in a loss of work productivity and drain money away from local development projects (for example, Lentz 1994:159-163, fn 15).

Local employees often expect their companies to give them time off to attend funerals of those in their lineage, not just those in their immediate family. Employees expect to attend a funeral for several days, and funerals occur many times throughout the year. Family members of the deceased expect companies to contribute money to help with funeral expenses and that a funeral representative from the company will attend and participate in the customary rites. Moreover, it is not unusual for family of the deceased to ask the company for financial or employment help in the distant future. In other words, an employee's personal world intermingles with their work world in a much tighter way than is expected in the West. During my fieldwork, I became the funeral representative for my host parents' restaurant when one of their head chefs died after prolonged illness. I attended the funeral, participated in some of the funeral rites, and presented a sum of money to the chef's wife. To the surprise of my host parents, the wife came to visit the restaurant several months later to ask for further financial assistance. My host parents thought presenting the sum of money to the family meant the linkage between the deceased employee and the restaurant was now finished. Apparently this was not so. Jim faces the challenge of managing these funeral customs that link his company and his world to the personal lives of employees.

In this company, we don't really listen to excuses; we're looking for results. We have to evolve Ghana. We all have our own culture and habits. We have to respect their [Ghanaian] culture. If you're in Ghana, you have to respect Ghana. But if you're in my company, you have to respect my company culture. In Ghana, they attend funerals everyday. One of my fellow friends who has lived in Ghana for more than 20 years warned me about this. They often go to funerals between Thursday and Sunday. Much of their lifetime is spent at funerals. Seven days a week, and four days for funeral. Only three days for work. And not only that, your company has to contribute something to show sympathy, appreciation, whatever else the reasons are.

Jim explained to his employees that the “company is like an individual human being...a neutral entity that doesn't play a role at any wedding, funerals, or personal affairs. He doesn't have emotions. Let's respect him.” To manage these cultural expectations, Jim directed the personnel relations manager to handle the funeral announcements that employees wanted to be made known. He also had the manager set up a system for employees, including himself, to contribute money for particular funerals, thus maintaining a system to distinguish between himself and the company that he owns. In both these situations, Jim demonstrates that given the circumstances he has to work with, he attempts to reshape them in ways that do not violate the cultural practices and habits while at the same time providing a different path and incentives for change to occur.

### **James: Coming (I)**

Though the lives of most Chinese are hardly noticed by non-Chinese, there is even a subsection of the population that tends to be out-of-sight from most other Chinese. Many of these are workers for private Chinese companies. Some of

these companies are under contract with the Chinese government for different kinds of development projects far away from urban areas. They stay for a few years and then leave, hardly making any dents in the everyday lives of the rest of the Chinese population.

There is also another set of workers, mostly from China, who work for Chinese factories. Although they are employed for longer terms than the development project contract workers, many of them live, work, and spend their free time within the compound of the factory. The first group tends to be the most isolated from the rest of the Chinese community, although the second group is not far behind.<sup>19</sup> News about these groups, takes the form of anonymous and vague stories that spread through the rumour mills. It is often pointed out that entrepreneurs, the ones whose hands reach into many different social networks and whose motives are often suspect, are the ones who know the lives of these people. The reputation of most businessmen is that it is their business to know what is going on with others, and it is also their business to keep you from know what is going on with them.

I first heard about James, a Chinese glass factory supervisor, during a casual conversation in a mixed company of entrepreneurs and their housewives. Although his name was not mentioned, it was said that production at Aaron Pok's glass factory in Tema had stopped again and the two Chinese workers there were now just "hanging around" with nothing much to do. The fate of the workers was

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<sup>19</sup> This type of isolation amongst Chinese workers on development projects seems to mirror the experiences of Chinese workers in Tanzania of the 1970s.

brought up as another example of how difficult the economic climate was in Ghana for business owners and how living in Ghana was often *kumen* (boring and depressing). The expression captured this feeling of stagnation and on-again off-again stuckness. It also curiously highlighted migrants' insistence on going through this difficulty.

I finally met James through a series of serendipitous events. Because I often travelled between Tema and Accra for fieldwork and to visit friends, I became the *de facto* messenger and delivery person for part of the Chinese network. I often delivered money and goods between entrepreneurs and clients. Many Chinese ran informal trading businesses in addition to their main line of work. These trading businesses imported products that were in demand or had potential for the domestic market. Extra space left in the cargo containers is filled with familiar Chinese food products and household items that attract Chinese clientele. Production had stopped at the glass factory, and Aaron had revived his seasonal trading business. One of the products he was promoting was powdered laundry detergent, and several friends asked me to pick up bags of this detergent. It was on one of these trips to Tema that I became acquainted with James, the floor supervisor for the factory, and over the course of several visits grew to know more about his life in Ghana.

James is a married man of 35 with a young child. Both his wife and child live in China. Neither of them has visited him in Ghana or has any plan to do so. Every two years, James returns to China to visit. His wife works in a factory in China where they first met. James has been in Ghana since 1999, about six years.

He is busiest when the factory is in production, which happens to be about six months of the year. In that period, he works eight to twelve hour shifts rotating with another Chinese employee, with occasional help from Aaron. Once the glass furnace is lit, production has to be continuous because glass that cools and hardens will expand, breaking the machinery. To clear the machinery of all molten glass once a night is a tremendous amount of work. When production finally stops for the year, James does other odd jobs for the factory and for Aaron. On his off days, he prefers to stay in the factory compound.

On one particular visit I found James sitting at his usual spot at the desk surrounded by piles of scrap metal, old tools, and broken office furniture. The factory had been shut down for six months. James pointed to the boxes of glass lanterns that filled the back half of the factory. "There's more in the back there," he said. "Production won't start until we are able to clear these products." I asked him if the fuel price increase of 50% in February had affected them and he waved his hand. Production had actually stopped long before the price of fuel increased. "We aren't even increasing the price of our lanterns. Same old price as before," he said, implying that it was difficult to do business in Ghana, and despite their best efforts, the piled up stock, which is essentially unrealised cash, was not moving.

The factory has had intermittent production cycles for the past many years. Why did James keep returning to his job here? What made him leave China? Tema did not seem a particularly inviting place to spend one's time, especially the industrial section of town. The town has outgrown its original plan from the 1960s and now is spilling well beyond its original plan. The infrastructure is



unable to keep up. Unpaved and well-worn roads criss-cross these new areas, including the area where the glass factory is. Local entertainment<sup>20</sup> and lifestyle are generally uninviting for Chinese. It also seemed that spending one's free time within the walled compound was not that enjoyable. In our conversations, James mentioned that he never thought about immigrating because he did not have the persona qualifications to do so: "What skills do I have? I have never thought about immigrating. All I can do is fix machines and simple things like bearings and machine parts." But somehow, he did migrate to Ghana.

Over lunch at the factory with the other Chinese worker and Aaron and Sandra Pok, I asked James why he came to Ghana. He said, "It's very simple, like everyone else. Why am I here in Ghana? Money. It's all about the money. I didn't get a very good education in China. I don't have many opportunities. I can save a lot here in Ghana. All living expenses are provided." He laughed, smiled broadly at Aaron and Sandra, lifted his chopsticks in the air, and then bent his head down as he resumed eating from his rice bowl. His message was clear. It was a familiar one. He poked a little fun at his bosses, Aaron and Sandra, who have an obligation to the welfare of their employees (James) even during difficult economic times. James was lightly suggesting that he has the better end of the bargain because he receives a salary, much of which he can save, and all expenses are paid even though factory work has stopped. But it wasn't so clear to me that

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<sup>20</sup> Local entertainment includes: concert parties (a kind of popular theatre performed by travelling bands of actors and musicians who perform African pop music, skits, melodramas, and popular highlife music); neighbourhood drinking spots; and nightclubs that play both Western and African pop music. Ghanaian social life also often revolves around church activities which include gospel singing and dancing.

James had the better deal. Walled in without other entertainment, his life in the factory seemed confining and small. I found it hard to believe that being a self-imposed prisoner in a foreign country was what he had bargained for. All he divulged to me about why he left China for Ghana was related to money. What he said seemed to conceal other possibilities more than it seemed to clarify. Sometimes it seemed he may have been using typically accepted public narratives to divert attention away from more personal reasons.

## **B. Concurrent Narratives**

Anthropological theories of migration tend to be situated in the context of capitalism and globalisation, arguing that economics is the primary reason for such movement (Foner 2003). These are also the most obvious and common narratives that Chinese migrants themselves give when first asked about their reasons for leaving. Over the course of my fieldwork as I developed deeper relations with some of my informants and had more opportunities to talk with them in different settings, a wider and more nuanced range of reasons arose. Reasons that they originally presented for leaving their home and settling in Ghana gave way to a much wider range of reasons and even opened up questions they had about the choices they made. Doubt was sometimes expressed over their intention in wanting to leave. I call the simultaneous existence of multiple narratives, *concurrent narratives*. These narratives are not expressed at the same time. Certain narratives are divulged with greater ease, and often in more public

settings, while other narratives occur in more personal settings. Concurrent narratives reveal that reasons for leaving tend to be more complicated than economic motives. Sometimes one narrative supersedes another or conflicts with other narratives. Often, more public narratives serve to close off inquiry to more personal reasons and exploration of alternative narratives. In a striking way, concurrent narratives also reveal that informants do not always have clear reasons for why they left for Ghana. Motivations that seemed clearer in the past may not seem as clear in the present moment. Or perhaps the reasons were never clear to begin with.

Much of my fieldwork, like other anthropological fieldwork, does not only involve direct interviews but rather occurs in less well-defined and more everyday situations such as during car rides, conversations over dinner, or while socialising at a party. Although fieldwork has a defined time limit, many conversations that begin in the field do not always end when I leave the field. They disappear and sometimes re-appear at different times in the field, or even after formal fieldwork has completed. Such environments and circumstances allow space for the curiosities and interests of both my informant and me to unfold more naturally, rather than being confined to the time and space constraints of formal direct interviews.

## James: Then Going, and Coming (II)

I was often unsatisfied with the initial responses my informants gave as to why they left their original homes and came to Ghana: “It’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s for the sake of money.” Financial well-being plays a role in why people migrate, but to simply understand this phenomenon as a choice made by *Homo economicus*,<sup>21</sup> the model of the person who is rational, self-interested, and an instrumental maximiser, is too tidy. The model is unable to account for contradictions and conundrums in decisions made by people like James who may at times explain their lives from a rational economic perspective, at other times question the sense in striving too much for wealth, and at other times express uncertainty as to how to balance priorities within his family. Furthermore, paths taken are not always a result of intentional choices, but can be a result of resigning oneself to the pressures of external circumstances. With many of my informants, eventually circling back to the question months or a year later produced different results.

James, the glass factory supervisor discussed previously, was also one of many who gave a simple economic rationale for leaving their previous homes, but subsequent conversations revealed some of the twists and turns that happened before he took the path to emigrate. One conversation with Aaron, which James corroborated, has a surprising twist. James’s former employer in China was

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<sup>21</sup> Persky (1995) has a good discussion of how *Homo economicus* has been misunderstood by critics of Mill. Persky argues that Mill’s *Homo economicus* (a term he never actually used) “does not treat of the whole of man’s nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society” (Mill 1967[1836]:321) but is only concerned with the person who is interested in gaining wealth.

friends with Aaron's parents. When Aaron wanted to hire a Chinese to manage the factory, Aaron's parents, who were living in China at that time, offered to help. They had close connections to factory owners in the area, and eventually one of them highly recommended James to them.

James was reluctant to take on the opportunity but at the same time did not entirely dismiss the idea of leaving China. Aaron was unable to get James to make a firm decision, despite their numerous phone conversations. His indecision caused some uneasy periods for Aaron. Each factory has a quota for how many foreign employees it can hire. To exercise that, Aaron had to apply ahead of time. Aaron explained that at the last minute, he had to force a decision out of James by telling him that he could no longer be indecisive because the quota was approved and he had to come. In 1999, James came alone, leaving his wife behind. James did not seem to come with full intent and willingness, nor could it be said that he was totally unwilling. He seemed uncommitted either way. I pondered this, considering how it was possible for someone to be pushed into a life-changing decision without feeling strongly convinced for it. It was a decision he chose not to fully make and one in which he allowed external circumstances to push him in certain ways.

In a later conversation, when I asked James again why he came to Ghana, he emphasised the economic well-being aspect of the decision:

I tell you. I can't compete with many people, I tell you [He attended very few years of school and has no diploma] . When I left my foster parents, I had nothing. 1985 was when I left my foster parents. I only had my own shirts and nothing else. Not a single cent. I wanted my own home, wife and son. Brother, if I didn't leave China

to try to strive for some money, I will have no opportunity. I've come out for about 6 years now. My aim in life was to have a house, marry a wife, and have a son.

Later in the conversation, he also admitted that the idea of coming to Ghana (which is glossed as Africa) was scary for him:

I thought, like you see in those movies, Africans were still living in thatched huts and naked. At first I was afraid to come over, but then later I decided to take on the risk.

In the earlier part of the conversation, James suggests that he did not have much hesitancy when deciding to immigrate to Ghana. In a later part of the conversation, he suggests that there were risks involved; however, because he was unattached and perceived that he was unable to compete with others in China's job market, he decided to risk coming to Ghana.

How do we understand these three narratives of James's emigration? One narrative spoken at the lunch table in the factory portrays the move as one made entirely out of simple economic sense. A later narrative portrays James as being practically forced by external circumstances to come to Ghana. The final narrative shows that James was uncertain about his emigration as he considered the possibility of living in what could be a worse social environment.

While there is a tradition in anthropology to demonstrate voice and agency, it is also equally true that people do not always know why they make certain decisions. In James's case, representing his story in multiple ways suggests that coming to Ghana was not an unambiguous decision for him. It is apparent that he debated with himself whether to emigrate, and later conversations I describe below show him having doubts whether he should continue to be an emigrant.

The three different narratives about his arrival to Ghana are indicative of the vestiges of earlier debates he had with himself, ones that he has internalised, and at the moment of being questioned about his decision, these different narratives arise. It also suggests that part of the decision was left to intuition (e.g., “I decided to take on the risk”) while part of him relinquished making a firm decision and allowed external circumstances to narrow down his choices or to make a choice appear more obvious (e.g., being pressured by Aaron who told James it was too late to change his mind).

These concurrent narratives exist simultaneously but are expressed under different circumstances. The most public and therefore most common narrative about Chinese emigration portrays individuals as driven by economic self-interest. There are various reasons for the effectiveness of this explanation. This kind of narrative is made commonsensical at many levels of power, from governments to scholars of immigration to individuals themselves. At each level, this type of narrative is reaffirmed, legitimised and thus its commonsensical quality becomes recursive. This narrative of economic self-interest is consistent with contemporary Chinese and Ghanaian state rhetoric.

Ghana historically coupled its immigration policy to its economic development, though with short periods of anti-immigrant sentiments. After the political independence in 1957, Nkrumah’s government was in a period of rapid economic development and infrastructural and administrative expansion. For these, a large number of immigrants were employed largely as labourers. Foreign industrialists were also invited to build up Ghana’s manufacturing base, which

early Chinese migrants were part of. When Ghana's economy began to decline in 1962, the government tried to arrest this by placing restrictions on foreign remittances leading many African labour migrants, especially those of cocoa farms, to return to their original country (Addo 1974). This policy was less effective towards the Chinese because their salaries were paid in Hong Kong using Hong Kong dollars. In 1966 when Nkrumah's government was overturned by a military coup, a change in public policy also occurred setting the terms for the "Ghanaization" of the economy.<sup>22</sup> In the 1970s, the Ghanaian parliament passed a series of laws accelerating the pace of indigenisation.<sup>23</sup>

To stop the continued decline of its economy, Ghana participated in Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) beginning in 1983 sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. SAPs are conditions that countries must adopt in order to get loans from the IMF and World Bank. This meant shifting towards a market-oriented economy, divestiture of state-owned enterprises, focusing economic output on direct export and resource extraction,

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<sup>22</sup> The ideas behind this move are: 1) that national development is endangered when foreign companies hold the "commanding heights of the economy", and 2) that social development of Ghanaians is encouraged through business ownership, and the assurance of national independence is inextricably linked to domestic control of its own economy. The National Liberation Council, which was formed as interim government, announced that while it welcomed private foreign investment, its new policy was to ensure that Ghanaian enterprises would receive the greatest benefit and that there would be control over excessive foreign domination of the country's economy (Akinsanya 1982). Certain enterprises were reserved for Ghanaians with the provision that foreigners operating in now "reserved" or "forbidden" businesses had to transfer to domestic ownership in two to five years time.

<sup>23</sup> An example of this was the Ghanaian Business Promotion Act which accelerated the pace of indigenisation by providing greater financial assistance to local Ghanaians to invest in businesses and set the deadline for divestiture of foreign companies to an earlier date. Since the policy did not specify how foreign businesses were to "indigenise" many firms including many Chinese-owned ones had a Ghanaian hold minor ownership shares in the company and were able to pass the indigenisation test. In 1977, a later phase of indigenisation was implemented that enlarged the scope of the 1970 act and gave Ghanaians more capital control over joint-foreign enterprises.



and trade liberalisation among many other things (see, Konadu-Agyemang 2000). One of the results was a return of more favourable conditions for foreign enterprises and what was perceived as a more welcoming attitude for foreigners.<sup>24</sup> The government is once again promoting the country as the “gateway to Africa” (for example, GNA 2008; Grant 2002); though unlike the 1960s when this phrase had political intentions of African unity, the current rhetoric is about business promotion and attracting foreign investors and tourists.

China’s reform of its formerly highly restrictive emigration policies is inextricably linked to its economic and social development strategy (Xiang 2003:23). Examples include Deng Xiaoping’s “Reform and Open” economic modernisation project, which encouraged Chinese to work abroad; and the 1999 “Go Out Policy” that encouraged state enterprises to search for raw materials abroad and drive China’s domestic growth.

Ghana and China’s economic policies are intricately tied to their immigration flow and policies. States are in the business of creating a “world order of things” where they try to impose certain logics of the world on their citizens. Donald Carter’s study of Senegalese immigrants in Italy explains how states manage their populations, and particularly why migrants are considered problematic:

It is only through the reification of the state as the legitimate arbiter of movements of migrations and populations and of the creation of

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<sup>24</sup> For example, there are much fewer restrictions on foreign business activities, foreign enterprises can be fully owned by foreigners, and also trade restrictions have been lifted. Some would argue that these trade restrictions have led to a “flood” of foreign imports that compete with domestic products such as textiles (for example, Abdallah 2010; The Ghanaian Chronicle 2007; Kokutse 2010).

‘boundaries,’ ‘frontiers,’ and ‘citizens’—through what one might call the *politics of location*—that the itinerant becomes a problem, an object of state intervention. (Carter 1997:19; emphasis in original)

“Itinerants” refer to immigrants, and when applied to China includes internal migrants. China has for over the past 50 years managed its urban development through the *Hukou* or *Huji* (permanent residency), whereby household registrations are required. Such registrations establish which areas and regions of the country they are allowed to establish a home and find a job. This is regulation of internal immigration flow (see, Chan 2009). Ramifications of this system are broad and include sharpening the economic chasm between rural and urban areas, taking away the freedom of mobility, and regulating people’s access to government resources. Recent changes to China’s emigration policies have encouraged private citizens to seek economic ventures abroad.<sup>25</sup>

States lay the ground rules for how foreigners are to reside within their boundaries. Immigrant policies are formed to advance state projects, specifically tying immigrants to economic policies and regulations. Gramsci ([1971] 1992) describes the state acting like an “educator”, where particular conceptions of the world are used to rationalise, standardise, and thus manage its population. In place then is state and public rhetoric that continually specifies how immigrants should legitimately arrive, and what they are supposed to be doing. For Chinese in Ghana, citing economic welfare as a personal motivation for immigration taps into pre-existing Ghanaian and Chinese state rhetoric about immigrants and thus provides a safe and publicly acceptable justification for their presence in Ghana.

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<sup>25</sup> For some studies on China’s internal migration, see Chan (2008); and Davin (1999.)

Not only does the state legitimise a certain rationale for immigration and the existence of immigrants, but this narrative is re-affirmed by Chinese who agree that these are their motivations for immigration.

The Chinese I asked unfailingly pointed to the self-evident nature of their migration decision: “For money, of course!” Coupled with this response is the corollary statement often made by my informants, “It doesn’t matter where we live, as long as there is money to be made.” The implied self-evident nature of the rationale, or what Linger has termed the “experientially insistent world of common sense” (1993:3) makes it difficult to understand how certain types of common sense became adapted.<sup>26</sup> Supposedly money trumps all, but there were times when my informants expressed that money was not the only standard to measure a good living. My informants aired dissatisfaction about their social relationships, criticising them as Janus-faced and described their experience in the Chinese community as isolating. They also expressed discontent with the way of life in Ghana, characterising it alternatively as *men* (bored) and *kumen* (depressed; dejected), and in the process questioned themselves whether any of this was worth it. It is not so obvious then that emigration is only about the money.

Classic Marxist studies of hegemonic processes treat the subaltern consciousness as being appropriated by bourgeois values (for example: Bates 1975; Counihan 1986). Institutional processes in society misguide the subaltern and are hidden from their consciousness. The subaltern unknowingly

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<sup>26</sup> Common sense, as used by Gramsci, means a shared sense.

appropriates bourgeois values that are meant to keep them in check and maintain the stability of the structure. A Marxist approach to understanding how Chinese came to adopt state economic values of immigration would argue that their misunderstanding of the economic processes in state projects leads them in an unreflective way to adopt these values, which become routine and commonsensical to them. The classic Marxist approach argues that while the subaltern may have contradictory consciousness, aspects that are in line with proletariat values are appropriated, and thus the subaltern becomes in alignment with the ruling class. How does appropriation happen if we are to consider the agency and will of the subaltern?

Gramsci's concept of common sense calls into question false consciousness and brings agency into the picture. It also helps explain how ideologies become common sense. His model of power is not that dominant alliances impose their will on the subaltern, but rather it is a continuous process of *consent* between the dominant and the subjugated in which those in authority must be flexible to change and respond to circumstances. These processes of consent take place in all kinds of social settings including the family, churches, and workplace. This process is lived by commoners as a type of common sense that colours their entire social experience. In other words, the limits and pressures that social, cultural, and economic systems exert correspond to the limits and pressures of their experience of common sense (Williams 1977; Jones 2006). Linger characterises the "resistance to critical scrutiny" as a trademark of common sense because it is shared and therefore "alternative constructions of

reality are rarely voiced” (1993:4). In order to be ruled, people must participate in particular conceptions of the world and the order of things. As James explained to me, as an orphan who was forced to fend for himself at the age of sixteen, he did not have the social resources and know-how to adequately participate in the social world of China: “I can’t compete with many people.” In a sense, the shared sense of the order of the world did not fit into James’s social experience, given his historical circumstances. There were contradictions.

Though James expresses the economic rationale of immigration, he is not a prisoner of this type of narrative. Being the most publicly acceptable narrative, it is the easiest and safest rationale and also the clearest one for him to express. It is also the kind of narrative that diverts attention from other rationales that one may have for emigrating. This safe narrative presents the individual as a rational actor who is aware of his circumstances, knows what the consequences of each action would be, and therefore is in control of his actions. Because of the acceptable and common sense nature of this rationale, it becomes a convention to take this respectable self-presentation in public settings at face value. This means this narrative closes the door to further public inquiry. It is also a comforting presentation of the self to the self. Both others and the self can find respect in this type of narrative. Though this type of common sense has a tenacious hold on how we may understand and experience our reality, it is not a prison.

James’ other two narratives reveal part of the conflicting processes he went through (and perhaps continues to go through) in having made the move to Ghana. His other narrative indicates that he was not a fully willing participant in

his own migration, and yet on the other hand he remembers that a part of him also decided to take the risk in moving to Ghana where living conditions in his mind were questionable. These types of inconsistencies occur when space is given for personal exploration, for the informant to examine their own past rationalisations. Indeed, where James's narrative of economic rationale revealed itself was usually when Aaron was part of the dialogue or within earshot of our conversation. Aaron has strongly opinionated views and so not surprisingly James would often voice the "correct" narrative. Perhaps with the difficulties he faced growing up, he knew that he could not only depend on himself to succeed but that he depended on others. It seems to be an important part of how he relates today.

In later conversations, James further reveals his internal inconsistencies. He subverts the economic narrative of migration by criticising the Chinese focus on monetary gains, and at the same time this questions his own attachment to money. James explained that back in China he mainly repaired factory machines and kept them in working order. It was a physically difficult job working in the heat and noise of the factories. In Ghana, his social situation changed dramatically. No longer considered just a machinist, he now was employed mainly to keep an eye on the workers and make sure they were not slacking in the job and were not stealing from the company. After teaching the local workers the basics of operating and repairing the machinery, he no longer had to closely supervise them operating the machines. Life became very comfortable.

Several years ago when James returned to China, he wanted to stay for good to start a family. His wife pressured him to return to Ghana because he could make a lot more money. He returned unwillingly. On the day we had our last conversation, several months before James was going to leave, we chatted about the state of Chinese emigration. I asked him what he observed about the trend of Chinese leaving the country.

Conal: Do a lot of mainland Chinese want to leave China to work now that China is rapidly developing?

James: How do I express this? In my case, when I am in China I want to leave, but when I'm living outside the country I want to return. Once I come outside, I know how it is outside. But then I feel it's better to return. But when I'm back in China, I feel like I want to leave again when I get the opportunity. I want to see for myself how it is outside. Why? First, many mainlanders now are not like before. Almost all of them have money.

C: Money, so you mean they all have money.

J: Yes, those living in Shanghai, Guangzhou. The economy is booming, many factories and one year's salary you can earn 7,000 to 10,000 RMB. The more money you get the more money you want. And so of course you want to emigrate.

C: Then why do you feel you want to return?

J: Well, when I'm outside the country, I feel my life is just the same [as it is in China] except that I have more money. So I want to return [to Ghana].

C: Okay, so more money.

J: Yes, more money but I'm more lonely [in Ghana]. My son and wife are not with me.

C: Your wife doesn't have the chance to come over?

J: There is opportunity but she doesn't want to.

C: Why?

J: Come here for what?

C: To make money. She can find a job here too.

J: There isn't much reason to do so. What's the point of making all that money?

We have enough to sustain us and to spend. Making enough to spend and save is all we need. We don't need to strive to make more than that. That's what I think. No need to push so hard to make money. So if we work hard to make money for the next couple of years, and then we do get that kind of money, then what? What are we working so hard for?

C: So you've made almost enough?

J: [laughs] Yes, almost enough. No. This is how I think. So we work hard to make a lot of money. Then when we return home, we don't need to work, we just

sit all day at home. What's the meaning of that? It's meaningless. We all want to have a job, right? When you don't have enough money, you go and get a job. With the job, you get some money but then you just put it away for savings. Right? For what?...For Chinese, making money is their main part of life. I don't understand why there is that kind of attitude. Work like that for what?

C: Do you think you could easily leave Ghana? Would you miss it?

J: I don't want to leave Ghana. I miss it. It's very good here. It's very comfortable here. Life in Ghana is the best—it's very good. I mean really in China how could you have this? You can have money and not work much, that's too comfortable. Really not bad. The problem is my family isn't here, so it's not sustainable here.

James explained that there was no need for his wife to come along since earning extra income was not necessary, and even if she could find a career here, about which he expressed doubts, the lifestyle here would be boring for her. Later when I asked James what he made of the frequent comment by Chinese that Ghana is a boring place, he observed that the Chinese were passive towards each other, not taking initiative to form and develop social relations.

J: Boring? Yes. A bit boring. Chinese here, it's like watching a movie.

C: What do you mean?

J: You know, movie. You're watching it but you're not involved in it. You're just watching it go by. That's how the Chinese are here with each other. They just watch what's going on with each other but they don't offer to help. It's like watching monkeys—watching a good show go on.

They're like this in China too now, in these past 10 or 20 years. But when I was growing up people were a lot more intimate with each other. When you had problems in the home, everyone came to help. When I was young, and people were building their homes, everyone came to help out. You didn't need to pay to get people to help you move bricks and things like that. That was just the norm. Neighbours would help out.

Leaving China for Ghana, and then leaving Ghana for China are not easy decisions for James to make. It is apparent that there is more than just economic wellbeing involved. Life in Ghana can be comfortable and satisfying because



James is able to hold a comfortable job that does not require him to do more than supervise competent workers. It is not the kind of life he can enjoy in China. On the other hand, life can be boring in Ghana and socially unfulfilling because of a lack of commitment the Chinese have towards each other and also because his family is not around. He is content in China when he is with his family but he “itches” to go out and see more of the world such as Ghana. Yet, there is no point in his wife coming to Ghana with him because both of them do not need to be earning so much money, and he doubts if she would be able to handle the simple lifestyle he leads in Ghana. He questions the wisdom in creating a life around gaining wealth, a view he criticizes many Chinese for having. But he does understand why wealth is heavily emphasized.

- J: Put it this way, you may not have experienced the suffering when there is no money. But after you have suffered through it, you won't think like that.
- C: I understand. Do they think that once they have accumulated enough money to make a home, have a family and be comfortable, that they don't need to keep on finding more ways to make even more wealth?
- J: That's not how Mainland Chinese think. Everything is about money. When I teach my son, this is what I will teach. First, I don't want my son to suffer through the same hardships I did. Not to let him suffer because we cannot pay the school fees and things like that. I want to teach him that financial condition is important [but it is not everything]. But in mainland, money is everything. It's like god.

In his last chapter to *No One Home*, Linger summarises his argument on "conscious self-making" placing the primacy of persons, their engagements with their circumstances, their agency, and their consciousness over society and discourse (cultural narratives, cultural symbols). He puts this as "imaginings are

not congruent with narratives” or that “a person is bigger than society” (2001b:304).

What Linger is arguing for is that people are in a “construed environment” meaning that while they are enmeshed in their environment, or what is often repeated as socially constructed conditions or environment, they are not just whatever their environment is. He argues against deterministic theories of identity-making that become the conduit for how meaning is constructed and how experiences are made sense. These deterministic theories give primacy to discourse, socio-cultural narratives, and language in general in the construction of persons and personhood. Instead, Linger shows in his ethnography that people engage in these social representations and narratives rather than being contained within them or constrained by them. These social narratives, far from being the stories of people's experiences and ways of meaning-making, are just the beginning where people then unfold in different ways due to the way they engage with their circumstances. Self-identity and meaning are not in the signs (social narratives) and actions themselves and not in cultural scripts (the word “scripts” suggests something that is already determined). Meaning-making comes through people's encounter with their circumstances, which always appropriate narratives, twisting, contradicting, and kneading them into different shapes. Linger writes,

Minds intervene between encounters and experience, and further subjectify experience itself, spinning tears, resentment, and laughter into constellations of meaning, and turning that meaning back into feeling. (306)

Through this theory of meaning-making, we can begin to understand how it is possible that James's can hold contradictory views regarding his circumstances. There is no definitive reason why he left China. Certainly economic rationale plays a big role and is part of Chinese common sense. James is aware of that, and he criticises it for being part of his social environment that pressures him to act accordingly, and yet which he also subverts and contradicts it on his own terms. He has contradictory feelings about living in either China or Ghana. But, he also can suspend these feelings and debates about how and where he ought to settle down. When he returns to China he feels unsettled in China and has the itch to leave and seek more "opportunities". What are these opportunities that he seeks? Are they opportunities where he can achieve a less contradictory sense of being in a place? It seems his mind is unsettled in this regard although it is clear he is seeking. His feelings for Ghana and China switch when he is viewing each country from the other, suggesting that in each country certain desired experiences are brought to the foreground when he is outside of the country. It is not as if James is living in a state of psychological paralysis, unable to find meaning in living in either Ghana or China. What it suggests more strongly is that there is indeterminacy to his experiences and that he is uncertain in predicting his future actions and feelings because actions and feelings are only created in relation to changing circumstances and not deterministic, already-composed cultural and historical scripts. Like most of us, James does not know what he finally wants. There is no finality to wants or to arrive at a settled place. The quest for legibility in our theories of people and ourselves can present us with

the false idea of a place where we can finally find clarity and come home to. In a similar vein, Linger tells us that one of his informants, Naomi Mizutake, cautions her Japanese friends, “Don’t ever think I’m going to do everything the way you think I’m going to do it.” In his ethnography, Linger asks, “Is she also addressing herself?” (313)

### **Anna: Leaving Home Twice, Lessons in Self-presentation**

Anna Yeung is in her mid-50s and has been working in the Chinese restaurant business with her husband for over two decades. She came to Ghana in the 1970s with her husband, George, who worked in one of the new Chinese factories. A stay-at-home mom and housewife for her first decade in Ghana, she became a restaurateur with her husband when the factory George worked for downsized in response to Ghana’s flagging economy. Their restaurant had great success in the past two decades. Ghanaian dignitaries, including former head-of-state Jerry John Rawlings, used to patronise the restaurant frequently. Anna explained that new competition in the Chinese restaurant has pulled away most of their wealthier clients. These newer Chinese establishments offered trendier food and dining spaces. Though Anna and George had renovated their restaurant, they were losing the competition. Anna blames this mostly on their decision to immigrate to Canada, which had detracted much of their energy from managing the restaurant as a team. In order to maintain residency requirements, Anna and her husband traded their place of residency alternately—part of the year she

would live in Canada while he managed the restaurant and then they would switch. A couple of years ago, they fulfilled the Canadian residency requirements and are now citizens, but they continued to maintain this round-robin way of living.

I have known Anna since I was a child and had developed a close friendship with her during the course of my fieldwork. She was the first person I asked to help guide me in developing deeper social relations with the Chinese. Though I had many connections, most people did not seem to want to talk. I asked Anna why the Chinese were so reluctant to talk. Anna observed,

Everyone has their own personal history, information they keep secret. It looks simple from the outside, but it's something else inside. They all think it's better to keep their stories away from everyone else. But you can see I'm very open.

Anna was open, but even she had to grapple with how much of her private life she would share with me.

In one of our conversations, I asked her why she left Hong Kong. Lightly brushing aside my question, she said it was obvious that Chinese come to Ghana for money. She later explained that she came from a poor background and she hoped that leaving Hong Kong would improve her living conditions. Her response struck me not only as brief, but it seemed to conceal a deeper story. One afternoon I went to visit Anna right as the afternoon shift at the restaurant was closing. She handed me the keys to her house, located behind the restaurant, and I waited for her in the sitting room. About a quarter of an hour passed when she stormed in. I had heard an argument brewing outside before she came in. Her

husband, George, had accused her of not managing the restaurant account properly and insisted that she must be regularly dipping into the money pot. Needing a breath of fresh air, Anna asked me to accompany her at a local café. In the course of the hour, she unwound and told me her side of the story about how her husband constricts her freedom by controlling the money she can use. This was the first time she told me her story, but having opened up to me this part of her private life, she would later repeat this story multiple times in different circumstances.

My grandmother used to tell me that it was important to always love daughters because a daughter never receives love. No one cares about her. Her own family doesn't, her mothers don't and her husbands don't. That's why my grandmother loved me. My mother never liked me. She loved my brothers but not me. She was biased against me. The reason I left home was to get away from my mother. I thought he [George] was a good man, but I feel the same here as I did then. I'm being locked down. Let's see if he has anything to say when I leave him alone to the business.

I asked Anna to say more about why she came to Ghana with George. Did he seem different to her then than now?

I didn't know he was like this when I followed him. I wasn't happy at home. Like I said, my mother made me do everything in the house while my brothers could do whatever they wanted. That's why I only went to school until Grade 3. George was the first guy I met and he seemed alright. I thought I would escape it all by following him.

Although it is difficult to say to what extent Anna came to Ghana because of her home situation and to what extent it was her experience of poverty, it is clear that her experiences at home were a crucial factor for her to see marriage as a way out of her home life. While the chance to earn money may be a pretext for her

migration, it is only a part of her story. It is also clear that when coming to Ghana became an option for her, she took it in part because her life at home was undesirable. In the following months she had multiple arguments with George. She talked about feeling imprisoned by her own husband and complained that he limited her freedom by limiting the money she has access to. She thought it was a mistake to have followed George to Ghana. She found it ironic that the oppressions she thought she had dodged by coming to Ghana are the same ones rising again. She thought she had escaped that in the 1970s when she left home.

The original intent to immigrate to Canada was for the sake of their children, since it provided them with the option to leave Ghana. Anna's daughter was initially reluctant to participate in the immigration process. She just finished studying in the U.S. and felt she had a chance to stay in the U.S. through employment. Anna persuaded her to participate in Canadian immigration: "I told her at least she could get Canadian citizenship and if she wanted to get American citizenship, it would be easier." This plan is now benefitting Anna. Out of sight from her husband most of the year, she has begun setting up her own financial base and social networks. She tells me that one day the circumstances will be just right when she can leave George behind in Ghana and she can start own her life in Canada.

Erving Goffman's (1959) study of social interactions in social situations helps to illuminate how different responses or expressions are given depending on the social situation. Goffman uses a dramaturgical approach to impression management, the idea that individuals in a social setting go through the process

of trying to control the impressions that other people formulate about them. When an individual enters a social setting two kinds of activities ensue: the expressions they give to convey information, which are typically verbal, and the expressions they give which are typically nonverbal and are actions performed for reasons other than conveying information. In theorising how an individual knows how to perform, Goffman argues that it is in the best interest of the individual to be able to control the conduct of others, especially in the way they respond to the person. The individual does this by influencing how others come to understand the social situation and this influence occurs by the kind of impression the person gives. This is what Goffman terms “definition of a situation”, a collective understanding of a situation through which the individual influences its formulation through their actions and responses to other social actions and expressions. Goffman’s model of social interactions understands expression in light of its communicative role in social interactions rather than what he terms as a “consummatory or tension-release function” for the person (249). Goffman refers to these social actions in this dramaturgical model as “performance”, which he explains as “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (22). The “front” of these performances is the part of the individual’s performance that

regularly functions in a *general and fixed fashion* to define the situation for those who observe the performance. [I]t is to be noted that a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific



tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a 'collective representation' and a fact in its own right. (22, 27; emphasis mine)

In other words in many social situations there are already assigned social roles which an individual finds him or herself stepping in to. This is what Goffman defines as front-stage behaviour. It is performance meant for observation and meant to present a certain standard acceptable in public. Goffman also has the idea of back-stage, a place relative to the front-stage performance "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (112). This is where the front-stage performance can be scrutinised and the individual can step out of character and be away from the "deterministic demands" of the front-stage.

Moving from front-stage performance to back-stage is what happened between Anna and me. In Anna's case she used the common narrative of economic rationale to initially explain her decision to come to Ghana. This follows the established social practice that every Chinese exchanges with every other Chinese when discussing their reasons for coming to Ghana. It maintains an impression of normalcy. Making a livelihood occupies the forefront of most Chinese in Ghana given that it is the usual story they tell each other, and it is also an easy way to dismiss further details of one's life. It conceals the personal, often complicated, and sometimes painful reasons for coming to Ghana.

Once Anna had disclosed to me her other reasons for coming to Ghana, she was unable to return to the older story because other pieces of her life, particularly her relationship with the restaurant and her husband, had come to light. Revealing to me her desires to escape her childhood past disclosed even

more about the current tensions she has with her husband, changing my understanding of her. This was a potential risk for her, given how gossip spreads among Chinese networks. It provided a clearer explanation for why tensions between her and her husband continued to escalate and why she was content with moving between Ghana and Canada. It is important to note that though we had known each other for a long time, being in an intimate setting was not enough for Anna to disclose other parts of her personal life. She understood that doing so would change my understanding of her. While she publicly presented her movements between Ghana and Canada as primarily intended to maintain an economic base in Ghana and a new home in Canada, by telling me that she had additional, perhaps deeper motives for maintaining this lifestyle she revealed more about her personal life than she normally would.

### **Other Concurrent Narratives**

I encountered many other concurrent narratives, each of which affected my understanding of the individual. Sometimes concurrent narratives are not readily revealed because of painful pasts that individuals try to suppress or forget about. Coming to Ghana allows the individual a new start and presents the opportunity for separating past circumstances and history from one's current life in Ghana. In this way, the past and its social relations can literally be left behind and one's life begins anew. In other cases, the past may be dug up to lay claims to

compensations for present circumstances, as is the case with many victims of institutionalised racial discrimination.

Two ethnographic examples illustrate this. Tsao Bak, formerly a well-known businessman in the community, is now mostly forgotten by many Chinese and a remnant of his former self. He now hangs by his wife's side letting her make the decisions about when to go to Church and when to leave the house. He has fallen on hard times, and his Chinese friends who still maintain connections with me tell me that Tsao Bak used to be well-known only because of his wealth, so his relationships with others were not genuine. I asked several of his friends how he came to rise in wealth and social capital so dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s only to be abandoned now by his former friends. They attributed part of this to his days in the Triad (organised crime) in China and Hong Kong. This is apparently known history among Tsao Bak's business associates but unspoken among other Chinese who turn a blind eye, perhaps in part to maintain a certain public imagery they have of Tsao Bak. I was told that the main reason he left Hong Kong was because other Triads were after him. Using his connections to the textile industry, he escaped to Ghana where he had a chance at a new beginning. When he started his own business, he supposedly used underhanded tactics and other techniques he learnt from his Triad days to become successful. Though I had known Tsao Bak for a long time, I did not know about this history and only learned about it through secondary sources. Like others, he would indicate that economics was the reason for his move and promptly ended his

story. I was unable to get more about this part of his past from him except through other informants.

There are others who left to make a clean break with unsatisfactory social and political situations. Grace, for example, previously lived in China and married a Hong Kong Chinese man in the 1980s. She paints her decision to emigrate as a way to experience more of the world: “Back then, who didn’t want to leave China? Do you know how difficult it was to meet the qualifications to leave? Everyone was trying to find a way to get out of China.” I asked if it was because she had lost faith in the Communist Party, and she replied that though she could not pinpoint where her feelings came from, she could not attribute them to being afraid of the Communist Party because to her, the Communist Party no longer felt threatening. She said there was a general sense of finding the social and political situation in China unsatisfactory, and even though it was bearable, people left when they got the chance so at least they could see the world for themselves as opposed to through the eyes and ears of Communist China. Leaving China was also attractive because it was seen to provide better career opportunities.

Many men who came to Ghana as bachelors (or who are still bachelors) often told me that being young they wanted to “seize the world”—to grab opportunities to explore. They talked about how they wanted to open up their world to a different way of living and seeing. It was difficult for them to point out why they had this urge, though they often attributed it to being youthful. Economics played a role for many of these men but they centred their stories on the significance of grabbing on to the opportunity to explore the world. These

men did not imagine themselves making a break with the past, for many of them found their lives and careers in Asia agreeable. However, the opportunity for adventure and something different in Ghana presented them with the potential to further develop their skills and careers in unexpected ways.

Stories from wives contrasted sharply with those of their husbands. They often portrayed themselves in supporting roles for their husbands' careers, believing that it was their wifely duty to support their husbands' decisions. Thus Grace followed her husband from Hong Kong to Eastern Europe and finally to Ghana. I describe and analyse her story in fuller detail in Chapters 3 and 4. When her husband was suddenly transferred to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, leaving her behind with the two children for the first time, the shock of the transfer became a watershed event for her. With her husband gone to the Congo for an unknown period of time, she reflected on the point of letting her husband's jobs determine where they would go next. While she said she had supported these moves in the past, she wonders now what life could have been like if she had decided to be a career woman from the start. She experimented with that idea a bit and tried to set in motion making a career for herself in Ghana while her husband was away.

The case of Mrs. Hua begins similarly. She explained that after being laid off, her husband had a difficult time finding a job in Hong Kong. Her husband applied for a job in Ghana and, even though she felt reluctant to go because Ghana was far and she imagined was undeveloped, she resigned herself to letting her husband take the family there: "I don't want to prevent him from advancing

in his career.” When the company transferred him to a rural area in Nigeria, she stayed in Ghana with the children. She supported his decision to make the career move but stayed behind because the education system in Accra was better than in rural Nigeria. She does not regret making the move but longs for the day when the family is reunited.

A more unusual case is that of Aaron who is reluctantly in Ghana. He runs the factory that James is employed in. When his parents were deported from Ghana for political reasons, his father asked him to go to Ghana to take over the business. Aaron had two older brothers but because they do not know English, Aaron was the only one in the family able to take over the family business. Aaron finds that one cannot run a successful business in Ghana—or in Africa generally—by only following rules and regulations. Sometimes regulations are just the window dressing, and to move forward one needs to grease the appropriate social relations.

Aaron: My family did not really like me to come here. Don't you find that Africa is not suitable for me?

Conal: Yes, you said so yourself—

A: Yes, because of my character. My family knows I'm a very straightforward kind of person and not one who knows how to turn corners and so forth. But that's not Africa. Africa is a place of bribery, a place where you need to kiss ass. My family felt that by coming to Africa I have cut my life short [because of the stress]. But their views are too limited in how I am. Yes, my character is like so—

C: But you know how to change—

A: No, it's not that I don't know how to change. They just didn't realise that “I do as Romans do.” When I came, my father was surprised at how adaptable I was. And furthermore, I made the most profit whereas the others didn't make that much of a profit. [...]

When Aaron told me he has plans to sell the factory, I asked him if it was because he wanted to retire early. He said,

It's not my age that's the issue. I feel that life in Ghana gives me too much pressure. I'm not that happy in Ghana. [...] My older brother likes Ghana a lot. This world is really strange. He was deported from Ghana and he really liked Ghana. Not like my case. I'm here but I don't like Ghana. I told him before I came here that I would never like it. I don't.

By digging deeper, we find concurrent narratives that lurk under common sense narratives and state narratives of immigrants. Without being attuned to these concurrent and frequently quieter narratives, and being careful of how theoretical legibility can be an easy way to tidy up conflicting and complex circumstances, we end up giving primacy to economics. We end up portraying migrants as flat, two-dimensional, calculating beings whose value system is ultimately economics-based. In hearing informants provide concurrent narratives for their reasons to emigrate, we see informants debating with themselves at various levels their own reasons for coming. The choice made was not always clear in the past, nor were the reasons. Sociologist William I. Thomas advises,

It is also highly important for us to realize that we do not as a matter of fact lead our lives, make our decisions, and reach our goals in everyday life either statistically or scientifically. We live by inference. (Goffman 1959:3, citing William I. Thomas)

## Chapter 3

### Being in Limbo: Structural Causes & Individual Experiences

In the early 2000s, the literature on Chinese in the diaspora mostly portrayed Chinese transnationals as having access to resources that enabled them to move around the globe with ease. Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) and her edited volume *Ungrounded Empires* (1997) provided some of these images. She argued that in the era of globalisation, individuals develop a flexible notion of citizenship. The cultural logics of late capitalism, travel, and displacement all "induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (1999:6). It is more useful and accurate to understand the experiences of many Chinese in Ghana as distinguished from the idea of flexible citizenship, teasing out the difference between "flexibility" in the way that Ong describes and "stability" in the sense of settledness.

For the Chinese in Ghana, the image of the highly mobile subject, though accurate in some cases, does not adequately explain the complicated experience of living in transition. Living in Ghana for many is a type of holding pattern: a way to respond to an uncertain future while coming to grips with the experience of being in a state of limbo, neither wanting to settle down in Ghana nor having better options to live elsewhere in the current moment. At other times, this state of being in-between is a *desired state* that fits what some individuals understand as a good compromise between a past they want to leave behind and a future with



potentially unexpected changes. These various subtleties of being in-between are what I term *limbo* or *liminality*. Depending on how an individual senses their experiences and understands their circumstances, these states of limbo may be ones they feel stuck in without recourse for something better, or ones they feel empowered in because they finally have better options.

James's case, discussed in the previous chapter, is an example of this type of liminality. When presented with the opportunity to leave China, it was not an unambiguous choice for him to leave. Several years later, he had the opportunity of returning to China and re-settling with his new family, or staying in Ghana to continue saving money. He finds it difficult to commit to either place. He finds Ghana comfortable and he continues to make a substantial amount of money, but he finds himself confined to the factory compound, has a poor social life, and misses his family. Back in China, he enjoys living with his family but finds that life is not as exciting nor as interesting as he imagines Ghana *could be*. He says this without noticing the irony. In China, he feels the constraints and pressures of his society, culture, and family which lead him to a routine that he feels confining. In Ghana, work dominates his life and he does not have a social life, but he feels that there is the *possibility* for something else other than this routine even though he has not yet lived it. Because of this feeling of potential, he gets the "itch" to leave China when he is in China. Among one of the criticisms he has of the behaviours of Chinese migrants is how making money consumes their life. "What's the meaning in that?" he asks. I wonder if he was criticising himself. During our conversation about how his feelings fluctuate from place to place, I

got the sense that I was not his only audience. He was listening to himself, putting into words the circumstances he faces and feelings he experienced, and meanwhile trying to find ground to understand why he felt the way he did.

A middle ground seems difficult to find and instead of committing to either place, James seemed at that moment comfortable committing to neither. When I last talked to him before he returned to China, I asked him if he would return to Ghana. Was he returning to China in the manner of a holiday or re-settlement? He was uncertain but he did say he knows he will miss Ghana even though he misses China now. He remembers how he felt in past visits to China and projects that he will feel similarly again. At least for the moment, he was willing to embrace this new disjuncture until something else occurs to make him rethink how he could respond.

Since the 1950s, the Chinese have lived and participated in Ghana's economy and society but have lived as a minority group whose activities and presence as a group remains hidden from the national radar. They are for the most part invisible. For the Chinese, Ghana is also under their radar—most do not consider Ghana as a place they would like to belong to and they prefer not to become entangled in its social and political life. Instead, Ghana is seen as a launch pad that enables them to gain economic stability and other forms of social capital to move on elsewhere though most are uncertain where that could be and when it could occur. Ghana is viewed as an opportunity to escape from past circumstances because it holds potential to help launch different life pathways. But, Ghana can also be experienced as a trap when the kinds of social capital

gained turn out to be liabilities that confine them, even if temporarily, to Ghana, because local and global circumstances have changed. For instance, social capital that enabled them to migrate to Ghana may not be enough to launch them onwards to another place. For some, living in Ghana is like being in a holding pattern where it is uncertain when desirable changes will occur.

Organised into three parts, this chapter examines this tension of mobility and immobility through two perspectives. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the structural conditions and historical causes that create this tension of mobility and immobility for Chinese expatriates. In the second and third parts of the chapter, the structural and historical perspective is put into the background while the diversity of individual experiences is brought to the foreground. I pay particular attention to how informants live out this tension of being in limbo. What were the choices they made and the conundrums they faced?

I highlight how in an era of globalisation, migration patterns can be more complicated and convoluted than the perceived one-way movement towards the first world. The movement of migrants is not necessarily a straightforward movement from Point A to Point B with settling that occurs at Point B. Movement in the era of globalisation can be punctuated with in-between stops and flows that move back to the original home country before moving forward again to another place. Though the developed world is often believed to be the choice home for many migrants, this is not always true, especially among Chinese, who now see China's growing global dominance as an attraction. A point to highlight in this type of punctuated movement is that periods of certainty can follow periods of

uncertainty. Earlier circumstances that have enabled mobility, or earlier choices that created avenues for greater movement, may sometimes lead to periods of immobility, and thus, a prolonged sense of uncertainty in one's direction for settledness. In the third part of the chapter, I continue to examine individual experiences of mobility and immobility with specific attention on how personal relations and social pressures can create experiences of being in limbo.

A question that needs to be addressed is the relationship between the two perspectives of being in limbo: the structural aspects of liminality and the individual experiences. Do structural aspects set the conditions for liminality, or are individual experiences and structure two perspectives of looking at the same phenomenon? These two perspectives are complementary rather than in opposition to each other. Each perspective highlights different ways to understand this experience of liminality. Structural conditions that make a situation liminal may not always be experienced as such by individual actors. Furthermore, not all experiences of liminality are due to structural causes. Because of this, one perspective does not necessarily lead us to understand the other perspective although both perspectives have something to contribute in our understanding of the overall experience of being in limbo.

From the structural perspective, larger historical forces, such as shifting geo-politics, decolonisation, and global capital, all *induce* conditions of liminality. Other times, these structural and historical forces can even more forcefully *actuate* individuals into states of limbo. The difference here between “induce” and “actuate” should be noted. “Induce” signifies the potential for conditions of

liminality, but the individual may respond and experience the phenomenon as something else. “Actuate” is a more direct force of structural causes because it signifies that it *causes* conditions of liminality.

From the closer perspective of individual experiences, it becomes clear that not everyone responds to structural conditions similarly. This is a view that Linger (2005) has termed “personal worlds” which he explains is “intended to suggest size, systematicity, variability, and complexity in lives and minds” (2005:13). It is in contrast to “public worlds” which are the environments where people are “thrust” into or “which they build together.” In a similar vein, Rapport (1997a) has described this view as individual consciousness animating cultural forms and practices. In the second and third parts of the chapter, I examine, for several Chinese, how those persons’ relationships to their conditions, their immediate relationships, and how they grapple with their circumstances can affect if a phenomenon is experienced as liminality or as something else. Particularly in the third part of this chapter, I highlight how one chooses to engage in social relations and how social pressure can create the experience of being in limbo. From this perspective, historical or structural forces do not necessarily cause the experience of limbo.

### **1. STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY**

Tensions of mobility and immobility occurred as far back as the first major wave of Chinese migrants in the 1960s. In the previous chapter, I alluded to this

tension and now expand on this theme focusing on the circumstances for causing this tension and ways that Chinese have responded. The desire of mainland Chinese industrialists to escape from communist influence became a deciding factor why they first moved away from China, to Hong Kong, and then later to Ghana. Similar to how Ghana is today for many Chinese, Hong Kong was used as a launch pad decades earlier for many Chinese industrialists. As a British colony, Hong Kong served as a doorway into the rest of the Commonwealth and Anglophone world where capitalism was common.

Sociologist Wong Siu-Lun (1988) writes about Shanghai industrialists who began emigrating to Hong Kong in the mid-1940s and eventually helped to develop Hong Kong's vibrant industrial economy, particularly around the textile industry. With the intensification of civil war in China in the 1940s, emigration of Shanghainese industrialists to Hong Kong grew, becoming a refuge for them to re-establish their factories. Some of these industrialists made a second move to Southeast Asia and Africa because of increasing competition in Hong Kong. For many of these entrepreneurs, these second migratory moves for the entrepreneurs were temporary. Once the factories were established, managers and workers from Hong Kong were transferred to take over the everyday operations of the factories, allowing many of these industrialists the freedom to move away from Ghana. Textile managers and workers were attracted to employment abroad because of the potential job security it offered. Less well-resourced industrialists, who often did not have factories outside of Ghana, managed their factories closely

while wealthier industrialists who had a larger global reach employed relatives of trusted workers to manage the factories.

The history of Ghana Household Utilities Manufacturing Company Limited (GHUMCO), an enamelware factory, illustrates some of these points about mobility.<sup>1</sup> The founding of GHUMCO begins with the shared history of the Shanghainese textile magnates who moved factory productions away from China to Hong Kong. Joe, the managing director of the company, explained that enamelware production in Hong Kong targets the export market, because Hong Kong's population was too small. Most were going to Indonesia and Philippines at that time and some to Africa. He explains how the relatively inexpensive cost of enamelware and its multiple purposes made it popular in Ghana. In the 1970s, Joe worked for GHUMCO as a chartered accountant. A few years later, he left for the UK, and then over 20 years later, returned to become the managing director after another industrialist bought the factory. The former industrialist of GHUMCO, who owns multiple factories in Southeast Asia, resided in Hong Kong, just as the current one does. Joe recounted:<sup>2</sup>

The factory was started in 1959 and production began in 1960. At that time, the company was half the size of today. Over the years, it

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<sup>1</sup> Company history and business practices are difficult to uncover. In part, this is due to fears that trade secrets and other proprietary information could land in the hands of competitors. What seems to be innocuous information to outsiders may be considered sensitive information by the company, especially when bits of insider information from various sources are pieced together by competitors or even non-competing businesses. Chinese companies operate on an unofficial policy that the less other businesses know about them the better. On the other hand, it is common practice among Chinese entrepreneurs to feel out all types of information about their competitors' practices. Besides the nature of competition and resulting secrecy that makes it difficult to uncover company history, the turnover of employees and managers contributes to the partial knowledge of the business.

<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted in English, which Joe felt more comfortable with when talking about business.

gradually expanded. Initially, we had about 30 plus Chinese workers working here because none of the locals knows how to operate the machinery. Gradually the expat staff reduced on a yearly basis [as local staff gained technical knowledge]. Today we have only nine Chinese technical staff. Most of the work is done by the Ghanaians. It is owned majority share by the Chinese from Hong Kong. Minority share is owned by Ghanaians—25 percent. In the early days, it was compulsory that you have Ghanaian shareholders though often they were sleeping partners – just a name to satisfy government requirements.

Enamelware moved from Mainland China to Hong Kong when the communists took over. Their main market is export because Hong Kong is a small market. Whether you like it or not, enamelware is the poor man's cooking utensils. It is cheap to produce and so cheaper to buy than other kinds of cooking utensils such as aluminium. So, it is primarily to poorer countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Nigeria, and Ghana that we export enamelware to. When the practice in Hong Kong became expensive to operate, the only thing to do is try to establish businesses in those countries. Even before this factory moved here, a trading company was established. I believe the first Hong Kong trading company was called Africa Trading Company Limited and they not only sold enamelware but also cigarettes and other items. That was established in the early 1950s.

Chinese entrepreneurs were keenly aware of global trends and national politics that affected their decisions on where and how to move their enterprises. In the 1960s when Ghanaian government policy favoured industrialising the economy, the founder of GHUMCO latched on to this opportunity to move away from Hong Kong. In the early days, it was compulsory that every foreign-invested company have a local shareholder though most were “sleeping partners”, whose role was to fulfill the state requirements for foreign companies. Their shares were small, and thus they held no executive power, but the opportunity was attractive. It provided a stable source of income and foreigners often had other kinds of social



and economic resources that Ghanaian shareholders could potentially tap into. The relationship was mutually beneficial.

Entrepreneurs were often based in Hong Kong rather than Ghana, though from time to time they would visit Ghana and other countries where they owned factories. They employed Chinese staff and management from Hong Kong to take over the daily operations of the plants. Moving the factories to Ghana became a way to gain financial capital for the entrepreneurs. Furthermore, using the mobility of Chinese managers and workers, they were able to guarantee their own mobility. Using the mobility of these Chinese managers and workers helped to guarantee the entrepreneurs own current and future mobility. However, these Chinese workers risked immobility, in part due to the company's operational policies, in part to national politics at the time, and in part to the global economy.

Chinese companies had large numbers of Chinese workers in the early years. For the Chinese workers, Ghana presented an opportunity for economic advancement from their low-income jobs in Hong Kong. Workers in other factories also expressed these sentiments. In Hong Kong, their prospects of advancement were low. Many workers had the same skill set. Working abroad meant they could earn more than what they could in Hong Kong. An additional benefit was that companies covered their living expenses enabling them to save most of what they earned. From the mid-1980s onwards when Ghana's economy took a downturn, many factories, including GHUMCO, reduced the number of expatriate staff and replaced most Hong Kong staff with those from Mainland China in a move to lower the cost of operations. Joe said, "On a virtually yearly

basis, the expatriate staff was reduced to its current size in 2004 when only nine Chinese expatriates remain. Most of the factory work is done by local staff today.” The experience of movement was one of continued mobility for wealthy entrepreneurs and one of immobility or liminality for the employed Chinese worker.

Some industrialists had no intention of long-term investment in Ghana. Although they considered the political situation as fairly stable when they first migrated in the 1960s, they did not believe the country had any sustainable long-term plan for economic development. Furthermore, government created a sense of instability for industrialists. The plan was that industries would eventually become solely government- or Ghanaian-owned, thus leaving no room for considering long-term stable establishment for the Chinese. Indeed, Nkrumah’s industrialisation expansion led to the development of many different types of industries, including an aluminium smelting plant, saw mills, timber processing plants, cocoa processing plants, textile manufacturing plants among others. Many of these industries only survived through Nkrumah’s protectionist policies. From 1970 to 1977, the economy became stagnant due to the “overvalued Cedi, shortages of hard-currency for raw materials and spare parts, and poor management in the state sector” (Berry 1995:175), and then declined from 1977 to 1982 until the implementation of the structural readjustment programme. After Nkrumah’s overthrow, various regimes put into place economic and immigration policies that addressed the imbalance between wealthy foreigners and poor locals and the slow development of local talent. Some of these policies included

restricting the number of foreigners a company could hire, limiting the types of economic activities that foreigners can participate in, and requiring all foreign companies to have Ghanaian shareholders (Addo 1974; Akinsanya 1982).

In a conversation I had with factory owner Mr. Pok, he explained these industrialists saw a way to manoeuvre national policies to their benefit. Up until the 1990s, Ghana had a policy of foreign exchange control allowing only certain companies such as manufacturing industries to have access to foreign exchange to buy necessary equipment or resources to further develop or maintain their factories and production levels. Many of these companies would misstate the amount of foreign exchange needed, by either: (1) over-invoicing whereby they reported a higher buying price for certain materials than what they actually paid for; or (2) bringing in fewer materials than what they had reported. The foreign exchange not used could then be exchanged at a higher rate for Cedis in the local black market. With Cedis in hand, these companies could then turn to the Bank of Ghana, where the official exchange rate is lower, and exchange it again for more foreign currency. In this way, they ended up using foreign exchange to buy more foreign exchange. Another informant who worked in the textile industry corroborated Mr. Pok's story and illustrated this. He told me that around the 1960s and 1970s, the foreign exchange rate was officially 1 US Dollar (USD) for every 3 Cedis, and the black market rate was 1 USD for every 10 Cedis, so about three times the value. On the black market, Chinese industrialists could buy Cedis, which were then exchanged at government banks for USD at a higher rate. They had the privilege of exchanging for foreign currency because as

manufacturing industries, they had permission to use USD for factory equipment. Mr. Pok reported to me that in many cases, new machinery was brought in for the express purpose of earning foreign exchange, but this machinery was never installed, and in fact, not needed. He also stated, as a matter of fact, that over-invoicing<sup>3</sup> was the norm of doing business in developing countries: “Who doesn’t do it!”

In the 1980s when Chinese factories in Ghana began to downsize, it became clear to workers that their residency situation was precarious. As entrepreneurs manoeuvred foreign exchange, factories often operated at a basic minimal level without updates to equipment or further training of workers in newer methods of production. From the perspective of the entrepreneurs, long-term investment was risky, but there was still money to be made.<sup>4</sup> Workers faced a changing global economy of production that was leaving behind older and less effective machinery and methods of production. They found their skills difficult to transfer outside of both Ghana and other developing countries.<sup>5</sup>

Further immobilising these Chinese workers was an informal government practice that prevented large industries from closing down. Often, the reasons

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<sup>3</sup> Over-invoicing is reporting a price as higher than is actually being paid. This allows for the discrete exit of illegal money.

<sup>4</sup> As China’s influence in Africa began to increase in the 2000s, it was noted that Western companies were less willing to take the risk in making initial investment while the Chinese were willing to take that risk. See, for example: Hilsun (2005); Otung (2006); The New Vision (2006); Sautman and Yan (2006).

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, these workers also have stated that advanced computerised machineries were difficult to maintain. They were not easily serviceable—in-house technicians could not machine spare parts because they were proprietary technology. The lack of distributors to supply the parts meant companies had to depend on overseas distributors, which added another layer of inconvenience. Though these older machines and the associated skills to maintain and operate them seemed out-dated, they were sometimes more appropriate for countries that lacked a sophisticated and more formalised economic infrastructure.

were politically motivated. The government feared that shutting down factories would lead to worker unrest. Several managing directors noted that there were cases where the government shared the financial burden of operating factories at a loss. Many of these workers experienced a sense of immobility as they felt “left behind by the rest of the world”.

Ghanaian immigration policies made it impossible for residency without employment, and naturalisation was not an option. Until 2000, naturalisation laws were ambiguous; it was unclear whether or not foreigners could become citizens. Most foreigners presumed they would not be able to.<sup>6</sup> Recent changes to the citizenship act legalises naturalisation. However some of the qualifications seemed almost insurmountable by Chinese standard—they must be “able to speak and understand an indigenous Ghanaian language” (Act 591§14.1e; PRC 2000), “assimilated into the Ghanaian way of life or who can easily be so assimilated” (Act 591§14.1g; PRC 2000). Most Chinese have a poor command of English—the official language of Ghana—, which is also the lingua franca between foreigners and local Ghanaians. The latter requirement is ambiguous, but it would be hard-pressed to argue that the Chinese lifestyle in Ghana resembles any form of assimilation. These circumstances—changes in global economy, the ways manufacturers responded to the political and economic

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<sup>6</sup> It was assumed that you could only be a Ghanaian if your parents or grandparents were Ghanaians. Chinese born in Ghana were not given Ghanaian citizenship. Instead, they defaulted to the citizenship of their parents. Chinese who tried to naturalise (called “citizenship by registration” in Ghana) found out it was not an option for them. Recent debates on dual citizenship made clear that past constitutions “perpetuate[d] ambiguity” of who is a Ghanaian, whether by birth, or by registration. “The Citizenship Act, 2000” clarified this. For further discussion, see: Boateng (2008a); Boateng (2008b, 2008c, 2009); (Public Agenda 2003).

circumstances in Ghana, and Ghana's immigration policies—resulted in a situation where permanent residency in Ghana was difficult to obtain, but leaving Ghana to make a living in other countries was not easy and took considerable planning, social and economic capital, time, and luck.

## **2. EXPERIENCES OF LIMINALITY**

Holding in place for a moment the structural and historical perspective on mobility, I now turn to a different perspective on the same phenomenon, focusing on individual experiences of mobility and immobility. The attempt here is to understand how individuals produce meaning given the cultural, historical, and structural conditions. Furthermore, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the wider perspective of historical conditions are not always congruent with the personal worlds of individuals and has the effect of complicating some of the narratives produced about historical conditions. I begin with looking at the experiences of Joe the manager of GHUMCO whom I previously introduced.

### **A. Joe: Arriving in 1969, Returning in 1994**

Joe has made Ghana his home twice—first from the late-1960s to the early-1970s, and then again from the mid-1990s onwards. Both times, he lived in the twin cities of Sekondi–Takoradi. Though it forms the third largest metropolitan area in Ghana with a population of 335,000, Sekondi-Takoradi feels

far and remote from the economic and political centres of Ghana: Kumasi in central Ghana, and Accra-Tema on the coast. Due to the uneven quality of the highway, it takes about four hours to cover the 140 miles from Accra to Sekondi-Takoradi. Tall grass and bushes run the length of this long stretch. It skews the traveller's perspective to think that they are travelling along deserted areas when, in fact, she is flanked on both sides the peripheries of small towns and villages along the coast. For the few Chinese who live in Sekondi-Takoradi, their social and work lives revolve around the factory.<sup>7</sup> Most factory workers live in the residences that are inside the factory compounds. Upper-level employees live in private residences nearby. The metropolis no longer attracts expatriates since the centre of economic development shifted to Accra-Tema in the 1960s. Tourists also bypass this metropolis for other areas. A recent guidebook describes Takoradi as "of interest primarily as a well-equipped staging post for forays to more inherently attractive places" (Briggs 2008:185).

Takoradi hasn't always been this way. Beginning as an obscure fishing village, Takoradi developed into Ghana's first deep seaport during the colonial era and rapidly became its economic centre. This attracted Chinese factories to establish here, and with that came Chinese migrants. You can also find Ghana's western-most freight train station here, a testament to its former significance as the colony's deep seaport. This initial wave of economic energy pulled Joe to

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<sup>7</sup> Between Sekondi-Takoradi and Accra-Tema, in the town of Saltpond, is Saltpond Ceramics. Owned and managed by Chinese, it produces ceramic-ware for the local market. Similar to GHUMCO, the Chinese in this factory mostly confine their working and personal lives within the compound. I visited the factory in 2005. For an earlier news report on this factory, see Daily Graphic (2003).

Sekondi-Takoradi. When economic development shifted east to Accra–Tema, the Chinese and their factories moved too. GHUMCO, the oldest existing Chinese factory is still here, though its Chinese staff of nine is a skeleton of what it used to be.

When Joe returned to Ghana in 1994, GHUMCO was under new ownership and he now was employed as its managing director. Takoradi was no longer socially and economically as vibrant as it was twenty-some years ago. The BBC described Takoradi as a “dusty, run-down port city” (BBC 2011a). The government discourse of modernisation was ubiquitous, but economic and social development focused resources in the Greater Accra Region. Local FM radio presenter, Nana Otu Gyandoh feels that Takoradi has “not been given due attention” over the years. He says, “Everything happens in Accra or Kumasi. We don’t even have a university.... Things in Takoradi were slow. Even banks started to close. The Central Business District was virtually at a standstill” (BBC 2011b). In light of Takoradi’s stalled development and semi-marginal status, I was curious why Joe was attracted to his job.<sup>8</sup>

For many single Chinese men in Ghana, whether they arrived in the 1960s or 2000s, the potential for life change is one reason among many that attracted them to the new country. Unlike the early Chinese narratives of the United States in the nineteenth century that described migrants “dreaming of

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<sup>8</sup> Since this research was completed in 2007, oil has been discovered off of the Takoradi coast by the Irish company, Tullow Oil, resulting in rapid change to the city as investors and companies flock to take advantage of this economic boom. For reports about this, see: BBC (2007); Melik (2010); Walker (2011).



gold” (for example, Hsu 2000), Chinese in Ghana arrived without knowing much about the place and had few expectations associated with the country. Instead of placing hope on the place, the potential for life change came from the possibilities that could open up by *leaving* China or Hong Kong. Ghana had potential to affect personal life change and it became the interstice between promise and disappointment

Joe’s personal journey to Ghana speaks to this experience of living in the interstice— this space of liminality where the initial desire to leave is less about the place of the arrival but the possibilities that *potentially* open up when one leaves a place. Shortly after graduation from university in his twenties, Joe went to work for Hong Kong’s public housing programme. He met one of the owners of a private housing estate who also was the owner of an enamelware factory in Ghana. Joe reveals his desire to gain worldly experiences and suggests that leaving Hong Kong took precedence over what new country he was going to live in. He said,

Of course coming to Africa, leaving Hong Kong, you earn a bit more money. It opens your eyes to others, to how the [world] outside of Hong Kong operates. So, when we talked about the possibility of going to Africa I was willing to come. I was single and young. Initially, I was supposed to be sent to Abidjan [in neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire] because they were just about to [start operations]. But then there was a delay there and they needed somebody here [in Ghana], so I was sent in.

Joe describes the enormous task of setting up a new factory and distributing products in a foreign market. When protocols have been established and they

become routine, not only is the challenge gone, but in Ghana Joe feels it is easy to become complacent.

JOE: It was really an adventure then. These days the business is not so good. It was not like this when I first came here. When I first came here I was taken aback, in the sense that we also have a big warehouse in the back. It was considered a very big warehouse at the time it was built. Because we didn't have enough space here, the corridor was full of stuff stacked ceiling high. I'm in charge of marketing and sales and the problem was I didn't have a stock list. I spoke to the MD [managing director] at the time and I said look I need two weeks to rearrange the stocks, otherwise I cannot go out and sell. So I was given two weeks. You know the weather here is very good especially in January — it never rains. We moved literally everything out of the warehouse rearranged it and put things back where they were supposed to be in separate piles. We got a real stock list. Then I went around the country to sell. Those days there were only about five or six big companies who had such power to distribute . . . So I went around to see all these big companies. In the end, I was quite successful. After a year then there was no stock left. Nothing. Every day you have cars waiting outside the factory for the products to finish. Some of the cartons were quite hot because they just came off the conveyor belt. These were loaded on to the truck. So then kind of, life becomes a bit boring. The challenge is gone.

CONAL: It becomes routine?

J: Not only that it becomes routine. People come chasing for the products, instead of you going out to sell the product. I started dealing with other things as well because I have time now. What I found at that time is that it is not suitable for a young man to be in this part of the world. One, you have the habit of laziness. Apart from office work you don't need to do anything. Like a cup of tea, servants or staff will bring it over. You want something, they'll bring it to you. You go home and dinner is already cooked [by the servant] on the table. You finish your dinner, you just relax, and everything will be taken away. It doesn't happen in the developed world. If I continued living here I think it would become a problem for me to live outside Ghana . . . . When I was engaged in early 1971, I decided to move away from here and go to England. My wife lived in England for a long time, so we married in England and I continued my study for a year and I started working over there. I started working in charter accounting firms auditing auditors and private business.

C: So you didn't want to set your roots in Ghana, or even try to settle down?

J: Not at that time. I see that that would be problem. If it is forever then my knowledge of business would have been very limited. I was only about 22 or 23 when I came, so it's not very good. I only started working a few years in Hong Kong. The environment [in Ghana] is also very limited.

Experience only grows by years not days.... Here, I see that I'm close to the wall. There's a wall to the future.

It seemed the newness of Joe's job, the enormous amount of responsibility he had in setting up a product distribution system, along with exploring the potential markets in Ghana, gave Joe a sense of adventure. Very quickly though, he felt he had exhausted Ghana's potential. His job not only became routine, he also became complacent. It was easy to be satisfied, because everything seemed to be already taken care of. Ironically, it was this premature sense of satisfaction that made it unsatisfactory for Joe. He described this later experience in Ghana as a "wall to the future".

This expression and experience that an extended stay in Ghana is in itself limiting, is often expressed among Chinese in Ghana. Joe gave me three distinctive responses to this. One was about developing "bad habits", habits that did not enable a person to live elsewhere successfully. Joe said,

[It's] very simple. Time is a very important factor in business in the developed world. When you say you will get it by tomorrow, you will get it by tomorrow. Here, when they say "tomorrow" it means "unknown". There's a joke here, I don't know if you know. When they call the time, it's called GMT. GMT is not Greenwich Mean Time. It means Ghana Maybe Time. Nobody takes a blind notice of time. If they say, I'll start lunch at twelve, you go there at two, it has not started yet. It's like that. This is a really bad habit. I remember the first time I came here in 1964; I joined the Rotary Club. The first year I joined there was a function. It was some sort of outside function. It was supposed to be at eight. I was there before eight. I'm always at a meeting place before the time. I waited half an hour and not a single soul turned up. I was about to leave, then I saw one turn up. I said I was about to leave. I thought it was supposed to be at eight. "Nobody shows up until nine or nine-thirty." I was very angry. So, at the following meetings, I raised the point. I told the people, you know your time is very limited. I said, from the moment you're conceived to the moment you die, your time is fixed. That's it. There's no more. So every second you waste, you

waste it within this limit. It's gone. You wasted half an hour, it's gone. It's no longer there. I made an attack on them and they realised. So any time there's a meeting, they're on time. See, one of the worst things is when you are going to attend functions, they might say an event is at seven-thirty but you'll be lucky if a few people show up at nine o'clock. So from simple things like that, you will see that you'll develop a very, very bad habit here.

It did not strike me during the conversation to ask Joe why it was important to be able to live elsewhere. What if he had decided to live in Ghana? Presumably, then that lifestyle he experienced in 1964 would be suitable. Part of our early discussion had ventured into the topic of being too indulgent, lazy, and not doing things for oneself. Though Joe expressed discomfort towards that lifestyle, he did later acknowledge that he enjoyed being pampered every now and then. Still, he was uneasy about the effects of a prolonged lifestyle like that. He said, one becomes "an object of society" with such indulgence. I asked him to explain.

You become so useless. Let's say from the beginning you like a cup of tea and someone else is doing it for you all the time. But, if you go somewhere else, there's nobody making a cup of tea [for you], so you don't know how to. Simple things like that! Things like this, it happens, it's not like it doesn't happen. It happens. People who do not know how to make it, because they were always served to the fullest extent. It's not good. Even when my son comes here [to Ghana] and he wants water, I say to him, go get it yourself. Don't ask the maid for it.

It seemed Joe was uncomfortable with being too complacent because it was not acceptable to how he understood what was a moral human character. There was also another practical side to the dangers of being complacent. Joe cautioned me not to forget that the conditions and abilities to face a situation by an employee are different from those of an employer. He said,

One, you're an employee, a worker. Things can change. It's [the

privilege of living in Ghana] not yours. It's not like you have a lot of money. [As an employer] today, you do this business and the next day if you don't like it you do something else. But, being an employee, if your knowledge is limited, then your future becomes limited. You must broaden your knowledge, your way of behaviour, so that you can be accepted into sort of other jobs, other environments easily.... It is very important for you to be versatile, whether you're operating a business, or whether you're establishing a business. So, this thing is not my cup of tea.

It all seemed very ironic. Joe left Hong Kong because he wanted to see more of the world and gain more experience. He sensed that there was adventure beyond the confines of Hong Kong society and as a young man, he wanted to see what the world could offer. Having found himself in Ghana, the first couple of years seemed to be very exciting as he grew to explore the country and work in ways that he had not in Hong Kong. Then, when his skills as a promoter of the factory's products were no longer needed, and when he realised that many of the desirable comforts in life could be fulfilled by someone else, he felt confined to a small potential of what he could do. What seemed to be so luxurious, being taken care of, became a signal to Joe that he was becoming complacent and inert. In his words, he was "not versatile". Despite the comforts of the position he held and the living situation he had, he realised that this all could be taken away from him if the factory decided to end his contract. If that happened, what recourse could Joe have? A sense of unease about the possibilities in the future as Joe experienced, are characteristic of some of the realities among the Chinese living in Ghana.

Moving the factories to Ghana was one way to gain financial capital for the entrepreneurs. Furthermore, using the mobility of Chinese managers and workers, they were able to guarantee their continual mobility. However, this also

created the possibility of immobility for these Chinese workers, in part, due to the company's operational policies, in part, to national politics at the time, and in part, to the global economy. Earlier, I mentioned Mr. Pok who talked about how certain Chinese factories did not intend to invest in their future in Ghana, and were earning a big part of their money through foreign exchange. Joe further extrapolated for me the necessity of being not only personally flexible, but that factories needed to be flexible too. I asked him if Chinese imports to Ghana were making it difficult for his enamelware factory to sell in the market. I asked him to compare his factory's condition with those of Chinese-owned textile factories who were finding it difficult to compete in the local market that was becoming saturated with cheaper imports of imitation wax prints from China. Joe contrasted his company with the textiles industries. For one, his factory was constantly improving their machinery so that the product and productivity improved while at the same time reducing the cost of production. He said,

In textiles, they [the local Chinese factories] were really digging their own graves. If you look at their machinery, it is really old. When they were enjoying [profits in their heyday], they were not looking at improving the technical side of it. When these things happen [such as cheap imports], you don't have enough time to improve your equipment, to reduce cost, and so forth. That becomes a problem. The goods they [local Chinese textile factories] produce here is really quite expensive. This is why China gets the chance to compete. TTL, GTMC they have a lot of problems. Not like before. This is the reason. Now if they want to reinvent, it takes a lot of money, so it's not something they can do.

Flexibility seemed a key for Joe in facing what felt like circumstances that walled in his own future. He met his wife in 1971 when she came from the U.K. for her holidays. Her family was working in Ghana at the enamelware factory too.

Because his wife was already living in the UK, that opened a pathway for him to move out of Ghana to the UK where he had more opportunities to expand his skill set. He attended one more year of school and later landed a job at a chartered accountancy firm where he learnt his profession. For over 20 years he lived and worked in the UK. Surprisingly, he returned to Ghana in 1994 to the same enamelware factory although in a different work position, but still without the desire to establish a longer term relationship with Ghana.

In the 1980s, the factory ownership changed hands to his cousin. At that time, Joe was hopping between London, Hong Kong, China, and Southeast Asia for business. During that period, his cousin kept him abreast of developing management and financial problems in the company. In the early 1990s, his cousin asked him to return to Ghana to help with the factory.

“I said to him, my son is too young and I can’t leave him. I said he needed to give me a couple of years at least, at least to when he gets to what they call the 11-plus, around 11 to 12 years old. When my son was about 12, my cousin said look it’s come to a head now, so in ’94, I came. The company was on the verge of bankruptcy at the time.” That was the reason Joe gave for returning to Ghana—connection to family. Gaining flexibility in the UK through a larger skill set meant that returning to Ghana no longer would have a “walling” effect on Joe’s livelihood. He had experience and contacts beyond Ghana and those could lead him elsewhere if working in Ghana no longer were sustainable.

I thought that his return to Ghana could signal that Ghana had become a possible place for him to retire. He seemed to have professionally done well and

has a secured life. Perhaps retiring to the slower pace of life in Ghana was something that attracted him? Although reaching close to 60, Joe expressed that he had never thought of retiring because he would feel a bit “bored”. Comparing retirement to going on vacation, Joe said,

Let’s say that I go on leave, the first two weeks is wonderful, after that I feel a bit bored. Oh, you wake up, what are you going to do? Today we go there. After two weeks, not much to do. You wake up, read the paper, go to the shop, buy some food, and that’s it. What else? If you really retire, that becomes your daily life. You’ll be bored stiff. I wouldn’t want to really retire.

He also further extrapolated that his life stage did have something to do with feeling a kind of insecurity about Ghana.

Medically, it is a big problem. Let’s say you have a heart attack here. The chances of survival are next to zero. One of the main problems is medical. I have international health insurance coverage. In case of emergency, they will send a plane to take you to the nearest facility that they have. Even the plane is fully equipped with doctors and nurses and— I know somebody who already used that service.

But even if Ghana’s medical facilities were adequate, Joe said he still would not find retiring in Ghana acceptable.

There is nothing much to do, to be honest, if you retire here. What are you going to do? Let’s say in the UK you can do something. Either you can do some charitable work, consultancy work, there’s a lot of things one can do. Here, nothing. Lack of opportunities. Basically it’s lack of facilities. You want to take a walk in a park, there is none. For relaxation, in the morning you go walk around and so. Here you can only walk on the roadside. There is no park. So, definitely I wouldn’t even think about retiring here even if I think about retiring.

I found Joe’s patterns of response about his earlier and later years in Ghana at first strikingly similar. When he felt he had exhausted the potential for economic and career advancement and that Ghana no longer had opportunities



that would “open his eyes”, he felt “walled in”. It seems feeling “walled in” can only happen when you sense that there are other experiences that are beyond what your current circumstances can afford. You would not feel “walled in” if you had no sense that there were other possibilities. This sense that there are other experiences can come from internal sources—imagination, sense of dissatisfaction—or external influences. In Joe’s later years as a company executive, his sense that Ghana lacked opportunities and modern facilities made it undesirable for him to retire in Ghana. He could imagine himself engaged in other activities that Ghana could not provide. Ghana would be “boring” for him.

Although Young Joe and Old Joe saw a lack of opportunities in Ghana that made certain life projections impossible, there are salient differences in these two experiences of “lack”. Young Joe did not look at the world the same as Old Joe did. Young Joe used the language of ownership, power and control to describe his life as a young employee. His company created the circumstances that provided him with social and economic privileges in Ghana. Because he was not in control of those circumstances and could easily fall into too much dependency on the employer, he needed to remain versatile and not expect a lifestyle that he did not *own*. He could not be too comfortable and complacent. Old Joe had different perspectives of the world. Whereas the desires of Young Joe understood life circumstances and his life ahead in terms of ownership, power, and control, Old Joe talked about them in terms of existing opportunities. Old Joe seemed less concerned about control and more concerned about not being bored by his

surroundings. Young Joe placed himself in the centre of action, whereas Old Joe depended more on the existence of facilities and opportunities.

There are also other differences in perspectives. Old Joe is comfortable seeing his life settle in the UK. He has lived in Ghana for the past 10 years but he returns to London every year for a month to 6 weeks. “My home now is in London.” He is not used to the lifestyle in Hong Kong, which he finds a “hassle”. He finds that it is customary for friends to continually invite each other for meals as a way to acknowledge each other’s friendship and repay social debt: “It becomes obligation as opposed to enjoyment. In the UK, we get together; let’s have a dinner. Fine, everybody enjoys it, and that’s the end of it. But in the Far East, it’s not like that.”

For Old Joe, becoming comfortable in the UK came with an adoption of a new identity but not the discarding of an old one. After Old Joe told me his story of multiple migratory moves, I asked him where he feels he belongs. He began his response by referring to what his children come to see themselves as:

Even my children, they always say we are Chinese, although we have British citizenship. My children were born in Britain and my wife and I are naturalised British subjects. We enjoy the full right of British citizenship. I have two children and they were born in London, but the first thing they say is we are Chinese. We never thought to say that we are English.

I asked if he would say he is British. “No, we are British subjects but we are Chinese nationals. You will never change the fact that we are Chinese, no matter where you live, or where you come from. I live in England. I always say that.” But when I asked him to comment about the large South Asian community in the UK

that lay claims to being British, Old Joe said, “Yes, we are British too, we are British citizens, British subjects, but our roots are still Chinese.” Believing that my experiences living in America has skewed my understanding, he said,

You’ll find that this is a very clear distinction between Chinese national living in Europe and Chinese national living in America. More Chinese in America will say they are Americans without mentioning that they are Chinese. In their view, the American status is more important than their root or forefather status. Most [Chinese in Britain] will say they’re Chinese.

He attributes this distinction to his belief that people in America are predominantly immigrants whereas the narrative of being an immigrant does not run strong in Europe. I noticed that Old Joe referred to himself once as a “British citizen” but predominantly uses “British subject”. The distinction between British citizen and British subject has a long and complicated history. In general, when referring to the period of the British Empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anyone born within the British Commonwealth was a British subject, which meant that they owed allegiance to the British sovereignty. This did not mean they were necessarily also British citizens though, for that category comes with particular rights, including the right of abode in the UK, that British subjects did not have. British citizens were also British subjects, but not all British subjects were British citizens. Those born in Hong Kong were considered British subjects but most were not British citizens. Hong Kongers who grew up in the colonial period understood that they were subjects of the British sovereignty but held no rights to work or live in the United Kingdom. Perhaps some of these realities of British nationality laws influenced why Old Joe identifies himself as a British subject who

is a Chinese living in Britain. His experiences working in a “very English” chartered accountant firm confirmed for him that people who were “very English” accepted him. He did not feel discriminated against in England. He found his life in the UK adaptable and adoptable. He felt a comfortable and accepted in British society, and did not feel pressure to choose between Chinese or British. Adopting the new identity of a British subject and keeping his old identity as a Chinese, Joe found home in the UK.

Joe’s history of returning to Ghana, after having found a home elsewhere, is unusual on two counts. It was atypical among the Chinese to return after an extended absence. Usually those who return have been unable to make it elsewhere, so returning to Ghana they try to launch forwards again. Under those circumstances, returning can be associated with being a failure. It is even more unusual to return after having found a place where one could settle. In Joe’s case, he was comfortable in Britain and had been working steadily in accountancy. Although Joe did not seem dissatisfied living in Ghana, he was clear that it was only temporary and that his future lay elsewhere. What seemed odd was Joe’s willingness to re-enter a liminal situation where it seemed his life in Britain was put on hold for the sake of helping out a cousin for the long term. Perhaps having already identified and established a base in the UK as a place he could comfortably call home was enough reassurance for Joe to re-enter a liminal period of his life. On the other hand, it also seemed equally true that Joe was willing to move away from a steady life and embrace a kind of disjuncture which required him to be living in a somewhat liminal state for a long period. I later understood

that embracing disjuncture and even seeking it out rather than resisting it, was a more typical way that Chinese lived their lives in Ghana, contrary to how some scholars have talked about transnationalism and diasporic communities. I discuss this idea of embracing disjuncture later on in this chapter through ethnographic portraits.

#### **B. Fracturing and Congealing Social Relations, 1**

Joe's earlier experiences of feeling "walled in", his sense of lack of opportunities, being in liminality, and sense of stagnation are common experiences among the Chinese. On the one hand, life here is described as mellow and simple, qualities that many workers found attractive compared to the engrossed work-lives in the cities of China and Hong Kong. On the other hand, it takes enormous effort in this environment to create momentum to make changes and to re-create the experience of fresh-ness. "Nothing new; same thing every day. That's Ghana," one of my friends often said. The slow pace of change along with limited options for leisure activities made life seem inert. This perception is widely held among locals and foreigners. Locals who migrate from the rural countryside to the metropolis often remark at the hectic pace of urban life. As they establish their lives in Accra, this initial shock of change diminishes and they become mostly accustomed to this style of living. For many, they may begin to imagine that life outside of Ghana is potentially more exciting, ever-changing, and rife with opportunities. A significant portion of people in the rural areas want to

migrate to urban areas and those in the urban areas want to go overseas. It seems like there is this movement of step migration. The popularity of these perceptions may, in part, be influenced by the stories that Ghanaians in the diaspora have carried back home and the social and economic effects of their remittances (see for example, Mazzucato, et al. 2006; van Dalen, et al. 2005; Zan 2004).

Ghanaians in the diaspora are a significant number and have strong political and economic influence in Ghana. In 2005, Ghanaians in North America formed the Diaspora Vote Committee to change laws in Ghana to allow voting franchise for Ghanaians citizens living abroad (Boateng 2005), resulting in heated national debates about representation and the right to vote (see for example: Bebli 2005; GNA 2006a, 2006b, 2005b).

During eighteen months of fieldwork, my friends expressed varying degrees of feeling stuck and being in limbo. These feelings, which seem to have seasonal oscillations, came most strongly in the middle of the year when large numbers of Chinese and other foreigners left Ghana for vacation and business. The void left behind was palpable: social activities decreased within the community, and Chinese restaurants saw a noticeable decline in Chinese patrons. Those who stayed behind experienced boredom and restlessness, which contributed to this sense of being liminal. In my case, I received regular visits and requests for favours from acquaintances that I rarely hear from independently. Over the next few months, some of these relationships grew closer. For many, a reduction in their regular social contacts called attention to the dulling effects of the daily grind of earning a living in an undesirable place.

This seasonal movement of people drew my attention to how Chinese realigned themselves during the summer months when their former networks are temporarily disbanded. However, more strikingly, it also became a signpost signalling the oscillation between the fracturing and congealing of social ties. While this type of oscillation was easily visible at the beginning and ending of the summer months, when old friends left and later returned, this type of push and pull of social relations was, in fact, an ongoing occurrence. The more one becomes enmeshed in particular social relations, the greater the potential for negative consequences because it more firmly defines the relationships one has with others. The more firm or “congealed” these social ties are, the odds become higher that there is greater obligation and increased expectation for reciprocity, including the exchange of gossip and the sharing of personal lives. In many cases, more firmly defined social ties also constrict the potential social networks to which one may branch out. Thus, while certain social ties congeal, others start to fracture at a basic level due to neglect. With the greater potential for danger, there is also then an increasing potential personal desire to withdraw from these social ties that become defining of one’s life. Sometimes these congealing social relations provide a kind of certainty in the fluxing of social relations among Chinese, but other times the experience of this congelation suffocates. With the greater potential to personally withdraw from existing social ties, there is a higher chance for these social ties to fracture or pull away from each other. The greater expectation there is for loyalty, the more obligation one has to certain relations, that can become increasingly demanding. Some individuals respond by

withdrawing from one set of social ties, while firming up relations with other individuals. This oscillation between fracturing and congealing of social ties shows the volatility of group loyalty and personal desire to redefine one's identity and relationships. Using ethnographic cases, I demonstrate these points.

During the summer months, I became close friends with Grace, whom I had met several times at dinner parties, but with whom I did not develop an independent relationship. Grace is in her late 30s, married to a commercial sales manager and has two children of primary school age. She and her family remained in Ghana this particular summer because they had already used up their vacation leave which is granted by the company once every two years. With her friends gone for the summer and her children occupied with private tutoring at home and at a learning centre, Grace felt restless. She initiated our social contact early in the summer, and I soon realised that she wanted to branch out of her typical social life. She felt her current social relationships confined her to the roles of motherhood and wifeness. She was dissatisfied with the lack of career diversity among her friends, most of whom were also housewives or mothers. She wanted to branch out to different networks in order to make life in Ghana more meaningful and purposeful. Motherhood felt constricting to her. It was a role she fell into, "maybe because this is expected of women." She said she would not want to be a mother if she started all over again. The recent rising business success of a Chinese woman in a major wholesale business made Grace question how she could make her life more meaningful. The successful Chinese woman had only been in Ghana for about five years and had risen from numerous recently failed



business attempts. Comparing herself to this woman's success, she noted that she had lived in Ghana for over a decade and has not accomplished anything important. The seemingly natural unravelling roles of motherhood and wifhood made her feel as if everything else was already planned by someone else: her husband is the wage earner; her maid does most of the household chores and babysitting; and private tutors supervise her children's schoolwork because she isn't fluent in English. Grace's criticism of her life is similar to Joe's fear of complacency in Ghana. Complaining that everything else in her life was taken care of by someone else, Grace suggested that her environment encouraged her to be easily satisfied and live a lifestyle of sloth and torpor. Though this was comfortable, life felt meaningless this way. I examine this particular situation deeper in the following chapter, but suffice here to say that these factors among others became deep enough for Grace that she felt she was ready to break free of her ennui and drudgery.

Since I had helped to run a restaurant and had a few leads with other businesses, Grace started visiting me daily and hoped she could learn more about the restaurant trade and business networks. She also urged me to join her while she made rounds in town dropping into the workplaces and homes of other Chinese whom we knew but not usually well enough for unannounced drop-ins. During these visits, Grace seemed to always find the most appropriate times—during the lull of a business day or when the person was taking a break from work. In all cases, these routine visits worked out because there were few variations in daily routines. It was strongly pointed out to me that life in Ghana is

*predictable*. We were even welcomed during some of these unexpected visits. Some hosts expressed relief that something out of the ordinary had broken the drudgery of their daily work lives.

The mood during these months and the alternative kinds of social interactions that occurred highlighted the curious nature of living in Ghana — a paradox of living in limbo and feeling stuck is that social relations are continually being fractured and congealed. Certain friendships that formed would not have developed had there not been a lull during the year. Boredom and restlessness can draw different parties together that otherwise would not have formed. These relationships were fragile; when the summer was over, so did many of the relationships end. If we take a broad socio-political perspective, we would have missed the effects these relationships have on liminality. By homing in on the private lives of Chinese, I realised that the experience of liminality was not only produced by the socio-economic/political conditions in Ghana, or by the global economy. The fragmenting and congealing of personal relations can create the experience of liminality.

In the first chapter, I introduced Xiaolü, a wholesaler of household goods who claimed to have only one primary friendship relationship in Ghana because he generally distrusted other Chinese, finding them petty and ungenerous. His friends were a married couple who lived in Tema, about 45 minutes drive from his home and business. He made weekly trips to visit these two friends and not only depended on them for friendship, but also for assistance in his business, including logistics and exchange of foreign currency. The nature of his business

meant he did not need to have much contact with other Chinese. Through the help of his Ghanaian contacts, he has his own network of local retailers. His relations with Ghanaians were strictly business-oriented. He had no other social relations beyond the Chinese couple. He majored in commerce, in which he later became uninterested in. After college, he entered the futures market but found China's political economy unsuitable for that kind of work. He found China's communist system disagreeable and made his way out of the country. Ironically, he found himself back in commerce and now depended on the burgeoning development and trade in China to earn his living in Ghana. He tells me he is uncertain where he is going with his life, but this way of living is viable for the meantime. He has a wife in China but she does not plan to join him in Ghana. He is here to "make money."

Waiting is a large part of what Xiaolü does. At the time of one of our conversations, Xiaolü's business was at a lull. His stock of household goods had expired and he had been waiting for over two weeks for his shipping container to arrive from Dalian, China. Once the container arrives, he has to wait for the container to clear customs and for Ghanaian bureaucracy to run its course before he can resume his business. Waiting and anticipation are frequent occurrences.

Finding Chinese social relations untrustworthy and disingenuous, Xiaolü removes himself from these networks and keeps mostly to himself. He has no interest in befriending Ghanaians, and his poor command of English would have made it difficult to do so. Wholesaling occupies most of his active life, though interrupted by frequent breaks. Xiaolü is not committed to making a living in

commerce and said he envied those involved in intellectual work. He spends most of his punctuated free time at home, researching on the internet for an essay on the ills of communism that he hopes to write. One day when he sent his computer for repair because of a virus infection, he told me he felt even more lethargic because of boredom.

By removing himself from most social networks, Xiaolü's world in Ghana seemed very limited. His life seemed largely in a holding pattern. The combination of his fragmented social networks and personal life put him into a temporary existence of waiting and anticipation. Social relations here were, for the most part, neither satisfactory nor dependable. This was not a lifestyle into which he wished to bring his family. They stay in China while he lives in Ghana making a living. Meanwhile, there are no obvious plans for how to bringing the two parts together. When Xiaolü talked about writing his essay, he sounds as if he were on a different plane, scheming how to put his desires to have a life of an intellectual into fruition. Alternatively, was he discovering what plans he could have? It is not clear where the line between waiting and strategising is. Xiaolü seems to be waiting for his external circumstances to align with his internal circumstances. On the other hand, perhaps waiting in this circumstance *is a form of strategising*. Xiaolü left China to gain distance from its political system in order to make an acceptable and comfortable living. Though Ghana is not ideal, it seems he is somewhere between being resigned and satisfied, at least for the time being.

The scarcity of social relations in Xiaolü's life and his strategy of removing himself from most social relations puts him in an extreme category. He has taken

a particular advice of caution, often heard in the community, to its fullest. When I arrived in the field, one of the first advice friends and friends of friends gave hinted at the role that suspicion played in fragmenting and solidifying social relations. Unbeknownst to me, these social relations can affect one's experience of liminality and stagnation. One friend warned that even though what I may think is innocuous information, and even petty, could be used against me in unexpected ways. They generally characterised the Chinese as capable of doing great harm, having an uncanny way of spinning and weaving different pieces of information to form false stories. Seemingly innocuous information I give could be combined with previous ideas and understandings to form stories of other people. These stories would be told as truth and I could be pointed out as the source of these stories.

A week before I concluded my fieldwork I met two friends, Mr. and Mrs. Pok, for dinner. Mrs. Pok asked me how my research was wrapping up and what difficulties I had encountered. I expressed to her that it had been unexpectedly difficult for me to get interviews from the Chinese, despite being considered somewhat of a "local" in the network. She was surprised. "I think your research topic is very interesting and wouldn't harm them in any way." Then she thought about it and said, "Perhaps they are afraid you'll be asking them sensitive questions and they wouldn't know how to politely deflect the question."

"There's nothing to it because they can say I am not at convenience to answer this question," I replied.

Mr. Pok quickly retorted that that was already giving away too much information, since I could then deduce something suspicious from that response. Instead, he explained that it was more likely that they were trying to prevent the dissemination of any information because they did not want to take the risk of having sensitive information spread.

At the end of our dinner, Mrs. Pok said, “The Chinese in Ghana are just like little children—fighting over miniscule things and being irritated about the most insignificant matters. Moreover, when you are advantageous to them, they’ll beckon you. However, when you need their help they won’t go out of their way. [The friendship] it’s all just surface level.” Mr. Pok added, “In Ghana, there isn’t one good person. Everyone tries to cheat, lie, and steal. Not one good person!” I was used to Mr. Pok’s straightforward and often biting remarks by now. He has a reputation among the Chinese for being argumentative and “walking straight without learning to turn corners.” The implication there is that he gets straight to his point without concern for the delicate nature of maintaining social relations.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Pok gave an example of what he was talking about.

“Mr. Fong [a Chinese restaurateur] once asked me if I considered him a good friend.”

“I bet you said no,” I said. I could imagine where this was going knowing Mr. Pok’s reputation.

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<sup>9</sup> On numerous occasions in the field, I received advice that being a successful human being is learning how to turn corners at unexpected moments. We can’t always walk a straight line to get to our goals. Even our goals have to change depending on circumstances. A successful human being’s life path is winding because he or she works with changing circumstances rather than revolts against them.

“That’s exactly what he said,” Mrs. Pok said and started laughing. “Mr. Fong’s complexion totally changed!”

Mr. Pok responded, “I considered what he said. Is he a good friend? He’s a friend but he’s not a good friend. I’ve been able to actually help him, say ten times, and he has only been able to help me once. He tries to help, but most of the time his assistance adds more trouble. He would say ‘hey this person you can trust to help you out’ actually turns out not to be so. So, if he knows that the person isn’t reliable why would he tell me that I should trust the person? He’s not a good friend.”

Mr. Pok’s conversations were straightforward and many would consider harsh, but they were variations of common topics discussed among friends and associates. His unfiltered speech was often attributed as contributing to the failure of his restaurant business. In the 1990s, he tried to branch out of the manufacturing industry to try his hand at a Chinese-European fusion restaurant. However, although his food was considered innovative and of good quality by many, they complained that he did not know how to please patrons and cater to their personalities and whims. Mr. Pok was brutally honest with them and this alienated many Chinese from his restaurant. Although his restaurant did not entirely depend on Chinese for survival, his strained relationships with many Chinese did contribute to the restaurant’s closure. After numerous disagreements, his Chinese chef left to join another Chinese restaurant. Despite having stressed relations with the Chinese, Mr. Pok nevertheless depended on the Chinese to give him feedback for improving his restaurant. It was his only

community network he could tap into largely due to language and cultural similarities. Antagonising these relationships hindered his restaurant's progress. In the end, the Poks sold their restaurant and returned to running the manufacturing plant even though both had high hopes of leaving it behind. The glass manufacturing business was becoming less profitable. He wanted to sell the business but wondered, "Who is going to buy this in this economy?" Imported glass lanterns from China were cheaper than what the factory could produce. The primary source of fuel for the furnace, coal tar, was increasingly expensive. The factory may soon become unsustainable but at least it fared better than the restaurant. Meanwhile, Mr. Pok is exploring the growing and extremely competitive import business, testing out different products to see if he can find niche markets among the local expatriate communities.

Themes of trustworthiness, suspicion, friendship, being taken advantage of, and how much of one's information one should keep private were constant themes in social discourse. The fragmenting of social relations during the summer months brought into relief the nature of living in transition in Ghana. When asked directly, the Chinese would frequently answer that living in Ghana is solely instrumental, only for earning money and a way to advance to a more modern and comfortable life. This was true for Young Joe, who after arrival in Ghana had a change of goals and began to find importance in making his young career burgeon. When he felt he had exhausted all training that Ghana could provide, he left for the UK. In my conversations with young Chinese men who worked in factories or in the wholesale business, they also expressed that they saw



potential for themselves in Ghana's economy. Though this instrumental view of Ghana is common, the summer months of boredom and restlessness revealed that instrumentality was *not enough*. In fact, it highlighted the peculiar tension of networking and community and how they can play a role in making life in Ghana liminal and stagnant. Despite periodic verbal expressions of dissatisfaction with the perceived nature of Chinese social relationships—friendships, business relations, etc.—there is an oscillation between creating closer social ties to Chinese and simultaneously putting up guards because of suspicions of those relations. To further explore this theme of fracturing and congealing of social relations, the two following that examine how this oscillation of relationships creates experiences of being in limbo.

### **C. Of Bread and Cakes: Social Prominence and Outcasts**

This section is anchored by descriptions of the interactions and relationships between four people, all of whom are on the fringes of Chinese networks although not all of them used to be marginalised. I first focus on the experience of social relations among the Chinese leading to a discussion of how the experience of being in limbo can be formed not only through global processes and political structures, but also through more immediate pressures from existing social relations. Two of these people, Tsao Mei-yee and her husband Tsao Ying-fung, are an elderly couple, once prominent in the Chinese community, but who have in the past decade been outcast. The other two, Jenny and Mandy, are two

young women who, because they are social outcasts of the Chinese community, have found company and solace in their friendship with each other. To the casual observer, the relations between these two groups are non-existent and neither party would recognise having much relationship with the other. However, a role that I fell into revealed “relationship by proxy” that often occurs among Chinese, perhaps speaking to the nature of suspicion and how social relations form in such environments.

*1. Relationship by Proxy: Connecting Social Outcasts*

To the casual observer, Tsao Mei-yee and Mandy do not have much social connection with each other since neither acknowledges their social connections directly, though they do know each other since both have lived in Ghana for a long time. There is a generational gap between the two since Mei-yee is two generations older than Mandy. Neither of them shares the same social circles since both had different economic backgrounds and so they usually do not appear in the same social scene together. All signs point to neither of them having connections with each other, but I later discovered otherwise when I helped Mei-yee, a food caterer, to deliver her goods to her clients. Their relationship demonstrates the tension between the congealing and fracturing of social relations, albeit in much subtler terms. Each kept social ties without openly demonstrating them. It was also questionable how much of their connection they acknowledged to themselves.

For decades when the Chinese community wanted readymade Chinese baked goods and Chinese western-style cakes, Mrs. Fung was the person they turned to. She received frequent orders from Chinese restaurants and private parties. Sometimes, she would decline their requests when she had too many orders and needed a break from the work. She could do this since her business was informal and ran whenever she wanted. She had no competition since the business was hard work and, according to many, her clients had high standards. When she left Ghana for good, she offered Mei-yee the chance to take over her business and offered to encourage her clients to turn to Mei-yee for their business. Mei-yee was reluctant to take over the business over her concern that she could not handle the workload given her advanced age. However, there were deeper and more delicate concerns. Given her social status as the wife of a once wealthy tycoon who is now on downtrodden times, she worried about the potential for gossip and how others would perceive the family.

Mei-yee took over the business secretly after a long period of indecision. Several mutual friends of ours pulled me aside and expressed regretfully, “She now has to resort to peddling food.” My host mother fronted Mei-yee’s business for a while. She received her clients’ orders, relayed them to Mei-yee, and delivered the goods for her. Other times my host mother’s restaurant was the central pick up point. Mei-yee delivered the goods to the restaurant where her clients would come pick them up after she had left. My host mother warned me not to reveal that Mei-yee had taken over the business. Clients knew they could continue to make orders but were not supposed to know who was fulfilling them.

When my host mother left the country for the summer, she asked me to become Mei-yee's intermediary, and so I began an impromptu delivery service for her baked goods. Clients called me to place orders and the client network grew through word-of-mouth. I was puzzled that when clients placed orders, they only asked if certain foods were available but never specifically naming the caterer. Chinese is a "pronoun-dropping" language in which both subject and object can be dropped in certain cases, especially when they can be inferred. (see, Huang 1989). In cases even when neither subject nor object can be inferred, it is possible to strategically use this feature of Chinese grammar for social reasons. For example, if naming the subject is socially sensitive, not having to refer to the subject allows the speaker to imply that the listener already knows who or what is being talked about even though that might not be the case. In these circumstances, the listener can play along and pretend to know what is being talked about in order to elude social awkwardness.<sup>10</sup> To maintain a comfortable presence in my role, I avoided mentioning who made the goods, or if "she" is available to make them. I suspected, though, that everyone knew who made the food.

One client, Mandy, heard about my delivery service and became one of Mei-yee's largest clients. Mandy, like Mei-yee is a social outcast though for different reasons. Mandy's parents had strained business relations with several

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<sup>10</sup> Here is a sample dialogue of pronoun-dropping in Chinese along with the literal English translation:

有冇麵飽賣呀？ Have, [have] not, bread sell?

有。 Have.

好呀，訂兩個啦。 Good, order two.

prominent Chinese families in the 1980s and ran into trouble with Ghanaian officials, who eventually deported her father. During high school, she eloped with an Iranian and became a young mother before graduating. Although the family accepts her marriage with some resignation, she explained that other Chinese still find her marriage distasteful because non-Chinese, except for Caucasians, are often regarded as culturally incompatible and lazy. Mandy has a few key Chinese social connections, but for the most part, avoids contact with the rest of the community.

Although Mandy travelled often to Mei-yee's town and had her contact information, Mandy did not order from Mei-yee directly nor did she pick up her orders when she was in Mei-yee's town. Though Mandy did not explicitly avoid Mei-yee when they happened to meet in social situations, they interacted minimally with each other. Mandy gossiped to me about Mei-yee's past, although she never brought up the topic of her baked goods. Mei-yee behaved similarly. In situations when it would have been easier for Mei-yee to ask Mandy to deliver baked goods to area restaurants, Mei-yee would wait several days until I was in town to pick up her goods to deliver for her. Though Mandy had closer ties than I did to certain area restaurants that ordered Mei-yee's baked goods, Mei-yee relied on my delivery role even though sometimes she had to wait several days for me to pick them up.

Mei-yee and Mandy's social interactions seemed puzzling. Though they had occasional contact, I became their intermediary in the matter of baked goods. In this part of their relationship, I became a proxy for them. Both Mei-yee and

Mandy were avoiding the delicate question of social status and eliding evaluation of social conduct. Selling baked goods was potentially inappropriate for the wife of a former influential tycoon.<sup>11</sup> To do so openly was to publicly admit social and financial failure, a potentially shameful act. Mandy did not want to be in the position of acknowledging that she knows about Mei-yee's business lest she be accused of being judgemental or run into danger of being blamed for spreading gossip about Mei-yee's life. It was obvious that the baked goods came from Mei-yee, but it was kept an open secret for good reasons. An intermediary allowed Mei-yee's clients to evade the delicate nature of her social status and gave them a buffer from potentially being accused as gossipers about Mei-yee's life. An intermediary also allowed Mei-yee to avoid being in the spotlight of the Chinese community. Though everyone could assume that gossip about Mei-yee would spread, the presence of a buffer allowed both Mei-yee and the rest of the Chinese community the pretence of the non-existence of gossip. Furthermore, an intermediary allowed the pretence of Mei-yee's financial status to remain unspoken and the previous status quo fictively maintained.

Both Mei-yee and Mandy avoided arenas where their social status would be potentially evaluated. Differences in how they were marked as social outcasts explains why both did not form a united front. In the community, discussion of Mei-yee's social status was generally left unspoken, or if done so, expressed in an indirect and low-key manner. I suspect because the change in her family's social and financial status was so sudden and drastic, its tragedy made it taboo to

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<sup>11</sup> I go into details about Tsao Mei-yee's social status in the next subsection.

discuss how to socially recognise the family. In addition, her family's financial crisis continues to have rippling effects in the broader community and the outcome of litigation could have a role if they continue to fall or eventually re-emerge as a prominent family. Mandy's natal family had not been well-regarded and her behaviour in her youth was considered unprincipled. Without the history of a good reputation on her side, Mandy was publicly evaluated and talked about as one of many typical Chinese who have failed because they have adopted an unproductive lifestyle, which is seen as typical of Ghana. Mandy was a social pariah for being unprincipled, whereas misfortune is what led to Mei-yee's family becoming marginalised. The only commonality they shared was the general experience of being in social limbo, but the more specific experiences of how they were marginalised by the Chinese differed.

## *II. Tsao Ying-fung and Tsao Mei-yee: From Social Prominence to Outcasts*

Mei-yee and her husband, Tsao Ying-fung, an elderly couple, were once a successful and highly-regarded business family among the Chinese. Ying-fung's heyday was during the 1980s and 1990s when Ghana went through privatisation and deregulation. Considered one of Ghana's top Chinese entrepreneurs, he was known to have deep financial connections to the Ghanaian business and political communities. He co-founded a metalwork factory and later, with amassed wealth, established two more factories on his own. In the years when there were severe government restrictions on foreign currency exchange, Ying-fung knew how to

move money in and out of the country and informally provided this service to members of the Chinese community. In the late 1990s, due to mismanagement, several of his factories ran into debt. In one of them, he lost major shareholding power. Since then, Mei-yee and Ying-fung have been socially marginalised.

Whereas once they were guests of honour at many private functions, they are now often excluded from social functions. They live in limbo, waiting for the court to resolve business conflicts they have with their business partners. In their late 70s, they are now without enough money to leave the country for retirement in Hong Kong.

Like numerous stories of young Chinese men in the 1960s and 1970s, Ying-fung was part of the factory employment trend that brought him to Ghana. In the 1980s, when Ghana faced economic and political uncertainty, Ying-fung was laid off from his job at the textile factory. Realising his chances of thriving in Hong Kong were slim if he returned, he convinced several friends to pool resources to start a metalwork factory. This factory successfully cornered the market on trunk lockers.<sup>12</sup> Ying-fung's reputation grew as his factory's reach expanded and he became a central figure in the Chinese community, both socially well known and as a financial resource for many.

In the 2000s, after making a bad business deal in a new factory, Ying-fung's finances began hemorrhaging. Details of the financial troubles remain a

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<sup>12</sup> For a long time, up until the early-1990s, Ghanaian children of junior-high-school age who could afford it were sent to public boarding schools. Trunk lockers were used to hold and transport their belongings. Trunk lockers were versatile as both luggage and easily accessible "closets" in the dormitories.



mystery, but it is well known that Ying-fung and a business partner accuse each other of mismanaging the factory finances. Ying-fung also accused his business partner of manipulating him to sell his shares. They sued and countersued each other, dragging the case out for several years. This led to further suspicion and gossip that there must be internal family conflicts that generated these lawsuits. Because most Chinese in the community lacked knowledge of Ghana's legal system, and because most have a poor command of English, it was common to form opinions based on hearsay and partial knowledge. This made gossip exciting but also dangerous when the lines between fiction and truth were blurred.

Ying-fung's financial fallout had split his social networks into factions, cutting across groups of business associates and close friends. The few friends who remained close to him explained this was indicative of how Chinese took advantage of each other by forming friendships that are then jettisoned when there is no need for them. Although this may be true, there were other social aspects that made it difficult for Ying-fung's friends and business acquaintances to remain firm allies with him. To do so would risk the danger of taking sides in a contentious relationship, opening up one's own behaviour to gossip and thus potentially fracturing one's own social network. Others, who were not caught in the middle, did not want the potential problems of being involved. Some Chinese businessmen responded by distancing themselves from Ying-fung and Mei-yee in order to parry potentially volatile gossip about whose side they were on and what benefits they may be receiving from their particular social alliances.

Given the ethos of approaching social relations, it was understandable that others would maintain the guise of a social barrier when facing Mei-yee. The problems that her family faced were socially and economically volatile, lending themselves to speculation and gossip. To avoid this, or at least remove herself from direct experience of such gossip, Mei-yee wanted to maintain her own privacy and distance. She frequently said that there was so much gossip when Chinese came together that she preferred to maintain her distance for peace of mind. At the same time, others seemed to help maintain this sense of privacy for Mei-yee in her presence, in part to use distance as a way to present oneself as being non-intrusive and respectful of boundaries.

Though it seems that the overall pattern of social relations between Mei-yee's family and other Chinese is to maintain distance, it is more accurate to understand this as constant movement between the congealing and fracturing of social relations. Mei-yee did not completely reject relationships with Chinese. Managing social tensions meant she chose generally to remain distant from networks of social influence but with enough connection for her own economic reasons. It seemed fitting that I became one of her mediators for her network. I was in a liminal space between an insider and outsider to Chinese social networks, creating a bridge to social networks for Mei-yee.<sup>13</sup> It also meant that some Chinese who were on the margins could approach me with their orders

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<sup>13</sup> I was an insider to these networks, in part, having grown up in Ghana and having social relations from the past that continues today. I was also an outsider to these networks in the sense that it had been over a decade since I lived in Ghana, and also because I had left Ghana to establish myself.

because I occupied a relatively non-threatening, low-stakes social position in these networks. This acts as a buffer for them, lowering their chances of being involved in gossip networks, which many try to stay away from because of personal stakes — for example, personal and economic interests.

Ying-fung and Mei-yee are mostly living a life of waiting in Ghana. They are waiting for the legal case to come to an end and hoping it ends in their favour. With that money, they can stop waiting and return to Hong Kong to live out their life in retirement, a desire that Mei-yee has.

### *III. Jenny*

Jenny is in her mid-40s, married and with a young daughter. Unlike Mei-yee, Jenny has a conspicuous relationship with Mandy that attracts criticism. Though both are friends and confidantes, Jenny also takes liberty in using her life experiences to advise Mandy on the nature of human beings and human relations. Perhaps part of her didacticism is to release her anxieties of being stuck and in limbo. Her marginal social position in the community is a result of pushing the community away and the community pushing her away. She has the reputation for being too forthright with her ideas and feelings and does not tend to skirt around sensitive issues. This also makes her an easy suspect for being a gossip. Because many Chinese view her as having a rather volatile personality who is difficult to moderate and approach with tact, many have chosen to exclude her from their relations.

The gossip that surrounds Jenny's complex and entangled family and business relationship is, perhaps, the greatest cause for her social marginalisation. To understand this complicated mix of relations, I first describe the family relations in which Jenny grew up and how it became further entangled with her current business relations. When she was a toddler, Jenny's natal family gave her away to her paternal uncle's family. Jenny's paternal uncle had one biological child, Law Man-kwong, who is thirteen to fifteen years older than Jenny. It was not uncommon in China for parents to give up a child to relatives who either had no child of their own or could use the benefit of having more children. Often when a male child was adopted, it was because the couple had no male heirs and needed one to carry on the family name. In other cases, such as in Jenny's adoptive family, Man-kwong explained that having a female child could be a source of assistance for the parents in their old age. Though Jenny officially became a surrogate daughter to her uncle's family, the relationship never seemed to have fully translated. In some situations, Man-kwong and Jenny have described each other as siblings, as one would expect, but in other situations they each talk about the other as uncle or niece. I have also heard Jenny talk about her adoptive parents as either grandparents or parents. I have been unable to find out why this was the case. Because Man-kwong's and Jenny's relationship transgresses between the level of sibling and that of uncle and niece, Jenny has been accused by Man-kwong's wife and by acquaintances for exhibiting inappropriate, and sometimes suggestive behaviour, toward her brother. Jenny and Man-kwong have both dismissed these accusations. Jenny told me, "Isn't this appropriate sort of

fondness that a sister would have to a brother?” Or sometimes she would say this is the type of affection that is appropriate for a niece to display to an uncle. Man-kwong has expressed similar notions regarding their relationship.

Man-kwong explained that when he left Hong Kong for Ghana, he felt guilty for leaving his aging parents and not living up to his filial duties. However, he found some relief that Jenny was there to take care of them. About fifteen years later, when Jenny and her newlywed husband, Simon, were having a hard time establishing a family in Hong Kong, Man-kwong convinced both of them to come to Ghana to establish a fast-food restaurant. Ghana is an inexpensive place to build a family, he said. The agreement was that Man-kwong and his wife would finance the restaurant while Jenny and Simon would put in the work to run it. Both families would have equal shares in the business and Jenny would also be paid a salary. Man-kwong explained that he also had a secondary motive for encouraging Jenny and her family to immigrate. By bringing Jenny to Ghana, he would be also be able to bring his parents, whom Jenny would also be able to look after.

The financial and work situation did not pan out once Jenny and her family moved to Ghana. Man-kwong's wife found the arrangement unacceptable, arguing that their capital investment in the business meant they should own more shares. Instead of receiving half of the restaurant shares, Jenny and her husband now had a quarter of it. According to Jenny, they were never paid as employees. “When they found out the business was not profitable, they stopped paying us a salary and said whatever profit we make is ours to keep.” Adding

more complications to the business arrangement, Man-kwong's wife objected to her in-laws living with Jenny. Man-kwong's wife was concerned that other Chinese would interpret this arrangement as a reflection of her inability to take care of her own in-laws, or worse, her being disrespectful towards them. Jenny believed that as the adopted daughter, it was her duty to take care of her parents. The disagreement fractured the relationship between the families and ultimately, to bring peace among the various parties, Man-kwong moved his parents back to Hong Kong.

Jenny and Simon describe being stuck in their situation as living a life deferred. Jenny said, "My grandmother blames me for leaving her. I told her if I knew this was what was going to happen, I wouldn't have come to Ghana. But for the sake of my husband's career and of my daughter, there's nothing I can do but stay. We're planning to leave after she completes high school." Simon explained that making a living in Ghana has not been easy. He runs three businesses to make ends meet. The restaurant business barely keeps itself afloat. He co-founded a video rental company with another friend and also established his own security alarm business.

Jenny and her husband feel trapped by their social circumstances to which they feel both socially and financially obligated. It was Man-kwong who enabled them to try their chance at a better life in Ghana, but it is also this new life, with its complex family relations, and the fear of outsider gossip, that now have trapped them into living a life deferred. They have invested too much in the restaurant to abandon it. Beyond finances, it would be socially awkward for Jenny

to abandon her restaurant venture with her brother. It would also add fodder to the perpetual gossip the Chinese have about her relationship with her brother and their entangled family businesses. The minimal profit the restaurant makes does enable Simon to work two other businesses, neither of which are self-supporting. Finding herself both obligated and pressured by her social relations and financial situation, Jenny explains, “I ended up not being able to do anything. I feel depressed. But my husband said I have to remember why we are in Ghana. We’re here for our daughter. He said, then if that’s the case, we should continue doing what we do, for her sake. So I no longer live here for me, but for my daughter.”

#### **D. Fracturing and Congealing Social Relations, 2: Gossip and Suspicion**

In an earlier section, “Fracturing and Congealing Social Relations, 1”, I discussed how the seasonal fluctuation of Chinese brought to focus the fracturing and congealing of social relations. In the three or more months when a sizeable number of Chinese are away, those who stayed behind have a tendency to reconfigure their social networks, in part due to boredom. The social reconfiguration also demonstrates that economics are not the only causes for migration and for living in limbo, though it may be a primary factor. For example, the experience of boredom and restlessness eventually incited Grace to expand her social network and reimagine herself as a career woman instead of a housewife and mother. In the section that followed, “Of Bread and Cakes”, I closely examined how the experience of living in limbo can occur through

immediate pressures from existing social relations. Underneath the various social pressures that Mei-yee, Ying-fung, Mandy, and Jenny experience are the additional pressures of gossip and suspicion that helps to manifest the experience of living in limbo. In this section, I turn attention to the effects of gossip and suspicion as two ways of social interaction that dominate much of daily life.

Some of the earliest advice I was given was to be careful of what information I disclosed, because even seemingly innocuous speech can be re-used in ways that could cause me disrepute or embroil me in other's affairs. I generally tried to keep a low profile but other people had their own ideas of how to fit me in to their society. I was careful with what I disclosed and tried to learn what kinds of information could be repurposed in less malevolent ways. But it is difficult to encourage and solicit information without disclosing some of my own. People knew the kinds of connections I had and sought me out for information to connections I had. It is clear then that gossiping and being suspicious are two sides of the same coin. You have to gossip, or at least partake in presenting certain kinds of information, in order to receive information that you are looking for. Being suspicious is the concomitant side of such social interactions. To be judicious in how you partake of these interactions, you learn to be suspicious of intentions and of the information you receive, and you imagine how what you say could be construed and used.

Gossip and suspicion, and the resulting congealing and fracturing of social relations, electrified the experience of living in liminality in Ghana. On the one hand, you are hesitant of being fully committed to the community and on the



other hand, it is difficult to live in Ghana without having an ear in the community. No matter how you interact, being entangled in someone else's gossip is part of living in Ghana. Moreover, this entanglement creates a sense of unease. Just as gossip and suspicion are two sides of the same coin, congealing and fracturing social relations are relatives to that duo. There are people like Xiaolü whose circumstances along with their own disinterest in a particular way of living, have successfully removed themselves from being a part of the Chinese community. But they live very isolated lives. Even Mr. Pok who tried to sever his ties with the Chinese community finds it difficult to do so because his businesses constantly demand his reconnection to that population.

Earlier, I mentioned Man-kwong who helped to bring Jenny and her family to Ghana. Man-kwong's entanglement illustrates the issues I outlined above. Man-kwong has a reputation for being too casual around women and everyone has heard there are issues between him and his wife, although you would never witness these problems. Contrary to this reputation, Man-kwong and his wife present a solid relationship to others and each talk about the other in very positive ways. Who gets to see the problems that broil underneath this presentation?

One night at Man-kwong's restaurant, he motioned me over to join him for dinner. It was a typical quiet summer and business at every restaurant was slow. His wife had gone to Hong Kong for a couple of months.

MAN-KWONG: You still live with [your host father]?

CONAL: Yes.

M: How is business?

C: So so. Not too good.

M: In fact, not very good at all. The restaurant business is team work for husband and wife—a couple's business. One person cannot manage it at all. By the time you take care of the kitchen, you can't manage the front. I heard business is not good at all.

C: You've been talking to him at the casino?

M: No, I don't go to the casinos any more. Too much talk. But maybe I will tonight. I get the information. All the waiters [of all Chinese restaurants] know each other. They [my host parents] should not hold such grudges with each other. Be more open and magnanimous. Let go of the old hurts. Like my chef, why do they still remember that incident? He came willingly. I didn't force him to come.

My host family have tensions with Man-kwong though these tensions remain unspoken. According to my host mother, years ago Man-kwong was short of kitchen staff and had a big event he was catering for. "Out of the kindness of her heart," she loaned one of her chefs to Man-kwong for several days. Instead of repaying her back in kind, Man-kwong made an attractive offer to the chef who became permanent staff of the restaurant. I had not conceded this information to anyone, yet Man-kwong spoke to me as if we had already discussed it. He assumed that my close relationship with my host parents has given me privilege to their inner world. This is an assumption that other Chinese have also made.

Man-kwong continued evaluating the characters of my host parents and laying out what flaws they had, and how they could make amends. He was also didactic, using stories about them to show me how to be a righteous person. When he was done, we sat in silence. It was awkward to hear him talk about my host parents in these ways as he fully knows that it was not politically savvy for me to agree to what he says. It was an uncomfortable situation. Suddenly the tone of the conversation changed. Man-kwong confessed and confided to me about his

own marital problems. He complained about the pressures he felt in the community. Being righteous was not easy.

You know, my wife and I, we also have some problems. There isn't any Chinese in Ghana who actually is interested in helping others. I'm honest with you. I, Man-kwong, am being really honest with you. There were some in the past — old friends — but now there is no one. Many see that I have filial children, good finances, a stable situation, and they see my marital relationship and think it's good. They envy us. Then they hear that we have problems and they say, 'Aha! Even you have problems.' They watch our situation like a movie, adding salt and pepper to the situation [to spice it up further and to create false impressions]. They are not interested in helping you or the relationship.

Man-kwong described his wife's jealousy and her demands to have his loyalty squarely on her when he feels that he is equally obligated to both his mother and his cousin, Jenny. Like much of social relations in Ghana, the personal and the business became inseparable constantly shifting ground, congealing and fracturing. He describes the situation in the following way:

Jenny is my cousin. We have the same grandfather, so we are very close. You know, a man, when he is free, likes to sometimes enjoy time away from his wife: watch soccer, talk to relatives, so on. But he also likes to have the atmosphere of a family, which I have. Jenny and I are very close and we talk a lot. Sometimes I invite them over for a meal. My wife is very jealous of Jenny and says, 'Why don't you talk to me more often like you do to Jenny?' I, Man-kwong, am very fair and equal to everyone. Ask my wife, she would agree. But she would say she wants to be treated special and she doesn't feel special. I tell her, we've been married for so long, it's not like we're just dating. It feels awkward to dote on her.

Why did Man-kwong finally capitulate and confess and complain? Were the pressures of having to act righteous too much? Was the quiet summer too boring? I never got a full grasp of why Man-kwong, who was always so upright, would suddenly break down. Perhaps I was marginal enough in Chinese

networks to be innocuous. What this does show is there is a tendency to make connections within networks of Chinese and at the same time trepidation that occurs when social relations are made. The tendency to break off social relations or keep the connections at bay is, partly, a result of the fear that current relations can have negative effects in the future. At the same time, they are regulating the flow of information along with regulating one's expectations of what can be gained from such relationships. Past and current experiences mediate their approach to their current relations shaping how much investment and hope they put into a relationship, especially when gossip is an everyday part of social circles.

When Jenny's restaurant business made only marginal profits, her husband ventured into two other businesses. He mentioned that it was difficult to start businesses with other Chinese, because they seem to have ulterior motives and are not trustworthy. He finally found a suitable business partner, one who had a reputation for being brutally honest and who was also marginalised in social networks for his criticisms of individuals and of the community. Jenny characterised this attitude of suspicion and competition during a conversation with a newly-arrived Hong Kong Chinese, Mr. Lau. I was sitting in her living room when Mr. Lau knocked on the door, walked in, uttered a quick greeting, casually picked up a jar of peanuts, and began popping them into his mouth. I was struck by his ease and discovered that they had apparently met at a local Chinese fast-food restaurant. Mr. Lau told us about his adventures with figuring out what was a fair salary for the housing staff. He has three servants and had been paying each of them GHC 800,000 (US\$ 87) a month along with GHC

100,000 (US\$ 11) for food allowance. It was a Ghanaian who had recommended the salary. Jenny then feigned scolding him and said he had been cheated. He should have asked around amongst Chinese for how much house staff costs. I end this section with a snippet from the conversation between Mr. Lau and Jenny.

LAU: You think I haven't [asked around]? I have! But none of them [Chinese] would tell me. I went to Sister's of the East [Chinese restaurant] and the woman there was quite rude. I introduced myself and presented my business card to her. She took a look at it and then threw it away. Hey, was that necessary? She didn't have to throw it away in front of me. If she really wanted to, she could just do it later.

JENNY: Yeah, that's human nature. We're one pile of loose sand. When she sees you as a customer, she very politely talks to you. But when you show that you're in Ghana to do business, she ignores you. That's the nature of human beings.

LAU: And then I went to Tip Top restaurant [Chinese fast-food]. The woman there when I asked her the question was very reluctant to tell me. And the husband was even worse. So how can it be that I won't be cheated? Of course I would be cheated. The Chinese here have a prevention mentality. Like that Xiaogao, I asked her where she gets her jeans from, thinking that I could help her out if she buys them from the Chinese market because there are factories she can buy from for much cheaper. Of course, the problem is if you buy from a factory, you have the problem of having to buy large quantities of the same stuff. Do you have a market for that quantity? If you buy it retail, you have more varieties to choose from, but the prices are higher. I thought I could introduce her to factories and get her a deal. She kept brushing off my question. Fine!

I have thus far tried to demonstrate that life in Ghana for the Chinese is often experienced as predictable and routine, which creates a sense of boredom. Being in limbo in part creates this sense of ennui as the cycles of tension rotate between having to be in Ghana, not wanting to be in Ghana, and resigning oneself to Ghana. These internal psychological movements can be circular and, from time to time, exhausting. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that there are benefits to living in Ghana with higher standards of living possible with lower

living expenses. Circles of friendships and business associates cannot be simply described as close-knit. Instead, as one altercation that developed in the field, along with the stories told around it unfolded, some of the tensions within relationships occur precisely because there is a desire to both create closer bonds of relationship and reliance and, at the same time, prevent too much intimacy which often results in a lingering suspicion of each other's relationships.

Relationships seem to mimic the larger limbo effect of being in Ghana. The relationships themselves seem to be constantly in flux, aligning, falling apart, and re-aligning in new ways.

Being in limbo in Ghana is a result of both transnational structural politics and forms of consociation practiced at the everyday level. Although there is a tendency in studies of cross-border movements to sometimes depict these movements as highly fluid, this would be inaccurate to describe the experiences of a major segment of the Chinese population in Ghana. Movement for the Chinese comes not only with experiences of fluidity, but also periods of stasis. Importantly, more than just the various degrees between mobility and immobility is the uncertainty regarding how, when, and if the next move will come. Living in Ghana without permanent residency privileges precludes the possibilities of long-term practical settlement. These uncertainties at the geo-political level are expressed at the everyday level in the shifting, somewhat loose and temporary relations formed. The connection between these two types of limbo illuminates living and belonging not only in a world of movement but more importantly in a world of uncertainty. While many Chinese came to Ghana with the idea of raising

their economic wealth during a period in which movement seemed fairly fluid, they nevertheless were cognizant that their stay in Ghana was temporal even though not everyone had solid plans on where else to go next. There was always uncertainty about the future.

Similar to the experiences of travelling consultants in the Cayman Islands who experience “institutionalized transience” (Amit-Talai 1998), Chinese in Ghana do not see the transnational plane as a field of endless economic opportunities where they are freely able to move. In some cases, they do not have the desire to move. The Chinese in Ghana embrace a level of disjuncture that they take as part of their everyday living and being in Ghana. This disjuncture is in part living a life on hold, a mode of operating between being flexible (Ong 1999) and being stable. Initial flexibility in movement has now become a state of living in limbo. The case of Xiaolü where much of the time he lives waiting for businesses to pick up or for when it is necessary for him to return to China to make additional orders. The case of Mei-yee and Ying-fung is another example as they live also in waiting for the court to decide on their litigation. Jenny who now finds herself socially obligated to run the restaurant that she established with her brother, is similarly situated. Despite its slim profit margin, the restaurant is also what enables her husband the foundations to run two other businesses. Sometimes there are laments that the ground they stand on is not as stable as they would like, yet at the same time conditions from their past have shown them that their groundings in the past were similarly unstable. It was, after all, one of the reasons that propelled them forward and outward, away from Asia into

Ghana: an unhappy home life, uncertainty of how they could make a better living, and lack of economic opportunities in Asia. For many, moving to Ghana is but one of many steps of successive movements.

Like the travelling consultants whom Amit studied in the Cayman Islands, searching for immediate stability is not necessarily the foremost strategy in their ways of navigating the world. Rather, they manage to work with the disjuncture of living in limbo—between flexibility and stability—in their lives. For example, Mrs. Hua lives with her two daughters of secondary school age while her husband works and lives in Nigeria. At least once a year during the vacation months the family reunites in Hong Kong. Sometimes during the Christmas season, mother and daughter travel to Nigeria to visit. Embracing the possibility of lessened family intimacy is part of embracing disjuncture. At the same time, embracing a disjointed sense of community, and at a more personal level embracing more temporary social connections, many of which they feel they need to be guarded about, is part of this embracing of disjuncture. Unlike scholars who write of transnational movements and diasporic connections that emphasise the unity and strength of connections and in addition, reading these as “counter discourses to modernity” and “cultures of resistance” (Clifford 1994:319), Chinese in Ghana flip this equation over, work within the various levels of disjuncture in the geopolitical and everyday, personal realm, along with reproducing it themselves.

Living and embracing disjuncture does not mean that each time movement occurs that it is fully embraced. Sometimes unexpected movement is met with a resistance and then with a sense of coming-to-terms. I end this chapter



with an ethnographic example of Grace, whom I mentioned earlier, as one of my consociates who formed a deeper friendship bond with me during one summer of fieldwork in Ghana.

In March 2005, I returned a phone call that Grace had made earlier in the day. The second she knew who was calling, she said to me, “I’m moving to Congo!” Just the evening before, we had dinner at her neighbour’s home and were chatting about mundane everyday social life in Ghana. I was in disbelief and asked her again what she had just said. “Congo! I’m moving there!” she said with exasperation. Finally, when she said it for the fourth time I understood that my mind was not playing tricks on me. I asked her if this was something that had been in the works for a while but that she didn’t want others to know about.

“It was just all of a sudden. My husband came home and told me. I was shocked. I almost couldn’t handle it,” she said.

“So when are you leaving?” I asked.

“In a month.”

“A month?”

“My husband is leaving in a month and then I’ll leave a few months later.”

“The company can do that? Just all of a sudden they can move you? But how can they do that? All of a sudden, they ask you to move. What about your contract?”

“Well, it’s the same company—“

“I know same mother company but different factories—“

“Still it’s the same company. Our big Madame who is in charge of the Cha Group wants us to move. What are we going to do? Not move? They have a clothes factory in Congo and all the machines are broken. No one knows how to repair them. My husband’s background is in repairing clothes-making machines so they want him over there to help start the business.”

“Just like that? Can’t they employ someone from Hong Kong?”

“Well, we’re here already. They know our behaviours, that we have children, and nowhere to go, so who are they going to use?” Grace laughs and says, “And I thought you’d be leaving before us.”

“So what are your children going to do? Where are they going to school?” I asked her.

“I spoke with Tong Hong yesterday and she said send my children back to China to study.”

“Why China?”

“Well they are Chinese, right?”

“But their English is going to suffer. I guess it’s an asset to learn Chinese, but their English will be very poor. Especially when everything they’ve learnt in school has been in English, they have to start all over again,” I said.

We paused a bit, then she said, “Talk to you later! Okay?” I told her I’d see her tomorrow.

After we finished our phone conversation, I was surprised at how upset I had been to hear this news. I was not ready to face another case of friends moving

unexpectedly. When Grace said she thought it was ironic that she was going to be leaving Ghana before me, she wasn't the first person to say so. Amy, a Malaysian Chinese friend, said the same thing when she came back from summer holidays in Malaysia. She said, "We're moving back to Malaysia after this academic year. And I thought you'd be leaving before us." Other friends in the field eventually finalised plans to leave many months after I had come to Ghana. My host mother left Ghana for what at that time was an indeterminate amount of time, a couple of months after I had arrived. A couple I knew also had expressed uncertainty about how long they would be able to sustain living in Ghana. Towards the end of my fieldwork, they made the final decision to leave Ghana and retire on a rural island of Hong Kong. For this couple, rural Hong Kong did not bring certainty to their lives. They continued to negotiate with each other where to live and how they wanted to retire. A couple of years later, they moved to a city in southern China where it was less expensive to live and where the wife felt more lively. However, access to medical care was inconvenient because they had to travel to Hong Kong for their medical needs. Eventually a couple of years later, they moved back to Hong Kong in an urban region. Will they move again?

I left the field in November 2005, indeed after Amy and her family left Ghana, and after Grace's husband left for Congo. However, Grace did not leave Ghana. Her husband left for Congo for an indefinite amount of time, which turned out to be about two months. During those two months, Grace worked with living in the face of uncertainty in ways that surprised both of us.

## Chapter 4

### Inhabiting and Working with the Limbo Lifestyle

This chapter examines what it feels like to live in limbo and how the Chinese inhabit this reality, particularly how they experience and respond to the pushes and pulls of community, and to their unclear current situations and future unknowns. Being displaced and being uprooted are more common terms to describe some of the experiences of being in limbo but I shy away from them in my ethnography. “Being uprooted” and “displacement” suggest a prior status of being firmly planted in place. Both terms normalise the experience of *terra firma* giving it more significance than what underlies the Chinese experience and how the Chinese navigate their worlds. Inhabiting limbo and being in limbo point us in different directions. The distinction highlights the experience of *living in uncertainty* instead of suggesting that stability is necessarily an end-goal. Logically, this also means that the implications of stability that rootedness implies is not necessarily a natural longing. The implicit bias in many treatments of psychological and cultural effects of modernity and globalization is a type of natural nostalgia for some kind of rootedness, a return to some previous stabilised and perhaps pristine sense of home and belonging. We can expand this sense of stability in being rooted to include a sense of collectivity and belonging and importantly that it is necessarily natural and what we all seek. This chapter in particular brings into question these assumptions. Some implications of

inhabiting and being in limbo are that there can be a sense of freedom and a sense of potential when living in limbo, and that the sense of stability itself can be confining. Inhabiting limbo can provide the opportunity for breaking from the sense of confinement. Inhabiting limbo is not necessarily psychologically destabilising, and being rooted does not necessarily provide a sense of belonging.

### **1. THEORIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN MODERN SOCIETY**

The sense of displacement has been a topic of concern for sociologists and anthropologists since the formation of both disciplines. Two strains of theory are preoccupied with this sense of uprootedness in the modern world. First there are those concerned with the shift in social form from traditional community, usually agricultural and rural, to complex modern societies, usually capitalistic and industrialised. These scholars include late-nineteenth century scholars such as Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber. Second are those who have written specifically about diasporas and global migration who generally approach these movements as an unmooring and a lost sense of home. Implicit in these theories of the psychological and cultural effects of modernity, capitalism and globalisation is assumption of nostalgia, that people have a natural longing for rootedness and a sense of home and belonging. In this chapter, I question this general assumption not because it is inherently wrong but because in some cases, such as in this ethnography, the desire for rootedness and belonging does not apply. In this section, I discuss briefly the main ideas and assumptions about the modern

society as laid about by several major late-nineteenth century/early-twentieth century sociologists. Then I examine how contemporary scholarship on diaspora and globalisation accentuate many of these themes (e.g.: Castells 1997; Cohen 1997; Delanty 2003; Giddens 1991; Ong 1993; Ong and Nonini 1997; Ong 1999). And finally, I question the validity of these claims especially as they apply to my ethnographic research.

Late-nineteenth century European society was undergoing rapid change. Small rural communities based on an agricultural economy were being incorporated into larger metropolitan areas based on organised free labour and an industrialised economy. This became a concern for European sociologists, many of whom conceptualised this as a shift from a pre-industrial form of social existence based on tradition and kinship ties to a complex and impersonal social structure based around rules and bureaucracy developed to mitigate internal conflicts between individuals and groups. These changes in the concept of community led European scholars to debate the origins and nature of these social formations and their governance. Rationalists based their arguments on Enlightenment ideas and argued that people have absolute power and an inalienable right to make rational laws. It followed then that the social structure and its governance should embody this rational nature. Historicists held tradition to a higher authority and argued that social structure needed to adhere to traditional standards and established norms of regulation and governance (Tönnies [1887] 2001:3-14).

One of the earliest modern sociologists Tönnies attempted to reconcile these conflicting viewpoints to gain a better understanding of social life, though for Tönnies this was not only an intellectual response. Born in the Duchy of Schleswig, he experienced its shift from a small rural community to its incorporation into a larger metropolitan area that became part of the German Empire. Tönnies developed the abstract binary concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which he termed “normal types”. Concepts in “normal types” were to be treated as mutually exclusive in the theoretical realm, but in the actual world each society had a different combination of these types ([1887] 2001:xvi, 21). Tönnies argued that two basic forms of human wills determine what social formations occur: a natural, spontaneous and unreflecting will, and at the other end of the spectrum an artificial, deliberative calculating will. Societies formed around natural will he termed *Gemeinschaft* for they were a natural social formation born out of an instinctive and unreflective mode of consciousness linked to the fulfillment of one’s inherent obligatory social function and duty within this social formation. Natural will was to be in harmony with others, and was to be closely identified with one’s family unit and neighbours. In the original or natural state where there was a “unity of human wills”, the natural social formation is *Gemeinschaft*. When you were born into a *Gemeinschaft* society, you were “united from the moment of our birth with our own folk for better or for worse” (18). Individuals interacted with each other as people instead of merely through their social roles. There was a lively sense of community born first from the primal bonds formed between mother and child, between husband and wife,

among relatives, and among neighbours and so forth. These bonds and sense of unity reverberated organically to larger groups. Blood relations created a primal unity which developed into a “community of place” expressed through living close to each other. This in turn became a “community of spirit”, a “binding link on the level of conscious thought”, or what also was known as a sense of collectivity (27).

It is important to note that Tönnies held that natural bonds are experienced through power and authority. It is this natural authority, such as the authority a father has over a child, which enforced the bonds, kept the norms, religion, and traditions ongoing. This created obligations, privileges, and “substantial inequalities to exist or arise” (32). Because inequalities occurred due to differences in power and authority, Tönnies has described *Gemeinschaft* as a social formation in which people remained united despite everything that separates them.

In larger and more complex societies, natural will and natural bonds no longer worked because these bonds became diffused. Power and authority that arose naturally from the types of bonds that occur in *Gemeinschaft* no longer held individuals in unity in complex societies: “[r]elationships between peoples as friends and comrades have nothing organic, no inner necessity about their character; they owe least to instinct and are less conditioned by habit than are neighbourly relationships; they share a common outlook and thus, in contrast with neighbourliness [a bond typical in *Gemeinschaft*] seem to rest either on chance or free choice” (29). Only political legislation and agreement that demarcated authority and power could keep individuals together in these types of



societies. As such, complex societies were only formed around rational and calculating will since in these social forms each individual was in that society for himself and no one was willing to contribute anything to society unless he or she got something in return. It was in these societies where laws defined individuals and economic conditions, and demarcate property. A *Gesellschaft*-type society was maintained through individuals acting upon their self-interest to achieve status, such as through education and earning money. An individual's desire for freedom rather than for the common good kept this type of society going. Rational exchanges in this social formation linked these individuals together rather than emotions leading to unity and community spirit. The rise of markets, capitalism, and specialisation of labour shifted modern societies from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. In this type of social formation, people "remain separate in spite of everything that unites them" (52). Modern complex societies could not support the kind of communal spirit that was naturally born to human beings if they were allowed to live in a natural social formation. Although individuals in complex societies were kept together and in order by legislation, the spirit of togetherness could not be reproduced as each person was calculating what was most advantageous for him or her.

Durkheim took the theme of calculating social relations and sense of disunity in modern society a step further. Durkheim was concerned with how modern societies held together. His famous study on suicide provided commentary on modern society and the relationship between a general sense of disconnect and social deregulation (anomie). He discovered that in more

traditional communities such as Catholic ones, the rates of suicide were lower than in more modern communities that rose with Protestantism. Through logical elimination, he dismissed the notion that an individual's character and particular circumstances caused changes in suicide rates. He explained that social behaviours were shaped and guided by "social facts" such as cultural norms, institutional structures, and values which were themselves an objective reality and coercive of an individual even when it may have seemed that the individual was acting on his or her own will: "[e]ven when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education" (1982:50). The weakening of social integration and inadequate moral regulation increased incidences of suicide and other pathologies.

Traditional communities, such as Catholic ones, insisted on a strong sense of shared credo and practices and so individuals in these communities held a stronger sense of collective conscience. Modern communities that rose with Protestantism moved away from a tight hierarchy and religious rituals thus diminishing one's sense of embeddedness in community. Rather these societies encouraged a spirit of "free inquiry" pushing the individual to be the "author of his faith" ([1897] 2002:112). In modern communities, collective conscience receded to the background while "excessive individualism" intensifies (168). The lack of strong integration of an individual into their families and communities caused certain types of suicide due to a sense of not belonging and not being

integrated into a community (169-173).<sup>1</sup> Durkheim's reasoning for why a lack of social integration brought about suicide shows rather dubious assumptions about human nature. A person's reason to live must be attached to something external that "transcends and survives him" (169). Without a reason to live other than for oneself, the thought of annihilation becomes terrifying and we lose the courage to live. Societies in which people could embed themselves became the external source that encouraged them to live. Thoughts of the meaninglessness of an individual's short existence were eliminated. Durkheim implied that living for oneself then is meaningless because the individual cannot live in perpetuity.

He described another form of suicide that resulted from inadequate moral regulation. He argued that individuals need external regulators to mitigate the human tendency to have increasing aspirations higher than what could be supported by their environment. Social regulation brought about an "equilibrium of happiness" (211), preventing an individual from setting unattainable goals. Echoing Tönnies's concept of *Gemeinschaft*, Durkheim argued that traditional societies brought about this equilibrium through laws, and by having greater levels of homogeneity where individuals had similar social connections, jobs and lifestyles.

Durkheim explained that modern societies lacked adequate regulation due to their complexities. Work became increasingly specialised leading to increased division between individuals resulting in greater differences. Modern societies, he

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim categorizes suicides into four types, though for my purpose, their names and distinction are not important.

wrote, were marked by their development of increased trade, markets and industrialisation which depended on decreased political and social deregulation (215–216). Governments and laws that formerly functioned as regulators were now tools for reproducing this kind of economic life. In modern society, religion was no longer a force of social regulation. Without adequate regulation, society normalised people’s natural disposition for unbridled aspirations. Furthermore, the development of markets added energy to further encourage these aspirations, which in turn led to greater dissatisfaction in individuals because everyone lived only to achieve their own aspirations. Being eternally dissatisfied became normal. The modern dilemma was that greater personal autonomy led to social isolation, increased individualism, and greed.

Max Weber took a different approach in his understanding of the rise of modern society but came up with very similar characterisation of despair. He asserted that modern society was unique in that it was an economic machine where the reproduction of capital means continued reinvestment for further economic efficiency, the pursuit of profit for the sake of profit, and labour performed as if it were a calling ([1930] 2005:xxxii, 25). Weber characterised this as the “*duty* of the individual” ([1930] 2005:17; emphasis added), which is the fundamental basis of the social ethic of capitalistic societies. Not only rational laws and rational organisations were needed for the establishment of capitalism but people’s entire disposition needed to change in order to support this type of economic culture. He linked this sense of duty to the Protestant ethic of approaching worldly affairs which has been described as “rational mastery of the

world” ([1930] 2005:xxxix). Protestantism emphasised that the only way to live a life that is acceptable to God is through fulfilling one’s obligations in this world rather than separating from this world as Catholics do through monastic asceticism. This provided one element in modern society where the focus was on living an earthly life rather than the traditional societal emphasis on the other world. Calvinism’s idea of predetermination meant that people do not know if they are saved and that an individual’s activities on earth cannot change his destiny. Weber believed that the “extreme inhumanity of this doctrine” led to a “feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual” ([1930] 2005:60). In a surprising logical jump, Weber declared that this type of ethos was “naturally” unsustainable ([1930] 2005:66), so followers of Calvinism came to hold that it was their duty to consider themselves chosen and to demonstrate it. The best way to do this was to “augment the glory of God by real, and not merely apparent, good works” ([1930] 2005:69, cf. 71). It is through this that the world would become *rationalised* and magic and mysticism, such as religious rituals, would be eliminated as a means to salvation. This began the spirit of capitalism, which then propelled itself forward without ever needing the original religious ethos to co-exist (34).

Weber characterised (and critiqued) modern society first as relentlessly rational. Labour was now organised to be attuned to the demands of market for profit and not to politics or irrational speculative opportunities. Whereas formerly businesses were part of households or arose from them, modern society had clear separation of these two spheres, thus family life and work life and individuals

involved were no longer necessarily in the same spheres. The result of this calculated rational way of being was the destruction of spontaneity and impulsive enjoyment and unyielding demand to live an orderly life. Weber evoked the image of the “iron cage” (123) to describe how this method of living—the “calling” of constant pursuit of profit—has entrapped human beings. Like Durkheim’s concept of social facts, Weber suggested that this “calling”, which was external to individuals, came to control how individuals act and respond.

In his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel (1950:Chp. 4) developed the theme that the modern life of the metropolis created internal angst for the individual. He took the view that the natural human inclination is to connect and be embedded in community—that is, to have a sense of collectivity—which traditional rural life supported. The main problem for the individual in traditional society was how to survive biologically. Life in the metropolis turned this around. Echoing the views of Durkheim and Weber, he saw the metropolis as an external force, what he called “super-individual contents of life” (409) that created a crisis for the individual. Unlike Tönnies, who argued that modern society has overemphasised individualism, Simmel argued that the crisis of modernity is how an individual is to “preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence” in the midst of the pressure that modern society coerces (409). According to Simmel, modern society demanded highly specialised roles for each person such that they depend on each other and at the same time are trapped in a structure that makes them cogs in a mechanism. Modern society was also an organism full of external stimuli. The individual needed to resist over-

stimulation and resist becoming a mechanism for society in order to recognise his own existence. The only way to do this was to react with the head instead of the heart, that is, to think and calculate rather than to feel, because rationality was difficult to defeat by the over-stimulation of modern society. This over-emphasis on intellect, however, also triggered the inherent character of modern society that focused on money economy since it is cold rationality that enables this mechanism. Ironically, the rationality of money economy rendered individuals anonymous because production no longer served the individual but rather operated to perpetuate a faceless market. Furthermore, individuals receded to the background as “punctual integration of all activities” and social relations were forced into the mould of a “stable and impersonal time schedule” (413). Whereas the original defence individuals had to becoming a cog in the social mechanism was to become rational, modern society has also co-opted that behaviour and turned it against its original goals, promoting impersonality, indifference and a “blasé” attitude. The individual became uprooted from his natural state and was ultimately “reduced to a negligible quantity” (422).

There are general assumptions and characterisations of modern society that run in the works of these scholars. Traditional societies had a stabilising quality and sense of collective conscience about them. Individuals were assumed to have close bonds with each other. In some versions (e.g., Tönnies) these bonds were inherent to human beings that were further developed through living in close proximity to each other. In other versions (e.g., Durkheim) these bonds were enforced through external sources, such as Catholicism, in which there was a

demand for a shared sense of credo and ritual. Regardless of whether these bonds were seen as primal or constructed socially, individuals gained an emotive and psychological response which led to have a larger sense of self embedded in a community. Individuals gained a sense of collective conscience. Modern society, on the other hand, was like a machine run amok with rationality. Its efficiency and demand for rationality made it an impersonal place for individuals. The trade off is that there is a heightened sense of being an individual and being independent. Paradoxically, these heightened senses are also in tension with the cold mechanics of society that drive individuals like cogs in a machine. There was no sense of collective conscience in modern societies even though individuals are embedded in it. Individuals were not so much connected to each other as in traditional society but were connected to the economics and rationality that run this type of society. In essence, being uprooted was concomitant of heightened individualism and being independent in this type of society.

Later in the twentieth century, the question of uprootedness and belonging has been applied to bigger contexts: the formation of nation-states (Anderson [1983] 1991), impact of colonialism on native populations (Jackson 1995), impact of regional wars resulting in exiles and refugees (Malkki 1995, 2000), and how cultural belonging is kept intact in a globalising era (Pan 1994; Wang 2000). Benedict Anderson ([1983] 1991) argued that nineteenth century nationalism in the Americas was facilitated by print technology and a type of amnesic experience from the Old World: “out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* . . . , which because it can not be ‘remembered,’ must be



narrated” (2004). This notion of fraternity and safety of home is taken up by other scholars.

Delanty (2003) succinctly summarised the key ideas of these works on globalisation and diaspora. Modern society, now called postmodern, has gone into hyper-drive with capitalism spreading around the globe. There is great movement of people, and exchanges of materials and ideas to all corners of the world. The scales of capitalism has spread beyond the boundaries of a few societies and nation-states and gone global. This has the effect of producing not just insecure individuals but an insecure and uprooted world. The tendency is towards cultural struggles and conflicts over questions of belonging. Paradoxically, this great sense of uprootedness brings with it a great desire for community. Being globally uprooted now brings uncertainty to our social roles and identities. The assumption is that identities and the roles we see for ourselves are necessarily tethered to a sense of community.

Community is however fraught with contradictions. It is continuously created and dismantled by the fragmentation and vagaries of this postmodern world. Traditional forms of community were understood as a level of experience that was symbolically constructed which is articulated in the boundaries it creates. Delanty argued that this symbolic level of construction of community no longer addresses the way that community tends to work today. Community is not only about meaning constructed through symbols and boundaries but about belonging: “Community is more likely to be expressed in an active search to achieve belonging than in preserving boundaries” (189). Community is not

opposite to individualism for it is the very fragmentation in society that creates this yearning for community. But it is also this very fragmented nature of society that makes it difficult for people “in search of community to orient themselves around symbolically coded meanings, such as those that communities in the past could rely on” (190). He argued that this is because the symbolic forms in contemporary life do not make clear how people should act since these forms have been co-opted for many different projects by different kinds of people. As a result of global hyper-fragmentation, the yearning for community increases. Yet the only way this can be accomplished in a fragmented world of hyper-individualism is through a search for belonging. Finding belonging in a hyper-fragmented world can only be accomplished through an increased sense of individualism since we have to actively find and situate the communities we feel we belong to. This is unlike Durkheim’s and Tönnies’ sense of belonging to a community in which external or primal forces already place us in community. In the postmodern world, the individual pushes the search for community and determines how to situate him or herself. It seems as if there is a never-ending cycle or perhaps a feedback loopback. Hyper-fragmentation creates nostalgic yearnings for community, which are put into motion through searches for belonging that also heighten our sense of individualism.

The assumptions in both turn-of-the-twentieth-century understandings of modern society and later conceptions of postmodern society begin with the primacy of belonging and groupness. This entails knowing one’s place in society whether society is conceptualised as a geographically bounded unit or in the

global age abstracted as cultural consciousness. If one doesn't belong to a more geographically traditional society, one's yearning then turns to an abstract concept of cultural community. Whether community is externally enforced, primal, or desired by individuals, it offers mooring for individuals, providing a sense of meaning and stability. Without this anchor, individuals feel lost. This seems suspiciously similar to Durkheim's assumption that society provides individuals *raison d'être*. In such a fragmented existence, we are supposedly pushed to the edge and need to belong to something in a flowing world.

The assumption that being rooted matters and is of concern may be true in many ethnographic cases but is a misleading assumption to have about the Chinese in Ghana. Having this view would prevent us from seeing how Chinese in Ghana inhabit liminality without constantly looking for some community or place to ground their sense of self. Groundedness and the sense of community do not always provide us with a secured sense of self. For some Chinese, being anchored and embedded in community is limiting and confining. In his preface to *Existential Anthropology*, Jackson questions this sense that belonging is necessarily a state that is desired. Born in New Zealand, he felt he never belonged there and that living elsewhere might provide him the opportunity of "living another life" and allow him to "somehow come into [his] own" (2005:xi). The desire for groundedness cannot be assumed. In my ethnographic study, there are cases where individuals prefer to be in liminality and work to create a kind of liminality, which provides them a kind of potential and flexibility. Being in

liminality can help in re-inventing oneself and can help in leaving one's past behind.

For the Chinese in Ghana, the tensions of relations that continuously create and dismantle this sense of community demonstrate that being rooted is not always what it is made out to be. It is not always desired, does not always provide a sense of belonging (it is questionable how much a sense of belonging individuals need), and does not necessarily provide the Chinese ways to navigate the world. My previous ethnographic examples have demonstrated the point that we do not always find belonging in the place we were born or raised (e.g., Anna, in Chapter 2, who married in order to leave an oppressive home life). We don't always leave one community behind in order to find another community to belong to. Leaving a community or a home does not always entail the desire for settling or closure that finding belonging seemingly presents. Leaving a community can entail confronting uncertainty, and then, living in liminality. Closing the door to one's past and one's childhood community should not imply that we necessarily want to find their replacements. It is possible to open new doors to unknowns. In many cases, Chinese come to see that living in liminality can be desirable. In the following section, I look at the relationship between gossip, suspicion, and betrayal and how they are related to the general situation of living in liminality. Then, I analyse a particular heated gossip that occurred during my fieldwork as a case study. The remaining sections continue to expand on the theme of inhabiting limbo, limbo as a kind of lifestyle.

It is important to note that part of the problems that scholars of diasporas and globalisation face in making their assumptions about rootedness and community may stem from the problems of perspective. Recalling the argument from an earlier chapter about structural perspectives and personal experiences, I discussed that while both perspectives are valid, what we learn from one perspective does not necessarily translate to what we understand from another perspective. From a structural, and thus, broad perspective, it does seem that societies are highly fragmented due to migration, moving capital, and global economies. Yet with a more up-close perspective focusing on how people experience their living circumstances — whether we want to call it fragmentation or heightened individualism — do not necessarily translate to yearnings for stability, community, or belonging.

## **2. SUSPICION, GOSSIP, AND BETRAYAL**

Ethnographers have depended on local informants to orient them socially in the field and to help gain an understanding of the local socio-political scene. Although sometimes overlooked by contemporary anthropologists, gossip is equally central to how ethnographers orient themselves (e.g., Besnier 2009). Gossip seems to be given greater attention and better studied in small-scale societies (e.g., Brenneis 1984; Cox 1970; Haviland 1977b) but is seen as less significant in urban settings and multi-sited research where presumably people are loosely connected, and where gossip then atrophies (e.g., Merry 1997). This

assumption, however, does not hold for the Chinese in Ghana who are loosely connected, are conscious of their desires to dissociate themselves from each other, and yet in certain ways may depend on each other's relations to inhabit uncertainty. In this society, as in many others, gossiping is a social interaction form that provokes scorn and derision. It is dismissed as a senseless "childish" activity for those with "too much time on their hands", but is engaged by everyone. Precisely because of these contradictions and the frequency of this form of social interaction, gossip becomes a window to understanding how Chinese work with their liminal status. Even though the gossips may be about seemingly trivial matters, gossip occurs where ambiguity lies, especially when moral rules are at stake. Gossip is also likely to occur where the cultural ideal is demanding. Gossip reveals what makes this social network tick. In this section, I argue that gossip and suspicion are responses to living in liminality and at the same time reproduces conditions of liminality.

Gossip is difficult to define partly because of its ambiguous, multi-faceted and contextual nature. Depending on one's social status and whether one is the speaker or listener, gossip can be understood as information exchange, sharing of personal secrets, and public scandal, among others. Using Besnier's working definition, I take gossip to mean a "negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange" concerning an absent third party (2009:13). Although Besnier confines gossip to that which occurs in private settings, I include verbal exchanges that

occur in public settings where the third party was absent.<sup>2</sup> These settings include places like restaurants, marketplaces, and casinos. In these settings, the gossips exchanged were often heard by other Chinese who were not have been part of the gossiping group, or sometimes these gossips were openly exchanged in a semi-public format.

Moral assessment of character, often discussed in terms of suspicion or betrayal, was one of the most common themes of gossip that I encountered. The topics ranged from gossips about sexual infidelity, disloyalty of old friends, and complaints about acquaintances that divulge others' business and personal secrets. Suspicion of each other's motive is palpable in many social interactions. One particular gossip I discuss later in the chapter involved multiple betrayals and a realignment of alliances. I later discovered that it had a protracted history that began before I entered the field and did not conclude by the time I left the field. The gossip was part of a larger atmosphere of suspicion in the community that brought out morally laden evaluations of character and stories of business betrayals. To understand gossip and how it relates to strategies of inhabiting liminality, I first contextualise how gossip and suspicion is part of a historical trend in the community. Suspicion and gossip go hand-in-hand in this community. Betrayal is sometimes the result, or the perceived result, of gossiping.

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<sup>2</sup> Closely related to gossip are: 1. Scandal, which Gluckman (1963), has defined as gossip that becomes public knowledge, and 2. Rumour and hearsay, which Rosnow and Fine (1976), has defined as unconstrained circulation of information about an event understood to be significant.

Suspicion was institutionalised early in the history of the community. Though it is currently less formalised, management of many factories continue to fear industrial espionage and it seems this is warranted. In the early 2000s, imitation wax print<sup>3</sup> from China began flooding the local market. Local textile factories, which ironically are largely Chinese-owned and managed, found it difficult to compete with these imports and began investigating how these imitation cloths came to the country. A Chinese sales manager for a local textile factory said, “It’s usually people who have worked in Ghana and know about this market.” According to managers of a local Chinese textile factory, one of their former Chinese engravers<sup>4</sup> realised there was potential in the local market. He left the company, and while maintaining insider connections to the factory, he was able to steal textile design patterns and have them printed in China, then sold on the Ghanaian market before the local Chinese factory was able to manufacture the same pattern. Local newspapers in mid-2005 were flooded with reports of local textile factories closing down due to the influx of imitation wax prints from China (e.g., DG Editors 2005; DG Reporters 2005). Two stories noted the uproar among textile factories when a Mr. Zang Yong Quin<sup>5</sup> was accused of “flooding the

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<sup>3</sup> “Imitation”, here, does not mean copy of an original. Wax print is a form of resist-dyeing where dye is prevented from reaching certain areas of the cloth, thus, creating a pattern on both sides of the cloth. True wax print has patterns that match and align on both sides. Imitation wax print is cloth that has been printed on both sides, and thus the patterns on one side can never accurately align with those on the other side. The “imitation”, in this case, refers to an imitation of the manufacturing process of the more expensive wax print.

<sup>4</sup> Skilled worker who designs and executes the patterns for wax prints.

<sup>5</sup> Through sheer chance and luck, a friend of mine happened to have business connections with Mr. Zang [sic, Zhan], and I was able to interview him. While newspapers report the collapse of the textile industry as a result of the work of Chinese importers, the story is more complicated than a story about foreigners collapsing the local economy. Mr. Zhan has key African contacts throughout West Africa including Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria both in the local market and inside textile



Ghanaian market with cheap textiles from China . . . [and] is largely responsible for the collapse of the textile industry in the country (TI 2005b, 2005a).”

Examples such as these keep factory managements suspicious about their own employees.

The indistinct boundary between personal life and business work continues to encourage this atmosphere of suspicion. When medium-scale Chinese industries formed in the 1960s, most had a formal or informal policy that forbade their employees from being in contact with people from other factories. Interviews of male workers of that period revealed that management took on a patriarchal relationship with their employees. Management feared that their employees could spread seemingly innocuous information. Interviewees told me that management did not necessarily believe their employees were involved in industrial espionage but they wanted to keep a tight rein on information flow. Competition between factories was high and factories were protective about the knowledge and research they had done to thrive in newly developing market. In factories without a formalised policy forbidding outside contact, it was nevertheless an unspoken understanding between employees and employer that employees would minimise contact with outsiders. Interviewees

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factories. In both spheres, his contacts are a mix of local Africans and Chinese. At the time of our interview, “angry textile workers in the country [Ghana] were in hot pursuit” (TI 2005a) of Mr. Zhan. He was doing business in Togo at the time and needed to come to Ghana to complete some business. With the aid of local Ghanaian contacts that found him safe passage, Mr. Zhan entered Ghana for a few days and left the day after our interview. As local Chinese are quick to point out, Chinese importers cannot do their trade without local Ghanaians. It is not uncommon for market women who sell textiles to distinguish within their own group, those who sell imitation wax print from China and those who stay away from such activities.

were certain that employers had their own spies to discover who in the company was spreading industrial information or having too much outside contact.

Many companies approached their employees *in loco parentis*. They kept an eye on the private lives of employees making sure they had a “healthy” sleeping schedule and did not stay out late. Part of the rationale was that worker’s private lives could negatively affect their work performance if they did not lead “normal” everyday lives. The work contract encouraged this type of relationship. Workers had a housing allowance or they lived in company housing. Most workers were bachelors or came as bachelors and so factories typically provided all meals for them at the factory canteen. If they had families, factories often provided a food allowance for them. In most cases, factories forbade the wives of the employee from working.<sup>6</sup> Informants said because the company was supporting the lives of the family, a wife who found outside work would be construed as taking advantage of company benefit, “using factory money to make money”. Some middle and upper level staff were provided an allowance for domestic help. These benefits were not negotiable and were implemented or taken away depending on how management assessed the economic outlook.

When it came to taking advantage of each other’s resources, the relationship was reciprocal. Employers had an unspoken expectation that their employees would be available to offer assistance during their off-hours on non-work related affairs. In some cases, wives of employees were depended on to offer

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<sup>6</sup> Few Chinese women were employed in these factories and that continues today. Most were housewives in Ghana even though in Asia they were often employed in factories.

their assistance. In the period before Chinese restaurants, wives were expected to assist in catering company parties. During fieldwork, I witnessed an employer requesting a male worker to use his skills in metalwork to repair kitchen equipment. Workers also made use of factory resources for personal use, sometimes “borrowing” a local worker to assist in their house or using the company driver to run personal errands. The boundary between private lives and work lives was fuzzy for both worker and employer. The relationship between management and employer was not strictly work-oriented. Work and personal lives blended together usually around unspoken rules about what was the acceptable level of interplay. Partly from institutional policy and partly from how workers and employers took advantage of each other’s resources, the situation was ripe for creating suspicion of each other and of factory outsiders.

Although these factories and recently established ones are no longer as formalised with their watch over their employees, the private and work lives of both employers and employees continue to overlap. Each depended on the other for their existence in Ghana. In the 1980s during several rounds of layoffs, several former workers started their own businesses such as restaurants, while some combined resources with former colleagues to start their own factories. This became an additional layer that provoked suspicion. In some situations, former colleagues and friends would have at times a cooperative and at other times a competitive relationship with each other. These relationships were defined by varying amounts of mutual reliance and by suspicion that one was taking advantage of the other. Dialogues with each other and gossip about trust, betrayal

and friendship rejuvenate diachronically. When Jenny discussed the establishment of her restaurant in the early 1990s, she acknowledged that she was given help from her husband's colleague, Alice, who also started a restaurant several years before and had experience in managing and executing the details necessary to form a restaurant. Jenny said in time she offered her assistance when Alice's restaurant needed it. This included providing the use of her staff when Alice needed extra help and buying and cleaning seafood for Alice when she was short of help. These kinds of work exchanges and reliance on assistance are not unusual. Jenny also complained of situations where Alice however did not equally show her gratitude and offer her resources in later years. Rather than maintaining a mutual relationship, Jenny felt Alice began to take advantage of the informal arrangement. From Alice's side, she had a different story to tell. She said she began distrusting Jenny years ago when Jenny would take monetary advantage, not repaying her for goods that she had asked to be purchased and so forth. These kinds of situations of continual rising and falling of trust and betrayal are not atypical. Structurally, when friends find themselves in a competitive situation, negotiating the friendship and business competition becomes a delicate process that requires continual tending.

Factories formed in the 1960s and 1970s were primarily textile industries. When former employees of these factories joined forces to create their own factories in the 1980s, they focused on other industries since they did not have the resources to found the more expensive textile manufacturing plants. Rather they focused on smaller industries such as metal works, cardboard boxes and so

forth. Informants relayed that even though these newer factories were not in direct competition with each other, the former employers did not find this entirely agreeable. They believed that their former employees, whom they had spent time and resources on training, had betrayed them because they used their learnt skills and knowledge that they were taught to develop their own businesses. This paternalistic attitude about betrayal was common. These historical patterns of trust, betrayal, suspicion and gossip continue in networks today even as institutionalised forms of suspicion have weakened and, in some cases, no longer exist. Chinese new to the country are surprised at the suspicious attitudes Chinese have towards each other (see Mr. Lau's case in Chapter 3) and the great lengths they take in hiding potentially helpful information from newcomers. They also express surprise at the prevalence of gossip as way of being and relating to each other. These forms of interaction are always brushed off as infantile and some informants suggest it shows how local Chinese lack class and education since everyone participates in it.

But because everyone participates in this form of social interaction, gossip in this environment suggests something else. I argue that gossip in this ethnographic case is a response to living in liminality and at the same time functions to reproduce liminality. In the midst of inhabiting liminality, gossip becomes a useful tool and resource to navigate socio-economic uncertainty. Gossip is a socially interactive way to parse, evaluate, and mark individuals, but its evaluations are volatile and potentially unreliable. This volatility — the edge between truth and fiction — is one source of power for gossip. Gossip is typically

second-hand or third-hand or it is at least presented as such. It is not unusual for individuals who have first-hand information, to present the information as hearsay, in part, to remove themselves from being identified as the original source. Clarifying the source of the information is to remove one factor of volatility in gossip, and it is volatility that gives gossip potential power and efficacy. Volatility allows room for wider interpretation and embellishment of information to serve a wide variety of purposes. Living in a liminal situation where individuals may not want much of their past known due to how deeply intertwined business and personal lives can be, or where the social landscape is already murky because of historical, institutional, and personal creations, gossip becomes a helpful but imprecise tool for navigating and understanding the landscape. Gossip is a many-headed Hydra. Some examples of what gossip can do include: providing information, stigmatising individuals and groups of people, creating or destroying personal friendship and economic alliances, moral evaluations of personal behaviours, offer titillation, and so forth. Gossip is a way to create “cognitive maps of social identities and reputations” (Merry 1997: 54), but its reliability is continually questioned. It is important to understand that gossip is not a tool and resource for creating certainty in the midst of socioeconomic uncertainty. What gossip allows—because of its volatility and potential to find truth while also exhibit equal potential to create fictions (that may become understood as truth)—is that gossip allows individuals to hover around and live in uncertainty.

Gossip is a flexible tool that can introduce clarity into a socially liminal and unclear situation if the tool is successfully used to gain information. At the same time, it is also a tool that can be used to introduce murkiness to cause or enhance confusion in the community. Gossip's volatility, flexibility, and questionable reliability are factors that perpetuate liminality. Related to its nature of flexibility is its double-edged nature. While gossip can be used to stigmatise others, create alliances, and so forth, it can also come back to bite those who were involved in creating or spreading the gossip. Just as gossip can be used to create suspicion of others, particularly because of its volatile nature, it can be turned around creating suspicion on those participating in the gossip. Thus, not only is the reliability of the information provided through gossip questioned, but the motives of the participants can be questioned too. Individuals involved in gossiping walk a delicate balance between being too close to the information and being too far from it. Being too close to the information potentially places you in the category of traitor, but being too far from the information highlights the credibility of the information. In a social setting where murkiness exists, where navigating a new society is difficult, gossip and suspicion go hand in hand in simultaneously ameliorating and reproducing liminality. Using the events and gossip surrounding the rupturing relationship in a network of family and friends, these points are elaborated and analysed.

### 3. CASE STUDY ON SUSPICION, GOSSIP, AND BETRAYAL

On a Friday night in January, Tien Feng-yee invited me for dinner. I often helped her out with her computer, so often stayed over for dinner. For a few days I had heard rumours that an altercation had developed between good friends. Feng-yee and Jenny were involved but I was not sure how. Feng-yee did not talk about it over dinner but instead talked about her landlord who lived in the flat above hers. We also talked about her friends in the restaurant business. Something was clearly bothering her. She was friends with Mrs. Zhang, the owner of a Chinese restaurant, but she felt she had been overcharged for a large party. “Even though we are good friends, she charged me GHC 130,000 (about \$13.50), but she said it was a discount.” She hesitated. “Still, business should take priority.” Then in a moment of regret for having said those words she waved her hand across the living room and said, “Many of the furniture you see here, Mrs. Zhang gave to me. Maybe she thought I was an unaccompanied woman, so she pitied me.”

Although some of my friends singled out Feng-yee’s friends for having precarious relationships — friends who would be close for a long period and then suddenly explode — almost everyone in the community was involved in some kind of fluctuating relationship due to accusations or feelings of betrayal and manipulation. When Feng-yee expressed her dissatisfaction with her friendship with Mrs. Zhuang, but hesitated to fully condemn her, she was openly and morally evaluating their relationship, and making a remark that the line between friendship and business relations are sometimes muddied and sometimes very



clearly drawn. It is easy to be hurt when you expected an act to come from friendship but instead the business side dominates. This issue of how to behave, or ways of being, arises constantly and it was about to get bigger.

Grace, our mutual friend, dropped by towards the end of our dinner. We continued chatting about the restaurant business when Grace dropped the words, “Have you heard about it?” She shot several glances over to Feng-yee, who stared straight ahead. She was testing the moment to see if it was appropriate to continue with the explosive subject.

In the past few days, Feng-yee had offhandedly hinted about an altercation, but only through generalised comments about inappropriate Chinese behaviours and what that said about natural human character. The vagueness of her commentary allowed her to express dissatisfaction without being guilty for gossiping. This was common tactic. When someone had an axe to grind, they resorted to giving moral lessons about how human beings should or should not behave. Over the course of a day, or a couple of months, as the speaker revisits the same topic, the listener is able to build a more complete picture. Part of this is tactical. This type of delivery and the speed at which it is given absolved them of gossiping and pointing fingers at others. Slow gossip leak makes it harder for the listener to trace the origins of the gossip as it converges with other pieces of information opening up space for fiction to become accepted facts. Part of this is less tactical. I have observed speakers tired of trying to dress up information. To conceal tactfully takes energy and sometimes it may not be worth the effort when the point of gossiping is to release emotional energy.

When Grace asked if I have heard, I had a difficult time knowing what to do strategically. To admit that I know some of the details of the gossip created space for gossiping but also acknowledged my own position as gossip. It was also be risky because it could potentially point fingers at Feng-yee since she was the most recent source of my information. Not knowing what to do, I held a straight face. Grace glanced a few more times at Feng-yee as if to confirm with her if it was okay to talk. A few seconds later, Feng-yee broke the silent tension. She finally named the people involved in the altercation. The following comes from both Feng-yee and Grace's perspective. There was no disagreement between them in this version of the story. The altercations involved the relationship between several friends and business associates.

A few nights earlier, several friends had gathered at Grace's apartment to settle rumours about alleged affairs between friends. Rumours had been spreading that Jeffrey Choy and Melaney Guo were romantically involved, but both were partnered to different people, neither of whom were currently living in Ghana. Supposedly, Jenny had tipped off Melaney that Grace, Feng-yee, and Mandy, were spreading these rumours, so all of them were now at Grace's to settle affairs. Im Chung-kit and his apprentice Linda Gao, were initially called to witness this dispute and settlement. However, they were eventually dragged into the brewing cauldron and became part of the accused as well.

At the most basic level, Melaney accused Mandy of spreading lies about her relationship with Jeffrey. "Who said we are involved and why do you say that?" said Feng-yee, imitating Melaney in her account of the evening. Mandy sobbed

and said she was innocent, then pointed to Chung-kit and Linda accusing them of starting the gossip. At that point Mandy's husband landed his fist on Chung-kit and screamed, "You Chinese! You spread gossip about each other!" Feng-yee said that if it were not for Jeffrey, Chung-kit would have lost his front teeth.

Somewhere in the raucous confrontation, Feng-yee was also accused of being a so-called typical gossipy woman who probably helped to spread false stories about Jeffrey and Melaney. Although not a full accusation, it was a character denouncement. Feng-yee at some point jumped in to say to Jeffrey and Mandy, "Honestly, I can't deny that we talk about what might be going on with you or anyone else. Between Grace and me, we certainly small talk. We are neighbours. Neighbours chat."

Feng-yee did not say what else happened at Grace's house. She shifted to talk about the meaning of the event. She drew a distinction between gossip and talk. She argued that she does not gossip, and rather engaged in neighbourly talk: "More or less we [neighbours] will talk when we see each other. It's neighbourly chat." To her, neighbours are supposed to share news. It is how neighbours are supposed to interact with each other. By Feng-yee's logic, neighbours can exchange information as much as they desire with no actual consequence to the third parties, because it is to whom the third party is obligated that matters. Since neighbours who engage in neighbourly chats carry no weight with either Jeffrey or Melaney, it should not matter. To further absolve herself, Feng-yee said, "Luckily, they could not accuse Grace or I for spreading gossip." She announced that recently the two of them had fallen out with Jenny over the results of a

mahjong game. Feng-yee was on a winning streak and eventually Jenny accused her of not playing fair. “You know, every time someone wins, she [Jenny] says bad things about them regardless of who it is. All right! I can pretend she’s a little child [Jenny is about two decades younger than Feng-yee], but never before have I been insulted like that at this age!” Grace finally spoke up and agreed. She said they both avoid Jenny now.

Then Feng-yee said she thinks she knows how the gossip started: “One day, Mandy went up to Lotus Garden Restaurant to chat with the owner. She was up there for several hours and people began to say, ‘You know, she’s been up there for a while now, do you think she could be talking about ——.’” Feng-yee gave a long pause, then winked and nodded once at me to signal she was referring to Jeffrey and Melaney’s affair. Grace laughed and said, “Yes, yes! That’s exactly how these type of things happen!”

Without clear information but with strong hunches, individuals concoct reasons for other’s whereabouts and their movements. From stories of possibilities, they propagate throughout the social network, and these stories gain a stronger hold as truth and people begin to form firmer impressions of others. Long before the development of this particular confrontation, there was talk that Jeffrey and Melaney were having a dalliance. I received this information through multiple sources, and none of them vouched for its validity. Shortly before Melaney confronted her accusers, the rumour had become more widespread and was being spread as truth. The public reception of the veracity of the rumour had gone from possibility to a much higher level of certainty. While it is difficult to

trace how this change occurred, one possibility is that the more widespread a rumour is, the more volatile it becomes as it gains momentum, and with more momentum it gains the higher probability that the rumour is taken as truth.

Superficially, the confrontation is about being wrongly accused and annoyance for being the third party in the gossip. Gossips happens every day in Ghana but most do not result in a direct confrontation. In eighteen months of research, I saw and heard people trade gossip about each other and bicker behind each other's backs. Even though there were feelings of betrayal and alliances shifted, most did not result in direct confrontation of a large group of people. People responded to each other's accusations by, as a friend said, "adding salt and vinegar to an already volatile situation." What happened in this case to make it different? The timing of the gossip along with what was gossiped about insinuated and alluded to deeper historical issues and everyday politics in ways that made this particular gossip-turned-rumour extra volatile. When we understand the background of the individuals and their relationships with each other, we can begin to appreciate the gravity of the accusations and how they highlight the issues of social debt, alliances, suspicion, and betrayal in the community. That the rumour had taken on a public reception as truth made the rumour volatile, provoking Melaney to respond.

Feng-ye did not believe Mandy had any reason to spread rumours about Jeffrey and Melaney. Mandy's marginal status among the Chinese meant she did not have credibility in the community; she was not romantically involved with Jeffrey either, so she would not benefit from spreading such rumours. Feng-ye

admitted that prior to this confrontation, she had her suspicions about Jeffrey and Melaney. She deduced that Melaney did not actually believe Mandy was the culprit. Instead, Melaney scapegoated Mandy for several possible reasons: to provoke Mandy to get her to charge a more probable offender, or perhaps, to cause enough commotion to expose the likely offenders. Though these reasons did not seem very plausible to me, I did see her point that Mandy was unlikely to be the source of the rumour. Like Feng-ye, I had heard this rumour long before it had become volatile. But Feng-ye was also suggesting something more subtle about the intricate coupling of personal lives with business relationships.

Jeffrey and Chung-kit are co-proprietors of one of Accra's high-end Chinese restaurants but they were previously employed as chefs at a local Chinese restaurant. Two decades ago, that restaurant did an extensive search for trained chefs in Hong Kong to which both Jeffrey and Chung-kit responded and were eventually hired. Jeffrey at that time had experience as a professional chef in Hong Kong, but had immigrated to Canada ahead of Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997. He continued his profession in Canada, but was unable to make comparable pay to what he earned in Hong Kong. He returned without his wife to look for better economic opportunities. When he moved to Ghana for the new job, his family remained in Canada. Later, he formed a brotherhood with Chung-kit and combined finances to open a new restaurant, believing that they could be earning more money as restaurant owners than what they were making as chefs.

In Ghana, Jeffrey developed a reputation as a philanderer. His wife caught wind of the rumour and came to Ghana for a year, as local Chinese said, to keep

an eye on him. The story told is that he made up to his wife and persuaded her to return to Canada. Since then, his wife had not returned though frequently I caught wind of rumours about his playfulness around women. Though Jeffrey returned to Canada annually to meet his wife, she was to visit Ghana that year. Possibly because of this change, Jeffrey tried to silence rumours before his situation become too volatile for him to control.

Feng-yee alluded to another layer in a later remark. From what she could observe, she said she “concluded definitely” that Melaney was involved with Jeffrey and because they had both been called out, Jeffrey was now trying to protect Melaney’s reputation. She defended her statement saying that she had seen them alone in a restaurant parking lot and in public. I had known that Melaney came to Ghana several years ago with her boyfriend, Lai Dong-wai from Guangzhou. They were wholesale importers of Chinese manufactured clothing, primarily jeans. There are two sides to their business that needs direct supervision from either her or Dong-wai. One of them has to reside in China for part of the year to make contacts and place orders with Chinese clothing factories, and then prepare the goods for shipment to Ghana. Another one of them stays in Ghana to see the goods clear customs and duty, and are then marketed and distributed to local retailers. Both of them take turns managing these sides. Rumours about Jeffrey’s and Melaney’s affairs started to spread when Melaney’s boyfriend was in China supervising that side of their business. When her boyfriend/business partner left for Guangzhou to place orders, Melaney looked for a new home to rent. Feng-yee questioned why Melaney would search for a new

home when her boyfriend was out of the country on a business trip for their shared business if she did not already intend to break up with him. When Dong-wai returned at the end of summer, Melaney broke off their relationship. Their alleged romance however is a cover-up for their economic partnership. Feng-yee says the whole so-called show was about protecting Melaney and Jeffrey's economic partnership. Feng-yee says she knows that Melaney had embezzled money from the business that her ex-boyfriend and she had set up and Jeffrey was somehow involved in the new economic arrangement. By trying to stop rumours of his alleged affairs, he was also trying to economically distance himself from Melaney in the public eye. Though I knew the allegations of Jeffrey and Melaney a while before the situation turned volatile, I had not heard other gossip about their alleged economic partnership.

There was another layer in the gossip that suggested Jeffrey had trouble in his partnership with Chung-kit. At Grace's home, Mandy redirected her blame to Chung-kit and his apprentice Linda, for spreading the rumour. Although Chung-kit and Linda denied it, it added additional tension to their restaurant partnership. It was already known in the community that there were difficulties in their business partnership but everyone had different details as to what was causing the problems.

Chung-kit, like Jeffrey, was separated from his family by long distances. His wife and a daughter lived in China. Linda was a recent stowaway who was attempting to get to the US via Ghana but who returned to Ghana after being denied entry in the US. I could not find more about how she was able to stay in



Ghana instead of being deported back to China. Ever since Linda was detained in Ghana from her failed attempt to get into the US, Chung-kit became her guardian in Ghana and offered her a job in his restaurant to manage the waiters. She had quit the job once before trying to make her own way in Ghana to the US. When that failed, Chung-kit offered the job back to her. Rumours spread that their arrangement was more than just business, and that they were romantically involved. They were often seen together and people questioned why a married man would be so dedicated to a young single woman. People drew conclusions. I directly heard Jeffrey complain that since Linda is under Chung-kit's protection, she showed an attitude in the restaurant, "like she can't be touched."

Grace pointed out something else insinuating to me that indicated Melaney was involved with Jeffrey. She referred to an incident at a local trade exhibition, an incident that I had already heard about through other sources. Several times a year, Accra holds a trade fair exhibition for local industries. Melaney had a booth in one exhibition to promote her clothing import business and needed extra help. Grace alleged that Melaney wanted extra help without pay and wanted to ask Linda to do it. Not having authority to do so, she asked Jeffrey to tell Linda to temporarily work for Melaney. Since Jeffrey co-owns the restaurant that pays Linda, it was more in line for him to ask. Linda went to work for Melaney but it created tensions between Chung-kit and Jeffrey, who saw him acting as Linda's guardian. The issue with Linda is likely only the tip of the iceberg pointing to Chung-kit and Jeffrey's troubled economic partnership. About a week after the confrontation, Grace had lunch at Jeffrey's and Chung-kit's

restaurant where Chung-kit remarked to her, “Even if Jeffrey and I do make up, there will always be a thorn in my heart.”

Feng-yee pointed out that questions of betrayal and suspicion were an ongoing issue in Chinese business relationships, which often are mixed with friendships. She reminded me of two other relationships involving Jeffrey that have dissolved due to the tensions of friendships and business, two widely-known stories in the community. When Jeffrey and Chung-kit were employed as chefs at their first restaurant in Ghana, they also worked with another Chinese at the restaurant, Andrew Wan, who was the general manager for the restaurant. He had previously managed restaurants on cruise ships before he decided to settle in Ghana. When all three re-established themselves in Ghana, they formed a brotherhood and agreed to take care of each other’s economic troubles. They eventually pooled resources together to form their own restaurant. Andrew was a heavy gambler and had, from time to time, used the restaurant’s capital to cover his debts. Eventually, he was forced to sell his shares from the restaurant and had to leave the brotherhood. Feng-yee mentioned this dissolving brotherhood and said “Look at Chung-kit and Jeffrey now.”

She pointed out another brotherhood that Jeffrey and another restaurateur, Mr. Lau, had formed before Jeffrey had his own business. This arrangement eventually also broke up. “Jeffrey is the godfather of Mr. Lau’s children, but they had a falling out over a Ghanaian cook. Mr. Lau sacked the cook and Jeffrey employed him.” I didn’t understand why this should create a rift between the two. Shouldn’t these two relationships be distinct? Feng-yee explained and it took me a

while for to understand. Mr. Lau believes that his brother, Jeffrey, is supposed to back him up in major decisions. “What’s not good for me is not good for my brother, so if his brother respects him, he won’t employ someone he just fired.”

Jeffrey and Melaney’s semi-public confrontation has many layers of complexities that draw attention to patterns of economic and non-economic relationships. On the surface, the gossip that started the confrontation at the beginning of this section seems to be about being accused of unfaithfulness and clearing up one’s name, but the suddenness of their outburst and urgency to address the rumours points to other issues. The details of the gossip and the particular background information of the individuals and their relationships cannot all be checked for their trustworthiness. The information came through a mix of various sources and from different gossips, but also through my own direct observations and conversations with the individuals involved. Though the details cannot be verified — ultimately, the nature of gossip does not lend itself to a stable truth — one overarching picture it generally manifests is that how gossip can create or heighten tensions between business and personal relations. In this case, it points to the merging of economic and romantic interests between Jeffrey and Melaney. The convergence of those interests would better have been left removed from public view in order to allay suspicions about pre-existing and prior economic relations they both have. The outburst also betrays the long-troubled economic relationship in Jeffrey’s fraternal alliances.

Generally too, gossip is a many-headed Hydra because the functions of gossip are manifold. In the cases above, gossip does the following: provides

information about social networks, especially meta-information about alliances and antagonistic relationships; creates alliances and enemies; offers economic opportunities; includes gestures of friendships; suggests moral evaluations; and can cause provocations. Because of gossip's manifold nature, and also because of the difficulty of verifying the truth of particular details, gossip has multiple interpretations and is not usually susceptible to a singular interpretation or attribution of motives. The one interpretation I have particularly focused on is the interaction of personal relationships and business alliances. Along the way as gossip travels, undoubtedly "salt and vinegar" was added to the information for various reasons, one of them being to make it even more interesting and provocative.

Earlier in the dissertation, I describe how Chinese are geographically spread out in the Accra-Tema metropolis. Unlike the Chinatowns of the United States, the historical places of settlement for Chinese, Chinatowns were not established in Ghana. Factory policies determined where Chinese staff lives and, depending on the factory, there were unofficial and official policies governing workers' personal lives and the kind of interactions they could have with staff from other factories. This created a fragmented cultural landscape. Official and unofficial institutional policy that had the intention of preventing the spread of rumours and gossip instead built an environment of suspicion.

Although these institutional policies are no longer at the forefront of perpetuating this cultural landscape, personal lives that have no relation to factory

relations continue to reproduce this geography. Part of this is the historical legacy that factories designed and built to prevent competition. Today, the Chinese view each other as potential competitors whether it is regarding the Ghanaian economic market, forming potential business alliances with each other, and with Ghanaian labourers. Among business alliances that have formed between individuals such as Jeffrey and Chung-kit, trust in the relationship is always being tested and suspicion of disloyalty is constant.

Despite cultural landscape fragmentation and the lack of interest to live in closer proximity to each other, there is fascination and curiosity to know about each other, likely because of the desire to know more about each other and to get better bearings on the economic and cultural landscape. The corollary is that the Chinese are also keen on keeping a hold on to their privacy and attempt to keep prying eyes and ears away from their lives.

The process of manoeuvring for self-protection due to fear of competition results in tensions where gossip plays a role in both ameliorating and reproducing these tensions, at once providing possibilities for self-preservation and gathering information from others. As part of the historical production of suspicion, gossip creates leakages between the boundaries of public and private information and thus has the effect of producing suspicion while also entertaining the possibility of receiving information from others.

Gossip can marginalise both the third party and the gossiper. Depending on circumstances, the gossiper can be judged for being indiscrete or for being an ally in sharing information. Gossips in Ghana can confirm old alliances or create

new factions. When Grace dropped in after my dinner with Feng-yee and tested the waters to see if she could gossip about the confrontation, her hesitation was indicative of the play between confirming of old alliances, creating new alliances and being judged for being indiscrete. Although she had shared some minor gossip with me in the past, this was the first time when an ally of hers was present in the room who could potentially call her out for making the mistake of allowing me privilege into their inner circle.

When gossip was formalised as a study within anthropology, the debate was about whether gossip has a structural-functional aspect in keeping a community together by policing what is and is not acceptable to a community (e.g., Gluckman 1963), or whether it is transactionalist in nature in which individuals use gossip to advance and protect their interests, a kind of public impression and information management (e.g.: Handelman 1973; Paine 1967). Gossip for the Chinese in Ghana has some striking similarities to Haviland's study (1977a, 1977b) of gossip among the Zinacanteco of Mexico. Unlike the Chinese, the Zinacanteco live in close proximity to one another, but like the Chinese they have a "morbid sense of privacy" along with a great curiosity to pry on others' affairs. It would be limiting to look at gossip in Ghana as merely about creating communality when clearly there is great suspicion of each other and in some extremes a refusal to deal with the larger Chinese network; there is the constant tension between forming and dissolving networks and a great sense of dis-community. It would also be limiting to only understand gossip in Ghana as a performance of one's public self-presentation, both consciously and

unconsciously (e.g., Goffman 1959). There are clearly effects that gossip has in network relations and personal senses of disunity and unity.

I argue that we should look at gossip from both a near and far perspective. Gossip and suspicion for the Chinese in Ghana has an institutional history that has geographic and relational effects. As I have illustrated, spatial geographic distribution of the Chinese were in part determined by factory policies that more or less restricted the type of contact Chinese workers had with each other which, in turn, created a strong sense of competition and suspicion among them. Gossip was one way for workers to get around this restriction. At the same time, it heightened the sense of suspicion when one had to be careful how discrete one should be and around whom. Despite setting up these policies of social restriction, employers were suspected of having spies in other factories and were known to have employees who informed them of the latest gossip in the factory. In circumstances where it is favourable to be in alliance with the employer or with a competing factory, gossip became the source of clandestine gathering and social suspicion.

In recent years when many employees became business owners, the same tactic was used to survey the market or business world while attempting to keep the gathered information to themselves. Business espionage requires forming secret alliances, but these relationships were continually in danger of dissolution since suspicion was high and trust was constantly being tested. For example, numerous attempts have been made to form a Chinese Chamber of Commerce. At the time of fieldwork, there were two of these institutions, one named Ghana-

Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the other Ghana-China Chamber of Commerce. I met the director of the *Ghana-China* Chamber of Commerce who said he was based in the Cayman Islands. He said he was in the business of encouraging businesses from China to invest in Ghana. Other informants told me that the director was not to be trusted and that he was using the Chamber of Commerce as a front to hide his sex trafficking, particularly young Chinese women who were looking for “freedom” from China. An informant cursed his family for being “crooks”. He accused that Chamber for misinforming Chinese abroad about the realities of Ghana in order to coax them to invest. Those who were enraptured by their stories of Ghana would ultimately have to rely on them to lead them and would end up losing lots of money in the process.

The other, similarly titled, *Ghana-Chinese* Chamber of Commerce is more established. Its history was not shady but it was considered to be an ineffective organisation. A friend of mine who is an officer of that Chamber said the organisation was mostly run by old, ranking officers from the heyday period of Chinese factories who continued to relate to other Chinese as if they were still in power. Many other Chinese businesses were dissatisfied with this Chamber for not helping them out when they needed it. A friend of mine who helps to run a family-owned factory said,

The Chamber wants face but doesn't want to earn it. In big meetings they represent us and while we are the ones providing finances, they are not willing to use their resources to help us with our problems. They find our problems bothersome....The Chinese here are of two types: those who are conceited and those who are selfish.



She told me stories of how the Chamber had been used by a former director (an elected position) to run his own private affairs including selling discount air tickets to the Chinese community. It has also been used to create divisions within the Chinese community: a woman from China was starting her own Chinese restaurant and some elected officers in the Chamber gave her official encouragement and said, "We support you. Make a place for us because in the past Hong Kongers have looked down on us." Though there is reliance among many Chinese on each other to run their businesses, they also distrust each other and many, I have found, discovered their own way to mitigate these issues by cutting business contacts with other Chinese businesses once they are able to figure out how to use more local businesses resources. Nevertheless, because no Chinese business is fully invested in the local economy, their contacts back to Asia mean that there is always some reliance on other Chinese businesses for navigating businesses problems in Ghana (e.g., taxes, labour quotas, etc.) and also for solving problems that occur back in Asia (e.g., making business shipments, foreign exchange, etc.). Responding to liminality through gossip also has the effect of propagating uncertainty because the nature of gossip can lead to divisions, factions, new alliances and other rumours. Gluckman does not go far enough when he argues that gossip creates communality because it delineates immoral acts from righteous behaviour. Those who gossip can be accused of being indiscrete, as often is the case among the Chinese when determining who originated and who helped to spread the gossip. While I agree with Sally Engle Merry (1997) that "gossip is a confidence, a sign of trust and closeness", gossipers

and the audience can turn around to lay blame on each other for being the originator of a gossip. This in turn makes it impossible to trace how a gossip started, thereby formally releasing anyone from blame, but it then makes many become suspect.

While gossip is one strategy to inhabit liminality, there are other ways of living in this space of limbo. In next section below, I focus on one case where an individual takes on a situation fraught with uncertainties and possibilities and attempts to create purpose in liminal situations.

#### 4. LIVING HERE, THEN IMAGINING OTHER WORLDS

It was a quiet evening in the early summer of 2005 when I received a phone call from Grace Lam who interrupted my nap. On the phone Grace was in despair. “I’m going to *Ganguo*<sup>7</sup>.” As Grace told the story, which was unclear to her, her husband had returned home the previous night from work and announced that he has “good news.” The company had acquired a clothing factory in *Ganguo* and would give him a raise of USD 500 a month if he transferred there immediately. The former owners of the factory were never able to find a foothold in the market and after years of mismanagement, sold the factory at a loss. The machineries were in disrepair. Mr. Lam saw this opportunity as a positive experience for his career path. I asked Grace if the communication from the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ganguo* in Chinese can refer to either the former Belgian colony, Democratic Republic of Congo, or its neighbouring country, a former French colony, Republic of the Congo. Grace’s husband was going to the DRC.

factory was a request or obligatory. She said they had no choice in deciding if they could stay in Ghana, “The company moves us whenever they want to.”

A few days later we got together for dinner. Mr. Lam explained that he was dissatisfied with his job as a sales agent for the textile company, a job he was not professionally trained to do nor one that he felt confident in. He was also not confident speaking English. Originally trained as a machinist, he was comfortable working on the factory floor and it was what he was hired to do when he was first employed in Ghana. When the company downsized several years later, he was transferred to the company’s sales office. Returning to his profession was a good career choice, Mr. Lam said. Then he caught himself being off guard and said, “I don’t know if this is good or bad news.”

Grace expressed mixed feelings. Her husband has travelled around the world including Thailand, Czechoslovakia, Dominican Republic, Kenya, and Nigeria, all the while working for Chinese factories. She did not express interest in moving with her husband until his latest job in Ghana.

“Good news? For me, it’s different. I was shocked and I could barely take it. Maybe because I’m a woman. I have to manage the children, and they have school. It’s a headache,” she said.

Feng-yee responded, “Wherever men go it’s the same for them as long as they find work. Women worry about the details like schooling and making a homey life. This makes it a headache.” Although informants sometimes claimed men and women differ in how they value a stable home over a mobile job, the distinction does not seem strictly warranted. I have noticed many of the same

women, including Grace, who have also remarked that everywhere is the same as long as there is a stable job and home.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the shock of having to make a life-changing move and that women tend to be in charge of re-establishing the family in an unfamiliar place that these sentiments occur. I asked Grace again why her husband could not refuse the request and continue his work in Ghana. Grace threw back the question at me and said, “With that kind of salary raise [an addition of USD 500 per month], wouldn’t you go?” The company was not making it compulsory for Mr. Lam to move, although it would perhaps be politically wise to move if he wanted to continue working in the same company.

The company has also clarified its request. If the rest of the family chooses to remain in Ghana, they would pay for their living expenses while Mr. Lam moves to DRC. Grace interpreted this as a temporary measure. Feng-yee’s family faced a similar situation several years ago. Mr. Hua works for the same company and was transferred to Kaduna, Nigeria. Feng-yee and her children stayed in Ghana. Their children were entering secondary school, an age when Feng-yee decided it was best not to move them. She decided they needed a good stable education and a new environment would not support that. She was also not impressed with Kaduna’s education opportunities and was fearful of the religious tensions there between Muslims and Christians. Returning to Hong Kong was not a possibility for Feng-yee because the children did not know enough Chinese to enroll in Chinese schools and they did not have enough money to attend Hong

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<sup>8</sup> “It doesn’t matter where we go. Anywhere in the world is just the same. We’re all looking to make money. Anywhere you can make money is fine,” Grace once said to me. I had asked her question about isn’t the US a better place to be than in Ghana.

Kong's elite international schools that taught in English. Feng-yee said, "They offered my children and me to live in Kaduna, but since we refused we are on our own in Ghana," she said.

By the time Mr. Lam left for DRC two weeks later, Grace was still uncertain what direction to take her family: stay in Ghana, move with her husband to DRC, set her sights to the US where her children have citizenship, or return to Guangzhou, China. What she decided later was to take two complementary paths. In the following two sections, I discuss these two paths.

#### **A. Setting Her Children on the Right Path**

"I did not realise citizenship actually mattered," Grace said to me a few days later. Grace was known to be indifferent towards the issue of citizenship and home, an issue that other Chinese in the community were concerned about. Her friends congratulated her for having the wisdom to give birth to her children in the United States, thereby getting US citizenship for them. She replied it was not her idea and that more or less her elders coaxed her into this decision. She half-jokingly says that to prevent tensions with them, she went along with their idea. She frequently said that it did not matter where home was as long as there was a job; anywhere can be made a home.

The recent family upheaval made it a reality for Grace that citizenship and where home was mattered. Moving to DRC with her husband was a possibility but not a realistic option. She was not confident she could learn French and has

not mastered English. She was also fearful of DRC's political instability, although its ongoing tension had the most direct impact in the east and not in Kinsasha where the factory was located. Staying in Ghana was a temporary option. She had always complained about being bored in Ghana and this seems to be the moment for her to leave. Once her husband left, there was no reason to stay in Ghana since the options to live in US or China open up. With the family's background, both the US and China *seemed* equally accessible to her children.

Grace's sister lives in the US. Her children have US citizenship and if she decided to relocate her children there, they would get a better education ("Learn English better") and would be working towards their future in a stable country. She was not concerned about living expenses in the US, knowing that her sister could easily accommodate the three of them. She was most concerned about her legal status, questioning the wisdom of staying in the US illegally. But before even this question could be considered, at stake for her was how to predict the future: would the Chinese language and China dominate the world by the time the children are working adults, or would the English language and US continue to dominate?

Over the next several weeks, she and our friends debated what the future would look like. She consulted a friend of mine, Ivy, who had analogous experiences moving her children several times in the early years of their lives. A Malaysian Chinese married to an Italian, she moved from Malaysia to Ghana, then to China, and then back to Ghana. Grace was uncertain if they were to move

back to Guangzhou, China whether the children should attend local Chinese schools or international schools.

Ivy considered this a question about balancing their cultural background and predicting her children's future. "It depends on your cultural background. My husband is a European, so we are part mixed westerners. So that's why [my children] needed to go to international school. But which school to send them to [also] depends on their future. Because my husband is European, it is possible my children will work in Europe or even all around the world."

The difficult decision was predicting their future: "What their future will be may determine what school they go to." Then she unravelled what she just said, "But Chinese is just as important as English these days." Following the new line of thought that Chinese language equals in importance to English, Ivy rationalised that since Grace's family was "fully Chinese" this moment of uncertainty was a chance for them to build a good foundation in Chinese. "English is very easy to pick up, but Chinese is difficult. In international schools, the Chinese taught is not enough."

Then thinking about the practical concerns of money, Ivy concluded that because of the high expenses of international education in Guangzhou, it was a better tactic to save the money for the children's college education: "Learning English is very important. But these days, so is learning Chinese. The children won't learn very good Chinese in international school. They also won't learn very good English in Chinese school, but it's easier to pick up English."

Ivy had a very flexible view of children, believing that switching languages was easy for them and also the challenges would strengthen their abilities in both languages. To her one's cultural background partly determined where one's future lies, even though she and Grace construed that the world was becoming more global, evidenced by their difficulties in determining whether English or Chinese was going to be dominant.

Two other mutual friends of Grace and mine had different thoughts. Mr. and Mrs. Liu both agreed that China was rising in political and economic power and both agreed English continued to dominate the world. But they warned that moving young children around, switching language of instruction only confused them and would be a waste of time. They believed that at their young age, they had not built a solid foundation in either language and needed to set their foundation in their education language, English, before moving on to another language. Mrs. Liu said, "Right now, he's [one of Grace's children] working on his English foundation. You take him to China and he'll lose his English. Then when you take him to the US, he'll have to rebuild his foundation for English and meanwhile he begins to lose his Chinese skills."

There were many external factors and internal desires to consider in this sudden change for Grace. For the first few days, of most concern for Grace was whether her children should continue education in English or Chinese language schools. This question was then tempered by practical considerations on where she could actually stay and how much money towards education they could afford. Although her children are American citizens, Grace expressed that sending them



to live in the United States was going to be a problem: “The living expenses in the United States do not worry me. My sister has a big restaurant there and we can eat all we want and live with her too. I’m concerned about what legal status I would have. Do I really want to stay there illegally?” Although she has the legal right to live and work in Hong Kong, it was immediately out of consideration: “I don’t have a house there. I can go to Guangzhou because we have a home there. And after all, it is my *diqu* (world) there.”

Even when a language of instruction is determined, how to actualise that for the children was an issue. Grace asked me to do some research on boarding schools in the state her sister lives in and we immediately realised the cost was prohibitive. International schools in Guangzhou were close to being unaffordable and so Grace had to decide if it was worth it for her children.

Several days later Grace invited several friends and me to a late breakfast brunch at La Palm Beach Hotel, a four-star hotel that is among the handful of international quality hotels that many Chinese frequent for their buffets and recreation facilities. It was still unclear to Grace and her husband whether his transfer to DRC was permanent. A friend at the table rationalised that since living expenses in both countries were going to be covered, the move was likely only temporary and at the same time a benefit because it was a promotion for Mr. Lam. Grace interpreted the situation differently. For her, having living expenses covered in two countries was only a temporary consoling measure and the transfer was going to be permanent. When the factory reveals that the transfer is permanent, she expects them to remove their benefits in Ghana. She rationalised

that her husband is professionally trained to repair clothes-making machinery and someone else with the same or better qualifications could “easily” fill his sales position at the textile company in Ghana. Grace shows how her unsettled life in Ghana has suddenly become even unsettling:

Our lives are not in our control. It’s controlled by the big bosses. Because we aren’t self-employed but rather employees, whatever the big boss says we have to do, we do. The only thing we can decide to do is whether to work for them or not.

There were too many contingencies for Grace to consider concerning her children’s future. Though the questions she had about language, the future, where to move the family and her husband’s transfer where unanswerable, the new stage of uncertainty opened up possibilities for Grace. Forced to confront how to chart her own and her family’s future, something which she had taken rather lightly in the past, she had to make some decisions on how seriously to take her children’s English language training. Rather than deciding whether her children were better off in China or the U.S, she decided the most immediate intervention she could make was provide her children better English language training. Although they had local tutors for English whom they met several times a week, Grace decided to switch into a more intensive English summer program taught by American teachers at an after-school service. At the same time, this seemed to be her strategy to get her children occupied while she figured out a new role for herself.

## **B. Career Woman?**

Prior to her husband's transfer, Grace half-jokingly questioned the meaning of her existence in Ghana. In Ghana, she did not have to spend much time with her children. Most of her children's waking hours was occupied with either programmes or someone else took care of them. She iterated it like this: "School takes up most of their time. My husband is gone most of the day at work. At home I have two maids to take care of the kids. They also prepare the food for the family and clean the house. All I need to do is cook it and in a few minutes everything is ready. I don't have much to do."

As the youngest in her family of three, her mother and siblings coddled her. She married in her early 20s and gave birth to her children in her 30s though she was not keen on motherhood. Depending on the tenor of her life and how she relates to it at the moment, she has two general ways of talking about her life in her 20s. In one of her typical "live and let live" fashion, she has described it as a carefree and career-free life. Much of her time after work was spent with her friends at bowling alleys and karaoke bars. With an existential crisis, Grace began to look on her current life and then her 20s differently. Comparing herself to her friends back in China who are now self-employed she says, "Look at me. I'm just a housewife. I sit at home, send the children to school, pick them up, and cook. What else?" This lifestyle is luxurious but as Grace complained, it did not give her much of a role. Because she was not keen on motherhood, she admitted that she delegated part of the child rearing to others. In moments when she felt aimless,

she confided to me that if she had to do it again, she would not marry so early and she would think again about motherhood.

“I don’t think I want a family. It’s not what I want. I should have furthered my education. I only finished high school. I really hated going to school, so I went to work. I thought I was a smart and capable woman but when I came out to the real world, I realised there were so many more capable women than me.” At the same time, Grace was remarkably self-reflective and would step aside and criticise herself for not paying more attention to her children and blame herself for delegating child rearing responsibilities to others.

Following her husband to Ghana seemed a natural path to take but when her husband was requested to move to DRC, she questioned whether it was sensible to move the family there. Her children were already well on their way in studying English and moving to DRC meant “starting all over again” with learning French and perhaps maybe even abandoning English. Her investment in a certain pathway, even though she did not plan it that way, seemed too much to throw away now. Though she had not paid much attention to motherhood, she had already invested in her children’s lives in the English-speaking world. There was the additional issue that DRC’s political instability gave her pause. Staying in Ghana and living as she did before did not seem to make sense: “What am I doing in Ghana when my husband is over there?” Going to DRC also did not seem to make sense given the investment in another kind of life Grace had started making.

At this moment of existential crisis, Grace's next moves took me by surprise. Expressing despair at her situation, we had long conversations about two recent friends she admired. Both women juggled the pressures and duties of motherhood and had their own careers. One was a woman from Dalian, a major port city in northeastern China. She and her husband bought a fast-food Chinese restaurant in Ghana and turned a failing business into a success. Chinese restaurants in Ghana have historically catered to middle-income customers because of the belief that they would be unable to make a profit if they catered to the local majority, most of whom were low income. Their restaurant was considered unusual for being able to cater to low income Ghanaians. As was typical of narratives of Chinese capability, Grace emphasised how the owner, Mrs. Xiong single-handedly made the business profitable without knowing a single word of English. Grace moreover emphasised this was a woman who did the job and not the husband. She ran the restaurant floor and also handled restaurant administration including finding vendors for food and drinks. Her husband, who had experience as a cook in China, managed the kitchen. The other friend Grace admired also ran a restaurant and from anyone's guess she did it single-handedly. Huajie (Sister Hua), as she was known, had a mystic air about her. She divorced her Chinese husband after they immigrated to the US. She once declared to me that she liked Ghana because there is "freedom". She said that by freedom, she meant that she could rid herself of old relations, including her parents, whom she felt were controlling her. "The relations are too complicated in China and they control you. People always mind what you're doing." She said in the US there is

freedom but mostly for whites. As a “yellow-skinned person” there is only so high you can climb. “It’s a white person’s world in America and they don’t respect yellow-skinned people. In Ghana, they respect you a lot.” She is now married to a Ghanaian politician. Part of her mystique comes from the story that she single-handedly found her way to Ghana and made a successful business. Even more powerful is her story of having arrived in the US, which often is presumed to be where everyone wants to be, but decided she did not have enough “freedom” and sought a world where she could climb higher. The other mystique she has comes from the belief that she has connections to Ghanaian ruling elites and politicians.

After this initial onset of despair coupled with admiration for several Chinese businesswomen in the community, Grace compared how her life had unfolded (unsuccessful and boring) with those of her friends in China and also of the Chinese businesswomen (successful and independent). For Grace, to be successful in this period of her life meant gaining economic success through her own abilities<sup>9</sup>. She sometimes praised Mrs. Xiong and Huajie for their business and investment-sense. When she seemed to regain her pride, which often seemed to come with a critical bite, she pointed out how she would manage their restaurant businesses differently and what she thought they were doing wrong. Then in self-reflexive moments, or perhaps to soften her pride and express humility, she said to me, “It’s bad of me to have criticised. I’m just an empty shell.

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<sup>9</sup> Grace often pointed out that Jim Tse, a mutual friend who founded a growing computer business, was the epitome of success. Jim earned a doctorate in medicine and has another advanced degree but never made practical uses of these degrees. Grace pointed out his re-invention of himself as a successful businessman as the definition of success. Jim’s case was discussed in Chapter 2.

I say all this [criticism] but I have no *liu* (material, quality, skills).” Other times she said, “Don’t think I know what I’m talking about. I sometimes feel I’m at a great disadvantage for not having continued my education.”

Grace volleyed back and forth with her praises and criticisms of herself and of those she purported to admire. Volleying seemed to be indicative of setting herself up for a new life path and change in lifestyle. The narratives of Chinese women’s success such as those of Huajie and Mrs. Xiong offered openings of life possibilities for Grace. Furthermore, the gap of boredom and aimlessness that widened in Grace’s life when her husband was asked to transfer seemed likely to have a role in channelling her restlessness into a different form.

Grace made quick changes to her social routines. From a mother who often played mahjong and made social visits when her children were busy at school or being tutored at home, she formed deeper relationships with a small set of Chinese businesswomen, especially Mrs. Xiong and Huajie. This also meant that she was in less contact with her older network of friends, most of whom were housewives.

When she overheard rumours at a casino that my host father’s restaurant may contract out their business, she made strong and insistent pursuit to find out how much the rent would be. There were two things she had to manage. She deemed it important that my host father not know that she was interested in the business. To reveal that she was interested was to reveal that she had heard the gossip and gave it some credence which in Grace’s assessment might put her in the suspicious camp of industrial espionage. She was concerned my host father,

George, would question how she formed this idea, and then question with whom she associated. Her first strategy to get more information was through using me as her proxy. “Ask for me, but don’t be direct about it or else he [my host father] might become suspicious and not want to consider contracting the restaurant.” Grace also worried that three of her friends who are in the restaurant business would think, “I’m stepping into their territory”. She cautioned me not to let anyone know she is in pursuit of the restaurant business.

Over the course of several months, Grace used various disguises to mitigate both issues. She often visited my host father’s restaurant for lunch after picking up her kids from school. She casually introduced her children to George thus offering more points of connections for self-introduction. “We have to know people internally before we can strategically approach them,” she said. She also said, “I have to build up good rapport with George and make my way into his heart and know what he is actually thinking before I make my move.” She also offered praises to George for running a successful business, although in private she discussed with me how she would run the restaurant differently. She also made various excuses to visit the restaurant more often such as asking George to sell to her wonton skins and tofu. But she was also cautious about not visiting his restaurant by herself because “What would others think of a married woman coming alone to visit him all the time?” She often brought others with her. Once she brought a Chinese friend of hers who ran a wholesale tyre store and they discussed the restaurant’s potential for future success, and also about how to remodel the restaurant to bring it up-to-date. When George had to leave for the



UK for his son's wedding and had no one to help him run the restaurant, he asked me to help out. Grace offered to help and while hesitant at first, George yielded to Grace's insistence. For two weeks, Grace and I learnt the Chinese restaurant trade. Grace eventually stopped frequenting George's restaurant when they were unable to negotiate a rental price. Nevertheless Grace had learnt much about the restaurant trade. A couple of years after my fieldwork, I learnt she had formed a restaurant partnership with a recent Chinese immigrant.

On the BBC radio programme "Network Africa", Kwaku Sakyi-Addo, a Ghanaian BBC correspondent was interviewed about life in Ghana. He said, "It is a comfortable place to live, but it is not necessarily fun" (2004). He explained that while there is some nightlife in Ghana focused in the few urban areas, it is not comparable to the UK. "Big names don't pass by here," he said referring to international celebrities. While not strictly true, since Stevie Wonder put up a concert eight months ago, Sakyi-Addo has a point. Most international stars skip Ghana. At first it seemed odd that Sakyi-Addo did not mention local musicians and artists. There is a growing music genre popular among Ghanaian youth called hiplife, a hybrid mix of rap music and Ghanaian highlife music. But then it made sense that people like Sakyi-Addo do not find Ghana "fun" though it is comfortable. Urban Ghanaians have their feet in Ghana but keep an eye towards the international scene, the gold standard for modernity and advancement.

Comfortable but not fun describes the experience of living in Ghana for many Chinese. Life in Ghana for the middle-income Chinese is comfortable.

Many, like Grace and Feng-yee, employ housekeepers and chauffeurs. Grace also has a nanny. As Grace says, almost everything is done for her. In the work sphere from factories to restaurants and wholesale importers, many describe the working style as relatively laid back compared to the “outside world”, a reason many give for why they are able to compete or survive in Ghana. In many cases, tasks can be delegated to local workers although there is the constant watching over that they feel is necessary. In a previous chapter I described James’s working situation in a glass factory. Trained as a machinist, his job in Ghana was mostly keeping an eye on local workers and making sure they did the job properly. I asked him if he worked much with the machines. He said that initially he did but once the workers were trained and he only needed to supervise and remind them.

Life is comfortable, but paradoxically this kind of comfort also brings with it an inertia of boredom. How does one spend the extra time that one gains from comfort? It is what Sakyi-Addo described in his interview as “not fun” and specifically he is referring to the lack of international calibre recreational activities to pass leisure time. I want to note that it is possible to be bored without fully knowing why. Philosopher Svendsen (2005) makes this case through an analogy of Freud’s differentiation between melancholy and grief. Both contain the awareness of loss. Whereas the person who grieves knows what has been lost, the person who is melancholic does not. This is similar for boredom. There are times

when the cause of boredom is known and times when what plagues is a “nameless, shapeless, object-less boredom” (Svendsen 2005:14).<sup>10</sup>

Responses to why Chinese are feeling bored or restless range from vague remarks to specific reasons.<sup>11</sup> Often noted is that recreational activities for the middle class are very limited, even in the capital. Only in the past decade has there been an increase in the number of retail shops and services that cater specifically to this segment of the population, notably many South African multinational companies including the retail chain Woolworths and the satellite service company Multichoice (e.g., Besada 2005). A popular past time for the Chinese is eating out, especially at Chinese restaurants and lunch buffets at one of five resort hotels in Accra. But there are constant complaints that the food in Chinese restaurants all tastes the same. The same comment is made for the buffets at the five-star hotels.

Grace’s experience in Ghana illuminates these nuances of boredom. Prior to her husband’s transfer, she acquiesced to her role as a mother but even then she left much of the caregiving and other jobs a mother could do to her domestic helpers leaving her with much free time which she also expresses not knowing what to do with. How her children became American citizens exemplifies her attitude that lies somewhere between detached decision-making, nonchalance, and aimlessness. She did not think it was of much consequence where her

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<sup>10</sup> It would be fruitful to explore the experience of boredom, and especially its relationship to lackluster-ness and sense of resignation in the lives of Chinese in Ghana. However, this exploration will have to wait for later works.

<sup>11</sup> It seems that the experience of restlessness occurs more often when the cause of boredom is unclear. You want to do something to alleviate the sense of restlessness but you are unsure how to proceed because what is it that you are aiming to overcome?

children were born but she explained that pressure from family and friends made her choose the path that they all wanted. And, she was not entirely reluctant to do so since she did not have a strong opinion. In Ghana, she occupied her free time from making social visits to playing mahjong, all the while vocally expressing a lack of purpose.

When Grace's husband was requested to transfer, the meaning of her lifestyle and the meaning of her boredom rose to the front of her consciousness. Her husband's transfer made an already liminal situation into one that was even more so. Unlike her relatively nonchalant decision about her children's birth, it mattered to her that following her husband to DRC meant facing an unwanted lifestyle and realities for her and her children. Yet, staying in Ghana and carrying on as before also had consequences she saw that were not desired. It seems that when she recognised the consequences and those consequences mattered, her boredom propelled her to make changes to a situation that was even more in limbo. She responded by imagining different possibilities for her life path and then made practical choices to bring those imaginations into reality. She did not imagine these possibilities out of thin air. She had the examples of Huajie, Mrs. Xiong and other Chinese women who worked with their liminal situations and who then, from Grace's point of view, brought purpose to those liminal situations.

Although it is easy to conclude that from the moment her husband decided to transfer that Grace played a more active role in re-creating meaning in her life in Ghana, her responses are not as clean. Generally, for the next several months she was persistent in pursuing the idea of becoming a restaurateur. Yet at

the same time she had moments of accepting being where she was, letting life be in limbo instead of continually struggling to find stability. She had doubts about whether she actually wanted to pursue the restaurant business.

During a phone conversation she remarked to me, “I talked to my brother in Germany and he said if there is chance of doing business in Ghana he would come.” Grace explained that her brother was a professional chef in Hong Kong, a profession he continued when he immigrated to Germany. However, he was dissatisfied with the pay, dreaming that he could do better as a restaurateur. Grace was already revealing doubts about her own interest and determination in the pursuit.

Then the doubt came out full force. “But really, how will it be possible? I really want him to accompany me while I’m in Ghana because it’s so boring here. But I might help out [in the restaurant].”

Sometimes she criticised how others run their businesses and offered ideas of how she would do things differently. Then in moments of self-reflexivity, she would say, “Don’t think I know what I’m talking about. Sometimes I feel I’m at a great disadvantage for not having continued my education.” She was referring to having only completed secondary school education. When I suggested that many successful Chinese business people do not have higher degrees, she said, “You don’t understand. There are certain complexities I don’t understand, ones that I don’t seem able to reach because my mind cannot take me there. I cannot understand some things because I don’t have the knowledge to.”

Switching back and forth from being committed to not being committed to the new line of pursuit, and having both doubt and confidence in herself, she showed she was sometimes resigned to the pressures and difficulties of her own circumstances and internal confusion. Grace showed the tension of living life absolutely and living life relatively. In the struggle to make meaning, we have moments when we live and understand our lives independently of what other pressures there are to tell us how we ought to live them. Grace's initial decision of not caring where her children are born is an example. At the same time, we also live life relative to how others believe life *should* be lived versus how life *could* be lived. Grace, giving in to familial and peer pressure about where her children should be born, is another example. As Grace refashions her life in Ghana, the stuttering movements backwards and forwards in her decision-making also demonstrate this tension.

To be sure, our experiences of life are not usually clear demarcations of life lived absolutely or relatively. Most of the time it is meshed together, making it impossible to disentangle what is what. Feng-ye, whose husband lived and works in Nigeria alone while she and her two children lived in Ghana, is another such an example. The decision to live in Ghana was hers because as she understood, it gave her children the better opportunity compared to what northern Nigeria had to offer. At the same time, how she understood the world and what she understood would make a successful life for her children was also partly based on societal standards of success. That in turn also informed how she took a role in creating her path as her children's guardian.

The accounts Grace and Feng-yee provided show how they lived in Ghana in ways that propel them and their families to the best trajectory of how they imagined the future might be. The present moment exerts its own pressures while the way we understand how the future could unfold also creates its pressures. Many like Grace and Feng-yee, as they live in their present situations, imagine what the future could be. While at some level we all experience variations of this, one key part I tried to emphasise in both Grace and Feng-yee's situations is that their experiences of uncertainties and uneasiness was more amplified and that it coloured the experience of how they lived. In particular, they often seemed to *circle back* to living with a kind of resignation; in this case, resignation was a space between acceptance and rejection of their living situation. In the midst of fluctuating from acceptance towards rejection and back, they frequently kept their eyes on the future and imagined how else the future could be. And in those moments of future-imagination, they may have taken the chance of doing something differently in their current situation to try to put into alignment what it is that makes the future-imagination come to fruition.

Grace and Feng-yee's experience and perspective of inhabiting limbo is not unusual among the Chinese in Ghana, but her case was the most heightened example I encountered during my fieldwork. The sudden and unexpected notice from the employer about a major change in their lives was unusual, but how Grace approached this new liminality was not entirely unique. As another illustration, Amy Tong's situation, in a way, took different twist than Grace's. In Chapter 3, I briefly introduced Amy, a Malaysian Chinese friend. She had a career

as a hair stylist and owned several franchises in Malaysia, but gave up that career when her husband was hired by a multinational corporation, resulting in their relocation in Ghana. The business opportunity for Amy to continue her career in Ghana was not only slim, but also illegal for foreigners to engage in.<sup>12</sup> Living in Ghana became Amy's first time in her adult life when she was without a professional career. Many Chinese women follow their husband to Ghana and find that, while their husbands continue their professional lives, their own professional identities may languish, Amy re-envisioned what she could do in Ghana and became increasingly involved in fundraising events and volunteer work organised by international groups such as the British High Commission and Ghana International Women's Club. Amy's and Grace's situation are analogues. Amy's primary reason to move to Ghana was to be with her husband, and in the process lost her professional career which was a major part of her life. In the process, she took on her situation of uncertainty (but also possibilities) and determined she could focus much of her time on volunteer and fundraising work. My host parents' situation and how they established their restaurant, which I mentioned earlier in the dissertation, is also along these same patterns. When my host father was fired from his factory job, he and his wife faced a situation where he could not return to Hong Kong because two things were against him: his age and that his technical skills were no longer applicable in Hong Kong's job market. Furthermore, their children were in primary school and did not have a firm grasp

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<sup>12</sup> The Ghana Investment Act of 1994, Section 18, lists a number of enterprises that are reserved for Ghanaians, among them "operation of beauty saloons and barber shops".



of the Chinese language to continue their education in Hong Kong. International school in Hong Kong was beyond their family's means. Stuck with having to live in Ghana, my host parents had to re-envision how they could create a career in the midst of being in limbo. They opened a Chinese restaurant. Meanwhile, their extended stay in Ghana was only secured as long as they had the financial ability to invest and work in Ghana. If they had no financial ability, or decided to retire, they legally had to leave Ghana. In many of the ways that Chinese live in their situations of liminality, they often hold the great uncertainty of their future residency at bay while bringing purpose to situations of uncertainty.

## **5. EMBRACING LIMBO, SECURING THE FUTURE**

What strikes me most in Grace's experiences of living in limbo is how boredom propelled her in two distinct ways. From an overwhelming inertia one can become so restless that one eventually moves. In the later stages she was interested in changing her lifestyle from motherhood to career woman and attempted to invest in the future in Ghana, although with some uncertainty about the possibility given her doubts about her own abilities. Juxtapose this with other ways of responding to living in limbo, and I notice a pattern of planning ahead for the future, paving a path towards it, and then embracing a certain amount of being in limbo knowing that there is a second path. In short, while living in limbo

sometimes propels the Chinese towards finding a resolution, it is equally true that many have embraced living in limbo as a kind of lifestyle.

These responses to living in limbo were not atypical among the Chinese in Ghana. When Grace praised George for being successful despite increasing competition in the Chinese restaurant business and especially when he managed the restaurant alone for a large part of the year, he replied that it was not entirely of his own volition but that circumstances played a role in affecting his responses. He replied with the idiom, “When the horse dies, you get off and start walking.” The implication here is that you carry forward with your plans as intended but when you meet circumstances that are beyond your control, the obvious way to respond is to “naturally” meet those circumstances and work with them. While George says he only responds “naturally”, to choose to respond in that manner is still under one’s volition.

Many Chinese families with children responded to living in uncertainty by first attempting to create a more certain future. There were two patterns that were typical. Families with the economic resources who had relatives in the USA, Canada, or the UK tried to get citizenship for their children from those countries. If this were not possible, when their children were of high school or college age, they would send them to those countries to further their education in hopes that this would provide them with a brighter and more secured life path. These two types of responses were typical even as early as the 1970s.

Mr. and Mrs. Yee navigated this uncertainty with some variation to these responses. Mr. and Mrs. Yee held Hong Kong Certificates of Identity (CI), a travel

document and passport issued by the colonial Hong Kong government until 1997. These were documents issued to Chinese nationals who had the “right of abode” in Hong Kong but who could not obtain any other valid travel documents for overseas travel and could not obtain passports from the People’s Republic of China. Their two children were born in Ghana and because they could not obtain Ghanaian citizenship, they were also issued CIs. George explained that because they were uncertain what would happen to Hong Kong after the 1997 handover to China, they needed to find an alternative place for their children to settle and decided on Canada. With the restaurant business flourishing, they had enough savings to send their children to Canada to complete their high school educations and continue to university. The idea here was that with a Canadian education, the children could at least have a chance in competing for a job on the Canadian market.

The Yee family finally gained enough savings in 1999 to apply for immigration. They qualified under Canada’s Immigrant Investors Program, which among other things, required them to have enough capital to invest in a business in Canada. George said he did this for the sake of his children’s future as a kind of “insurance policy”, but stated “it was not a good deal because of all the money I spent” and because during that period neither he nor his wife could give the restaurant full attention which he attributed as the cause for its unremarkable performance during my stay. Nevertheless there were benefits for George and his wife in this naturalisation process. His adult children are now settled comfortably in Canada. Mr. and Mrs. Yee travel between Ghana and Canada, both switching

places to manage the restaurant when one of them is in Canada. A benefit of being citizens of Canada is the easy and free access to healthcare. Mrs. Yee finds life in Canada more expansive in many aspects of life: at the workplace, socially, and recreationally. She can find a wider circle of friends and can engage in different kinds of leisure and work activities than what is available in Ghana. Mrs. Yee expresses that she wants to leave Ghana behind and live permanently in Canada but the restaurant tethers her back to Ghana.

George tells a different story. He chooses to continue to live in a limbo state moving between Canada and Ghana, not calling either home, though he is comfortable enough for the time being living in this state of flux. He finds life in Canada acceptable at times and “boring” at others. He explains that his limited ability to communicate in English and his fear of navigating the large and complicated landscape of Metro Vancouver hinders him from finding things to do beyond his immediate suburban neighbourhood. He likes the benefits that come with being a Canadian citizen, namely the health and economic benefits, but those are not enough to want him to make a home in Canada. His relationship to Ghana is primarily through his restaurant. He finds the restaurant routines enjoyable and familiar but cannot see himself retiring in Ghana. Not only does he not have permanent residency, he also does not trust the healthcare system in Ghana. When he retires, he imagines himself returning somewhere in Guangdong province, China, where the cost of living is inexpensive and where he had invested in a house. I asked him if it is also that he trusts the healthcare resources in Guangdong which is why he feels comfortable settling there?

Surprisingly, he said for healthcare needs he will be going to Hong Kong (several hours by train) or he might take short visits to Canada to make use of its superior healthcare resources. Though he imagines for the majority of his retirement he would live in Guangdong, he also sees himself moving among different places depending on his needs.

George highlights that there are other ways to respond to living in limbo and uncertainty besides needing to find ultimate resolution. His response, similar to the response of other Chinese in Ghana, demonstrates that responses to living in limbo and uncertainty can also fluctuate with the uncertainty. Living in a place of uncertainty neither requires a constant wanting to seek ultimate resolution nor an experience of frenzied despair. George and Grace both demonstrate in their own ways that their relationship to living in limbo is dynamic and non-linear. It is neither a static response nor a steady relationship to the circumstances. George's response to the uncertainty of Hong Kong's handover of 1997 was to begin the immigration process to Canada both for his family and his "safety". Though having paved a path to what seems to be a steady situation, he is not entirely satisfied with living or retiring in comfortable Canada and continues the relationship of living in limbo in Ghana. The way George characterises his relationship to Ghana is that for the time being it is a comfortable and temporarily settled one. For the long term though, the possibility of living in Ghana diminishes and he sees himself leaving the country and creating a new relationship with Guangdong. And even in his imagination, settling in Guangdong requires him to maintain constant connection to either Hong Kong

or Canada. My informants were fond of saying, “Today doesn’t know tomorrow’s business.” The meaning of that idiom is that there are practical limits to how much worrying and planning for tomorrow we can do today. Today still needs to be lived and whatever we plan for tomorrow can change at a moment’s notice. This is what happened to Grace with the news about DR Congo.

## Epilogue

One night when business was slow at George's restaurant, I sat with him at the bar where he hangs out at night to watch over his business. He was reminiscing about his unexpected career path. He completed only two years of secondary school when his parents needed him to help support the family. He became an apprentice in the printing department at a textile factory in Hong Kong. In Ghana, he became a technician for a Chinese textile company. Less than a decade later, when the factory decided not to renew his contract, he became a restaurateur. He reminded me that his circumstances — out-dated technical skills and poor schooling — meant he had to take bigger risks to make something of his life. He said,

Places like this — where the risk is high, where the government is corrupt — is also where people can make profit. The more dangerous and risky a place, the higher the return. Isn't that why we are seeing so many Chinese investors now? White people have given up on Africa.

He believed that Westerners consider Africa too risky for business and no longer see opportunities there. He explained that people from the developed world are used to working within systems and order— laws, institutions, and infrastructure. In less developed countries where these institutional structures are weak or do not exist, doing business through the proper channels is not usually effective. He believed that attempting a successful business in Ghana (and Africa) requires gaming the system. He acknowledged that not having proper infrastructure does make running a business difficult, but it can be advantageous. The advantage

comes from being less easily detected by the government, and being able to find loopholes. Importantly, the lack of a developed infrastructure means someone without much social capital, like him, has higher chances of success.

Journalists French and Polgreen (2007a), reported similarly that Chinese find potential in African economies while Western companies have retreated since the 1970s. Africa's poorly developed economic infrastructures have made it risky and difficult to do business. They wrote about Yang Jie, a Chinese entrepreneur who moved to Malawi at the age of eighteen and now is twenty-five:

Mr. Yang relayed news back home of abundant opportunities in a part of the world where many economies lie undeveloped or in ruins, and where even in the richer countries many things taken for granted in the developed world await builders and investors.

Conditions like these often deter Western investors, but for many budding Chinese entrepreneurs, Africa's emerging economies are inviting precisely because they seem *small and accessible*. Competition is often weak or nonexistent, and for African customers, the low price of many Chinese goods and services make them more affordable than their Western counterparts. (2007b, emphasis mine)

Both George and Yang Jie suggested that African economies have business potential, so long as you are willing to invest without solid institutional and legal infrastructure. George believed that it is the lack of competition, inadequate government oversight, and the available personal and financial resources that one has, that make it possible to succeed in African economies.

My friend Sandra Pok takes a different angle about the Chinese in Africa. She says that Africa is really not as attractive as others make it out to be. Sandra suggests that Africa is a place of last resort for many Chinese.



No one thinks of coming to Africa to develop their careers and invest in the economies. Like all my Taiwanese friends in Ghana, it's only when they have no other ways to make it — they have lost it all in Taiwan and have nothing more to lose — then they think of coming to Africa to fight it out, to take the risk. Even those employed by the Chinese embassy are given more money as an incentive to come to Ghana, otherwise they wouldn't come.

Sandra's explanation is another version of the story about Chinese in Africa, one that I also hear, even from George, but not the one most often highlighted in public discourse. From time to time, in moments of what seemed to be despair about his own reasons for living in Ghana, George would remark, "If Africans were more resourceful and not so lazy, I wouldn't be able to make a living here." His commentary is undoubtedly a sharp and racist disapproval of Africans, but also a criticism of his own worth. Although he was not as articulate as Sandra, he was suggesting that had he been more resourceful, he would not have continued to live in Ghana. Even French and Polgreen end their story of the rush of Chinese entrepreneurs to Africa with uncertainty about what keeps Chinese in Africa:

In Addis Ababa, in what is a typical arrangement for most large companies, the 200 Chinese workers for China Road and Bridge all live in a communal compound, eating food prepared by cooks brought from China and even receiving basic health care from a Chinese doctor.

"After a day off you wonder what you're doing here, so we like to keep working," said Cheng Qian, the country manager for the road building company in Ethiopia. He added that his family had never visited him during several years of work there. "They have no interest in Africa," he said. "If it were Europe, things would be different." (2007a)

Broad historical and geopolitical narratives have captured the pattern that large numbers of Chinese entrepreneurs are “flocking” to Africa. While there are geopolitical reasons for why this is happening now, the stories of George, Sandra, and Cheng Qian demonstrate a more complicated and conflicting picture about what brings Chinese to Africa and what keeps them there.

From a near-total silence about the Chinese in Africa in the late twentieth century, the turn of the twenty-first century has seen a rise in the question about China’s presence in Africa, because of China’s increased activities in Africa, particularly in mining, oil drilling, and trading. A rising concern among scholars and politicians was whether China’s presence in Africa was comparable to western colonialism.<sup>1</sup> This conversation in the academic and larger communities has continued to unfold in related ways, asking questions about exploitation, rights to resources, whether what China is doing aids the development of African countries, and if Chinese presence takes away the ability of African governments to manage their own resources. These are all legitimate questions that need investigating. However, in the midst of these types of questions about the Chinese presence in Africa, I see a disturbing conflation of China’s government with the Chinese, as people, and as individuals. China’s activities in Africa and its geopolitical strategies are mapped directly onto Chinese people’s activities that may or may not be working as contractors for the Chinese government. This

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004 when I was in the field, Sautman and Yan, a political scientist and an anthropologist, were travelling throughout Africa, making observations and doing preliminary research about this question. They interviewed me about Chinese relations with Ghanaians. They argue that China’s activities were not colonial in nature (2006).

logical leap to map an economic and political structure onto people is, in part, due to forgetting that structural perspectives and analysis only give a partial understanding of people's activities.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, structural types of analysis cannot be used to answer questions about people's experiences. In fact, lost in the debates about China's presence in Africa are questions about *Chinese* presence in Africa.

In this study, I have opened up space in the question about presence of Chinese people in Africa to give focus on experiences of migration, revealing some unlikely patterns and realities about the Chinese experience in Ghana, especially about how they inhabit experiences of liminality. It is commonly assumed that migrants live in close proximity to each other and have a sense of community and connection with each other. For some migrants, such as the Chinese, the transnational model used in certain studies of diasporas, emphasise the two-way movement of migrants (see, for example, Hsu 2000). However, these patterns do not entirely fit with the Chinese experience in Ghana.<sup>3</sup> I have shown that for much of their history in Ghana, they have not lived in "enclaves" but are scattered throughout the metropolis of Accra and Tema. Living under the radar, the Chinese as a group are largely invisible to local Ghanaians and even to the

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor and Xiao (2009) have also argued against seeing Chinese activities in Africa as being singularly directed from the government of China. They argue that the public still sees China as a "centrally controlled, monolithic unitary actor" (717) even though Beijing does not have a singular coherent Africa policy. Furthermore, Chinese state-owned and private-owned companies compete against each other and their interests may or may not coincide with those of Chinese actors (715).

<sup>3</sup> In her study of Chinese in St. Louis, Ling (2008) has made similar arguments. However, unlike the case of Chinese in Ghana, the Chinese in St. Louis have economically integrated into the larger society, but "they have preserved their cultural heritage and achieved ethnic solidarity without a recognizable physical community" (12).

Ghanaian government, in part, because there is no recognizable physical community.

The reasons for the lack of a physical community are myriad and complex, and involve both institutional and personal relational reasons. The majority of the Chinese in the 1960s and 1970s were brought over by factories. Many of these factories, especially those in textile manufacturing, were rivals creating suspicion between factory management. Even the management of factories that did not economically compete with each other had suspicions of each other, afraid that their methods of handling business would become widespread. As some of my informants said, every business in Ghana had to be involved in some underhanded methods. Fear of exposing company secrets drove some factories to enforce social rules that prohibited the intermingling of workers from different factories. In some factories where these rules were not institutionalised, there was unspoken understanding that workers would not interact much with workers from other factories.

The lack of a physical community is also due to the continual tensions among the Chinese to disassociate from each other, even though economic factors and social reasons sometimes push them closer to each other. This constant fracturing and congealing of social relations is perpetuated by gossip and the fuzzy boundaries between personal and business relations. When factories began to decline in the 1980s, leading to the firing of many Chinese employees, many re-established themselves in other smaller ventures such as restaurants. The late 1990s saw an influx of Chinese traders. Like the factories before them, these

restaurateurs and traders were secretive of their business practices and their sources. At the same time, many of these businesses gained footholds in Ghana through personal relations with other Chinese in Ghana. The mix of personal and business relations, and fierce competition with each other and the local market, led to suspicions about each other. Gossip became one primary technique through which relations fractured but also congealed.

When examining the reasons for Chinese leaving Asia, they are not as clear and simple as typical public narratives about leaving home to find a better living. While there is some truth to this, my analysis has shown that personal reasons vary and include, youthful exploration of the world, leaving an oppressive home environment, and the desire to reinvent a new life, thus leaving one's past buried. Even among those who speak of economics as a reason for leaving home, such as James Wang, they may be uncertain for the exact reasons they wanted to leave but find the economic rationale temporarily a good enough reason to explain their actions. In James' case, as in a few others, he was uncertain if he wants to return or if he wants to continue living in Ghana. While individuals have many reasons for leaving, they also have just as many uncertainties about why they exactly left. Part of my analysis tries to show the gaps in the discourses about leaving, showing that uncertainty and lack of clarity also exist. Structural analysis can provide us with some larger patterns for understanding why Chinese leave for Ghana, but it is unable to show the more varied reasons, and unable to capture the uncertainty that comes in an individual's migration.

Examining individual experiences shows us that assumptions about migrants' desire for rootedness and connection to their old home does not necessarily hold. Some want to leave their past behind and find a new place to settle, while others are uncertain about wanting to settle. The experience of living in Ghana for many Chinese is one of living in liminality. While reasons for leaving home are not always clear, neither are the reasons for continuing to stay. Plans to stay in Ghana are only temporary, but where they would move next is not usually certain. Some, like Grace Lam, attempt to make purpose out of living in liminality and try to reinvent themselves. Others like Helen have obtained citizenship elsewhere but have not committed to living in any one place. Living in liminality is a way of life, contrary to ideas that we all have a desire to settle as soon as we can.

While this study provides some understanding about the Chinese experience of living in Ghana, I also try to make room for the uncertainty that my informants have about their actions and motives. Focusing on experience has led the analysis to foreground aspects of migration and living in liminality that do not usually come through. However, there is more that could be done. One aspect that this study has touched on, but did not describe in detail, is the role that boredom plays in the experience of liminality. While boredom may be portrayed as a state of disinterest and lack of activity, my informants have shown that boredom can push them to make changes. Boredom is sometimes the reason for mending fractured relations, for creating new relations, and for reinventing oneself, as in Grace Lam's case. It is important to remember that experiences are not solid

things but rather flows of circumstances and interactions that continue to change, and in the process of change, we assess and reassess where we have come from and where we may be going next.

## Appendix

### Biographical Sketches

Listed here are persons who are cited by name in the text. All names and some biographical details are fictitious. Chinese names are written with the family name first, followed by the given name. Chinese who are referred to by their English names are written with their given name first, followed by their family name. For example, in the names “Aaron Pok” and “Tien Feng-yee”, “Pok” and “Tien” are the family names.

**AARON POK** Mid fifties, born in Hong Kong. Married to Sandra Pok, has one daughter attending university in the US. Arrived in Ghana in 1988 to take over his parents’ glass factory. Lives in Tema. Self-described as a “reluctant businessman”. Believes his strong opinions do not make him a good businessman, but feels he has an obligation to take over his parents’ business. Attempted to branch into other business opportunities by opening a Chinese-European fusion restaurant that ran for several years. Completed university in the US.

**DR. AGYEMAN** Late sixties, Ghanaian. Educated in the UK and Ghana. Professor of sociology and history at the University of Ghana, Legon. Works with prominent international agencies, including the United Nations and World Health Organization.



**ALBERT KUNG** Mid seventies, from Shanghai. Married and has adult children. Major shareholder of a successful metal rod factory. Lives and works in Tema. Immigrated to Hong Kong in his youth and later came to Ghana in the 1970s.

**AMY TONG** 43, from Malaysia. Married with two boys. Worked as a fashion designer in Malaysia. A full-time housewife and volunteer at various social organisations in Ghana.

**ANDREW WAN** 45, from Hong Kong. Marital status is unclear. Trained at a Hong Kong culinary institute and worked as a professional chef. Arrived in Ghana at the same time as Jeffrey Choy and Im Chung-kit in the 1990s to run a newly-established restaurant. Later, established a high-end Chinese restaurant with Jeffrey and Chung-kit. Left the business partnership due to gambling debts. Founded his own restaurant which closed after several years of operation.

**ANNA YEUNG** 53, born in Hong Kong. Married to George Yeung and has a daughter and a son living in Canada. Completed primary school education. Came to Ghana in the mid-1970s. Describes her childhood as unhappy and oppressive. Runs a restaurant in Accra that is frequented by Ghanaian dignitaries. Obtained Canadian citizenship to provide her children a way to establish themselves elsewhere.

**MR. FONG** Chinese restaurateur. No other biographical detail.

**GEORGE YEUNG** 60, born in China, identifies as a Hong Konger. Married to Anna Yeung, has a daughter and son living in Canada. Completed

secondary school education. Came to Ghana in the mid-1970s to work in the textile industry. Started a Chinese restaurant when his factory contract was not renewed. Has Canadian citizenship.

GRACE LAM      36, born in Guangzhou, China. Married and has two children. Identifies herself from Hong Kong or China, depending on social context. Completed secondary school education. Had a brief career as a salesperson in China before marrying in her twenties. Arrived in Ghana in the 1990s. A close friend and neighbour of Tien Feng-yee. Lives in the apartment complex nicknamed “Chinatown”. Both children are born in the US. Husband works as a manager for a textile company, and later was transferred to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to a clothing factory. Regrets that she has not established a career of her own and is uncertain about the path of motherhood. Attempts to start her own restaurant business.

HAUJIE      Late forties to early fifties, born in China. First marriage to a Chinese. Divorced after immigrated to the US. Second marriage to a Ghanaian politician. Successful proprietor of a restaurant in Accra.

IM CHUNG-KIT      52, born in Guangzhou, China, married. Worked as a professional chef in Hong Kong. Arrived in Ghana in the 1990s and worked as a professional chef in the same restaurant as Jeffrey Choy and Andrew Wan. Later, established a high-end Chinese restaurant with both of them. Unofficially, the guardian for Linda Gao. Lives in Accra.

**JAMES WANG** 35, from China. Orphaned at the age of 16 and lived with several foster families. Became a machinist in China. Hired by Aaron Pok as a supervisor for his glass factory. Arrived in Ghana in 1999. Wife and child live in China and have never visited him Ghana. Attended but never completed secondary school. Feels that his background disadvantages him in the competitive environment in China. Lives and spends most of his time in the factory compound.

**JEFFREY CHOY** 47, born in Hong Kong, married. Arrived in Ghana in the 1990s. Is also a citizen of New Zealand where his wife and daughter lives. Worked as a professional chef in Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Ghana. Co-founded a high-end Chinese restaurant with Im Chung-kit and Andrew Wan. Lives in Tema. Alleged affairs with Melaney Guo.

**JENNY TAM** Forties, born in Jiangsu province, China. Married to Simon Tam. Has one daughter. Was adopted into Law Man-kwong's family. Refers to Man-kwong as both uncle and brother. Refers to her adopted mother as both mother and grandmother. Moved to Hong Kong as a young adult and worked in an electronics assembly factory. Arrived in Ghana in the early-1990s. Runs a Chinese fast-food restaurant in Osu, Accra. Has difficult relationships with Man-kwong's family. Lives in the same compound where the restaurant is located.

**JIM TSE** Early fifties, trained in Shanghai, China as a medical doctor and later attended postgraduate school in the UK for biology. An entrepreneur in the US, founded a computer assembly and support services company in

Ghana. Arrived in Ghana in the late-1990s. Half of the year lives in Accra, the other half of the year lives in the US.

**JOE** Late sixties, born in Hong Kong, married. Completed university education in the UK. Arrived in Takoradi, Ghana in the 1970s to work in the sales force of a newly established enamelware factory. Left several years later for the UK and became a chartered accountant. In the 1990s, returned to Ghana to become the managing director of the enamelware factory. Completed university education. Lives in Takordai.

**LAI DONG-WAI** 37, from China. Arrived Ghana in the early 2000s. Established a wholesale clothing business with Melaney Guo, but has since split business partnership with her.

**LAW MAN-KWONG** Fifties, born in China, married. Arrived in Ghana in the 1980s to work in a printing firm. Runs a Chinese restaurant in Osu, a rival to Anna and George Yeung's restaurant. Completed secondary school education. Calls Jenny Tam his niece or sister.

**LINDA GAO** Twenties, from China. Had tried to enter the US by way of Ghana but was deported at US immigration and sent back to Ghana in 2005. Under the unofficial guardianship of Im Chung-kit. Works at his restaurant.

**MANDY** 25, identifies as a Hong Konger, born in Ghana. Completed secondary school education in Ghana. Married to a Lebanese. Has two young children. Lives in Accra.

- MELANEY GUO 36, from Guangzhou, China. Arrived in Ghana in the early 2000s. A wholesaler of clothing from China, primarily jeans. Worked with her boyfriend, Lai Dong-wai, to establish the business but has since gone her own way. Alleged affairs with Jeffrey Choy. Lives in Accra.
- SANDRA POK Mid fifties, born in Taiwan. Married to Aaron Pok and has a daughter attending university in the US. Arrived in Ghana in 1988. Formerly a primary school teacher in Taiwan. Ran a Chinese-European fusion restaurant in Accra. With her husband, runs an informal business importing non-perishable foods manufactured in Taiwan and sold in the Ghanaian market. Completed university education in Taiwan.
- SIMON TAM Forties, born in Hong Kong. Married to Jenny Tam and has one daughter attending secondary school. Arrived in Ghana in the early-1990s. Worked in the assembly line of an electronics factory in Hong Kong. Runs three businesses: a Chinese fast-food restaurant in Osu, Accra; an electronic home security firm; and a video rental store. Completed secondary school education in Hong Kong.
- TIEN FENG-YEE Mid fifties, born in Hong Kong. Married and has two daughters. Arrived in Ghana in the mid-1990s. Husband was working in Ghana and later transferred to Nigeria. Decided to remain in Ghana for the sake of her children's education. Lives in the apartment complex, nicknamed "Chinatown" in Accra. A close friend and neighbour of Grace Lam.

TONG HONG Late forties to early fifties, from China. Married and has children.

Considered a rising entrepreneur in the tyre and automotive business.

Rumours that a government public transportation agency has contracted him to import buses from China.

TSAO MEI-YEE Seventies, born in Hong Kong. Married to Tsao Ying-fung.

Attended primary school. Worked in the weaving department of a textile factory in Hong Kong. Arrived Ghana in the 1960s and worked for several years in the textile factory before becoming a full-time housewife. Former socialite. Secretly runs a Chinese baked goods catering service. Hopes to retire in Hong Kong.

TSAO YING-FUNG Seventies, born in Enping, China, married to Tsao Mei-yee.

Attended primary school. Worked in a textile factory in Hong Kong. Arrived in Ghana in the late 1960s to work at a local Chinese textile factory. Became a wealthy tycoon after he established several factories, but has lost most of his money and fame in his later years. Currently in dispute with a major shareholder of one of his factories.

XIAOLÜ Early thirties. Born in China and married with daughter. Family has intimate political ties with the Communist Party but disavows himself of that connection. Studied commerce at university but found it was not a good fit. Found living in China socially and politically oppressive, so became a businessman to enable him to move outside of the country. Arrived in Ghana in the early 2000s. Works as a wholesaler of Chinese

household products. Wife and daughter live in China. With the exception of Aaron Pok and his family, has few friends in Ghana.

MRS. XIONG Late forties to early fifties, from Dalian, China. Married.

Husband and her own Chinese restaurant catering to low-income locals.

MRS. ZHUANG Fifties, born in Hong Kong, married. Attended some primary school education. A restaurateur.

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