The Differential Politics of
Chineseness

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This paper is intended as a follow-up to a previous one. That previous paper had two versions and two titles: the original, full version was entitled 'On not speaking Chinese: Diasporic identifications and postmodern ethnicity', which I prepared for, and presented at, an international cultural studies conference held in Taiwan in 1992.1 In the following December, I presented an abbreviated version of this paper at the Cultural Studies: Pluralism and Theory conference at the University of Melbourne. I gave this version of the paper another title: 'Migrations of Chineseness: Ethnicity in the Postmodern World'.2 I am spelling out this genealogy here because the title change is significant and indicative of some of the questions I want to raise in this paper.

These questions do not relate to 'Chineseness' per se, although it is through a discussion of the differential politics of Chineseness — to echo the title of this paper — that I want to examine some of the problems and possibilities of what is generally called 'the politics of identity'. The politics of identity, or identity politics, is particularly known as such in western, postindustrial, liberal democratic societies, and is often associated with the emergence on the political stage of previously invisible or subordinated social groupings: women, lesbians and gays, and, of course, racial and ethnic groups. One of the consequences of this emergence has been a pluralization, particularization and fragmentation of the political arena, putting universalist conceptions of politics (i.e. political agendas formulated in the name of 'the people', the 'citizenry' or 'humanity' in general) into crisis. In the logic of identity politics, politics can no longer be separated from the personal; it is always formulated from a subjective, and subject-specific point of view (see Rutherford, 1990). The slogan, 'the personal is political', which was very popular in western feminism in the early seventies, is one example of the emergence of the politics of identity as an important force in political culture, as well as in cultural politics. One way to denote this shift is in terms of a shift from a modernist to a postmodernist public sphere — a shift whose ramifications at both national and global levels are yet to be fully understood. In Australia, the most prominent social area in which the politics of identity is operative, is that of multiculturalism, and in relation to Aboriginal politics (see Castles et al., 1990).

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While the politics of identity has gained much ground in the last two decades or so, it has also recently received much criticism, particularly in the United States, not only from the right but, significantly, also from the left. Lawrence Grossberg, for example, criticizes "the isolationist, fragmenting tendencies" (Grossberg, 1992:372) of any politics of identity because "[it] is predicated on the assumption that different social positions (e.g. nation, class, gender, sexual, race) define radically distinct political and cultural constituencies. ... In such a politics, moral and political legitimacy ... is determined by the singular difference ... which determines the position of subordination" (Grossberg, 1992:364-5). Grossberg goes on to say that one of the most damaging impacts of the politics of identity has been that "it has produced a 'politics of guilt' ... in which anyone's social position already determines their authority to address specific social problems" (Grossberg, 1992:367).

Grossberg's critique here is based on the assumption that identity politics is principally based on a crude essentialism, which claims that a person's identity is inevitably predetermined by factors such as gender, race and sexuality. (Significantly, class politics has generally not been conceived as a politics of identity.) As a result, the politics of identity all too often degenerates into a determinist, rather rigid, and often moralistic enterprise. It is not my intention here to fully engage with Grossberg's critique. (In my view, his rejection relies too much on a caricature of some of the excesses of identity politics in the United States, which have been a central target in the controversy over political correctness in that country.) Suffice it to recognize that the problems of essentialism are real in any political or cultural practice which is articulated in terms of some notion of 'identity'.

What I would like to do here, is to examine the politics of identity by going beyond speaking about it in a general — if you like, sociological — sense. In my view, it is not helpful to reject or embrace a generic notion of identity politics; instead, we have to be sensitive about the specific conjunctures and contexts in which 'identity' can be mobilized as a political concept, and the specific ways, positive or negative, in which it intervenes in those conjunctures and contexts. Of course, this also implies a theoretical conceptualization of 'identity' which can accommodate this demand for conjunctural sensitivity. To put it simply, and to draw on a personal example, for me to be or not to be Chinese — or rather, to identify myself as such — is a question of political articulation, not a self-evident, natural matter. Let me go back to my previous paper to explain this.

In that previous paper, I theorized that Chineseness should not be seen as a fixed racial and ethnic category, but as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora. That is to say, what it means to be Chinese varies from place to place, moulded by the local circumstances in which peoples of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living. There are, in other words, many different Chinese identities, not one.

Theoretically, what this proposition does is a deconstruction and dissolution of the pure and essential Chinese subject, the absolute norm for authentic Chineseness which overseas Chinese — people of Chinese descent living outside of China — can never match up to (see Pan, 1990). What I wanted to put forward in that paper is a political point: at a general level, I wanted to deconstruct the essential Chinese subject to carve out a space for overseas Chinese people in which they can claim their own,