

Living in the shadows of fahfee

Apartheid's legacy

The Chinese who came to South Africa before 1994 recently won the right as previously disadvantaged people to benefits under employment equity laws. In a period marred by xenophobia, the minister of labour attacked this court decision in highly racist terms. **Ufrieda Ho** puts this attack into perspective by looking at the Chinese community through the lens of fahfee and highlighting how apartheid drove it into strategies which created an identity of secrecy and shame.

Dreams close in on a fahfee's man's sleep. A noble king appears to the dreamer, standing near a brilliant pool of water but mysteriously the king dies. These may seem like fanciful dream icons, but to the fahfee man these are omens of the subconscious, the gods and the ancestors. These are symbols that if interpreted accurately could bring him fortune and if ignored could cost his pocket dearly.

Fahfee is an illicit form of gambling, also called ju fah in Cantonese, and run mostly by the Chinese in black townships, across the country. Fahfee is a form of gambling that is believed to have migrated with the new immigrants who left China from around the 1870s.

MECHANICS OF FAHFFEE

Fahfee involves betting on a number(s) between 1 and 36. One number is 'pulled' each time and payouts are determined by a pre-agreed rate, usually R1 to R28.

Fahfee feeds off the racial dynamic that is specifically South

African both in apartheid days and in the lingering aftermath. This can be seen in the dynamic between the 'Chinaman' and the people who bet who also refer to him in township-speak as the 'ma-China'. The Chinese operator is always in the position of the banker. The betters are always drawn from the majority pool of poorest black people.

Another fascinating hallmark of fahfee, is that it is a practice linked to superstition, symbols and dreams in particular. The 36 numbers are all linked to a particular dream icon or symbol, which has the same meaning for both the banker and the better.

The mechanics of the game involve an operator, called the ju fah gong in Cantonese and the Ma-China or Chinaman, and a group of betters. The betters can be organised into various groups, usually based in different locations, which are referred to as 'banks'. Among the betters is a person who is selected to be the go-between between the betters and the operator. This person is called the

'runner'. It is the runner's job to collect purses with bets in time for the ju fah gong's daily rounds (sometimes twice daily).

Each time the operator arrives he produces a number, which he has thought up looking at his records. He believes that this is the number that will have the fewest bets made against it. The term used is 'pulling' a number. The runner shows this number in public to all the betters at that bank.

There are 36 numbers that the betters can choose from and they can place as many bets as they like on as many numbers. They need to put the right amount of money into the purse for the bet to be valid. The pay-out is an agreed upon rate, usually one to 28. Each better has a purse that is marked with an identifying number and the number of the bank where they play regularly.

It is through the regularity of players' individual trends that the fahfee operator is able to create records and work out the patterns of his key players in each bank. He is also guided by dreams,



The Lion Dance is performed at major Chinese community gatherings in South Africa.

superstition and other chance happenings that he may experience. For his betters the same is true. All who are involved seek out the meanings behind symbols and icons to find a 'supernaturally' ordained number that will bring them a win.

ECONOMIC RESPONSE TO APARTHEID

Fahfee exists still today, albeit in a changed form, but it was most prominent in the years after the Group Areas Act of 1956 came into being. The Act meant Chinese were subject to additional restrictions as non-whites, including prohibition from trading in their small shops in areas reserved for whites only. It is under these circumstances that fahfee was transformed into an economic livelihood.

Fahfee is an allegory of the Chinese South African community's carefully constructed public and private identity. Fahfee stands in for what is hidden and left unsaid. Fahfee with its mythical symbols and emphasis on fate, luck and chance even today remains in the dark, in the shadow world of shame

and illegitimacy and has the effect of pulling a veil over the identity of the Chinese South African community.

The role of apartheid is central to understanding how fahfee became a strategy for economic survival and how restrictive apartheid Calvinist practices relegated fahfee to the realm of the taboo. It was the racial divisions of apartheid that made it possible for fahfee, as an underground economic activity, to exist and thrive among two oppressed population groups in apartheid South Africa.

Apartheid drew the access to power along racial lines. Power and agency for the Chinese community was then, and still is, limited. Under apartheid the South African Chinese community was classified as non-white or 'coloured' and disenfranchised like all non-whites.

History shows that in the early 1900s, even before unification days in 1910, laws considered both the 'free' Chinese and indentured labourers prohibited people. The first piece of segregationist legislation passed in South Africa, in

the Cape Colony, was in fact the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1904.

By the time apartheid's segregationist policies were in place Chinese, like other non-white groups, were also herded into townships. But their small numbers meant that the only township that could viably be established was in Kabega Park, Port Elizabeth. The community's small numbers indirectly helped to get them 'concessions' that other non-white groups were not entitled to, such as being allowed to live in whites-only suburbs. But even this was only under the humiliating approval of their would-be neighbours.

Their small numbers, too few to sway votes, have also been their downfall. Even in the post-1994 era they have largely been ignored and were excluded from government's employment equity and broad based economic empowerment schemes. It took nearly nine years of negotiation, which ended in a court battle in June 2008, for government to concede to extending the definition of 'black' to the Chinese. For the community,



Chinese New Year celebrated with fireworks in Chinatown, Johannesburg.

which now numbers fewer than 10 000, the court case victory was less about the economic opportunities a 'black' label affords, and more about dignity and affirmation.

It is this history that has entrenched Chinese people's isolation and given the community reason to shrink into their insularity and distinct public and private identity.

Under apartheid the Chinese lived without professional and academic advantages reserved for whites. It was a matter of survival to become resourceful and to exploit different avenues of economic activity, including fahfee. It is for this reason fahfee transformed from recreational gambling recreation into an economic survival strategy with its dangers and risks.

Fahfee would not have survived had it been conducted in just the Chinese community. It had to move beyond the community and rely on a bigger pool of people to place bets. So it spread out to black communities. There was, and still is, a grudging partnership between better and fahfee man where the possibility of economic benefit is the only common ground. It was a mutual collusion against an apartheid system that benefited neither group. Apartheid's triumph perhaps was that it sowed division everywhere even among those who suffered. The relationship between better and fahfee man was transactional, not unifying.

Fahfee, in its South African form therefore became bastardised. Its recreational gambling roots were transformed because of the

imperative of economic survival.

This means that even though fahfee is similar to various other forms of gambling in other places in the world, such as the numbers games and Chinese lottos, it has a unique South African flavour.

FAHFEE AND HIDDEN IDENTITY

Fahfee's most prominent marker was, and is, its existence outside the law despite being a central way of making money, particularly among the generation of income earners of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Throughout its existence it has been practised in the shadows and it is never spoken about openly to outsiders.

Fahfee has connotations of being illegal and dirty and is something associated with the working class, transacting with the poorest of the poor. Fahfee remains something people skirt around even to community insiders. It remains a practice of humiliation and secrecy, which turns it into a practice of shame.

Yet even with its shame and secrecy the Chinese community has had to exist and operate within a broader South African context with other non-Chinese communities. It is this necessary interaction that has resulted in a dual identity, particularly for the younger generation. The people who fall into the 'post-fahfee' era have begun to chart new economic courses for themselves, mostly within the professional mainstream, yet this still has to be reconciled with their roots and backgrounds. It often includes negotiating the reality of parents and family members who did, and maybe

still do, operate fahfee banks.

This management of the stigma goes beyond the realm of the personal and extends from the immediate family through to the Chinese community as a whole. It is as if every Chinese person needs to preserve the 'light' part of herself in public to hide all the 'dark' that is committed by every Chinese person, who indirectly represents her.

The South African Chinese construct an identity that protects itself by being silent, by flying under the radar and not rocking the boat, especially a political one. It is a community that has been taught to draw veils over what should not be seen publicly. This secrecy feeds the taboo of fahfee and also deepens the chasm between fahfee insiders and fahfee outsiders.

Fahfee among the South African Chinese is not 'pulled' as much as it was a generation ago. Most operators used fahfee as an economic tool to spare their children from a life of hardship and toil as fahfee operators. There are therefore fewer and fewer Chinese operators under the age of 45.

But still there is an invisible thread that binds the community and binds the generations. Perhaps through understanding the significance of this connection, and by understanding why fahfee is made taboo by politics, history and circumstance, it will allow the practice of fahfee to simply exist and to breathe free of shame and stigma. LB

This article is adapted from Ufrieda Ho's honours research 'The invisible thread that binds - fahfee as a metaphor that binds the Chinese community in silence, stigma and shame', completed at the University of the Witwatersrand. Ho is a freelance journalist.