
WANNING SUN
"MONSTER HOUSES", YACHT
IMMIGRANTS", AND THE POLITICS OF
BEING CHINESE: MEDIA AND ETHNICITY IN
CANADA

In his seminal work 'Cultural China: the Periphery as the Centre', Tu Weiming argues that Cultural China can be examined 'in terms of a continuous interaction of three symbolic universes'. The first, according to Tu, consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. The second, Tu says, consists of Chinese communities throughout the world, who recently have tended to define themselves as members of the Chinese 'diaspora'. Tu's third symbolic universe consists of individual international scholars, journalists and writers who write about China for the consumption of their own linguistic communities. Tu's tripartite distinction is useful in understanding Chinese identity politics because it emphasises the interaction between the three symbolic universes, however, this locality-based categorisation does not recognise pluralism and mobility which increasingly become the defining features of postmodern identity. Culture is increasingly rethought in terms of mobility rather than fixity, and in plural identities rather than in a single

locality. This is most evident in the 'astronaut families', a term coined to describe Chinese families who have migrated to North America from Hong Kong, where the father of the families lives in Hong Kong and travels between Hong Kong, where he runs his business and his home in Vancouver or Toronto. For these so-called 'global citizens', or members of transnational elites, identity is negotiated between movement and displacement. Deterritorialisation, rather than locality is the essential condition in their negotiation of a plural or fragmented existence.

Chinese migrants, like migrants of other ethnicities, often encounter, annoyingly and predictably the question. 'where are you from?' According to Ang (1993), the obligation to answer this question on various levels, - literally, philosophically, and epistemologically - obscures the obvious fact that a migrant's subjectivity is equally shaped by the question of where 'you are at'. A productive position to take, proposes Ang, is a multiperspectival one which allows us to 'keep a creative tension between 'where you're from' and where you're at'. In addition, the Chinese, as other peoples anywhere in the world, migrate for a variety of reasons, political, economic or personal, and under a multitude of different conditions and circumstances. The diversity and heterogeneity of Chinese experiences requires that any inquiry into Chinese diasporic subjectivity must start by looking at the multiple processes by which Chineseness is imagined and constructed. Such construction necessarily operates on the intersection of categories such as race, gender, class and geography, rendering a singular master-narrative of diasporic subjectivity impossible and irrelevant.

To emphasise the 'where you are at' factor allows us to examine the specific sites and moments where both hegemonic control and resistance are negotiated. Kathryn Mitchell's (1996, 1997) analysis of the discourse on race and nation in Vancouver in the past decade over the issue of Hong Kong business migration uncovers the social relations of power involved in the struggle over meaning. She identifies a structural tension between a pro-integration discourse and an anti-integration one. Using the controversy of Hong Kong migrants' increasing economic power in Vancouver, Mitchell points out that those who perceive Vancouver's integration into the global economy as a positive move facilitate the transition by presenting the issue of progress, growth,

internationalisation, world-class cities, Pacific Rim investment and racial diversity in a positive light. Those who believe Vancouver's integration to be harmful emphasise concepts of conservation, environment, nationalism, localism, neighbourhood, and control.

It is at this point, or within these theoretical parameters, that the title of my paper can be unpacked. Admittedly attention-grabbing, it is a metonym for a specific Chinese diasporic experience and a metaphor for mainstream Canada's ambivalent perceptions of the recent arrivals of Chinese immigrants, particularly from Hong Kong. To trace the history and pattern of the Chinese immigrant is not the focus of this paper, and suffice it to say that the arrivals of Hong Kong immigrants have dramatically changed the 'ethnoscape' of the Chinese population in Canada as well as the mainstream perception of the Chineseness.

Along with the influx of migrants comes the influx of capital between Hong Kong and Canada. One statistic source believes that people in Hong Kong and Taiwan transfer about a billion Canadian dollars a month to Canada (Mitchell, 1996). An important source of this capital flow comes from business immigrants, who have immigrated to Canada under the business immigration program. Initiated in 1984 and targeted for the Hong Kong elites wishing to diversify their economic portfolios in advance of the 1997 handover, the category includes investors and entrepreneurs who are required to bring a certain amount of money to Canada and are then given higher processing priority for immigration. As of 1991, the total amount required for investors in BC was a minimum of C\$500,000, with a promise to commit \$350,000 to a Canadian business over a three-year period.

Classification as an entrepreneur or investor means that these immigrants have money or money-generators - a valuable group for advertisers. According to the Canadian Census of 1991, since the mid 80s, Hong Kong immigrants have accounted for between 1/3 and 1/2 of all immigrants entering the country in the entrepreneur class and between 40 and 60 percent of the investor class. The promotion brochure of the Maclean's Chinese edition cites studies to show that members of the Chinese community are more likely than average to purchase luxury goods, designer clothes and electronics. The Chinese community, therefore, provides a lucrative market for advertisers.

In 1991, the number of ethnic Chinese in Canada was 586,845, representing an increase of 54 per cent over the previous five years. Among them 68% live in the Greater Vancouver and Metro Toronto. In 1994, the total Chinese figure was estimated to be 737,574, an increase of 26 per cent when compared with 1991. In the recent few years, the number of Hong Kong immigrants coming to Canada has remained steady. In 1993, 36,026 Hong Kong immigrants landed in Canada, with about 40 per cent of them classified as business immigrants (So and Lee, 1995).

Mainstream Canadians' reactions to these recent and wealthy arrivals was ambivalent, to say the least. On no other issue is this tension encapsulated more vividly as in the Vancouver Sun's coverage of the stories of 'monster houses'. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some white residents in the western affluent suburbs of Shaughnessy petitioned the Planning Department of the Vancouver City Government to change the building code and reduce the ratio between the floor area and the lot size in houses to be built in the west side of the city - the affluent part of the town. The objective was to prevent construction of more 'monster houses'. This was obviously targeted at the Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants who like to maximise the floor ratio in building their new mega houses. Related to the 'monster houses' issues were the complaints about the building of Chinese enclaves with huge Chinese shopping malls in areas like Richmond, as well as complaints about Chinese threatening to chop down aged-old cedar trees in order to build houses.

A regular channel for these resentments was the Vancouver Sun, which was accused by the Chinese language press in Vancouver of publishing stories 'favouring the white extremists and largely ignoring the views of the Chinese' (So and Lee, 1995: 139). In November 1991, for instance, the Vancouver Sun raised widespread concern among the Vancouver residents by citing a housing survey showing that 96 percent of Vancouver residents feared that their children would not be able to afford to live where they were raised, due to the 'ugly' buildings and erosion of the neighbourhood. 'Monster house', a phrase frequently used in the journalistic narratives, captures the sentiments of the 'mainstream' perceptions of the Chinese arrivals in a revealing way.

The monster house - ugly, frightful, and ominous, becomes a metaphor of the character of the people living in it, giving a concrete (pun intended) dimension to the traditional orientalist image of the Chinese as an inscrutable, mysterious and ugly race. It is what Cavell (1996: 47) refers to as the 'racialisation of space'.

Mitchell's (1996) reading of the narratives in the Vancouver Sun finds that another recurring metaphor evoked the image of water, such as tide or wave, to describe the new business activities and immigrants of the Hong Kong Chinese, in a same vein as Margaret Cannon's 1989 book *China Tide*, which details Hong Kong business investment activities in Vancouver. The metaphor of destruction and engulfment by water, as Mitchell suggests, is a symptom in writing and fantasy that relate to deep fears about dissolution and transgression of boundaries in racial and sexual terms. Juxtaposing two seemingly contradictory metaphors reveals a common tendency to associate the Chinese presence with traditional orientalist image of unpredictability and uncontrollability. It also, however, points to a structural contradiction in the self-perception of the mainstream Canadians. In the era of increasingly globalised capitalist economy, articulation of the meanings of race and nation takes on an ambiguous dimension: on one hand, masculine notions of discipline, city planning and urban control are imposed; but on the other hand, openness, availability and vulnerability conventionally associated with the feminine are considered to be necessary for Canada to survive in the increasingly intensified transnational capitalism.

The reputation as a racist, anti-Chinese newspaper was one that Vancouver Sun had since then tried hard to shed. The Chinese community, both in terms of consumptive potential and advertising dollars, is a market that no mainstream business could afford to ignore. 'Yacht immigrants', a term with no clear origin but derived clearly from a contrast to the 'boat people' began to be used commonly to describe the recent arrivals, who tend to be young, educated, single, and 'rich, skilled and sought after by Western countries', and represents a more appreciative mainstream perception of the Hong Kong arrivals. The desire of the Vancouver Sun to smooth racial friction and build more 'positive images' of minorities may perhaps be considered as the triumph of a pro-integration discourse over an anti-integration one.

In 1995, the new editor of Vancouver Sun, Jean Chroshack, considered that it was time for Vancouver Sun to do something to woo back the Chinese community. The Sun adopted a series of measures in order to repair damage, including consulting the Canadian Asian Pacific Foundation for specific strategies. Ron Richardson, media and public relation director of the Foundation, was unambiguous in his reading of the motive behind the Sun's moves: 'there is a lot of money out there, and they simply can no longer ignore the market.'

The Vancouver Sun is not the only news organisation that has come up with the initiatives. Maclean's, Canada's nationally weekly news magazine based in Toronto, has a Vancouver office, which publishes a Chinese version of the magazine five times a year. Lillian So, an immigrant to Canada from Hong Kong in 1975, was formerly the editor of Canada's News Section of Sing Tao Daily newspaper. In 1993, So successfully established Ming Pao's Vancouver Edition after eight months as general manager. Now editor of the Chinese edition of the Maclean's, So also writes her regular column in the Chinese edition, on issues of interest to the Chinese communities in Canada. BCTV's news broadcast also provides simultaneous translation of Mandarin and Cantonese which is made possible with a converter attached to the television.

A prominent initiative taken by the Vancouver Sun is the regular weekly use of letters and articles taken from Chinese newspapers on its editorial page, under the title 'the News from the Ethnic Press'. Alternately, every second Monday, instead of 'the News from the Ethnic Press', it will use "Opinions and Correspondence" ostensibly in the form of Chinese character ideograph. The editor's note reads:

Above are the Chinese characters for opinion and correspondence. Below are letters reprinted from the weekly.

Bilingual forum of Ming Pao Daily News. Letters from the Vancouver Chinese language daily newspaper will appear from time to time on this page on Monday. This practice of the Vancouver Sun dated from November 1995 and has continued till present.

However, what I am interested in here is not how and why Vancouver Sun has had a change of heart towards the Hong Kong immigrants, but the interaction between the mainstream media, such as the Vancouver Sun, which constitutes what Tu calls the 'third symbolic universe', and the ethnic media, such as Ming Pao, which represents what Tu refers to as the 'second symbolic universe'. In addition, I am interested in finding out how this interaction between the two symbolic universes allows the contestation between various Chinese mentalities to form a particular form of Chinese diasporic subjectivity in relation to a Western hegemony. Thirdly, and perhaps, most importantly, I am interested in the tension, ambiguity and indeterminacy which mark the new articulations of race and nation. I am also concerned with the mutual appropriations in reworking the notion of multiculturalism for the hegemonic production in the interests of multinational capitalism.

The globalisation of the Chinese language newspapers is a well-established phenomenon. As early as in the 1960s, Sing Tao Daily in Hong Kong recognised the potential market outside Hong Kong and subsequently set up offices in selected cities in North America, Australia and Europe. While Sing Tao is a media conglomerate extending its influence from Hong Kong outwards, World Journal represents the overseas expansion in North America of the Taiwan-based United Daily News Group. It set up its office in the US and Canada and upgraded to a full-fledged operation with its own printing press in 1987, the year when the Canadian Government changed its immigration policy. Before the arrival of Ming Pao, the market niches for Sing Tao and World Journal in Canada were well-defined: people from Hong Kong read Sing Tao and those from Taiwan read World Journal. Although there were many other Hong Kong based Chinese language papers circulating in Canada, their lack of local content made it impossible for them to compete with Sing Tao and World Journal.

Ming Pao was first published in Hong Kong in 1959. Statistics show that Ming Pao ranked fourth among daily newspapers in Hong Kong and commands a readership of about half a million people, after the Oriental Daily News, Tin Tin Daily News, and Sing Tao Daily News. While the three are commonly perceived as populist newspapers, Ming Pao is considered to be closer to an elitist newspaper catering to the

middle-class, business people, many of whom are young, educated professionals and executives, with a higher income (So and Lee).

Compared with Sing Tao and World Journal in Canada, Ming Pao was a late arrival. Its full-fledged Canadian edition was not launched till 1993, with its Eastern Canadian edition based in Toronto and West Coast edition based in Vancouver. The challenge Ming Pao poses to the other Chinese papers is obvious: it clearly aims at capitalising on the recent influx of new immigrants to Canada from Hong Kong. It promotes itself by emphasising its quality and comprehensive coverage, and marks itself as being different from others in that it is a "Canadian newspaper that speaks Chinese". It also strives to 'Canadianise' the contents so that it would not be treated as just a newspaper flown in from Hong Kong, even as it retains the style and tradition of the parent paper. In addition, the Canadian editions of Ming Pao have certain unique advantages in terms of attracting the recent 'yacht immigrants' since many newcomers from Hong Kong were loyal readers of Ming Pao and would naturally continue to read the Canadian editions of the paper after they settle in Canada (So and Lee, 1995).

Given these circumstances, it becomes clear that the Canadian editions of Ming Pao is many-fold and ambitious. Its effort to Canadianise itself and set itself apart from the other Chinese papers marks its attempt to compete with mainstream English language papers - most 'yacht immigrants are well educated and likely to be bilingual; they also represent an attempt to siphon Canadian Chinese readers who habitually read Sing Tao and World Journal; and in order to achieve these, it sees itself function, like other Chinese newspapers in Canada, not only as a bridge between the Chinese in Hong Kong and the those in Canada, but also a binding force among the various sectors of Chinese communities inside Canada. More importantly, it sees itself as providing a channel for the Chinese community to collectively exert political influence on mainstream politicians in decision-making and serve as a platform for dialogues between 'mainstream' and the Chinese community.

In no other places is this ambition more clearly displayed than its Monday edition, which includes a page called 'Bilingual forum'. It is an opinion page that juxtaposes the original articles with their translated versions. The English version of the editor's note reads:

The public forum calls for our readers and friends to express their opinions and comments on three aspects: Canadian politics, social policies as well as economic and trade issues. Contributions of both Chinese and English articles are welcome.

The Chinese version of the editor's note also includes the above, but adds:

The public forum is published in both languages. The English part will be made available for the selection and reprinting by the English-language media outlets.

Although Chinese and non-Chinese Canadians both are welcomed to contribute in either Chinese and English, the majority of the writers write in English and have Chinese names. A close reading of some of the articles seems to suggest the paper consistently alternates between the discourse of sameness - we are Canadians - and that of the difference - we vs. the Canadians.

Two examples I have chosen for illustration both are concerned with medical system in Canada. Ming Pao's Monday Bilingual Forum on May 26th, 1997 published an article by K. K. Wan. Entitled 'Health care needs help', the article - English as original - argues that Canada should learn from Britain, Australia and New Zealand in their reforms of government health care by bringing in user-fee co-payment system and limiting certain non-essential services. The author argues that the discussion should not be silenced by class warfare rhetoric. 'Our health care makes us proud and define us as Canadians.' 'We don't want an American style system, but we need a system that can look after all the essential services for all Canadians'. The us vs. them dichotomy in Wan's article is clearly not based on race, but class. By writing in English and identifying himself as 'us as Canadians', the author not only seems to align with the wealthy 'yacht immigrants', possibly like himself, but also implicating the 'mainstream' Canadians of comparable socio-economic status.

By comparison, another Ming Pao bilingual article, also on the issue of medicine, criticises the government's decision to control the

use and practice of the Chinese medicine and enforce its bans on prohibited drugs, the author Shu Tan argues that Chinese medicine is one of the human achievement's treasure and is a critical ingredient of Chinese culture, widely practised among Chinese communities all over the world. The author comments that the government's recent legislation would arise 'anxiety within the Chinese community' (April 14, 1997). Contrary to the earlier article, Chinese community is marked out as a singular experience which is separate and different from the rest of Canada. This discourse of difference based on race clearly elides other markers, including class, gender and geography. Discussions of the lives of 'yacht immigrants' in both English and Chinese narrative consistently omit the experiences of female members of the 'astronaut families' - the impact of mobility and displacement on the formation of diasporic female subjectivities.

It is not hard to understand why Ming Pao seems to deliberately play an ambiguous role in its attempt to align with its intended readers, i.e., middle class Canadians, both Chinese and non-Chinese, while at the same time attempts to maximise the Chinese readership across different socio-economic denominators. Nor is it hard to understand why Ming Pao alternates between what can be called a strategic essentialism by presenting a uniform Chinese perspective on one hand and a strategic pluralism by functioning as a contesting ground for various forms of Chinese identity politics on the other (which I do not have time to give examples of). What is significant and worthy interrogating is the range of narrative choices afforded by Ming Pao to mainstream English language outlets such as the Vancouver Sun and the textual decisions made by these media outlets regarding articles from the Chinese language press. What perhaps is even more important is the question of who is claiming what, the motives and rationale behind these textual strategies, as well as the tensions and ambiguities which arise from a phenomenon which I refer to as the 'textual transaction'.

In more specific terms, what does Ming Pao get out of this arrangement with the English-language media outlets? What does the Vancouver Sun get out of taking these stories from the Chinese press and reprint them? Am I simply try to read too much and too suspiciously a cluster of narrative that is, after all, well-intended, cultural-aware and

politically enlightened? Perhaps not, but even the answer was yes, the question still wouldn't go away as to what the issues exist in such process of textual mobility and the political and cultural implication of these issues in our attempts to define ethnicity and diasporic subjectivity in an environment whereby multiculturalist ideology and rhetoric works to refine new relations of power in the postmodern global economy.

It seems that the most important issue is the question of maintaining or relinquishing a narrative 'voice', and how the gain and loss is negotiated in such transactions. Doubtlessly, too many things, including translation, recontextualisation, editorialisation and purposeful selection happen in this process of textual transaction, which threaten to take away the 'narrative control' that the author of the original text has, willingly or unwillingly. An example worth considering is a Ming Pao article entitled 'The Chinese community's mentalities', which was reprinted in the Vancouver Sun on November 20, 1995. The author Gordon Li argues that within the Chinese community in Canada, there are two kinds of 'abnormal mentalities' which make it difficult for the Chinese to emerge from the shadows of narrow-mindedness in dealing with race-relations issues. They are firstly what Li calls the 'inferiority/superiority complex' and the second is the mentality of victimisation. As a result 'we are unable to relate to the mainstream white society with foresight, openness, gracefulness and peace of mind.'

Li goes on to say:

... Canada has a multicultural policy and consequently minority ethnic groups enjoy equal rights as protected by a constitution and share them with all alike in the mainstream society. Canada is the "most liveable country on earth". Such a Canada was not built by the Chinese. Therefore, compared with the Chinese people in other countries, Chinese Canadians should feel satisfied and should not have so much of a victim mentality!

Li concludes by urging,

My fellow Chinese Canadians, do not feel inferior or superior.
But certainly treasure the fortunes bestowed on you!

Clearly addressing Chinese readers, the article was written in a typical self-critical, soul-searching way, a discourse of Chineseness reminiscent of Bo Yang's book *The Ugly Chinaman*, a book written in a narrative mode familiar to Chinese readers. The Vancouver Sun's decision to reprint this article raises a series of questions. How is point of view negotiated when the article is taken out of its codifying context and reappears read by an 'unintended' audience?

Would it have made any difference to the meaning of the article had it been written by a 'white' Canadian and published in the Vancouver Sun? Would the Vancouver Sun have been able to get away with such remarks without being quickly accused of being racist by the Chinese community? To push it even further, would it have been conceivable for the Vancouver Sun to publish an opinion piece like this if it had been written by a 'mainstream' Canadian? Whose voice is appropriated here and to that end?

As discussed earlier, the most obvious motivation behind the Vancouver Sun's initiative in printing 'News From the Ethnic Press', particularly opinions and correspondence from Chinese writers, is primarily economic, and it may also be that together with potential dollars its image as an 'enlightened', pro-Chinese paper could also be established. After all, it is a major breakthrough for an English language newspaper to regularly use characters from another language as the title of a column. In addition, indeed regular excerpting from Chinese newspapers can be regarded as a 'window' which gives mainstream Canadian readers a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of the 'other world'. However, is there, in terms of effect, a certain degree of positive marginalisation going on? Here I agree with Mitchell's argument that in an era of global capitalism, the heralding of subject positions 'at the margins' too often neglects the actual marginalisation of subjects (1996, 220). By lumping the non mainstream voices, once a week, under a column called 'News from the Ethnic Press', is the Vancouver Sun engaged in some kind of ethnicisation of various types of Canadians by safely erecting this us vs. them dichotomy? Isn't it actively perpetuating a 'mainstream' paradigm

by reinforcing 'otherness' of the Chinese community and flattening differences within the Chineseness? And in this light, aren't voices from the Chinese community simply represented as a privileged minority because of their consumptive and voting power?

My readings are supported by Jing Wongshu, a third-generation Canadian Chinese who is now the President of the BC's Asian Writers' Association, also the editor of Rice Paper: The Newsletter of the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop. Asked about what he thinks of Vancouver Sun's move, his description was curt, 'lip service' and 'cliché'. When asked to interpret the arrangement between Ming Pao and the Vancouver Sun, Chris Creighton-Kelly, consultant on racial issues to the Canada Council said that it is sheer 'co-optation'. These views are echoed by Pat Howard, a China studies scholar teaching at Simon Fraser University: 'There is no such a thing as the Chinese community. The Chinese come from different social contexts and have different class background.' The Vancouver Sun, however, would be nonplussed to hear these remarks. When I rang Vancouver Sun to ask if I could interview the page editor who is responsible for the selection and editing of these stories from the 'News from the Ethnic Press', I was put to a woman editor, who said, 'I think you should really talk to So-and-So, because he is the person who deserves congratulations.'

Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that Ming Pao itself is an active and conscious participant in such a process. After all, Ming Pao puts up the sign of availability and invites the curious, if not somewhat voyeuristic gaze from the English mainstream press. I would like to suggest that if the Vancouver Sun's move is an exercise which is economically driven but which has definite political implications, then Ming Pao's participation may have been motivated by political desire of the 'yacht immigrants' to participate, intervene and influence mainstream politics and decision-making, although this political desire may come from an economically-based understanding of a certain kind of Chineseness. These members of the transnational elite, professionals, and business people living and working in several global sites and involved in the control of capital and information flows between the sites, negotiate the new spaces of 'late capitalism' to their supreme advantage.

They also desire to influence and intervene politics at the sites between which they traverse. The 1997 general election in Canada which saw two out of six Liberal seats in BC taken by Chinese is a good example of the growing power of the Chinese immigrants. And for this purpose, a discursive site such as Ming Pao's bilingual forum, through appropriation of a mainstream liberal multiculturalist rhetoric, becomes an important site of contestation against a Western hegemonic system of meaning.

Through such a mutual arrangement, both parties seem to have got what they want, and whatever the loss is seems to be a necessary price to pay. The relationship between the Sun and Ming Pao seems to suggest a more complex and complicit scenario than simple opposition or complementarity. In this context multiculturalism has been reworked to function more as a strategy than as a philosophy, and is something which both the 'mainstream' Canadians and the 'ethnic Chinese' can deploy in their attempts to advance their economic and political interests. And it is in the realm of international networks of global capitalist system that these political and economic interests have a common ground.

Given this scenario, it seems crucially important that any inquiry into the constructions of diasporic subjectivities should on one hand consider the fluidity of meaning attached to concepts such as race, nation, class and ethnicity, but at the same time, continue to consider them as important categories which mark difference and otherness. More importantly, we need to consider how these markers intersect to exercise hegemony in the ever-more intensified transnational capitalism. Furthermore, in order to do these, it is necessary to examine the formation of Chinese diasporic subjectivities as a dynamic and ambiguous process of interaction between the three increasingly mobile, rather than fixed 'symbolic universes'.

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