

**ON CHINESENESS AND  
THE IDENTITIES OF VANCOUVER'S CHINESE YOUTH  
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION**

by

Peter Lee

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines the creation of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities using a cultural studies framework. This thesis moves the thinking about Vancouver's Chinese youth beyond that of mere victims of racism and views them instead as active desiring agents with interests, ambitions and the power to decide for themselves how to identify. This study also avoids any essentializing assumptions about Chineseness and illustrates the multiple constructions of Chineseness by Chinese youth. By investigating more complex identifications, the boundaries of what constitutes the category "Vancouver's Chinese youth" become blurred and a challenge is made to any commonsense notions about Chineseness, Canadianness, and cultural identity generally. In such a way, this study helps to fill a significant gap in the literature on Vancouver's Chinese youth identities, a literature that focuses primarily on stereotypes, race-relations, and quantitative socio-psychological work.

A discourse analysis is performed on two "texts": a historical novel, *The Jade Peony*, and a contemporary incident involving the release of controversial Internet video clips by a social club on the University of British Columbia campus. They are analyzed for their representations of Chinese youth identifications using the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the work of cultural studies thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Ien Ang and their poststructuralist notions of cultural identity, and the work of queer theorists of colour such as Patrick Johnson and José Esteban Muñoz.

The study will show the usefulness of the concept of hybridity and the limitations of the diasporic paradigm that places homeland as "centre." Chineseness then becomes an open signifier whose meaning is continuously struggled over and dependent on the context of discussion. The study also makes a connection between the complexities of Chinese Canadian

identity and debates in antiracism education by showing how antiracism must work with the ambivalences that come from ruptures within Chinese communities. Incidents of conflict within Chinese communities show how antiracism can move beyond a minority/majority or Chinese/White paradigm and consider more productive notions of power and how minorities are capable of social hatreds themselves.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Two Contrasting Experiences of Growing Up Chinese in the West .....	1
1.3 Authenticity, Relationality, and the Diasporan Youth.....	7
1.4 The History and Demographics of the Chinese in Canada.....	10
1.5 Overview and Organization of Thesis .....	13
1.6 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions .....	16
1.7 Rationale Statement .....	16
1.8 Significance of Study .....	18
1.9 Conclusion .....	19
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	20
2.1 Introduction .....	20
2.2 Early Conceptions of Canadian-Born Chinese Youth Identities .....	20
2.3 Conflict Between Local-Born and New Immigrant Chinese Youth.....	24
2.4 Vancouver's Chinese Community from 1960-1980.....	25
2.5 Contemporary Chinese Youth Identities in Vancouver.....	28
2.6 Acculturation and Adaptation of New Immigrant Chinese Youth .....	31
2.7 Chinese Canadian Youth, Schooling, and the Model Minority Stereotype .....	33
2.8 Asian American Studies and Chinese Youth Identities .....	35
2.9 Contemporary Chinese Youth Cultures in the West .....	38
2.10 British Chinese Youth Identities .....	41
2.11 Conclusion .....	43
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework .....	45
3.1 Introduction .....	45
3.2 Cultural Identity as Contingent and Strategic .....	45
3.3 Rethinking Ethnicity .....	47
3.4 Chineseness, Multiplicity, and the Diasporan.....	49
3.5 Hybridity .....	52
3.6 Performative Notions of Identity.....	56
3.7 Conclusion .....	59
Chapter 4: Methodological Framework .....	60
4.1 Introduction .....	60
4.2 A Multiperspectival Approach .....	60
4.3 Justification of Methodology .....	62
4.4 Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory.....	65
4.4.1 Social Constructionism .....	66
4.4.2 A Poststructuralist Theory of Discourse .....	67
4.4.3 Discourse Theory and Identity Formation .....	69

4.5 Method of Data Analysis .....	71
4.5.1 A Preliminary Analysis of <i>The Jade Peony</i> .....	73
4.5.2 A Preliminary Analysis of the UBC Club Controversy .....	77
4.6 Conclusion .....	81
<b>Chapter 5: The Changing Meaning of Chineseness and the Problem of Competing Identity Positions: Chinese Youth Identities in Wayson Choy's <i>The Jade Peony</i> .....</b>	<b>82</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	82
5.2 Chinese Identity as Place of Origin and Political Ideology.....	85
5.3 Chinese Identity and the Connection to Race .....	88
5.4 Jook-Liang, Gender, and the Challenges to a Nationalist Discourse.....	91
5.5 Meiying, Desire, and the Problems with Identification.....	96
5.6 Conclusion .....	100
<b>Chapter 6: An Analysis of the Chinese Club Controversy at UBC and the Problematic Meaning of “Chinese” for the Chinese Varsity Club .....</b>	<b>102</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	102
6.2 An Analysis of the Internet Video Clips .....	103
6.3 The Question of the Rickshaw .....	107
6.4 “Chinese” Clubs and Their Stake in Chineseness .....	111
6.5 To Identify as Chinese or Not? .....	114
6.6 Conclusion .....	118
<b>Chapter 7: Rethinking Chinese Youth Identities and the Implications for Antiracism Education .....</b>	<b>120</b>
7.1 Introduction .....	120
7.2 Masculinity, Patriarchy, and Ruptures within Chinese Communities.....	121
7.3 Chineseness as Hegemonic Discourse and Disciplinary Tool .....	123
7.4 “The End of Innocence” and Antiracism .....	126
7.5 Minority Group Relations and the Productive Nature of Power.....	127
7.6 Racism Perpetuated by People of Color .....	130
7.7 The Model Minority Stereotype and Antiracism Education .....	132
7.8 Conclusion .....	135
<b>Chapter 8: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>137</b>
8.1 Introduction .....	137
8.2 Review of the Study's Aims and Discursive Approach .....	137
8.3 Rethinking Chinese Youth Identities and the Myth of Nationhood .....	141
8.4 Performativity and Chinese Youth Identities .....	144
8.5 Suggestions for Further Research.....	150
8.6 Stuart Hall's Reflections on “New Ethnicities” .....	152
<b>References .....</b>	<b>156</b>

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This qualitative study examines the cultural identities of Chinese youth growing up in Vancouver using a cultural studies framework and the methods of discourse analysis. This study draws on poststructuralist thinkers of cultural identity who reimagine cultural identity from something pure and unchanging to something more fluid and open-ended. This reconceptualization of identity draws our attention to the processes and new formations that occur at the borderzones between cultures. Chinese youth who have grown up in Vancouver live in such a borderzone between Chinese and non-Chinese culture. But what exactly makes them Chinese? What is it about them that is non-Chinese?

This introductory chapter will frame the research problem to be examined in this study on Vancouver's Chinese youth identities. It begins by analyzing two contrasting experiences of youth growing up Chinese in the West. This analysis raises many questions of cultural identity that lead into a discussion of authenticity: Are diasporan youth less "authentic" than those born in the homeland? A brief history of the Chinese in Canada is then given, followed by an overview of the entire thesis. The chapter ends by stating the research questions that will be explored, the rationale for the study, and how the study will contribute to the existing literature.

### **1.2 Two Contrasting Experiences of Growing Up Chinese in the West**

Many factors contribute to how Chinese youth experience the effects of their cultural identity. History, geography, and politics, for instance, can influence whether their Chineseness is experienced as something positive, negative, or neutral. The following two passages illustrate how two Chinese youth growing up in different parts of the Western world are affected by their cultural background:

But even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be *Chinese*.

Stepmother knew this in her heart and feared for me. All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born “neither this nor that,” neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain.

*Mo nos* went to English school and mixed with Demon outsiders, and even liked *them*. Wanted to invite *them* home. Sometimes a *mo no* might say one careless word too many, and the Immigration Demons would pounce. (Choy, 1995, p. 135)

One day, when I was about six years old, one of the kids at school called at me “Ching Chong Chinaman, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha.” I had no idea what he meant although I knew from his expression that he was being horrible.

I went home to my mother and I said to her, “Mum, I’m not Chinese, am I?” My mother looked at me very sternly and said, “Yes, you are.”

Her tone was hard and I knew in that moment that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother, who was four years older than me, and much more experienced in the world. He said, “And you’d better get used to it.” (Yang, 1996, p. 65, as cited in Ang, 2001, p. 37)

These two passages give different accounts of what it is like growing up Chinese in Canada and Australia respectively and the discrimination experienced in the host country. The first passage is narrated by Sek-Lung, one of the siblings in the novel *The Jade Peony*, and illustrates the



xenophobia experienced by the Chinese in Vancouver prior to the Second World War and the fears families had of being inexplicably and suddenly deported. More interesting are the questions it raises about Chinese identity and how the adult generation's self-definition is different from the youth's definition. For the adults, the "boundaries" between Chinese and Canadian are unquestioned and made absolutely clear by decades of racism. They criticize their "no brain" children for their ignorance of this history about the "Demons." For the children, however, the boundaries are more porous. Sometimes they even act like the "Demons" by speaking English and saluting the Union Jack. They even mix with and befriend them. Yet no matter how similar Sek-Lung may be to the "Demons"—"even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times"—there is the jarring realization that he could never completely bridge the difference—especially at this juncture in history.

William Yang, a "third-generation Australian-Chinese" (now a celebrated photographer), comes to a similar realization, rather bluntly, in his autobiographical account about growing up in a small mining town in Northern Queensland. While Sek-Lung shows an understanding beyond his years of his cultural heritage, Yang is completely ignorant of his, until, through an act of prejudice, he becomes startlingly aware of his status as Chinese—as if it were "some terrible curse" that cannot be removed, something to "get used to" like an incurable disease. And unlike Sek-Lung's elders who fear the "Demons" will make him forget the "Old China" ways, Yang's further autobiographical account reveals that his parents lacked interest in transmitting any knowledge of their Chinese cultural roots and traditions onto their children. This was partly because they grew up during the 1940s and 50s when the few non-White people in the country were expected to assimilate into "white Australia" (Ang, 2001, chap. 2). These two passages thus demonstrate how the cultural experiences of Chinese youth—of what it is like being

Chinese—can differ significantly depending on factors such as the country and decade they grew up in.

But despite these differences in how they come to learn of their *own* Chineseness, the Canadian and Australian societies in which Sek-Lung and William Yang respectively grow up in view them in one common way—as somehow “marked.” This difference may be due partly to characteristic physical features or by some essential tradition or homeland. The notion of Chineseness that is based on biology, the notion that certain fixed physical or character traits are transferred by genes from one generation to another, is one that is often connected to the idea of race. The notion of Chineseness that is based on essential cultural characteristics such as history, language, or kinship is commonly associated with the idea of ethnicity. Whatever the nature of the difference, they and their families are bracketed in some unitary and closed way that separates them from those who are considered non-Chinese.

It is in this way of being marked, either racially or ethnically, that both youth experience social hatreds. William Yang discovers that his distinctive racial characteristics place him in a subordinate position to White Australians whose normalized characteristics have historically placed them unmarked at the centre of Australian society with other ethnicities forming the periphery. This begrudging acceptance of relations between the dominant White Australian society and the subordinate Chinese-Australian one is what is behind Yang’s brother’s sarcastic remark: “you’d better get used to it.” Sek-Lung also experiences discrimination but from, ironically, his own family, and not because he is Chinese, but because he is not Chinese enough. Terms used to describe such Chinese youth growing up in Western countries are “bananas” or “hollow bamboo,” or, as in Sek-Lung’s case, “*mo no*”—no brain. These youth are criticized for being too Westernized and stereotyped as being “caught between two cultures,” born “neither

this nor that.” The cruelty that Sek-Lung experiences from being called *mo no* by his own family is a curious example of a social hatred perpetrated from within a subordinate community (although one can argue it is in fact the dominant society that is the instigator of the hatred since it is the dominant society that raises the fear of being deported within the Chinese community in the first place which in turn creates the conditions under which the *mo nos* might say a “careless word”).

While these two passages illustrate well the constraining elements of race and ethnicity, they also raise important questions about—and challenge our common sense notions of—cultural identity as fixed, essential, and unchanging. For instance, what does it mean for Sek-Lung to be “‘neither this nor that,’ neither Chinese nor Canadian?” If he is neither, then what is he? And is Yang’s family indeed Chinese even if they no longer have any meaningful attachment to a Chinese homeland in terms of language or culture? If so, what makes them so? Stuart Hall (1996d) has written about this so-called “crisis of identity.” He conceptualizes the postmodern subject as having no permanent identity, but an identity that is continuously being formed and transformed:

It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent “self.” Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about....The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily. (p. 598)

Both Choy and Yang's passages bear out Hall's re-conceptualization of identity. Firstly, Hall states that identities are historically, not biologically, defined. Indeed, there is a historical reason—an immigrant history—behind Sek-Lung's resignation to the "fact" that he will always be Chinese despite adopting many "Demon" sensibilities. Yang's un-chosen minority status too is closely tied to the history of Chinese emigration and Australian politics.

Hall also states that subjects assume "different identities at different times." This is evident in Choy's passage as Sek-Lung is Chinese when he is at home with his family in Vancouver's Chinatown but identifies as Canadian when he is at school with friends. Yang feels Chinese at no other time than when he is called "Ching Chong Chinaman." We can also imagine the identities of these two boys in continuous transformation, never completed. Perhaps Sek-Lung grows up to abandon his Chinese culture and proudly declares himself as Canadian only. Perhaps Yang grows up to develop a curiosity for his parents' culture and embraces his Chinese roots. Moreover, both could identify in ways that have little to do with their Chineseness. These are all speculations (and there are many), but they nevertheless highlight the "bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities."

This more fluid notion of identity does not imply, however, that we can be anything we want, that identities do not mean anything, or that race and ethnicity have little impact in the real world. On the contrary, we have just discussed how Sek-Lung and William Yang's racial and ethnic characteristics have had real constraining effects on their lives in the form of social oppression. Hall is suggesting that we need to also consider some of the more productive elements of cultural identity that leave open the possibility for new identity formations "where you're at" that may occur at the interstices of two colliding cultures. It is at these interstices,

between Chinese and Canadian culture, that we begin to unpack the meaning of Chineseness for Vancouver's Chinese youth.

### **1.3 Authenticity, Relationality, and the Diasporan Youth**

Chinese youth growing up in Canada experience their Chineseness differently from Chinese youth growing up in China. But exactly *how* does Chineseness in China compare to Chineseness in Canada or other parts of the West? Radhakrishnan (2003) addresses a series of compelling questions in relation to the Indian diaspora living within the United States that might also pertain to Asian diasporas living in the West more generally:

Is the “Indian” in Indian and the “Indian” in Indian-American the same and therefore interchangeable? Which of the two is authentic, and which merely strategic or reactive? To what extent does the “old country” function as a framework and regulate our transplanted identities within the diaspora? Should the old country be revered as a pre-given absolute, or is it all right to invent the old country itself in response to our contemporary location? Furthermore, whose interpretation of India is correct: the older generation's or that of the younger; the insider's version or the diasporan? (p. 123).

His answer to the first question is an emphatic no. Radhakrishnan suggests ethnicity is always context-specific and, assuming in the first place there is a secure notion of Indian in India, when people move, their identities and perspectives change. The Indian in the diaspora (Indian-American in this case) is made more aware of his or her Indianness. That is, an Indian amongst millions of other Indians acts and is treated differently than an Indian immigrant (amongst millions of non-Indians) who, suddenly, is reborn as an “ethnic minority.” The term Indian now takes on a more “reactive, strategic character” (p. 123). He makes a distinction between “being Indian” (in some natural and self-evident way) and “cultivating Indianness.” The former pertains

to those in India (although Radhakrishnan makes clear that “being Indian” in India is itself a questionable premise), the latter to the Indian in the diaspora who will often self-consciously cultivate an Indianness to maintain uniqueness and connections to the past, or to combat forms of racism by politicizing “difference.”

But Radhakrishnan (2003) probes deeper and asks, “Is there a true and authentic identity, more lasting than mere polemics and deeper than strategies?” (p. 124). He gives no direct answer but finds the question itself problematic and is especially critical of the term “authentic.” Why can’t someone be Indian without having to be “authentically Indian?” Any discussion of authenticity thus raises a new set of questions: “Authenticate to whom and for what purpose? Who and by what authority is checking our credentials? Is ‘authenticity’ a home we build for ourselves or a ghetto we inhabit to satisfy the dominant world?” (p. 127). Radhakrishnan (2003) suggests instead that questions of identity be engaged with more fruitfully alongside notions of relationality and the politics of representation: “When someone speaks as an Asian-American, who exactly is speaking? If we dwell in the hyphen, who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the [two] components?” (p. 127). The debate over the use of the hyphen in “Asian (-) American” shows how competing narratives with which to represent relationality can become politically charged.

Similar cultural logics of identity may also apply to debates over hyphenated categories given to other Asian diasporas living in the West. Lisa Lowe (1996), for instance, is critical of the use of the category “Asian American” which groups such diverse communities as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean within the United States into a pan-ethnic coalition: “[It] is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific position, assumed for

political reasons” (p. 82). On the one hand, the category is necessary to disrupt discourses that exclude Asian Americans and yet, on the other hand, needs to be critiqued for its internal contradictions and slippages. Similar questions can be asked about Yang’s identity as an “Australian-Chinese” or Sek-Lung’s status as “Chinese-Canadian.” Indeed, the category of “Chinese-Canadian” was not fully embraced until Canada’s official policy on multiculturalism became law and celebrating one’s ethnic culture while identifying as Canadian no longer clashed (see Ng (1999) for a discussion of the political development of this cultural category). So rather than ask, “What is this ‘Chinese’ in ‘Chinese-Canadian?’” we can be more strategic: “Which holds the greater authority to represent the other? The Chinese or the Canadian?” Radhakrishnan’s discussion with regards to the Indian diaspora in the West suggests unequal power relations need to be considered when dealing with issues of representation.

In the end, Radhakrishnan (2003) explains that both generations need to better understand and empathize with each other’s different histories and “starting points.” He questions the “parental wisdom” of the older generation and their privileged place for having spent time in the “home” country (India in his case). One generation’s version of India is no more real than another’s version as they are both inventions. This is his advice for different generations living in the diaspora: “The older generation cannot afford to invoke India in an authoritarian mode to resolve problems in the diaspora, and the younger generation would be ill-advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about ‘where they have come from’” (p. 123). Both sides need to appreciate each other’s unique patterns of experience and accept the existence of multiple versions of the same reality.

## **1.4 The History and Demographics of the Chinese in Canada**

Questions of cultural identity among the Chinese in Canada have become increasingly complex, making any claims about a homogeneous Chinese community within Canada problematic. Part of this complexity results from the long history of Chinese immigration to Canada, a history that Tan and Roy (1985) suggest can be divided into two distinct phases—pre- and post-World War II immigration. The pre-World War II Chinese immigrants, mainly from rural areas of Southern China, were labourers and overwhelmingly male, a fact which “reinforced the image of the Chinese as sojourners” (p. 20) who hoped to return home upon retirement. This image was sometimes used as justification for acts of discrimination such as few citizenship rights. Chinatowns were the social and economic centres for many of these early immigrants. Voluntary associations, for instance, would help them make the transition into the new country and protect them against anti-Chinese sentiment. They faced discriminatory immigration laws in the form of head taxes (1885-1923) and exclusionary acts (1923-1947). The Chinese Exclusion Act (1923) was particularly humiliating and delayed the growth of a second and third generation of Chinese in Canada (Li, 1998).

According to Tan and Roy (1985), the post-World War II Chinese immigrant, in contrast, often came from different parts of the Chinese diaspora (but mainly from Hong Kong), were better educated, were urban rather than rural dwellers, lived in areas outside of Chinatown forming communities in the suburbs, and received full citizenship rights. White Canadians responded to these post-war immigrants more favourably: the 1947 Chinese Immigration Act allowed family reunification and 1967 legislation introduced a point system which ended explicit discrimination against the Chinese putting them on equal footing with other immigrants. These changes in immigrant policy resulted in large numbers of Chinese immigrants, particularly after



1967, and would create a divided community with different politics and ideas about how the Chinese community should relate to the larger Canadian society. As a result, conflicts between the aging sojourner population, the native-born and educated Chinese, and the more recent Chinese immigrants were commonly visible during fights for control of key Chinese political and cultural organizations (Ng, 1999).

Although it may be convenient to divide the Chinese community into two groups—those with links to the sojourner generation and those arriving later—many differences existed between the Chinese within each period of immigration, particularly the latter, much larger, post-1967 one. For instance, this latter group had national origins from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Vietnam amongst others, but predominantly from the first two. And due to economic forces and political factors, immigration from Hong Kong to Canada would peak in 1995 but slowly decline. In contrast, immigration from Mainland China would gradually increase from the early 1990s, and by the early 2000s, immigrants from Mainland China accounted for the largest number of new immigrants to Canada from a single country (Li, 2003). Furthermore, changes to Canada's immigration selection system in the past two decades would create even more sub-ethnic differences as business immigrants and immigrants under the family class arrived with differing levels of human and economic capital (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006).

A look at the demographics of the Chinese in Canada reveal even greater heterogeneity—the 2006 Census of Canada reveals a large and diverse Chinese population. Chinese was the second largest visible minority in Canada in 2006 (second to South Asian) with over 1.2 million identified as Chinese. They accounted for 24% of the visible minority population and 3.9% of the total Canadian population. Although the Chinese have a long history in Canada, only 25.5%

are Canadian-born because of recent immigration growth (the Japanese have the largest proportion Canadian-born at 63.3%). Among the foreign-born Chinese, 18.4% arrived in Canada since 2001, while 45.2% came during the 1990s. Moreover, of the foreign-born Chinese, 52.9% were from the People's Republic of China, 24.4% from Hong Kong, 7.4% from Taiwan, and 5.7% from Vietnam (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Also according to the 2006 Census of Canada, the Chinese community in Canada is highly concentrated in Ontario and British Columbia. In fact, British Columbia's largest visible minority group was Chinese at 407,200—making up 40.4% of its visible minority population and comprising 10.0% of its total population in 2006. Similarly, Chinese was the largest visible minority group in the Vancouver metropolitan area (comprised of the cities of Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, Burnaby, Coquitlam and others) with 381,500 people representing 43.6% of the visible minority population and 18.2% of Vancouver's total population. This percent is the highest proportion of Chinese among all metropolitan areas in Canada; in contrast, 9.6% of Toronto's population was Chinese. In Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver, 43.6% of the population was Chinese—the highest proportion of Chinese in any municipality in Canada. Like the Chinese in all of Canada, almost three-quarters of the Chinese in Vancouver were born outside Canada. Most were born in the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Vietnam. Among the foreign-born Chinese residents, about one in five arrived in Canada between 2001 and 2006, while 45.8% came in the 1990s (Statistics Canada, 2008).

This context, consisting of both the unique history of the Chinese in Canada and their changing demographics, needs to be kept in mind throughout the study as many questions regarding cultural identity have their roots within this historical past. It should also be noted that this brief profile on the Chinese in Canada was presented using an immigration-based model

where Chinese Canadian heterogeneity implies different degrees of assimilation to mainstream society. Later chapters in this thesis will also consider diversity in terms of social, class, and gender differences and move beyond the ubiquity of the immigration model. (See Lisa Mar's (2009) book *Brokering Belonging* as an example of an alternative framework for looking at Chinese Canadian history.)

## **1.5 Overview and Organization of Thesis**

The three previous sections were intended to give a general sense of the kinds of questions that Chinese youth face when dealing with issues of cultural identity and to give a brief history of the Chinese in Canada. The rest of this introduction will outline the specific research questions that will be examined, give a justification for the study, and explain how the study will add to the existing body of literature on Chinese youth in Canada.

Chapter two is the Literature Review and argues for a cultural studies approach to Chinese youth identities in contrast to the abundant socio-psychological literature focused on stereotypes, acculturation, and race-relations. The chapter begins with a historical analysis of Chinese youth living in Vancouver. This analysis gives an important history of the beginnings of the cultural category "Chinese youth" and how this group played an important role within the Chinese community during struggles over community self-definition. The review continues with a discussion of both quantitative and qualitative research on contemporary Chinese youth in Canada. This research centres on issues of immigrant adjustment, race relations, schooling experiences, and model minority stereotyping. Then there is a brief survey of research on Asian American youth and minority youth cultures more generally. This literature review will make clear that more research is needed that critiques the discursively constituted nature of the

category “Chinese youth” rather than assume the category and use it to explain other social phenomena.

Chapters three and four comprise the Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the study. The study takes a multiperspectival approach and draws on theory and methods from a number of different fields in order to effectively examine how Chinese youth in Vancouver both actively negotiate their own identities and have identities discursively ascribed to them. Chapter three discusses the theoretical work of cultural studies thinkers Stuart Hall, Ien Ang, and Néstor García Canclini and their poststructuralist conceptions of cultural identity, Chineseness, and hybridity, respectively. The study also borrows from the work of queer theorists such as Patrick Johnson and José Esteban Muñoz and their writings on the performative dynamics of identity. All these theorists emphasize the contingent, open-ended, and fluid nature of identity. Chapter four gives a justification for why discourse analysis is the best methodology for this study. Moreover, it discusses how the cultural theory presented in chapter three can be combined with the methods of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory to form a coherent framework. This poststructuralist discourse theory will then be outlined together with how it can be applied to analyze discourses on Chinese youth identities within empirical texts. A preliminary analysis of the two “texts” used in this study—the novel *The Jade Peony* and a recent controversy on the campus of the University of British Columbia—will be done to demonstrate this method of data analysis.

Chapters five and six present the core research of this study where the two “texts” mentioned above will be analyzed for their representations of Chinese youth identifications in greater detail. Chapter five is an analysis of historically ascribed Chinese youth identities in Wayson Choy’s historical novel *The Jade Peony*, a story of young siblings growing up in

Vancouver's early Chinatown told from their own perspective. This analysis reveals the changing meaning of Chineseness for Chinese youth, a meaning that is dependent entirely on the context of discussion. Moreover, the intersections of gender and cultural identity will be discussed together with the issue of competing and antagonistic identity positions—all of which take place during the Second World War setting of the novel when racial tensions were at a peak. Chapter six is an analysis of a recent controversy that took place on the University of British Columbia campus between competing ethnic Chinese clubs and involving the release of offensive Internet video clips as part of an ad campaign to increase student membership. This controversy highlights some of the problems with the cultural category “Chinese” as a meaningful label of identification and suggests the usefulness of the concept of hybridity in order to counter the essentializing notions of identity, ethnicity, and diaspora.

Chapter seven discusses the implications of this study for antiracism education. This chapter makes a connection between the complexities of Chinese Canadian identity and debates in antiracism education by showing how antiracism must work with the ambivalence that comes from ruptures within Chinese communities. Incidents of conflict within Chinese communities show how minorities are capable of social oppression themselves. Thus antiracism can broaden the minority/majority or Chinese/White power paradigm and consider more productive notions of power in the Foucauldian sense.

The thesis concludes in chapter eight by first summarizing and reviewing the study's overall aims and discursive approach and then drawing together the principal points about the nature of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities. There is a discussion of how this study's rethinking of Chinese youth identities challenges certain societal “myths” such as what constitutes “the Canadian nation” or “the Canadian people.” This is then followed by addressing

a research question purposely left at the end of the study regarding “queerness” and the critique of “identity.” The thesis ends by giving some suggestions for further research and advice on classroom pedagogy.

## **1.6 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

This study examines the cultural identities of Chinese youth growing up in Vancouver using the methods of discourse analysis. The study aims to reveal the instability of such cultural categories as “Chinese,” explore how Chinese youth actively construct hybrid identity forms, and explain the implications for antiracism pedagogy of this rethinking of Chinese youth identities.

The key research questions of this study are as follows: What is the meaning of Chineseness for Vancouver’s Chinese youth and how does the meaning shift depending on the social and historical context? In what ways do political and historical events influence negotiations between one’s Chineseness, Canadianness and other markers of identity such as gender? Is the Chinese diasporic identity a meaningful category of identification? In what ways are Chinese youth identities hybridized identities? What are the implications for antiracism education of this rethinking of Chinese youth identities? Finally, in what ways do Vancouver’s Chinese youth demonstrate performative notions of identity and how can such performative acts critique “identity” itself and the conventions of the dominant culture? This last question will be addressed at the end of the study in the Conclusion chapter.

## **1.7 Rationale Statement**

There is a need for studies on Canada’s Chinese youth that goes beyond a mere debunking of popular Asian stereotypes and focuses on issues of youth agency and desire, intra-ethnic conflict, and gender and generational differences *within* Chinese communities. Takaki

(1994) argues that in the teaching of Asian American history there is the danger of reinforcing “stereotypes by failing to penetrate beyond the notions of the exotic and by leaving Asians still faceless and voiceless. Thus, ‘Orientals’ remain ‘Orientalized’” (para. 6). That is, a critique focused purely on racial stereotypes may fail to show Asian Americans as complex human beings: “In our examination of the nature of white racism, we have, in effect reproduced the very monocultural perspective we have been aiming to challenge” (para. 7).

Qualitative studies that do more than explode racial stereotypes would be timely in light of widely-read media articles that continue to reinforce stereotypes of Chinese youth as a “model minority” or “forever foreign.” For instance, an excerpt from Amy Chua’s (2011) memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* details why the parenting styles of Chinese parents are superior to those of Western parents and why their Chinese children grow up to be more academically successful. Moreover, a *Macleans* article originally entitled “Too Asian?” but later changed to “The Enrollment Controversy” on the magazine’s website is framed around the notion that an “Asian” school is one that is too academically focused and whose students sacrifice social interaction and athletics for good grades (Findlay & Kohler, 2010). These types of media articles describing Chinese youth as one-dimensional have a decades long history in North America. Consider the headlines of these articles from the *Montreal Gazette* and *Globe and Mail* respectively: “Asians Make ‘Average’ School Academic Giant” (Mathews, 1988) and “Kitchen Table the Key to Success” (Sheppard, 1992). The latter article describes Asians as math whizzes.

Chinese youth need to be represented as multi-layered individuals capable of making their own choices and asserting control as opposed to being constantly oppressed and victims of racial prejudice. Chan (1996) notes in her Asian American historiography that Asian American

historians privilege neither structural oppression nor human agency but maintain a dialectical balance between the two:

On the one hand, [Asian American historians] recognize that structures do limit the ability of individuals to act as subjects or agents in the making of their own history; on the other hand, they acknowledge that it is human action that creates those structures.

Agency and structure thus must both be described and analyzed. (p. 375)

This study takes such an approach, balancing both the constraining and productive elements in the analysis of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities.

## **1.8 Significance of Study**

Significant gaps exist in the literature on Chinese youth identities in Canada, and this study addresses these by adding to the literature in a number of ways. Firstly, this study takes a cultural studies approach and moves the discourse away from a focus on Anglo-Canadian racism, race relations, stereotypes, and assimilation—essentializing concepts which tend to reify the Chinese as the “exotic other”—and towards a critique of the category “Chinese” itself and the multiple ways that Chineseness is constructed.

Secondly, this study will be open to the multiple and hybrid possibilities of identity forms and expressions that Chinese youth create for themselves. Instead of limiting the study to a “caught between two cultures” or “finding one's roots” discourse, this study will consider how Chinese youth actively negotiate their cultural identities with other key markers of identity such as gender, generation, and place of origin. This study gives special attention to the processes of hybridization that occur at the borderzones where different cultures collide.

Lastly, there is a lack of research on Chinese youth in Canada generally, particularly when compared to the United States due to its establishment of Asian American studies as an



area of research and teaching. Although some research has been done with foreign-born Chinese immigrant youth, Canadian-born Chinese youth have been neglected within the literature. This study will add to the literature on this latter group.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

This introductory chapter began by illustrating the different ways in which Chineseness may be experienced by youth living in the West and how cultural identities can be analyzed for both their constraining and productive elements. For Asian youth living in diaspora, questions of cultural identity can often lead to questions of authenticity. But such questions are better engaged alongside notions of relationality and the politics of representation. Hyphenated categories such as “Chinese-Canadian,” for instance, need to be carefully parsed for their specific histories; and competing narratives over the development of such categories can become politically charged. Such political struggles were not uncommon within Canada’s Chinese community as the community experienced internal conflicts over how best to represent itself. The long history of Chinese immigration to Canada, moreover, created complexities within the community that made any claims of a homogeneous Chinese community problematic. With such a backdrop in mind, this thesis explores the unstable meaning of Chineseness for Chinese youth growing up in Vancouver and the implications for antiracism education of a rethinking of Chinese youth identities. This study is significant in the way it moves beyond a mere debunking of racial stereotypes towards a critique of the category of “Chinese” itself.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will show that qualitative research on the topic of Chinese youth identities in Canada is lacking and will argue for a cultural studies approach in contrast to the literature focused on stereotypes, race-relations, and quantitative socio-psychological work. The literature review begins with an important history of the development of local-born Chinese youth identities in Canada with particular attention to British Columbia and continues with a discussion of more contemporary Chinese youth identities. The review then gives a brief overview of the socio-psychological work on Canada's Chinese youth and discusses research related to the model minority stereotype. Finally, some related research done within the field of Asian American studies will be examined together with research on Asian youth cultures in both North America and Great Britain.

### **2.2 Early Conceptions of Canadian-Born Chinese Youth Identities**

In 1861, Won Alexander Cumyow became the first child born in British Columbia to parents from China and marked the beginning of many more local-born Chinese to come. But the growth of a second generation of Chinese would be slow. Timothy Stanley (2011) estimates that by 1921 there existed less than 2500 local-born Chinese in British Columbia of which less than 300 were over the age of thirteen (thus making most of them school age). Despite these small numbers, however, young locally born Chinese began to construct distinct cultural identities for themselves. One group of young Chinese men from Victoria formed a social club in 1914 called the Chinese Canadian Club—perhaps the first public usage of the term “Chinese Canadian.” Stanley (2011) details how this group led the fight against the Victoria School Board's decision to segregate students in 1922 along racial lines. The Board argued that

segregation would allow for more effective teaching of students who spoke little or no English. The Chinese Canadian Club would be joined by other locally born Chinese to argue, on the other hand, that integrated schooling would be more effective in teaching English and that segregation threatened assimilation.

This fight against school segregation by the local-born Chinese in Victoria challenged the common sense notions at the time of “Canadian” and “Chinese” as being two mutually incompatible racialized categories. The arguments against segregation by the local-born Chinese community demonstrated a high degree of English literacy and appealed to ideas of British justice and fair play and opposition to racial prejudice. Segregation denied self-defined Chinese Canadians the prospect of being Canadian since most of the students affected were Canadian-born and claimed citizenship rights. Yet these Chinese Canadians and their children straddled both Chinese and Canadian communities. Some were literate in both English and Chinese as many were sent to China for part of their schooling. This young group thus blurred distinctions between Chinese and Canadians and marked the emergence of a local-born Chinese Canadian identity. Despite a keen awareness of their subordinate position and limited prospects and job opportunities due to prejudice and restrictions from certain professions, the group nevertheless maintained a distinct North American outlook (Stanley, 2011).

Wing Chung Ng (1999) gives an account of another group of politically active Canadian-born Chinese. This group of youth and young adults consisted of those born in the 1920s or earlier. They would come of age during the Second World War and begin to assert a coherent identity distinct from their parents’ generation (the older immigrant settlers) and those of the newer immigrants who arrived following the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947. The federal government’s decision to induct five hundred local-born Chinese (half from British

Columbia) into the armed forces to fight in the last stages of the Pacific War played a key role in this new found identity. The government singled out the young Canadian-born Chinese from the rest of the Chinese population because of their exposure to Canadian culture through public education and mass media. Ng (1999) notes that although some resented being called up to fight for a country that denied them citizenship rights (they were denied the franchise and access to government employment and certain professions despite their birthright), others saw an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to Canada and demand full citizenship after the war. Indeed, the returning Chinese soldiers would organize themselves into the Army, Navy, and Air Force Veterans of Canada, Unit 280 (headquarters in Vancouver), to lobby the government for citizenship rights commensurate with those who bear full citizenship responsibilities. Roy (2007) explains how the war benefited Chinese Canadians by giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the country not just by volunteering to fight overseas but also by buying Victory Bonds and working in war industries. With public support on their side, the Chinese in British Columbia would win the franchise in provincial and federal elections in 1947 (the Chinese in Saskatchewan were enfranchised in 1944) and the municipal vote two years later.

Much like the youth a decade earlier, a younger generation of Canadian-born Chinese youth—those born during the 1930s and 1940s—began to assert themselves during the fifties (Ng, 1999). This time, however, there was no war to serve as a catalyst for identity construction. The rise of this segment of the Chinese population in Vancouver was evidenced by the numerous organizations that catered mainly to the needs of the local-born. The Chinese Varsity Club on the University of British Columbia campus was one such organization. It planned student activities for the Canadian-born, and membership grew from fifty in 1955 to almost two hundred ten years later. In Chinatown, Chinese Christian churches offered opportunities for youth

fellowship and boys scout teams. But the most popular recreational facilities were provided by the Pender Y. Ng (1999) explains how hundreds of mainly Chinese young people used the facilities and a large majority of these were English-speaking local-born youth. Other local-born youth societies such as the Chinese Bowling Club and the Chinese Athletic Club used the Pender Y as a site for meetings. These various organizations thus provided Canadian-born Chinese youth venues for social and recreational activities different from those of the older settlers and post-1947 new immigrant youth (predominantly from Hong Kong).

More importantly, however, these key organizations were crucial cultural spaces for the local-born Chinese since they enabled that critical mass needed to forge a coherent identity. Ng (1999) illustrates how a local-born Chinese youth identity in Vancouver emerged through their interactions with other Chinese subgroups:

The fact is that *tusheng* [local-born Chinese] identity did not develop in solitude; it evolved in full view of the older settlers and the new immigrants through interacting with their respective cultural assumptions and propositions. Their criticisms of one another, rejoinders, and counterattacks were landmarks in the cultural trajectory of *tusheng* identity. (p. 51)

The local-born (particularly the generation that came of age during the war), despite their need for autonomy, empathized with the older immigrants. A majority from both groups grew up in Chinatown, spoke the same Cantonese dialect, and even shared experiences of racial discrimination. The local-born rarely criticized them and their traditional ways in public, often serving as cultural brokers to bridge the gap between the Chinese and mainstream society. The older settlers, on the other hand, lamented their children's loss of Chinese culture but nevertheless expressed approval of their children's success and competence. The traditional

associations, for instance, set up scholarship awards in the early 1960s for the children of members who attended university (Ng, 1999).

### **2.3 Conflict Between Local-Born and New Immigrant Chinese Youth**

While the relationship with the older settlers could best be described as ambivalent, the relationship between the Canadian-born Chinese youth and the post-1947 new immigrant Chinese youth from Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s could best be described as less accommodating and sometimes conflictual. Ng (1999) recounts a particularly violent episode, and the first to draw considerable public attention to this internal conflict, which occurred in January 1954. A fight broke out in Chinatown between youth belonging to these two groups. What began as a verbal exchange and the hurling of snowballs escalated into an exchange involving weapons and, in the end, resulted in several arrests made by police. Ng's (1999) analysis of the Chinese newspaper coverage of the incident is revealing of the identity politics of the time and showed a clear divide within the ethnic Chinese population. The two Vancouver Chinese-language newspapers, the *Chinese Times* and the *Chinese Voice*, sided with the young immigrants and placed the blame on the Canadian-born youth. Editorials would be critical of the local-born's acculturation and lack of knowledge of the home country. The *Chinatown News* (an English-language newspaper considered to be the voice of the local-born Chinese published between 1953 and 1995), however, staunchly defended the local-born youth. While its assessment of the incident seemed balanced, placing equal blame on both groups for a lack of understanding of each other's cultural differences, the paper ultimately upheld the local-born's cultural agenda: "Since acculturation was inevitable and desirable for the Chinese, the cultural arrogance of the newcomers and their self-assured Chineseness were misguided" (Ng, 1999, p.

55). Although future altercations of this sort were not reported, the divide between these two groups would continue to grow well into the 1960s (Ng, 1999).

The *Chinatown News* was the site for another exchange between these two groups. By the end of the period of exclusion in 1947, Li (1998) observes that the male to female ratio in Canada was approximately four to one. This imbalance forced many male immigrants by the 1950s to return to Hong Kong in search of a suitable partner (Ng, 1999). The question was then raised in the newspaper whether or not Canadian-born Chinese girls could make good wives. According to Ng (1999), one immigrant youth response to this question was that Hong Kong girls were preferable because they were not ignorant of “their Chinese parentage” (p. 56) nor “prejudiced against their own kind” (p. 56) and Canadian-born Chinese girls knew only how to enjoy themselves, spend money, and put on make-up like White girls. Rebuttals from Canadian-born Chinese youth soon followed accusing the writer of “bigotry and bitterness” (p. 56). Ng (1999) astutely notes that “the gender aspect of the controversy is especially fascinating, for explicit references to gender roles and expectations in the unfolding debate on Chinese identity are relatively rare” (p. 56). A local-born female respondent, for instance, argued that Canadian-born Chinese are culturally different from the immigrants and are “entitled to have their own expectations of their future spouses” (p. 57). Not only does this woman shift the discourse on Chinese identity from “roots” to “routes,” but she exposes the genderized nature of identity discourse.

## **2.4 Vancouver’s Chinese Community from 1960-1980**

Ng’s historical account of several conflicts involving local-born and new immigrant Chinese youth frames a cross-section of Vancouver’s Chinese community using an immigrant generation narrative. However, there are other ways in which the community can be

conceptualized that does not risk splitting the community into two homogeneous groups (native and foreign born) and glossing over other important social distinctions such as class differences. An alternative way to look at Vancouver's Chinese community is through the lens of community activism, and Vancouver's Chinatown between the years 1960 and 1980 was a key arena for much community politics. By analyzing the political actions of the Chinese community during this period, the heterogeneity of the community becomes exposed as the voices of Chinese women, lower-class Chinese, and Chinese youth become heard as they fight against different forms of social oppression.

Jo-Anne Lee (2007) revisits one of the more notable stories of community-based activism within one of Vancouver's inner-city ethnic neighborhoods. In the 1960s and early 1970s, a group of Strathcona residents and their supporters successfully fought off plans by the city to demolish and redevelop the area, adjacent to Chinatown, in a struggle to defend their homes and way of life. Lee's analysis complicates the story of Strathcona and shows it was more than the stereotypical inner-city neighborhood characterized as homogeneous, bounded, culturally ghettoized, and segregated. More importantly, Lee's analysis identifies the unique activism of ethnic minority women. She highlights the often obscured importance of minority women's leadership in community mobilization against urban renewal. These women used culturally hybrid forms of mobilization such as banquets, ribbon cutting, and walking tours of the neighborhood as part of their political strategy. Lee's telling of the activities of these minority women in the community thus provides a counter-discourse to masculinist models of resistance.

The period from 1960 to 1980 brought many other challenges to Vancouver's Chinatown neighborhood that would galvanize the community. Hayne Y. Wai (1998) describes how meetings to discuss proposals to build freeways through Chinatown often attracted a large and



vocal opposition (including many of the same Strathcona residents who opposed redevelopment) that felt the freeways threatened the Chinatown neighborhood. Wai also describes the rejuvenation of the Chinatown-Strathcona community including the development of the Chinese Cultural Centre. Despite opposition from a small minority organization, the Chinese Cultural Centre was built and became a launch pad for many cultural activities to be shared with the larger Vancouver community. Both the freeway controversy and the building of the Chinese Cultural Centre illustrate the important role that Chinese youth played within the Chinese community as many participated in protests against the building of the freeway and volunteered for the Chinese Cultural Centre.

Ng (1999) describes a small group of about seventy undergraduate students at UBC belonging to a new generation of Canadian-born Chinese youth. They were part of a growing youth culture coming out of the 1960s in North America that was “critical of traditional authorities and ready to experiment with new ideas” (p. 118). This group, borrowing ideas from the Asian American movement down south, condemned cultural assimilation and re-embraced their ethnic background. As mentioned, these young activists participated in public protests against building a freeway through Chinatown and enthusiastically joined the Chinese Cultural Centre as volunteers that gave them a feeling of camaraderie and community. Furthermore, they looked to express their cultural identity in other more creative ways such as writers’ workshops, poetry, photography, and tabloids.

One important medium for these youth was a radio program called *Pender Guy* (the word “street” in Cantonese is pronounced “guy”) that explored issues of identity and culture. It grew out of a youth conference at UBC and aired from 1976 to 1981 and reflected an emerging identity amongst the Canadian-born Chinese: “Instead of nourishing a transplanted and

unfamiliar culture from China, this younger generation sensed that a Chinese-Canadian consciousness must be rooted in Canada and must be derived from local experience” (Ng, 1999, p. 119). In other words, their perspective was neither Chinese nor Canadian, but something unique unto themselves. Many other cultural works were produced by this young local-born generation that gave specific meaning to a Chinese-Canadian identity. For instance, two historical documentaries produced by the *Pender Guy* in 1977, *The War Years* and *The Chinese Canadian Laundry-Worker* presented photographs of old Chinese settlements along the Fraser River and interviews with elderly residents: “By tracing and reaffirming the historical roots of the Chinese in Canada, these efforts empowered the *tusheng* [Canadian-born], who now rejected outsiders’ representations and aspired to narrate their own past” (Ng, 1999, p. 119).

Chan (1983) describes how Chinese youth participated in an important political protest that would bring together Chinese Canadians from across the country. In 1979, the CTV public affairs program *W-5* showed a film entitled *Campus Giveaway* that accused the “foreign” Chinese of taking seats away from “real” Canadians in higher education. Not only did the show make statistical errors, it homogenized all Chinese and counted Canadian citizens of Chinese descent as part of the “foreign” student population. The young local-born in Vancouver would form a protest committee as part of a larger protest by Chinese in Toronto against the station. The following year CTV would give a full apology, and *Pender Guy*’s coverage of the protests won the Annual Media Human Rights Award for radio.

## **2.5 Contemporary Chinese Youth Identities in Vancouver**

The identities of today’s Canadian-born Chinese youth, many the children or grandchildren of post-1967 immigration, will not likely have the historical roots in the older Chinese settlements in Canada like the third or earlier generation of local-born youth. Their

parents, if not themselves local-born, were likely part of a wave of Chinese immigration originating, not just from poor rural areas of Southern China like in generations past, but from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and increasingly Mainland China. If the parents themselves were local-born, the children may be part of a growing (but still relatively small) third or fourth generation of Chinese in Canada with roots to the older Chinese settlers. (Note also the possibility of one parent being local-born and another foreign-born or parents with different countries of origin.) The point is that the complexities are innumerable and there are a myriad of ways in which the local-born can identify their roots that go beyond China, Canada, or Chinese-Canadian making generalizations about the heritage or cultural identity of today's local-born Chinese youth in Vancouver difficult.

The articulations of Chinese identity amongst today's local-born Chinese youth may indeed be unique to the individual. Rather than a search for common roots, identity is best conceptualized as a production—something that is as much about the future as the past (Hall, 1996b). Expressions of cultural identity for today's Canadian-born Chinese may therefore be less about capturing the history of the Chinese-Canadian laundry worker and more about a possible future identity expressed imaginatively in a myriad of ways through art, film, writing, or popular music. Yet the recent release of important histories, stories, and films about the past demonstrate the continual importance of Chinese-Canadian history in shaping the sense of belonging and identity for today's Chinese in Canada (consider Rebeca Lau's *Mami*; Chad Reimer's *Chilliwack's Chinatowns, A History*; Larry Wong's *Dim Sum Stories*; Timothy Stanley's *Contesting White Supremacy*; and Diana Leung's film *Cedar and Bamboo* all released in 2011).

Similarly, new Chinese immigrant youth to Canada over the past three decades are much more diverse than in times past when they came mainly from Hong Kong. Today, their families differ widely in terms of countries of origin, languages spoken, pre-migration experiences, and socioeconomic class. Families from Taiwan, Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Southeast Asia have their own distinct language, culture and politics and often form communities separate from each other. Their large numbers have had an impact locally, establishing numerous businesses, restaurants, religious groups, and charities—entire malls are devoted to selling only Chinese products. New Chinese newspapers were established: *Sing Tao* (1983) and *Ming Po* (1993) for Hong Kong immigrants and the *World Journal* (1991) for Taiwan immigrants, replacing the historical *Chinese Times* and *Chinatown New*, both closing down in the early 1990s (Wai, 1998).

Global forces also shape this population and a rise in transnational practices and consciousness is what distinguishes many of these recent Chinese immigrants. Ong (1998), for instance, has written about “flexible citizenship” and “astronaut parents.” These terms are associated with Hong Kong businessmen who spend much of their time travelling while their wife and children live in countries like the United States, Australia, Britain, or Canada. Moreover, Katharyne Mitchell (1996) examines the anger toward Hong Kong Chinese investors and immigrants by Vancouver residents, particularly in the purchase of “monster” houses. Mitchell details how an acculturation program called “Meet with Success” in Hong Kong educated middle-class emigrants to Vancouver about Canada. Such a “manipulation of Orientalist codings” (p. 252) helped wealthy Hong Kong Chinese businesspeople strategically position themselves to “reduce cultural frictions caused by Chinese immigrants of other class fragments, who may not share the same degree of cultural capital” (p. 252) and allow foreign investment in real estate to proceed more smoothly. Mitchell’s analysis based on class

differences contrasts with media discourses at the time that depict the “Hong Kong Chinese” as a homogeneous group. Furthermore, her discussion gives an alternative narrative to the previously discussed conflicts between acculturated native-born Chinese and new immigrant Chinese who are criticized for showing a lack of genuine commitment to their new country. Her analysis of transnational identities points to limitations to the immigrant assimilation model in the way it can homogenize large immigrant groups such as the “Hong Kong Chinese.”

## **2.6 Acculturation and Adaptation of New Immigrant Chinese Youth in Canada**

There exists a paucity of contemporary research on Chinese youth identities in Canada generally. Publications in the early 1990s were largely a response to the influx of immigrant Chinese youth at that time. Due to a growing public concern regarding the increase in Asian youth gangs, for instance, Lee (1992) examined their causes and the intervention strategies required for the prevention of the formation of new youth gangs. Joe and Robinson (1980) conducted an earlier study on Chinese youth gangs in Vancouver’s Chinatown. Other research aimed to help social workers and educators better understand the relationship between Chinese immigrant parents and their teenage children and the difficult transitions and cultural conflicts they face (Jim & Suen, 1990).

But typical research on Chinese youth in Canada over the past twenty years has been socio-psychological, concerned with the acculturation and adaptation of new immigrants to Canadian society, and quantitative in nature. Wong (1999) shows that an adherence to Chinese culture relates to lower delinquency in a sample of Chinese-Canadian youth compared to North American acculturation. Crane, Ngai, Larson, and Hafen Jr. (2005) show how differences in acculturation between parent and child relate to adolescent depression and delinquency amongst Chinese adolescents in North America. In a comparison between Canadian-born and foreign-

born Chinese adolescents, Lay and Verkuyten (1999) show how ethnic identification is related to personal self-esteem. And the multiple ways of ethnic identity negotiation of “satellite children” are examined by Tsang, Irving, Alaggia, Chau and Benjamin (2003). Other quantitative work of note examines the ethnic identity, national identity, acculturation, and socioeconomic outcomes of “second generation” immigrants within Canada’s multicultural framework, although none refer to Chinese youth specifically (Tonks, 1999; Lee & Hébert, 2006; Walters, Phythian & Anisef, 2007; Sykes, 2008).

Qualitative research on Chinese youth in Canada is limited. But the majority of research that does exist is on new immigrants and of an educational nature. Thomas and Willinsky (1997) conducted surveys of high school students from several Pacific region countries on the racial and ethnic tensions present at their school. The eleven Canadian students surveyed were from two British Columbia secondary schools with large immigrant Chinese populations from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The comments from the students hint at some of the same tensions discussed above between Chinese subgroups. Discrimination was less race-based and more based on immigrant status and English language proficiency:

When discussing ethnicity, the students distinguished between Canadian-born students of Chinese ancestry who spoke fluent English and recent immigrants from Chinese-speaking countries: “There is a distance between native born Canadians and immigrants....Even having the same ethnic background does not encourage contact. As a ‘Chinese-Canadian’ myself I still find it difficult to communicate.” (p. 367)

New Chinese immigrant youth face other adjustment issues within Canadian high schools. Diane Minichiello (2001) has pointed out some of the negative learning consequences associated with having a large concentration of foreign-born Chinese in one school. She interviewed

twenty-three Chinese-speaking and foreign-born students from a Vancouver high school with a large Chinese-speaking population. She describes how these students can often replicate their home environment and maintain their home culture and language within the school. Adaptation to Canadian culture (by speaking English for instance) was often discouraged, not only by the presence of other Chinese-speaking peers, but by a Canadian policy which encourages ethnic diversity and retention. Being a visible minority can create other unintended effects. In an interview study, Li (2001) explores the expectations of immigrant Chinese parents for their children. While these expectations were grounded in Chinese tradition, their acculturative attitudes and visible minority status sometimes shaped their expectations by advising their children to enter science-related fields where they felt they would have better success compared to the humanities which required English-language fluency.

## **2.7 Chinese Canadian Youth, Schooling, and the Model Minority Stereotype**

Other qualitative studies on immigrant Chinese youth in Canada critique the notion of Asians as a “model minority.” This term originated in the United States and is often used to stereotype Asian youth. Model minority discourse is based on the false image of Asian Americans as academically and economically successful (ostensibly due to the adherence to Confucian cultural values) compared to other minorities such African Americans and Latinos as shown by higher reported test scores in mathematics and SATs, and higher high school GPA (Sue & Okazaki, 1991). One of the problems with this stereotype (other than its questionable validity), as with many stereotypes, is the way in which it essentializes all Asians as overachieving and successful. It neither recognizes the challenges and difficulties that many Asian students face, particularly those who are underachieving or have low socioeconomic class,

nor addresses the vast differences that exist between and within Asian subgroups. (A more incisive critique of the model minority stereotype will be given in chapter seven.)

Several qualitative studies in Canada on immigrant Chinese youth have evidenced these problems. Xu, Connelly, He, and Phillion (2007) creatively use a narrative inquiry approach to explore a Chinese immigrant student's experience of schooling in Toronto. Written in the form of a story, their paper describes in rich detail specific days in the life of Yang Yang, a grade seven student, and his family who recently emigrated from Fujian. Their approach gives several revelations that quantitative studies would overlook. Firstly, exploring Yang Yang's schooling experiences within the context of his entire life gives greater understanding into his difficulties in school compared to just focusing on a narrow set of variables—school should be seen not in isolation but as an extension of the home. Secondly, Yang Yang's experience is not representative of all Chinese. As Fujian immigrants, his family is in contrast to the often written about Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese immigrants who have tended to be middle class and professional. Indeed, their "'kind' of Chinese" (p. 415) is often discriminated against because of their differences in language (Fujian dialect is quite distinct from Cantonese and Mandarin), low educational attainment, rural origins, and, sometimes, illegal means of entering the country. This paper shows that differences within the Chinese ethnic group not only exist between local-born and foreign-born, but also within the foreign-born subgroup. This leads to the third and final point. The model minority myth conspires against a struggling student like Yang Yang by overshadowing his difficulties. He therefore does not receive the required resources and programs that would help him succeed.

G. Li (2005) and Chau (1996) further demonstrate the negative effects of the model minority stereotype and how it can mask problems for Chinese-Canadians within the school



system. G. Li (2005) uses the case study of an academically struggling Chinese student (much like Yang Yang) living under the shadow of other students' success to demonstrate that the model minority stereotype can contribute to underachievement and enhance school's "blaming the victims" (p. 69) approach towards underachievement. The latter study is a master's thesis and is a rare example of a study with Canadian-born Chinese interview participants (six out of the ten participants) that also touches on issues of identity. Chau (1996) categorizes her participants into four groups according to how they identify: Chinese, Canadian, integrated Chinese-Canadian, and personally isolated (that is, neither Chinese nor Canadian). She argues that these various identifications are used as coping strategies to deal with negative schooling experiences such as discrimination in the form of stereotypes. Some students, for instance, vehemently embraced a Canadian identity in order to minimize the negative consequences that come with being a visible minority. These qualitative papers ultimately call for greater attention to be paid to the individual lived experiences of student learners, something the model minority stereotype overlooks.

## **2.8 Asian American Studies and Chinese Youth Identities**

Although parallels can be made between the experiences of the Chinese in Canada and the Chinese in America, there are crucial differences and the Canadian context should not be equated to the more thoroughly researched Chinese experience in the United States. W.C. Ng (1999) notes that while patterns of Chinese immigration to the two countries were similar, anti-Chinese legislation in the US never reached the same degree of exclusion as in Canada. Continual immigration to the US through the "paper son" phenomena (which also existed in Canada but to a lesser degree) eased the type of generational distinctions we saw in Vancouver and allowed a distinct American-born Chinese cohort to emerge earlier than their Canadian

counterparts. In addition to these differences in Chinese population mix between the two countries there are crucial differences in political history. Consider the implementation of multiculturalism into federal policy in Canada, the civil rights movement in the US, and the galvanization of ethnic groups to form a more cohesive Asian American coalition. These differences in political climate create differences in the way researchers approach and participants respond to questions of cultural identity, schooling, and culture between the two countries. With these caveats in mind, a brief survey of research on Chinese youth in the US may point to research in Canada which is lacking and also give a sense of where this study on Vancouver's Chinese youth sits within the broader North American context.

Like Canada, there is much quantitative socio-psychological work related to race relations, assimilation, and ethnic retention compared to the number of qualitative studies. And many studies typically do not focus primarily on the Chinese, but are also written in relation to the Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and South-East Asian communities—the Asian American community—as a whole. Despite this, many excellent ethnographies and interview studies exist that can give insight into the identities and lived experiences of contemporary Chinese youth in North America. In her book *Unraveling the “Model Minority Stereotype”: Listening to Asian American Youth*, Stacey J. Lee (1996) conducted an ethnography of a high-achieving American high school and collected youth views on identity, race-relations, and stereotypes. She found that the Asian American students there were a very heterogeneous group and reacted differently to the common Asian stereotype which, while on the surface seems harmless, can in fact be harmful. Many other studies also touch on model minority stereotyping and unpack the complexities of the Asian American student experience (S. J. Lee, 2006; J.C. Ng, S.S. Lee & Pak, 2007; Chou & Feagin, 2008; G. Li & Wang, 2008).

Other qualitative studies focus on what it is like growing up as a “second-generation” Asian in America and the experiences of dealing with racism, stereotypes, growing up between two cultures, and the pressures to perform academically (V. Louie, 2004; Kibria, 2002; Tuan, 1998). One study in particular, Andrea Louie’s (2004) ethnography *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*, is a fascinating exploration of Chinese identity and notions of Chineseness and rootedness across borders. Her study focuses on a program called “In Search of Roots” that takes young Chinese Americans of Cantonese descent to visit their ancestral villages in China’s Guangdong province. The multisited perspective of her research exposes the diverse meanings of Chineseness:

Chineseness can be a national/racial discourse on a scale that is transnational in scope (such as orientalist views of China, or Chinese state discourses of overseas Chinese). It can be part of Western media constructions of capitalist networks or discourses on human rights. In a U.S. context, Chineseness can be framed both as a form of multiculturalism tied to definitions of U.S. cultural citizenship, and as a form of empowered identity within Chinese American activism. Chineseness can become a set of reified, essentialized values and traditions within a Chinese American folk culture concerned with the problem of “passing down” traditions and culture. It can also take on meanings as a sense of family and community in the construction of family histories and Chinese American networks, such as in the experiences of the In Search of Roots group. Finally, particular forms of Chineseness can be used to define Guangdong Chinese in relation to Chinese from other areas of China and abroad. (p. 191)

Louie shows how diasporic Chinese identities can be constrained by a Sinocentric worldview on the one hand but can be equally responsive to transnational forces as they are manifested locally on the other.

## **2.9 Contemporary Chinese Youth Cultures in the West**

The majority of research discussed so far in this literature review has centred on issues of racism, ethnic identity, and assimilation. But it is worthwhile to review some studies within the context of the emerging literature on youth cultural forms and to see where Chinese youth fit within it. Going back as far as a century, the study of youth culture in the West has been greatly influenced by both the Chicago School and the Birmingham School. The Chicago School tended to focus on the causes of youth-related problems such as delinquency. The Birmingham School, however, began to pay more attention to the overall richness of the youth experience and the role of class and hegemony in shaping those experiences (Hall & Jefferson, 2006). In recent decades, research on youth cultures in the West has moved beyond a narrow focus on deviant behaviour or class structures and emphasized the diversity of youth cultures (see books such as *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* edited by Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff (1995), *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* edited by Jonathon S. Epstein (1998), *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* edited by Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (1998), or *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* edited by Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (1998)).

More recent studies analyze the intersections of the traditional categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality with youth but also consider the impact of geography, globalization, technology, and popular culture. Youth are viewed as active and creative producers of new cultural expressions, identities and subcultures often in the form of fashion, music, and dance,

occupying a space of “in-betweeness.” Such studies include *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place* by Andy Bennett (2000); *Race, Place and Globalization: Youth Cultures in a Changing World* by Anoop Nayak (2003); *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia* edited by Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (2003); *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World* by Rupa Huq (2006); *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes* edited by Paul Hodkinson and Wolfgang Deicke (2007); and *Queer Youth Cultures* edited by Susan Driver (2008).

There are also studies that focus on specific ethnic minority youth growing up in the West such as Blacks in Britain (*The Art of Being Black: The Creation of Black British Youth Identities* by Claire E. Alexander (1996)), Blacks in America (*The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* by Bakari Kitwana (2002)), or South Asians in America (*Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* by Sunaina Maira (2002)). There is a notable absence, however, of significant research on Asian youth cultures in the West, specifically Chinese youth cultures. Three notable exceptions are *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* edited by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2004c), *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* by Xiaoping Li (2007), and *Through Different Eyes: The Cultural Identities of Young Chinese People in Britain* by David Parker (1995). The first two books will be discussed next and Parker’s work in the next section.

J. Lee and Zhou’s (2004c) book contains essays on emerging Asian American youth cultural forms and practices such as import car racing, the 1990s obsession with cyber cafes, the DJ scene in Filipinotown in LA, and Vietnamese youth gangs in Little Saigon. The book also contains essays that touch on issues of space and identity such as Rebecca Kim’s essay “Made in the USA: Second-Generation Korean American Campus Evangelicals” or Mark Ng’s essay

“Searching for Home: Voices of Gay Asian American Youth.” J. Lee and Zhou (2004a) argue that Asian American youth and youth culture be framed within the dual processes of international migration and American racialization. These processes—which concern issues of immigration, racial exclusion, racial stereotyping, invisibility, and globalization and transnationalism—create opportunities and constraints for the production of cultural forms unique to the Asian American youth experience.

Xiaoping Li’s (2007) book provides a sketch of Asian Canadian cultural activism through twenty interviews with Asian artists and cultural producers such as Aiko Suzuki, Sean Gunn, Kyo Maclear, and Mina Shum. The study gives a history of the creativity of the Asian Canadian community over the past three decades. This community consisted of scholars, university students, self-made or professionally trained artists, and community activists of mainly Chinese and Japanese background. While diverse, this community shared a collective trajectory:

Upon recognizing the existence of inequalities, and upon recognizing culture’s controlling and liberating power, many resorted to their creative agency in order to carve out a terrain in which a discursive battle could be waged. In assuming, either consciously or unconsciously, the role of social activists, these individuals and groups have reaffirmed culture as a vehicle of social change. Their articulations have had social implications: consciousness has been raised; communities have been formed and mobilized; and a vigorous Asian Canadian cultural production has gradually come into being. (p. 2)

Li’s attempt to define an emerging “Asian Canadian culture” is an important step towards filling a significant gap in the scholarly research on Asian Canadian cultural and political endeavours. While both *Voices Rising* and Lee and Zhou’s work open up a space for a discussion on Asian

Canadian and Asian American youth culture respectively, neither deals with the possibility of a specific Chinese youth culture. In the following section, David Parker attempts to do so for Chinese youth living in Britain.

## **2.10 British Chinese Youth Identities**

David Parker (1995) conducted life story interviews with young British-raised and educated Chinese. He explores a wide-range of identities particularly those that are neither wholly British or Chinese (Parker himself is of mixed-race). He writes just prior to an important period in British history—the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997—and recognizes the importance that historical context plays in the identity formation of his youth participants, and how relations of power between China, Britain, and Hong Kong are connected to cultural representations and identity formation. He notes “how histories of cultural forms of racism, the legacies of stereotyping and modes of visualization at times interact powerfully with economic conditions to limit the social mobility and range of identifications available” (p. 241). But while his study is mindful of the historical and global context, it is also grounded in the local and explores identities in terms of personal and familial narratives and everyday social relations.

Parker’s (1995) interviews resulted in a range of identifications that he organizes into five categories. While each are of note, I will only discuss one category in detail and that is the guarded Chinese identity exhibited in private or Chinese-only contexts. This “defensive strategy” acts as a form of protection from racism and discrimination that young people face, often in the catering trade. The wide dispersal of the catering trade makes it difficult for Chinese young people to collectively resist racial discrimination and it is often accepted as a part of growing up in England. This “defensive strategy” results in a “segmented identity” where certain aspects of identity are practiced in the public sphere and others are practiced in the

private sphere with little interpenetration of elements. For instance, the appropriation and consumption of Hong Kong popular culture by Chinese youth in Britain is practiced privately. This example is used by Parker to demonstrate the limitations of the term hybridity: “Cultural identities do not always interpenetrate, even in the ‘global postmodern.’ They may be held apart as a necessary defense, to safeguard a sense of subjectivity and integrity” (p. 233). The remaining four identity categories can be characterized in varying degrees as hybrid, multiple, and fragmented.

Despite the diversity of cultural identities that Parker (1995) has encountered, he argues “it is premature to describe forms of Chinese identity in Britain as ‘cultures of hybridity’” (p. 239). For many of the young people he interviewed, Chinese and British identities remain separate. This is in contrast to black or South Asian youth who are more vocal about asserting both a black or South Asian and British identity. There does not seem to exist a collective consciousness among young Chinese people in Britain to establish a unique Chinese identity or culture grounded in British circumstances. Instead, many see themselves as Chinese who happen to be living in Britain—“a clear distinction is drawn between formal citizenship and subjective sense of identity” (p. 239). Over half of his participants plan on leaving Britain.

There have been some signs, however, of Chinese youth creatively negotiating a relationship with British identity. In a follow-up essay “Rethinking British Chinese Identities,” Parker (1998) suggests that it is unproductive to look for British Chinese identities as a “British-based cultural hybridity” (p. 73). Instead, many young British born Chinese people (BBCs) have created a self-definition for themselves outside of Britain upon their “return” to Hong Kong or other overseas Chinese communities. This newfound sense of identity combines the cultural capital many BBCs have in the form of Chinese language oral skills, local family ties, and a



British education and passport together with the excitement and opportunity of a burgeoning Asia. Not only do these youth escape a stagnant and often racist British labour market, a return to Hong Kong connects BBCs from different neighborhoods with each other; Chinese youth from London, Manchester, Hull, or Birmingham who would never meet each other in Britain would meet for the first time at a social club in Hong Kong. “Being Chinese” for young British Chinese has expanded further to include connections with other Chinese from the diaspora—those who grew up in North America, Australia, or New Zealand for instance. But Parker makes clear that these BBCs never fully belong to Hong Kong either. Many subsequently migrate to Canada or the United States where other large Chinese communities reside; their identifications can best be described as non-national, mobile, and uncertain.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

Historical works on the Chinese in Canada give important insights into the active construction of different, and often competing, Chinese youth identities within the community. Such struggles for self-definition highlight the continuing complexities of Chinese identity with each new wave of immigration and raise familiar questions about the meaning of being Chinese—both for whom and against whom. Explorations of sub-ethnic contestations avoid essentializing Chinese and also give insights into identity formation that are often missed when only interactions between minority and majority or dominant and non-dominant groups are examined.

While there is a growing literature on Asian youth cultures in the United States and Britain, the literature on Asian youth, and Chinese youth in particular, in Canada is still small and consists primarily of quantitative socio-psychological work or the qualitative work on stereotypes, race relations, and acculturation into Canadian society. Many of these studies take

for granted the category of “Chinese” and make essentializing assumptions about Chineseness. This study adds to the literature on Chinese youth in Canada by being critical of the category “Chinese” itself while exploring the fluid nature of identities and the multiple and hybrid possibilities of identity forms. Furthermore, the majority of research is on new immigrant youth. This study adds to the little that is already written about the identities of the Canadian-born.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This study draws upon the theoretical work of many cultural studies thinkers and their poststructuralist approaches to cultural identity. One of the most important thinkers cited in this study is Stuart Hall. He argues that cultural identities are contingent and continually unfolding rather than pure or permanent—as much about the future as they are about the past. Similarly, Ien Ang is critical of trying to understand the identities of diasporic Chinese in terms of point of origin rather than those new identifications and hybridizations that result from local interactions at the point of destination. Néstor García Canclini also writes about hybridity. He points out that while hybridity allows a departure from essentialism, it is not an innocent term. This study finally borrows from the work of queer theorists such as Patrick Johnson and José Esteban Muñoz and their writings on the performative dynamics of identity.

### **3.2 Cultural Identity as Contingent and Strategic**

It was pointed out in chapter one by some poststructuralist thinkers that identities are not fixed, secure and complete, but rather multiply constructed and constantly in the process of change and transformation. They are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power (Hall, 1990). So what can be said of key concepts that serve as essential markers of identity such as “ethnicity” or “Chinese”? Can they still be used? According to Hall (1996b),

The deconstructive approach puts key concepts “under erasure.” This indicates that they are no longer serviceable—“good to think with”—in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them—albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms.

(p. 1)

Such “language games” are necessary in order to be understood at all. Thus a category such as “Chinese” used in this study is to be understood from the subverted side of the term; it is not an end but a contingency—meaning continues to unfold. Chinese serves as a starting point in anticipation of something more. “Chinese youth” in the title of this study does suggest something pre-determined by history, but also something that has yet to be explored.

But even though identity categories may “no longer be serviceable” in the usual way, they do mean something. The strategic and arbitrary closure of identities is of particular importance in the political arena:

All the social movements which have tried to transform society and have required the constitution of new subjectivities, have had to accept the necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity, of the arbitrary closure which is not the end, but which makes both politics and identity possible. (Hall, 1993, p. 137)

The idea of the necessity and impossibility of identities (Hall, 1996b) inspires Ang (2000) to write in her essay “Identity Blues” that no matter how convinced we are theoretically that identities are constructed and somehow not “real,” identities remain deeply felt on the level of everyday experience: “While we may have discarded ‘identity’ in theory, we cannot do away with cultural identities as real, social and symbolic forces in history and politics” (p. 2).

Moreover, she sees this “double bind” as an urgent call to action, an opportunity to construct our futures: “If we cannot do without identities, so the reasoning seems to go, then we’d better make sure that they are vehicles for progressive change!” (p. 2). This call for action can also be felt in the following paragraph from Hall (1996b):

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from,” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (p. 4)

For Hall, then, cultural identity is a “production”—a strategic positioning—which is never complete.

### **3.3 Rethinking Ethnicity**

Like identity, ethnicity is often imagined as if it were natural, pure, and permanent. But as a form of identity, it too is unstable and untenable. Without careful scrutiny there is the risk of essentializing entire populations. Hence, Sollors (1989) does not see ethnicity as a category that explains other phenomena, but sees it as something that needs to be understood and explained in itself. Through the metaphor of “invention” he opens up an alternative understanding of the ethnic phenomenon as historical and dynamic in context, the result of psychological, social, and cultural forces:

It is not any a priori cultural *difference* that makes ethnicity. “The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China.” This the Chinese immigrant [to America] Lee Chew asserts [in 1906] . . . One can hardly explain the prevalence of Chinese-American laundries by going back to Chinese history proper. It is always the specificity of power relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act itself. (p. xvi)

Thus, the notion of invention is meant to “suggest widely shared, though intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented” (p. xi). Although this view may make ethnicity appear less real, it does not mean that ethnic consciousness is weak. Parallel to the discussion of cultural identity, ethnicity seems theoretically impossible, yet it feels real and is politically necessary. Notions of assumed blood ties, race, language, religion, and custom—“primordial ties”—remain powerful forces capable of making and unmaking nations (Geertz, 1996). Nevertheless, it is one of those concepts “under erasure.” We must acknowledge and describe concrete ethnic differences on the one hand without necessarily reifying the concept of ethnicity on the other.

Hall (1996c) also believes there needs to be a contestation around the term ethnicity. He argues that the essentialist notion of ethnicity, often evoked in discussions involving multiculturalism, has been “deployed, in the discourse of racism, as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression” and the term needs to be “dis-articulated from its position in the discourse of ‘multi-culturalism’” (p. 446). Like Sollors, Hall (1996c) treats ethnicity as a term that needs to be explained and understood rather than assumed. He makes a distinction between the old ways of thinking about ethnicity (English ethnicity being the prime example) as being connected to notions of race, empire, and the nation and the conception of “New Ethnicities,” which carries a more diverse meaning no longer purely associated with the nation-state. This new way of thinking about “ethnicity of the margins” (p. 447) recognizes that we all speak out of a particular history, experience, and culture. We are all thus ethnically located, and this non-essentialized, non-coercive conception of ethnicity opens up a fresh space which allows “ethnics” to see themselves, not as possessors of exotic crafts, languages, dresses, and cuisines frozen in time, but as possessors of identities which look into the future, cross boundaries and

frontiers, and allow for hybridization. Thus both Sollars and Hall suggest that the ethnic notion of Chineseness does not necessarily have any connection with the nation China but needs to be scrutinized under its own specific historical and cultural context.

### **3.4 Chineseness, Multiplicity, and the Diasporan**

The above discussion has suggested the necessity of such categories as “Chinese,” although the term may be contested. And in a study of Chinese youth the fact of their Chineseness seems inescapable. A problem arises, however, when we ask in what way, say, a third-generation Chinese youth born in Canada, who has “lost” all of his or her cultural heritage including language and with no knowledge or emotional attachment to China, be classified as Chinese? In a chapter entitled “Can One Say No to Chineseness?” Ien Ang (2001) suggests that in discussions of the Chinese diaspora there is a tendency to study identity along the vertical axis where point of origin takes precedence over the new local interactions rather than along a lateral axis in which diasporic identities are produced through creolization and hybridization. For the immigrant generation, it makes sense to study identity along the vertical axis as many in that generation still possess the linguistic and cultural capital typically associated with an authentic Chineseness. But what of people like William Yang, the third-generation “Australian-Chinese,” whom we discussed in the Introduction? Yang, like many Chinese in the West, has only a tenuous and imaginative relationship with China, if any at all. Ang (herself a *peranakan* from Indonesia who still instinctively identifies herself as Chinese) suggests that to attempt to understand his Chineseness would be missing the point altogether.

Note first that Yang’s identification as Chinese occurred during a racial interaction with a boy different from himself. Yang’s identity was relationally and externally defined by a dominant group based on his physical characteristics. And his brother hammers the point home:

“You’d better get used to it.” Ironically, later in his autobiography, Yang would describe his experience of visiting China for the first time through the fiction of race: “The experience is very powerful and specific, it has to do with land, with standing on the soil of the ancestors and feeling the blood of China run through your veins” (as cited in Ang, 2001, p. 49). Ang (2001) argues, however, that to connect Chineseness with blood and race means to surrender one’s agency:

The fiction of racial belonging would imply a reductionist interpellation (in the Althusserian sense of the term) which constructs the subject as passively and lineally (pre)determined by “blood,” not as an active historical agent whose subjectivity is ongoingly shaped through his/her engagements within multiple, complex and contradictory social relations which are over-determined by political, economic and cultural circumstances in highly particular spatio-temporal contexts. (p. 49)

Ang (2001) believes it possible and necessary to break out of this “prison of Chineseness” and to embrace an identity that is more than just Chinese. For instance, William Yang’s identification with Western gay culture is entangled with, but distinct from, his ethnicity. He is often celebrated for photographs of friends suffering from AIDS. In this case, there is no meaningful advantage to a Chinese identification. Therefore, it is not enough to consider just differences between national cultures and diasporas, but to recognize the multiplicity of other differences that locate people such as gender, sexuality, and class, and, moreover, that these differences are dislocating in relation to one another (Hall, 1996c).

Problems can arise when one’s visible Chineseness is privileged over all other identity positions. For ethnographers, a narrow focus on the “fact” of someone’s Chineseness may blind the researcher to other more salient differences and therefore cannot be thought of exclusively on



its own. After an interview with Homi Bhabha, Olson and Worsham (1999) summarize him as follows:

Cultural location is always an articulation of various intersecting and often contesting positions, and essentializing difference or isolating it from other positionalities is counterproductive. Race, class, gender and other forms of difference are always being ‘constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process.’ (p. 4)

Thus to forcibly ascribe a racial category upon a community before first interrogating the significance that the category has for them will fail to do them justice.

Consider Rey Chow’s (2003) essay “Against the Lures of Diaspora: Minority Discourse, Chinese Women, and Intellectual Hegemony”. She questions the right of Chinese women intellectuals in diaspora to speak for other Chinese women and oppressed classes in the Third World. She suggests they need to be self-reflexive of the fact that they speak from a privileged position and “must use this privilege as truthfully and as tactically as they can—not merely to speak as exotic minors, but to fight the crippling effects of Western imperialism and Chinese paternalism at once” (p. 176). For Chow, then, Chineseness takes on strategic meaning only when considered alongside differences in gender and class. In his book *Racial Castration*, Eng (2001) gives another example of how one’s Chineseness or “Asianness” cannot be considered separately from other categories of oppression. He argues that sexual and racial difference cannot be understood in isolation as separate spheres of analysis in his exploration of the racial formation of the Asian American male and the management of Asian American masculinity. The “fact” of one’s Chineseness should not be seen as a permanent scar. On the contrary, this “fact” can be strategically used for political gain in conjunction with other markers of identity.

Ang (2001) states succinctly, “If I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how is a matter of politics” (p. 36).

### 3.5 Hybridity

Ang (2001) uses the concept hybridity to counter this weakness in the diasporic paradigm that necessarily relies on the unstable notion of a homeland as “centre” to describe displaced communities. For Ang, hybridity describes the variety of Chinese who differ by time, place, and circumstance, cutting across gender, class, and region of origin: “‘Chineseness’ becomes an open signifier invested with resource potential, the raw material for the construction of syncretic identities suitable for living ‘where you’re at.’” (p. 35). But like cultural identity and ethnicity, hybridity is a highly contested term. Its many uses in various fields of the social sciences have created divergent meanings. Many related terms are sometimes used interchangeably with hybridity—creolization, syncretism, and *mestizaje*—to name a few, even though these terms have their own specific meanings, uses, and histories.

Canclini (2005) provides the following tentative definition for hybridization: “sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices” (p. xxv). He is careful to note that these “discrete structures” are themselves the result of hybridization and are not pure of form. An example of hybridization is Spanglish that originated in the Latino communities in the United States. Note that Spanish and English themselves are hybridized languages based in Latin, Arabic, and pre-Columbian languages (Canclini, 2005). This definition opens up the door to a spectacular number of processes that can lay claim to hybridization: inter-racial marriages, advertising collages, fusion music, cuisine, and architecture to name just a few. Indeed, if every “discrete structure” were the result of hybridization, would not all things and processes be hybrid

in some form? Canclini (2005) asks astutely: “What is the utility of grouping under just one term such heterogeneous devices and experience?” (p. xxvi) and “Do they or do they not allow an improved understanding of something that previously had been unexplained?” (p. xxvii).

When it comes to questions of cultural identity, hybridity has allowed a departure from essentialism. The myth of fixed characteristics belonging to nations or ethnicities is exposed when we realize that authentic or pure identity traits such as languages, traditions, and stereotypes are the result of a long history of mixing. Goldberg (1994) has argued against the fiction of monoculturalism in favor of heterogeneity and hybridization as the object of study. This shift in normative thinking forces us to study the processes of cultural formation rather than affirm self-sufficient identities. Put in another way, Canclini (2005) argues “the object of study is not hybridity but the processes of hybridization” (p. xxvii). A focus on explanation rather than description is much more revealing of the strategies involved in cultural translation. Indeed, for Hall (2000), hybridity “is a process of cultural translation, which is agonistic because it is never completed, but rests with its undecidability” (p. 226).

It was mentioned above that many terms are sometimes used interchangeably with hybridity but need to be defined uniquely on their own. The term “mestizaje,” for instance, refers to the history of fusions (in both a cultural and biological sense) between the European colonizers and indigenous populations in what is now called Latin America. “Creolization” also refers to cross-cultural mixes. But, “in a strict sense, it designates the language and culture created by variations from the base language and other languages in the context of slave trafficking” (Canclini, 2005, p. xxxiii). An example of creolization would be the changes that French has undergone in places like Louisiana and Haiti. “Syncretism” refers to the fusion of religious beliefs. The result of mass migrations and the transcontinental diffusion of beliefs may

result in individuals in North and South America who identify with more than one religion. Another term often used synonymously with hybridity is “border-crossing” which Grossberg (1996) defines as “marking an image of between-ness which does not construct a place or condition of its own other than the mobility, uncertainty and multiplicity of the fact of the constant border-crossing itself” (p. 92). (This definition is also related to Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) notion of a “borderland.”) These different terms refer to particular, classic forms of hybridization, while hybridization itself refers generally to the mixing of ethnic or religious elements and the products of modern and postmodern social processes (Canclini, 2005).

The definitions above illustrate that hybridity, throughout history, has not been a neutral or innocent process. “Mestizaje” and “creolization” (also consider “mongrelization”), for instance, are terms that carry, what Stuart Hall has coined, “condensed connotations.” Using such terms interchangeably with hybridity in modern contexts risks ignoring the history of unequal relations in cultural power implicit in the terms “mestizaje” and “creolization.” These terms suggest more than just facile notions of cross-cultural reconciliation or homogenization. They suggest the

Need to acknowledge the extent to which these processes are destructive, and recognize what is left out of the fusion [or what is lost]. A theory of hybridization that is not naïve requires a critical awareness of its limits, of what refuses or resists hybridization.

(Canclini, 2005, xxxi)

Although hybridization can be an innovative and creative production, the contradictions and ambivalences, the unplanned and unforeseen consequences, the coercion and subordination, and the incompatible and irreconcilable mixes that result from the processes of hybridization need to be acknowledged (Canclini, 2005).

Bhabha (1996), with regards to third world migration, argues “the translation of cultures, whether assimilative or agonistic, is a complex act that generates borderline affects and identifications, ‘peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash’” (p. 54). Just because someone accepts a culture, doesn’t mean he or she accepts it indiscriminately. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro notes candidly the thinking of some Whites and their fascination with Afro-American culture: “I’ll listen to their music, but they’re not marrying my daughter” (as cited in Canclini, 2005, p. xxxvii). In short, what power conflicts result? Homi Bhabha in an interview with Olson and Worsham (1999) put it this way:

For me, hybridization is really about how you negotiate between texts or cultures or practices in a situation of power imbalances in order to be able to see the way in which strategies of appropriation, revision, and iteration can produce possibilities for those who are less advantaged to be able to grasp in a moment of emergency, in the very process of the exchange or the negotiation, the advantage. Hybridization is much more a social and cultural and enunciative process in my work. It’s not about people who eat Chinese food, wear Italian clothes, and so on; but sometimes, in a very complimentary way to me personally, it’s been taken to mean some kind of diversity or multiple identities. For me, hybridization is a discursive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective process having to do with the struggle around authority, authorization, deauthorization, and the revision of authority. It’s a social process. It’s not about persons of diverse cultural tastes and fashions. (p. 39)

In Bhabha’s (1996) view, the hybrid strategy creates a space for the agent to challenge unequal power relations and refuse simple binary representations.

### 3.6 Performative Notions of Identity

Many queer theorists have written about identity construction. For example, Susan Driver's (2008) introduction to the book *Queer Youth Cultures* is critical of commonsense constructions of queer youth as victims or aberrations who fall outside of dominant classifications and draws our attention instead towards heteronormative knowledges which delimit the category "queer youth" and to more performative ways of thinking about identity:

Performative ways of thinking about identity decenter liberal norms of rational individualized subjecthood, turning attention onto relations that both invoke and question multiple conjunctions of desire and identification, suggesting so much more than can ever be known in advance or guaranteed in the present. (p. 11)

Driver thus refocuses our attention onto the active production and invention of youth identities rather than fixed and predetermined ones and places the scrutiny on heteronormative knowledges that circumscribe identity forms.

These performative dynamics of doing have been written about extensively by Judith Butler (1988) in her theory of gender identity. For Butler, gender identity is a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions and taboo" (p. 520). Gender is neither fact nor essence but a construction. It is performed by the body in a series of gender acts which are "renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (p. 523). The body becomes its gender through a series of acts that have been going on long before one arrived on the scene. Butler (1993) insists that

Performativity is thus not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not

primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated. . . . Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. (pp. 12-13)

An important aspect to Butler's theory of gender identity is that while gender is understood to be constituted, its performative character opens up the possibility of it being constituted differently and hence challenging its own essentialized status.

Johnson (2005) is critical, however, of applying Butler's theory of gender performativity to the processes of identity formation, particularly racial identity, more generally. According to Driver (2008), Johnson advances "quare" studies to overcome "the abstract and white privileged textual abstractions of performative theories by returning theory to the fleshed out mediations of memories, powers, and corporeal knowledges" (p. 12). Johnson (2005) questions the efficacy of queer theory to deal with issues of materiality and describes "quare" theory as a "theory of the flesh" which acknowledges the contributions of non-middle class gays and lesbians of colour in the struggle against oppression:

Theories in the flesh emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world. Theories in the flesh also conjoin theory and practice through an embodied politics of resistance. This politics of resistance is manifest in vernacular traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art. (p. 127)

Johnson notes how issues of race and class make the politics of identity for gays and lesbians of colour more complex and that alliances with heterosexuals are not, as with some queer activists, necessarily precluded.

Johnson's (2005) "quare" theory employs notions of both performativity and performance into a more dialogical and dialectical framework that highlights not just the discursive effects of acts but also the particular context and historical moment of the performance. The discursively constituted subject is thereby made capable of disrupting the power of discourse.

The performance of self is not only a performance or construction of identity for or toward an "out there," or even merely an attachment or "taking up" of a predetermined, discursively contingent identity. It is also a performance of self for the self in a moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform one's view of self in relation to the world. People have a need to exercise control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered. For the disenfranchised, the recognition, construction, and maintenance of self-image and cultural identity function to sustain, even when social systems and codes fail to do so. Granted, formations or performances of identity may simply reify oppressive systems, but they may also contest and subvert dominant meaning systems. (pp. 137-138)

José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification elaborates further these notions of performance identity. His theory shows how queers of colour can work within and outside oppressive structures simultaneously in order to combat them. Disidentification is a hybrid survival strategy for minority subjects living within a public sphere that disciplines those who do not conform to normative notions of citizenship. It is about

Recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its



workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.

Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (p. 31)

Disidentification therefore uses discourse in the service of resistance. Like Johnson, Muñoz (1999) is involved in cultural praxis work emphasizing the “theory-making power of performance” (p. 33).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The theoretical framework of this study rests on the notion of identity as unstable, contingent, strategic and something yet to be determined. Essential categories of identity such as Chineseness, therefore, cannot be assumed to be natural but are social constructs in need of scrutiny and investigation. Identities are not predetermined by race or “blood” but continually shaped by social interactions and multiply constructed by specific political, economic, historical, and cultural circumstances. Hybridity allows a departure from such essentialisms, but it is not hybridity that should be the object of study but the processes of hybridization. Such processes are not always innocent but can nevertheless open a space to be critical of unequal power relations that result. Queer theorists of colour have adopted such a hybrid strategy. José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, for instance, rearticulates hegemonic discourses in order to empower minority identities that are otherwise rendered invisible.

## **Chapter 4: Methodological Framework**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In addition to the cultural theory discussed in chapter three, this qualitative study incorporates the theory and methods of discourse analysis to form a multiperspectival framework. The poststructuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as presented by Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jørgensen (2002), will be utilized. This chapter will give a justification for this choice of methodology and argue that it is the best option to meet the aims of this study. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe will then be outlined together with how it can be applied to analyze discourses on Chinese youth identities within empirical texts. A preliminary analysis of the two “texts” used in this study, *The Jade Peony* and the UBC club controversy, will be done to demonstrate this method of data analysis.

### **4.2 A Multiperspectival Approach**

The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe cannot be used as a method of data analysis separate from its theoretical and methodological foundations. Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) argue that Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse analysis (together with critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology) contains ontological and epistemological premises, theoretical models, methodological guidelines, and specific techniques for analysis that form a complete package: “*Theory and method* are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study” (p. 4). Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) stress, moreover, that it is possible to combine different discourse analytical and non-discourse analytical perspectives in order to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Kellner (2011) argues that cultural studies work should also take on a multiperspectival approach. Such an approach would take advantage of the strengths that come from each different perspective while also acknowledging each one's blind spots. The multiperspectival approach this study takes is analogous to cultural studies paradigms that have historically drawn upon many different strands. This creative combining of different approaches has been a source of popularity and productivity for many cultural studies projects, but also friction (Saukko, 2005). In Stuart Hall's (1996a) view, cultural studies "has attempted to *think forwards* from the best elements in the structuralist and culturalist enterprises, by way of some of the concepts elaborated in Gramsci's work" (p. 48). Frow and Morris (2003) have shown how contemporary versions of cultural studies have been shaped by multiple perspectives as diverse as critical race studies and indigenous peoples' scholarship. But although cultural studies cannot be contained within a single framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), "it does matter whether cultural studies is this or that" (Hall, 1992, p. 278).

Thus the following sections will show how the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe does not contradict the postmodern theories on cultural identity and hybridity presented in chapter 3. In particular, any ontological (anti-essentialist) and epistemological (anti-foundationalist) assumptions Laclau and Mouffe make regarding the social construction of the world and the contingent nature of identity remain consistent throughout the study. Furthermore, while Laclau and Mouffe do not provide the researcher with fully developed tools for empirical analysis, their theoretical concepts nevertheless suggest how a researcher can creatively develop a coherent method of analysis. This method will be demonstrated in the latter half of the chapter with regards to analyzing discourses of Chinese youth identities.

### 4.3 Justification of Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine two historical “texts” for their representations of Chinese youth growing up in Vancouver. Both texts serve as sites where hegemonic meanings are produced and where the notion of “Chineseness” is struggled over. This study unpacks these sites, their interweaving of different social relations, and how these relations inform what it means to be Chinese. For example, Vancouver’s early Chinatown as depicted in the novel *The Jade Peony*, is a site where different cross-disciplinary discourses on Chineseness can be read: economic, gender, racial, ethnic, geographic, political, national, and community discourses on Chineseness are all played out within this one social domain at the dawn of the Second World War when racial tensions were at a peak. Similar struggles between different discourses over Chinese and Canadian identity are played out on the campus of the University of British Columbia where conflicts between different Chinese ethnic clubs over student membership are not uncommon. While these two sites of conflict are historically and geographically separate, they are linked by a common discursive struggle over what it means for youth to be Chinese. A further aim of this study is to show the connections between what on the surface appears to be two very distinct historical moments. This cultural studies project is united not only by the object of study itself but also by the method of analysis—the work of examining interdisciplinary discursive structures and how they shape identities and nationhood across seemingly disparate historical moments. Discourse analysis is therefore the best method of study because it supports these dual aims of unpacking specific texts and examining their discursive structures.

But discourse analysis is also compatible with this cultural studies project in the acceptance of its own partiality: “it is openly incomplete, and it is partisan in its insistence on the political dimensions of knowledge” (Frow & Morris, 2003, p. 508). In terms of the former,

this project analyzes texts for discourses of race, ethnicity, and gender while leaving out important analyses in terms of class and sexuality. There is a degree of self-reflexivity for the researcher when subjecting objects of study to one “reading” over another. Discourse analysis is therefore consistent with a project that does not aim to produce “grand theories” on or an exhaustive understanding of some phenomenon. Instead, this study engages with theory to show how it looks when applied to a particular context and to reveal some of its limitations. For instance, this study shows how theory on cultural identity, Chineseness, and hybridity apply or do not apply to the Chinese youth in *The Jade Peony* and to the Chinese youth on the UBC campus involved in the club controversy. This study’s strategy is thus compatible with theories and/or methods that do not assume general or universally applicable results.

In terms of the latter, political dimension, Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) remark that discourse analytic approaches, including that of Laclau and Mouffe, “share the starting point that our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them” (p. 1). Discourse analysis hence enables a discursive understanding of the social constructedness of both cultural and national identities within specific texts or images selected for empirical analysis. Competing conceptions of Chineseness or Canadianness, for instance, could be understood as a struggle between different political discourses which construct different identities for individuals and label them as Chinese, Asian, Cantonese, Canadian, or Chinese-Canadian among others. Thus, this cultural studies project shares the critical aim of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse analysis “to investigate and analyse power relations in society and to formulate normative perspectives from which a critique of such relations can be made with an eye on the possibilities for social change” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 2).

Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) discuss Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory in conjunction with two other approaches to discourse analysis: critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discursive psychology. They have selected these perspectives within the field of discourse analysis because "they represent particularly fruitful theories and methods for research in communication, culture and society" (p. 2). Out of these three approaches to discourse analysis, however, Laclau and Mouffe's approach is ideal for this study as it is less concerned with "the need for systemic empirical analyses of people's talk and written language" (p. 20) (as are CDA and discursive psychology) and "more concerned with general, overarching patterns and aim[s] at a more abstract mapping of discourses that circulate in society at a particular moment in time or within a specific social domain" (p. 20). The setting of *The Jade Peony* and the UBC club controversy respectively represent such social domains and moments to be broadly analyzed as opposed to the specific details of people's everyday discourse found, for instance, in research interviews.

It should be noted then that an interview study was also considered as a possible method for the examination of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities. Such a study would highlight the voices, personal histories, and concerns of today's Canadian-born Chinese youth. And such a study would have provided nuanced portrayals of the different ways in which they identify (or not identify) as Chinese growing up in Vancouver. Moreover, an interview study is "particularly well suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 116). This research project, however, has chosen to examine alternate multimedia expressions of identity other than what people have to say about how they identify. Through the two mediums of Internet video clips and a novel, this

study has chosen to explore theoretical notions of Chineseness and hybridity through “texts” that already exist. While an interview study of Chinese youth would make an interesting project, it would make for a very different study.

#### **4.4 Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory**

This section outlines Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and its underlying assumptions as presented by Phillips and Jørgensen (2002). Phillips and Jørgensen briefly summarize the theory as follows:

The theory has its starting point in the poststructuralist idea that discourse constructs the social world in meaning, and that, owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed. No discourse is a closed entity: it is, rather, constantly being transformed through contact with other discourses. So a keyword of the theory is *discursive struggle*. Different discourses—each of them representing particular ways of talking about and understanding the social world—are engaged in a constant struggle with one other to achieve hegemony, that is, to fix the meanings of language in their own way. Hegemony, then, can provisionally be understood as the dominance of one particular perspective. (pp. 6-7)

Laclau and Mouffe focus more on theory and do not provide many practical tools for the analysis of empirical materials. Phillips and Jørgensen (2002), however, suggest how the concepts raised by Laclau and Mouffe can be transformed into tools for analysis given a little imagination. These methods will be discussed later in section 4.5.

#### 4.4.1 Social Constructionism

Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) understand poststructuralism to be a subcategory of social constructionism. While Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory draws heavily from poststructuralist theory, it is worthwhile to review some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of social constructionism within which Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is based. Four premises of social constructionism stated by Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) are listed below:

- Our knowledge of the world should not be treated as objective truth. Reality is only accessible to us through categories, so our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality “out there,” but rather are products of our ways of categorising the world, or, in discursive analytical terms, products of discourse.
- The ways in which we understand and represent the world are historically and culturally specific and *contingent*: our worldviews and our identities could have been different, and they can change over time. . . . Discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world—including knowledge, identities and social relations—and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns. This view is *anti-essentialist*: that the social world is constructed socially and discursively implies that its character is not pre-given or determined by external conditions, and that people do not possess a set of fixed and authentic characteristics or essences.
- Knowledge is created through social interaction in which we construct common truths and compete about what is true and false.



- Within a particular worldview, some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable. Different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences. (pp. 5-6)

#### **4.4.2 A Poststructuralist Theory of Discourse**

According to Phillips and Jørgensen (2002), Laclau and Mouffe's theory is a combination and modification of both the Marxist and structuralist traditions. While Laclau and Mouffe agree that signs derive their meaning from their differences from one another, they are critical of the Saussurian tradition of structural linguistics that does not adequately address the *changing* meaning of signs.

Poststructuralists agree that signs acquire their meanings by being different from each other, but, in ongoing language use, we position the signs in different relations to one another so that they may acquire new meanings. Thus language use is a social phenomenon: it is through conventions, negotiations and conflicts in social contexts that structures of meaning are fixed and challenged. (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 25)

We are constantly striving to fix the meanings of signs but such a project ultimately ends in failure because every fixation of a sign's meaning is contingent. It is the discourse analyst's job, therefore, "to map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalised that we think of them as natural" (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, pp. 25-26).

For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a temporary closure on meaning and is not total in the Saussurian sense:

[Discourse] fixes meaning in a particular way, but it does not dictate that meaning is to be fixed exactly in that way forever. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, articulations are contingent interventions in an undecidable terrain. That means that articulations constantly shape and intervene in the structures of meaning in unpredictable ways. Discourses are incomplete structures in the same undecidable terrain that never quite become completely structured. Hence there is always room for *struggles* over what the structure should look like, what discourses should prevail, and how meaning should be ascribed to the individual signs. (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 29)

Rather than just uncovering the structure in a Saussurian sense, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is aimed at showing how discourse constitutes and changes the structure. Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe's theory is more than just about language. It is also a theory of the social and a direct critique of Marxism and economic determinism. The social is organized according to the same principles as language. That is, we are constantly attempting to fix the meanings of social acts through various articulations and these articulations either reproduce or change common ascriptions of meaning (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

In discourse theory, the determining role of the economy in the creation of society (as in Marxist theory) is thus replaced by political processes. Political acts are precisely those articulations which attempt to fix meaning in an undecidable terrain. Laclau and Mouffe "understand politics as the organisation of society in a particular way that excludes all other possible ways" (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 36). Struggles often take place between actors over the primacy of different discourses and hence different ways of organizing society. Those discourses which are firmly established to the point they become natural are called "objective" discourses:

Objectivity is the historical outcome of political processes and struggles; it is sedimented discourse. The boundary between objectivity and the political, or between what seems natural and what is contested, is thus a fluid and historical boundary, and earlier sedimented discourses can, at any time, enter the play of politics and be problematised in new articulations. (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 36)

Two other key concepts in understanding Laclau and Mouffe's theory and relevant to this study are "hegemony" and "power." As political conflict becomes objectivity, it passes through a hegemonic intervention which is an articulation whereby one discourse dominates and all competing discourses are undermined and dissolved: "alternative understandings of the world are suppressed, leading to the naturalisation of one single perspective" (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 37). Laclau and Mouffe view power similar to Foucault as a productive force. Power is what keeps the social order, creates our knowledges, and gives us our identities. On the other hand, power is what precludes alternate possible social realities. Thus, "society," for Laclau and Mouffe, is impossible, as it is only a contingent structure which is never final or total. It is a myth, much like one's "country" is imagined as a stable entity through hegemonic processes. For discourse analysts, then, "how it is that some myths come to appear objectively true and others as impossible" becomes a central question (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 40).

#### **4.4.3 Discourse Theory and Identity Formation**

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of the social can be extended to questions of identity formation. For Marxists, everyone belongs to an objective class identity and this identity is determined by economic and material factors. For Laclau and Mouffe, however, people are interpellated by discourses: "Identity is thus identification with a subject position in a discursive structure" (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 43, 2002). Discourses designate different positions for

people to occupy—whether it be “teacher,” “firefighter,” or “mother”—and such designations carry certain expectations about how to act and speak. But since all discourses are temporary fixations and can change through processes of discursive struggle, identities themselves are contingent and changeable.

Laclau also borrows from Lacan’s understanding of the subject “as a perpetually incomplete structure which constantly strives to become a whole” (Phillips & Jørgensen, p. 42, 2002). This understanding helps to explain why people allow themselves to be interpellated by discourses: “The subject comes to know itself as an individual by identifying with *something* outside itself, that is, with the images presented to it” (p. 42). But these images are “at one and the same time, the basis of identification and of alienation” (p. 42), the internalized images never quite fitting. The feeling of wholeness is never achieved according to Lacan and the idea of a true whole self is a mere fiction (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). By borrowing this notion of the subject from Lacan, discourse theory “has provided the subject with a ‘driving force’ as it constantly tries to ‘find itself’ through investing in discourses” (p. 42). Identity is thus a process of identification with the various subject positions that discourses have to offer.

Lacan uses the notion of *master signifier* to indicate “nodal points of identity” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 42) (to use Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theoretical term) which are privileged signs around which other signs acquire their meaning. “Chinese” is an example of a master signifier and through the linking of this signifier with other signifiers such as “inscrutable,” “conniving,” and “dirty” through *chains of equivalence*, an individual’s identity can be established relationally. Of course, “Chinese” can be articulated differently through a different chain of equivalence—“intelligent,” “hard-working,” and “generous”—to suggest a very different identity: “It is by being represented in this way by a cluster of signifiers with a

nodal point at its center that one acquires an identity” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 43). Thus, rather than some core essence which everyone possesses, identity is negotiated within discourse and accepted and discarded through continuous social processes.

#### **4.5 Method of Data Analysis**

The analytical approach of this thesis does not employ any quantitative techniques to code micro-level concepts as with some discourse analytical approaches. Instead, this thesis views discourses more abstractly. A good starting point for analyzing texts is with the notion that discourses and hence identities are temporary and contested constructs. By looking for the points of contestation over identity within empirical materials, the discourse analyst can begin to pin down the different understandings of reality, how meaning is constructed socially, and the exact nature of any antagonisms. In particular, important clues to these different understandings of reality can be found when the analyst examines how identities are established relationally—that is in comparison to that which it is not. For instance, who is considered “Canadian” and who is excluded from such a category?

Identifying master signifiers (the key signifiers that organize identity) will be crucial to this thesis. The main master signifier that will be investigated is “Chinese.” But this signifier carries no meaning in itself—it is an empty signifier—and only begins to take on meaning when it is linked with other signifiers through chains of equivalence. Once these key signifiers are identified, then the investigation into how identities are discursively organized by society and become “objective” reality or naturalized can begin (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). Furthermore, once these discourses are identified, an analysis of open antagonisms between conflicting discourses will become possible as well as an analysis of any hegemonic struggles that attempt to

resolve these conflicts. The social consequences resulting from these interventions will be important points for analysis. This discussion thus suggests several possible lines of inquiry into the key signifier “Chinese.” In what ways is Chineseness contested and struggled over? What are the different understandings of Chinese? What are the social consequences of choosing one understanding over another? In what ways is one’s Chineseness made to seem natural?

To examine the multiple meanings of Chineseness and how identities are constituted for Vancouver’s Chinese youth, I have selected two “texts” for analysis. One is a historical novel, *The Jade Peony*, and the other a contemporary incident. The former is set in Vancouver’s Chinatown during the 1930s and 40s while the latter incident was a club controversy that took place on the campus of the University of British Columbia in 2008. The choice of these texts separated by over half a century is to give a sense of the changing and contested meanings of Chineseness during two key periods in Vancouver’s history—the pre-Second World War period and the post-1967 immigration period. Moreover, both “texts” capture the voices of Vancouver’s Canadian-born Chinese youth in the first person, not filtered through adults. Chinese youth are depicted as active agents making choices, weighing decisions, and exhibiting desires rather than as mere victims. The texts also demonstrate incidents of intraethnic conflict including gender discrimination suggesting how minority groups are capable of committing social hatreds themselves. Finally, the historical novel is rich in showing how identities are often ascribed to Vancouver’s Chinatown youth while the incident shows how identities can be performed. While identities are far more complex than to be categorized as either ascribed or performed, these two categories nevertheless provide a point of departure and give a general structure to the way the paper is organized.

#### 4.5.1 A Preliminary Analysis of *The Jade Peony*

*The Jade Peony*, although a work of fiction, is grounded in historical fact and based on the experiences of the author, Wayson Choy, who grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown a decade after the period in which the novel is set. The novel is particularly rich in its depiction of life in the Chinatown community during a time of approaching war when racial tensions were heightened within the larger Canadian society. What is unique about this novel and what makes it appropriate for analysis in this study is that the story is told from the perspective of three Chinese youth growing up in Chinatown. This point of departure raises questions of cultural identity and allows for an exploration of what it means to be Chinese in a Canadian society. The youth struggle to define their own identities under the scrutiny of the elders of the family and the larger Chinatown community who have their own ideas as to what is "the right way to be Chinese" and discipline the youth if they do not conform to a particular definition.

Choy's novel shows a variety of ways in which identities are ascribed to youth while also suggesting the complexities of identification. The story takes place in a rich setting and during a tumultuous period in time. Such conditions, however, can be fruitful in revealing the fluid, contingent, and strategic nature of identity. Vancouver's early Chinatown, for instance, was a patriarchal society and girls were expected to conform to traditional gender roles. The story of Jook-Liang in the first chapter, however, shows how her ascribed identity conflicts with her own desired identifications. Moreover, the Second World War raised tensions between Vancouver's Chinese and Japanese communities. These tensions gave new and multiple meanings to Chineseness and revealed how identities can be used strategically and, as with Meiying in the third chapter, can be a matter of life or death. Not only was the selection of this novel done purposefully, but the choice of passages within the novel to be analyzed were chosen that most

engaged with the relevant theory on cultural identity. *The Jade Peony*, while ultimately a work of fiction, nevertheless demonstrates some of the possibilities for youth identification and argues against the fiction that Vancouver's early Chinatown community was a monolithic community free from ruptures.

In order to give a sense of the methodological approach, consider again the passage from *The Jade Peony* that began chapter one. It is presented again below for convenience. A preliminary analysis is then performed to illustrate how discourse analysis can be used to examine notions of identity and the constructed meaning of "Chinese."

But even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be *Chinese*.

Stepmother knew this in her heart and feared for me. All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born "neither this nor that," neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain.

*Mo nos* went to English school and mixed with Demon outsiders, and even liked *them*. Wanted to invite *them* home. Sometimes a *mo no* might say one careless word too many, and the Immigration Demons would pounce. (Choy, 1995, p. 135)

The narrator, Sek-Lung (Sekky), laments that no matter how "Canadian" he acts or behaves he will still never be fully accepted by Canadian society and will be forever branded as "Chinese." This passage suggests a number of identity or subject positions that have been constructed for him. One identity is constructed around the master signifier "Canadian." This sign is linked through chains of equivalence with being "born in Vancouver," saluting the Union Jack, clean



hands, and prayer. But Sekky implies that there is really only one criteria which is necessary to be considered Canadian and that is to be white: for no matter what Sekky does, he “would still be *Chinese*.” A second identity is constructed around the master signifier “Chinese.” While this passage does not in any positive sense describe what it means to be Chinese, it does suggest, by exclusion, a link with being “non-Canadian.” A third identity or subject position is one that is ascribed to Chinatown’s youth by the adults—one constructed around the master signifier “*mo no*.” This sign is linked with “no brain,” “neither this nor that,” “English school,” mixing with “Demon outsiders,” and not knowing the boundaries. In terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, all three subject positions are in an antagonistic relationship to each other. To be both “Chinese” and “Canadian” is incompatible, and to be “*mo no*” is incompatible with being either for it is “neither this nor that.” How then does Sekky articulate his identity position within this passage given so many possible ways to identify?

For Laclau and Mouffe, the subject is *fragmented* or *decentred*; that is, “it has different identities according to those discourses of which it forms part” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 43). Sekky’s identification can change given the context, and the passage suggests that this identification is often hegemonically determined. For instance, within the Chinatown community he is ascribed the identity as a “*mo no*” youth to the adults; outside of the Chinatown community, to the rest of Canadian society, he is ascribed the identity of “Chinese.” The passage also suggests Sekky’s own desired identification—that of being Canadian. But Sekky’s articulation of Canadianness is distinct from one that is associated with being white and is instead one that is articulated by a series of actions—saluting the Union Jack, having clean hands and so on—an articulation which, within Sekky’s universe, would not immediately exclude him from being Canadian.

When Sekky is positioned by several conflicting discourses his subject position is said to be *overdetermined*: “For Laclau and Mouffe, the subject is always overdetermined because the discourses are always contingent; there is no objective logic that points to a single subject position” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 41). This passage suggests such antagonisms where discourses collide. At school, for instance, Sekky is split between his desire to associate with white “Demons” and his family’s desire to distance themselves from the white community. In such a situation there has yet to be some hegemonic intervention which resolves the conflict and naturalizes a particular discourse. Perhaps the pressure from his family becomes so great that Sekky no longer associates with other white students in school. Or perhaps Sekky continues to secretly associate with white friends despite his family’s disapproval. Whatever the case may be, “identities are accepted, refused and negotiated in discursive processes” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 43).

A more comprehensive analysis of *The Jade Peony* is presented in chapter five taking the entire novel into consideration. The analysis shows how Vancouver’s Chinese youth identities and the meanings of often taken-for-granted concepts such as Chinese are never ultimately fixed but are constantly struggled over with resulting social consequences. As the novel was read, notes were taken of any incidents that revealed the challenges of growing up Chinese in Canadian society. Any struggles over youth identity whether it be gender or cultural identity were noted and, in particular, notes were taken of any conflicts that occurred with other communities outside of Chinatown such as with white Canadians or Japanese Canadians as a result of such identity struggles. Identity issues occurring within Chinatown or in a familial setting such as conflicts with family elders were also noted. These lines of conflict, antagonisms, and hegemonic struggles were investigated in order to identify the various discourses within the

novel. Chapters one and three of the novel will be the main focus of analysis, centering around the characters of Sek-Lung, Jook-Liang, and Meiying, with the latter two characters raising important questions of gender identity. It will be shown that Vancouver's early Chinatown was a patriarchal community and girls were often ascribed traditional gender roles. The analysis of the novel will be critical of such hierarchical structures, unequal power relations, and privileged terms.

#### **4.5.2 A Preliminary Analysis of the UBC Club Controversy**

The second "text" addresses the meaning of Chineseness but also engages with other concepts different from those from the novel. While the first text was chosen for its depiction of historically ascribed identities and competing identity positions, the second "text" (or, more appropriately, group of texts) was chosen for its demonstration of intraethnic conflict and cultural hybridity. To explore these concepts, I have selected a series of controversial Internet video clips (which can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/user/SuperPetelee> under the title "CVC"), two newspaper articles about the controversy (Haves, 2008; Hansen, 2008; links to both articles can be found in the References section), and a historical account of a past but related controversy for analysis (to be discussed in chapter six).

The recent controversy revolves around the production of a series of culturally offensive Internet video clips by the Chinese Varsity Club (CVC) at the University of British Columbia in 2008 as part of a membership drive but which several other ethnic Chinese clubs found offensive. The incident resulted in the CVC being disciplined by the university that required the removal of all videos from viewing and a written apology to the clubs that filed complaints. This act of "cultural racism" of one minority group towards another raises important questions about what it means to be Chinese for diasporic communities. It also illustrates the complexities of

Chineseness with each continuous wave of immigration to Vancouver. Furthermore, the University of British Columbia campus can be seen as a borderzone where hybridizations take place and acts of disidentification are performed. This second group of texts is therefore fertile ground where much theory discussed in this study can be both tested and complicated.

The Internet video clips released by the CVC parody the “Get a Mac” television commercials that ran from 2006 to 2010. Such a move immediately draws upon an already built-in discourse to those familiar with the popular television campaign. The original “Get a Mac” television advertisements have an all-white background with a playful melody that can be heard in the background. Two characters introduce themselves. One character, played by John Hodgman, is dressed in a suit and tie and introduces himself as a Windows PC. The other character, played by Justin Long, is dressed more casually and introduces himself as a Mac. A short vignette is then played out in which the pros and cons of Mac and PC are compared. All the ads highlight the weaknesses of PCs running the Microsoft Windows operating system while highlighting the strengths of Mac OS.

The advertising campaign produced by the CVC follows a similar template. But instead of discussing the merits of two operating systems, the merits between the CVC and other ethnic Chinese clubs on the UBC campus are discussed. A young Asian woman who speaks fluent English introduces herself as “CVC” whereas a young Asian boy who speaks English with a Chinese accent introduces himself as “THC.” On the surface, the CVC campaign can be interpreted in economic terms like many advertising campaigns. The CVC is attempting to attract a wide student membership and every additional club member means additional funds for the club. These funds can be spent on better activities and programs for the club which in turn will attract more membership bringing in more money and so on. The CVC attempts to appeal to

new members by depicting itself to be the better club. To identify as a CVC member as opposed to a member of THC means one is identifying with a much cooler club in much the same way the “Mac” character is made to look more laid-back compared to the stuffy-looking “PC” character. The specific merits of both clubs are also discussed. Both CVC and THC have a singing contest, fashion shown, and a ski trip but CVC is shown to be the better club as it boasts more members: eight-hundred compared to about one-hundred.

But the problem with the CVC advertising campaign that makes it so controversial compared to the “Get a Mac” television campaign is its heavy reliance on ethno-racial stereotypes which have played a part in the long history of Chinese exclusion in Canada going back to when the Chinese first arrived in Canada. Thus, the CVC is not just a better, cooler, and larger club, but is a gatekeeper-club to all things Canadian. A typical THC club member, on the other hand, is articulated as a “landed immigrant,” a Visa applicant, foreign, an English-language learner, clannish, coming from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan and living in Richmond. To be a member of the CVC is implicitly linked to identifying as a Canadian and local-born whereas to be a member of a THC is to identify as non-Canadian and foreign-born. Potential club members are asked to choose between two identities: one linked through a chain of equivalence with Canadian, “multicultural,” and English-speaking and another opposing identity linked with “F.O.B.” (fresh off the boat), “Typical Honger,” and immigrant status.

Borrowing once again from Lacan’s notion of the subject, the CVC campaign aims to get potential members to “find themselves” by investing in a particular racial discourse. This racial discourse constructs two identities in an antagonistic and mutually exclusive relationship to each other—one cannot be a Canadian and an FOB at the same time. The various clubs on campus can be interpreted as representing different discourses that offer students various subject

positions. The Taiwan Association will appeal to a part of the student population who wants to identify in a certain way and the Ski Club will appeal to another (sometimes overlapping) part of the student population with other desired identifications. Increasing club membership thus becomes a process of getting students to identify with the club's own particular subject position. The CVC sparked controversy by adopting a subject position which has historically been deemed offensive and exclusionary in nature.

A more thorough analysis is conducted in chapter six and draws on additional sources in addition to the Internet video clips produced by the CVC. By drawing on newspaper reports of the incident and historical accounts of past controversies between the CVC and other ethnic Chinese clubs on campus, the chapter will broaden the scope of analysis, put the controversy in historical context, and allow for greater connections to be made. As with the analysis of *The Jade Peony*, attention will be paid to such master signifiers as "Chinese," the struggles between different groups over how to define it, and the social consequences of fixing a particular definition hegemonically. The chapter will ultimately show how the CVC, in its attempt to define itself (Is it a "Chinese" club or not?), supports Lacan's notion of the subject as never being complete. The CVC's most recent attempt to distance itself from foreign-born Chinese immigrants can be seen as just one of a series of identifications (or hegemonic interventions) throughout the club's long history. Chapter six will thus examine some of the club's different struggles at defining itself. While never able to find its "true self," it will be argued that the CVC will do well to theoretically embrace a more hybrid identification. Such an identification rearticulates some of the club's defining characteristics such as "multicultural," "Canadian-born," and "English-speaking" into an identity which neither discriminates against other groups believed to be more "authentically Chinese" nor privileges a purely Canadian heritage.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis provides an effective methodology to meet the aim of this study to unpack specific texts and analyze their discursive structures. Discourse analysis does not aim to produce generalized theory but to engage theory and apply it to particular contexts. Moreover, discourse analysis is consistent with a cultural studies project that is critical of unequal power relations with the ultimate goal of social change. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory begins with the poststructuralist idea that meaning is never permanently fixed. Discourses, social structures that fix meaning, are in continuous struggle with each other to achieve hegemony. Part of the methodology of this thesis is to investigate why some of these meanings and perspectives dominate while others seem impossible. This chapter has demonstrated how the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe can be used to analyze texts and the construction of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities. In particular, by identifying master signifiers and chains of equivalence, the process can begin into how key signifiers are combined with other signs to produce discursive meaning. In chapters five and six, a more rigorous analysis will be performed on *The Jade Peony* and the UBC club controversy respectively.

## **Chapter 5: The Changing Meaning of Chineseness and the Problem of Competing Identity Positions: Chinese Youth Identities in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony***

### **5.1 Introduction**

One day, after shopping with Grandmama and studying the Chinese flag and the Union Jack and the Buy War Bonds posters hanging in Chinatown store windows, I had a burning question. I came home and interrupted Stepmother, who was busy learning how to knit socks for the soldiers in China.

“Am I Chinese or Canadian?” I asked Stepmother.

“*Tohng Yahn*,” Grandmama said, collapsing in her rocking chair and setting her grocery bags down on the floor. “*Chinese*.”

“When Chen Suling comes to Canada,” Stepmother said, caught between a missed row, “she will teach you the right way to be Chinese.” (Choy, 1995, p. 133)

*The Jade Peony* tells the story of the Chen family and takes place in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s and 40s. The story is composed of three parts, each part told from the point of view of one sibling. The first part is narrated by Jook-Liang, the second youngest sibling and the only sister. Jook-Liang has dreams of becoming Shirley Temple to the dismay of her Grandmama (Poh-Poh) and her story details her friendship with the mysterious Monkey Man, one of Grandmama's Old China friends, who must return to China to bury the bones of the Chinese who have died in “Gold Mountain.” The second part is told through the eyes of the adopted second brother, Jung-Sum, who takes an interest in boxing and Joe Louis. His story tells of his growing attraction for an older boy Frank Yuen and his coming to terms with his sexual identity. The last part of the story is told by the third brother and youngest sibling Sek-Lung (Sekky). He tells the story of his relationship with Grandmama who often doted upon him. But



he also details the tragic story of Meiyong, the adopted daughter of Mrs. Lim a family neighbor. Meiyong has a secret relationship with a Japanese Canadian boy, Kazuo, and Sek-Lung is the only other person who knows about this forbidden relationship. Her story ends sadly with her death from a failed abortion just as Japanese Canadians, including Kazuo, were being sent to camps in the interior of British Columbia. (The first son, Kiam, tells his story in Choy's sequel *All that Matters*.) All three stories intertwine and, taken together, give a vivid portrayal of what it might have been like growing up in Vancouver's early Chinatown with the backdrop of a racist Canadian society and an approaching war.

The opening passage to this chapter is taken from the third part of Choy's novel. The narrator of this passage, Sek-Lung, exhibits a curiosity about his cultural identity to the adults of his family. But there is absolutely no doubt in the mind of Grandmama what he is: "Chinese." Stepmother reaffirms this. For this older generation, Chinese culture is something that can be passed on to or inculcated within the younger generation. They have the responsibility and authority to decide what is "the right way to be Chinese" and in what manner this is to be transmitted. Yet despite the adults' attempts to raise Sek-Lung as an unalloyed Chinese, they cannot shelter him completely from Canadian influences. Indeed, Sek-Lung speaks English; he studies not only the Chinese flag but also the Union Jack; the Buy War Bonds posters hanging in Chinatown store windows suggest the Chinatown community's support for Canadian soldiers fighting in China against the Japanese. Indeed, Stepmother herself knits socks for these very soldiers. Sek-Lung, thus, sits in the borderzone separating Chineseness and Canadianness.

The first half of this chapter shows how this Chinese identity is ascribed to the youth in the novel by the adult generation and interrogates the multiple meanings of this Chinese identity within the context of the larger Canadian society prior to the Second World War. Hall (1990)

remarks that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (p. 225). We will see how the siblings internalize the dominant histories and memories of their Chinatown community as they are positioned by traditional kinship and gender roles, class histories, and larger historical events taking place outside of Canada. The second half of this chapter explores some of the complexities and problems of identification when Chinese identity is privileged over other identity positions. It illustrates the conflicting identity positions of Jook-Liang and Meiying as they exert their own desired identities against imposed gender and cultural norms established by the Chinatown community. Their struggles against a masculinist adult Chinese world challenge nationalist discourses (framed in such simplistic terms as Chinese versus Canadian) which render gender invisible.

I should note that *The Jade Peony* is a frequently cited literary work for its nuanced representation of Vancouver’s early Chinatown. Domenic Beneventi (2006), for instance, uses the novel to demonstrate how nationalist discourses attempt to “evacuate” the Oriental body from the Canadian landscape and how foreign bodies are confined to ethnic ghettos and excluded from more privileged sites of the city. She shows crucially how Chinese create their own spatial models that reflect a “unique history of transience and marginality in that space” (p. 137). Rocio G. Davis (2008) uses Choy’s representation of Chinatown to problematize the notion of diasporic space and rearticulate the notion of space, belonging, and heritage for Chinese Canadians. Both these writers show how Choy’s novel offers readers a new view of the history of Chinese Canadians growing up in Vancouver’s Chinatown that moves beyond cultural stereotypes. Marie Vautier (1999) argues that historical fictions in Canadian literature, including Choy’s, blur the boundary between fiction and history and make us accept the indeterminacy and ambiguity of

the past. It is in this spirit of demonstrating an alternative history that I use Choy's representation of Chinatown to illustrate the complexities of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities.

## **5.2 Chinese Identity as Place of Origin and Political Ideology**

The four siblings in the novel are not born knowing they are Chinese, and the older generation fears they will grow up not knowing the "old ways." They thus play an active role in inculcating a form of Chineseness into the younger generation, often done selectively and strategically, and the results are never predictable or unproblematic. Consider the following passage from Jook-Liang's chapter:

Poh-Poh spoke her Sze-yup, Four County village dialect, to me and Jung, but not always to Kiam, the First Son. With him, she spoke Cantonese and a little Mandarin, which he was studying in the Mission Church basement. Whenever Stepmother was around, Poh-Poh used another but similar village dialect, in a more clipped fashion, as many adults do when they think you might be the village fool, too worthless or too young, or not from their district. (Choy, 1995, pp. 15-16)

This passage suggests that from birth the siblings are already positioned by the adults in a number of ways and that their Chineseness is historically specific and can be traced back to a particular region in China. Firstly, they are not any Chinese, but Chinese from the southern coastal province of Guangdong (capital is Canton) where the majority of early Chinese migrants to Vancouver's Chinatown were from. They came to escape famine, droughts, and civil war in this region of China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This region is culturally distinct from northern parts of China and not just in terms of language (i.e. Cantonese versus Mandarin). According to Con, Con, Johnson et. al. (1982), people from Guangdong regarded

themselves as “people of the Tang” in contrast to the “people of the Han” (pp. 7-9) up north and they are noted for fine regional cuisine and a distinctive tradition in the arts. Secondly, the family is from Toi-san in Sze-yup, a (poorer) region southwest of Canton, which also includes the districts of Hoi-ping, Yin-ping, and Sun-wui. In Sze-yup, a subdialect of Cantonese was spoken called the “four county village dialect.” Cantonese, on the other hand, was spoken in the major commercial centres of Canton, Macau, and Hong Kong. Thirdly, Kiam, as the first son, is given preferential treatment by the grandmother. He is being taught the more pragmatic, mercantile and high-status dialects of Mandarin and Cantonese compared to his sister or younger brother. Poh-Poh’s choice of language to Kiam not only reinforces the importance of traditional kinship roles (male over female, older over younger), but also reveals how her choice is not arbitrary but motivated by economy. The siblings’ identification with a specific articulation of Chineseness then, whether it be an aspect of Toi-san, Cantonese, or Mandarin culture, is governed by the history of Chinese migration to Vancouver, natural and political events within China, traditional gender and kinship roles, and the shrewdness of the grandmother. The siblings, and Kiam in particular, have no say in these matters that have been unfolding long before they were even born and miles away from where they live. They may in the future position themselves differently, for identities are constantly in flux (Kiam may, for instance, reject his responsibility to carry on the family’s lineage as the eldest son despite being groomed as such). But normative practices which regulate bodies in the family for the economic well-being of all nevertheless make identity an issue for them at an early age, sometimes unknowingly internalizing these identifications.

This notion of “grooming” children to adopt a particular cultural consciousness occurs again within Jook-Liang’s chapter in regards to The Enemies of Free China game. This game

that Kiam received for his tenth birthday from Third Uncle Lew is an example of how the cultural identities of Chinese youth can again be shaped unbeknownst to the youth themselves. The Hong Kong-made game is a propaganda toy which encouraged overseas Chinese youth to identify with China—and not just any China—but a China controlled by the Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang). China at that time was split along ideological lines and was the site of conflict between the Nationalists, Communists, and local Warlords while also in conflict with imperial Japan. The game consisted of three Enemy-of-China “heads”: one represented a Warlord, another a Communist, and the third a Japanese soldier named Tojo. The cutout hardboard heads set on the kitchen table are described as having “ugly yellow faces, squashed noses and impossible buck teeth” (Choy, 1995, p. 20). The goal of the game is to “whack” the enemy heads with toy swords onto a roll-out floor map of China. The number of heads that land on the map is the number of points received. While the elder members of the family have a serious conversation about the upcoming visit of an Old China friend of Grandmother’s, the two older boys, Kiam and Jung, are heard enthusiastically “whacking” the enemy heads onto the floor in the background: “Kiam swung his toy sword like an ancient warrior-king from the Chinese Opera. Jung preferred to use his sword like a bayonet first, and then, *Whack!*” (Choy, 1995, p. 15).

Although the boys may be too young to be aware of the exact politics taking place in China and thus do not identify with any of the parties fighting for control of China much less the Nationalists (indeed they may simply find the game fun and entertaining), this episode shows nevertheless how the identities of Chinese youth overseas can be indirectly influenced by larger historical events taking place miles away and over which they have little control. It is ultimately the father, the editor of a local newspaper, who encourages the boys to pretend to be Nationalists

in his house. He has openly editorialized that the Chinese in Vancouver must support the Chinese (as in Nationalists) against the Communists and Japanese because “no one else will” (Choy, 1995, p. 17). Indeed, the father is just one individual of a larger Chinatown community generally supportive of the Nationalist ideology. Surrounded by such circumstances both at home and in the community that normalizes who the enemies and allies are in the fight for China, it would be difficult for the boys to identify in any other way. Indeed, imagine the father’s anger if the boys sided with the Communists, or Japanese! Thus the notion of Chineseness in this instance is framed more in terms of differences in political ideology in contrast to differences in language or geographic region of origin.

### **5.3 Chinese Identity and the Connection to Race**

How then does China’s war against Japan influence the identification of Vancouver’s Chinatown Chinese with respect to Canadian society generally? By examining the positioning of the siblings under this frame of reference, the arbitrariness of cultural identities and particularly those fixed cultural categories such as Chinese and Asian becomes evident. Note first that Chinatown is not isolated from the events going on in China: “There were tales of incredible enemy cruelty. A cousin wrote from Shanghai how the Japanese army were burying people alive, women and children” (Choy, 1995, p. 195). The father rages openly against those “dogshit Japs!” (p. 195), and Sek-Lung too is unduly influenced: “They cook up Chinese babies,” he says with authority (p. 195). Compared to the grownups who were born and raised in China, Sekky has only a mythical connection with those “family losses.” Yet, his identification with China is consistent with the prevailing sentiment within the household and the larger Chinatown community.

This sentiment would spread onto the schoolyard playground, as fights would break out between Japanese boys and everyone else. Identifying as Chinese may simply mean you sided with the White kids to beat up the Japanese boys. Sometimes, however, boys in other classes mistake Sekky for Japanese but “Alfred Stevorsky and Joe Eng straightened them out” (p. 196). Sekky also has tin buttons on his lapel with “I am Chinese” or a Chinese flag proudly stamped on it to prevent further confusion. Thus being Chinese sometimes carries less cultural significance and more of a strategic “non-Japanese” identity.

Identification for the youth in Choy’s novel becomes even further complicated when we consider the impact of White racism towards Chinese migrants. These acts of racism often result in an arbitrary or confused sense of identity. Consider the following exchange between Kiam and his father after learning about the atrocities committed by Japan in China:

“I want to join the Canadian military,” Kiam said.

We all turned to see what Father would say.

“You’re not a citizen of Canada,” Father said, calmly. “You were registered in Victoria as a resident alien. We’ve had this talk before. When the Dominion says we are Canadian, then we will all join up!” (Choy, 1995, p. 196)

Kiam seems quite comfortable expressing a hybrid identity at once Chinese and Canadian: He wants to serve as a Canadian soldier overseas in Hong Kong to defend China against the Japanese and cannot understand why he cannot join. His identity is in conflict with the patriarchal authority of his father who views identities and loyalties in more black and white terms. To Kiam’s father, they are not Canadian, and Canadianness is something that can only be granted by an act of law from government. For the father, the spectre of White racism still lingers in his mind and he remains cynical about being fully accepted by Canadian society in

contrast with his children who have no such reservations. Identities are shaped by memory and desire, and Kiam's desire to fight for Canada as Chinese is outweighed by his father's memories of discrimination.

Indeed, some of the children, the youngest in particular, have not yet "learned" to be what mainstream Canadian society thinks of as "Chinese." They have some understanding of Chineseness, but have yet to come into identification as the exotic "other" to White society. Moreover, Sekky is only beginning to learn of his "Asianness" in the way the category homogenizes distinct communities from an Orientalist perspective. This is illustrated in the following passage:

A few years ago, one Halloween night, mobs of white men in masks and armed with clubs had rioted in Japtown, smashing plate glass windows, kicking down doors, looting whatever they could carry away.

Everyone in Chinatown talked about that night.

Some recalled another night, years before I was born, when a similar mob had hit Chinatown. "Years and years ago," Third Uncle told us. "You bet they yank us Chinkee pigtails. Cut off, like this!" Years before that, there had been white mobs in San Francisco that left, some said, three China men, limbs and necks broken, hanging dead from lampposts.

But I wondered why we, the Chinese, had not joined the Halloween mob that attacked Japtown. (Choy, 1995, p. 215)

Sekky is confusing two separate identities: his identity as a Chinese allied with Canadians against the Japanese in the war in China and his developing identity as Asian allied with the Japanese in a struggle against an anti-Oriental Canadian society. His confusion over why the



Chinese had not joined in the mob that attacked Japtown emphasizes how identities are strategic, relational, and dependent on the historical frame of reference. Indeed, the Chinese Exclusion Era in Canada and the United States sometimes created complex and unusual relations between Chinese, Anglo, and other communities. Lisa Rose Mar (2009) explores, for instance, the controversial role of Chinese brokers who acted as intermediaries between Chinese and Anglo institutions. These political middlemen, while sometimes accused of exploiting Chinese labourers, nevertheless created unofficial ties between a disenfranchised Chinese population and mainstream institutions.

Identities are thus a positioning, and how anyone identifies at any one time depends on how the context of practice is framed. For instance, the siblings can identify as Cantonese, Chinese, or Asian depending on the particular context. When Poh-Poh speaks her Sze-yup dialect to them they are Cantonese. When they beat up Japanese kids in school they are Chinese. When they are targets of racial attacks they are Asian. Moreover, these identities only make sense with respect to the “other” they are not. When they are Cantonese, they are not Mandarin. When they are Chinese, they are not Japanese. When they are Asian, they are not White. To borrow from Chun (1996): “In no case is facticity an issue” (p. 135). Like Choy, Chun is critical of the idea there exists some Chinese essence that is passed on from generation to generation or some monolithic Chinese culture. Moreover, this examination of the processes of youth identification show how powerless they can be to resist identities ascribed upon them by family, Vancouver’s Chinatown community, and the events going on in China.

#### **5.4 Jook-Liang, Gender, and the Challenges to a Nationalist Discourse**

The nature of Chineseness discussed in the previous sections has been framed in mainly masculinist terms: the war in China, sojourner societies, family lineage passed on through the

eldest son, and racially motivated playground fights between boys. What then is it like being a girl and Chinese in Vancouver's early Chinatown? And how does a focus purely on Chinese cultural identity and the nature of Chineseness obscure the oppression that girls face living in a Chinese community? Insight into these questions can be gained by an analysis of Jook-Liang's narrative in the novel.

Wayson Choy details well the maltreatment of the only sister Jook-Liang particularly at the hands of Poh-Poh. This is evident when we look at some of the differences in the ways boys and girls are treated in the novel:

Grandmother stepped back onto the porch carrying Sekky. He was more weak than strong, which made Poh-Poh spoil him even more. I bet no one carried me around like that when I was three, except to pass me along to someone else. When I was six, Grandmother already had me folding diapers for Sekky, and when I cried, I cried on my own. (Choy, 1995, p. 62)

Boys are much more valued by Poh-Poh than girls and Jook-Liang is valued in so far as she is able to care for her younger brother. Moreover, Jook-Liang is often verbally abused by her grandmother simply for being born a girl: "A girl-child is *mo yung*—useless" (p. 32); "Feet so stinky. Not pretty girl feet. Cow feet" (p. 33); "Aiiiiiyaah! How one China girl be Shirlee Tempolah?" (p. 34).

But Jook-Liang does not accept such chiding from Poh-Poh quietly and counters by constantly pestering Poh-Poh with her desire to become like Shirley Temple. She dresses up, acts, sings, and dances like her idol despite Poh Poh's reproaches that she could never be like her.

“In China, Jook-Liang, you no play-act anything.” She looked up at her obviously spoiled granddaughter. “In China, they tie up your feet like this—” With her hands, she made tight, bent-back fists. “—No can dan-see!”

“Well,” I said, with my best sense of dignity, mustering up the Toisanese words, “I’m only play-acting for Wong Suk.” This was a lie: I also play-acted for myself, imagining a world where I belonged, dressed perfectly, behaved beyond reproach, and was loved, always loved, and was not, no, not at all, *mo yung*. (Choy, 1995, p. 40)

Jook-Liang’s ambitions to become like Shirley Temple conflicts with the “old China ways” represented by her grandmother who sees Jook-Liang as a spoiled girl and views her acting, singing and dancing to be a waste of time and an insult to the hardships she faced when she was a young girl. Nevertheless, Jook-Liang identifies as Shirley Temple in order to escape from the oppression that she faces being labeled as a “useless” girl-child. She has discovered a more appealing identity—one that takes place primarily in the imaginary—that of being “loved, always loved, and was not, no, not at all, *mo yung*.”

For Jook-Liang, Chinese culture is not about the war in China, a particular dialect, or a style of cuisine. The salience of Chineseness is felt most when women and girls are devalued, when Chinese identity is assumed to be a dominantly masculine identity. Imagining herself as Shirley Temple provides not just an escape, but an escape from a repressive Chinese identity. The forms of Chineseness discussed in the first half of the chapter were framed around issues of war, Chinatown’s early bachelor societies, and the preference for boys. Thus her presence in the story offers an alternative perspective to the question: What is the nature of Chineseness for youth growing up in Vancouver’s early Chinatown? While the boys are positioned positively by a Chinese identity through such things as the Enemies of Free China game, she is positioned

negatively by a Chinese identity which results in Poh-Poh's poor treatment of her. Her desire to become like Shirley Temple offers her a Western identity to strategically escape the Chinese one imposed on her by the Chinatown community.

In a similar manner, Jook-Liang rejects the traditional gender roles represented by the "Old China ways" by strategically claiming a Canadian identity: "We're in Canada, not Old China" (Choy, 1995, p. 191). But Poh-Poh is quick to respond: "We in Chinatown. . . Things different here" (p. 191). Her response makes two assumptions. Firstly, Vancouver's Chinatown is a microcosm of Poh-Poh's Sze-yup village where the family originated. The social values, hierarchies, and organizations that existed there continue on unchanged in the new country. Secondly, Poh-Poh shows a keen knowledge of White racism and assumes it would be impossible for Jook-Liang to achieve a goal such as the one to become like Shirley Temple much in the way Father is reluctant to accept Kiam's desire to become a Canadian soldier. Such hybrid identities seem natural for the younger generation yet inconceivable to the older one due to different understandings of the history of race relations in Canada. Poh-Poh thus attempts to obscure the gender abuse that Liang experiences by evoking a Chinese nationalism. Consider also when she explains to Liang why she should side with China even though they are living in Canada and there is no war in Canada: "'*You* not Canada, Liang,' she said, majestically, '*you* China. Always war in China.'" (p. 37). By masking gender inequalities by framing the argument in nationalist terms, Poh-Poh is able to maintain power over Jook-Liang (and similarly Stepmother) and secure her own dominance as the matriarch of the family. Jook-Liang is thus unfairly made to choose between her identities as a girl and Chinese, between her desire to be like Shirley Temple and respecting the "Old China ways" of her family, and between anti-sexism and anti-racism.

And even though Poh-Poh herself was once a girl, she does not treat Jook-Liang any better than she was treated growing up in “old China.” Poh-Poh continues to reinforce the old hierarchies of male over female and old over young. As the matriarch of the family, she holds a substantial amount of power and authority. Being a woman thus does not necessarily mean one’s politics will also be on the side of women. Judy Yung (1995) explores such dynamics for Chinese American women in San Francisco. She shows how Chinese American women lived cloistered lives in the nineteenth century but soon experienced greater liberation and played a key role in labour and industry particularly during World War II. Yung’s social history importantly challenges the notion of homogeneous womanhood and illustrates the class and generational tensions amongst Chinese women themselves and how women responded differently to their allotted roles in life.

Further complexities are evident when we analyze the novel for some of the ambivalences that come along with constantly shifting identity positions. For instance, although Jook-Liang rejects some aspects of her Chinese identity, she embraces others. She revels in Wong Suk and Poh-Poh’s fantastical Old China stories. She mimics Chinese Opera heroines such as the warrior-woman, the deserted wife, and the helpless heroine. Even Poh-Poh is not implacable in her old China views toward girls. Grandmother shows some tolerance towards Jook-Liang, for instance, when she indulges Jook-Liang and gives in to tying ribbon laces onto her tap-shoes after much begging and pleading. We need to keep in mind, therefore, that identity positions, while necessary to make any meaning of the world, are nevertheless strategic, temporary and contingent.

## 5.5 Meiying, Desire, and the Problems with Identification

In contrast to Jook-Liang, Meiying is less ambivalent towards her Chinese identity. Instead of resisting the “Old China ways,” Meiying accepts them as a stable alternative to a previously chaotic life. Sometimes Poh-Poh chastises Jook-Liang for not being more like her:

Meiying turned out to be a blessing for Mrs. Lim; she had a quick mind, shed few tears, and went gratefully from her own mother’s drunken chaos into the widow’s firm Old China ways. Grandmama repeated Meiying’s mother’s story many times to my sister, Liang. (Choy, 1995, pp. 190-191)

Assumptions about gender roles carried to Canada from the “homeland” do not conflict with her sense of identity in the same way they do for Jook-Liang. Rather, it is Meiying’s secretive relationship with Kazuo, a member of the Asahi Tigers Japanese baseball team, which makes issues of cultural identity not just relevant but ultimately tragic for her.

For Meiying and Kazuo, their differing ethnic categories seem less relevant within the context of their private relationship than within the public sphere. Indeed, it is her very Chinese identity and his Japanese identity which make theirs a forbidden love in the eyes of both the Chinatown community and the larger Canadian society because of the escalating war with Japan and increasing racial tensions in the local community. Members of the Japanese community also show their disapproval of the relationship. Consider the reaction of some of Kazuo’s teammates when Meiying and Sekky visit Oppenheimer park (as narrated by Sekky): “A large menacing [Japanese] man in a black jacket walked over to Kaz and began to shout at him. He pointed angrily at Meiying, shaking his fist and spitting in the sand” (Choy, 1995, p. 213). By juxtaposing both the private and public aspects of their relationship, Choy pushes us to ask why cultural identity matters more within some contexts rather than others. The conflict between her

secretive relationship with Kazuo and society's expectations (of how she should act and identify) is what leads to Meiying's and her unborn baby's death.

The youngest sibling Sekky best represents the condemnation that the larger community has with this interethnic relationship. Growing up with the understanding that the Japanese are nothing more than the enemy, he does not understand why Meiying is sneaking about with a Japanese boy. His young mind does not grasp the idea that love and desire can significantly influence questions of cultural identity and politics:

The whole adventure was inexplicable and deeply exciting. . . .I knew, of course, Meiying was involved in something shameful, something treasonable.

Everyone knew the unspoken law: *Never betray your own kind*. Meiying was Chinese, like me; we were our own kind.

"Keep your business in your pants," Third Uncle had warned Kiam when he got interested in a white waitress at the Blue Eagle who liked to dance with him.

I could see Father's outrage if he ever found out, and I shuddered to imagine how horrified Stepmother would be: *No, no, not Meiying, not the perfect one!*

There was no getting around it. She must have known Kazuo for a long time. She was a *traitor*. Her boyfriend was a Jap, a monster, one of the enemy waiting in the dark to destroy all of us. (Choy, 1995, p. 214)

For everyone other than the couple themselves, cultural identities eclipse all other identity positions. Cultural identities, particularly those defined around racial lines, are seen as fixed and this polarizes the community—to cross racial lines would be unthinkable during this juncture in the history of Vancouver's Chinatown as the Second World War drove racial tensions to a peak.

Choy's telling of this interethnic relationship belongs to the genre of socially "forbidden" love stories that have a long history. Notable works in this genre are Shakespeare's tragedies *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* to the more contemporary *Twilight* saga by Stephenie Meyer. Another notable work is Elizabeth Nunez's *Prospero's Daughter* (2006) that tells the story of a young woman, like Meiying, who must cross social and racial boundaries for love. In all of these works, a choice is made between an emotional attachment and social acceptability. Not all interracial relationships, however, are frowned upon within Choy's novel. An exception is the marriage between Yip Gong and Nellie, a White woman educated in China and the United States. She speaks five Chinese dialects fluently and sometimes better than those born into the language. She was also midwife for the delivery of many Chinatown babies: "Poh-Poh said that Nellie Yip knew both white and Old China medicine ways, but she was mainly Chinese in her heart, which was all that mattered" (Choy, 1995, p. 96).

Choy's use of this relationship between Meiying and Kazuo (and even Yip Gong and Nellie) makes apparent the arbitrariness of racial and ethnic categories. For instance, Sekky has difficulty distinguishing between Kazuo and the Chinese soldiers he's seen in the movies, between enemy and ally:

He had a high forehead, deep black eyes like coal, thin lips; his hair was shiny with hair cream. He looked like a Chinese movie soldier, a Good Guy, in one of those films we saw at the China War Effort Fund Drive. But he was *Japanese*. (Choy, 1995, p. 211)

Sekky's misunderstanding not only proves the folly in trying to distinguish between someone who is Chinese and Japanese, but also that one's appearance will somehow determine one's politics. The following family conversation furthers the point as a distinction is made between Japanese who are born in Canada and those born in Japan:



At home one evening, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked Father, “Are all Japs our enemy, even the ones in Canada?”

Stepmother sat stiffly; her set of four knitting needles stopped clicking. Father shuffled his newspapers with authority.

“Yes,” he said, with great finality. He looked sternly across at Stepmother.

“All Japs are potential enemies . . . even if Stepmother doesn’t realize that.”

“Well, Sek-Lung,” Stepmother began, “some Japanese persons were born here and—”

Father sharply snapped his papers. Kiam looked warningly at me, trying to signal me to shut up. Then, in an effort to lessen the tension, he said, “The ones who are born here are only *half* enemies.” (pp. 224-225)

The nonsensical notion of a “half enemy” or half identity assumes that identities are somehow quantifiable and divisible, a perverted extension of racial classifications often invoked in many racist discourses. Canclini (2005) reminds us of the need to acknowledge the extent to which hybrid processes implicit in terms such as “half-breed” or “octaroon” are destructive and signify unequal power relations. Indeed, Kazuo, a Japanese born in Canada, exhibits a hybrid identity that is both Canadian and Japanese. However, regardless of his desired identity, within the eyes of the Chinatown community and the larger Canadian society, he is a member of Imperial Japan and a “potential enemy.” The Second World War had escalated fears and racial tensions to the point that the entire Japanese community in Vancouver, many of who were second and third generation Canadian, was absurdly ascribed identities as Japanese loyalists. So while evoking the theoretical notion of cultural hybridity may seem to be politically astute (as in second or third

generation Japanese Canadians claiming citizenship rights), it may have little relevance in practice.

Meiying's story thus illustrates some of the problems with identity especially when one's desired identity conflicts with an ascribed one. There is a politics of identity within the Chinatown community and the larger Canadian society which conflicts with Meiying and Kazuo's secret relationship. Their love raises the question of why they should identify at all? Why must they choose between being Chinese or Japanese or just young people? But the "reality" of identity cannot be ignored especially during World War Two when national boundaries were rigid and nationalities were polarized. By making the authorial choice to tragically end Meiying and her unborn baby's lives, Choy makes the reader face the "truth" of identity and the tragic consequences that can come from identifying. In theory, identities may seem impossible, yet Choy's story gets us to imagine a world where they can have real material effects.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (Kingston, 1975, p. 6)

In this famous passage from *The Woman Warrior* the narrator suggests the impossibility of separating the various identity positions that define an individual in order to distill an "authentic" Chineseness. Having conflicting and competing identity positions is a part of what makes up a human being. Choy's novel illustrates well how Chinese youth can be pulled in numerous directions by family, the Chinatown community, Canadian society, and by their own personal

desires, pleasures, imaginations, dreams, and memories. They can therefore identify across multiple valences of oppression: race, ethnicity, gender, generation, and class, and can face conflict when attempting to act exclusively in terms of any single political interest. Jook-Liang, for instance, should not have to choose between her Chinese identity, Canadian identity, or her identity as a nine year-old girl; and neither should Meiying have been made to choose between her relationship with Kazuo and her loyalty to the Chinatown community. Both stories thus illustrate the limitations of identification itself.

## **Chapter 6: An Analysis of the Chinese Club Controversy at UBC and the Problematic Meaning of “Chinese” for the Chinese Varsity Club**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In September of 2008, the Chinese Varsity Club (CVC), a University of British Columbia social club, released three controversial Internet video clips made in the style of the popular “Get a Mac” television commercials. Complaints from four other clubs—the Chinese Students Association (CSA), the Association of Chinese Graduates, the Chinese Collegiate Society, and YOURS Student Association—were lodged with the Alma Mater Society (AMS) as a result. (These clips can be located and viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/user/SuperPetelee> under the title “CVC.”) All the complaints point to the videos’ derogatory and culturally offensive nature. The AMS agreed with the complaints and ruled that the CVC executive be required to remove all the videos from online viewing. Other disciplinary actions included equity training and forfeiting their table for the first day of clubs days. The CVC executive was also required to write specific letters of apology to the four clubs that lodged official complaints and to complete one year of probation, which required reporting to the AMS twice per term (Haves, 2008; Hansen, 2008; links to both articles can be found in the References section).

This chapter analyzes how some groups may find these video clips, intended to expand the membership of the CVC and to promote the club as a non-exclusionary “multicultural” club, objectionable and exclusionary. But more interestingly, the chapter examines how the members of the CVC struggle to construct a unique cultural identity for itself on a campus with competing ethnic Chinese clubs. The club stresses on its website (<http://ubccvc.com>) that one does not have to be Chinese in order to join the club, that the ethnic name of the club is a mere reflection of the club’s history, that the club welcomes all cultures and ethnicities, and that events aim to promote

multiculturalism. How then can a club that purports itself to be inclusive make such a mistake with this ad campaign? How does this “non-Chinese” Chinese club come to terms with its rich historical past as a once vibrant centre of social activities for native-born Chinese students excluded from other campus clubs? How does the “Chinese” in the Chinese Varsity Club act as both a blessing and a curse, a source of unity yet a potential seed of the club’s own destruction? These internal contradictions that the CVC faces reveal some of the problems with identification itself. This chapter also suggests how the theory on cultural hybridity can open up a new space for CVC members. This hybrid position will privilege neither the club’s historical roots in China nor its Canadian origins, but acknowledge its unique history and respect both non-Canadian and Canadian cultural characteristics.

## **6.2 An Analysis of the Internet Video Clips**

Claims of the video clips being controversial centre around the way they caricature new Chinese immigrants (many of whom are English language learners) who are the dominant members of the other competing ethnic Chinese clubs. These clubs are derogatorily grouped under the label of a “Typical Honger Club.” The members of such a club, represented by the “PC” character, are stereotyped as recently immigrated from either Hong Kong, Taiwan, or China (and jokingly Richmond), heavily accented, speaking poor English (mistaking “Viagra” for “variety”), no fun, nerdy, and clannish. This is in contrast to the members of the CVC, represented by the “Mac” character, who speak Canadian English without an accent, are predominantly native-born, smarter, more well-rounded, more fun, and open to friends outside of their ethnic group.

Such stereotyping is reminiscent of the history of racial stereotyping of Asians in Canada by Whites as unassimilable and more recently the stereotyping of Asian university students in a

*Macleans* article as no fun and a model minority (Findlay & Kohler, 2010). Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2004b) have written about the attitudes of North American-born Chinese youth towards recent Chinese immigrant youth and conjecture that:

Second-generation Asian American youth disparage and distance themselves from their less acculturated counterparts because the newly arrived are a blatant symbol and glaring reminder of the negative stereotype of Asians as “forever foreign.” By distancing themselves from foreign-born youth, the more acculturated 1.5 and second generations attempt to actively assert an identity that is diametrically opposed to the “forever foreign” stereotype—one that is unquestionably “American.” (p. 322)

Lee and Zhou (2004b) go on to argue that foreign-born Asians in the United States cast an “immigrant shadow” on all Asians that marks them as foreign. American-born youth realize the negative consequences associated with foreign-born status and choose to disassociate with newly arrived immigrant youth, even those from the same ethnic group. The irony of the video clips then is that the CVC are enacting upon the new immigrant Chinese clubs the very thing they fear being done to themselves—being stereotyped as “forever foreign.” The caricaturing and exclusionary tactics depicted in these clips are eerily reminiscent of the ones historically used by Whites—the gatekeepers of Canadian citizenship—against the Chinese in Canada. Ironically, such exclusionary attitudes were the very impetus for the founding of the CVC over a half-century ago by a small group of native-born Chinese students at UBC who felt excluded from other student bodies (Ng, 1999, p. 47). The videos thus reveal a gross ignorance of not just Canadian history but the club’s own history amongst the CVC executive.

Another misstep by the club is in its usage of the term multicultural to describe itself, an act which merely serves to mask the lie of the club as non-exclusive. The woman representing

the CVC loosely defines multicultural as “when a group of people with different backgrounds get together and have some fun.” She is not referring to Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism but is using the word as an adjective in the sense of different cultural groups coming together to share experiences. The point that the CVC is trying to make is that other ethnic Chinese clubs are exclusive and only accept people with a Chinese or Chinese-speaking background. The CVC, on the other hand, is not like these other clubs (Chinese only) and, despite its name, accepts members of all backgrounds and hence is a multicultural club. But is the club really “multicultural” if it discriminates against landed immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or China? The Internet clips clearly show that recent Chinese immigrants are not welcome. Thus the CVC is shown to be just as exclusive as the other clubs it attempts to criticize—it is the exclusive domain of the English-speaking and Canadian-born or raised. By definition, multicultural implies a degree of cultural heterogeneity, but for the CVC, there is an assumption of a certain degree of cultural homogeneity.

Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of colonial mimicry, the idea of colonized subjects imitating colonial ideas and practices, is relevant in this discussion:

Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus the sign of the double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the other as it visualizes power.  
(p. 86)

A key point about mimicry is that it is a form of dissidence by colonial subjects. But while Canada is somewhat ambiguous as a postcolonial site (Mishra & Hodge, 1991), the CVC can be loosely attributed with this “double articulation.” The “PC” character is representative of the colonized subject. The “Mac” character, on the other hand, is a hybrid subject, possessing some

of the characteristics of the colonized subject but also capable of mimicking colonial ideas and practices. These differences between “PC” and “Mac,” particularly with regards to unequal cultural and power relations, become evident from the beginning. The woman’s fluency with the English language and Canadian culture symbolizes the West’s superiority over the “Orient,” represented by the “PC” character who seems no better than a village idiot. Yet the woman’s power over the young man who represents the “Typical Honger Club” is insignificant set against the larger Canadian cultural landscape that puts Whites at the center and all other cultures at the periphery. That is, even though the woman is exerting some dominance over another visible minority, such dominance is dwarfed by the long history of racism against the Chinese in Canada.

The “Get a Mac” ad campaign is a theatrical “visualization” of power. The CVC portray themselves as the gatekeepers of an authentic Canadianness by keeping the “foreigners” out of the club while awarding a symbolic badge of Canadian citizenship to those who do join. Yet at the same time, the CVC would be against any notion of Canadianness that accepts Whites only. The CVC thus upholds a Canadianness that is English-speaking and native-born while disavowing a Canadianness that is strictly based on race. Their act of “colonial mimicry” can be interpreted as a strategy of shifting the criteria of Canadianness from one based on race to one based on language and place of birth. It is also notable that the videos seem to represent ethnic CVC members as passing into Whiteness through an unmarked Chineseness: in one of the clips a Caucasian man Carlos, a “multicultural friend” who also happened to be CVC president at the time of the videos’ release, invites the CVC woman to a party. But the very fact that the president of the club can pass as a member of “White Canadian society” suggests that a non-Asian wields the real power in a club whose members are predominantly Asians. These video



clips can therefore be interpreted as mere projections of a cultural hierarchy dominated by White Canadian society. No matter how much the CVC belittles the other ethnic Chinese clubs, they too are victims of the “colonial project.”

This UBC club controversy gives further fuel to those critics of Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism who say it continues to push certain ethno-racial groups to the margins and fails to deal with the problems of systemic racism. “While ‘tolerating,’ ‘accommodating,’ ‘appreciating,’ and ‘celebrating,’ differences, it allows for the preservation of the cultural hegemony of the dominant cultural group” (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995, p. 48). Likewise, by championing itself as a multicultural club, the CVC has created a veneer of tolerance and equality while glossing over issues of inequality, power and privilege.

### **6.3 The Question of the Rickshaw**

The controversy over the Internet video clips was not the first time the CVC had raised the ire other ethnic Chinese clubs at UBC. In 1964, a dispute broke out between the Chinese Varsity Club and the Chinese Overseas Students Association (COSA, now called CSA, the Chinese Students Association). According to Ng (1999), the dispute was a struggle over the power to define what is authentic Chinese culture and is worth retelling in its entirety:

In the 1950s, the Chinese Varsity Club for the local-born was the only ethnic Chinese student organization and was, therefore, assumed to speak to the university audience for all things Chinese. This changed with the arrival of an increasing number of Chinese immigrant and foreign students towards the end of the decade. With a predominantly Hong Kong background, in 1960 this group was large enough to set up the Chinese Overseas Students Association.

From all indications, relations between these two Chinese student bodies at the university were poor. Common interest in recreational activities and social events did not necessarily draw them together. Actually, the Chinese Varsity Club preferred to co-sponsor campus activities with the Japanese Nisei Varsity Club, an organization of fellow Canadian-born Japanese, who were likewise in search of a locally derived identity. As for the new immigrant students, they were equally determined to dissociate themselves from the *tusheng* [Canadian-born], evidently because they were upset by the Varsity Club's "mis-representation" of Chinese culture. One revealing episode was the argument over "The Question of the Rickshaw," which broke out in February 1964.

As part of the celebration of the Chinese New Year on campus, the Varsity Club performed a lion dance and displayed a rickshaw. The latter was a rather common exhibit, presented on occasions of Chinese festivity as an exotic "Oriental" artefact. The Chinese Overseas Students Association had voiced its objection in the past, but this time it launched a publicity campaign in the *Chinese Voice* to denounce the event as "a national disgrace" (*youru guoti*). In an open letter it took pains to point out the origin of the rickshaw as an American invention in Meiji Japan. Once transplanted to China and various colonial cities in Southeast Asia, the vehicle had become an unmistakable symbol of the West's subjugation of Chinese people. To reenact the scene was humiliating. The letter went on to ridicule the Varsity Club's undertaking as "laughable" because it served to reveal the native-born's superficial grasp of Chinese culture.

In a rejoinder submitted to the *Chinese Voice*, the Chinese Varsity Club reiterated the popularity and success of the event. Unfortunately, the explanation just provided more ammunition for its critics, who jumped on the organizer for being brazen and for

distorting and shortchanging Chinese culture for the satisfaction and curiosity of the non-Chinese. (pp. 57-58)

This dispute was clearly won by the immigrant Chinese youth. By carefully tracing the colonial roots of the rickshaw, they were able to expose the Chinese Varsity Club's perpetuation of White stereotypes of the Chinese as the exotic other. More importantly, however, this incident shows the local-born's growing disinterest in representing Chinese culture especially when a more authentic Chinese youth from Hong Kong began arriving (Ng, 1999). Thus, in their search for a more locally derived identity, the Canadian-born Chinese began to shift the locus of identity construction from the place of descent to the place of settlement, to adopt a more North American heritage rather than a Chinese one, and to choose English as their native tongue rather than Chinese.

A look at some of the similarities and differences between these two club controversies, spaced over forty years apart, is instructive. Both illustrate cases of intraethnic conflict—new immigrant versus native-born Chinese, yet the conflicts are framed by an overarching White hegemony symbolized by the rickshaw in the older incident and mimicry in the more recent one. The ignorance displayed by the CVC in both incidents suggests that any corrective measures to be taken need to consider these larger issues of colonial power and privilege that are foregrounded by a critical or “revolutionary” multiculturalism (McLaren, 1997) and not treat either conflict as a mere squabble between two minority groups over club memberships.

There is a notable difference between the two conflicts in terms of the nature and direction of the criticisms between the two groups. In the rickshaw incident, COSA criticizes the CVC for not being Chinese enough. The later incident has the CVC ridiculing the CSA (and other ethnic Chinese clubs) for not being Canadian enough. This shift is due in part to Canada's

policy adoption of official multiculturalism. Prior to adoption, the new immigrants could easily criticize the native-born for losing their Chinese identity since being Chinese at the time was irreconcilable with being Canadian. But after the policy was in place, visible minorities were encouraged to adapt to and identify with Canada while celebrating their ethnicity (Ng, 1999, p. 106). This change in sociocultural context thus empowered the CVC to make fun of competing club members' immigrant accents, clannishness, and general inability to adapt to Canadian values. (Notice how in one of the clips, "THC" plays badminton, whereas "CVC" plays a variety of sports including hockey, thus playing on Chinese and Canadian stereotypes.)

Furthermore, these two club controversies highlight the continuing complexities of Chinese identity as new immigration renews questions about the meaning of being Chinese. In the earlier incident, the CVC and COSA hold different "stakes" in the representation of an authentic Chineseness. COSA, whose membership consisted largely of new Hong Kong immigrants, had stronger ties to China and felt it had greater authority in the representation of China and thus found the display of the rickshaw offensive. The CVC, on the other hand, had looser ties to China. This distance from the "homeland" may have contributed to CVC's disinterest in the "proper" representation of Chineseness and they thus wondered what the fuss was all about. This indifference is further reflected in some of the CVC's responses to the controversy in the local Chinese newspapers where they reiterated the popularity and success of the event and downplayed any wrongdoing (Ng, 1999, p. 58). In one paper they wrote: "We think that [COSA] is making a mountain out of a molehill" ("Around Chinatown," 1964, p. 23). Over forty years later, a similar response from the CVC over the Internet video clip controversy was made by their president Carlos McCallister who felt the issue had been blown out of proportion and emphasized the intent of the campaign to diversify and expand CVC membership

(Haves, 2008). While the CVC of the past may have felt some responsibility to share with the community its “Chinese culture,” there is no such compulsion for the CVC today. The video clips and McCallister’s comments suggest, quite the opposite, that the club needs to overcome its own categories in order to thrive and survive in the market of student activities. So while both incidents generated controversy, the earlier one does so by attempting to uphold its own categories while the later one does so by attempting to relinquish them. The CVC today has significantly distanced itself from its historical roots as a haven for students of Chinese descent and its mandate is more concerned with expanding membership.

#### **6.4 “Chinese” Clubs and Their Stake in Chineseness**

Today, numerous other ethnic Chinese clubs at UBC fill the shoes that the CVC once wore alone to meet the social, cultural, and even spiritual needs of an amazingly diverse Chinese student population. Many of these clubs make contributions to the community and none feel the need to “educate” the larger community about Chinese culture. (What would “Chinese culture” be anyways and whose version would be correct?) Although each club’s membership is predominantly ethnic Chinese, each club serves the cultural interests of a specific segment of the Chinese student body, often distinguished by the language spoken or country of origin. Both the CVC and the COSA (now CSA) continue to flourish and recruit a similar membership as in previous generations. The CVC’s membership today consists largely of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students although it has, obviously, made efforts to recruit non-Asian members. Activities are all conducted in English. The CSA caters largely to Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Hong Kong and activities are conducted in Cantonese.

Other ethnic Chinese clubs have joined these two long-standing ones to reflect the growing diversity of the Chinese population. In 1987, the Chinese Collegiate Society (CCS)

formed and its members are mainly Mandarin-speaking students from Mainland China. Three years later, the Taiwan Association formed, also for Mandarin-speaking students but from Taiwan. Moreover, clubs like the Dragon Seed club, in addition to offering social functions, also offer tutoring help, volunteer opportunities, and poker and mahjong tournaments and have members who span the cultural spectrum from Canadian-born Chinese to newly immigrated Chinese. Furthermore, there are many religious and hobby clubs whose membership is predominantly ethnic Chinese such as the Chinese Christian Fellowship, Chinese Catholic Society, and the Chinese Chess Club to name just a few.

It will be argued that all these clubs have a very real and tangible claim to some aspect of Chineseness that justifies their membership's collective identification as a "Chinese" club beyond the idea that the majority of their members share a similar race or ethnicity *except* for the CVC. The CVC's ties to Chineseness are becoming increasingly ambivalent and the term "Chinese" in its unreconstructed sense (i.e. one linked to race and ethnicity) may no longer be useful in describing the club. The CSA, CCS, and Taiwan Association, on the other hand, cater to (roughly) the Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan student populations respectively by organizing social events or activities around shared interests and experiences often related to their places of origin. Other clubs such as the Dragon Seed club help new students from China make the transition to living and studying in Canada and services for the ethnic Chinese religious clubs are given mainly in Cantonese or Mandarin. Although none of these clubs are necessarily restricted to students of Chinese descent—many non-Chinese speakers, for instance, are sometimes accommodated with English translations at Chinese religious club meetings and one need not be Chinese in order to learn or play Chinese Chess—the very roots of each of these clubs are tied to some place, history, experience, or culture traditionally deemed Chinese or

linked to China as a nation which justifies the club's name. Thus, it is not the fact that Chinese is in the name of the club which makes it Chinese; it is the activities which the members perform, whether it be singing karaoke in Cantonese or playing a board game with origins from China, that solidify the club's cultural identity.

Put another way, being a member of the club does not make one Chinese, it is rather the members' activities that make the club Chinese. There is no Chinese essence that each member possesses. Indeed, it is conceivable for the membership of any one of these clubs to consist of all non-Chinese students and still justifiably be called a Chinese club based on the clubs' activities alone. For instance, the Chinese Chess Club does not need to have any "Chinese" members to be a "Chinese" club. Neither does the Chinese Catholic Society if the only thing that makes it Chinese is that the services are given in Cantonese or Mandarin—there are many non-Chinese who can speak these two languages fluently (however, see Carnes and Yang (2004) on the complex intersections of race, language, and religion). Indeed, it is not unheard of for schools around the world to have an Africa club, China club, or British club whose members do not "look" "African," "Chinese," or "British" and are merely interested in studying the history and culture of the region.

The point behind these hypothetical examples is to show that the connotation of the term "Chinese" for these clubs depends on the frame of reference (note the similar discussion in the previous chapter on how individuals can be considered Asian, Chinese, or Cantonese depending on the context). For the Chinese Chess Club, its Chineseness is based on the origins of the game in China. For the Chinese Catholic Society, its Chineseness is based in part on its services given in Chinese. And for the Chinese Students Association, its Chineseness is based on its members speaking Cantonese and originating predominantly from Hong Kong. At no point is the race of

their members, the “fact” of their Chineseness, an issue in determining each clubs’ cultural identity—it is rather the activities performed by its members which do, whether it be speaking a particular language or sharing experiences that come from a common history or place of origin. Thus in order to name a club Chinese there should be some justification more than just the race or ethnicity of its members.

To reject someone from the Chinese Christian Fellowship because he is White is racist, but for a White student to decide not to join the club because he would not understand the service delivered in Cantonese is merely regrettable. Similarly, for the Taiwan Association to fail to appeal to a student from Mainland China because she has no history or interest in Taiwan and will not have anything in common to share with the other members is one thing, but for the Taiwan Association to reject such a student because she is simply from Mainland China is quite another. I am under no illusions, however, that the distinctions between race or ethnicity and language, culture, or history are entirely clear, as it is entirely possible some students choose a club simply on the basis that the other members are racially similar to themselves. And it is possible that some clubs hold events in a particular language without translation in part to maintain a racial homogeneity although no club would admit to this practice as such. That is, some clubs may claim to be diverse and multicultural but the activities of the group make it difficult for people who are racially different to feel accepted.

## **6.5 To Identify as Chinese or Not?**

The previous discussion suggests that for a club to label itself as Chinese purely on the basis of the race or ethnicity of its membership is risky and potentially self-defeating. Yet this is exactly the predicament the CVC is slowly finding itself in and, I will argue, the cause of many of its controversies and “crises of identity.” The “Chinese” is kept in the name of the club



because of its history as the first Chinese club on campus at a time when Chinese students were excluded from other clubs (Ng, 1999). Has the CVC outgrown its “roots” particularly at a time when there seems to be a proliferation of other Chinese clubs? Hall (1990) speaks of the ruptures and discontinuities caused by history on our sense of cultural identity: “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (p. 225). The meaning of Chinese to the Chinese Varsity Club of the 1950s is different from the meaning of Chinese to the club today. The cultural identity of the club in times past was defined primarily by the essentializing gaze of the West, and carried both a political and practical purpose. But today, the club’s Chineseness is becoming less important and supplanted by a more “authentic” Chinese student population. The “Chinese,” then, in the Chinese Varsity Club is becoming increasingly more symbolic.

Another reason why the CVC may be maintaining the “Chinese” in Chinese Varsity Club is because the majority of Asian members are stereotypical “bananas”: White on the inside and yellow on the outside. That is, members are typically English-speaking and North American born or raised, but of Asian descent with Asian physical characteristics and possibly immigrant Asian parents. For instance, Chinese “bananas” may speak Chinese fluently and hold stereotypical Chinese cultural values but are “often criticized as ‘not Chinese enough’, or being ‘too Westernized’” (Ang, 2003, p. 152). This “between two cultures” stereotype may provide a powerful social connection and cohesion for club members. Indeed, no one can argue against the club’s popularity and long-standing reputation as one of the largest social clubs on campus (over 1200 members according to its website). But is “Chinese” still an appropriate label for this club

when, unlike the other Chinese clubs, social events and activities are neither conducted in the Chinese language nor revolve around common experiences living in a particular region of China. Quite the opposite, CVC members are defined primarily by their fluency in English and distance from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China as seen in the controversial Internet video clips. Is there anything else Chinese about this club to justify the name? Is being a banana Chinese enough or, indeed, is it “too Westernized?”

We are beginning to see how concepts like Chinese, as essential markers of identity, are not fixed, secure, and complete but in the process of change and transformation. They are

No longer serviceable—“good to think with”—in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them—albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms.

(Hall, 1996b, p. 1)

Drawing on cultural hybridity theory may provide an alternative to essentialism. Thus a CVC that recognizes its hybrid identity and makes it central to its definition will not shy away from giving members opportunities to explore what it means to be labeled a “banana.” This hybrid approach can be the glue that binds the club while not necessarily excluding others from participating, as the club is primarily North American in outlook. It is a mistake for the club to promote itself primarily as a multicultural club, accepting of all, pretending they are colour blind and not realizing they are a “new ethnicity” themselves. The Internet video clips illustrate how their multicultural approach, through mimicry, places White English speaking Canadians at the centre (and practically invisible) and all others, including the CVC members themselves, at the periphery. Neither should the club promote itself as an essentialized Chinese club. The

rickshaw incident has shown that the club has sufficiently distanced itself from China and adopted more North American sensibilities. The majority of CVC members are neither purely Asian nor White Canadians, but are *both* and should not privilege one over the other.

Ien Ang (2003) is critical of such diaspora politics which place emphasis on identity rather than the complicated entanglements that occur when different peoples come together. Such politics

Is based on the premise that ancestry is ultimately more important than present place of living in determining one's contemporary identity and sense of belonging. It is also premised on the notion that the signifier "Chinese" alone, whatever its meaning, is sufficient to differentiate between people who do and do not belong to this massive diasporic community, and to somehow seal the shared identity of all those who do belong. One perhaps unintended effect of this is the inevitable hardening of the boundary between "Chinese" and "non-Chinese." (p. 145)

She argues, instead, for the importance of hybridity and the CVC can act as an interesting site for a study on the processes of hybridization when "East" meets "West": "It is in these borderzones that the fuzziness of the identity line can be best recognised and where the fundamental uncertainty about where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begin can be empirically examined" (p. 148). The Internet video clips show the club attempting to champion itself as a "multicultural club" and erasing boundaries and difference. Instead, a hybrid analysis suggests that such boundaries need to be confronted and problematized.

So should the "Chinese" stay or go? Why not call themselves the "University Varsity Club"? If they stay with "Chinese" Varsity Club, the name should be understood in its deconstructed form. That is, their Chineseness is put under continuous erasure and neither

Chineseness nor Canadianness is privileged. If it is not understood in this sense, the only basis for the club being Chinese is the club members' common race or ethnicity since activities and events have little connection with China itself. This may lead to more "crises of identity" and other controversies in the future. (A possible "middle-ground" may be the "Chinese-Canadian" Varsity Club. But, beside its wordiness, the category "Chinese-Canadian" has a historical and political connotation that a "fun" social club may not want to be associated with. See Ng (1999, chap. 7) and Stanley (2011) for more on this cultural category.)

The other option is dropping the "Chinese" altogether, which will open itself up to a wider membership but lose the social and symbolic force that comes with being Chinese and by implication a "banana." The club would disconnect itself from its past legacy as a pioneering Chinese club and, more importantly, a potential political coalition with other Chinese ethnic clubs against racism becomes less likely. The *Macleans* article "Too Asian" which incites the racial profiling of all Asians—both new immigrants and the native-born—is an example of an issue where the CVC can join with other Chinese clubs, indeed other Asian clubs, to raise an objection against. Thus, the question of labeling a club as "Chinese" or not reveals some of the problems associated with identification but also points to the importance of identity itself. Identification creates both losses and gains. (The club may have already gone the way of KFC, which has adopted the acronym as a meaningless string of letters in its attempt to distance its brand from the notion of being "fried," by the prominent way in which they display their CVC logo on t-shirts and at promotional events.)

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This analysis has argued that the actions of the Chinese Varsity Club with the release of controversial Internet video clips lacked forethought and that the claims the clips were

“culturally offensive” towards other ethnic Chinese clubs were justified. Through acts of mimicry, the club executive “visualized” power by defining, in their own terms, a Canadianness based on English language and local birthplace, while implying a disavowal of one based strictly on race. And more to the point of this thesis, the incident has shown the unstable meaning of Chineseness and questioned its usefulness as a category of identification for diasporic Chinese youth. While many Chinese ethnic clubs on the UBC campus label themselves as “Chinese,” they each have different claims to Chineseness based on differences in such things as language, place of origin, history, or politics. The CVC, however, has a more symbolic relationship with Chineseness. For instance, the club has a past history of being a haven for Chinese students once excluded from Whites-only clubs on campus. And today’s members are predominantly stereotypical “bananas,” many of who are born or raised in Canada with immigrant Asian parents. Thus for CVC members, it makes more sense to identify with North America rather than some distant essentialized homeland in Asia. This chapter has argued that the club examines its hybrid character and privileges neither a purely Canadian nor Chinese sensibility, but both. Activities should centre on local experiences that negotiate what it means to be “where you’re at.” While essentialized cultural categories such as “Chinese” serve a political purpose, they do gloss over internal differences, and this chapter has illustrated some of the subethnic contestations that can occur. The next chapter will explore some of the implications for antiracism education of this critical engagement with difference.

## **Chapter 7: Rethinking Chinese Youth Identities and the Implications for Antiracism Education**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Gordon Pon (2000a) states that there is a lack of educational research particularly with regards to issues of race and racism on Asian Canadians, who are often excluded from discussions on antiracism education. He argues that this absence is “inextricably linked to the context within which antiracism education emerged and the prevalent view of Asians as ‘model minorities’” (p. 140). Pon states that antiracism education in Canada was a response to the failure of multicultural education to deal with systemic and structural racism in the school system and meet the needs of Black students who continued to show poor school performance. And although antiracism education has broadened to include other groups who face racism in schools, “the focus on racism’s negative effects on students’ educational experiences and the dominant view that Asian students do extremely well at school position Asian Canadians outside, or on the margins of, debates about antiracism education” (p. 140). Pon continues by remarking that the dominance of the Black/White paradigm in antiracism education ignores the role of Chinese labour and migration in the formation of the Canadian nation state.

This final chapter will follow Pon’s lead and explore the place of Asian Canadians in debates on antiracism education using the conclusions of the preceding chapters as supporting arguments. In particular, this thesis suggests that antiracism education can expand to include the critical engagement with difference within ethno-racial communities. The Black/White paradigm is predicated on the power of a dominant group being exerted upon a non-dominant group and, like multicultural education, framed around the idea of a majority culture at the top of the power pyramid with several minority cultures below (Yon, 1999a). But such a framework

overshadows the oppression that can be committed between two non-dominant or minority groups towards each other. The previous two chapters have already suggested that within Vancouver's Chinese community alone there exists differences in the treatment of boys and girls, youth and elders, and the local-born compared to the foreign-born. Antiracism movements would benefit by taking into consideration these more complex Foucauldian power dynamics and how minorities themselves engage in acts of social hatred including racism.

## **7.2 Masculinity, Patriarchy, and Ruptures within Chinese Communities**

In "The Art of War or The Wedding Banquet? Asian Canadians, Masculinity, and Antiracism Education", Gordon Pon (2000a) critically examines one well-known incident of social hatred enacted within the Asian American community: "The debate centres around representations of Asian masculinity. Revisionists such as Frank Chin desire images of Asian men as warriors, whereas feminists like King-Kok Cheung and Maxine Hong Kingston criticize such desires as patriarchal and essentialist" (p. 141). According to Pon (2000a), Chan, Chin, Inada, and Wong (1991) have argued that popular Western culture has historically portrayed the Asian male as emasculated and effeminate and have attempted to counter such negative portrayals with images of Chinese male warriors by celebrating Chinese and Japanese heroic classics such as *The Art of War* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Moreover, Chin (1991) writes a particularly scathing critique of Maxine Hong Kingston's book *The Woman Warrior* (1975) accusing her, as Pon (2000a) puts it, of "pandering to White society's racism and perpetuating the emasculation of Chinese men" (p. 142). But while Chin and his co-editors attempt to restore the heroic martial tradition, they unknowingly buttress patriarchal norms of masculinity and misogyny: "The trouble in Chin's new caricatures of Chinese masculinity lies in their naively erasing Chinese men's contradictory position—oppressed by racism themselves but

also oppressing Chinese women. Chin affords no space to engage with such contradictions” (Pon, 2000a, p. 144). Furthermore, Chin’s stable and essentialized notion of masculinity does not value other heterogeneous conceptions of Chinese masculinity.

Pon’s astute analysis of this rupture within the Asian American community has implications for antiracism education. Chin’s “stinging attack on White supremacy and his opposition to the cultural castration of Asian masculinity gloss over the complex dynamics of gender, class, and power struggles and differences among Asian men and women” (Pon, 2000a, p. 147). Racism mattered to Chin, sexism less so. Perhaps a better strategy would have involved an integrative antiracism approach. That is, while the salience of race can be primary, an integrative antiracism “acknowledges our multiple, shifting and often contradictory identities and subject positions . . . [it] rejects meta-narratives or grand theories . . . in effect, calls for multiplicative, rather than additive, analysis of social oppression” (Dei, 1996, p. 70). While the primacy of race may have been a political decision for Chin, it was at the expense of building an Asian American coalition across both genders seeking the same objective of social change. Pon (2000a) thus concludes his essay by remarking that antiracism education “still manifests a clinging to innocence” (p. 148), holding that racial minorities possess little or no power and cannot engage in acts of domination and that it is justified to overlook intragroup ruptures if it means gaining power from the majority.

A similar analysis to Pon’s may be applied to the subject matter of this thesis. But rather than asking how Asian masculinity might figure productively in antiracism pedagogy, we may instead ask how might Vancouver’s Chinese youth identities both historical and contemporary contribute to the debates in antiracism education. While Pon (2000a) uses Ang Lee’s exploration of heterogeneous masculinities in the film *The Wedding Banquet* to engage differences within



Chinese American communities, *The Jade Peony* can similarly serve as a starting point from which to explore the rifts within Vancouver's Chinese community prior to the Second World War. Jook-Liang's narrative, for instance, suggests she is a rare voice in a community dominated by men, where the perspectives of women and youth are not valued. Recall how she is told repeatedly by Poh-Poh that she is "*mo yung*," a spoiled and worthless girl-child. She is reminded that her dreams to be a dancer like Shirley Temple show a disregard for the poverty and famine Poh-Poh experienced as a child growing up in China. Jook-Liang also struggles to be heard in a household where three brothers are swept up by the events of the war in China and the interests of a girl are made to seem trifling. And all this takes place within a male-dominated Chinatown society where key community organizations and voluntary associations are controlled by men, including her father who is the editor of a local Chinatown newspaper and very vocal about the war in China. To be Chinese in Vancouver's early Chinatown as described by Choy is to be aligned with an identity with patriarchal roots. Thus Jook-Liang's protests within the home, while seemingly innocuous, highlight larger rifts within this community.

### **7.3 Chineseness as Hegemonic Discourse and Disciplinary Tool**

Canada's war against Japan in China would further fix and stabilize the meaning of Chineseness for the Chinatown community and in turn its patriarchal nature. Indeed, as Canada was allied with China, any questions of loyalty to Canada or identification with anything other than an unalloyed Chineseness could mean reprisal from a Canadian government already suspicious of the legitimacy of its Chinese migrants. It was thus in the best interest of those in the Chinatown community to keep hidden any sympathies with Japanese neighbors, unhappiness with racial prejudice, or ruptures within the Chinese community itself over what it means to be Chinese and maintain a monolithic image. This strategic essentialism served as a survival

mechanism for the Chinatown community in a hostile environment during a hostile time. For a girl such as Jook-Liang to challenge the patriarchal and sexist nature of the Chinatown community would suggest a destabilization of the nature of Chineseness already established by the elders of the Chinatown community and in turn suggest a rupture which may endanger the community's already precarious place within the Canadian political landscape. Chris Lee (1999) argues that "those interpellated as Chinese are expected to act in ways defined by the discourse of Chineseness, which was hegemonically controlled by the community leadership" (p. 19). C. Lee illustrates how Chineseness acts as a disciplinary tool by the community elders in order to maintain power. Sekky, for instance, learns that the "proper" way of being Chinese in part entails addressing elders with the appropriate familial title which reinforces the hierarchical nature of family. Moreover, being a member of a Chinese family implies the agreement to keep certain aspects of family history secret in order to avoid interrogations by immigration officials. Sekky's experiences of what it means to be Chinese, like Jook-Liang, is thus closely linked to power relationships which aim to smooth out internal differences within the Chinese community.

However, the Chinatown community's attempts to maintain a semblance of homogeneity may act as justification for glossing over social oppressions that exist within the community. This notion of masking seemingly "minor" social hatreds within a community if it means larger gains from the dominant society echoes Poh-Poh's often said statement that "In Gold Mountain, simple is best" (Choy, 1995, p. 14). That is, the place of the Chinese in Vancouver is already tenuous and there exists the constant fear of deportation. Chinese families often harbored secret histories and stories of false identity and illegal migration. Keeping things simple, which often included hiding or keeping silent about abuses committed within the family or community so as not to arouse the suspicions of Canadian authorities, was standard in Choy's novel. Take for

instance how Grandmother makes Jook-Liang and Sek-Lung both call their birth-mother “Stepmother” when she is in fact Stepmother only to the two older brothers. This “private” humiliation is consistent with Stepmother’s rather inferior position within the family. C. Lee (1999) suggests that this re/misnaming by Grandmother is in deference to Canadian laws against polygamy (although accepted practice in China) and to avoid potential interrogation by immigration officials. Hiding local or private abuses thus avoided public trouble.

By the end of the novel, Stepmother’s marginalized character emerges as a subtle challenge to the monolithic Chinatown community when Sekky, defying Poh-Poh, addresses her as “Mother” for the first time:

When Sekky declares “Mother, I am here” (238), he consciously inscribes his own identity within the mother-child relationship, a relationship that Choy seems to privilege here as liberating against the patriarchal culture of Chinatown. Juxtaposing this moment of enlightenment with Meiying’s tragic death, Choy ends the novel on a provocatively disturbing yet hopeful note. (C. Lee, 1999, p. 30)

Such ruptures within Vancouver’s early Chinatown community thus show the complexity of power dynamics exerted not just between majority and minority, but between members of the minority group itself. Furthermore, multiply marginalized characters such as Jook-Liang, Sekky and Stepmother, do not remain silent and express their own independence in heterogeneous ways. But as mentioned, not all attempts to resist the oppression of the Chinatown community end happily. For C. Lee (1999), Meiying’s secret relationship with her Japanese boyfriend Kazuo is read as a subversion of the authoritarian Chinatown community (where loyalty is both expected and demanded) and its alliance with Canada. But her rebellion ultimately ends tragically:

Her abortion symbolizes the eradication of an unborn child whose very existence embodies the deconstruction of boundaries between Chinese and Japanese. In the death of mother and unborn child, the symbolic order of Chineseness maintains itself through the cruel repression of dissent. (p. 30)

Meiying's story thus illustrates the risks and dangers inherent in resisting certain constructions of Chinese identity against those who have a stake and the power in maintaining it.

#### **7.4 “The End of Innocence” and Antiracism**

The interrelated stories of the Chinese youth in Wayson Choy's novel show that the defense of essentialist notions of ethnicity by the Chinese elite is connected to relationships of power and obscures the complex realities of identifying as Chinese “on the ground.”

Vancouver's Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods act as borderzones where different cultures collide and processes of hybridization take place. The fixity of Chineseness in Chinatown is challenged on all sides by contact with Western culture, Japanese culture, rifts from within the community, and the realities of diasporic experience in late modernity (Lee, 1999). As the argument of this thesis has shown, notions of Chineseness are heterogeneous, contingent, strategic and shaped by history, politics and experiences in a multiplicity of ways.

The view of culture, on the other hand, as “mutually co-existing, yet discrete and bounded” (Yon, 1999b, p. 6) is shared by antiracism and multicultural education. In Yon's (1999b) introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, he discusses some of the implications for pedagogy of Stuart Hall's well-known essay “New Ethnicities” and “the end of innocence” for the essentialized subject:

This dominant understanding of culture is traceable to anthropology, and to its tradition of relativism, which frames culture itself as stable and coherent, and the making of

cultural identities as a process of innocently inheriting the community's cultural attributes. Within this framework, culture becomes both the knowledge that can be mimetically learned and the hand that guides its subjects. Such a view of the workings of culture also assumes a smooth relationship between "cultural identity" and "personal identity" such that when disjunctions and ruptures occur in this relationship then identity is in crisis. This discourse structures much multicultural and anti-racist education and the attendant desires for curriculum that "reflect" the identities of the learners. Accordingly, education is perceived as the means through which the "crisis" can be resolved. "The end of innocence," on the other hand, recognizes the limits of these modernist views as it calls attention to the complex play of fantasy and desire in identification and in the making of subject positions. It also recognizes the possibility for ambivalence, contradiction, and tensions where smoothness was previously assumed. (p. 7)

Yon's mention of the role of "fantasy and desire" in identification is important. Jook-Liang's dreams of becoming like Shirley Temple and Meiying's relationship with Kazuo demonstrate the importance of these psychological factors in identity formation. Although sometimes ignored, these factors contribute to one's identity in a way that help us move beyond defining someone by, for example, the mere "fact" of their Chineseness. While a strategic essentialism such as that used by Chin can be effective against racism, it may gloss over internal differences and more complex forms of identification. Educators should thus be critical of their desires to "know" a culture and avoid making assumptions about the cultural identities of their students.

## **7.5 Minority Group Relations and the Productive Nature of Power**

The club controversy on the campus of the University of British Columbia is an incident which also has implications for the Black/White paradigm in antiracism education by providing a

contemporary and revealing example of a minority group engaging in an act of domination towards another minority group. The codes of the dominant culture are used to empower the CVC's minority position, but as was discussed in the previous chapter, their minoritarian position is antagonistic to the minoritarian positions of other competing Chinese clubs. We have just discussed two other situations where the "tools" of the dominant culture are used by minorities to oppress those within minority groups. For instance, Pon (2000a) argues that Chin's efforts to combat White supremacy by bolstering Asian masculinity merely reaffirms prevalent Western, patriarchal, and binary perspectives. And Vancouver's early Chinatown elders' internal disciplining of community members was buttressed in part by "fears" of Canadian law and retribution. So we must be critical of how in fact power dynamics "flow." In what ways is power "productive?"

While it is one thing to understand that minorities have power and can commit acts of social hatred themselves it is another thing to ask *why* there are internal ruptures within minority groups. (Are such ruptures overlooked to gain power from the majority or do such ruptures serve to perpetuate dominant discourses?) Pon (2000a) is wise to suggest that antiracist education should move away from zero-sum notions of power where groups compete over limited and quantifiable amounts of it in society and where the majority group possesses the most and minority groups possess amounts of lesser degree. Instead, Foucauldian notions of power should be invoked in which "power is inseparable from the power/knowledge of discourse; it is more diffuse, chaotic, contradictory, and multidirectional" (Pon, 2000a, p. 141). Such a conception of power allows us to analyze and conceive of the different ways minorities themselves can wield it: minorities are not dupes and can resist racialization; they can commit social hatreds amongst and between themselves; and oftentimes they serve as willing or

unwilling puppets in the service of the dominant culture. Power moves in much more complex and unpredictable ways than merely from top down.

This discussion of power also suggests a weakness in the way the histories of multicultural societies are sometimes taught in North America. For instance, the histories of specific groups such as Asian Americans or African Americans are often taught in isolation and in relation to the dominant culture only. Takaki (1994) argues that this fragmentation of history denies “opportunities for different groups to learn about one another. . . .intergroup relationships remain invisible, and the big picture is missing” (para.11). He goes on to point out that a pluralistic approach will allow history teachers to help students see the differences among different groups and their differential treatment within American history. Although African Americans, Indians, Mexicans, the Irish, Jews, and Asians all experienced some form of discrimination, they played very different roles within America’s nation building project. Moreover, broad comparative approaches allow students to see how the experiences of ethnic communities occurred within shared contexts and how there were many instances of cooperation, solidarity and sympathy between minority groups. At the same time, minority groups were often pitted against one another, particularly, in the workplace:

In 1870, Mississippi planters recruited Chinese immigrants to discipline newly freed blacks. During that same year, Chinese immigrant laborers were transported from California to Massachusetts to break an Irish immigrant strike. The Irish responded initially by trying to organize a Chinese lodge of their labor union called the Knights of St. Crispins in order to promote intergroup class solidarity. (Takaki, 1994, para. 16)

In Canada, more can be written on these histories of interethnic relations such as those between the Chinese and Japanese Canadians, Chinese and Aborigines, and Chinese and Black

Canadians. A focus purely on the acts of racism perpetuated by White Canadian society on its ethnic minorities ignores the important role of minorities in nation building and fails to move beyond seeing them as “victims.”

## **7.6 Racism Perpetuated by People of Color**

There is a tendency for antiracism education in North America to see racism in terms of White racism and White hegemony, but every global act of racism needs to be analyzed within its own historical and local context—no two acts of racism are the same and caution should be made when making comparisons between separate acts. For instance, attacks on Chinese merchants in Indonesia during the riots of 1998 may be reminiscent of Blacks looting Korean merchants in L.A. following the Rodney King civil rights case in 1992, but issues of race and class developed differently in these two localities and their different histories and politics need to be taken into account. Western racisms, ethnicities and identities tend to use binary oppositions such as minority-majority and racist-racialized to explain identity formation, group boundaries, and the politics of exclusion but may overlook other forms of “cultural racism” (Rattansi, 1994).

Omi and Winant (2002) claim that racism in the United States is not just a White problem and disagree that non-Whites, often believed to possess no power, cannot act in a racist manner. Black elites, for example, have been known to collaborate with White supremacy at the expense of more vulnerable members of the already racially subordinate group (Frazier, 1957). Indeed, it would be naive to believe that racially defined minorities have not attained some power and influence over time. But Omi and Winant (2002) make clear that all racism—or any racist political project—is not the same. When situating various “racisms” within the dominant hegemonic discourse about race, the rantings of a Black ideologue, for instance, seem far less menacing than a White racist of the White Aryan Resistance. The former has far fewer examples



and is associated with a particular historical phase of the Black power movement. The latter, on the other hand, is associated with a once powerful legacy—that of White supremacy in the US and fascism in the world at large. Black supremacy may be racist, but is hardly the threat of White supremacy. It is a “toothless racism” and is not as easily absorbed by the already established hegemonic discourse (Memmi, 1982/2000).

A field study conducted by James Loewen (1971) of Chinese in the Mississippi Delta (mentioned briefly above) provides a historically specific example of race relations between two non-dominant groups: Chinese and Blacks. The study is interesting in three ways: it illustrates racism of people of colour; it shows how a group’s position in the racial hierarchy is not necessarily fixed; and it demonstrates how racism of one non-dominant group directed at another non-dominant group merely reaffirms Whites as the dominant race. Loewen (1971) explains how Chinese migrated to the Delta in the 1870s in response to White plantation owners’ efforts to recruit an alternative supply of cheap labour to weaken the bargaining power of Black sharecroppers. Soon the Chinese would leave farming and establish grocery stores to serve the Black community—an occupation shunned by Whites. Note that during the Jim Crow era, the only racial categories were Black or White, and the Chinese labourers were classified as Black. They lived in the Black community, often in back of their grocery stores, attended Black schools, and a few of the bachelors would eventually take on Black wives.

In the early 1920s, as Chinese merchants became more affluent, they began to demand that their children attend the far superior White schools, but such demands were rejected for fear of setting a precedent that would weaken the norms of racial segregation (Loewen, 1971). Despite the setback, the close-knit Chinese community in the delta region began to mobilize and adopt White social norms and etiquette and distance themselves from Blacks in an attempt to

change the racial definition of “Chinese.” Chinese merchants with Black wives were pressured to leave them and ostracized from ethnic associations. And to demonstrate that the Chinese accepted the White norm against racial mixing, children of mixed Chinese-African marriages were socially excluded from the Chinese community. The strategy eventually succeeded and Chinese families began moving into white neighborhoods and their children gained admission into white schools (Loewen, 1971).

This unique account of the Chinese in the Mississippi shows how the racism of the Chinese towards Blacks and even towards other Chinese with marital ties to Blacks is born out of a specific historical moment. It in no way threatens the dominant hegemonic discourse on race and pales in comparison to the systematic racism of Whites towards Blacks in the South. Note also how race is imbricated with issues of class, culture, geography, and even gender to create the exceptional circumstances for this form of racism. More importantly, while this racism of people of colour takes place within the larger context of racial segregation in the South, it is not independent of it. Indeed, the racism of the Mississippi Chinese towards Blacks is a product of White racism and used as a vehicle to improve their own socioeconomic position by moving themselves closer to the dominant White position at the top of the racial hierarchy and further from Blacks who form the bottom. Racism of people of colour can therefore strengthen White racial superiority.

## **7.7 The Model Minority Stereotype and Antiracism Education**

I bring up the example of the Mississippi Chinese at length not only because it is an interesting illustration of racism between two non-dominant groups but also to take us back to the question of the dominance of the Black/White paradigm in antiracism education and the place of Asian Canadians in debates on antiracism education. The example of the Mississippi

Chinese demonstrates that other non-dominant groups can indeed play a central and unexpected role in questions of differential and unequal treatment. More interestingly, a parallel can be made between the Mississippi Chinese and the Chinese stereotyped as a model minority within a contemporary Canadian context. As mentioned previously, Chinese are often excluded in debates on antiracism education because of their model minority status. But paradoxically, by their very exclusion in these debates they are in fact made central to them. For in the same way Chinese labourers were brought into the Mississippi in order to discipline newly freed Blacks, model minority discourses in Canada aim to punish insurgent challenges to a neo-liberal ideology of individualism and self-sufficiency while downplaying the impact of racism.

Gordon Pon (2000b) gives one of the few Canadian critiques of Asians as a model minority (see also Maclear (1994)). He shows how model minority discourse in Canada “converges with Canadian discourses of multiculturalism to buttress Orientalist notions of Chinese Canadians on the one hand, and to discipline and punish insurgent challenges to liberal democracy on the other” (p. 279). Firstly, he argues that multiculturalism and multicultural education are problematic not only in their inability to address structural forms of racism, but also in the way they essentialize notions of “culture” and “identity.” Multicultural expressions of Chinese culture as dragon dances, exotic food, and calligraphy thus parallel the model minority discourse of Asian culture as laden with Confucian values which translates into academic success. Secondly, he shows how model minority discourse is inseparable from a neo-liberal ideology. During the 1960s within the United States, many popular media stories would come out heralding successful Asians as a “model” community in contrast to a growing non-White underclass, namely, “inner city” Blacks. Peterson (1966), for instance, writes about the success of Japanese Americans as a minority. And an article entitled “Success story of one minority

group in the U.S.” appeared in *U.S. News and World Report* praising the industriousness of Chinese Americans. The message was that anyone could succeed by pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. Similar stories would run for decades and Canadian newspapers would carry similar “success” stories (Mathews, 1988; Sheppard, 1992). Echoes of these stories can still be heard in today’s headlines: “Chinese Canadians lead in investment income, while immigrants outpace non-immigrants” (Jimenez, 2009); “Chinese immigrants’ kids more likely to graduate” (Proudfoot, 2008); and in reference to the heavily Chinese-populated suburb of Richmond, “Let’s hear it for this multicultural success story” (Mason, 2007). Pon (2000b) argues that these stories support a neo-liberal ideology of individualism, self-sufficiency, and market freedom while downplaying the impact of racism in Canadian society (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995) and the history of exploitation of non-Whites (across race, gender, and class lines) implicit in Canada’s nation-building project (Ng, 1993). Blame is placed on the downtrodden not Canadian society itself. Pon (2000b) therefore concludes that “together the ‘model minority’ and multiculturalism discourses can be regarded not only as hegemonic devices that maintain white domination, but as mechanisms of control at the disposal of liberal democratic governmentality” (p. 286).

Both model minority discourses and the Mississippi Chinese illustrate how Chinese have historically been used by the dominant White culture in North America to discipline Black communities while the Chinese themselves remain stereotyped and discriminated. Moreover, such disciplining creates a wedge between Chinese and Black communities in a way that may discourage political cooperation between the two groups. Instead, tensions between these two minority groups may develop, reinforcing the hegemony of the dominant culture and obscuring the racism experienced by both Chinese and Blacks. There needs to be greater cooperation not

just between these two groups but between all minority groups to fight social oppression in all its forms including racism. Coalitions can be formed based around a common politics rather than on race. Women of colour, for instance, can fight for pay equity. Immigrants of colour can protest restrictive immigration laws. Queers of colour can fight against government homophobia. A more sophisticated understanding of power will allow antiracism education to move beyond the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy and be more conscious of how minorities can be pitted against one another in a multiplicity of ways and how they can strategically band together.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

In summary, this thesis gives some prominence to Chinese Canadians on debates in antiracism education in two ways. Firstly, by exploring the heterogeneous constructions of Chineseness and the ruptures within Chinese communities we discovered that while a strategic essentialism may empower a community, since identity by its very nature is unstable, contingent, and historically and politically determined, ruptures inevitably emerge which challenge the imagined homogeneity of any group. Yon (1999a) discovered something similar in his observations of a mainly female organization called the African Queens during his ethnographic study of a Toronto high school: “Empowerment began to break down as ambivalence and differences within the group began to undermine the conformity and discipline that the particular strategy of empowerment demanded of its members” (p. 39). Antiracism education must therefore work with this ambivalence. Secondly, power can be multi-directional and social hatreds, including racism, must be examined not just for how power is exerted by the dominant group against a non-dominant one but also for how it can be exerted between two non-dominant groups and within a non-dominant group itself. We have already discussed how the Mississippi

Chinese discriminated against Blacks in order to buttress their own socioeconomic status; how Vancouver's early Chinatown community disciplined its own members, particularly women and youth, in order to maintain conformity; and finally how UBC's Chinese Varsity Club produced video clips which ridiculed foreign-born Chinese immigrants in order to increase their own membership. Antiracism education must move beyond minority/majority or Chinese/White paradigms to consider multiple possibilities for oppression.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This concluding chapter begins by summarizing and reviewing the original aims of the study and the discursive strategy used to examine cultural identities. It then draws together all the main points regarding the nature of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities and explains how this rethinking of Chinese youth challenges our commonsense notions of belonging and nationhood. The next section addresses the final research question proposed in the Introduction regarding how Vancouver's Chinese youth demonstrate performative notions of identity and how such acts of performativity can critique the conventions of the dominant culture. This is followed by some suggestions for further research. The thesis ends with Stuart Hall's reflections on his essay "New Ethnicities" ten years later and the implications of it for community politics and classroom pedagogy.

### **8.2 Review of the Study's Aims and Discursive Approach**

The aim of this study has been to examine the identities of Chinese youth growing up in Vancouver. In pursuit of this aim, the category "Chinese" was not assumed to be predetermined but was the very object of study. Indeed, the notion of cultural identity, more generally, was under scrutiny. Rather than some pure, unchanging essence that everyone possesses, cultural identities were theorized to be more fluid and contingent. Neither was the category of youth taken for granted: diasporic youth do not experience questions of cultural identity in the same way that their immigrant parents do. Chinese youth born or raised in Vancouver often do not have the same connection to a Chinese homeland as their elders (this becomes even more pronounced for third or fourth generation Chinese in Canada who may have no cultural connection to China at all). They can often be criticized at home for being too Westernized or

not Chinese enough and, at the same time, be ridiculed for being too Chinese at school. Indeed, they live hybrid lives at the borderzone between Chinese and Canadian cultures. Furthermore, youth are growing up in a formative period, transitioning between childhood and adulthood, when identity issues are most salient and youth are most susceptible to identifying with the images that are presented to them. In short, this thesis unpacked the possible meanings of “Vancouver’s Chinese youth identities,” revealed the instability of such identity categories, and discussed the resulting implications for education.

A review of the literature revealed that, while there exists a vibrant body of work on Asian-American youth in the U.S. due to the establishment of Asian-American studies as a field of teaching and research, there does not exist as extensive a literature in Canada. Much research in Canada on Chinese youth is quantitative and socio-psychological in nature and focused particularly on immigrant youth. This research often assumes the category of “Chinese” and uses it to explain other social phenomena such as socioeconomic status, educational outcomes, or immigrant adjustment. Similarly, much qualitative research on Chinese youth in Canada also assumes the category of “Chinese” but deals with questions of ethnic identity, acculturation and assimilation, psychological adjustment, model minority stereotyping, and experiences of racial discrimination. In contrast to these studies, however, many historical analyses of the Chinese in Vancouver prior to 1980 investigate the struggles for self-definition as new waves of immigration create tensions within the Chinese community over how the Chinese community should represent itself to the rest of Canadian society and how this Chineseness is to be defined.

This thesis avoided any essentializing assumptions about Chineseness and Chinese youth and instead focused on the multiple constructions of Chineseness and youth as active desiring agents, with interests, ambitions and the power to decide for themselves how to identify.



Yet at the same time, it was understood that identifications could be ascribed to youth, whether by their own families or the larger Canadian society, which create restrictions on how Chinese youth can act. This study thus examined how cultural identity is continuously struggled over, how Chinese youth experience competing identity positions, and how identities are social constructs that only take on meaning after a process of negotiation.

To begin to accomplish this aim of critiquing the category Chinese and to fill in some gaps in the literature on Vancouver's Chinese youth, it was necessary to locate representations of Vancouver's Chinese youth that demonstrated contestations over the meaning of Chinese identity. Also, Chinese youth need to be depicted as "active desiring agents," engaging with a multiplicity of identity forms. Such raw materials were found in two "texts": the novel *The Jade Peony* and the Chinese club controversy on the UBC campus. Both texts help to rethink Chinese youth as more than just troubled youth unable to adapt to Canadian culture or mere victims of racial prejudice—the Chinese youth are seen as complex human beings. And the texts do not assume Chinese youth possess some inherent unchanging Chineseness but the very notion of Chineseness is what is struggled over. Both texts show how cultural identity is shaped more by political, historical, and economic circumstances than something that is naturally given. Moreover, the two texts depict representations of Chinese youth at two different times in Vancouver's history highlighting the different ways in which struggles over self-definition are engaged with across time.

An appropriate theoretical and methodological framework that would facilitate this rethinking of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities was then decided upon. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis formed part of such a framework. Its discursive strategy provided an effective method in which this study could unpack the meaning of Chinese youth identities within texts by

analyzing how meanings are constituted by discourses within those texts. For Laclau and Mouffe, subjects acquire identity by being represented discursively. And in the same way discourses are changeable, so are identities. Moreover, “individuals have several identities (decentring) and...they have the possibility of identifying differently in given situations (overdetermination)” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 44). These different identities, which are constituted by different discourses, can sometimes collide and become antagonistic. For instance, it was shown how Jook-Liang rejects the traditional gender roles represented by the “Old China ways” by strategically claiming a Canadian identity. Her identity as a “Chinese girl” is thus in an antagonistic relationship with her desired identity as a “Canadian girl.” Such conflicts are resolved through hegemonic interventions (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). Thus, Laclau and Mouffe’s method allowed an examination into why some identities and power relations become so naturalized they become common sense while others seem unthinkable. The method also opened up the possibility of challenging existing discourses by rearticulating elements within texts—a process that could potentially destabilize the normative ways of thinking about identity.

While Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory provided an effective method to analyze Chinese youth identities that was consistent with the assumption that identities are contingent and fluid, it was not sufficient in showing youth to be active and multi-layered human beings. Laclau and Mouffe view individuals as fully determined by structures giving them little room to act within discourses (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). Discourse theory was therefore complemented with relevant cultural theory on identity that emphasized subjects as active agents capable of reimagining the elements within discourses. The notions of strategic essentialism, new ethnicities, and hybridity were introduced to allow subjects to take control over their own

identities rather than focus on how one's identity limits the possibilities for action. Later in this chapter, the notion of disidentification will be used to show how Chinese youth can reappropriate stereotypical images imbedded within the codes of the dominant culture to empower their minority position. Thus a combination of discourse theory and cultural/queer theory enabled a dialectical interaction between structure and agency.

### **8.3 Rethinking Chinese Youth Identities and the Myth of Nationhood**

This thesis has moved the thinking about Vancouver's Chinese youth beyond that of mere victims of racism, individuals too assimilated (or not assimilated enough), or math whizzes. Such thinking essentializes and marginalizes Chinese youth while leaving the norms of the dominant culture uncritiqued. By investigating more complex identifications, the boundaries of what constitutes the category "Chinese youth" become blurred and a challenge is made to any commonsense notions about Chineseness, Canadianness, or cultural identity generally. Chinese youth have been shown to identify in a plethora of unpredictable and "unthinkable" ways: Kiam aspires to fight for Canada in Hong Kong; Jook-Liang wants to sing and dance like Shirley Temple; Meiying has a relationship with a Japanese-Canadian boy. Moreover, it was shown how Chinese youth are not "innocent" racialized subjects but are capable of social hatreds themselves particularly against recent immigrant Chinese: they produce offensive and exclusionary ad campaigns; they act as gatekeepers to an authentic "Canadianness" for foreign-born Canadians; they ignorantly parade around a rickshaw, an artifact of colonialism, during New Year's celebrations. By rearticulating elements from within the dominant Canadian cultural discourse this thesis has reimagined the myriad possibilities of what it means to be a Chinese youth beyond their racialized subjecthood while challenging commonsense notions of belonging and nationhood.

This thesis attempted to reaffirm for Vancouver's Chinese youth what Stuart Hall (1996c) has written in relation to the black subject in his essay "New Ethnicities." He recognized the "immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects" (p. 443). He recognized that "the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity" (p. 444). Furthermore,

If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is "ethnicity." The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge is contextual. (p. 446)

By substituting "Chinese" for "black" in these direct quotations, one begins to see the possible generalizability of Hall's conjectures to all "ethnic" groups.

This thesis also raises questions about some of the "myths" of society. Laclau uses the term "myth" to mean "a floating signifier that refers to a totality" (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 39). Examples of myths are "country," "the Canadian nation," and "dominant culture." Since discourses only temporarily and partially fix meanings, to think of the meanings of these myths in any objective, unambiguous, or permanently closed way is impossible—competing articulations always seek to undermine prevailing meanings. But it is necessary and inevitable that meaning be ascribed to these terms as if they were a totality otherwise politics would not be possible (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). So by analyzing these myths, it can be shown how social actors struggle to invest certain myths with particular meanings to the point of objectivity while

other myths remain impossible. For example, the analysis of *The Jade Peony* revealed that “the Canadian people” meant predominantly “White people” in the minds of both Canadians and even non-Canadians prior to the Second World War. For Chinese people to be a part of this group would be unthinkable at that time. But the instability of such a myth as “the Canadian people” becomes evident when Kiam decides he wants to fight as a Canadian soldier. How can one sacrifice one’s life for a country and not be considered a citizen of that country? Indeed, as was discussed in the literature review, it was a group of Chinese veterans who had volunteered to fight in the Second World War that began to lobby the government and eventually win full citizenship rights for all Chinese including the right to vote. The notion of “the Canadian people” thus had to expand to include those who were non-White.

The analysis of the UBC club controversy gave a different example of how the myth of “the Canadian people” can be imagined. The Internet video clips show that the CVC executive had their own particular understanding of “Canadian”: Canadians are native-born and English speaking. Their motivation for such a definition was to attract the greatest number of new membership, appealing to a perceived desire in new members to join a club that is indisputably Canadian rather than a foreign one. Notice the interesting shift in what constitutes the myth of “the Canadian people” from one that is racially defined (white-skinned) in *The Jade Peony* to one that is culturally defined (by language and place of origin) by the CVC.

Other groups of people will have their own competing understandings of what defines “the Canadian people” and debates over who belongs to this category and who does not have been going on since the country’s beginning. Quebecers, First Nations people, or Sikhs—depending on who is asked and at what moment in history—will give their own “truth” on Canadianness depending on their vested interest in the country. Don Cherry will give a very

different answer than David Suzuki. Thus this study on Vancouver's Chinese youth, on account of their own marginalized status, has indirectly raised important questions about who belongs to the nation and who does not and how the status of one's belonging is never fixed but can change (Japanese Canadians during World War II became tragically aware that one's citizenship is never certain).

#### **8.4 Performativity and Chinese Youth Identities**

One research question proposed at the beginning of this thesis has yet to be addressed and can best be addressed at this point: In what ways do Chinese youth demonstrate identity as performance and how can such performances critique the conventions of the dominant culture? In other words, I will be suggesting how representations of Vancouver's Chinese youth identities, "through acts like postcolonial mimicry and the emergence of a hybridized and queerly reflexive performance practice, the social and symbolic economy that regulates otherness can be offset" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 81). José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) readings of cultural film producer Richard Fung's works are useful in my own readings of performativity within *The Jade Peony* and the CVC incident. Muñoz's working understanding of performativity is informed in large part by the work of Judith Butler. Butler (1993) explains that if a performative succeeds, "that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. What this means, then, is that a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" (pp. 226-227, as cited in Muñoz, 1999, p. 80). Muñoz (1999) identifies within Fung's videos two key characteristics of the practice of performativity: reiteration and citation.

This "practice of performativity that repeats and cites, *with a difference*" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 80) is also evident in the second part of Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*. While not discussed

in the body of the thesis in relation to Chineseness, it becomes quite relevant in this discussion on performance identity. This second part of the novel is narrated by Jung-Sum, the second brother. Unlike the other children, Jung-Sum was adopted into the family. The story details his coming to terms with his sexual identity as his admiration develops into attraction for Frank Yuen (a tougher older boy who had a rough upbringing and would end up joining the U.S. marines). The elders within the Chinese community sensed this “difference” within Jung-Sum even before his own self-awakening: Poh-Poh observes, “*Inside* unusual, not ordinary” (Choy, 1995, p. 81). This “difference” is further captured metaphorically in the following conversation between Poh-Poh and Mrs. Lim, a family friend, as Jung-Sum shadow boxes in the background, dancing, skipping and punching:

The Old One put down her embroidery and turned back to Mrs. Lim and started an old saying, “Sun and moon both round...”

“—yet,” Mrs. Lim finished the saying, “sun and moon different.”

“I’m the sun,” I said, cheerfully, puffing away, breaking into their conversational dance. “I’m the champion!”

“Jung-Sum is the moon,” Poh-Poh said.

Mrs. Lim stopped drinking her tea, her eyes as alert as the Old One’s. Between her fingers she held a half shelled melon seed.

“The moon?” Mrs. Lim blurted. “Impossible!”

Mrs. Lim knew the moon was the *yin* principle, the *female*. Mrs. Lim studied me as I went through my paces, jabbing away at the air.

“Impossible!” she said.

The Old One slowly lifted her tea cup and gently focussed on me, her gaze full of knowing mystery. (Choy, 1995, p. 82)

This passage gives a fascinating description of Jung-Sum's "difference" and a rare representation of a "queer" youth growing up in Vancouver's early Chinatown. Such an identity position seems unthinkable for the Chinese community at this juncture in history or, as Mrs. Lim puts it, "Impossible!" Choy, however, expertly opens up such a space both subtly and creatively.

This juxtaposition of images of Jung-Sum as a champion boxer on the one hand and as "unusual, not ordinary" on the other would be reiterated often by Choy within this second part of the novel. I suggest that these repeated juxtapositions of images antagonistic to each other are acts of performativity in Muñoz's operative sense of the term. Choy draws upon the conventions associated with boxing—that it is a masculine, violent, and aggressive sport. But he covers these commonsense notions by repeatedly juxtaposing them with images of the female, the yin principle. Jung-Sum's declaration that he is the champion is quickly met with "Jung-Sum is the moon" by Poh-Poh. In such a way, Choy undermines the dominant heteronormative assumptions about boxing and masculinity and opens up other "queer" possibilities. For Muñoz (1999), "to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly 'line up'" (p. 78). Jung-sum can be read as investing in a popular cultural site—the boxing arena—a place with its own codes and conventions, but also a place where meaning can be disrupted and shown to "not properly 'line up.'"

This act of performativity becomes clearer as we reach the climax within Jung-Sum's story that takes place within an empty assembly hall. Jung-Sum runs into a drunken Frank Yuen who challenges him to a fight. During their wild scuffle, Jung-Sum ends up grabbing Frank's concealed knife and comes close to slitting Frank's throat. The fight ends, however, with Frank



delivering a powerful blow to Jung-Sum's shoulders knocking him down in pain. Jung-Sum breaks down into tears, the blow bringing back painful memories of being beaten as a child. Frank kneels down and begins to comfort and cradle him; both rock back and forth pressed against each other for minutes. When Frank lets go, Jung-Sum's body is aroused: "a strange yearning awoke in me, a vivid longing rose relentlessly from the centre of my groin, sensuous and craving, rising until my hands unclenched" (Choy, 1995, p. 117). But such feelings, antagonistic to the heteronormative culture of fighting, are once again made invisible by the machismo talk typically associated with fighters. Frank shows his newfound respect for Jung-Sum by saying, "Nearly killed me, you little bastard" (p. 118), and "So where the fuck's my knife, Champ?" (p. 118). Jung-Sum feels great pride in being called "champion" by Frank Yuen as the dominant conventions of this type of "brotherly respect" story are restored.

This performative practice of repeated covering, uncovering, and re-covering of dominant conventions within Jung-Sum's story draws the reader's attention away from the thinking of "queer" youth as victims or as some sort of aberration but instead towards heteronormative knowledges which delimit identities within dominant classifications. Choy uses the image of the boxing champion as a vehicle to blur the boundaries between the stereotypical notions of masculinity as strength and toughness on the one hand and femininity as caring and vulnerability on the other. A hybrid space is opened up where what constitutes a "champion" can be re-imagined.

Muñoz (1999) explains that a performative can also "explicate the workings of *various* 'minority' identifications" (p. 81), particularly in the postcolonial world, and can act as a powerful disidentification with other "othering" discourses such as race. Consider the following

short passage from Jook-Liang's narrative. It describes how Jook-Liang overcomes the melancholy she experiences from her physical appearance as Chinese:

I looked again into the hall mirror, seeking Shirley Temple with her dimpled smile and perfect white-skin features. Bluntly reflected back at me was a broad sallow moon with slit dark eyes, topped by a helmet of black hair. I looked down. Jutting out from a too-large taffeta dress were two spindly legs matched by a pair of bony arms. . . .I looked down: masses of red clustered at my feet. I thought of old Wong Suk leaning on his two canes. And I danced. (Choy, 1995, p. 43)

This performance in Jook-Liang's story demonstrates her disidentification with North American society's measure of beauty as White-skinned. Despite her inability to conform to this norm, she nevertheless remains unperturbed and reinvents herself by reappropriating the stereotypical elements of beauty represented by the Shirley Temple-like dress, shoes, and bows and re-imagines a world where a Chinese girl can be beautiful to both her family and mainstream society. Her disidentification serves as a survival strategy in a hostile world where limits are placed on notions of beauty and the roles that a girl growing up in Chinatown can play.

Two other performances attributed to the Chinese Varsity Club on the campus of the University of British Columbia can also be read as acts of disidentification: the "rickshaw" incident and the incident involving the Internet video clips. Rather than reconfiguring normative notions of beauty, however, these performances open up hybrid spaces that break down stereotypical notions of what it means to be Chinese. Through acts of postcolonial mimicry, the CVC past and present, disidentify with the Orientalizing notions historically applied to Chinese youth. They rearticulate the images of colonial power, such as the rickshaw and those used in the clips, as a strategy of enacting the self while gaining access to power.

By parading around the rickshaw, the CVC disidentify with an authentic Chinese culture but also disidentify with Orientalizing notions by mimicking the colonizers. Similarly, the CVC disidentify with recently immigrated Chinese in the video clips but also disidentify with “forever foreign” and “model minority” stereotypes by adopting North American sensibilities yet remaining strategically antiassimilationist. In short, the CVC occupies an “unthinkable” identity position, neither purely Chinese nor Canadian, within a hybridized space. Their position is hybridized, much like the cultural work that Muñoz is engaged with, “insofar as it is cultivated from the dominant culture but meant to expose and critique its conventions” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). The codes of the dominant culture are used as raw materials to empower the CVC’s minority position. It should be noted, however, that their minoritarian position is nevertheless antagonistic to other minoritarian positions, particularly those represented by the members of the other competing Chinese ethnic clubs.

The theoretical notions of performativity and disidentification have allowed us to rethink Chineseness, and identity more generally. Muñoz (1999), however, cautions scholars that the concepts “queerness” and hybridity are not unproblematic. They are not to be used in a celebratory fashion and neither in a way that “flattens difference in the name of coalition” (p. 78). Not all hybridities are innocent and neither do they share the same histories. While these concepts have allowed a departure from essentialism, they must not themselves be essentialized: Muñoz (1999) explains how “queerness” and hybridity are “spaces of productivity” rather than universally fixed sites. With this caution in mind, he melds the two concepts together when discussing the work of Richard Fung because

Hybridity helps one understand how queer lives are fragmented into various identity bits: some of them adjacent, some of them complementary, some of them antagonistic. The

hybrid—and terms that can be roughly theorized as equivalents, such as the Creole or the mestizo—are paradigms that help account for the complexities and impossibilities of identity, but, except for a certain degree of dependence on institutional frames, what a subject can do from her or his position of hybridity is, basically, open-ended. The important point is that identity practices such as queerness and hybridity are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated. (p. 79)

This thesis has engaged with such theoretical concepts as “queerness” and hybridity and has demonstrated their effectiveness in helping us to understand how life for “othered” youth such as Jung-Sum becomes fragmented into “identity bits” (How is it that he is marked as adopted, coloured and “queer?”). These concepts have also made visible subjects who live and work within dominant cultures and institutions that stand to gain from erasing hybridity. Furthermore, to borrow from Johnson's (2005) description of “quare” theory, the concepts of “queerness” and hybridity give communities of colour a language to take “control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered” (p. 137). *The Jade Peony* and the CVC ad campaign were just two examples of powerful representations of hybrid subjects that “may also contest and subvert dominant meaning systems” (p. 138). So despite the pitfalls and difficulties associated with the terms “queerness” and hybridity, they have nevertheless opened up a space for this study to explore the “complexities,” “impossibilities,” and “open-ended” nature of identity.

## **8.5 Suggestions for Further Research**

This discourse analysis of Chinese youth identities suggests further avenues for exploration. While I have selected two “texts” for analysis, there exist other possible materials—in the form of films, plays, and other novels or historical incidents—that touch on the lives and

experiences of Chinese youth growing up in Canada, and an analysis of these other representations would reveal different forms of youth identification. For example, the films *Double Happiness* and *Eve and the Firehorse* touch on issues of gender and religion, respectively, in relation to race. And Choy's follow-up novel to *The Jade Peony*, *All that Matters*, further explores Vancouver's early Chinatown community but this time from the point of view of the eldest brother Kiam. The novel *Banana Boys* explores a possible subculture of Chinese youth.

While there has been much research done in the United States exploring Asian-American youth cultures, there can be more research done on Chinese Canadian youth cultures. Do Chinese youth subcultures exist? Or is the community too diverse to be galvanized around any shared hangouts, interests or activities? The CVC incident suggests further research into ethnic Chinese clubs (whether in high schools or secondary schools), fraternities or sororities and how they influence identity formation amongst their members. Other subcategories of Chinese youth can be examined including Vietnamese-Chinese youth, "queer" Chinese youth, or Christian Chinese youth. In what ways do cultural identity clash with these other markers of identity? Indeed, fruitful research projects may be found in further examining this diversity of Chinese youth, how subcategories of Chinese youth are formed and maintained, and how they challenge common stereotypes about Chinese youth. Insights can be made into the different meanings of Chineseness for these groups, if anything at all.

Other research can take into account the different experiences of growing up Chinese in different parts of Canada. Being Chinese in Central Canada is a much different experience than on the West Coast or the Prairies as Chinese communities developed differently in these areas of the country. Such comparative work can be extended to include the United States. Do Chinese

youth growing up in Vancouver and San Francisco have more in common than youth growing up in Montreal or New York? Rather than geography, comparisons can be made from a historical perspective. How are Chinese youth today different from Chinese youth at the beginning of the twentieth century? (This study's literature review touches on this history.) Thus, a rich vein of discourse analytical, ethnographic, or historical work can be mined from simply explicating the category "Chinese youth."

## **8.6 Stuart Hall's Reflections on "New Ethnicities"**

I would like to end this thesis by briefly discussing an interview with Stuart Hall in 1998 conducted by Daniel Yon (1999c). In it, Hall is asked to reflect on his essay "New Ethnicities" a decade after writing it. I bring this interview up because Hall makes some relevant comments regarding how his theoretical ideas in the essay fared in terms of where the world was moving. He also points out some implications of his rethinking of ethnicity for pedagogy. These comments suggest ideas for future research and teaching in terms of both theory and education. During the interview, Hall reiterates his arguments that we should not attach ourselves to ethnicity in any closed absolutist sense of the term. But while our identities are not predetermined in our genes, history or kinship, "ethnicity is something" (p. 89). We cannot "be black today and white tomorrow" (p. 89). Despite all the problems with the term, ethnicity nevertheless locates a subject: "Subjects are essentially cultural subjects, with specific histories that form, as it were, *both* [italics added] constraining and productive elements" (p. 90).

Hall wants us to get away from thinking about ethnicities in "the 'older' sense that depends very much upon an essential conception of group, tradition or homeland" (p. 89). He expresses his astonishment, however, over the "numbers of people who want to recognize themselves as an 'old' ethnic subject" (p. 91) despite globalization and the constant migration of

peoples. This development changes the argument to one regarding the role of ethnicities: “whether ethnicities are essentially defensive or whether there are ethnicities which have been left out of modernity” (p. 91). Hall is concerned with people who may not have access to modernity and move backwards to the “old” ways of thinking about identity as a survival strategy.

In terms of Chinese youth, we can ask whether they do indeed see themselves more in terms of “new” ethnicities instead of the “old.” What conditions are needed for Chinese youth to see themselves as “new” ethnic subjects and under what conditions do they revert to the “old” ethnic subjects? Hybridity also falls under scrutiny. Is it more theory than actuality for Chinese youth despite globalization and mass migrations? While this thesis has been optimistic in its analysis of texts in terms of the new ways of thinking about identity, more research needs to be done with Chinese youth to further explore the validity of concepts such as “new ethnicities” and hybridity for this community, particularly within contexts germane to them such as within those ethnic school clubs or college fraternities/sororities mentioned above. For instance, is joining an ethnic Chinese youth club a “defensive” move and does it tip the balance to the “old” identities in the form of “old” ethnicities?

Yon (1999c) then asks Hall what the connections are between this discussion on “new” and “old” ethnicities and our thinking about race. Hall responds by saying that the two ideas are brought closer together and that race is no longer about mere genetics and biology when it is thought more as a discursive category: “Once you open race up, it is in fact, culturally, politically and socially defined. Race becomes, in its structure, not a completely different thing from ethnicity, but a kind of special case” (p. 94). Hall believes race has been “read off the biological much too far up the chain” (p. 95) and that one’s genetic potential is merely that—it

has no social meaning outside of the context of family and the wider society. Hall's refusal to accept that a person's characteristics are determined by a biological conception of race to an acceptance of a more discursive one is what he means by the end of the essential subject.

This thesis has tried to approach race, as Hall does, in a more discursive sense. This approach has revealed that conflicts between members from within the same ethnic group (such as the one between the Chinese youth groups involved in the UBC club controversy) are not unrelated from racial conflicts between Black/White or Chinese/White communities. This suggests that research should not overlook the conflicts that occur *between* sub-ethnic groups anymore than those that occur between races, and that structural inequalities based on ones' accent, religious practices, or place of origin are equally as pressing as those based on skin colour. The Chinese community in Canada is a particularly diverse group and the potential conflicts for examination are numerous. Consider all the possible struggles between young and old, men and women, foreign-born and native-born, low-income and high-income, Christian and Buddhist, straight and "queer," Mandarin-speaking and Cantonese-speaking, or pro-Taiwan independence and pro-China groups.

Yon (1999c) ends his interview with Hall by asking him what he thought were some of the implications of what they have been discussing for community politics and pedagogy. Hall responds by saying that community politics is made more difficult because of the instability of such groups as the "black community" or the "gay community" which, while strategic, are contingent representations that can gloss over enormous differences. The imagined unity of a group is the "result of an alliance between differences or willingness of differences to compromise to get to an end for a certain purpose" (p. 98). Hall is hesitant, however, to impose any anti-essentialist politics on a group when it is unclear how the presence of difference will



undermine the political effectiveness of a collective. Thus, the dilemma becomes, on the one hand, to deny difference in the name of the collective but, on the other hand, this unity is undermined by the very differences it hopes to polish over. Hall points to feminism as an example where differences between women have exploded the singular category of woman. Hall believes that, in the end, since differences do not disappear, a politics that does not recognize its unities are but fragile constructions across differences will not survive.

According to Hall, what is said for community politics also applies to pedagogy. While there is much that can be learned by understanding communities as homogeneous fixed categories, differences exist and have to be addressed. Hall feels that the classroom is probably an easier place to learn about these differences than in politics since schooling offers a period of reflection whereas in politics the stakes are more immediate:

It seems to me that you do have a space there to tease out with students the balance between similarity and difference, the balance between homogeneity and difference. I'm not saying that *everything* is different or that there is nothing to the collective. I am saying that one has to recognize these collective entities as constructed for a purpose in situations that are contingent, likely to shift over time. (p. 99)

While not an easy task, teachers of multicultural, antiracism, and inclusive curriculum are in a unique position to encourage students to reflect on this crucial balance between homogeneity and difference.

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