The Reconstruction of Chinese Canadian Identities across the Pacific: Personal Narrative and Collective Memory

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Introduction

The reconstruction of Chinese Canadian identity is a subtle, incremental process that dates back to the 18th century. This paper identifies major migratory forces behind that process and assesses its impact on shaping the psyche of the Chinese Canadian community. Many arguments in the paper are supported by looking at the interplay between individual “narrative recollections” and the more obvious trends in communal building of “collective memory” found in documents, genealogies and institutional records. These repositories of memories, at some point, begin to merge to form what is now discerned as identity. By tracing this change through individual efforts and service provision, the pivotal role of librarians and archivists in the documentation, preservation, manipulation and dissemination of these records is underscored. With professional training and experience in the management of information, especially primary materials, this article seeks to offer a librarian’s “reconstruct” of the complex and hotly-debated question of Chinese Canadian identities that strives to appreciate its process and sheds lights from different perspectives on the published literature.

Chinese Canadians: A Stock of Identities

The demographic profile of Chinese Canadians underwent tremendous changes since their first documented arrival in 1788. To be clear, Chinese Canadians had rather complex relationships with the citizens of their host country. The interdiasporic and
indigenous relationships ebbed and flowed over the years, which ultimately shaped the psyche of the Chinese community as we examine it today.

Let’s consider the view of history back to the gold rush of 1858 through the post-WWII years. At that time, most Chinese migrants in Canada were from the nine counties of the southern province of Guangdong: Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, Enping, and Heshan. These counties were collectively known as Wuyi; Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde known as Nan-Pan-Shun; and finally Zhongshan. Migrants were stereotyped as sojourners who would eventually return to China after making enough money in Canada and/or poor consumers who sent their meagre earnings back home. A closer look at the immigration laws revealed that they were allowed neither to bring their spouses or children to Canada nor to marry the white and aboriginal women they encountered in Canada. This effectively reduced them to indefinite periods of bachelorhood, never tenable in a period of popular growth and prosperity.

In the post-1967 years, many more Chinese emigrated from different provinces of PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan. As the numbers increased so did the range of source countries. Some had been stranded in other locales before coming to Canada while others did not see Canada as the final destination. In the 1980s and 1990s, ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, India, Peru, Brazil, Guyana, Mexico, South Africa, Europe and other parts of the world joined the wave of migration to Canada. Among the newcomers, the presence of boat people from China who came as migrants between 1999 and 2000 underscored the increasingly transnational character of late 20th century immigration.

“The globalization of the world economy causes tension between the need to encourage the international movement of people and the nationalist agenda of most Asian and Pacific countries. In addition, individual mobility has dramatically increased as a result of technological advances in transportation and communication.” Toon van Meijl, Beyond economics: transnational labour migration in Asia and the Pacific. IIAS Newsletter, # 43, spring 2007.
Over time, the social consciousness of Chinese Canadians has become jarred by a confluence of globalization, transnationalism, multiple modernities - and the fragmenting results of the Chinese diaspora. As migration becomes more dynamic - so have the identities of migrants. The dreams and values of the pioneers arriving in the 1860’s who were financed by extended families and clansmen were very different from the “big spenders’ who looked for a safe haven for their fortunes and scooped up investments and properties in the post-1982 years. Taiwanese arriving at Canada’s doorstep generally brought with them a strong sense of national identity which seemed to be compromised by Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation. (Tsang, 2008). Their primary identity was ‘Chinese’ though they labelled themselves as ‘hyphenated”; in the same manner that second, third or fourth generation Chinese are “Chinese Canadian”. From this stock of identities, Chinese Canadians of different eras, for a variety of reasons, see themselves as sojourners; regular Canadian citizens who call Canada home; astronauts; empty nesters and more.

**Formation & Articulation of Ethnic Identities at a Personal Level**

Individuals often do not discuss the issue of identity in their daily life. Yet ethnic identity is vigorously articulated in the sharing of biographies, homemade remedies and recipes; the preservation of family history archives and genealogy projects. There are inspiring stories about Canadians of Chinese descent reclaiming family names through genealogical research. Official immigration records of Chinese before the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947 did not always represent their true identity because of the error-prone registration process. Chinese were at a disadvantage because there were very few ways to correct the inaccuracy of migratory records.

Today, successful endeavours that rekindled or rebuilt trans-national lineages are more numerous. As a consequence, popular genealogy software helping people to develop their family trees such as GENI [www.geni.com/family-tree](http://www.geni.com/family-tree) are available. Descendants of Yip Sang, a prominent Chinese businessman in the late 1800s through early 1900, created their very own rich family tree in 1972. It was diligently updated in 1986, 1996 and again
in 2008. Their latest family reunion was an enthusiastic gathering of over 500 in Vancouver where stories of ancestors were shared over and over again.

Many Chinese chose to contribute to clan associations, pass on their social and business networks to the younger generation, partake in community and social activities and answer calls for help from the unfortunate in the community. This year, the lobby for the residency of a man from Fujian whose wife died after giving birth in Canada, was widely supported in the Chinese phone-in hotlines on major radio shows, television, websites and blogs.

Driving Forces that Reconstruct Identities

Political, economic and social forces in host countries such as Canada have an impact on Chinese Canadians’ choice of residency and community as much as in their country of origin. Many of the breadwinners in “astronaut families” from Hong Kong in the early 1980s to 1997 faced the challenge of how often they should visit their children or wives living in Canada given their busy business schedules or work life in Hong Kong. The robust economy for businessmen and attractive remuneration for job seekers were magnetic draws. Compounded by a favourable tax system and lower taxes compared to Canada, thousands of economically active and productive immigrants flocked back to Hong Kong, literally “parking” their families here. In the following two years, Taiwanese families and emigrants from Mainland China in the new millennium began to join the ‘astronauts’ by and large driven by a similar desire to make their fortunes where economic opportunities and established networks were aplenty. Their ultimate choice of domicile to a great extent can be factored into how “Canadian” they regard themselves.

The “Chineseness” of the newcomers to Canada varies, understandably, depending on where they called home before taking up residency here. Overall, the Taiwanese seem to have little emotional attachment to the “lao huaqiao” - literally the “old Chinese sojourners” who came from Guangdong, the southern province. Notwithstanding their common Confucian values, the Taiwanese immigrants live with unique cultural and
historical baggage which sets them apart from those from Hong Kong and China. Because their numbers remained very low until 1999, and are now only stabilized at around 20,000, the Taiwanese regard themselves as a distinct community within the fast-growing community of over one-million-strong Chinese Canadians.

At the same time, numeric supremacy helps to shape the collective identity of migrants from Mainland China. They are after all the largest source of immigration recorded nationally in the new millennium to 2008. Recently, an apartment building in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey almost burned to the ground in a fire was dubbed the “Beijing lou” or “Beijing House” due to their dominating presence in the building. This critical mass fuels their sense of “Chineseness” which does not seem to be the case for those from Guyana, Peru or Singapore, for example. Their numbers are not big enough to make a statement of this kind. Apparently, this sense of identity is reinforced by the stellar rise of China as a global economic and political power in recent years.

A number of factors play a part in defining one’s identity: for example, age, race, educational attainment and social status. Younger generations who spend their lives or most of their childhood and teenage years in Canada tend to assume identities which are radically different from their parents and grandparents. In 2008, photos of Edison Chan, a young Chinese Canadian pop-singer, and several young female pop-stars from Hong Kong depicting explicit sex acts hit YouTube, Hong Kong as well as Canadian television outlets. Many younger Chinese Canadians regarded the photos as unfortunate and viewed the pop stars as youth icons similar to Americans Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. Incidentally, video games, female celebrities and musicians tend to dominate web searches of the young, according to search engines such as Dogpile and Metacrawler. Older Chinese Canadian are less patient and were worried that young people would openly identify with these lewd acts. This generational gap gives rise to tensions where conflicting images of the importance of family and community take precedence over the transient nature of fame and fortune.
The digital divide among Chinese Canadians is a reality. Similar to other segments of the Canadian population, it is created by educational and social gaps and compounded by socioeconomic status. What seems certain is that the formation of new identities is indeed a shifting and evolving process. With popular social-networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook taking over young people’s lives, global platforms such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and YouTube create huge gaps in values between young and old. User-friendly devises such as I-Phones and Blackberries command the attention of the trendy and the young who are likely to be influenced by what is happening around the world.

The sheer number and diverse activities of community, business and government organizations have an impact on the image and identities of Chinese Canadians. Non-government organizations such as the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia aims to bring out untold stories of ethnic Chinese in the province; SUCCESS and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation are dedicated to the helping Chinese Canadians to overcome challenges in the settlement and in times of hardship whereas the Canada Hong Kong Business Association strives to promote trade and business between Hong Kong and Canada. In helping the ethnic Chinese, they raise the self-esteem of the community and its profile in society.

The conspicuous Chinese presence in the transnational cinema, sit-com and domestic drama industries in the last decade help to boost the self-image of Chinese Canadians. Common themes deal with social stereotyping and discrimination. Stories of modern diasporic femininity and displacement are popular as is the presentation of an historically new experience to audience viewers. At the same time, an overseas writers group like the Chinese Canadian Writers’ Association enjoys unprecedented opportunity for exchange with writers from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States and ensures that more literary works are based on stories from the diaspora. Cross-cultural experiences of recent immigrants and diasporic Chinese in a number of global locations redefine Chineseness in the twentieth century. Music, new media, popular culture and a variety of genres offer stages for interrogating and redefining the identities of Chinese Canadians. The proliferation of this literature also fuels development of Chinese heritage language
education in Canada. It gradually evolves as a preferred non-official language in school curriculum and has become a language option for bilingual education. These aspects come together to strengthen national identity which includes both China and Canada. After years of lobbying, learning Chinese etiquette in a classroom that respects diversity is now a reality.

Another driving force at work is Asian Canadian studies in academia. Ethnically-diverse campuses in Canada endeavour to create comparative cultural perspectives in teaching and scholarship. The growth in numbers of ethnic Asian students registering as both local and international students has been impetus for launching ethnic and intercultural studies. Chinese language studies is one of the fastest-growing programs in the academy. However, there is no established discipline in Asian Canadian studies despite the fact that the study of race, gender, migration and indigeneity are in place.

Inquiries by students in social issues often translate into reflection and transformation of identities. In Mach 2009, the Asian Canadian Cultural Organization (ACCO), a student body at UBC which aims to raise awareness of diversity within Asian Canadian cultures, organized a three-day workshop “Do you know an Asian who deals drugs or is in a gang? Drug, Gangs, and Asian Youth Culture”. Students were concerned with the rise of gang-related crimes in the Lower Mainland and criminal lifestyles that are increasingly associated with Asian Canadian youth. For example, police-raided grow-ups suggest that Chinese own a good share of these illegal operations. In any case, the ACCO with UBC researchers gather to explore the social and political consequences of these findings.

Outside the academy, social activists join to promote social justice issues. Canadians for Reconciliation (www.fullofnews) is a group of ethnic Chinese supported by their First Nation and Caucasian friends; they work with the media and supporters to seek an official apology from the provincial government for the head tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act. They lobby for public consultation on the projected building of a new school on a burial ground where unidentified bodies (including Chinese) were laid to rest.
This burial ground dates back to the turn of the 20th Century in New Westminster which is an old Chinatown at that time.

Activism may also take the form of community-based research. The Pacific Northeast Labour History Association hosted its 40th annual conference on Indigenous, Immigrants, Migrant Labour and Globalization in June 2008 in collaboration with the Labour and Working Class History Association and the Simon Fraser University Centre for Labour Studies. This conference seeks to connect the history of migration to North America with contemporary globalization and considers how the labour movement will strengthen in the future. The program includes research papers, individual presentations, interactive workshops, drama, music, memorabilia and displays. The program focuses on immigration experiences; the impact of refugee policies on immigrants and indigenous women in their communities; workplaces; labour movements and remittance, from those sent away to those sending money back home. The main stream media also played a role in this regard.

In 2007, CBC Radio co-organized the 1907 Anti-Asian Riot Walking Tour through Chinatown and Japantown. It echoed the “2007 Anniversaries of Change is” which is a broad-based coalition of institutions and organizations that came together to mark 2007 as an anniversary year in the quest for equality and justice in Canada. The years 1907, 1947, 1967, and 1997 mark watersheds in the history of Asian migrants in Canada and their struggles to fight against discrimination and oppression. These anniversaries set the stage for historical reflection and encourage research on racism. Stakeholders include Centre A, Vancouver City, Kikkie Museum and Heritage Centre, Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society, Chinese Canadian Historical Society of B.C., UBC, University of Victoria, District Labor Council and Aboriginal Liaison-Provincial Capital Commission. These groups reflect on who Chinese-Canadians are and encourage ethnic Chinese to consider similar questions. It should be noted that long before these new organizations are formed, the National Council of Chinese Canadians helped the Chinese focus on specific social issues in the 1960s.
Following their workshop and book “Finding Memories, Tracing Routes” CCHS held a successful second writing workshop with the theme of food and family. Twenty-three participants of Chinese Canadian or Aboriginal backgrounds researched, discussed, and wrote their memories of family gatherings, home cooking, restaurant outings and other stories cooked up by smells, tastes, sounds, sights, and textures that bring families and communities together. In addition to stories, thirty-seven recipes and over 170 images were included. The product is an easy-to-read, engaging monograph entitled “Eating Stories, a Chinese Canadian and Aboriginal Potluck” edited by Brandy Lien Worrall. At these events, the city turns its gaze towards Chinese and aboriginal Canadians. A growing number of activists want to make sure the hardships they endured are never forgotten. It is interesting how it echoes what Valerie Matsumoto of UCLA said about in “Foodways”, “how food is tied to culture, society, identity, history and communities” and “family memories around food, rituals, people and lives lived become collective memories of contributors, the sponsoring organization and a much wider readership and “foodies.”

Collective memories and institutional depositories

It is important to identify the major forces which persistently influence how Chinese Canadians perceive themselves and how they are viewed by other Canadians. It is equally important to see how this community evolves as a result of a continuous re-mapping
process. The lives and stories of individuals and families are starting points and, ultimately, an embodiment of an ongoing recycling of actions and reactions. The articulation of identity gives rise to the formation of cultural repositories which in turn form collective memories. Consciously and subconsciously, individual memories of Chinese Canadians will continue to shape the larger more collective identities of the group.

The impact of change and the subtle, incremental nature of progress are beyond the analysis of this paper. The robust character of cultural repositories is central to its being; this is the exciting part of studying Chinese Canadian history. It draws on both Chinese and English sources and is defined in this paper as an ephemeral entity that calls forth to document, preserve and manifest the lives and stories of the Chinese diaspora. Family and business archives in the custody of museums and libraries, publications, full genealogical histories for sale or free download, records of organizational activities, films and performances, media coverage, are cornerstones of diasporic history, and they are central to the mapping of Chinese identity. At the same, the systematic documentation and dissemination of personal stories enrich collective memories and encourage personal and social reflection on the part of an entire community.

**Individual articulations & recollections embodied in cultural repositories**

Biographies and Chinatown stories become coffee table books that readers from all walks of life consult to learn about the Chinese Canadian experience. Louie Tong’s biography; “Salt Water City” and” Finding Memories, Tracing Routes: Chinese Canadian Family Stories” are popular titles that document compelling stories of individuals and are read by many Canadians. The BC documentary film on the Wong’s family tailor shop in Vancouver’s Chinatown reached thousands of viewers with the inspiring stories of a family of successful pioneers. Literary writing such as “The Concubine’s Children” recounts the hardships and bravery of a woman who spent her whole life here after marrying a man she never met. The passing of a well-loved TV star moved the City of Vancouver to name a beautiful summer day as “Fei Fei Day”. Other examples are
numerous but they send powerful messages to Canadians and remind us of a diverse and complex ethnic group with its own remarkable set of achievements.

Digitization of primary documents has come to the study of this collective memory. The head tax database of 97,000 Chinese registrants was digitized by the University of British Columbia Library and serves to facilitate genealogical research of Chinese immigration on a national scale. Public libraries offering local and family history lectures and workshops continue to attract participants from the Chinese community as well as other ethnic groups. In the future, Canadians can avail themselves of this depository of knowledge on Chinese immigration to learn about Chinese Canadians and their history. Some UBC librarians that work with the database say that a few e-mail queries have led to historical treasure hunts and the re-uniting of long-lost Chinese family members. For the technologically-savvy, genealogy software is indeed a powerful social networking tools comparable to new platforms such as Facebook.

At the International Symposium on Cultural Diversity and the Contemporary World, 2006, I argued how the adoptions of personal names are the cornerstones of genealogical study and that they map and reflect on the formation of Chinese Canadian identities. In the last two years, I have continued to map county and village names registered in the head tax database with their names in Chinese characters. The process of working with the Chinese who are able to recognize the Romanized form in the Guangdong dialects and the database of place names are invaluable means of shaping our collective memories of Chinese pioneers. It enables the memories to linger on much longer after the reconciliation process which started on June 22, 2006.

A new crop of trans-national lineages linked by family names or common ancestors is springing up around the world. Records of their meetings and activities are documented and shared beyond their own groups. To support research on trans-national lineages, the Asian Library and Genealogy Society of Utah are collaborating on digitalization of forty-six Guangdong clan association publications for free public access. Many of these are
‘live’ publications and will continue to bridge the Chinese overseas with their extended families and clansmen in China.

Closer to home, the family history archives of pioneers such as Yip Sang and Steven Lok Tin Lee have left their families and are part of the collective memories stored in institutional depositories such as museums, libraries and databases such as the Historical Chinese Language in British Columbia web page www.hclmbc.org.)

In a similar way, cultural performances, exhibits, memorabilia and media coverage through traditional and on-line platforms such as You-Tube and podcasts institutionalize the preservation and dissemination of individual activities. Launched at the Asian Library, UBC on April 30, 2009 the digitization of the Ming Pao community news preserve the stories of everyday Chinese living in British Columbia. Community news of ethnic newspapers are more neutral and balance out the loud and even occasionally negative headlines. Newspaper headlines, especially negative ones, feed speculation and gossip. Sensational stories in the Chinese as well as English media are still broadly disseminated. Recently, Tung Sze (Betty) Yan was found shot to death outside the Canadian Chinese Chess Society in Richmond, B.C., where her husband was said to be a director. According to a transcript of an Immigration and Refugee Board detention review hearing in 2001, Yan was a failed refugee claimant who managed to stay in Canada for nearly a decade after she was ordered deported. The media went to great length to present their luxurious life as loan sharks and gangsters. In the following media discussion, politicians and phone-in audiences used this as a way to criticize Canada’s immigration system. With the archiving of newspapers, the lives of Chinese Canadians may be viewed in a more objective fashion by future historians after the dust of scandal settles.

Professional focus groups such as the Genealogy and Diaspora work group under the Council of East Asian Librarians and Genealogy librarians have a pivotal role to play in developing cultural repositories for family archives, oral histories, media coverage. As the interest in this area of research flourishes, the repositories will constitute an invaluable resource of study, reflection and objective appreciation.
Eleanor Yuen, *The Reconstruction of Chinese Canadian Identities across the Pacific*

References


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