

IMAGINING CANADA: TRACING THE CULTURAL LOGICS OF MIGRATION
AMONGST PRC IMMIGRANTS IN VANCOUVER

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the cultural logics of migration amongst recent skilled immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia. Challenging the economistic view of scholars who subscribe to the dominating imperative of capital, it emphasizes instead the social and cultural embeddedness of migration decisions. Integral to this analysis is the role of the imagination in migration. Personal geographies further determine whether the idea for migration takes root in the imagination, and is eventually translated into action. Two key questions guide my enquiry. Firstly, why migrate? Secondly, why migrate to Canada, and Vancouver? A central concern is the kind of resources relied upon as sources of knowledge before the immigrants arrive: how important are social networks and cultural discourses in shaping their knowledge of life in Canada? Another concern is to uncover the migrants' lived realities after their arrival. Do the migrants' experiences in Canada match their expectations prior to migration? How likely are they to remain? Conversely, are there indications of return migration, or migration elsewhere?

In terms of methodology, I conducted 3 focus groups and 36 in-depth household interviews with 78 recent PRC immigrants. I also performed textual analysis of the Chinese media, the Internet, and other sources. My research indicates that there is a cultural logic to migration, which reproduces and is reproduced by discursive practices located in the home community and the community of fellow migrants overseas. Key to this cultural logic is the significance of the imagination, where migration is tied to a particular representation of reality such that potential migrants view it as a route for success, regardless of the actual reality. Upon their arrival in Canada, experience is the overarching factor in influencing migrants' responses to Canada. Having parted from their original lives in China, some decide to remain in Canada while others raise the possibility of returning to China. In crossing from China to Canada, different worlds of imagination and reality are traversed, with a premium placed on the perspective of experience in the *New World* of Canada.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: New Immigration from the People's Republic of China

Once every two months, a new immigrant reception is held at the headquarters of the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society (S.U.C.C.E.S.S.), an immigrant agency.¹ The reception is free for all new immigrants. Lasting about 2 hours, the program includes an introduction to Canadian society and its job-finding culture, the sharing of experiences by an earlier immigrant, games, and a lucky draw. At one such session in January 2002, about 60 new immigrants from 17 different cities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) were present, many accompanied by their families. Their impressions of Canada ranged from "the air is fresh, beautiful environment", "the people are warm and courteous" to "like a countryside, no night life" and "the economy is not prosperous". When asked for their most urgent need at that point, the answer was resoundingly similar: to find a professional job.

According to Ms Lilian To, the agency's Executive Director, most of the immigrants from China² are professionals. Many have degrees in engineering or information technology, and approximately one in four has a background in finance or business. About 40 per cent of the immigrants fail to find work related to their training. Ms. To said, "We're wasting a lot of talent. We need bridge programs to get them up to speed and upgrade their skills" (Matas, 2002). Speaking at a public forum entitled "The Asian Infusion of Vancouver", Ms Angela Kan, the Executive Director of the Chinese Cultural Centre since 1995 (and former Executive Director of S.U.C.C.E.S.S. in 1977), described the recent PRC immigrants as a

¹ S.U.C.C.E.S.S. is one of Vancouver's most vibrant non-profit social-service agencies, with a \$16-million budget and a staff of 350 people (Matas, 2002). Apart from the headquarters at 28 West Pender Street, it has 11 branch offices in Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby, Tri-Cities and Surrey. Between April 2000 and March 2001, it served 23 815 immigrants from the PRC, representing nearly half its clientele (S.U.C.C.E.S.S., 2001).

“sophisticated” and “professionally trained” cohort. To her, their present problems in finding employment felt like “history repeating itself” as it reminded her of the time when she was working at S.U.C.C.E.S.S. in the 1970s to lobby for the recognition of immigrants’ foreign credentials.

Today, the greatest hurdles for new immigrants from China remain obtaining recognition of their foreign credentials and finding a job (Matas, 2002). To illustrate, Bill Kuan had abandoned his career as a lawyer in a city of 10 million people in central China in early 2002 to move to Vancouver with his wife, Carol Qian, an accountant. Shortly after arriving in Canada, Kuan began working as a cashier at a Mexican fast-food restaurant while making plans to enrol for a graduate degree in business. Qian became involved in volunteer work until she could begin courses to qualify as an accountant. Substantial anecdotal evidence from immigrant agencies, and new PRC immigrants alike, suggest that they are not alone in their experiences.³

Two apparently contrasting representations of these immigrants emerge from the Chinese press in Canada: as settlers or potential returnees. The first view is by far the more dominant, and tends to adopt a measured optimism towards the immigrants’ prospects. There is a tendency to consider PRC immigration in the context of Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, highlighting the latter’s wealth and consumer power. After this observation is made, the need for a long-term view is emphasized:

² Thereafter in this thesis, all references to “China” exclude the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong.

³ A caveat is that Kuan could be one of the “more fortunate” cases if he succeeds in enrolling for a graduate degree. The obstacles many PRC immigrants face in getting their educational qualifications recognised, and

As the skilled immigrants need to adapt to the environment in the first two or three years that they are in Canada, it is not only quite hard on them, their contributions to the local economic market are also not that obvious. *However, five or ten years later*, when they have integrated into the local society, and their careers are well established, their potential can be seen then. (Chan, quoted in Ming Pao, 2002a, my italics)

The PRC immigrants may spend less on these areas *but* they are interested in establishing their own career, especially in the high-tech industries. Thus from *a long-term perspective*, the change to the immigration structure is creating a new path. (Luo, quoted in Ming Pao, 2002b, my italics)

Essentially, the new PRC immigrants are portrayed as having “a strong desire to settle and establish a career here” (Luo, quoted in Ming Pao, 2002b). In addition to economics, Thomas Leung (2002) perceives them having impacts on the mainstream society in general – albeit after integration - and Chinese culture in Vancouver in particular.⁴ A darker side may also accompany the growth in new immigration from the PRC. Family counsellors at S.U.C.C.E.S.S. have found that spousal abuse is most serious among immigrants who have been in Canada for less than three years (Liang, 2002). According to Guoyuan Wu, a counsellor, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. used to receive about 3 cases of wife abuse a month in the past but since February 2002, there have been about 6 cases a month (ibid). He estimates 80% of them to involve PRC new immigrants, and believes one of the reasons is that having recently arrived, they are stressed because they cannot find a job yet.⁵

A second - and more recent – representation is that there are indications that the immigrants may return to the PRC. An article on 8 July 2002 in *Ming Pao* raised the possibility of PRC

the issue of language, have meant that they tend to opt for a second undergraduate degree or certified courses at colleges and technical institutes if they are adopting the route of studying.

⁴ The most obvious impact on Chinese society in Vancouver is that there are more Mandarin speakers now (Leung, quoted in Ming Pao, 2002c). TV and radio programs have also changed from an exclusive focus on Cantonese programs to include Mandarin ones.

⁵ However, he cautions that the rise in numbers could also be due to other immigration agencies cutting down their services or because there has been a rise in unemployment rate.

immigrants following the footsteps of Hong Kong immigrants who had returned to Hong Kong, especially in light of significant migration from the latter to China to take advantage of its growing economy (Huang, 2002). It quoted a PRC return migrant saying, "After becoming residents in those countries (including Canada), most people will return to their homeland." Another article on 15 July 2002 wrote that 52 organisations from the city of Shenzhen were going to New York, San Francisco and Vancouver in August to recruit 467 skilled workers, mostly in finance and insurance positions, with a top salary of US\$300 000 (Ming Pao, 2002d).⁶

Grounded in these empirical realities during the settlement process, my thesis extends the lens on immigration back in space, and time, to the phase *before* immigration occurs.

The wider theoretical and empirical contexts of migration from China to Canada are examined in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis respectively. Chapter 4 discusses the reasons for migration, reflecting particularly on the role of the imagination. In Chapter 5, I explore why Canada, and Vancouver, are chosen as destinations, and contemplate upon the notion of place. Chapter 6 looks at the kind of information that potential migrants have of life in Canada, and emphasizes the value attached to experience. In Chapter 7, I survey the migrants' lives after their migration to Vancouver before finally making my conclusions in Chapter 8.

⁶ This is the third overseas trip led by Shenzhen government bodies to recruit skilled workers (Ming Pao, 2002d).

Chapter 2

Tracing Cultural Logics and Personal Geographies: Towards an Interpretation of “New” Chinese Migration

An essentializing notion of Chineseness continues to dog the scholarship because the Chinese past, nation, singular history, or some “cultural core” is taken to be the main and unchanging determinant of Chinese identity. Sometimes we forget that we are talking about one-quarter of the world’s population.

(Ong, 1999: 111)

In this chapter, I examine the intersections between culture and migration. Scholars who follow an economistic view subscribe to the dominating imperative of capital, and tend to consider sociocultural relations irrelevant or peripheral in influencing migration decisions. I argue instead that migration is socially and culturally embedded, and that despite increasing academic attention on the significance of social networks in migration processes, the *cultural* is still underrepresented. In particular, I highlight the role of cultural logics in influencing migration, and suggest that it is in understanding migrants’ personal geographies - how they imagine, negotiate and experience places; in short, their mental maps - that we can unravel the workings of these cultural logics. My substantive concern in this theoretical reformulation is to depart from possible orientalizing tendencies of research on the “Chinese diaspora” - with its many assumptions about overseas Chinese culture and identity - and adopt an approach that is more sensitive to the contexts within which migration arises from.

Discipline and Migration: Re-understanding Decision-making

The significance of migration has been declared in no uncertain terms by Castles and Miller (1993) who view the present era as the “age of migration”. Massey et al (1998: ix) too believe that “international migration will be the emblematic social, political, and economic

issue of the twenty-first century". This perceived importance is reflected in the breadth of academic interest in the issue. Robin Cohen (1995) claimed in his prologue to *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* that Richardson's catalogue of disciplines involved in studying migration was "inadequate only in that it *understates* the degree to which migration has been a subject considered by scholars in many disciplines" (author's italics).⁷ By drawing attention to this statement, my intention is not so much to echo Cohen's point as to use it as a platform for considering how the field of migration has been "disciplined".⁸

Earlier theories of international migration – which still constitute the major paradigm of economists – tended to emphasize differences in economic opportunities between places of origin and destination: jobs offering higher wages and greater opportunities for economic advancement were the key to understanding flows of immigrant labour from one country to another (Clark, 1998). In this neoclassical economic framework, migration is regarded as being primarily driven by the desire for improving human capital (see DaVanzo, 1981; Mincer, 1978; Sjaastad, 1961).⁹ The challenge to such an economic approach is demonstrated by Massey et al's (1998: 8) comment:

The theoretical approach to immigration that has prevailed for the past fifty years does not come to terms with the complexities of the current reality, and social scientists have consequently begun to question the two pillars upon which earlier models were built. At the micro-level, they question the conceptualisation of migrants as rational actors responding to economic disparities between countries.¹⁰ At the macro-level, they question the "push-

⁷ Richardson included demographers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, psychiatrists and psychologists. Cohen added to this list, geographers ("the most obvious omission to Richardson's statement"), international relations specialists, philosophers and scholars in cultural studies.

⁸ This idea is inspired by Steven Vertovec's guest lecture at UBC on 14 March, 2002, entitled "Disciplining the Field of Transnationalism".

⁹ Another common economic approach is world-systems theory, which is predicated on exploitative relations between "core" and "peripheral" countries (see Cheng and Bonaich, 1984).

¹⁰ As Haberkorn (1981) puts it, "the fact that migration decisions involve people rather than products should lead us to one important realization, not all decisions are primarily rational and following carefully calculated means-ends combinations, but rather are quite frequently heavily influenced by emotion."

pull” approach, which views migration as a means of establishing equilibrium between regions of labour supply and demand. With seeds of doubt planted about the primacy of economic motives, the conceptual edifice of neoclassical economics has wobbled as never before.

Empirically, the inadequacy of these models is suggested by the observation that some poor nations have not generated significant migratory flows to the US, and that it is not always the poorest and most dependent people who emigrate or plan to emigrate (Boyd, 1989; Clark, 1998; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Migrants are instead often those with middle levels of social status. Although none of these observations invalidate the human capital explanation of migration, they do suggest that it is incomplete (Clark, 1998). This recognition has led to a renewed interest in the nature of migration decision-making, including the basic motivations that underlie geographic mobility, and the context within which decisions are made (Massey et al, 1998).

My argument is that migration decisions are *socially* and *culturally embedded*. Although I am borrowing the term “embeddedness” from recent literature on the cultural turn in economic geography¹¹ to emphasize that social and cultural influences are tied inextricably with economic motivations, the idea of socio-cultural influence itself is not new in migration studies. One of its earlier proponents was Germani (1965) who conceived three levels of analysis in studying the causes of migration. The *objective level* includes the conventional push and pull factors, as well as connections between place of origin and destination. At the *normative level*, the emphasis is on perceptions and evaluations of particular locations being regulated by a societal framework of institutionalised roles, expectations, and behaviour patterns. When considering the *psychosocial level*, it is the “attitudes and expectations of

¹¹ For example, see Lee and Willis (1997); Yeung (2000, manuscript).

concrete individuals” that are taken into account (Germani, 1965: 162). The purpose of outlining this framework is to place my later consideration of socio-cultural elements in perspective.

Hugo (1981: 187) had also asserted, “Migration researchers, however, working at the community and/or individual levels as distinct from those dealing with aggregate (usually secondary data) are acutely aware of how poor a predictor of population mobility economic variables are when considered in isolation from social and cultural influences”. In his own research in West Java, Indonesia (1978), he found that villages with similar ecological situations, economies and levels of pressures on agricultural resources differed widely with respect to the level and type of mobility, and concluded that the social and cultural context in which such decisions are made exerts an important influence upon economic and other motives of potential migrants, thus shaping: 1) whether or not migration occurs; 2) what form of migration takes place; 3) the place of destination; and 4) the nature of experience at the destination (Hugo, 1981). Points 1, 3 and 4 will be woven into my analysis in the following chapters.

While the cultural embeddedness of migration has largely been sidelined until recently, its social counterpart has been demonstrated competently by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers, among others, who have evoked networks and contacts in explaining migration flows (Hugo, 1981; Lomnitz, 1977; Pessar, 1982; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1974). Chain migration is the embodiment par excellence of social networks: once established, immigrant communities offer an entry point and an initial set of contacts for new migrants. Flows then acquire a momentum of their own, and will continue even when economic

conditions appear to contradict such flows (Clark, 1998). There is a geographical aspect to chain migration – channelling occurs such that migrants from certain locations are more likely to settle in particular destinations (Miyares, 1997). For example, many Chinese immigrants in Western and Southern Europe are drawn from Hong Kong and a small number of villages located in Southern Zhejiang (Pieke, 1998).

Since the early 1990s, research utilising the concept of transnationalism¹² has helped to elucidate the processes by which *transnational* social networks facilitate these flows. At the same time, the recognition of transnationalism has also helped to refocus attention on the importance of *social* linkages, which were formerly subsumed beneath a concern with economic and political connections.¹³ For instance, studies on the astronaut phenomenon – where one member of the household, usually the husband, remains in the country of origin to pursue a professional career or business – have stressed the significance of familial ties, and revealed the human costs that belie the apparent economic and political benefits of such an arrangement (Man, 1993; Pepua et al, 1998; Waters, 2000).

Thus far, I have briefly delineated two dominant strands of research on migration. My objective is twofold. First, to indicate that migration research is for the most part conducted from the preserves of disciplinary concerns. While migration lends itself to multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary explorations, and there are indeed such collaborations, I think it is due to the nature of academia that the migration field has been artificially divided into specific streams of theorization and research. This is perhaps inevitable since academic

¹² Transnationalism is defined as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al, 1994: 7).

disciplines, by virtue of their specialised training, will foreground particular perspectives. To me, what is important is that one should not forget the big picture; an ongoing evaluation of relevance is critical. A second objective is to highlight the social and cultural embeddedness of migration decisions, especially paving the ground for an exploration of a previously neglected domain – the cultural. This objective builds on the earlier one in that although I am proposing to foreground the cultural, I am keenly aware that it does not occur in a vacuum. My larger goal is to demonstrate that work on the cultural realm needs to be taken seriously, and should be regarded equally with the economic, social, and political disciplines in the field of migration.

Defining Culture in an Era of Globalization

As with the cultural turn in most of the social sciences, steps have been taken to engage with the cultural dimensions of migration, most notably from the perspective of cultural studies. Before looking at the implications of this turn, I think it is helpful to discuss what “culture” - a term which Raymond Williams (1983: 87) regards as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” - means. In an incisive overview of the responses by economic geographers to the cultural turn, Phil Crang (1997) perceived two main types of understandings of “culture”. First, culture is cast as a “generic” facet of human life, bound up with human abilities to make the world meaningful and significant i.e. associated with questions of meaning and value. Second, culture is stressed as a “differential” quality, marking out and helping to constitute distinctive social groups each with their own meaning and value systems.

¹³ Refer to Massey et al (1987) for a classic example of the relationship between social networks and migration. Although they do not explicitly refer to transnationalism, the concept is implicit in their framework, which encompasses both the sending country Mexico and the receiving country US.

Drawing from the first definition, I am primarily concerned with the way culture has pervaded, what de Certeau (1988) terms, “ the practice of everyday life” and is deeply intertwined with our beliefs, values and lifestyles. I also think of culture as an *ongoing* practice, following Shurman-Smith and Hannam’s (1994: 79) observation that “Not only is culture a process and not a thing but...it is a process which is often treated as if it were a thing”. This view explains Appadurai’s (1996) preference for the adjectival form “cultural”, which he sees as being a realm of difference, contrasts and comparisons, and is his strategy for escaping the implication of culture-as-object when using “culture” as a noun. While sympathetic to Appadurai’s concern, I remain unconvinced that using a different form of the word is useful in rethinking what “culture” means, much in the same way as “modernity” has been permuted into “modernities” without further illumination of the root word.¹⁴ The second definition, in my view, needs to be treated cautiously, in light of the heightened sensitivity in representing “other” cultures in the humanities and social sciences, especially anthropology (see Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Said, 1978, 1989, 1993). I would, however, not venture so far as to reject it for I believe that its differentiating element still has analytical value, not least in our understanding of globalization.

That the world we live in is an increasingly globalised one, is a subject which has been covered extensively. My interest lies more in the observation made by anthropologists and others that despite the apparently widespread dissemination of globalization – Coke and McDonald’s Restaurants being popular examples – to villages and world cities alike, these products are not bringing about a global cultural uniformity. Rather, they have greatly increased cultural diversity because of the ways in which they are interpreted and the way

¹⁴ Derek Gregory voiced the latter critique during a graduate seminar.

they acquire new meanings in local reception (Ong, 1999; Featherstone, 1990). Returning to the issue of migration, this realization of the transformations accompanying the drawing together of people and places, commodities and capital, raises important questions of the meanings attached to “here” and “elsewhere”. Not only is “here” constantly being reconfigured by the intervention of travel and communications, “elsewhere” is also a site of varying meanings. Amidst this flux of change, what are the cognitive geographies associated with migration? How do the interactions between cultural representations, products and regions shape notions about border crossings, and lives in other places? Following Ong’s (1999: 5) take on globalization, my concern is with the cultural logics that “inform and structure border crossings”, and which make migration seem “thinkable, practicable, and desirable”.

The Cultural Logics of Migration

Among scholars who have been studying the Chinese in Europe, there has developed the idea of a “cultural logic” of migration, which refers to the reasoning behind migration decisions within a particular cultural context. This logic reproduces and is reproduced by discursive practices located partly in the home community and partly in the community of fellow villagers in Europe. It is tied to a representation of reality that focuses prospective migrants in the home community on an overseas career (Pieke, 1998). For instance, the San Tin village in Hong Kong consisted almost entirely of families who had at least one member overseas (Watson, 1977). Whole villages have come to depend on remittances for survival. In the Fujian home communities, folk theories of success translate into a veritable culture of emigration that stigmatises local alternatives to emigration as second rate or even a sign of failure (Pieke, 2000). Ko-Lin Chin (1999: 9), in his research on clandestine immigration to

the United States, found that people in the Fuzhou area of China in the early 1990s were “simply engulfed with desire to emigrate”. In the words of a Chinese journalist who visited Fuzhou (quoted in *ibid*),

Everybody went crazy. The area was in a frenzy. Farmers put down their tools, students discarded their books, workers quit their jobs, and everybody was talking about nothing but going to America...If people found out someone had just successfully arrived in the United States, his or her home will be crowded with people, both acquaintances and strangers, come to collect information about going to America.

Despite the high costs and hardship associated with being smuggled to the United States, many young Chinese from the Fuzhou area are eager to take a chance because they are convinced that this is the only way that they and their families can dramatically change their economic and social status within China. For many people in the sending communities, a family has “hope” only if it can produce a *meiguoke* (Guest from the Beautiful Country i.e. America). Even those who do not see it this way may eventually go due to pressure from their families and relatives (Chin, 1999). At this juncture, it is appropriate to point out that my interest is not so much in the form – whether “illegal” or “legal” - that their migration takes, as the cultural logics that have influenced the migration to take place.¹⁵

In *qiaoxiang* (emigration sources) in the Wenzhou area, a “culture of migration” has emerged that is distinctly different from the culture of surrounding areas (Li, 1998:194). With little industry and even less agriculture, the local economy relies on two resources: soft stones and tough overseas Chinese (Hood, 1997). As *qiaoxiang* people, they are proud of their close connections with Europe. It is perhaps unsurprising then that “the Chinese

¹⁵ An appreciation of the cultural importance attached to emigration is useful in understanding why snakeheads (human smugglers) are often held in high respect in China, as opposed to their criminal image in Europe. They

transliterations for European cities roll off tongues as easily as the names of neighbouring counties, even if *Haiya* (The Hague) or *Duling* (Turin) remain abstractions” (ibid: 85). When visiting Lishan – a small and remote village in Wenzhou, Li (1998) learnt that the village population numbers about 1000 now while 700-800 adult villagers make a living abroad, most of whom have settled down in the Netherlands, France and Italy. More than half of them are new migrants i.e. people who emigrated during the last ten years. She was also repeatedly told, “all capable teenagers are preparing to find their future in Europe” (ibid: 184).

It appears then that the Wenzhou people believe “getting rich in Europe” is their common destiny, ignoring how few of their peers in Europe can truly be considered successful, and how hard life really is for many migrants. Instead, their eyes are turned towards the conspicuous consumption – and heightened status - of return migrants as well as the remittances received by the families of migrants. As Li (1998: 194) notes, “The belief that every migrant is or can be a millionaire has been created, and migrants in Europe are widely admired and taken as a reference group.” Therefore, despite the many opportunities that the booming Wenzhou economy offers and the tighter control of (illegal) migration exercised by the European and Chinese governments, chain migration is unlikely to stop soon. The common sentiment among the people in Wenzhou’s *qiaoxiang* is “We are richer than in the past, but we are much poorer than our fellows in Europe” (ibid: 185). Of note here is the concept of relative deprivation, whereby migrants compare themselves with other villagers and consider themselves deprived even if their absolute standard of living has risen.

are regarded as the ones with the “means”. Illegal migration is regarded as one particular strategy to achieve

Increasingly, with improvements in technology and communications, the discursive practices are not limited to contact with previous migrants, but also involve the media and the Internet.

The Imagination as Social Practice

No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people) and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labour and of culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ("individuals") and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai, 1990a: 5)

I suggest that the keystone in the cultural logic of migration lies in the realm of the imagination. Here, I am influenced by Appadurai's (1990a, 1996) conviction of the new role for the imagination in social life, a role based on the trinity of the image, the imagined, and the imaginary. This is not to deny that the imagination – expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories – has always been part of the repertoire of every society, in some culturally organised way. Rather, there is a new force to the imagination in social life today: more persons in greater parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than before. As such, the imagination has "entered the logic of ordinary life... Ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives" (1996: 5). Central to Appadurai's argument is the significance of the mass media, which offer a rich, ever-changing supply of possible lives; ready scripts for their own lives, as well as those of others living in other places. Also important are "contacts with, news of, and rumours about

the aim of landing in Europe (ibid).

others in one's social neighbourhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds" (1996: 53). Media and migration thus form the twin (interconnected) pivots in his examination of the imagination. This relationship is partly inverted in my analysis: I focus mainly on the effect of the imagination on migration while allowing for the possibility that migration may further spark the imagination of others.

A distinction needs to be drawn between fantasy and imagination. The idea of fantasy carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from achievable projects and actions, an easy way to fulfil desires while the imagination on the other hand implies a vigorous engagement with the real, and has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression (Appadurai, 1996, Tuan, 1989). Fantasy can dissipate but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. This distinction can help to clarify the psychoanalytical claim that "(t)he departing person becomes the repository of his peer group's projected fantasies. The context of these fantasies may reflect others' desires to emigrate, a desire they try to satisfy via projective identification with the person actually carrying them out" (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 69). Such a finding in turn reveals the highly social nature of the link between migration and cultural imagination.

I propose that the link between migration and imagination is first established through the recognition of *possibilities*, of alternative constructions of future lives, as demonstrated by Mr H., a village woodworker in Wenzhou (quoted in Li, 1998: 185):

Why do I want to go abroad? Very simple, to earn money, to become rich... Yes, I can earn money here. As a woodworker, I can earn more money than those guys who can only farm the land, but if I go to western Europe, I know I can earn much more. I can become rich very quickly and bring a lot of

money back to do anything I want here. I imagine I can build a new and big house for my family, although I have this five-storey house now and it is not bad. I will rebuild my family tomb, which will be among the best in this area, if not the best. Of course, if I have a lot of money, I may also donate some money for building a school or an old people's home in my village [laughing].

These possibilities may be nurtured through contacts with émigrés, or in some cases, the development of a "community of sentiment" through the media (Appadurai, 1990b). As Benedict Anderson (1991) has shown, print capitalism can bring about groups that have never before been in face-to-face contact to think of themselves as belonging to the same nation, thereby creating an "imagined community". The power of the transnational media today is that they can work beyond the nation-state, for instance, in forging a "third space" of transnational Chinese identity through interaction with Hong Kong and Taiwanese mass culture (Bhabha, 1994; Yang, 1997).¹⁶ This is significant in that migrants may start to identify with Chinese overseas and imagine living on those shores. At the same time, although I subscribe to the notion that media can, to an extent, influence migration via the work of the imagination, I think its influence should not be exaggerated since media reception analysis has drawn attention to the broad range of "creative but contradictory" practices in people's dealings with media texts and technologies, hence pointing to the necessity of situated negotiations in concrete cultural contexts (Ang, 1990: 257).

I have so far been exploring the imagination largely in its collective sense. Although this may account for why the thought of migration could occur among a group of people, it does not however explain why usually only a minority of those people will actually make the

¹⁶ The issue of a transnational Chinese identity is a complex one. Note that the 1997 return of Hong Kong to the PRC was preceded by a considerable wave of migration overseas to countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, albeit there has since been evidence of return migration. The sovereignty of Taiwan remains a hotly contested issue. Despite this being the case, the intersection of capitalism with media power appears to have drawn these regions closer even as some distinctions have come into sharper relief.

decision to migrate. In the next section, I delve into the personal realm to further the discussion.

Personal Geographies

The most fascinating *terrae incognitae* of all are those that lie within the minds and hearts of men. (John K. Wright, 1946¹⁷)

As a geographer, I am inclined to wonder about how the world we live in is viewed. By highlighting the role of the imagination in the cultural logics of migration, I have argued that it is the capacity to conceive of movement and/or other possible places to live that first lays the foundation for an actual decision to move. Now, I take a next step to argue that these cultural logics are ultimately filtered through migrants' personal geographies, which are in part influenced by their perception and mental images of places, i.e. their mental maps (Gould and White, 1974), as well as a more general world view. In a seminal paper entitled *Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology*, the humanistic geographer David Lowenthal (1961: 248) wrote, "Separate personal worlds of experience, learning and imagination necessarily underlie any universe of discourse". When applied to migration, the notion of personal worlds underscores the unique meaning that migration has for each individual, and that is because each individual has a personal history and inhabits a different milieu. While there is a wider "consensual world" that we all share, the private milieu is more complex, and "includes much more varied landscapes and concepts than the shared world, imaginary places and powers as well as aspects of reality with which each individual alone is familiar" (Lowenthal, 1961: 249). Integral to these personal geographies is the dialectical relationship between real and imagined worlds:

¹⁷ Quoted in Lowenthal, 1961: 241

The lineaments of the world we live in are both seen and shaped in accordance, or by contrast, with images we hold of other worlds – better worlds, past worlds, future worlds. We constantly compare the reality with the fancy. Indeed without the one, we could neither visualize nor conceptualize the other (Lowenthal, 1975: 3).

Such a concern with the personal realm has its roots in the late 1960s when humanism was “rediscovered as a central concern for a geography of man” (Ley and Samuels, 1978: 1). My objective in revisiting the humanistic approach is to draw inspiration from its commitment to “interpret the meaning of human attachments and aspirations” (Tuan, 1989: vii), and extend it to a study of migration. By doing so, I am negotiating the difficult but unavoidable terrain of human values, which all our decisions are grounded in.¹⁸ The decision to migrate, for instance, may be implicated in a value-laden choice between adventure/ambition and stability/contentment. How much weight is placed on each depends greatly on the individual’s temperament and personal biography. In Mr H’s case (quoted in Li, 1998: 186):

I know that I may not be able to find a job as a carpenter in the Netherlands! But I don’t care about that. I am a young man of great strength. I can work in any Chinese restaurant. I believe I can earn Dutch guilders simply by exerting my utmost effort (...) Yes, recently, I have seen someone who became rich in China very quickly. But to accomplish that, you need capital, you need special knowledge and you have to have very good *guanxi*. I have none of those. Therefore, I have no prospects if I stay here and be a carpenter all my life, but I do believe that I may become a restaurant boss in the Netherlands in a few years, just like my uncles and other fellow villagers. Maybe I am not wiser than they are, but at least I am as clever as any of them. What I need is a good chance. This chance is in Europe.

We hence return to Germani’s (1965) notion of the psycho-social level where it is individuals’ attitudes and expectations that are considered, the intangible nature of which is suggested by Grinberg and Grinberg (1989:58):

The desire to leave can well up as something that surprises even the person who feels like it, like a thought that wafts in the wind without even entering one's mind; at a particular time, one does not know why exactly, one becomes receptive to the idea, lets it in. In other cases the idea of leaving responds to a long-harboured desire, considered impossible to launch, perhaps previously satisfied only in fantasy.

Geography plays both a material and conceptual role in migration. Migration not only requires movement from one physical place to another, it is also intimately linked with personal world views. Consciously or otherwise, it involves an exercise in figuring out where places of origin and destination fit within an individual's mental map of the world. Just as utopias, whether fictional or experienced, are "ways of thinking about the world" (Porter and Lukermann, 1975: 204), a migrant's choice of destination also expresses something about his or her perception of the place in contrast to other places. Appraisals are, of course, deeply affected by society and culture: each social system organizes the world according to its own structure and needs; each culture screens perception of the social environment to harmonise with its own style and techniques (Lowenthal, 1961). Language, as a core cultural element of most societies, is important in this respect. In fact, "the very words we use incline us toward a particular view of the universe" (ibid: 254). For example, "China" means "Middle Kingdom" in Chinese, which reflects its historically central position in Chinese perception.¹⁹ Not only does language shape the way we think, and how we perceive our experiences, different languages also accomplishes this in different ways.²⁰

¹⁸ Tuan deliberates no less on the relationship between "Morality and Imagination" (1989). In a later book "Escapism" (1998), he argues that escape via fantasy can degenerate into a self-deluding hell or move in an opposite direction, towards the real and good (heaven).

¹⁹ The division between "the West" and the "the East" has also been reinforced in our minds through the use of such classificatory terms.

²⁰ Therein lies the major problem of translation, of which more later in my discussion on research methodology in Chapter 3.

Essentially then, it is in understanding the personal geographies of individuals in their specific social and cultural contexts that we can really comprehend their migration decisions.

Diasporic Identities, Transnational Cultures: The Return to Local Knowledges

Since the 1990s, there has been a celebration of the “diasporic” in contemporary cultural debates as a space of liberation from the dominant hegemonies of nation and race (Mitchell, 1997). Previously, diaspora referred to the specific situation of a people living outside of their traditional homeland. In much of cultural theory today, however, the term signifies a more general sense of displacement, as well as a challenge to the limits of existing boundaries (ibid).²¹ One reason for the academic interest could be that scholars are attempting to make sense of their own cosmopolitanism (see Robbins, 1992).²² In such writings, the issue of *identity* has been a recurring theme, at times accompanied by a sense of “in-betweenness”.²³ While appreciative of their theoretical merit, I am concerned that the common use of these terms in their abstract sense runs the risk of eliding the actual pains of border crossing that may be faced by migrants. I argue instead for a grounded approach, wherein theory is carefully situated in empirical research.

Related to diaspora is the concept of transnationalism, which became popular within the migration field around the same period in the 1990s. Scholars in both cultural studies

²¹ See, for example, Gilroy's book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Gilroy (1992: 193) argues that the history of the Black Atlantic has been “continually criss-crossed by the movement of black people” and “...is a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory”.

²² Note bell hooks' observation that international or postcolonial issues are frequently more comfortably dealt with by U.S academics than those differences of race and class that are closer to home (hooks, 1989, 1990).

²³ Bhabha writes of the “turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between spaces* through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated” (Bhabha: 1990: 4, his emphasis).

(Appadurai, 1990, 1996; Bhabha, 1990; Clifford, 1992) and the social sciences (Kearney, 1991; Portes, 1998; Mitchell, 1995) have been prolific in utilising the concept. It is not my intention to review the burgeoning literature here.²⁴ Rather, I wish to highlight the new transnational culture that has been created by the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, and which combines values, behaviour, and attitudes from sending and receiving societies to create a largely autonomous social space that transcends national boundaries (Massey et al, 1994).²⁵ The transnationalization of culture hence changes the context within which migration decisions are made. Instead of viewing migrant origin and destination independently in a linear trajectory, they ought to be conceived as interdependent entities within a broader decision-making framework. The implication for research on immigration is that a deep understanding of the particularities of not only the migrant destination, but also the place of origin, is needed.

The distinguished Chinese intellectual, Fei Xiaotong, who has been hailed as the finest social scientist to emerge from China in the twentieth century, was once told by his three esteemed supervisors, Professors S.M. Shirokogoroff, R.E. Park, and B. Malinowski that adequate theories of China must be based on intensive, firsthand knowledge of Chinese society itself. This calls for intensive research into a specific context instead of transplanting “Western” theories at will.²⁶ After all, what passes in “the West” for general

²⁴ For a conceptual overview, see Vertovec (1999). See also the edited collection by Smith and Guarnizo (1998) which covers both theoretical reflections and grounded studies.

²⁵ By referring to a new transnational culture, I am not suggesting that the phenomenon itself is necessarily new. Instead, it is the new theoretical idea of transnationalism that has allowed us to *recognise* the phenomenon. It is useful here to consider Portes’ (2001) defence of transnationalism as a concept. Detractors of transnationalism have pointed to earlier instances that occurred before the term was coined. Portes dismisses that argument, citing the “fallacy of adumbration”, which negates the novelty of a scientific discovery by pointing to earlier instances.

²⁶ See Barlow (1991) for an illuminating view on why the language of the post-Marxist *Zhishifenzi* (intelligentsia) is a colonial discourse.

social theory is often, in fact, local knowledge – particular rules about particular people in particular places (Hamilton and Zheng, 1992).

An appreciation of local knowledge is crucial for understanding the more subtle elements of human agency, and its production and negotiation of cultural meanings. Human agency provides the capabilities to “place” the imagination, not only in choosing a particular place to dream about, but more importantly, in transforming desire into action. Throughout the process, “placing” requires conscious decision-making. Construing the voices of migrants themselves as theoretically meaningful allows Western-centric understandings to extend beyond current theoretical and epistemological blinders (Silvey and Lawson, 1999). Although I foreground human agency, I am aware that human actions do not occur in a vacuum. They exist as a form of cultural politics embedded in specific power and economic contexts. Therefore migrants’ decisions, whether in leaving, in adopting a particular migration strategy or in returning, reflect (and may also shape) the prevailing conditions. Furthermore, a country’s historical development, such as the “strong China, weak China, strong China” cycle (Wang, 1993: 937), has to be taken into account as well as more specifically, the history of migration in the place of origin.

Critiquing the “Chinese Diaspora”

In arguing for a return to local knowledges, I am referring to knowledges specific to both ends of the transnational spectrum. A recent impulse in geographical scholarship - in part driven by postcolonial academic politics - is to open up an epistemological space that explicitly recognizes the agency of “non-Western” peoples (Yeoh, 2000). While committed to this intellectual project, I am at the same time concerned about the danger of essentialism.

As Arif Dirlik (1996a) has suggested, Orientalism is very much alive in the present – in a reconfigured relationship between politics, culture and history – but not necessarily where Edward Said (1979) located it.²⁷ In the case of China, its rising economic clout has transformed the power relationship between China and Euro-America, such that Orientalism has now become a new instrument by the Orient to differentiate itself, just as it once helped to define Europe (or the West).

By drawing attention to the issue of self-orientalization, my aim is to question the very idea of Chineseness that has surfaced in academic and political constructions of the Chinese diaspora. A good example was the “Confucian revival” in East Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where Confucianism was reaffirmed as a positive force in capitalist modernization, not only to Chinese societies but also to East Asian societies in general (Dirlik, 1996a). Chief among the proponents of a Confucian revival was the academic Tu Wei Ming who sought to turn it into a global philosophy.²⁸ Many others, including Peter Berger (1987) and S. Gordon Redding (1993), have made similar observations. In fact, a whole industry seems to have been created around the subject.²⁹

The discourse has, moreover, been institutionalised through a relentless series of conferences, particularly in various East and Southeast Asian locations, bearing some

²⁷ Since the publication of Edward Said’s important work, *Orientalism* as a discourse has been revealed as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1978). By focusing on “the colonizer’s view of the world”, his study marginalized the voice of the colonised although he did acknowledge that the Orient “participates in its own Orientalizing” and more recently, that “there are two sides” (Blaut, 1993; Said, 1978: 325; Said, 1993: 191).

²⁸ Note Ong’s (1999: 205) dismissal of Confucian values in Chinese modernisation, and her criticism of Tu Weiming’s “universalizing pronouncements about Chinese culture.”

²⁹ See for example, the two volumes on *The Chinese Diaspora: Selected Essays*, edited by Wang and Wang (1998, 1999); Haley et al (1998) and Pan (1990).

variation on the title, "East Asian Culture and Modernization". In the nineties especially, China has increasingly become a major site for these conferences, suggesting official support (Dirlik, 1996b). These intellectual trends were products of a contemporary circulation of intellectuals and ideas; Confucian revivalists cited Herman Kahn and Peter Berger as the "Western" authorities who have legitimised the "new Confucianism". At the same time, the assertion of "Asian cultural differences" by political leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia and the PRC leadership, especially over issues of democracy and human rights, resonated with prevalent anti-Eurocentric sentiments in Europe and the US (Dirlik, 1996a). The idea of a "Confucian revival" thus acquired authority, as Said (1978) observed, in the ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, institutions and individuals, which created referential power.

Amidst this backdrop, it is critical to highlight the concrete *local* differences that have been erased or suppressed in the construction of a transnational Chinese ethnicity. By focusing on migration from China to Vancouver, my study locates itself within the broad framework of the Chinese diaspora. I am, however, wary of attaching any quintessentially "Chinese" characteristics to the migrants or the nature of their migration. I hope, instead, to situate their experiences within a transnational approach that takes account of the historical and prevailing conditions of both China and Vancouver.

Conclusion: Positioning New Chinese Migration

Emigration from China has reached its highest levels since the start of the reforms in 1978, and the liberalization of migration with the emigration law of 1985 (Pieke, 1998). A distinct transformation has occurred in the PRC state's attitude towards emigrants. In just over two

decades, “the nature of emigration has turned from treacherous to tolerated but ideologically suspect to patriotic” (Nyíri, 2000: 3). Migration is now celebrated by the state as a patriotic and modern act, thus encouraging transnational practices among people who are in the process of, or just preparing for, leaving China.³⁰ In publicly available official PRC literature on overseas Chinese affairs, people who have left China since 1978, including students, are now commonly referred to as *xin yimin* (new migrants), a term that obscures the traditional official dichotomy of *huaqiao* (Chinese citizens residing abroad) and *huaren* (ethnic Chinese citizens of foreign countries). This move has to be understood in terms of the state’s strategic recognition of new migrants as a highly useful resource for economic construction in China, the attraction of foreign investors and business partners, as well as the leadership of overseas Chinese communities, which are deemed to be losing touch with the homeland and Chinese culture. The State Council’s “Opinion on unfolding new migrant work” (probably 1995, cited in *ibid*: 2) declared:

Since reform and opening, people who have left Mainland China to reside abroad (called “new migrants” for short) have continuously been more numerous. They are currently rising as an important force within overseas Chinese and ethnic Chinese communities. In the future, they will become a backbone of forces friendly to us in America and some other developed Western countries...

Media images of the “successful new migrant” have accompanied the state’s active recruitment of new migrants to share in the modernising goal of the state.³¹ These discursive practices in China are complemented by overseas elite mobilisation of imaginaries of the home province and the homeland, especially through the Internet (Nyíri,

³⁰ Illegal migration is however condemned in some of the official discourse (*ibid*).

³¹ As a response, Geremie Barmé has satirically entitled his analysis of cultural nationalism in China, “To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic” (Barmé, 1999: 255-80). The title is possibly inspired by the popular television drama series *A Beijing Native in New York*. A critic, Zha Xiduo, commented that the unifying theme of the series could be summed up in one line “Screw you, America!” (quoted in Barmé, 1999: 276), suggesting that

2000). Overseas Chinese community organizations may also play a role in this through their relationships with the PRC state. For instance, the PRC ambassadors in Hungary through most of the nineties had a close relationship with the Hungarian Chinese Association's (HCA) ex-president Zhang Manxin, even arranging meetings for him with visiting PRC chairman Jiang Zemin (Nyírim 1999).³² At the pan-European level, the European Federation of Chinese Organizations is affiliated to the PRC (Li, 1998).³³

From these accounts, it appears that PRC migrants are enjoying a new state-sanctioned flexibility. Aihwa Ong (1999) has eloquently captured the way Hong Kong migrants respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. To what extent are PRC migrants acting in a similar way? In the context of Vancouver, this is a particularly interesting question, considering how Hong Kong migrants who were formerly represented as the new wave of migrants in the late 1980s and early 1990s, are now being succeeded in that position by PRC migrants. At that time, the popular representation of successful, well-educated immigrant entrepreneurs from Hong Kong was shared by the media, public opinion, government and academics, and resonated with the West Coast representation and *self*-representation of the Chinese immigrants as *homo economicus*.³⁴ However, it turned out to be a myth: a successful entrepreneur in Asia is not necessarily an entrepreneur at all in Canada (Ley, 1999, 2000b). Will the myth of the *homo economicus* apply to the PRC skilled immigrants, as it did for the Hong Kong business immigrants?

even though the protagonist of the series has to give up his "wholesome Chinese values" to succeed in America, Chinese values are ultimately superior over American ones.

³² As a testimony to its astute diplomacy, HCA's good relationship with Beijing was at the same time acceptable to Budapest (Nyíri, 1998).

³³ In contrast to the Union of Chinese Associations in Europe, which is linked to Taiwan.

³⁴ Someone whose personality is fashioned by or her aims to maximize economic interests (Ong, 1999, Ley, 2000a, b).

More specifically, is there a gap between the objectives and outcomes of Canada's skilled immigration program?

Just as important are the perspectives of the migrants themselves before their migration. It is telling that Ley (2000b) found that none of his interviewees came to Canada for economic reasons; instead they were here for other reasons, ranging from geopolitics and education to quality of life. In fact, a common sentiment is reflected in the saying: "Hong Kong for money; Vancouver for quality of life" (Hiebert et al, 1998: 29). As a consequence, the phenomenon of the transnational household - or astronaut family - has developed in Vancouver, whereby the household head works in Hong Kong while the rest of the household live in Canada. Since the aim of the Business Immigration Program is to bring economic entrepreneurs over to Canada, the astronaut family arrangement is an irony, particularly so when these transnational arrangement are often planned *before* migration (Waters, 2000). Such subversions of official policies are perhaps unsurprising in light of Ong's (1999) concept of flexible citizenship, which stresses the agency of Asian subjects. Do PRC migrants follow similar strategies?

Returning to my substantive focus, what are the transnational imaginings and practices of the PRC migrants? How do their personal and social conditions influence the migration decisions they make? These two questions underlie the subsequent chapters, where I rely on the experiences of PRC immigrants in Vancouver to both address, and reflect on, the cultural logics of migration. In editing *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, Robin Cohen (1995: 8) mused upon the idea that "The well-established dualism in social theory of agency versus structure, subjective versus objective factors, micro versus macro

perspectives, voluntarism versus determination, feeling free and also constrained – these contradictory tensions are rehearsed, reflected and occasionally resolved in the migration experience.” As an editor, he found many authors making insightful contributions to understanding the old dualism, which led him to conclude that “much larger questions pertaining to the nature and variety of the human condition are tangibly grasped through the study of migration” (ibid). By examining the human condition through the prism of migration, my latent goal is to tease out those rationalities of thought and emotion that make us distinctly human. For the moment, though, I would like to outline the empirical context of new migration from China to Vancouver before turning to a more nuanced analysis.

Chapter 3

Contemporary PRC Skilled Immigration to Canada

The present chapter shifts my discussion to the empirical context of recent migration from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Vancouver³⁵, British Columbia. I focus on skilled immigrants, also known as "independent immigrants", who landed in Canada between 1996 and 2001. The choice of skilled immigrants is undertaken for two reasons. First, the skilled worker category as a whole, i.e. principal applicants and their accompanying spouses and dependants, has become the single largest immigrant category to Canada since 1995 (Couton, 2002). While representing a positive development in Canada's objective to tailor the immigration program to long-term economic goals, it comes with a set of challenges that includes the non-recognition of professional credentials, which could prevent highly trained immigrants from finding employment commensurate with their status in China (ibid). My research aims to provide a more human face to prevailing political and economic concerns surrounding these issues. My subsequent findings on the status of new PRC arrivals could be regarded as an example of the experiences of other new immigrants in the independent stream, bearing in mind of course, varying circumstances, notably language. Second, for the recent PRC immigrant cohort as a whole, the skilled worker category is not only the largest, but is also the one that has attracted the greatest attention among community organisations and fellow PRC immigrants for the distress and disappointment confronted upon arrival in Canada.

³⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, Vancouver from here on refers to "Greater Vancouver", equivalent to the Greater Vancouver Regional District, and very similar to the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (CMA).

I begin the discussion in this chapter by introducing the structural conditions for PRC skilled immigration. After presenting a general profile derived from immigration statistics, I outline my research methodology and then move on to more specific profiles generated from my interviews with immigrants.

The Canadian Focus on Skilled Immigration

In 1995, Canada started full immigration processing in China, sowing the seeds for the ensuing phenomenal growth in population movement from China to Canada. Motivations for migration, and the choice of Canada as a destination will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5, but first, I wish to make the point that migration resulted from intersecting conditions occurring in both China and Canada.³⁶ My focus, for now, is on the Canadian institutional changes that facilitated immigration from China.

The year 1967 marked a critical change in Canadian immigration policy. A White Paper on Immigration introduced the “point” system, which has resulted in immigrants in the Independent category being assessed against a list of factors including education, working experience, age, knowledge of English and/or French and “personal suitability” (CIC, 1999). Essentially, the main immigrant selection criterion changed from immigrants’ country of origin to their potential human capital (Green and Green, 1996). Until then, immigrants from Europe and the United States, with the United Kingdom as the leading national source, had dominated immigration to Canada. Just a generation ago, in 1966, between 80 and 90 percent of new arrivals originated in these two source regions (Ley, 1999). The new Act

³⁶ Lucia Lo demonstrated this point effectively by matching a chronology of historical events in Canada with that of China during a presentation at the Fifth National Metropolis Conference, Ottawa, 2001. A good example is the large emigration from Hong Kong preceding its handover to China in 1997, which occurred

dramatically transformed the composition of immigrant origins, for which “there can be few equivalents in any country in any historical period” (ibid: 3). Figure 3.1 shows this change.

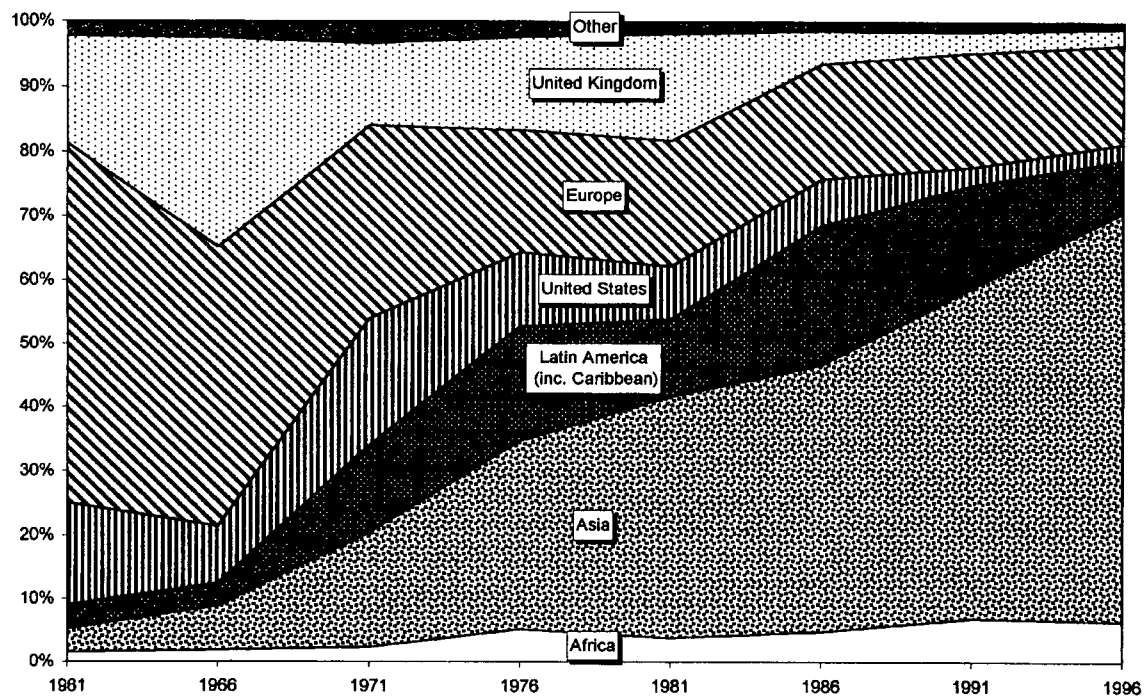


Figure 3.1: Immigration to Canada by source area at five-year intervals, 1961-1996 (Source: Ley, 1999).

Thirty-five years later, while Canada continues to emphasize the economic advantages of skilled immigration, it is not alone in its efforts to attract highly skilled workers. The OECD (2002: 1) has stated:

...international migration of highly skilled workers is on the rise and has emerged as an issue of increased relevance, not just to immigration ministries but also to higher education and research ministries as well as economic ministries. Indeed, during the recent economic expansion a strong increase in the demand for skilled relative to unskilled labour, especially in the information technology sector – combined with an apparent shortage of such workers in a number of OECD countries –

from a confluence of local motivations, in part stimulated by anxieties regarding the political change, and Canadian changes in immigration programs that appear to have taken it into account.

prompted several governments to implement policies to facilitate the entry of skilled workers.

At the high end of the spectrum, the contribution of foreign-born skilled workers can be seen from the estimation that a quarter of Silicon Valley firms in 1998 is headed by immigrants from China and India, collectively generating almost USD 17 billion in sales and 52 300 jobs (OECD, 2002). On the whole, Asian skilled workers have been particularly well represented among traditional immigrant-receiving countries, such as Canada and the United States (refer to Table 3.1).

| Canada (2000) | Permanent Migration |
|---|----------------------------|
| Inflows in thousands of highly skilled foreign workers | 52.1 |
| As a % of total immigrants who intend to work | 43.2 |
| % of Asian workers among the highly skilled | 56.4 |
| Australia (1999-2000) | |
| Inflows in thousands of highly skilled foreign workers | 35.3 |
| As a % of total permanent labour migration | 77.4 ³⁷ |
| % of Asian workers among the highly skilled | -- |
| United States (1999) | |
| Inflows in thousands of highly skilled foreign workers | 24.1 |
| As a % of total labour permanent or temporary migration | 46.0 (1998) |
| % of Asian workers among the highly skilled | 46.4 (1998) |

Table 3.1. Inflows of foreign highly skilled workers and share of Asian people among them (Source: International Mobility of the Highly Skilled, Policy Brief, OECD, 2002)

As shown in Table 3.1, Asian workers constitute 56.4 percent of the highly skilled immigrants in Canada in 2000. Specifically, the proportion of skilled immigrants to Canada intending to work as engineers whose country of origin is China has risen from 23 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2000, with no other source country coming close (Couton, 2002). Couton notes, “(t)he migration to Canada of such large numbers of highly trained

³⁷ Calculation based on the estimates of the per cent of immigrants in workforce (Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Australia, 1998-99).

professionals, and the fact that a very large proportion come from a single source country, present a number of new opportunities and challenges.” In order to address these concerns, an understanding of the immigrants’ backgrounds is first needed.³⁸

General Profile of PRC Skilled Immigrants

This section provides a general profile of PRC immigrants based on statistics derived from the 1996 Census and the Landed Immigrant Data System (LIDS) of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

PRC Immigration to Canada

Since 1998, PRC has been the top source country of immigrants to Canada (Table 3.2). The increase has been rapid, with the numbers more than tripling in 7 years, from 12 486 in 1994 to 40 296 in 2001. While the increase was fastest in 1999, up by almost 50% from 1998, there appears to be a slight tapering in the rate of increase from 2000 even though the absolute figures are still very impressive, especially if we consider that there were “only” 22 242 new immigrants from Hong Kong when it was ranked first in 1997.³⁹ Proportionally, the level of immigration from China also stands significantly above all the other source countries (Table 3.3).

³⁸ Since the rapid growth of skilled immigration from China is a recent phenomenon, there has not been much detailed research carried out on it yet. An exception is the economic research carried out by Kangqing Zhang and Don DeVoretz (2002).

³⁹ This last point has to be qualified in that the peak years of Hong Kong migration were in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Hong Kong SAR is not included in the PRC totals in Table 3.2.

| Year | Rank | Number | % of total immigration |
|------|----------|---------------|------------------------|
| 1994 | 4 | 12,486 | 5.58 |
| 1995 | 4 | 13,290 | 6.25 |
| 1996 | 3 | 17,549 | 7.76 |
| 1997 | 3 | 18,530 | 8.58 |
| 1998 | 1 | 19,749 | 11.34 |
| 1999 | 1 | 29,112 | 15.33 |
| 2000 | 1 | 36,715 | 16.15 |
| 2001 | 1 | 40,296 | 16.10 |

Table 3.2 Immigration by top source country to Canada (Principal Applicants and Dependants) (Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994, 1995, 1998, 2001).

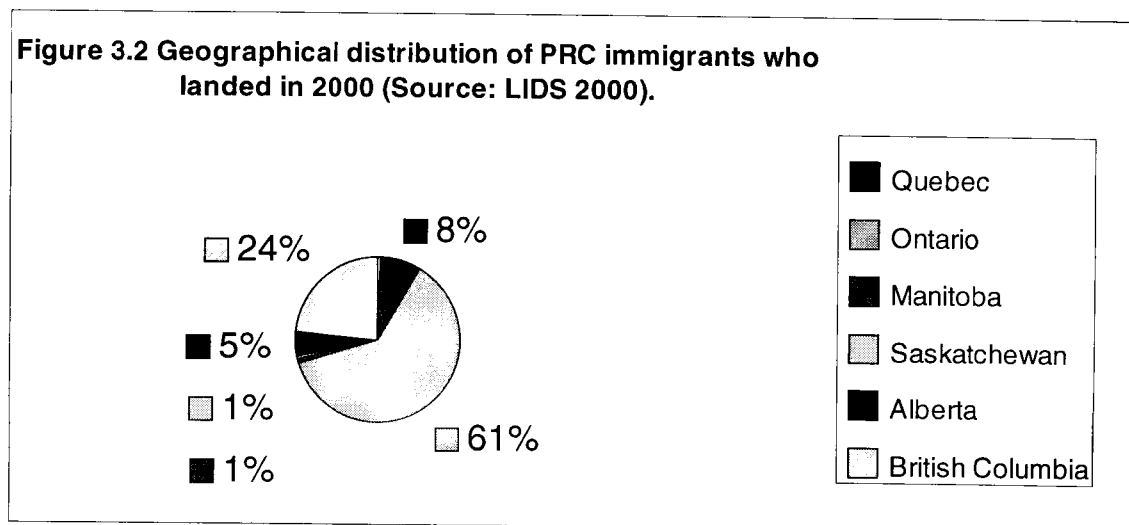
| | 1999 | | | 2000 | | | 2001 | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|----------|----------------|--------------|----------|----------------|--------------|----------|
| COUNTRY | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank |
| China, People's Republic of | 29,112 | 15.33 | 1 | 36,715 | 16.15 | 1 | 40,296 | 16.10 | 1 |
| India | 17,429 | 9.18 | 2 | 26,086 | 11.48 | 2 | 27,812 | 11.11 | 2 |
| Pakistan | 9,295 | 4.89 | 3 | 14,182 | 6.24 | 3 | 15,339 | 6.13 | 3 |
| Philippines | 9,170 | 4.83 | 4 | 10,086 | 4.44 | 4 | 12,903 | 5.15 | 4 |
| Korea, Republic of | 7,216 | 3.80 | 5 | 7,626 | 3.35 | 5 | 9,604 | 3.84 | 5 |
| United States | 5,528 | 2.91 | 7 | 5,814 | 2.56 | 7 | 5,894 | 2.35 | 6 |
| Iran | 5,907 | 3.11 | 6 | 5,608 | 2.47 | 8 | 5,736 | 2.29 | 7 |
| Romania | 3,461 | 1.82 | 14 | 4,425 | 1.95 | 11 | 5,585 | 2.23 | 8 |
| Sri Lanka | 4,723 | 2.49 | 9 | 5,841 | 2.57 | 6 | 5,514 | 2.20 | 9 |
| United Kingdom | 4,478 | 2.36 | 10 | 4,647 | 2.04 | 10 | 5,345 | 2.14 | 10 |
| Taiwan | 5,464 | 2.88 | 8 | 3,511 | 1.54 | 14 | 3,111 | 1.24 | 19 |
| Yugoslavia | 1,490 | 0.78 | 29 | 4,723 | 2.08 | 9 | 2,786 | 1.11 | 22 |
| Total for Top Ten Only | 98,322 | 51.78 | | 121,328 | 53.38 | | 134,028 | 53.54 | |
| Total | 189,922 | 100 | | 227,313 | 100 | | 250,346 | 100 | |

Table 3.3 Immigration by top ten source countries (Principal Applicants and Dependants) (Source: CIC, 2002).

In terms of geographical distribution, the majority of PRC immigrants stated their province of destination as Ontario (61%), British Columbia (24%), Quebec (8%) and Alberta (5%) in 2000 (Figure 3.2).⁴⁰ From interviews with my respondents, the general impression is that PRC immigrants, often urbanites in China, tend towards the major cities of Toronto,

⁴⁰ Small numbers pick the other provinces: one percent each for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Newfoundland (27 immigrants), Prince Edward Island (3), Nova Scotia (75), New Brunswick (43), and none in North West Territories and Yukon.

Vancouver and Montreal, and to a lesser extent, Calgary. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, apart from perceived job opportunities, social networks and prior images were integral to their choice of destination.



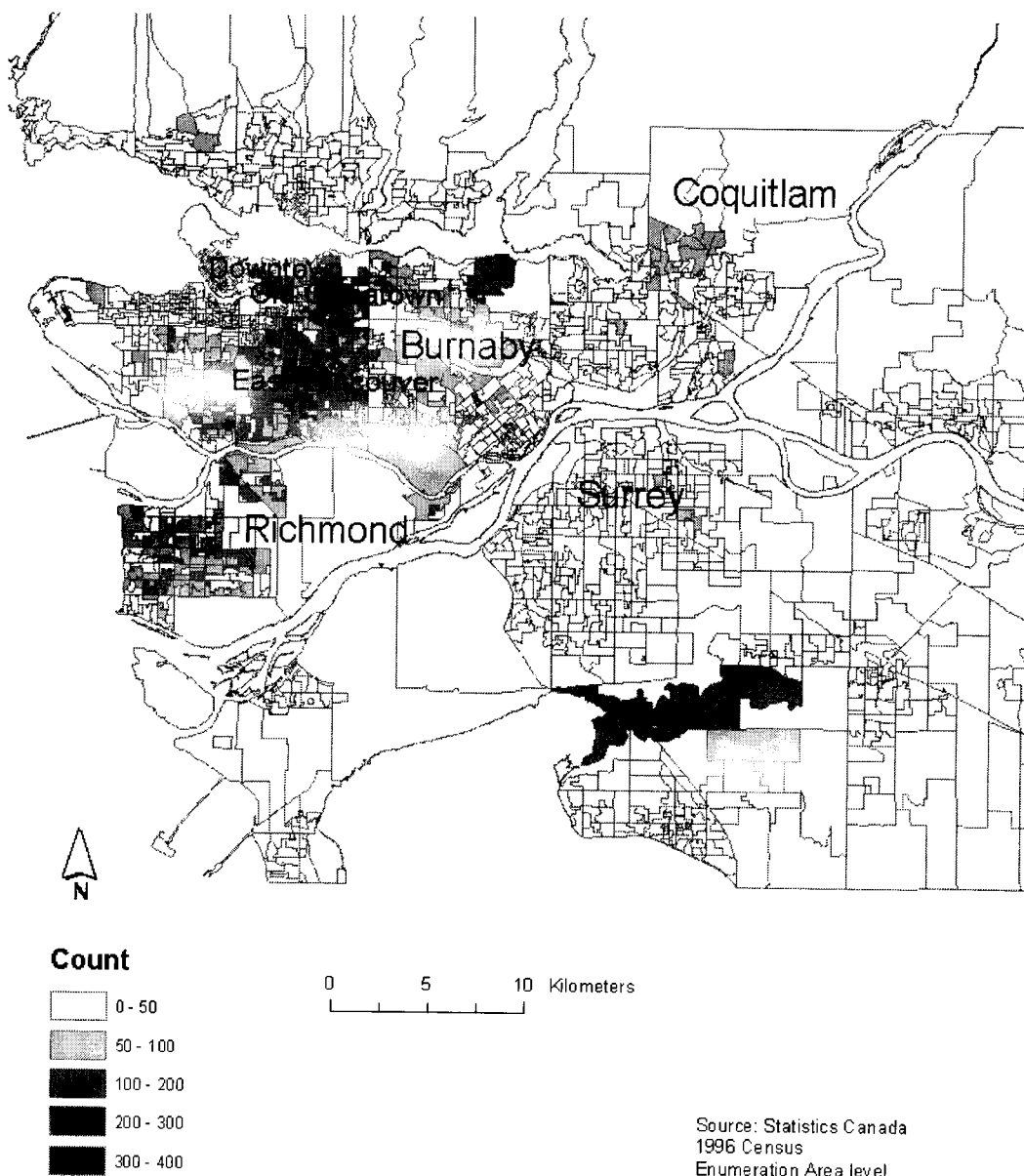
Like Canada as a whole, PRC immigrants have been in first position in Vancouver since 1998 (Table 3.4). Accounting for 27.86% of all new immigrants in Vancouver in 2000, their presence is proportionally higher than at the national level of 16.1% (Table 3.3, 3.4).

| | 1998 | | | 1999 | | | 2000 | | | 2001 | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------|------|---------------|--------------|------|---------------|--------------|------|---------------|--------------|------|
| COUNTRY | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank | # | % | Rank |
| PRC | 5,537 | 17.33 | 1 | 8,077 | 24.95 | 1 | 9,483 | 28.48 | 1 | 9,518 | 27.86 | 1 |
| India | 3,245 | 10.15 | 3 | 3,438 | 10.62 | 3 | 3,826 | 11.49 | 2 | 3,914 | 11.46 | 2 |
| Philippines | 2,439 | 7.63 | 5 | 2,579 | 7.97 | 4 | 2,619 | 7.87 | 3 | 3,125 | 9.15 | 3 |
| Republic of Korea | 1,733 | 5.42 | 7 | 2,001 | 6.18 | 5 | 1,994 | 5.99 | 5 | 2,656 | 7.77 | 4 |
| Taiwan | 4,679 | 14.64 | 2 | 3,508 | 10.83 | 2 | 2,174 | 6.53 | 4 | 1,861 | 5.45 | 5 |
| Iran | 1,751 | 5.48 | 6 | 1,440 | 4.45 | 6 | 1,221 | 3.67 | 6 | 1,227 | 3.59 | 6 |
| United Kingdom | 682 | 2.13 | 8 | 693 | 2.14 | 9 | 632 | 1.90 | 9 | 764 | 2.24 | 7 |
| United States | 646 | 2.02 | 9 | 745 | 2.30 | 8 | 724 | 2.17 | 8 | 679 | 1.99 | 8 |
| Pakistan | 377 | 1.18 | 12 | 555 | 1.71 | 10 | 630 | 1.89 | 10 | 642 | 1.88 | 9 |
| Hong Kong | 2,933 | 9.18 | 4 | 1,303 | 4.02 | 7 | 933 | 2.80 | 7 | 623 | 1.82 | 10 |
| Total for Top Ten Only | 24,219 | 75.79 | | 24,339 | 75.17 | | 24,236 | 72.79 | | 25,009 | 73.21 | |
| Total | 31,956 | 100 | | 32,378 | 100 | | 33,292 | 100 | | 34,165 | 100 | |

Table 3.4 Vancouver by top ten source countries (Principal applicants and dependants)
(Source: CIC, 2001, 2002).

Spatially, the PRC immigrants were mainly concentrated in and around East Vancouver – a traditional immigrant-receiving area - as well as Burnaby in 1996 (Figure 3.3). Anecdotal accounts from community workers and PRC immigrants suggest that this pattern is being reinforced with the new arrivals, many of whom have settled in East Vancouver. This area consists of neighbourhoods of older and (by Vancouver standards) cheaper housing, with single-family houses often divided (legally and illegally) into basement suites and main floor flats. Three storey apartments are also available. The absence of settlement in Old Chinatown is striking. There are also pockets of growth in Richmond, Surrey and Coquitlam where anecdotal evidence points to a clustering of PRC immigrants (Table 3.5). This reflects Hiebert's observation that while approximately 2 out of every 3 immigrants arriving in Vancouver in the early 1990s found housing in suburban municipalities, the phenomenon has been associated with a slight *increase* in the degree of spatial separation between ethnic groups (Hiebert, 1999; 2000).

Figure 3.3 Immigrants from People's Republic of China to Vancouver CMA, 1996



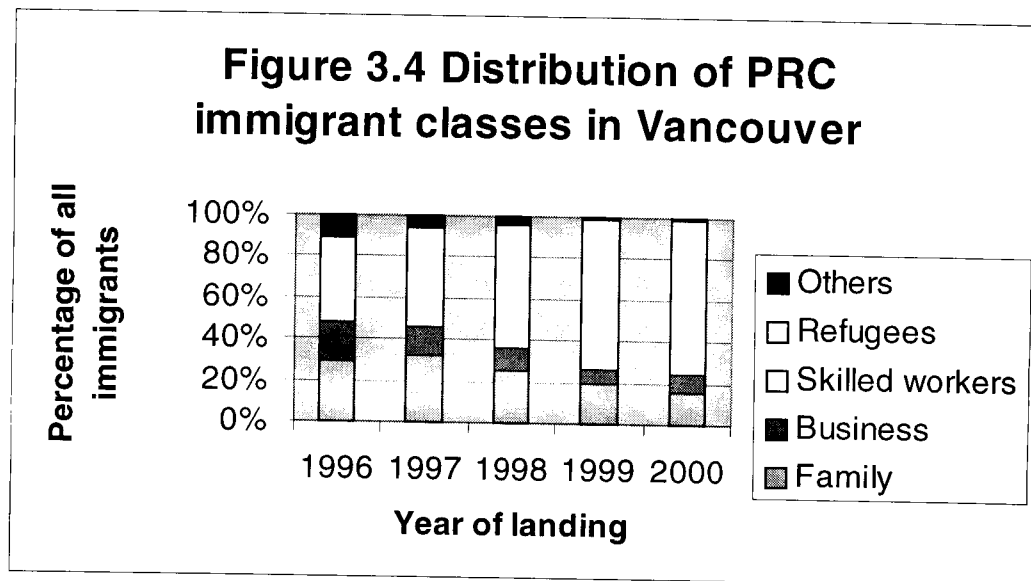
| City of Destination | Year of Landing | | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| DELTA | 7 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| PORT MOODY | 2 | 3 | | | 6 |
| VANCOUVER | 2492 | 3023 | 3636 | 5916 | 7223 |
| BURNABY | 105 | 143 | 87 | 137 | 115 |
| COQUITLAM | 18 | 14 | 24 | 39 | 27 |
| LANGLEY | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| MAPLE RIDGE | 1 | | | | |
| NEW WESTMINSTER | 7 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 7 |
| NORTH VANCOUVER | 3 | 8 | 5 | 9 | |
| PITT MEADOWS | | | | | 4 |
| PORT COQUITLAM | 3 | 6 | | 10 | 3 |
| RICHMOND B.C. | 84 | 84 | 50 | 87 | 78 |
| SURREY B.C. | 14 | 14 | 21 | 37 | 29 |
| WEST VANCOUVER | 10 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| WHITE ROCK | | | | | 1 |
| BOWEN ISLAND | 1 | | | | |

Table 3.5 New PRC skilled immigrants' distribution in Greater Vancouver Regional District (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

PRC Skilled Immigration to Vancouver

Now, I proceed to focus specifically on PRC *skilled* immigrants in Vancouver. Overall, there were 7503 PRC skilled immigrants who landed in 2000. During the period 1996-2000, skilled immigrants have been consistently the largest group among recent PRC immigrants (Figure 3.4). The general rising trend has seen skilled immigrants increasing from 40.9% in 1996 to 74.8% in 2000, accompanied by a decrease in family immigrants from 29% in 1996 to 15.7%. This reflects an overall movement away from immigration associated with family reunification to that of economic immigration.⁴¹

⁴¹ However, family reunification is likely to remain an important component.



Source: LIDS, 1996-2000.

The category for skilled immigrants consists of both principal applicants and their dependants.⁴² Their numbers are approximately equal, with slightly more dependants on average (Table 3.6). In terms of gender, there are over twice as many male principal applicants as females. Overall, both genders are equally represented in the category.

| Category | Gender | Year of Landing | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Principal Applicant | Male | 966 | 1120 | 1306 | 2116 | 2464 |
| | Female | 416 | 490 | 617 | 869 | 1011 |
| | Total | 1382 | 1610 | 1923 | 2985 | 3475 |
| Dependant | Male | 480 | 584 | 667 | 1105 | 1432 |
| | Female | 886 | 1110 | 1247 | 2160 | 2596 |
| | Total | 1366 | 1694 | 1914 | 3265 | 4028 |

Table 3.6 Skilled Workers – Principal Applicants and Dependents (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

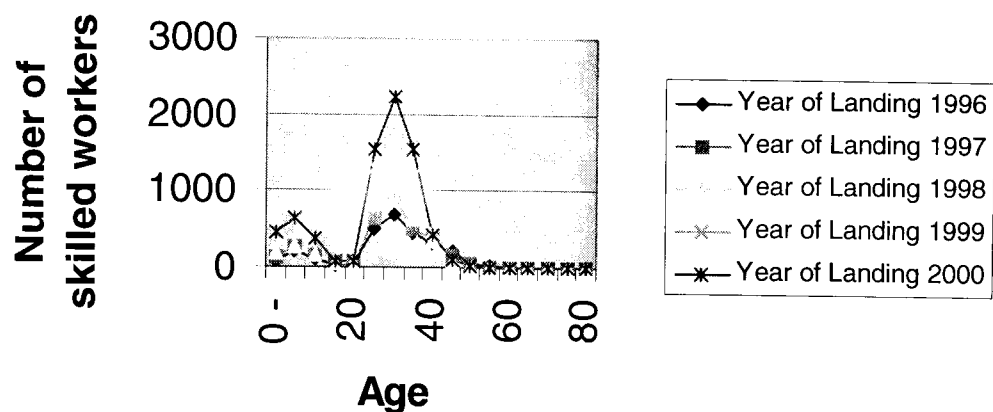
⁴² From here onwards, all the statistics are based on both principal applicants and their dependants in the skilled workers category.

From figure 3.5, we can see that there are two peaks – a particularly high one at 30 and a smaller one around 7 years of age, both of which have become increasingly pronounced. This suggests that recent PRC skilled immigrants tend to be rather young, with a modal range of 25 to 39 years of age; in 2000, 1528 arrivals were 25-29 years old, 2220 were 30-34 years old and 1547 were 35-39 years old, representing 70.6% of the total skilled immigrants in that year. Also, their children are mainly less than 14 years old, with 457 between 0-4 years old in 2000, 635 between 5-9 years old and 378 between 10-14 years old, representing another 19.6%. Table 3.8 indicates that married skilled immigrants are twice the number of those who are single. After taking children into account, the proportion is even higher. This statistical profile correlates well with anecdotal accounts which frequently portray the “typical” PRC skilled immigrant household as consisting of married couples who are in their early 30s with a child around 5 or 6 years old.⁴³

The native language of PRC skilled immigrants is commonly Mandarin (or Chinese) with a diminishing number of Cantonese speakers over the period 1996-2000 (Table 3.8). A third indicated that they had English language ability while only a minority were bilingual or knew French (Table 3.9). The percentage of skilled immigrants with no “Canadian language ability” has climbed steadily from 32.4% in 1996 to 47% in 1999, and further to 66.2% in 2000, a statistic which intimates integration difficulties.

⁴³ Sources include Ms Lilian To, Chief Executive Officer of S.U.C.C.E.S.S. immigrant agency.

Figure 3.5 Age grouping based on a 5-year age band



Source: LIDS, 1996-2000.

| Marital Status | Year of Landing | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Single | 834 | 1037 | 1248 | 1947 | 2442 |
| Married | 1859 | 2223 | 2504 | 4218 | 4958 |
| Unknown | | | | | 3 |

Table 3.7 Marital status (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

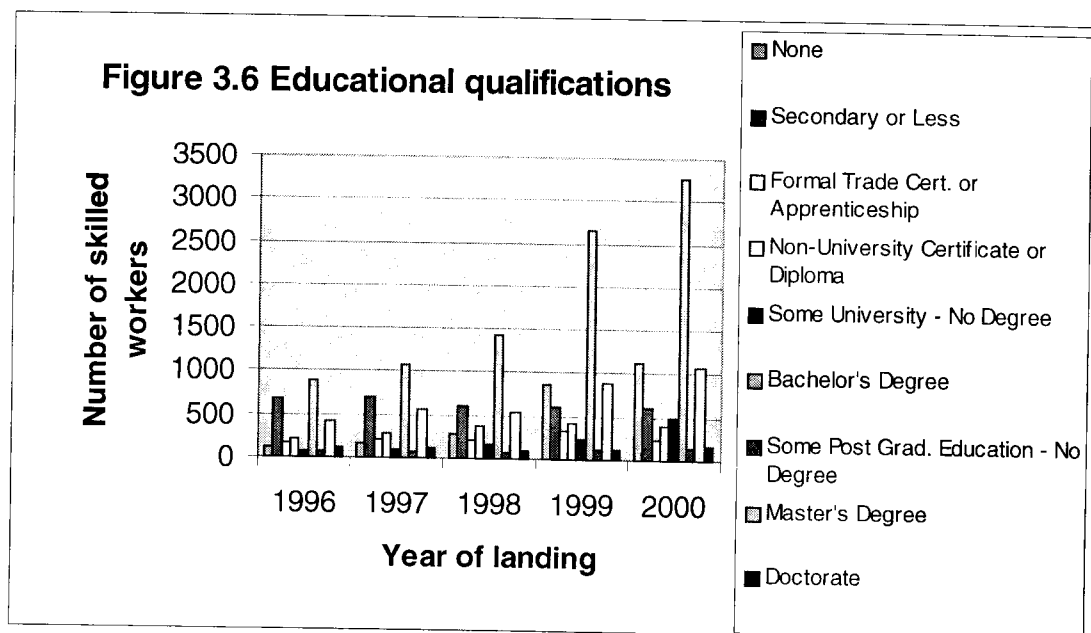
| Language | Year of Landing | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Mandarin | 1167 | 1462 | 2312 | 4606 | 6171 |
| Chinese | 982 | 1365 | 1107 | 1467 | 1175 |
| Cantonese | 559 | 440 | 392 | 161 | 137 |
| Shanghai | 8 | 3 | 7 | | 2 |
| Other Chinese Dialects | 4 | | 1 | | |
| English | 16 | 24 | 11 | 10 | 13 |
| Tagalog | 12 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Others | | 7 | 6 | 4 | 4 |

Table 3.8 Native Language (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

| Language | Year of Landing | | | | |
|-----------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| English | 1846 | 2088 | 2107 | 3291 | 2513 |
| French | 2 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 4 |
| Bilingual | 10 | 13 | 12 | 17 | 19 |
| None | 890 | 1202 | 1716 | 2936 | 4967 |

Table 3.9 Canadian language ability (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

Since one of the main criteria for skilled immigration is the educational qualification of the principal applicant, it is unsurprising that skilled immigrants are very well-educated, with a majority holding Bachelor's degrees or above (Figure 3.6).⁴⁴ For instance in 2000, there were 3256 immigrants with a Bachelor's degree, 1074 holding a Masters and 156 who had completed Doctorates. Such a high proportion also means that it is not only the principal applicant who is highly educated, but quite frequently the spouse also. Focusing on the Bachelor's degree and above, Table 3.10 reveals that there are only slightly more males than females who have reached this high academic level. At the higher levels, the difference is more distinct.



Source: LIDS, 1996-2000.

⁴⁴ A proportion of those with no education are presumably children.

| Educational qualification | Gender | Year of Landing | | | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Bachelor's Degree | Male | 450 | 576 | 725 | 1424 | 1776 |
| | Female | 431 | 502 | 718 | 1238 | 1480 |
| Some Post Grad. Education - No Degree | Male | 48 | 38 | 54 | 69 | 94 |
| | Female | 30 | 36 | 23 | 51 | 48 |
| Master's Degree | Male | 296 | 386 | 373 | 627 | 740 |
| | Female | 129 | 168 | 175 | 269 | 334 |
| Doctorate | Male | 90 | 97 | 88 | 100 | 118 |
| | Female | 21 | 27 | 13 | 25 | 38 |

Table 3.10 Educational Qualifications – Gender (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000)

As a skilled immigrant, the principal applicant tends to have been in an occupation – usually a profession – that is considered desirable for the Canadian economy. Like the case of education, the spouses of the principal applicants are often also professionals themselves. These points are reflected in Table 3.11 where the top three occupations are all of a professional nature in: 1) natural and applied sciences, 2) business and finance and 3) social science, education, government services and religion. In 2000, the landed immigrant cohort in Canada was dominated by the category “Professional Occupations in Natural & Applied Sciences”, which includes engineers, computer professionals and other technological and scientific occupations (Couton, 2002). So too in Vancouver, the category “Professional Occupations in Natural & Applied Sciences” represented an overwhelming 77.3% of all the occupations indicated by PRC skilled immigrants who landed in 2000. This striking characteristic is perhaps one reason why, quite frequently, there is a sense of recognition upon encountering stories that are circulating about PRC skilled immigrants. The most common problem is that of the non-recognition of foreign credentials, which although not unique to the PRC immigrants, is one that is causing particular hardship for them.⁴⁵ On their

⁴⁵ This has been a notoriously persistent problem faced by new immigrants in Canada. There is growing evidence that a substantial proportion of immigrants to Canada are not able to convert their foreign qualifications into jobs that match their training and experience (Basran and Li, 1998). Canadian policy makers are well aware of the problem (Couton, 2002). A number of key documents, including the 2001

part, there is a strong desire to work, which is verified by the 74.5% of skilled immigrants who intend to work in Canada (Table 3.12).⁴⁶

| Occupations | Year of Landing | | | | |
|---|-----------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Senior Management Occupations | 26 | 10 | 18 | 40 | 53 |
| Professional Occupations in Business and Finance | 153 | 172 | 144 | 183 | 195 |
| Skilled Administrative and Business Occupations | 173 | 205 | 250 | 146 | 97 |
| Clerical Occupations | 26 | 18 | 8 | 6 | 6 |
| Professional Occupations in Natural & Applied Sciences | 792 | 943 | 1115 | 2130 | 2782 |
| Technical Occupations Related to Natural & Applied Sci | 68 | 87 | 95 | 105 | 63 |
| Professional Occupations in Health | 25 | 28 | 17 | 15 | 15 |
| Technical and Skilled Occupations in Health | 43 | 36 | 34 | 53 | 25 |
| Assisting Occupations in Support of Health Services | 3 | 3 | 1 | | |
| Prof Occup in Soc Sci, Education, Gov Services, and Relig | 92 | 90 | 94 | 108 | 105 |
| Paraprof Occup in Law, Soc Services, Educat, and Relig | 6 | 10 | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Professional Occupations in Art and Culture | 82 | 80 | 82 | 97 | 91 |
| Technical and Skilled Occup in Art, Culture, Rec & Sport | 23 | 17 | 14 | 13 | 18 |
| Skilled Sales and Service Occupations | 108 | 123 | 163 | 145 | 85 |
| Intermediate Sales and Service Occupations | 26 | 39 | 33 | 50 | 28 |
| Elemental Sales and Service Occupations | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| Trades | 15 | 9 | 8 | 18 | 17 |
| Skilled Transport and Equipment Operators | 38 | 44 | 38 | 20 | 9 |
| Intermed Occu in Transport, Equipment Op, Install & Mainten | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | |
| Trades Helpers, Construction Labourers & Related Occupations | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Skilled Occupations in Primary Industry | | 1 | | | |
| Process, Manufact, & Utilities Supervis & Skilled Operator | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | |
| Labourers in Processing, Manufacturing, and Utilities | 6 | 17 | 17 | 32 | 3 |

Table 3.11 Professional Occupations (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000).

Speech from the Throne, the new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, many policy research projects, and statements by various federal departments list foreign credentials recognition as a priority (ibid). At the provincial level, which is where most of the jurisdictional leverage lies, several policy initiatives have also been introduced. Non-governmental organizations, such as SUCCESS, have been providing more direct support to the new immigrants, such as through employment counselling and job finding workshops. Despite much rhetoric and effort, the non-recognition of credentials is a continuing problem. This has been attributed to two general explanations: the poor transferability of some foreign credentials because of real quality and relevance disparities; and employer disparities, intended or otherwise, due to lack of information, apprehension or prejudice (ibid). Institutional barriers in the form of regulatory bodies, such as the Association of Professional Engineers and GeoScientists of British Columbia, pose further obstacles. Without serious and practical commitment at all levels, the conundrum - which raises the ethical question of Canada's responsibility towards these new immigrants - will remain. See Geddie (2002) for a study on the employment issues faced by immigrant engineers in Vancouver.

⁴⁶ Although there are more females who do not intend to work, on the whole, they are well represented among those who intend to work.

| Intention to work | Gender | Year of Landing | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Intend to work | Male | 1214 | 1387 | 1607 | 2579 | 3077 |
| | Female | 833 | 917 | 1093 | 1847 | 2510 |
| Do not intend to work | Male | 232 | 317 | 365 | 642 | 819 |
| | Female | 469 | 683 | 771 | 1182 | 1097 |

Table 3.12 Intention to work (Source, LIDS, 1996-2000)

A final point is that the vast majority of PRC skilled immigrants have migrated directly from China (Table 3.13).⁴⁷ As I will argue in subsequent chapters, this may be significant in shaping their imagination of life abroad, and conception of Canada as a destination.

| Country | Year of Landing | | | | |
|--|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| Canada or Stateless or other miscellaneous | | | | 1 | |
| Africa, MidEast & some islands Atlantic & Indian Oceans | 3 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| Asia, Australasia and Pacific | 2590 | 3191 | 3728 | 6174 | 7418 |
| L America, Greenland, some islands of Atlantic & Pacific | 10 | 7 | 11 | | 2 |
| United States | 11 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 2 |
| Europe except the U.K. | 80 | 70 | 63 | 36 | 43 |
| United Kingdom | 54 | 15 | 18 | 19 | 33 |

Table 3.13 Country of last permanent residence (World areas grouping) (Source: LIDS, 1996-2000)

Essentially, the general portrait provided by this statistical analysis is that PRC skilled immigrants are frequently university-educated professionals in the natural and applied sciences in their late 20s or early 30s, and quite likely to be married with a young child. Growing numbers have no English facility upon arrival.

⁴⁷ Table 3.13 indicates that there are a number who have migrated from the UK, the rest of Europe and the US. The general decline correlates with anecdotal impressions that earlier there were more immigrants who had arrived from countries other than China, compared to now. However, the relatively small numbers help to put into perspective stories claiming that PRC immigrants migrating from other countries (where they were studying or working) were competing for jobs with those who had migrated straight from China.

Research Methodology

My research comprises largely of focus groups and in-depth household interviews with 78 PRC Independent immigrants in 2001 and 2002. The participants were recruited in three ways. One was through an agreement with the immigrant agency, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., which provided me with 16 participants for two focus groups and 18 households for interviews. The second was through snowball sampling where I took care to have a wide range of entry points to obtain another 18 households. Developing contacts this way took considerable time but it allowed me to learn from a broader cross-section of immigrant experiences. A third way was through an Internet mailing list that, as I found out later, was cross-posted on a Chinese-Canadian website. This recruited my first focus group of five participants, which also served as a pilot study where I sharpened my research questions.

The basic criteria for the selection of participants were that they had to be Independent immigrants from PRC who landed in or between 1996 and 2001. Where feasible, I preferred diversity among participants, particularly in terms of gender, number of household members, and year of landing,⁴⁸ as well as province of origin and occupation in China. Apart from my first focus group - in which four out of the five were students at UBC studying for graduate, post-doctoral or second Bachelors' degrees - no other students were recruited as I wished to learn more about the array of employment experiences faced by new immigrants. The other two focus groups were divided into male and female groups, the reason being that I wanted to explore whether there were gender differences in their motivations to migrate and their current experiences. To ensure that the focus group was conducted in an environment convenient and familiar to the participants, the pilot group was

⁴⁸ It was particularly difficult to recruit earlier immigrants who arrived in 1996 or 1997.

held at UBC and the others at the headquarters of S.U.C.C.E.S.S. For the same reason, interviews were conducted mostly in the participants' homes either at night or during the weekends,⁴⁹ with the exception of two held in cafes and another one at the interviewee's office during lunchtime.

Before each focus group and interview, I requested participants to complete a short survey form (Appendix 1). The focus groups lasted between two to two and a half hours while the interviews were one and a half to two hours on average, with the longest being three hours. These were recorded by audiotape and then transcribed, generating a literal mountain of transcripts, which were then analysed. Since all but two interviews and one focus group were conducted in Mandarin, translation inevitably complicated and lengthened the transcribing process. As far as achievable, I sought to keep the original meaning intact but was regrettably unable to capture the more lyrical inflections of proverbs and couplets that participants frequently impressed me with.

Although the focus groups and interviews were semi-structured, and I encouraged participants to explore freely issues that they felt were important, I adhered loosely to four central themes:

1. Why did they migrate?
2. What were their impressions of Canada in general, and Vancouver in particular?
3. What kind of information sources did they rely on before migration?
4. How do their present experiences compare with their expectations before migration?

⁴⁹ These times were arranged to match the interviewees' busy schedules.

During the research process, several methodological issues emerged. The first was of an epistemological nature. As my objectives were linked to their pre-migration mindsets, accessibility to this realm was necessarily compromised in two ways. One was that recollection from hindsight relies on memory, which can distort events and emotions over time. Moreover, respondents might choose to remember in certain ways, whether subconsciously or otherwise. Another potential distortion was that in conveying what they remembered to me, the meaning might be changed, intentionally or not. To an extent, I think the point on memory cannot be avoided unless interviews had occurred in China prior to their migration. However, since the course of migration decision-making and formal application is, in many cases, a long and drawn-out affair and, as I will stress later, it is a *process*, recollection - and perhaps rethinking - will always be involved at any stage. Furthermore, my intention is also partly to understand how their thinking has changed over time, as *they* view it. With regard to the second point on the validity of what they say, I tried to address it by integrating several checks during the interviews.

A second methodological issue was my conscious decision to interview households, rather than individuals, as a unit whenever possible. Altogether, I interviewed 21 households, 14 individuals – 7 of whose spouses were away in China at that time and one who was separated – and one single woman with her father who was in Canada on a visitor's visa. I made this decision partly because substantial migration research has found that it is often at the level of the household that migration decisions are made. Nonetheless, I was initially concerned whether participants might practise self-censorship in front of their spouses. More often than not though, participants seemed very willing to challenge or contradict what their spouses said, and thus provided an additional check on possible errors. In several cases,

lively exchanges between the spouses gave me further insights into their emotional landscapes. On the whole, I believe that the presence of both partners in the interview helped me to sense how their household dynamics worked, and just as importantly, to keep the atmosphere relaxed. At the same time, the individual interviews also gave me opportunities to understand more about the kinds of gender relations that could be subsumed during household interviews.

While carrying out my research, I could not help but be conscious of a third issue: my positionality as a Chinese Singaporean student overseas in Canada.⁵⁰ This reflection arises not so much from a desire to capitalise on the politics of identity and difference that were popular in academic circles in the 1990s but rather because I feel that my personal identity has been implicated in the research process, often via participants' perceptions of me. Rather than pretending to be a detached researcher, I tried to take on a doubly critical stance by being aware of how my positionality might have influenced the findings and yet also wary of overvalorizing my involvement. Ien Ang (2001: 25), in pondering over the predicaments of Chineseness in diaspora, has rightly proposed, "Chineseness is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pregiven, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside of China". Indeed, interviewees varied in their opinions of my "Chineseness". When sharing with me the dilemmas that they faced, some would address me as a "fellow *zhongguoren*" (native Chinese), creating a common *cultural* identity. Some others in emphasizing my *national* identity regarded me as a "*huaren*" (ethnic Chinese of non-PRC nationality), and a few were surprised that I could speak Mandarin "even though" I

⁵⁰ See works by feminist geographers, such as McDowell (1992) and Rose (1993) on the "situatedness" of a researcher's position.

was from Singapore.⁵¹ Being perceived as a *huaren* had its advantages since interviewees would make an effort to clarify differences in practices that were foreign to me. Generally, depending on the subject under discussion, different aspects of my Chineseness were highlighted, occasionally during the same interview.

On one level, the most important element of my Chineseness with respect to this research was that I could speak Mandarin. Although a number of interviewees could speak very fluent English, they preferred to use Mandarin for the interviews because as Joyce explained in Mandarin, “if we were to use English to answer your questions, we wouldn’t be able to express this articulately. A lot of the subtle meanings wouldn’t be conveyed so well.” On another, less tangible level, I could sometimes feel there was “something more”. To quote Xianzong, “it is the culture behind language”. A number of interviewees asked me about my own experiences as well as my family’s migration history.⁵² Keen as I was to know about them, I understood that there was a sharing in progress, which depended partly on trust and a larger mental construction of the Chinese diaspora.

Profile of Participants

From the selection process I outlined earlier, it should be clear that my research sample is not geared towards a statistically representative sample of PRC skilled immigrants in Vancouver. Rather, my objective is to bring together a range of diverse participants who

⁵¹ On the whole, interviewees appeared to regard Singapore in a good light. For several interviewees, Singapore had an image as an English-speaking country. A considerable number were interested in its bilingual educational system. This was partly because they wished their children to be fluent in English for pragmatic reasons, but were also concerned that they should have a good command of Mandarin, both in its spoken and (more difficult) written form.

⁵² Diana Lary made an interesting observation that there is a hierarchy of Chinese overseas, with North America being in the top position, Singapore in the second, followed by the others (personal communication).

share the common experience of immigration to Vancouver from China. The profile of my 78 participants reflects this objective.

There is a relatively balanced representation of gender with 41 females and 37 males. The age distribution clusters between 30 and 39, somewhat mirroring the general profile in Figure 3.5 except that there are fewer participants in the 25-29 category (Table 3.14). For marital status, my sample tends towards the married immigrants, with 51 married, 1 divorced, 2 separated and 3 single. This is due to an explicit interest on my part in how migration decision-making operates within a family. If we were to consider the participants in terms of households, there are 57 households, of which the principal applicant is male in 38 cases, and female in 20 cases.⁵³ As I will show in Chapter 4, this does not necessarily reflect which gender has greater motivation to migrate. In terms of number of children, 41 households have one child⁵⁴, 6 have two children⁵⁵ and 10 have none.

| Age | 25-29 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 | 50-54 |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| No. | 2 | 33 | 30 | 9 | 1 | 3 |

Table 3.14 Age grouping of participants.

The majority of the participants landed in 2000 and 2001, accounting for two-thirds of the sample (Table 3.15).⁵⁶ Their last permanent city of residence varied: 9 were from Beijing; 8 each from Shanghai and Tianjin; 7 from Nanjing; 4 each from Fuzhou, Guangzhou,

⁵³ In one case, both husband and wife applied separately as principal applicants to maximize their chances of application success.

⁵⁴ Note China's One-Child policy since 1978.

⁵⁵ Either one or both the children were born in Canada for five of the households. The remaining one had twins in China.

⁵⁶ Two participants in the first (pilot) focus group were in the process of application for landed immigrant status. One was in Canada on a work permit and the other on a student visa. Save for 3 families, both husbands and wives landed in the same year.

Shenyang and Shenzhen; 3 each from Dalian, Taiyuan and Kunming; 2 each from Beihai, Chongqing, Foshan, Jinan, Weifang, Xi'an, and 1 each from Bengbu, Changsha, Chengde, Hangzhou, Hunan and Wuhu. Apart from these 23 cities, there was 1 each from Hiroshima (Japan), Davis (California) and Sydney (Australia). Looking back further into their migration history, 28 had moved away from their place of birth, which is often in a smaller city than their last city of residence. Altogether, the participants' birthplaces numbered 38 cities.

| Year | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No. | 3 | 4 | 11 | 7 | 24 | 27 |

Table 3.15 Year of landing for participants.

Mandarin is the mother tongue for 66 of the participants, followed by Shanghai dialect (6), Cantonese (4), Fuzhou dialect (1) and Sichuan dialect (1).⁵⁷ When asked to assess their own English language ability when they first arrived, most indicated that they were average, with only a few on either ends of the spectrum (Table 3.16). By the time I interviewed them, 25 felt that they had improved, and the overall assessment shifted upwards to both “good” and “average”.

| English language ability | At time of landing | At time of interview |
|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Very good | 5 | 6 |
| Good | 19 | 30 |
| Average | 36 | 34 |
| Poor | 14 | 7 |
| Hardly able to speak it | 4 | 1 |

Table 3.16 English language ability (self-assessed) at time of landing and time of interview.

⁵⁷ All those with dialect for a mother tongue also speak Mandarin fluently.

Most participants hold a Bachelor's degree (56) or above (17 Masters and 1 PhD Candidate). Of the remaining four, three are polytechnic graduates and one a high school graduate. This matches well with the general profile. Likewise, the occupations of participants before their immigration reflect the high proportion of professional jobs held by PRC skilled immigrants in general when they were in China (Table 3.17). What is remarkable though is the dramatic change in occupations upon immigration. On one hand, professional occupations in all fields show a significant drop. For example, the number of participants in professional occupations in natural and applied sciences, which include engineering and computer science, decreased from 29 to 3 and those in business and finance decreased from 11 to 2. As for the six participants who found jobs in professional occupations in social science, education, government and religion, three of them had switched to their new jobs only in Canada,⁵⁸ indicating that many of those originally in the sector (mainly teachers) were no longer. In addition, none of those working at the senior management occupation were holding similar positions after immigration. On the other hand, the service sector has had a sharp increase in the number of employees. All in all, considering the education level and professional experience of the participants, there appears to be a substantial amount of underemployment - where former engineers are now working in comparatively lower skilled jobs such as machine operators and labourers - as well as unemployment. More females have also become housewives, frequently due to circumstance rather than choice, and a sizeable number are presently studying.

⁵⁸ Two as translators/interpreters and one as a social worker.

| Occupations | In China | In Canada |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| Senior Management Occupations | 7 | |
| Professional Occupations in Business and Finance | 11 | 2 |
| Skilled Administrative and Business Occupations | 6 | 6 |
| Professional Occupations in Natural & Applied Sciences | 29 | 3 |
| Administrator | 1 | |
| Technician | | 3 |
| Professional Occupations in Health | 6 | 2 |
| Technical and Skilled Occupations in Health | | 1 |
| Prof Occup in Soc Sci, Education, Gov Services, and Relig | 14 | 6 |
| Professional Occupations in Art and Culture | 1 | |
| Technical and Skilled Occup in Art, Culture, Rec & Sport | 1 | |
| Skilled Sales and Service Occupations | 1 | 4 |
| Intermediate Sales and Service Occupations | | 2 |
| Elemental Sales and Service Occupations | | 3 |
| Trades | | 1 |
| Process, Manufact, & Utilities Supervis & Skilled Operator | | 3 |
| Labourers in Processing, Manufacturing, and Utilities | | 4 |
| Housewife | 1 | 9 |
| Unemployed | | 9 |
| Students at University or Other Higher Education | | 5 |
| Preparing to Attend Graduate School | | 2 |
| Studying ESL | | 3 |
| Studying for Certificates in Trades | | 3 |
| N.A. (either residing in China or no intention to look for job yet) | | 8 |

Table 3.17 Occupations of participants before immigration in China and after immigration in Canada.

Thus far, I have presented a broad brush portrayal of the characteristics and present circumstances of my research participants to set the empirical context. I will return to this discussion in Chapter 7 where their experiences will be painted with finer brush strokes. Meanwhile, the next three chapters explore their geographical imaginations in China, prior to migration.

Chapter 4

“Seeing the Outside from the Inside”: Leaving China for Canada

In a place like Shanghai, the development is very fast, definitely a large modern city. But a lot of people in there do not know it, like inside a walled city: people who are inside want to get out while those who are outside want to get in.⁵⁹ (Minglu⁶⁰, from Shanghai)

When you are seeing the outside from the inside, you have many dreams, many illusions... (Alice, from Anhui)

This chapter explores the interplay of opportunity, human agency, and biography in creating “an immigrant”. In everyday and academic discourses alike, the label “immigrant” often derives from the nation-state’s territorial imaginary, where its focus begins from the point of border-crossing, when an “emigrant” becomes an “immigrant”. Suppressed within this account, however, are the personal meanings and narratives attached to *becoming* an immigrant. While cultural theorists have intervened by bringing attention to the sense of “in-betweenness” and ambivalence that migrants may experience (Bhabha, 1990; Gilroy 1993) - albeit primarily after migration - what remains absent are the lived geographies, and histories, of the migrants themselves. As Mitchell (1997: 539) notes aptly, “theories that discuss space only in terms of linguistic or spatial metaphors will inevitably provide only empty theoretical ‘frameworks’ as well”. Here, I engage the experiences of recent PRC immigrants in Vancouver to examine my theoretical concerns on the linkages between migration and imagination.

⁵⁹ Most of my interviews and focus groups were conducted in Mandarin, and subsequently translated by me. From here onwards, translations are presented in bold print.

⁶⁰ All the respondents’ names have been changed. I used English pseudonyms for respondents who were known to me by their English names, which were often acquired after they arrived in Canada.

I suggested in Chapter 2 that the link between migration and imagination is initiated through the recognition of *possibilities*, of the possibilities that potential migrants or their children will live, work, and play in places other than where they were born. A focus on the realm of the imagination provokes the question whether imagination as social practice can indeed be independent of national, transnational and political-economic structures that “enable, channel, and control the flows of people, things and ideas” (Ong, 1999: 11). In the case of the PRC immigrants, where the possibilities for immigration essentially emerged from the changing emigration and immigration policies of China and Canada respectively, and were then commodified by immigration consultants, such an analysis would appear too partial. Thus, an exploration of the imagination needs to be deeply grounded in the realities and constraints of everyday life, in the particular place from where the migrant works on his or her dreams. Two central questions guide this exploration. First, what is the wider context in which the idea of migration arises? Second, why migrate?

My objective in this chapter is to shift the focus on immigration to the phase *before* immigration occurs, focusing specifically on the social and cultural embeddedness of migration decision-making. Since immigrants are created and not born, understanding the pre-migration perceptions and motivations of migrants is crucial in formulating a truly transnational framework for conceptualising migration.

Extending the Going Abroad Fever?

Following the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, *chuguore* (going abroad fever) has been a leitmotif of China since the early 1980s. In a non-linear trajectory that has included studying abroad in the US, Japan and Canada since the 1980s, as well as immigration to

Australia and New Zealand in the late 1980s and early 1990s, present immigration to Canada constitutes the newest phase.⁶¹ The historical context suggests that the idea of immigration does not exist in a vacuum; instead, it belongs to a continuum of perceptions about “going abroad”. By focusing on *perception* rather than *form*, I argue that the way in which immigration is conceived in academic scholarship needs to be widened to situate immigration alongside other means of going abroad. Turning to the PRC example, there is a legacy of views that pertain to going abroad in general, which continues to feature in immigration. One recurring theme is that of isolation, both in the past and present. Shuwen asserts:

China - its many years of isolation have produced a longing for abroad in people. This is all over China. It is not like other free countries where you can tour freely, to go travelling round the world. Thus, as a country that has been closed for many years, it understands very little of the life that is outside the circle. It results in a trend that tends towards overseas in one's thinking. The whole of China longs for overseas.

While the roots of *chuguore* may be traced to the turmoil in China before opening up, this feeling of isolation is also partly explained by the thwarted mobility that many respondents experienced before migration. Chinese citizens must possess three documents to leave China legally: a passport, a visa issued by the country of destination, and an exit permit issued by the Public Security Bureau (Zhang and Gaylord, 1996). Although my respondents noted that with China's opening up, there was an increased possibility of work visits overseas and travelling (to a limited number of countries), they stressed that going abroad was still surrounded by too many difficulties. On numerous occasions, to allude to their sense of entrapment, respondents quoted a line to me, “**Like inside a walled city: people**

⁶¹ Studying abroad has continued to be a major pathway. Recently, new destinations, such as Canada and France, are also attracting PRC students.

who are inside want to get out while those who are outside want to get in.”⁶² Adeline

explains this sentiment:

The more tightly you wrap a person up, the more he is interested in what is outside; the more you don't allow him to go out and take a look, the more he wants to go out and see. It's the rebelliousness in a person. If it was open originally, and he knows what is going on, he might not have such a strong desire.

Earlier migrations, in forms other than that of immigration, may also play a role in reshaping and perpetuating ideas about “going abroad”. While networks of friends and relatives overseas were important in providing linkages to - an otherwise abstract - abroad, students who have returned from studying overseas were also singled out as an influence. Comparisons were often made between these students and those who have “stayed behind”. The returnee, embodying the cultural capital of “overseas experience,” and a fluent mastery of English, was portrayed as being on the path to success. Haiwen revealed to me:

We call it the “turtle”⁶³ gang”. The feeling in China is that these people are very fantastic, their English is so good, they know so much, they are very accurate in finding the market niches, and can earn money, so why don't we go overseas? This is also a driving force for people to immigrate overseas. The second batch of people.

SY: The second batch?

The students from the early days, the 1980s. Those who went back are very outstanding. Many have gone back. There are a lot of such famous people in China. Many top executives working in the big companies are all from overseas, their positions and incomes are very high. This way, the circumstances of overseas students are much better than the local ones. They have obtained high positions. Thus many people are willing to stay for a few years abroad, and change their entire situation.

SY: You mean...

⁶² Line from a book entitled *Weicheng* (Walled City) by Qian Zhongshu.

⁶³ The Mandarin term for ‘return’ has the same pronunciation as ‘turtle’.

The advertising effect - that immigration is a good path.

Underlying Haiwen's reasoning is the "cultural logic" of migration that I discussed earlier in Chapter 2. In the case of my respondents, self-perception, rather than overt social pressure, propels the logic. Shunfa illustrates this, to laughter from fellow male focus group participants:

A more important reason for us young people is that most have gone to US to study. If you go, you must be very capable. If you don't go, people think that you don't have the ability. Even if you really have the ability, and you are not able to leave, people think that you don't have the ability. When old classmates look at you, you feel that even though you originally felt that you have the ability, he feels that you don't have the capability because you haven't been able to go out. So still come out.

On the whole, most of the immigrants knew someone – in many cases former university classmates – who had gone abroad. Some had themselves contemplated going abroad when they were at university, having witnessed classmates taking the requisite exams in the hopes of obtaining scholarships for postgraduate studies in the US. Many more were oblivious at that time to the idea of going abroad, being caught in the more "regular" and "stable" paths of finding a job, getting married and having a child. Thus, as Grinberg and Grinberg (1989) suggested, the desire to immigrate can either be long-standing or spontaneous.

Immigration as a New Idea

I remember it was '96, '97, when going abroad was especially hot. Moreover, there were immigration seminars held by the immigration companies. The large-scale immigration seminars were often bursting to the brim. The immigration companies were holding introductions on immigration. Anyway, every session was very crowded, completely full!
(Iris, from Changsha)

Repeated across China, this scene of bustling curiosity painted by Iris transformed the way in which going abroad was perceived. No longer was studying abroad, work visits, or family reunion the only legitimate means by which the Chinese could go overseas. Now, an additional “opportunity”, in the form of immigration, was available for those who fulfilled the requirements. With their shrewd and polished marketing strategies, I argue that immigration consultant companies have played a pivotal role in promoting immigration to Canada.⁶⁴ In China, the consultancies maintain a very high profile through holding frequent immigration seminars in prominent - often five-star - hotels, advertising in newspapers, and maintaining Internet websites. One interviewee even suggested that the geography of migration in China could be mapped according to where their offices were located.

A brief history of one of the leading consultancies underlines the geographical spread of this business (Xingdao Daily, 28/10/2001). In June 1994, the company started in Vancouver. By July of the same year, its first branch office opened in Hong Kong. A second branch office opened in Beijing in March 1995, followed by the Shanghai office in October. By November 2001, there were 29 offices in China, located in many of the major cities, and extending into the northeast and interior areas. This trajectory appears to correlate closely with that of the place of origin of PRC immigrants to Canada. Substantial anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the earlier independent PRC immigrants to Canada were from the more cosmopolitan cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Tianjin, where there was a larger community of the highly educated, and skilled and the flow of information was faster. The wave of migration then swept to the Northeast and more recently, it has spread to the smaller cities in the interior areas.

⁶⁴ See Walton-Robert's (2001) Ph.D. thesis “Immigration and Transnational Networks Between British

The arrival of the immigration companies was greeted initially with a sense of disbelief. My respondents revealed:

At that time [1997], we thought it was “unbelievable”, that’s too cheap, spending slightly over US10 000⁶⁵ and you could go abroad. (Haojie, from Shanghai)

Didn’t know that we can just spend a little money to come abroad because in the past we felt that going abroad was very, very difficult. We didn’t believe that we could come by just spending a little money. The colleagues around also said that you shouldn’t believe the immigration companies. They felt that it might be like human smuggling, like refugees. This way, there was not much understanding, and I didn’t have much confidence. (Shulin, from Taiyuan, landed in 1999)

Such feelings could be explained in large part by the novelty of immigration as a concept. Being unfamiliar with the immigration process, potential immigrants felt that employing an experienced middleman agency might increase the probability of success. In some cases, they were not even aware that it was possible for them to apply directly. These factors contributed to the marketing success of immigration companies. While not claiming to be representative, over two thirds of the thirty-six households in my research sample applied through immigration companies. Of the rest who applied by themselves, six arrived in 2001, having benefited from the advice of friends or relatives who had migrated earlier, in addition to the greater availability of immigration websites and guidebooks. This reflected the general pattern observed by a number of respondents: immigration companies were first responsible for initiating immigration in an area, and after a time lag when more information became available, other potential immigrants would apply for immigration on their own. The availability of friends who had prior experience often had an effect on this. In one case

Columbia and Punjab India,” on the role of immigration consultants in India.

⁶⁵ The US10 000 included US7500 for lawyer and consultancy fees. Due to increasing competition amongst immigration companies, the service fees have dropped dramatically. For instance, at the Beijing immigrant consultancy that Cheryl applied through, she remembers the fees falling from US8000 in 1996, US6500 in 1997, US5000 in 1998, to just over US2000 in 2001.

though, an ex-colleague's entrepreneurial spirit added a twist. According to Laifu, an ex-colleague migrated first and then set up a consultancy company, bringing many colleagues over to Canada.⁶⁶

With rising numbers of people immigrating, some respondents, such as Linda, detected a climate of immigration that associated it with being **"a very trendy thing"**. Adeline echoes her thoughts,

In China at that time, immigration was a more fashionable thing. Usually, young people with the ability and the educational qualifications should go out to seek better development because they are after all very outstanding in China. I felt that I should be like others, like my classmates and others, [go out] to experience. That's my thinking at that time.

In feeling that she should be like her classmates, Adeline reveals that she was not only comparing herself to peers who were migrating, but also to those who had gone abroad previously by studying, thus extending the point of reference. However, even when framed as part of a continuum of "going abroad", there are clear distinctions between studying overseas and immigration. Interestingly, the discourse is not articulated so much with regards to the relative permanence either may imply or its purpose, but to the relative *ease* with which it can be achieved. Respondents told me that studying abroad could be achieved by two main ways in the 1980s and early 1990s. One could be by obtaining scholarships, "the hard way". Another was self-paid study, as was the trend to Japan between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Comparing immigration to either way could be considered as:

A change of trend. Before, we used to have a lot of overseas students. Right now, a lot more people are seeking immigration because it is easier and it costs less money and you get status. (Monica)

⁶⁶ Although Laifu himself had not been brought over by his ex-colleague, he notes that almost 100 of his ex-colleagues from an American MNC in China have immigrated to Canada.

One participant even went as far as perceiving a rank-order within “going abroad”: Go abroad is more successful than staying in your work unit, and to get permanent residency is more successful than just to be a student. And to be a citizen is [laughs] even more successful. There is some kind of formula there. (Xianzong)

However, Xianzong admits that the elegance of this formula is restricted to perceptions from within China, and not from without, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Discovery “By Chance”

The way in which immigrants first came into contact with the idea of immigration varies although in most cases, respondents remarked that they had learnt about immigration “by chance”. Shuwen recollects how a billboard in the streets of her hometown in Shandong Province had captured the attention of she and her husband. Entitled “Seminar on Immigration to Canada”, it sparked them to enter the office of a consultancy. Upon hearing the requirements, they realised that as lecturers in professional institutes, they fulfilled the criteria for independent immigration to Canada, and applied after a period of consideration. In another instance, Minglu had accompanied his friend to an immigrant consultancy. Since the business was commission-based, they offered to do a free assessment for him. He too qualified, and decided to apply on his own. Although in these two instances, the immigration companies were instrumental in introducing the idea of immigration, it was far more common for my respondents to have learnt about immigration “by chance” from the social sphere of friends and relatives. For instance:

It was especially *by chance* that I heard from my cousin about her classmate...(Cheryl)

***Incidentally* when chatting, I found that my friend was doing it. (Junnie)**

Basically, I knew about it *by coincidence*, ‘Oh, I can still immigrate?’ It was through such a way [from her sister] that I knew about this path.

Previously, I did not think of coming out, about finding which path to take, because I did not look for it specifically. (Binya)

This particular way of discovery points firstly to the inherently *social* nature of information transmission and interpretation. John explains:

The information that we receive in the first instance is often through communication with friends - talking and chatting. When you have this concept in your brain, you will realise ‘Oh, there is such a thing as immigration,’ and after knowing it, you can check it out on the Internet, watch out for it in the news, and inquire about it from friends. The first instance is often from friends.

Secondly, the subtext in finding out “by chance” is the cloud of secrecy that surrounds the immigration application process, where the topic of immigration is seldom mentioned in personal terms. Adeline informed me:

This is after all not something [embarrassed laugh] you could display on the table and talk about it grandly.

SY: Do you mean you won’t talk about it with too many people?

Yes, because immigration belongs to a personal matter. It is not like going abroad to study. There is still a difference between immigration and studying abroad because it involves your work - whether it will change in the future - and many other issues.

In almost every case, my respondents tried to keep their application for immigration a secret. My attention was first drawn to this when I asked a respondent about what other people thought of his decision to migrate and he remarked, “**no one knew about it**”. Later, when I asked another immigrant whether he was still in contact with friends from China, he told me that he was not, since few people knew about him migrating. Usually, the people who knew about it were the immediate family including their parents, and some close relatives and friends. One reason for keeping the application a secret was to avoid being embarrassed if it did not succeed. The more important reason though, was for fear that the work unit would

find out about their application. In their view, this could have two harmful effects. First, the work unit might either not approve or create difficulties when they were applying for notary documents that were kept by the work unit. This was a particular worry of immigrants who used to work in government departments or state enterprises. Second, in the event that the application was not approved, they wanted to be able to continue working there with no repercussions. Hence, colleagues at work were usually kept out of the close circle of people who knew. Lena, who used to work in a foreign corporation, recollects:

It is confidential to one another, but often, as you will look for agents to do it, you will meet at the immigration companies! [laughs]

Before I left, everyone seemed to “keep confidential”. I didn’t know who was applying but once I left, there were people who tried to obtain information from me, so I knew that you, and you were doing it! So many people were doing it. It’s quite amusing! [laughs] When I left, many people had loaded meaning in their words when they said, “Next Spring, we’ll meet at where and where.” This Chinese New Year, there may be a colleague coming because before I left, he said, “We’ll meet in Vancouver next year”.

Despite the secrecy, a spirit of bonding tended to evolve amongst those who were aware of one another applying, mainly by way of sharing information and moral support. In two cases, this extended to holding “meetings” over dinner with fellow applicants, debating over their reasons for migration and whether they should proceed with migration. Nevertheless, outside a circle of family and close friends, the application process for immigration was an intensely personal affair, varying from five months to three years, with an average of two years.

Imagining Alternative Lives

Immigrants are doubly selected. While public rhetoric tends to concentrate on the selection criteria of immigrant-receiving countries, the private realm of decision-making by

immigrants tends to be ignored or taken for granted. Here, I focus on the latter to uncover the reasoning (or not) involved in self-selection. I turn first to the immigrants' own perceptions of their place within Chinese society to illuminate why they, in contrast to others who are staying, decided to emigrate. Ruhao pointed out to me:

You can say that those who have come out of China are the minority among the minority; there is only a very, very small proportion. It's not that a lot of people do not meet the requirements. There are many whose qualifications are quite good, and can come out if they want to, but everyone's choice of lifestyle is different.

Orina, ex-agronomist in a state department, emphasized the psychological aspects of leaving a former way of life:

The ones who immigrate in the work unit belong to the kind whose thinking is more dynamic, who are more willing to change themselves.

It is the minority, as most are contented with a normal life, and they don't want a tremendous change; to come thousands of miles, to sell the house, to not be able to bring all the furniture that has been bought, and only bring what is the most treasured and necessary in a few boxes, and start all over again from nought.

In recollecting their pasts, a number of respondents referred to themselves as people of *shenfen* (status) and *diwei* (standing) in China. This self-perception is usually related to the educational level and professional background. For instance, Elaine - Masters graduate and former assistant general manager - comments:

(t)he ones who have gone out are after all the crème de la crème, the outstanding ones.

In contrast, Shunyu - former electrical engineer - adopts a more pragmatic tone:

The ones who apply for immigration are those who are not officials, or leaders, and not businessmen earning big money. The prospects for these people are like us, very bland. In China, it would be very plain because through your own diligence, you have a job, but no matter how high your

abilities and intelligence, or how good your opportunities are, these [prospects] are still unknowns.

Among friends of a similar educational background, John, a former marine engineer, found three different responses towards the issue of immigration: some people were entirely not prepared to immigrate, some would very much like to immigrate, and the rest were undecided. The first group consisted of those who were very stable in China, either having a business of their own, with firm economic and social status, or those in a state enterprise or government unit with secure jobs and social welfare. The second group were the ones who were very discontented in China, they felt that their lives and work were not very favourable, and they really wanted to go out to develop. He himself had belonged to the undecided group, until persuaded by his wife to come. John's classification serves to demonstrate the differential reception towards the idea of immigration.

After situating immigrants as a self-selected group, I now consider their reasons for immigration.

Personal Development: Beyond Economics

One key reason for immigration is "personal development". The choice of term is revealing in that the migrants regard themselves as belonging to the middle strata in China, with comfortable lifestyles and status. Rather than being unemployed or underemployed, "Independent" immigrants were usually professionals⁶⁷, such as engineers, accountants, and

⁶⁷ Since only skilled workers are likely to be accepted by the Canadian Immigration policy for 'Independents'.

doctors⁶⁸ in search of professional opportunities and perhaps improving their human capital (Clark, 1998). A desire for change is often voiced:

People at our age in China, we've already reached the top point [of our careers]. We hope to have some development here. (Aining)

At that time, we were 34. Our careers are already like this, sometimes we think that we need some kind of excitement, this is one of the motivations. (Elaine)

Elaine further points out that she frequently had the opportunity to go abroad for business and in the process, felt that China was more backward. Ruhao, a former thermal engineer earning RM200 000 a year, wanted to widen his horizons by acquiring new knowledge, and also make fuller use of his professional skills. Inherent in these motivations, is the hope of finding better opportunities elsewhere, as John expresses:

There are then people like us whose jobs are so-so. If we want to change, it is not difficult, and our salaries are relatively fine even though it may not be the best in our social stratum...Errr, however, in our hearts, we still think there might be other opportunities, more opportunities, a better living standard, and better social conditions. There is still a higher hope in our hearts.

While a number of immigrants emphasized that they wanted to migrate to a “developed country” (or “western society”) to study⁶⁹ for an MBA, to improve their English, or be exposed to new technology, fitting the “human capital” model of neoclassical economics, a more striking element was the prevalent feeling of wanting to have a new direction in life. Binya, who has worked in the same school for 13 years, felt that she “**could see the future too clearly**”.

⁶⁸ As “doctor” is not one of the occupations listed in the Canadian immigration list, these doctors are usually the dependents of the principal applicants.

⁶⁹ An immigration company told Jingyuan that if he were to immigrate “directly”, he would pay cheaper fees as a landed immigrant than an international student. In this way, he could realise his “going abroad” dream directly. If he were to study abroad, he would still have to apply for immigration after graduation. Thus with the comparison, he decided to immigrate.

The people around us were going to retire after another 10, 20 yrs. They had become professors and heads. It seems that was it! Perhaps it is because we didn't have too many worries at our level. We didn't have to worry about the house and so on, unlike here where there are so many unknowns. There, everything seems to have been fixed. It seemed that the path was going to be very smooth and plain when we walked on it. We could see at a glance what was ahead. That was the feeling. Thus we felt that it was fresher coming here. [laughs] (Binya)

Another respondent, Edward, concurs:

Speaking from my heart, all aspects of our environment weren't bad. However, I feel that if our days are passing one day by one day like this, it is a duller kind of living. [...] I feel that the life in China is such that today you are able to see tomorrow.

In this way, migration was conceived as a "new challenge," especially for "young people". The hard rationality that economics assumes in decision-making seems an unlikely explanation for such human feelings. The "personal" aspect to the development that migrants are aiming for is even clearer in Adeline's philosophical approach. A friend who had migrated to Canada after studying in Germany called her, and said, **"Only when a person has travelled and seen, and not missed it, can she be considered to have really lived in this life."** Adeline confided:

I was rather moved. I had a good career in China. I felt I should really go out to see. In life, one should really go out to enrich one's experience, not just go on a tour and gain a superficial understanding through cursory observation. At least live here for a period of time, and really feel what difference there is from China. Really go and feel, to experience a different lifestyle. That's what I thought at that time, a kind of curiosity.

As *zhishifenzi* ("intellectuals"⁷⁰), the immigrants frequently voiced a wish to "go out and take a look," to widen their horizons. Although a significant degree of this wish could be interpreted in terms of an accumulation of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984; Ong, 1999),

there also exists an intangible aspect that defies economic logic, and can perhaps only be attributed to a geographical imagination waiting to be lived. A caveat is that the different realities experienced by immigrants prior to migration influence to a considerable degree the meanings attached to "personal development". Several respondents suggested the role of economic geography: uneven development in China has led to differential job opportunities. On one hand, major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong are generally associated with a greater availability of jobs that offer higher pay and better career prospects. On the other hand, the interior regions have been less developed and less "open" to foreign investment until lately. Moreover, large-scale retrenchments in state enterprises during recent years - especially in the Northeast regions - have created an air of uncertainty. Although Xinlong observed that potential immigrants were unlikely to be the ones who would be retrenched due to their professional status, the uncertainty was sufficient to spark another interviewee Linda to consider migration. Shufen, from Shenyang (in the Northeast) revealed:

As there was nothing in China that I could not bear to leave behind, I felt that going anywhere would be the same. Here, it can't be worse.

It appears then that for some immigrants who come from the interior and Northeast regions, the more pragmatic issue of job opportunities might be the stronger undercurrent in "personal development". However, in the words of Monica, a former lawyer, for many respondents,

They come here not because they have a very poor living quality in China. Actually, they are high...they are of [a] higher level. They are doctors, lawyers etc in China, they have a lot of money, in a sense, comparing to what other people are earning. It's more of a self-fulfilment, I guess.

⁷⁰ Before the economic reforms, the most common designations in occupational and status groupings were those of "cadres," "workers," and "intellectuals," and they continue to serve as broad categories (Yang, 1994).

It is the location of this “self-fulfilment” as a possibility *elsewhere* that motivates many migrants to move.

“For the Children’s Education”: A Common Discourse?

Grace is the main motivation. We want her to have a happy childhood in a good environment. Grace is a sentimental... and sensitive child. In China, it is very competitive. It is important to let kids have a happy childhood. To let her be happy. Only in a happy learning environment, can she fulfil her ability, to fulfil 100%. If she is not in a happy environment, she can only fulfil 60%. Here Grace is very happy. (Alice)

The repeated references to a “happy childhood” and “happy environment” captured what is at the heart of many migrant parents’ concerns for their children. Among families with children, migration “for the children’s sake” was almost always cited. This is particularly the case for immigrants who are slightly older, such as Jiansheng, who is 45.

Those of our stratum and age consider not so much of our own development as that of the child’s development [...] because in China you are already very stable, and don’t want to move. If you are to move suddenly, it is mainly from the consideration of the child, and not for yourself. (Jiansheng)

In a few cases, the reason why the child’s future was not relevant was given without any prompting from me. I suggest that besides a genuine concern for their children’s welfare, a shared cultural discourse favouring studying abroad, as well as a retrospective justification perpetuates their voiced motives for moving. A frequent worry is the competitive and stressful atmosphere in the schools in China. Karen demonstrates vividly:

They are busier than the adults! They have no rest. From kindergarten onwards, their timetable is full because every family hopes that their children will grow up to be useful. Every household is like that. They will try their best for the kids. Even Saturday and Sunday mornings and afternoons are packed. The kids have no rest so they are very tired. As other people are like that, their kids are in school, why shouldn’t mine? Why can’t mine compare with other people?

Rather than being taught by rote, many parents also preferred their children to be taught in a more creative way that would allow them to express themselves. A number noted that while the foundational courses in China were stronger, university education was still better in Canada. This sentiment underlies the current trend in China for parents to send their children for education overseas.

We thought if we were to do⁷¹ immigration when he is in elementary school, and provide him with a better educational environment in Canada, then we could achieve the extremely arduous goal in China of sending the children abroad. Now by immigrating, we have sent him abroad to study. (Peixian)

Jiansheng further points out the pragmatic reasoning behind this strategy:

If there is the avenue of immigration, you can save a lot of money and the child can receive an education here earlier.

Moreover, when their children receive elementary educations in Canada, the parents can save on the high costs that may be involved to attend “more ideal” schools in China. (The cost arises when “donations” have to be paid for the children to enter schools that are outside of the designated residential zones.) For a number of immigrants, migration “for the next generation” constitutes the main reason for their migration. Here though, I interrupt this apparent logic by firstly suggesting that for some immigrants, the circulation of a common discourse among immigration companies and fellow immigrants perpetuates the *idea* that migration is for the children. My attention was first brought to this by observing an inconsistency between what Lena *said*, and what I interpreted her to *mean*, from her facial expressions, and a change in the tone of her voice.

Maybe for a lot of immigrants, I think it is to find a good environment for the kids because there are too many people in China. That is to say, everyone is doing it for his or her kids, for them to have a good environment [softer tone, somewhat rehearsed]. It is mainly for their kids,

⁷¹ Immigration is commonly spoken of as a thing to be “done”.

but it is *not just that*, [rising tone, and increasingly animated] it is also to come out and take a look because in China, I thought, “Staying in the work unit, I am able to see what I will be like when I am old. That is, there wouldn’t be much change, just staying there to work till retirement, and that would be it.” So ok, come out and take a look, and it wouldn’t matter. (Lena)

In Lena’s quote, the change from third person to first person narrative appears to highlight the difference between received information and her personal view on the issue. The implication of this for qualitative research is that the researcher has to not only listen to the content of what the interviewee says, but also observe the way in which it is said. I propose secondly that due to the retrospective nature of the research, some immigrants who are presently not experiencing the kind of lives that they were expecting, may through the lens of hindsight, psychologically justify “the next generation”⁷² as their main reason for immigration. This may be an internalised justification, or one that is taken to be a culturally acceptable reason that could be offered to the researcher without the issue of mianzi (face) being involved. Lyn, a woman of frank words, told me:

I personally feel...many people’s genuine mentality may not be for their children, for themselves or whatever. I think this kind of saying is not necessarily accurate. In actual fact, when you are living in a circle, you are too used to it. You merely want to change a way of living. I think this is more truthful. Thus I may say I am coming here for my child, but *in truth it is for myself*. (Lyn)

A couple of instances further support the idea that although “education” is an important consideration - and in a number of cases, *the* consideration - its significance has to be situated alongside other reasons, particularly the immigrant’s “personal development”. In response to my question, “Were your children an important reason for your migration?” a number of female focus group participants were quick to answer that they were only “**partly the reason**”, before one went on to emphasize that her own development would also have

an impact upon the child. An outspoken interviewee, Haojie, the father of an eight-year-old son declared:

Of course I don't think it is purely for the child. I'm not thinking just for my child. I am still young. I also want to lead my own life! How can I? Many people say that but I don't agree. I am not 50 or 60, already "over". My life is starting to be in its prime, "I also want to enjoy my life." (Haojie)

The apparently common discourse of migration "for the children's education" is thus not always shared, and its interpretation requires the recognition of different levels of truth.

"The Sky is Very Blue Outside": Yearning for a Different Environment

Another frequently mentioned reason was the desire for a change of environment. In some cases, immigrants were concerned about the natural environment, and tried to impress upon me the severity of air pollution in major cities, such as Shanghai, and the industrial areas. For many respondents though, the *social* environment⁷³ was the main arena of discontent, with the epithet being "*guanxifuza*" (complicated social relationships). Yang (1994: 52) pointed out in her book "Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China" that there is something about *guanxi* (social relationships) that makes it "distasteful and morally objectionable to a lot of people". This negative connotation may perhaps appear as a surprise to academics who have been used to the dominant association of *guanxi* with the strategic advantages possessed by Chinese business firms (e.g. Hsing, 1997; Olds and Yeung, 1999), but can be reconciled with the recognition that there are multiple points of views and definitions of *guanxi* (Yang, 1994).

⁷² In a few cases, this phrase was accompanied by a bitter smile.

My respondents were particularly concerned with two overlapping realms: the instrumental manipulation of relationships in the work unit, and official corruption in society at large. In the work unit⁷⁴, respondents were primarily unhappy about a work ethic centring on relationships, rather than meritocracy and transparency. Dewei echoed the views of several interviewees when he said:

Theoretically, as we are involved in purely technical work, one is one, two is two, three is three, and four is four. There is nothing else. If I am a designer, I should do things according to the standard. If it is possible, yes; if not, then no. But in reality, your boss, and the boss above him may tell you that what you are doing is not right. Why should I do according to him when what he says is not right? What should I do? It is very difficult.

Faced constantly with these moral dilemmas, Dewei thus wanted to leave China for the “blue sky and white clouds” abroad that his friend in Calgary had told him of. *Guanxi* also affected personal development. For example, Zhu Hong had initially been selected to go abroad on a work visit, but was eventually replaced by another person who had better *guanxi* with his superiors. In a darker version, Lyn divulged:

When I was in engineering, the head was involved with bribery so I was at conflict with him. Thus, he kept revenging on me. When I was leaving at that time, to a certain extent, it was really...my emotions were too repressed, I felt that there wasn't much that was worth it in this country. The common folks are good, but often, the power is too shady. [...] Thus under those conditions... because when I offended him, he kept revenging on me, refused to increase my salary, and at work he kept causing me problems. It was difficult to co-operate. With this state of mind ... I wanted to leave.

Official corruption was also another source of unhappiness with my respondents. Zhiyang, a male focus group participant, told us that because his work unit was considered to be one of

⁷³ The “environment” can be a politically loaded reference. For instance, pollution may allude to spiritual pollution (*jingshen wuran*) rather than pollution of the physical environment (Diana Lary, personal communication).

⁷⁴ Public sector work units, including state enterprises were particularly singled out.

the best in his region, there were many provincial governors' children there. Another participant, Minghui, agreed, and added, **"In one trading department, the colleagues are all university graduates who are newly allocated, and their parents are all not lower than deputy provincial governors"**. Demonstrating the pervasiveness of *guanxi*, a female focus group participant, Dora, proclaims:

Everything is based on humans...of course China is gradually progressing towards law. It is proceeding towards using law to rule the country and the people, but it is essentially based on the human word i.e. if I have power, then the law revolves around me.

When another participant suggested that she could have left the work unit if she could not handle the *guanxi*, Dora explained:

Up till the time I left, my interpersonal relations and all that were very good in the work unit, it's just that I didn't like it that way [Menglin: Yes, some people don't like it that way]. You have to develop another set of skills to adapt to that kind of living; it's just that I don't like to develop that. Rather than to have to fight this and that, and adapt just for that [kind of living], I would prefer to do things concretely. Here, I say that it is very tough, but you are doing things honestly, you are really depending on your own ability to do it. I prefer it this way.

In most cases, *guanxifuza* was not the primary motivation for migration. Sometimes, it may act as a catalyst, but usually, it serves as a secondary reason or background context in which potential migrants make their decisions. According to a number of interviewees, Canada, by comparison, was a much simpler society.

Politics, Mobility, and "Not Knowing Why"

For ethical reasons, I had decided right from the start not to ask my interviewees political questions that they might be understandably reluctant to discuss. Of my interviewees, only a

few volunteered that politics was one of their motivations for migration.⁷⁵ I could however sense that some shared Haiwen's view that **"In the short-run, migration may not be good but for the long-run, it is good because China's political situation is unstable...and it's good for the kids."** Qihua, who voiced that "freedom" was also a reason for his migration added, **"In actual fact, I am not interested in politics. However, there is always a climate of politics when I am living there."** His wife, Xiujing, who is a doctor, responded with some frustration:

There are still many people who like to talk about China's politics. I think for intellectuals like us, politics have no effects on you. So long as you do your own things, look after your patients, draw your blueprints, and do your things, there is no one controlling you. It is not like what is being imagined outside.

My sense is that for most of my respondents, politics *per se* is not a major motivation for them to leave China, even if they may have their own views on the situation. Obtaining landed immigrant status was however admitted in a few cases to act as "insurance" against political instability, particularly in light of the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Reflecting the emphasis on long-term considerations, Haiwen confided that it would be good to get a passport so that he could be mobile in the future. A new friend he had met that day agreed, **"Yes, it's all like that."** In a way, this desire to obtain a passport to become flexible seems to be similar to be analogous to the idea of "flexible citizenship" (Ong, 1999). However, as I shall argue in greater detail in Chapter 7, while getting a passport for flexibility could be one of the reasons for migration initially, experiences here in Canada, coupled with the burgeoning economy in the PRC, have increased its present and future significance.

⁷⁵ I thank Diana Lary for her astute insight that in China's context, "not talking about politics is not apolitical." Instead, silence can be immensely political.

From my interviewees, I have learnt that there are different rings of truth attached to answers. Haojie confirms this view:

Some of my colleagues are very embarrassed. Sometimes when we are drinking coffee, they tease me and say that they admire me very much. Bringing a whole family over just like that! They were “kidding” me! [laughing] “Unbelievable!” It’s not my own mother tongue and I have to learn all over again. Of course, I will not talk to them like I am today. I will just laugh and let it be. I would say, “How about your parents? Didn’t they migrate over?” There are *all kinds of reasons*. Of course I will not tell them too much. Even if I were to tell them, they wouldn’t be able to understand. (Haojie)

In direct contrast to Haojie’s “all kinds of reasons,” Shinan and his wife Lanxin responded this way to my question, “why did you migrate?”:

Why migrate? (Lanxin)

Why migrate? I don’t know either. (Shinan)

Although Shinan did explain his reasons later, their initial response reflected the current difficult situation they were experiencing in Canada, and understanding this was valuable in my analysis. The effect of hindsight was compounded by recollection of the better living standards they had experienced in China. Shinan and Lanxin’s responses reveal how questions may be interpreted in a different way from that intended by the researcher. A more fundamental challenge to my question was posed by Lena, who felt that her decision was **“quite blinded at first”**. Similarly, there were others - though in the minority - who had no clear reasons for migration initially, defying the model of the rational economic actor and ultimately pointing towards a more subtle “logic”. Weiying, a former university lecturer testifies:

I did not have concrete reasons for migration; it was only when here that I thought I should have an objective... at least get the citizenship status.

Asking “why” assumes there is an answer. By answering in the way they have, as I show above, my respondents are challenging the underlying rationality of models on migration decision-making, and affirming the complex ways of the mind.

A Gendered Perspective: The “Adventuring Wife” and her “Agreeing Husband”

The image of the “trailing wife” has accompanied analyses of gender and migration, with Bonney and Love (1991: 347), for instance, arguing that “male employment leads as the major migration motive for a couple”. In the course of my research, I uncovered a surprising pattern that goes against the grain of such an argument; namely, it was often the wife who tended to first have the *idea* to migrate. Moreover, the *desire* to migrate was more likely to be stronger in the wife. Among my interviewees, females initiated 17 of the households to migrate while males initiated 12 households to migrate.⁷⁶ These figures alone belie the fervency interviewees showed in conveying the prevalence of this phenomenon, an observation that can only be revealed by qualitative research. For instance:

The immigration decisions are all made by the wives! [quickly and with conviction] Yes, yes, yes. (Lena)

Yes, yes, yes! It is so for many people. (Philip) [Wife Elaine laughs]

Among the PRC, a lot of the women are willing to come. Many of the friends around me are the women pushing the husband ‘immigrate, immigrate,’ and the husbands are unwilling to go. Why? Because it is very boring...there are no friends, and it is hard to find a job. (Haiwen)

There are cases where both parties are keen. There are also cases where the men are keener but in terms of proportion, there are the most cases where the woman is keen. I think there could be 60-70%. (Zhiyang)

⁷⁶ Of the rest, 5 claimed to have shared the idea, and 2 were single or divorced. Interestingly, the principal applicant may not necessarily be the one who is more enthusiastic to migrate. Pragmatic reasons pertaining to eligibility for the point system (language and “suitability” of occupation in particular) appeared to be more important. Lyn, whose husband had been the principal applicant, told me, “**The appearance was that it was done through him because my language was not good. But I can very objectively say that the situation then was that...I decided we should leave**” (emphasis mine).

Instead of being the “trailing wife,” a gender reversal has been enacted, with the wife leading by her adventurous spirit, and the husband agreeing to follow her idea. The “agreeing husband” is however not a simple caricature. His responses to the idea of immigration proposed by his “adventuring wife” cover a whole spectrum of responses, from immediate agreement, to a case of persuasion, to outright reluctance (albeit in only one declared case). This is demonstrated below:

I thought of immigrating, so I asked him and he said, ‘That doesn’t matter, if you go, I’ll follow you in going’. [laughs!] (Joyce)

He is not the kind of person who likes to move too much. Later, he saw that I was more insistent, so ok. (Elaine)

The bottom line is that even up to now, I did not want to come. I followed my wife in coming over. [...] She had been sent to US twice on work visits. She felt that abroad is so, so good. I have never stepped out of the country’s doors [laughs], right. However I thought of the family. If she were to come over while I was in China, my parents-in-law wouldn’t feel at ease. My parents-in-law were very worried. They said, “If you want to go, you should go together. Otherwise forget about it, and don’t go.” From my view, since she really wants to go, forget it, I’ll go with her. So I came over with her. (Xiaofeng)

Frequently at the start of the interview process, it was not necessarily obvious that the wife was the one who had initiated the idea of migration, since the husband would also participate keenly in discussing the reasons for migration. This might suggest that the decision was in the end mutual, even if one party might be more enthusiastic at the start or during the process. My positionality as a female researcher may perhaps also have to be taken into account here. However, once it was established that the wife had initiated the migration, respondents would usually inform me “it is very common”. When probed for an explanation, the discourse was usually framed in terms of the women being more prone to fantasies, and the men being more down-to-earth, having to consider issues of survival, thus relying on common gender stereotypes. What is thought provoking though, is the

connection respondents make between these stereotypes and inclinations for mobility. The man, in this case, is portrayed as being grounded in place while the woman's flights of fancy take her away. For example, a male respondent, Zhiyang, said, "I find that usually the woman is more enthusiastic, because the woman *fantasizes* more, and it's easier for them to *imagine going out*." There is a gendered view of this "fantasy". On one hand, women tended to cast themselves as being in pursuit of "something more".

I say that women's hearts are not contented. They are always thinking that this is stable already, and they will be looking towards the far horizon. Yes, I think it is all like that. (Linda)

Maybe she thinks that life is too peaceful in China. Life is too peaceful. There is no need to worry about meals or drinks. She needs more excitement, or a new goal, a new life goal [laughs]. (Elaine)

On the other hand, men preferred an essentialised female identity of fantasy based on "feelings" while attributing men's groundedness to survival issues of making a living.

As men, it may not necessarily be because the wife goes, that's why he goes. He may have his own thinking. It's only that he may...sometimes men considers more things...not very rash like 'Let's go abroad!' and then goes. It's not like that. He may think a lot...consider some things... (Philip)

I think female comrades, as women, they pay more attention to feelings, her decision is more determined by feelings. I feel that her thinking comes mainly from the impulse of her feelings. She thinks, 'Abroad is good, everything is good, let's go quickly!' It's very impulsive. It's not related to you. [Embarrassed laugh seeing that I'm also female.] This is just my thinking. As a man, male comrades have more issues to consider. He has to make comparison, he has to go through a period of consideration. It's not as if from the beginning, he's lowered his head and is charging ahead regardless of everything. At first, he's only thinking. He has to make comparison, he has to consider before he can make a decision eventually. His enthusiasm may not be very great at first, unlike a woman. (Jianming)

So far, the respondents' own explanations for the gender distinction have revolved around the dichotomy of female fantasy/male rationality. Might there be more *social* reasons for this distinction? While a detailed understanding of gender relations within PRC society is

beyond the scope of this thesis, there are several observations that may aid a deeper interpretation. First, it seems that among my respondents, men had relatively more opportunities to go abroad as part of their work. With fewer such opportunities, women might see migration as one way to “go out and take a look”. This could explain why more women than men had emphasised this element when citing “personal development” as a motivation for migration.

Second, several women respondents mentioned female boredom. I suggest that this may be understood through the lens of gender relations. The majority of my women respondents were university-educated professionals in China, and as a male respondent, Zhiyang, expressed, **“have their own thinking.”** On a number of occasions during my household interviews, I found that the women were quite willing to correct their husbands when they disagreed on certain issues, challenging the stereotypical image of the “passive Chinese wife”. Since it is common in China that both husband and wife would work, Menglin even claimed, **“I think that there is greater gender equality in China than in Canada [laughs]. When Chairman Mao first liberalised China, he did indeed liberalise women first. I think it is even more liberal than in the West.”** Help from parents or parents-in-law further released them from the responsibilities of childcare and domestic chores.

In general, I believe that their boredom derived from the sentiment that they had already fulfilled personal and societal expectations of finding a job, and having a family. Now, they wished to have a change from the daily routine that characterised their lives, and encounter new experiences. The desire for a new lifestyle might also arise from dissatisfaction with present circumstances. For instance, a few women respondents mentioned that their

husbands were often out socialising at night either for business or recreation, and by comparison, they much preferred their husbands staying at home in Canada. A key element in the translation of female boredom into a household decision to migrate is that despite the common portrayal of Chinese families as “traditional” patriarchal structures, there is a greater fluidity in gender roles with regards to intra-family status and decision-making.

The third observation is that women are more concerned with the negative aspects of *guanxi*. My respondents reacted in the same way as Yang’s (1997: 52) finding that “women, more than men, objected to the aggressive tactics sometimes found in *guanxi* dealings, to the use and manipulation of people. Men tended to have an accepting attitude toward *guanxixue*’s⁷⁷ instrumentalism, regarding it as something one had to do in order to accomplish certain tasks.” This was reflected not only in the frequency with which *guanxi* was mentioned as a reason for migration but also the intensity of dislike that certain women respondents expressed towards it.

Within the social context outlined above, there could also be a *cultural* reinforcement of prevailing trends. For instance, it seems that there have been more female authors of autobiographical and semi-fictional novels on PRC who lived overseas, such as “**A Chinese Woman in Manhattan**”. In turn, there are more female respondents who have read it. (I will examine the reception towards these books in Chapter 5.) My interpretation is that the circulation of female discourses on migration both creates and normalizes the “female migrant” in the cultural imagination. In this way, the *possibility* of migration for women *per se* exists as a precursor of the woman’s own consideration of migration.

⁷⁷ The study of *guanxi*.

Despite highlighting a particular gendered perspective, I am also acutely aware that there are other narratives, which contradict those above. Now, I turn to the one third of my interviews where men “led” in the decision to migrate. One striking point is that 7 out of the 12 men had been abroad either for study or work-related purposes. For them, the experience of being abroad had been instrumental in their decision to migrate. This emphasis on experience fits into the earlier dichotomy of female fantasy/male rationality and helps to throw light on the gender distinction by revealing a male preference for experience, and their construction of female “fantasy” based on a lack of “experience”. Gerald, who had stayed in Vancouver for a year as a visiting scholar, told me:

I did think of it previously but it was mere thinking. The crux was to come over here to take a look first before making a decision.

Apart from Gerald, only one other academic Shinan had been to Canada before migration. Both emphasized that this was a unique situation; most PRC independent immigrants made the decision to migrate without first visiting Canada. For the other 5 respondents, the more important factor in initiating the idea of migration was the experience of being abroad in itself, rather than the destination. Shixiong recollects:

In 1996, my previous company sent me to study in Australia for two months. I saw that the abroad was indeed developing quite well. In various aspects, materially and otherwise, they were better than China by a lot. So from that time onwards, I thought of coming out to take a look.

Another distinctive feature of male-led decisions to migrate is the relative prioritisation of economic strategies of (cultural) capital accumulation. Haiwen was a sales manager in an American MNC in Beijing earning a very high salary when he decided to migrate, or as he put it, to “**change my identity,**” because he observed that those who held the highest positions in his company were either from Hong Kong or were foreigners. He felt this was

due firstly to the issue of nationality (“identity”) and secondly, fluency in English. There was also another strategic reason: his income had fallen from CAD100 000 in 2000 to CAD70 000 in 2001, reflecting the wider economic decline in his company’s home base, but he had been offered the possibility of another position in an affiliated company in Shanghai. In order to maintain cordial *guanxi* with his former company, he felt that the best strategy would be for him to move to Canada where he could first accumulate the cultural capital of a Canadian landed immigrant status and English language skills, and then plan his next step. However, his wife, a highly paid executive in an American bank, was as yet unwilling to give up her job. Thus Haiwen came over alone. His situation offers a hint of the intra-household dilemmas that may accompany the decision to migrate. Another woman respondent, Lanxin, who was reluctant to migrate, told me:

I have no choice. I have no choice because this is a family. My daughter says that she wants to live with her papa and mama [bitter laugh] so there is no choice. Even if I don’t want to come, I have to come.

He didn’t persuade! I can only say....this is...there is no choice [laughs awkwardly, followed by her husband]...how should I say this...For one thing, I have to give up another. There is no choice. Otherwise we have to be separated.

While I have emphasized female motivations in this section, a more important implication is that migration motivations are often gendered, whether “led” by women or men. Understanding this can help to uncover intra-household dynamics during the migration process as well as illuminate migrants’ differential experiences within the family *after* migration (Lawson, 1998; Silvey and Lawson, 1999).

Conclusion: The Agency of Imagination

Migration involves both an idea and a will. At the same time, the regulatory effects of the state, markets and cultural institutions that “shape people’s motivations, desires, and struggles and make them particular kinds of subjects in the world” should be recognised (Ong, 1999: 5-6). This reminder of the significance of context is not just to rehearse an earlier point that theory needs to be situated, but rather to allude to a more specific danger that Frank Pieke, a scholar of Chinese migration in Europe, has identified: the common propensity of geographers, demographers and anthropologists to problematize migration as a core analytical concept. He argues, in my opinion rightly, that migration is just one aspect of the total system⁷⁸ or configuration⁷⁹ (Pieke, 1998). A widening of context emphasizes the critical need to engage with the social, political, and economic realities that migrants face in the countries of origin and destination, as well as theorise the linkages between these realities and their migration experience.

Here, I suggest a different scale should also be analysed – that of the personal. Focusing on the *personal* emphasizes the selectivity of migrants and thus avoids the universalizing tendencies associated with living in an era that has been dubbed “the age of migration” (Castells, 1998). More importantly, it foregrounds the agency of migrants in acting upon their imagination of living an “other” life elsewhere. In my view, the imagination is not simply the grounds from where fantasies arise, but is itself both a reflection, and an additional realm to the actual world in which the migrant lives. As revealed in the last section, this imagination may be interpreted in gendered terms and drawn into a comparison

⁷⁸ A migration system, as geographers and demographers use it, describes aggregate connections through migration between one or more countries of origin with one or more countries of destination (Pieke, 1998).

with “experience” as a basis for understanding the world and making decisions. In essence though, the mutual workings of migration and imagination have been played out in the everyday lives of potential migrants, such that as Appadurai (1996: 7) asserts, the imagination “is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.” The next chapter considers Canada as the migrants’ imagined destination.

⁷⁹ A migration configuration, in an anthropological approach, is actor-centred: it describes a transregional or transnational community in which people are embedded and the established practices that inform and structure that community (ibid).

Chapter 5

The Place of Canada in Chinese Imaginaries

*If you love him,
Bring him to New York
For it is heaven.*

*If you hate him,
Bring him to New York
For it is hell.⁸⁰*

In 1988, the controversial television series *He Shang* (River Elegy) was broadcast in China.⁸¹ Written by media intellectuals, *He Shang* mounted a strong criticism of the entire Chinese tradition, especially Confucianism, and it called for a “great flood” to wash out “the dregs of the old civilization” (Zhang, 1996: 196). The message was that China had to change its ancient course and merge into the “blue ocean culture” (Ong, 1999: 41). One popular interpretation of this blue ocean culture was that it symbolized the West, especially Western industrialization, science, and democracy (Feld, 1991). However, Longxi Zhang (1996) warns that the positive representation of the West should not be misconstrued as mimicry of Orientalism. Rather - in light of an official discourse of Occidentalism equating the West with being evil and inimical – it should be recognised as an anti-official discourse.

Why revisit such an episode of cultural politics? Because it underlines the important point that theory has to be contextualised. By rejecting what in careless hands, might be recast as a discourse of Orientalism in reverse, Zhang is returning to the actual grounds on which meanings are negotiated – the local political and cultural context. In a similar spirit, this chapter examines how potential migrants in China imagined Canada by engaging the

⁸⁰ A couplet that appears at the start of each of the 21 episodes of the immensely popular PRC drama series “A Beijing Native in New York”. The voiceover was in English, with subtitles in Chinese.

concepts and themes that migrants themselves use in structuring their mental geographies. My inquiry is first directed at the circulation of cultural discourses that cultivates the imagination of a mobile Chinese overseas. This abstract view of abroad is then refined by my next question, "Why Canada?" Such a question brings attention to the important distinction between why migrants leave (the subject of my previous chapter) and their choice of a certain destination. Insofar as mental maps reflect our view of the world we live in, the migrants' perception of Canada's geographical positioning reveals their imaginary world order. In the last section, I turn to look at why Vancouver is chosen over other Canadian cities.

Cultural Construction of a Mobile Chinese Identity

In recent years, bookshops in Chinese cities have been selling a new genre of autobiographical and semi-fictional writing: accounts or stories by citizens who have lived in the United States or Japan of their experiences and fortunes (Yang, 1997). These themes have been subsequently taken up by theatre, film, and television productions. The book titles include *Near the Sea Breeze* [Figure 5.1], *Manhattan's China Lady*, *America: The Stories that Papa and Mama do not know*, *Telling you about the Real America*, *New York Awareness*, *The Bright Moon of Another Land*, *The Moon Back Home is Brighter* and *A Beijing Woman in Tokyo*. These books commonly adopt a contemplative tone when reflecting on past experiences.⁸² Some of my respondents especially highlighted *Near the*

⁸¹ It was subsequently banned and blamed for inciting prodemocracy movements in 1989 (Ong, 1999).

⁸² In personal communication, Diana Lary notes the sentimental style attached to such writing. In Chinese folklore and songs, the moon often reminds an overseas person of home since it is the same moon that shines in the homeland. The sea in turn connotes the separation of two lands, and thus the barrier lying between the migrant and his or her home.



Figure 5.1 Cover illustration of *Near the Sea Breeze* (Source: Yang, 1996).

Sea Breeze and *Manhattan's China Lady* for their popularity. While a number had read the books long before they had considered migration, a few stressed to me their efforts in looking for such books so that they could learn from their experiences abroad. Cheryl wanted to be mentally prepared for **"I did not know what I might face or the level to which I might drop"**. Although she could not find any books on immigration experiences in Canada, she read five that depicted the lives of overseas students in America and Australia.

By reading the books, I could roughly have an understanding and make mental preparations for how bad it might be...whether I might be able to withstand it and what I should be cautious about. I think this has been helpful to me. At least there is a limit, a gauge that I can accept. So at the time when I was reading, I could be more rational. For those figures that were very tragically portrayed in the novels, I would think about why they were like that. What are the reasons? What is the first reason? What is the second reason? *Aiyah*, if I am not in that situation, then I definitely won't be like that! I definitely won't be like that! [With an emphatic laugh] So little by little, I eliminated it. As for the non-fiction literature, they are more realistic. Then you will look at their circumstances, and *imagine in general what it is like for them. What the lives of the PRC Chinese are like outside.* (Cheryl, my emphasis)

Yang Lan, a famous female television host in China, wrote her autobiography *Near the Sea Breeze*, with a significant section devoted to her overseas studying experience at Columbia University in New York. After reading it, Adeline felt:

She was a public personality. I wanted to understand her journey in life. I like to analyse other people's thinking, to know how people consider their futures at different stages, and how they seize their fates. [Smiles] I like to analyse their thinking.

Taking a step further from analysing the thinking of the protagonist, Iris explains how she would put herself in the shoes of the female character in *Manhattan's China Lady*:

I felt that the world outside is indeed very exciting but you still have to pay a price – you have to fight for it. It gave me the feeling that when you are

outside, you have to work hard. You have to depend on yourself to walk the path that is suitable for you. After reading it, you don't think about how the character walked her path but how you would walk it yourself. It was like that.

SY: Yourself?

Yes, about myself. After reading the book, I would think about myself. About which direction I should take after going abroad that would be suitable for my profession and my background. How I could gain a foothold abroad. How I could anchor my roots. That was what I thought. I wasn't thinking of the character's...

From reading books of this genre, Junnie sometimes had **“the feeling that I know how Westerners will do certain things, and the kind of reactions they will have”**. She told me that she had brought the book *Near the Sea Breeze* along with her to Canada.

My husband didn't want me to bring it over because I have read it already and he didn't see much point in keeping it. However, I thought that if I am experiencing loss, I could look for it again in this book [laughs]. I can find the things that I have lost since the book is about success and optimism [laughs again]. (Junnie)

These responses indicate three issues. First, the substitution of American or other countries' experiences for Canada reveals the emphasis placed on “abroad” as a generic category.⁸³ Apart from migration to Canada being a more recent phenomenon, this is related to a general absence of Canadian literature, films or news in China. Second, there is an imagining of a mobile Chinese identity moving through foreign lands - a process in which the readers identify with characters who are Mainland Chinese experiencing life in an alien culture (Yang, 1997). This fits in with the wider curiosity in China about life abroad. It is pertinent to note here that for the majority of respondents who had read the books, interest in the characters' experiences and any possible identification with the characters did not

⁸³ None of my respondents had read any stories about Chinese experiences in Canada, except for Shufen who came across a book on Hong Kong immigration to Vancouver.

directly influence their motivation to migrate. Textual analysis alone might thus have overestimated the impact of such books. Instead, I suggest that the significance of these books lies in the establishment of a cultural context in which discourses on “going abroad” became part of a wider social norm.

A third issue is the greater popularity of the books among female respondents than male respondents. Not only had more female respondents read them, they were more likely to express a partial identification with the main characters - often female - compared to the male respondents. The gender of the protagonist was however not so much the point of contention as the perception voiced by a male respondent Minghui that **“the fundamental motive of all such autobiographical writings is to arouse your emotions”**. This reaction could be linked partly to the sentimental style that typifies the writing, as well as the earlier discussion on male rationality/female fantasy in the previous chapter. I now turn to another popular realm that has been central to the normalization of a mobile Chinese identity in the public imaginary – the mass media.

Portraying a Beijing Native in New York

People’s thinking only changed due to two television series in China – *A Beijing Native in New York* and *A Shanghainese in Tokyo*. Before I came out, I had already watched those series. They were very popular in China then. Ever since I watched those series, I felt that life outside is indeed very hard...At that time, those two series made people realise that ‘Oh, it wasn’t such an easy thing abroad.’ *Beijing* was filmed very well; it was very realistic...(Haojie)

The television drama series *A Beijing Native in New York* was the first to be shot entirely on location overseas and the first of a genre that attempted to reflect the fate of Mainland Chinese migrants in the West (Barmé, 1999). Based on the widely popular book of the same

title, it starred the two famous actors Wen Jiang and Lihua Zhao. As Haojie declared, the series was very well received in China when it first aired in 1993 and was repeated twice subsequently. In fact, nearly all my respondents watched it. Ruhao suggested that one reason for its popularity was that in the past, the films were **“divided into two extremes; one was propaganda for how corrupted and depraved the West was, the other adored the West blindly, everything about the West was good.”** In contrast, *Beijing* was **“somewhat more objective, it didn’t depict the West as being particularly good [or bad] i.e. very normal.”** According to my respondents, *A Shanghainese in Tokyo*, which followed upon the success of *Beijing*, was also popular but could not match *Beijing* in terms of the audience or interest generated. Not as many of my respondents had watched it either. Thus my analysis hereafter will focus on *Beijing*.

The plot centred on Wang Qiming, a cello player who went with his wife Guo Yan, a doctor, to New York City.⁸⁴ There, they started at the bottom of American society, he as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant, and she a seamstress in a garment factory owned by an American named David McCarthy. In the process of becoming a wealthy businessman, Wang went through a variety of trials, not least losing his wife to David McCarthy. Eventually he joined up with his employer, Ah Chun, a sharp businesswoman from Taiwan. I identify three themes that are central to the image of America as “abroad” that is constructed in the series⁸⁵. First, the striking urbanity of New York where at the beginning of each episode, the same trailer appears showing images of the city’s night-time urban landscape from different angles – its impressive skyscrapers, Brooklyn Bridge, endless

⁸⁴ I follow Yang’s (1997) succinct summary here.

⁸⁵ These observations were recorded when I watched the TV series myself. I rented the videos from a Taiwanese video store in Vancouver.

traffic, neon lights and a general air of sophistication that appealed to almost all my respondents. Demonstrating the influence of the series, Shulin revealed, **“The Canada we imagined was like the New York in *Beijing*, more prosperous, faster-paced and with a ‘thicker’ city ambience.”** In the first episode, the happy couple Wang and Guo were driven through the streets of New York with merry music in the background. Wang marked this introduction to New York by exclaiming, **“America, New York, I - Wang Qiming - have arrived!”** On another level, this also marked the arrival of the PRC media audience at a new stage, epitomising Yang’s (1997: 289) observation that “people in imaginary travel increasingly look outward and participate via mass media in what is going on with their fellow nationals in other parts of the world” leading to the “increasing cosmopolitanism of the homeland”. This cosmopolitanism is however selective since it relies on the particular images that have been shown, such that for instance, New York - in my respondents’ view - is synonymous with urban splendour and dynamism.

A second theme was the formidable challenge of transforming hard work into success. When Wang and Guo first saw the new home that Guo’s aunt had rented for them, they were overwhelmed with disbelief and despair since they did not expect a miserable basement⁸⁶ with graffiti on the walls and bereft of furniture. The aunt informed them coldly, **“With your economic situation, this should suit you.”** In Yang’s (1997: 306) research on the reception of the show, she noted one member of a workers’ film criticism group in Shanghai saying that the show “not only smashed the Chinese fantasy that one could pick up gold on the streets in America but also the fantasy that one could rely on one’s relatives abroad.”

⁸⁶ Basements are seldom used for accommodation in China.

Wang's pride was further wounded when the aunt gave him the address of a restaurant where he could work as a dishwasher.

Wang: **Washing dishes? To think I am from the white-collared stratum!**

Guo: **I have a feeling that there are many things here that are different from what we had imagined in the past.**

Guo's words were a premonition of their ensuing hardship. Eventually, Wang took up the dishwashing job for the sake of their daughter who was still in China. A particular eye-opener for them was the complete irrelevance of their past status and privileges to their lives now in America where hard work was the only key to success. An antique shop owner who used to be a top official in the Chinese Communist Party told Guo, **"This place America does not feed a person for nothing. No matter how great your background once was, no matter what you once used to do, no one will give you food for nothing."** Their difficulties were compounded by the beautiful dream they still tried to construct for their daughter.⁸⁷ When Guo wrote to her, she could not bear to tell the truth but instead lied that Wang had obtained a job in an outstanding orchestra in New York. In addition, rather than the emptiness she saw in reality, she wrote that that when looking out of the window, she could see Manhattan's skyscrapers and beautiful lights.

A third theme was the ruthless capitalism of America and the resulting conflict between Eastern and Western culture. On various occasions, Wang was reminded about the essence of American culture. Ah Chun, the Chinese who had learned "American" ways, voiced a key statement that was also part of the theme song, **"America is neither hell nor heaven, it**

⁸⁷ In another instance of the common discourse that "migration is for the next generation," Ah Chun and Wang shared the view that **"A common point among the first generation is that everything is for the children"**.

is a battleground". Later, when Wang showed signs of hesitation about declaring bankruptcy so that he could get away without paying his staff and other debts, Ah Chun admonished him, **"This is America, New York. Either you harm people and continue earning money or you don't harm anyone and wait for others to harm you! You shouldn't keep holding on to traditional Chinese values."** In another episode, the American McCarthy⁸⁸ further confirmed the contrast when he told Wang, **"No, that's not American practice. You can't rely on friends. You must rely on yourself."** American men in turn were essentialised when a female employee Xiumei described McCarthy as **"like other American men...still like a child"** - **"intelligent, passionate, wilful and ruthless"** while she and Guo gazed at a youthful picture of him in army attire.

Even as these caricatures of American society and people are being drawn, a direct appeal is made to the shared national identity of the PRC audience, reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's (1991) "imagined community". During a Christmas party, a karaoke session transforms an apparently "Western" celebration into a patriotic tribute with the characters joined in renditions of **"Beijing, you are a bright star in our hearts."** The lament that China is not understood by America reinforces this identity. Again, Ah Chun, who used to be married to an American, is the authority on the issue:

When you are really living with an American, you will discover that people from Eastern and Western cultures - two completely different cultures - can definitely never completely understand each other. To them, their knowledge of China is merely limited to its geographical position. As for understanding the Chinese, it is only from illegal immigrants spread around the world who are struggling for a living.

This was doubly ironic since the plot had been emphasising the *personal* goals of the characters and Wang's daughter was estranged from him in the end.

⁸⁸ The name is a possible allusion to the McCarthy era.

Despite the contrast with PRC society, there is nevertheless a suggestion of ambivalence about Western society, where competition for economic gain could mean a compromise of personal morality. This is shown through the changes embodied by the characters as they experience the triumphs and falls of their fate. In the end, identities are destabilized. Ah Chun's ex-husband told her: **"I feel that you are neither a Chinese woman nor an American woman."** Instead, she was **"something of both"**. Guo's aunt also said to Guo, **"I can't become an American, yet I have long forgotten what it is like to be a Chinese."** Guo looked contemplative as though she understood the implications for herself. The ultimate change is enacted in the last episode in a humorous yet darkly significant echo of the first episode. Wang's friend arrived in New York, and Wang, treating him the same way as Guo's aunt had, lent him \$500 and showed him the basement that he had rented for him. Wang then drove away swiftly in his car, leaving the friend helpless and shocked, to begin another story of a new migrant.

My textual analysis of *Beijing* is meant to portray one particular way in which the series could be interpreted. However, a reliance on textual criticism alone cannot cover the full range of the social effects of media products because "audiences selectively misread or read past the intentions of the producers" (Yang, 1997), and this is in turn due to the "structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences" (Hall, 1980: 131). Thus I move on to the important consideration of media reception (See Ang, 1990; Yang, 1994; 1997; Lee, 1999).

...At the Receiving End: A Story of Success

When asked for their thoughts about *Beijing*, most of my respondents felt that the moral of the story was that migrants had to work very hard at first but eventually their efforts would pay off, essentially representing a success story. Cecilia and Evelyn express a common sentiment:

There is nothing that falls from heaven. You have to work hard to succeed. So I think that it is already a happy story since he was able to attain success after hardship. Not being able to succeed after hardship, then that is a tragedy. So I think that this is still a positive story. It still has inspiration for the Chinese because although it is about hardship, as long as you persevere, you will succeed. (Cecilia)

You know, the ending of the series is that they made a fortune and did quite well. It produces a yearning in people after all [laughs] - that if you are willing to be hardworking and perseverant, there will be a good result. People still have this kind of thinking. (Evelyn)

I was initially surprised by these responses because although the protagonist Wang made a big fortune, he became bankrupt overnight from a failed business venture and was struggling to rebuild his garment business in the last episode⁸⁹. Jiansheng explained to me, **“When he lost it, it was man-made, not forced by the environment.”** The rationale then seemed to be that others might not make the same mistakes as Wang did. Moreover, as Evelyn observed with a laugh,

Although in the end, the person was bankrupt, he had made it big before. He nonetheless still had his glory once. Hence it gives people the feeling that if I am able to work hard abroad, I can still succeed.

The film is mainly trying to let people understand how tough it is abroad but the ending may instead make people want to go abroad even more - just struggle for a period.

⁸⁹ An instance of my situatedness as a researcher.

Evelyn's last comment raises the issue of audiences decoding a message that may be different from the encoding intended by the producers. Jiansheng detects a similar intention by the producers:

Not to imagine the outside as being all that good i.e. there are successes and failures. Within the successes, there are sacrifices entailed and you have to consider these sacrifices carefully.

A general consensus among my respondents was that compared to past representations of "abroad," *Beijing* provided a more balanced picture that neither depicted it as an evil entity in characteristic propaganda style nor as a place with streets paved with gold. While views were divided over whether the drama series had any influence on their own migration, I argue that it provided a cultural context in which discourses on migration were introduced into the privacy of the home through the act of watching television. Discussions on the development of the plot and the issues involved could be exchanged amongst family members, friends and acquaintances. This approach reconceptualises migration not just as a single event but instead as a process rooted within and informed by the biography of an individual (Robinson and Seagrott, 2002). Thus, even though *Beijing* might have been watched a few years ago, it nonetheless could have played a secondary role in shaping the perceptions of life abroad, perhaps at a taken for granted level, what Giddens describes as 'practical consciousness' (cited in Robinson and Seagrott, 2002: 7). Moreover, since nearly all my respondents watched *Beijing*, it provided a common platform for examining their perceptions at a particular point in time before migration.

Iris recounted how she had felt very deeply about the drama series when watching it. She and her husband would discuss it almost everyday while they were having dinner. They would "discuss quite a lot" about "the plot and the characters - whether their lifestyles

were right or not, whether their attitudes towards life were right or not.” A friend who used to visit her also often chatted about the series. During lunchtime in the workplace, her colleagues too would debate the series.⁹⁰ She noted that the popularity was underscored by the many articles published in the newspapers by film critics and the public, as well as a discussion on it in the famous television variety show program “Lucky 1997”. In spite of her keen interest in the film at that time, Iris emphasized to me that she could not **“feel their lives deeply enough”** then when watching from **“China’s view”**. Upon hindsight now, she thought the drama series gave new immigrants the feeling of being in the same situation as the characters.

Now that we have come abroad, we look at the same film from another angle. The feelings are completely different. We feel that we can really experience other people’s bitterness, their determination and struggle. Maybe from a different angle, you can understand why he or she will do that. You can look at it very thoroughly now that you have been abroad and looked at it from this angle. (Iris)

This emphasis on experience resulting in a pivotal change reflects Evelyn’s sentiments that **“Without personally experiencing it, without experiencing this kind of hardship, what they feel is not so deep...they will carry fantasies after all.”** My objective in this section is not to suggest that *Beijing per se* influences migration - many migrants adopt Ruhao’s view that it provided a window to look at life overseas but it did not feel relevant to them then since migration was not yet on their minds. Rather, I am highlighting the cultural embeddedness of perceptions about abroad and suggesting that the way in which information is interpreted is contingent upon certain sets of cultural values and attitudes. In the following sections, I will examine how images about Canada, which are culturally and socially embedded, impact migration decisions.

⁹⁰ Iris informed me that drama series were a common conversation topic, often started by saying, “Last night I

Why Canada?

The question “Why Canada?” brings attention to two issues. First, it places a doubt in the assumed logic of migrants moving from Place A to Place B. Could it have been Place C or D instead? Second, it assumes a clear and rational answer. Barsky (1995: 139) argues that “the choice of country is often motivated by perceptions and elucidated by complex discursive strategies, neither of which are easy to pin down or quantify.” This can be appreciated since perceptions themselves are formed at the intersections of imagination and reality, reliant on negotiated images and knowledges. Further hurdles are present in the translation between what the respondents think and feel, and what they say to the researcher; by the selectivity of memory in retrospection; and not least the analysis by the researcher herself. Despite these reservations, I argue that the question is an important one to ask, partly since it may reveal migrants’ expectations of Canada and facilitate our understanding of their settlement experiences.

In my inquiry here, I focus particularly on the role of images in migrants’ decision-making process while bearing in mind the point that images do not operate in isolation but are relevant within the wider context of the migrants’ reasons for leaving their country of origin (Robinson and Seagrott, 2002). This focus arises from the realization that Canada is not necessarily a distinct place to many of my respondents before migration. Instead it is often viewed as part of an “abstract abroad” with characteristics that may be projected from images of other places. For instance, to assure me that he was familiar with what being abroad meant, Xiaojiang told me about his work visits to Milton Keynes in the UK, about Hong Kong and about Macao. For Xianzong, it was a case of him wishing to venture “out

watched that TV program. Did you watch it?”

to the West somewhere.” In most cases, “the West” is an unspoken general destination.

Gerald notes:

China understands more about the West than the West does of China. [...] Even so, it is generally still very difficult for Mainlanders to detect the concrete differences between America, Canada and Europe. (Gerald)

My research reveals there was a remarkably close identification of Canada with America in the eyes of many migrants prior to migration.⁹¹ This was evident since the responses to my question “Why migrate to Canada?” would very frequently be along the lines of: **“Because it’s easier...compared to...”** (The most common reference would be America.) Sometimes, my respondents would add: **“It’s close to America.”** Their responses indicate there is an analytical distinction between why migrants leave and why they choose a certain destination (Mahler, 1995). Coming to Canada, in most cases, was a result of the opportunity provided by the “independent” immigrant category, with the relative ease of entry acting as an incentive. I was told on a number of occasions that it was impossible for them to migrate to America because its immigration policy was tailored towards family reunification. When one focus group participant said that she had wanted to go to America but it was easier to come to Canada, another participant whispered to me with a smile, **“The American dream”**.

The Imagining of ‘North America’: “Canada and America are One Family”

Aining admitted she had considered going to America. However, during a work visit there, she met several of her ex-classmates and realised that it was difficult to obtain *shenfen* (permanent residency status) in America. Thus she decided to **“take a step back”** and

⁹¹ Europe appears to be more distinct from Canada and America to respondents before migration.

come to Canada. This conceptualisation of Canada as a replacement for America appears to be quite common. Two respondents suggest:

Many people have an American dream. When that cannot be fulfilled, it becomes Canada instead...I believe most people substitute their impression of America for Canada. (Zhiyang)

Basically, people know that North America is very similar. Canadian lifestyles are very close to the Americans' and their cultural backgrounds are very similar. Therefore many people who aren't able to fulfil their American dream – their dreaming of America - [with a knowing smile] have come to Canada. (Haiwen)

Two issues lie at the heart of this replacement. First and foremost, the powerful attraction that America holds for PRC migrants. The idealization of America as a premier destination country is perhaps best encapsulated by the American Dream - a well-known vision, "one which is generally described in terms of possessions (house, car, boat money), lifestyle (leisure time, nuclear family, employment), political vision (freedom, liberty, democracy) and possible worlds (immigration, integration, mobility)" (Barsky, 1995: 127). Central to this American Dream for PRC migrants is America's position as the world's superpower. Thus common refrains among my respondents include **"Everyone knows that America is the world's number one country in economic development"** and **"America is the strongest country in the world"**. According to them, this perception is also shared more generally in China. Wanping, who had studied in America before migrating to Canada, explained the desirability of America as a destination:

There are many aspects. One is that America's productivity is efficient, its technology advanced and everyone is learning its management style since it gives the feeling of being very competitive. Another is its western frontier spirit. What is frightening about the US is that everyone can be a president; everyone has an American dream, right. This is very pivotal. This aspect has a lot of attraction.

In Chapter 4, the pursuit of personal development was established as one of the key reasons for “independent” immigrants to migrate. This fits well with America’s image of modernity, efficiency and technological advancement. For “independent” immigrants who are in the technical professions, the latter point is particularly appealing. Lena remarked:

In America - whether in Silicon Valley or other places - there is production, science and technology everywhere. This gives a feeling of youth and progressiveness.

Despite the favoured status of America in the minds of the migrants, migration to America is often not an available option. Instead, Canada is presented as an opportunity with its relatively more open immigration policy for skilled migration. This brings me to the second issue, which is the alignment of Canada with America in the migrants’ imagined geography. In their words: **“Canada and America are one family”; “Canada is walking together on the same path as America”** and **“Canada is part of North America, basically the same, not much difference”**. These views are very similar to anthropologist Li Minghuan’s observation that “before leaving for Europe, most migrants look to ‘Europe’ rather than to any specific European country as their destination” (Li, 1998: 188). One reason could be the distance - both in terms of geography and communication - between China and Canada such that a homogeneous image is constructed. Canada is seen to be “just like America” but significantly, the reverse possibility is not mentioned. Another reason is the hegemony of America in the global media. Shulin points out: **“A lot of people must have been cheated by America’s Hollywood, that North America is like that. I think a lot of women had been duped by this image.”** Laifu adds:

In China’s media, the reporting is mainly on US so the PRC have less understanding of Canada. When you watch films, they are US films. There are few on Canada. Indeed, Canada does not have a very dominant character in the world. It simply follows what US says; it is like a little brother.

Emerging from all these responses is the sense that there is a hierarchy of destination countries, with America at the top, and Canada following due to its perceived proximity to America. This is hinted in Junqiang's claim that **"Canada's special characteristic is that it likes to be called 'North America' not 'Canada' whereas US doesn't like to be called 'North America'. It likes to be called 'US'."** Shufen perceives America to have **"more vitality. It gives people the feeling of dynamism whereas Canada is laid-back and comfortable."** Moreover, **"there are more employment opportunities in America"**. For some respondents, their preference for America resulted in their original plan to immigrate first to Canada and then move on to America. Binya and her husband Xiaojiang told me:

Binya: **Of course think of Canada as North America. Definitely.**

Xiaojiang: **Yes**

Binya: **Yes. Otherwise, why did we not go to New Zealand or Australia? It's definitely because we think of North America as a whole.**

Xiaojiang: **In my profession, the highest level is in US. When we came to Canada - that was our initial thinking - we hoped to go on to Silicon Valley to develop. [...] Many people treat *Canada as a diving platform for US.***

Elaine echoed this sentiment, saying, **"Maybe after coming to Canada, it could also be very easy to go to America"**. Evelyn agreed:

At that time, I thought of Canada being nearer to America. It would be convenient if we were in Canada since America is the centre of world trade and finance - everyone wants to go towards it, to draw close to it. If we come to Canada, we would be free to go to America after we get the citizenship. It would be very convenient.

The mobility associated with a Canadian citizenship status was recognised by Xianzong who said with a meaningful laugh, **"Just Canada means possible. If you want to move again..."** A number of other respondents too had the same notion before migration. Once they came to Canada though, some changed their minds significantly. Xiaojiang told me with a self-

conscious laugh, **“Now... it seems... we are not thinking of this matter. After we came here, we did not think of this matter anymore”**. One pragmatic reason for this change in thinking is the downturn in the America’s economy recently, especially its information technology sector. Another more important reason is their experiences in Canada, which I will discuss in Chapter 7.

In the last few years, there has been a stream of PRC migrants who have applied for immigration to Canada from America. At first glance, this would appear to counter the pro-America trend among PRC migrants. Wanping counters this presumption:

When we were studying at X⁹² University, about 70% of the PRC students we knew had immigration papers from Canada. However, a lot of them don’t come. They have the immigration papers but they don’t come. Why? For them, if they feel that it is still ok there, they won’t come. If they feel that there is some problem they cannot resolve, then they will go to Canada immediately.

The ‘problem’ that Wanping mentions is the issue of *shenfen* (permanent residency). Should PRC migrants find jobs in America that would enable them to apply for a green card after working for 6 or 7 years on a work permit, Wanping suggests that they would not migrate to Canada since **“everyone knows that there are fewer opportunities in Canada. The employment situation is gloomier... Canada’s overall economic competitiveness is weaker than US”**. The application for a Canadian immigration status is thus seen as a form of insurance. Canada in turn is positioned as a destination that is secondary to America.

⁹² An American university that will remain unnamed to ensure Wanping’s anonymity.

Although the concept of “North America” is common among my respondents, an abstract distinction exists for some. This may transform into a desire for America as an ultimate destination, or as the next section suggests, the differentiation may favour Canada.

Differentiation between Canada and America

While some respondents had personally considered moving on to America eventually prior to their immigration to Canada, far more respondents told me that this applied to *others* and not themselves.

Many people seemed to have this kind of thinking but we didn't have it.
(Joyce)

Many people think of that. I have not considered it myself...because it is not particularly attractive. [...] In general, I think Canadians are more balanced. (Weihong)

When classmates talked about it, they would say that it is nearer to US, and there are more opportunities since Mainland Chinese still want to go to US but they are not able to go to US. That's why...they think by coming to Canada, maybe there is an opportunity. [Laughs] But we did not think this way. I would like to stay on in Canada, Canada feels safer than US.
(Jingwen)

Frequently, the preference for Canada is described in terms of the migrant's personality (see Barsky, 1995).

A lot of people have this thinking but it is not very strong for me. [...] Perhaps it depends on individual personality. I am not the kind who definitely wants to go and strike it out in US. I feel that Canada is quite suitable for me even though I know that Canada is very near to US and that when we are here, we can apply for visas. However I think it depends on the individual. Many people are like that but I do not really care that it is near to US. I think it is fine. The crux is whether you are suitable for the place. However good the place is, if you are unsuitable, it is useless, right. (Angela)

Reflecting some respondents' self-descriptions, Canada is often depicted as a “friendly” and “peaceful” country, as opposed to America's “aggression”. Sienna recalls, “**I don't have a**

specific image of Canada. I think I know more about America. To me, Americans are more progressive, or even aggressive. Canadians are mild and friendly. That's the general image in my mind before we came here...and um, nothing specific." Cheryl, who worked in a Canadian company when she was in China, had a stronger impression about Canadians through her personal interactions.

Maybe because I was more in contact with Canadians, I felt that Canadians were more down-to-earth and perceived Canada's environment to be safer and more balanced. America...how should I say this? Canadians themselves don't really like America. When the Canadian expatriates I was in contact with talked about America, they didn't really like America. From my understanding, America seems to be more modern and prosperous; the competition is stiffer, and the opportunities are greater. Americans are...they feel different from Canadians. Canadians are friendlier, kinder and more down-to-earth. (Cheryl)

Apart from a genuine appreciation of Canadians' friendly image, there are sometimes economic and political implications attached. The economic undertone is evident in Lena's comparison.

Since I came to Vancouver, one sense I have is that people here are not aggressive. They are more peaceful. They are easily contented. They are very contented here. They have a house, a car, and a stable job, and they are very satisfied. I feel that it is different from America, which is a picture of prosperity and competitiveness. It is not as competitive and challenging as America. I do not particularly like it here. Maybe it is because I am at this age. When I am older, I may not like competition anymore. At this age, I feel that if there is no challenge, it is meaningless.

Shixiong, who emphasizes his preference for realism, interprets the competitiveness that Lena yearns for differently.

At least I didn't think of it. Although I am in computer science, I don't think my educational qualifications are very high. If I were to go there, the competition might be even stiffer. Outstanding talents from all over the world are concentrated in the US. My educational qualifications are not very high, basically an undergraduate degree. If I were to go over there, the stress I face could be greater. I didn't think of Canada as a platform for US. (Shixiong)

Some respondents also detected a benign politics in Canada's peaceful image. According to Shuwen, her impression of Canada was that **"it is more peaceful. It is not aggressive on the international stage - the feeling of a quiet country village"** [with a chuckle]. Selena too felt, **"It's different even though it is close to America. In terms of politics, if I were to choose, I wouldn't really want to go to America, as it is more extreme. It has a stronger sense of superiority towards other countries whereas Canada does not."** A respondent who had been uncomfortable with the political climate in China was similarly concerned about America.

I feel that Canada is friendlier towards China. It is unlike US. I feel that US is too aggressive. It acts too powerfully towards some countries. On the whole, Canada's image is friendlier. It is a democratic country. It is basically similar to US but US is too imperialistic. My impression of Canada is quite good. (Qihua)

Ruhao discerned that Canada **"doesn't have the kind of bullying attitude that US has. This way, it is also difficult to be embroiled into conflict."** Thus he and his wife felt that Canada **"is more suitable as a country for settlement."** These concerns not only bring to light the migrants' wish for a safe country where they would be able to live peacefully but also suggest that the effect of Chinese politics and propaganda regarding America may have to be taken into account. Cheryl reminded me, **"When I was young, whenever America was mentioned, it was called 'imperialist'.** Her father, Weimin, who was visiting Cheryl in Canada with his wife, recounted America's tumultuous historical relationship with China.

There was the Korean War where China and America had great clashes. And in the Vietnam War, China and America also had troubles. Moreover, there have been some clashes these few years. Their societal systems are different and there are also many important issues. Thus the relationship is sometimes very tense. Canada does not have this problem so to us common folks there is less weight associated with Canada. In my letters and phone calls, there is no great sensitivity. If it is with America, it is difficult when the relationship is tense. Before the Opening Up and Reform, it was not

possible to have contact with America. Even if you have relatives and friends, you could not contact them.

Cheryl is Weimin's only daughter. Although his wife originally wanted to keep Cheryl by their side in China, Weimin was more supportive of his daughter's decision to immigrate to Canada.⁹³ During the interview, I sensed that Canada's cordial relationship with China was an important factor in his consideration for that meant Cheryl would still be able to keep in close touch with her parents, whether in terms of visits or phone calls. This was particularly close to Weimin's heart because of his own father's experience with China's political sensitivity towards America.

In the late 70s or early 80s, when China had started to open up, my father's old friend sent him a letter from America, from Seattle to Beijing. He was very nervous. He showed everyone that it was a personal letter, that it had no political motives, that it was only a letter between old friends for communication. Some didn't even dare to write back to their friends even if they had no political motives, merely communication between friends. But it was rather sensitive at that time – "enemy country", "American imperialism".

Other distinctions between Canada and America included the greater social stability of Canada. Jianming commented half in jest that Canada's welfare system was **"a little like our communist society. A little like it."** Therefore it would be easier for him to adapt. More importantly, the society was more stable compared to America, which **"due to its economic motivations, I guess there are more problems. And it is in an unsafe and unstable situation"**⁹⁴. Juntao felt there was less racism and better human rights in Canada. Overall, the pre-migration image of Canada was often cast in terms of it being a "very moderate" and "balanced" country.

⁹³ Jennifer's mum is still trying to persuade her to return to China where she feels there are better opportunities for her development. At the same time, Jennifer told me, with some amusement, that her parents also hoped to immigrate to Canada, "to grow old here as the environment is better".

Canada/Australia/New Zealand: How Perceptions Shape Choice

Xianzong used to walk past the Beijing embassy everyday because he lived near it. Once, on his way home from work – while he was preparing the documents for his immigration application to Canada - he stopped by and chatted to the people in a queue at the embassy. He learnt that there were many people who had applied to several countries (mainly Australia, New Zealand and Canada) for immigration and were comparing from which country they could obtain immigration status first. During my research, I did not come across any immigrants who had applied for immigration to different countries; all my respondents applied only to Canada and were accepted. Xianzong's anecdote however brings up the larger issue of why immigrants chose Canada over other immigrant-receiving countries such as Australia or New Zealand, which also had immigrant programs for skilled workers. Despite the differentiation between Canada and America discussed earlier, on the whole, discussion about destination choices was frequently framed in terms of the ease of entry. Canada, Australia and New Zealand were generally in the same tier based on their relative ease of entry compared to America.

Some respondents detected chronological waves of immigration associated with particular countries. One order was offered by Fusheng as **“Australia at the end of the '80s, New Zealand in the early '90s and Canada at the end of the '90s, around '97, and '98.”** These waves were overlapping and were attributed by my respondents to the tightening up of immigration requirements in the respective countries. It is important here to acknowledge that by enlarging the scale of enquiry to view *chuguori* as an emigration trend from China that involves a number of countries, the conceptualisation avoids the traditional linear

⁹⁴ The perception of America as an “unsafe” place may be partly attributed to the post-Sept 11 psyche.

approach in immigration studies. Fusheng recounted how the idea of immigration first occurred to him when a friend told him about his immigration to New Zealand.

I asked, "How did you do it?" He said the immigration was calculated by points but now it was very difficult to go to New Zealand. It was easy when he did it. I said, "Why are you like that? Not telling me at that time? Telling me only after you have done it!" He said, "Now it may be more difficult to go to New Zealand but you can go to Australia". Later I found out that it might be easier to go to Canada. (Fusheng)

One respondent in particular declared that he had conscientiously compared the three countries' immigration requirements.

From my research, I found that the three biggest immigration countries are Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In 1999, the annual immigration to Canada was 200 000 to 220 000, Australia about 50 – 80 000, New Zealand about 30 000 – 50 000. We are skilled immigrants. The requirements for skilled immigration are loosest for Canada. Theoretically so but the process is the longest. I knew that it was 15 to 20 months. When I did it, it was 25 months. The immigration requirements were looser in Canada; it was stricter for Australia and New Zealand. We might not have fulfilled the conditions. (Zhehui)

While most of my respondents decided on the choice of destination themselves, an immigration consultant played a greater role in Cecilia's case. Living in Shenzhen at that time, she had originally planned to apply to Australia for its warmer climate, which she perceived as being more suitable for "southerners" like herself. However,

Perhaps for business purposes, my immigration consultant said, "If you want to go to Australia, it is very troublesome. You have to write tens of pages for your application. When I heard that - and it is all in English you know - I fainted! Ah, so complicated? He said, "Why don't you apply to Canada instead because you fulfil the requirements?" Upon thinking, I felt if that's true then we might as well go to Canada. We did deliberate over this but we considered that we needed to settle the case. Moreover, he said that the rejection rate is quite high in Australia; it is not very easy to go to Australia so we had no choice. We'll go where the door is more widely open [laughs] so we chose Canada.

By contrast, immigration was synonymous with Canada as a destination for Cheryl because when she **“knew about the matter of immigration, it was to Canada so it was not a case of me being able to choose amongst many places. At that time, the only choice was immigration to Canada.”** This appeared to apply to a considerable number of my respondents, which may be partly due to the promotion efforts of the immigration companies. In some cases, respondents had thought of immigration earlier. For instance, Jingwen had wanted to migrate to New Zealand a few years ago but her children were too young and she later found out from a friend that she could migrate to Canada. Linda recalled that immigration to Australia was easy before 1996 **“but we didn’t really think of going abroad at that time... Maybe the impetus for me was that my friend was retrenched.”**

Where the possibilities of immigration were assumed to be similar, proximity to America emerged as a key reason for choosing Canada, as voiced by Huiling, **“Being in Canada is being closer to America; it is not so confined, unlike Australia, on another continent. That feels more confined.”** Another draw was Canada’s multicultural image. The contrast was often drawn between Canada and Australia in this respect. Concerns were expressed about racial discrimination in Australia, to the extent that it caused Iris to change her destination.

We were preparing to apply to Australia for immigration under the “skilled” category. It happened that there was news of discrimination against Chinese in Australia then - an incident of discrimination against the Chinese was reported in the news. We then decided to immigrate to Canada because there was no discrimination against the Chinese.

Those who migrated to Canada from elsewhere particularly noted the importance of living in a country that is more receptive towards immigrants.

I feel that the most important thing about being overseas is that the country should be balanced. If I am living in a more conservative or traditional country, I will feel very uncomfortable but here, there are a lot of new immigrants around. I feel relatively good. When I was in Japan and UK – two more conservative countries with fewer immigrants - even if I was to really stay on there, there may have been too many restraints. (Biying)

There was also frequent mention of Canada being one of the developed Group of Seven (G7) countries. As such, Jiansheng felt that Canada's **"strength is greater and its industry relatively more developed than Australia and New Zealand."** A few respondents strongly associated Australia and New Zealand with being "agricultural countries". Shixiong commented that New Zealand was **"too small. There is less industry there. The employment may be lower. Canada is bigger and it has rich resources so we thought there were more opportunities."** [laughs]

Overall, since my respondents eventually chose Canada, it is unsurprising that they professed to know more about Canada than either Australia or New Zealand. At the same time, most admitted that they had little concrete knowledge about Canada itself.

Images of Canada and Canadians

When asked about specific images of Canada, respondents drew upon a strikingly similar set of images that essentially revolved around its status as a member of the G7 industrial nations, natural beauty, excellent living environment, and good welfare and educational systems. Many respondents linked this common rhetoric to the immigration companies' publicity. One focus group participant, Xianzong, illustrated this vividly and was greeted with enthusiastic agreement from the other participants.

I think there is a slogan, like a key button in the agencies that they provide. Say 'Canada is the best place'. [Monica and Michelle laughed and said: 'Yes'] It's

like 'continued for five or seven years voted by the United Nations as the most appropriate place for living'. [Sharon: Yah] ... It becomes a button. So although I have a vague idea of Canada is a northern country, it snows, it snows, whatever, but it is the best country, voted by the United Nations. That is the authority, gives you the confidence. I have no problem - that is the best place.

As part of their publicity efforts, immigration companies commonly distributed information brochures on Canada. Some immigration companies also showed their clients videos on Canada. Shufen, who had watched one such video that was produced by an immigration company, felt it was essentially depicting the **"people and natural scenery"**. The companies also recruited earlier immigrants to return to China to talk about their experiences at immigration seminars. An extract from the website of Can-Achieve Consultants Ltd exemplifies the popular promotional rhetoric (Can-Achieve, 2002).

Canada enjoys full membership in the Group of Seven industrial nations and has one of the world's largest and most advanced economies. A Canadian passport, a privilege available to all citizens, allows one to travel freely without an entry visa to over one hundred countries including the United States and many European countries. Canada has been ranked first in the world for 6 straight years in the United Nations annual report based on a consolidated living standard index that measures a country's quality of education, income level and health care system.

Canada boasts one of the world's best education systems with a large portion of public expenditures devoted to education spending and schools. The country offers first class primary and secondary education, free to all residents, as well as some of the world's best universities and colleges, which are made affordable to all classes of people as a matter of government policy. Canada's social security system is second to none: its health care system is fully funded by the government. As well, Canada offers generous public pensions, household benefits, unemployment insurance, disability subsidies, and welfare payments.

A closer analysis of this text would reveal that it has been tailored to the PRC audience. The reference to a Canadian passport being "a privilege available to all citizens" in particular, contrasts sharply with Chinese citizens' restricted mobility. Another characteristic is the frequent allusion to Canada being "one of the world's best," appealing to migrants' hopes

for a better environment to lead their lives. Since most of my respondents had not been to Canada before migration, these introductions by immigration companies formed one of the main sources of their impressions of Canada before migration. (I will discuss their reception of this information in greater detail in Chapter 6.) Apart from highlighting the benefits that Canada could offer immigrants, immigration companies also stress that immigrants are very welcome in Canada, because they “tend to fulfil a number of important functions in Canadian society as a whole. For example, they help to combat the existing problem of under-population, a problem augmented by two factors: an aging population combined with low birth rates” (Canvisa, 2002). Some respondents brought up this point when asked about their choice of Canada. It seemed important for them to be able to contribute to the society as they felt that immigration was a two-way exchange. Canvisa proclaimed this in no uncertain terms on its website, “Immigration, as you see, is good both for you and for Canada, so if you are in any doubt as to where to settle down, think Canada!”

My attention was further drawn to the migrants’ perception that “Canada needs us” when similar jokes cropped up during my interviews:

Canada is considered one of the 7 big industrialised countries. It has wide land and scarce population. You know, China has the serious problem of there being too many people. Thus I felt that it would be more suitable if more people went to Canada since it has so much land and yet so few people! [laughs] (Shinan)

The land is wide and its resources plentiful; it desperately needs us to develop it! [laughs] (Michael)

Aside from these contemporary images, a number of interviewees suggested that Canada might have a special place in the minds of the Chinese, where memory has already differentiated geography. Here, they are referring to Dr. Norman Bethune (1890-1939)

(Figure 5.2), also known as Bai Qiu-en, a Canadian doctor who cured many patients in China during the Second World War, and lost his life in the process. In the preface to his popular biography, *The Scalpel, the Sword: The Story of Dr. Norman Bethune*, Soong Ching-Ling (Madame Sun Yat-Sun) wrote, "I am very happy to introduce the life of Dr. Norman Bethune to greater numbers of people than have hitherto been able to acquaint themselves with the life of this *hero of our time*, who symbolizes so nobly the common stake of all people in the fight for freedom." (Soong, 1952: xi-xii, italics mine). Even though the biography subtly acknowledges Bethune's flaws in his private life, on the whole it offers a touching portrayal of Bethune as a hero who spent the last two years of his life as a front-line doctor to save the lives of Chinese soldiers in their fight against Japanese invasion, sometimes operating for forty hours straight without sleep. Eventually, he died of septicemia, contracted when he cut himself while operating under extreme circumstances. His remains lie in the Mausoleum of Martyrs, in the city of Shijiazhuang, southeast of Beijing, where there is a Bethune International Peace Hospital and Bethune Medical School.

Bethune once had a meeting with the leader of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong (Figure 5.3). Upon his death, Mao immortalized him in an essay, entitled *In Memory of Norman Bethune*. The essay included the lines "What kind of spirit is this that makes a foreigner selflessly adopt the cause of the Chinese people's liberation as his own? It is the spirit of internationalism, the spirit of communism, from which every Chinese Communist must learn" (Mao, 1939). In the early days of the Cultural Revolution, the essay was part of the



Figure 5.2 Bethune the doctor (Source: Landsberger, 2002).



Figure 5.3 Bethune meeting Chairman Mao (Source: Landsberger, 2002).

narrow selection of reading materials that were considered to be ideologically correct: the courses of primary school students, for instance, centred on them (Landsberger, 2002). The recent immigrants belong to the generation who read (and memorized) the essay, and speak of Dr. Bethune respectfully.

Cheryl told me:

From the time I was studying, there was this article on Dr. Bethune written by Mao Zedong. He wrote that we should learn from Comrade Bai. Every Mainland Chinese has to memorise, to read it, because he espouses internationalism... Those in our generation must have read about him, and can all roughly quote a few sentences from it. That is, he was a Canadian, he came to China despite the great distance, helped with its liberation, sacrificed himself, etc. Basically he was very good. So from young, I had the idea that Bai Qiu-en is a Canadian. Maybe many Canadians do not even know about Bai Qiu-en, but every Chinese knows about him...Maybe Chinese, because of this person Bai Qiu-en, will think of Canada as being very friendly.

This exemplifies an intriguing case of cultural politics - a war hero whom some Canadians may not even know, is now representing them through an ideological text written by the former chairman of the Communist Party in China. Cheryl further discloses that her grandparents were initially very worried that she was going abroad. However, when she told them that she was going to **"Canada, Bethune's place,"** they were immediately more relieved. Peixian attested to this wide admiration of Bethune:

Bai Qiu-en had quite a strong sense of justice so it was through Bai Qiu-en that I had a very good impression of Canada...that it was very friendly.

With his bravery and self-sacrificing spirit, Bethune left a legacy that still caused some respondents to make an association between Canadians and him, echoing Soong's (1959: xii) words, "The new China will never forget Dr. Bethune. He was one of those who helped

us become free. His work and memory will remain with us forever.”⁹⁵ It was perhaps no coincidence then that Xianzong said, “I think for most of our generation the most famous Canadian is Norman Bethune.” Another well-known Canadian in China, whom Xianzong humorously referred to as the “second most famous Canadian,” is Dashan Xu (his Chinese name) who is respected for his excellent Mandarin. He performs the cross-talk⁹⁶ in Beijing and appears on the annual Chinese New Year Celebration program. Some respondents had also watched him in a series of English educational programs that were geared towards learning English in everyday situations such as how to arrange an appointment with a doctor. Sometimes after the language teaching was over, there would be a section introducing the cultural and natural environment of Canada. According to Elaine, one episode was filmed in Richmond. Judging from the affectionate tones with which respondents referred to Dashan, he was also a Canadian favoured by the Chinese.

It is important to consider the role of images about Canada and Canadians in context. Migrants are not passive recipients of the images and knowledges that they receive (Robinson and Seagrott, 2002). Moreover, they may be aware that reality could be different. Elaine who felt that Dashan’s shows were mainly for tourist purposes and **“knew that the real society wouldn’t be like that”** voiced precisely this point.

⁹⁵ In a new bridging of relationships, China and Canada co-produced the movie *Bethune: The Making of A Hero* with Donald Sutherland (as Bethune) and Helen Mirren (as his wife) in 1990. The movie, however, turned out to be a bust at the Canadian box office. Confirming the Canadian apathy towards Bethune, Ying Chen (2002: 168-169), a writer who was born in Shanghai and emigrated to Montreal in 1989, commented: “Canada is Bethune’s country. [...] You would be surprised to know that he’s almost unknown here. A modest statue in downtown Montreal and a film about him, that’s all. [...] On the other side of the ocean, a quarter of the human population knows him; in his native country, he has disappeared.”

⁹⁶ Cross-talk is a stage performance that involves two persons exchanging witticisms.

Why Vancouver?

When I first filled in the form, I filled in ‘Ontario’... I didn’t know which province to choose. I didn’t even know how to fit the map of Canada together as a puzzle or know the cities. I thought I would put the largest city that might be about the same size as Shanghai – Toronto so I wrote ‘Ontario’.⁹⁷ (Minglu)

Minglu’s experience highlights the difficulty that many immigrants face in differentiating the geography of Canada prior to migration, albeit to varying degrees. The unfamiliarity means that decisions regarding their initial destination are often reliant on secondary information sourced from earlier migrants, immigration companies, the Internet or other sources. As established in Chapter 3, the three main immigration destinations for PRC immigrants have been Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. Lena estimated that for skilled immigrants, **“Of 10 people, maybe 5 or 6 will go to Toronto and 2 will come to Vancouver.”** She herself had experienced the relative diversity of destinations. On the plane to Canada, there were **“three of us from Company Y⁹⁸, all to different places. One to Montreal, one to Toronto and me to Vancouver.”** Binya in turn believed **“there are many [skilled immigrants] who go to Toronto and few who come to Vancouver.** One of the most recent arrivals, Junnie⁹⁹, perceived a trend of migration where **“At first, everyone went to Toronto. After it was crowded, they are now all going to Montreal.”** She put it down to:

Mainland Chinese have a bad habit of thinking “since everyone has gone there, I will go there too”. Many people who have gone to Montreal say that the cost of living is lower and there are greater subsidies for going to school. Many Chinese want to go and study. The only bad thing is that they have to know how to speak French but they don’t care. Sometimes, it is a rash kind of courage. They say that they don’t care, “since the cost of living is low, I will go there first.”

⁹⁷ He later chose Vancouver when his friend offered to let him stay at his house for the initial period.

⁹⁸ Company to remain anonymous.

⁹⁹ She landed in November 2002.

She came to Vancouver because she wanted to distance herself from Chinese with **“fevered brains”** i.e. **“people who came here blinded”**. From 2001, she kept seeing news about Montreal on the Internet whereas before that, the information was **“all about Toronto”**. She felt one of the constraints of the Internet was that **“You have to passively look at other people’s subjective views.”** For the majority of my respondents who had arrived before Junnie, comparisons were made between Toronto and Vancouver.

We heard that Toronto is very cold. We thought we might not be used to it. And we thought it shouldn’t vary too much between different cities to find jobs. In the same country, there shouldn’t be too great a difference. Moreover, we had friends in Vancouver so we came. (Eileen)

There are three issues in Eileen’s response that are frequently mentioned by immigrants: social networks, climate, and the assumption of similar job opportunities in different cities.

I have a friend who immigrated to Vancouver. [...] I also have an American friend [originally from PRC] who said, “If you were to go to Toronto, I have no friends there but I have friends in Vancouver who can help you. If you want, you can first go to Vancouver, then Toronto later.” (Alice)

Like many of my respondents, Alice’s most important reason for choosing Vancouver was the presence of friends or relatives, or at least a friend’s friend. She explained that it was important to have friends around, as they could be a source of help. Huiling felt the same way:

I have a friend in Seattle. When she returned to China to visit, she suggested to me that if I wanted to immigrate, I should choose Vancouver [...]. When it comes to choosing, it often has something to do with friends. Often it’s because there are friends here. My Seattle friend told me that it is convenient for us to meet. She did in fact drive here to see me. I also went over to see her. It is easier to contact this way. I think the Chinese place more emphasis on having a familiar person, a friend around wherever they go. It feels more comfortable this way.

The presence of family or friends in Vancouver played a role in determining why a third of the interviewees chose Vancouver over other Canadian cities. One interviewee, Mingliang, who helped ten friends to settle in Canada embodies the importance of social networks. Each time, he would find an apartment for them before they arrived and fetch them from the airport. These apartments would always be in Richmond, where he lives, not just because it was a place that he was more familiar with but also it would be more convenient for his friends if they needed his help. For Xinlong and his wife Shufen, the absence of social networks meant that **“going anywhere was the same”**. Thus their goal was to find a place with a better environment. Vancouver’s climate was mentioned in an overwhelming number of cases. According to John,

I have thought of Toronto but she [his wife] has never even considered it. Relatively speaking, maybe I am more anxious about the employment. I thought there might be more employment opportunities in Toronto so I suggested that we go to Toronto. However, she strongly opposed the idea, saying ‘No, I’m afraid of the cold,’ so in the end we came to Vancouver.

Zhehui too had a similar experience. An agronomist by profession, Orina had considered going to Alberta as it was more suitable for her field. However, she had a very good friend in Vancouver who told her, **“Alberta is very cold, it is in a freezing state half the year. For a new person going to a new place, you don’t know whether you can find a job so go to Vancouver where the climate is better.”** Vancouver thus became the preferred destination for many respondents who sought a climate similar to that experienced in their home region, to the extent that there appeared to be a relative prioritisation of climate over job opportunities.¹⁰⁰ However, Ruhao and his wife, Eileen, explained:

There was information about more job opportunities being available in Toronto. But at that time, we also heard some news that because of this

¹⁰⁰ Three marine engineers were exceptions because they specifically picked Vancouver for its position as a port city. The majority who chose Toronto would presumably not share this emphasis on a warmer climate.

kind of information, almost 80% of new immigrants went to Toronto. We thought '*Aiyah*, if there are so many people going there, it may last for two or three years. After that, the job opportunities will be less. (Ruhao)

And he said 'Hmm, if I can find a job, I would be able to find a job anywhere. If I can't find a job, no matter how good a city I go to, I wouldn't be able to find one'. So we came based on this kind of courage. [smiles] (Eileen)

It primarily depends upon a person's diligence. (Ruhao)

On the whole, Ruhao's attitude regarding job opportunities being generally similar and his emphasis on personal rather than environmental attributes resonated with many respondents. Cheryl knew that **"there were more employment opportunities in Toronto than Vancouver but I felt that I wanted to give it a try first in Vancouver. If it is really too difficult then I will think of ways to go elsewhere but I wanted to give it a try here first. My first choice was still here."** Other than hearing from her Canadian colleagues in China that Vancouver is the **"most beautiful city in Canada, and the climate is good,"** an important reason was Vancouver's relative proximity to China. Toronto would **"take another five hours from Vancouver, so I naturally felt that this was closer. Anytime I felt like returning, I could go back in 10 hours, without having to change flights."** This last concern indicated the transnational nature of their migration, and at least for some, meant that there was no intention presently for a permanent rupture from the PRC. The relative proximity also had an unexpected effect on Jianming.

I had originally wanted to go to Toronto because I was in the technical field. There is a greater concentration of industry there. I had wanted to go there originally. But after staying here for a week to rest while transferring flights¹⁰¹, I felt that the climate and environment were very good so we thought we might as well stay here, and not go over to Toronto. [laughs]

¹⁰¹ There are no direct flights from China to Toronto so flights commonly stop over in Vancouver.

When asked whether the large Chinese population in Vancouver had been a factor in their choice of destination, there was a consensus that this had not mattered at all. In fact, prior to migration, many had preferred being in a place where there would be few Chinese so that they could interact more with the 'locals'. However, once they were here, they found that language and other cultural barriers meant that their social circles were still largely Chinese. Jiansheng expounded:

Let me tell you. After coming out, those with culture do not wish to be together with other Chinese. Why? Because by staying together, you will have fewer opportunities. There won't be any improvement for your English. Most people have no choice when they come here because you are not able to mix into the society immediately. It is like that. Initially, they are not willing to be together with other Chinese because they feel that since they have come abroad, they don't have to be with other Chinese. They all have this thinking...But when you come here and see the reality, it is not possible.

This finding has significant implications for multiculturalism, not least the idea that given a choice, recent PRC immigrants upon arrival would have preferred to join the "mainstream" although not, perhaps, in the sense of assimilation. Jingyuan saw three different possibilities for immigrants in Vancouver: first, the "mainstream" (*zhuliu*), second, "tributary stream" (*bianliu*) and third, "not in stream" (*buruliu*). The "mainstream" was that of the Anglo-Canadians; the "tributary stream" that of the rich Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants who have "made it"; and "not in stream" was simply for those who do not yet have the income and status to join even the "tributary stream". His analysis left little doubt which category he thought he and many of the recent PRC immigrants belonged to. The picture is however more complicated. Studies in social segregation recognise that there are forced and voluntary elements to it. Instead of tying the enduring strength of co-ethnic friendships solely to host society factors, there should also be consideration of the powerful social and

personal dilemmas that immigrants face. Xianzong, a confident man, shared his thoughts in a quiet tone:

At first, I want to stay away from the Chinese community when I first came here. Because I'm coming here. This is Canada, it's not China. Like the church, the Chinese church always invite you to visit them but I kind of found out... thought that stay away, be more in the mainstream society but as time passed by, I found that still the Chinese, our own community, still the most comfortable. You can like participate in like many white activities but you don't really feel as though...

Another prominent difference between what the immigrants had imagined prior to migration and the reality they experienced was the expectation of Canada to be an urban landscape. A number mentioned that the television series *A Beijing Native in New York* influenced them to think that Vancouver would be just like New York, with its ultra urbanity, **“all skyscrapers and massive buildings”**. Upon landing here, they found that Vancouver was like the “countryside”.¹⁰² Liming was hardly able to contain his disappointment.

I always thought that Vancouver, Canada, should be an international metropolis. As I had been to Japan and America on work visits, I thought Canada shouldn't be too bad. It should be ok. Actually...when I came [ironic laugh]...Vancouver is not like a big city! People all say that it is a huge modern countryside! I did not say this. Many immigrants say this, that it is a huge modern countryside. If Vancouver were to be ranked in the world, it wouldn't be too bad. But look at it; in what way does it look like a big city? Look at Tokyo or New York – they have the look of a big city. Don't talk about other places. China's Beijing has the look of a city, the scale of a city. Vancouver doesn't have it!

Pre-migration impressions of Vancouver are hence not always borne out in reality. The crux lies in the way immigrants manage the situation, which will be addressed in Chapter 7.

¹⁰² This comparison of Vancouver to the “countryside” takes on an additional significance when we consider the point that all the respondents had lived in cities before their migration. Boyang's remark that **“The city people discriminate against the country folks”** hints at a mental spatial hierarchy that prioritises urban areas over rural ones.

Conclusion: The Significance of Place

The notion of place has a venerated history in geography. Employed as one of the key concepts in humanistic geography during the 1970s (eg. Tuan, 1977), it continues to be one of the defining tenets of the discipline of geography, albeit treated in different ways (eg. Massey and Allen, 1984; Johnston, 1991). In this chapter, I used the term “place” to argue for a new theoretical space in migration studies – that of envisioning the place where migrants migrate to as a means of understanding migration dynamics. Silvey and Lawson (1999: 123) have suggested, “Interpreting the voices of migrants as theoretically meaningful allows researchers to open up ‘development’ and critique categorisations of place as undeveloped, backward, and traditional.” Inherent in this statement is a criticism of classical migration studies in geography that conceived of origins and destinations as unproblematic stages in a continuum of development (eg. Lowry, 1966; Harris and Todaro, 1970). My analysis challenges this linear view. By foregrounding the respondents’ perceptions, I sought to explicate the three different scales at which respondents engage Canada as a place: as an abstract “abroad,” the national and the regional.

What emerges from my examination is not only the point that Canada has “multiple identities”, but more importantly, the sense that place is deeply enmeshed in “networks of social relations and understandings” which link Canada to places beyond, temporally and geographically (Massey, 1989: 65-66). Places are thus drawn into processes in which migrants continually draw upon their faculties of imagination, intuition, memory, and reason to constitute their choice of destination. A particularly significant finding is the prioritisation of different factors when choosing the destination at different scales. The most apparent instance is the greater emphasis on the presence of family or friends at the regional

scale, compared to the national scale. Whilst I have argued that images play a part in decision-making, I wish to put this point in perspective by considering the following quote:

Before the immigration tide, Mainland Chinese neither understood much about Canada nor did they discuss it. Although it is one of the seven industrialised countries, it is not comparable to the other countries, to Britain, America and Asia's Japan. Of course, [small laugh] it has such a popular name in China because its immigration policy is very lenient. Many people, to be honest, are able to obtain the green card¹⁰³ in Canada.
(Philip)

Philip's opinion indicates that human agency and structural forces have to be considered in tandem: while immigrants make active judgments about different countries that they can apply to, these are restricted to choices that are available to them. After focusing on *place*, I turn to look at how migrants interpret sources of information about *life* in Canada in the next chapter.

¹⁰³ It is quite common for respondents to refer to the acquisition of Canada's "landed immigrant" status as "obtaining the green card," which is its American equivalent. This again points to the circulation of popular rhetoric on America as a destination.

Chapter 6

Knowing Life in Canada...A Paradox in Practice?

There are more things in heaven and earth, dear friends, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (Adapted¹⁰⁴ from Hamlet)

If you say it is not good, why have you bought a house? If you say it is not good, why have you bought a car? If you say it is not good, why are you not coming back?¹⁰⁵ (Shuwen)

During the course of my research, I became aware that there was a hinge upon which many of my respondents' narratives of disappointment turned - the gap between their expectations of life in Canada and the reality they confronted. Pieke and Mallee (1999) have rightly perceived that by leaving their native soil to settle in a foreign environment, migrants experience a profound biographical event, and process, that may permanently change their perceptions of themselves, and their place in society. The recent PRC immigrants - of whom a great number have encountered drastic transformations in lifestyles - exemplify this point. According to both immigrants and immigrant service agencies alike, it has become commonplace to hear former engineers, doctors, and teachers working as dishwashers, factory workers, and janitors. While the more fortunate ones among my respondents have obtained jobs that have at least some relevance to their previous professions, such as former engineers working as technicians, or human resource managers working as salespersons, in the majority of cases though, the credentials that made them eligible to immigrate to Canada in the first place, have ironically not been recognised. Their lives at this stage have frequently been described as a struggle, with the sharp drop in finances sometimes resulting

¹⁰⁴ This was cited in an immigrant's essay on the Internet to remind his "dear friends" in China not to have illusions about life in Canada. It was posted on the *Dabenxiang* website, entitled "When I stepped onto the plane from Beijing International Airport".

in marital difficulties or in a few cases, the phenomenon of the astronaut family, where one spouse returns to China to work. There are also instances where their young children are sent back to China for a period of time to overcome difficulties in childcare arrangements. Considering the immigrants' search for a better life in Canada, have these stories been heard...and believed?

In this chapter, I suggest that the **“large gap between reality and expectations”** Gerald discerned among new immigrants, and their accompanying **“sense of loss”**, can be traced in part to the kind of information potential migrants have about life in Canada, and more importantly, their reception of it.¹⁰⁶ My theoretical objective is to rethink the human agency involved in information reception, diverging from a structuralist interpretation of the “network society” (Castells, 1996), where information appears to be a black box with content that is at once assumed and mysterious. I seek to reveal those contents and more crucially, unravel what they *mean* to potential migrants. A central argument is that the information immigrants receive is distorted, and that even when the information is “pure”, they do not accept the stark truth (Mahler, 1995). This generalized portrayal is then tempered with the particular cases where immigrants, despite holding doubts about their future in Canada, nevertheless venture forth.

The chapter begins by looking at the media, immigration companies and immigration guidebooks as sources of distorted information. Next, it explores the social embeddedness of information transmitted by earlier migrants. It then examines the Internet's provision of a

¹⁰⁵ Shuwen was voicing aloud what her friends had “asked” her when she was persuading them not to immigrate to Canada.

new forum for potential immigrants. Present throughout these analyses is the immigrants' reception of such information. In the penultimate section, I suggest why migrants continue to come to Canada despite knowing that harsher realities might await them. The chapter concludes by discussing the premium placed on the perspective of experience.

Understanding Distortion

*The Medium is the Message*¹⁰⁷?

In Chapter 4, I explored the role that the TV series *Beijing* might play in creating a background context for potential migrants to imagine the possibility of living abroad and more specifically, the nature of "abroad" as a place. Here, I focus on another facet of the media's impact, namely, its selective depiction of migrants' lives. In this respect, the interpretation of *Beijing* as a successful story by many respondents, leaving aside the actual intention of the series' producers, constitutes part of a wider folk discourse on migration as a path for success (Li, 1998; Chin, 1999). Images of the "successful overseas Chinese" have been a prominent element in the discourse. One way in which it can be fostered is through the media, thereby calling attention to the cultural politics of representation. Wenxiu recalled, **"They were all famous people who were successful in terms of their careers or scientific achievement. Ordinary people were not featured."** Gerald concurred, **"There are relatively more positive reports, especially reports on outstanding Chinese."** Books such as "Ten outstanding figures of overseas Chinese" further propagate the view, creating a valorisation of the overseas Chinese, who are termed *huaqiao*.

In China, there are quite a lot of reports on the successful cases – of the older *huaqiao*...the ones who are more successful. With their diligence,

¹⁰⁶ Refer to Koser (1995) and Koser (1997) for work on the reception of information by refugees. See Koser and Pinkerton (2002) for the dissemination of information about countries of asylum.

¹⁰⁷ I am borrowing McLuhan's (1964) famous phrase.

they started from scratch to build their property, business or career. Actually, from my own perspective, the positive reports are indeed very good. However, in China, the reports give people a certain impression. The direct consequence is that as long as you become a *huaqiao*, as long as you go abroad, you will definitely succeed. Once you become a *huaqiao*, you will succeed, because all the reports are about the successful cases. For the common folks, the impression is that once you become a *huaqiao*, you succeed, so everyone wants to be a *huaqiao*. Everyone wants to immigrate. There is such a logical connection. (Gerald)

SY: How does such a logical connection develop?

There aren't [many reports] about the process of struggle, about the difficulties that the *huaqiao* have to undergo before success. There are fewer reports about that. They only report that he is now a billionaire, he is a Los Angeles *qiaolin*¹⁰⁸. (Gerald)

Aside from such skewed representations, the conflation of success by Chinese who go abroad can operate in another way. Famous Chinese media personalities often achieve the status of "superstars" in their home country. When these stars are portrayed as being "successful" overseas, worlds are drawn closer as people imagine their fellow citizens enjoying popularity in terrains that gradually become less foreign. This imagination, however, may sometimes only dwell at the level of fantasy. Zhiyang discovered:

The famous people who have gone back from abroad - whether in singing, acting or other realms - give people the false impression that they are already big stars in Hollywood. For instance, when stars such as Andy Lau have a concert in Vancouver, you may imagine that those sitting in the audience are all whites when he is singing. However, that is not actually the case. It might be a bunch of Hong Kong people sitting there, clapping, but the media would say that he has created a sensation in Vancouver. It would definitely be reported this way in China. So this is misleading.

After coming here, I had the feeling that I was tearing down a scam. When you read those reports in China again, you will think they are very laughable. For example, "someone has caused a stir in Sydney or other places." In fact, at the most, it has caused a stir in Chinatown!

¹⁰⁸ Another term for Chinese abroad.

Thus far, I have indicated there are recurrent tropes of “successful overseas Chinese” in the media. Now, I introduce a caveat: respondents frequently emphasized that this was a picture shared by the “common folks”, and being more educated, they were not easily influenced by the media. This scepticism not only highlights the difference they perceived between themselves and “others” - an important point which I will discuss in a later section - but also works in the opposite direction when more critical portraits of life overseas are presented. According to Orina, who had read a few articles on immigration in the months before arrival in Canada, such articles were **“mainly blowing a cold wind”**, and featured new immigrants in Canada - including PhDs¹⁰⁹ - who were doing manual work and were in poor emotional states. She recalled one journalist’s words:

New immigrants should have mental preparation before leaving. North America is not paradise. It is not as good as what you imagine. There are many problems. Jobs cannot be found. No matter how beautiful the scenery is, it cannot be eaten like rice... If you are in a very good job in China, with a high position, and a job that you like, you don’t necessarily have to pursue your North American dream, to give up your job, and go over.

Despite the negative portrayal, Orina was firm in her opinion that the articles **“will not reduce the heat. They [potential migrants] will not give up because of this.”** Although the very recent immigrants referred to similar reports, as well as documentaries like *“Searching for tales abroad”*¹¹⁰, which have emerged since the late 1990s, to show that they were aware of the general situation of immigrants’ lives abroad, they were ambivalent regarding the media’s reliability as a source of information. Ruhao affirmed this, **“In the**

¹⁰⁹ In recounting stories of other PRC immigrants’ situations in Canada, there is a tendency for some respondents to especially emphasize that PhDs were also working in labour jobs. One reason may be to highlight the consequent pathos. Diana Lary also suggests that there could be a desire to conflate their own academic qualifications by alluding to PhDs as part of the same group of independent immigrants (Lary, personal communication).

past, some of the reporting in Mainland was not very truthful. Thus even when somewhat more realistic situations are reported now, people do not trust it too much.”

Apart from the issue of trust, the difficulties portrayed may also be downplayed through another kind of differentiation illustrated by Evelyn.

I saw a TV interview of overseas students in the US. It was quite hard to be overseas then. They said they had not found a job after more than a year - it was very difficult - and they advised people who were immigrating to consider various aspects. At that point in time, I thought if they were looking for a job while studying, it should be easier since language wasn't a problem. They had already learnt the language so jobs should be easier to find. Thus, I thought perhaps their demands were higher and they were looking for better jobs. For us, I thought if we didn't have demands that were too high, simply find a job for survival first, and then gradually find...No matter what people are doing, they would find a way to resolve it. So we still thought of coming out. I felt that we wouldn't be too picky. Just find a simple job. Who would have known finding a simple job is not that easy either? (Evelyn)

When told about the TV interview, Evelyn's husband responded in exactly the same way:

“Their requirements are high, they have been to school [in the US], they do not want to do simple jobs. When we are there, we will first find a simple one.” Key to this distinction is the impersonal nature of the media as a source of information. Even when potential migrants come across “balanced” reports of immigrants' lives abroad, they may not necessarily identify with the subject. Hence, difficulties associated with living abroad may be dismissed or underestimated.

Partial Introductions: “Only the Good Aspects”

In contrast to the respondents' mixed feelings towards the media, there was a strong reaction against immigration companies, much of which was negative. A focus group participant,

¹¹⁰ Fusheng and Jianming both watched episodes of the series, which introduced the living conditions of PRC migrants in different countries. Fusheng recalled that **“there were some lucky ones, and some unlucky ones,**

Peirong, recalled an incident when an immigration consultant jokingly introduced himself as a *renfan* (human smuggler) to friends at a class reunion party. The other participants spontaneously added that immigration consultants were all "*pian ren*!" (cheats). Here, the immigration consultant became Capitalism personified in their eyes, out for profit. To comprehend their feelings, it is necessary to remember that over two thirds of the respondents had engaged the services of immigration companies. The general sentiment was that immigration consultants had (obviously?) only highlighted the positive aspects of Canada to them, emphasizing Canada's excellent living conditions and natural beauty, with little or no mention of the economic conditions here. In Junqiang's words, the immigration consultants **"simply said the good things and avoided saying the bad things"**. Furthermore, Shuwen reflected upon hindsight that they had told her, **"jobs are very easy to find but you may not necessarily be able to find professional jobs. These kind of words are very ambiguous."** Jiansheng elaborated:

When you ask them whether it is easy to find jobs, they will say that it depends on people; some people are able to find very good jobs after two months. For some, they can't find it after half a year. You can't say that they are wrong, but you also can't say that they are right, as they have not truthfully introduced it to you. They will definitely not say that it is very tough here, that there is a period of adaptation, that it is difficult for most people to find jobs. They won't say things like that. Because if they do, who will still dare to immigrate?

Several respondents pondered over the moral implications of treating immigration as a business. In the immigration companies' defence, it is pertinent to consider that they are perhaps not too different from a whole spectrum of migration agents, past and present, in sustaining the myth of immigration as a positive route among willing people. Nevertheless,

depending on their opportunities."

there is an uneasy tension between immigration being simultaneously a business, and a process that has long-term consequences. Gerald observed:

To do business, it is very natural for immigration companies to publicize. Their aim for publicity is to attract more people to depend on them to handle immigration cases...it is very natural that they will exaggerate the superiority here [smiled], and publicize only the advantages. Such publicity causes people to believe that this place is good, and they should come here. Actually, this kind of publicity is not very...it can cause great mental distress. Over in Toronto, there has already been a Mainland Chinese who committed suicide¹¹¹.

A more pragmatic reason also underlies the respondents' resentment towards immigration companies – the sense that the fees charged did not correlate with the actual level of services provided. On 3 October 2002, the Canadian Immigration Minister Denis Coderre appointed a panel to recommend ways to regulate non-lawyer immigration consultants - some of whom have been accused of unethical conduct (Clark, 2002a). Such regulation could mean that the field - even abroad - will be restricted to Canadian citizens and permanent residents to enable Canadian authorities to take legal action against them if they violate regulations (Clark, 2002b). The chair of the Canadian Bar Association's immigration section, Ben Trister, explained that the lack of regulation meant a few unscrupulous consultants could cause security trouble for the government and exploit immigrants since "It's the Wild West out there, and it's only giving Canada a bad name." He said, "Anybody who wants to be an immigration consultant can just print up a business card and instantly they become a consultant" (ibid). This recent move is an added blow to immigration consultants, who are already facing a possible decline in business from independent immigrants who are increasingly applying on their own.

¹¹¹ Two other respondents brought up this sad incident.

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, the growing tendency for independent immigrants to apply by themselves is due to the proliferation of information on immigration. Apart from early immigrants and the Internet being sources of information, immigration guidebooks have also appeared on the market in the last few years. Titles¹¹² include ***“Walking Towards Canada: A Guide for Studying Abroad, Working Abroad, Immigration, Business, Family Visits, and Travel”*** (Figure 6.1), ***“A Guide for Canadian Immigration and Study”*** and ***“A User’s Book – Living and Studying in Canada”***¹¹³. These guidebooks commonly provide general descriptions of Canada and advice on immigration application and settlement. The sources can often be traced to Canadian government websites. For instance, in ***Walking Towards Canada*** (The visa experts’ office¹¹⁴, 2000), a guidebook that several respondents had recommended on the basis of its relatively comprehensive nature, 185 of its 472 pages consisted of an inventory of work duties and employment requirements for occupations in Canada, directly printed from the Canadian HRDC website. Like the immigration companies’ promotions, these guidebooks are unmistakably catering to a PRC audience. In the prefaces, the authors tend to refer to the Opening Up and Reform as a defining characteristic of the present period, and frame their objective in writing the books as a form of service to their countrymen. The editor of the series¹¹⁵ that included ***Walking Towards Canada*** claimed that they were putting forward the series **“with the aim of doing something for Mainlanders, as well as to systematically and responsibly provide a service for readers.”**

¹¹² There are several guidebooks with similar titles, including two different versions of “Walking towards Canada”.

¹¹³ This title is in English originally. The book itself is advertised as “bilingual” in English and Chinese.

¹¹⁴ This is the pseudonym chosen by the collective authors.

¹¹⁵ Its first series covers 8 countries – America, Canada, Britain, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Singapore.

签证高手丛书

走向加拿大

赴加留学、工作、移民、商务、探亲、旅游指南

工作室 编著



Figure 6.1 Cover illustration of *Walking Towards Canada: A Guide for Studying Abroad, Working Abroad, Immigration, Business, Family Visits, and Travel* (Source: The visa experts' office, 2000).

Whilst many of the guidebooks were written in Chinese, English was sometimes used in particular sections, such as in demonstrating questions that might be asked by immigration officers. In *A Guide for Studying Abroad and Immigration to Canada*, there was a list of 85 questions that covered their reasons for migration to Canada, employment experience, and potential adaptability in Canada. For instance:

1. Why do you want to go to Canada?¹¹⁶
2. What do you know about Canada?
3. Why don't you go to USA?
4. You know a lot of Hong Kong people have come back from Canada, how [sic] do you think about it?
5. Do you have any idea about the job market in your occupation in Canada?

Other pragmatic advice included the observation that the Canadian consulate in Hong Kong had the highest efficiency among Canadian consulates. Hence, **“if applicants wish to obtain their immigration authorization as soon as possible, it is best that they hand the application form to Hong Kong”** (Yu et al, 2000: 297)¹¹⁷. Apart from preparing potential migrants for their interviews with the immigration officers – one reason for the guidebooks' popularity - the guidebooks also sought to introduce Canada as a place suitable for immigration. Linkages were drawn between China and Canada, signifying transnational

¹¹⁶ Questions 1 and 2 address the topics I covered in earlier chapters. Being aware that these were questions that some respondents had already prepared for prior to their interviews helped me to probe beyond rehearsed answers.

¹¹⁷ This appears to be common knowledge although for some cases, immigration companies had a role in suggesting that the application be sent to Hong Kong. Diana Lary notes that the consultants usually operate through Hong Kong (personal communication, 2002). 17 of the 36 households in my study were interviewed in Hong Kong for their application while 10 were interviewed in Beijing. The others were exempted either

ties. In “A User’s Book – Living and Studying in Canada” (Ma, 2000), there was a typology of “China and Canada Friendship Cities and Provinces” showing a twinning of cities, such as Beijing and Ottawa, Chongqing and Toronto, Dalian and Vancouver, as well as Guangzhou and Vancouver. There was also a chronology of Canada-China relations (1959-1998) which was taken from the official website of the Canadian embassy in Beijing¹¹⁸. Besides that, the “Canada-Asia Top Ten List of the 20th Century” described the significant events involving Canada and Asia in the past century. Lastly, it had a “Top Ten List of Canadians”¹¹⁹ who have contributed to Canada-Asia relations in the past century, which included Dr. (Henry) Norman Bethune the “doctor and political activist”, and Former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. By highlighting these linkages, the guidebooks are perhaps attempting to reduce any fears that potential immigrants may have about Canada, and emphasize instead its history of friendly relations with China, hence giving the assurance that future communication between the two countries would not be problematic. At the same time, they could also alleviate possible concerns about the prospects of PRC immigrants in Canada. An attempt to address such concerns is evident in *A Guide for Studying Abroad and Immigration to Canada*, which had a section devoted to changes and improvements in the political and economic roles of the Chinese in Canada, in particular highlighting Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson’s¹²⁰ new political role.

News of the most uplifting kind came over from Canada on 8 September 1999: Chinese Canadian Madam Wu Binzhi¹²¹ will be taking on the position of Canada’s Governor-General! On 7 October, she will become Canada’s 26th Governor-General. She will be the second woman in Canada’s history,

because they had taken the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam or had applied from other countries of residence.

¹¹⁸ The source was not cited. This practice appears to be quite common amongst the guidebooks.

¹¹⁹ In this case, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2000, was cited as a source.

¹²⁰ She was born in Hong Kong in 1939 and came to Canada as a refugee with her family during the war in 1942. (Source: The Governor-General’s official website <http://www.gg.ca/governor_general/biography_e.asp>).

¹²¹ This is Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson’s Chinese maiden name.

and the first Chinese to become its Governor-General. News spread like wildfire, and elicited an overwhelming response in the Chinese community. Madam Wu Binzhi is the pride of the Chinese, gaining glory for both overseas Chinese and the Chinese civilization. (Yu et al, 2000:377)

Not only does this text offer another instance of the celebratory tones associated with overseas Chinese, it implies that the Chinese are accepted in Canada, and are assured of their status. Bearing in mind some respondents' anxieties about Australia that were discussed earlier, this appears to be an important point. When mentioning the initial economic situations of immigrants in Canada, some of the guidebooks appear to take on a different tone, with carefully chosen words that suggest one needs to read between the lines. Even though there are warnings about the difficulties of finding jobs, there are always attenuating factors, which are meant to reassure potential migrants. For instance, the same guidebook included an essay posted by a new immigrant on an Internet website. He wrote:

My classmate sent me a letter warning me that unless I have a VERY SOLID foundation in computer software or website programming, don't even think about being able to find a job immediately. I may not find a job even after half a year or one year. Well, if I can't find a job, then I will study. That is not bad too. (Ibid: 366)

The option of studying thus deflects attention off the issue of job-finding.

Justification is further offered through rhetorical questioning.

Are we really doing that poorly in China, with no choice but to immigrate? I don't think so. After all, those who can immigrate commonly have some economic foundation, and have a certain level of work experience and societal *guanxi*.

The majority of people who go abroad will give themselves many reasons, but the fundamental reason is that they do not have confidence in the country's future. They feel that their development is not clear and that there is no security.

In another guide, *Walking Towards Canada: A Necessary Read for Immigration, Studying Abroad, Travel and Business*, out of more than 300 pages, there was only a single paragraph mentioning the job conditions for new immigrants in Canada.

Finding jobs not only requires time but due to language difficulties, and the lack of professional certifications and Canadian employment experience, new immigrants may not be able to find suitable jobs, even jobs that are greatly below expectations. However, there must not be discouragement because of this. One must know that now in Canada, *many successful professionals, entrepreneurs, senior management personnel in finance and industry, and scholars, have all worked as waiters, labourers, cleaners and personnel in other low-paid jobs.* A job in the initial period can at least help you to familiarise yourself with Canada's job environment, raise your language ability, as well as make adjustments for a future occupation. (Xinni, 1999: 136, italics mine)

Initial hardship is reconciled by the promise of eventual success. This is particularly evident in *Fulfilling a Dream in Canada: Canada's "Labour Models" Speak the Truth*, a collection of 28 biographical essays on Mainland Chinese immigrants by Chuan Zeng (1999), who himself immigrated to Canada in 1996. In the preface to the collection, Peter M. Mitchell of East Asian Studies at York University, wrote:

The history of Chinese in Canada is replete with stories of hardships – the hardships of facing racist prejudice of unemployment or underemployment, of barriers of language and adjustments to unfamiliar business and social practices. But it is *a history marked by many success stories*, the footprints of resolute individuals determined to overcome such hardships by dedication to hard work, thrift, ingenuity and education. (Mitchell, 2000: 2, italics mine)

Although sympathetic towards this genre of writing, I question how this kind of selective portrayal, focusing on the lives of individuals who encounter hardships initially but nevertheless tend to “succeed” eventually, may indirectly influence readers. The protagonist in the essay, *An Insurance Genius Admired by Westerners*, voices a characteristic optimism:

I do not approve of this kind of pessimistic behaviour. Actually, this society gives new and old immigrants alike many opportunities. It depends on how each person grasps it. (Zeng, 2000: 13)

Even those who have had less fortunate experiences offer the potential migrants the reassurance that **“you will definitely have to work solidly for three or four years before you can gradually taste the fruits. After you have put in that work, your heart will feel more stable”** (ibid: 24). The effect is thus very similar to *Beijing* despite the collection being biographical. Although not strictly a guidebook, it too offered advice on how potential immigrants should view life after migration. Overall, respondents’ general sentiment towards guidebooks was that they were relatively useful for factual information. However, with regards to a deeper understanding about life in Canada after immigration, Jiansheng felt:

I couldn’t tell. Why, because from reading them, there are only the good things. They first introduce the country’s population and how much resources it has. Second, the country’s welfare – this is the key focus.¹²² Third, what the application procedures are. They mainly introduce these and avoid the other things so you can’t catch their weaknesses. Even if you wanted to say that they deceived you, that they misled you, you can’t say that. If they talk about jobs, they brush it over lightly. You can’t catch them out; they try to avoid this as much as they can.

Although the majority of guidebooks appear to correspond to Jiansheng’s descriptions, there are some guidebooks that do pay more attention to immigrants’ working experiences in Canada. For instance, *A Guide for Canadian Immigration and Study* warned:

When companies for immigration and studying abroad fervently promote and guarantee your ability to enter Canada, going abroad sounds so simple, causing you to think that going to Canada is indeed the goal you hope for and would like to pursue. [...] Previous glories belong to the past. The pursuit of a beautiful tomorrow needs to start from today – a new beginning. Before you obtain your new success, you may need to *dagong* (be a worker) for a period of time to make a living. (Wen and Yi, 2000: 52)

¹²² From my reading, this is not necessary the case.

"Dagong" is perhaps one of the most circulated terms among recent PRC immigrants. I did not know of this term before I carried out my research. Respondents told me that it referred to all kinds of jobs that were low in skill requirements and pay. It included work at restaurants, factories, warehouses and other places in service, production, packaging, delivery and other "labour work". *A Guide* vividly described the hardships associated with *dagong*. First, the physical weariness **"can almost strike you down"** (ibid: 57). Second, **"you discover that those working with you are the ones 'without culture' - what they say and how they behave is not only shallow but common and even despicable."** This leads to doubts about the future as to whether one can eventually **"emerge from all that."** Third, **"if there is prejudice against you, especially trouble being made for you by people whom you look down upon, you will be angry, and wish to give vent to it, or even go off in a huff. However, you know that it is not so easy to find a job, and you need this job to maintain a livelihood, so you have no choice but to bear it all, and suffer the unhappiness in your heart."** In yet another instance of the danger of labelling all Chinese as part of "the Chinese community", these descriptions mirror some of my respondents' experiences in Canada. Whilst self-help can and does exist within "the community", over-romanticization of this ideal would mask tales of prejudice, discrimination and bullying that are very much a part of reality. In fact, *A Guide* advised new immigrants that **"if given a choice, work for a western boss, rather than a Chinese one"**. Apart from the opportunity to improve English, the working environment and remuneration would be better - points frequently mentioned by respondents.

Taking a step further, *A Guide* not only provided a picture of how working life could be for immigrants initially but also offered advice on the mindsets that should accompany these

experiences, elevating the “how to” nature of a guide to a psychological level. Rhetorical strategies were employed to reinforce its message that *dagong* was a temporary tactic. Moreover, China’s history was once again referred to in the encouraging claim **“no matter how great the difficulty, it will be over one day. Many years later when you remember the past, you may be like the educated urban youth in the 1960s and 1970s working in the countryside and mountain areas who said, ‘the youthful days have gone, but there are no regrets!’”** (ibid: 59). Herein lies an almost propagandistic appeal to the “hardworking Chinese” who would have to accomplish everything through their diligence (ibid: 61). This can result in a mentality that many respondents admitted to holding prior to migration - hard work would eventually overcome any problems they might face. Indeed, Shixiong said:

Among immigrants, there is a saying that there will be great hardship in the first year, minor hardship in the second year, and no hardship in the third year. [Laughs]

Lest the optimism be attributed only to Chinese sources, Evelyn’s experience with a Canadian immigration officer reveals otherwise. The immigration officer told her after her interview¹²³ in 1997:

“You are still young, and you still have skills. English shouldn’t be too much of a problem. When you are in that environment, you have many opportunities to practise. You should have rather good development when you are there.” So at that time, we thought that once we came we would be able to find a job since it should be quite easy to do the simplest jobs for a start but it was entirely different from what we imagined.

By the time Zhiyang was interviewed in 1999, the immigration officer who interviewed him adopted a more cautious tone and warned him that he would **“definitely not be able to find**

¹²³ Part of the procedure for immigration application unless applicants took the IELTS, which was introduced in 1999.

a job within half a year”. Although an isolated case, Zhiyang’s response contradicts conventional expectations about information reception.

So what did I do? We¹²⁴ went to have fun. We each bought two-zone transit passes. I live in Burnaby, and we went to play everywhere.
(Zhiyang)

From examining these various sources, the validity of the information that immigrants receive transpires as an important issue.

Social Domains, Private Worlds

“Baoxibubaoyou” and the Issue of Face

My research reveals that earlier migrants are the most trusted sources. However, when talking over the phone with their family in China, many interviewees claimed a practice of *baoxibubaoyou* (reporting only the happy news and not the bad news), a form of self-censorship to prevent their families from worrying. Participants in a male focus group revealed:

I think many people *baoxibubaoyou*. When they are suffering here, they won’t want them [the family] to worry. For me, I *baoxibubaoyou*. I will tell the good news to my family members. (Shunfa)

I don’t tell the unhappy circumstances I have experienced abroad to my friends or even family. (Jingyuan)

Yes. (Zhiyang)

Because many people who have gone abroad prefer to be silent to their friends and relatives. Most Mainland Chinese like to - (Jingyuan)

Return to their hometown in silken robes [*Yijinhuanxiang*¹²⁵]. (Zhiyang)

¹²⁴ Zhiyang and his family.

¹²⁵ A very old Chinese proverb.

Concern for the family was one of the reasons for *baoxibubaoyou*. Minglu could now understand **“why people who had come here earlier wouldn’t say [the bad things]. I myself wouldn’t tell my family or friends everything - how bad it is. I will not tell them the whole story. This could be due to a trait of the Mainland Chinese: not willing to tell their family the bad news. Actually, it is really very bad here.”** His wife Wenxiu explained, **“Because once they know that your situation is not good here, they will worry about your living conditions etc. As adults, we don’t want our parents to worry too much about us. I already feel bad that they have to look after our kid¹²⁶ so I don’t want them to worry about us.”** Gerald agreed, attributing it to a **“very complex mentality”** that resulted in one saying **“It’s not bad, not bad,”** and he added with a laugh, **“even if you have a job which is quite tough or low-paying and you are very bored at work, the people in China will think that you have very high pay here!”**

Boyang personally experienced the consequences of this kind of masked truth. He said:

Mainland Chinese are like that, when there are people coming out from the family, they don’t talk about the bad things abroad. They only talk about the good aspects. Hence you will definitely want to go abroad. My elder brother studied in the US and settled permanently there. It was him who introduced us to immigration. [...] He gave us some introduction. He didn’t say that it was not good. He merely said that it was difficult but it was in more abstract terms. I didn’t spend any energy to understand [the situation] because I thought if he could survive, I could survive too.

As Zhiyang, a focus group participant, mentioned earlier, there is another aspect to *baoxibubaoyou* – the pressure to return to one’s hometown only after making good (*yijinhuanxiang*). To Winnie, *yijinhuanxiang* meant, **“you only dare to go back to your hometown when you are grand or rich. You will have more face among your kin and**

¹²⁶ Her parents are taking care of their child, aged 10 months, in China. They plan to bring the child over to

relatives when you go back. You need to have certain accomplishments before you dare to return to your family.” A greater pressure – whether self- or socially-inflicted – therefore weighs on some PRC immigrants as they contemplate which stories to convey home. The existence of phrases such as *baoxibubaoyou* and *yijinhuanxiang* suggests there is a wider set of cultural discourses and practices beyond migration that influence migrants’ mindsets. The analysis of migration, thus, cannot be divorced from human desires and cherished dreams that may continue after migration. In *American Dreaming* (1995), a remarkably sensitive study of mainly undocumented Salvadoran and South American immigrants in New York, Mahler wrote,

Most immigrants insisted that they suppress much of the grim reality of their experiences in the United States (and of their journeys) in order to keep their families from worrying about them. I suggest that another factor comes into play. This is migrants’ desire to counter the attacks on their social esteem that they encounter in the United States by recovering or enhancing their social status at home.

Whilst the first of these two factors is relevant in the case of the PRC immigrants, I did not find a similar “countering desire” among my respondents. What remains pertinent though is the point that there is a geography of status. Even as most PRC independent immigrants discover that their relative social status had plummeted in Canada, some may seek to preserve their status back home, capturing the sentiment expressed by Minglu, **“if they are not coming out, I would leave them with a good impression.”** One possible consequence would be the perpetuation of the notion of “going abroad as success”, whereby family members in China may further share this good news with their relatives or friends.

For an audience other than their immediate family, the issue of *mianzi* (face) was cited. A fear of “losing face” meant that they would not want other people to hear about the problems they were facing. According to Shuwen:

Everyone wants to have his or her face. Why would they say, “I have dropped into this difficult pit? Don’t come.” They won’t say that. One reason is that they are afraid that the family will worry. Another is *mianzi*. So they will say that it is not bad. Thus people will think, “Since it is not bad, I’ll go too.” It’s hard for them to understand.

Hence, Menglin found, “When friends go back, they won’t tell you the details. They will only say things like the environment is good, the welfare is good.” Similarly, Jianming’s friends told him about “the wider aspects, not the concrete things”. When asked how she will describe her experiences in Canada to her friends in China, Sienna admitted:

I will tell them “Ok, just generally ok”. Life is not easy but we don’t tell them in detail how hard we have to worry about our bills. We don’t tell them the detailed information because they won’t understand you at all because in China, they have different situation. They don’t have to worry about so many bills, like rent. So many bills here. Even you tell them, they won’t understand. That’s why we just escape and only tell them the good things. Yah, life is hard but we have hope, yah.

In some cases, respondents had been advised by their friends not to immigrate to Canada, but were not provided with specific reasons. Minglu’s friend in Canada had advised him against immigrating to Canada.

After I came, he said, “I had told you not to come.” However, I’m not a person with no thoughts, no brains like a child, to simply follow what he said about this being possible or that not being possible. I’m a mature person, with my own independent opinion. I needed sufficient reasons for knowing why I shouldn’t come. I wouldn’t believe otherwise. (Minglu)

To understand why it is so difficult for some PRC immigrants to discuss their personal experiences, let us consider Shinan’s experience. Formerly a senior computer systems

analyst in China, he is currently working part-time as a dishwasher whilst preparing to apply for graduate studies. During the interview, he revealed that he had been embarrassed to take up the dishwashing job when his ex-classmate offered it to him. His wife, Lanxin, a former doctor and now a homemaker, explained to me on his behalf.¹²⁷

He was still hesitant so he said, "Let me consider". Then, the classmate's wife called me to ask, "How is it? It seems your husband doesn't want to work, is it?" I said, 'Aiyah'¹²⁸...' She then said, "My husband has found a job for him. Yet he says he needs to consider it. It was so difficult for my husband to find this job. He was out looking for a job despite the wind and rain. Now there's a job looking for him, and yet he's not willing to do it. You should ask him to treasure it. He really doesn't know what's good for him!" [Lanxin laughs as she says this. Shinan chuckles loudly.] "He really doesn't know what's good for him. You should talk to him!" I said "No, he merely wants to read some books, and go to school now." She said, "Going to school? He should work first. It's so difficult to find a job now, including a dish-washing job."

This telephone exchange underscores the difficult psychological adjustments that many PRC independent immigrants - who had entered Canada on the basis of their skills - experience when they take on *dagong* jobs. Part of the emotional struggle stems from the sharper societal distinction between blue-collar and white-collar jobs in China compared to Canada. When asked by relatives and friends in China for advice about immigration to Canada, some migrants are caught in a quandary as to what they could say without their status being lowered in the minds of those who are still in China. Shinan tended to describe in more general terms, **"The economic condition is rather poor now, rather difficult. If you want to come, you must make sufficient preparation."** Lanxin in turn told me:

He has a younger cousin who is applying for immigration. I told her, "You must have mental preparation. The stress here is very great. I think it is not as good as you imagine it to be."

¹²⁷ One of the benefits of a household interview is that sometimes when interviewees are reluctant to speak on a potentially embarrassing subject, such as their current job situation in Canada, the spouse (usually the wife) will often interject, thus helping to soothe possible tensions.

¹²⁸ Typically used to express being caught in a dilemma.

SY: Did you tell her about your personal experiences?

I didn't say it too explicitly. How should I say this? Those in China would surely not know our situation would be so bad. They would definitely think that we are living well here because skilled immigrants like us are certainly living well in China, definitely not badly. [...] When we talk to people in China about our present situation, we don't tell the truth. We told his cousin to consider it well. He told her that when one more person comes, there is one more unemployed person. But as to him washing dishes here, I didn't tell her that. [Shinan looked embarrassed]

A common thread that runs through a considerable number of respondents' advice to potential immigrants is the tendency to suppress their own experiences even as they warn them about the wider economic conditions of Canada, as well as other immigrants' experiences. In a focus group session, Zhiyang felt an immigrant might *"baoxibubaoyou when he is talking about his own situation but when he talks about the whole situation, he will say that it is very difficult to find jobs."* Jingyuan found *"no contradiction between these two aspects. The former is to introduce to others what it is like for you whilst for the latter, the person is asking for information about the local situation."*

The issue of face lies at the centre of this divide. Thus Jiansheng suggested:

With regards to the source of information, I feel that you should find those with whom you normally have frank discussions. Otherwise, if you find acquaintances, they won't tell you the truth, or they may be very polite. They won't answer you directly. And they will say, "It is best that you experience it for yourself. I won't be able to tell you accurately." This way, he keeps his face, and also, he doesn't tell you false things.

True to Jiansheng's observations, some respondents, including Haiwen, told me that they would answer diplomatically when asked by friends about their situations in Canada. In such cases, the subtleties of language¹²⁹ provide a route out of a focus on the personal.

¹²⁹ One example would be the use of the phrase *"burongyi"* (not easy) rather than *"hennan"* (very difficult) when describing the lives of new immigrants to their friends in China.

Faced with such a situation, I will usually say, "You ask me whether it's good to come to Canada, or whether it is right, or whether I regret. *I cannot tell you because this kind of thing depends on the person. Everyone feels differently.* Some people feel that it is great. The environment is good, and it is comfortable and modern. Some people feel that it is too lousy. They can't earn money or find a job, and the house is expensive. There is nothing good! There are others who are more in the middle ground. Hence, I say, as to whether it is good or bad to stay in Canada, you must first be clear about why you are in Canada. What are you pursuing? Can your goal be accomplished? Otherwise, it is very difficult to ascertain whether it is good or not. This is a very difficult thing to say. (Haiwen, italics mine)

Apart from the issue of face, there are other reasons accounting for why some respondents only learnt about the positive, or at most ambivalent, aspects of Canada from their friends. According to Zhiyang, immigrants might have a fear of being misunderstood by their friends and thus were not as forthright in their answers. Referring to a friend who had enquired about Canada from him, Zhiyang explained his dilemma, **"If I were to ask him not to come, he might say that it is because I have gone out, and I don't want him to come. I can only say that you have to think. I can't say directly that you shouldn't come."** Eileen and her husband, Ruhao, suggested another possibility - a self-selection among immigrants, with a greater likelihood for immigrants leading "more stable lives" overseas to contact their friends in China. Before their migration, several friends would call them for a chat. Recalling the past, she told me, **"I guess those people who are busy struggling with work wouldn't have the time to call. They are already busy with life, why would they call us for a chat?"** As for friends who called them, Ruhao evaluated their circumstances this way, **"They are comparatively leading an ok life here. Their moods are better. Communication with the Mainland is also, on certain psychological levels, a kind of achievement for them. But if they are really not doing too well, not living too well, they won't have much to say to Mainland. And they wouldn't be too willing to be in contact**

with friends in Mainland.” Ruhao’s rationale is ultimately derived from the powerful hold that perceptions – both of others and themselves - have on immigrants.

The generalised nature of the information supplied by family or friends in the destination country is not unique to the PRC independent immigrants in Canada. In Robinson and Seagrott’s (2002) study on asylum seekers in the UK, they made a similar observation. My objective is not simply to demonstrate the filtered nature of such information transmission, but also to explicate, from the immigrants’ perspectives, *why* this is the case, and *how* they engage in this process through rhetorical strategies. Eventually, though, several respondents believe:

The information will return to China with a certain discount, but once the time is long enough, and there are more cases, people will slowly understand that it is quite tough here in the beginning [...] The earlier the information returns, the better, and the fuller the information, the better; because potential immigrants can consider this for reference. They can make a more complete judgment, and not just rely on positive or superficial things. (Gerald)

In the next section, I show another, quite different, reaction to “truthful” information.

Inadmissible Truths

While a group of the respondents were more concerned about the issue of face with regards to the kind of information they would transmit home to their friends, another group was quite emphatic in stressing that even though such a practice might be common, they would, however, **“tell the truth as it is”**. They would warn potential immigrants, and **“not merely say the good things”**. Haojie distinguished himself from the former group:

No one talks about it when it’s bad. They may even lie and say that it is good outside because they don’t want their own value to drop. There is this kind of thinking. That’s why I say I am half a Canadian. I never only say

just the good side. I will tell the truth as it is. I will say it is 20-30%. For about 70-80% [of the immigrants], it is very difficult. I tell my friends, "If you have a very stable job in Mainland, and are getting about US1000, I do not approve of you coming to Canada. I am still renting a house. I had to work at an oil station when I couldn't find work." I told all those I knew. Even though I am now very lucky already, financially, it is nothing great. (Italics mine)

Joyce, too, assured me:

For friends who really want to understand the true situation here, we do not want to lie to them because we are all friends. If our friends come here and find that it is different from their mental preparation, wouldn't it be tantamount to harming them? So we *tell them the truth*. (Italics mine)

Zhuhong was similarly honest with his friends:

I just *tell the truth*. I say, "Well, don't be thinking you can find a professional [job], same job as in China right away. You could be, but do some preparation. If you are willing to do any kind of job, you can come here. If you don't, probably just stay in China." (Italics mine)

What is referred to as "the truth" in these responses is almost invariably the difficulty in finding professional jobs in Canada. It is intended to contrast with both the mental picture that potential migrants may have of Canada, as well as the ones other early migrants may have painted. There is, however, recognition that there is no one "truth". Rather, there are different subjectivities, which create different kinds of truths. Respondents were anxious that potential migrants should be able to "judge for themselves", and saw their own roles as purveyors of "objective" information – both the good and bad aspects – so that they could evaluate their own particular situations. To friends who had asked her whether immigration is good, Huiling's advice would be:

I will not tell them whether it is good or not. I will describe to them the objective situation. They have to make a choice. I will say that there are good and bad things about every place. China has its good points, and Canada has its good points. If you choose this place, you have to give up the other place. [...] For instance, if you want to enjoy Canada's clean air,

green grounds and good environment, you have to give up what you had in China. [...] I will tell them from different angles. For example, I think the welfare system, public libraries, community centres, free education for the children, pension, and social security are good. I think these are honestly very good. I will also tell them how the employment situation is – the competition is really very stiff, there are very few job positions, the tax is very heavy etc.

In terms of sharing personal stories, Cecilia said, “I won’t just tell them my example. I will also tell them the stories of the friends around me, because one doesn’t represent everyone.”

As Orina expressed, the intention is **“to let them consider this issue in a more coolheaded fashion, not come out in a rush, and feel disappointed when they come. They should look at this issue more rationally, and analyse it more objectively.”** Frequently, respondents would tell me that they advise potential respondents to have some **“mental preparation”** and to **“think about it carefully”**. Lena told her friend in Tianjin who was preparing to immigrate:

I’m neither saying that this place is like a furnace, nor am I saying that this place is like paradise. The reality is that you will have a very painful period when you first arrive. You won’t have any job and friends; no one knows you and you don’t understand the place. [...] However, if you were to see its good sides, you will get used to it gradually. [...] My priority is how you will get over the painful period. You must have a very desirable goal at the end for you to walk on this difficult path.

Thus far, I have suggested that a substantial number of respondents will make an effort to inform potential migrants about the possible realities, both positive and negative, that they might face once they have immigrated to Canada. The question is: how do potential migrants react to this information? Iris divulged:

I told them that Canada’s economy.... is not that optimistic. “You should have some mental preparation. It’s not like in China where you have a stable job. Here, you don’t know whether you will have a job the next

day.¹³⁰ Today, you don't know what may happen tomorrow¹³¹, and you don't know whether the work unit will be good or not tomorrow." [...] So I gave them some mental preparation that it is not so optimistic, that it is not as easy to find a job as they imagine.

SY: Will they come after hearing what you say?

Yes, because they have already decided. So *even if they hear that, they have already made up their minds.* (Italics mine)

Respondents were almost unanimous in their agreement.

If there were originally 100 people who wanted to come over and they know that jobs are difficult to find in Canada presently, I estimate there are 80 who will still come. (Laifu)

Basically 80-90%. Most of the people who have this thinking are almost there already. We can't really prevent them much. They have already made up their minds. They just want to hear the positive news. Maybe they can't even absorb the negative ones! *Just like when we first came, we thought how bad can it be, right?* (Cecilia, italics mine)

Even if friends say bad things, you won't pay attention to them. You only listen to the good things. (Menglin)

Their statements reveal that even if an accurate picture were painted of life in Canada, the rose-tinted lens through which it is viewed would colour it in the minds of those who wish to migrate. Contrary to rational expectations of information reception, there is a twist to the story, which suggests that even when migrants tell the negative aspects of immigration to potential migrants, this will not necessarily affect the latter's decision to immigrate, and may even deny the validity of such information. I suggest this demonstrates the phenomenon of "the inadmissible truth", which is adapted from Sarah Mahler's term "the unacceptable truth" (1995). I prefer "inadmissible", as it alludes to the deeply personal level at which

¹³⁰ Respondents often mention the unsettling prospect of "layoffs" in Canada, a particularly great contrast for those who were originally holding professional jobs in state-owned enterprises in China that were previously not as susceptible to retrenchment. In recent years, however, inefficient or bankrupt state-owned enterprises have resulted in 27.2 million retrenchments – of which 40 percent have only lower secondary education or less (Fong, 2002).

conceptions of reality that are different from their imagination, are rejected. I was alerted to the issue by respondents who, like Cecilia, had themselves been advised by earlier migrants, but nonetheless decided to come. Now, I turn to the respondents' accounts to understand why this phenomenon occurs.

My friend [in Vancouver] talked of releasing a news report on Central TV in China, telling people not to come, what's so good about Canada?! My husband said, "They won't believe him. They will only think, 'Then he is stupid. He has no ability. If we go, we won't be like that.'" Everyone thinks like that, because back in China, people like us are all considered *jingying* (crème de la crème). If it's like that for him, maybe it's because he's stupid, so he can't earn money. If I go, it won't be like that! (Menglin)

When you tell people in China that it is very difficult to find a job here, they won't believe it. [sigh] They will say that you can't find a job because you are stupid. It won't be the case when they go. [laughs] They won't believe you. (Zhiyang)

As these comments indicate, the disbelief partly emerges from a process of self-exclusion, whereby potential migrants' confidence in their own abilities precludes them from seeing themselves being vulnerable to the same kind of problems that "others" might encounter. Xiaojiang explained:

Even if you portray it tragically, they may not believe you. Including me - I might not have believed you because we all had a lot of confidence. But when you actually come here and experience it for yourself, it is an entirely different feeling. However much mental preparation you made, when you come here, you will still feel that it's different from what you imagined. Thus there is no point telling them. However badly you put it, they won't believe it.

SY: Why? How did that confidence arise?

In China, they are all very outstanding. They will feel that it is not so difficult. We are already able to make a living with 1.2 billion people. When we come to a country with 30 million people, won't we be able to earn a living? It is this kind of thinking.

¹³¹ This is a sad irony for some immigrants who had wanted to escape from their mundane paths in China (see Chapter 4), only to experience instability here.

While some of the respondents spoke of themselves as being the *crème de la crème* in China, there was a general consensus that independent immigrants tended to be the ones who were “doing quite well” there. Often “self-made”, in that they had risen through the educational system to professional jobs on their own merits, they are doubly-selected, as I argued in Chapter 4, and this may have given rise to Evelyn’s perception that **“Everyone thinks ‘Maybe my ability is stronger than other people, maybe my opportunities are better than the others. I won’t have to suffer as much compared to others.’”** Another form of self-exclusion was by thinking of the stories they had heard as “individual cases”. However when they were here, Cuilin found that **“actually the majority is like that”**. Participants at a female focus group further raised the issue that there could be an oversimplification of problems prior to migration.

I didn’t imagine finding jobs to be so difficult. I thought, *aiyah*, after one year, I should be able to find one. However, ha, I had simplified this problem. (Aining)

In China, people think that after coming out, with this language environment, they would be able to cross the language barrier after one year. Little did they know, ha, [participants laughed] actually it’s not possible to cross the language barrier that quickly. (Menglin)

Before migration, some respondents shared Ruhao’s thinking that **“if we lowered our expectations, we might still find something suitable.”** Elaine remembered how she and her husband had **“made some mental preparation to endure the hardship, even if we have to do labour work. My husband said that it is all right; it is only temporary. [...] However after coming here, we were really very disappointed, because even for [finding] labour work, it is very difficult.”** Among potential migrants, there also seemed to be quite a strong belief in perseverance and hard work being able to overcome difficulties. Jianming said:

I think they will still come, because I myself was like this. [Laughs] I knew that people had to wash dishes and it was very tough. They had to wash dishes through the night. It was especially tough for those migrants in Japan. I watched [on television] how those in Japan had to wash dishes throughout the night, *aiyoh*¹³² carry corpses¹³³; all kinds of hardship. But... how should I say it, the majority feel that they have more brains. They feel that they are able to see the main issues. They know the problems that they may face, and they feel that they can overcome them. They all have this kind of view [short laugh]. In the initial period...people all feel that you have to persevere, you must hold on¹³⁴.

Another rather common mentality was: “if people can survive, I can survive too.” Shulin depicted this:

My friend had sent me a letter telling me to think about it carefully, that if I’m in China, and I’m managing alright, then don’t come. But reading it was like not reading at all – I didn’t take it to heart. I thought, “Since you have managed to survive, it means that it’s ok. At the most, it means to struggle for a few years but after that, it’ll be ok.” Even though I saw this negative stuff, I didn’t consider it.

From the accounts above, it is evident that when receiving information through the social domain of friends, interpretation occurs within potential migrants’ private worlds. How they view the information depends, to a great extent, on how they relate this information to themselves. At the same time, the identity of the information providers also plays a role. Several respondents told me how they had met with a sharp rebuttal when advising their friends not to immigrate to Canada. Cuilin recounted, “**When you say that it is not good here, they will think, “If it is not good, why are you still here? [Laughs] Why don’t you return to China?”** Her husband, Zhehui, had asked a friend this exact question when they were considering immigration. Junqiang echoed, “**If I were to tell my friends in China that it is hard to find jobs here, they wouldn’t believe. They really wouldn’t believe as**

¹³² Typically used to express incredulity.

¹³³ Through television drama serials and news conveyed from migrants, several respondents learnt of PRC migrants in China having to carry corpses down the high-rise apartments in Tokyo.

they would say, 'Why aren't you going back if it is not good here?' 'You are only saying it's not good because you have gone'. His wife, Shuwen, added, "Their thinking may be, 'If it is not good, how is it that we know you have bought a house and changed to a new car'¹³⁵? You yourself are intending to stay on but you don't want us to come.'"

To help explain these findings, I consider some points made by the social theorist Fei Xiaotong. Contrary to most modern interpretations, he believes that Chinese society is not group-oriented (Hamilton and Zheng, 1992). Instead, he sees Chinese society as being centred on the individual, and that it is built from networks created by relational ties linking the self with discrete categories of other individuals. This focus on the individual sheds some light on why potential migrants might suspect their informants of harbouring ulterior motives for not wanting them to migrate to Canada. It also elucidates the rationale behind some migrants' belief that "I" can succeed even if "you" cannot. Returning to the earlier discussion on the issue of face, such a theoretical perspective clarifies why some migrants do not present an accurate picture of their predicaments in Canada to friends in China. Fei further observes that the key factor in the network structure of Chinese society is that one's obligations to family and kinship networks override the obligations to more distant network ties. This does not contradict the stance that Chinese society is individual-oriented since the preferential attachment to the family is still negotiated through the lens of the individual, such as in the practice of *baoxibubaoyou*. The different stories that were told to family and acquaintances could then be attributed to their different network obligations.

¹³⁴ Many respondents echoed this view when asked about their present coping strategies in Canada.

¹³⁵ During a male focus group session, participants reflected on how, by virtue of the "spread-out" nature of Canadian cities, cars are regarded more as items of necessity in Canada. By contrast, cars are quite frequently

In writing this section, I made the basic argument that selection occurs at both ends of the information flow between early migrants and potential migrants. The social embeddedness of information is evident through the decisions (whether conscious or unconscious) to tell or not to tell, to listen or not to listen. What is missing from my writing though, is the real sense of poignancy, which accompanied my respondents' words. Although I have attempted to foreground what they said to me, their literal voices - emotional, dry or ironic - cannot be recreated, and can only be left to the reader's imagination. The next section focuses on another, ultimately social, medium - the Internet.

Anonymous Interventions: Opening Up a New Forum?

A minor revolution has occurred in the transnational flow of information across the Pacific Ocean. In recent years, the increasing popularity of the Internet in China¹³⁶, coupled with the burgeoning number of websites on immigration, has resulted in the Internet being regarded as a highly important source of information on immigration issues for potential migrants. In fact, almost all the respondents who arrived in 2001 had utilised the Internet during their immigration process.¹³⁷ Apart from accessing official websites such as that of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, respondents relied on websites maintained by two other major categories of webmasters - immigration companies¹³⁸ and earlier immigrants. My focus here is on websites maintained by earlier immigrants in Canada. Sophisticated in their design and presentation, these websites contain an impressive quantity of detailed information that range from pragmatic

symbols of status in China, although this is growing to be less of the case as China's car population is increasing rapidly.

¹³⁶ Official estimates indicate there were 22.5 million Chinese with online access as of early 2001, and 200 million users are forecast by 2005 (Harwit and Clark, 2001).

¹³⁷ Respondents arriving in or after 1999 were more likely to have used the Internet than the earlier respondents since the Internet had not been as popular then.

guides on application procedures; to message boards which allow the exchange of queries and comments; to personal accounts in the form of journal entries, some of which have gathered a steady following. Table 6.1 shows some of the more popular websites among my respondents.

| No. | Title | Website address |
|-----|---|---|
| 1 | <i>Dabenxiang</i> | http://immi.virtualave.net/links.html |
| 2 | Chinasmile | http://www.chinasmile.net |
| 3 | VanSky.com | http://vansky.com |
| 4 | Online Community for Chinese Canadians | http://www.rolia.net/index.php |
| 5 | Tigtag.com – We put the world at your fingertips! | http://www.tigtag.com/community/whatsnew.asp |
| 6 | Sina living space | http://eladies.sina.com.cn/aboard |
| 7 | Everything for you | http://www.is4u.net/index.php3 |
| 8 | NWIC.com | http://www.cnwic.com/newdiscuss/index.asp |

Table 6.1. Popular websites on immigration issues.

A distinctive feature of such websites is their interactive nature, where users can enter forums to discuss related issues.¹³⁹ Common forum topics include “immigration application”, “finding jobs” and “life in Canada”. Potential immigrants frequently pose questions to earlier immigrants, some of whom would reply, hence showing a willingness to share their immigration experiences with a wider community. The webmaster of *Yangyang’s Forum – DIY to Canada* quite consciously encouraged this spirit:

I hope this website can offer help to friends who are at different stages of the immigration process. To help everyone solve their problems, find happiness, increase mutual understanding, and find friends who share the same ideals during the process of immigration. No matter which corner of the globe everyone ends up eventually, never forget that it was on *Yangyang’s* website where we spent the times when our minds were most unstable.

¹³⁸ Refer to Chapter 5.

¹³⁹ The convention is for users to first register. They can then participate by posting messages or replying to the ones already posted. Usually, there are moderators to ensure that users adhere to Internet protocol.

His last line hints at one aspect that particularly differentiates the Internet from other sources of information on immigration – the frank outpouring of immigrants’ frustrations and disappointments. **“What the media and the newspapers publicize tends to be more positive, what the immigration companies publicize is all positive,”** Orina said, **“the Internet is more detailed and there are all kinds of information. This way, you can look at all sorts. For example, some immigrants may be very disappointed when they arrived. It is not like what they imagined. The news that they circulate back is available on the Internet. This gives a kind of pointer to those people in China who want to come over.”** Shixiong suggested to me, **“you may even get more information from the Internet than interviews. Moreover, these are from the heart.”** Essay titles such as **“Think thrice before immigrating to Canada”**¹⁴⁰, **“Thoughts on Vancouver: immigration was a mistake”**¹⁴¹ **“I hate Canada through and through”**¹⁴² are apt illustrations of the stronger, and by no means isolated, sentiments circulating in cyberspace. Warnings, such as that below, appear quite regularly.

To compatriots who are thinking of immigrating: if you are already past your prime years, if you have your own piece of sky in China, if you have a house and income that is not bad, if you have the ability and opportunity to make contributions towards the country’s scientific technology, then you should think carefully before making the decision to migrate. Once you step out, it will not be easy to turn back.¹⁴³

In essays revolving around the theme “My immigration journey”, immigrants document their actual experiences, as well as their thoughts and feelings of the process. I will now look briefly at a series of essays written by Wang Youxin to provide a sense of the detailed nature of some of these explorations while at the same time recognising the potential for

¹⁴⁰ In an essay entitled “Floating” on *Dabenxiang*.

¹⁴¹ On NWIC.com.

¹⁴² On Vansky.com.

multiple interpretations by subjects. Highly recommended by respondents, the series is entitled “**A letter from a new immigrant to friends in the home country**”. It started on 15 September 1996 with the 25th, and most recent, essay dated 4 June 2002¹⁴⁴. Of his motivations, Wang wrote,

I am introducing Canada at length here from a new immigrant’s personal experience, hoping that my family and friends can learn something from it because one of my aims for going abroad is to increase the understanding between Chinese and Canadian people. Because I miss all of you! I hope to have a chance of publication one day.

It is clear from Wang’s writing that his letters are, paradoxically, both personal and public. Personal in that the content of his letters is largely based on his own experiences; and public in that his letters are intended for an audience of present and potential immigrants, with whom he tries to establish ties of familiarity by addressing them as “**my dear family and friends**”. He is careful to emphasize – thrice – that his letters “**are not representative because I have only just arrived in Canada, thus the letters are understandably partial and may not be correct**”. This tone of apparent objectivity reflects his aim of offering readers an account that is devoid of the issue of “face”. In fact, he suggests that readers have to decipher migrants’ language in this way:

If people say that they are doing an ordinary job, it means *dagong* jobs that don’t require professional skills. If they say that they found a professional job here very quickly, it means that they have found jobs equivalent to the level of technicians. Without 5 years, it is almost impossible for overseas students or immigrants to be in professional jobs such as engineers or doctors.

An overarching theme in Wang’s letters is the difficulty of finding jobs. In a letter entitled *Dagong*, he outlined the experiences of 10 married couples, each with a similar tale: of

¹⁴³ On *Dabenxiang*.

former Associate Professors and engineers in China now working as factory workers and babysitters¹⁴⁵. Piling the stories one after the other, he concluded:

I believe that everyone who sees this may have a bitter smile. These situations are what Mainland Chinese - who love their face - would not be willing to tell truthfully in their letters home. [...] Dear family and friends, please eradicate your illusions about abroad. Begin from what you have by your side, and be down-to-earth about doing things for your country, your civilisation, and yourself.

I suggest the desired poignant effect might, however, be undermined by his own experience of finding a “proper job” as a technician in his professional field - with an annual salary of CAD\$29 000 - after being in Canada for 66 days. Despite emphasizing that his situation is “extremely rare” – **“it’s like being on an express train, obtaining what people get only after four or five years of hardship”** – there is a possibility readers might think that they could be an exception like him, especially now that they have his letters to read as a guide. This is, of course, only a surmised guess. The more important issue here is the different interpretations that readers have of these letters. On one hand, the rationale of the “inadmissible truth” could apply here¹⁴⁶. Wang himself lamented, **“friends in China didn’t have the expected responses”**, giving the example of a friend who told him that he neither understood nor believed the content of the letters when he was in China¹⁴⁷. Among Wang’s letters, friends in China found the one on *dagong* the most difficult to comprehend. What puzzled them was: **“if PhDs and Masters all have to *dagong*, and even *dagong* jobs are so difficult to find, why don’t they return to China?”** and their conclusion was: **“since**

¹⁴⁴ The essays were posted on the Internet from January 1999 onwards. Many websites include his essays. Here, I am using the *Dabenxiang* and *Chinasmile* websites as sources.

¹⁴⁵ Four couples’ children are still in China.

¹⁴⁶ Boyang cited an incident on the Internet where other surfers rebuked an immigrant in the following manner: **“Having landed, you say that it is not good. You are attacking the confidence of those of us who have not yet landed.”**

¹⁴⁷ Upon arrival in Canada, he felt that Wang had not written sufficiently about the difficulties that would be encountered.

they don't return, life abroad is still better than in China.”¹⁴⁸ Such a response is similar to those encountered by Junqiang and Shuwen (pg. 30) when persuading friends to reconsider their migration decisions. On the other hand, Wang's letters might also successfully convey the impression he intended. Shulin recounted how PRC immigrants who arrived in the last two years told her that they had **“some mental preparation about Canada because they looked at Wang Youxin's letters on the Internet, and thus know what the situation is like.”** Wang quotes two other readers' responses:

After reading your letter, I don't have that wild impulse anymore. What is left is rationality, allowing me to have a better understanding of Canada. I can do something more valuable, and that is to keep studying English, especially oral English.

I don't know why but after reading your essays, I had an unspeakable feeling. As though that initial desire for abroad has completely vanished. Instead, images of immigrants struggling for a living appear in front of me. Now when I walk on the streets and see those poor people from the countryside searching for work in the city¹⁴⁹, I really cannot imagine how I will be like when I am at that stage myself. I really don't dare to imagine. Are most of Canada's immigrants' lives like that?

Between the shores of Canada and China, e-mails flew to and fro, with Wang spending up to two hours daily on answering queries from his readers. Replying to his readers' questions about whether they should go abroad and what is actually good about abroad, he wrote:

It is very difficult to answer this question. In my letters, I talked about the harsher side of life in Canada, but in actual fact, where would life not be hard? Now I like Canada very much because this place is fair - you reap what you sow. As to whether you should come to Canada, the crux lies in what you want out of life. This is a question of your philosophy on life. What is the meaning of life to you? Is it wealth, happiness, career, or other things? What can fulfil your needs more?

¹⁴⁸ Significantly, Wang's response was cast in romantic terms, comparing the initial hardships immigrants have to face to **“the mermaid drinking the potion, tail becoming legs, walking into the human world. For her love, she has to face so many tests, undergo so much pain!”**

My objectives in highlighting these extracts are twofold. First, I wish to provide a sketch of the vast resources available on the Internet for potential immigrants. The possibilities of the Internet as a medium for the exchange of information, interaction, and the formation of identities have only recently been recognised (Nyiri, 2000; Crang and May, 1999; Turkle, 1996). By virtue of their education and professional status, potential independent immigrants are precisely the ones who are likely to have greater access to, and proficiency in using the Internet in China. While websites operated by CIC and other Canadian government bodies, as well as immigration companies, were popular among respondents for “factual information”, websites such as those listed in Figure 6.1 cater to the needs of immigrants in a wider spectrum of ways. Wang’s letters, for instance, provide a personal touch to the issue of immigration, and this appears to have certain resonance among the Internet audience, judging from responses posted on the websites.

On these websites, “forums” are both *places* in which, and *media* through which, ideas and views on immigration can be exchanged. These forums should be distinguished from the other sources discussed earlier since obtaining information from friends and family consists of interaction at the personal scale – hence possibly involving the complicated intercepting issues of “*baoxibubaoyou*” and “face” – which is different in nature from the anonymity associated with Internet usage; moreover, print materials such as guidebooks do not allow for the feedback functions found on the websites. In light of these considerations, I think the growth of websites on immigration is an

¹⁴⁹ This is in reference to Wang’s suggestion to another reader to wear old and tattered clothes, and stand for a day at the place where people from the countryside wait for potential employers, in order to experience what it feels like as an immigrant.

exciting development in the history of recent PRC immigration to Canada because potential immigrants can be better informed of the process and likely prospects of immigration to Canada.

This leads to my second - and what appears to be contradictory – objective: to demonstrate that the Internet should not be over-valorised as a source of “objective” information since it is still highly socially mediated, not least at the reception end. As Shixiong noted, **“there are all kinds of voices, you have to analyse for yourself to see what are the right views and the extremist ones”**. Selective reading is one possible tendency. Junnie, who regarded the Internet as a more “genuine” source of information than guidebooks, commented, **“Letters with a positive attitude are more widely spread because people hope to receive upbeat information. The Internet also has views that are very pessimistic. When I was thinking about it, I didn’t think too much about the pessimistic ones since I wanted to carry on with this [immigration] matter.”** Apart from a positive bias, the phenomenon of the inadmissible truth may also apply. Even when potential migrants come across the negative stories, Orina believes **“most people will still come because people usually want to keep walking forward, and are unwilling to turn back.”**

Hence, while the advancement of information technology can collapse space and time in transmitting the stories of immigrants in foreign lands to potential immigrants in China, certain cultural logics still persist. In the next section, I reflect upon why potential migrants carry on with their plans for immigration even when they are aware that it will not be an easy path.

Taking the Plunge: Dilemmas and Decisions

Junnie and her husband Guanghui applied for immigration to Canada in mid 1999. Between their application approval in early 2001 and their landing in the latter part of the year, they were making preparations for a new life in Canada. The news relayed to them over the Internet was, however, very negative. Junnie, who was in a cheerful state till this point of the interview, confided, **“The pressure was very great; we were very uncomfortable.”** They faced a dilemma that confronted a significant proportion of the very recent PRC independent immigrants: whether to continue with their decision to immigrate or to remain in China. Quite frequently, the very recent immigrants told me they had waited until their landing papers almost reached the deadlines before they came to Canada. Adeline characterised this reluctance, **“the closer it was to the deadline the more unwilling I was to come... until the last day of the deadline.”** Cheryl described her conflicting feelings:

On the one hand, I felt that even if I did not go out, I was doing very well. I have so many opportunities staying in China. I can earn so much money. I can buy a car and a house etc. Those who come out have to start all over again. They have to rent a house there, work very hard, and start all over again. I felt that I did not envy them. On the other hand, I felt, *aiyoh*¹⁵⁰, it is quite good for those who are overseas. They have, afterall, obtained a *shenfen*¹⁵¹ from overseas and so on. Thus, PRC people are in a very ambivalent situation.

Their personal dilemmas about giving up their jobs and a familiar way of life were sometimes compounded by pressures from family and friends to remain in China. Ruhao's family was “unanimously” against his immigration, and many of his friends tried to persuade him to abandon the idea. Minglu's best friend even commented disapprovingly,

¹⁵⁰ Usually used to express envy.

¹⁵¹ Landed immigrant status.

“What are you going there for? What can you do?”¹⁵² At this stage, the same motivations for migration may persist but with the amount of effort¹⁵³, time and money, as well as emotional commitment invested in the process of application, immigration, for many, is a matter that *has* to be completed. As Junnie divulged, **“You have already put your heart into doing it – financially and professionally... and you have imagined it as being real.”** The notion that immigration is a process, which starts even before the physical crossing of borders, is evident in her changing valorisation of the immigration application.

At first, we thought that we would do it first. It’s only a case of sending the application, we can continue doing other things. It won’t affect me. However, when you have actually started doing this, it is very hard to stop. Because it means a person’s dreams and her hopes for development in the future have been invested. How can you change it? It is very difficult to take a step back. (Junnie)

A common feeling was that since the application had been successful, they should “go out and take a look”. This was, after all, an “opportunity” which they felt could not be given up, even if they were unsure about its consequences. Moreover, the sentiment was - as Peirong had explained to her concerned friends - **“if it is not good, I will come back”**. Otherwise, it could be **“a new path”**. Weimin felt the same way when encouraging his daughter Jennifer to proceed with her immigration plans.

As a parent, I hope that if my child fulfils the requirements, she can go out and create a new path. She has learnt English¹⁵⁴. **If she doesn’t go to an English-speaking country to try and train... it would be a regret.** [This is] a

¹⁵² While the friend might view Shanghai – where they were living – as a better place for development than abroad, Minglu felt this was because **“his economic position in Shanghai was better than mine. Everyone in different positions says different things. If my condition in China is very poor, I would not regret coming here but if I was doing very well in China, if I was able to utilise my professional knowledge and skills, I need not come here.”** A proclivity for comparison is revealed here.

¹⁵³ Due to the need for secrecy (discussed in Chapter 4), obtaining notary documents for the immigration application is a lengthy affair. Passports too are difficult to obtain although in recent years, this has been relatively easier. A popular strategy that appears to be “common knowledge” among my respondents is to join regional package tours, such as those offering the Singapore-Malaysia-Thailand itinerary. Learning English to pass the immigration interview is another major undertaking for the principal applicants.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer’s undergraduate degree specialised in English.

kind of opportunity. If it is not ok, at the worst she can come back. The family would be welcoming. [Weimin]

Several respondents adopted a more philosophical approach towards the prospect of immigration. Aware that there would be hardship involved, Edward believed:

Young people have the spirit to take hardship. I do not think people are living to enjoy life, right, but to experience life. [...] No matter whether one succeeds or fails, when a young person has an opportunity to experience such a kind of life, there is a different meaning to his life. In the past, he might have merely wondered what overseas is like.

These responses indicate that the very recent skilled PRC immigrants – especially the ones who arrived from 2000 onwards – are likely to have pondered over their decisions after being informed about the possible difficulties ahead. Nonetheless, as C.S. Lewis (1952: 40) wisely commented, “You cannot see things unless you know roughly what they are”. Gerald echoed this view, **“You can’t imagine without experiencing at first hand. If you haven’t seen something before, how can you imagine it?”** Here, Gerald is alluding to the imagination being grounded in the “reality of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Other respondents perceived a clear distinction between imagination and reality.

I have told my family and friends not to imagine what this place is like. It is totally different from your imagination. (Siwan)

They think, not know. It is what they imagine. In actual fact, it is not the same. (Jingwen)

They may believe but in their hearts, they still do not understand. Even though they know that they will have to suffer hardship when they come out, and that it is difficult to look for jobs, but what you imagine - compared to reality - does not have that kind of personal experience, that kind of feeling. You are only thinking in your head that it may be very difficult when you are looking for a job, but as to how difficult it actually is, you do not know. So those who have not come out are still trying their utmost to come out. (Evelyn)

Experience is deemed to be the necessary bridge between imagination and reality. The passive reception of information about abroad is insufficient since as Cheryl expressed, **“Listening to other people, it is other people’s experiences.”** Linda’s friends told her, **“Aiyah, I have not gone there. I still don’t know. It is useless for you to say all this.”** Potential migrants hence perceive a need to experience life in Canada for themselves. In Haiwen’s view, **“You have to experience the bitter and the sweet for yourself.”** Zhehui had many friends in Vancouver who provided him with information before his arrival. **“However,”** he said, **“it is indirect experience. Only when you personally experience this place, will you know what this place is like.”** The desire to experience Canada prior to immigration is, despite that, not a feasible option for most PRC independent immigrants. Frustrated with the prevalent misrepresentations, Junnie expounded:

I have heard people - including the native Canadians¹⁵⁵ - say, “Why do you people come without sufficient understanding?” For example, many people will complain that they regret coming here, and people will say that they deserve it because they came without understanding it properly. However, PRC people have a special situation in that they are not able to come over and understand it properly. It is very difficult for them to come out. One factor is the requirements by the PRC authorities for going out, and another is economic. Apart from studying abroad, family visits and work visits, there aren’t many other reasons you can use for coming out. You have no choice. [...] I feel that native Canadians still have prejudice in that they feel PRC immigrants are very blinded. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, this cannot be helped.

Even when given the opportunity to visit Vancouver before immigration, I suggest that it may not necessarily always be possible to give an objective appraisal. Jianming came to Vancouver for a conference before his immigration. After staying for two weeks with his friends and distant relatives, he felt that Vancouver was **“too good”**, and was impressed

¹⁵⁵ Junnie gave the example of her teacher in an employment training class who commented that unlike the PRC immigrants who came without being familiar with their employment prospects, he would have gone to Mexico on a holiday first to check for its suitability if his long-term plan were to retire in Mexico.

with its natural and social environment. On a sunny day at Stanley Park, Lihuan met a few PRC tourists who told her she was “like living in paradise”. While Jianming and the tourists might have experienced the *place* of Vancouver, their *subjectivities* are also central to the nature of their experiences. Following the drift of this argument would imply that potential migrants would naturally not be able to fully understand the predicaments of actual immigrants in Vancouver since it is not yet an everyday reality for them. Such a perspective would privilege experience as an important means of knowing the migrants’ destination; and is the subject of the concluding section.

Conclusion: The Perspective of Experience

To experience in the active sense requires that one ventures forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain. [...] Why should one so dare? A human individual is driven. He is passionate, and passion is a token of mental force.
(Tuan, 1977: 9)

Taking into account Lowenthal’s (1961: 257) insight that “all information is inspired, edited, and distorted by feeling”, this chapter has examined the transnational flow of information between Canada and China from both ends of origin and reception. The ultimate goal, though, has been to understand potential migrants’ prior knowledge of Canada, and how such knowledge influences their decision to migrate to Canada. This empirical focus has, at the same time, served to illuminate a wider theoretical concern on tensions between the objective and subjective facets of knowledge, in particular drawing out the significance of individual subjectivities in interpretation. By studying potential migrants’ thoughts and feelings before their migration – albeit upon hindsight – different worlds of reality are traversed. First, the world of their everyday life in China, which is normally taken for granted as reality, and is a world that “originates in their thoughts and

actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 21). Second, the imagined world of Canada that is removed from them in terms of space and time, and yet holds the promise of *becoming* real. There is an ongoing correspondence between the two worlds as potential migrants seek their desired realities in the imagined world even as they wonder whether that world would still offer them the familiar comforts of their everyday world.

At the crossroads of human experience, the two worlds are brought together. Immigrants place a premium on experience as an avenue to truly understand life in the new country. This can be appreciated for what seems to be real and true depends “on what we know about ourselves and not only on what we know about the external world. Indeed, the two kinds of knowledge are inextricably connected” (Hutten, 1959 quoted in Lowenthal, 1961: 258). Since experience is “compounded of feeling and thought” (Tuan, 1977: 10), and by definition, implies practical engagement with external facts or events, it is an apt medium. Without experience, the information received by potential migrants lacks personal meaning; and in many cases, it is precisely the hope of experiencing a different way of life that draws migrants to the *New World* of Canada.

Chapter 7

Bridging Imaginary and Real Worlds: Lived Experiences in Canada

There is a saying, “Whether Canada is heaven or hell, the crux is if you have a good job.” If you have a very good job, it is heaven. If you have no job, then it is hell. It is not better than going back to China. (Peirong)

Immigration is almost always very painful. Why? Even though it is a good path for development, the change is too drastic; it decides the way you live for the rest of your life. It is not easy to take this step. I thought of giving it up a number of times, but eventually - after pondering over it - I still decided to walk on. (Haiwen)

Although my focus in the previous chapters has mainly been on the imagination, and discursive practices, of PRC migrants prior to migration, the very real struggles that these migrants are undergoing after their arrival in Canada pose serious questions about their current circumstances, as well as the kind of attitudes, and strategies, that they are adopting at present, and in the future. During interviews and focus groups with respondents, up to one third of the time was spent in understanding their experiences in Vancouver. However, due to the constraint of space, I can only provide a brief - but hopefully significant – glimpse into their lives in Canada.

Through the words they chose, my respondents painted a poignant picture of their worlds after migration. Almost all of them faced a drop in living standards. Two issues stand out, both through the sheer number of times they were mentioned, and the degree to which they affected the respondents: employment and language barriers. For some respondents, the availability of childcare, and marital difficulties, were also concerns. The strategies they adopted to counter these problems were at times transnational – bridging the distance between China and Canada – but, almost always, familial. With these experiences, how

likely are they to remain in Canada? Conversely, are there indications of return migration to China, or migration elsewhere?

Lofty Ambitions, Thwarted Dreams

With a wry smile, Evelyn, 35, told me that when she was among friends from the PRC, they would say that their time in Vancouver was like “*shangshanxiaxiang*”, which referred to a movement - during the Cultural Revolution in China - whereby educated urban youth would be sent to “labour and reform” in the countryside and mountain areas. When asked to explain, she pointed out that although PRC independent immigrants had professional skills, they too were subjected to “**doing all that laborious work**”. Jingwen related to me another “joke” that was circulating among her social circle of fellow PRC migrants:

We have a joke that skilled immigrants are like those Sichuan seasonal migrant workers coming to Guangdong to work. They are interior farmers coming to Guangdong to do very rough work. They have poor meals, and live in very bad conditions... very, very bad ones. We compare ourselves - skilled immigrants who have come to Canada - to agricultural workers who come to Guangdong to do those kinds of work. (My emphasis)

A common element in the two respondents’ descriptions is the usage of past, and contemporary, events in China to contextualize their experiences in Canada. Immigration, by definition, connotes arrival at a different place. However, this does not mean a tabula rasa, a past way of thinking, and living, erased from their minds. Instead, their frames of reference fluctuate between the familiar world of China, and the new world of Canada, and not infrequently, arise from both simultaneously. Thus for Jingwen, who had migrated from Guangdong, those workers were “coming” – not “going” - to Guangdong, just as she herself had “come to” Canada. From listening to my respondents, it seems to me that what renders their experiences in Canada all the more poignant, is their instinctive comparison of present

circumstances with past achievements and status that may mean little in a different society.

Cheryl describes a sentiment common to many respondents:

A general feeling is that after coming out, there is a big drop. Because no matter from which angle you look at it, it is a drop as those who are able to come out by using their skilled qualifications are generally doing quite well in China. First, they have very good educational qualifications. Second, they definitely have a very good job in China, and they have worked up to a certain position. That is to say, those who are more flexible in thinking¹⁵⁶ are normally the ones whose circumstances are better. If their personal circumstances in China were poor, they wouldn't have the prerequisites to walk towards a greater height, right? So those who come out are quite outstanding but after coming out...- of course they came out with aspirations - but after coming to a strange place, there is more or less a drop.

Sienna offers an explanation for the "big drop" that is experienced:

In China, rent is very cheap, and also, you don't pay many taxes. And you don't have so many bills... Most people own their apartments, or the work units provide you the living place, so we don't need to worry about the living place. But here, it's so crucial. You must pay rent. Otherwise, you'll be out of the house. You won't have any place to live. So it is a very critical situation. In China, most people have a low salary but they have low expenses too. They don't need to worry about too many things. And for us, we had a better pay. With lower expenses, we had more than enough to put in our savings accounts, and we also have a job. It is easier to find a job with your educational qualifications, with your university degree. But here, you are in a new country so you have to start from the beginning. Of course it is very, very different.

Many respondents told me that their lifestyles had undergone a drastic transformation after migration. One particularly significant change, as Sienna had mentioned, is that the majority of my respondents presently live in rented basements or apartments, which contrasts with their previous housing situation in China, where they either owned their

¹⁵⁶ She is associating migrants with a more "flexible" kind of thinking.

houses or paid nominal rents to their work units.¹⁵⁷ Another difference that is often observed is the sharp alteration in their spending patterns. Participants at a female focus group illustrated this animatedly:

In China, you would buy an air-conditioner even if it were tens of thousands of dollars.¹⁵⁸ (Charlene) Yes, you would buy it as you please. Buy the best. But here, you can't. You have to buy the cheapest. (Peirong) My laserdisc was RM5-6000. My phone was more than RM3000. No need to be frugal. (Charlene) When buying second-hand furniture here, you will even bargain to reduce it from \$50 to \$30!¹⁵⁹ (Shulin)

Accompanying these material changes is an acute sense among the respondents that their social status had plummeted since their migration to Canada. Participants at a male focus group raised this issue:

In China, we had the status and (economic) ability to discriminate against others. When we come here, however, we are discriminated by others! (Boyang) [Laughter from the other participants who appreciated the irony.]

It's the difference between the *absolute* and *relative* standard of living. [Minghui: Yes.] In China, your absolute standard of living is probably lower than here when you consider factors such as the air and natural environment, but your relative standard of living is high. There are many others who are not as good as you. Don't even talk about those who have *xiagang* (been retrenched¹⁶⁰). How could those with jobs possibly earn more money than a departmental head?¹⁶¹ Here, the absolute standard of living is more equal; it is all very high. Every household has a car.¹⁶² That is no

¹⁵⁷ The value that PRC immigrants often place on home ownership is suggested by the finding that the earlier immigrants who arrived in 1996 and 1997, as well as those who were of better economic circumstances, would tend to buy their own houses.

¹⁵⁸ Here, she is referring to the Chinese currency.

¹⁵⁹ Note that unlike other streams of PRC migration, the skilled immigrants usually do not send remittances to China. Menglin jokes, to much laughter from the rest of the female focus group, "I think it is a case of money being sent here instead." Shulin said, "My sister often calls me, saying that she knows someone who is coming to Canada, and asks whether I need any clothes. They all feel that we cannot cope here." Peirong added, "Before I went back to China last year on a work visit, I asked my friends in Shanghai whether they wanted me to bring anything from Canada. They said, 'Now, how could there be things that you can bring from Canada? There can only be things that you can bring from Shanghai to Canada, only things to be brought from here, and not from there.'" (News about conditions in Canada appears to have travelled back in these cases.)

¹⁶⁰ The phrase usually applies to employees of state enterprises.

¹⁶¹ The rhetorical question assumes that many of the skilled immigrants are holding relatively high positions, which is quite often the case, but not always.

¹⁶² While car ownership is more common in the big Chinese cities now, it is still considered a status symbol. Hence, a respondent from Guangdong, Laifu, took care to inform me that he and his wife, Jingwen, had a car

problem. It is the most basic thing. But in terms of the relative standard of living, it has declined for us. Most people are living better than us. Thus our mental states are not balanced. (Zhiyang)

Key to Zhiyang's distinction between the absolute and relative standard of living is the constant comparison with other people, which respondents claim to be a particular preoccupation within Chinese society. The disappointments, and frustrations, that result from changes to the respondents' lives have prompted a saying that likens a PRC immigrant's life to the process of peeling an onion:

You are crying along while you are peeling the onion. By the time you have finished peeling, there are no more tears for you to cry, and all the money is spent.¹⁶³ (Elaine)

As discussed earlier in Chapter 4, a key reason for the migrants' decision to migrate was their quest for personal development, especially in terms of their career opportunities. Once here, several respondents felt that the experience of immigration had eroded their former zest. Xiaojiang revealed:

There is a lot that is worn off for those who have an ambitious mindset towards their career. Take me for instance, I had originally wanted to train here [in Vancouver], and then go on to Silicon Valley, climbing up to the peak of hardware engineering. But once I came here, I realised that this was not possible. This kind of thinking has gradually faded. My thinking now is to buy a house, and have a stable goal, not like when I was in China. I know that I was the departmental head in China. After coming here, I have gone down a rung.

Participants in the female focus group agreed:

each before others did, and his was a Lexus. Being a businessman earning between RM500 000-2 million a year, his case appears to be the exception though. (Jingwen is the principal applicant for Independent immigration.) My impression is that a substantial number of the principal applicants started owning cars – usually second-hand ones – only when they were in Canada. When reflecting on possible improvements in their lives after migration, a few mentioned that they were now owning cars, a good which they might not have been able to afford in China.

¹⁶³ Elaine heard the saying from PRC friends in Vancouver.

I think when those who had lofty ambitions and great ideals in the past have gone abroad, and stayed for a few years, they will think that they just want an ordinary, and plain, life. They may have thought of having a great career, and achievement, in North America before they went abroad. But after staying here for a few years, they don't have this kind of thinking anymore. They feel that it is not bad to have a stable job already, to pass their lives peacefully. That's what our friends told us when they returned to visit us. They were once people who had a great deal of ambition. (Shulin)

People say that if they want to have a great career, they should go back to China. [...] After some time [in Canada], I feel that you would be worn down until you have no extravagant hopes. In China, you would definitely not think that you merely want to go over to lead a plain life. After coming over, reality has given you a blow, and you think that if you can learn English, then it is not bad already. (Menglin)

The greatest wish is to find a good job. (Peirong)

In the next section, I examine the grounds for these sentiments.

Challenges in a New Country

The Employment Conundrum

What disappoints me after coming here is that about 80% of those I know are not in their original occupations. [...] Most have changed occupations. It is very much a loss. After studying for so many years, they can't be in this line, and have to change to another line. It is a waste. All the resources are wasted. (Yihui)

To paint a bold brushstroke, the single most critical issue facing recent PRC skilled immigrants today is that of employment, more specifically, employment which is commensurate with their educational qualifications and work experience. As outlined earlier in Chapter 3 (see especially Table 3.17), there is a striking change in my respondents' occupations upon immigration. Respondents identified three main obstacles hindering their employment in professional occupations: 1) local work experience, 2) licensing requirements set by professional associations, and 3) language. These obstacles – save that

of language – are, however, not entirely unique to PRC skilled immigrants. Rather, they need to be viewed as problems faced by new skilled immigrants to Canada in general (see for example, Bauder, 2002; Geddie, 2002). The importance of context nonetheless means that an understanding of the particularities of the PRC immigrants' situations is necessary for a situated study. Besides, there is also the consideration of the PRC skilled immigrants' persisting status as the largest source group of skilled immigrants for Canada since 1998.

To appreciate the employment difficulties, let us turn briefly to the experiences of a married couple, Elaine and Philip, who landed in Canada in 2000. Elaine, 36, used to be a human resource manager at a hotel while Philip, 38, was the assistant director of a shipping company. Both held Masters degrees from well-respected universities in China, and had travelled to other countries on work visits. Upon arrival, Philip sent out his resumes – **“maybe up to a hundred”** – to companies, but only three or four replied, with negative results. Elaine too met similar rebuffs. Four months later, Philip found a job at a Chinese supermarket and worked there for half a year before deciding to take TOEFL exams for university application. Finding his TOEFL results unsatisfactory, he took up a communications course at the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) while working part-time at a factory. He was later laid off from the factory, and is presently on unemployment benefits. Meanwhile, Elaine had changed several jobs: working in a food court for 3 weeks,¹⁶⁴ and then as an assistant to a realtor for a few months. Finally, she found her present job as a sales coordinator with a telephone card company. Their eventual plan is to get a degree in Canada because **“No matter whether we are to stay here to**

¹⁶⁴ Elaine told me half in jest, “This was my first labour job. I had never worked in such a job in China. At that time, I thought I should give it a try, to see how it felt, like in *A Beijing Native in New York*; they had

develop, or to go back, either way it is needed. If we are in North America, we need a local degree. Were we to go back to China, it would be better for us if we have a North American degree.”

While Philip recognised that **“the language problem has caused a very big obstacle in terms of employment, especially if you want to work in your original profession”**, he was indignant about his credentials and work experience not being recognised in Canada. This point was also echoed by many of my respondents, with considerable strength of feeling. Philip pointed out that when he was applying for immigration, the immigration authorities had requested for, and approved, his Chinese educational qualifications. Yet, when he used those very certificates to apply for jobs, the Canadian companies demanded **“local degrees”**. Similarly, with regards to the often-asked requisite of **“local experience”**, Jingyuan said:

The Canadian Immigration Department is also misleading. When we were applying for immigration, they wanted to know your experiences in China, and these are given points. However, when we come here to look for work, we discover that the experiences in China are absolutely useless. You have to begin all over again.

Yihui further remarked, **“Canada’s ‘local experience’ really puts people at a great distance. It uses this line to put people at a distance.”**¹⁶⁵ While it is understandable that the respondents felt this way, another respondent Cecilia is right to distinguish between the Canadian government’s immigration regulations and the Canadian employers’ requirements. Nevertheless, faced with the respondents’ stories, and anecdotal accounts that suggest the

started their way working up from a restaurant. I thought I should really have such an experience. Otherwise, it would be very regretful!”

¹⁶⁵ As several respondents argued, a vicious cycle was built: without local experience, they would not be able to enter the relevant occupations; which in turn meant that they would never be able to obtain the requisite local experience.

widespread impact of this issue amongst recent PRC skilled immigrants, a pressing question, which David Ley (1999: 16-17) posed in another context, needs to be asked:

What are Canada's obligations in terms of the human and economic costs some members of this population face, and that have made some of them angry at what they see as misrepresentation and deceit?

Ruhao, 31, was formerly a thermal engineer in China and his wife, Eileen, 30, used to be an accountant in the civil service. They earned about RM200 000 each annually, leading rather comfortable lifestyles. After immigration to Canada in 2001, Ruhao sent out more than a hundred resumes¹⁶⁶ without receiving any interview opportunities. Presently, Ruhao is a worker in a warehouse owned by a "Westerner",¹⁶⁷ and is paid \$9/hour.¹⁶⁸ During the peak season, he would work 50 hours a week (including overtime pay for 10 hours) whereas during the off-peak season, he would work for about 30 hours a week. Eileen, on the other hand, is volunteering¹⁶⁹ at a non-governmental organisation while preparing to attend English lessons at the Vancouver School Board before eventually taking courses for a professional certificate in accountancy.

When they were in China, Ruhao **"thought I would be able to pass some exams to obtain a licence. As long as I have the skill, I should be able to be assessed by an association for my standard. Even if I can't be an engineer, I can be a technician or be in some**

¹⁶⁶ Apart from some furniture, a computer and fax machine occupied the central position in the living room. I could not help noticing that these were two very common fixtures in my respondents' houses. The fax machines were invariably used for sending resumes, and the computers usually for Internet usage, offering yet another hint of the high Internet literacy amongst PRC skilled immigrants.

¹⁶⁷ Upon deciding to find non-professional jobs – albeit as a temporary measure – most respondents indicated that they preferred working in a "Westerner's" company, if given a choice, mainly in the hope of being in an English-speaking environment, and to a certain extent, to avoid discrimination; or bullying, by Chinese employers (often Hong Kong or Taiwanese immigrants). (Note the similarity between this reality and the advice given in the guidebooks discussed in Chapter 5.) Most, however, end up working in Chinese-owned companies either due to language barriers or recommendations from friends. Colleagues in either case tend to be fellow immigrants, though not necessarily from China.

¹⁶⁸ The minimum wage of \$8/hour is regarded as a norm when PRC immigrants start work in "labour jobs".

other similar position.”¹⁷⁰ Reality proved to be different from his expectations. Ruhao and Eileen shared with me their feelings about the difficulty in finding jobs:

I think there is quite a big impact on your state of mind when you have not been able to find a suitable job after searching for a very long time. (Ruhao)

There is a strong feeling of defeat. Even if you were to look for a job in dishwashing, there are many people queuing for it. It is not that your requirements are high. You have already dropped your expectations to a very low level, yet it is not very easy to find.¹⁷¹ (Eileen)

Evelyn noted that skilled workers would “**feel especially lost if they are not making use of their skills**” and hence “**could not possibly willingly, and gladly, work in labour jobs**”. Even Zhuhong - who as a technician is in a comparatively better position - has conflicting feelings:

When I am in this situation, sometimes I still [get] depression...you have no feeling of achievement. In China, you have little money but people respect you, they know your ability. What you say, at least they will listen. Here it is very different.

Language Barriers: “Circling Outside Their Circle”

During a conversation, Diana Lary noted, “Language is something you don’t think about before migration, but once here, it becomes everything.” Indeed, apart from the issue of employment, the acquiring of English language skills is a major priority, and source of anxiety, for a significant number of respondents (refer to Table 3.16). Within a household,

¹⁶⁹ Regarded as a way to gain local experience.

¹⁷⁰ A number of other respondents, who were also engineers, voiced a similar view. To them, being a technician would be tantamount to a sacrifice already. However, they soon realised that in Canada, they would need to receive training at institutes, such as BCIT.

¹⁷¹ This can be seen in Shinan’s case where his dishwashing job in a “Westerner’s” restaurant was taken over by another person. His wife, Lanxin, commented, “Even a dishwashing job has such stiff competition. People are vying to do it. Maybe for the ‘Westerner’, it was a friend or relative. You see, it is not easy to wash dishes either.” Later, Shinan’s friend introduced him to his present part-time dishwashing job at a Hong Kong restaurant. Participants in the male focus group and several interviewees commented that dishwashing jobs also required “local experience”.

there is often one spouse – usually the principal applicant – who is stronger in English.¹⁷² The other spouse, depending on his or her standard of English, would attend either government-sponsored or private English as Second Language (ESL) classes.¹⁷³ Several principal applicants commented that high TOEFL scores did not translate into good spoken English. They perceived themselves as only knowing “dumb English”, whereby they had reasonable reading and writing skills in the language, but were poor in the aspects of listening and speaking. Minglu contemplates upon the difficulty of learning a language in his situation:

I can only say this: language [learning] is not about one or two days. Without three or five years, it is impossible to improve by a great deal. I am already trying my best. Here, I can only try my best to improve. I may try my best but it may not be realistic because of the environment. At home, I can't speak English. And outside, if you can't find a job that allows you to interact with the locals, then it is hard to raise your English standard. At the same time, if you can't raise your English standard, you can't find such jobs. It is a vicious cycle; the more you can't find such jobs, the more your English standard can't be improved.

My respondents frequently echo this view. Huiling, a researcher in the social sciences, represents one of the few respondents continuing in a similar occupation after migration. Working in an English-speaking environment, she remarked:

I think the language obstacle is not really manifested in everyday life, especially in Vancouver. There are really too many Chinese here. When I first came, I thought it is possible to survive here without speaking English. For example in the banks, they have a notice saying, “We can speak Mandarin and Cantonese.” Some banks even claim, “We can speak Hokkien”.¹⁷⁴ (Laughs) In Chinese supermarkets, there is no need to speak English since Mandarin is used. On the streets, to ask for directions... I

¹⁷² Although the respondents are likely to have taken English classes at some point during their education in China, their level of competency in the language depended largely on whether they had made the effort to learn, or practise, English on their own in China, whether out of consideration for their career prospects, the hope of studying overseas, or personal interest.

¹⁷³ Some respondents voiced a concern that the ESL classes sponsored by the government were of a level lower than their English language standards. Thus they had to take private ESL classes, such as those run by community colleges (e.g. Vancouver Community College).

¹⁷⁴ A Chinese dialect that originates from the Fujian province.

don't think there is any obstacle in terms of daily life. However, there are times when English is felt to be very important: finding a job, and at work. (At work) you will find that it takes a long time to raise the standard, or you feel that it is not as easy to express yourself in English as it is in your native tongue. During times like this, I will feel the importance of language.

Expressing their sentiments in layered nuances, my respondents noted that culture is imbued in language, and how, even if they were able to cross one barrier by mastering English, it would still be difficult for them to cross the cultural barrier, and communicate - in the true sense of the word.¹⁷⁵ One possible serious implication of this is that it is difficult for PRC migrants to interact with the English-speaking majority in Vancouver. Respondents often lamented how their attempts to integrate into Canadian society were being hindered by the lack of social bridges, resulting in their friendship circles being still largely Chinese (see Chapter 5). Philip conveyed his frustration:

Actually, how much we earn is not the main thing. We feel that we have been here for such a long time, but we have not entered the society. Even though we are in Canada, we are circling outside their circle. We have not entered it at all. This is in fact...how should I say it...we feel... this is the greatest failure, the greatest failure.¹⁷⁶ (My emphasis)

"Language barriers" are hence more than a synonym for the difficulties encountered in language acquisition. Rather, they have to be understood in terms of both their cultural and social implications for the PRC migrants.

¹⁷⁵ Boyang provides an amusing instance: "I have liked English since I was young, and had always been learning English when I was in China. When I got off the plane, I asked the customs officer 'Where's toilet?' (Everyone in the male focus group laughed.) He told me very warmly where it was, knowing that I meant "washroom", and I thought, 'Wow, my English is very much up to standard. People can understand what I am saying!' [Some laughter from the rest] After I came here, I told my landlord's daughter that I wanted to go to the toilet, and she said, 'Yeeks! That's disgusting!' I asked her why, and she said 'We never say that. You should say that you want to go to the 'washroom'!' It was only then that I knew how poor my English was, ha, ha." [The rest roared with laughter.]

¹⁷⁶ His wife, Elaine, said: "We are staying in Richmond. The people we are in contact with, the people in the shops, are all Chinese. At home, we speak Mandarin, and we speak Mandarin to our friends. There

Domestic Anxieties: Childcare, Education, and Marital Difficulties

Aside from facing employment and language barriers, immigrants may encounter issues that arise from within immigrant households themselves, often as a direct result of immigration. One important concern for households with young children is that of childcare. Previously in China, the extended family – usually the grandparents – tended to look after the respondents' children while both parents were at work. Otherwise, parents would place their children in childcare centres. Now in Canada, the absence of the extended family and affordable childcare means a reduction in – much needed – household income since only one parent can work while the other has to take care of the child at home. Such an arrangement makes it difficult for the latter to engage in work that can improve his or her career prospects or to study English.

Take for instance, Alice's situation. Alice, 38, is presently staying at home to take care of her two young children, aged 6 months and 7 years old while her husband, a former Maths teacher, works as a cook.¹⁷⁷ Outgoing and driven, she had been a teacher in a small city before moving to Shenzhen, where she worked her way up to the post of executive manager in five years, which was the highest position that a PRC citizen would have attained in a foreign company, as she was told by her Taiwanese boss. She then went alone to Singapore to work for a year, leaving her child to the care of her husband and parents-in-law. In China, she had never done any housework, and had to learn everything from scratch when she came to Canada.¹⁷⁸ Now, her dream is to become a teacher. In order to do that, she will have to

are no opportunities to speak English.” Philip added, “We cannot afford to stay where the ‘Westerners’ are staying. We can’t afford to stay in West or North Vancouver...”

¹⁷⁷ Alice was the principal applicant. As her husband's English was poor, Alice suggested that he should learn cooking skills in China.

¹⁷⁸ Several other female respondents made similar comments. Waters (2002) discovered this with the Hong Kong and Taiwanese astronaut wives too.

undertake further studies. However, her plan is impeded because there is no one to look after her children. Hence she hopes that that her parents-in-law will be allowed to visit them in Canada so that they can help to take care of the children for a period of time.¹⁷⁹ She argued:

The new immigrants' jobs are not very good. Both parents need to work for a long time to attain a certain living standard. There would be no one to take care of the children. The children would be put in nurseries, day-care, after school care, and places like that. Those places have a time period, right. The new immigrants from China often have to work overtime, to work very late, or on Sunday. First, there is no one to look after the children. Even if there is, our hearts are not at ease. So I think that if our parents can come over to take care of the children for a period of time, this would be more ideal. Maybe they [the Canadian authorities] will think: if the old people fall ill, they will increase Canada's load. They can buy insurance, right? [...] Old people may not necessarily fall ill when they come. [...] They are only here temporarily. If they are ill, they won't want to come. Who would want to come abroad to suffer when they are not well? In China, they have their pensions. Like my parents-in-law, when they are ill, the state pays. If they are ill, they will rather stay in China.

Parents with children of school-going age (around 7 years old) highlight a different concern: the children's education. Although many respondents had voiced that one of their migration motivations was for their children's education, some now harboured doubts about the style of education in Canada. Binya and Xiaojiang, whose child Zuyao is currently in grade one, said:

There is no stress in the school; it is more relaxing for the child. However, the education we imagined before migration is quite different from the reality. At that time, we thought the education must be very good. After we came here, I feel that the education is not anything great. Sometimes, I'm even worried whether we might have ruined the child. (Binya)
When he was in kindergarten in China, he was able to multiply one digit with two digit numbers for Maths. (Xiaojiang)

Grade one here is even easier than kindergarten! (Zuyao)

¹⁷⁹ With the family's present income, they are unable to satisfy the Canadian authorities' income requirement for their parents to visit.

The Maths he is learning now is not even up to what he learnt in kindergarten. (Xiaojiang)

We are in the dark about their education. Our language is not especially good yet.¹⁸⁰ I keep wondering whether the education is too loose here. If it is too loose for the child, there isn't any advantage. When the child is this big, he likes to play. As there is no stress at all, and he is free to do what he likes, he will become good if he is of good substance. If he is not of good substance, and yet he is free to be as he is, that should definitely not be the case! (Binya)

At a female focus group, Menglin and Peirong's comments mirrored these concerns:

The kids all like it here, but I don't... (Menglin)

The adults are all very anxious. Can they learn anything? Especially for the kids in grade one and two, can they learn anything? (Peirong)

I think it is a dilemma. (Menglin)

Yes! (Peirong)

Before coming out, I wanted to let him come out. After coming out, I felt that this was a little too relaxed for the child because the elementary education in China is stricter (Menglin)

While for these respondents, the "looser" educational system in Canada was a cause for worry, especially in terms of their children's abilities in Maths and Science subjects, other PRC migrants sang praises of the more flexible and creative education they perceived in Canada. For instance, Shulin said:

My child is in day-care now. She is just over 4. I feel that although she is learning less than the forced-feeding kind of education - she knows fewer words - but I feel that she has used her hands well. There are a lot of things in the study room which are made by her hands - drawings etc. The teacher puts a lot of things in front of you, and allows you to fully utilise your imagination, to use your hands to do things. I feel that the things she makes are quite fun. A paper plate with a piece of paper and some fruit pasted on it - she creates all that. I think this ability is stronger than that of the children in China. There is a lot of handiwork, but there are fewer lessons on words and Maths compared to the kindergartens in China.

¹⁸⁰ This means that it is hard for them to clarify their concerns about the child's education with the teachers.

On the whole, many parents felt that their children – released from the stress they faced at school in China – were enjoying their time in Canada. Turning to the adults themselves, Haiwen told me:

There are other issues involved in immigration, such as family problems, emotional problems... I dare not say what I have seen. In actual fact, immigration has many impacts on people, that is, on the family, on the child, on the wife.

Here, Haiwen is alluding to the marital problems that are faced by some PRC immigrant families. Due to the sensitive nature of this subject, I did not broach it unless the respondents themselves first brought it up. After Qihua's wife left the living room where we were conducting the interview, he disclosed:

There is quite a big change, of course... Here, the living standard is a little higher than in China, the expenses are also higher. Another change is that I often quarrel with my wife, more so... Maybe because the stress is greater, the load is heavier. In China, it is more stable - working. Usually... Before we left, there wasn't *xiagang* [retrenchment]. Now there's more of that. Not so at that time. It was more stable, and you wouldn't normally lose your job. Now, we often... sometimes we can't control ourselves and would lose a little temper. Sometimes after a few words, we would be impatient and we would... often quarrel and so on.

Qihua and Xiujing landed in Canada in 1997. Formerly a doctor practising western medicine in China, Xiujing worked in several odd jobs before being employed at a Chinese medical clinic where she stayed for three years. Last year, she opened her own Chinese medical clinic and is presently also teaching part-time at a Chinese medical academy. During the interview, it quickly became apparent that she felt highly stressed about her life in Canada. She confided:

Actually, I feel that there has been *a lot of stress* ever since we came out. I feel that *the stress is still very heavy*. Firstly, even if we have challenges in China, our livelihoods were ensured. We had jobs. I didn't have to worry about meals. As long as I have a job after university, even though it is not considered the best job, I can at least be counted as being in the middle

strata in terms of living standard. I did not have to worry, and I felt that my status was also reasonable. When you come out, you immediately face the problem of earning money for food. This is the most basic problem of survival. If you don't work, you won't have anything to eat. I really feel that my *stress has been very great* since coming out. [...] Now, I feel that I have found myself. After these 4 years of hard work, I feel that those many years of study in the past and being a doctor for almost 20 years, what I learnt in the past is still useful, and I am still using it... However, I still feel that *the pressure is very great* because even though I have my own clinic, you will make money only when you have business, so that is still a very tough process.

Qihua, a former engineer who held a Masters degree from Japan, had been retrenched from his last job. Xiujing hence felt that she was **“the only one who is propping it up.”** Despite the material and environmental benefits in Canada, she still longed for the less stressful life she led in China before migration.

In China, I would not have such great stress, and would be able to live in a more relaxed and unrestrained manner. Of course, our house would not be so spacious in China as there are many people in China. Thus the houses are smaller. The natural environment is also better here - the air and the physical environment are better in Canada. The general quality of the environment is poorer in China. However, mentally, I think there is not so much stress. (Xiujing)

According to Haojie, families like that of Qihua and Xiujing are not isolated cases.

You could say that every new immigrant family is under stress. If you ask 10 people who migrated from Mainland China, I believe there are none who are not stressed... unless both spouses are very lucky and found a job immediately. There are such people, but I believe there are few of them. (Haojie)

Speaking from personal experience, Haojie's wife and son were away in China when I interviewed him. Among my interviewees, he is among the minority who likes his present job. His situation is unique in that he had migrated partly to change his career path from that of a marine engineer, which required him to be at sea for long periods on end. Although Haojie considers himself to be among the fortunate “20-30%” of PRC skilled immigrants to

be able to work as a technician in Canada, he admitted: **“Even though I have found such a good job, immigration still has impacts on our family.”** Haojie told me about his wife:

She did work in Canada but she couldn't stand the rotten work. She has done it all. I mean that she has really done it all. She wasn't able to take it. After that, it was not good for her mentally. She wasn't able to take it. She couldn't look on the bright side of things and treat it as a transitory period even when I talked to her. She then developed depression. She couldn't adapt. Now she often goes to and fro. Now for Chinese New Year, she wants to go back even more. I think going back is good for her too. She has also mentioned it herself, that the feeling of being in China is still better. I feel that a person's health is important. No matter what, health is the most important. A person has to be healthy. Hence my wife has gone to and fro twice this year. [...] From the looks of it now, it seems that she is thinking of staying in China. It is a “challenge” to me. I like this place every much, the job and other aspects. [...] Presently, I don't want to go back.¹⁸¹

From the respondents' narratives, it is apparent that migration can affect the family in rather powerful ways.

Coping Strategies: Transnational Possibilities, Familial Goals

If words do indeed shape worlds, then the words that my respondents use to describe their present situations could perhaps offer a peephole into their inner worlds. The saying *jilaizhi zeanzhi*, translated approximately as “since here, might as well be contented, and make the best of it” that I have heard repeatedly from them, convey to me a sense of quiet courage amidst despair. In highlighting the challenges that the respondents face upon immigration to Canada, my intention is not to cast them in the role of passive victims. Rather, I am emphasizing their *responses* to prevailing circumstances, and paving the ground for appreciating the *agency* that they demonstrate in planning strategies to cope with those challenges. While the nature of many of the immigrants' experiences would appear to incline them towards bemoaning their fate, I was struck more often than not by their stoic

acceptance - not of defeat – but of their present experiences as challenges to be overcome. The first step towards managing their new situation is ineluctably that of a mental adjustment to reality. Iris advised:

If they can accept reality, then they will like Canada. If they feel that their prospects are not in Canada, or they are always thinking about how good or superior they were in the past, and are not able to give up their superiority, then they may be more pessimistic, or they may consider Vancouver as an “immigration prison”,¹⁸² and plan to go back after they have completed it. For us, although our conditions were superior, but the past is past – it is already in the past. You are standing on a new starting line. You should have a new kind of thinking to face the new problem.

Likewise, Zhiyang thought that new immigrants should discard their old attitude of wanting to be superior to other people and Charlene advocated the pragmatic approach to **“first settle your lives, and then plan your future, what your path should be.”** The second step is usually to adopt a household strategy that optimises the family’s resources and opportunities. For instance, Wenxiu works at a fish farm in the day and in a restaurant at night while her husband, Minglu, studies English full-time.¹⁸³

I am willing to take on the most laborious jobs first so that he can learn the language well. Then he will have the opportunity to develop. [...] His standard was higher than mine in China so I want him to try to learn first, and see if he can... I think it will be easier for him than me. Hence I told him that I will go and work first and he can study for these two years. I said, “Don’t have any distracting thoughts about going out to find a job. I do not want them to wear down your will. You go and study English. Even if you can’t find a job in your original field but your English has improved, that would be a result.” So he shouldn’t worry. That’s my thinking.¹⁸⁴
(Wenxiu)

Over time, there appears to be a general trend among my respondents for their circumstances to improve. Kaiyang and Biying, who arrived in 1996, have recently bought a townhouse

¹⁸¹ The irony is that it was Haojie’s wife who had initiated the idea of migration.

¹⁸² I will discuss this notion in the next section.

¹⁸³ Whether it is the husband or wife who works depends on each family’s particular situation.

for about CAD 300 000 with a mortgage from the bank. Between the two of them, they earn CAD30-50 000 a year. Their lives are very hectic. Kaiyang is an RESP salesperson and a part-time tour guide during the summer, and Biying, a beautician. Both also work in direct sales.¹⁸⁵ Kaiyang is optimistic about the prospects of PRC skilled immigrants:

I definitely believe that those who come out from Mainland China are very enthusiastic. There are few who aren't enthusiastic i.e. everyone will grumble that it is tough, and be disappointed, but after 2 or 3 years, they will not think about it. If after 2 or 3 years, they still have this feeling, then they have really not adapted, and may go back. But there are few people like that. There aren't people like that among those I know up to now. There is thus an adaptation period. It is natural for those kinds of feelings during the process of adaptation.

This description follows the notion of a V curve that typifies immigrant adaptation.

Cheryl's landlord introduced her to the head of a *tongxianghui* (association) in Vancouver when she first arrived.¹⁸⁶ When they met, he told her:

A regular pattern of coming out is that you may be in a high position in China i.e. a high point on a V. When you first come out, it may be very fresh, and you feel that the air is good here, the environment is superior, the facilities are superior, everything is good etc. You feel that it is like a honeymoon – very sweet. At that point, your spirits rise slightly upwards. When you have really settled, and are starting a new life, really adapting to life here, you will discover that everything is strange, even the roads are unfamiliar. Everything is unfamiliar, and everything is different from China. And the most important challenge is a job. It is very difficult to get a job. As a new immigrant, everywhere they want you to have experience etc. All your past glories cannot be put to use. At this point, it is a drop, an immediate drop from a high point. Slowly, with adaptation, you can return back to that point. The faster you adapt, the shallower the valley; if you adapt slowly, maybe you will drop to a very low point, to the extent that you may not be able to rise again. This is a regular pattern of immigration.

¹⁸⁴ When she finished her words, both Minglu and I looked at her. Minglu said with some pride, “**My wife is very great,**” and we laughed.

¹⁸⁵ This method of selling products through networks of distributors/consumers appears to work particularly well through immigrant networks. Biying told me that the method is more prevalent amongst Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants than PRC immigrants. I have also encountered another PRC couple, as well as one other respondent engaged in direct sales, and inevitably, they tried to “recruit” me.

¹⁸⁶ She did not join the *tongxianghui* eventually.

Transnational family arrangements are included as part of the repertoire of strategies that are available to some immigrants. At the time of interview, 7 of the 36 households in my research were astronaut families, with the wives in all except one case staying in Vancouver while the husband works in China, and shuttles to Vancouver every four months on average. At first impression, the phenomenon seems to mirror that of the astronaut families amongst Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants in Vancouver (see Waters, 2000). Upon closer examination, there are clear differences. Unlike the Hong Kong and Taiwanese astronaut families, the children are more likely to remain in China than Canada.¹⁸⁷ The reason is that these children tend to be younger than those of the former group, and as such, the provision of a transnational childcare arrangement by the grandparents in China frees up valuable time for the mother in Canada who can then work or study. Another difference is that the decision for the transnational family arrangement is usually made in Canada *after* migration when they have a clearer picture of Canada's employment condition.¹⁸⁸ Invariably, the arrangement arose from the family's realization that the husband would be unable to have a job or business in Canada that is comparable to what he has in China.¹⁸⁹ Four of the families had landed together, and upon assessing the situation, the husbands returned to China. Two other husbands had tried to look for work in Canada but after working in "labour jobs" for a period of time, they too went back. For Haiwen, the only male respondent whose wife is working in China, his wife had landed with him in Canada but was all along unwilling to give up her very well paid job in China.

¹⁸⁷ This is the case for four of the families. Two of the other families have their children with them in Canada as three of the four children are of school-going age. For the remaining family, two of the children are in Canada with the grandmother helping to take care of them. The youngest is in China, being taken care of by a babysitter.

¹⁸⁸ This suggests that the Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants had more precise expectations.

All the respondents stressed to me that this is only a *temporary* arrangement. Lena ruminated on the pain of being in a transnational family:

Actually sometimes, particularly when it is during festive periods or times of trouble, I will often miss [them], especially my child. You may not understand the feeling of leaving your child behind when you have not been a mother. When they sent the VCD of my child to me, I watched it for 3 hours, and kept crying. You know, the feeling was especially bad. I wondered whether this step I have taken is right. Is what I am doing worthwhile? What am I here for? Leaving my family and all that to be here alone? What am I doing here?

Lena's husband is planning to join her in Canada next year. Evelyn is trying to persuade her husband to do the same to **"maintain the family life"**, especially for the sake of the children. She told him:

You chose to come out initially, and you said it was for the kids. Now there are two over here, and one over there, you can't have it like that, it is not like a family.

Linda, whose husband and child are in China, is unsure of what she wants:

I have conflicting feelings. Sometimes, I want him to come, and then we can be together as a family. But if he were to come, I don't know what he can do. He is very comfortable in China. If he were to come here and not have a job, we may not be in a good mood, and we may not be very happy, right? [...] I am very undecided, sometimes I want him to come, and sometimes I don't want him to come.

Ultimately, as in Huiling's case, the transnational arrangement needs to be resolved.

It is difficult for him being alone over there. He complains that being alone, he's not like someone who has a family; his life is not regular, with no one to take care of him, very solitary and lonely. He often talks about this. This kind of life is very hard on both sides. [...] And me, I have to take care of two children and go to work. It's hard on us two but it can't be helped. Often, he says it's the cost of our immigration. Everything has a price. This is our price. We have to endure this kind of life. This kind of life... I don't know how long it will persist. We have to discuss eventually whether

¹⁸⁹ Two of the husbands are businessmen who can better afford this arrangement, which includes the financial cost of flights to visit their spouses in Canada.

I'm going back or he's coming here. One thing that we both agree on is that this is temporary. We must think of a plan after we obtain citizenship. Whether it's him coming or me going back, it's important that we make a decision.

While I have emphasized the human costs to the family, I recognize that after a period of adjustment, these women frequently adapt well to their new environments, demonstrating an admirable resilience and independence.¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the desire to be reunited as a family is a perennial weight on their minds. Speaking to Michael, who came with his child to Vancouver to visit his wife, I was further reminded of the important place that the family occupies in the minds of the PRC immigrants. Michael, an MBA graduate from a renowned university in China, and the vice president of a major company in China, appears to be the very embodiment of Aihwa Ong's (1999) flexible economic subject.

You can say that the globe is our home. In the past, our consideration may be, for example, that our home is in Nanjing, and our job is in Beijing. Is there much difference between working in Beijing and working in Vancouver? Not really, because to go from Beijing to Nanjing, the most convenient way is to take a train at 10pm, which will reach Beijing at 7am. Now from Shanghai to Vancouver, it is 10 hours. I think the feeling is about the same. The distance is already not a problem, including communication through telephone and e-mail. It is very convenient. Thus I feel it is about the same everywhere.

¹⁹⁰ When feeling down, Lena would often encourage herself with the thought that **"what I am doing will bear fruit in the end."** Linda too carries forth, building up a support network of fellow astronaut wives: **"Each time my husband leaves, I feel very lonely initially but once the time is long enough, it is alright. I have loads of friends, and I am busy. If I am not busy, it is different. During the times when I do not have much to do, and am not anxious over my studies, I am often with my friends. They would come over to my place, or I would go over to theirs for dinner. Everyone would get together for fun."** Several respondents, male and female, alerted me to their sense that there is perhaps a gendered dimension to the settlement experiences of PRC skilled immigrants as a whole. According to them, women are likely to be happier in Vancouver compared to the men. From my research, there is indeed such an overall impression. I am, however, wary of making such a generalization because of the poignant examples that contradict this pattern (refer for instance to the experiences of Xiujing and Haojie's wife in the last section). Suffice it to say that it is critical to note the different experiences *within* an immigrant household (Mark Ellis, personal communication).

When immigrating, he had thought of Vancouver as **“a chess-piece in a game of chess”** and **“it is more of having a base in the globe, there is no feeling of completely moving house.”** For him, the strategic move would be to remain in China since **“the whole world is thinking well of China’s market.”** Probing deeper, beneath the rhetoric of a “rational economic man”, Michael reveals:

It’s not good for the family in the long run. Separation is definitely not good. So we will consider being together. However, when your job position has reached a certain level, you will be relatively freer. There are some jobs that you can’t be away from but there are some jobs that can be done from home, especially for those of us involved in brainwork. We can often solve this problem. It is relatively easy to solve. If you have to be at your workplace, then it is quite troublesome. If that’s the case, I think it is the family that should be the priority. It is still the family that is important. (My emphasis)

Huiling has a similar view:

For me personally, in terms of living, I really like Canada. But I have to think *primarily for the family*, to consider what the future will be for my children and husband. (My emphasis)

The emotional dilemmas experienced in the astronaut families are mirrored to some extent in the transnational childcare arrangements of some PRC immigrant families. At the time of interview, 11 out of the 29 households with children had sent their children back to China to be looked after by the grandparents, or in some cases, babysitters.¹⁹¹ Usually, the child is very young, below the age for starting school. In most cases, when the child reaches the school-going age of 6 or 7, he or she will return to Vancouver. The parents emphasize that this is, again, a temporary situation. Once their economic conditions improve, they would try to have their children in Vancouver with them.¹⁹² The decision to embark on this

¹⁹¹ Excluding one household which is journeying between Canada and China.

¹⁹² Peirong brought up another reason for sending back her daughter, aged 7, for a couple of years: to have a foundation in Chinese and firmer background in Maths. Other focus group participants pointed out the difficulties such an arrangement would mean for the child’s education, especially her command of English, and

transnational arrangement is one that is fraught with heartaches. Ruhao and Eileen had brought their child over when they landed. But after staying for two months, they felt that with the child, aged 3, **“both the parents’ hands are tied. The kid is too young; he needs a lot of the adults’ time. For the child to have a better life later, it is best that the child should be sent back. [...] We really could not bear it. It was really hard to bear but we could not help it. That’s why we are trying our best to fetch him over.”**

To allow their faces to be seen, they have installed a web video camera on their computer.

Eileen said:

He looks at our photos everyday, at least once a day. Our kid is quite obedient. When we are talking, he will bring a fruit over and try to force the fruit into the computer! And he will bring two, one for each. [We laughed.] This is on our minds all the time. We can’t carry on like this. As he grows older, he is becoming more sensible. And when he is sensible, if the time becomes too extended, we are afraid that he may develop psychological problems so we hope to fetch him over. I still hope that he will receive the education here. [...] We hope that the kid can grow up in a better environment like here.

There are slightly more respondents who made the decision for such a childcare arrangement *after* migration. Those who had decided prior to migration usually had children who were below 2 years old, when childcare is most intensive. Their pain in separation is often compounded by the lack of understanding from other people who are not in their shoes. Shuping, who is intending to send her daughter, aged 4, back to China for a short period, held her closely, and said:

There is no choice. Those Westerners cannot understand. I went to quite a few places and spoke about my thinking. And they said, “A lot of you PRC immigrants are like that. If it were me, I wouldn’t send my child back.” In

the possibility that she might forget the Chinese she had learnt anyway when she eventually comes over to Canada.

my heart, I was thinking, "Of course. You have a job and an income here. How can we compare to you?" [Her husband laughed bitterly.]

The phenomena of astronaut families and transnational childcare have brought to light the costs of transnationalism (see also Waters, 2002) . Arrangements that appear to be flexible and mobile at first glance turn out to have a more rooted ultimate goal: the family as a unit.

"Taking One Step at a Time": Settlers or "Immigrant Prisoners"?

I was introduced to Jiansheng, 45, and his wife, Nianhua, 36, by a PRC immigrant who said their immigration experience was an **"exceptional and very interesting case"**. Shuttling between China and Canada, this was their fourth visit to Canada in less than two years. When they first landed in 2000, Nianhua had stayed for three months on work leave, after which she had to return to China. Meanwhile, Jiansheng stayed to **"understand the society"**. This was to help him resolve two issues: **"firstly, whether you should stay here or not, and secondly, what you are going to do when you stay here."** To achieve that, he worked in labour jobs and made friends widely, hoping in addition to find out whether the friends might provide him with any **"opportunities"**. A year later, Jiansheng returned to China to continue with his job at a research academy. Despite the unique form their immigration appeared to be taking, Jiansheng clarified:

Our going to and fro is not an explicit decision to go to and fro. We have basically decided to stay in Canada. It's just there are many things in China that have not yet been settled.¹⁹³ Once they are settled, we will set our hearts here because it is not realistic for any immigrants to keep going to and fro. It's not possible. [...] At the most, you can do it for one or two years. There are many problems here. One is that the immigration law has rules; you can't keep running to and fro. Second, your economic ability - with your income in China, you can't keep running to and fro. It will not sustain you. Thus, we have to come to a decision whether we should place

¹⁹³ For example, taking the TOEFL exam in China to apply for graduate studies in Canada. This means that Jiansheng can continue with his research job in China without having to work in labour jobs in Canada during that period of time.

our game counters in China or here. Our final decision is to come over because we have established in the year [when I was here] that our eventual goal is for both of us to study.

Unlike many other skilled immigrants, Jiansheng and Nianhua had not resigned from their jobs in China before they landed in Canada, so as to ensure **“a path for retreat”**. The journeys they made between China and Canada epitomize on one hand, the conflicting attractions and difficulties that PRC immigrants face in settling in Canada, and on the other hand, their continuing connections with China. Through my respondents, I learnt of a popular term *yiminjian* (immigration prison) among PRC immigrants in Canada. The term is highly evocative of immigration as a prison sentence that has to be served before freedom – in the form of a Canadian passport – may be obtained.¹⁹⁴ I was told on several occasions that “many” PRC immigrants have returned to China. I was also often reminded about the challenges that PRC immigrants in general face in Canada and how Canada does not “retain people”, as Binya expressed:

The Canadian society does not retain people. It does not retain people indeed. It doesn't allow people to see hope. You can't earn money, and the social infrastructure and all that are cumbersome.¹⁹⁵ Those who have immigrated over are people who are relatively more able to strike out a new path. They are not satisfied with just any job. If there is something bad, they feel that they can change it since they have already made it out [of the country]. They are that kind of people so their mobility is definitely also quite great.

Some respondents spoke of China's rapid economic growth as a factor for influencing return migration. Respondents also regarded the recent change in the PRC state's attitude towards

¹⁹⁴ According to a few respondents, the term originated from Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants who arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the aim of securing Canadian citizenship as a way to bypass the Hong Kong handover to China and the geopolitical tensions that exist between China and Taiwan. David Ley has also heard this a number of times from Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants (personal communication). In an interesting turn of events, immigrants from the PRC have now appropriated the discourse.

¹⁹⁵ Here, she is referring to the strikes that have occurred in British Columbia, and which are regarded as a source of inconvenience by some immigrants.

return migrants, especially overseas students, as a favourable move. Comparisons were frequently drawn between China and Canada. While some respondents missed the world they had left behind, others, like Elaine and Jinghong, also pointed out the positive changes in Canada.

When I think back to my life in China, there are some very great differences. In the Mainland, people's lifestyles are more hectic. You can say that the lifestyles are not very healthy. The two of us have to socialise a lot. We often have to eat and drink outside, always feasting and drinking... it is like that. I feel that it is very hectic. You can't quieten down and you don't have time for thinking. Here, it is very quiet, you are given a lot of time, it is not so crowded, and it is not so noisy. You have a lot of time to think about a lot of things. Thinking back, I feel that the life here, compared to China, is very peaceful. It is duller but it does not have all the fighting. Life here is not so tiring, unlike in China. (Elaine)

In China, people will worry about houses and cars. People will compare. Here, that's not the case. However way you live is fine, and you yourself won't feel afraid of other people seeing the way you live. (Jinghong)

In a survey among my respondents, I found that there was a clear divide between those who had yet to decide whether they would stay in Canada (40) and those who would stay for 20 years and above (24).¹⁹⁶ The common refrain among those who had yet to decide was "*zouyibukanyibu*" (taking one step at a time) or "wait and see".

I have not decided yet. I want to wait and see. China has things that make me waver and think of going back but there are also things that make me feel not like going back. Because I have stayed here for so long,¹⁹⁷ I am slowly getting used to this place, and I have a job here... I am used to the life here. There are many things that I like about here, some of which China does not have. I feel that life is quite good here. Although there are many opportunities in China, but I don't feel like... I feel that as a girl, I do not want to be too tired, always having to pursue a new goal. It is very tiring, right. To go wherever it is good, to go there since it is good, always working so hard. I do not think it is necessary if it is just for that. It is not as if I want to establish a great career, and go towards where there are great opportunities, because the priority is living.

¹⁹⁶ For the remaining respondents, 11 intend to stay between 1 and 5 years, and 3 between 6 and 10 years.

¹⁹⁷ Cheryl landed in 1998.

An important issue that can influence whether immigrants decide to stay in Canada is their perception of the alternative choice – that of return migration to China. Immigrants have devoted much time, effort and money into their immigration, such that they are not likely to give it up easily.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, in most cases, respondents had resigned from their jobs. As Zhehui described, **“When you go, you have pulled your roots in China to come to Canada.”** Haojie elaborated:

Once you leave China, those people below you will take over your job position. That’s why a lot of people who have come for two or three years don’t want to go back. They may have had a very glorious yesterday, but now when they go back, it won’t be “as it was”. That’s not possible. China is a society that depends heavily on *renshiguanxi* (social relations). Even when you leave for half a year, it will have an impact on you. In the West, you will fall behind if you don’t touch technology for half a year. For China’s *renshiwang* (social networks), if you are not there for half a year, there will be all kinds of change, causing you to fall behind in society. (Haojie)

The issue of face also plays a role here.

Many immigrants feel that it is difficult for them to either go forward or retreat. If they were to go back, they feel that it is difficult to go back due to the issue of face. Hence they can’t go back. If they were to stay here, there is not much development. Many immigrants have depression because there is no retreat; they are not able to return. (Evelyn)

It is also a kind of culture. In Shanghai, when you go back, they will say, “you must definitely have been getting along like a tramp outside, that’s why you return.” Shanghai people are very realistic when they are talking. If you were doing well, you wouldn’t come back! [...] There are two kinds of people who go back. One, those who have a high degree or who have made a fortune [...] Then you are not afraid of people talking because you have a lot of money. For most people, when they go back, the feeling is that they have not been able to make it outside, that’s why they are going back. This has imperceptibly given you a kind of pressure. That is to say, once you go back, even before you have done anything, there is already a kind of pressure. In Canada, at least nobody cares about that, whether you are doing rotten work, or studying, or driving a broken car. (Haojie)

¹⁹⁸ Similar to the reasons outlined in Chapter 6 for explaining why immigrants carry on with their decision to migrate despite hearing negative information.

Regardless of how respondents viewed return migration, most of those who were undecided about whether they would stay in Canada nonetheless felt that they would at least stay for three years to fulfil the requirement for Canadian citizenship. For a number of respondents, a Canadian passport symbolized a mobility that they did not previously enjoy, and offered additional destination possibilities, whether to the US, or other places. As for plans thereafter, Linda said:

Whether we go back depends on these three years, if I am able to find a relatively stable job that I think is quite good, I may stay here. But if there is not much opportunity here, it may be better to return to China.¹⁹⁹

Among my respondents, there is a great deal of consensus on this perspective. Evelyn, however, makes an important point:

A few friends I know haven't reached the three years yet, but they all have this thinking, that they are able to leave once they get the *shenfen* (status). They can go wherever they wish, to US, or anywhere. But I remind them, "It is not so easy. You have a family here. Especially if you have kids, it is not so easy like you say about leaving anytime when you have a *shenfen*. You have to consider where your home is, where your children's education is, where your children's development is going to be. There are many issues. When the time comes, you will have to consider these issues. As the time has not come, you have not thought of these things so you think that you will be free once you get the *shenfen*.

As a few participants at a focus group expressed, even if they are staying on now in the "immigrant prison" only to get the passport, the paradox is that after three years, they would probably have adjusted to their lives here, and even if they had not, their children would probably want to stay. Thus, with an ironic smile, Charlene praised the Canadian government's ingenuity in having the foresight to require three years' residence before

¹⁹⁹ This does not necessarily mean returning to the city of origin. Rather, as Jiansheng points out, migrants may move to other cities e.g. those from the interior may move to cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. Haiwen, originally from Beijing, recently informed me that he has moved from Vancouver to Shanghai to take up a high-paying job with a subsidiary company of the American MNC he used to work at.

awarding citizenship, and concluded, **“Because 3 years constitute a period of adaptation, a process. When you have adapted, you would all stay here.”** The immigrants’ experiences during the critical three years hence determines to a large extent whether they become settlers or released “immigrant prisoners”.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

“You have to understand the geography of China.” With those words, Nianhua promptly drew a map of China, separating the territory into three areas: coastal, northeast, and the interior, and annotating the locations of Shanghai, Guangdong, Beijing and Tianjin. The aim of this pedagogical exercise was to show me the regional differences in migration motivations, and to highlight the prime positions of those cities, in terms of exposure to the “outside world”. Two questions arise. Why did Nianhua focus on China when I was asking her about migration *to Canada*? And why draw a map?

In this thesis, I have considered the social, and especially the cultural, embeddedness of migration, and argued that this is manifested in migrants’ reasons for migration, their perceptions of the destination, and the cultural discourses surrounding migration. My focus on the imagination highlights the processes by which possibilities of alternative lives led in other places are introduced into the minds of potential migrants. I also emphasize the role of personal geographies in differentiating the meaning of migration for each individual. At the same time, this work rejects received notions of essential “Chinese” characteristics and practices, and it demonstrates why an understanding of context is essential for a reflexive study. By adopting a transnational approach, I situate the study of new Chinese migration from PRC to Vancouver in the prevailing and historical conditions of both China and Canada, thereby reflecting Nianhua’s frame of reference. Geography is thus critical to the analysis.

While migration, by definition, implies the crossing of physical borders, I am interested in a different kind of journey. The maps that I examine are those in the mind's eye - mental maps. David Lowenthal argued over 40 years ago for the place of the imagination in geography (1961). Since then, geographical imaginations have had a veritable tradition in the discipline (see Gregory, 1994, 2000). By and large though, the insights that have emerged from such an approach have not filtered over to the study of migration.²⁰⁰ My study represents an attempt to address this theoretical gap. On another level, such an approach also stems from my belief in the application of abstract theoretical reflections to concrete, real-life issues. After all, as Jonathan Culler notes, "works regarded as theory *have effects* beyond their original field" (Culler, 1997: 3, author's italics).

Central to my thesis is the notion of a cultural logic of migration, which creates, and perpetuates, migration overseas.²⁰¹ Key to this logic is the significance of the imagination. Personal geographies further determine whether the idea for migration takes root in the imagination, and is eventually translated into action. In part socially constituted, the cultural logics of migration take place within the milieu of family and friends at home and overseas.²⁰² On the whole, there appears to be a valorisation of migration as a path for success in China. This helps to explain not only why migrants wish to migrate, but also why they remain in Canada even when circumstances are not ideal since, as respondents revealed, there is the wish to *yijinhuanxiang* (return to their homes in silken robes). The myth of success is further maintained through a self-selection in the kind of migrants - usually the "more successful" ones - who return to China. A caveat is that the notion of

²⁰⁰ The closest approximation is the work on travel writings, which for the most part is confined to textual studies.

²⁰¹ Note that rather than being a monolithic logic, different kinds of cultural logics can operate.

success tends to undergo a change after migration, from one that emphasizes the material aspects to a more philosophical approach towards life. Another important consideration is the concept of relative deprivation where prior to migration, migrants take into account not so much their absolute standard of living but their standards relative to those abroad.

I suggest that the critical loop in the cultural logics of migration is the kind of information that migrants receive prior to migration. This arises mainly from social networks and cultural discourses. Of particular significance is the information relayed back by migrants overseas. As I have argued, the suppression of information due to the practice of *baoxibubaoyou* and the issue of face is a crucial factor. There are, nonetheless, also those who will “tell the truth”. The strongest evidence for a cultural logic of migration is the prevalence of “inadmissible truths”. Cultural discourses in the form of the media - television drama series, news reports and books featuring Chinese overseas - also reinforce the idea of migration as success, playing a part in creating a social environment open to the possibility of migration. The use of the Internet has been important: speeding up the process of information relay back to China, and due to its anonymity, encouraging more “truths” to emerge. In both the cases of the media and the Internet, there is the issue of reception where “inadmissible truths” may again play a role. Last but not least, the cultural logics of migration have in part been fuelled, and shaped, by the immigration consultant companies, demonstrating the importance of wider economic interests.

Over time, however, a more accurate picture of life overseas appears to have been conveyed back to China, albeit with regional differences.

²⁰² To isolate the social from the cultural in this case would be to introduce false divides that are not borne out

In Guangzhou, people call us “crippled *huaqiao*²⁰³” because we have no money, not like in the past when they say that the *huaqiao* are returning from the gold mountain. Now they feel that our lives are not so good.
(Charlene)

There are few *huaqiao* in Shanxi. When we go back, they still say, “Aiyah²⁰⁴, they have gone abroad,” and there is a halo over our heads.
[Chuckled] (Menglin)

Turning to potential migrants’ imagination of Canada, there is a strong sense that Canada remains only an abstraction for the majority. The idea of “North America” is a common refrain amongst my respondents, a result of the dominant image of America in their geographical imaginations. Understanding their imagination of Canada is important as it may be linked to expectations of life after migration. Moreover, it helps to clarify why – amidst an increasingly global competition for skilled immigrants - migrants choose Canada. Their choice of Vancouver also enables an understanding of the dynamics involved in destination decision-making. Upon landing in Vancouver, most respondents found that the circumstances were “worse than expected”. Increasingly, as potential migrants have more precise information of the reality in Vancouver, they are more likely to be better prepared. For instance, prior to their landing in late 2001, Junnie and her husband, Guanghui, had learnt from friends and Internet sources about the difficult employment conditions in Vancouver. Thus before arrival, they had already planned that they would apply for studies at UBC, with the goal of acquiring cultural capital through education, and social capital through making friends with “local” students. Eileen also informed me that she knew of a PRC migrant who had asked friends in Vancouver to register her at a popular ESL course even before landing in order to avoid the queues.

in reality.

²⁰³ Chinese overseas.

²⁰⁴ Used in this case to express awe.

Imaginary worlds and real worlds collide when migrants land in Canada. Experience now becomes the prism through which Canada is viewed. My research concurs with anecdotal accounts of the employment and language challenges faced by PRC migrants, to which I add domestic concerns over childcare, the children's education, and marital difficulties. I argue that the strategies migrants have employed are chiefly based upon the family as a unit. While some respondents indicate a desire to settle in Canada, a substantial number are unsure of their future plans and raise the possibility of return to China or migration elsewhere. The crux depends on their experiences in Vancouver, especially over the next three years. At heart though, most prefer to stay at one particular place "for the family's sake", especially for families with children of school-going age. This familial goal, combined with the cultural baggage of "face" associated with return migration, contributes to a feeling of thwarted mobility among some respondents. My sense is that the kind of flexible citizenship Aihwa Ong (1999) observed for Hong Kong migrants may only apply to a select group – and perhaps class – of PRC skilled immigrants who have the "right" mix of cosmopolitan cultural capital.

Return to China, however, remains a possibility, and one that is dependent not only on conditions in Canada but also those in China as well. A report in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* provided stories on the successful return of overseas professional Chinese who have found their fortune and success in China – which made them feel there is "no place like home" (Wilhelm and Biers, 2000). Luo et al (2002) attributed this increase in returnees partly to the active recruitment efforts of the Chinese state, which has labelled returned overseas students, scholars and other skilled labour as "overseas talents". Since 1990, various state efforts have been in place, including the establishment of a number of "science

parks” and “special development zones” in Beijing and most provincial cities to attract returnees (ibid). In recent years, the Chinese state also promoted its incentive programs - through “recruitment fairs” - to PRC migrants in countries such as the US, Europe, Australia and Canada (*Ming Pao*, 2002d). With these efforts on the part of the PRC state, claims of a “postnational imaginary” and “postnational membership” appear to be over-celebratory (Appadurai, 1996; Soysal, 1994).

When asked whether they saw themselves as *zhongguoren*²⁰⁵, *huaqiao* or Canadians, participants in both the male and female focus group unanimously declared that they were *zhongguoren*. For them, national identity was not so much an issue of citizenship as the feelings of attachment to a country they grew up in.

You can say that this is already determined when you are very young. I don't know what age, maybe in your teens. For those children who are born or came here when they were four or five, they may think of themselves as Canadians, they may not think of themselves as *zhongguoren*. But for those of us who came at this age, if you say you are not, then I think it is laughable. (Zhiyang, landed in 1999)

Been here for more than one year, the time is not long, all the while been feeling that I'm a *zhongguoren*. Whenever I talk about Canada, I would say “their” Canada, “their” place, “their” Canadian government. (Peixian, landed in 2000)

I have been here for four, almost five years, but I still say “*guonei*”²⁰⁶. Ha, ha. Is this [Canada] really my country? I will still say how “*guonei*” is doing. (Boyang, landed in 1997)

I still think [of myself as] *zhongguoren*! There is not much change. Only the *shenfen* (status) has changed, actually nothing has changed. Instead, I think those who have gone abroad love their country even more, you know. When you are in China, you feel that everything about China is not good; but when you come out, you think instead about which aspects are still good about China, which good points it has, who says China is not good. (Evelyn, landed in 1997)

²⁰⁵ Chinese nationals.

²⁰⁶ A term referring to China that at the same time denotes the speaker is inside China.

Evelyn's sentiments are reminiscent of Pal Nyíri's analysis of the PRC state's celebration of new migrants, which is aptly titled "Expatriating is patriotic". For Haojie, who is in the process of applying for citizenship, his feelings are very different. He regards himself as "half a Canadian".

Maybe because I have been working with Canadians, I find that when I am talking to my [PRC] friends, I feel that my change is greater than them, really. [laughs] I feel that I am gradually having feelings for Canada. Indeed, I have found a job in Canada, Canada has given me and the family good benefits, and all that. It really varies for individuals. If you are still doing rotten work after 7 years in a Chinese Richmond factory and being paid hourly, then I think the feeling would definitely be different. The feeling would definitely not be to treat Canada as your mother. I really do have the feeling that Canada is like my mother. [laughs] My second mother.

The confluence of migration and imagination changes the place that was "there" to "here". How do the migrants imagine Vancouver now? Does Nianhua's focus on China even while discussing Canada still ring true?

Elaine misses China sometimes. Her husband, Philip, tells her to visit China like he did, guaranteeing that it would make her appreciate Vancouver more. In this instance, a passage that might have been regarded as a visit to the "homeland" only serves to deepen the feelings of home that this migrant has for the other place, that is no longer "other". Philip spoke of how when he wakes up each morning, he will stand at the balcony to admire the scenery. And then in a rare poetic moment, he burst into verse,

**On the grass field, there are pigeons, little birds and seagulls,
Wow, the natural scene [is] extraordinarily beautiful!²⁰⁷**

²⁰⁷ The harmonious intonations are unfortunately lost in the translation.

To conclude on such a note would have been ideal. However, it would belie the struggles of everyday life that are confronting a substantial proportion of PRC skilled immigrants in Vancouver. A gap exists between their imagined and real worlds of Canada. That same gap is found between the objectives and outcomes of Canada's skilled immigration program.

Meanwhile, another imagined world is being produced, this time from inside Vancouver. On 12 December 2002, a team of eight Chinese actors and about 20 production-crew members led by producer-director Zhao Baogang arrived in Vancouver for two and a half months of shooting (McCullough, 2002).²⁰⁸ They are staying at the 2400 Court Motel on Kingsway.²⁰⁹ Titled *Farewell Vancouver*²¹⁰, the production is adapted from a 1997 novel by Chiang Ling, and is a romantic drama surrounding the experiences of Chinese immigrants, refugees, students and professionals on temporary work permits in Canada.²¹¹ Fifteen of the twenty episodes will be shot in Vancouver and the remainder in China.²¹² It will begin airing in China in May during the prime time at 8 p.m., and is expected to garner a large audience.²¹³ According to Zhao:

There is always a set TV audience in China where people who are seniors usually stay at home and watch TV. That would probably be 100 million. Because this TV drama is made for a younger age group,²¹⁴ so include that and it would be such a large audience.

Is art imitating life, or life imitating art? About a decade ago, almost all my respondents had watched *A Beijing Native in New York*. Now, in what appears to be the newest product of a

²⁰⁸ I thank David Ley for informing me of this article in the Vancouver Sun.

²⁰⁹ Located in East Vancouver where a substantial population of the recent PRC immigrant population live.

²¹⁰ However, on the B.C. Film Commission's production list, it is titled *Farewell to Canada*. Why *Farewell*? Could it perhaps indicate return migration to China?

²¹¹ Another sign that immigration is situated alongside other means of "going abroad".

²¹² A transnational film?

²¹³ Draws include the main characters all being played by Chinese actors famous in China, and Zhao's reputation as a director. Moreover, as Zhao says, the Chinese "enjoy love stories".

genre of films on PRC citizens living abroad, *Farewell Vancouver* is depicting the lives of the Chinese in Vancouver. One reason that Zhao thinks this production will appeal to Chinese viewers is that the Canadian setting makes it more exotic:

As China is developing economically, people like to see more of how people live in a foreign country such as Canada and this would be a good way to show people.

What Zhao neglects to mention is that Canada has also been one of the most popular destinations for PRC immigrants in recent years. Locations including Gastown, Chinatown and English Bay Beach will “feature prominently” in the series. Zhao also hopes to have scenes of mountain and snow in the show, and has specifically chosen to have the series in the middle of the winter to have a grey light in the scenes, which would match the wistful atmosphere of the subject matter. After watching the series, would images of Vancouver’s natural scenery come to the minds of the Chinese, just as Brooklyn Bridge and towering skyscrapers did for New York?

What kind of stories will travel back to the PRC audience with this series? To what extent will it reflect the “real” experiences of the PRC migrants here? Essentially, how will it shape Chinese imaginaries of migration, and of life abroad in Vancouver?

Yet another episode unfolds in the cultural logics of migration.

²¹⁴ Precisely the group most likely to migrate.

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Appendix 1

Survey on Recent Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Greater Vancouver

1. Age
2. Sex
3. Marital status
4. Number of children
5. Place of birth City: Country:
6. Previous place of residence City: Country:
7. Mother tongue (in place of origin)
8. In which year did you immigrate to Canada?
9. Immigrant category
10. Are you the principal applicant?
11. Did you arrive with any family members?
 Spouse? Number of children: Age (at time of immigration):
 Other family members? (Please specify)
12. If not, are they planning to immigrate to Canada?
13. When you immigrated to Canada, how long did you intend to stay?
 Yet to be decided 11-20 years
 1-5 years 20 years and above
 6-10 years
14. Before immigrating to Canada, what language/s did you speak at home?
15. Before immigrating to Canada, what language/s did you speak at your workplace?
16. What is your highest educational qualification? (Degree/diploma name, discipline, organization, date awarded)
17. In term of skills, what is your highest professional qualification? (Highest level, organization, date awarded)
18. What was your occupation in China?

19. What is your present occupation in Canada?
20. How do you rate your English language ability when you first arrived?
Very good / good / average / poor / hardly able to speak English
21. How do you rate your English language ability now?
Very good / good / average / poor / hardly able to speak English