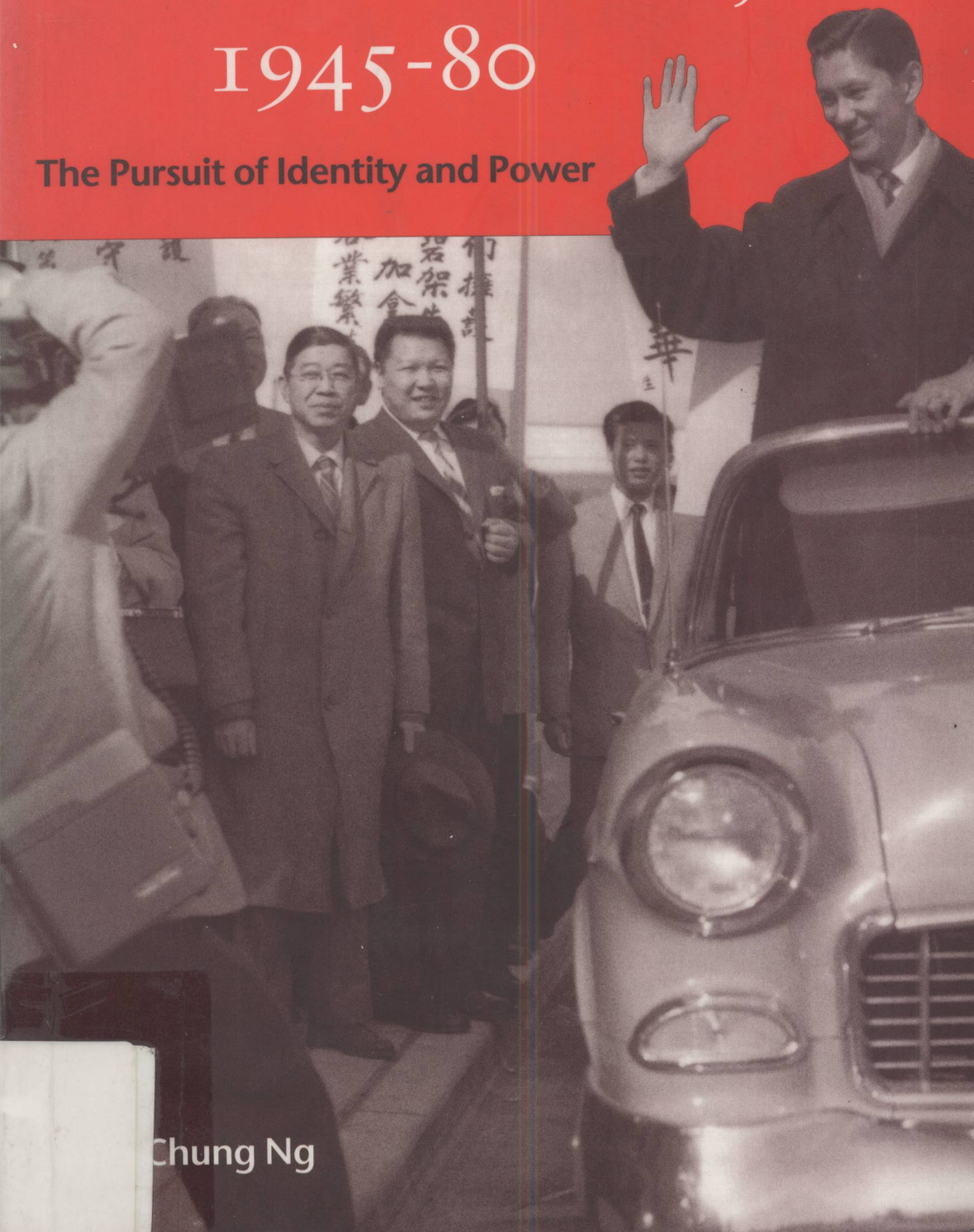
CONTEMPORARY CHINESE STUDIES

The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80

The Pursuit of Identity and Power



Chung Ng

Wing Chung Ng

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Contemporary Chinese Studies

This new series, a joint initiative of UBC Press and the UBC Institute of Asian Research, Centre for Chinese Research, seeks to make available the best scholarly work on contemporary China. Future volumes will cover a wide range of subjects related to China, Taiwan, and the overseas Chinese world.

Wing Chung Ng's *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* is the second book in the series. Glen Peterson's *The Power of Words: Literacy and Revolution in South China, 1949-95* was the first.

To How Ling

Acknowledgments

I want to begin by thanking S.T. So and Eve Au for imbuing in me a love of history while I was a high school student at Ying Wa College in Hong Kong in the late 1970s. At Hong Kong University, W.E. Cheong, Mary Turnbull, and Ming K. Chan initiated me into historical research. Mary, in particular, guided me patiently as I began my study of the Chinese overseas. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), where this work first took shape as a doctoral dissertation, I was fortunate to have Edgar Wickberg as my supervisor. Ed's fine scholarship, his sense of responsibility to the field of learning, and his profound humanity have continued to challenge and inspire me. At UBC I also drew great benefits from the wise counsel and generous support of Alex Woodside, Graham Johnson, and Diana Lary. Bob McDonald was a relentless critic of sloppy scholarship and half-baked ideas. Bernard Wong and Him Mark Lai were gracious hosts when I worked briefly in San Francisco in the summer of 1991, seeking to cultivate some comparative perspectives on the Chinese experience in North America.

The revision of the manuscript began after I joined the history faculty at the University of Texas at San Antonio in 1993. I thank my colleagues Patrick Kelly, David Johnson, and James Schneider for reading my work in progress; many others have generously shared with me their ideas. The year (1996-97) I spent at the National Humanities Center (NHC) as a postdoctoral fellow was immensely beneficial. I am grateful to Lloyd Kramer and members of the seminar on 'Achieved Identities' for many hours of stimulating discussion and the opportunity to present my work. Bob Connor, Kent Mullikin, and the wonderful staff at the NHC all made my time there unforgettable. I also want to thank Vasant Kaiwar, Sucheta Majumdar, Don Nonini, and members of the international migration work group at Duke University for the exchanges at our monthly gatherings. Last but not least, my sojourn in North Carolina allowed me to further my conversation with Arif Dirlik, who, since I was a graduate student, has provided a number of important observations on conceptual issues in my work.

In Vancouver, an important part of my research was conducted at the Special Collections Division of the UBC Library, the Asian Library at UBC, the City of Vancouver Archives, and the Vancouver Public Library. The kind assistance of their librarians and staff is much appreciated. Among the local Chinese, I have received tremendous help from so many individuals and organizations that it would not be possible to thank them one by one here. I managed to conduct forty personal interviews and talked to many others on numerous occasions. A number of organizations kindly gave me access to their publications and internal records, which were absolutely essential to my analysis. Certainly, a lot more can be done to reach out to the members of this ethnic group, and I hope my work will stimulate others to tap broadly and fruitfully into this reservoir of historical memories. In this regard, I am especially hopeful that the recently opened Museum and Archives at the Chinese Cultural Centre, which I visited only briefly in January 1999, will soon develop into a major repository of historical records that will be indispensable for any future study of the Chinese in Canada.

I am glad to have a chance to acknowledge crucial financial support for this work. The full period of my training at UBC (1988-93) was funded generously by a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship. The University of Texas at San Antonio provided a Faculty Research Award in 1995 and a Faculty Development Grant in 1996. Finally, my year at the NHC was made possible by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In the final preparation of the book manuscript, Bill Bishel produced the maps and Joanne Poon helped me with the glossary. I am also greatly appreciative of the copyediting by Joanne Richardson and of the sound advice and professional support of Jean Wilson and Holly Keller-Brohman, my editors at UBC Press.

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Finally, both Cheuk Ming and Stella deserve a special note of thanks for having had to live with this project for as long as they care to remember. My deepest appreciation goes to How Ling, my wife and soulmate, for her love and our shared Christian faith.

Note on Chinese Terms

As a general rule, I render the English names of Chinese persons, publications, and ethnic organizations in their local forms whenever they are known: hence Foon Sien (Wong), not Huang Wenfu; the *Chinese Times*, not *Dahan gongbao*; and the Chinese Cultural Centre, not Zhonghua wenhua zhongxin. I have also decided to follow usages familiar to many English readers, including Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek instead of Sun Zhongshan and Jiang Jieshi, respectively. In a few cases, such as my preference for Kuomintang rather than Guomindang and the Wade-Giles spelling of certain individuals affiliated with Taiwan, my choices were based on political sensitivity. All other Chinese names and special terms are given in standard pinyin. As a consolation for such inconsistencies, readers can look up Chinese characters in the glossary at the end of the book.

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1
Introduction

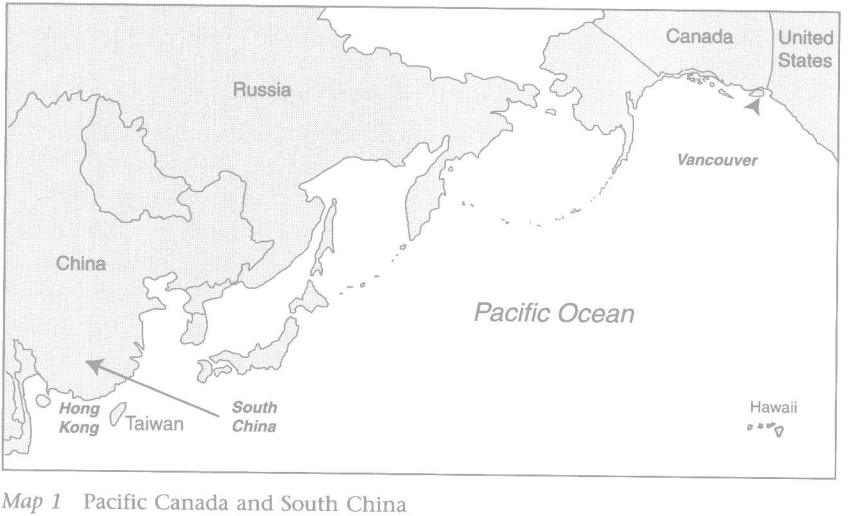
On Sunday, 25 April 1993, some 5,000 people voted in one of the most contested elections in the history of Vancouver's Chinatown. The occasion was the election of that city's Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC) board of directors. Fearing trouble, organizers had arranged some private security guards to ensure order in and around the venue, and, in addition, several police officers were on the scene. Just outside the hall, where members cast their ballots, booths were set up by candidates and hundreds of campaign workers.[1] The tense atmosphere surrounding this election was not unexpected. For several months, the CCC had been the subject of a heated public debate and, at times, acrimonious exchanges between two camps. On one side was a group of self-designated 'reformers' seeking to invigorate a community organization that they claimed had been mired in partisan politics and poor management. On the other side stood the incumbents, whose position in the CCC was based mainly on the support of the traditional clan and native place organizations in Chinatown. The latter disputed the criticisms of their leadership and, in turn, accused their 'detractors' of conspiring to mount 'a hostile takeover.'[2]

From its very beginning in 1973, the CCC had been a product of the Canadian government policy of multiculturalism, which encouraged ethnic minorities to preserve and celebrate their cultural heritages with fellow Canadians. The CCC's initial supporters came from all existing generations of immigrants and local-born Chinese, including a majority of Chinatown's well entrenched traditional organizations. Two decades later, however, many of Vancouver's Chinese began questioning whether the CCC, in its current form, still represented the interests and experiences of a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse Chinese population, many of whom had arrived only recently from Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan, and numerous other places. At the heart of the debate were questions about cultural representation and identity: What should be the content of ethnic Chinese culture in a Canadian context? How should the power to define Chineseness

be negotiated? One particularly salient aspect of identity politics in the 1993 election battle was the perceived alignment of the CCC with Mainland China and the office of the Chinese Consulate-General in Vancouver. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, many local supporters of the pro-democracy movement in China (and Hong Kong) demanded that the CCC not be wedded to Beijing and that it be amenable to non-Mainland Chinese cultural models and political ideas.

While this struggle over the CCC and the underlying issue of identity was new to more recent immigrants, long-time Chinese residents of Vancouver may well have realized that it was not the first time that a community organization had been engulfed in such a storm. In the late 1970s, the young CCC itself was involved in a similar 'takeover,' successfully wresting the control of the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA) from the pro-Taiwan elements in the Kuomintang.[3] Elderly settlers might even have recalled that in 1961-2 the conservative leadership of the CBA had withstood a public challenge from the younger generation of postwar immigrants, who had demanded that it admit representatives from their group.

The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80, examines some of these events, but it is important to note that these struggles were the tip of an iceberg. Beneath each confrontation was an ongoing contest – engaged in by several generations of Chinese immigrants and their Canadian-born descendants – over the meaning of being Chinese in Canada. This book traces the beginning of this process of identity formation and contestation to the period right after the Second World War. It unveils a plurality of cultural positions and definitions within this ethnic group and contends that their evolving interactions constituted a discourse on Chineseness over the span of some thirty-five



Map 1 Pacific Canada and South China

years. It seeks to explain the differential constructions of Chinese identity within the local context of Vancouver, while attending to the effects of relevant Canadian state policies and the transnational ties of the ethnic Chinese with China and their specific home areas. My primary objective is to help us rethink some deep-seated essentialist notions and to overcome an ahistorical tendency when we talk about ethnic Chinese identities (or, indeed, about any cultural and ethnic identity).

Directly or indirectly, this book has been inspired by a wide variety of scholarly work. One source of inspiration is the anthropological and historical scholarship developed in the 1950s and 1960s, which examined the 'Overseas Chinese' in Southeast Asia.[4] The Cold War atmosphere cast suspicion on the loyalty of the huge population of relatively affluent ethnic Chinese to the indigenous nation-states of this region, and it raised the question of Chinese identity to a new level of academic interest and political urgency. Most of these earlier studies sought to chart the course of ethnic Chinese cultural adaptation and assimilation. Many of them yielded insights into the community structure, leadership, organizational networks, and some salient divisions among the minority Chinese in various Southeast Asian countries. This scholarship was the first to alert me to the possibility of studying dimensions of social organization and cultural life in order to illuminate the more subtle and complex issue of identity, though I realize that it is imperative to eschew the structuralist paradigm and the unilinear logic of assimilation implicit in these earlier works.[5]

Intellectually, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80*, is more like the new literature on identity and ethnicity that emerged in the 1970s. In the wake of Frederik Barth's trailblazing essay on shifting and permeable ethnic boundaries, scholars have come to stress the situational quality of ethnic identity and its negotiation by individuals, interest groups, and state authorities. The existence of communicable cultural traits and inheritable biological elements is perhaps undeniable, but all these 'primordial' items acquire significance and become part of an identity only in specific contexts. Rather than fixed and stable, ethnic and cultural identities are contingent and malleable. Hence, the most meaningful inquiry does not compose a list of 'heritage items' – such as language, religion, social customs, dietary habits, and so on – in order to see if an identity is present, but, rather, it discerns the historical process within which an identity takes shape and explores how it evolves over time.[6]

This view of identity as a negotiable cultural construct can be applied to the study of individual and collective identities, to the relationship between these two levels of identities, and to their interplay with variables in different arenas of social, economic, and political life. I focus on the construction of identities by generational cohorts among the Vancouver Chinese. These cohorts started with the early migrants, mostly single males, from