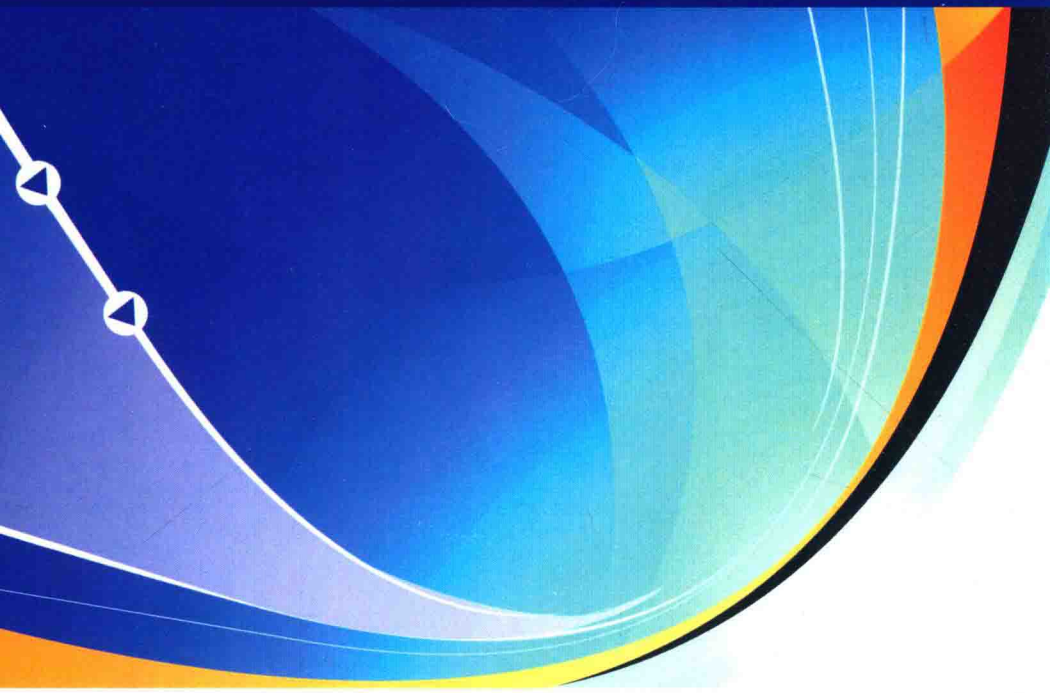

Frances S. Chiang

Chinese Immigrant Women Entrepreneurship

The Intersection of Class, Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Migration

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Frances S. Chiang
Vancouver, BC
December, 2009

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One

Introduction

Chinese women in Canada have long suffered from invisibility in academic research and misrepresentation in society; and more specifically, innovative research on Chinese women entrepreneurs as a unique group is virtually non-existent. To fill this gap, this study attempts to bring a group of Hong Kong Chinese immigrant women entrepreneurs to the centre of analysis by exploring the complexity and diversity of their entrepreneurial experiences in terms of the intersection of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and migration. Drawing from their personal narratives, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of these women's projects by detailing the processes from immigration to business start-ups and the operation of these businesses. This book is a revised version of my dissertation "*The Intersection of Class, Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Migration: A Case Study of Hong Kong Chinese Women Entrepreneurs in Richmond, British Columbia.*" The research was set in the City of Richmond of Greater Vancouver in the beautiful province of British Columbia in Canada. Richmond has gone through major transformation with the benefits from the massive Chinese immigration to Greater Vancouver from Hong Kong in recent years. Its flourished ethnic economy deserves research attention.

Greater Vancouver: Changing Faces

As a settler society, Canada, from its inception as a nation, has been continuously defined and redefined by immigration. The role of immigration has always been important in shaping the demographic composition of Canadian society, which simultaneously has affected and is reflected by its social, cultural, economic and political milieus. Since the post-war years, Canadian society has undergone major demographic transformation. From a predominantly white society with European roots, its population in recent years, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Calgary, has become increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-racial. The reasons behind such changes are complex. This is partly due to declining immigration from European countries after the War, and partly to the lifting of overt discrimination against immigrants from non-European sources in favour of meeting economic demands of skilled labour and capital investment in order to stay competitive in the global market. Immigration selection has opened up since 1967 with the

introduction of a universal points system based on humanitarian grounds and economic demands, doing away with over a century's preference for the British and other Western Europeans.

As a result, the demographic picture of Greater Vancouver, one of the top choices of immigrant destination, has become increasingly diverse. During the past two decades and so, it has attracted immigrants from East, Southeast, and South Asia as well as people from non-traditional sources such as the Middle East and Latin America (Hiebert, 1998). The growth of immigrants from Asia, notably from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and India was particularly tremendous as a result of the recent economic boom in the region. For example, between 1967 and 1986, while the British were still the largest place-of-birth group, the three next largest birthplace groups were from China, India and Hong Kong, and seven of the top ten sources countries were Asian (Hiebert, 1998:10-11). In essence, the proportion of Asian population grew from 2.4 percent in 1951 to 5.4 percent in 1971, and further to 18 percent in 1986 (Hiebert, 1998). Between 1986 and 1996, Vancouver has attracted the highest proportion of Asian immigrants, and immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China made up as many as 44.6 percent of total immigrants to British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 1996).

Among all Asian arrivals since 1967, the growth of Chinese population is particularly striking. By 1996, Chinese constitute close to half (49.4 percent) of the entire visible minority population in metropolitan Vancouver where the Chinese language ranked the top non-official language (11 percent) spoken at home (Statistics Canada, 1996). The arrival of Hong Kong Chinese is even more noteworthy. Its ranking as a source country to Canada went from tenth place in 1971 to fourth place in 1981 to first place in 1987 (Johnson and Lary, 1994:94), and remained so in the following decade. Hence, most of those who immigrated from Hong Kong in the post-war years are relatively recent arrivals: "over 60% of those living in Canada at the time of 1991 census arrived in the 1980s, while another 28% came between 1971 and 1980. In contrast, 8% came in the 1960s and only 1% arrived before 1961" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1996). The fear of economic and political instabilities when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese communist sovereignty had instigated a massive outflow of Hong Kong people (Li, 1998; Costa and Renaud, 1995). By 1996 Hong Kong had replaced the United Kingdom as the single most important place of birth among immigrants living in Vancouver (Hiebert, 1998).

Not only are recent immigrants diverse in terms of ethnicity and race, they are also becoming increasingly heterogeneous with respect to socio-economic status. There is no longer the "typical immigrant" (Hiebert, 1998) who came from the lower rungs of society to work as cheap labour to improve their economic position, probably with a sojourning mentality hoping to cash in and leave for good in a matter of time. Now, as a result of diverse immigration programs, with immigrants coming

through different channels, as investors, entrepreneurs, skilled and educated labour, family sponsorship, relative assistance and refugees, we find marked socio-economic differences rather than uniformity (Hiebert, 1998). Such complexity was noted, for example, among Hong Kong born immigrants:

> "... of the 29,300 immigrants from Hong Kong who landed in Canada in 1990, 12,800 were in the independent class and therefore were assessed according to their level of education, work experience, and so on; 1,600 retirees; 20 were refugees; 8,100 were part of the family reunification program; and 6,800 were either principal applicants in the business classes or their dependents" (Hiebert, 1998)

These immigrants are as diverse in education as they are in terms of economic participation. According to a report on the profile of immigrants from Hong Kong (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997) based on the 1991 statistics, Hong Kong Chinese varied in terms of education, employment, self-employment, occupational distribution and income. While 28 percent of Hong Kong immigrants had a university degree, 6 percent had less than a grade nine education. Eighty-five percent of Hong Kong men aged 25-64 and 69 percent of women in this age range were employed, out of which 15 percent of the men and 7 percent of the women were self-employed. While 49 percent of the men worked in professional or managerial fields, only 33 percent of the women worked in professional fields. Over half, 58 percent, of the women worked in clerical, sales or service positions. With respect to income, even though many made more or less the same income as an average Canadian, as many as 25 percent had incomes below Statistics Canada Low-income Cut-offs as compared with the Canadian-born (15 percent). There is also a remarkable variation between men and women. Hong Kong Chinese men on the average made 50 percent more than their female counterparts.

Overall, the ethnic-cultural transformation of Vancouver's demographics resulted in sweeping changes in many different ways. Economically, Vancouver has benefited from the flow of capital as a result of the Canadian business immigration program, that is, capital-linked migration (Wong, 1997), which makes capital-intensive investment to fulfill their immigration criteria (Li, 1993). For example, between 1987 and 1990, 1,511 entrepreneurial immigrants from Hong Kong brought in a net worth of $1.9 billion to British Columbia, and those who came under the investor program invested $343 million or 46 percent of the total funds by all investors in Canada (Li, 1993:235).

Offshore investments from Asian countries have also become significant. As reported by Li (1993), with respect to Canada as a whole, while foreign investments between 1983 and 1990 from all Pacific Rim countries quadrupled and from Japan tripled, those from Hong Kong alone increased nine times. Major Asian capital investments to Vancouver, according to Li (1993), include the following:

$320 million on the expo 86 site and control over its development by a Hong Kong multi-billionaire's corporation, a Japanese-based multinational corporation's development of a twenty-seven-thousand-square-foot supermarket and an eighty-one store mall in Richmond, and a Taiwan corporation's joint-venture with a Vancouver based company in building a hotel and shopping mall complex. Others include a Hong Kong capitalist who owns the Burrard building and the Hotel Georgia in Vancouver, a Hong Kong movie tycoon who owns land holdings at the entrance of Stanley Park and 30 percent interest in the Cathedral Place of Vancouver, a Macau casino owner and financier who owns le Meridien Hotel of Vancouver, a Vancouver based Hong Kong corporation who owns the English Bay Village, the Aberdeen Centre and Parker Place in Richmond, and controls two television stations and a radio station. Asian investors in total also control as much as 25 percent of the five hundred commercial properties in Vancouver's West End alone. High profile Hong Kong companies also established subsidiaries here, such as HSBC and Jardine Matheson Canada Limited. Ironically, massive off-shore investments from these Pacific Rim societies did not benefit much local ethnic labour or the ethnic economy. Underemployment and unemployment of immigrants from these places were notable (Hiebert, et.al., 1998) as selected immigrants complained about "no experience, no job" and made comments about the lack of economic opportunities like "Hong Kong for money, Vancouver for quality of life" (Hiebert, et.al., 1998).

Geographically speaking, recent immigrants have changed the ethno-cultural profile of urban and suburban neighbourhoods. According to Hiebert (1998), while traditionally, immigrants chose to reside in the City of Vancouver, many extended their residence beyond the city core to neighbouring suburban areas such as Richmond, Burnaby, Surrey, the North shore and the Tri-cities (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, and Port Moody). Interestingly, most did not choose to live in municipalities further away from the city centre, which are predominantly occupied by Caucasians. A twin pattern has occurred in terms of their settlement. While on the one hand there is increasing suburbanization, that is, moving away from the city core, on the other hand, many ethno-cultural groups remain highly concentrated[1].

The increase in Asian immigrants is also reflected in the changing political scene. As Asian participation becomes increasingly visible, we find Indo-Canadian and Chinese politicians representing

[1]According to Hiebert (1998), while immigrants tend to move to suburban areas close to the City of Vancouver, their residential patterns are pretty much concentrated. For example, Chinese are more likely to concentrate in the Vancouver eastside, Shaughnessy and Southlands of the Vancouver west side, Western Richmond, the British properties in Western Vancouver, the Westwood Plateau in Coquitlam, and throughout Burnaby avoiding North Vancouver, Delta, most of Surrey, and the Eastern suburbs. Indo-Canadians, on the contrary, settled in east Richmond, the border zone between New Westminster and Richmond, Northwest Surrey/Northeast Delta, and western Surrey.

all levels of government[2]. In fact, the representation is so spread out that in the 1997 federal election there were Chinese-Canadian candidates representing all four political parties in the Kingsway riding of City of Vancouver (Hiebert, 1998). Currently, British Columbia's premier is from a minority background, which is unprecedented in Canadian history[3].

Even though the political scene looks encouraging, socially, British Columbians received such dramatic changes with mixed messages. For example, a poll done in 1997 by the *Vancouver Sun* and *CBC TV's Broadcast One* found that while 49 percent of the GVRD [Greater Vancouver Regional Districts] residents thought that they were more tolerant of different races and cultures over the past ten years, 45 percent said that they were less tolerant or remained the same (The Vancouver Sun, 1997b). While people may, on the one hand, praise the multicultural images Vancouver has established, they dread and at the same time are threatened by the visible presence of the Asian immigrant population and their cultural inadaptability. Issues over monster houses, tree-cutting, skyrocketing real estate prices, non-English commercial signage, English as a Second Language (ESL) funding, *satellite* kids, overachieving kids, *astronaut* families, gangs and organized crime, violence and militancy, RCMP uniforms and the helmet by-law for cyclist are among the many that have been racialized and overblown by media attention[4]. In general, negative public sentiments and attitudes toward new immigrants have transformed into a different nature, especially for the Chinese.

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[2] Among these politicians, some notable ones include the following. David Lam, a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong, was nominated as the first lieutenant-governor of British Columbia. Vancouver MP Herb Dhaliwal became the first-ever Indo-Canadian federal cabinet minister in 1997 for the Liberal government. Raymond Chan, a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant, was first elected to the House of Commons in 1993, is currently Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific) for the second term. He represents the Richmond riding. Sophia Leung, who is also an immigrant from Hong Kong, is currently MP representing the Vancouver Kingsway riding. Jenny Kwan is the first Hong Kong Chinese immigrant woman elected to provincial legislature for the NDP government after working as a community activist and as a City Councilor for some time. She is currently Minister of Community Development, Cooperation and Volunteers. At the municipal level, Don Lee and Daniel Lee, also immigrants from Hong Kong, are currently Council members for the City of Vancouver.

[3] Ujjal Dosanjh, an immigrant himself, who used to be the Minister responsible for Multiculturalism and later the Attorney-General, became the Premier of British Columbia after former premier Glen Clark was forced to step down as a result of a casino scandal.

[4] More specifically, Chinese immigrants were blamed for skyrocketing real estate prices, building huge houses commonly known as monster homes, cutting trees in their own property, creating problematic *satellite* kids by leaving them alone in Vancouver while both parents return to their home country for better economic pursuits, unwillingness to plant roots in Canada by establishing *astronaut* families with a parent, usually the father leaving, exploiting Canadian benefits such as the school, university and medical systems, draining Canadian resources for ESL program, creating youth gangs, self-segregation, speaking Cantonese and Mandarin in public, driving expensive cars, flaunting their wealth, etc. Indo-Canadian immigrants are blamed for their militancy over religious and their back home political affairs, wife-beating, gang behaviour and organized crime, activism in maintaining the Sikh's turban in RCMP uniform and helmet by-law for cyclists, etc. Vietnamese and Iranian immigrants are blamed for gang behaviour and organized crime.

> "In the past, ethnic conflict was connected to competition for working-class jobs. Now the tension is more about real estate deals, university admissions and the esthetics of houses and landscapes.... Time was when host residents grumbled about poor immigrants who wouldn't adapt to western consumerist lifestyles and were eroding the education system. Now they grouse about a new generation of immigrants who, with their luxury cars, offshore investments and honour-roll kids, have adapted *too* well." (The Vancouver Sun, 1997d:B4c, Italics mine)

The expression of anti-sentiments has also become more subtle such that it has become extremely difficult to detect and analyze (Rose, 1999). For example, the relative homogeneity of the suburbs further to the city centre implies the possibility of "White[5] flight" of White residents moving away from these suburbs[6]. Many of these people do not openly admit this to be racist or anti-immigration, citing "too many people" (The Vancouver Sun, 1997d) and problems associated with urban and population growth (Hiebert, 1998) as factors.

Increased immigration also changes the faces of ethnic communities. For example, the Chinese community has moved beyond the old Chinatown in the City of Vancouver to different areas and its neighbouring cities. They are no longer confined to the Strathcona area next to Chinatown. As a result of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, Chinese now take up different spaces, from the modest Strathcona area and East Vancouver to upscale Vancouver Westside and West Vancouver (Hiebert, 1998). Businesses established by Chinese immigrants and residents have burgeoned and moved beyond Chinatown and penetrated into different districts and areas to meet the demand of the increased population[7]. While the traditional *huiguan*[8] normally located in Chinatown still maintain some significance, newcomers who are more diverse and modernized, tend to form and join organizations based on the Western models (Wickberg, 1994). Associations such as evangelical Protestant churches have become key adaptive organizations for new immigrants; social service organizations such as

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[5] Adopted from Anderson and Collins (1995), the term *white* is capitalized when it is referred to a properly named group. However, we should recognize that just as there are no uniform experiences among *minorities* or *women of colour*, the *Whites* are not a universal group but refer only to a particular group experience.

[6] The notion of "White flight" was popularized through media portrayal. Very little was known about it except a recent study by Rose (1999) who briefly took note of some form of mobility similar to this.

[7] More will be discussed in the next section.

[8] According to Wickberg (1994) *Huiguan* are home-district associations and "same-surname" or "clan" associations based in Chinatown that have historically provided services to Chinese migrants and residents. These services include business relations and networking, financial help for emergencies, maintaining Chinese schools to educate the younger generation, housing and employment assistance, provision of social support and protection, etc.

SUCCESS are also formed catering mostly to middle-class immigrants and residents (Wickberg, 1994). Other associations such as school alumni associations and social clubs are formed for business and other kinds of social networking (Wickberg, 1994). All of these organizations are now spread out into different geographical locations to serve the needs of a dispersed Chinese population.

New immigrants remain exclusive in character. Persisting racism continues to draw large ethnocultural groups, especially those with limited command of language, to a network of co-ethnic friends and relatives who define a culture of significant others (Hiebert, et.al., 1998:28). Few new immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, for example, include White Canadians among their good friends (Hiebert, et.al., 1998:28). Lack of opportunities in employment has intensified intra-ethnic networks and in-group systems of employment that fed the growth of ethnic enclave economies and in turn, socio-economic fragmentation (Hiebert, et.al., 1998:26).

The City of Richmond: Increased Chinese-ization

Richmond, one of the suburbs south of the City of Vancouver, which used to be a farming and fishing community very much rural in character (Rose, 1999; City of Richmond, 1993), experienced dramatic urbanization only in the past two decades, and became a city in 1990 (City of Richmond, 1993). Its population and urban growth coincided with increased immigration when the city attracted immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds, and has become one of the most multicultural areas of greater Vancouver (Hiebert, et.al., 1998). While in 1971, over 87 percent of Richmond residents reported European origin, by 1991, over 40 percent of its population was born outside of Canada with approximately one-sixth who claimed Chinese ethnic origin (Hiebert, et.al., 1998). While the Chinese population constituted less than one per cent of the entire Richmond population prior to 1981 (Li, 1998:114), it has increased to 7 percent in 1981 and 16.5 percent in 1991(City of Richmond, 1997). By 1996, Chinese constitutes 33% of the entire Richmond population as the largest group of visible minorities (City of Richmond, 2000b).

As a result of the massive presence of Chinese in Richmond, Chinese businesses have burgeoned in the past two decades. These businesses have broadened from the traditional restaurant and food-related businesses to include a variety of retail and wholesale firms and professional services (Li, 1992). According to the statistics compiled by Li (1992), between 1981 and 1990, Chinese firms in Richmond have almost tripled. Based on a rough count from the *Chinese Buyer's Guide, 1996*, the total