Beyond Silence:

Chinese Canadian Literature in English

Lien Chao

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Lien Chao

Introduction

In Canadian writing the two major (but by no means only) new forms to appear have been those that embody ethnicity and the female.
LINDA HUTCHEON

Criminal like man with no culture / very difficult to find true identity.
SEAN GUNN

The Chinese have a mythological origin in North America which is difficult to retrieve. The alleged discovery of this continent by a Chinese Buddhist monk named Hoei-shin in the fifth century remains today a controversial hypothesis. It is a historical fact, however, that Chinese have settled in Canada for one hundred and thirty-seven years.[1] Like other immigrants, Chinese sought dreams and hopes; but unlike European immigrants, for about one hundred years Chinese in Canada were treated as an undesirable race and convenient scapegoats for social woes. While the contributions made by Chinese immigrants were not recognized in Canadian history, racial discrimination against Asians in Canada, especially the Chinese, was recorded in three Royal Commission documents (in 1885, 1902 and 1908).[2] With head taxes and an exclusion act imposed on them, Chinese were branded as the unwanted race in Canada.

In order to minimize their contact with the dominant groups, for many decades Chinese in Canada were confined in Chinatowns and had absolutely no access to the mainstream media. They were collectively silenced. In the 1970s, however, community activists started to break through the wall of alienation and isolation. In 1976, a group of native-born Chinese in Vancouver organized a Writers' Workshop together with Japanese Canadians, the result of which was a joint and ground-breaking anthology published in 1979. This was not just an isolated literary event but part of a political campaign to challenge racial discrimination in Canadian society and the powers endorsing

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it. Like a spark igniting a wild fire, the first generation of Chinese Canadian writers emerged from the Writers' Workshop.

Their collective voice brings out a largely unrecorded Canadian experience and heritage that have been excluded or misrepresented by the dominant media. In various literary forms, writers from the community started to redress this historical injustice, to deal with issues of Chinese Canadian history and confront racism past and present. Twenty years later, a body of Chinese Canadian literature has been created in English in all genres and forms. Though recent, the growing corpus of this minority literature demonstrates the potential of becoming a significant component of Canadian literature.

The topic of Chinese Canadian literature suggested itself to me in 1988 upon reading a review of Paul Yee's photographic essay *Salt Water City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Lacey C11). Reading the book itself, later, was an emotional experience; it aroused anger and sadness at the way the Chinese were treated. But I was also intellectually stimulated into pursuing a research project to which I felt strongly connected.

There were few literary publications by Chinese Canadians at that time, so I dug out every piece of material in the library concerning Chinese immigrants, Chinese in Canada, and Chinese Canadians, these being the stages that Chinese Canadians have gone through in their long journey toward Canadian citizenship. I was overjoyed to find a copy of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Anthology* published by the Chinese Canadian Writers' Workshop in Vancouver in 1979. After reading this first anthology, I sensed that a community-based Chinese Canadian literature had been born, and I wished to be part of its growth.

Chinese Canadian literature did not exist in the literary canon at that time. The work had to be sought one at a time. I found an only copy of Jim Wong-Chu's poetry collection *Chinatown Ghosts* (1986) in a book store; I learned that Winston Christopher Kam's play *Bachelor-Man* was staged by Theatre Passe Muraille in November 1987; after meeting Kam I got hold of his manuscript and a video tape made during a performance; I also read that Fred Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan* won the 1985 Governor General's Literary Award for poetry. Meanwhile many new Chinese Canadian writers were publishing. The first chapter of Denise Chong's family memoir,

The Concubine's Children, was published in the October issue of *Saturday Night* in 1988; Paul Yee's *Tales from Gold Mountain* came out in 1989; Sky Lee's novel, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, was published in 1990 and aroused immediate public attention, laying down a cornerstone for Chinese Canadian literature; Evelyn Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* released in 1989 became an instant market success and the author, a media focus; it was followed by Lau's poetry and short story collections; and then, in 1991 came the long awaited second anthology, *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*. There had never been a time in which so many Chinese Canadian writers were publishing for the first time and being reviewed and recognized! As well, there had never been a time when there was such a need for critical interpretations of Chinese Canadian literature.

Contemporary Chinese Canadian literature is community based. Its interior landscapes are emotionally connected with the historical Chinatowns in which the stories and characters are situated. Here, generations of Chinese immigrants first arrived and worked; here, for many decades they were confined and built their community; also here in the Chinatowns, new generations were born and raised, including writers, and traditional Chinese culture was regenerated and circulated with a Canadian consciousness. Chinese Canadian literature is characterized by the historical experience of the community; consistent literary tropes and expressions have been developed to reclaim the collective community history and to redefine a collectively shared Chinese Canadian identity.

I wish to dedicate my work to the Chinese Canadian community, from which I have long since derived my personal identity. This project has been a double journey for me, academically and personally. The process of researching the community history; reading the texts and attempting to synthesize shared paradigms from across the genres; introducing the topic of Chinese Canadian literature at various academic conferences in Canada and the United States; anticipating and participating in the "Writing Thru' Race" conference in July 1994 in Vancouver; meeting Westcoast Chinese Canadian writers, and becoming a member of the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop myself—these have been the indispensable stages of my journey.

My personal identity has developed along with this study. I came

to Toronto in 1984 from mainland China as an independent student; I only became a landed immigrant after the events in Tien An Men Square in 1989. I remember that every September before I was "landed," in order to renew my visa and work permit I had to line up for half a day in front of the Immigration Canada office in Forest Hill in Toronto. Among other applicants in the line, many were foreign housekeepers and babysitters from Asian countries, especially from the Philippines. While listening to their chat, I knew I was one of the few lucky Asian women who, instead of being a housekeeper, had the opportunity to pursue graduate work in English.

As a graduate student studying Canadian literature and European drama, I became familiar with the existing literary canon, in which European values were taught through literary texts as a universal experience. Students like myself who did not belong to the dominant groups in society found our subjectivity either rendered irrelevant, thus nonexistent in the canonical texts, or stereotyped into caricatures which offended us collectively. Unless we adopted white values and tried to sound white, we would find ourselves constantly being denied a legitimate voice either in the texts or in analyzing them as readers. It was my experience with the mainstream canon that prompted me to challenge its composition by introducing Chinese Canadian literature.

In search of critical models for Chinese Canadian literature, I found similar quests made earlier by South Asian Canadian and Asian American writers and critics. As early as 1985, *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*, edited by M G Vassanji, was published by TSAR Publications. In 1988, Williams-Wallace published Arun Mukherjee's first essay collection, *Towards An Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature, Criticism, and Cultural Imperialism* (reissued by TSAR as *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space*). From south of the border, Asian American literature started to enter almost all the state universities; critical books have been published: *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* was published in 1974; later in 1991, *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* was published; Amy Ling published *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* in 1990; Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature* was published in 1993; and the list keeps growing in both countries.

I hope this book will help bridge the gap between Chinese Canadian literature and mainstream Canadian literature. By now the bridge is being built, though back in 1988 that was still a wish cherished by emerging Chinese Canadian writers. The only way a minority literature can be treated as equal to mainstream literature is if serious critical attention is paid to its development. The development of Asian Canadian literature has definitely caught mainstream attention, with the ground-breaking special issue of *Canadian Literature: East Asian Canadian Connections*, which, however, as its editor W H New pointed out, could "scarcely do more than provide another set of 'mentions' " (6–7).

The scope of this study covers contemporary Chinese Canadian works written in English only, with Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994) as the publication cut-off line. This selection does not preclude writings in Chinese or in French by Chinese Canadians from being read also as branches of Chinese Canadian literature. In fact there exist a huge quantity of journalism and literary texts published in Chinese by the communities across Canada. But the difficulty of translating texts from Chinese into English is an enormous task which cannot be attempted here. Writings in Chinese obviously deserve a separate and detailed study in their own right. Leaving out writings in the Chinese language from this study might suggest that the heritage language still remains silent and invisible in contemporary Canadian society; however, the functional existence of Chinese across all Chinatowns in North America indicates its parallel power to English somewhere in this culture.

This book consists of eight chapters, starting with a rereading of Chinese Canadian history (Chapter 1). This is followed by a theoretical attempt to summarize the discursive strategies that have repeatedly occurred in Chinese Canadian writings (Chapter 2). Next are five individual chapters analyzing selected literary works by genre, namely, anthology (Chapter 3), folklore (Chapter 4), drama (Chapter 5), prose (Chapter 6), and poetry (Chapter 7). A separate chapter deals with Evelyn Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989), the CBC movie of Lau's diary, and her latest short- story collection, *Fresh Girls and Other Stories* (1993). This structure treats the works considered here as part of a collective literature, at the same time reflecting its diversity. The generic division also looks forward to future develop-

ment of this growing literature with its new writers already producing in all the genres

Chinese Canadians have a history of one hundred and thirty-seven years; their lived experience needs to be recorded in Canadian history and literature. Whereas their images have been invented and reinvented as negations of the dominant groups, it is time that they invent their own images and tell their stories in English, one of the official languages of Canada. It is time that Chinese Canadians reclaim their community history and individual identities. A full-fledged, contemporary Chinese Canadian literature has entered the Canadian literary landscape with its own heroes and heroines, ghosts and devils, tragedies and comedies. This literature celebrates the survival and the development of the community and its individuals. As a minority literature, Chinese Canadian literature—like other such literatures—raises a resistant voice against European cultural hegemony in Canadian literature. From within Chinatown, contemporary Chinese Canadian writers set off in the 1970s to establish a community literature; encouraged by their works, my work joins the "epic struggles" (Garrick Chu viii) to help establish Chinese Canadian literature critically.

Contents

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1. Rereading Chinese Canadian History and the Need to Access Mainstream Discourse

One curious fact about the existing literature in Canada on racial discrimination is that a relatively large proportion of it was produced either by the governments or by government-affiliated, government-funded organizations, often in the form of in-house research, special task forces or commissions, or through special research activities contracted with university -based academics . . .
KWOK B CHAN

. . . to historicize any structure, to write its history, is to mythologize it.
CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

In 1761 French Sinologist M Deguignes published his research on a Buddhist monk named Hoei-shin, who had returned in the year 499 AD from a forty years' voyage of discovery to Fushang, which lay 30,000 *li* to the east of China. (1 *li* = 500 meters, i.e. half a kilometre.) The original document was an entry in the Year Book of the Chinese Empire, *Liang Shu*, collected in the *Encyclopedia of Mantuanlin*, the court archives. *Fushang*, from which Hoei-shin returned after his forty years' journey, was later identified by scholars as a geographical area in Western America, ranging from Mexico to British Columbia.[1]

The hypothesis that Chinese might have discovered America in the fifth century, 993 years earlier than Christopher Columbus, was investigated by several scholars. Among them, C F Neumann, professor of oriental languages and history at the University of Munich, published in 1841 Hoei-shin's original narrative in *Liang Shu* together with his own commentary. In 1875 American scholar C G Leland, supervised by Neumann, published Hoei-shin's entire narrative in English translation. According to both scholars, Hoei-shin's narrative captures convincing details of exotic landscapes presumably of an

earlier and unrecorded America.

The genre to which Hoei-shin's narrative most likely belongs, according to the two Sinologists, is alien to the Buddhist monk's practice and specialty. Although they did not specify the genre, my guess is that they probably referred to the genre of travelogue or popular travel literature:

> Some of the peculiarities observed by Hoei-shin—as, for example, the manner of wooing, the exposure of the dead, and the possible origin of his Kingdom of Women—existed in a strongly-marked form among the Red Indians; others recall New Mexican or Aztec culture, as it may have been driven south; and there are, withal Siberian-Mongolian traces. But I cannot resist the feeling, which has grown on me through years of study on this subject, that in the fifth century the Buddhist monk visited a race combining characteristics and customs which afterwards spread to the south and the east. All that he observed is singularly American, and from the tone of the narrative, was evidently new to the missionary. (Leland 60)

The inspiration provided by this mythological voyage goes beyond the question of historical accuracy. Whether Hoei-shin was a historical voyager or a "lying priest," or whether Fushang was Mexico or Vancouver or Japan or an invention (Leland 185), are less likely today to make an ideological impact on world history. Leland might disagree with my fictionalization of what he considered to be a historical fact. He chided novelists and poets who confused history with "absurd inventions and marvellous tales, [so] that even at the present day discredit is thrown by a certain class of critics on the entire narrative" (vi).

As a nineteenth-century historian, Leland failed to see that Hoei-shin's discovery of Fushang could not replace Christopher Columbus's discovery of "India," which was too deeply entrenched in the dominant (Western) world's mythology and construction of itself. As an academic, Leland was probably too naive to see that history means not only historical data but also the constitution of history as politics. Lévi-Strauss points out that history is never only history *of* but history *for* (emphasis mine); history is constituted from selected data for a

specific manifestation or latent purpose (257).

In the nineteenth century, China was defeated by joint Western imperial military powers. Starting with the First Opium War with Britain from 1840 to 1842, China was forced to open her five port cities (Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai) to foreign traders with tax exemptions, as well as to cede the island of Hong Kong. China also had to pay indemnities of forty million silver dollars to Western nations. After the Opium Wars, the Western powers arrived to carve out residential enclaves in Chinese cities and spheres of influence in the whole country.

Under the historical circumstances, it was politically impossible for Leland or any other scholar to argue that a Chinese Buddhist monk was actually the first discoverer of America. Had China been a strong imperialist power in the nineteenth century, this mythological voyage might have been reconstructed by institutional historians, using selected data and maybe even archaeological artifacts. It might then have become the earliest documented historical discovery of America, a history-*for* an imperialist nation with relevant ideological manifestation.

Whereas versions of origin(s) and of history are continuously invented and reinvented by historians, genealogists, and epic writers, the voyage of the Chinese Buddhist monk to America in the fifth century has never been publicized beyond the interests of a few academic scholars. In his contemptuous comments on the "absurd inventions and marvellous tales" developed by poets and writers of romances, Leland was too limited by his time and his discipline to see that imaginative and metaphorical language was shared by historical narrative and fictional accounts. Again, Lévi-Strauss's observation is pertinent: "to *historicize* any structure, to write its history, is to mythologize it" (104). Furthermore, Leland did not recognize that to mythologize any historical experience is to legitimize it, and to make it part of the existing cultural reference systems. Hence by positioning the Buddhist monk's voyage at the beginning of Chinese Canadian immigration history, I seek an engendering, mythological origin for my imagination. With this mythical beginning as a prelude to the journey undertaken by the Chinese Canadians in the last one hundred and thirty some years, I search for the "marvellous tales" writ-

ten by poets and storytellers of Chinese descent in Canada.

If Hoei-shin's journey to the West can be read as a mythological origin of the Chinese on the American continent, the tale of the fifty Chinese artisans' being assimilated into the Native tribes in British Columbia is a story of the origin of Chinese settlement in Canada. In 1788, fifty Chinese artisans disembarked at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island to help Captain Meares develop a fur-trading post. It is said that with the assistance of the Native people, Chinese carpenters built a two-storey house and a forty-ton schooner, *North West America*. Later, the Spanish drove out Captain Meares, fearing threat of future competition; however, most of the Chinese crew members decided to settle down on the island. They raised families with Native women and eventually grew old and died in the New World.

Various archaeological artifacts from that time remain today. They include objects used by the artisans, paintings by later artists to depict this event, reports written by American sailors five years later in 1793, and by Fort Nisquallie of the Hudson's Bay Company fifty years later in 1838.[2] These pieces of evidence tell many stories from which a conclusion can be drawn: Chinese immigrants made a settlement in Canada in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the Chinese settlement is very different from that of the Europeans. During the same historical period, European missionaries, traders and settlers, both French and English, came to colonize North America and its Native peoples.

By tracing the mythological journey of the Chinese Buddhist monk in the fifth century and the settlement of the fifty Chinese artisans in the eighteenth century, I am not applying, but rather challenging, a well accepted Canadian sociological paradigm, "who got here first has the most say," theorized by John Porter in *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965):

> In any society which has to seek members from outside there will be varying judgements about the extensive reservoirs of recruits that exist in the world. In this process of evaluation the first ethnic group to come into previously unpopulated territory, as the effective possessor, has the most say. This group becomes the charter group of the society, and among the many privileges and prerogatives which it retains are decisions about what other groups are to be let in and what they will be permitted to do. (60)

This problematic Canadian social law, "who got here *first* has the most say" became "who got here *second* has the most say" in the 1990s, as acknowledgement of the aboriginal people's right to the land achieved some recognition (Lupul 3). However, both versions derived from Anglo-French colonialism and nativism. Without legislative settlement of Native peoples' rights to their land, without admission of Native peoples and visible minority groups into the power structure, the rhetorical difference between "who got here first" and "who got here second" does not alter the fact that the two charter groups still have the most say in contemporary Canadian society. Since history is not history *of* but history *for*, Canadian history written by the two charter groups in the two official languages speaks to the interest and value of the dominant groups. In Canadian history, the contributions made by the Chinese immigrants to this nation, and to British Columbia in particular, are largely untold and therefore unrecognized.

Chinese immigration shares common ground with European, African, and other Asian immigration to Canada in terms of the cause of immigration, motivation, and the class status of the immigrants. Observing international migrations, sociologist Peter Li notes, "It was a combination of factors in the home country and the receiving state, which served as 'pushing' and 'pulling' forces, that propelled the wave of human movement from one country to another" (12-13). The pushing force in Chinese migration to North America consisted primarily of natural and human disasters. In the nineteenth century, the majority of Chinese immigrants to Canada came from the Pearl River Delta, southern China; Taishan is one of four counties that sent most of the immigrants because of floods, typhoons, earthquakes, famines, and a local war.[3]

While the pushing force was strong, the pulling force more strongly propelled southern Chinese peasants to seek opportunities in North America. The term "Gold Mountain" (*gun shan*), a synonym for the California gold rush, which was extended later to include Canada, suggests hope, prosperity, and stability.[4] The gold rush was never fair play for everybody, nor were the frontiers a free world. The term, "a Chinaman's chance," originating from the gold rush, has a racist overtone. Chinese were allowed to work only in the mines

abandoned by white miners, and some were even murdered for the bit of gold they eventually accumulated. While the chance for Chinese gold miners to make a fortune was very slim, many of them took up other frontier jobs. During the period of the 1860s and 70s, Chinese were also employed in various public construction jobs in British Columbia: building the Cariboo Wagon Road in 1863, driving horse teams through the dangerous canyons, stringing telephone wires for Western Union in 1866, digging canals, reclaiming wasteland, and establishing the fish canneries and lumber industry (Lee Wai-man 17-18; Paul Yee 12).

In addition to the large number of Chinese contract labourers, many Chinese came as independent immigrants. They were miners, merchants, domestic servants, restaurant owners and other service workers. They started various service businesses, out of which grew the large service industries later needed in a modern industrial society. The most significant contribution made by the Chinese immigrants to Canada's Confederation and its future as a nation was their collective participation in building the British Columbia section of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

The CPR British Columbia section was Canada's reward to the British colony for its commitment to join the Confederation. It was built between May 14, 1880 and July 29, 1885 (Chan 63). Approximately 17,000 Chinese labourers (Paul Yee 17) were recruited from Hong Kong and southern China by Chinese contractors who worked for Andrew Onderdonk, the contractor for this part of the railway. Chinese labourers were underpaid and worked in the most dangerous areas without safety devices (Li Dong Hai 131; Wickberg 23) or medical attendance (Paul Yee 80); there was also lack of fresh food supply (Chan 63). As a result, numerous deaths were caused by accidents and diseases. According to the conservative estimate of Onderdonk's testimony to the 1885 Royal Commission, 600 Chinese died in the construction. This was a ratio of more than 4 Chinese deaths to every mile of railway. According to an estimate made by a community resource, 4,000 Chinese workers died, more than 26 Chinese deaths to every mile of this section of the railway(Lo 60). In 1891 the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria alone arranged for a collection of more than 300 unidentified corpses from the Fraser and Thompson canyons to be returned to China for a

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