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ASIX 300A

18 April 2024

The Episodic Condition of the Chinese Canadian Identity:

Defining the Hong Kong Canadian

The relationship between Hong Kong and Canada has taken various forms throughout history and has proved to be integral to the formation of the traditional Chinese Canadian identity. As noted by Henry Yu in his article "The Rise and Fall of the Cantonese Pacific, 1850-1950", Hong Kong was at the core of trans-Pacific Chinese migration until the end of the 20th century (Sinn qtd. in Yu 31). For nearly a century and a half, being identified as a "Chinese Canadian" was strongly associated with having Cantonese roots and a connection to Hong Kong.

However, with the sudden outbreak of the 2019-20 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, a new "Hong Kong Canadian" identity rapidly emerged amongst the broader Chinese diaspora, challenging the label of "Chinese Canadian" as the sole representative of all ethnic Chinese in Canada (Xu and Vanderklippe). Understanding the identities of 'Hong Kong Canadians" and "Chinese Canadians" requires a deep examination of the history of the Chinese diaspora and their complex relationships with various incarnations of the Chinese state. In his 1997 exploration of the Hong Kong identity, Gordon Mathews writes: "As Hong Kong reverts to China, Hong Kong's people become once again Chinese, and heunggongyahn (the distinct Hong Kong identity) fades into history" (Mathews 13). He suggests that the Hong Kong identity is ultimately another expression of the greater Chinese identity, one that is temporary

and subject to constant change. This implication of an impermanent Chinese diasporic identity is further supported by Shanshan Lan, who states that identity should be treated as 'fluidity rather than fixity' (Ong and Nonini qtd. in Lan 720).

In this paper, I argue that both the "Chinese Canadian" and "Hong Kong Canadian" identities are inherently episodic, subject to continual redefinition and revision with each major wave of trans-Pacific Chinese migration. The "Chinese Canadian" of the present differs from that of the past and will continue to evolve into something distinct in the future. While there might exist some similarities across various generations of Chinese Canadians, such as common spoken languages or political views, they are ultimately insignificant – too trivial to establish the "Chinese Canadian" identity as one characterised by long-term diachronic continuity and coherence. The "Chinese Canadian" identity undergoes constant reconstruction and destruction, reaffirmed by the unique backgrounds and traditions of each Chinese migration wave.

Between 1850 and 1950, the Chinese diaspora in Canada was largely composed of Cantonese migrants who traced their origins to a cluster of small villages in the Guangdong province of China (Yu 32). The Cantonese heritage of these immigrants became a significant, unifying influence amongst the Chinese diasporas in an era of strong racial discrimination. As pointed out by Yu, the strong Cantonese heritage of these early migrants was reflected by their establishments of Chinatowns and their use of "Tong Yun" (唐人, translates to "People of the Tang dynasty") to describe themselves, a term that remains exclusive to the Cantonese-speaking community (Yu 43). This was not only a factor in Canada, but also in the British colony of Hong Kong, where the majority of the population consisted of immigrants from Guangdong and their descendants (Chan 32). In the case of Hong Kong, M.K. Chan states: "to many Chinese residents…in the pre 1949 days, 'China' meant Guangdong while 'homeland' referred to the ancestral villages in the Pearl River Delta." (Chan 31). It is highly probable that this set of references demonstrated in Chan's article was also seared in the minds of early Chinese settlers in Canada. Hong Kong at this time was the main 'through-port' for almost all trans-Pacific migrants from China; it is no

wonder that the Chinese diaspora in Canada and the population of Hong Kong of this era shared a strong Cantonese self-identification (Yu 31; Lan 712).

However, by the 1960s and 1970s, this cohesive Cantonese identity began to show signs of strain as a result of the increasingly visible economic, political, and social disparities between Communist-controlled Guangdong and British Hong Kong. While mainland China was caught in political turmoil such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Hong Kong experienced tremendous economic growth, forcing the emergence of a distinct Hong Kong identity (Lan 712). By the 1970s, the average Hong Kong resident was more wealthy, productive, and internationally sophisticated than their northern neighbours (Chan 52). This divide within the Cantonese-speaking world also marked a new beginning in the Chinese diasporic community: "many of the new urban migrants from Hong Kong saw themselves as utterly distinct from their forebears in Canada" (Yu 45). It is crucial to emphasise that the post-1970s migrants were urbanites, which sharply contrasted with the existing Chinese diaspora. For much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most ethnic Chinese in Canada were employed in trade-related occupations, such as labourers or farmers (Public Archives of Canada qtd in. Ma 11).

Although much of Hong Kong's residents considered themselves ethnically and culturally Chinese, they did not necessarily align themselves with the policies of the Chinese state (Mathews 6). In fact, the territory was often seen as a 'base of subversion against the Chinese state' throughout its history as a colony (Chan 45). Hong Kong not only served as a place of asylum for the likes of Sun Yat-sen, Zhou Enlai, and the student leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, but also acted as a source of modern thought and revolutionary causes challenging the various incarnations of the ruling Chinese state (Chan 45). However, such a plurality of political thought only existed in the grassroots social strata of Hong Kong – the governor of Hong Kong was never elected by the populace, and any notion of liberal democracy was denied by colonial elites until the final decades of colonial rule (Mathews 11). Under British rule, Hong Kong became a relatively free place of political deliberation for the Chinese populace, contrasting with the chaotic, factional environment of 20th century China, despite having little or no

control over the colony's politics. It was colonial Hong Kong's sovereign separation from China that fostered the rise of an independent Hong Kong identity amongst the population – "loving the (Chinese) culture and seeing themselves as ethnic Chinese, yet loathing the Communist regime" (Carroll 56).

With a history of political and economic turmoil as exemplified by the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, the residents of Hong Kong had long developed a sense of uneasiness with their future Chinese masters, who were to gain sovereignty over the territory in 1997 (Ma 6). Further reassuring this sense of mistrust was the Chinese government's brutal crackdown on the student protesters at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. As Mathews states: "The Tiananmen Square incident, on 4 June 1989, dashed Hong Kong's dreams of a benevolent China." (Mathews 7). The heavy-handed response of the Chinese government was especially shocking for the Hong Kong people, who had little to no control over the political affairs of both their ancestral and adopted homelands. Constrained by the lack of political representation in the Hong Kong government, the colony faced a 'gathering wave of emigration' following the June 4th incident (Wong qtd. in Carroll 56). In all, the occurrence of the Tiananmen Square massacre not only intensified the Hong Kong people's political disconnection from China, but it also triggered a significant wave of migration from Hong Kong to Canada (Yu 46).

Considering their political and cultural background, this new generation of Chinese migrants originating from Hong Kong was incredibly different from the existing Chinese diaspora in Canada. Unlike the existing Chinese diaspora that held economic aspirations in Canada, this new generation of migrants was motivated by desires for political refuge and educational mobility (Ley qtd in. Yu 45). In even greater contrast with the existing group of "Chinese Canadians", this new generation of migrants often held considerable financial wealth or professional backgrounds – an unprecedented phenomenon in both the Chinese diaspora and Canadian immigration history (Ma 7).

The physical impact of the new Hong Kong migrants was particularly noticeable in the coastal city of Vancouver and its surrounding areas. The "Chinese Canadian" community was no longer confined to the racial discrimination of a predominantly white mainstream society, which had previously compelled

them to concentrate in the historically impoverished area of Vancouver, now known as "Chinatown" (Edgington et al. 155). Instead of a continued development of Chinatown, the new generation of migrants centralised on the neighbouring municipality of Richmond, constructing "Chinese malls" that emulated the gigantic shopping centres of urban Hong Kong (Edgington et al. 171). In terms of economic prowess, the Hong Kong migrants of the 1980s and 1990s far surpassed their predecessors.

The most shining example of this newfound economic prowess was Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-Shing's 1988 purchase of the former EXPO' 86 lands, a large property adjacent to Vancouver's downtown core (Edgington et al. 177). Even though Li Ka-shing himself may not hold Canadian citizenship, his son, Victor Li, is a Canadian citizen who runs Concord Pacific, the company that is responsible for the land's development (Hamilton A12). The great wealth of the new migrants was also highlighted in contemporary Canadian news coverage, as noted by Jianming Ma: "For the first time in well over a century, ethnic Chinese seemed to have won wide public attention for their increasingly influential economic power – rather than allegedly exchanging cheap coolie labour for a share of Canadian wealth." (Ma 110). This generation of the Chinese diaspora redefined the "Chinese Canadian" identity; ethnic Chinese were no longer designated as cheap labourers or "coolies" but as well-off entrepreneurs and business professionals (Ma 17). The chop suey restaurants of old now made way for the *cha chaan teng* – the Hong Kong-style café.

In the new millennium, the Cantonese-dominance of the Chinese diaspora began to rapidly erode as a new generation of migrants from different regions of the People's Republic of China started to redefine the "Chinese Canadian" identity (Yu 46). This coincided with the rise of a more localist Hong Kong identity, which was growing increasingly hostile to the once-popular concept of a pan-Chinese identity. By 2012, Hong Kong had become known as a "city of protest"; this newfound identity of the territory was further aggravated by the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019-20 pro-democracy protests (Carroll 61). As stated by Carroll in his historical analysis of the Hong Kong-China relationship: "Beijing's promotion of patriotism to justify deferring universal suffrage has pushed some young

Hongkongers against the idea of China 'even on a cultural level'" (Veg qtd. in Carroll 61). The rejection of China on both political and cultural levels has caused a major split within the "Chinese Canadian" identity, which has become increasingly conflated with patriotism towards the Chinese state. This perception was shared by various interviewees in a 2019 Globe and Mail news article, who spoke proudly of their Hong Kong identity and rejected the redefined "Chinese Canadian" identity (Xu and Vanderklippe). In our present time, we now see the birth of a new "Hong Kong Canadian" identity from the ashes of a now-dead Cantonese-dominated "Chinese Canadian" identity.

However, a major question remains: Can this diasporic "Hong Kong Canadian" identity endure in the face of the recent attempts to suppress the native Hong Kong identity? As the Chinese government suffocates the last gasps of democracy in Hong Kong with the National Security Law and Article 23, the final remnants of this once-protesting and free-thinking Hong Kong identity will be only preserved in the Hong Kong overseas diaspora. Hong Kong is no longer the 'base of subversion against the Chinese state' – the political differences that separated Hong Kong from China have been destroyed. Despite writing his article nearly 27 years ago, Mathews's sombre forecast remains true: "As Hong Kong reverts to China, Hong Kong's people become once again Chinese, and heunggongyahn fades into history." (Mathews 13).

What does this imply for the Hong Kong Canadian diaspora? The "Hong Kong Canadian" identity is ultimately temporary. It will only be rewritten by new generations of "Hong Kong" migrants, who will hold dissimilar cultural and political values as a product of autocratic rule by the Chinese Communist Party. Perhaps, it will merge with the "Chinese Canadian" identity once again – united by their closeness to the Chinese state. As the *cha chaan tengs* dim their lights for the last time, hot pot restaurants prepare for their grand openings.

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