

Language in Chinese Canadian Writing: Impact on Interpretation and Reception

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When one group finds it difficult to stand up and say its name; when to say one's identity is already to mark one as lesser than, that is where the boundaries of exile begin. (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Afterword 168)

The very choice of the language in which to compose is itself a political statement on the part of the writer. (Barbara Harlow xviii)

During the last three to four decades, there has been—in the United States and Canada—a flowering of diasporic Asian authors of Chinese and Japanese origin, who have both acquired considerable commercial success and enlarged the canon. To name only a few, I am thinking in the United States of the reception of such works as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and Gish Jen's novels and stories about the immigrant Chang family.¹ In Canada, there are Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and *Itsuka* (1992), Evelyn Lau's *Runaway Diary of a Street Kid* (1989), SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and *Bellydancer: Stories* (1994), Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994), Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1995), Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995) and *salt fish girl* (2002), Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996), and Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence* (2002), among others. The success of Asian Canadian creativity has been supported by a variety of anthologies, such as *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* (1979), SKY Lee and her co-editors' *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures* (1990), Bennet Lee and Jim Wong-Chu's *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary*

Writing by Chinese Canadians (1991), and Lien Chao and Jim Wong-Chu's *Strike the Wok: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Canadian Fiction* (2003), as well as an ever increasing number of scholarly monographs and articles.²

This Asian American and Canadian literary production is, at least in Canada, well matched and even preceded by writers belonging to a very broad range of other ethnic groups, with different linguistic, cultural, religious, and geographic backgrounds. The immigration experiences depicted in literature—initially predominantly of peoples coming from Europe and, to a much more modest extent, from East Asia, now from most parts of the world—reflect the fact that over time there have been significant shifts in the educational and other assets of the newcomers and therefore altered opportunities for integration into society. A startling, but not unique, example is the difference between the economic and human plight of early Chinese and Japanese labourers, who were not only exploited but also discriminated against by force of law, and the relatively smooth social success of today's immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Often well educated and sometimes well heeled, they are now frequently accepted—in the first and not only second or third generation—as a natural part of the country's elite. In certain parts of Canada, such as the areas of greater Vancouver and Toronto, they moreover represent a rapidly increasing demographic fact.³

In literary terms, there was in Canada a prolonged period of attempts to document the immigrant experience, including painful identity crises, of settlers belonging to the various majority and minority groups, such as the English, Scottish, Irish, French, Ukrainian, Jewish, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and others. Writing in their mother tongue, or in English or French, authors belonging to that earlier period usually emulated in their writing older, realist, and naturalist paradigms, with a gradually increased use of modernist techniques and attitudes. Today, immigrant writers from the whole spectrum of the Canadian ethnic mosaic—from Blacks and Creoles from the Caribbean to the Chinese and others who came from South-East Asia—examine not only the traditional tribulations of being in an unaccustomed and different environment, climate, geography, and culture, but they tackle in addition

the new internal and external psychological and social problems and advantages of a largely post-modern, post-industrial, globalized, and resolutely heteroglossic society. Their prominent themes express the preoccupations of a society with a rapidly changing demography, a society that has become, to a great extent, truly multi-cultural, albeit within a still vertical mosaic privileging the traditional Anglo-Canadian, and in Quebec Francophone, mainstream.

For a long time, most scholars perceived the specificity of ethnic minority writing—a term meriting a special critical inquiry—as being thematic, a matter of subject, theme, and perspective. Nevertheless, more recent inquiries tend to show that “ethnic writing may be distinguished from what is not ethnic writing by its particular preoccupation with language” (Blodgett, “Towards” 623; see also Blodgett, “Ethnic [...] Paratext”). Quoting poets and critics such as Amprimoz, Caccia, and Viselli, E.D. Blodgett concludes, “ethnic poetry, especially Italian-Canadian, is where cultural values are confronted as a problem in language” (“Towards” 624). Analyzing Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* in the perspective of Lacanian psychology, Blodgett finds that the language and its varied uses in the novel are essential for the understanding of the protagonist and, indeed, the author (“Ethnic”).

Before concentrating on my corpus, which covers Chinese Canadian writing in English, I should like to point out with emphasis that various strategies of “breaking up” standard English are not an exclusive practice of Canadian minority writers. This world wide phenomenon is described, from a linguistic point of view, in such books as David Crystal’s *English as a Global Language* (1997) and Tom McArthur’s *The English Languages* (1998). The study of this development is the focal point of the scholarly periodical *World Englishes*, published in Oxford and New York since 1985, first by the Pergamon Press and now by Blackwell. While it specializes in questions of linguistics and teaching strategies, the journal offers, from time to time, articles that may interest literary historians. A literary and ideological exploration of this field can be found, for example, in Dennis Walder’s *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* (1998), which focuses on Indian fiction in English, Caribbean and Black British poetry, and contemporary South African

literature; Walder also discusses the Canadian author Michael Ondaatje. Recent short overviews such as Christopher O'Reilly's *Post-Colonial Literature* (2001), on Anglophone literature, and the late Jacqueline Bardolph's *Études postcoloniales et littérature* (2002), on Anglophone and Francophone literature, offer equally some insights into the question of language appropriation.⁴ The most active debates about these practices and their meaning, as well as their influence on reader-response and reception have taken place, it seems, in Sub-Saharan Africa and the West Indies (Dasenbrock 11–12). It is worth mentioning that similar developments, albeit probably less radical, have taken place in the international, multicultural Francophone, Hispanic, and Lusophone literary and language spaces (Dimić, esp. 11-12., 15, 18-19.)

But let us return to writers of Chinese origin in North America. In an often reproduced and quoted article, “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan, the contemporary American writer of best sellers of Chinese origin, expresses one aspect of this problem of and in language; while it may be the most basic, it is not the only one. Mentioning that “lately, [I have] been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks,” she continues:

I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts. (135)

Amy Tan identifies in this statement four types of her mother's speech and three problems in reproducing it. Of the four types, at least two involve non-standard language: the category of “broken” English, and that

which has “neither an English nor a Chinese structure” but rather some in-between organization. The three problems are: how to express the subtle varieties of her mother’s speech, how to avoid pejorative labels for it, and how to ensure that the book she writes is “easy to read.” Although already complex, this diagnosis does not mention the additional difficulty of rendering Chinese dialects and idiolects, an obstacle encountered by some of the writers studied by me, and the inevitable cultural connotations embedded in any use of words, something that is present in all Chinese, and for that matter, in all writing, be it ethnic, minority, or majority. It is important to keep in mind that certain postmodern authors, for artistic or political reasons, do not wish to facilitate the reading experience and prefer “making strange” or “defamiliarization” (Viktor Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*) or even the purposeful creation of misunderstanding and unintelligibility (Dasenbrock).

Distortions of English, insertions of Chinese words and speech patterns are frequent in the reproduction of dialogue in narrative fictions by writers of East Asian origin. In this presentation, I will rely especially on the exemplary use of languages in one prominent Chinese Canadian novel, Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*. His “Author’s Note” refers to matters of language as follows: “I am also responsible for any rendering of Chinese phrases and complex kinship terms into English equivalents, and for the adoption of the different sets of rules for the spelling of Chinese words” (8; see also Christopher Lee). Vancouver’s Chinatown in the late 1930s and the early 1940s is the setting of the reminiscences of three young children, Jook-Liang, Only Sister, Jung-Sum, Second Brother, and Sek-Lung, Third Brother. The novel covers 238 printed pages and at least one hundred of them (I tried to count) contain Chinese words. These are usually translated in the same sentence or fairly soon after, in a kind of “appositive” inter-lingual stylistics, similar to simultaneous translation in oral situations. Already the motto, taken from Wing Tek Lum’s “Translations” (1987), reads as follows: “*Tòhng Yàhn Gāai* was what we once called where we lived: ‘China-People-Street.’ Later, we mimicked Demon talk and wrote down only *Wáh Faub*—‘China-Town.’ The difference is obvious: the people disappeared” (9). On the second page of the first chapter we find “the *lao wah-kiu*, the Chinatown old-timers”

(14), on the third page “Ahyaii, ho git-sum! How heart-cramp!” (15), and there are in the novel well over one hundred similar juxtapositions of Chinese words and English equivalents.

Quite frequent are instances of “broken” English, and somewhat less the particular mix of Chinese and English termed “Chinglish” by Jook-Liang, Only Sister, who practices it with her close friend, the Old Monkey, for their own secret talks (63). Already in the first chapter, Third Uncle Lew is fond of saying about old-timers: “We all pea-pod China men!” (18). Grandmother Poh-Poh, when furious, says to her grand-daughter, who is only a useless girl-child, *mo yung* (32): “No more teach!” (35) In her mouth, Shirley Temple becomes “Shirlee Tem-polah” (34). A Chinese assistant of a camp’s cook, staring at the Monkey Man, exclaims, “You lookee good!” (54), and so on, certain expressions inadvertently sounding like Anglo-American caricatures of Asian speech habits. Pointedly, Jook-Liang, Only Sister, uses true colloquial English, which she learned at Kingdom Church Kindergarten, only when she wants to insult her brothers: “‘Fart Face,’ I said” (20).

In addition, from the very opening page of the novel, the author frequently alludes to various Chinese regional and even village dialects, naming many, and signals idiolects, even family preferences. Usually he does not attempt to illustrate them with direct quotations or English semantic and semiotic equivalents, but only mentions their social and psychological importance for that family and the whole Chinese Canadian community.

A large role in the novel is played by English words that are not used in their standard Anglo-American meaning. Beginning with the quoted motto, the words “demon” and “ghost” designate any non-Chinese, especially “white” person, but also Chinese mythological demons and ghosts, without any explanation of the former usage.⁵ Chinese kinship terms are sometimes elucidated, as in the case of the family’s decision to call the concubine, once she had children, Stepmother—because this is Canada after all (14). Most other terms, like Third Uncle, are left as reminders of “otherness,” little pebbles, and sometimes stones, on the reader’s path. The narrative voice in the novel assumes that Gold Mountain, as a name for Canada, is self-evident, but the young girl’s

musings about Old Monkey, an important figure in her childhood, are unlikely to enlighten a reader unfamiliar with the legends about this popular hero. On only one page in the novel (72), Giltrow finds seven cultural references that probably would not be understood by the average reader who is not a member of the Chinese immigrant community, and one of these references—to Chinese children attending both English and Chinese school—would be incomprehensible to Asian Canadian readers whose families arrived in the 1990s. It is otherwise a sign of the author's broad humanity that his protagonists are aware of the plight of other immigrants: "Some nights I would hear in my dreams our neighbours' whispering rising towards the ceiling, Jewish voices, Polish and Italian voices, all jostling for survival, each as desperate as Chinese voices" (51). Towards the end of the novel, Sek-Lung, Third Brother, who fancies young athletic men, learns that even the despised Japanese are human and subject to tragedy.

SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* inserts a number of syntactic alterations of current English, as well as some phonetic and morphemic translations of Chinese words and metaphors, certain of which with cultural connotations that escape a non-Chinese reader.⁶ The author avoids concessions to a readership comprised of cultural outsiders and introduces many hidden cultural subtexts.⁷

The most recent novel mentioned in my introduction, *This Place Called Absence*, is the work of Lydia Kwa, a Singaporean Chinese, who came to Canada in 1980 and studied clinical psychology. The novel intertwines two narrative streams, one set in present Vancouver and Singapore and the other in the Singapore of the 1900s, interweaving the mistreatment of Chinese prostitutes in early Singapore history with the story of a Peranakan Chinese living in Vancouver and her difficult attempts to make her family accept her homosexuality. The book is written in a mixture of, as Kwa informs the reader, "Malay and 'Singlish'—a corruption of the Queen's English—a colloquial form spoken in Singapore" (213). The narrator, Wu Lan, includes the Cantonese and Hokien dialects in her text.⁸

Although outside of my present purview, the novels by Ying Chen, well-received and winning prizes in Quebec and France, follow much

more closely the traditional standards of the French literary language. The author, raised in Shanghai, came to Montreal in 1989, studied French language and literature, and decided to write in that language, always keeping an eye on Marcel Proust. Nevertheless, she uses reformulated Chinese proverbs, refers to the meaning of Chinese names, and includes cultural pointers, which may escape some readers.

Shorter narratives by Chinese Canadian writers, with the exception of those by Evelyn Lau, contain similar linguistic and cultural specificities. SKY Lee, in “The Soong Sisters,” an anthologized short story from her collection *Bellydancer*, has at least two such passages. One of the three female protagonists, who are not sisters by blood nor do they belong to the Soong dynasty, Sue Mei, has a mother. Before dying, she exclaims: “‘Yew Sue Mei mama,’ were her last words, fired off perhaps randomly, perhaps not” (541). These words are not translated. More importantly, the little ditty about the Soong Sisters of China is quoted early in the narrative, without further information: “One loved money, / the other loved power, / and the third loved China” (538). The editors of the anthology felt obliged to provide a long footnote (538). Such explanations are not given for other cultural references, for example “It’s all a part of her inalienable rice,” an expression referring both to the Chinese biological inheritance and the title of the pioneering anthology of Chinese Canadian writing.

Nevertheless, and regardless of the theme of the narrative, in some short stories there is only a limited actual display of either altered English or of Chinese terms. For instance, Larissa Lai, who was born in La Jolla, California and grew up and lived in various places in Canada, from St. John’s, Newfoundland, to Vancouver and Calgary, in her recent brief fiction “Two Houses and an Airplane” (2003) presents a complicated double vision of two houses, two countries, two cultures, two identities, two generations, two protagonists, two languages and two dialects; still, verbal examples of otherness are very rare (see 4), and there are two references to the inability of one of the narrative voices to speak (15) or comprehend Chinese, according to the second-last sentence of the text: “Of course, I cannot understand a word” (18).

More subtle, but not less important are such interferences in poetry.

They range, as in writings originating in other Canadian minority groups, from the mimetic reproduction of particular speech habits to postmodern explorations of language and identity (Chao, “Dialogue”). An example of the mimetic is to be found, for example, in Jim Wong-Chu’s poem “old Chinese cemetery: kamloops July 1977”; the poet narrates an old man’s memory of a road construction accident caused by a white engineer’s mistake:

the *gwai low* engineer
gave wrong instruction
with the dynamite

“I lucky”
the break in his leg
did not pop the skin (28)

In the few sentences the old man can pronounce in English, he asks: “Where is my china?”

Sean Gunn in his poem “And Then Something Went” sarcastically points out the deadly racial stereotypes and clichés, introducing some of them into his own text:

here
suck fortune cookie
click click
.....
every day sammy tong houseboy
one day he find no peter
sammy tong shoot self in head
click click
beep beep (*Inalienable Rice*)

Canadian writers of other ethnic origin often use stylised, “broken” English when they depict Chinese characters. Andrew Suknaski, a poet of Ukrainian extraction, for example, adopts a phonetic spelling: “commeh bek in coopleh veek time” (19), and introduces his Chinese cook in a stereotypical way that is representative of Western Canadian fiction:

all time takkie too much
makkie trouble sunna bitch
wadda hell madder wid you? (28)

Lien Chao, who was born in China and came to Canada in 1984, has published a collection of bilingual narrative poems, evenly covering Chinese and Canadian spaces, and expressing the author's youth, marriage, and divorce in China and her new life as a Chinese Canadian academic (*Maples and the Stream* 1999). In some of the poems, she expresses her desire to belong to the majority community ("Canada Geese"), which still sees her as part of the Chinatown (105, 117); at the same time, her Mandarin speaking background separates her from the Chinese Canadian community dominated, at least in the past, by the Cantonese culture and dialects: "The truth is, I don't understand a word in Cantonese" (114). The author uses unsimplified characters in the Chinese versions of the poems, but apparently with many errors, some of them due to the ignorance of Cantonese pronunciation (Jay).

Language as a problem is directly addressed in Laiwan's poem "The Imperialism of Syntax," published in *Many Mouthed Birds* in an English and a Chinese version, which often alters the original (Chao *Beyond Silence* 45-46 128ff.). Addressing Chinese immigrants the poet, who herself cannot read Chinese, states:

you had travelled long and far to be subject to another's
language,
another's *syntax*.
Right away, those rules of grammar were the forgetting of
yourself.
Those letters never pronounced before
Became the subject of your ridicule.
The bitterness on your tongue became hidden in need of
survival
a proof of assimilation
the invisibility of yourself...

Now you are here
do you remember your syntax, your language
that which would be the remembering of yourself? (57-58)

Laiwan's most ambiguous feelings about English are explained in her short essay "Ubiquitous China," in the anthology *Yellow Peril* (40).

A particular case is the creativity of Fred Wah, of mixed origin, who in his numerous well-received poems, prose poems, narratives, and essays explores in a sophisticated way both postmodern experiments with language and the more traditional search of personal and family roots. In the prose poems of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985) and the narrative *Diamond Grill* (1994), and other works, Wah probes into the conflicting feelings of a cosmopolite education and temperament and the nagging need to find a defined place of belonging for one-self, in one's own mind but as well in society, and explores, with some provocation, the question of being on "the margin" or on "the edge."⁹ When speaking of his family, Wah evokes their special idiolect, which combines English and Chinese phrases with the so-called Chinook jargon and elements of indigenous languages (Hilf 145); he presents his father's Chinese gambling games and the family's home-cooked Chinese dishes, usually providing the Chinese names (9, 67, 91, 167; see Hilf 148-49).

Winston Christopher Kam's play *Bachelor Man* (1985/87) reconstructs the language spoken by Chinese bachelors in the 1930s, with whole paragraphs of broken sentences (Chao 1997 66-87, esp. 72ff.). A fairly extreme case of imitation of people's way of speaking is Betty Quan's play *Mother Tongue*, written in 1996 and performed a few years ago in Toronto that depicts cultural contacts and conflicts going beyond words, using various English sociolects, Cantonese, and American sign-language.

Local, Canadian born and raised, authors of Chinese descent are sometimes criticized by other Chinese for their imperfect knowledge of the "mother tongue" and greater ease in English (see Ng "Chop Suey" and "Representing"). My colleague Jennifer W. Jay, of the History Department at the University of Alberta, who knows Chinese dialects and classical Mandarin, makes the following observations ("Gold Mountain"):

because their first language is a spoken Cantonese dialect, hybridities of language are created in the texts of the local-born Chinese, as indicated by the scattered appearance of dialect terms. SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* contains a child's literally translated Taishanese, as in "go die, stinky bitch," "dead girl bag," and "how many times ten years" (24, 70). In Denise Chong's family history, we see confusion in the translation, as when "jook gee Hing" is translated as "fast enough to catch a pig," when the intended meaning is "Hing, who is gullible and stupid like a pig" (110). Fred Wah's native Kaiping dialect, sprinkled with Chinook jargon, refreshingly yields two original terms: "high muckamucka" for putting on airs, and "You mucka high" for a crude Cantonese swear phrase. (*Diamond* 68)

It is this hybrid or deficient grasp of the Chinese language that has drawn ridicule to the local-born Chinese as *zhuxin*, hollow bamboo or hollow in Chinese culture. SKY Lee remarks that Hong Kong Chinese similarly look down at the local-born because their Chineseness derived from peasant families, reflecting low-brow culture and low class practices (Go 64). But to the local born writers, not just in Canada but elsewhere, the ability to speak Chinese is not a defining criterion of Chineseness. In fact, Chinese identity is more complex and changes in configuration, as put by Ien Ang: "In short, if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how is a matter of politics" (36).

These literary practices display many different features. Their scope and motivation can be very varied. In some cases, the interferences are limited to dialogue or isolated words and expressions; in other cases, the whole text is contaminated with regional Englishes or with the syntax and rhythms of a foreign tongue. The reasons for such deviations from standard language usage may be quite divergent.

In principle, most post-colonial theorists and linguists contend that "all language is localized, heterogeneous and 'variant', and that the concept of a Standard English is a construction of imperial rhetoric that

constantly separates 'centre' from 'margin'" (Ashcroft et al. 148–49). In subverting "standard English," post-colonial issues are often combined with feminist concerns, but they also involve matters of multiculturalism, on the level of the state, and pluri-culturalism and cosmopolitanism, on the level of the individual.

While the introduction of variant Englishes into fiction and poetry may be considered to have convergent elements in cases of political post-colonial and feminist concerns and aesthetic post-modern practices by Anglophone authors from the Commonwealth, the motivation of some minority ethnic writers in Canada, and often in the United States, as we have seen, seems even today to be often different. As expressed by Amy Tan and others, they primarily want to preserve and to do justice to the speaking, thinking and feeling of their family and community, to express with verisimilitude the complex dualities and pluralities of their cultural and social existence, their personal and collective past and present. A poem like Ha Jin's "The Past" (1996) is a telling example of the intimate struggle between these heterogeneous, often agonistic elements of the immigrant, minority psyche, attempting to find a proper self-image and empowering identity.

Studying the impact of this broad range of linguistic practices and cultural markers on both the implied or "ideal" reader and on empirical, specific communities of readers, one can sharpen the conceptualization of the inquiry by the introduction of methods and ideas developed by polysystem theory (see Dimić et al., Even-Zohar, and Toury), particularly in its application to the study of literary translations. Empirical analyses of translations in many languages, past and present, show conclusively that translators make choices and in doing so inevitably adjust the source text according to the linguistic usages and literary norms (repertoires) of the target system. The extent of these transformations and adaptations can be projected on a continuous axis that reaches, on one end, the complete acceptability within the target system, and on the other extreme, the complete adequacy to the original. Well-received translations tend historically to be more "accessible" and "acceptable," while more "faithful" or "adequate" translations resist or even hinder the standard reading experience.

Seen in this perspective, literary works by most writers who are not of Anglo-American extraction and do not fully identify with the dominant, “mainstream” language and culture, including, therefore, most ethnic and minority authors and almost all Chinese Canadian authors consulted by me, can be similarly placed on such an axis. Their works would occupy points on this axis from “very readable” or “accessible” and “acceptable” texts to those more reflective of the complexity of immigrant psychology and life and, for this reason, requiring various degrees of multilingual and multicultural competence. To readers lacking this competence, which in North America and beyond probably include most Anglo-Americans, plus the peoples belonging to other nationalities and races, these texts would, firstly, represent different degrees of obstacles, of obscurities, and ambiguities; secondly, while this resistance may attract certain readers, it excludes and irritates others.

It would seem, at first sight, that such texts could find their implied or ideal readers in members of the same ethnic, here Chinese, community, especially if they were similarly raised and educated as the author in question. Others would be apparently left on the outside, at least from time to time and to some extent (Giltrow). Plausible as this conclusion may appear at first, it has only a limited validity. Increasingly, Chinese Canadian authors are not only speaking for their collectivity but for their individual selves. They are in a more obvious way attracting attention to the diversity and complexity of such an omnibus term as “Chinese.” In their plots and characters, but as well in the language and in the cultural references, they point out the regional differences of the various parts of China and of the disparate areas of Chinese Diaspora; they foreground differences of class, authority, politics, and education; they insist on generational, age, and especially gender tensions and conflicts. These attitudes, in addition to the further de-homogenization of the implied audience, may provoke diverse reactions even within the supposed “family,” among readers belonging to the same or the supposedly same community. Typical examples can be found in the writings of SKY Lee, Larissa Lai, Lydia Kwa, and Fred Wah, authors who are otherwise of quite divergent educational and general backgrounds. But even Wayson Choy, often considered as mildly conservative and idealizing

in his pictures from Chinatown, when read carefully, does not hide the plurality of Chinese immigrant experiences and the struggles and tensions within a traditional Chinese family.

The more postmodern authors, mentioned before, who use postmodern narrative devices and sometimes those of magic realism, who embrace forms of radical feminism, express not only the well-known racial and economic conflicts between the immigrants and the dominant Canadian society, but also the internal vertical (class and gender) and horizontal (geographic) cleavages among the Chinese. They strongly challenge many traditional Chinese (patriarchal and Confucian) attitudes about gender, heterosexuality, and other social and family power relations, often preferring the more liberal standards of modern Canadian (and Western) society (Hilf 55–59 and Jay, “Writing”). They freely reinterpret or transform traditional Chinese culture: a distinct example is, for instance, Larissa Lai’s handling of the legendary fox figure and of Daoist transformation processes in general. They present texts full of hybridities in culture, identity, and language. Being provocatively personal and individual, these and other writers subvert not only the habits and prejudices (and the lack of adequate knowledge) of many readers “from the outside,” but equally the horizon of expectation of readers belonging to the so called “in group.”

In this paper, and a larger project conducted in collaboration with my colleague at Shih Hsin University, Professor Peng-hsiang Chen, the heuristic hypothesis is that, in addition to “imitations of life” and strictly artistic experimentation, this marked, foregrounded use of languages is part of the Chinese Canadian writers’ attempts to find and create a Self using a constant element of transgression of Anglophone “mainstream” values. These writers transgress linguistic norms and often those of Anglo-American literature: there is an underlying tension between their attempt to depict their own, or their group’s “real” life experience, negating in their mimetic efforts the silence and stereotypes of Anglophone representations, and, in some of them at least, their postmodern being, with its multicultural and intra-cultural position. They always transgress cultural norms; they sometimes transgress the law of the land. They in addition transgress the expectations of the

(imaginary) “mainstream” reader (often white, Christian, European, if not WASP).

Quite importantly, this predominant transgression in the nature of ethnic writing and its use of language can be demonstrated in the artistic activity of other such groups in Canada and elsewhere. This phenomenon helps explain both the great attention this literature is receiving and the malaise many feel in reading it: it is a literature of challenge, often of fragmentation, even exclusion, and while, on the one hand, it makes the different racial, national, cultural, and religious communities better known to each other, it does not, on the other hand, necessarily foster a new, harmonious unity. It is a literature characterized by its openly or covertly agonistic character, challenging the host society but also ancestral traditions, a literature asking for change, itself constantly changing.

Notes

- 1 See Kim, Ling, Lim and Ling, Wong, and Cheung and Yogi.
- 2 See Chao, “Anthologizing” and *Beyond Silence*, Hilf, Miki, and Miska.
- 3 According to reports by Statistics Canada, during 1951–1970 Chinese immigrants did not belong to the top eight ethnic/national groups joining this country; for 1971–1980 immigrants from the People’s Republic of China occupy the seventh rank and those from Hong Kong the eighth. In 1981–1990 immigrants from Hong Kong occupy the first place and those from the People’s Republic of China the fifth. In the most recent report, for 1991–2001, the first place is occupied by immigrants from the People’s Republic of China, the fourth by those from Hong Kong, and the seventh by those from Taiwan. Right now the break-down by ethnicity includes over one third of all Canadians who avoid that question by declaring themselves to be “Canadian”; other groups follow in this order: English, French, Scottish, Irish, German, Italian, and Chinese—in the seventh place among declared ethnic origins, ahead of such important Canadian groups as the Ukrainian, Aboriginal, Dutch, Polish, and East Indians. These summaries were presented in Taipei by Professor Eleanor Ty. More can be found on the website of Statistics Canada: <www.statscan.ca>. Demographers predict that the Chinese immigrants will soon reach a population of two million and that in the greater Vancouver area more children entering primary school will have Mandarin and Cantonese as their mother tongue than English.
- 4 See O’Reilly (63–64); Bardolph, (25, 30–31, 44ff., 49–58); and Dimić.
- 5 See Dasenbrock 13–14.
- 6 See Chao, *Beyond Silence* 102–3.

- 7 See Hilf and Chao (96–97; see also 119).
- 8 Ng places Kwa's novel in the context both of Chinese Canadian writing and of works by ethnic Chinese writers from South East Asia.
- 9 See Chao, "Dialogue" (12–29), and Hilf (137–55); also Derksen and McCaffery, "Anti-Phonics" and "Death."

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