LOADED WORDS:
RACE, ETHNICITY, CULTURE & LANGUAGE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
CHINESE-CANADIAN IDENTITY

by

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Abstract

This thesis presents an ethnographic study based in the city of Toronto on how ethnic Chinese negotiate their ambivalence towards the category “Chinese-Canadian”, particularly in relation to discourses about race, ethnicity and language. It is the finding of this study that second generation, economically privileged ethnic Chinese women are likely to feel most comfortable with the aforementioned category, in relation to their counterparts. This is because they are most likely to be able to speak Chinese and English, as well as seek out a vocabulary that allows them to make sense of their experience. They are also likely to be most comfortable because, as Chinese is a feminized category, they more easily fit into the mold of what a Chinese person is “supposed” to be like. Ethnic Chinese men, however, are less comfortable with the category and assert their masculinity by engaging in humour driven in racial and ethnic stereotypes.
Acknowledgements

The most frustrating thing to me about writing is that there really are times when you, try as you might, you cannot find the words. This is one of those times. Despite my constant and never-ending scribbles throughout the past two years, I really can’t seem to conjure up the right words to thank the many people who made this study possible. But I will try.

Monica, I thank you first, for your patience and your guidance. This thesis simply wouldn’t have happened without your criticism and direction. I thank you for going beyond the call of duty, and also taking the time to teach me the importance of categories and boundaries.

Rinaldo, thank you reminding me to relax and have fun with what I’m doing.

To my friends, who offered me constant comfort, counsel and (most of all) forgiveness for disappearing weeks, if not months at a time (and never-ending existential crises) – thank you.

Thank you, Yuko.

To my parents, thank you. For much more than this thesis – perpetual and infinite gratitude. Thank you.

Finally, I am indebted and grateful for all the people who participated in this study. I thank them for sharing their stories and letting me into their lives. I can only hope that thesis resonates with some of their experiences, and at the very least, provides them with interesting fodder for future conversations.
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CHAPTER FIVE: NEW TAKE, OLD TALK (NO ILLUSIONS OF GRANDEUR) – THIS STUDY AND “ON NOT SPEAKING CHINESE” .........................................................80
In natural selection, I’ve avoided all detection
And the tender bits underneath
All with window dressing and calculated guessing
And a bark bigger than my teeth

‘Cause it was the suit that got me the gig
It was the tear that got the girl
I’m a sheep in this wolf’s clothing
I’m a picture that I’m holding
Of someone who is cool

- The Odds, “Someone Who’s Cool”

Familiarity breeds contempt – and children.

- Mark Twain

Chapter One: “I Don’t Understand” – Chinese Looking Alike, Looking the Part and Sounding Different

We all look the part. How well we know our scripts and play our parts, however, vary considerably. This study is an attempt to document how these things play out.

This study is about how different people that embody and represent a particular fuzzy category, “Chinese-Canadian”, make sense of themselves. It’s about how they talk about their fuzziness, in relation to the loaded words that have been used to describe them, and the loaded words they use to describe them and others like them. It’s about who they are in relation to the category, and the category’s communities. It’s about how they negotiate their respective fuzziness, across their various social locations and positions.

I have, myself, often felt fuzzy in relation to the category. Meeting David\(^1\) was a watershed event. Through no intention of his own, David was the first person who managed to make me feel simultaneously very Chinese and not Chinese at all.

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\(^1\) Names have been changed.
It wasn’t his fault. We were respectively six (me), and eight (him) at the time. He had just arrived in Canada, and it was his first day in a new school. I had lived in Canada my entire life, but David – I think – was from China.

What I know for sure was that he was Chinese. And I know for sure that he didn’t speak a word of English. I know both of these things because: One, I was told by my elementary school’s librarian David was Chinese. Two, I was told by that same librarian that David couldn’t speak English. Three, I experienced first hand how David couldn’t speak English.

My elementary school didn’t have a lot of Chinese kids, or kids that looked like me. It was David’s first day of school. My school’s librarian and my first grade teacher presumed that I would be able to communicate with David. I should have been able to help him out. I should have been able to help him adjust to the school; help him orient himself to his new environment. The two of them – the librarian and my first grade teacher – knew that I was born in Canada and spoke English. They presumed that I also spoke Chinese, because, well – I am Chinese.

I did speak “Chinese” then. The problem was, however, the “Chinese” that I spoke wasn’t the type of “Chinese” that David spoke. Our respective dialects – Teochiu and Mandarin – were mutually unintelligible to one another. So when the school librarian asked me to tell David where the school’s washroom was; to show him where his classroom was – my attempt to do so was an abject failure. My version of “Do you know where the washroom is?” was met with a confused smile. I returned a confused smile when he tried to communicate with me. There was some nervous laughter from David,

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2 I feel like I should say now that even then, my grip on Chinese was already slipping – being replaced by Canadian pop culture references, via a daily routine of Mr. Dressup and Fred Penner.
and then some from me. We exchanged a few more mutually incomprehensible sentences. (It’s funny. With my present paltry knowledge of Mandarin, my memory reconstructs the incident with me hearing David say “Wo bu mingbai” – or, “I don’t understand”.) He couldn’t make sense, and neither could I, of what was going on.

This went on for a while, until the school’s librarian mercifully caught on to what was happening. We clearly had no idea what we were trying to say to one another. Finally, I think the school librarian took David back to the main office, and told me to go back to my classroom (she had, thankfully, engineered this little exchange in the hallway).

That’s how David, through no fault of his own, simultaneously made me feel very Chinese and not Chinese at all. The category, “Chinese”, described me and him. And yet, at the same time, it didn’t – at least not in the same way. Though we both looked the part, we didn’t quite make sense of it the same way. And as a result, the way we acted the part didn’t make sense to the people who asked us to act it out. The entire incident left me feeling confused about what being “Chinese” meant, and embarrassed about how, when I was asked to “be” Chinese – I wasn’t able to.

**Introducing the Topic at Hand: Deconstructing and Speaking Chinese (Canadian)**

In retrospect, I am not angry at the school's librarian, or at my first grade teacher. They were not being malicious. They simply did not know.

In the broader sense, the focus of this study is on people who could be called members of a particular ethnonational category. This study's departure point is that, while ethnonational categories are still hugely important and have a great deal of primacy in today's world, the assuredness that they once offered as means of self-organization and
identity articulation is no longer as resolute as it once was (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1990). Processes of globalization, transnationality and a host of other postmodern developments make categorizing oneself along these lines more difficult. In short, about ethnicity we are all supposed to be a little less confident. I mean to highlight what happens to a specific group of people when this happens.

At least we’re supposed to be less confident about ethnicity, in theory. As the previous episode made clear, people are still prone to ethnic categorization. My “David Experience” was indicative and demonstrative of broader conversations about language and Asians in North America – a conversation which can be described as “You’re Chinese, you must be able to speak Chinese, right?” As various sources have pointed out (Lo & Reyes, 2009; Lee & Zhou, 2004), other Asians in North America attest to having similar experiences. People who are visibly Asian in North America often confront particular sociolinguistic expectations, one of them being that they should be able to speak their “native”, or at the very least, an Asian language. Like I did, those who are unable to speak their ascribed native languages often confront feelings of inadequacy in relation to those who can speak these languages (Ibid.).

Rosch (1978) writes that processes of categorization and the construction of categories are a necessary process. Because people’s mental faculties are daily assailed with perpetual information, and because their mental faculties are limited, categorization and categories are coping mechanisms. Both categorization and categories allow people to more quickly and easily process wide arrays of information, because they provide them with a script at the ready for interaction. In a similar vein, Agha (1998) argues that stereotypes function metapragmatically, guiding our pragmatic actions. From what they
knew of me, the librarian and my first grade teacher categorized me as someone who would be able to speak Chinese and English.

Those who are called “Chinese” are comprised of a variety of different ethnic groups. Both personal experience and scholarship inform this statement. Those who are “Chinese” use a variety of different measures to differentiate one another from each other, to create particular bounded enclosures within the larger enclosure. They have different cultural beliefs and customs from one another. They can speak mutually unintelligible dialects from one another, which are effectively different languages. Different “Chinese” people live all over the world. Some speak Chinese, others don’t.

For years, both academics and community movements have called for analyses of the “Chinese” as a group to take these and other facts in consideration. For example, some have suggested (see Chow, 1997; Chun, 1996; Ong and Nonini, 1997; McKewon, 1999) that any analysis of the Chinese as a group (in China or otherwise) that purports to be accurate requires an acknowledgement of the particular local histories, social ideologies and various other discursive factors that have shaped the specific subjectivities of the individuals in question. Ang (2001) has gone so far as to call for “Chinese” to be thought of as an open signifier, one that has no meaning other than the ones people give it.

Critique, however, does not necessarily translate into public perception and practice. Ethnonational categories may elide important details, but this does not mean that people do not rely on them, and use them. As fuzzy and flexible as the category “Chinese” is, specific fixed bodies and practices are still thought of as being Chinese, or variants thereof, such as Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American.
This study examines a particular group of people who could be called “Chinese-Canadian”. There are a number of reasons why it is now an opportune time to do so. Firstly, the category is a fuzzy and complex one. This compound category begs to be questioned. For example: What exactly is a Chinese-Canadian? How can one be Chinese and Canadian? Is a “Chinese-Canadian” someone who is Chinese, but someone who was born in Canada? Is a Chinese-Canadian someone who is of Chinese descent, but speaks of being affiliated with the Canadian nation-state, and its prescriptive ideologies and values?

Secondly, people of Chinese origin have had a long role in Canadian history (see Chan, 1991; Li, 1998; Ng, 2001), and are poised to be more prominent in Canadian society. As this study will make apparent, there are multiple historical conversations which affect those who could be Chinese-Canadians in multiple ways that deserve our attention. Moreover, if current Canadian immigration trends continue, along with the natural increase of the group’s Canadian born population, the rise in numbers of those who could be called Chinese-Canadian in Canada is set to increase. In effect, given this information, and the fact they are already the country’s second largest visible minority population (Canada, 2006), coupled with their relative social and economic affluence (see Li 1998; 1999; Canada 2006b), Chinese-Canadians are likely to be participants in society whose choices and actions increasingly affect the lives of their fellow Canadians.

Thirdly, the world’s interest in China, those who could be called Chinese, and Chinese-ness seems to be at a particular high. Everyone today, it seems, has something to say about China and the Chinese. Indeed – what has been said about China? Ang (2001) contends that no other place occupies an as “privileged” place in the Western
imagination. To be sure, places such as “The Middle East” and “Africa” serve to contest her statements. But as a verifiable China Industry of revelatory books and films about China continues to grow, one would be hard pressed to find no merit in her argument. A sampling: China is all at once, a place of ancient mystery and place of emerging modernity; China is both impending Communist peril and steadfast bulwark against American hegemony; China fuels our global consumption, and is home to over a billion customers in waiting, China is Mao; but also Deng; China is Beijing 2008, but also Tiananmen 1989. In light of even just these conversations, critical examinations of those who would be called Chinese, and would call themselves Chinese (and possibly something else) are necessary. In other words, there exists the need to problematize what seem to be clear-cut categories, and clarify fuzzy ones. This text is intended as a contribution in those endeavours.

**Working with Words: Imagining and Speaking Chinese-Canadian**

More precisely: This study aims to make a contribution that highlights how a specific set of ethnic Chinese in Canada make sense of and negotiate being categorized Chinese-Canadian, particularly through frames and ideas about ethnic identity boundary processes; perspectives from cultural studies; and sociolinguistic ideas about the construction of identity as indicative of specific articulations and negotiations of discourses and social positions.

More elaborately: Identity, as Hall points out (1993), is both notoriously difficult to define and always a sort of political endeavour. A person’s identity is what makes a particular person distinctive from and also similar to a greater group – it can be all at once about perception, reflection, presentation and socially informed performance (see

Bearing these arguments in mind, this study takes its departure point about identity, particularly ethnic identity, from Barth (1969). Ethnic identity is understood as something that is reflective and demonstrative of particular processes. Rather than intrinsic characteristics or experiences, ethnic identity is understood as related to specific and contextual boundary processes, undertaken by individuals to differentiate themselves from others. Identity is thus not what a person is, but rather what a person does, dependent on a host of contingent and contextual factors.

The "does", so to speak, that this study is primarily concerned about is what people speak about. More precisely, what this study's participants respectively said, and how they said it. The data analyzed for this study was derived largely from interviews with twenty-two participants, focus groups and ethnographic shadowing techniques. Those who have written about language as a social and communicative act have long articulated that language can evidence social difference. It has the capacity to articulate particular social positions (Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 1999), reproduce existing social hierarchies (see Willis, 1981) and conform to and subvert existing language ideologies (Blommaert, 1999). The participants' statements highlighted here are thus understood as ideologically laden accounts, reflective of multiple discourses and particular social positions, as well as a host of other factors. Those who are putatively “Asian” in North America have received comparatively less attention from sociolinguists than other
ethnonational groups (see Lo & Reyes, 2009); this text aims to afford some attention to a particular group subsumed underneath this label.

Therefore, the principal task of this text is to highlight and analyze the statements made by some people who could be called “Chinese”. It means to analyze their particular perceptions, reflections, presentation and performance as influenced by a particular possible label, and some of its narratives. Returning to Barth for a moment, if ethnic identity is primarily a question of boundary maintenance – then this text is concerned with the activity of their boundaries. It is concerned with the boundaries that they navigate and create when speaking about what it means to be Chinese-Canadian.

**Setting the Stage: Some Discursive Meanings of “Chinese” in Canada**

The particular contextual and contingent factors of interest here are specific discourses about ethnic Chinese in Canada (heretofore also called “Chinese in Canada”). Given the commonalities between the two (see Li, 2007; Ty, 2008), another factor of interest is broader discourses about Asians in North America. I would like to describe some of these discourses here.

Several authors (see Li, 1999; Razack, 2002; Thobani, 2007 for examples) have pointed out that race is not only a pervasive feature of Canadian society, but also a systematic feature of it, functioning as a means of social organization that privileges certain European-Canadians, or some of those who could appear to be White. Discourses about ethnic Chinese in Canada serve to racialize them in particular ways to their detriment.

Peter S. Li (1998) argues that racist tropes that to served to depict the Chinese in Canada as a Perpetual Other and inassimilable horde continue recur in contemporary
conversations, although in a different manner and with different actors (see also Chan, 1991; Anderson, 1995). Particular tropes that Li highlights are the Wily Businessman and Yellow Peril. The two are similar, interrelated stereotypes. The first frames the Chinese as conniving, capable but cruel business people. The second frames the Chinese as a foreign menace to the West, unrelenting in their urge to stage an eventual political and socioeconomic takeover. Li (1998) makes evident that as Chinese-Canadians have become more affluent, and consequently both populate and open up businesses with storefronts with Chinese-lettering in traditionally White populated suburbs, the reaction on the part of the existent population has been unfavorable. Chinese-Canadians and recently arrived Chinese immigrants from Asia are lumped into an homogeneous mold, blamed for building too large houses that disrupt the harmony of neighbourhoods, and for inconveniencing the greater population by creating entire areas of business where it is “impossible” for non-Chinese to feel welcome and to be serviced.

Another prevalent stereotype is the Model Minority stereotype. This stereotype has its roots in the United States, one that operates on the premise that Asian-Americans owe their academic and social success to the “fact” that they are preternaturally hard-workers with of great intellect, but little creativity (Chan, 1991; Chou, 2008; Lee and Zhou, 2004; Lee, 1994). As many have pointed out (Ibid; Chou & Feagin, 2007; Wu, 2001), while this discourse seems benign and even beneficial, in actual fact it functions to erase the experience of those who do not live up to this stereotype. Moreover, it also functions to place those who could (i.e.: anyone who looks and is racialized as Asian in North America) at odds with other racialized groups, because they are socially placed as, to co-opt Bhabha’s (1994) famous phrase – not White, but not quite (raced).
Canadians too, have their version of this discourse. In Toronto, a common phrase is the “Chinese” or “Asian” Six-Pack – describing all of the combined math and science high school courses required for entrance into certain Canadian university programs. The Canadian variant of this discourse also casts and sets apart Chinese-Canadians as (too) intelligent and (too) capable students, but also as students who are taking places in university classrooms away from “native” Canadians.\(^3\) (One such account for example, aired on CTV’s W5 news program in the late 1970s, titled “Campus Giveaway”.) Like their American counterparts, while they are depicted as studious and industrious overachievers, they are overachievers of a particular sort, those that solely excel in the “uncreative” and “technical” subjects such as mathematics and the sciences, and those that do so at the cost of their social detriment. In short, they are depicted as meek, awkward and inarticulate nerds, albeit “successful” ones.

Aside from being conniving businessmen and nerds, Chinese in Canada are also subject to particular gender stereotypes. Scholars from a variety of fields have long called for race, class, ethnicity and gender to be seen as mutually constitutive, intertwined and reinforcing systems and processes of hierarchal categorization and differentiation that work in concert with other like systems and processes (see Stoler, 1995; Brodkin, 2000; Mohanty, 1991). A conversation about racism, for the Chinese in Canada as well as other racialized Asian bodies, is a conversation incomplete without mentioning gender.

Chinese bodies are raced and gendered as either incomplete, or deviant. The historical legacy of North America’s exclusionary policies which caused the formation of what were effectively ethnic Chinese bachelor societies in the 19th century, as well as

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\(^3\) A popular nickname for the University of British Columbia or UBC, for example, is the University of a Bunch of Chinese People. Similarly, the University of California at Los Angeles or UCLA is popularly known as the University of Caucasians Lost among Asians.
socioeconomic conditions which forced them to take up occupations traditionally seen as
women’s work (see Anderson, 1995; Li, 1998 for more detailed discussions), linger in the
form of stereotypes that frame Chinese men as incompetent and impotent. Chinese men
are feminized, seen as passive and reticent. Chinese women, on the other hand, suffer
from stereotypes which cast as them simultaneously as being hyper-sexual and ever-
submissive virgins in waiting. How these stereotypes are reflective of larger processes of
global imperialism, patriarchy and Orientalism (Said, 1978) has been taken up by a
number of authors (see Eglash, 2002; Garber, 1993; Khoo, 2008 for recent discussions).

About the Subject(s) and Site: Why “Young Adult” and Why Toronto

It is clear then, that there are a number of things to talk about. It was a conscious decision
on my part to recruit participants of a particular age and from a particular locale to talk
about these things with. I would like to justify my decision to do so here. The participants
involved in this project were twenty-two ethnic Chinese, roughly between the ages of 20
and 30 years old. Save one participant, all the participants resided in the city of Toronto,
Canada.

The participants involved in this project were thus people who could be called
Chinese-Canadian, and were people who could be called young adults. A number of
reasons can be offered why a study of how Chinese-Canadians of this particular age
range negotiate their categorization is relevant.

Firstly, I chose Chinese-Canadians of this sort because I thought it was likely that
they would already know something about negotiating a fuzzy category (other than
“Chinese-Canadian”). They were Chinese-Canadians at a particular type of social
juncture and social precipice. They were Chinese-Canadians who were still in school, or
who had just completed school; Chinese-Canadians who had yet to start, or who had just
started steady careers; Chinese-Canadians who have yet to start families of their own.
They were Chinese-Canadians with a particular type of lifestyle, a lifestyle which has
stereotypical characteristics reflective of adulthood, but not to the full extent.

As mentioned earlier, various writers have argued that part of the contemporary
condition for many is to be unsure about one’s place in the world. This, I would argue, is
a condition especially felt by many who could be designated “young adults”. One's youth,
or young adulthood, is a particular liminal point. Young adulthood, for those that live in
modern and postmodern societies, serves as a specific type of in-between place in their
lives. It is a temporal site that is marked by tension – the luxury and obligation of having
the capacity to continually define and re-define one's life beliefs and trajectory. It is a sort
of second adolescence. If one's initial adolescence is the period in which one comes to
know one's body, one's second adolescence is the period in which one's comes to know
oneself. It is time when one has enough experiences to have a self-narrative, though one
that remains malleable. And more importantly, young adults are able to make decisions
and act according to this self-knowledge that would affect others. Of course, this is not to
say that individuals do not re-interrogate who they are throughout their lives. Rather, it is
to say that young adulthood serves as a crucial juncture during which how individuals act
on this particular type of question can result in particular consequences for those around
them, in ways different from how actions in previous junctures would have.

These participants were also chosen because they were they had potentially
consumed recent cultural output by those who could be called “their own”, materials
which dealt with some of the issues that are being discussed here. To clarify: In the past
ten years or so, there has been large amount of cultural and discursive production from those who could be and explicitly call themselves “Chinese-Canadian” and “Asian-Canadian” (see Mah, 2004; Li, 2007; Ty, 2008; Woo, 2005), complementing the long existent cultural forms of putative “Asian-Americans” (see Nguyen & Tu, 2007 for an overview). These texts – novels, plays, films, etc. – descriptively and prescriptively deal with the group’s identities, issues and experiences. Several offer narratives framed by the issues – race, ethnicity, language – discussed here. Categories are explicitly invoked in their titles. The film “A Chink in the Armour” (Mah, 2004) is an example, while the novel “Banana Boys” (Woo, 2001) – Yellow on the outside, White on the inside – is another. They were also chosen then based on the likelihood that they had consumed, or were at least aware of these products – and were thus able to speak about their categorization as informed by their familiarity with these categories.

Finally, to return to an earlier conversation, if putative Chinese-Canadians “are likely to be participants in society whose choices and actions increasingly affect the lives of their fellow Canadians” – we should study a segment of that population which, I would argue, are more likely than others to identify with this particular category. For example, based on the fact that the discursive production based on the category is relatively recent, I would argue that those who are contemporary adults and ethnically Chinese are more likely to label themselves as “Chinese-Canadian” than those who are more senior in age and ethnically Chinese. Moreover, because these particular potential Chinese-Canadians are at an in-between age, a study about them can have multiple purposes. Aside from describing their experiences, this study could serve to inform and make sense of the experiences of those who would call themselves Chinese-Canadian in the future.
Toronto was chosen because it is an appropriately fuzzy, complex and contradictory backdrop. Iyer (2000) has noted when the world watches what it thinks are American cities, it is in fact watching Toronto, because the city is so often a movie stand-in for its more famous American cousins. Much of the city's landscape and architecture lends itself to this role. Aside from the CN Tower, for the uninitiated, Toronto is a city without immediate landmarks and must-see neighbourhoods. This is a city that is the generic North American metropolis par excellence.

At the same time, however, the city does have an incredibly ethnically and culturally diverse population. Iyer argues that Toronto's ethnic populations have transformed Toronto in new sort of colonial metropole, a place where the much of the world's former colonial populations converge and interact in new ways. Only Toronto, according to Iyer, could have produced a Michael Ondaatje – a writer of Sri Lankan descent whose "In the Skin of Lion" (1987) is a story about Toronto's early European immigrants. And the city's government is quick to use its diversity as a selling point, its motto being "Diversity our strength".

Ethnic Chinese contribute to the diversity. To put it plainly: Toronto is a good site to study the ethnic Chinese in relation to the rest of the world, because there a lot of ethnic Chinese in Toronto, and they are not the only people there with similar numbers.

The community reflects the broader community’s diversity and tenuous nature. To return to Barth (1969) for moment, if ethnic identity is a question of boundaries and different circumstances favour different performances, then Toronto serves as an ideal site for exploring what the boundaries are that both bind and differentiate Chinese-Canadians. There are a variety of Chinese communities which are both similar and
dissimilar from one another in Toronto – i.e., a Cantonese speaking community from Hong Kong, a Mandarin speaking community from China, communities situated in downtown Toronto, communities situated in the GTA’s outlying suburbs, among others.

Toronto is also a good site to study those who could be called Chinese-Canadian because, in a very real sense, it is also a very “Chinese” place. The degree of institutional completeness (Breton, 1964) enjoyed by those who are ethnically Chinese in Toronto is substantial. Toronto’s ethnic Chinese communities are communities with access to particular Chinese spaces, goods and services. The city has a large Chinese business infrastructure. There are several Chinatowns, strips and malls. A person can easily receive a number of social services and aid in Chinese languages. In fact, one participant remarked that Toronto’s community was so institutionally complete that it allowed her to have a particularly "quote unquote, uncultured" childhood. She did not understand many of her friends’ references to popular North American culture until she was older, because for some time in her childhood, she largely consumed Hong Kong popular culture.

It could be said then that Toronto is a rather idyllic space for ethnic Chinese communities to live and thrive. However, as idyllic as Toronto is in some ways for ethnic Chinese (and as diverse as it purports itself to be), the city does have its shortcomings. The other reason why Toronto serves an appropriate site of analysis for a project about Chinese-Canadians, race, ethnicity and language is because reductive and problematic discourses about the Chinese are prevalent in Toronto. A large part of the data presented in Li’s aforementioned study was collected from Toronto and its suburbs. In addition, a number of the aforementioned Chinese-Canadian cultural texts that deal with discourses about race and stereotypes were produced and took place in Toronto.
Misnomers and New Conversations: What This Study Is and What it Hopes to Be

In some sense then, the title of this text is a misnomer. It purports to deal with the construction of "Chinese-Canadian Identity", when it more accurately deals with how some Chinese-Canadians construct their identities.

I bear in mind that many writers from a variety of disciplines have discussed the number of problematic issues that arise from frameworks which purportedly explain entire groups, societies or cultures. As Weinstein reminds us, individuals have “the need and capacity [to] actively construct different versions of reality as they contend with their idiosyncratic conflicts in the context of many social locations that they occupy” (1995, p.302).

What this study purports to be, and the best that this study can offer, is a partial picture about how some people deal with a particular type of conflict, across their own many social locations. The previous parts of this chapter have hopefully made clear that the scope of this study is limited. While it hopes to be representative of some conversations among some Chinese-Canadians, this text makes no claims of being an entirely representative text, and is neither a definitive one about its particular subjects. This is to say much more simply – I didn’t talk to everyone who could’ve been Chinese-Canadian, nor did everyone who is Chinese-Canadian talk to me. And I certainly can’t claim to know what exactly is going on.

But thanks to my interaction with this study’s participants, I think I have an idea. When interviewing the participants, I asked them questions about their lives. I asked them questions about how being Chinese, Canadian and Chinese-Canadian figured and affected their lives. This again, more precisely is – how the discursive terrain described in
the previous sections, how conversations about Chinese, Canadian, race, ethnicity and language affected their lives. I asked them to provide self-narratives, mini-biographies. I asked them fuzzy questions. I asked them to explain what it "meant" to be Chinese-Canadian, in an “authentic” way.

In asking to explain what it meant to be “authentically” Chinese, I was purposely using a loaded word to incite controversy and conversation between myself and the participants. “Authentic”, to me, meant nothing. As the previous sections have hopefully made clear, I do not now, nor then believe in an “authentic Chinese” (Canadian or otherwise) experience. However, based on the belief that asking about authenticity would compel people to speak about their experiences in relation to discourses about and that frame the Chinese in Canada, I asked them what it meant to be authentic.

The data for this study was collected over the period of two and half months, from October 2008 to December 2009. There were twenty-two participants in total; twelve participants were women; ten participants were men. At the time of data collection, the youngest participant was 22 years old; the oldest participant was 34 years old.

The bulk of the data comes from interviews that I conducted with the participants. The explicit purpose of these interviews was to find out what being “authentically” Chinese-Canadian meant to the participants, to find out how living life as putative Chinese-Canadians had affected their lives, particularly through the frames of race, ethnicity and language. I conducted two interviews with each participant, the first face-to-face, with a recorder present. These first interviews varied in length – most lasted about an hour, many lasted longer than that (the longest being just under three hours). The second interviews were conducted via e-mail.
Data was also collected from two focus groups that were conducted in early December. The focus groups were meant to provide an opportunity for the participants to speak with one another about the topics of the project, and whatever else came up in conversation. Ten participants in total took part in the focus groups; five participants per each session.

In order to let me observe how they acted and used language in different social situations, of the twenty-two participants, fourteen participants also allowed me to shadow them in a single social context of their own choosing. As such, data was also derived from the interactions that I had with these participants and their chosen associates. Each shadowing session lasted at least four hours. The social contexts in which I shadowed the participants varied considerably. For example: I shadowed some participants interacting with their families in their family homes, I shadowed one participant in their workplace, and I shadowed another participant while she was attending a Daoist religious service with her family. I accordingly observed, listened and made note of what the participants did during all of my interactions with them. I focused on what they were saying, and how they were saying it.

The following chapters will show that, although “Chinese-Canadian” is a fuzzy category, the participants in this study did give it credence. The remainder of this text proceeds in the following fashion.

The second chapter of begins this study by showing that the participants felt ambivalent about being Chinese-Canadian, that although they liked being Chinese-Canadian, they were also at unease with the category. Accordingly, this chapter provides an overview of the reasons for their ambivalence.
The third chapter illustrates how the participants particularly negotiated their ambivalent feelings. It will show that the participants dealt with the category and their categorization through a combination of constructing and relying on “their” community, various strategies of critique, laughter and mockery.

Based on the presupposition that those who are putatively Chinese-Canadian feel ambivalent about being categorized Chinese-Canadian, the fourth chapter presents this study’s primary analysis and thesis: The contemporary condition in some social contexts necessarily produces feelings of ambivalence, in relation to social categories that previously offered more stability and assuredness in self-perception and self-presentation. For those who can be called “Chinese-Canadian” in the city of Toronto, these feelings are particularly acute because they are putative members of a categorical group that is difficult to define, in a social context that both encourages “Chinese” expression, while at times being adverse to it.

As a result, while Chinese-Canadian may be a term that is difficult to define, there are dominant social conversations and expectations which frame and affect those who could and would label themselves as such. The category “Chinese” – and therefore also those who appear to be Chinese – are raced and gendered feminine. They are also classed. Those who appear to be “Chinese-Canadian” are socially perceived and expected to be middle class and upwardly mobile. Finally, they are also expected to be able speak Chinese, irrespective of whether not they are able to do so.

Based on their respective social locations, different types of Chinese-Canadians have different concerns. They also have different capabilities, in relation to their capacity to navigate the conversations that frame their subsequent experiences. Patriarchy
influences how those positioned as Chinese-Canadian women perceive themselves and their opportunities in Canada. Some women in this study recognized that growing up in a patriarchal Chinese household had affected how they conducted themselves in their interpersonal relationships. Others spoke of being appreciative of Canada’s more liberal social and political norms, which allowed greater freedom of expression than more conservative “Chinese” or “Asian norms”.

For those positioned as Chinese-Canadian men, the aforementioned social ideologies which frame the “Chinese” as feminine influences how they perceive and act out their masculinity in relation to others. Because they, as “Chinese” males are “feminine”, to be “Chinese” and a “man” compels them to engage in particular types of masculine performance. I argue that humour and mockery, when utilized by some men who could be categorized “Chinese”, allows them to diffuse the tension of being socially located as feminized men, because humour and mockery can be interpreted as an assertive masculine performance.

Of all those who could be called Chinese-Canadian, second generation Chinese-Canadian women are those who would be most capable in articulating and negotiating some of the grievances that can come about from being Chinese-Canadian. This is in part because they fit the mold of what society expects a “Chinese” person in Canada to be: relatively affluent, female and capable of speaking Chinese. This is also in part because in being second generation Canadians, the likelihood of them being able to speak Canada’s dominant language of English, and seamlessly interacting with the broader society in which they live, is increased. Finally, a Chinese-Canadian woman of this sort is most likely to be “comfortable” with the category Chinese-Canadian because they are
positioned in such a way that they have the incentive, resources and capacity to seek out and engage in measures which would allow them to deal with their feelings of ambivalence. Because they are women, they more likely to seek out an education and/or social spaces in which they can acquire the theoretical language needed to contextualize and make sense of their experiences, both for themselves and for others.

The final chapter serves as an afterword. It contextualizes this study in the broader literature, addresses some of its limitations and offers a final commentary on what those who do categorize themselves as Chinese-Canadian might want to consider when negotiating their categorization. Broadly speaking, what this text attempts to do, is attempt to make sense of their attempts to make sense.
C: How are they going to know that we’re Asian? This is radio. We’re going to sound like White people.

K: Do you want us to speak Cantonese? I want that to be a quote.

- Calvin and me, while discussing the immigrant experience and relationships for a radio program.

[. . .] I remember growing up and being really frustrated with, especially my Mom, because she would expect us to act a certain way, or know certain things or be a certain way . . . Like even knowing just how to address relatives, it’s a really big thing, like how you address relatives by their proper Chinese title. And not knowing, like, what those titles were supposed to be?

- Kelly, speaking to me about part of her childhood.

Chapter Two: On Ambivalence and Chinese-Canadians

Ambivalence is not a word that conjures up an immediate definition. Unlike emotional states like happiness, anger or sadness – “ambivalence” does not prompt an easily processed visual image. Certain emotional states can be depicted via simple signifying images. The ubiquitous “Smiley Face” attests to this. But imagining a corollary “Ambivalent Face” is more difficult. Ambivalence is imprecise. It is an in-between word describing an in-between condition.

A simple definition of indifference is that when one is indifferent, one has no feelings about a particular topic. A topic, such as “Chinese-Canadian” for example, prompts no sentiments of happiness, anger or sadness. Someone who is indifferent is someone who is, in some sense, sedentary. There is no dynamism implicit in the condition of indifference. In fact, the opposite is expected. No productivity is expected of an indifferent person. A certain amount of figurative non-movement explicitly comes along with the condition. An indifferent person just is.
For some, the word ambivalence suggests a similar amount of non-movement – or even suggests a particular type of paralysis. Perhaps this is precisely because to have feelings of ambivalence, to be ambivalent means to be uncertain and to have contradictory feelings – such as love and hate, like or dislike – there are those who believe that to be ambivalent means one cannot move literally or figuratively. The ambivalent person cannot navigate their contradictory sentiments.

I would contend, however, that one is not necessarily subject to a particular type of paralysis if one is ambivalent. Indeed, to the contrary, I would suggest that ambivalence (and all of the uncertainty and contradictory feelings that it entails) necessarily means that one is active. Because ambivalence requires contradictory feelings, ambivalence is a dynamic condition because contradictory things (sentiments or otherwise) are in themselves productive spaces.

Sustaining and negotiating (indeed even recognizing) uncertainty and contradictions requires work. Regarding contradictory sentiments, for example: It requires effort, or at the very least, energy to be emotional about a subject. When a person is one-way emotional about a subject, it suggests a certain amount of personal investment in that subject. When a person is multiple-way emotional about a subject, it also suggests a certain amount of personal investment about that subject – arguably more investment. If energy is required to love, then it is fair to say that perhaps even more energy is required to both love and hate. Ambivalence and its after-effects are thus things that should be conceived as tangible – expression(s) rather than non-expression. Ambivalence is something that is substantive.
Like “ambivalence”, the term “Chinese-Canadian” does not conjure up an immediate definition. It is a category that is not immediately processed. It is also arguable that, at least for some, it is a contradiction in terms. (How can one be both Chinese and Canadian?) Indeed, it can be said that all people with hyphenated identities embody and sustain some type of contradiction. On a theoretical level, two (or more) groups are embodied by an individual; the hyphen (appropriate line that it is) simultaneously articulates, joins and demarcates an individual’s parts.

In attempting to explain themselves in relation to the category Chinese-Canadian, the participants involved in this study made it clear that they liked being “Chinese” (and conversely, “Canadian” and “Chinese-Canadian”). For example, the majority of participants stated that, if they were to have children, they wanted to pass on “Chinese” characteristics and traditions. However, their relationship to the category was not entirely amicable. Their experiences as a result of this particular categorization, for a number of reasons, spurred ambivalence. This chapter provides an outline of these reasons. It will show that, if ambivalence can be thought of as a productive space, than the participants were very productive indeed.

More than Chinese (Canadian): The Limitations of the Category

Some participants were ambivalent about the category “Chinese-Canadian” simply because the category was a category, necessarily reductive and a site of possible generalization. Speaking to the ideas of the authors mentioned in the previous chapter (for example Ang, 2001; Chun, 1996), they had issue with Chinese-Canadian as a means of self-identification and as a means of being identified, precisely because they thought that the term “Chinese” was one that should be thought of as historically contextual and
contingent. One participant, Janice, when asked what it meant to be “authentically” Chinese, spoke to this eloquently:

I don’t believe in authenticity, because it’s authentic to whom, at what time period, to what socioeconomic status . . . At what cultural time period are you talking about, even the economies of China, the history of China from the 19th century after the Opium War, when you have all these people, through colonization, I don’t think there’s anything such as authenticity. Ever. Because that culture itself is, you know, you go from extreme to extreme. Um, post-Opium War to Mao . . . from Communist Party to Nationalist Party to Communist Party to open doors to shut doors to Japanese occupation to World War II . . . You have all that to what is authentic to Chinese culture at what time period, at what century you know? At what dynasty? (Laughs) Who knows? Who knows, really? And history books being burned every year, and re-written, um, and war after war, there’s no such thing as a stagnant Chinese identity [. . .] Because it means something different to everybody, I think.

Even those who spoke about the essentializing potential of the category, however, did utilize the category as a means of identification. In other words, although some participants spoke to the dynamic and even arbitrary nature of the category, they did ultimately use it as means of identification, and spoke of the properties and practices that one was expected to have in defining oneself as Chinese-Canadian. It was something that was real to them, and something that they made real. To return to Ang for moment, they gave their own meanings to the signifier. Janice, for example, would later speak of definitive Chinese characteristics and attributes. Chinese, for example, was a very “judgmental” culture; Cantonese was a very “reactive” language. Another participant, Allan, while able to articulate at length the extent to which he avoided offering essentialist definitions of Chinese, eventually offered: “We all know how to use chopsticks”.

This, however, was not the prevalent process. Several authors (see Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Giddens, 1990 for examples) have pointed out that
ambivalence is the condition of the day. In regards to identity, it is endemic and experienced by virtually everyone, particularly for those in postindustrial and postmodern societies. The affluence of postindustrial and postmodern societies enables people to self-actualize. However, it is likely that the corollary, (self and otherwise) reflexivity, that accompanies self-actualization also prompts some ambivalence. The contemporary condition confronted by most in these societies is, to paraphrase Giddens (1990), a perpetual attempt at self-definition in relation to increasingly unstable social anchors. As he puts it, longstanding social institutions are less likely to bind people to a set series of shared ideas. Ambivalence is thus a social response. It is one that is symptomatic of the modern condition. This is because previous bedrocks of social organization and categorization – such as one’s family, or racial and ethnic grouping – are now less reliable because they are less easily defined and more easily problematized (Gans, 1979).

The more prevalent process then, was instead Chinese-Canadians feeling ambivalent about the category “Chinese-Canadian”, because the category as a sole means of identification and identity articulation did not suffice. In other words, though they were comfortable with using Chinese-Canadian as a means of speaking of themselves, they also spoke of themselves in other ways. They categorized themselves in other ways. The figurative weight of “Chinese-Canadian” did not preclude other identities. The other identities that they spoke to reflected the multiplicity of embodiments, experiences and subjectivities of the participants. Some of the other identities that they spoke to reflected the multiplicity of national, cultural and ethnolinguistic groups described by the label “Chinese”. For example, participants defined themselves particularly as being of “Hong Kong blood”, “Taiwanese”, “Hakka Chinese” and even
“ethnically Chinese, culturally Canadian and politically American”. Another participant, Derrick, noted that at times he “felt Vietnamese too”.

They were several things all at once, and attested to this fact. Indeed, for some participants, Chinese-Canadian seemed to be a second order means of identification. When asked how to identify themselves in the context of this study, other social categories proved to be just as (if not more) salient than Chinese-Canadian for some participants. For example, Derrick’s first order of business – indeed the very first thing that he said – was to speak to his class position. When asked how he identified himself, he replied: “I’m a working class guy. (Pause) I come from a working class background”. In a similar vein, when asked the same question, Janice said: “My name is Janice Li (. . .) I’m from Toronto. I’m a chef. I claim that proudly because it’s very important to me, to my culture, to every culture really”. Xiaomei, occupying a markedly different class position than the two others as an established and well paid medical professional, immediately identified as a “professional woman”. Participants also categorized themselves according to other collectively known categories. Jill for example, spoke of being a nerd.

**Girls, Geeks and “Go Home!”: Stereotypes and Racism**

Racism was also a source of ambivalence for the people involved in this project.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, several authors (Li, 1988; 1999; Razack, 2002; Thobani, 2007) have pointed out that racism is not only a pervasive feature of Canadian society, but also a systematic feature of it, functioning as a means of social organization that privileges particular people who could be categorized as White. Following this line of argument, racist stereotypes are part and parcel of this means of
social organization, serving (whether intentionally or otherwise) an ideological function to perpetuate self-alienation for some, and privilege for others. Both Fanon (2008) and DuBois (1989) have provided vivid writings about the detrimental effect of stereotypes on the Black psyche. DuBois specifically writes about the notion of double consciousness, espousing the idea that African-Americans live their lives according to two sets of beliefs about their people. They have to live their lives based on both their lived experience and “own” perceptions about their community. They also have to live their lives based on, and dictate their actions according to how others (specifically the dominant White population of the United States), perceive them.

The central issue with DuBois’ proposition of double consciousness is that it is not possible to refute such an idea. The argument is problematic precisely because it is impossible to disprove. What is critical about a hypothesis is that it is open to debate. DuBois’ own hypothesis is not open to debate, because it is patently impossible to verify whether one has learned beliefs from one’s own group or from the “other” group(s). Nor is it possible to verify if an entire other group believes what is presumed that they are supposed to believe. With an entire group of people – who is to say where they learned what? Moreover, with other entire groups of people – who is to say that they actually believe what they are supposed to believe?

This is not to say, however, DuBois’ claims are not without merit (at least on some level). As the proceeding discussion will show, there were those within this group who have had their lives affected by what others are capable of believing, and could believe.
The aforementioned gender and sexual stereotypes that pathologize Asian bodies were topics that prompted a great deal of conversation. Both the women and the men involved in this project largely knew of these stereotypes, were frustrated by them and lived in relation to them.

The fact that Asian women are simultaneously sexualized into being both ever-submissive and at the same time ever-lascivious sexual partners was well-known by most female participants. One female participant, Laurie, asked me in an ironic fashion – because she expected me to know – about whether or not I knew about the phenomenon known as the “Rice King”. Having to deal with Rice Kings and “Yellow Fever” – White men who have a pronounced fetish for, and consequently only pursue East Asian women; symptoms had and exhibited by said individuals – were recurrent themes in conversations I had with female participants. Several women spoke about how they been involved in relationships with partners with disconcerting fascinations with Asians and Asian culture; a number of women spoke about how their screening process for prospective partners had been affected by this phenomenon. One participant went so far as to say that “Yellow Fever has been the bane of my existence”.

The male participants were also more than ready to offer accounts about how the social demasculinization of the Asian male had affected their lives. Several male participants spoke about the stereotype of the asexual, reticent and passive Chinese male and how it affected their interpersonal relationships with both men and women. Some participants, like Allan and Dan, were able to offer long and measured statements about this stereotype and how their lives had been affected by it. Dan, in particular, spoke at
length about how he felt his pursuit of romantic relationships with women had been adversely affected by this stereotype.

But perhaps the most apt and poignant summation of the stereotypes was provided by Derrick. When asked what he thought the broader public thought of Chinese men, Derrick without hesitation simply said: “They think we all have small dicks”. He also offered a particularly vivid account of how these stereotypes had affected his life, speaking to how he had felt it necessary to be violent and fight throughout his adolescence because of them. Though he went on to say that he had eventually “gotten over it”, this particular conversation lead to him to complain for several minutes afterwards about his counterparts. Based on what he had seen in terms of fights at nightclubs, he spoke about how “Chinese men have a (Beat) fucking (Beat) Napoleon complex”.

Elements of the Model Minority stereotype also seemed troublesome for the participants as well. They could speak about to being thought of as ever-acquiescent and quiet, awkward nerds. Dan, for example, could recall having conversations with non-Chinese employers who would make fun of him, playfully asking him if he was good at math or had played the piano in his youth. Expressing frustration about the stereotype of the, in her own words, “quiet Asian girl in the back” – Janice related how she was mistaken for an ESL student by a teacher in whose classroom she had been for over a year. Because she had been so often presumed to be good at math, Hoa spoke about she reveled in showing people that she was, in fact, terrible at math.

Only a few participants, however, explicitly called these stereotypes – nor did they characterize their experiences as a result of these stereotypes – as experiences that
were result of systemic racism. In fact, even fewer participants spoke explicitly to knowing about, or experiencing systemic racism. Indeed, reflecting this trend, this was a recurrent theme in the conversations with most of those who spoke explicitly to the existence of systemic racism: The idea that coming to the realization that such a thing as “systemic racism” even existed was a gradual and cumulative process. One had to gain a particular type of vocabulary to speak the language, to articulate their experiences in that particular frame. It was something that had to (needed to, might be more apropos) be learned about. “One’s education”, so to speak, about systemic racism was often the result of interaction in particular activist circles. While in these circles, they would encounter either people or literary material that helped them in interpreting their experience. About systemic racism particularly: Kelly spoke about her career as a city servant in the public sector, providing several anecdotes relating how she had either experienced, or had seen colleagues experience discrimination or tokenism. Nadine, befitting someone who had worked for years in the field of education, spoke about she regarded her early childhood as the experience of someone who had been in the position of little power, someone whose embodiment and experience were not as valued as those of the dominant group.

Most participants, however, could speak to experiencing incidents of racism. Racism, as experienced by most the participants, was of the type that was directly experienced, in the form of slurs. As one might imagine, these experiences of racism were another source of ambivalence for some of the participants. Predictably (and unfortunately), the racism most often experienced by the participants was that experienced by a putative immigrant. The trope of Chinese as Perpetual Foreigner seems to be alive and well. When speaking about their experiences of racism, the participants
related stories in which their assailants hurled insults that spoke to them being immigrants (actual or otherwise). Participants were mocked in faux-Asian accents, and told to go home. Other participants spoke to being accosted with more Chinese-specific insults. One participant, for example, related an incident about an irate driver yelling at her father and mother, while she and her sibling were in the car. The motivation of the other driver’s diatribe was his belief that the participant’s father had “stolen” his parking spot – eventually leaving the scene yelling out “fucking Chinese can’t drive”.

**Demonstratively Deficient: Lacking Language and Feeling Less Chinese**

Their ability to speak Chinese, or more accurately, their inability to speak Chinese, was another source of ambivalence.

Taking a nod from Bourdieu, Goldstein (2003) theorized that the Cantonese, as it was used by students in a Toronto high school, functioned as a type of capital. The school in which she collected data for her ethnographic study was a type of market, and speaking Cantonese had a particular type of exchange value. The use of Cantonese by Cantonese-speaking students enabled them to access the school’s broader community of Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong. Students in this community would use Cantonese with one another to both help one another with schoolwork and while socially interacting with one another. Cantonese was a symbolic resource, enabling the students to better ensure their collective educational successes, as well as construct a distinctive “Hong Kong” student identity. Particular students that putatively “belonged” to the Hong Kong Cantonese speaker community, and who were unable to speak the language, felt conflicted as to whether they could consider themselves part of the community.
It seems that those who could be called, and choose to call themselves “Chinese-Canadian”, go through a similar process. The majority of participants in this study spoke to feeling as if they lacked the necessary capital to legitimately call themselves Chinese-Canadian. The resource more often than not was language.

Those that predominantly spoke English lamented their inability to speak, or lack of skill in a form of Chinese. They framed themselves as inadequately Chinese-Canadian, because they were unable to speak, read or write Chinese, either well enough or at all according to their standards. One participant, Kate, although able to speak Cantonese with a considerable degree of fluency, still labeled herself as “a periphery participant” in Toronto’s Chinese community, because of her inability to fluently speak Cantonese. She felt as if this characteristic made it difficult for her to access and interact with both of her constituent communities. In her own words:

> I mean, one of the reasons that I don’t feel so participatory in Chinese-Canadian society, I mean the mainstream, the very – in Canada is because I don’t speak Cantonese fluently, I don’t, I can’t read it, and I can’t write it. I mean, I can read a little bit, I can write a little bit, but I don’t, so I can’t participate in the major institutions, for example the newspaper? And also I’m not up to date, I mean . . . Fluency, mastering fluency in Cantonese is a major part in participating in the culture and, just heck, even having a discussion over the dinner table with my family . . . Sometimes I can’t even follow it at all. But I knew that if it was translated into English, I’d probably participate in, you know probably follow it . . . Sometimes it’s just little things, like being stuck for what’s the Chinese name for you know, what’s the Chinese name for the Liberal Party in Canada?

Language was a measure by which the participants gauged their authenticity. How they spoke of their “inauthenticity” ranged from providing apt statements – a variation of “I don’t speak Chinese, so I don’t feel that Chinese” – to providing extended descriptive frameworks. Joanne provided an example of the latter, providing an account about how
she thought that language as well as consumption was linked explicitly to “how Chinese” one was. As she put it:

Um, speaking to the conversations, um, if we were having conversations about what it means to be Chinese, or CBC\(^4\) or somehow we just get on that topic, it’s just (Pause) I mean, there are discussions about whether or not, you know, how Chinese we consider ourselves to be. And I think we can see who’s more Chinese than not. One of my friends Richard I would say that he’s more Chinese than me, because he can actually speak Chinese fluently. But he doesn’t actually speak Chinese unless he’s spoken to by his parents or his grandmother, he doesn’t speak Chinese when we’re out or amongst us, um, and Gene would be even more Chinese, because he speaks Chinese to his mother and his family [. . .]

Indeed, more so than anything else, speaking any type of Chinese – in any fashion, whether fluently, semi-fluenly, often or occasionally – was indisputably the most often mentioned indicator of Chineseness. The few participants who were able read and speak Chinese with either considerable or entire fluency explicitly spoke to their capacity to do so, one participant remarking that she was “pretty Chinese. I mean, I speak and read it”. Some participants offered statements that indicated that they had encountered a hierarchy of Chineseness, in which their varying abilities to communicate and understand the language afforded them a certain position. These participants spoke to how aside from being a marker of how one was Chinese, the ability to speak Chinese was also an indicator of how a person was “more” Chinese. The participants had either expressed this particular sentiment in the past, or had known of particular family members who had felt this way.

As such, the participants seemed acutely aware of how their capacity to speak Chinese placed them in a particular social location. It was also a significant social

\(^4\) CBC = Canadian Born Chinese.
performance. For some participants, “being Chinese” meant speaking Chinese with those who would understand it, particularly in familial contexts. English was the dominant language spoken in my interactions with the participants, both during their interviews and in periods during which I interacted with their peer groups. But a number of participants spoke to making a pronounced effort to speak Chinese with their families. And on the occasions I was able to be with these participants as they interacted with their families, the practice of speaking Chinese was accordingly observed. Participants spoke in varying mixtures of Chinese and English, often codeswitching to English both while speaking to me, and with one another.

Hoa described the significance of the practice by drawing a contradictory comparison between it and another way she understood her identity. Her comparison suggested a deep investment in how language was tied to her sense of Chineseness, and how speaking Chinese was tied to a sense of proper familial conduct. Hoa is a self-identified bisexual woman. She remarked how, while she knew that there were “Chinese people who didn’t speak Chinese to their parents”, she did not quite understand them. To express the extent to which she did not understand “[these] people”, she compared them to “[those] people (sic) don’t think bisexuality exists, people who don’t think bisexuality is possible”. While she failed to see the contradictory nature of her statement, she did verify her claim about how she spoke to her parents. When she was observed interacting with her parents, Hoa seldom spoke English. When Hoa would interact with individuals who were both Chinese speakers and of her parents’ age, she more or less exclusively spoke Cantonese.
There were, however, no participants who regarded themselves as “better” Chinese than their counterparts because of their capacity to speak Chinese, or particular types of Chinese. Unless explicitly asked to qualify what they meant by “Chinese”, participants simply spoke of being able to speak “Chinese”. And when pressed about whether or not they differentiated between the various dialects, participants answered in the affirmative, though that did not seem to matter. Chinese – Mandarin, Cantonese or otherwise – was Chinese. The participants knew that were differences in dialects, and conversely, differences between those who spoke the different dialects according to regional origin and custom, but Chinese was Chinese. If I spoke (some sort of) Chinese, and if you spoke (some sort of) Chinese, we were (ultimately) Chinese.

The ascriptive and contingent nature of ethnicity, it seemed, was the prevalent factor here. Because the entirety of the group was perceived as singularly Chinese, they thought of themselves as Chinese, despite their respective dialects, or national differences. Xiaomei, a Mandarin speaker originally from Taiwan, spoke to this process. When pressed about differences between Chinese dialect and regional groups, she mentioned that when she lived in Taiwan, these differences did matter. She differentiated Chinese people according to their ethnolinguistic and national origins. And while she continued this practice upon first coming to Canada, she eventually stopped differentiating Chinese people according to those criteria, because as she put it: “It doesn’t matter (here)”.

That being said, all of the participants were aware that Mandarin, because of the political and socioeconomic rise of China, had a particular type of financial exchange value. While not explicitly naming it as such, to use Heller’s (1999) term, they were
cognizant of the fact that Mandarin was a linguistic commodity. A number of participants were also aware of how their capacity to speak English and Chinese in particular ways afforded them particular sorts of privilege. Betty, who was originally from Hong Kong, provided a particularly memorable quip that attested to this (though perhaps inadvertently). Betty lamented about how midway through one of her years in elementary school, her English teacher of English descent (“who spoke perfect British English”) was replaced by a English teacher from the Chinese mainland. It was Betty’s complaint that she felt that English teacher from the mainland had negatively affected her accent. On the other side of the coin, Hoa spoke about how she felt her Mandarin, which she learned from her Taiwanese best friend, “sounded better” than Mandarin from the mainland. Mandarin from the mainland, in her estimation, “sounds crass”.

**Deficiency and Difference: Chinese-Canadians and the other Chinese**

Indeed, the group as a whole were hyper-conscious about their difference. The participants who were native born stated that they felt different from Chinese people from China, Hong Kong and other parts of Asia. Because they were different, aside from having an “insufficient” command of the language, they talked about being unable to engage in specific symbolic Chinese performances and practices. And being unable to engage in these performances and practices made them feel that much more different.

For example, several participants mentioned having a spotty knowledge of Chinese customs and traditions – they weren’t able to address relatives according to traditional Chinese nomenclature, they weren’t able to “properly” use chopsticks. In a similar vein, some participants spoke about how they were less Chinese because they did not do certain things. Certain consumption habits, such as frequenting Chinese
restaurants and bubble tea houses, were spoken of as performatively “Chinese” things to do by the participants. (How these habits, as well as particular spaces and practices, were given symbolic importance will be further taken up in the following chapter.) Will, for example, spoke about he was not Chinese because he did not eat Chinese food. He adopted a self-deprecatory tone, saying that he would often tell his friends this: “I don’t eat Chinese food. Why? Because I’m the worst Chinese person ever”.

He would go on to say that he felt "too" Canadian. This was a recurrent statement. A number of participants mentioned that they felt and acted too Canadian, in relation to not feeling or acting Chinese enough. Will, for example, chose to express his sentiments by stating how he often felt that his Chinese identity was defined in relation to how he wished he did not so often "feel so fucking White". In a similar vein, Dan sheepishly related an anecdote about how when he was younger, he would often order chicken fingers in Chinese restaurants, in order to "be" more Canadian.

Being different from other Chinese people also was an issue. Some participants complained about certain collective characteristics and tendencies of the Chinese (which, of course, they didn’t have.) While being wary of racist stereotyping, this did not stop them from using the very same or similar stereotypes to frame themselves as unique. Participants complained that the Chinese were ethnocentric, conservative, materialistic and too passive. Indeed, some participants mentioned during their interviews that they were unlike those who were “typically” Chinese, those being of course, those who exhibited the aforementioned characteristics and tendencies.

Finally, enduring “different” experiences because of specific Chinese social norms also prompted feelings of ambivalence. Some participants spoke about growing up
in a household with hierarchic familial culture, particularly favourable to males. They provided personal stories relating how they were taught to be quiet and deferent according to these norms.

For example, when asked about how being Chinese had affected her life, one such participant, Jane immediately related a poignant anecdote. Jane spoke about how her mother once took great care in telling her that it was her responsibility to be able to gauge her husband’s mood, when he came home. Her mother told her that, depending on her assessment of her husband’s mood, Amy should adjust her behaviour accordingly to accommodate and make him happy. In a similar vein, Hoa spoke about she perceived “Western relationships” to be freer than her parents’ marriage, more often allowing a person to “do whatever the hell you want” than “Chinese relationships”.

**I Am: (Chinese) Canadian**

The category of Canadian, on the other hand, prompted far fewer feelings of inadequacy.

Canadians was just what they were, it was something that they did not need to qualify. This was probably reflective of how most of the Chinese-Canadians in this particular sample were capable of communicat- ing in the specific Canadian context in which this study took place, which is to say, more specifically, they were able to speak English in Toronto. How Chinese-Canadians as a whole are positioned in relation to other minorities in Canada is another factor that should also be considered. Comparatively speaking, Chinese-Canadians – while certainly experiencing discrimination and mistreatment as result of how they have been particularly racialized and marginalized – statistically enjoy certain privileges over other minorities. They are for example, disproportionately educated and socially mobile (Li, 1988; 1998).
How the participants mostly did not feel the need to either disqualify or qualify their Canadianess is thus reflective of a certain amount of unexamined privilege. One could speculate that if the particular Chinese-Canadians in question were differently socially located than they actually were – for example, if they were Québécois nationalists or members of the First Nations – they would have had different sentiments and offered different statements. Various scholars in the field of critical race, white and feminist studies have pointed out how those with invisible types of privilege have difficulty grasping that they actually have privilege. They have difficulty grasping that they have privilege precisely because they have it; they are comfortable (Dyer, 1997; McIntosh, 1988).

A similar process seems to be at hand here. The participants were comfortable (at least comfortable enough) with the label Canadian because their particular social location allowed them to be. It seems appropriate here to discuss how most of the Chinese-Canadians in this particular sample were by most social indicators, privileged. Descriptively speaking, the case could be made that this was an extraordinarily well-placed group. Most had at least one degree from a prestigious university. Several either already had graduate or professional degrees, or were in the process of acquiring them. Most came from well-to-do families, on the upper-end of the socioeconomic spectrum. As mentioned earlier, most participants spoke English fluently, and moreover spoke (at least to some degree) the dominant lingua franca of Toronto’s Chinese community, Cantonese. Descriptively speaking then, the case could be made then, that this was not a group best poised to recognize their own privilege. Let alone, to borrow some terms from McIntosh, to unpack their backpack of privilege (1988).
One should not be left with the impression, however, that the participants were unaware of the fact that the title “Canadian” was something that they had to live up to an extent. (As mentioned earlier, the participants spoke to being racialized and feeling different from the norm.) They knew theirs was an identity that had to be negotiated, and at times asserted.

Duration of time spent in Canada substantiated Canadianness. They were Canadian because they had uniquely “Canadian experiences” and were able to converse about them. “Canadian experiences” meant a number of different things to different people. For some, a typically “Canadian” experience as had by a Chinese-Canadian was the experience of feeling different from the norm. Some participants related how they felt Canadian precisely because they had spent most of their lives as minorities in the Canadian context, as opposed to part of a majority in another context. Because they had endured, and could speak about, these experiences in Canada, they were Canadian.

The capacity to engage in conversations about specifically Canadian ideas, and having consumed/enjoyed particularly Canadian cultural products and forms, were also recurrent themes. In particular, a participant named Eric largely (and enthusiastically) defined his Canadianess via his consumption and his appreciation of things Canadian. Eric’s statements demonstratively made evident how our expressions of allegiance are both simultaneously codified and enabled through particular social structures. He talked about how he was Canadian because he really liked maple syrup, and Canada’s nature. He talked about how, if there were instances in international sport when Canada would competing against China, he would (generally) support Canada instead of China.
For others, Chinese-Canadian was explicitly a particular linguistic identity. You were a Chinese-Canadian because you spoke English. One participant stated that she thought you were “more” Chinese-Canadian if you spoke English and French. During her first interview, Joanne recollected how she retorted in French to respond to a person who was yelling at her to go back to China in English. In Joanne’s words, because French was Canada’s other official language, retorting in French served to assert that she was “more” Canadian than her assailant, whose attack was predicated on his presumption that Joanne was not Canadian at all. Joanne thus negotiated the incident by utilizing particular ideologies, which constitute our expectations of what legitimate Canadians should be like, in her favour. Being called an illegitimate Canadian, she acted in a way that made her more legitimate according to – again, in her words – “Canada’s official doctrine”.

It should be said again, however, that they liked being Canadian. A number of participants spoke of how they more identified with the political values and processes of the Canadian nation-state – such as multiculturalism – than those of the Chinese nation-state. Canada afforded them social freedoms and flexibility in the way they chose to live their lives. For Joanne, the way she felt about her identity was aptly described as being “Canadian before Chinese. Only because, I think I have only a surface knowledge of being Chinese by growing up here, and I don’t know what it’s necessarily like back in Hong (Kong), or wherever . . . I know about Canada. I know about how people kind of think and act here. When I travel, I’m Canadian, you know? I’m not Chinese, I’m Canadian”. For Joanne, it was also easy to be, as she put it, “to be both”.

What I have attempted to show in this chapter is that this is not entirely true. Those involved in this project, through the statements that they made, indicated that
particular sentiments come along with being categorized Chinese and Canadian. The following chapter provides an overview of how they negotiated these sentiments with particular types of statements and actions. It will show that, in order to deal with ambivalence, they afforded significance to “Chinese” practices and experiences, to bind themselves together, and to make themselves different from others. Moreover, it will show that they spoke about these practices and experiences in particular ways – they were “happy” critics of a sort.
H: Yeah? Well, I found out a year ago that someone I know from high school was a lesbian, and also Asian. You probably know her.

K: Sandra.

H: Yeah. (Laughs) So we, we talked a lot. And it was nice, it was nice to know that here is another Chinese person who is like me, and experiencing similar things and talking about it. It’s nice to talk about it. And to know that you’re not alone.

K: Do you feel alone sometimes?

H: Yeah. Like I feel like sometimes I feel like people don’t understand kind of? It’s a lot of things. Sometimes I’m really anti-social? Because I don’t like people sometimes. But sometimes, sometimes people are okay! (Laughs) Yeah.

- Hoa and me, in conversation.

Man invented language to satisfy his great need to complain.

- Lily Tomlin.

Chapter Three: Symbolic Consumption, Community, Complaint and (The Opposite) of Crying

I have thus far offered that an emotional condition pervasive among those involved in this study is ambivalence. More precisely, what I have tried to do is provide an overview of the reasons why they felt ambivalent about being categorized “Chinese-Canadian”. Their general sentiment was being conflicted about being categorized “Chinese”, primarily because of racist Chinese stereotypes, and feelings of inadequacy in relation to their capacity to be engage in “proper” Chinese linguistic and social performances. For the most part, however, the category of “Canadian” was met with far fewer feelings of inadequacy. Canadian was just something most of them were – from Will: “I guess I’m Canadian, by default right?” And for some, as Joanne evidenced: “I’m not Chinese, I’m Canadian” – a category that was preferable.

This chapter provides an overview how they negotiated this condition. In other words, it illustrates the strategies that they utilized to deal with being (categorized)
Chinese: their feeling not Chinese “enough” and Chinese in a way different from the norm. Broadly speaking, there were three types of strategies: community-building, complaint, laughter and mockery. This chapter will illustrate that, to deal with their ambivalence in relation to this compound category, they came together. And they did so largely to complain about themselves and others.

**Eat Like Me: Chineseness through Consumption**

“The Sojourner” is a historical trope used to describe the first Chinese male settlers that arrived at, and as one might be able to guess from the label, left North America. According to popular interpretation, the initial Chinese migrants came to North America to work, and because of their familial commitments back in China, sent their wages and eventually themselves back home. Because of their attachment to China, they developed few ties to North America. They chose to cluster together in ethnic enclaves, rather than interact with the broader societies in which they lived.

Li’s (1998) re-interpretation of the “Sojourner” thesis is likely more accurate. Using the history of Canada’s ethnic Chinese population as a backdrop, Li suggests that North America’s initial Chinese settlers returned to China not because of any attachment they might have had for China. Instead, the settlers returned to China because of the less than favourable, violent and hostile-to-Chinese conditions they faced in their new environments. Their “sojourn”, so to speak, was a forced one. Based on that historical interpretation, the migrants clustered together in ethnic enclaves not because of a preference for “their own”. Rather, to return to Barth (1969), the boundaries and bounded enclosures they that they created were measures born out of necessity. Because there was
(and is) strength in numbers, they built communities accordingly (see also Anderson, 1994).

Certainly, the conditions are different. But based on this study, it would seem that some Chinese-Canadians today do much the same. They engage in the process of community building, in order to deal with their own issues with being “Chinese” in Canada.

What do you if you feel inadequately Chinese and differently Chinese? For the participants in this study, you afford symbolic importance to things that you do. For one, you afford significance among certain consumption habits, and the experiences that you have because of these consumption habits. You label these consumption habits and experiences as performatively “Chinese”, “Chinese-Canadian”, or “Asian”. You do so, because you know other people who are also labeled as such engage in them. Because you have labeled the practice as one that legitimates your Chineseness and your “Chinese-Canadianness”, you legitimate yourself as Chinese-Canadian. (Despite the fact that, without the significance that you afford these practices, they are just practices engaged in by those with the means and the incentive to do so. There is nothing really “Chinese” or any other category about these things.) Some of the more popular habits and experiences included after-school math tutoring and piano lessons.

The participants also afforded significance and legitimating properties to the consumption of particular products geared toward those who could be Chinese or Asian. Examples of such goods included Chinese specific language media in the forms of film and music, and media produced by and for those who could be labeled Asian. Asian-American media was also mentioned. That they spoke of expressing their Chineseness
via consumption with such ease was reflective of larger social processes and the particular context in which they lived.

Innovations in media technology, such as fan community websites and file-sharing programs which operate on the Internet have also made consumption of particularly Chinese cultural products that much easier. The world is smaller because of increased information flow via communication technologies. Moreover, certain shared imaginings of identity are made that much more possible because of this increased information flow. Chinese-Canadians who speak to consuming Asian American cultural forms is reflective of this. After all, as the term suggests, “Asian-American”, is an American imagining.

That some Chinese-Canadians would speak to consuming Asian-American cultural products as performances of Chineseness – as well as using the terms “Chinese” and “Asian” interchangeably – suggests a number of things. For one, it suggests that some Chinese-Canadians see themselves in coalition with other Asian-Americans and Asian-Canadians (as the identity, after all, is very much a coalition identity that subsumes multiple groups). It also suggests that some Chinese-Canadians believe that there exist a number of particular shared experiences between themselves and other Asian-Americans and Asian-Canadians. It also speaks to the efficacy of how processes of racialization have made “Asian-American” and “Asian-Canadian” into readily known categories that individuals can utilize as self-orienting (and orientalizing) points of reference. It also speaks to the efficacy of how a number of discourse producers – in the form of those that would produce popular Asian-American culture, as well as academics – have successfully
produced texts that both utilize and propagate the category as a site of analysis and as something that is knowable.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the sentiments of some participants of having a particularly different, or as Janice put it, “uncultured” Chinese childhood were more acute because most participants had spent most of their lives in Toronto. The substantial overseas Chinese community and Chinese-specific business infrastructure in Toronto should also be remembered when contextualizing how many participants spoke of “being” Chinese because of their consumption habits. This backdrop was also conducive in enabling and prompting the participants to speak of Chineseness, at least in part, as a matter of consumption. Toronto enabled their access, or at the very least made it much their access to these spaces and goods that much easier. Nadine, for example, spoke of reveling in the “Asian” backdrop offered by Toronto. Because she had lived in the Maritimes for most of her young life, she talked about how much she appreciated spaces where the majority of people in them would be speaking “Asian” languages. (She even went so far as relating how, when she first went to university in a major Canadian metropolis, she would go to these spaces, just to hear people speak to one another.)

The symbolic importance of food to the participants warrants mention. Various scholars have written about the significance of cuisine in particular ethnic communities, making note of how both particular types of food and the particular ritual of eating food serve to both perpetuate and regulate notions of ethnic identity (Buscker, 1999; Gabaccia, 2000). While one study cannot purport to either prove or disprove these theses, food did certainly seem to figure especially prominently in these participants’ notion of identity.
Aside from statements about language, statements about food were most numerous. One was Chinese, because one ate Chinese food.

The participants spoke about the importance of food, and the ritual of eating food. Indeed, it could be argued that some participants spoke about eating Chinese food in almost reverent terms. Mike, in particular, spoke at length about the importance of Chinese food to him. He began his interview by immediately speaking about how he was Chinese because he had to eat rice everyday, though he immediately followed this by stating that it “didn’t necessarily have to be Chinese rice. [He] usually [chose] Japanese rice, for health reasons”.

He did, however, demonstrate more traditionalist tendencies. At one point during his first interview, Mike went off on an extended tangent about how he felt the importance of Chinese food in sustaining a sense of Chineseness had become diminished with the proliferation of Toronto’s other Chinatowns. Because there were now so many Chinatowns, there was no longer a central community site for the ritual meals, for Saturday or Sunday Dim Sums or meals of that sort.

It would seem, however, as a great majority of his counterparts also spoke to the importance of Chinese food, that the opposite is true. Eating Chinese food was a pedagogical activity, for virtually everyone involved. It was where you learned to be Chinese. Based on this study, it could be argued that the capacity and the willingness to consume Chinese cuisine is one of the community’s de facto legitimating practices. Moreover, it could be argued that the particular sites where these practices occur, i.e. Chinese restaurants, are the community’s de facto institutional sites of importance. These serve as border sites for those who would call themselves Chinese to legitimate
themselves. At the risk of being redundant, in other words – I am Chinese, because I eat Chinese food. And while I do not necessarily have to eat Chinese food at a Chinese restaurant – because eating the food with chopsticks is enough – I feel that much “more” Chinese when I eat at Chinese restaurants.

**I Get By With a Little Help From My Friends: Mobilizing Difference**

The sentiment of feeling different as a result of growing up and being Chinese in Canada, and finding others who had undergone similar experiences, was also afforded significance. A number of participants talked about how they had undergone the experience of seeking out others that had sentiments and experiences similar to their own. They spoke about how feeling different from the norm galvanized them to find people and spaces where they could speak about how they felt different from what was normatively Canadian. They related how, with these people and in these spaces – the latter varying from explicitly “Chinese” interest clubs and informal friendship groups – they took the opportunity to articulate the sentiments they had from being different. Because these people had also experienced things that had set them apart from the norm – again, examples varied from coming from a more “family oriented” culture to the embarrassment one had from eating Chinese food in the school cafeteria – they were together Chinese-Canadian. Lianne was able to speak about how she had undergone this experience earlier on in her youth, and was able to contextualize her experience in relation to others (while also inadvertently stressing the importance of food):

L: Well, just like, figuring out who you are and how being, I think that’s when I became really comfortable with labeling myself as Chinese-Canadian, like how you see yourself or how you relate yourself within a group context or a community and that’s not something that happened over night, right? That’s something that happened when I was sixteen and
in boarding school, but I mean it carried through for many years because, it was not something I’d think about all time, because, Oh my God I had to get into university and that would take a backseat to Who am I? So it’s like, over the years, it’s something that kind of iterates over and over again, where it becomes a little more clear kind like how I identify myself . . . Am I still being too abstract?

K: No, no. This is actually really great. I think you’re the first person, who’s spoken to the actual process of identity process very explicitly? I mean, it is abstract, but I mean . . .

L: And I think that’s something that most Asians go through, like Asian-Canadians or otherwise, or specifically Chinese-Canadians, ‘cause like, when I’m talking to my friends, you can sort of understand how they’re, a little more comfortable with who they are, or saying I’m Chinese, or hey I can eat congee\(^5\) for lunch, you know? Things like that, it takes time, and I think it’s an age thing, because when you’re young, and you’re surrounded by people who don’t look like you and who don’t eat the same things as you, it’s not necessarily a process that you can go through by yourself, or are willing to go through by yourself. I feel like it was really something that, was really facilitated by a group. Does that make sense?

In lieu of finding other Chinese-Canadians, some participants opted to associate with those who could be designated Asian. Those that did so adhered to an ideology of sameness, stressing the commonalities between the various Asian groups. Allan, for example, frequented a church catering to ethnic Koreans. In explaining his choices, Allan talked about, among other things, how Chinese and Koreans had similar and intertwined historical trajectories. That both groups were deeply influenced by Confucian ethics was also mentioned.

Indeed, while the case could be made that there isn’t a cohesive Chinese-Canadian “community” to speak of – this did not prevent the participants from speaking as if the opposite was true. The extent, however, to which they were committed to boundary maintenance varied considerably. For example, as mentioned earlier, virtually

\(^5\) A rice gruel dish.
all of the participants spoke of wanting to pass on particular Chinese traditions and
customs. Other participants spoke of seeking out specifically-Chinese romantic partners.
For some participants, like Joanne, it was largely as a matter of convenience. Joanne
consciously chose Chinese romantic partners (or as she put, “people from other family
oriented cultures”) because it would be easier for both her and her partner to both interact
and integrate with each other’s families. Lee, another participant, had a markedly
different and much more severe perspective. For Lee, the extent to which he would go to
preserve Chinese groupness went to the length indirectly policing his future’s children’s
dating lives. Though he said he would not condemn any romantic relationships with
people who were not Chinese, neither would he directly support them. Lee said that he
“wouldn’t drive his children to their s.o.’s (significant other’s) homes” or “acknowledge
them when they were in his presence”.

I want to point out here, however, that Chinese-Canadian (at least to these
participants) was largely not perceived as a political identity. Gans’ (1979) hypothesis
about how ethnic groups would articulate their identities via selective and symbolic
measures instead of traditional, organized political measures in this instance proved to be
right. Very few participants spoke about being Chinese via specific forms of civic
participation as a means of articulating Chineseness. This is to say, for example,
participating in social institutions specifically meant for the social improvement of those
who are Chinese such as social advocacy organizations. Indeed, reflective of Gans’
hypothesis, of the three participants who spoke participating in forms of participation,
two participants were directly involved with the running of one such organization. And
the last of these individuals was a non-participant, speaking about how she felt less
Chinese because she did not participate in Chinese-specific forms of civic participation. She seemed almost ashamed about this fact. The reality of situation was, however, most of her counterparts were non-participants as well.

I also want to note here that one’s “own” community was not always an entirely safe space. For example, the study’s self-identified gay male and self-identified bisexual woman offered their opinion that ethnic Chinese spaces were more rigidly heteronormative spaces than “Canadian” ones. Because of this, they spoke about, on some level, keeping their “ethnic lives” and their “sexual orientation” lives separate. For example, because the ethnic Chinese were more heteronormative (at least in their experience), it served as a disincentive for them to reveal their sexual orientations to their families.

**Speaking (About) Types of Chinese: Commentary, Criticism and Complaint**

These people were also all capable critics themselves (and, of themselves).

As indicated in the previous chapter, because “Chinese”, “Canadian” and “Chinese-Canadian” were categories were sources of ambivalence for some participants. A number of participants negotiated these feelings by critiquing the categories, and contextualizing their experiences in relation to the categories.

They offered metacommentary. They provided their own ideas and analyses of their experiences, about their own relationships and experiences in relation to categorization. Indeed, some participants were able to offer extremely well-informed and sophisticated critiques and complaints. They could deconstruct “Chinese-Canadian” and themselves, speak to the social processes that made Chinese-Canadian something knowable. Despite their feelings of inadequacy vis-à-vis Chineseness, they were able to
articulate, along with their socially informed dispositions, their social positions. For example, Allan, railed against the notion of an “authentic” Chinese identity, and could speak to how this informed his social practices with others:

And they ask me a number of questions, really I end up giving the shortest and simplest answer possible, because first of all, I don’t think it’s my position or anybody’s position in particular to try represent, to try to represent an entire group. So if I say for example, Chinese people eat rice, that’s a form of essentialization, because even as it’s spoken, then exceptions come to mind, right? Such as, what about some people who come from Northern China and eat, you know, steamed buns or something right? So in other words, there are certain kinds of variations that always have to be taken into account, right? [. . .] And yeah, when people like, such as my roommates and so on ask questions like those, I usually give them very specific answers such as, they might ask me, uh . . . like “Do Chinese people like to eat noodles a lot?” And I would answer: “Well, I like to eat noodles quite a bit, and I like to eat egg noodles more than wheat noodles, more than rice noodles” or something. So in other words, I tend to turn the question back into, something more individualistic context.

Laurie could offer a comparative analysis of race and discourse in Canada and Hong Kong, and talk at length about how different languages ultimately produced different understanding of racism, as terms are changed in translation. Janice, on the other hand, historicized the contemporary ethnic Chinese familial experience, with reference to Confucian tradition:

[E]verything that you do is for the family. Right? Everything you do, especially if you’re a son, I think? Everything you do is giving back to the parents, I think it goes back to the idea of the Confucius filial piety crap? (Laughs) I don’t think it’s crap, but I think it’s crap that its enforced? [. . .] And, and it’s that, I think the filial piety thing is, or those Confucius traditions is a lot, is following a lot of empty traditions I feel like. It’s like, a lot of guilt that you should be doing this, there a lot of things that are expected of you, there’s a lot of guilt that comes along with being ‘cause there’s a lot of unspoken expectations of what you should be doing. Um, as Chinese person. Son or daughter. Of how obedient you should be, of how, you know . . . All those expectations of being Chinese.
Kelly, who worked for a human rights organization that catered to Toronto’s ethnic Chinese community, while conceding that she may not be able to live up to someone’s expectation of “authentic” Chineseness, explicitly said that she was Chinese because she experienced being categorized as such:

Well, um, I think being a Chinese-Canadian, I think for me the Chinese part of my identity is a racialization of who I am? Because I was born a Canadian citizen, culturally I’m very Canadian, whatever that means. Um, but, when people see you on the street, they don’t see you as Canadian, they see you as whatever racialized group you come from, right? So it’s an identity that others have placed on me, it’s not an identity that I necessarily choose for myself, not that I’m not also proud of my heritage, on a certain level? But I think there’s a tension there. Because I actually don’t know that much about Chinese culture or Chinese history, or politics or anything like that. And it’s interesting, actually working for a Chinese organization, because people kind of expect that I would know that kind of stuff? But I actually don’t know that much at all. And I don’t actually have the language skills and I’m actually not that literate. So the question is how do I work in this Chinese organization? But the thing is, this organization is not a cultural group, it’s not like, we don’t do song and dance, we deal with human rights issues? And we deal with discrimination, and uh, systemic barriers to people’s participation in society, and that’s something that I’ve experienced, because of who I am, right? Regardless of what I know of Chinese history and culture.

Less common, but also prevalent was placing oneself above the categorization. A few participants stated that they considered themselves individuals, as one person put it, “a composite of a variety of different experiences and views”. As indicated earlier with Will’s “I’m guess I’m Canadian by default, right?”, and Joanne’s “I’m not Chinese, I’m Canadian”, some people disavowed the category of Chinese. Another tactic was framing oneself against other Asians, Chinese-Canadian or otherwise. Dan immediately introduced himself as “I’m one of the more outgoing Asians that you’ll meet”. Betty spoke to thinking that “it’s kind of true (that the Asian girls at work don’t know how to
think for themselves)”. Mike openly complained, saying that “I’m embarrassed by them”, when speaking about ethnic Chinese who he felt were too loud and crass.

**Jesters of the Yellow Emperor: About Laughter and Mockery**

It is significant that everyone was always laughing. The participants laughed at everything, throughout their interviews and during my social interactions with them.

When and how they laughed indicated the participants’ ambivalence. In other words, it was both what they said in relation to being Chinese-Canadian, and how they said it that suggested that they had conflicting feelings about how being members of the category. What I am suggesting is that their laughter, beyond being symptomatic of ambivalence, was also a strategy that they chose to utilize in order to deal with what could make them ambivalent. It was both reaction and action.

At times, the interviews felt like therapy sessions. To deal with their ambivalence, they laughed. The participants were perpetually laughing. Laughing, finding humour in everything, was the strategy. I want to venture that the Chinese-Canadians that I spoke to, on some basic level, laughed as a coping mechanism. These were not intrinsically “funny” topics that we were speaking about, after all. On a very basic level, people were often talking about very unfunny things. People were often speaking about how they felt inadequate in relation to groups to which they were supposed to belong; how they felt unaccepted, or even unworthy for membership in particular groups. It is worthwhile here I think to remember an old adage, which states that from misery comes humour. If the participants in this study can be said to be representative at all – this is a community comprised of comedians. They made jokes and laughed about themselves a lot. Mocking oneself was the order of the day.
They also laughed at themselves, for the benefit of other people. When some participants were with other people, they engaged in three types of interrelated mockery.

First, there was mockery to invoke a sense of solidarity, to speak to a shared idea within the group. A poignant example of mockery of this sort was performed by Dan, in a room that was virtually all Chinese. At his friend’s birthday party, Dan encouraged a number of other Chinese participants to play a recently released videogame called “Rock Band”. (The game, as the title suggests, allows individuals to play out any rock star fantasies that may have – its peripherals include a guitar, a drum kit and a microphone.) Upon garnering the necessary participants to play the game with him, Dan proceeded to act in a fashion which indicated that he was cognizant of certain sexual tropes associated with the Chinese. He also acted in a fashion which indicated he was presumed the others in room with knew of these tropes as well. Upon grabbing the microphone, as he was poised to sing the very first song of the evening, Dan loudly proclaimed that the name of his would-be rock band was going to be “Hardcore Yellow Fever”.

Second, mockery seemed to serve a pre-emptive function, as a means to invoke laughter about a particular situation on one’s own terms. My interactions with Mike suggested this possibility. On multiple occasions, while interacting with individuals who were non-Chinese, Mike both spoke in what has been called “Mock Asian” (Chun 2009) and made jokes referencing Asian stereotypes. He alternating between an affected “Chinese” accent and his regular pattern of speech/accent to index his social position (see Eckert, 2000; Eckert & Rickford, 2001). (Mike normally spoke with an accent typical of someone who was middle-class and raised in Toronto.) A particularly memorable incident happened when he was with some individuals while driving his car. Not some
ten minutes after everyone had gone into his car, Mike began a litany of “Chinese bad driver” and another assorted stereotype driven jokes (“Don’t worry, I can drive”). At one point, Mike even pretended to accost a Chinese cyclist, telling him that it “wasn’t China” and that he “should go home” (the windows were closed, the cyclist couldn’t hear him). While his colleagues would at times join in with their remarks, Mike both dominated and largely dictated the direction of that particular conversation.

Finally, mockery seemed to serve as means of facilitating and easing transition for non-Chinese. There seemed to be an element of performance, a need to speak to being Chinese when entering or introducing particular Chinese things or spaces to those who were not Chinese. For example, the preceding incident involving Mike occurred when he was driving a group of his friends to what has been called a “Chinese ethno-mall” located in Toronto’s suburbs. Mike’s performance was echoed in the recollections of Hoa, who said that when she was younger, she would bring her non-Chinese friends to one of Toronto’s ethno-malls, not because it was a normal thing to do, but rather to “laugh” and to be able say to them “hey, this is what Chinese people do”.

Dan thought laughter was “healthy”, and “the best strategy”. He would say this again and again. The best thing, according to Dan, was to be able to laugh at oneself, as well as laugh at others. From the way he described his years growing up in a small town in northern of Ontario, Dan certainly had his fair share of being laugh at. He related how up until his early twenties when he went away to university, he was ridiculed for being Chinese and/confronted with racial slurs on a regular basis, sometimes on a daily basis. He was, in other words, someone whom it was permissible to laugh at, and he was that someone because he was Chinese.
It is unlikely that Dan, or Mike, or any of the other participants who engaged in Chinese-directed mockery meant to reproduce the conditions which make the Chinese among groups of people which are more permissible to laugh at (and to laugh at more often). Still, because they themselves chose to utilize humour driven by racial stereotypes, they did. As sociolinguists have pointed out, humour can accomplish contradictory objectives (see Bucholtz, 1999; Chun, 2009; Jaffe, 2000). Humour driven by stereotypes can subvert dominant ideologies – because it can serve to ridicule them; at the same time, those who engage in this type of humour propagate the very stereotypes and reproduce the very ideologies they mean to critique. Moreover, those that would utilize this sort of humour run the risk of unintentionally providing misinformation, telling someone whom they would not want to utilize this strategy that they can. Or, more simply put: “Hey, that person is making fun of Chinese people! I’m not Chinese, but I can probably make fun of Chinese people too!” Dan himself even spoke to how he knew he risked reproducing the very same conditions that he had to endure growing up. He said that while he felt that humour of this sort had a place, utilizing it carried the risk of “sending a message” to “racist rednecks” that they too, utilize it.

The reality is, irrespective of any criticism leveled at those that would utilize it, and no matter how careful we are, people will continue to use humour that can accomplish problematic objectives. “How” and “when” we should laugh are, at the very least, difficult conversations to have – because irrespective of these debates, people will laugh and make fun. Society is not utopian, and every joke requires a victim.

What is more productive, I think, is a conversation about the conditions that produce comedians – or about the “who” is most likely to want to make us laugh. The
next chapter, via an overview of how the different participants were socially positioned, and an attempt to answer who among would be most comfortable with the label “Chinese-Canadian”, highlights who some of these people could be.
J: I’m White as Rice.

- **Jack, about being Chinese-Canadian.**

C: Isn’t it strange that evolution would give us a sense of humour? When you think about it, it’s weird that we have a physiological response to absurdity. We laugh at nonsense. We like it. We think it’s funny. Don’t think it’s odd that we appreciate absurdity? Why would we develop that way? How does it benefit us?

H: I suppose if we couldn’t laugh at things that don’t make sense, we couldn’t react to a lot of life.

C: (Pause) I can’t tell if that’s funny or really scary.

- **Bill Waterson’s “Calvin and Hobbes”**.

**Chapter Four: Who Speaks, Who Laughs and Who Jokes**

The previous chapter provided an overview of the different strategies the participants utilized to deal with their ambivalence. These strategies were, again, community building, complaint, laughter and mockery. The previous chapter then, described the “what” – what the participants did to deal with their feelings. This chapter deals with the who. More precisely, by who, I mean to say that this chapter deals with among the various participants, who is likely to feel most ambivalent. Conversely, it also deals with – if everyone is ambivalent about the category Chinese-Canadian – who is likely to be most comfortable with the category. It argues that, based on host of factors, among the variety of participants, a particular type of woman is likely to be most comfortable with the label Chinese-Canadian. And why they are comfortable, is fundamentally tied up to their ability to speak in a variety of different ways.
Learning How to Speak: On Assets, Deficits and Education

And they all did do things in different ways, according to who they were. They dealt with different situations differently, as informed by their respective backgrounds and personal histories. They each had different perspectives, actions and reactions to particular topics and events.

An illustrative example of this was how the participants took up the topic of racism. Racism was spoken about in different ways by different participants. While all participants attempted to speak about these topics lightly, certain participants were more quickly moved to palpable anger and frustration than others. The key variable at hand here was the extent to which participants felt that they were confronted with racism on a regular basis. The “less angry” participants spoke of racism as an isolated experience, or as a series of isolated experiences. While visibly flustered, frustrated and angry when speaking about racism, they were not indignantly so. They were angry – but as their label suggests, not that angry.

This was not the case for those that spoke of racism as a series of experiences, or for those that spoke of racism as a structural impediment that had often affected their lives. Their feigned laughter generally gave way to angrier criticism, some describing themselves as feeling “sick” when being confronted with it. Prolonged exposure and awareness were key factors here. The “more angry” participants had spent a substantial portion of their lives (either living or working) in spaces in which their status as visible minorities was much more acute – i.e., contexts which were predominantly White and conservative. Because they had more often experienced racism in these spaces, they had developed an awareness of it. And based on their capacity to speak at length about it, I
would argue that they had a greater investment in articulating their grievances with it. They wanted people to know about what they had endured.

“Less angry” and “more angry” could thus potentially serve as frames which we could utilize to interrogate and examine (as well further categorize) those who could be labeled Chinese-Canadian. Other frames, however, would probably be more productive. Based on the findings of this study, a more productive frame of analysis might be “assets” and “deficits”.

Why assets and deficits? As the preceding sections make clear, it would seem that in this particular case, the respective theorizations of Bourdieu (1984) and Bauman (2007) are true. For these Chinese-Canadians, some of being “comfortable” with the identity of Chinese-Canadian is about having certain types of capital a la Bourdieu; it was also about being able to engage in certain consumption habits a la Bauman. Those who had linguistic and cultural capital were more comfortable with the category Chinese-Canadian; those who did not have that same capital (or have the degree of capital they would have liked) were less comfortable with the category. More specifically: Those who were able to speak some form of Chinese and were able to “properly” engage in Chinese traditions and customs were more comfortable with the label. They also more easily interacted in and engaged in consumption habits in Chinese language-specific institutional spaces, such particular places of commerce.

“Assets and deficits” is also useful because the participants spoke of their Chinese-Canadian identity in terms of assets and deficits. More concretely, there were some participants who would say variations of this sentence: “I am Chinese-Canadian, because I can do this and I do this and I have done this”. When offering their
metacommentary about their experience, they (more often) spoke to their (ontological, political, personal) issues with the categories by criticizing the categories. They criticized the social realities that came about because of these categories, such as certain experiences that they had to endure as a result of categorization.

Other participants more often engaged in self-criticism. As indicated earlier, many participants felt deficient in relation to being able to properly be Chinese. Some felt more deficient than others, and those that felt more deficient than others spoke of their deficiency. Variations of the sentence “I’m Chinese-Canadian, but I’m bad at being Chinese-Canadian because I can’t . . .” were a constant refrain. The more incapable they felt, the more that they complained about themselves.

The key variable here, was education. When the participants spoke about the categories with sophisticated and specialized language, it was reflective of a particular education they had received. They were able to speak about these concepts as concepts. They were conversant in a certain type of “academese”. At the very least then, the capacity of these participants to speak a specific sort of academese was demonstrative that they had been intellectually trained in a particular way. Their ability to speak this particular sort of language affirmed a particular sort of identity. It marked them.

In speaking in this fashion they evidenced that they had engaged in a particular social field, which had constituted their social dispositions and perspectives, or their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). To borrow the words of Bakhtin, they ventriloquated a particular social community (1981). They made clear their social position as those that had been privileged enough to educated in a particular way, either in the academy or via engagement with particular activist-type crowds or text. After all, not everyone is able to
commandeer words like “essentialization” and “racialization” at will, or refer to the Opium War while articulating one’s sentiments about their ethnic identity.

So a particular type of education helps with one’s ambivalence, because one gains a particular type of language and analysis. This language and analysis allows one to frame one experience as “Chinese-Canadian” is a product of social processes and constraints. Because one is able to do this, one is less likely to engage in self-denigrating and self-deprecating behaviour. Reasonable questions to ask at this point would then be: What else helps? What other factors should we also consider? Who is poised to have more assets, than deficits? How do you gain these assets? Returning the language metaphor for a moment: Who is most comfortable to speak about being Chinese (Canadian)? Or: What helps you speak Chinese (Canadian)?

**Made in (Middle-Class, Chinese) Canada: On Generation and Class**

Generation should be considered. This is to say more precisely that, the likelihood of being someone who is putatively Chinese-Canadian and comfortable is increased depending on how long they have been situated in Canada. It is true that much of the ambivalence that was expressed by the participants stemmed from the Chinese part of their compound identity. As evidenced earlier, for example, many participants felt inadequate about their Chineseness because they could not “properly” practice particular and customs and traditions. However, it should be remembered that their compound is a compound identity because there was an attending “Canadian” component. And while most participants always felt adequately and comfortably Canadian, there were participants who did not share these sentiments. Hoa and Xiaomei spoke to feelings of inadequacy and discomfort in relation to their Canadianess. Both were immigrants, and
both spoke to feeling as if they were unable to participate in certain conversations because they either lacked the cultural references, or linguistic capacity to do so. Hoa talked about how, even after almost twenty years in Canada, she still felt as if she at times an impostor, as if she had to make a conscious effort to fit in. (She had spent most of her early childhood in Hong Kong.) Xiaomei spoke about how, when she first came to Canada, she wished her English was “better”, and how she found it difficult to simply live her day-to-day life because it she couldn’t communicate with and understand others as well as she would have liked.

It would seem then that having undergone a particularly Canadian experience is important for those that would embody the category Chinese-Canadian. (Not as a measure of how Canadian one is, but rather as a factor that increases how comfortable one is with being identified as such.) Being longer situated in the Canadian context increases the likelihood one is able to speak languages of Canada, whether in the literal or cultural sense of the term. As a result, because one is more capable of engaging with the broader society with which one lives, he or she is more comfortable being labeled as a Chinese-Canadian.

Class position also plays a role in determining how comfortable one is as a Chinese-Canadian. Those of more privileged socioeconomic class are more likely to have engaged in the consumption habits necessary which contribute to one’s comfort with the label Chinese-Canadian.

Of course, certain consumption habits are more easily engaged in than others. Chinese food, and Chinese restaurants (which, as evidenced earlier had a substantial amount of importance) are examples. That being said, while everyone can eat (at least to
an extent), not everyone is able to do everything else. Certain consumption habits, and conversely certain skill sets that came about as a result of certain consumption habits, were more often found among individuals that were more affluent. Simply put: It takes both money and time to engage in certain consumption habits which are afforded symbolic importance by some within in the community. Participants from familial backgrounds that had both were more likely to engage in such habits.

“Math help school” or “piano lessons” are the experiences of a particular class group within an ethnic group, that consequently both reflect particular class interests and capabilities. These “Chinese” experiences were the experiences of those who could afford them. It would seem then that being “properly” Chinese-Canadian for these Chinese-Canadians was very much tied into notions of middle class propriety, though none of the participants that spoke of enduring these “typical” Chinese experiences recognized this connection.

Those from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds were also more likely to be able to speak English and Chinese. Their privilege enabled them to frequent spaces where the languages were in use. Aside from having the capital to participate in Chinese-particular ethnic spaces and engage in Chinese-particular activities, their positioning allowed them to go to spaces where which they had either been trained or would have to speak Chinese.

More explicitly, this means to say that some participants from backgrounds with more money who were able to speak both Chinese and English, were more comfortable with the label “Chinese-Canadian”. They were able to speak both Chinese and English, because their affluence had allowed them to spend substantial portions of their lives both
in Canada, and in regions where Chinese was the dominant language. They had lived their lives in this manner because they came from backgrounds where it was possible to have a home both in North America and in Asia. Being a particular type of transnational was thus conducive to being more comfortable as a particular type of national, as it more likely afforded one the capital needed to be engage with their respective communities.

Jane, Betty, Kate and Laurie were transnationals of this sort, as was Lianne, to an extent. The five came from socioeconomically privileged families. All five, while having spent the majority of their lives in Canada, had spent also spent a substantial amount of time in Chinese-speaking regions of the world. Jane’s family was in China, the respective families that Betty, Kate and Laurie belonged to were in Hong Kong, and Lianne’s family was in Macau. All related that they spoke Chinese in their homes, both in Canada and Asia. Of the five, Jane and Betty were particularly advantaged. Jane and Betty had both been schooled in institutions where Chinese and English were the teaching languages, and were Chinese(s) where taught. As a result, Jane and Betty were able to speak English, Cantonese and Mandarin fluently. For them, engaging in English-speaking and Chinese-speaking communities was effortless. Of the participants, they were the linguistic elites.

**Who’s Playing to the Crowd? Women and Men**

Gender, or how Chinese-Canadians in particular have been gendered, should also be taken into account when considering who is likely to be most comfortable as a Chinese-Canadian.

Depending on the participants’ respective gender locations, they were uncomfortable for different reasons. The participants who spoke to having issues with particular characteristics of Chinese familial culture were largely all female and women.
It was women participants who related stories about, and spoke how they had issue with having to be deferent and quiet. It was largely women participants who recognized that their lives at home had been marked by a type of patriarchal hierarchy that privileged men. Indeed, while most the women participants spoke about patriarchy on some level, virtually none of the male participants spoke to it – presumably because they did not have to. Because they were in a position of privilege in this respect, it is likely that disadvantage was something that they either did not recognize or feel that they had to voice.

In a similar vein, there were virtually no male participants who spoke to feeling appreciative, or feeling as if they had benefited from Canada’s political structures or aspects of its social culture. In this particular instance, it was again those who were in a subordinate position – those that would be expected to be feminine in particular ways, a number of women and a gay man – who were cognizant of how the existence of these structures had affected their lives. It would seem that the difference was that because they had to think about this, they had thought about this – and subsequently voiced their sentiments about the topics. Most of the male participants, however, again presumably because they were in a position of relative privilege, did not speak about these topics.

The key words here, however, are relative privilege. While the male participants were largely not cognizant of what the privileges that they had because of their sex, they were very cognizant of the disadvantages that they had as a result of how they had been gendered. While both men and women spoke about how gender and sexual stereotypes had affected their lives, it would seem that their respective set of stereotypes was more of
a concern for the men. They spoke more at length, and more in depth about how these stereotypes had affected their lives.

In addition, it was more often men that engaged in mockery while with others. The work of Miller (2000; 2000b), as expanded upon by Bressler (2006), provides an interesting frame for this situation. They argue that humour is valuable tool, particularly for men. Humour is a fitness indicator, because it is demonstrative of one’s intellect, it evidences one’s capacity to read and assess social dynamics and social situations. For men, humour is particularly valuable because to those that they would court, being funny serves to highlight their viability as potential partner.

I do not entirely agree with the premise put forth by these scholars. Humour is a valuable tool period, irrespective of gender. Men are not the only ones expected to be funny. And obviously, neither are only men funny. However, their analysis is useful in that it articulates humour as a particular social tool.

As I have highlighted in the previous chapters, those whose bodies signify “Chinese”, are racialized by particular discourses that frame them as socially awkward and inept. In other words, they are subject to social ideologies that framed them as lacking the capacity to use humour as a social tool. While Chinese people might be (too) hard-working and (too) intelligent, they are also not funny.

Moreover, while women are also funny, I would suggest that if masculinity is a context-specific socially informed performance (Butler, 1990; Kaufman 1987; 2007; Kimmel & Messner, 2007); and if actions demonstrative and constitutive of what it means to be masculine are assertive and declarative in general (Kaufman, 1987; 2007; Kimmel & Messner, 2007) – then it could be said that mockery asserts masculinity. And
for (at least) some of the Chinese men involved in this project, in being funny and vocal and dominating, they were performing masculinity. Because they were, in some sense of the word, socially located as women – the men more often acted like men. Mockery was a tool that they used to negotiate gendered racist discourses. In being funny, they set themselves apart from those that weren’t. Even if “those that weren’t”, were, in some sense, those like them.

I want to stress again, however, that this was more about social location than embodiment and sexuality. It was primarily straight men that engaged in mockery. But tellingly, the women placed in social situations where they would have act “masculine” spoke to behaving, and behaved in similar fashion. Women who had to function in spaces in which “masculine qualities” (spaces like law school, a professional kitchen, and a financial firm) such as fierceness and competitiveness were praised and lauded also more often engaged in mockery. Moreover, Calvin and Hoa, a self-identified gay man and bisexual woman, also engaged in mockery. This suggests that, at least for them, that ideologies of performance which can be interpreted as “masculine” behaviour, also had currency for them. They too, were compelled to act in a particular type of masculine way.

**Who are We Listening To? On Comfort and Discomfort, On Dismissal and Stories**

So who is poised to be most comfortable with the category Chinese-Canadian? If everyone is ambivalent, who is poised to be the least ambivalent? At the very least, who is positioned to feel as if they are most comfortable with the idea of being labeled as such? Who would person likely be?

This person would likely be a person who has spent a substantial portion of their lives in Canada. This was person either born in Canada, or likely spent their formative
years there. Because this person has spent time in and has gone to school in Canada, they can speak English at least, and possibly French. Because this person has grown up a bit in Canada, they have undergone any number of Canadian experiences, and so they can speak about them. They might find hockey boring, but they understand its significance to the Canadian national psyche.

This person probably comes from a comfortable family background. Because this person comes from a comfortable family background, because this person’s parents had the resources and wanted the best for them, they probably had after school tutoring sessions or attended piano lessons. Maybe this person even spends a significant amount in China or its surrounding environs, because they have family there. If this person has spent time in those parts of the world, they likely also went to school there. They were taught to speak and read Chinese at school. As a result, this person speaks Chinese, and is confident about their Chinese speaking-skills. This person speaks Chinese and English at home with their family, but mostly English in public with their friends. Sometimes, if a particular friend can speak Chinese, they speak English and Chinese together. Usually it is English peppered with Chinese words.

This person was probably raised in a city like Toronto, where they saw other Chinese people on a regular basis, and where they saw Chinese businesses and (especially) restaurants. As this person got older, because they grew up in Toronto, they saw more and more Chinese businesses and restaurants. When this person was younger, they probably went to Chinese restaurants pretty often with their family. As they got older, they probably hung out at bubble tea houses, maybe even in the city’s Chinese-specific mall(s). This isn’t to say that this person did not do the “normal” things that
every other Canadian did growing up, like go see movies and occasionally get drunk without their mothers knowing – but sometimes there they did things that were, as decided by them, decidedly more “Chinese”. Sometimes, doing decidedly more Chinese things meant simply talking about what it’s like to be Chinese, in a country where most people aren’t. And sometimes, it meant talking about what it’s like to be Chinese in a country where some people think there are too many of you.

Finally, this person is probably a woman. She’s probably a woman because, as a Chinese woman living in Canada, she understands that living in Canada has likely allowed her to express herself and live out her life in ways that she probably wouldn’t be able to if she wasn’t living here. While this doesn’t mean, however, she hasn’t had her share of issues with living in Canada – the fact that she’s gone out on more than a few dates with White guys who have thought of her like a fetish object one of them – she likes living here. She likes being Canadian, despite the fact that sometimes she’s been approached in pretty messed up ways. Besides, she probably has a brother or a friend or a boyfriend who is a lot more angry or the very least more frustrated by how people have perceived and treated him. And she’s probably pretty sick of him constantly making self-deprecating Chinese jokes – why does he always do that, anyway?

Put another way: Second generation Chinese-Canadian women, who can speak English and Chinese, and who are come from more affluent backgrounds are positioned to be most comfortable with being labeled Chinese-Canadian. Their social location has put them in a situation where they have the necessary assets to be both parts of the compound, as well most enjoy what being both parts of the compound allows. While their lives are likely affected by negative Chinese stereotypes, particularly those explicitly
focused on gender and sexuality, their male counterparts seem to have more issues with them. To return again to Joanne’s words for minute, albeit in a modified fashion – these particular Chinese-Canadians are most likely to be most comfortable with being both.

By women being more comfortable than men, I mean to say this: All things being equal (education, generation and class location) a putative Chinese-Canadian woman is less likely to manifest discomfort with the category by engaging in humour driven by anti-Chinese racism and stereotypes.

More elaborately, I mean to say that, if this study is any indication, Chinese-Canadian women are more likely to seek out and acquire the aforementioned language necessary to constructively articulate and deal with their feelings of ambivalence. The women involved in this project were more capable of offering more sophisticated and critical metacommentary about their lives in relation to processes of categorization. The women most capable of offering this sort of metacommentary were those who had received a particular type of education and were situated in a particular generation and class situation. Because they were cognizant of their multiple sources of discomfort, and had the luxury of dealing with their feelings of discomfort, they sought out comfort. And consequently, they were more capable of locating and articulating their sources of ambivalence. They could speak to racism, stereotypes and patriarchy.

I want to stress however, that this is not to say that women will always be more comfortable than men. Nor is this to say that men are incapable of articulating and dealing with their ambivalence in ways that do not involve perhaps problematic humour. They can – the fact that a number of men in this study were capable of offering metacommentary on par with that offered by some women in this study attests to this.
What I am suggesting, however, is that those expected to be Chinese-Canadian “men” are subject to particular social ideologies that compel them – irrespective of their capacity to engage in critique – to articulate and (literally) perform their critique and discomfort in a particular way. Because Chinese is a feminized category, and being Chinese means being “feminine”, those who could be Chinese men negotiate this by acting in a performatively “masculine” way. In being funny and loud, they are being (literally) declaratively men. To paraphrase Derrick, if it can be said that some Chinese men have a Napoleon complex, and this complex is in part because they are expected, in some sense, to be women – one way in which they counter this is being comedic. The compulsion to perform masculinity counters and informs their criticism, so their criticism – even if well-intended – sometimes comes out in the form perhaps problematic “Chinese” jokes.

This is ironic in way, even – because I suspect that these types of overtly-masculine performances are also in part the result of (and will also continue because of) the particular burden of masculine silence. (It is fitting I think to point out here that it was initially much easier for me to find participants who were women.) Certainly, the currency of the ideology that posits men as quiet and unemotional is less powerful than it was in the past. I would argue, however, there is still a particular code of silence men are subject to.

What I am suggesting here is that, for most men, self-introspection and critique are not as easily acceptable endeavours as they are for women (at least at present). Virginia Woolf (2008) once famously argued that a woman must have money and a room of one’s own, in order to write fiction. Women, in Woolf’s time, were socially positioned in such a way which dissuaded them from writing. They lacked the necessary rooms of
their own, or social space, in order to write. It would seem that today, some men lack the social space necessary in order to think about who they are and what they would say – and even if they can do that, they are obligated to say what they would in particular ways. Despite of the fact that men might have the capacity to access sites and materials that would better inform their critique, commentary and practice, they will less often do so than women. Rather than think and talk in a certain way, masculinity (of a particular sort) is predicated on action. And as a result, those who are framed as feminine and would be masculine compulsively act, even if they might know better.

The reality of the situation was, however, that even those who were poised to the most comfortable were not comfortable. Even if they had the necessary assets, the necessary languages and the necessary scripts to call themselves Chinese-Canadian, they were not entirely comfortable with how they were categorized.

It could be argued that we could be dismissive of their feelings of ambivalence. After all, because those in this particular sample were privileged in relation to their respective communities, it could be argued that they set up some of their own terms of ambivalence. Their privilege allows self-reflection, as well as intellectual dissection. Moreover, as individuals who actively engage and interact with the various discourses that constitute “Chinese-Canadian” identity, they serve to perpetuate these discourses – arguably more so than those of a less privileged socioeconomic class. The reality of the situation was that those who were less privileged spoke to having a different set of concerns other than defining themselves. Derrick for example, found it hilarious why anyone would want to know how Chinese-Canadians define themselves, and act in certain ways according to these definitions. His concerns were more immediate – at the
time of his first interview, having just lost his job, he was more concerned with finding a new one. After the premise of this study had been explained to him, he responded as if it was the most incredulous premise ever, laughing and saying: “Who cares?”

The reality was, however, Derrick was the one who cared. Derrick – along with his counterparts who could be called Chinese-Canadian – cared a lot. While initially hesitant to speak about himself, Derrick’s initial interview eventually went on for hours. He spoke at length about how at times he felt uncomfortable in relation to people who he felt were “more” Chinese than he was, because they could speak Chinese better than he could. He spoke at length about how he had lived in relation to racism and stereotypes his entire life, and how they had affected his choices, some of which he deeply regretted. He spoke about his family, his friends, his aspirations.

So did everyone else. Certainly, their experiences were different from Derrick’s experiences. And they did not all talk about the same things. But that would perhaps be the point. They shared their respective stories. All of them, even if they were initially hesitant, eventually seemed eager to share their stories. To be dismissive of their feelings, we would have to dismiss their stories.

And that would mean for example, that we would dismiss much of what Jane talked about, because for all intents and purposes, she was the epitome of a comfortable Chinese-Canadian. (To state once more – she spoke the languages fluently, she was born in Canada, is from to a well-to-do family and interacts in both communities without any trouble.) We would dismiss how her story was very much tied into the story of her Grandfather, and how he managed to escape wartime China, which (much) later eventually resulted in Jane being born in Canada. We would dismiss how Jane spoke
about her Grandfather for a full forty minutes, before answering any concrete questions about what being Chinese-Canadian meant to her. (Or at least so she thought.) We would dismiss how Hoa said she once thought of being Chinese as some “sort of curse”, but now thought of it “as a sort of treasure”.

It doesn’t seem fair to dismiss these things.
H: It’s different in different situations. Like when I have to speak Chinese with people I don’t know in Chinese, like I feel like, it’s always a test when I have to go to restaurants without my parents? To be able like, either order food, or just be able to act Chinese enough so they won’t be able to take advantage of this person who can’t order food or whatever. Blah blah blah. Um, yeah. Do you ever feel that?

K: Oh my God, are you kidding? Of course. (Laughs)

H: (Laughs) Yeah, that’s how it feels.

Hoa and me, speaking about what its like to sometimes speak Chinese.

M: I try.

My five year old cousin Marcus, in response to the question “Are you Chinese?”

Chapter Five: New Take, Old Talk (No Illusions of Grandeur) – This Study and “On Not Speaking Chinese”

This chapter presents some last thoughts about this study, and how we should deal with fuzzy categories.

I should say first that isn’t a new conversation. At its core, this text is driven by very old conversations and very old questions. This text is a new take on old questions like: Who am I? How do I see myself in this world? How do I make sense of this world, for me?

People have long before, and people will long afterward offer their respective takes on these old questions, offer their own conversations and their own opinions. Particularly for the latter questions, the case could be made that every text that has been committed to paper is, in some way, a reflection and exposition about these inquiries.

One of the key points that this text has attempted to illustrate isn’t a new one, either. That being: Categories and group identities, in the ways that they offer us to speak about ourselves, present a particular type of limited opportunity. We can partially define
who we are, according to the discursive terrain that has been created to sustain the idea of particular groups. At the same time, however, this terrain confines our articulation and our negotiations of who we are. To return to Barth (1969) again, we work within and to create certain boundaries. And a la Foucault (1982), our resistance is determined by that which we are resisting against.

“Can”, is the operative word here, however. “Where”, is also important. What this text has attempted to do is show in detail how some young adults who could be called “Chinese-Canadian” in the city of Toronto can act in a particular locale, with certain conversations as a backdrop and via particular frames of analysis. It has shown how a particular group of people who could be labeled in a particular way work with their labels. To return to the very beginning, it has shown how they dealt with being “Chinese”, and how their issue was more with “being” Chinese than “being” Canadian. Through an overview of what and how they spoke, it has shown that this results in particular sentiments and statements, as well as particular negotiations that varying according to how they are socially located.

What we spoke about more accurately describes what happened. Access to particular conversations was made easier by the fact that many of the participants spoke to how I was “one of them”. I am a young adult. I, too, could be labeled “Chinese-Canadian” – so I was a native ethnographer of a sort. Some participants told me that they felt at ease around me, because they felt that I would both understand some of the things that they were talking about, presumably because I had undergone similar experiences. Other participants told me that they felt more comfortable inviting me into their homes, because I knew how to act around their parents. One participant in particular said that she
wanted to be involved with this project both to support the research, and because she felt that I would “understand and interpret the data” in a respectful manner. She presumed that being Chinese would help me write about what it’s like to be Chinese.

To return to a previous theme, however, I am certainly not the first Chinese person to discuss the questions addressed in this project. At the risk of being redundant – Who am I, and how do I make sense of the world? – are questions that have already been discussed. The specific variant addressed in this text – “How are you Chinese, here?” – has also already been discussed. The Chinese diaspora has produced a number of “native” academics who continue to ask and sort out the implications of this question. These are a people who are both seeking out and creating a literature.

One exemplary text from this literature is Ien Ang’s (2001) On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West. Ang’s work offers a multifaceted and dense conversation about the diversity of the Chinese diaspora.

Something similar about Ang’s work and this work is that both texts deal with ambivalence in relation to being Chinese. Our departure points are different, however. This text sought an answer to the question “How are you Chinese, here?” and found that the respondents had ambivalent feelings, and offered responses/affects that attested to this fact. As Ang herself puts it, her text is a response to a particular existential plight that she has had to negotiate throughout her life, and her own feelings of ambivalence that have resulted from it. Ang is someone who is ethnically Chinese, but doesn’t speak Chinese. The project that she presents with “On Not Speaking Chinese” is driven largely by two questions that she has confronted, and her own feelings of inadequacy and ambivalence
in relation to her Chineseness, that result from it. Those two questions being: One – where are you from? And two – Why don’t you speak Chinese?

Her text is then is an exposition on one of the central dilemmas that many of these particular participants have to deal with – what happens when you look Chinese, but don’t speak the language(s) people presume you’re able to speak? In dealing with this question, she provides an account of the particular conditions that enable these questions to be asked – among them, the aforementioned trope of the Perpetual Foreigner and other racist discourses. She also offers insight about how some ethnic Chinese mobilize according to their ethnic interests in some contexts, as well as how some non-Chinese scrutinize the ethnic Chinese in other contexts. One particular topic that is recurrent through the book is the Australian politician Pauline Hanson, and how her xenophobic, anti-Asian political campaigns in the 1990s managed to gain currency in Australian discourse.

To deal with her ambivalence, Ang wrote about being Chinese. These particular Chinese people that I spoke to, they spoke about being Chinese. A few spoke about their ambivalence in relation to the category, because they found the category too limiting. They all could speak, at length, about their feelings of inadequacy in relation to category, as brought upon by their inability to speak a language. Some talked about how they didn’t like how being part of the category meant that it brought upon certain associations, with certain characteristics, behaviours and people. Others talked about how being members of the group meant adhering to certain social stipulations that they didn’t necessarily agree with. A number of them spoke about how the context that they lived in contributed to their mixed feelings. To deal with all this, some constructed, sought and took refuge in
particular communities. All of them complained and laughed about it, though in different ways, according to who they were.

**Criticism of Exogenous and Endogenous Factors: They Don’t Know How to Speak Chinese (Canadian), and Neither Do We**

“Why are there recurrent conversations between the two texts?” – would be a reasonable question to address at this point. Certainly, some of this can be chalked up to the fact that Ang’s work and this work are thematically similar. Despite their differences, but both texts deal with race, language and ethnicity. Still, Australia isn’t Canada. Ang’s book was also published almost ten years ago.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that similar conditions persist. Returning to Barth (1969) – if contextual conditions prompt certain performances, then certain conditions prompt certain performances as well. Earlier in the text, for example, I highlighted how some writers have articulated ambivalence as something symptomatic of humanity in modernity. Ideological anchors that root us into certain roles in groups are less reliable. Modernity, and all of its sociological and technological effects, still assails us. We live in an era when many people are bound to have their respective subjectivities contested by a staggering array of multiple social forces and (dis)locations. Few people, I think, would be willing to (or can) define themselves as principally one thing – as a number of participants in this particular study explicitly attested to.

Beyond this existential inevitability, however, there is still much to be ambivalent about. A huge part of why these conversations are recurrent and persist is because, to be frank – some people still don’t know how quite to speak about the Chinese (at least in a good way). Canada isn’t Australia, to be sure – but as this text made clear earlier,
Canada has its own issues to work out. The same discourses that Ang mentions in her text, the ones that cast ethnic Chinese as Perpetual Foreigners and other unflattering roles, are still in circulation. More contemporary examples of how these discourses work to the detriment of the Chinese in Canada are too easily found.

For example, since 2007 the Ontario government has been working in concert with various human rights agencies to address what has been dubbed the “Asian Anglers” situation. Various fisherman of Chinese and East Asian descent have in recent years begun to complain to the authorities about being mistreated and abused by those who live in the predominantly White, small rural towns in which they fish. Evidently, a practice popular among some locals in rural towns across Ontario has come to be known as “Nipper Dipping”. In this practice, fisherman of East Asian descent are attacked in their boats by those who reside in the towns – according to one local, spurred by the sentiment that “there are some people around these parts that don’t like foreigners very much”. These attacks are unprovoked. On several occasions, the fishermen have ended up in the water, losing their valuables and their equipment. On one particular occasion, a 73 year old man was beaten unconscious and his son in-law was thrown off a three-metre high bridge (Anulakh, 2008; CTV.ca, 2007).

Canada’s metropolises shouldn’t be that quick to pat themselves on the back either. While Canada doesn’t have its version of Pauline Hanson, it does have its share of politicians who have committed racist gaffes. Former leader of the Parti Quebecois and Montreal resident Andre Boisclair, evoking conversations about the Perpetual Foreigner and Yellow Peril, commented in a 2007 speech that “about one-third of the students” at Harvard University had slanted eyes, and were “not just sweatshop workers”, but were
globally competitive and highly educated (CBC.ca, 2007). Of course, Toronto responded in kind. In 2008, city councilor Rob Ford drew criticism for comments in which he said “Oriental people work like dogs” and “I’m telling you, Oriental people, they’re slowing taking over, because there’s no excuses for them. They’re hard, hard workers” (CBC.ca, 2008).

So some non-Chinese don’t know how to talk about the Chinese. But as this text has shown, the case could be made that some of the Chinese involved in this project didn’t know how to talk about the Chinese either. Though they knew of problematic conversations about the Chinese, some participants were quick to utilize those same conversations for their personal betterment – a la “I’m one of the more outgoing Asians that you’ll meet”. They used and affirmed particular social ideologies to distinguish themselves from other speakers of Chinese – “Mandarin from the mainland sounds crass”; “I’m embarrassed by them”. They also used and affirmed particular language ideologies to distinguish themselves – “It’s kind of true (that the Asian girls at work don’t know how to think for themselves)”.

This is not say, however, that some of those that could potentially represent them are faring much better. To return to an earlier point, these are a people seeking out and creating a literature. Not every book can be On Not Speaking Chinese. Some texts have caused unintended chagrin. An example of this is The York Region Chinese Cultural Guide for Employers (York, 2008), with a number of Chinese authors among those who were responsible for its publication. The text means to encourage the region’s employers to hire the area’s large immigrant Chinese population. It is also a text full of familiar
Chinese stereotypes, which has caused the ire of the Greater Toronto Area’s Chinese activist community (CBC, 2008b). On Page 9:

Once given a work assignment, most Chinese employees feel a strong sense of responsibility towards completing the work assigned. Coming from a collectivist culture, they are more likely (compared to North American individualistic culture) to forgo their personal interests for the sake of completing assignments delegated for them. Completing tasks at work can take precedence over their personal interests.

To the authors’ credit, however, they do publish a small disclaimer at the onset of the Guide, telling would-be readers that they should treat each individual situation as such, and use their own judgment and discretion accordingly. Better known is Terry Woo’s (2005) aforementioned Banana Boys, a fictional account of five Chinese-Canadian men, all in their mid-twenties. The book explores how one group of Chinese-Canadians negotiate the label of Chinese-Canadian, how being labeled a Banana Boy – Yellow on the outside, White on the Inside – affects their lives. It has been lauded and praised in some circles; a play was adapted from the novel, and has enjoyed some success, attracting mainstream media attention. At one point, there was also talk of a movie adaptation.

The five characters’ interconnecting stories provide an account of how Chinese-Canadian men negotiate particular social conversations and expectations, and how their choices and directions are affected by the former. Central to the story is how the men make sense of the search for love with the opposite sex, and being Chinese-Canadian men affects this search. Woo provides an account the particular challenges that Chinese-Canadian men face in interpersonal relationships because of racist gendered discourses.

Woo himself has stated that he intended the text’s five main characters to serve as exaggerated composite characters, drawn from different sets people who he has met.
throughout his life. These five characters all have different approaches to deal with how Asian men are framed in particular race and gender conversations. According to Woo – Dave, the group’s resident “I see Racism Everywhere” type and misogynist, ultimately serves to show how one with said attitudes makes detrimental and self-destructive choices. (For example, Dave goes off on tangential rants about how Asian women are uninterested in dating Asian men, as they are primarily attracted to White men.) While his text explores these attitudes, he intended his book to be a criticism of them. Canadian academic Gordon Pon praised Banana Boys as being one of the most sophisticated analyses of gender and race he had ever read (Pon & Woo).

Not everyone, however, sees it that way. Several participants in this particular project had read Banana Boys. Each participant had their reservations and criticisms about the text. Despite the fact that the book has done well, and that a recent showing of a play adapted from Woo’s novel played to packed houses, these particular participants didn’t really like it.

The participants who had read Banana Boys felt that the book had some critical shortcomings. Though it was Woo’s intent to criticize misogyny, each participant spoke about how they felt the tone of the book very misogynistic, bitter and pessimistic. One (female) participant felt as if the female characters in the book were portrayed as passive dupes. She felt that while the male characters in the book negotiated racist gendered discourses, the women were passive victims of discourse and ideology. The book was “bitter, angry and sexist”.
Last Words: On this Text and The Politics of Fuzzy Identities

My reason for thus far discussing Banana Boys is because of the larger questions it brings up. No single work about a group, Chinese-Canadian or otherwise, can be representative of all the opinions or interests about a group. The previous section made that clear. I think, however, the larger issue of representation is one that needs to be discussed – particularly for those who can be labeled with fuzzy categories. Those who are less easily defined have historically been prone to more scrutiny than those who are easily defined. How they are represented are important issues, and if the data presented in this text is indicative of anything, are issues which are important to them.

Banana Boys is similar to this text in the sense that it is also an attempt to speak about how a people who can be labeled a particular fuzzy category – the same category – negotiate their particular label. As evidenced by the previous section, not everyone agreed with how living with the category was presented. What then, do we do with this situation? More precisely and more broadly speaking: How do we address the politics of speaking about fuzzy categories, negotiating fuzzy categories and presenting ourselves in all of our fuzziness? Bearing in mind that, not everyone is necessarily going to agree with how we speak, negotiate and generally deal with our fuzziness?

I have the luxury of addressing potential criticisms before they are leveled at me here. To close my analysis, I would like to do that here, while at the same offering an opinion on the politics of being, and living a fuzzy category. Put another way: These are my opinions about how I have spoken, and we should speak Chinese (Canadian).

There are two immediate issues that I would like to address. Firstly, I have to offer a discussion on the validity of the data and the analysis that has been presented here.
Secondly, I would like to offer a discussion on a central argument of this text. Briefly, that argument is again: Second generation ethnic Chinese women who have lived in Canada for substantial periods of time are likely most comfortable with the label “Chinese-Canadian”, because they have the capacity to speak particular languages, which allow them to mitigate feelings of ambivalence.

On the topic of the first issue: It would be more accurate to state that this is reiteration of statements that I have previously made. This is, to say again, that isn’t meant to be a definitive text. This study isn’t meant to be representative of how all those who could be labeled Chinese-Canadian affectively react to and negotiate their labels. It has attempted to provide a particular conversation about how a specific group of people who could be labeled as such do so.

In addition to being environment-specific, this data collected from this study has also been context-specific. More specifically, the data and analysis presented here (if accepted) must be remembered as the product of particular types of encounters between me and the participants. Being a “native” ethnographer, as I evidenced earlier, made it easier for me to broach, and engage in certain conversations. That being said, I was always the Researcher, and they were Participants. There was always that underlying dynamic present, and that no doubt affected their choices, their statements and their performances. Their statements and affects that indicated ambivalence, for example, should still be thought of as, as Boler (1999) reminds us – responses reflective and demonstrative of multiple power-laden spaces which they had to negotiate. This was, after all, a research study and they knew they were going to be subject to critique.
All that being said about specificity and context, I wouldn’t be surprised if a larger study focusing on young adults who could be called Chinese-Canadian would yield similar results, both in Toronto and in other contexts, as least to an extent. The discourses discussed here have fairly wide circulation, and as demonstrated in this chapter’s preceding section, other people have negotiated similar issues.

On the topic of the second issue: I want to clarify that, while it is this study’s finding that second generation Chinese-Canadian women are comfortable with the label “Chinese-Canadian”, this isn’t to say that they are always more comfortable than their male counterparts. The experiences that they have to endure as a result of their particular social locations are not being discounted here. Women face particular difficulties not faced by men. Patriarchy still advantages men over women. For example, the vast majority of representative authority figures are men. And women are still poised to often garner less respect in the workplace, and make less than men.

This is not to say that the issues articulated by the men in this project are ones that don’t warrant further examination. These issues do exist, and do need to be addressed. That being said, however, in articulating these issues, and in saying that Chinese-Canadian women are likely to be more comfortable to be called as such – we still have to admit that many men enjoy certain tangible and material advantages over women. However, we must also admit the axiom of “A Man is always advantaged over a woman” is simplistic. As this study has shown in the case of particular Chinese-Canadian men and Chinese-Canadian women, conversations based on particular patriarchal gender norms about what is “masculine” and what is “feminine” have been detrimental to both men and women. Everyone was affected by these conversations, albeit in different ways.
Ultimately, belonging in some types of groups are easier than others. Making yourself connected to people you don’t even know requires a very particular type of discursive exercise, fuzzy category or otherwise. (Which is something this text has tried to make evident.) Regardless of this, I think it is of paramount importance to remember a variant of the earlier statement. In doing so, we can do our part in addressing the multiple ways we make sense, and ultimately live out fuzzy categories, which have been socially framed, and consequently frame us in a particular ways.

More precisely: While articulating and negotiating what being part of a fuzzy category means for them, one should remember that are other people involved. And remembering that there are other people involved, irrespective of whether or not one can label them “Chinese-Canadian”, should inform their practice. This isn’t to say that speaking about and negotiating one’s relationship to a category should always be a moral enterprise, where one bears in mind and is responsible for the interest of others. (As the study has shown, acting in one’s own self-interest is inevitable.) That being said, we should remember that those that we would speak about in relation to ourselves, those that we would speak about in order to speak about ourselves, are people as well. And they are affected by these conversations, even by just serving as foil(s).

And while how they think, speak and act might not be representative of how we would do the same things – the likelihood is, neither our own actions for them. Put more simply: Maybe we should be more careful in saying things like “I’m one of the more outgoing Chinese people that you’ll meet”. These are the types of statement one needs to qualify, sometimes at the detriment of others. We do not need to contribute to anyone’s detriment, regardless of the particular labels, potential or chosen.
Epilogue: Navigating Their Cities

Argentinean writer Alberto Manguel delivered a Massey Lecture in 2007 entitled “The City of Words”. His lecture was in response to ethnic intolerance across the world: the backdrop of France’s then-recent race riots, among other incidents, informed his work. Through an examination of various literary and artistic works, ranging from The Epic of Gilgamesh (George, 2003) to 2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick, 1968), Manguel attempted to illustrate how humanity’s works of fiction provide ample ethical guidelines for dealing with one another. The keys to fair behavior and averting conflict, Manguel argues, can be found in some of the stories we have made up to tell one another.

It is fitting, I think, that Manguel both delivered his lecture, and had previously spent a substantial portion of his life, in Toronto. (He now lives in France, having moved there after twenty years in Ontario’s capital.) Toronto, with its varied ethnic population, is itself a City of Words.

City of Indecipherable Words would be a more apt description – at least for some parts of it. It is impossible to be able to read everything in Toronto (let alone, understand what everyone is saying). Because Toronto is so ethnically diverse, there are parts of the city where it seems that script in English is an afterthought. Signage appears in cascades of different languages, different colours, signifying specific havens for recently arrived immigrants. English is there, certainly – while French is noticeably absent – but always alongside a more prominent, other language. Walking along one street alone sees signs in English turn into signs in Korean/English, and then Ge’ez/English. A substantial part of Spadina, one of the city’s main north/south throughfares, has the majority of its signage in Chinese/English. Koreatown, Little Ethiopia, Chinatown – the names for these
neighbourhoods sound like parts of a welcoming amusement park. See the World in one city.

It’s easy to forget, but Toronto didn’t always used to be this way. English used to be much more dominant – and much more hostile to non-English. On the western most edge of Koreatown, a small plaque commemorates the Christie Pits’ Riots. Christie Pits is a park in middle of the city. During the 1930s, violence broke out between the city’s dominant Anglo-Saxon population, and city’s population of Jews and Italians, which lasted for six hours. And you probably wouldn’t suspect it, give the size and vibrancy of Spadina’s Chinatown today – but Spadina’s Chinatown was initially a makeshift solution. Much of Toronto’s then Chinese community migrated there because most of the city’s first Chinatown was destroyed in 1960s, despite the Chinese community’s protests, to make way for City Hall. In some sense, I suppose writing this thesis has served as a way to preserve the memory of that city, the Toronto that wasn’t that diverse. And also, to examine how some people in today’s Toronto are affected by conversations that are as old, if not older than the Toronto of the past.

I’ve begun to think of Toronto’s present ethnic neighbourhoods as comforting in a way – sometimes, there is no greater luxury than the inability to speak or understand. And Toronto is great for that. Certainly, Toronto is built for that. If you really wanted to, you could probably spend an entire day in Toronto and not hear English. You literally don’t have access to the script. But you could still be comfortable, even though you might not necessarily understand everything that is going on. Sometimes, to understand what is going on, you might have to make a bit of an effort (and sometimes, a lot of an effort). And sometimes, you simply just can’t understand.
It occurred to me that, for some young adults who could be called “Chinese-Canadian”, you could probably describe part of their experiences in a similar fashion. (You could describe their experiences in relation to the label and being Chinese-Canadian in a similar fashion, at least.) These are people without access to a particular type of script. If language is the means by which we get to know ourselves, then these are a group of people who don’t necessarily have access to one of “their” languages. They don’t necessarily understand or speak what people expect them to. Nor do they necessarily know about part of “their” history, or the significance of certain acts. They might not know ancient Chinese history, or Canadian pop culture references. Either way, lacking a working knowledge of both makes them uncomfortable. And because they can’t understand the symbolism behind certain words or acts, they imbue other mundane acts with symbolism. (Everyone might not be able to speak [about themselves or at all], but almost everyone can eat.)

And you’re comfortable certainly, but you don’t necessarily understand what is going on, at least all of the time. You’re comfortable, but you have to make an effort to figure out what is going on, or to fit in. Things are familiar to you, but there are varying degrees of detective work happening, in making sense of everything. Sometimes you have listen to for a word, watch for a gesture and have to think for a while before going on. You listen and observe, until you can or until you have to fashion something on your own, with which you can act. And sometimes, even though you know about certain conversations, you’re not entirely sure how you should participate in certain conversations. Sometimes, there isn’t a clear way to do so. And so you find comfort in specific others, laugh and complain to get through it all.
Hyphenated identities are predicated on the notion that a person’s ancestors came from place other than the place you are at present. The origins of your family are from one place, and you’re from another place. You’re not the migrant, someone else was. Implicit in the idea of being a non-migrant is that you’re supposed to be settled. Things are supposed to be easier.

Most of the Chinese-Canadians involved in this project were the children of people born somewhere else. Their parents were immigrants or refugees, and they were born here. Those who weren’t the children of immigrants were often immigrants themselves. Reflecting the statistics which show that most of Canada’s ethnic Chinese population is foreign born, only one participant had family that had lived in Canada for more than one generation.

This is likely why language figured so prominently on the minds of those that participated in this study. Because most of the participants came from households that had been in Canada for one or two generations, their homes were ones in which they were accustomed to speaking and listening to two (or more) languages. Moreover, because most of them spoke to how they didn’t speak particular languages with fluency, their homes were where they learned that sometimes it is difficult to be understood. Where they learned that sometimes, you literally don’t have the words to convey what you’re thinking, or what you’re feeling.

A lot of people have trouble talking to their parents, about certain topics. That being said, based on the preceding discussion – I think it would be fair to say that the extent to which some people have trouble “talking to their parents” can vary considerably. A number of participants explicitly spoke to how they thought their
relationships with certain members of their family were lacking, because of their inability to fully communicate. This wasn’t about hitting to close to home. This was about home.

In the final analysis, language is ultimately about and is one of our most basic means of communication. And because of this – irrespective that people who look a certain way have been talked about and are more expected to be able speak a certain way, and irrespective that certain people are more able and more likely to speak in other ways – everyone is trying to communicate. And if some people learn very quickly, very acutely and very early on in their lives that it can be difficult to communicate – we should expect language to figure prominently on their minds. How it could it be otherwise?

It did, because they were the children of immigrants. One of the challenges confronted by immigrants the world over is the reality that they must re-constitute their reality. At the very least, the fact that they moved means that they have to undergo a period of adjustment. They have to learn how their adopted society works, get used to its conventions and idiosyncrasies, its tenor and its tempo. Sometimes, they have to learn how to speak a new language. It isn’t easy, to be people who want to, or have to move. And who sometimes have to learn to speak in whole new ways.

This study has specifically been about how people who are labeled and self-label as Chinese-Canadian speak about and work with the label. This has been their very particular story. At the same time, however, sans the group and context-specific details – this could have been the story of many different people. This has been a story about what happens when some people move, after the fact.

Much of this study has illustrated how the children of some immigrants and refugees adjust to the adopted societies of their parents. While their respective challenges
are certainly not those that were confronted by their parents, it has shown that they do confront their own. Things are easier, to be sure – but they are not easy. They too, have to constitute their respective realities, get used to particular conventions and idiosyncrasies, and in some non-traditional but very real ways – also learn how to speak. They have to learn how to speak in a way specific to themselves, much like but also very unlike their parents. Navigate and build their own cities of words, to make sense of themselves and for others. People who can, and who cannot be labeled Chinese-Canadian have all long before, and will long after have to do that. And so this story will be repeated, in some form or the other. Even though I haven’t seen David since, I’m guessing we probably have more in common now than we did then.
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Consent Process Appendixes:

Principal Participants

I, the undersigned, agree to participate a study examining the idea of Chinese-Canadian identity among Chinese-Canadian youth, and how people's understanding of these ideas affect their lives and how these ideas translate into social practice. I understand that this study is principally interested in examining whether or not there are collective ideas of authentic Chinese-Canadian identity, where these ideas come from in society, whether or not anti-Chinese racism influences these ideas, and whether or not the use of either English or Chinese is important in maintaining a distinctive Chinese-Canadian identity.

I understand that my participation in this study will be used for the purpose of serving as data for the M.A. Thesis project of Kenneth Huynh, a Graduate Student in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and the Principal Researcher in this study.

I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and am able at anytime to withdraw from this project, if I so desire. I also understand that if I choose to withdraw from this project, I am able to request that any information that I have disclosed to the Researcher will not be used for his thesis research, and/or destroyed.

I understand that by agreeing to participate in this project, between September 2008 to December 2008: I will be interviewed a total of two times, writing a response about what it means to be Chinese-Canadian, participating in a focus group with other Chinese-Canadians, and be accompanied for a total of 20 hours by said Principal Researcher over 4 days (or 5 hours over 4 separate days). I understand that all aforementioned events will be recorded by the Researcher with a digital recorder, and later transcribed by said Researcher. I also understand that said Researcher will take notes during all of our interactions.

I understand that in the interests of maintaining my anonymity, the only individuals that will be able to access the data acquired from my participation in the study will be the Researcher and his Faculty Supervisor, Professor Monica Heller, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies/Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto and the Second Reader of his thesis project, Professor Rinaldo Walcott, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies, University of Toronto. Moreover, I understand that also in the interest of maintaining my anonymity, I will be provided with a pseudonym (or can choose my own pseudonym), and any information that I provide about my experiences/my experiences in this study will be attributed to my pseudonym.

I understand that data collected from my participation in this project will be stored at the Principal Researcher’s office at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for the duration of this research period (September 2008-September 2009). I further understand that after the initial research period the data
derived from my participation in this project will remain in the possession of the Principal Researcher for an indefinite period of time. The reasoning behind this decision is driven by the Principal Researcher’s belief that the data derived from my participation can serve as data for future projects/documents about Chinese-Canadians, ethnicity, etc. I further understand that data or findings derived from my participation in this project may be used for other projects/documents/publications. If, however, I wish to have the data derived from my participation in the project destroyed, it is my right to make my desires known to the Researcher.

I understand that the document produced from my participation will be a public document, and can readily be accessed at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. I also understand that I will be provided with a one to two page summary of the findings of the project by the Researcher. I further understand that if I require any more information regarding this study and the nature of my participation in this study, I can contact the following

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Fax: 416-946-5763
Secondary Participants
(Meaning: those who are indirectly involved in the research process, the Principal Participants’ friends, family or colleagues)

I, the undersigned, agree to participate a study examining the idea of Chinese-Canadian identity among Chinese-Canadian youth, and how people's understanding of these ideas affect their lives. I understand that this study is principally interested in examining whether or not there are collective ideas of authentic Chinese-Canadian identity, where these ideas come from in society, whether or not anti-Chinese racism influences these ideas, and whether or not the use of either English or Chinese is important in maintaining a distinctive Chinese-Canadian identity.

I understand that my participation in this study will be used for the purpose of serving as data for the M.A. Thesis project of one Kenneth Huynh, a Graduate Student in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and the Principal Researcher in this study.

I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and am able at anytime to withdraw from this project, if I so desire. I also understand that if I choose to withdraw from this project, I am able to request that any information that I have disclosed to the Researcher will not be used for his thesis research, and/or destroyed.

I understand that my participation in this project is as a Secondary Participant, as I am an associate of one the project’s Principal Participants. I further understand that this is the nature of my participation in the project: that by agreeing to participate in this project, between September 2008 to December 2008, during specific social occasions with the project’s Principal Participant(s), my social exchanges, interaction and behavior between myself and the Participant(s) will be observed by the Principal Researcher. I understand these interactions are being observed in the interests acquiring data as to how said Principal Participant acts in particular social settings, for example (how he or she uses language). I understand that all aforementioned events will be recorded by the Researcher with a digital recorder, and later transcribed by said Researcher. I also understand that said Researcher will take notes during all of our interactions.

I understand that in the interests of maintaining my anonymity, the only individuals that will be able to access the data acquired from my participation in the study will be the Researcher and his Faculty Supervisor, Professor Monica Heller, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies/Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto and the Second Reader of his thesis project, Professor Rinaldo Walcott, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies, University of Toronto. Moreover, I understand that also in the interest of maintaining my anonymity, I will be provided with a pseudonym (or can choose my own pseudonym), and any information that I provide about my experiences/my experiences in this study will be attributed to my pseudonym.
I understand that data collected from my participation in this project will be stored at the Principal Researcher’s office at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for the duration of this research period (September 2008-September 2009). I further understand that after the initial research period the data derived from my participation in this project will remain in the possession of the Principal Researcher for an indefinite period of time. The reasoning behind this decision is driven by the Principal Researcher’s belief that the data derived from my participation can serve as data for future projects/documents about Chinese-Canadians, ethnicity, etc. I further understand that data or findings derived from my participation in this project may be used for other projects/documents/publications. If, however, I wish to have the data derived from my participation in the project destroyed, it is my right to make my desires known to the Researcher.

I understand that the document produced from my participation will be a public document, and can readily be accessed at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. I also understand that I will be provided with a one to two page summary of the findings of the project by the Researcher. I further understand that if I require any more information regarding this study and the nature of my participation in this study, I can contact the following:

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