

**DECONSTRUCTING ESSENTIALISMS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF CHINESE CANADIANS  
IN KITCHENER-WATERLOO**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

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**by**

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## **Abstract**

What does it mean to be Chinese in Canada? This thesis argues that such meaning is not based on facile categories such as community or culture, but a shared discourse of difference based on essentialisms and biological inheritance.

Fieldwork conducted in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, forms the basis of this ethnography. In describing the nature of the data my fieldwork produced, the gaps and limitations are considered, and an ultimately ethical condition of anthropological knowledge is concluded.

As an alternate conceptualization to the commonly used category of a Chinese community, ideal types of a front and back stage of Chinese identification are constructed dialectically. These ideal types show that while there is a commonly shared understanding around the term 'Chinese' (the front stage), it is simplistic and falsely homogeneous. It is the shared aspect of the front stage of Chinese identity, by both non-Chinese and Chinese people, that gives the front stage meaning - it is not a culture or community. The back stage is where a myriad of distinctions and categories hold meaning for Chinese Canadians, and this arena of self and other identification is all too often glossed over by researchers reifying Chinese communities.

There is, however, more meaning to Chinese identity than is evidenced by the front stage. A further set of ideal types are constructed to demonstrate this, based on a dominant discourse in Canada that blurs community, ethnicity and culture into reified essences based on heritage; and, a demotic discourse that is bounded by the dominant one. The demotic discourse of Chinese identity in K-W exists in localized relationship to the dominant one, and represents the bridge between individuals and the dominant discourse. In this sense, to be Chinese is to possess inherited traits of family, mindset and personality that are part of one's essence.

The ethnography treats what could be conceived as uniquely Chinese as part of a shared language of difference. As such, the implications for both our society and the social sciences are grave: how can we hope to mute or overcome false differences if the very language we all use reifies culture, community and ethnicity as racial or ancestral essences?

*for Erik Edward Stokholm*

## Acknowledgements

The generosity of this study's participants in both time and candour made this thesis possible. To all of you: thank you, do che, and shei shei. It is my sincere hope that this work "gets it right", and accurately reflects the detailed insight into identity and personal experiences so many shared with me. Any merit in what follows is solely a result of the kindness participants extended to a nosy student.

A professor of mine at the undergraduate level once told me, "My dear boy, there will come a time soon when you will no longer have or need mentors." I am happy to report that this has not been the case yet. Stanley Barrett has been more than a mentor to me: his dedication to my education and this project went far beyond the normal role of an advisor. Stan, you have been a teacher and a friend - and no few words can express my thanks and admiration. And *that*, is the "big picture"!

To the other members of my committee, Frans Schryer and Ed Hedican, thank you for all your attention to this thesis - and for the less formal office chats that greatly helped me in finding focus and confidence. I could not have been in better hands. Frans, I promise to work in some Bourdieu next time around! Belinda Leach was chair of the examination committee for my defence, and deserves credit not only for making my trial by fire pleasant, but for her meticulous reading of the manuscript - including my faulty Latin!

The support staff in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and in particular Millie McQueen, managed to face my frequent interruptions and constant administrative "emergencies" with smiles and patience. As anyone who works at a university knows, academics are selectively bright - I would still be trying to fill out my first registration form without the help of the secretaries and assistants!

If I were to name all of my student peers, other faculty, and friends who helped, listened, and encouraged me in the last year, I would run too great a risk of leaving out names. I will simply state that it has been a pleasure to work with you all.

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So, to all my anthropological and social kin, your help is gratefully acknowledged. Any errors and misinterpretations in this thesis are mine alone, and exist in spite of all your best efforts.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Early this summer, I was a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course in social anthropology. During a seminar I was leading on anthropological methods and problems, one student asked incredulously, "Why do anthropologists always work alone?". A good question.

While engaged in fieldwork in Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W), a city (twin cities, actually) in southwestern Ontario with a population of about 250,000, I rarely felt alone. The problems of interpretation and outright confusion were not tackled in isolation - participants in this study helped me at every turn with detailed and enthusiastic interpretations and explanations of their own. I hope that upon reading what follows, they will find their input was not given in vain.

But even the novice student would not believe that this ethnography is the product of pure collaboration. After all, I wrote it! And in the interpretation and "writing up" of fieldwork amongst Chinese people in K-W, I made choices that were largely my discretion. Some were ethical in nature: hiding aspects of people's lives that would be identifiable to others. Others were made in the light of where the most detailed data were gleaned: inconclusive evidence will be noted, but I prefer to write about things I feel more confident about. And, of course, I began and concluded this project with some problems and theoretical interests that were the product of my own experience and



academic life.

What makes anthropological research worthwhile and maddening all at once is the process of interpretation, of describing patterns and incongruities, while attempting to keep the experiences of the real people one encounters as the ultimate judge of the choices made at every step. In this case, bearing in mind that this study's participants were human beings first, then having social roles such as 'woman' or 'Chinese', required systematic challenge of accepted stereotypes (within and without the academic world).

My desire to portray people as real, not caricatures of ethnicity or culture, faced its toughest test in the final process of writing. How could I write about Chinese people while questioning the validity of the category? Just who did I study if my intent was to take on any label that might deny the individual agency and context that struck me with every interview and encounter? Is qualitative methodology able to cope with real life? To make matters worse, each of these questions opposes issues of theory with aspects of lived reality. This is an unavoidable condition of anthropology. This ethnography is my attempt to come to grips with this condition, while trying always to "get it right" so far as the participants are concerned.

In beginning this chapter with a discussion of fieldwork and interpretation, I have put the cart before the horse. Why did I choose to study Chinese people in K-W? As a topic of research, the choice was influenced by two factors. I have lived in Hong Kong, and travelled in China and Taiwan. In fact, until recently, my parents had lived in Hong

Kong for several years. I was curious to see what life in Canada was like for both immigrants from that area of the world and subsequent generations. The second influence came from witnessing several years of xenophobia in the face of emerging Chinese suburbs near Toronto and Vancouver. Monster homes and a plaza with all-Chinese signs have been cited as undesirable outcomes of these newcomers by non-Chinese media and politicians. I viewed this as thinly veiled racism, and wondered how this would be interpreted in a city where such overt expressions against Chinese people had not occurred.

But a topic and location alone do not make for a successful project. A problem must be established to give focus and direction to fieldwork. In this case, my theoretical side tempered my anger toward injustice, and I noticed that the victims of racism in Canada were rarely examined much beyond the realms of either ethnic communities or recipients of injustice. Furthermore, I wondered to what degree relatively affluent (and thus not obviously disempowered) Chinese people would in fact view the world in the same manner as the non-Chinese people who had been so public with their xenophobia.

I also was well aware that Chinese is a false label - it lumps billions of people from drastically different backgrounds into a simplistic category. How did this figure into such factors as self-identification? These were questions that the literature did not address, and I put together a proposal concerned with the problem of self-identification, construction of categories in which to place 'others' and interpretations of mainstream xenophobia and

racism. The problem, in short, that I planned to address was one of exploring just how individuals who are visible minorities - Chinese people in this case - interacted and interpreted their roles both in self-identification and categorizing 'others'.

I will not recount the model I constructed in writing a proposal. It was wrong. The arguments presented in this thesis address the original problems I was concerned with, but represent a refined version that is the result of fieldwork.

My initial problem was with a perceived gap in conventional research, but what follows will also address common fallacies. Community and culture are bandied about by social scientists as meaningful categories - they have not held up to close scrutiny in this case. In examining the false notion of a Chinese community, a further argument will be made: what is often touted as uniquely Chinese may in fact be a shared experience of many Canadians or most immigrants; or, simply a matter of assuming that a Chinese flavour to a practice or experience is significant.

Deconstructing the idea of a Chinese community - either Canadian or in K-W - will not be matter of simple negation. After all, the idea holds both academic and popular currency. Instead, ideal types of front and back stages of Chinese community will be explored to reflect the ease in which participants held notions of division and unity at the same time. The message for anthropologists ought to be clear in this discussion: to treat a Chinese community or culture as real is an exercise in taking popular language at face value - and worse still reifying the concept as meaningful.

In consistently asking what patterns I perceived might not be unique to Chinese people, I have written an ethnography that explains what is not Chinese as much as what is. But to all participants in this study, being Chinese held some meaning (in spite of the distinctions such as Cantonese and Mandarin speakers). I am not about to challenge the views of participants - they existed and worked for them - but will probe deeper into an explanation of a Chinese essence. There is a dominant discourse (which again I have constructed as an ideal type) of difference in Canada, one that relies upon the reification of socially constructed categories into distinctions based on biological inheritance. Race, culture, gender, community and ethnicity are transformed into categories of personality, values, philosophy and mentality. What was explained to me as "essentially Chinese" will be presented as a localized, demotic discourse - again an ideal type that is bounded by the dominant discourse. The demotic discourse is the arena in which individuals identify themselves based on the categories dictated by the dominant discourse (Both the dominant and demotic discourses are used following Gerd Baumann, 1996).

The identification of being "Chinese" will be demonstrated as first, independent of a community in the common connotation - there are many distinctions within this simple label; but second, conceptualized in terms of inherent traits - this following a more generalized pattern of categorizations being reified into biological essences that are taken to be a part of one's heritage.

Before these dialectical pairs of ideal types are explored, a thorough consideration of methodology and its relationship to anthropological knowledge will be given in Chapter 2. Fieldwork can be planned with care and strategy, but is never predictable. The very term methodology is a misnomer, for it suggests control that the researcher never has. We can be systematic in our approach, but 'the field' will never be a laboratory. In describing the methodology, I have attempted to outline just where I had little or no control during research alongside those factors in which my influence was unavoidable. The first section of the chapter is largely traditional in format and describes the factual history of this project - its formulation and evolution. It does not tell the reader much about the nature of this ethnography and its knowledge, however, and subsequent discussion is dedicated to exploring and questioning the connections between networks, ethics, context and methodology. The premise is quite simple - we cannot appreciate what we have learned and then write about if we do not acknowledge that fieldwork creates knowledge. Such knowledge or data is never waiting to be discovered, it emerges from a process initiated by the anthropologist.

Chapter 3 considers the idea of a Chinese community. The problem of posing theoretical problems against lived reality is apparent here, and the approach I have taken to balance these two may be surprising to some. Ideal types are constructed to compare a front and back stage of Chinese community that contradict standard understandings of culture and community. Following Max Weber's approach may seem a sure recipe for

excluding participants' voices and experiences, but in fact it proves to be very inclusive of them. The advantage to constructing ideal types is that comparison can be made not only between cases, but between phenomena of differing orders. The front and back stage ideal types of Chinese community polarize the general and specialized, the public and private, the symbolic and the lived. By muting the difference in scale and order between the two, we are not misled into assigning primacy for either. The participants in this study used both effortlessly.

To be honest, I had not planned to write much about "community" in formulating this study: the debate seemed tired and fruitless. But in trying to understand how those I met could effortlessly balance a conception of Chinese community with a myriad of distinctions that demolished it all at the same time, a discussion of community was mandatory. What is unique in this discussion is that dialectical oppositions, which can easily be sidestepped with statements about the inherent irrationality of human conceptualizations, are instead shown as logical and compatible.

Chapter 4 is about race, difference, and biological essentialisms. There is unfinished business in Chapter 3, as the ideal types of the front and back stage do not fully explain why people would call themselves Chinese. The problem in this case was again a product of fieldwork and the attempt to faithfully reflect participants' perceptions and beliefs. Having discredited the concept of a community, something participants also did routinely, there remained the problem of understanding what it means to be Chinese.

Make no mistake, there are people who call themselves Chinese and believe it means something. Given the overwhelming evidence that this identification does not rely on a culture or community, where does it come from? How can it persist?

Identification requires distinction and difference. The problem in comprehending socially constructed categories of difference in this chapter is premised on a key point of logic: a general, sustained discourse of difference in a society cannot be perpetuated by a minority, even of elites. The content of particular conceptualizations and identifications can only be understood in the context of a broader language in which most people agree on the categories and their meanings.

In the context of this study, I found remarkable agreement on a set of qualities described as Chinese: values, family structure, beliefs and mentality were among the qualities most participants agreed on. These qualities were attributed to heritage and biological essence, or what is commonly known as race. I could have described this and left it at that, but this would have been a serious injustice. The views I encountered seemed to me to be little different than the views I encountered among all residents of K-W, or in the media and political arenas of Canada for that matter. While a concept of race was being expressed by and about Chinese people, presenting this in isolation would give the reader the impression that this was a unique occurrence. By comparing the discourse of difference I encountered in the field (to be called the demotic discourse) to the broad language of difference that exists in Canada (to be called the dominant discourse, both

terms following Gerd Baumann's use (1996)), it will be argued that there is no reason to treat these views as uniquely Chinese. They are likely not unique to Canada, or perhaps even North America.

The concluding chapter will consider what the implications of this study might be for anthropology and similar future studies. Our tradition of studying small-scale collectives and communities needs to be reconsidered: as the world grows more connected, the problems of understanding societies in terms of emerging large-scale phenomena can be reinforced. Note that I used the word reconsidered, not rejected. This ethnography attempts to cope with individual realities as they connect to the larger world. It is the tradition of anthropology and qualitative research that allowed me to do this.

To give the reader an idea of the mindset I have tried to maintain in fighting assumptions and questioning everything, I will offer a playful question to keep in mind. Until very recently, my parents had lived in Hong Kong for many years, as I did once for a period. Does this make me part Chinese?



## Chapter 2

### Methodology: beyond *veni vidi vici*

#### Introduction

It is customary to follow an introduction to a monograph with a literature review. This allows readers unfamiliar with the topic area to understand the disciplinary framework a study fits into, and is often used to relate the researcher's theoretical approach to the data that will follow. By contrast, methodological discussions are often given cursory treatment in the introduction, though sometimes an expanded treatment is given in the form of an appendix.

I have chosen a different approach for this thesis, as evidenced by the chapter title. Talk to any anthropologist about her research and you will hear wonderful stories of field experiences, trials, and tribulations. As a student, one typically finds professors using their own history of research to help students learn the craft of anthropology. To formalize this in a thesis chapter is hardly revolutionary. And for those who crave theory and literary citations, they abound in the chapters to follow.

A gap between theory and methodology has plagued anthropology for some time. (Barrett, 1996) We have never suffered from a gap between methodology and knowledge, however, for the latter's existence is contingent upon the former. However, in privileging theory over method in our ethnographies, we have perpetuated an inability to understand the content and limits of anthropological knowledge.

Fieldnotes are not recordings of facts, they are a document of the anthropologist's experience amongst people. Johannes Fabian (1994) goes further, calling the process of fieldwork a confrontation (not in the hostile sense) between researcher and subjects; this confrontation being the generator of our data. Far from being a dry recounting of what was done during active research, something to endure before the "good stuff" of ethnographies, methodological descriptions convey the most important information any reader should have about a study - the nature of its knowledge.

This study is based on thirty interviews which were conducted mainly in May and June of 1998. As my broad interest was in Chinese identity and experience, I began by soliciting the help of some Cantonese friends. A local Chinese church, the Central Ontario Chinese Cultural Centre (COCCC), ethnic Chinese businesses and student Chinese associations at the local universities were also contacted. Interviews, when granted, were semi-structured in format. The snowball technique was used, with each contact being asked to offer the names of friends, family or associates who might be interested in participating in the study. My attempts at entry met with varying success - but I must quickly add that people responded with generosity and kindness more often than not.

Beyond the above textbook description of research, the following will approach methodology from multiple angles: i) the researcher: formulation, and constraints on the study, ii) the nature of networks tapped into during fieldwork, iii) the relationship between

ethical concerns, research and writing, and finally, iv) the conclusion which will highlight the benefits of qualitative methods in this context.

**The Researcher: formulation of, and constraints on the study.**

*Choosing a Project*

To paraphrase Bronislaw Malinowski: Imagine yourself at home, in a red brick, rented bungalow, in a busy urban residential neighbourhood near the core of Waterloo. Hardly the stuff of anthropological lore! However, doing research in my home city held particular appeal to me - I had the benefit of the native's perspective, and the initial entry into K-W was a *fait accompli*. Even more importantly, I believed (and still do) that research at home had the altruistic quality of contributing positively to the community in which one lives - inasmuch as an academic treatise can do so.

Why study Chinese people in K-W? I have lived in Hong Kong, travelled in both mainland China and Taiwan, and belonged to a Chinese Students Association at my undergraduate university in this same city. I claim no expertise in Asian cultures, and speak but a few halting words in Cantonese and Mandarin, but have always felt a bit nostalgic toward my time overseas, and such a study excited me on that admittedly unscholarly level. My own family history includes the migration of my father and his parents to Canada from Denmark in the 1950s. Growing up with that background has always kept me interested in the experiences of immigrants, minorities, and so-called

ethnic communities. This interest was further entrenched while living in Hong Kong - I experienced a taste of living as a visible minority.

I have lived in K-W for a decade in various roles; among these: university student, produce clerk, grocery store manager, bachelor and married, apartment and house dweller, with and without a personal vehicle, NDP supporter, and now Masters student. I am white, male, in my late twenties of age, and possess a surname that is generally identifiable as European in origin. It was my five years of working at grocery stores that spurred an interest in race, ethnicity and multiculturalism in K-W - the stores where I worked mainly employed white, non-immigrant people who exhibited more sexism and racism than I would previously have believed possible in this day and age.

This project was also inspired by anger on my part. In recent years there had been demonstrations of overt xenophobia in the face of growing Chinese suburban presence in the Toronto and Vancouver areas. While one may typically encounter myths of recent immigrants living on state welfare and committing crimes, in this case the charges were of affluent Chinese immigrants "taking over" neighbourhoods and of commercial plazas with Chinese-only signs! The flexibility of racism is boundless. Would Chinese persons in K-W share my fury and disbelief toward this racist state of affairs?

In presenting the formulation of this study, I have deliberately included some (potentially) extraneous information about myself. The purpose has not been one of self-indulgence. Quite to the contrary, it feels a little silly and is not a comfortable exercise -

I would much rather write about this study's other participants. But to simply hide behind the label of student or anthropologist would allow the reader to forget that I am as much a participant in this study as anyone else is. Furthermore, as the only participant with final editorial control over the written product, and as the participant that initiated confrontation in the field, the reader needs to be able to judge me and the data I present. It seems only fair that I be at least as forthcoming with personal information as my contacts in the field were.

### *Limitations*

Before describing some more technical aspects of the research, some major limitations of this project must be spelled out, for they were brought to the field by myself, and cannot be marginalized as unavoidable. Time, money, and language were prominent in this respect.

First, the period of fieldwork was limited to about two months. During this time, I was working as a part time teaching assistant, and maintained limited aspects of normal life. In that there were few opportunities to participate in ongoing life with participants (i.e., I did not live with anyone), some maintenance of personal life was not as damaging as it might have been in other circumstances. But the time restriction had severe ramifications upon the representation of contacts included herein - quite simply, a year or two would be required to do the project justice. One benefit of a brief field visit is that

it maintains reasonably equitable historical context for all contacts and interviews. However, this benefit is more of an after-the-fact rationalization than an intended strategy.

Second, with no outside sources of funding, I was unable to pay contacts. In that most people whom I interviewed were not poor, it is uncertain to what degree an offer of payment would have benefited my rapport and reputation. In fact, offers of payment may well have jeopardized my self-presentation as a student working towards his thesis. People were helpful and generous with their time and candour, and more often than not treated me to coffee or lunch. Perhaps we underestimate the desire of people to help us in research and contribute to meaningful research. Payment, in this light, is crass and could even be insulting.

The issue of payment is one where the methods literature is of little help. H. Russell Bernard offers: "If you are studying elites in your own culture, then payment is inappropriate. If you are studying elites in an African village, then payment may be mandatory." (1995: 178-179) Leaving aside his baffling assumption that the reader is not from an African village, the question remains of defining elites. I met a range of people, from a woman who worked recently as a live-in housekeeper to a man who was only in his thirties, was independently wealthy, and could retire today if he so chose. My sense is that in either case, an offer of payment would have been inappropriate and quite likely insulting. So was the lack of funding a limitation on the study? Yes. Aside from the ease of field operation that money can allow, I would have been able to treat contacts to

lunches or dinners routinely, and would have made certain that all participants received a bound copy of the final thesis. Most participants showed an interest in my final write-up, and the promise of a bound copy to all would have been an ideal form of reimbursement. Many anthropologists provide copies of their books to local libraries or schools where they have conducted fieldwork, and while copies for all participants may never be financially feasible, it might be worth trying if funding could be solicited. Providing all with a final copy of the book, article or thesis would help foster a sense of participation without rendering the relationship mercenary. I could not afford to do so in all cases, but a bound copy will be given to the COCCC, and photocopies will be available to all participants.

Finally, my failure to speak Cantonese or Mandarin (beyond a few words) presented a considerable limitation to the study. This was driven home during an early interview with two women. They both worked at English-speaking firms, and spoke the language quite well though not effortlessly. The joint interview was fascinating from my perspective, for virtually every answer in English was prefaced by a spirited exchange in Cantonese between the two! A researcher who could converse in Cantonese would have emerged from that interview with better data. I did not steer my attentions deliberately toward the most practised English speakers, but obviously was limited to contacts with some knowledge of my mother tongue. Related again to funding, a translator would have

been ideal, but nothing can replace a researcher who speaks the language of comfort for participants.

It is generally assumed that anthropologists either arrive in the field with, or quickly gain, the necessary linguistic competence. However, it seems bad professional form to give the reader an idea of how well or poorly the anthropologist spoke the languages at hand. In the context of my study, it may be that English was in many cases the preferred language of interaction. Had I studied Cantonese and Mandarin for two years or so, I may have achieved base conversational comfort in both. (Though my high school French teachers would likely beg to differ!) Even for those participants for whom English was a second language, they had been using it for decades - my competence in Cantonese or Mandarin would not compare. Obviously, there were some potential contacts to whom I was never introduced due to language barriers, but it is worth noting that meetings at the COCCC are now held in English - the one common language of all board members!

### *Interviews: Getting and Conducting Them*

Having settled on and gained approval for the study, I began to solicit interviews. There is no Chinese neighbourhood in K-W where I could begin knocking on doors, so the plan was to base a snowball technique by first soliciting such places as the Central Ontario Chinese Cultural Centre (COCCC) and a few friends who had already expressed



a willingness to participate.

Interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to three hours, but typically I met with people for an hour to an hour and a half. A semi-structured interview technique was employed - I settled on about fifteen key questions which were memorized and introduced into the conversations in differing orders. There is an argument to be made for asking identical questions in identical order to all participants - the comparability is easier between cases. I did not want to lose the flexibility of my less systematic approach, however, and needed to be able to tailor the questions to different contexts. For example, I might have universally asked the question, "Would you like to see a Chinatown in K-W such as is found in Toronto?", as a way of probing participants' appraisal of concentrated Chinese enclaves. But in a few interviews, this topic was broached by the participant without my prodding. This was significant in its own right, and had the interviews been conducted in a more formal manner, I would have no way of knowing the salience of "Chinatown" on an individual basis. Even the probing of individual life histories had to be approached with care, for certain participants were clearly more suspicious of me than others. In the middle of one interview, I was quite taken aback to be asked sternly, "Are you *really* a student?" I had not begun that interview with questions about birthplace, age and family as I sometimes did, and can only imagine how her suspicions would have been confirmed if this had been my approach! The following list is a summary of the questions raised in each interview, save

the first few where I was still in the process of fine-tuning my interview strategy.

1. Personal history, occupation, family, age, etc....
2. How do you like living in K-W? (How would you describe life here?)
3. Do you remember some of the controversies about Chinese neighbourhoods and businesses in such places as Markham and Vancouver? What do you think about it?
4. Are you aware of Phillip Rushton, the professor at the University of Western Ontario? He's the one that has the theory about different races, with a scale of intelligence, sexuality and civilization that ranks Orientals over Whites, and Whites over Blacks. Is this crazy or do you think there's something to his ideas?
5. Do you agree that Canada is a multicultural country? How do you think this affects everyday life?
6. Are you aware of racism in your day-to-day life? Has this changed over the years?
7. Some discussion about the Chinese language school and the cultural centre. This was highly variable depending on the individual's history and age.
8. Is it fair to write about a Chinese community as one group in Canada or K-W?
9. Some people have told me that to be Chinese is to have a different value system, family, and what-have-you from non-Chinese people. Do you agree?
10. I seem to have trouble meeting people's parents, and men in general. Why do you think this is so? [this was introduced later in the study]
11. Many scholars have written about Chinese businesses as though they were

something special - and as though they indicate a dependence on Chinese clients.

What do you think?

12. Do you ever visit Chinatown in Toronto? How would you compare it to K-W?

Would you like to see something like that here?

13. How large would you estimate the Chinese community to be in K-W? What other groups could you name as present in this city? [The second of these questions was omitted eventually, as it seemed to destroy a comfortable conversational feel in the face of "listing".]

14. I'm interested in how people choose to identify themselves. If you were filling out a census, how would you describe yourself?

15. If the topic of marriage preference (for themselves or their children) was broached *by the participant*, I would probe the topic along the categories introduced, be they racial, ethnic, or linguistic criteria.

The above list was a living document, evolving and subject to alteration given different contexts. I had drafted a list of questions prior to my first interview, but the questions were more vague, and often were met with stares of incomprehension or retorts of "what do you mean?" For example, I initially asked people to "describe K-W" to me, but soon found that asking how they "liked living here" was more easily understood. I quickly learned that more direct questions, in addition to a detailed preface about my interests and purpose, was the best approach. My fear had been that very direct questions

would be impolite and alienate participants, but learned that 'beating about the bush' can be just as alienating.

I took notes during interviews, which were expanded upon more fully as I typed up complete fieldnotes at home. A few people were clearly wary of my jottings, and in such cases I tried my best to write as little as possible. In most cases people seemed to barely notice my pen and paper. I did not use a camera, tape recorder or video camera - and would not feel comfortable in doing so. I could smugly point out that battery failure was never an issue, but all too painfully remember two occasions when my pen ran out of ink and I had to awkwardly search my pockets and briefcase for a spare that seemed to elude me. This derailed the conversation completely in both cases, and I learned to hold my spare pen in my front pocket at all times.

Successful interviews were not simply a result of asking the right questions or providing the proper cues to participants. I assumed different roles in different contexts. Such roles were not complete transformations of my typical self (something I am incapable of), but rather involved muting or exaggerating certain nuances of myself. Anthropologists may shy away from psychological explanations of social phenomena, but we are highly dependent on making rapid assessments of people when necessary and altering our approach to suit the individuals we are faced with. It would be false to suggest that I figured out appropriate roles properly in each case - for every smooth interaction I can count one where I made many mistakes.

Some facts of my own life seemed to provide common ground for conversation. For example, when speaking with someone who had migrated to Canada, I was sure to mention my own family's immigrant history - it helped establish common ground. Some participants seemed bemused by my status as a married student in his late twenties of age and I was quite comfortable being the object of some mirth - it seemed to break the ice nicely. However, this could backfire, and in one case a man simply could not believe that my wife was the "breadwinner" of our household. I was too odd for him to be comfortable with me. When talking with businesspeople, I tried to act more like my old "grocery store manager" role, when meeting students or professors I could pretty much act like my current academic self. At no time did I lie to a participant about my own experience.

Not lying, of course, is not the same as telling all. I found that playing up my experiences in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan was well received by some, but amounted to showing off in the eyes of others - particularly if they had been unable to visit "back home" in many years. "Cultivated ignorance" had its place too. At times I would pretend not to know a certain incident, trend or person if the participant seemed willing to explain such to me in detail. Conversely, at times it was very valuable to show that I knew a little bit about the topic at hand. For example, the terms *gwailo* and *banana* (*gwailo* is a Cantonese term for Westerners, 'banana' will be discussed in a later chapters), were not

always offered to me. Asking about these terms at times helped get the conversation rolling.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face. Three were conducted by telephone. While I preferred to meet in person, if a telephone interview was all a participant could spare I was not about to lose the opportunity for any contact. Telephone interviews, surprisingly, did not affect the nature of topics that participants would entertain. In course of fieldwork, one inevitably collects information that is of such a personal nature that it is never published. I had not expected to gain so much in that vein by telephone from people I had never met in person. This may have been facilitated by the 'hidden' pen and notepad, and poses some tricky ethical dilemmas. However, my role as a researcher and my intent to publish findings in a thesis were made clear at all times over the telephone.

Meetings were held in restaurants, at workplaces, and (to shatter a few myths about 'ethnic' restaurants) routinely in coffee shops. I met a few people at the COCCC, which has boardroom space free for all members to use. I did my best to parlay any opportunity into simple participation on my part, but such chances were limited. I was never invited into a participant's home, and the preference seemed to be to meet with me on a one-to-one basis, rather than with a group of friends or family. Rules of etiquette in K-W do not generally involve the free visitation of casual friends' homes, and I can only

suspect that a greater investment of time on my part may have allowed for greater informal participation.

### *Problems Inherent in the Study's Methodology*

While the semi-structured interview allows for greater flexibility in exploring opinions and experience than a written survey, it is not passive strategy. Notions of Chinese identity, categorizations of others, and multiculturalism are but a sliver of participants' lives. At times I feel reluctant to create a thesis around such a select conceptual domain, for the information I duly recorded was due to my engagement with people; and such engagement was deliberately limited in scope of topic. Readers must bear in mind that this work exaggerates certain aspects of social life and belief by way of omitting an unknown and potentially infinite consideration of social life in its totality.

It is hardly ingenious to note that a written work is a poor reflection of reality. Clifford Geertz, in characterizing anthropological writings as second or third order interpretations (1973: 15), was wrong only in understating the distance between lived reality and textual product. But an awareness of interpretive distance is only part of the story here: a greater danger lies in blindly creating caricatures of people by way of selectively describing their lives. People are whole, but descriptions are always partial.

The line between theory and methodology is blurred in this case, and avoiding the creation of caricatures is embedded in all aspects of fieldwork. When I sat down with a

willing participant, for example, I would first describe my interests and the study in the broadest terms possible (believing that vagaries would mute my influence upon the conversation). The following was a typical introduction:

Thank you for meeting with me today. I should begin by explaining what I'm interested in and what sort of questions I'll be asking. I'm studying Chinese identity and community in K-W, conducting interviews with as many different people as possible. I'm curious to find out to what extent it is fair to even use the terms "community", or "Chinese", and to learn if such labels are important to you in self-identification. I'd like to know how you find living in this city on an everyday basis, and if you believe your identity plays a role in such. I realize that the term "Chinese" is very broad, and that to many people their cultural or ethnic identity has little importance.

But no matter how open I tried to keep the interview, the reality is that the range of discussion was severely limited at the outset. This is a necessity if one wishes to pursue information systematically, but all too often we forget that it is a necessity imposed by the researcher. My very first interview comes to mind as an illustration. I read in a local newspaper about the business aspirations of a young man whom the reporter noted was from Hong Kong. I tracked his telephone number down, and was able to arrange a meeting in person. We met at a local coffee shop, and I was already excited about the prospect of comparing media representation to my own interaction with a participant and his take on the whole matter. He might even turn out to be a key informant, a central figure in this ethnography!



Within twenty minutes of conversation, my fantasy was blown apart. He was friendly and willing to talk, but I quickly guessed that he was mentally unstable - a suspicion that was further confirmed by his trying to follow me home after the interview, and then calling repeatedly that evening to ask if I could find him employment. Other researchers tackling different problems may have gained more from the interaction than I did. For this study, his reality was out of tune with the scope of my interest.

Sometimes an extreme case such as the above can be useful in illuminating more subtle examples. By presenting myself as an interviewer interested in things "Chinese", and despite the *caveats*, interviews were less likely to drift into discussions about the technical aspects of participants' jobs, their recent home renovations, their children's tastes in music, or their methods used for balancing chequebooks. All of which may have been more pressing issues in everyday life.

Some researchers have attempted to get around the problem of unquestioned ethnic primacy by considering the salience of ethnic identity for individuals (Alba, 1990; Rietz, 1980) with various measurements such as friendships, awareness of others' ethnicity, or languages spoken. I would argue that this does little to avoid presenting caricatures of people, ethnic caricatures in this case. Suppose I had set out to establish the degree to which people were aware of their friends' ethnicity and used this as a measurement of salience. People who scored "high" in knowledge of others' ethnic backgrounds (correct or not) would score high in ethnic salience. The problem lies in a

lack of comparability. Possessing knowledge, detailed categorization, and a depth of opinion about a matter does not necessarily mean it ranks highly in comparison to other factors. I play guitar as a hobby, and will gladly talk anyone to death about music; but in reality my monthly rent payments and family relationships loom larger. And a researcher conducting an interview may or may not be setting the stage to find this out about me.

My defence against creating Chinese caricatures out of complex people has been twofold. The semi-structured interviews at least allowed an opportunity for other topics to arise (a limited opportunity at best); and, I have tried always to resist the pull toward labelling traits as Cantonese, mainland Chinese, or what have you. Rather than ask of my data what participants shared in common and label this 'Chinese in K-W', I have first asked if such commonalities might not be shared by most residents in town, or most immigrants and their recent descendants, or by most women, and so on. Both measures are stop-gap solutions at best, I realize.

If avoiding the over-amplification of this study's limited scope is of key concern, this is made more difficult by the dynamics of the snowball approach in the field. By presenting such a limited domain of interest, the sort of people I was told I "should talk to" was limited in equal measure. This shall be discussed in greater detail in the next section, but for now suffice it say that the pull toward creating caricatures is exerted by both specific interviews and the sort of sample that emerges in the field.

## **The Nature of Networks**

This section will describe the evolution of contacts as they emerged in the field, consider just what sort of sample I can claim to have, and finally judge the utility of concepts such as "studying up" and "anthropology at home" for the research I conducted.

### *The evolution and nature of networks, including gaps in representation.*

Based on the 1991 Census, we can say there are at least 3,335 Chinese people in K-W ( This includes Cambridge and some further surrounding districts. Furthermore, this would not include students attending university who are resident by virtue of visas, and leaves out those who identify themselves as Canadian on the census form). Most people whom I asked felt the number was underestimated - and three contacts of mine stated that they would fill out censuses as "Canadian". The same three were at the same time affiliated to ethnic Cantonese identities in addition to being 'Chinese'. My point here is not to dwell too long upon the utility of census data (see Waters, 1990, for a thorough and compelling analysis of just how people arrive at ethnic affiliation), but simply to suggest that we might take the size of the Chinese population in K-W to be at least as large, and likely more so, than the census records.

There were three main avenues I followed in attempting to meet people for interviews - the COCCC, friends, and "cold-calls". Broadly speaking, my sample can be broken down into those affiliated with the COCCC and those who were not. Of course

there are many other patterns I have identified, but in terms of the networks of participants, cultural centre affiliation seemed to predominate my field experience.

Earlier in the study, I had hopes of engaging in over forty in-depth interviews. My final count is about three-quarters of the projected one. I had foolishly assumed a nice progression of contacts to grow modestly, and possibly geometrically. After about a month of pursuing interviews, however, people were recommending certain key 'experts' whom I had already met. On one level, this was gratifying. I had done my homework, and could proudly reply that I had already met this or that person, and would welcome other suggestions for interviews. The problem was, beyond a select and repetitive list of "You know who you should *really* talk to...", participants were reluctant to steer me toward others. The most dominant factor these few experts held in common was active (current or in the past) involvement with the COCCC. I did meet other people, and in fact did tap into another network of people who had come to Canada as refugees in the 1980s, in addition to three participants who were not meaningfully associated with any other participants in this study.

The COCCC members were very generous with their time and help, and in no way do I wish to suggest that a dominant network is unappreciated on my part. However, there are certain factors that cultural association members hold in common that render them but one sort of sample - this will be discussed in the next chapter.

But what of the networks, or types of individuals who remained inaccessible or, worse yet, unknown to me? The most obvious gap in my experience is meeting those who might in some manner be considered Chinese, Cantonese, or what have you, but in no way identify themselves as such. This occurs to me as a very meaningful sort of person who may be impossible to meet in the course of a study like this. Participants are not about to set a researcher loose upon friends who have no interest in the subject matter. In a very real sense, this study was predisposed to exclude anybody who would not at least passingly identify themselves as Chinese by ancestry or experience. Years ago, I upset an acquaintance of mine by suggesting that he might have some insight into the experience of visible minorities, since his background included a parent of African-Caribbean descent. The flash of anger and denial taught me two things: that academics (i.e., yours truly!) are not immune to being insensitive and racist, and that there are individuals who define their own labels in life. Researchers must respect this, for the only alternative is to begin engaging in forceful labelling such as we have witnessed in South Africa or China by authoritarian states. Be that as it may, those with at least the option of affiliating with a given group or status ought to count as much as those who are socially forced, or willingly adopt, such affiliation. They do not in this study.

As many people identified the Chinese family as unique and different from "Western, Canadian or Caucasian" families, I tried to meet multiple members of the same family. This was only achieved once, and actually illuminated a few things for me. At

no time, despite requests on my part ranging from subtle to more exasperated, was I invited to meet participants' parents (I did meet people in their fifties and sixties of age, but all such people were working professionals - I learned of many parents who were retired and living at home whom I could not meet.). The older generation, I was told, would not wish to talk about "this sort of thing". I cannot say if this is a unique stance of my participants, or something that would have been reflected by broader representation.

Another trend that resulted from being directed to 'ideal' participants was a gender bias. I was overwhelmingly directed towards women, who represent over 70% of participants.

The limits of contact are unique to each researcher and each field situation, a point which is proven in my case by the over-representation of women. This would not be noteworthy, save the skewed representation, but for the accepted wisdom that:

...it does seem that in at least one dimension women do have an advantage over men: role flexibility. The various possible threats to women notwithstanding, the fact that they have access to both the male and female worlds is not insignificant. (Barrett, 1996: 199)

Unlike the traditional focus on methods for bridging the assumed distance between the "natives" and the anthropologist through participation, feminist anthropology, along with feminist sociology, defined the appropriate focus of research as women and assumed that because feminist anthropologists would almost certainly be women themselves, the distance between observer and observed would be reduced. (Lewin, 1995: 323-24)

Against these often accepted truisms, I am delighted that my access to women for interviews was greater than that to men. Nor was this simply a matter of women recommending other women exclusively - men generally provided me with the names of women as suggestions for further contact.

I could claim an exceptional capacity to engage in roles friendly to women, exceptional for a male at least, but this is certainly not the case. My experience in the field does challenge the automatic assumption that women are best suited to interact with other women in the field. Two warnings must be noted. First, this trend may well have reversed itself with a larger sample. Second, interviews were scheduled - generally at neutral locations, and it may well hold true that if I were able to 'hang out' more freely with participants, I might find male domains more accessible. Warnings aside, the trend of being directed toward women was data in and of itself. Later discussion of gender will be partially informed by the nature of direction I received while in the field, as will be a consideration of the COCCC, where women constitute a healthy portion of the board of directors. Mary E. Hawkesworth (1994) argued that there is nothing particularly inherent in science that ought to objectify women, and to that I would add there may be less holding men back from interacting with women than is commonly believed.

I did not specifically ask people about their financial worth or income, but can generally state that all participants were employed either as professionals or entrepreneurs, the lone exception being a student. This lack of variance might not be so

skewed as it seems, for broadly speaking the Chinese in Canada are affluent. (see Li, 1988; who nevertheless argues that such affluence is limited by racism) But the extent to which these participants represent a reasonable representation of wealth or occupational status is impossible to determine.

One known group whom I was largely unable to contact members of, with one exception, was university and college students. The timing of this project - during the summer months - was the main culprit for this gap in access. However, some participants noted that students, in their estimation, did not really count as citizens of K-W as they only live in town for a limited time. Certainly my own sense of 'community' ties to K-W was non-existent as an undergraduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Describing the sort of networks, fields or subgroups one has 'tapped into', or simply trying to state certain patterns of individual types encountered in the field is somewhat like trying to grab handfuls of water: the more precise one attempts to be about what is there and what is missing, the greater the sense of futility. Bernard described a method for ascertaining which participants (informants) have the greatest competence in given domains, using the "cultural consensus model of informant competence" (1995: 171-78). Well-informed people can certainly be of more use in one respect, but the notion that certain members of a society are more culturally competent than others flies in the face of a working society - clearly every member is sufficiently competent to maintain the function of the whole. In a large-scale, urban society, it is simply impossible for any one



or few people to know all the potential information about a phenomenon. In the end, even Bernard noted that the model he describes is of little use to general descriptive ethnography.

The description of the evolution and nature of networks provided here has deliberately highlighted the gaps in access, and potential representation that was never realized. Methodology and theory are intertwined around the issue of networks and representation. The direction people point the anthropologist in is valuable information in and of itself. Additionally, an ethnography that is not well grounded in its limits cannot pretend to be of any worth. Gaps in access are unavoidable. Failure to cope with these gaps as a condition of knowledge results in a wasted field experience.

*Inside, outside; up or down?*

Having sketched out the sort of networks I was involved with in the field, the question remains as to what kind of anthropology this represents. I am inclined to describe it, broadly, as urban anthropology. This distinguishes the project from the traditional bread and butter of the discipline: small-scale tribes, collectives or villages. There are two (at least) major problems with this. First, there are some who would argue that small-scale phenomena occur within the larger urban arena, often referred to as communities (see Cohen, 1985). Second, by invoking the term urban, there is the risk of

presuming that such projects exist in a tangibly different social systems than traditional projects did.

Is there really any gain to labelling a study beyond a means of library classification? Methodologically, it holds appeal. One cannot charge into a society and expect to apply the same tools of research strategy without question. The question is, though, can societies be typed meaningfully? While comparing cultures has been a signature analytical tool in anthropology, comparing methodologies and research settings may lead us back to the schemes of almost a century ago (such as Lewis Henry Morgan's). Perhaps a useful consideration of what sort of anthropology is being undertaken is not to be found in urban-rural, Western-non-Western or peasant-industrial dichotomies. They assume a geographic or economic primacy to the nature of society and thus methodology.

Delmos Jones (1988, org. 1970) saw the position of the researcher relative to the group of study as inescapable in any methodological approach. Researching one's own group requires sensitivity to different dynamics and problems than the traditional outsider status does. In that most participants were unknown to me during the course of study, I could label this project as outsider anthropology. But then I do happen to live in K-W, something that allowed me to understand why many participants view this as a 'German' town, in spite of my own experience that does not lead me to encounter many who overtly identify as German beyond surnames. Having been an undergraduate student here, I understand how students can be viewed as unimportant community members. If I was,

for example, of Asian descent, born in Hong Kong and never a resident of K-W, would this make me more of an insider? To Jones, yes. The example of his own insider anthropology was amongst black persons in Denver - people unknown to him as individuals - the insider connection was one of skin colour and shared social experience on that basis. Feminist anthropology experienced a revolution of sorts when Third World and women of colour challenged the accepted pan-gender understanding monopolized by largely white and Western feminists. The notion of insider *versus* outsider anthropology is intriguing, and while I am not going to claim insider status it would be an artifice to claim absolute outsider status.

Laura Nader (1988, org. 1972) urged anthropologists to begin 'studying up'. Rather than continually study the marginalized and disempowered, we ought to be studying the elites in society. She noted that the methodology inherent in this would likely differ from that of traditional participant-observation, and would require anthropologists comfortable with structured interviews and archival research. Entry itself would prove the greatest obstacle, she argued, and would require different strategies to successfully achieve. This strikes a chord of comparison with this project, yet many would argue that in studying a visible minority in Canada, I was studying 'down'.

As with 'insider-outsider', the notion of studying up or down becomes difficult to apply in subtle cases. I am more comfortable in characterizing this as a case of studying up, though, for a number of reasons. To begin, most people who met with me were

employed or entrepreneurs, often far wealthier than I. Furthermore, I was turned down in many interview requests. Refusal in and of itself is not limited to elites in society, but I can at least point out that I had no organization behind me that would compel people to submit to an interview.

The education of many participants was of at least the high school level, and some held degrees superior to mine. Members of the COCCC were more sophisticated than me in their appreciation of government multiculturalism and the programs they implemented under this umbrella. Furthermore, the issue of the final published thesis was often raised; again an indication that participants were fully aware of the consequences of participation and just what anthropology is. To some, these arguments fall more in favour of 'informed consent' than of studying up. I would argue that participants who are in full control of meetings, fully aware of the social issues at play, and who understand what theses generally amount to are probably at no disadvantage relative to myself.

The greatest challenge to this project as an example of studying up would be that the participants represent a visible minority in Canada. The very notion of a visible minority would hold no relevance unless it implied disadvantage, and following such logic I may be accused of focussing on the victims. I can only hope that the following chapters address this to some degree. Where Stanley Barrett (1987) argued that extreme racism can only exist when tolerated and shared in tendency by the moderate majority, I will be taking my explanation of racism and ethnicity a step further. Following Gerd

Baumann (1996), I will propose a dominant discourse of race, culture and ethnicity that is shared and propagated by all members of society.

In considering the dynamics of studying up or down, inside or outside, the methodological considerations have often drifted into more philosophical or theoretical directions. This might be an indication that the utility of such divisions is limited. I wish to conclude this section with a quotation that returns to the crude geographic category of urban based anthropology. Frances Henry used the word elites, but the description of research in Trinidad could well be of my own:

In terms of practical problems, one must first contend with the fact that elites are generally urban based and this involves the researcher with difficulties that may be created by an urban research environment. By way of contrast, the researcher is rarely able to live within the elite community because it is usually found in upper-class residential neighbourhoods where temporary housing is generally unavailable. ... In most studies which emphasize interview techniques, the researcher is dependent upon the cooperation of the informant, and this is especially important in a study of elites. These individuals are generally occupied with time-consuming activities, and frequently an interview appointment must be made weeks in advance. An interviewer may not be given more than a short period of time - in some cases as little as half an hour. (Henry, 1969: 43)

To this, I would only add that the same restrictions would apply to a clerical or factory worker as well as elites - all work long hours, may have family obligations, and quite simply may be busy with any manner of activity (elite or not). Perhaps 'urban' is more apt a description than I had suspected. More likely an explanation is that

anthropologists no longer have the dubious luxury of colonial power to operate within, and thus the playing field has been levelled.

### **Ethics and Knowledge, Beyond the Consent Form**

The current protocol for ethical clearance of projects at the University of Guelph is some dozen pages long, and includes such considerations as risk to participants, need for the study, and measures that will be taken to protect the privacy and well being of those encountered in the field. "Informed consent" is of primary importance. So too are guarantees of anonymity for participants, and an assurance of protecting them from risk and harm. This chapter began by challenging the typical approach to methodology as cursory or bracketed in nature. All too often, a consideration of ethics in a specific study meets a similar fate. Without an appreciation of the ethical dimensions of this study (both the "confrontation" in the field and in the analysis of data), the reader is being misled. Ethics are more than rules of behaviour, they represent (or ought to) a primary condition of the knowledge one accesses and presents. There is no easy divide between thinking and morality:

A professional commitment to view human affairs analytically is not in opposition to a personal commitment to view them in terms of a particular moral perspective. The professional ethic rests on the personal and draws its strength from it; we force ourselves to see out of a conviction that blindness - or illusion - cripples virtue as it cripples men. Detachment comes not from a failure to care, but from a kind of

caring resilient enough to withstand an enormous tension between moral reaction and scientific observation... (Geertz, 1968: 158)

Ethics and epistemology, to Geertz, do not exist on separate planes, and more precisely analytical detachment must be wrested, but can and should never be treated as distinct from, morality. And the ethical condition of doing and thinking cannot be pinned down as the protocol forms would suggest they can be. Elvi Whittaker succinctly noted:

Yet all fieldwork is noted for its emergent changing relationships with the people studied, and indeed depends on for its success upon this. At the same time there is an equally shifting knowledge about what is ethical and what is not. (1981: 445)

If ethics and epistemology are intertwined and evolve, we may find that what is all too often viewed as a set of rules to live by, get around or feel secure in, is in fact the potential meeting place of theory and methodology. To that end, ethics will be considered from three perspectives commonly laid down in regulations: anonymity, and informed consent and protection of participants (the latter two will be treated concurrently).

#### *Anonymity*

A professor of mine, recently giving a lecture on ethics, said quite forcefully, "Do not guarantee anonymity if you are not prepared to do so!" At a time when anthropologists note the use of pseudonyms as matter of rote, such a warning is well taken. A guarantee of anonymity is a serious matter, and we all should give sober second thought before such a promise. I am committed to this principle for this study. There is

only one key in existence with real names - even my fieldnotes use pseudonyms. Included in this work are data from interviews with people who live near K-W and work there, but are not properly residents, in an attempt to further muddy the trail toward identification. In that the population of this city is well over 200,000, protection seems assured.

But is this enough? As noted in the section about the nature of networks, this study relies on a relatively small number of people who were often aware of each other's existence. A simple name change might not suffice. If I described an interview with a high school principal in town who was widely identified as Chinese, for a fictional example, changing her name from Sylvia to Rebecca would be meaningless. The solution then, is to further obfuscate the identity of this fictional Sylvia and perhaps describe her as a male factory worker. If this strikes the reader as a potential abuse of editorial license on my part as author, I agree. The line between the pragmatic and epistemological dimensions of ethics has clearly been crossed. And to make matters more difficult, postmodernist and feminist theorists call for *reduced* authorial authority, and *increased* description of individuals rather than cultures or groups. For example,

The strategy has for writing this paper, then, has been to juxtapose five sets of autobiographical writings ... The idea is to allow multiple sets of voices to speak for themselves, with my own author's voice muted and marginalized as commentary. (Fischer, 1986: 201)

The different components or figures are thus all parts of persons or relationships fixed on to one another. One person or relationship exists



cut out of or as an extension of another. Conversely, these extensions - relationships and connections - are integrally part of the person. They are the person's circuit. (Strathern, 1991: 118)

Michael Fisher claims to have muted his own voice, Marilyn Strathern is arguing for a representation of individuals in contexts of relationships and connections. To return to our fictional principal, the logical representation by ethical standards of anonymity - completely obfuscated - runs contrary to both reduced editorial control and a presenting individuals in social context. This illustrates the difference between method and theory, for both of these authors were writing in pragmatic ethical vacuums - Fischer used published autobiographies for data and Strathern's work is almost purely theoretical. The 'writing up' of original research allows no such luxury. Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) wrote eloquently in favour of detailed presentation of real individual people ("a particular Bedouin woman"), yet offered no clues in coping with the ethical dilemmas inherent in jeopardizing the anonymity of participants.

Nor does giving a pseudonym to the city help very much. While I suppose I might have used a fictional name for K-W, the problem of residents of the city potentially identifying each other in this work would not disappear. And, in negotiating the terms of interviews with people, if they had concerns about anonymity, such concerns centered on local reputation - never on the city's or a community's.

In fact it was the concern with anonymity raised by *some* participants that adds further complexity to ethically writing this ethnography. Three people specifically asked

that their professional and family ties not be used in the final thesis. Their fears were that certain opinions held would not be well received by their peers, and could do harm to their reputations and professional standings. And yes, in each case the participant could be described as holding some professional or business status that was in part dependent upon a good reputation amongst Chinese persons in town. My problem in happily honouring these requests is not one of how to achieve sufficient anonymity; this is easily done if one is willing to defend the researcher's authority in presentation and sacrifice detailed context. The question is, and this is of key epistemological importance, is it ethically or intellectually defensible to provide more obscurity in an ethnography for some over others?

When anonymity is only granted to those who happen to ask for it, no claim to an ethical anthropology can be made. Furthermore, if certain participants receive greater attention in an ethnography because they are less identifiable by certain characteristics (profession, family ties, income, education, history), what does this do to the quality of internal comparison? It is of little surprise that anthropologists have favoured non-elites in their study of urban societies - such people are less likely to worry about professional stakes, and the pyramid structure of classes provides greater natural camouflage for those closer to the bottom.

If I wish to compare Tom and Joe, and perhaps draw some conclusions about their similarities or contrasts, I cannot provide disproportionate levels of description about each

simply because Tom is a taxi driver and Joe is the mayor - this is ethically wrong and epistemologically untenable. The solution seems obvious - provide the same level of anonymity for all participants used in the study, using the most stringent request or requirement to do so as the common denominator. If the audience will accept a high level of editorial control, and place a great deal of trust in my faithfulness to the data, this may work. In fact, this is the strategy that will be employed in the following chapters - all participants will be given equal shielding to the best of my ability.

Anonymity, which is generally a pragmatic concern, extracts a high analytical price when taken seriously. The very nature of anthropological knowledge is formed by even this simple premise. Just when we are learning to appreciate the value of specific contextualizations, and the need to represent individuals in all their complexity and unique embodiment of social fields, it seems we have forgotten the ethical dimensions of fieldwork and ethnography. Quite often what makes information socially relevant, significant, or interesting is precisely what we cannot divulge. A high school principal, a mayor, and a taxi driver hold occupational *and* status roles that bear great influence upon their experiences, yet the ethics of anonymity tend to discourage the inclusion of such.

The researcher who plans to protect participants - and without such the goodwill necessary for fieldwork would evaporate - must be aware that this implies more than using false names. The extent and sort of data we can present ethically is part and parcel

of honouring promises in the field. Ethical and epistemological issues are inseparable in this light. Before moving on to other issues, consider the following two statements:

"The truth is, I only belong to the Chinese Cultural Centre because it's good for business."

[discussing the proportion of Asian clients...] "Our business was traditionally Germans and professionals ... we could hardly kick them out for the ethnics, could we!?"

If such statements appear later in this thesis, I can assure you that their origin will be indiscernible; shrouded in vague or false references. To analyse them completely would require information about the speakers that I cannot divulge. Lying is an ethical necessity, and a key condition of anthropological knowledge.

#### *Informed consent and protection of subjects*

I have already described the efforts I made to ensure participants were aware of my intentions. As with promises of anonymity, however, it would be facile to suggest that informed consent is as simple as that. There is a certain chicken-and-egg flavour to the dilemma of informed consent - the final thesis cannot be created until fieldwork is complete, so even I could not fully inform people as to what their input would result in.

Informed consent is primary to the protection of adult participants - without enough information to judge the risk inherent in talking to me, they are being duped.

The following aspects problematic to informed consent and protection will be considered: the problem of the Hawthorne effect (the researcher's influence upon subjects), the disciplinary delusion that individual consent grants *carte blanche* in interpretation and presentation, and the ultimately subversive nature of anthropology.

The Hawthorne effect, so named after a sociologist, refers to the problem that the very interaction of the researcher with the subject can result in the subject modifying his or her behaviour, thus defeating the very point of inquiry. If we accept Fabian's (1994) framing of anthropological research as ultimately confrontational in nature, producing created knowledge as a result, the point becomes moot in one respect. When considering informed consent, however, there is more to be said. Earlier in this chapter, the use of roles in the field was detailed. Such roles are necessary, and research would be an unhappy process if anthropologists treated all people the same: we tailor our approach based on an assessment of each participant. The goal, crudely, is to get the most out of an interview. Call it being polite, savvy, or sensitive; in reality we strategize each encounter to maximize our gain.

For example, early in the research process it became apparent that several young women shared the belief that life in Canada was better for them than it would have been "back home", where they felt traditional subservient roles for women would be difficult to avoid. In post analysis, this is certainly significant to my findings. I suspected this, but must admit that I did not raise this as a specific interest of mine in all subsequent

interviews. The question is, in interviewing a man with daughters, should I have directly informed him that I had a growing curiosity as to whether men also perceived the roles of women "back home" as more restrictive? In that my interest was in self-definition and definition of others, I could argue that explaining this made the comments regarding women by such men "informed", and made with fair appraisal of the risk involved. The flip side of this was a fear that mentioning the views of young women would result in a Hawthorne effect whereby the men would defend certain practices rather than simply discuss them. Was their consent informed?

Consent for participation is negotiated on an individual basis. This is in keeping with an ethical and legal-contractual formula, a *caveat emptor* relationship where each party assumes some risk and responsibility. If anthropologists are happy with this state of self awareness, then we truly exist in a state of disciplinary delusion. We write about groups, cultures, cities, social systems, and beliefs. All of these are meant to represent shared or collective practices. If we create knowledge about groups, it is illogical to claim that individual consent, no matter how informed, absolves us from responsibility to collectives.

Consider the following statements made in the context of discussing the xenophobia in Markham toward recent affluent Chinese neighbourhoods: "They brought it on themselves.", "They come here and don't try to fit in.", and, "They don't respect Canadian ways." These comments were common, and ran contrary to my expectations.

I will use such views in the next chapter to draw some conclusions about the people I describe *as a group*. This may actually do harm to multicultural relations in this province or country, yet by the standards of formal ethics I am free to write about this unless it could be proven I was inciting riots or violence. This is delusion in its purest form - individuals cannot consent on behalf of groups.

I am sure that many would pat me on the head and explain that these are the sort of decisions all social scientists must make routinely - hopefully with professional responsibility and sensitivity. But as with the issue of anonymity, note how the authority of the author must reign supreme once again. Furthermore, we must be realistic in admitting that what is interesting and socially meaningful can often be contentious or even unflattering to some groups. "One of the great gaps in anthropology is that we have been too much interested in the 'system', and although we know that people live half their lives trying to 'beat the system' we tend to take serious notice only when they are caught out, brought to trial and punished" (Bailey, 1969: 87). F.G. Bailey's message was direct and true: a respected ethnography must reflect both idealized and actual aspects of social life. The latter is not always welcome to those we write about.

Let me rephrase this point more strongly: good anthropology requires some risk of harm to people, just as anonymity requires lying. We take consent from multiple individuals, and rightly so, but the responsibility for assessing risk and providing sufficient protection is ongoing. The nature of our knowledge is contingent upon ethical

decisions that ultimately cannot be defended by multiple contracts with individuals. The decisions are ours alone to make. It is with great trepidation that I write about the attitude of many participants toward what I view as racism toward Chinese people in Markham and Vancouver; visible minorities in Canada have enough obstacles without my contribution. But then, I find it paternalistic and equally unethical not to present the complete picture of my encounters. Discussions of epistemology rarely warn the student that all knowledge and analysis is potentially harmful, and always an ethical process. They should.

The final aspect of informed consent and protection of participants that seems ethically 'loaded' is the assumption that we ought to protect all participants. Pragmatically, this may be the general rule, for: "It is improbable that a discipline can endure if the bulk of its research has the purpose of undermining the people who are investigated." (Barrett, 1984: 23) Barrett concluded the same article by noting that the subversive nature of anthropology is unavoidable and at the same time uncontrollable. His solution is to accept this reality, and focus our attentions on reducing social inequality rather than strive for an impossible value-free anthropology (p.24). I agree with this recommendation, but wonder if we will ever be sophisticated enough to keep our weapons pointed only at those who deserve it.

To begin, how can we expect informed consent and participation from those whom we wish to undermine? This can be sometimes honestly given, with participants



expecting little real protection. Daniel Wolf (1991) wrote about an outlaw motorcycle club in Edmonton, Alberta, that, while clearly obtuse at times, presented a portrait that would not engender their welcome in your neighbourhood. Barrett's (1987) ethnography about the radical right wing in Canada was not apologist in any manner, yet was apparently well received by some of the racists themselves (personal communication). Outlaw bikers and Fascists, however, enjoy a rogue reputation to begin with, and their willingness to risk subversion may not be shared by all groups.

Such openness might be more difficult to broker amongst the elites in society. A lawyer's bar association or other high status organization would likely not allow unfettered access to their ranks. Even if a gifted fieldworker were able to do so, the ethical problems are really not lessened. True, the beneficiaries of unequal power relationships may deserve our best subversive efforts; but this assumes that we can identify who is benefiting, and limit the effect of our ultimate products to them alone.

Returning to the comments about Chinese neighbourhoods in Markham and Vancouver, there is little guidance to be found in deciding who the elites are - the reality is far more complex. I could decide that affluent immigrants building monster homes are clearly advantaged, and that their actions are harming other Chinese people in Canada by engendering racism. Such would accurately reflect the sentiments of most people I interviewed. Alternatively, I could decide that the information is simply too harmful to present, and keep my thoughts restricted to my fieldnotes. A third option could be based

on the conclusion that presenting people as real and complex does more service than writing about them in a manner that patently glosses over potentially unflattering findings. Obviously, I have chosen the final path, and can only await the consequences with some trepidation.

Promising to protect participants and ensuring informed consent may satisfy base legal sensibilities, but can serve to delude us into believing that our ethical work is done. Journalists have two relatively simple guidelines to live by: protect their informants and verify all facts with at least two independent sources. But newspapers split their pages into 'news' and 'commentary'. We have no such luxury in anthropology: our facts are interpretations and *vice versa*. Our knowledge is ethical to its core.

### *Our knowledge is ethical*

There are no quick fixes to engaging in a practice that is so potentially unethical and subversive. For my part, I have tried to imagine that every line I write will be read by every participant, their friends and family, and anyone else with an interest in the subject matter. This does not always satisfy intellectual criteria, but the epistemology of anthropology is not rooted in abstract reason and argument. It is based on the often competing interests of groups, individuals (participants), the researcher, methodology, consequences of publishing, and theory (intellectual criteria). What mediates all these interests can be called ethics. In this sense, the ethical decisions that formulate an

ethnography must be included honestly along with an account of methodology. We are in serious trouble, and completely out of tune with the nature of our own knowledge, if we believe that pre-research promises can bear the weight of mediating an ethical ethnography.

Pragmatic ethical guidelines, which are necessary and widely accepted, carry epistemological ramifications. And if certain paths feminist or postmodernist theorists would suggest are of no help, neither is a return to positivistic research. Whittaker notes:

The notion that all thought has morality built into it, an idea so fundamental to the interpretive paradigm, would be completely wrong from the perspective of positivism. Indeed this very moral possibility is seen as a dangerous "error", a bias that positivism itself is expected to correct. (1981: 449)

Geertz noted the folly of both extreme positivism and a foreshadowed postmodernism:

This flight into scientism, or, on the other side, into subjectivism, are but signs that the tension cannot be any longer borne, that nerve has failed and a choice has been made either to suppress either one's humanity or one's rationality. These are the pathologies of science, not its norm. (1968: 158)

A consideration of ethics can easily lead one to a nihilistic appraisal of fieldwork. Every action on the anthropologist's part requires a consideration of harm and justice, and it is only sheer delusion that allows us to believe a committee or forms in triplicate can free us from this condition. Such judgments are never a matter of choosing the morally

right course: lying and carefully assessed (but never eliminated) risks are part of the ethical mandate. Our knowledge is dependent upon the ultimate authority of the researcher to present data that balances meaning with protection, and explanation with consequence. Small wonder some suggest we give up the enterprise of anthropology.

Even if we did pack up our tents and retreat into the library, we would be committing the ethical act of non-action (truly, there is no escape!), and denying our belief that anthropology has any meaning or worth. Having attracted some very bright and just people over the last century, it is difficult to believe there is no worth to what we do. And if we could learn to embrace ethical dilemmas, we might find a new arena of public contribution in an age where issues of technology, exchange of information, individual privacy, and media dominance are begging for ethical guidance.

**Conclusion: the medium is the method.**

This chapter began by challenging the traditional theory discussion as sufficient background for ethnography, and promised a methodological accounting for this project in its place. This was a device, of course, for one cannot split the world into pragmatic (methodological) and abstract (theoretical) categories.

Our theories are all too often built upon abstract thought and literature reviews, then foisted upon our data as though they were so many insects to be categorized into species. Data are created by our methodology, limitations brought to the field, the nature

of networks and individuals we encounter, and, most importantly, are essentially ethical embodiments. There is no reason why our theoretical musings cannot tackle such issues.

There has been a great deal of self-flagellation involved in outlining the life of this thesis, and this too was done deliberately. Self-satisfaction within the discipline left us wide open to criticism - with just cause. We have existed in a state of self-delusion. An ability to understand the limits of one's understanding is at least as important as the understanding gained itself. Unreflexive knowledge is a pleasant mental exercise at best, and entirely without meaning. I have attempted to steer away from angst ridden navel-gazing and self exploration, which to many postmodernists and feminists is the chosen route to reflexive knowledge. In fact, it is Emile Durkheim who comes to mind as more suitable example to follow. As we ought to do more often in anthropology, he took great pains to isolate the conceptual domain (i.e., the limits of knowledge) that sociology dwelt in, and presented this as *methodology* - not theory. *Rules for the Explanation of Social Facts* remains a classic attempt to understand just what sociological knowledge was, in a manner that could be applied to concrete research.

By reason of this principle, society is not a mere sum of individuals. Rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. ... If, then, we begin with the individual, we shall understand nothing of what takes place in the group. In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the same break in continuity as between biology and physiochemical sciences. Consequently, every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure the explanation is false. (Durkheim, 1988 (orig. 1938): 241)

Note how he was able to marry abstract ideas about the nature of sociological knowledge to concrete statements about methodology. Psychological factors cannot explain social phenomena. His structural-functionalism may have been too clean, too ordered for current tastes; but he stands out as a thinker who understood the difference between abstract philosophy and the actual practice of sociology. Let me stress that I am not endorsing a revival of Durkheim's approach - his method lacked the flexibility of adaptation to specific contexts and courted a vision of individuals who were incapable of innovation and action. What I am suggesting is that his problem - how to understand the nature of sociological knowledge conditioned by methodological approach - should be our problem. We would do well to follow such an example.

I would like to conclude this chapter by explaining what was gained in this study (beyond the chapters to follow!). A friend of mine, an archaeologist, playfully dismisses qualitative methods as proving nothing when all is said and done. I agree, qualitative methodology is not the cup of tea for those who prefer tidy causal models. However, to limit our understanding of human societies to that which can be quantified is to assume that we understand the 'big picture' sufficiently to commence mopping up the fine points of mystery.

So far as this project goes, there is every reason to believe that the 'big picture' eludes us to date. Had I simply set out to understand Chinese ethnicity in K-W by way of a survey, something that is routinely accepted as both a meaningful category and

approach in both sociology and anthropology, I would have completely missed the distinctions between Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, ethnically Chinese but from countries such as Laos and Vietnam, affluent immigrants, less affluent descendants of the previous generation of immigrants, and so forth. Such distinctions are effortlessly understood by the people I interviewed, and no brilliance was required on my part to find them out. What was required was my presence, ignorance, and flexibility to combine my own interests with those of the participants.

The very process of finding out who I "should *really* talk to" was instructive, and would have been completely untapped had I randomly selected suitable respondents for a survey. The process of engaging in conversations, albeit strategized from my end, allowed me to remain sensitive to complex answers to simple questions. For example, in asking for comments on Rushton's theory of racial hierarchy, I was at times given a qualified "yes": yes, "Orientals" tend to achieve more, but this has more to do with hard work than inherent superiority. This is an important twist, reflecting some thought and a great deal of sophistication on the part of participants. A "somewhat agree" coding on a survey would not convey such complexity.

The confrontation that is fieldwork tends to inspire a healthy humility in the researcher. People are complex, and most will not suffer fools well. People are also kind and generous. By interacting with people face-to-face, one cannot ignore the human equation to such abstract ideas as ethnicity, race and gender. If the trade-off required to

gain such appreciation is a surrender of absolute proof and reliability, a winning deal has been struck.



## Chapter 3

### A Chinese Community?

A community. Who would not want to belong to one? In large-scale, impersonal urban societies, communities bind us together in meaningful and mutually supportive collectives. They may be based on affiliations of ethnicity (Chinese), territory (the Beechwood neighbourhood in Waterloo), political activism (Greenpeace), or even professional guilds (police officers). Anthony Cohen argued that communities can transcend geographic proximity: "As we have seen, the diminution of the geographical bases of community boundaries has led to their renewed assertion in symbolic terms." (1985: 117) Evoking nostalgic sensibilities of family and friendship, the symbolic community seems to represent a marrying of 'old-fashioned' simplicity to modern hustle and bustle - we can belong to a close-knit group without segregating ourselves from the multiple unrelated allegiances that characterize life in the latter part of this century. Tuan Yi-fu (1996) goes so far as to identify a wonderful condition - 'high modernism' - where the individual can embrace both the complex world (cosmos) and the community (hearth, home).

There was a time when anthropologists focussed almost exclusively on small villages or migrant bands, and did not spend much time worrying about whether or not they were communities - such a debate would have been somewhat redundant. In the urban context, we have borrowed the term from sociologists, and often use it to suggest

the existence of reformulated bands or villages existing withing broader social structures. When approaching potential participants, answering queries from friends, or speaking to a seminar of peers and professors, the phrase "I'm doing a study of the Chinese community in Kitchener-Waterloo!" is universally understood. Therein lies the danger of the concept: it is too easy to employ without question. The utopian ideal of the community is an honourable one, but of dubious merit as an unquestioned object of study. Anthropology was founded on studies of race, which were eventually put aside in favour of studies of culture (see Stocking, 1982). In recent years, the culture concept has been challenged (Abu-Lughod, 1991), and it may be tempting to follow the sociological lead and claim communities as our object of study. But for all the same reasons that culture has been questioned (assumptions of homogeneity, denial of individual choice and action), we should be careful not to seize new words that might amount to little more than community and ethnicity repackaged in "new and improved!" labels for the same old ideas. It is a risky imitation of laundry soap marketing.

A problem with conducting fieldwork and formulating projects is that one must be prepared to provide *some* description of intent to provide participants and academic agencies with, and I must confess that I presented a study concerned with the "Chinese community in K-W". Given the body of literature concerned with "the Chinese" and "Chinese communities" in Canada, such a presentation was not unfounded. But while participants were not offended by the label, few agreed that we could speak of a Chinese

community without noting some distinctions and occasional discord.

Rather than set up a "straw man" of a Chinese community to be beaten down - and this seems extreme in the face of widespread acceptance of the idea - this chapter will split the concept into two ideal types: the front and back stages of Chinese community. They exist in dialectical relationship, and neither is more salient or more important than the other. The reader must remember that as ideal types, the front and back stages are exaggerated constructions, not reality, and gloss over detail for the purpose of comparison and explanation. In fact, I am not completely comfortable with the use of "stages" as a metaphor. It is visualist (see Fabian, 1983), and can serve to draw vain attention to the cleverness of the anthropologist. It is the participants of this study who possess expertise in balancing different connotations of a Chinese community, and their realities are not ideal, they are lived.

The front stage is where a public and symbolic Chinese community is shared by both Chinese and non-Chinese people. It is represented by, among other things, the cultural centre, ethnic businesses, and many academic works. The image of the Chinese on the front stage is homogeneous, simple, ideal, and could be called the surface of Chinese experience. Common social understanding, in large part, is found on the front stage, for it requires no particular expertise or sophistication to grasp.

The back stage is where those "in the know" must contend with the many distinctions and divisions that permeate the supposed community presented on the front

stage. Cantonese and Mandarin, male and female, insular newcomers and established Chinese families are the sort of distinctions made on the back stage. It is an arena of heterogeneity and complexity, it requires deep understanding, and represents who people "really" are. But it is no more important than the front stage to participants; it is simply more refined. I am reluctant to call the back stage covert, for this would imply a deliberate conspiracy of silence. By its very nature, the back stage prevents such consistent and unified action. It is hidden to non-Chinese people as a rule, however, while requiring participating Chinese people to be keenly aware of each other's distinctions and their own relationship to the same.

Carolle Simard's (1991) study of the Chinese community is an example of the back stage being glossed over for an unquestioned front stage - the Chinese component of a larger multi-ethnic study was overwhelmingly represented by those immigrated from Hong Kong (seven out of eight participants), something that anyone familiar with the back stage would know is wrong. Even if she were a member of a Chinese cultural centre.

As with all models, ideal types are deliberately simplifications of complex and shifting social realities. The reader is cautioned to treat it with due suspicion, and bear in mind that I favour the simplicity of a duality (front-back) in the hope that such a presentation is more transparent, and thus vulnerable to reinterpretation, than more complex models are.

### *The Back Stage*

Strictly on the basis of personal experience, I strongly suspected that there was no such thing as a homogeneous Chinese community before research began. To that end, I asked all participants if indeed it was fair to speak of a Chinese community. The divisions, distinctions and stereotypes that were revealed as a result represent the 'back stage' of Chinese identity in K-W, and pose a serious challenge to any work that treats 'Chinese' as a suitably discrete category of affiliation. Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, ethnic Cantonese from Laos, Vietnamese Chinese, ethnic Cantonese from Malaysia, recent immigrants, refugees, 'established' Chinese (non-immigrants), and just plain Cantonese and Mandarin speakers are some of the prominent categories that were widely employed.

Some of these categories were presented as unfavourable stereotypes, others, benign identifications. In any case, my intent is not to present an unflattering portrait of participants, but to reflect the complex reality of identification and differences that are masked whenever researchers write about Chinese culture, community or ethnicity. Consider the following passage from an ethnography by Bernard Wong, *Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship: The New Chinese Immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area*:

Some Chinese immigrants keep their Chinese cultural orientation in dealing with things, people, and the unknown. They celebrate all the customs and festivals of the Chinese culture. In their homes, they use only Chinese style furniture and, following the advice of geomancers (*Feng Shui* experts), eat

only Chinese food. They work only with Chinese firms and interact only with Chinese people in America. (1998: 108)

Wong began the ethnography by detailing the various origins of past and present immigrants that are called the Chinese in America, but then proceeded to treat them as a single cultural, culinary, religious, and social unit. While it is true that certain practices are shared amongst most Chinese nations - *Feng Shui*, Chinese New Year, temples - they analytically on a par with a Christian, European or North American culture.

This assumption of community or culture can be couched in political terms. In that there has been a sorry history of official and informal racism in Canada directed toward Chinese people, some assume that group suffering will be opposed by group action. *Chinese Canadians: Voices from a Community* (Huang and Jeffery, 1992) is a delightful collection of interviews with Chinese Canadians, and generally celebrates the contribution of successful members and improved status of the community at large. A concluding essay in the same compilation by Peter S. Li explores the changing struggles and demographic makeup of the Chinese in Canada, and concludes:

It is difficult to speculate what the future will be for Chinese Canadians. The historical facts suggest that the road towards equality has been hazardous and precarious. It would appear that despite the economic and occupational advances made by Chinese Canadians in recent decades, they have yet to cross the social barriers to full acceptance into Canadian society. (1992: 273)

The shift from group oppression to assumed group action is subtle, and would assume, for example, that Chinese Canadians in cities as close as K-W and Toronto would

be unified in some meaningful way. However, in the course of this study, I found quite the opposite to be true. I talked to all participants about some of the very public xenophobia that had arisen in recent years toward growing Chinese neighbourhoods in affluent suburbs such as near Vancouver and Toronto (Markham, Scarborough). In general, people had less to say about the history of anti-Chinese sentiment in Vancouver, but most were aware of two issues that had been matters of public debate in suburban centres near Toronto: the Agincourt Plaza (where all the businesses and signs were exclusively Chinese) and the 'monster home' trend (where recent immigrants from Hong Kong had been accused of taking over neighbourhoods and building large homes). I cannot stress enough the value of qualitative research in exploring opinions on this issue - my expectation had been, wrongly, that participants would have taken the public outcry as a painful sign of enduring racism.

A typical attitude was represented by Sharon, who had lived in K-W for over twenty years, and first came to Canada from Hong Kong to attend university. She was involved in Chinese associations in town, and was a most animated and intense person to interview. On the topic of the growing Chinese neighbourhoods of more recent Hong Kong immigrants north of Toronto, she had the following comments:

"To me, and I was *born* in Hong Kong, I can see how Canadians think. They [the Hong Kong Chinese] take over a portion of a city, force people to change signs - every corner you see it - it's a bit overdoing it. ... You have to, in a way, follow tradition. ... The way they park! My husband drove down there recently, and I told him to be careful! ... They have their own circle of friends, all rich, and they

don't speak English. They want to have Hong Kong here. They compare their kids to ours and look down on us [for not raising the children in a proper Chinese manner].

Sharon's characterization of recent Hong Kong immigrants in the Toronto area as unwilling to adjust to Canadian ways and generally deserving of public disapproval was echoed by many others. These more recent immigrants were varyingly referred to as the Hong Kong people, or the Cantonese, but the disparaging opinions were not directed at all Cantonese-speaking people. One woman in her early twenties of age, Mary, who was Cantonese-Laotian herself, had the following story reflecting the boorish (my word) conduct of more recent immigrants from Hong Kong:

"Once, these friends of my parents came over - they're Cantonese - and the whole time they treated my parents like second class, like children ... it's the same when I'm at a party with mainly Hong Kong people - they look down on me. [she then recounted meeting the same people who had treated her parents poorly at a shopping mall, and told me they had ignored her]"

The above passage does not convey the bitterness in Mary's voice - it was haunting. Both she and Sharon shared the view that newer Chinese immigrants were essentially snobbish and not to be taken as representative of all Chinese people.

Such dynamics are far from unique to Chinese Canadians. Micheline Labelle (1997) described a reverse split in various ethnic 'communities' in Montreal - Haitian community leaders, for example, were aware of the problems in representing more established and affluent long-term residents alongside less affluent and established



newcomers. In essence, the community was splintered by the ongoing history of immigration.

Not everybody was critical of the new neighbourhoods or the all-Chinese plazas such as "Agincourt Plaza" that have been at the centre of controversy. Mike, a man in his sixties, blamed Canadian racism that punished the Chinese both historically for stealing working-class jobs, and now for being successful. I heard an account of another man who said, "Here we go again, they're always out to get the Chinese." Two other participants were not as vehement in their charges of racism, but nevertheless did not blame the recent Chinese immigrants for the public xenophobia. However, most people held some negative stereotype of more recent Hong Kong immigrants. John, having moved to Canada from Hong Kong very recently, expressed a negative view toward all-Chinese neighbourhoods.

It's not right what they're doing. I mean, I moved into a subdivision here, and I took a look around at my neighbours. We back onto a lake, and I wanted to build a fence for my children [protection] but no one else did so I just watch them closely instead.

In discussing Chinatowns - a more politically neutral topic - most people explained that a benefit to living in K-W was precisely that no concentrated Chinese neighbourhoods existed. K-W was described as 'friendly and open', in opposition to Chinatowns where the merchants were often described as both snobbish ("I try to speak Cantonese to them, but because it's not perfect they won't even talk back sometimes!" - Kim) and mercenary: many reported that with the recent growth of Vietnamese populations in Toronto,

Chinatown shops were catering increasingly to non-Chinese people.

David Chuenyan Lai's *Chinatowns* (1988), is a comprehensive study of the Chinatown phenomenon in Canada, yet in considering the revival of Victoria's Chinatown, he proposed: "A comprehensive plan should be devised to retain the labyrinthine characteristics of 'the forbidden city', enhance its viability as a heritage entity, and preserve it as 'a sociopsychological well' to which the Chinese, young and old, can return to water their cultural roots and refresh themselves." (268-9) While the people I met in K-W appreciated the ability to buy speciality foods and other goods unavailable here, the general attitude toward Chinatown in Toronto was of a place to visit infrequently for necessary shopping - their "sociopsychological wells" seemed full.

I suppose it would be naive on my part to expect a different attitude. After all, if Chinatown was seen as an ideal to a person, they would move near there. However, the sociological literature seems to take it for granted that Chinese people would prefer to live in either a Chinatown (or nearby) or a Chinese suburban enclave. Without denying the historic and current importance of Chinatowns in many North American cities, it is worth questioning the symbolic importance of Chinatowns to Chinese identity or community. It is as though they have captured a romantic zeal in the public imagination, and have led researchers to assume they exist as the epicentre of a unified Chinese community. Lai described a shift from old to new Chinatowns with a positively evolutionary twist - the

assumption being that critical masses of Chinese people will necessarily give rise to a Chinatown, new or old:

To these new Chinese immigrants [post 1967], the Old Chinatown was merely an area where they could taste genuine Chinese food and purchase Chinese commodities not available in other parts of the city. However, this changed rapidly when many Hong Kong and Taiwanese entrepreneurs established new restaurants and supermarkets outside the Old Chinatown. ... Thus New Chinatowns began to emerge not only in the suburbs of large metropolitan cities, but also in cities where no Chinatowns had been established before. (Lai, 1988: 279)

While Lai only promised a study about Chinatowns, and cannot be criticized for providing such, the front stage of community is unquestioned. For those whom I met in K-W, the back stage involved a distancing between themselves and Chinatown in Toronto: ranging from neutral disinterest to outright distaste. Social scientists have largely failed to look beyond such obvious symbols in studying 'communities', and thus contribute to a false homogeneous portrait of "the Chinese." In the course of one interview, Linda described a party she was at recently where she met a man who spoke Cantonese. They spent the evening conversing in the common language. As she concluded the story, she referred back to our earlier discussion of Chinatowns by saying, "You don't need to have Chinatowns to have a community." The back stage in this case is not necessarily a matter of inter-K-W dynamics, but nevertheless has been instructive in peeling back some common layers of misunderstanding that permeate both popular and academic imaginations.

Closer to home, I encountered additional distinctions. The first, rather than being expressed in fixed categories, can best be interpreted as a gradation from Chinese-Chinese to partially Chinese.

"You want Chinese-Chinese people to speak to? [I replied I wanted to meet all sorts of people...] I have a friend you can talk to, but she's Laotian too - is that okay?..." - Tanya

"Whenever I'm with Chinese people, older people who are more Chinese than me, I feel like an outsider" ... "I wasn't attractive to Chinese men [as a younger woman] I wasn't submissive enough." - Linda

Tanya was a friend of mine prior to this project. She had come to Canada as a child in the 1980s with her family as church-sponsored refugees from Laos. While Laotian by birth, her family roots were in fact Cantonese, and they spoke both languages. As a researcher, I welcomed the additional representation for the study, but Tanya's hesitation in recommending a friend who might not be 'adequately Chinese' was telling - and likely resulted from my self-presentation as a researcher studying Chinese people. Linda was born in another province and raised in a town where her family was for the longest time the only Chinese residents. She spoke fluent Cantonese however, and her professional clientele was based in part upon her connections to other Chinese people. Yet she described other, older people as being 'more Chinese'.

Those who described themselves as less Chinese than others were a relative minority, exclusively women, and either married to non-Chinese men or from a

background described as not completely Chinese. There is another term I encountered - 'bananas' - used to describe younger people born in Canada who were 'yellow on the outside but white on the inside'. The next chapter will deal with this term in greater depth, but for the current discussion it is raised in the context of a gradation from Chinese-Chinese to less so.

By raising the issue of those who might be considered less Chinese than others, I do not mean to imply a rift amongst Chinese people in K-W. The point is to accent the complexities of the back stage that are evident upon investigation. Particularly when considering a visible minority, it is all too easy to consider the 'members' as possessing equal amounts of that minority group's 'culture' or essence. I introduced the experiences of Tanya and Linda to furthermore show that language is not necessarily a reliable indicator of 'ethnic' solidarity or commonality. Both spoke fluent Cantonese. A great deal of attention has been paid to 'heritage languages' (Swidinsky and Swidinsky, 1997, for example) as a sign of successful multiculturalism. The danger lies in assuming that a shared language is sufficient to maintain a 'community'.

The Canadian census lists 'Chinese speaking' as a choice of home language or mother tongue to be listed. The 'back stage' is certainly not elusive in this case, for Cantonese and Mandarin are mutually incomprehensible languages! (There are a few shared words, but not enough to conduct even a simple conversation in.) The distinction goes beyond language, however. In terms of stereotypes placed upon Cantonese speaking

people, there is some relationship to the attitudes expressed toward the new Hong Kong immigrants as described before, but I found that a characterization was at times applied to all "the Cantonese".

"I have three good Cantonese friends only ... Some people feel they cannot mix with the Cantonese. I do not know about white people, for them the competition is less severe. It's a different philosophy" - Robert

"You can always tell the Cantonese, they're loud and obnoxious!" - Sharon (who was Cantonese herself, and made the comment with laughter)

"I don't have much to do with the Chinese cultural centre, it's really all controlled by the Cantonese." - Nancy

Loud, obnoxious, controlling and insular. Such would summarize some of the stereotypes, often offered by Cantonese-speaking people themselves, of the Cantonese people as a whole. I would disagree with Donald Taylor (1981) who argues that all stereotypes contain a kernel of truth. These are stereotypes without much basis beyond the tonal nature of the Cantonese language and the animated manner in which it is spoken. What is interesting, however, is the application of personality types on the basis of a language whose speakers can trace their histories back to Hong Kong, the south of China, Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam.

Mandarin speakers from mainland China were seen as mysterious and closed by many I encountered. Often this was accounted for by the fact that many mainland Chinese

immigrants in K-W were students, or that a communist country resulted in such personalities.

"As for the mainland people; overall they are very reserved. They have a fear of change. *It is a communist country.*" - Jennifer

"The mainland Chinese are more closed. They don't trust. They have to learn to be more open. They should respect other people more." - Josie

"Those of us from China are more closed. We have a different language and find it harder to get along well with the Cantonese from Hong Kong. It's ideological. In Hong Kong it's all commercial. ... We grew up being told what to think..." - Barbara

In the quotations regarding both Mandarin and Cantonese speakers, I deliberately included members reflecting on their own linguistic peers. The language stereotypes were not expressed with the same vehemence that one encounters when certain anglophone Canadians characterize French Canadians as a different race, for example. However, language is used as a marker of difference.

Three warnings that should be registered here. First, there is nothing unique to Chinese people in categorizing each other, and making stereotypical assumptions on that basis. For example, Frans Schryer (1998) described how Dutch immigrants to Ontario maintained a 'pillar' system of division that was transported and then partially transformed. Second, anthropologists have not been immune to the idea that a given culture will produce people with generally common personalities and qualities - Ruth Benedict was the pioneer of the Culture and Personality school of anthropology (see Benedict, 1932) Finally, it must be restated that Cantonese and Mandarin stereotypes are not a source of

bitter division, and seem to be comfortably believed by most people I met. A final irony is that the COCCC recently adopted English as the language used in meetings - it was the only common one between all members!

So far, the notion of community has been exposed as too simplistic, whether one wishes to consider a pan-Canadian Chinese culture or a seamless community in K-W. The final distinction that shall be explored is one of gender. I hesitate to include gender in an argument against notions of community for two reasons. First, women are overrepresented in this study, and despite the belief of many feminists that women ought to be studied in their own right, I would prefer to have more input from men - gender being a relational category. Second, there is a trend in the popular media and entertainment fields to treat the experience of Chinese women as a given within North American Chinese culture. Amy Tan novels come to mind as embodying this iconic representation of young Chinese women struggling to come to terms with their mothers. Yet there is no reason to believe that young generations of any ethnic, cultural or social group do not have to balance the authority of older generations against their own desires.

My experience in the field is worth recounting, however, for it does challenge the mother-daughter strife as defining the life of young Chinese women in North America. In fact, most young women whom I met talked about both parents and their brothers as defining their family life. Furthermore, 'back home' was almost universally used as



representing a less desirable life for women. Regardless, the experience of women should not be overlooked when questioning the notion of community.

"My brothers, they can get away with anything!" - Tanya

"A Chinese family is part of your heritage. Some good and some bad, it's hard to break. Overall it's more good - except for the guy thing: girls don't matter." - Barbara

"Here, very often the husbands can never be as important as they were back home, and the wives often do better. Then the husbands take it out on their wives or divorce them." - Ming

"My friends worry about how strictly my brothers treat me, but I know it's just their [the brothers'] way of caring." - Brenda

[on the topic of Chinese families] "Not all our ways are nice. They can be restrictive and not very friendly." - Nancy

Women overwhelmingly viewed Canada as a better environment to live in, and often contrasted this to 'back home' where they would have to be subservient to their husbands. Conversely, the only issue of gender imbalance raised by men was created from *not* being back home. Some men told me stories of Hong Kong businessmen leaving their families in Canada once established only to revisit them a few times a year. This was frowned upon as unfair to the wives and children. Women also recounted this trend to me.

This male dominance, which was seen as fading in Canada as younger generations established families, was not uniform. By this, I mean that in certain areas, such as having open conversations, women were seen as superior (though one might attribute this to a

characterization of women as emotional and thus weak). I have already mentioned the trend of recommended contacts in the field where I was directed to women far more often than men. This was difficult for me to understand, and despite asking people directly why this might be the case, I was never given an explanation. I sensed that perhaps men were seen as too important to be bothered with a nosy anthropologist at times, but alternatively I had the sense from younger women that their fathers and brothers were too conservative and traditional for their tastes, and thus not suitably open for interviews.

When one looks at such factors as the representation on the board of directors at the COCCC (roughly half are women), and the professional mobility of the female participants I encountered, it is easily understandable why women view Canadian life as preferable. Again in the spirit of 'writing against the grain' of community and characterizing these dynamics of gender as somehow uniquely Chinese, it must be pointed out that the lot of earlier generations of all Canadian women was worse than it is now. Among my own age group, most of our mothers held full time jobs and carried by far the burden of managing the household. When participants spoke of 'back home', perhaps it is not so different than friends of mine comparing their desires to their parents.

The back stage of the Chinese community is really nothing more than the sort of detail lost in considering "Chinese" communities or culture as a cohesive group. Whenever I asked participants if it was fair to speak of a Chinese community in K-W, answers were mixed, but most noted the distinctions between new and previous

immigrants, and Cantonese and Mandarin speakers. Of course this ethnography is now guilty of its own glosses of detail - each individual has a unique history and context. However, the sort of distinctions I have noted here are commonly known and used, and far from presenting an unflattering portrait of participants, they serve to demonstrate that what is so often oversimplified is in fact as complex and human as any other existence.

### *The Front Stage*

There is an annual Multicultural Festival each summer held in Victoria Park (Kitchener). Children's games, music, dancing, and dozens of stalls selling international crafts draw thousands of local residents. If you make your way to the food court, you will see tents with banners from various cultural associations: the Vietnamese Catholic Youth, Greek, Croatian, and Kurdish groups are all serving wonderful fares. And, as you may have guessed, you will find a banner representing the Central Ontario Chinese Cultural Centre. Welcome to the front stage!

The front stage of Chinese community consists of those common symbols, events and practices that are part of the wider public conscience. In addition to a booth serving egg rolls and chop suey (two foods that are Canadianized versions of Chinese food), one may encounter the Chinese community by attending the annual Chinese New Year festival at City Hall, eating at a Chinese restaurant, or even having a Chinese person as a co-worker.

The last instance, of the co-worker, is not fancy on my part. I went to meet a participant at her work place for an interview. I had never met this woman, but she agreed to an interview via a helpful friend of mine who approached her on my behalf. My friend greeted me at his cubicle, and introduced me around to his neighbours. They learned what I was there for, and began to fondly joke about this woman: "Oh, she's always talking that funny Chinese talk on the phones!", and, "She sure is the right person to talk to - she belongs to all sorts of Chinese clubs.", and, "Whenever she's talking Chinese on the phone, she's probably talking to all her family!". These comments were said kindly, and indeed this woman played up her role as a boisterous, no-nonsense Chinese woman with her friends and co-workers. And compared to many non-Chinese people I know in K-W, her co-workers seemed quite comfortable and knowledgeable about the Chinese.

As the above perceptions illustrate, the public image of the Chinese community and identity is far removed from the reality of the back stage. That said, there is a different reality at work here, and it would be a mistake to discount the front stage as uninformed or unworthy of examination. The participants I met were not offended by the term Chinese, and in fact use the term often. Members of the COCCC were proud of their contribution to the Multicultural Festival and annual Chinese New Year celebration (which is completely managed by the centre), and I was frequently encouraged to attend both. The front stage may be simplistic and surface level, but it is not dismissed by those who fully understand the back stage.

The best way to understand the characteristics of the front stage is to look at a few examples, and isolate the public symbolism from the back stage. Chinese ethnic businesses, the Chinese language school, and the COCCC (there are other, smaller organizations in K-W such as the Lan Tin Club and the Chinese Women's Federation) will serve well to illustrate the front stage of the Chinese community in K-W. By looking into these cases in some depth, it is unavoidable that certain inconsistencies will be noted, or fallacies revealed. This is not to be taken as a negative attack (such as pointing out that egg rolls are not traditional Chinese food), but as an example of the complex dialectical relationship between the front and back stages.

#### Chinese Ethnic Businesses:

K-W is home to numerous Chinese restaurants, a Cantonese video rental shop, a branch of the Hong Kong Bank of Canada that offers services in both Cantonese and Mandarin, a Chinese food wholesaler, a travelling caterer who will cook Chinese food in customers driveways (in a large truck outfitted as kitchen), a Chinese grocery store and many professionals from acupuncturists to lawyers who cater to Chinese clientele. To most non-Chinese residents, these represent the obvious signs of a Chinese community.

In arguing that the front stage of the Chinese community is a matter of public symbolism, there is no better example than the Chinese ethnic business. In talking to various entrepreneurs and professionals, one theme was universal - few businesses could

depend on strictly Chinese clients and survive. This flies in the face of sociological studies that assume ethnic businesses are a sign of a cohesive ethnic community, or are an economic necessity resulting from structural racism. In K-W, such businesses (with the exception of the Cantonese video store) represent a public arena of contact between the Chinese community and all others.

In visiting and observing the clients of restaurants (a most welcome aspect of fieldwork!) and the Chinese grocery store I had been told of, I was struck by the mix of people patronizing each. Now, I cannot determine on sight a person's heritage, but can offer that on the surface, it appears many people of European and African descent were present. If my own observations are weak data at best, I did not meet one professional or entrepreneur who claimed the majority of their business was in fact Chinese-based. I did meet one accountant who had recently moved to Canada from Hong Kong who depended mainly on Cantonese-speaking clientele for the time being, but he was emphatic in outlining his plans for working with "Canadians" (his word) as the mainstay of his firm. There was only one example I encountered of a business that was strictly limited to Chinese clients - a Cantonese video rental shop. Given what has been discussed about language on the back stage, what many would take to be a Chinese ethnic business would in fact be glossing over the back stage.

There is another argument put forth that recent Chinese immigrants have no choice, due to racism, but to work at ethnic Chinese businesses. This was almost certainly

the case historically, but as Wong notes: "Even those [immigrants] who were relatively well-educated and held high school or college degrees in their homeland have trouble finding work outside of the ethnic niche if they do not speak English." (1998: 42) That language may limit the employment prospects of all immigrants from non-English speaking countries escapes the more spirited criticisms of structural racism (such as by Li, 1988). While Canada most certainly demonstrates structural racism, it is reasonable to argue that "pull" factors with regard to economic activities operate alongside "push" factors.

The Chinese ethnic business is often characterized as family based. The majority of people I met in 'Chinese' businesses of all sorts, were either individual professionals or hired mainly unrelated people. Miri Song, in a superb article about Chinese take away restaurants in Britain, criticized researchers who assume children are forced to work by parents, who in turn are forced to use the children as cheap labour: "In most cases, access to family labour is treated as a given, reducing family members to labour inputs, rather than as individuals who work together to make a living." (1997: 692) Further on, she noted that Chinese family businesses are stigmatized unfairly as "racialized and dirty" as opposed to the more wholesome family enterprises such as farms (*ibid*: 695).

There is a final aspect to ethnic businesses that is often cited: Chinese people must establish businesses that do not exist in competition with others due to racism. This may well be true, but none of the participants I met claimed that a Chinese business was the

only way to get ahead. One man who went into wholesaling had started in the same field at a Chinese business in the late 1960s), but as he explained, "I had a friend who recommended me there, and my attitude was to take any job first, then look around." The notion that Chinese restaurants do not compete with other restaurants in town is not compatible with the experience of restaurateurs - restaurants all compete with each other, given that most people only eat three meals a day. In fact, at a local shopping mall, a Chinese family used to own a Chinese food concession, but it was reported to me that they had not renewed their lease, and the owners of the new Chinese food counter are not Chinese!

Wong (1998) noted that in the San Francisco area, Chinese businesses historically catered to non-Chinese people, and that only in recent years has the Chinese community grown sufficiently to comprise the bulk of clients in many cases. In K-W there is nothing close to a sufficient Chinese population to suggest that ethnic Chinese businesses represent a community or enclave. Rather, they exist as a known economic symbol that can be capitalized upon by both Chinese and non-Chinese persons. Consider the following statement:

"Our business was traditionally Germans and professionals ... we could hardly kick them out for the ethnics, could we? ... And in fact our next office will be located in a caucasian neighbourhood." - John



I will not reveal the nature of John's business, but will reveal that he was not Chinese, yet was in a business that ostensibly catered to Chinese clients. The front stage is important (a Chinese business as a symbol and means of contact with others), but can never be confused with a community. I must add that I encountered other non-Chinese people who directed some marketing toward Chinese clients, were grateful for the business, and enjoyed a good trustworthy reputation with many of the Chinese people I met.

Finally, in considering the Chinese ethnic business as part of the front stage, and isolating it as a symbol, not a sign of community, I must remind the reader of the countless Chinese people in K-W who do not work in Chinese businesses. A hairdresser, computer analyst, insurance salesperson, university professor, students, homemakers, and factory workers are but a few examples. The business-community connection relegates them to drones who will patronize mainly Chinese businesses. Given that the bulk of my interviews took place at coffee shops like Tim Hortons, at the request of participants, this assumption should be treated with caution.

#### The Chinese Language School:

Run under the auspices of the Chinese Cultural Centre, there are classes offered in both Mandarin and Cantonese for children. I have chosen to include the language school as emblematic of the front stage for two reasons: it represents the most common

experience of all Chinese people, or their children, in K-W; and, as it participates in the government sponsored heritage language program, it is very much part of the public image of all ethnic communities and minorities in Canada.

I was unprepared for the realization that language school was a virtual rite of passage for all Chinese children growing up in K-W. It is affordable, and very much expected:

"I may not have sent my kids there, but everybody would have asked me why not!"  
- Sharon.

Language is often taken as a marker of ethnic survival and solidarity in social studies. In that language school was a rite of passage, perhaps I have been too hasty to categorize the front stage as not representative of a community. But the following would tend to argue against community solidarity through language:

" I don't think the kids get too much out of it. They are not interested in multi-linguism. And it's ironic, there's less mixing [between students] at language school than there is at regular school." - Nancy

"It was a waste of time. All the kids around me spent more time laughing and playing than learning!" - Josie

"I don't know how much longer I can make them [her children] go, they don't like it. We hope that when they are older, they can learn enough to pick it

[Cantonese] up if they want to." - Sharon

"My husband insists that my son learns Cantonese, Chinese ways. He makes him watch Cantonese cartoons, speaks to him always in Cantonese, and he goes to the school. ... To me, it doesn't matter as much." - Sue

To the parents, language school represented a means of passing on cultural heritage. The children, it would appear, were not overly enthusiastic about the prospect. Several parents spoke to me of forcing their children to go, in the hope that they would appreciate it in later years as adults. In that most children would rank weekend school as low on their list of priorities, there is nothing novel in these findings.

Based on participation, one would have to rate the language school as among the most successful programs run by the COCCC. However, when I spoke to younger adults about their memories of language school, they recalled mayhem more than learning, and any sense of Chinese culture they explained to me was almost always drawn from family experiences. Still, this represented one aspect of Chinese community that seems quite common.

As an aspect of the front stage, the language school was first introduced by most participants to me as Chinese Language School. Only when I probed to find out if both Cantonese and Mandarin were taught was this further explained to me. This illustrates the ease of shifting between front and back stages, even in the context of one conversation. For a Chinese person talking to a non-Chinese person, Chinese language school suffices

as a reference, and the distinctions are made only when necessary.

Some may be confident in the existence of a Chinese community by reason of a successful language school. As a symbol of culture, perhaps this may be the case. But parents seemed resigned to the fact that it would essentially be up to the children (once adults) to maintain competence in Cantonese or Mandarin, and generally hope that some sense of heritage will be imparted. In this sense, the front stage is shared by generations, with the older presenting what must seem a curious symbol of culture to the younger.

The Chinese Cultural Centre:

Sitting on the corner of Victoria and Mayfield Streets is a renovated old house that is home to the Chinese Cultural Centre. There are about 200 families who hold membership, and the centre has grown from a few members meeting in living rooms in the 1970s to a model cultural association in K-W.

There are two aspects to the function of the centre: public awareness and members' activities. Public awareness comes from participation in the Multicultural Festival, an annual ball, and the Chinese New Years celebrations, among other examples. Members' activities include managing local radio shows in Mandarin, and until recently, Cantonese (there was insufficient demand as Cantonese television, movies, and radio are widely available); bus trips to various tourist locations, and a newsletter with advertising directed at the Chinese community.

As a participant in official government multiculturalism, the centre has a public profile. At the same time, the members' activities are numerous, and fees are relatively low. But while the membership may be as high as eight hundred, there is still reason to discount such a centre as the key to a community.

"The truth is, I really only keep my membership there for business reasons."

"You should go meet the people there, I think they probably know more about Chinese people than I do."

"There's too much factionalism there. I wish we could get together more and have one voice."

These three quotations, understandably unattributed, are not meant to undermine the very real pride and hard work evident at the centre. Furthermore, the help I received from board members was second to none.

However, we must ask whose cultural centre this is. There is no need to revisit the distinctions masked by the term Chinese, but this does reinforce the public symbol of a Chinese community. I cannot speak to the absolute number of members who belonged for business reasons alone, but this was a common thread of membership explanation given to me by many. It should be stressed that a great many voluntary associations exist by virtue of businesspeople who wish to "network", something that should cause us to question how unique a cultural centre is by comparison.

Over the course of fieldwork, it became apparent to me that the members I met were largely professionals, and in their mid-thirties of age at least. I met one woman who worked three jobs, and would have had no time to join or participate as a board member. It is not uncommon to see social agencies and voluntary groups dominated by relatively affluent and established people (Morgan, 1988). The time and financial commitment are often beyond that of younger or poorer people.

I gave a quotation from a participant earlier in this chapter that charged the Centre as being Cantonese controlled. This is categorically not the case, and the board of directors was represented by Taiwanese, mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Cantonese, and even Malaysian Cantonese people. The Mandarin radio hour was being maintained, despite its limited audience, due to the need for such - the Cantonese radio hour was dropped (The decision was forced by the radio station).

There is one commonality to board membership that became apparent during the course of fieldwork, and can be attributed to the value of the snowball technique. While the board of directors membership changes out from year to year, it seems that directors are drawn from a relatively select group of people in town who are well-known to each other - if their suggestions for contacts are any measure, for the same names started reappearing. I also found that many of the directors were cited to me as examples of experts in the K-W Chinese community, even by people who were not members of the Centre! Again, this is not so unusual for voluntary associations. My wife was once on the

board of directors at a local women's shelter, and as a result recognizes the names of most prominent social activists, fundraisers, and charity workers in town.

At times, such during the Agincourt plaza crisis, the Centre has exercised a political voice on behalf of Chinese Canadians. However, those I spoke to would prefer to foster public understanding through education and exposure to the Chinese culture, and do not view the centre as a lobbying organization. This is also in keeping with participation with government multiculturalism, which was not implemented to create bodies that would criticize the hand that feeds them.

The Chinese Cultural Centre is a voluntary association, and while it provides 'community' activities strictly for its members, the nature of those members can hardly be cast as representative of all Chinese people. Participants, whether members or not, were all aware of its existence, if vaguely, and suggested it to me as the prime source of understanding the Chinese culture. Preserving a culture or community is too grand a task for one association to do, and flies in the face of our understanding of both as shared and lived by all members of a group.

### *Conclusion*

In questioning the existence of a Chinese community in K-W, more myths were debunked than evidence given in their favour. I would far rather leave the reader with an impression of distinction and symbols than a false presentation of a homogeneous group.

To do so would be engaging in the creation of an urban tribe. Participants spoke frankly about both unity and division, and about the ideal and the less so, and this chapter has tried to repay this by taking both seriously. The distinction between front and back stage is merely an explanatory device - society never breaks down into clean binary divisions, but the device does convey the experience of people I met far more than would a measurement of salience, ethnic solidarity, or any of the other approach that questions "how much" community a given group has. Taking a step back, there is never a question that the people I met have a community - it is formally known as Kitchener-Waterloo. This is too easy to forget, and we should not.

In considering some of the institutions and agencies that comprise the front stage of Chinese community, the reader may well be confused at this time. There seems to be far more distinction and division than cohesion and common identity. Distinctions can be used to denote commonality, though. Richard Alba (1980) concluded that white ethnicity in New York state, varied and selective as it was, served to bond those descended from European ethnicities. How? It distinguished them from colonial American descendants (a fading elite class in the United States), and served to perpetuate the myth of white immigrants succeeding against all odds and assuming a privileged role over other non-white groups (p.315). The particular was transformed into the general.

But the front stage is not a transformation of the back stage - a simplification it most certainly is, but unlike the New Yorkers Alba wrote about, this study's participants



did not use divisions to denote commonality. So what perpetuates the front stage identity of being Chinese? To answer this, a bridge between the individual and social categories must somehow function in the absence of a community (in the sense commonly used.) This bridge is one of race. The distinctions noted in this chapter are numerous, but as the next chapter shall explain, they are unified by a dominant discourse that has a great deal to do with biological explanations.

## Chapter 4

### **The Essence of Being Chinese: a dominant discourse of difference**

#### *Introduction*

To this point, the ethnographic evidence has challenged simplistic notions of community and culture. I deliberately left out one dimension that exists on both the front and back stages, and is shared by Chinese and non-Chinese people. Reifications of biological essence result when socially created categories are attached to immutable personality, family and philosophical attributes. In Canada, one encounters such essentialisms on the basis of region: Western Canadians are thought to be rednecks, French Quebecers insular and snobbish, and Torontonians are thought to believe they exist as the cultural, economic and cosmopolitan centre of Canada. These are beliefs, not facts, and they convert broad impressions into statements about the essential nature of people. With the exception of attitudes toward French Canadians, we have not treated regional stereotypes as similar phenomena to racial ones as a rule. Whether or not social distinctions use traditional categories of race, they may amount to the same thing if they are reified into matters of heritage and individual essence. Gerald D. Berreman (1988, orig. 1972) illustrated this cross-culturally by comparing Indian caste and American race hierarchies, concluding that there is little meaningful difference between the two.

In exploring what is held to be a Chinese essence by many of this study's participants, I am going to build a case that our society is dependent on a language of

difference, one that more often than not has biological assumptions at its core. Following Gerd Baumann (1996), this shared blurring of culture, race, community and biology will be called the dominant discourse. This shall be treated as an ideal type, and will be juxtaposed to a localized demotic discourse.

The dominant discourse that will be constructed here is one of difference. It is shared by the majority of Canadians as a mutual framework of communication. The differences given meaning by the dominant discourse may be based on gender, race, ethnicity, culture, status as Canadian or newcomer, or region. What happens to these and other distinctions however, is a blurring between the social and biological that allows their reification as statements about individual essence, heritage, and ascribed identity. What makes the dominant discourse so powerful is its monopoly on communication and thought - the Whorfian overtones here are apparent. A monopoly of communicative categories cannot be maintained by a minority of people. Politicians of all stripes, racists, egalitarian activists, men and women all use the dominant discourse of difference. This is key to understanding its use here: the dominant discourse is philosophically neutral and ultimately flexible. The only common denominator between the parties engaging in the discourse is that the categories are not convenient labels to distinguish each other, but rather are statements about the core nature of those labelled. As an ideal type, the dominant discourse *is not* to be taken as causal. It is a mode of communication and

understanding, it can evolve in form, and exists in close relationship to numerous demotic discourses.

The demotic discourse is one in which individuals connect themselves to the dominant one. It can be conceived of as localized, and while it shares certain aspects of the back stage, it is not the same thing. Where the back stage involves specialized knowledge about a relatively select group of people, the demotic discourse invokes similar terminology to the dominant - culture, race, gender, and ethnicity. What takes place at the level of demotic discourse is a personal activation of reification. This may involve profound disagreement with the dominant discourse, but nevertheless is bounded by the conceptualizations shared by all. How can a feminist dedicated to eradicating gender barriers go about this business without using female and male categories? It is dilemmas such as these that make the demotic discourse a complex mode of relationship between individuals and the dominant discourse.

While following Baumann's model, I must absolve him from blame in my use - *Contesting Cultures* (1996) did not construct ideal types as I have here. Where he chose to be subtle in the relationship between the two forms of discourse, I have chosen to polarize the two. The benefit to this ethnography is that such a polarization explains individual affiliations without rendering them part of a unique cultural practice. We all make such affiliations, and few of us avoid reifying them in the process.

Baumann's ethnography of a multi-ethnic London suburb - Southall - is remarkable in that he was able to explore reification and essentialisms from the perspective of visible minorities, without either blaming them or excluding them from the process. The subtlety of his approach underlines the need here to remember that these ideal types represent but one aspect of reality for participants:

It would be naive to pitch a Southall demotic discourse against a dominant one... The ethnography argues only one thing: the dominant discourse is not the only one that Southallians engage in, and therefore does not capture the wealth of meanings they create and live in. ... What Southallians say and do cannot simply deny the dominant reification of culture. (Baumann, 1996: 30)

The participants I encountered engaged in a demotic discourse of their own that, as Baumann so astutely recognized in Southall, differed from the dominant one but never escaped it. The demotic discourse of Chinese essence uses markers of family, mindset, work ethic, gender relations, generational relations, self and other racial identification, culture, religion, and solidarity. All of these markers combined to form a racial category called Chinese or Oriental.

The reader may sense a wolf in sheep's clothing - community and culture have been discounted only to be reframed as discourse and race. If a pan-Chinese essence is outlined, have I crossed arguments and presented a community after all? Absolutely not. The dominant discourse is *shared* and utilized by all Canadians in conversation, law, and media - including those who identify themselves as Chinese. If I ignored the elements of

the demotic discourse, and failed to draw connections to the dominant one, I would be leaving the reader with the same old impression of the victimized visible minority: Chinese Canadian in this case. By not taking this dimension of belief and identity head on, I would in fact be contributing to an academic apartheid that does not account for the real participation and membership in broader society that must exist to have a society in the first place. I met real people while conducting fieldwork, and this chapter will demonstrate once again that being Chinese is not meaningfully different from being Danish, Croatian, anglophone or francophone - these are all elements of the dominant discourse.

### *The Dominant Discourse*

Anthropologists have long debated the nature-nurture quandary. To what degree are human species culture bound as opposed to products of biology? As a matter of philosophy, I tend to lean toward the cultural aspects of human life. The irony is, 'culture' is laden with biological explanations! These rarely have any scientific basis, but that is not the point - people take sociological and cultural categories, and transform (reify) them into biological essences. This is the dominant discourse of difference. It is a shared language that treats gender, ethnicity, race and culture as categories within which members share traits of belief, outlook, experience, history, morality and practice. The message is one of difference being a natural state of the human condition.

A discourse does not imply agreement between all parties on everything except the rules of distinction. One can be a white supremacist or a dedicated anti-racist, but the language of distinction is the same. This, of course, represents the irony of idealized equality, and a long standing dilemma in the Canadian federation - how do we fight inequality and discrimination without robbing the rich texture of difference that makes society vibrant? However, between the white supremacist and the anti-racist, or the feminist and the male chauvinist, exists a moderate majority. I am following Barrett's take on racism in Canada in this case:

Where does all this leave ordinary citizens, the vast majority of whom would seem to regard both the extreme right and left as nuts? The middle position may well appear to be more sane, but one thing is certain: it is not neutral. Instead, it is part of the status quo, with its institutionalized inequality. The big question is whether, in the crunch, the middle position is morally defensible. (1987: 355)

I would suggest that a foundation of institutionalized inequality is a dominant discourse of difference. For such a discourse to be viable, it requires an agreement by a majority of society to engage in its terms and categories. This cannot be stressed enough. When I turn to examine the conceptualizations of participants in this study, their demotic discourse is bounded by this generalized agreement among the majority. The people I met do not represent a unique cell of worldview.

Turn on your television news or read a newspaper. The odds are, there will be a report or two about a local crime that has been committed, and a description of the suspect

at large will be provided. For example, last night while I was watching the television news there was a story about a suspect, wanted for a violent rape, who was described as "male, in his twenties of age, average height and build, white but with a dark tan." A racial description is always given in such cases where possible, and is generally limited to the categories of white, black, Asian, or oriental as a rule. Racial categories are not only common in our society, they represent a core condition of communication.

Gender distinctions are also commonplace aspects of the dominant discourse. Yan Li's fictionalized autobiography and history, *Daughters of the Red Land* (1995), is published by Sister Vision: Black Women and Women of Colour Press (she lived in K-W during the period of research). It gives a gripping account of the lives of three generations of women living under the rise and establishment of communist rule, woven in with the story of a woman's life as an immigrant to Canada. If there were not a press that specialized in publishing the stories of minority women, the book may well have never been published. This represents one of the core ironies inherent in the dominant discourse - we recognize discrimination and the need for equality, yet must achieve this by entrenching differences - gender and skin colour in this case. All those dedicated to breaking down barriers of race and gender have had to struggle with this problem of using the same categories of harmful stereotypes to eliminate them.

There is every reason to suppose the discourse of difference will be with us for the foreseeable future. In 1982, Canada adopted a Charter of Rights and Freedoms which has



played a significant role in the dominant discourse. Evelyn Kallen describes the sort of difference entrenched by assigning rights on the basis of ethnicity, culture, region and gender:

...the significance of constitutionally rooted status differences among founding, aboriginal and multicultural ethnic groups is that they afford differential bases for collective claims: claims based on special (founding or aboriginal) status, and claims based on equal (multicultural) status. Moreover, a direct consequence of this tripartite division is that minority-rights claims put forward by representatives of each of these categories are in competition, if not in direct conflict with each other. (1990: 86)

The Charter, while entrenching certain categories such as gender and culture (by way of protection), is not an end product of the dominant discourse. Rather, it is the ensuing court cases and public debate over who has status under the law and what the nature of protection ought to be, that has set the arena for an evolving discourse based on difference. Consider the following article from the Charter:

*Multicultural Heritage: 27.* This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians. (Russell, *et al*, 1989: 785)

Without defining what multicultural heritage is, the Charter specifically mandates that it will be preserved and enhanced. The only clear aspect to this is a promise to formulate programs based on categorizations of individuals by culture. Putting aside the fallacy of culture (as with community), the message at work is one that assumes that first;

people "have it" in significantly different manners; and, second, that such culture is acquired only by "heritage"- that is, one gains culture by birth. This definition of culture is a rather biological one, and would tend to exclude other viable contenders for multicultural status. Poets, factory workers, and residents of Guelph may all share a cultures or communities of sorts (given the vague and often false formulations of the two concepts), but lack the key element of birth ascription to complete the discursive circle of biological reification.

The discourse about ethnic minorities as communities defined by a reified culture bears all the hallmarks of dominance: it is conceptually simple, enjoys a communicative monopoly, offers enormous flexibility of application, and is serviceable for established institutional purposes. Yet each of these features raises doubt in its own way. The conceptual economy of the discourse relies on equations that no researching anthropologist can take at face value. (Baumann, 1996: 30)

Baumann has cut to the heart of the matter. The dominant discourse of difference and reification (such as Chinese community) is virtually impossible to think outside of. Ideals like multiculturalism are just vague enough to enjoy popular application without challenge. When examined closely, they collapse into meaningless symbols. Some go so far as to call multiculturalism pure ideology: "For our purposes we can define multiculturalism as a political doctrine that officially promotes cultural differences as an intrinsic component of the social, political, and moral order" (Elliot and Fleras, 1990: 63). However, I would dispute the relegation of multiculturalism as strictly a matter of political

doctrine or (as the authors describe it elsewhere) a "present-day exercise in myth-making."

(p.52) Such explanations smack of deliberate conspiracy, and assumes that an entire nation can be led down a path of belief.

To put this more boldly, the dominant discourse is not a product of class relations. That is, there is no elite group that could pull off the coup of collective agreement. A failure to realize this has reduced many fine researchers inspired by Marx to struggle with the intersection between class, race and ethnicity - an intersection in which the frame of their analyses must render race and ethnicity epiphenomenal to class.

While political economy [concerned with capitalism and relations of power] is critical of 'race relations' sociology for its use of unscientific and reified notions of 'race', there is conceptual space within this theoretical tradition to for the analysis of racialization - that is, those social processes whereby social significance is attached to patterns of physical or genetic variation... (Satzewich, 1990: 265)

A small part of the dispute over whether an ethnic component to the vertical mosaic [following Porter's seminal work] has persisted in Canada is captured by the proverbial 'is the glass half-full or half-empty?'. Exactly how much inequality is enough to grant it 'fundamental' status? However, a far larger part of the dispute turns on matters of both theoretical definitions and methodological procedure. [how to interpret census data, for example] (Lautard and Guppy, 1990: 193)

'Diversity management' [an offspring of multiculturalism, she argues] assumes that a racially, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous workforce needs to be managed or controlled in ways that contain and suppress conflict. This process is precisely a means of preserving and fortifying power relations based on class, gender and race. Such a disciplining of diversity is, in fact, a strategy for more exhaustive control of the working class. (Davis, 1996: 41)

In describing the dominant discourse as it relates to this study, I am not going to enter the debate of economic class causality. Too often there is confusion between a mode of shared communication (ultimately a qualitative problem) and delineated class divisions (which often involve quantitative measures of income and rank) This confusion is confounded by veiled references to "control", "working classes" and "ethnic component". What is left unsaid is the underlying assumption that race, culture and ethnicity are a created tool of the *bourgeoisie* or elite class - and the assumption lacks the weight of empirical evidence.

The waters get muddier when some have tried to connect gender, race, ethnicity and class. As Daiva K. Stasiulis asked: "are feminist analyses of connections among gender, race, ethnicity and class merely matter of 'bland intersectionalism', or are they real theoretical advances...?" (1990: 281; see also Stolcke, 1993, for an examination of the similarity in the sex to gender and race to ethnicity oppositions.) The problem inherent in class and power analyses that tackle race and ethnicity, is that they confuse language and discourse with objective reality and social status. What can be borrowed from the Marxist camp is a further appreciation of the dominant language of difference. Even if race and other distinctions were being "used" to mask class relations, it is significant that it is done so easily and completely.

In addition to gender and culture (ethnicity and community), immigration is embedded in the dominant discourse. This is the most significant aspect of Porter's

*Vertical Mosaic* (1965), and one that those following in his path have missed. His thesis was that through state control of immigration, various ethnic classes were perpetuated by allowing only certain people from various countries to enter Canada. The Chinese in Canada have a history that best demonstrates this, from the time of railroad labourers to the head tax, and more recently the influx of affluent Hong Kong immigrants. (see Li, 1980; and Li, 1992, for a most detailed and rich history of Chinese immigration history and state policy in Canada.). So far as a discourse of difference is concerned, the very distinction of immigrant from non-immigrant, from assimilated to non-assimilated, is rarely questioned.

This is best illustrated by examining the ambiguity toward multiculturalism certain researchers have noted in post-war immigrant individuals from Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands (Delafenetre, 1995; Schryer, 1998). Do they want to assimilate, to fit in quietly, or to be identified as possessing a unique heritage. What both exemplify is that one can be viewed as either immigrant or Canadian (non-immigrant). The ambiguity comes from a discourse that requires individuals to define themselves in either category, but rarely both. As with race, the immigrant distinction can have both negative and positive connotations - more established and affluent immigrants (often European in origin, see Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990) can point to the failure of other immigrant (often non-European) groups as a sign of their supremacy. Furthermore, the dominant discourse that distinguishes between immigrant and Canadian makes statements about personality.

Canadian personality? This would seem impossible to exist in a country dedicated to multiculturalism. But consider the following quotation from a 1993 Canadian government publication entitled *Living in Canada: What You Should Know*: "Canadians are informal people. They will often call you by your first name and shake your hand when meeting you for the first time" (Employment and Immigration Canada: 1993: 9). The bulk of the document, produced for new immigrants, has helpful information about finding apartments and getting drivers' licences. This line caught my attention as further illustration of the dominant discourse of difference (not to mention the questionable evidence of handshaking as a sign of informality - I rarely shake my friends' hands!). It seems that the authors assumed a majority of immigrants would be taken aback by a handshake and first name address! Reifications, of personality in this case, can pop up in the most incongruous circumstances.

One final aspect of immigration that we as researchers tend to overlook, and I would suggest utilize the dominant discourse without question as a result, is to only examine the destination country as a key factor in the equation. In the case of immigration from China, for example, the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1996 motivated many more students to remain in Canada than might have otherwise (Liu and Norcliffe, 1996). Even the key distinction between refugees and immigrants is rarely made in many sociological studies of a given group, thus glossing over the various motivations and experiences various migrants within such broad categories as Chinese immigrants many have made.

The reification of ethnic, cultural and racial distinctions is demonstrated routinely by our perception of many conflicts as "ethnic" in nature. David Maybury-Lewis (1997) debunks the popular take on the horrors witnessed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Demonstrating that war and massacre in these cases were due to greater structural factors (colonialism and Soviet rule, respectively), he was critical of the push to view "ethnic" conflict as inevitable. His conclusion:

It is clear that ethnicity is simply not an innate propensity of human beings to bond with those like them and to fight with those not like them. It is a potential that must be activated and cultivated. In this book I have therefore paid attention to those agents who call forth ethnic sentiment and the circumstances under which they do so. (Maybury-Lewis, 1997: 157)

To somewhat hijack his insight, if people can be rallied under the banner of ethnicity (or ethnic sentiment, in his terminology), and the world made to believe that ethnic conflict is real and possibly inevitable, we must accept that there is a common understanding at work around the language of difference. Remembering Baumann's argument that the dominant discourse is ideologically plastic, we have now seen ethnicity used as both a source of positive diversity (multiculturalism) and of negative factionalism.

To this point, the dominant discourse has been defined with examples of broad social structures: a constitution, immigration policy, official multiculturalism and so-called ethnic conflicts. Each of these use categories of social construction, often gain strength from biological explanations (treating culture and gender as uniformly shared

amongst various groups), and treat them as though they were real. However, the explanation for this has countered the typical 'conspiracy of the elites' and posited a shared discourse in its place. Such dominance of language and meaning would be beyond the power of a minority of people, regardless of how powerful they may be. But how does this dominant discourse translate into smaller-scale interactions and local life? In part, the demotic discourse I will describe in the next section illustrates this. But in the context of fieldwork for this study, certain aspects of life in K-W can be categorized as part of the dominant discourse. Arbitrary models are not as simple as they seem, and others may wish to treat the following as a demotic discourse.

I began this section with an example of suspect-at-large reports and their reliance on basic racial descriptions. While police departments have come under fire for keeping racial/cultural crime statistics in recent years, there is rarely a peep to be heard when individual descriptions are provided with race included. For the most part, however, race is not an acceptable form of categorization in public discourse. Or is it? Recently, Rogers Cable Television service offered subscribers a new television channel: Black Entertainment Network. (There is also a channel dedicated to women, and Toronto has a multicultural television station that includes broadcasts in Italian, Cantonese, Hindi, and other languages). As with the need for a Women of Colour publishers, such a use of race is acceptable so long as it is seen to remedy discrimination. But the dominant discourse of difference, I would argue, is fuelled by such use. I have not undertaken a study of black



"culture" in North America, but would suggest that it would likely crumble if subjected to the same scrutiny the Chinese community or culture was in the previous chapter. What is more, a television channel dedicated to a socially constructed group suggests that there are commonalities in taste, personality and philosophy that can be categorized as black. In fact, a pamphlet from Rogers Cable described the new channel as one that would appeal to an "urban" audience! Reification has occurred, when in all likelihood the opposite was intended.

Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo is home to many more student clubs than the Chinese Students Association. There are groups for many sorts of students to join: Women, Black, Jewish, Croatian, Scottish, and other national/ethnic affiliations. These are not funded by the government for the purpose of fostering multiculturalism, and demonstrate the dominant discourse at a very local level. Make no mistake, such organizations enrich campus life and socialization greatly. But what is the socialization that is taking place? What is the message of enrichment? I myself belonged to the Chinese Students Association as an undergraduate student in 1990-91. I was the only non-Chinese member, and was a bit of a novelty. Why? Look again at the list of clubs I have given. Note the mix of gender, nationality, race, ethnicity and religion. The only thing they possess in common is that students who can claim affiliation to any one of them must share something meaningful. These are not clubs of benign interest such as photography, history, or music, they are clubs of heritage, and clubs of cultural essence.

K-W is a German town. I heard this repeatedly from participants, and according to the 1991 census it is the second most common language spoken (by "mother tongue" criteria), after English. There is an Oktoberfest celebration of enormous magnitude held annually, touted to be the largest outside of Germany. What is curious, however, is that there is no German representation at the Multicultural Festival I described in the last chapter. By local "rules", it would seem that Germans do not have culture! This mirrors the national definition of multiculturalism in Canada - culture and ethnicity are minority entities, quite often aligned with race in the popular imagination. I am not aware that the lack of German participation at the multicultural festival has ever been a local issue - in fact it might be argued that the Oktoberfest gives sufficient public exposure. But then the Chinese New Year celebration is well advertised, attended and reported every year, but the COCCC continues to participate in the festival.

The dominant discourse, as I have treated it, poses the threat of oversimplifying some very complex trends and subsuming all social structures under a universal model. It should not be confused with such. It is a conceptualization that is both an ideal type and a result of my own methodological approach. I set out to probe identity and experience, and as such this ethnography has remained in that realm. There are aspects of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, for example, that are very political in nature, and others that attempt to cope with balancing the individual with the collective. The dominant discourse I have laid out is one of difference and distinction, ultimately dependent upon

transforming social categories into essences, and would not fully address such aspects.

I would challenge the reader, however, to live in Canada for any length of time without encountering the dominant discourse, regardless of personal philosophy. Quite simply, our collective interactions are patterned by common categories of defining people. It is impossible to think, much less be a participant in society, without engaging these categories. Keep this in mind as we explore the attitudes of this study's participants, for Chinese or otherwise, they are members of general society, not an insular sect.

One final thought. I have not particularly focussed upon the ugly side of distinction: discrimination, racism, sexism and general inequality in power and opportunity. This requires a certain cultivated ignorance and deliberate distancing to achieve: one need not be a social scientist to see the harm inherent in categorizations - people are labelled and limited before they ever have a chance in life. But by describing the dominant discourse in its seemingly benign manifestation - as shared by the majority - we gain a sense of just how difficult the problem of social inequality is. Were there a discourse of difference being enforced by a select few empowered, we could direct our attentions to undermining them. Taken as a shared aspect of public communication and engagement, sometimes in the name of desired social variety and sense of history, the dominant discourse of difference may well pose a greater moral challenge to understand and work within. It may not always be ugly, but it is always there.

### *The Demotic Discourse: Chinese Essence*

I have chosen to follow Baumann's term, demotic, partly out of respect for his model, and partly out of a failure to come up with a better term. The demotic discourse represents a localized interpretation of the dominant one, and it may be misleading to identify it under a different term. For the participants in this study, their version of the demotic discourse was one of personal identification called Chinese. Bear in mind that there is no representation in this study of those who may have the option of identifying themselves as Chinese, but choose not to. What I will describe are some common interpretations of 'Chineseness' that were employed by those who are comfortable with the category.

The demotic discourse of difference that I encountered can be conceptualized as an arena of personal identification to a category of essence, ultimately bounded by the terms and logic of the dominant discourse. The demotic discourse is not the back stage I described in the last chapter. It is a matter of personal engagement with the dominant discourse. Nor is it strictly analogous to the front stage, for the beliefs that represent the demotic discourse are not a matter of wide public knowledge. Only in the context of my direct questioning and interaction did participants express such views and identifications to me. I seriously doubt that at a party, workplace or over a neighbour's fence would they refer to me as "caucasian", for example, as four people did. Fieldwork is confrontation, and represents an amplification that easily imparts a false impression.

As an ideal type, the demotic discourse shares all the conceptualizations of the dominant discourse with one key additional one: it is ultimately personal in nature. Unlike the back stage, which in one manner is a very specialized arena of knowledge and worldview, the demotic discourse serves to align individuals with broader categories - Chinese in this case. But can we call this a discourse if it represents personal attitudes? Yes, and in fact I would argue that there would be no cultural centre, language school, Chinese New Year celebration, and no thesis (in my case) were there not a discourse taking place. Remember, participants directed me toward other 'Chinese' people.

The demotic discourse of Chinese identity in K-W involves family, philosophy and religion, judgements of multiculturalism, values, gender roles and personality. It can be summed up as a Chinese essence, for all the above are reified into statements about personality and heritage. While at times the demotic discourse disputes the dominant one, it generally is in agreement and always uses the same conceptualizations. The demotic discourse reifies personal experiences and beliefs into a category that sets the Chinese as distinct from white or Western people, but does not particularly demand hierarchical schemes.

At the core of the demotic discourse was the belief that Chinese families are different. This was expressed in a variety of ways, but was virtually a universal belief. What made Chinese families so different?

"We still have some modern beliefs, but we respect our elders. It's Bhudist. ... That's the main difference between Caucasians and Chinese" - Brenda

"I'm not a traditional Chinese woman, I do what I want." - Nancy, describing how her marriage is not typical

"We tend to live with our parents." - Mary

"Chinese families have different values. [Like what?] Confucianism." - Tanya

I chose to begin with descriptions that had to do with families, for this was the context in which most people described their heritage as different from Western, Canadian, and Caucasian. To summarize the unique qualities of Chinese families as they were described to me: respect for elders, subservience of women, living at one's parents' home longer, stressing education and a work ethic, traditional, and Bhudist or Confucian in nature.

Respect for elders was a particular point of pride and distinction, something uniquely Chinese. A few people expressed horror at the "Canadian" practice of shipping the elderly off to old age homes. Without disputing a repugnance on the part of participants for segregating the elderly in homes, it is fair to say that participants overstated the lack of respect for elders non-Chinese people have. But the point of this ethnography has never been to dispute beliefs - beliefs either exist or they do not, they are not to be judged on the merit of truth. What is of greater relevance here is that a practice toward elders was viewed as something unique to those who can trace ancestry back to Chinese countries. It would be remiss not to point out that anthropologists, by way of kinship studies, have certainly contributed toward this family-culture connection, after

which it is but a short leap to reify such as biological essence. (I hasten to add that some wonderful studies showing the mutability and transformation of kinship structures within supposedly traditional ethnic enclaves exist - see Yanagisako, 1985, as an example).

The image of the Chinese family living together for more protracted periods (from the children's point of view), was raised mainly by participants in their twenties of age. One woman pointed out how silly it was for young Canadians to move out of home so quickly, on the basis of wasted money. In fact, we can well question the notion of shared family resources and residence as being somehow cultural in basis, and ask whether or not this is an economic strategy.

To many participants, particularly those born in Canada, the family represented tradition. 'Back home', 'Confucianism', and 'Bhudism' were routinely used in the context of discussing family. I did not systematically explore religion in this study, but it is worth noting that there are no Bhudist or ancestor temples in K-W such as are found in China or Hong Kong, but there is a Chinese Alliance Church (Christian). This philosophical or religious dimension of Chinese identity is not simply a local phenomenon. *Chinese Canadians: Voices from a Community* (Huang and Jeffery, 1992), preceded each interview with a Confucian quotation. Note the reification process at work here: a broad religion and philosophy are held to represent a culture, but are conceived of as being held by the family - Confucianism is in the genes!

Gender roles repeatedly were raised in discussing family. I have already described how I had more contact with women than with men. As with most young women in this country, those I met were not about to follow their mother's footsteps, engaging in "embroidery and crap like that" in the words of one woman. On the whole, they were not positive about the role of women in the Chinese family, particularly in the context of marriage. This attitude emerged in two manners: a desire to break away from traditional women's roles, and in the problems inherent in marrying non-Chinese men.

"My mother is more a staunch protector of Chinese ways. Both my parents were against me marrying [her husband, who is not Chinese]. They disowned me for many years, and refused to come to the wedding." - Linda

I must point out that for some parents, having their children marry non-Chinese spouses was not contentious. Furthermore, for some the dangers of back stage distinctions were greater. In fact, one story I heard was of a Chinese woman marrying a man who was Cantonese but from Vietnam - her parents were Hong Kong Cantonese and *hated* this man. What is missing from any tales I pass on is that by and large, they were told not in anger or bitterness, but mainly as an illustration of just how traditional Chinese families are. This may call into question any studies that use 'intermarriage' as a measure of ethnicity, Linda certainly experienced tremendous pressure to marry a Chinese man, yet followed her own judgement. While she viewed herself as 'less Chinese' than her elders, she clearly identified with the label.



Do these views of the family, representing the demotic discourse, relate to the dominant discourse of difference? I would say so for a number of reasons. First, what might be called cultural trends are packaged as inherent in the family - this is rendering broadly shared practices and experiences as inherited - a biological essence if you will. Second, the same participants who effortlessly led me through descriptions of all the variety and distinction that existed within the category of Chinese were able to describe Chinese family traits as commonly shared. Finally, in using personal examples to illustrate general trends, participants denied the opportunity to stress the unique qualities of their lives in favour of Oriental or Chinese explanations. The dominant discourse of difference is based on race and culture, not individual experiences.. The demotic discourse in this case fleshes this out.

Multiculturalism bears a massive weight of meaning in Canada. Diversity, anti-racism, protection of rights, and enrichment of community life are at various times the domain of this meta-philosophy. As part of the dominant discourse, it stresses the value of diversity and the possibility of a world where difference is celebrated and embraced, without being tainted by discrimination.

This is a case where the demotic discourse did not agree entirely with the dominant version. To begin, there were a few people who believed racism was very much present in K-W, though this view was a minority one.

"When we go to [a clothing store], the sales clerks follow us around - they think we're going to shoplift." - Tanya

"You don't see it on the surface, but you know it's there underneath." - Nancy

More common were stories of racism in the past, usually the 1970s and 1980s, with the conclusion that things were much better in recent years. Those who came to K-W in the 1960s and 1970s as adults told me it was quite common to hear people speak of a yellow peril, and to be called all manner of racist names. Younger people almost all had stories of being called "Chink" while in school as children, but tended to ascribe this to the cruelty of children. In general, however, people told me K-W was "open and friendly", and that if racist beliefs were being held, at least people kept it to themselves. One of the worst stories I heard was of a daughter of one participant whose mother is Chinese and father is Jewish - a fellow student at her school made a comment to the effect that she ought to suffer a similar fate to Holocaust victims.

However open and friendly K-W may have been, this did not equate into an endorsement of government multiculturalism. I will not attribute the following quotations, for some were made by members of the COCCC, and one by a member of the Chinese Women's Federation:

"What does it mean?! It's just a chance to try each other's foods."

"I'm certain the only reason some people are nice to me is that they know I can sue if they're not..."

"Nowadays the government seeks out people to help, you don't have to look for them anymore." [implying that the real need for government involvement was years ago]

While many were cynical about multiculturalism in general, the COCCC was seen as a positive force in K-W for educating people about the Chinese. If the same people can be cynical toward multiculturalism at the same time as endorsing the cultural centre, is the demotic discourse illogical? Not at all. Bear in mind that the demotic discourse is based on personal experience, which in this case is influenced by the government approach toward multiculturalism in Canada. In effect, insular organizations are encouraged to promote and preserve various cultures, with little inter-group contact. That those I met tended to lump all other Canadians into one category of culture (also called caucasian or Western) may simply be the logical outcome of such programs and sensibilities.

Official multiculturalism was not identified by those I met as an anti-racism or discrimination mechanism. While many described K-W as open and friendly, most believed that in all likelihood there was racism that was simply not expressed publicly - and this was seen as an acceptable state of affairs. I began discussing multiculturalism and the demotic discourse as a case where the dominant one was not mirrored. It is possible that this is the wrong interpretation. If the dominant discourse is one of difference mattering, of culture and essentialism being intertwined, perhaps the demotic discourse reflects the only logical conclusion people would come to in appraising multiculturalism: that a program accenting differences can at best force overt expressions of racism into the

realm of quietly held beliefs - never to overcome them completely.

Having already introduced such terms as Oriental, Chinese, caucasian and Canadian as culturally or racially meaningful to participants, there remains the question of comparison between these categories. While Chinese families were described as qualitatively different from Canadian ones, is there more to this? I asked all participants about the theories of a man named Phillip Rushton, a Canadian scientist who released controversial theories about his version of human races - white, black and oriental - in which they were ranked by such attributes as intelligence, sexuality, and propensity to have civilization. Orientals were ranked highest by the criteria of civilization and intelligence, and lowest in sexuality, followed by whites, followed by blacks whom he concluded were the most sexual but the least intelligent and the least prone to arriving at a state of 'civilization'. Needless to say his work has been discredited in academic circles, but he does hold a place in the public arena, particularly after David Suzuki, perhaps the most famous Canadian humanist, environmentalist and genetic scientist (the latter being his formal status) engaged Rushton in a televised debate. Most people I met were aware of this controversial theory.

In general, few people discounted the idea of races existing at all (unsurprising, given that most attributed something essential to being Chinese or Oriental in the first place). About half of participants argued against any sort of ranking of races. For those who did see something to it, however, some felt that he had not given due credit for the

work ethic that is a core value of Chinese peoples. That is, while not objecting to the ranking scheme *per se*, it was taken as insulting (my interpretation) that the achievements of the Chinese were a matter of racial fate. One man felt the differences between races were not inherent, but rather a consequence of history: black people had come to North America as slaves and thus must live with this heritage. Others had varying opinions on the controversy:

"It's values. In certain areas we are different. We care about their (our children's) future, health, education. ... I don't like it all. [back home,] the education system is harsh." - John

"It's not crazy, it's just how the statistic or opinion is published. It's true, people just don't want to accept it."- Josie

"I don't think he should make these statements. Every race has its own genetic heritage, positive and negative." - Sue

"Chinese have lower than average unemployment because they work harder." - Mike

"It's hard to say. When you look at it, sure, Orientals are smart, but also superstitious, it holds us back." - Mary

These views were not universal, I must restate, and there were those who completely discounted any hierarchy of races (though, as already noted, the existence of races themselves were rarely questioned, but a few people vehemently shared views such as:

"I laugh at it, it's not true." - Brenda

"All people are the same." - Karen

For those who outright denied the existence of races, such short statements were common.

As the person responsible for asking the question about Rushton in the first place, I must point out that the topic was never raised independently of my prodding. That said, for those who did not discount the existence of races completely, little explanation of the theory was required. Clearly, people were aware of these sorts of views and have given them some thought. I would like to be first to level a criticism at myself - there is a certain "catch-22" flavour to asking someone if they agree with a ranking system that places them on top. There was certainly a dogmatic neutrality among most on the topic of ranking. Great pains were taken to explain why natural superiority was likely not a valid explanation, when simple agreement would have been much easier.

I described the dominant discourse as it applies to race in rather neutral terms - this is the common employment of skin-colour categorizations in Canada. So too was such a neutrality encountered in K-W. Interestingly, if we take extreme racism and extreme egalitarianism to be on the margins of this majority discourse, then the localized demotic discourse seems to reflect this quite faithfully, fleshed out with personal input such as an over-looked work ethic.

Prior to conducting interviews, I had a conversation with a friend who alerted me to the term 'banana'. It means someone who is Chinese (yellow) on the outside but white

on the inside. It is the label given to children or young people who have lived most if not all of their lives in Canada (or other non-Chinese countries). Not all had heard the term, but most were aware of it, and a few people did explain the term to me without asking. 'Bananas' represent the greatest challenge to notions of a Chinese essence, and I suspect exist as a category in their own right for this reason. There is no more compelling example of the personality-race connection that is part of the dominant discourse than a consideration of 'bananas'. The demotic discourse takes some curious twists here.

"When I was first called one [a banana] I was a little taken aback and offended. But I think it does describe who I am. My worldview and values are a mixture of both." - Linda

"Banana! Well, never to *my* face, some people I know could be called that." - Sharon

"[laughing in response to my question] Well, it means that they look Chinese, but they think like a caucasian on the inside!" - Mike

"It's especially used in Chinatown. You don't speak Chinese, or good Chinese, but you look like you should." - Sue

"My kids are bananas! It's not a bad thing. When it comes to labels, you just have to take a step back and laugh... It's just a description, yellow skin but like a white on the inside. ... I guess that would make me a green banana, not yet ripe! [i.e., not fully white on the inside." - Nancy

"They consider themselves white. If that's their attitude they deserve it!" - Mary

I met one woman who knew of the term, and was quite hurt that people called her this. Most, however were comfortable with the idea that their children were going to be

more Canadian than Chinese, and used 'banana' in the most casual manner. Those for whom the term applied seemed to accept it. But the messages that lie behind this term are remarkable. There are white and Chinese essences. While one cannot lose their skin colour, they can become *de facto* members of another race (in part).

In describing the relationship of immigration to the dominant discourse, it was noted that among both the public and academic worlds, very little sophistication is applied to the term. By necessity, the demotic discourse of those I met dealt with the reality of life in a new country by incorporating a language of essences that coped with an individual having a foot in both cultures. This is a reversal of the dominant view where most Canadians do not discern much beyond the term immigrant: the participants I met tended to treat white as a homogeneous and cultural way of being. I was repeatedly cautioned that using 'banana' was not a slight against those it applied to (save Mary), which makes it all the more remarkable in its acceptance. It must be noted that a few people I met had never heard of the term, and in one case in particular this may be telling - she spoke very little of her parent's Mandarin.

The demotic discourse used by participants is one of reifying conceptions of Chinese culture, family and worldview into a biological essence - something inherited. It is often similar to the dominant discourse, occasionally counters it, but uses the same language of difference and distinction. Though based on race, it does not imply notions of supremacy. It does suggest that the moderate majority in Canada allowing structural



discrimination on the basis of race may include members we would not routinely expect.

### *Conclusion*

It would have been far easier to write about the views of this study's participants as though they represented something uniquely Chinese. Particularly given that many participants themselves believe in some sort of unique Chinese essence that has all the hallmarks of a biological race.

In using the ideal types of dominant and demotic discourses, however, it has been demonstrated that the attitudes I encountered are part of a greater language. Only through the use of ideal types could one compare two aspects of phenomenon so different in magnitude, and there is a cost in interpretation. As with one's methodology limiting understanding to a limited slice of reality, the use of ideal types can further limit what is presented as data. The benefit in this case has been to shatter any tribalistic take the reader might have on a Chinese collective in K-W, and demonstrate how even specific individual affiliation can be part of a broader practice.

Can racial beliefs be benign? Most people, myself included, do not believe so. There is a history of inequality too dependent upon race to trust such beliefs as harmless. But what about ethnicity, and what about multiculturalism? While not based on biology on the surface, they play a role in a dominant discourse that readily reifies such concepts as somehow hardwired into humans. I am not suggesting an abandonment of

multiculturalism in Canada - it is well intended and has achieved much. What can be gleaned from this chapter is an appreciation that multiculturalism as a policy or belief system can never be innocent so long as it uses a language dependent upon difference.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Could there ever be a world, or at least a pocket in the world, where we perceived each other as more or less the same, with our differences being a matter of celebration and enjoyment? A naive question, it is true, but it is one that lies at the heart of the anthropological discipline, and exists under tension between the desire to seek out the unique or exotic at the same time as diminishing its importance.

This thesis has stressed at every turn the commonality between Chinese people in K-W and other Canadians. Culture and community have been argued against as untenable concepts in face of detailed study. Conceptions of a Chinese essence were framed in the context of a dominant discourse that we all engage in. The purpose behind all of this was to avoid robbing participants of their humanity by refusing to treat them as caricatures of Chinese culture or worldview. This runs contrary to my anthropological instinct of describing rich and fascinating cultures, or unique ways of seeing the world, and of both reflecting the lives of those written about while taking unfamiliar readers on a journey to a new place.

In stressing that which is far from unique, I do not mean to argue that there is a simple pattern to human existence that will be revealed if we examine how people view themselves and others. To begin with, each context of research and its history, and each methodological approach will result in different data. This study, for example, did not

particularly cope with social change - the findings represent a snapshot of experience in K-W working with Chinese people during the summer of 1998. The dominant discourse of difference may be omnipresent, but there is no reason to suspect it will not evolve.

In fact, by questioning everything that might have been called the Chinese culture, a different sort of complexity was introduced. It is tough enough to understand a "culture" or "community" if that is the intent. Trying to write against such notions while looking for explanations as to why the distinctions exist at all is daunting.

One thing is certain, the focus on the individual life history does nothing to free us from the trap of reifying culture into an essence of being. If I were to write in detail about a Chinese woman in K-W, how could I use the term Chinese without accepting the standard dehumanizing implication of cultural or racial labelling? To the other extreme, it would be equally futile to write about humans without social context. Describing a dominant discourse, or a front stage of community has no meaning without an examination of how this plays out in real life, with specific examples. A broad philosophy of social relations can be no more than impressionistic without the test of real research among people to see if the theory holds up.

This is why there is still a need for anthropology, fieldwork and ethnography. We cannot cope with thousands of in-depth interviews for one project to lend weight to our findings as do sociologists with masses of surveys. We can, however, attempt to understand the complexity inherent in an individual's life as it relates to socially

meaningful relations of power, language and identity. If this leads us to cope with broader phenomena such as a dominant discourse, so much the better. What is impossible, however, is to start with the general and elicit the particular. The formal term is the ecological fallacy - the individual may not reflect trends evident among many. This is the Achilles heel of sociology.

Of course the anthropological approach is limited by dependence on a smaller sample, and we too often believe that the individual is society writ small. This is wrong, for no individual can embody the essence of the whole. Our secret weapon, if you will, is that if not the whole, every individual embodies, or at least participates in, aspects of broader social life. Studies that focus on large-scale are needed, I hasten to add, and they may reflect aspects of individual experience, just as the individual will always have traces of the large-scale. The latter is why anthropology can remain a vital discipline even in the study of urbanized societies.

I am not saying this as a point of self-satisfaction. Our most serious limit in this age is a failure to understand the nature of our knowledge. It is methodological, not theoretical. A failure to understand this relationship between knowledge and the process of research has resulted in disciplinary debates about such issues as joking relationships and the incest taboo. We felt safe in these debates, but all the while were pretending that we were on to something truly scientific. Our methods simply do not lend themselves to the nomothetic - they produce their own data. This is not to say that we cannot be

meticulous and methodical, nor that we cannot contribute to an understanding of society. But we must understand our own knowledge. In the meantime, Desmond Morris has been explaining gender differences on the basis of "observing people like birds", as I once saw him explain in a television documentary.

This ethnography was presented as a product of methodology first, and theory second. Fieldwork was never a matter of gathering facts, a contradiction of what we do, but rather a process that worked toward gaining an understanding of certain phenomena. Had I based my interpretation upon abstract theories alone, I more than likely would have fallen prey to the trap of reifying Chinese culture.

Understanding the nature of anthropological knowledge is not an atheoretical practice, and in interpreting the data I emerged from the field with, engagement with existing theories and creating a few of my own was necessary.

The findings I have presented suggest that we ought to use categories of ethnicity, culture and community with caution. In the case of community studies, we may be well served to drop the idea entirely. This is made easier through an appreciation of the inherent limitation of fieldwork - one can only explore a limited scope of lived reality. The limitation can be worked around by asking what dimensions of an individual we have missed, and more often than not this will lead to a questioning of such entities as a Chinese community. The front and back stage dialectic I proposed in place of a simplistic community used a basic polarization to illustrate complexity. Where postmodernists and

some feminists have taken the traditional ethnographic format to task and accused it of denying personhood of our subjects, it is now clear that the format can indeed bear the weight of presenting whole people. The outcome is not perfect by any means - one must categorize and simplify to allow interpretation - but using a traditional ethnography to debunk the common conceptualization of a Chinese community is far more satisfying than retreating to the library.

The most significant advance this project has made is to take the issue of race and division head on, and go beyond a simple demonstration of structural racism and the harm it does. We are all well aware that racism is alive and well in Canada. We rarely go beyond this self-evident truth in our research. The dominant discourse penetrates more aspects of communication than race divisions, and involves the transformation of gender, culture, ethnicity, and other distinctions into reified categories of biological essence. In a localized demotic discourse of Chinese essence in K-W, what could easily have been taken as a unique worldview was argued in the light of greater patterns. Urban studies, and I daresay all studies, must never be undertaken without an appreciation of larger trends and symbols. The connection between the individual and society is not achieved through membership in a smaller culture, it results from sharing in a collective medium of communication and meaning.

Does it make you uncomfortable to think of a society that distinguishes individuals by genetic heritage? It should. This is a field of study that begs further research, and a

renewed nerve on the part of anthropologists. We have lost culture as an object of study; and for good reason. Rather than attempt a reformulation of the same old conception, we ought to be taking on the task of explaining why divisions persist between people, and why they are interpreted on such a visceral level rather than being a matter of curiosity and enrichment of social life.

Most of us in the social sciences share a motivation to engender mutual understanding between people. The problem raised by this ethnography, but not answered, is one of challenging categories and fighting popular wisdom while at the same time engaging in the same language of difference. The implications of this problem - using the same categories we wish to help mute or eliminate - occur to me as a condition of social research that we have paid too little heed to. If anthropology is to have meaning, we must come to grips with this.

I offered a playful question in the introduction as to whether or not I might qualify as Chinese. On the surface, it is rather a silly question, and I would certainly raise a few eyebrows if I chose this as a new identity. On a more sober level, what blocks me from being Chinese is the acid test of this ethnography. I will leave you with another question, a participant's this time, that is perhaps less playful. We were discussing what this person described as competition between Chinese people, and his belief was that such divisions started between siblings and were manifested on a larger scale of Chinese culture. I



mentioned that non-Chinese people were, in my experience, equally prone to compete with each other and cross purposes as a result. His astonished reply:

"Caucasians are like that too?!"

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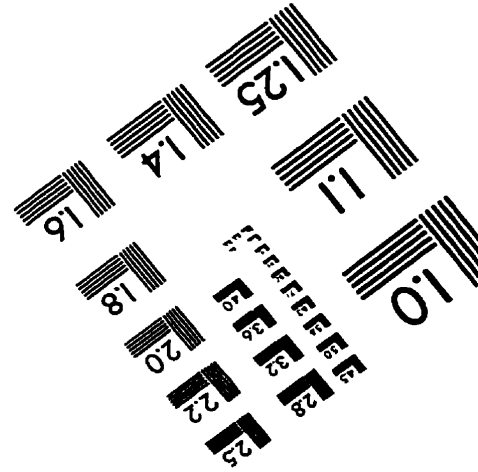
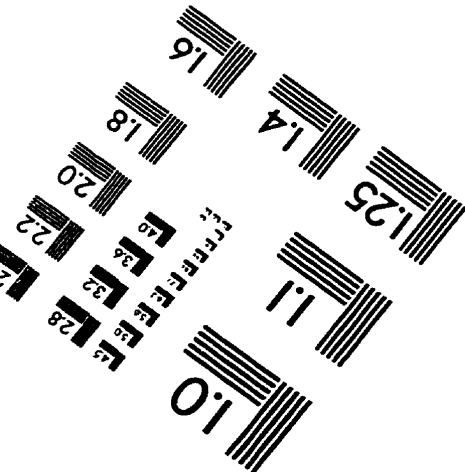
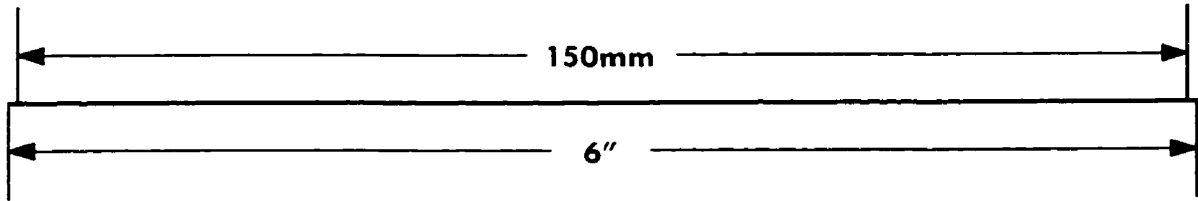
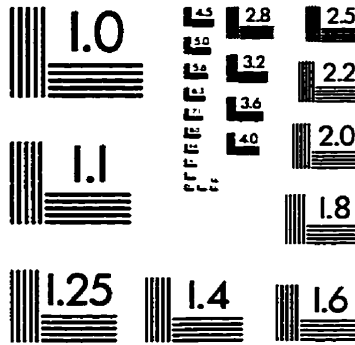
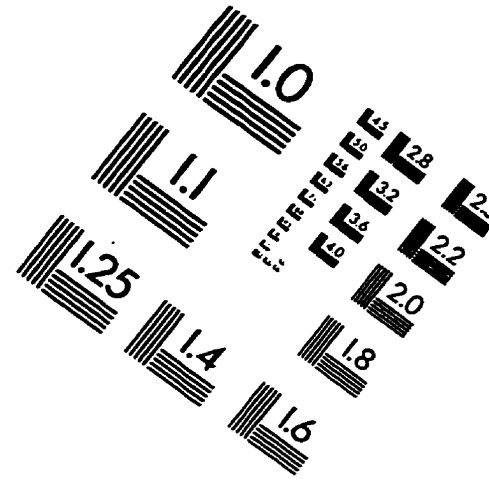
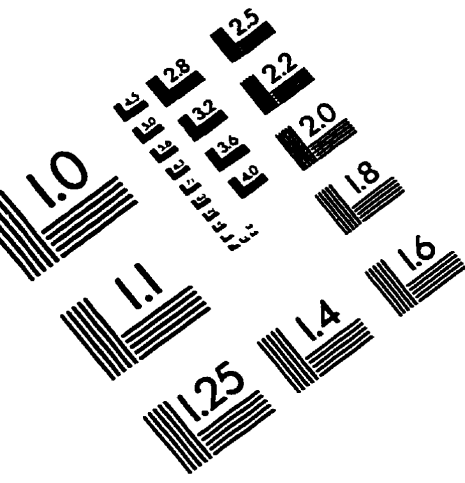
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