

Representing Chinatown: Dr. Fu-Manchu at the Disappearing Moon Cafe

In *Rush Hour* (1998), Brett Ratner's Hollywood interpretation of ethnic bonding, the black Los Angeles detective Carter takes his Hong Kong counterpart, Lee, to Chinatown. While Jackie Chan's character is nonplussed by his surroundings, Carter gestures toward some gaudy architecture in Chinatown and quips, "Look familiar? Just like home, air't it? . . . I ain't never been to China, but I bet you it probably looks like this, don't it?" Lee's response is to be literally and metaphorically speechless.

Ironically, the film director has replaced the traditionally white racist with a black one, pitting one marginalized race against another. He thereby adds an extra dimension to a scenario of anti-Asian racism in America. Yet, this scene also remains symptomatic of well-established western assumptions about Chinese people and Chinese culture. First, the scene highlights the stereotypical idea that a Chinese will automatically want to visit or feel comfortable in Chinatown, because it resembles his or her native milieu.¹ Second, the exchange between Carter and Lee also insidiously suggests that a Chinese living in a western culture belongs to an area designated as Chinatown. Third, Carter's action illustrates the metonymic power the concept of Chinatown has over the western popular imagination.² All of these assumptions raise complex questions regarding the interconnection between race, place, and representation. For instance, what kind of knowledge of Chinese culture and history will compel someone to equate Chinatown, a small urban neighbourhood, with a people of great diversity and long cultural history? The stereotypical image of Chinatown has been,

and continues to be, in part a legacy of literary fiction. What is needed to counteract the persistence of stereotyping Chinese in North America, and to resist the way Chinatown is represented, is for readers to become more knowledgeable about Chinese cultures and history, and to be aware of the changes in immigrant culture within western society. Furthermore, readers must remain critical of orientalist practices in texts written by ethnic writers. As Sheng-mei Ma suggests, it is necessary to read ethnic texts "along with the ever-shifting social realities" (5-6).

To support my claim that stereotypes of the Chinese in Chinatown are of long fictional standing, I wish to examine representations of Chinatown in fiction from the first and the last decades of the twentieth century. My first text is the extremely popular *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913) by Sax Rohmer, which has spawned a series with many titles, as well as adaptations on the radio, in film and on television, and in comics (Robert Lee 114).³ As examples of works from the 1990s, I concentrate on Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) and a detective novel by the Anglo Chinese writer Irene Lin-Chandler, entitled *The Healing of Holly-Jean* (1995). Although published eight decades later, these recent texts share with Rohmer's fiction stereotypical features westerners have come to associate with Chinatown and with the Chinese. As Kay Anderson explains in *Vancouver's Chinatown* (1991), Chinatown was seen as lawless in the 1910s, because the Chinese were inveterate gamblers. As the site of opium dens and prostitution, the area was condemned as morally pestilential (92). The typical fictional Chinatown, beginning with Rohmer's version, is based on the model of an ethnic enclave analysed in Anderson's book. While the socio-economic conditions of immigrant culture have changed, representations of immigrant lives have not. The recurrent image of the Chinese as forming an enclave which excludes outsiders, an image that legitimizes the accusation that the Chinese people do not acculturate in a western society, needs to be reexamined. Although Chinese Canadian writing has gained increasing readership and critical attention, fiction about Chinese Canadian culture is very much about the past and of a specific historical context (see M. Ng 182-84). The persistent representation of the Chinese as huddling in Chinatown will not only discourage public acceptance of the Chinese as an integral part of western society, it will also encourage reactionary response against the Chinese community whenever debates over immigration policy surface.⁴

Obviously, a more differentiated general knowledge of Chinese cultures and history will help resist stereotypes; attention to changing immigrant culture will offer the western imagination a different understanding of the Chinese living in western society, so that the Chinese will not be indexed to a "territorial place-based identity" in the minds of the non-Chinese (Harvey 4). To achieve these various ends, readers of fiction about Chinese living in Chinatown need to bear in mind not only the aesthetic aspects of the work, but also the historical and social contexts within which the fictional narrative is enmeshed. That Rohmer's Fu-Manchu stories are orientalist is self-evident; more problematic is the tendency to self-orientalization in fiction by writers of Chinese origin. Or as Sheng-mei Ma writes of Asian Americans, they "often take on the white gaze at their nonwhite object" (25). The comparison made in this paper between Rohmer's, Sky Lee's, and Lin-Chandler's Chinatowns shows that they are disturbingly similar. The persistence of representing Chinatown as a den of criminal activities and a place with its own interests which are contrary to those of the general public, indicates that this is the Chinatown that the writers, whether of Anglo-Saxon or Chinese descent, believe will attract readership, in spite of the changing face of the non-fictional Chinatown.

To contextualize the analysis, this paper begins with a brief history of early Chinatown in the London of Sax Rohmer and the Vancouver in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Then it examines fictional images of Chinatown by Rohmer and Sky Lee. A brief profile of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada, a country which has witnessed a dramatic rise in ethnic Chinese population since the 1970s, underscores the differences between fictional Chinese immigrant lives and social reality. The paper ends with some scenes of criminal Chinatown from Lin-Chandler's detective novel set in contemporary London. These examples show the tenacious influence of Rohmer's Chinatown as well as surprising similarities between two ethnic Chinese writers' portrayals of a Chinese neighbourhood.

Chinatowns in London and Vancouver

The history of Chinatown in London, England, like that of Vancouver and other North American cities, is not a savory one. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinatown was established because early Chinese immigrants were excluded from every walk of life in Caucasian society; Chinatown was a product of cultural and economic segregation. In London,

the turn-of-the-century Chinese immigrants were predominantly seamen who had settled in the East End. In spite of the term, Chinatown in London was made up of only two small streets in the Limehouse area (Ng Kwee Choo 17-18). Since its destruction in the Second World War, London Chinese have established themselves throughout the metropolis, thus changing the social pattern of an ethnic group which confines itself, in self-protection, to a small area. However, this change in ethnic settlement pattern does not imply that anti-immigrant and racist sentiments against the Chinese have been eradicated. The persistence of the need to perceive and represent the Chinese as the Other will be shown in the analysis of *The Healing of Holly-Jean*.

The settlement history of Vancouver's Chinatown is the history of Chinatown everywhere, in that "[w]hite racism was one factor in the creation of a Chinatown." In Vancouver, "[w]hite landlords would not sell or lease their properties to the Chinese unless the lands were on the fringe of the town and thus unattractive to the white community" (Lai 34). While Chinese immigrants to the west coast of Canada in the 1880s and 90s were railway labourers, the white population reacted to these labourers in much the same way the English did to the Chinese seamen in England. Fear of the so-called yellow peril⁵ and the unquestioned belief in their own racial superiority encouraged white residents to practice and sanction residential segregation. Thus, the area of East Pender and Main in Vancouver was linked to those "saffron coloured sons of the East" (*Vancouver News* 3 June 1886, qtd in Anderson 81). The colour saffron, an evocation of the yellow peril, became a short-hand description of the Chinese, whose qualities include immorality, the "herd instinct," and a propensity to contract and spread infectious diseases. To prevent any kind of racial contagion, Chinese immigrants were confined, through social and economic measures, to a few streets of undesirable real estate.

In order to survive in a hostile society, Chinese immigrants voluntarily banded together and formed ethnic enclaves in which various systems of support, through schools, trade associations, political associations and dialect associations, were developed to help Chinese immigrants. However, as Zhou Min points out in *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (1992):

Because of the need for social and cultural support from fellow sojourners and the need to maintain ethnic identity and kinship ties with China, immigrants chose a way of life in Chinatown that reminded them of home. This voluntary

self isolation created a stereotype of unassimilability that in turn reinforced the community's irrelevance to the larger society. (40)

This "stereotype of unassimilability" and of resistance to acculturation is an image that feeds the suspicion harboured by the non-Chinese against an allegedly enclosed and inscrutable people. Recent Chinese Canadians have tried to discourage, through Chinese talk shows on radio and on television, and advice columns in Chinese newspapers, the tendency of voluntary self-isolation in immigrants.⁶ However, the image of an alien and unreadable enclave, metonymic of a whole culture, persists among non-Chinese.

The Lair of Dr. Fu-Manchu

Sax Rohmer (Arthur Sarsfield Ward) wrote the first Fu-Manchu stories in 1912 and 1913, based on "vague stories . . . of a shadowy criminal called Mr. King who ran a gambling syndicate" in Limehouse (Greene v). While Rohmer's Fu-Manchu and Chinese characters "had almost no relationship to real people" because Rohmer knew nothing about the Chinese (vi), his realistic and vivid depiction of Chinatown is based on the Limehouse district in London's East End which housed Chinese seamen and labourers. The very term "East End" suggests "a different world, an unknown world," where poverty was "open, omnipresent and dominating" (Briggs 314-15). These threatening quarters gave rise to the image of a dark, dangerous, and dingy area inhabited by aliens such as the Chinese. The circulation of such stereotypes is partly attributable to the popularity of works such as the Fu-Manchu series.⁷

In the first book featuring the inscrutable 'Chinaman,' *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913), the hero Nayland Smith, an official of the British government, has tracked Fu-Manchu to a Chinese barber shop in Limehouse:

A seemingly drunken voice was droning from a neighbouring alleyway. . . . We stood in a bare and very dirty room, which could only claim kinship with a civilized shaving-saloon by virtue of the grimy towel thrown across the back of the solitary chair. A Yiddish theatrical bill of some kind, illustrated, adorned one of the walls, and another bill, in what may have been Chinese, completed the decorations. From behind a curtain heavily brocaded with filth a little Chinaman appeared, dressed in a loose smock, black trousers and thick-soled slippers. (32)

This passage illustrates Rohmer's failure, throughout the Fu-Manchu series, to differentiate among ethnic types: the Chinese barber shop advertises a Yiddish revue; the language is as foreign to the English reader ("theatrical

bill of some kind”) as Chinese. The main goal of the description is to house these racial outsiders together. As Robert G. Lee points out, “Rohmer’s Orientalism collapses national histories into an ahistorical cultural category of Oriental Otherness” (115). Nayland Smith is unmistakably a colonial Anglo-Saxon, whose attractive appearance as “a tall, lean man, with his square-cut, clean shaven face sun-baked [from serving in Burma] to the hue of coffee” (Rohmer 1), serves as a foil to Dr. Fu-Manchu, who has the face “of an archangel of evil . . . wholly dominated by the most uncanny eyes [which] were narrow and long, very slightly oblique, and of a brilliant green” (Rohmer 36). While Smith’s physical attributes are consistently positive (he is tall and fit, and colonial service in the tropics has left him with an attractively tanned skin), Fu-Manchu’s features are the opposite: he is evil, uncanny, and his narrow oblique eyes suggest shiftiness. Interestingly, Rohmer alternately describes Fu-Manchu as “tall” and “lean,” but also as “feline” and invested “with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race” (13). Thus, although Fu-Manchu at times resembles Nayland Smith, he is the degenerate version of the Englishman, just as the Chinese were viewed as a corrupt race in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸ In the barber shop, the Chinese in the above passage is identified as “little,” resembling a monkey who chatters in “simian fashion” and has a “yellow paw” (32-33). The saloon is filthy, the curtain encrusted with dirt; the word used is “brocaded,” thus evoking a material frequently linked to eastern interior decor.

As befits a place engaged in shady activities, Chinatown is never seen in daylight but is always shrouded in darkness:

The mantle of dusk has closed about the squalid activity of the East End streets as we neared our destination. Aliens of every shade of color were about us now, emerging from burrow-like alleys into the glare of the lamps. . . . In the short space of the drive we had passed from the bright world of the West into the dubious underworld of the East. (142)

The metonymic suggestion here of Chinatown as an image of all of China is unmistakable. In the beginning of the passage, the characters are still located in London; but under the shroud of darkness, they find themselves in the evil world of the East, surrounded by ethnic groups described as “aliens of every shade of color.” These foreigners are equated with rodents, as they emerge from burrows to begin their nocturnal activities. Although geographically London’s Chinatown was insignificant, in fiction it embodies *all* the negative values attributed to the East namely laziness, duplicity, degeneration.

As if anxious that the reader might overlook the connection between Chinatown and the East, Dr. Petrie, Nayland Smith's staunch ally and the narrator of the novel, quotes in detail two news items he is reading: the first on Chinese in Honolulu poisoning their children with scorpions, and the second on a member of a triad society attempting to assassinate the governor of Hong Kong. Rohmer creates the character of Dr. Petrie, who is trustworthy and loyal, as another foil to the evil Chinese doctor, and often Petrie echoes what the masses would say or think on issues of race and social values. Dr. Petrie's reaction to these activities is a prime example of reasoning based on genetic fallacy: "Is it any matter for wonder that such a people had produced a Fu-Manchu?" (62). Thus, Chinese everywhere are rapacious criminals, committing infanticide in North America, involved in gang activities in Hong Kong and China, and planning world domination in London. Perhaps the sophisticated reader will laugh at such fallacies, yet the enduring popularity of the Fu-Manchu series, which have recently been reissued in omnibus format, would indicate that there are readers still interested in this type of stereotypical depiction of the wicked ways of the East. In Vancouver, the image of a criminal Chinese area thrives in spite of rigorous efforts by merchants and property owners in Chinatown (see Mulgrew "The Battle"). The image of Chinese criminals is reinforced with sensational headlines such as "B.C. Cops Say The Asian Crime Ring They Claim To Have Cracked Has No Fear Of The Law" ("They're" A1). Incessant media attention on any illegal activities involving the Chinese, such as smuggling operations trafficking in illegal migrants, strengthens the predominant perception that the Chinese are an undesirable population. Representations of Chinatown as a den of iniquity in fiction and film can only add to this perception as, for example, in Jim Christy's hardboiled thriller, *Shanghai Alley* (1997), set in Vancouver's Chinatown. Thus, Rohmer's shady Chinatown is kept alive through various media.

A Cafe in Chinatown

Although Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) has been acclaimed as a literary landmark in its depiction of Chinese Canadian life (Chao 93) and as a sophisticated subversion of traditional genealogical romance (Huggan 35-36), Sky Lee's novel can also be read as proof of the lingering power of stereotyping in ethnic characterization and setting. Some ethnic Chinese writers' self-exoticization has been analysed in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading*

Asian American Literature (1993) and, more recently, in David Leiwei Li's *Imagining the Nation* (1998) and Sheng-mei Ma's *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998). David Leiwei Li calls this tendency to self-exoticize the "romantic embodiment of Asia in genes and consciousness" that one can detect in Asian American writing, which ties "the production of the cultural symbolic and communal identity to the determination of place and history" (126). Sheng-mei Ma is more explicit about the marketing value of using ethnic history and setting in fiction:

Asian American raconteurs and the American market actively woo each other in appropriating alien(s') stories, the surest sign of ethnicity, as commodity. Indeed, a significant source of that ethnicity is Asian American writers' employment of immigrants' heart-wrenching and almost always "exotic" experiences. (11)

Although Sheng-mei Ma targets popular Asian American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, his comments can also be applied to a writer like Sky Lee, whose novel is featured in university syllabi and who is considered one of the pioneers in Chinese Canadian writing. There is no denying that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is a ground-breaking work, and that it deserves the attention it receives from both the academic community and the mainstream reading public. Nonetheless, it is useful, in analysing *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, to locate the Chinese immigrant experiences featured in Sky Lee's novel historically, in order to avoid wallowing in nostalgic recapitulation of what the white community has done to the Chinese, instead of actively accepting the Chinese now living in Canada. This process of contextualization may also discourage any desire to homogenize the Chinese immigrants of several generations and from different countries as one single ethnic group. After all, the Chinese immigrant culture featured in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* may be quite alien to recent immigrants. I hope to make this difference between Chinese immigrant history of the 1910s and that of the 1990s clearer in the latter part of the essay.

Sky Lee's saga of tough first-generation immigrants (Wong Gwei Chang, Lee Mui Lan), of second- and third-generation victims (Fong Mei, Suzanne) and, finally, of an enlightened fourth generation (Kae) provides a complex narrative of family intrigue. For the most part unattractive, vindictive, superstitious, and sometimes physically repulsive, the main Chinese characters in the novel are victims of racial prejudice, but they in turn also victimize those who are weak among them. Although some events in the novel take place in China and Hong Kong, the most vivid and detailed scenes are

those confined within Chinatown, Vancouver, where the *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is located.

One of the most realistically written scenes in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is set in a darkened room reminiscent of the smoke-filled den in Rohmer's Limehouse district. A group of Chinese men gather to find a scapegoat for a particularly notorious crime involving the murder of a white woman in the 1920s. The clannish meeting takes place in the Chinese Benevolent Association Building. Traditionally, Chinese associations were formed as a network of assistance for new immigrants, and the Chinese Benevolent Association had the responsibility "to serve the needs of the adult male Chinese" who made up the bulk of the community (Bernard Wong 13-23). But outsiders to Chinese kinship structure and dialect networks might also link these associations with images of illegal activities and gang warfare. When Sky Lee chooses the Benevolent Association, the harrowing and objectionable process of finding a scapegoat as a setting for the novel is reinforcing the prejudice that businesses in Chinatown are mere fronts for criminal organizations.

The main room of the association is described as filled with Chinese furniture that has been coldly and formally arranged. Below this meeting room is a floor called the cheater-floor, which houses gamblers and tax-evaders. Thus, fiction affirms public prejudice. As Anderson's historical study of Vancouver's Chinatown shows, "the 'heathen Chinese' was known for inveterate gambling. Successive officers of the city police certainly accepted the label, and they pursued Chinatown's gambling vigorously" until the harassment of the Chinese was too obvious to ignore (101). The meeting in the novel is limited to men, and it is convened to try and force a confession out of the houseboy alleged to be involved with the murdered woman. So far, all images are negative: patriarchal, paranoid, potentially violent, illegal and, as the scene develops, deeply misogynistic. When the young man reacts indifferently to the lewd accusation that he has been "sniffing after white women's asses" (Sky Lee 76), the older men begin to torture him. The Chinese characters in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* are certainly not silent, but the language is a string of obscenity. The accused is addressed as "sonovabitch" or "dead boy-bitch." The possible sexual relationship between him and the white woman is described as "a rotten fish matched with a stinky shrimp" (76), a vulgar reference to the male and female private parts; and when the patriarch tries to call the violent and excited men to order, he chides them

as “mangy dogs sniffing after the stink of a dirty she-bag” (77). The Chinese in this scene are portrayed as men obsessed with fornication who need to verbalize this obsession abusively.

These men, who are respected members of the Chinese community, are described in negative stereotypical terms: Chinese men are crude, they are mere peasants, they may indulge in sexual perversions. Although *Disappearing Moon Cafe* addresses racism against the Chinese in Vancouver and Canada in the first half of the twentieth century, the novel also feeds off the stereotypes created by this racism. Thus, Sky Lee’s Chinese men fit a pattern established by western writers like Somerset Maugham and films like Polanski’s *Chinatown*. In these works, Chinese men are cast as house-boys (though they are middle-aged) or gardeners. Unlike the vociferous men in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, these domestic males are often silent unless spoken to, but in their silence lurks treachery. The reduction of the Chinese man into a silent and docile object serves two purposes: it neutralizes his sexual presence so that the threat of Chinese contamination is diminished; his silence also enhances the impression that he belongs to a secretive race (Robert Lee 97-105). But when the Chinese man’s anger is aroused, he can become frighteningly violent, a response depicted in numerous gangsters’ films. The obsession with obscenity in Sky Lee’s torture scene also highlights the allegation that sexual vice flourished in Chinatown: “In 1919, the Women and Girls Protection Act had been passed by the BC legislature outlawing white women’s employment on Oriental restaurant premises.” After some amendments to the act, it was left to the chief of municipal police to decide “in which places it was unsuitable for women to be employed. The legal path was thereby cleared for any such officer to wield old conceptions of the ‘lascivious Oriental’” (Anderson 159).

Sky Lee’s negative stereotypes are not confined to the bullying merchants and clan patriarchs in the benevolent associations. Ting An, the illegitimate son of Wong Gwei Chang, who eventually commits adultery with his sister-in-law, is yet another ineffectual man. In another scene of male gathering, Sky Lee introduces the reader to the oft-mentioned Chinese vice of gambling. First, Ting An goes to a theatre to meet his friends:

Ting An ducked into the back door of a blood-coloured brick building on the corner of Pender and Columbia. Inside the lobby, he walked past a little box office, unmanned and unlit. . . . Ting An pushed one back, and the door opened just enough for him to slide into a darkened theatre. (104)

Again, the rhetoric in this passage has uncomfortable echoes. In Rohmer's *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, the owner of an opium den "dived behind the dirty curtain" and "shuffled" off silently while another "Chinaman" with "small, oblique eyes" and "a coiled pigtail . . . [crept] nearer, nearer, silently, bent and peering" (33-4). In Sky Lee's narrative, the Chinese ducks and slides in an environment that is "unmanned" and "unlit." The predominant impression created by the diction in both works is that of stealth, deceit, and darkness. Later that evening, Ting An and his friends gamble and drink at the Lucky Money Home Club:

Whooping and hollering from the next table caught his attention, signalling a potential win. . . . He looked over at the unshaven faces focussed exclusively on their chips. There was blind lunacy in their eyes, like the full moon reflected in a wine bowl. Greasy hair snapped back only when the length of it threatened the vision of both eyes. These gamblers might have been there for days; shirts almost shredding off their backs, flies carelessly left undone after a piss, suspenders dangling. Dirty plates strewn about; they had guzzled their food without missing a turn. (109)

Apparently without a trace of irony, Sky Lee recreates Chinatown as a gambling den and Chinese men as filthy, fanatical gamblers lacking refinement. They whoop and holler. Their faces are unshaven and their hair unwashed. Like animals, they guzzle their food. As a Chinese Canadian reader, I baulk at these scenes and these stereotypical representations, and as a teacher, I feel the need to explain to my students that these characters are not at all representative of Chinese Canadians then or now.

These representations cannot be interpreted as purely formal conventions, since "whether intended or not, [representations] are activities through which objects or subjects take on both meaning and the relationships" inherent in all forms of interpretation (David Li 180). Furthermore, if Sky Lee and other ethnic writers have the power to give voice to ethnic identities, then they cannot "ignore his or her inevitable social function or fundamental relatedness with the world outside the text—that is, the people who read and to whom the writer refers" (181). Another question raised by a critical reading of Sky Lee's Chinese characters and Chinatown is: "[W]here are we to find and how are we to imagine a social space capable of reaffirming and reproducing the ever-changing form of Asian American [and Canadian] knowledge?" (139). While *Disappearing Moon Cafe* provides a complex insight into the history of Chinese immigrant experiences in the

early decades of the twentieth century and the way their early hardship has shaped fourth- and fifth-generation Chinese Canadians, Sky Lee's Chinatown does not contribute to a nuanced awareness of current (or even past) Chinese Canadian immigrant culture.

FOB (Fresh Off the Boat)⁹

1980s and 90s Chinese immigrants differ from the fictional Wong Gwei Chang in terms of ethnic background, linguistic usage, and social class. Immigrant culture, like the geopolitical dynamics which affect it, does not remain static. The communist government in China forbade emigration after it came to power after the Second World War. Thus, the majority of Chinese immigrants to Canada between the 1950s and today have originated from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, or Taiwan, instead of coming from the South China coastal villages which were the ancestral homes of many early immigrants. Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asia speak English, Putonghua, possibly Malay, and a Chinese dialect such as Hakka. Immigrants from Hong Kong speak English and Cantonese. Those from Taiwan speak Taiwanese, a dialect related to Putonghua, the official Chinese language. Linguistically, all of these languages are distinct. The new generations of immigrants, those arriving in 1980s and 1990s, settle in Canada with new expectations. Some come to invest, others to provide their children with a western education. Thus, their economic profiles are quite different from the Chinese labourers at the beginning of the century. Between 1883 and 1903, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Canada (72.5%) worked as servants (Peter Li 25). In contrast, immigrants in recent decades have had more diversified backgrounds, from middle-class families who establish businesses in retail stores to high-profile businessmen who invest in real estate. Unlike the ghettoized Chinese we find populating *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, these new immigrants are established throughout the metropolis and in the satellite suburbs. This decentralization in settlement patterns not only diminishes the function of Chinatown as an enclave for Chinese Canadians, but the many varied Chinese residential and business neighbourhoods also have changed the urban landscape and culture of cities like Vancouver. While Chinese movie houses have closed in Chinatown, Chinese movies are shown in East Vancouver and in Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver. Any cursory glance at the advertisements in the local Chinese newspapers such as *The Singtao Daily* would show that the majority of

Chinese restaurants bear Richmond, Metrotown, and New Westminster addresses, instead of a Chinatown address.

All these changes do not mean that stereotypical representations of Chinese have been eradicated. In Robert Kaplan's discussion of Vancouver in his influential book, *An Empire Wilderness* (1998), Hong Kong Chinese immigrants are singled out as an economic pillar of society, owing to "a real-estate bubble" (318) which they created by buying \$2 billion worth of Vancouver real estate between the 1980s and 1990s. Treating Vancouver Chinese as an off-shoot of the west-coast Chinese-American community, Kaplan presents a simplistic view of Chinese culture in British Columbia and ignores the history of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, the focus of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Kaplan also seems to be unaware of the diversity among Chinese immigrants who come from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and China. He interprets the Chinese presence in Vancouver as a temporary one, implying that the Chinese investors bear no civic loyalty toward the city, that they are here merely to buy up land and provide their children with the opportunity for a Canadian education. While the chapter attributes the economic vibrancy of Vancouver and British Columbia to the Hong Kong Chinese, thus introducing a new image of Chinese immigrants which contrasts sharply with the beleaguered Chinese in Sky Lee's novel, it also contributes to a new stereotype, that of the real estate magnates who are not willing to put down roots in Vancouver, who are, in other words, not real Canadians.

In a more thorough study, *China Tide: The Hong Kong Exodus to Canada* (1989), Margaret Cannon wants to write a book "about the [Hong Kong] people themselves: about their values, ambitions, anxieties and customs; about the burden of tradition and history they carry, and the impact they are having on all of Canada's people" (15). Similar to Kaplan, however, Cannon centres on only one type of Chinese Canadian: the entrepreneurial Hong Kong Chinese. In Cannon's book, Hong Kong Chinese are well-off, buy properties, own businesses in Hong Kong and Canada, and are ambiguously portrayed as both dynamic and aggressive. Both Kaplan's and Cannon's writing highlights a problem implicit in representations of Chinese Canadian experience: certain social classes are singled out for analysis, usually for social and political reasons, while the increasing complexity of Chineseness and Chinese identity is ignored or simplified. In the past, illiterate and lower-class Chinese immigrants were lampooned in newspapers because these images seemed to justify the racial prejudice of the society. Today,

although Chinese immigrants' economic clout is generally admired, the investment class is also under critical scrutiny because it has the power to change the local culture. For instance, while Vancouver real estate has been benefiting from the influx of property buyers from East Asia, there have also been heated discussions of whether these new residents understand the 'indigenous' culture of areas which have been predominantly white, such as the Shaughnessy area in Vancouver.¹⁰ Therefore, while stereotypes change from the Chinese laundry man to the Chinese business man, fictional and non-fictional representations still take the part for the whole.

The Persistence of Place

In *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian America and Asian Diaspora Literatures*, Sheng-mei Ma concedes that ethnic Chinese writers might "deliberately employ the Orientalist view in order to debunk it," but they are also products of the West and they "frequently conceive of China in the Orientalist way" (25). This view of the ethnic writer can also be applied to third- or fourth-generation Chinese Canadian writers who were born in Canada, who have been immersed in the Canadian culture, who might not read or write the Chinese language, and whose link to Chinese culture and history in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong will necessarily be mediated.¹¹ As indicated by Rohmer, Sky Lee, and the last writer to be examined in this paper, Irene Lin-Chandler, an "Orientalist way" of conceiving China consists of exaggerated and stereotypical personal appearances, or the mixture of English, pidgin English and Chinese dialects, or the inclusion of sexual deviation, gambling, and drug trafficking as normal activities of the Chinese and Chinatown. These strategies inevitably perpetuate the general perception that the Chinese are not only different, but different in a negative way, from westerners.

In Lin-Chandler's *The Healing of Holly-Jean* (1995), Holly-Jean Ho is an Anglo Chinese investigator who works amongst the Chinese in London. The novel opens with an exchange between Holly-Jean and her mother, an exchange of generational and cultural conflicts made familiar by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Holly-Jean's mother speaks a mixture of phonetically transliterated Hakkanese and ungrammatical English, such as "Ai-yo, you had a proper job . . . Why you quit—," at which point Holly-Jean cuts her off. Mrs. Ho then swears in gutter Hakkanese, denouncing all and sundry as "dog-fart neighbours" and a "copulating corner-

shop cow" (3). This scene, which condemns Mrs. Ho to pidgin English and scatological Hakkanese, magnifies the role of linguistic differences as an indicator of "the Oriental's alienness and at times degeneracy" (Ma 27).¹²

One of Holly-Jean's clients is a Mrs. Wang, whose daughter has run away after being sexually molested by her father. Unimpressed with western detection, Mrs. Wang boasts: "Word has gone out in the little Middle Kingdoms. . . . Inside our little Chinas, Su-ming would be safe. For everyone knows my family has *guanchi* with the *Ju Lyan Bang*" (85). What Wang is claiming here is a connection to a powerful gang. Wang continues: "We Han people have been over here for many, many generations, but this is not our country." The narrative goes on to explain what *Ju Lyan Bang*'s (Bamboo Union's) activities are:

Wherever there were Chinatowns, there also lurked the virus known as the Bamboo Union.

Twin fronts. Criminal: drugs, prostitution, gambling, bonded labour, illegal migration, and extortion from the miasma of Chinese commerce. Legit: brand-name market leaders in insurance, entertainment (89)

In an eerie echo of Sax Rohmer, Lin-Chandler goes on to describe the secret societies' ambition to achieve world domination through economic power and the simple force of demographic numbers: "the Han people would come to dominate the world, as was writ in their five-thousand-year history" (90). This portrayal of Chinese overseas is utter nonsense. But it is hard to dismiss the book, since it has wide circulation among, and thus influence on, readers of detective fiction. While Rohmer's orientalist depictions of the Chinese can be dismissed as symptomatic of his time, stereotypical representations of Chinese in *The Healing of Holly-Jean*, which was published in 1995, are even more disturbing for two reasons. The negative portrayals are authenticated by an insider, since the writer is an ethnic Chinese. The image of the criminal Chinese infiltrating the West adds life to any anti-Asian immigration sentiment at a time when many Hong Kong Chinese and Taiwanese have been trying to emigrate because of the unsettled political relationships between their countries and China. With Lin-Chandler's secret societies in London's Chinatown plotting to take over the world, various Chinese characters conversing in broken English or Chinese dialects, and with sexual depravity as a subplot, representations of Chinese and Chinese neighbourhoods have come full circle from Fu-Manchu to Holly-Jean. Chinese communities remain closed to outsiders; Chinese like Mrs.

Ho and Wang are unwilling to acculturate; and to westerners, the Chinese still spread disease like a virus.

Unlike Rohmer, whose clear objective is to paint the Chinese as yellow devils, the ethnic writer must decide “whether to reconstruct their history in a favourable light that elevates them in the eyes of others, or in a way that portrays them as victims [of racial discrimination]” (David Li 137). The figures of Kae in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Holly-Jean in *The Healing of Holly-Jean* can be seen as the writers’ attempts to show that the Chinese are intelligent and attractive human beings. But both Sky Lee and Lin-Chandler further complicate the problematic position of an ethnic Chinese representing Chinese people living in a western culture when they orientalize their Chinese characters. As quoted previously, an ethnic writer might “employ the Orientalist view in order to debunk it” (Ma 25), which is Fred Wah’s strategy in *Diamond Grill*, where Wah ironizes racist depictions of the Chinese in order to undermine these very stereotypes. An ethnic writer may also “employ the Orientalist view” because, as Ma puts it bluntly, ethnicity is “in.” Whatever the reason, the lure of harnessing the metonymic power of Chinatown in fiction and in film remains overwhelmingly attractive to ethnic and non-ethnic writers alike. A criminal Chinatown is obviously still an easily identifiable and marketable setting, since both fiction and film continue to feature it, among them S.J. Rozan’s detective novel *China Trade* (1994) and its sequels and James Foley’s *The Corruptor* (1999), the latest Hollywood film about a white detective trying to change the insidious ways of Chinatown in New York.

This paper is not advocating a boycott of books and films about Chinatown. Nor am I suggesting that ethnic Chinese writers should stop writing about their Canadian experience. I also believe that more people should (critically) read the Fu-Manchu series, because contemporary readers of ethnic writing need to be acquainted with the literary history of the stereotypical criminal Chinese operating in Chinatown. However, I do suggest that writing by and on Chinese Canadians should be read contextually so as not to elide the differences between various types of backgrounds. Although recent increases in Chinese immigration and changes in student demographics (a process which Margaret Cannon in an alarmist way calls the “China Tide”) have led to more public and academic attention to ethnic Chinese writers, it is not enough to put *Disappearing Moon Cafe* on the syllabus as a way to understand Chinese immigrant culture. Nor is it sufficient

to use *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as a tool to teach students about the Chinese or the 1990s immigrant culture. As Ma points out, immigrant ethnic writers have concerns different from American-born ethnic writers and tend to address different issues. I see an example of this divergence between works by Canadian-born ethnic writers and those by immigrant writers in Ying Chen's *Ingratitude* (1998). It is a refreshingly original novel by a Chinese writer who came to Canada in 1989. Here the reader will not find any images of Chinatown, opium-smoking Chinese, or members of the *tongs* lurking in the pages. The novel deals with family tension and emotional conflict in ways that are unencumbered by a history of stereotypes about the Chinese, and not interested in presenting easily recognizable locations and plotlines. Indeed, *Ingratitude* holds the promise of a significant new development in Chinese Canadian writing.

NOTES

- 1 There are, of course, many Chinese native milieus. The Hong Kong and some Taiwan Chinese come from urban environments while mainland Chinese are less familiar with these, since the People's Republic of China is still undergoing various processes of modernization. I use the plural "Chinese cultures" to indicate the differences amongst the Hong Kong Chinese, Taiwanese Chinese, the Chinese of the People's Republic of China, and other overseas Chinese.
- 2 On the formation of the ethnic canon, see David Leiwei Li and Ma. For most non-specialist readers, "knowledge" about Chinese cultures is readily accessible through popular fiction such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, whose superficial treatment of Chinese immigrant culture is given prolonged life through its filmed version.
- 3 On a recent visit to Reykjavik, Iceland, I found a Fu-Manchu Restaurant in the telephone directory.
- 4 In July and August, 1999, when three boatloads of illegal Chinese migrants reached the west coast of Vancouver, the media obsessively concentrated on the subject. As one reporter points out, this alleged *déluge* of newcomers consisted of "fewer than 450 migrants" (Mulgrew "Why").
- 5 The term "yellow peril" came originally from the German term "die gelbe Gefahr," used by Kaiser Wilhelm II to encourage his army to take over territories in China at the end of the nineteenth century. See Gollwitzer.
- 6 An example of Chinese immigrants analysing their roles as Canadians is the documentary *Beyond Golden Mountain*.
- 7 For further examples of current representations of Chinatown, see Jan Lin.
- 8 See Adas on western attitudes towards China as a backward culture. Riis's *How The Other Half Lives* provides another example of views of Chinese at the turn of the century.
- 9 The term is borrowed from Hwang's play, *FOB*. The term FOB (= Fresh Off the Boat) is, of course, a pun on FOB (= Freight On Board), a common shipping term.

- 10 On the racial politics of real estate in Vancouver, see Cavell and Mitchell. Cannon also touches on this issue.
- 11 Sky Lee tells an interviewer that her knowledge of Chinatown was based on her childhood in Port Alberni and neighbouring Comox, both small towns on Vancouver Island. See Michele Wong.
- 12 According to some critics, the term "pidgin" does not mean broken English, nor should it be used pejoratively. See Lang.

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