

Literary Language and Ethnic Sensibility: A Case Study in Chinese-Canadian Fiction

According to whether Chinese or English is used as their literary language, Chinese-Canadian writers can be divided into two major groups.¹ Unless we could assume that language is a transparent, neutral medium, which it is not, we could not avoid considering these questions: How do the works produced by one group differ from those created by the other? What are the dynamics underlying the simultaneous distinction and unity of the two bodies of texts, i.e., one in Chinese and one in English, within the framework of Chinese-Canadian writing? And what is the relationship between the language in which a text is written and the ethnic sensibility it reflects? These are very complicated questions to which I cannot do justice in this short paper. What I propose to do here is to compare the following works by Chinese-Canadian authors: Four short novels by Yuen Chung Yip (*The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, *The Vagabond*, *The Warm Flow of Love*, and *Foreign Offspring*), all originally written in Chinese, and four short stories by Weyman Chan ("Mee Wai," "Another Man's Shoes," "Night of Transgressions," and "Getting to Know You"), all written in English. Then, on the basis of my analysis, I shall venture some hypotheses in the hope of provoking further discussion.

The common ground shared by Yuen Chung Yip and Weyman Chan, which provides a rationale for this comparative study, is not so much their ethnic origin as their ethnic sensibility. Both of them deal with the life of Chinese Canadians as a minority group, and both take up issues such as racial relations, the self-definition of Chinese Canadians, and the negative aspect of Chinese tradition; but the ways they handle these subject matters differ considerably.

1 To simplify the discussion, I leave French and other languages out of account. If the argument in this paper is valid, there is no reason why they could not be applied to languages other than Chinese and English.

Let us first look at the ways Yip and Chan each treat the racial relations between the Chinese and other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese-white relations. In Yip's *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, the hero, Charlie, is subjected to racial discrimination on a number of occasions, but he is convinced that racial biases can be overcome "with a good dose of patience" (93). Acting on this belief, he refuses to move out of an apparently predominantly white neighborhood to escape white racism; instead, he befriends his hostile neighbours and eventually wins their friendship. An especially significant aspect of racial relations is interracial marriage and relationships. In *The Warm Flow of Love*, Yip portrays two Chinese-white relationships which culminate in happy marriages. The first is between the heroine, Xie Muzhen, a high school English teacher from Hong Kong, and Darwin, a radio reporter with a degree from Columbia University. The second is between Brown, a Chinese youth orphaned at an early age and brought up by a pastor, and a white girl who has won the laurel of a beauty queen. In both cases, the white person takes the initiative and breaks whatever reserve the loved one may have. Explicit disapproval of mixed relationships comes from both the whites and the Chinese (e.g. Muzhen's mother), but love conquers all, rather easily, and reason triumphs in the liberal-minded whites. The story is obviously idealized and, one may even say, simplistically optimistic.

Chan's characters suffer from white racism, too, but their reactions are different from Charlie's in *The Tears*. For example, in "Night of Transgressions," Gerald as a child at first

did not know why the other children didn't play with him. Once though, some older kids called him bastard and threw rocks at him, hitting him on the back enough times so that he walked with his head down, in defense, for years afterwards. And he understood at that moment — just as the rocks flew at him — what his mother had been meaning to get into his head when she told him at night, "Be strong. Don't hit back...."

But later on, when he was kicked in the stomach by a white schoolmate, Manfred Hoffman, he vowed to get even with him. Two weeks later, with the help of his friends, he managed to trap Manfred, who cried and wanted to go home:

Gerald waited calmly, not only smiling, but laughing, knowing that this was all he wanted to see from Manfred, shame and cowardice. Yet his hands were still fists, he could fight and haul out screams of blood and bruises from Manfred if he wanted to. He wanted to, he was already peeling off his shirt to beat Manfred. Back then, even young boys took their shirts off to prove a point.

Whether Gerald actually hit Manfred or not is not important. The fact that as an adult he can recall the experience vividly proves that it has become irrevocably part of his ethnic experience as a Chinese Canadian and thus enters into the formation of his personality. One may say, "Boys are boys." True. Gerald the boy found it hard to exercise the kind of self-restraint his mother, as well as Charlie in *The Tears*, suggest. Gerald was caught between acting according to certain Chinese precepts and following his own gut feeling. When Gerald's childhood experiences of racism are placed in the context of his life as a whole and related to his adult behavior, they become entwined with the more complicated issue of his self-definition as a Chinese Canadian.

Chan's treatment of interracial marriage is more subtle than Yip's. In "Getting to Know You," Tom, a college student of Chinese origin who narrates the story, tells his white friend that his sister married a German fellow. Then the dialogue below ensues:

"Really!" cried Marta. "I can imagine how it went over with your parents."

"It didn't. But she's been married more than once."

"Well, did she do it right the first time?"

"You mean marry a Chinese? No. The first was white. I don't know what nationality..."

In fact, the first man Tom's sister married was Chinese, and he has never told anybody about this. In the above passage Tom construes Marta's enthusiastic reaction to the news of his sister marrying a German as implying that she marries above her racially. This judgment of Tom's leads him further to interpret his friend's question as to whether his sister married right the first time as suggesting, perhaps ironically, that her sister should 'stick to her own kind,' i.e., marry a Chinese. Although Tom does not like his sister's first husband, he does not want to leave the impression that when his sister married a Chinese, of whom his parents seem to have approved, the 'right' marriage turned out to be a failure, while the 'wrong' marriage with the German fellow is apparently doing well. By claiming that his ex-brother-in-law is a white man instead of a Chinese, Tom seems to want to neutralize any possible racist innuendoes his white friend might intend. Whether or not Tom is fully justified in making the above suppositions, he is clearly portrayed as insecure about his position in Chinese-white relations.

How do the Chinese in Canada view themselves? How do they define their identity as Chinese Canadians? On these crucial issues Yuen Chung Yip and Weyman Chan again express different visions. Yip depicts many of his characters simply as exiles from the homeland. His *The Vagabond*, which could also be translated as *The Exile*, is a story about a Chinese youth wandering through Canada in exile. Most of those characters who are

already settled in Canada are, however, oriented towards China. They reveal different aspects of the "sojourner mentality" (see Con et al., 6). Reflecting the immigration patterns of early Chinese Canadians, characters like Uncle Liang in *The Tears* and Huang Bingshi and Huang Pincai (George Huang), father and son, in *Foreign Offspring*, are lonely laborers who come to Canada with the purpose of making enough money to return to China eventually and who have to suffer forced separation from their wives and children for dozens of years on end. As a consequence both of Chinese cultural tradition and of white racism (see Chang, "Sojourner"), these people occupy a marginal position in Canadian society, and this in turn prompts them to view themselves as Overseas Chinese rather than Chinese Canadians. In Yip's works, his characters' extensive involvement, emotional or otherwise, in the politics of the old country contrasts significantly with the scanty references to sociopolitical developments in Canada. In *The Warm Flow of Love*, the story ends with a happy marriage between the heroine Muzhen and Darwin, with her pledge, supported by her husband, to work for five or six years in Canada to save enough money so that she could return to Hong Kong one day to open a school.

If ever oriented towards Canada, Yip's characters show many features characteristic of first-generation immigrants. The reality of racial inequality prompts them to struggle for acceptance by mainstream society and for the enhancement of the social status of Chinese Canadians as an ethnic group. One avenue leading to the realization of these goals is education, as one character in *The Tears* argues:

Why can immigrants of other national origins grab high positions in society while we can't? That's because our education is too low and nobody takes us seriously... "This isn't discrimination; it's a competition in knowledge... In recent years, the Canadian-born Chinese have already made great strides in society. Why can't the newcomers follow suit, learn something from their examples? That's the only way to enhance our image and win respect from other ethnic groups. (43)

Chan, on the other hand, deals mostly with Canadian-born Chinese. His characters are more integrated with mainstream society. One indicator of this is their language status. If for Yip's characters, learning to speak good English means a step towards integration, then for Chan's characters, English has become the superior language and the 'mother tongue' is being gradually lost. For them, self-definition cannot be simply reduced to gaining acceptance from the dominant white population; rather, it becomes a complex question of finding one's own identity in Canadian society while being caught between ambivalent feelings about one's ethnic heritage and the desire for acceptance by white people. A case in point is Ronald in Chan's "Another Man's Shoes." Ronald is a young shoe salesman at a

department store. When he first came to the shoe department, the two old ladies who had worked there for dozens of years found him too "soft, Chinese," and "lack[ing]" in "enterprise" (6). Gradually, as they have tutored him into a "competent" salesperson like themselves, Ronald has come to take on their values and biases. One day, when a customer's child bursts out crying, he deals with the situation rather unsympathetically. He tells the mother, "I know your daughter is upset. But I don't want our customers to be frightened off" (8). He says that because "he assumed that this was what the ladies" [i.e. his senior co-workers] "would have him say" (8). Ronald's apprenticeship and acculturation at the department store threatens his independent personality.

Ronald's attitude towards other ethnic Chinese is clearly ambivalent. On the one hand, as he begins to attract more and more oriental customers, he feels rather proud of himself. He even speaks to them in two Chinese dialects "just to impress his co-workers" (8). On the other hand, he feels embarrassed and resentful in the presence of those Chinese customers who wear cheap and tasteless clothes and act unelegantly. At least on this point, he will acquiesce in his co-workers' racist contempt for those oriental customers. Ronald's ambivalence towards other ethnic Chinese comes to a head when a Chinese couple approaches him with a problem. This awkward, ill-dressed couple claim that they were talked into buying shoes a size too small at a reduced price by one of his fellow workers, and now they want to trade them in for a larger pair. Ronald remembers that his co-worker "admitted to hooking her sucker" (10). During a brief confrontation with his customers, Ronald's mind becomes a battlefield for conflicting values and rival feelings. At first, he "felt a resentment towards the couple stir inside him" and he "winced at the stupidity" of their dress (10). This is not just a matter of innocent vanity. In this elderly Chinese couple he sees "the same mould that had shaped his parents" (10). He hates the frugality they practice in order to save for a rainy day. At the immediate level, he sees the injustice of his co-worker's trick but wants to stick to the store's policy of not refunding sales items. Then, as he yells at the Chinese couple and builds up his anger and despair, another aspect of his being, perhaps long repressed, is brought up to the surface.

But suddenly, all of that was gone. He saw himself in a hot, steaming laundry, his hands cracked red from detergent. His head was full of the war of customer complaints, dirty linens, creased collars. Threats in a foreign language, exploding like bombs. Ronald returned to himself, overhearing the woman's words as if they came from inside him, as if his body was a huge brass bell that cried from an elemental tone that she'd struck in him. (10)

But, as the woman finds her anger after suffering one injustice after another, the argument quickly turns into a personality conflict. The story ends with Ronald turning away from the Chinese couple to serve another customer. The conflict within Ronald as he seeks to define his identity as a Chinese Canadian remains unresolved. His identity crisis is aptly summed up in the title of the story: "Another Man's Shoes."

Criticism of the negative side of Chinese tradition is another point shared by Yip and Chan. In *The Tears*, Yip launches sharp attacks against gambling and patriarchal tyranny among Chinese Canadians. For instance, Zhenfang's father treats her like a domestic slave. Not only does he refuse to let her finish high school, but he also tries to force her into a marriage with the degenerate son of a "community leader," purely for his own selfish ends. He tells Zhenfang: "I'm your father. I call the shots here. You've gotta listen to me" (39). But Zhenfang does not give in; she eventually revolts against her father by running away from home.

Compared with Mee Wai in Chan's story, Zhenfang is fortunate in being able to find a solution to her problem. Mee Wai is the wife of Chang Liu Chin, a chef in a Chinese restaurant. She grew up in a village in southern China and was brought to Canada by Liu Chin for their marriage. The story opens with a description of a routine day in her life as a domestic 'slave' when she is "eleven years and eight months into her residency" in Canada (12). Here is a passage that reveals Mee Wai's thought:

She thinks at one time she did enjoy her role, this steady flow of hours from the first ashtray or newspaper picked up to that final twist of the finger that turns off the night light and puts tomorrow forward, in reach after only so much as a brief closing and opening of her eyes. (12)

Yet Mee Wai's endless toil hardly earns her the appreciation she so richly deserves. Instead, Liu Chin "enjoyed mocking her intentions, perverting them. "You don't do enough around here," he'd say to her. 'Your work isn't worth the rice you eat. *You're my wife so do as you're told*'" (14, emphasis added). Notice here that Liu Chin's male chauvinism comes close to being a form of sadism. His arrogant exhortation that "You're my wife so do as you're told" bears striking similarity to Zhenfang's father's assertion, "I'm your father. I call the shots here. You've gotta listen to me."

Although patriarchal domination of women in Chinese families is a theme common to both Yip and Chan, the two authors present two different kinds of reaction from their women characters. Zhenfang chooses to revolt against her father and break away from her oppressive family. Mee Wai, on the other hand, is so dependent on her husband financially, socially, and psychologically that she can only protest with an apologetic smile and, so to speak, rebel on her knees. If she ever asserts her independent personality

and resists Liu Chin's oppression, she is always alarmed by her own boldness and feels guilty afterwards. The story closes with Mee Wai's thought about the emotional as well as physical insecurity that will always be a major fact of her life. But one thing she knows for sure: "she would never go too far. She will always come back down, and make it up to him in the end" (15). Mee Wai has so much internalized the patriarchal values of traditional Chinese culture that she has simply lost the capacity to fight for her dignity and rights as a woman. "Mee Wai" is thus a tragic story beneath the appearance of a domestic melodrama.

From the analysis above, it is easy to see that Yuen Chung Yip and Weyman Chan differ considerably in their ethnic sensibility and in their ways of handling similar ethnic themes. How can these be related to the fact that they write in different languages? What is of interest here is not the intrinsic properties of the languages in question, but rather the sociological implications of the specific choice of language made by the two authors. First of all, it seems safe to say that their respective choice of language reflects their differences in educational background. Yip grew up and received most of his education in China, and Chinese is for him a language to which he feels emotionally close and in which he can be fully articulate. This is a situation typical of writers who are first-generation immigrants. Chan was born in Canada and has an education that one may expect of Canadians in general. English is the only language which he has worked on systematically and in which he can be articulate in writing. Like other first-generation native-born Canadians, for him the 'mother tongue' spoken by his parents is basically an oral language. The basic language orientations of the two authors must have played a significant role in the shaping of their respective cultural values at an impressionable formative stage of their lives. The same linguistic orientations also determine to a large extent the literary tradition in which the two authors write. Not surprisingly, Yip's work owes much to the influence of Chinese literature, and it is possible, in fact, to regard his work as so-called "overseas Chinese literature" (see Chang, "Introduction" 18-20). Chan's fiction, on the other hand, is very much in tune with the trends in contemporary Canadian literature. An interest in the psychological analysis of characters, a lively and sometimes wry sense of humor, a touch at once ironic and sympathetic, and a tendency to explore ethnic themes in the light of the universal problems of modern man, "such as alienation, loneliness and the existential quest for identity," "which have been major preoccupations of modern writers generally" (Kroetsch et al. v) — these features of Chan's fiction situate him somewhere close to, if not right in, the mainstream of Canadian literature.

If we examine the language-work relationship from the perspective of the audience, the issue becomes further complicated. As it is well acknowledged in contemporary criticism, the meaning of a work is closely related

to its reception by a historically specific audience. But how does the situation of the audience affect the reception of Chinese-Canadian works? For the purpose of this paper, we can divide Chinese-Canadian readers into three groups, those who read only Chinese, those who read only English, and those who read both (this group includes those who mainly read Chinese and those who mainly read English). Obviously, to those who read only one of the two languages, works in the other language are inaccessible unless translation is provided. If a work is not available to a certain readership, then, as far as that readership is concerned, it does not exist; for the author's voice cannot reach them and therefore cannot have any effect on them.

The situation of the bilingual readers is rather complex. Apparently they switch their "horizon of expectations" (Hans Robert Jauss) according to the language in which a work is written. If a work is written in Chinese, then they may reasonably expect certain typical features of Chinese culture and literary tradition. The same goes for works written in English. Here we are assuming a perfectly balanced bilingual and bicultural audience. In most cases, however, bilingual and bicultural readers have one language and culture which is relatively stronger, and it is very difficult, if not impossible, to effect a neat switching of horizons. Rather, the two horizons are bound to interact with each other, thus making the reader's mind a battlefield of two distinct sets of values and norms. The result may be some temporary truce, uneasily maintained. If this is true, then one's appreciation of the two bodies of Chinese-Canadian literary works in a comparative light must be constantly altered in the light of one's changing reading as well as social experience.

To sum up, a literary language carries with it a wide range of sociological implications, from the author's sociohistorical background to the reader's "horizon of expectations" to the literary tradition(s) of which it is a part. This comparative analysis of Yuen Chung Yip's Chinese work and Weyman Chan's English work suggests that the choice of language made by Chinese-Canadian authors is significant because it bears on their ethnic sensibility and substantially affects the production and consumption of their work.

University of Southern California

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South Asian Literature in Canada

Is there a South Asian Canadian Literature? Let us first consider what is called 'South Asian Canadian Literature,' that is, the body of work to which this term is sometimes applied, and then, consider the question as to whether such a literature in fact exists: to what extent does it have a unity, a self awareness as South Asian, as Canadian, literature.

First the nomenclature. The term South Asian is perhaps a little unfortunate: a scholar's disinfected, neutered shorthand, definitely not a literary term. In fact it is a painful term from the literary point of view, for behind its whitewash lurk memories, the pain and anguish of separation, partition. South Asia refers to the Subcontinent — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. South Asians have come to Canada from these countries, but more recently also from East and South Africa, the Caribbean countries, Fiji, and elsewhere. Many speak only English or an Indian dialect, some speak both and perhaps a third language like Kiswahili. Most come from a former British Colony.

Elsewhere I have called this meeting of cultures here in Canada, and more specifically, of literatures, "A Meeting of Streams."¹ But this meeting did not begin with the arrival of plane-loads of refugees to Canada in the 1970s. Before that there were plane-loads to Britain, in the 1960s. This meeting is the prologue to our colonial past, it began with the presence of the British in our countries. Going to London was an important pilgrimage in the colonies. It brought status. There were many Dick Whittingtons where and when I was growing up. Knowing English brought status. (One is reminded of the terms 'black Englishman,' or 'brown Englishman' that were used pejoratively then.) Knowing English still brings status, of course, but now the role of the U.S. must also be considered. For many South Asians, therefore, at least for those who grew up in the colonies, this arrival in Canada, or the U.S., or the U.K., was a tryst with destiny (to turn around

1 M.G. Vassanji, ed. *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (Toronto: TSAR 1985).