

SAW NEWS

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Without privileging marginality, so as to ascribe too much power to the centre, how can identities of in-between cultures be asserted? If one becomes "invisible" in a public forum because one's origins are vague, or told that one's presence is contingent on particular economic factors, or if one's "in a pickle" because repatriation from your own country is a violent expulsion that leaves you with no place to go, then what is the answer? Nothing less than to locate a space of belonging within the violence of exclusion.

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Yellow Peril RECONSIDERED

CURATED BY PAUL WONG

JUNE 19-JULY 23, 1991

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

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"The (not so) exotic from the point of the (not so) exotic becomes familiar."

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term "yellow peril" was widely used to refer to the "threat" posed by Asian immigrants to Canada coming primarily from China and Japan. They were perceived to affect the racial purity of the Canadian population and as detrimental to the existing system of values. This sentiment was reflected in racist

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legislation such as the Head Tax on Chinese immigration imposed by the British Columbia government in 1884 at \$10 per head, and later, at the hands of the federal government rose as high as \$500 in 1904, a considerable sum at that time. Later, Chinese immigration was prohibited entirely. The surface of Canadian history is pocked marked with other blatant injustices, most notably the wartime internment of Japanese Canadians, including the local born, and the confiscation of their property. These various legislations, regardless of how long ago their introduction took place, continue to have an assortment of repercussions, some more insidious than others.

The individual histories of Asian Canadians reveal the subtleties of these effects as well as the systemic nature of the practices in which they are embedded. For instance, many members of the older generation who were directly affected by the Head Tax or the internment refuse to speak of or even remember events of that time, although they are asked to for the purpose of obtaining redress. They perceive their differential treatment as something to be ashamed of. Outside of any physical or material harm, the wound to pride is often the most devastating.

The ensuing generation widely internalized that shame in such a way as to understand the Asian side of their culture as inferior, and by corollary, the Western side as superior.

While this may be true of people living in many colonized nations, it has particularities resulting from the lack or at least diffusion of an indigenous culture to "return" to. Asian Canadians are not so much "colonized" as progenitors of the diaspora.

With the institutionalization of post-modern theory, the fixity of truth and the concreteness of standards for what constitutes "art" are thrown into question. One can not help but observe the coincidence that at a time when members of colonized nations or the diaspora are discovering the strength of their case against history, the hidden "truths" behind their oppression, that theory in the West denies the validity of any

truth claims. It is as if to say "If we can't be right, then certainly no one else can either."

In as far as the funding agencies are concerned, the tyranny of fixed standards has been difficult enough to dispute. It need not be mentioned that the traditional standards of such organizations are based on a Eurocentric conception of what constitutes art. Paul Wong, in the exhibition catalogue for *Yellow Peril* writes:

It is a racist practice to judge marginalized work and new ideas that have never been given the opportunity to evolve. When confronted by work that is different, we don't understand because we do not know how to see. When viewing work that is critical of the dominant culture, we get offended because it is about us. When seeing work that is clearly and intentionally 'reverse racism' we get reactionary and defensive... The unfortunate part is that we dismiss work of this nature as being 'not art' and being too 'issue specific'.

In reclaiming the label "yellow" the artists in this exhibition turn around the assumption of whose peril the expression refers to. On the one hand it is a means of solidarity with those who share similar historical conditions, on the other, it is a context in which the precise nature of each artist's work may be illuminated.

Each artist in the exhibition represents a unique voice; however there are certain themes which arise in many of the works. At the present, mass media fills the niche historically occupied by legislations such as MacKenzie King's Order in Council of 1947, which claimed that "large scale immigration from the Orient would change [the] fundamental composition of the Canadian population". To offset the effect current media hype expressing much the same sentiment (eg W5's 1979 segment "Campus Giveaway", the NFB's *Bamboo, Lions, and Dragons* or the more current CBC Radio serial *Dim Sum Diaries*), Chi Chung Mak's *East End*

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Implicit in this statement is the problem that who constitutes "we" is not clear, that the line between "us" and "them" is vague. Tongue in cheek, Wong places himself as a member of the mainstream, but the irony in his voice places him outside it. The arbitrary quality of race as a social construction is reflected not only in the practice of racists, but also in that of people who seek to undermine that practice. The socially constructed nature of the categories, however, makes them no less important. Cries of "reverse racism" from the culture which generated the categories in the first place can not be considered valid until they/we have addressed thoroughly the "original" racism that spawned them. It remains the case that artists of colour in comparison with white artists are severely underfunded by the arts councils, and in addition that they are often shuffled off the ghetto of Multiculturalism as Richard Fung describes in his catalogue essay.

Afternoon throws a wrench in the common stereotype of the Hong Kong immigrant as a wealthy real estate capitalist having no respect for the Canadian working class, giving us a much more down to earth representation of a Chinese immigrant on the steps of a modest house in Vancouver's East side. Nhan Nguyen's work deals with the effects of media generalizations on peoples perceptions of one another and of certain locations. Specifically, how does media coverage of non-Westerners affect Western perceptions of immigrants? How do Western portrayals of Western life affect the expectations of those planning to make a new home here?

The wave of immigration in the late 1800s is manifest in the present by a third generation of people with Asian faces, but little or no experience of life in Asia. While the second generation may have internalized the inferiority complex imposed on the first, the new genera-

tion is in a position to question it. The overt racism in place at the turn of the century has evolved into a more insidious form, encouraged by the politics of Multiculturalism that marks Asians as "gently" different, a "model minority", but diffuses the political nature of that difference. To get in touch with their "ethnic selves", some Asian Canadians "return" to their origins. What they find often profoundly defies expectations. Sharyn Yuen's *Jook Kaak* deals with the shock of this defiance- the incongruence of technologically produced photographic images on handmade paper echoes the shearing sensations of coming in touch with a past which may exist in the collective memory, but has no context in the personal. For Ruby Truly "going home" (an undefined place) takes on an almost sinister aspect. As eggs "containing the germ of the new individual" crunch and squelch between the performers toes, we wonder what past is being cut off, and what the future might hold. Roy Kiyooka's piece *her last trip up to the family grave on the top of mt. hitsudan* deconstructs the touristic experience by including the photographer's hand or foot in each frame. The human anatomy inserted into the "story" denies the location's exoticism, as if to say "I know this place. I have been here before."

The will to integrate is implicit in Daisy Lee's *The Morning Zoo*, Tony Chan's *Chinese Cafes in Rural Saskatchewan*, and is addressed more clearly in L'Amitie Chinoise's collectively produced tape *Silence into Silence*. The latter deals with family conflict surrounding a young woman's choice to pursue her career as a graphic artist in Toronto while her family moves to Edmonton to open a restaurant. It is primarily a conflict of values- that which is traditionally Chinese, emphasizing the well being of the group, against the individualist ethic of the West. The conflict extends to that between one generation and the next.

Notions of sexuality arise in a number of works, intersecting in all cases with issues of race. Richard Fung's *Chinese Characters*

specifically treats the lack of Asian representation in gay male pornography. Helen Lee in *Sally's Beauty Spot*, deconstructs the Hollywood stereotype of Asian women as naive yet sexually available. At the same time she attempts to "reconstruct" a more positive model of Asian women's sexuality (as having agency), disassociating herself from the early feminist understanding that to attain their freedom women had to deny any form of sexual existence. Brenda Lem's *The Compact* touches on the absurd assumptions made by a Western fetishization of the Asian female, and the human consequences of such perceptions.

Many of the works in *Yellow Peril* directly question Western stereotypes of Asians, or deal with specific exclusions of Asians in the representation of certain practices. Others, such as *Nobuo Kubota at the Western Front*, are an innovative mixture of artforms from the cultures to which the artists belong. Surrounded by the work of other Asian Canadians, the twenty-five voices become distinct. The Western media continues to produce media in the tradition of *The World of Suzie Wong*, *The Year of the Dragon*, or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with representations of Asians as sexually available lotus blossoms or Dragon ladies, as sinister gangsters, as environmentally unsound real estate tycoons, or as the uncountable victims of various natural or (native) government imposed tragedies. Although there is still a long way to go in erasing the authoritative Anglo male voiceover controlling our understanding of history, *Yellow Peril* undermines it, beginning to reconstruct the past and future in more familiar voices.

