

# Photographers shed light on Asian myth

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Media incite  
hype, racism,  
artist claims

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**O**N THE FOURTH step of a nondescript stucco bungalow in Vancouver, a man stands staring across the front yard.

The sky fades from light blue to a kind of gauzy-grey on the horizon. There's an empty lot next door with long, stubby grass turned brown. A wooden electrical pole with its mass of wires tilts towards the house.

But the one thing that's different about this photograph, titled *East End Afternoon*, is that the man is Asian — a Hong Kong immigrant. There's no monster house, no expensive car in the driveway, no neatly manicured front lawn.

As photographer Chi Chung Mak says in the catalogue: "With the help of mass media, the myth of Hong Kong immigrants is being inflated to a cosmic proportion. Hopefully, my work can shed some light on the 'Immigrant Phobia.'"

For Paul Wong, curator of the show *Yellow Peril Reconsidered*, *East End Afternoon* is one example of how Asian artists show see themselves differently from the media's portrayal of Asians in Canada.

"Look, we don't all have money. We don't all have monster homes — (the photograph) really addresses the incredible amount of racism about Hong Kong dollars," Wong said. "The kind of racism that has been levelled against the Chinese that have moved here has been outrageous. It's only because they are a visible minority."

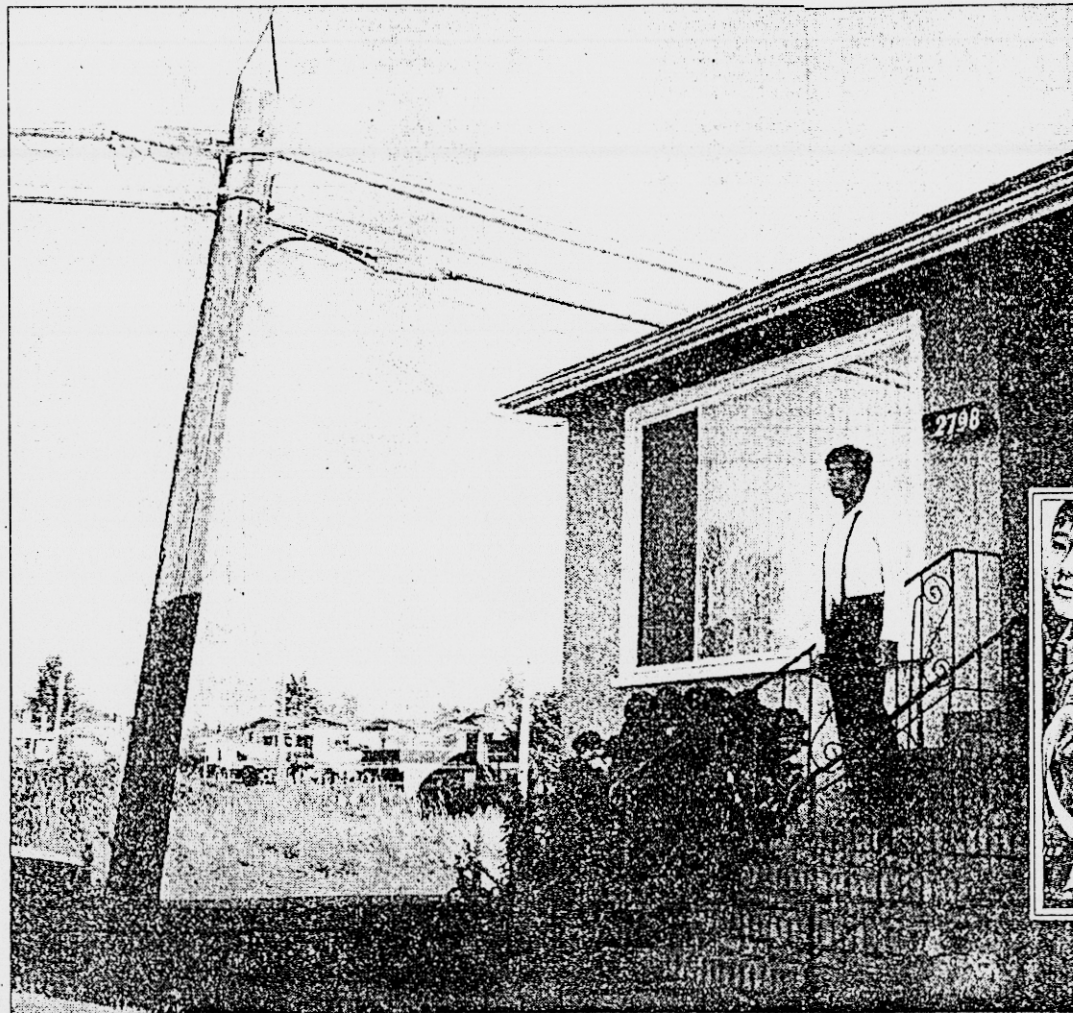
*Yellow Peril Reconsidered*, which opened Saturday, is a collection of film, video and photo-based works from 25 Asian-Canadian artists being shown at three art galleries in downtown Vancouver.

The show opened last year in Montreal, with stops in Toronto, Winnipeg and Halifax before reaching Vancouver. It ends later this summer in Ottawa.

In an interview amidst shipping crates full of mounted photographs still being unpacked, Wong explained how the genesis for the show began about three years ago when he became aware of how the Canadian art world came from an almost exclusive Euro-centric point of view.

So he started on an exploration that led him to the U.S., where he found a much more vibrant Asian-American creative and artistic world.

As he writes in the catalogue accompanying the show: "Despite what we are taught to believe in



**ASIAN ARTISTS** are showing their works at three galleries in Vancouver. Chi Chung Mak's work, left, deals with the lives of Hong Kong immigrants in Vancouver, while Nhan Duc Nguyen, below, tries to help promote a better understanding of the dilemmas of being a visible minority.



Canada, it is appalling how far behind the United States and the United Kingdom we are in the development of 'minority programs.'

"The ongoing and unresolved bilingualism problem in Canada leaves little or no monies, political energy, commitment or media attention for other cultural issues. This inability to recognize 'others' directly, and perhaps intentionally, suppresses our voices."

So he decided to organize a video show called *New World Asians*, featuring mainly Asian-American artists. That led to the next step: a multimedia art show around what it means to be of Asian heritage in Canada.

Opposition to the whole idea came

from several quarters, including the established art world that couldn't — or wouldn't — accept art that was about a specific issue — being Asian.

Wong was also criticized by some Asian artists for being a "banana" — yellow on the outside but white on the inside. Other Asian artists didn't want to be in the show out of fear of being ghettoized as Asian artists.

"It is astonishing that this exhibition, I believe, is one of the first of its kind that really shows that we do exist and that there is a community of Asian-Canadian film, video and photo artists," Wong said. This show says that it is quite all right to explore what it is to be Asian as a subject matter.

"That we can talk about identity crises, about being sexual, about racism and cultural isolation and, at the same time, show that we are artists."

Wong also hopes, in a "positive way," to influence various multicultural programs and policies to ensure they don't become locked into supporting traditional "folk arts" at the expense of artists interpreting the Asian experience in a Canadian setting.

Wong's challenging of stereotypes also shows up in the typeface used for the show. *Yellow Peril* is printed in a typeface called *Chinatown* to reclaim the stereotyped sign language and make it mean more than a Chinese language restaurant logo,

he said.

The show includes a wide cross-section of 140 works including photographs by Tamio Wakayama, chronicler of the Japanese-Canadian community around Powell Street; photo-collages by Nhan Duc Nguyen, who learned about the Vietnam War through the eyes of the Western media; and several video works, ranging from experimental to traditional documentaries. These include Richard Fung's *Chinese Characters*, about gay Asian desires in relation to white gay pornography; Anthony Chan's *Chinese Cafes in Rural Saskatchewan*, which looks at the lives of Chinese-Canadians who run cafes in rural Prairie towns; and Mini Onodera's film *The Dis-*

placed View, about the suppressed history of Japanese Canadians through the lives of the women in one family.

The photo-based works are being shown at the Contemporary Art Gallery, 555 Hamilton and Artspeak, 3-311 West Hastings; film and video at the Or Gallery, 110-314 West Hastings. The show ends June 8.

Film and videos will be screened at special showings Wednesday and Thursday at 8 p.m. at Western Front, 303 East Eighth.

A lecture by Wong with a discussion including *Yellow Peril* artists will take place May 30 at 8 p.m. at Video In, 1102 Homer.