Being a one-and-a-half-generation Chinese Canadian, you have one foot in and one foot out and no strong sense of belonging.
—Julia Kwan

It will take a few generations to melt that barrier and, hopefully, that word 'Asian' will drop out of the lexicon and we will be identified as Canadians and not as hyphenated ones.
—Cheuk Kwan

I think a lot about the transitory space that I exist in, the journeyman in me—here, but not here.
—Ho Tam

NOTES ON HYPHENATION

To refer to Asian Canadian film and video as a hyphenated cinema might seem an obvious or unnecessarily controversial move, worrying the existence or non-existence of punctuation marks perhaps a bit like scratching at dissolving stitches after they have already been absorbed by the skin. Debates in Asian North American cultural studies over the significance and appropriate use of the hyphen have undoubtedly suffered from a certain banality—a banality also apparent in the increasingly routine observation that all North Americans are in some sense 'hyphenated.' Yet the crux of the discussion has been and remains germane to those situated in, not in and/or between racial and national entities such as 'Asia' and 'Canada' or 'Asia' and 'America,' and who continue to seek means to articulate the contradictions and negotiations that bind these categories in their unsettled and mutually unsettling dynamics. For its multiple charges, and for simply occupying the gaps between identifiers at once coextensive (or equal), and subordinate and super-ordinate (or unequal), the hyphen still marks a contentious spot on our cultural-political maps; it serves to punctuate an otherwise awkwardly or deceptively empty space.[1] This mediary space or interval—indeed, in the above quotations from Julia Kwan and Ho Tam, it would seem both a time and a place—has been both easy to overlook and prone to co-optation.

Asian American scholars have offered a number of provocative and competing interpretations of the trouble with hyphens. According to

literary critic David Leiwei Li, the presence or absence of the hyphen locates the user squarely on one side of a cultural-political divide: 'the hyphenated "Asian-American" is the rendering used by the dominant (white) culture; without the hyphen, "Asian American" is the way Asians describe themselves.'[2] Of interest in this polarizing formulation is the reading of the hyphen as a sign of exclusion, a gesture that enfolds the 'Asian-American' into a mainstream 'American' discourse at the same that it asserts the homogeneity and separateness of a white majority. In David Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier,* the question of inclusion and exclusion is not decided by the terminology's users but rather inheres in the two-term structure itself, in a 'transitivity' of identifications that the author emphatically re-marks with/as a slash:

> The nature of Asian American social subjectivity now vacillates between whiteness and color. Its visibility is of a particular texture and density; its function is always to trace a racial minority's possibilities for assimilation. . . . Asia/America resides *in transit,* as a point of reference on the horizon that is part of *both* a "minority" identity and a "majority" identity. This constant transitivity evinces precisely the malleability and resistance of "America" with regard to racial reformation.[3]

Hyphen or slash? I think what matters may be less the choice to hyphenate or not to hyphenate than the relationship between the signifiers 'Asian' and 'American' that these markings both and/or either reveal and/or conceal: conjuncture and rupture, an exorable pressure to assimilate or the impossibility of assimilation, a permanent suture and/or an impermeable barrier interposed between presumably distinct racial-national formations. The fluctuations of intractability and elasticity in the very language of identification evoke impasse as well as possibility. For cultural critic Kandice Chuh, 'Asian American' is 'a term *in difference from itself—* at once making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement.'[4] According to theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha:

> The predicament of crossing boundaries cannot be merely rejected or accepted. It has to be confronted in its controversies. There is indeed little hope of speaking this simultaneously outside-inside

actuality into existence in simple, polarizing black-and-white terms. The challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself: the *becoming* Asian-American; the realm in-between, where predetermined rules cannot fully apply.[5]

For the challenges of becoming that it encodes, the hyphen offers a suggestive metaphor for the Asian Canadian screen, the slash perhaps an image in miniature of a 'slanted screen'[6]: an in-between or off-centre representational space devised and projected onto by many of the contributors to this anthology. In these pages, Ann Marie Fleming describes her work's often at once critical and comedic sensibility as 'sideways.' Helen Lee refers to her 'sideways and askance' way of viewing her own experience in the Asian American world. Several of Keith Lock's 'Adventures in Celluloid Gold Mountain' have navigated the interstices of the Canadian film industry, felicitous accidents and the blind spots of institutional racism. As the essays and conversations gathered here demonstrate, the screen slants and cuts more than one way.

ASIA/CANADA: SPLIT SCREENS, AMBIVALENT IMAGES

Philip Rosen has argued that 'The concept of a national cinema is always implicated in a dialectic of nation and anti-nation.'[7] Asia's status as 'anti-nation,' its exclusion from the formation of Canada and its national cinema, is abundantly apparent in a number of founding contradictions. In her essay for this volume, Alice Shih notes that the Canadian Pacific Railway's vital sponsorship of an early national film industry was underwritten, like the railway itself, by thousands of Chinese workers imported as a surplus labour force beginning in 1881. The exploitation of Chinese labour, along with the genocidal clearing of First Nations peoples from the land, is the underside or repressed of the dazzling Canadian landscapes packaged in CPR-commissioned travelogues, commodity spectacles created to entice Anglo-American and European tourists as well as what Christopher E. Gittings has called the 'right/white kind of invader-settlers' to populate the expanding colony.[8] The implications of this racist disavowal reverberate in the contemporary context, relevant to the operation of cinematic images as well as the politics of production, exhibition and reception today.

As Benedict Anderson's classic study contends, the nation is an 'imagined community,' a 'deep, horizontal comradeship'[9] projected across

differences and geographical distances. Film as a technology of fantasy[10] certainly helped to engineer early collective imaginings of a 'right/white' Canada from east to west, the 49th Parallel to the Arctic Circle, in dialectical opposition to the various 'anti-nationals' that would threaten its purity and cohesiveness. *Back to God's Country* (David M. Hartford, 1910), starring Nell Shipman, opens with the public humiliation and murder of a Chinese man in a northern saloon, a gesture that, as Gittings suggests, sanctions the white claim to Canada's natural resources from the outset by marking the Asian other's entry into the Gold Rush as avaricious and therefore illegitimate.[11] Before killing Shan Tung, a drunken, burly, hairy French Canadian trapper (itself a demeaning stereotype) slices off the 'Chinaman's' queue, reclaiming it as a trophy and as a prop in a mocking dance that he performs for the amusement of the other saloon patrons. The act conflates cultural castration and the assimilationist imperative, effecting one kind of murder before the Chinese interloper in the Canadian space is then slain.

Yet while it is tempting to read the disturbing opening frames of *Back to God's Country,* or the loathsome entirety of a film like *Secrets of Chinatown* (Fred Newmayer, 1935),[12] as straightforward exercises in racist representation, it can be self-defeating to take these images at face value, to seal them in a falsely unified conception of the stereotype and its power to define and circumscribe the 'other.' As Homi Bhabha suggests, the stereotype is a fetish, a metonymic displacement of an '"impossible" object' that the racist obsessively claims to know: a 'fantasy that dramatizes the impossible desire for a pure, undifferentiated origin.'[13] The trapper's expropriation of Shan Tung's queue to consolidate community is fetishistic and fantastic in this sense, as is the mimicry of 'Chineseness' performed by the lead detective in *Secrets of Chinatown,* Donegal Dawn, executed supposedly to perfection in improbably dark black face, a turban and a very weird accent. The severed hair, the makeup, the untraceable accent: these detachable, dislocated masks of Asian difference are arguably cinematic souvenirs of a *failure* to fathom the other and achieve or retrieve an indivisible, original white Canadian nationhood at the other's expense. The screen from the very beginnings of 'our' film history is split or ambivalent in this key respect.

Detecting such fractures in national or culturally dominant self-imaginings can interrupt and intervene into racist, sexist, homophobic and other pejorative forms of representation. A number of filmmakers in this

collection work (and play) with the play between fetishistic images and the objects they refer to and defer. David Eng, Ann Marie Fleming, Richard Fung, Helen Lee, Midi Onodera, Mieko Ouchi, Ho Tam, Paul Wong, Wayne Yung and others have infiltrated stereotypes and other reified images in their art, at times reiterating them with a Butlerian difference,[14] as can be seen in Ho Tam's *Pocahontas: TransWorld Remix* (1998), Wayne Yung's *The Queen's Cantonese* (1998) and Mieko Ouchi's impersonation of Marilyn Monroe in *Shepherd's Pie and Sushi* (1998). Ouchi intriguingly both recalls and defamiliarizes the screen icon by displacing and replacing her signature platinum blonde hair, blue eyes and beauty mark around and onto a recognizably Asian face. The unexpected difference the viewer confronts in this instance of 'race drag' may be complicated, visibly and invisibly, by the fact of the impersonator's bi-racial identity. In this and other works, the split between celluloid or video as opaque surface and as transparency is acknowledged and exacerbated. Midi Onodera's use of split screens and multiple framing often exploits the slippage between the thing and its cinematic materialization, decomposing composition in ways that estrange the aesthetic object and disrupt the visual field. These kinds of breaks and interstitial openings become spaces for possibly reimagining the normative (perceptual, social, cultural) ties that bind what a spectator is seeing to an external referent.

At the same time, images do not only (fail to) reflect back on or displace some unknowable, 'impossible object'; they also act on viewers in the world. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, visual images have lives of their own. They want, love and, in some cases, take hostage:

> The stereotype is an especially important case of the living image because it occupies [the] middle ground between fantasy and technical reality, a more complexly intimate zone in which the image is, as it were, painted or laminated directly onto the body of a living being, and inscribed into the perceptual apparatus of a beholder. It forms a mask, or what W. E. B. DuBois called a "veil," that interposes itself between persons. . . . [I]t is the pictures—the stereotypes, the caricatures, the peremptory, prejudicial images that mediate between persons and social groups—that seem to take on a life of their own—and a deadly, dangerous life at that—in the rituals of the racist (or sexist) encounter.

And it is precisely because the status of these pictures is so slippery and mobile, ranging from phenomenological universals, cognitive templates for categories of otherness, to virulently prejudicial distortions, that their life is so difficult to contain.[15]

The ability of images to shape social reality and their capacity to persist and proliferate as if on their own are engaged by a number of contributors here. Monika Kin Gagnon traces a particular splitting of the national screen over time in the National Film Board's documentary representations of the Japanese Canadian internment, beginning with the cinematic containment strategies employed by the blatantly propagandistic *Of Japanese Descent: An Interim Report* (1945), produced as part of an initially pan-Canadian, 'right/white' nation-building project during John Grierson's tenure as NFB Film Commissioner.[16] David Eng and Leon Aureus discuss the myopia of an industry that seems to offer the same limited yet almost self-propagating repertoire of the same small roles to Asian male actors. Aureus suggests that to cast an Asian actor as an iced-coffee drink-dispensing monster in a convenience store chain's commercial is a non-innocent act, however unintentional; it is an example, perhaps, of what Mitchell describes as the 'lamination' of the monstrous image on an otherwise largely invisible Asian male body.

THE VISIBILITY OF ASIAN CANADIAN VISIBILITY

There is, in other words, a visibility of visibility—a visibility that is the condition of possibility for what becomes visible, that may derive a certain intelligibility from the latter but cannot be simply reduced to it.
—Rey Chow[17]

To create an anthology that takes Asian Canadian film and video as its subject matter is to make a bid for recognition in a complex and contradictory cultural-political field, in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to see anything or anyone 'as they are.' As discussed above, onscreen images mediate between reality and fantasy, hyphenating them (if you will) in both directions. On the one hand, no film or video—not even the documentary variant, as Monika Kin Gagnon, Karin Lee and Loretta Todd, and Khanhthuan Tran and Pamila Matharu demonstrate—transparently scopes

unequivocal, empirical truth. On the other hand, film and video play undeniably significant roles in orchestrating social reality, including the ongoing determination of those who cannot or will not be seen or heard. Attempts to identify, let alone promote, an Asian Canadian cinema as such would thus seem to be both problematic and strategically imperative.

Cultural theorist Rey Chow writes that 'the fetishization of identity as it is currently found in the study of cinematic images...tends to proceed with a Janus-faced logic.'[18] Identity-based interventions such as feminist film theory and minority cinema studies have, she contends, confined themselves to the very visual realm onto which they have displaced a much broader political battlefield, limiting their efforts to commending or rebuking images that appear on the stages and screens of a now 'virtual field of global visibility' and a '"Look at me! Look at us!"'[19] culture for their putative authenticity or inauthenticity. 'There are those,' Chow notes, 'who, mistaking simple visual presence for the (entirety of) visibility, will always insist on investing artificial images with an anthropomorphic realism.'[20] In his conversation here with Nguyen Tan Hoang, Wayne Yung calls attention to precisely this mistaken investment in accusations that his videos 'misrepresent' gay Asian experience, to which he has responded by inviting such critics to make their own videos. Yung further describes, in an insightful and hilarious spin on Chow's observation, having recognized that:

> ...purely 'positive representations' of Asian Canadians were boring, unrealistic, and often counterproductive. (It can become a strait-jacket if you're not allowed to show your 'unacceptable' side.) I depicted these attitudes in my videos, especially in *Lotus Sisters* (1996) and *The Queen's Cantonese* (1998), but in such an overblown way that it looks like Vancouver is completely dominated by radically queer Asians, which it certainly isn't. It's more like a 'serving suggestion,' where the glossy photo looks much more appetizing than the real thing, or a fantasy of how I wish Vancouver really was.

Yung's notion of a 'serving suggestion' conjures the wishful magic of the image that Chow rightly argues is suppressed in a great deal of current thinking about cinematic representation. It also points to the forces that enable and disable visibility in a larger, beyond-the-screen sense, to

the fact, for example, that Vancouver is not dominated by radically queer Asians: far from it. This is where 'the condition of possibility for something to become visible' must be, if not deduced from onscreen visibility, then thought together with it, coactively and case by case. I think Chow offers a compelling and illuminating analysis of the 'repressive hypothesis' governing much identity-focused work in cinema- and media-related studies and activism. However, I also find that her readings of the sentimental in contemporary Chinese film—'the tenacity, in the midst of global visibility, . . . of residual significatory traces of a different kind of social behavioral order'[21]—are themselves somewhat limited, in that they tend to occlude an important dimension of global visibility: namely, the shifting, particularized material conditions of film/video production and distribution. In a transnational marketplace in which certain commodified forms of Asianness are being increasingly, even voraciously, consumed, it may be important to ask not only what specific types of Asian film dominate the offerings and why—but what else is there to consume? What kinds of works are not being made, or have been made but not seen, and why not? What does becoming visible really, fully mean and entail?

To ask these sorts of questions need not necessarily be to fall back on preconceptions of an enduring and essentialized identity prior to the image's capacity for distortion, to demand more of the 'positive representations' of an ethnic/racial or cultural minority group that Yung quite accurately notes are often boring to watch and straitjacketing to create. It can be to inquire into some of the precise ways and means of showing, telling and seeing that constitute the mechanisms of local and global visibilities. Canada is fairly unique among multi-ethnic, post-industrial societies for its official understanding of difference in terms of 'visible minorities'; attributes such as skin colour, gender and able-bodiedness comprise some allegedly equivalent coordinates of a national grid for identifying (among) citizens—the 'majority,' by contrast and extension, invisible or less visible on this map. Perhaps because vision is both so privileged and so vexed in the Canadian cultural-political framework, it seems neither easy nor altogether useful to extricate questions regarding the cinema or media spectacle and spectatorship from a more far-reaching context of visibility: one that includes employment, entitlement and access to social services, government subsidization of culture and the arts, mobility, voting, buying and other practices of daily life.

The contributors to this collection telescope areas for investigating the visibility of Asian Canadian visibility both on and off the screen. Several of them do so in part by interrogating the label for what it obscures from view: other social locations and the democratizing potential of technological expertise (Onodera); a largely unreflected and culturally specific assumption that 'identity' is private property, anchored in notions of private life that do not translate well outside North America (Yung); mixed-race and hybrid identities (Nobu Adilman, Nicole Chung, Fleming, Ouchi); and the traffic of the 'particular' with the 'universal' (e.g., Romeo Candido, Fleming, Cheuk Kwan, Julia Kwan, Mina Shum). Others, like Richard Fung, Karin Lee and Ho Tam, struggle with the challenging, palpable divide between art and off-screen activism while at the same time practicing their inseparability in their videos and films. As an optic, 'Asian Canadianness' clearly works unevenly across institutional, economic, regional, linguistic, technological, thematic, generic and other specificities, as well as differences by ethnic and national origin, gender and sexuality. Su-Anne Yeo suggests that concentrated movements of capital, talent and product between western Canada, the western US and the Pacific Rim render west coast film cultures distinctive, creating the formative conditions for the diverse work of highly individualized Asian Canadian film and video artists such as Ling Chiu, Karin Lee, Desiree Lim, Michelle Wong and Paul Wong. A number of contributors—including Colin Geddes, Kwoi Gin, Cheuk Kwan and Lily Cho, Mary Stephen, and Wayne Yung and Nguyen Tan Hoang—consider and track displacement, travel and cultural migration within Asian diasporas that far exceed a Canadian frame.

The mediation of 'Asian' and 'Canadian' by historically ambivalent institutions[22] registers in an institutional ambivalence that reads across the span of this anthology. Many artists acknowledge the vital, invaluable support of NFB diversity initiatives, the Canada Council for the Arts, provincial arts councils, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and other bodies. Yet at the same time that these organizations are genuinely appreciated and applauded for their constitutive role in developing something like an Asian Canadian film and video culture, it would seem also understood that they have established certain limitations, shaped governing norms of participation in regional and national art-making enterprises, and laid down steps by which members of pre-identified groups can ascend to onscreen visibility. In a way, these artists are thus seen before they are

or can be seen on screen, in another Janus-faced operation whereby the support of 'visible minorities' could be said to 'minoritize' them, or render them visible as minorities, again or in the first place.

Contributors to this volume remark similar double-binds in the artist-run centres that have been the crucible for many independent film- and video-makers, and in the smaller, community-based film festivals that have been crucial in nurturing and showcasing their work. Both outside and inside, anti- or extra-institutional and institutionally dependent, ARCs and specialized festivals perform supplementary[23] kinds of work, in that they both expose and compensate for what totalizing structures may lack. Numerous artists and critics here note the pitfalls of an allegedly all-inclusive notion of Canadian multiculturalism that, in practice, often means that the 'centre' remains unchallenged while the 'margins' proliferate, and also help to bolster the power and apparent neutrality and centrality of the centre. It is, for instance, widely, complacently assumed that minority filmmakers have their own small, safe places in which to make and screen their work (see Fung and Onodera, Shih), and that the true sign of arrival and success is the 'maturation' or 'graduation' of a minority artist to a mainstream, one that would appear to be unmarked racially or otherwise if only by virtue of comparisons with the 'niche' production and exhibition channels.

These quandaries number among the challenges faced by an organization like the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival, to which this book owes its impetus and its main title. Many of the contributors have come together in recognition of the festival's support of their work, and its influence in both dismantling and forging older and newer imagined communities. Like the many facets of Reel Asian, the pieces and pictures assembled here are variously critical, celebratory, searching, irreverent, reflective, funny, lyrical and visionary; established and emergent artists are represented, and persons and places near and far. At the same time, this anthology does not and cannot presume to offer any overarching or comprehensive portrait of a multiply hyphenated Asian Canadian cinema, and indeed reproduces many of the problems of the categories it both critiques and repeats. 'Asian Canadian' can be a term of resistance, marking a national difference within a notion of shared ethnicity or race (e.g., 'Asian American') or an ethnic/racial difference within a notion of shared nationality (e.g., 'Canadian'). But it can also operate as a term of elision,

collapsing other differences while preserving the authority of primary or empiricist designations by race and nation. The virtual omission of South Asian Canada from the purview of this collection may be a case in point, deriving from but by no means justified by Reel Asian's particular genesis, as festival co-founder Anita Lee recounts in her conversation with Cameron Bailey, amidst myriad other Toronto-based festivals in 1996. The terms and the images mobilized here do not invoke, cover or exhaust any Asian Canadian essence or totality; they mediate partially and imperfectly between plural realities and delimited representations. Perhaps this is why the word 'reel' in Reel Asian is so suggestive,[24] and why readers might be inspired by this collection to look, and to envision visibility, both within and beyond its pages.

1. The hyphen's simultaneous demarcation and erasure of a demographically complex space is suggested by the title of Anne Marie Nakagawa's documentary on mixed-race Canadians, entitled *Between: Living in the Hyphen* (2005). The NFB-produced documentary takes issue with the assumption that 'in Canada, diversity often means "one ethnicity + hyphen + Canadian"' (National Film Board of Canada website, http://www.nfb.ca/collection/films/fiche/?id=51629xv=h&lg=en&exp=112204, accessed 2 July 2007).

2. David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 207, n. 12.

3. David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.

4. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

5. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 157.

6. I borrow the expression from the title of Jeff Adachi's 2006 documentary, *The Slanted Screen: Asian Men in Film and Television*.

7. Philip Rosen, 'Nation and Anti-nation: Concepts of National Cinema in the "New" Media Era,' *Diaspora* 5.3 (1996): 375–402, 391; quoted in Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

8. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema,* 8.

9. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 7.

10. See Peter X. Feng's *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) for a nuanced, sustained discussion of the distinction between 'reality' and 'fantasy' in film, and the implications of this distinction for readings of race and ethnicity at the level of the cinematic image. It is precisely because film is a 'technology of fantasy' that it is contestable and resistible, that images and identities move in more than one sense and direction.

11. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema,* 23.

12. This would-be British 'quota-quickie' is steeped in anti-Asian racism, from its representation of eastern religion as the occult to its depiction of drugs, white slavery and what Homi Bhabha

has called the 'duplicitous Asiatic' (*The Location of Culture* [London and New York: Routledge, 1994], 75). Keith Lock's documentary on the fascinating life of a pioneering Chinese Canadian restaurateur, *The Road Chosen: The Lem Wong Story* (1997), incorporates some revealing clips from *Secrets of Chinatown.*

13. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 81.

14. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), Judith Butler has theorized parody and impersonation as denaturalizing re-performances of bodily regimes, serving both to reinscribe and to subvert them.

15. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 295–6 and 297.

16. By Gittings's provocative reading, *Of Japanese Descent* furnishes a striking example of the NFB's original work as an ideological state apparatus, creating a community of properly (white, anglophone) Canadian subjects in part by 'offering spectators the vicious pleasure of consuming stereotypes of its cultural and racial Others' (*Canadian National Cinema,* 75; see esp. 69–75).

17. Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11; italics hers.

18. Chow, 12.

19. Chow, 11.

20. Chow, 11.

21. Chow, 22–3. Chow enlists the term *wenqing zhuyi*—'warm sentiment-ism,' connoting moderation and tolerance as well as 'touchy-feely,' more western-style emotionalism—to elaborate a definition of the sentimental that she locates in a number of 'typical situations' in recent Chinese films. These include 'filiality,' 'the preparation, consumption, sharing and/or offering of food' and 'childhood and old age.'

22. As Gittings notes, 'It would take forty-six years before the NFB would shift its institutional structure to fund the representation of racial difference as an identifying co-ordinate of Canadian-ness under the New Initiatives in Film programme of Studio D' (*Canadian National Cinema,* 84).

23. Jacques Derrida's concept of the supplement was first introduced to the anglophone North American academy in his 1966 lecture, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93 and 339.

24. Colin Geddes's appearance in this volume might conform more to a 'Reel Asian' than to any 'real Asian' logic, and not only because so many people closely affiliated with the festival enthusiastically suggested his involvement. In his reclamation and recirculation of little-known and forgotten Asian genre cinema, he has made a distinctive mark on the Asian Canadian screen.

OVERVIEW: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

RICHARD FUNG & MIDI ONODERA

Richard Fung, still from *Dirty Laundry* (1996).

Over the course of a few weeks, in between crazy deadlines, looming projects and personal obligations, Toronto-based artists Richard Fung and Midi Onodera sat down to have an extended email conversation. Although the two have known each other for over twenty years, this was a rare opportunity for them to come together, if not in person then through print, to discuss concerns about their work, their creative practice and some of the pressures they've encountered in their careers.

MIDI ONODERA: Unofficially, I began making films back in 1979 when I was still in high school. I was fortunate enough to attend a film studies class where we screened a variety of different films—from NFB documentaries to old gems such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a groundbreaking German Expressionist film by Robert Wiene. At the end of the term we could choose to make a super 8 film or write an essay. Naturally, I chose to make a film. From the moment I picked up the camera, I never looked back. The desire to make films struck me as something that was both creatively challenging and empowering. I can't say that my early work reflects any political awareness in terms of gender or race, and back then it hadn't yet consciously occurred to me that I might be a lesbian. I would

have to say that it wasn't until I spent time at OCAD in the Experimental department that I began to view the world with a finer lens. When did you start making videos and why? Did you approach your work from a political position or was it motivated by the passion of working with moving images?

RICHARD FUNG: Like you, I studied at the Ontario College of Art, OCA before it acquired the D for Design. I majored in what was called Photoelectric Arts, the precursor to Integrated Media, the area I now teach in. After leaving school, I got a job as a community video animator at Lawrence Heights, a public housing area in Toronto that was getting bad press. My job was to train people in the community to produce their own images, which were then aired on the community TV channel. I later got a degree in cinema studies and was very interested in the language of the moving image, but even so it took me a long time to 'own' the word 'artist'; I saw my work as primarily social and political. So I think we were starting from different places. By the time I interviewed you for my first independent video, *Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Asians* (1984), you'd already made short experimental films. Those works, as I remember them, didn't have identity markers. In fact, in the video you talked about a primary affinity with punk and artistic communities. I was in the midst of organizing lesbian and gay Asians, so in a sense, I was at the centre of that identity project, but I always felt outside essentialized categories. Growing up in Trinidad during the Black Power era gave me a different perspective on what it meant to be Chinese or Asian. And in the '70s when I came out, I was often the only person of colour at queer events.

In your landmark short, *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* (1986), you and Anna Gronau feature in an interracial lesbian flirtation scene set in a Japanese restaurant. Is this the first time you dealt with ethnicity and queer sexuality together? What led up to that decision?

MO: When I decided to make *Ten Cents A Dance (Parallax),* I originally never intended to do a piece that was specifically lesbian/gay/interracial; the scenes that finally ended up on the screen were conceived through a collaborative process with the non-actors involved. It wasn't until after the film was shot, and I was dealing with various post-production censorship issues, that it became apparent that perhaps the characters and the

subject of a one-night stand might be controversial within a mainstream context. Then, when the film started to be screened at various festivals, the political impact of the work hit me. As you will recall, the gay and lesbian film circuit was in its infancy and it felt like we were all just beginning to find our footing—or perhaps it was just me. I remember when you approached me to be in *Orientations,* I honestly hadn't really publicly acknowledged what it meant or means to be an Asian lesbian.

Your work was/is very empowering on a personal and community level. It opened discussion on identity and made 'visible' the invisibility of being a gay or lesbian Asian. I actually never knew your academic background in detail, so it makes perfect sense that you were approaching video with a completely different agenda. I am very interested in hearing your thoughts and perhaps a bit about how you approached *Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Asians.* I don't think it was a particularly open interview. I recall being a bit suspicious of what I considered to be 'serious' politics. I think I was just too involved in exploring my artistic process and trying to do something interesting with the moving image. Although I officially came out during my years at OCA, the lesbian/feminist awakening was difficult. Back then, as you probably recall, some of the L/F communities were rather anti-men, gay or straight. There was an intensity about the time that was never easy to figure out, and I always felt as if I was being tested—about what I thought and how I saw my work.

Was there one thing/incident/memory that motivated you to focus on work that was coming from a more 'community-based' perspective? And then, why did it take you a long time to 'own' the word 'artist'? What kinds of controversial markers of identity did it bring up for you and for your audience? Do you think that these points are relevant today, to a younger generation?

RF: I don't believe there was one thing. I actually came out as gay before I had any sort of relationship with a man—that might tell you something. I was also influenced in my introduction to video by my studies with Sylvia Spring, who had recently finished the first feature fiction film directed by a Canadian woman since Nell Shipman: *Madeleine Is* (1971). She taught for one year at OCA and had us document the University of Toronto library workers' strike. She taught us 'guerrilla television,' and so my use of the medium was influenced by the various social movements of that

time. It was this orientation that held me back from identifying my practice as 'artistic,' even though my second tape, *Chinese Characters* (1986), was clearly an art tape and not a social-issues documentary. My distance from the term was heartfelt, and not a political or judgmental stance—I admired my artist friends, I just didn't think it was me. I think I began to use the term for myself because it began to seem pretentious not to after having received arts grants and such. After a residency at the Banff Centre in the early '90s I became fascinated by the process of visual artists and have learned a lot from them.

If I think of younger queer Asian film- and video-makers today— younger than us, anyway—I see quite a range of approaches. Some, like Wayne Yung, who is now based in Germany, are still engaging the politics of race and sexuality head on, but with an aesthetic precision, technical polish and an approach to identity as contingency that is quite different from the '80s. Others, like Mishann Lau, are also making reference to race, culture and sexuality, but the pleasure of watching a film like *Shaolin Sisters* (2004) is as much about clever writing as it is about the 'politics.' Folks like Alison Kobayashi and Ho Tam seem very much in that productive, overlapping zone between media and visual arts.

I'm interested in your own training, because you really took the technical aspect seriously. There is an attention to the art of filmmaking that characterized your work from the start. Weren't you in the professional union?

MO: I guess I came out, as well, before I was involved with another woman; hmm. As we are discussing the issues of coming out and making work, it of course makes sense that we are talking about how our identities are formed and how we perceive ourselves—rather than how others observe us through their filter of the physical body or more specifically through the indicators of race, gender, age, etc. I think that's why I gravitated toward the identity of an artist rather than one that seemed to me an external or 'assumed' identity. Of course I know that I am a woman working primarily in a male domain, and perhaps that's why I became so caught up in the technical side. I felt and still feel that as an artist (there I go again), I need to understand the tools of my craft so that I can not only use them as they were designed to be used, but also 'break the rules' and 'be inventive.'

I was tired of men telling me what I could and could not do; I was fed up with their stereotypical notions that a woman couldn't understand the tech side of film/video-making.

When I work with people, I look at the skills they bring to the table, and now automatically expect that they will respect me in the same way. Perhaps this is a sign of getting old, but when you've been working with moving images for almost thirty years, it does something to the way you operate in the world. When I think of younger artists/filmmakers today, I want to mentor and am interested in young women. There is still such a small number of women authoring media work. When I speak with some of my academic friends, I am always amazed to hear the same stories that I heard back when I was young. They tell me that young women are still intimidated by technology. They are afraid of making mistakes (in front of their male colleagues), looking foolish (in front of their male colleagues), etc. This is a terrible disappointment to me since I think technology is getting easier and more accessible everyday. But this kind of techno-insecurity seems to stem from the larger global issue of women's identities in the twenty-first century. Young women don't seem to own what it means to be a feminist; I've heard that to some, the word 'feminist' equals 'bitch' (and not in a good, reappropriated meaning of the word). Whatever happened to equal pay for equal work? Whatever happened to the reproductive rights of women? One only has to look toward the blatant erosion of the basic right to choose in the US. Perhaps Canada, with its current Conservative government, is the next to act. Being supportive of young women film/video-makers is important for the next generation—without these women taking control over the technology, how many personal stories or good stories will not be told? Even for those women who have been making work for years and who now have families—both children and aging parents to look after—the creative path always seems to be the road less taken. We are called upon to be the caregivers and asked to give up our time to nurture others. But I know that I am ranting; perhaps I'm being a bitch, or perhaps I'm just an old feminist.

As an educator, what are you seeing in your classes? How does identity create or locate itself in the next generation? I know that you've mentioned some Asian queer artists, but does the work that is produced by queer Asians *still have to have* queer and/or Asian content? Do you think that we're still at that point in the debate, or has technology moved us into

another direction of identity politics? I don't mean in the sense of technological determinism, I am merely wondering if technology has truly allowed us to reach audiences in another way, or if we are still speaking to 'the converted,' a specialized audience yet perhaps in a more worldwide (www.) way?

RF: Funny you should mention the gender disparity. I don't know if it's always intimidation, but you're right that fewer female than male students become geeks or have a techno aesthetic. Though there are exceptions, my female students often shine at a conceptual level; male students can get stuck in trying to reproduce the genres they like. In teaching I stress 'appropriate technology.' I try to give students a sense of technical choices: some projects need to be slick and some should be down and dirty.

Many young women in my classes are impatient with any implication that they may be oppressed as women; they see themselves as having choices and being in different circumstances from feminist writers. Women students are often hostile when reading Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze,[1] for example, and talk about the ways that men's bodies are objectified today. I recognize the ways that their consciousness is in fact different from pre-feminist women, but as someone who came of age in the '70s, when style was so politicized, I am struck by the spirited resurgence of looks-based femininity.

It's not that common that my students produce work that arises from their identities or social locations, even though I show videos and films by queer artists, racially and culturally diverse artists, Aboriginal artists and disabled artists. I go for the gamut. I think it may not be seen as cool or creative enough, especially at the lower levels. When I do get these projects, I emphasize that the success of the work is in the specific story they choose to tell and in their storytelling, broadly speaking.

For myself, I haven't been making work on either queer or Asian themes. My most recent single channel piece is a doc on contemporary art in Trinidad, and my current installation project is on a Palestinian Canadian. What I find, though, is that the queer and Asian distribution and exhibition circuits are so developed that it becomes harder to circulate work that does not fit into these slots. It is hard to place it. Have you found this to be true?

MO: I think what I am hearing from your comments is the feeling that we're somehow being restricted by our past identity constructions. By this I mean that the younger generation is naturally turning away from the previous one. Young women today don't think there is any need to be concerned with gender equality because they believe they are equal. But some may not have reached a point in their work careers where they may face the glass ceiling that women of my generation encountered.

The same thing goes for work created today that seems to be located in identity politics. Our generation was focused on this kind of work in the '80s and '90s as a response to the absence of voices. So, naturally, the younger generation has also turned away from this kind of work. I agree that it's not enough nowadays to produce work that focuses solely on 'coming-out stories'—referring to race, gender or sexuality. But if we move on from there, then what is it that defines Asian or queer work? Are we once again addressing the cultural/racial/gender/sexual orientation of the maker? How has identity shifted, and how does it locate itself in the work that we choose to do now?

I feel that the queer and Asian exhibition and distribution networks have become institutionalized and restrictive. There seems to be little support or interest in work that doesn't, as you say, 'fit into these slots.' In some cases, I had a larger and more diverse audience for my work when the 'alternative' distribution/festival culture was just beginning to be developed more than twenty years ago. Now it seems that as I choose to expand the subject matter of my work, it gets more difficult to locate the audiences who might be interested.

As I speak to other women film/video-makers, we all see the same thing happening on the international film festival circuit. There seem to be fewer women programmers in the alternative/independent film circuit. And then within a mainstream context, there are fewer women and fewer people of colour in programming positions, and given the number of alternative festivals there are out there, it is sometimes easier to believe that works by queers and people of colour will be taken up at 'specialty' festivals rather than included in a mainstream context. In other words, although the number of works by queers and people of colour continue to grow, the titles and perhaps their makers are still ghettoized by the mainstream. Now we have our own screening places, so no need to come knocking on our door.

Within the mainstream festival circuit, the emphasis is on male-centred drama and quirky oddball 'family' dramas. When I finished *I have no memory of my direction* (2005), which is a 77-minute 'experimental' video, it became obvious to me that the work didn't fit within any kind of current framework, alternative or mainstream. It was rejected by so many festivals that had previously showcased my work that it was quite shocking. I understand that there are different format concerns when dealing with a long-form piece, and that there are never enough programming slots, so the majority of work that gets programmed is short films/videos.

I think in reaction to this experience, I again turned to technology. In late 2005, I began a project to make 365 short 'movies': one per day. This year-long project focused mainly on using toy camera technology. Recently I've felt dragged down by distribution and exhibition concerns, so by shooting with toys I rediscovered a playfulness that I had forgotten. The thirty-second to one-minute shorts were an incredible creative challenge since I tried not to repeat myself but always tried to look for something different. They were all designed for the small format of an iPod or online viewing. For a while I was posting them online—free to whomever wanted to see them. But recently a distributor has purchased 160 titles, so I've pulled down the website. I will, however, be posting the other 205 films on my site and will probably end up doing another 160 to replace the purchased titles, just to have 365 available online.

In part, I see that the web still has enormous untapped potential for reaching audiences. Once again, it has become an alternative distribution path—but aesthetically, works online or produced for an iPod or cellphone are very different from the large movie theatre experience. For me, it's not so much about producing work that fits within a convention; rather, I am interested in work that pushes me to see and read the world in a different way. It's making work that of course is informed by my politics and aesthetics, but not dictated by it. Your current work is not specifically queer or Asian—where do you place it in the context of your own personal creative development, and then within the larger exhibition/distribution structure?

RF: I have been thinking of the arc of your career, in fact, from films with few markers of identity to ruminations in different genres on sexuality, gender and ethnicity. I was struck that *I have no memory of my direction*

Midi Onodera, still from *Basement Girl* (2000).

(2005) develops ideas begun with *Made in Japan* (1985) twenty years earlier, both I guess riffing on Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983). It seems to me that your work moves in spirals, ever forward but simultaneously circling back to reconsider previously visited territory.

I think I also move in spirals. I keep coming back to two elements that haunt me: (1) Trinidad, the country of my birth, and (2) my extended family. Whenever I think I'm done with them, something that has been tickling my mind suddenly presents itself as a possible project. These are about the past, though, and I'm interested in confronting the present. I want to make work on Toronto, where I live now. It is intimidating as it's too familiar, too messy; it's hard to get the distance.

You've done experimental, documentary, drama and hybrid forms. You've worked in film, video and now web-based digital media. What holds it together for you? Do you have a driving central interest?

MO: Looking over your body of work, I think your thoughts about the connections between the past and current pieces are quite accurate. Like you, I think that it's not necessarily the genre or the format that ties everything together, but rather the content and the exploration of the familiar themes that keeps resurfacing in our work. I think taking on Toronto as a

Richard Fung, still from *Sea in the Blood* (2000).

subject is interesting, and as you say, it will be difficult to find that distance. However, I trust that by delving into the city, you may find you have a clearer picture of yourself and your relationship to the place you now call home.

1. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

TRACKING SHOTS

MAPPING THE ASIAN CANADIAN FILMSCAPE

ALICE SHIH

The Cinematographe, an early film camera-projector, was reported to have been invented by the Lumière brothers in 1895. The world gradually caught on and Canada is said to have had its first film screening as early as 1896. However, early Canadian productions were few and insignificant, compared to our neighbour south of the border. These early Canadian commissioned films were made mostly by Americans or the English, as they were considered 'expert' in this new technology. Perhaps inadvertently, the Canadian Pacific Railway became instrumental in the advent of Asian Canadian filmmaking. Most of the pioneering films produced in the late nineteenth century were travelogues showcasing the distinctive Canadian landscape in an effort to entice tourists, and were commissioned by the CPR. Chinese labourers were brought in by the CPR to help build the railroad in 1881, more than twenty years after the first wave of Chinese that arrived in Canada with the Gold Rush in British Columbia around 1858.

It is perhaps a grim historical irony that Asian Canadian filmmaking owes its existence, in part, to the CPR, which both stimulated Chinese immigration in its exploitation of imported workers and produced the first Canadian films. From the Chinese Exclusion laws to the Japanese internment, and over waves of Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese and Hong Kong Chinese migration from the 1950s to the '90s, the history of Asian immigration and settlement in Canada is complex, multiple and rife with discriminatory legislation and practice. The long-term effects of past discrimination as well as the myriad facets of the immigrant experience, past and present, are richly represented in the work of Asian Canadian film- and video-makers. One of the issues this essay means to address is the lengthy, approximately seventy-year gap between the introduction of film in Canada and the first examples of Asian Canadian filmmaking. Another is the question of how to ensure the continued production, dissemination and visibility of Asian Canadian film/video and Asian film/video in Canada in an era of shrinking resources coupled with unprecedented access to this work.

TRACKING SHOT 1: HISTORY

Despite the fact that the Chinese settled both in Canada and in the US at roughly the same time, Asian American film predates any Canadian counterpart by many years. The first Chinese American director on record is a

woman named Marion Wong. She made *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* in 1916. According to the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, *Curse*, a love story, featured Wong and many of her family members as individuals placed under a curse by a Chinese god because of their westernization. After its completion, the film did not find distribution and disappeared, never having met an audience.

Distinguished Chinese American personnel who worked in the film industry came on the scene much earlier than our Canadian counterparts as well. Cinematographer James Wong Howe and his cousin, the charismatic but ill-fated actress Anna May Wong, were both being recognized for their talent in the 1920s. However, it wasn't until 1954 that James Wong Howe got to direct his first movie, *Go, Man, Go!* Howe became the first Asian American director to work within the Hollywood system; Japanese American silent star Sussue Hayakawa had previously gone his own route, independent of the studio system. Around 1918, he established his own production company, Haworth Pictures, to write, produce and later direct Asian-themed films starring himself and his wife, Tsuru Aoki. His films are largely portrayals of the immigrant's yearning to assimilate into a society free of racial discrimination. His films fell out of popularity in 1922 with the rise of anti-Asian sentiment during the post-WWI economic slump.

Films with Asian content helmed by non-Asians were also made much earlier in the US than Canada, like D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* in 1919, with Caucasian actors in Oriental drag so as to avoid the slightest hint of miscegenation. 'Chinatown fiction,' a genre reinforcing 'chink' stereotypes as vicious, immoral and deceitful, was also produced at the time, which eventually led to the popular *Fu Manchu* series for a few decades. Canadians also tried their hand at this genre with the British 'quota film,' *Secrets of Chinatown*, in 1935, where Chinese were portrayed as criminals who practiced exotic witchcraft to cast spells on Caucasians. Approximately twenty years later, Asians were given a new image in Hollywood mainstream representation: that of the exotic lover. Miyoshi Umeki, playing Red Buttons's love interest, proudly took home the best supporting actress Oscar in 1957 for *Sayonara*, the first-ever nomination and win for an Asian performer. In 1960, Eurasian Nancy Kwan's portrayal of an Asian prostitute with an undying love for her Caucasian lover in

The World of Suzie Wong further reinforced the stereotype of the submissive and sensual Asian woman, a compliant alternative to the modern North American woman. James Shigeta established himself as the only Asian romantic leading man in the late 1950s. Canadian director David Secter followed suit in 1966 with *The Offering*, a romantic love story about a visiting Chinese dancer and a Caucasian stagehand.

Asian-themed films made by non-Asians performed a certain kind of political and ideological function. By the late 1950s, North Americans had developed a sympathetic view of the Chinese, who were supposed to be suffering mightily under Communist rule. The Japanese needed to be guided away from imperialism, and other Asian countries were so backward that all of them needed to be rescued by the West. These films by non-Asians tended to have Caucasian heroes who emerged as the Asians' 'great white saviours,' to whom the benighted Asians would be forever indebted and grateful.

Having established a presence in Canada for more than a century, it was not until the late '60s and early '70s that Asian Canadians finally ventured into filmmaking. Some were visual experimentalists while others were social and political activists who worked in documentaries; most of them were unknown to the general cinema-going public. The best known of these pioneers were future Governor General Adrienne Clarkson and Jesse Nishihata, both of whom worked on TV documentaries not intended for theatrical release.

There was not much of an indie film scene forty years ago, but more independent productions started to appear sporadically in the mid-'70s. The first Asian Canadian experimental feature, *Everything Everywhere Again Alive* (1975) was made by Keith Lock, who started making films in 1969, when he was seventeen. Keith's student film, *Flights of Frenzy*, won the Best Super 8 Award at the UNESCO Tenth Muse International in Amsterdam. Apart from being one of the first Asian Canadian filmmakers, Lock also contributed to the burgeoning film community as a founding member of the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op in 1969, which eventually became the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT). In 1973, pioneering Vancouver-based video artist Paul Wong helped found a non-profit, artist-run video production, exhibition and distribution centre, Satellite Video Exchange Society, since renamed Video In (VI). Following Wong's inspirational example, an active supporter of VI is Wayne Yung,

a member of the next generation of Asian Canadian media artists.

The '70s produced many blossoming experimental artists with the arrival of the avant-garde film and video scenes in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. For these artists, film was not merely a vehicle for conveying narrative but a visually expressive medium in its own right. This opening up of greater opportunities and applications for the medium inspired some Asian artists to conduct their aesthetic experiments on film and video. In mainstream cinemas, however, Asians were invisible on the Canadian screen, with the exception of Bruce Lee flicks and other imported martial arts films. Awareness of Asian Canadians was as yet not a part of the dominant national consciousness.

In 1977, after working for years at the CBC, Jesse Nishihata independently produced *The Inquiry Film: A Report on the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry*, which went on to win a 1977 Canadian Film Award (the future Genies) for best documentary over sixty minutes. The Canadian tax-shelter law, with its introduction of the Capital Cost Allowance in the late '70s to early '80s, stimulated massive Canadian productions, but only a few Asian Canadians benefited from it.

The '80s were the planting and germinating period for Asian Canadian filmmaking. All four major areas of filmmaking—experimental, animation, documentary and drama—witnessed the emergence of Asian Canadian talent. Documentaries and animation works were well developed, thanks in part to years of nurturing by the CBC and NFB. Experimental works, particularly in video, were embraced by Canada's burgeoning arts scenes. However, there was still no Asian representation on the dramatic screen with the exception of humiliating stereotypes. Some North American talents found it alienating, as they saw no positive Asian screen images and finally decided to make some changes. Filmmakers like Wayne Wang in the US started to thematize minority voices, stories and communities, in close conjunction with the consciousness-raising and identity-politics movements that had begun in the 1960s. The inspirational extended run of *Chan is Missing* (1982) helped raise Asian consciousness in Canada and showed Asian Canadians that the mainstream market was ready for diversity on screen. Asian Canadian dramas started to emerge. These films were usually made by struggling first-generation Asian immigrants, or roots-searching second- and third-generation Asians. Other second- and third-generation Asian filmmakers who had completely assimilated

into mainstream society produced works that did not present any visible Asian content at all. Stories that went beyond such dominant concerns as racial discriminaton, immigration and issues of identity to explore other problems and themes gradually emerged.

The Asian Canadian population by the 1980s was a diverse mix. As discussed previously, offspring of the first wave of Asians were third- or even fourth-generation Asian Canadian. With government immigration policy welcoming Asians in the '80s, there were also 'fresh-off-the-boat' immigrants who were still struggling to fit in. Important immigrant filmmakers included Richard Fung, who came to Canada from Trinidad, Jeannette Loakman from England, and Ho Tam and Kal Ng from Hong Kong. Their experiences were poles apart and their vastly different concerns and priorities are reflected in the diversity of their stories.

Diversity exists even within the same generation. Art has never been a popular career choice among Asian Canadians. Many immigrant parents, themselves with little to fall back on, perceive the arts as an economically unstable proposition from which their children should be discouraged. It has taken guts and determination for Asian Canadian filmmakers to subsist and persist. Some of them demonstrated an inclination toward filmmaking very early on in life, like Mina Shum and Ann Marie Fleming, but others stumbled into the director's chair by accident, in many cases against their parents' wishes. Julia Kwan wanted to be a writer, but, uncomfortable letting others fiddle with her words, has also ended up a director. Richard Fung is a social activist turned director. Khanhthuan Tran went to art school to study painting and came out a filmmaker. Their different paths are one index of difference and diversity within one generation of filmmakers. Yet their stories are always personally significant, uniquely Canadian with an Asian flavour, and never genre pieces. These films are not always easy for an audience to appreciate without pre-existing exposure to or experience of an immigrant community; perhaps less successful in Asia, these films have found their audience and success in the Asian diaspora.

Although each of these filmmakers excels in one particular film form, many Asian Canadians have crossed generic lines to experiment in different filmmaking media and disciplines. Ann Marie Fleming has produced an impressive body of work and garnered awards in areas as diverse as personal documentaries, experimental films, animation and dramas. Keith Lock has gradually moved from experimental work into dramas and documentaries.

Midi Onodera, initially an experimental filmmaker, at one point developed an interest in drama. Richard Fung started out as a documentary media activist and ventured successfully into personal and experimental films and videos. Their works have never been commercial, with most pieces self-funded through grants or family members. With film and video co-ops springing up across the nation, they have been able to work independently on small budgets, but limits have also been imposed on the length of their productions as well as their access to audiences.

The West Coast art scene was shaping up in the 1980s with emerging visual artists-turned-filmmakers like Fumiko Kiyooka, Linda Ohama and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design graduate Ann Marie Fleming, who in 1990 made the first Asian Canadian dramatic feature, *New Shoes.* Other directors followed. Keith Lock made his first dramatic feature, *Small Pleasures*, in 1993. In 1994, Mina Shum wrote and directed *Double Happiness* and Midi Onodera directed *Skin Deep.* By choice, most of these works were somewhat marginalized because of very strong Asian content and the very specific audience each director had in mind. Theatrical releases of these Asian Canadian films were limited to particular communities and repertory theatres, never receiving strong nationwide distribution. But they explored universal themes, and some sophisticated mainstream movie-lovers started to notice them at film festivals: at the time, the only real option for exhibition. The favourable critical response to most of this clutch of dramatic features increased the visibility of Asian Canadian films, inspiring the next generation of filmmakers. They started to emerge with their own works: directors like Helen Lee, Larissa Fan, Julia Kwan, Nicole Chung, Romeo Candido, Jane Kim, Nobu Adilman, Min Sook Lee, Cheuk Kwan and Sook Yin Lee. Dylan Akio Smith, director of the award-winning short, *Man Feel Pain* (2004), has openly cited Ann Marie Fleming's influence on him.

TRACKING SHOT 2: FESTIVALS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Increased Asian Canadian independent productions did not garner more screen time as major film festivals continued to be dominated by mainstream cinema with limited Asian representation on screen. Noticing this growing gap between Asian filmmakers and their audience, the Vancouver Asian Film Festival (VAFF) and Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival (TRAIFF) emerged concurrently in 1997; 2006 marked the tenth

anniversary of both festivals. It was also the inaugural year of the Calgary ImaginAsian Film Festival. Their mandate is to showcase films with an Asian connection, particularly North American Asian filmmakers.

There were film festivals that showcased Asian films as early as the Festival International du Cinéma Chinois de Montréal, founded by Tammy Cheung between 1987 and 1992; Asian Canadian films, however, were not their focus. The West Coast can boast being the first in the nation to launch an Asian North American focused film festival; the Chinese Film and Video Festival was started by Lorraine Chan and Karin Lee through the Chinese Cultural Centre of Vancouver, and ran from 1994 to 1996. In the inaugural year, the main focus was on Chinese Canadian and Chinese American films. By the second year, the board of directors expanded to include film industry professionals and film critics, and a special focus on Taiwanese films was presented, including works by Hou Hsiao Hsien. In the third year, apart from focusing on Chinese Canadian works, a series on Hong Kong films brought superstars like Leslie Cheung and Michelle Yeoh to attend the Vancouver festival. The festival ended in 1996 with the departure of a major administrator/programmer.

Chinese film aficionados were mourning the loss of their beloved Chinese Film and Video Festival, so Barbara Lee founded VAFF in 1997. 'I was researching Asian film festivals to submit my films to and was so disappointed that Vancouver didn't have one that I started it.'[1] Concurrently, Anita Lee and Andrew Sun, co-founders of TRAIFF, came up with the idea of a festival after attending the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival and realizing what the city of Toronto lacked. Lee and Sun applied for a grant of $5,000 from the Canada Council; TRAIFF has since showcased Asian filmmakers for ten consecutive years. In November 2006, it rolled out its red carpet for the North American premiere of *After This Our Exile*, a feature shot in Malaysia by Hong Kong's Patrick Tam, which has since garnered best picture honours at both the Golden Horse Awards (Taiwanese Oscars) and the Hong Kong Film Awards (Hong Kong Oscars). It was a record-breaking year for TRAIFF with a twenty per cent increase in attendance.

Calgary is the new kid on the festival block. The first ever Calgary ImaginAsian Film Festival was born in May 2006 as part of Asian Heritage Month. The festival has been renamed the Calgary Pan Asian Film Festival (CPAFF) to increase the visibility of its founding organization, the

Calgary Pan Asian Cinema Society, a not-for-profit film society headed by Ben Tsui.

First-time or emerging Asian filmmakers who had always been shut out of major film festivals were finally exhibited in venues like these. Veteran filmmakers also had a chance to show their more personal works in between major projects. Asian Canadian filmmakers with remarkable bodies of work have been granted special attention; for example, Mary Stephen, who has worked with Eric Rohmer extensively as an editor, was the subject of the TRAIFF's Artist Spotlight in 2002. Showcasing films from Asian countries provides opportunities for cultural and artistic exchange, recognizing and inspiring creativity from diverse places and artists. These festivals also provide a one-stop shopping opportunity for an audience interested in Asian-content films, to which they did not have much access before.

It seems like filmmaking is easier for Asian Canadians now with the arrival of digital video technology, which can lower the cost of filmmaking significantly, but the funding budgets for independent films have also declined. Like the struggling Asian Canadian filmmakers, Canadian Asian film festivals are also finding themselves facing challenges, especially in recent years. With the increasing popularity of worldwide online DVD shopping and internet video downloading, audiences these days are not as reliant on film festivals to access Asian films. Some Asian film lovers who already know how to obtain film and video work online might choose to buy a DVD instead of coming to the festival, unless there are other incentives, such as the chance to meet the stars of the film. The festivals have had to constantly reinvent themselves to stimulate audience growth. TRAIFF, for example, launched a new free database service, www.rafilms.ca, in 2006 to serve the Asian Canadian film community year round.

Another way of attracting an audience is by premiering the works of established Asian filmmakers, but this has become a challenge as well. The Asian festivals have, to some extent, become the victims of their own success, as they may no longer have the chance to premiere or even program emergent Asian Canadian filmmakers' works after they have 'graduated' to major film festivals. Programming the best in the Asian Canadian film community, which is very much the intention of these festivals, has become virtually impossible. Films like *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* by Mina Shum and *Eve and the Firehorse* by Julia Kwan were not programmed

at TRAIFF, as they premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) two months earlier, and would not have drawn much audience interest a second time around. Competition among other Toronto-based film festivals of similar size is also intense, as the city has over sixty community film festivals a year that serve audiences with diverse interests. Films made by Asian Canadian filmmakers may have content that other film festivals—such as gay and lesbian, experimental, documentary, short film and other festivals—are also pursuing.

Shortage of funding is another challenge. Government grants are becoming less reliable as budgets for the arts continue to shrink while the number of applicants rises. A film festival needs to grow to justify funding, as well as to attract corporate sponsorship. One way to increase audience attendance and industry participation is to fly in high-profile stars and important Asian film producers, but this is an extremely expensive strategy. Asian film festivals of TRAIFF's scale find it particularly hard to meet this demand. This essential growth component cannot materialize without the support of sponsors who share the festivals' visions.

Appropriate marketing and publicity costs have to be budgeted for as well, as media attention is needed to reach an audience. Positive press is crucial for screening attendance, and in turn for a festival's survival. Critics' tastes and audience interests would thus have an influence on future programming decisions.

Although the support structures for Asian Canadian filmmaking have improved greatly, and more opportunities for artists are available, the process of funding and making works here is still highly challenging, as reflected in the limited number of produced works by both established and emerging filmmakers. The US has turned out more Asian American films comparatively, but the market share of these films is still insignificant as compared with that of the vast American film industry as a whole. Asian film festivals continue to work hard to nurture and grow the community. VAFF introduced the Mighty Asian Moviemaking Marathon (MAMM), a one-week filmmaking competition for young filmmakers in the community, and TRAIFF has launched a first-ever Reel Asian Industry Series, providing networking access for Asian Canadian professionals and connecting emerging filmmakers with established funders and broadcasters.

Asian Canadian film festivals are vital to the healthy development of the Asian Canadian filmmaking scene, as well as to highlighting and increasing Asian representation on Canadian screens. The festivals have also been instrumental in breaking Asian stereotypes and other restrictions on Asian artists and performers, very much an ongoing issue in the North American context. There have been seventy-nine years of Academy Awards, during which only six nominations have gone to Asian actors, all in the supporting category. Ang Lee became the first Asian to win the best director Oscar in 2005. Although Julia Kwan garnered the Claude Jutra Award in 1997, no Asian has ever won a Genie for best direction in Canada. It seems that Asian North American talents are better recognized at foreign film festivals than they are at 'home.'

Canada celebrates diversity, yet Asian-content film at the Toronto International Film Festival constitutes less than ten per cent of the total program, far fewer than films from Europe or the United States. Asian Canadian filmmakers and film festivals have to work together strategically to generate more exposure and recognition in the years to come. It may be a good time to celebrate much hard-won success, but a great deal more work for Asian Canadian filmmakers, festival organizers and industry professionals lies ahead.

1. Barbara Lee, email to the author, 27 November 2006.