REGENT COLLEGE

Beyond Stories of Migration:

Perspectives of Asian Canadian Filmmakers

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INTRODUCTION

A growing wave of immigration to Canada from non-European countries is expected to alter the demographic landscape of Canadian culture and society. In 2017, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) asked Statistics Canada to prepare new projections of the ethnocultural composition of Canada's population over the next 25 years. They discovered that by 2036, nearly one third of Canada's population will be immigrants (primarily from Asia) growing from 20% in 2011 to 24.5-30% over a 25-year span.[1] Alongside this statistic is a growing population of second-generation Canadians and visible minorities who will likely increase from 17 to 20% of the country's population.[2] Statistics Canada has reported that the growing immigrant population, combined with their Canadian-born progeny, will continue to transform Canada's ethnocultural portrait in a lasting way.[3] This reality provides the impetus to (re)examine existing theories of acculturation that assume certain patterns of assimilation and to challenge the efficacy of current multicultural policies in Canada that assume to understand the needs and values of ethnic minorities.

The term 'acculturation' is used to describe the process by which migrants to a new culture develop relationships with that new culture, while maintaining their original culture.[4] Recent theories of acculturation suggest a theoretical model called 'segmented assimilation,' which explains that migrants will experience different modes of incorporation into the dominant society[5] depending on factors that either help or hinder their economic and social mobility. Another indicator of segmented

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[1] Samuel MacIsaac. "Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036." (2017).
[2] MacIsaac, 2017
[3] MacIsaac, 2017
[4] John W. Berry. "Acculturation and adaptation in a new society." *International migration 30* (1992): 69-69
[5] Min Zhou. "Segmented assimilation: Issues, controversies, and recent research on the new second generation." *International migration review 31, no. 4* (1997): 975-1008.

assimilation is one that focuses on examining the experiences of acculturation that inform one's expression and understanding of identity.[6]

Since trends show that the children of migrants (and their subsequent generations) often experience improvements in educational and occupational attainments,[7] studies have further suggested a shift beyond socio-economic mobility (or lack thereof) to that of identity and vocation as indicators of immigrant adaptation. The need for new insights on the experiences of second generation or post-generation adults in particular is supported by research around the psychological and behavioural shifts connected to acculturation and adaptation in a new society which can vary over an individual's lifetime.[8] The research has also revealed that the identities, attitudes, and values of an individual can change drastically as one learns to adapt and adjust to the dominant culture and negotiate their ethnic and cultural identity in a changing world.[9] Other research has also shown that the further one departs from their ethnic origin – including a departure from or disinterest in histories that are tied to their ancestry – the more likely the individual will experience a break in the social link to their culture.[10]

While post-generation[11] Asian Canadians have made attempts to construct a new category of Canadian identity that incorporates aspects of their cultural or ethnic roots, it is largely unknown whether the construction of identity and the "fragmented memories" of one's diasporic ancestry empower or hamper one's exploration and understanding of one's identity and vocation. In light of this,

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[6] Harry H. Hiller and Verna Chow. "Ethnic identity and segmented assimilation among second-generation Chinese youth." *Sociological studies of children and youth*, pp. 75-99. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2005.
[7] Monica Boyd. "Educational Attainments of Immigrant Offspring: Success or Segmented Assimilation? 1." *International migration review 36, no. 4* (2002): 1037-1060.
[8] Berry, 69
[9] Jean Bacon. "Constructing collective ethnic identities: The case of second generation Asian Indians." *Qualitative Sociology 22* (1999): 141-160.
[10] Researcher Nathan To argues that a lack of access and unknown or less known nature of Chinese histories epitomizes the break in the social link for Canadian Chinese
[11] Post-generation: this term implies a move away from strict generational labels or categories of Canadian-born progeny. For the purpose of this study, the participants were 1.5, second, and fourth generation Asian Canadians.

the purpose of this study is to gain a nuanced understanding of the experiences and effects of acculturation beyond the first generation population of migrants. Thus, the question this paper asks is how perceptions, attitudes, and values towards one's own ethnicity, culture of origin, and diasporic migration stories change for Asian Canadians as they mature into adulthood. Adulthood or mid-adulthood is a time when members of this group are still discerning who they are, negotiating ethnic and cultural identities, deciding what their particular contribution to society will be, and selecting careers or vocations that could be viewed as non-traditional occupations for immigrants. In light of this, this study explored these changes among 1.5, second, and fourth-generation Asian Canadian filmmakers. How is their identity negotiated and how is it related to the process of acculturation? How do they understand and relate to their migration story? And how have their perspectives and experiences of acculturation informed their sense of identity and shaped the stories they tell? Understanding the trajectory of this post-generation's growth in self-understanding will help us identify the questions that the next generation will be asking and address what supports are required to encourage positive acculturation for generations to come.

STUDY DESIGN

I have chosen to approach this study using qualitative research methods. The goal of the study was to learn from, understand, and gain insight on the attitudes and experiences of the participants. Such data are best obtained using qualitative methods (by way of asking questions that will surface participants' deeper longings and beliefs) that quantitative methods could not adequately measure. Moreover, understanding the particular effects of acculturation on a specific demographic (Asian Canadian filmmakers) required an appreciation for similar ethnographic and phenomenological studies on migrant experiences, which had largely informed and motivated this project. Thus, I have chosen to collect data by conducting one-to-one interviews with participants. By conducting interviews, I was able

to build rapport with the respondents and ask deeper questions that concern motivation and invite reflection.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted through video conference calls. There was a pre-planned set of questions and as the conversation allowed, a follow-up question, prompt, or probe was presented for further clarification or elaboration. Information was later compiled, analyzed, coded, assembled, and distilled into key emerging themes which will be discussed in this report.

In order to participate in the study, respondents had to be born in Canada or be non-Canadian born but immigrated before the age of 12. They would have also had one or more parents who were Asian. Due to time constraints and capacity limitations, the sample size for this study was small, as was the scope. The sample comprised four respondents[12] with diverse backgrounds. Ryan, a Canadian-born participant, had parents who immigrated from East Asia and Southeast Asia. Joy, also born in Canada, had parents of East Asian and Southeast Asian ethnicity who immigrated from Vietnam. Jaclyn moved to Canada from Brunei at the age of 7, her parents were of Chinese and Filipino descent. Kris, born in Canada, had a unique heritage with great-grandparents who immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s. His father is of Chinese descent, while his mother is French Canadian Caucasian. These four Asian Canadian filmmakers were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Participants in this study currently worked in the North American film industry as an actor, producer, writer, director, or editor. All participants were between the ages of 35-40 years old and lived in either Vancouver or Calgary.

One reflexivity consideration of this study pertained to my (the researcher's) ethnic and cultural background. While this study is not autoethnographic, being a second generation Asian Canadian, I brought my own experiences of acculturation as a child of immigrant parents. I had also been personally interested in learning about my own diasporic ancestry, investigating my own family history,

[12] Respondents' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

including the stories of my grandparents and great-grandparents' experiences of displacement during times of war and conflict. In one sense, my closeness to the interest of this paper's topic could be a limitation. I came into this study with the assumption that the participants had been asking similar questions about their identity, family, and ethnic origins which would have informed their sense of meaning, identity, and their work as filmmakers. However, my social location and natural affinity with the participants given our shared context and similar experiences as Asians raised in Canada also allowed me to enter into conversations with ease and unspoken familiarity.

The data collected from this study were analyzed in conversation with existing academic literature including past studies on second generation Asian Canadians, psychological studies on acculturation, and research focused on the experiences of assimilation and acculturation in Canada and the United States. As part of my study and approach, I briefly reviewed some of the participants' films to help provide context for how they processed and made sense of their identity and narrative and to observe emerging themes or patterns in the way they told stories that connected with their interview responses and life decisions. I also read online magazine articles, blogs, biographies of filmmakers, watched films, video interviews, and other media that were relevant to and appropriate for this study (see Bibliography).

THE FINDINGS

The findings will show aspects of the respondents' journeys of navigating their ethnic and cultural identities in the Canadian context. Some keywords and themes emerged from the interviews and are outlined below.

Identity & Connection to Heritage

When respondents were asked to describe their upbringing in Canada, they shared experiences of participating in family traditions and learning about their family's migration stories. Common among

three out of the four stories was a strong connection to family members who inspired or encouraged them to value, retain, or be curious about their ethnic identity. Kris shared,

> …my grandma passed (away) a few years ago, but since then, she was sort of like the glue for the family. So we've done much less meals around large tables and Chinese restaurants. We still try to get together on the special holiday occasions, but since having a lack of those events, I feel more interested in learning about not just my Asian Canadian specific family specific heritage, but just the broader Chinese immigration to Canada history

In addition to positive experiences, respondents also shared some of the tensions as well. For example, Jaclyn reported that ruptures in her relationship with her parents had affected how she thought about her family history, ethnicity, and culture as a whole. Though she did not disclose in detail, she made reference to trauma and intergenerational conflicts over normative gender values & traditions, with lesser emphasis on issues of cultural preservation. In spite of this, Jaclyn expressed a desire to continue the journey of discovering her identity and find a connection with her heritage. She commented,

> So I'm in this place of how do I connect to that, but without engaging with my parents, which has not been the healthiest space to do it?…How do I navigate finding a connection to my people?...I feel like it's more expansive…I'm not just my Filipino identity.

Joy also named the challenge of connecting with her heritage. She noted that her parents were navigating assimilation themselves and negotiating aspects of their own identities, while also trying to raise their children to appreciate their Chinese culture. Joy recalled that while her father encouraged her to learn about her culture and Chinese identity, her mother was “all for assimilation” and wanted to be “fully Canadian.” Joy observed,

> She (Joy’s mother) was never big on her own identity, and she was always to where she wanted us to fit in at school and kind of, I don't know, just fit in with the Canadian culture I guess.

In both the positive and negative aspects of acculturation, responses seem to reveal that one’s sense of ethnic identity as an Asian Canadian was tied to cultural customs as well as relations with family members, for better or for worse.

The findings seem to both support and challenge existing literature about how the second generation population are caught between the worlds of their parents and the dominant culture and therefore have to negotiate in and out of the two segregated identities.[13] On studying second generation Chinese youth, Hiller and Chow suggest that a key element in the preservation of an identity is the cultural artifacts and customs that help to sustain that identity.[14] They also suggest that familial connections and dynamics have an impact on shaping identity and either increased or reduced acculturative stress overall.

Tensions of Being A Visible Minority

All four respondents spoke to the tensions that they experienced growing up as a visible minority in Canada. Participants were asked to describe what it was like for them to go to school, make friends, and participate in social activities both inside and outside their ethnic family contexts. In addition, they were asked to share about their awareness of their ethnicity growing up. The goal of these questions was to capture how the respondents navigated their ethnic and cultural identities in relation to others. Three out of the four respondents expressed that they were not aware of their ethnicity at an early age. Jaclyn shared that she had gone to predominantly "white schools" and could not articulate it at the time, but had felt different. She reflected,

> It's interesting to think about. It's one of those very insidious kinds of things. It's not a light bulb thing as a child, I think you just start to observe around you and just know instinctually that you are different but don't know how you are different.

Ryan echoed similar feelings of marginalization and said that even though he went to a school that was predominantly Asian, he "still felt like a minority." Meanwhile, Joy shared that growing up in elementary school and junior high was "all about assimilation," so she never really thought

[13] Jean Bacon. "Constructing collective ethnic identities: The case of second generation Asian Indians." Qualitative Sociology 22 (1999): 141-160.
[14] Hiller & Chow, 85 (2005)

about her own identity. She continued to say that it was actually in her high school years when her Asian ethnicity became a way she found belonging and connection with others. She shared,

> I ended up only hanging out with Asians in high school…I think it was at that point when I started embracing my Asian identity. It was more of…almost like in a clubby kind of way or a very more of a social way. I don't know, it was just a way for us to connect. We had similar experiences growing up that we kind of gravitated toward each other.

All respondents reported that it was not until they began reflecting on their past as adults when they were able to name specific interactions and feelings of dissonance, confusion, worthiness, and marginality. Kris, who had reported having a "pretty good upbringing" and had not experienced things that "felt racist," shared how these sentiments changed as he grew older. He stated,

> …as I grew up and experienced racism outside of my little city, it sort of…triggered memories that I experienced when I was younger. So at the time, I maybe didn't know it was necessarily racist, but then something felt off about it.

Further to this, respondents shared that as they entered adulthood and began their journey into filmmaking, these tensions and feelings of dissonance became more overt and pronounced, particularly as they were confronted with various challenges that arose being an ethnic minority in the film industry. Jaclyn shared that she had not thought about ethnicity, her race, or how she was perceived until she began working in the film industry. She shared that all these "feelings of difference" were already underneath, but she just "didn't have the language" to name it. In a similar sense, Kris shared that he did not realize how hard it was to be an "underrepresented filmmaker." Reflecting more on this, he said,

> I thought I had the same chances that most people had…Normally, I feel like the jobs still go to white filmmakers, but that could just have happened by chance. I don't know.

Ryan, who had experienced early success in his career, also noticed unspoken inequities as an Asian male actor. He remembered that his Caucasian actor friends,

> …would audition three to five times a week, and I would be very happy if I got one a month. And it's just the disparity in terms of roles that are available…There wasn't enough work to sustain that many careers, and I was lucky to be one of the few that had enough to keep me going.

It is worth emphasizing Jaclyn's response of "not having the language" to name her "feelings of difference." As respondents continued to tell their stories and describe their experiences growing up, all shared the common experience that discovering these unnamed feelings of difference as a visible minority adult had in some ways informed a sense of purpose and advocacy in their work. In addition, it became a way for them to connect with a greater sense of belonging to others who shared similar feelings of unfairness or marginality.

Moving Beyond Stories of Migration

When asked to describe what the journey has been like working in the film industry in Canada, respondents disclosed various challenges related to being an Asian, or visible minority. Jaclyn explained that due to the way multiculturalism policies in Canada influence government grants, many Asian Canadian filmmakers had felt a pressure to tell particular stories and take on certain hiring practices in order to "check off boxes." In fact, it is significant to note that when discussing some of the particularities about making a living in the Canadian context, all four respondents used the term "checkbox" to describe how they felt they were being treated by funding programs. Joy shared that because Canadian funders were compelled to uphold diversity, inclusion, and equity policies, the process of applying for grants often felt like they were "really trying to check these checkboxes." She went on further to explain that as an Asian female filmmaker, she often felt pressured to tell "specific stories" about her culture. She reflected,

> I think it's like a double-edged sword because I guess it's forcing BIPOC filmmakers to want to make works that are about their own culture, but then it's also like, am I just ticking a checkbox or am I tokenizing myself because that's just the funding that is available to me?

Other respondents shared similar sentiments and disclosed that sometimes if the films they made were not about generational trauma or experiences of migration, it would not interest Canadian programmers or be considered "valid enough" to be shown. Within this tension, participants lamented

feeling “pigeonholed,” explaining that even new programs were “ticking certain boxes” and wanted underrepresented filmmakers to talk specifically about their immigrant experience in the films they made. As Kris was sharing about his experience interacting with these expectations, he expressed emphatically,

> Why can't I myself as an Asian Canadian, just…make a story that is based on just the human experience rather than an “Asian Canadian” human experience or “Asian” human experience?

On the note of making a story based on the “human experience,” all respondents seemed to be energized by the idea that they could, and wanted to, tell new stories that challenged the status quo. They were in effect “ready” to tell stories beyond their experiences of migration, trauma, or “some sort of racial tension.” Ryan shared,

> If you go to any Asian film festival, all the stories were kind of like, this is an immigration story…(But) I think we're getting to the point where we just want people to be people. And I think that culture is a flavor, which adds a lot of details to all these little moments and things that are happening. But it's not defining the story necessarily, right?

According to Ryan, culture in itself did not define the Asian Canadian (or ethnic) experience, it was a “flavour” that provided details to the overall context of the experience. These findings seem to suggest that respondents were aware of the rub and reality of working in the Canadian film industry, but also exhibited a deep sense of purpose in their work as filmmakers. The general consensus seems to be that they wanted to move beyond migrant stories and instead learn to celebrate ethnic identities, “propagate” culture, and tell authentic stories of the human experience.

DISCUSSION

Immigration & Diversity in the Canadian Context

Concerning the subject of immigration and diversity in North America, the spotlight in media and in popular culture has often gravitated toward the United States. With its ongoing struggles for equality, the representation of people of colour remains a focal point in America. Against the backdrop

of the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements, the conversation on diversity and inclusion in the United States are complex and racialized. Moreover, extensive research has explored the impact of acculturation on migrant communities, particularly following the changes to America's immigration policy in 1965. While discrimination and inequity form the core of the issue in both American and Canadian contexts, it is worthwhile to take a closer look into the historical and legislative context of immigration policies in Canada in order to gain insight into the nuances of the Canadian-migrant experience today.

Since 1869, Canada has implemented immigration regulations with laws that have been shaped by the social, political, and economic climate, as well as considerations of race, desirability, and integration.[15] Elements of discrimination have often influenced Canadian immigration policy. Yet, in 1967, changes were made to prioritize skill and education as the primary criteria for entry into Canada, although some discriminatory elements are still in place.[16] The Multiculturalism Act of 1988 further created a legislative framework to put policies in place to better reflect Canada's increasingly diverse racial and ethnic composition and protect the cultural heritage of all Canadians.[17] Today, the cultural diversity of immigrants to Canada has become a key component of Canadian identity.[18]

Hiller and Chow observe that the ideology of the Canadian multicultural state legitimates and supports cultural retention (usually fragments of culture) and has, in a way, minimized racism by stressing the naturalness and ease of clinging to cultural groups, even when bounded by race.[19] One could argue that this ideology has even informed Canada's preference for the word "visible minority" to describe "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in

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[15] Lindsay Van Dyk, "Canadian Immigration Acts and Legislation," accessed December 4, 2023. https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation
[16] Dyk,"Canadian Immigration Acts and Legislation."
[17] MacIsaac, 2017
[18] MacIsaac, 2017
[19] Hiller & Chow, 91

colour."[20] It is perhaps a softer way to refer to ethnic categories over using the word “race” to describe ethnocultural distinctives. However, the effectiveness of these subtle language changes and immigration policy reforms in reducing racism, discrimination, prejudice, and inequity remains somewhat ambiguous.

Interestingly, Jaclyn, speaking from the perspective of being a producer and consultant in the film industry, shared that she often has to interact with these immigration policies as they directly correlate to funding opportunities. She argued that the policies that have emerged from the Multiculturalism Act are “very passive.” She commented,

> It's saying that we accept people…of all cultures and we're inclusive, all of it. But that's kind of where it's ceiling. And I think why…a lot of first and second gen Asian Canadians or just Canadians from different diasporas are really investigating, interrogating that is like, are we really multicultural? What does that mean?

Jaclyn raises a poignant question. What does it really mean for Canada to be multicultural? While this question exceeds the current paper's scope, a closer examination of the participants' responses in this project, particularly the feelings of dissonance expressed in being treated as a “checkbox” suggests it is a matter worth revisiting.

Community Building vs “History keeping”

In comparison to other responses to questions, respondents did not elaborate when sharing their family’s migration story. Most of the time, they seemed to tell me the story as if reporting a fact. It became apparent that this was not the first time they had had to answer a similar question, “Where are you *really* from?” While prompted multiple times to delve into their family histories, respondents exhibited less enthusiasm for this topic compared to their keen interest in discussing today's ethnocultural complexities and the broader impact of these factors on ethnic minorities. For example,

[20] Statistics Canada. "Population and dwelling counts, for Canada, provinces and territories, 2016 and 2011 censuses,” accessed December 4, 2023. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Var.pl?Function=DEC&Id=45152

Kris shared how he was interested in learning not just about his specific family heritage, but about the broader Chinese immigration history. Based on Kris' response and the findings exhibited in this project, respondents seemed to be expressing a vision for the future that is more interested in celebrating aspects of an Asian Canadian identity that takes into account all the complexities of what it meant to be (in Kris' words) "human and not just Asian Canadian." This vision leans toward fostering community building rather than merely preserving history. The sentiment is supported in all four interviews where there were unmistakably strong correlations to themes related to advocacy, solidarity, and community. The common use of the pronoun "we" suggests that each respondent to some extent felt like they were part of a community of underrepresented ethnic minorities. In advocating for a change in how society perceives ethnic minorities, Ryan shares, "I don't just want this for myself. I want this for everyone."

FINAL REFLECTIONS

How do *we* tell our stories? At the beginning of this research project, my goal was to find companions who were on the journey of discovering their ethnic roots. I was hoping to find other Asian Canadians like myself who wanted to connect with a larger diasporic ancestral narrative that expanded for generations beyond and could frame my one little life. Instead, I learned that the process of learning about or even recovering one's cultural identity is not linear. The journey of embracing one's Asian cultural identity calls for an expansion beyond the migrant story. It calls for nuance and integration of both the past and present narratives, as well as a vision for the future.

Underscoring the themes explored both in the interviews and in the literature that has shaped this project, there is an invitation to tell stories that display nuance and deep reflection. To this effect, Jaclyn shared,

> "I think "nuance" is the best word for storytelling and more deeper reflection. I know it's hard to see this on screen, but I think it does transfer when filmmakers really have gone through that stage of

> self-reflection…(asking) why is it that I should be telling the story? Why is it important for the story to be told now? And why should it be told in this way?"

Listening to Jaclyn makes me think that the solution is not to shift entirely away from the immigrant story but to ask the deep questions and seek to discover shared wisdom. Themes of community and identity permeate the migrant experience and they continue to be reflected in films,[21] so there may be tensions between the multiple generations of migrants who continue to tell and articulate their stories. The telling of nuanced stories seems to corroborate existing literature about the acculturative experience of migrants being an ongoing journey of constructing and negotiating their ethnic and cultural identities in a changing world. Authors of "Healing Conversations On Race" suggest that storytelling is part of the solution in bringing healing to those who have experienced marginality or racism.[22] Thus, articulating and finding language for our personal and collective experiences can stir a need for deeper understanding of the world, ourselves and others.

[21] Baisakh Roy. "Immigrant directors focus on themes of community and identity." Canadian Immigrant, Accessed: September 10, 2023, https://canadianimmigrant.ca/living/culture/tiff-2022-immigrant-directors-focus-on-themes-of-community-and-identity

[22] Veola Elise Vazquez, Joshua J Knabb, Charles Lee-Johnson, and Krystal Hays. 2023. *Healing Conversations on Race : Four Key Practices from Scripture and Psychology*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 12-13

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