
Voices Rising

Xiaoping Li

Voices Rising:
Asian Canadian Cultural Activism



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Voices Rising

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed the maturing of contemporary Asian Canadian culture. Its existence is signified by the spread of professional and community-based artistic activities and the involvement of an increasing number of young Asian Canadians in the artistic fields. Undoubtedly, these occurrences are characterized by rich expressions, with distinctive sensibilities nurtured in the crucible of political, social, and historical experiences. Perhaps the name “Loud Mouth Asian Babes,” which refers to a Toronto-based Asian Canadian theatre company, best represents this collective enunciation. According to one former member, “It is in your face. It’s like: whether you like it or not, we exist and damn it, you’re going to notice it!”¹

Indeed, Asian Canadians have made an indelible mark on both the Canadian and international cultural landscapes. From the inception of the late 1980s they organized events that stirred controversies and heated debates. They won awards in almost every field of the arts: Roy Miki and Madeleine Thien in literature, Aiko Suzuki and Paul Wong in visual and video arts, Fumiko Kiyooka and Mina Shum in film, and Alvin Erasga Tolentino in dance, just to name a few. Today, at the community level, the arts are flourishing. Symposia, literary readings, and cultural festivals have encouraged artistic development and have introduced the contemporary Asian Canadian imagination to the larger society.

The current creative energy burgeoning in Asian Canadian communities has a history, and this is the focus of *Voices Rising*. In this book I sketch the trajectory of an evolving Asian Canadian cultural production that spreads over three decades. I should point out that contemporary Asian Canadian culture is a terrain marked by different discourses. I do not cover popular commercial cultural discourses or traditional art forms imported from Asia; rather, my primary interest is in what I call “Asian Canadian cultural activism.”

By “Asian Canadian cultural activism” I mean a discourse or a “socio-cultural movement” created and participated in by Asian Canadians who

have attempted to affect the world through their cultural practices. The living embodiment of Asian Canadian cultural activism comprises a community consisting of scholars, university students, self-made or professionally trained artists, and community activists. Together they form a recognizable “intellectual segment,” in Anthony Chan’s words, within Asian communities.² Many, particularly those who launched the movement in the 1970s, consciously undertake a role similar to that which Gramsci ascribed to “organic intellectuals”: they are grounded in the grassroots communities from which they originally came; they organize activities for the purpose of undermining existing unjust social relations and power structures; and they are engaged in the production of new consciousness. The makers of this politically charged and socially committed cultural discourse see a close connection between intellectual, artistic activities and community/societal betterment. Over the decades, they have addressed a broad range of issues concerning not simply racialized communities but also Canadian society at large, thus contributing both to their own community’s well-being and to democratic changes in Canadian society.

It is also true that many of those who have contributed to the making of this transformative cultural discourse did not necessarily start with a grand vision. In some cases particular and compelling social circumstances prompted a desire for expression. For instance, musician Harry Aoki survived internment with the help of his harmonica and later became one of the world’s top harmonica players. Visual artist Mary Sui Yee Wong entered the arts partially because she wanted to carry on the legacy of her father, a professor of Chinese opera in Hong Kong who, after immigration, could only find work in fish canneries. According to Wong, “My father’s pain of not being able to live the life of an artist was a pain that I carried.”³ Dancer and choreographer Alvin Erasga Tolentino pursued a professional dance career partially in order to deal with the trauma of having immigrated at a young age. The activists’ different journeys into the sphere of culture converged into a collective trajectory: that is, upon recognizing the existence of inequalities, and upon recognizing culture’s controlling and liberating power, many resorted to their creative agency in order to carve out a terrain in which a discursive battle could be waged. In assuming, either consciously or unconsciously, the role of social activists, these individuals and groups have reaffirmed culture as a vehicle of social change. Their articulations have had social implications: consciousness has been raised; communities have been formed and mobilized; and a vigorous Asian Canadian cultural production has gradually come into being.

While *Voices Rising* covers the period since 1970, I should point out that cultural activism had existed prior to the 1970s within Asian Canadian communities and is identifiable in well-known figures such as Muriel

Kitigawa, who wrote extensively about the injustice done to Japanese Canadians during the Second World War; Douglas Jung, the first Chinese Canadian Member of Parliament; and Roy Mah, the editor of the Vancouver-based *Chinatown News* and a long-time champion of minority rights. I focus on the past three decades and on the creative arts because these three decades constitute a pivotal era of heightened political consciousness and new creative energy among Asian Canadians, corresponding to social, political, and intellectual movements in and outside Canada. Central to this collective awakening is the realization that culture is a vital terrain that the oppressed and marginalized cannot afford to ignore. The Asian Canadian movement decided to claim culture – defined in this case as the symbolic dimension of human existence – as a key component of political and social struggle.

Despite the long presence of this activist cultural discourse, systematic research on Asian Canadian cultural life has been scarce. Those who first wrote about the exciting cultural development in Asian Canadian communities are from these communities. In the 1980s Anthony Chan, Jim Wong-Chu, Arun Mukherjee, Suwanda Sugunasiri, and M.G. Vassanji wrote about Asian Canadian literary development. The 1990s saw Roy Miki's critical essays, Lien Chao's book on Chinese Canadian writing, and numerous articles published in journals such as *Essays on Canadian Writing*. Then in 2000 and 2002 a couple of dissertations on Asian Canadian literature were produced.⁴ Literary scholars' engagement with the concept of "Asian Canadian literature," along with the offering of courses on Asian Canadian or Asian North American literature in a few Canadian universities and colleges, signals an increasing academic interest in the creativity of Asian Canadians. However, as a whole, Asian Canadian cultural production and the Asian Canadian movement, which drove the development of Asian Canadian literature and culture, have not been the subject of scholarly research. The limited awareness of Asian Canadian cultural history is reflected in Lien Chao's work on Chinese Canadian writing and Donald Goellnicht's analysis of "the protracted birth of Asian Canadian literature." Chao fails to take into account the fact that Chinese Canadian writing emerged and developed as an integral part of the Asian Canadian movement. Despite his good intention, Goellnicht unfortunately constructs a history that virtually negates the long public presentation of political and cultural activities carried out under the collective identity of "Asian Canadian."⁵

Over the past few decades texts outside the literary field that provide accounts of these activities have for the most part been produced by the activists themselves. These include Anthony Chan's *Gold Mountain*, which includes a chapter on Chinese Canadians' anti-W5 campaign in the early 1980s, and his essay on Chinese Canadian filmmaking; Roy Miki's writing

on the Japanese Canadian redress movement and his editorial work on Muriel Kitigawa's and Roy Kiyooka's writing; Terry Watada's essay on the early 1970s political awakening among Asian Canadian youths; Richard Fung's essay on Asian identities, film, and video; Monika Kin Gagnon's *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art*; and Gagnon and Fung's *13 Conversations about Art and Cultural Race Politics*.⁶ Gagnon and Fung inform us about the political activities of "artists of colour" in the visual arts during the late 1980s and 1990s, but pay little attention to the political and cultural struggle prior to that period and outside professional art circles.

The limited scope of scholarship on Asian Canadians calls for a systematic, historical, and interdisciplinary inquiry into the people's political and cultural endeavours. *Voices Rising* is my attempt to fill a gap. It is one of the outcomes of my interest in the historical and contemporary conditions of Asian Canadians as racialized communities in Canada. I was first introduced to these topics as a foreign student in Canadian Studies at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, where I became acquainted with contemporary issues in Canada and began to learn about the conditions of racial minorities in this country. In 1993 the premiere of *Small Pleasures*, a feature film by Keith Lock, and a long interview with the filmmaker initiated my interest in the experience of Asians who were born and grew up in Canada. Working in the area of cultural studies and contributing to magazines such as Toronto-based *Border/Lines* exposed me to the cultural politics and minority discourses of the 1990s. I felt an affinity with the struggle of racialized minorities in Western multicultural societies. Their effort to assert themselves against the domination of the "cultural centre" was inspiring to me as I had recently escaped from a highly authoritarian regime in the People's Republic of China – a regime that rests on the deprivation of basic civil and human rights. It was this fascination with minority struggle and the discovery of the paucity of scholarship on Asian Canadian cultural production that gave birth to and drove this project.

Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Research Procedure

Postmodernist cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and the works of such Canadian scholars as Roy Miki, Diana Brydon, and Himani Bannerji, who are engaged in theorizing contemporary cultural politics and Canada's postcoloniality, form the general theoretical framework for my work. My analysis is also informed by globalization, transnational/ transcultural, and diaspora theories. Stuart Hall's work on the cultural struggle of racialized diasporic communities in Britain as well as Roy Miki's writing on the politics of Asian Canadian cultural production are particularly useful in illuminating the period of the 1980s and 1990s – a watershed moment when the "margin" forcefully entered the realm of representation. Reading the texts

produced by activists in the 1970s and 1980s enabled me to trace a dialectical relationship between minority cultural and social activism and the body of theory by which I was being informed. It is clear that grassroots social, political, and cultural practices nurtured cultural studies and postcolonial studies and that critical discourses helped sustain Asian Canadian cultural activism.

My work is primarily ethnographic, and I used a snowball sampling technique to locate potential interviewees. In the process I collected print and audio/visual materials produced by Asian Canadians and participated, as an observer and/or a volunteer, in some community cultural events. Between 1997 and 2004 I interviewed more than fifty cultural activists in Vancouver and Toronto, including writers, visual artists, filmmakers, performing artists, and scholars who were also community activists and key organizers of community cultural events. In addition, I communicated, through e-mail and telephone, with people located in Montreal, Calgary, and Seattle. In almost every instance of communication I experienced genuine support and a welcoming openness. I realized that I had entered a vibrant community and felt extremely privileged to be the receiver of its members' extraordinary personal "stories." In *Voices Rising* I present my sketch of Asian Canadian cultural activism and my interviews with twenty cultural activists. Most of the interviews were taped and transcribed by me and then reviewed and revised by the interviewees to ensure their clarity and accuracy. A few interviews were conducted in unconventional ways: through e-mail communication over a period of time or through a face-to-face communication using the computer to record responses. All the interviews were semi-structured and, in some cases, were a follow-up to previous telephone conversations.

Mainly as a result of the snowball sampling technique, the majority of the interviewees are of Chinese and Japanese Canadian background. The unfortunate absence of activists/interviewees of South Asian background is also due to my lack of knowledge about South Asian communities. The sheer magnitude and heterogeneity of the groups labelled "South Asian" is another factor that limited my reach. I am resigned to the fact that this is a preliminary study and hope that it will stimulate more research on the issues it attempts to raise.

Several factors influenced how I selected which interviews to include in this book, and key among them is the collaboration of the interviewees. Some interviewees were not able to find time to review and revise the interview transcript, and this has resulted in, for example, the absence of interviews with Jim Wong-Chu, Henry Tsang, Karin Lee, Mary Sui Yee Wong, Sharyn Yuen, Jin-me Yoon, Richard Fung, Ken Pak, and others. Some other interviews have been omitted due to space limitations. In an effort to enable

the reader to become intimately acquainted with the activists, I decided to present the interviews in their entirety. However, this strategy severely limited the number of interviews that I could include and resulted in the absence of some key players in the Asian Canadian movement. This, of course, should not be taken personally. And I hope that those who do not appear in *Voices Rising* find that their work and views are reflected in my analysis. I also had to omit those who did not fall within the parameters of “Asian Canadian cultural activism” as defined above (e.g., visual artist Gwen Boyle, who has worked on environmental issues, and filmmaker Quentin Lee, who has worked on the subject of homosexuality and identity). Finally, my selection of interviews was influenced by my desire to present activists from different artistic disciplines.

I use age as one denominator for defining the genealogy of Asian Canadian cultural activism, which seems to fall into three historical stages. The first stage occurs between 1970 and the mid-1980s, when organized political and cultural activities among young Asian Canadians developed in places such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Calgary. Important periodicals such as *The Asianadian: An Asian Canadian Magazine* and *Rikka*, photo exhibitions, and cultural festivals helped establish and maintain nationwide networks of cultural activists. The 1970s and early 1980s, the foundational period of Asian Canadian cultural activism, is given the most attention in my account. The second stage begins in the late 1980s and lasts throughout the 1990s. During this period a younger generation of activists (most of whom were professionally trained as artists) were actively involved in identity and cultural politics, working in alliance with artists from other marginalized communities. The third stage of Asian Canadian activism seems to be unfolding now, at the beginning of the new millennium. Young activists who grew up in the era of multiculturalism entered the professional art world at a time when “diversity” and “inclusion” had become buzzwords in the public arena. Although some of them feel that they want to move beyond “old” issues, they continue to explore what it means to be “Asian Canadian,” and there is a persistent effort to foster change at a time when diversity and differences are celebrated and when globalization has blurred cultural and national boundaries. In defining these three historical stages I hope to capture the changing social conditions under which activists of different generations carried out their projects.

The interviews with Asian Canadian activists provide concrete examples of what it is like to be members of a racialized community who have, at the same time, directly or indirectly experienced class exploitation, sexism, and/or homophobia. They reveal the intimate yet at times tenuous relation between artists/activists and the ethnic communities of which they are a part. They also helped me to better understand the intricate, contested processes

of identity (re)construction and cultural production in both national and transnational contexts. On the whole their stories delineate the formation of resurgent subjects who have dedicated their energy and creativity to building a just Canadian society. Meanwhile, we must note that there are rich nuances in contemporary Asian Canadian cultural expressions – nuances shaped by diverse subjectivities, experiences, and practices. Although many artists have been actively engaged, at one time or another, in community and social issues as well as in the general struggle for social justice, their perspectives and positions are by no means monolithic and static. Not all of them see themselves as part of a “movement.” Their self-definition varies, and they do not all perceive their relationship with “mainstream” society in the same way. Additionally, even if all of these activists hope to introduce changes into Canada’s socio-cultural life, they may not share the same goals. This heterogeneity is evident in their narratives and artworks.

Voices Rising is organized into several sections.

Part 1, “Mapping Asian Canadian Cultural Activism,” consists of my account of the Asian Canadian movement. In Chapter 1, I examine how culture is a site of struggle that is problematic for Asian Canadians. Chapter 2 continues the argument about the significance of cultural struggle by tracing the initial emergence of Asian Canadian cultural projects, especially the imperative to foster an Asian Canadian culture within the public cultural arena. Chapter 3 explores the historical formation of the collective Asian Canadian identity and its continual evolution. Chapter 4 looks into history as a source of Asian Canadian cultural production, and Chapter 5 examines the activists’ complex relations with their communities and their effort at community building. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on cultural activism among Asian Canadian women.

Part 2, “Voices,” consists of the interviews. Chapter 7, “Emergence,” contains a brief account of the embryonic stage of the Asian Canadian movement and offers eight interviews with activists who went through the dark days of Canadian history and who participated in political and cultural projects in the early 1970s. Chapter 8, “Cross the Threshold,” includes a brief description of the second stage of Asian Canadian cultural activism and presents seven interviews with activists involved in the struggle of the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 9, “Moving Ahead,” consists of a brief account of the current trends of cultural activism within Asian Canadian communities and offers five interviews with activists who are in their twenties and early thirties.

In the Epilogue I compare the current state of Asian Canadian Studies with the current state of Asian American Studies. I also discuss the need to modify institutions of higher education and to establish Asian Canadian Studies as part of a critical, transformative discourse.

The sketch of Asian Canadian cultural activism that I offer in the following chapters is incomplete. In order to do justice to this community of activists and to provide a fuller picture of contemporary Asian Canadian cultural production, more research projects and more space are required. In this initial foray I deal with the question of why Asian Canadians have engaged themselves in cultural production, and I discuss what I see as the major aspects of Asian Canadian cultural activism.

Part 1:
Mapping Asian Canadian
Cultural Activism

1

The Culture Question

Since the 1980s the sphere of culture has become a central area of contestation in Western multicultural societies as the demand for equal representation by marginalized groups has intensified, causing many ripple effects. What Cornel West names the “new cultural politics,” or what Charles Taylor names the “politics of recognition,” has its roots in such international developments as Third World decolonization and the Western social movements that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Among these social movements was a vigorous Asian American movement, along with less visible and cohesive Asian Canadian collective endeavours. Both movements were inspired by the civil rights and “Black Power” movements, and they centred on community-building, identity (re)construction, and the demand for racial equality and social justice. The anti-hegemonic agenda was accompanied by community-based cultural production imbued with heightened political consciousness. While a radical Asian American cultural discourse can be traced back to the 1960s, the issue of culture has been part of the Asian Canadian struggle for equal participation in Canadian society since the early 1970s. In the past three decades a politically charged cultural discourse has evolved, expanded, and shifted, yet somehow maintained its original mandate: that is, to enhance community through cultural and artistic development, to foster a collective Asian Canadian identity, and to intervene in nation-building by pushing for both structural and discursive changes in the cultural sphere in order to realize the ultimate goal of racial equality and social justice.

What prompted this activist engagement with culture? The significant role played by culture in individual, communal, and national formations has been well illuminated by postcolonial theories and cultural studies. In writing about decolonization in Algeria, Frantz Fanon outlines colonial culture’s role in the making of the colonial subject and the instituting of a hierarchical scheme of race, culture, and class. He argues that building a national culture is “at the very heart of the struggle for freedom.”² Decades

later, Edward Said delineates the intricate connections between imperialist practices (e.g., slavery and colonialist and racial oppression) and “the poetry, fiction, philosophy of the society that engages in these practices.” Like Fanon, Said views culture as “a sort of theater” or “a battleground” where “various political and ideological causes engage one another.”³

Canadian postcolonial scholars have also identified culture as an important site of contestation. They have focused on the battles over the redefinition of Canada and Canadianness since the 1980s and have attempted to address the problem of “how to situate and evaluate the cultural production of invader-settlers in colonies such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.”⁴ Thomas King’s fictional writing, Roy Miki’s essays on the politics of writing and publishing, and other scholars’ examinations of Canada’s postcoloniality are efforts to problematize nationalism, the formation of Canada, and Canadian literature.⁵ Writings on “cultural racism” and controversial cases in Canada’s cultural sphere between 1985 and 1995 bring to the fore the idea that racist discourse is embedded in the very fabric of culture and that we need to engage in the realm of culture in order to transform power relations.⁶ These works elucidate the uniquely Canadian characteristics inherent in the struggle over culture.

It is important to understand that Asian Canadian cultural production developed not only into social movements and revolutions outside the national boundaries but also in relation to political struggles that are specifically Canadian; namely, Québécois nationalism, regionalism, First Nations struggles against colonial legacies, and English Canadian nationalist struggles against the dominant colonial forces of Anglo-European and American cultures. In the 1960s and 1970s nationalism, in both its Québécois and English Canadian versions, was driven, in part, by a fervent concern over cultural survival. The latter, epitomized by Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* and Dennis Lee’s “Cadence, Country, Silence,” regarded the development of an “authentic” Canadian culture as being crucial to the nation’s survival⁷ and, hence, foregrounded culture as a site of national struggle. However, in asserting Canada’s national distinctiveness against external domination, Canadian nationalism is blind to its own roots in colonization and the continuing existence of “imperialist patterns of domination.”⁸ As Miki points out, Canadian nationalists

adopted the language of victimization to place “Canadian” cultural identity in opposition to its external enemies, American and British imperialisms. This triadic model justified a reductive “Canadianness” – a cultural lineage linked to an essentialized British past – that elided the relations of dominance inside the country, what has been called “internal colonialism.” The internal structures of dominance include a racialization process in which

non-white subjects in the Canadian state are subordinated as “others” who inhabit a realm of shadows, of chaotic darkness, of “non-persons.”⁹

Within this context cultural activists from Canada’s racialized communities inevitably confront the power structure and power relations built on the colonial order. Aware of Canada’s colonial history and postcolonial conditions, many Asian Canadian activists have allied themselves with First Nations peoples, whose position is candidly articulated in *The Asianadian* and *Rikka*, in SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and by Asian Canadian activists of the 1980s and 1990s.

Another tactic of the Asian Canadian struggle is to contest the marginality and racial positioning of Asian Canadians in Canadian society. Historically, although Asian Canadian pioneers were not colonized as were First Nations peoples, their labour was exploited to assist in the formation of the Canadian nation-state, and they were subject to the racializing process accompanying nation building. The new European order, which was based on a hierarchy of race and culture, was maintained not only through bureaucratic practices (e.g., population enumeration), legal manoeuvres (e.g., immigration laws, enfranchisements, naturalization, and citizenship), and economic exploitation, but also through representing the European’s “other” in official, mass media, and popular cultural discourses. Critical historical studies in Canada provide many examples of how discursive and material forces fed and reinforced each other in the overall process of constructing and consolidating a white, European, Christian nation. Cultural discourses are carriers of ideology; words and images participate in stratifying the material world.¹⁰ It is for this reason that Darrell Hamamoto calls American television representations of racialized minorities “controlled images” that help sustain the continual exercise of political economic domination by mainstream society. He argues that “the social construction of Asian Americans’ ‘otherness’ is the precondition for their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American life.”¹¹

When racial discourses saturate the sign system by which individuals and communities define themselves and others, they can produce self-hatred. As Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon remind us, “Racism penetrates to the very core of who we are. It is one of the primary influences negating – or affirming – our sense of individual and group worth, passing final judgment on the value of one’s history, culture, and language, of one’s intellect and physical appearance.”¹² As a result of European “cultural imposition,” the colonized Algerian, Fanon observes, is “in a state of absolute depersonalization.” Being reduced to a symbol of sin, “a Negro is forever in combat with his own image.”¹³ Such identity crises were part of a collective Asian American experience. Psychological studies suggest that both structural

domination and racist cultural representations have affected how Asian Americans felt about themselves. Thus, when the Asian American movement began to gather momentum in the late 1960s, one of its main tasks was to confront this mental colonization. In their polemical introduction to *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, writer Frank Chin and others argue as follows:

For the subject to operate efficiently as an instrument of white supremacy, he is conditioned to accept and live in a state of euphemised self-contempt. This self-contempt is nothing more than the subject's acceptance of white standards of objectivity, beauty, behaving, and achievement as being morally absolute, and his acknowledgement that, because he is not white, he can never fully measure up to white standards.¹⁴

In the early 1970s similar “decolonized sensibilities” were stirring the minds and hearts of small groups of Asian Canadian youths (primarily Chinese and Japanese Canadians) in Vancouver and Toronto; most of them were seeking answers to questions related to their feelings of self-doubt and alienation from Canadian society, their disconnection from history and cultural heritage, and their frustration at the lack of space within which they could express themselves. It is no coincidence that the Sansei, third-generation Japanese Canadians, were among the first to experience a political awakening. The internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War not only destroyed the community but also seemed to paralyze its soul, rendering it speechless. Yet it is through “telling,” as Joy Kogawa and other activists assert, that an oppressed people can deliver themselves from their mental imprisonment, reclaim their subjectivity, and restore their human dignity. Cultural expressions, then, are an integral part of political and social struggles, and this is crystallized by both Asian American and Asian Canadian movements. In order to fully participate as citizens in Canadian society, it is imperative for Asian Canadians to act as creative subjects, using words, images, music, dance, and theatrical performances to express themselves. This message was clearly put forth in the 1970s and has been uttered repeatedly by activists of younger generations.

A question arises when we think of how long there has been an Asian population in Canada: why had so few Asian Canadians articulated themselves so self-consciously and forcefully before the 1970s? I do not mean to imply that no Asian Canadians engaged in cultural activities before the 1970s. As a matter of fact, Chinese theatre and Chinese opera existed in the late 1890s, as did various arts groups and clubs within district and clan associations. In the early twentieth century, in the small towns of British Columbia there were portrait photographers like Chow Dong Hoy, whose work has only recently been recognized by curators and publishers.

Even during the dark period of the Chinese Exclusion Act, a Chinese Canadian jazz band, the Celestial Gents, was a hit within Victoria's Chinese community. Wing Chung Ng describes a flourishing cultural life in Vancouver's Chinatown in the 1950s and 1960s, which was enlivened by a new wave of immigrants, many of whom were young and educated.¹⁵ Even in the trying years of the Second World War Japanese Canadians did not give up aesthetic pursuits. Aiko Suzuki recalls that craft-making helped women in internment camps to deal with the hardships of having been uprooted and separated from their families. A simple arrangement of flowers, as Kiko Hirano remembers, could transform an impoverished Japanese Canadian home in the postwar years.¹⁶ Music and writing were other outlets for interned Japanese Canadians. In Lemon Creek, British Columbia, a harmonica band was formed and performed Japanese and English songs both inside and outside the internment camp. Another group in the Angler camp organized a club to write *haiku* and eventually published an anthology. Between 1941 and 1948 Muriel Kitigawa produced a large volume of writing. By the 1960s Roy Kiyooka had already established himself as a prominent visual artist and had authored two "stunning books."¹⁷ In the mid-1960s several young Chinese and Japanese Canadians formed the rock band "Asian Minors" in Toronto, where they played top-forty radio songs in high schools, country clubs, and nightclubs. Another band, "Singing Knights," composed of Chinese Canadian, Japanese Canadian, and Caucasian singers, performed traditional folk and popular folk-rock songs.¹⁸ Indeed, culture is an integral part of human life. It is inconceivable that a community would not have its own writers, poets, dancers, filmmakers, musicians, and so on. The reality, however, is that it was not until the early 1970s that Asian Canadians made conscious efforts to forge an "Asian Canadian" culture.

What then explains the late arrival of Asian Canadian cultural production? We can argue that Asian Canadians lacked the material conditions necessary for cultural production. This argument shares the basic Marxist premise that culture is rooted in the material modes of production and that Canada's class system, which operates in conjunction with racism and sexism, prohibited Asian Canadians from engaging in intellectual and aesthetic production or recognizably participating in the national cultural sphere. Their lower-class status made economic survival a priority. Therefore, in the postwar years, when restrictions on Asian Canadians' political, social, and economic participation loosened, many members of these communities were inspired to enter mainstream society via newly opened professional occupations. For example, early issues of *Chinatown News* celebrated the entry of Chinese Canadians into once exclusively white occupations. Economic conditions shaped by the racist class structure of Canadian society impeded the cultural development of Asian Canadian communities.

A second reason for the late arrival of Asian Canadian cultural production is that the public cultural sphere in Canada was organized according to the same social relations as was the larger society; as such, it marginalized women, the poor, and the racialized. When filmmaker Mina Shum's mother responded to her daughter's "fantasy" of filmmaking by saying, "You are crazy. Film is a rich white men's world," she did not exaggerate.¹⁹ Guarded by a professionalism inscribed in European aesthetic discourses, the Canadian art world had only admitted a very small number of Asian Canadians by the early 1980s. There were musicians Harry Aiko and Nobuo Kubota; painters Shizuye Takashima, Kazuo Nakamura, Takao Tanabe, Raymond Chow, and Paul C. Huang; visual artists Bryce Kanbara, Aiko Suzuki, and Paul Wong; filmmaker Keith Lock; sculptors Allen Chan and Gwen Boyle; writer Joy Kogawa and the versatile Roy Kiyooka. These pioneer artists should be hailed for breaking into the exclusionary professional art world, but their marginal presence in that world placed them under certain constraints: some were deprived of their "Canadianness" because their work carried traces of their ethnicity; others unconsciously obscured their ethnicity in order to fit in; and still others found that their desire to explore issues related to being a racialized minority met with indifference. Miki's analysis of the production of the category "Asian Canadian," which he tells through an analysis of Roy K. Kiyooka's case, speaks volumes about this peculiar situation.²⁰

A third reason for the late arrival of Asian Canadian cultural production involves the painful experience of racism, which created both fear and a desire to assimilate, hence shattering the potential for self-expression. Miki, in addressing problems around the reception of Asian Canadian writing in the 1990s, maps out a range of historical and contemporary factors that hindered the development of minority expression. He comments on the general absence of Japanese Canadian writers and the assimilationist tendencies of the 1950s and 1960s:

Had their lives not been so utterly stymied by the mass uprooting of 1942, the Nisei [second-generation Japanese Canadians], as is the pattern in other immigrant communities, might have developed aesthetic, political, and cultural strategies to promote their own expressiveness in visual and literary texts, but the radical discontinuity of internment at the hands of their own government severely shook their faith in democratic values – and threw them into a double bind. Their ethnicity, the very cultural and linguistic skin inherited from their parents, as they "entered" the dominant society in their dispersed state, became a negative that had to be translated into a positive, if they were to be accepted/adopted within white culture.²¹

The mechanisms of exclusion would be challenged by those Asian Canadians who acquired political consciousness in the early 1970s. Invigorated

by critical discourses and revolutionary ideas from the Third World and the United States, their search for history, community, and identity as well as social justice gave rise to the articulation of Asian Canadian experiences and issues through writing, historical research, publications, photo exhibitions, music, theatre, radio broadcasting, and taiko drumming. This emergent anti-hegemonic force utilized culture as a means of engaging with the political and social world. Its first task was to create “genuine Asian Canadian expressions.”