

Chinese-Canadians, Canadian-Chinese: Coping and Adapting in North America,
by Robert Guang Tian

Reviewed by Dru C. Gladney¹

Chinese-Canadians, Canadian-Chinese: Coping and Adapting in North America, published by the Edwin Mellen Press in 1999, marks a new watershed in the study of overseas Chinese and other diasporic refugee communities in that it has been produced by one of these new global citizens. The author, Dr. Robert Guang Tian, is a Chinese Canadian who arrived in Canada as part of the world-wide dispersion of young Chinese intellectuals following the infamous 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. He thus entered into Canadian society on the wave of a new Chinese migration, one that has followed many previous waves washing from China to North America and helping to transform the very nature of Canadian and U.S. societies. Canada has absorbed over 300,000 Chinese immigrants, and Toronto has the largest Chinese community in North America with 5 separate and growing "Chinatowns." It is now in the process of taking in even more from post-Communist Mainland China. How will they adapt? How will they integrate not only into the Canadian mainstream but also into the other Chinese communities that preceded them? These are but some of the questions that this study seeks to answer.

Dr. Tian represents the crest, and perhaps the best, of a new wave of Chinese immigrants: well-educated in China, upwardly mobile and quick to adapt to Western society, yet pushed out by a restrictive Chinese social and political system that had little place for them. This book demonstrates that this wave may be quite different from those of the past and perhaps the most important for Canada's growing linkages to the Asia-Pacific region. Dr. Tian joins a host of Chinese who live in large and small concentrations across Canada who are linked to their ancestral homelands but are forging new ties in their new places of work and citizenship. In the finest anthropological tradition Dr. Tian he brings a perspective from the inside to the study of the adaptation of Chinese communities.

Immigrating to Canada as a visitor after the crackdown on intellectuals involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Guang Tian quickly enrolled in a Ph.D. program at York University and proved to not only have keen insights into Chinese society in general but also into the problems and challenges facing the acculturation of Chinese from mainland China to Canada. These challenges were not

restricted to the EuroCanadian host population. Dr. Tian demonstrates through painstaking fieldwork that mainland Chinese have just as many challenges adapting to Chinese Canadian society, particularly among the Chinese Canadians who have lived for many generations in Canada and barely relate to their newly arrived cousins. In many cases they may be resentful and feel threatened by this new wave; in other cases, they are delighted to re-establish close contacts with those from a distant and somewhat alien homeland. This book represents a view from within, through the eyes of one who has learned advanced sociological and anthropological methods in order to understand the contingencies of Chinese Canadian society.

Yet this is not an easy task. There is much debate in contemporary anthropology concerning the modern crisis of ethnographic writing. James Clifford and George Marcus have led a host of scholars who argue that only natives can truly write from the native point of view. It should, thus, be left to them; non-natives ought to keep their noses out of other people's business. Others continue to argue that objectivity and the relevance of the anthropological enterprise can only be gleaned by a trained professional outsider completely distanced from the subject of study. Without this distance analysis becomes altogether too mired in the subject politics and positions of those under study. This prevents comparison and generalization, the contribution to broader social scientific knowledge.

In order to resolve this long-standing dilemma the traditional anthropological solution as described in this work advocates a "participant-observation" approach in which the anthropologist seeks to be neither a true member of the community nor a complete outside observer. Yet this compromise often produces neither a fully empathetic account nor a distanced critique, failing at both ends of the spectrum. The debate rises around the crisis of subjectivity. If one is to understand the subject position there needs to be a loss of objectivity, something that most agree can never be attained in any case. Polarization has thus increased in the Social Sciences and Humanities between those maintaining the need for detached academic rigor and those caught up in a postmodern self-reflective analytic, caught between what Harvard University's Elizabeth Perry has described as a rock and a soft place.

Few works have been able to avoid slipping through the cracks of this dilemma. Yet Dr. Tian is not a typical Chinese immigrant minority. His perspective is enlightened by the fact that he is also a minority within his own people in China. Born to a Hui Muslim family, Tian grew up in the rural northwest region of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, later moving to Beijing for further academic study. One of the best-educated of his people who are, for the most part, impoverished and uneducated compared to the broader Han Chinese majority, Dr. Tian knows what it's like to struggle for dignity and advantage against difficult odds. The Hui are marginalized among the greater polytheistic and pork-eating Chinese majority. His people survived by filling the social, economic, and intellectual niches that Chinese society lacked: long-distanced trading, pastoralism, butchers, jewelry traders, time-keepers, mathematicians, and money-lenders. Not unlike the Jews of Europe, his people were the outsiders perpetually inside Chinese society in every city and small town, spread across the length and breadth of the Chinese social landscape. In a recent book, Jonathan Lipman has termed these people the "Familiar Strangers" of China, not too different from the Chinese diaspora in North America. Like the Chinese diaspora, they sought to keep their heads down, earn a living, open a restaurant in a small rural town, and adapt their lives to a society entirely unlike that of their ancestors. As William Safran and James Clifford have observed, these diasporas are increasingly defining the nature of every city and local community. This heritage gives Tian a tremendous advantage in his ability to move in and out of Chinese society in Canada, to be both a true

insider and outsider. As Homi Bhabha has argued, this "interstitial hybridity" provides Dr. Tian with a unique ability to both observe and be observed, to not threaten his subjects with a superior status but also to never be completely accepted among them. He thus represents the newest kind of postmodern social scientist: able to fit in anywhere but never completely at home (unless it's moving between cultures). This sociological border-crossing is what gives this book a special place in the growing body of refugee and diasporic studies. This is critical for understanding the new Asian immigrants as these refugee communities from Asia are often the most abused and least understood. Nevertheless, they are often the first to adapt and make a tremendous contribution to their host society.

This study will add to a host of growing studies of the contemporary effects of globalization and the increased role of Chinese immigrants in that process. From human-to drug-smuggling, the Chinese diaspora increasingly play critical roles in the global netscape of human movement. Few scholars are as well-equipped to address this new social phenomenon as Robert Guang Tian. This work has broad implications not only for our current understanding of Toronto's Chinese immigrants but also the increasingly globalized world to which every community, from Los Angeles to New Delhi to Peking, is subjected.

Notes

1. Dr. Gladney is a Professor of Asian Studies and Anthropology University of Hawaii at Manoa.