Figuring Out Who We Are: Identity Construction of Chinese Canadian Youth in Richmond, BC
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In Richmond, BC — otherwise known as North America’s most Asian city — 54 per cent of the population is ethnically Chinese (Statistics Canada, 2016). The city represents a unique sociocultural milieu where Chinese Canadian youth develop nuanced understandings of race, culture, nationality and homeland. From June to July 2020, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype with 10 Chinese Canadian youth from Richmond to explore the social and cultural factors that shape their sense of identity. Participants spoke about two key themes: their self-positionings within Richmond’s Chinese Canadian community and the impact of racism on their sense of self. The research reveals that as Chinese Canadian youth figure out their identifications (Hall, 1990), their agency is shaped by wider social conditions of white dominance, liberal multiculturalism and assimilation (Valentine, 2011). While individual agency allows youth to resist and disrupt racist, ethnocentric social orders, it also reproduces hierarchies of belonging and superiority.

As a second-generation Chinese Canadian from Richmond, this study was inspired by reflections on my hometown’s uniqueness. My positionality as the child of immigrants from Hong Kong shaped the recruitment process, data collection and analysis. Notably, eight of my participants had at least one parent from Hong Kong, while only three participants had one parent from mainland China. While this sampling bias may be tied to Richmond’s immigration trends and the study’s eligibility criteria, the lack of participants with mainland Chinese backgrounds may also reveal ongoing political tensions. Future research should focus on the identity formation of youth in Richmond whose parents immigrated from mainland China or Taiwan.

Within Richmond’s Chinese Canadian community, intracultural difference is perpetuated through the use of the CBC (Canadian-born Chinese) and FOB (“fresh off the boat”) labels and the divide between the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese diasporas. These categories, respectively premised on an individual’s perceived degree of assimilation and the region of origin from which they or their family emigrated, challenge the myth of a monolithic Asian immigrant experience and create an intraracial hierarchy. Particularly, among Richmond’s Chinese Canadian youth, the derogatory FOB label is used as a site to redirect white hostility and as a way to distance oneself from peers who are not “fully assimilated” into Canadian culture. By characterizing FOBs as “rich Chinese kids,” youth dissociate themselves from the stereotype of wealthy Chinese immigrants and investors driving up real estate prices, an image frequently invoked by local media and white communities in Richmond and throughout the Lower Mainland. Through the application, contestation and rejection of these classed and racialized categories, youth grapple with internalized notions of the white dominant culture’s supremacy and the necessity of cultural assimilation (Cui, 2013).

Richmond’s demography is often weaponized as a means to advance xenophobic attitudes toward its Chinese Canadian residents. Youth regularly face white hostility and othering, which recently have been fuelled by associations of the Chinese community with the COVID-19 pandemic and by notions of Richmond’s “foreignness.” While these labels challenge their sense of belonging and claim to the Canadian identity, youth employ different coping strategies to challenge oppressive structures, demonstrating resilience through the recognition and denunciation of racist tropes.