

## **Sociocultural Analysis of the Commodification of Ethnic Media and Asian Consumers in Canada**

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This article studies the transformation of ethnic Asian media in the Canadian context and examines the role of media firms in the organization of Asian-language media by employing political economy and cultural studies perspectives. The analysis begins with the discussion of the body of knowledge related to ethnic media and Asians. It then investigates the role and limitations of ethnic media, not as a public sphere offering alternative views to the mainstream news and commentaries, but as a commodity, which is an advertising tool to target ethnic minorities and corporations. It also maps out the ways in which Canadian corporations and advertisers have commodified ethnic media. Finally, the article explores the overall socioeconomic impacts of ethnic media and the ethnic population on mass media marketing and its representation of Asian ethnicities.

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, the population of visible minorities, primarily Asian immigrants, has soared in Canada. This rise in the ethnic population has stimulated the meteoric growth of ethnic media and has made them influential players in the Canadian political, economic, and cultural realms. Compared to aboriginal people, who are the most significant minority members that Canada protects, members of visible minorities are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in color, and include Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians (Department of Justice of Canada, 1995). Among these, people who have immigrated to Canada from Asian countries consist of 78.5% of visible minorities as of December 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Because of the ethnic influx to Canada in recent years, Asian-oriented media firms have constructed and sold this commercial and cultural commodity as the "Asian audience" (Rodriguez, 1997).

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Date submitted: 2010-07-08

Several media sectors, both ethnic media and national media—from traditional mass media (such as newspapers, radio, and network broadcasting) to new media (including cable and the Internet)—have rapidly turned their attention to Asians who are primarily Chinese and Indians, but also include Filipinos and Koreans, as their new target audiences. In the midst of the Asian population growth of both immigrants and non-immigrants,<sup>1</sup> mass media have been actively involved in the profit-making process by commodifying Asian consumers whose purchasing power is overall higher than other ethnic groups. Corporations and media in big cities, including Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, have capitalized on the changing environment, as they witness Asians emerge as targetable consumers. The growing ethnic-based commercial broadcasting infrastructure and print media are integral to the global ethnic economy and politics, and Canada is by no means an exception (Karim, 1998; Murray, 2008).

The sheer mass of Asian media consumers and their economic impact is a factor that neither ethnic nor national media, including advertising agencies, can no longer afford to ignore in Canada (Campo-Flores, 2000; Paredes, 2001, 2008). Media experts admit that the next media battle will be among the ethnic media, especially Asian-oriented media, and, accordingly, they have developed new strategies and business models to target this growing market of Asian consumers. Advertising agencies, corporations, and federal and local governments have also begun considering the ethnic diversity of their audience to develop and implement their ethnic marketing campaigns (Guion & Kent, 2005).

This article examines the transformation of ethnic media and investigates the role of media firms in the organization of Asian-language media, such as Chinese, Korean, and Hindi, within a Canadian sociohistorical context, which emphasizes ethnic diversity. It begins with an analysis of the body of knowledge related to ethnic media and Asians. As Canadian society continues to grapple with issues related to race and ethnicity, it behooves mass media scholars to investigate the role and limitations of ethnic media, not as a public sphere offering alternative views to the mainstream news and commentaries, but as a commodity, which is an advertising tool targeting visible minorities and corporations. Then, the article maps out the ways in which Canadian corporations and advertisers have commodified ethnic media based on the substantive increase in the Asian population and the rise of ethnic media. Given that there are several ethnic media, including Chinese, Korean, and Indian media, this part of our analysis especially articulates whether they have constructed a pan-Asian market. The article also explores the overall socioeconomic impacts of ethnic media and the ethnic population on mass media marketing and its representation of Asian ethnicities. As such, by employing the critical juncture of political economy and cultural studies perspectives, we examine the complex effects of an expanding ethnic media consumption and market share, due to the fact that ethnic media represent ongoing cultural negotiations that authorize diversity and hybridity in a multiracial and multicultural society.

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<sup>1</sup> National population census data include only immigrants, excluding foreigners who stay as temporary employees and visitors; therefore, “visible minorities” means those who have immigrated to Canada. However, both ethnic and national media target these temporary dwellers as ethnic consumers, as well. Therefore, Asian consumers encompass both Asian immigrants (visible minorities) and Asians who are temporarily working and visiting in Canada in this article.

### **Globalization and Diasporic Formation: Contextualizing the Rise of Ethnic Media**

There are several categories of ethnic media; however, two primary definitions of ethnic media are well received. On the one hand, ethnic media are primarily regarded as media by and for ethnics in a host country with content in ethnic language (Hayes, 2006; Ojo, 2006). This assumption is that ethnic media are produced by ethnic communities in the host country to serve ethnic cultural, political, economic, and everyday needs (Shi, 2009). In this sense, ethnic media are the products or services tied to a particular ethnic group to organize themselves and sustain their cultural heritage within multicultural societies, including Canada. On the other hand, many ethnic outlets are also transnationalized or in the process of transnationalizing these days: their products are, in part, produced by their parent outlets in home countries rather than by immigrant communications themselves in their host countries (Shi, 2009). While these two ethnic media have very different objectives and are beholden to different power structures, both seek to make sense of the transforming structure of the existing media industry and public culture as ethnic media increasingly cross existing national barriers. More importantly, these two ethnic media are all commercial enterprises that are revenue sources for advertisers to reach their target markets. Therefore, it is crucial to make a connection between ethnic media and advertising due to its clear linkage in the commodification process. Although advertising and ethnic media are not the same because of different principles at play, we consider ethnic media as not only including media products but also including ethnic marketing and advertising in terms of ethnic-media practices.

Ethnic media have indeed played a number of significant roles, from serving as community representative, to providing a public sphere for ethnic groups in Canadian society as in many other places. Most of all, the role of ethnic media has been deeply related to its crucial role as a channel for community-based news agencies. Ethnic media, which are usually the products of attempts by various ethnic groups to organize themselves and sustain their cultural heritage within the multicultural society of Canada and other countries, provide news and programs of interest to the people of their respective ethnic communities (Ojo, 2006). They also serve as a focal point for the development of a local consensus and a means of expression of the community's demands on the wider host community (Gandy, 2000, p. 45). Several of these ethnic media outlets were established in response to the misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and invisibility of ethnic groups in the mainstream media (Ojo, 2006, p. 351). Therefore, ethnic media provide a public sphere for cultural expressions in the sense that cultural traditions and languages are regularly used in reporting and programming.

However, ethnic media have rapidly become part of commercial media plans by advertising agencies and corporations as a reflection of the growing Asian presence in major cities and their increasing purchasing power. Advertising agencies and corporations interrogate the role of ethnic media not only as a public sphere, but also as a part of the commodification process (Jeffres, 2000; Lin & Song, 2006). Ethnic media in multi-ethnic, multicultural societies often become the vehicles that not only enable an ethnic community to promote and identify itself as a member of a pluralistic society, but they also make it available and visible as a source of consumers to marketers alike (Fox, 1996; Husband, 1994). Burgeoning ethnic consumer markets also become a part of the transnational commodification of expanding the existing media industries and their distribution networks into new ethnic groups and individuals. Marketing and advertising practices targeting ethnic groups and individuals are an explicit

political-economic attempt to control the emerging market across the different visible communities by intensifying the exchange process and creating marketable information about the new users (Paredes, 2001). In other words, marketers and advertisers foster ethnic consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content aimed at the audiences that seem to be willing to put their voluntary engagement in the service of commercial corporations (Deuze, 2006).

The mass media, particularly ethnic media, have become sites where the past images of ethnic identities are mixed with images representing the experiences of individuals negotiating real life in the new country and interacting with other individuals and groups in that society. In acknowledging the intensified commodification of ethnic media marketing through which ethnicities are increasingly represented as global consumer groups, it is crucial to understand the ways in which contemporary marketing and advertising strategies are shifting, while they aim at the growing ethnic media and population.

### **Shifts in Demographics and Asian Purchasing Power**

Canada has witnessed a massive scale of immigration, causing cultural and economic shifts that have transformed it from a melting pot to a pluralistic society (Johnson, 2000). The new ethnic consumer groups in Canada come primarily from Asian countries, and they have shown tremendous purchasing power in major cities while developing their roles as significant cultural entities. The ethnic consumer groups were initially conceived as culturally and linguistically foreign and therefore commercially unattractive (Rodriguez, 1997). However, because of their soaring population growth, the marketing and advertising strategy of Canadian media markets, including ethnic media, has rapidly changed. In other words, advertisers and media are inclined to engage with the ongoing shifts in Canada's demographics, just as U.S. marketers have begun to target the Hispanic ethnic group over the last decade (Paredes, 2001). In particular, ethnic media themselves have become major targets in the domestic mergers and acquisitions market because diverse sectors, including broadcasting and telecommunications companies, are interested in ethnic media due to their growing popularity and attraction to visible minorities.

The Asian population has quickly become the largest visible minority in Canada. According to the Statistics Canada Census released in April 2008, Canadian demographics are rapidly shifting as the visible minority population continues to rise. The census shows that visible minorities accounted for 16.2%, or one in every six persons in Canada at the time of the 2006 census, up from 13.4% at the time of the previous census in 2001, and an increase from 11.2% at the time of the 1996 census. The growth of the visible minority population was due largely to the increasing number of recent immigrants from non-European countries, noting that 83.9% of the immigrants who arrived between the 2001 and 2006 censuses were from countries other than European ones. Between 2001 and 2006, the visible minority population, including Asian immigrants increased by 27.2% to nearly 5.1 million, compared with the 5.4% growth in the overall population (Statistics Canada, 2008).

More importantly, nearly 96% of visible minorities live in metropolitan areas, compared with just 68.1% of the total population. They account for 42.9% of Toronto's population and 41.7% of Vancouver's population. The Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Vancouver, comprising the cities of Vancouver, Surrey,

Richmond, Burnaby, Coquitlam, and others, had 2.1 million residents of whom 875,300 (41.6%) belonged to a visible minority group in 2006, up from 20.6% in 2001 (Table 1). Statistics Canada therefore predicts, "if current immigration trends remain, Canada's visible minority population will continue to grow much more quickly than the non-visible minority population" (Statistics Canada, 2005, 16–17). They have projected that they will account for one in five of the total population (between 19% and 23%) by 2017 (Beauchesne, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2005).

There are a variety of ethnic Asian minority groups in Canada. Among these, the Chinese have been the largest visible minority, followed by Indians. However, combined South Asians, mainly from the Indian subcontinent, surpassed the Chinese as the largest visible minority for the first time in 2006. Close to 1.3 million people identified themselves as South Asians in the same year, a 37.7% increase from 2001. They accounted for 24.9% of the visible minority population and 4% of the total population. The number who identified themselves as Chinese increased 18.2% and accounted for 24% of the visible minorities. Although by country of origin, China is still the largest because only 69% of South Asians reported ancestries from the Indian subcontinent. Other visible Asian minorities included Filipinos, making up 8.1%; Koreans, 2.8%; and Japanese, 1.6%. In fact, in the CMA of Vancouver, Chinese were the largest visible minority group with 381,500, while 9.6% of Toronto CMA's population was Chinese.

**Table 1. Visible Minority Groups in Canada, 2006 counts. (1,000).**

Major Cities CMA	Total Population	Total Visible Minority	South Asian	Chinese	Black	Filipino	Latin American	Southeast Asian
Canada	31,241	5,068	1,263	1,216	783	410	304	240
Toronto	5,072	2,174	684	486	352	172	99	70
Montreal	3,588	590	70	72	169	23	75	45
Vancouver	2,098	875	207	381	20	79	22	33

South Asian minorities include East Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan.

Southeast Asian minorities include Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, and Laotian.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2008.

In Vancouver, the cultural shift by 2017 will be even more dramatic as the majority of people in the region—approximately 53%—are projected to be counted as part of a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2005). These demographic statistics indicate a new social and cultural reality, which is the Asianization of Canadian society and its economy.

Against this backdrop, the ethnic media target Asian immigrants mainly from China and India because the Chinese and South Asian populations are emerging swiftly enough to form large target markets. What is more important than the numbers is that China and India are potentially huge markets for Canadian corporations that cannot be overlooked. Canadian corporations and the media sometimes identify the Asian ethnic groups as a whole, while at other times they serve the people of the Indian

subcontinent and China differently. It is important to note that corporations and media have acknowledged the significance of visible minorities as specific target groups, differentiating them from other ethnic groups due to their huge impact on Canadian society as a whole.

There are several major characteristics that distinguish Canada's demographic shift with regard to visible minorities from ethnic media perspectives. Since visible minorities in Canada primarily comprise Asians, one might argue that Canadian media have a unique advantage because there is one single, dominant minority group. What sets the biggest cities in Canada apart is that a large share of the immigrants comes from China and India. Major cities have a lot of cultural variety, but these cities' immigrant groups are large enough to support thriving commercial sectors in their mother tongue—from a Punjabi market to a Chinese market, for example (Skelton, 2008). Of course, language is one of the most fundamental factors to construct ethnic marketing, and the current landscape of ethnic media displays a more complicated picture due to several ethnic groups and ethnic languages. However, it is clear that the ethnic media in Canada benefit from the limited territories in which ethnic migrants live. Indeed, about 84.6% of ethnic Asians live in two metropolitan areas: Toronto (42.9%) and Vancouver (41.7%). Within these two metropolitan areas, Asians live in different cities. For example, in the Vancouver metropolitan area, the majority of Chinese live in Richmond, Indians in Surrey, and Koreans in Coquitlam, which makes it easier for the ethnic media to use ethnic languages to target these niche markets.

Another major characteristic is that visible minorities in Canada tend to be younger than the population in general, with a median age of 33 years compared with 39 years for the population as a whole in 2006. These figures help to explain that ethnic minorities in Canada have much more purchasing power than those in the U.S., mainly because Hispanics—the largest U.S. ethnic minority group—are younger, with an average age of 27.4, almost 10 years younger than the average age of the U.S. population (36.4 years) in 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2008). Because the average age of Asians in Canada is 33, they have relatively decent jobs, careers, and income. Many college-educated and/or skilled workers have immigrated to Canada as compared to Hispanics in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Asian immigrants in Canada are in relatively good economic shape. Although nationwide data are not available, the average annual income of immigrants, again mostly Asians, in Vancouver was CAD\$47,436, compared to CAD\$54,316 among employed households (Ministry of Advanced Education and Labor Marketing Development, 2006). Although these

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<sup>2</sup> For example, skilled workers and professionals are selected as permanent residents based on their education, work experience, knowledge of English and/or French, and other criteria that have been shown to help them become economically established in Canada. Persons who immigrate to Canada under the Provincial Nominee Program also have to get the skills, education, and work experience needed to make an immediate economic contribution to the province or territory that nominates them. Due to these priorities, Asian immigrants are relatively ready to establish themselves successfully in terms of jobs and income as permanent residents in Canada.

data exclude non-employed households, the average income factor alongside with age is a relatively critical indicator of the strength of the Canadian ethnic market.<sup>3</sup>

As such, the potential rewards of what is termed “ethnic marketing” in Canada are substantial. Although targeting ethnic communities is by no means a new trend, the current phenomenon is not just another cycle that will soon cease because of the expected exponential growth of visible minorities and their purchasing power in the future. According to a *Marketing Magazine* report, South Asians spent \$12.6 billion while the Chinese spent \$12.3 billion in the greater Toronto area alone in 2004. Their combined expenditures comprised 15% of the total market dollar spent on retail goods and services that year. Throughout Canada, visible minorities represent \$76 billion in annual buying power (Bhandari, 2005). As Manjunath Pendakur (1991) points out, commercial-based attempts to create and manage demand are imperative in the creation of a consumer culture. In other words, media focus on ethnic audiences as immigration rates soar. Advertisers who once deemed ethnic audiences too small, too poor, or too old now take these markets seriously. Since visible minority groups account for more than 40% of the buying power in major cities, marketing to these audiences is no longer simply the politically correct or socially aware thing to do. It’s all about business (Lieberman, 2006).

Under these circumstances, media and advertisers have rapidly given attention to this emerging consumer group. Previously, they paid very little attention to the Asian consumer groups, not only because the size of the population was small, but also because Asians consumers had no serious purchasing power. The massive Asian immigration flow only started over two decades ago in the mid 1980s when China and the UK agreed that Hong Kong would be returned in 1997. All four sources of independent audience data in Canada—Nielsen Media Research, the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement, the Print Marketing Bureau, and Newspaper Audience Databank Inc.—underrepresent the number of non-English-speaking viewers and readers in general audience surveys. Ethnic media outlets were also not included with mainstream media in their market surveys, which rank according to audience size and reach. This lack of verified audience or market data means that media watchers have to rely on incomplete information or surveys paid for by an individual media outlet or company, which limits the ability of ethnic media to compete on a level playing field with mainstream players for advertising dollars (Young, 2006). Research is employed by media and advertising agencies to help them target their advertising messages through mass media to the people they want to reach at the time they want to reach them; however, the current form of media research in Canada cannot provide estimates of the number and type of people using different media—for example, how many people are watching specific television programs or reading particular magazines (Green, 2007). Any media business has two products to sell: its content (to readers and viewers) and its audience (to advertisers) (*The Economist*, 2006). The Canadian media business has not been able to fully isolate demographic data for their marketing efforts in relation to ethnic media and marketing.

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<sup>3</sup> In Canada, visible minorities are relatively stable in the economy. The average median income of Hispanic households in the U.S. in 2005 was US\$35,967, and the poverty rate among Hispanics was 21.8%. The median income for non-Hispanic white households was US\$50,784 during the same year. In addition, almost one-third (32.7%) of Latinos did not have health insurance in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2008).

In the past few years, media and advertising agencies have finally begun to think that mainstream ad campaigns in English-language media would eventually reach this largely high-income, immigrant, and Asian-language-speaking population. Advertising agencies have especially started unitizing burgeoning ethnic media for advertising in major cities like Vancouver and Toronto, which means they consider ethnic minorities and ethnic media as commodities that can be sold to advertisers.

### **Burgeoning Ethnic Media Toward Commodified Mass Media**

In Canada, the first ethnic medium originated back in the 1850s when the first black Canadian presses were formed; however, visible minority groups have actively created their own media, in particular, broadcasting since 1979. Back then, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC)—which is an independent agency responsible for regulating Canada's broadcasting and telecommunications systems—granted a license to CFMT-TV, Canada's first multicultural television station based in Toronto. Two similar stations were then licensed in Montreal and Vancouver. Later, five more ethnic specialty and pay-television services as well as 44 digital specialty services have been licensed across the country (Media Awareness Network, 2008a).

According to the Media Awareness Network (2008a) in Canada, there were more than 250 ethnic newspapers including weeklies and seven non-English dailies, as well as 14 full-service radio stations to provide programming for various ethnic groups. These ethnic media outlets, which predominate in large urban areas such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, represent more than 50 cultures and over 5 million Canadians whose cultural heritages are neither French nor Anglo-Saxon. Ethnic media in major cities have further soared with the growth of visible minorities in recent years. According to the CRTC (2008), in 2007 there were as many as 36 radio services in languages other than English and French and 126 television services in other languages, surpassing the 103 French-language services.

Ethnic media are mainly located in big cities where immigrants reside. For example, as of October 2007, in Vancouver alone there were as many as 144 ethnic media outlets, including 80 newspapers, 24 magazines, 15 radio channels, and 15 TV channels (Murray, Yu, & Ahadi, 2007). There are also two online magazines and one online newspaper. Among these, 17 newspapers are daily and 36 newspapers are weekly or appear more often (two to three times per week). Unlike a few years ago, these new ethnic media in Vancouver are mainly non-English media, which means they are ethnic language-based media. In fact, by language, there are as many as 28 Korean media, 22 Chinese media, 22 Punjabi media, and 14 Japanese media outlets.

**Table 2. Vancouver Census of Metropolitan Area (CMA), Ethnic Media.**

Media Type	Number of Media	By Language	Number of Media
Newspaper	80	Korean	28
Magazine	24	Chinese	24
Radio	15	Punjabi	22
TV	15	Japanese	14
Print (unspecified)	4	English	11
Business Directory	3	Multilingual	9
Online Magazine	2	Farsi	8
Online Newspaper	1	Filipino	6
		Spanish	22
Total	144		144

In addition to their native language, several ethnic minority newspapers also publish in English. Totals include: 1 Fijian, 2 Filipino, and 7 South Asian papers.

Source: Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Media in BC.

Asian languages have rapidly become the primary languages of the ethnic media in Canada. Conversely, English-language Asian media are targeted to elite Asians, who, by virtue of their choice of English-language media, are considered to be of a higher class with greater disposable income, and thus, more attractive to advertisers. English-language Hispanic media applies the same rationale about the Hispanic population in the U.S. (Rodriguez, 2001).

There are several significant measures that account for the emerging ethnic media, including changing government policies, major players, and the commodification of ethnic media outlets themselves. Most of all, the rapid growth of ethnic media, particularly in broadcasting, has been made possible because the Canadian government amended the Broadcasting Act in 1991. The federal government then committed itself to ensuring that the broadcasting system would reflect Canada's racial and cultural diversity (Media Awareness Network, 2008b). Unlike the previous Act, the revised Broadcasting Act (1991) states plainly that "the Canadian broadcasting system should serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women, and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society" (Ethnic Broadcasting Policy, 1999). Although this policy did not mention the broadcasting system as a public sphere, it certainly served the arcane policies of special interests of ethnic minorities, as Jürgen Habermas argued (1989).

These guidelines are only voluntary; however, they do have some regulatory teeth. Since the CRTC grants licenses to networks and stations, it has the authority to take action against broadcasters that do not comply. Furthermore, in 1999, the CRTC reviewed its policy in relation to Canadian television and recommended the formation of an industry task force to examine how television portrays cultural

diversity (Media Awareness Network, 2008b). Against this backdrop, Canadian broadcasters have to reflect cultural diversity in programming and are responsible for the representation of minorities. The regulatory, technical, and economic changes in the Canadian broadcasting industry throughout the 1990s expanded the industrial production and the reach of the Canadian Asian-language media sector; it spurred the formation of a specific profile known as the (pan-ethnic) Asian audience (Paredes, 2001).

Governments, both domestic and foreign, have indeed played a key role in the growth of ethnic media as a public sphere for visible minorities. In Canada, the private sector is not the sole marketer since the federal government and, to a much lesser extent, provincial governments have rapidly become part of the system. The federal government has acknowledged the importance of immigrants and ethnic media as their partners; therefore, it has begun running political ads in a variety of ethnic newspapers and radio stations across the country. For example, in May 2008, the Canadian government launched an in-paper ad campaign in hundreds of ethnic newspapers at a cost of \$1.1 million to introduce a new immigration bill that would change the way immigration applications are processed, even though the bill was still before Parliament (Clark, 2008).

In addition, foreign governments, mainly China, have been interested in the Canadian media system. Central China Television (CCTV) applied for the acquisition of cable channel positions so it could launch nine Chinese-language specialty channels in Canada, partnered with Rogers Communication Inc., one of the largest telecommunications corporations in Canada. Until 2006, local Chinese-language media, including three radio stations and three television channels, had largely focused on Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong, who were among the earliest Chinese immigrants to British Columbia. Although there were a few cable channels, including Talentvision established in 1993 and newspapers targeting Mandarin-speaking people from Taiwan and Mainland China in the 1990s, they were not significant in terms of their popularity as ethnic media. In the 21st century, new immigrants, however, tend to come primarily from Mainland China and speak Mandarin, which means they are an underserved but important group. The Chinese government's application to the CRTC recognized the need; local media are now girding themselves for intensified competition (Young, 2006).

The role of the counterpart, which is Rogers Communications Inc. in Canada, has also taken a significant role. As a commercial media and telecommunications agency, Rogers has acknowledged the importance of Mainland China as the largest source of immigrants to Canada as the cable giant markets to an expanding Canadian-Chinese community (Wong, 2007). Rogers Communication Inc. has been trying to market to an expanding Mandarin-speaking community, and its interest coincided with the desire of the Chinese government to enter the Canadian media system. CRTC has finally given its approval for nine new Chinese-language television stations in Canada, although some protestors believe that the channels will be propaganda tools for the Chinese government. These protestors argue that the CCTV is transnationalizing the commodification process by expanding its existing media and its distribution networks to include ethnic groups living in Canada, instead of serving as a crucial news agency for the growth of the public sphere.

While ethnic media have taken some of the major roles as a public sphere, ethnic media themselves have become commodities in the media market due, in large part, to their potential as profit-making companies to reach visible minorities. Therefore, marketing and advertising projects through and

in ethnic media have become more common in recent years. For instance, *Canadian Immigrant Magazine*, with a circulation of about 20,000 in Vancouver as of 2006, has been acquired by Star Media Group, a division of Toronto Star Newspaper Ltd. and a subsidiary of Torstar Corp. The magazine provides information about careers, education, lifestyle, culture, money, and business opportunities for immigrants in B.C.'s Lower Mainland. Carol Peddie, vice-president of business ventures for Star Media Group, which also publishes the Chinese daily *Sing Tao* and the magazine *Sway*, stated, "This acquisition is a perfect fit with our strategy to enter the multi-ethnic publication sector," when it purchased the magazine in 2006 (Bhattacharya, 2006, p. C6). In addition, in 2007, CTV Inc., one of the largest private broadcasting companies in Canada, took over Toronto-based CHUM Ltd., which owns many ethnic radio stations throughout the country (Vieira, 2007). While ethnic media have been targeted as new space for marketing and/or advertising for many Canadian and Asia-based corporations, ethnic media themselves turn into commodities to be sold in the midst of changing cultural and economic environments.

As a matter of fact, commodified ethnic radio stations around Canada have enjoyed a boost in their revenue as a consequence of the rapid growth of their audiences and commercial sales. In 2006 alone, ethnic radio stations' revenue increased 8.3%, while overall private radio's advertising revenue increased only 5.3% (*The Globe and Mail*, 2007). Given that overall advertising revenue in 2006 increased 5.7% from the previous year, it clearly demonstrates that ethnic radio stations and all ethnic media have played a major role in the advertising market (Statistics Canada, 2008). In 2004, for example, a Chinese radio station, CHMB AM 1320, which began in 1973 with one hour of leased broadcast time a day, was already ranked third in advertising revenue among all radio stations in Vancouver. *Ming Pao*, the largest circulating Chinese daily in Vancouver, reported an increase in circulation from 83,000 in 1995 to 115,000 in 2000 (Krauss, 2004). Fairchild Media Group, which owns and operates the national television networks, Fairchild TV and Talentvision, (providing more than 300 hours per week of programming, mainly in Cantonese and Mandarin through cable and satellite across Canada and parts of the U.S.), reported earnings of \$6.5 million in 2004 compared with \$3.2 million a year earlier (Young, 2004).

Just as many national mass media have lost their power in providing a public sphere due in large part to their emphasis on economic imperatives; ethnic media have turned into market-driven commodities. While some ethnic media remain part of a public sphere for cultural diversity, cultural heritage, and equal rights, the majority of ethnic media have swiftly been absorbed as part of the Canadian market, not only as marketing tools, but also as major commodities.

### **Commodification of Asian Consumers in Canadian News Media**

The transformation of ethnic media into a major commodity has complex consequences for the existing representation of Asian ethnicities in Canada. As ethnic media and markets in Canada are characterized by the visible presence of Asians who mostly live in major cities and possess relatively higher purchasing power, contemporary marketing and advertising practices in Canada tend to reify Asians as consumers. For mainstream ethnic media and advertisers, this means that the existing marketing strategies targeting the homogeneous mass audience are no longer effective, and it demands a new strategy to specifically reach out to Asian audiences to fit their lifestyles, tastes, and culture in Canada. As Naomi Klein (1999) demonstrated, diversity and multiculturalism in media and advertising

practices have already become a central concern among multinational corporations, which try to brand global consumers since the free flow of capital, people, goods, and information have intensified. In the contemporary Canadian context, where the mass migrations from China, India, Philippines, and Korea reshape the ethnic mix of the host society's population, such ethnic media and advertising strategies have been expanded and deepened to the extent that ethnic marketing is considered "the panacea for all future economic problems," contended by the latest generation of marketing gurus (*Irish Independent*, 2007).

In Canada, narrowcasting or niche marketing to Asian audiences has become dominant in several areas, including retail, food, and commercial banks, in the last decade. Instead of targeting ethnic Asians as a whole, Canadian corporations and advertisers have deliberately constructed individual ethnic marketing strategies based on different languages. For example, since the spring of 2007, Walmart Canada Corp. developed a tactic to make it easier for customers to identify store employees who speak different languages by having them wear special vest buttons (Flavelle & Bhattacharya, 2007). Major food companies are also responding to Canada's diverse makeup. When Frito-Lay Canada sought to bring some new flavors to market, it went with a South Asian mix, starting with Lay's Spicy Curry in 2006 and expanding to Doritos Tandoori in 2007. Although English-language commercials run on mainstream TV stations, Frito-Lay also runs ads on ethnic TV stations that are targeted at South Asian communities (Flavelle & Bhattacharya, 2007). As Oscar Gandy (2000) clearly points out, these corporations have utilized and intensified "a segmentation strategy" of the Asian audience as discrete consumers based on different languages.<sup>4</sup>

More significantly, commercial banks in Canada were the first to recognize the potential opportunity of harnessing immigrant groups as consumers. They realized that they needed to expand their marketing to ethnic communities and moved their reach into the heart of ethnic communities in Canada. Since 70% of Canada's annual population growth depends upon immigration, the banking industry in Canada has made strategic moves in courting potential immigrants. In their aggressive pursuit of Asians mainly from China and India, big banks in Canada—such as Bank of Montreal (BMO), Scotiabank, Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), Toronto-Dominion Bank, and Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC)—made strategic investments in so-called multicultural or ethnic media and have launched advertising campaigns or events.

To begin with, in 2007 CIBC invested \$280 million to expand its branch network to reach immigrants in major cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Banks like RBC, BMO, and Scotiabank have actively invested their money to support varied cultural events to reach out to specific ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> According to Gandy (2000), "segmentation" is "the product and source of strategic information about individuals who share an identifiable status based on any number of attributes," while audience segmentation means a "social practice readily identified with a variety of modernist projects marked by a planned intervention in the lives of individuals" (p. 50). There are multiple factors involving audience segmentation, however, this paper intends to focus on the audience segmentation of Asians in Canada, where the construction of Asians as consumers is shaped by market forces by considering complicated factors that "push and pull individuals toward diffusion and assimilation, or the maintenance of sociocultural distinctiveness within the dominant society" (Gandy, 2000, p. 44).

communities. For instance, Scotiabank has been a sponsor of cricket in the Caribbean and was the official sponsor of the 2007 Cricket World Cup in the West Indies, while RBC sponsored golf and cricket tournaments organized by the Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce in 2006. Scotiabank also funded a preview of the highly anticipated Bollywood Sony Picture Movie, *Saawariya* (Beloved), in Toronto and Vancouver (Trichur, 2007). While cricket is enormously popular among Canada's South Asian and Caribbean populations, it is scarcely covered by the mainstream media in Canada. One ethnic media outlet, Ontario-based Asian Television Network Limited (ATN), covered the 2007 Cricket World Cup and launched a channel dedicated to 24-hour cricket coverage. This form of narrowcasting and niche marketing targeted specific South Asian audiences in Canada. During ATN's cricket coverage, commercials from RBC were repeatedly watched by many South Asian and Caribbean communities in Canada.

In recent years, media and advertisers have stepped up their television advertising efforts to attract Asians by targeting this audience through broadcasting not only on ethnic media, but also on major networks (e.g., CBC and CTV). Tim Hortons' 2006 TV commercial, "Proud Father," is a case in point.<sup>5</sup> The commercial featured a Chinese immigrant family of three generations in a short, heartwarming family drama. This commercial starts with a scene in which a grandfather—the stern first-generation patriarch of a Chinese immigrant family—has come to the ice rink carrying two of the familiar Tim Hortons' double doubles (coffee with two sugars and two creams) to watch grandson, Tommy, play hockey. In the next scene of a flashback to the early 1970s, the son (the father of Tommy in the present) was dragged out of a road hockey game by the patriarch (the grandfather in the present). "You must study harder," chides the older man, leading his son into the house while mostly white neighborhood boys play on. "Not just hockey all the time." The father is surprised to see Tommy's grandfather, who had never come to see Tommy play before. As they sit, the proud father, making small talk, says that Tommy is a good player. "Better than you," shoots back the grandpa. The father turns to grandpa, asking: "How would you know?" The father's face falls as he replies, "You never came to see me. You hated hockey and thought it was a distraction from study." The grandfather says, "I come watch." The son cannot believe it. "Okay, what team did I play for?" asks the son. "You right wing," says the old man, pulling out his wallet and finding a fading photo of his son in a hockey jersey. Unlike the usual mainstream television commercials in Canada that typically portray Asians in the background or in groups, the Tim Hortons' commercial introduces an intergenerational relationship in a Chinese-Canadian story and portrays an experience relating to hockey that every family in Canada can relate to.

Another example of this narrowcasting TV commercial on network broadcasting can be seen in a Bombardier commercial, which was specifically broadcast during the CBC's coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games—one of the biggest television advertising events of the year. During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games' coverage, major advertising players such as Nike, Bell, and Visa launched new TV commercials through mainstream channels like NBC in the U.S. and CBC in Canada for about three weeks. These corporations knew that a huge population of Chinese immigrants in Canada would be interested in knowing what was happening during the Beijing Olympic Games and would likely watch the opening and

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Hortons is one of the most famous and largest Canadian coffee-and-doughnut fast-food restaurant chains, comparable to Dunkin' Donuts in the U.S., and founded by famous National Hockey League player Tim Horton in 1964.

closing ceremonies as well as game coverage. In this niche market, Bombardier, a Canadian conglomerate that manufactures regional aircraft, mass transportation equipment, such as snowmobiles and locomotives and is well known as a Canadian equivalent of Boeing in the U.S., launched an audience-specific TV commercial featuring a contemporary high-speed rail running across the Chinese countryside and urban areas, while local Chinese people greet this new modern train by waving their hands. A traditional Chinese Mandarin song is played as background music throughout the commercial. At the end, a script reads "Bombardier, planes, trains and Canadian Spirit."

As such, the contemporary ethnic media and audience research techniques, which are mainly used in the private sectors in Canada, have been refined through such niche marketing to targeting specific segments of audiences. In this process, ethnic media and advertising in Canada were based on a segment of the Asian audience, especially relatively wealthy and educated middle-class immigrants. These media and advertising campaigns targeted those new immigrants as commodities as they bring much more wealth and knowledge to Canada than before. These commercial banks and other Canadian corporations sometimes pursue Asians as a whole and, at other times, pursue more segmented target groups, emphasizing Chinese and/or Indian identities.

It may not be uncommon that contemporary ethnic media marketing and advertising tend to target a relatively wealthier Asian audience as profitable commodities. The commercial representation of the Asian audience also tends to exploit the image of Asian immigrants as assimilated, wealthy, and middle-class families. Niche marketing strategies as seen mostly in retail, foods, and commercial banks will likely continue to target Chinese, Indian, or Korean consumers, while emphasizing difference, which is manageable and regulated, in terms of languages, tastes, and lifestyles (Hall, 1996). As Yudice (2003) points out, culture becomes an expedient resource to be exploited or appropriated not only for the resolution of social problems such as empowering ethnic minorities but also for the rampant global corporations extracting value from difference. Myriad ethnic media and audience research techniques, niche marketing for instance, mobilize varied cultural resources of what dominantly represents Asian ethnicity. In multicultural and multiracial societies, including Canada, ethnic distinctiveness is reproduced in relation to the accepted standard of cultural difference.

The commercial representation of the Asian audiences, which results from the strategic marketing and advertising practices, is never random. The image of Asia as a different yet targetable consumer group is based on the changing social demography of new immigrants from the Asian region in the last two decades. Throughout this period, Canada has been facing a growing pressure of neoliberalism on its economy. Canada has also maintained the business migration program to specifically target investors and entrepreneurs who could commit to a certain level of investment or the creation of a set number of jobs. It explicitly describes the exact amount of financial commitment that immigrants needed to make in order to be given fast-track immigration status. Provincial and federal governments in Canada were sometimes aggressive in establishing recruitment stations in Asia, in particular in Hong Kong before the 1997. One advertising agent says: "Today's immigrants arrive wealthy and ready to plow their savings into the Canadian economy. . . . When they come in, consumption is very big" (McArthur, 2006, p. M4).

The exclusive focus on middle-class Asians in the representation of Asians by contemporary Canadian media and advertising has the potential to become colorblind in primarily showing Asians' class mobility.<sup>6</sup> What is problematic with this sanitized representation is the lack of attention to the realities of Asian immigrants: polarization among Asian immigrants themselves along the lines of citizenship and class, and their increasing financial and geographic disparities.

### Conclusion

This article has discussed the interaction of culture and economics in the production of a specific cultural economy of the Asian audience in Canada. The analysis has demonstrated the presence and expansion of ethnic marketing and ethnic media on an unprecedented scale corresponding to the swift growth of visible minorities in major metropolitan cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Canadian media and advertisers as well as mass media have shown a unique trend of ethnic marketing targeting an Asian audience whose purchasing power is relatively higher than all other ethnic minority groups. Although it is too early to call it a boon to ethnic media and ethnic marketing, it is certain that ethnic media and ethnic marketing are becoming important in Canada, mainly because of the increasing number of Asians and their growing value as consumers, as well as commodities. Accordingly, the number of ethnic media or Canadian media targeting these ethnic groups should rise. Since visible minorities reside in big cities topping more than 50% of the population, ethnic media will focus on these cities, as well. In Canada, the growth of ethnic media and the new markets it has created have paralleled the exponential increase in visible minorities, primarily Asian immigrants.

Previously, media marketers assumed that foreign-language-speaking consumers would eventually integrate themselves into the English-language media fold, and hence foreign-language broadcasting would no longer be necessary for closing the linguistic gap in North America (Paredes, 2008). However, the continuous migration of people from China, India, and Southeast Asia, and Asian people's deep linguistic, religious, and cultural connections to their countries of origin have diminished the expectation that Asians will completely assimilate into the mainstream culture in Canada (Torres, 2003). Consequently, the media and advertising agencies in Canada turned their attention to the growing Asian audience and have made varied efforts to reach out to the Asian audience in Canada. In other words, Canadian corporations and advertisers alongside ethnic media have deliberately constructed individual ethnic marketing strategies based on different languages and cultures.

With the shifting trend of contemporary ethnic media and advertising practices in Canada, marketing strategies and advertising campaigns trying to reach the growing numbers of visible minorities become common in and through the ethnic media. The images of an Asian audience as a consumer become circulated in the dominant representation of ethnic minorities. However, in contemporary multicultural and multiracial societies, including Canada, ethnic identities become part of a commodified global culture, and ethnic media have been transformed into profitable commodities instead of providing a public sphere.

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<sup>6</sup> As for the analysis of the relationship between race-neutral, colorblind discourse and class mobility in contemporary representations of Latinos in the U.S., see Davila (2008).

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