

# community storytelling and locally informed immigration services



Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network

Partenariat sur l'économie sociale et la durabilité

Bridging, Bonding, and Building / Renforcement des Liens et des Capacités



ISLAND STUDIES

UPEI UNIVERSITY  
of Prince Edward  
ISLAND

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*Dr. Hung-Min Chiang-“Spring Thaw”*

***Dedication***

This work is dedicated to Dr. Hung-Min and Mei-chih Chiang, for their inspiration and support to myself and our larger community.

### ***Abstract:***

Many immigrants go through similar processes in integrating. According to this research, these stories, if shared and honoured, can inform both the host community and empower the newcomers.

The first Chinese person to arrive on Prince Edward Island came in 1851. Over one hundred and fifty years later, this community remained hidden in the shadows. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, through the process of storytelling, this community transitioned from liminality to their rightful place in the local community story.

Listening to the voices and stories of the first-generation of island born Chinese provides an opportunity to increase awareness and understanding of those who are not of the majority anglo-saxon ancestry group. The research also provides information that may assist governments to formulate policy that works well both for those who choose to come to a new place, and for those who are well established locals.

### ***The three goals of this research were to:***

**GIVE VOICE:** To highlight the stories and voices of the first-generation Island-born Chinese who were faced with the specific challenge of trying to “fit in” on an island

**EDUCATE:** to increase awareness of the concept of Islandness and how it specifically affects the human integration process culturally, socially, economically and politically

**CONNECT:** to connect Chinese Islanders to the recently arrived Chinese newcomers for the purpose of friendship and support.

This research has demonstrated the significance of the process of storytelling, and how that process affected the participants, giving voice to their lived experience. The opportunity to share their stories was a stepping stone for the community’s “coming out”, coming forward with their history, acknowledging the trials and the tribulations of their lives, and being celebrated by and for themselves and with the community at large.

This work also reviewed the concept of liminality and observed how Chinese Islanders experienced liminality for decades, and some would argue as long as a century. It examines how the insularity of an Island, compounded by its relative homogeneity and geographical isolation intensifies the experience of a liminal community.

### Bridging the Gap

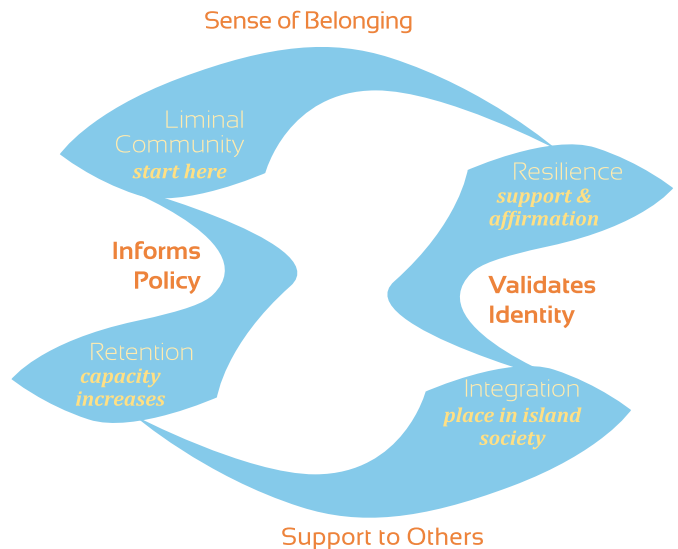
There's a lot of them that come into the store. They seem to want to join the Co-op. The lady in Membership Relations, she says to me, 'Come here, understand these people.' They have very little English. I can make them out more than she can. Some of them think I'm Eskimo or Indian. 'No I'm Chinese and French'. Others know I'm Chinese or half. I say to my boss 'You just gotta learn to speak slowly to them'.  
(Participant 15)

The final goal of connecting Chinese Islanders to the recently arrived Chinese newcomers for the purpose of friendship and support became redundant during the process of this research. The large numbers of Chinese newcomers quickly outgrew the population of the "old Island Chinese", and they are effectively settling themselves and each other.

### Connection between Community Storytelling and locally informed Immigration Policy.

### The Power of Storytelling

From this research came the Model(right), demonstrating that story telling is a powerful tool, a creative device that can increase social capital by building resilience, validating identity and creating bridging and bonding in integration, this informs immigration policy and increases capacity for newcomer retention.



This research wished to also fill a gap in the story telling process and follows up on the seminal work of Dr. Hung-Min Chiang, author of *Chinese Islanders, Making a Home in the New World*.

This research project considered attributes of Islandness that impacted particularly on this community. We looked at how boundedness, particularism, and migration are an integral part of Island life and how these nuanced the Chinese Islanders' lived experience. The phenomenon of 'routes and roots', or migration and an islander's sense of place and its impact on the Chinese community on PEI was explored. Concepts of liminality, resilience, and integration were overlaid and woven into the story to create the model that relates story telling to island connectivity. The researcher suggests that this model may inform public policy in regards to understanding the dynamic of liminal communities on Prince Edward Island and developing an approach with which to bring them "out" to increase social capacity and improve retention for new immigrants.

The power of being a sub-national island jurisdiction was discussed. We observed the Prince Edward Island provincial government's increasing interest in the immigration file, along with the federal government's encouragement for the province to take more of an interest and a lead. Through the federal-provincial nominee program we saw an increased number of Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) candidates coming to Prince Edward Island, increasing exponentially the numbers of newly arrived Chinese. These numbers have quickly surpassed the number of old and established Chinese on the Island. One of the objectives of this research was to connect the old Chinese with the new. In the course of the project, things changed so rapidly on Prince Edward Island, that the number of newly arrived Chinese far outweighed the old community (PEI Association for New Comers(PEIANC) reported over 800 arrivals from China in 2007<sup>1</sup> ).

### Breaking out of Liminality: How to Be Accepted

Try to mingle in with people and try to get involved. Perhaps the best place is your local church, or some volunteer work. And really get into it. That's the best way where you're going to be accepted, and people are gonna see you as not such a threat or something foreign that they should be afraid of, cause some people are like that! (Participant II)

We saw a public acknowledgement that racism exists and that it is a problem on Prince Edward Island. We had the honour of listening to the stories of many of the first-born Chinese Islanders who grew up on the Island and who became willing and able to

### Being in Between

It's funny when I go to the Chinese dinner you know, when I was picked by acclamation or whatever you call it - when they just picked you to be the president, because they don't vote you in back then because nobody wanted to do the job, right?! But today, it's a big to-do! With the new young Chinese there must have been ten of them up there on the stage. They want to be the president, and they actually vote for them now!!! It's just such a different day!!!! And so when I think of that, when I go to the dinner, the New Year's dinner, and I go to pick up my voting ticket, the young people say, 'well, you're not Chinese. You can't vote!' But the old Chinese who know who I am say 'No, no, no don't do that. She's the past president. Give her a ticket!' The young Chinese don't see me as Chinese, they see me as North American! It's wild. They don't see me as Chinese at all! It's really funny! Cause you see me as Chinese, well, a lot of people don't see me as Chinese looking.

(Participant 10)

share the full breadth and depth of their experiences. Through the process of telling their stories, the researcher argues that the first-generation Island-born Chinese emerged from a state of betwixt and between, or liminality. Once a level of trust was established, the participants were willing to come forth and tell their stories, and have their accomplishments lauded and their struggles acknowledged.

They have taken their rightful place in the Island story.

In 2004 when I began to assist Dr. Chiang with the PEI Chinese history research, I guessed there to be about forty Chinese people on Prince Edward Island. Beginning to delve into the history brought continual surprises as new research uncovered a history of much greater depth and breadth than initially imagined. Chinese New Year celebrations grew to the point where tickets sold out weeks before the 2008 dinner which had a limit of five hundred tickets available!

Breaking down and becoming aware of the elements of Islandness that affect the integration of newcomers is instructive. Lessons can be learned for improving integration strategies for long-term settlement of new immigrants. The study of firstborn Chinese Islanders allows us to learn from past experiences, while becoming aware of the elements of Islandness, and working towards respectful forms of integration.

## ***Findings and Recommendations:***

***Repeat the 1991 Race Relations In Prince Edward Island survey***, as a way of gauging the change in attitudes on Prince Edward Island over time.

Within the ***Department of Education, encourage the understanding of the concept of Islandness*** and its various elements, increasing our knowledge of ourselves and our society.

***Develop programs for recently arrived newcomer youth*** so they may have opportunity to express themselves in a language free environment through the arts (painting, drawing, cooking, photography, industrial arts, etc. i.e. The Juggling Cultures Art Program).

***Department of Community and Cultural Affairs:*** Following a place-based approach, ***encourage the telling of stories*** as a creative method for improving the bridging and bonding mechanisms for developing social capital, leading to increased integration and social cohesion.

***Retention*** is one of the three major objectives of Prince Edward Island's immigration policy. This research suggests that by telling their stories and researching their history, liminal communities not only enhance their own community but also integrate and build social cohesion as they educate society as a whole to the full spectrum of the Island story.

***PEI Statistics Division: Begin collecting local migration data*** that will aid in a clearer picture of the flow of people that come and go. Longitudinal statistical data could be very beneficial to delineate patterns of success to build on, as well as areas that need more attention.

***Carry out a similar research project looking at the next generation*** of Chinese Islanders, the children of the cohort considered in this research. This would give a longitudinal perspective and understanding of long-term integration experience.

## Conclusions:

the primary objective for this research was to hear the voices and stories of first-born Chinese islanders. This process appears to be cathartic and helpful to the transitioning of a community that was in a liminal space, to taking their spot in the Island Story. With a liminal community “coming out”, being willing to tell and share their story; taking their rightful place in the history of PEI; showcasing the Chinese contribution to the Island community; highlighting the verbal abuse and its negative impacts; advances in understanding Island society may decrease the time that liminal communities may spend in that space of ‘betwixt and between’. It has been observed that the recently arrived Chinese community certainly has dramatically decreased that space, and are making their way with their own website (allowing wide and democratic free distribution of information and the ability to connect with others in an instant), a Chinese School, and the recently sold out 2009 Chinese New Year’s dinner with 600 (six hundred) participants.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> *The Prince Edward Island government does not currently keep statistics of the in and out flow of migrants. The PEIANC does keep statistics of all clients that they serve. They now serve PNP clients, and it is this category many of the recent Chinese arrivals. More information can be found at <http://www.peianc.com/>.*

*To check out the Canadian Chinese Association of PEI (CCAP), go to [www.ccapei.org](http://www.ccapei.org)*

<sup>2</sup> *Viel, Jean (2008) “Place-Based” Approaches: Towards Stronger Communities”, a presentation at the 10th National Metropolis Conference on Immigration in Halifax, April. Also refer to <http://www.ancncommunity.ca> and [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org).*



Community partner:  
Canadian Chinese Association of Prince Edward island  
(CCAPEI) is a non-religious, non-political, and non-profitable  
organization with the purposes as follows:

1. To improve networking and promote the spirit of helping each other
2. To promote Chinese cultures and heritage
3. To build friendship and improve cultural communications between the Chinese community and other communities in PEI .

