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### Asian religions aren't that exotic

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# ricepaper

## THE POETRY & PHILOSOPHY ISSUE

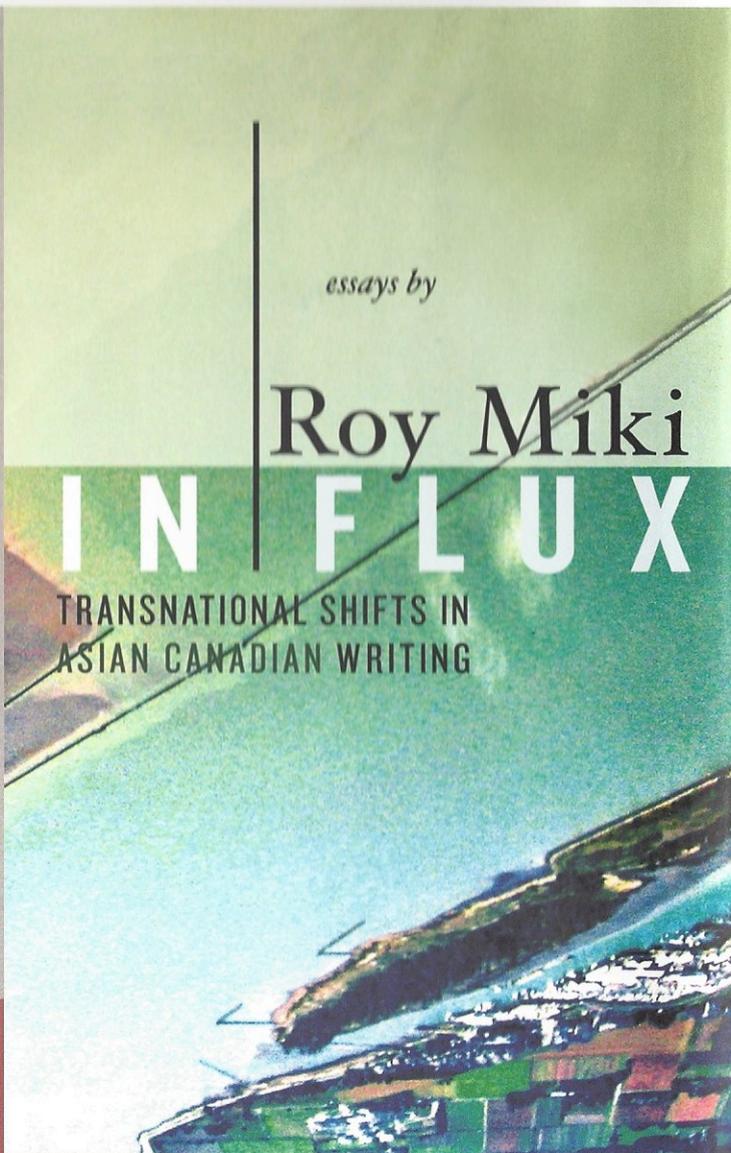
**ALMIGHTY ASIAN CANADIAN  
PHILOSOPHER-POETS**

**CAO YU: PIONEER OF  
MODERN CHINESE DRAMA**

**NEW FICTION BY TERRY WATADA  
AND YASUKO THANH**

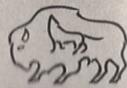
# INFLUX

Transnational  
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Canadian Writing



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## ricepaper 16.4

PHILOSOPHER-POETS

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*Ricepaper* is a national literary arts magazine committed to providing a voice and focus on East Asian and Southeast Asian culture. A forum for inclusive, representative and progressive dialogue, *Ricepaper* showcases the quality work by artists, scholars, and cultural producers that reflects the diverse interests of Asian Canadians. By providing an alternative to mainstream media for both readers and advertisers, *Ricepaper* strives to connect the local, national, and global community by challenging the parameters of how Asian Canadians are perceived and defined.

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## PHILOSOPHER-POETS

BY EURY CHANG



AT THIS TIME, IT'S PROBABLY APPROPRIATE TO MENTION the passing to two prominent members of the Asian Canadian community: David Y.H. Lui and Milton Wong. Lui, a former board member of The Canada Council for the Arts, founder of Ballet BC, and one of the most dedicated impresarios this country has ever produced, passed away last September 2011. Wong, noted arts philanthropist and businessman (who was profiled in Issue 15.1 of *Ricepaper*), passed away early this year. In addition to their many accomplishments in their respective fields of endeavour, both of these leaders worked together to bring The Vancouver International Dragon Boat Festival to fruition, giving us a signa-

ture event that combines a healthy competitive spirit with multicultural values and world-class performances. If there is any small consolation to this great double loss, it would be that both men left such a lasting legacy. Perhaps we can usher in 2012, the official Year of the Dragon, knowing that we can learn from people with such integrity and pride in Asian Canadian Art and Culture.

The twinned themes of "Philosophy & Poetry" in Issue 16.4 offer us an opportunity to showcase some of the most active contemporary poets living in Canada today. Perhaps poets are the deepest of all thinkers, not least because they bring life to a certain stillness or abstraction. By provoking our senses and imagination through carefully chosen language, poetry can challenge our personal philosophies and encourage us to think and see in new ways. In this issue, you will also find our usual mixture of engaging profiles, fiction, and articles covering a variety of literary topics and genres.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of outgoing team members Patricia Lim and Melissa Guzman, both of whom have dedicated many years to *Ricepaper* magazine. We are definitely better as a result of their efforts and energizing contributions. Also, please welcome Kristin Cheung aboard as new Managing Editor.

Most of all, we would like to thank you for your continued readership. Your interest, curiosity and support of this magazine is greatly appreciated.

*Kung Hei Fat Choy!*

Best regards,

Eury Chang  
[editor@ricepapermagazine.ca](mailto:editor@ricepapermagazine.ca)

# ASIAN RELIGIONS AREN'T THAT EXOTIC

BY JUSTIN TSE

TORONTO FILMMAKER QUENTIN LEE'S *The People I've Slept With* (2009) may seem like a sex-comedy at odds with Asian Canadian religious values. The story is set in California - but the movie is classified as Canadian because of Lee's Torontonion roots' - and revolves around the love lives of Angela Yang (Karin Anna Cheung, *Better Luck Tomorrow*), a woman who accidentally gets pregnant amidst her countless sexual escapades, and her gay best friend Gabriel (Wilson Cruz, *My So-Called Life*), whose quest for marriage to the same-sex love of his life leads him to a fundamentalist church where he is "re-virgined" by sprinkling baptism until marriage.

As fascinating as they may be, I am less interested in Angela and Gabriel than I am in Angela's socially conservative and presumably evangelical Christian sister, Juliet (*Lynn Chen, Saving Face, Surrogate Valentine*). Juliet advises Angela in light of her pregnancy to get married instead of getting an abortion (an Asian Canadian Christian no-no): "Maybe this is God's way of saying settle down, grow up, and be truly happy for once in your life." According to Angela, Juliet has "a perfect husband and kids out of the Gap catalogue," and Angela wants that too, igniting her quest to find the baby's father. But Angela's dad (*James Shigeta, Flower Drum Song*) tells her not to rush into marriage because no family is perfect, as Juliet "is about ten years from realizing." I found myself wondering if Juliet's evangelical family, like many such families among both Asian Americans and Asian Canadians, might contain sexual skeletons and gender insecurities, unexplored in the film, that could be fair game for an Asian Canadian popular culture probe.

*The People I've Slept With* doesn't leave the religious tantalizations there. Angela's top suitor and most probable impregnator is aspiring probusiness, family-values politician Jefferson Lee (Archie Kao, *CSI, Power Rangers Lost Galaxy*). Angela tells him to his face that she is sure that her evangelical sister would vote for him. In fact, I'm sure that the Canadian media would expect Juliet to vote for him too, given its as-

sertions of a conservative turn in the religious immigrant vote over the last ten years due to the advent of politics that focus on family values.<sup>2</sup> As a conservative politician professing to represent the religious interests of Asians in North America, Jefferson's affair with Angela doesn't exactly square with Juliet's evangelical "Gap catalogue" family values. It's also ironic that Jefferson, a politician who advocates for traditional family systems, almost marries Angela at the same time as Gabriel weds his partner in a same-sex ceremony, another seeming religious faux-pas. But instead of calling for personal moral accountability and public-private consistency for Jefferson Lee, I suggest that Asian Canadian writers, artists, and filmmakers could seize on these inconsistencies for their own creative output. Indeed, in the same spirit as American political biopics like Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar* (2011) or Oliver Stone's *W.* (2008), I wonder if public figures supported by Asian Canadian religious communities, whether their politics sway left or right, might be worth treatments in semi-fiction.

But on second thoughts, I wonder if anyone would care much about Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee. The problem, of course, is that they're supposed to be Christians (or at least get the Christian vote), and that's not very exotic for an Asian Canadian religion. I suspect this partly contributed to why the film was largely panned. While many of the negative reviews shy away from mentioning the Asians, *Box Office Magazine* tackled the elephant in the room, aghast to find "Asian filmmakers both fitting in and caving into western social norms for the sake of cinematic parody." Granted, the criticism is a reference to the *American Pie* connections, but by way of corollary, it suggests that Juliet and her objections to Angela's promiscuity are also borrowed from "western" evangelical tropes.<sup>3</sup> Don't Asians have their own non-western religions with conservative sexual norms? Wouldn't a reference to Confucius help Jefferson's family values political campaign? Wouldn't the film be less western if Juliet were Buddhist?

In short, Juliet and Jefferson aren't from real Asian Canadian religions. *Box Office Magazine's* tacitly religious critique is in good

company. In 2005, Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) Canada published a report on the state of migration and multiculturalism in Vancouver based on the 2001 census. "Immigrants have brought to Vancouver several religions that are virtually absent among the Canadian-born," the report read. "One-quarter of immigrants as a whole and an even larger share of recent immigrants are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or Sikhs. Among the Canada-born, none of these four religions claims the affiliation of more than 3% of the population."<sup>4</sup> Sure, the report acknowledges that 15% of recent migrants are Catholic, that the proportion of Protestant migrants has decreased by half compared to those prior to 1986, and that the percentage of secular migrants roughly mirrors the Canadian-born at over one-third. But the excitement over the new Asian (Muslim/Buddhist/Hindu/Sikh) religious plurality seems to designate the new religions (20% total immigrants; 16% before 1986; 29% 1986-1995; 27% 1995-2001) as immigrant (Asian) religions. By contrast, the clearly larger proportion of Christians among the immigrant populations (43% total immigrants; 56% before 1986, 32% 1986-1995; 34% 1996-2001) simply reinforces the Canadian religious status quo. As the mock cultural studies blog *Stuff White People Like* puts it, "religions that their parents don't belong to" are the fascinating ones when people think of Asian Canadian. Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee aren't as Asian-cool because they're just the old time religion in a different skin colour.<sup>5</sup>

No. 5 Road in Richmond, BC, a three kilometre stretch of road that lines up over 20 different religious institutions in one row, is a site prone to just this sort of exotic oversight. I'm involved with a collaborative project to explore the road with Claire Dwyer (University College London, Geography) and David Ley (UBC, Geography) funded by Metropolis Canada, a consortium of policy-makers and academics exploring how immigration has transformed Canadian cities. The word on the street when we started the project revolved around how "much of the religious activity that [Asian studies scholars] have studied overseas has become increasingly visible right here in the province."<sup>6</sup>

It wouldn't be hard to see Juliet Yang going to a church on No. 5 Road that would vote for Jefferson Lee. But many promotional websites don't discuss Juliet or Jefferson; instead, they gawk at the exotic edifices from Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, and Sikh traditions. Of Margaret Deefholt's "Pathways to Heaven via Richmond, British Columbia," not one is a Christian site (though there are eleven on the road) as she prefers to explore "the exotic, the inspirational, the whimsical and the astonishing" that is "just over the fence of my backyard. And yours."<sup>7</sup> Dave's Travel Corner's tour of No. 5 Road emphasizes the "peaceful and tolerant" Muslims, the "tasty vegetarian Indian meal" at the gurdwara, and the tour guide who "oozed with enthusiasm" when talking about Buddhism because "he had found the essence of life in his new religion."<sup>8</sup> The nomination of the road for CBC's Seven Wonders of Canada marvels at how all the religions "coexist on the road" in "stark contrast to what is happening in other parts of the world."<sup>9</sup> In turn, *The Globe and Mail* sought pictures from the road's religious leaders to debunk common stereotypes of what religions do.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that even these major news outlets had to deal with the popular perceptions of Asian Canadian religions as exotically different underscores the assumption that so-called normal Canadians who aren't religious see No. 5 Road as an Asian religious spectacle: mystical, different, strangely beautiful, transforming the Canadian (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) religious landscape. Christianity and its post-religious cousin, secularism, are just ordinary, static, boring, what everybody else is. When we think about Asian Canadian religions, we don't want to hear about Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee's private lives. We want to hear about meditation, tolerance, and spiritual worlds starkly different from our everyday reality.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with all this exoticization is that it is, to put it bluntly, an act of silencing.

Julia Kwan's *Eve and the Firehorse* (2005) has garnered more attention than *The People I've Slept With* for Asian Canadian religions, and I suspect its exotic elements have a part to play. Eve (Phoebe Jojo Kut) is a nine-year-old Chinese Canadian in 1970s Vancouver.



Her mother (Vivian Wu, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Founding of a Republic*) practices popular Chinese Buddhist meditations that enable her to direct hidden forces in her bedroom: now that's exotic. But Eve and her sister Karena (Hollie Lo) also attend a Catholic Sunday school, which is not very exotic because the nun keeps harping about hell and the girls are bullied by their Caucasian classmates. Yes, the combination of the two religions is a bit weird: as their mother explains to a friend, "Why not have them in two religions if both teach them to be good?" Stranger still is how Eve can see apparitions of her dead grandmother (Ping Sun Wong), as well as the deities from her different religions—Jesus, Guan Yin, and Guan Yu—dancing together.

But let me propose against the grain that *Eve and the Firehorse* is giving the same non-exotic message about Asian Canadian religions as *The People I've Slept With*. Sharon Suh, a Buddhist studies professor at Seattle University, argues that thinking the Pacific Northwest is a religious "none zone," a geographical space with little to no formal religious commitment, fails to take into account how "religion has always been salient in the negotiation of complex multigenerational identities" for Asian North Americans like Eve.<sup>13</sup> The dance of the deities and the grandmother apparitions aren't so much ghost sightings as they are Eve making sense of all of the contradictory religious messages swirling in her head. You could say that Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee are doing the same thing. Juliet may

be evangelical, but she has to walk a fine line between intervening in and tolerating the sex lives of her non-evangelical extended family. Jefferson may represent the moral minority as well as his powerful ethno-religious Taiwanese family, but he has to toggle between his public family-values high ground celebrated by religious communities and his private affair with Angela that smacks of a secular sexual ethic. Negotiating hybrid religious backgrounds seems to be a common Asian Canadian trope here. And of course, this isn't particular to these films. Think about Wayson Choy, like many others, who attended Christian church kindergarten in Vancouver's Chinatown and went home to popular Asian religions.<sup>14</sup> I also think about my students who tell me that because they are Vietnamese, they can be simultaneously Pure Land Buddhist and Roman Catholic. And if I reflect carefully, some of the uncles and aunties at the Chinese churches of which I've been a part emphasize the exclusivity of Christianity as the way to God because they don't want to betray their conversion from Chinese popular religions, which suggests in a twisted way that they can't stop thinking about their former religious experiences.

It's not exotic for Asian Canadians to have hybrid religious backgrounds. It's normal to the point where it's offensive to some Asian Canadian religious communities when they get boxed into a narrow either-or of Asian or Western religious practice. Li Yu, a history instructor at Langara College, has pointed out, as have I, that the number of Christians (25%) within the Chinese population in Vancouver exceed that of the Buddhists (15%). What was controversial was that Li argued in turn that Chinese Christianity in Vancouver should be considered a "Chinese religion."<sup>15</sup> Religion journalist Douglas Todd used this assertion for his Chinese New Year article in 2011, arguing that Chinese churches in Vancouver are spaces where Chinese cultural traditions, like Chinese New Year, insulated the Chinese community from the Canadian mainstream with a veneer of Christian practice.<sup>16</sup> Todd's article was subsequently blasted by the Vancouver Chinese Evangelical Ministerial Fellowship. Chinese

Christians were *Canadian*, said the response, because they rooted for Canadian hockey teams, spoke English with their Canadian friends, and joined Canadian Christian denominations.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese Christian pastors read themselves as being re-exoticized, and exoticism, they imply, produces false religious binaries. If, at a religious level, Eve can be both Buddhist and Catholic (as my Vietnamese students are), then why can't Chinese Christians at a merely cultural level be both Chinese and Canadian? Why can't the "Juliet Yangs" and "Jefferson Lees" of the world be more personally complicated than their publicly Asian Canadian, religious, and socially conservative faces?

Despite their Canadian essentialism, I think the pastors have something to say. Maybe Quentin Lee and Julia Kwan have taken the first step in de-exoticized films concerning Asian Canadian religions. But let me take this further. What are the skeletons in Juliet's evangelical family closet? How do we portray Jefferson Lee in a way that blurs the lines between his public support of religious values espoused by many Asians in North America and his private sexual life? What kinds of stories are Asian Canadian kids like Eve and my Vietnamese students telling about their mixed religious upbringings? Maybe, in religious scholar Rudy Busto's words, it's time that we "disOriented" the exoticism of Asian Canadian religions.<sup>18</sup> Maybe then, Asian Canadian popular culture can finally probe the contradictions of everyday religious negotiations as an integral part of Asian Canadian identities.

That said, my everyday life is filled with encounters with people who think what I study is exotic. I've learned recently that when I sit in a coffee shop with books entitled *Asian American Religions* or *Faithful Generations* or *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, random people will ask a lot of questions. "Are you Buddhist?" one Caucasian woman asked me hopefully. Unfortunately, no. She ploughed forward in a nostalgic voice: "I find the history of religions fascinating, especially how all of it grew out of agricultural patterns and the seasons." I wonder what Juliet Yang would say to that.

<sup>1</sup> "The People I've Slept With," Wikipedia, Accessed 27 November 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_People\\_I've\\_Slept\\_With](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_People_I've_Slept_With); see also "The People I've Slept With," Internet Movie Database, Accessed 27 November 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt024770/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Chad Skelton, "The shifting immigrant vote," *The Vancouver Sun*, 19 June 2004, C1; Adrienne Arsenuault, "Diversity among voters," in Peter Mansbridge, *Road stories: Vancouver*, *The National* (CBC), 4 April 2011. Accessed 7 April 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/thenational/indepthanalysis/story/2011/04/04/national-roadstoriesvancouver.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Cogshell, "The People I've Slept With: challenging the phrase 'bad sex is better than no sex at all,'" *Box Office Magazine*, 27 August 2010, Accessed 27 November 2011, <http://www.boxofficemagazine.com/reviews/theatrical/2010-08-the-people-i-ve-slept-with>.

<sup>4</sup> Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas: Vancouver—A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census* (Ottawa: Strategic Research and Interests, 2005), 10. For the "Christian" count, I amalgamated "Roman Catholic," "Protestant," "Orthodox Christian," and "Other Christian." For the "Asian religions" count, as the CIC report does, I amalgamated "Muslim," "Buddhist," "Hindu," and "Sikh."

<sup>5</sup> Christian Lander, *Stuff White People Like: A Definitive Guide to the Interests of Millions* (New York: Random House, 2008), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Don Baker and Larry DeVries, "Introduction," in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, eds. Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmyer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Let me count them: Cornerstone Evangelical Baptist Church/Cornerstone Christian Academy, Fujian Evangelical Church, Richmond Chinese Evangelical Free Church, Peace Evangelical Church, Trinity Pacific Church, Rosemary Church, Richmond Bethel Church, Richmond Chinese Mennonite Brethren Church, Richmond Middle and Secondary School, The Way Community Church, and a nameless Brethren church.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Deefholts, "Pathways to Heaven via Richmond, British Columbia." Accessed 26 November 2011, <http://www.margaretdeefholts.com/heaven-via-richmond-bc.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Habeeb Salloum, "Exploring Richmond's History, Then Taking the Highway to Heaven," *Dave's Travel Corner, Destination: North America*, 26 May 2009. Accessed 26 November 2011, [http://www.davestravelcorner.com/journals/publish/article\\_472.shtml](http://www.davestravelcorner.com/journals/publish/article_472.shtml).

<sup>10</sup> CBC.ca, "CBC.ca - Seven Wonders of Canada - Your Nominations - No. 5 Road, British Columbia," CBC.ca, Accessed 26 November 2011, [http://www.cbc.ca/sevenwonders/wonder\\_number\\_5\\_road.html](http://www.cbc.ca/sevenwonders/wonder_number_5_road.html).

<sup>11</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, "In Pictures: Highway to Heaven's many faces of faith," 12 December 2010. Accessed 26 November 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/highway-to-heavens-many-faces-of-faith/article1834655/>.

<sup>12</sup> For further reading, see Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Sharon A. Suh, "Sacred Seattle: Exhibiting Asian Pacific American Religions in the Pacific Northwest," paper presented at the Asian Pacific American and Religion Research Initiative, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, 5-7 August 2010. Accessed 26 November 2011, <http://aparri2010.wordpress.com/abstracts/>. For the "none zone," see Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk (eds.), *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004). See also Seattle University - Sacred Seattle, from <http://www.seattleu.edu/artsci/theology/blog.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> See Wayson Choy, *All That Matters* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2005); Jiwu Wang, "His Dominion" and the "Yellow Peril": Protestant Missions to Chinese Immigrants in Canada, 1859-1967 (Ottawa: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Li Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese belief," ch. 11, in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, eds. Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmyer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 233-274. See also Justin K.H. Tse, "Making a Cantonese-Christian family: quotidian habits of language and background in a transnational Hongkonger church," *Population, Space, and Place: A Journal of Population Geography* 17, no. 6 (Special Issue: Migration and Everyday Matters: Materiality and Society, eds. Madeleine Dobson and Elaine Ho) (2011): 756-768.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Todd, "Chinese celebrate festival despite shift in religious beliefs; Metro Vancouver's 100,000-strong Chinese Christian population continues to observe Lunar New Year despite its roots in Buddhism," *The Vancouver Sun*, 5 February 2011, A13.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Todd, "Evangelical Chinese Christians respond to Feb. 5th piece," *The Search*, 14 February 2011. Accessed 27 November 2011, <http://blogs.vancouver.sun.com/2011/02/14/evangelical-chinese-christians-respond-to-feb-5th-piece/>.

<sup>18</sup> Rudy V. Busto, "Disorienting Subjects: Reclaiming Pacific Islander / Asian American Religious Traditions," *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, eds. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9-28.