

**CHINARIAN MYTH AND HISTORY:
Historical Re-invention and Ethnographic Illusions**

By

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The deliberate feigning of the past continues to determine our cultural present.

Curtis Collins, *Feigned Memories*, 2004

ABSTRACT

This thesis project, *Chinarians*, proposes that our understanding and perceptions of the past are more influential than any actual “historical” events. For this studio thesis project, I am studying a mythical ancient culture: the Chinarians. The Chinarian culture was loosely influenced by the Huns, a tribe of nomads that emerged from ancient China and whose descendents are said to be Hungarians and Turks. *Chinarians* is visually manifested through the construction of relics, replicas, and reenactments. The project is an investigation into issues of hybridity, and explores the intricacies of cultural representation in the solidification of knowledge types such as historical documentation and ethnography. In this paper, I examine the key methodologies that *Chinarians* draws from: history, myth, ethnography and reenactment, all of which intersect in my work. These methodologies will include the exploration of both material artifacts, in the form of relics, replicas, and reconstructions, and mythopoeia. In each section, I will elucidate the methodologies by providing an artist or writer as an example.

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DEDICATION

To people throughout the world who share the Chinarian experience.

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this project is to reflect on the mythical ancient culture of the “Chinarians” in order to investigate issues of cultural hybridity and to explore the intricacies of cultural representation in the solidification of knowledge through practices such as historical documentation and ethnography. This evolving mythopoeia involves the fabrication of ancient/antique objects and replicas, reenactments of Chinarian customs and practices, and discussion of key historical events. The roots of Chinarian culture may be traced to the little-known but documented history of the Huns (Xiongnu): a tribe of nomads that emerged from ancient Tongwancheng and whose descendents are said to be Hungarians and Turks. A timeline for the history of the Chinarians is presented in Appendix 1.

This research project deals specifically with hybridity (as the experience of cultural mixing). Theorist Homi Bhabha, describes hybridity in terms of new forms of culture occurring at the interstices of, or the spaces between, cultures meeting. Bhabha states “The very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities—as the grounds of cultural comparativism—are in profound process of redefinition” (Bhabha 7). Within this project I will invoke Bhabha's ideas on hybridity and the importance of the space in-between cultures in the creation of shifting identities. From a personal perspective, I am creating this work to challenge racial categorization and cultural assumptions and to contribute to the discussion of mixed race experience. Myth and history inform identity (Bhabha 220). Like many portrayals of the past, *Chinarians* is

concerned with the problem of origins, and my version strives to give voice to my experience of being mixed race with recent family histories of migration.

There is a disconnect between my family's "homelands" and actual place, the geographical homelands that are no longer familiar and don't equate with the places that my family knew or remember before coming to Canada. This is true of many families and perhaps most pertinent for this discussion for families with recent histories of migration. With each generation, pieces of our stories are forgotten, specifics and details are misplaced. From between these holes and gaps of memory and history, new traditions and versions of stories emerge.

The creation of a Chinarian myth of forgotten origins is an attempt to explore the understanding and representation of self, and to challenge the illusionary boundaries that inform cultural identity—and the way we culturally define each other. *Chinarians* attempts to recognize a hybrid culture that is both and neither—and rich because of the ambivalence. I intend for my work to be easily identifiable to people who share similar experiences. This is a work for those of us who are constantly questioned about our cultural origins. For those of us, who because of our visual appearance, are often read as ambiguous signifiers beneath a normative gaze. *Chinarians* explores this space of ambiguity and grows out of my interest in the undefined spaces in-between cultures, as well as between fact and fiction, history and myth. It is intended to provide multiple answers to questions and to questioners who seek specificity. Similar to the way that new versions of history and myth leave room for empowerment, new cultural traditions have the potential to be rich and powerful in their iterations.

METHODOLOGY

In this essay, I look at the key methodologies that inform *Chinarians*: specifically history, myth, ethnography and reenactment. These methodologies will include the exploration of both material artifacts, in the form of relics, replicas, and reconstructions, and mythopoeia. In each section I elucidate the methodologies by providing an artist or writer as an example. In the history and myth section, I investigate Larissa Lai's mythopoeia in *Salt Fish Girl*. In the ethnography section, I explore Brian Jungen's ethnographic aesthetics in *Prototypes for New Understanding*. And in the reenactment section, I examine Joan Fontcuberta's historical re-invention in *Sputnik*.

History and Myth: Myth Can Set You Free

“Myth, memory, history—these are three alternative ways to capture and account for an elusive past, each with its own persuasive claim.”

Warren I. Susman (151)

All history is partial imagination, often reflecting the teller's subjectivity. History is what allows us to understand and locate ourselves in present day context. However, history also represents various perspectives and interests, producing knowledge that in turn changes our perception of the past. The collection of these multiple perspectives creates many versions of the past, and therefore many versions of the “truth”. Historian Margaret MacMillan states that “history can be helpful in making sense of the world we live in” (MacMillan 3). However, it is important to remember that historical knowledge is based on selected versions and interpretations.

An example of the evolving versions of the past is illustrated by the story of the unearthing of the site of Troy. Prior to the discovery, Troy was thought to be a purely mythic city from *The Iliad*, the famous poem written by Homer. Heinrich Schliemann, a German businessman and self-made archaeologist, was credited with the discovery of Troy. With the help of Frank Calvert, a scholar and methodical researcher, Schliemann found the site of Troy using clues from *The Iliad* (Alexander par. 11). The world was captivated when Schliemann found tangible evidence for the historicity of Homer's poem. The city of Troy was filled with treasures that Schliemann claimed belonged to the subjects in *the Iliad*, including golden jewels once worn by Helen of Troy (Fortune "The Truth of Troy", Lavery "The Truth of Troy"). Schliemann also found the walls from the Great Tower of Ilium and Scaean Gates (Alexander par. 16).

Later research presents alternative versions of this story. The historical evidence that Schliemann excavated and entitled "Priam's Treasure," is agreed by scholars to not match the time period of Homer's Troy. It is suggested that Schliemann had not actually found Troy, but had dug several layers too deep, uncovering another one of the nine layers of settlements on the site and mistaking it for the ancient city (Fleischman 34, Jewsbury par. 6). There is speculation that in the process of Schliemann's excavations he destroyed the main layer of the Homer's Troy, actually bypassing it as it did not conform to the Troy that he had envisioned. It is also speculated that some of the artifacts that Schliemann excavated from the site where, in fact, planted in order to in order to prove his discovery and to capture the world's attention (Alexander par. 20).

The strength of Schliemann's belief in the Homeric epic led him to determine the existence of the site of Troy. At the time, the magnetism of mythologized historical

evidence, even if unreliable, lent credibility to his findings. If just for a moment in time, Schliemann historicized a myth, simultaneously mythologizing historical evidence. The widespread fascination and excitement brought about by Schliemann's findings illustrates people's desire to ground their myths in fact. This story demonstrates our evolving understanding of history, as well as the occurrence of truth within myth and myth within history.

Laurence Coupe discusses the legitimacy within myth as "the very acknowledgement of the *limits* of myth—its inherent modesty and *faiblesse* as an experience of truth. The weakness of myth is its strength. Its disclaimer to absolute truth is its claim to partial truth—the only kind we, as finite historical interpreters, can ever presume to possess" (Coupe 96). Like the story of Troy, *Chinarians* is grounded in myth. Schliemann's discovery of the site of Troy and the discovery of the Chinarians both rely on the inexactness of myth, while using models such as history, ethnography and archaeology that claim truth. It is the inherent human desire to shed light on our origins, and the imprecise nature of myth that lends power to our causes, providing us with the potential for proving the existence of historical relevance within our myths. Myth and history are an intoxicating combination because of their potential to "rediscover" our past, in turn justifying our existence as well as the status quo.

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context—they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but—and this is fortunate—never set so hard they cannot be

changed again. (Warner 14)

Like historical accounts, myths are reflective not only of the past, but also of the time in which they are told. Seeded with metaphors, myths often relate to emotional, cultural, and spiritual knowledge, providing us with exemplars of the moral and value systems of those who came before us. Thus myths help us to understand our roots.

Joseph Campbell, in “The Power of Myth” (38-40) identifies four functions of myth. The mystical and cosmological are two functions, speculating about the origins of the world, life and human society and seeking to explain how our universe is organized. The third function is sociological, which focuses on how society is organized. Finally, the fourth is a pedagogical function teaching lessons about how to live our lives through showing how others have lived theirs, and highlighting the consequences of their choices. While all these functions are pertinent, it is the cosmological and sociological functions that are most relevant in this discussion. These functions talk about origins and usually justify social order and relations. For example, myths about brave and just kings support power structures and order in society, myths about outsiders and people from “foreign” lands justify social relations. Often, these latter myths highlight insiders’ virtues and the shortcomings of outsiders, thereby often creating the basis for xenophobic assumptions and racial prejudice.

Coupe discusses typology within mythology as types of models that are passed down through lineages of myth. These models create expectations in regards to social behaviors and cultural norms—this brings order, but can also result in stereotyping. Through reiteration and reinterpretation of myth comes the possibility of change, or what Coupe describes as radical typology. Coupe writes that

all myths presuppose a previous narrative, and in turn form the model for future narratives. Strictly speaking, the pattern of promise and fulfillment need never end; no sooner has one narrative promise been fulfilled than the fulfillment becomes in turn the promise of further myth-making. Thus myths remake other myths, and there is no reason why they should not continue to do so, the mythopoeic urge being infinite. (Coupe 109)

Mythopoeia, which is considered the creation of new myths and the revision of old myths, can operate as a creative function for producing new myths—new myths that challenge dominant paradigms and empower those people who were previously typecast or otherwise excluded from symbolic order.

To the extent that myth and history impact identity, mythopoeic creations (including certain types of reenactment referenced by my thesis installation) might be seen as powerful methods with which to revise the past to reflect a more inclusive social imaginary. In his curatorial essay for the group art exhibition *Feigned Memories*, Curtis Collins underlines this idea: “The deliberate feigning of the past continues to determine our cultural present”. The exhibition explored how “postmodern cultural strategies . . . are determined by a re-invention of the past” (Collins n. pag.). Our ongoing fascination with remembering, reliving or replaying the past is evidenced in the success of *Ancestry.ca*, the *History Television* channel, and in the appropriation and reinvention of myths, memory and history in many current art practices, such as those discussed in coming pages of this thesis essay.

Salt Fish Girl

In the novel *Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai proposes a hybrid mythic alternative to the legend of NuWa: a goddess in ancient Chinese mythology best known for her creation of mankind from mud and clay, and for her serpent-like tail (Harmer 4). *Salt Fish Girl* also draws from *The Little Mermaid*, a fairytale by the Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen. Lai's novel takes place in both ancient and nineteenth century China, as well as in the future Pacific Northwest, which she calls *Serendipity*. The story intersects the myth of NuWa with the plot line of the *Little Mermaid*. In Andersen's fairytale, the little mermaid falls in love with a human prince after rescuing him from drowning. In order to get closer to him, she visits a sea-witch who gives her a potion that will allow her to walk on land, but only with the consequence of constant pain in her legs and feet that feel like they are bleeding, to serve as a reminder of her transformation. Drawing from the *Little Mermaid*, in *Salt Fish Girl*, NuWa glimpses a person in a boat and desires to become human. She goes to see a fish woman who has the power to assist her transformation and undergoes a bifurcation of her tail.

In addition to referencing the *Little Mermaid*, *Salt Fish Girl* reinterprets the story of Jesus' Immaculate Conception and the story of Adam and Eve, suggesting an alternative myth of origin in which humans are made from mud, and their lonely creator, NuWa, trades in her serpent tail to walk on earth. As NuWa's transformation from goddess to human takes hold, she shrinks and drifts beneath the surface of the waters where she is scooped up in a cup and swallowed by a woman. Nine months later the woman gives birth to her. By positioning NuWa as the creator of humankind, she subverts a Christianized myth of origin (Harmer 1). The story of Adam and Eve is alluded to with the symbolism of the serpent and also with the naming of the character

Evie Xin, which appears to be a reference to Eve from the garden of Eden and also to SimEve of the nineties. SimEve was the digitally morphed “model” of future multiculturalism that appeared on the cover of Time magazine in November, 1993. Her computer generated face is “15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5 % Asian, 35% Southern European and 7.5% Hispanic” (Sina 1). In *Salt Fish Girl*, Evie states “My genes are point zero three per cent *Cyprinus carpio*—freshwater carp. I’m a patented new fucking life form” (Lai 158; *Salt Fish Girl*)

Incorporating elements of mythology and science fiction, as well as popular culture, Lai’s intersection and hybridization of myth echo the state of cultural multiplicity experienced by many today, particularly by racialized people with histories of travel or Diaspora (Lai 170; *Future Asians*). Lai brings the reader new ways of looking at culture by locating the book in both the past and the future and by exploring how race and representation can be addressed in contemporary and futuristic contexts. The shape-shifting and species-shifting in the story acts as a metaphor for hybridity, as does the melding of legend and fairytale from different cultures. The retelling of these myths suggests alternative perspectives, which function as a revised and more inclusive history that represents both westernized and non-westernized accounts and identities within the story.

In my artwork, I am creating a mythopoeia in order to challenge and question the act of classification as well as the creation of intentional knowledge forms. By playing the role of an ethnographer in my writing and through presenting relics and reconstructions, I am actively producing the Chinarian culture and accompanying historical evidence to insert the Chinarians into history. Similar to *Salt Fish Girl*, but also

engaging with visual and material culture, *Chinarians* intersects history, myth and fiction in a way that challenges and reinterprets conventional paradigms. Lai's writing influences and expresses much of the intent behind my project. Like Lai, I feel that

I am working on a fictive history...for people like me to make sense of the world.

By 'like me,' I mean people who come from histories of travel and migration, people who are caught in various, often contradictory, positions with regards to the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, the body etc. (Lai 170; *Future Asians*)

My interest in creating *Chinarians* stems from a desire to make sense of the world as navigated through the lens of hybridity, particularly from my own mixed-race perspective. On the most basic level this fictional culture is a fantastical response to a question I am frequently asked, "What are you?" as in "What race do you belong to?" In the *The Hapa Project*: a bookwork, photographic exhibition, and online community, Kip Fulbeck and over 1200 participants also address this question, which many multiracial people often face. Rooted in the tendency to categorize, ascribe, or typecast, it is a complicated question to answer for an increasing number of people whose ethnic backgrounds do not fit neatly into one checked box. In the United States, it was not until the year 2000 that the census permitted more than one box to be checked, thereby allowing multiracial people to indicate their backgrounds. This appears to be a reflection of the anxiety governments have had with "the impure". The lack of an opportunity to indicate mixed race backgrounds prior to that point essentially denied the existence of people who did not fit into a single racial category listed on the census.

Lai utilizes the intersection of eastern and western myths and fairytales as a metaphor for hybridity. Similarly, I appropriate from pop-culture, myths, and histories of the Chinese, Hungarians and Xiongnu (in particular) as both a method to create a hybrid culture and a metaphor for hybridity. Writer and mythographer Marina Warner comments on the many perspectives and reiterations of the past: “Every telling of a myth is part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account” (8). The myth of Chinarian history is full of conflicting accounts, illustrating Warner’s statement on the absence of an original or singular version. In this way, I aim to emphasize the multiple perspectives that shape historical knowledge as well as the cultural multiplicity and ambiguity that has been my experience as a person of mixed race.

Ethnography: Who’s your Anthropologist?

One method of producing the Chinarian culture is through a lens of ethnographic representation. Particularly relevant here are James Clifford’s and Vincent Crapanzano’s discussions on ethnographic authority and representation. The technological advance of modernity has led to widely accessible travel, migration, cosmopolitanism, and complex cultural histories. The borders and boundaries of culture are at times less distinct and as a result, hybridity is experienced by many people. Clifford discusses the fear of endangered authenticities and lost origins, specifically with reference to historical and ethnographic representations of the Other. Nostalgia for purity and the primitiveness of the Other draws from both the desire to situate the “West” as advanced and the longing for an experience of histories more rooted than our own “ruined” land (Clifford 4-5).

Clifford poses some important questions about ethnographic representation: “Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity and authenticity? What are the essential

elements and boundaries of culture? How do self and other clash and converse in the encounters of ethnography, travel, modern interethnic relations?” (Clifford 8). These questions underline the potential power inherent in the ethnographic approach, and are issues that I consider in this project. In the role of ethnographer and historian of the *Chinarians*, I have assumed the authority to speak for the Chinarian people. The limited mass exposure of the “forgotten” Chinarian culture and history positions my representation as credible since I disperse knowledge about the Chinarians. In the production of the Chinarian culture, I am attempting to play with modes of viewing and with the blurring of cultural boundaries, to represent intercultural interactions and migration.

In *Hermes Dilemma* (edited by Clifford), Vincent Crapanzano discusses how ethnography is only a provisional way of interpreting a culture. There is no exact formula for ethnography: the ethnographer must produce a “translation”, an interpretation of each unique yet “distinct” culture. Within Crapanzano’s example cases of ethnographies—George Catlin’s colourful paintings and descriptions of the O-Kee-Pa ceremony, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s theatrical narration of the Roman Carnival and Clifford Geertz’ pun-laden interpretation of a Balinese cockfight—cultural understanding is determined by the ethnographer’s subjectivity. Historically, when an ethnographer’s viewpoint is widely accepted in academia, previous perspectives are often erased. An example that underlines the process of the academic solidification of knowledge, which occurs in ethnography as well as history, is the discovery of pasteurization as discussed by Bruno Latour in *The Pasteurization of France* (Latour 26). Until the point that science accepted Louis Pasteur’s process to be correct, pasteurization did not exist. Its acceptance was

influenced not only by Pasteur's discovery, but also by the social and political climate of the times. There were other scientists who were aiming to find solutions and methods, but once pasteurization was accepted, other methods were disregarded, dismissed and promptly forgotten. Pasteur solidified a piece of knowledge because he fit it into the scientific model of inquiry and at the same time created a new paradigm.

In this sense, an ethnographically studied society is academically "grounded" and therefore becomes an encouraged perspective created by the ethnographer and reinforced within academia. The ethnographer's perspective becomes the authoritative version, particularly if there is limited outside exposure to this culture. The power is in the hands of the ethnographer who produces the culture academically; through the creation of knowledge, these presentations solidify perspectives.

My practice draws on ethnography in two ways. By producing visual representation and writings on the Chinarians, I am introducing the Chinarians, bringing their culture into the realm of public knowledge, much like ethnographers do. My methods of knowledge dispersal will include public display and Internet exposure. In the studio, the production of artifacts, replicas, and contextual surroundings help to realize the Chinarians in a physical/material way. These artworks are produced to imitate relics and act as a visual link to the culture they are representing, providing physical evidence, from functional and contextual tools such as arrowheads to ambiguous artifacts, or abandoned ruins. As ethnographers examine not only people in the act, material products and relics created and utilized by cultures extend these acts to exemplary tokens. Secondly, in the presentation of my work, I am an artist in disguise as an ethnographer (not an ethnographer in disguise as an artist). Within my work the performance is

subtle—I am not performing in a bodily sense (dressing up/lecturing on Chinarians) but I am presenting the visual relics and didactics through an ethnographic guise.



Fig. 1: *Stereoscopic viewer and stereographs*, 2005. Installation view. Replica produced by P.T. Schliemann. Image courtesy of Stephanie Ing. From the collection of Johnson-Shaw Stereoscopic Museum.



Fig. 2: *Stereoscopic Viewer*, 2005. Detail. Replica produced by P.T. Schliemann. Image courtesy of Stephanie Ing. From the collection of Johnson-Shaw Stereoscopic Museum.

“Famous scenes and places” was the operative phrase for much of the stereograph’s history” (VanderKnyff par. 2). After Queen Victoria took an interest in the stereograph at the 1851 *Crystal Palace Exhibition*, stereoscopes became a popular viewing (tourist) device (Spiro). The stereograph’s 3D view offered viewers a heightened sense of “reality” through the illusions, in many ways, of experiencing faraway people and places from home (Desmond, 41).

This stereoscopic viewer and accompanying stereographs are “replicas” of stereoscopic viewers and stereographs used for “viewings” of the Orient and other tourist attractions popular during the re-emerging prevalence of Chinoiserie in the West. These viewings coincided with the ever-increasing interest in the East and were one dominant way that images of Chinarian culture were disseminated. Patrons would flock to museums and Stereoscopic Parlours where they could participate in immersive viewings (in this particular case of the abandoned Chinarian city of Tongwancheng) in 3D. (Schliemann 20)

The hybridization of Chinoiserie style decoration with the Victorian style stereoscopic viewer references the Orientalist gaze on the Chinarians. The stereoscopic viewer replica was constructed with the museum patrons’ perspective in mind. Construction techniques included Sculpey, laser cutting, gold leafing, and sewing—a hybrid of old and new methods. The stereographs of Tongwancheng were not shot in 3D. The images were appropriated from the Internet, which I altered in Photoshop and then converted to stereographs through the 3D digital manipulating program *Anabuilder*.



Fig. 3: *White City*, 2005. Stereograph. Replica produced by P.T. Schliemann. Image courtesy of Stephanie Ing. From the collection of Johnson-Shaw Stereoscopic Museum.¹



Fig. 4: *Tongwancheng: The Only Chinarian City Ever Discovered*, 2005. Stereograph. Replica produced by P. T. Schliemann. Image courtesy of Stephanie Ing. From the collection of Johnson-Shaw Stereoscopic Museum.¹

One manner my artworks will be exhibited is with the formal aesthetics of museum display, and the texts about the Chinarians will be written from an ethnographic perspective. There are different possible contexts for the material works of *Chinarians* to

be installed, and the reading of the project will change within each context. One ideal installation setting for *Chinarians* that I hope to realize post-graduation is an exhibit in a museum. Exhibiting *Chinarians* in a museum will allow the context of the location to reflect the ethnographic illusion that I am creating. With this aesthetic framing, it would be less likely that the authenticity of the Chinarians as a “real” culture would be subject to questioning than if *Chinarians* were viewed in an art gallery. In a museum setting it could be assumed that the primary information source behind the cultural exhibit is a historian or an ethnographer, not a visual artist. If *Chinarians* were exhibited in an art gallery, the preconceived expectations for art would likely surpass the possibilities for an ethnographic illusion.

It is important to state that within this fiction there is more than one ethnographer or Chinarian expert. While it is romantic to think of myself as the first and last Chinarian ethnographer, it becomes problematic in situating the culture if there are no other researchers and interested producers. To have only one researcher, and therefore to have only one creative perspective, limits the magnitude of the possibility of recent discoveries. As well, there are contradicting theories on the Chinarian existence. I want the origins to be disputed as a reflection of hybridity, interpretation and subjectivity. Writings and artifacts will not be presented as products of a singular source but as products of a multitude of sources and therefore a plurality of opinions.

The positioning of ambiguous metaphors within *Chinarians* is one intentional method of challenging classification. It stems from, but is not limited to, personal experiences of hybridity and cultural ambiguity. The implementation of dualities, multiplicity and ambiguity within the project acts as a metaphor for hybridity. These

intersections and contradictions can be seen within the process of mixing of fact and fiction, and as a result the project hovers between envisioning and revisioning, enactment and reenactment. The disputed history and origins of the Chinarians subtly, yet purposefully, speak to any population whose histories and origins are forgotten, addressing the scattered traditions, holes and gaps within cultural group histories and even personal family trees.

In my family, the Chinese language was forgotten by my mother's generation. Having lived in Canada since 1956, my father's Hungarian is considered old-fashioned in Hungary, because the language has evolved in ways that he does not have access to. I have often been criticized as foolish for not speaking Chinese, but in Hungary (where I am rarely recognized as Hungarian) I am praised for my rudimentary Hungarian. I am illiterate when it comes to Chinese characters, so I have created hybrid characters that Chinarians can read. One day there will be Chinarians who will no longer be able to read them, but it is my hope that they will feel empowered to create their own.

The works are made with both Chinarian intent and with purposeful (sometimes problematic) ethnographic representation. As relics, the characters were created for Chinarians to read and express themselves. However the presentation and the accompanying ethnographic text discusses the external curiosity of the unknown Chinarians origins.



Fig. 5: *Chinarian Script*, Estimated date: 200 - 300 A.D. Discovered by archaeologist Manuel Mead. Image featured in C.L. Castaneda's *The Origins of the Chinarian Language*. Photograph courtesy of Israel Carlos.

If so, then what to make of the obvious Finno-Ugric similarities? Is it possible that Hunese is an "ugricized" Turkic language? Or a "turkicized" Ugric one? Or neither, but rather a hybrid mixture of both? Or were these similarities developed as an ancient meta-language to enhance communication among different human groups? There is no answer yet to these questions and, without considering other anthropological evidence, it is not likely that such an answer will be found. Current research focuses on synthesizing available evidence of different kinds, to try to find the answer to one of the oldest and most exciting questions of all time: where do Chinarians come from? (Castaneda 33)

The ethnographic research that I am conducting, intended to situate the Chinarians into history, is deliberately based on the prevalence of inconsistent information located on the Internet. In addition the details, myths and photographic evidence of the Chinarian culture will later be infiltrated back into society, primarily via Wikipedia. I am interested

in Wikipedia as a historical research resource as Wikipedia information can be created, shaped and edited by multiple people, therefore the histories are contested, mirroring the multiple perspectives and illusions that shape history. What is left on Wikipedia is, importantly, the ‘residue’ of countless numbers of arguments, factual disputes and perspectives, as the information left is what is generally agreed upon by those who actively moderate it.

Prototypes for New Understanding

Brian Jungen is a Vancouver-based artist whose work demonstrates the power of ethnographic representation. “Jungen brings the models of artist-as-ethnographer and artist-as-Trickster together into one complex, post-colonial artistic trope” (Tousley par. 4). When presented with the phrase artist-as-ethnographer, what comes to mind is the significant book chapter written by Hal Foster, *The Artist As Ethnographer*, which discusses the role of the artist in community-based projects that are involved with the representation of marginalized groups. Amongst other inquiries, Foster questions the assumption that “the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation” (302) and the notion of the other as invariably an outsider (302). Raising a similar inquiry to Clifford’s aforementioned question, “Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity and authenticity?” (Clifford 8), Foster discusses the internal and external dynamic within artistic ethnography. Those who are visibly perceived as insiders of a marginalized group are assumed to merit access to research and to offer credible representations of that group, while those who are not visibly part of the group are left with restricted access to research and limited representation credibility (302).

Jungen’s unique adoption of the model of artist-as-ethnographer can be seen in

the sketches solicited for wall drawings originally exhibited with *Prototypes for New Understanding* in the Charles H. Scott Gallery 1999 (Cuauhtémoc 31). Jungen invited passersby to represent their interpretations of First Nations art through quick sketches, which he then enlarged and drew on the walls of the gallery (Cuauhtémoc 31). Jungen researched the general public's perceptions of First Nations art, as opposed to basing his project on a study of the First Nations community itself, challenging the ethnographic paradigm of outsider versus insider access and representation, and Clifford's question about where representational authority should belong.



Fig. 6: Brian Jungen, *Prototypes for New Understanding*, 1998-2005. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Partial installation view. Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo: Trevor Mills/Vancouver Art Gallery.

Jungen's series *Prototypes for New Understanding* is a fusion of glorified Western and Northwest Coast Aboriginal consumerist cultural iconography. The sensational Nike Air Jordans are transformed into objects that mimic indigenous ceremonial masks (Chaat Smith par. 12). Jungen plays with the formal approaches of museum display and also borrows from selected modes of ethnographic representation.

Prototypes for New Understanding is exhibited in a manner that simulates museums' displays of culture, employing large vitrine-covered plinths that house the prototypes on simple white stands (Thompson par. 8).

His work brings to mind the prevalence of commoditization and mass-production of First Nations artifacts and culture (Tousley par. 16). In addition, he speaks to the commercial appropriation of First Nations objects, which are exhibited extensively outside of traditional context in tourist shops, at institutions such as the Museum of Anthropology, and even at the 2010 Olympic Ceremonies. Jungen turns this dynamic around by appropriating emblematic western pop-cultural symbols such as Nike Air Jordans and exhibiting them in a context removed from original purpose or intent.

Jungen challenges representational politics in cultural display, particularly in relation to the rampant post-colonial exhibit of Northwest Coast First Nations art. "Jungen draws a clear parallel between the mass consumption of commercial objects and the mass consumption of cultural differences" (Thompson par. 8). Tourist and museum displays primitivize the "other" Aboriginal culture, while simultaneously appropriating Native imagery as Canadian identity. An example of this complex dynamic was evident in the 2010 Olympic Opening Ceremony.

Like an ethnographer, Jungen presents new ways of looking at culture but, uniquely, his appropriation and transformation of emblematic models create an alternative version to the artifact as "pure product." *Prototypes for New Understanding* instead presents a vision of the hybridization of culture within a globalized society.

Reenactment: The World's a Stage

*The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the
re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind.*

R. G. Collingwood (215)

In addition to fictional histories, I also recognize that reenactment has resonance within my work. I am looking at reenactment as the restaging of historical events or representations of such and I am examining it particularly within the framework of visual art. Cultural theorist Anke Bangma discusses the purpose of reenactment. “For the most part, artists deploy the reenactment for two common critical purposes: to ‘rewrite’ history by offering a forum for other viewpoints traditionally kept outside the ‘grand narratives’, as well as to deconstruct the images and accounts that have composed these narratives.” (Bangma, cited by Huyghe par. 2). The reenactment of *Chinarians* is an attempt to create an alternative history that challenges historical and ethnographic representations as well as celebrates contradiction, ambiguity and hybridity. Beyond the use of reenactment as a visual tool to present the history of the Chinarians, the parallel functions of myth and history for reinterpretation and reinvention are what have led me to work with reenactment as a strategy. Bangma’s statement on rewriting history through reenactment brings to mind Coupe’s perspective on radical typology “myth, as a play of past paradigm and future possibility, gives expression to the ‘other’, to those persons and causes excluded from the present hierarchy” (Coupe 196).

Many current art practices use reenactment as a method of deconstructing and revising historical accounts (Kubicki par. 1). Similar to the way Lai fictionalizes or intertextualizes histories within her writing, reenactment is another method of re-

versioning history and myth. Joan Fontcuberta's work, described later in this document, is an example of this.

Within *Chinarians*, I am utilizing reenactment as an extension of my re-envisioned history; it is a tool to present ancient Chinarian culture in a visual way. The hybrid intersection of fact and fiction within my project results in situating *Chinarians* in a liminal space between enactment and reenactment. Literally, the existence of the Chinarians is speculative; therefore, the presentation of their culture in an ethnographic or historical context is not truly a reenactment. It is an enactment. The relics, myths and history within this project are enactments in disguise as reenactments. However, in order to locate the Chinarians within history, I have researched and am drawing from Chinese, Hungarian and Xiongnu (to name a few) cultures and histories, which are not fictional. Therefore, in a broader sense, I am reenacting a history that includes the hybrid, ambiguous culture of the Chinarians.

Finally, there are works within *Chinarians* that I label specifically as reenactments, such as a series of photographic stills from *Tracing Chinaria*, a historical film based on the Chinarians. I traveled to Lethbridge, Alberta and surrounding areas such as Milk River and Diamond City to utilize the local landscapes as "film sets" and as a stand-in for Central Asia, following a tradition of movies shot with substitute locations. The project references Western and Eastern (Eastern-Westerns), among other filmic histories, as well as the inter-cultural histories of the West. These images are presented as reenactments and in a sense they are; the costume design and poses of the models were influenced and even appropriated from movies such as *Mongol*; *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; *The Oil, the Baby and the Transylvanians*.



Fig. 7: *Tracing Chinaria*, 1998. VHS Cover. L.A. Pictures Home Video.



Fig. 8 & 9: *Tracing Chinaria*, 1998. Photographic Film Stills. Historical drama produced by Margaret Heinrich. Directed by Gabor Elizalde.

My work borrows from the practice of reenactment by simulating an ethnographic perspective. In an effort to challenge ethnographic authority in representation, I am strategically inserting a fiction into supposedly authoritative presentations.

Sputnik

Technological developments, particularly in regards to photography, film and the Internet have influenced the way that the past can be represented. Notions of truthful history, and what is accepted as historical evidence, are constantly being negotiated, encouraging digital manipulation as one strategy of artistic reenactments (Kubicki par. 1) The use of reenactment is well illustrated within the work of Joan Fontcuberta, an artist whose practice utilizes photographic fiction as both a means to question the truth in photography as well as to re-invent history.



Fig. 10: Joan Fontcuberta. *Imatge manipulada, tal com va ser publicada a l'enciclopedia Rumb a les estrelles, 1997. Dimensions not available.*

In the project, *Sputnik*, 1997, Fontcuberta intertwines fiction with history by staging the recent discovery of a major cover-up by the Soviet authorities—the fictional disappearance a cosmonaut named Ivan Istochnikov. It was supposedly discovered by a journalist that Istochnikov was a cosmonaut who mysteriously vanished from the Soyuz 2 space shuttle. The incident and Istochnikov's existence were written out of history by the Soviet authorities. In light of the space race between U.S. and U.S.S.R., and in the aftermath of the Soyuz 1 disaster, the authorities did not want to admit to another technical misadventure.

Fontcuberta researched and borrowed visual methods of presenting from space museums and Disneyworld space displays in order to create a convincing installation for *Sputnik*. Digital manipulations, restaging, and creation/appropriation of artifacts served to insert his fabricated story into knowledge forms (Fontcuberta 2007).



Fig. 11: Joan Fontcuberta. *Sputnik*, 1997. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at David Winton Bell Gallery, 2001.

The project was first exhibited in 1997 at the Foundation of Art and Technology, Madrid in 2001. *Sputnik* was later exhibited as part of “False Witness” at the David Winton Bell Gallery as an installation that included artifacts, fabricated press cuttings, staged and digitally altered photographs, vitrines with charts, uniforms, and spacecraft models. In addition, Fontcuberta published a book entitled *Sputnik*—a faux scientific text featuring images of the artifacts and installation. His fabricated conspiracy has been featured in magazines, TV and on the Internet.

The artist stated that “One of the strategies is . . . to overwhelm the viewer with documents . . . that seem very serious but nobody is able to understand” (Fontcuberta 2007). His authoritative presentation, as well as large volume of documents, such as charts, provides a convincing display, which allows him to play with humour and fakery. In one of Fontcuberta’s photographic documents, the artist demonstrates the illusion of photographic truth by capturing an image of a flying potato as a stand-in for an asteroid. In addition, selected space images were photographed in his kitchen (Fontcuberta 2007).

In the same vein, the photo documents of Chinarian relics also challenge the notion of the photograph as historical proof. “The role of the historian and the notion of what constitutes historical evidence have become more unstable in recent decades, particularly with digital imaging technology” (Kubicki par. 1). Historical evidence performs a significant role in establishing historical knowledge. However, in this digital age, what is accepted as proof can be questionable as photographic documentation can be doctored. Ancient artifacts can be constructed with new technologies, as is the case in this project. I wanted to address the confusion of what we perceive as history, and therefore what we identify as cultural proof.



Fig. 12: *Chinarian Arrowheads*, 400 - 1300 A.D. Discovered by archaeologist Kari Ellen Fujimara. Photograph © UBC Museum of Anthropology. From the collection of UBC Museum of Anthropology.

The arrowheads are crafted with Sculpey, photographed and then synthesized in Photoshop with a picture of ancient arrowheads that I found on the Internet. The colors of the arrowhead come from a dream that I had many years ago of discovering ancient small red objects in the red shale of the Lethbridge coulees. Joseph Campbell has noted the connection between myths and dreams in his statement: “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (Campbell 48).



Fig. 13: *Tongwancheng Petroglyph*. Image courtesy of Archeologist Gade Schulman.

The Chinarian petroglyph is based on ancient ligature found on Pilis Mountain of Hungary. I distorted and imposed the ligature with a photograph I took of a hoodoo from Writing-on-Stone Park in Southern Alberta, two hours away from my hometown. Like Pilis Mountain, Writing-on-Stone has its own history of petroglyphs and pictographs from the Blackfoot people, who considered the location a sacred landscape. A related image is the Photoshopped construction of a cave where Chinarians once resided. Once again, I utilized the Southern Alberta hoodoos in place of Central Asia. The cave is a digital synthesis of several images of caves found on the Internet.



Fig. 14: *Caves of Tongwancheng*. Photograph courtesy of Shinichi Barnum. Collection of the University of Győr, Department of Archaeology.

The recent discovery of Chinarian relics inside the caves of Tongwancheng has led to much speculation on the origin of the Chinarians. To date Tongwancheng, also known as Chinaria, is one of the few documented sites of Chinarian long-term dwelling. Previously the Chinarians were identified as primarily nomadic. Other relics were found scattered throughout the plains.

However, with the volume of excavated artifacts from one location, the discovery provides vital information for the study of the Chinarians, who have, to date, remained a mystery to ethnographers and archaeologists because of the lack of adequate historical material and evidence relating to their culture. (Rouchomovski par 3)

Throughout much of *Chinarians*, Southern Alberta makes a reoccurring appearance as the plains of the Chinarian people, and as a pragmatic reference to my

personal origins. The reenactment images that I discussed above were purposefully shot in Southern Alberta as the stand-in for Central Asia, playing on the similarities of the geographies and landscapes. I wanted to pass off the Southern Alberta as Central Asia as well as reference the use of stand-ins within the history of filmic representations of culture and landscapes.

CONCLUSION

The idea of nation is often based on naturalised myths of racial or cultural origin.

(Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 137)

Chinarians engages in mythopoeia that investigates hybridity through a constructed myth of unknown origin. Identity and perception are influenced by histories that are built on multiple perspectives and interests. *Chinarians* is concerned with the production of knowledge that challenges singular versions of truth and history. *Chinarians* utilizes myth and history to situate the nomadic Eurasian culture, and draws from ethnography and reenactment in order to physically and visually manifest the project. In this paper, I explored methods of representation specific to each methodology. These approaches are exemplified in the works of artists such as Larissa Lai, who employs speculative fiction to contemplate alternative myths of origins and to create new myths, Brian Jungen, who draws from and challenges ethnography, and Joan Fontcuberta, who utilizes reenactment in disguise as a mysterious hidden history.

Chinarians is in the genre of these works that illustrate how artists and writers use history, myth, ethnography and reenactment to re-invent the past.





Fig. 15,16 & 17: *Tracing Chinaria*, 2011. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Charles H. Scott Gallery, 2011. Image courtesy of Suzie Wu. From the collection of Lana Gabor.

NOTES

1. Fig. 3 & 4: These two stereographs were altered and adapted from Rupprecht Mayer's photographs *White City Tongwancheng*, 2008 and *In the Ruins of the White City*, 2008.

The images are used with permission of the photographer.

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APPENDIX I

Timeline for the History of the Chinarians

- 200 AD** The Chinarians mysteriously appear around the borders of the Ural Mountains.
- 350 AD** Under the leadership of Lake Same, the Chinarians make their way across the Silk Road and eventually gain control of the settlement of Tongwancheng.
- 1250 AD** The mysterious and sudden desertion of Tongwancheng.
- 1251 AD** Jin dynasty records tell of Chinarian migration on the Eurasian Steppes led by the woman warrior Ki Nai.
- 1256 AD** Chinarians, led by Ki Nai, reach the Caspian Sea. At least one group of Chinarian is thought to have crossed the waters.
- 1299 AD** The Chinarians are first mentioned in the West in Marco Polo's tales of his travels throughout Eurasia. The nomads are described as a perseverant people, known for their mounted archery, dancing and celebrations.
- 1800 AD** The little known Chinarians are brought to light on a world scale when what is thought to be Chinarian petroglyph is discovered on the rocks of Asia Minor.
- 1991 AD** Chinarian arrowheads are discovered near the site of Tongwancheng.
- 1993 AD** Caves in Tongwancheng are discovered and are believed to have once housed the Chinarians. Relics are revealed in an onsite archaeological dig and are attributed to the Chinarian people. Amongst the articles are pottery, drinking flasks, unidentified fabric and a headdress.