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Paul Wong and the Question of Refugee Citizenship

In the summer of 1999, four ships carrying Chinese “boat people” arrived on the West Coast of Canada, causing heated debate about refugee status and national belonging. In September 1999, Adrienne Clarkson, of Chinese ethnicity herself and Canada’s most famous refugee, was appointed Governor General, ostensibly indicating the triumph of official multiculturalism. In the wake of these incidents, Vancouver-based video artist Paul Wong was commissioned by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, a state-funded agency, to make a series of television ads which he titled *Refugee Class of 2000*. In them, Wong brings the viewer face to face with young refugees living in Vancouver while exhuming the history of racism and exclusion in Canada. This paper examines the subtle ways in which Wong negotiates the complex balancing act between complicity and critique in dealing with issues of national belonging, state-sponsored multiculturalism, racism, and identity politics in *Refugee Class*. It explores the techniques he uses to build a seemingly paradoxical identity of “refugee citizenship” as a challenge to national-legal citizenship, on the one hand, and to refugee statelessness, on the other. Working against notions of the refugee as not “human” and thus ineligible for rights, Wong seeks to humanize the refugee subject into citizenship by providing her with a site for claiming voice, a counter-history, and a representative “head of state.”