

**NEITHER THIS NOR THAT: THE HYPHENATED  
EXISTENCE OF CHINESE CHILDREN GROWING UP IN  
TWENTIETH CENTURY NORTH AMERICA**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project takes its evidence from Chinese North American authors who have written about their own lives or those of members of their immigrant community. Authors such as Denise Chong, Wayson Choy, Ben Fong-Torres, Amy Tan, and Yuen-Fong Woon have written autobiographical fictions, fictionalized biographies, and family histories that delve into Chinese communities in Canada and America. These authors have opened windows into the personal worlds of their communities, and this project attempts to analyze what can be seen. Although racism is discussed in all the literature, it remains peripheral to themes of connections to China, family dynamics, generational conflicts, and formal and informal education. Through their historical novels or fictionalized ethnographies they attempt to understand their families and cultural history, to come to terms with their hyphenated existence, and to assuage their existential angst at being viewed as neither 'this nor that,' neither 'truly' Chinese, nor 'truly' Canadian.

*To my parents, Bob and Judy Byrne...*

*who have supported all my eclectic educational endeavours.*

*And to Ray, my amazing husband...*

*who fully understands and supports my compulsion to*

*explore...*

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## Introduction

Growing up at any time, in any culture, can be a challenging and confusing process but it can seem overwhelming to do so while bridging conflicting cultures. When familial ethnic values constantly clash with the mainstream culture, finding a balance between parental expectations and societal norms can be a daunting prospect. A number of contemporary Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian authors, such as Denise Chong, Wayson Choy, Ben Fong-Torres, Amy Tan, and Yuen-Fong Woon, have explored their cultural heritage, family life, and ethnicity, growing up as the “other” in North America. Through their autobiographical fictions, fictionalized biographies, family histories, and histories with personal references, these authors struggle with, and often reject, the concept of a hyphenated identity. Surprisingly, while they discuss some racist governmental policies and isolated personal racist incidents in North America, racism is not the central struggle around which their stories develop. There was an awareness of the racism by the characters in their stories, but it is only discussed peripherally. It remains a constant backdrop within their stories, visible and relevant, but not central. Instead, the struggles these authors depict focus almost entirely around their families and relationships. Specifically, these authors recount major tensions between the generations, between grandparents, parents, and children. Although the issue of parents and



the power structure within a family could be viewed as central in most children's lives, it is telling that these authors have given so much attention to generational conflict. These were not children isolated from the racism that existed in mainstream society, nor were they sheltered from life outside the Chinatowns of North America as they all attended the public school system. Yet racism in mainstream society was not the most immediate issue in their lives; generational tension was.

The books created by these authors offer a wide range of life experiences and perspectives so the reader is able to attain depth of understanding of Chinese family life in North America in the twentieth century. Obviously, a historical novel or fictionalized ethnography, like all historical sources, must be used discerningly. One must glean the history by analyzing the family stories and events, always mindful that the author's personal "baggage" of emotion and bias affects her or his account. When the author feels so personally connected to the events and situations she/he reports, it is almost inevitable that some sort of filtering will occur as pivotal family moments are recounted. Moreover, because these stories are personal and come from memory, corroborating documentation is generally lacking in some cases; the authors rely heavily on oral history and family stories. This is not necessarily problematic, for oral history can be a rich source of information; however, each family creates its own mythology and culture, and this must be taken into account. As well, autobiographical or biographical fiction must always balance creative purpose with historical event. The positive aspect of this is that such history offers the

read a richer and more personal understanding of the lives and history because the story “comes alive.” Moreover, the books chosen for this study vary in locales, timelines, and approaches; hence, the reader is able to appreciate the experience holistically and obtain a real sense of living at this time, within two cultures.

A perfect illustration of this is Wayson Choy, who is an English professor at the Humber College in Toronto. He writes a very personal story in *The Jade Peony* that amalgamates many of his family experiences growing up in Vancouver. His sense of humour allows him to recount rich, honest, and poignant childhood stories. His writing style enables the reader to readily grasp the nuances of his family interactions as a Chinese child growing up in Canada before and during World War II. Choy’s Chinatown was one stunted by the restrictive Chinese Exclusion Act, full of older bachelors who seemed to live in limbo, stranded by poverty, their opportunities limited by blatant racism and hostility. Choy’s other novel analyzed here, *Paper Shadows*, was written as a consequence of the success of *The Jade Peony*. Choy received much publicity and many accolades for his first novel. In fact, it was subsequent to a radio interview about his novel that he found out from a listener of the show that he was adopted. As a result, Choy began to investigate his family background even further by interviewing family and community members. The outcome of his research was *Paper Shadows*, which Choy himself calls a “memoir” and a “work

of creative non-fiction.”<sup>1</sup> This book, too, deals with a child growing up poor but not in poverty, in Vancouver, during and after World War II.

Similarly, Denise Chong wrote *The Concubine's Children* for herself and her family, delving into her family's life in China, describing their impoverished lives in the Chinatowns of Vancouver and Nanaimo, and exploring the connections their family maintained with China. Unlike Choy's, however, Chong's book is more epic in its timeline, and spans from the 1920s, when her Grandmother lived in China, to 1989, after Chong's last trip back to her ancestral homeland. Because Chong recounts such a long history, we are able to see the transitions of the Chinese community as it evolved. The Chinese community struggled in the early twentieth century, fraught with social issues. Gambling, opium dens, and prostitution plagued a disproportionately bachelor society in the Chinatowns in Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo. Only after World War II and the change in immigration policies in the 1960s did the Chinese community reinvigorate itself and spill out from the confines of the Chinatowns. An economist by training and a journalist by profession, Chong writes this history to discover her past and to reconnect with her heritage. In fact, she refers to her novel as a “family project,” and much of her information comes from family interviews from people in Canada and China, as well as surviving photographs, documents, and letters. As Chong writes, “I stood at the wicket where Chan Sam once bought passage to China; I sat at the counter at the B.C. Royal Cafe, where May-ying once worked; I climbed the dark staircases of the rooming houses

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<sup>1</sup> Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (Toronto: Viking, 1999), author's note.

where my mother once lived."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, *The Concubine's Children* is a very personal historical fiction.

Like Choy and Chong, Ben Fong-Torres also writes about himself and his family in *The Rice Room*, but his personal reminiscences illustrate the Chinese-American experience on the West Coast of the United States, in the almost exclusively post World War II era. He too searches to understand his past, and his place in the Chinese community. The main thrust of Fong-Torres' book is an explanation of his immersion into American popular culture during his teenage years in the 1950s and 1960s. To be sure, this focus is in part due to his love of American music and his profession as a radio rock deejay and journalist. In recounting his experiences, Fong-Torres tries to find the balance between his Chinese family's expectations, and success within mainstream society in the 1970s and 1980s. The Chinese history we discover here is quite distinct from Choy, and for the most part, from Chong. Fong-Torres's youth was rocked by the ripple effect of the civil rights movement, affected by the turbulent clashes between youth and authority that were occurring all over America, and influenced by musicians who used music as a form of rebellion; he developed in this age of experimentation and individualism. His Chinese community is evolving, with a new wave of Chinese immigrants arriving in the 1970s. The Chinatown of his adulthood is now more concerned with Chinese youth gangs than Anti-Chinese League mobs, and his world is more mobile, his restrictions lessened by time and acculturation.

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<sup>2</sup> Denise Chong, *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* (Toronto: Viking, 1994), x.

An American perspective is also offered by Amy Tan, the author of *The Joy Luck Club*. She outlines a Chinese-American generational theme in the relationships between four mothers who grew up in China in the early 1900s, and their Chinese-American daughters who grew up in California after World War II. Tan is a professional writer, and though her personal experiences provide the basis of her story, her book is less about herself, and is more of a distanced literary creation of emotions and senses. Although Tan's book delves into the history of these Chinese mothers and the Chinese community, the real story in *The Joy Luck Club* is about the generational relationships between mothers and daughters, and how a lack of cultural understanding simultaneously strains and strengthens their bonds. Like Fong-Torres, Tan's younger characters are immersed in American culture and are looking into the Chinese community from the outside.

Conversely, Yuen-Fong Woon, an associate-professor at the University of Victoria in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies, focuses less on the North American cultural influence on Chinese children and more on the strength of the cultural and familial ties between those who moved to Vancouver, and those who remained in South China. Because of this, Woon's book highlights the changing cultural values of the Chinese family in China as they cope with war, Communism, and the spacial distance between their family members in China and those in Canada. Her historical, fictionalized ethnography, *The Excluded Wife*, investigates the lasting connection between Guangzhou and Vancouver in the years from 1929 to 1987. As her bibliography shows, her

sources are varied, and range from primary documents and interviews, to secondary research books, and fictional works, including those from Denise Chong and Wayson Choy.

Lastly, included in this list of Chinese-American or Chinese-Canadian books that have appeared in the last twenty years, is Anthony B. Chan's *Gold Mountain*. Although his work is largely a conventional history, it is relevant as a source in this study. Chan himself is a product of the awakening of Chinese-Canadian authors that occurred in the 1970s and in sections of his book he highlights the work of other contemporary Chinese-Canadian writers. Chan's book, published in 1983, was motivated by his reflection that while in China, he was considered Canadian, but in Canada and the United States, he was considered Chinese.<sup>3</sup> The result was *Gold Mountain*, a detailed empirical study of the Chinese in Canada from the eighteenth century to the early 1980s.

Chan spent almost ten years searching through primary and secondary sources, as well as his own family history, to try to offer a deeper understanding of what it is like to live in Canadian culture with this contradiction. For example, he looks into his own family history and recounts a wedding of the son of his Grandmother, Koo Shee, and Grandfather, Chan Dun; the Chan clan was a prominent business family in Victoria's early twentieth century Chinatown. In exploring this important event and others like it, readers are able to understand the customs and dynamics of Chan's family in that era; this provides context for his conventional work.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983), 8.

According to Chan, Choy, Chong, Fong-Torres, Tan, and Woon, conflicts were numerous between the generations that were born in China and the children who were raised in Canada. Tensions were often palpable within their homes and were always an undercurrent in their relations with elders. All the authors explore these tensions and their books have common themes. Deep-seated issues emerged in their families because of fundamental disagreements about traditional values, especially when dealing with gender and family expectations. Conflicts also arose because of expectations about formal and informal education. Compounding these two issues was the fact that a severe lack of communication hampered the development of an understanding between the generations. Secrets were kept, and when the generations wanted to express themselves, misunderstandings abounded and communication barriers resulted in a pervasive lack of understanding and an emotional distance between the generations.

## History of Chinese Immigration to North America

Clearly, generational conflicts often arose between those who were raised in China and the children who were raised in North America. In order to understand the underlying issues between the generations, it is important to examine the history of the Chinese immigrants who came to North America in the early twentieth century. *The Excluded Wife*, by Yuen-Fong Woon, *The Concubine's Children*, by Denise Chong, and *Gold Mountain*, by Anthony B. Chan, provide readers with a starting point in understanding how connected the rural areas in southern China were to Canada and the western United States, and how older generations could feel more connected with their homeland than their adopted home in North America. Most of the immigrants who came to North America before World War II were poor illiterates from southern China, specifically from the province of Guangdong, also known as Guangzhou or Kwong-Tung.<sup>4</sup> As Woon's novel details, Chinese men took the enormous risk of travelling to North America and did so for a number of reasons: poverty, repeated droughts, famine, civil wars, and the hope of a better life, were but a few. Obviously, the Chinese who took the risk and emigrated to North America arrived at the ports with their traditional customs, beliefs, and values. And, naturally, the newly arrived immigrants held a set of values and customs divergent from the

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<sup>4</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 182.



mainstream culture of another country. What is striking, though, is that the majority of these Chinese immigrants did not assimilate over time in the pattern of most other North American immigrant groups. As a result, generational tensions did not necessarily ease with time, as some of the older Chinese did not assimilate at all, or even come to accept or understand the values and customs of the dominant society.

Cultural blending and values assimilation did not occur in the Chinese community in early twentieth century North America for a variety of reasons. First and foremost was the reaction of mainstream culture to the Chinese emigrants who were almost exclusively male. The Chinese were viewed by other North Americans as temporary sojourners who came for the riches of the gold rushes, or were needed as cheap labour to build the railways and work in the primary industries during the periods of labour shortages. In other words, they were viewed as temporarily valuable and ultimately disposable. Once a larger number of white settlers moved to the western coast of North America in the early twentieth century, it was expected, and sometimes demanded by politicians and labour groups that Chinese immigrants would return home to China. Won Alexander Cumyow, the first Canadian born Chinese man, summed up this feeling for the 1902 Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration. "A large portion of them (Chinese men) would bring their families here, were it not for the unfriendly reception they got here during recent years which creates an unsettled feeling."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 50.

Clearly, Chinese assimilation was not desired and therefore was not encouraged. In fact, as Kay Anderson so effectively argues in her book, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*, Chinese immigrants in North America were limited in their contact with mainstream culture by spacial and racial boundaries. Anderson cites numerous cases where city medical officials, health inspectors, and municipal authorities targeted the Chinese community. They attempted to limit the Chinese spatially through the use of inspections, litigation, and sometimes destruction of property.<sup>6</sup> Nayan Shah makes a similar argument in *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*, as he argues that the dominant culture in the United States believed the Chinese immigrants were an unsanitary people who posed a health threat, and had hereditary vices.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Chinatowns were created by the dominant culture to keep the Chinese contained in one area; they were not simply communities created by the Chinese for comfort and convenience. Anderson contends "...for 100 years, the screen through which Vancouver's Chinese community was filtered to Europeans was subtly revised and recycled, not radically transcended. Hence, Chinatowns were formed as much to serve the needs of those living outside the community as those residents living within it."<sup>8</sup>

Not welcome in many areas of any town, the Chinese had little opportunity to learn about, let alone accept, a new way of living. Moreover, many of the

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<sup>6</sup> Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875 – 1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991), 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Contagious Divides*, 10 and 53.

<sup>8</sup> *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 247.

Chinese immigrants themselves viewed their stay in North America as temporary. Many of these men came to *Gum Sahn*, or Gold Mountain, to make enough money to be able to buy *mau tin*, land, and build a *yeung-lau*, foreign mansion, back in their villages, so they could return to China permanently and support their families through farming. Chan Sam, a Chinese labourer in Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, demonstrates a typical attitude; he cared little about Canada in the 1930s:

Chan Sam, who never saw himself joining the larger white society, had little interest in the newspapers' campaigns for equal access to unemployment relief and the welfare for whites and Chinese in Canada, or for other rights due them as residents and citizens. The future that preoccupied Chan Sam was China's; he cared only about developments at home that might affect his house, his *mau tin* and his kin left behind.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the Chinese villagers in *The Excluded Wife* referred to all these men as *kam-shaan haak*, or *Gold Mountain guests*. Even though many of these men never returned to China, they would always be referred to by their Chinese kin as "guests" of North America, albeit unwelcome ones.

Why would these Chinese immigrants try to assimilate into a society that by and large rejected them, especially when they were not planning on staying? As Chinese sojourner and Nanaimo market gardener Sing Cheung Yung stated simply to a Canadian commission on Chinese immigration, he would not send for his family, even if he could afford to. Why? "...the people in this country talk so

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<sup>9</sup> *Concubine's Children*, 61.

much against the Chinese that I don't care to bring them here."<sup>10</sup> In 1919 one newly arrived Chinese immigrant carved his thoughts in his Victoria immigration cell. The sense of frustration and unfairness is palpable, even after translation:

I have always yearned to go to Gold Mountain.  
 But instead it is hell, full of hardships. I was  
 Detained in a prison and tears rolled down my  
 cheeks.  
 My wife at home is longing for my letter,  
 Who can foretell when I will be able to return  
 home?  
 I cannot sleep because my heart is filled with  
 hate. When I think of the foreign barbarians,  
 my anger will rise sky high. They put me in jail  
 and make me suffer this misery. I moan until  
 the early dawn,  
 But who will console me here?<sup>11</sup>

In 1919, both men and women who landed at the ports in North America knew immediately they were not wanted due to their "welcome," and ten years later, the "welcome" was still comparable. In Canada, as Wayson Choy recounts in *Paper Shadows*, it was a deliberate message for his mother, arriving in Victoria in the 1930s.

"Canada no want you," Dai Yee said, matter-of-factly, remembering both her and Mother's welcome-to-Canada three-week confinement together in the "Pig House" customs building in Victoria. "Canada say, 'Go home, chinky Chinaman!'" Mother tapped my head, the better for me to remember. "You worry about being Chinese."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Timothy J. Stanley, "White Supremacy, Chinese Schooling and School Segregation in Victoria: The Case of the Chinese Students' Strike, 1922 – 1923," *Historical Studies in Education* 2 (1990), 298.

<sup>11</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 187. Also found in David Chuen-Lai, "A 'Prison' for Chinese Immigrants," pp. 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 31.

Ben Fong-Torres recounts that his mother had much the same experience arriving in San Francisco in 1940. On Angel Island every Chinese immigrant was held, examined, and interrogated repeatedly, and could possibly be kept for two or three years. Under the restrictive immigration laws, a Chinese immigrant at Angel Island could be sent back at any time to China if his/her story was doubted.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, Chinese immigrants who sojourned in North America were not encouraged to assimilate, and some had no desire to do so simply because they had no intention of staying. Instead, many Chinese men felt more closely connected with their homeland, villages, and relatives thousands of miles away than they did with the communities in which they lived in North America. As Yuen-Fong Woon explicitly states in the preface of *The Excluded Wife*, one theme of her book is to demonstrate:

...how greatly affected the Chinese families and Chinese community in Canada have been by external forces such as the international status of China and diplomatic relations between China and Canada, as well as by events and politics within both China and Canada....these forces influenced the identity and images of Chinese-Canadians, the inter-generational dynamics of their families, and the socioeconomic structure, cultural life, and personal relations within their community.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, of course there would be generational issues between children who were adapting to mainstream societal norms, and the older family members who had little or no concept of them because their heads and hearts remained in their homeland.

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Fong-Torres, *The Rice Room: Growing up Chinese-American: From Number Two Son to Rock 'n Roll* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 20.

<sup>14</sup> Yuen-Fong Woon, *The Excluded Wife* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), ix.

Naturally, the cultural environment was not monolithic for the Chinese communities in North America and it evolved over the course of the twentieth century in several key stages. As mentioned previously, the first wave of male Chinese sojourners arrived in North America to capitalize on the 1848 gold rush in California, and then many migrated north to the gold rushes in British Columbia, which began in 1858. After the immigrant waves for the gold rushes subsided, Chinese men were solicited from South China to work protracted stints in the primary industries such as logging, fishing, and coal mining, and on the railway. Although some early records describe the Chinese workers as “enduring” and “industrious,” this attitude quickly changed.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1800s and in the early 1900s anti-Chinese sentiment was strong as the Chinese men were no longer needed; the labour shortage had subsided due to an influx of European immigration, and the Chinese workers’ “willingness” to work for lower wages made them unwanted competition in the workforce. The overwhelmingly male Chinese workforce struggled to find jobs in the undesirable industries such as laundries, hotels, restaurants, and domestic service, which were characterized by poor working conditions, low pay, and long hours.<sup>16</sup>

After an increasingly expensive head tax failed to keep out the Chinese men, exclusion acts in the United States (1882), and Canada (1923) were enacted.<sup>17</sup> Previously, Chinese immigrants were almost exclusively male

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<sup>15</sup> Harry Con, Ronald J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg and William E. Willmott, *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 17.

<sup>16</sup> *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, 82 – 83.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 211.

sojourners, as only rich business people could afford the passage, occasionally fake papers, and always prohibitive head tax costs to bring over wives and other female family members. Hence, until World War II, Chinatowns across North America were mainly filled with aging bachelors, and maintained a slow-growing population due to the limited number of families. It is in this context, isolated and truncated, that the first wave of immigrants lived, and it is no wonder that the older generations clung to the old ways and their old homeland.

Only after World War II did immigration become a possibility in a limited fashion for the Chinese community, so that another wave of immigrants, albeit a small one, came to North America, and more families were reunited and created. Not until major immigration policy changes occurred after the civil rights movement in the 1960s in America and with the advent of official multiculturalism in Canada did another large wave of Chinese immigrants arrive, after the Exclusion Acts were repealed in both countries. It is then that the Chinese communities metamorphosized, and a new set of issues emerged as value systems once again clashed. The authors examined in this paper lived through this time, when a major rift developed in the Chinese community between North American born Chinese, or *tusheng huayi*, and the new immigrants that arrived in the 1960s and 1970s. Wing Chung Ng also analyzes this conflict in his work, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945–1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power*. He discusses the difficulties of varying value systems between the *tusheng huayi* and the new immigrants, and highlights the obstacles in negotiating between two

identities and two worlds, the Chinese and the Western.<sup>18</sup> A cultural awakening occurred in the Chinese community at this time due to the influx of new Chinese immigrants, a self-conscious angst and sometimes painful awareness that the North American-born Chinese knew little about their own heritage and the feeling that they were somehow “less than” because of it. It is out of this community conflict and growth that a new group of authors emerges, with a common goal of examination and exploration of their place in the Chinese community and within their own families. In doing so, they attempt to bridge the gap that exists between the older generations and themselves.

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<sup>18</sup> Wing Chung Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 40.



## Traditional Views and Family Expectations

Of all the books reviewed in this essay, it is Woon's that is most valuable to readers who want to understand the society and history which molded the thinking of the older generations. *The Excluded Wife* focuses primarily on the Toi-Shaan County in southern China, and highlights the life, traditions, and obligations of a fictional woman named Sau-Ping. At age fourteen, without her consent, she was married to Yik-Man, a *Gold Mountain guest* ten years her senior. Shortly after their marriage, her husband returned to Vancouver to work, and she struggled for years as a grass widow, or a wife with a husband in North America. This book poignantly illustrates the hardships of these grass widows as their life choices were limited in their communities by their poverty and gender, and they were restricted from joining their husbands in Canada due to racist legislation and prohibitive costs. The head taxes in Canada, starting at fifty dollars in 1885 and increasing to five hundred dollars by 1903, as well as the Exclusion Act of 1923 which stymied all Chinese immigration, ensured that many of these wives would never move to Canada to be with their husbands. Similar prohibitive legislation was created in the United States with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Immigration Act of 1924.<sup>19</sup> In Canada, even when money was scraped together to bring over a relative before the 1920s, or after the Chinese Communist stranglehold was lessened in the 1950s, it was often a

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<sup>19</sup> *The Rice Room*, 24.

male that would have the opportunity to emigrate. For instance, in *The Excluded Wife*, Sau-Ping was angry when her son was summoned to Vancouver in the 1950s, instead of herself and her daughter:

But what of the daughters?...It was true that Fei-Yin was only a girl, and in the past girls were usually not sponsored overseas, but now times were different, and the Exclusion Act had been repealed, which meant Yik-Man could now sponsor everybody in his family. Surely Fei-Yin and Sau-Ping could be as helpful in the restaurant kitchen as Kin-Pong! But the men only looked to men and to boys.<sup>20</sup>

Traditionally, only a male relative could work respectably outside the home unless it was in the fields, and he could earn more money for the family than the wife could, and was therefore viewed as more “valuable.” Before World War II Chinese waitresses in Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo could make high wages, but there was a price, as May-ying discovered in *The Concubine’s Children*. Women working in tea houses were considered to be “available.” “However morally strict Chan Sam or May-ying were, the rest of Chinatown would judge her as no better than her own people, the circle of tea house waitresses.”<sup>21</sup> Sadly, working in that profession tended to create a self-fulfilling prophesy, as May-ying herself found out.

Without a doubt, gender expectations further exacerbated the conflicts between the generations here in North America. Traditionally in China females were considered to be a burden whereas males were valued members in the family. For example, in *The Excluded Wife*, in 1934, when the midwife announced that the arrival of Sau-Ping’s firstborn was a girl, Sau-Ping was

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<sup>20</sup> *The Excluded Wife*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> *The Concubine’s Children*, 29.

distraught because she felt such pressure to bear a son. “How can it be a girl?’ she cried.”<sup>22</sup> Worse yet, because Sau-Ping did not bear a boy, and Yik-Man had already returned to Canada, Sau-Ping’s mother-in-law, without consulting her, decided to adopt a boy for the daughter-in-law to carry on the family name and ensure the family inheritance. Sau-Ping’s reaction was immediate. “She [Sau-Ping] was nothing, she was worthless, she was to blame.”<sup>23</sup> This was because daughters could not ensure inheritance rights. They were only considered temporary members of their biological families. Once married, they often moved to another village to live with their in-laws, and sometimes had little contact with their biological parents afterwards, as was the case with Sau-Ping and her sister. A woman was always tied by the “three bonds” according to Confucianism: the father, the husband, and the son.<sup>24</sup> Denise Chong writes of much the same sentiment in her family history, *The Concubine’s Children*. She says of May-ying, who was born in 1907 and became a concubine of a *Gold Mountain* guest:

No one is glad when a daughter is born; a girl is “someone else’s,” a mouth to feed until she marries and goes to live in another household. Sons, on the other hand, live at home even after they are married. May-ying’s double curse was to be a girl born into a poor family, although not so poor that they drowned or abandoned her at birth.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, May-ying was so disappointed that she bore Hing, a girl, in the 1930s in Canada, that she gave Hing a male haircut, dressed her as a boy and stated, “I’m going to change you into a boy!”<sup>26</sup> Males, clearly, were

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<sup>22</sup> *The Excluded Wife*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> *The Excluded Wife*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> *The Concubine’s Children*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *The Concubine’s Children*, 91.

cherished. They often maintained a lifelong connection with their parents, as Chong mentions. Moreover, they also secured family inheritance rights, contributed more directly to the family income, and financially looked after older family members. The eldest son, in particular, was valued above all others because he was to ensure that funeral rites were properly carried out and the ancestral graves were properly cared for.

These traditional views about females caused tension in Chinese families in China. Yuen-Fong Woon illustrates this in her story of Sau-Ping. For example, in the 1930s, Sau-Ping was upset when her mother-in-law bought her adopted grandson gifts, because her mother-in-law “would never think to purchase [toys and candy] for her flesh-and-blood granddaughter, Fei-Yin. Sau-Ping had expected such behaviour, for of course boys were more valuable than girls...”<sup>27</sup> These attitudes, which were hurtful for a woman still living in China, caused much more discord in North American homes of the Chinese-Canadians and Chinese-Americans as children grew up understanding that these attitudes were not overt in mainstream society. In *The Jade Peony*, by Wayson Choy, Jook-Liang, a five year old girl, often felt that she did not receive the same amount of attention her brothers did growing up in Vancouver’s Chinatown in the 1930s. She was often criticized by her *Poh-Poh*, or grandmother, for being female. “A girl-child is *mo yung* – useless, *Poh-Poh* grunted, shifting down her other knee to give me, as always, reluctantly, my measure of attention.”<sup>28</sup> Jook-

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<sup>27</sup> *The Excluded Wife*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Wayson Choy, *The Jade Peony* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995), 32.

Liang did not take kindly to this point of view, and rebelled in small ways, such as singing over her *Poh-Poh's* yelling.<sup>29</sup>

Female Asian children growing up in North America often rejected the traditional role of women, exacerbating familial friction. Many of the females born or raised in Canada found their own husbands, and some chose husbands who were not Chinese. This was not an option in the villages in China, and the older generations voiced their disapproval of their daughters and grand-daughters in North America. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan discusses this tension in several parts of her book. Tan explores the relationships between the mothers who were raised with traditional Chinese values in China, and the daughters who grew up with these values in North America. For example, Lindo Jong, one of the mothers born and raised in China, reminisced about her own marriage, commenting, "...even if I had known I was getting such a bad husband, I had no choice, now or later. That was how backward families in the country were."<sup>30</sup> Lindo may not have agreed with this custom, but this does not mean she accepted the romantic choices her daughter made without family input. Waverly, her daughter, said of her first husband:

By the time my mother had had her say about him, I saw his brain had shrunk from laziness, so that now it was good only for thinking up excuses. He chased golf and tennis balls to run away from family responsibilities. His eye wandered up and down other girls' legs, so he didn't know how to drive straight home anymore....It wasn't until after we separated...that I wondered if perhaps my mother had poisoned my marriage.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 44 – 45.

<sup>31</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 192.

Because of her mother's strong opinions about her daughter's relationships, Waverly agonized about telling her mother she was getting married again as she was terrified. "I'd never known love so pure, and I was afraid that it would become sullied by my mother."<sup>32</sup> Waverly refused to capitulate to her mother's wishes, but still dreaded the conflict that it was bound to create.

Others did not defy their parents openly; instead, they chose to live with a dual persona, and kept separate the "Chinese life" from the "North American life." Meiying, a teenage girl in the 1940s in *The Jade Peony*, is one such example. She was described in the novel as an ideal daughter. "Everyone liked Meiying. Father even pointed her out as someone my sister Liang should emulate....she did so many things so well."<sup>33</sup> She never talked back, always got good grades, silently endured the yelling of her adopted mother, and completed whatever chores were expected of her. Yet, she covertly rebelled. While babysitting Sek-Lung, she regularly snuck to the forbidden Japanese part of town to see her secret Japanese boyfriend. Sek-Lung was amazed. "I could see Father's outrage if he ever found out, and I shuddered to imagine how horrified Stepmother would be: *No, no, not Meiying, not the perfect one!*"<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, this rebellion cost Meiying her life, as she chose to attempt a fatal self-conducted abortion rather than let the Chinese community discover that she had become pregnant out of wedlock by her Japanese boyfriend.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 194.

<sup>33</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 206.

<sup>34</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 214.

Female children railed against the sexism within the Chinese family. Many of the young girls realized that mainstream society did not have the tight restrictions on females that Chinese families did, and they resented the fact that more was expected of them within their families. For instance, Jing-Mei Woo, another daughter in *The Joy Luck Club*, resented the pressures put on her by her family while she was growing up in the 1950s. She remembered ignoring her mother who was calling to her. "I didn't budge. And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China....She was the stupid one."<sup>35</sup> When the power struggle exploded, her mother reacted dramatically. "Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"<sup>36</sup> Part of the reason that her mother reacted so strongly was because of the way she herself was raised. Those born in China typically valued the traditional ideas of Confucius. Family members were expected to adhere to the Confucian ideas of loyalty, obedience, filial piety, and obligation. Most Chinese families through custom adhered to a Confucian philosophy which "attached certain duties and patterns of behaviour to particular social roles, and stressed the need of each person to live according to his or her role."<sup>37</sup> Sons and daughters who did not do so brought shame to the family name. Confucius himself is said to have given

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<sup>35</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 152.

<sup>36</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 153.

<sup>37</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 100.

the advice, "Never disobey!" to a prince who complained of his parents' treatment of him.<sup>38</sup>

Jook-Liang, the only sister in *The Jade Peony*, understood these Confucian concepts perfectly. "Grandmother must not lose face; we must not fail in our hospitality. Excellent behaviour on the part of my two brothers and me would signal our family respect and honour the old ways."<sup>39</sup> Waverly Jong in *The Joy Luck Club* understood this as well. When a friend offered her advice about her mother, Waverly responded, "Well, I don't know if it's explicitly stated in the law, but you can't ever tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an accessory to your own murder."<sup>40</sup>

Chong, more so than the other authors, highlights the theme of strict family expectations in *The Concubine's Children*. Hing, the neglected daughter struggling to grow up in Vancouver's Chinatown in the 1940s, strove to meet her mother's expectations. Her mother, embittered by her status as a concubine and forced to work as a tea house waitress, turned to the devastating cycle of drinking and gambling as an escape. These vices were sometimes paid for with prostitution. Even though both of May-ying's children had difficult childhoods, Hing's was even more turbulent because she was female. As a girl, Hing received less attention than her younger adopted brother, and her life was full of chores, corporal punishment, and recriminations, with few loving words or praise. For example, she was abandoned as a teenager for three years when her mother

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<sup>38</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 101

<sup>39</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 191.



followed her boyfriend to Winnipeg, though the mother took Gok-leng, the brother, with her.

...she [Hing] would feel as if she had been left to raise herself and she would wonder what it would be like to have a real home life. She would never know where her mother was until a letter came...Each time one came, Hing replied, as expected, in the language of a good daughter: she wished her mother good health, told her not to worry and said she was studying hard.<sup>41</sup>

In Hing's case, it was not until many years later when she had a family of her own, that she was able to tell her mother how she really felt. "All the years of resentment and near-rebellion had come to the breaking point. She became her mother, wanting to hurl back worse than she got. 'You didn't raise me. I raised myself. You threw me out on the road, left me like a plant, without water or care.'"<sup>42</sup> Instead of admitting that she made mistakes, May-ying attempted to sue her daughter in retaliation. In May-ying's mind, it was never acceptable for a daughter to criticize her mother, in any circumstance.

Besides the Confucian belief in filial piety, many grew up with the 'old Chinese ways' valued Taoist beliefs of minimizing the self, finding balance, maintaining self-control, wanting nothing, and expecting nothing. In other words, events in one's life will unfold according to fate, and one's personal fretting and decision-making have little impact or usefulness in determining an outcome. An-Mei Hsu, another mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, epitomized this ideal. "...I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's

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<sup>41</sup> *The Concubine's Children*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> *The Concubine's Children*, 208.

misery, to eat my own bitterness."<sup>43</sup> One can easily see how these traditional Chinese values contrasted starkly with contemporary North American ideals. North Americans often value independence, youth, fun, freedom, emotional pleasure, free thinking, and opportunism. Canadians and Americans tend to believe they are makers of their own destiny, and fate plays little role in their personal successes or failures. Most North Americans believe they must make their choices carefully, for their own personal decisions dictate their fate. How different the family world of these children must have seemed compared to mainstream society.

Males, too, were not immune to this dichotomy between North American values and the pressure of family expectations, even if they were given more personal freedom and leeway in the family to express themselves. They may have been males, but, as Anthony Chan points out in *Gold Mountain*, unless they were the oldest males in the family, they were still subordinate in the family hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> The younger males in the books surveyed were not oblivious to the tensions within their homes, and they, too, either rebelled, or led a life with a dual existence. For example, Ben Fong-Torres spends much time in his autobiography, *The Rice Room*, discussing how he kept his personal life secret from his parents. He was thirty before he had the courage to introduce his long-time Caucasian girlfriend and fiancée to his parents. Even then he brought an older Chinese liaison with him for support to the meeting between his parents

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<sup>43</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 241.

<sup>44</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 100.

and his fiancée because he "...couldn't face my parents alone with the news."<sup>45</sup> He knew what their reaction would be and he was correct as they were "...devastated, and responded with bitter silence...they would file the event away as yet another tragedy in their lives."<sup>46</sup>

Fong-Torres's and his siblings, Barry, Shirley, Sarah, and Burton, all felt pressure to date Chinese people exclusively. Sarah caused a family crisis when she married a Caucasian man and often Ben did not tell his parents when he dated Caucasian women. During public engagements, such as his sister's wedding, he felt compelled to bring Chinese women for whom he had no romantic interest on dates. He filtered so much of his life when he was around them that they really did not know his true identity.

When I joined *Rolling Stone*, I told them only that I was working at a newspaper in San Francisco that covered music. There was no easy way—and no point, really—to telling them more. My parents tended to judge people on surface appearances. That's how they had treated Shirley's dates; how they responded to various friends of ours; and why Barry and I rarely talked about our dates. When Barry mentioned that he liked Kate, and that she was not Chinese, Mom had told him, "Please, don't. Sarah already upset us so much."<sup>47</sup>

Ben's parents seemed to find this filtering acceptable; it was easier for both generations to avoid these painful conversations about unconventional Chinese aspects of their children's lives. It seemed for Chinese parents to be proud of a child, he/she had to sacrifice a carefree North American lifestyle. For example, Kiam was the firstborn son in *The Jade Peony*, and the weight of that

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<sup>45</sup> *The Rice Room*, 233.

<sup>46</sup> *The Rice Room*, 233.

<sup>47</sup> *The Rice Room*, 176.

title meant that he did not have much of a childhood. "Ever since Kiam had come to Canada, Third Uncle always told him that, as First Son, he had to behave more like a man than a boy...Already, at only ten years old, Kiam was doing odd jobs..."<sup>48</sup> Kiam voiced his own opinions only tentatively, and seldom engaged in any childhood activities. In doing so, he made his father proud.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 98.

## Not Chinese Enough

Besides coping with the tensions caused by traditional values and family expectations, children growing up in Chinese families also struggled with a hyphenated identity. As mentioned above, they were often viewed as less than Chinese within their homes, and only as Chinese outside of them. They struggled to meld these two worlds together, often rejected one or the other, or, as previously mentioned, they developed dual personas to hide aspects of their lives from their parents. The frustration that Chinese children harboured for “the old ways” was surpassed only by the frustration that the older generations felt with their children. Lindo Jong, one of the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, was one of the only parents who grudgingly and reluctantly came to terms with the Americanization process of her daughter. About her daughter she stated, “Inside—she is all American-made....I couldn’t teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother’s mind. How not to show your own thoughts...Why Chinese thinking is best.”<sup>49</sup> And, later, the mother reflected, “I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other.”<sup>50</sup> However, Lindo did not epitomize a traditional viewpoint, as most of the older Chinese parents fought against the

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<sup>49</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 289.

<sup>50</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 304.

Americanization or Canadianization of their children. For example, in *The Excluded Wife*, when Sau-Ping's children became adolescents, culture became an additional barrier during the already turbulent teenage years:

Pauline and Joe grew into teenagers, and Sau-Ping found herself confounded by their Canadian manners and clothes. Pauline, her daughter, was the most difficult to handle, for this hybrid girl had no patience with Chinese customs that commanded women to obey and serve their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. She scolded her sister-in-law, Katherine, for being subservient....Pauline thought it horrible that a woman like Katherine would allow herself to be married to a man who had chosen her from a batch of photographs, and she declared herself to be uninterested in Chinese boys because they were too "short and wimpy."<sup>51</sup>

Pauline rebelled openly against a culture that she found unfair and stifling to females, and Sau-Ping could not understand Pauline's frustration because she understood very little about the mainstream Canadian culture. This mutual frustration is echoed in all the books. When Lena St. Clair's mother was upset with her daughter in *The Joy Luck Club*, she yelled, "Annh! Why do you Americans have only these morbid thoughts in your mind?"<sup>52</sup> It was indicative that her mother yelled "you Americans," as if her daughter were a stranger, a foreigner who would never be understood. Along the same lines, Jook-Liang and her *Poh-Poh* seem to be separated by a lack of mutual understanding. The little girl in *The Jade Peony* could not fathom why her *Poh-Poh*, or grandmother, cared so much about the Japanese invasion into China. "There's no war in Canada," I said. "This is Canada." *Poh-Poh* sighed deeply, gave me a

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<sup>51</sup> *The Excluded Wife*, 254.

<sup>52</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 105.

condescending look. “*You not Canada, Liang,*” she said, majestically, “*you China. Always war in China.*”<sup>53</sup>

Sek-Lung, Jook-Liang’s brother, also understood that the elders felt this way about them. “All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born “neither this nor that,” neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain.”<sup>54</sup> Those born in North America were considered by their elders to be less than Chinese, and like Jook-Liang’s and Sek-Lung’s *Poh-Poh*, they felt that they had to point out this flaw and correct the children so they would be educated on what it meant to be Chinese.

But how could these children avoid absorption of North American culture? As Anthony B. Chan remarks, Chinese children learned little about their heritage in public schooling, and much about the powerful stereotypes of Asians; “Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, Fu Manchu, the Red Scare, Suzy Wong, Madame Butterfly, David Carradine, the little grasshopper, and the sojourner” had an impact on Chinese youths and created widespread cultural alienation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 37.

<sup>54</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 135.

<sup>55</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 189.

## Formal and Informal Education

To counter the influence of the North American culture, the older generations pushed the old Chinese ways on their children at every opportunity, causing resentment, and sometimes pushing their children farther away from their heritage. Ben Fong-Torres comments, for example, that when they would pretend to be Chinese opera heroes with their father, "Beneath the nonsense, our parents had a mission in life: to instill Chinese culture in us."<sup>56</sup> In *Paper Shadows*, Wayson Choy recounts similar experiences while growing up in Vancouver in the 1940s. He often found his *Gung-Gung*, or grandfather, wearisome, because he always tried to teach Wayson lessons on their outings:

"*Nay mo-no doi!*" the old man would say, tapping me on the head. "You no-brain boy!" A *mo-no* was what the elders called a local-born like myself, someone raised in Gold Mountain who was thoughtless and mindless of the Old China traditions. A *mo-no* was Chinese and not-Chinese at the same time, someone doomed to be brainless. *Gung-Gung* tried his best to teach me everything, he told me, so that I wouldn't be *mo-no*.... "You should learn to read," he said. "Read Chinese."<sup>57</sup>

One of the most desirable options parents had to avoid raising a *mo no* child was to immerse their children in Chinese culture. Ultimately, the best way for parents to ensure that children grew up "Chinese" was to send them back to China to be educated. This option was only for the children of rich Chinese

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<sup>56</sup> *The Rice Room*, 44.

<sup>57</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 78-79.



merchants or labourers who had, through luck and/or hard work, saved a large sum of money. This option was also only available in the twentieth century when migration was not cut off by wars, Communism, and restrictive legislation. For example, part of the reason that Hing's family was separated in *The Concubine's Children*, was for schooling:

The daughters Ping and Nan would be left behind [in China]...in the interests of their schooling...Educating children in the homeland, for the first years of schooling at least, had been the accepted thing to do among families sojourning abroad. Parents feared that filling children's heads with a white society's curriculum foreigner's language first might turn them against going back to China.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, because of money troubles and political strife, it would be decades before the sisters reunited with Hing. The second best option, a private tutor from China, was also only an option for a very few wealthy Chinese families. So, the most common compromise was for children to go to Chinese school during the evening and/or weekends. Choy states, "All respectable Chinatown families felt obliged, even coerced, to send their sons and daughters to one of the half-dozen private Chinatown schools....[to] be taught Chinese, in the formal Mandarin or Cantonese dialect. Village dialects like Toisanese were not taught at all."<sup>59</sup> Most of the Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American authors railed against this infringement on their precious spare time. Experiences varied between the authors, but by and large Chinese school was resented. For example, Way Sun (Wayson) Choy in *Paper Shadows* hated Chinese school because of its generous use of corporal punishment, and was frustrated at his

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<sup>58</sup> *The Concubine's Children*, 47.

<sup>59</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 215.

lack of understanding of the written form of a language that he did not even speak at home. As a result, he began to skip out of the Chinese school, and ultimately failed the year. When a fellow classmate asked him, "Don't you want to be Chinese?" his immediate reply was, "I'm Canadian."<sup>60</sup> In fact, his realization that he did not have to be "Chinese" elated him. "I no longer felt I was a failure, because I was no longer going to be Chinese. I was going to be Buster Keaton or a Keystone Kop...my head buzzed happily..."<sup>61</sup> Sekky, too, came to this conclusion in *The Jade Peony* because of his intense frustration with verbal and written Chinese. He declared that he was only going to speak and write English, and this was later reinforced when he embarrassed the family in front of an elder.

I was sent to my room and grew even more to hate the Chinky language that made such a fool of me. I hated the Toisan words, the complex of village dialects that would trip up my tongue. I wished I were someone else, someone like Freddy Bartholomew, who was rich and lived in a grand house and did not have to know a single Chinese word.<sup>62</sup>

Conversely, as much as the children hated Chinese school, most embraced the English public school system. English provided an escape from the pressures of home life, and though corporal punishment was still utilized in public school in the early to mid twentieth century, the Chinese children there still felt more carefree than at Chinese School. Though parents tried their best to control the influence of English schooling, they had little success. For example, in *The Rice Room*, Fong-Torres's parents "implied that we'd do well to make

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<sup>60</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 238.

<sup>61</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 239.

<sup>62</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 140.

friends mostly with Chinese. They had bad names for white and black people—they were *bok guey* and *hok guey*, “white demons” and “black demons.”<sup>63</sup> English schooling had one purpose for the parents, and it had nothing to do with socialization. English schooling was to provide a venue for children to “study hard and become a doctor, dentist, lawyer, or, if we [the children] weren’t quite up to snuff, maybe an engineer.”<sup>64</sup> However, parental concerns were often brushed aside as the Chinese children embraced English schooling. For example, Hing, in *The Concubine’s Children*, found she could obtain all the attention she lacked at home by excelling for her teachers at school in Vancouver. She was even one of the few Chinese children willing to accept the harsh corporal punishment of the Chinese schools in exchange for attention. “Hing’s escape from the misery of her life was school...having only her teachers to commend her, [she] threw herself more and more into what school had to offer...Before long she had enough certificates of achievement and recognition to wallpaper the wall on her side of the bed at the rooming house.”<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, Hing’s excellent marks did not translate into university training and a professional career for two major reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, she had no parental support. “All the time Hing was keeping her career plans from her mother, May-ying continued to steer her in a different direction. Once her daughter turned seventeen, May-ying took it upon herself to get her “used to the ideas of boys.”<sup>66</sup> Traditionally, females did not receive post-

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<sup>63</sup> *The Rice Room*, 63.

<sup>64</sup> *The Rice Room*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> *The Concubine’s Children*, 129.

<sup>66</sup> *The Concubine’s Children*, 164.

secondary education, and May-ying saw no reason for her daughter to be any different. Compounding this issue was the fact that Hing's family had very little money. Why would they waste valuable resources on educating a girl? Moreover, Hing, now called Winnie, recognized that Vancouver's educational system was still systemically racist in the late 1940s and she decided to quit. When she confided in her principal her fears about her family, her lack of money, and the institutionalized racism, he surprised her by agreeing that she should quit. "I hate to lose one of Grandview's best students, but what you are doing is a good thing.' He brought up the word "prejudice." He said that high school standing would not necessarily improve her chances at getting a job. He confessed that he had failed to place his top Chinese graduates..."<sup>67</sup>

It is really only since the 1960s in America and the 1970s in Canada that Asians have found their collective voices and demanded changes in the systemic racism of the public school system. *Gold Mountain* details the process whereby Asians started demanding that they not be "shunted into essentially non-verbal and vocational occupations by their high school counsellors and teachers..."<sup>68</sup> They also questioned an educational system where they learned about Louis Riel, but knew nothing about Mao Zedong, and were "sneered at" by the new wave of immigrants from Asia because they knew so little of their own heritage.<sup>69</sup> It is out of this era of questioning that the current generation of Asian writers emerged in North America, exploring their identity and cultural assimilation, and rediscovering a past they never learned in school.

<sup>67</sup> *The Concubine's Children*, 163.

<sup>68</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 194.

<sup>69</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 189-190.

Even with all its obvious racist flaws, the Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian authors found the public school system useful in the process of assimilation, which was universally sought by all the children highlighted in the books. Ben and Shirley Fong-Torres, for example, were teenagers growing up during the civil rights movement, when perceptions about the Asian community were changing. They became heavily involved in student affairs at their schools in the United States so that they could socialize with students of other ethnic backgrounds. Even Sek-Lung, who grew up during the World War II era, when the Chinese community was almost segregated from mainstream society, knew the potential freedom that public schooling offered. He was held back from school in Vancouver due to his health, and desperately longed to begin. Once he did, he immersed himself in the English language and mainstream culture. He found a haven in his Advance Grade Three class at Strathcona, in Vancouver. He marveled that, "At recess, our dialects and accents conflicted, our clothes, heights and handicaps betrayed us, our skin colours and backgrounds clashed, but inside Miss E. Doyle's tightly disciplined kingdom we were all—lions or lambs—equals. We had glimpsed paradise."<sup>70</sup> However, for these Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American authors, formal and informal education could be a no-win situation once they returned home from school. Children were expected to excel in the public school system; it was demanded of them by their parents. But, once they "learned the rules" and succeeded, they were then often looked down upon by the older generations for being too much like the *bok guey*.

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<sup>70</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 184.

## Communication Issues

Chinese parents were astute to mistrust the influence of the public schooling system on their children in North America. In effect, what it did was increase the communication gulf that separated the generations. Relations were already strained due to disparate values and family expectations and this was further aggravated by communication barriers. Once children immersed themselves in the English school system, which was what their parents expected of them, their Chinese fluency withered. The parents, for the most part, could not communicate in English. A few parents, such as Fong-Torres' mother, did try to learn, "But after a few classes, I [the mother] decided it would be better to teach my children how to speak Chinese."<sup>71</sup> Fong-Torres came to that conclusion that "my parents felt they didn't need English to survive."<sup>72</sup> The problem was that the sons and daughters like Ben Fong-Torres found Cantonese useless in their American lives. Fong-Torres states unequivocally that they "saw no use for Cantonese, other than to appease our parents...without an effective common language, a wall arose between parents and children. Yes, we could talk and understand most of what the other was saying. But shadings, detail, nuances, turns of phrase...all of those, and much more, would be blocked by the

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<sup>71</sup> *The Rice Room*, 58.

<sup>72</sup> *The Rice Room*, 58.

omnipresent wall.”<sup>73</sup> Instead, the older generations and children communicated through what several authors called “Chinglish,” a pidgin verbal language that sufficed for basic conversation but offered none of the semantics and connotations needed for complex conversation. For example, it worked when Wayson Choy read *The Three Little Pigs* to his *Gung-Gung* “using my very best Chinglish,” but otherwise failed for the Chinese daughters and sons in all serious conversations.<sup>74</sup>

Communication barriers also preoccupied the characters in *The Joy Luck Club*. When Jing-Mei Woo’s mother explained ideas to her, the daughter commented that it “made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese.”<sup>75</sup> Later in her reminisces, she added, “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings, and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.”<sup>76</sup> Daughter Lena St. Clair also had issues with communication, compounded by the fact that her father was Caucasian and her mother was Chinese. Her mother, Ying-ying St. Clair:

...spoke Mandarin and a little bit of English. My father, who spoke only a few canned Chinese expressions, insisted my mother learn English. So with him, she spoke in moods and gestures, looks and silences, and sometimes a combination of English punctuated by hesitations and Chinese frustration: “*Shwo buchulai!*”—Words cannot come out. So my father would put words in her mouth....But with me, when we were alone, my mother would

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<sup>73</sup> *The Rice Room*, 58-59.

<sup>74</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 144,

<sup>75</sup> *Joy Luck Club*, 23.

<sup>76</sup> *Joy Luck Club*, 27.

... speak in Chinese...I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings. One thought led to another without connection.<sup>77</sup>

As Lena observed in her own relationship, many Chinese children grew up without understanding the motives and reasoning of their parents. Fong-Torres discusses this frankly in several sections of *The Rice Room*. "What I speak, then, is a patchwork Cantonese, with lots of holes, some of them covered up, to no avail, by occasional English words that they [the parents] may or may not understand. What we have here is a language barrier as formidable, to my mind, as the Great Wall of China."<sup>78</sup> Sadly, because this "Great Wall" was so insurmountable, when the siblings needed to have a serious discussion with their parents, they brought in a trusted family friend to interpret for them. This wall, commented Fong-Torres, "has stood through countless moments when we needed to talk with each other, about the things parents and children usually discuss: jobs and careers; marriage and divorce; health and finances; history, the present, and the future."<sup>79</sup> In other words, sharing every rite of passage in their lives was darkened by the shadow of "the wall."

Part of the communication barrier between the generations had to do with the parents' lack of English and the children's lack of Chinese, but the rift ran deeper than this. The parents kept secrets from their children as well, for a variety of reasons, and this further exacerbated the mistrust between the generations. Fong-Torres, looking in hindsight with adult eyes, can now understand their silences.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 108-109.

<sup>78</sup> *The Rice Room*, 4-5.

<sup>79</sup> *The Rice Room*, 5.



For all these years, it has been so hard for them to talk...it's not that they don't remember. They remember too well. The silences—about who and what they were in China, and about what they wanted to be when they arrived in America—were born of the guilt and fear shared by all who left their homeland in the southern part of China for what they universally knew as *Gum Sahn*...<sup>80</sup>

This is why so many Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American authors have chosen to research their past, in the hopes that they can fill in the silent parts of their childhoods and uncover the multitude of secrets that have left such crevices in their family history. For many parents, however, the secrets were sometimes necessary at the time to ensure the safety of their families' immigrant status. For example, many Chinese parents came to North America illegally; the buying and selling identities in the villages in southern China was sometimes the only way to enter Canada and the United States before World War II. Lives were created out of aliases, children were bought and sold, and secrets were kept out of necessity. The children were often not told that they were living with an assumed name or identity because:

mo nos went to English school and mixed with Demon outsiders, and even liked them....Sometimes a mo no might say one careless word too many, and the Immigration Demons would pounce. One careless word—perhaps because a mo no girl or a mo no boy was showing off—and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night...separate family members and ask trick questions. Then certain "family" members would disappear.<sup>81</sup>

Jook-Liang, from *The Jade Peony*, understood that she was not welcome during some conversations for this very reason. "No one would say anything more: a child with a Big Mouth stood beside the oak table. Big Eyes. Big Ears.

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<sup>80</sup> *The Rice Room*, 11.

<sup>81</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 135.

Big Careless Mouth. A Mouth that went to English school and spoke English words. Too many English words. Poh-Poh looked at me cautiously.”<sup>82</sup>

Some of these secrets were kept because of immigration fears but the reasons for other family secrets may never be known. Wayson Choy lived for fifty-six years without knowing he was adopted. Part of the reason he wrote *Paper Shadows* was to come to terms with the secrets of his life. Why did no one tell him he was adopted? Who were his real parents? Why did his father never mention all his other brothers and sisters? When he interviewed his aunt about his family history and asked these questions, she merely replied, “It’s surprising we know anything,” Aunty Freda once said. “The old Chinatown people were so secretive.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *The Jade Peony*, 50.

<sup>83</sup> *Paper Shadows*, 338.

## Conclusion

It seems clear that these Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American authors wrote their about their lives, their families, and their community, more to try to understand their family and cultural history than to tell a story. For contemporary authors such as Chong, Choy, Fong-Torres, and Tan, their books provided a way to ask the questions they always wanted to as children, but never were able to because of the distance they felt with their parents, and the secrets kept by the older generations. Regardless of the years in which they grew up, these themes remain constant. For Chan and Woon the books became a way to highlight the struggles that Chinese families endured in their quest to create better lives for themselves, and to highlight these hardships for mainstream North America. The fact that a story unfolded for them to write about almost seems incidental. It is the process of self-discovery that has been so cathartic for these authors. This is especially true of Choy, who wrote his second novel, *Paper Shadows*, after writing *The Jade Peony*, and finding out that he was adopted. Through their books, they attempt to bridge a distance they have felt since childhood: a distance with their parents, their elders, their community, and their own heritage.

This distance affected all the authors deeply as children. It is not that they, for the most part, had dysfunctional childhoods. Instead, one feels a sense

of quiet confusion and a dampening of happiness when reading about the lives of these authors growing up in North America. They were never quite sure what to do or how to act to fit in with their relatives and the larger Chinese community. Nor were they fully accepted in mainstream society. Moreover, due to major communication issues as children and young adults, they never felt that they could discuss their concerns and feelings with the older generations. Instead of communicating verbally with their elders, the authors ask these questions through their writing. Telling is the fact that they use English as their medium, for their audience is mainstream. Also, for most of the authors, their written and verbal Chinese is inadequate to reach a Chinese language audience, so English is utilized out of necessity as much as practicality.

It is through their writing that the authors explore their own hyphenated existence, never quite “this nor that,” and try to come to terms with what it means to be Chinese in North America in the twentieth century. As Chan so aptly states, “Much Asian Canadian literature is concerned with the discovery that Chinese Canadians have a cultural identity that is neither Chinese nor Canadian, but *Chinese Canadian*.”<sup>84</sup> The pressure they felt as children to be “Chinese” was only equaled by the pressure they felt to fit in with conventional society. Being second and third generation Chinese in society meant that they had dual roles growing up. They had to abide by their parents’ traditional Chinese views and gender expectations, yet they were expected to excel as well in North American society.

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<sup>84</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 191.

This questioning and awakening is relatively new for these second and third generation Canadians. It is only after the American Civil Rights Movement and the advent of multiculturalism in Canada and the flood of new Chinese immigrants from overseas that Asians sought their literary voices. As the Chinese communities gained in strength and numbers, they began to flourish in prose and poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. As Chan details, they first had to overcome the systemic racism that stymied their schooling, limited their careers, and rejected their work on the basis that they “wrote like a ‘Chinese.’”<sup>85</sup>

Researching their ancestral history in China and learning about traditional customs, beliefs, and traditions, has helped these authors to understand why they were raised the way they were. Perhaps even more importantly, though, it has provided the framework to help them to understand the motives, beliefs, and views of their parents, something which the parents would not or could not communicate to their children effectively themselves. In completing the research, and now being able to look back on their pivotal childhood events with time and wiser eyes, they gained an understanding of their past that had previously eluded them. Tan, speaking through Jing-Mei Woo, one of the daughter characters, expressed this idea perfectly. “...today I realize I’ve never really known what it means to be Chinese. I am thirty-six years old. My mother is dead and I am on a train, carrying with me her dreams of coming home. I am going to China.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Gold Mountain*, 194.

<sup>86</sup> *The Joy Luck Club*, 307.

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