

**CHASING THE LIONS:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATION INTO
CULTURAL TRANSLATION, CULTURAL TRANSFER
AND IDENTITY FORMATION**

by

Jean W. Quon

Bachelor of Education, University of British Columbia, 1992
Bachelor of Arts, University of British Columbia, 1987

PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In

Graduate Liberal Studies

© Jean W. Quon 2011

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2011

All rights reserved. However, in accordance with the *Copyright Act of Canada*, this work may be reproduced, without authorization, under the conditions for *Fair Dealing*. Therefore, limited reproduction of this work for the purposes of private study, research, criticism, review and news reporting is likely to be in accordance with the law, particularly if cited appropriately.

Approval

Name: Jean W. Quon
Degree: Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Title of Project: Chasing the Lions: An Autobiographical Exploration into Cultural Translation, Cultural Transfer and Identity Formation.

Examining Committee:

Chair:

Eleanor Stebner, PhD
Associate Professor, Department of Humanities

Stephen Duguid, PhD
Senior Supervisor
Professor, Department of Humanities

Michael Kenny, PhD
Supervisor
Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Paul Crowe, PhD
Internal Examiner
Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and the Asia-Canada Program

Date Defended/Approved: 18 April 2011



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

Declaration of Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the "Institutional Repository" link of the SFU Library website <www.lib.sfu.ca> at: <<http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/handle/1892/112>>) and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author's written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author. This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis, project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, BC, Canada

Abstract

This project examines the two notions of cultural translation and cultural transfer and their impact on identity formation. In it, I use my own family history as a case study in order to investigate how identity formation is constructed through the experience of two cultures: one culture being Canadian, therefore more public and mainstream; with the other culture as Chinese, perhaps more private and embedded in past history. Using the Chinese schema of Wu Xing as a framing device, I attribute a personal trait to a specific family member by connecting memories and events from my childhood and early adult years. The intention of this project is to take into account the history of and influences on my grandparents and parents. In doing so, I wish to reveal how that person's cultural background affected me as a child growing up in a Canadian setting. In looking at the people and stories that have shaped my life, I posit that my identity has been, to much extent, constructed by my Chinese experience, my Canadian experience, or more likely, the combination of the two experiences.

Keywords: cultural translation; cultural transfer; identity formation; Wu Xing; autobiography; Chinese Canadian; immigrant experience

Like a good mystery novel ... one's life should
always be read twice, once for the experience,
then once again for astonishment.

- Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows*

With love and indebtedness to all my ancestors,
whether they are known to me or not.

Acknowledgements

This project began as an assignment for an autobiography course. Its instructor, Dr. Stephen Duguid, provided me with both the encouragement and support to further pursue my journey into my past and identity.

I would also like to acknowledge the community of friends and scholars who offered their encouragement, direction, and wise remarks.

I give much gratitude to all of my family who never tired of my endless questions and musings, and without them, this project would never have been.

André - thank you for your unwavering belief in me.

Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Tables.....	viii
Family Members in Autobiography	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chasing the Lions	4
Chapter 1. Theories, Perspectives and Histories	7
Section 1	7
Cultural Translation.....	7
Cultural Transfer and Identity Formation	10
Reflections on Theory and Practice.....	13
Section 2	16
A History of the Chinese in Vancouver	16
Section 3	24
Journeys Across the Pacific.....	24
Chapter 2. Autobiography and Wu Xing	33
Autobiography.....	33
Wu Xing	33
Section 1. Paternal Grandparents.....	36
Yeh Yeh	36
Honouring the Dead.....	36
Arms Too Long Empty	38
The Kitchen God.....	40
Ah Ngen	43
Love, War, and Tragedy	43
In the Village the Customs are Clear	44
Water 水 “Judgemental”.....	48
Section 1. Maternal Grandparents	53
Goong Goong	53
Honest, but Not Too Smart.....	53
Poh Poh	57
Endless Cups of Tea	57
A Woman’s Fate	59
Good Intentions	63
Section 2. Parents.....	64
Dad	64
Amateur Armchair Commentators	64

“I’m Chinese, So I Talk Chinese!”	65
Metal 金 “Self-Sufficient”	68
Mom	72
A Mother’s Hands	72
Life Changes	73
Fire 火 “Impatient”	76
Section 3.	80
Siblings	80
The Good and the Bad	80
Brothers and Sisters We Will Always Be	82
Earth 土 “Responsible”	84
Chapter 3. Reflection	88
Section 1.	88
Combin·Asian	88
Section 2.	92
Desig·N·Asian	92
Section 3.	98
Liber·Asian	98
Tree 木 “Adventurous”	98
Conclusion	103
Amalgam·Asian.....	103
References.....	105

List of Tables

Family Members in Autobiography.

Family Members in Autobiography

Quon Gim Wah
Great-Grandfather
1869? - 1929

Quon Chong Jung
(Richard)
Yeh Yeh
1910 - 1970

Woo Cho Kam
(Kim)
Ah Ngen
1910 - 2001

Cheung Chong Kwun

Goong Goong
1904 - 1951

Deng Kim Ha

Poh Poh
1916 - 2002

Quon Yook Kin
(York Ken)
Father
1935 -

Cheung Chi Kwan
(Joan)
Mother
1941 -

Len Hok Yuen Quon

Brother
1960 -

Henry Hok Chiu Quon

Brother
1961 -

Jean Wymen Quon

1965 -

Emily Fayee Quon

Sister
1969 -

Introduction

Hindsight creates significance: reading forward, like living forward, is an interpretive act in process; memory, reconstructed in narrative, is therefore implicated in self-identity. (Nicola King, 2000)

“What past events shape who you are today?” “What predispositions from when you were young come out now that you are older?” These two questions were first posed to the class in a recent autobiography course. The philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that “the child becomes the man.” If this is the case, then it follows that what happens to us in childhood powerfully influences who we later become in adulthood. There are the numerous experiences that we have as children, which if we are attentive, will develop in the future into understanding as adults. That is to say, the essence of who we are is nurtured in childhood. It is only when we become older that we go back to our memories and seek to give them meaning. Whether we are aware of it or not, we accumulate a set of skills or abilities in childhood that may have a direct impact on our adult identity. This line of questioning and thinking was the impetus to my autobiographical journey as a Canadian of Chinese heritage.

This project is an inquiry into the two notions of cultural translation and cultural transfer, and their impact on identity formation. I will develop this investigation in four ways. The first involves exploring various definitions of cultural translation and cultural transfer, and their relationship to identity formation combined with personal experiences. The second is to preface my autobiographical study by presenting a succinct chronological background of the Chinese in Vancouver, followed by how my family specifically fits within this historical context. The third is to share my own story, in the form of an

autobiography, as a case study to further illustrate the ideas and theories previously outlined. Finally, I wish to reflect upon how my past experiences may provide some insight on my identity formation.

In the first chapter, I consider how the notion of cultural translation is becoming more relevant as globalization asserts itself into our world. In order to help define the term, much of my discussion is based on both academic literature and fictional writing. It can be argued that autobiographical writing is largely fiction, but I also believe the opposite to be true. Fictional writing can be seen as autobiographical, as writers often use the people in their lives and their own personal experiences in their work.

Whereas there is a plethora of material on cultural translation, there is little information on the idea of cultural transfer in the sense I wish to use it. As this is the case, I offer my own definition of what I determine it to mean for this project. One of my goals in this study is to show how the two concepts of cultural translation and cultural transfer impact a person's identity. Moreover, I wish to investigate to what extent identity formation is constructed through the experience of two cultures: one culture being Canadian, therefore more public and mainstream; with the other culture as Chinese, perhaps more private and embedded in past history.

The first chapter also sets the stage by providing a general overview of Chinese settlement patterns in British Columbia. I rely much on the published writings of others, and to a lesser extent, public archives, in order to recapitulate the one hundred and fifty years of history of the Chinese. As for the history of my family in Canada, I have not enough of a connection to recount the one hundred and twenty years beginning with my paternal great-grandfather. Indeed, I had the opportunity to know three of my four now deceased grandparents, but I did not think it important or urgent as a child or teen to ask them the questions I now have as an adult. I suspect the questions were always there, but I had neither the courage nor the foresight to inquire after them until now. As a consequence, much of what could help in accurately relating my family's history has been

destroyed in wars, lost in relocation, or forgotten through deaths. Therefore, apart from several photographs and one or two formal documents, I rely solely on my own memory, and the recollections of my parents and siblings, to help unfold the past.

In an attempt to recover and reclaim family history, the second chapter employs the genre of autobiography to tell my story. This project follows from a previous autobiographical exploration whereby I began the investigation into what I considered some of my character traits. I was able to attribute each trait to a specific family member by using memories and events from my childhood and early adult years. The intention of this project is to broaden the scale to take into account the history of and influences on my grandparents and parents. In doing so, I wish to reveal how that person's cultural background affected me as a child growing up in a Canadian setting.

The generation of my grandparents is shaped mainly by Chinese attitudes, and to some extent, Confucian thinking. On the other hand, the generation of my parents is greatly influenced by their being raised in China mostly by one parent or adult figure. I want to examine the challenges of passing these cultural attitudes and values after a transition brought upon by immigration. My assumption is that the generation of my grandparents is firmly planted in the ways of the Chinese experience, and that for them to change their thinking, despite being in a new country, would be very difficult. Therefore, the influence my grandparents' generation had on me was directly tied to this old country attitude. On the other hand, although my parents' generation still has some strong ties to China, I suspect my father and mother also had the ability to filter the benefits between the old and new world before passing their views on to me. Incidentally, how these values and attitudes can change for one generation over time may be revealing. I also wish to use my recollection of memories and events growing up to explore the experience of intergenerational family dynamics of three generations living closely under one roof. Further, I consider how cultural attitudes and values are accepted, adapted, or refused by my current generation, and how they might shift during a person's lifetime.

In this introduction, I also want to acknowledge the difficulty often associated with autobiographical, memoir, life story, or bio-fiction writing. As the recorder of my family's history, I understand the problems involving accuracy in recalling the past when memory is the main source of information. Canadian author Denise Chong (1995) even concedes, "There are as many different versions of events as there are members of a family" (p. xiii). Therefore, the discovering and telling of my history will be much like an autobiographical detective, or sometimes mystery, novel. As a result, a large portion of this project will use the narrative to help in revealing my story. However strongly I feel about doing the best job of truthfully ordering the past, I am acutely aware of the disparity that exists in the memories of those still living, and the fact that much is lost in the lives and intentions of my deceased grandparents. Even so, I must choose somewhere to start writing, and I must learn how to trust my memory.

The third and final chapter of the project is a reflection on my upbringing and its impact on my identity formation. I would like to go back to the beginning of this introduction to Nicola King's (2000) reference on how memory is implicated in self-identity. In looking at the people and stories that have shaped my life, I believe my identity has been, to much extent, constructed by my Chinese experience, my Canadian experience, or more likely, the combination of the two experiences. In order to better understand who I am now, it is important for me to look back at my inheritance to see from where I come. Therefore, much of what I know about my background comes from my memory, or moreover, the recollections of my parents, and now gone, grandparents. I strongly suspect that the lives of my ancestors, whether I have accurately recovered the past or not, significantly affects and shapes who I am today.

Chasing the Lions

When I think of my very first memory, I am taken back to my childhood home. I recall a brief time of shiny hardwood floors before they are quickly

concealed in a chocolate-flecked golden carpet. When I am three and a half years old, I remember looking out the back door of the new house into which the entire family, apart from my soon-to-be-conceived sister, has just moved. I am alone in the kitchen, except for a sensed presence of my grandparents in another part of the house. I wonder at the strange sight of a white refrigerator standing lopsided in the neighbours' back yard. It must be near mid-day, as intense, southern sunlight is washing out the colours of the back yard making the dirt look almost a muddy, mustard yellow. I turn around, and I immediately forget the odd sight because I notice long fingers of sunshine reaching across the kitchen linoleum onto the newly polished hardwood floors of the front rooms. I recall a feeling of pure elation at the sight, and the next thing I hear are my bare feet running across the floor taking me, what seems like such a far and long distance for someone so young, all the way to the sliding front windows. I stop abruptly with a smack on the glass; my palms flat on the window in a "hands up" position. I survey momentarily the imposing mountains; twin lions caught in repose off in the distance in front of me, before my breath on the windowpane obscures my view. This memory is the beginning of when I first became cognizant that I had my own existence and identity.

Our home, a Vancouver special, is long in length, yet boxy at the same time, so there is only one way to align furniture in the living room that does not threaten to impede my running path. Starting at the front of the house by the window is my father's black, polyester reclining chair. This is the place where I often find him sitting when I come home from school or immediately after dinner. When I am very young, this is also the spot where I squeeze in next to him to cheer on our favourite hockey team – *Les Habitants*, and our most revered hockey player – Guy Lafleur. In between his chair and the green chenille three-seat sofa is a square, veneered side table. On top of this sits two items: a faux bronze lamp complete with dangling glass crystals and silk shade; as well, there is as a black and silver ashtray belonging to my father. As a child, I used to ask for the treat of pressing down on the centre knob of this device so that the plates would rotate open. I loved to watch the ashes disappear mysteriously into the

bowels of the ashtray. The only remaining item that will fit along this assembly line of furniture is the matching single chair to the sofa. No one ever sits in this chair except for my father's mother, my grandmother, who I call Ah Ngen in the *Toisan* dialect. Characteristic of the Chinese, my parents purchase the best quality furnishings and carpeting they can afford at the time, but they also fall into the distinct practice of many new immigrants – they keep many of their recent possessions protected in their original protective wrappings, like the lampshade, and they place plastic runners along the high traffic areas. Despite the influx of new furnishings, I luckily still have a direct path all the way from the back door in the kitchen towards the windows at the front of the house. I have spent much time describing the layout of the house only so I can best describe to you how I modify my running pattern.

Running the length of the house will become a habitual occurrence in my life, and one that continues even into my early teen years. “*Ai-yah!*” my mother would reproach me in Chinese, “Why do you run around like a *deen gai* - a crazed chicken? Have I not taught you to behave like a proper and obedient young girl?” I ignore her warnings, and I laugh as I run by her. However, I also suspect she only scolds me half-heartedly as I am never punished for doing so. One day, for some unknown reason, and much to my mother's dismay, I decide to leap midway through my run off the plastic runner that separates the dining room from the living room. With arms outstretched, I throw my body forward when I reach the living area. There is a brief sensation of weightlessness as I fly through the air, yet I am altogether focused on the far end of the sofa. Breathless and elated, I land on both feet with a soft thud on the sofa, and to the gentle jingling of the glass crystals on the lamp that is disturbed by my landing.

It's funny, whenever I am at home in my dreams, I am never in my current house where I have resided most of the past fifteen years. I am invariably, without a doubt, in the home of my childhood when I am asleep. This is the home in which I spent a score of my early life. This is the home where I belonged in security to a family. This is the home where I developed, although I had no idea of it at the time, both my Chinese and Canadian character.

Chapter 1.

Theories, Perspectives, and Histories

Section 1

Cultural Translation

When the word translation is considered in a conventional sense, we think of the act or process of translating from one language to another. Literally, the meaning of the word translation is to “bear across” or to “convey across.” Written work in an author’s mother tongue is often translated into other languages in order to become available to a wider audience. Alternately, an opera in French is also performed in Italian, German, or English. However, if we change the context over to a cultural sense, then the term translation takes on a very different meaning.

The study of different cultures has intrigued scholars and lay people alike for centuries. Conversely, the notion of culture can no longer be seen as fixed in today’s international combination of people. Culture is complex, indefinite and ever changing, so it is no surprise that its definition today is a matter of much analysis and debate. As a result, there has been growing attention to the process of cultural change, and in particular, the notion of cultural translation in recent years, and it points to the need to understand translation beyond a simple linguistic level. In *Gender in Translation*, Sherry Simon (1996) notes:

It was only a question of time until cultural studies “discovered” translation. After all, the globalization of culture means that we all live in “translated” worlds, that the spaces of knowledge we inhabit assemble ideas and styles of multiple origins, that transnational communications and frequent migrations make every cultural site a crossroads and a meeting place ... The hybridization of diasporic

culture and the mobility of all identities – including gender – are central to the concerns of cultural studies. (p. 134)

As diasporic experiences continue to be added to a host culture, there is an increasing emphasis on converting messages and making meaning of cultural differences. Due to an increasingly mobile population and to new technologies, we are exposed to an array of unfamiliar languages, values, attitudes, and behaviours. When faced with such experiences, each of us is a translator: we test what we are given, whether it be ideas or actions, and then we translate it to fit into our way of thinking and into our particular environment.

Due to these phenomena, will the multitudes of monocultures or homogeneous cultures as we have come to know them become a reality that is progressively rare? Are we fixed in a singular culture? If we live in a global world, are we not, to some extent, all hybrids? With the prevalence of multiple peoples and global citizens, how do we define culture today? In a world of increasing diversity, cultural translation is therefore made more complex and more important for us to consider. Through an examination of academic writing and popular fiction, I will review some perspectives on cultural translation.

Homi K. Bhabha, a twentieth century philosopher, post-colonial theorist, and current professor at Harvard University, describes cultural translation as “a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness *in relation to itself*. In that sense there is no ‘in itself’ and ‘for itself’ within cultures because they are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 210). Therefore, Bhabha (1994) suggests it is only in the “third space” when we are displaced outside of ourselves, that we allow for a creative and individualized transformation to occur. For Bhabha, translation is more than just a bridge between established cultural entities; it is the place in which cultural production takes place. He describes this path as, “the boundary [that] becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). In other

words, the “third space” is the place in which cultural production allows for the emergence of another self, or otherness, to be articulated.

Trinh T. Minh-ha makes reference to an ambiguous area in which cultural translation is at the root of being simultaneously the same yet also the other. As a professor of the University of California, Berkeley, Trinh is also a writer/poet, literary theorist, filmmaker, and composer. Much of her work centres on the theme of the “other,” or the guise a person chooses to hide behind. It is interesting to note some of the language from her work *When the Moon Waxes Red* (Trinh, 1991). The words “opposition” and “other/same” make reference to an “other” wandering in a world of duality. Incidentally, her use of the word “deceptive” can be related to the word translation. In the act of translating, people often impose their own bias and interpretation, thereby distorting, betraying, or deceiving the original meaning.

Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while persisting in her difference, and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (Trinh, 1991, p. 74)

Canadian writer, poet and academic, Fred Wah suggests cultural translation as living within a hyphenated identity. Wah writes from the perspective of a racial and genetic hybrid. In his book, *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*, he describes himself as a “half Swede, quarter Chinese, and quarter Ontario Wasp ... [whose] hybridity obliges [him] to locate by difference, not sameness” (Wah, 2000, p. 47). Due to his multiple genetic mix, Wah is able to offer a unique perspective about his experiences of growing up within multiple cultures. In the same work, Wah goes on to say, “the hyphen, that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides ... is the operable tool that both compounds difference and underlines sameness. Though the hyphen is in the middle, it is not in the centre” (Wah, 2000, pp. 72-73). Much of Wah’s writing and

thinking is based on cultural translation and the “particularity of being in-between (as well as outside-of)” (Wah, 2000, p. 4).

In his self-termed bio-text titled *Diamond Grill*, Wah recounts his years growing up within the context of a hyphenated identity in Nelson, British Columbia during the 1950’s. In this work of prose, the door between the kitchen and restaurant acts as the boundary between his two worlds. In the kitchen, there are all the familiar sounds, foods, and people that are Chinese, whereas the dining area at the front of the restaurant represents the predominantly white community in which he lives. On the occasional early morning when he opens up the café for his father, Wah describes “the wooden slab that swings between the Occident and Orient [as the] silence that is a hyphen and the hyphen is the door” (Wah, 2006, p. 16).

Cultural Transfer and Identity Formation

Before leaving the notion of cultural translation, I would like to bring attention to the idea of cultural transfer. We are all translators in that we take on things presented to us, before we are able to make our own personal sense of it. However, even prior to engaging in cultural translation, we arrive with our own preconceived ideas and set of skills that affect how we pass along things, such as ideas or values, to others. This concept is what I refer to as cultural transfer.

I would like to use the familial relationship between a father and daughter to help explain the basis of my thinking. A father has had throughout his life, but perhaps particularly in his developing childhood years, a number of experiences that essentially shape who he is. The things that have shaped the father determine both how and what he decides to transfer to his daughter. The daughter, in turn, takes the lessons and values passed on by the father, and translates them in a way that makes sense to her. During the process of translation, I believe that the daughter can choose to accept, adapt, or refuse the things that are transferred to her by her father.

It is my belief that the two notions of translation and transfer are intricately tied together, and I also feel this has much influence on a person's identity formation. In particular, cultural transfer and identity formation are especially complex when a person is living within a dual culture whereby difficulties often arise from belonging to two distinct and, in many ways, conflicting worlds. To continue with the use of academic material and fiction, I would like to further explore the idea of cultural transfer and its effect on identity formation.

The novel by Maxine Hong Kingston (1989), *The Woman Warrior*, is arguably at the forefront of the Asian North American literature canon. Writer and faculty member of a number of American universities including the University of California, Berkeley, Kingston uses the novel to describe her personal struggle with cultural translation while growing up as a visibly ethnic Chinese in the predominantly Caucasian state of California in the 1950's. The autobiographical writing focuses largely on how Kingston as the narrator translates the experiences of her Chinese mother with her own Chinese American outlook and understanding. Chinese language, history, and culture are introduced to her through her mother, and Kingston absorbs it by means of an Asian Western lens. Through the re-telling of her mother's stories, whereby "the beginning is hers, the ending, mine," the product is the emergence of her Chinese American identity (Kingston, 1989, p. 206).

Interestingly, in response to academic critiques to her novel, Kingston ponders in a subsequent critical essay entitled "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" whether she should re-evaluate her use of the hyphen. In it she says, "I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the words on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today's world" (Kingston, 1998, p. 99). Apparently, Kingston feels the binary pull of the hyphen: she is both Chinese and American, yet also fully neither.

Identity formation is a complicated concept, and it becomes even more difficult when one is in between two cultures. How do you determine which parts of you are, in Kingston's case Chinese or American, and how does it come to be? Kingston poses a thought provoking question to her readers at the beginning of her novel.

Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America ... Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (Kingston, 1989, pp. 5-6)

Lisa Lowe, noted scholar in Asian American Studies, writes in *Immigrant Acts* that regardless of the number of years or generations in North America, racialized minorities will always be considered by the dominant culture as the "foreigner-within" (Lowe, 1998, p. 5). She attributes this reason to the fact that Asian Americans as a cultural group are in constant transformation due to their continual numbers arriving into the country, the varying degrees of assimilation, and the complications of intergenerational relationships caught between different integration levels.

In terms of how these occurrences affect identity formation, it is worth noting that Lowe and I have similar categories. Whereas I classify identity formation into the three areas of accept, adapt or reject, Lowe argues that the development of one's on-going construction of identity in a dual world "includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented" (Lowe, 1998, p. 65). Her categorization of "partly invented" is of particular interest, as I have not contemplated this idea before. It does make one wonder how much of our identity is created from something new.

Strike the Wok is one of a growing number of works showcasing contemporary Chinese Canadian writers. The motivation of the editors for this anthology was to illustrate the extensive collection of the Chinese Canadian

experience in the age of globalization. Larissa Lai, writer and faculty member of the English Department at the University of British Columbia, starts off the collection of stories with her contribution “Two Houses and an Airplane.” The story gently meanders through a world of dualities: “two houses, two provinces, two women, two men, two languages, two dialects, [and] two identities” (Chao & Wong-Chu, 2003, p. xi). When faced with a further two options, one of refusing a plane ticket to China and the other of accepting the offer, the central character reveals an underlying fear that explains her inability to come to a decision, and a deeper, more fundamental confusion, about her Chinese and Canadian identity.

Her minority status obviously makes the main character feel as though she is an outsider in the primarily Anglo population of Newfoundland where she grew up. However, she also knows that despite physically appearing more like the people in China, she will also be considered a stranger there because her manner is not entirely Chinese either. Perhaps, in her opinion, it is better to feel like a foreigner in just one place rather than two. She is caught between two countries: she lives in one; yet she knows neither. It is also worth noting the irony of the main character’s name, Ilene, which sounds like the words “I lean.” For in the short story, it is my observation that there is neither person nor home in which Ilene feels she is able to rest against.

I think I’m afraid to go. I’m afraid I won’t fit in. I mean, I don’t speak the language. I don’t have the demeanour. And I don’t ... well, I don’t want to feel like an outsider there. You know? It’s like, as long as I don’t go, I can imagine I belong somewhere ... Besides, I think what I want to put my time into, what I think is worth fighting for, is an identity here ... I don’t want to be white ... I want history of my own. In this place. (Lai, 2003, p. 13)

Reflections on Theory and Practice

The definition of culture remains abstract. Over the past few decades, our understanding of the concept of culture has gone through a number of transformations. Moreover, I believe culture will continue to be in a process of evolution as our world becomes more globalized. With this influx of new ideas

and ways of thinking, as a translator, I am constantly converting these many messages and trying to make meaning of them.

However, due to culture's plurality, it has also directed me to look at the notion of location and identity. Through the moving boundaries of culture and cultural identity, I now see that it is necessary to first have a position from which one is able to move. That is to say, in a world of globalization, I must have a sense of location, or territory, from which I begin before I can translate messages in order to reconstruct my position (Simon, 1996).

I wish to consider Bhabha's (1994) position of the "third space," or when we are displaced outside of ourselves. If culture is continually evolving, how, in this ever shifting landscape, does one get outside of oneself to a point of existing in the entity of the "third space?" It seems to me that to live in this constantly transforming space might often be difficult, and therefore, rather elusive.

Wah (2000) refers to the "hyphen" as locating oneself by difference rather than sameness. As a genetic hybrid, Wah suggests that his numerous racial backgrounds allow him to offer his own unique viewpoint of growing up within a hyphenated identity. If I allocate a hyphen to myself, it would appear more as Chinese – **Canadian**. I agree with Wah that although the hyphen is placed in the middle of the two words, it does not exactly have to measure in the centre. As the forthcoming autobiographical chapter will show, my experiences do occur within the two worlds of Chinese and Canadian, but that they are not of equal weight.

Trinh (1991) hypothesizes, much like Wah, that within a world of duality a person can simultaneously co-exist as being the same yet also the other. Although Trinh sees the location of the "other/same" as a deceptive outward appearance, my opinion is that this double position is not illusory at all. Instead, it very much reflects my sensibility of growing up in Vancouver. The stories of my family and childhood will in many ways parallel this twin reality.

It is within the confines of the "third space," the two sides of the "other/same," or the conspicuous "hyphen" that cultural translation, or how we

interpret the back and forth flow of concepts across cultures, occurs. When we exist in this otherness, a new and individual “other” is able to transform and emerge. In an increasingly global environment, the ability to recognize and understand cultural translation is necessary, yet it is also important to realize how we construct our identities.

We all have a history that shapes who we are today, and it is that background which influences what we in turn pass along to others during the process of cultural transfer. The preconceived ideas, beliefs, or values of a person affect how and what s(he) passes along. Consequently, the person receiving these messages then has the opportunity to translate them according to her/his own disposition. As people are a result of their experiences, it is my belief that much of our identity is closely tied to the two notions of cultural transfer and cultural translation.

When I think of this process specifically through my personal experience, I question to what extent is my identity constructed within the occurrence of two cultures: one culture being Canadian, therefore more public and mainstream; with the other culture as Chinese, perhaps more private and embedded in past history. I don't believe I was fully aware of any division between my Chinese experience and my Canadian experience until I was older, but it certainly must have existed from the very beginning. In an effort to examine this phenomenon, I would like to use my autobiographical history as a case study. However, in order to set the stage, I would first like to offer a brief account of the Chinese in Vancouver, and secondly, how my family fits into this context.

Section 2

A History of the Chinese in Vancouver

The lives and journeys of immigrant Chinese Canadians are still not well known to most people. The truth remains, without their efforts, Canada would not be the country it is today. (Yu Shing Chit)

The Chinese have a mythological origin in North America which is difficult to retrieve. The alleged discovery of this continent by a Chinese Buddhist monk named Hwei-shin in the fifth century remains today a controversial hypothesis. It is a historical fact, however, that [the] Chinese have settled in Canada for one hundred and [fifty] years. (Chao Lien)

Persons familiar with firm ground beneath their feet will require some time to become accustomed to the constant sway and rocking of a ship. Fifty Chinese, all artisans, had the span of the entire Pacific Ocean to get used to such a journey when they sailed with Captain John Meares from southern China to the shores of the West Coast of Vancouver Island. This group of Chinese, less one rumoured to have been lost along the voyage to savages in the Philippines, was the first to arrive in Canada in 1788 (Chliboyko, 2001, p. 23).

Meares' initial idea was to use the Chinese to create a system of outposts along the western shores of North America. There, the Chinese were expected to help collect sea otter pelts and to receive foreign vessels for shelter and repair. Although Meares' plan did not come to fruition, the Chinese did successfully construct the first non-indigenous vessel, the *North West America* (Chliboyko, 2001, p. 22). While many in this initial group of Chinese men married the local Nootka women and fathered a generation, little else is known about the fate of these first settlers. However, the immigrants who arrived seventy years later are generally more recognized as Canada's first Chinese.

In 1858, nearly all the Chinese who flocked to British Columbia originally came from the surrounding counties and villages of the Pearl River Delta. The port of Canton, later to be known as Guangzhou, was established as the only point of entry in which the Chinese government permitted the West to trade. Southern China at this time was experiencing much turmoil with an increasing population, an ongoing fight over land and water rights, as well as a ruling of a corrupt government. In addition, the area was further plagued by recurring natural disasters such as floods, typhoons, and droughts. On top of all this was the military threat posed by Western imperialists. So, it was no surprise that when reports arrived from the New World of potential riches from gold, a few merchants, but mainly farmers and labourers, fled their homeland for *Gum Saan*, or Gold Mountain, in search of fortune and a better existence for both themselves and for their families at home (Yee, 2006, p. 5).

Besides those from China, the Chinese arriving into Canada for the gold rush also came north via California. However, the Chinese had to follow the established western rules for mining gold. One of the main conditions was that the Chinese could only work the mines that the white miners had given up or abandoned. Even then, the white miners often returned to threaten the Chinese for what little gold they did manage to find.

With all the rules and risks of mining, several of the Chinese turned to alternate frontier employment. Roughly one thousand workers constructed the Caribou Wagon Road between Williams Lake and Harrison Lake in 1863, and another five hundred Chinese were employed to string telegraph wires for Western Union in 1866 (Chao, 1997, p. 6). In addition, many of the other Chinese found labour as cannery workers, coal miners, launderers, lumber workers, farmers, restaurateurs, merchants, and domestic servants. Within five years of the first arrivals to 1863, there would be over four thousand Chinese, nearly all male, toiling for roughly ten dollars a day throughout British Columbia (Con, Con, Johnson, Wickberg & Willmott, 1982, p. 16).

The building of the British Columbian segment of the Canadian Pacific Railway brought the next wave of immigrants from China. From 1881 to its completion in 1885, seventeen thousand Chinese arrived from southern China and Hong Kong to work the railway (Con et al, 1982, p. 22). In groups of thirty, the Chinese were responsible for clearing and grading the foundation for the roadbed, as well as securing the rail ties with gravel. For this, the workers each collected one dollar per day (Yee, 2006, p. 11). Living conditions were crowded and harsh, especially during the cold winters to which the immigrants were unaccustomed, and there was a lack of fresh food and insufficient medical care.

The job itself was also highly dangerous. What commonly killed the workers were the frequent dynamite blasts or the unexpected landslides. One conservative estimate based on Royal Commission testimony indicates that six hundred Chinese died during the construction of the railway, thereby putting the ratio of deaths to four Chinese to each mile of railway, whereas another community resource puts the figure closer to 4,000 Chinese deaths, thus making the ratio closer to twenty-six deaths for each mile of railway (Chao, 1997, p. 6).

To add to this discrepancy, the Victoria based Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association arranged in 1891, six years after the completion of the railroad, for the collection of over three hundred unidentified bodies along the railway to be returned to China for a proper burial (Con et al, 1982, p. 24). Although it was law that all deaths were to be reported, this was not the case during the building of the railway. Without a doubt, many Chinese deaths during this time were a consequence of diseases or accidents.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway on November 7th, 1885 near Revelstoke at Craigellachie resulted in two events (Hume, 2010, p. A1). The first result was the end to the fifteen hundred jobs for the Chinese railway workers, and the second was the establishment of a Chinese community at the western terminus of the transcontinental line. The labourers were left with two alternatives when they were refused the promised return tickets to China at the completion of construction. Those who were inclined and could afford the

passage home departed for China, while those who were less fortunate dispersed east towards the prairies or west to Saltwater City (Yee, 2006, p. 14).

In order to differentiate between the established mainland city of New Westminster and the yet to be incorporated city of Vancouver, the early Chinese settlers gave Vancouver the initial name of *Hahm-sui-fau*, or Saltwater City (Yee, 2006, p. 1). A number of men were added to this emerging community, in which just over a year before the completion of the railway, the Chinese population was approximated at 114, of which included “60 sawmill hands, 30 washermen/cooks, 10 store clerks, 5 merchants, 5 children, 3 married women, and 1 prostitute” (Yee, 2006, p. 17).

Throughout the waves of Chinese immigration, there was often a measure of anti-Chinese sentiment. There were calls to various levels of government to thwart the increasing numbers of immigrants from China, and as a result, increasing head taxes were initiated. In British Columbia in 1884, those who arrived from China were asked to pay a ten dollar head tax. With the Canadian Pacific Railway successfully finished, the Royal Commission of 1885 raised the head tax to fifty dollars. This slowed Chinese immigration for a time, but five years later in 1900, the head tax was further increased to one hundred dollars when Chinese immigrants found ways to raise the extra money. Finally in 1903, the head tax reached its peak of five hundred dollars, which was at that time the equivalent of roughly two years of a Chinese labourer’s wages (Chao, 1997, p. 10). It was sometimes the case whereby entire villages would have to pool their resources in order to send a chosen singular male to Canada. It would be his responsibility to work overseas to repay the debt, and then to continue sending remittances to help the village when he was done doing so.

Still, the Chinese continued to arrive in British Columbia. In China, living standards for farmers and peasants remained grim with overpopulation and with droughts and floods in 1920 and 1922 that affected food supply (Yee, 2006, p. 68). In Canada, the economy was battered with another recession when peacetime created a reduction in war production and wages (Yee, 2006, p. 59).

As a last measure to keep Chinese immigrants out and to protect jobs for western males, the politicians of British Columbia successfully lobbied the Federal Government into abolishing the head tax in order to introduce the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, on July 1st, 1923. It was the bill that would have the most devastating effect on immigration as it basically terminated anyone from entering Canada apart from four classes of immigrants. They included “university students, merchants, native-borns returning from several years of education in China, and diplomatic personnel” (Con et al, 1982, p. 141).

From 1923 until the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947, only forty-four people of Chinese descent were permitted to enter Canada (Yee, 2006, 62). During this time, a number of the older Chinese chose to retire to China, whereas those who faced unemployment over the years were encouraged to return home. The dwindling number of Chinese who remained in Canada contended with difficult times that included racism, the Depression of the 1930's, and the Second World War. During this time, the Chinese in Vancouver were forced to rely mainly on themselves as a community, and they would grow gradually only as a result of the Canadian born Chinese coming of age to marry and to have children of their own.

The onset of the Second World War brought attention to the Canadian born Chinese. Although this generation was blocked from occupations outside the streets of Chinatown, they grew up within the Canadian education system and had access to mainstream culture. This generation was caught between the two different worlds in which they grew up, and when faced with the decision to join the war effort, many attempted to enlist.

At first, the local born Chinese were refused recruitment by the Canadian government, as politicians from British Columbia feared that the Chinese who returned from war would then want the right to vote. Nevertheless, the Canadian born Chinese decided to volunteer. Desperate for soldiers, the Mobilization Board in Vancouver eventually drafted the local born Chinese. The war efforts of

the Canadian born Chinese helped to swing public opinion in favour of the Chinese. As a result of their efforts, the Chinese Canadians were able to have the Exclusion Act of 1923 revoked in May of 1947, and they were given the right to vote in British Columbia, and later, federally (Yee, 2006, p. 113).

Over the twenty-four year period of exclusion, the number of Chinese in Vancouver had been on the decline. After the war, when Pacific shipping recommenced, some 1,500 Chinese departed Canada (Yee, 2006, p. 117). The men who decided to stay and make their lives in Canada still faced challenges. The repeal of the Exclusion Act did not offer the Chinese Canadians instant acceptance. For example, the men who finally tried to send for their families in China were told only Canadian citizens could bring their wives and their children under the age of eighteen. After much lobbying by the Vancouver Chinese Benevolent Association, there were gradual concessions and amendments to Chinese immigration. By 1954, besides the men, Chinese Canadian women could now ask their husbands, as well as any children under the age of twenty-five, to be admitted into Canada. Despite this, from 1947 to 1954, of the 1.15 million immigrants to Canada, only 11,000, or less than one percent, were from China (Yee, 2006, p. 118).

Between the years of 1951 to 1961, Vancouver saw another influx of Chinese. The immigrant population nearly doubled from 8,729 to 15,223 (Yee, 2006, p. 119). This young group of immigrants coming into Vancouver was dissimilar from the established Chinese Canadians. They ranged from the majority of immigrants who did not speak English and were still obligated to send some of their earnings to relatives in China, to the few immigrants from Hong Kong who were more urbane and westernized. Meanwhile, the local born Chinese were making tentative moves into the Canadian mainstream by moving out of Chinatown and taking up professional occupations elsewhere in Vancouver. Having different interests and expectations, these two groups of Chinese rarely interacted with one another.

However, both the local born Chinese and the 1950's immigrants would have to contend with the new influx of Chinese beginning in the late 1960's. The typical Chinese immigrant between 1923 and 1967 did not speak English, was poorly educated, and was born in a rural setting (Con et al, 1982, p. 245). The new Chinese coming into Canada from 1968 to 1984 numbered 169,000, with the majority coming from Hong Kong. This was largely a group of educated professionals who were able to enter Canada without the burden of a biased immigration system or the necessity of an immediate blood relation. Instead, they came to Canada as independent or entrepreneurial immigrants based on their finances, age, occupation, and language ability (Yee, 2006, pp. 155-156).

These middle-class immigrants moved into homes outside of Chinatown, they increased the need for Chinese speaking businesses, and they improved the standard of Chinese restaurants as their Hong Kong culture became more central. While the old time Chinese were still living in their established ways, and the local born Chinese were just starting to assimilate into the mainstream, this "massive arrival of newcomers raised the profile of all Chinese in the eyes of white society" (Yee, 2006, p. 161).

Between the years of 1986 and 2000, immigrants continued to flow into Canada mainly from Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan. By the year 2000, Vancouver and its surrounding area had a population of 1.9 million, of which 300,000 were Chinese (Yee, 2006, p. 191). Three reasons prompted this influx. One was due to Hong Kong billionaire, Li Ka Shing's, involvement in the Vancouver area and Canadian economy. After 1986, Li invested over \$800 million to purchase the former World Expo site on the shores of False Creek, as well as a large percent of Husky Oil based out of Alberta. Further, the Bank of British Columbia was purchased by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC), of which Li was a major shareholder. Encouraged with Li's confidence in Canada, Hong Kong residents followed suit. A second reason for this wave of immigration was the impending handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Fearing a loss of freedom by a Communist run China, the residents of Hong Kong packed their bags for Canada. Lastly, the third inflow of Chinese was a

result of the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. Drawn to Canada's safe environment, better education system, and open spaces, the Chinese moved for the hope of a better life (Yee, 2006, pp. 191-192).

Since the millennium, the majority of immigrants arriving in Vancouver continued to come from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As of the 2006 census, Metropolitan Vancouver's population was nearing 2.1 million, of which, the Chinese numbered 381,535 (BC Stats). According to projections, the Chinese population could be as high as 809,000 in another twenty years, bringing this largest visible minority's share from eighteen percent of the Metropolitan area to twenty-three percent by the year 2031 (Chinese in Vancouver). The Chinese community in Vancouver has a long and complex history, and this group of people will gradually continue to grow and evolve over time.

Section 3

Journeys Across the Pacific

All of them desperately weaving tenuous, invisible threads over the ocean, to cling cobweblike to their men and sons in the Gold Mountains. (SKY Lee)

In my immediate family, my sister and I are the only ones to be considered *dai yut doi*, or first generation. In fact, I am the very first of the Quon family to be born in Canada. Yet there are before me, not one, but three generations of Quon men, whose arrival in this country preceded my birth in 1965.

By my father's account and my own deduction, my great-grandfather, Quon Gim Wah, was born in and around 1869 in Harbin, a village that sits within the Hoi Ping District in southern China. By the late 1880's, my great-grandfather was approximately twenty years old, a husband, and already a father to a daughter and son. By this time, he was also obviously old enough to have learned the tradition of herbal medicine from his father, as all the Quon sons did. He was also old enough to move to Canada as a sojourner.

There are no formal documents that exist today to verify the fact that my great-grandfather served as a herbalist to the Chinese coal miners in Cumberland, British Columbia in the late 1880's. Whether it was an entrepreneurial spirit, or just a means to feed his family, my great-grandfather paid a head tax of fifty dollars and spent the next three weeks on a ship before arriving on the shores of Western Canada.

From there he apparently made his way to Cumberland, home to the second largest Chinatown after San Francisco, as well as two four-hundred seat theatres for touring Chinese performers and acrobats (www.cumberlandbc.org). At that time, a miner's daily wage for labour was from \$1.00 to \$1.25 (Con et al,

1982, p. 50). Medical care for the Chinese was scarce, so when my great-grandfather set up his practice in Cumberland, he charged the workers one dollar per visit. For this amount, the workers received a consultation as well as a paper packet of herbs to brew a thick tea to remedy their various ailments.

The intention of the Chinese who came to Canada was never to settle permanently in their new country. Instead, the aspiration for a Chinese sojourner was to work hard to save money, send remittances to his family to supplement their living, as well as return home every three to four years to improve the family status. There, he used his savings possibly to enlarge the family home, or to purchase more land, while fathering even more children if his wife was still of childbearing age. When the time came to retire, he returned to China with sufficient means to live comfortably with his family. On the other hand, a worker, being cut off from his wife or family, was often tempted to cure his loneliness with drink, women, or gambling. As a result, he could only afford to send money home in bits and pieces and was forced to make fewer trips back to China.

From what I am able to ascertain, my great-grandfather fit into this latter category, and his vices were twofold: gambling and opium dens. However, his saving grace was that he earned a good salary in traditional Chinese medicine. The sort of capital my great-grandfather earned should have built a two-story home for the family in Harbin surrounded by an abundance of land for farming. Instead, the remittances he sent home were only enough to establish the Quon household as a family of modest means.

Apart from the money my great-grandfather squandered through gambling and smoking opium, he enabled in 1890 the construction of a permanent dwelling that serves as the ancestral home today. It is a single level stone home of roughly twelve hundred square feet. Adjacent to it is a rice field and small garden for vegetables that is nearly adequate in producing sufficient food to feed the family. Besides the remittances from Canada, jobs around the village would be needed to supplement the income necessary for living.

It is uncertain which years my great-grandfather would have travelled repeatedly across the ocean, but he undoubtedly returned to China at least once before retiring in order to father another two sons after some years of working in Cumberland. This travelling back and forth across the ocean was the general pattern of the men on my father's side. For whichever reason, my great-grandfather ventured to Canada in search of riches, but when it came time to enjoy the benefits of all his years of hard work, he was like most other Chinese, and he just wanted to rest on home soil with his family. Nevertheless, before retiring to the village, my great-grandfather sent for one of his sons so that he in turn could be taught the tradition of Chinese medicine. This is when the next generation, this time my grandfather, came to Canada to contribute to building up the family's wealth.

Conceivably, it was due to the hardships of the floods and droughts that hit China in 1915 and again in 1920 (Yee, 2006, p. 68), but at the age of fifty-two, instead of going home to retire, my great-grandfather called for one of his two surviving sons. Perhaps because the older son was already twenty-one, married and established, the responsibility then fell on to the youngest son at the age of eleven years to join my great-grandfather. My grandfather, Quon Chong Jung, after paying a head tax of five hundred dollars, arrived in Canada in 1921, just two years before most immigration was cut off by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923.

Since my grandfather, now given the English name of Richard, was of school age, he was expected to attend class in Cumberland during the day. However, during the other times, he assisted my great-grandfather with preparing the Chinese herbal medicine packets. This was the way in which a father passed knowledge to his son, but for some lost reason, my great-grandfather terminated these lessons prematurely when he decided to go home to China for the final occasion some time after 1921 but before 1928.

I can only speculate as to when and why my great-grandfather left Canada. Perhaps it was the decline of the Chinese mining community who

served as his client base, or the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, but the number of Chinese workers in Cumberland started to dwindle (Con et al, 1982, p. 217). Perhaps my great-grandfather, by this time in his mid-fifties, felt he was too old to start anew in another town, so his thinking started to turn to retirement in China.

However, his son would only have been in his early teens around this time. My grandfather, Richard, must have experienced a great shock and adjustment when he was torn from the village in which he grew up to live in an unfamiliar land. For this reason, it is possible that my great-grandfather stayed on a few more years, but only as long as 1928 for the following purpose.

My grandfather Richard decided to stay in Canada to continue to help the family financially back home, but without the knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, he had to find work in other jobs until obligation called him back to China. Being the youngest son and unmarried, his duty was to return home to marry a young woman within the district of Hoi Ping that his mother had chosen for him.

In 1928, my grandfather Richard went home to his village of Harbin, in which all the Quon men before him were born, in order to marry in the presence of both of his parents. He stayed long enough to father one daughter, with another on the way, before returning to Canada in 1930. With the Depression going on in his adopted country, my grandfather would move to Alberta to find employment.

After working and saving for four years, responsibility would call him again to China; my grandfather Richard had yet to father a future generation of Quon men. A return trip to Harbin in 1934 resulted in the long awaited birth of his only son the following year. However, 1936 would mark the last time my grandfather would set foot in the ancestral home of his parents, and it would be another twenty years before he would again see his son.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947, but seven years would pass before my grandfather started the paperwork for his own son to come to Canada. Two generations of Quon men had already moved to work abroad,

perhaps my grandfather Richard felt a third might be necessary to ensure the family's wealth in China. By this time, my father was living in Guangzhou to further his studies, but he would move to the British colony of Hong Kong at my grandfather's request, as it was the only departing point from China.

After two years of waiting, in 1956, when my father was a young man of twenty-one, he would leave his mother once again. He would leave a country that was familiar to him to meet a father he had not seen since he was an infant: to be united with a father of whom he had no living memory. While the generations before him arrived in Canada by sea, my father instead boarded a DC-6 aircraft. The Air Canada flight took my wide-eyed father to the foreign places of Tokyo and Alaska, prior to landing in Vancouver. From there, my father finally ended his journey in the even more alien settlement of North Battleford, Saskatchewan. There, like the father and son before them, the two generations hesitantly became acquainted and learned to live quietly side-by-side.

After my father had been residing in Canada for nearly three years, he was asked by his mother to return home, this being Hong Kong, to carry out his filial duty. As the only son, he was expected to marry and to produce a future generation. In January of 1959, my father returned to the British colony in time for Chinese New Year. In place of the village girls that traditionally would have been carefully selected by his mother, my father grew up in another time and another place that afforded him the opportunity to choose his own bride. By the summer, my father met a young woman of his liking through some friends, and by early December of the same year, he was married to her. Just as the Quon men before him, my father stayed long enough to enjoy the birth of a first child, this time the good fortune of a son, within a year after marrying.

In April 1961, my father journeyed for the second time over the Pacific Ocean. Soon after his re-entry, he was greeted with a letter from his wife with the news of a second child on the way. After the birth of his second son in late 1961, my father decided to take advantage of an opportunity unavailable to the generations before him. Previous immigration laws prevented many Chinese

men from bringing their wives over to Canada to join them, thus prohibiting the formation of families among this group of people. Over the years, these laws and restrictions were gradually lifted until this time when my father was able to send for his immediate family to live with him in Canada. However, even that proved to be a difficult process.

In order to clarify this, I must go back in detail to explain some history. In the time before the Chinese Exclusion Act, the majority of Chinese men who moved to Canada were faced with few choices when it came to wives and family life. A Chinese sojourner might already have a wife before coming abroad, or he may make the return trip across the ocean to marry someone chosen by his family when the time came. If he was inclined, and could afford the fees and passage, he could have his wife and any children, join him in Canada. However, this usually occurred only amongst the wealthy merchants.

Alternately, if a man of reasonable means was unable for whichever reasons to have his wife in China join him, he had these options. He could settle on making trips home every few years to visit his wife who obediently waited for him until the time came for him to return to China, or he could take a second wife. In old China, not only was it acceptable to have more than one wife, it also elevated a man's status. Of course the Canadian officials would frown upon Chinese immigrants having more than one spouse, but only if they were aware of a first wife. Apart from searching out gambling and opium operations, the police in Vancouver left the Chinese to themselves in Chinatown, and the Chinese kept their business to themselves.

For the Chinese men who wanted a wife, the number of available women was an issue. Both the Canadian and Chinese peoples did not approve of interracial marriages, so that left most Chinese men with a very small pool of women from which to choose. The ratio of Chinese women to men in Chinatown was never good ever since the start of immigration. In 1911, there were only "twenty-eight Chinese men for every Chinese female; [but] that ratio dropped to ten-to-one by 1921" (Yee, 2006, p. 49). There was an adage among many of the

single men at that time, “There were no ugly girls in Chinatown” (Yee, 2006, p. 139).

Of the females of marriageable age in Chinatown, some of them belonged to the merchant class. Women in this class did not mix with the general Chinese population whose background was mainly peasant and farmer stock. Besides, the merchant families often insisted on their daughters making a more favourable marriage. As a result of an exhausted supply of working class women, the men in Canada had to look elsewhere. The single men were forced to inquire in China for a bride, or in the case of a married man, a *jeep see*, or concubine, who would be willing to move to a foreign country to be partnered with a man she had never even met.

For a woman not from a family of means, this was an advantageous offer, for the rumours of bountiful wealth in Gold Mountain had been impressed upon the villagers. A bride brought over from China had a wedding ceremony in Canada, but a concubine was sent off without fanfare or ceremony. Either way, a great amount of money was still required for her passage, and a Chinese immigrant often had to borrow this money to bring a wife or concubine to Canada. Often it took the woman two to three years of work before repaying the debt in full.

Finally, when an immigrant man had his newly secured wife with him, he could ease his loneliness with her company and begin a family with her. Quite often, there were two simultaneous families: one in China and one in Canada, but all children belonged to the first wife who had traditional claim on them. When the children became of school age, they were often sent back to China for their lessons. The mentality of a Chinese immigrant was still of sojourner, and he wanted his children to be educated in Chinese ways.

However, with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, all Chinese persons living in Canada were required to register with the Immigration Department. Before then, many of the old Chinese immigrants had no formal documents to prove they had legal entry into the country. After the Exclusion Act, children of

Chinese heritage who were born in Canada were provided a certificate from the Department of Immigration and Colonization. Insofar as it served as a sort of birth certificate, the statement “This certificate does not establish legal status in Canada” did not give the Chinese any legal rights. The Chinese who first came to Canada were of an entrepreneurial mindset, and with the Immigration Department’s new requirement of legal documents, some Chinese found ways to work that necessity to their advantage. Thus, the era of paper sons was born, and this, after much explanation, is where my mother fits into this story.

Only the children who were born in Canada had the entitlement of being in the country. When the Immigration Department started the business of sorting out the sons and daughters of Chinese immigrants, two results occurred. With no paper evidence to support the births of children in Canada, many immigrants made false claims of offspring. My great-grandfather on one of his trips to visit China made such an assertion. Upon departure, he declared that two of his sons were born in Canada, but that they were back in the village studying. This is how my grandfather Richard had the opportunity to come to Canada in 1921.

The second result was the practice of selling certificates of Canadian born Chinese. There were two sources of certificates: there were those from people already returned to China, and who had no intention of ever coming back to Canada; and there were those from false claims of children born in Canada. Therefore, a great number of paper sons were generated. Referring once more to my great-grandfather, he sold the second certificate supposedly belonging to his older son for a sum of two thousand dollars to a family with the surname of Wong. All that was required was to match a person to the sex and age on the certificate, and even the issue of ones surname was overlooked by those keen on sending a son to Canada.

Eventually the scheme of the paper sons came to light, and this is when my father and mother experienced more stringent reviews of certificates by the Canadian Immigration Department. In order to sort out that my mother’s entry papers to Canada were indeed legitimate, my father had to hire the services of a

lawyer to first prove his claim as a son to a Canadian citizen to be genuine. Nonetheless, after seeing to all the regulations and procedures to secure his young family to Canada, my father was the first of a succession of Quon men to turn away from his homeland of China, and the first to call Canada his new home.

In 1963, while living in the small community of Blubber Bay on Texada Island, British Columbia, my father was united with his wife and two young sons. Upon his retirement in 1964, my grandfather Richard, at the age of fifty-four made the decision to not return to China. Perhaps he considered Canada even more of a home than China due to the fact he moved abroad at the age of eleven. Possibly, he felt no ties to China now that all three of his children were living in either the United States or Canada. Not even the call of a wife not seen in over thirty years could entice him back, but perhaps that was never his intention. Instead, he packed his belongings and left Calgary to join his son and young family on the West Coast.

I was born in the winter of 1965, and after my father realized the safety hazards of raising a young, growing family isolated from the mainland of British Columbia, he moved all of us to Vancouver within the year. After years and years of waiting for his father to ask his mother over to Canada, my father was prompted into action when the events of the Cultural Revolution threatened to spill over into Hong Kong. It was the son, and not the husband, who invited my paternal grandmother to live with us in Canada.

In 1967, my grandmother arrived, much to the dismay of some, and eventually to nearly all, to assert her presence and place among us. Finally, the whole family moved into the home of my childhood in 1968, where my sister was born the following year, and where three generations of Quons resided altogether under one roof.

Chapter 2.

Autobiography and Wu Xing

Autobiography

This chapter employs the genre of autobiography, and the schema of *Wu Xing*, to tell my story beginning with my grandparents, then parents, and finally, my siblings. Following from a previous autobiographical exploration whereby I began the investigation into what I considered some of my character traits, I was able to attribute a personal trait to a specific family member by using memories and events from my childhood and early adult years. The intention of this project is to broaden the scale to take into account the history of and influences on my grandparents and parents. In doing so, I wish to reveal how that person's Chinese background affected my cultural translation and identity formation as a child growing up in a Canadian setting.

Wu Xing

Before the sharing of my autobiography, I want to first draw the reader's attention to the schema that I will adopt to share my history. *Wu Xing*, or "The Five States of Change," is an ancient Chinese mnemonic device that is normally simplified into the elements of metal, tree (wood), water, earth, and fire. The five elements in the cycle are all related, and their qualities either enhance or weaken one another. It corresponds with a yin or yang character, a particular season, a specified time of day, or a certain directional sign. Each element has its own attribution or association, and this concept is what I use to explain, or perhaps to better understand, my own character. When I consider how I have come to embody these traits, I connect it with the members of my family and to my

Chinese Canadian upbringing. In light of this, it only seems logical to assign the elements of *Wu Xing* to explain each of my characteristics.

All things begin in the east. So, before I share the remembered events of my past, I will start with who I am from the beginning. I am Jean Wymen Quon, the third child, the first daughter, and the first born of the first generation to my parents Ken and Joan. I was born in the early morning of the 20th of December in 1965, during a winter storm that threatened my parents' journey aboard a small water taxi from Texada Island across to the hospital in Powell River.

My father gave me the name Jean because he liked the sound of it. In later years, after I was born, he heard it in a song from a movie. When he was in a playful mood, or if he was trying to get me out of a sour one, I remember he used to serenade me in a surprisingly beautiful tenor. His singing voice was so different from his everyday speaking voice. For some reason, when he sang in English, he no longer sounded Chinese to me.

Jean, Jean, roses are red
All the leaves have gone green
And the clouds are so low
You can touch them, and so
Come out to the meadow, Jean

Both of my parents gave to me my Chinese name of Wei Man (惠敏) because of my father's father, my Yeh Yeh. My father explained to me once a long time ago, "Your Yeh Yeh didn't always think like a traditional Chinese. Although he loved your two older brothers, he yearned for a grand-daughter, a *shun nui*, born from his own son." In Yeh Yeh's thinking, he knew his male grandchildren ensured the continuation of the family name, otherwise ancestors wandered in the After World for thousands years. However, he also knew that girls, unlike boys, always returned home to love and to care for their elderly parents. The birth of a granddaughter fulfilled my grandfather's yearning. For this reason, my Chinese name can be translated to mean "clever favour" or "kind act from above."

To the Chinese, there are proper names to address each person depending on factors such as sex, age, or whether it is a maternal or paternal relation. It is a very elaborate, rigid and confusing system, but every well-raised Chinese child should be taught the difference. Depending on whether a brother is older or younger than you, they are called *Goh Goh* or *Dai Dai* respectively, whereas older and younger sisters are referred to as *Geh Geh* and *Mui Mui*. Unlike the English language whereby only the two terms of grandmother or grandfather are used, the Chinese language has a further distinction. I must refer to my paternal grandfather as *Yeh Yeh* and my paternal grandmother as *Mah Mah*, or in the case of my family, *Ah Ngen*. Along the same lines, I must call my maternal grandfather *Goong Goong*, and my maternal grandmother *Poh Poh*.

Section 1. Paternal Grandparents

Yeh Yeh

Honouring the Dead

Twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, my father invites me to *hang saan*, or literally, “walk mountain” with him. This is where I am asked to join him at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Burnaby to pay respect to my grandparents. At the beginning of the call, he always insists, “It’s not so important, but come only if you can make the time.” I suspect he means what he says, but nevertheless, my sense of dutifulness always sees me asking what day and time to join him. When I was much younger, it used to be only Yeh Yeh’s headstone that the entire family gathered around. It wasn’t until thirty-one years later that my grandmother Ah Ngen rested beside him, but the custom remains exactly the same.

Each time, my parents arrive with three items. There is always a box that holds the food and wine offerings, the same metal pail that we use to burn the paper money, and a fresh bouquet of flowers. While I divide the flowers and put them in the wells, my father immediately busies himself with the rest of the preparation. He takes out a large tray and places it down on the grass. On it he adds three porcelain bowls already filled with white rice, three pairs of red plastic chopsticks, and finally, three small cups that he fills with rice wine. Once this is done, he unwraps an entire roasted chicken that I know he has purchased just that morning from a shop in Chinatown.

“If you ever buy roast meat, make sure you go to Dollar Meats on Keefer,” my father often recommends. He pauses momentarily before adding with his eyes wide for effect, “They got big chicken and duck. Good price, too.” I watch as he first tears the bottom beak off the chicken, and then one of the wings, before placing the two items in a small porcelain bowl already containing a hard-boiled egg. As a child I used to imagine that this ritual enabled the dead to act in

the Other World, and even perhaps to communicate with the living in my world. Funny, it only occurred to me recently to ask my father why this is done, but he only shrugged and said, "I got no idea. That's what you're supposed to." This makes me wonder what other superstitions and rituals have been lost over the years. I rather suspect more will be gone after my parents are deceased, as I am merely a spectator with no true understanding of the celebrations and rituals I participate in today.

After the food and wine are ready, my father takes out a lighter from his breast pocket to light the incense and candles. He usually chooses a fair day to visit the cemetery, but sometimes during inclement weather, we have to use our bodies or umbrellas to act as a shield in order to light the sticks. When the two items are lit and smoking, he inserts them into the ground next to the headstones. Following this, the paper money is ready to be burned. As children, we four siblings used to take turns burning the paper once we were old enough to be trusted to do so safely. When it was my turn, I remember watching my mother's hands as they carefully unwrapped the bundle of fine, brightly coloured paper. She would skilfully work the paper between her hands until they magically fanned apart like a deck of cards. Then she would guide me in Chinese, "Don't throw it in all at once. You have to separate each sheet and burn it slowly." As an adult, I still deposit each sheet into the flaming pail just as I was instructed when I was young.

Once the paper money is smouldering, my father will again reach into his breast pocket to take out a cigarette. He doesn't smoke it, but he will light the cigarette and bend down to insert it in between the raised letters on Yeh Yeh's headstone. Years ago, although I don't recall exactly when, my father rose to his feet after doing just this, and asked us with a glint in his eye, "You want to know why I do this?" Sensing the start of a story, I must have eagerly leaned in so as not to miss a single word.

My father recounted the time when Yeh Yeh was ill in the hospital. Content with the news that Yeh Yeh was to be discharged the following day, my

father turned to leave when his father called him back to ask in their *Toisan* village dialect, “Wait. You got any cigarettes?” My father had only a couple of cigarettes left in his Rothman’s package, but he was happy to leave both with Yeh Yeh. That would be the last exchange between father and son, for Yeh Yeh died unexpectedly in the early hours the next morning. Sometimes, when my father is feeling particularly nostalgic, he will retell this story as he customarily leaves a cigarette on the headstone.

To end the visit, my father clasps his hands together in front of his chest, before he asks us children to pay our respects and to say good-bye. All of us bow three times towards each of the headstones. My father then tells me to say thank you to Yeh Yeh, and later Ah Ngen, for taking care of me. Obediently, I clasp my hands together and silently give my thanks to both grandparents. Now that I am older, I often take this time to reflect on the few disjointed memories I have of Yeh Yeh, for he passed away just weeks after I turned four.

Arms Too Long Empty

Much of what is known about my grandfather Richard has already been recounted in the previous chapter. He came to Canada to live with his father in Cumberland, B.C. when he was only eleven years old. There, he was schooled in English during the day, and in his free time, he assisted his father with the medicinal herbal packets for the railway workers. My grandfather went back to his village twice, once to marry and father two daughters, and the second to see the birth of his only son. Yeh Yeh would never return to China again. In later years, he would even go as far as to say that his wife had passed away.

By the time my grandfather arrived in Canada for the third occasion, conditions in the country had changed for the worse. In 1930, The Great Depression hit Canada. The few remaining jobs were to be found in small centres all across the country for someone like my grandfather, and he needed to travel through Vancouver at some point to set off for his next job prospect. Despite the name, Chinatown would be a popular settling point for numerous

groups of people. Besides the Chinese, this area of town would be home to a plenitude of people including Japanese, Eastern Europeans, Jews, and Blacks (Yee, 2006, p. 82). However, with the multitudes of Chinese coming to Vancouver before my grandfather over the past several decades, clan associations would have been established.

To the Chinese, the first loyalty is to *gee gay yun*, or to your own relations. In China this normally meant an allegiance for families or even entire villages. In Canada, with few family members to look to for support, the Chinese created clan associations based on surnames. The Quan Association was established in 1925, and it was most likely one of the first places my grandfather stopped. The association served as a meeting place for people with the same surname where news could be shared with one another. Furthermore, it was set up to assist the Chinese people with issues including accommodation, a meal, a loan, or even a job if it was available. By 1931, four out of five Chinatown residents were out of work (Yee, 2006, p. 103), so my grandfather made plans to join a small number of men in a business opportunity in the prairies. Never having fully learned the tradition of Chinese medicine, my grandfather would turn to any employment he could find over the next three decades.

By the time Yeh Yeh was fifty-four years old, despite all the years of toiling in Canada for a living, he did not have much to show for it. According to my father, Yeh Yeh did not have the best head for business, and much of his meagre earnings were lost either in poor transactions or unfortunate circumstances. When I ask my father whether Yeh Yeh had any failings in character with which he may have squandered the family fortune, I am told otherwise. My grandfather, apparently, was a gentle and kind man, but he was not a businessman like his father before him. The rumour in the family was that Yeh Yeh even had property in today's upscale neighbourhood of Yorkville in Toronto, however he needed to sell it in order to finance a business prospect in Saskatchewan. All one has to do is to look at which area is better off economically today to know whether Yeh Yeh made the right business decision at that time.

Having lived in Canada since he was eleven, perhaps by the time my grandfather's own thoughts turned to retirement he no longer dreamed of feeling his feet planted back on Chinese soil. With his parents passed away, two daughters in California, and one son starting his own family in Canada, maybe my grandfather didn't see the point in going back to China. It's possible that after all those years of living like a bachelor, he didn't really know anything else except for Canada. Further, with the new laws allowing families to be reunited in Canada, maybe fewer men were making the decision to return to China.

For whatever explanation, when my father asked Yeh Yeh to come to Texada Island, my grandfather did so. There he would be reunited with his son and daughter-in-law. In his new home, he could enjoy life through the eyes of his two young grandsons, and he could cradle in his arms, too long empty, his infant granddaughter. There, for the first time since he was a boy, family of whom he could call his own, surrounded him.

The Kitchen God

The kitchen is the single place that I connect with Yeh Yeh, as this seemed the only room I remember him inside our family home. When we were young, and we all lived on the one floor of our house, there were eight of us who shared three rooms. Being the youngest, my sister slept in the room facing the mountains with my parents. In the middle was the smallest and warmest room with a bunk bed for my two older brothers. In the largest room, my grandparents lay side by side. Next to them was a tall, white chest of drawers, then another single bed, and this is where I rested. Despite the fact that I shared a room with my grandparents, I don't really have any connections of Yeh Yeh in that room.

The kitchen, however, is where I remember him the most. Around our Formica kitchen table with the chrome legs and speckled turquoise table top, the eight of us sat in pairs: my mother and sister; my two elder brothers; my two grandparents; finally, my father and myself. Just for a short while, I recall the security of being flanked by my father and grandfather. No matter which way I

turned, a large presence was there on either side of me. On the nights when I couldn't sleep, my grandfather's voice called out to me in the dark. While the rest of the household was sleeping, we silently made our way to our familiar kitchen where Yeh Yeh prepared for me a cup of hot water with condensed milk. The convex kettle reflected our calm waiting in the dimly lit room. Silently, we sat together until I was finished and ready for bed once more.

During the days when my brothers were in school, I had my grandfather all to myself. My only recollection is the two of us in the kitchen: he reading; and I playing, inseparable for hours on end. During dinner, sometimes my father filled my bowl with green vegetables that I quietly refused to eat, while my grandfather, sensing my distress, deftly removed the offending green to his bowl with a quick flick of his chopsticks. It is remarkable to me now how my gratefulness for this small act was conveyed without a word or glance, but simply sensed between grandfather and granddaughter.

Today, the kitchen is the room where I feel most at ease, with the pots of boiling water, familiar food smells, the warmth from the oven, and with windows which face southward just like when I was a child. I wonder what my character would be like if Yeh Yeh had been with me a few more years. I remember him being such a quiet man, who spoke or moved only when absolutely necessary. When I look at his Head Tax Certificate, his eyes, even as an eleven year old, have the look of an old soul reincarnated many times. No energy was wasted needlessly with him. Just now, as I am writing this, it occurs to me that maybe he has taught me to be contented when I am still and quiet with myself. I don't feel as though I always have to share my feelings about him, but when I do, my memories of him are only intermittent and fragmented snapshots from a child's mind.

Condensed milk streaming

into a cup like a ribbon, green lettuce

untouched, Campbell's mushroom soup.

I don't recall the sound
of your voice, or the feel
of your hand in mine,
but I know I draw strength
from your silence. Walking to the
grocery store, your sudden fall, and
rolling cans upon the sidewalk.
Unspoken secrets from Ah Ngen,
and private understandings between us.
Then I see you
laying in a casket.
Confusion.
And then you are
gone from me.
I don't remember
thinking about you
after that,
but now that I am older,
sometimes when I am
alone in the kitchen,
my thoughts
weave their way
back to you.

Ah Ngen

Love, War, and Tragedy

Whereas I was only just four years old when my paternal grandfather passed away, I have nearly four decades of memories to draw upon when it comes to Ah Ngen. These days when I think about my grandmother, I realize I have come to a conclusion that has only recently taken form. Childhood memories are not necessary happy ones, and I can say without a hint of malice or resentment, that I have only a singular, pleasant recollection of my paternal grandmother. Although I am only able to provide a few basic details of this event, I can offer more a general feeling of one of the rare times she and I spent an enjoyable afternoon outside of the house together.

The one and only time I recall a truly positive memory of my grandmother is sometime when I was between the ages of four and five. My recollection begins after a trolley bus ride to Vancouver's Chinatown. I know now that the Shaw Theatre was nearby the corner of Hastings and Gore, but what I didn't know at the time was Ah Ngen was taking me to her favourite pastime, and to my first experience, of Chinese opera. Chinese operas are about love, war and tragedy, and often with all three occurring within the same show. These performances also reinforced the Confucian values with which my grandmother was raised.

However, I didn't recall any of this then. What I do remember was her purchasing for me a packet of Glossette chocolate covered raisins before we seated ourselves in the cool, dark theatre. I remember savouring nearly the entire packet, but I saved a few so that I could hear them shake in the box just like in the television commercials. Of course, I didn't understand a word of the odd sounding singing and clanging instruments of the opera, but as a child I admired the elaborate make-up and costumes of the performers. I especially remember one of the characters and his headdress with the red spheres that seemed to vibrate whenever he moved.

There are no other details that I can share about this one memory, but only that it is the solitary positive experience I can associate with my grandmother. Each and every other memory of my grandmother, even if it was once positive, has been tainted or revealed to me as false or deceiving. When I was younger, I often thought of her as an insufferable woman, for she had a way of choking life till it was devoid of happiness. Now that I am older, and the years have softened previously powerful emotions, I wonder to myself if there was ever a time when my grandmother might have been generous and contented.

In the Village the Customs are Clear

It is said by some that first-born daughters bring good luck, and that a string of sons will surely follow. My paternal grandmother, Woo Cho Kam, was born in 1910, to a family of humble means from a rural village in southern China. However, she was not the first-born daughter whose job it is to welcome her younger brothers into the family and care for them; instead she was the second-born daughter, and more likely a second disappointment, for a family looking for sons to secure the lineage of future generations.

No Chinese family is complete unless there is the presence of the desired males. Sons stay within the family to ensure that parents will be looked after in their old age, and that there will be someone to worship them when they are passed on to the next world. Otherwise, the spirits of all the deceased ancestors will wander the After World for ten thousand years before they eventually fade away to nothing. Daughters, on the other hand, are not kept in the family, but they are “given away” when the time comes for marriage. Then they move into the homes of their new husbands to bear for his family the desired sons. For centuries, this had been the way for daughters, and this was no different for my grandmother.

Fortunately for the family, after the birth of my grandmother, there followed the birth of two preferred sons to ensure the family’s wealth and place in the world. Once a son is born, the family, especially the wife whose sole job is to

produce male heirs, is able to rest assured that calamity has been avoided. I suspect my grandmother knew her precarious place in the family as a lowly female. Being the second daughter, Ah Ngen also recognized that unless she was obedient and clever, she would remain last in favour to her brothers and older sister. I suppose this was a real fear for my grandmother, for she also played favourites later in life with her own two daughters and two granddaughters alike. That is the problem with same-sex siblings, there is always the opportunity to be compared and judged.

In the Confucian way of thinking, Chinese wives and daughters have no freedom to make their own choices in life, and they are expected to accept their fates without question. Actually, there are two choices: one is to obey those above you; the other is killing yourself and being cast out from the family. Daughters are seen as temporary members of a family, as they are being fed and clothed only until the time when they leave to live with another family. No education, no medicine and no extra kind words are wasted on females; those luxuries are all reserved for the males in a family. Nonetheless, I would like to imagine that parents love all of their children, and mothers especially dread the time when their too young daughters leave their side to live like orphans in another home. For once a woman is married, she severs all ties with her own family in order to forge new ties with her marital home.

By the time Ah Ngen was eighteen, she was informed by her mother that she had found for her a *ho muen how*, or a good doorway, in which was to be her new home. When it comes to marriage, a great deal of trouble is taken to look carefully into the background of prospective boys and girls to avoid a mismatch and ensuing embarrassment between families. Parents never consider a love match, and sons and daughters alike would never think to ask. If truth were told, love between a new husband and wife threatened the authority a mother-in-law had over her new daughter-in-law. In a traditional Chinese household, relationships follow a very strict order.

The formal announcement to the village arrived that Ah Ngen was to be married to someone whose family home was only three to four miles away, but to a man who was already reaping the tremendous benefits of living in Gold Mountain. At this point in a girl's life she becomes the centre of attention. With the marriage date consulted, and the bride price settled, all preparation for the union occupied my grandmother's life, but I presume that she must have had burning questions. "Would her new husband be a handsome and kind man?" "Would her new mother-in-law be helpful or demanding?" "Would she live with her new family only temporarily, or would she shortly move to Canada?"

All too soon, the wedding day arrived, and my grandmother met her new intended for the first time. I can only imagine a shy meeting between two awkward teenagers suddenly joined together as husband and wife, but this was the way in those days. My grandmother lived with her husband in his home, and there she became acquainted with her new surroundings and way of life. Her anticipation must have been great with her first pregnancy, and she was greeted with the birth of a first-born daughter – the one that is supposed to bring luck. After that, my grandmother would have to wait to be deemed a worthy wife, for her husband returned to Canada in order to avoid paying the head tax, or "traffic fee" as the Chinese called it, a second time. The child in my grandmother's womb was unborn when her husband left, but later, she sent news that he was a father to a second daughter.

In the year of 1930, at the age of twenty, my grandmother found herself alone as a young wife living with her in-laws and as a mother of two young daughters. Without the birth of a son, my grandmother did not yet secure her position in the family. However, I know she was capable of being quick with her hands and sweet with her words, and armed with these two talents, she served as the model, obedient wife expecting the return of her overseas husband. Meanwhile, my grandmother had nothing else to do but to bide her time and wait.

Hearing the news that her husband was returning for a visit, my grandmother must have been a bride all over again. The house was quickly

prepared, the kitchen was full of cooking and activity, and clothes were embroidered and pressed. My grandmother waited four long years for her husband's return, and on this occasion her presence in the family was finally legitimized by the birth of a son. The Chinese word good (好) are the two characters of girl (女) followed by boy (子). Standing next to one another, the character denotes balance and harmony. With her husband next to her, and her family complete with both females and males, my grandmother's heart must have been full and happy. Of course, this is something I will never know for certain, but only as I imagine it to be.

In 1934, still as a young woman of twenty-six, my grandmother would again say good-bye to her husband. Her earlier contentedness would be necessary in order to carry her through the tumultuous events and long years of the Japanese occupation, civil war, the marriage and departure of one of her daughters, and Mao Zedong's Communist policies. In 1954, my grandmother moved from her village to Hong Kong with two of her children. Having already sent her second daughter to the United States, my grandmother also saw her eldest daughter and her young family off to California soon afterward. Shortly after that, in 1957, she sent her last child, her son this time, to Canada so that he could join his father. Alone in Hong Kong apart from her mother-in-law, my grandmother lived once more like a widow for another ten years, waiting silently for someone to tell her what to do next.

After an absence of thirty-one years, my grandmother, at the age of fifty-seven, was finally invited to Canada to be reunited with her husband. Again, the two were like strangers to one another, but this time, they were also too old in years to be shy lovers. Although my paternal grandparents stood next to each other like husband and wife, I suspect there was no real bond between them. I don't remember Ah Ngen being such a tyrant yet, so did Yeh Yeh's presence temper her? Did she only become bitter after his death? After all that waiting in silence, she was finally living the life she was meant to have with her son and grandsons nearby. Not three years later does her husband pass away to leave

her waiting once again for the day when she can join him in the After World. Perhaps this was when my grandmother began to question her life.

Torn away from a country she understood, and forced into another, my grandmother must have asked herself if this had to be her fate. Hadn't she done everything that was expected of her? Was being with a husband who made no effort to see her for three decades, and living with a son too busy attending to the needs of his own family, her reward for all her years of servitude? In the village the customs were clear, and my grandmother knew her place. In this new country, she was without language and isolated from all that she had ever known.

A good wife never questions; the answer is always respect and compliance. No matter how my grandmother felt about her life, she would have followed the Confucian order so ingrained in her despite travelling an entire ocean away from her home. This sense of duty compelled her to bear her bitterness in silence. My grandmother may have once been a happy young woman, or she may also have always been the controlling bitter person I knew her to be. I can never know what lay in my grandmother's heart, but one fact I know for certain, she acted like the wronged heroine in a Chinese opera, and she made her misery known far and wide to others.

Water 水 “Judgemental”

The third of the *Wu Xing* elements is water, and it denotes the North, winter, darkness, and night. Those under this influence are believed to be flexible, yielding, and pliant. Those with an excess of this element are thought to be too fluid, therefore they have difficulty choosing a path or staying the course. Conversely, those with a deficiency in this element are said to be stubborn, negative, disparaging, and critical. To my way of thinking, all of these characteristics can be used to accurately describe my grandmother Ah Ngen.

Traditional Chinese parents normally do not demonstrate their love through kind words and embraces. Instead, they point out the faults of their children or find wrong and bad things about them. This is done with the hope that the children will rise above the criticism to improve and become better. The birth of same sex children will always lead to comparison, and in my grandmother's case with her older sister, this was no different. Whether Ah Ngen was truly the better of the two daughters, or whether my grandmother called attention to the faults of her sister, the story that is passed along is that Ah Ngen was preferred to the older daughter. In the mind of my grandmother, someone had to be superior to the other; someone, preferably her, had to win. From my grandmother, I attribute my characteristic of being judgmental.

Sometimes I find it sad that I really only have one memory associated with Ah Ngen that is not tainted with any negative feelings until she herself became much older. This memory occurred when I was four or five years old, so perhaps I was too young to have many deliberate faults, or at least undeveloped enough to have them worked out of me. Both of my parents worked to support the family when I was growing up, so Ah Ngen was the one most responsible for looking after me.

When I was old enough to go to school, it still was necessary to report in to my grandmother when I returned home. In fact, when I think about it now, I didn't spend much time with my parents when I was a child. Either they worked during the day, or they were out socializing with their *mah jong* partners on the weekend. The only time we were all together as a family was during dinner on the weekdays and at dim sum on Sunday mornings. Sometimes, I had my father to myself when we watched hockey games, or I had my mother for my own when she taught me how to mend or sew clothing.

Without a doubt, my grandmother was the strongest influence on me until I became old enough to look after myself. Even then, I could not get away from her harsh words until I moved out of the family home. Perhaps my grandfather had a very good reason for leaving Ah Ngen in China. I suspect it was much to

the chagrin of my grandfather and mother that my father brought Ah Ngen to live with the family in Canada. My grandfather passed away a few years later, but the rest of us had to live with my grandmother for another thirty-four years.

My grandmother was very talented at calling out orders and contributing criticism. Ah Ngen focused her criticisms on me, and later Emily, but rarely my two elder brothers. When she wanted, Ah Ngen could pour out sweet words coated with honey, but more often she had an acid tongue like a hot iron searing through tender skin. According to her upbringing, female children do not contribute to the wealth of the family. Whereas sons keep or bring in riches, daughters are an expense as they are fed and clothed for a number of years before being sent out to produce sons for another family.

With this mindset, Ah Ngen tried to raise my sister and me to be obedient, to not question those above us, and to act with just a sufficient amount of Chinese humility. When I cried or fussed over something I couldn't have, my grandmother would scold in Chinese, "Why do you think only about yourself? A girl can never ask; she can only listen!" Perhaps she didn't think my tears were worth crying when she had had a much more difficult life than me. What is a lost toy or a scraped knee compared to what she has had to endure?

When I grew older and refused to follow her ways, needless to say, Ah Ngen did not approve of my deviation from her determined path of a girl. Daughters should not throw away family money by being educated in university. Daughters must accept everything they are told without question. Daughters must learn to eat their own wishes before those of their elders. There was a difference between boys and girls, for I could not cry or shout if I was disappointed. I had to be compliant and mindful of my elders. My grandmother was disproving of much that I did, and even when I thought I was being obedient, it was rarely acknowledged. When I showed my will against hers, she would admonish me by saying, "Your sister is more dutiful than you, and that is why I have *always* liked her better."

Of all my siblings, I was the one to come head to head with my grandmother the most often. It seemed to me that Ah Ngen did not discipline my two older brothers as much, and as boys, they were free to come and go as they pleased. My sister and I were under constant watch and instruction, but my sister had the advantage of letting my grandmother's harsh words drop ineffectually to the floor as soon as they left her mouth. I, on the other hand, would stupidly let her words anger me.

I always had a difficult time letting my grandmother know how I felt. Despite living in Canada for many decades, my grandmother insulated herself in a world of Chinese, and she never learned to speak English. Growing up, I spoke Chinese with my grandmother, a mix of Chinese and English with my parents, and English with my brothers who were four and five years older than me. By the time I entered school, I started speaking English both inside and outside our home, unless I was conversing with my grandmother. The extent of my Chinese was that of a five year old, and hardly the level required to make my point when I argued with my grandmother. Although I desperately wanted to, I couldn't explain to her that, "This isn't China! Girls don't have to act that way here," or "If you want to cling to the old ways of China, why don't *you* go back?"

Besides my linguistic deficiency, the problem was further compounded with the fact that I could still understand her malicious words and comments. She often hurled abuses and criticisms at me, and on more than one occasion, my grandmother reminded me, "You're not a Westerner. Don't forget, you are a Chinese!" Then with a sneer, she maliciously added, "Not only that, you are just a worthless girl!" Within a very short time, two generations in our home had lost the ability to communicate, but my grandmother still managed to make her feelings known to the rest of us.

Now that I am older and have a better understanding of my grandmother's mindset, I wonder if she said such terrible things to me because she actually loved me. The old Chinese way is to say the opposite of what you think, so that the gods or fate did not take away something you cherished. Babies were

birthed in barns, and then called “ugly pig” in order to deceive any evil spirits. Was my grandmother trying to encourage me to be an even better granddaughter by saying such disapproving comments?

This is when I need to turn to my siblings to ask them their thoughts. As much as I want to believe that my grandmother was once truly a kind and contented woman, my siblings validate my opinion of her being harsh and cruel instead. Used to being told what to do, Ah Ngen must have found it a shock to suddenly be the person telling four unruly grandchildren how to behave. What other way did she know to act other than to be disparaging and blunt?

Even though I am learning to be less critical, I sometimes hear it in my words now when I speak before thinking, or when I am put in a defensive mood. To be certain, my grandmother was lacking in the element of water. I am born in the year of the snake, and the element that governs me is fire. As fire weakens water, I too am lacking in this element. Therefore, it is no wonder that I learned from someone also wanting in water to be judgmental.

Section 1. Maternal Grandparents

Goong Goong

The only connections I have to my maternal grandfather are two items. One is a photograph of Goong Goong and his wife when they are young. Their hair is thick and glossy, and their skin is as clear and smooth as a pearl. Both are smiling into the camera, heads slightly inclined toward one another, their faces full of light and expectation. The other is a Communist publication about all the graduates of the Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou, China. In it is a short paragraph written in Chinese detailing my grandfather's role as a military elite. Apart from these two belongings, Goong Goong's existence is shrouded in mystery and lost with the passing of my maternal grandmother.

Since he was sentenced to death before my birth, I obviously never had the opportunity to meet him, yet snippets of his past are uncovered from time to time. For this very reason, this side of my family is more intriguing to me, at least to my way of thinking. Even as I write this section of the project, I am considering ways of discovering more truths about my maternal grandfather. Although my association to Goong Goong is not very strong, just the few pieces of information and small details I come across are enough of a connection to deepen my sense of pride for my ancestors.

Honest, but Not Too Smart

My maternal grandfather, Cheung Chong Kwun, was born into a privileged family in Hainan, China in 1904. Neither my mother, nor any of my uncles, can give me exact details, but Goong Goong was one of a large brood of children provided by one of his father's four wives. In those days, parents arranged the marriages of their children; after that, and for whatever reason, the men were free to take on subsequent wives as they wished. However, all children belong to the first wife, and they are numbered sequentially, regardless of which wife

gave birth to the infant. Other than this, no one alive in my family can tell me any further details regarding Goong Goong's family.

I didn't know this until recently, but my grandfather was married to another woman other than my grandmother. Through this arranged marriage in 1922, Goong Goong fathered eight children of whom four were boys and four were girls. Within this time, he also attended the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924. According to the publication in my possession that outlines the students at the academy, my grandfather moved up in the Kuomintang Army as the National Revolutionary Army's platoon leader, company commander, battalion commander, and lastly, Colonel. After graduation, my grandfather went to fight for the Kuomintang Army and the ideals of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen to unify China from feuding warlords.

The Japanese Invasion in 1937 caused much havoc in China, especially for a member of the military. My grandfather was moved from place to place, and his young family was also forced to retreat from the dangers of the Japanese invading from the north. Although none of his sons or daughters was lost to illness or injury during all the movement, the equally distressing news arrived in 1938 that his wife had gone missing during all the confusion. I have no idea what effort went into searching for his wife, but with his eight children safely settled in with their grandparents, Goong Goong went back to fighting against the Japanese.

Interestingly enough, during this period of disorder, my grandfather chose to marry for a second time. He established his new wife in Guangzhou, and fathered another seven children, of which the first surviving child is my mother. At this time, with the onset of World War II, the Kuomintang and Communists put aside their differences to join forces in a united effort against the Japanese.

My father has a story of Goong Goong that he has only shared with me once in my life. My father describes his father-in-law as a principled soldier, but at the same time, "not very smart." During a fight against the Japanese, my grandfather's battalion captured a Japanese General. In an attempt to free the

officer, the Japanese offered my grandfather a bribe of fifty ounces of gold, which was considered a tremendous amount at that time. Knowing this was against proper conduct, my grandfather refused the offer. However, this was to no avail as a junior soldier to my grandfather accepted the gold and secretly set the Japanese officer free. Apparently, after Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's death, many of the officers became corrupt under the rule of Chiang Kai-Shek. However, my grandfather never took advantage of it. Hence, my father's opinion of, "Your Goong Goong was a very honest man," before tapping his head and continuing, "Just not too smart."

The Kuomintang and Communists would fight together against a common enemy, but as soon as the war against the Japanese ended, the two groups resumed their civil conflict and fought for the spoils of what was left of China. In the meantime, after the end of the Second World War, Goong Goong became the Police Chief of Hainan Island. According to my youngest uncle on my mother's side, Goong Goong started to become disillusioned with the Kuomintang Army and its ideals after Chiang Kai-Shek was established as leader. Whereas Sun wanted to unite China to take her through a period of modernization, Chiang wanted to revert back to an imperialist regime with himself at the head. My grandfather continued to support the Kuomintang, but he started to sympathize with the Communists. Later, in a show against the corruption of the Kuomintang, my grandfather assisted in an uprising in support of the Communists. This decision would haunt him in future years when both parties would rise against him.

Goong Goong's first arrest was at the hands of his own party in 1949. In an effort to search out those who showed sympathy for the Communists, my grandfather was found guilty and condemned to death. Fortunately, my grandfather's connection to the Whampoa Military Academy proved useful, and a former classmate with a high position in the army was able to have the sentence reduced to life imprisonment. Goong Goong spent some time in the Hainan prison, but in 1950, when the newly victorious Communists defeated the

Kuomintang once and for all, the Communists took over the entire city and freed everyone from prison.

However, in 1951, the Communists began conducting their own trials against former Kuomintang officers. Although his second wife implored him to take the entire family to safety in Taiwan, my grandfather did not have the means to move two wives and fourteen children across the strait to safety. Instead, he accepted the promise of help from a Communist officer whom he had helped to save, and Goong Goong believed that his record with assisting the Communists would work in his favour. Regrettably, this was not the case. In late 1951, Goong Goong was arrested a second time, and the Communists later executed him with a single bullet to the head.

Poh Poh

Endless Cups of Tea

My maternal grandmother rented the top floor of an old house on Georgia Street in Chinatown. On the days that I went to her home for lunch, I let myself in with the key she had given me. As I climbed up the steep, narrow pathway to the second floor, two things occurred as the stairs creaked beneath my feet. The first was the ancient smell of the house in my nose. I can't remember it exactly to describe it now, but I vaguely recall a layered mix of wood, incense, old linoleum, and something mysterious I still cannot describe to this day. The second was my voice, suddenly childlike, echoing off the walls as I called to my grandmother in Chinese, "Poh Poh, I've arrived." Before reaching the landing, I would hear my grandmother reply from the kitchen where she was preparing our meal, "Ah Nee? Good, you're here." My grandmother and I quickly established a routine once I started visiting, and it did not vary much until the day when I stopped calling on her.

Despite seeing her for nearly three years once a week for lunch, I can only picture two rooms inside her home. One was the room that served as both the eating and living area. As I crossed into this room, I always noticed the ceramic pot filled with hot tea and two tea cups my grandmother had set out for my visit. I also saw that my grandmother set out her prettiest pair of ivory chopsticks for me. By contrast, my grandmother's own pair was simple, wooden, and free of any adornment.

In order to get to the second room, I remember crossing through this front area and turning left into the small kitchen. There I would find Poh Poh at the stove filling the plates with food, or sitting on a low wooden stool gently picking the tails off each of the bean sprouts one by one. If this were the case, I would join her in this last act of lunch preparation. Just through watching her hands, I learned to remove any soft, green shells from the heads of the bean sprouts, as

well as any roots that looked like long, fine tails. Once the bean sprouts had been added to the meal, my grandmother and I sat down at the table. Every time I went over to eat, we unfailingly had a Buddhist feast of vegetables and fried flat rice noodles with scrambled eggs and bean sprouts.

I'm certain the conversations between Poh Poh and I were rather halting at first, but I quickly rediscovered my Chinese vocabulary. Soon, the sounds of Cantonese would once again feel comfortable rolling off of my tongue. Of course, my grandmother had to simplify her sentences, and she had to help me with mine when I stumbled for a word or phrase. Through our weekly visits, and over countless cups of Chinese tea, my Cantonese improved to a point whereby we could exchange the happenings of our lives and of the other people in our family.

I do recall the few times she shared some of the past events of her life, but just as quickly as she started them, she ended them abruptly when the memories became too painful for her to speak aloud. I wish now that I had the courage then to inquire more about this period of her life. Instead, I let the questions remain in my head where they still sit today. At the end of my visit, I always thanked her for making such a delicious meal and promised to come again the following week. In response, Poh Poh kindly refused my thanks by saying that the meal was nothing, and that I could come anytime I wished.

Having grown up in Canada, I didn't know this at the time, but in the Confucian way of thinking, a daughter, once married off, severs all ties with her family. The rules are so clear and strict that a mother would never think of helping her own daughter's children for fear of ridicule or scorn. Even though I was a granddaughter born from her own daughter, Poh Poh did not follow this way of thinking. Poh Poh never once hesitated to give me attention or to show me love. In much later years, I learned over time that Poh Poh did not share the same Confucian attitudes as my paternal grandmother despite her being born and raised in China.

After I changed employment, and no longer made the weekly visits to Poh Poh, if she ever felt slighted, she never let on. Instead, on those sporadic occasions when I made the trip to Chinatown to see Poh Poh in her new home, she smiled as she opened the door wide for me to enter, and she always asked, as is the Chinese custom, if I had eaten yet. Today, my grandmother's house that she rented no longer stands on Georgia Street, and in its place, is a newer four-storey building complete with shops and apartments. As for the house that she later purchased with her sons, it was sold several years ago to a neighbour with plans to build a triplex.

When I look back now, I am wracked with guilt at not visiting my grandmother as often as I should have once I became too busy with my own life. Yet, Poh Poh never gave me one reproachful look or said one reprimanding word. By my own doing, I will carry this shame and remorse with me the rest of my life, but at the same time, I will remember a very special period when I had only one person in my life to call Poh Poh, and who in turn, was the only person ever to call me Ah Nee.

A Woman's Fate

My maternal grandmother, Deng Kim Ha, was the second born, but first daughter, of eight children. She was born in 1916 in Maoming, China to a family of considerable means. As a daughter of a wealthy family, her education was not ignored, and she had private tutors to give her lessons for a many number of years. My grandmother had servants to help attend to her personal needs, and she had many siblings and cousins to keep her company. However, such an auspicious start in life does not always guarantee happiness, for a woman's fate is not in her hands.

Much of what I know about Poh Poh's life is not documented, so I have relied heavily on the memories of my mother until she moved away at the age of fifteen, and my youngest uncle who lived with my grandmother the longest. Although they may be able to tell me information from the time they were young

children and onwards, they know little about Poh Poh's life before then. Despite that, between the people in my family, there are some facts that we have been able to piece together.

Although Japan and China fought intermittently since 1931, the year of 1937 marked the official date that China and Japan engaged in what is known as the Second Sino-Japanese War. With the constant threat of the Japanese, my grandmother and her family were forced to move around southern China in search of safety. It was during one such move to Guangxi Province that my maternal grandparents happened to meet. According to my mother, there was a celebration, perhaps something like Chinese New Year or Mid-Autumn Festival, when my maternal grandfather caught a glimpse of a young woman in another room. My grandfather made inquiries into the identity of this woman, and he was later introduced to Poh Poh.

I would like to take a moment to contrast the lives of both my grandmothers. Ah Ngen was only six years older than Poh Poh, but circumstances regarding their marriages were rather different considering only eleven years separate their nuptial dates. Ah Ngen married during a time when the Japanese and Chinese were only sparring with one another, but her marriage was arranged through her parents between one small rural village and another. Poh Poh, on the other hand, met her husband during a full on war with the Japanese, but she was an educated woman from a wealthy family who was free to choose her own spouse. Nevertheless, there was one large issue that stood between my maternal grandparents becoming engaged. My grandfather had been married once before, and the whereabouts of his first wife was still unknown. Was she alive ever since her disappearance roughly a year earlier? If so, why hadn't she sent word or come home? Would she not do everything in her power to see her husband and eight children again?

To resolve the issue, Poh Poh placed an advertisement in the newspaper announcing her intent to marry and to ask if there was anyone who opposed the engagement. When nothing came from the advertisement, Poh Poh, at the age

of twenty-four, married in 1939. The war with the Japanese continued for another six years, and with her husband sporadically gone to fulfil his duty as a soldier, my grandmother was left alone to be in charge of the children. During all the chaos and running, my grandmother's efforts were not enough to save her first-born son from illness. He died before reaching his first year of life.

During one of my weekly visits with Poh Poh, she once told me that she was fortunate not to go through the excruciating ordeal of having her feet bound. Although petite, lotus feet were considered by men in China to be the most sexually alluring part of a woman, the guilt of causing this much pain to one's own daughter fell onto the mothers. My grandmother was twice lucky in this respect: one, that her mother could not bear the burden of bringing about such discomfort on her daughter; and two, that my grandmother did not have the additional burden of bound feet when she had to flee during the war from one place to another with young children in her charge.

To add to matters, in 1942, after an absence of four years, the first wife of my grandmother's husband managed to reappear to make her way back to the family. My grandmother now found herself a second wife, which is not a common status for a woman from a background of wealth. However, at least her husband set up two households, rather than the traditional single one, for my grandmother and children. No one in my family can offer me any further details of this time, so it remains a mystery to those living today.

By 1945, at the conclusion of World War II and the Japanese Occupation, my grandmother did not see much improvement in her life. There was a temporary reprieve when her husband was released from the army, and when they would all live together on Hainan Island. However, soon afterwards, my grandmother's life would spin beyond her control. Within six years after the end of the war, China was thrown back into another civil conflict. Further, her husband was sentenced to life in jail, released some months later, but then re-arrested and executed. By 1951, at the age of thirty-five, my grandmother

became a widow with five children all under the age of ten and with one child still in the womb.

Under the rule of the newly victorious Communists, China experienced order and discipline for the first time in decades. However, with Mao Zedong at the helm, he would unleash a string of harsh policies that saw millions starved and killed. By the year 1953, my grandmother took care of her young family by first moving them to Guangzhou to live with a close relative, and she opened a small shop selling everyday goods. Poh Poh also had a younger sister who managed to send money intermittently from Hong Kong.

My grandmother was left much to her own wit to care for her family. Yet life was not easy under Mao's rule. Living conditions would remain dismal, food was scarce, her sons would be sent all over the countryside to assist in the latest Communist policy for years at a time, and unemployment would remain high. Although she became a Buddhist in 1966, most likely, Poh Poh found little consolation in life.

My grandmother, on one or two occasions, used to lament to me how unfortunate she was to be born when she was. I never thought of asking her if she was happier living in Canada because I never had any idea what her life was like in China. In 1982, at the age of sixty-six, my maternal grandmother took her first and only plane ride to cross the ocean to Canada. Her living with our family was out of the question, as my paternal grandmother was firmly established in our home and would not look favourably on her daughter-in-law's mother living with us. Old Chinese ways are clear and unwavering.

Slowly, over the years, all but one of her children joined my grandmother in her home in Chinatown. There, they kept to themselves and never once imposed on us. Yet, their door was always open to any of our family, and I was never able to leave without something being pressed into my hands. Poh Poh lived a very simple and calm life in Vancouver, and even her passing twenty years later was done quietly in the middle of the night. I hope for my

grandmother's sake, after all the suffering she lived through, that she has been reincarnated into a much happier existence.

Good Intentions

Poh Poh only became a part of my life when she arrived to Canada during my late teens, but in those few short years when we shared a weekly meal in my early twenties, I forged a relationship with someone who became an influence on how I needed to see myself in later years. I realize now that she was the most intimate, and last, connection to the ways of the old world.

I was living in Hong Kong when I received the news that she had suddenly passed away. I think being away from my family added to my deep sense of loss when she died. At a time when I was finally beginning to recognize some of my Chineseness, the person who started the personal reflection was gone from me. Poh Poh developed in me the process of acknowledging the Chinese side of who I am.

Years later, when I found myself standing at the kitchen sink with a growing pile of cleaned bean sprouts, I finally understood my grandmother's intention. That is, love does not always have to be shown with kind words and embraces, but rather, through the food you share with those you love. The meaning of food is conveyed through the scent, colour, taste, and the cook's intention; it should always be engaged with others and never eaten alone. Poh Poh always shied away when I kissed her good-bye, but she was happy to convey her love for me through her careful and deliberate preparation of food.

Section 2. Parents

Dad

Amateur Armchair Commentators

“Jerk,” my father says disappointingly to the television after one the players from *Les Canadiens* makes a bad play. “How can he shoot the puck so wide?” I know this isn’t a real question I have to answer, but I look up at him expectantly anyway, just in case he is asking my opinion. Our favourite hockey team as far back as the beginning of the seventies, and even before that for my father, is the squad from “Mun-chee-hall.” Starting from as early as I can remember, my father and I would sit side by side, tucked together into his Lazy Boy. I can still picture his feet outstretched on the recliner, and mine, much shorter, just reaching past the edge of the seat. I used to mimic his movements: if his legs were crossed, always right over left, so were mine; and if they were extended, four legs would reach towards the television.

From our comfortable vantage point, my father and I cheered on our most revered team, even if it meant watching a game on the French channel, just to see our most beloved hero, Guy Lafleur. In my mind’s eye, I can still imagine Guy’s flowing hair as he flew down the ice on the right wing with his line mates, Steve Shutt and Jacques Lemaire, before taking a pass and shooting the puck past the opposition’s goal tender. Arms outstretched, we joined the maximum capacity crowd at The Forum in celebration. Through observing countless games, this is where I absorbed the rules, the conduct, the nuances, and the resulting fierce loyalty and pride for our nation’s national sport.

I will always treasure this long ago, special time with my father. Even as the years passed, and I became too big to sit next to him in the recliner, these occasions were reserved just for the two of us, to be enjoyed in our quiet corner of the living room. When the Canadiens won, we were both elated; during their defeats, we were both downcast. Decades later, I have the good fortune to be

able to sit in the same living room with my father, while cheering on the same team. After a missed pass or golden opportunity, just for old times sake, I will look over at my father and ask, “Dad, is he a jerk?”

“I’m Chinese, So I Talk Chinese!”

My father was born Quon Yook Kin in September of 1935, in a small village in the Pearl River Delta from a line of men who departed China for Canada in search of fortune and a better life. He came from men who left, but who always returned to their home country, to marry women chosen for them and to father future generations. However, my father would be the first to come to Canada with the intention of staying.

Apart from his first year, my father, due to the absence of his own father, spent the next twenty years under the responsibility of women. For the first decade, his mother and two elder sisters cared for him in their small village. Today, my father is quick to make jokes, so I can imagine him as a youngster spending most of his days in school and, by his definition, “fooling around” with his friends afterwards. By the time he was eleven, it was decided he should attend a better school than what was offered in the village, so he moved to the city to live with an aunt in Guangzhou.

Under the supervision of his aunt, whose husband was already a sojourner in the United States, my father spent the next eight years away from his own family to be educated. During this time, my father was still in contact with his father in Canada. There was one letter posted by my father when he was fourteen or fifteen years old asking for money to purchase a bicycle. Two months later, a letter from his father arrived inquiring about his studies, but no funds would accompany the correspondence. Apparently, remittances from Canada were often small and sporadic, so my father was not surprised of this outcome.

By the time my father was nineteen years old and in grade eleven, his last year of high school was interrupted when news arrived that his father wanted him to move to Canada. From Guangzhou, he said good-bye to his surrogate family, and he moved to Hong Kong with his mother and eldest sister to start the process of immigrating. During the next two years while the paperwork was being sorted, my father attended English classes and “chased girls” before leaving for Canada.

In November of 1956, by the time my father was twenty-one years old, he joined my grandfather on the prairies of North Battleford, Saskatchewan to work at the Dominion Café as a waiter, then to Calgary, Alberta for a year as a grocer at the Marlboro. It must have been fortunate that my father lived in the westernized city of Hong Kong for two years, so that the culture shock of moving to the Canadian Prairies was not as drastic. Nonetheless, three years later when familial duties called, my father flew back to Hong Kong at the request of his mother in order to marry.

After a brief four month courtship, my father of twenty-four married his young bride of eighteen in December of 1959. When I study their wedding picture, I can imagine that it took only moments for them to be attracted to one another. There is a beautiful innocence to my mother, and a handsome mischievousness to my father. There are times I imagine that my father’s organized and determined character willed the birth of one son, with another unknowingly in the womb, before he left Hong Kong in 1961 to return to Canada to establish a new home for his wife and family who were to arrive the following year.

Upon his return, my father was employed at the Canada Fisheries for two months before working in Chinatown at the Tai Hing Grocery. Even with his small earnings, my father was able to pay off a nine hundred dollar loan to the bank, a considerable amount at that time, that my grandfather Richard owed. In 1961, my father took over ownership of the Arbutus Café in Blubber Bay, British Columbia for the next four years. There, his young family grew to include a

daughter and his own father before the decision to move the whole Quon family to Vancouver in 1966. A brief stay in the basement apartment of friends in Vancouver included the arrival of my paternal grandmother. After which, my parents moved on the 18th of April 1968 to the home in Vancouver East that they still own today.

For as long as I can remember, my father has worked in various restaurants as a cook or as a grocer. His capacity to learn new skills, his head for business, and his friendly demeanour were all assets when it came to finding employment, or in later years, running his own businesses. Oddly enough, despite what one might assume of an immigrant from the late fifties, my father never worked in the stereotypical Chinese restaurant of egg foo yung and chicken chop suey, although he did include a few of these items on his menu. He always said that Western food was so much easier to make, and that Chinese food just meant a great deal of preparation.

There is one story that my father has shared with me recently during one of my memory collecting sessions to write this project. When my father worked at the Skyline Airport Hotel in Richmond in 1976, he used to be sent out from the kitchen from time to time to take food orders from tourists who spoke only Putonghua. Although Cantonese and Putonghua are not entirely alike, my father could make out what the patrons wanted to eat.

One time, the manager on duty poked his head into the kitchen to ask my father to help in a similar situation. Happy to assist, my father interrupted his cooking and walked out to the dining area. He came back seconds later to reprimand the manager, "What the hell? They're East Indian! You think because I talk Chinese, I can talk East Indian, too?" With one last incredulous look at the man, and a dismissive wave of his hand, my father called "Crazy!" over his shoulder as he walked back into the kitchen in disgust.

My father has been retired since 1995, and I don't even have to ask if he misses going in to work or chatting with people. He has always lived a very ordered life, and the working for a living part of his existence is long over and

past. These days, his wife keeps him busy, he sees his four children and two grandchildren whenever he can, and he is one of the last three hundred or so members of the Quan Association in Chinatown. My father admits that he is getting “old and tired,” but his mind remains sharp at the age of seventy-five. In the meantime, I recognize that he is the glue that holds our family together, and that makes me appreciate the fact even more that our family remains the whole it is today.

Metal 金 “Self-Sufficient”

The first of the elements in *Wu Xing* is metal. It symbolizes the direction of the West, autumn, and dusk. Those under this influence are said to be stable, organized, and logical. Even from a very young age I associated all of these qualities with my father, and besides a natural disposition, I suppose his own upbringing ascribed to his being this way. It is apparent to me that with all of the responsibilities required of my father, he very much had to be resolute, rational, and controlling. He had a young family that was to grow to four children as well as his two elderly parents. Whether we all looked to my father for guidance, or whether it was his personality, my father has always been the one in control, the one who made decisions, and the one who offered advice.

As a young child, I would often hear one of the adults in my family teaching me how to behave, what to do, or how to go about doing things – or more the case, how *not* to behave. My father seldom spoke to me because we already seemed to be of the same mind. He asked me to study hard so that I would get good grades, so that is exactly what I did. He told me to look after my sister, and I made that my responsibility. If he asked me to prepare the evening meal because Ah Ngen was not feeling well, I made certain I did a proper job. If my two older brothers got into trouble, I was sure to guide my sister and myself away from doing the same.

There was a period of two years before I entered university in which I rebelled against my father and his pronouncements. By the time I was fifteen, I was beginning to question his outright authority. Although my father was very good at dispensing general assertions, I was beginning to suspect that he was not so good at the small details. What does “study hard” actually mean when I have my textbooks spread out in front of me? How was I to “stay out of trouble” exactly when I was watching my sister? What does “be smart” really entail as I was leaving the house to go out with friends?

Occasionally when I asked him what he meant, he just looked at me with exasperation, as though he was thinking out loud, “How can a daughter of mine be so stupid?” Then he instructed in a direct manner, “Just listen to your dad, and do what I tell you.” Offended by his look and tone, not to mention lack of an answer, I flatly accused with all the contempt of a teen, “You don’t have a clue what you are talking about.” Finished with the direction of the conversation, my father sometimes threatened that I was not too old to have some sense beaten into me. Knowing how far I could push my father, not to mention deliberately standing a safe distance from him, I sent a dismissive parting shot over my shoulder as I left the house.

For some reason my father assumed that once I arrived safely at the gates of university, I would be old enough to make my own decisions. To him, childhood and youth was a dangerous time, and all that was required was to listen to him so that no dangers would befall me. Although my father had good intentions and cared for my basic needs, he in fact could not help me with things such as school work, with deciding which courses to take, or even with making a realistic choice about a career path. He was the one person in the entire family who could come the closest to guiding me, but in truth, I realized by the time I entered university I had done so on my own accord.

Relations with my father would improve greatly upon my entry into university. Certainly, he continued to offer his pearls of advice, and I learned to accept them graciously. In fact, I came to discover something that benefitted our

relationship. I occasionally went to my father with a minor dilemma to ask him his opinion. It might be a question such as should I purchase Car A or Car B, or it might involve me asking if I should teach elementary or high school. Either way, I had already come to my own conclusion, but by simply extending the question to my father, it gave him immense pleasure to know that he was still needed in guiding his daughter in her adult life.

When I was considering teaching overseas, it was my father who suggested a position in Hong Kong. I had no desire to work in Asia, but subsequently while on holiday there, I thought it would make him happy if I put in an application. Much to my surprise, an interview in March and sudden job offer in May, saw me saying good-bye to my family in July. Although my father had not lived in Hong Kong for decades, he was excited for me and full of recommendations about which areas to live, which banking institution to use, or which street market had the best food.

Despite the fact that I was able to be entirely independent overseas, I continued to ask my father for his opinion. Little did I know that the tables would be reversed the following summer when I returned home for the break. Three months after I moved to Hong Kong, my father called to inform me in a matter of fact voice that my paternal grandmother was diagnosed with stomach cancer and was given three to six months to live. Despite my tumultuous relationship with Ah Ngen, this was the grandmother who had raised me as a child. Even when faced with the news of his mother's terminal illness, my father remained strong and stable. He told me not to worry and not to make plans to come home until he advised me.

My grandmother would prove to be very stubborn and to have a very strong life force for she even lasted into the following summer while I was visiting. It was the last week of the holiday, and I was home with my family, when we received the call from the hospital to say that my grandmother had passed. I volunteered to go to the hospital with my father, and the drive there was silent. We had some quiet words with the nurse before we walked down the hall to my

grandmother's room. I was shocked to see her face distorted with her eyes wide open and mouth agape, as if she died in a fierce struggle to gasp one last breath. I felt one of us should close her eyes, but I had never touched a dead person before, let alone seen many dead.

When I looked over at my father, he said, "Well, at least she lived a good, long life. I took care of her the best I could," before he covered his face and burst into tears. A well of emotion took over me for two reasons. First, besides the passing of my paternal grandfather when I was four, this was only the second death in my family when I was thirty-six. Secondly, I had *never* seen my father cry. His tears and momentary lack of control were a shock to me. Chinese dads, as I'm sure in other cultures, never display extreme emotions of sadness under any circumstance. They just don't.

With a death, there is often a long list of things to look after. My father, after a brief weeping, started to put things in order. As the child my father considered the most responsible, as well as conveniently on holiday, I helped him to plan my grandmother's funeral. Yet apart from making some personal calls to family, my father seemed out of sorts when it came time to meet with the funeral director. The simple questions of what type of casket or what sort of flowers we wanted left my normally business-like father at a loss.

It took me a moment to recognize his indecision, until the metal element in me took control. On behalf of my father, I stepped in to help make decisions for him as easily as he had for me all of my life. Although in appearance I may look more like my mother; that was the day it became clear to me that my actions were more like my father. From him, is where I attribute my characteristic of self-sufficiency.

Mom

A Mother's Hands

Even though a stroke has stilled one of my mother's hands these days, I can still picture them in a flurry of activities from when I was younger. Her soft hands gently washed me until I reluctantly learned to do so myself. I watched her hands in the mirror as she adeptly brushed my long, thick hair into a single, smooth plait. Looking down, I could see her quick hands buttoning a new jacket she skilfully created for me out of remnants of fabric she brought home from work. On the few occasions when I was sick, the same comforting hands placed before me the bowl of macaroni in chicken broth I didn't know I wanted until it was steaming in front of me.

One of the most vivid, yet sketchy, memories I have of my mother occurred sometime when I was of primary school age. I know this only because my brothers were still in school with me, yet my sister was not yet old enough to attend kindergarten. My mother had taken a rare day off work to attend Sports Day with us. I remember a warm morning in May, my mother wearing Capri pants and a sleeveless white blouse, and seeing sunshine reflecting off her smooth and bare arms. I have no recollection how my house team placed at the end of the day, or whether I won any of my races. My mind was far too excited to have my mother with me in a place she had never come before. The last memory I have of this event are her hands, at my eye level, helping me to push the orange flavoured ice cream on a stick up through the cardboard tubing. Afterwards, I took the ice cream with one hand and hers with my other. I especially loved my mother's hands at these times, for they conveyed a love she rarely spoke out in words, but one that I knew existed.

Life Changes

Right in the middle of the war between the Chinese and the Japanese, my mother was born in Guangzhou, China in December 1941 and named Cheung Chi Kwan. Apart from an older brother who died as an infant, my mother is the eldest of six children. In her family, the two daughters flank the four sons in the middle. Despite the war, my mother lived an early life of wealth and status. During the times when the family had to run from the Japanese, and her own mother was physically unable to attend to so many young children, hired help arrived to carry the children from one place to another. After the war, starting from when my mother was nearly four, there was a brief period where she remembers having servants attending to her needs and taking her to school in their arms. However, when she lost her father at the age of eight, and finally ten, the family fortunes would take a severe turn.

After moving to Guangzhou to live with relatives, my mother had to watch all of her siblings after school, while my grandmother worked in a small shop to support the family. By the time my mother was fifteen years old and had finished two years of high school, she and her younger brother were granted permission by the Chinese government to move to Hong Kong. There, my mother and uncle lived with their maternal grandmother and aunt. The idea was for the older five children to go in pairs or threes to Hong Kong, before being joined by the youngest sibling and parent. However, before this plan could come to completion, the Communist government clamped down on people leaving China for the British colony of Hong Kong. My mother and first uncle were the only two of the family to leave China, and it would be another twenty-six years before any of the rest of my mother's family were free to do the same.

For the next three years until her engagement, my mother describes her existence as a young "Hong Kong Miss." During the days, she might have watched her younger cousins, but more often than not, she went out with her older cousins to walk around town, meet friends, and snack on light foods and drinks. In the evenings, my mother attended night school to take English

lessons. Occasionally, she would go back to Guangzhou to visit her mother and siblings to bring extra food or other provisions. Visiting the Chinese Mainland from Hong Kong was not an issue, but the reverse would be impossible. However, one of my mother's favourite past times was to go to the movie theatre. There, she watched a variety of *sai peen*, or western films, with Chinese subtitles. She enjoyed the films with John Wayne, but my mother especially loved the films starring Elvis Presley for his singing and charm. To this day, her face lights up when she reminisces about this past time.

In the summer when my mother was only eighteen, she would meet a young man who would catch her attention. After a brief courtship, my mother informed my grandmother that she was hoping to become engaged. My grandmother knew the hardships of marriage and children, and she tried to dissuade my mother from entering such a hard life at a young age. Yet, my grandmother had also seen many sorrows in her life, and with her daughter being so far away from her, she eventually acquiesced to the engagement. The marriage took place later that year on the third of December 1959, with only a handful of immediate family to witness that day's happy occasion. Life would, yet again, change drastically for my mother.

Nothing prepared my mother for her married life. She left the carefree lifestyle and loving attention of her aunt and grandmother on Hong Kong Island to be with her husband all the way across Victoria Harbour on the peninsula. There she lived a miserable existence under the tyrannical rule of her mother-in-law. Instead of employing the services of a maid, as she was accustomed in her Hong Kong experience, my mother became the maid who was treated like a servant and scolded constantly by her mother-in-law.

To make matters worse, my mother did not understand the guttural sounds of the *Toisan* dialect, so her mother-in-law was required to repeat her demands and double her abuses. Within the year, my mother gave birth to a chubby baby boy, but not even that made life better for my mother. She still had to complete all of her daily chores with a young infant strapped onto her back.

The following year saw a second pregnancy, as well as her husband's return to Canada, all while she was left to the mercy of her mother-in-law.

In late 1963, my mother crossed the wide Pacific with two young toddlers in tow. Compared to the ordeal she experienced as a new bride, moving to a new country was less of a shock and trauma for my mother. My mother was at least away from her unpleasant circumstances in Hong Kong, and she could slowly become familiar to yet another language and environment. It took some time for my mother to become accustomed to the quiet after the constant hustle and bustle of Hong Kong, and the long nights with her husband working till midnight left my mother alone in the house with two sleeping boys. In a small place with only two Chinese families, it was not long before my mother became friends with Mrs. Chow and her family. Yet, just as my mother was getting used to living in Blubber Bay, now with three young children, her husband made the decision to move to Vancouver in 1966.

Life in Vancouver proved to be another challenge. The arrival of her mother-in-law called for two changes. One was the search for a home to accommodate the growing family. The second, now that the children could be left in the care of the paternal grandparents, was the issue of finding employment. My mother found work as a seamstress, and she proved quick to learn it despite never having done it before. Once her husband started owning his own businesses, my mother left sewing to help her husband in his line of employment. Soon after this time, my mother finally balanced the two boys born in Hong Kong, with the birth of a second girl in Canada. The only times my mother did not work was when she had her first heart surgery in 1991, but a stroke in 1995, would see an end to her working life.

These days, my mother spends much of her time in the company of family, and she has also rekindled her love of *mah jong* with a small group of old friends. Her hair has gone partially grey, and her eyes require glasses, but my mother continues to love to joke and tease. Even though she can badger my father to the point of frustration, they can still make each other laugh.

Fire 火 “Impatient”

The fifth element is fire, and it is representative of the South, summer, and the afternoon. Fire spreads in all directions and is radiant and hot, so those with fire attributes can be seen as dynamic, enthusiastic, and restless. However, those born with too much fire can be impulsive, easily annoyed, and impatient. My mother embraces all of these characteristics, both the good and the bad.

Perhaps because she was so privileged at one point when she was a child, she also learned to be very stubborn and fierce. I am told that my mother sometimes wore a smirk on her face, and she was far too impudent to listen. Even from a young age she knew how to use her words and beauty to be admired or to attract attention. Alternately, if any servants dared to cross her, she would lash out at them with burning eyes, fists on hips, and pigtailed bounces. Once when one of her younger brothers refused to share a succulent, flat peach with her, she tore it out of his hands and stomped it to a pulp before she beat him with her feet and fists. To be certain, my mother was, and continues to be, in excess of the fire element. Not even the brutal shooting of her father by the Communists when she was ten, or the subsequent loss of family position, could quash the fire that burned deep within my mother's belly.

With my father, we children knew exactly when we had crossed the line. Punishment was dealt out quickly and efficiently, and then it was finished. One minute I was spanked for excessive whining, while the next, my father asked if I wanted a grilled cheese sandwich. It was confusing at first, but it eventually made sense to me. With my mother, on the other hand, we children never quite knew what or how much would set her over the edge. Sometimes, I unknowingly pushed a situation until my mother lost patience and unleashed a fast scolding. Other times, after she had had enough, she announced her annoyance as well as form of physical punishment I was to receive. She always reverted to Chinese when we were bad, and although I couldn't translate exactly what my mother was

saying, she certainly made her meaning understood. With my mother, we all knew she was volatile, but what we didn't know, was when she might lose it.

My mother used to tell me how badly her mother-in-law treated her when they first lived together. Nothing had prepared my mother for such abuse, and being so young, she said she just didn't know any better. As for my grandmother, I'm positive she was enjoying the power of her position as mother-in-law. What better way is there to break the will and backbone of someone so young, than to heap insults and to emphasize her worthlessness? My mother called herself "too stupid" to fight back at first, and when her mother-in-law moved in with the family in Vancouver, the same pattern of cruelty continued. That is, until the day my mother rediscovered the fire within her.

I have no idea how the tension started, but my recollection begins with my grandmother seated in her single chair in the living room and my mother sitting on the floor in the kitchen. I must have been quite young, perhaps five or six, but sitting next to my mother I sensed that she was very angry and frustrated. My grandmother lobbied snide, cutting remarks from one room, while my mother tried her best to defend herself in the other. My father, who was sitting in his recliner, tried to maintain the peace by occasionally asking the two women to stop fighting. Yet, how could he get into the middle? On the one hand, he had the filial duty of respect to his mother, while on the other he had the marital duty of love to his wife. Nevertheless, neither woman conceded nor apologized: seemingly, no one had shown them how.

The conflict continued to escalate until my grandmother must have said something especially egregious or hurtful. Suddenly a bolt of my mother's former strength pulled her up by her backbone. My mother kicked the cabinet door off of its hinges with a sharp cry, before she announced her intent to grab a cleaver in order to silence the old woman. My mouth dropped wide in astonishment as my mother quickly jumped to her feet and pulled open the drawer containing her weapon of choice. Before I could think of doing anything, my father suddenly

appeared in the kitchen. He wrestled my mother away from the drawer, but she continued to scream her own string of abuses at my grandmother.

Left alone in the kitchen, I recall hearing angry sobs from my mother and low, calming sounds from my father in their bedroom. No one ever spoke about the incident again, but I'm certain if I were to ask my mother about it now, without hesitation she would tell me that she would have preferred the demise of the old woman that day, rather than waiting another thirty years for her to die. For certain, I am glad that my mother's impatience has softened over the years, but given the right circumstances, her fiery temper is not to be underestimated. To this day, it is still dangerous to cross her.

Fire also governs the Chinese zodiac animal of the snake, a sign under which both my mother and I are born. Many people tell me I have grown to look like my mother, and I have come to accept this comparison as a compliment. There are also those who know me who would include, to a lesser extent, that I can conduct myself in a manner similar to her. I can show the same annoyance and irritation. Yet, how can I not look and be like my mother when we once shared the same body? There is a part of her mind that is also part of mine. We have a way of being and a collective memory that goes back in time like stairs to her mother and grandmother, and to all the mothers and daughters previous to us. Although I generally see things through my Canadian eyes, I can also see things with my Chinese eyes – the piece of me inherited from my mother.

While we normally have good relations, how would a mother and daughter born in the snake year, and with the fire element, keep on good terms? Growing up, there were times my mother's lack of patience set me off balance with just a few sharp words or silent actions. Without warning she could turn and know exactly what to say to hit a nerve or cut a wound deep into me. I can still remember the first time I felt it, and from that age I understood I needed to learn to read her for signs of impatience.

Yet, I found small ways to fight back. What little Chinese I had learned as a child was soon forgotten from lack of use once I started schooling in English.

Although I still spoke to my grandmother at home in Chinese, it was nothing beyond simple, basic sentences. To further complicate matters, our exchanges were a mix of the country dialect that my grandmother spoke, and the city dialect I learned from my mother. If I ever made the mistake of using any *Toisan* in front of my mother, she quickly reprimanded me and gave me the correct term in Cantonese. Once when I asked her why I wasn't permitted to speak *Toisan*, her reply, which did not invite any further discussion, was "because it sounds terrible."

Sometimes, when I felt particularly frustrated or annoyed with my mother, I would speak with my grandmother in the *Toisan* dialect within earshot of my mother. I would be certain to drag out the vowels and guttural sounds for effect, while under the pretension of conversing with my grandmother. It all appeared very innocent, but when you are a child, and powerless at that, sometimes the only way to assert yourself is through these circuitous routes. I didn't employ this method very often, but when I did, just a sideways glance at my mother satisfied my spiteful streak.

It was years before I was able to fend off the strength of my mother's will, and after one such time my mother took my hands gently in hers. I looked down to see two pairs of hands that looked nearly alike, and then she placed into my palm her green jade necklace. She began in Chinese; "This is your jade now, so that you will know your life's importance. Wear it next to your skin as I have, and you will come to know my meaning." Yet, what my mother hadn't realized was that she already exists within in my bones. I am all the good qualities, as well as the bad qualities of my mother, and I willingly accept the trait of impatience from her.

Section 3.

Siblings

The Good and the Bad

For my younger sister and me, the good thing about having two older brothers was that we had the opportunity to join in with their infinite storehouse of ideas when it came to fun. Nine years separate us siblings: Len is the oldest, Henry is a year younger, I follow four years after the boys, and Emily is another four years my junior. The way I remember it, my brothers, especially Henry, tormented me a fair bit. By the time Emily was old enough to play with us, that period only lasted a short time before the two boys became too old to play with their little sisters. Nevertheless, there was a span of a few years whereby we four played together.

The house we lived in had two floors. The upstairs was divided into half lengthwise: on one side were the three bedrooms and one bathroom; on the other contained the living, dining, and kitchen areas. The downstairs was unfinished with studs and cement flooring. Besides the upstairs, the basement also served as our playground on rainy days, or when we had to be home in the house. One activity I remember is when we dragged our blankets and pillows off our beds to create an indoor luge with the fourteen steps in our house. We laid the blanket on the first few stairs. Then, each of us sat atop of our pillows, all in a straight row, with our legs wrapped around the body of the person in front. We took turns being in the front, but the person in the lead pulled the blanket tightly over his or her feet, before the rest of us pushed off, and we bounced down the stairs until we fell into a laughing, crashing heap at the bottom.

The basement is where we played indoor hockey. Now that I think about it, my sister and I always spent more time as the net minders, while my brothers battled each other for supremacy. Naturally, I played for the Montréal Canadiens, and since I was in net, I became Ken Dryden himself. I even copied

his stance of resting both hands and chin on top of a vertical stick when play was at the other end. After one such time, I didn't react soon enough when my brother's slap shot ended straight at my forehead. No doubt, I must have taken large gulps of air before releasing a loud howl. My brothers, knowing how to appeal to the vain side of me would exclaim, "Wow, that was the best save ever! You stopped a for-sure goal!" Just as they thought, I stopped crying and inquired between quieting sobs, "Was it really?"

Alternately, having two older brothers, and wayward ones at that, was not such an advantage for my sister and me. Early on in our playing years, my father found cause to create what we children deemed "The Ken Quon School of Discipline." My father was long awake and gone by the time we ourselves woke up to go to school, but he was always home by the time we returned. At some point after relaxing and having a cigarette, my father retired to his room for a nap. If we children happened to be outdoors playing, this act of my father's was of no concern to us. However, if we happened to be indoors, it was of the utmost importance that we not disturb his rest. We learned to keep our voices quiet, to run around in silence, and to have the television volume low.

However, playing together also leads to the opportunity of fighting with one another, and children will be children. I don't remember exactly what happened, but I do recall the immediate feeling of panic that there was going to be imminent parental intervention. One of my brothers knocked over and broke an object, and in a moment of disbelief, we all stood in shock looking at the broken pieces. If the crash did not wake up our father in the next room, the ensuing argument between us certainly did. Knowing there was going to be punishment meted out, my brothers started quarrelling over who actually broke the object, while my sister and I took sides by adding what we thought had happened.

Our father came storming out of his room, and in a booming voice he asked why we were fighting. Before we had time to stop bickering, my father saw the broken pieces lying on the floor. In a deadly quiet voice he inquired as

to which one of us was responsible for the mishap. Experience taught us that his calm demeanour was only a mask; like a snake about to strike. Suddenly, we all stared at the ground and became mutely silent. However, not wanting to be held accountable for the deed, each of us also immediately took turns denying responsibility. Getting nowhere and unsatisfied with this line questioning, my father reached out and swiftly slapped all of us in rapid succession. This action, through tears and finger pointing, quickly brought about the actual culprit.

My father only had the patience to ask a question once, and his method of “hit first, ask questions later” was an effective way of getting directly to the truth. My father’s approach to discipline was so effective amongst us children that it got to the point whereby my father wouldn’t even have to cuff us. Just knowing punishment was unjustly coming our way was enough to put pressure on the actual perpetrator to confess to his or her crime. As a result, I didn’t necessarily learn to own up to the truth, but I did learn to be extremely well behaved.

Brothers and Sisters We Will Always Be

December is by far the busiest month in the Quon family. This month holds my parents’ anniversary and the birthdays of three of the four siblings. Technically, my mother’s Canadian birthday is in the same month, but she chooses instead to recognize her Chinese birthday, which generally falls in the month of January. For nearly a year and a half, the ages of all the siblings are in the same decade. However, my eldest brother recently led us into the next decade, where we will all join him in our own time. Over the customary turkey baked in black bean sauce for our family celebration this December, I had the chance to look at each of my siblings and ponder the direction we have all taken.

My eldest brother, Len, is the one to most resemble my father, but that is as far as the similarity goes. At fifty, he is still the easy-going character with a mischievous streak with which we are all familiar from when we were young. Even the fact that he has a daughter going on eighteen has not tempered his behaviour. Nevertheless, my brother did offer to live with my parents when they

decided to move back into Vancouver after retiring. My brother is relatively independent with various interests of his own, and he has a truly generous disposition. He may not necessarily live up to the expectations for which my father might have hoped, but then Len wouldn't be the playful brother I have come to know.

It took too much time, but my brother Henry finally received attention for his mental disorder. He has a slow, but steady, course in front of him now, and he is learning to take small steps to being as independent as he is capable. When I think about the brother who tormented me endlessly when I was a little girl, it is hard for me to see that same person now when I sit across from him. He is nothing short of courteous, and he is always agreeable for conversation. Henry has a reciprocal relationship with my parents now that they are older, as it should be, and they both have come to rely on each other for different things. Today, I see more of the brother who walked me to elementary school, or the sibling who offered to teach me to swim when we were young.

As for my sister Emily, I became tired of always being third, fourth, or more often last, in her life. When I moved away to work overseas more than a decade ago, I came to the painful realization that we were never going to be as close as we once were when we were younger. Yet the summer I moved away was in the months preceding the birth of her son. I'm told children change your life in many ways, and I believe my nephew brought my sister's focus from herself to him and to her relations. My sister was the one to get our family back into the habit of seeing each other after we had started to drift apart with our own lives. Just as I decided to move on from my relationship with Emily, she just as quickly included me back into her world. I might rank third or fourth in her life again, but I know I am not last, and that is enough for the time being.

It's amusing to think that my parents were more concerned with their daughters being self-sufficient than they were the sons, when it seems we have all arrived at a place where we seem comfortable. Under the watchful eyes of our parents and grandmother, we all evolved in different ways from one another.

Regardless, we four siblings succumb to certain roles when we are all together, but we willingly accept the others' part. I'm certain if we look back on our childhoods, our roles and characters were decided even then.

Earth 土 “Responsible”

The fourth element is earth, and it embodies the centre of the compass, all four seasons, and the middle of the day. The earth substance absorbs the excesses of all the other elements, and its attributes include being responsible, thoughtful, practical, and hard working. Although there are four children in my family, I consider myself, much like the earth element, in the middle. My two older brothers, separated from each other by just over twelve months, are four and five years before me, while my younger sister is four years after me.

Being the oldest child, my brother Len was in charge of looking after the rest of us, and if anything amiss happened, it was he who was held accountable whether it was his fault or not. Although Len was given this role, it was contrary to his nature. His main goals were to be with others and to have fun. Even at the age of fifty, he still pulls pranks such as shooting spitballs at my ten-year-old nephew. Forty years separate the two, but there are times when one would not know it. Being in charge and officious were contrary to his nature, and this has been apparent since his teens. As a result, this caused much tension between my father and Len when we children were growing up. It is no wonder Len is so relaxed with his own daughter today when it comes to rules and expectations.

As for my second brother Henry, I find it difficult to write about him when he was young for a number of reasons. Whereas I usually got along with Len, Henry was always my worst adversary. He tormented me endlessly until the summer when I was fifteen. After I was absent all summer visiting an aunt in San Francisco, Henry suddenly stopped verbally and mentally torturing me when I returned. There was a short period of about four years where our relationship was normal. Yet just as quickly as things were good, they turned for the worse over a minor incident. What no one knew at that time, but only I suspected, was

that in his early twenties Henry was suffering from the onset of schizophrenia. It started off, as expected, rather mildly, but it became progressively more apparent. Therefore, how can I honestly describe my brother when he was robbed of his true self through a disorder? How can my memories of him not be tainted with the fact that he was not himself? How does my guilt of being unable to help him affect our relationship? Without being properly diagnosed, Henry gradually retreated into his own world, while he pushed the family out to the periphery.

Of all the siblings, my sister Emily and I have the closest relationship. While she kept my hands full with making certain she stayed out of trouble, eventually when Emily became older, it was simply natural for us to be together at all times. My sister was always lively and adorable when she was young, and when she became older, she was forever considered the vivacious and beautiful one. Whenever we went out together, all the males flocked around her. Yet if she noticed someone talking to me, our former roles reversed, and it was she who came over protectively to ask if I needed assistance with the young man chatting with me. I have pulled my sister out of a fight on more than one occasion, and I have no doubt she would dispose of any unwanted male attention if she deemed it necessary.

Although my parents were very strict with my brothers and myself, my sister being the youngest of four, seemed to live under an entirely different set of rules. It was as though my parents became tired of parenting by the time my sister entered her teens. The numerous rebellious acts with which my sister got away would have translated into an instant death sentence for my brothers and me if we ever tried the same at her age. I used to laugh and warn my sister, "One day, you're going to find out that you can't always take whatever you want." However, this wasn't a reality at the time, for Emily's sense of self-entitlement prevailed until she experienced motherhood.

Whether I desired the assigned role of being responsible or not, or whether it was truly my nature, what choice did I have? I could not find it in me to

disappoint my parents especially after hearing the way they used to boast about me. To the Chinese, bragging about your children ranks up there as a national sport: news of the child being praised is always met with enthusiasm; thanks to the god of good fortune is never forgotten; and small lies, or inconsequential embellishments, are forgiven and overlooked.

According to my father, he and my mother were making their way to a table to be seated for dim sum when they ran into one of their old friends. At first, pleasantries were exchanged, and then the mother of the friends pointed to the young woman at their table and asked, “Do you remember our daughter Pauline?” Without waiting for an answer, the mother turned to her daughter and advised, “Pauline, show your manners and say hello to auntie and uncle.” Responding appropriately, my mother looked disbelievingly and exclaimed, “Waahhh, Pauline! You are so thin and so beautiful ... just like your mom!” With a wave of her hand as if to say my mother was too generous, the friend continued, “Pauline is married to a business man who is always travelling for work to make money. Pauline is such a good girl because she never forgets her parents and takes them out for dim sum *every* week at a different restaurant. Our choice! *Always* expensive!”

Without missing a step, my father offered his pursed lip smile like Mona Lisa and hesitated briefly before he started. “Oh, that’s nice your daughter can meet you for lunch. Pauline is such a good girl.” After a momentary pause, my father changes the direction of the conversation, “Hmm, I wish our daughter, Jean, could meet us for dim sum. No, Jean’s living in Hong Kong to make lots of money because she bought a house in Vancouver for *sup mahn* – one million dollars. I tell her to let Daddy help her pay, but she says no, she will find a job in Hong Kong. Now she is too busy and too far away to see her old Mom and old Dad.” With a smack of his lips to punctuate the next sentence, my father continued, “That’s right, but every year Jean gives plane tickets – first class – so we can stay as long as we like.” Even if these details are only very loosely based on a true event, how can I shirk my given characteristic of responsible when my parents talk about me in such a manner?

Considering Len's resistance to being responsible, Henry's retreat into his own world, and Emily's self-absorbed behaviour, it is no wonder my parents looked to me to be the one child who would meet their expectations. By default, in my parents' eyes, as well as by the rest of the siblings, I was bestowed with the glory, or rather more the burden, of being the golden child when we were younger. Although we have evolved into somewhat different roles today, this was certainly not the case when we were growing up. From my two brothers and one sister, I attribute my characteristic of being responsible to them.

Chapter 3.

Reflection

Section 1.

Combin·Asian

The third and final chapter of this project is a reflection on my upbringing and its impact on my identity formation. To refer back to the notion of cultural translation, or the carrying across of ideas, I am, especially in my globalized world, a translator. Information is conveyed, and then I am able to convert it in a way that is presently meaningful to me. When I consider Bhabha's (1994) idea of cultural translation occurring within the third space, I find it to be rather restrictive. It is my belief that cultural translation can happen anywhere, and it does not require the displacement outside of oneself in order to arise. Whether I was a Canadian girl growing up in a Chinese household, or a Chinese girl developing in a Canadian environment, the opportunity to translate was still able to take place.

Even Wah's (2000) concept of the hyphen is somewhat foreign to me when I think about myself. In the working class neighbourhood where I grew up in the seventies, we were a Chinese family interspersed among German, Russian, Scottish, Italian, English, Polish, Japanese, Portuguese, East Indian, and Ukrainian ones. To be certain, there were times when we addressed one another as Chinks, Wops, Krauts, and Nips. We were also aware of our different cultural backgrounds when we retreated to our own homes; we often saw it and heard it, but we did not necessarily see each other as a racially hyphenated Canadian. For once we stepped outside to play, we saw each other as much the same: we were all kids, we were all friends, we all went to the same schools,

and we all spoke English. During this time, I was blissfully unaware of the differences between the other children and myself.

Meanwhile, Trinh's (1991) reference to the existence of an Other/Same living in a dual world is the closest to my experience as a girl growing up in Vancouver. It seemed to me that I had two minds, one being Chinese and the other Canadian, living within multiple worlds. This was especially apparent after I started school and left the Chinese influence of my grandmother. There were no clear divisions between my Chinese worlds at home with the adults in my family, my Canadian surroundings both in and out of the home with my siblings, as well as my Canadian environs, such as the classroom, playground, or neighbourhood.

Naturally, my home was where most of my worlds converged: Chinese newspapers laid next to English newspapers; aspirin might be administered as easily as a Chinese herbal tea; and dinner one night might consist of minced pork with preserved vegetables and rice, while corned beef with cabbage, potatoes and rice was served on another. My grandmother would dispense old world traditions and values, whereas my parents might see the advantages of new world thinking and opportunities. To this day, December to January is the perfect example of my two worlds co-existing.

The month of December saw Christmas rituals come alive in our home. With the Christmas tree decorated, brightly packaged presents slowly appeared underneath it. My father draped a string of multi-coloured lights outside along the length of the balcony, and he displayed the Christmas cards we received from friends and family above the mantle. Christmas morning saw the entire family in the living room as we each ripped open our presents. Long before the siblings settled into the afternoon with their new toys, my father already started preparing the turkey brunch. However, our Christmas meal included potatoes being roasted beside taro root, which was my mother's favourite. Also, we never had stuffing. Instead, my father prepared a marinade for the turkey that included fermented black bean, soy sauce, and Chinese Five Spice. To round out the

menu, there was always a large pot of steamed rice and a plate of sautéed *gailan* greens with garlic.

At the end of the meal, the nearly bare turkey carcass was frozen. A week after that, with December done, we took all the Christmas decorations down in a single day. Then, the long process of cleaning the entire house began for Chinese New Year. Platters of dried, sweet nuts and fruits appeared on the table next to neatly stacked arrangements of Chinese oranges. Red paper banners with Chinese characters I could not understand hanged on the wall. All of us received the customary hair cut and new set of clothes. We children were not permitted to fight, and only sweet words were allowed to leave our mouths. On the eve of Chinese New Year, the adults gave red packets containing an even amount of money to the children, and there was a massive feast of foods each representing something auspicious for the New Year.

All Cantonese meals begin with a soup, and in our home, the customary one for this time of year has two main ingredients. One is *faht choy*, a type of seaweed, and it's a homonym for "get rich"; the other is *ho see*, or dried oysters, which is synonymous for "all goes well." Other dishes involved in this meal include: chicken and fish, with head and tail, to signify completeness; shrimp, or *hah*, for the Chinese pronunciation sounds like laughter; long noodles to denote a long life; cake called *neen goh*, for it symbolizes "year high"; and Chinese oranges, or *guum*, for it denotes gold and riches.

However, before the festive and celebratory evening meal, my family shared in my favourite part of Chinese New Year. In the morning, we ate a meal of *jook*, or congee, as it is more commonly known today. I would describe *jook* as similar to oatmeal, but it is made with rice and tastes savoury with the addition of various bits of meat and vegetable. I especially enjoy mine with liberal amounts of white pepper and cilantro, and I absolutely refuse to partake in it unless it is served with a type of deep fried bread. Whereas my father cooked the Western meals in our house, my mother cooked the Chinese ones. The Christmas turkey carcass reappeared for the preparation of the stock, and its

significance for me was that it symbolized the seamless bridge between Canadian and Chinese customs in our home.

This culmination of East meets West was what I considered normal when I was growing up, and my navigation freely in between the two worlds is what I understood. I quickly realized which person I was required to be depending on who I was with or where I was. My grandmother had certain expectations at home, as did my parents, but at school my parents and teachers had different aspirations for me. When I was younger, living within the two worlds, and translating the many messages, seemed completely natural to me. The Chinese traditions and activities that survived the crossing over from the East were all moulded by a Canadian sensibility. Many of my actions at home could be seen as Chinese, but I mainly identified with being Canadian. Several events during my teens and early adult years solidified this connection, but it was several years later before I needed to re-evaluate how I saw myself.

Section 2.

Desig·N·Asian

I believe much of who I am today can be traced back to when I was young. When I reflect on those who have influenced me, I have to recognize that their personal background must also be considered in how they affected me. This passing along of values or thinking, or cultural transfer as I call it, is then closely connected to the notion of cultural translation. I have the opportunity to take on the values or ideas passed on, and then I translate it in a way that makes sense to me. In other words, I can take whatever I am presented with, and then I can accept, adapt, or reject it.

In an earlier chapter in this project, I pointed out that Lowe (1996) has a similar way of classifying a person's continual construction of identity into practices that a person can inherit, modify, or invent. We differ on a minor point: I think I can reject something passed on to me; whereas Lowe believes a person can invent something completely new. When I consider her third point, what I suppose Lowe to mean is if a person comes across an unfamiliar occurrence in the new host culture, there is the possibility that a person can invent a new manner or way of thinking that is particular to him or her.

In addition, Lowe (1996) argues that ethnic groups are in constant cultural transformation due to their continued numbers coming into the country, and that varying degrees of assimilation are a result. When I take this into account and reflect on my own experience growing up, I find her observation to be deserving of further attention. Not only are there the gaps in thinking between my parents' generation and mine, but there are also gaps between the on-going waves of immigrants and the Chinese already living in Vancouver.

When I was younger, the adults in my life wanted me to have the best of the old ways of China as well as the new ways of Canada. My grandmother drove into my head the benefits of Chinese traditions, but my parents could filter

between the advantages of the two countries and encourage the opportunities only available in Canada. There was sometimes the feeling that if I succeeded in one aspect, it also meant that I had failed in another. A good report card pleased my father to no end, but my grandmother pointed out that it implied I was only “English smart” and not, more importantly, “Chinese smart.” For me, it was more significant, and natural, to assimilate, so I subconsciously started to turn away from things Chinese.

I further solidified my strong identification with being Canadian beginning when I was in my mid-teens. During this time, my Chinese side was compressed into the private sphere of my home, and even then it was only a very small part. Everything else in my life, especially out of the home, was about being Canadian. I spoke English with my friends, I read and watched English books and films, I listened to English music, and I majored in English in university. Friends and food were the only areas in which other cultures might find its way into my life.

However, at a time when previous groups of Chinese, as well as their Canadian born children, were more frequently blending into mainstream society, a new group of immigrants was starting to come into Canada during the 1980’s. This wave of immigrants was mainly from Hong Kong, and many of them were educated, moneyed, and professional. Instead of assimilating quietly into Canadian society and learning to speak English, their large numbers demanded that services, such as banking and real estate, be set up for them in their mother tongue. At a time when I saw myself as fully Canadian, these new people who were the same race as me, were conducting themselves in a way that was very different. This group kept within themselves, dressed differently, spoke mainly Chinese, and behaved in ways that were contrary to mine.

I remember not wanting to be confused as belonging to this new group, but since we shared the same physical features, this was sometimes the case. Although I’m not certain why at the time, it used to bother me when Westerners were surprised that I could speak English. Worse yet, were those occasions when I was accused of being “one of them” and told to “go back to China.” I

resented others seeing me more as a denizen, rather than a citizen, of Canada. At a time when I connected with being Canadian, I have no doubt this is why I clung even more tightly to identifying as such, and why I began to overtly turn away from my racial heritage.

I also want to bring attention to what Lowe (1996) defines as the “foreigner within.” Lowe believes that ethnic minorities will often be seen by the dominant culture to be of another kind regardless of how many years or generations have passed. Although I agree with this observation, I wish to add that people in other countries, besides that of the dominant culture, can also see visual minorities as being of or from another country. Having been born and raised in Canada, I associate with being Canadian. Yet, during my experiences of travelling abroad, I have had to defend being Canadian on a number of occasions because I did not look the part.

While travelling, my partner and I were always asked from which country we came. Our answer was simply, “Canada.” Being of German ancestry, my partner was never questioned about being Canadian. I, on the other hand, was never permitted such an assumption. Whether it was in India, parts of Africa, the Philippines, or Sweden, I was not once accepted as being Canadian. The inquisitiveness of the locals from the other countries was only satisfied once I revealed that I was of Chinese heritage.

It may not only be the dominant cultures of a country that see visual minorities as the “foreigner within,” but people in other countries can also see Canadians as being only those of European, and perhaps First Nations, lineage. After insisting to everyone where I travelled that I was indeed Canadian, I was beginning to wonder if it would be less troublesome if I just said I was Chinese. When I look back at this occurrence, I have to question how much this affected my perception of self-identity.

Earlier in this project, both Kingston (1989) and Lai (2003) made reference to being ethnic women growing up in North America, and how they translated their experiences through a Chinese Western lens. Kingston (1998), in a

reassessment of her use of the hyphen in Chinese-American, concluded that she is at the same time both Chinese and American, yet also wholly neither. The main character in Lai's (2003) short story also struggles with this dichotomy as she fights to find an identity for which she can be accepted. Her reluctance to travel to the country of her ancestral roots is further complicated by her fear that she will not only be seen as a foreigner in Canada, but in China as well.

Although I did not move to Hong Kong with this particular trepidation, my experience overseas highlighted the question of my identity. After not being accepted as a Canadian while travelling, my assumption was that I would be considered Chinese while living in Hong Kong, for the Chinese follow the belief that a child follows the lineage of the father. Since my father was born in China, it automatically means that I am recognized as being nothing else but Chinese. I still identified myself as Canadian, but I thought the locals would assume I was Chinese and not ask where I was from. The truth ended up being a little of both.

In Hong Kong, those of Chinese descent did not perceive me as entirely Chinese. They saw that I was not exactly one of them. It was not because I did not look the part, but for the reason that I did not act the part. My mannerisms were different from the local women, and the Hong Kong people were able to differentiate this. Further, I did not sound the part. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak, I betrayed my Chinese roots. The local people sometimes hesitated after I spoke in Cantonese, and then they inquired if I were a Filipina. When I explained that I was born in Canada of Chinese parents, I was then scolded for neglecting my linguistic heritage.

On the other hand, when I went out with expatriate friends, naturally the common spoken language was English. The local people often complimented my ease and command of the English language. My friends would laugh and feel the need to explain that it was because I was from Canada. This would often prompt the question, "Oh, how long have you lived in Canada?" Apparently, to some of the Hong Kong Chinese, I was considered a Chinese national, but just one that happened to be living overseas.

I have come to the realization, that to some, I am “too Chinese.” No matter that I was born in Canada, or that my ancestors came over decades before me, I am not automatically considered a Canadian. To others, I am “not Chinese enough.” I have been called a “CBC,” or Canadian Born Chinese; I have been called a “banana,” yellow on the outside but white on the inside. Those who identify themselves as Chinese have also called me “not three, not four,” in other words, neither one nor the other.

There is one last idea that I wish to consider in the examination of my identity formation. Davis (2007) uses the term “situational ethnicity” in connection with biracial persons and their experience with choosing one of their racial or ethnic identities based on a given situation. However, I feel as though the term can also be applied to my own case as a person who looks ethnically Chinese, but who mainly identifies as being Canadian. For example, while purchasing roast meat in a Chinese supermarket, I will speak in Cantonese to increase my chances of getting a better selection. Or in the case of inquiring over the phone in English about a dining special at a Chinese restaurant, I will make certain to provide at some point in the conversation my Chinese surname. For some reason, I think I may receive a more straightforward reply or better service if the person knows that I am of Chinese descent.

However, I believe “situational ethnicity” is more the case when I am travelling within Asia. When I am in another country, I rarely choose to walk hand in hand with my brown haired and green-eyed husband for two reasons. The first is that I have on more than one occasion been mistaken for a local bar girl who has temporarily found herself a Western tourist to exchange services: for him he has a hired companion for company, whereas I have a wealthy foreigner to pay for hotels, meals, and the odd trinket. For obvious reasons, I find this offensive. The second reason is, even if I can pass for a local, when I am bartering for items or services, the price often goes up indeterminately if my husband is at my side. True, there are times when I can play, “The price is okay with me, but sorry, my husband says it is too expensive” card while bargaining,

but more often than not, it is far better for me to either pretend I am a local by saying as little as possible or being on my own when negotiating.

Interestingly enough, this scenario does go both ways. If we are in Asia, I tend to inquire after accommodation, transportation, and meals. However, if we are in places such as India, Zimbabwe, or the Philippines, my husband is able to use his western features to our advantage while I make my presence scarce. In one instance, he secured plane tickets ahead of the local populace, when few seats were apparently to be had. On another, after performing his best impersonation of a Zimbabwean accent on the telephone, my husband booked a luxury hotel room at the local, rather than the exorbitant, tourist rate. Later, when my husband went to check in at the front desk, he didn't want my presence to arouse any suspicion, so he sent me outside to admire the foliage. I rather suspect we have both learned to maximize our own version of "situational ethnicity" as a couple.

Having experienced polar reactions from others about my identity, as well as choosing when I want to identify as Chinese or Canadian, it makes me reflect on the events in my life that have helped to determine how I see and think of myself. I am fully conscious of the juxtaposition of my Chinese experience and my Canadian experience, as well as the periodic friction between the two. Yet, I do not believe I have struggled with a sense of belonging as I have always strongly identified as being Canadian and Canada to be my home. Other people remind me, or make the point, that I cannot assume the persona of a Canadian. However, it has only been the past few years that I have been reconsidering my identity, and I now find that I cannot entirely disregard my Chinese roots. As I become older, I understand they are a significant part of who I am. My identity is made up of all the events of my past experience. As a result, I am beginning to see more of a balance between the two sides in terms of my self-representation.

Section 3.

Liber·Asian

Memory ... does not lie dormant in the past, awaiting resurrection ... but [it] collaborates between past and present, negotiating ... between remembering and forgetting, between the destruction and creation of the self. (Nicola King)

The purpose of my autobiography was to draw upon memories of my childhood and youth in an attempt to understand who I am as an adult today. In order to come up with the traits I attributed to myself, it was necessary to take a step back to be able to look at myself objectively. I believe I was successful in determining the qualities that have been true to my character ever since I was young, as well as assigning a memory and person(s) who influenced me in that direction. To conclude this chapter, I wish to share my last characteristic and *Wu Xing* element.

Tree 木 “Adventurous”

The second of the *Wu Xing* elements is tree, or more commonly, wood. It is representative of beginnings such as the East, spring, and dawn. Its attributes include strength and flexibility. A tree, if successful, will grow upwards and expand outwards. I strive to mature and develop in a similar way by being open to new ideas and by seeking new opportunities, so I attribute my characteristic of being adventurous to this element. As a child I was always jumping and running around my home. When old enough to go outside, I eagerly explored the streets with the neighbourhood kids. With a watchful eye for snakes, I climbed over the smooth, rounded boulders by the old railway tracks, and each summer I risked scratches to feast on the wild blackberries that grew in abundance.

Looking back, it was easy to think of myself as a growing tree because my life was ordered and planned before me. Being from a Chinese family, there

were clear expectations. From Ah Ngen, she demanded that I be good and obedient (especially to her as she was the eldest in the family). From my father, he enforced the idea, that as females, my sister and I should be totally independent so as not to rely on our future husbands. Therefore, he deemed it mandatory to graduate from university and necessary to find a profession. My father was particularly hopeful for at least one child to be a doctor by profession and a concert singer by hobby. From my mother, she said my sister and I should marry “nice, wealthy, Chinese boys” so they would not only buy a home for us, but one for her to live in as well. Further, she advised us in Chinese, “Don’t be *chun*, dumb, like me. Go out with *many* boys before choosing, and no concerning yourself with so many babies. Too much trouble! Only two babies – one boy and one girl. Don’t worry, mama will help you, not like Ah Ngen with me.” When my sister and I joked that we’d never have any luck finding such generous husbands, our mother waved her hand at us as if she were trying to fan good fortune our way and advised, “Just listen to what I tell you.”

Both my sister and I seemed to cause worry amongst our parents, so we received much counsel and guidance. I suppose being males, my brothers, by default, were supposed to lead successful lives. With all this advice, you might think it ensured that I was to grow tall and strong like a tree with branches reaching in all directions. Yet somehow, although only for a brief time in my life, I lost my ability for growth and adventure. Despite all the good intentions of my blood relations, there was one important lesson I failed to learn until much later in life. “What is your self worth?”

I can remember the great angst that surrounded my sudden decision to travel alone for the first time. I was twenty-five years old, and after years of feeling as though I had a direction in life, I found myself in the past two years floundering to find my personal compass. I was neither happy nor unhappy with how things were going in my life, yet I sensed that it should somehow be more meaningful or eventful. After what seemed an entire lifetime of schooling, I was anxious to get a taste of “the real world” upon graduation from university. Unfortunately, the real world did not live up to my expectations, so I found myself

dissatisfied one day after appraising three areas of my life: my family, my relationship, and my job.

When I reflect on my family, I can see now that as a unit we have gone through several stages. During my mid-twenties, we siblings were all in the same decade of our lives, but we were no longer bound together in the same household. Apart from my younger sister, Emily, with whom I lived, I no longer felt the direct influence of my family that had guided me for years. We were all living separate lives, and there was limited contact between us. No one really seemed concerned with what I was thinking, and in return, I was not all that interested in sharing my life with anyone. To this day, I consider this to be my family's "lost decade."

As for the relationship I was in at the time, all I knew was that it had become an unhealthy one for me. My first boyfriend and I had dated mostly on and sometimes off – usually at his decision - for nearly eight years. I had a strong sense that he loved me, but at the same time I also felt shame to think of how I let him take me for granted or treat me with inadequate appreciation. After I finished university, I tried desperately to sever our ties. However, just as I was finding the courage to let go, he found the determination to hang on. I couldn't find the inner strength to shut the door with finality on him, so I allowed his continual re-appearances in my life to drain me emotionally.

When I think about my first job out of university, I find myself confronted with mixed emotions. On the one hand, it was the most exciting and engaging job I've done to this day. On the other hand, even though I never voiced my opinion, I knew my ability and effort were not being recognized. Even when I received more senior positions, I was still asked on a regular basis to help those who replaced me in my previous departments. I never spoke up for myself because I thought it wrong not to help or rude to ask for monetary compensation.

Although I had started to travel over the past couple of years, I had never done so on my own. When I couldn't find a travelling companion, I decided it was not a sufficient reason to stop me from exploring solo. I wasn't running away

from my problems, I was just starting to assert what I thought would make me, and not necessarily others, happy. Nevertheless, the reception to my travel announcement did not go over well with many people. My mother called me countless times to tell me that her mental ability to shield me from dangers only worked while I was physically in Vancouver, and she was somewhat sceptical that her protective force would extend all the way to Europe. My ex-boyfriend pointed out that I had never travelled alone, and that I would most likely have a miserable time. My employers, although they signed the vacation leave papers, only did so grudgingly because who would see to my responsibilities while I was gone?

With all this negative energy surrounding my decision to do something just for me, I boarded the plane with much consternation. During the ascent, I pressed my face to the window and strained to see where I thought my home was to say a silent “see you soon” to my family. When the plane reached the clouds, I sat back in my seat to take stock of the decisions that had led me to this point. When did I start allowing others to affect me so much? Why couldn't I tell people what I felt I was worth? When had I forgotten how to jump onto new ways of thinking and different paths of being? My life and thinking was stuck in a fog, much like the layer of cloud I was flying through. Just then, as I recall, the plane broke through into a dazzling sunshine that forced me to squint and shield my eyes from the brilliance. When my eyes adjusted, and I could see clearly again, I knew then that I had to do things for myself that would help me to grow if I was to be happy. I understood that without this knowledge or understanding of one's own self worth, it would be impossible for me to mature into that strong, yet flexible, tree. I didn't learn to shout my worth that day, that would only occur several years later, but I did learn to speak it.

The tree element is the only one that I credit solely to myself, and that no one else in my family can lay claim or responsibility. Yet, I recognize that I am free to develop and grow due to two reasons. The first is the indebtedness, or Chinese guilt, that I feel I owe to my family. My ancestors immigrated to Canada in search of a better life, and there were all the early sacrifices made for family by

both the males and females. Any positive outcomes in my life can be traced back to my ancestors: the opportunity to be educated, the freedom to make my own choices, the ability to work in a job of my choosing, and the option of living where I wish. It is due to this guilt that I now have a conscience and a strong moral sense to help guide me in my growth.

The second reason is there is security in the knowledge that I have a family who cares for me, and who still live in the home of my early years. When I think of my childhood, I am reminiscent of being that little girl running through the house again. What a delight it is to remember those feelings and to imagine the lightness returning to my body. Today when I let myself into this same home, as I climb the familiar stairs, I hear my voice call loudly and confidently to my parents, "I'm home!"

Conclusion

Amalgam·Asian

This journey of examining my past has given me much insight into how I have arrived at who I am today. In terms of my life, much of it was situated in two worlds, so my identity formation occurred within multiple sites. However, when I was young, I rarely felt the binary pull between them. Instead, I instinctively knew when I was required to act Chinese, or that of which was more natural to me, to behave in a Canadian manner. As a result, whereby I have come to share some of the same sensibilities as my ancestors, I might have different structures to manifest them.

My understanding of self is very strongly connected to my family, and especially to those who have raised me. In looking at the people who have shaped my identity, I realize that whether I have come to fully know them or not, all the generations before me are part of my inheritance and part of the path to knowing myself. To borrow from SKY Lee (1990), the following serves as a reminder of the significance and strength of family history in understanding our past.

Do you mean that individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them - past and future, no matter how slightly? Do you mean that an individual is not an individual at all, but a series of individuals - some of whom come before her, some after her? Do you mean that this story isn't a story of several generations, but of one individual thinking collectively? (p. 189)

However, through the process of writing this project, I realize much of the body of work written by North Americans of Asian descent centres on the immigrant experience, issues with assimilation, and problems between generations. While my own stories share some commonalities, I feel it is of

equal importance to look beyond these themes. Whereas previously I could not relate to Wah's (2000) notion of the hyphen, I am now beginning to see the value in it. I have never defined myself as Chinese, but I know through the reactions of others, that I cannot entirely claim being Canadian either. Perhaps what I should be looking at is the hyphen; that unidentifiable, in-between space where I can be me, and where identity does not have to be fixed. Insofar as I have explored my ethnicity, the next logical progression would then be to express what I think it simply means to be Canadian.

I may have started this project with the intent of looking at my collective past to determine my identity, but now that I have shared part of my history, I know that I am not exceptional. There are the multitudes before me who have had a similar experience, and another entire host of people who currently can be included in this universal occurrence. I know my experiences are unique to me, but that they are in no way the only one of its kind.

However, this process of reclaiming my past does not end here. The more I delve into my history, the more questions arise regarding my background. When does such a journey come to a conclusion? Will I ever uncover the many mysteries surrounding some of my ancestors? What other questions should I be asking my parents while they are still with me? Many who know of my writing endeavour have inquired as to when I will share my work. Once again, to make use of Denise Chong's (1995) insight, in her acknowledgement in *The Concubine's Children*, she confesses, "The truthful answer is probably that such a [work] is never finished, but that there comes a time when the story is ready to be told."

References

- BC Stats. (May 11, 2010 rev. 7). 2006 Census Profile Vancouver, C. In *2006 census of Canada: Census profiles (A) regional districts*. Retrieved December 27, 2010, from <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/cen06/profiles/detailed/rd15.asp>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London, England: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). The third space. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207-221). London, England: Lawrence & Wishart Limited.
- Chinese in Vancouver. (n.d.). Immigration. In *Vancouver's visible minority population to double in 2031*. Retrieved March 9, 2010, from <http://www.chineseinvancouver.ca/?p=10318>
- Chao, L. (1997). *Beyond silence: Chinese Canadian literature in English*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: TSAR Publications.
- Chao, L., Wong-Chu, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Strike the wok: An anthology of contemporary Chinese Canadian fiction*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: TSAR Publications.
- Chliboyko, J. (2001). Brief empire: Canada's first Chinese settlement. *Beaver*, 81, 22-26.
- Chong, D. (1995). *The concubine's children*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Penguin Books Canada Limited.
- Choy, W. (1999). *Paper shadows: A Chinatown childhood*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Viking Press
- Con, H., Con, R. J., Johnson, G., Wickberg, E., (Ed.), & Willmott, W. (1982). *From China to Canada: A history of the Chinese communities in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: McClelland and Stewart Limited.
- Cumberland Chamber of Commerce. (n.d.). Heritage. In *From mining town to funky village, Cumberland has a diverse and rich history*. Retrieved December 28, 2010, from <http://www.cumberlandbc.org/heritage/>
- Davis, R. G. (2007). *Begin here: Reading Asian North American autobiographies of childhood*. Honolulu, HI, U.S.A.: University of Hawai'i Press.

- Hume, S. (2010, November 7). Loss of ceremonial spike infuriates relatives of Chinese workers who helped build railway. *The Vancouver Sun*, A1-A2.
- King, N. (2000). *Memory, narrative, identity: Remembering the self*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kingston, M. H. (1998). Cultural mis-readings by American reviewers. In L. E. Skandera-Trombley (Ed.), *Critical essays on Maxine Hong Kingston* (pp. 95-103). New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: G. K. Hall & Company.
- Kingston, M. H. (1989). *The woman warrior: Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Vintage International.
- Lai, L. (2003). Two houses and an airplane. In L. Chao & J. Wong-Chu (Eds.), *Strike the wok: An anthology of contemporary Chinese Canadian fiction* (pp. 1-18). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: TSAR Publications.
- Lee, S. (1990). *Disappearing moon café*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre Limited.
- Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Durham, N.C., U.S.A.: Duke University Press.
- Rutherford, J. (1990). *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. London, England: Lawrence & Wishart Limited.
- Simon, S. (1996). *Gender in translation: Cultural identity and the politics of transmission*. London, England: Routledge.
- Trinh, T. M. (1991). *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Routledge.
- Wah, F. (2006). *Diamond grill*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: NeWest Press.
- Wah, F. (2000). *Faking it: Poetics and hybridity*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: NeWest Publishers Limited.
- Yee, P. (2006). *Saltwater city: An illustrated history of the Chinese in Vancouver*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre Limited.