

# Chinatown Children during World War Two in *The Jade Peony*

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**ABSTRACT**

In *The Jade Peony* (1995) Wayson Choy captured vividly the lives of three children growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s and 1940s when the Depression and the Second World War constituted the social backdrop. In the article, I argue that the Chinatown residents exemplify the type of vulnerability defined by Judith Butler as "up-againstness" and especially the children in the novel suffer from a greater vulnerability as they are caught up in the crossfire of both sides. Growing up in two conflicting cultures and restricted to the liminal cultural and physical space, the children are disorientated and confused as if stranded in no man's land. More importantly, in their serious struggles, the children show great resilience and devise their own strategies, such as forming alliance with others, to survive and gain more space in spite of the many restraints imposed on them.

**RESUMEN**

En *The Jade Peony* (1995) Wayson Choy captura vívidamente las vidas de tres niños que crecen en el Chinatown de Vancouver durante las décadas de 1930 y 1940, con la Gran Depresión y la Segunda Guerra Mundial como telón de fondo social. En el artículo, argumento que los residentes en Chinatown ejemplifican el tipo de vulnerabilidad definida por Judith Butler como "up-againstness"(2) y especialmente, que los niños en la novela sufren una gran vulnerabilidad al estar atrapados en medio del fuego cruzado mantenido por ambos sectores. Ya que crecen en dos culturas en conflicto y restringidas al espacio liminal cultural y físico, los niños están desorientados y confundidos como si hubieran sido abandonados en tierra de nadie. Sobre todo, en sus serias luchas, los niños muestran una gran resiliencia y trazan sus propias estrategias, como formar alianzas con otros, para sobrevivir y ganar más espacio a pesar de las muchas restricciones que se les impone.



In *The Jade Peony* (1995) Wayson Choy captured vividly the lives of three children growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s and 1940s when the Great Depression and the Second World War constituted the social backdrop.<sup>1</sup> I argue that in the book the children are uniquely vulnerable as they are caught up in wars on many fronts: China is at war with Japan; Canada sends troops to the European battlefields; their survival space, Chinatown, is surrounded by hostility as the larger society does not recognise the legitimacy of their existence; meanwhile, the second-generation children, as depicted in the book, are constantly intimidated and belittled by the first-generation immigrants who deem themselves to have better cultural capital and do not hesitate to use it to keep the later generations in their places; and lastly, the children also engage with personal wars while growing up, encountering sexism, awakening sexuality and cultural confusion. We see the children are disorientated and confused as if stranded in no man's land trying to sort out identity issues and find a way to survive generational conflicts. More importantly, in their serious struggles, the children show great resilience and devise their own strategies to grow up in spite of the many restraints imposed on them.

In the sequel, *All that Matters* (2004), Choy explains that the Chen family came to Vancouver in 1926 because of famine and civil wars in China. They came to settle in Chinatown in Vancouver, along with the many bachelor male labourers who were forced to remain in Canada as they could not afford the passage home. Alena Chercover observes: "Disenfranchised, ostracized, and exploited by the host nation, early Chinese settlers clustered in the less desirable periphery of Vancouver. This space then became known as 'Chinatown'" (6). This ghettoised Chinatown, to a certain extent, provides shelter and cultural space for its residents. However, its isolation and independence are only delusive, because it is far from what Mary Louise Pratt defines as "safe houses" which provides "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression". Indeed, although the residents took Chinatown as a safe zone for themselves, thinking they could be at home within it, it was seen by outsiders as a conspicuously unruly space. The self-secluded Chinatown was subject to the surveillance of the wider society, and maintained rather tense relationships with their neighbours, such as the Japanese Canadians. With historical grudges between

<sup>1</sup> The author, Chinese Canadian fictionist Wayson Choy, second generation, was born in Vancouver in 1939. He currently teaches at Humber College in Toronto. According to his autobiography *Paper Shadows*, Choy was born and raised in Chinatown in Vancouver before the family moved to Ontario where they ran a fish and chip restaurant.

the two communities, Chinese and Japanese Canadians were not allies at that time but enemies, competing for opportunities and for space.<sup>2</sup>

In "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethic of Cohabitation", Judith Butler defines vulnerability as:

when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solicitations in languages we may not understand or even wish to understand. This happens, for instance, at the border of several contested states but also in various moments of geographical proximity—what we might call "up againstness"—the result of populations living in conditions of unwilling adjacency, the result of forced emigration or the redrawing of the boundaries of a nation-state. (134)

Indeed, we see Chinatown residents in the novel exemplify this type of vulnerability as their community is under threat, surrounded by the hostile wider Canadian society and adjacent to the unsympathetic Little Tokyo. Meanwhile, the Vancouver Chinatown is also located in a multi-racial and diverse community which could well exemplify the notion of a "contact zone".<sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone in her *Imperial Eyes* as "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (8). For Pratt, the contact zone is propitious to producing literate art forms. However, Renisa Mawani, in *Colonial Proximities*, drawing upon Guha, Hindess and Homi Bhabha's theories about the colonial contact zone being a place of fear and anxiety, explains that "No matter how ambiguous and unfounded these apprehensions, the uncertainty and contingency of colonial contacts and their potentially destabilizing effects often engendered illiberal reactions from colonial administrators and bureaucrats, including discipline, force and violence" (14). Thus, Butler's definition of the vulnerability of people who are forced to live in proximity to other groups in a contact zone could also be understood from the perspective of the dominant power. They also do not like "intimate proximities" (Mawani 8) amongst different races due

<sup>2</sup> This changed in a later period than in the novel in the 1970s when different ethnic minorities united under the banner of "Asian Canadian".

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in *Colonial Proximities*, Renisa Mawani theorizes British Columbia as a contact zone where "a place of racial mixture—a place where Europeans, aboriginal peoples, and racial migrants came into frequent contact, a conceptual and material geography where racial categories and racisms were both produced and productive of locally configured and globally inflected modalities of colonial power" (5).

to the fear about “racial heterogeneity” which is seen as a threat to “racial purity” and will unsettle and blur the “racial taxonomies and boundaries” upon which lie the “biopolitics of state racism” (10). Therefore, it is not hard to imagine the tension in early twentieth-century Chinatown with the mutual mistrust and repulsion.

I argue that the children in the novel suffer from such vulnerability as they are not only up-against the white society but also seen as “enemies” or “traitors” within Chinatown. It could be said that they are caught up in the crossfire between the two sides. In the novel, Meiyang, the youngest brother Sekky’s babysitter is asked why she knows so much about the war, to which Meiyang answers: “Aren’t we all at war?” (*Jade* 261). Indeed, Choy suggests that though no battles took place on Canadian territory during the Second World War, people in Chinatown during the period were at war on different fronts, as patriarchal oppression, racial discrimination, and cultural conflict turned people against each other. Amidst such confusions and crossfire, Chinatown becomes a battlefield for the children. The war is not of fire and smoke but of racist attacks and disorientation in forming one’s identity. Winning over allies seems to be especially important for the children to live and grow as they are neither experienced nor resourceful on their own and the political and economic conditions are extreme. Indeed, I extend the use of the words ally and alliance here from cooperation between states, often in a military context, to mean the forming of strategic personal or social relationships, often with a view to affirming mutual interests or defending against a common enemy. In relation to *The Jade Peony*, I am especially interested in the capricious nature of an alliance, with its members constantly changing their perspective and commitments. Moreover, though the children in the novel are not really at war, the danger is similar: put one foot wrong and there may be serious consequences. There can be casualties too, such as Meiyang, who died tragically. We also see that the Chinatown residents, represented in the book by the Chen family, constantly form and reform alliances, permanent or temporary, against the enemy, which turn out to be a floating category with shifting boundaries.

I have chosen to focus my reading on the idea of being at war, and especially on the forming of alliances, because the historical period presented in Choy’s story seems to have been a time when the lines between enemy and ally were very distinct, and when social, political and racial conflicts were especially intense. These conflicts were often understood in more simplified, black and white terms than was the case in later decades. For example, in the story, Liang describes different reactions from the audience towards the newsreel that is shown after movies:

Wong Suk and I stayed late to catch the newsreel. China was at war, fighting the Japanese invaders. Wong Suk liked to start the clapping whenever Chiang Kai-shek appeared on the screen. Then we would all hiss the enemy if they showed up, especially if General Tojo marched into view, or if we saw the western-dressed Japanese going in and out of the White House, chattering away with the Americans. If enough Chinatown people were there, the hissing was as loud as the clapping. Grown-up white people clapped every time they saw President Roosevelt, Chinatown people booed every time they saw the Japanese, and children cheered every time Mighty Mouse showed up. I always looked forward to the Petunia Pig cartoons and *Only the Shadow Knows* mystery serial. (*Jade* 45)

With the war as the backdrop of their daily life, the tensions between people of different races and nationalities are manifested directly and openly. It is interesting to note that people who share the same physical space, such as the cinema hall, identify different allies from the screen, but do not seek connection with those with whom they share the actual place and time. Chiang Kai-shek, the then president of China, was clearly supported by the first-generation labourers. And the Chinese immigrants do not try to hide their anti-Japanese feelings. White Canadians also express their affinity with America by clapping at the appearance of President Roosevelt.

The deciding factor in the different countries’ choice of allies is common interest rather than justice. For instance, it was after Pearl Harbour was attacked in 1941 that the US declared war on Japan. In the stories, the father is excited to hear the news on the radio: “‘The tide has turned’, Father said. ‘America is going to be China’s ally!’” (*Jade* 264). China and Japan had been at war, a conflict known as the second Sino-Japanese War, since 1937, and the Chinese immigrants’ excitement over America’s and then Canada’s declaration of war against Japan is therefore understandable.<sup>4</sup> It meant not only that China then stood a greater chance of winning but also that they, as Chinese immigrants, could hope for better treatment in Canada. In comparison, the children’s world seems more

<sup>4</sup> The First Sino-Japan War, fought between the Qing Empire and the Empire of Japan happened in 1894 and lasted till 1895, ended with China’s grave losses.

<sup>5</sup> Cartoons can also be politically charged, and are not always innocent. Among those that Choy’s Liang enjoys, Petunia Pig is relatively uncontroversial, but Mighty Mouse, an American superhero, was shown in wartime films fighting enemies that clearly represent the Nazis. Cartoons can also be racist, as in the case of the Fu Manchu comic strips, one of the spin-offs from Sax Rohmer’s original novels.

innocent. Kids, regardless of their background, like cartoons. Liang, the Chinatown girl, learns to appreciate American-made cartoons in English as she grows up in Canada.<sup>5</sup> However, each fighting their own battles, the ethnic minorities failed to recognise the importance of forming alliances.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, I argue that, though the novel is written from the perspective of children, it is hardly a children's book. In *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage, and Childhood in Post war Britain*, Valerie Krips explains how books about children reflect an adult world: "children are imagined and imaged by adults, and what is thereby revealed is a profoundly important insight into the culture's (literal) self-understanding" (6). Apart from the fact that the novel talks about many complicated issues, such as the Depression, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, the Second World War, and suicide, I argue that the children's world is in fact an analogy of the adults' reality as the children's frustration about not being treated as equals is also acutely felt by the adults. People of Chinese ancestry were not recognised as citizens in Canada until 1947 when the Canadian government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and granted them the right to vote in federal elections. Choy's novel recaptures a Chinatown, which, in the view of white Canadian society, was a tumour that the city would prefer doing without. With their rights unrecognised and their existence often ignored, Chinese Canadians felt deeply humiliated because of this vulnerability that they were unwillingly subject to. They were, to some extent, treated as if like children who do not enjoy full rights and who should be told off and punished when caught up doing mischiefs. Chinatown residents called July 1, 1923, the day when the Chinese Exclusion Act came into effect, "Humiliation Day". The irony of this name is clear: July 1 was also Dominion Day (now "Canada Day") and marks the anniversary of Confederation. In her article "The Healing Effects of Childhood Narrative in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*" Christine Lorre argues: "The narration allows the intellectualisation of the conclusion, and occasionally the pain, of childhood experience, which reflects, sometimes faithfully, sometimes in a distorted way, the confusion and pain of the adult world that surrounds it" (72). In the book, the children are at times frustrated with the adults who either ignore them or antagonise them by calling them useless or brainless, which, I argue, could be seen as a projection of the frustration of the adult community.

For example, in the first part, Liang observes the embarrassing situation that many Chinese adults find themselves in:

<sup>6</sup> It was not until the 1970s people from various ethnic groups formed the idea of coalition between different ethnic groups and fought under the banner of an "Asian Canadian" identity.

In the city dump on False Creek Flats, living in makeshift huts, thirty-two Old China bachelor-men tried to shelter themselves; dozens more were dying of neglect in the over-crowded rooms of Pender Street. There were no Depression jobs for such men. They had been deserted by the railroad companies and betrayed by the many labour contractors who had gone back to China, wealthy and forgetful. There was a local Vancouver by-law against begging for food, a federal law against stealing food, but no law in any court against starving to death for lack of food. The few churches that served the Chinatown area were running out of funds. Soup kitchens could no longer safely manage the numbers lining up for nourishment, fighting each other. China men [sic] were shoved aside, threatened, forgotten. (*Jade* 10)

Since the Chinatown residents had to rely entirely upon the community's inner resources to survive in difficult times, such as during the Great Depression, they had to stick closely together, to the effect of forming a ghettoised residential zone within the city. In "Does Shirley Temple Eat Chicken Feet?", Michelle Hartley argues: "The deprivation of rights and freedoms that the Chinese faced resulted in a close-knit, insular community for the remaining residents, a community that both took care of its own and closely watched its boundaries" (64). What isolated Chinatown was a double layer of barriers constructed upon its physical borders—a layer of self-isolation from within, intending to screen off the judgemental white gaze, and a layer of forced exclusion from the mainstream society that actively ignored its existence. The forming of a physical shield, such as Chinatown, renders them more vulnerable because the fact that they are displaced is made more obvious.

The stories depict a society organised by Confucian beliefs and located in Vancouver's Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> At that time, this district was mainly inhabited by first generation immigrants, and was isolated by a distinctive culture and social organisation that differed from Canadian norms.<sup>8</sup> The family that the stories revolve around is a typical Chinese family in Chinatown

<sup>7</sup> Confucianism greatly influenced traditional Chinese culture. It has effectively supported a patriarchal system. In fact, during Confucius' own time, about 2,500 years ago, his teachings were not widely accepted. However, in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE—220 CE), the first emperor declared China a Confucian state and other ideologies were banned because the government saw the potential of Confucianism for maintaining order, thus facilitating its sovereignty. Since then, Confucianism has become the state-endorsed ideology and has filtered into Chinese and many other Asian countries' cultures.

<sup>8</sup> For example, as the family at the centre of Choy's novel is not very affluent and both the parents need to work hard to support the relatively large family (of seven members), readers may wonder why they still seek to adopt a son and also why the character known as Stepmother sees it as

but unusual by Canadian standards. The widowed father goes to Canada with his first son and his grandmother, as paper relatives to a man whom the children would later call Third Uncle. The Uncle also arranges for a wife procured from China to come to join the family. This second wife gives birth to a daughter, Jook-Liang. Then the family adopt a recently orphaned boy, Jung-Sun. Meanwhile the second wife, whom all the children, including the two biological ones, call Stepmother, gives birth to another boy, Sek-Lung. She is only relieved of the duty of reproduction with a miscarriage.

The book is devoted to stories of children who are second-generation immigrants. This emphasis on a specific generation and age group is of vital importance to the novel because firstly, the second-generation children are exposed to double worlds—Chinatown and Canada—and the conflict between them. Both worlds were created by others and require the children's participation and cooperation. And secondly, as children, they are still forming their identity and personality while they struggle to grow up. This means that they are at a most critical and vulnerable stage of life.

In the book, women are oppressed gravely by the patriarchal system. This oppression is most effective as it turns the female members against each other, preventing them from realising that they should form coalitions with one another for their own benefit. Chercover argues:

Gender constrictions, like the bounds of ethnicity and class, related to cultural and institutional sexism both within the Chinese diaspora and within the sociopolitical framework of the host nation. Both structures erect barriers that deny Chinese women access to knowledge, power, wealth, public space, and even physical wellness. (8)

In the novel, Poh-Poh, the grandmother, with her age and superiority in cultural capital (language ability and cultural know-how), is dominant within the family. As Sekky observes: "Because of her age, the wiry ancient lady was the one person Father would never permit any of us to defy" (*Jade* 147). Liang, because she carries the family name, comes second within the women's hierarchy. Stepmother, who remains nameless and seldom speaks in the novel, is put at the bottom of the family order.

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an obligation to give birth to more children. It is, in fact, a Confucian decree that a proper family should increase its numbers to ensure and honour the ancestral lineage. Another example is the burial ceremony and the custom of bringing the bones back to where the person was born. In the novel, traces of Confucian idealism pervade Choy's depiction of the society in Chinatown. However, because the narrators are second-generation CBC children, cultural explanations of this kind are

Liang observes her mother, in a rather detached tone:

Stepmother was a young woman when she came to Canada, barely twenty and a dozen years younger than Father. She came with no education, with a village dialect as poor as she was. Girls were often left to fend for themselves in the streets, so she was lucky to have any family interested in her fate. Though my face was round like father's, I had her eyes and delicate mouth, her high forehead but not her high cheekbones. (*Jade* 5)

As Liang is only a child, her knowledge and understanding of the adult world is influenced by other adults' teachings. Here she judges her mother inferior because of her lack of education and poor command of language. And it seems Liang thinks that "her family" is kind enough to take the mother in as "girls are often left to fend for themselves in the streets" (5). Liang feels superior to her mother, as she belongs with the family more than Stepmother does, and this belonging is made visible through her resemblance to her father. Though she also takes after her mother, she obviously does not feel much related to her. Liang explains: "She was brought over to help take care of Poh-Poh and to keep father appropriate wifely company; but soon the young woman became more a wife than a concubine to Father, more a stepdaughter than a house servant to Grandmother" (6). The fact that Stepmother is brought over to Canada initially as a concubine and a house servant to the family ensures that she remains inferior and insignificant, though the family is generous enough to "promote" her to be Stepmother to the children.

Poh-Poh, having internalised patriarchal beliefs, becomes a faithful defender of the system, despite having herself been oppressed by its injustice. She actively subordinates the other female members. Therefore, in the book, the women's army—Stepmother, Poh-Poh and Liang—are turned against each other. Liang observes shrewdly:

Poh-Poh, being one of the few elder women left in Vancouver, took pleasure in her status and became the arbitrator of the old ways. Poh-Poh insisted we simplify our kinship terms in Canada, so my mother became "stepmother". That is what the two boys always called her, for Kiam was the First Son of Father's First Wife who had died mysteriously in China; and Jung, the Second Son, had been adopted into our family. What the sons called my mother, my mother became. The name "Stepmother" kept things simple, orderly, as Poh-Poh had determined. Father did not protest. Nor did the slim, pretty woman that was my

mother seem to protest, though she must have cast a glance at the Old One and decided to bide her time. That was the order of things in China. (6)

Here, the patriarchal oppression of Stepmother is exposed as she is effectively alienated in the context of the family. With the pretext of “simplifying” things in Canada, Stepmother is deprived of her natural title of mother to her two biological offspring. However, as Liang accurately points out, the simplification is made on account of the two older boys. In fact, the usage of the term “stepmother” is to remind Stepmother of her inferior position.

At the same time, there seem to be ongoing wars between Poh-Poh and Liang, as Poh-Poh endeavours to make her grand-daughter reconcile herself to her own inferiority: “‘Jook-Liang, if you want a place in this world’, Grandmother’s voice had that exasperating let-me-remind-you tone, ‘do not be born a girl-child’” (27). Liang observes: “Whenever she was alone with me, the Old One snapped at what she saw as my lack of humility” (30). By purposely antagonising her grand-daughter, Poh-Poh means to keep Liang realistic and tough, in preparation for the hard reality for girls in the world. Therefore Poh-Poh repeats her admonishment, determined to make an impression on Liang:

“Mo yung girl!” She said, as if I would never learn a thing, however much I wanted to be taught. “Too much spoil!” [...]

“Too fussy”, Poh-Poh said, her back to me. “Useless!” (33)

Literally, “Mo yung” means “no use”. This accusation of being useless, paradoxically, seems to be a mixture of reproach and a blessing that Poh-Poh gives to her grand-daughter. For example, Poh-Poh refuses to teach Liang any of her skills: “But all her womanly skills she would keep away from me, keep to herself until she died: ‘Job too good for *moyung* girl!’” (32). Exploited in Old China as a slave girl, Poh-Poh acquires her domestic abilities not for self-fulfilment but to be used cruelly by others. Although she expresses her concern and love in a rough manner, her calling Liang “moyung”, to some extent, is a disguised blessing, suggesting Liang will not be used as her grandmother has been.

The old timer Poh-Poh believes things won’t change in Chinatown, since they are Chinese and will remain Chinese:

“There’s no war in Canada”, I said. “This is Canada”.

Poh-Poh sighed deeply, gave me a condescending look.

“You not Canada, Liang”, she said, majestically, “you China. Always war in China.” (34)

Emphasising that Liang is China, Poh-Poh believes in the existence of a tie that will bind a Chinese to her country under any circumstances. China has been engaged in a series of wars, and therefore all of the Chinese, even the Canadian-born Liang, must be associated with the outcome of the war. It also shows how Canada has failed to assure of its residents of security and belonging to the point they would alienate themselves and their offspring.

Frustrated about being undervalued and unrecognised, Liang seeks affirmation and affection from outside the family. Her relationship with Wong Suk, who comes to Canada as an indentured CPR worker, is empowering to both of them. They form an alliance: “I was happy. I knew our adopted relationship was a true one: Wong Suk would otherwise have been only one of the many discarded bachelor-men of Chinatown—and I, barely tolerated by Poh-Poh, would merely be a useless girl-child” (36). Strengthened by this friendship, Liang is able to gain resources outside the family, which is determined to restrain the development of her subjectivity. Liang’s external resources for support and sustenance are from Wong Suk who supplies affirmation, and affection and Shirley Temple, with whom Liang imagines developing a friendship: “It was a fact that we were both nearly nine years old” (*Jade* 46). However, Liang is not the only child in the family to identify herself with a Western role model. She imagines her grandmother’s disappointment at witnessing the children’s fantasies: “*This useless only-granddaughter wants to be Shir-lee Tem-polah; the useless Second Grandson wants to be cow-boy-lah. The First Grandson wants to be Charlie Chan. All stupid foolish!*” (37). The Canadian Born Chinese (CBC) children start to internalise social and cultural influences from their environment.

For example, Liang is pained by the fact that what she self-identifies with does not reflect what she is, or at least look like:

I looked again into the hall mirror, seeking Shirley Temple with her dimpled smile and perfect white-skin features. Bluntly reflected back at me was a broad sallow moon with slit dark eyes, topped by a helmet of black hair. I looked down. Jutting out from a too-large taffeta dress were two spindly legs matched by a pair of bony arms. Something cold clutched at my stomach, made me swallow. (*Jade* 41)

Growing up in a country whose mainstream culture is different from their family culture, the Chinatown children, especially those local-born, are “at war” within themselves, trying to come to terms with their self-image and identity. This is not always easy as the prevalent values and aesthetics do not recognise their “kind”, since they are not reflected positively in

mainstream images. Charles Taylor explains: “Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it. [...] The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized” (36). Liang describes her own image in the mirror as featuring a “sallow moon” face and “slit dark eyes”, using the Western terminology usually applied to describe Asian facial features at that time. She not only uses the terms, but also internalises the values attached to them: that they meant “ugly”, as she realises with dismay. With regards to making Liang feel inferior and ugly, it seems as if Chinatown culture, represented by Poh-Poh and Canada form (weather intentionally or not) an effective coalition, with Poh-Poh attacking her for being a girl of no use and Canada promoting an ideal child image of a blonde, chubby, lovely girl.

In the second part of the novel, Jung relates several stories that influence the forming of his self, such as believing in ghosts, luck, and physical strength. In this section, I will concentrate on his sexual awakening and coming to terms with his homosexuality. Although she continually reproaches Liang, Poh-Poh’s attitude towards her adopted grandson is affirmative: “After eight years of living with her, since I was four, she never stopped appraising me with her faded eyes; her glance, still watchful, searching” (87). Apart from her apparent preference for male heirs to girls in the family, I argue that Poh-Poh and Jung’s alliance is fortified by the fact it is Poh-Poh who helps Jung to come to terms with his sexual orientation.

The reason for that seems to be that Poh-Poh thinks Jung is different, in a good way:

“Jung-Sum is different”, I overheard her say to Mrs. Lim one day when I was waiting for a chance to do my daily round of showdown boxing. [...]

“Of course”, Mrs. Lim responded, always blunt. “He has different blood. More handsome than your own two grandsons”.

“No, no, not looks”, Poh-Poh protested. “Inside unusual, not ordinary”.

“Very ordinary to me”, Mrs. Lim chimed back. “All Jung wants to do is to fight all the other boys. All boys the same!”

“Different –that’s all I say!” [...]

The Old One put down her embroidery and turned back to Mrs. Lim and started an old saying, “Sun and moon both round...”

“—yet”, Mrs. Lim finished the saying, “Sun and moon different”.

“I’m the sun”, I said, cheerfully, puffing away, breaking into their conversational dance. “I’m the champion!”

“Jung-Sum is the moon”, Poh-Poh said. [...]

“The moon?” Mrs. Lim blurted. “Impossible!” [...]

The Old One slowly lifted her teacup and gently focused on me, her gaze full of knowing mystery. (87-8)

Jung is perplexed by Poh-Poh’s announcement that he is the moon, the *yin* sign for female, darkness (or shadow) and softness; instead of being the sun, the symbol for the *yang*, male, the light and the powerful, as he obviously takes to activities which build physical strength. Poh-Poh seems to be able to see the underlying nature of Jung, that he “is” *yin* though he manifests many *yang* features. This essentialist view contradicts contemporary liberal thinking which proposes that one’s conscious choice of actions, rather than some inner essence, defines the self. However, traditional Chinese thinking actually creates a space for Jung to face his homosexuality, since Poh-Poh, the “standard-bearer” of the old ways, can appreciate his nature, thinking the transgression in his sexuality extraordinary rather than abnormal.

Later in his stories, Jung comes to realise that he has real affection towards another boy, Frank Yuen: “*Frank Yuen is the sun*, I remembered thinking. [...] Yes, I said to myself, [...], *I am the moon*” (*Jade* 132-3). As Jung is not a very expressive character, this development in sexuality is not fully articulated. Concurrently, Jung does not accept his sexuality completely, believing his sexual preference is due to gender transgression—that he is at some level female. Though this transgression is justified and allowed by the Chinese belief in predestined nature—to be born as *yin* or *yang*—Jung is perfectly aware that his sexuality should be kept to himself and away from the prying eyes of the Chinatown community. The assertion that Jung is *yin* by Poh-Poh, an authority on Chinese culture helps Jung to gradually accept his sexuality. Yet his desire continues to contradict the mind-set he has formed in the close-knit Chinatown community. And since Jung is not an outwardly expressive character, his inner turmoil is all the more acute.

The third part has the youngest, Sekky, as the protagonist and narrator. Davis conjures a very vivid metaphor: “[Sekky] lives in the no-man’s land whose boundaries are two conflicting racial and cultural realities: Chinatown and Canada” (“Chinatown” 131). Being sickly with lung infections since birth, Sekky has not been able to go to English school or Chinese school until two years after the usual age for beginning. Staying home with Poh-Poh, Sekky develops a deep bond with his grandmother and the old Chinese ways. At the beginning of this story, Sekky complains about the family calling him—“*mo no*” (brainless in Cantonese)—simply because he cannot address a Chinatown adult correctly.



Sekky explains that the second-generation children who were born in Canada are considered as brainless and are mistrusted: “All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born ‘neither this nor that,’ neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain” (*Jade* 152). Therefore, being brainless or *mo no* does not refer to a person’s intelligence but is closely associated with one’s ability to walk within social boundaries. Taking for granted the traditional ways and values, the elders do not realise that their own perceptions and views were acquired through life experience in Chinese society. They then think of the two generations who were born and raised in Canada as stupid, not knowing better. Moreover, it seems that calling the second-generation children *mo no* is a strategy that the elders use to instil a sense of inferiority in them, so that they will remain humble and respectful towards the old order. By taking advantage of the new generations’ lack of life experience and linguistic proficiency, the elders or the authorities in Canada construct purposefully a false “reality”—that the local born children are “*mo no*”. They enforce this concept by constantly reprimanding and humiliating them with this disparaging term whenever they make any mistakes due to insufficient knowledge or lack of instruction. Sekky, as we see, mistakenly takes out his anger against Chineseness—which he is not “good” at being.

In Sekky’s little six-year-old heart, he feels it is unfair of the family to be so “focused on the way I stumbled over calling my adopted Gim Sam Gons (Gold Mountain uncles) their proper titles” (145). It seems to him that Chinatown family life is to some extent more difficult to cope with than life in the English world. Being a less experienced Chinatown resident, Sekky is bewildered not only by the overwhelming addressing system in Chinese based on the addressee’s gender, age, status and kinship to the addresser, but also by the importance of addressing people correctly. However, addressing a person by his or her proper title is a very important part of Chinese social custom, since it maintains the order of patriarchal hierarchy, upon which basis Confucian society functions. As Sekky observes: “Every Chinese person, it seemed to me, had an enigmatic status, an order of power and respect, mysteriously attached to him or her” (147). Lee explains: “Misnaming is therefore an act that suggests a potentially rebellious refusal to submit to the community’s social standards. Wittingly or not, Sekky casts himself as a dissenting subject who needs to be disciplined and molded until he partakes (and consents) fully in the discourse of Chineseness” (20). Indeed, the Chineseness within Chinatown is an artificial construct that is made true by the reinforcement of each of its participants. Sekky’s seemingly trivial mistake is intolerable because he is in effect poking the bubble created by the authority of the community, which may endanger the existing social order.

Sekky also explains that the English-speaking second generation are potential “traitors”, that they may betray Chinatown people to the white society:

*Mo nos* went to English school and mixed with Demon outsiders, and even like *them*. Wanted to invite *them* home. Sometimes a *mo no* might say one careless word too may, and the Immigration Demons would pounce. One careless word—perhaps because a *mo no* girl or a *mo no* boy was showing off—and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night, bang on the family door, demand a show of pile of documents with red embossed stamps. Then the Immigration Demons would separate family members and ask trick questions. Then certain “family” members would disappear. Households would be broken up. Jobs would be lost. Jail and shame and suicides would follow. (*Jade* 152-3)

This situation turns the English-speaking Chinatown children into potential traitors to the Chinese community as children tend to misplace their trust and be careless with the disclosure of information. Chinatown parents purposely withhold some information from children. Children, therefore, are excluded from the centre of Chinatown life and sensitive secrets are kept away from them. Davis observes: “the secrets of the Chinatown inhabitants become another effective border that separates the insiders from the mainstream world on the outside, as well as generations within Chinatown from each other” (“Chinatown” 125). Choy shows how discriminatory policies in Canada not only segregated Chinatown from the rest of Canada but also divided Chinese Canadian people within Chinatown.

Choy complicates the old and new paradigms. In his book, it is not simply that the new wins over the old or the old gives way to the modern. For him, both the old and the new are valued. In Sekky’s stories, he becomes Poh-Poh’s ally in preparation for her own death as they would go on scavenging trips in search of glittering objects in garbage bins. They conceal their trips from the other family members as they think scavenging brings shames on them. After Poh-Poh’s death, Sekky attests that he can see Poh-Poh’s ghost in the household. Eventually, the father is persuaded by Third Uncle to *baisen*—a ritual ceremony to pay tribute to the dead of the family: “‘The fact is,’ Third Uncle said to Father, ‘you haven’t paid your respects properly to your dead mother. You must *baisen*, you must *bow*. Pay your respects! All this political talk you talk, one world, one citizenship! You forget you Chinese!?!’” (*Jade* 188). *Baisen*, a term composed of two Chinese words *bai* (paying homage to) and *shen* (god or gods) is used to refer to ancestral veneration here. The ritual

is not only ceremonial: people have to be sincere. As in the book, the father has to arrange a second *baisen* for Poh-Poh. After the second *baisen*, the family is no longer disturbed and also Sekky's lung infection is cured instantly. This part of the narrative mystifies Chinatown life since its superstition is proved to be not entirely baseless. It seems that the old does win over the new but I argue that Choy includes this in order to emphasise the importance of cultural legacy.

After Poh-Poh's death, the family arrange for the neighbour's adoptive daughter, Meiyong, to babysit Sekky. However, it turns out Meiyong uses this arrangement to her advantage as she is in love with a Japanese Canadian boy, Kazuo, and so she can use Sekky as a pretext to go to Japantown to visit her boyfriend. Meiyong wins Sekky over to be her ally with her knowledge of how the war is going, and he promises her to never tell on her. However, the whole time Sekky understands the graveness of the matter: "Everyone knew the unspoken law: *Never betray your own kind*. Meiyong was Chinese, like me; we were our own kind. [...] She was a *traitor*. Her boyfriend was a Jap, a monster, one of the enemy waiting in the dark to destroy all of us [...] *I, Sek-Lung, could turn her in*" (*Jade* 247-8). Having internalised the foremost teaching about Chinatown: "'You remember: we Chinese,' all of the Old China men drilled into my brothers and me, between their sips of tea and hacking up the bad waters, 'never forget, *we together Chinese*'" (232). Sekky understands that Meiyong's seeing a Japanese boy is a betrayal of her own people, which would be judged by her community as morally and ethically wrong. The children's world view is purposely shaped by adults, who instil hatred into the children's minds. This serves to bind the child more closely to the group, thus ensuring the solidarity of the community.

Sekky imagines that Meiyong will be subject to severe punishment if she is found out, since she breaks a social taboo:

If her widowed mother, with her deep village loyalties and Old China superstitions, found out about Kazuo, she would spit at Meiyong, tear out her own hair, and be the second mother to disown her. If Chinatown found out, Meiyong would be cursed and shamed publicly as a traitor; she would surely be beaten up, perhaps branded with a red-hot iron until her flesh smoked and flamed. In the Chinese propaganda movies that Stepmother sometimes took me to see, there were violent demonstrations of what happened to traitors. (*Jade* 255)

The imagined behaviour of Meiyong's adoptive mother shows that Sekky understands she is not Meiyong's real ally as she will disdain and disown Meiyong in order to attest

her own loyalty to the community. The mother is a widow and lives on the community's benevolence. The community's persecution of Meiyong (as imagined by Sekky) not only reflects their intolerance of disloyalty but also their hatred towards Japanese people at that time: to the point of causing maximum pain to their own kind. Meiyong transgresses social, ethnic and physical borders by getting impregnated by a Japanese boy. She dies on attempting a self-abortion because the boy is forced to relocate shortly after Canada declares war against Japan. Her death portrays a serious physical consequence resulting from breaking social taboos.

As Sekky learns to like Meiyong's boyfriend, who plays baseball well and with whom he shares pleasant memories, a question becomes inevitable:

I asked Father, "Are all Japs our enemy, even the ones in Canada?"

Stepmother sat stiffly; her set of four knitting needles stopped clicking. Father shuffled his newspapers with authority.

"Yes", he said, with great finality. He looked sternly across at Stepmother. "All Japs are potential enemies...even if Stepmother doesn't realize that". [...]

Then, in an effort to lessen the tension, he said, "The ones who are born here are only half enemies". (*Jade* 260)

It is hinted that Stepmother is Meiyong's ally as they share many private talks, probably about the Japanese Canadian boyfriend. Father's point of view, which positions all Japanese, even those who were born in Canada, as enemies represents the stance of early Chinatown residents. In both the US and Canada, immigrant communities retained strong diasporic ties to China and Japan, which inevitably lead to clashes between the two groups. At the same time, both groups suffered from similar anti-Asian racism on the part of white citizens. Hartley argues that Choy captures facets of the attitudes towards the internment of Japanese Canadians at that historical moment:

yet his interest in the novel lies in depicting the effects of these facts on the identity constructions of the child narrators: how tragedies cannot be denied, yet how characters produce meaning and resist despair despite them. This being so, the novel, as it dramatises conflicts, critiques Canadian society for its intolerance and its various communities for mirroring that intolerance; its individual narrators do not judge other individuals for their failures of the imagination in submitting to its pressures. (66-7)

During the war, Japanese Canadians suffered forced uprooting and relocation and were categorised as “enemy aliens” by the Canadian government; there was no attempt, on the part of the Chinese as “resident aliens” to form any alliance with their fellow immigrants to request their civil rights from the government.

In conclusion, in *The Jade Peony* Choy chronicles a period of history when Chinatown was on the verge of modernisation, transformation and assimilation. Though the elders attempt to preserve and enforce the old order within the boundaries of Chinatown, new ways and Canadian culture are seen to be filtering gradually into Chinatown life. It seems the allies that people seek to form are untenable as they are based on shifting sands with enemy being a floating category and their courses being false. Only by accepting its vulnerability or upagainstness, through absorption of the conflicting cultures and forming allies with the enemies (Canada and Japanese Canadians) of the second-generation children, did Chinatown become prosperous yet indistinct, losing itself out in history.

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