

**University of Pardubice  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**Chinese Children Growing up in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Canada  
as Reflected in Wayson Choy's The Jade Peony**

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### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Studentka se ve své práci bude věnovat analýze literárního díla současného kanadského autora Waysona Choye, The Jade Peony, zejména otázkám postavení čínských dětí v Kanadě v první polovině dvacátého století zobrazené v daném díle.

Úvod práce bude věnován historii čínských imigrantů v Kanadě s následným rozбором knihy v otázkách tradiční výchovy dětí v čínské rodině a s tím spojené komunikační problémy a hledání vlastní identity v kanadském prostředí.

Studentka bude ve své práci využívat textové analýzy a práci s primárními a sekundárními zdroji.

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## **Declaration of authorship**

I, Miluše Chlumecká, declare that the present bachelor paper and the work presented in it are my own.

I further declare that where I have consulted work of others, this is always clearly attributed. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the quotation is always marked and the source given. With the exception of such quotations, this essay is entirely my own work.

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I understand that this declaration of authorship must be read, understood and signed in order for this paper to be accepted.

Date: June 27, 2008

Signed: .....

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses life of Chinese children growing up in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada while taking its evidence from Wayson Choy's internationally acclaimed debut novel *The Jade Peony*. The characters of the novel are children of Chinese descent living in Vancouver. Through their stories they present what it is like to grow up in Canada while dealing with difficult living conditions, traditional views and expectations of their parents and other people of the community, and finally grappling with their individual identities.

To provide background for the study of the children's everyday life, history of Chinese immigration in Canada and a policy of Canadian multiculturalism is also explained.

## **Key words**

Chinese children, Canada, Wayson Choy, *The Jade Peony*, identity

## **Anotace**

Tato bakalářská práce analytickým přístupem rozebírá život čínských dětí, které vyrůstaly v první polovině dvacátého století v Kanadě. Výchozím zdrojem pro analýzu se stala mezinárodně uznávaná prvotina Waysona Choye *The Jade Peony*, jejíž hlavními postavami jsou děti čínských přistěhovalců žijících ve Vancouveru. Jejich příběhy podávají svědectví o těžkých životních podmínkách čínských dětí v kanadském prostředí, tradiční výchově v čínské rodině a komunitě a následně i o problémech s hledáním vlastní identity.

Pro nastínění problémů každodenního života dětí, práce v úvodní části obsahuje stručný přehled historie čínských imigrantů v Kanadě a kanadského multikulturního postoje vůči imigrantům na pozadí literárního díla.

## **Klíčová slova**

čínské děti, Kanada, Wayson Choy, *The Jade Peony*, identita

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Growing in any culture, at any time can be a difficult process but it may be overwhelming when bridging conflicting cultures. For children who are not part of mainstream dominant culture, everyday life in such environment can be a painful, frustrating as well as joyous experience. A perfect illustration of this is Wayson Choy's internationally acclaimed debut novel *The Jade Peony*, the story of four siblings growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown before and during the Second World War.

The characters of the novel are children of Chinese descent living in Canada. The first-person sections are written in the voices of three of them, "all of whom are having some trouble finding their way in a world where the old certainties of centuries of Chinese life seem not always to apply." (James, 12)

Jook-Liang, Only Sister, is the third child and only girl in the migrant family. Her main interests are going to movies and tap dancing as she dreams of escaping the confines of tradition to become the next Shirley Temple. She befriends an elderly family friend, Wong Suk, to form an unlikely friendship. Jung Sum, the second oldest brother, is adopted into the Chen family after having been put in foster families all over western Canada. Besieged by childhood trauma, he struggles with uncertainty about his sexual identity. He ultimately finds his strength in boxing, learning to be strong to mask the hurts of his childhood in China. Sek-Lung, the youngest brother, is often plagued with lung infection and thus allowed to rest and play past his six year. Being adored and protected by his grandmother, they spend a lot of time together and become inseparable. After her death he meets his baby-sitter who becomes his new best friend.

Through their stories the three siblings present what it is like to grow up in Canada while grappling with their individual identities. Their stories deal with the everyday questions of who is really a Canadian, of growing up and living in more than one culture, of stereotyping and of confronting racism.

The novel *The Jade Peony* explores the life of the Chen family through the eyes of the three youngest siblings, but not through the perspective of the First Son, Kiam-Kim. The stories of the youngest reflect upon the maternal qualities of

Chinatown rather than the paternal ones. However, Choy states in the interview by Sellers that Kiam-Kim was raised and tutored mainly by his father and Third Uncle and that is why his narrative was developed in another novel *All That Matters*, a sequel to *The Jade Peony*.

In *The Jade Peony*, Wayson Choy writes a very personal story that joins a lot of his family experiences growing up in Vancouver. For his first novel he received a lot of accolades and publicity. In fact, as Martin notes, while he was doing a radio interview about his novel, he learned from a previously unknown listener to the interview that he had been adopted. At the age of 56, long after his parents were dead, Wayson Choy started investigating his family background even further by interviewing his family and other Chinese community members. As a result, the outcome of his research was *Paper Shadows*, which Choy himself calls a memoir. The memoir describes his experiences growing up in the working-class world in Vancouver's old Chinatown during and after World War I.

All the three Choy's books bring numerous references to Canadian history. However, the author primarily relies on oral history and family stories. In the interview by Sellers, he admits that he was not a historian looking at an overview but was researching for specific details. "I would ask some of the older people, "do you remember when this happened in Chinatown, ..." I had memories that would help verify or give me more details. And then I would join the dots and try to create that version of my childhood." Even though the fiction always balances with historical event, the positive aspect is that a novel written from a personal point of view offers a richer and more personal understanding of the lives and history because the story comes alive.

## 2. HISTORY OF CHINESE IMMIGRATION IN CANADA

Generational conflicts often emerged between the children who grew up in China and those who grew up in Canada. In order to understand these hidden issues between the generations, it is necessary to explore the history of the Chinese to Canada.

Most of the Chinese immigrants who came to Canada before the Second World War were poor people from southern China, “from the dense villages of southern Kwangtung province, a territory racked by cycles of famine and drought” (Choy, 15). McCarthy and Crichlow claim that many Chinese entered Canada during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as workers in canning factories and lumber mills, a domestic labourers, and as railroad workers. (202)

When the call for railroad workers came from labour contact brokers in Canada in the 1880s, every man who was able and capable left his farm and village to be indentured for dangerous work in the mountain ranges of the Rockies. There had also been rumors of gold in the rivers that poured down those mountain cliffs, gold that could make a man and his family wealthy overnight (Choy, 16).

Most of these first arrivals were called sojourners, temporary workers, rather than settlers, adds *Chinese Canadian Historical Photo Exhibit*. They came to “Gold Mountain” from California, where anti-Chinese feeling was then growing. In Lam’s opinion, “Gold Mountain refers to the similar theory of the American Dream, symbolic of the immigrant dream.” Nevertheless, Lam maintains, in both cases, the dream and its realization are basically incompatible and the promise of wealth never materialized for the Chinese immigrants.

Once the Canadian Pacific Railroad was completed in 1884 and Chinese labour was no longer necessary as it had been, McCarthy and Crichlow add, the Government of Canada began to pass a series of laws restricting the immigration and activities of Chinese. Next to Canada’s Native peoples, the Chinese may have been the recipients of the most overtly discriminatory treatment in Canadian history. McCarthy and Crichlow continue (202). *Encyclopedia of Canada’s People* says that the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 placed a \$50 head tax on every Chinese immigrant wishing to enter Canada as a means of restricting and regulating Chinese

Immigration into Canada (366). In 1990 the head tax was raised to \$100 and by 1903, to \$500. In 1923,

on July 1<sup>st</sup> the Dominion of Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and shut down all ordinary bachelor-man traffic between Canada and China, shut off any women from arriving, and divided families. Poverty-stricken bachelors were left alone in Gold Mountain, with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month and never enough dollars to buy passage home. Dozens went mad; many killed themselves. The Chinatown Chinese call July 1<sup>st</sup>, the day celebrating the birth of Canada, the Day of Shame (Choy, 16).

As a consequence of this legislation, fewer than 50 Chinese immigrated to Canada between 1923 and 1947 when the act was repealed. Largely because of the head tax, *Chinese Canadian Historical Photo Exhibit* asserts, the cost of bringing a wife or aged parents to Canada became prohibitive; therefore, men typically came alone and lived as bachelors in Canada. In the novel, seventy-seven-year old Wong Suk was a bachelor who used to work for the Canadian Pacific Railway but now he was “too old to live a solitary existence any longer” (15). He became an adopted uncle of Jook-Liang, the only sister, and a close friend of the Chen family. Their relationship was a true one; “Wong Suk would otherwise have been only one of the many discarded bachelor-men of Chinatown” (39).

According to *Encyclopedia of Canada's People*, those who had the financial resources took periodic trips to home country to visit their wives and families (366). However, they could be away for up to only two years; otherwise they would lose the right to return to Canada. For many, the dream remained to save enough money so that they could eventually retire in China where cost of living was lower. Some bachelors like Old Wong in the novel, during all their hard time in British Columbia, “still hoped to return to China if they could somehow win the numbers lottery or raise enough money from gambling” (16).

Many men in Canada lost contact with their families during World War II after Japan had invaded China and when “more civil strife between the Communists and the Nationalists, and even more starvation” (Choy, 16) had occurred. The dream of reunion became even more remote after the war, when the Communists defeated

the Nationalist party and established a socialist government, *Encyclopedia of Canada's People* concludes (366).

The absence of women in the Chinese community also meant that the growth of a second generation in Canada was delayed, *Encyclopedia of Canada's People* emphasizes (364). Moreover, the majority of those early Chinese immigrants did not assimilate to the same extent as most other North American immigrant groups did; partly because Chinese and white had limited contact outside economically competitive situations, Roy says (27). Byrne states other reasons:

The Chinese were viewed by other North Americans as temporary sojourners who came for the riches of the gold rushes, or were needed as cheap labour to build the railways and work in the primary industries during the periods of labour shortages. As soon as Chinese workers were not needed in Canada any longer, they were demanded by politicians and labour groups to return to China.

As a consequence, Chinese assimilation was not desired and not encouraged. On the contrary, Chinatowns were set up by White Canadians to keep the Chinese in one area, Roy claims (29).

The old people in the novel, Grandmother or Po-Poh and Wong Suk, were those who resisted assimilating as they feared loss of culture and identity. Their greatest challenge was to preserve their native language and culture. Poh-Poh and Wong Suk never integrated into the Canadian society and were not able to accept the Canadian culture and societal structure, says Lam. As a result, they were unable to master the English language properly. Poh-Poh used a kind of half-English pidgin and half Chinese:

This useless only granddaughter wants to be Shirley Tem-po-lah, the useless Second Grandson wants to be cow-boy-lah. The First Grandson wants to be Charlie Chan. All stupid foolish! (40)

Wong Suk used Chinglish to talk to his adopted niece Jook-Liang “- the mix of Chinese and English they threw together for their own secret talks” (63). Not speaking English properly also meant that this older generation kept themselves to themselves.

On the other hand, because of the emotional needs to overcome separation or for the sole purpose of communication, Lam adds, many Chinese immigrants attempted to assimilate into Canadian society. Adults such as Father and Stepmother were trying to fit into the new society and were ready to give up their Chinese way. At the same time, adults were sometimes trapped between two cultures. Sek-Lung's narrative says: "What does this White Demon want?" said Stepmother, I could see she wished Sulling were here, with her perfect English". (141)

The young generation born in Vancouver, like Jook-Liang and Sek- Lung, growing up and attending school, were accepted toward the larger social cultural Canadian landscape and were willing to become real Canadians, Lam explains. As a result, cultural politics and social pressures caused generational conflicts and ultimately a division among generations.

### 3. MULTICULTURAL CANADA

As the only country in the world with an official policy of multiculturalism, Canada prides itself on being a tolerant, multicultural nation. It has a reputation for being a mosaic of world cultures, in contrast to the American ideal, where the USA is seen as a giant melting pot, in which diversity will be subsumed into a common American identity. In the mosaic policy, everybody is expected to respect each other's cultures of origin.

When the west of Canada was opened up in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was so much space that Ukrainians, Poles, Germans and many other national and religious groups were able to form their own separate communities. According to Ashworth, each group that came to Canada brought its own historical and cultural background which gave its members a view of how the world works (26). In the novel, Jook-Liang's says,

Some nights I would hear in my dreams our neighbours' whispering rising towards the ceiling, Jewish voices, Polish and Italian voices, all jostling for survival, each as desperate as Chinese voices (51).

The words "desperate voices" in *The Jade Peony* show that the image of Canada being positive about the different cultural groups within the country is not accurate in the 1930s and 40s. Nemeth and Collins note that Choy in the novel addresses directly the anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant sentiments of the period. However, although Choy remembers signs in store windows during his childhood that read "No Chinese, No Dogs allowed", his writing is not that bitter and dogmatic, Nemeth and Collins add.

In the novel, on the first day at school, Sek-Lung, came to a class for immigrant children who knew "too little English or who could understand English but not read or speak it well, or who for whatever reason were starting late and needed extra attention" like Sek-Lung (173). They were "an unruly, untidy mixed bunch of immigrants and displaced persons, legal or otherwise" (180). Luckily, their teacher Miss E. Doyle really cared and was not as Miss MacKinley who had taught Sek-Lung one day before he was excluded due to a suspicion that he carries tuberculosis.

“To her I wasn’t any different from the Japanese, Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish and Italian boy in her class”, narrates Sek-Lung (154).

Most of those immigrant children had experienced the humiliation, the mockery, and the tittering brought on by their immigrant accents. “Me wa’nee fly lice! Lot-see lice!” (177) On streetcars and in shops where only English was spoken, people ignored them or pretended they did not hear them “or, worse, shouted back, “”WHAT? WHAT’S THAT YOU SAY? CAN’T YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?!”(177) Such verbal attacks directed against various groups of children laid in deeply held conviction as the superiority of the white race, explains Athworth (11).

As a result, the immigrant children were keen on mastering English in hope that they will not be looked down upon. They assumed that it was their teacher’s duty

to take our varying fears and insecurities and mold us into some ideal collective functioning together as a military unit with one purpose: to conquer the King’s English (180).

Besides, Miss E. Doyle’s class was the only public place where the immigrant children were treated equally and with respect in spite of their broken English.

At recess, our dialects and accents conflicted, our clothes, heights and handicaps betrayed us, our skin colours and background clashed, but inside Miss E. Doyle’s tightly disciplined kingdom we were all – lions or lambs – equals (184).

In the novel, the Canadian ideals of fairness and tolerance came out again when the Japanese invaded China in July 1937 and were committing horrendous atrocities against the Chinese.

Around all the tables and café counters of Chinatown, people wailed or whispered the news of family losses, an aunt here, a friend there, a father, a mother, a sister. There were tales of incredible enemy cruelty. A cousin wrote from Shanghai how the Japanese army were burying people alive, women and children. Another wrote how she witnessed living people, tied to posts, being used for bayonet practice. There were even darker rumours: the Japanese had camps for medical experiments, there were special camps for women hostages (Choy, 172).



This caused that the Chinese, members of one minority have hatred and ill-feeling towards members of another minority community, the Japanese. In the novel, Sek-Lung says, “In older grades, there were already fights between gangs of “good guys” and “Japs”” (195).

Gangs of older, jobless boys roamed back streets hunting for Japanese. Fights broke out. There were knifings on some streets, and on Fourth Avenue and Alberta, a Japanese boy, trying to protect his mother was shot dead (172).

Despite their own persecution from the white population, the majority of Chinese community in Canada felt hostile towards the Japanese community. However, Stepmother in the novel felt that there was too much hatred that ended in killing. She told Father to write about that into the newspaper he contributed to to protest the killing. Father opposed:

“They’re killing Chinese boys in China,” Father said, in Stepmother’s dialect. “I lost three cousins, the youngest seven years old. You lost your Mission Church friend when they bombed Canton. What the hell am I supposed to write about?” (172)

Stepmother tried to stop Father detailing the horror stories about the Japanese atrocities against the Chinese population because she had noticed how the children had absorbed Chinatown’s hatred of the Japanese, “the monsters with blooded buck teeth, no necks and thick Tojo glasses; I wanted to kill every one of them”, says Sek-Lung in Part Three (196). In his narration,

I got each match to spiral down in a trail of smoke and sizzle out perfectly, just singeing the tops of the bundled newspapers. I flew over the whole mountain range, striking pairs of damp matchheads together, one expertly after another. With each one, I caught my breath, pursed my lips, and made the roaring sound of a diving fighter plane. Then, I was busy bombing to death thousands of Japanese troops (118).

The situation even worsened after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. “There was growing anger and fear and hatred for anyone Japanese” (Choy, 197), this time also among white Canadians. Everyone in Vancouver was boycotting the Japanese stores selling Japan-made goods (Choy, 213). The Japanese were suddenly considered enemies of Canada.

On June 20, 1941, at 10:15 p.m., shelling from a Japanese submarine hit Estevan Point on Vancouver Island; then a day later shells hit the Oregon coast ... The enemy is everywhere (Choy, 171).

In Sek-Lung's narration, Kazuo, the young Japanese boy who secretly went out with Sek-Lung's babysitter Meying, was worried: "There's more talk about being the enemy. The *Sun* printed letters about putting us away, there's talk about us registering \_\_\_\_\_"(211). There was general fear among the Japanese children.

All the Japanese kids at Strathcona were sticking together now; they made up almost half of the classes. They kept to themselves, said little, only waited to see who else would be mean to them (Choy, 218).

Being present when Father constantly ruined their dinner with his spluttering rage against "the dogshit Japs""(195), Sek-Lung then felt bewildered when "some of much older boys, white and Asian, began to protect the smaller Japanese from those who wanted to bully them. Some of us stood around, confused."(197) This was to prove that the status of the Japanese was difficult at that time but there were some people who considered them as inhabitants of Canada and not enemies.

#### 4. LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHINESE IN CANADA

The depression era significantly affected British Columbia, Canada. The 1930s and 1940s were hard times for Canadians struggling in unsteady economic situation, never mind Chinese immigrants who were not desired in their new country.

Through the novel, we can learn that the economic conditions of the Chinese in Vancouver were severe. In Jung- Sum narration, Gee Sook, “a bachelor-man dry cleaner who ran the one-man American Steam Cleaners at Pender and Gore” (94) says,

There might never be enough money to buy more food for another mouth, never a secure job to pay regular rent, even enough decent work to feed the children that would come along (96).

There were few job opportunities for men who came to “Gold Mountain” and stayed. Those who were lucky to be hired on, “worked for weeks and months in the hellhole kitchens of steamship lines, touring the BC coast from Seattle and Vancouver to Alaska” (Choy, 71). Also Father of the children in the novel “was many times away at different seasonal jobs during the Depression” (59). Jung-Sum, the younger brother, soon after his adoption to the Chen family realises how difficult it is for a man to support his family. “The Depression meant the man who I now called Father struggled at many jobs to keep everyone at home well nourished” (91). In fact, all the members of the Chen family,

Father, Stepmother, brothers Kiam and Jung, and even sister Liang, were all working wherever and whenever they could. Our household was constantly short of money (185).

According to James, the need to excel through hard work has traditionally been one of the values of Confucius teaching (128). In the Chinese community, children over six, like Kiam and Jung-Sum in the novel, had to help out the family, either on finance or housework; otherwise, they would be considered *mo yung* – useless. Also Jook-Liang, even though only an eleven-year-old girl, was supposed to help her family by working and earning money. “Liang dried and stacked dishes at

Hon Lee's Cafe (and would get ten cents for that, too) or stuck on labels at the Chinese Times" (191).

However, it was especially Kiam, the First born son, who was treated as a man from very beginning of his childhood and was given the biggest responsibility for supporting his family. Already, at only ten years old,

Kiam was doing odd jobs at Third Uncle's warehouse, and he had shown an interest in helping with the careful business of entering numbers onto long sheets of papers printed with columns (98).

To teach the importance of hard work, Poh-Poh, the Old One, often took little Jook-Liang and Jung-Sum to Gee Sook's to show them how hard he had to work to earn a living. Yung-Sum's narrative says,

For all Liang and I could make out, Gee Sook did not look like he was working hard at all. He sang Chinese songs and English songs, like chick-a-ree-chick, cha-lah, cha-lah and pressed jackets and suits, while two or three ladies sat at he back mending and sewing and stitching away happily (95).

For many children in Old China, childhood meant nothing but work. At seven, children in Old China laboured in fields, "rode bone-crushing oxen, crawled with oiled bodies into narrow coal seams and emerged bent-backed forever" (Choy, 35). Poh-Poh, Grandmother, told the children how lucky she was at seven to be a house servant and not one of the field servants (34). Also Stepmother pictured how children in Old China were sold to rich merchant families as their house servants (62).

Obviously, Jung-Sum being seen by old men who visited their house just bringing in buckets of sawdust and armloads of wood, was considered weak and spoiled.

They were from Old China, after all, remembering the calluses already forming their own hands at five and six and seven. And here I was, ten years old, with hands like silk (72).

Yet, for many children residing in Vancouver's poverty-stricken Chinatown life was not easy. The Chens belonged to those poorer families who were constantly

making over old clothes and whose children had to wear old clothing and had to be proud of it. Jook-Liang says:

The patent surface of my tap-shoes glimmered back at me: the shoes no longer looked second-hand, not at all as if they came from a throwaway church bazaar sale, which they had” (36).

Jung-Sum, the Second Brother, soon after he had started living in his new family, got “a new box of hand-me-down clothes. Everything seemed two or three sizes too big” (91). When he received a second-hand jacket from his uncle Old Yuen as his birthday present, he felt proud of it; even though “the second-hand coat from Old Yuen, falling on my twelve-year-old shoulders, felt like armour” (93).

In addition, a number of people from the Chinese community were left back on resources of charity organizations.

From Father and Stepmother, we all received equally what clothes or second-hand goods were salvaged or given to us from the Tong Association. As well, the Anglican Vancouver Chinese Mission passed along books they couldn't sell and gave Sekky stacks of magazines to look through before they were bound up for the paper drive (Choy, 91).

As living in Depression era and wartime Vancouver, poverty predominated the early immigrants' experience. However, the children in *The Jade Peony* seem to survive hardships with grit and humour.

## 5. KEEPING CHINESE TRADITIONS

*The Jade Peony* is valuable to readers who want to understand how traditional Chinese thinking affected the children. In the novel, Wason Choy describes the importance of paying tribute to tradition, and the role of ghosts, signs and symbols that had a profound impact on children growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown before and during the Second World War.

In *The Jade Peony*, it is Poh-poh, a formidable woman who strongly believes in the ways of Old China. She is the heart of the family and plays a large influence on the three children. "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" (13).

In the interview by Sellers, Wayson Choy confesses that the inspiration for the character of Poh-Poh was the elderly people in Vancouver's Chinatown who shared a vital part of his childhood. They were the ones who could not afford to return to China or those who stayed so that they could send remittances back home. When they retired, some of them became extended members of settled Chinatown families, and helped to look after children like him. Their folk tales and life stories passed on to the children the meaning of ghosts and spirits. Five-year-old Jook-Liang in Part One says,

There were in Grandmother's stories, always, with storms and parting clouds, thunder, and after much labour, mountains that split apart, giving birth to demons who were out to kill you or to spirit who ached to test your courage. Until the last moment, you could never know for sure whether you were dealing with a demon or a spirit" (20).

The author in the interview denies believing in ghosts but admits that they occupied his mind. The children in the novel, however, seemed to like Poh-Poh stories and strongly influenced by them they undoubtedly believed in ghosts. Jook-Liang, the younger sister, often pestered Poh-Poh and Wong Suk for stories.

He told us about fights he had with white demons in mills, late at night, by campfires, when all the men were surrounded by the glowing needle eyes of wild animals. I preferred the stories with demons and ghosts, like those Poh-Poh used to tell me" (58).

Jung-Sum, the younger brother, believed in ghosts “like everyone else in Chinatown” (75). Also, Sek-Lung recalls his alive Grandmother teaching him that spirits and ghosts were everywhere

because the Chinese were such an ancient people; so many Chinese had died that their ten-thousand million ghosts in Old China inhabited “the ways of the Han people” (156).

Grandmama also had told me that in Vancouver only a small population of China ghosts could bother with us, really no more than a hundred or so, and most of these were somewhat confused by not being able to go with their bones back to Old China (157).

Jung-Sum continues, “Grandmother told that story and then another, each story brief and sad and marvellous. There were seven pieces of jade, carved in the shape of ancient symbols” (123). Jade, the major symbol of the novel, has always been of the great importance in China. In *The Jade Peony*, this small amulet of pinkish jade carved in the shape of a peony was Poh-Poh’s most valued possession. She kept it in her pocket until her death (145). The jade in the novel symbolized Old China’s culture and traditions which stayed strong with Poh-Poh in her new country. After Poh-Poh had died, the peony was passed on to Sek-Jung. “I began to cry and quickly put my hand in my pocket for a handkerchief. Instead, caught between my fingers, was the small, round firmness of the jade peony” (151). The fact that he got the stone in private was to symbolize how much he had to keep the knowledge of old traditions and at the same time to avoid ridicule from the others including his family members, says Wikipedia. After Poh-Poh’s death, Sek-Jung started to develop more of her characteristics. The jade peony was always there to remind him of his cultural roots and to keep him from losing his culture.

After the Old One’s deaths, Sek-Lung continued paying attention to “visions and good sense that were the meaning of everything” (158) as he had been taught by his grandmother. To his family dismay, he believed that his Grandmama comes back to visit him in exactly the way she had promised. “Things began to happen to me which the family preferred to call incidents” (157).

However, in his surrounding “there was little sympathy for his clinging to the Old One’s presence” (159). No one in the family really wanted to talk about ghosts. On the contrary, they insisted on the facts of life and death. “First Brother Kim insisted on the Big Fact: Death meant the end of someone’s activity on earth. There were no such things as ghosts or demons or spirits” (164). Chinatown people in the neighbourhood assumed that as “he spent all his seven years with Poh-Poh ... he can’t get over it” (156). When Sek-Lung saw his Grandmama’s ghost on their staircase and in the hallway, the subject of debate emerged again. No one wanted to believe him, though, no one wanted to doubt him either, “for the world of Chinatown was the world of what if” (158).

What if the Soon family hadn’t, each of them, dreamed of their village burning down; how would they have known to warn the family by cable to get away, three weeks before Japanese bombers actually devastated the empty house” (158).

Poh-Poh or the Old One was the mainstay of the family and though vivid reminiscences of her life in the old China passing down to her children, she conferred them their cultural heritage. The Chen family sometimes felt embarrassed by her when “peering into our neighbours’ garbage cans, chasing away hungry, nervous cats and shouting curses at them” (145) she looked for “treasures” needed for making windchimes. However, the family’s superstition was as strong as their embarrassment. Undoubtedly, they took her views into account far more than they would like to.



## 6. TRADITIONAL VIEWS AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

### RESPECT FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

In James's view, in Chinese culture, as in many Native communities the elders in the family are revered and respected for their wisdom (93). In the novel, Poh-Poh or Grandmother and Old Wong "who was an Old China friend of Grandmother's" (15) and "who had once lived in the same ancestral district village" (16) were both in their seventies, "the old-timers", and the younger in the family were supposed to pay respect to them.

Before Old Wong came to see the Chen family for the first time, Father was worried about the children's behaviour. Old Wong as a veteran of the railroad-building camps in the Rockies was crippled but "was an elder, so every respect must be paid to him, and especially as he knew the Old One herself" (17). Father delivered to the three children a stern lecture about respect "as if Wong Bak was "a teacher" to be highly respected, as much as the Old Buddha or the Empress of China" (18). Jook-Liang says:

Respect meant you dared not laugh at someone because they were "different"; you did not ask stupid questions or stare rudely. You pretended everything was normal. That was respect. Father tried to simplify things for my five-year-old brain. Respect was what I gave my Raggedy Ann doll. I knew respect (18).

In addition, the love and respect for a parent and an elderly person in the family, or the virtue of filial piety, traditionally belongs to the values of Confucius teaching, James observes (128). Those born in the Old China, such as Poh-Poh and Wong Bak in the novel, typically valued the traditional values of Confucius teaching. Byrne maintains that "family members were expected to adhere to the Confucius ideas of loyalty, obedience, filial piety, and obligation". Also Poh-Poh in the novel adhered to a strict code of hierarchy in their house.

Before the Chens came to Canada, Father's first wife and Kiam's mother had died in China. A young girl, who was an orphan "when bandits killed most of her family" (Choy, 12) and later sold into Father's Canton merchant family, was sent to Canada to become Father's concubine and Grandmother's servant.

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 (13).

However, “Poh-Poh insisted we simplify our kinship terms in Canada, so my mother became “Stepmother”” (13). At Poh-Poh’s insistence, Gai-Mou was always known as Stepmother even to her own children Jook-Liang and Sek-Lung. Father did not protest and allowed his domineering mother to dictate his relationship with Gai-Mou or Stepmother, who was never allowed to become his bride out of respect for his dead wife. In Jook- Liang narration,

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 (13).

Her time came several years later, after Grandmother had been buried for a few years. In an argument, Father told Stepmother that she “should have chosen a damn rich man” (235) if she wanted to buy a real estate in China. Stepmother suddenly revolted against him:

“I *chose*? I was *bought*!” Stepmother said, for all at once she could not stop herself. She stood up, as if pulled against her will. “Even Jook-Liang and Sek-Lung – my *own* two children – call me *Stepmother*!” (235).

However, Father stood on his mother’s side, showing that he strongly approved of her as an elderly person to be treated with respect. “That was the Old One’s decision”, Father said. “She decided, you accepted!” (235)

## **POSITION OF GIRLS AND BOYS IN THE FAMILY**

Traditionally, in Chinese culture the life of a boy has been above that of a girl. As Byrne explains, daughter could not ensure inheritance rights because they were considered only temporary members of their biological families. After they had got married, they mostly moved to another place to live with their husbands’ family.

Sometimes they had little contact with their own parents thereafter. “A woman was always tied by the “three bonds” according to Confucianism: the father, the husband, and the son,” Byrne continues.

Clearly, mother in China wished to give birth to a baby boy rather than a baby girl.

The birth of a boy-baby, in Old China, would be announced from bedside immediately to a village crowd at the doorway. The father would be praised, the ancestors’ names called one by one (Choy, 99).

In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-Poh or Grandmother “was going regularly to their family Tong Association Temple on Pender Street to pray for a boy” (13) before Sek-Jung was born. She also recalled Kiam’s birthing day in Old China. “*It’s a boy!* Poh-Poh had self-whispered when Kiam first pushed his way out of First Wife” (98).

Chinese children, even though growing up in Canada, were raised in accordance with the Old China traditions. A boy-child was cherished and a girl-child was considered useless.

A beautiful girl-child from a poor family is even more useless than an ugly one from a rich family, unless you can sell either one for a jade bracelet or hard foreign currency. Then you can feed your worthy sons, give them educations, arrange marriages, make them proud men. But a girl-child? (Choy, 42–43)

In the novel, five-year-old Jook-Liang often felt that she did not receive the same amount of attention as her brothers did. For example, for her Grandmother only the youngest brother Sek-Lung was a chief concern, “I was a distraction, a nuisance. She was happy to see me off with Wong Suk” (42). Jook-Liang continues:

I recalled how Sekky had received twice the number of jade and gold bracelets that I had got as a baby, and how everyone at the baby banquet toasted his arrival and how only the women noticed me in my new dress (31).

Moreover, Jook-Liang was often criticized by Grandmother for being female. ““A girl-child is *mo yung* – useless, “Poh-Poh grunted, shifting down her other knee to give me, as always, reluctantly, my measure of attention” (32). Although Jook-Liang ignored Poh-Poh’s remarks about being a girl-child, she did not like the idea of

being treated less than her brother Sek-Lung, who was the centre of attention for the Old One. She rebelled in small ways, such as singing over Grandmother's yelling, and ambitiously dreamed of escaping the unyielding old ways.

In Byrne's opinion, males often maintained a lifelong connection with their parents as they were expected to secure family inheritance rights, contribute to the family income and financially look after family members. As a result, a boy-child was treated and raised differently from a girl-child. The youngest son in *The Jade Peony*, Sek-Lung, also realised that even though males were not the oldest in the family, they were still subordinate in the family hierarchy. "I had always been glad I was not a girl-child" (191).

The oldest son in the family, in particular, was valued above all others "because he was to ensure that funeral rites were properly carried out and the ancestral graves were properly cared for", Byrne continues. Kiam was the first son born to the Chen family, "born of First Wife who died in Old China during the famine when he was just three years old" (98). Poh-Poh or Grandmother always being aware of his position in the family, used different Chinese dialects to speak to First Son. In Jook-Liang narration,

Poh-Poh spoke her Sze-yup, Four County village dialect, to me and Jung, but not always to Kiam, the First Son. With him, she spoke Cantonese and a little Mandarin, which he was studying in the Mission Church basement (15-16).

The weight of the title "being First Son" meant that Kiam, surrounded more by men rather than women, did not have much of childhood:

Ever since Kiam had come to Canada, Third Uncle always told him that, as First Son, he had to behave more like a man than a boy. Father agreed, and together, he and Third Uncle taught Kiam as much as possible how to behave responsibly. Of course, he was expected to stay away from the influence of the women. Kiam belonged more and more to Father, to Third Uncle, to the men of Chinatown who knew the worth of a well-trained and well-mannered First Son (94).

## 7. EDUCATION OF CHINESE CHILDREN

The desire within most Chinese immigrant parents was to see their children lead better, happier, more fulfilled lives than they had lived. One of the ways how to accomplish it was to provide their children good education. Furthermore, to be an all-round educated person, to be trained in the mind and the body, belonged to the values of Confucius Teaching, claims James (32).

However, Chinese parents primarily wanted their children to maintain the Chinese language and be familiar with the Chinese history. They wanted to expose their children to all the aspects of the Chinese culture and pass on to them everything they had been taught back in Old China. In *The Jade Peony*, Father in the Chen family insisted on learning Chinese despite the children's opposition.

“But it is useless, this Chinese they teach us!” Liang lamented, turning to First Brother Kiam for support. “I agree, Father,” Kiam began. “You must realize that this Mandarin only confuses us.” “And you do not complain about Latin, French or German in your English school?” Father rattled his newspaper, a signal that his patience was ending (147).

Ultimately, the best way for parents to ensure that children grew up “Chinese” was to send them back to Old China to be educated, states Byrne. This option was only for children of rich Chinese merchants and labourers who had, due to to good luck or hard work, saved a large sum of money, Byrne continues.

The second best option, a private tutor from China, who also an option for several rich Chinese families living in Vancouver. Although the Chen family in the novel did not belong to rich people, it was Stepmother's best friend Sulling who was to ensure Sek-Lung's education, “to teach him the right way to be Chinese.” (137) However, Sulling died during bombing back in China and then there was no one else to “come to Gold Mountain to give Sek-Lung a *brain*.” (129)

So, the last option for the Chen children, and according to Byrne, the most common compromise in the Chinese community, was to go to Chinese school at the weekends. Nevertheless, the children in the novel mostly resented to be sent to heritage school every Sunday. They became frustrated at the lack of understanding of the written form of a language that they did not even use at home. I was especially

Sek-Lung, Third Brother, who never quite came to terms with the plethora of complex Chinese dialects he was forced to study and got frustrated with verbal and written Chinese.

On the other hand, the more the children hated Sunday's Chinese school, the more they liked the English public school system. In Byrne's view, English provided pressures of home life, and even though corporal punishment was still utilized in public school in the first half of the twentieth century, the Chinese children felt there more carefree than at Chinese school.

Sek-Lung in the novel, who grew up during the Second World War, when the Chinese community was almost segregated from mainstream society knew the potential freedom that public schooling offered. Due to his health problems, Sek-Lung was held back from school in Vancouver, but he longed to start school again.

When Grandmama was alive, I told her how desperately I wanted to go to school and be grown like First and Second Brothers. Kiam and Jung came home and opened impressive books, made handwritten notes using long wooden nibholders to scratch out inky words and formulae. Then they dipped the nibs in a screwtop bottle of Bluebird ink. Sometimes Kiam let me press a sheet of blotting paper over his writing, and hold it in front of the hall mirror to see his writing, and hold it in front of the hall mirror to see if I could read the word reflected back (161).

Watching them all go to school in the morning, I wanted to be taught my lessons by a real teacher like Miss MacKinney ... whose class I've been in for those first weeks. I liked the way she broke in to a smile and her blue eyes lit with laughter when she discovered I could read English words (though I could not pronounce the words exactly right (154).

His natural child's thirst for knowledge even increased when he saw his siblings benefit from attending English school.

Liang impressed me with her ability to read rapidly, turning the pages of *Beautiful Joe* and *Little Women* with sudden smiles or tears. Sometimes she read aloud to me, simplifying passages for my benefit. I liked the dog story the best (154).

However, no pupils were admitted to schools until "they can so understand English language as to be amenable to the ordinary regulations and school

discipline,” argues Athworth (112). The pupils who could not pass a satisfactory test in the English language were not admitted to the ordinary graded schools (Ashworth, 116). Sek-Lung had to take such a test after being examined by a school doctor.

I confidently completed a six-page English reading test, matching cartoon pictures with English words, wrote a paragraph of my choice, passed everything – and was allowed to start at Strathcona (173).

Sek-Lung was impressed by his new teacher even more than by his Grade One teacher Miss MacKinney who “had a wooden ruler with a steel edge, bending. She slapped it on our desk if you didn’t pay attention in class (130). Miss E. Doyle, Sek-Lung’s Grade Three teacher at Strathcona School, was a typical elementary-school teacher who managed to encourage her pupils and motivate them: “I can tell your *spoken* English is much improved this year, Joseph.” (174)

Miss Doyle was very strict, “the General of this class” (173), and her pupils sat with their “backs straight like soldiers” (174). She made it a rule never to tolerate interruptions or careless behaviour in her class.

Not only did she prefer to stand at attention for most of the time she spent with us, she expected every boy and girl in her class to adopt her military bearing, her exact sense of decorum (180).

However, even though she tolerated “no pushing, no kicking. Not even whispering.”, and “her commands were simple and simply barked: “Sit.” “Eyes front.” “Feet flat on the floor.” (173), all the girls and boys listened to her. Moreover, “they liked to please Miss Doyle” (175) and looked up to her with admiration.

Miss Doyle never ignored us, never tittered; she stood strictly at attention as if to compliment our valiant efforts when we spoke and read out loud, daring anyone to mock us (177).

In the novel, we can read that education played a major role in lives of children in Vancouver’s Chinatown in the 1940s. According to Ashworth, Chinese children were described as obedient, attentive, studious and often setting a good example to their children (110). In *The Jade Peony*, Kiam, First Brother, provides such an example of an excellent student. At fifteen “he was getting all A’s at King

Edward High.”(131) He was “first in his math and science classes” and “won a prize in science at King Edward High School.”(161)

Chinese children were expected to excel at school; it was demanded of them by their parents who traditionally followed the Confucius Teaching. Nevertheless, once they learned “the rules” and succeeded, they were often looked down upon by the older generations for being “educated fools”. They were losing “the roots” of their Chinese culture but were not being accepted into the culture they had become familiar with and whose language they had mastered.

No one laughed at my efforts to learn English. Education, in whatever language was respected. Around me were “uncles” who had gone to universities in the 1920s and 30s but remained unemployable because only Canadian citizens could qualify as professionals. For it you were Chinese, even if you were born in Canada, you were and educated *alien* – never to be a citizen, never a Canadian with the right to vote – “an educated fool” in the words of some old China men, or a “hopeful fool” in the word of those who knew the world would soon change (139).



## 8. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

### CULTURAL IDENTITY

A construction of cultural identity is a complex process. According to James (24), cultural identity refers to the collective self-awareness that a given group embodies and reflects and the identity of the individual in relation to his or her culture. Hier and Bolaria (54) add that the degree to which individuals identify with their group culture varies depending on place of birth, social class, abilities, education and occupational expectations and achievements, interaction with members and non-members of their group, and their willingness to adopt to the main cultural norms.

As far as the Chinese community is concerned, it is a common view among the Chinese parents that they do not want their children to be like "bananas", yellow-skinned yet white inside, James (37) comments. In the interview by Sellers, Choy admits that as a first-generation North American child of immigrant parents, he was caught growing up between cultures. "In my day Canadian-born children like myself were often called "bananas"- we were yellow on the outside and white on the inside".

As a child, Choy continues in the interview by Sellers, he first dreamed of becoming a sword-slashing warrior in a Chinese opera and soon after he had seen his first cowboy movie, he changed his mind. However, both dreams became a part of the author. This experience is reflected in the novel *The Jade Peony*. Five-year-old Jook-Liang easily switched from a Chinese character to the western idol Shirley Temple when playing with Stepmother's old dresses.

I mimicked the Chinese Opera heroines: the warrior woman, the deserted wife, the helpless princess. And lately, in my movie costumes, I tapped steps as deftly as Shirley herself (38).

However, Jook-Liang more and more preferred to play Shirley Temple rather than Chinese princesses. She imitated the movie shows that "occupied her head" and smiled and curtsied, "just like Shirley did" (44). Eventually, she "decided, for absolute sure, to become Shirley Temple" (56). In this way, she might see the possibility how to escape the confines of Chinese tradition.

Poh-Poh or Grandmother in the novel, who spent most of her life in Old China and “had a wealth of dialects which thirty-five years of survival in China had taught her” (16), obviously insisted on keeping traditional Chinese culture. She kept reminding Jook-Liang where her roots are. When Jook-Liang could not fully comprehend why her Poh-Poh cared so much about the Japanese invasion to China., because “there is no war in Canada” (37), Grandmother sighed deeply and gave her “a condescending look. “*You* not Canada, Liang,” she said, majestically, “*you* China. Always war in China” (37).

Grandmother also assumed that Sek-Lunk, the youngest brother, “should be raised in old ways, the best ways” (189). She demanded that he should have known how he “needed to address his elders properly and remember how to speak their names in the right way” (189). Similarly, Stepmother felt that Sek-Lung should be taught the Chinese language properly and that is why she invited her best friend Sulling, “a woman who had given up her own family’s wealth to become a Christian teacher in Old China” (129), to come to Canada as she considered Sek-Lung “mo no – no brain” (129). However, to teach him “proper Chinese” did not mean to teach him only the language itself but also how to use it; in fact Sulling was supposed to come to Canada to teach him Chinese culture. “Stepmother would sing in her *Sze-yup* dialect, “*Sulling, Sulling*, come to Gold Mountain, give my boy Sek-Lung – *a brain, a brain!*” (129).

On the other hand, Father was aware of the importance to learn the values of Canadians in order to integrate into the mainstream of the society. He “wanted his children to have both the old ways and the new ways” (147). To oppose Grandmother’s “Old way, best way” (162), Father encouraged everyone in the family to change, be modern, move forward and throw away the old times. “After all these dirty wars are finished”, Father lectured to Third Uncle, “those who understand the new ways will survive” (162).

Six-year-old Sek-Lung, the youngest child in the Chen family was unlike his older brothers born in Canada and had never been exposed Chinese to the extent as his brothers had. He had difficulties mastering plenty of dialects used in Vancouver’s

Chinatown as well as family ranking and Chinese kinship terms that “gave him headache” (131).

The Chinese rankings for acquaintances and relatives were overwhelming. There were different titles for those persons related to us according to the father’s age, the mother’s age, and even the ages of the four grandparents, and according to whether they were from the mother’s or father’s side – never mind if you threw in a *stepmother* and *her* best friend (132).

Not able to speak and understand Chinese dialects and use proper terms for family ranking, he started to “hate the Chinky language that made such a fool of him” (140). He hated the Tosian words,

the complex of village dialects that would trip up my tongue. I wished I were someone else, someone like Freddy Bartholomew who was rich and lived in a grand house and did not have to know a single Chinese word (140).

Moreover, he decided that he would conquer his Second Language “if Chinese was impossible to know correctly” (138). Sek-Lung was determined to “be a Master of English better than Chen Sulling, even if Miss Chen had ten thousand prizes!” (138). Eventually, he came to a conclusion that he will “speak and write only English!” (136).

English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quick sand. I preferred English, but there were no English words to match the Chinese perplexities (134).

In the novel, we can see that first-generation Chinese-Canadians tend to run away from the old culture but the older generation makes an effort to keep them aware. Consequently, being raised in such a bicultural environment, the immigrant children found themselves trapped between the dominant culture of their society in which they lived and their own subcultures, states James (29). As a result, the children began to struggle with their hyphenated identity. “We were Canadians now, *Chinese-Canadians*, a hyphenated reality that our parents could never accept” (Choy, 143), says Sek-Lung. In fact, the best example of a child struggling between cultures is Sek-Lung, Third Brother. When asked “Who are you, Sek-Lung?” (135), he answered without hesitation:

Canada! I said, thinking of the ten days of school I had attended before the doctor sent me home, remembering how each of those mornings I had saluted the Union Jack, had my hands inspected for cleanliness, and prayed to *Father-Art-in-Heaven* (135).

However, even though Sek-Lung was born in Vancouver, “even if he should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if he had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever” (135), he knew he would still be Chinese. Six-year-old Sek-Lung was aware of the fact that he was the Canadian-born child of “unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. “The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger” (136). In Sek-Lung narration,

Stepmother knew this in her heart and feared for me. All the China town adults were worried over those us recently born in Canada, born “neither this nor that”, neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boudaries, born *mo no* – no brain (135).

Similarly, the “neither nor that” motif appears when the eldest son, Kiam, confesses his desire to join the Canadian military. In response,

“You’re not a citizen of Canada, “ Father said calmly. “You were registered in Victoria as a *resident alien*. We’ve had this talk before. When the Dominion says we are Canadian, then we will all join up!” (196)

As Byrne states, the children of Chinese immigrant parents “were often viewed as less than Chinese within their homes, and only as Chinese outside of them” They mostly did not manage to meld these two worlds together but developed dual personas to hide aspects of their lives from their parents, Byrne continues. An example of hyphenated identity of the children in *The Jade Peony* is their effort to make an English equivalent for their Chinese names. Jook-Liang in Part Two says, “we should all have real English names. When we’re outside of Chinatown, we should try not to be so different” (124). Kiam, Third Brother, adds: “When I fight for Canada – when I join up, I mean,” Kiam said, putting down an invoice he was entering into Third Uncle’s account books, “I’m going to call myself *Ken*” (124).

Sek-Lung, Third Brother, also longed to change his Chinese-sounding name. Although his teacher at school, Miss Doyle, encouraged students to be always brave

enough to be proud of their name (176), he rather accepted the opinion of his Grade One teacher at Strathona School. “Miss Mackinney had not called me Sek-Lung, but “Sekky”, because, she smiled, it was “more Canadian”” (130). Also Sek-Lung’s babysitter and friend Meying, who lived in the neighbourhood, was often called “by her English name May” (191).

However, changing a Chinese name to a more western-sounding one did not mean that they would be considered more Canadian. There were always their skin colour and physical characteristics to set them apart. The majority of the Canadians were Anglo-White and despite the immigration wave at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they remained a Chinese-Yellow minority as “they did not possess the privilege that many Canadians of European descent possessed” (James, 37).

In *The Jade Peony*, people from the Chinese community were not only set apart from White Canadians but were often mistaken for the Japanese. In most cases white Canadians were not able to distinguish these two Asian ethnic groups of 1940s Vancouver. The difficulties appeared after the Japanese were also confused with the Chinese, who often had to defend themselves for not being considered the Japanese. In Sek-Lung’s narration,

“You Japs?” a man in a brown jacket said to us. Meying showed him tin buttons pinned on our lapels that had the Chinese flag proudly stamped on them. Kiam had got them for us from Chinese School. I also had one that said: I AM CHINESE. “Get home, “ said the man. “It looks like snow” (218).

## **SEXUAL IDENTITY**

Children living in the 1930s and 40s Vancouver Chinatown did not only face difficulties to find their cultural identity, but some of them also had to face up to a question on sexual identity.

In the novel, it was Jung-Sum, the adopted child in the Chen family, who was considered “different” by his Grandmother.

“Of course, Mrs. Lim responded, always blunt. “He is different blood. More handsome than your own two grandsons”. “No, no, not looks, Poh-Poh protested. “Inside unusual, not ordinary.”(81)

After eight years of living in the family, Grandmother was completely convinced that Jung-Sum “is the moon, the *yin* principle, the *female*.”(82) Although much research suggests that sexual orientation is set in early childhood, the first sexual attraction begins in middle childhood approximately at the age of ten. Jung-Sum was thirteen when he gradually began to understand that he likes seeing Frank Yuen, a son of one of the Chinatown uncles. Frank Yuen was much older than Jung-Sum, even older than Kiam. “He was not a boy like First Brother but a wiry, sharp-eyed man, earning big money at lumber mills.”(110-111) Frank supported Jung-Sum’s interest in boxing and fighting at the Hastings Gym. In Jung-Sum’s narration, “I was always hoping for a chance to run into Frank Yuen. I liked to see him spit and swear and have him show me how to fight properly.”(112)

Jung-Sum may have sensed his difference, but he did not have words to express his feelings. It was not until their fight in the gym when Jung-Sum started being aware of his sexual orientation.

Frank Yuen, kneeling forward and pressed my babbling head against his torn shirt. He began to rock me and the slow rhythm of his rocking, back and forth, caught me off guard. I closed my eyes and moved with him, a child being cradled, back and forth. There was the smell of Frank’s sweat and his tobacco; his rapid breathing sounded as loud and ragged as my own. We were collapsed on the floor. (117)

He suddenly realized that he was attracted by Frank Yuen, which proved his homosexual identity. Jung-Sum narrates, “I remembered the Old-One telling Mrs. Lim, “”Jung-Sum is the moon””. Yes, I said to myself, as I finished putting on my coat, my armour, *I am the moon*.”(118)

Jung-Sum knew that “Frank Yuen is the sun”(118) because he was interested in girls “just as Kiam did, no that Kiam was starting to date Jenny Chong and even jitterbugging with her at the Y dances”(110). However, since the fight it was Frank Yuen Jung-Sum desired most. He wanted Frank to hold him again, he wanted Frank “to press against him, even harder and closer.”(120)

Wayson Choy, may have recorded his own experience being homosexual. He as well as Jung-Sum in *The Jade Peony* felt that he was different from people living in Chinatown. In the analysis by Nemeth and Collings, Choy shares:

I never thought I was in the closet... When I was growing up, in the Dark Ages... it's hard to explain to people today, but there wasn't language to discuss what it meant to be queer and healthy – that just didn't work.

Choy adds,

When I go back to Chinatown and meet people of my generation ... there still isn't anyone who's come up to me and said, 'You know, I'm gay too.' So I was the only gay person in Chinatown. I have to tell you how unique I was.

In the author profile by Martin, Wayson Choy admits that he never discussed the fact that he is gay with his parents. However, he thinks that they knew and that is why they never pressured him to marry and have children. "They fell into accepting me the way I am, as many parents do, even when they don't have the language to express their disappointment."

## 9. CONCLUSION

Chinese immigrant children who lived in Canada in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were certainly brought up in difficult conditions. First of all, their lives were scarred by political upheavals such as the Depression, the Japanese invasion of China and the Second World War which brought many social, economic and personal hardships to them. Secondly, being raised in traditional Chinese community but socialized at Canadian schools caused problems of finding identity, generational conflicts and finally a division among generations. However, Wayson Choy's semi-bibliographical novel *The Jade Peony* shows that in spite of the fact that life in Vancouver's Chinatown was hard, it was seemingly safe for the children, without a lasting affect on them.

Wayson Choy himself was born and raised as an adopted child in Chinatown in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada. His familiarity with both Chinese and Canadian cultural backgrounds gave him an insight into the way Chinese children lived in Vancouver at that time. *The Jade Peony*, therefore, can be considered as a source of true information about their life.

In Choy's view, Vancouver's Chinese community was scarred by the Chinese Immigration Act which restricted the immigration of Chinese people in Canada. The new law divided families and created untold suffering. Moreover, Canada's immigration laws turned Chinese immigrants into second-class citizens. They were not desired in their new country so it was difficult for them to find a job. To survive poverty, children over six also had to help their families by working and earning money.

Before the children started going to school, they were brought up by their parents and the community in Chinatown according to the Chinese traditions and Confucius Teaching. The Chinese raised their children to respect a parent, elderly people and to behave politely in society. They tried to pass on their children traditional values by telling stories from the Old China and emphasizing the importance of signs, symbols and ghosts. In the interview by Chan, Wayson Choy concludes,



“I believe in the idea that ghosts are a metaphor for understanding life at the loss of loved ones, and the understanding that life gives us signs and omens that we must pay attention to,” he says. “Basically, many people in Vancouver at that time came from the small villages, and most of them were not educated, but they were highly skilled in oral history and oral story telling. And you tell stories so you can give warnings about what is good and what is evil. And I think that sense of my life was enriched by the stories of good and evil and by the ghosts that would guide us and the ghosts that would harm us.”

As soon as the Chinese children started attending Canadian public school, they were encouraged to master English and learn about Canadian culture. This was to help the new generation to adjust and assimilate, often at the sacrifice of the “old ways”. Consequently, the first-generation of the Chinese began integrating so successfully that there were fears in the community that their Chinese identity would gradually erode. This is why Chinese immigrant parents sent their children to Sunday’s Chinese school as well.

However, the children eventually found themselves trapped between these two cultures. They had to struggle with their hyphenated, Chinese-Canadian, identity. They felt themselves at the crossroads, never quite “this or that”, trying to find a good balance between the two value systems, the one they were brought up with and the one they were confronting at the moment.

Through his writing, Choy tries to come to terms with what it meant to be Chinese in Canada in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Byrne’s opinion, for Choy his book

provided a way to ask questions he always wanted to ask as a child, but never was able to because of the distance he felt with his parents, and the secrets kept by the older generations.

Choy wrote about his life, his family and his community more to understand his family and cultural history than to tell a story, Byrne concludes. Wayson Choy in the interview by Chan confirms:

“I must tell you, I began writing the book as if it was going to be a light, entertaining read because I had a happy childhood, but the more I delved into the past, I realized that dark path of the ghetto and the racism and the family sex life and so on. So the book turned on me and let me see for the first time what Chinatown meant.”

## RESUMÉ

Práce se zaměřuje na analýzu života čínských dětí vyrůstajících v Kanadě v první polovině dvacátého století. Analýza je provedena na základě novely Waysona Choye *The Jade Peony*, která v kombinaci s fakty ze sekundární literatury poskytuje obraz postavení čínských dětí ve společnosti v dané době.

Většina čínských přistěhovalců, která přišla do Kanady před druhou světovou válkou, byli chudí lidé z jižní Číny. S vidinou lepšího života a získání bohatství přicházeli do „Cold Mountain“, aby pracovali na transpacifické železnici. Po dokončení železnice kanadská vláda vydala několik zákonů, které měly výrazně omezit příliv přistěhovalců z Číny. Číňané si nemohli dovolit platit vysoké částky při každém vstupu ze země a do země, a proto zůstávali v Kanadě převážně bez vlastní rodiny jako staří mládenci podporováni jen čínskou komunitou. Tato stará generace měla velký vliv na výchovu dětí imigrantů, kteří je svěřovali do jejich péče, zatímco oni těžce pracovali.

Třicátá a čtyřicátá léta dvacátého století byla těžkým obdobím pro Kanadany, kteří se vypořádávali s nestabilní ekonomickou situací. Byla o to těžší pro čínské přistěhovalce, kteří nebyli žádoucí v jejich nové zemi. Bylo obtížné získat jakoukoli práci. Muži často vykonávali několik zaměstnání i různé sezónní práce. Každý v rodině se podílel na její finanční podpoře, včetně dětí. Podle čínské tradice, každé dítě, které dosáhlo věku šesti let, muselo vykonávat nějakou práci a vypomáhat tak své rodině. Ve srovnání s generací jejich rodičů, kteří vyrůstali ve válkou sužované Číně a od sedmi let pracovali dlouhé hodiny na polích nebo jako sloužící v jiných rodinách, práce dětí v Kanadě spočívala v mytí nádobí v kavárnách, roznášení novin, nošení hromad dříví a jiných pomocných pracích.

Stará generace, prarodiče čínských dětí žijících v Kanadě, měla významný vliv na výchovu svých vnoučat zejména v jejich předškolním věku. Staří lidé udržovali zvyky staré Číny a snažili se je předat i dětem v podobě vyprávění příběhů a pověstí. Duchové, znamení a symboly se tak staly pro děti vodítkem pro rozpoznání toho, co je dobré a co je špatné.

Podle čínské tradice byli tito staří přistěhovalci ve své komunitě respektováni pro své životní zkušenosti a moudrost. Věřili v udržování tradic, ale odmítali se integrovat do kanadské společnosti, protože se obávali ztráty čínské kultury a identity. Nikdy se nenaučili hovořit plynně anglicky, nikdy nepochopili kanadskou kulturu a strukturu společnosti. Se svými vnoučaty komunikovali jazykem, který byl směsí čínštiny a angličtiny. Čínské děti, které byly vystaveny životu v kanadské společnosti, zejména ve školách, byly naopak ochotny přijmout pravidla společnosti, ve které žily. Tyto rozdílné pohledy na asimilaci následně způsobovaly konflikty mezi generacemi.

V navštěvování kanadských škol viděly čínské děti únik z nátlaku, který na ně byl vyvíjen v rodinách. Rodiče a prarodiče trvali na uchování čínské identity ve formě zvládnutí čínštiny. Kromě kanadské školy musely děli navštěvovat i čínskou nedělní školu. Zde ale byly flustrovány množstvím složitých dialektů a osvojováním mluvené a psané čínštiny, která se tolik lišila od angličtiny. Nebyly schopny si zapamatovat složitý způsob oslovování příbuzných a ostatních členů komunity. Uvědomovaly si, že čínština pro ně, jako děti žijící v anglicky mluvící společnosti, není prostředkem, který jim pomůže začlenit se do společnosti.

Stejně jako další přistěhovalecké národnostní skupiny, které žily v první polovině dvacátého století v Kanadě, i čínské děti zažily posměch a ponížení, když hovořily anglicky svým čínským přízvukem. V tramvajích a obchodech, kde se mluvilo jen anglicky, byly často ignorovány nebo lidé předstírali, že je neslyší. Zvládnout angličtinu dokonale se tedy stalo jejich cílem a věřily, že ho dosáhnou v kanadské škole.

Podle kanadských zákonů se dítě mohlo stát žákem kanadského školního systému jen tehdy, pokud bylo schopno používat angličtinu v takové míře, že porozumělo učiteli a mohlo sledovat výuku. Proto se čínské děti často učily od svých starších sourozenců, kteří jim předčítali pasáže z anglických knih nebo jim pomáhali s opisováním anglických vět. Po úspěšném zvládnutí testu mohly být čínské děti přijaty do kanadské školy, kde tradičně dosahovaly výborných výsledků, excelovaly ve vědomostních soutěžích a dávaly dobrý příklad ostatním studentům.

První generace dětí čínských imigrantů narozených v Kanadě si uvědomovala, jaké možnosti jim život v nové zemi přináší. Tato generace se chtěla vymanit ze zvyků a tradic země svých rodičů a prarodičů, kteří naopak lpěli na odkazu svého kulturního dědictví. Čínské děti se tak ocitly uvězněny mezi těmito dvěma světy a potýkaly se se svou přistěhovaleckou identitou. Byly považovány za „bananas“ – žlutí na povrchu a bílí vevnitř. Věděly, že i když si změní svá čínská jména na anglická, i když budou ve škole každé ráno vzdávat hold anglické vlajce, vždy budou považovány za děti nežádoucích imigrantů, kterým není dovoleno stát se občany Kanady. Uvědomovaly si, že to bude jejich barva pleti, kterou se budou vždy odlišovat od bílých Kanadčanů, a zůstanou tak jen příslušníky čínské menšiny.

Wayson Choy se stejně jako děti v knize narodil a vyrůstal v Chinatownu ve Vancouveru v první polovině dvacátého století. Dokonale poznal podmínky, ve kterých vyrůstaly a kterým musely čelit generace dětí čínských přistěhovalců v nové anglicky mluvící zemi. Jeho kniha proto může být považována za cenný a pravdivý zdroj informací.

Hlavními postavami knihy jsou čtyři sourozenci: Jook- Liang, která je jedinou dívkou a druhým nejmladším dítětem v rodině Chenů, Jung-Sum, adoptovaný a druhý nejstarší syn, nejmladší Sek-Lung a nejstarší Kiam, který se jako jediné dítě v rodině narodil ve staré Číně. Kniha zkoumá život rodiny a čínské komunity z pohledu tří mladších sourozenců, nikoli z pohledu Kiama. Ten byl vychováván především svým otcem a strýcem, na rozdíl od mladších sourozenců, jejichž příběhy odráží spíše ženskou výchovu v Chinatownu; proto bylo jeho vyprávění rozvinuto v knize *All That Matters*, která je pokračováním *The Jade Peony*.

Za svůj debut *The Jade Peony* Wayson Choy získal řadu uznání a cen. O své první knize vedl několik rozhovorů v médiích a v jednom z nich se v rádiovém vysílání dozvěděl od neznámé posluchačky, že byl adoptován. Ve věku 56 let, dlouho poté, co jeho adoptivní rodiče zemřeli, začal pátrat po svém rodinném původu a ještě intenzivněji se věnoval rozhovorům se svou rodinou a dalšími členy čínské komunity. Výsledkem jeho výzkumu se stala kniha *Paper Shadows*, kterou Choy nazývá memoárem.

Všechny tři knihy Waysona Choye se opírají o historické události v první polovině dvacátého století jak v Kanadě, tak i v Číně. Autor však čerpá spíše z vyprávění starších pamětníků z řady čínské komunity. Ve své knize tak líčí příběhy, které mají mnoho společného s jeho vlastním životem. Například postava Jung-Suma zobrazuje dva životní mezníky, které sehrály velkou roli i v autorově životě. Wayson Choy stejně jako Jung-Sum v *The Jade Peony* byl adoptovaným dítětem, aniž tuto skutečnost při psaní své první knihy věděl, a stejně jako Jung-Sum se musel vyrovnávat se svou odlišnou sexuální orientací, pro kterou v tehdejší Chinatownu nebylo jiné pojmenování než „odlišný“.

Napsáním knihy *The Jade Peony* a následně pak dvou dalších se stejným tématem se Wayson Choy pokusil vyrovnat se skutečností, že vyrůstal jako dítě čínských imigrantů v kanadském Vancouveru, a snažil se pochopit, jaký to na něho mělo dopad. Jeho kniha mu poskytla možnost klást otázky, na které se chtěl zeptat jako dítě, ale nebyl schopen. Cítil se vzdálen od svých rodičů a nebyl schopen porozumět tajemstvím staré generace.

Ve své knize Wayson Choy psal o svém životě, rodině a čínské komunitě, spíše aby porozuměl své kulturní historii a až v druhé řadě, aby vyprávěl příběh. Jeho původním záměrem bylo napsat zábavné čtení, protože i jeho dětství bylo šťastné. Čím více však studoval historii té doby, uvědomoval si také stinnou stránku života čínských dětí vyrůstajících v Kanadě v první polovině dvacátého století.

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