

**LITERARY ‘BONE COLLECTORS’: RECOVERING THE VOICES OF AN
OLDER GENERATION OF CHINESE WOMEN IN BRITISH COLUMBIA
(1923-1967) IN WORKS BY WAYSON CHOY, SKY LEE, AND DENISE CHONG**

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DEDICATION

To my family.

ABSTRACT

Drawing from theories of Chinese indigenous psychology, subjective well-being, and cultural identity, this study examines the representations of Chinese women immigrants in four texts by Wayson Choy, SKY Lee, and Denise Chong. These women lived through the Canadian Chinese-exclusion period of 1923-1947, and many witnessed the introduction of the points-based system in 1967. Situating my examination in the social, historical, and cultural contexts of the multiple worlds where they lived, I suggest that through these characters, who use their own language/dialect to tell their own stories and demonstrate their own values, these texts literally and figuratively give this generation of women a voice and present them as complex humans. In this way, the authors are actually ‘bone collectors’; they excavate neglected aspects of Canadian history to find the ‘bones’ of their elders and attempt to piece these together, while being aware that they are not fully capable of doing so.

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INTRODUCTION

GIVING AN UNPRECEDENTED VOICE TO WOMEN:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDYING CHOY, LEE, AND CHONG

This study focuses on the representations of Chinese immigrant women elders in four Canadian texts (three novels and one work of literary non-fiction) by three second-generation Canadian authors with Chinese heritage: Wayson Choy, SKY¹ Lee, and Denise Chong. All four texts have won important Canadian literary awards and provide new insight into the Chinese community in various ways, which is why I have selected them for this study. Some of the reviews of individual texts describe them as “breaking the silence” of the community (*Maclean’s*), tracing “the ties” of many generations (*Publisher’s Weekly*), demonstrating the author’s “contagious desire to make sense of her origin” (*Kirkus*), and “opening a door into a beguiling and largely unknown world” (*Toronto Star*). These comments acknowledge each author’s devotion to recovering voices for the “silent” Chinese community that remains “unknown” despite its history in British Columbia since 1858. In this dissertation, I use “Chinese community,” “Chinese in Canada” and “Chinese-Canadians” to refer to different groups of people in Canada who have a Chinese background. “Chinese community” refers to the whole population with Chinese background; “Chinese in Canada” refers to the Chinese nationals who were born in China, came to Canada as adults, and still identify as “Chinese;” and “Chinese- Canadians” refers to the those who were born in Canada or came to Canada at

a young age and who identify as “Canadian.” It needs to be noted that there has been a debate about the use of hyphen. Some scholars, such as Peter Li and James Doyle, still use it, while others, such as Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu and Rachel Wong, do not use the hyphen any more and the former Toronto City Councillor Gordon J. Chong once advocated that references to hyphenated Canadians be abolished as “Canada needs unhyphenated, unconditional Canadians,” citing John Diefenbaker’s declaration of an end to hyphenated Canadianism. I have opted to use the hyphen for the ‘Chinese-Canadians’ in this dissertation because the hyphen shows the historical fact of the marginalization of the Chinese, which should not be neglected. However, when I use some sources which do not use the hyphen, I cite them as they are.

As each of my chosen texts traces a family’s history back to its female ancestors, an examination of these works can help us better understand the experiences of Chinese women immigrants – whose voices have not otherwise been preserved in the historical record – and better understand how the authors have approached the portrayal of this generation. One important fact about the authors’ writing of the texts that scholars have not paid enough attention to is that it was deeply shaped by their own historical research. This included travel to China, which in some instances drastically changed their writing. Understanding the history and culture of China was essential for the authors to understand their foremothers’ lives in Canada, generally, and in Chinatown, specifically. Building on the authors’ own efforts to represent the women in their own cultural context, this dissertation on the literary representations of a generation of forgotten and misunderstood

women is a combination of traditional literary analysis, historical research, cultural analysis, and psychoanalytic approaches to the study of these figures. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I will highlight the value of these literary texts which, despite receiving major literary awards, have been overlooked by literary scholars and by those interested in the history of the Chinese community in Canada. This study of these works, and of the important historical context that informs them, will illuminate these authors' insights into this community of Chinese women and will also contribute to a broader understanding of the experiences of the real immigrants on whom these figures are based.

I.1 THE NEGLECTED EFFORT TO RECONSTRUCT BRITISH COLUMBIA'S CHINESE COMMUNITY

By situating my examination of the women characters in the historical and social contexts in which the texts are set, this study critiques earlier literary representations of the Chinese in Canada and it shows how the works by Choy, Lee, and Chong give new meanings to women's experiences. Most of Lien Chao's assertion in "Anthologizing the Collective" (1995) about Chinese-Canadian literature is applicable to the texts in this study. She observes that Chinese-Canadian writing is "dealing with marginality, cultural damage and an inferiority complex" and is a means to "break out of this syndrome of trying to become white" (Chao, "Anthologizing" 149). I would further add that looking inward and backward into their own past, both personal and collective, can help authors find a foothold in their search for identity. Most significantly, these texts represent a very important part of the Chinese community's effort to rediscover its multiple cultural roots,

yet they have not received adequate critical attention from the community itself. This thesis represents one of the first close studies of these texts and makes an original contribution to our understandings of how these texts can help us recover the voices of a critical, but often forgotten, generation of early Chinese women in Canada.

In January and February 2019, the Chinese community in British Columbia hosted eight community sessions in five cities in the province to discuss establishing a Chinese Canadian Museum. The goals of the new museum that emerged from the sessions include 1) sharing factual Chinese Canadian histories that tell the full story, including focusing on the women whose history is missing; 2) highlighting the diversity within Chinese Canadian culture; 3) celebrating Chinese Canadians' achievements; 4) connecting present and past generations and giving seniors a chance to share their stories; 5) establishing the relevance of the past to inform the present and focus on hope in the future; 6) preserving Chinese Canadian identity, values, heritage, and culture; 7) connecting Chinese immigrant history to the larger history of Canadian immigrants and to the immigrants' impact on China; 8) connecting the museum to the broader Canadian society through education and research programs ("Establishing" 10-11).

This work to establish the museum is part of the ongoing effort of members of the community, from historians to authors, and from workers for Chinese community to ordinary citizens, to tell their own story through what Tzvetan Todorov, the Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher, calls a "commission of inquiry" into crimes caused by racism (34). Todorov (2001) discusses three means of reparation for past

injustice: punishing the criminal with the law, addressing the victims with the instruments of politics or culture by providing them with symbolic or material compensation, and “establishing the truth about [the community’s] past as a whole” with the goal of “restoring the unity of a scarred society” (30). Todorov believes that the third means will construct “a common image of [the community’s] past that better conforms to justice” (36).

Today, in Canada, the 223 discriminatory laws against the Chinese have all been repealed (“Three Levels”) and monetary compensation has been provided to individuals and the Chinese community as a whole, but the construction of the community’s collective image remains to be worked on. Despite the community’s tremendous effort, the discussions of the new museum not only make no mention of the authors that have been writing with the same goals, but in a more accessible way, but also completely neglect the potential role of literary texts in achieving the same goals that the museum is intended to achieve. Similarly, within academia, little scholarly attention has been paid to the literature produced by Canadian authors with Chinese heritage, and this thesis helps to address this dearth of scholarship. By “little scholarship attention,” I mean that for one thing, these texts have been much less studied compared with other literary award-winners by white Canadian authors. Furthermore, most of the scholars who have studied these texts are themselves non-white, suggesting that the communication between the Chinese- Canadian and white-Canadian communities that Choy, Lee, and Chong hoped to accomplish with their writing has not been fully achieved.

Since the 1970s, authors from Canada's Chinese community have been writing and publishing essays, interviews, poems, short stories, plays, and novels. After the "fruitless, one-sided attempts" by the Chinese-Canadian Edith Eaton at the turn of the nineteenth century (L. Chao, "Anthologizing" 146), the Chinese were silent for decades until the 1970s when the Asian-Canadian Writers' Workshop was organized by some Chinese descendants in Vancouver, together with Japanese-Canadians. Their joint effort led to the publication of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* (1979), the first community-based, collective literary work. Over a decade later, Chinese descendants collectively produced two anthologies of their own: *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990) and *Many-mouthed Birds* (1991). The anthologies represent the Chinese community's "epic struggles" to "transform the historical silence of the community into a voice of resistance [against dominant cultural hegemony]" (L. Chao, "Anthologizing" 147).

At the same time as the collective work, individual effort was made by authors of Chinese heritage who began to publish novels, some of which have attracted serious attention, as evidenced by the important Canadian literary awards they have won. Over a dozen authors of Chinese background have been writing about the past of their own community, but few discuss all the major themes that the Chinese community as a whole is concerned about. For example, the historian, archivist, and author Paul Yee has written a great many short stories about the Chinese immigrants, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, one of which is *Ghost Train*, winner of the 1996 Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature, but his stories focus on the men's experiences

over a short period at the end of the nineteenth century so they do not tell a “full story.” Others, who belong to the new waves of Chinese immigrants after the 1980s, have different stories to tell. For example, Madeleine Thien, daughter of a Malaysian Chinese father and a Hong Kong Chinese mother, wrote *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, which won the 2016 Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Governor General’s Award. However, such works focus on the last three decades of the twentieth century, which is only a small section of the community’s past.

The four texts that this dissertation explores most thoroughly represent the history of the Chinese in Canada and pay close attention to the Chinese women who have been neglected and forgotten in other works. SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) won the 1990 City of Vancouver Book Award and was nominated for the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize and the Governor General’s Award. Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1994) won the 1994 City of Vancouver Book Award, the 1995 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction, and the 1995 VanCity Book Prize. It was also on the bestseller list of *The Globe and Mail* for ninety-three weeks and was shortlisted for the 1994 Governor General’s Literary Non-Fiction Award. Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995) (expanded from the well-anthologized short story “The Jade Peony” (1977)) shared the 1995 Trillium Award with Margaret Atwood’s *Morning in the Burned House* and won the City of Vancouver Book Award in the same year. For twenty-six weeks it was on *The Globe and Mail* bestseller list. His *All That Matters* (2004), which Choy calls a “companion” of the former (Wiebe D9), was nominated for the 2005 Giller Prize. As

every single historical event in these texts faithfully reflects the social context, these award-winning works can reach a large audience and play a leading role in reparation by teaching readers about the history of the early days of Chinese emigration to Canada and the people who lived through it.

Though historical fiction can be problematic in presenting historical reality as it “cannot represent the entire spectrum of human life in history simultaneously (Shaw 189), Ann Rigney (2004) notes that historical fiction may play an important role in shaping cultural memory and suggests that recreated artificial memories may, in practice, be more accessible than fact-based memories. Likewise, Mari Hatavara (2014) observes that “realism and artificial reworking are not opposites but rather constitute a vital liaison in representing history [...] and fictional forms and modes of representation enable the reader to engage in understanding and evaluating the past as history” (242). Hatavara’s observation helps explain how the authors and the proposed Chinese Canadian museum can collaborate in the goal of restoring the past by telling the story in different forms in order to build up connections between past, present, and future. For the Chinese community, these authors provide what Elleke Boehemer calls “the imaginative coherence that was undermined during colonial times” (169) as migrants’ lives were disrupted and their story is usually absent from or misrepresented in the mainstream history and literary record. The novels are exactly the “vital liaison” hoped for in the Chinese Canadian museum, because they build these connections between past and present, and between immigrants and descendants. This dissertation, as a scholarly study,

adds to this work of building connections by drawing attention to the importance of these texts, highlighting their successes, and proposing further steps for academics to take to understand this history.

I.2 TEXTS WHICH FOCALIZE WOMEN

Both fiction and non-fiction about early Chinese immigrants have largely focused on the Chinese men who contributed to the construction of Canada by working on the railroad, trails, and mines. The four family sagas at the centre of this dissertation, however, present women playing an essential role in this immigrant community, thus challenging the notion of the Chinese “bachelor society” (P. Li; Dere). Since *The British Colonist* announced the arrival of Mrs. Kwong Lee (the first Chinese woman on the west coast) on February 29th 1860 (“Arrival of Chinaman” 2), women were indispensable members of the community. However, because of blatant anti-Chinese hostility and the Chinese tradition that “decent” women, such as merchants’ wives, stay indoors most of the time (Yee, *Saltwater* 41), most remained invisible, or, if their presence was obvious, were viewed only as prostitutes or servants. However, the texts at the centre of this dissertation highlight women from different backgrounds, showing their joys and pains, struggles and achievements, good deeds and bad ones.

In the texts, these women miss and help their families back in China, gossip about their life in Chinatown, entertain and watch out for each other, celebrate births of children, educate each other about life in a foreign land, and guide newcomers to fit in the new environment. They live in relationships which the authors have managed to present in

detail and which readers who prize individuality may find difficult to understand. This dissertation will discuss how the texts portray these women as real human beings made of flesh and blood, shaped by their personal history and by their ambitions for the future, rather than as unidentifiable shadows in old photographs.

I.3 SYNOPSIS OF THE FOUR TEXTS BEING ANALYSED

Disappearing Moon Café tells the century-long story of the Wong family from 1892, when Wong Gwei Chang is chosen by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolence Association to come to Canada to collect the bones of the Chinese who died “on the iron road” (S. Lee 2), until 1986 when his great-granddaughter, Kae Ying Woo, makes a trip to China in search of her “chinese² roots” (25). After spending three years on his bone-collecting mission with Kelora Chen, a half-Indigenous/ half-white woman with a Chinese surrogate father, Gwei Chang returns to China on his “family’s beckon[ing]” to marry Lee Mui Lan, the wife his family has chosen for him (314). Then, leaving the pregnant Mui Lan behind in China, Gwei Chang returns to Canada to find Kelora dead, and he takes over care of their son Ting An without telling him the true story of his parents.

After living with her son in China for sixteen years, Mui Lan joins Gwei Chang in Canada to help run the family restaurant, Disappearing Moon Café, the largest in Vancouver’s Chinatown. Though feeling trapped in a twenty-eight-year “hollow” marriage (37), Mui Lan still expects to see the Wong family thrive. In 1924, five years after bringing over Fong Mei, “a real wife from China” for their son (312), Mui Lan sees no sign of a grandchild coming. In despair, she finds another woman for her son to have

children with: a waitress named Song Ang. Meanwhile, desperately wanting a child, Fong Mei starts an affair with Ting An, who has been raised as the houseboy without the family knowing he is their relative, and she has two daughters (Beatrice and Suzie) and a son (John) with him.

The elder daughter, Beatrice, is the narrator Kae's mother. The younger one, Suzie, commits suicide at the age of seventeen when she learns that her boyfriend (the biological son of Ting An and a French woman) is really her half-brother and after their son, the last of the Wong family, dies shortly after birth. Mui Lan's lonely and miserable life ends in 1951 and Fong Mei dies in 1962, leaving their Canadian-born descendants, Beatrice and Kae, to have only pieces of the family history.

While telling the family story, the novel includes important historical events and themes, such as the Chinese bone searching³ and shipping to China, the 1907 Riot⁴ in Vancouver, the Janet Smith murder case⁵ in which a young man from Chinatown was the suspect, Chinese-Indigenous relationships, the practice of Chinese immigrants coming to Canada using purchased birth documents and presenting false family relationships, the identity crisis of the descendants who grapple with navigating between the Chinese and the Canadian cultures, and more.

Though a piece of creative non-fiction about her family history, Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children: The Story of a Family Living on Two Sides of the Globe*, reads like "a well-plotted novel" (*Thunder Bay Sunday*) and was called an "astonishing tale" written in "clear and unflinching prose" when awarded the 1995 Edna Staebler Award. It

tells the story of the split Chan family from the late 1860s when Chong's great-grandfather first came to North America, until 1989 when Chong, her mother Hing, and her brother Wayne went to meet their China family for the second time. Chong's great-grandfather is lucky to make enough money in California to retire in China in comfort in 1888. A decade later, however, Chong's grandfather, Chan Sam, becomes one of the seven thousand Chinese who leave home to make a living elsewhere due to the difficult conditions in China.

Both the family's need for remittances⁶ and Chan Sam's sense of "loss of face" in not making a fortune in Gold Mountain make him stay in Canada after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1923. In his fifth year in Canada, his wife dies, and he takes a replacement wife⁷ who is to stay in China to take care of the family, including his daughter by his first wife. When still son-less at thirty-six in 1924, Chan Sam brings May-ying, Denise Chong's grandmother, to Canada as his concubine⁸. As the subtitle of the book suggests, it is about a split family: one in China with Chan Sam's replacement wife, their son, his daughter from his first wife, and two of his daughters from May-ying; and the other in Canada with Chan Sam, May-ying, their youngest daughter Hing (later self-named Winnie) and her family (including Denise Chong and three other children), and May-ying's adopted son.

To support the two families, May-ying has to work very hard at any available job, mainly working as a waitress in the Chinatowns of Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo, and dies in 1967. Despite her effort to maintain the two families, her daughter Hing

remembers living in humiliating poverty and seeing her mother's life filled with gambling, drinking, and men, and she decides to cut ties with May-ying, "tr[ying] to hold shut the door on the past" (xi). It took Chong great effort to get her mother to talk about her past, and she conducted research for a decade and made two trips to China to finish this "family project" (xiii). With its completion, Chong claims that she "had found some nobility of purpose" to her grandparents' hard lives in Canada (265).

Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* and *All That Matters* follow the Chen Family from 1926 when Kiam, First Son of the family (and narrator of the latter text), his father, and his grandmother Poh-poh came to Canada on purchased immigration documents, until 1941 when Kiam has his first child and the family line is continued. They are to be the paper family⁹ of Third Uncle who is a distant cousin of Patriarch Chen, Poh-poh's Master in China, but not a relation by blood. Stepmother joins in 1928 and thus the Chens becomes one of the few, and much admired, extended families in Vancouver's Chinatown.

Choy said in an interview that *The Jade Peony* is *yin*, the maternal side of Chinatown, and *All That Matters* is *yang*, its paternal side; that is why he calls the latter a "companion" rather than a sequel of the former (Wiebe D9). Author Margaret Drabble regards *The Jade Peony* as "a genuine contribution to history as well as fiction," which could also be said of *All That Matters*. After two near-death experiences and a trip to China to make the documentary *Searching for Confucius* (2003), Choy wrote the entire manuscript of the novel "at a deeper level" (*Not Yet* 74): it was more than seven hundred pages and five hundred of those became *All That Matters*.

The Jade Peony is narrated by the three younger siblings: the only girl, Jook-Liang (meaning Jade Bell); the adopted Second Son Jung-Sum (meaning Loyalty); and the youngest son, Sek-Lung (meaning Stone Dragon facing the Pacific). Each child narrates a short period of their childhood. Liang is five years old when her story with Wong Suk, an old bachelor, begins. He is her “only true friend” (*Jade* 35) from 1933 to 1937 and she is his “family” (36) and “bandit princess” (39). Wong Suk is Poh-poh’s age and came to Canada in the 1880s when he was twenty. He worked on the railroad, remained in Chinatown for decades, and kept many papers¹⁰ such as one “stamped CP RAILROAD, B.C. WORK PERMIT,” because of Canada’s changing immigration policy, which makes it so that Chinese “[n]ever know what government do” (47). He is put in touch with the Chen Family by the Tong Association¹¹ at the height of the Depression when he is too old to live alone. When Wong Suk is not visiting, the girl Liang spends most of her time with Poh-poh, who tells fascinating stories about Old China and cooks mouth-watering food, but “always say[s] something discouraging” such as calling the girl “*mo yung*” –useless (28; 32; 33; 35) – and talking about herself “dying soon” (20; 39). Liang is devastated when Wong Suk returns to China with a bone shipment to live out his last days, as poor as when he left China.

Jung-Sum narrates the second section of the novel. He was adopted by the Chen family when he was four after his parents’ deaths. He does not feel like he is a member of the family, so he tries to prove to everyone that he is worthy of love and gradually develops a sense of security, trust, and love for his new family, sharing Poh-poh’s stories

and Stepmother's love with the other three children. Jung-Sum finds that boxing is a powerful outlet for him as he develops his sense of sexuality and fights against the negations of his past. Jung develops a close relationship with Frank Yuen, a local boxing legend who, near the novel's end, joins the U.S. Marines as Chinese are not allowed to join the Canadian army.

Sek-Lung, the sickly youngest boy, narrates his first seven years when he "spent nearly all my time with Poh-poh and knew that she would be with me forever" (*Jade* 163). There are scenes when Poh-poh and Stepmother take turns all night to watch the boy, making sure he can breathe, and Poh-poh uses her mix of ancient herbs and balms, massaging Sek-Lung to bring the boy's breathing to normal. There are also scenes when the boy and Poh-poh seek pieces of colourful glass and metal to make a windchime, which is given to the boy after Poh-poh's death at 83. One of Poh-Poh's last wishes is that the boy would be healthy enough to go to school and, when that happens, he proudly tells his parents, "Grandmama said I would get better" (192). When he finally feels healthy, he secretly tells grandmother so that her soul can lie in peace.

All That Matters is narrated by Kiam, who comes to Canada at three and tells about the first eighteen years of his life. In his fifteen years in Canada, Kiam experiences losing his "Chinese brains" (25), being called "bamboo stumps" by the elders (29; 77), developing a close friendship with a neighboring Irish boy, and struggling to balance the new Gold Mountain ideas he is exposed to at school with the Chinese traditions and knowledge he learns at home. Though Choy calls this novel the paternal side of

Chinatown, as Kiam spends more time with Father and Chinatown men after he is thirteen, he is close to Poh-poh and Stepmother before thirteen and is never far from them after that.

Kiam's relationship with Poh-poh changes from intimacy, in which he takes everyone's respect for her for granted, to his efforts to distance himself from her stories and beliefs, to his final realization of her strength and his belief that it is impossible that "Poh-Poh could ever leave us" (170). Kiam's relationship with Stepmother evolves from acceptance, to dependence, to admiration. As Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu sensitively points out, by naming Stepmother *Siu-Diep*, meaning Little Butterfly, Choy uses a simple metaphor to "symbolize the significant impacts of small acts of humanism" and to let Kiam's history grow into a novel about the "boundless power of love and decency, an ultimate pursuit of dehyphenation" ("All" 223).

I.4 THE DESCENDANTS' SUDDEN AWARENESS OF THE LOSS OF THEIR PAST

Although scholars such as Rachel Wong and Brook Taylor have discussed the identity issues in these texts, I argue that the primary goal of the authors is in fact to rediscover their ancestors and that the authors' and descendant characters' rethinking of their own identity is only a byproduct of the process. Wing Tek Lum's poem "Translation," which Choy cites as the epigraph for *The Jade Peony*, best illustrates the Chinese descendants' awareness of their ancestors' disappearance and their pain at this realization:

Tòhng Yàhn Gai was what
we once called
where we lived: “China-People-
Street.” Later, we mimicked
Demon talk
and wrote down only
Wàh Fauh—“China-Town.”
The difference
is obvious: the people
disappeared.

Choy’s goal in writing is thus to recover “the people [who have] disappeared” and women are the most forgotten ones. Choy and others realize that the language is gone with the people, and that they can only use the “Demon talk” (English as white people’s language) to tell their own past. This piercing pain is the pushing force for the new generations to write. Balancing their (grand)mother’s only language, Chinese, with the English language to communicate with mainstream society, they have begun to reconstruct their past. It is in this process that they begin to understand their lives in the present and imagine their future in different ways.

Most of the writings by Chinese-Canadian authors who began to write in the 1970s take the form of short pieces such as little poems and essays, reflecting the short and usually fragmented moments in their memory. A few, however, have tried to present the “full story” by writing novels or memoirs. Among them, Choy, Lee, and Chong are the ones most recognized for picking up on the paused effort to break the silence, giving attention to those living in Canada, granting them agency in words and deeds, and presenting the diverse themes that helped shaped women’s lives.

Choy, Lee, and Chong have all explicitly talked about their sudden awareness of

their ignorance of their own past. Their writing of these texts is their confession of this ignorance and their literature is the fruit of decade-long learning and part of the ongoing process of further discovery of the past. These texts present not only the Chinese migrants moving to another land for survival and the descendants struggling to reconcile the new ideas in Gold Mountain with the old Chinese traditions and knowledge, but they also explore the full history of the Chinese community by presenting their perseverance in maintaining their Chinese values, heritage, and culture (though the authors also acknowledge the immigrants' contribution to the early construction of Canada). Most importantly, by writing family sagas centred on women, the authors fulfill the goal of "bridge[ing] the past and the present" not only by "preserving living history" but also by "giving seniors a chance to share their stories" for new generations of descendants ("Establishing" 10), which are the same objectives that many hope the future Chinese Canadian museum will achieve.

With the authors' motivation to write in mind, I will challenge the more common reading of the texts as immigrant progress narratives, which argues that each succeeding generation of the Chinese community lives better than the older generation. Instead, I will argue that through their representations of female characters, these texts demonstrate the women's own sense of achievement in successfully fulfilling their duties in the Chinese culture as a wife, a concubine, a mother, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, and so on, as well as the pain that comes from their failure to perform these family or social roles.

I.5 HISTORIES OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN CANADA:

AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE

In writing the history of the Chinese in Canada from 1923 to 1967, historians, even the best-intentioned ones, present only a small portion. This history mostly focuses on the Chinese men, their bachelor society, their contributions to the railroad, and their experiences of racism. In this history, the Chinese women are neglected and their daily life, which contains their culture and values, is excluded. Some historians have made an effort to fill in the gaps, but more needs to be done. In “Why I Killed Canadian History: Towards an Anti-Racist History in Canada,” Timothy Stanley, who has tried to follow in the footsteps of his mentor Edgar Wickberg by “see[ing] Canadian history from a Chinese perspective” (Godley 193), presents four features of the Chinese community that he has noticed in Chinese-language sources such as the influential newspaper *The Chinese Times*, a major documentary source on the Chinese in twentieth-century Canada. Stanley argues that this source opens up many new perspectives on the experiences of Canada’s Chinese immigrants which have not been adequately presented in English-language histories of the Chinese in Canada. His research shows that there was a more obvious and greater extent of racism endured by the Chinese than historians have acknowledged, but it also illuminates that the Chinese experience was not defined solely by racism, and that there are multiple aspects of the Chinese experience in Canada that are worthy of attention. My dissertation will explore such representations in the literary texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong which make these texts invaluable contributions to the writing of the history of the

Chinese in Canada.

Stanley's work on *The Chinese Times* has greatly inspired my approach to the texts. To begin with, his work shows that the English-language papers of the same era have not adequately noted the full extent of the racism that Chinese in Canada faced, with *The Chinese Times* frequently publishing accounts of racist violence (including physical assault) or harassment, which English-language newspapers often did not report. Additionally, in contrast to the portrayal of the Chinese as docile in English records such as newspapers and government documents, there were constant reports in *The Chinese Times* of Chinese activities and efforts to resist or circumvent racist regulations. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly for my study, Stanley notices that racism and its effects were only "a small part" of the newspaper (*Contesting* 100), which also reported on political and military events in China and all over the world, including debates among Chinese political parties. Finally, Stanley finds it surprising that the newspaper "even includes discussions of literature and of other cultural activities [... thus describing] a far different and more complex world from that contained within the fantasies about Chinatown circulated by English papers" (100; my emphasis).

Stanley himself has been devoted to studying the nature and severity of racism, its impact on the Chinese community, and the Chinese response to it. However, the more important features of the Chinese community, such as their connection to their home country, their literature, and their culture, which all give them agency and make them self-respecting humans, have rarely been addressed in history books. The four texts

studied in my dissertation carefully present these features, serving as examples of how literary texts can complement historical records by portraying a more complete picture of the Chinese community, including the Chinese culture which shaped the women and influenced their lifestyle in Canada, but which scholars (of both history and literature) have not given sufficient thought to.

Set in British Columbia, and Vancouver's Chinatown in particular, these texts present aspects of the Chinese in Canada that have been neglected by other authors and by many historians. Before 1885, nearly all the Chinese lived in British Columbia for obvious reasons: it had more convenient connection to China and there was no way to move eastward (D. Lee 433). British Columbia had the largest Chinese population for a very long time. Before 1891, ninety-nine percent of the Chinese in Canada lived in British Columbia; in 1924, one year after Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, sixty-five percent of the Chinese still lived there. Before immigrants started coming to Canada after the 1960s, the majority of Chinese in other parts of Canada had moved there from British Columbia and had close relations in the province (D. Lee 434). Thus, telling the story about Vancouver's Chinatown is telling the story about the Chinese in Canada before 1967.

By demonstrating British Columbia's provincial policies for the Chinese and their impact on the characters, these texts portray a more complete picture of the Canadian policies for the Chinese. The first anti-Chinese sentiment was felt in 1859 when a ten-dollar poll tax for Chinese was proposed (Morton 259). The first discriminatory

legislation, *The Qualification and Registration of Voters Act* (1871), was passed as one of the province's first laws after joining Confederation. The first anti-Chinese organization was established in Victoria in 1873 (Morton 260). Also in the province, the first proposal for a head tax in the *Chinese Head Tax Act* (1878) was made, though it was disallowed by the federal government. However, head tax was later collected in the province, beginning in 1884. The biggest and most violent anti-Chinese movement, the 1907 Riot, happened in Vancouver. What was more, every federal policy such as various restrictions and exclusions was first proposed by British Columbia. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act 1923 was passed under "pressure" from the provincial government of British Columbia (B. C. Government, "History"). The last batch of nineteen discriminatory laws, sixteen of which were for Chinese only, was stopped in the province too in April 2018 ("Three Levels"). Many historians have studied the history of racism in Canada but Choy, Lee, and Chong, while writing about the history that has been neglected, forgotten, or deliberately unacknowledged, do not allow either the hostility or the Chinese response to the hostility to be the sole focus of their stories.

I.6 BUILDING ON OFFICIAL HISTORIES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FICTION AND LITERARY NON-FICTION

Both history and fiction describe the past and share some similarities in method. De Groot observes that "both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style" to represent the past (113), and Hayden White insists that the two kinds of authors write with the same aim, both wishing to "provide a verbal image of 'reality'"

(122). Yet Mari Hatavara argues for the significance of historical fiction in (re)writing history by considering the function of historical references in the genre. First, she observes that intertextual references to real historical documents and sources help to build historical credibility of novels (246). Second, historical references create tension between the time depicted and the time of writing (243), forcing the reader to think carefully about history when they read historical novels:

The narrator openly plays with his double role as omniscient narrator and historian, declaring his ability to take the reader to whatever time and place he chooses while at the same time giving historical details connecting the story world to history. This indicates that the narrator, despite his ability to move in time and place and to telepathically read the minds of the characters, does not [have...] the omnipotent ability to make anything happen in the story world. This goes together with the role of a historian: the narrator wants to assure the reader that although the past world is accessible to him, it is not changeable, since the events have actually taken place. (253)

While the narrator plays a double role, the reader too has the dual experience of living in the history as the characters do, and of reflecting on this past as history.

Written in the latter half of the twentieth century, these Chinese-Canadian texts present to readers life as it was decades ago, offering insight into the lasting influence of racism and shedding light on the present conditions of this community. Doing this interdisciplinary research during the US-China trade war, when many North Americans see China and Chinese as threats, and during the COVID-19 pandemic when anti-Asian hate has risen again, I have found the texts' portrayal of the history extremely valuable for understanding the present. I agree with Mary Chapman (2021) that hate is motivated by "ignorance, jealousy, suspicion, competition" and is demonstrated in forms of "racist

violence, hate crimes, verbal harassment, opaque policing and passive bystanders,” and that things which Edith Eaton wrote about over a century ago, remain the same today (Chapman, “Writing”). The four texts at the heart of this study were written with a sense of urgency and a desire on the part of the three authors to save their ancestors from the dustbin of history. This literature is uniquely positioned to serve as an important bridge connecting the present with life a century ago and to give us the opportunity to understand the root of some disturbing realities in Canadian society today. Through their depiction of women’s experiences, these texts certainly reveal the aspects of Canadian history that had devastating effects on the Chinese community.

Based on the authors’ thorough research about the Chinese community, these texts contribute to writing the history of the Chinese in Canada in three extraordinary ways that are missing from the “official” English-language record. First, they show a clearer distinction between the immigrants and their descendants than other forms of writing, which have inadequately presented or even confused these groups, calling them all Chinese-Canadians. Furthermore, they include details of the history of the Chinese in Canada which are not contained in any history books but which the authors obtained through oral history, archival sources, family accounts, and personal experience in the various locations where their characters lived. Most extraordinarily, these works give an unprecedented voice to the women who have received surprisingly little attention despite their long presence in Canada and their importance for sustaining the Chinese community. In doing so, the authors not only reconstruct the women, but they also continue the

tradition of sharing history and culture, which the women so desperately try to pass down.

No other written works have as adequately presented the clear distinction between the immigrants and their descendants as these texts do. Even Stanley, who tries to take the Chinese perspective and has greatly inspired my research, confuses the two groups when using the term ‘Chinamen,’ thereby neglecting the different identifications of the two. In making the argument about the evolving nationalistic identity among the Chinese, he cites the Chinese-Canadian Club in Victoria as an example and claims that by the 1920s “the ‘Chinamen’ were claiming their rights as British subjects” (“Why I Killed” 102). In fact, it was the descendants, who identified as Canadians, not the immigrants, who organized the club. Indeed, it was common for descendants to want to be considered Canadians though they were called “aliens” by the Canadian society. The authors have descendant narrators tell the stories of the immigrants, obviously showing their awareness of such distinctions.

Some scholars have tried to differentiate the two, but not as clearly and vividly as the texts. Gungwu Wang (1985), in telling the difference between *Huaqiao* (Chinese immigrants) from *Huayi* (Chinese descendants), notes that even the descendants of rich merchants who were sent back to China for education were still too different from their parents to understand them (“Within”¹¹). Wang is fair in making this statement as the descendants are usually ignorant of the immigrants’ life in China and are usually unaware of their ignorance for a long time. William Ging Wee Dere, a Chinese Head Tax redress activist and author of *Being Chinese in Canada: The Struggle for Identity, Redress and*

Belonging (2019) is typical of the descendants. He writes about his much later awareness of such ignorance, admitting that in his late thirties he knew “virtually nothing about the struggles of my own people and nothing about the history of my own family here in Canada” (4). While working on the redress, Dere found that “very few of us [his generation] were aware of the true consequences” of the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act (131). Dere’s feelings are typical of descendants and his response to his own history also shows a key point in reading the texts about the early Chinese immigrants: the narrators are at different stages in the process of gaining knowledge about the people whose story they are telling.

Another extraordinary contribution these texts have made is that they show a comprehensive history not contained in any history books. As Stanley has noticed, many faces of Canadian racism, often the darker and uglier, are absent from many English-language history records. These records also tend to neglect the cultural aspects of Chinese life in Canada, as well as the resilience demonstrated by this community. In recent years, there has been a more robust historiography about race and racism in Canadian history, including anti-Chinese/Asian racism, such as Laura Madokoro’s *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War* (2016), her co-edited work *Dominion of Race: Rethinking Canada’s International History* (2017), and Julie Gilmour’s *Trouble on Main Street: Mackenzie King, Reason, Race, and the 1907 Vancouver Riots* (2014)). Nevertheless, most of these and similar studies, conducted at least a decade later than the literary texts explored in this thesis, do not focus on the history of Chinese women as

much as Choy, Lee, and Chong did when conducting their own research. This means that their literary texts remain unique and important sources of historical information about Chinese women in Canada. Take Patricia Roy, for example, who is one of the first scholars to do very thorough research on Canadian racism against the Chinese (and Japanese). Roy modestly says that she did not read every [English] newspaper for her project, but she candidly explains that though she was aware of the fact that immigration questions should be seen “from the viewpoints of both policy-makers and the people affected,” she was unable to present the viewpoints of the Chinese (and Japanese) because she did not know the Chinese language (“Reflection” 96). No wonder Stanley notices the overlooked part of the history of the Chinese in Canada once he turns to Chinese-language sources. By contrast to historians like Roy, the authors at the centre of this thesis have discovered the hidden history through their research and presented it elegantly in their stories.

The texts present the more violent side of Canadian racism at the turn of the twentieth century, which, unfortunately, is still present in Canada now. For example, every text narrates Chinese being physically attacked by white Canadians, which is seldom documented in the English-language record. Moreover, the texts present a strong distrust of the Canadian government among the Chinese. For example, Wong Suk in *The Jade Peony* takes extra care of his papers because “[you] never know what government do” (Choy, *Jade* 47). What is more, the texts outline many fundraising and donation activities, which were almost daily activities in the Chinese community from 1937 to the

mid-1940s. These activities show the community's extraordinarily strong connection to, and identification with, China. Finally, the Chinese values and culture and their influence on the life of the Chinese community are artistically presented with details everywhere in the texts.

In addition to highlighting the difference between generations and showing a history that English-language and Chinese-language history records have overlooked to different degrees, the texts also give an unprecedented voice to the women who have received surprisingly little attention despite their presence in Canada for almost as long as the men and their importance for sustaining the Chinese community. That history usually becomes 'his-story' is too true for the Chinese community in Canada despite the slow but steady increase of the women population and their absolute importance for the survival of the community. In 1919, Vancouver alone had 210 Chinese families and Victoria had 180 (Wickberg 25), and in 1931, Canada had 3,648 Chinese females (Chan, "Chinese Canadians"). However, the women have only existed in the form of historical statistics to show the imbalanced sex ratio and to repeatedly confirm the title of "bachelor society" of the Chinese community in Canada (Lai 7).

My research has yielded only two comprehensive works that focus on the experiences of the immigrant women who came to Canada before 1947. The first is *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (1992), a collection of interviews of women who recalled their mothers or grandmothers, some of whom directly came from China before 1947. The other extraordinary effort is the website *Chinese Women Immigrants*

1923-1967 by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, which provides archival photos and a few precious interviews with people who lived in that time period. However, these two precious attempts still mix the Chinese women immigrants with Canadian-born Chinese women, which results in under-representation of the former, or the former being represented by the latter. In fact, most of the interviewees in both attempts were Canadian-born or came to Canada after 1947, lacking experiences in early twentieth-century China or exclusion-era Canada. Besides, though authentic, the interviewees' memories are often fragmented and personal and are usually very limited. Even more problematically, the website mixes the history of immigrants from different waves, neglecting the uniqueness of the women who were raised in Old China and lived in Canada in that particular period from 1923 to 1947. In addition, the interviewees frequently and explicitly state that they do not understand their mother or grandmother. I would argue that despite these attempts, the record of the old generation of women immigrants would still be missing if it were not for these literary texts I am analyzing. These authors are the first to try to understand the women and conduct detailed research into this history, and this dissertation will draw attention to how that research has been transformed into a literary representation of the uniqueness of this generation of women.

Not only have the women received surprisingly little attention from later scholars and their own descendants, but they were also marginalized in their own time, leaving very few primary sources. Dozens of periodicals in China were reporting on overseas Chinese in the first half of the century. However, in all the reports from 1923 to 1947,

only two were about women, both very brief. One told about women fundraising for a relief program in China (“Fundraising Sale” 18) and the other about them fundraising to support the Red Cross in Montreal in return for Canada’s help with China’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (R. Zhou 17).

Another source about the women in their own time is writings by early men immigrants imagining the perspective of a wife, which appear in collections such as Marlon K. Hom’s *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (1992) and Steven G. Yao’s *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (2010). Though only a few in the collections explicitly mention Canada and most are by Chinese in the United States, they are still useful resources to understand the women in Canada because the Chinese back then saw little difference between the two countries. These two sources are complementary to each other: the former tells about women in the private sphere being a wife and serving the family and the latter about women in the public sphere serving larger communities which they would not have done if they had been in China.

Giving women immigrants a voice is the most significant achievement of the texts under study because this is the best way to reveal the cruelest aspect of Canadian racism: by targeting the women with its restrictive and exclusive immigration policies, Canada would see the shrinking and termination of the Chinese population and effectively reach its goal of making Canada ‘white.’ In discussing prostitution as a necessity in California, Marlon K. Hom (1992) finds that some politicians and local newspapers “advocated”

allowing Chinese prostitutes, rather than wives, to immigrate for the purpose of avoiding massive Asian settlement and “maintain[ing] Caucasian racial purity” (309). This desire was shared by Canadian politicians such as Robert Laird Borden, an MP of House of Commons in 1909. He expressed explicitly the plan “to keep a white Canada” (qtd. in K. Cho) which was prevalent in the coming decades.

The desire to see the Chinese population decrease was made clear by A.W. Neill, another MP of House of Commons in 1924. When celebrating the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Neill said, “The birth rate [of the Chinese] will hardly keep up with the death rate. And in time, we will look to their gradual elimination and the final solution to the Chinese question in Canada” (qtd. in K. Cho). Leaving women out of the study of the history only maintains the self-congratulatory view of Canada’s past and fails to see the dark nature of the Canadian immigration policies. It also perpetuates the false notion that Canada “has been remarkably free of the ugliest forms and consequences of racism that have caused so much tragedy elsewhere in the world” that Craig observes (139). This dissertation will highlight the part of Canadian history that few white Canadians are aware of or feel comfortable learning through its focus on the women whose existence and values Choy, Lee, and Chong have tried to restore to Canada’s historical record.

Last, but not least, studying the women as represented in these texts not only enriches Canadian history, but enables the reader to understand the Chinese community as well. On the one hand, family was the primary way to define the ‘haves and have-nots’ in the Chinese community: having a wife and family was the symbol of well-being and

success and a source of admiration, more so than criteria like class, wealth, caste, or occupation. On the other hand, the women are the embodiment of what Paul Yee calls the Chinese “cultural baggage” (24). Yee does not elaborate on what he means by this, but Choy, Lee, and Chong specified the contents and effects of this Chinese “cultural baggage” that, when closely studied, is revealed to be an integral part of the Chinese community and of the Canadian history as well.

The importance of knowing this part of Canadian history is explained by Marie Vautier. She agrees with Georg Lukacs’ observation about fiction and nationhood that “novels [are] both sources of pleasure and pedagogical vehicles” that transmit “knowledge of the past and knowledge of a culture” (qtd. in Vautier 217), and believes that “the necessity of knowing one’s history [is] a prerequisite to constituting a nation” (Vautier 217). In Canadian literature, these four texts belong to what Martin Kuester calls the “rebirth of the historical novel in Canada,” marking a change from the “ideological thrust of the historical novels” produced in the first two thirds of the twentieth century and clearing up the “historical ambiguity and hesitancy” that characterized early works of historical fiction (qtd. in Vautier 217-19). In this sense, they do deserve the literary awards granted to them and this dissertation will highlight their contribution in building the history of both Canada and the Chinese community.

By discerningly reading the texts, I will, for one thing, make the well-researched, accurate historical representations become more widely known and appreciated by adding my knowledge of the experiences of the immigrant women, clarifying the meaning of

many details that the authors have artistically woven together. For another, I will also challenge some questionable arguments made by scholars of these texts who lack knowledge of the Chinese immigrants' own background.

I.7 TEXTS THAT COMPLICATE THE WOMEN'S LIVES IN THREE WORLDS

Current studies mainly focus on the women's experience living in the shadow of Canadian racism and within "claustrophobic" Chinatown (Chong, *Concubine's* 79), leaving out their life in China, which I argue is the most important influence on their life in Canada. To reconstruct the women and their story, the authors searched all three worlds to find out what women's lives were like in these worlds at the time. Choy's determination to rewrite the whole manuscript of *All That Matters* and Chong's later realization of some mistakes in the first edition of *The Concubine's Children* give us a glimpse of the density and complexity of the texts.

Readers can face various difficulties in comprehending the texts. For example, contemporaries of the authors may be ignorant of their own Chinese ancestors; later Chinese immigrants from mainland China or other parts of the world, who have very different social and occupational experiences from those who came in the last century, will find both the Canada and the Old China depicted in these works unfamiliar; non-Chinese scholars can interpret some details inaccurately (as exemplified by Michelle Hartley's mistaken interpretation of Liang eating chicken feet in *The Jade Peony*, which I will discuss in Chapter Two.) The key to a fair understanding of the texts lies in having in

a good knowledge of the three worlds and this dissertation will be the first to discuss the representation of the women in their multiple worlds.

Old China was not only about poverty and social unrest; the geographical, historical, and cultural characteristics all left traces on the immigrants' personality and mentality. Chinese came to Canada with an adventurous spirit born of the centuries-long local history of migration and outstanding ability to do business shaped by a long history of commercial interaction with foreigners. They also brought with them the memory of foreign powers robbing their country and waves of political reformers trying to save the country, along with their culture-laden language, food, and entertainment. Canada, which they called Gold Mountain, was where they expected to make a fortune, but at the turn of the twentieth century, all forces of white society, including the politicians, legislators, media and writers, worked together to restrict and exclude them, "standing up and abusing [them] behind their backs and calling them all the bad names" (Eaton, "A Plea"), and shaping a whole system of restriction and exclusion. The harshness of survival was beyond their expectation and imagination. They managed to survive and to continue living in the Chinese way at the edge of the cities and gradually, what they brought from China enabled them to thrive economically and socially. Considering the difficulty they overcame, which arguably exceed that faced by other immigrant groups, I propose seeing them with "respect and warmth" as suggested by Mu Qian (Qian 1). They are too strong-willed to be pitied and their devotion to family and community is too great for the descendants to be merely grateful for.

This discussion of the multiple worlds will make the readers alert to possible misreadings of the texts caused by the “social unconscious” which may hinder one from understanding “foreign” thoughts. According to Erich Fromm:

Each society determines which thoughts and feelings shall be permitted to arrive at the level of awareness and which have to remain unconscious. Just as there is a social character, there is also a “social unconscious.” By “social unconscious” I refer to those areas of repression which are common to most members of a society; these commonly repressed elements are those contents which a given society cannot permit its members to be aware of if the society with its specific contradictions is to operate successfully. (*Beyond Chains* 70)

Readers of these texts should be conscious of some kind of “social unconscious” which may disparage some thoughts and feelings which the immigrant women in the texts see as natural and take for granted. For example, readers who celebrate individuality will find it hard to understand that individuality and personal freedom are not the most important values in some cultures; readers who believe in the notion of migration as progress will be reluctant to accept that the values and cultural practices of the immigrants’ home country can be equally good, if not even better; and readers who believe in equality will not understand why some people take a hierarchical social order for granted and make every effort to maintain it. The purpose of this thesis is not to defend any particular social value or order, but rather to demonstrate that it is necessary to understand characters in the context of their own worlds, rather than judge them according to the standards of a reader’s own time.

In order to explore these stories and illuminate their value as sources that contribute to our understanding of the history of the Chinese women who came to Canada before

1947 and lived through the exclusive and restrictive years from 1923 to 1967, this thesis will consider the following questions: How reliable are the descendant narrators, who typically celebrate individual success, in representing the immigrant women and their practice of sacrificing themselves for the collective interest? How does examining the context of the three worlds that these women lived in help with the interpretation of the women's story? Was the women's migration from China to Canada an upward movement in every sense, or were there things about their home country that they tried to hold fast to but had to lose? What might these characters teach us about the formation of Chinese identity in Canada in both the past and the present? What implications can the study of the Chinese women give to the study of ethnic literature in Canada?

I.8 THESIS

The three authors are literary 'bone collectors' of the Chinese immigrants, particularly the Chinese women. I believe that the authors have fulfilled their primary goal of recovering the past by representing the Chinese women immigrants through using the women's own language and even dialects; telling the women's stories in three worlds; demonstrating the women's pains and joys, culture and values; placing the women in the focal position of the narration; portraying the women as the vital member of the Chinese community; and writing the women as an essential part of the authors' own sense of self.

These works of fiction and creative non-fiction are written with two goals: to restore the past which the authors have nearly lost knowledge of and to construct their own personal identity while grappling with their Chinatown background and their broader

lived experience in Canada. Each of the authors suddenly became aware of, and chose to write about, a past that they had not been previously aware of and that their generation, collectively, is fast losing all knowledge of. The texts represent an effort to grasp that history, which is why these writers all use descendant narrators like themselves; these narrators allow the authors to reproduce their own development from being completely ignorant to gradually discovering their own past. In this process, there are feelings such as confusion and frustration as well as gratitude and appreciation for the older generation. More importantly, however, based on thorough archival research, extensive interviews, studies of various Chinatowns in British Columbia, and travel to China itself, these authors have re-constructed the women immigrants and placed *them* in the focal position.

Despite the dual threads in the texts, the current scholarly discussion of these texts mostly focuses on the descendant characters, especially on how they appear to form their identity by “challenging many traditional Chinese attitudes” (Hilf 55-59), situating the older women immigrants as part of the background or as antagonists to other characters. By concentrating only on the descendants’ identity, scholars have failed to recognize that the authors’ primary attempt is to reconstruct the immigrants and reveal the important distinctions between the descendants and the immigrants. This oversight has resulted in further negligence and erasure of the immigrants by literary scholars. Even when some attention has been paid to the women immigrant characters, hardly any effort has been made to explore their experiences in China, even though these shape who they are and influence how they respond to a new environment in Canada.

In addition to focusing on descendants, by reading the texts primarily in relation to Canadian racism, scholars have inadvertently deprived the immigrant characters of their agency and minimized the richness of the Chinese life in Canada. What surprises me most is how some scholars have fiercely criticized the depictions of the women immigrants, which comes from the authors' greatest effort in their research. The three authors have been considered to "feed off the stereotypes created by this racism" (M. Ng, "Representing" 166), to self-exoticize the "romantic embodiment of Asia in genes and consciousness" (D. Li, qtd in M. Ng, "Representing" 166), to write with "apparent stasis of fictional presentation" while neglecting the diversity of the Chinese community (M. Ng, "Chop" 171), and to use ethnic history for marketing value (M. Ma; S. C. Wong; David Leiwei Li). I believe, however, that using the immigrants' own language, including their dialects, telling their stories in relation to the four aspects of Chinese life in Canada that Stanley notices in *The Chinese Times*, and writing the women as an essential part of the authors' own sense of self are where the value of the texts lies. Criticizing the authors for telling an old story of the immigrants who speak very poor English or for including dialects that need to be translated into English for the readers is a failure to see the authors' desperation to save what is fading from their memory about their ancestors. Seeing the story as being too remote from the reader's times will blind the readers to the nature and root of the racism which is still prevalent today. Overlooking the women's Chinese background results in uninformed or incomplete interpretations of the women's story in the texts.

Understanding the details about the immigrants' experience is no easy job for the reader with inadequate historical, cultural, or social knowledge. Firstly, many details in the texts, especially those about China, can be too truncated for the majority of Canadian readers and even critics. For example, when Choy writes "The dog-turd Japanese. The demon Russians. The big-nosed British," which Father says to the children as part of the family education (*All* 34), he intends to include the hundred-year-long history of China being invaded, thus implying the immigrants' strong connection to (and deep concern about) their home country. This makes it challenging for readers unfamiliar with China's history to understand the immigrants' perspective. My dissertation will challenge many of the arguments made by critics by revealing the meanings of the details which the authors have obtained from their thorough research and have carefully woven into the texts.

Secondly, the narrators' effort to objectively present the multiple facets of the immigrants' life can confuse the reader. Take Chong's writing of Chinatown in *The Concubine's Children*, for instance. In one place, Chong writes about her grandparents insisting on living in Chinatown without clearly explaining why they do so. In another, she describes Chinatown as a place characterized by "the poverty, the lack of education, and the claustrophobic existence of being excluded from the larger white society" (xii). Chinatown obviously has a different meaning for her than it did for her grandparents: numerous other details scattered in the text show that Zygmunt Bauman's description better represents the immigrants' version of Chinatown: a "cozy, secure and comfortable envelope [that] the community-hungry and home-thirsty selves have sought and hoped for"

(43). While Chong's writing about the harsh Canadian social context (most of which accurately reflects historical reality) helps to rewrite the Canadian history, her ways of representing her grandmother can be perplexing to readers. In Chinatown, there was poverty, but there was also donation of tens of thousands of dollars to help China; there were poorly educated labourers, but there was also an effort to send children back to China or to have teachers come over to Canada to educate the children; there was segregation, but the interaction between Chinese and other ethnic groups never stopped.

Finally, some details which are very significant can be easily overlooked, especially those about the Chinese perspective of Canada. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the twenty-five-year-old Choy Fuk, Fong Mei's husband, is "wound up" by two white kids no older than fourteen who "threw things at him," calling him "chinkee chinaman" (S. Lee 131). Racism in Canada obviously was a "common sense and [...] day-to-day practice" (Stanley 230) the Chinese lived though. When even a young man can be attacked, the women naturally feel the hostility and danger and remain in the secure Chinatown.

By placing the women immigrants in the focal position of my research and exploring their experiences in the three worlds of China, Chinatown, and Canada, this dissertation discusses their representation in the texts more completely than previous scholars have done. Based on this discussion, I will challenge the push-pull theory in studying migration that suggests that positive socio-economic factors of the destination give migration the meaning of "life and progress" (E. Lee 21), a theory which does not explain the women's values or even devalues the women's beliefs. This study will also

complicate the experiences of Chinese women immigrants in Canada. Instead of viewing their experiences in terms of upward movement from the ‘backward’ China to the ‘advanced’ Canada, a comparative study of these texts allows us to consider their experiences in relation to a dynamic losing-gaining-preserving model.

I.9 CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter One, titled “The Emergence of Chinese-Canadian Literature: Reviewing History, Constructing Identity,” will review the literature that informs the different issues this thesis explores. I will begin with the slow birth of Asian/Chinese-Canadian literary studies, which Donald C. Goellnicht (1990) calls “a long labour” in the title of his essay (2). Despite continuous literary creation by four waves of authors since the late nineteenth century, and critical studies by scholars including Lien Chao (1995), Lily Cho (2017), and Eleanor Ty (2020), a home for Asian/Chinese-Canadian literature as an academic discipline is still under construction. Next, I will outline various approaches to writing the history of the Chinese community in Canada which include a social-economic approach, a social-political approach, cultural studies, a geographical approach, a psychological approach, gender studies, and so on. Thirdly, I will survey the writing about the Chinese women in both historical records and in literary texts.

Finally, I will review scholarly discussions of the four texts, including the value of the texts in the rewriting of Canadian history (Hilf; L. Chao); identity formation and hybridity among the diaspora, especially of the descendant generations (Madsen; L. Cho); and the descendants’ grappling with Chineseness (L. Chao). I will also include the major

criticisms of the texts such as that they feed stereotypes about the Chinese by telling only the stories set in old times and in settings like restaurants and laundries (M. Ng), and claims that the authors' practice "self-exoticization" by including the dialects, strange behaviour of the immigrants, and values different from Western ones (D. Madsen). I will also bring Chinese scholars into the discussion as they tend to focus more on the immigrants rather than the descendants (L. Han; H. Zhao), and they see demonstrations of traditional Chinese culture in the texts that Canadian (including Chinese descendant) scholars either overlook or interpret problematically (Q. Li; Dong and Liu). At the end of this chapter, I will point out three problems in the current scholarship: inadequate studies of the women; decontextualization of the examination of the women; and leaving the women in a peripheral position or in the background while focusing on the descendants' identity issues.

Chapter Two – "Historical Context and the Lived Experiences of Women," presents the historical background of the three worlds where the women lived: China, Canada, and Chinatown. China was not only about the well-known push factors such as socio-economic difficulties caused by wars and natural disasters, it was also a country which had been invaded, causing civil unrest and government corruption. Most importantly, China composed a 'cultural baggage' made up of the Chinese immigrants' collective characteristics such as the spirit of adventure, the ability to do business, and open-mindedness, which provides them with the spiritual support and resolve needed to survive Canadian hostility.

Canada, on the other hand, was far more than Gold Mountain with gold and job opportunities. In Canada, politicians, legislators, journalists and writers worked together for decades to construct a suffocating social environment. Politicians proposed, debated, and celebrated racist attitudes and topics, legislators legalized racist policies and conduct, media publicized and normalized racism among the public, and authors of literary texts reflected and reinforced racism.

Finally, Chinatown was both a forced enclave shaped by social hostility and a place that Chinese immigrants voluntarily lived in, where they could live their own Chinese way while absorbing what they found positive in the communities of other ethnic groups. Chinatown was not a fully segregated place: there was interaction between the Chinese immigrants and people of other ethnic groups all the time.

By drawing on Wayne C. Booth's and Vera Nünning's thoughts on unreliable narrators, **Chapter Three** – "Unreliable Narrators: Revealing Collective Ignorance about Women of the Past," examines the impact of the descendant narrators' western perspective on recollecting the memories of the Chinese women. I believe that the authors, who are obviously aware of the narrators' incompetence in telling the family story, use them to demonstrate their own (the authors') gradual discovery of the history of the Chinese community. Thus, I would argue that the descendant generations' ignorance and misunderstanding are major reasons for the women's fading from the community which the authors have tried to reconstruct. With Choy's and Lee's intentional use, and Chong's unintentional use, of self-justifying unreliable narrators, the authors demonstrate their

concerns about the disappearance of Chinese women, not only from the Canadian historical record, but from their descendants' memory and knowledge. What is more, my study is intended to draw the reader's attention to the narrators' unreliability so that they will always think critically about what they read about the Chinese in Canada.

Chapter Four, titled "Understanding Life in China and Its Influence on the Early Chinese Women Immigrant Characters: The Neglected Multidimensional Connection," will discuss the women's memory of their life in China, which has been largely neglected by critics who study these texts. In terms of material poverty, a large proportion of the representation of the hard life caused by material need and social unrest in China is accurate, but the texts show that the hard-life memories tie immigrants closely with their home country rather than drive them away. This chapter will discuss their emotional, political, and cultural connections with China. Drawing from Kwang-Kuo Hwang's theory about the Chinese relational self and Erving Goffman's Self-presentation theory, I argue that the various relationships with China serve as a foothold which provides enough spiritual support to assist the women in facing hardships in Canada. The wish to "return home in brocade" becomes the guiding principle in their self-representation (Chong18). Therefore, maintaining the ties gives them the necessary strength to face hardship and losing any of the relations causes pain that cannot be soothed with material gains. Meanwhile, the joy from contributing to their home country, which they could not have done had they stayed in China, gives them the sense of triumph which they could not have otherwise.

Chapter Five – “Chinatown: The Struggle to Achieve Subjective Well-being through Maintaining Traditional Familial Relationships,” explores the women’s life in Chinatown. Drawing from the theory of Chinese relational self of Kuo-shu Yang and Xiaotong Fei¹² and the subjective well-being theory of Ed Diener and Campbell, this chapter discusses the Chinese women’s subjective well-being based on their devotion and effort to maintain a family in Chinatown. This chapter re-examines the sympathy for the Chinese women as victims living “under dual oppressions” (Women’s Book Committee; S. Zhu; H. Yang; T. Liu and Y. Yang) and argues that Choy, Lee, and Chong represent the Chinese women differently: these women define themselves in the familial relationships which have been made difficult by Canada’s harsh immigration policy. Therefore, I argue that in the four texts the Chinese women obtain their subjective well-being from the existence of the expected familial relationships, from fulfilling their own expected roles, and from contributing to maintaining the familial relationships. I suggest that the extraordinary significance of doing paid jobs for the women’s subjective well-being does not lie in the personal economic success and the sense of independence that comes along with this work, but instead lies in how it empowers the women to make extraordinary contributions to their family, which they could not do by remaining in China. Approaching these characters in this way will enable a better understanding of them. For instance, May-ying in *The Concubine’s Children* willingly gives everything she has to Chan Sam’s family because she sees herself as part of the Chan family, rather than because she has been oppressed or pressured into giving up her property. Similarly, in

Choy's novels, Poh-poh's happiness is all from her family and she is not bothered by doing paid work. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, Mui Lan's suffering is all from her family problems and owning the largest restaurant in Vancouver's Chinatown does not save her at all. I suggest that celebrating the women's freedom and independence not only marginalizes the women's own values about the familial relationships, but also incorrectly identifies the values that these women are embracing and pursuing.

Chapter Six, "Whose Canada?: Exploring the Different Cultural Identities between the Chinese Immigrant Women and the Descendant Narrators," explores representations of the women in the Canadian social context. By raising and answering the question: "Whose Canada is presented?" this chapter discusses the different cultural identities of these women and their Canadian-born/raised children. Drawing from Abraham Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs and Richard Taylor's theory about cultural identity, I will discuss the relationship between the satisfaction of needs and the Chinese women's identification with Canada. In addition, applying Thomas F. W. Barth's theory (1966) of ethnicity boundaries and Chun-chieh Huang's theory (2012) of the dynamic identity evolving in an ever-changing cultural and political context, this chapter discusses the women's conflict with their children and their gradual incorporation of Canadianness into their identity.

I begin with the wall between the Chinese immigrants and their Canadian-born/raised children caused by the immigrants' complicated forms of 'silence.' Then I argue that though both physically live in Canada, they have their own versions of

the country. The women's version is constructed with their Chinese background and their knowledge of Canada, especially about how it treats the Chinese, before and after their arrival. Meanwhile the descendants' version is constructed based on their limited life experiences within Chinatown, which they mistake for 'Canada,' and their experience in going to public school. I discuss the conflict between the two versions by examining important identity markers such as language, food, and cultural activities.

My **Conclusion** summarizes how the women that these authors reconstruct, while unique in many ways, can also be understood as representatives of Chinese immigrants more generally. These representations have been informed by detailed research by the authors, and this thesis provides further historical and social context about both China and Canada that contributes to our understanding of these characters and the real generation of women they are based on. Their stories reveal their resourcefulness, perseverance, and values in solving their problems caused by a chaotic period in Chinese history and the most difficult social context in Canadian immigrant history. By portraying their diversity and dynamism, the authors overthrow the stereotypical image of the Chinese being monolithic or static. More importantly, by writing their stories, the authors not only rescue a group of people that have been largely neglected and forgotten in Canadian history but also discover their own disappearing ancestors who are an indispensable part of their own undiscovered self.

Finally, despite drastic cultural and historical differences, these women are not too remote to relate to in today's world when the number of migrants is larger than ever

before in human history: one out of every thirty people on earth currently live in a country where they were not born (“Migration Today”), and one out of four Canadians will be foreign-born by 2043 (Statistics Canada, “Canada in 2041”). To study migrant issues, the push-pull theory that suggests positive socio-economic factors of the destination give migration the meaning of “life and progress” (E. Lee 21) is far from enough. Instead, a dynamic model that outlines what migrants lose, what they gain, and what they seek to preserve as they build a life in a new country should be adopted if we are to understand the complexity of the migrant experience and the ways in which it is depicted in contemporary Canadian literature.

Notes:

- ¹ SKY is the initials of the author's name Sharon Kwan Ying and thus the author writes it in upper case.
- ² Lee uses lower case for all the ethnic groups in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.
- ³ From 1875 to 1937, bones of the Chinese who had died during gold rush and railroad construction in Canada and the United States were found and shipped back to China to be buried. This practice follows the Chinese culture that 'fallen leaves return to their root.'
- ⁴ See Julie Gilmour's *Trouble on Main Street: Mackenzie King, Reason, Race, and the 1907 Vancouver Riots* for a thorough discussion of the event. During a recession and high unemployment, many believed Asian immigrant labourers, who often accepted much lower wages, threatened white workers' livelihood and warned that further Asian immigration would inevitably overwhelm B.C's white population. Led by the Asiatic Exclusion League, the 1907 Anti-Asian Riot occurred from 7th to 9th September, 1907 in Vancouver, first in Chinatown and then in the Japanese community. No death was reported but the property loss was extensive.
- ⁵ See Harry McGrath's MA thesis, *Discordant Voices: Vancouver's Scots Community and Janet Smith Case, 1924*. In 1924, 22-year-old Scottish nursemaid Janet Kennedy Smith was murdered in Vancouver and the suspect was Wong Foon Sing, a young Chinese man. As SKY Lee writes, this case made the Chinese worry about the occurrence of another riot like that in 1907.
- ⁶ Remittances are the money the married bachelors sent to China to support their families.
- ⁷ In the Chinese culture, a wife and a concubine have very different status in the family. While a man had only one wife, he could have as many concubines as he could afford. While a wife is the hostess of the family, a concubine is a servant for the purpose of the man's pleasure or the family's need for babies. A wife is formally accepted into the family with established rituals and enjoys a prestigious position whereas a concubine may not be even recognized by the family. A Replacement wife, in the case of Huangbo in *The Concubine's Children*, is close in status to the wife.
- ⁸ See Kuo-shu Yang's "Familism and Pan-familism," p.249. While there were several reasons for a Chinese man to take concubines, such as to show his wealth and status, to satisfy his physical needs, and to have a woman of his own choice, the most important reason was to have babies. In fact, taking concubines was one of the ways for the Chinese to continue their family, others being adoption and having a uxori-local marriage.
- ⁹ See Estelle T. Lau for a thorough discussion of the Chinese in the United States, which is applicable to the Chinese in Canada. During the Chinese exclusion (1923-1947), the

Chinese brought over families with purchased birth or immigration documents to have a “paper family.”

- ¹⁰ See Bo Yin. “A History of Misery of the Chinese in Canada.” *The Voice of Overseas Chinese*. vol. 3 no.11, 1941, pp. 34-37. The Chinese community learned to take care of their papers. In 1912, the Canadian government suddenly required that all the Chinese in Canada register for a new resident permit. For that, they had to present the receipts which had been issued since 1887 on their landing in Canada. The receipts were not mentioned again until 1912 and those who could not produce one were deported.
- ¹¹ See “The Tongs of Chinatown” at https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Tongs_of_Chinatown). The Tong Association: Tong (堂), literally meaning “Meeting Hall,” originated in Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the early 1800s and provided legal, monetary, and protective services to a wave of laborers excluded from mainstream institutions. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Tongs were one of the few resources immigrants could turn to in difficult times.
- ¹² For the phonetic notation of Chinese names, I use both standard and traditional *pinyin*, depending on how the author’s name appears in his/her publication. Kuo-shu Yang is in traditional *pinyin* and Xiao-tong Fei in standard *pinyin*. Most Chinese names have been written with first name first, but the names of author of classical works, such as Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a prominent Confucian scholar’s name and Zhu Yuan-Zhang, the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, are spelled with the surname first.

CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE REVIEW:
THE EMERGENCE OF CHINESE-CANADIAN LITERATURE:
REVIEWING HISTORY, CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

Chinese-Canadian literature remains understudied. Lily Cho (2017) recalls having not read anything by Asian-Canadian authors as a junior English student at university and remembers that in the mid-1990s, she “had not read any literature by an Asian Canadian writer in [her] school work” (“Landmark” 167). Things have been changing, but slowly. By searching the online syllabi of over thirty Canadian universities up to the end of 2020, I discovered that only three Chinese-Canadian authors have been included in Canadian literature or cultural studies course readings at four universities: Edith Eaton at the University of Ottawa and the University of Lethbridge, Larissa Lai at Lakehead University, and Denise Chong at Sheridan College. Eleanor Ty calls Asian Canadian literature a “relatively new field of study” as the term “Asian Canadian” has only been used since the 1990s to replace the former category of “multicultural” literature (“Building” 45). Discussing this new field, Ty coins the term “politics of the visible” to refer to the paradoxical existence of Asians in Canada as “being legally, socially, and culturally marked as ‘visible,’ and [...] being invisible in dominant culture and history” (*Politics* 11–12). Despite Chinese-Canadian literature being slow to develop as an academic field, four distinct groups of Canadian writers with different types of Chinese backgrounds have been writing since the late 1890s, each with its own characteristics.

This chapter first situates the three authors that are the focus of this dissertation in

the context of the century-long history of Chinese-Canadian literature to show that understanding their texts is key to understanding important topics in the Chinese-Canadian literature by the authors whose families lived through the restrictive and exclusive period in Canada. Following this, I outline the unique characteristics of Chinese-Canadian literature, a genre which has long been overshadowed by Chinese-American literature. Next, I review the significance of these texts as historical fiction and draw attention to the absence of the Chinese historical context in scholarly research. After that, I present multiple approaches to reading these texts as migration literature by discussing the descendants' identity issues, their views of the earlier immigrants, and the fact that women immigrant characters have been overlooked in most literary studies of Chinese-Canadian literature, which focus more on the male labourers. Finally, I explain the benefits of using Chinese indigenous psychology to approach the study of these Chinese women characters, which helps to underscore the authors' intention of placing the Chinese women in the focal position and helps avoid the misinterpretation of rich textual details that can result from exclusively analyzing the women from a modern, Western perspective.

1.1 FOUR WAVES OF CHINESE-CANADIAN WRITING:

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

The first group of Chinese writers in Canada consists of those from the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries and includes immigrants from that period, as well as two Euro-Asian sisters: Edith Maud Eaton (1867-1914), writing under the Chinese

pseudonym Sui Sin Far, and Winnifred Eaton¹ (1875-1954), writing under the Japanese pseudonym Onoto Watanna. Based on very thorough research, James Doyle determines the Eaton sisters to be “the first professional writers of Chinese ancestry in North America” (50) and “the first Chinese Canadian women [...] to challenge conventional nineteenth-century conception[s] of gender and culture” (29). While the Eaton sisters wrote for publication in both Canadian and American newspapers and magazines, the Chinese immigrants who were their contemporaries wrote only for others in their small community, either on detention centre walls (which I discuss later in this chapter) or in the literary societies that existed in Chinatown.

These early texts about or by Chinese immigrants provide invaluable clues for understanding the representations of early immigrants in the four texts this dissertation explores because they portray the multifaceted lives of this generation. Mary Chapman (2016) outlines Edith Eaton’s important position in Chinese-North American literature and argues that Eaton’s writing shows great diversity in terms of genre, subject matter, and intended audience. Eaton not only wrote short Chinatown fiction, but also didactic tales for children set in foreign lands, ethnography, literary sketches, poetry, autobiography, and translations (Chapman, *Becoming* xxi). Eaton’s texts, both fiction and non-fiction, cover diverse topics revealing immigrants’ complex lives. These topics range from multi-ethnic urban life in Canada to racism (especially against the Chinese), and from the descendants’ struggle with identity issues to the Chinese immigrants’ culture and values.

While Eaton was writing in English for publication in both Canadian and American newspapers and magazines, many Chinese immigrants wrote in Chinese on the walls of the detention centers² where they were housed for weeks or even months after arriving in North America at the turn of the twentieth century, and through participation in literary societies they organized in Chinatown. These works tell about their lives in, and thoughts on, Canada and the United States, both of which they called “Gold Mountain,” using the names “Flowery Flag,” “San Francisco,” “Canada,” or “Maple Leaf Country” to specify the country they lived in (Hom). Hom (1992) summarizes eleven themes from over 240 verses³ by these Chinese immigrants. Although some verses are about the immigrants’ agony caused by the detention centre, or about economic failure caused by racism, most are about their thoughts on living in the Western culture, missing their families in China, wishing for a stronger China to return to, and their nostalgia about the traditional social relationships in China.

Hom notes that the literary legacy of the Chinese in North America is not widely known because the study of them has mostly focused on the labor history of this ethnic group and because the few of them with English proficiency had “practical English skills [working for Chinese organizations to negotiate with white men or for the court or immigration cases involving non-English-speaking Chinese], but not literary ones” (29). In fact, Hom points out that writing literature was not the primary concern of Chinese immigrants who saw basic survival as their priority. However, the Chinese merchant class, though small in population, were educated enough both to create “a cultural atmosphere”

in their living quarters in the new world and to equip their offspring with the Chinese skills necessary for their anticipated future back in China (29). There was “no shortage of cultural expression” among the Chinese immigrants (Hom 30), and Hom finds out that from the 1880s to the 1930s, there were several influential poetry societies where the writing topics included the leisure-class’s interests, reflections on migration experiences, and debate over the political and social affairs in China. The immigrants held writing competitions that often attracted over a hundred contestants from both the United States and Canada (Liu, cited in Hom 32-38). This literary era was “basically conservative, unaffected by the literary reform⁴ [in China in the 1920s]” (Hom 38). These literary activities whose content focused on their personal and family sentiment and some concern about China’s weakness started to weaken in the 1930s as the immigrants shifted their attention to helping their home country during the Japanese invasion from 1931 to 1945 (Hom 38). The fact that the Chinese immigrants at that time kept the traditional Chinese culture and values makes them different not only from the non-Chinese in Canada, but also from Chinese scholars who study them decades later. Consequently, any study of this earlier literature or other literature about the same historical time requires a careful consideration of the era’s distinct historical and social context.

Though there is little evidence that early Chinese-Canadian writers had a direct influence on later descendant authors, Choy, Lee, and Chong write with similar richness about the Chinese immigrants’ stories. These descendant writers belong to the second category or wave of Chinese-Canadian writers, and they were prompted to write by the

sudden realization that they were ignorant of their own family's past. Chinese descendants in the United States began to write in the 1940s but, for reasons which will be explained later in this chapter, their counterparts in Canada began to write only in the late 1960s after realizing that they had been "shielded from the history" that the older generations of Chinese immigrants lived through (Liu and Wong-Chu). Since that realization, these writers have been making collective and individual efforts to portray their ancestors and the community's past. Their writing represents "a whole political awakening" (Liu and Wong-Chu) with the goal to move what Dere calls two "mountains" (211), meaning the state-sanctioned racism that lasted for sixty-two years under a series of government policies (1885-1947), and its "profound and lasting" influence (Dere 211).

Speaking of his own work, the Chinese-Canadian historian and novelist Paul Yee says he writes to "document the past, pay homage to those who struggled and sacrificed, capture the spirit of a people, and negotiate the terrain between Old and New Worlds" (qtd. in M. Davis 51). It is in this process of representation and reexamination that these writers connect the old with the new and bring the forgotten into the light again. This dissertation explores three award-winning authors from this wave in order to study the representation of Chinese women immigrants, the most forgotten or understudied population in Chinese-Canadian history and literature.

The third category of writers consists of the Chinese who came to Canada from outside mainland China after 1967. Being immigrants themselves, they are still concerned with "immigration, displacement, the politics of identity, and cultural clashes" (Luo 172)

and write “more diversely” in terms of subject matter, genre, and style (Attrux 4), but their writing about migration barely includes the immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century.

The fourth and final category includes immigrants who have come from mainland China since the late 1980s, and these include Yan Li, who writes with the intention of communicating between the Chinese and Canadian cultures. Her first novel, *Daughters of the Red Land* (1995), which she began to write as a graduate student at Windsor University, answers the frequent question of the professors there: “What is China like?” Meanwhile, her second novel, *Lily in the Snow* (2010), answers her mother’s question, “What is good about Canada?” Unlike the descendant writers who look back to their immigrant ancestors for a sense of their own identity, the last two groups write about their own time and concerns.

One of the things that makes descendant writers worth studying is that most important issues relevant to immigrants of Chinese background from more recent times become more comprehensible when the experience of the immigrants before 1967 is understood. I agree with Mary Chapman in her observation that “[r]ecent reports [in 2021] of racist violence, hate crimes, verbal harassment, opaque policing and passive bystanders could have been written more than a century ago” (Chapman “Writing”), and that these show there are similarities between the social environment experienced by Chinese in Canada today, and that experienced by the earliest immigrants. I would add that the women characters’ life experiences in Choy, Lee, and Chong’s texts reveal other

important features which immigrants of later generations can relate to. Therefore, this dissertation's approach to the study of these women will illuminate the study of immigrants in Chinese-Canadian literature more broadly.

Chinese descendant writers have played an important role in representing the Chinese community and in preserving valuable clues that can help us understand the nature of the Chinese immigration issues. Jim Wong-Chu describes this group of writers:

It was a group of very conscious people, activists that pushed this agenda [of having as many as possible readers without considering the monetary reward]. They are the pioneers that you see, Paul Yee, Denise Chong, SKY Lee, Wayson Choy and so on. We are the first generation, we are the ones who responded to the duty and we are the ones that stand behind it. We are the ones who talk about it and encourage the newer generations. (Liu and Wong-Chu)

The three authors under study in my dissertation belong to this group of “conscious people” and are the “pioneers” of the descendant generations who see it as their “duty” to uncover the community's past and make the forgotten story known.

Liu and Wong-Chu also explain how this group of writers have come to where they are and what they write about:

We never felt that writing was going to be in our future. We are more activists. It was like, we were sitting having coffee and talk till 12am, talking about what's wrong, what the community needs, why things are the way they are. We always talked about what's wrong. (Liu and Wong-Chu).

The feeling that something was “wrong” pushed the Chinese descendants together and the joint attempt to find out exactly “what's wrong” has motivated them through the following decades.

The descendants' writing began with a sudden awareness that they knew little about their own past and that something was wrong; naturally, this category of writings is

“mostly about looking at the past” because the authors were “bothered [...] about the family, about the past, about their identities” (Liu and Wong-Chu). Thus, the majority of this branch of Chinese- Canadian literature focuses more on ‘the past’ and on the immigrants rather than the descendants, and the key to understanding the descendants lies in the proper understanding of the immigrants.

The literary texts by this generation have drawn attention from critics who read these as historical fiction, as migrant literature, and as feminist novels. Considering the authors’ initial purpose of rediscovering the past of the community, I would like to propose that the Chinese immigrant characters’ experience in China be taken into consideration and examined using the approach of Chinese indigenous psychology, which I discuss later in this chapter. In this way, we will be able to see these characters in the ways the authors tried to represent them based on their years of research, rather than in the ways the narrators – who have limited knowledge – see them.

1.2 THE LATER, SLOWER, AND MORE NEGLECTED DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE-CANADIAN LITERATURE COMPARED WITH CHINESE-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Chinese-Canadian literature has been marginalized in literary studies in both China and North America, where more attention is paid to Chinese-American literature and Anglo-Canadian literature. In CNKI, a Chinese database like JSTOR with over 8,000 Chinese journals and 58 million pieces of literature, a keyword search with ‘Chinese-American literature’ yields 877 journal articles and 252 dissertations; by

comparison, a search with ‘Chinese-Canadian literature’ yields only 70 journal articles and 3 dissertations. A search with authors’ names shows even larger differences. There are 611 journal articles and 418 dissertations about America’s Amy Tan and 1146 journal articles and 294 dissertations about Maxine H. Kingston; however, as of August 2022, there are less than 30 articles in total about Canada’s Wayson Choy, Denise Chong, and SKY Lee together. As for studies of individual texts, Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* and Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* are each studied in over 1000 journal articles and hundreds of dissertations, whereas the database shows that as of August 2022, only 31 journal articles on *The Jade Peony*, 13 on *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and 6 on *The Concubine’s Children*.

In China, studies of Chinese-American literature began in 1992 (Z. Zhang) and studies of Chinese-Canadian literature in 1995 (Guan). Similarly, Chinese-Canadian literature has been largely neglected by Chinese scholars when compared with Anglo-Canadian authors such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro. The much smaller numbers of studies on Chinese-Canadian authors and their works, and other problems such as inadequate translation of character names, are obvious signs that there is a need for more comprehensive studies of Chinese-Canadian writers. For example, in Qingxia Li’s MA thesis, Junk-Liang, the only girl narrator in Choy’s novels, is “祝良” in transliteration instead of “玉玲,” neglecting the textual detail of “Jade Bell/Bracelet” (Choy, *All* 47), and thus missing the important symbol of Chinese culture “jade” and Stepmother’s right to name her first born.

Studies of literature by Chinese-Canadian authors are also limited outside of China.

While ‘Chinese-American literature’ has been long recognized as a body of literature that began in the 1850s and flowered in the twentieth century, ‘Chinese-Canadian Literature’ is not yet an established keyword in search engines such as Google Scholar, though the term was used by Lien Chao for the first time in the title of her 1995 essay, “Anthologizing the Collective: The Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English.” In the first decade of Chinese-Canadian literary studies, fewer than two dozen studies were published, and most were on one of the three award-winning texts: Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*, and Choy’s *The Jade Peony*. Most outstanding in this period is Chao’s *Beyond Silence* (1997), the first and, so far, the only comprehensive study of Chinese-Canadian literature (though there have been comprehensive studies of Asian-Canadian literature by Tara Lee and Eleanor Ty since then). Studies of Chinese-Canadian literature have discussed various topics such as diaspora (L. Cho; Madsen; Kamboureli; Luo; R. Wong), identity (Zhu; Attrus; Falkenhayner; R. Wong); children (Liu; Byrne); colonial politics (Fu; Ty), family and/or history (Calder; N. Chan; G. Chen; A. Gee; Vautier; L.Lai), and Chinese-Indigenous relationships (J. Lew; C. Kim; M. Phung). However, compared with Chinese-American literature or literature by non-Chinese-Canadians, Chinese-Canadian literature is still understudied. One obvious reason why Chinese-American literature has received more attention is that there is simply more of it, which has to do with the fact that Canada is only about one tenth the size of the United States in terms of population. For its size, however, Canada has in fact produced an impressive number of Chinese/Asian-Canadian

authors, yet there has been a relative lack of attention paid to their work within Canadian academia.

One reason why Chinese-Canadian writing is less studied may be that it was slower to develop than in America. Donald C. Goellnicht (2000) calls the “protracted birth” of Asian- Canadian literature “a long labour” in the title of his essay and compares it with the earlier and more visible birth of Asian-American literature. Goellnicht attributes the slow birth of Asian-Canadian literature to complicated reasons. First of all, he sees the much smaller Asian population in Canada⁵ as the most obvious reason (Goellnicht 4). Also, Canada did not participate to the same extent in things like Anti-Vietnam War protests, the Civil Rights Movement, and the 1968 student strikes in California, which helped to “create a strong pan- Asian ethnic movement” in the United States, led by groups like the Asian-American Political Alliance in order to stimulate social change (4).

Additionally, in the 1960s, Canada’s discussion of identity was focused on Quebec’s independence movement and the ongoing and unresolved bilingualism problem, leaving Canada with “little or no monies, political energy, commitment or media attention” for other cultural issues (Goellnicht 8). Furthermore, Goellnicht speculates that since the 1960s the Canadian literary institutions, including publishers and universities, have been more dominated by authors of South Asian origin. These Asian authors write on “the past in a distant place that still haunts them” and Goellnicht argues this makes them more popular or acceptable to Canadian readers than Chinese descendant authors, who write about “racism and discrimination *in Canada*” (15; original emphasis), suggesting

Canadians' reluctance to face racism within their own borders. While there is room to debate Goellnicht's theories, what is clear is that authors of Chinese backgrounds seem to have received less attention than those from other backgrounds, with their literature being included as course readings in Canadian universities less often than that by South Asian authors like Michael Ondaatje.

Finally, Canadian multicultural policy, which includes redress for Japanese internment and some success in preserving Chinatown, successfully makes ethnic groups less concerned about their status, thus producing the "illusion of equality of opportunity" and assisting in "whitewashing the asymmetrical distribution of power in society" (Goellnicht, "Long Labour" 9). Goellnicht believes that the claim that such programs are not needed in Canada because official multiculturalism has served to produce a more tolerant and equitable society has been one of "the major stumbling blocks" delaying the study of Asian-Canadian and other ethnic minority literatures ("Long Labour" 27). In sum, the multiple features of Canadian society have worked together to block the Chinese descendants from learning about their own past, so the sudden realization of such ignorance has motivated them to write and to rediscover the past and is key to reading their texts.

Although Chinese-Canadian writers and Chinese-American writers both struggle with being "legally, socially and culturally marked as visible" and simultaneously "being invisible in dominant culture and history" (Ty, *Politics* 11–12), and though both groups use literature to "re-inscribe the visible markings of race but to change the meaning of

these markings into a means of self-empowerment” (Ty 27), there are important differences between the descendant writers in the two countries, who began to write at different times and on different issues. First of all, Chinese descendants in the United States began to write earlier than those in Canada. The first piece of fiction by a Chinese descendant in the United States is Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943), followed by Jade Snow Wong’s *The Fifth Daughter* (1950), thus beginning a new era of Chinese-American literature. Yet Chinese descendants in Canada did not begin to write until two decades later.

Secondly, they write on fundamentally different topics. In the form of autobiography, Chinese-American authors tend to focus on the complex inter-generational problems as seen from the descendants’ perspective. Take the above two texts, for example. While Lowe treats the conflict lightly, ending with a father embracing the new world’s offering but retaining his belief in Chinese training, Wong writes more seriously about her struggle against her Chinese parents’ control. Inter-generational and inter-cultural conflict continues to be the focus of novels in the 1990s, including Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), and Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991). Tan’s and Kingston’s portrayal of China is so dark that other authors of Chinese heritage have criticized them for reaffirming the stereotypes of the Chinese in America. For instance, Frank Chin, a Chinese-American playwright and novelist, sharply criticizes Kingston for “liberally adapting [traditional stories] to collude with white racist stereotypes and to invent a ‘fake’ Chinese-American culture that is more

palatable to the mainstream” (“Frank Chin” 159). Similarly, Sau-ling C. Wong thinks Tan’s novels “appear to possess the authority of authenticity but are often products of the American- born writer’s own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese” (89), while Lee and Stefanowska say Tan’s writing tries to comfort Western consumers with “its reproduction of stereotypical images” (503). In addition, Chin accuses Tan of “pandering to the popular imagination of Westerners regarding Chinese people” (qtd. in Huntley 58).

While Chinese descendant writers in Canada also write about similar conflict, they focus more on retrieval of the community history. According to Jim Wong-Chu, the term “Asian- Canadian literature” is tied to the Asian-Canadian Writers’ Workshop (ACWW) which was formed in the later 1960s with the encouragement of Ronald Tanaka, an American professor and activist teaching at UBC who was “the first talking about identity, identity politics, community, history and so on” (Liu and Wong-Chu). Another influence on the young Chinese descendants was Tamio Wayakama, who initiated the first Japanese-Canadian historical photograph project and published *The Japanese Canadians: A Dream of Riches* (1978). Wong-Chu calls his generation’s writing and social activity “a third generation phenomena,” meaning that the third generation suddenly became aware of being “insulated” from the history of their ancestors and began to retrieve that (Liu and Wong-Chu). Their effort to retrieve the community’s past first appeared in the form of “an exhibition on Chinese Canadian history” organized by Sean Gunn, Paul Yee, SKY Lee and many others (Liu and Wong-Chu). The writing by three authors in my study is

more about their ancestors than about their own generation, making their work different from that by their American peers. This dissertation will highlight this feature of the four texts by focusing on their representation of the female ancestors the authors have made so much effort to portray.

Notably, few Chinese-American writers travelled to China to learn about the cultural background of the Chinese immigrants they write about, whereas many Chinese-Canadian writers travelled to China before they began to write. Kingston visited China for the first time in the late 1970s after the publication of her most famous *The Women Warrior* and implies in an interview that her narrator has “a wild imagination” in telling stories (Zagni 103). Amy Tan visited China for the first time in 1987 shortly before the publication of *The Joy Luck Club* and she admits in a much later interview that she used to see China as “the hell” and the United States as “the heaven” as the consequence of her exposure to the “American pastiche of stereotypes” (Christiansen). The misrepresentation of the Chinese in their works results from the authors’ limited knowledge of China.

By contrast, Lee, Chong, and Choy all spent time in China well before writing their books. Chong visited China twice and talked with the Chinatown elders in addition to doing archival research about the Chinese community, and Choy spent a great deal of time studying Chinese culture and went to China to make *Searching for Confucius: A Documentary* (2003). Lee first set foot in China in 1972 after taking Chinese 100 at university. She was nineteen years old and there was “next to no information available on

China” in Canada (“Sharon Lee” 95). Their eagerness to learn makes their representations of Chinese immigrants and Chinese culture fundamentally different from those of their American counterparts.

Eleanor Ty (2020) identifies five categories that can help readers understand important topics and themes in Chinese-Canadian literature and that show the diversity within this body of literature. Interestingly, each of the four texts that this dissertation discusses falls into all the categories. The first one is what Ty calls “breaking the silence,” which refers to writers and scholars rediscovering the history of the Chinese community in Canada by telling the “unwritten stories” and by conducting scholarly work (Ty, “Building” 46). For example, Chao Lien’s *Beyond Silence*, a book-length scholarly study of Chinese-Canadian literature in English that highlights the literature written about the lives of Chinese immigrants during the Exclusion Era, breaks the silence of the Chinese community in the academic sphere.

The second category refers to “living between old and new worlds” and includes literature that articulates the “discomfort of being an outsider in one’s adopted country” and that discusses the positive and negative connotations of hybridity (Ty, “Building” 47). In these texts, the Canadian-born protagonists call themselves “Bananas,” meaning yellow on the outside and white on the inside, or *jook sing*, meaning bamboo shoots, which implies the descendants’ lack of Chineseness (48). Texts in this category also discuss generational conflict, usually by exploring the pressure descendant children feel to meet parental expectations.

Ty's third category involves "writing beyond autoethnography" and shows the authors' refusal to be "contained simply by ethnic markers" and their effort to instead provide "new possibilities in creative expression that were not necessarily predicated on the exposition of the authors' ethnic identity" (49). To go beyond ethnicity, the authors use multiple time and space settings, such as in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), which takes place in nineteenth-century China and North America's west coast in 2044, and Madeline's Thien's *Certainty* (2006), set in Canada, British North Borneo, and Holland.

The fourth category, which Ty refers to as "unfastened," shifts the themes from "constraints of autoethnography, stories of intergenerational conflicts, issues of assimilation, and East-West themes" to "the impact of globalization on Asian North Americans" and the attitude of "critical globality" (51). In terms of form, these texts shift from the "mainly realist, documentary mode" of the 1980s and early 1990s to popular genres such as detective novels (51).

The final category is "new independent voices" (Ty, "Building" 53). This literature is usually by 1.5 generation⁶ writers, meaning those who have come to Canada in their early teens from mainland China since the 1980s and acculturate more than their parents or independent adult immigrants. This category explores interethnic relationships between people of all cultural backgrounds. The four texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong belong in each category: they break the silence of the Chinese community, demonstrate the struggle between the two cultures, portray immigrants from different countries, discuss the global migration of the Chinese, and explore the root of the issues faced by

immigrants in all countries.

Ty's categorization helps to identify important topics and themes of Chinese-Canadian literature and shows its diversity. Ty acknowledges the relationship between literature and history and literature's political function of righting wrongs. This relationship means that texts should be read in their historical context and that biased or inaccurate interpretations will certainly hinder the texts from fulfilling their political role. One of the roles the texts at the centre of this dissertation can play is to address the neglected history of Chinese women in Canada. While most Chinese-Canadian literature focuses on Chinese men's contribution in building Canada by working on the railroad, for example, the four texts examined in this dissertation represent Chinese women in ways no other literature does. The dissertation will discuss the value of these four texts in representing Chinese women, and more importantly, will explore their realistic portrayal of women who celebrate their own set of values, which no other research has done.

Though the two have similarities, Chinese-Canadian literature has been overshadowed by Chinese-American literature. Moreover, though Chinese-Canadian literature is part of Asian-Canadian literature, the texts, especially those by the descendants of the Chinese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, have their own unique features due to the immigrant characters' unique historical background in their home country, and the history of Canada's Chinese Exclusion Act. Reading these four texts as historical fiction, migrant literature, and ethnic literature will provide new insights into the representation of Chinese immigrants in Canada.

1.3 HISTORICAL FICTION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the beginning, descendant writers set their stories in the community's past to give a voice to the Chinese immigrants who have not been featured prominently in Canadian literature or works of Canadian history. Lien Chao reviews the descendant generations' attempt to rediscover the community's past in her monograph *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English*, which Guard Beauregard calls a "most eloquent and historically grounded version of the claim for Asian Canadian literature" ("Emergence" 55). Chao reviews the "fruitless, one-sided attempts" made by the Chinese community, from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1990s, to communicate with Canadian society with no response ("Anthology" 146). Chao calls the descendants' literary attempts an "epic struggle" that "opens a forum for Asian Canadians to question the lack of representation of their experience in Canadian history and literature" ("Anthology" 153-54). She notes that the anthologies *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology* and *Many-mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians* "rewrite the existing Canadian history in order to right the wrongs" and "reclaim the community heroes and heroines from the existing stereotypes so that contemporary Chinese Canadians can expect to have more respectable identities" (149). In the descendants' writing, Chao notices their "awareness of the marginality, cultural damage, and an inferiority complex" (150); their "painful" and "helpless" feelings at the loss of the Chinese language (157); their need to reclaim the experience of early Chinese

immigrants (158); the connection between the need for a recognized community history and the need for a respectable personal identity (153); and the “self-imposed and prolonged silence and isolation” of the Chinese, especially the women, from Canadian society (147).

Chao notes the function of literary texts in righting past wrongs, the descendant authors’ desperation to rescue their ancestors from disappearing, and their realization of the relationship between their identity and their knowledge of the community’s past. Her observation about the Chinese community being silenced and women being isolated has been inspirational to my research, but in her desire to “reclaim the community” history, Chao stops at the early immigrants’ experiences in Chinatown without recognizing the need to situate these in the context of their lived experiences in China. Without the historical context in China, any reading of the texts is superficial. Also, Chao focuses on the descendants’ experiences and feelings while neglecting the authors’ effort to spotlight the immigrants and fails to note the possible limitations of the descendants’ perspectives in viewing the immigrants. What is more, Chao’s claim about the community’s “inferiority complex” (149) is problematic as it may only be true of the descendants, and only during a certain period of their life, for the Chinese immigrants in these literary texts demonstrate an obvious sense of pride and even superiority.

Chao also contradicts herself in her discussion of the Chinese immigrants’ “silence.” She finds that the Chinese immigrants produced Chinese-English phrase books (1894-95) and twenty-three newspapers (with at least ten in English or mixed Chinese and

English/French language) (145), which undermines her claim that those immigrants maintained a “self-imposed and prolonged silence and isolation” (148). Most importantly, in her definition of Chinese-Canadian literature as a collective voice whose “interior landscapes are emotionally connected with the historical Chinatowns in which the stories and characters are situated” (*Beyond Silence*, 125), she does not give enough attention to the authors’ endeavour to recall the historical China which the immigrants hold fast to, and to which some return. I would argue that with these literary texts, the representation of the immigrants has not been fully understood by scholars, who usually fail to address the immigrants’ experiences in China before the transformation era in the 1920s, resulting in a uninformed and incomplete interpretation of their experience in Canada.

In studying characters in historical fiction, the Soviet and Russian philosopher, psychologist, and sexologist I. S. Kon warns:

Modern readers must be cautious that they should not understand people of earlier times in the readers’ frame of thoughts. We must be aware that living with different values and ideologies, they think and feel differently from us. Besides, we must respect others (people in earlier times in particular), whose passions, pains, and pursuits can be fundamentally different [...]. In fact, the questions they had to answer were their own, not ours. Therefore, if we do not think beyond our values and ideology, we are sure to misunderstand them. (54-55; my translation)

Kon’s warning is most relevant to studying the representation of the women in Choy, Lee, and Chong’s texts in that the authors make every effort to portray women with fundamentally different passions, pains, and pursuits. Therefore, present-day scholars, even those in China, need to be aware of the differences, step out of their own positions,

and study the historical contexts in order to effectively study the representation of these characters.

Ladislav Nagy (2014) notes that historical fiction is not “mere entertainment,” but “a statement about our past and the way it influences our present, an effort to unravel something about the past that we have not yet been able to see, or, even, an opportunity to give us a different past and to grasp one’s identity in a completely different way” (9). Her highlighting of the educational function of the genre that results from a realistic presentation of the past means that historical literary texts demand careful analysis for truthful education. Additionally, in noting that there are multiple versions of history, Nagy suggests there is room for different interpretations of the past, and of historical fiction. Most importantly, her emphasis on the connection between people’s knowledge of history and their own sense of identity reminds us to take into account the impact that the dynamic personality of the narrators in these four texts has on the story as they learn more about their families, and to understand the authors’ own view of themselves.

Based on Georg Lukacs’s observation of the historical novel, Mary K. Tod (2015) clarifies seven ways fiction can create historically accurate narratives that can bring the reader’s attention to important details about the past. These include ensuring that characters act appropriately for the time period; that the language and grammar used is appropriate to the era; that the setting is convincing and conveys the distance in time between the reader and the characters; that the themes reflect the historical social context; that the plot corresponds to the time period; that the conflict reflects the historical period;

and that the historical novel builds a convincing world for the reader to step into (“7 Elements”). Tod’s criteria for good historical fiction suggest that the genre is typically meant to place the reader into the past and to allow them to experience what it was like. These elements suggest that the interpretations of character, language, setting, conflict, and theme must be based on the historical time and place, and that a lack of historical knowledge can result in misinterpretation. An author’s presentation of the past should faithfully portray the old timers so that readers can better understand them, rather than feel estranged from them. This dissertation will take on the challenge of examining the women characters in the four texts in multiple historical settings in order to shed light on the authors’ hard effort to fully represent this generation of women and preserve their voices, images, and values through these characters.

Historical fiction also has the potential to deepen and widen the scope of written histories themselves (Fay 1; Adhikari 43, 47; Demos, 329–330; Harlan 143). Mari Hatavara argues for the significance of historical fiction in (re)writing history by considering the function of historical references in the genre. First, she observes that intertextual references to real historical documents and sources help to build historical credibility of the novels (246). Second, historical references create tension between the time depicted and the time of writing (243), forcing the reader to think carefully about history when they read historical novels:

The narrator openly plays with his double role as omniscient narrator and historian, declaring his ability to take the reader to whatever time and place he chooses while at the same time giving historical details connecting the story

world to history. This indicates that the narrator, despite his ability to move in time and place and to telepathically read the minds of the characters, does not [have] the omnipotent ability to make anything happen in the story world. This goes together with the role of a historian: the narrator wants to assure the reader that although the past world is accessible to him, it is not changeable, since the events have actually taken place. (253)

While the narrator plays a double role, the reader too has the dual experience of experiencing the history as the characters do and of reflecting on this past as history.

Though Hatavara focuses on the role of fiction in rewriting history, her analysis reveals the challenge in reading historical fiction. On the one hand, the reader's different level of knowledge about any historical reference can lead to different interpretations of the literary text. Failing to notice or unknowingly misunderstanding some historical references can lead to misreading the text. Literary texts with rich historical references involving multiple histories become even more challenging for readers with limited knowledge of the cultural background featured in the text. In the four works I explore, the authors portray the Chinese immigrants through the eyes of the descendant narrators who do not have the same firsthand knowledge of the past as the older immigrants themselves. In examining this difference in the knowledge between these descendant figures and the older generation, this dissertation will reveal a more complete understanding of Chinese women in Canada than other studies have provided.

Not only can historical fiction (re)write history, it can also shape what Ann Rigney calls the "cultural memory" of the ethnic group, which in turn shapes the present. Rigney (2004) defines "cultural memory" as the "shared images of the past [...] from commemorative rituals to historiography" (365). She differentiates "cultural memory"

from “collective memory” to avoid the latter’s suggestion of “some unified collective entity or superindividual which does the remembering” (365), thus emphasizing the importance of ethnic culture, rather than just recollections by individuals, to understandings of the past. She also differentiates “cultural memory” from “social memory” as the former “foregrounds the acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible and thus opens the way for an analysis of the artifacts and cultural processes through which shared memories are shaped and disseminated in the modern age” (365).

Rigney emphasizes the role of fiction versus history in shaping cultural memory, arguing that the former gives meaning to the artifacts which would not be otherwise understandable to viewers. Chinese-Canadian literature about the early immigrants is thus the Chinese community’s “cultural memory” which stores the memory of the ethnic group that goes beyond a particular time period. In other words, in writing about their immigrant ancestors, descendants are trying to “remember” them so that the Chinese cultural traces are rediscovered and the historical wrongs against the Chinese righted.

Rigney’s observation about the potential for historical fiction to be a source of healing from trauma is highly relevant to the genre’s role in connecting the past with the present. She notes that historical fiction makes up for the limits of both other genres of fiction and history through its “literary expressiveness and narrative skills” in “fixing,” “transforming,” and “transmitting” cultural memory across time (380). Compared with historical monuments, for example, literary texts are more likely to result in “creat[ing]

the sense of a shared social space and a shared historical time” (373-74). Secondly, the authors’ imaginative details, including dialogue and character, make the history more “memorable” (382). Finally, literary texts are “portable monuments, which can be carried over into new situations” and future times (383), making them effective in transmitting cultural memory. Rigney concludes:

The same literary work may serve both to confirm and consolidate the sense of a common heritage and [...] to arouse interest in the heritage and experiences of other groups. To take the point even further: it is arguable that making uninterested parties “interested” in the experience of others may be as much a key to the construction of cultural memories as the putatively spontaneous identification with the experiences of one’s family or the experiences of the ethnic group with which one usually identifies. (390)

Rigney’s observation confirms the multiple functions of historical fiction. It can illuminate histories that may not typically be included in traditional historical writing, and it can help recover cultural heritage and consolidate cultural memory. Rigney suggests that creatively reworked artificial memories may prove more accessible than those strictly adhering to the known facts. The literary texts studied in this dissertation represent Chinese women as culture bearers and are the public, durable, and portable monuments the authors have made to honour the women.

Seeing history and fiction as interrelated and complementary in historical fiction, in his essay “Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality, Rethinking History,” Hayden White uses the analogy of “the true” and “the real” to explain that historical discourse focuses on “the true” and fictional discourse on “the real.” He discerns that “the true” account of the world that is based on documentary records

about what happened in particular times and places can provide only a very small portion of the 'reality;' but that "the real" refers to "the domain of the possible or imaginable" which would consist of "everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be" (147). White gives credit to the writers' imaginative power, which he believes enables them to create "a new kind of realism" (150). As for the selection of history to include in a literary text, White challenges Harry Shaw's observation that historical fiction is "never complete" by pointing out that both historians and novelists have to face the issues of "too much and not enough" (White, "Introduction" 150). When historians use narrative as the principal mode of representation, they, like novelists, face the question of what real events and processes in the past to leave out; and when dealing with earlier periods, they have to face the fact that the sources "are limited, have been lost, or never existed" (150). Therefore, the different versions of the same historical facts are presented in different ways by historians and historical novelists who make different choices about what to include and to exclude.

Arguing against Richard Slotkin's notion that historical work and literary work must be separate, White insists that they complement one another and that the "real" in a literary text tells more about the history than the "true" in a historical text does. In sum, White reasonably insists that, rather than undermining the reliability of the history in question, the author's imagination actually supplies more details. Most importantly, White's belief in historical fiction as an effective means of recording history not only

confirms the connection between fiction and history but reaffirms fiction's role in (re)writing history to include historical characters who are absent from the historical record, such as the Chinese women discussed in this dissertation.

In studying the Chinese immigrants in historical fiction, one must bear in mind the history and the culture these immigrants live in. Singaporean scholar and diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (2020) reminds us of the huge difference between Chinese history and culture and that of the non-Chinese. He points out that “the Chinese people cherish social harmony and social well-being more than individual rights [and that] [a]ny assessment of how the Chinese are doing must be done against the long and rich history of the Chinese people” (333). As Jean-Paul Sartre once observed, “We are obliged to be satisfied with forging our history blindly, one day at a time, choosing from all the options the one which seems best to us at present.[...] We are *inside*” (378; original emphasis). The immigrant women live *inside* their own history and forge it by choosing what, in the context of their own time, seem to be the best options. For example, when they take jobs outside the home, they do so because of the family's financial need, not out of a desire for personal financial freedom, as abundant textual evidence proves. This dissertation will study the representation of the Chinese women in their multiple historical and cultural contexts in China, Chinatown, and Canada, and will consider their roles as embodiment of Chinese history and culture in a way that no other study has done.

1.4 MIGRATION LITERATURE: RECOGNIZING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

In *Fictions of Migration* (2001), Roy Sommer identifies several sub-genres of migration literature. He proposes two overall categories of the “multicultural” and the “transcultural” novel. Though both counter essentialist ideas of homogeneous national cultures, the former views cultural flux and unbelonging as a problem in that individuals lose the stability of homeland and rootedness, while the latter celebrates uprootedness and cultural fragmentation as liberatory processes which thrust identity into perpetual becoming (75–76). Sommer further divides each into subcategories. The “multicultural novel” is subdivided into the “migration novel” (1), which deals with diasporic experiences, and the “multicultural Bildungsroman” (2), which deals with second generation immigrants and their search for identity (75). He also subdivides the “transcultural” novel into two types, the “historical revisionist novel” (3), which deconstructs colonial history from multiple perspectives and angles (76–7, 157, 136), and the “transcultural hybrid novel” (4), which explicitly deals with issues of hybridity and is concerned with a constant “in-betweenness”, a “borderless cosmopolitanism” and which asserts “transnational” and “transitory” identities (51, 58, 54, 52, 54).

In terms of representations of Chinese immigrants, the texts under study are both the first type of multicultural novel, which deals with diasporic experiences, and the first type of transcultural novel, which deconstructs colonial history from multiple angles. The novels are also examples of a multicultural Bildungsroman of the Chinese immigrants

who are quite open to the new Canadian environment they live in and who incorporate new cultural elements into their selves. Besides, unlike the descendants, who most critics see living in-between, the immigrants firmly believe in their ties to China. (This will be discussed in Chapter Four, “Understanding Life in China and its Influence on Early Chinese Women Immigrant Characters: The Neglected Multidimensional Connection”).

Soren Frank’s discussion of general themes and formal features of migration literature in *Migration and Literature* (2008) provides insights into understanding the representation of the Chinese immigrants in Chinese-Canadian literature. Frank admits that, thematically, identity with “[h]istory and geography [as] fundamental components” is always dominant in the migration novel (17-19). He claims that the migration novel rewrites identities “in order to evoke their impure and heterogeneous character” (18-19). Frank observes that, stylistically, migration literature “not only reflects but also helps create an intratextual migratory world” and that the genre is characterized by a “plurality of discursive tracks” insofar as “a variety of discourses and styles are combined into highly complex compositions” (19-20). Most significantly, Frank gives attention to the use of language in the migration novel as a sign of construction. He sees the migrant’s experience of several languages as a means to “constitute [...] an awareness of the world’s high degree of constructedness” because language “is constantly set in motion, varied, and impurified through the double awareness of two or more languages” (Frank 20). (The discussion of the use of dialects in the Chinese-Canadian literature will be discussed in Chapter Six: Whose Canada?: Exploring the Different Cultural Identities.)

The four Chinese-Canadian literary texts under investigation present multiple histories and geographies, and this dissertation will focus on the immigrants' discourse and study the representation of the immigrants in multiple contexts to complicate their image in Canadian literature. Instead of seeing the authors' use of the English language as a sign of conformity or catering to mainstream Canadian society, I will argue that writing in English represents both a howling from their deepest self for the lost cultural heritage embodied in their ancestors, and a continuation of their ancestors' effort to communicate with Canadian society. Meanwhile, in trying to recall the Chinese phrases their ancestors used, they try to hold fast to part of themselves that may fade away if the phrases are lost.

Descendants: Diasporic identity, generational conflict, and feeling stuck “in between”

Descendant characters in the Chinese-Canadian literature this dissertation studies often celebrate their personal life and achievement by comparing themselves to their ancestors. For instance, in discussing *Disappearing Moon Café* as a postmodern historical novel, Mei-Chuen Wang (2010) critiques Kae's way of seeing a contrast between her “free” life and her ancestors' restricted one and seeing herself as “the resolution” of the four-generation family story (276). Wang notes that Kae “imposes freedom [as] the ultimate meaning” on her story and that she repeatedly attempts to present her female ancestors as “warriors united by their common resistance to oppression” (271).

Wang obviously implies that Kae sees freedom as “the ultimate meaning” or goal of the previous generations' struggles (276). However, unlike Kae, who feels a sense of

liberation in giving up her successful career in Canada to follow her dream of becoming a writer and meeting her lesbian partner in Hong Kong, her grandmother Fong Mei postpones her planned return to China, first because of her prospering business, which she cannot give up, and then because of her pregnant daughter, who she thinks she must take care of. Wang questions Kae's obvious celebration of her freedom and higher status as something that contrasts her foremothers' supposed oppression and low position. Wang helpfully highlights the generational difference and challenges the narrator's representation of the immigrants.

Despite Wang's reasonable challenge of Kae's representation of her foremothers, however, her failure to see some details and her misunderstanding of others undermine her interpretation of the text. For instance, Wang describes the character Kolera as "half Chinese and half Native" (279), when SKY Lee actually makes it clear that Kolera is half Indigenous and half white (9). This misunderstanding can lead to other inaccurate interpretations of the texts because relationships are key to understanding Chinese people.

While Wang critiques Kae's view of herself as the resolution of the family story, Smaro Kamboureli (2009) calls Chong's tone in *The Concubine's Children* "one of postethnicity" ("Diaspora" 366), with which Chong "imagines a future in Canada free of racialization and discrimination" while "affiliate[ing] herself with Canadianness" and "releasing her from the historical legacy" of Chinese immigration in Canada ("Being" 366). Kamboureli frames her argument in terms of Rey Chow's concept of self-regard, which she considers to be "a healthy kind of 'narcissism' that can assist the ethnic subject

achieve 'self-preservation' in light of the negative construction of its identity by 'mainstream society'" (qtd. in Kamboureli 364). According to Chow, self-regard is the "complicated result of the self's negotiations with the observing collective conscience" (qtd. in Kamboureli 367), but Kamboureli considers that Chong, as both the narrator and author, "desire[s] to put 'behind' her, to defer confronting, her self-racialization as the same-as-white" ("Diaspora" 380). Based on her observation of Chong's lack of self-regard, Kamboureli sharply criticizes her for "[being] unabashedly clear about not belonging to this diaspora" of the Chinese immigrants she writes about (367).

It is reasonable of Kamboureli to make the above argument about Chong's lack of self-regard given that Chong clearly makes an effort to distance herself from her grandparents' Chinese background, describing Chinatown, which was a thriving community in her grandparents' time, as a place marked by "poverty, [...] lack of education, and [...] claustrophobic existence" (Chong xii). It is also plausible to argue this if one considers Chong's completely negative presentation of Confucianism, the core value of her grandparents. However, Kamboureli's implication that the lack of self-regard is the consequence of Chong's voluntary choice is problematic. In fact, lack of self-regard is the consequence of century-long racism which continuously presents the minority group's culture as inferior, leading to self-negation and even self-hate, especially among the descendant generations. Failing to discuss the latter will lead to failure to understand the Chinese immigrants in all three worlds they live. More importantly, *The Concubine's Children* portrays the Chineseness of Chong's grandparents' generation in ways that few

other Chinese-Canadian literary texts do, especially their strong connection to China and the influence of that connection on their life in Chinatown and Canada. This dissertation will look through the window Chong opens to study the Chinese immigrant women in relation to their own positive understanding of Chinese culture.

Scholars have discussed the narrators' identity formation in relation to the idea that Chineseness and Canadianness are mutually exclusive. Despite Wayson Choy's declaration of being "proudly a banana" ("From the Archives") and his portrayal of the gradual shaping of such identity among Chinese-Canadian children in his novels, scholars have emphasized the moments when the children choose Canadianness over Chineseness and neglected the moments they embrace the Chinese culture of the family.

Deborah L. Madsen (2013) argues that Choy "proposes a rhetoric of non-belonging and double exclusion" that Chinese-Canadians experience (102). To prove her point, Madsen focuses on Choy's use of the term "*mo no*," meaning "'no brain,' to describe his Canadian-born characters who lack 'China-born' way of thinking, responding and behaving" (101). Meanwhile, Madsen argues that Choy's emphasis on grandma's "hard life in China" at the end of *All That Matters* and Meiyong's "hard life in Canada" at the end of *The Jade Peony* highlight the older generations' identity crisis and feeling of not belonging ("*Mo No*" 103). While Madsen notes that the descendants' identity is shaped by "non-belonging and double exclusion" (102), she does not examine the children's tendency to return to the family's Chineseness. Besides, non-belonging is not a crisis for the immigrants because they have little desire to 'belong to' Canada; instead, they feel

strong connections to China and believe they will return some day.

Like Madsen's critique of the "celebratory or liberatory tone" of much critical work on North American Chinese diasporic writing ("Rhetoric" 30), Glenn Deer also notices this problematic tendency and warns descendants they may lose their identity by celebrating differences while neglecting the racism against the Chinese over time. He writes: "We must be wary of how critical energy spent on the celebration of multiculturalist diversity can often serve to distract us from ongoing systemic forms of racism" (qtd. in Madsen's "Rhetoric" 31). Madsen's and Deer's warnings reveal at least three features in current literary scholarship that focuses on the issue of identity in migrant literature. First, despite growing studies in this field, the immigrants' identity and their influence on the descendants' identity are still neglected. Second, critics too often join the descendants' celebration of winning the generational and cultural fight for a Westernized "self" and their frequent denial of the non-Western culture. Finally, when critics focus on the descendants, they marginalize the immigrants, despite the authors' effort to focalize them.

In fact, the immigrants' rich experiences portrayed in literary texts have been understudied. Their identity-constitutive experiences echo not only what Eaton and the first wave of Chinese immigrants write about the Chinese community, but also what Timothy Stanley (2000) discovers in Chinese-language historical documents. The literary texts all demonstrate the Chinese immigrants in three worlds: their close ties with China, which are reflected in their firm and proud belief that they are Chinese; their subjective

well-being in Chinatown, which comes from fulfilling their traditional familial roles; and the combination of their refusal to identify with Canada and their inevitable incorporation of Canadian elements into their selves in the frequent interactions with other ethnic groups. The authors' representations of such elements have important differences from what appears in written historical records in English.

Immigrants: To be evaded, sympathized with, or accepted into descendant' own identity

As previously mentioned, Choy, Lee, and Chong all write with the desire to save the history of the immigrants of the turn of the twentieth century from disappearing. Choy tells Poh-poh's stories about when she was in Old China; Lee writes about Mui Lan's memories of the old village women as a soothing hub and about Fong Mei's desperate dream to go back to China despite her economic success in Canada; and Chong uses about half of her ink on the "concubine" who the "children" really know little about. The small number of critical studies that do discuss the immigrants analyse them from the descendants' points of view and present the immigrants as people for the descendants to evade, to sympathize with, or to selectively include in their own growth, rather than as immigrants living according to their own values.

Some scholars argue that the immigrants represent a past the descendants are trying to escape because they hinder the descendant generations from progressing. In her essay on Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* and Chong's *The Concubine's Children*," Lindsay Diehl proposes a "political reading" of the texts and challenges Kae's overall

representation of her family due to her “problematic” relation to her family stories, suggesting that Kae “largely disregards cultural and historical differences” and uses narrative as a “self-consolidating project” (109). According to Diehl, these two texts fall into “a common organizing structure in women’s writing” which depicts the “subject’s movement from silence to voice” and thus underlies progressivism, which requires “women’s oppression to assume an air of pastness [in contrast to the narrator’s modernity]” (101). Diehl points out the problem with this structure:

when this structure interacts with stories of first-generation immigrants and their Western-raised children, it can reify East–West distinctions by projecting Orientalized difference onto the parents and by linking the children’s acculturation with increased freedom and autonomy. That is, it can position the East as backward, repressive, and “excessively genderist,” while also equating the West with modernization, liberty, and self-fulfilment. (101)

In other words, descendants like Kae and Chong see themselves as everything that their immigrant ancestors are not. For the sake of their identity, they have to avoid everything their ancestors embody. Diehl argues that reading Chinese-Canadian literary texts from a non-Western perspective is necessary and that the immigrants’ own culture must be considered.

However, while Diehl rightly challenges Kae’s and Chong’s representation of the early immigrant women, she is unable to identify the cause of their misrepresentation beyond their Westernized perspective, nor does she provide a more valid approach due to her own insufficient knowledge of these women’s complicated lived experiences in China. In studying these texts, it is important to recognize that the authors in fact tell the stories of the Chinese women immigrants from multiple perspectives, not just those of the

descendant narrators, despite the tendency of scholars to focus on the latter. For example, in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the family nursemaid Chi repeatedly reminds Kae of her limited and naive vision of her family's past. Similarly, in *The Concubine's Children*, both Hing and Chong – who believe themselves to be distinct from May-ying – act in similar ways, such as finding pride in the family's continuation and being willing to sacrifice for the good of other family members. Likewise, Kiam in *All That Matters* rejects Poh-poh's Old China stories when he is younger and feels proud of having the Chinese gods when he grows up. Reading the texts with a focus on their multiple perspectives will reveal how the authors complicate the immigrants' existence. We need to always keep in mind that the immigrants, not the descendants, are the primary focus for each of these authors.

Some scholars have discussed the authors' attempts to objectively put together the historical facts from multiple sources and to involve readers in re-constructing the immigrants' existence. Guard Beauregard (1999) approaches *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as “a theoretically informed narrative” that readers can participate in by “making connections between discrete [...] historical moments” of the Wong family from the 1890s to the 1980s (“Emergence” 62). He agrees with Joshua Mostow, a professor of Asian Studies of UBC, that, like the character Wong Gwei Chang in the opening episode, Lee “is collecting the bones of her family's history, but rather than attempting to assemble them into distinct skeletons, she leaves it for the reader to connect them, while she handles and rubs each one individually in brief vignettes that switch from character to

character” (qtd. in Beauregard, “Emergence” 62). Beauregard believes that through writing *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lee makes herself one of the “literary and cultural critics [who] are collecting these bones into a pile called Asian Canadian literature” (“Emergence” 67). Beauregard’s claim that Lee is a bone collector is applicable to other Chinese-Canadian authors of her generation and it rightly echoes the “urge to write” felt by other authors (Liu and Wong-Chu). I suggest that, unlike Wong Gwei Chang, who collects the bones of Chinese male labourers, Lee, as well as Choy and Chong, have collected the bones of Chinese women, which few others have done. Viewing this urge to write as an action to collect the bones of the immigrants undermines any argument that the descendants despise their ancestors or evade their ancestors’ presence, even if the narrators do make some attempt to distance themselves from the older generation at some point. This dissertation will explore the texts along this line and examine how each descendant author “handles and rubs” the bones through their writing.

Some critics have found the Chinese immigrants pitiable for living in the grim Chinatown. For example, in an interview with Chong, Soo finds that *The Concubine's Children* offers the “discrimination, heartache, suffering, and fear” of the “decaying” Chinese culture that May-ying and Chen Sam faced. Soo’s observation presents the immigrants as victims of both Canadian society and Chinese culture. He-ping Qi makes a similar argument in her study of *Disappearing Moon Café*. Reading the novel from the perspective of Gothic tradition, Qi notes that by using the Gothic elements of a mad woman, family secrets, and ghosts, the novel presents all the Chinese immigrants as

“neglected and silenced” (43). However, other scholars argue that exclusion from white society “didn’t make the Chinese immigrants miserable or pessimistic” and that “although its members, for the most part, were uneducated and poor, it was a thriving community” in the 1920s and 1930s (A. Lee).

This dissertation will join in this debate by examining details of the immigrants’ lives including their food culture, naming culture, and interpersonal interactions. I would argue that Father’s words to the children in *The Jade Peony* best describe their condition. When the Chinese have to be “aliens” and “educated fool[s]” with no career prospect and political rights, even with a university education, Father tells the children: “Furnish your mind. You don’t have to be poor inside, too” (Choy, *Jade* 158). When the outside Canadian society makes them pitiable, they create livable quarters in Chinatown; and while they are needy in terms of material property, they live a rich cultural life for themselves, their family, and their community. I would also argue that they deserve what Mu Qian calls “warmth and respect” (1) rather than pity or celebration .

I am not the only scholar to think Chinese immigrants are presented as having qualities that are valued by the descendants. Huai-Yang Lim examines Choy’s exclusion and inclusion of the Chinese immigrants in his first memoir *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (1999). He notes that Choy “unproblematically integrated” drastically different life experiences into his narrative: from seeing his family and home in “such a solid, no-nonsense, no-mystery manner” (*Representations* 333), to suddenly feeling that “nothing of my family, of home, seemed solid and specific [and] nothing in

my past seemed to be what it had always been” (*Representations* 280). Choy realizes that the family elders have “excluded” him from their sufferings when he learns about his own adoption after the publication of *The Jade Peony*, and Lim argues that by writing about his family’s “ghosts, secrets, and silences” (249), Choy allows his ancestors to have agency by keeping a record of their life as faithfully as he can. In another essay, Lim observes:

In tracing his past through memories, Choy encounters ghosts, silences, and secrets that function both as expressions of the past and as loci for a positive reengagement with that past. Tracing the past through his personal memories and those of others causes Choy to reconceptualize his own attitude towards these manifestations of the past, which, in turn, raises ethical and political questions about his interacting with this past. His text exemplifies the possibilities that one has for engaging with the past and integrating it into one’s identity. (“There’s Nothing” 249)

Lim obviously points out the descendants’ evolving knowledge of the past and its influence on their attitude towards the past. He suggests that the missing parts (in the form of secrets and lies) are not necessarily negative or to be ashamed of, and that the immigrant ancestors’ silence and secrets are for complicated reasons. Lim also emphasizes the necessity of “a positive reengagement with that past” (“There’s Nothing” 249), which means on the descendants’ part that they need to actively reach out for, relearn, and understand their past. However, while Lim studies the agency that Choy gives to his Chinese elders, Lim still sees the immigrants as a tool of the descendants’ empowerment and neglects Choy’s effort to write for the sake of his ancestors, rather than for himself as a descendant.

Recognizing that the authors’ initial prompt to write was the urgent need to

rediscover the history they felt ignorant of, this dissertation will follow the authors' intention to place the immigrants in the focal position and study their complicated lived experiences in China, Chinatown, and Canada. In this way, I expect to reveal the dual value of these texts as historical fiction and as migration novels.

Chinese women in Canadian literature: A forgotten population

Herb Wyile (2009) points out that women, together with the working class and racial(ized) minorities, are usually excluded from the historical record and that historical novels by Asian-Canadian writers and other non-white ethnic groups usually “have to do with their historical exclusion from [...] the Canadian literary scene and with their exclusion from dominant narratives about Canada’s past” (*Speaking* 4). Unfortunately, this exclusion applies to Chinese women in all ways, and White-Parks makes a similar remark about Chinese women in the past, noting that early Chinese-Americans all too frequently see women only “in ratios” (of their population relative to men’s) and in a family context (qtd. in Wong and Santa Ana 186). Studies on women immigrants in Canadian literature demonstrate two attitudes towards them: sympathy for their being victims of double oppression “within the constraints of a racist North America and a patriarchally defined Confucianism” (Quigley 238), and celebration of their newly gained independence and freedom (H. Yang; T. Liu).

Calling Chong a “feminist, post-Confucian autobiographer,” Ellen Quigley sees her as a “Chinese Canadian female speaking subject” with her “discursive representation of her matrilineage, agency, and power” (239). Quigley argues that Chong “challenges the

historical and discursive construction of female and Chinese ‘othering’ to create the permeable, im-propre (non)legitimacy, agency, and power of her female relations of kin that unveil and ground her ghostly presence within the female Chinese Canadian community” (248). First, she remarks on the negation of Chong’s “proper female self” within her family relationships. Quigley notes that Chong remains “unnamed” as simply “the new baby, another daughter, home from the hospital” until the birth of a baby boy who, with the “patriarchal privilege of establishing filial relations” calls her “‘*Jeh-jeh*,’ not... Denise” (194). Quigley believes that “*Jeh-jeh*” (姐姐 the Chinese term meaning “an elder sister”) deprives Chong of her individuality while “Denise” gives her individuality (239). This, however, neglects the Chinese relational self— different from the Western independent self—which Chong truthfully represents and which will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Second, Quigley sees Chong “challenge the patriarchal discursive representation of gender” by writing “cross-gendered” female characters who have some agency (246), thus implying that traditional Chinese women can only gain independence by abandoning their own values and by having characteristics of the other gender. Finally, Quigley sharply criticizes the Confucian culture because of “the injustice which the officially Confucian Chinese society allowed to happen to women” (247). In this way, Quigley completely neglects the fact that the Chinese women not only accept their gender roles but defend them as well, and that Confucianism and the social system based on it are the core value of the Chinese.

While discussing women's agency on various levels and the causes of women's loss of identity in Chong's text, Quigley presents herself as a strong believer in the western definition of agency. She obviously believes women have agency when they are addressed by their names rather than by their relations to others, when they go beyond their traditional gender role, and when they are free from "injustice" imposed by the Confucian culture. Though Quigley seems to show sympathy for women for living under double oppression, she also negates the social order and value the women try to maintain. She also fails to notice that Chong finds the meaning of her writing in fulfilling her grandparents' wish for the family and helping her mother reconcile with the past, which are the same values that her grandmother holds.

Quigley's observations can be easily challenged by other details from the same texts. For example, it is a common practice in the Chinese culture that siblings address each other by titles that reflect their relationships, so Chong not being called "Denise" does not reflect a loss of agency. Quigley's discussion about cross-gender characters is problematic too, for there are moments when May-ying contentedly plays her role as a daughter, a mother, and a wife figure with a sense of achievement, rather than revolt. At no point does she challenge Chan Sam's status as a patriarch figure; instead, she defends his position even after his death. Finally, Quigley neglects the fact that May-ying has lived in the Confucian social order and maintains that order by passing down the recognized values to her daughter and grandchildren. She also overlooks Hing, who, though making every effort to distance herself from her mother, makes similar sacrifices

for her family, just like her mother. She gives up her education to please her future mother-in-law, agrees to visit China to fulfill her husband's will, and opens up her memory of the past with great pain to satisfy her daughter's curiosity. Considering May-ying's influence on Hing and Chong, it is necessary to further examine May-ying's representation in the text.

Tegan Zimmerman (2014) generally agrees with Wyile and White-Parks that women are often "neglected" (56), but she sees "shifting" in the trend of writing "transnational maternal genealogies" in the emerging genre of contemporary Canadian women's historical novels since the 1980s (56). Works in this genre "focus on women's inter-generational lives, cross national boundaries, and disrupt a unified setting in terms of space and time by incorporating the recent past" (Zimmerman 58). Using *Disappearing Moon Café* and other texts as examples, Zimmerman argues for three important goals that woman's historical novels aim to achieve: to assert a "critical contemporary feminist narrative style"; to suggest that gender and one's maternal past are more important than the national context "in shaping the female protagonist's identity and in empowering her feminist challenges to patriarchal authority"; and to "subvert [...] the traditional boundaries of historical fiction" by "focus[ing] on immigration and being Canadian without having been born in Canada or being able to locate one's ancestral roots in Canadian history" (56-57).

Zimmerman further clarifies:

A maternal genealogy connects women, and in the Canadian woman's historical

novel these connections occur across familial generations, nations, and intersections of identity. This writing emphasizes a traversing between a contemporary narrator/ character to a maternal origin which begins in a different homeland and time frame. In doing so, transnational maternal genealogies express continuity between women's lives in the past with those in the present. (58-59)

Zimmerman's attention to female characters highlights the women's focal position in the texts. However, arguing that Kae in *Disappearing Moon Café* follows a maternal genealogy is problematic. The family lineage that Kae follows includes her mother Beatrice, her maternal grandmother Fong Mei, then her two *paternal* great-grandmothers Mui Lan (mother of her nominal grandfather Choy Fuk) and Kolera (mother of her biological grandfather Ting An), and her great-grandfather Gwei Chang (father of both Kae's grandfathers). Thus Kae takes only a partial matriarchal line, one which traces her roots in Canada. Though she begins with her mother and her maternal grandmother, she stops following her matriarchal line (which should have led her to Fong Mei's mother in China); instead, Kae shifts to her biological grandfather, Ting An, whose mother Kolera is half Indigenous and half white with a surrogate Chinese father. Therefore, it is not the "maternal genealogies" that matters; it is the group of people who Kae regards as her family and their values that matter. All of these women Kae feels herself related to define themselves in their own relationships and these relationships are more important to them than the development of individuality and personal freedom.

Neglecting their Chinese cultural values has led to decontextualization in the study of immigrants, which in turn has led to problematic analysis of the women characters and to the neglecting of important details of the texts. First, most scholars interpret the

interpersonal relationships without considering the immigrants' own perception. For example, Robert Lee refers to Kolera as Wong Gwei Chang's "abandoned first wife" and Lee Mui Lan as his "redoubtable second wife" (27), but in fact Wong Gwei Chang and Lee Mui Lan each honour one another as the only legitimate spouse while Kolera, who Wong Gwei Chang takes without his parents' consent, has no position in the Wong family, even though Kolera sees herself as the wife in the marriage arranged by her adoptive father, a Chinese, and her maternal aunts. This misunderstanding of relationships leads to misanalysis of the women characters and their behavior. For example, when Joanna Antoniak sympathetically argues that Mui Lan's identity crisis is because "she is robbed of her individuality" (14), she does not see that Mui Lan's pain is not because of the loss of her individuality but because of lost or troubled relationships, including the ones with her husband, her daughter-in-law, her son, and her grandchildren.

Even more problematic is Monique Attrus' interpretation of 'oppression' in the relationship between Poh-poh and Stepmother in *The Jade Peony*. Though Attrus tries to be understanding and sympathetic, her claim that "Stepmother who is controlled by her mother-in-law is seen as inferior because she came from the Four Counties⁷" has at least four problems. First, her assumption about interpersonal equality makes her unable to see that the Chinese women faithfully observe their hierarchical social order by playing their own roles. Second, Stepmother is not "controlled"; instead, Poh-poh even follows her way of doing housework and the two women collaborate to keep the family functioning.

Third, coming from Four Counties does not make her inferior, as Poh-poh is from the same area and shows no sign of self-pity.

The fourth and most severe problem is Attrus' claim that a hierarchical system necessarily leads to the upper tier oppressing the lower tier, without seeing the dynamism of the tiers, or that the high tier has more duties, not simply more privilege. For example, Father takes the family responsibility by being "always busy in pursuit of one part-time job after another" and works with Stepmother to keep the family "fed and clothed" and to prepare First Son to "do [his] share" for the family (*All* 121). His hard work makes it possible for Poh-poh and Stepmother to relax more. Negligence of the Chinese culture and values will only lead to arguments that confirm the inferiority of the Chinese. For example, when scholars defend against the injustice in May-ying's arranged marriage (W. C. Ng; E. Byrne; Y. Woon) and express sympathy for her, they neglect the fact that May-ying not only accepts the arranged marriage, but later sees it as her duty to arrange a marriage for her daughter. These incomplete or inaccurate interpretations are caused by decontextualization and lack of understanding of the complicated Chinese historical and cultural background as well as some important culture-laden details in the texts.

1.5 CHINESE INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGY: A NEW APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE WOMEN IN CHINESE-CANADIAN LITERATURE

Lijuan Ou's observation about the causes of readers' difficulty in reading literary classics about eighteenth-century China is applicable to the difficulty in understanding

the immigrant characters in Chinese-Canadian literature written by the descendants. Ou (2017) believes that the tremendous cultural gap caused by the “totalistic anti-traditionalism” in China and the introduction to China of “the pursuit of personal freedom and individualism” from the West at the turn of the twentieth century are, among others, the major causes of such difficulty (14-24). Because of this gap, she proposes that we avoid approaching the texts through the “single-lens of modern times” and resist interpreting according to *our* standards; instead, she suggests reading for the “complexity, depth, and subtlety” of the people by shedding the preoccupation with *our* time and values (23-24). Following these suggestions, in order to study the representation of Chinese women in Chinese-Canadian literature, I will apply important concepts of Chinese indigenous psychology.

According to Kuo-shu Yang (2008), the Taiwanese founder of Chinese indigenous psychology, indigenous psychology refers to:

the psychological knowledge system which is developed with scientific methodology to study the mentality and behaviour of a particular ethnic or sociocultural group, in which any theory, concept, method, or tool for the study must be highly accordant to, comply with, or link closely with the ecological, economical, social, cultural and historical context of the people with that mentality and behaviour. (“Indigenous” 12; my translation)

Yang clarifies fundamental principles of indigenous psychology, an important one being that any study of mentality and behaviour of an ethnic group must be based on the intellectual tradition of the people’s own social and cultural context.

Elsewhere, Yang (1995) specifies the most important features of the Chinese people as four orientations: familistic orientation, which means “the family rather than the

individual [...] is the basic structural and functional unit” in Chinese society (“Chinese” 22); relationship orientation, which refers to the Chinese people’s “strong reliance on interpersonal relations as bases for defining social status” (24); authoritarian orientation, which refers to the “natural [...] psychological and behavioural tendency of authority sensitization, worship, and dependence” (32); and ‘other’ orientation, which refers to “a complicated pattern of social interaction in which the Chinese are readily influenced by other people on both psychological and behavioural levels” (34). Yang makes it clear that these orientations exist to “lesser degrees” among the Chinese today (32), encouraging us to study the traditional Chinese people by taking the above features into consideration.

Due to the cultural gap, present-day readers and critics, be they Chinese or non-Chinese, are likely to make incomplete or inaccurate interpretations of some details while neglecting others, which calls for a new approach to Chinese-Canadian literature. For example, readers readily associate the immigrants’ silence with shame (Cho, “Asian Canadian” 168). However, silence is also for survival purposes such as Poh-poh’s warning Kiam not to tell Jack about Stepmother’s arrival because leaking the news would mean the family have to “go back to China on next boat [and starve] to death in China” (Choy, *All* 35). What is more, the immigrants’ silence can also be a sign of their desire to protect the younger generation from disturbing facts in the immigrants’ life. For example, Poh-poh keeps the secret of Father being the son of Patriarch Chen who “forced himself on” Poh-poh, then a servant, until Kiam is eighteen and Poh-poh is dying (Choy, *All* 336). By that time, Kiam is old enough understand the complexity of the situation and not to be

shocked by the whole story. Besides, the immigrants feel it unnecessary to have their children carry a burden they cannot change. For example, May-ying in *The Concubine's Children* does not tell Hing about the two daughters in China and only collaborates with Chan Sam to maintain the two families on each side of the Pacific.

While some details are misunderstood by scholars, others are ignored completely. For example, Huiling Yang, as well as Tianwei Liu and Yangping Yang, believes *Disappearing Moon Cafe* celebrates Mui Lan's "independence and freedom" (Yang 59; Liu and Yang 75), but more details prove that the top priority in her life is the continuity and unity of the Wong family, which can only be guaranteed by babies being born. For example, Mui Lan "perk[s] up" at the sight of two babies carried by two poor women walking past her restaurant, and her "brow furrow[s] deep" when the two women with babies have left (S. Lee 32-33). Her eyes that are "glued to the soft-snoring infants" (S. Lee 33) tell that her ultimate happiness is not in independence and freedom, but in family continuity. As for the successful family business she runs, she believes that she is doing her son's job temporarily and takes every opportunity to train him to be capable enough to take over.

Likewise, Fong Mei, who becomes very successful and independent, "hated [Canada] which had done nothing except disqualify her [and] hated [Chinatown], which kept her bored and labouring like a poor woman" (S. Lee 164). She feels she has been 'disqualified' because what she gains in Canada is not what she expects from her life and doing paid jobs is obviously not her choice. Despite the fierce determination of these two

women, they believe that economic success and independence are not what they desire.

One important fact about the Chinese immigrants in Canada whose story the literary texts tell is that they are insulated from the cultural change happening in China and remain as traditional as they were before the 1920s. As a result, Chinese indigenous psychology, combined with other sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies theories, is the most appropriate approach to take when studying them. As Hom (1992) notes, while the “American-based” philosophy for reform was advocated and gradually accepted in China, it was “unlikely to be accepted” in the Chinatown community (37). Hom explains that the Chinatown community “safeguarded its Chinese tradition and cultural heritage [...] and were intent on maintaining a sense of belonging, dignity, and purpose in an America [continent] whose political system and social practices had denied Chinese the right to participate in national life” (38). That is to say, when a wholesale Westernization was going on in China, the Chinese immigrants who experienced racism every day found little in North America that was worthy, beyond it being a place with food and without war. Using Chinese indigenous psychology to approach the study of Chinese women will best reveal the meaning and the cause of the immigrants’ repeated claim that they are Chinese and their efforts to live the Chinese way in almost every aspect of their lives. This method will also enable us to explore the representation of the women from their own perspective.

1.6 CONCLUSION

The texts which this dissertation explores are the result of the authors’ decade-long

research. They are more about the immigrants and the Chinese community's past than about the descendant authors' own generation, and they tell the story of the female members of the Chinese community who are largely absent from other forms of writing about the Chinese community. Their migration and isolated life in Chinatown make them different from the male members of their community, and these women grew up in such a different time, space, and culture that it takes particular knowledge about that time, space, and culture to understand the authors' representation of them.

This dissertation will frame the examination of the representation of Chinese women using the relevant scholarship on historical fiction, migrant literature, and Chinese indigenous psychology. I will discuss the women in all three worlds they live in, paying special attention to their life in, and connection to, China, which heavily influences their life in the other two worlds: Chinatown and Canada. No other scholars have studied the women with this approach and that leaves them misunderstood. In this way, I will give credit to the authors' efforts to find out about a whole generation of Chinese women whose lives are much richer than simply being victims of trauma and oppression. At the same time, I will discuss the differences in the representation of these women by the three authors due to the different levels of the author's knowledge at the time of writing, and the different nature of the stories themselves. The study of Chinese women is still ongoing, and as Chinese-Canadian writers continue to learn about both Chinese and Canadian history and culture, their writing about the community's past will likely continue to evolve.

Notes:

- ¹ See James Doyle's "Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna: Two Early Chinese-Canadian Authors." Winnifred Eaton (1875--1954) was Edith Eaton's sister who mostly published under the Japanese pseudonym Onoto Watanna and occasionally dropped oriental subject matter altogether. She later rediscovered her Chinese heritage, especially in the light of political events in Asia in the late 1930s, and felt "ashamed of having written about the Japanese" and felt "very proud" of being partly Chinese on her mother's side.
- ² In Canada, the first Chinese Detention Shed opened in British Columbia in 1890. Photos can be seen through the city of Vancouver archives at <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/chinese-detention-shed-at-vancouver>.
- ³ The verses Hom includes in his book are all in Chinese language and from two sources: Toisaan folk songs on America which had been published in Mainland China and Taiwan and Cantonese writings in the literary societies in Chinatown.
- ⁴ The New Cultural Movement in China in the 1920s advocated Westernization of China with science and democracy and attacked the traditional sages including Confucius. Many overseas Chinese experienced hostility in the West, however, and refused to accept its values. See Hom.
- ⁵ The Asian-American population was well over one million in 1965 and grew further because of the 1965 Immigration Act, but the Asian Canadian population was only 285,540 (1.3% of the whole population) in 1971, despite its fast growth from 121,753 (0.7% of the whole population) in 1961.
- ⁶ See Ruben Rumbaut's "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States." The terms "one-and-a-half" or "1.5 generation," which Rumbaut coined in 1976, refer to adolescents (ages 13-17) who may or may not come with their families of origin. Their experiences and adaptive outcomes are hypothesized to be closer to the first generation of immigrant adults than to the native-born second-generation individuals.
- ⁷ Four Counties, *Siyi in Pinying and Sze Yup* in Cantonese, include Taishan, Enping, Kaiping, and Xinhui in Guangdong Province in South China, and are the area where the majority of Chinese immigrants come from in China. Wayson Choy calls the area "Four County village district," (All 44), SKY Lee calls it "Four County District," (151) and Denise Chong calls it "four counties" (6). I cite them as they are in different sources. In my own discussion, I apply SKY Lee's "Four County District."

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

This chapter begins by outlining three types of incomplete or uninformed interpretations of the literary texts by Lee, Chong, and Choy. Such interpretations due to the researchers' decontextualized analysis often neglect both the historical contexts that the Chinese women in these texts lived through and other textual evidence. In order to make contextualized interpretations, which will serve as the foundation of the exploration of the women characters in Chapters Four through Six of this dissertation, I will present the three worlds that the women characters live in: China with economic plight and social unrest caused by foreign aggression and domestic political corruption on the one hand, and cultural-intensive regional and national characteristics on the other; Canada with widespread discrimination shaped by politicians, legislators, media, and authors; and Chinatown, which white Canadians perceive as a vice-filled enclave but in which the Chinese characters actually make a thriving society where they live according to their Chinese ways.

2.1 DECONTEXTUALIZED INTERPRETATION OF THE CHINESE WOMEN

In her article "Does Shirley Temple Eat Chicken Feet?" Michelle Hartley argues that in the Chinese community, female characters' "gender, sexuality and cultural transience make them marginal to position of power" (62). She cites the moment when Jook-Liang is dreaming about dancing like Shirley Temple but is interrupted by Poh-poh's offer of chicken feet. Hartley uses her logic that "chicken parts are allotted according to the

family hierarchy: the parts requiring the most work and offering the least meat—the wings and the feet—are left for women after the choicer parts are handed out” (67-68). She believes that the girl eating the allegedly less desired part means her position is at the bottom of the family hierarchy.

This argument is based on ignorance of Chinese food culture and on a preoccupation with the idea that Chinese culture is restrictive to women, and Hartley’s assumption is problematic in several ways. First, she does not know that chicken feet have long been a gourmet delicacy, especially in Guangdong Province, where nearly all the Chinese in Canada came from before the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, deliciously cooked chicken feet are really a favourite part that usually the privileged have the right to eat. This is shown by an anecdote recorded in *Lyshi Chunqiu*, a Chinese classic written in the second century BCE about the King of the Kingdom Qi, whose favourite part of a chicken is the feet.

Moreover, Hartley chooses to neglect important details from the text itself. Liang obviously desires to eat the chicken feet when she thinks to herself, “I *wanted* the chicken feet” in the same way the two bigger boys “*would fight* [for] hard-as-marble calcified fish eyes” (11; my emphasis). Hartley is inconsistent and does not make a similar association between the boys’ eating fish eyes and a marginalized position. She does not prove fish eyes are in any way more desirable than chicken feet or that those who eat fish eyes are less marginalized than those eating chicken feet. Therefore, eating chicken feet should not be readily associated with a low position in the family and such an assumption reveals the

critic's ignorance of the Chinese culture and her own preoccupation about the Chinese women and their community.

Similarly, negligence of the social reality in Canada leads to incomplete or uninformed interpretations of the Chinese women. Hui-ling Yang, a Chinese scholar, argues for May-ying's pursuit of "independence and freedom" and her "unique personality as a female" (59). Yang supports her argument for May-ying's pursuit of "independence and freedom" with the fact that May-ying earns more than her husband and insists on surviving by herself even in difficult [economic and social conditions] (57). As for May-ying's "unique personality," Yang considers May-ying as being "far-sighted" in her insistence in giving birth to her expected baby boy in Canada so that "with a Canadian birth certificate [he] would always have the choice of living abroad" (59).

Yang's argument shows her negligence of the Canadian reality which is that, except for some degree of economic possibility, the Chinese characters see no prospect of "independence and freedom." Besides, the Chinese women like May-ying do paid work only out of necessity rather than for the purpose of financial independence. May-ying expects a domestic life on arrival in Canada and feels upset when told that she will have to work. When she earns money, instead of spending it on herself, she uses it mainly to support the family in China which she sees herself as part of. In addition, she has gladly sent her two daughters back to China for a Chinese education and sends Hing to the Chinese school to prepare her for her possible return. Finally, the praise for May-ying's far-sightedness is based on speculation as she may just expect her baby born in Canada

(which she expects to be a boy) to support the whole family in the same way she and Chan Sam do, since Canada promises no political or professional future for the Chinese. To sum up, the scale of hostility in Canada makes it impossible for the Chinese to culturally or politically identify with the country and it is, at least partially, a lack of understanding of this reality in Canada that causes Yang to make the above arguments.

As the product of the social and legal segregation in Canada and the Chinese immigrants' regional and national characteristics, Chinatown is not easy to understand adequately and uninformed recognition of Chinatown can cause inaccurate readings of the literary texts. In studying the formation of immigrant culture as a process in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Ping Guan (1995) describes the first-generation immigrants:

It takes three or even four generations to change from immigrants to Canadians with the mainstream cultural traits and values. When the first-generation Chinese migrated to Canada, they faced an entirely different society where they could still maintain their culture such as their language, food, clothing, traditional festivals, and even their patriarchal ideology and superstitious thoughts. Psychologically, they saw themselves as Chinese who only "sojourn" in Canada and they even did not want to leave their bones in Canadian soil. (10; my translation)

In many ways, Guan's observations are reasonable, such as her acknowledgement of the slow process of acculturation in general, intergenerational differences, and the Chinese practice of maintaining their own culture. There are, however, problems due to the Guan's 'progressive' approach in studying immigrants and her negligence of the social reality of Chinatown in Canada. Chinatown is in fact a place to practice their own civilization for the Chinese who see hostility and 'barbarism' outside this area. Therefore, the judgmental claim that some cultural practice represent "patriarchal ideology and superstitious

thoughts” undermines Guan’s discussion of the Chinese immigrants the authors have tried to save from disappearing.

While Choy, Lee, and Chong spent decades filling their own knowledge gap about their (grand)parents’ generations, the gap between the reader/researcher and the Chinese immigrants is still so wide that it can lead to uninformed interpretation of the Chinese-Canadian literary texts. As Russian philosopher Kon warns, “we must respect others (people of earlier times in particular), whose passions, pains, and pursuits can be fundamentally different” from ours (54).

The fundamentally different passions, pains, and pursuits of the Chinese women that the authors present in the texts create the greatest challenge in reading Chinese-Canadian literature. When they enjoy the food they love that people nowadays may detest, work hard for a cause other than independence and freedom, and practice their cultural rituals, the best thing that a modern reader can do is what Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) says: “not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them (ch. 1, sect. 4, 5133). For the goal of understanding the Chinese immigrants, the first thing to do is to learn about the multiple social and historical contexts in which they lived.

2.2 CHINA: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PUSH FACTORS AND CULTURAL PULL FACTORS

To understand the representation of the women in the texts and other Chinese immigrants of the same time, it is first necessary to understand what kind of China they lived in and what they brought with them to Canada, because their life in China largely

shaped their mentality in Canada, especially as they were often segregated from mainstream Canadian society. The women's repeated talk about "clan starving in war-torn, famine- and drought-cursed China" (Choy, *Jade* 152) and Stepmother's words to Kiam that "Baby be Chinese, too [...] *Tohng-Yahn* (Chinese) is best" (Choy, *All* 54) illustrate the push and pull factors of the Chinese immigration, which are different from many immigration theories. Nearly all the Chinese who came to Canada from the 1860s to the 1960s were from *Siyi* (Four Counties). Among the immigrants to the Americas from *Siyi*, over seventy percent were from Taishan ("Leading Overseas Chinese" 71) and among those in Canada, more than half were from Taishan (D. Lee 430).

David Lee's *A History of the Chinese in Canada* (1967) is the only study that thoroughly examines immigrants' origins in their home villages in China. By using rich documents of various levels of government in China, he provides a reliable picture of the economic, social, and cultural background of the Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century. He summarizes the regional features that he considers the major causes of the massive migration: large population, scarce farming land, devastated economy, bad politics, and years of natural and man-made disasters (48-51). The area was the most densely populated area in the world at the time with over 1500 people per square kilometer (D. Lee 54). Facing the sea, the counties are a mountainous and hilly area. Except for a few villages where people could manage to plant enough food, the majority of the area had such scarce arable land that the crop harvest was an extremely unreliable source of livelihood (48). Therefore, owning land, called *mutian* in Chinese-Canadian

literary and history texts, was a dream of the local people. At the same time, the area had convenient waterways which led to easy access to sea transportation; therefore, the people had a long tradition of doing business within China and overseas, making them more mobile and adventurous than many other areas in China.

The economic conditions caused by the scarcity of land worsened in the late-nineteenth century as foreign invasions and domestic unrest increased. From 1840 to 1906, China faced eight major invasions by Britain, France, Russia, Japan and the Eight-Nation Alliances¹. The most incredible one was the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) that was fought mainly on China's land, as China only "looked on helpless [and ...] demonstrate[d] the disorganization and powerlessness of the empire...[and] could only accept such terms as were imposed on her (Morse 5). One consequence of the war that had a direct effect on the ordinary people was that the Qing Court had to sign numerous treaties with foreign powers requiring payment of 736 million taels of silver to them, causing China devastating financial difficulty. Every Chinese felt the influence. Fighting the wars which were decades long with high financial and human cost caused devastation to the whole country, from government corruption to high taxes.

What followed the foreign invaders and made the social conditions worse were frequent civil uprisings due to people's great dissatisfaction with the government. Four major uprisings influenced the *Siyi* area tremendously, causing massive migration. First was the Red Head Rebellion beginning in May 1854 which tried to overthrow the Qing Court and led to ruin and chaos in Guangdong and neighbouring provinces (D. Lee 51).

Almost at the same time was the Hakka-Punti War (1854-1867), which consisted of bloody battles between the Hakka (guest people, a branch of Chinese nation) and Punti (native people, the local Cantonese) in Guangdong. The frequent and violent battles left “dead bodies everywhere and nine out of ten homes empty” in *Siyi* (D. lee 51). The third was the Boxing Movement² (circa 1900). And the last one was the Revolution of Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of Guomindang (the Nationalist), to overthrow the Qing Court.

After forming the Xingzhonghui (China Revival Society) in San Francisco in 1894 and collaborating with two other societies to form Tongmenghui (Chinese United League) in Tokyo in 1905, Sun, who was born in Guangdong Province, soon had large numbers of followers in *Siyi*. So, when the Qing Court began to crush Sun and his influence, many fled to North America. From 1909 to 1912, nine out of ten of those early immigrants to Canada were Sun’s followers (D. Lee 54). *The Chinese Times* (1914-1992), the most influential paper in the Chinese community, is frequently mentioned in the texts that this dissertation explores and was owned by people who were followers of Sun.

In addition to the civil unrest in China were natural disasters. According to *Almanac of Flood in China*, in 1862, a flood of the Pearl River caused 100,000 casualties. In 1908, a bad storm surge caused thousands of deaths in Guangdong. In 1915, another flood of the Pearl River affected 3.79 million and killed more than 100,000. Limited natural resources, difficult economic conditions, and civil chaos directly caused by uprisings, and indirectly caused by foreign invasions and man-made and natural disasters, together contributed to

push factors impacting Chinese migration at the turn of the twentieth century.

A desperate need for survival, however, was not the only thing the Chinese took while emigrating. Paul Yee contends that the Chinese came to Canada with their “cultural baggage” (24), the contents of which were specified by Qiyun Zhang as their regional characteristics of “a spirit of adventure, outstanding abilities in doing business, open and active political thought, and strong patriotism” developed from a long tradition of travelling overseas and century-long interaction with foreign merchants (qtd. in D. Lee 44). According to Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Fredrik Weybye Barth (1969), ethnicity has three important features: ethnic boundaries persist despite flow of personnel; important social relations are maintained across boundaries, and cultural differences that are relevant to the situation matter (9-10). Barth notes that ethnicity is not only “largely biologically self-perpetuating” but also “cultural bearing” as well (10-11). In addition, he contends that an ethnic group has varied and dynamic forms of cultural traits.

Understanding their Chinese background helps readers, especially researchers, to learn what ethnic characteristics persisted when the Chinese came to Canada, how they maintained social relations, and how they resisted and tried to fit into Canadian society.

What Paul Yee means by “cultural baggage,” the specifics of which are outlined by Qiyun Zhang, included the experience in interacting with foreigners learned during the long history of Guangzhou Port, which made the local people “adventurous and accustomed to traveling afar ” (qtd. in D. Lee 44). Guangzhou saw its first visitor from Europe in 166 CE³. Since then, the local people in Guangzhou had various types of

interaction with foreigners who were doing business, sojourning, and doing missionary work. In the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644), though the Royal Court had various foreign trade policies, Guangzhou remained the most important trading port of the country. In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Guangzhou was arguably China's only port under the Single Port Policy⁴ from 1757 to 1842, when Britain forced another four ports to be opened (J Liu 24-25). Finally, after the Second Opium War in 1859, Guangzhou was "leased" to Britain and France⁵. Britain, the United States, France, and Germany then all had their trading companies and banks built in the Leased Territory.

Various interactions familiarized the local people with different lifestyles, ways of doing business, religions, and beliefs, which could have enabled many to settle down in Canada. However, the hostility they faced in Canada was a barrier to smooth settlement. As Won Alexander Cumyow, the first Canadian-born Chinese man said during the 1902 Royal Commission investigation: "A large portion of them [Chinese men] would bring their families here, were it not for the unfriendly reception they got here during years which creates an unsettling feeling" (qtd. in Chan, *Gold Mountain* 50). Therefore, while feeling proud of and maintaining their Chineseness, the Chinese immigrants did not necessarily think in binary terms about different cultures and practices as being 'Other,' and were unprepared for the sharp confrontation they faced in other places, including Canada.

Not only did the Cantonese meet foreigners at home, they had a long tradition of migration and sojourning too, to which the Chinese in Canada belonged. For example, by

the fifteenth century, Chinese merchants already had a significant role in various Javan ports. By 1600, 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese lived in the Philippines, and by 1733 some 80,000 Chinese lived in and around Batavia (Jakarta) (M. Zhou 5). When David Lee was writing *A History of the Chinese in Canada* (1967), there were 16 million Chinese immigrants and their descendants all over the world, two thirds of whom were Cantonese (D. Lee 44).

In addition to their regional spirit of adventure, the Chinese immigrants brought with them other regional characteristics. Cantonese culture places particular importance on the following seven aspects: fame, high-ranking offices, fortune, praying, maintaining and trading servants, having many sons, and violent fighting in resolving dispute (Xu, “Customs”). Except for the pursuit of high-ranking offices, which was barred by Canadian laws, all the other pursuits are demonstrated clearly in the literary texts, but have not received enough attention from scholars. In addition, the Cantonese developed new characteristics in their interaction with foreigners and through their sojourning experiences. As David Lee observes: “The Chinese sojourners were very good at running businesses; they loved luxurious clothing, food, and ceremonies like big weddings and funerals; they had a strong sense of patriotism due to witnessing China’s confrontation with foreign powers; and they were generous in doing charity both in China and in Canada” (D. Lee 45; my translation). Lee’s observation explains the reasons for the Chinese immigrants’ achieving economic success in tremendous difficult as well as their effort to maintain their Chinese culture and strong connection to China, which will be

further discussed in Chapter Four. Finally, the particularly strong clan sentiment and sense of morality among the Cantonese made chain migration easy, as they took very good care of new arrivals from their village or clan by providing any newly arrived with free boarding for three days (D. Lee 55). All these characteristics defined their life in Canada.

One more important regional feature of the immigrants from Guangdong that must not be overlooked is also a dominant national characteristic: their pride in their own civilization and devotion to educating children about Chinese tradition. Their pride, which at some moments meant more pain for the Chinese, was observed by “a fair-minded observer” who compared Chinese coolies with black slaves in 1859 (Morse 176). The observer remembered the Chinese coolie telling him that “their fate [was] the more lamentable [than the black slave] because they belong[ed] to a race which is more civilized and more intelligent than the negroes” (Morse 176). The deep-rooted belief that they were “more civilized and more intelligent,” though making them “lamentable” at that time, was the source of their self-regard as they faced discrimination in Canada.

Their belief in their superiority was bred by the long tradition of traditional education. Guangdong province was one of the leading provinces in southern China in traditional education, as shown by the number of people who got the title of *jinshi* (‘Imperial Scholar’)⁶ in the Qing Dynasty. Behind the success stories of the 1,012 *Jinshi* degree holders in the province in the Qing Dynasty was people’s strong devotion to education, the purpose of which was to guide people along the Confucian route to self-cultivation: cultivate yourself first, then regulate your family, then order well your

state. This purpose of education defined humanity in the Chinese culture.

Educating their children, even during chaotic times, was their means of self-cultivation. Take the county of Taishan for example. It had what is regarded as the best education and culture systems in China before 1949 with its twenty-two secondary schools, over eight hundred primary schools, and over seventy periodicals for its population of about 800,000 (D. Lee 48). According to D. Lee, Taishanese sent their young people to Beijing, Shanghai and even Japan to attend universities since the beginning of the twentieth century. Because of this, there were few illiterates in Taishan and even old women could read to some extent⁷ (D. Lee 48). Though the overall illiteracy rate was high in China and the education level in different counties varied, the Chinese in Canada's Chinatowns had strong enthusiasm for education, which explains the fact that all Chinese descendants were either sent back to China or to a Chinese school one to two hours every day, and that there were twenty-six Chinese schools for the thirty thousand Chinese in Canada in the 1930s (D. Lee 316-321).

To sum up, a good knowledge of the China that the immigrants lived in enables us to see the Chinese immigrants as more than victims of economic difficulty, social chaos, and political corruption. Instead, their regional and national characteristics, and cultural baggage, together shaped their mentality in Canada, and Chapter Four will discuss the multilayered connection the Chinese women have with China.

2.3 CANADA AND SEGREGATION

For complicated reasons, the Canada that the Chinese came to at the turn of the

twentieth century was drastically different from the one we live in today, and even the one most Canadian history textbooks describe. Although there is a common belief that Canada's racial discrimination is less intense than that of its southern neighbour (Stanley, *Contesting* 14), and "many Canadians may [...] be reluctant to give away our pride in Canada's relatively civil racial history in comparison to more dramatically traumatic racial histories" (Coleman 9), evidence shows that at least in three areas, Chinese in Canada experienced more difficulty than in the United States. Firstly, due to the climate difference, those in California were able to use agricultural skills to make a living easily while those in Canada could not. In fact, according to Carmen Lee, Chinese in California were one of the first ethnic groups other than the Indigenous peoples to bring "their own foods, skills, seeds and expertise" to develop "the most advanced agricultural technology in irrigation, crop rotation and fertilization" (5). However, in Canada's climate, the Chinese could hardly use their familiar agricultural skills and had to join in the capitalist job competition right from start. Secondly, the Chinese were somehow welcomed in California in 1850 and had some peaceful time with the local peoples too, but in Canada they had to face racial hostility right from the beginning, as will be discussed later. Thirdly, compared with the American Chinese-exclusion policy, which spared the Chinese who had been naturalized and those born in the United States, Stanley argues the Canadian political denial of Chinese was more extensive with the "essentialist assumption" that "all 'Chinese' were alike, whether in Canada, in the United States, or in China" (*Contesting* 14).

As a result, though many Canadians do not know about or refuse to believe the severity of Canadian racism towards the Chinese, the British Columbia provincial government admits, “no other ethnic group in British Columbian history has suffered such formally sanctioned mistreatment of its members on entering Canada over such an extended period (“History of Wrongs”). The same observation has been made by Yuen-fong Woon, noting that the Chinese “historically suffered the greatest immigration and emigration hurdles” of all immigrant groups in Canada (“Between” 84), and by Peter Li, who writes that “[a]side from the Indigenous people, no other racial or ethnic group had experienced such harsh treatment in Canada as the Chinese” (*Chinese* 1).

In a newspaper article in 1962, Pierre Berton reviewed the Canadian social context of the Chinese from the 1860s to the 1960s and reflected on a whole century when “we [the white people] have used [them] selfishly for our own ends” (4). Berton begins with the Canadian “enticement” of the Chinese across the Pacific in the 1860s to profit from their passage and the fact that 17,000 Chinese constructed the Trans-Canada railroad in the 1880s, during which many were “dumped [...] on these shores” and one-tenth died of scurvy. Berton also notes that Canada threw the Chinese out of work at the completion of the main section of the railroad in 1885 and passed its first *Chinese Immigration Act 1885* which made the Chinese the first and only ethnic group to pay a Head Tax of \$50. The Head Tax then rose to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903. From 1883 to 1923, Canada collected from 81,000 Chinese \$23 million in face value, and from 1905 to 1914 alone the Canadian government collected \$13.8 million from the Chinese, which was equivalent to

about 14 percent of the national defense budget⁸ (P. Li 38). Then came “the most infamous immigration act” in Canadian history, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which shut off all Chinese immigration. Not more than fifty⁹ Chinese entered Canada in the following twenty-four years, causing wives to be separated from husbands and children from fathers. As for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947, which Prime Minister Mackenzie King believed removed all trace of racial discrimination against the Chinese, Berton calls that “self- congratulation” and King’s claim a “lie” because two other laws (P.C.2115 and P.C.1378) were still in position to single out the Chinese as the only Asian people who could not bring their family to Canada.

After presenting the social rules for the Chinese and “for them alone,” Berton describes the situation in 1962 when the Chinese were still underprivileged:

[W]e are still making special rules for the Chinese and the Chinese only. They are still having trouble becoming citizens after five years or more in this country. The Procedure normally takes four months, but for the Chinese it seems to be taking two years. Scores of applications are being held up. The Chinese, alone of all applicants, are being subjected to special detailed interrogations that amount almost to inquisitions. (4)

For more than a century, the Chinese belonged to what *The Chinese Immigration Act 1923* calls the “undesirable” and “forbidden” class. In presenting the way the Chinese were treated in British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century, James Morton writes, “It is difficult for British Columbians to realize that such clauses in provincial government contracts ever existed” (viii), using *The Chinese Immigration Act 1923* as one illustration. What Berton reveals about the Chinese up until 1962 is the suffocating segregation shaped in the real world by politicians, legislators, and journalists, and which

is reflected in the fictional worlds of various literary texts.

Anti-Chinese sentiment among politicians

Politicians' attitudes towards the Chinese went from ambivalence to hostility at the end of the nineteenth century and the top politicians played important roles in the process. A debate between Noah Shakespeare, a self-claimed advocate of workingmen ("Noah Shakespeare"), and Arthur Hill Gillmor, a five-time member of New Brunswick's House of Assembly Wilson, which was reported in a newspaper article in April 1883, best illustrates the different political views towards the Chinese ("Chinese Immigration: The Grievance" 1). Shakespeare proposed that Canada should follow the example of Australia's *The Influx of Chinese Restriction Act of 1881*, an earlier Australian version of Canada's *The Chinese Immigration Act 1885* which, in order to "regulate and restrict" Chinese immigration, required anyone of "the Chinese race" to submit a ten-pound fee on arrival, every hundred tons of the tonnage of each vessel to take only one Chinese, and the Chinese to be issued a certificate to stay in Australia.

According to Shakespeare, Chinese men came to Canada "as slaves" and their women were also imported "for base purposes," so the Chinese would "contaminate the public morals." ("Chinese Immigration: The Grievance" 1). According to the same newspaper article, Shakespeare also opposed Chinese immigration because it was "impossible to compete with [the Chinese] in industrial labour" or with their ability to live cheaply, and he accused the Chinese of not making contributions to Canada as they sent their money out of Canada. He also felt concerned that the Chinese "would soon

outnumber the white population.” Shakespeare’s opposition to the Chinese immigrants can be summed up as a belief in their inferiority at birth, their low morality, their unbeatable competitiveness and ability to live cheaply, their preying on Canada’s economy, and their potential threat to outnumber the white Canadians.

Gillmor represented the people who, while being more tolerant of the Chinese and even showing some sympathy, essentially agreed with Noah Shakespeare. In the same debate, he acknowledged the contributions of the Chinese, including providing urgently needed cheap labour and doing the hard and dangerous work on the railroad which no white workers were willing to do, and challenged other accusations about their lifestyle. Gillmor asked sympathetic questions: “Was there anything wrong in living so cheaply? As they worked for little money, did not the country benefit of their cheap labor? What crime was there in eating rice? What crime was there in sleeping on a board?” However, even in defending the Chinese immigrants’ right to continue their own lifestyle in Canada, Gillmor shared the sense of superiority among the English Canadians of the time in that he saw in the Chinese their potential to become better by converting to Christianity.

Showing his knowledge about the Chinese culture, he said:

The Chinese were disciples of Confucius, but they were not destitute of ability or invention. They invented the mariner’s compass, the printing press and gunpowder before the Europeans knew the use of these articles. If absorbed into Canada, they would improve rather than go backwards, and become Christians and Canadians rather than remain followers of Confucius. (1)

Even as tolerant and supportive as Gillmor seemed to be, he still saw the Chinese as a lesser and inferior race than white Canadians and the way for them to “improve” was to

become Christians. This kind of debate was soon lost to Shakespeare's side and Gillmor's voice was to be neglected and forgotten even by the compiler of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, who included Shakespeare's harsh standpoint but not Gillmor's comparatively mild and lenient one.

When similar debate occurred at the federal level, the top politicians took the more aggressive stance. Canada's political hostility towards the Chinese was set at the federal level by its first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald. Timothy J. Stanley argues that Macdonald "personally introduced biological racism as a defining characteristic of Canadianness" ("Macdonald's Aryan Canada"). Based on Macdonald's words during a debate in the House of Commons about the *1885 Electoral Franchise Act*, which he later called "my greatest triumph," Stanley argues that Macdonald was the one who strongly opposed giving the Chinese the right to vote, who saw the Chinese as "foreigners," who made sure that his legislation excluded "a person of Mongolian or Chinese race," and who insisted on ensuring European dominance by excluding Chinese ("Macdonald's Aryan Canada").

During that debate, when challenged by the opposition that the Chinese were "industrious people" who had previously voted and had "as good a right [to] be allowed to vote as any other British subject of foreign extraction," Macdonald made it clear that Chinese exclusion was necessary to ensure European dominance. He warned:

If [the Chinese] came in great numbers and settled on the Pacific coast they might control the vote of that whole Province, and they would send Chinese representative to sit here, who would represent Chinese eccentricities, Chinese

immorality, Asiatic principles altogether opposite to our wishes; and, in the even balance of parties, they might enforce those Asiatic principles, those immoralities..., [and] the eccentricities which are abhorrent to the Aryan race and Aryan principles, on this House. (qtd. in Stanley, “Macdonald’s Aryan Canada”)

Most of Shakespeare’s accusations of the Chinese were repeated and strengthened by Macdonald who announced the Canadian position: people belonging to the “Mongolian or Chinese race” were to be excluded to “ensure European dominance.”

Interestingly, Macdonald’s role in Canada’s political hostility towards the Chinese has been discussed differently by some Chinese-Canadians. Anthony B. Chan finds him tolerant and even appreciative of the Chinese. He cites Macdonald’s words “either you must have this labour or you can’t have the railway” in the House of Commons in 1882 when he was pushed to exclude Chinese (60), but Chan obviously does not notice that Macdonald debased the Chinese by viewing them as tools, rather than as humans. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Arlene Chan ambiguously claims that Macdonald’s racial policy came out when he “willingly yielded to prejudiced and discriminatory politicians, trade unionists and public opinion,” minimizing his role in the shaping of Canadian racial policy against the Chinese. Yet, Stanley’s argument that Macdonald was “the father of biologically-defined Canadian white supremacy as an organizing principle of the state” is more clearly supported by the way Macdonald defended only keeping Chinese immigrants until the railroad was finished. In 1883 Macdonald is quoted as saying, “It will be all very well to exclude Chinese labour, when we can replace it with white labour” (qtd. in Stanley, “John A. Macdonald” 6). Chan obviously takes Macdonald out of context

and *The Canadian Encyclopedia* neglects Macdonald's defense of his racist policies.

The top politicians' mindset had huge influence on the country's political climate. Wilfrid Laurier, Macdonald's successor, carried on his racial policy. In 1900, Laurier said: "In my opinion, there is not much room for the Chinaman in Canada. He displaces a good Canadian or a good British subject" (qtd. in W. Johnson). Later, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration* (1902) confirmed the Prime Minister's opinion by announcing:

[The Chinese] are unfit for full citizenship and are permitted to take no part in municipal or provincial government. Upon this point there was entire unanimity. They are not and will not become citizens in any sense of the term, as we understand it. They are so nearly allied to a servile class that they are obnoxious to a free community and dangerous to the state. (qtd. in W. Johnson)

The *Report* both reflected and constituted the social tone that Chinese were inferior, immoral, and threatening; therefore, the Canadian immigration policies for Europeans and Chinese showed a contrast until 1967. One illustration of this contrast was the fact that from 1901 to 1918, \$18 million was collected from Chinese immigrants while \$10 million was spent on promoting immigration from Europe (Canadian Council for Refugees). Even in 1950, the Canadian government was still planning to "advance to prospective [European] immigrants part of the cost of transportation to this country" in the following year ("Governments to Aid" 1).

All levels of government in British Columbia pushed the same attitude, and Chinese-Canadians, unable by law to vote in elections and thus silenced (something I discuss below), became the scapegoats and targets for political movements that used anti-Chinese

discrimination and legislated racism to rally voters. From the 1870s onward, racial discrimination against the Chinese community became a mainstay of British Columbia politics, culture, and society. In Nanaimo and Kamloops, for example, civic governments segregated Chinese community, attempting to confine them to the outskirts of town. As geographer David Chuenyan Lai observes, citing Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria as an example, even after death, the Chinese were segregated from Westerners. There, the Chinese were buried in Block L, which was set apart for the burials of “Aborigines and Mongolians” (Lai, “Chinese Cemetery” 27). The Burial Records reveal that the first Chinese person buried there on 18 March 1873 was namelessly listed as ‘Chinaman No.1’ and subsequent Chinese burial plots marked as ‘Chinaman No.2,’ ‘Chinaman No.3’ and so on (Government of British Columbia, “Anti-Chinese”).

Due to the mindset of politicians at all levels, discrimination against the Chinese soon became systematic and institutionalized in Canada. By 1922, discrimination had become “common sense and [...] day-to-day practice” and Europeans had established themselves as “native” and Chinese “alien” (Stanley, *Contesting* 230). Stanley writes:

[racialized] Chinese were barred out of participation in the state system, from voting, from being elected to public offices, from sitting on juries, from becoming lawyers, and from working in government, or for provincially incorporated companies or licensees. They were subjected to recurring popular violence and effectively barred from entering most of the territory of British Columbia. (*Contesting* 231)

Physical violence, social and geographical segregation, and economic deprivation should make it clear that few would want to identify with such a society. Yet, all of these were just paving the way for a formal law declaring exclusion of the Chinese in 1923.

Politicians' discriminatory attitudes lasted beyond the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. In May 1947, Prime Minister Mackenzie King's statement in the House of Commons outlining Canada's immigration policy continued to marginalize the Chinese. According to King, "The policy of the government is to foster the growth of the population of Canada by the encouragement of immigration" (King). The government will "seek by legislation, regulation, and vigorous administration, to ensure the *careful selection* and permanent settlement of such numbers of immigrants as can advantageously be absorbed in our national economy" (King; my emphasis). Regarding discrimination, he made it clear that Canada is "perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens" (King). He announced, "The people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental alteration in the character of our population. *Large-scale immigration from the orient would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population*" (my emphasis). As a result of King's desire to maintain the fundamental composition of the Canadian population, two other acts, P.C. 2115¹⁰ and P.C.1378¹¹, continued to single out Chinese and made it difficult for them to naturalize and bring their family over for reunion for another two decades when the points-based system was introduced.

Legislation depriving the Chinese of rights

All actions against the Chinese were encouraged by the laws passed by the municipal, provincial, and federal governments, thus silencing and segregating the Chinese strategically and systematically. In the same year it joined Confederation, British

Columbia passed its first anti-Chinese law, titled *Qualification and Registration of Voters' Act* (1871), to disqualify Chinese, along with 'Native Indians' and other non-whites, from voting for provincial representation and to quiet them from arguing against any injustice or fighting for any rights.

The 223 anti-Chinese laws ("Three Levels") can be roughly divided into three categories. The first category includes those restricting and barring Chinese entry to Canada. The Head Tax was passed with the intention of discouraging Chinese from coming, beginning in 1885, but the earliest attempt at a head tax of \$10, though it was disallowed, was raised in the Vancouver Island House of Assembly in 1865. Then in 1878, the topic of a head tax was picked up again with the *Chinese Tax Act* saying that every Chinese person over 12 should pay a \$10 license fee every three months, but this too was disallowed (129). Despite the failure of these two attempts¹², the hostility was obvious, and in 1884, the *Chinese Regulation Act* was passed in the province and imposed a \$10 head tax on all Chinese (7). Then, in 1885, the federal government passed the *Chinese Immigration Act 1885*, imposing the well-known Head Tax of \$50 and granting one-fourth of such revenue to the province where the money was collected (210). So, both the federal and provincial governments legally profited from this policy. Lily Cho observes that, though the stated purpose of Head Tax was to restrict the Chinese, the true purpose was to profit from not only their labour but their money as well, because long after 1885's last spike, Chinese labour was needed until the railway was really completed in 1916 ("Rereading" 69). Therefore, the Head Tax symbolizes a "contemporary

discourse as a policy of state-sanctioned discrimination motivated by repugnance for Chinese people in Canada—a logic of undesirability that creates a policy restriction and ultimately outright exclusion” (L. Cho, “Rereading” 63).

After five versions of *The Chinese Immigration Act* in 1885, 1887, 1892, 1900, 1903 came *The Chinese Immigration Act 1923* which called Chinese a “Prohibited Class” (304). As a result, not more than fifty Chinese entered Canada in the next twenty-four years. In fact, the five decades of segregation was so effective in singling out the Chinese that when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1923, there were “virtually no voices of opposition” except for the protests from the Chinese community in Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees). Even after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in May 1947, Order-in-Council, P.C. 2115, which was passed in 1930, was still in effect. It stipulated that Canadian citizens could bring their spouses and children under the age of 18 to Canada, but only eight percent of Chinese-born residents were naturalized citizens at that time (Canadian council of refugees), so the majority had to continue living away from their family.

The second category of laws denied the Chinese nearly all job opportunities. Some made it unlawful for offices or businesses to hire Chinese. Over eighty laws, such as *Esquimalt Water Works Act, 1885*, had articles beginning with “No Chinese persons shall be employed or permitted to work in...” which prevented the Chinese from getting any jobs with the government or private companies (166). Other laws forbade the Chinese from getting licenses to start their business. Nine laws such as the *Licences Act*

Amendment Act, 1894 explicitly stated that “No license for the sale of wines or liquors by retail shall, after the passage of this act, be given or transferred to any person of the Chinese race in any portion of the Province” (144). Because of these two types of laws, the Chinese had to employ themselves by opening companies, restaurants, laundries, and grocery stores, or to be house servants. However, there was a third type of legislation that cornered them even more.

The *Companies Act, 1897* prohibited any Chinese company from doing business in British Columbia and “[n]othing contained in this Part of this Act shall authorise the registration of any Chinese company or association” (48). There were also laws which forbade the Chinese from hiring white people and white people from visiting Chinese businesses. For those running restaurants or laundries, the *Municipal Act Amendment Act, 1919* prohibited the employment of white women or girls in Chinese businesses, stating: “No person shall in any municipality employ in any capacity any white woman or girl or permit any white woman or girl to reside or lodge in or to work in or [...] to frequent any restaurant, laundry, or place of business or amusement owned, kept, or managed by any Chinese person” (271). Not to be hired and not to hire was to completely shatter the Gold Mountain dream of the Chinese, the major cause of their migration at the time.

The third category included those which seemed to be neutral but were really targeting Chinese to make them politically, economically, or culturally discriminated against. On the political level, *An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Municipal Acts* (1881) empowered municipalities to make discriminatory bylaws by stating only British

subjects were entitled to rights, so the Chinese were therefore excluded from rights on the municipal level. For example, the *Land Registry Act, 1947* ensured that only those with Canadian citizenship, in addition to being a British subject, had the right to own land (243). As only ten percent of Chinese had Canadian citizenship, the majority were denied this right.

Economically, the Chinese were impacted by the *Municipal Amendment Act, 1885*, which charged a \$75 laundry license fee every six months (93). At the time, and for a long time after, nearly all the laundries were run by Chinese, so this law was passed with Chinese as clear targets without naming them. For those who depended on working long hours to make up for the low wages, which were one third to two thirds of the white men's, the *Hours of Work Act, 1923* limited work to eight hours a day in job like mining and construction (148). Historian Patricia Roy said part of the idea was to lessen the appeal of hiring Asian workers who would work longer hours (*Oriental Question* 97). Another restriction on the laundries was the *Factories Act Amendment Act, 1919* which stipulated that no one—other than a watchman or heat/steam maintenance worker—could work in a laundry except between the hours of 7a.m.—7p.m (111). Roy calls this “an oblique method of limiting Chinese laundries” as it made the Chinese laundries less competitive (*The Oriental Question* 101).

Culturally, the Chinese were impacted by *The Chinese Regulation Act, 1884* and *Grave-yard Act, 1884* which ensured that deceased remains could not be exhumed without the permission of Coroner, or the Provincial Secretary, or the Government Agent

(55). Though not stated clearly, this Act was intended to stop bone exhumation and shipment, which the Chinese believed would mean leaving Chinese souls wandering in the Canadian wilderness. What was more, some laws had regulations which restricted certain rights to people on the voters' list only, confining different generations of Chinese to specific types of employment. For example, *Pharmacy Act, 1891* limited those who could be registered as a certified pharmacist's apprentice to those entitled to be placed on the voters' list under the *Provincial Elections Act* (286). By that time, 'Indians' and Chinese were the only ethnic groups excluded from the provincial voters' list. As will be discussed in later chapters, seeing no hope for career prospects other than the jobs in restaurants, laundries, and grocery stores was one major cause of conflict between the Chinese descendants and their parents, and of the Chinese unwillingness to identify with Canada.

Although the Chinese had to wait until April 2018 for the last nineteen discriminatory laws to be formally stopped ("Three Levels"), a points-based immigration system was introduced in 1967 and race, colour, or nationality were no longer important when ranking potential immigrants for eligibility. Chinese immigrants began to be treated in the same way as those from other countries, so, at least in terms of the law, the last element of racial discrimination was eliminated.

The news media's role in creating a suffocating social atmosphere

In addition to politicians and legislators, the news media played another important role in shaping the changing social atmosphere for the Chinese at the turn of the twentieth

century. For a short period after Chinese arrived in Canada from San Francisco in 1858, for example, the media, like the politicians, presented a mixed voice about Chinese undesirability. They used a persuasive and soothing tone to convince the public to tolerate the Chinese, but argued their presence would be only temporary. They were useful, the media claimed, in one way or another, but writers also suggested that “we” could drive “them” out at any moment.

In the same way that the politicians borrowed Australia’s restrictive laws against Chinese, the media in what was to become Canadian British Columbia province borrowed American hostility towards the Chinese. As early as 12th March 1859, the *Victoria Daily Colonist* reprinted an article from San Francisco that first reports a mixture of Americans “talk[ing] in favour of the Chinese” and voicing complaints and “dissatisfaction” (4), before clearly taking a stand:

And for our part, we sympathize with and take the part of the white miner, when he is driven to meet such unnatural competition. We say, it is the prosperity of the white men in this State that makes up her prosperity; that the aggrandizement of the Chinese does not make us a particle richer--adds nothing to our fixed capital, builds no cities or towns, erects no churches or school houses, or in short, does anything to advance us in wealth power or greatness. (“S.F. Bulletin” 4)

Showing obvious agreement that the Chinese were “unnatural competition” that threatened the white workers, and parasites who drained the white men’s prosperity, this reprinting established a critical attitude towards the Chinese in the then British colony. In the coming decades, the Canadian media continuously incited hatred for the Chinese by presenting the white working class as a victim of Chinese competition, Canada as belonging to white people only, the Chinese as preying on Canada instead of contributing

to it, and Chinese continuing to do harm to Canada. While still reporting softer tones about the Chinese, the media inclined to support restrictive and exclusive measures against Chinese.

Just a few days after the *Victoria Daily Colonist* republished the article from San Francisco in March 1859, these feelings appeared in the *Gazette*, which published an editorial showing the first sign of the exclusion of Chinese. It declared, “They [the Chinese] are, with very few exceptions, not desirable as permanent settlers in a country peopled by the Caucasian race and governed by civilized enactments” (qtd. in K. Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown* 37). This sentiment culminated in the repeated effort of British Columbia to convince Ottawa to pass federal laws to restrict and exclude the Chinese.

An article in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* in 1885 reported one such petition assembly which claimed that “the unlimited admission” of Chinese would “work injury to the moral and material welfare” of Canada for the following reasons:

[T]hey do not come to make home or settle in the country, or to add to the country’s wealth; but to prey upon our natural resources, and take what they earn out of the country. ...there are immoral practices, debasing habits and contagious diseases, particular to [Chinese], which they have already introduced to an alarming extent, upon this continent, and against which we have a right to defend ourselves and our children. (“Fourth” 3)

For the 1,175 Chinese in Canada in 1859 (D. Lee 414), the accusations here were a continuation of what the paper borrowed from the United States and were to get more intense in the decades to come. The accusations included: the Chinese were sojourners and did not belong, they did not contribute to Canada, they preyed on white Canadians,

they did not spend their earnings in Canada, and their immorality and lifestyle did harm to Canada. In contrast, white Canadians owned Canada, contributed to its prosperity, had high morality, and therefore, white Canadians were justified to protect their interest by all means.

In the meantime, however, the need for consumers and cheap labour made white Canadians feel it necessary to keep the Chinese until there were enough white workers, thus shaping mixed feelings of what Lily Cho calls “desire for cheap labour and [...] fear of otherness” (“Rereading” 67). In March 1860, the *Victoria Daily British Colonist* reported a poll-tax on “Chinaman” that illustrated the mixed feelings (“Right” 2). This article tried to persuade people to tolerate the Chinese as the local economy needed “consumers.” It soothed the people by saying that the Chinese presence “at this juncture would benefit trade everywhere.” Citing California as an example of a place that had driven the Chinese away and wanted them to return to purchase “clothing, boots and shoes, mining implements, hardware, pork, vegetables, groceries, and Chinese edibles,” this article promised that “when the time arrives that we can dispense with them, we will heartily second a check to their immigration” (2).

In another article published two months later in May 1860, the Chinese were presented as useful labour to be tolerated:

That the gold existed all were convinced; but how it might be produced in quantities sufficient to attract the attention of emigrants from the British North American provinces and Great Britain, and nearer still, of the British population in California remained a problem unsolved. China and its horde of laborers have stepped forward to relieve our wants and solve the difficulty. (“Chinese

Immigration” 2)

In addition, the article reminded the public that the incoming Chinese supported the passenger freight, which would certainly suffer if Chinese stopped coming. Either as consumers or developers to make British Columbia attractive enough for the more desired British immigrants, the Chinese were not expected to stay for long in the province. According to the media, once British Columbia had attracted enough desired immigrants, it would be time to exclude the Chinese.

The mixed tone about Chinese can be found in just a few articles from the early 1860s and soon a tone of hostility dominated. By 1923, just before the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, the media began to publicize a celebratory tone on solving the “Chinese question.” An article in May 1923 explained the new version of *The Chinese Immigration Act*:

With some required amendments. It will form a very satisfactory measure of exclusion, only those admitted being the Diplomatic Corps, Chinese children born in Canada, merchants and students. If the definition of ‘merchant’ is sufficiently strict, it will practically prohibit the immigration of more Chinese into Canada, a good and long desired measure. If only the word ‘Asiatic’ had been used instead of ‘Chinese.’ However, it is a long step in the right direction! (“Observation” 1)

This article obviously showed that it understood its readers’ expectations of having Chinese, and ideally all Asians, excluded. It gave encouraging remarks that the Act would be effective because “merchant” would be given “sufficiently strict” definition. By calling the Act “a long step in the right direction,” the article announced its opposition to Chinese immigration and foresaw further and more “satisfactory” steps to secure the land for white Canadians.

In the 1940s, there began to be a change in the tone of reporting on the Chinese which both reflected and led to a softened social atmosphere for the Chinese. On April 5th, 1940, in an article entitled “English and Chinese Wisdom,” the author Atticus remembered listening to First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy explain how old people in China lived:

In China, we have no old pension. When the children are young the parents care for them. When the parents are old, the children care for them. To leave your parents in want would mean you had lost face. But it is not only that. When you care for people, whether they are young or old, that care makes you love them more. That is why in China the old people are happy, and they give happiness to the sons who support them. (4)

When Atticus later listened to a talk about the problem of old people’s life given by a Scotch Socialist, who explained how young men “were being estranged from their parents because part of their wages had to go to the support of the old people” (Atticus 4), he could not help but make the comparison between the two methods. The way old people live is not just a matter of money, but dignity and feelings. Taking care of one’s parents is not only a financial burden, but a source of happiness, too. This difference will be further discussed when I compare how Fong Mei treats her father-in-law and is treated by her daughter Beatrice in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

Though there was still talk of a “solemn responsibility to future generations ‘to keep Canada white’” in 1947 (“Bitter Fight” 3), curiosity about the Chinese grew little by little. In 1949, two years after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, an article in the *Lethbridge Herald* reported on a study on the lower frequency of high blood pressure among the Chinese. Some physicians suggested that including rice in the diet for some

time might improve blood pressure (Baeton 4). More importantly, the article believed that the “principal” reason the Chinese had lower pressure was “their manner of life.” The article wrote that being an old race, the Chinese “are philosophical and do not let the little worries of life get them excited so that the heart beat and pressure are raised.” Drastically different from a few decades earlier, when eating rice seemed to be a ‘crime,’ now it was seen as a lifestyle and even a possible asset. Besides, attention began to go to the Chinese “philosophy” about life, which was what helped them live through the hostility in their time.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the media began to speak *for* Asians, including the Chinese, letting the public know about Chinese thought. In 1958, an article criticized Canada’s policy towards Asiatic immigration, calling it “heartless” (“Equality for Asiatics” 4). It also reported the voice of a delegation of young Chinese and Japanese when they were talking to the Immigration Minister Ellen Fairclough, saying that though it had been “softening from the rigid exclusion,” the Asiatic is “still the object of unfair discrimination.” This was sharply different from earlier times when the media only reported what white Canadians said and thought about the Chinese.

In late 1959, there was news about over 10,000 illegal Chinese immigrants entering Canada via Hong Kong, so Canada conducted an investigation and had the RCMP raid the Chinese community suddenly (Macbeth 9). In response to this, an article “Stop the Extortion” expressed the anger of the Chinese community, writing, “[u]nderstandably, Canadians of Chinese origin are angered and upset by wholesale police raid... [and the

action] they have taken so far has unfairly cast suspicion not on individuals so much as upon whole communities of citizens of Chinese origin” (4). More importantly, media began to question the Canadian immigration policy. Pierre Berton wrote: “It is now almost 100 years since an ad in the *British Colonist* promised that Chinese immigrants would be treated ‘the same as white men.’ Isn’t it about time we began to fulfill that pledge?” (4). Although the reasons for Canada’s more friendly immigration policy for Asians in the 1960s were still similar to Macdonald’s reason for allowing Chinese in Canada in the 1880s, namely that Canada, which was “hungry for people,” was unable to attract enough Europeans, the Chinese would not wait much longer to be treated equally, at least in legal terms, with the introduction of the points-based system in 1967.

Fiction’s role in both reflecting and constituting social hostility

When politicians, legislators, and journalists segregated the Chinese in the real world, white Canadian writers created a fictional world that reflected and enhanced the stereotypical images of the Chinese and intensified the public fear of Chinese in the first half of the twentieth century. While there were open debates over Chinese merits and Chinese problems in the real world, in fiction, the atmosphere is no more tolerant.

Terrence L. Craig insists on the importance of literature in learning about Canadian society because “the all too common incidents of racial discrimination” are not recorded as “concrete facts of history” and cannot be “indirectly assumed from sociological studies and public opinion polls,” but their scope and meaning is “properly present[ed]” only in literature (18). By getting to know who was writing at the turn of the twentieth century,

their motivation and goal of writing, the important themes in their writings, and the Chinese characters in their writing, we can understand the less visible but more profound social hostility that existed before the 1960s.

It is not surprising that early Canadian literature in English before 1939 was almost entirely written by writers with obvious British Canadian backgrounds who expected to build “a society controlled by a certain self-conscious group (which thought of itself as a race) hoping to maintain that control” (Craig 18-19). These writers came to Canada with what Benedict Anderson calls the conception of “Empire,” a major element of which is colonial racism, “which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community [...] by generalizing a principle of innate, inherited superiority on which its own domestic position was (however shakily) based to the vastness of the overseas possessions” (B. Anderson 150). Terrence Craig observes that in producing a “self-congratulatory literature for their own group,” this literature “recognized little need to even include others in their work, except for local colour, or to provide extra proof of their own superiority” (20). This racial superiority thus became the basic tone of Canadian literature of the time.

The arrival of the Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the time when Canada was searching for its own national identity with “muscular Christian ideals” in its core (Coleman 160). In this process, literature played a significant role. Looking at the history of the “construction of White, English Canadian privilege,” Daniel Coleman tracks the genealogy of “Whiteness” in Canada by examining popular Canadian fiction, which he believes to be “one of the best places to examine the complexities of

nationalist identity” (3). Coleman concludes that “White Canadian culture is obsessed and organized by its obsession, with the problem of its own civility” (5), and determines “Canadianization” by one’s degree of assimilation to the so-called universal ideals represented by “White civility” (177). Following this thought, when the Chinese were repeatedly declared “unassimilable,” it is no wonder that they were the least likely to “Canadianize.” Like Coleman observes, even among those who advocate multi-racial liberalism and tolerance such as Frederick Philip Grove, Ralph Connor, and J. S. Woodworth, Chinese, other Asians, and Blacks are not within their border (182-86). Meanwhile there were other authors, such as John Murray Gibbon, who would not even mention Chinese when talking about those having worked on the railroad (Coleman 186), and Emily Murphy, who believed that a Chinaman’s morals were “as oblique as his eyes” (262).

Through discussing influential authors in the first four decades of English Canadian fiction, Craig discusses the racial attitudes which mainly supported the English-Canadian upper-class supremacy and “reflected a static, conservative view of society” as reflected in three major themes (25). The first theme is an obvious demonstration of what Peter Ward calls the “overtone of mockery and contempt” (3). Craig argues that, influenced by James S. Woodsworth’s *Strangers Within Our Gates* (1909), Robert Stead (1880 –1959), a Canadian novelist whose writing was representative of his time in defending the racial hierarchy, wrote to defend the superior class position in racist terms. Woodsworth made a qualitatively ranked survey of possible immigrant groups who were evaluated based on

their potential for assimilation with consideration of their assumed intelligence and undesirable features. On this list, Asians were at the bottom.

The second theme Craig identifies is an obvious sense of superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. While Woodsworth stressed religious differences, believing that the Protestant religion stood for “progress, civilization, and enlightenment” (Craig 27), Stead emphasized imperial greatness, objecting to immigration of any origin for fear that “their potential threat [was] to displace his charter group’s position in the West” (Craig 29). Both writers frequently use words such as “breed,” “stock,” and “blood” in a racial sense, thus “imposing livestock terminology and value judgments upon races” (Craig 30). Stead’s first book of poetry, *The Empire Builders and Other Poems* (1908), tried to defend the charter group’s interests from alien immigrant greed. Craig cites “The Mixer,” a poem in the above collection, as an example to mark Stead’s “blatant flaunting of the colour bar” (29). Each stanza of the poem ends with the line: “As I turn ‘em out Canadians—all but the yellow and brown” to celebrate the transformation or “mixing” of assorted immigrants into fully assimilated Canadians (29). In sum, Craig points out that Stead’s philosophy was that “Anglo-Saxons were thoroughbreds who must be guarded against adulteration by inferior breeds” (30). This sense of superiority echoed the tone of the politicians and media.

Madison Grant (1865 –1937), an American writer who also wrote about Canada, specifically presented the supposed inferiority of Chinese in various manners. On the one hand, he portrayed them as being docile and of low birth. Chinese houseboys in the

service of a wealthy British-Canadian master frequently appeared in Grant's writing, and in his *The Coif Puncher*, Grant writes:

Dave pressed a button, and a Chinese boy (all male Chinese are boys) entered, bowing in that deference which is so potent to separate the white man from his silver. The white man glories in being salaamed, especially by an Oriental, who can grovel with a touch of art. And the Oriental has not been slow to capitalize his master's vanity" (qtd. in Craig 44).

Craig notes that such derogatory contempt for foreigners persists throughout Stead's work and that this frequent appearance of Chinese as servants in Canadian fiction reflects one aspect of their position in Canadian society at the time. In his *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which was so popular that it had three more editions within seven years, Grant condemned the destructiveness of the melting pot theory and demanded an end to immigration. Besides, he wrote to "justif[y] the continuation of slavery for the good of the uncivilized slaves and [to deny] the possibility of 'inferior' people's ever rising to the level of the Master Race" (Craig 3).

The third theme identified by Craig consists of the idea that the Chinese are a threat. Hilda Glynn-Ward's novel *The Writing on the Wall: Chinese and Japanese Immigration to B.C., 1920* (1921), which Craig considers "Canada's most racist work of fiction" (14), warns of the threat that the Chinese will come to dominate white Canadians. The novel presents how the elites' greed, corruption, and decadence, when combined with Chinese (and Japanese) cunning and maliciousness, could lead to the "Oriental" domination of the province during the early twentieth century. As Patricia Roy, who wrote an introduction for the novel's reprint in 1974, observes, when published in 1921, it was intended to

shock its readers, to prevent greedy politicians from selling out to the “Orientals,” and to encourage the passing of strict immigration regulations as protections against the ‘yellow peril’ (“Introduction” 7). Each of the three parts presents one type of threat the “Orientals” posed to Canada. The first part, set in the past (1910), shows the “Orientals”’ greed and vices, which undermined white society. The second part, the present (1920), shows the consequences of granting “Orientals” the vote in British Columbia, including the selling of land, resources, and power to the wily “Orientals.” The third part painted a grim picture of a future when the “Orientals” rule: the land was lost and the “Orientals” took control of the province, leaving the white hapless. The story ends on a happy note as one of the main protagonists awakens from his nightmare to realize that he should not sign into force a bill giving Oriental landowners the right to vote.

As Roy notes, Glynn-Ward was living in Vancouver during the 1920s and was familiar with events in British Columbia that were mirrored in her novel (“Introduction” 20). This novel not only helped to shape the reader’s fear of Chinese but portrayed the white people’s perspective of Chinese as well. By presenting the Chinese as living in filth and indulging in illegal and immoral habits, controlling the vegetable market and thus endangering the health of the white population, and as patronizing opium dens that threatened to undermine white society, this novel illustrates the white Canadians’ fear of, and prejudice towards, the Chinese in the early twentieth century. By portraying the stereotypical images of the Chinese and describing the consequence of imagined Chinese rule, Glynn-Ward justifies all the hostility towards the Chinese. Considering Timothy

Stanley's observation that the Chinese-language sources present more accurately the extent of racism endured by the Chinese, with frequent reports of racist violence not found in English-language reports, I would question Roy's claim that Glynn-Ward gives an "exaggerated" portrayal of society (Roy, "Introduction" 35), and would suggest that this novel is actually more reflective of the social reality that the Chinese lived in than the news reports.

Coleman and Craig have studied different aspects of the whiteness of English Canadian literature in the first half of the twentieth century, but they agree on the Anglophone-centred nature of the literature. Their analysis of racial attitudes provides a great source for understanding how the English in Canada viewed the racialized groups such as Chinese. Despite the various degrees of tolerance for non-British Canadians, the Chinese were portrayed negatively, ranging from simply being undesirable, to being a threat. Craig, who believes that Canada "has been remarkably free of the ugliest forms and consequences of racism that have caused so much tragedy elsewhere in the world" (139), would have thought otherwise if he had read the Chinese side of the history.

Like the changing tone in the media, the fictional world that the Chinese were represented in also changed from the 1950s to 1960s, symbolized by two poems. One is "Towards the Last Spike" (1952) by E. J. Pratt (1886-1964), a long narrative poem in epic style about the construction of the transcontinental railroad in Canada, which received the 1952 Governor-General's medal. The other is "All the Spikes But the Last" (1966), by Francis Reginald Scott (1899-1985). Scott begins his poem with a direct challenge to

Pratt, asking, “Where are the coolies in your poem Ned? / Where are the thousands from China who swung/ their picks with bare hands at 40 below?” and ends with “Is all Canada has to say to them written in the Chinese/ Immigration Act?” Scott not only tries to restore the forgotten or neglected ethnic group to Canadian history, but questions Canadian immigration policy, thus joining the politicians and journalists discussed above in making changes to the Canadian society. This is a giant step, but the female members of the Chinese community remain obscure and the diversity of the community is yet to be discovered. Furthermore, it must be noted that despite a changing tone in literature, negativity did not disappear immediately; therefore, it would be naive to believe that Chinese immigrants immediately began to live in a friendly Canada or identify with it.

2.4 CHINATOWN AS AN IMPOSITION AND A CHOICE

Escaping from the desperate state of China and looking forward to making a living in Canada, mainly for their family, the Chinese were greatly shocked at the difficulties they faced at first and soon worked out a way to survive and thrive: sticking together in Chinatown. The moment they set foot on Gold Mountain where, they believed, one had to “push the gold from their feet to find the road” (Chong, *Concubine's* 8), they were shocked at the way they were treated. Although the quarantine stations were justifiably established to protect the host community from incoming epidemic disease, the desired and “undesirable” newcomers received different treatments. While most immigrants received positive receptions with “free, safe accommodation, food, information, and [invaluable] guidance” (Chilton 5), the Chinese had to answer “harsh” interrogation

questions and some had to stay weeks, months, or even over a year with minimal facilities and no consideration for privacy (Hom 71). There the shame was enough to drive some men to commit suicide (Hom 71), and women could be raped (S. Lee 57). Their expectation of a new life was shattered when seeing “the promise that Chinese immigrants would be treated ‘the same as white men’” broken (Berton 4). Those who failed in the examination and investigation were deported (Hom 72), and those who luckily passed moved on to their next stage of shock: all round discrimination.

The second blow was the extremely difficult economic conditions caused by institutional racism. As P. Li observes, the most serious impact of Canadian institutional racism was on the economic life of the Chinese, which was the result of them being singled out as inferior by the restriction on citizenship rights, the antagonism of white workers, and unequal treatment, all justified by law. Li outlines major forms of discrimination:

In those sectors where Chinese were hired along with white workers, they had to settle for lower wages. Indeed, lower wages became the incentive for white employers to hire Chinese, despite periodic protests from white workers. But as anti-orientalism intensified, the Chinese found themselves excluded by law from many industries that their cheap labour had previously helped to build. Racial hostility and legal barriers made it increasingly difficult for the Chinese to compete with white workers in the core labour market. Eventually, many Chinese retreated into the ethnic business sector, largely the service industry, where they found refuge by avoiding competition with white employers and workers. (43)

The Chinese found that they had to settle for low wages and in the meantime live more cheaply than what their wages could afford in order to send remittance to their family in China. The 1902 *Royal Report* shows that, in about 1900, the Chinese usually received

one third to two thirds of the white men's wages (qtd. in Li 44). The low wages and sending remittance to China led to several accusations. First, their low wages made them unfair competitors for the white workers. Second, their living cheaply lowered the living standard of the white society. Third, their limited spending was making no contribution to the local economy and their sending remittance meant they were taking the Canadian wealth out of the country. As previously discussed, these accusations frequently appeared in political debates or newspaper articles at the time.

As for the formation of Chinatown, the popular belief holds that the Chinese stayed together because they tried to avoid competition and direct conflicts, because the Chinese lacked the language ability to communicate with the Westerners, and because they were not protected by the law and needed to shy away from possible physical injury (D. Lee 63). D. Lee contends, however, that there was another important reason: the Chinese were well organized because they all came from a small area. They even had their own laws to punish those who did not behave, which is illustrated in the Janet Smith case in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*; therefore, when they saw what they considered disorder and lack of discipline among the Westerners, they despised the Westerners' behaviour and stayed away (D. Lee 73). Gradually, the Chinese were driven both by the segregation of the Canadian society and by voluntary choice to stay near their own people. Either way, where the Chinese gathered, Chinatown came into shape.

Despite the Canadian society's effort to segregate the Chinese and their own effort to stay with their Chinese community, Chinatown was not a complete enclave or "Forbidden

City” as C. Lai sees it (69). Dunae, Lutz, Lafreniere, and Gilliland (2011) have studied Victoria’s Chinatown “near its zenith” and when anti-Chinese sentiment seemed to be particularly strong and pervasive (53). Although Dunae and his colleagues acknowledge the existence of racial prejudice, they also show that a considerable amount of the property inside Chinatown was owned by the white elite of Victoria; thus Chinatown was not occupied exclusively by Chinese (58). Besides, the study also demonstrates that about twenty-five percent of Victoria’s Chinese population resided outside the Chinese quarter (68). In addition, outsiders’ visits to Chinatown, daily interactions between white residents and Chinese peddlers and laundrymen, and other activities made Chinatown a “transactional space” for social and commercial interactions between Victoria’s Chinese and non-Chinese residents (79). They conclude:

While some Victoria businesses boasted they did not employ Chinese, white Victorians patronized Chinese businesses regularly. White labourers and Chinese labourers rode the same streetcars to work sites beyond Chinatown. In the working-class districts that included Chinatown, Europeans, Asians, and Aboriginals were neighbours. (80)

Chinatown was very complicated: racism with restriction and exclusion was a fact, the Chinese effort to live in the Chinese way was a fact, and the voluntary and involuntary interactions were a fact too. To understand the Chinese characters in the texts, it is essential to consider these features of their time and their space.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Erich Fromm’s words about “social unconscious” cause alarm when we read stories about people who live in a different society from ours. Fromm’s “social unconscious”

refers to the “repressed elements [...] which a given society cannot permit its members to be aware of if the society with its specific contradictions is to operate successfully” (70). He reminds us that “[e]ach society determines which thoughts and feelings shall be permitted to arrive at the level of awareness and which have to remain unconscious” (70). The Chinese living in British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century in the literary texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong lived in a China that most Chinese today would consider strange but that included multiple pull factors for disaster-stricken immigrants. They also lived in a Canada that the majority of Canadians today would not recognize, including the severity and scope of its racial discrimination against a single ethnic group. They also existed in a Chinatown that was such a unique historical product, no immigrants today could really understand what it was like, including its thriving economy and rich cultural activities that existed despite social segregation. Therefore, though the characters in the above texts are fictional or fictionalized, a good knowledge of the historical context will enable fair interpretation and do justice to the decade-long research of the authors. Understanding this context will allow readers today to avoid interpreting the texts solely in accordance with their own present-day perspective.

Notes:

- ¹ See Yi and Wen's *Blood shed in Beijing and Tianjin: A Documentary of Eight-nation Alliance Invasion of China*. Eight-Nation Alliance: From May 28, 1900 to September 7, 1901, a military force of about 45,000 troops from the eight nations of Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary invaded China with the excuse of suppressing the Boxing Uprising for the Qing Court. The result was the signing of *Austria-Hungary, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Netherland, Russia, Spain, United States and China —Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances of 1900*, which requested China to pay 450 million taels of fine silver (around 18,000 tonnes) as indemnity over a course of 39 years to the eight nations involved. Other articles such as reserving a special area for the alliance nations' exclusive control formally made China a semi-colony and semi-feudalistic society.
- ² See Dai's *A Monograph of the Yi He Boxers*. The Boxing Movement, also the Boxer Movement, (approx. October 1898 to September 7 1900) reached its height around 1900 during its fighting with the Eight-Nation Alliance. It began with the motto of "supporting the Qing court and fighting/destroying foreign invaders" and later caused frequent local unrest due to its loose organization. Sun Yat-Sen highly praised the Boxers for the courage they demonstrated in their attack of foreign invaders including missionaries. See Sun's *Three Principles of the People*.
- ³ See "Guangzhou Port: The Only Trade Port in the World History That Has Prospered for Thousands of Years." The earliest record of a European's arrival in Guangzhou Port was as early as 166 CE. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius sent his messenger to Guangzhou with ivory tusk, rhino horn, and tortoiseshell in hopes of establishing a relationship. Guangzhou began to serve as a port for international trade during the Han Dynasty (217 CE). During the South and North Dynasties (420-589), Guangzhou became the starting point of the marine Silk Road. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Guangzhou became China's largest port, and ninety-eight percent of the country's foreign trade with over fifty countries was through Guangzhou.
- ⁴ See Jun Liu's "A few Remarks on the 'Closing-up Policy' of the Ming and Qing Dynasties". The Single Port Policy only applied to Europeans cargo ships, especially from the UK and the Netherlands when Guangzhou Port is the only Chinese port that was open to ships from these countries. Meanwhile, Chinese cargos and those of other Asian countries can use other Chinese ports.
- ⁵ See "Shamian Became a Concession of Britain and France." Archive Studies Center of Guangzhou, 15 July 2014.
http://gzsqw.org.cn/sdfzpc/gzsq_276/gzsq/gzgs/gmfy/201407/t20140715_4034.html.
- ⁶ *Jinshi*, sometimes referred to in English-language sources as Imperial Scholars, is the highest and final degree in the imperial examination in Imperial China. The *jinshi*

degree was first created after the institutionalization of the civil service exam during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE).

- ⁷ China's literacy rate remained low for a very long time. By 1923, 506,724, a little over 10% of its population of 474,780,000 were literate. As for women, the literacy rate was even lower, in 1909, about 66,500 women were educated. See Yu-fa Zhang's "China's Social Change, 1900-1949"
- ⁸ See Peter Li's *The Chinese in Canada*. This calculations of the defense budget are based on the Historical Statistics of Canada, tables H1-18, and H19-34 (Statistics Canada, 1983).
- ⁹ There are different opinions about how many Chinese entered Canada from 1923 to 1947, ranging from eight to fifty. Berton believes it is fifteen.
- ¹⁰ Order in Council P.C. 2115, passed in September 1930, remained after The *Chinese Immigration Act* was gone in 1947 and "in fact prohibited 'the landing in Canada of an immigrant of an Asiatic race' except the wife or unmarried children under eighteen years of age of Canadian citizens." See Peter Li's *The Chinese in Canada* (88).
- ¹¹ P.C. 1378 required that Chinese applying for Canadian citizenship to obtain consent from the Ministry of the Interior in China. The Chinese were the only ones in Canada to have to obtain consent from the ministry of a foreign country as a condition for Canadian citizenship.
- ¹² The bill was failed twice for many reasons, the major one being Canada's urgent need for Chinese labour to construct the railroad, as demonstrated in John A. McDonald's words in 1882, "It is simply a question of alternatives: Either you must have this (Chinese) labour or you can't have the railway." But in fact, it turned out that head tax did not discourage the Chinese from coming to Canada due to China's domestic social chaos and the sharp difference in economic conditions between China and Canada.

CHAPTER 3

UNRELIABLE NARRATORS: REVEALING COLLECTIVE IGNORANCE

ABOUT WOMEN OF THE PAST

In this chapter, I argue that, through the use of unreliable narrators, the authors demonstrate their concerns about the disappearance of Chinese elders not only from the Canadian historical record, but, more seriously, from the descendants' own memory and knowledge. The narrators of the four texts include retrospective adult narrators and synchronous child narrators. The former are second-generation descendants who explicitly state their "western attitudes" (S. Lee 166) and their "western way[s]" (Chong 258; Choy, *Jade* 21) when they recollect the Chinese elders, while the child narrators have limited knowledge and perspective, making it impossible for them to fully comprehend the elders. All the narrators display the desire to be white at various stages of their life. Kae in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Chong in *The Concubine's Children* belong to the first category, and Kiam, Jung, Sek-Lung, and Liang in *The Jade Peony* and *All That Matters* belong to the second.

I will discuss the "author's norms" (Booth 10), meaning the motivations that pushed them to spend years researching and writing family and community stories, which are demonstrated in their interviews, real life talks, and paratext including title, epigraph, and foreword. According to Booth, the "degree and kind of distance" between the author and the narrator serves as a criterion within rhetorical narratology (155). Booth suggests that the accuracy of a narrator's words can be tested by examining textual signals. And in

another work, Booth clarifies the textual signals as warning of unreliability: 1) paratextual elements, such as titles and epigraphs (55); 2) direct warnings by the narrator or other characters (57); 3) conflicting “facts” within the work (61), as well as conflicts between fictional elements (69); and 4) discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author in other contexts (*Irony* 47–86).

By discussing the authors’ norms, and examining the distance of various types and degrees, I argue that, while the narrators claim to be qualified to tell the elders’ stories, they are really unreliable because of their different experiences and thus different understandings of the immigrants. Furthermore, with the exception of Denise Chong, whose narration I will discuss later in this chapter, I argue that the authors are conscious of their narrators’ unreliability and are deliberately employing an unreliable narrator.

I will begin with explaining the concept of unreliable narrators and the causes of their unreliability. Then, after revealing the norms of the authors’, I will analyze the distance between the narrators and the authors, the distance between the narrators and the elders whose story they tell, and each narrator’s own developing character to show that what they tell about the elders only represents their perspective at specific times in their life and from limited viewpoints. I will challenge the two adult narrators in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and *The Concubine’s Children* by pointing out their own incompetence as well as the unreliability of their major informants by revealing their shifting sense of personal identity and their over-sentimentality. Furthermore, I will show that Choy’s child narrators are outsiders to their elders’ worlds though they physically live together.

I argue that the use of unreliable narrators reveals the descendants' 'D-shaped' process in learning about their immigrant elders: the vertical stroke 'l' referring to the immigrants, and the 'y' curve referring to the descendants. As children, the descendants are close, or at least believe that they are close, to their elders. As they grow older, the descendants struggle to distance themselves from the elders. Finally, when their knowledge of the elders increases, the descendants attempt to get close to the elders again, though the closeness and the time needed to reach such closeness vary. While telling the stories, the narrators are at different spots on the 'D' curve.

3.1 THE CONCEPT OF THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Wayne Booth defines an unreliable narrator in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983):

I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not. If [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed. It is most often a matter of [...] inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible. (158)

This definition reveals three features of narrators. First, the narrator can be in disagreement with the author's "norms." Recognition of the distance between the narrator and the author, which can be of various degrees and directions, is considered "the most important" for practical criticism (Booth, *Fiction* 158-59). Second, though the narrators claim in the narration to possess certain "qualities," they can be intentionally or unintentionally unreliable. Their unreliability could be because of their own inherent inconsistency or erratic nature, or because they have problematic "moral and intellectual

qualities” (Booth, *Fiction* 157-158), which means they have a limited knowledge and ability to comprehend life in a different social context from their own. Third, Booth explicitly points out that once a narrator is discovered by the reader to be unreliable, then the whole narration needs to be “transformed”: the representation has to be challenged by the reader and the story reinterpreted.

Vera Nünning (2015) builds upon Booth’s discussion of the causes of unreliable narration and agrees that critics should examine the “consistency, expertise, morals, and ethics” of the narrator (13). She further observes that some narrators cannot be trusted not because they give incorrect or inaccurate accounts of the facts in the literary works, but because they present “faulty interpretations, evaluations and morals” (15). In addition to Booth’s notion that unreliable narration can be either first person or omniscient third person narration (Booth 158), Nünning contends that not only can homodiegetic narrators (ones who are characters in the story, like Choy’s child narrators) be unreliable, but that heterodiegetic narrators (like Lee’s and Chong’s narrators) can be unreliable too (12).

Nünning emphasizes that narrators can be unreliable whether or not they are involved in the story, and she discusses three types of clues for detecting the narrator’s reliability: text-internal, text-external, and paratextual clues (Nünning 13). Text-internal elements include “inconsistencies concerning the story and/or discourse level as well as stylistic features” (10). Text external elements involve external consistency, including the relation to other stories and the plausibility of “culturally accepted notions of ‘normality’” (24). Nünning emphasizes the importance of readers’ knowledge and experiences of not

only textual features and cognitive processes but also “the implicit cultural knowledge in a given period and culture” (8). As for paratext, which Nünning notes as “signals in the title or foreword” (19), Gérard Genette (1961) explains more profoundly that the paratext elements are “more than a boundary or a sealed border, [but] rather, a threshold” (1–2), meaning that paratext usually reveals the author’s “norms.”

Narrators’ “incongruous or incomplete” words can also be signs of unreliability (Olson 95). Greta Olson suggests that a narrator’s unreliability can be detected by using textual signals including direct warnings that the narrator is not to be confused with the author, obvious historical mistakes on the part of the narrator, conflicts between what are presented as “facts” within the fiction, and discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author in other contexts (95). According to Olson, narrators are “unreliable” and “untrustworthy” because, on a personal level, they “deviate from the general normative standards implicit in the text” and because they make biased observations about how they perceive themselves and their fictional world, meaning that they may not have the ability to “perceive and report accurately” (96). Like Booth, who suggests that once the narrator is found unreliable the meaning of a text is transformed, Olson discerns that new information can be discovered when the narrator’s unreliability is detected; this means that proper detection of unreliable narrators leads to discovering informational gaps (105).

This chapter will present clear evidence to show that the narrators in the works by Choy, Lee, and Chong do not in fact possess the qualities they claim to have, that they

represent the elders in ways that are at odds with the authors' purpose of writing these works, that they lack the ability to report the elders' life accurately, and that they are incapable of fully comprehending their world at certain stages of their life. In the four texts, all the narrators are first- or second-generation descendants telling their own stories as well as stories of the Chinese immigrants. The important difference between descendants and immigrants is vital in detecting the unreliability of the narrators.

Gungwu Wang (1985) distinguishes them as *Huayi* (Chinese descendants) and *Huaqiao* (Chinese immigrants), noting that even the children of rich merchants who were sent back to China for education were still too different from their parents to understand them.

David T. H. Lee (1967), author of the first book-length history of Chinese in Canada, describes the *tusheng* (local-born Chinese) as a group that "suffer badly from an inferiority complex" (qtd. in W. Ng 113). Because of their English education, their understanding of Chinese culture was often different from the immigrants', their relationship with the local Chinese community remote, and their Chineseness often "fragile and vulnerable" (W. Ng 114). As a result of such misunderstanding and remote distance, the descendants often "attempt to behave and present themselves as Canadians" (W. Ng 113).

W. Ng acknowledges the "rising" of the descendants in Canadian society and the emerging of their Canadian identity but she also agrees with David Lee that the "cultural deficiency of the *tusheng* was a reflection of the larger problem with the existing shallow and distorted 'Chinatown culture'" (W. Ng 41), suggesting that the Chinese descendants

can be “mistaken” in understanding the Chinese culture that their elders were brought up in and tried to live with. D. Lee is supported by Choy who remembers the descendants being called “*mo no*” (no brain), the way that the elders called a local-born, “someone raised in Gold Mountain who was thoughtless and mindless of the Old-China traditions” (*Paper Shadow* 78). Choy obviously agrees with the elders’ accusation of the descendants by clarifying that a *mo-no* is “Chinese and not-Chinese at the same time, someone doomed to be brainless” (*Paper Shadow* 78). In this way, the descendants grow up without the “right kind” of brain to understand and represent to elders (Choy, *All* 61). This will be discussed in detail in the following section.

3.2 DISTANCE BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE NARRATOR

On different occasions and in different forms, all three authors admit their previous ignorance of their Chinese background, their shock at finding out about it, their hard effort to make more discoveries, and their attempt to write the story of a family as a means to save the history of the community. For example, Choy admitted being one of the many descendants who had “less and less understanding of Old China traditions, and less and less interest in their village histories” when he was growing up and being “colonized by white-bread” (“I’m a Banana”). In the same article, he also expresses his realization that, in order to have a sense of belonging, he needed to understand the past and to find the foundation of his Chineseness so that he would find roots. He wrote the above after he had had one memoir and a novel published, and retrieving and writing the stories of the elders is his means of rediscovering what he had lost about his past. The author’s “norms”

are expressed in various forms of paratext as well as in interviews and speeches. By intentional use of unreliable narrators, the authors not only demonstrate the process they went through in discovering their own backgrounds, but also present gaps between the narrators and the elders whose stories they are telling.

“Norms” of the authors

All three authors have explicitly expressed their worry about the gradual but steady disappearance of knowledge about the elders’ generations, even within the Chinese community, and about their passion to rescue the history. However, the degree of connection to the Chinese background varies from author to author: Choy accepts the paradox of being both Chinese and not Chinese and smiles at his reflection in the mirror, echoing the Chinatown voice that “You still Chinese!” (“I’m a Banana”). S. Lee believed she had no identity confusion or insecurity but also thought she might have the suppressed wish to be white (“Sharon Lee” 94). Chong accepts her mother’s suggestion, “You’re Canadian, not Chinese. Stop trying to feel something” (*Concubine’s* 238). The authors’ view of their connection to their Chinese ancestry is demonstrated in their narration.

Choy expresses his concern about the disappearance of “the people” on various occasions. As mentioned earlier, in *The Jade Peony*, Choy has the poem “Translations” as his epigraph:

Tohng Yahn Gai was what
we once called
where we lived: “China- People-

Street.” Later, we mimicked
Demon talk
and wrote down only
Wah Fauh— “China-Town.”
The difference
is obvious: the people
disappeared.

The epigraph reveals Choy’s purpose in writing, which is to save “the people” from “disappearing.” He observes the fact that “people” literally disappear in the translation from the Chinese name “China-People-Street” (*Tohng Yahn Gaai*) to the white name “China-Town” (*Wah Fauh*). With this awareness, Choy writes about the “people” with more focus on their daily activities, rather than on the geographical location where they lived.

Choy also addresses the causes of the ‘disappearance.’ It was first caused by the white people and then by “we” the descendants who internalized the white people’s perspective by “mimick[ing] Demon talk and [writing] down only *Wah Fauh*.” In his novels, Choy illustrates how the child narrators incline towards their white friends and get further and further away from their Chinese families. Living in the Canadian social context, the narrators grow up to look at their own community from the perspective of the white people. Choy sensitively points out an important difference between the descendants and the immigrants: language. When the descendants choose the English language and gradually lose the Chinese language, they lose their elders, along with their culture. Therefore, Choy frequently uses Toisanese, the language the elders speak, to restore the elders’ existence and the inalienable part of his own self.

Another important purpose of Choy's writing, I would argue, is that he tries to restore the immigrants' pride in their own background, which distinguishes them from the descendants' "inferiority complex" (Chao, "Anthologizing" 149). The first character "Tohng" (*Tang*) of the Chinese version *Tohng Yahn Gaa* refers to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) when China, as an advanced and open country, had vibrant relations with its neighbouring countries and a population of about one million in its capital city Chang'an¹ alone. At that time, the Chinese people were called "*Tang ren*" (Tang people) by neighbouring countries with respect and admiration. Therefore, when overseas Chinese called themselves *Tang ren*, they inherited the pride in their own culture. However, "China" in "Chinatown" carries an opposite sentiment towards the Chinese immigrants.

In the Canadian context, Chinatown was a "social construct that belonged to Vancouver's 'white' European society" (Anderson, "Idea of Chinatown" 594). Anderson argues:

"Chinatown" has been an arbitrary classification of space, a regionalization that has belonged to European society. Like race, Chinatown has been a historically specific idea, a social space that has been rooted in the language and ethos of its representers and conferred upon the likes of Vancouver's Dupont Street settlement. ("Idea" 594)

Anderson rightly sees that Chinatown was a historical and racial product and an "arbitrary classification of space." She traces how, in the Canadian context, Chinatown was an image of "an unsanitary sink" and "a morally aberrant community" (586). By "unsanitary sink," Anderson refers to the view of Chinatown as "Celestial Cesspool" and immoral "vice-town" where the "heathen Chinese" lived from 1886 to 1920 (586-91). In such space,

the Chinese were “residentially segregated and socially apprehended” in North America (583). Thus, Chinatown conveys racialization, segregation, and othering. All these negative connotations led to the younger generation’s eagerness to escape Chinatown in the 1950s and 1960s and a sweeping sense of inferiority. In his novels, Choy restores the pride which can be found in the contemporary Chinese newspapers and other writings that the child narrators do not read.

Choy’s second memoir, *Not Yet* (2009), outlines his long writing career ranging from an anthologized story about “Caucasian boys” to stories about Chinatown elders (72). After the publication of his first story, his father bought him “the Parker fountain pen with a 14-karat gold nib from Birks” that he had always longed to buy for himself, telling him: “You write with this. Tell people the stories that you remember from your grandfather and all those elders who took care of you” (37). Choy secretly “frowned at [his father’s] naiveté, his utter foolishness” because he did not think anyone in North America would want stories about the elders of Chinatown or about anyone from Chinatown (72). After two novels and two memoirs, however, he was eager to write his Chinatown stories and refused to take a rest after a bad illness. He found his own voice in the Chinatown stories and claimed “I am Chinese” on various occasions (“OWC 2016”).

Being aware of her own “whitewashed” Western point of view, which leads her to call many of her mother’s common practices “superstitious,” SKY Lee knows that she does not have her mother’s firm sense of identity (“Sharon” 92). She writes:

My mother never attempted to Canadianize her thinking: She used to dry fish on

our front yard and dry vegetables on our clothesline. Those were practical things, but she also kept superstitious traditions too—like we weren't allowed to wash our hair on special days. ("Sharon Lee" 92)

Disappearing Moon Cafe is Lee's effort to grasp the fading of the old Chinese community represented by her mother.

In the self-reflection essay "Sharon Lee," Lee writes about how she finally found her voice while she was looking for subject matter for her art creation when doing a degree in Fine Arts. She was discouraged because "[m]ale instructors wouldn't give me the time of day because I was a woman [and racist] instructors wouldn't give me the time of day because I was not part of the WASP mainstream culture" (95). Finally, in her effort to develop her own style, she turned to "Iron Chinks" and produced her first series. "Iron Chinks" was actually the engraved name on a fish-cleaning machine that had squeezed the Chinese out of what little work was still open to them. Lee writes:

I used this title for my series because I saw all kinds of symbolism in it. But basically, my series was portraits of my family, combined with writing about my experiences growing up. [...] So I realized that I had finally found what I wanted to do. [...] If I had something to say, it had to be said. Another good way to get it across was with words on paper, right? So I started writing too. (95-96)

Old Chinese experiences and struggles were what Lee focused on. She had noticed the disappearance of the Chinese community from the mainstream culture and the women's disappearance in particular. It was in making art and writing about the experiences of the elders that Lee finally found what she wanted to do: to put back into the history of Canada the Chinese, especially the women, who suffered injustice that had not been adequately addressed. She calls the novel her "response to social injustice" (Kamboureli, "Tian xia" 306), doing justice to the less privileged.

Lee's effort to discover her family history is rightly observed by Joshua Mostow who compares Lee with her character Gwei Chang and argues that Lee's writing is like "collecting the bones of her family's histories" (qtd. in Beauregard, "Emergence" 62). Guy Beauregard agrees with Mostow's observation and adds that Lee is not attempting to put the bones together into "distinctive skeletons" but instead leaving the connecting job to her readers ("Emergence" 66). I would argue that by using a narrator who is still too busy unravelling knots to put them into a clear shape, Lee modestly admits her own lack of full competence to make all the connections. Beside, in having a complaining narrator, Lee writes the novel as the confession of her own denial of her mother at a younger age. Seeing her mother picking vegetables on her way home with her school friends, she was too embarrassed to recognize her mother and told her friends: "What squatting Chinese woman? I don't see any Chinese woman squatting there. I don't know her" ("Sharon Lee" 92). This shame finds its way into Kae's frustration with her family ties as shown in her agreeing with the comment on her family by Morgan—son of Ting An and a French woman and thus Kae's uncle—as "A family full of assholes [. . .] plugged with little secrets!" (S. Lee 215). Kae is seventeen at the time she says this and her showing no objection to such remarks about her family reflects Lee's own denial of her own family at some earlier stage of her life, long before her desire to collect the family bones developed. While I agree with Mastow and Beauregard about Lee being a bone-collector, I would add that, as I have mentioned earlier, unlike Wong Gwei Chang who collects the bones of men, Lee, as well as Choy and Chong, also collects the bones of women.

Chong talked about why and how she wrote her well-anthologized speech “Being Canadian,” which she gave for Citizenship Week in 1995. This speech reflects important features of *The Concubine’s Children*:

The motive of the story teller should be to put the story first. To speak with authenticity and veracity is to choose narrative over commentary. It is not to glorify or sentimentalize the past. It is not to sanitize our differences. Nor to rail against or to seek compensation today for injustices of bygone times. In my opinion, to try to rewrite history leads to a sense of victimization. It marginalizes Canadians. It backs away from equality in our society, for which we have worked hard to find expression. (330-331)

Chong declares her effort to tell the story objectively by “put[ting] the story first “and “speak[ing] with authenticity and veracity.” Yet her attempt to not victimize and marginalize, nor to glorify or sentimentalize, is challenged by Michele Gunderson who believes that this text fits into the dominant multicultural discourses as “a non-threatening version of multicultural difference that public sector managers and mainstream Canadians can take comfort in” (107). Gunderson observes that, despite her grandparents’ mostly broken dreams, Chong still portrays Canada as a land of promise because their daughter and granddaughter live a middle-class lifestyle at last (112). Furthermore, Gunderson points out that Chong’s suggestion that racism has diminished makes her text fit into the dominant idea that multicultural Canada values diversity (115). However, I would argue that despite Chong’s intention to be “true to the individual lives of the family” (Chong, *Concubine’s* xiii), the narration which is based on limited knowledge and her overall sense of self-satisfaction in claiming “being Canadian” (Chong, “Being” 327) hinders her from objectively representing the Chinese values of her grandmother May-ying.

Chong is aware of her limitations in writing. Her feeling that she does not know enough about her grandmother's life and her eagerness to retrieve it have been evident throughout her writing career. Her knowledge was limited to "a photograph of two young children [her mother's sisters] among a pile of other black-and-white photographs in the bottom drawer" (*Concubine's* 3). Her first trip to see her Chinese family in 1987 led to the cover story of the October 1988 issue of *Saturday Night Magazine*. Even then, as she tells Jacalyn Soo, "I think people realized that there was more to be told; I didn't, at the time. Of course, I never even imagined writing a book" (Soo). That is to say that even after her first visit to meet the China half of the family, her knowledge remained very limited. It took the publisher's encouragement, a second visit to China, and another seven years of further research into the Canada half of her family history to finish the book, which she admits "is never finished" ("Acknowledgements"). Years later, Chong concedes some small errors in her knowledge about the Chinese culture and insists that *The Concubine's Children* "was mine at the time" ("Preface" xi). Though the errors seem to be trivial – for example, she did not know that rice vinegar is really made from malt, or that the Chinese delicacy of *tin guy* (literally "field chicken") is actually frog – they do reveal the limits of her knowledge about the culture she was writing about. In fact, she has not detected more serious errors, such as "the seven traditional 'outs'²" (*Concubine's* 214), which she believed constrain May-ying, but which really only constrain wives, not concubines.

Chong only learned about the disappearing community of early Chinese immigrants when she went to the Chinatowns in British Columbia to conduct research for *The*

Concubine's Children. She realized:

It was not easy to find physical evidence of earlier generations. Nanaimo's old Chinatown was already gone, burnt to the ground in 1960. In Vancouver, I stood at the wicket where Chan Sam once bought passage to China; I sat at the counter [...] where May-ying once worked; I climbed the dark staircases of the rooming houses where my mother once lived. But in the echo of my footsteps, the wicket was torn down, the café was closed and the rooming houses were overtaken by a skid row drug culture. The decline continues as the newest wave of Asian immigrants [...] bypasses the old Chinatown in favor of setting down roots in the flourishing suburbs. (xii)

Chong noticed the disappearance of the physical space of Chinatown from the vision of Canadians. She felt that as she was researching and writing the book, "the window of opportunity to get a glimpse of the past was closing" (*Concubine's* xiii). Without immediate action, the wicket, the B.C. Royal Café, and the rooming houses which gave Chong a sense of her grandparents' existence would soon be gone, and those people would forever disappear with no traces left. Besides, her visit to Chinatown made her realize that not only was the physical space fading, but more urgently, the people of May-ying's generation were becoming fewer (xii). Interestingly, though she notices a relationship between the influx of new immigrants and the disappearance of the early ones, she does not mention that the avoidance and negligence by the descendants, including herself and her mother, also causes the elders' disappearance.

The narrators' distance from the stories they tell

While the authors all make various efforts to save the story of Chinese elders, the narrators, by contrast, show a strong inclination to distance themselves from the elders and they take quite a long time to develop the willingness to access their elders' world.

Kae in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Kiam in *All That Matters* are examples that I will now discuss to show how both adult and child narrators are a long distance away from their elders.

Kae is fundamentally different from Lee the author. Lee has little issue with her Chinese identity and sees Confucius' thought about the ideal political system for good governance, *Tian xia wei gong*, meaning "all under the heavens belongs to all," as her "all-time favourite quote" (Kamboureli 330). By contrast, however, her narrator Kae announces that she feels "disappointed" with kinship, which is at the core of the Confucian social system, and she sees that there are "[k]nots in our dainty gold chains" (S. Lee 166). Her detest of her family history is so strong that even the family servant Chi, who Kae also sees as her "other mother" (171), can no longer bear it. When Kae nags Chi again for more about her family's "real truth," Chi chides Kae for her inquisitiveness:

"Chi, I want to know the real truth!" I announce, each word highlighted against the fluorescent daylight.

"No you don't," Chi whips back, "you want to hear about smut, and the guilt. And who is to blame for the little lost babies ..." (178)

The Wong family has secrets, and Chi accuses Kae of only being interested in learning what these are, and not being interested in understanding other things about the family.

Knowing about the adulterous relationship in her grandparents' generation, Kae knows that feeling worried about possible deformation of Kae's baby boy, her mother Beatrice "count[s] [his] fingers and toes [. . .], unravels his tightly clenched fists and reads his wizened little face, [...] pinches his earlobes and prods his entire skull, [and] peer[s] at private parts" (S. Lee 29). Her mother Beatrice knows about her own sister Suzie's

deformed baby, whose death has been a family taboo for decades. Kae thinks her mother “want[s] to be so damned perfect all the time” (Lee 25), only to find the family has kept a secret of “the whole messy truth about anything!” (25). This leaves Kae feeling she herself has been “tricked” (25), which she resents. Having lived with the Wong family since high school, Chi knows the family and is right to say that Kae only wants to know about the “smut” and “guilt” of family. Therefore, by giving such a direct sharp answer, Chi is pointing at Kae’s sense of superiority over the elders, which makes her see her family all negatively.

Chi’s criticism of Kae is justified by the fact that the latter sees her family as full of “knots” and repeatedly shows her frustration at nearly everyone’s life. In Kae’s eyes, “knots” exist in everyone from Mui Lan down five generations to Kae’s own baby. In the case of Mui Lan, being rich does not make her happy, and her obsession with having grandchildren is an evident knot. The first time the reader sees her, Mui Lan is standing behind the shining counter and feels uneasy when her sighs draw the eyes of a few patrons. “They made her feel like squirming, but that would have been very poor behaviour for a woman. She touched her bun again, as if needing reassurance that the knotted silver hairpin holding it in place was still there” (S. Lee 35). This bun, or knot, reminds her of her position as a merchant’s wife³ but, more importantly, it reminds her of her failure in the most serious mission of her life. After “five years, three months and eighteen days” and “five years, three months, and soon nineteen days” (Lee 33), she still has no grandchildren, and no sign shows the Wong family will survive in Gold Mountain.

In Kae's opinion, however, Mui Lan's desperation for a baby makes her a "pathetic [...] tyrant" in that she is "frustrated and isolated from the secluded life she understood [...] and] she made her suffering felt far and wide" (S. Lee 41). Kae knows about Mui Lan's misery but not its cause, which lies in her familial position and its associated duties.

In Fong Mei, her grandmother, Kae sees knots in the adultery which leads to disastrous scandal for the Wong family. After five years' marriage without a baby with Choy Fuk, Fong Mei's solution is to turn to Ting An, the houseboy of the family, who is really Choy Fuk's half-brother (although none of them are aware of this), and they have three children. The babies make the Wong family a normal one for years, but Fong Mei's 'knot,' one that will cause the family to collapse, surfaces when she learns that the young man her first daughter is about to marry might be her half-brother (Keeman is really the son of the waitress Song Ang and another man Woo, but Fong Mei thinks he is the son of her husband and Song Ang the waitress).

Shocked and despairing, Fong Mei explodes, yelling at her daughter, "You could see that I've always hated him. Why him? [...] Didn't I ever count for anything?" (S. Lee 201). Kae tells the reader about the reason for Fong Mei's outburst: "Year after year of tightly knotted lies—what she had had to endure. All that she had worked so hard to avoid. She would not have it destroyed. Blind rage consumed her. She kept striking out" (201). In Chinatown, where the population was fixed and limited due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, young people, including Fong Mei's children, have limited choice in who to marry. As Lee writes, "The rapidly diminishing chinese-canadian community had withdrawn into

itself, ripe for incest” (198). How hard Fong Mei strikes out at her beloved daughter’s face is how hard she has been suffering from her knots of shame, worry, and fear.

Kae sees knots in her mother Beatrice, too, who was once the proud Miss Chinatown in 1942. However, behind the glorious surface, Beatrice has her own knots. When waiting for Kae to give birth in the hospital, Beatrice sits in a chair “like a scrunched-up piece of paper” with “her face crinkled with tears [and her] shoulders knotted together” (S. Lee 178). She fears something about the baby’s birth, and as soon as the baby is born, Beatrice “starts to count fingers and toes [and] unravels his tightly clenched fists and reads his wizened little face” (29). It turns out that she is worried that the baby might be deformed because both she and her husband are from “rather dubious parentage” and may be half siblings (178). These complicated relationships cause dreadful confusion. Therefore, Beatrice’s knot is a sign of the years’ long feeling of fear and uncertainty.

Kae sees knots in her own life, too, specifically the part related to her family. She shows complete satisfaction with the part of her life that has nothing to do with her family, seeing it as almost flawless. She used to work for a small though influential holding firm and has just got a new job offer of “a prestigious research position” which makes her feel “no more scrambling” (S. Lee 165). However, her personal life in her house with its “hand-knotted carpet” is full of knots (164). She thinks:

My private life is what I find confusing. At home, I must work at unravelling knots—knots in my hair, knots in my stomach. Knots of guilt; knots of indecision. Knots in our dainty gold chains. Figurative knots in our children’s shoelaces. Do not panic lest we get more tangled! We must pick, trace, coax and cajole each knot out. One at a time, even when we know there are hundreds

more. (166)

Kae sees her private life dominated by “knots” which consist of “guilt” caused by the ‘sins’ that everyone in the family has committed.

Throughout the text, Kae literally uses the word “guilt” or “guilty” multiple times: her great-grandfather Gwei Chang’s guilt in leaving Kelora and making Ting An an orphan (296; 315); her great-grandmother Mui Lan’s guilt of being extremely harsh to Fong Mei (83); her grandmother Fong Mei’s guilt of not having a baby for years (49); her grandfather Choy Fuk’s guilt of fathering no baby (138); her real grandfather Ting An’s guilt of having an affair with Fong Mei (158); her mother Beatrice’s guilt of dating her assumed half-sibling (226) and of bringing her mother to knee (243); the whole family’s guilt of Suzie’s suicide and her baby’s death (85;178). Kae even assumes her paternal grandmother’s tolerance of a gambler husband must be because she is too “guilty” of something (116). Her habit of assuming everyone she is related to is being guilty should raise the alarm for readers when it comes to accepting Kae’s reliability in telling their stories.

Kae’s tendency to see knots everywhere is why Chi sharply observes that she only wants to know the “smut” and “guilt” of her family because of her “western attitudes” (166). She is so obsessed with seeing knots in her family that she even sees the face of her newborn baby “knotted up with pain and anguish” (167), and her family is the cause of the knots in her life. Kae’s celebration of her life in the public sphere and her shame about her family stops her from understanding what the elders celebrated.

Unlike Kae and Chong who spent little time with their grandmother, the child narrators in Choy's novels spend almost all their childhood time with their grandmother. Also unlike Kae and Chong, who largely depend on their Canadian-born mother to learn about their grandmother (and also great-grandmother in Kae's case), Choy's child narrators write about their own childhood spent with their mother and grandmother who both migrated from China. However, there are differences between Choy's child narrators: while the three younger children in *The Jade Peony* claim their Canadianness in contrast with their elders' Chineseness, the young adult narrator Kiam in *All That Matters* looks back at his own experience going along the curve of what I earlier described as the D-shaped graph, and finally getting closer to the elders on the vertical stroke.

Seeing Kiam's changing attitudes towards the elders enables the reader to see the relationships between a descendant and an immigrant. When Father asks Poh-poh to tell the Chinese stories to the children, particularly to Kiam who, as First Son, has the duty to be the role model for his younger siblings, Kiam recalls:

They were the stories she had told Father when he was a small boy and Father said they would be the same stories we would one day tell our own children. I didn't think that would happen. [...] Why would I tell anyone, Jack O'Connor or stubborn Jenny Chong, let alone my own future children, about the dragons and devious Fox Lady and the talking pigs and monkeys on sacred treks that once lived in Old China. (Choy, *All* 53)

The boy's refusal of Poh-poh's story is obvious. However, looking back, Kiam now echoes Choy's reference to the stories as a "chain of being" ("OWC 2015") and a "chain of humanity" ("OWC 2016") in passing the culture down from generation to generation. When still young, however, he prefers the Western stories like cowboys and Cheetah, and

avoids Poh-poh's stories, thinking even his own generation (including his white peer Jack and Chinese peer Jenny) would not like them, let alone the future generations. This is why I argue that due to the first-generation descendants' lack of interest in the old stories when they were young, the culture conveyed through the stories by the immigrants is neglected and forgotten by the descendants. Even though some of them may want to retrieve the stories and the culture like Kiam does later, too much is already lost, and the descendants find that very difficult. Kiam regrets shutting his mind when Father was tracing news about China (187), and he does not think that Poh-poh will leave him one day (161), but the fact is that by the time he feels regretful, Poh-poh's and Father's lives and stories are too far behind to get back. This is how the split between the Chinese immigrants (*huaqiao*) and Chinese descendants (*huayi*) happens.

Kiam not only refuses Poh-poh's stories himself, he also tries to guard his younger siblings from being influenced. At the age of ten, Kiam comes to see the difference between Poh-poh's ancient Chinese stories and what he learns at school, and he decides Poh-poh's stories are not "real" or "true." He claims:

I would watch over my siblings, catch them if they slipped into Poh-Poh's beguiling waters, as I had often slipped in my dreams, half believing trains to be iron dragons. I decided that one of my duties would be to explain to Jung and Liang what was real, what was true, in Gold Mountain. (Choy, *All* 121)

Kiam's image of himself as a protector of his younger sister from Poh-poh's Old China stories shows that he sees the Chineseness in Poh-poh's stories as something undesirable that he does not want his siblings to "slip" into. He decides to see a train scientifically as "a train, a solid, whistling, steam-blowing piece of reality" rather than view trains as

“lucky dragons to protect you from white demons” (4). The irony here is that while he tries to turn away from the Chinese stories, he is also trying to fulfill the duties assigned to him as First Son by the family, protecting the younger siblings.

Kiam’s distancing from the elders reflects Choy’s own changing attitude towards the elders and their stories. Kiam realizes later that “I should have been paying more attention to Father, who was tracking the news from China” and regretfully recalls how he “shut my mind” when Father told stories about China being invaded (*All* 405). This regret is Choy’s own, which pushed him to uncover his Chinese background and put it down on paper. As shown in *Kiam*, the Chinese descendants’ experience with their Chinese background is usually like a curve shape: at a very young age they live in the Chinese way without understanding it. As they grow older, nearly all the descendants experience some desire to distance themselves from their Chinese family and to be more Canadian. Then some may develop various degrees of interest in their Chinese background and begin to get closer to the elders’ generation again.

Choy’s own wish to hold fast to his memory of the Chinatown elders whose stories accompanied his childhood, which he developed later in life, is reflected in Kiam’s laughter to himself at Poh-poh’s last words to him asking him to “have many tiger sons” (Choy, *All* 369). Seeing Poh-poh’s “look of joy and irrepressible triumph” at the prospect of the fourth generation of the family, Kiam is sure of her forever existence within the family. The comparison between the fact that Kiam is eighteen years old in *All That Matters*, whereas Choy rewrote over seventy percent of the novel after experiencing and

learning the Chinese culture, shows that Kiam's narration needs to be taken with a grain of salt. He still has a long way to go in order to discover and understand the elders.

3.3 HETERODIEGETIC ADULT NARRATORS

Though Kae from *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Denise Chong were already about twelve years old when their grandmothers died, they had little shared life experience with the older women, making them dependent on their mothers for the family history. In determining the reliability of narrators based on the textual evidence, Greta Olson advises that narrators make mistakes about how they perceive themselves and their fictional world, meaning that they may not have the ability to "perceive and report accurately" (96). She further notes that the narrator's high level of emotional involvement can be a sign of their unreliability (Olson 98). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and *The Concubine's Children*, Kae and Chong repeatedly demonstrate various degrees of ignorance of the elders. Besides, as will be shown, both Kae's mother Beatrice and Chong's mother Hing frequently get too emotional to provide an objective account of their families.

Kae's and Chong's distance from their elders

Kae is the fourth generation on her mother's side to live in Canada and the fifth generation on her father's, and Chong is the second generation on her mother's side and the third generation on her father's. Yet both Kae and Chong rely on their respective mothers, both of whom are the first Canadian-born generation of the family, to tell the stories of their immigrant foremothers. Both remember having little direct contact with their (great)grandmothers. Kae never saw her great-grandmother Mui Lan, who died

before Kae was born, and spent little time with Fong Mei, who lived in the old people's home. Similarly, Chong's grandmother May-ying is left living alone when Chong's mother Hing insists on moving away from her. Whether their mothers sent Grandmother away from home or moved away, both narrators had brief direct contact with their grandmothers and must recreate them somehow. This recreation is usually tainted with what psychologists call "hindsight bias" and what Daniel Schacter calls "consistency bias" by which she means that people "reconstruct the past to fit what they know in the present" (Schacter 147).

All of Kae's memories about Fong Mei are related to her visiting the old people's home, which raises great doubt about her ability to tell her grandmother's story. As she confesses:

I knew my grandmother only briefly, when I was very young and she was very old; a woman who was not really there, sitting primly on her crocheted cushion, in a wheelchair, on the lawn of a respectable old folks home. She bent down and told me very solemnly that she was the only chinese there. (50)

Although Fong Mei lived in the old people's home for twelve years, Kae's memory of her actually fragments these twelve years, recalling them only as separate short moments, which further casts doubt on Kae's knowledge of her grandmother. Kae feels that she "was not really there," meaning Fong Mei was not in Kae's life, but instead merely one to be visited occasionally. Besides, she remembers that though Grandmother was in a "respectable" home, she was lonely, sitting "primly" and talking "very solemnly," but Kae does understand the reason for her loneliness and the connection between her loneliness and being away from her family, and being the "only chinese there" (something I discuss

below).

Kae's connection with Grandmother is further limited when her brief visits are put to an end by her mother long before Grandmother dies. Kae remarks that during one visit when she was "very young," Grandmother "kept filling my mouth with sweet, sticky preserved plums" and, after glimpsing this, mother "never again took me along when she went to visit her" (233). The lonely "trapped" woman shows her love by feeding her granddaughter a snack, but Kae's contact with Grandmother is cut off after that. Nevertheless, the tie was first broken by Kae's mother sending the old woman away, and then severed altogether by bringing an end to the girl's visits, which means readers should be skeptical about Kae's memory of the family elders.

Kae's ignorance of her family history is pointed out by the family servant Chi after Kae shouts at her mother upon learning her family's secret. Kae confronts Chi:

"Why didn't you tell me! What's the big secret? Look at the identity crisis you left me with!"

"Identity crisis! Pah! What's your real problem? What have you got to complain about? Being overprotected, over-cherished, or just spoilt? It was your own ignorance, so what if you didn't ever think to ask until now!" (257)

Chi openly tells Kae about her "ignorance" and sharply points out the cause of her ignorance: she has been "overprotected, over-cherished, or just spoilt." Each of the three reasons reveals one difference between the two generations' lives. Firstly, not wanting their children to suffer physical assaults and even "murder, arson, and intimidation" (Roy 19), which were frequent in North America for decades, Chinese elders usually "overprotected" their children by not telling them about the assaults and keeping the

children close by. One example of such assault is when Choy Fuk, a young man in his twenties, was stoned by some white boys in Pender street in the 1920s (S. Lee 130-31).

Secondly, children were “over-cherished” in Chinatown because they were “rare” (S. Lee, *Disappearing* 32). The extremely imbalanced sex ratio in the Chinese community before 1967 led to a very low birth rate. Statistics in David Lai’s *Towns within Cities* explain the reason for the rare sight of babies in Chinatown:

In 1921, [...] there were 37,163 Chinese men in Canada and 2,424 Chinese women. The ratio was about twenty-five males for every female. As well, there were very few child-bearing Chinese females. In British Columbia, for example, there were 685 births [...] between 1923 and 1925. (60)

Lai later adds that, though the city directory’s enumeration usually shows the sex ratio of about ten males to one female in Chinatowns, in reality, the ratio was well over 200 to one most of the time (*Towns* 186). Therefore, Chi rightly points out Kae’s ignorance of such background when she shouts the above remarks.

Thirdly, before Kae learns about (and Chi reminds her of) her mother Beatrice’s life, she has little idea about how the elders raised their children by “spoil[ing]” them.

Growing up in one of the richest Chinatown families, Kae’s mother was “pampered like royal offspring” (S. Lee 194). When she was sent to Hong Kong to prepare for a bright future, here is what her daily life was:

In the mornings, when Beatrice awoke, a tiny porcelain teacup of fragrant tea stood waiting on a lacquered tray beside her bed. Slippers miraculously appeared before her feet. Polished shoes whenever she expressed a wish to go outside. Pretty umbrellas to keep her skin pale. Curtains and blinds drawn by unseen forces. Dirty towels left in a heap no longer drew criticism but were simply replaced by clean on the rack. Fresh linen every day. White cotton blouses starched and ready for school. Food in bowls came; dirty empties went.

(194)

Therefore, when Chi, the *Bo Mo* (a surrogate-mother like female servant) of the family, tells Kae “[your mother] was openly bred to be a princess! So were you” (177), the reader has a glimpse of how spoiled Kae has been. Besides, Kae admits that Chi “always treated me like a pet poodle” never allowing her to do any house chores (177). When Chi “throws [...] one of her most spiteful faces” and tells Kae that she is even worse because her mother Beatrice is at least honest about being totally useless, Kae can only “glare at her with all [her] might, as indignant as a four-year-old, all the more offended knowing that [Chi’s] words are true” (177). At this time, Kae is thirty-six years old and has just given birth to her first baby. Chi implies that while the descendants like Kae know that they are taking advantage of their immigrant parents’ hard work, they not only take good things in life for granted, but complain of the family fiercely and find fault in their life.

Chong has a great deal in common with Kae in terms of her relationship with her grandmother, May-ying. Like Kae, Chong has limited shared experiences with her grandmother and is too distant from her to make a fair representation of the older generation. Also, like Kae, Chong admits that her ignorance of May-ying is caused by her lack of interest and lack of courage. She admits that “by the time I was either interested in the past or had the necessary courage to ask her about it, she was long gone. And so, I had to rely upon my mother’s memory” (xii).

Also, like Kae, Chong is well aware of her Western perspective in telling her grandmother’s story. However, these differences between them make Chong even more

unreliable than Kae. Firstly, Chong's distance from May-ying is bigger because Chong did not develop intimacy with her grandmother when she was alive, whereas Kae at least remembers visiting Grandmother, who kept filling her mouth with preserved plums, and she could feel her grandmother was trapped. There is obvious affection between the grandmother and granddaughter. Chong, however, remembers that, unlike her sister and brother, both of whom were Grandmother's "favorites" who received her thoughtful birthday gifts and "could light up her face [and] turn on her girlish laughter," Chong "had nothing" from May-ying to mark her own birth and "gave little in return" (Chong 206-07).

Secondly, Kae and Chong have received drastically different images of their respective grandmother from their own mother. Kae's mother "used to hug her all the tighter whenever she talked stories about her own mother," and the stories make Kae feel that everything about Fong Mei is "so good and beautiful" and she is "like a fairy goodmother⁴" (Lee 50). In addition, Kae feels the beauty of Grandmother and her mother's love for Grandmother in the "tighter" hug. In contrast, Chong's mother refuses to mention the past, "try[ing] to hold shut the door on the past" (Chong xi), She tries to cut any tie with May-ying by rarely visiting Chinatown where May-ying lived and died in a car crash, by refusing the Chinese way of cooking, and by wanting nothing to do with May-ying's jewelry. In Chong mother's words, "I'm not going to be cursed by [the jewelry and] it's not a happy thing to have" (233). Thirdly, Chong does not have a Chi figure to remind her of her bias in uncovering the family story. Therefore, although

Chong claims using an omniscient narrator “to be true to the individual lives of the family” (Chong viii), the reader should be skeptical when reading *The Concubine’s Children*.

Chong’s unreliability also lies in her lack of knowledge of May-ying’s common practices, from daily activity to formal ritual. For one thing, some of May-ying’s daily practice makes Chong “shocked” (224). Once, when visiting Hing, May-ying expects to cook Chinese dishes for the family, but Chong sees it as something exotic when May-ying asks Chong’s father to “buy a live chicken, kill it by wielding a Chinese cleaver across the chicken’s neck, and cook it in the Chinese style” (224).

When even May-ying’s common cooking practice is strange to Chong, it is no wonder that the cultural-laden ritual of ancestor worship is even more confusing. When May-ying “requires” the grandchildren to pay tribute to their dead grandfather, saying “It’s only proper; they must worship their grandfather” (215), Chong obviously does not understand that ancestor worship is “the only religion people may have in China (Cassirer 112). The whole process leaves Chong in entire confusion:

When Father arrived, [Grandmother] had ready a thermos of tea, a bottle of whiskey, porcelain bowls of hot steamed rice, a whole steamed chicken and barbecued pork from a suckling pig, packed in a cardboard box along with cups for the tea and whiskey. Not understanding the rituals of worshipping the dead, I was astounded when she left it, dishes and all, in the shadow of the tombstone. (215)

May-ying transforms the ritual by using anything available for the ceremony, such as using the Western whisky instead of the Chinese alcohol, to maintain the essence of ancestor worship. Chong, however, is a confused on-looker, watching May-ying do all the ceremony without understanding a thing about it. May-ying obviously knows about her

daughter's family's ignorance of the ritual so she explains that it is the duty of the younger generation to guarantee Chan Sam "a life never short of tea or rice" even when dead (Chong, *Concubine's* 8). May-ying does not know that her daughter and granddaughter will not perform the ritual for her; her own tomb is not visited for twenty years and cannot even be located when they finally decide to pay respect (Chong 266).

Chong's open confession of her ignorance about China further undermines her representation of her grandmother who lived in and thought about China all her life, including the family there and her two daughters in particular. For Chong,

China was what was left behind when the boat carrying my grandmother, pregnant with my mother, docked in Vancouver. China was the soil underfoot in the photograph of the two sisters who, as I thought then, would never meet the third, my mother. China was where you'd find yourself if you dug a whole deep enough to come out the other side of the Earth. (220)

Chong sees an obvious clear-cut difference between China and Canada and between past and present and they are mutually exclusive, thus implying the distance between May-ying's Chineseness and Chong's Canadianness. As Lindsay Diehl argues, Chong follows the assumption that "China is stuck in the past while Canada is ahead" (116). I would argue further that Chong writes about her grandmother with a sense of superiority and reinforces the ideology of the "West being modern, enlightened, and civilized and the East being the antithesis of all three" (Bonnett 281).

In general, China is something foreign and unknown to Chong. What is more, Diehl also notices that Chong admits that "the Chinese side was a mystery" to her and that her only source for learning about China is Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking* (1939), which her

mother recommended to her. Diehl challenges Chong's knowledge about China because this book is based on Orientalist discourses which often construct the East as the "West's mysterious" counterpart (115). She rightly points out that the Orientalist's approach makes Chong see China as a place of "mystery" located "beyond" her comprehension (Diehl 115).

Chong's distance from May-ying largely undermines her ability to fulfill her goal of restoring the family story. The memoir has a subtitle, "Portrait of a Family Divided," and Chong repeatedly mentions the "two halves of the family," one in China, one in Canada (4; 199; 220; 254), as well as her hope to restore them to one. She even writes that, during the visit to China, her mother understood that "the two halves of the family's history had closed together to make one" (254). However, Chong tells the story only from her Canadian perspective, which causes her to see a clear-cut division, as seen in the fact that she stops "condemning" May-ying because of the success of the Canadian half (Chong, "Being" 328). Other aspects of May-ying's story are yet to be uncovered, and Chong stops short of presenting May-ying as a full person, rather than merely an economic contributor and a provider in Canada for Chong and Hing.

The adult narrators' unreliable informants

As Olson observes, "incongruous and incomplete words" and high level of emotional involvement can be a sign of unreliability in a narrator (98). By examining their informants' incomplete information (due to their distance from the elders and their strong emotions, which prevent them from giving objective accounts of their mothers'

stories), I will demonstrate that readers must question the reliability of Kae's and Chong's narration.

Both Kae and Chong are aware that there are various versions of their family story and they both strongly rely on their mother for the family story. Kae explains how she has gathered her story:

I could create another scenario, with handfuls of hair torn out by their roots, with brutal language to roil the blood, but these points of reference no longer count. And that which should be included in the final reckoning is deeply buried within my mother. She will not speak of it. Chi will speak, Morgan is all too willing to tell his version, even my father will say a few words if I ask it of him; but even after so many years, my mother still needs that margin of silence from the guilt and the pain. (241)

Of all the versions of the family story: her nanny's, her boyfriend's, her father's, and her own version pieced together from multiple sources, Kae considers that "the final reckoning" lies with her mother. She also reveals that the reason for her mother's silence is "the guilt and the pain."

Chong has a similar process. Like Beatrice, who practices "silence," Hing had tried to "hold shut the door to the past" until Chong's own visit to China twenty years after her grandmother's death (xi). Like Kae's various versions, Chong knows that the family story depends on which member of the family tells it. Like Kae, who has "another scenario," Chong sees her writing as an act to "bring another shading of truth" (xiii). Like Kae, who sees "the final reckoning" in her mother, Chong notes that she "rel[ies] upon my mother's memory" (xii) and admits she is "most grateful" to her mother, who was "never tired of my questions and [...] willingly—and vividly—replayed the past for me"

(“Acknowledgments”). Most importantly, after the silence caused by guilt and pain, Kae’s mother opens her memory to the past, “cry[ing] a lot” (178). Likewise, Chong’s mother “first spilled [...] a mud puddle of emotion” when telling the story (xii).

Both Lee and Chong largely use a third-person heterodiegetic narrator, but their seemingly object narration does not make them more reliable. As Booth observes:

objective narration, particularly when conducted through a highly unreliable narrator, offers special temptations to the reader to go astray. Even when it presents characters whose conduct the author deeply deplors, it presents them through the seductive medium of their own self-defending rhetoric. It is consequently not surprising that reactions to such works have been marked with confusion and false accusations. (388-89)

Feeling justified for being ashamed of their family, both mothers tell the story with their own “self-defending rhetoric” and both have a past “marked with confusion” (Booth, *Fiction* 389).

Ellen Quigley reasonably points out Chong’s “unreliability” in presenting the family’s history through her mother’s Chinese-Canadian memory (250), which is also applicable to Kae’s narration in Lee’s novel. Close examination reveals that both mothers are unreliable informants due to their own deliberate distancing from their mothers and their strong emotional involvement when looking back. The existence of multiple versions should signal to the reader that there is no single, reliable narrative of either family’s story and that no version should be accepted unquestioningly, especially one that does give voice to the older women themselves, whose stories are the ones being told. Reading the multiple perspectives poses further challenges to the reader who may not have sufficient knowledge to appropriately determine reliability.

The informants' distance from the elders

Kae sees her mother Beatrice's Chineseness as so central to her mother's identity that she even believes the family's Malaya-originated servant Chi "had learned her chineseness from my mother" (S. Lee 174). However, Kae is not aware that her mother's Chineseness differs from the elder Fong Mei's in very important ways. The following example shows that the way Beatrice treats Fong Mei drastically differs from the way Fong Mei treated her father-in-law, Gwei Chang though both women believe they are filial.

Beatrice sends her mother to an old folks' home, a "respectable" one, but Fong Mei looks "trapped" and lonely (Lee 233). By contrast, years before, Fong Mei had treated her father-in-law, Gwei Chang, in her Chinese way, meaning he spends his old age in his own home and has family around:

[After a friend's visit,] Gwei Chang was getting tired, couldn't keep his eyes open. Fong Mei came in to arrange a pillow or two. He fell back with a heavy thud. The children [were] shooed away. She was always very kind to him, chattering as she opened one window and closed another. [...] It was true she had come a long way from a village bride. Glossy and perfumed, she was a rich woman now. (S. Lee 308)

Fong Mei is rich enough to find a respectable old people's home or hire a nurse, but she waits on her father-in-law, noticing how the pillows should be placed to make the old man more comfortable and which window should be opened or shut to ventilate the room, to let in some sunshine, or to make more shade. She chatters with him when he needs some conversation and keeps the children out when Gwei Chang needs a private talk with his old friend and some rest after the guest leaves. Thanks to her great care, Gwei Chang

lives, relaxed in his own house, and can see his own children and grandchildren any time he wants. By being “respectful,” “available,” “kind,” and “considerate” of the elders’ needs, Fong Mei is the embodiment of filial piety (G. Ye 301-02).

By contrast, in sending Fong Mei away to an old people’s home and not allowing her to see her granddaughter, Beatrice shows she has a different sense of family. Although she also tells Kae beautiful stories about Fong Mei, the above difference shows that Beatrice does not understand her mother’s needs in the way her mother understands Wong Gwei Chang’s needs. This in turn hinders Beatrice from giving an objective account of Fong Mei. This distance exemplifies the difference between Chinese descendants and Chinese immigrants, as previously discussed: the descendants are so different from the immigrants that they are likely to misrepresent the immigrants.

In *The Concubine’s Children*, Chong’s mother Hing takes a different approach in distancing herself from her mother. As soon as she gets married, Hing stays away from May-ying in every possible way. First, she hurriedly moves to another city when her husband gets a job and does not see May-ying for four successive years (Chong 202). Second, she avoids her mother’s lifestyle, beginning with food. Believing that Western food would make her children more robust, she “put roasts on the table, enriched the milk [...] with extra cream and introduced cheese into her cooking” and cooked Chinese-style “only infrequently” (224). Third, after May-ying’s death, Hing makes an effort to clear out all trace of her as if she had never existed. When she goes to May-ying’s rooming house to clear up, Hing takes only two items that could be returned to the store and told

the building's caretaker to "dispose of everything else" (233). As for the jewelry that had been passed down from May-ying's grandmother, to her mother, and to May-ying herself, who had tried hard to keep it in the most difficult financial circumstances, Hing sees it as "not a happy thing to have" and does not want "to be cursed by it" (233). Fourth, Hing does not feel loss at her mother's death. She "didn't cry at the funeral" (232), and for twenty years she did not go to worship at May-ying's grave (241). If May-ying tried to make sure that Chan Sam's ghost had "rice and tea," Hing, the only daughter, left both her parents' ghosts hungry and thirsty for decades, though maybe unconsciously.

Finally, she cuts May-ying out of her life by removing May-ying's photos, which May-ying had taken "for posterity" (xi). Chong remembers that some people were "scissored from their backgrounds" in some photos (236). Many photos were left "loose ...in the bottom drawer" (3; 11; 220). When compared with how Hing carefully "compiled chronicling her children's accomplishments— news clippings of piano competitions, a program from the family concert, academic certificates" (236), the loose photos on the bottom of the drawer reveal Hing's lack of affection for her mother and her being "bothered" by May-ying so much that she "removed the offending photograph from the pile [because] she wanted never to look at it again (229). All these efforts culminate in her refusal even to mention May-ying. When Chong attempted to persuade her mother to visit her grandparents' village in China, her mother had little inclination to go with her until Chong "pleaded" by reminding her of her father's will: "After I die, Win, spend your money and travel—go to China"(238). Hing's final decision to travel to China shows that

while she cherishes her own family and is willing to sacrifice for it as her mother May-ying did for hers, she refuses to include her mother May-ying in it.

Kae's and Chong's overly emotional informants

Lily Cho best summarizes how the second-generation descendants like Kae and Chong learn about their elders when they are told “the most important stories were the ones that we knew should never be told” (“Asian Canadian” 167). However, from May-ying’s taking photos for posterity to her eagerness to tell her past life to her daughter Hing, the immigrant elders are eager to be known. The same eagerness can be felt among the interviewees in many later documentaries such as *Under the Willow Tree* (1997), *In the Shadow of Gold Mountain* (2004), and *The Legacy of Chan* (2013). It is the first-generation descendants like Beatrice and Hing who feel strongly negative about the community and began the tradition of not telling the story.

The first time Beatrice tells Kae the family story, she begins, “You don’t know, A Kae, but there has been much trouble in our family. It’s best that what I tell you does not go beyond these four walls” (S. Lee 30). There have been signs of Beatrice’s emotions that keep her quiet about the family’s past. The first time Kae finds her mother’s strange emotion is when she tells her parents about meeting Morgan Keung Chi Wong. She notices her father “glanced over to my mother, who looked as if she needed to choke” and Kae is surprised at their unusual response (113), but they do not explain. The first time her mother sees her together with Morgan:

My mother turned her face away abruptly as though she couldn’t bear to look at

him, clutching at her throat as though she needed to protect it. I couldn't see Morgan's face until my mother tried to sweep past him. When he turned, trying to keep up with her in this strange dance, he looked as if he was in the depths of hell! I realized, then, that this was an encounter between long time, mortal enemies. (119-20)

Morgan is Beatrice's half-brother who, unaware of their connection, had an incestuous relationship with their late sister, Suzie. Suzie committed suicide after their baby was born deformed and died. Seeing this man together with her daughter, Beatrice can no longer handle the long-suppressed shame caused by her mother, Fong Mei's, adultery with Ting An, which, unknowingly, was also incestuous.

This shame and fear lasts to the birth of Kae's baby. In the hospital, Beatrice was "sitting [...] like a scrunched-up piece of paper" and told Kae "that both your father and I come from rather dubious parentage" (178). Her pride of being the daughter of a rich family, the elegance of playing the piano, and the confidence of handling life is all gone. What is more, her husband is the son of the woman who was paid by her maternal grandmother to have a baby for the Wong family. She has tried hard to shed the family story, but after decades, she fears that the ghost of incest is still cursing the family.

More severely than Kae's mother in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, who has stories of a fairy grandmother despite the shame, Chong's mother in *The Concubine's Children* has been drowning in her past memories. Chong remembers Hing losing control of herself and letting the past trauma take charge of her:

Once Mother came across the kitchen trash bin full to the brim; one of us children had neglected to empty it. She turned it upside down, scattering wet peelings, egg shells and tea leaves across the floor. We mopped it up, looking at each other in disbelief and disgust at what Mother had done. Mother, watching

us, threw onto the trash these words: “It’s scary. My mom once did the same thing to me.” Another time, I forget what I had or hadn’t done, I remember only that Mother grabbed the closest thing, the hollow extension to the vacuum cleaner. I was fourteen or fifteen, too old to be spanked. My sister yelled at her to stop. I began to hyperventilate. Mother froze upon her own words: “I used to cry like that. My mom used to strike me for no reason.”

There were other times when Mother would unexpectedly spill tears upon something Father did or said. [...] she was still hurting from her past. (235)

Hing remembers her mother punishing her when she failed to do the house chores and her mother hitting her “for no reason.” It is strikingly interesting that both Chong and Hing have selective memories. Chong forgets what she had or had not done and Hing remembers being hit “for no reason,” but they both remember what their mothers did to them: Chong remembers her mother’s weird reaction of “scattering wet peelings, egg shells and tea leaves across the floor,” and Hing remembers her mother striking her. This selective memory has been the cause of Hing’s emotions of “fear and confusion” (91). Her repeated mentions of the past, such as “my mother did the same to me” and “I used to cry like that” is what Booth calls “self-defending rhetoric,” which often leads the reader to side with the speaker in their “confusion and false accusations” (*Fiction* 389). However, the incomplete information also undermines the reliability of her narration.

Hing’s fierce declaration to May-ying in their fight best illustrates her hatred for her mother. Once, when May-ying asks Hing for money to send to China, Hing, thinking that May-ying is asking for money to buy alcohol, refuses the demand and the fight begins:

“Ah Hing! Give it to me. You owe it to me; I raised you!”

As a stream of invective swirled by Winnie’s head, something in her snapped. All the years of resentment and near-rebellion had come to the breaking point. She became her mother, wanting to hurl back worse than she got.

“You didn’t raise me. I raised myself. You threw me out on the road, left me

like a plant, without water or care.” (208)

The words “You didn’t raise me. I raised myself” reveal her long suppressed “resentment and near-rebellion.” The reader soon finds Hing doing what she says her mother did to her. Hing leaves May-ying on the road: Chong remembers her father “pulling [the car with Hing inside] away from the curb in front of Po-po’s rooming house, leaving her yelling and gesturing after us” (222-23). She wants to cut her mother out of her life in the same way she wants nothing to do with her mother’s jewelry, seeing it as “curse” (233). In sum, “curse” is how Hing feels about her mother.

Hing and Chong’s feelings for May-ying after the two visits to China further challenge their representation of May-ying as a family member and as a Chinese woman. After Hing learns that a whole grand house was built “on her mother’s back” (254), Chong feels that Hing’s “burden of her shame” that her mother was “nothing but a *kay-toi-neu*” (wait-on-table-girl) has been lifted and that she has decided to forgive May-ying (259). Chong stops condemning her grandmother and has sympathy for her now. Angela Lee notes positively that the result of the two visits to China is Chong’s reconciliation with her grandparents. I doubt it is real reconciliation though, because what May-ying is recognized for is her economic contribution and her giving Hing and Chong the opportunity to be born and to live in Canada. In this way, Hing’s forgiveness and Chong’s sympathy only confirm their superiority in being Canadian and May-ying’s inferiority in being Chinese and still “nothing but a *kay-toi-neu*.” The irony in Hing and Chong’s views of May-ying is what Gunderson sees as “escapism”: they make effort to

rescue May-ying's history without trying to do justice to her Chineseness, which weakens their effort to restore May-ying's story (11). This Chineseness will be a subject of discussion in my later chapters.

3.4 HOMODIEGETIC CHILD NARRATORS

This section discusses the four child narrators in Choy's novels who are descendants like Beatrice and Hing but who, unlike them, narrate the story while still in their youth. Even in the intimate Chen family, the children gradually distance themselves from their elders, which further illustrates Beatrice's and Hing's own distance from their elders. *The Jade Peony* is narrated by five-year-old Jook-Liang, eight-year-old Jung-Sum, and six-year-old Sek-Lung, each of whom tells one short period in their life. *All That Matters* is narrated by the 18-year-old Kiam who reflects on his childhood, and there are obvious changes in his attitudes towards Poh-poh and the Chineseness she embodies.

I consider these child narrators unreliable not because they are mistaken and sometimes even lie, but because their knowledge and perspectives are limited; therefore, their truthful telling of a particular period of their life with their immigrant elders is often mixed with their uninformed interpretation or judgement. Olson categorizes child narrators as "fallible narrators" and notes that they "do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased" and their perceptions "can be impaired because they are children with limited education or experience" (101). Olson obviously does not think that these kinds of child narrators are unreliable on purpose, but that they simply lack education and experience; therefore, their

narration, though from fresh eyes, usually requires the reader to dig deeper and find out what the children do not see, which leads to new interpretations.

Booth makes another comment about unreliable narrators that is applicable to child narrators and that concerns when narrators' "characteristics change in the course of the works they narrate" (Booth, *Fiction* 156-57). Though the characteristics of any narrator can change, child narrators are more likely to change as their knowledge increases and their environment changes, and their comprehension, which they take for granted in one moment, can turn out to be entirely groundless later.

The fact that the children's life is restricted within Vancouver's Chinatown limits their vision of the world, resulting in their inability to understand the three worlds the elders live in. In *The Jade Peony*, when the family is on their way to the dock to see Wong Suk off on his return voyage to China, Liang remembers, "The taxi went smoothly forward, down our street, down streets soon *unfamiliar* to me. In no time we were driving past the docks, past huge ships bobbing like monsters" (70; my emphasis). Similarly, in *All That Matters* when the family is returning home after picking up Stepmother at the dock, Kiam remembers, "When the taxi finally turned south, crossing the *familiar* streets of Hastings and Pender and then turning east on Keefer, a pain started to throb in my hand" (41; my emphasis). These two scenes – Liang leaving Chinatown to enter the "unfamiliar" world and Kiam returning to the "familiar" streets from the outside world – portray the limited and enclosed space that the children live in.

The children's limited world stands in clear contrast to the way their elders live in

three historical and cultural contexts, as discussed in Chapter One. While Choy writes with a “strong presence of historiography, briefly defined as ‘the writing of history’” (Vautier 18), the children’s insufficient knowledge makes them leave much about the elders for the reader to infer. Choy is obviously aware of his narrators’ limitations, and he intentionally uses them to present examples of Chinese descendants’ ignorance like his own at a younger age. This section focuses on the children’s limited comprehension of the three worlds and the following chapters will discuss the elders by placing them in their three primary cultural and historical contexts.

Child narrators’ lack of knowledge of China

For the elders, China is what they brought along when they came to Canada and what they believe they will return to one day, but for the children, China is games, stories, and news. In *The Jade Peony*, Liang describes how her brothers play the Hong Kong-made game called Enemies of Free China which is “to send the flat heads flying into the air [with a sword] to fall on a roll-out floor map of China” (7):

One enemy head swooped up and clacked onto the linoleum floor, missing its target by three feet. Jung started to swear when Father looked up from his brush-writing in the other room. He could see everything we were doing in the kitchen. Poh-Poh sat on the other side of the table, enjoying Kiam and Jung’s new game.

[...]

Whack! Another head rolled onto the floor. Kiam swung his toy sword like an ancient warrior-king from the Chinese Opera. Jung preferred to use his sword like a bayonet first, and then, Whack! (Choy, *Jade* 7-8)

The children have no concern about what China is, who the Chinese see as enemies, or why; they are simply having fun. Father specifies the “enemies” as “the evil foreigners

who were dividing up China. The dog-turd Japanese. The demon Russians. The big-nosed British” (Choy, *All* 80). At the time, the boys are just enjoying swinging the sword and seeing the heads fall on the floor. The adults allow and encourage the children to play as part of their education, but the children do not feel connected to China the way they are expected to. For them, the floor map of China is similar to a chess board and the enemies mean little real harm.

For the children, China is also the stories to be traded at recess. The stories are mainly about the Japanese invasion of China from 1931 to 1945. In *The Jade Peony*, the children respond to Father’s question, “What kind of dog-screwing bastards those Japs are?”:

“They bayonet pregnant women!” Liang volunteered, her eyes wide with terror.

“They bury alive villagers and nuns,” Jung joined in.

“They cook up Chinese babies,” [Kiam] said, with dark authority. (Choy 225)

The children have learned something about the Japanese conduct in China and they trade stories during recess, and begin to turn away from the Japanese boys and girls at school, and bigger children have “fights between gangs of ‘good guys’ and ‘Japs’” (Choy 225).

However, for them, this kind of “knowledge” is more a story than actual history and they cannot really relate to the situation in the ways that the adults do.

They find it more relatable when the Japanese aggression is in British Columbia where they are living than in China. Kiam, First Son who is nearly eighteen years old and understands the situation better than his siblings, remembers in *All That Matters*:

Chinatown kids who knew nothing of politics but played at war with a fierce and dedicated craving. MacLean Park was crowded with boys of all ages

shooting at each other with toy weapons, the older ones rumbling in jerry-built tanks nailed together out of wooden crates and cardboard flaps. Boys like Sekky even wore war-surplus goggles and dented helmets, ran amok with tin-pressed planes held high in the air ready to drop their bombs. [...] he swore to Father he would become a pilot and go “kill the Japs to death.”

“*Dai-goh*,” Liang began, picking up a piece of *bok choy*, “what’re you going to do if the Japs invade B.C.? Are you going to join up?”

“Of course he is,” said Sekky, rolling his eyes. “Jung and me, too!” (318)

The strong sentiment of the war stories makes them exciting to trade during school recess and provides good subjects for the children’s imaginative play, but the children need to imagine the war in their own world in British Columbia for it to be relatable.

When Kiam looks back and recalls his younger brothers’ and sister’s response to the war “stories,” he is well aware that the lack of political knowledge limits their understanding of war. In fact, elsewhere, Kiam remembers himself distancing from Poh-poh’s stories about Old China and trying to prevent his siblings from being influenced by her tales as he tells them, “Poh-Poh’s stories were just stories, nothing more” (*Jade* 23). The idea that stories are “just stories, nothing more” speaks to the nature of the difference between the child narrators and their elders: while the elders worry about their family in China during Japan’s invasion, the children see the Japanese as nothing more than something like the bad wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood;” scary, but harmless, to them.

For the children, China is also what they hear in the news. Sek-Lung sees adults sharing news about China:

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. A dozen incidents of mass slaughter were exposed in the newsreels: machine guns ripped across a line of defenceless citizens; bombs fell on civilian targets; ... in one newsreel of captured enemy film, a Japanese bayonet lifted up what seemed to be a woman's head, her long dark hair matted with blood. (Choy, *Jade* 226)

While the adults "wailed or whispered" at the losses, Sek-Lung sees them as "news," "tales," and "rumour" about unknown people in a faraway land. Bio-weapon experiments, bombing, slaughtering, bayoneting do not bother the child. Instead, he is so excited about the war in China that he "wanted the actual fighting to start happening in Canada [... and] each day [he] looked into the sky and waited for the fall of bombs," wishing that he was in Singapore and London, cities bombed by Japanese and German troupes respectively (*Jade* 227). He obviously does not understand war or death yet. Though Sek-Lung is inevitably influenced by the unrest and excitement of older boys who wish to enlist, the eight-year-old boy cannot connect "actual fighting" and the "fall of bombs" with death and does not feel for war-torn China the way the adults do.

Similar limitations on her ability to serve as a reliable narrator impact the recollections of Jook-Liang, who does not understand Wong Suk's connection with China. Just before Wong Suk makes his trip back to China, he comes to see the little girl to say goodbye and it is the first time she hears about bone-shipment:

"I'm going on the Empress steamship this afternoon," I heard him say. "I'm going back to China with the bone shipment."

"But we're going to the Lux today," I said, "to see the cartoons and the news about China. Kiam said they bombed Shanghai." I pulled away from him. "And you're late," I said.

“The bone shipment,” Wong Suk kept on, “that’s all the bones of the dead Chinese, the Chinese who died in Gold Mountain. The bones come from all over B.C. I’m going back with the shipment to Hong Kong first, then to Mainland China, then back to my—”

The old man could see I was not listening to him properly, but he kept talking. “Two thousand pounds of bones going home to China. Liang-Liang, isn’t that wonderful?”

In my mind, I saw a pile of bones, a mountain of dead people’s bones: it was horrible. Like all the dead people lying about the railroad in Shanghai. “Stupid bones!” I said. “You promised me we would go to the movies today. Father gave you big money last week. We could go to movies for years and years.” (Choy, *Jade* 66-67)

There are two parallel talks in this conversation: while the old man is speaking of a trip to real China, the girl is talking about the China in the news. While the old man is excited about sending back to China the bones of the Chinese who died from “the lumber, fishing and railroad camps” (187), three major industries which employed Chinese labour, the girl is longing for cartoons and movies. While the old man tries to get across to the girl the message that the bones are souls to be rested in peace in their home country, the girl is unwilling to listen and for her, they are “stupid” and “horrible.” While the old man is envisioning his trip to the homes of those people so that the ghosts no longer need to wander about in Canada, the girl is looking forward to movies. Her “pull[ing] away for him” is a symbolic action to show the distance between the descendant and the immigrant, especially in terms of the meaning of China to them. For the girl, neither the Chinese labourers who died along the Canadian railroad nor the ordinary Chinese who were bombed by the Japanese are relatable in any way. Though the girl loves the old man and knows that the old man loves her—the girl calling the old man her “bandit-prince” (*Jade*, 39; 57) and the old man calling the girl his “bandit-princess” (*Jade*, 29; 74), the love does

not bridge the gap between the worlds they live in. In general, his “keeping talking” and her “not listening properly” can be a metaphor for the conversations between the Chinese immigrants and their Canada-born/raised descendants.

The child narrators’ lack of knowledge of the elder’s life in Canada

As shown previously, the children’s universe is Chinatown, but they understand it to be “Canada.” In this way, their Canada is different from the elders’ who, while doing various jobs from railroad construction to being houseboys, experienced various forms of hostility. Because the children’s lives centre on Chinatown and school, they are largely sheltered from this type of hostility. This leads to a contrast in their identifications and impacts the children’s ability to accurately represent the elders, which will be discussed further in Chapter Six. While the elders firmly identify with China and attempt to implant this identification in the children, the children are inclined to identify with Canada, the one that they fabricate from their limited experiences within Chinatown where they are protected from the harsh social setting the elders know too well.

In *The Jade Peony*, this difference in how they identify with each nation is illustrated in a conversation between Liang and Poh-poh when the girl hears the adult talking about war in Europe and in China, and feels the security in Chinatown:

I thought of the newsreels, smoke and bombs: Europe and Germany were at war. Britain was at war. The Chinese were forever at war with the Japanese invaders. War everywhere but here in Chinatown.

“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.” (Choy 34)

The girl feels the sense of security in Canada, which is her entire world, and is not bothered by the wars in Europe and China in the way Poh-poh is. For Liang, war is only in newsreels and in lands far away.

At this moment, Poh-poh finds it necessary to remind the girl of her ethnic identity. Her “condescending look” and majestic tone certainly suggest her awareness of the girl’s drifting away from Chineseness. Choy himself confesses his naive recognition of the world in his memoir *Paper Shadows*: “The world was at war but here, enrolled in the Vancouver Chinese Mission Church, read to and cared for, *I hardly knew what any of that meant* (116; my emphasis). It was not until Choy became an adult that he realized that he did not understand his childhood life enough. Similarly, the child narrators mistake Chinatown for Canada because they have a limited vision of both. Ignorant of the adults’ life in Canada, the children fabricate a Canada based on their own limited knowledge of Vancouver’s Chinatown, which further distances them from the elders..

One of the things the child narrators are ignorant of is the impact that the restrictive and exclusive immigration laws have had on the Chinese. Liang remembers seeing Father and Third Uncle take out “neatly tied bundles of paper” from a case: “I could see half-folded documents stamped CP RAILROAD, B.C. WORK PERMIT, letters from China, old bills, certificates with Chinese words in black ink, signed with red chop marks... all important papers” (Choy, *Jade* 47). The papers look “important” to the girl, but she cannot figure out why they are important. When, curious, she asks what one paper is, and only concludes that Wong Suk is old, nothing more, from her father’s answer:

“This certificate says that Wong Suk arrived in Canada when he was twenty—what? Not clear here” (47).

William Ging Wee Dere, a leading activist of the redress movement, writes about his own ignorance of the Chinese experience in Canada. He admits that at the age of 37 in 1985, he knew “virtually nothing about the struggles of my own people and nothing about the history of my own family here in Canada” (120). Dere’s ignorance is shared by most Chinese descendants in Canada. For instance, May Chiu, a Montreal lawyer and activist, first learned about the Head Tax and Exclusion Act when she saw Dere’s documentary *Moving the Mountain* in 1994 (Dere 145). Along with Choy’s young narrators, in both *Disappearing Moon cafe* and *The Concubine’s Children*, Kae’s and Chong’s ignorance in their twenties or thirties also illustrates the gap between the descendants and immigrants, which makes the descendants highly unreliable in representing the elders.

The children’s identification with Canada is also different from the elders because they have limited knowledge of Canada. The youngest child, Sek-Lung, remembers a sharp conflict when he looks at his community in the same way his white friends do. It happens after dinner when he is praised for reading “like a scholar” by Stepmother but mocked by Third Uncle who teases the boy for not knowing how to address *Sam gon* and for reading a book with no Chinese language. The boy gets frustrated at having to learn the Chinese relationships and the Chinese language:

I slammed my book shut and glared at *Sam gon*. In my best Chinese, I said loudly, “What’s the difference what you’re called! My *huhng-moh gui*, my red-haired demon friend, says if you drop a plate in a restaurant, a dozen Chinks

will answer!”

Sam gon's eyes opened wide as saucers. Stepmother dropped a large plate. Grandmama walked out of the room. That evening, there was no supper for me. Stepmother could hit hard, but when Father came home from working at the restaurant, he hit harder. He walloped me with a wad of folded *Chinese Times*.

I was sent to my room and grew even more to hate the Chinky language that made such a fool of me. I hated the Toisan words, the complex of village dialects that would trip up my tongue. I wished I were someone else, someone like Freddy Bartholomew, who was rich and lived in a grand house and did not have to know a single Chinese word. (Choy, *Jade* 158)

The eight-year-old boy has just started school and is despising the elders' way of life in Canada and the language they speak. By shouting “What's the difference what you're called!” he obviously has no idea about what effort it takes to maintain family relations in Canada, let alone the fact that the Chinese people define themselves in terms of relationships.

In mentioning the Chinese competition for jobs, the boy also shows he has no clue about the Chinese difficulty in surviving in Canada. Hating the Chinese language and dialects, the boy also knows nothing about the elders' effort to bring over Chinese teachers from China and to build Chinese schools. In addition, his slamming, glaring, and shouting at the adults all present him straying from the family's effort to raise well-behaved and respectful children. Finally, with his wish to be someone else, which he confesses elsewhere too, saying that “I sometimes wish my skin would turn white, my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue [...] and I would be Jack O'Connor's little brother” (*Jade* 151), the boy is trying to distance himself from everything the elders are.

Sek-Lung's internalization of his white friends' view of the Chinese illustrates the poem of “Translation” which Choy uses as the epilogue for *The Jade Peony*. The boy has

learned to see his community from the white people's perspective: he calls the Chinese "the Chinky language;" he looks down upon the people in their struggle for survival; and he does not understand the relationships and does not bother to learn about the relationships. Not understanding the elders' belief that "Old China had bigger and better things than anything in Canada" (Choy, *Jade* 155), the boy does not inherit the immigrant's pride; in looking down upon his relatives, he feels shame in being Chinese and develops an "inferiority complex." Though he calls his white friends *huhng-moh gui* (red-haired demon), the way his elders call them, the boy does not use it with the same feeling.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Writing at different stages of uncovering their family and community history, the three authors use unreliable narrators of various degrees and types. Choy's use of innocent child narrators represents his own childhood ignorance of the elders, and his unreliable child narrators also reflect his retrospective understanding of his own ignorance as a Chinese descendant. He makes a confession-like statement in his first memoir when recalling his resentment for his father when he was a boy: "I am just saying I understand all that now" (*Paper Shadow* 97). Lee uses a minor character, Chi, to remind the reader of Kae's frequent inaccurate assumptions and her biased and limited perspective. Chong, as both the writer and narrator, declares the text her version of the story at that moment, implying there is room for more discovery and new interpretation, and her text should therefore be read with care and skepticism. Thus, in various ways, the

three authors reveal that they are conscious of their narrator's limitations, and this unreliability of the narrators illuminates the ways in which the elder generation has been misunderstood, and the ways in which the authors attempt to represent the elders more accurately.

Understanding that the authors are deliberately using unreliable narrators underscores the need for new approaches in the study of the Chinese elders in the texts. Fulfillment of the goals of the Chinese-Canadian authors, which include increasing readers' knowledge about Canadian society, building their personal and collective identity, and communicating with Canadians about the Chinese community's past, requires fair recognition and representation of the Chinese elders. As explained by Georg Lukacs, novels serve as "sources of pleasure and pedagogical vehicles which [transmit] knowledge of the past and knowledge of a culture (qtd. in Vautier 19), and the four texts in this study need to be studied in the cultural and historical contexts of China, Canada, and Chinatown. In the following three chapters, I will fill in the gaps left by the unreliable narrators by exploring the representation of the Chinese immigrant women.

Notes:

- ¹ See Zhuang's *Life in the Tang Dynasty*. Population of Chang'an, capital city of China's Tang Dynasty, is believed to be 920,000 according to *Master of Ceremonies* by Du You, a politician and historian of the Tang Dynasty. "*Tang ren*" is from "Story of Zhenla" in *A History of the Ming Dynasty*. *Tang ren* is how the Barbarian countries call the people of the Middle Kingdom. It is true all over the world." The way is well accepted by the early overseas Chinese who call themselves "*Tang ren*," with pride, wherever they are.
- ² "Seven Traditional Outs" refers to the seven types of errors or shortcomings that will cause a husband to divorce his wife. This includes being unfilial to parents-in-law, having no son, being carnal, being jealousy, having incurable disease, being over talkative, stealing which refers to taking the property of her husband's home to her own home. These rules were only applicable to wives, not concubines. Therefore, May-ying in *The Concubine's Children* is not restricted and has much more freedom.
- ³ In old China, it was customary that a young girl wore her hair down, and married Chinese women changed their hairdo and made a chignon/bun at the back of their head. The bun is thus the symbol of a woman's married status.
- ⁴ "Goodmother" is the original text. It may be a typo and Lee might have wanted to write "Godmother."

CHAPTER 4

UNDERSTANDING LIFE IN CHINA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON EARLY CHINESE WOMEN IMMIGRANT CHARACTERS: THE NEGLECTED MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONNECTIONS

This chapter begins with considering the “hard-life” narrative that has dominated scholarly discussions of Chinese immigrant characters in Chinese-Canadian literature set at the turn of the twentieth century. Though this hard-life narrative is present in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong, scholars in Canada and China have largely overlooked the complexities of each author’s portrayal of immigrant characters and their reasons for leaving China. I will examine some of these complexities and then present two major characteristics of Chinese society that are key to understanding the Chinese women in Canada: the first is the idea that “between men and women, there [are] only differences” (Fei 87), and the other is “*Chaxu geju*: a differential mode of association” (Fei 60).

Drawing from Fei, I will argue that the women in the four texts view their relationships with men in accordance with the idea that men and women are playing ‘different’ roles in order to maintain the desired order, and that the women feel an important emotional connection with their family in China. This connection gives the women a sense of belonging to China, even during their ‘sojourning’ years. Secondly, I will argue that the connections that the women feel with the diverse Chinese culture nurture their self-regard in a Canadian society that debases them. Finally, I contend that the women’s knowledge of the hard life in China, past and present, serves as a pull factor,

instead of a push one. This knowledge also unites the women with each other, and unites them with men, as they contribute to the same cause by helping their families back in China. Moreover, these efforts empower the women as they are able to contribute to China in ways that women in China cannot.

I will also argue that their hard life is only a small portion of some Chinese women's memory and that the women also remember good times and positive elements of Chinese culture and history. In addition, their memory of a hard life in China is more than a push factor of their migration; this memory, together with all the other memories, is also the pull factor that serves as an invisible tie with China. This tie further empowers the women as their knowledge of Chinese life and culture is the source of their self-regard and is a source of wisdom that enables them to grapple with their current difficult situation.

4.1 THE DOMINANT HARD-LIFE NARRATIVE

Everett Lee's migration theory, which discusses the push-pull factors in the origin country and the destination country and emphasizes the "dominance of the economic motivation" in human migration (48), largely provides theoretical support to the hard-life narrative. Push factors refers to conditions in the home country which force people to leave their homes and pull factors refer to conditions that attract people to a certain country. E. Lee believes that compared with "[b]ad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation)," the desire to improve "in material respects" produces more migration (48). Lee obviously believe that economic opportunity in the destiny country is a stronger

motive for migration than a push factor. In the case of the Chinese migrants, the “push” factors include natural disasters, internal upheavals, and imperialistic aggressions in China especially since the 1840s, and the “pull” factors are the discovery of gold in California and later in Fraser River and the economic opportunities in North America. Yet, Lee also notes that women’s migration experience is often different from men’s in that, although men’s decision to migrate is “never completely rational,” women are often “[torn] away” from environments they love (51). This implies that men’s migration is usually active in that they have a choice of where to go and why, but that women’s is usually passive as they are taken to where their husbands settle, with little choice of their own.

Lee’s observation is especially true of the Chinese women in the texts who are either sent overseas to a husband they have spent only a short time with after their wedding, like Mui Lan in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, or to a man they have never met before, like Fong Mei in the same novel, who emigrates as an intended wife. Similarly, May-ying, who emigrates as a concubine in *The Concubine’s Children*, and Stepmother, who emigrates as a “helpmate and companion” for Father in Choy’s novels (*All 15*), do not meet the men they will be living with until after arriving in Canada. The women’s migration from poor and war-stricken China to Canada, which promises absence of famine and war, forms the basis of the hard-life narrative.

In some ways, the literary texts I am analyzing do present the contrast between Canada and China as one between wealth and poverty, stability and chaos, and even life

and death. The economic plight of the female characters is obvious. Fong Mei in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* excitedly writes to her sister about her “prosperous” new family in Canada living in the “very large and stately” house with “three storeys and a large porch in the front and back” (S. Lee 56), while Poh-Poh in Choy’s novels remembers “so much starvation and famine” in China (Choy, *All* 113). May-ying in *The Concubine’s Children* learns that the man she is being married to has “wealth and riches” in Gold Mountain where “they have to push the gold from their feet to find the road” and where she will have “a life of contentment, a life never short of tea or rice” (Chong 8). For the women, marrying a man in Gold Mountain means guaranteed economic prosperity.

In addition to the devastating economic conditions, social unrest in turn-of-the-century China makes life even worse for women. Poh-poh talks about “many bandits and wars” in Old China which killed “[t]en times ten thousand” and the horrific scene of “bodies in the Canton laneways, the carcasses pushed into gutters, to be dragged away by coolies before sunrise” (Choy, *All* 113). May-ying’s second daughter is found raped and dumped “in the fields [...], [h]er clothing and legs [...] bloodstained” (Chong 139). The novels factually present a whole century of aggression by foreign powers, civil wars between China’s divided armies, and bandit-related violence that caused massive migration out of China. Those women left behind by husbands who have gone to Gold Mountain could be particularly vulnerable, as seen in the account given in *All that Matters* of Third Uncle’s wife and son in China, who were abducted and later “decapitated” (Choy 7), with the letter for ransom mailed to Canada. For the women,

leaving China means a more secure and stable life.

Attitudes towards gender expressed in the literary texts also present the women in China as oppressed, and these views on gender are often tied to economic issues. For instance, the fact that baby girls are less desired and have a lower chance for life in China is evident in *All that Matters*. It is said that when a baby girl is born to a poor family, she may be “snatched” from the mother and “quickly sold or given away to another family” (49), or “someone palm[s] her mouth and clamp[s] her tiny nostrils” (Choy 49). Girls are sold as servants to rich families, just as Poh-Poh was “bought and sold three times” (Choy, *All* 137), and just as May-ying was sold to be a servant at four and “sold again” at seventeen to be a concubine (Chong 7). In contrast, in *Gold Mountain*, the Chen family keeps the baby girl Jook-Liang (Choy, *All* 53) and even ensures she is “spoiled” (Choy, *Jade* 40).

While Chong notes that girls’ status is because of the Old Chinese belief that “a girl is ‘someone else’s,’ a mouth to feed until she marries and goes to live in another household” (6), Margery Wolf (1959) makes different observations. Wolf notices that while having sons is a “necessity” with practical and economic function in maintaining the normal patriarchal lineage, raising a daughter is a “luxury” only rich families can afford (*House* 40). Canada provides the Chen family in Choy’s novel with the “luxury” of “not hav[ing] to get rid of the girl child” because, in Poh-poh’s words, “[n]o one starve here” (Choy, *All* 48).

As Deborah Madsen (2008) argues, in the “seemingly endless” list of Chinese-

Canadian/American literature, including that by the three authors that this dissertation explores, there is a “contrast [between] the ‘hard life in China’ with modern life in the West, very much to the detriment of the former” (“Rhetoric” 5). In another article, Madsen argues the popularity of the Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian writers such as Wayson Choy is because the “celebration of multiculturalist diversity” in these texts is “entirely consonant with ‘dominant ideology’ [...and] works with rather than against systemic forms of racism” (“Mo No Boy”102). While abundant evidence in the texts supports Madsen’s observations, Choy, Lee, and Chong present a much more complicated picture of the Chinese women than just their hard life in China.

Though economic and social factors in China, including views on gender, all place women in a less privileged position, the texts’ representation of gender roles and of the women’s experience needs more examination. For example, though women may be less powerful than men in some ways, a wife may gain significant respect and affection from her husband. This is seen in *All That Matters*, in which Kiam’s late mother, who has been dead for years, is still remembered and missed by Father. On hearing the tapping of the teapot, Father “almost wept” as he remembers that his late wife “used to do that every morning” (Choy 245). As for Stepmother, Father is seen to “look so tenderly” at her and “pull the chair back for her and push it in as she [sits] down” in her pregnancy (51). Similarly, in *The Concubine’s Children*, Chan Sam is “[n]umb with sadness” at the news of the death of the first wife and takes all the trouble to go back to China “to visit her grave and erect an ancestral tablet there [...] so that future generations could worship her

soul” (20). Huangbo, the Replacement Wife, gets a whistle from Chan Sam which is to “be hung round her neck [to carry] the sentiment [...] that he was there at her calling” (Chong 44). The women all receive some form of genuine affection from their husband.

In addition to affection, the power granted to wives is evident in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, in which Mui Lan has the right to make decisions in the sphere of “woman’s business [such as] babies, grandsons” (S. Lee 40), which her husband tries to stay away from. Widowed mothers have even more power due to their seniority and the Chinese advocacy of filial piety. Poh-poh in Choy’s novels has become the matriarch and is “respectfully called [...] the Old One,” enjoying the tea Father “dutifully” pours for her and Father’s obedience (*All* 22). This is considered a demonstration of the relationship between a dutiful son and “a stern matriarch, [who] is beloved by her family and readers alike” (Wiebe D9).

In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Gwei Chang readily goes back to China on receiving his mother’s letter summoning him to marry the woman she has chosen for him as his official wife (S. Lee 313). He obviously has no objection to his mother’s authority in arranging his marriage as two decades later he takes on this motherly role himself when he promises to arrange for Ting An, whose mother Kolera has died, a “real wife from China” (S. Lee 311). As Kamboureli rightly discerns, “the obligations of filial piety remain pretty much unshakeable [among the Chinese in Canada]” (“*Tian xia*” 368), and “it is his sense of filial duty that takes him away from Kolera” (370). As wives or mothers, Chinese women have their own unshakable position in the established social order, which

guarantees the women of authority and esteem and which the women themselves try to maintain.

The hard-life narrative based on the contrast between China and North America is both confirmed and problematized by Amy Tan in an interview from 2014 in which she recalls the China she envisioned before her actual visits there:

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I thought of China as a prison that everyone wanted to escape. [...] [Other families] sent us letters that described hard work and lack of proper food, hygiene and clothing. In their photos, they looked weathered and shiny with sweat. [...] If America was heaven, [...] China would be hell. (Christiansen)

Tan's words reveal several aspects of this hard-life narrative about China. It was a fact that people worked very hard, yet their basic needs were not met. Based on very limited information, Tan "thought" that this hard life was simply a strong push factor of migration, and she has a strong sense of superiority living in North America, finding nothing relatable in her (grand)parents' native land. However, during the same interview, Tan admits that she used to know "little more about China than an 'American pastiche of stereotypes'" (Christiansen), implying reasons why the hard-life narrative about China was dominant: it resulted in part from the descendants' ignorance and North American society's "pastiche of stereotypes."

Michael Schuman, an American journalist and author, attributes the cause of the "pastiche of stereotypes" to the teaching of history "through the prism of our own story" in the United States. Schuman warns:

Prisms, though, distort. It just so happens Americans encountered China at one of the darkest points in its history. China in the 19th and early 20th centuries was

politically decrepit, militarily inept, economically archaic, and, as Westerners saw it, socially backward. We were left with an image of the country that at best was an unmodern realm of quaint rice paddies and silk-robed mandarins; at worst, a war-torn basket case drenched in destitution and decay. (“China’s Inexorable Rise”)

Schuman sharply points out that China’s social backwardness is just as the “Westerners saw it” and that Americans see only a very small section of China’s history.

In the same article, Schuman points out the part of history that is largely missing from Western education:

Historically, though, the country had been a major manufacturing center and premier exporter, capable of producing valuable goods on a mind-boggling scale.... China has “risen” many times before. One of the most remarkable features of its history is how frequently the Chinese were able to rebuild their society into a major power after periods of decline, political disorder, and invasion. This latest period of weakness, with China subordinated to the Western world, hasn’t been all that long by the standards of Chinese history.

Schuman rightly points out two features of China that explain the constant expression of profound pride among the Chinese immigrants, such as Poh-poh’s claim of “[o]ld way, best way”(Choy, *Jade* 185), and Third Uncle’s words to Kiam: “Remember that in this country of white demons we are undesirables—*Chinks*, but we are, in fact, a superior people” (Choy, *All* 53). One is China’s history of prosperous times and great capability, and the other is its self-healing ability and record of rising, repeatedly, from down times.

Choy, Lee, and Chong present the Chinese women with a collective memory of multiple ups and downs, which enables them to envision China’s next rise. When the elders encourage the Canadian-borns to “[g]o back to China [and][f]ight for China” (Choy, *All* 315), and the Chen family collaborates to dress up the thirteen-year-old First Son to collect donations for “New China Relief Fund” (Choy, *All* 196), they know their home

country will rise again. An examination of the Chinese women in their own social and historical context will show that readers should avoid seeing them merely as oppressed figures who should completely discard their past in Old China.

4.2 SOCIAL ORDER IN OLD CHINA: “A DIFFERENTIAL MODE OF ASSOCIATION” AND “DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN”

Xiaotong Fei, a Chinese sociologist and anthropologist, provides valuable guidelines for understanding Chinese society that can be helpful for interpreting the women in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong. Fei suggests that the traditional Chinese society belongs to the Apollonian patterns, which “rest on a belief that the universe consists of a perfect order that is beyond the creative power of human beings to alter” (88), that “human beings can only accept this order, be content with it, and maintain it” (88), and that “if human beings do not have the capacity to maintain the world as it is, the paradise will be lost and the golden age will pass away” (88). The ultimate goal of such a society is “order,” which is the prerequisite for the “paradise” for everyone. Individuals are born into specific roles that they must play to maintain such order, and those whose behaviour may threaten the established “order” and lead to chaos will be persecuted. Writing about the traditional Chinese rural society, Fei observes:

[The order] depends on intimate and long-term cooperation to coordinate the interactions of individuals. Their social contacts are so well developed and so familiar that rural people do things automatically to a certain extent. Only living and dying in the same place, generation after generation, will create such intimate groups. In such a place, people develop a high degree of mutual understanding. They have similar likes and dislikes. (89)

The relatively static population, people’s willingness to cooperate, and the shared lived

experiences are important reasons for such intimacy, and the result of the intimacy is that people know each other and care for each other.

The social segregation and the relatively static Chinese population caused by *The Chinese Immigration Act 1923* enhances the intimacy of the rural Apollonian Chinese community that the Chinese women come from. The familiarity and intimacy among the Chinese, which stems from their earlier lives in their home villages, draws them closer to one another in the face of Canadian hostility. In Choy's words:

Everyone in Chinatown seemed to know everyone else. You only had to say your surname, mention any Kwangtung county—*Sam-yup, Sze-yup, Chungshan, Heungshan*—even mention *Canton, Hong Kong*, speak any of the city or village dialects—and smiling strangers would link you to a chain of kinfolk. In a hostile country like Canada, anyone having the same last name was enough: *we Chinese together.* (*All* 112)

For at least twenty-four years, from 1923 to 1947, the population of the Chinatown depicted in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong remains stable. Coming from the same area in China to live in the small quarter in British Columbia, the Chinese who speak the same dialects know everyone else from that area. This stability is even more true for the women as men work on seasonal jobs and are frequently away from Chinatown, but women rarely leave. Except for very few occasions, such as the annual visit to the cemetery, the Chinese women in the texts rarely leave Chinatown, and living together all the time leads them to “have similar likes and dislikes” and to know each other's likes and dislikes well.

One key feature of the social relationships in this stable society is “a differential mode of association” with a “self-centered quality” (Fei 65). Fei describes this mode as

“the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake, each circle spreading out from the center becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant” (Fei 65). Every individual is the centre of “circles of relationships that spread out from the self” and this mode stresses various types of human relationships in which “everyone should stay in his place” (Fei 65). Everyone has his/her own “circles of relationships,” and no relationship is the same in terms of distance and intimacy. Fei explains that to maintain order, this society “suppresses all potentially destructive forces” (93).

In *All That Matters*, the way the women (Poh-poh, Stepmother, and Mrs. Chong) handle the fight between Jung-Sum, the adopted second son, and Jenny, the granddaughter of Mrs. Chong, shows everyone’s effort to maintain the order of the “differential mode of association” by suppressing “potentially destructive forces.” Mrs. Chong and Poh-poh have been talking of arranging a future marriage between Kiam (First Son) and Jenny when the kicking happens. Having learned that Jung-Sum kicked Jenny because she had called him Kiam’s “dog,” all three women try to maintain the good relationship between the two families by convincing each other that Jenny did not mean to insult Jung-Sum, and that the whole incident started with mishearing.

Poh-poh begins:

“Did Jenny speak *lao-fang wah*, foreign words?”

...I (Kiam) said. “She spoke English words.”

Poh-Poh mulled over things. Mrs. Chong’s raised eyebrow suggested she hadn’t heard this version of the incident before.

“Jen-Jen just say her greetings,” she said. “I’m sure you and Little Brother misheard her.”

“*Lo-faan wah*,” Stepmother said, “difficult to hear.”

Grandmother agreed. The three women nodded in unison: English so easy to *mishear*.

“Is that not so, Grandson?”

“One sound like another,” Mrs. Chong said. “Barbaric!”

I knew I was expected to agree. Dog. Log. Fog. Bog. (*All* 178)

Mrs. Chong has come to complain about Jung-Sum’s “brutal” action and her voice was “already pitched high,” but she readily accepts Poh-poh’s suggestion about the possible mishearing (*All* 177). Mrs. Chong is willing to accept a more pleasant version of the story and “suppresses” her anger at seeing Jenny’s injured legs. Poh-poh and Stepmother do not blame Jenny for insulting Jung-Sum. In fact, the cause of the incident does not matter to them; instead, maintaining the order does. Things ends with Poh-poh offering some ointment for Jenny while “pat[ing] her open palm against the back of Mrs. Chong’s wrist” and promising to speak to Jung-Sum “about this misunderstanding” while Mrs. Chong’s looks with “softening” eyes on Kiam with expectations of the marriage between him and Jenny (*Choy, All* 179).

Though she knows that her second grandson kicked Jenny because the girl really had called him “dog,” and she even tells him to “kick harder” if he is insulted again (*Choy, All* 184), Poh-poh does her best to resolve the possible conflict. When the women nod “in unison,” they obviously know that they are going to be neighbours for a long time, they know what each other cares about, and they know how to appease each other’s discomfort. The most important feature of the women’s reactions in resolving the children’s fight is that every person considers the overall harmony: no one should feel offended and the long-term relationship that will be formed by a marriage between Kiam and Jenny should

not be disrupted. This way of seeing and handling interpersonal relationships makes Chinatown a more livable place and helps resolve other conflicts in the community.

An important element of this scene is the fact that the women “all agreed” not to involve the male family members (Choy, *All* 177), which reveals another characteristic of Chinese society: “between men and women there are only differences” (Fei 91). The women’s awareness of such difference gives them agency in their own sphere. They emphasize gender difference in the arranged social order. As Fei observes about an Apollonian society:

The relationship between men and women must be arranged so that their emotional states are not erratic. That is what the principle “between men and women, there are only differences” actually means. One need not seek an underlying commonality between men and women; between them, there should be some distance. This distancing is clearly present in the prescription “There should be no intimacy in the interaction between men and women.” This distancing is not just physical but also psychological. Although they act in concert, men and women should manage their respective economic and reproductive activities by strictly following assigned rules of behavior. They should not hope to achieve mental or emotional harmony with each other. (91)

In the arranged order, women expect to develop intimacy with other women rather than with their husbands, and consequently are not much affected by a lack of intimacy with their husband. They “act in concert” for the shared economic and reproductive goals of the family instead of seeking their own interpersonal intimacy.

The American anthropologist Margery Wolf further clarifies the roles of men and women in the arranged family order: a man “calculate[s] his accomplishments in terms of their benefits to all his descendants” instead of “his own welfare and that of his immediate family” (*House* 37). Then, with the birth of a son, a woman changes from

being “a provisional member of her husband’s household” to “mother of one of its descendants, a position of prestige and respect,” with the birth of a son guaranteeing the continuation of the family (Wolf, *House* 45). In Choy’s novels, harmonious scenes recur repeatedly when the men and women “act in concert” to create peace for the children in the chaotic outside world:

[...] the muffled voice of Poh-Poh [is] dramatically finishing her ghost story, Sekky calling out for more, and Liang racing Jung to use the bathroom first. [...]The two would take turns helping Sekky with his home studies. Stepmother would sit and knit and watch over them, making sure that they also did their own school work—quietly—while Father continued to write. The ordinary made the brutal wars in Asia and Europe seem remote. (*All* 327)

No one is talking, but every adult understands her/his role and plays it well to create order for the family for the good of others. This order guarantees the core interest of the family, which is to ensure the children have a carefree present, which will help them secure a successful future. By playing one’s own roles to maintain order of the group, each one actualizes her/himself. Most importantly, the women obviously see their relationship with men as one of collaboration, rather than gender inequality.

Erik Erikson’s concept of “healthy development” best explains Poh-poh and Stepmother’s peace of mind in the recurrent harmonious family scenes. “Healthy development” occurs when there is “a pattern of relatively successful outcomes” after the individual meets “a crisis or a new set of societal expectations” (qtd. in Greene 1). Erikson uses crisis to mean “a time when environmental demands precipitate the need to expand the interconnections between self and the environment, [...which] plays a critical role in personality development” (qtd. in Greene1). With their own memory of the famine

and chaos in China and their current experience of social hostility in Canada, the women desire more security and stability in their relationships, and they obviously value the peace and order created by the difference and division of labour. In this sense, their connection with China shapes their thinking about what is important and guides their actions.

While Fei notes that the Chinese social order suppresses destructive factors, other Chinese scholars argue the Chinese believe in “interdependence” and “self-oppression” with familism as the core principle (Yang and Ye 254-58). This observation sheds light on abundant details about women’s role as wives. Before Mui Lan came to Canada, for instance, she lived entirely on Wong Gwei Chang’s remittance and did not have to do manual labour. In an example of “self-oppression,” Gwei Chang suppresses his feeling for Kolera, and “interdependence” is shown in the way he depends on Mui Lan for maintaining the family and performs his duty as the man of the house by paying to have the farm work done. Mui Lan’s life in China is typical of wives who see domestic affairs as their duties with no need to worry about working outside home. These views are expressed in one interview conducted by Peter Li about the life of the Chinese who came to Canada before 1923. The young interviewee remembers: “We depended on Dad to send money to support us [...]. I know that he earned about \$140 a month and every time he sent \$100 back to support us, he only had \$40 for all kinds of expenses (P. Li 64).

Chong writes a similar story about a man who, before dying in Canada, “left instructions to send what remained of his life’s savings—thirty-five hundred dollars—to

his wife and son in China” after almost “a lifetime apart” from each other (Chong, “Introduction” 3). Chong explains that the man “still felt an obligation” to his family and the familial ties had been “severed” by the separation (Chong, “Introduction” 3). Such cases show the interdependence between the husband and wife to support the common goal of maintaining the family, each taking his/her own “obligation” willingly. Likewise, when May-ying gives every penny she can save, she willingly fulfills her family obligations, believing that she will one day live under the roof of that house. She does not see spending her money on the China half of the family as oppression or exploitation.

When the women in the texts do feel resentment, I argue that is because the order they expect to live by is violated. They feel immediate frustration when their most natural grandmotherly or motherly role is disrupted. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Mui Lan’s deepest sorrow and desperation is from the failure of her expectation that she will be a grandmother and see another generation of the family. Despite the sharp confrontation and even hatred between them, Fong Mei shares Mui Lan’s desperation for babies to the degree that she commits adultery to achieve this goal. In *The Concubine’s Children*, May-ying is depressed by not having a son as she understands her role as a concubine for Chan Sam is to help him father a son. She feels “genuinely happy [for the birth of Huangbo’s son...] for the continuation of the lineage ensured her own afterlife as long as she was part of Chan Sam’s household” (Chong 100).

The women are reluctant to take paid jobs outside the home unless it is for the benefit of the family. Mui Lan runs the largest restaurant in Chinatown only because her

husband “certainly couldn’t be relied on” as he is so “easy-going” that he would say “leave it alone” or “Never mind!” when the employee steals a bag of rice or brings a few friends to have a free meal, and Mui Lan believes that the business could “be eroded in no time into bankruptcy” if she did not take over (Lee 36), and because her son is still too young. Likewise, despite her great financial success, Fong Mei obviously prefers domestic roles, and when she “hate[s]” Canada it is because she believes that it has done “nothing except disqualify her” and keep her “labouring like a poor woman” (220). As for May-ying in *The Concubine’s Children*, she believes the promise that the man she is going to meet in Canada is going to give her a life in Gold Mountain with no lack of food and tea. Therefore, when she is told that she will begin work immediately, “her bright eyes [dim] with resentment” and she says to herself, “whatever have I done in my previous lives to deserve this?” (Chong 26). She obviously believes that having to work is a punishment for her unknown past mistakes. All these women prefer to remain in the domestic position and have little desire to step into what they believe to be men’s sphere by doing paid work outside home.

All the women in the texts by Lee, Chong, and Choy live according to the rules of their Chinese rural society where men and women are different. Having evaded the social chaos in China, they are trying to establish order in the small area of Canada where, according to Poh-poh’s “Old China eyes” (Choy, *All* 33), there are “white barbarian ghosts with big noses and funny names” (33). The “hard life” they experienced in China is no longer as significant as the values rooted in the land they left. The order they try to

maintain, their self-definition in that order, and the respect and authoritative power they cherish, all complicate the Chinese women's status and show that, despite the hardships they experienced in China, their adherence to certain values central to Chinese society gives them a sense of fulfillment and power.

4.3 CHINESE WOMEN'S CONNECTIONS WITH OLD CHINA

William Safran (2008) defines diasporas as communities of people who, though living in a foreign country, usually maintain a strong bond with their home country:

they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

Safran's definition of diaspora differs from Everett Lee's theory on push-pull factors, which places primary emphasis on economic motivations and the physical migration. By stressing emotional and cultural bonds instead, Safran focuses on the home country's pull factors, which include the immigrants' "collective memory, vision, or myth" of their home country that bond the migrants in terms of culture and value. This implies an unlikeness for the migrants to identify with the home country before they could construct a new positive "collective memory, vision, or myth." In the case of Chinese immigrants, Canada's social hostility thus becomes push factors, which make it hard for the

immigrants to belong.

I would add that for the Chinese immigrants, the bond with China is even stronger because of their concern about their families in chaotic, poverty-stricken China and because of the segregation and extraordinary hostility they face in Canada. In their own words, one day, “every Chinese would go back to their home village” (Choy, *All* 281). The Canadian immigration policy makes the Chinese feel undesired and even prohibited, (this will be discussed in depth in Chapter Six), which strengthens the Chinese women’s feelings of a profound emotional bond with their family, dead or alive, with the culture, and with the historical and contemporary situation in China.

Women’s bonds with their own and their husband’s family, past and present

Unlike the male characters, who usually return to China for a visit, the women never go back to their own family again. Despite this, the women feel a strong connection with the two families in China, their own and their husband’s. These connections give the women a sense of belonging and blessing, confirm for them who they are, and guide them in their definition of morals and success.

The connection with their own family gives the women a sense of blessing and protection, which becomes particularly important in the social hostility in Canada. In *The Concubine’s Children*, May-ying’s earrings and the jade pendant, which her mother gave her when sending her away at age four, are her connection with her mother and her grandmother. She believes that the jewels are “bestow[ed] [with] good luck” as “the souls of her ancestors would do all they could to keep harm from her path” (Chong 5); therefore,

she “guard[s] no other possessions more carefully” than she does them (Chong 5). Later, in her most devastating situation, when she has to go to the pawnshop, she always makes sure to get her jewelry back as soon as possible (Chong 125).

Not only does May-ying feel her mother and grandmother protect and bless her, she hopes to pass down their protection and blessing to her daughter Hing by giving her the jewelry as her wedding present with the wish that “[i]t will bring you good fortune” (Chong 180). May-ying’s motivation for keeping the jewelry is in keeping with what the Dutch Sinologist and ethnographer de Groot (1854–1921) notes as an important belief of the Chinese people: “the family ties with the dead are by no means broken, and [...] the dead continue to exercise their [...] protection” (qtd. in Cassirier 112). The connection with their family forms the women’s most direct tie to China.

The connections situate the women in the familiar relationship circles where Chinese women define themselves. Take May-ying’s emotional bond with her two daughters in China, for example. After she sends them back to China in 1928, May-ying never sees them again before her death in 1967. Over the years, however, she plays her mother role every day:

May-ying diligently stocked the cardboard carton under their bed with “things to send to China”: used clothing, tea towels or kitchen scrub brushes, food tins, anything that might have another life. From time to time, she knit sweaters to send to the girls. More than once she bought a dress from downtown Nanaimo that was big enough for Ping, that Nan could grow into, that Hing herself might wear if the family were together again. In Hing, she was reminded of her absent daughters. The youngest had some of the lighthearted gaiety of Ping, and some of the serenity of Nan. (Chong 59)

The bond is reified in her everyday activity. She keeps thinking about how tall each

daughter is, how each looks in the clothes she is storing for them, and how the three daughters resemble each other. Different from her mother's jewels, which she can hold in hand, her daughters are only in her memory and imagination. She keeps wondering "how the two girls are doing" every time a letter comes from China (Chong 59). By "diligently" gathering things she believes her daughters might use in one way or another, she is torn apart, physically in Canada with one daughter and emotionally with the other two in China, thus echoing Chong's subtitle for the book: "Portrait of a Family Divided."

Later, when Hing tries to stay away from her, not seeing her for years, May-ying fills the gap created by the absence of all her daughters by finding satisfaction and happiness in the company of the two women who have come to Canada with the purchased birth documents of her daughters. She visits Mary, the one with Ping's paper, in hospital and takes care of Mary's children like a real grandmother. They get so close that Mary "ha[s] to dab at her eyes" when speaking of May-ying (263), and the two paper daughters "worship at the graves" during the Chinese grave-sweeping festival, whereas Hing cannot even locate her parents' graves after not visiting once for twenty years (Chong 264). It is the effort to maintain the Chinese-style connection that occupies May-ying's hours while alive and that prevents her ghost from being neglected after her death.

The most intricate connection with the family in China is seen in *All That Matters* in Poh-poh's relationship with the Patriarch Chen, who was her master and her son's father. On the one hand, after leaving China for fifteen years, she still competes with him by the old China criterion: who has better children. Her sense of triumph and her tone of "neither

regret nor sorrow” (Choy, *All* 366) come from the fact that “I have everything now. I have three grandsons. Good family. Plenty food. I rest and wait. I have long life already” (Choy, *All* 351). In contrast to seeing her son as “a smarter boy” (*All* 365), and her grandson as a boy with “a Number One Brain” (*All* 61), she thinks the Patriarch Chen has “two ox-brained sons” (*All* 366). “Everything” Poh-poh has places her in a position of what Wolf describes as “near-reverence” and makes her feel she is more successful than her former master (*House* 215), which gives her great satisfaction and a sense of success.

On the other hand, while Poh-poh has a feeling of triumph over Patriarch Chen, she wants to emulate him, and she treats less privileged people in the positive ways Patriarch Chen treats her. This then places her on the moral high ground by the Chinese standard. She offers help, for example, to the devastated bachelors without making the men feel embarrassed. In *The Jade Peony*, Old Wong comes to the Chen family in 1933 when the Tong Association matches families with old bachelors who cannot afford a trip back to China so that the bachelors could have “a meal now and then and then, a few visits with the family” (Choy, *Jade* 11).

Poh-poh shows her high morality of caring for others based on her wisdom of knowing others. For Old Wong’s first visit for dinner, Poh-poh “put[s] on her jade hair ornament” (9) as if to receive an honoured guest rather than a hapless old bachelor. Yet, on Old Wong’s arrival, when Father and the children welcome him at the door, she remains in the kitchen, shouting “Who’s there?” and “all this time waiting for one of [the children] to call her politely to come and meet the visitor” (19). This is designed to make

the visit seem a casual and unexpected one, and when she comes out to the parlour and sees Old Wong, she meets him in the old Chinese way:

“*Aiiiyah!* Wong Kimlein!” Poh-Poh exclaimed, calling him by his birth-name in a voice loud enough to break up the hubbub. “It’s truly you! They say you come back from Yale. Not die there. Die here, in Salt Water City, in Vancouver.”

“Die here, maybe,” Monkey said, looking up. “How goes your old years? Are you well?”

“Die soon,” Poh-Poh said. “You and me too old for these days.”

...

“You hear from Old China?” Poh-Poh took Monkey’s arm, as if she would lean on his walking stick, too.

“We must talk, Wong Kimlein, just you and me,” Poh-Poh commanded.

“Come, come, sit for dinner.” (Choy, *Jade* 20)

In this episode, Poh-poh demonstrates her commitment to treating those less fortunate with respect.

Joe Weibe calls Poh-poh a “marvellous character who embodies the values of her native land” and claims that the “stern matriarch [...] is beloved by her family and readers alike” when he reflects on Choy’s ability to write the story of the Chen family from Poh-poh’s perspective (1). Weibe’s observation about Poh-poh is supported by the above scene in that, out of her two former masters’ ways of treating the less privileged, Poh-poh chooses the moral one. She condemns the Mistress Mean-Mouth, who used to beat Poh-poh, the servant girl, with a slim bamboo cane for pulling at hair tangles, telling her grandchildren a story in which the mean master girl was so cursed for her bad behaviour that she died from overeating. Instead of becoming cruel herself, Poh-poh follows the benevolent example of Patriarch Chen, who gives Poh-poh’s son a good education and sends her and her son to Gold Mountain when “[o]ld and poor house-servants like her do

not leave [the poor and chaotic] China” (*All* 365).

Like the Patriarch who cared for Poh-poh the servant’s needs, Poh-poh receives Old Wong with the Goodness (*ren* 仁) which Confucius defines as “care for others” (*ai ren* 爱/爱人) based on her Confucian Wisdom of “know[ing] others (*zhi ren* 知人)” (*Analect* 12.22). She “knows” that Old Wong, like most old Chinatown bachelors, is “[h]ungry as a bear” (*Jade* 22; original emphasis). 1933 was a time when there were no jobs for old Chinese bachelors and when a local Vancouver by-law prohibited begging for food, and a federal law prohibited stealing food (*Choy, Jade* 10). Sending out the first greeting from the kitchen and urging Old Wong to “[c]ome, come, sit for dinner,” Poh-poh gives out a clear sign of “welcome to dinner” without making the needy old man embarrassed.

She also knows Old Wong is lonely. Her calling him by his first name in a loud voice and suggesting that they talk with each other, “just you and me,” immediately makes him feel the intimacy between the villagers back in China. She even shares with him her granddaughter Liang who spends so much time with Old Wong in the following years that she becomes his “little girl” and his “family” (36). Moreover, she knows that Old Wong is considering where to spend the rest of his life. With little possibility to return to China and die there, Vancouver is a better choice than other places in Canada as the ghosts will, at least, be surrounded by the largest Chinese community.

Most importantly, the way Poh-poh treats the less privileged stems from the way her master and father of her son treated her as an inferior servant of China. By sending Poh-poh and her son to Canada, Patriarch Chen saved her from the insult and

maltreatment of his wife and his other children. Poh-poh knows Old Wong needs dignity and respect when the Chinese are defined as “RESIDENT ALIEN” (Choy, *Jade* 153) and called derogatively “*stinky Chink*” (Choy, *Jade* 47; original emphasis). Her enthusiasm in meeting and talking with him makes this arranged dinner look like a surprising visit from a long-lost old friend and the rescuer-rescued relationship a mutually beneficial one.

Poh-poh’s “care” for her fellow Chinese bachelors who are not fortunate enough to have a family in Gold Mountain enables her to “know” them and her knowledge of them makes her “care for” them in the genuinely Chinese ways. By conducting in Patriarch Chen’s kind ways, she accepts his values and shows no bitterness for her past experience in China.

The women’s direct emotional connection with the family in China gives them a strong foothold, a sense of belonging and security, an identity in the familiar relationships, and even a way to establish a moral high ground. Therefore, even when physically away from China, the women hold fast to the connections with the people there in various ways, and their connection with the Chinese culture, which I will discuss next, is reflected in every aspect of their life.

The women’s connection to the diversity of the Chinese culture

Safran’s observation that migrants maintain historical and cultural connections to their homeland in the form of their “collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its [...] achievements” is demonstrated in the Chinese women’s cultural identification (16). This cultural identification is clearly defined by the

Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas F. W. Barth with his theory of cultural boundaries. Barth discerns that “categorical ethnic distinctions [...] entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories” (9). Barth thus acknowledges cultural distinctions between ethnic groups and the persistence of ethnic boundaries despite intermingling and cooperation among different ethnic groups.

Barth also urges that ethnic studies must see the people as a “cultural bearing entity” and that researchers must give attention to the traits considered significant by the ethnic group (10-11). Barth gives particular attention to cultural traits that have come through a long history. The Chinese women, despite migration and physical absence from China, bear the Chinese ethnic and cultural distinctions in every aspect of their life. Most importantly, the literary texts portray the diversity of Chinese culture through their depiction of Chinese women whose lives are shaped not only by Confucianism, but by many other, lesser-known cultural elements.

Confucianism embodied in jade

Jade repeatedly appears in Chinese-Canadian literary texts, and examples include the pendant May-ying hopes to give to Hing as a wedding present in *The Concubine's Children*, the jade peony that Poh-poh leaves for Sek-lung at her death in *The Jade Peony*, and the very title of Choy's novel. The women not only cherish these jade pieces but expect to pass them down to the next generation in one way or another. Jade is more than

just a precious stone in Chinese culture; it is an embodiment of all the Confucian virtues since the fifth century BCE, which the Chinese women live by and expect their children to inherit.

In the famous classic piece *Inquiry about Jade*, Confucius explains why jade is cherished and compared to the most cultivated men (*jun zi* 君子):

Anciently superior men found the likeness of all excellent qualities in jade. Soft, smooth, and glossy, it appeared to them like benevolence; fine, compact, and strong,—like intelligence; angular, but not sharp and cutting,—like righteousness; hanging down (in beads) as if it would fall to the ground,—like (the humility of) propriety; when struck, yielding a note, clear and prolonged, yet terminating abruptly,—like music; its flaws not concealing its beauty, nor its beauty concealing its flaws,—like loyalty; with an internal radiance issuing from it on every side,—like good faith; bright as a brilliant rainbow,—like heaven; exquisite and mysterious, appearing in the hills and streams,—like the earth; standing out conspicuous in the symbols of rank—like virtue; esteemed by all under the sky—like the path of truth and duty. (Confucius, *Phing I, Book of Rites*, Chap. 45)

Confucius' reply reveals eleven virtues most celebrated by educated and cultivated *junzi* (superior) men: benevolence (*ren* 仁), intelligence (*zhi* 智), righteousness (*yi* 义/義), propriety (*li* 礼/禮), music (*yue* 乐/樂), loyalty (*zhong* 忠), faith (*xin* 信), heaven (*tian* 天), earth (*di* 地), virtue (*de* 德), and path of truth and duty (*dao* 道). More importantly, at the core of Confucianism is the philosophy of what Herbert Fingarette (1972) calls “secular as sacred” in the title of his book on Confucius, meaning everyone “secular” can become “sacred” when they acquire the above virtues through self-cultivation. These virtues become the spiritual support for the Chinese women in Canada, not only guiding them through difficulties, but giving them a sense of moral superiority when they are discriminated against.

As desired objects, May-ying's jade earrings and pendant are what she makes sure to get back when, to get the money she needs to survive, she has to pawn them in *The Concubine's Children*. In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-poh's jade pieces, including the jade peony, are what she takes good care of with the belief that "[e]ach piece is different, [and] each is precious" (Choy, *Jade* 139). The way the Chinese women hold fast to their jade is the same as the way they hold onto their Chinese culture. While May-ying does everything to keep her jade pendant (which embodies her mother's and grandmother's blessings for her), Poh-poh occasionally takes out hers from a "small envelope of silk" and tells the children stories about them and about her youth (Choy, *Jade* 139).

However, the most intricate writing about jade is Choy's naming of the two Canadian-born children of the Chen family: Jook-Liang (Jade Bell) and Sek-Lung (Stone Dragon). The Chinese believe that jade and stone are of the same nature with "beautiful stone being called jade" (Xu 10). Li-juan Ou, a professor of Chinese of National Taiwan University, further clarifies in her lecture that stone is the unpolished and uncultivated jade, and jade is stone that, because of the values and skills of human society, has been polished and cultivated ("On Baoyu").

The use of "jade" in the children's names, explicit in the girl's name and implied in the boy's, expresses the Chen women's wish for their children to have the virtues endorsed by their home culture. The significance of naming is well observed by Naribigeli, a Chinese scholar:

For the ethnic groups whose name systems have significant social functions,

naming is to mobilize, to maintain, and to educate. In the naming process, the members of the ethnic group display the social establishment and the authority of the tradition through their own social and psychological activities. Naming emphasizes the duties of the individual members and of the society as a whole, communicates feeling, and exchanges information. Meanwhile, naming is a process of reproduction and adjustment of knowledge and cultural concepts and a process of confrontation and contradiction between old and new forces. (95; my translation)

Thus, by including “jade” in their children’s names, the women emphasize the Confucian virtues they hope their children will acquire. Especially when they must face the children’s question, “Am I Chinese or Canadian?” (Choy, *Jade* 149), and hear the children claiming to be Canadians, which is “a hyphenated reality that [they] could never accept” (Choy, *Jade* 162), the women repeatedly confirm to the children that “*Tohng-Yahn* is best” (Choy, *All* 22), “Old China way best” (179), and “*Old way, best way*” (*Jade* 185).

The women’s insistence on the superiority of their values has some result despite the children’s effort to run away from these at certain points in their lives. This can be seen when Jook-Liang moves into Poh-poh’s room after her death, symbolically taking Poh-poh’s place in the family, and Sek-Lung receives the best piece of Poh-poh’s jade, which contains “her life in Old China” (Choy, *Jade* 141). He sees “Grandmama smile” in his “mind’s eye” (Choy, *Jade* 172), and Kiam exclaims, “[h]ow was it possible that Poh-Poh could ever leave us?” (*All* 369). All the children know grandma is still with them, together with the culture she embodies, showing that the woman and the virtues she values have had a lasting impact on them. Most importantly, the connection to China that the women like Poh-poh feel shows that the country represents more to them than just a

hard life; instead, they feel nurtured by its culture and make every effort to maintain the connection and share it with their descendants. Failing to see the strength that the women gain from their home culture is a failure to understand the authors' motivation in writing the Chinese women's story.

Confucianism embodied in Kwan Kung

In *All That Matters*, Poh-poh takes First Son through the “dragon-carved doors” into the assembly hall, where they worship the Chinese gods, one of whom is Kwan Kung. Though the boy sees him as “fierce” at first (Choy 30), he later understands that he is “lucky” because he has “all those Chinese gods” who make Chinatown “more Heaven than Hell” (*All* 226). Kwan Kung, a household name of a general of the Han Dynasty (202BCE-220CE), is remembered for his martial skills and bravery, but more for his loyalty. Over centuries, he has been as worshiped as Confucius with Confucius being the Literal Saint and Kwan Kung the Martial Saint, or God of War. Kwan Kung is not only a statue in the temples but also one of the heroes in Cantonese opera stories that everyone in Chinatown at the time knows about.

Like Confucius, who was born ordinary but became a Saint, Kwan Kung is a role model for the Chinese by showing the people the way to self-perfection, which the Chinese women hope that their sons will follow. Stepmother gives general guidelines of being “good” by telling the children the connection between “luck” and “doing the right thing” (Choy, *All* 113). She also gives First Son specific instructions “not to fight with girls, even if they teased, [e]ven if they started it, and [e]ven if they deserved a sock in the

mouth” (*All* 100). She is teaching First Son that being strong must not make one a bully but should make one qualify for nobler causes in the way that Kwan Kung served his nation.

By inserting Kwan Kung into the children’s lives, Poh-poh shows them the way to become a saint as described in *The Great Learning*, one of the Four Classics of

Confucianism:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. (Confucius 29-30).

To make it simple, according to Confucius, the right way to self-perfection is cultivating the self, regulating the family, ordering the state, and illustrating illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom. Everyone can become a saint through perfecting the self for the betterment of the larger society and acquiring “illustrious virtue.” In Kwan Kung’s case, he develops from a general to the Martial Saint. In other words, Confucianism is not about remembering an ancient man who lived two millennium ago, but about pursuing self-perfection in daily life, whatever circumstances one lives in.

Following this philosophy, Stepmother and Poh-poh guide the children to be “good” and to have discipline from a young age. When First Son is turning thirteen, the Chen family prepare him for more duties and Kiam learns the lesson that “[t]he oldest branch bear the most fruit” (Choy, *All* 166). He is expected to improve himself and thereby “regulate the family” by being a role model for his younger siblings, to “order the state” by possibly being a soldier fighting for China, and to become a virtuous person. With the

family's collaboration, First Son appears in front of the Chinatown public "like a nationalist officer of the Kwomintang" (Choy, *All* 199), and the elders tell him and other the Canadian-borns to "go back to China [and] fight for China" (Choy, *All* 315). In reply to Father's remarks that Canada does not need soldiers, Poh-poh tells First Son that China needs soldiers to "Fight the warlords! Fight the Japanese!" (Choy, *All* 229)

The Chinese women in Canada see Confucius' philosophy as light that will guide not only themselves but their children out of darkness of Canadian social segregation and hostility. As the anonymous quote about Confucius recorded by Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE) says, "Without Confucius, all ages would have been like a long night" (X. Zhu 6: 2350). The Chinese women play their role in producing cultivated young people for their community with Confucian philosophy as the light that allows them to see through the darkness of racial discrimination in Canada, and in form of war and chaos in China. When they call their Canadian-born children "*mo no*," meaning "no brain" or "*juk-sing*" or "hollow bamboo stumps," they worry that the children do not have the "right kind" of brain (*All* 61)—the Confucian kind.

Poh-Poh frowns when her grandchildren do not behave properly and, as Kiam reflects:

She quoted something from Confucius, "Follow the Right Way." This was the highest authority, to warn me to be on my best behaviour. The classic four-word proverb meant nothing to me, but the Old One's warning tones as she pronounced each word so precisely spoke volumes: Confucius was High Authority. (*All* 56-57)

Though they "laughingly" call their Canadian born children "*mo no*" (*All* 61; 182), their

concerns are real. They tell the children stories of their own lives back in China and teach them the Confucian ritual. For them, connection with China is connection with the spiritual and moral centre which they take seriously not only for themselves, but for their children as well.

Diversity of Chinese culture

While Confucianism plays an important role in the lives of these women in Canada, it is not the only aspect of their upbringing in China, and the literary texts really present the diversity of the Chinese culture that helps make the women's lives livable. However, it is the rich diversity of the Chinese culture that serves as the source of wisdom and pride for the women. Few scholars have explored these diverse elements in enough depth to really understand that the diverse Chinese culture is the source of the women's spiritual wealth. Elizabeth Byrne is one the few who explores Taoism in Chinese-Canadian literature and she believes that the women live by the Chinese Taoism, which makes them lead a life "minimizing the self, finding balance, maintaining self-control, wanting nothing, and expecting nothing" (26). Byrne is unique in noticing the diversity of Chinese philosophy that the Chinese women live by, but her observation is problematic in several ways that will be discussed in the next chapter. I contend that these texts deliberately try to show the great importance of these beliefs and practices in that in addition to the prevailing Confucianism, the women also find strength and wisdom from ancestor worship, Taoism, Buddhism, and natural gods to support themselves during the chaotic and difficult moments in life.

In *All That Matters*, First Son has an epiphany when he feels that he finally understands what Poh-poh and Stepmother have provided for him. His reflection provides an invaluable window to the richness of the women's cultural connection to China. Having previously thought that the biblical God was better than his Chinese gods, he experiences a moment in which "the fires and demon visions [of Christianity] suddenly receded":

The Chinese Heaven was certain to be more splendid than the Christian one. And there were Chinese guardians, too, though I always felt unsure about them, like Poh-Poh's Kitchen God, and the Goddess of Mercy in our parlour, and the pictures of our distant dead cousins on the end table between the incense and the thick red candles. Chinatown was flooded with spiritual wealth. Most everyone we knew had a laughing Buddha sitting on top of their piano or on a plate shelf. Every Chinatown business had the fierce-faced God of Good Fortune standing on a temple-shaped platform, and almost every store sold incense and lucky envelopes.

I could see now that in Chinatown there was more Heaven than Hell. (Choy 226)

Though the boy is "unsure" about the Chinese gods Poh-poh thinks protect them, he begins to see them as "wealth" and protectors of Chinatown, which is a "Heaven." The boy then shares with his younger sibling his revelation of feeling "lucky" because they have each other as a family and they have "all those Chinese gods" (*All* 227). Though the boy does not understand the profundity of his mother and grandmother's culture, his honest but mixed and disorderly memory of the women-centred domestic life shows the reader the women's multiple sources of wisdom, peace, and strength.

First, Kiam's memory reveals the ancestor worship that makes the Chinese women feel their roots in China. They tell the children learn about "good ghosts" with whom one

has to “prove your character a worthy one” (Choy, *All* 132) and believe that good ghosts are still around them and protect them. This belief is successfully implanted in the eight-year-old Sek-Lung who, after Poh-poh’s death, “look[s] to the ghost of [his] ancient guardian for help” and believes that “Grandmama, though dead and buried in her pine coffin, would never desert me” (Choy, *Jade* 177). Though ancestor worship is regarded as “the first source and the origin of religion” among many races in the world (Spencer, cited in Cassiere 112), de Groot points out that, in Chinese religion, “the family ties with the dead are by no means broken, and [...] the dead continue to exercise their authority and protection [and are] their household gods” (qtd. in Cassiere 112). Drawing from Spencer and de Groot, Cassiere observes that in China, the worship of the ancestors, “sanctioned and regulated by the state religion, is conceived to be the only religion people may have” and it is “one of the highest religious duties of the survivor, after the death of a parent, to provide him (the male ancestor) with food and other necessities needed to maintain him in the new state on which he has entered” (Cassiere 112).

Cassiere is right about male ancestors being worshiped but fails to note that the matriarch receives just as much respect. For example, after Poh-poh’s death, the family believe that “[h]er blessing mattered [, for] if she died unhappy, we would be cursed by her ghost” (*All* 219). The family’s fear of being cursed, and their reluctance to accept Poh-poh’s death, push the family to conduct respectful ceremonies to honour her. Besides, though Cassiere rightly remarks on the importance of ancestor culture among the Chinese people, his claim of ancestor worship being “the only religion” fails to mark the

inclusiveness of the Chinese beliefs. What is more, ancestor worship is really part of Confucianism, which emphasizes five fundamental relationships with parent-children relationship at the core, and thus connects the Chinese immigrants not only with their blood relatives but with the ancient ancestors of the Chinese race more broadly.

A second cultural connection in Kiam's reflection is Taoism, represented by the Kitchen God (*Tsao Chung* in Cantonese). Kitchen God, one of the household gods, is believed to have first been worshiped in the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) and this worship reflects the most important principle of Taoism as a religion that is both restrictive and authoritarian when it comes to ordinary people's daily activities. This god is believed to take charge of people's food and drink and to provide them with the necessities of life. More importantly, the duty of the Kitchen God, assigned by the Jade Emperor, is to investigate the good and evil of a family. For example, Poh-poh hesitates when speaking of her dream about wanting three grandsons in front of Kitchen God in case "Heaven grows jealous" (*All* 151). When Third Uncle somehow brags about having enough money (*All* 52), and First Son over-confidently speaks of his smartness (*All* 70), Poh-poh looks up to the Kitchen God to remind herself and the people around her not to want too much, not to show off, and to be modest.

Poh-poh's worship of the Kitchen God illustrates the Chinese belief that people should discipline themselves by inviting outside supervision into their homes. At the end of the year, Poh-Poh performs the ritual to send the Kitchen God back up to Heaven to the Jade Emperor to report about the family. Kiam remembers:

During the last week of the year, after smearing the paper lips with a dab of honey to sweeten his words, Grandmother had Father walk out the back porch and set *Tsao Chung* free by burning him up in a clay pot in front of all the family. Transformed by the fire into smoke, *Tsao Chung* began his journey to Heaven to report on our family. Last year, [...] Poh-Poh solemnly followed the rising vapours [...], never looking away until every bit of ash vanished skyward. By the second week of the New Year, a new Kitchen God would be pinned in the same place. (*All* 75-76)

When Poh-poh passes down the ritual to Father and the children, she passes down the Chinese belief in discipline as a virtue. The ritual is performed once a year, but it is the daily practice of the belief that humans are an organic whole with Heaven and Earth that gives the Chinese a sense of certainty, belonging, and protection, and it is the self-supervision that keeps order in the Chinese community and gives Poh-poh a sense of superiority as an order-keeper.

A third cultural connection to China is evident in the texts in the women's belief in Buddhism, represented by the "laughing Buddhas" and "the Goddess of Mercy," two other household gods in the Chinese family. This particular Buddha is Maitreya, Successor of Shakyamuni, who is featured with his big fat belly and a big grin. The Chinese belief in him is best expressed in the couplet found in many Chinese temples for this Buddha, which translates to "his big belly can accommodate whatever the world finds difficult to accommodate; his open mouth will laugh at whoever the world sees deserving to laugh at¹." The Chinese believe that his big belly symbolizes Chinese tolerance and forgiveness while his grin symbolizes kindness, humour, and positivity. He represents the Chinese belief that one should "endure" all hostility, "forgive" any injustice, and return any kindness they receive. An example of the Chinatown community practicing this

belief in *All That Matters* is when, knowing about the Canadians' sympathy for the Chinese during the Second World War, the Chinese purchased Victory Bonds and "[e]ven the mahjong ladies were holding knitting parties and spending hours wrapping up cotton bandages for the War Relief Campaign" (*All* 336). This reflects the reality at the time, and a Chinese newspaper article from 1940 reports on Chinese in Canada actively donating over 1,600 dollars within five hours for the Canadian Red Cross fundraising campaign "in gratitude for the sympathy of the local government and people for China's War of Resistance" (Zhou 17). The grinning Buddha certainly warms up the Chinese in Canada of the time, teaching them tolerance and forgiveness.

Meanwhile, like other gods and goddesses, Kwan-Yin, the Goddess of Mercy and Child-giving Goddess, who is worshiped for being a saviour of people in misery and for giving children to families, serves as a soothing power for the desperate Chinese. In Chinatown, where children are a "rare sight" (S. Lee 32), the significance of Kwan-Yin for the Chinese – who place family in the very core of their life – is obvious. For instance, to pray for a baby for the Wong family, Mui Lan has "incense burnt at the temples at home, [and] amulets made" (Lee, *Disappearing* 81). Similarly, in *All That Matter*, Kiam remembers:

The Old One took me to the tong hall temple to burn incense before the statues and to ask for luck and blessings. She chattered away about Stepmother's condition [of the pregnancy when she does not feel very well]—"such a humble, useless condition"—then said her deepest thoughts to herself, in a prayerful manner. Poh-Poh told me that the gods were listening most of all to her silences. (Choy, *All* 153)

Without even the need to talk, the Chinese women believe that their gods and goddesses

care for them and will answer their prayers. In the most desperate moments, their hearts and minds are pacified.

The fourth belief revealed in the boy's memory is the Chinese constellation worship embodied in God of Good Fortune, God of Longevity, and God of Prosperity. The three gods together embody the Chinese people's wishes for blessings, long life, and good luck, which they believe are taken care of by the stars in the sky. It is a demonstration of people's "dependence on and awe for nature" and the belief that everything in the universe is the creation of gods in the heaven and thus should be ruled by natural forces (X. Chen). Xuxia Chen notes that the Chinese believe that everything in the world has its counterpart in heaven and there is a god or goddess who takes care of things in the earthly world. Not only does every mountain, every piece of land, or every type of flower have a god taking care of it, but every type of natural phenomenon, such as wind and rain, or aspect of life, such as wealth, has its god or goddess to take charge. When Stepmother teaches Kiam that "good luck was always connected to doing the right thing" (Choy, *All* 113), she encourages the boy to be good so he will naturally be granted good luck. Meanwhile, Poh-Poh wants Kiam to "respect the Old Ways, to believe in the forces of *feng shui*, the forces of wind and water, of luck and fate" (Choy, *All* 202). Holding this belief, the Chinese women are certain that every aspect of their life is taken good care of and when things go wrong, they change their own behaviour in order to change their fate.

The most significant aspect of the Chinese women's cultural connection with China is that these multi-layer connections are inclusive and overlapping, thus providing the

Chinese women with multiple sources of strength and wisdom. They see themselves as proud heirs instead of victims of Chinese culture. Take Kwan Kung for example. He is worshiped not only as a Confucian saint but as the God of Wealth and Health in Taoism, as *Kuan ti*, samghaarama in the Chinese Buddhism, and as a deity in Chinese folk religion. More importantly, even though Kwan Kung was first a heroic general from the Han ethnic group, he has been accepted and worshiped by other minority groups and become a Saint of all Chinese, thus uniting overseas Chinese, no matter what ethnic group they belong to. With Chinese migrating all over the world, Kwan Kung temples have been built in the United States, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia.

Diachronically and synchronically, cultural markers like Confucius and Kwan Kung have been binding the Chinese immigrants with their shared cultural roots. Worshiping many gods and saints at the same time, and the same god or saint being worshiped by various religions, make the Chinese women highly inclusive and open-minded when it comes to certain matters. Thus, they are ready to incorporate new elements of North America into themselves. For example, though Poh-poh and Mrs. Chong strongly believe in arranging marriage for their grandchildren because “Old way [is] better,” they adopt the “Canada way” of their children spending as much time together as possible to develop their own relationship (Choy, *All* 179).

In another example, for good health, Poh-poh insists on using Chinese herbal tea and ointment and Stepmother tries to save the little sickly Sek-Lung, who has serious

breathing problems, by “calling out his name as if to call him back from some dark well” so the boy will not be taken away by some evil spirit (Choy, *All* 169). However, Poh-poh is also happy to get Western medicine for herself and to invite a white midwife, Mrs. Nellie Yip², for the delivery of the family’s last baby. I agree with Timothy Stanley that racial discrimination is only a small part of the Chinese immigrants’ life and that they have their own literature and culture too, but I would add that the Chinese women not only adhere to the Chinese culture, they also expand it. Chapter Six will discuss further the Chinese women’s selective incorporation of their experience in Canada.

Chinese women’s connection to the collective memory of China’s history

The Chinese-Canadian historian and archivist Paul Yee was once asked whether the Chinese girl heroine in his novel *Roses Sing on New Snow* (2002) is subverting the patriarchy. Yee replied that the girl would not have seen herself as a feminist at the time when the Chinese were singled out by a hostile Canadian society and that racism was “more prominent in their mind than their situation as women being oppressed by men” (M. Davis 56). Yee obviously insists that the Chinese should be interpreted in their own historical and social context and that gender oppression among the Chinese in Canada becomes less severe in the context of Canadian racial oppression. However, the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong present a more complicated gender relationship: due to their shared knowledge of China’s history, the women readily collaborate with the men in bringing China back from the low times. This collaboration empowers the women in ways they would have not been if they were in China.

Chun-chieh Huang, a historian of National Taiwan University, calls the sense of history a “defining characteristic” of the Chinese people in that they believe “to live humanly is to be historically oriented” (“Defining Character”181). British academic Martin Jacques notices that China treats its history differently from the West in that China “lives in and with its past to a greater extent than any other” (11). Jacques emphasizes that the Chinese see a much longer history of political change than the majority of Westerners do: from pre-Confucius through many dynasties to the modern times, which are marked by European and Japanese imperialism from the First Opium War in 1840 to Japanese colonization between 1931 and 1945 (18). In keeping with Huang’s and Jacques’ observations about the Chinese sense of history, the texts show that the Chinese women, like their men, remember a long history of China with ups and downs and believe that China’s low times are only temporary and that they can help it rise again.

Despite their geographical distance, the women in Canada are disturbed daily by the chaos in China caused by Japanese aggression, especially after 1937 when Japan started full-scale invasion of China, which makes the women feel emotionally closer to China. They find it harder to contact their family in China, and Fong Mei in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* finds it more difficult to send money back home and must repeatedly put off her visit to her sister in China because of “bandits and soldiers roaming the countryside” (S. Lee 193). Even more worried than Fong Mei is May-ying who has two daughters in war-torn China and agrees with her husband to send more than his usual remittance “when he could” before the mail and courier services are cut off by the war (Chong 97).

In *All That Matters*, Poh-poh and Stepmother learn from Father that the Japanese troops “were amassing, aiming to march southward into central China” (Choy 123). At a regular gathering in the Tong Association reading rooms with a big map of China on the wall, the women learn the progression of the Japanese troops and that “Dog-shit Japs bomb here [their own village]” (Choy, *All* 206), and a woman “felt faint and had to be guided to a chair” because her son and daughter are “still there!” (Choy, *All* 302).

Not only do they feel for their own families, but the women also feel for other women in China who are suffering through war and unrest. They learn that, on fleeing from their ruined homes, the upper-class women with bound feet “have been raped and slaughtered by the tens of thousands” because they could not escape fast enough (Choy, *All* 288). Living on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the Chinese women are never far from the chaos and suffering in the weakened China and determine to do everything they can to alleviate the pain.

Although the Chinese women feel Japanese aggression daily during the 1930s and 1940s, they remember more foreign powers making trouble in China for a longer time, the memory of which strengthens their belonging to China and their reluctance to identify with the host country of Canada. In *All That Matters*, Poh-poh remembers that except for “a rare breed of [kind] white foreigners, [...] there were those others, so many of them in China, those white foreigners selling opium and taking away Chinese territory” (*All* 33). She also knows China’s weakness when facing foreign powers, telling the children about Chinese being killed by foreign bombs while “pushing her fists into the air” (Choy, *All*

80). “Today, one bomb kill everybody!” she tells the children (Choy, *All* 80). Her words are further supplemented by Father’s condemnation of the “dog-turd Japanese,” the “demon Russians,” and the “big-nosed British” (80). Their talk about, in Alison Kaufman’s (2010) words, the “century of humiliation” (1), which describes the period of intervention and subjugation of China by Western powers and Japan from 1839 to 1949, is an important part of the women’s memory of China.

Poh-poh’s memory of white foreigners selling opium and taking away China’s land in Choy’s text is also discussed by Denise Chong and SKY Lee. Chong connects her grandfather’s migration with British and American trade of opium from India for Chinese silk and tea, which caused “tremendous outflow of China’s silver” and led to massive poverty in China (12). Chinese women of Poh-poh’s age remember China losing Hong Kong with the ceding of Hong Kong Island in 1841, Kowloon peninsula in 1860, and New Territories in 1899. Though SKY Lee does not explicitly mention the British presence in China, she agrees with Kamboureli about the undertone in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* that Chinese migration is the product of British “economic slavery and ecological destruction” (Kamboureli, “*Tian xia*” 318). In Kamboureli’s words, there was “a definite historical parallel” between British imperialism and labour migration, including Chinese, in the nineteenth century and the Chinese migrants were the “result of the [...] circumstances including the two Opium Wars and the rise of the global trade [which] the British practiced that was synonymous with colonial domination in China” (“*Tian xia*” 318). Such memory of China’s low times not only leads the women to agree

with their men about contributing money to China but empowers the women when they can participate in bringing their home country out of the low times.

The Chinese women's historical and political connection with China as a nation is, in some way, an example of what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community." Anderson argues that the nation is "imagined" because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6-7). The Chinese immigrants' lived experiences in China, their education about China, their witnessing of each other's suffering over missing their families in China, and their knowledge about China from their close relatives, all shape a solid political bond that determines their actions for China. Indeed, for Poh-poh, Fong Mei, May-ying and many other Chinese women in Chinatown, the history and political condition in China is not "imagined," and the change they believe they can make is real.

Believing that China can return to normal and be free from foreign aggression, the women take action through various education and fundraising activities, which empowers them with new strength to contribute to nation building more directly. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Fong Mei has "participated in enough auxiliary women's volunteer war efforts" to know that large numbers of "loyal overseas chinese [...] had already declared full-fledged war on Japan" in 1937 (S. Lee 189). She explains to other women that "[t]hose pesky, troublesome little japanese 'turnip heads' have been making so much trouble in northern China [and now] they've gotten so far south they're starting to make

the Hong Kong business cliques nervous” (Lee 188). Fong Mei, like many other overseas Chinese, keeps her eyes on the Japanese aggression in China and shows clear allegiance to China. Despite the fact that her concern may be related to the family’s import business run by Gwei Chang’s sister in Hong Kong, her detestation for the Japanese aggressors is genuine and she is ready to educate other Chinese women about the situation.

In addition to educating people about what is happening in China, fundraising is an important and more direct demonstration of the women’s connection with China and one that unites them with each other, and with the men. As Chong notes, Chinese in Canada joined other overseas Chinese in contributing one-quarter of China’s military expenses in 1937 and their increasing remittances guaranteed foreign exchange for the Nationalist government to maintain China’s balance of payments until the end of 1938 (*Concubine’s* 98). In fact, David Lee estimates that the Chinese in Canada sent back to China 138 million Canadian dollars from 1924 to 1947 and 251.5 million dollars from 1858 to 1947 in various forms (467). Choy, Lee, and Chong present Chinese women participating in these fundraising activities as a major daily activity, especially after 1937.

All That Matters presents the women’s collaboration in fundraising activities as a demonstration of their connection with China. In the activity, the women expect not only to get immediate monetary help for China but to educate the next generation to be responsible members of the country. When Kiam is thirteen, Father expects him to be a “soldier for the cause [...] like a nationalist officer of the Kwomintang (Choy 199), and

the family prepare him for his first fundraising for the “New China Relief Fund” to “benefit our soldiers of Free China” (Choy 199):

Father showed me how to polish my shoes with my own spit.... Stepmother pushed my arms through a freshly ironed and starched blue shirt and buttoned it up to my neck. Poh-Poh encouraged me to put on my best woollen pants with my new suspenders. I shivered as the tweed material prickled against my legs.

“Itchy make you stand up,” [Poh-poh] explained. “Make you taller.”

“Kiam-Kim, hold still,” Stepmother commanded. She rubbed her palms together with a dab of Father’s emerald-coloured pomade. [...] Then she ran her palms and fingers through my hair and neatly combed a part in the middle. By the time I stepped out of the house, my shoes and my hair shone and I smelled of fresh lemons. (Choy, *All* 196-97)

Prior to this scene, Poh-poh has listened to Father and the elders debate the war news from China for weeks, Stepmother knows that “[Chinese] children need food” (196) and the two women have been teaching the boy his fundraising speech in Cantonese:

Generous donations benefit our soldiers of Free China with blankets for winter. Spare coins fill the empty rice bowls of our starving countrymen. A New China will rise from the old. Every penny helps. Every dollar matters. Thank you, kind sir, kind lady. (Choy, *All* 199)

The two women share with Father the goals of contributing to China through fundraising and making First Son fulfill their wish for a “New China [which] will rise from the old” (*All* 199). Together, they are making the boy not only a dutiful member of the family, but a loyal young man of the nation they identify with. Their carefully prepared fundraising activity becomes the ‘rite of passage’ for First Son to step out of home and into society.

In *The Concubine’s Children*, Chong presents her grandparents’ direct and collaborative involvement in fundraising activities. May-ying has lived away from Chan Sam since shortly after the birth of their third daughter in 1930, with letters from China about their two other daughters being their only reason for meeting. However, they find a

common connection with China after 1937. May-ying “wanted to hear from Chan Sam only what he knew about the war in China” (Chong 97), and in that situation they put aside their own differences, “uniting in their fear for the future of the motherland and hatred for the enemy Japanese” (97). Though May-ying still dislikes Chan Sam and does not want to be close to him in other ways, she *wants* to hear about China from him and *wants* him to contribute to the fundraising activities she participates in. In Chong’s words, “the pull of the strings to the motherland” keeps “Chan Sam and May-ying [...] unwavering and in solidarity” (97-98). The couple take each other and their daughter to their respective clan fund-raising banquets and performances of Chinese opera with the inspirational words that “in entertainment, we must not forget saving the country” (98). Obviously, her home country, like her daughters, becomes the strongest connection that May-ying feels.

In fact, participation in fundraising activities in various forms empowers the Chinese women who feel that they are partners with the men in contributing to their home country. Their whole-hearted involvement in “helping our country” challenges Deborah Madsen’s (2013) argument about the Chinese “double allegiance” to both China and Canada, as suggested in the title of her essay. At least in the particular period of history portrayed in the texts by Choy, Lee, Chong, when the Chinese are excluded by the Canadian society, the characters feel allegiance to China only and believe they can help alleviate the suffering of their home country.

In the late 1930s, nearly every issue of *The Chinese Times* had at least one report

about fundraising activities in one way or another, from calls for donations to announcements about the amount recently collected, and from the donors' name list to the use of the collected funds. For example, on December 13, 1937, the day when the notorious six-month-long Nanking Massacre began, *The Chinese Times* alone had six reports: one about the Vancouver Women's Association receiving donations (2), another about organizing a five-person fundraising group for the purpose of "Saving Our Nation"(4), a third about forty-six people's donation of 492 dollars for "Fighting against Japan & Saving Our Nation" (5), a fourth about every shop owner in Xiamen, a major city in southern China, donating a month's rent for the country (6), a fifth thanking the British troops stationed in Suzhou for providing help for the local people (7), and a sixth declaring the doctrines of the Hongmen—saving the nation with loyalty, uniting with the code of brotherhood, and punishing traitors with chivalrousness (7).

In these everyday activities, women played their part well and felt obliged to do everything for their country. When Japan was defeated in 1945, the Chinese in Chinatown celebrated the success no less than the Chinese in China did. *The Chinese Times* on August 15, 1945, the day when Japan formally surrendered, was filled with numerous reports about the victory: celebrating the victory (1; 2; 3; 4); expressing gratitude to the Allied Forces ("Victory" 3); and raising funds for the wounded Chinese soldiers and war refugees organized by the Overseas Chinese Women Association ("Overseas Chinese Women" 7), and for China's post-war reconstruction (8). China is not just a place where the hard life was a push factor that made people leave. Instead, it is also a "pull factor" in

the sense that, by living in Canada, the women are empowered to serve China in ways their counterparts still living there cannot.

4.4 CONCLUSION

As Sarah Sceats observes, “[b]odies are not only biologically determined, but socially culturally, and politically so” (63). The immigrants from China in the texts by Choy, Chong, and Lee are presented as biologically, emotionally, culturally, and politically Chinese. While they try to cope with a new situation in a foreign land where they are seen as inferior aliens, they make every effort to maintain the multi-layered connections with China, which serves as the source of their self-regard.

Understanding these connections enables us to avoid seeing the women as mere victims of the Chinese patriarchal system and to see them instead as complicated human beings with their own values and beliefs. Viewing them in this way helps to explain their “lack of bitterness and regret” that many third generation Chinese-Canadians have been shocked and puzzled by (Women’s Book Committee 21). Many have wondered where their grandmothers “draw their strength and support from” (Women’s Book Committee 232), and understanding these cultural connections with China helps to answer this. These connections not only give the Chinese women a foothold and a sense of belonging, but also serve as their source of strength and wisdom. What is more, the multi-layered connections challenge Madsen’s claim that the “exclusionary logic of the ‘neither/nor’ traps the diasporic subject in a static location, an ‘unhomeliness,’ beyond historical space and time” (“Rhetoric”11).

The connections also show that the “both/and” rhetoric of transnational belonging, which Madsen notes in texts by other Chinese-Canadian writers such as Larrisa Lai and Fred Wah and which she believes “offers an alternative, productive paradigm within which to consider the dynamics of transnational identity formation and the kinds of stories that are told about national belonging and the determinants of diasporic ‘unhomeliness’ (*unheimlichkeit*)” (Madsen, “Rhetoric” 43) is in fact applicable to the study of the Chinese women in Lee, Chong and Choy’s texts. More importantly, understanding these connections will enable the reader to grasp that the authors are not presenting their foremothers as “exotic” in order to exploit their ethnic history for some type of marketing value (M. Ma; S. C. Wong; David Leiwei Li), but are genuinely trying to portray this generation of women as they truly were. Finally, a good knowledge of the women’s connection with China is vital for understanding the women’s life in Chinatown, specifically, as well as in Canada more generally, which will be discussed in the following two chapters.

Notes:

- ¹ This couplet is believed to be written by Zhu Yuan-zhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368—1644) and is now on the door of the Maitreya Hall of Tantuo Temple in Beijing.
- ² Nellie Yip Quong (1882-1949) was a Canadian midwife and feminist and her marriage with Charlie Yip Quong, a Chinese jeweller, were among the first mixed Chinese/European married couple in Vancouver. The couple went to China and stayed there for about four years before 1904. She worked hard to improve the conditions of Chinese living in Canada for four decades.

CHAPTER 5 CHINATOWN:

THE STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING THROUGH MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (1992), “a pioneering book” that is the first to chart the journeys of Chinese-Canadian women (*Times-Colonist* [Victoria]), Chinese women immigrants are described as follows:

Much of the traditional Chinese family life could not be transplanted to the overseas community. Although many of them were free from the expectations and interference of the in-laws, establishing a life in the new country demanded many sacrifices—and the sense of family took on greater significance. Many of the pioneer women were thrust into an unfamiliar environment without the familiar village networks of support—without the language skills that would encourage interaction with the larger community. They were forced to deal with the double burden of racism and sexism in a white and male dominated society. (Women’s Book Committee 19-20)

This description, based on the memories of the interviewees who are all Chinese descendants, suggests four assumptions about the lives of Chinese women immigrants. First, emigration from China has positive results as the Chinese women are freed from bondage such as their Chinese family’s “expectations and interference.” Second, their life in Canada (mostly in Chinatown) makes them “under double burden of racism and sexism.” Third, while having no support networks that existed in villages in China and no English skills, the Chinese women make “many sacrifices” for their homes. Fourth, while they have lost many elements of the traditional family life, the sense of family becomes more important. In all, the immigrant women’s life in the new world appears to hold little happiness.

The descendant interviewees' overall sympathetic tone is mixed with admiration for their (grand)mothers as strong women, confusion about where they "draw their strength and support from" (Women's Book Committee 232), and shock at "the lack of bitterness and regret" (20) and "strange absence of resentment" among the immigrants (232). These interviewees' reflections raise questions: does the freedom from Chinese family responsibilities make the Chinese women happier? Is the so-called double oppression the major cause of their misery? Do the Chinese women of that generation enjoy any happiness at all? What is the source of their well-being and strength?

In the four texts under study, the women immigrants rarely step out of Chinatown except for going to the dock or the cemetery but, quite differently from the above assumption, all the women have some sort of happiness to various degrees. The texts do present the suffering of the Chinese women, but the primary cause is not presented as the dual oppression of racism and sexism, but is rooted in relationships. Although many of the women work outside the home out of necessity, their well-being is mostly affected by their familial relationships. The three main causes of their suffering are the absence or distortion of the familial relationships they expect to live in, the fact that they themselves are not viewed by other family members in the expected ways, and their inability to fulfill their expected roles in such relationships. By contrast, when their various familial relationships exist and are in harmony, when they are accepted by other family members in their own expected ways, and when they contribute to the harmony of such relationships, they feel their well-being fulfilled.

5.1 THE DEFINITION OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Angus Campbell believes that, unlike objective well-being, which has indicators including “education, health, employment, crime rate, political participation” (118), subjective well-being “will surely not have the precision of indicators that are expressed in number of dollars, units of time, or number of square feet” (118). Campbell sees subjective well-being as a “cognitive experience in which the individual compared his perception of his present situation to a situation which he aspired to, experienced or felt he deserved” (119).

While Campbell implies there is a connection between one’s subjective well-being and one’s past experiences and future expectations, Ed Diener emphasizes the subjective and affective components of well-being such as “pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, life satisfaction, fulfillment and more specific states such as stress, affection, trust and joy” (“Science of Happiness” 40). Elsewhere, Diener and Eunkook Suh discern that people’s subjective well-being is not only related to satisfaction of their human needs, but also “represents judgments based on the particular norms and values of each culture” (4). This remark is extremely significant as it implies the importance of studying well-being in the context of culture.

Harry Triandis et al share Diener and Suh’s view and further specify the cultural traits as “a shared pattern of attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, values and other subjective elements” (13), thus providing guidance on how to determine a person’s sense of well-being. Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel R. Markus

explicitly state that well-being is “very much a collaborative project” meaning that “one cannot experience well-being by one’s self” and that one’s well-being “requires engaging a system of consensual understanding and practices and depends on the nature of one’s connections and relations to others” (15). Katamaya and Markus clearly state that one’s well-being lies in the relationships one lives in.

These definitions of well-being reveal important features of the concept. For one thing, subjective well-being is such a culture-laden concept that the study of people’s well-being must be situated in their culture, and people of one culture may thus find it difficult to understand the subjective well-being of people from another. Additionally, one’s subjective well-being, though cognitive, is not a personal matter; instead, it is based on one’s interaction with other people and one’s opinion on such interactions. Therefore, to interpret the subjective well-being of the Chinese women in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong, it is essential to understand the way the Chinese women define themselves in the relationships they live in, at the core of which are familial relationships, now that their migration and their life in Chinatown make the sense of family much more significant.

5.2 ‘RELATIONAL SELF’ OF THE CHINESE

Kuo-Shu Yang (2008) explains the importance of relationships for the Chinese by pointing out that the Chinese define themselves by emphasizing their own relative position in various relationships. When introducing themselves, the Chinese always call themselves “someone’s son,” “someone’s student,” or “someone’s friend” (“Theoretical Analysis”180). Yang calls this self in relationships “relational self” (180), and Chun-Lung

Chien and Li-li Huang (2009) call it “interdependent self” (465), further distinguishing the Chinese self from the Western independent self with its emphasis on individuality.

Although scholars give different names to the Chinese self, they have all pointed out the importance of relationships in the way Chinese define their selves.

According to Yang (2008), the Chinese relational self has five characteristics: relationship formalization; relationship reciprocity/interdependence; relationship harmony; relationship fatalism, and relationship determinism (“Theoretical Analysis” 180-88).

Relationship formalization, Yang explains, means that the interpersonal relationships are formalized or even ritualized, and everyone is assigned definite roles to play. In this way, “the role division is clearer and the role connotation is more solid” (180), meaning everyone is clear about his or her relative position with another.

Relationship reciprocity/interdependence refers to the duality of roles, meaning each person’s code of conduct is closely coordinated with the code of conduct of the corresponding role for mutual benefit (181). According to Yang, this reciprocity can be “spiritual and psychological” as well as “material and substantial” (182). Yang also points out that “the basic principle of the Chinese culture is the pursuit of balance and harmony,” which is expected to be achieved through everyone playing his/her own role and satisfying the expectations of the coordinating roles (184).

Yang stresses that the Chinese are more afraid and anxious about chaos in social relationships than about poverty (183), which explains why even in the most poverty-stricken situation the Chinese still try to maintain relationship-based order.

Believing that their relationships are predestined, the Chinese either make an effort to keep harmony with each other or tolerate any disharmony rather than try to alter or abandon relationships, no matter how unpleasant they are. Instead, they make every effort to put right and to enhance the relationships (184).

Finally, the way the Chinese treat each other is determined by the relationship between them; thus, individuals operate on different principles in different types of relationships (185). These features of Chinese relationships are the key to understanding the women immigrant characters in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong when considering their upbringing in the Old China and their environment in Chinatown in Canada.

Out of all relationships, family relations are at the very heart of how the Chinese define themselves, as the Chinese people see “the family, not individual, as the fundamental unit of a society” (Yang, “Theoretical Analysis” 177). This is especially true of the Chinese rural culture in which the women in the texts were raised. Xiao-Tong Fei’s observation about the Chinese rural family is helpful for understanding the women characters:

Chinese rural society took on a differential mode of association when kinship was successfully used as a medium to create social groups and to manage all kinds of activities. [...] First, in Chinese rural society, lineages carry the responsibility for political, economic, religious, and other functions. Second, in order to handle so much activity, the family structure cannot be limited to simple combinations of parents and children but must expand outward. Moreover, because politics, economy, religion, and social activity all require long-term continuity, the basic social groups certainly cannot be as transitory as Western families. The family must have continuity. It must not break up when the children grow up and must not end when individual members die.[...] The Chinese family is the opposite of a temporary household. (84)

In addition to seeing family continuity as a must for the Chinese, Fei points out two very important features of the Chinese lineage: unlike the “transitory” Western ones, Chinese family puts far more emphasis on familial continuity and its more complicated multi-layered functions. Therefore, the absence of such lineage creates chaos in the Chinese community and causes its members’ anxiety.

Yang and Ye call this “complex system of attitudes which individuals, who see themselves as a part of the family, hold towards the whole family, other members, and related affairs” Chinese familism (248; my translation). Yang and Ye note that Chinese familism has three components: cognitive components which include recognition of family continuity, unity, and dignity as life goals; affective components, which include the passion for one’s family and longing for interdependence with each other; and intentional components, which include devotion to family continuity, willingness to make sacrifices for family unity, and the desire to fight for the family’s dignity (248-260). In what Liang-nian Jin calls the “duty-based” Chinese society (“Foreword” 2), the core value is that everyone accepts their assigned roles in the reciprocally hierarchical system and fulfills the duties associated with the roles. People get satisfaction, and thus happiness, when they fulfill the duties associated with their roles and feel upset when they fail in their duties or see other members fail in theirs.

In Choy, Lee, and Chong’s texts, the women in Chinatown know their roles and are psychologically prepared for these. However, the importance of family relations is intensified because the primary reason for the women’s migration is to join a family, and

because maintaining a family becomes much harder due to the Canadian immigration policy. In Choy's novels, Poh-poh, together with Father and First Son Kiam, comes as Third Uncle's family and Stepmother comes to be wife to Father despite the document's claim of her being a "helpmate." In Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Mui Lan joins Gwei Chang as an official "merchant's wife" and Fong Mei comes to marry Choy Fuk. In *The Concubine's Children*, May-ying is to be Chan Sam's concubine. While the women emigrate to Canada with a particular understanding of their roles, their subjective well-being is to be strongly influenced by the degree to which these expectations are satisfied.

5.3 THE WOMEN'S EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

Choy portrays a happy old grandmother in the Chen family in Vancouver's Chinatown. At the age of eighty, Poh-poh is fully contented with her life: "I have everything now. I have three grandsons. Good family. Plenty food. I rest and wait. I have long life already" (*All* 351). For her, "everything" means a good family with three grandsons, together with the arranged marriage for the eldest grandson, meaning the prospect of the next generation is within reach. In the two novels, Poh-poh has all the relations a Chinese woman can expect. She has a son she cannot speak of without smiling, telling her eldest grandson that his father is "a smarter boy than the Patriarch's two ox-brained sons" (*All* 366). She also has a daughter-in-law, three grandsons, a granddaughter, and a would-be granddaughter-in-law. These people together make what

Wolf calls a complete “uterine family” with the mother and her children (*Women* 33), in which the absence of the father (Patriarch Chen in Poh-poh’s case) does not matter.

Elsewhere, Wolf precisely explains the self-definition of a Chinese, male or female: “it is with his family, his parents, and grandparents, his children and grandchildren that he takes the measure of his life” (*House* 23). In her old age, Poh-poh feels full satisfaction with her life in her extended family of three generations and a potential fourth generation. Her last words to her grandson Kiam—“Have sons, Kiam-Kim. Have many tiger sons with Jenny”—are spoken with a “look of joy and irrepressible triumph” (*All* 369). Poh-poh sees herself in a far better position than Patriarch Chen, her master and her son’s father in China, who is far wealthier and has a much higher social status¹ than her. Her happiness all comes from the quantity and quality of her own family and is intensified by the rarity of such relationships in Chinatown and the close collaboration of the whole family to make it happen.

In fact, Poh-poh has led a contented life since migrating to Canada in 1926, which is best explained by Wolf’s observation about Chinese women who expect “peaceful years of decreasing responsibilities and increasing leisure time” in the last two decades of their life (*Women* 221). Her well-being lies solely in maintaining the family. As soon as the family settles down in Gold Mountain, she “clamour[s]” to Father, “Before I die, I want to see three grandsons” (Choy, *All* 16). At the joyous celebration of the arrival of the adopted second son Jung-Sum, she “cri[es]”: “I long for three grandsons. Then I die soon” and her “laughter rumble[s] up the staircase” of the porch (Choy, *All* 110).

Poh-poh's laughter is not only because of a newly-adopted boy as her second grandson, but because of the prospect of a third grandson who will be the ultimate satisfaction of her life. In fact, all of her grandchildren, the adopted second one being an exception, spend most of their childhood time with Poh-poh and sleep in Poh-poh's room for a long time. In this whole period, Poh-poh lives her life in the ideal Chinese way called "*hanyi nongsun*"(含饴弄孙/含飴弄孫), which literally means "sweets in the mouth and grandsons in the hand," which describes the leisurely happy life of old age. Though baby girls are not presented as being cherished as baby boys in that they Full Moon is not celebrated with a splendid banquet and they do not receive a gold trickles, other details show a more complicated attitude towards girls. For one thing, just like her two brothers, Jook Liang sleeps in Poh-poh's room with similar intimacy with the Old One and the girl is also spoiled by Poh-poh who happily "engineer[s] the ribbon laces" on her shoes (Choy, *Jade* 29). For another, the family decides to keep the little girl because they have "a pine-board home with running tap water, a metal stove that ate logs in its grated mouth, and enough dried food stored away in a deep pantry for a month of eating" (Choy, *Jade* 29). In Margery Wolf's words, for the Chinese, raising a boy is a necessity while raising a girl is a "luxury" (*House* 40). This dissertation will not further discuss the difference between girls and boys because the rarity of babies in Chinatown has made all babies precious, largely lessening and the gender inequality.

Not only does Poh-poh seek her own well-being in the harmonious familial harmony, but her pursuit also breeds the happiness of everyone in the family. In *All That Matters*,

which Choy rewrote “at a deeper level” following two near-death experiences and after travelling to China to make the documentary *Searching for Confucius* (2003) (*Not Yet* 74), Choy presents numerous scenes of the familial harmony. His narrator, First Son, feels warmth and gratitude in retrospect for his life with Poh-poh. Here is one of the daily scenes of family life he recalls:

Stepmother was in the parlour showing Liang how to finish her knitting project. [...They then] got up and went into the dining room. Jung-Sum was showing Sekky how to set up the oak table for dinner. As the two of them helped me to pull the round table away from the wall—but not too close to Father’s corner desk—Stepmother and Liang straightened out the plates and bamboo mats on the table.[...] I set up five chairs. Poh-Poh hollered for us to watch out and slowly brought in the soup tureen; Stepmother and Liang followed with rice bowls and savoury dishes. I carried in the last plate of stir-fried greens and beef. (Choy, *All* 286)

In the very limited living space, where Father’s work area is the same as the family’s dining area, lives the harmonious family. The older family members teach the younger ones skills to prepare them for the future, such as Stepmother teaching the daughter Liang knitting and second brother helping the youngest boy to set the table. The younger ones offer a hand when they can, such as the two younger boys helping First Son move the dinner table.

In the following dinner scene, knowing one another’s favourite dish and gladly offering it to each other demonstrates the connection between subjective well-being and Chinese familial relationships:

Father ... picked up a choice piece of leafy greens and put it on Stepmother’s plate. He stood up, reached over and added a crisp stem of *bok choy* to Poh-Poh’s rice bowl, and then Liang decided to share a slim piece of stir-fried beef with Sekky. I pushed a chunk of pork into Jung-Sum’s bowl. I wanted

somehow to make a gesture of gratitude for this family meal. Instead, I told Sekky to stop kicking the legs of his chair. (*All* 286)

This traditional Chinese dinner presents everyone taking food from the same containers. It is all the foods together that make a dinner, just like all the people together make a family. The fact that everyone gives each other their favourite food shows they know each other well and care for each other's likes and dislikes. In the eyes of First Son, this family dinner scene, together with others like the scene of Father "dutifully" pouring tea for Poh-poh, is the rule of the universe (*All* 22). He naturally tries to keep the rule by reminding the little one to behave. "To stop kicking the legs of his chair" is a symbolic suggestion: if the little one wants his world to be stable and secure, he needs to make sure the "legs," which symbolize the roots of his world, are firm. Meanwhile, while everyone contributes to the harmony from which all benefit, it is not customary for the Chinese to explicitly express their gratitude as demonstrated in Kiam's hesitation to "make a gesture of gratitude." Instead, he further contributes to the harmony by stopping his young brother from kicking the chair legs which makes unpleasant noise and can possibly cause his own fall, breaking the harmony at the moment.

One significant feature of the family's network of relationships is its complicated position-duty connections. In the relationship between elder and younger siblings, the former takes care of the latter, but also regulates the younger siblings when they behave improperly, as demonstrated in First Son stopping youngest son from kicking the table. Seniority does not merely mean priority or power; however, it means more care and duty. Reprimanding his younger sibling is part of the older child's duty, not just the exercising

of power. Meanwhile, in the relationship between a mother and son, the most important factor is not gender but filial piety, which is the crowning virtue in Chinese culture. As shown above, Poh-poh's satisfaction with life derives from the existence of all the expected relations and the sense of certainty and security the relationships provide for the younger generation of the family.

Poh-poh's subjective well-being from family relationships can be easily missed, as illustrated by Elizabeth Byrne's argument:

Many grew up with the "old Chinese ways" valued Taoist belief of minimizing the self, finding balance, maintaining self-control, wanting nothing, and expecting nothing. In other words, events in one's life will unfold according to fate, and one's personal fretting and decision-making have little impact or usefulness in determining an outcome [...] one can easily see how these traditional Chinese values contrasted starkly with contemporary North American ideas. North Americans often value independence, youth, fun, freedom, emotional pleasure, free thinking, and opportunism. Canadians and Americans tend to believe they are makers of their own destiny and fate plays little role in their personal successes or failures. (26-27)

Byrne correctly points out that the Chinese raised in Old China have different values from the Westerners and she even tries to interpret the women in terms of the Chinese philosophy of Taoism. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Taoism is one important source of the spiritual support of the Chinese women's self-regard; however, Byrne's observation that the Chinese minimize the self and want nothing is problematic. Choy, Lee, and Chong all present Chinese women *wanting* familial relationships, their joy at having them, and their desperation at the absence of these relationships. Poh-poh's joyful exclamation of having "everything" shows that the Chinese women not only have wants and expectations, but also achieve subjective well-being when these are satisfied. The Chinese

women's wants are often missed because their wants are too different from those in societies which excessively value individuality.

The two scenes above show the sense of certainty and thus satisfaction and happiness the Chinese gain from harmonious relationships in their extended family. For a typical Chinese grandmother, “bigness [of family] is a matter for pride” (Wolf, *House* xiii). Wolf further clarifies that for the Chinese, “bigness” does not mean “numerical size” but “complexity” (Wolf, *House* xiii), which means extended family living together. Xiao-Tong Fei makes it more clear: a family with parents and ten children is not considered a “big” one, but a family with four people including parents, their adult son, and the daughter-in-law, is not “small” because the latter is “more complicated than the first in structure” (81). Besides, in the Chinese culture, “men's dependence on his fellow men is primary” (F. Hsu 247), and the traditional Chinese have “a strong desire to depend and to be depended on”: they usually turn to their family when in need and are ready to provide for the needy (Yang and Ye 255; my translation). Everyone contributes to the overall harmony in their own ways and naturally provides for each other; and the ones on the receiving end accept the love and kindness comfortably.

Family harmony is the source of Poh-poh's, as well as everyone else's, subjective well-being, which best represents Choy's philosophy of “all that matters”: Poh-poh's family is all that matters to her and when she has a “good family,” she feels that she has “everything.” In his speech given at the Ontario Writers Conference (2016), Choy talks about his idea of the “chain of humanity” (“OWC 2016”), which means that it is people

that matter. Not only does the family matter to Poh-poh, but she matters to the family as well. Her insistence on maintaining the chain ensures that her son, Father, has an appropriate partner and that the children are cared for and loved; and the Old China stories are passed down to the children. Father matters because he makes the Old One feel respected and the little ones well-guided and protected. Stepmother matters because her arrival makes it real that “we would be a family in Gold Mountain” (Choy, *All* 22). All the children matter because they give meaning to the adults’ striving and give the family a future.

When receiving the 2015 George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award, Choy recalled his most beloved aunt, who taught him the lesson that one “can have everything even when one seems to have nothing” (“Wayson Choy--June 11”), which refers to the importance of family. This aunt had sacrificed for her family and had the love of the whole family. Poh-poh is similar as the good family is all she wants and she is contented that she has one. As Daniel Kahneman remarks, happiness “is not to be confused with good fortune, which is an assessment of the circumstances of someone’s life” (5). Good fortune – income, health, and so on – does not necessarily lead to happiness and material lack does not necessarily mean absence of happiness.

Unlike Poh-poh, who lives a life ‘with sweets in the mouth and grandchildren in the hand,’ Mui Lan and Fong Mei in Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* mostly live in misery, mainly because of problematic familial relationships. Joanna Antoniak sees Mui Lan’s frustration as a sign of her identity issue because “she is robbed of her individuality and

becomes recognized only through her husband” (13). Similarly, concerning Fong Mei’s reactions to Mui Lan after the birth of her first child, Antoniak thinks that “she submits herself under her mother-in-law’s iron rule until she becomes strong and independent enough to free herself” (14). Sympathizing with Mui Lan for her loss of individuality and celebrating Fong Mei for gaining independence and fighting for freedom, Antoniak does not see the striking similarity between the two Chinese women who both long for the relationships they believe must be present in one’s life and share the desperation to create such relationships.

Mui Lan’s first appearance shows the most important influence on her subjective well-being. Despite being the owner of the largest restaurant in Chinatown, she is so obviously unhappy that anyone with “some contact with her, no matter how minimal [...] always [leaves] with a faint, dry dusting of dissatisfaction blown over their faces and shoulders” (Lee 31-32). Wealth does not bring her happiness, and the cause of her dissatisfaction is soon revealed through her interaction with two laundresses she spots passing by. Seeing the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, each carrying heavy laundry bundles and with “a sleeping baby strapped to her back” (Lee 32), Mui Lan “perk[s] up” and “dive[s] under the glass display case in search of candies to poke into the ungrasping hands of the infants” (32). What she sees are two “[b]ig, healthy babies, with their adorable round heads dangling and lolling, their fine wispy hair fluttering with every breeze and movement” (Lee 32).

The two women are clearly aware that, despite their poverty, they have an advantage

over Mui Lan, who has been seen by the whole of Chinatown to be expecting babies for over five years. “[O]ut of politeness” and to not hurt Mui Lan (33), they make negative remarks about their babies as if they were undesirable: “Useless as ever. Eat, sleep, excrete. Then eat more, and excrete more. Who needs them!” (Lee 33). At this, Mui Lan responds, “You have prosperity!” and saying this, “her eyes glued to the soft-snoring infants with the same intense cupidity that always cut conversations short” (Lee 33). As the two women walk away, “Mui Lan’s brow furrow[s] deep, [and with] a drawn-out sigh, she deflate[s] until her head droop[s] onto her chest again” (Lee 33). Having no children means having no prosperity; that is what absence of relationships means to her. The wealth of the largest restaurant is nothing compared to a baby and does not bring her any sense of security or happiness. Though poor and having to work as laundresses, the two passers-by enjoy what Mui Lan desires most: babies.

Despite the fierce conflict with Mui Lan, Fong Mei needs a baby as much as Mui Lan because she was raised in the same culture with “extraordinary hunger for descendants” (Wolf, *Women* 56). As Wolf observes about the traditional Chinese culture, “the dominant theme of the marriage ritual is fertility and descendants” and, after spending “enormous amount of money [...] to bring in a girl capable of extending the family another generation [...], any delay is certain to cause anxiety (*Women* 56). Fong Mei used to have her own dream of having a baby when “unguarded thoughts of babies brought playful smiles about her mouth [and a] perfect baby had been her one desire—something for which one’s body had to be bartered away in marriage” (Lee 65).

She thinks babies come naturally with marriage, which is also suggested by her “beloved and honoured” sister who teaches her to enjoy the first year of being a new bride, which she warns “will be over sooner than you think!” (Lee 63). According to her sister, a new stage of her life as the mother of the descendant(s) of the new family will quickly begin:

When the first-born comes, you’ll be too busy to even eat. Then, you won’t even give your big sister another thought, will you? If it is a boy, your status in this great family will be assured. Then, how you’ll laugh at yourself for behaving peevishly. Listen to your elder sister teach! (Lee 63)

Fong Mei’s real identity crisis lies not, as Antoniak argues, in the desire to win independence and freedom from her mother-in-law’s tyrannical oppression, but in the failure to experience the essential relationships brought about by having babies, which she needs as much as her mother-in-law.

Fong Mei herself is becoming so sensitive about her status as “a new bride” that she loses control of herself when Ting An (son of Gwei Chang and Kolera), who is always on good terms with her, sees her frustration and teases her by asking her about any trouble she as “a young bride” may have with her mother-in-law. Fong Mei talks back angrily: “Don’t call me a bride, you turtle! I’ve been married five long years. [...] get out of here! I don’t want to look at your face!” (Lee 69). Every reminder of her inability to step into the expected role of mother and achieve the consequent status burns her. Five years is too long for Fong Mei to be “a new bride.” She has expected to redefine herself as a mother, but she cannot.

As Wolf discerns, “a young woman wants a baby because she has been told that her

reason for existence is to produce one, because the family pressure on her to do so is uncomfortably urgent, and because she is desperately lonely” (*Women* 148-49). I think Wolf overemphasizes women being “told” about their “reason of existence” and the pressure from the family, but she is right in noticing that a woman can achieve a secure and prestigious position by becoming “mother of one of the family’s descendants” (*Women* 156). Fong Mei believes it natural that a woman should have babies as demonstrated in her plan for her younger daughter Suzie. When she learns that Suzie is pregnant by her half-brother Morgan, she insists on taking Suzie away to Hong Kong to “marry someone else, have servants, more babies” (Lee 276).

In addition to the need for family continuation, Fong Mei’s desire for a baby is no less than Mui Lan’s for the same personal reasons. Margery Wolf is also right that a childless woman is “desperately lonely” (*Women* 149) and in fact, both Mui Lan and Fong Mei are terribly lonely because the family does not have babies. Seeing the two women each carrying a baby hurts Mui Lan:

[T]heir closeness also annoyed her. She even envied them for their prosaic work because it was something that the two women had in common and did together. A singularity of purpose; the babies would also grow up close to each other. Together, the two women gave an impression of strength, as if they knew something that she didn’t. (Lee 33)

The two women have a bond with each other by having the same job and, most importantly, by having babies, and their bond will last as the babies grow up together. Having no babies, Mui Lan feels isolated.

Fong Mei, too, has expected that being a “mother” will happen within one year of

marriage, only to find that it has become an impossible dream to her and that she has become a dangling person, not knowing what to do with herself. She agrees with the whole community that it is only natural that “a woman married five years would have a tiny baby in front, one on her back and a big one clinging to her pantlegs” (S. Lee 72), and her loneliness first comes with her own unfulfilled expectation for babies. However, her loneliness also results from the failed relationship with her mother-in-law because the lack of babies prevents the two women from collaborating in any other business and isolates them from each other, tortured by the same family problem.

As Wolf notes, a mother-in-law “usually approaches her first daughter-in-law with hopes for good relations” (*House* 143). However, Mui Lan’s frustration from over five years’ waiting has worn out her patience and she sees Fong Mei as the one who ruins the “prosperity” of the family, and thus the two women have little to collaborate on. Besides, as Wolf observes, a first pregnancy “mends many breaches in the relations between a young wife and her mother-in-law, the girl out of need and the older woman out of delight at the prospect of a grandson (*Women* 152). Therefore, without babies, whatever conflict exists between the two women just remains and worsens.

Some readers may sympathize with Fong Mei as it is not her fault, but her husband’s, that she has not had a baby. However, the fact that Mui Lan wants to get her son another wife and asks a waitress for help proves that she, not understanding reproductive medicine as an uneducated woman living in the 1920s, does believe it is Fong Mei’s fault. What is more, having no babies has distanced Fong Mei from her husband Choy Fuk who,

like the two women, is desperate to have a child. As Wolf remarks, in the Chinese culture the birth of the first child means that a man “becomes fully adult” (*Woman* 148). A baby is also what Choy Fuk needs to step into the new stage of his life. Even an adopted child could have connected the family members, but babies are too rare in Vancouver’s Chinatown for the Wong family to adopt one.

Wolf’s description of the function of a baby, including an adopted one, best explains the loneliness of the Wong family:

The adoption of a baby girl does not relieve the young bride’s anxieties about her ability to provide the family with the one thing it wants from her, sons, but the introduction of a child into a family without children often changes the climate of the group. The girl and her husband have a legitimate topic for relaxed conversation. The parents-in-law can enjoy the presence of a grandchild and feel that they are doing all they can to fulfill their obligations to their ancestors. And the “mother” has a child to hold when the other women gather to chat with their babies on their backs, a child to fondle and console when she herself feels utterly alone and friendless. (*Women* 151-152)

A Chinese family makes sure of its continuation by having babies through adopting, taking concubines, and having a uxoriocal marriage (Yang and Ye 249), but in Chinatown, none of these is possible due to the hostile immigration policy. The climate of the Wong family remains gloomy as there are no babies to connect the members or soothe their anxiety. The young woman has no company; the parents-in-law are too concerned to be kind to the daughter-in-law; the couple are too occupied by their failure in fulfilling the primary goal of the marriage to talk about other topics; everyone is isolated and stuck in their current state, unable to move on to the next stage of their life; and the childless women of both generations are also isolated from their peer women in the community as

they cannot join the gatherings where babies are certainly the dominant topic, which further negatively impacts their subjective well-being.

Their similar degree of anxiety drives both women to uncontrollable desperation, which further deteriorates their subjective well-being. Mui Lan used to be a happy, sociable, and kind young woman. She gathered with the village women who were also mothers or wives of Gold Mountain men and shared in the collective joys and sufferings about receiving remittance, or being sent for, or losing a son or husband (Lee 34). Besides, on numerous occasions, Mui Lan helped the young girl Song Ang, who she met on the same ship coming to Canada, and who could have died from her husband's violent beatings without Mui Lan's "not infrequent intervention," and who, after the death of her two sons, "would have simply died of neglect" if Mui Lan had not come just in time (Lee 125). Having saved Song Ang's life, Mui Lan gave her a job as the waitress of the Wong's restaurant.

The kindness and sociability Mui Lan initially displays fade over time as she grows desperate for a grandchild. For over five years, Mui Lan has "[s]pared no expense" to provide Fong Mei with the "best food" and "all the required medicines"; she has "sent gifts, and money to have incense burnt at the temples at home, to have amulets made"; and she has sent for white doctors (Lee 81). Believing that she has "done everything possible" with no result from Fong Mei, she has thought about bringing another woman to be Choy Fuk's concubine and to have his children, which has become impossible because of The Chinese Exclusion Act 1923. In desperation, she turns to Song Ang, who

is more than willing to help Mui Lan out now. Finally, the time comes when she spends “an entire morning debasing Fong Mei and forcing her to her knees” to make Fong Mei accept the baby Choy Fuk is to have with the waitress (Lee 125). The moment when she becomes a tyrant is also the moment she is collapsing with desperation for a baby.

Meanwhile, Fong Mei’s own desperation is demonstrated in her committing adultery with Ting An. She needs children not only to fulfill her duty in the family but to define herself, empower herself, and ensure her status in the family, as seen in her reaction to the birth of her first baby:

Of course, the new baby consumed Fong Mei, and she liked the idea of a sanitary western hospital at first, because she knew the baby would be out of Mui Lan’s ever-grasping reach. [...]After two weeks of confinement, she came home a very nervous, high-strung woman, so any spark at all could have sent her into a fiery rage. Yet fierceness, whether she was conscious of it or not, was exactly the artillery she needed to do battle with her mother-in-law in order to usurp the throne. And Fong Mei certainly would upset the order of this house; her rage demanded it. From now on, things would be done her way. Never, never again would Mui Lan bring her to her knees. (Lee 181)

As much as Mui Lan, Fong Mei is eager to construct her own “uterine family” which will be “out of Mui Lan’s ever-grasping reach.” The baby gives her the strength to “rage,” to “usurp the throne,” to demand things to “be done her way,” and to stand up to her mother-in-law. Having grown up in the culture, she understands the power that comes with having children. Therefore, her power is not from independence or economic success, but the traditional role of a mother. She raises her children by providing them with everything and sends them back to Hong Kong for education as she sees “absolutely no future” for them in Canada (S. Lee 188). What Fong Mei does is best explained with the

Chinese idiom: ‘parents who love their children have to consider for them in the long run.’

The children give Fong Mei’s life meaning and thus bring her profound sense of well-being. However, viewing Mui Lan and Fong Mei from perspectives other than their traditional Chinese one is likely to result in either seeing them as fighters against patriarchy, or as speakers for their individual identity, and thus miss the values the women embrace. For Instance, Bennett Y. Fu argues that “Lee creates a genealogy of female characters who transgress normality; in particular, the female bodies in Lee’s novels transverse the hyphenated space by subverting established patriarchal laws to claim their subjectivity” (*Differing Bodies* 70-71). However, both Mui Lan and Fong Mei firmly stick to the Chinese normality rather than transgress it, doing whatever they must to keep the Wong Family going.

They both also try to maintain the established patriarchal order and define themselves in such order, as seen in Mui Lan’s recognition of Gwei Chang’s position as the man of the house and Fong Mei’s thoughtfulness in fulfilling her duty as a daughter-in-law taking care of Gwei Chang when he is old. In fact, the women collaborate with the men in maintaining relationships rather than subverting them. As previously stated, Chinese traditionally view relationships as predestined; therefore, instead of subverting them, they either try to make the relationships harmonious or tolerate the disharmony. The women neither fight against the men nor struggle to be distinct, although each does have her own characteristics.

Rachel Wong believes that Mui Lan and Fong Mei are part of the “family’s murky history in the enclave [of Chinatown]” that Kae “must nonetheless come to terms with” (36). Wong presents Mui Lan as “the shrewd [sic] and manipulative businesswoman who will stop at nothing to secure her son’s bloodline” and Fong Mei as “(a business-savy [sic] woman) unsatisfied in her marriage [who] turns to her husband’s illegitimate half-brother in order to cope with her husband’s infertility” (37). Wong views both women as serving Choy Fuk without seeing them striving for the whole Wong Family, or seeing that Choy Fuk himself is doing the same thing. As I discussed above, Mui Lan has only changed to a shrew by the prolonged waiting. What is more, she strongly believes in her duty to keep the Wong family going. As for Fong Mei, she becomes quite financially successful, but she remains a member of the Wong family when she could have easily left and survived by herself either in Canada or in Hong Kong.

In a nutshell, despite their sharp conflict in the text, Mui Lan and Fong Mei share the same source of happiness and suffer largely for the same reasons too, which is demonstrated in their reaction to the news that the family’s girls are marrying their half-brothers. Learning that the Beatrice, the elder daughter, is marrying Keeman (who is believed to be the son of Choy Fuk and the waitress, and thus a half-brother of Beatrice), Mui Lan and Fong Mei fall into the same despair. (Keeman is actually the child of the waitress and another man Woo, and thus has no blood connection to Beatrice). Crying, Mui Lan begs the girl, “Don’t marry him, Bea Bea! Brothers and sisters can’t marry! You’ll ruin your life. This family is falling apart, and I won’t be here much longer. Please

listen to me!” (S. Lee 260), and with these words, she “[sinks] into the chair” (260).

Relationships going wrong and the family being ruined is what drives Mui Lan to tears.

Fong Mei, who is the more direct cause of such incestuous relationships, loses her mind when she learns that her second daughter Suzie is pregnant with Morgan, the son of Ting An and a French woman. Suzie remembers:

Mom drove home in the middle of the day. Right away, she marched into my room and started to tear out my hair. By then, nothing she said or did surprised me.

“Are you crazy? Have you no shame—no shame at all?” She slapped and slapped, and when I tried to crawl away, she dragged me back by the hair.

“Parading yourself up and down the street! Dead girl, dead girl-bag!” The words edged out through her tightly clenched mouth. She wasn’t going to stop until I conformed to her fierce will, but I wasn’t going to do that any more. (S. Lee 271-72)

Her children have brought Fong Mei happiness and given meaning to her life. However, when the relationships are going wrong, she falls back into misery and despair. Years ago, when she was scolded by Mui Lan for not being able to have babies, she called herself “just a dead girl-bag anyway, useless to everyone” (S. Lee 65). Today, she calls her own beloved younger daughter the same. That one with no proper relationships is dead and will not have well-being is both Fong Mei and Mui Lan’s belief.

5.4 ACHIEVING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING BY PLAYING

THE EXPECTED ROLES

The Canadian-born American sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1956) observation of presentation of self explains the Chinese women’s sense of satisfaction, which lies in their relationships, especially their roles in familial relationships. Goffman compares people’s

face-to-face interactions to “theatrical performances” (“Preface”), arguing that when someone comes in contact with another person, he or she attempts to control the impression the other person forms of him or her (2-3). Goffman also believes that participants in social interactions employ “preventive practices” to “avoid embarrassment” and “corrective practices” to “compensate for discrediting occurrences that have not been successfully avoided” (7). Therefore, Goffman suggests the self lies in the two-way interaction with “defensive practice,” meaning people take “strategies and tactics” to protect their own projection of the situation, that is being what they think they are in the situation; and “protective practice,” meaning people take “strategies and tactics” to save the definition of a situation projected by others, that is what they are in others’ eyes (7). Specifically, the Chinese women’s sense of self and well-being related are strongly connected to the way the women see themselves in the relationships and to the way the women are seen by their relatives. When these two selves are consistent the women’s well-being is achieved; and when they are inconsistent, their well-being is affected.

There is a paradox in the fact that the women find agency through playing their roles within various relationships, and at the same time are influenced by how others judge the degree to which they successfully fulfill their duties. Therefore, to understand the representation of the Chinese women in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong one must consider the women’s own perspective of their position within various relationships, including the way they see others’ judgement of them and the way they see their own contribution to relationships. However, several scholars have misinterpreted the women’s

sense of well-being, sympathizing with them for ‘enduring’ what they perceive as harmful relationships, or celebrating their success in breaking away from these relationships. For example, when Robert Lee mistakenly calls Kolera Wong Gwei Chang’s “abandoned first wife” and Mui Lan his “redoubtable second wife,” (“Imagined” 27), he does not recognize Mui Lan’s role as the only legitimate wife, the associated duties and rights she has, and of course her frustration at seeing no grandchildren “[a]fter five years, three months and eighteen days” (S. Lee 33). Robert Lee also does not understand Mui Lan’s secure status in the Wong family and Fong Mei’s contrasting insecurity. As for Kolera, Gwei Chang does not see her as a wife because he will never take any woman as his wife without his parents’ consent. Similarly, Huiling Yang calls May-ying in *The Concubine’s Children* Chan Sam’s “second wife” when in fact Huangbo is the replacement wife after Chan Sam’s first wife dies and May-ying is really a concubine (59). A wife and a concubine play drastically different roles in a family, and a clear understanding of the women’s status and the duties associated with each role is key to interpreting their well-being, which depends on the degree to which they fulfill their duties.

Choy, Lee, and Chong all portray Chinese women as having a sense of well-being when they feel they have fulfilled their duties as family members. Poh-poh becomes what Wolf calls an “asset to a busy family” (*Women* 222), running the family, maintaining traditions and Chinese customs, taking care of children, and getting tremendous satisfaction from contributing to the family. In *The Concubine’s Children*, May-ying is visibly happy in at least four situations, all related to domestic roles. The first is when she

sets foot in Canada to meet Chan Sam for the first time. After “barely” making introductions at the dock, Chan Sam’s first sentence to May-ying is “I’m inviting you to *dim sum*” (Chong 8), to which May-ying “[gives] a quick smile and trie[s] to hold back a laugh of girlish delight” (8). Seeing Chan Sam and hearing the invitation to *dim sum*, she obviously believes her aunt’s words about her life in Canada being one with sufficient food and drink.

Her happy mood lasts throughout the dinner:

a waitress [...] placed before them bamboo basket after basket of hot steamed morsels, rice dumplings of shrimp and minced pork, small porcelain dishes of bite-sized spareribs, stuffed bitter melon, dishes that could be found in tea houses in Canton. To wash it down, there was a choice of teas: green teas of jasmine or chrysanthemum or *wulong*, a tea only partly fermented and therefore, both green and black. (Chong 24-25)

In China, when May-ying heard that she was to be the concubine of a Gold Mountain man, she was so angered that she shouted that she “might just as well stay in China and be a prostitute” (8). Her aunt, who she was sold to as a servant, had to convince her that her marriage with a man of “wealth and riches” would mean that she would “have on lock *cha fan*” (sufficient tea and rice) (8). As the old Chinese saying goes, “marrying a (good) man is living a good life.” Upon meeting Chan Sam in Canada, the invitation to *dim sum* brings about her “laugh of girlish delight” and the lavish dinner makes her look forward to her life as a concubine.

The second clear moment of happiness for May-ying is when she is treated by Guen as if she were a wife. While still fulfilling her role as a concubine and contributing to the Chan family in China, May-ying feels disappointed at Chan Sam, who fails to play his

role of man of the house, and she moves away to have affairs with several other men. It needs to be noted that while Chong portrays May-ying as a sex worker for some time, the reader also finds two reasons for May-ying to do so. For one thing, she needs money to support her family instead of her personal need or pleasure; and for another, she seeks the expected domestic roles and ends each relationship when she finds the man unable to give her any of those roles. When she meets Guen, whose family is in China, she lives with him for many years as the man gives her a ring, has a photo taken with her as husband and wife, and lives with her and her children like a real family. Even this pseudo family, where May-ying is somewhat a wife, makes her a woman her daughter has “never seen before”:

In contrast to the deliberate sparseness of how she and Chan Sam had once lived their lives, May-ying set about making some home improvements [...and] added four chairs and a table, which she bought at Woodward's on a monthly instalment plan. When that was paid off, she bought a cupboard. She also bought some fabric remnants, hung one over the window and another over their clothes hanging on hooks on the wall. [...] When Hing and Gok-leng returned from school, they would open the door to the sight of Guen trimming greens and meat or fish. Soup and rice already on the gas burner steamed up the windows and warmed the room. The table was already set for four, awaiting May-ying's return for dinner. (Chong146)

As a wife, though not an official one, May-ying does everything to make a “home.” Most importantly, she collaborates with the man to make this temporary ‘family’ where she is like a wife and where he provides food for her and her children.

The third type of situation that makes May-ying happy is becoming a mother of both a son and a daughter. On her bedside dresser is a photo with the mother, daughter, and son, taken on the day of her adopted son's Full Month:

It was a photograph that captured a mother's pride. May-ying's *cheong sam* was a cascade of shimmering stars on pale silk; her son, in a white bonnet and leggings, sat on her lap, and standing at her side was her nine-year-old daughter [...]. Like their mother, both children were adorned with a flash of gold and jade. Around Hing's neck hung the jade pendant of the monkey holding a coconut; around Gok-leng's tiny wrist was a pale jade bangle. (117)

This photo demonstrates her dreamed "good" family with a daughter and a son. The Chinese character for "good" (好) consists of two parts: the left half "女" meaning "girl" and the right half "子" meaning "boy." Both her children are as precious as "gold and jade" to her (117), bringing her tremendous satisfaction and happiness.

May-ying's sense of well-being also comes from her role as a grandmother and

Chong remembers how May-ying always enjoyed being with her grandchildren:

[May-ying's] favourite place to sit was next to Wayne's crib. He draped himself over the rail to look at her. The two liked to mimic each other, turning their heads this way and that, clapping their hands, playing peek-a-boo. She liked to bounce him on her knee. When he went to sleep, she went back to knitting, pulling technicolored yarns from her paper shipping bag for a new sweater for another one of the children (223).

Wayne is May-ying's second grandson and fourth grandchild. Seeing her grandchildren grow up one after another, playing games with them, and knitting for them makes May-ying see herself as an accomplished person. After many years of trying to make ends meet, May-ying's face "light[s] up" and she "turn[s] on her girlish laughter" again when she sees her grandchildren, both boys and girls (Chong 206; 221). In the last period of her life, when her daughter moves away from her, May-ying establishes new relationships by taking care of the young women who came to Canada with the immigration document of May-ying's daughter in China, visiting the young woman in hospital and staying at her home to care for her children in the same way she would treat her own daughter and

granddaughter. In old age, she feels most contented when continuing to contribute as a family member and enjoying the company of her paper daughter's family.

Unlike Mui Lan and Fong Mei in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and May-ying in *The Concubine's Children*, who have an official title and thus a traditional role to play in their respective families, Stepmother in *All that Matters* is a complex character because of her ambiguous status in the family. She is fortunate to live in a rare extended family with a mother-in-law who never treats her in the harsh way that Mui Lan treats Fong Mei in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and a thoughtful husband who “pull[s] the chair back for her and push[es] it in as she [sits] down” during her pregnancy (Choy, *All* 51). She has four children including two biological ones of her own, one from the first wife, and one adopted, all of whom love and respect her. Additionally, she has the support of Third Uncle, who, though being a paper relative, welcomes her arrival with a big wedding-like banquet and celebrates the birth of each of her children. However, the moment in the novel when she explodes with great frustration reveals her long-suppressed dissatisfaction with her title. A close examination of this moment reveals the profound negative influence that being called “Stepmother” has had on her subjective well-being, thus demonstrating the significance of ‘relationship formalization.’

The fight begins when Stepmother disagrees with Father on whether the family should “invest” in former Japanese property² in British Columbia during the Second World War. Father has been wanting to purchase some of this property and, out of respect,

he asks for Stepmother's opinion. She disagrees with his view, which makes Father frustrated. The quarrel begins:

“Look at all the land the Japanese have taken from China! Now it is our turn, don't you understand?”

“We don't want any of it,” cried Stepmother.

[...]

“You should have chosen a damn rich man!”

The needles went silent. Stepmother's face reddened with pain. I (Kiam) remembered the night Father had told me he liked *Gai-mou* but that he loved my mother. Though she wept that night, I assumed that Stepmother had accepted her position, accepted that she belonged to the family in the only way that was possible...

“I chose? I was bought! Even my own two children call me Stepmother!”

...

“The Old One decided,” cried Father. “You accepted!”

I saw now that Father had taken for granted the Old China ways without realizing how Stepmother had been pushing against them. Stepmother's eyes flashed in the same way that Jenny's did whenever she felt cornered. (*All*, 410)

Although whether or not to invest in former Japanese property sparks the quarrel, the talk is all about Stepmother's frustration about being called “Stepmother” by her own children. She is “cornered” by the discrepancy between the roles she plays and titles she is granted.

Father's position on this issue adds to Stepmother's frustration. Father knows that Poh-poh was sold to be Patriarch Chen's servant, bore Patriarch Chen's son who she parents on her own, had been favoured by Patriarch Chen who sent her and their son away from the turmoil in China to Canada, and that she has expressed no objection to her position in life. He has expected Stepmother to feel the same way, and he thinks that he and Poh-poh treat Stepmother kindly in the way that a kind and generous master treats a servant. However, what Stepmother tries to push against is her ambiguous status, and she

tries to gain the official status of wife in the new country when she is the only woman Father is in a relationship with.

Father has overlooked at least two important differences between the two women that have been caused by migration: Poh-poh is called “mother” by her son while Stepmother is not, and, though Stepmother is essentially holding the positions of wife and daughter-in-law, she is not granted these titles. Besides, Stepmother has not acquired Poh-poh’s wisdom that can only come with age and experience. The question about investing in former Japanese property provides Stepmother an excuse to let out her long-suppressed dissatisfaction with her title-less existence.

Stepmother’s identity crisis, which has a strong negative impact on her subjective well-being, is foreshadowed before her arrival in Canada. She comes to Canada as a “female helpmate and companion” to Father and *gai-mou* for Father and First Son, with Poh-poh’s announcement that “This new companion [is] not wife” (Choy, *All* 15-17). Throughout the novels, she does not have any family title like daughter-in-law, wife, or mother. She is only *gai-mou* which is translated to “stepmother” for the non-Chinese readers. As First Son explains:

A *gai-mou* would never be named an official wife. She was not a concubine either, but a helpmate. She was a false mother, as important as false papers for our survival in Gold Mountain. She would have duties like a wife, and work as hard to help us all survive as a family. (20)

From the beginning, her titles “new companion,” “helpmate,” and “*gai-mou*,” do not make her feel she belongs to the family. The fact that she is treated like family and performs the duties of a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother does not resolve the confusion

about her relationships that causes her identity crisis.

Despite her importance for the survival of the family, she has been told and trained to be a “helpmate.” Having grown up in a culture which believes in “rectification of names” (Confucius, *Analects* 13.3), meaning an exact match between name and essence, and between position and duties, Stepmother has to suppress her confusion and the pain caused by her inadequate name. She is aware that, because of immigration rules, giving her the official title of wife would mean the whole family would have to “go back to China on next boat [and] [s]tarve to death in China” (Choy, *All* 35), and she understands that things have to be made “simple” in Gold Mountain so that the children do not accidentally reveal that the family has used false immigration documents (Choy, *Jade* 148). Despite this understanding, however, she cannot cope with a position which she has not been taught about while growing up in China and learning about women’s roles within the family.

The kindness and respect she receives from everyone in the family does not save her from the frustration of having no proper title. She is received like a new bride with a grand “welcoming dinner at the Peking [restaurant with] eight tables, seating ten each” and the attendants include the Chen elders, important associates of Third Uncle, and Poh-Poh’s mahjong ladies (Choy, *All* 41). In this way, she is formally introduced to the clan as an important member, but without a title. Poh-poh’s attitude to Stepmother also shows how Stepmother is cherished. Though she announces that Stepmother will not be Father’s wife, who both Poh-poh and Father believe to be irreplaceable, Poh-poh is so

happy to have Stepmother that she dresses up in “her embroidered jacket,” goes to the dock herself to meet Stepmother, and gets so emotional that she has to “dab at her eyes” (*All* 39).

More complex are the indications that Poh-poh really accepts Stepmother as the daughter-in-law without giving her the official title. For example, when they return home from the dock and Father helps Stepmother out of the taxi, “She followed Father up the front steps, across the porch, and through the front door. [...]The Old One looked disgruntled: she should have been the first to follow Father into the house” (Choy, *All* 43). Stepmother performs her role of being Father’s helpmate by staying close to him; however, Poh-poh is “disgruntled” because a daughter-in-law is expected to follow the mother-in-law. As Wolf notes, a traditional Chinese marriage “is not conceived of in terms of a man taking a wife, but of a family calling in a daughter-in-law, and every bride is well aware that pleasing her husband is the least of her concerns, that it is her mother-in-law’s face she must watch” (*Women* 142). It is a paradox that Poh-poh’s disgruntlement is exactly the evidence that she sees Stepmother as her daughter-in-law, though without a formal title.

There are other elements in the text that suggest Poh-poh views Stepmother as her daughter-in-law, and Monique Attrus’s argument that Stepmother “is controlled by Poh-poh” and “is seen as inferior because she came from the Four Counties” is seriously flawed (32). First, Poh-poh does not “control” Stepmother; instead, she accepts the young woman with joy, does the house chores such as folding her own sheets “exactly in the

way Stepmother did” (*All* 62), and comforts her gently after her miscarriage. Second, Poh-poh herself is from the Four County District and speaks her village dialects to her grandchildren. With “a wealth of dialects” (*Jade* 8), each of which “hinted at mixed shades of status and power” (8), she “could eloquently praise someone in one dialect and ruthlessly insult them in another” (8). Therefore, there is no way Poh-poh would see Stepmother as “inferior” because of her dialects: they are both from the same area and they speak the same dialects.

Father’s kindness also fails to ease Stepmother’s desire for the official title of wife.

When Father is teaching First Son Kiam how to handle his relationship with Jenny,

Kiam’s girlfriend, he uses himself and Stepmother as an example:

“*Gai-mou* and I,” he began, “we ... *like* each other. Very much, of course.”

“Liking each other, is that enough?”

“Yes, all these years, that has been enough.”

“But you loved my mother?” (*All* 352)

Hearing this, Stepmother walks in and joins the conversation:

“Yes, Kiam-Kim,” she said, “your father *like* me. Like me very much. That is true.”

Stepmother stared at the two of us, as if to decide whether to say more. She herself must have thought a long time about her own situation, accepted things as they were. She was Father’s helpmate; she was our *gai-mou*.

[...]

“Your father love only First Wife, Kiam-Kim,” she said. Her head bent lower. “Some nights your father, half asleep, he call me by your mother’s name.” And her tears fell. (*All* 352-53)

Stepmother admits that Father likes her, likes her “very much.” However, kind treatment and “liking” is not all that she desires. She wants the love that a husband has for a “wife” and “liking” does not soothe the pain caused by such absence. Though she has performed

all the duties of a wife over the years, she is still Father's helpmate by name.

The fact that she cannot be called a wife hurts, but what hurts her most is that she cannot have the title of "mother." It is true that First Son is taught to pay full respect to her as a mother by remembering "filial piety is the first" before she arrives in Canada (Choy, *All* 20), and that Stepmother is so respected that she has the right to choose her daughter's name, "Jung-Liang" (meaning "Jade Bell," 玉玲 in Mandarin and *Yu-Ling* in Pin-Yin) (Choy, *All* 47). Stepmother is essentially treated as a real parent, as filial piety is for parents only, and only the eldest person or the most powerful/respected one has the right to name a baby in Chinese culture. However, she is tortured daily by her own daughter Jung-Liang and her son Sek-Lung calling her "Stepmother." This daily torture accumulates and eventually makes her scream, "Even my own two children call me Stepmother!"

In addition to being upset that her biological children do not call her Mother, she is also disturbed by not feeling entitled to guide First Son in a mother's way when he needs it, even though she loves and cares about him. After the boy gets drunk for the first time and guiltily thinks of his duties as First Son, he turns to Stepmother for her words. Stepmother shows the boy his mother's picture and reminds him of his irreplaceable position as First Son and his late mother's expectation of him. The boy then asks:

"*Gai-mou*, what are you going to say to me?"

"Nothing. I am not your mother."

In the mysterious quiet that settled between us, Stepmother's eyes seemed to swallow me up. As I looked away, the image in the dresser mirror wavered. In

the back of my mind, someone else's despairing eyes drifted towards me, and I longed to fall into their darkness. (Choy, *All* 242)

The boy calls her "*Gai-mou*" but sees her as his real mother, coming to her at this awakening moment in his life. Stepmother wants to do more for the boy, but her title-less position hinders her from doing anything more than just reminding the boy to imagine what his mother would say to him in this situation.

First Son correctly sees Stepmother's frustration; however, he does not understand why she feels so. He thinks that she has been "pushing against" the Old China ways Father and Poh-poh use to maintain the family, but he does not understand that the Old China way—the match between name and essence and between position and duty—is actually what Stepmother tries to defend. Father may think it acceptable for Stepmother to settle for the situation because Poh-poh was a servant and now she is contented, but he is not aware of key differences between Poh-poh and Stepmother. For one thing, Poh-poh has the titles of "mother" and "Granmama." For another, Poh-poh's wisdom that comes from her age and experiences enables her to cope with her own wrong title of "Poh-poh," which means maternal grandmother, while she should really be called "Nye-nye," paternal grandmother³. Stepmother is only seventeen when she joins the Chen family, and she needs more time to learn to cope with the absence of the official titles of "Daughter-in-law," "Mother," and "(Replacement) Wife."

What Kiam does not realize is that Stepmother wants to have a name in the family so that there is clarity about the roles she should play and the ways she should treat others and be treated by them. A quote of Confucius best explains her situation:

If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. (*Analects* 13.3)

This quote from Confucius has become an idiom in the Chinese language that every Chinese is typically taught: “rectification of name meaning right of speech” (名正言順/順). Without the proper name, one cannot be justified to make speeches in a given situation; without the right person giving the right speeches, things will not be done in the right manner; then there will not be the right ritual to celebrate or the right penalty to punish; then people will not know what to do or who they are. In other words, lack of name rectification leads to chaos, which is the most intolerable for the Chinese. This statement accords with the previously-mentioned features of Chinese familism, with “relationship formalization” as the foundation, because the formalization of people’s name in relationship determines who depends on them and who they depend on, as well as what duties they should take and what reward they can expect and from whom. While Poh-poh has at least two names rectified, “mother” and “grandmother,” which grant her the respectable position as the centre of the “universe” in First Son’s eyes (Choy, *All* 22), Stepmother has none.

As Stepmother does not have the name of Wife, she is not in the position to make decisions about how Father invests money; so when Father criticizes her response, she does not feel that she should be blamed. Her title-less position also leads to her thinking of her relationship with the children. When she cries in despair, “Even my own two

children call me Stepmother!” she can no longer contain her frustration. Stepmother is not “pushing against” the Old China ways, neither does she see Father and Poh-poh as oppressor figures, nor does she try to overthrow either of the relationships. Indeed, she cherishes family relationships as she knows that they have been made more difficult by the Canadian immigration policy and she reminds Kiam that he is “lucky” to have “a good father” and “a good *nai-nai* like [his] Poh-Poh” (*All* 111). While it is true that Stepmother is changing in the new world, as seen in her admiration for her Irish neighbour’s flower garden, or when she invites her stepson’s Irish friend into her house for the first time and makes him a sandwich, serving his food with a fork and spoon, she is also maintaining Chinese tradition. Until Canadian society becomes more welcoming to the Chinese community so that they can step out of Chinatown to absorb new elements of life, Chinese women like Stepmother, who physically live with their families, still maintain traditional familial roles, which determines their well-being.

5.5 ACHIEVING WELL-BEING BY MAKING NEW CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to striving for orderly relationships through which to define themselves, the Chinese women in the texts by Choy, Lee, and Chong are ready to contribute to their family in ways they would not if they were still in China. Their experiences in Chinatown and the ways they help their families are what distinguish them from their counterparts in China. As Third Uncle in *All That Matter* says, “[e]veryone work hard in Gold Mountain” (Choy 28). The women work in different jobs: Mui Lan as the manager of the family

restaurant in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, May-ying through work at the restaurants in several cities in *The Concubine's Children*, and, in Choy's novels, Stepmother through trivial jobs sorting and trimming vegetables and Poh-poh by offering to clean the rooms and cook and wash for Third Uncle. It needs to be noted, though, that these women do not work for the purpose of achieving economic independence or defining their personal value in the society. Rather, they do paid work only out of necessity for the good of their families and the amount of money they earn has little impact on the degree of their subjective well-being. Therefore, it is problematic that Huiling Yang over-emphasizes the women's economic achievement and argues that while maintaining traditional thoughts, May-ying "continuously pursued independence and freedom with her positive thoughts"(59), which she bases on the fact the May-ying earns more than Chan Sam. Such observations further marginalize the elders by neglecting their beliefs and values and failing to recognize that they do not view this as their most important contribution; instead, they see the value of doing paid work only in its importance for their family.

While running the largest restaurant in Chinatown, Mui Lan finds herself "good at a lot of things, especially good at making money" and she "enjoy[s] adding up the day's take, energetically organizing the money into neat rubber-bound bundles" which she considers "the most important task of the day" (Lee 37). However, she sees herself doing this for her husband and her son, not for herself. As she believes, "Her husband certainly couldn't be relied on. Left to his own devices, Wong Gwei Chang would let his business be eroded in no time into bankruptcy by petty thievery and laziness" (Lee 36). Mui Lan

steps in to run the family business only when she feels that it may erode in her husband's hands. If her husband were more reliable and could be trusted to keep the restaurant from going bankrupt, Mui Lan would remain in her domestic position. She is like the mother of a descendant interviewed in *Jin Guo* who remarks that, before her father's death, her mother was "very quiet" and only became "more independent and outgoing, out of necessity" (114).

The family's need, not her personal ambition, is the driving force for Mui Lan to work. Meanwhile, she is waiting for her son to be capable enough to take over. She repeatedly assures her son that "[t]his business is your business" and reminds him of his position as "the heir" (44), and as "the only son" who should learn to be "[his] father's right-handed man" (47). She not only encourages Choy Fuk to learn to do business but trains him as well to handle various situations to keep the business going. She remains the manager because of her son's incapability. At twenty-one, he is a laughingstock among the young men in Chinatown because of his childless state and because he is unable to solve the problems with the family business. While the ineptness of both men of the family (including Gwei Chang's negligence of the family business and Choy Fuk's infertility and irresponsibility) provides Mui Lan with an opportunity to discover her abilities as a manager she undertakes this work in order to serve her family, not out of a sense of personal ambition.

Unlike Mui Lan, who is socially and economically significant in Chinatown, May-ying works as a low-class waitress; but, like Mui Lan, May-ying finds her

well-being in contributing to the family she has married into. Even though the family is beyond the ocean in China and she spent only a few months there, she feels she belongs to it. May-ying has a decent income but nearly all her money goes to the Chan family. She makes twenty-five to thirty-eight dollars a week (Chong 29-33); that is about 1976 dollars a year. Considering that the average wages were 999 dollars in Canada in 1926 (Statistics Canada, “Salaries and wages”), May-ying’s income is almost double the average, yet nearly all her money goes to meet the family’s needs.

One of the ‘needs’ is to win honour for the Chan family, which she does by making a “return home in brocade” in 1928. Bringing back to China a concubine, two children, and substantial wealth (though much of it is earned by May-ying), makes Chan Sam a success and a hero in the villagers’ eyes. As Yang and Ye discern, for the Chinese, one who succeeds but does not come home is like “walking in the dark while wearing brocade” (252). May-ying and Chan Sam’s trip uplifts the whole family to a higher social class in China, which brings glory to the ancestors of the Chan family.

Next, May-ying gives every penny she earns to realize the shared dream of making sure that the family has “soil underfoot and tiles overhead” (Chong, *Concubine’s* 15; 75). As Wolf remarks, a Chinese man builds a house “with a vision of housing under one roof a large and prosperous family of many generations” and for him a house is “a sign of prosperity [...] and continuing good fortune” (Wolf, *House* 24). While Chan Sam stays in China to watch the house going up, May-ying contributes with “the wages and wits of waitressing and the life that came with it” (Chong 254). May-ying is sure that she will

return to China and live under the same roof with Chan Sam's wife and children (Chong 69). The house and the land are not only of practical significance to shelter and feed the people, but more importantly of sentimental and cultural significance to glorify the family. May-ying joins in her husband's endeavour to bring prosperity and glory to the Chan family by ensuring a large house and some farming land.

While the first two expenses are closely related to May-ying's own life, the last one reveals where her heart lies. May-ying is "genuinely happy" about Chan Sam's wife's son; she willingly gives money to treat the boy's deformed feet and agrees to send more remittance than necessary after the start of Japan's full-scale invasion of China in 1937 (Chong 97). Spending her money on the Chan family gives May-ying the sense of belonging that, in turn, develops her relational self and positively influences her subjective well-being.

While Mui Lan and May-ying have to work one way or another, in Choy's novels, Poh-poh and Stepmother need not work most of the time and remain domestic, "respectable women" because, like in Old China, "respectable women in Vancouver do not leave the house" (*All* 151). However, they are always ready to step in when needed by the family. At first, Father takes all the responsibility in feeding the family:

he was always busy in pursuit of one part-time job after another. He was helping small storekeepers with their accounts, waiting on tables when he had the time, and writing letters for the uneducated elders and unemployed labourers who sent lies back to village families, often evading the truth about their despair and sinking funds. Father was also kept busy at Third Uncle's remaining warehouse, filling in customs documents and invoices and always dealing with Third Uncle's panic over the account books and their diminishing numbers. Between

jobs, Father wrote a few articles and filed interviews for some of the Chinese-language journals. (*All* 28-29)

While father does everything he can, the two women coordinate by playing their own domestic roles so that the children are well fed and clothed and are educated about their own roles.

However, the time comes when Father's wages can no longer make ends meet. At that moment, Stepmother joins him in doing available part-time work, "however menial" (Choy, *All* 167), to "bring enough food on the table" (Choy, *All* 169). Choy writes:

Stepmother left the house at five each morning, picked up by a co-worker in a truck and taken to Keefer Wholesale Grocery. There, alongside other women, she sorted and trimmed vegetables and rinsed countless heads of lettuce and cabbage before they were sent to over a hundred Chinese greengrocers. (Choy, *All* 119-20)

It is significant that there is no calculation of how much Stepmother earns or how her wages compare with Father's; instead, all the money is put together and the savings are used for the family's future and the children's education. The family members work organically as a whole, doing paid or unpaid work.

Stepmother not only gets wages for the family, but more importantly, her working outside the home is seen as collaborative and she is thus rewarded with care from all family members. This is seen when she comes home from work:

When she came home, Poh-Poh would rub [her] water-wrinkled hands, and every two weeks she would treat them in a pan of warm paraffin. Father massaged her neck and back. And big Mrs. Lim taught me how to wrap the teapot with a towel when she made a special herbal tea for all of us, a revitalizing tonic she used to make for her one-eyed husband. Sometimes Poh-Poh added a little bit of grated ginger. (Choy, *All* 120)

Stepmother gets care from Poh-poh, the older generation, from Father, her partner, and

from the children, the younger generation who is learning the way to care for each other as a family. When Stepmother works alongside Father to keep the family running, the other members do their share by giving her care and love.

Poh-poh in Choy's novels is the most thought-provoking character when it comes to the relationship between women's subjective well-being and doing paid work. In fact, among all the women characters in the texts I am discussing, she is the most contented and enjoys the highest sense of subjective well-being, but she alone has never done any paid work. Only once does she offer to work, and she is motivated entirely by devotion to her son and grandson. In order to purchase a house for the family, she tells Third Uncle: "When Kiam-Kim go to school, I come work for you. Clean your rooms. Cook and wash for you" (Choy, *All* 27). She insists on buying a house because she believes that their second-floor apartment is "no place to raise a grandson," where she can smell the "unwashed smells" and hear "muffled coughing...drowned out by the voices of younger men shouting and singing, sometimes mixed with the voices and laughter of women" (Choy, *All* 23). She determines that "to have three grandsons before I die, we need a house like other Chinatown families" (Choy, *All* 26). She knows well that her son faces years of debt to pay for the migration of the three of them, and she offers to work for money, which she has never done before. Nevertheless, despite the family's urgent need for money and her own desire to have her family live in a house, she still gives priority to her role as a grandmother and will work only when Kiam goes to school. The most

important thing about Poh-poh's only offer to work is that it reveals where she thinks her value lies: she gains dignity and happiness by providing for the family.

5.6 CONCLUSION

For the Chinese women characters who spend nearly their entire life within Chinatown, racism has a very limited impact on their daily life, even though it is undeniable that the Chinese community as a whole faces great political and economic difficulties. These women from small rural villages expect to live in familial relationships, define themselves in these relationships, and gain their subjective well-being from the existence and harmony of such relationships. They desire to be viewed and accepted through the roles they play in these relationships and gain satisfaction from contributing to the social order and stability. Their subjective well-being is negatively impacted when their family falls into disharmony, and they feel extraordinary stress when they cannot play the expected roles or bring back order and harmony.

Choy, Lee, and Chong demonstrate the women's willingness to collaborate with the male family members for their shared interest and show that the women feel disappointed when they or their male family members do not fulfill their familial duties. Any form of freedom and independence, which scholars such as Hui-ling Yang and Tian-wei Liu have celebrated in their discussions of these texts, is not the women's primary motivation. In fact, studies that fail to discuss the women in the context of the traditional Chinese notion of a relational self or Chinese familism, that sympathize with the women as victims of patriarchy, or that celebrate the women's pursuit of freedom and independence, actually

turn away from the root of the women's real pain, which is the distorted familial relationships caused in part by Canadian immigration policy. Recognizing their lifelong endeavour to reestablish such relationships is key to understanding these characters. The authors represent the Chinese women as defining themselves and building up their subjective well-being through familial relationships, so to simply view the women as being oppressed in such relationships is to neglect their cultural values and risk further marginalizing them and the culture they embody. The next chapter will explore how their cultural values and views of familial relationships at times conflict with those of the younger generation.

Notes:

- ¹ Details indicate that Patriarch Chen is related to the royal family. In his full-length portrait that Poh-poh shows the Kiam is “a wealthy man dressed in a fine robe embroidered with dragons, with carved jade pendants hanging from his neck” (Choy, *All* 365). The dragon-embroidered robe and the jade pendants are both signs of the royal family.
- ² In 1942, ordered by the Canadian federal government, some 21,000 Japanese Canadians in British Columbia — many Canadian-born — had to leave their homes to live in internment camps or choose from other options including work camps and contract work, leaving everything behind. Their property was sold to people of other ethnic groups including white and Chinese.
- ³ In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, SKY Lee makes this straight by having Kae call her mother Beatrice’s mother “Poh-poh,” and her father Keeman’s mother “Nye-nye.” This is important in understanding the Chinese relationship. Chinese see relatives on father’s side as families and those on mother’s side more distant. Therefore, Poh-poh in Choy’s novels has the tolerance and wisdom to handle the situation because when she is called Poh-poh, it seems that she is no longer Father’s mother, but the late Mother’s.

CHAPTER 6 WHOSE CANADA?

EXPLORING THE DIFFERENT CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF THE CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND THE DESCENDANT NARRATORS

This chapter explores the differences in the extent to which the Chinese women characters and their Canadian-born/raised descendants identify with Canada, and the causes of these differences. Drawing from Charles Taylor's theory of cultural identity and Abraham Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, this chapter begins with the Chinese women's response to the restrictive and exclusionary Canadian society that partially satisfies their lower needs of food and safety (as seen in Poh-Poh's comments that "No one starve here [in Canada]" (Choy, *All* 48), and "[there is] always war in China" (Choy, *Jade* 34)), but which completely fails their higher needs in that the women have no sense of belonging, no respect, and little potential for self-actualization.

The most important reason why the Chinese women do not identify with Canada can be explained with Charles Taylor's suggestion about the connection between "identity and the good," which basically means identification is a "moral or spiritual commitment" that "provides the framework within which [people] can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value" (Taylor 27). I will begin by arguing that living with a fundamental sense of insecurity and frustration, the Chinese women in the texts refuse to identify with Canada as they see little that is good, worthwhile, or of value, and they are not awarded with any "achievement or status" that gives them "dignity" (Taylor 28).

I will then discuss how the Chinese descendants' claim that they, having been born or raised in Canada, are "Canadian" is based on their limited lived experience, their often-distorted interpretation of their (grand)parents comparisons between Canada and China, and their access to Canadian culture and society through schooling and their Canadian peers, which their (grand)parents have no access to. Despite self-identifying as Canadian, they continually discover restrictions of various degrees and from various sources which hinder them from full identification with the country.

Finally, I suggest that the difference in the degree to which the older and younger generations identify with Canada is caused by the Chinese women's silence about the hostility they face living in Canada (a silence they maintain in hopes of protecting their children), the descendants' often inaccurate interpretation of their (grand)parents' messages, and most importantly, the difficulty in communicating across generations, which is complicated by the children's loss of the Chinese language (usually at a young age) and the elder generations' very limited English. I would argue that with the descendant narrators, the texts are not only the authors' attempt to rediscover their immigrant foremothers, but, more importantly, Canadian history and their own process of forming a personal sense of national and ethnic identity.

6.1 THE CHINESE WOMEN'S CANADA

Several studies have focused on the Canadian hostility towards the Chinese community and scholars agree that Chinese women lived under dual oppression of patriarchy and racism in early Canada (S. Zhu; H. Yang; T. Liu). Peter Li, one of the few

to focus on the Chinese response to such hostilities, notes that they “responded by retreating into their own ethnic enclaves to avoid competition and hostility from white Canadians” (P. Li 7). Choy, Lee, and Chong’s texts not only portray Chinese women who ‘retreat’ from white Canadians, who but also, for good reasons, hold white Canadians and their culture in contempt.

Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu (2008) rightly observes that, in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the Chinese passage across the Pacific Ocean means they experience the shift from seeing the Canadian “utopia promise” of jobs and prosperity to the “dystopia” with “family tragedies and cultural isolations” created by the “atrocious” Head Tax and Exclusion Act (“Dystopia” 66). In particular, he sees the women in Lee’s novel as “victims” of the Chinese patriarchal tradition and the white racist Canadian hegemonic exclusion” (“Dystopia” 66). While I questioned Fu’s claim that the Chinese women are “victims” of the Chinese patriarchal tradition in Chapter Five, I agree that the women feel disillusioned when they arrive in Canada and that they are culturally isolated. In this section, I would like to focus on their active response to the state of living, consider where their agency lies, and argue that the Chinese women refuse to culturally identify with Canada because, although their basic need for food and security is partly satisfied, their higher needs are entirely neglected.

Canada as a promised utopia

While marrying a Gold Mountain husband is a mixed blessing that brings material prosperity but also emotional loneliness, joining one’s husband or having him come back

to China is expected to make the blessing complete. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, for sixteen years after a brief wedding, Mui Lan was impacted both by “overseas prosperity” and loneliness, as seen in her talks with other village women about “who received a letter and who didn’t get money [from their husband in Gold Mountain]; whose husband was coming home and whose son was being sent for” (S. Lee 34). The turning point of Mui Lan’s life is when she receives the message that she is to join her husband Wong Gwei Chang in Gold Mountain:

she became the brightest centre of attention. A new bride all over again! It was like being chosen by God himself. Her neighbours gazing at her as if she glowed [...]. In this welter of woman-sounds, Mui Lan was at her happiest. Propelled by women who could only dream of such a reunion with their men, she landed in the Gold Mountains, full of warmth and hope. Little did she realize that people’s most fervent hope can turn into their worst nightmare. (S. Lee 34-35)

She feels “happiness,” “warmth,” and “hope” when the “dream” for the reunion is coming true and she is admired by other Gold Mountain wives in the village. Obviously, her dream is shared by all the wives of Gold Mountain men who look forward to the complete blessing when the family reunion comes, but who are not aware of “nightmare” that can develop.

Even luckier, seemingly, are Fong Mei in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Stepmother in Choy’s novels, and May-ying in *The Concubine’s Children* as they do not have to suffer Mui Lan’s loneliness from the long separation and can immediately live with their husband in Canada. Fong Mei is amazed at the prosperity of her new Gold Mountain family as demonstrated in their “ultramodern” lifestyles and her luxurious betrothal gifts (Lee 55). Likewise, May-ying is told that she will lead a life with “no shortage of tea and

rice” in a place where people “have to push the gold from their feet to find the road” (Chong 8), and she is immediately convinced of such wealth when Chan Sam takes her to a banquet with “bamboo basket after basket of hot steamed morsels, rice dumplings of shrimp and minced pork, small porcelain dishes of bite-sized spareribs, stuffed bitter melon, dishes that could be found in tea houses in Canton” on her arrival in Vancouver (Chong 25). In *All That Matters*, Stepmother tells Kiam that the family’s leaving China for Canada is the result of Patriarch Chen’s “kindness” because “[o]ld and poor house-servants like [Poh-poh] do not leave China” (Choy, *All* 365). By all accounts, Canada is a utopia of abundance and a privilege for few in poverty-stricken and war-torn China.

A verse by an anonymous author of the time best demonstrates the Chinese mentality about marrying a Gold Mountain man.

O, just marry all the daughters to men from Gold Mountain:
All those trunks from Gold Mountain
You can demand as many as you want!
O, don’t ever marry your daughter to a man from Gold Mountain:
Lonely and sad. A cooking pot is her only companion! (qtd. in Hom 46)

All the women who live with their husband in Canada expect to have only the first half of the verse, only to find that they have a great deal to cope with in the foreign land, which turn it into a dystopia.

Partial satisfaction of the women’s basic needs

On arriving in Canada, the women soon find that the basic needs of theirs and their fellow Chinese are at risk. As Allen Gee notes, “poverty and starvation are daily realities”

(21). In *All That Matters*, Poh-poh witnesses bachelors living in “narrow cots in divided eight- or ten-foot-square spaces separated by paper-thin hardboard walls or by flimsy curtains” and she learns that few of them have any family in Canada and some are “too poor to buy a decent meal” (Choy 9). Poh-poh learns about dozens of jobless Chinese men dying of “neglect” in these overcrowded rooms and “living men [sleeping] in cots and on floors beside dead men” before church people come to take the bodies away (Choy, *Jade* 10-11).

The cold shoulder of the Canadian government, which contributes to such poverty, discourages the Chinese women from identifying with the country. As Choy writes, a local Vancouver by-law bans begging for food, and a federal law bans stealing food, “but [there is] no law in any court against starving to death for lack of food” (Choy, *Jade* 12). Though the women, who usually live with their family, can manage to have enough food for themselves and their household, they know that many of their countrymen struggle hard to survive and that death is a daily reality. Mrs. Chong, who works together with Poh-poh on the arranged marriage of Kiam and Jenny in *All That Matter*, tells about at least two hundred unemployed men living in terrible conditions in 1935:

Segregated areas were now populated by Chinamen who had lost their seasonal jobs and who could no longer afford sharing a shift-time room, often just a bed with three or four others taking their turn to sleep; dozens had already starved to death, their bodies found in the rooming houses in Canton Alley, in the weekly-rental hotel rooms along Hastings and Main Street, and in the deserted alleyways. (Choy 161)

The women know the Chinese need for food and shelter in Canada is satisfied through their own work and collaboration with the Chinese Benevolent Society, with no help from

the Canadian government.

In response to seeing their fellow countrymen struggling in Canada, the Chinese women become part of the community's self-rescue program. Poh-poh occasionally brings food to the door of the bachelors' rooms with the words "[s]uch a shame to waste this" (Choy, *All* 21), as if the bachelors did her a favour by eating the leftovers.

Additionally, she provides Old Wong, an old bachelor in his seventies who has been in Canada since his early twenties, with "a meal now and then [and] a few visits with the family" on the arrangement of the Tong Association (Choy, *Jade* 11). They believe that they must help each other survive because "[n]o one else will" (Choy, *Jade* 10).

Chong describes this interdependent relationship within the community as a "convivial atmosphere... [w]here there's a worm, there's a leaf to help" (56), but the Chinese women lose their trust in the country they live in and have no intention of seeing themselves as Canadian. The fact that the Chinese were left out of the Canadian government's relief program was recorded in a newspaper article in 1936. The article shows the sharp contrast between the fact that Chinese were "the most numerous of the races of Asiatic origin now residents of Canada" and the fact that "very few cities and towns, if any in eastern Canada [...] have Chinese on their relief lists" ("Chinese Merit"). It talks about the Chinese community's self-reliance and describes the Chinese as "look[ing] pretty well after their own countrymen when they become unemployed." As discussed in Chapter Four, Chinese define themselves in relationships and are used to interdependence; therefore, when such a relationship does not exist between them and

Canada, they do not define themselves as Canadian.

Along with poverty, which most of the Chinese women witness but luckily do not have to suffer from, is the profound sense of insecurity that accompanies them from the moment they set foot in Canada. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Fong Mei's excitement in marrying a Gold Mountain man is disrupted in the detention centre in Vancouver where she hears horrible stories about women being raped: they were "actually dragged off during the night, and when they were returned, they had become like petrified stone with bruises, their clothes torn" (S. Lee 58). There she is protected by other older "aunties" switching bunks with her "so that any evildoer would find that he'd dragged off a wrinkled, toothless granny for his lecherous troubles" (S. Lee 58). Every day in the detention centre, with newly-acquainted "aunties," the 17-year-old girl learns that the Chinese are a family, and the white people are "evildoer[s]."

Surrounded by their own people in Canada, the Chinese women in Lee's text, as well as in Choy's, learn from one another about the way white people treat the Chinese. In Choy's work, for example, Poh-poh learns about "white brutes in 1907 yanking the braided queues of the first elders and kicking them down Hastings Street, their white hands bashing Chinese heads and tearing down the shops and laundries of Chinatown" (*All* 33). Personal experiences and stories from other women in Chinatown create the profound sense of insecurity that makes the women determined to stay within Chinatown, unless they have to go the cemetery or the docks. Even May-ying in *The Concubine's Children*, who travels back and forth between Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo, still

lives and works within the Chinatown in each city. While it is customary for Chinese women to stay at home, it is really the unsafe social environment that largely prevents them from moving around.

Everyday physical violence, which troubles even the Chinese men, is enough to discourage the Chinese women from activities outside of Chinatown. SKY Lee depicts Choy Fuk being attacked by four or five white teenagers when he is walking out of Chinatown one evening:

Without warning, two of [the boys] wound up and threw things at him. Choy Fuk ducked one, but a wet paper bag smashed on the boardwalk and skidded between his legs, its contents splattering a foul stench over his pant legs and shiny shoes. [...the boys left after Choy Fuk shook and rattled one of the boys.] As [Choy Fuk] watched the boy hobble away, tears streaming down [Choy Fuk's] cheeks, scuff marks on the back of his pants, Choy Fuk contemplated the inequity of life. (131)

At the time, Choy Fuk is in his late twenties, but he is attacked by white boys who are no more than fourteen. The shame of being bullied like this is so insulting that “tears [stream] down his cheeks.” This scene is similar to a real-life experience recounted by 81-year-old Gim Wong in an interview with Karen Cho, in which he showed the profound impact of this kind of shame. The elder Wong recalled white children urinating on him and could not help choking when speaking of the experience half a century later (K. Cho). When even the men are frequently attacked physically, the women feel that they must remain at home to stay safe.

Even within Chinatown, the sense of insecurity prevails among the women. In *All That Matters*, the father of Kiam's Irish friend Jack comes to the Chen's house to return the lucky money Kiam has shared with Jack. However, the visit of a white man makes

everyone in the house worried:

Mr. O'Connor's tall, lanky figure shadowing our parlour window. Everyone stopped playing mahjong and stared quietly at the front door. Stepmother hesitated to open it. In the dining room, Poh-Poh glanced at Jenny Chong's mother, who spoke English. Mrs. Chong got up with a heavy sigh and went down the front hall. (*All* 58)

The joyful and relaxed atmosphere of the women's mahjong-playing in the room is disrupted and the women get alert and afraid at once. Though they know some kind white people and Jack's father is in fact harmless, the 1907 Riot is too well remembered. The women have no need to talk in this moment; their quiet staring, Stepmother's hesitation, and Mrs. Chong's heavy sigh all tell their shared fear at a white man coming to their house. Even after years of Kiam and Jack's friendship, the Chinese women do not presume that a white man's visit is harmless.

In Chong's work, we can see this fear of white society lasting until the early 1960s. In May 1960, when the Canadian government declares an amnesty for the thousands of Chinese, who are too many to be deported, the Chinese hide (Chong 221). Sek-Lung's scary memory well explains why the Chinese do not trust the Canadian amnesty policy.

One careless word—perhaps because a *mo no* girl or a *mo no* boy was showing off [about their paper family]—and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night, bang on the family door, demand a show of a 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. (Choy, *Jade* 228)

The Chinese do not believe that the Canadian government would let them stay, especially during the “investigations and crackdowns on immigration fraud” which begin in the mid-1950s (Chong 221). During the crackdowns, the Canadian government carries out

“simultaneous raids in Chinatowns across Canada, entering offices, businesses and private homes to seize evidence” one Sunday morning (Chong 221). It is not difficult for the Chinese to think about mass deportation given what had happened several times before in various forms. The Canadian government’s decision to declare an amnesty does not spare the Chinese fear and they try to hide a few more years before believing that they are safe. The decades-long sense of insecurity greatly discourages the Chinese women from feeling they belong to the country they reside in.

The impossibility of higher needs satisfaction

The failure to have basic needs like a sense of safety and security fully satisfied, though more “tangible or observable” (Maslow, *Motivation* 100), does not discourage the Chinese women from identifying with Canada as much as the failure to have their higher needs met does. These needs, which include a sense of belonging, respect and self-actualization, are harder to satisfy and discourage the women’s identification with Canada even more. Maslow differentiates the lower and higher needs and discusses the causes and results of higher needs satisfaction. He believes that it is higher needs that distinguish humans from other living beings and that the ability to recognize one’s own needs is a “considerable psychological achievement” (99).

Maslow clarifies the conditions necessary for the satisfaction of higher needs. He observes that this satisfaction requires “better economic, political and educational outside conditions” and usually involves “more people, a larger scene, a longer run, [and] more means” (99). Maslow stresses that self-actualization, the highest need, is only possible

under “very good conditions” (99). Maslow discerns that while higher need deprivation does not lead to the same desperate reactions as those produced by a failure to secure basic survival, the satisfying of higher needs produces “more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life” (99), and makes people develop qualities including “loyalty, friendliness, and civic consciousness” (100). Canada fails to provide the outside conditions for the satisfaction of the women’s higher needs and thus deprives the women of “more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life” (99), which in turn makes the women unwilling to identify with Canadian society because it offers little of what Taylor believes to be the basis of cultural identification: “what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value” (Taylor 27) .

Choy, Lee, and Chong present Chinese women who feel the absence of two important values from Canadian society: trustworthiness and reciprocity, the latter in particular being “an important foundation of Chinese social relations” (L. Yang 53). Mui Lan’s negative experience with a white English Canadian business partner serves as an example of trustworthiness and underscores the obstacles that made it difficult for the white and Chinese communities to build a good relationship. After years of being cheated, she is infuriated and asks her son Choy Fuk to resolve the issue:

“Did you deal with that no good iceman?”

“He say no candoo, Maah!”

“Paahh!” she spat viciously. “That dead white devil! Cheating us all these years! Selling us *tang* people the leftover ice for full price. I’m sick of it!”

[...]

“If that sonovabitchee,” she continued, “doesn’t want our business, then he doesn’t want any of Chinatown’s business. Yuen Fong, Yip Hay—all those

stores. You go to all those places! Go to Japantown even! You and me . . . we'll figure out a way to bypass that 'no candoo' and get more for our money even. There's that little italian iceman¹. He can supply all of us if you make a special deal.

“You go talk english to him!” (S. Lee 45-46)

In calling the business partner “no good,” “dead white devil,” and “sonovabitchee,” Mui Lan shows she has no trust in him at all after years of the man's dishonesty. She arrives in Canada in 1911, and by the time she makes this comment, she has been running the business for about thirteen years, which teaches her a great deal about white Canadians².

Mui Lan sees little positive result in her continuous effort to communicate with white society. The Wong family spends large amounts of money for their son to learn English so that he can communicate with white Canadians, but the message she gets back is his straightforward refusal, “no candoo.” She also understands that problematic relationships are not necessarily about personal conflict between individuals, but are part of broader concerns about racial difference. When she tells her son that the icemen cheated “us *tang* people,” for instance, she understands that the matter is not a question of animosity between two individuals, or because she is a women and he a man, but that it is part of a clash between two races³.

Not only do the Chinese women not trust white individuals, their distrust of the Canadian government has also accumulated over the years. In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-poh feels tired of the Canadian government's Chinese immigration policies, which are complicated, changeable, and unpredictable. Once, when the Chen family is waiting for Wong Suk to come for dinner, Poh-poh tells the impatient Liang that he will come late

that day because it is “[p]aper day for Wong Suk [...]. Paper, paper, paper” (Choy 47).

The family have seen Wong Suk’s “half-folded documents stamped CP RAILROAD, B.C. WORK PERMIT, letters from China, old bills, certificates with Chinese words in black ink, signed with red chop marks [...] all important papers” that he has to keep (48). In Wong Suk’s words: “Never know what government do. One day they say Old Wong okay-okay. Next day, Wong stinky Chink” (48).

The Canadian government is here portrayed as untrustworthy because its immigration rules change unpredictably, as seen in the fact that Canada first “enticed” the Chinese to come and work (Berton 4), but later imposed the Head Tax and then passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. In passing this extremely discriminatory act, the Canadian government violated *The Burlingame Treaty* (1868), which stated that the “most-favored-nation” should recognize “equal rights of Chinese with other immigrants in North America” (Anthony Chan, *Gold* 42). Poh-poh’s repeated cry of “paper, paper, paper” shows her frustration at the discriminatory demands placed on the Chinese and their resulting lack of trust in such a government.

The importance of trustworthiness finds its root in Confucius teaching, which the Chinese women see as “highest authority” (Choy, *All* 57). On the level of individuals, Confucius says “I cannot see how a person devoid of trustworthiness could possibly get along in the world” (*Analects* 2.22). On another occasion, when being asked to define a true scholar-official (*junzi* 君子), Confucius replies that the most fundamental requirement is that “in his speech, he insists on being trustworthy, and with regard to his

actions, he insists that they bear fruit” (*Analects* 13.20). The character “信” (trustworthiness) appears thirty-eight times and, Confucius explicitly states the important of trustworthiness in several instances, implying that without it, one is not a worthy human. As for government, Confucius says that the foundations of a nation include “sufficient food, sufficient armaments, and the confidence of the common people [in the government]” (*Analects* 12.7), and the last is the most important because “a state cannot stand once it has lost the confidence of the people” (*Analects* 12.7). When the Chinese women find few individuals in Canadian society or government to be trusted, they refuse to belong with them, and when they lose confidence in the Canadian government, they refuse to identify with the country.

As for social relationships, the Chinese women believe in Confucius’ notion of reciprocity and in “[r]equit[ing] injury with uprightness, and kindness with kindness” (*Analects* 14.35). When they learn that the decade-long hard work of their men is rewarded with all kinds of bans and restrictions, they understand that “[w]hite come from white tree.[...] Chinese come from Chinese tree” (Choy, *All* 34), insisting on staying away from the people who show no spirit of reciprocity.

An editorial in *The Chinese Times* that was published a year after the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act best expresses the Chinese community’s view of Canadian society:

It is the end of self-evident truth, death of humanity, and murder of diplomacy that Canada passed *The Forty-three Hostility Regulations* against the Chinese. The Act terminates the possibility for our fifty thousand Chinese to fight any

injustice or struggle for any rights. For years we have followed rules and abided by laws [...]. However, Canada's exclusivism conveyed in these regulations celebrates its achievements and supremacy while humiliating the dignity of both the overseas Chinese and our ancestor country. ("On July 1st 1; my translation)

The consequence of the absence of the important values of trustworthiness and reciprocity is that the Chinese women see no future for themselves in Canadian society and completely reject the white people's society.

Poh-poh's attitude in *All That Matters* demonstrates the Chinese women's all-round denial of the larger society that surrounds them. As Kiam remembers, Poh-Poh "barely acknowledged the O'Connors' existence, barely recognized any of the other pale-skinned outsiders, the *lo-faan*, that shared the ragged Keefer Street boundaries of our ghettoed Chinatown" (Choy, *All* 33), and in her eyes, "they were all the same: white barbarian ghosts with big noses and funny names like Oh-kan-nagh" (33).

She despises their food and cooking, and when Kiam asks for a hot dog, she exclaims, with contempt, "Hot dog, no head, no tail. Not real food" (Choy, *All* 232), at the same time making "real food" by "tear[ing] the feathers off a freshly killed chicken" and "lift[ing] its sagging head" (232). Not wanting her grandson to eat "flesh and blood" (*All* 221), she "spat at" the thought of having wafer and wine at church which would "instantly turned into the actual flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus" (221). She also mocks "the barbarians" for "boil[ing] greens into mush" and serving "blackened whole chunks of meat the size of a man's head, and carv[ing] the dead thing and [eating] whole slabs employing weapons at the table" (*All* 92). From the ingredients to the cooking method to the serving style, Poh-poh entirely disapproves of this aspect of Western life.

The Chinese women even mock their white neighbour's skin color. When seeing Jack and Mrs. O'Connor, who look "even more chalky and wan" in the sun, Poh-Poh sees them as having "no soy sauce, no hot sauce, no sauce at all!" (Choy, *All* 231), and when Stepmother comments pityingly that "[t]hey so pale!" (231), Poh-poh claims "They die soon!" (231). The Chinese women's distrust of white society has extended to almost all white people and contempt for all aspects of their lives.

The Chinese women keep to themselves, but this is different in an important way from Peter Li's argument that the Chinese retreat "to avoid competition and hostility from white Canadians" (17). Choy, Lee, and Chong do not present the women as having what Paul Wong calls the "inferiority complex" (qtd. in Chao, "Anthologizing" 5), which means the "behavioural codes includ[ing] 'try hard not to be noticed' and 'be subservient to white people'"(5), which result from the way the Chinese community is viewed in the dominant white culture. Although Lien Chao, too, believes that it is "always the first step toward healing" for the Chinese community to deal with "inferiority complex, together with marginality, cultural damage" (Chao 146), I argue that this is not what is happening among the Chinese women in the texts.

From Mui Lan's fury with the white iceman's dishonesty, demonstrated in her face, which "froze like white porcelain" and her voice (Lee 46), which "lowered until it was almost inaudible [...] in a slow deliberate monotone, with terrifying conviction" (46), to Stepmother's pity for O'Connor's "pale" skin, to Poh-poh's demand that Kiam not have "flesh and bone" in church, none of the women sees themselves or their culture as inferior.

Their high self-regard supports them in their efforts to stand up to the belittling Canadian society. I will argue later in this chapter that an inferiority complex exists only among the descendant generations and that it is not only the consequence of stereotypical views of the dominant culture, but more importantly a result of the descendants' own lack of Chinese culture, which supports the Chinese women in ways that the young descendant narrators do not understand at the time.

Although the Chinese women in the texts gradually incorporate some Canadian practices, this is not enough to make them feel Canadian. Some examples include Stepmother being willing to prepare a hot dog and lay out a fork and knife for Jack's visit to the Chen family for dinner, and her tendency to look "with envy" at Mrs. O'Connor's front yard (Choy, *All* 234) with its "pink and yellow flowers [...] in full bloom" (146), which is different from her own yard with its "the tendrils of bean and pea plants [...] tied to thin bamboo stakes" (146). Likewise, Poh-poh and Mrs. Chong agree to encourage Kiam and Jenny to meet each other in the "Canada way" although they still believe "Old way [of match-making] better" (*All* 179). Similarly, Mui Lan, in her desperation for Fong Mei to have a child, pays for Western medicine and sends Fong Mei to the "dead, immoral, white doctor-specialist" (S. Lee 79). Though admiring aspects of white people's culture, incorporating Western ways into their marriage arrangements, and trusting Western medicine, the Chinese women still stick to their own Chinese traditions and values by growing their vegetable garden, arranging a marriage for their children, and taking their herbal medicine.

In real life too, as explained by Choy in *Paper Shadow*, Chinese women joined in the celebration of victory after the Second World War, in which his mother's job was "to pin CHINA-CANADA ribbon on bystanders" and Choy himself "rattle[d] the can" (68). Choy also notes that the barbershops in Chinatown displayed more and more Union Jacks and National China flag in 1944 (68), but I would argue that these various acts of incorporation were not part of an attempt at assimilation, but self-expansion. As Frederick Philip Grove puts it, if assimilation means "absorption of one race by another [with] the absorbing race [not] undergo[ing] any change by the process, then there is no such thing as assimilation" (qtd. in Kamboureli, *Making* 17).

In the decades-long history represented in the text, the Chinese women neither give themselves up to the so-called mainstream culture, nor does Canadian society essentially change by absorbing the cultural traits of these women. The divide is still present. Even the authors' effort to restore the women into Canadian history is seen by scholars like Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and David Leiwei Li as self-exoticization or by Sheng-mei Ma as for marketing purposes (M. Ng, "Representing" 163-64). Therefore, the Chinese-Canadian descendant authors have a long way to go in telling the stories as part of an effort to reclaim the Chinese women's place in Canadian history, and this dissertation is an attempt to comprehend the women's representation in their own way, which I hope will enhance the understanding of the Chinese women and their community on the part of present-day readers, both Chinese and non-Chinese alike.

6.2 THE CHINESE DESCENDANTS' CANADA

In his second memoir, Wayson Choy recalls his personal experience of claiming to be “Canadian,” which is characteristic of Canadian-born/raised Chinese descendants:

As a boy of six I had stubbornly declared in Chinglish, “I belong Canada.” The elders had thrown back, “You Chinese!” [...]

[...] My conviction that I was Canadian, that I belonged to Canada, had remained unshaken all these years. But maybe the elders knew more about being Chinese than I had ever accepted. I had never been on Chinese soil; I had never breathed Chinese air.

It was easy enough to be Canadian, perhaps, when I had only ever been in Canada. (*Paper Shadow* 251)

Choy’s conviction that he is Canadian reveals important features of the Chinese descendants’ identification with Canada. It is a natural inclination based on the descendants’ limited knowledge and experiences, and which is bound to change as their knowledge and experiences expand.

The descendants’ declaration that they are Canadian, which we see in Sek-Lung (Choy, *Jade* 152; 162), Jook-Liang (Choy, *Jade* 27; 34) and Kiam (Choy, *All* 226), is based on limited experience and knowledge, as “Canada” is the only place they have been. I would like to add that at younger ages, they live in a particularly narrow world as a result of their elders’ overly protective actions. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, for instance, Beatrice, Kae’s mother and most trusted source of information, “hardly knew anywhere beyond the quiet streets of Vancouver” (Lee 220). In Choy’s novels, meanwhile, all the child narrators feel that places outside of a few Chinatown streets are unfamiliar. On Jook-Liang’s way to the docks to see off Wang Suk, for example, she remembers the taxi “go[ing] smoothly forward, down our street, down streets soon unfamiliar to me (Choy,

Jade 70). Kiam, similarly, remembers returning to “familiar” places on his way back after picking up Stepmother “[w]hen the taxi finally turned south, crossing the familiar streets of Hastings and Pender and then turning east on Keefer” (Choy, *All* 41). At eight, Sek-lung knows that he “shouldn’t be here” when he follows his babysitter to meet her Japanese boyfriend in Japantown (Choy, *Jade* 242). For various reasons, Pender, Hastings, and Keefer streets, together with the public school, are the children’s Canada.

As Elena Chercover notes about *All That Matters*, “at the level of the body, characters are ensnared by the named streets, toxic substances, and encoded buildings that mark Chinatown’s internal and external boundaries” (3). Chercover’s observation is more true of the Chinese descendants than it is of the immigrants who have rich memories of the Old China. What is more, within the limited physical space, the descendants receive information that is further filtered by the elders for reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter. Together, the limited space and filtered information shape a fantasy of Canada for the descendant characters.

In this protected bubble, the descendants’ identification with Canada happens naturally, in part because they take for granted the fact that their basic needs in life are satisfied. Kiam’s memory that “we ate well” because Poh-Poh could always buy “the choicest cut of pork, the fattest chicken, or the last clear-eyed fish in the pail” best summarizes the satisfaction of the children’s most fundamental needs (Choy, *All* 46). Even Hing in *The Concubine’s Children*, who is from a poorer family, is guaranteed “enough to eat” by her mother when the mother hurriedly leaves Vancouver for Toronto

(Chong 141). Meanwhile, Beatrice and her siblings in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* belong to one of the wealthiest families in Vancouver's Chinatown and "never [understand] poverty" (Lee 195). Beatrice even has her personal servant, Chi, who "existed totally for [Beatrice]" and Beatrice is "openly bred to be a princess" (177).

The children all have enough to eat, and their other basic needs are met to varying degrees. They enjoy the freedom to play, which they do in ways that reflect a mix of Chinese and Western influence. For example, while they are provided with the Free China toy, which they use to smack the Japanese toy soldier's head off, and practice Chinese Kung Fu and Tai Chi; they also play Robin Hood, Sinbad the Sailor, Tarzan (Choy, *All* 158), and use Peter Pan cafe matches (*All* 189). Although they still cannot resist the charm of Poh-poh's stories about the Monkey King and Mistress Mean-Mouth, they gradually find more fun in films with Charlie Chaplin (Choy, *All* 96), or the American police detective Dick Tracy (*All* 140), and Jook-Liang idolizes Shirley Temple and does tap dance like her. Every aspect of the Chinese descendants' life thus makes them naturally different from the "Chinese" children their elders expect them to be, and the children are used to having Irish, Jewish, or Italian peers close by.

As for security, the descendants, whose life is barely affected by war (and certainly not to the same extent as their elders' lives have been), have no real experience with the daily fear of war. They do, however, face the daily risk of physical assault, which makes them agree with their elders that they, as Chinese, are "Resident Alien" (Choy, *All* 129, 148; *Jade* 113, 153). The description of the children in Choy's novels by Zhen Liu, a

Chinese scholar, is applicable to the children in Chong's and Lee's texts too. According to Liu, the Chinese descendants are "uniquely vulnerable as they are caught up in wars on many fronts" (26). Liu believes that for the children, Canada is where they learn about the Sino-Japan war and European war, where their survival space is "surrounded by hostility" from the larger Canadian society, and where their existence is not recognized (26). The children do hear about war and some enlist, but they have little experience of real bombing and the social unrest that comes along with it, which is one major reason why their elders left, or cannot return to, China. Their sense of insecurity is mainly caused by street assaults. In Choy's novel, Kiam is attacked by a few Italian boys who call him "Chink" and "chickenshit China-boy" (*All* 256). Chong, who celebrates the present-day Canada she lives in, remembers that even in as late as the 1960s, "Taunts chased us to school: 'Chinky, Chinky Chinaman, sitting on a fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents.' At recess, children threw stone-laden snowballs in our direction; after school they waited in ambush to knock us off our bicycles" (*Concubine's* 218). Although the descendants feel a natural identification with Canada, they have to cope with their memory and experiences of not being accepted by others.

Along with physical insecurity are the frequent disrespect and insults the Chinese descendants must live with. Once outside the bubble created by their elders, especially by their foremothers, the Chinese descendants immediately learn that they are undesired and even detested. They are continually reminded that they do not belong. Growing up, the narrators' generation watches the Chinatown veterans of the First World War who

“merely shook their heads and coughed into their hands, [who] eked out their wounded days and nights sitting in the Hastings Street coffee shops and lived in those tiny rooms around Water Street, just below Victory Square, burdened with their painful memories” (Choy, *All* 285). Meanwhile, English-language newspapers tell stories about the First World War “as adventures that had turned inexperienced boys into fighting men” but they all “featured white faces and white names” with the Chinese young men “forgotten already” (Choy, *All* 285). When the Second World War breaks out and another generation of young men in Chinatown are ready to fight “for England, for Canada” so that they could be recognized by the government and work in good jobs “like everyone else” (Choy, *All* 343), they are refused because of [their] “alien status, [...] yellow skin, and [...] slanty eyes” (Choy, *All* 285). Despite the Chinese descendants’ declaration of being “Canadian” at a very young age, they gradually realize that being accepted as Canadian and being treated with due respect is a lifelong struggle.

6.3 IMMIGRANTS’ SILENCE, DESCENDANTS’ MISINTERPRETATION, AND INCOMPATIBLE LANGUAGES AS CAUSES OF DIFFERENT IDENTIFICATIONS

Allen Gee makes “one small critique” of Choy’s *All That Matters*, which is that the narrator is “a bit detached at the start” and appears “often an observer rather than a direct participant” (21). By “detached” Gee means:

Life is rich all around him: there is family history that the reader needs to learn; divisiveness exists between the city’s whites and Chinese; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 has kept whole families from immigrating; and poverty and

starvation are daily realities for vast numbers of Chinese bachelor men. [...] Why shouldn't the Asian character be the center of the story, of the dramatic action? The answer is a matter of viewpoint. Kiam, early on, because of his family's merchant class status, lives a somewhat protected life. (21)

Gee's observation about the detachment of the narrator is true of all the descendant narrators in Choy, Lee, and Chong's texts. It is even true of Beatrice and May-ying, who provide their daughters, Kae and Chong, with much of their information about the past. All the family history, racial divisiveness, poverty, and starvation have little impact on the descendants and have little meaning to them until very late in their lives (although Jook-Liang, Jung-Sum and Sek-Leung never appear as fully grown up in Choy's novel, and thus never reflect on their childhood experience at all).

In Chapter Three, I discussed in detail the children as unreliable narrators, and here I will probe more into the causes of the narrators' detachment. I argue that though most of the time, multiple generations live in the same physical space of Chinatown, they actually live in two different Canadas due to the immigrant women's silence about their world, the descendants' inaccurate interpretation of the messages from their elders, and the ultimate inability to make meaningful inter-generational communication because of their varying grasp of either English or Chinese.

The immigrant women's silence

Lily Cho remembers the silence in her family, which meant the most important stories in her family were the ones that children like her "should never be told" ("Asian Canadian" 167). She claims that Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* reveals the "secret code that guards these stories from the ears of outsiders" and that the novel unfolds as "a silent

pact leading to more silence” but ultimately results in characters “telling stories that busted injunctions of shame and silence (“Asian Canadian” 167-68). Cho’s observation about silence mainly has two features: the elders do not tell their children the most important stories and, if these are told, they are often related with “shame,” implying an oversimplified connection between silence and shame. However, Monique Attrux (2019) explores the more complex “ethos of silence” in the Chinese culture represented in Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* and Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* to further reveal the relationship between language/silence and the Chinese-Canadian identity of the Chinese descendants. While Attrux agrees that some stories are not told to outsiders because the Chinese believe “family ugliness should not be aired publicly” (1-2), she also argues that the practical need to remain in Canada to avoid the famine and war in China, combined with anti-Chinese laws, drove the Chinese community into “a strict code of silence so that families could remain together [in Canada] with less of a risk of deportation” (Attrux 2).

I notice even more reasons for the Chinese silence in the texts by Lee, Chong, and Choy, including their desire to protect their children from hurtful realities and their ability to wait patiently for the children to be grown up enough to understand. The Chinese do not speak a great deal about their life in Canada so that their descendants can have a better chance of surviving there. The biggest secrets the Chinese keep concern the paper relationships, which are their means of surviving Canada’s hostile immigration policies⁴. When Poh-poh learns that the three-year-old Kiam has told his Irish friend about the

arranged coming of Stepmother, she gets “mad” because she wants him to “[t]ell white ears nothing!” stressing that “Not one word, or we go back to China on next boat. Starve to death in China!” (13). During the years when China is torn by famine and civil unrest and war, remaining out of the country is the way to survive, so the Chinese keep secret from white society the illegal activities that they are engaging in in their pursuit of survival. So, while the existence of a paper family is an open secret within the Chinese community, this must be kept from the white society in order to avoid deportation, which would in turn lead to starvation and death in China. The Chinese simply tell their children to keep the secret without trying to explain why.

The Chinese also keep secret some facts that are too harsh for the children to learn. When Jook-Liang is the five-year-old “bandit-princess” of Wong Suk, she does not know what he and thousands of Chinese men like him, who built the most difficult part of the Canadian railroad, have experienced. The girl vaguely learns that Wong Suk “had climbed the Rockies, decades before I was born, and seen others, like him, climb up the steepest mountain slopes, then come skidding down, legs and arms flying, to escape dynamite blasts, rockfalls” (Choy, *Jade* 65). What Poh-poh tells the children is that “[a]t night when you sleep [...] *foih-chai* (train) change into iron dragons—lucky dragons to protect you from white demons” (Choy, *All* 14). The elders keep their hurtful experiences from the children and only tell them that the “good” Chinese ghosts will protect the Chinese community.

The immigrants also keep secret what these Chinese laborers get in return for their work in Canada. Kiam remembers seeing off hundreds of men and some women “who saw no more future in Gold Mountain/Tin-Pot Mountain (*All* 162) and who were deported by the Canadian government in the form of “free [one-way] passage” back to China in 1935. Later, he learns:

[S]ome sickened and died in the fourth-class hold of the slow steamers that took them back. Others jumped into the ocean, unable to bear the shame of going home with less than nothing in their pockets.

Beside a few obituary lines published in the Gold Mountain newspapers, some formal names were noted under the heading “Missing at Sea.” (Choy, *All* 164)

The Chinese descendants who live a “somewhat protected life” will need many years to uncover these secrets and many more years to understand the significance of the secrets for their elders and for themselves.

The last reason for the Chinese silence is that the elders wait for the children to grow up enough to understand their messages, only to find that the years-long silence has made the two generations so distant from each other that communication and understanding are very unlikely. In *The Jade Peony*, right before Wong Suk returns to China with the bones of the earlier Chinese labourers, he knows that once he leaves, he will never see the girl again, and he wants the five-year-old girl to know about the Chinese community’s story, but she fails to understand why:

“Poh-Poh tell you?” he asked, in Toisanese.

“Tell me what?”

“About the bones—the bone shipment.”

I was puzzled. I wanted to hear him speak Chinglish—the mix of Chinese and English we threw together for our own secret talks. I used Chinglish to tell

him all the movie stories we ever saw, about Tarzan and Shirley Temple, about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, about Robin Hood and how he, Wong Suk, my Best Friend, was like the bandit-prince and how I was his bandit-princess. What did *bones* have to do with us?

As the scene continues, the inability of the two to communicate clearly on this subject becomes more apparent:

“The bone shipment,” Wong Suk kept on, “that’s all the bones of the dead Chinese, the Chinese who died in Gold Mountain. The bones come from all over B. C. I’m going back with the shipment to Hong Kong first, then to Mainland China, then back to my—”

The old man could see I was not listening to him properly, but he kept talking.

“Two thousand pounds of bones going home to China. Liang-Liang, isn’t that wonderful?”

In my mind, I saw a pile of bones, a mountain of dead people’s bones: it was horrible. Like all the dead people lying about the railroad in Shanghai.

“Stupid bones!” I said. “You promised me we would go to the movies today. Father gave you big money last week. We could go to movies for years and years.” (Choy 67)

Caused by the silence of the older generation, the knowledge gap about Canada and China between the old man and the little girl is drastic. While he looks forward to securing the bones and the spirits of the Chinese labours by sending them back to China, she does not think the bones have anything to do with her and her “bandit prince.”

While Wong Suk tries eagerly to pass down his knowledge before he leaves Canada, she thinks about her own “secret talks” with the old man, her stories about Tarzan and Robin Hood and Ginger Rogers. While the man is immersed in the “wonderful” journey, the girl is narcissistically dreaming about her Shirley Temple dance, her movie, her pocket money, and her role as his “bandit-princess.” She does not understand the meaning of “all the dead people lying about the railroad in Shanghai” during the Japanese invasion

of China, his desire to return to China, or his expectation that the country will be free from war. At the man's persistence in sharing his stories about the bones, the girl quietly protests that the old man does not "notice anything I had on, not even the taffeta dress, not even the ribboned shoes" (67). Finally, she gets so frustrated that she curses the "Stupid bones!" and begins to stand up and leave. Obviously, the girl is "puzzled" by the man's decision to leave Canada because Poh-poh has decided to wait until the girl is older to teach her about the community's past, and Wong Suk has also kept the past a secret.

Choy expresses mixed views on the Chinese keeping secrets. On the one hand, he believes that it "carr[ies] a political, utilitarian function among the older generation who suppress their immigrant background [...] to access jobs in mainstream Canadian society" (Choy, *Paper* 290), and that it helps to maintain communal cohesion and make life bearable (282). Unlike Lily Cho, who connects silence with shame, Choy sees silence as "productive and meaningful" as it "embodies presence and a shared, unspoken understanding about their common experiences" (Choy, *Paper* 251). On the other hand, however, he feels that the silence leaves an unbridgeable gap between the generations:

It seems that despite a shared heritage, the past cannot be completely bridged between the generations since it is grounded in past circumstances and cultural practices that are now obsolete or incomprehensible. [...] Silence does not necessarily have to be negative or oppressive. Instead, the effects of silence depend on the conditions under which silence signifies and its implications for the construction of identity. (Choy, *Paper* 254)

Choy obviously sees the inter-generational gap made even wider by the difference in circumstances and cultural practices and by the descendant generations' knowledge deficit caused by the older generation's silence. He further illustrates his dismay when

becoming aware of this gap and feels that he has to relearn everything about his whole world: “Suddenly, nothing of my family, of home, seemed solid and specific. Nothing in my past seemed to be what it had always been” (*Paper* 280).

Scholars have noted other undesired consequences of the elder generation’s silence. In discussing the Wong family’s silence about Suzie’s suicide in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Goellnicht argues that the “failure to ‘tell’ is [another form of] suicide because the self-imposed silence amounts to an erasure of themselves, and a denial of their history” (“Of Bones” 318). All the Chinese-Canadian authors’ research to rediscover community and family history proves the validity of Goellnicht’s concern about the possible disappearance of the older generation, and this is especially true of the Chinese women, for the men are at least recorded, though vaguely, as being part of the construction of the railroad.

While agreeing with Choy’s view that silence was seen by the immigrant generation as necessary for survival, Rocío G. Davis, a scholar of American and postcolonial literature, finds that the Chinese descendants usually find this secrecy “a negative force that must be overcome through [the] healing power of narrative” (“Diaspora” 126). Davis sees Kae in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* as such a descendant who heals “through the recovery of bones, [which is] Gwei Chang’s commitment” in the first section of the novel (“Diaspora” 126). In fact, Joshua Mostow observes that by writing the novel, SKY Lee, just like her character Wong Gwei Chang, “is collecting the bones of her family’s history” (qtd. in Beauregard, “Emergence” 62). Davis and Mostow both imply that descendants,

be they characters or authors, exist for quite some time in an unknowing state, and I would argue that the unknowing descendant narrators and their growth reflect the authors' own ignorance and growth. In telling the story of their immigrant foremothers, the descendants are not just breaking the silence but, more importantly, communicating with their elders, partly as a means of confessing or making amends for their former attempts to avoid the elders and the culture they embodied. The authors' effort to research the past is also an effort to rediscover the voice that repeatedly spoke to them, but that they did not understand; their effort to give the women a voice is a howling from the deepest part of their own souls to reconcile with the women who they turned a deaf ear to at a younger age.

The descendants' inaccurate interpretation of the elders' messages

When the Chinese immigrants try to keep their Canadian-born/raised children Chinese, nearly all their messages are misinterpreted, resulting in the children being pushed further away from China and closer to Canada. The first thing is the children's rejection of the elders' high expectations of them. In *The Jade Peony*, the six-year-old boy Sek-Lung remembers his refusal to meet the family expectation when faced with a choice between following his family's wishes and following the pull of Canadian society. He, like all his brothers, is expected to be a "Confucian scholar" with both civil and military strategies needed to run a nation. To achieve this, he is encouraged to work hard with the Old China story about "a poor boy who caught a hundred fireflies and kept them in a jar [...] so he could have enough light to study at night" (Choy 214). He is also told

the story of a six-year-old boy in China who, despite poverty, keeps a balance between doing farm work and self-education:

There, in Sun Wu village in the county of the Four Districts, if a boy was not too poor, after his labours in the family shop or after his toils on some ancestral field, he looked forward to an encounter with reading and writing. Settling into a creaking chair with brush in hand, he sensibly studied the *Sam zi jing*, the *Three Character Classic*. [...] In Old China, no scholarly child actually played after age six. He put away childish things, found in learning his recreation and inspiration. (Choy 214)

The boy is taught through this story to look to a combination of physical labour and learning for recreation and inspiration, and he also sees everyone else in the family “all working wherever and whenever they could” because they are “constantly short of money” (213).

In contrast to these messages about hard work, the school doctor tells the family to “[l]et the boy play” and not to send him to the Chinese school like his siblings because that is “[t]oo much stress for the boy” (*Jade* 214). Hearing this, the boy reflects on the story and thinks, “it would be fun to catch the flies, but too much of a strain to read at night” (214). He resists the family’s expectation that he will be a Confucius scholar, determining that “such a boy I was not” (215). Between working hard to be a Chinese-style scholar and leading an easy life, the boy’s choice is stated in the one-line paragraph: “I played” (214), as he thinks it is obviously much easier to be Canadian.

A second type of message misinterpreted by the younger generations includes tales about the hard life in China, which the immigrants expect to be the driving force that will inspire the children to work hard for the ancestor country, but which only makes them

more eager to take advantage of the easier life in Canada. For instance, Jung-Sum, the adopted second son of the Chen family, is having fun with his new pet turtle when he hears the bachelors who consider him “weak and spoiled” talking about his hands, which are soft “like silk” in contrast to “the calluses already forming on their own hands at five and six and seven” (Choy, *Jade* 76). These old bachelors “warn” father of the consequences of the boy’s easy life: “No work, no will,” with some of them “waving old sinewed hands with missing fingers and bent joints” (Choy, *Jade* 76). Enjoying his pet turtle at ten years old, Jung-Sum has no intention to give up his life in Canada and to “work” to develop the “will” that the old bachelors expect the Chinese children to.

Meanwhile, the descendants are confused by the sharp contrast between the very real “old sinewed hands with missing fingers and bent joints” that are evidence of a difficult life and the abstract pride in China the immigrants try to share. Kiam sees the elders share the pride in their home country:

The way Father stared proudly at Third Uncle, who was showing me large picture books with ancient Chinese temples, and the way they both turned to study each page, telling me tales of monks who could snap steel rods and smash stone boulders with their bare hands, made me sit up straight in my chair. Even Stepmother looked up at me from her breast-feeding, as if it would be impossible, if not madness, to be other than *tong-yung*. (Choy, *All* 53-54)

Men and women of the old generations share Chinese literature, history, and culture, but the repeated words of pride from the elders leave no traces on the children in the moment.

When Third Uncle (the man who sponsored the Chen family to migrate to Canada) tells Kiam that “in this country of white demons we are undesirables— Chinks, [...] but we are, in fact, a superior people” (Choy, *All* 53), and when Stepmother tells him that “[the

new-born] Baby be Chinese, too. *Tohng-Yahn* is best” (Choy, *All* 54), the boy cannot relate to any of the messages. He only responds to Father’s quote of a Chinese poet in an unintended way. The poem calls the Middle Kingdom “a country as old as sorrow” (Choy, *All* 53), and Father expects the boy to be proud of China’s long history and take on the responsibility of saving the country from the sorrow. However, the line only makes the boy think that “no one ever laughed in Old China [and that] I was glad to be in Canada” (Choy, *All* 53).

The third type of misunderstood message is about the relationships the immigrants consider most important, but which are made extremely difficult by Canada’s immigration policies. When being brought up with little social context, the local-born/raised children often feel confused by these complicated relationships and are inclined to choose Canada because it is “simple” (Choy, *Jade* 148). For Sek-Lung in Choy’s *The Jade Peony*:

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. [...] And if these persons were also tied to us by false papers to obtain immigration visas, they became “paper sons” or “paper uncles,” heirs to a web of illegal subterfuge brought on by laws that stipulated only relatives of official “merchant-residents” or “scholars” could immigrate from China to Canada. Paper money could buy paper relatives. But whose papers were connected to whose relatives? My head pounded. (148-49)

The relationships cause the boy’s head to pound and the complexity of Chinese culture overwhelms him.

There are at least two reasons for his confusion, the first being that the relationships are indeed complicated because they are determined by many factors: which side the person is related to, the person's age as compared with the parents, and that person's relationship with the parents. For a single word like "cousin," there can be at least eight different terms. For example, on the mother's side, there will be *biaomei* (表/錶妹) for younger sisters, *biaojie* (表/錶姐) for elder sisters, and *biaoge* (表/錶哥) for the elder brothers and *biaodi* (表/錶弟) for younger brothers. On the father's side there is *tangmei* (堂妹) for younger sisters, *tangjie* (堂姐) for elder sisters and *tangge* (堂哥) for the elder brothers and *tangdi* (堂弟) for younger brothers. What makes things worse is the rarity of these relatives due to Canada's immigration policy. None of the immigrants in the four texts have a sibling, so the children do not have a real uncle or aunt or cousins and those they call uncle or aunt are either very distant relatives, like Third Uncle in Choy's novels, or just acquaintances like the Chinatown men or women who Hing calls uncle and aunt in *The Concubine's Children*.

The fact that most of the relationships are false ones created by purchased documents makes the children completely confused about how they are related to other people. Sek-Lung calls his own mother Stepmother instead of mother, and his Father's mother Poh-poh (mother's mother) instead of Nye-Nye (father's mother). A paper family, while deemed necessary for survival, only makes understanding the relationships even more overwhelming for the children. While the Chinese women live in a web of important relationships and take it for granted that their children should do the same, the

absence of blood relations and the complicated paper ones make the children so confused that they only want to escape.

The incompatible languages between the generations

The most important cause of the difference in identification between the immigrants and their descendants is their varying grasp of two languages. The children's loss of the Chinese language, which usually happens before age ten, and the immigrants' very limited English, which they only have enough of to cope with the inescapable need to interact with white people, make them unable to communicate complicated thoughts to one another. In other words, by the time the descendants are old enough to understand the more complicated thoughts and issues the elders have waited years to tell them, the children have lost the Chinese language needed to make conversations meaningful.

The immigrant women in these texts have very limited English, which they use when they need to interact with white people or when they need to cater to their children, whose world is already partly occupied by Western culture. In *The Concubine's Children*, May-ying uses English only in the most desperate moments when she has to go to the pawnbroker's so that she and her daughter will not starve. Presenting the most precious jewelry, which her grandmother and her mother have worn, May-ying asks the clerk, "How muchee [would you give me for these]?" and tells the man that "I likee toondee-fie dollah" in the pidgin English she knows (Chong 128). In this case, using English is for survival purposes.

The Chinese women also use English to talk about the children becoming

non-Chinese. When Poh-poh tells Wong Suk about her grandchildren, she uses a mixture of half-English pidgin and half-Chinese: “*This useless only-granddaughter wants to be Shir-lee Tem-po-lah; the useless Second Grandson wants to be cow-boy-lah. The First Grandson wants to be Charlie Chan. All stupid foolish!*” (Choy, *Jade* 37; original emphasis). Shirley Temple, cowboys, and Charlie Chan do not belong to Poh-poh’s world or the stories she has been telling the children and, in her view, none of these characters is a good role model. She thinks it is foolish of her grandchildren children to follow them, rather than the characters in her stories from and about Old China.

Even worse, knowing little English causes the women frustration, especially when compared with their children’s pride in their competence with the language. In Choy’s novels, the only time Stepmother uses English is when she has to sign for a parcel and needs her son to translate the postman’s words. At the space the postman points at, she writes her first English “word,” which is a simple X:

Stepmother took the postman’s pencil, and he pointed to the document in his hand. Carefully, Stepmother drew two lines, one crossing over the other. She could have written her name in Chinese ideograms, but the man only wanted an X. It was the first time I saw Stepmother write anything in English. X. She did not like the way the postman smiled at her.

“Sek-Lung, tell the White Demon to give me the box.”

“Sir,” I said, “my mama wants the box right away.”

“You’re a smart young fella,” he said, putting the box in her hand. He saluted Stepmother and slapped his receipt book shut and left.

“Did you hear that?” I said. “He called me *smart*.” (*Jade* 159)

Without competence in English, she feels powerless, nameless, and unimportant. When she must turn to her eight-year-old son for help, she feels frustrated. The connection between English competence and being “smart” makes Stepmother feel insulted and the

boy's victorious declaration, "Did you hear that? He called me smart," divides the immigrant mother from the Canadian-born child. Their incompetence in English leaves the Chinese women like Stepmother in a "world of debased, distorted, helpless subhumans lost in the darkness of meaninglessness" (Xie 355). Stepmother is unable to express her frustration with the mailman or her annoyance at her son's pride in his own English skills. Fred Wah puts it well by describing the Chinese women as "Yet languageless, mouth always a gauze, words locked behind tongue, stopped in and out, what's she saying, what's she want, why's she mad, this woman--silence stuck, stuck" (*Diamond* 5).

While the older women know little English, the children become more and more accustomed to it while feeling at the same time more confused about the Chinese language. As the eight-year-old Sek-Lung recalls:

I knew just enough Chinese and English to speak to people, but not always to understand the finer points; worse, each language was mixed in with a half-dozen Chinatown dialects. I never possessed enough details, in either language, to understand how our family, how the countless cousins, in-laws, aunts and uncles, came to be related. Behind their wrinkled hands, the few old women and the old bachelor-men, the *lao wah-kiu*, whispered their guarded knowledge of bloodlines, of clans claimed or deserted, of women bartered for silver coins, of indentured children bought or sold to balance family debts or guarantee male heirs.

[...]

English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quicksand. I preferred English, but there were no English words to match the Chinese perplexities. I sometimes wished that my skin would turn white, my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue, and Mr. and Mrs. O'Connor next door would adopt me and I would be Jack O'Connor's little brother. (Choy, *Jade* 150-51)

By the age of eight, after a few years of school education, the descendants are becoming more adapted to, and begin to show preference for, the “forthright” English language and the topics associated with it. Meanwhile, Chinese language is becoming “awkward and messy,” and the community is characterized by “perplexities” for the children.

With no direct lived experience of China and growing up at a time “of increasing nationalist feeling” in Canada, the Chinese descendant “naturally favors Canada and speaking in English” (Davis, “Backdair” 131). Thus, before the descendants are able to master their knowledge of the Chinese language, they lose and reject it, along with the finer topics associated with it, such as the many dialects used among the elders, the complexities of interpersonal relationships, the tradition of betrothal gift/money, and the emphasis placed on ensuring family continuation by any means. Losing their Chinese language, the Chinese descendants are incapable of processing the complex issues that the elders have waited to tell them when they grow up.

With language being at the core of the inter-generational difference, almost all the Chinese- Canadian authors use some dialects in writing the stories of their immigrant elders, but scholars have different comments on this phenomenon. Milan V. Dimić, a Canadian specialist in comparative literature, sees the use of Chinese dialects as a sign that these authors do not fully identify with dominant ‘mainstream’ language culture. Dimić believes that such texts, which represent “different degrees of obstacles, of obscurities and ambiguities” (104), require the reader to have “various degrees of multilingual and multicultural competence” (104). Dimić also believes that the frequent

use of non-standard English and Chinese dialects is part of the Chinese-Canadian writers' "attempts to find and create a Self using a constant element of transgression of Anglophone 'mainstream' values" (105).

In addition to seeing dialects in the texts as a barrier between the authors and mainstream Canadian society, and between the authors and their readers, Dimić also assumes that the use of dialects divides the readers by "attract[ing] certain readers and exclud[ing] and irritat[ing] others" (104). Considering the use of various forms of English and Chinese dialects in Chinese-Canadian literature, Dimić comments:

It is a literature of challenge, often of fragmentation, even exclusion, and while, on the one hand, it makes the different racial, national, cultural and religious communities better known to each other, it does not, on the other hand, necessarily foster a new, harmonious unity. It is a literature characterized by its openly or overtly agonistic character, challenging the host society but also ancestral traditions, a literature asking for change, itself constantly changing. (106)

Challenging the Canadian society, fragmenting and even excluding readers, and disrupting unity are the consequences of the use of dialect, according to Dimić.

While Dimić's views may be accurate in some ways, his calling Canada the "host" society marginalizes texts with Chinese dialects and non-standard English, and even appears as a refusal to accept Chinese-Canadian literature as part of Canadian literature. He refuses to acknowledge the history told in these texts as part of Canadian history and exorcizes the stories which did happen in Canada, focusing more on the impact of the immigrants' experience in China on their life in Canada. Furthermore, Dimić ignores the moments in the texts when the women use their own dialects to make themselves more

harmonious with, rather than antagonistic towards, other people, as is frequently seen in Poh-poh's use of various dialects with different people. Dimić also fails to note that the use of the dialects is, as I discussed in Chapter One, part of the authors' attempt to continue their elders' effort to communicate with Canadian society in Chinglish, something Chinese immigrants did at the turn of the twentieth century. The use of their elders' own language is not only literally giving the women a voice, but is letting out the long-suppressed voice of the authors themselves.

Many scholars see the use of non-standard English and Chinese dialect, together with the social setting, as part of the authors' "self-exoticization" and even their exploitation of such self-exoticization. Maria Ng reviews these studies:

Some ethnic Chinese writers' self-exoticization has been analysed in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature* (1993) and, more recently, in David Leiwei Li's *Imagining the Nation* (1998) and Sheng-mei Ma's *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*. David Leiwei Li calls this tendency to self-exoticize the "romantic embodiment of Asia in genes and consciousness" that one can detect in Asian American writing, which ties "the production of the cultural symbolic and communal identity to the determination of place and history." Sheng-mei Ma is more explicit about the marketing value of using ethnic history and setting in fiction. ("Representing" 163-64)

All these scholars notice important characteristics of Chinese-North American texts including the particular history and social setting, the Chinese culture, the authors' consciousness of the role of the Chinese culture in their own personal past, and the authors' effort to recreate a past that has disappeared with the death of the early immigrant generations. However, the claim that Chinese- Canadian authors write to self-exoticize and to profit from self-exoticization is debatable. For example, when Maria

Ng calls the use of Chinese cultural references “a new strategy of exoticizing the Chinese culture” because these references “can only have meaning for someone who knows the culture and the various languages, which is not the case for all readers” (M. Ng, “Chop Suey Writing” 181), she is making an observation that is West-centric.

When scholars see writing by and about the Chinese in North America (including the use of Chinese dialects) as exotic, they are not ready to accept the characters and stories as part of Canadian history and culture, even though the stories are set in Canada and the characters’ experiences are part of Canadian history. The impacts that these stories and women have had on the authors are not erasable, however, and need to be understood and accepted by Canadian society today if a full understanding of the nation’s history is to be achieved. The highly realistic texts mirror a particular group of people living in a specific period in Canadian history and these women deserve a voice, which is given to them by these texts. This voice is not only theirs, but the authors as well, and it is not, therefore, exotic.

Although I agree with Dimić that the use of Chinese dialects may create some barriers for non-Chinese readers, I believe the use of dialect serves several purposes: to slow down the reading process to allow one to re-consider this period of Canadian history and the people living through it, to literally give the Chinese, especially the women, a *voice*, and to enable the authors to reconcile with the women by making an attempt to re-learn the language that they had objected to when they were younger.

Most importantly, these dialects are the familiar voices that nurtured the authors' growing up, so by writing in the dialects, the authors rediscover their own past that they almost lost and fear losing. Therefore, I would argue that the use of the few words in their elders' dialects is the descendant authors' recovering their deepest memories in order to communicate with the elders whom they tried to distance themselves from at an earlier stage in life. As Huai-Yang Lim observes, Choy's inability to read the Chinese language "further exacerbates the epistemological separation between the generations" ("There's nothing" 252). The use of dialect is the authors' attempt to reconcile with their elders; a pleading for forgiveness for their obvious or hidden pride in their fluent English over their elders' tied tongues. It is an attempt to literally give the elders a *voice* in order to restore them, first to the authors' own self, and then to Canadian history where the Chinese women truly existed. It is particularly significant for the women because, unlike the men whose labour on things like the railroad is recorded in Canadian history, the women are more likely to disappear completely when even the Chinese descendant scholars adopt the term "bachelor society" in discussing the Chinese community. In using the women's own language, the authors literally give them a voice and let the women speak for themselves.

In an interview by Glenn Deer (1999), Choy talks about the importance of his use of the Chinese dialects in portraying his characters and rediscovering his own self. For Choy, the dialects make the Chinatown people who they are and make him who he is as a writer. Choy remembers:

There were different women and men who had taken care of me, “aunties” and “uncles” who in the privacy of their own homes would speak their particular village dialect. So the streams of Chinese dialects to me are a vital source of who I am as a writer. I think it’s quite obvious the source of my [sic]character’s thought patterns, their speaking rhythms, how they fall back into “sayings” and are sustained by the recurring use of mythic images and their beliefs in positive and negative forces [...]. The language memory I have inherited from Chinatown has somehow transmuted into the narrative voices in my writing. (Deer 35)

It is obvious that in the dialects reside the characters’ thoughts, culture, and values. In other words, those “aunties” and “uncles” were not silent; instead, they have been forgotten and thus silenced when their “voices” disappear. By including the dialects in English writing that can be read by mainstream Canadian society, the authors expect to make the Chinese immigrants heard.

These dialects are also “a vital source” for Choy as an author and an individual. Elsewhere in the same interview, Choy calls these dialects “the music of the drum beat of that past” to him (Deer 35). He says that when he speaks about the Chinatown voices he hears in his head, “certain sounds, certain phrases, and not only their voices, but the faces of some of the people would tonic back to me” (34). Therefore, to consider, as some scholars do, that the authors’ use of village dialects is simply self-exoticization or for marketing purposes will only lead to a failure to understand the characters, the literary texts as a whole, and the attempt by a whole generation of Chinese-Canadian authors to restore a neglected part of Canadian history and make reparation to their community.

The importance of using dialects to portray the Chinese women is also well explained with George H. Mead’s thoughts about language and identity. Mead (1952) sees

language as the beginning of a social act which serves as a stimulus to others. To Mead, language is “an objective phenomenon of interaction within a social group, [...] and even when internalized to constitute the inner forum of the individual’s mind, it remains social—a way of arousing in the individual by his own gestures the attitudes and roles of others implicated in a common social activity” (xvi). Mead shows how language brings one from a biological being to a social one. It is a social activity through which meaning is shared and communication occurs. Therefore, when the authors portray the Chinese women as they speak, the difference between the generations is being bridged and the pain when lamenting a lost history is eased. By learning about their elders’ joys and struggles the authors learn more about a generation who, like the descendants themselves, have values, happiness, and pains that shape their lives in Canada.

6.4 CONCLUSION

From 1924 to 1967 Chinese women and their children and grandchildren spent their time together within Chinatown, but the drastically different experiences of each generation shaped their different identifications with Canada. In the texts discussed in this dissertation, the Chinese women’s lives in Canada are largely restricted to Chinatown, where their need for security and food is somewhat satisfied but where their other needs are severely neglected. The Canadian-born/raised descendants, however, take it for granted when they are young that everyone’s needs are fully satisfied because, as Liang (the only daughter of the Chen family in Choy’s novel puts it), “this is Canada, not Old China” and everyone can “[have] a place in this world” (Choy, *Jade* 27).

After 1947, when the texts show Canada relaxing restrictions on the Chinese in areas like higher education and employment, the descendants have more opportunities outside Chinatown and feel more optimistic about their future. The different lived experiences of the older and young generations of Chinese in Canada, the different extent to which their various needs are met, and their different knowledge about why these needs are met or not, all help determine their different degrees of attachment to Canada. Most importantly, while the Chinese women are aware that their children are becoming more Canadian and less Chinese, the descendants do not realize they are drifting away from their elders when they lose their Chinese language, and they fail to understand the elders' messages while mistakenly thinking that they do. It takes the descendant narrators decades to rediscover their elders' stories and, most significantly, their version of Canada. In turn, these texts reflect each author's own journey towards a better understanding of the Canada they grew up in, and of the older generation's experiences navigating life in a new, and often hostile, country.

Notes:

- ¹ The novels present the Chinese having an open attitude to other ethnic groups, as long as they are not hostile to the Chinese. Positive interactions between Chinese and other ethnic groups include Mui Lan's interaction with Italian and Japanese individuals in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. (It should be noted that latter scene takes place in 1924, seven years before the Japanese invasion of China, and thus differs from the hostility between the Chinese and the Japanese communities portrayed in Choy's novels). Another example of positive interaction occurs between the Chen family and the Irish O'Connor family in *All That Matters* when First Son receives help from Mrs O'Connor and Stepmother returns the kindness with her best tea. Still another example is the midwife, Madame Nellie Yip, a white woman who married a Chinese man and learned many Chinese dialects. She kindly helps with Stepmother's second delivery and the Chinese community respect and trust her. Choy also writes a moving story about an Roy Johnson, an English man, and Wong Suk in the old CPR days. When Wong Suk found the drunken Johnson lying on the railway nearly frozen to death after being beaten and robbed, he wrapped Johnson up, warmed him, and took him to safety. Johnson called Wong Suk "a friend" and tried to reward Wong in many ways but was refused. Finally, on his deathbed, Johnson asked his son to give Wong Suk a blanket in return for the one Wong Suk used to warm him.
- ² Mui Lan's decision to turn to the Italian businessman is significant in that this reflects the interactions among the minority groups which are usually less hostile than those between the dominant Anglo-Saxon and these groups.
- ³ Mui Lan sees the Tang people as a group is targeted. Chinese like her cannot distinguish one European ethnic group from another, but they are willing to interact with anyone who are not hostile to the Chinese, be it Italian or Irish or Jewish.
- ⁴ Erika Lee discusses the severity of anti-Asian discrimination in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, and Peru in the late-nineteenth and early twenty centuries in "The 'Yellow Peril' and Asian Exclusion in the Americas." Peter Li is right in saying that "Aside from the Indigenous people, no other racial or ethnic group had experienced such harsh treatment in Canada as the Chinese" (P. Li, *Chinese* 1). More anti-Chinese laws were passed than laws targeting any other ethnic group in Canada and the anti-Chinese sentiments lasted much longer than those against any other ethnic group, making the Chinese living conditions much worse. Additionally, though family is important to all human societies in different ways, familism is almost a religion for the Chinese, as demonstrated in their ancestor worship. Therefore, they would make any possible effort to maintain their family and were particularly harmed by laws preventing them from bringing their families to Canada, which did not apply to other immigrant groups.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has studied the representation of Chinese women immigrants in four texts that have won important Canadian literary awards, but which have been understudied. Having approached them with concepts of Chinese indigenous psychology and other theories concerning migration, migrant literature, historical fiction, identity studies, ethnicity studies, and more, this research concludes that, in important ways, these texts have fulfilled the authors' primary goals of writing to restore their own and the community's past, and to construct their own personal identity with a clear awareness of the distinction between the Canadian-born/raised descendants and the earlier Chinese immigrants. Choy, Lee, and Chong have been collecting the bones of an older generation of Chinese in Canada, particularly those of the Chinese women who have been neglected and forgotten by most historical records and other forms of writing. Their texts are not only a collection of the bones of the women, but also the process that the authors went through and the endeavour they made to put the bones together. Meanwhile, the authors are aware that they have not discovered all the pieces and that they are not fully capable of piecing the discovered bones together.

More importantly, by examining abundant textual details which have been missed, overlooked, or misinterpreted by other scholars, this research finds that the texts do not present the women's migration simply as upward social movement. Instead, they recover the women's voices by demonstrating the culture and values of their home country that they hold fast to and which deeply influence all aspects of their life in the small quarter of

Chinatown and in the larger Canadian society. I have also argued that these texts distinguish Chinese-Canadian literature from Chinese-American literature in that they rebuild the history of Canada as a nation by revealing a part of Canadian history historians have somehow neglected, but which illuminates the study of Canada's past from a difference perspective.

This dissertation demonstrates that in studying ethnic literature, especially in countries like Canada that have been shaped by immigration, the social setting of the host country and the theory of migration literature are not enough to interpret the characters. Rather, exploring the characters in multiple social and historical spaces and drawing from ethnic indigenous psychology will often yield unexpected and exciting results. This study has examined the women characters in multiple settings with an emphasis on their Chinese background as this greatly impacts their responses to the situation in Chinatown and the larger Canadian society. For the women, the poverty and social unrest in China are not just the push factors for their migration, but, more importantly, pull factors that keep them connected to China, even after they have moved away. Their concern about the devastating situation in China ties them close to their ancestral country and their Chinese culture serves as the source of their self-regard and the solution to the practical problems they face in the midst of difficult living conditions in Canada.

By examining the women through the lens of Chinese indigenous psychology, this study reveals the women's pride in their multilayered Chinese culture including Confucianism, Taoism, constellation worship, natural god worship, ancestor worship and

so on. This finding not only answers the descendants' puzzle about their immigrant elders' source of strength, but it also makes the women characters worthy of readers' respect, rather than just sympathy. Their dedication to their Chinese familism makes them vital members of the Chinese community and serves as the source of their subjective well-being in their struggle to maintain a family in the harsh Canadian society. The core Chinese values of reciprocity and trustworthiness explain not only their refusal to identify with Canada during the time period covered in the texts, but also explain their positive (albeit rare) interactions with people of other ethnic groups who possess similar values. For example, Chapter Six discusses Mui Lan's willingness to do business with the Italian ice-maker and Stepmother readily exchanging gifts with her Irish neighbour Mrs O'Connor.

This study also challenges the push-pull immigration theory, which views migration as an upward movement from a backward home country to an advanced host country, simplifies migration experience, and gives insufficient attention to its cultural and psychological impact. This approach views migrants only as passive reactors to economic and social forces with little subjectivity and agency. However, once the Chinese women in the texts are examined in their own cultural and historical context of the three worlds they live in, they can no longer be viewed merely as passive victims of dual oppression who are driven by socio-economic forces. Instead, in each of their spheres, they have losses and gains and ultimately enrich themselves through the empowerment of making contribution for their home country as well as host country, through the values

they preserve, and through new cultural traits they adopt.

In considering the authors' primary motivation of writing to rediscover the past of their own families and that of the Chinese community in Canada, this dissertation studies the women characters in the framework of historical fiction by examining the multilayered historical context. In this way, this study joins in the work conducted by both historians and authors by recovering the missing parts of the history of the Chinese community through focalizing the women characters and revealing the impact of their insistence on preserving and sharing Chinese culture. While historians restore the historical facts and the authors shape cultural memory by imaginatively recreating the past in ways that may be more accessible to readers, this dissertation, as a scholarly study, adds to this work of building connections by drawing attention to the importance of these texts, highlighting their successes, and proposing further steps for academics to take to represent this history. In addition, in ways that are similar to the efforts by the authors and by those in the Chinese community working to establish a museum, which are both driven by a desire to build connections between past, present, and future, this dissertation collaborates by highlighting the details in the texts that have been missed or misinterpreted but which give meaning to the experiences of indispensable members of the community: Chinese women.

The authors' efforts in representing the Chinese women and giving them a voice are far beyond what one dissertation can exhaustively explore. In fact, many more details about the Chinese women—such as the ways they interact with each other and with the

larger Canadian society—await further exploration. This work will not only help illuminate the study of the Chinese women who lived through a special period in Canadian history, but also the study of Canadian society itself. What is more, a better understanding of the characteristics of the Chinese women in the texts should draw attention to the complexity of the Chinese community and Chinese-Canadian literature, which includes work by other generations of Chinese-Canadian authors who write about their own distinctive migration experiences.

By framing the examination of the representation of Chinese women using relevant scholarship on historical fiction, migrant literature, and Chinese indigenous psychology, this dissertation joins in the historians' effort to rewrite Canadian history from another perspective and to rediscover the history of the Chinese community, but it also contributes to Canadian literary scholarship by illuminating the authors' endeavors to restore the women into the community history and recreate the community's cultural memory. What is more, this study contributes to the underdeveloped field of Chinese-Canadian literature studies by enhancing the focalization of the Chinese women whose values their descendants have inherited, though perhaps with little direct awareness. In this way, this study acknowledges the authors' efforts to present a whole generation of Chinese women who live a spiritually and culturally rich life and are more than simply victims of trauma and oppression, and whose existence serves as one pillar of the descendants' identity.

The study of Chinese-Canadian literature is still ongoing. Not only are Chong and Lee's generation of writers still researching and writing their new discoveries about the

generations of Chinese immigrants that this dissertation has studied, but the Chinese who have come to Canada from other parts of the world since the 1960s have also been writing about their own migration experiences. All this increases the complexity of the Chinese community and Chinese-Canadian literature, each branch of which should be studied in its own social, cultural, and historical context. As this dissertation has shown, the literature of each ethnic group deserves its own study and applying indigenous psychology can be an effective approach to analyzing ethnic literature, and is certain to yield exciting future research results.

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AFTERWORD

This research was conducted in the midst of two tremendous events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S.-China Trade War, both of which have had a great impact on the social environment in Canada. This has, consequently, placed me in an unexpected but similar situation to the immigrants whose representation this dissertation studies. Given that my family decided not to do grocery shopping in person for a few months for fear of physical attack, which frequently appeared in the media, I agree with Mary Chapman's observation that racial discrimination nowadays is of the same nature as that at the turn of the twentieth century, when the women who I have studied for this project lived.

Additionally, for a time I was worried that I might not be able to finish my studies when the Alberta government ordered four universities, including the University of Lethbridge, to "pause any new partnerships with links to the Chinese government and to review its existing relationships." Meanwhile, international travel became very difficult, mostly because of COVID-related border restrictions, but also because of the expensive fares. Thus, I too had moments when I experienced the Chinese immigrants' feeling of being stuck. Yet, I have also been surrounded by very nice people including professors, colleagues, bus drivers, shop assistants and more, who are of various ethnic backgrounds. In a very difficult situation, this warmth, which is like pieces of oasis in the midst of social isolation, has become much more significant than in peaceful times. I am certainly luckier than the women whom I have studied.

Also unexpectedly, doing this research has enabled me to reexamine my own identity

as both a first-generation ‘immigrant’ mother and as a local-raised descendant when my family ‘migrated’ from a village to the provincial capital in China over thirty years ago. Coincidentally, I brought my daughter to Canada when she was turning thirteen and I was taken away from my home village at twelve, the same age when Lee’s and Chong’s narrators lose their grandmother, symbolically losing their connection to the family member who embodies the home country culture. Though I am not immigrating to Canada, the past six years of watching my daughter has provided me with an invaluable opportunity to understand the Chinese (grand)mothers who watch their children drifting away from the culture of their home country. Meanwhile, I began to understand my mother’s repeated returns to our home village and the sacrifice she made for me and my siblings to have a better education in the city. This revelation has made me resourceful, especially when I was writing Chapters Three and Six. In Canada there live millions of people like me and my daughter who are struggling for a better life in one way or another, making sacrifices of various types. I wish them all well.

Finally, two stories have made me understand more profoundly the need for literature as a means of reparation for ethnic groups that have been hurt historically. One is from the documentary: *The Legacy of Chen*. When the seventh-generation girl of the family in British Columbia was given the family photo album as a special present, she was shocked by the family history, but her words also drove me to think. She said: “When I hear my grandparents being mistreated because they were Chinese, that really has a negative feeling for me because I know what honest, kind, great people they are. They

should not be mistreated just because what race they are. I can't imagine that because I have grown up in a world there is tolerance.”

The other story happened among the Chinese community in Lethbridge. In March 2023, Steven Yang of Winston Churchill High School was named one of thirty-five Loran Scholars and the Chinese community celebrated his success. A group leader encouraged the community saying, “We must work harder to maintain the good image of our community, and we must try to be good citizens.” I certainly agree with her desire to work hard and be good, but I question the implication in her comment that there is a relationship between maintaining the image of being a hard-working good people and being accepted by Canadian society. This disturbs me, especially when I compare this logic with a passage from a reading in a 19th-Century Canadian Literature course in which young Canadians were encouraged to work hard for the new country. While the first story shows that the Chinese community still feel they are “tolerated” by Canadian society, the second shows a contrast between the Chinese “working hard to be Canadian” and white people needing “to work hard for the country because they are Canadians.” In general, the Chinese, even the seventh-generation, still do not feel at home in Canada. More sadly, the pride of the women that Choy, Lee, and Chong portray is barely present among the Chinese in the two stories I have just mentioned, and the century-old trauma caused by discrimination still needs healing. There is still a long way to go and the women in the works can be the guide.