THE DECLINE OF THE CHINESE MATRIARCH: 
THE STRUGGLE TO RECONCILE "OLD" WITH "NEW"

by

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Abstract:
The Decline of the Chinese Matriarch: The Struggle to Reconcile “Old” with “New”

The thesis examines representations of the matriarch in three Chinese Canadian texts: SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*, and Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*. The matriarch is the female head of the Chinese household who is able to gain substantial power by manipulating the assets granted to her in a patriarchal system. Dislocated from her home in China, she serves in these texts as the focal point for the collision between the New World, Canada, and the Old World, China. Confronted by a new environment, the matriarch must decide whether she will choose conformity or identity experimentation. The thesis is concerned with the way Chinese Canadian writers negotiate multiple identities through narrators who must come to terms with the divided loyalties of the women of the past. The analysis of the matriarch’s identity shifts is informed by the work of the feminist theorists, Elspeth Probyn and Moira Gatens, who explore the productive potentials of rebelling against binary codes.

The thesis is divided into three chapters that discuss how the texts come close to embracing identity fluidity, but cannot overcome the need to reach a coherent representation of the matriarch. The first chapter is devoted to *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, and argues that Lee’s narrator sacrifices her female characters, albeit reluctantly, in order to privilege feminism over her Chinese heritage. The second chapter turns to *The Jade Peony* and discusses how Choy’s child narrators give in to binary thinking by relegating Poh-Poh, the Old One, to the realm of memories to make room for the New Ways. The final chapter on *The Concubine’s Children* explores Chong’s desire to redeem a grandmother who wreaked havoc on the family when she defied traditional gender roles.

The thesis concludes by determining that Lee, Choy, and Chong are reaching for a multi-voiced reading of the past, but cannot yet articulate a way out. The uncertainty of their representations of the matriarch signals their efforts to move beyond binaries to a state of coexisting identity categories.
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Introduction: Moving Away from Binary Identity Politics

This thesis is an examination of a central figure in many works of Chinese Canadian writing: the matriarch. The depictions of the Chinese matriarch that appear in SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*, Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*, and Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* are ambivalent ones, reflecting these authors’ inability to reconcile ties to Eastern tradition with desires to conform to larger Western society. My use of the term “matriarch” refers to the female head of the Chinese household who is able to gain substantial power by manipulating the assets granted to her in a patriarchal system. The Chinese matriarch, often the mother-in-law in the family, inhabits a secure position because of her unquestionable authority over the younger women around her. Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers in *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape* define this female as one who “wield[s] considerable influence in the family and authority over its female members, although her powers were limited to the domestic sphere” (11). While the women in these texts do wield considerable influence, they are unlike matriarchs in China in that they are doubly constrained by the pressures of patriarchy and by the hostility of the White community. I suggest that it is the migration to Canada that destabilises the family hierarchy and causes the matriarch to cling to her role while torn by her wish to explore other possible identity configurations.

Transplanted from one cultural home to another, the matriarch is confronted with a web of possible “belongings” that explode the binary conceptions of New and Old; this dislocation embodies an identity that is fluid and ever shifting. Without a voice of her own, the matriarch is subject to a narrator’s gaze that tries to prevent her from straddling multiple identity categories. The narrator feels pressured to produce a coherent image of these women, but his/her failure to do so indicates that a single identity category cannot encapsulate the complexity of individual experience. This thesis is concerned with the way in which these Chinese Canadian writers negotiate multiple identities through narrators who must come to terms with the divided loyalties of the women of the past. Their ambivalence towards the
matriarch shows that they are reaching for a multi-voiced reading of the past, but cannot yet articulate a way out. I intend to argue that the uncertainty of Lee, Choy, and Chong's representations of the matriarch signals their efforts to move beyond binaries to a state of coexisting identity categories.

Set in Vancouver's early Chinatown, the texts recreate the claustrophobic bachelor society that existed at a time in which Chinese women were highly outnumbered. Because all three authors deal with a historically situated group of women, it is important to understand the nature of the conditions that circumscribed their lives. The historical context that frames these narratives is one in which Chinese immigrants were constantly reminded of their marginal position in relation to mainstream Canadian society. During 1885 to 1947, Canadian immigration policy prevented Chinese migrants from viewing Canada as anything more than a temporary existence by restricting their abilities to gain entry and later establish permanent familial roots. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 required every individual entering Canada to pay a $50 head tax which was later increased in 1901 to $100 and in 1903 to $500. In a further attempt to stem the tide of Chinese migration, on a day known as "Humiliation Day" to the Chinese, the Canadian government passed the Exclusion Act of 1923 that stipulated that only those in specific exempt classes would be permitted to enter the country. The act was so effective in eliminating the "Chinese problem" that only twelve people were admitted to Canada during the exclusion years (Lai 52-67).

The resulting situation, exacerbated by the hostility of mainstream society, was one in which the Chinese community remained trapped in a ghettoised ethnic enclave that lay on the outskirts of "good" society. The few Chinese women who lived in Vancouver were restricted to the domestic sphere where they could hold onto the remnants of Confucian order that they had brought with them from the Old Land. This Confucian ideology established the standards of social value and rules of conduct that would regulate these women's lives. Judy Yung's discussion of Confucianism explains that "the 'Four Virtues' required of her were propriety in behaviour, speech, demeanor, and household duties" (18). The family system gave the
matriarch authority over her daughters-in-law, as well as any other subordinate female members of the household. Although the isolation Chinese women encountered in the New World allowed for the intensification of these traditional matriarchal powers, it could not prevent the changes that increased exposure to the New World would inevitably bring.

The women in these texts undergo a shift in their identities when they move from one cultural home to another one that is thousands of miles away. Such identity shifts are central to my study and will be informed by the work of the feminist theorists, Elspeth Probyn and Moira Gatens who extend Deleuze and Guattari's work on rhizomatic configurations. The rhizome is first of all a way of thinking of identity as a network of connections that focuses on lateral, as opposed to hierarchical positioning. Derived from the horticultural term for horizontal subterranean plant systems, the rhizome may at first seem like an odd way of thinking about the matriarch's exploration of new identity options. However, I want to emphasise the rhizome's shift away from what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the pre-established "bottom to the top" (35) pathways of arborescent systems. While Deleuze and Guattari argue that arborescent structures "are hierarchical, comprised of centers of significance and subjectivization" (36), the rhizome is composed of a multiplicity of identity points situated along a flat plane. This horizontal arrangement prevents the privileging of one identity affiliation over another.

Lee, Choy, and Chong seem to be reaching for this non-normative way of conceptualising identity whereby various allegiances can coexist without the need to transcend or override one or the other. Probyn and Gatens' articulation of the productive potentials of rebelling against binary codes will underlie the discussion of these three Chinese Canadian texts. Although these authors are still mentally trapped in a binary world in which identity categories are mutually exclusive, their attempts to negotiate all of the matriarch's desires indicate that they are searching for a viable exit from the either/or debate. Gatens offers a theoretical way out of this impasse when she proposes "the body as a nexus of variable interconnections, a multiplicity within a web of other multiplicities" (7) "that will not
individuate bodies in terms of the familiar molar binary distinctions” (9). Identity will no longer be a pre-determined set of characteristics, but rather “an event, or a haecceity – a becoming” (11) that is the result of many connections that are in the midst of coming together simultaneously. This idea of “intersectional ‘points of intensity’” (7) means that these three authors do not need to choose amongst the matriarch’s many desires to belong, but can instead embrace her state of disunity amidst the opposing forces of male/female and China/Canada.

In addition to being a contradictory character, the matriarch also figures in these narratives as a woman whose flouting of expectations often leads to her downfall. The actions of these characters can be understood through Gatens’ new conception of identity. This is an identity politics of possibility that “does not claim to know, in advance, what a body is capable of doing or becoming” (9), but instead calls for ongoing experimentation that works to explode the previously accepted “norms.” However, because there is the potential for failure as with any other step into the known, Gatens calls for “caution” (11) in lieu of the irresponsible freedom that might intuitively accompany this shift in perception. She speaks of the “‘art’ of selecting becomings” (16) to underline that movement is an exercise of judgement that requires careful consideration of the “range of possible future becomings” (15). The matriarch, therefore, risks failure if she attempts to relocate to a new system of meaning without at least a preliminary surveillance of her past, present, and future identity configurations.

Probyn is equally concerned with escaping arborescent identity configurations, emphasising how the element of “desire” serves as a catalytic force in the movement to belong. She writes that she is inspired “to study the inbetweenness of belonging, of belonging not in some deep authentic way but belonging in constant movement, modes of belonging as surface shifts” (19). This way of thinking implies that a character like the matriarch is fuelled by many desires to belong, and it is this overwhelming yearning for acceptance by her family, community, and larger society that pushes her to uncharted modes of living. Probyn argues
that it is desire that pushes individuals from “specificity to singularity,” a process defined as “the ways in which the general becomes realized by individuals as singular” (22):

Simply put, we do not live our lives as general categories: as a lesbian I should do this; as a feminist I ought to do that. While there have been times when the imperatives of the category meant that individuals became subsumed under the rules of the identity category to which they wished to belong, it seems now that the specificities of those identities may offer alternative modes of individuation that spill over the boundaries of the category. (22-23)

Singularity is offered as a way of escaping general identity categories such as “Chinese” or “female” that dictate what behaviour is necessary to attain full membership. The matriarch can then redefine the terms of her allegiances and embrace her individuality without fearing expulsion from the group.

Consequently, Probyn privileges the term “belonging” over “identity” because she prefers to think of “being” as nebulous and uncertain as opposed to stable and predetermined. Desire is identified as a positive, “profoundly upsetting force” (43) due to its ability to shake-up the established order and to force an individual to explore the options that lie outside the familiar. Both theorists make extensive use of the term “becoming” to focus on a metamorphosing identity process that invokes a feeling of ongoing movement. Probyn’s description of “the moment when the trapeze artist has let go of one ring but hasn’t yet grasped the other” (42) is an effective way of visualising the unpredictability of the in-between position called “Chinese Canadian.” Coupled with Gatens’ urge for precaution, Probyn’s call to insert the concept of positivity into sites of disconnection changes the matriarch from a figure of discord to one who emerges from conflict. This thesis will examine how these Chinese Canadian texts are moving towards the type of identity theorised by Gatens and Probyn, but are still unable to overcome the pressure to reach a place of stability despite these authors’ intentions to do otherwise.
This exploration of the movement away from the binary world will begin with a chapter devoted to *Disappearing Moon Café*. I will examine how Lee’s narrator sacrifices her female characters, albeit reluctantly, in order to privilege feminism over her Chinese heritage. Her depictions of women distorted by an enclosed domestic space will be shown to represent an imperfect attempt by her narrator to come to terms with the conformity of her female ancestors. Although Lee wishes to allow her characters the powers of self-definition, she herself still suffers from the debilitating self-division of trying to choose between her ethnic and gender affiliations. From the radical positioning of Lee, Chapter Two will turn to *The Jade Peony* and discuss how Choy centres his narrative on Poh-Poh, the representative of the Old Ways, who is eventually relegated to memories by her grandchildren to make room for the New. The grandchildren’s characterisation of this matriarch is infused with nostalgia for their Chinese heritage that is complicated by their desire to be accepted by Canadian society. Choy is able to recognise the consequences of a too strict adherence to binary thinking, but he cannot find a place for tradition amidst the pressures to assimilate into the larger community. The final chapter will be devoted to *The Concubine’s Children*, a biography that examines Chong’s mixed reading of a grandmother who dared to step outside of the pre-assigned definitions of what it meant to be a Chinese wife and mother. The chapter will explore both the positive and negative repercussions that accompanied May-ying’s move to live according to her own terms. The need to eventually redeem the concubine indicates that Chong, like Lee and Choy, has still not reached that moment of intersectionality.

Because each of the three texts is so preoccupied with issues of representation and identity, a fitting entry into this discussion would by my own reading of my maternal grandmother, Poh-Poh, who was born in Mei Xian, China, and immigrated to Cape Town in the search for greater opportunity. The policy of apartheid that legally designated the Chinese community as “Other” eventually caused her family to immigrate to Vancouver. The following prologue is as much an indicator of my grandmother’s struggle to belong as it is of my own inability to break out of binary thinking.
Prologue:

Grandma, Poh-Poh. I say these two words aloud as if to capture you for myself and enclose you within the safe confines of my imagination. I use your Chinese name when we are alone in the house because it is only there, where no one can hear, that I am no longer ashamed of speaking the word “difference” aloud. When I most want to forget who I am, you tell me stories of your childhood in Mei Xian, reminding me that you were happy in a place that I so insistently refuse to visit. I tell you to please let me go. I am not Chinese. The village, with its rice fields washed over by floodwaters, was where you were forced to stay home and wait for those older than you were to decide your fate. I want no part of that and instead, choose this land of mountains and sea far away from the place where you were born.

Your dialect rises in my throat as I choke on my own discontent, angry that you will not let me run free and lose myself in the oblivion of Canadian acceptance. You impose your language on me, but I only hide further in English until we are constantly circling each other, waiting for the other to give in. When you point to food on the table and give me its Chinese names, I will not give you the satisfaction of knowing that I know them all intimately by heart. I ask you for the translation and pretend that I don’t understand when you grope for the right word. The language sometimes escapes you, but I make sure to correct every lapse in grammar, pouncing when you forget an “s” or use the wrong tense. You try to please me by coming home to tell me that the grocery clerk thought you were “Canadian born,” but I become only more frustrated by your inability to perfect your speech. I want you to be whole, but you are horribly broken. In my dreams, your halting speech becomes so flowing and confident that we can finally converse with one another without any of the usual constraints that limit us to talk about the family and the weather. Imagine, it could be that easy if only you would try a little harder.

Why can’t you be still and stop moving about so much? Why do you insist on being so changeable when all I long for is a grandmother who will be my fixed centre when I am falling
down? I want you to be the feminist heroine who stood up for yourself when you were forced to make a life in an alien environment with a man you barely knew. How must it have felt being married off to a man seventeen years your senior, and then sent overseas with no hopes of seeing your home or your family ever again? You tell me stories of days when you could not stop the tears you cried for your loss of innocence or other times when you gazed into the eyes of passers-by and saw their hate for your yellow skin. “Go home. Go home,” were the only words that you truly understood. Sometimes I wonder whether I would have been that strong if I had lost my mother tongue and had to grope in the dark for salvation. More than likely I would have crumbled at all that visceral anger, been swallowed whole by the never ceasing demands of husband and children until I could no longer even speak my own name.

When I try to cast you as the subversive figure who overthrew the patriarchal yoke, you resist my academic condescension by shifting to another way of being until I only have fragments left on the page. My theoretical ramblings insult the reality of your memories by pressing you to spit on the memory of the husband you grew to love and to betray the traditions that allowed you to order your life. You are not the feminist icon, ablaze with anger for the male sex, but a woman who found herself in circumstances that forced her to do whatever she could to survive. Despite my wish to comprehend your transformations from one identity to another, I fail to find the simple path that leads to the woman who stands before me now. I only find the unconscious lines of flight you are taking as you jump from one desire to another, a blurred eighty-eight year-old body reaching for the next possibility.

My unified picture becomes unfocused when you blindly follow convention, urging me to improve my cooking skills and give in to my husband to maintain the peace. When I look to you to be my champion for female empowerment, you only counter my expectations by reminding me that a daughter has only duty left if she wishes to hold onto her self-respect. Who are you to tell me how I should run my life, but then again, who am I to judge the choices you made? You were denied an education and separated from the familiar, and yet, I detect no trace of bitterness to poison your feelings for the past, but only mute acceptance that I
reluctantly understand is a part of you. I look at you today and only see a woman who waits for each day to go by before she lets out a sigh of relief. Memory is a comfort, singing you to sleep when you crawl into bed every night and softening the anger that might remain from all those years ago.

Ah, Poh-Poh, I want to possess your memories and swallow them until they are so fiery that they burn the pages that I now write, but you slip away from my grasp when I need you the most. Sometimes I think that I have you figured out, but then the next day you do something so unexpected that the fragments I have assembled come crashing all around me. You twist and turn until I am dizzy from following the dead ends and detours of your life and must fall down in surrender. I cannot understand you. Perhaps I never will, but you have to believe that I want to do justice to your life before the time comes when we are no longer together. The pieces lie before me, scattered by time until they are so far apart from each other that their connections cease to speak for themselves. Woman. Mother. Wife. Daughter. Sister. Grandmother. Canada. South Africa. China. These names mean nothing to me without you, so I am asking you to put your many selves together while I record the patterns that slowly emerge. It might only take a little bit of your time and after that maybe we can have some tea and the cake I made the other day. How about it?
Chapter One: Hysterical Women: Caught Between Tradition and Feminism in *Disappearing Moon Café*

*Disappearing Moon Café* reveals the strain of trying to come to terms with two ideologically opposite points of view. Kae, the narrator, holds feminist interests and a competing sense of loyalty to her Chinese family heritage that make it difficult for her to come to a unified reading of the women of the past. Kae tries to negotiate her own divided subjectivity by examining the Wong women’s dilemma of whether to conform to tradition or to engage in identity exploration. She must decide how to judge ancestors who feel compelled to make a decision to alleviate the tension of being in-between two cultural worlds. The matriarchs of the family, Mui Lan and later, her daughter-in-law, Fong Mei, choose to remain constricted by Confucian ideology that preaches subordination of individual passions to the greater “good” of the household. Although Kae is equally tied to normative behavioural rules, she still feels that she is in a position to judge her female relatives for their conformity. Kae is torn between her feminism and her ethnicity, but eventually comes to censure her characters for their submission to tradition. She sacrifices the Wong women in her decision to privilege feminist ideology over Chineseness, distorting them until they are reduced by the judgements she levels against them. This decision stems from a mistaken belief that she can free herself to pursue non-normative desires by denouncing her ancestors for what she sees as cowardice. However, I argue that because Kae gives in to the pressure to align herself with only one affiliation, she is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempt to break away from a binary world.

**Kae as Narrator: Using the Past to Redefine Her Subjectivity**

In order to probe her own identity ambivalence, Kae chooses to write about the complicity of Chinatown’s early women in the perpetuation of a patriarchal system. Kae’s identity problems arise because she holds a particular conception of herself that has been destabilised by recent family revelations. Thus far, she has allowed her community and larger society to dictate what public behavioural patterns are “correct” for a Chinese Canadian
woman. She has suffered a profound loss of empowerment that is predominantly caused by her reluctance to leave the realm of fixed identity configurations. Her life has involved trying to meet predetermined expectations as opposed to her own version of self. She says, “I was afraid of being found out for the coward I am. All my life, I've managed to mask it with ambition and diligence” (Lee 122), making it her goal to “be the token, pregnant, ethnic woman; act cool, powdered, inhuman” (Lee 123). Her pursuit of an investment research position at the Howe Institute and her passionless, but respectable marriage to Henry Lee are both indicators of Kae’s need to allow her own desires to be subsumed by the pressures to “fit in any way we can” (Lee 138). She has ceased to be an individual, but only an embodied “so damned perfect” (Lee 20) personality type. Patricia Chu talks about how Asian women’s writing often deal with this “sense of grappling with norms for self-formation that are unsuitable or inimical to one’s own possibilities and aims” (17). Kae has allowed these norms to ground her self-formation because of the security in relying on general identity categories. She disregards whether or not these norms are suitable to her own desires, but instead follows them to impose predictability on her life.

However, the consistency of her public persona is shattered by her realisation that the past has been a fictional product that has been hiding a seething bed of chaos. Kae, raised to believe in a pure bloodline, is suddenly forced to re-evaluate her own subject position and realise that her own claim to a stable, uniform identity is tenuous at best given the rather convoluted sexual relations of her ascendants. She searches for a way to reconcile this chaos with the normative rules that constrain her, and eventually finds her solution in her reading of the past. This revelation gives Kae’s act of speech a distinct purpose: she must confront the “whole messy truth” (Lee 123) of her family’s past if she wishes to end her entrapment in a binary world. The impetus for her writing becomes her desire to make “the intricate complexities of a family with Chinese roots [...] into a suant digestible unit” (Lee 19) for both her son, Robert, and herself. Thus, the story is Kae’s reaction to the understanding that her own subjectivity is just as complicated as those of the women before her. The fate of her
subjectivity depends on whether she will trap four generations of Wong women in her gaze as narrator or whether she will attempt a more complex reading of their lives.

Kae, conscious of how she is using her family history to map out her own subjectivity, recognises that her rendering of the past will be shaped by her narrative agenda. Speaking from the present, the year 1986, she has taken it upon herself to sift through the past by providing a reading of the events and women who plunged the Wong family into lineal corruption. She is not an example of a detached narrative voice who professes to reveal an “accurate” historical account of her ancestors, but rather one who is conscious of the way in which the lens of the present can affect a particular representation of the past. By adopting a narrator so implicated in the stories about to be unfolded, Lee acknowledges that it is futile to make any claims of objectivity when any writing of the past will be subject to the interpretation and bias of the one who speaks. Over the course of the novel, not only does Kae speak about the lives of the Wong women, but she also speaks for them, acting as a ventriloquist who forces her relatives, dead and alive, to voice her own speculations about what they would say. Kae admits that she wields this representational power when she describes her ability to select what to include with her “throbbing cursor on a black-and-white computer screen” (Lee 179). Through the transparency of her narration, Kae recognises that her writing is as much about her identity struggles as it is about the lives of these matriarchs. Kae’s own inner anxieties are transposed onto her relatives, distorting them until their lack of focused presence comes to reflect the identity turmoil that she brings to the narrative through the move to reconstruct.

Kae’s subjectivity is linked to her ancestors’ because, although she does not at first realise it, she pursues a life trajectory that is as rigid as those of Mui Lan and Fong Mei. Her reading of these women will either cause her to escape or to perpetuate the binaries that constrain her because of the similarities in their situations. She is effectively reading herself when she examines the Wong women because both the older and younger generations respond to self-division by allowing prescriptions for behaviour to override experimental
solutions. The Wong women lead lives of generalities because they are paralysed by a suspicion that the unknown will envelop them whole once they dare to destabilise their worlds. Kae’s admission that, “I had managed one small glimpse into what it was like to release one’s being, to let it slip into the other realm where all the senses explode” (Lee 162), contains a note of wonder, but also one of unease at the prospect of escaping from conformity. Both Kae and her ancestors cling to this binary world because they need its definitional categories to insert stability into their lives. As Rosemary George contends, “binarisms are essential for the purposes of definition” (4), but as the Wong women demonstrate, they also impede re-definition. When Fong Mei and Mui Lan are located in the system, they are unable to appreciate how they have yielded to respectability in order to hide the fragmented aspects of their lives. As Leslie Bow claims, “to be outcast from any collective is to come face to face with its terms of inclusion, to confront the internal dynamics that render it coherent and stable to its members” (177). However, Kae and her ancestors never confront those internal dynamics because they fear the loss of control that accompanies looking beyond pre-established roles.

Kae’s connection with her relatives is intensified because she too follows a set of rules on how to run her life in order to insert predictability into an otherwise unstable existence. Like Mui Lan and Fong Mei, she remains with her husband and son because she dreads what will happen if she abandons them. This dread supports Leslie Bow’s assertion that “Asian American women’s literature eloquently attests to the stakes behind the maintenance of these lines, particularly for those who transgress them” (177). The potential loss of the woman’s good name and the security from her family appear so great that the stability of remaining within the collective becomes appealing. For instance, when Mui Lan’s Chinese identity becomes undone through the process of migration, she can only react to the alternatives before her with bewilderment. She has been so sheltered by tradition that when, “over the years, she became bodiless, or was it soulless” (Lee 26), she cannot negotiate these new affiliations to create her own sense of physicality. The desire for belonging draws her back to China, to a place where “there were at least customs and traditions which held people in check. There
was an established way of life" (Lee 27). She enforces Chinese social customs on the family because she fears she will lose all control once the Old Ways cease to have any meaning in her new Western setting. Kae similarly admits that she draws strength from established customs when she says, “I’ve come to expect the ceremonies and assemblies that come with families” (Lee 20). All three women, Mui Lan, Fong Mei, and Kae, are reluctant to let go of binaries because they believe that only the conventional can offer them normalcy. It is this connection between the generations that makes Kae search for a means of grappling with her own subjectivity in the occurrences of the past.

The Women Kae Represents: Domestic Isolation and the Intensification of Matriarchal Powers

Once Kae becomes conscious of the connection between her cultural divide and those of her ancestors, she begins the process of reconstructing and making sense of her family history. Kae turns her gaze on the Wong women, focusing on Mui Lan and Fong Mei's self-sacrifice to men eking out a marginal existence. However, she must first of all understand whom she is about to represent before she can proceed to judge them. The text is her reading of women who found themselves ripped from the familiarity of China to be transported to an alien environment populated by “a pool of single and poorly paid men” (Anderson 70) created by the Canadian government’s severe exclusionary practices. Kay Anderson underlines these women's isolation when she describes how “the enclave foundation was a critical locus for the renewal and preservation of White Vancouver’s conceptions of a Chinese race. The nexus of race and space operated in two senses: physical and cognitive” (29). Kae mentally transports herself back to the environs of Vancouver’s early Chinatown, conveying the sharp sense of suffocation that accompanied being locked into a geographic location that was shunned by mainstream Vancouver society. She speaks of “the rapidly diminishing chinese canadian community” (Lee 147) and “the numbing, claustrophobic world of single, chinese men” (221) to establish the sheer lack of space available for exploration. Because Kae's female ancestors were in a tightly knit ethnic circle, forced to “stick together” when “living on the frontier with
barbarians” (Lee 61), the potential for internal conflict was there. The members of the Wong domestic sphere, who were made to endure debilitating isolation, can be viewed as a microcosm for the Chinese community as a whole. The outside was hostile, a dark and shadowy world that offered the women little opportunity to escape from the strictures of the community’s watchful gaze. Kae surveys the historical conditions at the time, noting how the women had seemingly no recourse but to defer to tradition in the face of the threat of community expulsion.

In her examination of the past, Kae also tries to rationalise what motivates her female relatives to submit to their own oppression. The text is filled with negative judgement against these women, but it is also an exploration of how relocation to a new land affects patriarchal stability. The female characters come to stay within the patriarchal system because it provides them with the resources that they have been conditioned to manipulate to their best advantage. These women allow Chinese values to blind them from seeking self-fulfilment anywhere else outside of the Confucian family. For females of Vancouver’s early Chinatown, Confucian ideology already dictated that they remain confined to the domestic sphere, but their adherence to the old sources of power became even more pronounced when confronted by an environment divorced from the rest of society. While women’s lives were circumscribed by tradition and Western hostility, Judy Yung argues that “their important roles as producers (wage earners) and reproducers […] in a predominantly male and pervasively racist land elevated their value as scarce commodities and essential helpmates” (50). The surplus of men in the community as well as the scarcity of women of child bearing age (Anderson 141) meant that women like Mui Lan and Fong Mei had a certain amount of domestic leverage if they manipulated the assets granted to them. “That he had total authority would never be an issue for the patriarch” (Lee 30), but within the stifling confines of the home and family business, the matriarch was allowed to rule supreme in an intensification of her traditional powers over the household members. Kae recognises that so long as the Chinese people were “flattened like an insect on the limited horizons of Chinatown” (Lee 222), its women would continue to defer
to tradition for self-preservation. The women felt they had no choice but to abide by the status quo because the New World reduced the circles of authority until they were exceedingly minute.

After Kae examines the narrative's historical background, she turns to the dilemma facing the Wong women. Implicit in the text is the following question: will the Wong women choose to turn their backs on the Old ways and be branded traitors, or will they increase their stature by working within the intense conditions that existed at the time? In this case, the matriarch grasps for whatever power she can access by stooping to petty household stratagems. Mui Lan chooses to stay, scheming ways to impregnate her daughter-in-law to increase her prestige in the community. Fong Mei follows suit by using her children as artillery to gain her "enough omnipotence to vie for power and launch a full-fledged mutiny" (Lee 134). The pragmatism of the Wong women stems from a belief that power resides with the patriarchal structure and can only be increased by excelling at working within the system.

Kae locates her narrative in the domestic sphere in order to understand the implications of these characters' decisions to hold onto limited domestic authority and ignore more unconventional alternatives. Engaging in "the same malicious meddling that oppressed women excelled in" (Lee 189), the Wong women accept the limits assigned to them, eventually coming to defend the very parameters that hinder them from considering other "becomings." Kae sees that while the socially sanctioned labels of "mother" and "daughter-in-law" assign these women a degree of power and stability, they also ensure that their lives are always contingent on the caprices of others who are situated above them. She points out that as long as Fong Mei and Mui Lan accept their position in the family as fixed, their power will always be contingent on their relationship with the patriarch who wields all the "real" power. They may appear to possess considerable domestic might, but in fact, their acceptance of pre-established roles only intensifies their lack of control over their own lives. Kae understands the enormity of this acceptance when she says, "women, whose beauty and truth were bartered
away, could only be mirrored, hand-held by husbands and men” (Lee 189). Instead of naming
themselves in the deterritorialised zone where ethnicity, gender, and class collide and
intermingle, these women let themselves be “hand-held” by men to validate their existences.

The decision under Kae’s narrative scrutiny becomes more complex once she
understands the price these women have to pay to stay protected. For example, while Mui Lan
is allowed to rule supreme in the “ivory sphere” (Lee 163) of domesticity, she remains an
intermediary who channels her husband’s power to the rest of the household. She must accept
that Gwei Chang’s claim over her renders him slightly more fortunate because both racism and
the dictates of patriarchy do not disadvantage him. Elaine Kim argues that “no matter how
effeminate the Asian man’s face is to the outside world, the visage with which the Asian
woman is confronted is most definitely male” (80). Gwei Chang and Choy Fuk, although
emasculated by the hostility of White society, can still invoke Chinese tradition if they wish to
override their wives’ wishes to be more than just helpmates. Mui Lan defines this captivity
when she writes that “she was simply the mother of Gwei Chang’s only son. Stamped on her
entry papers: ‘A merchant’s wife.’ A wife in name only, she relied heavily on him for her
identity in this land” (Lee 29). Mui Lan comes to see that patriarchy may provide her with a
concrete way of labelling herself, but it makes her individuality contingent on her relation to
her son and husband. Shirley Lim proposes that “to be a free woman, such a woman must be a
‘no name woman,’ that is, outcast from her ethnic community” (580). This woman must be
willing to cast off the protective guise of her husband’s name and walk alone amidst many
identity categories. However, Mui Lan can never bring herself to leave her husband’s
household or his name. After examining her grandmother’s situation, Kae understands that
Mui Lan relinquished her chance to form a self-determined identity for the satisfaction of
complying with convention.
Negotiating the West/East, Male/Female Divide through the Act of Construction

Once the Wong women make their decision to submit to Chinese tradition, Kae is pressured by both her ethnicity and her feminism to arrive at a single reading of their conformity. She subscribes to the belief that she can only navigate her own identity if she either champions or denounces her ancestors' actions. Kae is torn between a need to castigate the Wong women for their cowardice in sanctioning the oppression of their sex, and the knowledge that their actions were simply the activation of a survival impulse in the midst of very difficult social conditions. The narrator's location between tradition and feminism makes it difficult for her to align herself with one side of the binary without doing so at the expense of another fundamental part of her identity. A denouncement of patriarchy in the name of feminist principles could be construed as a criticism of Chineseness itself and leave Kae open to accusations of ethnic betrayal. Similarly, a defence of her Chinese heritage could be interpreted as a celebration of the subservience of women to the detriment of her supposed feminist stance. While King-Kok Cheung asserts that “women of color should not have to undergo a self-division resulting from having to choose between female and ethnic identities” (246), as long as binary thinking prevails, this feeling of division will continue to exist.

Kae must negotiate identity categories that presume exclusive membership and pressure her to provide readings of the past that cohere to only one particular worldview. Feminism is often viewed as the progressive part of the binary equation because of its supposed emphasis on freedom, passion, and individuality while Chinese tradition is relegated to inferiority due to its associations with patriarchy and collective identity. As Shirley Lim argues, “for the woman writer whose ethnic community is patriarchal, ethnic and feminist values and identities must inevitably intersect in potentially uneasy, conflicting, or violent ways” (579). Kae recognises this uneasy collision between her Chinese roots and her feminist values when she questions her reluctant denunciation of Mui Lan: “Why do I need to indict her” (Lee 31)? King-Kok Cheung proposes that Chinese Americans must “work toward notions of gender and ethnicity that are
nonhierarchical, nonbinary, and nonprescriptive; that can embrace tensions rather than divisions” (246). Despite this call to bring about overlapping affiliations, Kae believes not only that she must make a choice between her Chineseness and her feminism, but also that she must assign blame to the women for their decisions.

Kae must confront this desire to align with feminism, but her efforts to singularise her characters are further complicated by the tendency to equate the East with backward thinking that obstructs Western progress. Rey Chow analyses how China is marginalised by Western spectators who “fantasize that other culture in terms of a timeless ‘before’” (7). She continues that, “China, being ‘essentially’ different, can only be the ‘woman’ whose materiality/corporeality becomes the sign of her repression” (8). This linkage forms a double binary bind in that China is equated with both the feminine and the regressive. The voyage from China to Canada becomes reduced to a journey from antiquity with its patriarchal holdovers to modernity with its promise of unhindered self-actualisation. The matriarch becomes the cultural protectionist who holds the household captive in a system that violates supposed Western rights such as independence and freedom. The Western gaze would classify Mui Lan as the overbearing traditionalist who prevents her daughter-in-law from considering any newfangled Canadian values. This gaze would focus on Mui Lan screaming at Fong Mei, “And don’t believe for a moment, you foul female stench, with your modern-day thinking about rights and freedom—ah that you’re too good for this bargain” (Lee 63) and argue that she is undermining supposed Western idealism. Mui Lan’s words remind Fong Mei, and also Kae herself, of the presence of two contrasting modes of existence, one that asks for submission and the other that offers empowerment in femininity.

Kae’s internal conflict can be better understand by considering Sau-ling Wong use of the figures “Necessity” and “Extravagance” when she works through the East/West cultural dichotomy. As two unifying rhetorical principles in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, “Necessity” represents survival, hard work, and conservatism while the other, “Extravagance” represents excess, emotional expressiveness, and impulse. These two opposite
tendencies, which can coexist in Asian culture, have the potential to further constrict the Asian American if “Necessity” becomes associated with being “Asian,” and “Extravagance” becomes synonymous with being “Western” (Wong 1993: 181). Consequently, the Wong women’s perceived need to quell their desires for sexual and emotional fulfilment in favour of a conservative family life could be read as Chinese Necessity’s suppression of the more Western Extravagant impulses of her grandmother. Western Extravagance pressures Kae to view Asian tradition as restrictive and emotionally empty compared to what the West can offer her. If Kae decides to accept this binary arrangement between West/East, she will be effectively placing her Chinese heritage below that of her Canadian upbringing. The Wong women’s outward obedience to the Chinese family would then become doubly suspect as Western feminism would become a rigid arbiter of what is praiseworthy in others.

Kae gives in to the pressures of Western feminism when she judges her female ancestors harshly. She forces herself to make a choice to end her self-division, thereby perpetuating her own entrapment in a binary world. The complexity of the narrator’s identity conflict leads her to create portrayals of her community that are sometimes less than flattering. The text is influenced by Kae’s feminism that causes her ancestors, especially the men, to be reduced by the anger that she feels for the historical and social context in which the women find themselves. The degraded state of the men is as much a comment on the illogical nature of patriarchy, as it is a critique of the effect that racism had on Chinatown gender relations.

The novel has come under academic fire by such critics as Maria Ng who assert that the novel adheres too strictly to White pre-conceptions of Chinatown society. The text’s portrayals of the past are criticised for portraits of Chinese masculinity that supposedly take advantage of what David Li refers to as the “persistent performative power of an orientalist epistemology” (75). Referring to the dangers of engaging in Orientalism, Ng proposes that this text engages in a type of cultural “Othering” whereby the Chinese community remains subject to the rigidity of binary categories that reduce it to a handful of derogatory features. She asserts that, “apparently without a trace of irony, Sky Lee recreates Chinatown as a gambling den and
Chinese men as filthy fanatical gamblers lacking refinement. [...] As a Chinese Canadian reader, I balk at these scenes and stereotypical representations” (167).

Ng unfairly labels Lee as a cultural collaborator because she fails to probe the cause of these distortions. Contrary to Ng’s assertions, I would argue that these contentious depictions are evidence of a narrator who feels that she needs to side with her feminine ancestors when she is evaluating the patriarchal structure that keeps them bound. Kae hints that the men are equally bound, but can only see the majority of the bachelor men as an anonymous mass that threatens her female characters. Elaine Kim talks of how, “the placement of men in secondary roles except insofar as they obstruct the pursuit of a self-determined identity for the women is in keeping with the modern feminist call for the examination of female self and subjectivity” (70). Her comment emphasises the tendency for female writers to neglect their male characters in favour of a more studied exploration of the female response to the immigrant life. The men never garner much of the narrative focus because Kae writes from the perspective of the Wong women who can only view with suspicion the men of the Chinatown community. In addition, the sharp gender division in the narrative reflects the institutional and societal racism that caused the Chinese people to turn on themselves and live within the construct fashioned by the White community. The misconstrued version of Chinese manhood stems from the “stone silence” (Lee 27) that pervaded the community, but more importantly, it comes from the narrator’s alignment with feminism that pressures her to “Other” the men.

When Kae privileges feminism over her ethnic roots, she resorts to blaming the matriarch for the family’s woes. While Kae grants her great-grandmother a certain degree of aggressive might, noting that “Mui Lan had gripped the family fortune with an iron fist” (Lee 168), she hands her empty agency by indicating that the consolidation of her powers was an act of desperation, not rebellion against an established order. Kae depicts Fong Mei and Mui Lan in such a way that they are personified character types, reduced to tracing the paths of generations of women who are too afraid to embrace their desire for freedom. She does not read these women as heroic figures, but instead sees them as “pathetic” (Lee 31) creatures who
cling to the mechanisms of their own subjugation until they are warped by their own scheming. Kae implies that these were crimes of consent because the Wong women not only choose to live according to others’ desires, but also betray their sex by forcing these same restrictions on the next generation. Their cowardice is seen as a failure to live up to the expectations that the Western feminist raconteur places on the women of the past. As Leslie Bow states, “In Asian American women’s writing, [the concept of gender equality] surfaces through the idea that women have the right to make choices about their lives. The subsequent drama, then, lies in whether or not the prefeminist woman (or her daughter) will come to recognize and claim these rights” (112). Bow’s comments indicate that the Wong women are criticised simply for being prefeminist women who are not aware of gender equality rights. It is only inevitable that Kae will be disappointed by the outcome of the “subsequent drama” if she uses feminist standards to judge the decisions of her prefeminist ancestors. Nevertheless, she continues to use these standards to evaluate these women. This causes her to unfairly force Fong Mei to admit that it was a weakness of will, and not a lack of alternatives, that caused her to submit to the demands of the family and place her life in others’ hands.

By placing her feminism at the forefront, Kae sacrifices her female relatives and forces them to beg for forgiveness for being so cowardly as to leave convention intact. Fong Mei’s misgivings of her own decisions stem from Kae’s reinterpretation of her ancestors’ motives according to feminist principles even if it means awakening the dead. In the section entitled “Feeding the Dead,” Kae assumes the voice of her grandmother who comes to what Leslie Bow calls, “a belated feminist regret” (105) of her own “capitulation to the status quo” (ibid). Kae judges her characters for not choosing other alternatives because she asserts that the choice was always there even if they were only dimly conscious of its existence. According to Kae, the women are guilty of failing to experiment with identity configurations beyond the boundaries of home, family, and the Chinatown community. She censures her relatives for their choices, claiming that it is her “privilege to assign blame” (Lee 32) because of her narrative position. Fong Mei is made to admit, “I was given the rare opportunity to claim [my children] for myself,
but I sold them, each and every one, for property and respectability” (Lee 189). Kae’s feminism really emerges as a dominant force in the narrative when she criticises her ancestors for forfeiting their chances of escape when they were on the verge of realising other possibilities. The text contends that the Wong women cannot use their own blindness or their own comfort in the familiar as an excuse for their loss of agency. Kae has managed to achieve stability for herself, but only by reducing her ancestors to women who were too afraid to claim the rights that her feminism places above tradition.

Sacrificing the Wong Women: Does Kae Truly Escape Identity Constriction?

Kae’s refusal to leave her relatives in a state of disunity in which they are neither adhering to Chinese tradition nor feminist ideology results in characters who are distorted by her forced reading. She tries to provide a narrative voice that coheres to one version of self, and lands up punishing her ancestors in the process. Their small domestic space cannot contain such conflict and the Wong women subsequently become “females climbing all over each other, all suffocating each other” (Lee 177) in their efforts to move within the impasse. The “whining, weeping women” (95) and the turmoil that pervade the Wong house result from Kae’s attempts to assert a monologic voice into the narrative. The Wong women eventually become so warped by this narrative strategy that they are reduced to little more than “women wailing around a timeless circular table” (187), unable to break out of the weight of Kae’s disapproval.

Kae sees this sacrifice as a necessary step in her own escape from binary identity politics. Mari Peepre has examined the depictions of the Wong women and agrees with Kae, asserting that diasporic writers “work out a literary expression of the conflict and confusion by demonizing the mother figure” (81) “before they can become fully integrated individuals” (87). She argues that while the narrators sympathise with the matriarch’s suffering, they still “project some of the fear and anger they experience back onto the mother-figure as an iconic expression of homeland” (82). There is certainly a degree of blame assigned to Mui Lan and
Fong Mei in the text, and while Kae does not propose that these characters are intrinsically "demonic," she does impose her feminist agenda on them. Furthermore, Peepre's comments reflect Kae's own beliefs when Peepre proposes that "this act [of demonising the mother] then liberates the daughter to create her own cross-cultural identity" (90). Both Peepre and Kae make the questionable supposition that by placing her ancestors within the confines of her Western anger, the narrator can embrace her own contradictory position. Kae gives evidence of this belief when she believes she is "as free as my bathroom, ma chère" (Lee 211) after she has trapped the past in a negative reading. Her confidence emerges from a misconception that she can accept her own ambivalent subjectivity after she has refused to deal with the complexity of the past.

Lee's narrator assumes that she is free of binaries when she reduces her ancestors' identity conflicts to a denunciatory feminist reading. However, she does not see that she must confront the tensions of her family history before she can reconfigure her own identity. The novel is Kae's process of deciding how to recognise that the connection of her life with her ancestors' is an undeniable part of her subjectivity. Her unforgiving treatment of characters who disappoint her feminist expectations indicates that the transition towards overlapping identity affiliations is still ongoing. Until Kae is comfortable with straddling multiple identity categories, she will continue to find it difficult to break out of a binary world.

The only other Wong woman who attempts to break out of the rigid family environment, Suzanne, demonstrates that caution is necessary for anyone who intends to minimise the risk of failure. Unlike her sister Beatrice, Suzanne rails against the strictures of her family and ethnicity, screaming, "I want out! Out! For God's sake, let me out" (Lee 177)! Unable to withstand the intensity of being between too many identity groups, she hungers for Morgan's "freedom" (Lee 173) which consists of a blind escape from the past. Her hysteria is reminiscent of the behaviour of the other Wong women, but unlike them, she chooses to leave the security of the familiar without even a backward glance. Her baby is born malformed, a product not only of incest, but also of its mother's aborted attempt to ignore the identity
conflicts that plague her. The baby cannot signal a future for the Wong family nor a successful act of becoming, but can only teach Kae of the importance of confronting the past with all its inconsistencies. R. Radhakrishnan argues that “it is all too easy to want to forget the past and forfeit community in the name of the ‘free individual’” (207), but cautions against focusing on the present at the expense of an understanding of one’s history. Suzanne’s eventual suicide supports Radhakrishnan’s warning of the potentially damaging consequences of ignoring the past. Moreover, the text emphasises that maintaining membership in many identity categories is extremely difficult if an individual like Suzanne is not strong enough to balance more than one allegiance at a time.

Donald Goellnicht, in his article on the novel, suggests that “suicide in Canada/America becomes for [Asian American] communities a trope of the failure to negotiate hybrid subjectivities” (2000: 322). Consequently, Suzanne’s death represents what Kae must avoid doing if she wishes to escape from the inflexibility of both her race and gender categories. Kae manages not to meet the same fate as her aunt, claiming that she has succeeded in negotiating hybrid subjectivities. Lee concludes in a way that seems to indicate that her narrator has solved the identity conflicts that have plagued the Wong women thus far in the novel. Kae declares, “I am the resolution to the story” (Lee 209), claiming that “after three generations of struggle, the daughters are free” (ibid). She believes that she can move beyond her ancestors’ identity conflicts in order to bring about resolution in a linear and predictable fashion. While Suzanne’s death represents, as Goellnicht argues, “the psychological division and displacement shared by all Chinese Canadians” (2000: 316), Kae contends that she represents a new beginning for the Chinese Canadian community. Kae is confident that she will not go “splat” (Lee 215) like her aunt because she has disconnected herself from the mistakes of the past. Her statements imply that it is acceptable, if not inevitable, that she be free to pursue her desires once the previous generations have been sacrificed to the problematics of identity constraints.
The evidence Lee uses to support her narrator's "freedom" is Kae's decision to be a writer and to live with Hermia away from her husband and child. However, the suddenness of Kae's exit to Hong Kong makes the ending contrived, as though her departure is more of an escape, than an actual solution to the problems of binary thinking. When Hermia offers her the chance to "LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER" (Lee 216), Kae drops all her responsibilities in Canada and takes the next plane to join her friend. Because Kae's new life choices are "unconventional" compared to those of her old life, the novel's conclusion indicates that Kae has saved herself from being another Suzie Wong. Graham Huggan, in his article on the novel, buys into this interpretation, arguing that romance can "provide an outlet for the liberation of women's desire, a means of reclaiming self-identity through the fulfilment of romantic fantasy" (39). Huggan contends that Lee uses romance "as a means of recuperating and memorializing an ancestral past, while remaining free to fashioning a different, as yet indeterminate, future" (36). Romance may sound liberating, but Huggan fails to mention that it only provides Kae with a type of pseudo-freedom, instead of the self-awareness necessary to negotiate multiple trajectories. While wild abandon is exciting, it seems too reminiscent of the lack of caution that characterised Suzanne's relationship with Morgan. Perhaps Kae may meet more success, but this is far from certain. She may have opted to leave heterosexuality and investment banking, but this does not necessarily mean that she has escaped binary thinking. Her new identity categories, "writer" and "lesbian," although different, could be equally as constraining as her old labels if she chooses to adhere to their membership rules. As long as she feels pressured to live up to group expectations, Kae will never find the exit that she desperately wants. It remains to be seen whether she will live her new desires as singular or whether her decision to go to Hong Kong will only be a shift from one general category to another.

Consequently, the ending represents a movement to give precedence to the desires for new belongings outside of normative paths, but it is by no means a resolution to the struggles of the daughters. Rather than seeking a definitive conclusion, Lee hints that Kae is still
searching for a way to leave the conflicts of the past in all their jarring dissonance. Kae may now be a writer and be with Hermia, but she still has succumbed to choosing between her feminism and her Chinese culture. Kae has just levelled feminist judgements at her ancestors at the expense of her Chinese heritage, and still thinks that she has liberated herself. However, because she confines the Wong women to a single descriptive feature, namely their lack of feminism, she fails to embrace her own complex subjectivity. As long as the past is still subject to the divisiveness of binary tensions, the novel continues to impose artificial resolution and does not allow for coexisting identity categories.

Conclusion:

Lee’s text serves as an example of how Chinese Canadian women writers undergo self-division as they work with various “belongings” that are in competition with each other. She examines the difficulties of confronting multiple subjectivities by creating a narrator who must reconstruct her family history in an exploration of self. Kae examines the past, expecting to find the legitimacy that has hitherto stabilised her life, but instead she finds a family history warped by incestuous liaisons and by the silence used to maintain a surface of normalcy. Kae must reconstruct female ancestors who are trapped in a cultural divide and forced to conform to patriarchy for the sake of stability. Kae’s inability to balance her feminist ideology with her respect for Chinese tradition results in a reading that is strained by competing pressures. Her privileging of feminism over Chineseness when evaluating the Wong women’s acquiescence to a patriarchal system indicates that she has not come to terms with the possibility of subscribing to more than one allegiance simultaneously. Kae expects to find liberation after reconstructing the past, but this liberation can only be achieved once she sees that feminism and Chineseness can coexist even in seeming conflict. She must not give in to the pressures to choose one reading of the past if she wishes to embrace overlapping identity categories. The ambivalence and hysteria that result from her narrative choices are signs of a novel in flux, a novel that sacrifices the matriarch as it struggles to find productive potential in that in-between zone.
The next chapter, which turns to Choy's *The Jade Peony*, will examine how Lee is not alone in her discomfort with relegating the matriarch to the past for the sake of stability. However, this time, it is the children from the past who will have the opportunity to speak.
Wayson Choy probes the claustrophobia of being in the in-between space by writing of a Chinese Canadian family living under the heightened racial and national consciousness of Vancouver in the 1930s and 40s. A central character of the text is Poh-Poh, the matriarchal figure who is never granted a voice herself, but is seen through the eyes of three of her grandchildren as they combat their personal identity crises. Poh-Poh, as the family's representative of the Old Ways, takes it upon herself to remind her Canadian-born grandchildren of their Chinese heritage. Although emotionally connected to the children's ethnic selves, the Old One's adherence to exclusive Chineseness is perceived as a hindrance to their pursuit of new "progressive" identities in the larger Canadian society. Choy's decision to have the children put Poh-Poh aside to be locked away amongst their other childhood memories may seem appropriate, but it has an element of the bittersweet. While the text explores the detrimental effects of categories of nationhood, its treatment of the grandmother recognises that the Old Ways must inevitably give way to the New if the children are to survive amongst non-Chinatown influences. I propose that the note of regret in Poh-Poh's eventual demise is the children's rebellion against binary thinking, a rebellion that yearns for a way for the Old Ways to exist alongside the New, but is at a loss as to what it could be.

**Poh-Poh as a Representative and Enforcer of the Old Ways**

The object of the children's gaze, Poh-Poh, is referred to as the Old One in the family, a sign of respect for her status as elder, but also a reference to what she represents to the household: Old Ways, tradition, heritage, China, the motherland. These associations are tied up with her role as the Confucian maternal figure whose generative powers can be channelled towards being a creator of cultural value. As the shaping cultural force of the family, Poh-Poh urges the family to take a "simple, orderly" (Choy 14) approach to identity to avoid the problems of a hyphenated existence. "We are all Chinese" (Choy 147), she unequivocally
states when the family is in the midst of debating the merits of the Old and New Ways.
Because she is surrounded by “children with no Old China history in [their] brains” (Choy 135), Poh-Poh assumes the task of promoting Chineseness to combat the effect that their Western upbringing has on their cultural selves. She cackles with glee, commanding her grandsons to “kill more” (Choy 15) when they are fighting against the enemies of free China, and scolds the children when they want to deny their ancestral roots. These actions emphasise how Poh-Poh offers herself as way for the children to access the Chinese culture that is denied them by Western society. Her pride in her Chinese roots, and her refusal to accept the children as anything but Chinese mark her attempt to instil a sense of motherland in them.

Poh-Poh is disturbed by the children’s cultural uncertainty because for her, being Chinese is not a halfway venture, but something essential that must be lived up to according to her rules of belonging. “‘You not Canada, Liang,’ she said majestically, ‘you China.’” (Choy 37). Poh-Poh proposes that the children can never engage in an act of becoming “other” or becoming “Canadian,” because not only is it ridiculous for them to have these desires, but it is also impossible for them to forget what they ultimately “are.” Such Canadianising would transform them into substandard Chinese individuals who are unwilling to fulfil their familial and racial responsibilities. Thus, the children’s claim to the title “Chinese” is compromised once they fail to meet her qualifications of what is “good” Chinese behaviour and what is simply “stupid foolish” (Choy 40). Because the children desire to forget their ethnic roots, Poh-Poh considers it her duty to keep them grounded in their Chinese background.

In their small Chinatown home, Poh-Poh succeeds in creating this space for the perpetuation of the Old World by capitalising on their isolation from the rest of Vancouver. She reinforces binary thinking by forcing the children to either subscribe to her definition of their Chinese heritage or be labelled a “no no – no brain” (Choy 135) cultural outsider. Poh-Poh’s ability to survive and fend off cultural invasions provides the children with a stable centre amidst the turmoil of living a liminal existence and the “troubling talk about old and new ways” (Choy 147). The family temporarily defers to her out of the belief that the
Christopher Lee examines “Chineseness” in the novel, arguing that “a sense of Chineseness gave the community a sense of cohesion, but ethnicity was also used to ensure conformity and unity” (18). Therefore, Poh-Poh’s power as the Old One allows the family to present a united front provided that they conform to her sense of Chineseness. This is because she represents the Old Order which, although deemed slightly antiquated, conjures up images of a cohesive sense of nation that the family lacks in their day-to-day lives in Vancouver.

While the matriarchal figure appears to be the embodiment of “authentic” tradition, the text reveals that Poh-Poh’s conception of Chinese identity is a construction that she uses to manipulate the power she wields over the family. Her relocation to Canada has allowed her to access a new system of meaning in which mobility is possible for a woman who was relegated to the servant ranks in China to be “owned” (Choy 15) and mistreated by wealthy Chinese mistresses. Poh-Poh has taken advantage of the fact that the Chinese social hierarchy has not been transplanted intact, but has been destabilised by the movement from one locale to another. Amy Ling writes that “for some people whom time has distanced from their ancestral homeland, memory has become amber-tinted by nostalgia and the landscapes that they paint in this condition reflect more the imagination of the artists than the reality of the land being depicted” (97). Poh-Poh is one of those people. She uses her skills as imaginative storyteller to reconstruct new representations of her ancestral Chinese culture and her power as family elder to enforce them until they are accepted by the family as fixed. “Poh-Poh being one of the few elder women left in Vancouver took pleasure in her status and became the arbitrator of the old ways. Poh-Poh insisted we simplify our kinship terms in Canada” (Choy 14). Poh-Poh is not an individual who teaches her children a definitive conception of ethnicity, but is rather an “arbitrator” of what are appropriate Chinese modes of acting and speaking. The family can only shake their heads and resign themselves to the idea that “that was the order of things in China” (Choy 14). Because the family is unable to see that Poh-Poh is not the static figure she
claims to be, they see her talk of the Old Ways as a reflection of Chinese “reality” as opposed to
careful construction on her part.

The children who depict Poh-Poh are especially unable to see this cultural construction.
To them, Poh-Poh is not an advocate of fluid identity, but a figure who will not allow them
ever to forget that they are Chinese. As Christopher Lee proposes, “ethnicity acts as a
disciplinary tool that mediates the relationship between the individual and the power elite, and
is eventually assumed to be a force of itself; Chineseness is thus regarded as a fixed, supposedly
independent, entity” (21). In this case, the children view Poh-Poh’s Chineseness as a
disciplinary tool that punishes them if they dare to express any non-normative desires. They
perceive the matriarch as a traditionalist who resists assimilating into Canadian society in
order to maintain a position of power and authority in the family. She derives power from her
role of mother-in-law according to Confucian ideology, but her refusal to accept the relevance
of outside society is seen as a threat to the children’s desires for mainstream integration.

This unwillingness to accept the family’s wish to enter larger Canadian society leads her
to scold the children into being more Chinese. She indoctrinates the children with statements
like “Old way, best way” (Choy 162) that call into question their loyalty to their Chinese
heritage if they are foolish enough to adopt the New Ways. Because the family has been
tainted by outside influences, she has taken on what Patricia Chu defines as the immigrant
mother’s “burden of voicing and attempting to enforce the American-born youth’s filial
obligations or more broadly, his or her family responsibilities” (43). Poh-Poh assumes full
responsibility for this cultural indoctrination, pushing Stepmother to the side to avoid any
competing versions of their ethnicity. As long as the children still feel some connection to Poh-
Poh, they will be bombarded by her commands to remain within the Chineseness that serves as
her locus of value.
The central dilemma of the text then becomes finding a way of reading this matriarchal figure who, though beloved, is questioned for her cultural rigidity. Choy chooses as his narrators the grandchildren who temporarily share Poh-Poh’s world even as they are drawn by the promise of approval from White society. His selection of children and the timing of their narration indicate his intent to explore their ambivalent feelings about the place of Chineseness in Canada. Christopher Lee speaks of how Sekky represents “the vulnerable and innocent child who is in the process of being formed by (among other things) the discourse of ethnicity” (19), but this statement applies equally to the other narrators. Childhood is isolated as a time conducive to the influence of the matriarch, not only because it consists of the formative years for “the discourse of ethnicity,” but also because it is a time when children are shielded by the domestic sphere.

Choy therefore picks children who are in the in-between space, still able to be emotionally captured by Poh-Poh’s mythical stories, but becoming aware that there is another life outside of her Chinatown world. The adults are overlooked as narrators because they are already hardened in their ethnic loyalties, and are more resistant to negotiating the various calls for belonging that are simultaneously at play. Similarly, Kiam is silent in the novel because he “only half-listened, if at all, to any of her tales” (Choy 99) and would provide the text with a denouncement of the grandmother’s Old Ways. Patricia Chu describes the Western tendency to depict “the controlling, ever present, Asian immigrant mother whose narrative function apparently is to retard the American socialization of the Asian American children by attempting to make them conform to inappropriate ideas of Asianness” (54). Kiam’s assertion that “he did not want to grow up taking in too much of what he considered the Old One’s superstitions about fate and jealous gods” (Choy 109) mirrors this Western “Othering” of the matriarch. On the other hand, the other children’s constructions of their grandmother reveal that they are torn by self-division that places their wish to believe in Chineseness in direct
opposition to the shame that accompanies this racial category. Choy pushes this uncertainty as far as it goes, before moving onto another child when his current narrator outgrows Poh-Poh and joins Western rationality and progress. The interplay between their love for their grandmother and their discomfort with her glaringly “ethnic” traits creates a narrative that speaks to that in-between subject position. Liang, Jung, and Sekky are narrators who regret the inevitable disconnection when Poh-Poh’s stories become nothing more than fairytales that cease to shape their realities.

The children experience difficulty representing their grandmother because they are torn between two cultural systems. Despite their desire to join Vancouver’s White community, the children are imaginatively stimulated by the world that Poh-Poh constructs through her myths, Chinese sayings, and childhood remembrances. The children are cast into a cultural space apart from their daily existences where it is possible to believe in a China that is eternal and all powerful: “There were in Grandmother’s stories, always, wild storms and parting clouds, thunder and after much labour, mountains that split apart” (Choy 21). Her stories of the “Monkey King” and her days as a household servant are no different; both are narratives that she uses to construct a particular image of Chinese culture to children who are still willing to learn from her teachings. The tales posit a social order based on a collective in which loyalty to family and to the Chinese deities precedes any new ideologies that preach scientific analysis or Western reason. The children may resent the certainty of Poh-Poh’s words, but they also derive comfort from being protected from the cultural ambiguities that exist outside her constructed idea of China.

The children want to write positively of Poh-Poh’s world because of their desire to inhabit it. For them, Chinensisness becomes an entity utterly apart from Canadian culture that can only be accessed if the children submit to Poh-Poh’s authority as a storyteller. Choy implies that the children have an emotional bond to her understanding of the Old Ways because their hearts secretly whisper, “Teach me” (Choy 34) whenever she is near. While they are young and relatively untouched by the outside world, the children believe in these stories
to such an extent that fiction shapes reality, but as they grow older they begin to doubt the veracity of her claims. Nevertheless, while they are between the borders of childhood and adulthood, of China and Canada, the children view the matriarch as an important member of the household whose stories reflect their cultural belonging. Jung says that he “still belonged with Poh-Poh, belonged to her stories and her ghosts” (Choy 125), just before his turn as narrator comes to a close and Sekky assumes the narrative voice. Although with maturity the family may pragmatically align themselves with Western ideology, a part of them is always attracted to the Chinese tradition that Poh-Poh advocates.

However, this emotional bond that sustains the immediacy of the relationship between the children and their grandmother is compromised by their need to be validated by White society. This hunger for validation pressures the children to portray Poh-Poh in a way that satisfies the demands of their White neighbours. While they may be imaginatively connected to their grandmother, they couch these desires for assimilation in terms of rationality and progress. R. Radhakrishnan discusses how the children’s reasons for assimilation are not unusual, arguing that “immigrants suppress ethnicity in the name of pragmatism and opportunism. To be successful in the New World, they must actively assimilate and, therefore, hide their distinct ethnicity” (204). This need to “actively assimilate” and lose their Chinese roots is fulfilled by questioning the legitimacy of the matriarch’s claims until the claims are reduced to nothing more than “Old China nonsense” (Choy 109). The New World is designated as “the real world” (Choy 192) while Poh-Poh’s Old World is a cultural holdover, excusable only when indulged in by elderly women and children. For example, Kiam is “indifferent” (Choy 99) to Poh-Poh’s tales because “he was to step into the Father’s shoes and learn sensible, grown-up things from Father and Third Uncle. Kiam spent more time with the men, and Liang, Sekky and [Jung] spent more time with Stepmother and Grandmother” (ibid). This quote illustrates how the children are permitted to be influenced by Poh-Poh’s teachings only when they are young and still not “sensible.” The family reduces her tales to fantasy,
unable to see that the logic assigned to Western thinking is being deployed to shame them into giving up their Chinese side.

Kiam's role as the oldest son is to convince the novel's narrators to adopt a Western perspective in their depiction of Poh-Poh. He undermines the Old One's authority by arguing that the children will only progress if they listen to reason and give up their childish fancies and with them, Poh-Poh herself: “First Brother Kiam always argued that Poh-Poh’s stories were just stories, nothing more” (Choy 28). He argues that these stories stand in the way of “a scientific, logical world” (Choy 147) that the older men in the family have decided are “the new ways” (Choy 124) that will help the children to succeed in their Western surroundings. In doing so, Kiam not only sets up the binary between East and West, but he also links the East with regressive behaviour and the West with progression and modernity. Chinese culture is denounced to such an extent that progress and logic become the exclusive property of the West that can only be attained through total assimilation. While the family wants to respect Poh-Poh’s place in the family, they are drawn by this promise of acceptance by the Canadian nation. Donald Goellnicht talks of this “attempt at balance between the old ‘mother tongue/culture’ [...] and the new fatherland (Canada and the United States respectively)” (1991: 122). The narrators, although hesitant to abandon the mother culture for the dominant Canadian fatherland, are tempted to adopt the “truth” as laid out for them by mainstream society. This reordering of their cultural identities would require them to submit to their desires to disown their Chinese heritage and take on another.

The children begin to see the logic of Kiam’s advice and begin their movement away from their Chinese heritage. The issue of naming, of cultural alignment based on linguistic signs, becomes crucial to the children’s attempts to break out of Poh-Poh’s world and move into “normal” society. English becomes a means for these children to lose themselves in a new cultural identity that lacks the complexities of their in-between position. Sekky says, “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" (Choy 134), explicitly linking his adoption of English with his wish to literally become "White." Sekky uses the simplicity of the English language and its normative connotations as an escape from the uncertainty of being Chinese Canadian. Christopher Lee discusses how this "misnaming is therefore an act that suggests a potentially rebellious refusal to submit to the community's social standards. Wittingly or not, Sekky casts himself as a dissenting subject" (20). While Sekky does rebel against the strictures of the discourse of Chineseness, this is not necessarily a positive act that frees him from community social standards.

Instead, by invoking the other side of the binary, Sekky is substituting one ethnicity for another, and one community's rules of belonging for another's. Moreover, his privileging of English over Chinese only perpetuates the binary distinctions between the two languages and the tendency to believe that becoming "White" is superior to remaining "Chinese." In lieu of dealing with the uncertainty of being Chinese Canadian, Sekky wants to master a language that will cut off any inappropriate cultural associations and designate him a fully functioning member of White society. Because the Chinese language marks its speakers as "Other," it must be translated into English in order to be made more acceptable to White Canadians. Kiam's decision to call himself "Ken," the renaming of the turtle to "King George," and Jenny's belief that "we should all have real English names" (Choy 124) come from an understanding that the Chinese language only belongs within the confines of the cultural ghetto and should not circulate openly outside Chinatown. Because the complexities of the Chinese language elude the children's Chinese Canadian understandings, they respond by assuming a position of linguistic dominance over the motherland.

The move to erase all Old linguistic memories can be read as the children's attempt to forget Poh-Poh's version of their ethnicity. Donald Goellnicht articulates this process when he describes how the Chinese American daughter "consciously rejects [her mother's Chinese stories], to unpack the heritage that her mother had crammed into her head, to cut off her 'mother tongue'" (1991: 127). This rejection of the children's Chinese heritage begins when they commence to build newly assimilated identities that fall outside of the parameters...
established by Poh-Poh. The Old One becomes a figure who hinders the children in their pursuit of self-fulfilment when she continually reminds them of the unfeasibility of their acts of becoming. She grounds the children in their Chinese lineage, shattering Liang’s “movie-star daydreams” (Choy 37) when she tells her she is “mo yung – useless” (Choy 32) and asks, “How can one China girl be Shirlee Tem-po-laW” (Choy 34)? Poh-Poh, who shuns the Anglophone mainstream, cannot understand why her grandchildren persist in such delusional activities. Liang struggles to defy Poh-Poh’s impositions by embracing the American icon, Shirley Temple, whose blond hair and blue eyes incite the type of mainstream adoration that Liang feels she lacks in her current form. Increasingly, she comes to believe that her dreams to be beautiful according to White standards can only be realised by escaping from the Old One’s grasp.

The more Poh-Poh tries to keep the children tied to their Chinatown surroundings, the more they struggle to construct their own versions of reality, ones in which they are capable of metamorphosing into Hollywood stars or wild west cowboys. Their desire for assimilation is so pronounced that the children can only see their own race through White eyes. Sheng-mei Ma examines this tendency, arguing that “considering themselves, thus, inferior or nonmainstream, many [Chinese Americans] seek to assimilate by adopting the white gaze and by projecting onto Chinese and Chinese immigrants Orientalist - often racist – stereotypes” (25). Consequently, even if the children show an interest in becoming Chinese, it is only in becoming the exoticised “Charlie Chan” (Choy 40) who panders to Western expectations of Chinese people. The identity created by Poh-Poh on the other hand, is suspect because it does not seek to appease Western standards of what is fitting of a Chinatown resident. By trying deliberately to lose their Chinese heritage, the children think they are increasing their own agency, when in actuality, they are allowing their voices to be appropriated by Western thinking.

Choy’s narrators do not realise that they can locate their subjectivity at the crossroads of two different cultural categories by destabilising, and not completely overthrowing Poh-
Poh's idea of Chineseness. Within an identity category, there is space to reconfigure the definitional boundaries to allow an individual to realise the term “Chinese,” not as a set of general imperatives, but rather as a singular experience. By viewing Poh-Poh’s identity configuration as fixed, the children miss the instances when her reading of Chineseness is able to incorporate more unconventional desires without showing any apparent signs of disruption. For example, Poh-Poh is the only family member to explicitly acknowledge Jung’s same-sex desires by stating that “Jung-Sum is the moon” (Choy 82), the female side of the yin principle. Poh-Poh may discard the children’s assimilative yearnings, but she is willing to entertain other possibilities as long as they expand, rather than transgress, the boundaries of the immediate and larger Chinese family.

Although the Old One seems to embody a fixed concept of Chinese culture, her comment that “different roots, different flowers” (Choy 134) demonstrates that the children can shift within their ethnicity without having to align themselves with the dominant culture. David Wu argues that Chinese culture engages in a “complex process” whereby the Chinese people are able to incorporate new cultural elements “without losing their sense of having a Chinese identity – not even their sense of having an authentic Chinese identity” (165). Although Wu is not directly speaking of Chinese Canadian experiences, the above quote, applied to Choy’s text, highlights how Poh-Poh’s version of Chinese culture may not be as static as it at first appears. Nevertheless, adrift between two competing cultures, the children feel only the urgency of having to choose and thus, cannot view Poh-Poh’s sense of ethnic identity as changeable.

The Movement from Cultural Defender to Cultural “Other”

Unable to face being in a cultural divide, the children vent their frustrations on the member of the family who comes to represent their alienation from mainstream society. They solve their dilemma of how to represent Poh-Poh by “Othering” her when they choose the New over the Old. Poh-Poh then becomes a static figure whose status in the family is mainly
determined by her alignment with the discourse of Chineseness. Being Chinese becomes a restrictive concept that must be entirely denied if the children wish to become “Canadian” and leave Chinatown. The children, although emotionally attached to their grandmother, begin to read her as a cultural relic who embarrasses them with her decision not to adapt to normative behavioural standards. They are unsettled when their desires to be “someone else, somebody like Freddy Bartholomew” (Choy 140) become ludicrous when Poh-Poh reminds them that their Chinese ethnicity will always be a part of them. In order to render her claims ineffectual, they place her in a position of inferiority in relation to Canadian culture. This treatment of the Old One supports Sheng-mei Ma’s claim that the Asian mother is often “judged to be out of date and out of place, symptomatic of her ineffectual adaptation to the New World” (18). The children’s solution to “Other” Poh-Poh as the embodiment of all that is “out of date” about Chinese culture is driven out of an impulse for self-preservation in a racially hostile environment.

As the children begin to dismiss Poh-Poh’s world, she is reduced to an old woman who persists in keeping the children tied to the past. Even Sekky, who clings to Poh-Poh longest, admits that “they all loved Grandmama, but she was inconvenient, unsettling” (Choy 145) when she continues to do things that are considered inappropriate in Western society. Poh-Poh not only isolates herself from non-Chinese thinking, but she has the audacity to publicly flaunt her ethnic difference in front of a community whose only wish is to blend in with everyone else. Her presence is disturbing because it reminds the family of their abortive attempts at assimilation and also the guilt they feel for giving into racial shame. Consequently, when she is “Othered,” her subversive potential is effectively neutralised because she is rendered into little more than a racial caricature who lacks vital substance. Her inconsistencies are no longer of interest when she has been cast as the “Old One” who is slowly but surely weakening.

The children’s move to distance themselves from Poh-Poh and from her categorical assumptions of Chineseness is a symptom of racial self-hatred and the internalisation of White
standards of value. As narrators, the children construct Poh-Poh according to what they believe would make their identities more appealing to their White neighbours. A celebration of Poh-Poh as a character could be construed as an affirmation of the very Chineseness that she stands for, and would be an inappropriate celebration for individuals who wish to join the mainstream. They believe that the solution to this predicament is to deny their Chinese roots by making the matriarch into a figure whom they can easily forget. Just as Lee sacrifices her ancestors for the sake of feminism, Choy’s children cast down Poh-Poh in order to cleanse themselves of any taint of the motherland.

Sau-ling Wong’s concept of the “racial shadow” is a good way of working through this response to Poh-Poh’s Chineseness. Wong claims that many Asian Americans, like these children, often displace their self-disgust onto an individual who represents to them inappropriate Asianness. Wong asserts that “by projecting undesirable ‘Asianness’ outward onto a double – what [Wong terms] a racial shadow – one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it” (1993: 78). The “racial shadow” becomes a figure who is increasingly pushed to the outskirts of the characters’ consciousness until she becomes a nagging feeling that assimilation has come with a price. The children are impelled to deny Poh-Poh’s hold over them by claiming unequivocally that they are “Canada” (Choy 135) when their identities are put in doubt. The vehemence of Liang’s response to identity questions shows what Wong explains as the racial shadow’s ability to “reveal radical dissonance between the protagonist’s flattering self-image and the rude reality of her inadequate qualifications for full membership in white society” (1993: 96). Wong emphasises how it is the racial shadow’s similarity to the protagonists that makes him/her such an unsettling figure. The children would not disown Poh-Poh as a racial shadow if they did respond on some level to her appeals for Chinese solidarity. However, they would be admitting this connection if they saw her as anything more than a Chinese relic. Poh-Poh’s influence over the family’s cultural development must be rendered non-existent in order for the family to preserve this semblance of perfect assimilation.
Although the children are seeking a way to accommodate overlapping identity categories, they accept the fate of “the racial shadow” who is made a victim of binary identity politics. When Poh-Poh dies, the family loses the one voice that is willing to battle for a Chinese consciousness that sets itself distinctively apart from Western thinking. While Poh-Poh’s tendency to impose Chineseness on the children may sometimes be suffocating, the alternative marks a clear surrender of cultural agency. Sekky’s comment that “my red-haired demon friend, says if you drop a plate in a restaurant, a dozen Chinks will answer” (Choy 140) shows the children’s unconscious absorption of a White perspective that causes them to denigrate their own race. Rather than recognise that Poh-Poh is an intrinsic part of their cultural being, the family represses her.

Their assumption of the West necessitates a denouncement of the East. Sheryl Mylan talks about how, in mother-daughter narratives, the child’s “standards for judging her mother are, if not manifest Orientalism, at least latent or unconscious demonstrations of Orientalism” (133). Orientalism places Poh-Poh at such a distance from the Western spectator that she is turned from a vital cultural defender into a passive cultural artefact. The matriarch becomes a form of Chineseness that must be unlearned by the children to avoid being labelled “Other” based on their association with her. Then, Poh-Poh’s version of their Chinese heritage will no longer plague the children with cultural uncertainty, but can be dismissed as “illogical stuff” (Choy 161) that serves as another marker of the Old World eccentricity of the matriarch. The family’s act of “Othering” Poh-Poh is a capitulation to mainstream negative perceptions of Chinese culture within a Western context. Although appealing in her marked “Otherness,” the racial shadow must be increasingly dismissed if the children wish to adopt the behavioural code necessary for assimilation. As long as she retains her powers of cultural persuasion, assimilation for the Chinese household will never be complete.

As the text progresses, Poh-Poh is gradually confined to a smaller and smaller portion of the domestic sphere until her hold over the family is reduced to her relationship with Sekky, the youngest grandchild. All the other children have “progressed” to such a point that they
have outgrown Poh-Poh and are no longer “pestered [...] with old sayings” (Choy 91) or bothered about their cultural identities by the Old One. Choy allows his characters to feel briefly disconcerted that they cannot access Poh-Poh’s world before they divest themselves of the cultural imperatives absorbed when they were in her keeping. The waning of Poh-Poh’s power culminates in her death, marking the end of the family’s desire to try and accommodate the Old One’s conceptions of their ethnicity within the new expectations of living in Canadian society. Her exit from the family provides the household with a convenient excuse to put Poh-Poh and her version of Chineseness in the past where they are safe and non-threatening.

Torn between Canada and China, the family’s cultural dilemma finds a temporary solution through its easy acceptance of the death of the matriarch and of the Old Ways she advocated. Ma’s comment that the mother figure “becomes ‘the other,’ an alien ‘ghost’ in America and to her own children” (18) is literally true in Choy’s narrative as Poh-Poh becomes a spirit who roams the house, silent and essentially ignored by the rest of the family. Choy voices his discomfort with the inevitable need to relegate Poh-Poh to the spirit realm by exploring Sekky’s insistence that his grandmother is still very much present in the household. Sekky is the last narrator of the novel and also the last member of the family who relegates Poh-Poh to the past. He continues to communicate with his grandmother, complaining that “they had already let her go” (Chong 165). Sekky, who clings to Poh-Poh’s teachings even after she is physically gone, is the only one who struggles with the family’s need to sweep away the Old Ways to make room for the New. For everyone else, her death is seen as a welcome relief from the ever-pressing issue of cultural ambiguity that she continually raised.

However, Sekky registers his disapproval when he will not let his family forget. He assumes the now vacant role of cultural arbitrator, forcing the family to *bai sen* (Choy 167) and to acknowledge Poh-Poh’s presence despite their obvious reluctance. The family is so entrapped by their conceptions of Western modernity that they feign ignorance of the Old Ways, claiming that Chinese rituals are only “silliness” (Choy 166) that they will not humour. Their eventual capitulation to Sekky’s demands is not an act of cultural revival because it only
occurs when Uncle Dai Kew rationalises that respecting the dead is done by White people who “run electric motors” (Choy 166). The family can tolerate these Chinese rituals because they are reassured that White society will not view the funeral rites as culturally “odd.” With Poh-Poh gone, they do not need to partake in Chinese traditions that violate Western ideology. The family is motivated by a desire to have Poh-Poh’s troubling presence out of the way in order to continue the business of constructing new, more Canadian subjectivities.

Choy explores how the family engages in self-delusion, convincing themselves that by denying Poh-Poh they can rest in more culturally unproblematic territory. Their belief that they are now free in their modernity is an erroneous assumption that overlooks the fact that they have chosen an equally constructed, equally rigid conception of identity. Sekky, for a brief period, seems to understand the necessity of negotiating the many calls for belonging, but all too quickly adopts the rest of the family’s attitudes. He becomes so caught up in becoming part of the Canadian family that he forgets the lessons he learnt from his now dead grandmother. He stops reminding the family that it only perpetuates the old binaries when it chooses to align itself with the more dominant side of the conflict. Although Sekky regrets that Poh-Poh is not a vital part of the family, his family’s continuation of a system of inclusion/exclusion prevents him from doing anything about it.

Choy is consequently searching for a way to end the children’s inability to allow their identities to contain elements of both the Old and the New. Christopher Lee’s article addresses the flexibility of identity when he argues that, “ethnic subject formation is therefore presented as a dynamically contested process” (31) as “Choy challenges essentialist, ahistorical notions of ethnicity” (24). While Choy does unmask the fallacy of holding onto essentialist Chineseness, he does not know how to remove rigid definitional boundaries and avoid labelling the category “Chinese” as outdated. Poh-Poh is relegated to a place of nostalgia because the text’s narrators are only able to note the impasse without offering any sort of viable solution. Similarly, a character like Meiying who dares to transgress racial barriers suffers the same fate as Suzanne Wong because the Chinatown people are unable to offer their citizens an escape from the
behavioural codes that prescribe what is acceptable. The family witnesses these examples of the detrimental effects of binary rigidity, but fails to reinstate the Old Ways alongside a New conception of identity.

The children seem at a loss at how to break out of a binary world in which figures like the Old One must be sacrificed for the sake of newly conceived social conformity. The final scene in which Stepmother “press[es] into her palm the carved pendant Grandmama had left to me” (Choy 238) is a belated gesture of cultural intersectionality. Sekky and his mother can nostalgically revisit Poh-Poh’s world, but they cannot undo the family’s and the community’s decision to align with a single cultural identity. Meiying’s body lies crumpled a few houses away, and the Old One’s presence has been all but banished from the house. Sekky and his mother both deeply regret the devastating consequences of believing in fixed identity categories, but it is uncertain whether their revelation will affect the rest of the family. In the deaths of the two women, one a proponent of identity beyond categories, and the other a defender of single affiliations, Choy seems to be reaching for a blending of the two, but can only end with an ambiguous hint that change may be coming.

Conclusion:

While Choy strives to locate a place for the Old to coincide with the New, his narrative shows that such harmonious coinciding is problematic. The children are brought up by their grandmother, cast into an imaginative space that refuses to recognise the effect that relocation has had on the discourse of Chineseness. The text explores how Poh-Poh’s categorical assumptions of Chinese culture remind the children of the heritage they so desperately wish to forget. Trapped in cultural ambivalence, the children desire to be accepted by mainstream society and they therefore give in to the temptation to “Other” Poh-Poh and her conceptions of their ethnicity. Poh-Poh ceases to be a figure of cultural agency, but is transformed into a fixed representative of the Old Ways who must be rejected in order for the family to complete their assimilation into Canadian society. The ghost-like Poh-Poh calls for herself to be included in
the family's new way of life, but her cries fall on deaf ears. The children are reluctant to make Poh-Poh decline into the obscurity of memory, but eventually they can only depict the effects of binary identity politics without offering a clear alternative. While the possibility of overlapping categories continues to elude them, all they can do is register a note of regret as they place the Old One in a place of nostalgia as the family continues to find their way in instability.

From Choy's depiction of cultural nostalgia, the final chapter will turn to a matriarch who rebelled against the very assumptions that Poh-Poh defends. *The Concubine's Children* is a narrative of a woman who represented both the potential for moving outside of fixed gender roles and the negative consequences that it often triggers. Chong must struggle with how she will read a grandmother who wreaked such havoc on family stability.
Chapter Three: The Non-Matriarch in *The Concubine’s Children.*
Denise Chong’s Exploration of Identity Experimentation

“The truth became a landscape of many layers in an ever-changing light” (Chong xiii). In her foreword, Denise Chong acknowledges that she is not providing the definitive, “true” account of her family history, nor does she feel that this is ever possible. Her intent is to use the scraps of family memory with creative license to explore the repercussions her maternal grandmother’s life decisions had on her mother and on herself. Her narrative charts the path of a woman who dared to leave the protective bounds of Confucian society in order to pursue her own desires. This break from the stifling Chinese domestic order was not without its price. The move to destabilise her world would result in an estrangement from her family, and a slow, but steady disintegration of her ability to cope with her marginal position. Labelled as a cultural traitor, an unfaithful wife, an unfit mother, May-ying revealed that challenging fixed gender roles is frequently construed as a threat to the entire social order. The rhetoric of ethnic betrayal ensured that the concubine was expelled from the community as punishment for her defiance of group cohesion. Nonetheless, while the concubine’s identity experimentation met a certain degree of failure, she stands as an example of the possibilities of embracing an identity that makes up its own rules. This chapter will demonstrate that although Chong imposes a tidy resolution to her grandmother’s life, her willingness to depict a woman who challenged pre-assigned roles signals a break away from the normative.

Rebelling Against Confucian Domestic Order: Reconfiguring Gender Roles

Chong begins her narrative by examining how the concubine arrived in Canada still adhering to the rigid domestic hierarchy she had been taught in China. The text establishes that May-ying was not only tied to her husband and family, but also to an entire cultural system that prescribed that a woman’s duty lay in the home. In moving to Vancouver, the concubine was displaced from a system of value that placed the family, with the husband at its head, as the primary concern for every member of the household. As Chong points out, “in the
Confucian way of thinking, a girl had no authority of her own” (9) and “love was not a consideration; in fact it was seen as a threat to the husband’s family” (6). Trained to be submissive and unassuming, the concubine deferred to her husband’s belief that they would be able to transplant this carefully constructed social structure to their new home. At first, May-ying maintained a semblance of the Old World in her dealings with her husband because the traditional ways were all she had ever known. She ignored the fact that she was in a new land with potentially new ways of living and continued to hold onto the old conceptions of value. Chong emphasises this point when she writes, “however May-ying felt about her lot, she was bound to the Confucian sense of social order that had crossed the Pacific with her” (30).

Chong records how this social order regulated the concubine’s life, giving her a sense of purpose even when she was surrounded by strangers.

During her early life in Canada, May-ying repressed her more subversive impulses for the domestic order that she believed would guarantee her repayment in the afterlife. Because “she held their life in Canada as temporary” (Chong 31) and believed that she would return to the village, May-ying did not disrupt the traditional customs. For example, decision making power still resided with the patriarch, and the concubine continued to work towards the success of the household, helping to remit regular payments to the village and giving birth to her husband’s children. Concentrating on “what was expected” (Chong 43), or on what would “confirm her usefulness to her family” (Chong 36), allowed May-ying to ignore the other voices that were clamouring to be heard. As long as she believed that the appearance of uninterrupted Confucian order still prevailed in Chan Sam’s household, she could continue to find meaning in the tasks assigned to her in the New World. Consequently, she did not let herself question why it was necessary for her to remit all her waitressing income to her husband and to strive to give birth to someone else’s sons.

However, May-ying slowly became aware that Confucian order had little bearing on her new economic role in Canada. While the Chinese tradition preached that women should remain sequestered in the house as an inferior, the Canadian reality required that Chan Sam
send his wife into the public sphere to earn their keep. May-ying’s entry into the workplace as a waitress made it increasingly harder for her to accede to the traditional hierarchy. Earning a salary that surpassed the income of her husband gave May-ying a degree of financial might that unbalanced the carefully controlled power allocations in the family. Judy Yung talks of how Chinese women like May-ying “now had an economic role to play in the urban economy” (57) which made them resist the power dynamics that confronted them when they returned to the private sphere. It was difficult for the concubine to accept the patriarch as her master when she knew it was she, the woman, who was really supporting the family. Thus, the disparity between her new found freedom in the bustling café environment, and her lingering ties to Chinese tradition became increasingly harder to bear. “The young May-ying was tossed between the contradictions of her life as a lowly waitress and her wish to do honor as a wife” (Chong 29), but as time progressed, her desire to perform the latter was overshadowed by her new economic mobility.

Because waitresses’ skills were now in demand in the Chinatown marketplace, their duties as helpmates and caregivers were now rendered irrelevant when “they were brought to North America solely for the profit of their work” (Chong 29). Chan Sam might invoke the punishment of the ancestral spirits, but both he and May-ying knew that the old behavioural expectations no longer applied to a concubine who provided him with his sustenance. May-ying was not just the producer of his children, but also an active market player who was entitled to a degree of independence that corresponded to her economic contribution to the family. With the ability to socialise publicly, she found new outlets for her desires that made an existence apart from the family a distinct possibility. The cafés were fully functioning worlds that granted the woman a respite from the more onerous responsibilities of home and the family. As May-ying became more accustomed to her life as a waitress, the connection between the patriarch and his concubine became tenuous at best.

This disconnection between wife and home allowed May-ying to question the pre-established roles that had previously left her powerless to rebel. May-ying began to assert her
independence by verbally resisting Chan Sam’s control over domestic decisions. Her protest against the power imbalance broke the Confucian harmony that relied on female submissiveness. May-ying challenged this submissiveness through speaking out against the belief that the patriarch’s commands were absolute, and that his judgement was always sound. “May-ying found she couldn’t help but protest his stubbornness” (Chong 37), sometimes treating his demands with “cold silence interrupted only by recrimination” (Chong 30). Even when they returned to the village for a brief stay, May-ying would not realign herself with Confucian ideology, finding it instead, “easier to outwit than obey” (Chong 45) the Dai-Pò who was meant to be her household superior. The patriarch could not prevent the torrent of words she unleashed on Huangbo because May-ying’s time away from China had allowed her to destabilise traditional power relationships. Rather than accepting the silence imposed on her by patriarchy, the concubine questioned the perimeters of her world by undermining her husband’s monopoly over speech.

This verbal hostility only marked the start of May-ying move to disengage herself from the relationship expected of a patriarch and his concubine. May-ying began to act on her rebellious words with her renunciation of her procreative obligations and the recognition of her own sexual needs. Chong says that “rarely was there intimacy between him and May-ying, and when there was, she made sure no pregnancy ensued” (59). By denying Chan Sam access to her body, Chong’s grandmother rejected the assumption that her needs were insignificant compared to her duty to serve as the vessel for her husband’s offspring. Chong argues that the New World, with its gender ratio imbalance and its absentee husbands, created a situation in which “the customs of marriage in China [...] had lost all meaning” (124) and thus a woman’s sexuality became capable of being redefined. In this case, sexuality for May-ying became a way of challenging an ethnic identity previously considered fixed in order to replace it with one that put female desire first. Sau-ling Wong underlines this connection between sexuality and identity when she asserts that, in Chinese American fiction, “sexuality is represented as far more than a physical fact; rather, it constitutes one of the primary terms
through which one’s ethnic identity is understood, experienced and structured” (1992: 113-14). Wong’s comments support how May-ying’s reconfiguration of her sexuality became a crucial way for her to express her cultural agency and to deny her captivity to the patriarch’s needs.

This perfunctory treatment of Chan Sam’s demands illustrates how sexual consent ceased to be a given and only occurred when the conditions were suitable for May-ying. She made it clear that her sexuality was no longer just for procreation, but an element of herself that she was free to use as she pleased. By adopting a son who affirmed her status as a single mother, May-ying sent the message that she would not use her sexuality to extend her husband’s male line. She halted all efforts at being the carrier of the first Chan son, thereby separating her sexuality from her responsibilities as concubine. When May-ying divorced the sexual act from its potential procreative end, she gave herself the liberty to use her sexuality for the purpose of lust and/or love. Her discomfort with other men’s advances evaporated when she realised that she could choose when and with whom she would have sexual relations. “She weakened to several men, all of whom she knew” (Chong 83) in casual encounters, and later began to form more serious “affair[s] of the heart” (101) with men like Jang Noong and Chow Guen. May-ying’s willingness to sleep with other men besides Chan Sam unsettled the Confucian domestic order because it broke the exclusivity of the sexual relations between concubine and her master and thus the purity of the lineage.

May-ying’s final blow to Confucian domestic order came when she “outed” herself from Chan Sam’s household and moved to Nanaimo with her child in tow. Being “outed” (Chong 30) from the protective family circle was usually a threat the patriarch used to scare his concubine into submission. However, since May-ying no longer subscribed to the codes that had previously ordered their lives, she was willing to seek fulfilment of her desires elsewhere. “May-ying simply announced her refusal to life with Chan Sam” (Chong 101) and left to make a new life for herself. In doing so, she placed herself in a new configuration of Asian womanhood, one that did not locate its value in the extent to which she was favoured by
the patriarch. By removing herself from Chan Sam’s “stultifying presence” (Chong 63),
Chong’s grandmother asserted that she did not need to remain bound to a man who refused to
give in to her demands. Furthermore, May-ying proved her continued resolve to stand apart
from male order in her decision not to move in with her lover, Chow Guen. After “outing”
herself from one man’s household, she was determined not to place herself under another
man’s protection, arguing that she would only “relinquish her restored freedom by falling into
the arms of another man” (Chong 103). May-ying was insistent that she “set a course
independent of either man” (Chong 125) and therefore would not accept their money to prove
her self-sufficiency. Her reluctance to rely on male power and financial security revealed a
new type of femininity that worked outside of, rather than within, the patriarchal system.

In tearing up the fundamental building blocks of Confucian society, May-ying was
effectively questioning the role the woman had to play in the family. In her new
configuration, with the woman removed from the patriarchal system, femininity now
inhabited a zone that could no longer rely on tradition to give it clear definitional boundaries.
May-ying began impinging on male territory, asserting that Chinese femininity and
masculinity were constructions that allowed men to keep their wives isolated in the private
domain. She demanded respect for her blatant disregard of these binary distinctions by
playing the role of a woman who dared to invade what were conventionally male-defined
arenas. Moreover, she had the audacity to wear male dress when she entered these sites of
male power, as if she was unequivocally stating that she had an equal right to the privileges
men took for granted:

When May-ying was seen dressed in this way in the gambling dens and around
Chinatown, it was as though she was making the statement that she was taking her
rightful place in a man’s world; that a woman who made her own living, who didn’t
depend on a man for support, should be respected. Perhaps more than anything, her
masculine dress was a statement that a woman could do as she pleased with her life.
(Chong 124)
May-ying’s behaviour in the gambling dens indicates that she was not satisfied with how
gender roles were currently configured. Whereas once the husband-wife relationship had
been the focus of the woman’s energies, she now gave herself the option to put herself first
before she directed her energies to the family. May-ying demonstrated that self-sacrifice and
womanhood should not have to be synonymous when she made her children accompany her
to the gambling dens and eventually abandoned Hing to be with her lover. Her assumption of
masculine dress did not signal a renunciation of her femininity, but was actually a visual
expression of her dissatisfaction with the way it was currently being interpreted.

“Unfit” Wife and Mother: May-ying’s Expulsion from the Chinese Community

This movement away from conventional definitions of Chinese womanhood was not
without its consequences. May-ying broached identity experimentation in an ethnic
community that, while lenient towards certain indiscretions, was still willing to suppress any
element that threatened group cohesion. Chinese society viewed with disfavour a woman like
May-ying who expressed indifference to the established order and took up residence in a self-
defined cultural system. Maying risked censure because she “began to behave during her
husband’s absence in ways that were at odds with the proper and decorous conduct expected
of a Chinese wife” (Chong 79). Sau-Ling Wong discusses how Chinese Americans must
submit to the community’s view of what is “naturally fitting” to their gender or else be
designated as cultural outsiders:

Gender roles, invested with strong emotions concerning what is “naturally fitting,”
become a locus for testing out and codifying cultural meaning. Thus, the character’s
actions depicted along a spectrum of gender appropriateness, are assigned varying
shades of “Chineseness” or “Americanness.” (1992: 114)

As long as May-ying still claimed to belong to “Chineseness,” she had to face her community’s
pronouncements of the “appropriateness” of her actions. She would be allowed to hold onto
her ethnic membership as long as she fulfilled their fixed requirements for belonging. Chong
writes how, “with her pale skin, her dress and shoes, [May-ying] seemed more a ‘foreign lady’ than Chinese” (42). This quote illustrates how the community used the qualities considered “essential” to Chinese femininity to judge May-ying as a cultural outsider.

Moreover, May-ying’s outsider status was made more pronounced because of the contrast in the behaviour between Chan Sam’s first wife and the concubine. May-ying was considered “unwomanly” because, unlike Huangbo, she failed to conform to versions of ideal Chinese femininity. While “Huangbo’s nature was to retreat more into the role of the model Chinese wife, ever more humble, yielding, diligent” (Chong 76), May-ying came to define herself more and more against what would have been conventionally expected of her in the village. The first wife’s alignment with her husband’s belief system left the concubine with no room to be anything but the cultural “Other.” Chan Sam’s complaints that “May-ying is not like a lady” (Chong 76) were met by sympathy from his other wife who wished “that he had been rewarded with a concubine more worthy of him” (Chong 76). Huangbo could only view May-ying’s lapse in wifely duties as a failure in her ethnic makeup that made her more of a “Faan-gwei-po” (Chong 42), a White woman, than a representative of “authentic” Chinese femininity. May-ying’s belonging to her ethnicity was questioned solely because of her failure to live up to what the Huangbo accepted to be suitable womanly behaviour. Chong’s grandmother was deemed unworthy, forced to compete with a wife who symbolised all that was revered about Confucianism for the community.

May-ying was punished for her lack of “appropriate” femininity, but also for her decision to adopt Canada as her “home.” May-ying wanted her children be “born in Canada, not in China” (Chong 47) and later, she was content to stay behind when Chan Sam returned to the village. May-ying did not insist that she accompany her husband when she “suggested that Chan Sam go home alone for a visit” (Chong 64). This wish to locate her identity in Canada excluded her from a community that constructed China as the motherland. Rosemary George suggests that “the notion of the ‘home’ is built as a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference” (2). Thus, if, according to the patriarch
and the community, “home” is a village across the ocean, the woman who wants to live in the “not-home” will be marked as aberrant. May-ying’s denial of the Confucian social order alienated her from the community because it was interpreted as a transferring of her affections to another “home.” The narrative probes this divide when it alternates between China and Canada, implicitly questioning which side of the family and which mother were more “Chinese” than the other. The family located in China “believe that [May-ying] brought their father only unhappiness, and that the other mother who raised them had been the superior wife” (Chong 254-55). In their minds, May-ying’s disobedience to Chinese tradition barred her from holding onto the title of “Chinese mother.” This denunciation of the concubine demonstrates that she was not permitted the option of belonging to two different homes, but had to choose her cultural affiliations carefully if she did not want to be excluded.

May-ying’s fidelity to her race was placed in doubt because she aligned herself with her new Canadian “home,” but also because she turned her back on traditional femininity. Working within the system was condoned, but her statement that “I don’t need anybody to look after me” (Chong 63) was deemed wilful conceit when coupled with her wish to remain a part of the community. By renouncing the traits that allowed her to claim Chineseness, May-ying placed herself in a precarious position, one that would allow the community to invoke the language of betrayal. Leslie Bow treats extensively the idea of female disloyalty in Asian American literature, arguing that “negotiating multiple affiliations becomes fraught as the language of betrayal comes to regulate fidelity and communal belonging” (11). Bow adds that if the matriarch was intended to “embody ethnic authenticity, patriotism, and class solidarity” (3), her flight from her husband and the matriarchal role could be perceived as ethnic “repudiation” (3). May-ying had to consider carefully how she portrayed herself to the community if she did not want to risk being accused of repudiating her ethnicity. For May-ying, the language of betrayal became a threat that was held over her to prevent her from realising the benefits of overlapping identity categories.
May-ying was not ignorant of this constraint, becoming intent to “stand by the traditional values of what made a good parent” (Chong 106) even if she could not fulfil the requirements of being a “good wife.” She responded to the threat of betrayal by becoming hyperconscious of how she lived up to expectations of Chinese motherhood. Alienated from the Chinese people as a deviant woman, she continued to try to hold, with little success, onto the degree of cultural authenticity available to her. In her dealings with her daughter, she still invoked “the whole Chinese hierarchy of kinship” (Chong 165), punishing her daughter for not bestowing on her the “gratitude” (Chong 209) that she felt she deserved as a Chinese mother. As well, Chong shows how Maying overcompensated for her lack of Chineseness by imposing on her daughter the very same restrictions that she had supposedly rebelled against decades earlier. Her daughter, Hing, “would be disciplined, with or without provocation” (Chong 103) to make her carry the burden of her mother’s Chinese responsibilities while May-ying behaved in a manner atypical of a woman in her community. However, these endeavours to remain connected to her Chineseness only exacerbated the ambiguity of her position and she was left torn between many competing allegiances.

May-ying’s position was problematic in that it would be impossible for her to satisfy the qualifications for being the perfect maternal figure as long as she straddled two different value systems. Chinese motherhood became exaggerated, even perverse, under May-ying because she was determined to do her duty as a parent. She would flog her daughter for no reason at all until “spankings became almost a daily ritual if May-ying was around and not sick in bed when Hing came home” (Chong 107). Hing lived in fear of her mother because she was living in a household where the very arbitrariness of Chinese power dynamics had been unmasked. May-ying’s attempts at motherhood became almost ridiculous because it was apparent that she was following protocol for the sake of appearances, and not because it was truly needed. She would concoct punishments for her son, but “May-ying’s drinking made a mockery of such punishments. She’d fall asleep, forgetting he was there. When she awoke to find he’d gone to bed, she’d wake him to start scolding him all over again” (Chong 204). Her scolding was only
a re-enactment of rituals that had been stripped of their meaning by her rejection of patriarchy. Ironically, Chong’s grandmother resorted to strengthening traditional maternal authority even though she had the initial intention of accomplishing quite the reverse. Instead, of becoming a symbol of successful Chinese motherhood, May-ying became a woman whose desperation and failure to maintain her status as parent were all too apparent.

Alcohol and Gambling: The Concubine’s Failure to Reconfigure Identity Categories

This sharp abandonment of her powers as wife and mother threw such instability into her world that the concubine was sent spiralling into excess. May-ying tried to embrace an identity that made up its own rules, but her desire to keep a part of herself in tradition left her stretched between two worlds. Once again, Sau-ling Wong’s examination of the binary of Necessity and Extravagance is a useful way of working through how May-ying allowed the seeming rigidity of these two modes of operating to warp her efforts to reach self-definition. If Extravagance is “irrational, crazy,” “dissipative,” and “irresponsible toward family and others” (1993: 171), May-ying can be read as a character whose overindulgence in Extravagance resulted in her being unable to switch to the other side of the dichotomy without a certain amount of distortion. While her new desires might have felt liberating, the Necessity of paying heed to her responsibilities as a parent hindered her from engaging in a seamless transition from one set of values to another.

May-ying’s overdose of Extravagance began to take its toll on her when her reckless behaviour prevented her from reasserting Necessity into her life. Her sexual activities and gambling began to take on an air of desperation that was worsened by her frequent drinking bouts. May-ying found solace in alcohol, gambling, and men in a bid to convince herself that she could escape the Chinese social order on her own. Her lack of place in an environment where set categories determined security made her vulnerable to substances that could serve as substitutes for real power. These outlets were meant to give her life a semblance of stability, but in fact, they only intensified her incapacity to cope with the multiple facets of her life. Her
inability to deal with her situation was most pronounced in the episode when May-ying mixed parenting with pleasure, “entertaining” a client in her daughter’s bed with the girl’s arm pinned under them (Chong 108). As time progressed, May-ying did not even bother keeping up a façade of good parenting, spending more time passed out on the couch than paying attention to what was going around her. Some of the final images Chong gives of her grandmother are particularly disturbing because they present a picture of a woman whose life ended in disaster. Chong tells of how her mother “observed that it took less than a day and a half for the bottle of whiskey kept in the restaurant kitchen to disappear. Guen and [May-ying] made no effort to have any regular meals. Nobody seemed to care about sleep” (Chong 205). This description of the concubine’s decline stands as evidence that any identity experimentation, if not properly regulated, runs the risk of inviting failure. May-ying, unfortunately, only realised the potential for disaster when it was too late for her and her family.

May-ying’s crisis of self reduced her to a woman who appeared cruel and irrational to others. To her daughter, May-ying was the mother who screamed, “Cry until you die – why don’t you cry until you die” (Chong 106) as Hing lay sobbing at her mother’s feet. This hysteria can be explained by the ambivalence the concubine felt for her position. May-ying attempted to break out of fixed gender roles, but was torn apart by her desire to remain true to her ethnic community’s expectations. Sheng-mei Ma has termed the breakdown May-ying suffered “immigrant schizophrenia,” and characterised it as a situation in which the “unresolved dilemma between her wish to remain a traditional [...] wife and the irresistible influences of the New World, particularly feminism, leads to her insanity” (56). The use of “schizophrenia” to characterise the female immigrant experience is particularly apt, considering the many rounds of self-division entailed in being a Chinese Canadian woman. May-ying’s more feminist impulses seemed directly counter to her lapses back into a traditional lifestyle and this incongruity became hard to endure. By placing herself in an
identity limbo, between the conformist and the non-conformist, May-ying was inviting the instability that slowly, but surely pulled her down.

Chong’s grandmother was a conflicted figure who eventually could not withstand the need to alienate one part of her subjectivity in order to realise the other. Chong summarises the loss of control when she writes, “I did not know that the years of [her mother’s] childhood that paralleled mine coincided with a period when her mother was having affairs with men, drinking and gambling, while still trying to prove she could be a good mother” (219). May-ying weakened herself through her substance abuses to such an extent that she could not cope with the discrepancies in her life anymore. Because the contradictions of her identity became too extreme for May-ying to bear, she could not devise an escape from the back and forth demands of her various belongings. Like the “household that was breaking up” (Chong 204), the concubine was falling apart herself from the stress of living a life typical of what Ma terms, “latent schizophrenics with splintered lives” (42). Never sure of which identity category would wield its hold over her subjectivity, Chong’s grandmother let herself be overpowered by the uncertainty of her existence.

Artificial Resolution Achieved through Chong’s Offer of Redemption

After depicting the concubine’s life in all its inconsistencies, Chong must decide how she will conclude her text. Chong wants to criticise her grandmother for what she calls “the shame of the past” (266), but feels that it is necessary for her to offer the concubine redemption for the drinking, the beatings, and the promiscuity that characterised her life. May-ying’s failure to cope with her identity experimentation affected her children who had to undergo the turmoil of living in a broken family environment. Her daughter “was torn between nursing and marriage, between finishing what she had started and putting her trust in family life, which had failed her so far” (Chong 178). Nonetheless, Chong is uneasy leaving the narrative in such a state of disarray and, thus, feels compelled to contend that all this sacrifice was necessary for the family to acculturate into Canadian society. This argument
offers the concubine forgiveness by asserting that the immigrant mother underwent instability to provide a better future for her descendants. The text justifies the chaos of the concubine’s life by juxtaposing it against the solidity of Chong’s own position as narrator. The narrator places herself as an example of success in the New World, the daughter who has made sense of how her mother and grandmother “struggled free of the familial obligations and sacrifice that bound the Chinese side” (Chong 265).

Chong and her mother’s visit to the ancestral home at the very end of the text only emphasises this cultural divide. The voyage back to the “motherland” makes them realise that China is too distant a mental and physical place for the family located in Canada ever to conceptualise. Chong states that “it would take a powerful sense of family to bridge the time and distance since travelled” (Chong 265). It is this revelation that confirms Leslie Bow’s assertion that “‘America’ appears in [Asian American] texts – although not unequivocally- as a symbol of futurity linked to increasing the possibilities of women’s self-determination” (73). Chong does subscribe to this dichotomy, indicating in the last chapter that it was the migration to Canada that allowed May-ying to progress to a higher level of female subjectivity. China is depicted as the site of female subservience while Canada is shown to be a place of “liberation, the best gift of all” (259). Chong’s decision to include a letter from a Chinese relative makes explicit her claim that May-ying left China because she unconsciously knew that the future could only be found in Canada. The relative writes that in Canada, “the family will be glorious and future generations will have a good foundation” (Chong 260). Chong succumbs to the temptation to place closure on the narrative, implying that the cultural rigidity that belonged to the Chinese past was overcome by May-ying when she chose to align herself with her Canadian surroundings. Her family can now nostalgically revisit their ancestral roots, but because of the concubine’s actions, they are saved from having to interact with their Chinese side in a more active manner.

The narrative depicts May-ying as the fragmented creature that she was, but it still wishes to impose unity on her life by reading into it “some nobility of purpose” (Chong 265)
that can order all her contradictions. It is this final note of resolution to the ambiguities of family history that shows that Chong is still subject to the need to neutralise conflict, most especially when she is dealing with a figure as problematic as May-ying. Her grandmother’s struggles to subvert patriarchy become part of an intention to capitalise on the New “liberating differences” (Chong 265) that typify a “modern world of choice” (265). Chong imposes on May-ying’s life a feeling of linearity that contradicts the confusion that has appeared thus far in the narrative. I would argue that the text’s process of sifting through the various facets of the truth more aptly captures the stress and strains of the concubine’s identity crisis than the forced note of resolution at the end.

Conclusion:

May-ying’s story concludes peacefully with Chong claiming that her grandmother’s struggles were not in vain. However, the concubine’s life was not characterised by such unity, but was, instead, characterised by having to face the consequences of subverting norms in a community where binary thinking was still an overwhelming reality. Chong ends by lauding the concubine’s overthrowing of traditional Confucian teachings as a victory, but at the time the destabilisation of May-ying’s world led her to seek comfort in surface diversions to escape such uncertainty. Chong’s text reveals the heavy toll that resisting one’s community can have on a single woman. Instead of successfully embracing multiple subject positions, this matriarch was torn apart by her allegiance to Chinese social order and by her own weakness for alcohol, men, and gambling. May-ying invited an explosion of alternative lifestyles, but her connection to the Chinese family would not allow her to escape so readily. The anxiety of trying to be the perfect Chinese mother while still engaging in nonconformist identity experimentation was too much for her to bear and ultimately, led her to engage in self-destructive behaviour.

Chong is perplexed by her grandmother’s actions, angry at her grandmother for betraying her children, but at the same time, wanting to validate May-ying for allowing her
family to escape into a more "progressive" way of life. It is only through her recognition of the
disparity between China and Canada, the two family "homes," that Chong is able to make
sense of the ambiguity and impose a directional bent to her grandmother's activities. She
concludes with a sense that the family can reconcile itself to the concubine's dysfunctional life
by feeling blessed that they were not the ones left behind in China. The concubine is finally
made whole. Chong comes close to charting the erratic movements of a woman who worked
against a system, but draws back from a complete abandonment of binaries at the very end of
her narrative.
Conclusion: The Desire to Embrace “Becomings”

The three texts come very close to embracing a state of overlapping identity categories, but cannot overcome their need to reach a coherent representation of the matriarchal figure. The matriarch becomes the focus of identity struggles for narrators who must cope with the conflicting calls of being Chinese and Canadian in a society that still makes them choose between affiliations. The narrator’s own subjectivity is under scrutiny as s/he attempts to construct a character situated in a historical context that was unforgiving towards women who did not conform to the patriarchal structure. These Chinese Canadian authors must decide what to do with women who enforced the categorical constraints of being Chinese and in doing so, helped to extend their own oppression. At first it appears that these writers have given in to the pressure to produce a single reading of the matriarch: Lee trapping her characters in a feminist mould, Choy banishing the Old One to the silence of memory, and Chong reading a note of cultural progress into her grandmother’s biography. However, despite the imposition of resolution at the end of each text, the major portion of their narratives deals with the mixed reactions invoked by the matriarch. The ambivalence in their depictions of these women indicates that these authors are striving for a multi-voiced reading of the past even if they cannot yet articulate an exit.

Desire is the one element that recurs in each of the stories, figuring as a force that pushes these women to seek new becomings even in the midst of the most restrictive of situations. Probyn’s discussion of the yearning that is an intrinsic part of belonging illuminates the power of living on the margins of many identity categories:

Here I slide from “identity” to “belonging,” in part because I think that the latter term captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state. (19)
A significant part of the immigrant experience is this very process of destabilising one's identity in order to realise the possibilities of harnessing desire to "proffer new modes of individuation and of being" (Probyn 23). This feeling of wanting connection collides with traditional power configurations that use rules and unspoken social norms to ensure that their members sacrifice their personal desires for those that will bring about the "greater good." The moment of contact between these women's desires for things like passion and independence and their wish to remain true to their Asian roots is fundamentally unsettling, but full of possibility. This is not an argument for the privileging of so-called Western values, but an assertion that these characters' desires keep them moving even in the face of community opposition. The texts recognise how desire shapes and reassembles characters' subjectivities.

The Wong women suffocate in their domestic environment, but their distorted submission to the Confucian system stems from an excess of desire without an outlet, more than a wish to remain subject to the demands of others. Lee tries to select which desires are most appropriate for Kae’s ancestors, but only succeeds in undergoing self-division herself when she reduces them to cliché feminist battles. In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-Poh is not limited by her ethnicity, but constructs a shifting version of Chinese culture that incorporates the non-normative and disavows her grandchildren’s desire to assimilate into mainstream culture. Her call for Asian belonging is disconcerting because the grandchildren must then negotiate their grandmother’s yearnings alongside their own wishes to disown the heritage she embodies. Chong’s concubine takes desire and makes it her primary concern, regardless of how this force rearranges the familial divisions of power and disrupts the relations that once ordered her life. Most of all, all three narratives highlight how desire is not a calming impulse or a way to achieve stability, but a catalytic presence that prevents these women from remaining still.

It is understandable that these writers want to move these women to a place of stability that will give direction, a certain purpose, to the narratives that have appeared thus far. However, it is this very uncertainty of being in-between many different modes of operating that proves that identity can be located in the most seemingly ambiguous of locations. Living
on the margins is a way of questioning the nature of identity conflict and of breaking the stifling silence that characterises a life devoted exclusively to conformity. The texts are “concerned with the ‘in-between’ of subjects, with that which passes between them and which expresses the range of possible becomings” (Gatens 9). These writers find a voice that embodies the tension of trying to conceptualise a place for co-existing identity categories. These female characters witness the disintegration of well-defined identity markers as they explore what other possibilities exist outside the boundaries of a traditional existence. Even though the women do not always take that ultimate step, their increased awareness that convention is not the definitive behavioural code signals that a process of upheaval is underway. These three writers use the matriarch and her identity discrepancies to play with the discomfort associated with shifting identities. Sometimes a victim to their binary thinking, sometimes allowed to experiment with new configurations, the matriarch is in a state of flux as conceptions of Chinese Canadian selves are up for negotiation.

More than anything, the conditions of the past gain a new immediacy once identity construction ceases to be a linear path, but instead becomes an exploratory movement of possibility. The narrators often want to distance themselves from the matriarch in an act of cultural “Othering,” but it is the note of regret or artificial closure that indicates that these authors are striving for more. They examine the fatal consequences of disconnecting oneself from the past in order to assimilate into a foreign way of being through their creation of characters like Suzanne Wong who are undone by their own experimentation. The need to survey the past and to examine the conditions that made certain things feasible emphasises that possibility does not necessarily lead to wild abandon. Lee, Choy, and Chong explore how the multiple strands of the matriarch’s subjectivity offer increased awareness of the ways in which the Old can coexist with the New. They are not quite at a point at which they are willing to embrace instability, but they are slowly reaching the possibility of attaining an intersectionality of identity categories. Their texts are evidence that the movement away from the purely
normative is a fraught one, but one that propels these authors to new modes of writing and of "becoming."
Epilogue:

Grandma, Poh-Poh. This time it is 1920, and I find you in China, waiting for your father to return from work to tie up your hair and tuck you into bed. Your mother is too busy with the other children to pay attention to you and besides, you fear her anger, bitter and violent when provoked. As the daughter of the village midwife, you have grown used to the women, heavy with child, who come to beg for your mother’s help with the little money that they possess. When she is away, your sisters wrap you in their care, telling you tales of demons who devour young girls and of ghosts of unborn children who haunt the fields around your house. You laugh at their stories when you are safe inside, but when you walk alone at night you cannot help shuddering as a shadow crosses your path. Devils and other malevolent spirits come alive in the woods as long as you believe that superstition can transform into reality right before your eyes.

Every day you attend classes at the nearby village school where you are taught to forget these old wives tales and replace them with reading and writing, and all the important domestic skills that will serve your future husband well. There will come a day when your schooling will be over and you will plead for your parents to send you to Peking, but they will refuse. Although you know that this is unfair, there is really nothing you can do, because this is the fate of a girl. You accept, knowing that someday you will be married off to a stranger and sent to live in another household where you will be removed from the warmth of your family and friends. This world and its people are all you have ever known, except for the foreign devils you sometimes catch sight of when you are by the docks watching the activities of the merchant traders. You giggle at their light hair, big noses and eyes, and when they pass your way you silently scream “Ugly. Ugly faan-gwei.”

But there is no time for traipsing around the wharf because there are chores waiting for you at home. The washing is done and as you hang up the clothes on the line, you curse because you know that it is far too cold for your school things to dry by morning. The
remembered sting of your mother's bamboo switch makes your legs run faster down the path to ensure that you can jump into your bed before she catches you out of doors. Tonight, when you fall asleep, you dream of your shirt blowing in the wind as the cries of wandering spirits haunt the village landscape. You press against your sister's body, wondering what she sees in her dream world when she murmurs to herself in her sleep. Perhaps she is thinking of the light that came through your bedroom window this morning, her day working in the fields, or the village boy who waved at her from afar.

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It is dark outside your bedroom window as you stare up at the stars in this God forsaken land. Your husband is in someone else's house, gambling and losing the money that you earned in the shop today while you lie by yourself in your bed. When he comes home with the smell of smoke on his clothes, he will wake you up and fill your ears with gossip from China and then force you to listen to the homesickness that infects him every time he plays with the other men. Even though he has a temper, you know that beneath his bitterness he is a "good" man who deserves the respect that he receives from the Chinese community. He will climb into bed and you will wait for his even breathing before you creep to the spare room to cry yourself to sleep. Your pillow will muffle the sound of your desperation so well that in the morning no one will ever suspect that you hate this life, this place, and these people.

Tomorrow you will get up and stand in your general store, selling to customers who call you "Charlie" and laugh behind your back. However, what they don't realise is that you have given them all nicknames, horrible insults, that you say under your breath as you take their money. When they demand to know what you are saying, you pretend you can't speak English and they accept your stupidity because you are Chinese.

You cling onto your shop, your husband, and your children because there really is nothing else for you in this foreign land. Of course some women find comfort in other men, forgetting that physical pleasure can lead to disgrace and exile when their lovers are eventually discovered. These women have no pride. They are dirty. However, you will never
let this happen to you because you cannot conceive of a life without the steadying presence of your five children or the security of your family's good name. Your husband sends your sons to boarding school in Hong Kong to make sure they do not forget their Chinese heritage and you silently weep when you watch them get on the ship and sail away. The boys will eventually return and go to university, stealing money from the cash register to have a good time before they drop out and leave for Canada. You never begrudge the expense because you remember all too well what it is like to be denied both an education and all the promise that knowledge can offer. The girls never get the chance to go further in their studies though because you need them to help you in the shop. You are relieved when they accept that this is what must be. They are good girls and they know that there are no good jobs for Chinese people anyway.

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One of your daughters is happily married to a faan-gwei and your grandchildren tell you that you have to change with the times and be more "modern" if you want to respect their choices. You say nothing because it is against your nature to interfere, but in your heart you wish they would pick a nice Chinese boy and settle down somewhere close by before you are gone. When your son wrote to tell you that he had married a White woman, his first wife, you could not bring yourself to finish the letter without feeling sick to your stomach. You remember as a child he came to you broken hearted when his father told him that he was a no-good "White boy" and he declared that he hated being Chinese with all his heart. But things have changed and you know that it is not always possible to marry Chinese anymore with everyone mixing with everyone else now. Children these days are spoilt, disrespecting their elders because they have grown up with more wealth than you think is sensible. Nonetheless, you bite your tongue when they spend too much money because you know that your words no longer have the same power as before, when you were young and full of restless fire. They would only call you old fashioned, and sometimes when you are alone and thinking about your eighty-eight years, you actually believe it to be true.
The truth is, there are times when you think of the past, but most of the time you can barely remember what really happened because it all seems so long ago. There are moments during the day when you cannot conjure up your husband's face or the sound of his voice when he was upset. Your letters to your relatives in China have become too difficult to write because the characters seem to disappear as soon as you sit down to respond to their demands for money. They are so far away and so poor compared to the amount of plenty that you see around you every day, but sometimes you get a pang when you think of that other family. You are tired of living when you wake up each morning, but most of the time, you are filled with wonder that things have changed so much since when you were a child. Why get married so young anymore? A girl can study so that she is independent and does not need to rely on a husband's income. Even though you know that this is possible, you still teach your grandchildren how to cook Chinese dishes and how to bake scones and bread because you fear that if you do not, they will be completely useless in the kitchen. They ignore the stream of Chinese words that you send their way, but you hope that someday they will be able to answer you, maybe even joke the way you used to with your sisters in the village. There are times when a phrase, even a word, registers with them and you celebrate together because at least for a brief moment, a connection has been made.

Every night when you go to sleep, you escape into a dream world where the different languages that circulate in your head all seem to make sense without even the need for messy translation. In your dreams, China gains immediacy until your memories lose their vague quality and instead become as vivid as the present you are experiencing now. Your husband stands waiting for you by the foot of the bed with a shirt in one hand and a loose button and thread in the other, while voices call you to come down for breakfast to see your father off before he goes to work. Customers stream in and out of the shop anxious to get their war rations before the others, and your children return home from school, hungry and anxious for your love. You are sitting in your rocking chair, knitting mittens for your great-grandson while your grandchildren chase each other across the room while they play tag. You rise and
reach forward and as if in answer, all the other hands reach forward to touch your own so that your past, present, and future rush all around you in a bewildering mix of times and places. Just as your fingers brush theirs, you lose your footing and suddenly you are opening your eyes and becoming aware of your bedroom in the present. You wake and feel loss.
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